DRAFT VERSION

Mass Shootings, Masculinity, and Gun Violence as Feminist Issues (Forthcoming in Verta Taylor, Nancy Whittier, and Leila Rupp. 2019. *Feminist Frontiers*, 10th edition.)

Tristan Bridges and Tara Leigh Tober
Department of Sociology, University of California, Santa Barbara

On April 20, 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold went to their school in Littlefield, CO in black trench coats and a collection of guns rivaling action movies like *The Matrix*. They killed 12 students, injured an additional 21 people and ushered in a new age of school shootings in the U.S. At the end of the massacre at Columbine High School, both shooters turned their own weapons on themselves and each pulled the trigger. In 2007, an undergraduate student at Virginia Tech, Seung-Hui Cho, committed a similar act, walking around campus dressed for combat. He took pictures of himself before the attack wielding the guns he later turned on professors, staff and classmates as though posing for an action movie poster.

In Newtown, Connecticut in 2012, Adam Lanza shot and killed his mother early on December 12 before driving to Sandy Hook Elementary school. Using a semi-automatic rifle, he shot his way into the building, ultimately killing 20 children and 6 adults. Like Harris and Klebold, Lanza turned a gun on himself at the end of his attack. That same year, James Eagan Holmes walked into a movie theatre showing *The Dark Knight* in Aurora, Colorado with a pistol, shotgun, and rifle. He opened fire on moviegoers while the film was playing, killing 12 and injuring an additional 70 people.

On October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock broke the glass of his two windows in his 32nd floor hotel room in Las Vegas, Nevada. His room looked down on a music festival below. In the days leading up to the attack, Paddock stockpiled a large arsenal of weapons including (among others) fourteen AR-15 rifles. At 10:05pm, Paddock shot at the crowd, killing 58 people and leaving an additional 851 injured. This event was among the deadliest mass shootings in recent history.

Less than a year later, on Valentine's Day, 2018, Nikolas Cruz was dropped off near Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida with a backpack and duffel bag. Cruz quietly entered one of the buildings, pulled a fire alarm, and waited with the semi-automatic rifle and magazines he'd brought to school, firing indiscriminately at students and teachers as they exited classrooms. Seventeen people were killed and an additional seventeen were injured. Following Cruz's attack, students at school took to the streets and began starting a social movement opposing gun violence and with the goal of impacting gun legislation in this country. Still today, these students have inserted themselves into the national dialogue about gun control. And the shootings continue. Sadly, as we were writing this chapter, another school shooting happened at Santa Fe High School in Texas on May 18, 2018. 10 people were killed and at least an additional thirteen were wounded.

Following all of these attacks, people have called on politicians to enact stricter gun control legislation, to reduce both the number and type of guns allowed in U.S. households. And gun

DRAFT VERSION

control is a vital part of the problem of mass shootings in the United States. But mass shootings are about more than guns. Mass shootings are statistically rare, but they happen more in the United States than anywhere else in the world. Though they are rare, mass shootings are significant in a cultural sense as they leave indelible wounds in the social fabric, evoking collective feelings of fear, helplessness, anger, and heartache. And the people who commit them share more in common with the shooters above than U.S. citizenship. Indeed, the single most patterned fact about mass shooters is gender—these violent acts are overwhelmingly carried out by *men*.

Any explanation of mass shootings has two separate questions to answer. Why are men so overwhelmingly more likely to commit mass shootings than women? And why is it that American men commit these crimes more than people in any other society in the world?

We argue that we cannot hope to understand mass shootings in the U.S. if we ignore their connection with American masculinity (Bridges and Tober 2016). And to fully appreciate this, we first explain what we mean when we say that mass shootings happen more in the United States than in any other society in the world. Next, we examine the relationship between gun control and gun violence by differentiating between “gun control” and what scholars refer to as “gun culture.” And finally, we offer a two-part feminist explanation for mass shootings in the U.S.—a *social psychological explanation* to understand why men turn to this type of violence so much more frequently than women and a *cultural explanation* to clarify what it is about American masculinity that causes the U.S. to stand out internationally when it comes to this particular type of gun violence.

What Are Mass Shootings and Are They More Common in the U.S.?

How many mass shootings occurred in the United States last year? And how does that number compare with other societies around the world? These sound like easy questions to answer. It ought to simply be a matter of counting them. Yet, they are challenging to answer for two separate reasons: one related to how we define a “mass shooting” in the first place and the other to finding reliable sources of data. And as it turns out, neither of these issues have easy solutions.

People tend to rely on either broad or restrictive definitions of mass shootings to reinforce their particular stance on gun control. But, after the 2012 school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, the U.S. Congress defined “mass killings” as incidents in which three or more homicides took place in a single incident. Frederic Lemieux (2014) examined rates of mass shootings between 1983 and 2012 in a collection of 25 separate nations. Lemieux defines mass shootings as incidents involving one or more shooters in which four or more people are killed in one public location. In that period, United States experienced 78 mass shootings; the country with the next highest frequency was Germany, with 7 mass shootings in the same period. And if we compare the number of mass shootings by nation in Lemieux’s sample with the number of guns per 100 people in each society, you can see a relationship between the number of guns and the number of mass shootings (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of Guns Owned by Number of Mass Shootings, 1983-2013

Source: Lemieux, Frederic. 2014. "Effect of Gun Culture and Firearm Laws on Gun Violence and Mass Shootings in the United States: A Multi-Level Quantitative Analysis." *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences* 9(1): 74-93.

Each of the data points in Figure 1 represents a different country in Lemieux's (2014) sample. There does appear to be a correlation between more guns and more mass shootings. But there are two other things worth noticing. For instance, just consider the number of nations in this sample that have approximately 30 guns per 100 people: Austria (30.4), Canada (30.8), France (31.2), Germany (30.3), Iceland (30.3), Norway (31.3), and Sweden (31.6). They don't all have the same rate of mass shootings over the period of 30 years. Iceland had zero; Norway had one; and Sweden had two. But France had six, and Germany had seven. These are small numbers, but even here, the range is large enough to suggest that the ratio of guns per people is not the *only* factor influencing mass shootings.

It is also worth noting just how much of an outlier the U.S. is when put in international perspective. Sure, we have roughly twice as many guns per capita as the other societies with high numbers of guns owned per inhabitant. But the number of mass shootings the U.S. has experienced makes us an extreme outlier in these data. Indeed, Lankford's (2016) international research comes to a similar conclusion with a different sample—nations with high rates of firearm ownership are more at risk of public mass shootings.

A common argument is that the United States simply has more *people* than the other nations included in Lemieux's (2014) sample, and thus more mass shootings. With a population of almost 320 million in 2013, the odds that a rare event like a mass shooting would occur are just higher. Figure 2 charts the number of mass shootings by society against the number of mass shootings per 1,000,000 people in the population (as of 2013) in each of the nations Lemieux (2014) studied. Here, we can see from the black bars that the U.S. has a much higher number of mass shootings than the other nations, but our *rate* of mass shootings per 1 million people (the

dots associated with the axis on the right of the figure) puts us *below* the rates of other nations—New Zealand and Finland in particular.

Figure 2. Number of Mass Shootings by Number of Mass Shootings Per 1 Million People, 1983-2013

Sources: Lemieux, Frederic. 2014. "Effect of Gun Culture and Firearm Laws on Gun Violence and Mass Shootings in the United States: A Multi-Level Quantitative Analysis." *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences* 9(1): 74-93.
 2013 Population estimates from The World Bank, IBRD . IDA. Available at: <https://data.worldbank.org>

Sometimes, those opposed to gun control legislation will rely on figures like Figure 2 to suggest that mass shootings in the U.S. are not the problem they are sometimes made to appear. After all, these are rare events. And with a population large enough, you are bound to experience *some*. The problem with looking at the *rate* of mass shootings as opposed to the *number* of mass shootings is that these are rare events – particularly with restrictive definitions that often exclude things like gang violence, multiple shooters, spree shootings (happening in multiple locations), and more. Small sample sizes make it difficult to analyze data like these statistically. New Zealand tops the list of mass shootings per 1 million people in Figure 2, but they only experienced 3 mass shootings over the 30 years analyzed. The second highest rate in the sample is Finland, with 2.

In statistics, as we examine larger populations, they tend to move toward some basic average (something statisticians call “regression toward the mean”). Smaller populations are more erratic and more susceptible to random fluctuations. This is why 1 or even 2 mass shootings in a country with a small population can propel the group to the top of the list for the *rate* of mass shootings. In medical research, populations with less than a certain baseline number of incidents of a particular injury or disease are considered unreliable—in these cases, it is not possible to statistically distinguish random fluctuations from some kind of meaningful change in the *rate* of disease. Thus, claiming that Figure 2 is a more accurate representation of the problem of mass shootings than Figure 1 is inaccurate—and sometimes deceptive. It ignores the fact that the United States experienced 1.9 times as many mass shootings in the period analyzed as all of the other nations in the sample combined.

DRAFT VERSION

Defining mass shootings as Lemieux (2014) does is restrictive and likely to produce conservative estimates (Bridges, Tober, and Wheeler 2015). For instance, the shooting on Virginia Tech's campus in 2007 fails to qualify—it happened in more than one building on campus (so, it did not happen in “one location”). Many data sets of mass shootings rely on different definitions—and different definitions produce different samples. So, while we know that mass shootings happen more in the U.S. than elsewhere, a more difficult question is whether or not they are occurring more frequently today in the U.S. than they used to occur. In other words, are mass shootings on the rise?

In 2013, President Barack Obama signed the “Investigative Assistance for Violent Crimes Act” into law which granted the attorney general the authority to study mass killings (and attempted mass killings) with guns in the U.S. And this resulted in a series of studies by the FBI of what they started calling “active shooter incidents” in which an individual (or, in some cases, individuals) is/are engaged in killing or attempting to kill people. These are not all mass shooting incidents, but incidents like mass shootings in which authorities have the opportunity to intervene to possibly change the outcome and save lives. Figure 3 shows the frequency of active shooter incidents between 2000 and 2017 from three separate FBI reports along with a trendline indicating the overall direction of change represented by the sample.

Figure 3. "Active Shooter Incidents" in the U.S., 2000-2017

Sources: Blair, J. Pete, and Schweit, Katherine W. 2014. "A Study of Active Shooter Incidents, 2000-2013." Texas State University and Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington D.C. 2014.
Schweit, Katherine W. 2016. "Active Shooter Incidents in the United States in 2014 and 2015." Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington D.C. 2016.
Active Shooter Incidents in the United States in 2016 and 2017, the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) Center at Texas State University and Federal Bureau of Investigation, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington D.C. 2018.

Thus, despite being rare events, mass shootings happen more often in the United States than anywhere else in the world. And, as the FBI and Follman, et al. (2014) found, the rate of occurrence of mass shootings in the U.S. has been *increasing* in recent years—they happen more than they used to.

DRAFT VERSION

Gun Control vs. “Gun Culture”

Mass shootings are a social problem with more than a single cause. An important element is the ability to acquire a gun. And the vast majority of guns used in mass shootings in the U.S. were obtained legally. But guns are only one piece of a larger problem when it comes to mass shootings.

Those advocating for fewer gun restrictions and who oppose gun control legislation often point to Switzerland and Israel. They rely on these two cases to make the argument that more guns do not necessarily lead to more gun violence (e.g., Klein 2012). Indeed, you can see Switzerland among the nations included in Lemieux’s (2014) sample illustrated in Figure 1. It’s an outlier—lots of guns, but a low number of mass shootings. In Switzerland, military service is compulsory for men; in Israel military service is virtually universal. Because of broad military service, large numbers of Swiss and Israelis have access to guns. Yet, the homicide rate in the United States is more than four times the rate in either Switzerland or Israel (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2018).

Additionally, Janet Rosenbaum’s (2012) research shows that Switzerland and Israel are not the “gun utopias” they are sometimes presented to be. For instance, both nations have more strict gun laws than the U.S. For example, owning a gun is not an individual “right” in Israel or Switzerland; you must have a reason to possess a gun. And in Israel, the government rejects around 4 out of every 10 applications submitted for gun permits. Both nations also have strict laws about *where* guns can be, requiring gun owners to leave firearms on military bases (in Israel) or in gun depots (in Switzerland). Both rules severely limit access to firearms among off-duty soldiers and other people who own firearms. So, for instance, as a rule in both Israel and Switzerland, guns are not generally found in households (Rosenbaum 2012).

Like Switzerland and Israel, another nation with high rates of gun ownership but low rates of gun violence is Canada. According to the Small Arms Survey (2011), the United States rate of guns per 100 residents is higher than anywhere else in the world at 89. The nation with the closest rate of gun ownership is Yemen with 55. Canada has about 31 guns per 100 residents, enough to situate Canada among the top 15 nations by rates of gun ownership. Yet rates of firearm homicide are dramatically lower in Canada—0.61 per 100,000 people as of 2016. That rate is almost 8 times smaller than the U.S. the same year, though in Canada it qualifies as the highest homicide by firearms rate since 2005 (Statistics Canada, 2017).

But why the large disparities in gun violence between nations that all have lots of guns? It is for this reason that scholars studying guns differentiate between things like rates of gun ownership and gun control legislation on the one hand, and what they refer to as “gun culture” on the other. Sociologist Jennifer Carlson (2015a, 2015b) argues that the meanings surrounding guns are very different in the U.S. and Canada and argues that the gun *culture* in each society cannot be reduced to rates of gun *ownership*. One fact that supports Carlson’s argument relates to the primary type of gun owned in each society. In Canada, for example, gun owners are more likely to own long guns as opposed to handguns. Long guns are more often used for hunting, while handguns are generally used for other purposes, like target shootings and self-defense.

DRAFT VERSION

A Congressional Research Service report states that as of 2009, the estimated total number of firearms available to civilians in the United States was 310 million (comprising 114 million handguns, 110 million rifles, and 86 million shotguns) (Krouse 2012). To help put that figure in perspective, consider that 310 million guns represents a number higher than the population of the United States in 2009 (306.8 million)—a society with more guns than people. These facts suggest a unique *gun culture* in the United States, and one that is dramatically different from other nations that might also have high rates of gun ownership (Carlson 2015a).

But what is the relationship between gun culture and mass shootings? The slogan that the National Rifle Association (NRA) uses to oppose gun legislation in the U.S. is “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people.” And this is true. In Switzerland, Israel, and Canada, there are lots of guns, but not a lot of gun-related homicides. The NRA leans on this logic when claiming that it is *people* (and not *guns*) that are responsible for gun violence. We suggest, however, that the slogan would be more accurate if it read: “Guns don’t kill people, *men* with guns kill people.” But we can do better still. It’s not just men with guns; it’s *American* men with guns. This is why we argue that the problem of mass shootings is about more than guns, men, and American culture; it’s about the relationship between all three.

I. A Social Psychological Explanation

In a famous essay on the relationship between masculinity and homophobia, Michael Kimmel writes “I have a standing bet with a friend that I can walk onto any playground in America where 6-year-old boys are happily playing and by asking one question, I can provoke a fight. That question is simple: ‘Who’s a sissy around here?’” (1994: 131). Here, Kimmel provides a simple explanation of a more general social process that social psychologists refer to as “social identity threat.” The general idea behind the theory of *social identity threat* is that when a person perceives some elements of their identity that they care about to be called into question, they respond in a patterned way: they attempt to over-demonstrate qualities associated with that identity. Kimmel’s bet is premised on this understanding. By forcing a situation in which some boy’s gender identity will be called into question, Kimmel assumes he can count on that boy to overcompensate by responding with violence to challenge the accusation. There are certainly other ways the boy might respond. But if we can agree that violence is an available (and possibly predictable) response, then this provides evidence that violence and masculinity are connected.

The research on social identity threat is primarily experimental, meaning that people come in to labs, receive different sorts of stimuli, and their responses are measured against others who are subjected to different stimuli. Experimentally “threatening” men’s gender identities is the subject of a small body of scholarship testing what Willer et al. (2013) refer to as the “masculine overcompensation thesis”—the idea that men will respond to “masculinity threats” by *over-*demonstrating masculinity. So, the question is: do men whose masculinity has been threatened respond differently from men who have not experienced masculinity threat? And we now have a large body of research showing that the answer to this question is absolutely “Yes.” To consider how this relates to mass shootings and violence, we have to consider *how* men respond to masculinity threat.

DRAFT VERSION

Christin Munsch and Robb Willer (2012) studied masculinity threat in assessing the ways that college men make sense of sexual interactions in which men are forcing or coercing women into sexual interactions. Munsch and Willer had men read scenarios involving sexual coercion or force by men against women and found that men whose masculinity had been threatened were *less* likely to identify sexual coercion as sexually coercive and more likely to blame the women victimized in the scenario. Willer et al. (2013) subjected the masculinity overcompensation thesis to a larger number of outcomes. They discovered men whose masculinity had been threatened were more supportive of violence and war, more likely to agree with statements about the “inherent superiority of males,” more likely to be supportive of sexual prejudice toward gay men, more likely to identify as Republican, and even more likely to say that they wanted to purchase a sport utility vehicle.

This body of social psychological research is important in making sense of mass shootings as many of the men who participate in mass shootings have experiences they perceive as threatening to their gender identities. Indeed, as Kimmel and Mahler (2003) discovered in a review of school shootings between 1982 and 2001, nearly all of the incidents were boys who perceived themselves as being targeted and bullied. And the most common type of bullying they discovered was “gay baiting”—none of the shooters in their sample identified as gay, but virtually all of them had been teased for being “gay.” More recent work also suggests that gender-specific bullying, and homophobic bullying specifically has become part of the profile for those boys and young men identified as “at risk” of becoming school shooters (Reuter-Rice 2008). And research shows that homophobic bullying is an endemic feature of American high school for many boys and young men (e.g., Pascoe 2007).

A simplistic reading of men who commit mass shootings is that they are *outliers*—social outcasts who react very differently from “the rest of us.” But the shooters are *not* outliers in an important sense—they are men who perceive their gender identities to have been threatened and respond by overcompensating. Masculinity threat research is important because it helps us identify what men understand as “masculine” in the first place. If we experimentally threaten men’s masculinity, what do they turn to when they overcompensate for their perceived loss? This body of scholarship has identified a collection of behaviors to which men turn: dominance over women, sexual prejudice, support for sexual violence and violence more generally.

Messerschmidt’s (1999) research with young boys is supportive of this notion as well. He defines “masculinity resources” as the collection of behaviors through which boys and men enact masculinity. He found that violence is understood as *the* resource boys and young men turn to in a crisis. This understanding of mass shootings as violent gendered behavior helps explain why crimes like mass shootings are so overwhelmingly committed by men—these crimes are enactments of masculinity.

This body of social psychological scholarship answers an important question about mass shootings: why they are so overwhelmingly committed by men. But it does not help us answer a separate question: why *American* men? That question requires a cultural explanation.

II. A Cultural Explanation

Boys and men in the U.S. are teased, endure homophobic and other kinds of bullying and emasculation, and sometimes feel that their gender identities are being “threatened.” But boys and men in other nations experience these things as well. So, why is it that mass shootings are so much more common in the U.S. if—as we discussed above—it is not only a question of gun control? To answer this question requires a *cultural explanation*—one that attends to the unique role that American culture plays in influencing boys and young men to turn to this type of violence so much more often than men anywhere else. To address this necessitates shifting our attention away from the individual characteristics of the shooters themselves to investigate the sociocultural contexts in which violent masculinities are produced and valorized (e.g., Carlson 2015a; Tonso 2009; Kimmel 2013, 2018).

Upward mobility remains a popular characterization of American society—“the land of opportunity.” But opportunities for *some* are made possible by systemically and structurally denying those same opportunities to *others*. This has been true throughout American history, and white men have long benefitted as recipients of these privileges. Over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, however, social movements of various kinds have worked to identify, question, and chip away at these inequalities. Though young, straight, class-advantaged, white men today continue to benefit from racial, gender, sexual, and class inequality, they also work alongside women, racial and sexual minorities in ways less true of their parents and grandparents. Today, these men have to compete with women, people of color, and more because of the gradual erosion of some of the privileges that historically worked in their interest.

Kimmel argues that one of the outcomes associated with moves toward equal rights has been the production of a new emotional framework for white American men living in this age of decline—something Kimmel (2013, 2018) calls “aggrieved entitlement.” Aggrieved entitlement refers to the “gendered sense of entitlement thwarted by larger economic and political shifts” (2018: 15) white men in the U.S. experience.

Aggrieved entitlement is a gendered political psychology that authorizes violence by entitling boys and men to exact revenge on others when they perceive their masculinity to have been threatened or otherwise inaccessible. But it is important to note that, for Kimmel (2013), aggrieved entitlement does not only or always lead to mass shootings. More commonly, it leads to racist and sexist sentiments toward women and racial minorities. Rather, as Kimmel understands it, mass shootings are simply an extremely violent example of a much larger sociocultural issue.

Michael Kimmel (2013) suggests that the relationship between violence and masculinity is particularly acute among a group he labels “angry white men.” When this group acts out, they turn to violence, and when they kill, access to guns and mental health are often quick to be blamed. These explanations are not simply problematic because they are wrong; they are dangerous because they focus attention *only* on individuals rather than the societies in which they live. In 2014, *The New York Times*’ editorial board collaborated on an essay on what we know about school shootings, noting that rates of “severe mental illness [are] roughly stable around the world... while gun violence varies.” And research on gun violence in the U.S. corroborates this

DRAFT VERSION

as only a tiny fraction of gun deaths in the U.S. can be attributed to mental health issues (Swanson et al. 2015). Simply put, explanations that put the focus on individuals are inadequate explanations for *social* problem.

Indeed, Pascoe's (2007) research on the lives of high school boys discovered that many of the struggles that put boys "at risk" of becoming school shooters are incredibly common. While Kimmel and Mahler (2003) found that school shooters were incredibly likely to have been teased for being "gay" at school, Pascoe (2007) shows that that experience is not unique to the shooters. It's part of the drinking water in American high schools. Kimmel's (2013, 2018) research on angry white men builds on this suggestion in Pascoe's research, suggesting that many American men (white men in particular) perceive themselves as being denied social positions and status in social hierarchies that they feel is rightfully theirs. Indeed, Tonso (2009) found that many young men in the U.S. experience a sense of shame and humiliation that stems, in part, from their perceived loss of privilege—an experience acutely experienced in small social networks, like schools.

In Jennifer Carlson's (2015a, 2015b) study of American gun owners, she found many men talked about a very specific kind of "nostalgic longing for a particular version of America" (2015b: 390). Some invoked it by name, referring to it as "Mayberry" or "Mayberry America." They were relying on a fictional town in North Carolina from *The Andy Griffith Show*—a 1960s era family sitcom representing a family in a small community of suburban single-family homes, safety and security. Though historian Stephanie Coontz (1992) has shown that this image of mid-century American family life has always been more fiction than fact, "Mayberry" represents a symbolic image of some of what has been lost to many American men. In an age of economic decline, the men in Carlson's study are living through the evaporation of the manufacturing economy in the U.S. While previous generations of men might have been able to "do" gender by economically providing for their households, this is less possible for many men today. And the men in Carlson's study use guns to mourn this social, cultural, and economic transition—a cultural process Carlson (2015a) refers to as "mourning Mayberry."

Indeed, in Yamane's (2017) history of U.S. gun culture, he argues that at the end of the turn of the 21st century, U.S. gun culture shifted from a culture of recreation to one of armed self-defense and citizenship. And scholarship on gun owners like Carlson's reflect this shift (e.g., Carlson 2015a, 2015b; Stroud 2012). In Stroud's (2012) analysis of *who* was applying for concealed carry licenses, she found that the vast majority of applicants were white men. And racial anxiety was a primary motivation cited by the white men in Stroud's study.

In Carlson's (2015a) research, she shows how the large swathes of men unable to access a "breadwinner" model of masculinity led to a rise of what she terms "protector masculinity"—a model of manhood in which guns provide evidence of gendered status. In support of this, Mencken and Froese (2017) discovered that white men who have experienced economic setbacks or who experience a great deal of anxiety about their economic futures are the group of gun owners *most* attached to their guns. As they write, "white men in economic distress find comfort in guns as a means to reestablish a sense of individual power and moral certitude in the face of changing times" (2017: 22). And the most recent data on gun ownership in the U.S. shows that

DRAFT VERSION

white people are more likely to own guns than are any other racial group—men much more so than women (Parker et al. 2017).

This is the sociocultural landscape of the relationship between masculinities and guns today in the United States. And this *cultural explanation* builds on our *social psychological explanation* by helping to make sense of why boys and men in the U.S. are so much more likely to engage in mass shootings.

Conclusion

School shootings are such a problem in the U.S. that American schools conduct “active shooter drills” the way Cold War era American children endured “duck and cover” drills in case of nuclear explosion. These drills are responses to larger cultural problems. Indeed, there are so many mass shootings in the United States that they are classified by type—often place. So, we have school shootings, workplace shootings, church shootings, nightclub shootings, mall shootings, and more.

The scale of mass shootings is a social and cultural problem unique to the United States. Rates of gun ownership and access are an important piece of this problem. But when we zoom out from the gun itself to the people wielding the gun and back again to the gun culture within which that action is understood, gender becomes impossible to ignore. Mass shootings are enactments of masculinity. But men only rely on guns this way when violence has been culturally masculinized in the first place. Men otherwise unable to access a gendered sense of status in their social hierarchies only turn to guns and violence as *resources* to accomplish masculinity in societies in which violence is understood as “proof” of masculinity.

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DRAFT VERSION

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