From Targets to Agents: Women's Perceptions of Their Vulnerability and the Strategies They Use to Resist

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FROM TARGETS TO AGENTS: WOMEN’S PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR VULNERABILITY AND THE STRATEGIES THEY USE TO RESIST

By

ALEXIS HALKOVIC

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2017
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Women’s Perceptions of Their Vulnerability and the Strategies They Use to Resist

by
Alexis Halkovic

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

From Targets to Agents

Women’s Perceptions of Their Vulnerability and the Strategies They Use to Resist

by

Alexis Halkovic

Advisor: Roderick J. Watts, Ph.D.

Women in the U.S. are sexually victimized at high rates and are socialized to believe they are unable to defend themselves. While there is ample evidence that women can successfully fight off assailants using physical force (Clay-Warner, 2002; Ullman, 2007), women’s self-defense training initiatives are not funded by the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) or any national anti-violence organizations (Carlson, 2014). The NRA, on the other hand, tailors programs to instruct women to use guns for self-defense leaving them as the only national organization promoting women’s right to defend themselves (Carlson, 2014). This project interrogates how women think about their vulnerability and the strategies they employ to defend themselves, focusing on self-defense training and gun ownership. Using the Listening Guide (Gilligan, 2015; Sorsoli and Tolman, 2008), a feminist form of narrative analysis, I did several close “listenings” of twenty-four interviews focusing on voices of vulnerability and resistance. I also did autoethnography based on my participation in ten armed and unarmed self-defense classes. In their narratives, many women reveal strategies of resistance that directly address the form their vulnerability has taken. By taking self-defense, these women re-learned what their socialization as girls and women had left them ignorant of (Tuana, 2006); that they are capable of defending themselves. Women’s narratives about guns hold many contradictions, highlighting the challenges of self and family protection in a context where guns appear to be everywhere. I
propose a new conceptualization of women’s resistance that is informed by vulnerability and experiences of victimization, reflecting complex personhood.
PREFACE

I have long referred to this project as a Trojan horse. I originally envisioned this research project as a means of understanding the ways women resist structural-personal violence in their lives. Stories of resistance, for me, are the antidote to hopelessness, so I conceptualized this research as finding and sharing sources of hope. I had no intention of conducting research on rape, domestic violence, incest or other violence assault. And yet, I learned that these core realities in many women’s lives did not lead to hopelessness, but to various forms of resistance.

My own experience participating in armed and unarmed self-defense classes, interviewing women (and a few men), transcribing interviews, and conducting analysis that required multiple readings (or listenings) left me with secondary trauma, making it difficult to proceed at various points in time. My own experience of trauma has, doubtless, influenced my analysis, my decision to use a lens of trauma as a way of understanding perceptions of vulnerability and resistance, and my reactions to each woman’s narrative. I have done my best to obtain feedback throughout the analysis and writing process in order to mitigate the influence of this effect. And, yet, based on an email exchange I had with Martha McCaughey, the lens of trauma is an important one to consider, as arguments against women’s participation in self-defense training often hinge on trauma. Notably, some of the women I interviewed talked about working through their trauma in self-defense training; a trauma that was intractable through traditional talk therapy.

On the other hand, I was drawn to this research initially by thinking about women and guns and seeking a way to understand women’s desires to have guns for personal protection as I did not grow up with guns and have never considered that they would make me safer in any context. This research has expanded my understanding of the complex ways women contemplate
gun ownership. I respect the depth of reflection that each woman I interviewed, pro-gun or otherwise, has engaged in while contemplating gun ownership. These reflections signify the necessity of thinking through gun ownership when one feels that they themselves or their family members might be at risk. It is these stories that have transformed my own thinking about guns, not as abstract or fetishistic objects, but as a viable form of protection in a world where fear is invoked continuously and the complicated ways gender is woven into this equation.

Finally, I have made a commitment to both my participants and myself to use this research to influence policy. This aim will engage me in anti-gender-based violence work for the foreseeable future. This is but one way conducting this research over the past three years has changed me.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While writing this dissertation has often felt like an isolated and solitary project, there have been numerous people who have guided, shaped, and supported my work, to whom I would like to express my gratitude.

The women and men who have shared your stories with me: You have opened up far more than I ever could have asked. Your stories of overcoming vulnerability and transforming your fears have inspired me to make this dissertation more than my own piece of academic work. I am forever indebted to you.

The instructors who enthusiastically included me in your classes, offering me discounts, informal interviews, access to students and instructors, you have all been invaluable to this work. I thank these organizations and instructors: Tac*One. Joe Deedon. R.A.D.: Korbie Perkins and Josh Burgar. FAST Defense and Shield II Shield: Bill Kipp and Woody Boyd. Impact Personal Safety of Colorado: Sarah Shepherd and Amelia Dorn. All of the folks at Boulder Rifle Club have been helpful and extremely honest at every turn. The folks at Makhaira made me feel welcome. Thank you all for supporting this research in various ways.

I have been blessed to receive extraordinary support from my dissertation advisors. I have deep appreciation for the many ways Rod Watts has joined me in deep, thoughtful inquiry. Thank you for challenging me to think more deeply and identify my own assumptions, to be methodologically rigorous and unambiguous in my writing. Michelle Fine has always been there for me, forgiving me long lapses in communication, and always inspiring and finding the ways to pull my thoughts together more eloquently than I ever could. Your support has been a raft through my dissertation and for this I will always be grateful.

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Dave Brotherton, I appreciate that you have continued to support my, even when I moved to a topic that is outside of your area of research. Thank you, Glenda Russell, for making time and space to support the discipline of writing for me. The structure and guidance you have given me has helped me get through this process. Deb Tolman, thank you for your own work on the Listening Guide, which has been instrumental for my work and for your guidance and support early on and throughout my doctoral process.

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My ability to complete this project was assisted by the music of Arvo Part whose stunning choral, piano, violin music has grounded me and helped me focus. The doves who placed their nest directly outside my office window have given me hope; through snow and hail, being buried so I could not tell if you were there or alive; then emerging, hatching, feeding, and protecting the young dove. Thank you for choosing the spot you chose, as if you chose it just for me.

While I have received extraordinary support throughout this process, I take full responsibility for the content. Any mistakes are mine alone.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: WOMEN’S FEAR AND RESISTANCE

Fear of being the victim of a violent crime is a central concern for most people in the United States (Robin, 2004; Madriz, 1997). While the vast majority of victims of homicide are men of color, specifically young, black men (FBI, 2014), women’s fear of violent crime, specifically white women’s fears of being victims of violent crimes, is more pronounced than men’s fear of crime while women, in general, are at higher risk of rape, sexual assault, and domestic violence than men (Pain, 1997; Wilcox, Jordan & Pritchard, 2006; May, Rader & Goodrum, 2010; Hollander, 2001). While FBI uniform crime reports (UCR) indicate that that vast majority of homicides with a single female victim and a single male perpetrator are committed by someone known to the woman (93%) and large-scale epidemiological research indicate that the vast majority of rapes are committed by someone known to the woman (66%; Kilpatrick, Edmunds, & Seymour, 1992; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a), the images of attacks against women are permeated by the discourse of “stranger danger.” This circulates an image of crime victimization that is inconsistent with the most likely scenario, of being attacked by a spouse or an “intimate acquaintance” (sexual partner), which account for 62% of homicides where women are the victims (Violence Policy Center, 2014). This inconsistency derives not only from images in the media, but from public policy and messages regarding women’s personal safety that communicate that women are more vulnerable to attacks from strangers and should modify their behavior to increase their personal safety (Ullman, 2007). Twenty-two percent of women surveyed in the National Violence Against Women survey (2000) responded that they were victims of intimate partner violence while 17.6% reported they had been raped or sexually assaulted at some point in their life. Together, these numbers represent a large majority of
women being subjected to violence, constituting a culture of violence against women.

In spite of the fact that since the 1980s, we have known that women are most vulnerable to sexual attacks by people they know and who are in the home (Gavey, 2005), much of the training that is meant to reduce instances of rape and sexual assault focuses on changing women’s behavior (to not walk alone at night, for example) and although most rapes occur when there is no bystander present, there has been much focus on training bystanders (Hollander, 2014) with the Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act of 2013 mandating bystander training to reduce sexual assault. Banyard, Plante, and Moynihan (2005) carried a large-scale study of a community-based approach to bystander intervention on a college campus and found positive changes in measures of attitudes, knowledge, and behavior after 2, 4 and 12-month intervals for both male and female participants. The training program they assessed was aimed at both men and women, while treating neither as the victim or the perpetrator, but fostering responsibility for all. A longitudinal study of a Green Dot bystander training programs, aimed at reducing both sexual assault and partner abuse, was implemented at one college and after achieved lower rates of both rape and interpersonal violence than schools with no intervention (Coker, Bush, Fisher, Swan, Williams, Clear & DeGue, 2016). A five-year study comparing thirteen Kansas high schools with Green Dot bystander intervention programs with thirteen control schools found reduced rates of sexual assault, harassment, stalking, and dating violence in years three and four (Coker, Bush, Cook-Craig, DeGue, Clear, Brancato, Fisher & Rektenwald, 2017). Additional research is needed on this type of training and in different contexts to establish effectiveness. There is limited research on the effectiveness of anti-rape training with men, but training with women has been shown to be effective (Ullman, 2007).
Women Can (and do) Fight Back!

Media images and public discourses around violent and sexual assault tend to show women as being helpless victims who are incapable of fighting back (Hollander, 2009). Media coverage of gang rapes, in particular, present an image of women who are “ideal victims”—truly incapable of resisting the attack (and therefore plausibly innocent) while reasserting a social script that women are vulnerable to violent and sexual victimization (Bumiller, 2008). However, research indicates that the common perception of women as being incapable of fighting back against assailants is inaccurate. In fact, across a series of studies, there is demonstrable evidence that women who fight back have been effective in preventing completed rape (e.g. Bart & O’Brien, 1985; Ullman, 1997; 2007; ClayWarner, 2002). Clay-Warner’s (2002) analysis of National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data demonstrates the effectiveness of women’s “physical protective action” (attacking with or without a weapon, threatening with a weapon, chasing the assailant or fleeing), which reduced the likelihood of rape completion by 54% and was reported by over 52% of survey respondents. Clay-Warner’s analysis also corroborated Ullman’s (1997) findings that decisive physical resistance is the most effective form of resistance to rape, leading to more cases of rapes that are not completed (attempted rape) and without serious injury to the woman. Pleading, on the other hand does nothing to prevent rape (and may increase instances of completed rape) and forceful verbal resistance is less effective than physical resistance. There is much less data suggesting that women who carry weapons are more effective in fighting off attackers (Kleck & Sayles, 1990; Quigley, 1993) while there is evidence that guns are used more often by men to threaten female partners than they are used by women to defend themselves (Azrael & Hemenway, 2000). It is also not likely that women will use weapons against the people most likely to attack them—
people they are intimately involved with (Ullman, 2007), raising questions about the benefits of self-defensive gun use for women.

Three studies (Bart & O’Brien, 1985; Brecklin & Ullman, 2005; and Peri, 1991) demonstrate that self-defense training has effectively helped women avoid rape. Bart & O’Brien’s (1985) study consisting of interviews with 51 women who avoided rape and 43 women who were raped showed that women who took self defense training were more than twice as likely to avoid rape as those who didn’t. Peri’s (1991) study of 4000 women who completed “Model Mugging” training (self-defense training where women practice techniques against a man in a padded suit) found that 46 of 48 women assaulted after taking the course were able to fight off their attacker and avoid assault. Brecklin & Ullman (2005) used National Survey on Intergender Relationship data from 3187 female college students and found that women with pre-assault training were more likely to report attempted, rather than completed, rape and felt their actions were more effective in warding off attack than women who did not have pre-assault self-defense training.

While these three studies did not use an experimental design, there are numerous studies that used pre- and post-test assessment of various women’s self-defense training classes (e.g. Frost, 1991; Ozer & Bandura, 1990; Shim, 1998; Smith, 1983; Weitlauf et al., 2000). Brecklin’s (2008) meta-analysis of 20 experimental studies found that there was strong evidence of the effectiveness of self-defense classes for improvement in “assertiveness, self-esteem, perceived control, self-efficacy, physical competence, and participatory behaviors; and decreased anxiety, helplessness, fear, and avoidance behaviors” (p. 72). However, results were mixed for measures of self-esteem, perceived control, fear, and avoidance behaviors (Brecklin, 2008). These studies used various existing instruments to measure broad psychological constructs, suggesting the
need for qualitative research that allows for more in-depth understandings of women’s experiences. Senn and colleagues’ (2015) randomized clinical trial placed 451 first-year female college students into four-module “resistance” training and 442 in a control group. In a one-year follow-up study, the women who received physical self-defense training as well as awareness and healthy relationship skills training reported half as many rapes as the control group. Further the populations represented in these studies were limited to predominantly white college students, indicating the need for further research with non-college and diverse populations.

Jocelyn Hollander’s (2014) study on women who participated in a semester-long feminist self-defense course showed that women who learned self-defense techniques reported numerous instances of asserting themselves in contexts where men tried to violate them sexually that they attributed to taking the self-defense course. This included greater awareness of inappropriate behavior and a greater willingness to speak up or use physical force. Hollander’s (2004) longitudinal study on self-defense participants found that self-defense training was transformational as it addressed women’s fear of sexual assault (a fear greater than death for many), asserted the value of the self, and the right for women to fight back.

Jill Cermele (2010) framed women’s use of self-defense broadly, by asking women to recall stories of sexual assault in which “nothing happened,” encouraging them to recount any type of self-defense strategies they used to ward off an attack. According to Cermele, the sharing of resistance stories has the potential to shift the scripts that perpetuate rape culture by 1) providing examples of successful strategies that can be adopted by other women, 2) providing a counter to the story of women’s vulnerability and 3) allowing women to access their own agency by identifying stories where “nothing happened” because their actions prevented a rape from occurring. Replacing dominant stories of women’s violability (reiterated in Vagina Monologues
and Take Back the night speak outs, according to McCaughey, 2013) with stories of women’s ability to defend themselves provides an important counter-story to the discourse of victimization.

Images of women as victims of domestic violence or sexual assault saturate the news media (rape cases involving high school or college sports team members and NFL players who abuse their wives, e.g.) reinforcing the image of women as victims and the instilling fear of victimization in many women. Many activist responses to violence against women also reinforce the image of women as victims. Notably, Martha McCaughey (2013) observed that the Vagina Monologues and the V-Day organization that is responsible for annual performances by local communities re-established the correlation between victim and vagina, as if having a vagina made women always already vulnerable to attack. On the other hand, McCaughey’s (1997) critical ethnographic research on women’s self-defense training led her to the conclusion that women’s engagement in self-defense training transformed their conceptions of women’s physical vulnerability, thus erasing the “natural” correlation between female gender and the vulnerability to sexual assault. This fundamental shift not only in one’s physical strength and skill, but also perception of one’s physical power, allows for the possibility to change the discourse that permeates rape culture by undermining the assumption that women are vulnerable and men cannot be defeated in a physical attack. McCaughey (1997) presented women’s engagement in self-defense training as a feminist alternative to the discourse of helplessness, dispelling the myth of the weaker sex in need of physical protection from men or from the state.

**Black Feminist Criminology: A Critique**

While creating a shift in perception of differences in physical strength is empowering for individual women, self-defense training does nothing to address the structural issues that put
women at risk, with poor women and women of color being at significantly greater risk of domestic and sexual violence (Potter, 2006; Coker, 2001; Richie, 2000). Taking a page from the black feminist scholarship on violence against women, the academic movement for the use of self-defense could be easily critiqued for its lack of attention to issues of race and class (Richie, 2000). Beth Richie names this failure “erasure” (2000. P. 1135), as it ignores the fact that black women are more than twice as likely to be murdered by men as white women and report significantly higher rates of rape and sexual assault as well (Violence Policy Center, 2014; Ullman, 2007). While the characterization of violence against women as something that can happen to anyone mobilized people around the issue, leading to legislative changes such as the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994, it also left out the stories of poor women and women of color meaning the legislation has largely been responsive to the needs of white, middle-class women (Richie, 2000).

Angela Davis (2000) also cautioned against the use of police and incarceration as the solution to domestic violence in particular, noting the historical relationship between police, violence, and people of color as well as the history of colonialism and sexual assault on native women. Davis also expressed the need to look beyond systems that promote violence against people of color (the carceral system) as solutions to violence that disproportionately strike poor women and women of color. Surveillance is another way that women of color are victimized by the state as higher rates of surveillance in poor communities and communities of color lead to higher instances of arrest, but don’t keep women safer (Davis, 2000).

Donna Coker (2001) pointed out that use of incarceration is not an effective deterrent to domestic abuse and that the majority of people who are arrested for domestic abuse are unemployed and live in disorganized neighborhoods. Also, mandatory arrest laws that have been
pushed through as a way to protect women remove women’s choice to pursue or not to pursue prosecution of abusers (Coker, 2001). While mandatory arrest laws are meant to protect women who are abused in the home, they are predicated on the idea that “battered women” are unable to protect themselves and therefore are not in a position to make a decision about whether or not to pursue criminal prosecution (Coker, 2001). This leads to more poor families and families of color being separated by incarceration while doing little to address the underlying issues that make women of color and poor women more vulnerable to violence in the first place, including poverty, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, and housing instability. These issues of structural inequality are then projected back onto women of color, which stigmatizes them but does nothing to address widespread structural and personal violence (Potter, 2006). Coker (2001) suggested that addressing material inequality is the best solution to violence against women of color but noted that there is much more of a political appetite to address violence through the criminal processing system (see also Potter, 2006).

Advocating for self-defense training for individual women does not address inequality of the lack of services provided to women, in general, and women of color, in particular. And the limited literature on women and self-defense does not explicitly address women of color’s experiences. So, while it is tempting to assume that self-defense training does provide an extra-judicial response to violence against women as women taking charge of their own self-defense can potentially remove police from the picture (unless guns are used in which case, police will certainly come into the picture, and often not to the aid of the woman who used the gun defensively). There are issues with the funding and availability of self-defense training, as self-defense training is not seen as a viable investment in preventing violence against women (McCaughey, 2013).
**Seeking Support for Women’s Right to Defend Themselves**

Advocacy for women’s right to defend themselves is limited by a narrow focus on changing specific policies, often at the expense of empowering women and expanding their safety. Everytown for Gun Safety, an umbrella movement focused on gun control legislation (which includes Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in American and Mayors Against Illegal Guns) and funded by Mike Bloomberg has identified the vulnerability of women to violent attack as one of their key messages, citing that women victims of intimate partner violence are five times as likely to be killed if there is a gun in the house (Everytown, 2014). Everytown (2014) produced a report on domestic violence laws, identifying loopholes and suggesting changes in legislation; however, their suggestions were limited to gun legislation and did not look at the issue of domestic violence as a regular occurrence in women’s lives that could be addressed through measures in addition to ensuring guns are not in the hands of abusers. This narrow focus on gun legislation over women’s safety echoes the work of the The Brady Campaign, an organization committed to ending gun violence, which Jennifer Carlson (2014) has critiqued for its limited insight into ways of addressing violence against women. The Brady Campaign has also focused its efforts on campaigns to restrict legal handgun purchase for those with a history of abuse and has donated to shelters for women who have experienced domestic violence, but does not advocate for or contribute to women’s self-defense training (Carlson, 2014). Arguably, campaigns that are aimed at addressing violence against women could also contribute to funds for self-defense training as well as provide awareness that self-defense can work.

The lack of funding for self-defense training for women at risk of domestic violence reiterates the script that women aren’t capable of defending themselves and, as Martha
McCaughey (1998) noted, [White] feminists’ critique of women using armed or unarmed self-defense because it is violent leaves the violent response as the exclusive right of men. This perpetuates the imbalance that is both assumed and maintained through both domestic violence and rape, keeping women firmly outside of the power balance. Again, more investigation into the effectiveness of self-defense training for women would add to the knowledge of what works in terms of stopping violent and sexual attacks against women.

Guns and Self-defense

Jennifer Carlson (2014) noted that while the NRA promotes guns for women for self-defense purposes, the anti-gun lobby promotes reliance on law enforcement and offers no alternative self-defense options for women making the NRA the largest national organization to promote self-defense for women. Carlson identified the abdication of self-defense opportunities for women by the Brady Campaign as a handing over of a crucial aspect of women’s personal protection to the NRA, while gun safety laws, which are the focus of the Brady Campaign, have not had any demonstrable effects on the rates of violence against women. This has to do both with the widespread proliferation of illegal guns as well as the large number of legal guns already in circulation, estimated at over 300 million in the U.S. (Pew Center for Research, 2013).

Of the privately owned guns in the US, the vast majority are owned by men (37% of people surveyed) with women who reported owning guns representing just 12% of the US population (Pew Center for Research, 2013). On the other hand, 30% of women reported living in a household with guns, indicating that a greater percentage of women live with someone who owns a gun than own one of their own. There is a note of caution relating to women who purchase guns for personal protection as they are more, not less likely to be killed than women
who did not purchase a gun (Violence Policy Center, 2016). Having a gun in the home is also linked to higher instances of gun-related suicides for women, men, and adolescents, particularly when suicidal ideation is present (note that suicidal ideation is one of the negative mental health outcomes of rape, in addition to depression and PTSD) (Anglemyer, Horvath, and Rutherford, 2014). Men who have a gun in their home are not at a greater risk of homicide, but are at greater risk of homicide when other men in their community own guns (Hemenway, 2014).

**NRA Women**

While self reports of the use of “physical protective action” demonstrate that unarmed defensive strategies are effective in preventing rape (Bart & O’Brien, 1985; Clay-Warner, 2002; Ullman, 2007), there is little evidence to support women’s gun ownership and reduction of violence against women (Kleck and Sayles, 1990 is an exception), yet the NRA promotes gun ownership for women as an effective means of personal protection (it has been well-documented that the NRA is funded generously by weapons and ammunition manufacturers demonstrating a plausible conflict of interests for the NRA when promoting women’s use of firearms for self-defense. Violence Policy Center, 2011).

The *NRA Women* website offers profiles of champion women shooters who teach other women to become shooters, too. They also post chilling stories on the *Refuse to be a Victim* section of the NRA Women site like Amanda Collins’ story. Amanda was a college student who was told she couldn’t carry a concealed weapon on campus and was raped in a parking garage on campus. Trained in martial arts, Amanda was not able to overpower her attacker, but was convinced that if she had a gun, she would have prevailed, preventing her assailant from raping and killing another woman months later. The spin given to this story was that restrictions on Second Amendment rights make the most vulnerable populations defenseless against violent
victimization that could easily be defended against with a gun, since guns are the “great equalizer,” making up for differences in size and strength. This contradicts the demographics of Concealed Carry on Campus clubs, which are almost exclusively male and white (over 97%) — not a group that is demonstrably vulnerable (Couch, 2014).

The focus on guns as the only viable self-defense option for women puts women in a sticky situation—women may feel the need to overcome their fear of guns first in order to then address their fear of violent assault (Kelly, N.D.). Thus, overcoming the fear of guns is portrayed as the first step toward taking the necessary steps to defend oneself. Amanda, who represented the NRA, talked about feeling guilty because she believed that had she been allowed to carry her gun, she could have saved another woman’s life. Amanda’s case illustrates a circumstance in which a woman might need a gun for personal protection while also illustrating the association Amanda had between carrying a gun and being capable of defending herself. This story illustrates that preventing women from carrying guns might endanger them while raising an important question (also raised by McCaughey, 1997) of whether a woman can be both a feminist and advocate the use of guns for personal protection. If the desire is to prevent violence against women, why should women be prevented from carrying guns? It also raises the question of the obligation to self-protect (raised by Amanda’s feelings of guilt). Literature that advocates women’s self-defense as a viable way for women to defend themselves cautions that promoting self-defense should not be confused with a mandate for women to defend themselves (e.g. McCaughey, 1997; Ullman, 2007), that transfers the social problem of violence against women from social structures to individual women. In other words, advocating self-defense training should not be confused with blaming the victim (Hollander, 2009).

Sharing Survival Stories
Additionally, as if following Jill Cermele’s (2010) suggestion of sharing stories of resistance, gun rights advocates posted survivor stories, documenting the cases where people have prevailed when under attack because of their use of firearms (thewellarmedwoman.com; gunssavelives.net). The oft-cited, yet widely refuted Kleck & Gertz (1995) study revealed that the data that are contained in the FBI’s NCVS and UCR reports do not give complete records of the number of cases where people have used guns for self-defense. The problem with reporting is a legitimate one as there is not comprehensive documentation of any type of shooting-related instances, a fact demonstrated by the New York Times special report into the underreporting of accidental shootings involving children (Luo & McIntire, 2013). The lack of standardized incident reporting protocols among police officers in different parts of the country is complemented by a lack of a centralized system of reporting gun-related wounds that are treated in emergency rooms (Luo & McIntire, 2013). The long-standing lack of federal funding for research on gun-related violence has contributed to a lacuna in centralized, accurate data relating to all types of gun-related violence (Frankel, 2015). The data we have relating to any type of firearms incident are partial, inaccurate, and subject to the judgments of those providing information for the reports. (We also lack accurate data on violence and victimization. Vera Lopez (2014) referred to the “lost Latin@s” because FBI reports, including the NCVS lack demographic data for Latin@s (who are lumped under the “White” and “Black” racial categories) meaning we have no victimization data for Latin@s). In an effort to address shortcomings in available data relating to the number of cases in which guns were used defensively, Kleck & Gertz (1995) carried out a phone survey in which they asked respondents about instances of defensive gun use. Extrapolating from their sample of 4977 participants to the population of the U.S., Kleck and Gertz arrived an estimated 2.2 to 2.5 million defensive gun
uses per year. There were numerous methodological shortcomings in their study resulting in an overestimate of unusual events (Hemenway, 1997). Azrael and Hemenway’s (2000) random digit phone interviews demonstrated that guns were more likely to be used aggressively than defensively (Azrael & Hemenway, 2000) which complicates the case for women’s gun ownership for personal protection.

Because there is no centralized datum tracking gun violence, independent groups have deputized themselves to track rates of violence. This includes, but is not limited to the Violence Policy Center, Everytown for Gun Safety, and Gun Violence Archive. These sites aggregate gun violence data using different methodologies, relying on newspaper reports. These are valuable sources of data on a topic where information has been intentionally repressed.

**Gun Laws and Personal Protection**

Considering the fact that women are most vulnerable to rape and violent assault in their homes, and the fact that guns are commonly viewed as a means of personal protection in the home, it would seem appropriate for self-defense gun legislation to enable women to use guns to defend themselves against violent attackers. However, laws like Florida’s Stand Your Ground (SYG) have not generally protected women from prosecution when they have cited the law in personal protection cases in the state of Florida (Crisafi, 2014). The conviction of Marissa Alexander for firing a warning shot when threatened by her ex-husband exemplified how SYG denies women protection in domestic violence contexts. Notably, the justification the prosecutor used to incriminate Alexander was that she was not afraid, she was angry (Light, 2017, March 23). In fact, juries have found women who used weapons other than guns innocent while women gun users have been found guilty as their actions appeared to be premeditated (Crisafi, 2014). The assumption was that if a woman were able to obtain a gun and use it against her abuser, her
actions were premeditated and therefore could not be seen as self-defense (Crisafi, 2014). On the other hand, concealed carry permits assume that guns are carried for self-defense purposes, without categorizing their use as premeditated.

According to those who subscribe to the more guns, less crime theory (Lott, 1998), SYG laws should reduce homicide; however, SYG laws were written specifically to protect people from strangers who presented a threat while in the process of committing another crime (e.g. robbery). And yet, the expansion of SYG does nothing to expand women’s tools to protect themselves from violent partners.

While SYG laws have now been passed in 27 states, the legal protections for those who use lethal force in self-protection situations have increased; at the time of the writing of this dissertation, the state of Florida was pushing to further extend defendant’s rights who claimed stand your ground, making the burden of proof entirely the prosecution’s (The Editorial Board, 2017, March 9; Light, 2017, March 23). Most of the states that adopted SYG laws directly borrowed the language used in Florida’s law that allows people to use lethal force in cases when they believe their life is in danger either inside the home or anywhere a person is legally allowed to be (Cheng & Hoekstra, 2013). Other states have Castle Doctrine laws which allow people to legally use lethal force to defend themselves when they believe their life is in danger only when they are in their own home (Cheng & Hoekstra, 2013). Both sets of laws are a repudiation of the “duty to retreat” laws inherited from British law that required people to retreat from an attack, including in a person’s own home. Both sets of laws also limit the legal protections against lethal violence for those who are mistaken for violent intruders, like Trayvon Martin. The establishment of a legal precedent for civilians to use lethal force reduces the financial and criminal risk of making an incorrect assessment that results in the death of an innocent person.
The acceptance of the possibility of making such a mistake undervalues the lives of those who are “collateral damage” in the enactment of self-defense, marking the violence of their death as banal. The expendability of certain lives is banal violence. In the aftermath of Mike Brown’s being fatally shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri protests and actions across the country publicized the fact that the people who are mistakenly shot by police or civilians are frequently people of color. Stand Your Ground and Castle Doctrine laws make these shootings more, not less likely, making some people’s self-defense perilous for others, including women and people of color.

**Cognitive Psychology and Inaccurate Perception**

In addition to real-world data that link laws facilitating the defensive use of guns in fear-based contexts to increases in homicides, cognitive psychology research provides evidence that implicit bias drives people’s decision to shoot. Jennifer Eberhardt’s research has shown that unconscious exposure to Black faces causes people to identify degraded images of guns and weapons faster (Eberhardt, Goff, Purdy, and Davies, 2004). Also, participants primed with crime-related words identified black faces more quickly than participants who did not receive the prime (Eberhardt et al., 2004). Knowing that implicit bias actually affects what we see and how we act should require people to be more, not less cautious when making judgments about the use of lethal force when they are under threat. The case of New York City police officers shooting Amadou Diallo 41 times as he reached for his wallet because they mistook the wallet for a gun was a sobering example of the deadly outcomes of incorrect judgment. Eberhardt’s studies demonstrate the racialized associations that are made in people’s brains that can determine actions when people are making decisions about self-defense. When guns are being used, the reaction is much more likely to be lethal, therefore caution must be exercised. What we
know about SYG laws, implicit bias, and the contexts in which women are vulnerable to assault, identifies short-comings in legal approaches to women’s safety concerns. For this reason, additional research is needed to identify ways women do seek to overcome these policy deficits.

**Scope for Further Research**

While there is research that demonstrates the effectiveness of self-defense training in preventing assault (Senn, et al, 2015; Bart & O’Brien, 1985; Peri, 1991; Brecklin & Ullman, 2005) and there is evidence that women’s efforts to fight back against rape and sexual assault are often effective (Clay-Warner, 2002; Ullman, 2007), as well as evidence that self-defense training can be transformational for women (Hollander, 2004; McCaughey, 1997), there is little research that looks broadly at women’s choice of self-defense strategies or looks closely at the narratives of fear in women’s lives. There is also limited literature that looks at both guns and self-defense (McCaughey, 1997 is an exception to this) as well as non-formalized ways women protect themselves. Also, there is a disconnect in literature on intimate partner violence and rape – the two most prevalent types of violence against women, as if these two spheres of violence are separate from a larger culture that tolerates the violent victimization of women and a state that defines both what victimization is and how it can be treated (Bumiller, 2008).

**The Current Study**

This research project documents women’s stories of vulnerability and resistance, focusing on the complex issues that women struggle with as they think through ways of making themselves safe, specifically focusing on women’s participation in self-defense and gun ownership as two forms of resistance. Using individual interviews and ethnographic data based on my participation in armed and un-armed self-defense classes, I contextualized resistance strategies within women’s lives, developing a complex understanding of women’s resistance.
Research Questions

Concerning women who employ the use of guns, feminist self-defense training, or other, informal ways of establishing personal safety, I engage the research questions: (1) what themes underlie women's feelings of physical safety and vulnerability (and how is race implicated)? (2) What decisions and actions do women take to address feelings of being vulnerable to violent physical attack? Within these questions I inquire specifically about: (a) the life events or social messages that prompt women to engage in armed or unarmed self-defense training, (b) the considerations in choosing armed vs. unarmed self-defense training (c) the effect of the training on perception of personal safety and ability to defend oneself in various contexts. (d) The references to power and vulnerability women make in describing their experiences.

Research Setting

I carried out research in the Front Range area of Colorado. The Front Range is in northwestern Colorado and includes the cities of Denver, Boulder, Fort Collins, and smaller towns in the area. Colorado is one of the many states that passed laws permitting the use of lethal force in one’s home. Colorado’s so-called “Make my day law” was recently expanded (“make my day better”) to cover a person’s place of business as well as their home (Field notes, Makhaira, 2015). Colorado has never had a duty to retreat, thus Make My Day is an explanation of the contexts in which lethal force is permitted and requires evidence of fear of imminent harm, unlike SYG. Colorado has also profited from the gun industry, not only as the home to a number of weapons and ammunition manufacturers, but also due to the hunting industry that brings many people into Colorado every year to hunt big game like elk (hugahunter.com). Recently, gun manufacturer Magpul announced its plans to relocate their manufacturing facility from Erie, Colorado to Cheyenne, Wyoming, as a response to legislation restricting the sale of
high capacity magazines in Colorado while maintaining a presence in the state in order to push back on “anti-gun” legislation which was said to be damaging to Colorado’s economy (Richardson, 2014).

Colorado’s complicated relationship with guns is epitomized by the Columbine shooting, which scarred the state and the more recent rampage shooting in the Aurora movie theater signaling a violent undercurrent. Changes in gun legislation to reduce the chances of similar types of mass violence have met with resistance. For instance the Tek-9 high capacity semi-automatic was used during the Columbine shooting in 1999, but high capacity magazines were not restricted until 2012, after the Aurora shooting (Hutchins, 2016). In addition to restrictions on high-capacity magazines, Colorado also recently passed a law requiring a wait period before purchasing a handgun as well as criminal and mental health background checks. The political backlash against this legislation led to Colorado’s first-ever recall election in which two state senators lost their seats (Weber, 2013). In the most recent election, the news media repeatedly reported that Governor Hickenlooper was vulnerable in the election because of his support of gun control legislation; however, he won re-election by a narrow margin. The two state senate seats also returned to democratic power in the recent election (Hutchins, 2016).

Colorado is one of 12 states being targeted by Bloomberg’s Everytown for Gun Safety, which supported both Hickenlooper’s re-election campaign and several state senate races (Schouten, 2014). The founder of Moms Demand Action (now under the umbrella of Everytown), Shannon Watts, moved to Colorado during the 2014 election and opened the Colorado campaign headquarters in Jefferson County (Field notes, Moms Demand Action meeting, 2014). Her move to Colorado signaled the campaign’s focus on Colorado as a site for reform, but the impact is yet to be determined.
Guns also surfaced as a State University issue in 2012 when a Colorado Supreme Court ruling determined that it was unconstitutional for public universities in Colorado to restrict students with concealed carry licenses from carrying concealed guns on campus (Frosch, 2012). Faculty members at CU Boulder spoke out about their concerns for their own safety and the safety of their students, but were sternly told by the Chancellor that discrimination against students with concealed carry permits would not be tolerated (Chancellor’s Corner, 2012).

Five Colorado universities have been under investigation for Title IX sexual violence complaints, including the University of Colorado-Boulder (CU-Boulder), Colorado State University, University of Denver, Regis University, and the University of Colorado-Denver. CU-Boulder has implemented a mandatory three-session orientation designed to educate students on topics ranging from defining sexual assault to learning how bystanders can prevent sexual assault from occurring (Brundin, 2014). The orientation program does not include self-defense classes (Field Notes. Meeting with Title IX administrator, April 2016). In spite of the focus on sexual assault on campus, CU-Boulder did not have rape kits at its healthcare facilities nor did any Boulder County hospitals, meaning if a woman was raped and wanted to have the option to report the incident, she would have needed to drive to Westminster (around 30 minutes from Boulder) in order to have access to a rape kit (Dukakis, 2014). Funding was provided for the implementation of a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE) program in Boulder County subsequent to a report on Colorado Public Radio that disclosed the lack of facilities for rape victims in Boulder County (Cheek, 2015). Colorado rated 18 out of 50 states in the rates of women murdered by men in 2012 (Violence Policy Center, 2014).

The Wild, Wild West

Finally, as a “frontier state” Colorado has a unique relationship with guns and the use of
self-defense (Limerick, 1987), in addition to having a history of racialized violence with the expulsion of the native Arapahoe, Ute, and Cheyenne people, and with their extermination, as in the case with the Sand Creek Massacre (Coel, 1988). This history, specifically of Boulder County and the Denver metro area demonstrates the justification of lethal force when people have felt their property was threatened, while using a discourse highlighting white women’s vulnerability at the center of the argument (Coel, 1988), in other words, *engineered vulnerability* or the argument made by those with financial, property, and race privilege that the other is a threat to their existence (Couch, 2014) has been used by white settlers as the justification for violence in Northern Colorado as well as other parts of the “frontier”.

Tonso (1982) wrote about a fundamental cultural difference between the attitudes toward guns as narrated by people in the frontier states and people in other parts of the U.S. This difference, based on geographical isolation, lack of legal institutions (including police officers), and an attitude both of entitlement and fear promoted widespread use of guns for both hunting and personal protection in the Western states, including Colorado. Colorado’s history as a frontier state and its present as a state struggling to manage a violent past make it a fertile site for examining women’s attitudes about guns and self-defense training.
CHAPTER 2
RESEARCH PROCEDURES

My research plan consisted of participant observation and individual interviews. I obtained IRB approval from the Graduate Center on April 21, 2015. I participated in seven self-defense and three gun-training classes (see Table 1 for list of courses, organizations, and locations). During the classes, I participated as a student, although I introduced myself as a researcher to both students and instructors. Prior to participation, I reached out to each organization and asked permission to attend classes and to recruit participants (see Appendix A for my recruitment letter). Instead of taking notes during classes, which proved to be impossible, I participated in all aspects of the classes and I took notes at the end of each day of class. I endeavored to record contents of the classes as well as the climate, describing my own experiences and reactions. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the other participants, I did not write about personal stories women disclosed about themselves during class.

I also conducted twenty-six individual interviews, lasting between one and one and a half hours. Interviews took place either at the participant’s home, my home, private meeting rooms in public libraries, or (in one case) a conference room at the woman’s place of work. I asked each woman to provide a pseudonym at the beginning of her interview and I referred to the women by their pseudonyms in all documentation from that time onward. I personally audio-recorded and transcribed all interviews.

Recruitment

This research is based on interviews I conducted with women who participated in either self-defense or gun training classes in the Front Range area of Colorado, specifically from the organizations: Model Mugging (women’s self defense: Broomfield), Impact Personal Safety of
Colorado (women’s basic and advanced self-defense: Denver), R.A.D./Rape Aggression Defense (women’s self-defense: Glendale), Fast Defense (48 hours of adrenaline/mixed self-defense. Longmont), Shield II Shield (Responsible handgun use under stress. Wheatridge), Makhaira (Women’s concealed carry. Loveland), Boulder Rifle Club (Personal protection in the home. Unincorporated Boulder County), Tac*One (Women’s self-defense. Denver), and Blue Bench (Women’s empowerment training. Denver) (see Table 1) beginning in April 2015 and ending in March 2016. Because my intention was to ask women about their decision-making processes around choosing to participate in self-defense or gun training classes and to learn what benefits they did (or did not) gain from participating, I recruited women who participated in self-defense and gun training classes. I attended ten classes myself (seven self-defense and three shooting), totaling 129 hours.

Before participating in the class, I reached out to the person in charge and asked their permission to recruit participants from their class and answered any questions they had about my research. In one case, I received a statement informing me that the organization supported my First Amendment Rights and neither condoned nor objected to my recruiting participants or writing about my experiences in their class. When I attended classes, I introduced myself to all of the participants as a researcher, assured participants I would not write down any personal stories they disclosed during class, offered to answer any questions about my research, and asked women if they were interested in signing up to participate in an interview at the end of class. In some classes, all of the women signed up for interviews while in others, only a few women signed up. Women in self-defense classes were more likely to sign up for interviews than women in gun training classes, so I interviewed mostly women I recruited through self-defense training classes.
Table 1  
*Training Organizations/Recruitment Sites, Locations and Course Names*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Course Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tac*One</td>
<td>Denver, CO</td>
<td>Women’s Self-defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R.A.D (Rape Aggression Defense)</td>
<td>Glendale, CO</td>
<td>Women’s Self-defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boulder Rifle Club</td>
<td>Unincorporated Boulder County, CO</td>
<td>Personal Protection in the Home (concealed carry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model Mugging</td>
<td>Broomfield, CO</td>
<td>Women’s Self-defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact Personal Safety of Colorado</td>
<td>Denver, CO</td>
<td>Basic &amp; Advanced Women’s self-defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Blue Bench</td>
<td>Denver, CO</td>
<td>Women’s Empowerment Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makhaira</td>
<td>Loveland, CO</td>
<td>Women’s Concealed Carry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAST Defense (fear adrenal stress training)</td>
<td>Longmont, CO</td>
<td>48 hours of adrenaline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shield II Shield</td>
<td>Wheatridge, CO</td>
<td>Responsible gun use under stress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sample**

A large number of the women I interviewed grew up with guns in their homes: ten used guns growing up and an additional seven grew up in families where gun were present, but did not use them themselves. Only seven women did not grow up around guns at all. Eight women owned a gun at the time of our interview, eight were not sure whether they wanted to own a gun or not, and eight women had no plans to get a gun. I found that sampling predominantly from self-defense classes provided a large enough sample of gun users as well as a variety of experiences with guns (see table 2). Twenty-two of the women have participated in self-defense training. The two women who had not participated in self-defense were both gun owners who carried concealed weapons. I did not actively exclude any women who signed up, but some women excluded themselves by not responding to my request to schedule an interview.
Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Previously /Maybe</th>
<th>Family Member Owns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you currently own a gun?</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3 (Prev)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you want a gun in the future?</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8 (Maybe)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you grow up with guns in your home?</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you carry a concealed weapon?</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2 (Prev)</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you participated in self-defense training?</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I interviewed twenty-four women and two male instructors (see Table 3). Twelve of the women I interviewed were self-defense or gun instructors. Seventeen women included in this analysis were White, four were Latina, two were Asian American and one was African American. This was reflective of the demographics of the classes I recruited from which were predominantly white. Fifteen of the women reported one or more forms of traumatic childhood experience, including incest (seven), physical abuse (two), psychological abuse (four), and childhood sexual assault (two), with eleven women reporting multiple forms of victimization (see Table 4). Six women reported domestic violence, five reported being stalked, two reported being raped, and five reported attempted/averted assault or rape. Eleven of the women reported private or intimate violence: incest, child abuse (physical/psychological), inter-partner violence, stalking by an intimate partner. These violent experiences were linked to the significant psychological trauma reported by many of the women. While I did not ask about traumatic experiences, trauma informed many of the women’s vantage points. The pervasiveness of victimization and trauma, while not necessarily representative of the population as a whole, provides important insight into the ways women resist traumatic experiences. Also, the high rates of intimate or private violence (incest, domestic violence) demonstrate the hidden toll of private
violence, some of the women having only recently disclosed their experiences to others (see Table 4).

Table 3
Sample demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Type</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Latina</th>
<th>Asian American</th>
<th>African American</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trainee Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor Male*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Not included in the current analysis

Table 4
Number of women reporting victimization by type** (N=24)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of violence</th>
<th>Public/Private</th>
<th>Familiar/Stranger</th>
<th>Total Number reporting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incest</td>
<td>Private 7</td>
<td>Familiar 7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child abuse (physical)</td>
<td>Private 2</td>
<td>Familiar 2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child abuse (psychological)</td>
<td>Private 4</td>
<td>Familiar 4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Childhood sexual assault</td>
<td>Private 1</td>
<td>Familiar 1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public 1</td>
<td>Stranger 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-partner violence</td>
<td>Private 6</td>
<td>Familiar 6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>Private 1</td>
<td>Familiar 1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public 1</td>
<td>Stranger 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted assault or rape</td>
<td>Private 2</td>
<td>Familiar 2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public 3</td>
<td>Stranger 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attempted murder</td>
<td>Private 1</td>
<td>Familiar 1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public 1</td>
<td>Stranger 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stalked</td>
<td>Private 2</td>
<td>Familiar 2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public 2</td>
<td>Stranger 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(No reported experiences of victimization)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>(5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Private 27</td>
<td>Familiar 27</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public 8</td>
<td>Stranger 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Many women reported multiple forms of victimization

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured interviews, asking all of the women a common set of questions, asking follow up questions based on women’s responses. At the beginning of each
interview, I walked each woman through the consent form, explaining that their information would be confidential, that they had the right not to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering, that they had the right to stop the interview at any time for any reason, and that they would be compensated twenty-five dollars for participating in the interview (see consent form in Appendix B). I opened each interview asking two questions about messages heard while growing up: “What messages do you remember hearing about vulnerability when you were growing up?” and “What would you say are the messages that you grew up with in terms of your own ability to defend yourself?” I followed up, asking for specific examples when the reply was general. I also asked, “Is there a reason/occurrence that lead to your deciding to take gun/self defense training?” to learn about women’s decisions to participate in trainings. I asked about women’s experiences in self-defense and gun training classes: “Can you describe what it was like the first time you participated in self-defense/gun training?” and “What part of the training was most important to you?” I also asked if anything was different after participating: “Can you remember if anything changed in your life after you participated in women’s self-defense/gun training for the first time?”

I also asked all women whether they grew up with guns in their home and in what specific situations might they find a gun to be useful for personal protection. I ended each interview by asking, “What factors do you think contribute to women’s vulnerability in general?” For each question, I asked follow-up questions, based on the individual’s response. Additionally, I asked instructors how they became instructors and what they personally got out of teaching other women. The interview protocol is in Appendix C.

Cross-case analysis
I used two approaches to the analysis of the interview data. The predominant approach is a feminist narrative analysis approach called the Listening Guide (Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008). I used the Listening Guide to interrogate the relationship between women’s vulnerability and resistance as well as to understand women’s attitudes and affect about guns and self-defense training. I defined this method in detail in chapter 4. The second method I used is thematic coding to compare women’s responses across all cases. I used thematic coding to develop an understanding of the patterns that were common across a number of cases as it was useful to know if women’s perceptions were common or unique. I specifically looked at women’s attitudes towards gun ownership and self-defense training, seeking to identify themes that were common across a large number of participants and themes that represented unusual perspectives.

**Coding**

I coded women’s responses to two specific questions: what are the most important things about women’s self-defense training? And under what circumstances might you want a gun for self-defense? After coding all interviews for plot (line-by-line coding), I scanned through each woman’s transcribed interview and identified her responses to each question, one at a time. I then listed out each response in a table (most women had multiple responses to each question), with separate columns for each question (benefits of self-defense training and reasons for women’s gun ownership), including each woman’s pseudonym. Working over several iterations, and following Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis procedures, I grouped similar responses together, identifying these as common codes and, when particularly evocative, using the women’s own words to develop names for the codes (e.g. “finding my fighting spirit” and guns are “too much”). I performed the full coding process twice, with several months passing between the two rounds of coding. There was a high rate of consistency between
the two rounds, although I identified several new themes the second time. Additionally, my research assistant reviewed all of the codes, comparing them with her own notes on each of the participants. She asked questions, made a few additions, and for the most part, confirmed that the codes I identified were representative of the women in the study. I discussed these codes later in this chapter with tables summarizing women’s responses.

**Responses: Benefits of self-defense training**

Looking at themes I identified in women’s narratives related to what they found to be most important about their participation in self-defense training, the women I interviewed mentioned a large number of different benefits of participating in self-defense training as well as a few concerns (See Table 5). The most frequently-mentioned were: *finding your fighting spirit* or recognizing that one had the ability to fight (thirteen participants), learning verbal skills/boundary setting (eleven participants), and *sharing stories/transmission of knowledge* (nine participants). Finding your fighting spirit addressed the fact that women previously did not believe that they were capable of fighting, but discovered that they were. Beth said, “*I found my fighting spirit. That I could in fact take care of myself if I needed to. That I was stronger than I thought that I was.*” Zarina said, “definitely the way I saw myself changed, because I tapped into that warrior energy for the first time.” Women’s self-defense classes specifically addressed *boundary setting* or *verbal self-defense* skills which include being able to say “no” and managing confrontations with both strangers and people familiar to you. Maddy, a White thirty-eight year-old executive consultant decided not to participate in any fights on the third day after two days of a training that triggered past trauma. She identified that she drew an important boundary when she told the instructor she would not be fighting and told me, “part of what I took away from the class was that willingness to violate social protocol, and do what worked for me.” This also
echoed valuing – which four women referred to when they talked about self-defense training making them aware that they were *worth fighting for*. Expressing the importance of *sharing stories/transmission of knowledge* Michelle, a White forty-two year old instructor who taught self-defense to both men and women talked about how her first instructor sharing his story of abuse helped her to connect with the training on a deeper level, something she emulated by sharing her own story of surviving incest in classes she taught:

> When I started telling my story in my self-defense classes, the dynamic changed because it’s like I didn’t have this big persona like I’m a badass and I’m going to teach you what to do. It was more like, I’ve been through shit, too and I’m not perfect and I need help and I’m here to give a little bit of what I learned to you.

Michelle, like many of the other women I spoke to expressed an appreciation for being able to share experiences with other women in a context where people were generous and supportive of one another.

It is notable that learning physical skills, while important to many women, was not seen as being the overriding benefit of self-defense training, instead the primary benefits address ways girls and women are socialized, e.g. learning that women are capable of fighting (fighting spirit) and learning verbal self-defense skills or boundary-setting. Additional benefits were clearly psychological, including *trauma recovery/healing* and *knowing I am worth fighting for/valuing*. Other benefits had to do with the ways the brain handles stress, including *control/adrenaline management* and *overcoming the freeze response*. Overcoming the freeze response was, for both women who gave this response, a desired outcome of taking self-defense training as they had each been assaulted (one by a flasher and one was sexually assaulted) and had “frozen” and not able to act in the ways they later wished they had. Many self-defense classes intentionally train
women in an adrenalized state to help women overcome the freeze response. Another stated reason for adrenalized stress training is that learning under such conditions is correlated with the ability to use those skills in an actual situation in which one is under stress (Meichenbaum & Deffenbacher, 1988). This research does not attempt to confirm or deny this assertion.

Only a few women expressed negative responses to or concerns about self-defense training, including acknowledging still being vulnerable, concern about not remembering skills if assaulted, identifying that going through the training was “traumatic” or “brutal,” and one woman said that self-defense training was not empowering for her (although might be for others). I discuss women’s beliefs about self-defense in chapter 5.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit of Self-Defense</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finding fighting spirit/strength</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal skills/boundary setting</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing stories/Transmission of Knowledge</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma recovery/Healing</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical skills</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control/Adrenaline management</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing I am worth fighting for/Valuing</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing we always had this ability</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to protect children</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming freeze response</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary tools (if you don’t have a gun)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less afraid</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern: I am still vulnerable</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern: I might not remember skills</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern: training was traumatizing</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern: was not empowering</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Making a Case for Guns
Unlike women’s predominantly positive feelings about participation in self-defense training, women’s feelings about gun ownership were mixed and even women who own guns and have positive attitudes about the use of guns for self protection expressed both benefits and risks of gun ownership (see Table 6). Women described specific situations where they felt that guns would be beneficial for self protections with seven women identifying public threats, including knowledge of violent crimes in her neighborhood or an active shooter situation. Three women said they simply felt safer knowing the gun were there (in the home or in the car). Two women discussed: private threats (a stalker; abusive partner); needing a gun to protect family against a threat that is bigger than me (e.g. multiple assailants); guns being the great equalizer, leveling the playing field for women; and rights (one saying that women have the right to defend themselves and another, “it is my Second Amendment right”).

Women made more references to the risks of gun ownership than the benefits, with eight women believing that the risks of gun ownership might outweigh the benefits. Risks included concerns about children being harmed by guns as well as risks to one’s self. Five women indicated that women might not be able to pull the trigger (four referring to themselves and one referring to concerns about other women). Four women expressed that guns were “too much” – inflicting too much violence (in domestic violence contexts, accidents, and other aggressive acts). Three women were concerned with the level of responsibility gun ownership entails, expressing that gun owners need to have a high level of training that most do not attain. The codes around women’s beliefs around gun ownership illustrate the complexity of women’s thinking about gun ownership. I discuss women’s complex personhood and their narratives around gun ownership in chapter 5.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits and Risks of Guns for Women’s Protection</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public threat</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel safer knowing it is there</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private threat</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great equalizer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protect family against threat that is bigger than me</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essential knowledge/Survival skill</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can take people by surprise</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk might outweigh benefits</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk: May not be able to pull trigger</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk: Too much violence</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk: Huge responsibility</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk: False sense of safety/do not address fear</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk: Can be taken from you/get into the wrong hands</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Vulnerability

I started this research project prepared to study women’s empowerment and decision-making around resistance strategies. As I participated in one women’s self-defense and gun training class after another, I was quickly confronted with a level of intimacy and vulnerability within the classes themselves. In most classes, women (and female and male instructors) started classes by sitting in an opening circle where some disclosed major personal traumatic events including child abuse, childhood sexual assault, incest, inter-partner violence, rape and more. I was struck by the gesture in two of the classes of having a box of tissues circulate in the opening circle. One instructor, in particular, authorized women’s tears by shedding her own – not over her own story or over her own grief, but on behalf of the women in the class. These tears were shed out of empathy, outrage, and deep sorrow over the traumatic experiences women endured. I shed tears too as I listened to women’s stories. I was deeply affected by women’s experiences in private while listening, transcribing, and analyzing women’s stories, but also during many of the interviews. Sometimes, my participants reflected my own emotions back to me. While listening to my interview with Robin (a pseudonym. All of the women I interviewed selected a pseudonym at the beginning of the interview and I referred to them only by their pseudonym from that point on), a competitive shooter and NRA instructor, she said to me, “you look really sad. Did something bad happen to you, too?” I tried hard not to be emotional during interviews and classes, but this was not always an easy task. During another interview Sunshine jumped up and said, “I think I have tissues,” reminding me that I was the one holding the space who should
have planned for tears – not mine, but hers. And yet at times, it was difficult not to be moved by the women’s stories.

Many women shared stories that were heart-breaking to listen to and felt unbearable to endure. And yet, the women I interviewed, while carrying the burden of tremendous personal trauma, also exhibited a strong will to push beyond their trauma, most raising children, living active professional lives, and many having a commitment to do work to address the very types of trauma that they have survived.

**Trauma**

I did not initially frame this project as one about women’s traumatic experiences, nor did I select women for the characteristic of *trauma survivor*; however, going through the process of participating in self-defense and gun training classes, interviewing women, and transcribing their narratives, traumatic experiences were dominant. Of the twenty-four women I interviewed, only five reported that they had *not* experienced any traumatic forms of victimization. (Those five did report sexual harassment, cat calling, stalking and threats, but insisted were not major concerns to them.) Based on the centrality traumatic life events took in the majority of the women’s lives, I felt it was important that women’s stories of trauma be understood as central to their understandings of vulnerability and as being an important factor among women who sought out self-defense training or guns as forms of personal protection. When women spoke of their vulnerability, they told stories of incest, child abuse, domestic violence, attempted murder, rape and childhood sexual assault. They told stories of events that stayed with them for years, shaping the way they understood themselves and the world around them. Judith Herman (1997) talked about how trauma takes away a victim’s sense of power while also destroying one’s feelings of control and connections to other people.
Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning. (Herman, 1997, p. 33)

Trauma is the backdrop of many of the women in this study’s stories. Considering what is lost through traumatic experiences, regaining a sense of power, connection, and control is a crucial form of resistance.

Learning about women’s traumatic experiences caused me to re-think the theoretical underpinnings of this project. I had initially proposed using the construct engineered vulnerability (Couch, 2014), a concept that is based in White people’s understandings of themselves being vulnerable to assault by people of color. However, the women in my study overwhelmingly shared stories of personal victimization as being the source of their vulnerability, rather than abstract or socially constructed notions of fear or vulnerability. Many of the women also discussed the fact that they were taught that they were incapable of defending themselves, because of their gender, identifying that socialization was also a significant factor in women’s perceptions of their vulnerability. Unlike Kristine De Welde (2003) who reported that women’s self-defense training classes were spaces where White privilege was reproduced, critiquing the white participants for developing “entitlement” to being free from fear that was linked to whiteness and class dominance (evidenced by women refusing to work in jobs where they were being harassed, for example), I experienced self-defense classes as spaces where the differences between prejudice and intuition was stressed as was the message that women were most likely to be raped or sexually assaulted by someone they know, at odds with the overblown
and spurious notion of “stranger danger.” The women in my study described how they experienced vulnerability within their life fields, or contextualized within their lives at specific moments in time (Lewin, 1939), specifying times and contexts in which different messages and experiences occurred, highlighting the salience of their specific circumstances of their feelings of vulnerability. There were also women who were explicitly taught that they needed to be able to fight others off – sometimes specifically because of the risks of growing up female.

I decided to use women’s narratives of vulnerability and trauma to explore how women conceptualize their vulnerability and resist it. I went into the research project conceptualizing women’s participation in self-defense and gun training as distinct forms of resistance, but identified that resistance was part of women’s lives and re-framed my thinking about resistance, raising new questions about the relationship between women’s vulnerability and resistance. This included how women’s specific experiences of vulnerability are related to the form their resistance takes, but also about the effects of resistance on women’s experiences of vulnerability (e.g. does their resistance reduce their feelings of vulnerability? Build confidence/feelings of power?). To better address these questions, I made some changes in the principal theories and ideas that inform my research and the ways I listened to narratives of vulnerability and resistance.

**Conceptualizing vulnerability in a context of political fear**

I initially conceptualized vulnerability using the dictionary definition of the word: “*capable of or susceptible to being wounded or hurt*” (dictionary.com) and thinking specifically about women’s vulnerability to sexual assault and domestic violence. Women are most susceptible to private or intimate forms of violence, with 92% of women who are murdered being killed by a person they know and 80.4% of rapes being committed by someone the woman
knows (Violence Policy Center, 2016; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a). This particular form of vulnerability cuts across racial and ethnic lines, although Black women are more likely to be killed by a partner than any other group of women and Native American women report higher rates of rape than any other group (Violence Policy Center, 2016; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000b).

There is a body of literature that examines women’s fear of crime which identifies that one of the reasons that women fear crime more than men is not that they are more likely to be victims in general (men are more likely to be assaulted by strangers or murdered, with Black men being most likely to be murdered of any group), but that they are more likely to be raped and that rape holds a unique kind of horror for its victims, rendering the act to be more egregious than other types of victimization (Pain, 1997). The psychological trauma associated with rape is related to this fear. Judith Herman (1997) identified that women’s experiences of rape and incest have psychological consequences similar to those experienced by combat veterans – both rape victims and combat veterans suffering posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). There is much silence and shame about women’s experiences of rape, incest, and domestic violence. Shame and silence are factors that serve to perpetuate various forms of violence against women.

The wounding associated with rape is both physical and psychological. The National Violence Against Women survey reported that one in five women will be raped in their lifetime (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a), a number suspected of being a gross underestimate. The number of women who are victims of incest is also grossly underreported and yet the prevalence of incest in a number of countries indicates that it is normative rather than exceptional (Finkelhor, 1997). Rates of girls’ sexual abuse in the U.S. are estimated to be around 17% and about 33% in the Netherlands) while 27% of women report having been raped by an intimate partner or spouse (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000b). These experiences are both horrible and unexceptional. As most
women have either been victimized or know someone who has, the experience of sexual victimization is, for many, part of their gender socialization. Women’s gender socialization includes not only the ways they learn to recognize and reproduce gender norms, but also an understanding of the female body as violable (McCaughey, 2013; Braun & Wilkinson, 2001). In other words, gender socialization for cis-gender women includes learning about physical vulnerability to sexual violation as normative. I specify cis-gender women as they share the common characteristics of growing up both female-bodied and socialized as girls. Both socialization and personal experience – including victimization – are salient factors in experiences of vulnerability. Gender is both a product of socialization and is an identity characteristic that separates society into groups that are viewed as being fundamentally different, with women being more likely to be viewed as vulnerable, and not dangerous and men being viewed as dangerous and not vulnerable (Hollander, 2001).

While gender socialization and physical size and strength are often cited as the bases for women’s fear and vulnerability, Yavorsky & Sayer’s (2013) interviews with twenty-six trans-women, almost all of whom were white, who embodied the same fears cisgender women typically carry—the fear of rape, in particular—contend that there is something about “doing hetero-femininity” that instills a sense of disempowerment and fear (p. 513). Noting that heteronormativity institutionalizes heterosexuality and establishes a social order based on gender difference and male power, embracing and living female gender makes trans- (and cis) women aware of male dominance, coercion, and surveillance, while taking on constrained physicality and perceptions of bodies as weaker—whether they are or not (Yavorsky & Sayer, 2013). The identification that trans-women who were socialized as boys/men and whose bodies are equal in strength to men’s (notably, their sample was 5’11” and taller) but still identify their vulnerability
to rape not with being trans, but with being women articulates the cultural manifestation of heteronormativity—a dynamic that is enacted and normalized, penetrating all relations in our heterosexual culture.

Heteronormativity which normalizes dynamics of inequality based on gender relies upon and perpetuates rape culture or the widespread tolerance for violence against women in U.S. society which allows the continued violation of women’s bodies to be less likely to be prosecuted that any other type of violent personal crime (Schafran, 1998). Judges who preside over rape cases are more likely to impose lower than recommended sentences on rapists than on perpetrators of any other type of crime, including: violent personal assault (three times more likely), burglary (four times more likely), drug offenses (five times more likely), and weapons offenses (seven times more likely). Lenient sentencing of rapists by judges indicates that rape is not seen as a serious problem (Schafran, 1998). Rape culture affects women as well; female jurors are less likely to convict a defendant of rape—especially if the accused is someone the victim knows (Schafran, 1998). Women psychologically distance themselves from the victim by identifying behaviors they would not have engaged in, e.g. going to a bar or bringing a man back to her home, thus leaving them open to “blame the victim” (Schafran, 1998). Rape culture and victim blaming inform the way women think about their own vulnerability.

Vulnerability as a Function of Being Bodies

According to critical legal scholar Martha Fineman (2008), vulnerability is under-theorized and offers an alternative to the way “subjects” are conceived of in legal scholarship and in enacted policy. Aiming to re-conceive the subject as both (inter)dependent and vulnerable rather than independent and equal, that is, not requiring different or “special” treatment, Fineman argued that we are all vulnerable by virtue of being bodies. Vulnerability strikes us all at certain
times in our lives: as infants and children, when we become ill or disabled, when we are elderly, i.e. we are vulnerable due to stage of life or circumstances (Fineman, 2008). Thinking in terms of state responsibility to vulnerable subjects, Fineman also advocates for moving away from an identity-based conceptualization of vulnerability noting that the idea of certain groups receiving special benefits is not politically palatable to most. Notably, this includes women, who have historically advocated for “equal” rights, rather than “special” or different rights. An example of this is Sarah Palin who advocated for a “conservative feminism,” referring to “mama grizzlies” who were independent (white) frontiers-women who could wield a gun, plow a field, and raise a child—all at the same time (Gibson & Heyse, 2014). Rather than addressing the ways women are vulnerable, Palin categorically denied it, acting as if feminists invented women’s vulnerability (Gibson & Heyse, 2014). Palin’s is an extreme case of women’s refusal to be viewed as anything other than equal; especially not vulnerable. Fineman, on the other hand, argued that if we can re-conceive of the subject—as in all people—as vulnerable, then we can create a climate in which the state could act in support of vulnerable subjects; something the state has very limited success with currently.

Fineman’s argument for a universal recognition of vulnerability obscures the ways in which certain individuals and groups actually experience vulnerability and/or victimization that are different from and perhaps require different interventions than other groups. The universal discourse of women’s vulnerability was invoked in campaigns to address rape and domestic violence in the 1970s and 1980s, which brought White women’s experiences to the forefront as if they were universal. Donna Coker (2001) describes this universalizing of white women’s experiences as if they represented all women’s experience as erasure, arguing for the lives of
women of color to be included and identifying that Black women’s needs are not necessarily the same as White women’s needs (see also Kimberle Crenshaw, 1994).

Fineman’s re-conceptualization of vulnerability examined our collective vulnerability in the context of a responsible state. In this way, she created a way to think about vulnerability as structural, rather than individual while identifying the state as the correct party to address vulnerability, rather than the private sector. It is my project to locate women’s vulnerability as a structural, not just an individual problem.

**Political fear and structural-personal violence.**

Galtung (1969) conceptualized violence as being both structural and personal. *Structural violence* obscures the origin of inequality because it is perpetuated through institutions and social structures through practices that we perceive as “normal.” Personal violence, on the other hand, is easily discernable having both an obvious victim and perpetrator. Galtung described personal and structural violence as intertwined—structural violence feeding personal violence and personal violence being a response to the structural. Rape culture socially sanctions violence against women in various capacities and is institutionalized in the way rape is approached in the police station and the courtroom. There is a long history of lawyers reminding juries that women’s claims of rape are hard to verify while the damage to the accused is long-lasting *(Gavey, 2005; Blackman, 1989)*. This is dissimilar from other crimes where the fact that a crime was committed is not routinely denied as a way of delegitimizing and building a case against the victim. Similarly, acts of violence against women help men maintain an upper hand—both interpersonally and socially. I use the term *structural-personal violence* to acknowledge women’s experiences of victimization while contextualizing them within structures that maintain inequality.
Using Corey Robin’s (2004) conceptualization of political fear, I identify that women’s fears are part of a system that maintains a social order based on inequality and fear. I view women’s vulnerability to rape and sexual assault as a form of political fear that maintains women’s secondary position in society. Robin defined political fear as:

…people’s felt apprehension of harm to their well-being – the fear of terrorism, panic over crime, anxiety about moral decay – or the intimidation wielded over men and women by governments or groups. (2004, p. 2).

According to Robin, both a woman’s fear of her husband and a worker’s fear of an employer are political (not personal) forms of fear. Women’s abuse is based on centuries of history where laws have awarded men power over women. Robin identified that people do not generally recognize political fear, but instead view it as personal fear and therefore do not understand how it is being used against them. Also, people get caught up in “the thrall of fear” and therefore do not see the social and political factors underlying it (Robin, 2004, p. 3). Women’s victimization being predominantly private isolates women, preventing them from connecting with other women and therefore viewing their fear as something that is shared with other women and part of a system that maintains inequality.

I relate the concept of structural-personal violence to political fear (see Figure 1), as it is fear that often prevents action, particularly with violence against women as being misidentified as being exclusively a personal problem. Women seeing their vulnerability as separate from other women’s vulnerability prevents women from banding together to act in solidarity. Notably, it is difficult to perceive rape culture as a common enemy as it is covertly woven into the fabric of our society making it challenging to make it a target of actions (there are some notable exceptions to this, including the movements against domestic violence and rape in the 70s and
80s). As such, many of the experiences of vulnerability and the acts of resistance are individual acts. The purpose of framing this problem in a structural-personal way is also to identify ways to raise awareness and strategies for addressing this problem that acknowledge both the structural and personal aspects. This is also to alleviate the pressure that women experience as they face their vulnerability and victimization in a vacuum.

Figure 1

*Political Fear and Structural/Personal Violence*

Race, Class and Identity Politics

Not only do different women have different experiences of vulnerability, but women of different races and classes are viewed differently in terms of the believability of their testimony, whose evidence counts, how the public reacts to women’s victimization – or who gets to be a victim. Race and class figure heavily into this picture. Michelle Fine (2012) dissected Nafissatou Diallo’s rape case against Dominique Strauss-Kahn. This was a case of a Black, asylum-seeking hotel maid from Guinea against the former head of the IMF and the one-time hopeful to the French presidency. In a case where physical evidence of sexual assault—in the form of semen on the carpet and scratches to Diallo’s face—was bountiful, Diallo’s life (being Black and having questions about the veracity of her immigration story) became the subject of investigation, as she was not seen as being believable and therefore not a legitimate victim (Fine, 2012). In the historic case of the Central Park Jogger, Trisha Meili, on the other hand, the White, investment
banker who received a head injury and was unconscious when she was raped inspired a public outcry, media frenzy, and prosecutor’s commitment to pursue her case (Didion, 1991). I attended a talk given by Meili and asked her how she felt about the wrongful convictions of the five boys; the so-called Central Park Five. Her response was that she had no memory and was unable to testify and so she felt no connection to the conviction, as if it wasn’t about her. (She also distanced herself from being classified as a rape victim, again, because she had no memory of being raped. She identified instead as someone with a traumatic brain injury, because this is what changed her life most significantly.) Meili’s privilege, as a White banker, was undeniable, and yet she deflected the consequences of this privilege on the Black and brown boys’ convictions. Unlike Diallo, Meili, who had no memory of the event, was a credible victim, being White, and physically incapable of fighting back.

Sharon Lamb (1999) problematized the role of victimization in prosecution of rape cases, identifying that it is the damage to women’s mental health, and not outrage at the act of rape itself that has become the focus. This, problematically, characterizes victims as emotionally weak and requires that victims fulfill this role on the witness stand. It also shifts the focus away from the perpetrator and onto the victim, who is likely already being interrogated to determine if she is a believable victim. Lamb also noted that there are women who have found empowerment in playing the role of the victim. On the other hand, victims of a violent serial rapist interviewed by Jan Jordan (2005) indicated that it was only in their interviews with her – not the interviews that were used for the trial when they were able to tell the stories, as they wanted to tell them. In other words, if Jordan had not interviewed these women, their psychological resistance strategies would have remained secret as we have very few sanctified spaces where women are empowered to share their survival stories.
Worthiness of being a victim and believability are fraught with identity politics – as is evident by the racial demographics of who gets convicted of rape, domestic violence, and murder. And yet, White women’s cases by no means ensure convictions, especially in cases where the defendant is also white. For example, the St. Paul’s prep school rape trial which addressed the school’s “senior salute” tradition where upperclassmen, passing along keys to the mechanical room, had sex with as many Freshman and Sophomore girls as possible (Bidgood & Rich, 2015) and the more recent and high-profile Stanford rape case, which while they each ended in conviction, the extremely short jail sentences given betrayed the empathy felt for the White, male perpetrator, rather than the White, female victim in both cases. These cases raised a complicated array of questions ranging from who gets to be vulnerable, to who deflects culpability by virtue of being coated in Teflon (Fine, 2012).

The election of Donald Trump as president in spite of “Pussygate” is a reminder that people with immense social/political power and wealth are impervious to culpability for sexual or violent crimes. T-shirt slogans like, “I’d rather grab a pussy than be one” demonstrated the contempt for victims and the support for violent and misogynist behavior. For many, Trump’s election signaled—among other terrifying revelations—that women’s victimization, White women’s victimization in this case (as the women who came forward with stories of being assaulted by Trump were all White) is forgivable, forgettable, and ultimately, not a significant enough factor to prevent millions of White men and women to vote to give this person extraordinary power. This both demonstrates the pervasiveness of rape culture and reinforces its power and scope. This also places women’s resistance in a hostile and resilient topography where the need for collaboration feels urgent.
Fine and Weis’s (1998) research with lower/working-class, urban men and women from multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds identified that while high numbers of White women are victims of domestic violence, the significant difference between what they refer to as “settled lives” (a respectable, yet self-sacrificial choice) and “hard living” (the rougher and less respectable choice of leaving an abusive situation) is whether or not the woman exits the relationship. Leaving, while often seen as the ultimate form of resistance, can also be seen by women themselves as a failure to be able to hold a relationship together. White women’s tendency to stay in abusive relationships also raises questions about entitlement, socialization and shame, another aspect of “feminine” growing up White, who gets to resist and how that manifests. The role of Whiteness, like that of other racial and ethnic factors cannot be overlooked. Sarah Brazaitis (2004), using a Group dynamics lens, wrote about the unique social roles White women hold – their proximity to White male power and privilege gaining them social capital, and yet they are often in the role of defending White men in the workplace, thus undercutting their own positions and those of women of color. This role of counter-productively sustaining White male privilege allows White women to retain their historical role of “angel of the house,” based on upper-class White women being too frail to work outside the home and in need of protection (Brazaitis, 2004). The symbiotic relationship between White women and White men does not only account for White women defending White men in the workplace, but in the home, as well—where protecting the sanctity of the home and family falls on the White woman.

In defending Black women’s central role in the Black family, Angela Davis (1972) wrote about how Black women’s equality to Black men during slavery came about through working side by side in the field and in revolt. Black women were viewed differently from White women
both due to their being property and as violable by White men, and therefore, different, and prescriptive stereotypes evolved about black women, including the *jezebel* and the *mammy* (Collins, 2002). The paradox of White women’s proximity to and distance from power and privilege actually being associated with their perceived vulnerability and their acquiescence demonstrates some of the complicated factors that women navigate when addressing their vulnerability. I look to complicate our understanding of the ways women resist their vulnerability.

When Audre Lorde (1984) wrote, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” she was calling for women from different races and backgrounds to support one another and to recognize our interdependence. She called on us to unite with “the women we do not love,” acknowledging that women’s interdependence is the only way to transform a White, patriarchal system. As such, recognizing our vulnerability is a way to redistribute power and, possibly, to dismantle rape culture.

**Resistance**

**Epistemological Ignorance and Resistance**

Because of the shame associated with sexual and domestic violence, women seldom share their stories of victimization, creating lacunae in women’s collective knowledge both of experiences of vulnerability and resistance. Women are often left to their own devices; navigating spaces that have, in many cases, been mapped before by other women, and yet their knowledge is unshared and therefore unknown. Additionally, women are often taught not to value their inner voices—learning that women are hysterical and illogical—women’s internal wisdom is collectively diminished through derogatory and stereotypical characterization of “old wives tales” that fail to recognize that women’s stories not only teach valuable social lessons, but
ignite the imagination (Greer, 2010). In these ways, our knowledge is discounted, dismembered and often categorized as ignorance.

“Ignorance is frequently constructed and actively preserved, and is linked to issues of cognitive authority, doubt, trust, silencing, and uncertainty.” (Tuana, 2004, p. 195)

Nancy Tuana’s work on epistemological ignorance, addressed important issues surrounding what women know, what they do not know and what has been unlearned. Tuana clarified that ignorance is not simply the lack of knowledge; it is intentionally constructed and maintained and it must be understood differently from ways we understand knowledge—or the things we do know. We must look at who is served through the preservation of ignorance and in what ways it is transmitted. In some cases, ignorance is willful in that people do not know and they do not want to know. In the case of incest, Judith Herman (1997) wrote about how Freud identified that White upper class women in Vienna told him stories about their experiences of incest, but when he went public with this revelation, people responded negatively to this information. He then hid what he had learned about incest and began talking about women’s experiences as phantasy, never to speak of incest as a real social problem again. Lynn Sacco (2002) revealed in her research on doctors in the U.S. that, in spite of previously knowing that gonorrhea was sexually transmitted and using that knowledge to prosecute poor and/or Black fathers of sexually abusing their daughters, when they discovered numerous cases of gonorrhea among middle-class white girls, instead of recognizing that these too were incest cases, they changed their knowledge of the disease and circulated the erroneous belief that gonorrhea was transmitted through casual contact with family members and through the use of public toilets (Sacco, 2002). Because the evidence they found conflicted with their beliefs about incest; that it was restricted to poor families, rather than being common among white, middle-class families,
they disconfirmed their own scientific knowledge, demonstrating the power of *willful ignorance* to erase glaring evidence as a practice of *unknowing* what was known about gonorrhea in order to sustain willful ignorance of evidence of incest (*Sacco, 2002*). Because of the negative connotations of the word ignorance that imply a lack on the part of the not-knoer, I use the less familiar word, *nescience*, referring to knowledge that is intentionally withheld.

In addition to willful ignorance and unknowing, Tuana discussed how certain people’s knowledge was considered to be suspect, including incest survivors whose stories are not to be trusted. Instead, there was a widespread movement asserting that psychologists implant false memories (*Loftus, 1997*); confirming both the untrustworthiness of certain women’s testimony, as well as their feeble-mindedness because they can be influenced to believe untrue stories about their own experiences. These women lack *epistemic credibility*—something that requires trust to maintain. The categorization of certain people or groups as “not knowers” (*Tuana, 2004*, p. 14) is both a product of and sustains membership in the fringes of society.

Tuana also talked about the importance of *epistemologies of liberation*; tracking cases where groups who have knowledge withheld from them break away from knowledge systems that are incorrect, incomplete, or damaging. The history of the women’s health movement is an example, as they broke away from the medical establishment’s control over information, with the speculum being both symbolic and practical in this movement—putting the knowledge of personal observation and experience into the hands of women who were previously constructed as “not-knowers” of their own bodies (*Tuana, 2004*, p. 14). The women’s health movement practiced *epistemic resistance* – by both distancing themselves from the medical establishment and by working directly with women to re-establish their connections to knowledge of their own bodies.
Tuana referred to how epistemic resistance is often rendered invisible or cast as ignorance, in a context where women’s experiences of victimization are often not believed and their evidence often does not count (see also Fine, 2012) and, more often, they remain silent. As such, identifying and sharing women’s knowledge and rendering their resistance visible is an important project. I use epistemic resistance as one way of understanding women’s resistance against their vulnerability.

**Hidden Transcripts**

Taking into consideration that resistance is often not seen as resistance and is sometimes masked or otherwise obscured, I conceptualize resistance broadly, thinking about the various ways that people who are oppressed may resist. My classification of women’s resistance is informed by a theoretical understanding of resistance that aims to identify what James C. Scott referred to as *hidden transcripts* (vs. the dominant public transcript). Scott’s hidden transcripts identify dynamics of domination and resistance as being almost universal. Hidden transcripts refer to modes of resistance that are subversive or not easily identifiable by those who hold power, examples include: pilfering, sabotage, “playing the fool to catch wise,” offstage performance for an audience of the subordinate and hidden from the dominant, and not buying into the dominant system (Scott, 1990).

Following from Lauraine Leblanc’s (1999) conceptualization, resistance implies both action and a critique of domination. This resistance can be manifested in various ways: 1) *physical/behavioral resistance* includes: challenging social norms of expected gender role behavior (Hollander, 2002), the use of the voice (in contrast to the silence maintained by many), making threats, or to ways women have avoided, interrupted, or stopped an assault using any type of physical force. 2) *Psychological resistance*. Jan Jordan (2005) refers to the internal ways
women employed to survive experiences of violent rape as forms of resistance. Jordan referred to tactics women used in the moment that influenced the behavior of the rapist (e.g. pretending to be passed out after being struck in the head, playing on the empathy of the rapist, making noise when other people were within earshot), as well as internal modes of resistance aimed at surviving when the victim determined there was no way of physically fighting off a violent rapist (e.g. praying, imagining oneself as physically huge, concentrating on how her brother survived almost drowning, exiting the physical body). These are survival tactics that helped the woman get through a life-threatening and terrifying experience. Establishing that survival is the baseline of successful resistance is important because in cases of rape and sexual assault, women often second-guess their own actions after the fact, thinking they could have/should have done more in spite of having done what they needed to do in the moment to survive. 3) Epistemological resistance or re-framing what we know about women’s vulnerability and power. This can happen at both a personal and a structural level. Stories where “nothing happened” can be included in any of these; Jill Cermele (2010) collected stories from women where “nothing happened,” but could have otherwise been stories of rape or sexual assault if the women had not done what they had done. Cermele notes that women would not have necessarily framed what they did as a form of resistance, even though they stopped a rape/sexual assault. Following from Cermele, I document cases where “nothing happened,” highlighting the actions women took (physical, psychological; subtle, overt) that interrupted/prevented an assault they identified was taking place.

Power/resistance

“Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority to power.” (Foucault, 1990, p. 96)
In contrast to thinking that certain actors have power and others do not, Foucault put forth the notion that power comes from everywhere, including power from below. Foucault identified that power is not restricted to institutions or actors, but present in all relationships – and that constant struggle can slowly bring about change, noting that power is not static, but the nature of relationships shift over time, changing the power dynamic. In other words, power is always a contentious dynamic among actors in a relationship. As such, resistance also emanates from everywhere, and transverses society, but doesn’t necessarily create a unified front. This notion of resistance coming from everywhere, without a unified movement or awareness of similar forms of resistance, is an important backdrop to women, usually in isolation, resisting their own vulnerability. It also highlights the potential for the creation of networks of resistance, were knowledge disseminated differently and secrecy not such a powerful instrument of maintaining the power structure.

Women’s vulnerability and resistance are contextualized within rape culture, but also within each woman’s life field (Lewin, 1939). Being a part of a culture that speaks discourses of violence and vulnerability, women’s resistance pulls from reservoirs of power that are invisible and produces actions that are often ignored or discounted. Their individual acts of resistance, when brought to light, can help us to identify ways forward for other women. Sites where women can work together, share stories, break silences, educate/help each other and make connections between their disparate and isolated stories and the greater cultural climate, are spaces with the potential to transform a landscape that feels unchangeable. More than sharing stories of broken silences and regaining hidden power, women’s resistance stories document the potential to create change—to pull together disparate strands of individual actions, braiding together a lumpy, uneven, coarse, and complicated landscape that overlays individual life fields atop an
inhospitable yet familiar landscape, altering the terrain enough to give us hope that a culture informed by women’s lived experiences of resistance, and not just their weaknesses, keeps emerging in spite of the messages that contradict women’s potential to shape culture.

Figure 2
*Forms of Resistance*
CHAPTER 4

VULNERABILITY AND RESISTANCE

Vulnerability to sexual assault is a central concern for most women in the United States (Madriz, 1997) and the rates of sexual victimization, including rape, incest, and childhood sexual assault are still unknown as the rates of reporting are exceeding low. Estimating that the baseline figure for rape of adult women is around 20% of the population of the US, and that the vast majority of violence against women is committed by people who are known to the women—and most of these are intimate partners—we can assume that the number of women who are living with the trauma of incest, childhood physical or emotional abuse, rape, and domestic violence is a large number. As such the stories of women who have dealt with these types of traumas and moved on with their lives are important stories to listen to, document, and learn from.

In this chapter, I interrogate the relationship between women’s vulnerability and the ways they resisted their vulnerability. I have created a framework and offered examples of each resistance theme. During my interviews, I asked women directly about their experiences of vulnerability, but I never defined the term for them. Consequently, women defined vulnerability for themselves, creating a rich tapestry of experiences and understandings of vulnerability. I conceptualized vulnerability as feelings of susceptibility to sexual or other violent assault, although I am aware of and have discussed several other conceptualizations of vulnerability. My conceptualization of vulnerability is very close to and rubs up against victimization. I was also interested in documenting the ways women resisted—and identified participation in self-defense training and gun ownership as two forms of resistance, but anticipated hearing stories of many other types of resistance. I did not ask direct questions about resistance, nor did I introduce the word into the interview (other than in the title of my dissertation which was written on top of the
consent form). To me, it was evident that every woman I spoke to referred to at least one act of resistance. Unlike vulnerability, which I thought of in its very narrowest terms, I framed resistance broadly, grounded in the extant literature on physical, psychological (contemplated, planned, or transformed), epistemological (developing new/counter stories, re-framing narratives), and connection as forms of resistance, which I described in greater depth in chapter three (Jordan, 2005; Hollander, 2002; Tuana, 2004, 2006). Physical or enacted resistance involves taking some sort of action in one’s own defense. Use of a gun and participation in self-defense training are both forms of physical/enacted resistance. On the other hand, the restriction of one’s behavior, or the use of retreat, may be a tactic that is used in the short-term as one awaits the opportunity to take a different kind of action and while not a form of direct resistance, may be essential for survival. Psychological forms of resistance (Jordan, 2005) include tactics people use to get through a distressing situation using mental or psychological strategies. This can include mental strategies to get through a situation, planning an exit, or re-framing a negative self-image with a positive one. Epistemological resistance involves learning, teaching, or disseminating information that counters dominant images of a group of people (Tuana, 2004); in this case images of women as incapable of being able to defend themselves. Connection or solidarity is a form of resistance for people who experienced their victimization as isolated and singular, allowing them to build networks of support and/or resistance. I drew on Audre Lorde’s (1987) articulation of interdependence as being (perhaps the only) alternative to patriarchal domination in identifying connection as a form of feminist resistance. Notably, certain acts of resistance span multiple categories. For example, teaching others to recognize their strengths is both epistemological resistance and connection.
Table 7
*Forms of resistance*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological</th>
<th>Physical</th>
<th>Epistemological</th>
<th>Connection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Devise a plan to get out of a situation</td>
<td>Using any type of physical force (use of body OR weapon)</td>
<td>Use own story to affect legislation</td>
<td>Seek out safe/alternative family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De-escalation</td>
<td>Make a threat</td>
<td>Teach others to use their stories…</td>
<td>Find/create support network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-frame perception of self, positively</td>
<td>Verbally stand up for self/others</td>
<td>Learned something that makes feel stronger</td>
<td>Work with organization to address issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use negative experience for good</td>
<td>Act crazy</td>
<td>Change narrative of self/group</td>
<td>Find positive role models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological distancing from negative emotions</td>
<td>Exit</td>
<td>Teach others to recognize strengths</td>
<td>Transform family (end cycle of violence)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I listened for and documented as resistance times when women disclosed that they ran away, used any type of physical force (with or without a weapon), made a threat of physical force, verbally stood up for themselves/others, acted crazy, devised a plan in their heads to get out of a situation, used de-escalation to avoid a conflict, moved away/exited, sought out an alternative/safe family, used the legal system, told someone, re-framed a situation where they previously saw themselves negatively (shamefully), used a negative experience for a positive outcome, used psychological distancing as self-protection, connected with others who shared a common experience of victimization, learned something that made them feel stronger, or used their experiences to teach others or to change policy. Many of these conceptualizations were evident to me when I interviewed the women, but others became clear only after transcribing and reading and analyzing the narratives numerous times. I also specifically listened for instances where there was a strong relationship between the type of vulnerability and the enactment of resistance.
Although women did not always give themselves credit for the acts of resistance in which they engaged; I identified acts of resistance as distinct from acquiescence through the determination of their actions (i.e. did they use active or passive voice? Did they say they were compelled to do something or did they choose to do it?). I also distinguished resistance from agency. Resistance is – a response (physical, psychological, epistemological) sometimes against a person, but just as often as a way of saving oneself when the person is no longer there. Feelings associated with resistance varied widely, with fear being a common one. Agency, on the other hand, is a self-perception of being able to do something. Agency can and does correspond with resistance sometimes, but not always.

The backdrop of trauma

Going into this project, my initial focus was on the empowering aspects of women’s participation in self-defense and I asked questions about vulnerability in order to better understand its role in their motivation to participate in self-defense or gun training, and to determine if this participation had an impact on feelings of vulnerability. I was surprised to find that the women often took the interviews in a different direction. They reported major traumatic life events, some of which were very difficult to hear; which were the major motives for eventually deciding to pursue a personal protective strategy.

Only five of the twenty-four women I interviewed reported that they had not experienced a traumatic event (incest, child abuse, childhood sexual assault, rape, domestic violence, attempted sexual assault, attempted murder). Having been surprised by the extent to which participants had experienced major traumatic events, I identified trauma as a common characteristic of women who chose to participate in self-defense training or use guns. This was confirmed by several of the instructors I spoke with, including Emily who said, “We do so very
much draw trauma survivors.” And Beth who talked about how difficult it was to get funding to train women in self-defense, since most were trauma survivors and therefore the training was not considered preventative, but therapeutic (whereas for children it was considered preventative). As such, much of the narrative analysis I did focused on women who reported traumatic experiences. Twelve of the twenty-four women I interviewed were instructors and I have included fifteen (seven are instructors) in the three chapters that utilize narrative analysis, focusing primarily on the women who told specific stories of victimization. In this chapter, I share analysis of narratives from five women who expressed forms of resistance that I could connect to their experiences of victimization. I also selected for the widest range of ethnic diversity from a very White sample.

**Analysis: The Listening Guide**

I analyzed the transcribed interviews using The Listening Guide, a psychodynamic, feminist form of narrative analysis that takes relationship and context into consideration (Gilligan, 2015; Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008). The strength of the relational aspect of the Listening Guide is particularly important considering that most of the violence that occurs in women’s lives occurs within the context of intimate or familial relationships. Through a series of close listenings, beginning with listening for plot, followed by listening for the self-voice, and then listening for contrapuntal and harmonious voices (Sorsoli & Tolman, 2008) (specifically for voices of vulnerability and resistance); I was able to track the psychological terrain of participants’ narratives and maintain a sense of their lives in context. Maintaining the context and psychological content is important, as it allows for telescoping in and out and making connections between an individual’s emotions and their familial social environment.
The Listening Guide is grounded in theory and theory is informed by the women’s voices. I came into the process of analysis with theoretically conceived understandings of vulnerability and resistance as discussed in chapter three. The process of analysis brought women’s experiences into conversation with this theoretical framing, resulting in a new way of thinking about vulnerability and resistance.

**Listenings.** In the first listening, listening for plot, I summarized the plot of each speaking turn, writing down my re-phrased versions in a column next to the full transcript. I paid close attention to what was happening in each speaking turn and who was involved. In addition, I wrote a summary of each woman’s full narrative, highlighting the stories that were most salient to the themes of vulnerability and resistance or pertained to experiences of self-defense training and gun ownership. Reading closely for plot ensured I had a clear understanding of the life events and the significant contexts around vulnerability in women’s lives.

For the second listening, listening for the self-voice, I italicized all instances where the participant used personal pronouns to refer to her experiences. Usually, this was marked by the word “I” or “me” but women also used, “we/us,” or, “you.” The variation in the use of personal pronoun often signaled either agency or ownership (I/me), being a part of a group, community, or family (we/us), or psychological distancing from an experience (you). In some cases, the pattern of the self-voice statements was powerful and implied a psychological state. In these cases, I have pulled out the self-voice statements, composing what Carol Gilligan has referred to as “I poems.” While Gilligan isolated only the first-person pronoun and the verb, I included additional contextual information to flesh out the meaning of the phrase. As I also included other pronouns, I refer to these as “self-poems.” Here is an example, showing first the passage from within Beth’s narrative and then a self-poem from the same passage as she talks about her
decision to move away from her family when she was still in high school. For coding, I used italics to indicate the self-voice, referring to instances where the participant referred to herself using the personal pronoun I, me, we, or you, or omitted a pronoun. Underlined sections of the text refer to voices of vulnerability while bolded text refers to voices of resistance (note that both self-defense and gun ownership are two forms of enacted resistance).

I felt like I couldn’t live with my family anymore and I was in a pretty dark place. I’d spend most of my time thinking and believing that I didn’t really matter to the world and spent a lot of time thinking of suicide. Glad I didn’t do that, but I spent a lot of time thinking about it and felt like I had to leave. My brother helped me with it - and I guess my parents were (inaudible). So, it was hard because I had to get out and yet they were all I knew. And so I left everything I knew.

The extracted self-poem:

I felt like I couldn’t live with my family anymore
I was in a pretty dark place.
I’d spend most of my time thinking and believing
I didn’t really matter to the world
[I] spent a lot of time thinking of suicide.
Glad I didn’t do that,
but I spent a lot of time thinking about it and
[I] felt like I had to leave.
I had to get out
and yet they were all I knew.
I left everything I knew.
From this self-poem, I identified the agony that Beth felt making the decision to leave her family. It was psychologically difficult, because she was in a dark space and felt that she didn’t matter. She distanced herself from the thoughts of suicide by excluding the “I” the first time and not using the word “suicide” the second time, instead saying, “thinking about it.” The darkness, the lack of mattering, and the thoughts of suicide made her know that she had to get out. And yet, her family (to whom she felt she didn’t matter) was also all she knew. The last line signaled finality, “I left everything I knew.” This was a total severing with her previous life, capturing the loneliness of the experience of having to leave everything in order to have a life worth living. Identifying the self-voice provides valuable insight into psychological states of the participants.

The next rounds of listening were listening for harmonious and contrapuntal voices. While listening for these voices, my theoretical framework guided me, but I also used the voices I heard to inform my theoretical understanding of women’s experiences. Using a version of The Listening Guide to carry out this analysis, I was able to identify the confluence as well as the dissonance between voices of vulnerability and voices of resistance in different women’s narratives. The relationship between vulnerability and resistance reveals ways in which women have unlearned and later re-discovered their ability to defend themselves. And while I initially conceptualized that women’s forms of resistance were self-defense and gun ownership, listening to the narratives, I identified that women’s resistance took numerous forms that I could not have anticipated. As such I have discussed women’s feelings about self-defense and gun ownership in separate chapters and focused on vulnerability and resistance in this chapter.

In addition to using the listening guide to identify different voices, I also identified various forms of resistance women took as a ways to acknowledge their actions. Listening for plot, (what happened), and the identification of the self-voice (what I did, felt, thought…) were
useful tools for identifying forms of resistance. Because the self-voice identifies the actions women took through their use of personal pronouns, it is useful in identifying the actions that may be classified as resistance (physical, psychological, epistemological).

The various voices that I identified during this analysis are not findings in themselves, but they make up the scaffolding that helps to reveal the psychological dynamics at play in women’s lives. My intention was to use the many ways facilitated by the Listening Guide to develop analysis that is both deeply contextual while also psychological, spanning the levels of analysis. This makes for complex analysis, which reflects the complexity of these women’s lives as they overcome experiences of victimization and develop new ways to navigate their lives.

**Credibility.** In order to verify the validity of my analysis, I trained a research assistant to use The Listening Guide for narrative analysis. We met regularly, at each meeting reading through one woman’s narrative, focusing on a single voice, stopping to highlight sections of text and discuss the voices we identified. We also read and analyzed the text separately, made extensive notes on numerous iterations of listenings of the text and then came back together to discuss agreements, disagreements and any questions that arose from carrying out the analysis. We had a very high degree of agreement and in the few cases where we did disagree; we talked through the difference of perspective and came up with a mutually agreeable solution. In addition, I received feedback from two of my committee members who raised issues relating to my biases in cases where I held beliefs that were fundamentally different from those of my participants. This was a useful counterpoint as my research assistant and I held similar beliefs.

**Rendering Women’s Resistance Visible**

Acknowledging that vulnerability is undertheorized (Fineman, 2008) and that the role of victim is heavily prescribed and often hides women’s true experiences (Lamb, 1999; Jordan,
and also recognizing that women’s resistance is underreported, unrecognized and seldom celebrated (Cermele, 2010), I aim to share women’s resistance stories through the lens of their own reported vulnerabilities, interpreting that women’s resistance is highly responsive to their experiences of vulnerability. The diversity of tactics employed by the various women I spoke to reveals the complexity of resistance in contexts where resistance may, in fact, be risky and the outcomes uncertain.

Holding the possibility that resistance emerges from everywhere, as a counter-form of power, but is also isolated and fragmented across time and space, foreclosing the possibility of a mass movement (Foucault, 1990), I situated stories of diverging experiences next to one another, so they might be considered as a cohort of women who have each resisted, independently. By sharing their stories, these women have knowingly contributed to a body of evidence of successful (or unsuccessful) resistance anticipating that their stories might help other women.

Overview: Sofie, Lola, Charlie, Beth and Zarina

In this chapter, I share narratives of five women who have experienced a tremendous amount of violence and demonstrated complex ways of thinking about their own victimization and vulnerability and the multiple strategies they employed to move forward with productive, full, and meaningful lives: Sofie, Lola, Charlie, Beth, and Zarina. The first four of these were mothers, with Sofie having grandchildren and Lola having grand nieces and nephews. I participated in self-defense training with all of these women, except for Sofie whom I met while volunteering with a self-defense organization. Beth was one of my self-defense instructors. Each of these women shared stories of some sort of abuse that took place in their homes and varying levels of secrecy around this—including discussions of how damaging the secrecy itself was. Sofie was a survivor of both incest and domestic abuse. She described her vulnerability as a lack
of control and resisted by taking back control of her life in various ways. Lola’s vulnerability was like being in the dark; she was completely isolated from anyone else, but ended the cycle of violence in her own family, although she still struggled with her inability to speak up for herself. Charlie pushed back on the word “vulnerable” but said when her “internal radar” went off, she had to do something, using knowledge of jujitsu and of her own physical capability as a form of power and resistance. Beth replaced the word vulnerable with “unsafe;” and sought out safe people and safe places as a way of resisting feelings of not mattering. Zarina re-framed vulnerability as a strength – the strength of allowing other people to witness her fragility.

In each of these five cases, the issues of: private violence, girls and women’s ignorance of their abilities to fight back, the importance of communities of support and failures by families and systems to protect those who are vulnerable are addressed. And yet, these women resisted in numerous ways. My hope is that sharing these stories of resistance will divulge and dispel the epistemic ignorance that has been perpetuated to keep women vulnerable.

**Sofie: Resisting silencing through storytelling (Voice of being controlled/voice of taking control)**

I met Sofie through a training for assistant instructors with an empowerment-based self-defense organization that facilitated trainings for women, teens, children, families, and men. For the interview, I went to Sofie’s home outside of Denver. Walking into her house, Sofie warned me that the four large dogs flanking her were friendly. They were. Two were sent outside so they wouldn’t disrupt the interview while the other two settled in near us in the living room, holding the space for the interview. Sofie was forty-four and grew up in Colorado. While she grew up using guns and enjoyed them when she was younger, she has no interest in owning a gun due to the high rates of murder in domestic violence situations when a gun is present. She is Latina and
was only now learning about her family’s ethnic, religious, and migration ancestry. She explained that her family’s efforts to assimilate meant that much of her family history and culture have been obscured. Her family’s untold (hidden) story was paralleled in Sofie’s own upbringing.

Sofie began her story by talking about the various ways her father tailored his abusive strategies to each of her siblings’ strengths and vulnerabilities.

Sofie: Well my mom was real passive. My step-dad though, he was very controlling. He was masterful really at like finding what all of our different strengths were and then tearing those down, individually. So, for me, I was a storyteller, I was a talker and for me it was, “you don’t speak. You don’t speak unless you’re spoken to. You don’t talk about the family outside of the house.” [For] my brother it was primarily—a lot of physical abuse, but just consistently talking about how stupid he was and how worthless he was. And I mean it was just constant. My younger sister who was in the house with me, it was, he used fear that – she couldn't go anywhere, because someone was going to take her. She couldn’t stay home alone, because someone would come and get her. So, very much, that’s how he controlled her and, you know, how we all responded to those things was very different, too. I was very quiet and withdrawn, my brother, he was pretty defiant in the face of all of that. And my sister, she would tell you (laughs) that she struggles a lot now looking back; that she befriended the enemy in order to stay safe. Like she knew who he was and how he treated everyone, but she could stay close to him, then that was the way she protected herself.

As a storyteller, Sofie held her younger brother and sister’s stories along with her own, as a collective whole. Their vulnerability stemmed from not being in control as their father
controlled their behavior by targeting their individual vulnerabilities. Sofie described her own response as becoming *quiet* and *withdrawn* in contrast to her brother who was defiant.

Withdrawing was another way of saying “retreat” which was her tactical and strategic decision to live and fight another day (which she did). While not a form of direct resistance, retreat is also not helplessness; it is a viable survival strategy that demonstrates the complexity of Sofie’s actions. Being quiet contrasts with speaking up, or telling stories, both of which her father forbade. Sofie connected her sense of self to her story telling. This came up repeatedly during her interview. So Sofie’s storytelling was a complex site where she recognized her sense of identity from early childhood only to have it taken away.

Sofie remembered a matriarchal, supportive, and loving extended family from her early childhood. In this space, she was a special child, because she was the first. She was also loved by a community of mothers and acknowledged for having special skills and abilities.

*When I was born we lived with my mom’s family in Denver.* My grandmother is one of 14 and they lived like in the same neighborhood. So it was like my great-grandmother and all of my mother’s siblings and kids. *So for the first 2 ½ years I never went to day care. I was the first grandchild so I was doted on. If I’m telling stories then I’m going to be this, you know, world-renown writer. If I was pounding on the piano I was going to be the greatest pianist. So I came from a place of a lot of love where they encouraged the storytelling.*

Sofie was nostalgic about the earliest years of her life where she lived among a community of family, including many women. The support of her storytelling was a profound contrast to the stifling of her storytelling that began in her childhood. Notably, Sofie’s supportive family was
her maternal family. She almost never mentioned her mother except to say that she was very “passive.”

On the other hand, Sofie referred to both her father and her abusive ex-husband obliquely using “he,” rather than saying “my father” or “my ex” or using their names. In this next quote, she simply remembered, “being told” although it is implied that she was talking about her father. The reference to being accused of lying was made several times throughout Sofie’s narrative. At no time; however, did she contradict the veracity of her own story. Instead, there was a conflict between what she was told about herself and what she herself believed. This was an isolating space to inhabit, a space where, like Cassandra, her warning was not believed.

_ I remember being told if I was trying to tell a story or spin a story that I was lying and then no one would believe me_. Which was a consistent theme anyway that, you know, no one’s going to believe you if you tell anyone. Oh, so _when I was in high school and I did tell someone—I told the high school guidance counselor about my brother, because my brother was getting married and they were going to have a baby. That scared me and I was worried about the baby_. His response, and I quote was, “what makes you think he would do that to anyone else?” and that was it. _That was my one foray out into speaking about what had happened_. But, he made it about me.

This response was important because it documented the first time Sofie told her story. She carried the message that no one would believe her and yet, she told her story anyway as an attempt to save her unborn niece or nephew from her stepbrother’s sexual abuse. The guidance counselor’s response was not of disbelief, but rather, “he made it about me.” Sofie stated this to clarify that he denied her concern for the baby was valid, but also that he implied that there was something about Sofie that brought on this abuse instead of something being wrong with her...
stepbrother for sexually abusing her. There was much loaded into this one short sentence that remains unsayable. Sofie never asked the question, “Why me?” but identified that the guidance counselor did something wrong by insinuating that it was something about her. Sofie’s telling her guidance counselor about her brother’s sexually abusing her was resistance against being silenced, and she felt betrayed by his response. When she said, “That was my one foray out into speaking about what had happened,” she signaled her decision not to disclose her story at that point in her life. Again, she retreated choosing to wait to speak publicly at a later point in time.

Sofie identified that she saw her family as presenting a false or fraudulent image. Her family’s public image was distorted to her, because it denied her lived experience entirely. Her family’s inauthentic presentation produced mistrust and anxiety as she witnessed that nothing was as it seemed.

_I remember having this level of thinking between my kindergarten and 2nd grade that nothing was safe—no one was safe. And that I couldn’t trust what people were presenting. Because our family looked really good, too. From the outside we looked great. Everyone was always talking about how amazing our family was and how great our parents were...And I remember once going to a friend’s house and sitting around and we were eating dinner and everyone was like talking and laughing and it was like surreal to me. But I actually had that thought, well we look good, too when company is over, so who knows what’s happening behind closed doors?_

This was a haunting memory, showing that Sofie’s experience with her own family made her doubt other families’ authenticity. She knew that there was a front stage and a back stage and that what happened back stage in her own home was unspeakable. Since this family’s image could not be believed, they were not safe. For Sofie, _appearing_ safe was different from _being_
safe. Sofie’s is a complex reflection on trust and safety where she had been told that she was untrustworthy, but she knew that the image her own family presented was untrustworthy. The inability to believe what she saw meant that she could not believe that people (or places) were safe, making her perpetually vulnerable.

In addition to the contradictions between the public image her family presented, her private image of the family and the conflicting messages she held about authenticity (being aware of her family’s contradictory image, her story being silenced. When she finally told her story, no one was saved.), the messages from her father about vulnerability were contradictory. He told her, “Do not allow yourself to be vulnerable. You always make sure you’re in charge of the situation.” And yet, she declared,” but you have no control over any situation.” Identifying the impossibility of her situation. In this case, her father’s voice claimed control, while her own lost (or could not hold onto) control. She gave an example of this:

I took my friend who was drunk home and then I went home, but by doing that, I missed curfew, I was late. I knew I was going to get in trouble for that and I did. I took that – whatever that punishment was and I remember I told him. I was telling him why I was late. Like no concern – there was never any concern for other people. “So, really that’s his problem, you made yourself ----. “I don’t think he used the word vulnerable, but that was what I would translate it as. “You made yourself vulnerable to: he could have grabbed the wheel, he could have done any of these things.” So, it didn't really matter.

Like in my mind, I was taking control of that situation by keeping that person safe, but it, there was no right answer ever. Does that make sense? So, I would interpret that I was taking control and helping and he was telling me I’m not doing that I’m making myself vulnerable in that.
The two contradictory perceptions here were Sofie’s and her father’s. Her father’s voice referred to Sofie becoming vulnerable through *losing control*, but Sofie’s own voice *took control* of her own actions – by making decisions and taking responsibility for them. Although Sofie was aware that her father did not believe that she was capable of taking control, she made what she believed was the right decision to take her drunken friend home. Distilling this into a self-poem, it became clear that Sofie took full responsibility for her actions, accepting the consequences:

*I took my friend who was drunk home*

*Then I went home,*

*I missed curfew,*

*I was late.*

*I knew I was going to get in trouble for that*

*And I did. I took that...punishment*

She *resisted* her father’s authority/control here, because she knew that she would be punished for taking control of the situation by making sure her friend got home safely and she did it anyway. In the face of contrasting perceptions of taking control, Sofie stuck with her own assessment of what doing the right thing was. (Note: Sofie was providing an example of her dad’s perception of vulnerability, and did not refer to this as an act of resistance, although it is.)

Sofie’s story continued through adulthood where she had further experiences of victimization in the context of an intimate relationship. “So, so after I grew up I was involved in a couple of not-so-good relationships and one horrific relationship.” The horrific relationship involved nine cases in court, violent assaults, strangulation and, ultimately Sofie’s changing her
name and moving out of the state. Throughout these experiences, Sofie navigated the public and the private faces of the abuse she was enduring.

One night we called the police and then it just escalated from there. We had a protection order, it was a legal nightmare. So he violated that several times. He showed up outside my work. And when I came out he attacked me there and he broke my wrist and smacked my head on the car. And my co-workers saw. And so he took off and they called an ambulance…. We were a few cases in already and I was a mess—I was hysterical. I’m like, “he’s going to kill me. When he finds me he’s going to kill me.” And so they took me to the hospital— they did take me crosstown to a different hospital than what was close.

At that point I told everyone who would listen. I told the doctor, I told the nurses. Everyone.

Sofie brought up numerous issues that she was navigating in this section. Sofie resisted victimization by filing an order of protection; unfortunately, the legal system failed her as her ex continued to stalk and assault her. The private violence she had been experiencing became public when her ex attacked her at her place of work where others witnessed her being violently assaulted. She resisted the secrecy associated with domestic violence when she told “everyone” her story. This was also a way of taking control—now she was the one who owned her narrative. In doing this, she reclaimed her own power, as her power was located in her identity as a storyteller.

While she was hospitalized, she discovered that her ex has somehow tracked her down at the hospital. She related how she had to fight with a nurse to get her to believe her:

It was the second day and I went back into my room and he was sitting on my bed. And I went—turned around and I walked down to the nurse’s station. And I was like, “he’s
in my room” and she was like, “no, he’s not” we argued, I’m not kidding, like 5-year-olds: “uh huh,” “nu uh” and finally I told her, I said, “look – you go look and if he is not there, I will sign whatever you want me to sign. You guys can keep me as long as you feel like you need to keep me if he’s not in there.” And then she stopped and was like, “oh” so she went down and she found him in there and so they took me out, locked him in probably.

Here the nurse doubted Sofie when she told her story, but Sofie refused to back down. Again, she took control of her narrative and got the support she needed in this incredibly difficult moment.

Sofie ultimately decided, with the support of a victim’s advocate and a friend’s father (this friend became her husband, but was not at the time) that she needed to go into exile. She was able to get support from the legal system to change her name, but they did not provide a place to live or other protection. Her ability to successfully hide herself and her daughter was contingent on having an extraordinary level of support—something that was not provided by the state. Also, in order to be safe, she had to give up her identity, her family, and all that was familiar to her.

And it was that advocate who I had dinner with she had – she’s the one who suggested. She’s like, “he’s not letting up and he’s smart. And he’s smart enough to—every one of his cases he was either initially charged with a misdemeanor or he was charged with a felony and he plead down. Every single one of ‘em. And she’s like, “he’s not showing any sign of relenting or letting up. You may want to consider this [living in exile]”.

And right after that, so, [Jim] who is my husband now. We were – we were friends at that time and he got kind of an inside view totally on accident of what was going on and he told his dad. And his dad, right around that same time, took me and my daughter in up in
The mountains and we were able to disappear. He supported us and that was when the victims advocate said, “We’ll do this” um. So he essentially supported us for a year while we went through that process..... I couldn’t use my social security number, I couldn’t use my ID. And I can’t imagine now. This was 20 years ago. 18-19 years ago. I can’t imagine right now the amount of effort it would be—to disappear.

Sofie’s story shines a light on the difficulties faced by women who leave abusive partners, but also on the significance of her choice to live in exile for a period of time, until she was able to return and live without the danger of being killed. Sofie’s vulnerability originated in an intimate, private relationship and did not dissipate, but transgressed the boundaries of private space into the public space, including the realm of legal cases. Sofie was able to find an extra-legal way to ensure safety for herself and her daughter which was her immediate survival strategy. She planned in advance, developing a strategy, with the support of an advocate to move, temporarily, to a safe location. Living in exile, far from being a form of acquiescence, was a temporary strategy that facilitated Sofie’s ability to return home and re-engage with her community of other victims of domestic violence. Connected and informed throughout her exile, Sofie returned to Colorado when she learned that her ex was in jail, stating and she had also become stronger.

I was way way way way way stronger. And I’ll say this now—he’s not looking for me.

He’s looking for someone that he can intimidate… He won’t show his face. It’s pretty out there that I work with the DA’s office and with the police departments and all that. So I feel like that deters him—exponentially (laughs).
Here, Sofie identified a major personal transformation. She overcame her fear and exhibited power through the connections she made through her advocacy work. She developed social capital and support from working in a space of political advocacy.

Sofie advocated for women who are victims of domestic violence and has done a considerable amount of work around victims’ rights and legislation. She learned through her own experience what laws were needed to protect victims. Most recently, Sofie has worked toward making non-fatal strangulation within domestic violence contexts a felony.

So we worked on legislation this year around that and we actually got it passed. So non-fatal strangulation with a domestic violence piece attached to it is now a felony.

She tells her own story as a way to advocate for victim’s rights and changes in legislation, like the strangulation legislation. Sofie suffered traumatic physical injuries when her ex strangled her, the physical injuries being discovered eighteen years after the fact when she participated in a research study. She was such a believer in the importance of women’s stories, that she trained women to tell their stories as testimony for legislation and as a form of support for others.

I try to work with survivors. I try to help. I also coach people on how to tell their stories in different scenarios. So whether it’s testifying for legislation or going to do a talk about their story – what that looks like.

Working with women on crafting their stories was central to who Sofie is—as a storyteller, as an advocate, and as a survivor. Sofie’s work with the DA, using women’s stories of victimization revealed their hidden experiences and served as a form of epistemological resistance (Tuana, 2004; 2006) as their lived experiences inform victims’ rights policy and other domestic violence legislation.
Sofie also shared her experience as a survivor of domestic violence by consulting on a production of Othello.

*You know, I did—I do speak. I do tell my story. I do. And I was involved with a theater company in Denver* was doing an iteration of Othello and she had taken—she had really stripped it down to all of the domestic violence pieces of it and so um she had hired me on as an advisor to work with her.

Both the director of the play and Sofie recognized the value of her knowledge, her story by including her as an advisor. And yet, Sofie’s own knowledge made her pause…

*I remember* there was one place where one of the actresses had a piece of paper she was trying to keep away from the other actor and he was taking it from her and pushing her and grabbing her at the same time. And it just looked awkward and *I was like, “here, do this.” It came so smoothly like, “no, no, no – do it like this.” I remember just stopping afterwards like when they did it that way and going, it’s so sad that I know that. That that’s what that should look like. I shouldn’t know that.*

While helping with the realism of the performance, Sofie recognized her knowledge as something that she shouldn’t know—that no one should have to know. And yet making the adjustment was second nature to her. By contributing her experience to this performance, she was self-consciously sharing hidden and unspeakable knowledge, making the private public and creating an opportunity for people who were not survivors to understand an experience like hers.

Sofie, like many of the women I interviewed, shared her story with me with the desire to help other women, employing both connection and epistemological resistance. My intention is to honor the stories of the women who participated in this study by sharing the pieces of their stories that illustrate their unique (or shared) forms of vulnerability and the relationship between
their vulnerability and their resistance. In Sofie’s case, her ability to tell stories was withheld from her through intimidation and control as a way to protect the secrets of incest and psychological and physical abuse. When this abuse was private and invisible, there was little support to be found, but Sofie ruptured the veil between the private and public by reclaiming her storytelling, taking it public, using it to address the issue of domestic violence initially at the individual level through the filing and pursuing of legal cases and later, at the structural level, by using her story to address policy. After her own case was managed—a process that involved multiple legal cases and a complete exit from her community, family and identity—she became both safe and strong and continued to give testimony in court on behalf of victims’ rights issues. She used her storytelling expertise to support other domestic violence survivors, both as part of a system of support and through coaching women to tell their stories as testimony in court, elevating their private and hidden stories of domestic violence to the level of public discourse with the power to inform policy. In spite of the fact that the legal system failed Sofie repeatedly, she continued to put her efforts into victims’ rights and criminal law reform. Sofie’s resistance transcended the individual level, connecting to other women, and informing policy. By raising women’s stories to the level of evidence, she was engaging in epistemic resistance, changing what we know about domestic violence and victims’ needs and rights. Her work with the DA’s office put her in a position to use her knowledge as evidence and had concrete outcomes in other women’s lives and in legislation. Sofie’s vulnerability and resistance were both enmeshed in the stories that she was forbidden from telling and the stories that became central parts of her own and other women’s advocacy.

Lola: Ending the cycle of violence. (Voices of nescience and volition)
Lola was a 59 year-old Latina veteran and mother of two. I met her during a women’s self-defense workshop in Denver. During the intensive 20-hour workshop that spanned two full weekends, we learned and practiced physical fighting skills as well as verbal self-defense tactics. Lola struggled mightily with the verbal exercises, in some cases not being able to speak at all, but standing in front of the role-playing instructor with her hands up in “ready stance” not saying a word (Note: I also struggled with the verbal exercises, although I became emotional, rather than tight-lipped). And yet, she volunteered to give a testimonial during our graduation at the end of the weekend with her mother, boyfriend, niece, and grandnieces in the audience. She told our friends and family-members who came to support, “If I can do it, anyone can,” characteristically down-playing her abilities and the challenges she overcame in order to complete the training. She later told me that she wished she had taken this training sooner, “Now I wish I would have known about that maybe many years ago when I was lot younger... now I just feel like—I’m kind of set in my ways,” indicating that at 59, she felt it was too late for her to have a transformative experience.

Lola was an incest survivor. Having been sexually abused by her stepfather from the time she was six (or younger; she remembered as far back as six, but family members believe that the abuse started even earlier), there was little, if any scope for her to resist.

Well as a kid um, most of the abuse was my stepfather and I was a child so that’s my authority, so um-um. It was “yes” “no,” you know, and I had to do, I mean I couldn’t fight. I was only a child. So, it’s just. I had to do it. What he wanted to do. So, I didn’t learn about self-defense. My mom was being beaten so, I didn’t really have any support. Capturing her vulnerability using the same section written as a self-poem:

I was a child
I had to do – I mean I couldn’t fight.

I was only a child.

I had to do it.

I didn’t learn about self-defense.

I didn’t really have any support.

Lola’s vulnerability was complete. She was a child, didn’t know self-defense and her mother was also a victim. So she was isolated, unlike Sophie who was aware of the abuse her siblings endured, Lola endured alone, although she had three younger brothers.

And, because it was all hush-hush, so nothing came out until I got. I think I was eleven, I was eleven when my mother caught him. So, um that’s why it’s like. She didn’t know so we didn’t get help or nothing.

Lola equated her mother’s not knowing with the lack of help available for her when she was a child. When her mother found out, she moved the family from California to Denver.

Alexis: did you have any idea that you were moving?

Lola: None. My mom sold everything. I remember – she sold everything. We just packed up what we could take; got in the station wagon and the next thing you know we ended up out here. But I did not know: who, why we were coming to Denver. You know, because I grew up in California. I didn’t know that he was there. But his sister, the one, my aunt—she said, because he was there we stayed with her. Even though she was sexually abused. I think they all knew what he had done. You know and he, um, kind of lied about things and stuff. But, nobody told me why we were moving out here and, and of course I didn’t know he was out here when we got here. Then when we got here and I
saw him I thought, what can I do? I’m only eleven, you know. But my mother never left me home with him.

In this section, Lola revealed a voice of nescience or being intentionally kept in the dark as she enumerated the many things she did not know – information that was kept from her: why they moved to Denver, that her stepfather was going to be there, who knew about her sexual abuse. There was much information that was important to Lola’s life that was obscured. Lola being kept in the dark was something that sustained her vulnerability.

Lola credited her mother with keeping her stepfather away from her once she caught her stepfather sexually abusing her.

*She never left me with him* until the day *he killed himself*. The night before was the last night that *he had touched me*. And then *he killed himself*. *He didn’t touch me for like the whole year that we were here*. Then all of a sudden something happened and *he just shot himself*. While *he did that to me first. I don’t know*. Was it later that night or the next day? Then *he killed himself*.

Lola intertwined these events; her stepfather resuming his sexual abuse after a year and his suicide, repeating each of these events and mentioning her stepfather’s suicide four times. While her own abuse was still private and unspeakable, shrouded in the words “he did that” “he touched me” the violence of his suicide was a public, speakable act. Even though it was in the home, everyone knew it happened and talked about it, while the violence she personally endured was spoken in hushed tones, and Lola was never really sure who knew what, and if she knew the whole story.

**Guns in the Family**
Although Lola learned to shoot in the military and shot competitively with a military team, she did not own or want a gun.

Not because of the (hits table) when my stepdad—when he took his own life (laughs). I didn’t want guns in the house, nothing. I mean kids could have gotten them, you know, things like that. So, I never wanted a gun.

Although she indicated that he stepfather’s suicide was not the reason she did not want a gun, it was very likely a contributing factor as it was a major traumatic event which she mentioned numerous times in the interview.

**Resistance: Ending the Cycle of Violence**

Somebody told me that it started younger [than six]—I think like his family. But, see, my aunt, because my aunt always told me that she was abused – which was his oldest sister – and she was abused by her father. So, I guess it was a cycle.

Lola articulated that she was aware that there was an inter-generational cycle of abuse in her family. Lola resisted this cycle in her own life, making bold choices.

I joined the army. I had my son at 21, my daughter at 22 and I joined the army at 23. I had to do something because I felt that if I joined the military it was going to make me stronger. I had my ex-husband made me feel like I couldn’t do nothing. That’s what he would say, “you can’t do nothing and blah blah blah.” I thought, I’ll show you. And I joined the army. And I made expert (laughs, thumps table)! I’ll show you! So that was how I said, I’ve got to get away. So I thought joining the military even as military police, because that was pretty hard training for a female. I did that and I passed all the way through.
Lola joined the military, because she thought that it would make her stronger. This was also a way to prove that she was capable and a way of getting away from her abusive ex-husband. Instead of a voice of nescience, Lola spoke with a *voice of volition*. She enacted resistance demonstrating that she had something to prove, she had to do something—and she did and felt successful.

Um and the reason *I felt that I had to go* and *I had two children when I left*. But, their father was such a womanizer and *he used to try to pound me, you know, like hit me*. And the last time he did—that was the last time, because the next day *I went in and took the test*. And that was it. You know like, that’s all it took. *I thought, I don’t want to live like this. I don’t want to be pounded*, just because he’s drinking and wants to have—and that’s it because *he tried to rip my fucking panties off and tried to force sex on me*. And *I said, you know, we don’t do that*. And so *I left and I walked to my mother’s house*, because she only lived a few blocks away.

Lola left her ex-husband after he tried to rape her. Her leaving was a complete break with her ex and included a plan to join the military—a way to get away, but also a way to re-configure who she was as a person and how she saw herself.

*I went to my mom’s house* and *we talked* and *I asked my mom—I talked to my mom*. *I said what I wanted to do was to join the military*, but *I needed help with my kids* because they were one and two…And my parents agreed to take temporary custody of my kids, because *I talked to their father* and he didn’t want to do anything, so he agreed to it. *I had to have him sign*, because *I didn’t want him taking the kids when I’m gone*. So [my parents] took [my children]…That gave me the opportunity to get away. And *I went for the hardest training I could*. *It wasn’t really what I wanted to do, but it was military*
police and at that time it was one of the harder trainings for a woman and I wanted the discipline. Because I really felt weak; here I am letting this man pound me.

Lola’s plan to join the military was specifically designed so that she could become stronger. Being abused by her ex-husband made her feel weak (and she blamed herself for this) and her idea of what could make her stronger was to join the military and learn to become strong. It is striking that she did not have a feminine role model of strength, but instead identified the military as a place to build herself up. Lola needed volition to plan out her departure, getting her parents (her mother had remarried and this stepfather was someone Lola loved and trusted) to take custody and getting her ex-husband to give up his custody of their children. In these acts, Lola ended the cycle of violence that she had endured, making a drastic move to resist violence in her life. Lola never acknowledged that her action ended the cycle of violence for her children. She also did not romanticize her time in the military. She talked about her struggles with verbal skills in the military police.

Learning to keep quiet: Learning not to speak up

Some of the things was hard for me to do. It was military police training. Which, my verbal skills sucked. So one of them was a bar brawl, how do you go in there in a bar brawl. So, things like that. Even though I feel like I’m a lot stronger in a lot of other ways, my verbal skills still was not strong. Because even when we had to do these, you know, like bar brawls or domestic violence things, thinking of what to say didn’t come out right. So that was something that I could never do. But, in other ways, it made me feel stronger. Cos I did something I had never done before: I shot my M-16, I did a hand grenade, I did a .38.
The voices of nescience and volition came up against each other in this section. Lola overcame the vulnerability of being kept in the dark by learning to do things she had never done before (epistemological resistance), and yet, she still didn’t know how to effectively use verbal skills (de-escalate a fight, for example). The military cultivated a particular type of knowledge that was associated with being strong which was what Lola sought by enlisting. Lola talked about her lack of verbal skills repeatedly as being a challenge for her throughout her life, including when she took self-defense training. She lamented that she didn’t have self-defense training, or family members looking out for her when she was a child:

See I didn’t have that. And so I had to just learn to keep my mouth shut because I didn’t know how to verbalize. I wish I had gotten into it [self-defense training] when I was much younger and kept on doing that. It’s very important.

Lola acknowledged that she didn’t learn how to speak up for herself. She learned to keep quiet as a consequence of being sexually abused by her stepfather. This was a survival tactic. Not having learned to speak up for herself was one of the long-term consequences of having her voice taken away from her through sexual violence. Notably, she talked about not being able to speak as being something she “didn’t know” how to do, equating speaking with knowing and not speaking with ignorance. This was another way Lola was kept in the dark. Consequently, she didn’t meet any other survivors of sexual assault until she joined a group with the V.A. a few months before she participated in self-defense training at the age of fifty-eight.

**Connecting with other survivors: The importance of community**

And I love it; because I love being with other women…I feel a connection. I don’t feel like I’m kind of like stuck in left field by myself. And I never—before I got involved with mental health I never knew there were others. You always think you’re the only one. You
know. Because I didn’t know anybody else. We don’t really sit around and talk about it.

And here, in mental health it’s just so nice because we all come together. We’re there for each other. That’s why I like it. I’m always at the VA, because I always feel so good when I’m there.

This section is virtually a self-poem as Lola referred to her own feelings throughout. She loved, felt connected, came together, was there for each other and felt good when she was with other sexual assault survivors at the V.A. Just as important was what she didn’t know or feel prior to connecting with other survivors: she “didn’t know there were others/anybody else,” because “we don’t really sit around and talk about it.” This referred to the silence and isolation that surrounded Lola because it was not common for people to share their stories of victimization, particularly of incest. Not knowing—nescience—being kept in the dark that there were others like her was an intentional act of hiding knowledge from Lola which perpetuated the alienation of incest and other sexual assault survivors. After connecting with others, she no longer felt like she was “stuck in left field.” This showed that there were two important benefits of her involvement with other sexual assault survivors: learning that there were others like her and coming together to be a support for one another. These needs of knowing and connection were ways of re-establishing her sense of self. She became a member of a community rather than being isolated. This reflected the important role that communities of support can play.

Summary: Lola

Like Sofie, Lola had to overcome both incest and domestic violence. Both took extreme strategies of exiting; however, Lola turned to a dominant cultural role model of what strength looks like, military training, while Sofie turned to an understanding of herself as a storyteller, drawing on a sense of self that had been encouraged in her early childhood. Lola was able to
break the cycle of abuse for her children by creating a strategy to get out of an abusive home and
to tend to her own need to learn to become stronger. Both ultimately found connection and
support through communities of survivors, with Sofie taking more of a leadership role, holding
the expertise of storytelling. Lola, on the other hand, finally found a place of belonging, although
she still harbored a longing for an ability to speak up for herself that was difficult to recover from
the silencing she adopted as a survival strategy through her childhood abuse. Each of these
women continued to connect with other women and to resist their past victimization.

Charlie: Learning to fight for yourself: “When you know that you can protect yourself, it
makes it easier for you to think about ways to not have to.” (voices of vulnerability and
knowing)

Charlie was a fifty-year-old African American real estate professional who taught self-
defense on a volunteer basis for women living in a transitional housing program, some of whom
were coming out of jail and others of whom were in an addiction treatment program. I met
Charlie during a weekend-long self-defense training intensive in which I was invited to join the
instructor training session as well as the regular training. Charlie was friendly, open, and
demonstrated her belief in the benefits of self-defense training far exceeding the development of
physical skills.

Growing up, Charlie’s father taught her that it was her responsibility to fight back,
authorizing her to use physical force (although he did not teach her or her brother or sister how to
fight). Her mother (whom she discussed far less than her father), on the other hand, taught her to,
“go tell somebody and in the meantime, try to go along get along.” Her father demonstrated a
different approach:
I remember one time when he found out about it [an older boy beating her up on the school bus], he was like, “Where do they live?” And he took me over to their house, called him to the door…called his dad or mom to the door – and let them both know in no uncertain terms that if he ever laid another hand on his daughter that he was going to kill him, so.

Although her father role-modeled that his children should stand up for themselves, Charlie saw a strong difference in the way she was raised from the way her brother was raised:

With my brother, he put my brother in karate. My dad was very gender role-oriented, we’ll put it that way. And so, in lot of ways he raised his daughters very differently from the way he raised his son. So, my brother took karate. Because he wanted him to be able to know how to fight. But he didn’t do the same thing with us girls.

In spite of not having learned to fight directly, embodying the different messages she heard about gender, Charlie often took on the role of protector, defending her younger siblings, and recounted a story of defending her sister when a boy was trying to come after her when the two of them were at the movies as teenagers:

When I saw him actually go after her when she was trying to get away from him, I grabbed a beer bottle and broke the bottom off of it to use as a weapon. [Alexis: WOW. WOW] I know, I sound psychotic, don’t I? I’m really not!

It is important to note that Charlie didn’t actually cut anyone with the bottle, but broke it as a way to intimidate the boy who was attacking her sister. When she said, “I sound psychotic,” Charlie invoked the stereotype of woman-as-crazy (see also: hysteria), rather than someone who stood up for her sister successfully, or even as a violent person. And yet, this stereotype challenged dominant gender norms as Charlie was effective when she enacted her crazy-woman role.
That was pretty much the end of the fight. After he realized that—he ran up on me and when *I started waving at him with the beer bottle*, he knew that *I wasn’t messing—I wasn’t playing with him* and he never bothered either one of us again after that. *I think he probably thought, ooh that bitch is crazy.* And that was the end of that.

By waving the broken beer bottle, she conveyed that she was serious, even if crazy. The line between her own seriousness and being seen as crazy seemed significant as she was able to enact craziness in a way that served her by defying norms of expected behavior (*Hollander, 2002*).

**A Woman’s Work Can Be Dangerous Work**

As an adult, Charlie was a realtor and described a few situations where she did not feel safe when she was showing homes on her own.

*When I worked in real estate I was accosted* on a property one day in broad daylight in the middle of the afternoon. And it was one of those things where *I was in trouble*, because if this guy had come in with the sole intention of robbing me. *I would have pointed him to my purse and sent him on his way*, but as we went to the office to get my purse, *he literally had his hand within inches of my throat* when a couple walked in and he just kind of turned and walked away as if nothing untoward was going on. *I was so grateful to see the couple that I immediately took off with them.*

This scene characterized the inherent vulnerability of Charlie’s job, as well as her discernment of the risk that was posed to her. She lost her agency, expressing her *voice of vulnerability*. This was not the dominant voice of her interview, but came up briefly when she described this assault that she was not mentally or physically prepared for. Her reaction to this event, on the other hand, was completely agentic (enacted resistance); she began taking private jujitsu classes every morning before going in to work.
So immediately after that, I contacted a friend of mine who had been teaching jujitsu. And so I started doing privates with him pretty much every day of the week. And so that kind of lessened my learning curve substantially. And I was accosted again.

Enrolling in private jujitsu classes was a direct form of resistance that was based on knowledge and physical preparation, in case she was assaulted again. Charlie’s private jujitsu training had been going on for five months when she was accosted on the work site again.

OK, so it was a different property with a different guy. He was well-dressed. He was well-groomed. He was attractive. He was nothing that you would think. But, anyway – the whole time that I was talking to the guy, just basically de-escalating to make sure he understood that I was not going back to the house with him at night, after hours. Um the whole time, you know, I was having those conversations with him all the people around me in those homes, because this was at night. I sold most of the homes immediately around me. So I knew if I screamed real loud somebody would recognize my voice and I would get attention that way…You know, the whole time I was talking to him there was a plan that I was formulating in my mind. So, I already knew how I was going to take him down and knew how I was going to take him out.

Focusing on Charlie’s self-voice; she was agentic, referring to her own actions in a positive, direct manner, because she knew what she was going to do. She spoke with a voice of knowing, encompassing both the knowledge she held and doing something with that knowledge. She had numerous plans to defend herself: verbal de-escalation, screaming (and knowing the people living in the homes around her would recognize her voice), and she knew how she was going to take him down. Her agency was restored through knowing that she could formulate a plan and execute it after taking jujitsu for five months.
So I was able to successfully de-escalate the situation and just get him to leave and then I find out about a week later, maybe five days later, but it was within a week of that incident, you know, with the subdivision immediately behind me which was less than a quarter mile down the road they found a dead woman in the gutter behind that property. [Alexis: OH MY GOD]. And when I heard about it, I just knew it was the same guy.

Something inside me said, that’s the same guy that came by here like a week ago.

Charlie’s ability to get the guy to leave was considerably more dramatic, considering that Charlie felt she knew that this person killed another woman the same week she was threatened by him.

Charlie continued to resist her vulnerability in her place of work. This time, she had to stand up to her boss who refused to let her take a weekend off to take a jujitsu workshop that Charlie felt she needed to keep herself safe at work.

So, I had put in to take that weekend off of work so I could go to the seminar [Alexis: UH HUH] and my project manager told me no, I needed to be there. Now I knew I had the vacation time to take, so my project manager tells me “no” because he needs me on the property to sell houses. And I just told him, I said, well I have been accosted twice within the last 5 months, I need to do, learn, I need to go and do this so I can be better prepared to protect myself [UM, YEAH] and he literally threatened my job in that moment and I just told him, “Do what you gotta do.” And I do believe that was part of why I ended up getting let go from that job, because I had the audacity to defy him and I even asked him, I was like, “how would you feel, how would you respond in this situation if this happened to your mother or your sister or your wife,” all of the above he had [UH HUH]. And he just didn’t care [WOW]. Um, but I took the time off, I took the seminar and I really feel like that was basically when he decided that he didn’t want to have me around because
out of 85 sales counselors. I was number three in the company [WOW]. So, it had nothing to do with the performance of my job. And what I really feel like it really had to do with was that he didn’t see a need for this, you know. He didn’t see a need for it and so I defied him, he decided to do something else. [WOW] so I just mention that to say that there are employers out there, they don’t have a clue, they just don’t get it even when you paint the pictures for them—show them within the context of people they care about they don’t see.

I share this passage to demonstrate that Charlie resisted her vulnerability regardless of her boss’s attitude towards her need to take time to learn to defend herself better. Her voice of knowing demonstrated that she knew what she needed and had the audacity to defy her boss. She expressed her agency and her competence, not backing down and doing what she felt was required to be safe of the job. She was also making a structural complaint, arguing that there were many employers who didn’t understand or respect the very crucial importance of their employees’ safety.

I figured even if there’s not funding, you know, federal funding or public money available for [self-defense training]. I think that it is an investment that employers should make in their employees, but the trouble is a lot of employers don’t see the need. She even argued that employers should pay for training for their employees.

Charlie moved into a different career after being fired. She started overseeing construction projects, but would do things differently if she did start selling homes again.

I wouldn’t show homes by myself, you know. I would always have somebody accompany me if I could. If I couldn't then I’m going to try and let them explore the house. I’ve been in situations where my internal radar went off about a person—well prior to those
incidents happening where my internal radar went off and in that moment said, I need to take some precautions here. So I did. I don't know that I would necessarily say that its feelings of vulnerability, I just know that if my internal radar says you need to do something different, that's what I need to do.

Charlie talked about being aware of things that were going on that made her uncomfortable and acting on that knowledge. She made a distinction between being vulnerable and acting on her “internal radar.” Internal radar was a system of knowledge about her own safety and the actions she needed to take. She has kept herself safe in spite of being assaulted twice at the workplace, so there was reason to credit this system of knowledge. She re-defined vulnerability in an agentic way, indicating that she knew that she needed to do something to protect herself and she did, combining knowing and enacted resistance. In other words, resistance was embedded in her conceptualization of vulnerability.

Guns: Another form of self-protection

Charlie grew up with guns in her home and recalled her father keeping a gun in the car when he went on long trips. She was also in ROTC in high school and practiced shooting two days a week at her school’s shooting range. Charlie owned a gun and kept one in her home, but did not carry as she “does not feel the need.” She told me about the first gun she purchased.

I purchased my first gun when I was in college, because I was traveling on the road – a lot alone at night. I was traveling alone on back roads at night and I just wanted to have a gun in case I had a mechanical breakdown and, you know, something were to happen where somebody, you know, hurts me under the pretense of wanting to help me. [UM HM] and things went sideways; I wanted to have a gun to protect myself.
Charlie bought the gun in order to facilitate her ability to travel in her car alone at night without the fear of something happening to her should her car break down. It is significant that her father kept a gun in the car with him when he traveled and this was her first use of a gun. It is also significant that she trained in jujitsu extensively after she was assaulted, rather than carrying a gun on the job. She said that she felt “more confident” and “not afraid” after taking jujitsu, because, “what *I really learned is that your ability to protect yourself doesn’t rely on your size and strength.*” Jujitsu is based on using your body strategically, so you can defeat an opponent who is bigger and stronger than you. Importantly, Charlie said, “*When you know that you can protect yourself, it makes it easier for you to think about ways to not have to.*” A statement that encapsulates the freedom of action that she developed through learning jujitsu. She gave an example of this when she talked about de-escalating a conflict with a person she believed later murdered another woman. Again, her *voice of knowing* was invoked as she learned how to defend herself through extensive jujitsu training.

**Summary: Charlie**

Charlie’s story was different from Lola and Sofie’s since she did not report growing up with domestic violence. She was also a gun owner who did not “have a problem with guns.” But, she trained extensively in jujitsu (and later became a self-defense instructor) as a way of preparing herself should someone try to attack her. Charlie’s voice of knowing was dominant in her narrative as she was drawn to learning and mastering a specific skill to defend herself. Also, knowing jujitsu was liberating, opening up other possible actions. As a younger person, Charlie had been empowered to fight, although she wasn’t taught *how* to fight. In spite of not knowing, she came up with a strategy to defend her sister—breaking a bottle—an act that has been depicted in films as a form of defense. Notably, Charlie grew up with guns, remembering that
her father kept a gun in the car when he traveled, she kept a gun in her car as a safety precaution should she break down. While she still owned a gun, it was jujitsu training that enabled her to act in a situation in which her life was in danger, providing her with the knowledge to come up with many ways to get out of the situation safely, including the option to avoid using her physical skills.

**Beth: In pursuit of a safe place** “I had to get out and yet they were all I knew. And so I left everything I knew.” *(Voices of disempowerment and valuing)*

Beth was my instructor when I took an intensive 20-hour women’s empowerment-based self-defense training. Beth was a thirty-six year old Latina woman who was slight and quiet and coached our class in a gentle and supportive way. During class, she told a story about being raised to believe that harm was lurking in every dark shadow – a teaching that paralyzed her with fear for many years of her life, as she was never taught any strategy to address her fear. So, she limited her activity. Self-defense training, she said, allowed her to connect with her “fighting spirit;” a sentiment echoed by many of the women I interviewed, but with different words.

I interviewed Beth in her home near Loveland, Colorado. She had dressed up for the occasion (or so I thought, not being familiar with the way she dresses outside of self-defense class) with a hat that matched her sweater and skirt. She had two dogs and two cats, one of which prowled the kitchen table throughout our interview, demanding my attention. Ultimately, the cat had to be put upstairs with Beth’s five-year old son who, Beth explained, was on the Autism spectrum and therefore required a lot of patience and thoughtful communication, including about personal boundaries—a skill Beth had learned much about through her involvement in women’s self-defense training.
Beth’s relationship with guns was complicated. She grew up with guns, but didn’t really shoot. She believed that guns may escalate, rather than calm down a situation and thought that verbal de-escalation skills were likely more useful than a gun in an active shooter situation. Her husband was a concealed carry permit holder and he had guns in the house. She saw being a gun owner as a part of her husband’s identity. “So I allow him to have his own boundaries that I can feel comfortable with. Most comfortable with, but there is a level of discomfort, too.” Because they had a child, this meant a lot of vigilance was required around teaching their son gun safety and storing their guns. And, yet Beth did not view guns as being a viable form of self-protection.

Beth was Sofie’s younger half-sister. Beth was eight years younger than Sofie and they grew up in the same household until Sofie was old enough to move out on her own. When the family moved to the Middle East when Beth was eleven, Sofie stayed in the U.S. and Beth was with her older brother, younger sister, and her parents. Beth described hers as a “domestic” household, putting emphasis on emotional, not physical abuse.

Honestly my growing up was very fear-based. And so there was two separate messages; it was always around fear in that, you know, if I was ever alone, then somebody who was a bad person was going to get me. Um so there was never any, like, “do these things to protect yourself,” it was just like, “we’ll never leave you alone.” So the other message was that you’re like the weak one, the one that needs to be taken care of, the one that needs protecting.

The fear that was present for Beth was a restrictive fear, preventing her from doing many things.

She described being controlled by virtue of messages that she was too weak to take care of herself. She attributed this message to her lack of voice and ability to problem-solve.
As for “the weak one,” I had an extremely controlling father. He used fear with manipulation to sort of get me to do whatever. Told me what to wear - or, you know, problem-solve for me. If he’s solving my problems, I must not be able to solve my own problems. I didn’t have my own voice, you didn’t speak up, you know.

Beth’s voice was a voice of disempowerment. She learned that she was weak; she didn’t have a voice, and felt incapable of doing anything for herself. Like her sister, Sofie, Beth talked about her father using messages about her weakness and vulnerability as ways to control her.

And he [my father] was such a fear person for me. Like I was afraid of and because of that I never spoke out and I never could have boundaries and I never could say anything, because I never knew when the yelling would start or, you know, things like that.

Beth’s fear was incapacitating as she anticipated and tried to avoid her father’s emotional outbursts. She constricted her speech and behavior, not wishing to rock the boat. Again, the voice of disempowerment came through as: she was afraid, never spoke out, never could have boundaries, and never could say anything for fear of setting her father off.

Unsafe Places, Unsafe People

To describe feeling vulnerable, Beth talked about safety – or rather the lack of safe spaces and safe people in her life.

Well just growing up in a domestic home, you don’t feel real safe there, you know.

Going to school that you’re bullied on a regular basis, you don’t feel safe there. I lived in country that just finished the Gulf War, twice a year Saddam Hussein would bring his troops to the borders, so there was not safety in the country we were living in. And just (pause) you know not having freedom to just go out and do what you want to do and things like that. My parents were pretty strict, too, you know. My brother could go to
parties and things like that. *My brother snuck me to parties, um, and I had like a controlled freedom, which I am thankful for that,* you know in that way.

And, although she felt unsafe, Beth also found some vestiges of safety. Her brother, she said, was consistently a safe person for her. He was able to provide her with “controlled freedom.”

Yeah he [my brother] was [safe] - he was a fairly safe person my whole life. And *I had an English teacher.* He was my [school] newspaper advisor and he was fairly safe.

She later sought out safe places and safe people in a major act of resistance.

**Vulnerable at school**

Beth also talked about being bullied at school. This contributed to Beth’s feeling that there was no “safe place” for her.

*When I was young they brought out a piece of paper, you know, “who hates Beth, sign this.” And they were the popular girls so they went and had everybody sign it and then they gave it to me.* You know, it was like those kinds of things of *devaluing somebody.* And, *I don’t know, just saying things to me, you know, verbal type of things.* As far as my personal experience, you know, *there was not a lot of safety in my world in general. So, I think I always felt vulnerable.* (pause) *Whether I knew it was vulnerable or not, I just always felt unsafe. I didn’t have very many safe places.*

Beth experienced that the way the girls in her school bullied was by *devaluing* her and expressed the voice of disempowerment. Her focus on the importance of being *valued* or *mattering* was carried through her entire interview. Recall the passage I quoted at the beginning of the chapter when Beth was discussing leaving her family and moving back to the U.S. with a friend’s family when she was seventeen.
I felt like I couldn’t live with my family anymore and I was in a pretty dark place. I’d spend most of my time thinking and believing that I didn’t really matter to the world and uh spent a lot of time thinking of suicide. (voice changes; becomes louder) Glad I didn’t do that, but I spent a lot of time thinking about it and uh felt like I had to leave. My brother helped me with it - and I guess my parents were (crying; so inaudible). So, it was hard because I had to get out and yet they were all I knew. And so I left everything I knew.

Beth connected her depression, suicidal thoughts, and need to move away from her family to the feeling of not mattering. This feeling propelled her to take an enormous step and a major act of resistance—moving away from her family in the Middle East and going back to the U.S.

_ I did come back to the US...I actually didn’t come back with my family. I came back with some friends and at that time. There’s so much - some things happened and I got a year behind in school, not necessarily through my fault or academic. So when I left, 17 before 18, I was still just going into 11th grade and so I came back to the United States with some friends of mine and went to the 11th grade in Louisiana. And then they felt it was time for me, my parents, my family was still in the Middle East; time for me to come back to Colorado, you know and be. My siblings were here, you know and be more with my family. And so I did come back. Um, at the time I was sort of supporting myself, so I ended up becoming a nanny and working and didn’t finish. I ended up getting my GED. I didn’t have the opportunity to finish high school._

Beth never explicitly said what precipitated her move back to the U.S., as some things continued to be unspeakable. Also unspeakable were the events that led to her moving back to Colorado and away from her friend’s family who had brought her back to the U.S. Although she
said, “My friend’s family, they were safe...they just were loving and accepting and valuing and appreciated spending time with me,” in this passage, it seemed as if they, not her, made the decision for her to move to Colorado to be with her sister and other relatives. Although she had selected a replacement for her own family, where she didn’t matter with a family that valued her, the respite was temporary and she needed to continue looking for safe people and safe places. While Beth did not speak of this as a betrayal, in this passage, her voice of disempowerment persisted, as she was not the one to make this major life decision. Subsequent decisions were ones that Beth had to make for herself.

I was really excited about that. I was really afraid because I had no idea what I was going to do...I moved in with my sister for a while trying to figure out what do I do? About going to school? Or do I work? What do I do? I don’t remember everything. It was all so traumatic for me there are pieces that I mean, I’m pretty sure I have PTSD from the move itself...So, I think it was scary and I didn’t know what to do and I felt like I had to take care of myself and I didn’t know how to do that and I didn’t know - didn’t know how to make the best decisions for myself. So, I ended up becoming a nanny for a woman and her child.

Beth referred to her feelings about moving overseas in many ways: excited, afraid, it was difficult. Her reference to having PTSD revealed that this move was more than difficult; it was traumatic. She repeated that she didn’t know what to do or how to make the best decisions for herself. In Beth’s case, not knowing referred to lack of experience or guidance making major life decisions, but also to the direct lesson that she was not capable of taking care of herself. And yet, she did take care of herself and found ways to keep herself safe.
I ended up really loving that family; loved the children…She became my very best friend. She was first my employer and she became my very best friend. She was incredibly amazing and loving and silly and safe - she was very safe. It was good. Having left everything she knew to resist being in a dark, intolerable place where she didn’t feel she mattered, Beth ultimately found a place where she felt love and safety.

In Resisting, What is sacrificed?

Although Beth was able to make her way on her own, as we talked, it was very clear that she still has a hard time talking about making the decision not to finish her education.

I think there was a real lack of value in myself. So there was a real lack of value and it was really important for me to finish my education. Let me get a tissue my nose is running (she gets tissues and comes back). So, I think I have some regret in that respect [Alexis: ABOUT YOUR EDUCATION?]. Yeah - yeah. I think there’s something about when you experience all those things and come from that background...in hindsight, it’s like, I wish I had done that differently, but I don’t think I could at that point.

Beth connected her regret about her decision not to finish her education to not valuing herself. Because she felt that she didn’t matter, giving up her education likely felt like a betrayal of herself. And yet, she was able to make connections and navigate uncertainty—things she was taught she couldn’t do, thus resisting negative images of herself. It is important to note that Beth made this decisions as a young person without the support of an organization or parents, raising questions about what types of support are needed for young people who end up living on their own because they do not feel safe at home.

Self-defense: Finding my fighting spirit
Beth sought out and took her first self-defense training in 2009. Her descriptions of what she learned and how this changed her life are extensive, ranging from finding her fighting spirit to learning how to teach her son to establish and enforce personal boundaries. I will discuss more of these in chapter six on self-defense. Confidence was at the root of what she got out of taking self-defense training:

*I was more confident. I think that inviting your, connecting with your fighting spirit in that adrenalized state there’s a messaging of value and honor to one’s self and I think that that brings out confidence, so I would say confidence. Less fear, because I started venturing out by myself without overwhelming fear.*

Reflecting on what she got out of self-defense training, Beth expressed a *voice of valuing* herself, acknowledging new *confidence, value and honor, and less fear.* These three things were at the core of her self-doubt and the restrictions she imposed on her own activities. In other words, self-defense directly addressed the issues that kept Beth paralyzed by fear.

**Summary: Beth**

Beth indicated that what she learned about herself (that she was weak, could not defend herself and to be afraid of strangers) left her feeling that her life didn't matter. Her quest was a process of resisting these notions and of developing value in herself. She did this by leaving home and finding alternative families where she felt loved and valued. This included the family who took her to the U.S. and the family she worked for as a nanny. Later, she found self-defense training and learned physical and verbal strategies that helped change the way she felt about herself. In all of this, Beth resisted the images that she was given of herself and sought out new experiences and interactions where she was valued. Her experiences with self-defense were what showed her that she wasn’t weak, she could fight back, she did have a voice and she could
establish boundaries. These forms of learning were not only atypical for girls and women, but they represent epistemic resistance (Tuana, 2004) because they defy common conceptualizations of women as weak, replacing them with lessons about women’s strength and ability to fight back.

Beth’s story also highlights the lack of options available for kids who are not safe in their own homes. There was a lack of structural support in Beth’s life and she ended up navigating the world on her own, having to make difficult/painful decisions about her own education. Sacrificing her education was something Beth clearly did not want to do, but felt she had to in order to support herself. Beth told me that very few people had heard her story, highlighting both the pain around her educational decision as well as her determination that sharing it now, making her private story public, might be valuable for others.

**Zarina: Reclaiming Vulnerability** “I feel like my own experience of vulnerability is like strength” (Voices of longing and accessing power)

Zarina was a twenty-three year-old White undergraduate student. I took a weekend-long self-defense workshop with Zarina and was her partner for both a sharing exercise and for sparring. Zarina was an unusual self-defense trainee; she was deeply spiritual and inwardly focused both during the training and during our interview. She took a meditative posture, breathed deeply with her eyes closed and eyelids fluttering manically, betraying her otherwise calm, grounded demeanor. Doing drills with Zarina, I felt as if I witnessed the awakening of an intense and boundless power. The images of Buffy the Vampire Slayer and a tightly coiled snake, resting at the base of her spine, only to be awakened and stretch out into a full striking pose when aroused came to me when sparring with her, and months later when I interviewed her. She did not grow up with guns and had never shot a gun, but said “guns feel like too much.”
Zarina was one of the few people who did not complete the full round of the self-defense class (for any class I participated in), skipping the third and final day. Because she had signed up for an interview and had dropped out of the class, I felt it was necessary to include her experience of the self-defense training, and so pursued interviewing her. While she was always amenable to an interview, there were often long delays before she responded to my requests. Consequently, I ended up interviewing her seven months after the training.

I went to Zarina’s very sunny, open and bright home in Boulder to interview her. We sat at the dining table, a huge open space flanked by windows with sun streaming in all around us. Zarina started off the interview re-framing vulnerability as a strength, rather than a weakness.

I feel like the strongest message was really not so much a verbal one, but me observing my primary caregivers like what they were embodying and how they like – they dealt with vulnerability. I had a hard time growing up too, just because like my mom wasn’t very affectionate… I felt like there was this wall around her and I couldn’t like penetrate it and I very much wanted her love and to be touched and like (pause) to experience like affection and connection which to me is very vulnerable—I tie it in with vulnerability. And so not receiving that sent this whole like story that I very much like am coping recently these past few years, like I’m unlovable and my mom doesn’t love me and stuff like that. Yeah and even though there was so much emotion in my house, mainly from my mom and I, like, crying and angry words. And so much emotion it didn’t feel vulnerable, because it was very much like out of reaction like and so for me vulnerability would have been sitting down and actually talking about what was going on inside of us without like blaming the other person.
Zarina framed vulnerability much in the way Brene Brown (2012; 2010) did, as a way of letting other people see your true emotions and of admitting fallibility, weakness, or fear. This conceptualization of vulnerability was a form of connecting with others through sharing these fears and in Zarina’s interview I heard this as a voice of longing. She longed for her mother’s love, touch, and affection.

Zarina also identified this positive interpretation of vulnerability as a way of thinking through and resisting the emotional and physical violence in her own life by sharing her own emotional experiences – or connecting (epistemic resistance and connection).

Whenever I was feeling vulnerable or crying or something that it was perceived as wrong—like there was something wrong with me. And I still experience that with my mother today. Like when I feel sensitive or something or feel like vulnerable in some way, it’s perceived as there’s something wrong with me.

Zarina described that when she displayed emotions growing up, it was seen as “wrong”—something she repeated three times.

And yet, Zarina talked about fighting with her mother as a major part of her childhood, characterizing her relationship with her mother as full of emotion:

My mom and I fought a lot growing up. We had a really tense relationship and I had a lot of anger towards her and so in the home, I felt very kind of boisterous. I felt kind of like—and very much like attacked like all the time like in my home … just a sense of being threatened in the home. [Alexis: PHYSICALLY THREATENED?]. At times, much more rare, much more kind of this real icky like emotional turbulent kind of environment. Hm. And so when there was like physical violence when my mother would
like hit me or something I would get very like (quick in breath/out breath) like my body was responsive to that.

Zarina described a tense, emotionally abusive household where she felt threatened by her mother. While there was some physical violence, it was the emotional environment that felt most threatening to Zarina. This was not the emotional exchange that she longed for.

Here, Zarina talked about her own emotional displays.

Or when I did [fight back], like in the case when I’m being with my mom it was very like uncontrolled and it kind of felt desperate and something I felt like ashamed of, like later…I then felt like, yeah, there was a sense of shame, or like I shouldn’t be acting that way. Or that I was a bad kid.

Zarina’s descriptions of both her feelings: uncontrolled, desperate, ashamed, that I was a bad kid, captured a sense of both being out of control and ashamed. While she didn’t correlate this learning to gender, she did invoke the image of a “crazy woman” who was emotionally unstable. Shame, on the other hand was a social emotion that was experienced only in relation to another person – in this case, her mother and her feeling like a “bad kid.”

Zarina said, “like the way I was taught to deal with my emotions was very chaotic – like emotional chaos.” So, she directly identified being socialized around her emotions in a way that felt chaotic to her.

When I would observe her [my mother] interact with like us or the outside world – you know like friends or people it’d be like putting on this mask: “no, like everything’s fine.” And so to me that translates now, it’s like that’s not really being vulnerable like with what’s going on inside of you.
In addition to Zarina’s seeing vulnerability as a positive behavior that was not exhibited in her home, Zarina also saw that her mother presented a different face to the outside world than she did to Zarina. The mask she wore concealed her vulnerability. Zarina, on the other hand, longed for the authenticity of being vulnerable. This paralleled Sofie’s depiction of her parents presenting different public and private faces, which felt deceptive to Sofie. Zarina saw her mother’s mask as being problematic, because Zarina valued vulnerability; something her mother hid. And yet, Zarina developed her own, positive perception of vulnerability:

*I feel like my own experience of vulnerability is like strength.* It’s very much like connected to strength. *I don’t know if that is something I was taught*… Or if it’s something I’ve kind of uncovered in these last three years of really more deeply understanding myself—of being on this path of like undoing my social—like my conditioning that *I received as a child.* (pause) yeah, *I feel like* (pause) *I guess the major one that’s coming to me* like expressions of vulnerability they cause reactions in other people, of fear or like, *what’s wrong with you* or. And so *what I’ve learned about myself* has been this kind of uncovering of allowing myself to fully express my feelings to people around me.

Zarina talked about a process of unlearning around the idea of vulnerability. Instead of viewing vulnerability as negative, over time, she determined that vulnerability was a strength. In this way, she *resisted* her own socialization, which taught her to be ashamed of her vulnerability or the way she expressed emotions like anxiety and fear. While she identified that being vulnerable made other people uncomfortable, she was committed to “fully express” her feelings to people around her, making a paradigm shift in her life. Zarina, like Beth, continued to struggle against the damage of growing up in an emotionally abusive household into adulthood.
Resisting Restrictions

Zarina talked about fear being instilled in her primarily through her father.

*I think that a big more vocal presence in that way was my dad* who was like really overprotective even though *I didn’t live with him*. It was this sense like feeling like really overprotective about my whereabouts. *I have much more recent examples of that where I, before coming to [college] I traveled a lot by myself* and that like really upset my father a lot—and my mother, you know. But more vocal was my dad about it who was like, “you’re a girl in the world. You can’t go travel on your own. You can’t go spend, go camping by yourself. You know and it’s not necessary.” *When I enquire* about that it’s like, “because it’s unsafe.” Like there’s not like a really—like why.

Unsatisfied with the answers to her questions and perhaps in opposition to being told she couldn’t, Zarina did travel alone: *“I traveled in Costa Rica and then all over the west coast of the US from like southern California, San Diego, all the way up to Vancouver BC up into Canada.”* Rather than feeling constrained by her father’s appeal to her fear, Zarina traveled alone extensively. This was a way of resisting limitations that didn’t make sense to her.

Not learning how to fight

Zarina associated messages about fear and a lack of learning any means of defending herself as a combination that enforced reliance on others.

*If I’m being told I’m not safe* and then, but there’s no like yeah – no talk about how to defend myself. *Like where does that leave me?*

She asked a pivotal question that was important not only for her, but also for women in general. Zarina sought out her own way of addressing this perceived lack by taking self-defense training.
A mentor referred her to a women’s self-defense class with suited instructors and she found this form of resistance to be important to tapping into power she was not aware she had.

**Overcoming boundaries**

Zarina told a story about a man hitting her on the head as she wore her bike helmet into a local grocery store.

*I was like, once again kind of felt frozen. I was just stunned. I just walked away and didn’t say anything* didn’t say like, “what the fuck dude?” And so it’s just this feeling of frozenness.

Zarina described experiencing a freeze response and also having her boundaries transgressed at multiple levels:

So, that experience of boundaries being broken at all levels was like physical, emotional, spiritual, you know, feeling like there’s something in my energy field that’s not mine and *I didn’t invite it here*. And that’s something *I’m very much working with*.

Wanting to be able to enforce boundaries at all levels was important for Zarina and one of the reasons she chose to participate in women’s self-defense training. She described her warrior energy that she was able to connect with during the self-defense training:

*It felt like a huge act of self-love. Like that warrior energy feels like self-love. It feels very primal and so it’s like. It comes full circle to boundaries again. And just experiencing like my boundaries being crossed a lot*.

*Like in relationships, heterosexual relationship at the time… I had no boundaries.* And somehow to me that connects to my ability to love myself – to be able to set strong boundaries.
Zarina made a connection between her warrior energy, setting boundaries, and self-love. She was referring to boundaries with people close to her and energetic boundaries (non-physical).

It felt like you know, *like I said, very primal like beastly*. Really wild (pause), um, very intuitive, very like really intense. Intense in the way it’s like focused; intense in my body, like, the sensations in my body were like, like fire’s running through your veins. It’s like this intense state of adrenaline. It’s like this focus and clarity and precision and solidness like within my body like this feeling of really trusting and solid… Maybe like, ugly. It kind of has this value judgment on it, like scary in the way where it was… like that mother bear energy. *I can kill you!*... *I feel like I hadn’t really* up until that point allowed for that type of expression. And there’s also this fear that comes up around it because it feels like uncontrollable maybe – like the essence of its energy… like it does feel very controlled in, yeah, and grounded. And if you if I go deeper into it, it’s so wild. And wildness is terrifying, because it’s unpredictable. *What am I really capable of?*

In trying to describe her warrior energy, Zarina called it: *beastly, wild, intuitive, intense, ugly, scary, being able to kill, and mama bear energy*. This tapped into something new that she had not seen in herself before and it was terrifying and exciting, raising the question, “What am I capable of?” Thinking about what she *was* capable of was a direct contrast to thinking about her physical limitations (based on gender) and being fearful which is how she was socialized. She used a *voice of accessing power*—a power that was completely unknown to her, because women and girls do not learn to engage it. And yet, accessing power was also a form of self-love that facilitated boundary-setting, a skill that was essential for her self-protection.
She talked about how it was possible to access her power in this way in the self-defense training class while it wasn’t possible before:

_I feel like,_ (pause) because the environment was rare, you know. It creates a very unique recreation of a certain type of scenario, so coming into contact with that type of experience which lead me to finding the kind of access point to that—whatever we want to call that kind of energy: warrior, snake…Like learning that there is an access point to that energy. Um and that it’s inside me, right. [Alexis: WHAT WOULD YOU SAY THAT ACCESS POINT IS?] _I’m tempted to say fear._ In a lot of ways. And at the same time: _I’ve experienced fear and not felt that access point._ Like it might be there and the path to it might not be very clear, so, there’s something about the way the space was structured. So, also again community plays a huge role to like holding, _you can find it_, right. _You can transform your fear into power._ Which, yeah, very naturally _opened something inside of me._

Zarina’s experiences were all described from an embodied standpoint. Her description of her experience in the class described the unique set-up of the self-defense class that was designed for a physical and psychological experience of empowerment. Identifying a connection between fear and power, Zarina identified a source of hidden strength. She referred to discovering an access point, identifying that the power she was able to access was something she already had, but didn’t know about. Zarina felt like she needed to continue to practice in order to maintain access to this power and she started training in kung fu, a martial art where she learned to “meet” her opponent and to “meet” her fear. Tapping into a physical power that had been obscured by thinking, she identified a different way of knowing—an embodied, physical way of knowing.

The self-defense class also connected her to different dimensions of herself:
I do kind of remember this one kind of moment after I, at first, did the sparring with those people or whatever and everyone was like, what/who is that person? I felt like, yeah, I felt very much like multi-dimensional. Very like sweet and like sensitive—just having all these; really, all these different expressions of myself. It felt really healthy to explore them and to give space to all of them.

Zarina directly experienced and described her own complex personhood (Gordon, 2008). Her multi-dimensionality was something that overcame the limiting gender norms ascribed to women, and yet still allowed her to embrace all aspects of herself regardless of whether they complied with or resisted gender norms.

Setting boundaries

Zarina told a story about how soon after taking a women’s self-defense training, she was able to stand up for herself with a boyfriend who refused to move out of her apartment.

And so, long story short, I ended up having to be like really firm, like in my power about it and I was like, “no you need to leave now.” And, you know also in that experience because when he said “no.” There was definitely a part of me that was like, “how am I going to deal with this?” You know it’s like—feeling powerless—or kind of scared. And resorting to in my mind, well I can call this other guy … Then eventually I was able to get him out of my room and out of the house and everything. So that happened after [self-defense training]. It’s so interesting just a few weeks later.

This was a classic example of setting a boundary—something Zarina and many of the woman I interviewed (eleven)— said they had a major challenge with. Her ability to stand up for herself, without relying on someone else was the achievement of a personal goal and stood in defiance against the image of reliance on others and fear she learned from her father. Since Zarina had felt
that boundary-setting was difficult, her ability to enforce a boundary was an important step for her. In this way, self-defense training was valuable in helping her learn how to set boundaries she struggled with in the past.

**What I Would Have Changed About Self-Defense Training**

Since Zarina did not return for the last day of the class (maintaining a personal boundary and making important progress for herself), I asked her what about the class made her uncomfortable. She discussed a need for connection and reflection that she felt was missing:

In terms of vulnerability, *I feel like one of my main critiques of this workshop is finding this balance between doing the physical fighting and like exploring the kind of emotional healing and vulnerability that comes up. I felt personally that the slideshows and the—it was just so yang—to put it in a Taoist perspective of Yin and yang. I just felt the whole time and more mental and like what I really needed in those times when we weren’t engaged physically was more of like a yin approach of kind of rest and like deeper connection with my feelings and in being vulnerable around like sharing and bonding with people.*

Zarina continued to express a voice of longing—for connection and for vulnerability. She referred to yin or feminine energy that was missing from this particular class, whose main instructor was a man. For Zarina, this was a need for “closure” which she said she found, even though she didn’t complete the class by continuing to learn to connect with her warrior in her kung fu classes. For Zarina, there was a need for on-going tapping into the access to her power, acknowledging it was a pathway that she had never been aware of prior to taking self-defense.

**Summary: Zarina**
Zarina framed vulnerability as connecting to others through the sharing of emotions, including ones that made her look “weak.” Zarina’s longing for vulnerability was a way of resisting the emotional chaos of her childhood and a way of healing the shame of being an emotionally expressive person. She also resisted messages about her limitations (as a girl/woman) by traveling alone extensively. Zarina resisted her lack of boundaries by taking self-defense training where she accessed her power. She described accessing power colorfully, invoking something ugly and scary – a mama bear and also described that this was a completely embodied experience and not an intellectual type of learning. And while the access point for this power was fear, she acknowledged that fear would usually make her freeze and that there was something about the context of the self-defense class that facilitated turning fear into power. Through this process she resisted nescience, identifying that wisdom was already present in her body. So, self-defense training – a physical practice – also promotes epistemic resistance by connecting women with knowledge from which they have been disconnected.

Chapter Four Discussion

Navigating landscapes that were fraught with violence and littered with guns, these women each identified and named what vulnerability looked and felt like to her, and sought out ways to navigate through these (variously named and conceived) vulnerabilities without backing down. These vulnerabilities were violent, hidden from the public, and often endured alone. The existing, public systems of support disappointed, leaving the women to find their own ways. For Sofie, the legal system was unable to physically protect her from her ex; for Charlie, her boss was unwilling to concede that jujitsu training was a legitimate reason to take a weekend off work. Beth, Lola, and Zarina were isolated within the contexts of their families, did not feel safe. The extent to which families are entities unto themselves was revealed in the hidden violence in
Lola and Sofia’s childhoods and the unsafe and chaotic emotional lives described by Beth and Zarina, respectively.

And yet, each of their stories pivoted around ways of being deliberately kept in the dark— or being kept from a form of knowing that should have been theirs: Sofie was prevented from storytelling and she later used her ability to tell stories to advocate for herself and other survivors of domestic violence. Lola was prevented from knowing the full story of her abuse—and was silenced by learning that she had to keep her mouth shut. She resisted the cycle of violence that was evident in her family by leaving her husband and enlisting the help of her parents while she joined the army in an effort to become stronger. She resisted her weakness—something that was reinforced by her family. Charlie resisted her vulnerability by learning how to use her body to fight back; regardless of the size and strength of her opponent. Knowing how to use her body enabled her to use other skills to avoid conflict while protecting herself. Beth resisted feeling unsafe and suicidal by moving overseas and away from her parents. She had to sacrifice her education, but she was able to find safe people and safe places. Zarina resisted the emotionally chaotic way she was raised by seeking out a different way of connecting with her emotions—through vulnerability—finding a way of turning what had been her weakness into a strength. In a striking parallel, she also learned that fear was the source of her power—something she believed was there all along, but was hidden and therefore inaccessible. All she needed was an access point and she was able to trust in her own wild, scary, and ugly power.

Each of these women illustrated an unknowing of strength that happens through girls’ upbringing; regardless of whether they experienced incest or child abuse or not. The messages these women grew up with concealed their ability to fight back, to establish boundaries, or to simply speak up. They each fought very hard to learn what had been concealed from them.
Knowing: how to set a boundary, how to speak up, that a body can be used strategically to fight someone bigger and stronger, that there are other ways to address conflict besides engaging in physical confrontation, that sharing emotions can be a way of standing in your strength, that leaving can be a way to resist, that learning to do things you have never done before can make you feel more confident, that you are not the only one who has lived through this. These stories show different variations of epistemic resistance (Tuana, 2004) – of learning things that have been intentionally concealed. Self-defense training is one site where women were able to learn that they had the ability to fight for themselves. The importance in this transcends physical fighting skills and gets to the basis of women’s fear and vulnerability by connecting women with their power—a power most never knew they possessed. This, as Beth said, is empowerment. And it is women’s empowerment itself that has the potential to eliminate rape culture, shifting much of what we “know” about women’s vulnerability.

I understand why women take self-defense classes. The world can be very scary and, statistically speaking, our worst fear is rape or murder, you know, and I get that and I think that a lot of people view and say you should take self-defense for these reasons. But empowerment-based self-defense has a lot more to do with you finding you…Do I know how to defend myself physically? Absolutely. Do I feel like I could do it? Absolutely. Do I take that from that training on a daily basis? No. What I take from that training is that

*I’m empowered enough to live the kind of life that I want…I think that creating a culture of empowerment training, you empower an entire culture to live life differently.*

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CHAPTER 5

ARMED AND SAFER? GUNS AND THE DISCOURSE OF PERSONAL SAFETY IN WOMEN’S LIVES

Introduction: Women’s Right to Bear Arms

Marissa Alexander’s case made national news when she was sentenced to twenty years for firing a warning shot into the wall behind her husband who was, she said, threatening her and whom she had reported to the police in the past. Legal questions about mandatory minimums (the reason for her lengthy sentence) and Stand Your Ground laws were brought into the public discourse, but so were issues of race and gender. Alexander, a Black mother of three, gained support from domestic violence victims’ advocates who were outraged by the disparities between the outcomes for George Zimmerman who was found innocent and walked away free after killing Trayvon Martin and Alexander who was sentenced to twenty years. Now free, Alexander is advocating for women’s right to Stand Their Ground as, in her second trial, the judge denied her right to use the law, stating that her action—returning to the house after getting her gun from her car in the garage—was “not consistent with the behavior of someone fearing for her life” (Hauser, 2017). The standard that has been cited is that fear, not anger, should be the driving force behind defensive use of guns. Notably, women who are afraid are likely to succumb to the freeze response and getting angry is the spark that is needed to get them to act on their own behalf. On the other hand, George Zimmerman was able to successfully avoid conviction by claiming self-defense after calling 911 and being told not to pursue Trayvon Martin, but going after him and ultimately shooting him.
While this disparity in sentencing raises many issues, I focused on the issue of women’s right to defend themselves using lethal force. In connection with this, I looked at the way the legal landscape around gun legislation affects women’s perceptions of their personal protection options. Within women’s narratives around their attitudes around guns, I examined how women’s feelings are complicated by cultural messages around gun ownership, women’s ability to defend themselves, and personal experiences with both guns and vulnerability. Women’s complex personhood (Gordon, 2008) becomes evident – and important for understanding how women think about guns.

Public Perception of Gun Ownership

Shifts in gun legislation and the perception of guns as being a primary means of personal protection mean that women have had to deeply consider their personal stances on gun ownership—not simply as a theoretical question, but as a practical question addressing both personal and family safety. Recent general social survey research has shown increasingly positive public perceptions of gun ownership with 63% of respondents reporting that having a gun in the house made them safer (McCarthy, 2014). While this number demonstrates a shift from the way people previously viewed guns, and the majority of women share this view (58%)—there are still large differences between people’s attitudes about guns for personal protection based on gender with more men (67%) reporting that guns in the home make it safer; race with more White people (65%) having positive impression of gun ownership than non-whites (56%); and political party (81% Republicans vs. 41% Democrats) (McCarthy, 2014). Also, 60% of people who do own a gun now state that it is for personal protection purposes, rather than sporting (hunting and target shooting) which were more common reasons for gun ownership decades ago (McCarthy, 2014).
One of the most significant changes in gun legislation in recent years was the passing of Stand Your Ground laws in 2005 in Florida; legislation that has been picked up by twenty-six states since. Stand your ground legislation is both distinctive from previous legislation and important for two reasons: 1) it eliminates the “duty to retreat” in self-defense situations in dwellings, residences, and vehicles (i.e. if you think you can get away, you do not have to retreat or back down) and 2) it removes the burden of proof meaning that the person who uses lethal force does not have to prove that they had a “reasonable fear of imminent peril of death or great bodily harm,” shifting the burden of proof onto the prosecution. Colorado technically does not have a Stand Your Ground law, but instead a “Make My Day” law. Make my day differs from Stand Your Ground in that: it applies only to a person’s home, the duty to retreat is not explicitly mentioned (this is because Colorado has never had the duty to retreat, so it wasn’t necessary to document this policy) and does not remove the burden of proof (Denver Post, 2017). While both laws grant the right to use lethal force for self-protection, Stand Your Ground laws significantly lower the bar for the legal use of lethal force. Also, the argument has been made that “reasonable fear” makes it more likely for white people to use Stand Your Ground as a rationale to use lethal force against Black people which is exemplified in the case of George Zimmerman killing Trayvon Martin (Cheng & Hoekstra, 2013).

The shift in public perception of guns in the home corresponds to the widespread passage of Stand Your Ground laws. The use of “justifiable homicide” has increased five times with an 8% increase in murder and manslaughter in the state of Florida between 2005 and 2011 (Cheng & Hoekstra, 2013). The Tampa Times reported that since Stand Your Ground came into effect, ninety-three cases in five years invoked the new law (Montgomery & Jenkins, 2010). The correlation between the widespread implementation of Stand Your Ground laws since 2005 and
the rapid increase in the perception that a gun in the home makes people safer raised questions about how policy affects people’s attitudes. Notably, there has not been a corresponding increase in the rate of gun ownership, which had been stable since 2000 (McCarthy, 2014). Among Americans who think crime rates have increased in the past year, 45% (37% of Whites) advocate stricter gun control while 53% (52% of Whites) of those who believe crime rates have remained the same or gone down want stricter gun laws (Kohut, 2015). This is a considerable drop from 1990 when 80% of those who thought crime rates were higher vs. 71% those who thought they had dropped or remained the same advocated stricter gun control laws (Kohut, 2015), marking a sea change in public attitudes toward gun control. The thinking behind guns in the home making people safer and the structure of Stand Your Ground laws ignore the ways/spaces where women are most vulnerable – that is, in the home and to people they know (Flatow, 2014). Stand Your Ground laws are written with the assumption that the person you are using lethal force against is a stranger who is in some way a threat to you (Cheng & Hoekstra, 2013). When women are murdered, the killer is almost always someone they know (93% of cases where an individual man kills a woman, Violence Policy Center, 2016) and when women are raped, it is also usually someone she knows (74% of cases. Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000a). On a related note, when women murder, they are usually killing an abusive spouse or partner. Marissa Alexander’s case demonstrated the uneven application of law, as she was originally sentenced to twenty years for firing a warning shot in the air as her ex (against whom she had an order of protection) approached her (Hauser, 2017). Her sentencing was based on her action being allegedly premeditated and the illegality of brandishing a gun. It is hard to juxtapose Alexander’s guilty verdict and Zimmerman’s “not guilty” verdict without asking questions about gender and race and the assumptions behind laws governing women’s right to protect themselves. Noting that the
contexts of women’s experiences of vulnerability are qualitatively different from men’s, Stand Your Ground laws are a form of legislation around the right to self-protect (and not back down) that applies to women only in less common and more sensational contexts. Although high profile cases like NFL player Joe McNight who was shot and killed in New Orleans, give the impression that most of the casualties of SYG laws are people of color, increases in homicides in SYG states have predominantly affected White males (an increase in 22 homicides per (10,000 McClellan & Tekin, 2012). The fact that homicides have increased since SYG laws were passed, SYG laws do not address intimate violence, and public opinion has become more favorable of guns for self-protection raises questions about the role of guns as a viable form of self-protection for women. It also raises questions about the sanctioning of lethal force and who gets the right to use it (and who wants to use it).

A Question of Rights: Women’s Gun Ownership

On January 5 2016, President Obama held a “Guns in America” Town hall meeting discussing his recommendations for gun legislation in the United States (Cooper, 2016, January 7). Kimberley Corban, a woman from Greeley Colorado who was raped as a college student by a stranger who broke into her apartment and has since become an outspoken advocate for women’s use of handguns for personal protection, asked the president why he did not understand that his policies were making it harder for her to defend herself. Corban’s question connected issues of gun ownership to issues of violence against women and aligned with popular opinion, since she indicated that having a gun in her home made her safer. She is a spokesperson for the NRA and has starred in ads telling president Obama (who has passed no laws to make it harder to obtain a gun), Colorado’s Governor Hickenlooper (who supported background checks, wait period and the banning of high-capacity magazines), and Mike Bloomberg (who funded Everytown for Gun
Safety and Moms Demand Action) that they do not have a right to tell her how she can keep her family safe. This raised the question of how can women keep themselves and their families safe? What options are available to women, and who is advocating for women to defend themselves?

Considering this landscape of increasing acceptance that guns make people safer, women are more likely to consider the option of owning a gun for personal and family protection than they might have in the past. The NRA promotes women’s use of lethal force. Their “refuse to be a victim” program specifically targets women and they regularly feature women shooter’s stories on their website. The NRA touts guns as the “great equalizer” allowing women to fight back against men who are bigger and stronger than them. The NRA currently is acting as the only major national organization to support women’s right to defend themselves (Carlson, 2014).

Notably, the Brady Campaign as well as Moms Demand Action are both focused on violence reduction through gun reform legislation and pressuring organizations to restrict people’s access to carry guns, but do not promote women’s right to defend themselves. Arguably, they are restricting one form of self-protection without replacing it with another.

It is not trivial that few organizations promoted ways for women to protect themselves. The reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) did not fund women’s preventative personal protection training (The Senate and the House of Representatives, 2013), nor did the original. This was in spite of the compelling evidence from FBI Uniform Crime Reports that show that in 81% of cases where women used physical resistance against someone trying to rape them, they successfully prevented a rape from occurring (Clay-Warner, 2002).

Women’s groups also did not actively support self-defense training, either. Martha McCaughey (2013) observed with frustration that the Vagina Monologues, Eve Ensler’s play about rape, held rigorous rules around the use of her play, including prohibiting local groups from donating
proceeds from their performances toward women’s self-defense organizations with the justification that self-defense promotes the use of violence and women should not use violence. McCaughey (2013) asked the pertinent question: *if violence is socially sanctioned as the purview of men alone, where does that leave women’s ability to defend themselves?*

**Towards a Complex Theory of Women’s Gun Ownership**

While thinking about women’s use of guns as a form of personal protection, violence cannot be ignored. One of the basics taught in any NRA gun training is not to point the gun at anything you do not intend to destroy. Jennifer Carlson (2016) described two dominant socially held conceptualizations of women guns owners, which Carlson argued both limit our understanding of women’s subjectivity while reinforcing gendered assumptions around the issue of violence. The first was the “pacifist presumption,” which assumed that women were peaceful and did not enact violence. The second was “martial maternalism” that viewed women’s use of guns as an extension of men’s violence, as it is a way of protecting not only oneself, but of protecting the family as well. In other words, when women owned and used guns, they were effectively acting as proxies for their husbands, rather than having their own ideas about what gun ownership meant. And yet women can be violent and have their own understandings about why they might have a gun (e.g. for protection against an abusive spouse). Carlson pushed back on the notion that violence is inherently a masculine characteristic, but also identified that women were caught up using the language and arguments of the NRA when they discussed their gun ownership. The white women she interviewed said they felt more powerful and less scared when carrying guns. While Carlson focused on the relationship between women’s gun ownership and dominant understandings of women’s violence, I listened to women’s stories of gun ownership with a focus on both vulnerability and resistance. This shift in perspective allowed for
the development of a more complicated understanding of women and gun ownership. Also, it is important to note that guns, unlike other forms of resistance, are a form of lethal violence and therefore the implications of gun ownership the women I interviewed wrestled with carries unique weight and complexity.

Thinking about how social identity was associated with perceived vulnerability, Jocelyn Hollander (2001) asked men and women in focus groups questions about victimization. In these focus groups, participants identified women (especially white women) as being more vulnerable while men were consistently viewed as being more dangerous. Participants also associated race and sexual orientation with increased vulnerability. Overall, Hollander’s study identified that vulnerability was socially perceived as being a feminine characteristic whereas dangerousness was viewed as a masculine characteristic. It was against this backdrop that women must contend with how to address their inherent (presumed and likely internalized) vulnerability and the strategies available to them.

**Complex personhood**

Avery F. Gordon (1997/2008) wrote about *complex personhood*, identifying that the statement that people’s lives are complicated is not banal, but holds important truths about power in our society. Power can be visible or invisible, taken away or reclaimed. While guns symbolically and literally hold power, the way women contemplate them unearths discourses that are both complex and contradictory. The women in my study exemplified complex personhood as they held contradictory ideas, were sometimes heroic, and sometimes disparaged themselves or others. They sometimes acted in ways that empowered themselves and others, and sometimes were fearful. Sometimes they trusted the system and sometimes acted in ways that were deeply critical of established forms of protection. These women exhibited complex
personhood in the ways they discussed guns in their lives. This complexity revealed ways women navigated their relationships to power and powerlessness. It is through this lens that I attempted to make meaning of women’s contrapuntal voices.

**Guns as Cyborgs**

Guns are sometimes considered a proxy for power, or an extension of women’s perceived ability to defend themselves. Drawing heavily on Donna Haraway’s (2000) *A Cyborg Manifesto*, I conceive of people with guns, or miniature, deadly machines, as cyborgs. While guns, obviously, give people lethal capacity they do not otherwise have, Haraway also conceived of cyborgs as being transformative of the social order, eliminating the polarity between the public and private and igniting a revolution of social relations. The cyborg question asks in what ways women change when paired with a gun.

**Resistance**

For the upcoming narratives, I drew on the multi-faceted conceptualization of resistance I described in chapter three: psychological resistance (Jordan), physical/enacted resistance (McCaughey), epistemic resistance (Tuana), and connection (Lorde, Gilligan). These types of resistance aren’t mutually exclusive, but they are scattered throughout women’s narratives – summoning power from everywhere as women push back against direct threats to their persons and reclaim their lives after being victimized. The question of gun ownership is a form of lethal resistance, and yet it has been normalized. This does not take away the complexity of making a choice – and feeling entitled to own a gun for personal protection.

**Women’s Choices Around Gun Ownership**

In this chapter, I examine women’s narratives about their attitudes and experiences of gun ownership specifically for personal protection. I interviewed a total of twenty-four women, eight
of whom said that they wanted to own a gun in the future, eight who said they did not want to own a gun in the future and eight who are uncertain about whether or not they want to own a gun (see Table 6, chapter 2). Their narratives illustrate the complexity of gun ownership as a personal protective strategy for women in the U.S. I shared narratives from five women who represented these three categories: the first group told about the contexts in which gun ownership was considered necessary, from their own personal experiences, the second tells the stories of mixed emotions—articulating the complex reasoning behind whether they would or would not own a gun, the third group explained why they did not want a gun. I selected cases to represent five of the themes I identified in the cross-cases analysis, including (number in parentheses after is the number of women with this response in the cross-case analysis): they make me feel safe (2), there are certain contexts where a gun is needed (6), if everyone else has one maybe I need one, too (1), maybe more risky than useful—unnecessary (5), and too easy to kill someone out of anger (2) (see Table 6). While I attempted to show the diversity of perspectives on the issue of gun ownership, this sample was recruited from self-defense and gun training classes, so these women’s experiences were not meant to be generalizable to the population of the US. Notably, this group of women elected to take a specific action to defend themselves and others, and these are actions that a small percentage of women in the US elect (around 12% of women in the US report having a gun, and a scant 5% participate in self-defense training). I used the Listening Guide (as described in detail in chapter 4) to carry out analysis that considers the context of women’s lives while listening for contradictory voices around the issue of gun ownership in particular. A discussion complicating the topic of women’s gun ownership follows.

The Complexity of Women’s Gun Ownership
For this chapter, I analyzed five women’s stories: Heather, Magpie, Kinsey, Laurie, and Sunshine, focusing on the complex issues that gun ownership raises, even among women who own and advocate for women’s gun ownership. All of these women were either violently victimized personally or were in close proximity to a violent crime that they were aware of. Heather, Magpie, Kinsey, and Laurie all grew up with guns in their homes, although their experiences using guns differed considerably. Sunshine did not grow up with guns, but served in the military and therefore was trained to use a gun as a part of her job. Heather and Magpie both advocated women’s use of guns for personal protection, but Heather trained rigorously to be capable of defending herself and others in various contexts, while Magpie struggled with the complexity of women’s gun ownership and their vulnerability—particularly for battered women. Kinsey owned a gun for a period of time, but felt so uncomfortable that she got rid of it, illustrating the complex role fear plays in women’s gun ownership. Laurie never owned a gun, but was vexed by the question, “if everyone else has one, do I need one, too?” contemplating how gun ownership reflects a notion of herd immunity or herd (in)security. Sunshine did not advocate gun ownership, being concerned about human nature and power. The consideration of safety was common for all of the women, and yet their concerns differed vastly, reflecting a varied and confusing landscape of resistance where women and guns are concerned.

**Heather: “You Never Know What Someone is Capable of” (voices of knowing and mastery)**

Heather was a twenty-eight year old White woman who was petite and energetic with long, dark hair. She was disarmingly warm and open in telling her story and invited me to come to her home in Northern Colorado to interview her. Her husband, son, and two chocolate labs were there, but made themselves scarce so we could have the living room for our interview.
Heather told me how important Champ, her lab, was during her the period of time after her ex-boyfriend tried to kill her, saying that Champ knew when her ex was lurking around.

I met Heather in a women’s-only concealed carry class in Northern Colorado where she was the assistant instructor (the main instructor was a young man with a degree in criminal justice who later became a police officer). Heather’s main role in the class was to come forward and tell “her story” in the context of a lesson about the levels of stress. In class, her story appeared to be well rehearsed and served as a rationale for the need to own a gun. When I interviewed Heather at her home in Northern Colorado, she did not mention levels of stress and told the story in fragments across the length of the hour and a half interview. I asked for clarification on a number of occasions. I was not clear what the omissions were because she assumed I already knew her story and did not want to repeat it, or because her memories were fragmented—as memories of those who suffer trauma often are (Herman, 1997). The idee fixe of the interview was repeated eight times: “you never know what someone is capable of.”

**Growing Up Fighting**

Heather grew up with guns and was trained to use long guns for hunting and was also taught to fight physically by her uncle. This began around “that puberty stage where different people were looking at me and talking to me.”

Growing up I knew I was going to be capable and I had to watch out for my own self all the time; my dad taught me that...The only person responsible for you is you. That’s what he always told me. You have to make sure everything you do you can do by yourself. So, that’s kind of where it all started, I just knew growing up I had to take it on myself.

Heather knew she had to take care of herself, speaking in a voice of knowing. She was also told, “You have to either be able to defend yourself or be ok with whatever it is,” referring
to unwanted attention she received going through puberty. These messages reinforced Heather’s responsibilities as an independent “liberal subject” (Fineman, 2008, p 10) who did not rely on other individuals or systems of support. This message was explicitly contextualized in her adolescent female vulnerable body. Heather talked about fighting with her sister and against bullies at school, the experience giving her the confidence of knowing she could.

*I learned a lot from it. As far as what I was capable of – I didn’t think I could take on my older sister – then I could, I could do it!* And even the boys at school into high school they’d always harass my little sister, *so I had to step in* and do that kind of thing and it really showed *me I was capable of more than I thought I was capable of. So, I liked it.*

Heather learned from the experience of fighting and liked knowing she was capable of fighting her older sister and defending her younger sister. From an early age, Heather’s way of dealing with vulnerability was to fight. This form of enacted resistance gave her power, but also responsibility.

**Gun ownership**

Prior to teaching handgun classes, Heather taught hunters’ education for the forest service and admitted that she still preferred long guns to handguns. She purchased her first handgun while in a relationship with her ex-partner who was controlling and abusive to her. She described buying her first handgun as empowering and exciting:

*I was excited yet nervous. It was a—I think it was a confidence booster almost—a feeling of empowerment. Now you have this: you can train with it, you can defend yourself, you can defend your family, your friends, whoever needs to be defended. You are now a reliable, responsible carrier of this.* So, it was really, really empowering, yet a little nerve-wracking. But, eventually *I did enjoy purchasing it.*
Owning a gun conferred new powers onto Heather instantly, including: reliability, responsibility, empowerment, and the ability to defend others. These were characteristics Carlson (2016) associated with martial maternalism, yet Heather’s feelings about guns were more complex than taking on male-determined meanings of gun ownership. She also expressed that she questioned her own motivation to buy a gun at that particular time:

*I just need to own a weapon in my life. Maybe it was, “you just don’t know what people are capable of.” You know, being told that all the time. And I never ran into it until afterwards. And so, making that decision was a hard one. I don’t know why that day or that time, that month. I don’t know what it was that came over me, but I just remember waking up that day and thinking that I need to get a gun today. It’s necessary. I need to do this today. And that’s what I did that day.*

The inexplicable need to urgently get a gun was the *voice of knowing*. Drawing from Nancy Tuana’s (2004, 2006) work on epistemological ignorance, women were socialized not to trust their own knowledge—including knowledge of their own bodies. In this case, Heather acknowledged her knowledge and followed it. It was notable that she described her reason for buying a gun based on both not knowing: “I don’t know why…I don't know what…came over me” and on knowing: “it is necessary…I need to do this.” She also referred to something her ex’s friends said to her that took on a different significance in retrospect: “you just don’t know what people are capable of.” Her unspeakable need that articulated itself through the urgency to buy a gun was not a message she could read at the time. She continued to trust her ex, a veteran who trained her to use all of his military weapons. But, he took control over the gun that she purchased for personal protection; leaving her without access to the gun she knew she needed to buy.
He had control over almost everything, including my gun, which was hard, but I trusted him until the big incident happened. So, I didn’t have any reason to question what he was doing.

Heather titled the time her ex tried to kill her “the big incident,” distancing herself from how close she was to not being here. She also referred to trust making her vulnerable. She had no reason not to trust him, except that she also reported:

And I think the biggest one now is he was constantly cleaning his guns. All the time. And it—I just thought—oh, he went and shot that day, clean it afterwards, no big deal, but there was no actual shooting going on. He was just obsessed with having them all the time. It was like a comfort blanket to him. I mean it was just guns, guns. I look back and I think that was a lot. He had them all the time. I mean it was constantly—handling it constantly—when there was no reason for it, you know. So, that’s, I think, was one of the biggest that I look back now. Somebody could have just slapped me in the face and I would have got it. But, no, I had to wait it out.

Here, Heather was talking about what she previously didn’t know that she was able to see clearly in retrospect, something was not right.

She described knowing that something was very wrong on the day her ex tried to kill her. I just knew walking in there, my hair stood up driving, parking in the driveway—my hair stood up and I just felt—different. Something was different and that’s why I put one phone in here (indicates bra) and he was so drunk he didn’t realize I gave him one phone instead of both of them and that’s why I was able to send the S.O.S. with the address.

Listening to her voice of knowing, she resisted her ex’s control and hid her phone. Not having access to her gun, her S.O.S. message prompted the police to come, but her ex, who was heavily
intoxicated, put a gun to her head and then passed out, dropping the gun as the bullet discharged, saving her life.

**Guns as self-defense**

While Heather survived her ex’s attack physically unharmed, the trauma of the event was long-lasting. She moved out of state and in with her father for a year before returning to Colorado. Having grown up with guns, Heather had a strong belief in their defensive power. Thinking back on the day her ex almost killed her, she thought of how differently things could have turned out if she had her weapon.

He was, he was 220-230, 6’2”. There was no way. He could just bear hug me and crush me. *I couldn’t physically get away from him,* but *if I had a different means of self-defense:* a flashlight, a pen, *I think about how different I would have done things,* because *I would have been more able to defend myself in that situation.* At any rate, *I would have probably,* if *I had had my gun,* *I would have probably shot him* as soon as he drew and pointed his weapon at me.

Heather’s focus on what she *would have* done with a gun demonstrates the qualitative difference between being armed and unarmed—or human vs. cyborg. While as a woman, “there was no way” for her to defend herself, as cyborg (which is how she saw herself), she “would have probably shot him,” using a form of enacted resistance she had prepared to use. Having grown up with guns, she felt comfortable having a gun for self-protection. She also grew up hearing the message that she was the only one who would/could stand up for herself. She perceived not having her gun as an impairment, leaving, in her mind, “no way” to defend herself. And yet, she used enacted resistance: hiding her phone, sending a text, and keeping her ex talking long enough for him to pass out from drinking too much without harming her physically.
Heather also holds the tension between having used unplanned, unarmed tactics rather than the armed tactic she planned to use to survive.

**Systems of protection—and their limitations**

There was systemic failure in Heather’s case. When the S.W.A.T. team came, Heather could see them, and yet she was still in danger with a gun pointed at her head. They did not intervene before her ex fired a shot as he passed out. Her ex was in the hospital for less than twenty-four hours and never went to jail. Heather’s lawyer told her that her ex would not be prosecuted because he was a veteran with PTSD. His status outweighed her vulnerability, she became solely responsible for keeping herself safe.

*I cut my hair off, changed colors, traded my car, completely packed up the house I was living in and moved across the state and I said well, if he’s not going to be in jail then I’m not going to be here. He’s not going to find me.*

Recognizing her ex would be free to come after her, she left the state for over a year; living in exile until she felt it was safe to return. She chose exile as a form of resistance because when she pursued legal forms of resistance, her vulnerability was not recognized.

**Mastering the gun; mastering personal protection**

Since she returned to Colorado, Heather has worked to develop her gun skills to protect herself and her family. When I asked Heather in what scenarios she felt she needed to have a gun for self-defense, she described situations that were public and publicized through the media, in spite of her near-death experience at the hands of her ex-partner:

Probably the most common situation I think of is an active shooter situation. Whether that’s an active shooter in Walmart or an active shooter in the grocery store or, you know. Mostly they’re scenarios that the public has brought to our attention: in schools, in
restaurants, in the Walmart, in the parking lot. But, anymore I see it—I see myself using it [my gun] at a stoplight if someone were trying to get in my car—carjack me. At school where [my son] might be going. At a restaurant where we might be having dinner. I really think about almost every—every place we would go on a normal basis. I try and visualize it in the beginning: if this happened, this is what I would do. I think I do this almost 99% of the time. It’s very rare that I don’t think about what if this, we’ll do this.

Heather’s focus was almost entirely on hypothetical situations involving a stranger making an attack. This is reminiscent of Kleinian (1946) projection – splitting off her experience and idea of “partner-as-violent” and projecting it onto hypothetical strangers. This allowed her to trust a new partner (her husband) without feeling vulnerable. This was a form of psychological resistance that enabled Heather to create a new family and to feel some semblance of safety in her home.

To feel empowered, she trained and developed expertise using her gun as a form of security and protection. Heather’s gun training encompassed physical, psychological, and epistemological resistance as she learned how to use a gun proficiently in self-defense contexts both inside and outside of her home. She enacted this knowledge through practice, and holding this knowledge allowed Heather to feel safe in her home again while focusing on risks from hypothetical strangers. She explained how she “pied the corners” of her house:

And so about every other week, I’ll go through the house and, you know, when [my son] is napping I will pie the corners of our house to make sure I know which way I’m stepping, what direction I’m shooting. I have to know what’s beyond, so if I have to shoot this way I’ve got 3 neighbors down, 2 kids. I’ve got 2 kids here, 2 kids here, so I really think about what’s—what would happen. So if somebody was coming up the stairs and
we’re in this room, *how do I see them before they see me? And how do I shoot at them and incapacitate them without harming everybody else around.*

In the ways that Heather described her level of preparation and training for various possible occurrences, she exhibited a *voice of mastery*, indicating that if she were prepared enough, and was an expert, she would be able to handle any situation that threatened her and her family. The way Heather described developing mastery merged physical, psychological, and epistemological forms of resistance. She mapped out specific strategies and practiced them, becoming confident that she could execute them. Developing mastery also represented the use of knowledge (epistemological resistance) and enacted experience to address a psychological wound (trauma). Heather’s extensive practice and development of physical mastery over guns specifically as a form of personal protection was a way of resisting a fear that was both public (based on the media) and private (based on personal trauma). And yet, her hyper-vigilance was a symptom of PTSD (Herman, 1997) and reflected paranoia. Her weapons mastery also marked her transformation into a cyborg—a being that was dangerous, not vulnerable (Haraway, 2000).

The mastery of the defensive use of guns was also consistent with the way Heather was raised—to be capable of independently taking care of herself and her family.

**You Don’t Know What I am Capable of**

Most people see me and say – oh, she’s a city girl. She’s got her toes painted and her nails done and her hair done and her makeup on. And that’s what I like people to perceive me as. Because **they don’t know what I’m capable of** – and that keeps me more safe.

So, you know as far as your perception of women. A lot of people just perceive women as not being able to, you know, protect themselves.
Towards the end of our interview, Heather talked about the importance of concealed vs. open carrying. Concealed carry held the element of surprise, while open carry allows others to anticipate your actions. For her, carrying concealed meant that she was seen as vulnerable, but was truly dangerous. This is a characteristic of the cyborg. In this way, Heather’s carrying is a way of turning her vulnerability on its head; now she was the one who was more deadly than she appeared.

**Empowering others: connection**

Heather’s response to feeling vulnerable is individualistic – based on her ability to control the situation herself, but she also found it empowering and important to share her knowledge with other women. When asked what was most important about teaching women to shoot, she said:

There’s no words that can ever—no words would ever pay me back for showing you how to defend your life. And that’s, that’s what *I really love about the women’s classes is I run into women that have similar stories to mine* that are finally 20 years later—or 30 or 50 years later—taking action… *I think that’s probably the biggest reward—is empowering other women to take action.*

By teaching other women to defend themselves with a gun, Heather used epistemological resistance. Heather went on to say that women might actually be better at shooting than men are—and it is important to her that other women know this:

…we can be equal if not better in gun handling and shooting than men. That the best sniper team in the world in all of history was an all-female team in Europe and, you know, being empowered by the team makes me want to tell the women, like wow, the best snipers in the whole world for as long as history tells back was an all-women’s team.
Like I just told you, we are more than capable of doing the same thing that these guys do in this macho man role.

Here, Heather demonstrated something very different from fear – it was the belief that she—and other women could best a man—when using a gun. In this way, Heather’s gun ownership and her commitment to training other women was a way of reclaiming her power. This was also a social transformation, reversing the effects of women’s vulnerability by becoming cyborgs. Remembering that her gun was taken from her, the importance of her commitment to training women became a way of ensuring that other women like her did not have their power taken away from them.

**Summary: Heather**

Heather’s was raised to believe that she needed to be able to defend herself or suffer the consequences. She was trained to fight, protected her sister, and learned to shoot guns growing up. Her perspective was based in a very American type of rugged individualism that opened her up to the belief that she *could* become proficient enough with a gun to protect herself and her family. Her diligent and focused personal gun training took on the hue of banal paranoia, taking on external, publicly broadcast fears as a response to intimate violence. Even as she told me over and over again that you “can never really tell what someone is capable of,” she survived, learned to trust enough to marry, and has used mastery to control her fears. She used enacted resistance escaping being murdered and moving into exile when she saw that the legal system privileged her ex’s PTSD over her safety. Although she never explicitly stated that she saw her victimization as a systemic problem, she worked to create a community of women with the means to prevent what she went through by teaching them to shoot. Heather associated guns with empowerment, power, and equality with men, signaling the social revolutionary power of the
dangerous cyborg, leveling the playing field of victimization. The gun solution was individualistic, which felt appropriate to intimate violence contexts like Heather’s where women experienced violence in isolation from others and where systems of protection often failed. I saw this as a feminist goal of gun training, being contextualized in Heather’s own resistance against abuse.

Magpie: “It’s one of those problems without an easy answer” (voices of equality and vulnerability)

Magpie was a seventy-three year old White retired lawyer who grew up on a farm where guns were used as a tool – to kill rabbits and cows. She was a shooting instructor – something she did as a service to her shooting club, because she believed that educating gun users properly—especially about safety—was essential to protect the image of gun owners. She also shot in competition in the recent past (starting in her sixties) and was considering doing it again. Magpie’s father taught both her and her brother to shoot when they were kids, but she didn’t think about owning a gun until she was a graduate student and two women were raped near where she was living and she learned that someone had been stalking her. At that point, she and a friend both decided to get guns to protect themselves (note that this was in the 1960 in Colorado).

Well, after the first night that they caught the guy trying to break in [to my apartment]… I had a friend who lived a couple blocks away… We were both renting basement apartments in there and a little bit after this incident had happened I started thinking about getting a gun then. And I actually called pawnshops to get prices and things like that. I didn’t even know where to go to buy, I guess. And um there were two incidents in
an ally sort of halfway in between us…One day [my friend] came in and said, “We’re going to Denver to buy guns.”

Magpie, who grew up with guns, made a decision to buy a gun after she felt threatened. Perhaps, having grown up with guns made gun ownership a viable option for her and did not feel like anyone needed to show her how to use it. Magpie’s language of radical independence echoed a conceptualization of justice based on the idea that all people are equal and therefore women require equal (not special) treatment, rather than being based on the idea promoted by Martha Fineman (2008) that humans are vulnerable and therefore different people may require different forms of support at various points during their lifetime. This concept of equality was also connected to the independent liberal subject who is capable of taking care of matters themselves, without external assistance.

*I didn’t feel like I needed [my boyfriend] to show me or tell me or anything. I bought a revolver, because that’s what I was familiar with—very comfortable with and uh, you know, I was reasonably accurate with it. Certainly defensive accuracy and after that I slept with it under my pillow and carried it.*

Magpie’s desire for a gun was very specific to her situation – she perceived a threat and used enacted resistance by getting a gun. Her lack of the need for any assistance invokes a *voice of equality* as she resists her own vulnerability. The police had told her that someone was stalking her and she purchased a gun with no hesitation, expressing a feeling of competence around owning and using a gun. Although concealed carry wasn’t common at the time, she carried it on her person. She did use it defensively – she stood outside and displayed the gun when she thought she heard the stalker outside of her home (on two occasions). Soon after this incident, she moved to a safer apartment and no longer carried her gun or kept it under her
pillow: “not after I moved. It was in the drawer, but not under my pillow. I didn’t feel like I needed it.” Resisting her vulnerability again, she moved, mitigating her need to carry her gun in order to feel safe.

Overall Magpie took several actions to resist her feeling of vulnerability: first purchasing a gun and then moving. After moving, she didn’t feel like she needed to sleep with or carry the gun, but she kept it. When I took class with Magpie as my instructor, she told the class that she still had the first gun she purchased, showing us the holster she had used to carry concealed—it was small and leather, just big enough to fit the nose of the revolver and was well-worn from years of use.

While supportive of women’s gun ownership, Magpie believed that women’s only spaces did more to stigmatize women than support them and advocated instead women’s inclusion in co-ed classes, referring to women’s only gun trainings as “counter productive”:

*I am personally concerned* about if a person is so inhibited by men that they can’t take a co-ed class. What are they going to do when they get in a situation when they need a gun to defend themselves? Are they just going to fold up and hand the gun over? Or are they going to shoot when they don’t need to? Or are they going to be afraid even to bring it out? *I mean I don’t see what the purpose is.*

Invoking her voice of equality, Magpie equated women’s needing separate classes as a personal shortcoming, a sign that such women might be constitutionally unable to use guns to defend themselves, correlating women’s-only spaces with weakness. She expressed that she didn’t understand women’s only gun classes: “This isn’t group therapy, right. This is shooting, and I don’t understand it.” As we continued talking, Magpie’s concerns were focused on segregated spaces, rather than on issues with women needing extra help. When I mentioned that I
personally had difficulty lining up the sights when I was shooting in her class, she thought of various ways men and women differ.

And I think there are some things that are built into the male brain, but *I guess I never thought that shooting should be that hard* (laughs). And, uh, I mean there’s other things about the grips being too large for women. Well sometimes the grips are too small and if women don’t have the finger strength that men do a too-small grip is hard to shoot, too. *So I just feel that you can compensate by explaining these things to women,* spending extra time with them and helping them. Another thing is that women have a much stronger startle reflex than men do. And *I have an extremely strong startle reflex. I mean I’m one of those people who will throw their coffee on the ceiling if you surprise me. But you can get over it.* Why do you need it to be a women’s class to get over these things?

To learn to deal with these things.

Magpie was not arguing against women getting extra help if they needed it, but rather she saw no need for women to be segregated from men in a shooting context. Considering her age (seventy-two) and profession (lawyer), being admitted to the same places as men likely held a different significance than for Heather who is twenty-eight. Giving women extra support in these spaces allowed them equal access to spaces where they were technical equals – even if guns are not designed for women’s hands. Since Magpie also talked about the fact that she used to participate in women only days at the shooting range, her pushing back on the idea of women’s only classes needed some consideration. She was advocating for women to have the same treatment as men, eschewing special treatment for women. At the same time, Magpie was fully aware of women’s vulnerability. When Magpie was being stalked during graduate school, two other women had been raped in her neighborhood. She took independent and individual actions
to make herself safer, unhesitatingly gravitating to a gun for protection. She continued to advocate for women’s inclusion in shooting classes, rather than creating separate spaces:

But if the instructors just give them a little bit of help in those areas I don’t think that there needs to be women’s only classes to deal with it. And I think that a women’s only class might be bad for self-confidence. Um, you know. I only did this because it was a women’s only class? Are people likely to think that? I don’t know. But, but I mean I am one of those people who end up thinking, “I can do it. If you can do it, I can do it.” (Laughs) and as long as I, I can’t bench press 300 pounds, but this isn’t bench-pressing 300 pounds.

Here, Magpie expressed her concern that there is a stigma associated with taking a woman’s only class that is not present in a mixed class, speaking from her voice of equality. This contrasted with Heather who shared her own story during women-only classes, connecting with other women. Magpie also made a distinction between needing physical strength and being able to shoot, indirectly stating that guns create a space where women can be equal to men.

Magpie’s responses to questions about women who had been abused by a spouse or partner demonstrated the complexity of women’s gun ownership, even among those who support it. When I asked her about women in domestic violence situations, she said:

*I think that’s a huge question and its really hard, because I represented, when I was practicing law, a fair number of victims of domestic abuse. And I’m seeing the same things all over again. And, I mention with respect to—they have not made the split and become strong and independent enough yet and I’m worried about things going wrong if they have a gun in the early stages of the separation. Not five years down the road. Because five years down the road they may not need the gun unless they get themselves*
into another situation. It’s in the early stages of the separation when they’re most vulnerable and when they’re least able to have the amount of responsibility you need to have to have a gun. *I mean they cannot just be victims.*

Magpie, speaking as a veteran of the war on women, discussed what we know to be true about women exiting abusive relationships—that they are more vulnerable (Blackman, 1987; Mooney, 2000). She stated concerns about women owning guns in the stage of leaving an abusive relationship, indicating they were not only vulnerable, but also might not be able to be responsible enough to use a gun. While this sounded like blaming the victim, she was also searching for ways women could be safe during these difficult and dangerous transitions as well as ways of bringing together her belief that guns were a viable means of self-protection and her experience from having worked with women moving out of abusive situations. While voicing two contradicting beliefs about women and guns, Magpie searched for answers because she was not comfortable holding these two sets of beliefs.

*Um, I think the only other thing to do is to find a place to live and you can’t be ambushed and the place can’t be broken into.* And that’s next to impossible. [HMM] so, um but *I mean I can’t tell you the number of abuse victims that I’ve had* that have invited the guy in and said, “I can handle this now. I’m strong.” And then when they found out they couldn’t, sometimes they called me. *What am I supposed to do about it?* Come over and kick him out? *I’m not going to do that.*

Referring to clients who called her when they were under duress, Magpie invokes a *voice of vulnerability.* Magpie indicated that she could not be the one to come rescue women, but wanted them to find other ways of being safe. She referred to a safe place to live as being the answer, but also that this was impossible to find (although she was able to find a place to be safe
when she was being stalked). The specific barriers to women’s safety here were not discussed, other than the woman’s own decision to let her abuser into her home. This focus on self-reliance was consistent with how Magpie handled her own situation, and her belief in equality and individualism. All things being equal, these women should be able to handle the situation, and yet, she knew these women were vulnerable.

*I mean that’s the kind of thing I’m worried about with a woman having—a battered woman having a gun.* They’ve got to do something. The ones who are willing to protect themselves need to have the means to do it. *I do think they need a lot of training. Because I do—any woman does. I think handling the gun has to be something they do without thinking about handling the gun.* Or they concentrate on the rest of the situation.

Handling the gun has to just almost be second nature. And getting to the gun—same. You know. But, it’s one of those problems without an easy answer.

Relaying the story of a local woman who left her abusive husband and bought a gun, but was killed by her ex-husband, Magpie tried to clarify her concerns around domestic violence victims owning guns. Although she identified there was a risk, she tried to think through solutions for women who were most vulnerable, including extensive training, because it is imperative that women who are willing to use a gun should be able to. She then connected to these women, saying all women need this training, including her, shifting away from the idea that battered women were more vulnerable and in a different situation to saying that *all women* need to have enough experience to use guns easily. This again, is at odds with the notion of equality, women’s equality, rather than vulnerability. And she acknowledged that making women safe/able to protect themselves with a gun remained an unresolved problem.
Expressing her belief in protecting oneself with a gun, Magpie also did not understand those who were opposed to using a gun to protect themselves.

Why are some people whom I would consider more liberal than I so adamantly opposed to anything to do with guns? And things that come to mind are like the psychologist I told you about who would not carry a gun even though she was having a breakdown over her former gang-rapist being released on parole. Why do people refuse to consider a gun? Why are they so anti-gun even when they are completely afraid of something? Are they really that moral that they won’t kill someone??? I know some of these people and they are not that moral in their other dealings. You know, so why do they say, “Oh, I could never carry a gun. I could never take somebody’s life.” When it’s right down to the choice between your life and theirs. And that – that’s what it is. That’s the only time a gun is justified. I don’t understand it. Do they really mean it?

Magpie asked a series of questions here as she struggled to understand a sensibility different from hers. Identifying people’s assertion that they could not kill another person as a moral stance, she challenged if they were “really that moral?” She was not conflicted about taking someone’s life if it came down to them or her, and specified that this was the only context when lethal force should be used. And yet, people who did not want to or could not imagine using lethal force – even to defend themselves, troubled her. Magpie vehemently rejected the pacifist presumption, stating that women should be willing to kill to defend their own lives.

**Summary: Magpie**

Like Heather, Magpie advocated women’s gun ownership for personal protection. And yet, based on her age and experience working with battered women, Magpie struggled with the tension and complexity of her belief in women’s equality and the right to protect themselves, her
knowledge of women’s vulnerability, and unresolved questions about how vulnerable women can protect themselves. These questions did not arise in other women’s interviews. Magpie’s concerns about how battered women could protect themselves echo messages that our society is not well equipped to support battered women’s choices to protect themselves. This was evidenced in Stand Your Ground laws that do not apply to women who kill their abusive partners in self-defense (Johnson, 2014) and in the inadequate forms of support to which women of color, in particular, have access (Crenshaw, 1995). Magpie could not understand people who were unwilling to kill to protect themselves. At the same time, while she knew that battered women needed to be able to protect themselves, she did not trust their ability to be responsible with a gun, and she saw it could be a risk to them. Magpie articulated and then moved past the concerns of risk for women in domestic violence situations. The idea of not owning guns was pushed aside as a consideration, leaving questions about the usefulness of guns for women who live with violence in their homes unanswered.

**Kinsey:** “Everybody in my family had love, hate [and] a lot of respect for guns, but maybe they’re unnecessary.” (voices of pacifism and necessity)

I met Kinsey in a defensive shooting class outside of Denver. She was a fifty-year old White therapist with an extraordinary cascade of straight blond hair and large, wide-set blue eyes. She was athletic and had trained in martial arts since she was in junior high, was an instructor and also taught self-defense. The class we took together was a small one taught by a self-defense instructor both Kinsey and I had worked with before. Unlike traditional gun classes that were taught in a shooting range, this class was taught in a warehouse and involved students having to make decisions about whether someone was a threat or not and combined verbal self-defense tactics with shooting. During one scenario, Kinsey adeptly talked a patient down who
was threatening to harm himself. Kinsey’s thoughtful responses in this situation made me recognize her as a skillful therapist. She also shared in class that the reason she was taking the class was because a patient’s boyfriend had threatened her and she had started keeping a gun in her car for personal protection. Her client was in a domestic violence situation and the abusive ex partner blamed Kinsey when she moved out.

Kinsey described how, from the beginning, her relationship with guns was difficult:

*I grew up in Colorado and shot a .22. Just target. My dad hunted when I was little and he offered to take me out when I was about 12 and I targeted on a deer and I remember seeing these blue eyes—it looked like the deer had blue eyes. And I was just like, “I can’t kill it.” It was like, I felt like it was Bambi and I couldn’t and I started crying. “It’s totally ok, honey, I get it” and he kind of stopped hunting after that [Alexis: OH, WOW]. So, I think both—everybody in my family had love, hate [and] a lot of respect for guns, but maybe they’re unnecessary.*

Here, Kinsey expressed her *voice of pacifism*, saying, “I can’t kill it”. She also shared her own contradictory feelings about guns, raising the question of their *necessity*, a contrasting and important voice.

Her family history as early settlers in Colorado and as gun users added some important background to Kinsey’s feelings about guns:

*So, we’ve been around for a long time and it was through those pioneering years when guns were pretty necessary. But I think they had a healthy respect and my grandpa and great-grandpa would have said, “Yeah, they’re absolutely necessary.” But my dad is the first generation to question that. He said, “There’s more deaths—accidental deaths with them then they are helpful.”*
Respect and necessary are words that Kinsey used several times to discuss her family’s relationship to guns. In doing so, she validated their reasons for having guns, identifying them as tools necessary for “pioneers.” She also pointed out that there was a split from the attitudes of previous generations that started with her father, who believed guns have outlasted their utility. His making this split opened up the possibility for her to hold different ideas about guns.

I remember just thinking guns are loud and scary and they can kill people you love. I heard stories about that – people cleaning their gun and then accidentally shooting their kid. These awful stories and I’d think, you know, these aren’t worth it. I always kind of disliked guns.

For Kinsey, the risk of accidental shooting was enough to overwhelm the benefits that guns might hold, invoking the voice of pacifism. I asked her for more information:

AH: Was there any particular story that you remember hearing about or somebody you knew, um, that was hurt with a gun?

Kinsey: One of my dad’s friends accidentally shot and killed his son when he was cleaning his gun. He became an alcoholic and pretty much went downhill until he died of cirrhosis of the liver.

Only after I specifically asked did Kinsey reveal that she knew someone who was killed with a gun. This came up with several people I interviewed, but not until I asked a very specific question. Knowing someone who killed their son changed the stakes of gun ownership as the risk was not abstract. Pacifism took on a different meaning when referring to the risk of accidental death. It became a form of protection.

This experience had long-term effects, shaping the way Kinsey thought about guns, and making her resistant to having a gun, even when a client’s partner started sending her threatening
texts. He had been in the military and was trained to fight with weapons. Here she talked about her decision to keep a gun in her car:

My old friend who is the kung fu instructor he said, you know, it might not be a bad idea to get a handgun just for a while. You know while this is at a fever pitch and – at least go get trained in it. And if somebody starts stalking you sometimes you're the first person on the line—you can’t get the cops there fast enough. So you might want to have some more immediate self-defense. And I went back and forth and back and forth on it but I thought, you know, I should just go get trained in this, because I still have a love-hate relationship—pretty fearful, relationship even if I was able to defend myself and disarm someone and there was a gun lying there, I would probably be too intimidated to use it or pick it up. But, if I really needed to, I needed to feel comfortable to do that, I thought. So, um I just went and got a handgun training class…[and borrowed a gun]. So I was able to keep that in my car for six months while things were heating up and he was getting prosecuted by the DA because of other stuff or charges.

Kinsey expressed that she had a love-hate relationship with guns, but also that she felt like she “needed to” be able to handle one, betraying the complexity of her relationship with guns. Here she was holding both a voice of pacifism, being “too intimidated” to pick up a gun, and a voice of necessity, needing “to feel comfortable” handling a gun. Note that Kinsey’s concern about her own ability to even pick up a gun echoed Magpie’s concerns about women being unwilling to use lethal force or unable to use a gun effectively. Kinsey embodied a deep and disconcerting ambivalence about using lethal violence, even when she was being directly threatened. She went on to explain how having a gun made her feel:
Nervous, because I have a young son – twelve. I have it in the holster and the safety on and I have it locked in the glove compartment. But, more fearful – I didn’t like that feeling. So now that things are no longer at a fever-pitch, I’ve taken it out and given it back.

For Kinsey, having a gun made her feel more, not less fearful. She didn’t keep it beyond the point where it was necessary. Later, when I asked her if she could think of another scenario where she might want to have a gun, she actually changed the question and talked about a situation where she might want to have pepper spray (note: there is one other participant who made the same substitution, Zarina who did not see a context where she might want a gun and said they were “too much”).

AH: That’s interesting – I asked you if you thought of a situation where you wished you’d had a gun and you thought, “oh, pepper spray”

Kinsey: Pepper spray. Yes, you're right. I probably wouldn’t have wanted a gun in that instance for sure. Pepper spray. So you can disable. I’ve always thought – incapacitate, don’t kill ‘em. Always. That’s why I thought the one period of owing a gun was so out of my element. That’s why [my self-defense instructor] actually said, “If you're frightened or feel that adamantly about a gun, you're safer to get pepper spray, because you won’t feel comfortable going, grabbing it, using it anyway. Whereas you totally would pepper spray.” I thought, you're right, I would. So, he goes, “Use the thing that will make you feel comfortable.”

Pepper spray took the place of a gun, because it was not lethal. Kinsey repeatedly mentioned that she did not want to kill – a deer, her child, or an assailant (voice of pacifism). Her value of life and not needing to kill to survive was central to the way she thought about personal
protection. Pepper spray also mitigated her discomfort with a gun. Instead of working to overcome her discomfort with guns, her discomfort signaled to her that guns were not for her. While I could not determine if Kinsey’s discomfort with guns was a product of her gendered socialization, it is important to contextualize her choices within her social context noting that for women, gun ownership appeared to disrupt gendered socialization, and yet it privileged masculine values. On the other hand, pacifist values are stereotypically feminine. Kinsey worked through her fear of and then rejected guns as too violent (lethal). Remembering that she studied martial arts most of her life, the fear and subsequent rejection of guns cast them as being beyond the pale for Kinsey. Three other participants shared this interpretation of guns as being “too much”.

**Guns, trauma, and therapy**

Since Kinsey taught self-defense as a part of women’s continued therapy/empowerment after coming through traumatic situations [to be discussed in the last chapter of the dissertation], doing therapy with EMDR, she noticed that women who were afraid would sometimes get guns, but did not feel comfortable having them and that taking self-defense allowed them to get rid of their guns and the additional fear they carried.

*I’ve had a couple women get guns*—start carrying guns after the event and the gun would scare them [MMMM] to have it around. Whereas doing [self-defense training] and going through the trauma work. Many of them got rid of their guns because the gun was scary to them. [WOW]. So *I think one was overcompensation whereas the other built the strength from the inside out.* That’s why *when somebody suggested that I get a gun I was so taken aback.*
Here, Kinsey referred to her model of “trauma work” that involved women coming to terms with their fears and becoming stronger as a result. Unlike the experience of confronting fears, the gun did not change the woman, but rather was “overcompensation,” or too lethal and ultimately became a burden, eliciting fear, which got in the way of women becoming stronger. Kinsey’s own story of getting rid of her gun mirrored the story of her students who were able to move on from guns that didn’t make them safer or resonate with their sense of self. Kinsey only carried a gun when she was under threat and was anxious. Kinsey had a strong value for personal protection—teaching self-defense and valuing those principles, even gravitating towards pepper spray—but her experience owning a gun made her recognize that guns were not necessary for her. Her pacifism—her dis-ease with the possibility that her gun might harm someone lead her to believe that guns were unnecessary. She knew there were other options for personal protection.

**Summary: Kinsey**

Unlike Magpie and Heather who grew up with and felt strongly in favor of gun ownership for personal protection, Kinsey was ambivalent about guns; she trained with one and kept it for personal protection when she was being directly threatened, and yet it made her feel more, not less scared. Kinsey was not against self-defense or violence per se, but guns, to her were “overcompensation,” which did not address women’s fear, exacerbating it instead. Kinsey taught self-defense to women who have survived trauma and identifying that overcoming fear, not lethality, was the benefit of self-defense training. Kinsey’s pacifism raises questions about the meaning of gun ownership in an era where guns are ubiquitous.

**Laurie:** “Should we have a gun because everybody else has a gun? Because that’s how we feel.” *(voices of anxiety and ambivalence)*
Laurie grew up in a household with guns, but never learned to shoot when she was growing up. Laurie was a thirty-five year-old Asian-American who was married with a two-year old daughter. She was tall with a deep voice and disarmingly open throughout the class and during the interview. Her husband traveled a lot, leaving her alone to care for her daughter much of the time. The vulnerability she felt getting her daughter into and out of her car is one of the reasons she gave for taking self-defense training. I took a three-day self-defense training with Laurie and later interviewed her in a conference room at the office where she worked as an executive assistant.

Laurie talked about growing up in a household where her mother was radically open about warning her of the risks of sexual assault, starting at a very young age. She appreciated getting these warnings and attributed the fact that she has not been seriously victimized in any way to her mother’s directness.

*I can tell you my mom was—she drove hard as far as stranger danger. Child molestation, good touches, bad touches and at a pretty young age…I mean even when she married my stepdad there were several conversations she had with me and I was five at the time about: she would always believe me, it didn’t matter who it was. So it was pretty prevalent from a young age that those type of things were discussed.*

Laurie’s mother was not unusual in speaking to her about risk, but in specifically talking about familiar people posing a threat.

Laurie grew up with guns in her home, but she never shot or handled a gun growing up. I asked her who owned guns:

Laurie: my stepdad, but my mom knew where it was. *I don’t think* she ever learned how to fire one, but should—in the event that she needed it, she knew where it was at. Um, *I*
think that when I was in my teens, she showed me where the lockbox was. Because my brother was younger and just wanted to make sure that I knew. Again, I’m like this because she’s like this. She was so paranoid about that gun in the house with kids. It was almost worse, that, you know what I mean? Than having the gun, for her.

Here, Laurie, using a voice of anxiety, related to her mother, feeling “paranoid” about having a gun in the house, and yet the gun was there, paralleling Kinsey’s fear of having a gun, but keeping one in her car anyway. This conflict between feelings of anxiety and the compulsion to own a gun is central to Laurie’s own ambivalence about gun ownership. We continued:

AH: her fear of…
Laurie: one of us finding it. Versus an intruder, you know. So, yeah, there was weapons in our house. Like I said the handgun, I never really saw it. She says one time I did find it, but I don’t remember that. I didn’t touch it, but I knew where it was at. But I don’t remember finding it. I don’t remember ever seeing a weapon other than those hunting rifles that were in that locked cabinet. And to me they were more like a piece of furniture, because they were always there, you know. So, none of them were loaded. They were again, more deer-hunting type rifles. So, the handgun was for self-protection, but I never saw it. So.

Laurie grew up with two types of guns in her home: rifles that were not used, but were kept in plain sight that she thought of as “furniture” and a handgun that was meant for personal protection that was hidden. This was the first time Laurie described guns as being something other than guns. It was as if the idea of a gun as a weapon were too slippery to hold onto and felt connected to Laurie’s ambivalence/anxiety around guns. The handgun that she did regard as a weapon was something she could not remember having seen. In this way Laurie distanced
herself from the guns that were in her home, while joining with her mother’s paranoia about guns. This was consistent with her ambivalence and anxiety about guns that she wrestled with throughout our interview.

**Is Gun Ownership Just a Political Issue?**

Laurie expressed a concern about owning a gun not being consistent with her political beliefs:

*I think it’s such a topic in the world that it's a topic in our house. Do we own a gun and if we own a gun—what does that say about our political beliefs and—do you know what I mean? My husband and I tend to be more liberal. So it almost clashes with the way we are – you know? Does that at all make sense? It’s become less of a personal protection thing and more of a, again, the question is: should we have a gun because everybody else has a gun, because that’s how we feel. We feel like we’re the only people in the world who don’t have a gun.*

Eliciting a voice of ambivalence, Laurie focused on the abstract, political connotations of gun ownership rather than on the violent aspects of gun ownership that made her anxious. She also articulated a conception of herd (in)security when she asked the question, “should we have a gun because everybody else does?” While it was unclear if this concern was a fear of being outgunned in a confrontation or simply a question of being the only one without a gun in a world of gun owners, this concern persisted throughout the interview. Like Magpie, Laurie discussed gun ownership not being a liberal value. But, ambivalence was what undergirded her question – which was essentially, should I get a gun, and why? Lacking an answer to this question, the persistence of ambiguity pervaded her interview.
Here, Laurie explained how she and her husband thought through the question of gun ownership together:

_We’ve discussed like guns, but neither one of us knows anything about guns._ You know and honestly with a 2 year old, _it would be like 20 minutes before I could get the thing together and loaded._ You know what I mean? I would be so paranoid about having _something like that in the house._ With a kid that – it would be in 45 pieces scattered across the house to where it’s virtually pointless. That’s where I’m at with it. We’re not anti-it, we’ve still thought about it. _We/our feelings are: we’re getting a gun because everyone else has a gun._ Is that the right reason to get a gun?

She mentioned earlier that her mother had been paranoid that one of her kids would get their hands on her gun. Here, she echoed that concern around her toddler getting ahold of the gun and the measures she would feel she needed to take to ensure she did not get ahold of the gun, invalidating the utility of the gun for self-protection purposes. This was similar to Kinsey who felt the risk of someone getting hurt with a gun outweighed its utility. But the voice of the ambiguity persisted with the implication that guns were everywhere coming up again without being resolved.

Laurie spoke very differently about self-defense than she did about owning a gun. She saw self-defense as practical, “like CPR,” which saves and does not take lives.

To own a gun or not to own a gun just seems very out of characteristic for both of us. You know, whereas the [self-defense] class is absolutely something that I would do. It’s in my personality. You know, you learn it—it’s a skill you should know this, like. I want my daughter to have, like, survival skills. I wish I had learned some of those things. Like I can’t start a fire without a lighter (laughs). These are things I want her to learn. _So that’s_
very much in my personality whereas owning a gun seems just very out of character – for us. Again it doesn’t mean we’re not going to eventually have one.

Although Laurie expressed that self-defense, rather than guns, were her “personality,” she remained ambivalent about gun ownership. Characterizing self-defense as a form of skill/knowledge necessary for survival, she described it as in “character,” whereas owning a gun was “very out of character.” She categorized gun ownership differently from survival skills, likely due to lethality and gendered assumptions about pacifism. Whereas Laurie characterized self-defense as a skill – a positive attribute, she characterized gun ownership with “paranoia” and thus anxiety. And yet, she remained ambivalent.

**What if Everyone Else Has a Gun?**

Laurie’s determination that everyone had a gun came about in an unusual way. One night while she was sleeping, she heard her neighbor shoot and kill himself, and his girlfriend reacting. This event had a significant effect on how Laurie thought about guns.

And we didn’t know him really at all, but they’d been living up front for a couple of years and we’d nod and say hello and we shared a garage with them, but um, I heard her find [him dead] – and I kept hearing it for days. Um, also it made me realize how much I type cast people who own guns, because I would have not in a million years thought this guy had a gun. Um, but – and I hate people who make themselves the victim of someone else’s tragedy, but we go to the movies the next night and that theater shooting had happened forever ago. But I couldn’t—every time someone walked into the theater, I’m like looking at the doors, I was panicked to the point where on the way home um I kind of started crying and [my husband] was like, maybe you need to talk to someone. Cos I’m like this is ridiculous, I feel like I’m a victim of gun violence and I didn’t even see it or
have anything to do with it. But that was almost worse, because the images in my head were probably way worse than what happened. You know. And hearing it. I just kept hearing it. So, that’s when, of course, when we start thinking, well if he has a gun, that’s where you go with it. That’s pretty much where you’re at. (laughs). Still haven’t gotten a gun, but we haven’t ruled it out, so.

Hearing her neighbor shoot himself was personally traumatic for Laurie, and the scenario re-played over and over in her mind as she experienced trauma and anxiety over the image in her head of his suicide (voice of anxiety). And yet, she was most struck by the fact that she would not have identified this guy as a gun owner, making her question who else had a gun—or if she should get one (the voice of ambiguity). In other words, her fear provoked by her neighbor’s suicide prompted her to question whether or not she, too, should own a gun.

Yeah, it’s almost like existential in my house. It’s—to have a gun or not have a gun. It’s less about the gun at this point in our conversation. It’s not like we’re arguing about it at all. It’s more of a, “Are we people who have guns?” Does that make sense? And, again, with what happened to my neighbor—it made me realize that I typcast gun owners into what I know from Southern Indiana. Does that make sense? Which honestly is not fair at all. I know that, now—I realize that. But, I’m thinking stupidly. I had no idea this guy had a gun. He’s like a tech guy who likes Portis Head and obscure bands and he wouldn’t carry a gun and you’re so naïve, you know.

By framing gun ownership as being an “existential question” about the type of people she and her husband were, Laurie indirectly asked how she should address her fear. What would it mean if people who looked like her owned guns? Expressed in a voice of anxiety, Laurie echoed
Heather’s comment, *you never know what someone else is capable of*—a sentiment heavy with fear of what one cannot know.

AH: so what types of people do you think would carry a gun?

Laurie: Oh, absolutely you know what *I’m talking about*. Right-wing, White, Nascar, Texas – absolutely. *I’m embarrassed I didn’t realize that’s what I thought*, but having had this happen and this guy having, you know, this look—this persona. *It made me realize, “you’re a little prejudiced with gun owners.”* It’s not the case. *You know, don’t just assume* because he looks like my husband, that he doesn’t have a gun, you know. So *that’s pretty much where we’re at with it*. It’s just weird to me, because when you said this and made me start thinking how dramatically different my views were on the self-defense class versus the views on a gun. Cos its almost as if the gun has lost its self-defense properties in our conversation.

Laurie’s mischaracterization of people who owned guns was a problem for her because she assumed that *people like her* would not own guns. Recognizing her error provoked anxiety and fear—and ambivalence (should I get a gun?). But, she also questioned what a gun was, as if it were a philosophical question instead of a weapon. This puzzling characterization of guns facilitated ambivalence and her intellectualization of guns serves as a strategy of psychological distancing—a way of dealing with their deadly power. And yet, thinking about guns and self-defense in the same framework made Laurie recognize that guns did not hold “self-defense properties” for her, causing her to re-think her already complicated relationship with guns.

Fundamentally, though, Laurie was not comfortable around guns, making her ambivalence around owning a gun more difficult to square with her beliefs about guns and the kind of person she was.
AH: and is that because of your image of people who have guns?
Laurie: Yes. Yeah. and *how we view ourselves as just more. We’re not aggressive.* And truthfully *I’m not comfortable with guns*—probably because *I don’t know anything about them, but I’m really uncomfortable with them.* You know. *If I was to come to your house and we were really good friends and you had a gun sitting in the living room I would not be able to focus on anything else other than the fact that you had a gun in the living room.* It would bother me – enough that *I wouldn’t stick around.* Even if you weren’t an aggressive, violent person. [AND IF YOUR DAUGHTER WAS THERE?] Absolutely. No, *we’re not coming back over.*

Laurie was very clear about her discomfort around guns: guns in the home, a friend’s gun. She also talked about her father-in-law leaving guns in his car making her “furious.” A gun in “my” house would drive her to distraction to the point where she would not come back. And yet, the fear that people she could not imagine owning guns owning them was enough to shift a person who was deeply uncomfortable around guns to contemplate owning one while psychologically distancing herself from their lethality. This highlighted how important the climate around guns is—the legal climate, the ease or dis-ease of ownership and questions about who owns vs. whom we think might own a gun. The norming of gun ownership therefore made it more likely for people who would not have otherwise wanted a gun to think about owning one. In this way, laws that made it easier to own and conceal a gun, might increase the likelihood of people who did not previously own guns to “try out” gun ownership.

**Summary: Laurie**

Laurie was haunted by the spectre of guns—starting in her childhood where guns were both hidden and in plain sight, making her mother “paranoid,” but she did not learn how to
use them. Perhaps because of her lack of experience handling guns, Laurie understood guns conceptually, in terms of her political identity and as the fear of others, rather than understanding guns as weapons. This complicated understanding of guns lingered and Laurie continued to be ambivalent about guns.

Like Kinsey, Laurie was uncomfortable around guns. And yet, she continued to entertain the possibility of owning a gun, raising a herd (in) security sentiment, if everyone else has one, do I need one, too? This question was connected to fear and anxiety—particularly the fear of that you never know what someone is capable of. For Laurie, fears were not directly connected to being a woman (rape, sexual assault), and she had no history of sexual assault. She was, however, concerned with her ability to protect her child, a sentiment expressed by six other women. Laurie resisted her fear by taking self-defense class and continued to think about whether or not she would need to own a gun to protect her family.

**Sunshine: “There has never been a time when I have wished that I had a gun.”** (voices of cyborg and pacifist)

Sunshine was a White forty year-old veteran who was briefly a self-defense instructor. I participated in a twenty-hour self-defense training with her that spanned two weekends. Her pseudonym, which she selected, was apt as she was smiley, warm, and friendly and was constantly working to make the other women in our class feel welcome and comfortable. She greeted others and me with a huge smile and was there, ready with tissues, whenever any of us felt the weight of emotions during our self-defense training. She was a survivor of multiple types of abuse, including: incest, childhood sexual abuse, rape, and domestic violence and discussed her process of overcoming trauma during our interview. For her, participation in self-defense was an essential way of processing her trauma as she had been going through EMDR with a

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therapist for a number of years. She expressed gratitude that teaching self-defense and working with other women who had been sexually abused had given a purpose to her life, and all of the abuse she had endured.

Sunshine did not grow up with guns in her family at all. The first time she shot a gun was in the military during basic training. Sunshine pointed out that she was aware she would need to shoot a gun since she signed up to be in the military, but that she was following orders, and it did not hold personal significance for her until she was deployed to Iraq. Sunshine’s description of learning about the power of a gun upon deployment echoes her cyborg voice.

It was interesting because it was just—*I was told to do it* at that time. And then yearly you'd go in to qualify. Um the first time that *I actually had an awareness of what it was like to have a gun*, to work with a gun, to know its power; that was when *I was deployed in Iraq*. That was when it got serious for me. But, before that it was just you know, “Here you need to know how to shoot a gun,” “OK, here I go” *I didn’t question it. I didn’t have any reserve about it. I was just told to do it so I did.*

Initially, Sunshine did not embody a transformation or think differently as a gun user. As military personnel, she was dutiful and unquestioning. Thinking about Haraway’s (2000) cyborg, Sunshine did not challenge the social order, but accepted orders as part of her job. And yet, the gun-related aspect of her job challenged gendered roles governing who has access to violence in US society. Her preliminary understanding of having a gun was conceptual, like Laurie’s understanding of guns and yet this changed for Sunshine.

*I know that I was glad to have a weapon when I needed it* and that was very—that was when *I was in Iraq* and we were guarding a convoy and, you know, were surrounding the perimeter of the convoy because it had broken down so we’re standing out there and I
never in my life have felt so many—like my energy was completely focused—like I had 360 vision. It was so incredibly intense. So, I was glad I was holding a weapon at that point.

Sunshine expressed that she was “glad” to have a gun to protect the convoy. She also described a transformation, she became “focused” and felt like she “had 360 vision.” Holding a gun, her cyborg nature became distinctive, holding defensive power. Being “glad” she could protect the convoy was directly related to having a gun—holding a power other than her own. And yet, Sunshine did not continue to wield this power.

In her civilian life, Sunshine did not see a need for guns for personal protection purposes and she communicated a note of caution.

I am not of the mindset that I wish I had a weapon—or gun—because of the whole entire fact that when you hold gun in your hand there is so much power behind that gun and unless your ego is in check and you have so much confidence. It’s like a relationship with a gun, if that makes any sense. It’s like being able to respect the gun because of the amount of power it has and being able to respect—to know that you have control over that gun. There was a circumstance where I was telling my abusive ex-husband about this and he wanted to get a gun and a conceal permit—concealed carry. I was explaining to him if you are carrying a weapon, you have the license you know how to use it, but all of the sudden your ego decides you don’t like how that person’s treating that person because of a traffic violation—like if its road rage or anything like that. You want to be a hero, you just put yourself in a position to mistreat a gun. And so for me, personally, I know that now especially because I have taken [self-defense training], I don’t need a gun
to protect myself. But, to answer your question again, there has never been a time when I have wished that I had a gun.

In this passage, Sunshine made some important connections between the mentality of the gun user and their behaviors. To Sunshine, the power that guns held was something that needed to be controlled, not misused by someone whose ego was not in check. Sunshine expresses a voice of awareness, making connections between the limits of human judgment and how recklessness could be compounded by the power of a gun. She directly experienced the power of a gun, but within the context of duty and discipline in the military.

Summary: Sunshine

Unlike the other women in this chapter, Sunshine was not conflicted in her views on guns. She was familiar and trained to use guns in the military—an experience that made her respect that guns needed to be controlled by human beings. In this way, she rejected the cyborg in favor of a different form of resistance—physical self-defense. Sunshine never appeared to hold conflicting feelings about gun ownership; when she was in the military, she used guns as part of her job and as a civilian, she is mindful of the potential for misuse of the power of the gun and made explicit statements about not wanting to have a gun. It is worth noting that she, like Laurie and Kinsey, made a distinction between gun ownership and participation in self-defense training, favoring self-defense training.

Chapter Five Discussion

Although there was very little consensus concerning feelings about guns for personal protection purposes, when women did talk about wanting to have a gun, it was to address fear. Often, it was a specific fear, as it was for Kinsey and Magpie, but sometimes the fear was more general, like Laurie’s fear that other people might have a gun—and what does that
mean for her? Heather’s fear, on the other hand, was rooted in a personal experience of victimization, but her use of the gun extended to different, public forms of violence. Sunshine, who had used a gun while in the military, saw a real risk in gun ownership. While she did not explicitly state it, having been in an abusive intimate relationship colored her feelings and echoed Lola’s (from chapter three), who also saw guns as more of a risk than a form of protection.

In spite of living in a frontier state and living in a time where guns are increasingly looked to as a preferred and legal form of personal protection, these women had complicated and, at times, contradictory stories about guns in their own lives that were reflected in contrapuntal or divergent voices. Living in a state of fear, facilitated by the news media, global, local, and intimate violence, these women are all seeking ways to protect themselves from either past or imagined/internalized fears and must confront/contemplate guns as a possible option as guns are the most familiar. While more familiar and comfortable to those who grew up around guns, even for those trained to use guns or familiar with them from childhoods of “playing” with guns as a sport, it is evident that the issue of gun ownership required considerable reflection. Even Magpie, who is adamantly pro-gun considered the complications of gun ownership at length.

There was a heavy burden of both vulnerability and a lack of institutional support for women who are vulnerable that was shared across these narratives. The message that the police and the courts could not be relied upon, that they valued men’s lives over women’s, and specific examples of women not being able to access safe places or to prosecute their assailants and needing to flee and find ways to protect themselves were prevalent—with Heather, Magpie, and Kinsey arming themselves in order to feel safe when they were under a direct and specific threat.
Living in a social context that did not acknowledge women’s vulnerability or provide resources (including housing), left these women to contemplate strategies of personal protection that were individualistic, relying on their ability to stop a threat themselves.

It cannot be denied that we are in an age where guns are normalized and are touted as being the solution to most forms of vulnerability, including campus sexual assault, active shooters, and home invaders. Because of the prevalence of guns and shooting ranges, and legislation that practically encourages the use of lethal force (Light, 2017), it is not surprising that even women who were uncomfortable with guns, like Laurie, felt an obligation to consider purchasing a gun as, perhaps, the best way to defend themselves and their families. And yet, women’s decision-making was complicated, situated in their particular circumstances, and impossible to divorce from their fears relating to gun ownership itself.

The issue of becoming cyborg (Haraway, 2000) was fraught with complications of excessive power, risk of harm to oneself or others, and the disturbing issue of herd (in)security. These issues were linked to women’s complex personhood, including: experiences growing up with(out) guns, messages they grew up with about defending themselves, their personal experiences of victimization or threat, their inability to trust others with their own/their families safety and their level of comfort with guns.

Complex personhood is a framework that captures the layered and complicated ways women think about guns, raising questions that go beyond personal protection to include identity, structural issues around vulnerability, and deep concerns about collateral damage. These complexities fail to wrap up questions about how women can be safe, allowing the problem of guns to fester, migrate, and expand – transcending and encompassing issues of violence and vulnerability.
CHAPTER 6
WOMEN’S SELF DEFENSE: RECOVERING HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE

Going into this project, I conceived of self-defense training as a forgotten alternative and as I carried out my research, heard women’s stories, and conducted analysis, I began to view self-defense training not only as a forgotten alternative, but as a critical educational intervention that addresses an overlooked or deliberately omitted form of education for girls and women. I made a distinction between self-defense and gun training in this regard as guns have become more widely accepted by both men and women as a useful form of personal protection, due to the higher rates of women’s gun ownership than women’s participation in self-defense training, and because self-defense training, unlike gun training forces women to re-evaluate their perceptions of their own abilities to defend themselves. Taken together with the personal risks associated with owning a gun and lack of substantive evidence that gun owners commonly used guns defensively (Azrael & Hemenway, 2000; Defilippis & Hughes, 2015) as well as the dominant social norms associated with gun ownership being transmitted from men to women (Carlson, 2016), I identify self-defense training as hidden knowledge that women in this study have sought out, with the intention of transforming their feelings of fear and vulnerability.

Recalling the examples Nancy Tuana (2004, 2006) provided in her discussion of epistemological ignorance (I use nescience, a synonym for ignorance, because it does not imply a short-coming in the person who doesn’t know, as ignorance does. Nescience emphasizes the fact that knowledge is concealed) and epistemological resistance, knowledge of women’s sexual pleasure was deliberately hidden, including references to women having multiple orgasms in ancient literature and knowledge of the internal and external anatomy of the clitoris. Women were able to reclaim this knowledge by working outside the medical field—a field that held
authority about women’s anatomy of pleasure—developing their own expertise and sharing that expertise with other women (Tuana, 2004, 2006). Reading this account of epistemological ignorance (the hidden knowledge of women’s anatomy of pleasure) and epistemological resistance (the women’s health movement’s self- and public re-education of women on their sexual anatomy, including handing out plastic speculums so that women could examine their own sexual anatomy), I was immediately struck by the similarity between the missions of women’s health advocates and women’s self-defense trainers. Women’s self-defense trainers, like the women’s health movement, had a mission to fundamentally change women’s understandings of their own strengths and limitations.

**Socialization, violence against women, and victimization**

It is well documented that girls and women are socialized to believe that they are incapable of standing up for themselves and, likely, that rape is inevitable (Searles and Follansbee, 1984; Hollander, 2001; McCaughey, 1997; Pain, 1997) and taught to be skeptical of any information that suggests otherwise. However, Yavorsky & Sayer’s (2013) interview research with twenty-six trans-women identified that trans-women who had been socialized as boys/men and were physically equal to men feared rape, experienced male surveillance, dominance, and coercion and experienced their own bodies as weak. The internalization of heteronormative conceptualizations of gender, then, was not only a product of socialization and physical limitation, but also of a heteronormative system that maintains a dichotomous/imbalanced power structure that casts women as weaker – physically, politically, and economically. Yavorsky & Sayer’s research urges a critical examination of heterosexuality as a system of gender-based inequality that uses fear as one form of disciplinary power (Madriz, 1997).
The media is rife with stories about women rape victims who were not believed and were discredited. For example, the judge dropped all charges against Dominique Strauss-Kahn because Nafissatou Diallo was not seen to be a credible witness; in spite of the presence of physical evidence on her body and at the scene of the crime that corroborated Diallo’s story (Fine, 2012). On the other hand, we see images of women who were what Sharon Lamb called “convincing victims,” those who the public could conceive as innocent by virtue of not being capable of fighting back (1999, p 116). Trisha Meili, the Central Park Jogger, is a prime example, because she was white, wealthy, and, perhaps most importantly, knocked unconscious, so there was no way she could fight back. Importantly, the accused were five black and brown boys who were caught up in a media and public frenzy that sought revenge for the “wilding” boys’ unspeakable acts (Didion, 1991; Bumiller, 2008). In a more recent case, Brock Turner, the Stanford University swimmer who raped an incapacitated woman behind a dumpster was sentenced to a mere three months for what his father famously referred to as “twenty minutes of action” in a letter to the judge (Miller, 2016). The lenient sentence was meant to protect Turner, raising the question, if the court protects rapists, who protects the victims?...illustrating a paradoxical lack of acknowledgement of women’s victimization. The case gained public attention when the letter the victim read to the defendant during the trial was posted on BuzzFeed and went viral. She vividly described her experience of waking up in the hospital naked and pulling pine needles out of her hair with no memory of what happened, being told that she had been sexually assaulted, telling her family, going through the court case and the defendant’s lawyer moving to discredit her testimony because of her memory loss (Baker, 2016).
Her story incited widespread fury at White male privilege – outrage that a white elite college athlete would get away with a slap on the wrist. Vice President Biden wrote a powerful public letter to the victim, stating:

I am in awe of your courage for speaking out—for so clearly naming the wrongs that were done to you and so passionately asserting your equal claim to human dignity.

(Quoted in: Namako, 2016).

Biden’s words made me sob with both the surprise and comfort that such a high official would take the time to write such an emotive and honest letter of support to a victim. And yet, the whole situation reinforced what I already knew—that sexual assault victims’ experiences of trauma are not viewed as being important and the means that the US has in place to address gender-based violence were entirely inadequate and could actually be quite destructive. And yet, systems supporting white male privilege and immunity continue in spite of public outrage.

Being incapable of ignoring the current political climate, where sexual assault has become socially acceptable—even massively rewarded—as Trump was elected president of the United States in spite of being caught on camera stating that he would grab women by the “pussy” against their will. This instilled renewed salience to the term rape culture. The appointment of Jeff Sessions as Attorney General puts the Violence Against Women Act on extremely shaky ground as he has stated that he does not want to fund any programs aimed at victims of gender-based violence (Lockhart, 2017). And so, in a state where institutional support for victims of gender-based violence has never been satisfactory, a more hostile environment for victims is foreshadowed.

Self-Defense, Vulnerability, and Women’s Right to Refusal
Martha McCaughey, who has interviewed armed and unarmed self-defenders and done ethnographic research in women’s self-defense and gun training contexts claimed that self-defenders “enacted the deconstruction of femininity” (1998, p 281) referring to the process of overcoming the perception of physical limitations through participating in the embodied practice of self-defense. Referring to Judith Butler’s work on embodiment, McCaughey recalled the ways in which gender both constructs and limits us—specifically focusing on women’s perceptions of their physical limitations and identified armed and unarmed self-defense training as ways to transgress these limitations. Identifying that the social order is imposed at the level of the body, McCaughey (1997) believed self-defense could offer the possibility of critical consciousness into what we see as male and female bodies. In other words, self-defense is more than learning to fight—it is a way of dismantling a social hierarchy that keeps women in place through their fear (McCaughey, 1997). I am just as concerned with the psychological benefits of self-defense training as I am with ways women’s self-perception of their ability to defend themselves using physical force after participating in self-defense as well as the potential self-defense has to transform dominant views of women as victims.

In this chapter I addressed the issue of women’s rights as it pertains to the topic of self-defense. Kidder, Boelle, & Moyers (1983) identified that one of the key things that women learned in self-defense training was that they had a right not only to defend themselves physically, but also to establish basic boundaries, including “the right of refusal,” in other words, the right to say, “no.” This does not only refer to yelling “no” when a stranger approaches aggressively, but also to familiar people who push women to do things they do not want to do. Across the cases, eleven of the women I interviewed said that verbal self-defense or boundary setting was one of the most valuable things they took away from self-defense training (see Table
5, chapter two). Thirteen of the women I interviewed said that finding their fighting spirit or learning that they had the ability to defend themselves was an important outcome of participating in self-defense. This is distinct from learning specific physical skills (which six women said was an important outcome of participation in self-defense) as it refers to understanding that one has the physical capacity to fight back—something that most were socialized to understand they were not capable of doing—even among women who had been encouraged by their parents to participate in martial arts, identifying that gender socialization stems from sources beyond parents.

I open this chapter with autoethnographic data from my own experience participating in a self-defense training class as a way to illustrate what participation felt like for one participant—myself. I tell my own story as a way to reveal my own vulnerability—in this case the vulnerability of sharing a physically and emotionally difficult experience—as a way of both demonstrating my respect for the vulnerability the participants in this study shared with me as well as a way to demonstrate what is challenging about such participation. Next, I share six women’s experiences with self-defense focusing on the benefits they described: Shelly, Cherry, Beth, Lilith, Stacy, and April, focusing on the most common reasons given: finding my fighting spirit and verbal self-defense/boundaries, but also discussing the importance of community and of sharing experiences among women. Shelly was brutally raped and credited self-defense training (as well as therapy) with getting her through her trial. Cherry was sexually assaulted as a child and as an adult and identified that self-defense training facilitated both “physical and mental” transformation. Beth, whom I discussed in Chapter 4, discussed the benefits of boundary-setting in all aspects of her life. Lilith and Stacy were sisters who were both college students and discussed the importance of hearing and sharing stories of vulnerability and
perseverance. April took self-defense training in college after averting a sexual assault in her dorm room, but did not find the training empowering. I shared her story to identify what was missing and other forms of empowerment. I end the chapter with a discussion and possibilities for future research.

Autoethnography: Becoming Vulnerable

‘The question is whether we should express our vulnerability and subjectivity openly in the text or hide them behind “social analysis.”’ Arthur P. Bochner (Ellis & Bochner, 2000)

In order to understand what took place in self-defense training classes, I participated in seven self-defense courses, five of which took place within a time-span of four months, spending a total of 106 hours participating in self-defense classes. Six of these classes used what is called stress inoculation training or intentionally triggering an adrenalized state in participants and then carrying out self-defense drills so what was learned would be accessible in a real assault situation, provoking a unique and intense physiological and psychological response. Having experienced this first-hand, I felt that including my emotional and physiological experiences as data was essential. My own experience of both participating in self-defense training and interviewing participants was challenging, not only because I held the weight of the psychological trauma carried by many of the women I interviewed, but also because the practice of self-defense was psychologically demanding, forcing participants/me to enact rape scenarios, use physical force, yell, and practice verbal boundary-setting tactics I was unaccustomed to using. The discomfort of the training crept into my body and my dreams, making it difficult to proceed with my research at times. I had two individuals (an advisor and a friend, both therapists) tell me that I was experiencing secondary trauma. These experiences did not make me more objective, but rather helped me to understand when women described aspects of the
training as difficult, including boundary-setting/verbal self-defense and the (re)enactment of rape scenarios. My experience of going deep into participant observation allowed me to describe and understand certain aspects of self-defense training, joining participants’ experiences, but then stepping back in order to assess my own reactions. This process guided me to seek out the parts of the training that women described as being emotionally difficult (scary, triggering, intimidating). I searched for an ethnographic method that incorporated the researcher’s embodied experiences and found Laura Ellingson’s (2006) research in hospitals that featured her autoethnographic work centering her own experiences as a cancer patient. Her work revealed her own body in her most vulnerable time. Revealing the researcher’s body disrupts the power that the (usually disembodied) researcher has over their subjects (Ellingson, 2006) and disrupts the dichotomy between subject and object. These disruptions allow researchers to challenge other dichotomous ways of thinking and to interrogate taken-for-granted socially constructed norms, so that others could be considered (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). I am interested in exploring how my embodied response to participation in self-defense augments my thinking and theorizing about women’s vulnerability and resistance to sexual and other violent assault.

Including my own experiences doing participant observation in self-defense trainings challenges the dichotomy between researcher and researched, allowing me to share my participants’ vulnerability. Because I have been studying women’s vulnerability and its relationship with resistance, revealing my vulnerability connects readers with the research participants through my felt and lived experience. I both recorded and reflected upon my own experiences as a way to disrupt the private nature of women’s vulnerability—making it visible and public. Sharing my own affect alongside other women’s with whom I shared training experiences enhanced the resonance of their stories. I also shared the difficulties I encountered
carrying out this research, revealing what is often unspoken—the reverberations of communicated trauma, the difficulty struggling through physical and verbal exercises, and ongoing feelings of fear and anxiety following repeated rounds of adrenaline-response training while hearing and holding women’s stories.

While I did not intend to conduct research that made myself vulnerable, I felt the reverberations of other women’s trauma in my body and considered it to be important data that I could not, in good conscience, conceal from myself, exclude from my analytical framework, or hide from my readers. Ignoring data that penetrated my life for months on end felt like lying—as if I was only reporting half of the story—the half that made me look like a good, objective, and emotionally distant researcher. Employing ocular ethics, I sought to make the invisible visible while weighing the benefits of the vulnerability associated with exposure (Casper & Moore, 2009). I viewed joining my participants in revealing some parts of my own experience as a form of solidarity, recognizing that it takes many voices to up-end a social hierarchy. Also, as I am working with the concept of epistemological ignorance/nescience—or knowledge that is intentionally kept from groups of people—I did not want my own omissions to keep readers—especially women—in the dark.

Vulnerability

I defined vulnerability in women as an internalized belief that they are unable to defend themselves against sexual or other violent assault (i.e., susceptibility to physical or violent assault). This view is constructed and maintained by cultural systems, including socialization, the legal system, and social norms and is not based on a woman’s physical inability to defend herself. But, while conducting this research, I was interested in women’s own perceptions of both the likelihood that they would be assaulted and their ability to avert an assault. In some
senses, I defined vulnerability very closely to “victim,” but I am aware that this word, too, is problematic and laden with excessive baggage. This term also describes a particular role in criminalized events and thus a legal term, as in the victim of a crime. While some have embraced the use of “survivor”, this term is also problematic as it implies a woman’s “heroic adaptation” (Lamb, 1999, p. 139). Sara Ahmed has written about the term fragility, specifically *queer fragility* and *accommodation*, identifying that not being accommodated makes us more breakable. Fragility, like vulnerability, implies both relation to institutions—the existence of or the lack of support making us more or less fragile (Ahmed, 2016). Structural-personal violence can be, and often is, the absence of support that is needed by many: queer, gender queer, cisgender women, in a heterosexist world.

I used vulnerable as a transitive verb, indicating that one is vulnerable to something. In the case of my research, I was interested in looking at what (or whom) women feel they are vulnerable to—of exploring the experienced relational aspect of this. Also, I was interested in re-framing of the word “vulnerable” and to explore the meaning that this word has for women based on their experiences. By this definition, women are not simply vulnerable, or fragile (although some are viewed in this way as well. Note the stereotypes held of white women as discussed through a group dynamics framework by Sarah Brazaitis, 1997). In the process of conducting this research on vulnerability, I identified that vulnerability works on multiple levels. It works on a systemic level in that certain groups are made vulnerable through various forms of difference, including sex, gender identity, race, socio-economic status, physical (dis)ability, and age (Fineman, 2008). Feminists in the 1970s coined the term *rape culture* to name that women’s vulnerability to sexual and other violent assault is systemic. Problematically, the systemic nature is hard to visualize as it is woven into our social fabric and embodied; few ‘structural’ conditions
are as intimately woven into our skin. Had I chosen to situate this study within an institution of higher education, we could clearly identify institutional refusal to address women’s victimization, particularly when people accused of rape are protected and victims are not. Other institutions involved with women’s victimization are battered women’s shelters, mental health facilities and prisons. All react to the problem, but aren’t preventative measures. And not all women who are victimized encounter these institutions. People are also individually vulnerable because of their families of origin and vulnerable based on our relationships to other people. Our vulnerability is both a social condition and an effect in that it is based on social constructions of our identities and situations (Massumi, 1987), for example, women are vulnerable to sexual assault by virtue of being women. Vulnerability is also a felt reality. By fetishizing women’s vulnerability, we deflect away from men’s vulnerability; we also deflect away from women’s strength and collective resistance—we may create the conditions we most fear. Using autoethnography as a way to track my feelings and reactions provides some insight into the ways living in a rape culture lives in the body and “between women.”

In the Self-Defense Class

While the bulk of the time in each class was focused on physical self-defense, most of the women I interviewed indicated that the most difficult and/or most important aspect of the training for them was the verbal self-defense or boundary setting. I assume this is based on our social conditioning as girls and women. Lola, a 58-year-old veteran said, “It’s hard for me to really verbalize and stand up for myself. You know, Fear that—well nobody’s going to like me. That’s what I’m working on.” Beth, a thirty-three year-old self-defense instructor indicated that the most important thing she learned from her first self-defense class was,
that I had a voice and I could use it to protect myself and that I could have boundaries. I don’t think I had boundaries - and what those look like - I don’t think I knew what boundaries were.

These two Latina mothers articulated that they were raised (as girls) not to be able to use their voices to establish boundaries. To address this, verbal boundary-setting tactics were taught through example and practice. Similarly, Maddy, a forty-two year old White executive consultant, identified that, in our society, girls are not taught that they are worth fighting for, a lesson she learned when she participated in self-defense training as an adult.

We do not teach little girls how to defend themselves. I think the underlying message is; you’re not worth defending. So, the irony of it was that learning to defend myself made me feel more worthy. Like made me feel more valuable.

In a typical class, the main instructor (these classes were generally taught by teams of instructors—a main instructor who both demonstrated and acted as a coach, an assistant instructor who traded off these responsibilities, and often padded attackers or suited instructors. The suited instructors were there to play the part of an assailant. They wore heavily padded suits with large, padded helmets to protect them from being injured while allowing women to practice moves using full physical force. Not all of the classes I participated in had padded attackers. One paired up participants and we held up pads for each other to practice punches and kicks and one exclusively used air-drills or attacks against an imagined attacker. The other five classes I took had male suited instructors as a central aspect of the training. Generally, the main instructor was a woman, but in two of the classes I took, the instructor was a male. In both of these cases, the instructor had been a police officer. In one of the classes I took that was taught by a woman, all
of the instructors (main, suited) were police officers. One class was taught out of a rape crisis center with only female instructors.

The scenarios we practiced could be verbal, physical, or both. After watching, each woman, in turn, practice as the other women in the class stood in support, always cheering the woman on throughout the exercise. These verbal tactics appeared to be simple, for example, telling someone to leave you alone when they were behaving in a way that made you feel uncomfortable. I shared my field notes of my own strong, emotional experience practicing “boundary setting.”

*Beth stood by each of us, reminding us to breathe and sometimes coaching on what to say, and encouraging. When my turn came, I picked running in the park as my scenario, because I don’t like to be stopped when I am running and it has happened a number of times, although not by aggressive or nasty men. The role play started out fine, “Burt” wasn’t too intimidating—he claimed he was hurt and wanted me to help him get to his car, but at some point this struck me as funny and I laughed—it was the kind of nervous laugh that would often overcome me when I was a child and one of my parents was yelling at one of my siblings—the kind of laughing that drew unwanted attention to my presence and the laughter took on a meaning that I didn’t ascribe to it. This same laughter was choking me now when I wanted to demonstrate composure and cool under fire—I wanted to show that I could do this simple exercise. But, then Burt yelled at me for laughing and said, “What kind of a person laughs when someone is hurt?”… I couldn’t suppress the laugh like I wanted to and tears welled up in my eyes and my throat swelled with the pressure of suppressed emotions. I listened hard to Beth who was reminding me to breathe and not listen to Burt, but try to stick to responses that would work, “I can’t help you to your car.” And “I’m not going to help you.” …At the end of the scenario, I felt the uncontrollable push of sobs and
tears that seemed disproportionate to the exercise and which I still can’t completely understand, but to connect them to a kind of nervous response I haven’t experienced in many years. (Impact Women’s Basics Class, June 2015)

I interpreted my suppressed laughter and crying as indicating shame for my inability to control my emotions during a class exercise. In this case, my shame was so intense that I could not keep myself first from laughing and then from crying (note: there was no physical assault in these scenarios—all of the emotion came from the pressure of having to tell a stranger to leave me alone). This display of emotion in front of the rest of the class made me feel exposed and unable to suppress my inappropriate affect. I felt like this was a public failure (as both a participant and a researcher/”expert”)—and, under this was the feeling that I would do this in real life—I wouldn’t be able to tell someone to leave me alone with a straight face. The urge to be nice or to be liked, isn’t just stereotypically feminine, it is also deeply entrenched in self-perception and the desire to confirm that perception is connected to affect. I witnessed other women laughing nervously during this exercise and many women told me that they had a difficult time doing this exercise.

It occurred to me that it was ironic that the women in the class were there to support one another and yet, the shame I felt had much to do with my performance in this exercise. This made the connection between performativity (performing as a strong woman) and embodiment. While I often felt that social constructionist framing of embodiment lacked a sense of the body, this experience brought together the embodied experience of the physiological arousal with awareness of expectations of a literal performance—one I couldn’t quite master in that moment.

During the second day of class, we practiced physical fighting skills with a focus on “reversals” which were actually rape scenarios. These were emotionally difficult fights where the
scenario was always the same: you were asleep in bed and you woke up to an attacker on top of you trying to rape you. The attacker always spoke to you, creating a scenario that was meant to be terrifying, but also meant to motivate you to fight. The second day of class included so many of these that I was psychologically drained and ended up with the worst cold I’ve had in years and I was still sick the following week when we resumed classes, needing to sip tea and suck on lozenges throughout the day to stave off coughing attacks. In my field notes I wrote:

*There is a demo at the beginning of class—we sit to watch—I can’t remember what it was about – but I think it was a conflict scenario rather than a rape scenario. I feel relieved. I think we get to work on conflict all day. When we do the check-in circle, I express how relieved I am to see [the suited instructors] in their regular clothes – not in their creepy overalls. Emily interrupts to let me know we will be doing more rape scenarios today. So, I sit with that and think, “OK—good to know.” And of course we are, right? Isn’t that why we are here? (Impact Women’s Basics Class, June 2015)*

My relief when I thought we weren’t doing rape scenarios was quickly wiped away. In spite of my difficulty with verbal encounters, I would rather spend a day on those than on rape scenarios. And yet, I was convinced that it was necessary for women to work on rape scenarios—even though they bring us up against some of our deepest fears and/or force us to recount traumatic past experiences. The fact that women have to prepare for these encounters makes me furious that we live in a society that sees women assaulted and does nothing, putting us in the unfortunate position of needing to educate ourselves by whatever means necessary. This is not blaming the victim; this is recognizing that our rape culture allows this—forcing a structural problem onto the backs of women.
As we went through the scenarios, we were instructed by the trainer who sat close to our heads to breathe, keep calm, to speak to the assailant and await the proper moment to make our own attack, leveraging the element of surprise. The verbal aspect of these fights was meant to throw off the assailant and make them believe that you were compliant, giving you an opportunity to act. In these brief field notes, my own resistance to this was evident:

Last rape scenario—talking about stalking, watching. I don’t want to engage with this person. I think, in real life, I wouldn’t talk to this person. I don’t; even though we are supposed to talk, distract, etc. I remain quiet. I am looking at his mask and thinking about jabbing his eyes. But, I wait for my moment and throw him off—and do the “traditional” moves: knee to the groin, several times, then kicking the head—and final blows. This time I don’t stop until the whistle is blown. (Impact Women’s Basics, June 2015)

There is much in what I did not say here. Even in my notes to myself, there are things that felt unsayable. I did not explain what stalking and watching mean to me as I had a hard time including my own experiences in this work—even though I had committed to writing autoethographically—making myself vulnerable on the page and articulating my own relationship to the material. Thus, I resisted describing my own experiences, maintaining my right to have a personal boundary between my self and my work even as I could feel history and the present wrap themselves around me. I could only make my self so vulnerable. The calculatedness of the strategy for this exercise required that we “wait for the right moment” to throw our assailant off. This wasn’t easy to do and it required that I restrain my urge to jab his eyes out. My rage was manifested in my refusal to engage this man in conversation in spite of the fact that this was the exercise and I wanted to do it right. This was partly because I was raised as a, “good girl” and partly because I was self-conscious of being a researcher in this context. I
should do a good job, because I am an expert, right? Making small talk and feigning compliance were not things that I wanted to do even in the context of this role-play. In spite of my resistance to complying with this exercise – my refusal to speak to someone I would never speak to – my physical resistance was effective. This speaks to my body’s ability to protect me in spite of my unwillingness to use language. This could also be a manifestation of “turning fear into power”—a central tenet of three of these self-defense organizations (Model Mugging, Impact, and Fast Defense). Notably, Kidder and colleagues (1983) identified both that anger helped women avoid rape and that women are socialized to suppress anger—even during assault. I made reference to an earlier fight where I hesitated – actually stopped before delivering the “death blow” to the attacker’s head.

Nonetheless, this illustrated the vulnerability I felt while speaking – or in this case, not speaking—overexposure that was shared with other women in the training. Our struggle to use our voices in our own defense hinted at an underlying silencing that permits violence against women to continue to be a serious social issue decades after feminists coined the term rape culture. The real struggle was the real emotions that we felt while engaging in these scenarios. Addressing how gender identity forced us to overcome our own emotions in order to stand up for ourselves is a deep and massive battle ahead.

While participating in self-defense classes myself allowed me to access the affect that was triggered during participation and allowed me to hold an embodied understanding of that experience, it also pushed me to identify if my own experiences were representative of the women I interviewed. As such, I paid attention both in class and interviews to other women’s experiences, asking: did they also struggle to get through boundary-setting exercises and rape scenarios? As a researcher, observing other women during the class, it was evident that these
were the most challenging aspects of the training for other women as well. I witnessed almost every other woman struggle with verbal self-defense exercises and talk about how difficult they were in closing circles. Later, as an assistant instructor, I witnessed participants who were not part of this study struggle as well. Both experiencing and witnessing this as a common phenomenon made me consider why this was consistently difficult for women, so I paid attention to women’s socialization experiences.

Thinking about my struggles with the rape scenarios made me think about the barriers to women’s participation in self-defense training, identifying that no one wants to go through these scenarios. And, as difficult as they were to participate in, they were equally difficult to witness other women going through. Lilith, a twenty-year-old White college student described the rape scenarios using verbal tactics (like the one I described) and “feigned compliance” as the hardest part of participating in self-defense:

[The hardest part was] the part where we had to play along with them and say what they wanted us to say was really hard for me—especially watching some of the other women go through that and seeing how hard it was for them. It just like made it too real and it was really hard.

As difficult as these experiences were for me and for other women, I hope that by sharing our stories, I have been able to convey the importance of women’s transformational experiences and to counter the dominant notion of women’s vulnerability.

**Stories of Self-Defense and Transformation: Shelly, Cherry, Beth, Stacy, Lilith, and April**

Referring back to Table 5 (chapter two), I selected women whose stories exemplified the benefits of self-defense in ways that were both similar to and different from the most commonly-expressed benefits: *finding my fighting spirit* and verbal *conflict/boundary-setting*. Also, holding
the notion of epistemological resistance, I listened for and shared stories that illustrated ways self-defense training transformed self-perceptions. Shelly gave a ringing endorsement of self-defense based on her experience recovering from rape trauma, which she credited to self-defense training, but also resisted victimization in numerous ways, including owning a gun. Cherry described the “physical and mental” benefits of self-defense training as being transformative for her. Beth described how learning verbal self-defense/boundary setting changed every aspect of her life. Stacy and Lilith who are sisters are among the few women who did not report experiences of sexual or other violent victimization. Perhaps because of this; their experiences of hearing other women’s stories had a strong impact on their lives, reviving an understanding for the need for spaces where women can share stories. I told April’s story, who did not find self-defense training empowering, as an example of a counterstory, listening for ways to facilitate more effective self-defense learning opportunities for women. Interestingly, each of these women grew up with guns, but only Shelly and Cherry expressed positively that owning guns was important to their sense of safety.

Shelly: “It [self-defense] just draws out who you were. It gives your confidence back a little bit.” (Voices of: overwhelming fear/obstacles and agency.)

I met Shelly in the first self-defense class that I participated in. I arrived early and was nervous, not sure what to expect. Shelly was the second to arrive and we started talking. She told me that she was taking self-defense because she had gotten older—she was a fifty-three year-old White woman and wasn’t sure if she had retained the skills she learned when she first took self-defense in her 20s. She eagerly signed up to be interviewed as soon as I brought my list out and is one of the first people I interviewed.
Shelly grew up on a farm and knew her father kept a rifle in the basement for hunting and protection, but he never taught her to use it. She eventually learned to shoot a gun and has owned a gun since her twenties. She worked at a casino, doing inventory and accounting and, taking the bus early in the morning, was concerned about being able to defend herself. Much of the content of Shelly’s interview revolved around Shelly’s being violently raped by a stranger when she was twenty-three years old. Shelly’s case was unusual because she testified in court twice: once as a child and once as an adult. She discussed multiple types of resistance with varying degrees of self-recognition. When I asked if she knew she could fight back as a child, she said:

Not as a kid no. Oh wait, yes, there was actually. Walking to the store one day this weirdo lived right next to the store. He came up and started grabbing me. And *I ran and I ran all the way home*. But it was never anything *because I ran*. It was never anything *I had to defend*…But physically no *I wasn’t in any danger because I got away from him*.

Shelly’s story illustrated what Jill Cermele (2010) referred to as a story where “nothing happened,” in other words, she wasn’t assaulted, because she ran. And yet, this was an act of resistance, which Shelly acknowledged, that it was “never anything,” *because she ran*, making the connection between her actions and the outcome. Using Lauraine Leblanc’s (1999) definition of resistance, Shelly identified the source of oppression (physical vulnerability), determined to oppose it (maintain her safety) and acted (she ran). Her immediate, effective response established her *voice of agency*—a voice that would come up again and again as she discussed multiple modes of resistance she employed. In this case, when she was eleven or twelve, she told her parents what happened and her father went to the police and, ultimately, she had to testify in court. Although she said she did not remember anything about testifying in court, I classify her taking the stand as an act of resistance.
Shelly was encouraged to take self-defense by the D.A. and bought a gun of her own volition when she was violently raped in her early 20s—an occasion that required her to testify in court again. Shelly described how it happened

*I used to teach country-western dancing* at this bar and *this guy kept buying me drinks* and *I never ever accepted them*. Well he waited outside for me. He grabbed me, threw me in his truck. He took me up. He raped me. He tried killing me… *I fought tooth and nail* and the cop said *if I wouldn't have fought that hard I may not have made it*.

Shelly resisted her attacker in multiple ways. Setting a boundary, she refused his drinks, “fought tooth and nail” and, according the police, she saved her own life through her physical resistance. Again, her direct “I” statements signified agency in this story. She is alive because she fought back.

She also resisted the way she was being treated as a “victim” in multiple contexts. She talked about being put on lots of drugs (prescription meds) after she was raped and was later stalked by her attacker.

And the doctors put you on these drugs and my mom had passed away so *I had two sisters to raise. I had a job*…And so, *I mean, I just told him [the DA] I'm not functioning. I'm scared to go anywhere. They have me on all these drugs*. The guy was following me, because he was a habitual. He knew *I was pressing charges* and that he would go to court. He knew he was going to face time. And *every time I turned around he was in my rearview mirror. I would move under other people's apartments under their names*. And he always would find me. So *I ended up getting a gun*… So long story short, *I went into the District Attorney's Office and I said, “This isn’t right. My whole life has been taken from me.”* So that's when he stuck me in a self-defense course *so I would feel more*
confident and get back out there and get to my job. Because no matter what I was still gonna go to court.

Shelly described a number of ways she resisted being a victim. She pressed charges against the person who raped her and was determined to go to court. She also moved and kept her name hidden to prevent the person who raped her (who was stalking her) from finding her. She got a gun. Finally, using her voice of agency, she told the D.A. that she needed her life back. The D.A. sending her to self-defense was pivotal as it allowed her to move on with her life and was likely not a strategy Shelly would have thought of on her own. She repeated the story of her interaction with the D.A., being extremely assertive, using her voice of agency:

I told him [the DA] I didn't want these drugs anymore. I want to be myself. I want to be able to go back to work. I've got two kids to raise. I can't be afraid of anybody anymore. It was the smartest thing. They should really send rape victims to these classes because it does help build yourself back up where you were. It helped me a lot.

Shelly advocated for herself throughout her trial and ensured she got her needs met. This was about reclaiming her life and refusing to take on the identity of victim (this included rejecting medications which impaired her ability to function), while taking on the legal role of victim in advocating her case in court. bell hooks (1984) made the distinction between victim identity, which she saw as divisive and problematic, obscuring the ways victims perpetuate the patriarchal system, and the role of victim—an acknowledgement of life events. Shelly illustrated this distinction through her strategic enactment of the victim role and her refusal to take on the victim identity. Shelly advocated self-defense training for rape victims—notably the only two times she uses the word “victim” during our interview (which lasted an hour and a half) was to recommend that rape victims have the option of taking self-defense training (she suggested that
rapists pay into a fund to support this). It helped her get back to work—back to her life.

Additionally, she said it helped her to be able to testify in court.

Shelly: *I'm really glad that the District Attorney had that idea.*

Alexis: Self-defense?

Shelly: That helped my court case a lot, too *I didn’t even think about that but it really did.*

Alexis: What helped your court case?

Shelly: That I was able to function.

For Shelly, self-defense training played a role in regaining her ability to function – and to testify in court – something she was committed to doing. She described her testimony in court:

She [the judge] tells me in court how has your life changed? So *I sat up there on the little stand and I got my purse and I put all these pills up there. And I said, “This is my life.” I said, “That’s how my life has changed.” I said, “I never took drugs before.” I said, “Now I’m just doped up all the time.” I said, “This is what this guy has done to me. I can’t function without any of these pills.” I mean I went to a psychiatrist on my own just to get my head back together. Along with that one class of self-defense. But just that one class helped. Even the shrink said that that helped a lot.*

Shelly used agency, embracing her opportunity to play the role of “victim” in the courtroom, much as Sharon Lamb (1999) described women embracing taking on the role they know they need to take on in order to convince a jury. Shelly recognized that she must convince the jury that being raped damaged her psychologically, as it was not enough to identify that what the perpetrator did was a violent crime (Lamb, 1999). Her testimony was an act of resistance on many levels: directly fighting back against the man who raped her by testifying on her own behalf, resisting the effects of the medications by getting off them, and making a public display –
for the judge, jury, and all who are in the courtroom. It is important to note that, in many ways, she was a “convincing victim,” making it more likely for her to get a conviction (she did)—this was a violent rape by a stranger, Shelly was physically beaten and used physical force to fight back (Lamb, 1999). Shelly framed the situation based on her survival, rather than on her victimization, referring to her own actions affirmatively, agentically—taking back, rather than losing power from this harrowing experience. She also mentioned how helpful self-defense was as a way of getting through this time. In fact, she attributed self-defense with helping her get off medications that were interfering with her ability to function and with facilitating her ability to testify at her trial.

   It [self-defense] just draws out who you were. It gives your confidence back a little bit. So, I mean, just a few hours of that really helped. And I don't know if it would help to have it before because I fought like hell when it happened, but I think physically it would've been better then, but mentally, it was better for me after, too.

While Shelly thought self-defense before the attack would have helped, she knew it helped her regain her sense of who she was after the attack. She referred to both physical and mental aspects of self-defense as important, but acknowledged that, for her, the mental aspects helped in her recovery.

   For Shelly, self-defense training turned out to be an invaluable form of psychological and epistemological resistance. While Shelly also used physical resistance to survive and carried a gun after she was raped, the type of resistance self-defense provided was different — it was psychological, facilitating her resilience and epistemological, re-framing her perception of herself. Taking self-defense helped her reclaim her agency. She attributed self-defense as helping
her get off medications that were making it difficult to function, testify in court, and get her life back.

Cherry: “When I walked out on that other side I was a completely different person and it was not just a physical thing. It was a mental thing.”

Cherry was a fifty-six year-old White woman who worked in state government. She was sexually assaulted as a child and as an adult and lived in an abusive marriage for ten years, so Cherry’s vulnerability was mapped onto her sense of self from childhood through adulthood. She talked about her socialization including learning that, because she was a girl, she didn’t matter:

_I was raised_ under the belief that women weren’t as important as men—that men mattered more and I think that created a huge vulnerability for me. That men—that there was a hierarchy. Who comes first? Men come first. Men make better decisions than women. Men go out there and make the money and women stay home and have children and are house makers and it’s OK for you to be a doormat.

Cherry connected mattering less—and the hierarchy with men being more valued than women – to being vulnerable. As a mother, Cherry wanted to send her daughter a different message than she had heard and took her daughter to a krav maga (Israeli martial arts) class when her daughter was thirteen.

It was her [my daughter’s] coming of age. When things started not going well for me, I _wanted her to be empowered_ where I wasn’t empowered in my teenage years. I _wanted her to know how to say “no” regardless_ if it was a family member or a stranger or whatever and _I wanted her to have the mental and the physical ability to ward off unwelcome actions towards her_.

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Cherry wanted to provide to her daughter what she lacked—empowerment and boundaries. She described “mental and physical” abilities, including her daughter’s right to say “no” to anyone, including family members, what Kidder and colleagues (1983) called the right to refusal, but what most self-defense classes referred to as boundaries and verbal self-defense. While Cherry found the krav maga class to be helpful, she also said, “it was more of a physical thing,” identifying that she needed—and later got—something different from self-defense training. While physical skills were one important aspect of self-defense training, they were not the full picture.

I met Cherry while participating in a weekend-long self-defense intensive which she was participating in for the second year in a row. I asked her whether that training had been valuable:

Yes. I found it to be extremely valuable – invaluable. I truly believe that women and men need to have the ability to protect themselves. The confidence—the physical and mental confidence to protect themselves. Um. There’s a threat everywhere, unfortunately. And we need to see that and be aware of it and understand and know how to de-escalate it – walk away from it – protect ourselves.

Cherry not only identified multiple threats, but also multiple ways of responding. Not only physical fighting, but de-escalation and walking away—were ways that she could protect herself. These tactics were emphasized in the training we took together. She also emphasized confidence: both physical and mental. Notably, it was novel as woman in her 50’s to learn about her ability to protect herself. She described one part of the training where each participant, in turn, faced a series of challenges:

I went in there and… I did it and when I walked out on that other side I was a completely different person and it was not just a physical thing. It was a mental thing. I found out no
matter what comes at me, I keep myself safe. That was the thing that I understood. I have the power to be my own protector: verbally physically, spiritually, mentally—in every shape and form is what I realized.

Cherry’ perception of her self changed as she took on a voice of confidence. She found her fighting spirit: recognizing that she had the power to be her own protector, disproving the old story that women are incapable of defending ourselves. The identification that there was more to learn than the physical skills was significant and her focus on the “mental” piece being connected to power was her way of identifying that she learned that she was capable of defending herself—something that she had unlearned as a child whose mother demonstrated to her that she/girls “did not matter,” a sentiment she repeated eleven times during our interview. Notably, like Beth (in the Resistance chapter and this chapter), Cherry connected feeling like she did not matter with her inability to stand up for or protect herself. As such learning that she was both able to and worth fighting for was a form of epistemological resistance—allowing her to replace her previous conception of herself as not mattering with new knowledge that she was both capable of and worth fighting for.

[While Cherry found self-defense training to be transformational, she was also a gun owner who had learned to shoot with her father as a child. At the time of our interview, she had a gun in her home and felt safe with it there.]

**Beth: finding my fighting spirit**

Beth, a self-defense instructor (who I discussed in detail in the Resistance chapter) also talked about what finding her fighting spirit meant while describing what she got out of self-defense training:
Connecting with your fighting spirit in that adrenalized state there’s a messaging of value and honor to one’s self and I think that that brings out confidence, so I would say confidence.

Beth found that she was able to recover value and honor of her self—both of which she described in her interview as having been missing and which made her vulnerable. She went on to explain what fighting spirit meant to her:

_I found my fighting spirit. That I could in fact take care of myself if I needed to. That I was stronger than I thought that I was. That I had a voice and I could use it to protect myself and that I could have boundaries. I don’t think I had boundaries—and what those look like. I don’t think I knew what boundaries were. I think I instantly gained confidence—I felt more confident. I felt less afraid - my fear level went down significantly. I really changed._

For Beth, like Cherry, her fighting spirit was not only about learning to fight, but was about something else—valuing herself and learning that she was worth fighting for, which was a sentiment that she did not grow up holding. For her, it was also about confidence—something that she also connected to the fighting spirit; in other words knowing that she had the ability to fight.

Like many of the other women, Beth emphasized the importance not only of learning to fight physically, but also of using verbal tactics (including de-escalation) and boundary-setting. She described various contexts where she used her skills:

_ I now have a voice and know what boundaries are. Long term, since I’m doing that—I’ve used it to set boundaries with people, to ask for things I needed: to stand up myself at work when I felt I deserved or should have gotten a promotion or a raise. I’ve used it to_
speak my piece at the end of a job. To set boundaries with my father. I’ve had two
encounters where I haven’t used physical skills, but I’ve used awareness skills that kept
me safe or used the verbal skills that kept me safe [WOW]. So, I use it with my son, I use
it with my husband. I use it the way I parent.

Beth identified that what she learned in self-defense training held importance in her
everyday interactions with people in all aspects of her life, revealing that self-defense teaches not
only how to fight, but how to communicate boundaries; a skill that most of us are never taught.
Beth used a voice of agency, like Shelly, describing all of the things she is capable of—and that
she does on an everyday basis. Note that, like Cherry, Beth found a way to share what she
learned with her child—she taught her son to set boundaries as well.

We talk about body safety and about his [my son’s] body and he gets a choice in whether
he feels lucky or happy about the person he just talked to. We talk about safety within
family and that we have the right to set boundaries with each other and we allow him to
do that. And we are working with him on asking for what he needs—and what he wants.

Beth devoted a considerable amount of our interview to talking about how self-defense
training has addressed some of the challenges of raising a son on the autism spectrum. Listening
to Beth’s (and other women’s) narrative, I identified that transmission of what we learned in self-
defense training to those we care about as a secondary, yet very important, benefit of self-
defense training. Transmission is linked to breaking cycles of violence and silence and occurs in
many of the women’s narratives, establishing a potential multi-generational benefit of women’s
participation in self-defense training.

Before Beth was able to help her family, she had to help her self—much like putting your
own breathing mask on before helping children on a flight, Beth found her fighting spirit—a
spirit that was about changing a fundamental misperception of herself as the “weak link” who was incapable of defending herself. This fighting spirit was missing from—and added back into her life—in the form of the ability to both establish personal boundaries and to stand up for herself in personal and work contexts. For Beth, self-defense facilitated a wholesale re-identification of who she is—a stronger and more confident person who values her self.

**Stacy and Lilith: the importance of connections and transmission of knowledge**

Kari Fraser and Glenda Russell’s (2000) interview research with fifty-nine graduates of Model Mugging women’s self-defense training identified that the small group structure of the training held numerous benefits for the participants, including: commonality (sharing common vulnerability to victimization), self disclosure (holding a special bond with other participants due to disclosure of vulnerability), and altruism (feeling empathy and a desire to help other women in the training). Stacy and Lilith, sisters who participated in self-defense training together identified that they learned about the traumatic experiences of the other women in the training by participating in women’s self-defense. The sisters were White twenty-two and twenty year-old students who were both attending college when their mother persuaded them to take self-defense training. While neither sister reported having ever been victimized, both had limited their movements due to reports of crime on their respective college campuses. They each identified the importance of learning about other women’s experiences of victimization, including their mother’s successful avoidance of rape when she was in High School. Lilith told me:

*My mom told me a story* of one time these two boys she knew and she was friends with tried to rape her and she fought really hard and she got away. *She always told me this story* saying, “**Fight as hard as you can**—sometimes it works. Never, never give up if you can help it.” That was a big message for me.
Lilith reasoned that if her mother could fight off assailants, so could she. Lilith was surprised that her mother’s mother found out about what happened the same time she did:

Mostly it made me resolve about the way I wanted my relationship with my mom to go. Because I’ve always wanted us to have the relationship where I can tell her everything. And she’s done a really good job of being open to everything and not being upset at the things I tell her. I don’t know—it was such a strange thought that she wouldn’t’ tell anyone—that she wouldn’t share it. It’s hard to say if I would carry through with this, but I’ve resolved that if anything happens to me that I will tell people.

Lilith’s resolution was about breaking the silence around—at least her own—victimization (should it occur) and about identifying the importance of telling others. Lilith spoke in a relational voice, voicing her desires for her relationship with her own mother that felt compromised by her mother’s secrecy with her mother. Hearing her mother’s story had a significant impact on Lilith, particularly because we do not often hear stories of women’s successful avoidance of rape (Cermele, 2010). This story was significant for both sisters.

Stacy talked about the importance of hearing other women’s stories during the self-defense training. And while both young women indicated that hearing women’s stories of victimization made the training “more emotional” than they had anticipated, they also found it to be a valuable aspect of the training.

Just hearing other women’s stories like talking about what scares me and talking about like why I was here. I thought that that part was really intense. Certainly more than I anticipated. I was thinking it was going to be all like kick fight, but I think that it was a lot—like one of the true values of the classes you kind of got to hear these other women’s stories. You got to bond with them and you got to, I guess, put yourself out there and say,
“This is what I’m scared of.” And I think that’s really empowering to just kind of admit, “Yes, this scares me so much,” like, now I can do something about it.

Stacy identified the importance of hearing other women’s stories as well as the importance of sharing her own fears and vulnerability with other women, finding admitting her own vulnerability to be empowering (altruism, self disclosure, and commonality, Fraser & Russell, 2000). Being in a context with other women who were sharing their vulnerability authorized Stacy to speak honestly about her own feelings of vulnerability – being able to speak openly about what scared her—and was one of the most valuable aspects of the training for her. The other piece was that being scared was not the end of the conversation—she learned that she had the ability to address her fears during the class as well.

Stacy, like many of the other self-defensers, also appreciated the verbal self-defense tactics, believing that they are the tactics she will most likely end up using.

*I really like the de-escalation. Where you put yourself out there like, “No, back off, leave me alone.” I think that’s what I can see myself using the most because that’s the kind of situation I’ve been in before where people are like shouting at me and catcalling or whatever. I just like—before you kind of felt really vulnerable and kept walking—kept your head down—didn’t think about it. Just kind of tried to ignore them the best you could. So I think that it kind of gave me back my confidence. First of all they can’t do anything to me because I know how to defend myself. And also that kind of confidence that I’ve been in this mock situation before and I know what to do. So that was really helpful.*

When Stacy described re-claiming her confidence here, she did so in the context of learning and knowing that she had the ability to defend herself. Tracking her self-voice, Stacy
moved from speaking in the third person about feeling vulnerable and “kept your head down” to speaking in the first person and having confidence, because “I know how to defend myself.” Knowing how to defend herself, through the process of experiencing her own ability to fight off padded attackers, was transformational. She went from avoiding confronting to believing “they can’t do anything to me.” The importance of knowing was directly connected to the ability to defend oneself (finding my fighting spirit).

On a related note, Lilith discussed how her own socialization to be polite or “nice” hindered her ability to set boundaries (similar to my own story). While women learn to diminish their own value, they tend to value others—even those who may intend harm or disrespect. Lilith said:

I have this like weird thing where I feel like I have to be polite to people and even though I never feel like other women should be polite to weird men it just is this strange instinct I have.

Lilith was talking about being nice to people catcalling her, something that, after taking self-defense, she no longer felt obligated to do and has learned strategies to assert her boundaries. Learning to use your voice is not only about being able to say “no!” loudly, but also being authorized to do so. Lilith learned that it was ok to be direct—even rude—without saying “please,” a common experience among the women I observed practicing verbal self-defense.

Lilith shared the importance not only of hearing her mother’s story of successfully avoiding being sexually assaulted, and added on that she would do a better job of communicating her story (should she ever have a similar experience), identifying the importance of transmission of stories of vulnerability and victory. Stacy talked about how empowering it was to be in the presence of women who shared their stories, of being able to articulate her own fears, and of
knowing that she had the skills to prevent an assault from happening. Both sisters shared that hearing other women’s stories—something that we do not normally do in our culture—was important knowledge to transmit—and to learn. Sharing stories of vulnerability and resistance represents epistemological resistance, as it is the propagation of exactly the type of information that is often silenced.

**April: it wasn’t empowering for me…**

April was a thirty-eight-year-old Latina who worked in public health who participated in a half-day self-defense workshop when she was in college, after having recently averted an assault in her dorm room. Unlike the other women I interviewed who, for the most part, took longer, intensive workshops (8-24 hours), hers was a four-hour workshop and, for her, it was not empowering.

But in their class, *I didn't particularly feel like now I know how to do this.* Yeah, but *I wouldn't say empowered*…*I would say knowledgeable, maybe? Sort of more prepared?* And you know *you're there with a bunch of 18-year-olds 19-year-olds and I think probably because there wasn't any real bonding between the girls.* Which maybe might happen if *you get a group of women that have been victims.* Where *you have something in common and you're all like, you know.* *Well for us it was kind of like we didn’t know who everybody was.*

April noted that the lack of bonding with the other “girls” – of even knowing who else was in the room contributed to the fact that the class was not empowering. She also indicated that having victims in the room might improve bonding (and the course overall). And yet, April already felt empowered—she had successfully averted an assault when someone entered her dorm room while she was sleeping.
Like I think I probably felt more empowered of how I handled the afterwards. Wow! I can't believe I kept my cool. [UM HM] Like, and I was able to. My first reaction was to scream and maybe it was good that it didn't come out, because it made me come back and be totally present. Um and taking the class I think if I had taken the class and then been attacked and used those things from it, because then you put it into practice.

April reported that she was already empowered, because she had been able to stay clear-headed enough to get a potential attacker out of her bed and dorm room. Even though she sought out a self-defense class because the experience had been scary, knowing that she had successfully handled the situation on her own had given her confidence while the self-defense training did not. She referred to the teaching in the self-defense class she took as “theoretical,” identifying that there was no opportunity to practice moves using full force under the adrenalized condition as was the case in six of the seven classes I participated in.

April’s experience confirmed the benefits of women sharing their stories that Lilith and Stacy identified. Also, her real-world experience of calmly getting an assailant to get out of her bed was a more empowering experience for her than practicing moves, which she didn’t think she would be able to use in real life. This shows that self-defense training is not “one size fits all” and that there are other ways of becoming empowered—including enacted resistance, like April’s. April also identified that what she wished her fourteen year-old daughter could participate in a self-defense class that taught “healthy relationship skills.” Reacting to her daughter losing her virginity in the janitor’s bathroom of her school to a senior boy who never spoke to her again, April said that she would send her daughter to self-defense training and hoped that she would learn something valuable from the experience. In other words, while April
didn’t find self-defense to be empowering for her, she still believed that it could provide her
daughter with skills she had been unable to provide.

Chapter Six Discussion

The six women whose narratives I shared disclosed that self-defense taught them
something other than physical fighting skills. These skills—the right of refusal and knowing that
they were capable of and worth fighting for—are forms of knowledge that are glaringly omitted
from formal and informal teaching. Their stories illustrate how heterosexual culture
communicates that girls and women are “less than” and how women are kept in the dark through
practices of epistemic ignorance on a structural-cultural level, making women vulnerable to a
form of structural violence that feels intensely personal and private. The silencing of women’s
victimization perpetuates their vulnerability and nescience, sustaining a cycle of violence that is
widespread, common, and denied. Considering the high rates of all types of gender-based
violence with the shame that surrounds victims feels conspiratorial. And it serves the gender-role
prescribing hetero culture.

Self-defense is, primarily, an individual solution to a structural-cultural form of violence,
which serves as a platform for epistemic resistance and liberation. Through embodied
experiences of physical and verbal confrontations and connection with a community of other
women whose stories are shared, respected, and viewed as valuable experience, self-defense
helps women recognize that they have the right to defend themselves. While this seems like it
should be self-evident, it is counter to what women understand about themselves, because of the
cultural scaffolding upholding heterosexuality as a norm. Cherry grew up believing that she did
not matter while Beth said she learned to not value herself—until she took self-defense. April
believed that her daughter had sex with an older boy, because she wanted to fit in, but had been
hurt in the process. Sacrificing oneself to fit in is an example of ways women (cis and trans) must be hobbled or otherwise reined in to be considered “normal” in a culture that defines norms based on the ways they support a patriarchal hierarchy. Cherry’s childhood sexual abuse by older boys was ignored, allowing her to learn that her safety was not important and that no one would save her. She had to save herself – through engaging in numerous forms of women’s empowerment trainings (which she now leads) as well as through physical self-defense and gun ownership.

Considering women learning the right of refusal as an act of epistemological resistance, it is important to note that the right to bear arms is considered fundamental, because it is legitimized in the constitution and is seen as a man’s right to provide for and defend his family (Carlson, 2016), but nowhere is a woman’s right to refusal considered basic or legislated (Carlson, 2014). It was a revelation for many women that they could stand up for themselves—verbally or otherwise, but it was also considered a takeaway with many women reporting that they established boundaries with people in their lives after taking self-defense, and it was empowering. Even for April, whose self-defense class was not empowering learned new tools for defending herself—and having more tools in your toolbox is useful in order to be able to handle various situations.

The systems we have in place to support victims do not necessarily address their most urgent needs. Shelly had to advocate for herself in order to get the type of help she needed to get through her trial—self-defense training. In our interview, she advocated self-defense training for all victims. She also spoke about teaching her daughter how to fight when she was a teenager, so she would know how to defend herself. Shelly recognized that her case and her needs were not isolated, but that there needed to be some way of transmitting what had helped her to other girls
and women. She said, “I just wish more girls would take it. It should be part of gym class. It really should be in high school.”

Importantly, not knowing had critical implications on these women’s lives—not knowing they mattered, not knowing they had a right to refusal, not knowing they were physically capable of fighting back, not knowing how to fight. All of these forms of not knowing are systemic, deliberate, and maintain a system of violent inequality. Even the lack of clarity around consent—that consent itself is seen as being a fuzzy concept makes women, not men, vulnerable.

According the Nicola Gavey (2005), heterosexual cultural makes the line between “just sex” and rape complicated, because women’s desires have been so frequently dismissed while men’s desires are seen as urgent and necessary. So what is now defined as rape (lacking consent) was historically run of the mill heterosex.

While these women discussed individual experiences of personal transformation, Russell, Folchman & Fraser (2001) postulated that if a critical mass of women participated in these classes and transformed their understandings of women as vulnerable and men as dangerous, it would be possible for there to be a cultural change in perceptions of women’s vulnerability. Through mass participation and subsequent transmission of knowledge from mother to child, sister to sister, friend to friend, daughter to mother, the flow of misinformation might be staved off. This requires a movement of its own.

The importance of sharing women’s stories and of learning to establish boundaries were significant findings that initially felt tangential to self-defense training. However, having spent a considerable amount of time participating in training, the importance of these lessons became palpable and clarified the need to embrace other women—even when their stories are painful and difficult—and to identify with their vulnerability—as it is likely your vulnerability as well. The
transmission of experience—including negative and unspeakable experience—as important knowledge reiterates the importance of building communities of women that are communities of re-claimed knowledge of strength and will. The women I met in these classes are the foundation and the evidence that it is through deep connection with other women that patriarchal systems may be dismantled (Lorde, 1984; hooks, 1984).
CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Widespread and Structural Nature of Gender-Based Violence

Women’s feelings of vulnerability are sometimes invisible, sometimes met with suspicion, and sometimes met with outright contempt. Statistics demonstrating that women are not as vulnerable as men to most types of violent crimes, for many criminologists (e.g., Riger, Gordon & Le Bailly, 1978; Valentine, 1989; Warr, 1993; Ferraro, 1996; Pain, 1997; Wilcox, Jordan & Pritchard, 2006) has raised questions about the reasons for women’s feelings of vulnerability, casting women’s beliefs in doubt. The spectre of the untrustworthy, hysterical, or crazy woman has yet to be dispelled from our culture. And yet, there has been a persistent push to put guns into women’s hands as the only viable form of self-defense. For not only are women untrustworthy, they are physically weak and would otherwise be unable to defend themselves and their families. And defend themselves they must, because we live in a culture where, it is politically unpalatable to acknowledge groups of people as vulnerable—and therefore, individual action must be taken in order for individuals to feel safe. And yet, gun laws—especially Stand Your Ground – are not written in ways that enhance women’s rights to protect themselves legally in the context where they are most vulnerable. Rather, they are written in a way that corroborates the false conflation with the public as being dangerous and the private as being safe—ignoring the realities of women who suffer from intimate violence of all types (Stanko, 1988). In spite of this short-coming, SYG law has been disseminated across the country and legislators in Florida are currently working to make gun laws even more beneficial for those who kill or harm others claiming fear as their only criterion (Light, 2017). What of those who are afraid of someone who lives in their home?
Women’s vulnerability is structural: it is wrapped up in the systems we inhabit—families, institutions of higher education, the media, and the workplace. Violence within families is invisible and incest is unspeakable: it is shrouded in willful ignorance and victims often endure in silence. Rape culture is the U.S.’s historical legacy and it has taken the presidency. Even as women have taken to the streets in protest and mobilize to use Title IX to hold colleges and universities accountable, the war on women is palpable. The persistence of an ideology focused on illegalizing abortion attempts to rob women of their right to privacy and freedom—rights that were won through the courts (in Griswold v. Connecticut, 1965 and Roe v. Wade, 1973), but cannot be accepted, because they allow women the freedom over their own bodies. The recent appointment of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court, who, as a district court judge ruled in favor of companies having the right to refuse to pay for insurance coverage that covered birth control for female employees (Burwell v. Hobby Lobby, 2014), because companies can have religious sensibilities that need to be protected, but women cannot have the right to make their own family planning decisions—unless, of course, the company they work for approves of them having that right. While the fight over women’s right to choose may appear at first blush to be unrelated to larger issues of violence against women, it demonstrates and reinforces a public attitude that considers women to be incapable of making decisions about their own reproductive rights—or control over what happens to their bodies. What of women’s right of refusal?

Maintaining systems of violence and control over women is a way of keeping women dependent and fearful. Failure to prosecute in rape cases, the failure of the public scrutiny of women who step forward as victims, the systemic denial of incest, and the protection of student athletes who are accused of rape at the expense of their victims are all structural ways rape culture and women’s fears of sexual assault are flagged. The prevalence of rape on college
campuses—a space where rates of all other types of crimes are considerably lower than in the rest of the U.S.—demonstrates a culture that allows one type of crime to thrive—a crime that diminishes women’s value and undermines her right to refusal. At a time when women’s college graduation rates exceed men’s, what does it mean that women’s safety is overlooked in spaces of higher education?

The perseverance of widespread tolerance of violence against women raises questions about heterosexual culture, which demands distinct and unequal gender roles and presupposes that women are meant to be available to men. Heterosexual culture is inherent in families—where children are sacrificed to the silencing of their screams and to the unwillingness of experts and lay people to recognize and address the problems that feel impossible—unspeakable. It is inherent in relationships where men feel entitled to use violence to maintain the upper hand. It is inherent in legal systems that force women to deal with violent ex-husbands in order to maintain parental rights, in criminal courts’ reticence to prosecute rape victims’ cases—and when they do, women are put on trial, needing to prove that they are worthy victims, rather than the case being based on the evidence alone. It is from the detritus of this system that the women I met in my study stepped forward demanding tools to make them feel safer navigating this space.

Women’s Voices Speak Back to the Literature

This study builds on the excellent research on women’s self-defense as a form of empowerment, overcoming perceptions of physical limitations, undergoing personal transformations, and sharing stories of survival. By situating women’s decisions to participate in self-defense or to own a gun for personal protection in the context of gender socialization and traumatic experience, I made connections between the ways women experienced vulnerability and the various forms of resistance they took. I also identified various ways women resisted,
acknowledging physical, psychological, epistemological, and connection as categories of resistance. Identifying self-defense classes as sites for epistemological resistance, I situated self-defense training as a context in which women can unlearn their gender socialization and reclaim knowledge of their abilities to fight back physically and verbally. I see this as a compliment to Martha McCaughey’s theory of physical feminism as a way of embodying a new form of physical power.

This research also extends the body of literature on women and guns, contextualizing them in a complex landscape that is generally dominated by male voices and perspectives (see Carlson, 2016 for a model of women’s gun ownership framed by men’s attitudes about guns) and where gun legislation is dominated by a male gaze and a male orientation to fear. There is no other research that interrogates the ambivalent and contradictory perceptions women have of gun ownership while identifying that holding these contradictions is a condition of living in a society that is manipulated by fear at a structural level. At the same time, this research does not foreclose women’s choice to own a gun, but identifies that women need to make difficult choices about personal and family protection in a culture where structural protections and supports are lacking.

Un-doing Epistemological Ignorance

“I think the number one factor that contributes to women being more vulnerable or feeling more vulnerable is their own lack of self-awareness and self-confidence. I know that society puts a lot of things and ideas in our heads, but I think that that’s like the number one is not having the belief in self – that you can take care of yourself.”

– Sunshine (White 40 year-old disabled veteran)

In spite of identifying violence against women as a structural problem, I sought out an understanding of how women chose to defend themselves; thinking first of guns and later of self-
defense (which I view now as a forgotten alternative). I, along with my participants, discovered that what women were learning was more than the physical skills that I assumed we would be learning. We were unlearning our socialization as women by learning that we had the capability to fight back (finding my fighting spirit) and learning that we had the right of refusal (verbal skills/boundary setting). These lessons were difficult for me—and for the women I took classes with, because they forced us to behave in ways that we had learned were “not nice” and we were pushed to set boundaries many of us had never set before. For most of the women I interviewed, it wasn’t the physical fighting skills that they felt would be most useful, but the everyday conflict de-escalation and boundary setting—ways of engaging voices that had been silenced.

Exercising the right of refusal and practicing physical fighting skills helped many of the women I interviewed recognize that they had the ability to take care of themselves—an ability that had been eclipsed by traumatic experiences for many. Reviving awareness of this basic ability was a key benefit of self-defense training for the women I interviewed. Of the women who expressed concerns about self-defense, they were concerns about not being able to remember physical skills, or the desire to have had the training earlier in life. April, who expressed that self-defense training was not empowering for her still wanted her teenage daughter to take self-defense.

Women I interviewed consistently expressed their desire for their children and friends to take self-defense. Lilith and Stacy took self-defense because their mother, who had taken self-defense, felt it was important for them to do. In their class, they were exposed to other women’s traumatic stories, but found it empowering to be able to speak about their fears and know that they could do something about them, having learned to stand up for themselves physically and verbally. The transmission of experiences—both harrowing and empowering—from woman to
woman demonstrates another aspect of breaking silences—knowing you are a part of a community of women and that women have survived, with many (including Sunshine, Sofie, Beth, Michelle) coming back in order to teach, empower, and be a part of the transformation of other women’s lives. Acknowledging other women’s struggles for survival also recognizes that those experiences do not demonstrate weakness or violability, but rather immense power.

[Self-defense organization] has been more than self-defense to me. It's been a lifeline. It's been a tribe, right. *I found my tribe. I found a purpose to utilize the bad for the good.* And that rocks (laughs)! – Sunshine

Additionally, teaching other women how to defend themselves gave purpose to the traumatic experiences some of the women I met had endured.

On the other hand, the prospect of gun ownership was fraught and women’s reflections on the topic elicited their complex personhood, illustrating the difficulty women face when coming up against the idea of using lethal force in order to protect themselves or their families. Kinsey, who had a gun in her car when she was being stalked and threatened felt more scared with a gun than without, and opted to switch to pepper spray—a weapon that would not kill her son if he managed to get a hold of it.

Magpie, who was a gun instructor who avidly supported women’s gun ownership, identified concerns that she held about women who were leaving abusive partners being too vulnerable to be able to use a gun effectively to protect themselves. She cited stories of women who she knew from her days as a lawyer who would not be able to shoot a gun, if needed. And yet, Magpie argued for their right use a gun to protect themselves and wondered about ways of making them safe enough, recognizing that it was not a problem with an easy solution.
Laurie’s concern about being the only one without a gun underscored how the presence of gun violence infiltrates women’s lives—through the media and mass shootings near where we live and through the suicide of a neighbor. The lethality of guns was something that Laurie kept at a theoretical level, distancing herself from ability to kill while wondering if she should have one. On the other hand, she had no qualms about using the physical skills she learned in self-defense class. They were ready when she needed them, without creating a risk to her daughter.

Most of the women I spoke to had experienced intimate forms of violence—violence inflicted by family members and romantic partners. And while they never expressed a concern about hurting someone they loved, it was evident that setting familiar boundaries and de-escalating conflicts were skills that they felt they could and would use. In several workshops, women came back and talked about using de-escalation or setting boundaries at home. Knowing that women are less likely to use lethal force against someone they know, and are at greater risk from people they know, self-defense is a more practical set of skills for women’s self-protection. And yet, women’s gun ownership is important to consider in a cultural context where women’s fear is continuously being flagged and women are still taught to believe they are not strong enough to protect themselves. What if all of the guns were in the hands of men?

Methodological Insights and Limitations

“In my experience I don’t think it [women’s vulnerability] has a lot to do with demographics or race—or geography for that matter, because I was raised upper-middle class in a predominantly white neighborhood and I still was abused. And I went to the military and I was still abused.” – Sunshine

While I initiated this project anticipating that using race as a lens would provide insight into the ways fear manifested for different groups of women. I imagined that White women
would expose their (irrational) fears of being raped by Black men. I was suspicious of White women (and a White woman myself). I did not anticipate that the fear women confided in me would be fear directly related to personal traumatic experiences. I learned about women’s traumatic experiences through the methodological choices I made. Doing autoethnography allowed me not only to learn what the other women were learning in the classes, it put me in a position to hear the ways women shared their stories in safe spaces while I was as vulnerable as any other participant was. I wrestled with my dual role of student and researcher at times and “went native” for short periods of time—losing “Alexis the participant-researcher” to “Alexis the participant/victim/survivor” in my experiences and in my writing. And yet, becoming vulnerable allowed me to understand other women’s experiences in a different—and often-visceral way. Sometimes this derailed me and I cannot know if women were more open with me during interviews because we had already had an intense training experience together prior to our interview, but I suspect they were, because women entrusted me with deeply personal and traumatic stories. I also volunteered to become an assistant self-defense instructor after I had completed my interviews (but while I was still writing my dissertation). One of the reasons I chose to become an assistant instructor was because I felt it was important for me to give back to the self-defense community who give so much to other women and to my research project. I also wanted to learn what the difference was between participating as a student and participating as an instructor. There is a significant difference in these roles as being an instructor allowed me to regain a sense of control that was missing from my participation as a student. I knew where the class was going and I knew, above all, that the suited instructors were never going to hurt me. This helped my ability to understand the perspectives of the instructors I interviewed and how such psychologically difficult work could not only be sustainable, but enriching. It also helped
me to think about other ways self-defense training could be utilized to address violence against women.

When carrying out analysis, I tried to be guided more by what I heard from other women in the classes than from my own experiences, although having participated made me sensitive to instances when other women’s reactions were similar to my own, making me curious about whether these were common themes. It also made me curious about women who had different experiences, including women who admitted to being very aggressive and learning to manage their adrenaline so they could de-escalate conflicts they might have otherwise exacerbated.

Using the Listening Guide helped me focus on the various voices women used in their narratives. Each listening offered something different—with the story establishing a framework for understanding a women’s world-view and the self-voices providing a window into women’s psychological worlds—pulling me into their realm of feeling. Listening again and again for the voices of vulnerability and resistance brought me closer to identifying not only how and when women held these different voices, but also how these voices were connected to one another. Using the Listening Guide pushed me deeper into women’s worlds while providing a scaffolding of life fields around each set of complimentary and contradictory sets of voices. Listening in this way facilitated my developing a way to understand women’s complex personhood around the issue of gun ownership and a way of detecting the relationship between women’s vulnerability and resistance while also holding the contexts of women’s traumatic experiences and socialization to view themselves as vulnerable.

As I recruited participants from self-defense and gun training classes, I only interviewed women who had taken definitive steps to do something about their feelings of vulnerability. The group of women I interviewed likely differ from the general population in their experiences of
sexual and other violent victimization as well as in their perceived need to use physical force as a means of self-protection. It would be important to conduct interviews with women who did not participate in self-defense or gun training in order to gain an understanding of how women who do not choose to protect themselves in these ways differ from those who do. It would also be beneficial to interview women who use other forms of personal protection, for example: carrying pepper spray, owning a dog, carrying a knife, taser, kubaton, or other forms of personal protection that I have not identified. I also did not select a large number of women with concealed carry permits to interview. It would be beneficial to learn how their perceptions of vulnerability and resistance differ from women who grew up with and are comfortable with guns, but do not necessarily want to carry. This research could be enhanced by including the experiences of more women of color and of trans women whose experiences of vulnerability are likely qualitatively different from the women in this study. Finally, it would be beneficial to conduct research with children or teens who participated in self-defense training programs to understand ways of addressing gender socialization prior to adulthood.

Epilogue

“And though she be but little, she is fierce.”

(Helena in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream)

After participating in seven self-defense workshops as a part of my research and recognizing the importance of women learning to defend themselves, I became an assistant instructor for Impact Personal Safety of Colorado (IPSCO), a non-profit organization that holds self-defense trainings for women, children, teens, men, and families. I have assisted in Women’s Basics (a twenty-hour workshop held once a week for six weeks), several one-day workshops (corporate and for a local LGBTQ organization) as well as the Empowered Family course. The
Empowered Family course was developed by IPSCO as Amelia, the founder and “chief inspiration officer,” worked to find ways of raising her young daughters to be empowered and to stand up for themselves. When I interviewed her, she told me that she had become involved in the outreach and education efforts in her daughters’ school when a teacher in the school was identified by homeland security for being involved in the distribution of child pornography. The experience of working with parents who were terrified by the possibility that their children had been harmed by their teacher helped Amelia develop ways for parents to communicate in a more supportive, less fear-based way with their children.

For Amelia, raising daughters to be strong, powerful, and to stand up for themselves was imperative—and she felt her twenty years of involvement with women’s self-defense helped her do that in essential ways.

*I think I would be a complete neurotic mess if I didn’t have Impact. If I couldn’t give that gift to [my daughters]— if I couldn’t empower them in that way. And, you know—I mean my kid just bit a kid at school and there’s a part of me that’s so grateful that she did that.* (clears throat) Because the other kid was pulling her arm, you know. That was her response.

Amelia was keenly aware that raising girls who were willing and able to stand up for themselves might also cultivate behavior that was not socially-acceptable. It was a risk she was willing to take.

The Empowered Family course ran for two days over a weekend with separate, simultaneous sessions for parents and children. I assisted the children’s class. There were ten children in the class ranging from age five to thirteen. We worked on communication skills with the children, teaching them how to stand up to bullies, how to set firm boundaries with familiar
people and how to report to adults what had happened. The children also learned physical skills, including groin kicks, eye strikes, and running to safety. The parents watched and supported their children as they enacted various scenarios with the suited instructor while being coached by the other instructors. Scenarios included: a child standing up to someone bullying someone else (and then telling their parent what happened), a child who was separated from their parents in a public place identified a trusted adult to help them locate their parent, and various scenarios where a trusted adult (a teacher, a babysitter, a coach) tried to convince the child to do something they did not want to do. Each of these was set up so that they child first enacted the scenario and then went to their parent(s) and reported everything that happened. The parents had been trained to ask questions to learn as much about the situation as possible. They also learned not to react in an alarmed, angry, or upset manner, but to stay calm so their reaction did not trigger the child. Finally, they told the child they were proud of them for standing up for themselves and for telling them what happened—and then they asked the child if they would like their help addressing the issue—with an offer of their support. One scenario involved the child taking ski lessons (a likely scenario in Colorado) and the ski instructor insisting on helping the child put their clothes on after going to the bathroom. The child was coached through telling the ski instructor, “No. I don’t need your help. I can do it myself.” The ski instructor, not backing down, insisted the child would take too long. The child repeated their refusal of the unwanted help. The ski instructor then threatened the child with not being allowed to ski for the rest of the day if he or she did not let him help. Throughout the scenario, the instructor coached the child, encouraging them and letting them know they had a right to say no to an adult. At the end of the scenario, the child ran to their parent and recounted what happened. One of the core lessons was to tell an adult and keep telling until someone really listened.
Participating in the Empowered Family class gave me a different perspective on self-defense training as focusing on children’s right of refusal felt like an urgent lesson, especially in light of the seven women I interviewed who were sexually abused as children. Recognizing that children were capable of learning to communicate clear boundaries and to seek out support made me wonder how women’s lives could have been different had they been exposed to this information earlier.

In New Zealand, self-defense training has been made available for children from age five and up on a large scale—with over 10,000 children a year participating in self-defense facilitated by well-trained, designated instructors who come into the schools for this purpose (Jordan & Mossman, 2016). The recognition that violence is a problem in children’s lives and that there are things that can and should be done to address it is a powerful message to the public. While self-defense might still be considered an individual response to a structural-personal form of violence, programs that disseminate teachings widely, starting with children whose socialization is then revised to include positive messages about the use of voice, body, and social resources as forms of resistance against gender-based violence of all kinds turns this seemingly individual form of resistance into a structural one with the possibility to overhaul a culture of violence.
APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT LETTER

**Project Title:** From Targets to Agents: Women’s Perceptions of Their Vulnerability and the Strategies They Use to Resist

**Principal Investigator:** Alexis Halkovic, Graduate Student  
*Psychology Department*  
*The Graduate Center, CUNY*  
*365 5th Ave. 6th floor*  
*New York, NY 10016*  
*347-878-0234*

I am a doctoral student at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York in Critical Social/Personality Psychology. I am conducting research on women’s perceptions of their own vulnerability and the strategies they use to make themselves feel safer, specifically focusing on participation in self defense training.

I am recruiting women to participate in individual interviews about their motivations for participating in self defense training and their feelings about vulnerability. Interviews will be scheduled to take place in an agreed-upon location and will last an hour to an hour and a half. I will take steps to ensure the confidentiality and accuracy of information shared during interviews. Interview participants must be 18 or older and will be compensated $25.

Please contact me if you are interested in participating in an interview at: ahalkovic@gradcenter.cuny.edu

Sincere regards,

Alexis Halkovic
APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Graduate Center
Department of Psychology

CONSENT TO PARTICPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

Project Title: From Targets to Agents: Women’s Perceptions of Their Vulnerability and the Strategies They Use to Resist

IRB Protocol number: 2015-0098

Principal Investigator: Alexis Halkovic, Graduate Student
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Faculty Advisor: Rod Watts, Professor
The Graduate Center, CUNY Psychology Department
365 5th Ave. 6th floor
New York, NY 10016
347-828-1234

Site where study is to be conducted: Lafayette Public Library, Lafayette, Colorado, the participant’s home, or other agreed-upon location.

Introduction/Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study. The study is conducted under the direction of Alexis Halkovic of The Graduate Center, CUNY. The purpose of this research study is to learn about strategies women use to make themselves feel safer. The results of this study will expand our understanding of women’s responses to feelings of vulnerability.

Procedures: Approximately 45 individuals are expected to participate in this study. Each woman will participate in one interview that will last one to one and a half hours. This interview will be recorded to ensure the accuracy of what participants discuss. Participants have the option to review the recording and to erase segments. Each session will take place at The Lafayette Public library, 775 W Baseline Rd, Lafayette, CO 80026, at the participant’s residence, or another agreed upon location based on the participant’s preference.

Possible Discomforts and Risks: Your participation in this study may involve feeling uncomfortable related to recounting past experiences. If you become distressed as a result of anything you discussed in this study, you may speak to Rebecca Bradley, Licensed Professional...
Counselor, by calling (720) 515-5058. This service is available on a sliding scale with the initial consult being offered free of charge.

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits. However, the information obtained from this study has the potential to add to our understanding of strategies women use to make themselves feel safer.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may decide not to participate without prejudice, penalty, or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You are not obligated to answer any questions you are not comfortable with and will not be penalized if you chose not to answer a question or if you decide to terminate the interview. If you later decide you do not wish to have your information included in this study, please contact Alexis Halkovic to inform her.

**Compensation:** For your participation in this study you will receive $25 in cash after completion of the interview, regardless of whether you skip questions or decide not to complete the interview.

**Confidentiality:** This interview will be audio recorded. To protect your confidentiality, you will select a pseudonym prior to the interview. Only your pseudonym will be associated with the information you provide after that. Any information regarding illegal activity is treated as confidential and will not be reported to any authorities. Consent forms will be stored in a locked file cabinet in Rod Watts’ office at The Graduate Center. Interviews will be transcribed with no identifying information and stored in password-protected files on Alexis’s home computer. Collected data will be stored for three years after the completion of the project. Collected data will be accessible to Alexis Halkovic, Rod Watts, and the CUNY IRB members and staff. Any information from interviews that appears in publications will be attributable only to the pseudonym and any identifying information will be changed to protect your confidentiality.

**Contact Questions/Persons:** If you have any questions about the research now or in the future, you should contact the Principal Investigator, Alexis Halkovic ahalkovic@gradcenter.cuny.edu or 347-878-0234. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or you have comments or concerns that you would like to discuss with someone other than the researchers, please call the CUNY Research Compliance Administrator at 646-664-8918. Alternately, you can write to:

CUNY Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research
Attn: Research Compliance Administrator
205 East 42nd Street
New York, NY 10017

**Statement of Consent:**
“I have read the above description of this research and I understand it. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that the principal investigator of the research study will also answer any future questions that I may have. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By signing this form I have not waived any of my legal rights to which I would otherwise be entitled. I certify that I am 18 years of age or older. I will be given a copy of this statement.”
I give permission to the researcher to make an audio recording of this interview: ___Yes  ___No

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<th>Printed Name of Participant</th>
<th>Signature of Participant</th>
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<td>Question</td>
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<td>Growing up, did you have a sense that you had the ability to defend yourself? OR What would you say are the messages that you grew up with in terms of your own ability to defend yourself (or women’s ability to defend themselves)? How were those messages communicated to you?</td>
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<td>What messages did you hear while you were growing up about vulnerability? What was the context in which you heard these?</td>
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<td>What was your involvement with women’s self defense prior to your involvement with (organization)?</td>
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<td>Is there a reason/occurrence that lead to your deciding to take [gun/self defense] training? What did you feel you most needed to defend yourself or others against?</td>
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<td>Can you describe what it was like the first time you participated in self-defense training? How did you feel?</td>
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<td>What part of the training was most important to you (memorable to you)?</td>
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<td>Can you remember if anything changed in your life after you participated in women’s self-defense training for the first time? Did your perception of things around you change? Did your behavior change? Tell me about the change(s).</td>
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<td>Can you tell me about how you first got involved in teaching [self-defense for women/personal protection in the home]? What is it that specifically drew you to devoting so much of your time to training women?</td>
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<td>What do you find most personally gratifying about training women in self defense? (what do you feel that YOU get out of it)?</td>
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<td>What would you say is most important about women’s participation in self defense training?</td>
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<td>Has there been a time when you personally have felt vulnerable to a physical assault? Can you tell me more about it?</td>
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<td>What do you personally get out of teaching women self defense/how you use handguns?</td>
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<td>After participating in self-defense training, how have your feelings of vulnerability and safety changed? What about feelings of power?</td>
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<td>Can you describe a real-life situation in which you have used or might use your self-defense training? A situation in which one of your students has reported to you that they used the training you provided? What was it like hearing about that?</td>
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<td>[Outside of your work as a police officer] have you ever been in a situation where you wanted a gun?</td>
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<td>When was the first time you had a gun of your own? Can you tell me the story of how you got your first gun? What was your response when you got your first gun?</td>
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<td>Did you grow up with guns in your family? What would you say is the importance of growing up with/out guns in your household to how you think about guns today?</td>
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<td>What factors do you think contribute to women’s vulnerability in general?</td>
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Brown, B. (2012). Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead. Penguin.


