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Title: Packing Heat : On the Affective Incorporation of Firearms

Year: 2024

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Saarinen, J. A. (2024). Packing Heat : On the Affective Incorporation of Firearms. *Topoi: an International Review of Philosophy*, Early online. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-023-09997-0>



Packing Heat: On the Affective Incorporation of Firearms

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Accepted: 12 December 2023
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Abstract

For countless citizens in the United States, guns are objects of personal attachment that provide strong feelings of power and security. I argue that a key reason for such tight affective bonds is that, under certain conditions, guns become integrated into their owners' embodied experience. To flesh out this view, I explain (a) how firearms, as material artifacts, can become a part of the feeling body and (b) how this integration impacts one's experience of self, others, and the world. I first apply the distinction between *body-incorporation* and *body-extension* by De Preester and Tsakiris (Phenomenol Cogn Sci 8:307–319, 2009) to delineate how guns can (and cannot) be integrated into lived bodies. I then introduce Ihde's (Technology and the life world: from garden to earth, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1990) notion of *embodiment relations* to elaborate on the key experiential features of technologically extended bodies and complement the previous, sensorimotor-centric accounts of bodily extension with Colombetti's (Phenomenology for the twenty-first century, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016) concept of *affective incorporation*. With this theoretical framework in place, I proceed to examine the motives and affective dynamics involved in the incorporation of guns, the practices by which this incorporation is constituted, and its impact on gun carriers' habitual comportment. In doing so, I identify two notable contradictions: first, between a desire for the *power* afforded by firearms and the *lack* in oneself that this power implies, and second, between one's *seemingly beneficial* feelings of confidence/safety and *potentially harmful* transformations in one's perceptions of threat. To conclude, I discuss how my analysis challenges current theorization on technologically extended bodies and consider its relevance for ongoing debates over gun policy.

Keywords Gun carrying · Body-extension · Body-incorporation · Embodiment relations · Affective incorporation · Prostheses · Feelings of safety and power

1 Introduction

Guns hold great sway over many people, perhaps more so in the United States than anywhere else in the world. According to the Small Arms Survey from 2018, there were up to 393,347,000 civilian-held guns in the U.S., which translates to roughly 120.5 firearms per 100 persons. This ranks the U.S. at No. 1 globally and makes it the only country in the world with more civilian-owned guns than citizens. To add to that, legislation for carrying a handgun is liberal nationwide: all states allow concealed carry either with a permit or, in so-called Constitutional Carry states, without one, and

open carry is likewise legal in 45 states. Between 1999 and 2022, the number of concealed handgun permits increased exponentially from 2.7 to 22 million (Lott 2022)—a trend that is only expected to continue. It is thus no exaggeration to suggest that “for millions of Americans, guns and gun ownership are a synecdoche for American-ness itself” (Blanchfield 2019, p. 197; see Haag 2016; Carlson et al. 2019, for further analyses).

Needless to say, any society awash with civilian firearms is likely to take a heavy toll on its members. The United States is no exception. In 2021, the most recent year for which complete data are available, 48,830 people died from gun-related injuries and in mid-June 2023 there have already been 272 mass shootings for the year, leaving 351 people dead and 1032 wounded (Gun Violence Archive 2023; Pew Research Center 2023). These numbers are nothing short of staggering, yet there is no agreement in sight over the nature of the problem or the policies to alleviate it.

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In this article, I will discuss the contested issue of gun carrying by spotlighting an oft-overlooked yet crucial psychological fact. Simply put, for countless ordinary U.S. citizens, guns are objects of *deep personal significance and attachment*. A recent survey by the Pew Research Center (2017) suggests as much, revealing that approximately three-quarters of gun owners “could never see themselves not owning a gun”, while half said that “owning a gun is important to their overall identity”. To explain their personal commitment to guns, dedicated owners tend to invoke ‘hard facts’ about crime rates, constitutional rights, and the state’s inability to provide sufficient protection. However, while some such reasons might be more compelling than others, rationalized beliefs and attitudes can only explain part of what is at stake—namely, why guns *matter* so much.

This is because gun devotion is equally rooted in *feeling*, if not more so. Consider the following testimony from one enthusiastic owner:

When you carry your weapon, you don’t feel intimidated, you feel empowered. In a way that’s tough to explain, the fact that you’re so much less dependent on the state for your personal security and safety makes you feel more ‘free’ than you’ve ever felt before. You feel a sense of burning conviction that you, your family and your community are safer and freer because you own and carry a gun (French 2018).

If such tight affective bonds with guns are relatively ordinary, two pressing questions naturally emerge: (1) Why and how are these bonds forged, and how do they engender valued feelings of power and security? (2) How do the specified feelings relate to the real-world effects of gun carrying, especially as these pertain to one’s capabilities as a habitual carrier and the safety of one’s surroundings?

To address these issues, I will focus on a lesser-examined phenomenon in gun studies, namely, the *integration of artifacts into the feeling body*. From this perspective, I will argue that a key reason for deep attachments to guns is that, under certain conditions, they become integral parts of their owners’ embodied experience and, in so doing, disclose a distinct kind of world in which to interact with others. Moreover, I suggest that the bodily integration of firearms is liable to involve various affective motives, dynamics and consequences that conflict with (or at least complicate) gun carriers’ self-described feelings of power and security.

The proposed approach is not entirely unprecedented. For example, in his article *Gun concealment, display, and other magical habits of the body* (Springwood 2014), anthropologist Charles Springwood asks, “How are gun owners *transformed* by the corporeal relationships they have with their weapons?” and urges us to investigate this relationship as “a mode of *affective embodiment*, or embodied habit, in which the gun so easily merges with its owner” (p. 453, my italics).

He refers specifically to the ongoing trend in philosophy of mind that scrutinizes the blurring of bodies, brains, and objects—a framework where “instruments such as smart-phones, watches, pencils, and even guns” are commonly considered to “become integrated with the mind” (p. 463). Ultimately, however, this is about as far as Springwood’s discussion of bodily integration goes: he is content to conclude, rather simply, “that the performance of wearing a gun extends a gun-toter’s body, his senses, and her mind(s)” (p. 463).¹ It is therefore still open *how* and in *what* sense(s) of ‘extension’ guns can become a part of their owners’ habitual, embodied experience, and what this entails for gun carriers’ affectively constituted world-relations. To fill in these gaps, I submit the issue of gun-integrating bodies to closer and more systematic philosophical scrutiny.

The aim of the article, then, is to provide a more thorough explication of (a) how firearms, as material artifacts, can become a part of one’s feeling body, and (b) how this integration impacts one’s experience of self, others, and the world. I begin by combining elements from three existing accounts of bodily integration to establish the theoretical framework of my analysis. In Part 2, I use the distinction between *body-incorporation* and *body-extension* (De Preester and Tsakiris 2009) to distinguish between restrictive and permissive conceptions of bodily integration and to delineate, accordingly, how guns can (and cannot) be integrated into lived bodies. Then, in Part 3, I employ the notions of *embodiment relations* (Ihde 1990) and *affective incorporation* (Colombetti 2016) to elaborate further on the *experiential* aspects of technologically extended feeling bodies. Finally, in Part 4, I examine some of the key motives and affective dynamics involved in the incorporation of guns, the (normative) practices by which this incorporation is constituted, and its impact on gun carriers’ habitual comportment. In doing so, I highlight two notable contradictions: first, between a desire for the *power* afforded by firearms and the *lack* in oneself that this power necessarily implies, and second, between one’s *seemingly beneficial* feelings of control/safety and *potentially harmful* changes in one’s perceptions of danger. To conclude, I discuss how my analysis

¹ This statement can be broken down into three claims, each of which could hold true independently, viz., that guns can extend certain (1) motor abilities, (2) perceptual capacities, or (3) mental states and processes (such as thoughts and emotions). It is also worth noting that Springwood appears to conflate the notions of phenomenological and ontological extension, and thus does not differentiate between cases where one’s body/mind is *experienced* as extended and cases where one’s body/mind extends to incorporate extra-organismic elements into its *constitutive* make-up. To be fair, this issue (and its ambiguous presentation) is no more than a side note in Springwood’s study, and as such does not detract from its value in illuminating various bodily-habitual and symbolic-cultural factors behind the “enchanted experience” of gun ownership.

advances current theorization on the relations between technology, embodiment, and mind. I also briefly consider its relevance for ongoing debates about gun policies. Overall, by providing a critical and conceptually consistent account of the embodied-affective nature of gun carrying, the article advances research in philosophy of technology, gun studies, and bodily phenomenology alike.

2 Embodiment and the Bodily Integration of Objects

‘Embodiment’ means that our perceptions, thoughts, and feelings are fundamentally rooted in our bodily capacities and activities. To clarify how this is so, phenomenologists distinguish between the *object body* and the *lived body*.² As ‘object’, the body is thematized as just another physical thing in the world. Phrased slightly differently, *having* a body means that it can be observed and analyzed from an external, third-person point of view—for example, as having a certain shape and executing certain movements. As something that is ‘lived’, the body is in turn given as the subjective, first-person center of experience. In this sense, *being* a body implies that the world is experientially disclosed through and structured by one’s sensorimotor capacities. In the following, I examine the body primarily as *lived*, and especially as *that through which* the extra-bodily world is experienced. From this broadly embodied perspective, I eventually zero in on the ways in which tight attachments between guns and bodies structure individual affectivity.

My analysis builds on the basic fact that, as a species, we humans have a flexible sense of bodily boundaries and a strong propensity to engineer our environments to various ends. Indeed, in the broadest sense of the term, we have evolved into *prosthetic-users* supreme, adroitly employing all manner of tools, technologies and environmental resources to support our mental and physical capacities. As Helena De Preester and Manos Tsakiris sum it up, “a human stripped from everything prosthetic-like is a human stripped from culture” (2009, p. 308). However, the two authors also criticize existing analyses of embodiment for failing to clearly distinguish between experiences of *mere* tool-use and prosthetic-use *proper*—especially if prostheses are regarded as objects that replace missing or lost body parts, and hence (are intended to) become a true part of the body. Faced with this ambiguity, it is necessary to ask: What

kinds of integrative relations *can there be* between lived bodies and non-living objects such as tools and artifacts?

De Preester and Tsakiris (2009) address this issue by identifying two basic integrative relations, namely *body-extension* and *body-incorporation* (see also De Preester 2011). In relations of extension, objects integrate with the body to alter its sensorimotor and body schematic capacities, but they do so *without* effecting changes in *body ownership*, i.e., in the feeling of what truly belongs to one’s body and what does not. Consider how the knife handling of professional chefs extends their bodily know-how to include effortless slicing, dicing, and chopping. As many have noted, this type of habitual tool use typically involves the receding of the tool into a pre-reflective sensorimotor realm where, although available to consciousness, it is no longer explicitly attended to, and thus becomes experientially (quasi-) *transparent* (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1945; Ihde 1990, pp. 72–75). In De Preester’s and Tsakiris’ view, such entrenchment and transparency of objects does not suffice for their incorporation proper (De Preester and Tsakiris 2009, p. 310). Case in point, putting down the knife will not result in the feeling of losing an actual part of one’s body, no matter how deeply its use has become ingrained into bodily habit.

If, on the other hand, genuine body-incorporation entails an experiential shift in body ownership, what explains this change? De Preester and Tsakiris (2009, p. 313) argue that one’s sense of body ownership emerges from the testing-for-fit of current bottom-up sensory stimuli against a pre-existing *body model*: a stable and largely innate matrix of the body that normatively constrains what can count as a part of one’s body and what cannot. As such, the body model is considerably more resistant to alterations than our more fluid sensorimotor and body schematic processes (which, as suggested, account for instances of extension). From this perspective, the *ideal* result of habitual prosthetic-use would be incorporation, with the prosthesis coming to feel like an authentic part of one’s body. However, as many prosthetic-users have testified, the artificial limb may end up feeling more like a tool that merely approximates some of the functions of the missing limb (p. 317). In that case, the prosthesis only serves to *extend* the body.

Interestingly, body-extension and body-incorporation have been suggested to exhibit relatively distinctive phenomenological profiles. According to De Preester and Tsakiris, extension is more likely to involve a sense of *increased* or *augmented* powers, i.e., a feeling of something having been *added* to one’s prior capacities (De Preester and Tsakiris 2009, p. 317). When the integration comes loose, the felt gains dissipate accordingly: chefs without knives do not feel capable of chopping carrots with their bare hands. Incorporation, in turn, is typically characterized by a sense of *completion*. Seeing as the object (or prosthetic) substitutes for something that was already expected, by virtue of the body

² This distinction draws primarily from differentiations made by Edmund Husserl between *Körper* and *Leib* (Husserl 1989) and by Maurice Merleau-Ponty between *corps objectif* and *corps propre* (Merleau-Ponty 1945).

model, to belong to the body in the first place, its integration gives rise to a feeling of *wholeness* (p. 317). Decoupling from the object accordingly elicits a sense of something essential missing from one's body, i.e., a fundamental feeling of *lack*. That said, De Preester and Tsakiris grant that the extension/addition and incorporation/completion pairings are not necessarily as experientially distinct as implied—an important observation that I will return to shortly vis-à-vis gun carrying.

Overall, then, De Preester and Tsakiris' incorporation-extension model allows for both restrictive and permissive conceptions of the integration of non-living objects into lived bodies. From the restrictive point of view, it becomes clear that *guns are rarely, if ever, incorporated into the body model*. This means that regardless of the depth or significance of individuals' attachments to their firearms, it is highly improbable for these to replace innately represented parts of the body. This would require guns to function as prostheses in the strict sense of the term and to therefore elicit a proper sense of body ownership—which, to all intents and purposes, they do not. Gun owners may of course *speak* of their guns as parts of their bodies, but when the gun is set aside, there is unlikely to be a feeling of one's body part literally going missing. Hence, to analyze guns vis-à-vis embodiment, we must essentially default to the more inclusive notion of bodily *extension*, i.e., to the integration of objects into the body in ways that alter its sensorimotor and affective capacities. I will next pursue this permissive, phenomenologically accentuated view of bodily integration and establish it as the basic framework for my analysis of gun carrying.

3 Embodiment Relations and Affective Incorporation

Don Ihde's postphenomenological work on human-technology relations is crucial to understanding the ways in which *experiencing* is transformed through the integration of artifacts into the lived body. In what Ihde calls "embodiment relations", technologies are *taken into* experiencing in a very specific way: the individual comes to perceive the world *through* the technology while that technology *reflexively transforms* their perceptual-bodily capacities (Ihde 1990, p. 72). For example, in wearing glasses, the optical technology *both* becomes *that through which* things are seen in a specific way *and* withdraws from experience into "maximal transparency" (p. 72). To denote the integration of the artifact into that which, as a whole, is intentionally directed towards the world, Ihde uses the shorthand: (*I-artifact*)-world.

There are three key features of embodiment relations that will inform my upcoming analysis of gun carrying (in Part 3). Firstly, as Ihde states, embodying activities "must

be learned or, in phenomenological terms, constituted" (Ihde 1990, p. 73). While some technologies (like glasses) are readily integrated into one's world-experience, others (like guns) require much more time and effort. Second, embodiment relations involve various wishes, desires and satisfactions. According to Ihde, at heart we desire both the *power* afforded by technology and "total *transparency*, total embodiment"—in other words, "for the technology to truly 'become me'" (p. 75). Viewed in this light, the desire to embody technology is essentially *contradictory*: "the user wants what the technology gives but does not want the *limits*, the transformations that a technologically extended body implies" (p. 76, my italics). I will henceforth refer to this tension as the *power/deficiency dynamic* of extension and soon demonstrate its pivotal role in gun carrying, as well. The third important feature of embodiment relations is that they "simultaneously magnify or amplify and reduce or place aside what is experienced through them" (p. 76). To cite Ihde's example, the moon looks very different when viewed with a telescope than with the naked eye: the heavens are screened out while the moon's craters become salient in visual experience (p. 76). This magnification/reduction structure also changes dramatically and in a markedly affective way, when guns are integrated into the body.³

To grasp the experience of bodily integration more fully, Ihde's account of embodiment relations can be complemented with one more theoretical piece. As Giovanna Colombetti (2016) has emphasized, it is not only the sensorimotor body but also the *affective body* that can undergo processes of integration. This is a much-needed addition and I will use it to round out the theoretical framework of my analysis. However, it should first be noted that, whereas De Preester and Tsakiris reserve the term 'incorporation' exclusively for those rare integrations that involve changes in body ownership, Colombetti's use of 'incorporation' is conceptually closer to De Preester's and Tsakiris' more permissive notion of 'extension'. From here on I will use 'incorporation' in the broader, more liberal sense suggested by Colombetti, for the simple reason that integrating guns into bodies excludes incorporation in the restricted, body model-specific sense defined by De Preester and Tsakiris. Thus, when I discuss incorporation, I mean the general "capacity of the body to take something else into itself" (Colombetti

³ A reviewer suggests that any discussion of gun carrying is incomplete without mentioning Bruno Latour's account of how guns transform agency (Latour 1999, pp. 174–215). There is no denying the originality or significance of his view. However, whereas I follow Ihde in emphasizing *phenomenological embodiment* vis-à-vis technology, Latour's actor-network theory is more *semiotically* and *textually* oriented (see Ihde 2015, for a concise comparison of the two approaches). Simply put, my focus is exclusively on bodily incorporation, to which Latour's account contributes little.

2016, p. 230). Likewise, I will use the term ‘prosthetics’ in its looser sense to refer to the variety of tools and technologies we humans incorporate to enhance our capabilities and actions, guns included.

To build her case for affective incorporation, Colombetti first draws on Merleau-Ponty (1945) to distinguish between *habit-* and *object-incorporation* (Colombetti 2016, p. 232). The former refers to the acquisition of a variety of bodily habits and skills that are enacted spontaneously and mostly unreflectively (such as walking), whereas the latter designates the integration of material objects into the body schema (such as the blind person’s use of the white cane).⁴ Colombetti describes the relations between these two forms of incorporation as follows: “Object-incorporation can be seen as a special form of habit-incorporation; it refers to cases in which our body schema has acquired specific habits by integrating material objects into itself” (p. 234). Importantly, in object-incorporation the integrated tool or artifact is not usually thematized as an object of experience. Rather, as with the blind person’s cane and the chef’s knife, it is *that through which* the world and its objects are disclosed in this way or that, for example, as filled with clutter or sliceable into *julienne*. As Colombetti, following Ihde, encapsulates it, “the artifact is part of that which does the intending” (p. 235).

Colombetti then transposes the basic distinction between habit- and object-incorporation to the domain of affectivity, where ‘affectivity’ is conceived broadly as the capacity or condition of being affected by something, and thus includes, for instance, emotional episodes, moods, and motivational states. Affective habit-incorporation often manifests as a particular bodily *affective style*, which, among other things, consists of spontaneous yet regulable communicative gestures. (Colombetti 2016, pp. 236–237.) Affective object-incorporation, in turn, denotes the bodily integration of an object so that the world is disclosed in a certain affective light. Here, Colombetti discusses two equally fit and experienced hikers, one of whom is wearing sturdy hiking boots while the other has on flimsy tennis shoes. As they begin descending a steep mountain path, the savvily booted hiker feels confident, which, accordingly, makes the path appear safe and manageable. The insufficiently equipped hiker, however, feels insecure and the path shows up as treacherously dangerous. For both, the shoes fade into the background of awareness and become part of that through which the surroundings attain the affective coloring that they do. As Colombetti sums it up, “we have here a case where

two different affective worlds are ‘projected’ by two subjects through the integration of different material objects into their body schema” (p. 240). The hikers’ affective states also involve an implicit sense of available *action possibilities*, especially in relation to the path they are treading. This underlines the fact that the feeling body is inextricably tied to the sensorimotor body: how one feels impacts one’s experience of the kinds of actions that the world affords.

With these conceptual tools in hand, we can now make a second, more specific and substantial supposition about gun-integrating bodies: *Guns can become incorporated into the feeling body in ways that significantly impact how one’s self, surroundings, and other people are experienced*. Importantly, this incorporation may come in *degrees*, from extremely tight habitual attachments to looser and more temporary bonds, which in turn depends on a variety of factors, including the primary purpose of ownership (hunting, personal protection, hobby, etc.), how regularly the gun is carried on one’s body, and how often it is handled. I will be concerned only with owners who carry their guns habitually and primarily for protective purposes. The following descriptions provide a picture of the group I have in mind:

One man with a concealed-carry permit likened his gun to a wallet: “You know, anytime you’re without, you never know when you’re going to need [a gun]. So it’s best practice to have it at all times... Just like carrying a wallet.” Others told me they felt “naked” without a gun (Carlson, 2015).

“I always have a gun on my person when I’m at home,” explained a 47-year-old white male suburban informant: “Hell, I don’t even take a shit without my gun. If I’m mowing my lawn or taking out the garbage unarmed, I feel like my lucky charm is missing” (Springwood 2014, p. 460).

In light of the above, guns can also be seen as deeply entrenched *affective artifacts*, i.e., as artificial objects that have the capacity to alter an agent’s affective condition (Piredda 2020, p. 549). Giulia Piredda suggests that the most interesting affective artifacts are those which produce their effects on a regular basis, do so reliably, and play a significant role in defining one’s sense of self (p. 554). As we shall see below, an affectively incorporated firearm can fulfill each of these criteria—but not without significant ramifications.

4 The Affective Incorporation of Guns and the Experiential World of the Armed

In this part, I examine (4.1) the key motives and affective dynamics involved in the incorporation of guns, (4.2) the (normative) practices by which this incorporation is established, and (4.3) the impact it can have on gun carriers’

⁴ Another terminological clarification: in Colombetti’s Merleau-Pontyan use, ‘body schema’ refers generally to “the body experienced not as an object but as a subject of awareness” (Colombetti 2016, p. 232), i.e., to the *lived body*, as specified above.

habitual comportment. In doing so, I identify two contradictions in incorporation: first, between one's desire for the *power* afforded by the gun and the *lack* in oneself that this power implies, and second, between one's *seemingly beneficial* feelings of control/safety and *potentially harmful* changes in one's perceptions of danger.

4.1 The Motives and Affective Dynamics of Incorporation

There are multiple possible reasons for buying and carrying a gun. As regards affectivity, a much-researched issue has been whether gun ownership is motivated by feelings of threat—where the source of threat can be perceived as specific and proximal, like getting mugged in one's own neighborhood, or more diffuse and distal, like 'big government' impinging on one's rights and freedoms (Cao et al. 1997; Hauser & Kleck 2013; Stroebe et al. 2017; Pierre 2019; Warner & Thrash 2020; Vegtel & Haider-Markel 2022). While some studies indicate that the relations between threat construal and gun ownership are complex, *protective* gun carrying is by definition fueled by a concern for safety. But what, beyond merely acquiring a gun out of fear, could motivate its subsequent bodily integration? Might incorporation likewise satisfy certain wants and desires?

In *Prosthetic gods: On the semiotic and affective landscape of firearms in American politics* (Blanchfield 2019), Patrick Blanchfield presents a compelling account of the psychological power of guns. In a view that aligns nicely with the one being proposed here, he considers guns "awe-inspiring" prostheses that "empower and extend a human's ability to interact with their environment" (p. 200). Indeed, firearms substantially increase both the range and force of projectiles under our immediate bodily control. While a trained individual can throw a ball several hundred meters at around 145 km/h, anyone wielding a handgun can effortlessly fire a bullet that can traverse several kilometers at over 1000 km/h. It is only natural, then, for firearms to "generate powerful feelings and fantasies of overcoming bodily limitations and discovering new modes of confidence and strength" (p. 201). Owing to this potency, I believe there may be an equally strong desire to transform the gun-as-prosthesis into a *permanent fixture* of one's embodied being—that is, to incorporate it as extensively as possible or, echoing Ihde, to have it truly 'become me'. This desire might not be fully conscious, but it can nonetheless drive the process of bodily integration onward. And as the gun becomes entrenched into bodily habit, both self and world begin to feel decisively different. As one shooting instructor sums it up: "Hell yeah I'm a different animal when I'm packing. I'm stronger. My environment is safer. I feel ready for anything." (Springwood 2014, p. 456.) Clearly, then,

incorporating a gun can be experienced as physically and psychologically advantageous.

However, as alluded to earlier, there is a flip side to this seemingly beneficial extension. As Blanchfield points out, "prosthetic tools, precisely by empowering those who wield them, also implicate a *lack* in the wielder's capacities without them" (Blanchfield 2019, p. 202, my italics). This reflects the fundamentally contradictory nature of human technology-relations pointed out by Ihde, or—as I have rephrased it—the *power/deficiency* dynamic of extension. Simply put, the gun carrier desires the *power* afforded by the technology without owning up to the inherent *shortcomings* implied by its use. Blanchfield, more than Ihde, emphasizes the psychodynamic and affective features of this tension, and in so doing introduces a new factor into the equation. He submits that, for someone suffering from profound feelings of insufficiency, vulnerability, or loss, a firearm can serve as an all-important *compensatory* device (p. 203). In this case, incorporation both *counteracts* an inadequate capacity to feel as one desires to feel and *conceals* personal deficiencies that threaten one's overall sense of integrity. By plugging the gap between unbearable lack and desired efficacy, the integrated firearm thus serves defensive and expansive psychological purposes simultaneously. However, the denial accompanying the increased powers can never be total: one's limits and weaknesses, while suppressed and alleviated, persist as an ineradicable part of the overall incorporation.

At this point it is worth revisiting De Preester and Tsakiris (2009) discussion of feelings of *addition* and *completion*, which, as suggested, might not be as clearly separable as first assumed. Ostensibly, the incorporation of a firearm might not entail much more than a varying sense of increased or enhanced capacities to act in (and on) the world. With their guns, habitual carriers often report feeling empowered, emancipated, calmer, and more ready; without, they feel naked, unprepared, uncomfortable, and prone to misfortune. But if we acknowledge that incorporation can simultaneously serve to counteract a deeper sense of lack in one's self, as Blanchfield proposes, then feelings of wholeness become just as intelligible and expectable in gun carrying. Overall, then, the elicited affects can be said to mirror the basic *power/deficiency* dynamic of incorporation: the gun enables its owner to feel more capable and confident (due to effective bodily extension) *and* more whole (due to successful compensation for, and suppression of, the lack that motivates the extension).

Clearly, this puts habitual gun carriers in a precarious position. The more they depend on their firearms for affective support, and the deeper these prostheses are entrenched into their bodily habit, the more threatening the prospect of separation becomes. As Blanchfield remarks, losing access to highly relied-upon objects typically entails "sliding from relative control and poise to uncertainty and clumsiness,

from relative confidence and empowerment to anxiety and vulnerability” (Blanchfield 2019, p. 207; see also Piredda 2020, p. 7). Put in terms of the *power/deficiency* dynamic, gun carriers risk losing access to the beneficial affective concomitants of their gun-augmented capacities, such as feelings of confidence, efficacy and control. But dispossession also poses another, more momentous risk: it threatens to dredge up that which has been relatively successfully repressed in incorporation, namely, a disturbing lack at the core of one’s self. Hence,

[t]he underwriting threat is that, stripped of prostheses with which their sense of personal identity and potency has become so bound up, those who have depended on them will not just be made intolerably vulnerable, but *humiliatingly exposed as profoundly insufficient* as well. (Blanchfield 2019, p. 203, my italics.)

If ever there was reason to stick to one’s guns, this is it. The degree of the established bond—the fact that it matters, *deeply*—also explains why potential infringement or curtailment of gun rights tends to elicit such strong feelings. As Blanchfield sums it up, “the sheer intensity of visceral, affective investment many Americans can display towards their guns can strike novice observers as shocking, but, in terms of the full emotional stakes of their prosthetic function, these feelings make abundant sense” (Blanchfield 2019, p. 203).

4.2 The Process of Incorporation

I have now discussed some of the motives and affective dynamics behind the incorporation of guns. But how, on a more practical level, is the integration achieved? One possible important route, I suggest, is participation in training classes that aim to establish a firm gun carrying habit. My main source here is a study by sociologists Shapira and Simon (2018) that draws from 33 months of fieldwork at firearms schools and 46 interviews with gun owners to illuminate how gun carrying becomes an everyday, embodied practice. Their research sample, like my group of interest, consists specifically of owners who have acquired their guns for self-defense, have a carrying license, regularly carry a loaded gun on their body, and are actively engaged in gun culture (p. 6).

Shapira and Simon’s main claim is that the need to own and carry a gun is something that is learned.⁵ In the inspected training program, this need is jointly constituted by (a) one’s *thoughts* and *beliefs* about guns and (b) one’s

bodily experiences of holding, shooting, and carrying them (Shapira and Simon 2018, pp. 4–5). The program accordingly seeks to inculcate in its participants a cognitive-evaluative framework within which the embodied skills and habits essential to gun ownership become intelligible and take root. A growing sense of comfort and mastery is in turn expected to reinforce the attitudes undergirding one’s identity as a responsible and committed gun carrier. So, to begin with, one must (learn to) think that owning a gun is reasonable—and indeed necessary. More often than not, the operative belief here is that the world is a dangerous place (Blanchfield 2016; Shapira and Simon 2018, pp. 7–9).⁶ Hence, the logic goes, if one chooses *not* to carry a gun, one willingly puts oneself at risk. This attitude is further buttressed by the idea that others, and society in general, cannot be relied upon to provide safety, either for oneself or for one’s loved ones. David French, a regular gun carrier, justifies this mentality as follows:

[I]t strikes me that many millions of Americans don’t truly understand how “gun culture” is built, how the process of first becoming a gun owner, then a concealed-carrier, changes your life. It starts with the consciousness of a threat. (...) With the consciousness of a threat comes the awareness of a vulnerability. The police can only protect the people you love in the most limited of circumstances (...) You’re surprised at how much safer you feel with the gun in the house. Next, you realize that you want that sense of safety to travel with you. So you sign up for a concealed-carry permit class.” (French 2018.)

What’s more, from this perspective the decision to carry a gun is not only shrewd but also *morally virtuous* (Shapira and Simon 2018, pp. 12–14). Here the reasoning is that, since there will always be ‘bad guys’ with guns, there also better be ‘good guys’ who are armed and willing to protect the lives of the innocent, to do the morally upright thing.

As the need to carry is instilled, trainees are strongly encouraged to think of their guns as safety-promoting *tools* rather than dangerous *weapons* designed to kill or to harm others (Shapira and Simon 2018, pp. 10–11). This attitude finds pithy expression in the slogan popularized by the National Rifle Association (NRA), “guns don’t kill people, people do”, which makes it clear that the person holding the gun ultimately decides whether it is employed for the good or the bad. Simon and Shapira note that the systematic

⁵ The authors base their study on Pierre Bourdieu’s theorization on *habitus* and *social practice*. While there may be interesting conceptual overlap between *habitus* and the present perspectives on embodiment, it is beyond the scope of this article to elaborate on these connections.

⁶ According to the Pew Research Center (2017), there is a significant link between owning a gun for protection and perceptions of whether the world has become more dangerous. Indeed, 75% of those who own a gun believe that the world has become a more dangerous place, and the majority of gun owners (72%) who believe this to be true cite protection as a major reason for owning a gun.

conceptualization of guns as ‘tools’ serves two important purposes. First, associating firearms with everyday objects like “cars, hammers, and even ballpoint pens” *normalizes* their widespread habitual use. Second, learning to think of a gun as “just another tool” can help to *alleviate* the initial bodily stress, or even fear, of handling and firing it. (pp. 10 and 14.) It is in this and other ways that adopting the right frame of mind for gun use is crucial to their eventual incorporation.

Yet, being comfortable with the *idea* of owning a gun does not, by itself, generate actual *bodily* comfort in handling, wearing, or shooting it. As Ihde would say, the embodied activity has to be *constituted*. This requires repetitive positive experiences of use-and-carry, even to the extent that these activities become enjoyable (Shapira and Simon 2018, p. 14). French captures the crux of the matter when he observes, “for most people there’s an undeniable thrill when they realize they can actually master so potent a tool” (Shapira and Simon 2018). With that result in mind, training instructors reassuringly explain the physiological responses to firing a gun, teach the appropriate postures, grips and breathing techniques, and provide regular exposure to situations where guns are discharged (Shapira and Simon 2018, p. 15–16). This gradually takes the edge off any gun-related anxieties that trainees might have and puts them on the path to full mastery.

Arguably, then, license-to-carry training is at its most successful when the extension of the trainees’ bodily-affective capacities via firearms morphs into *second nature*. Of course, this requires more than learning to handle and fire a gun at a shooting range; it must become a regular part of life *elsewhere*, too. Shapira and Simon discuss some of the bodily adjustments that such generalized habitualization demands. As one might expect, “becoming comfortable with carrying a gun” involves practical physical adaptations, like “finding a proper holster, clothing, and generally learning how to carry yourself (including sitting and walking) in a way that reduces the physical toll of the gun” (Shapira & Simon 2018, p. 17). Regular gun carrying thus entails a novel style of *comportment*, one that develops in conjunction with the gradual integration of the gun into one’s body. This process is also supported by trial runs:

[M]any of our respondents spoke about “testing” out the practice of gun carry, or “building up” to it by trying it out for a short period of time. One way many of our respondents say that they “built up” to carrying daily was through a ritual known colloquially as the “Wally Walk,” which refers to walking through a Wal-Mart while carrying a gun for the first time. (Shapira and Simon 2018, p. 17.)

It is important to note that these practices and processes do not unfold as they do in some neutral or arbitrary

manner. Rather, the license-to-carry program pivots on certain *standards* and *norms* concerning gun ownership, which prescribe (a) how firearms are expected to become a part of embodied habit, (b) how one should feel as a result of this, and (c) how one should communicate these feelings to others. The Wally Walk, too, is a communally sanctioned and supported move toward ideal carrying. Consider how one 58 year-old male talks about his first, tentative steps: “I went in [to the market] and I was so nervous I remember walking really quickly at first and looking at everyone to see if they were looking at me... I kept feeling this bulge on my hip” (Shapira and Simon 2018, p. 17). This experience betrays two critical shortcomings vis-à-vis *ideal* carrying. First, the individual is overly aware of the gun on his body: it protrudes and is poorly integrated. Second, he is far too apprehensive about other people’s perceptions of himself as a gun carrier. In short, the gun—and the body as a carrier of that gun—commands excessive self-awareness, when ideally the gun-integrating body should be *that through which* the environment is disclosed as it is. In terms of embodiment, the normative benchmark for carrying is therefore rather specific and demanding: not only should the feeling body be poised and comfortable in its everyday dealings with the world but also alert to its potential threats, and always ready to act if necessary.

4.3 The Outcomes of Incorporation

Having examined the process of gun incorporation in some detail, a final question remains: what about its outcomes? In a stimulating think piece, philosopher Evan Selinger (2012) uses Ihde’s magnification/reduction structure to portray the gun carrier’s experiential world. He suggests that “there is a reduction in the amount and intensity of environmental features that are perceived as dangerous, and a concomitant amplification in the amount and intensity of environmental features that are perceived as calling for the subject to respond with violence”. Moreover, he notes that “gun possession makes it easy to be bold, even hotheaded”. There are two important issues here vis-à-vis the outcomes of incorporation. First, Selinger’s description hints at, but does not fully spell out, what I wish to emphasize, namely, that the magnification/reduction structure applies not only to perception but also to *affective* experiencing. Second, his observation that gun carrying *lessens* the amount and intensity of environmental features perceived as threatening seems to be at odds with empirical research on the matter.

To reiterate, habitually armed people often claim that ‘packing heat’ makes the world safer for themselves and their loved ones.⁷ However, this strongly felt conviction appears unwarranted in light of studies which indicate that the mere presence of guns can prime people to behave aggressively—a phenomenon known as the *weapons effect* (Berkowitz and LePage 1967; Benjamin et al. 2018). Prevailing research has explained this finding in mostly cognitive terms, focusing, e.g., on the aggressive thoughts and hostile evaluations prompted by seeing a gun and how these cognitions may lead to aggressive behavior. In a counterbalancing move, Michelle Maiese (2022) argues that the weapons effect depends just as elementally on one’s bodily-affective orientation to the world. In her view, the presence of guns impacts the subjective process of *affective framing*, a continuous, pre-reflective mode of bodily appraisal that partially determines what we attend to, how we make sense of those things, and how we engage with them (pp. 8–9). An openly visible firearm can thus induce in its perceivers various pre-reflective bodily changes (e.g., in heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing) that make the perceivers more likely to become agitated, fearful, or angry—in short, to adopt a “fear-frame”, “anger-frame”, etc. (pp. 9–11). This, in turn, makes the influenced individuals “more likely to become attuned to aggressive action-possibilities, putting both them and those around them at increased risk” (p. 14). Overall, then, the weapons effect implies a notable discrepancy between gun carriers’ *feelings* of safety and the *actual impact* of gun carrying on the safety of their surroundings.

Empirical studies have also investigated whether holding a gun affects the *holder’s* judgments and perceptions (as opposed to the intentional states of those who *see* the gun, as in the weapons effect). Specifically, the so-called *gun embodiment effect* implies that holding a gun can bias one to judge that others are wielding one, too (Witt and Brockmole 2012; Witt et al. 2020). In theory, this finding points to the previously mentioned contradiction: although gun carrying is felt to promote common safety, it actually undermines security due to its negative influences on one’s perception, feeling and judgment. In terms of magnification/reduction and contrary to Selinger’s observation, this means that gun carrying is likely to *increase* rather than decrease the amount of environmental features that are perceived to be dangerous. That said, the gun embodiment effect still needs more empirical support, and even if that support were to materialize, the effect itself does not apply to *habitual* gun carrying in any straightforward or predictable fashion. Temporarily

holding a gun in one’s hand while viewing a fixed set of stimuli on a screen (as the experimental set-up requires) is indeed a very different proposition than incorporating the gun into one’s everyday embodied activities. More empirical research is thus needed to identify how incorporation in particular might affect the gun carrier’s intentional states and attitudes.

In lieu of that, we can rely on gun training courses to supply us with valuable information about the ways in which individuals are *expected* to relate to their surroundings *specifically as* habitual gun carriers. It is safe to say that certain practices provide extremely fertile grounds for the gun embodiment effect to flourish—at least in the broader sense of biasing one to perceive *threats* (and not just guns) more readily. Consider the following advice imparted to students in a license-to-carry class: “You must just continually look at people. It’s not paranoia. It’s just simply being prepared. So looking at people, understanding, ‘Are they a threat? Could they be a threat?’” (Shapira and Simon 2018, p. 12.) In a training course attended by Blanchfield (2016), the same point was driven home through a color code system whose aim was to impel students to progress from Condition White, meaning “blissful ignorance of [one’s] surroundings”, to the “active vigilance” of Condition Yellow, where one is mentally prepared for violence at all times. In short, such practices aim to establish an affective frame that magnifies the potential dangerousness of the world while screening off other, less threat-oriented ways of engaging with it.

Yet at the same time, habitual gun carrying is expected to constitute an empowering and self-confident relation to the world. Insofar as the incorporation of the gun involves an unrealistic sense of what carrying can actually do for oneself and for others, it can be said to be organized around a *wish-fulfilling fantasy*. And when individuals over-emphasize the experiential and functional rewards of incorporation through this fantasy, they are increasingly liable to lose touch with their actual capacities and limitations as gun carriers. If, in this way, incorporation blocks out significant personal limitations, it supports an affective frame that may be described simply as *omnipotent* in nature. One’s powers are unrealistically amplified, one’s weaknesses illusively diminished.

Needless to say, omnipotent framing can lead to all kinds of unanticipated problems. As Blanchfield notes, “in many scenarios, the sense of confident, directed focus that guns can bring those who own and handle them can be suddenly and irreversibly undone by mishaps that may cause grievous injury or worse” (Blanchfield 2019, p. 201). One’s deceptively self-assured gun-augmented grasp of reality can unravel in innumerable ways: words and actions might be misconstrued, situations may escalate unexpectedly, and guns can be accidentally discharged or turned against the very people they were bought to protect. All of this boils down to what Blanchfield calls the *paradox of prosthesis*,

⁷ According to Pew Research Center (2013), the majority of gun owners (79%) say that having a gun makes them feel safer. (Nearly as many, 78%, report that owning a gun is something that they enjoy).

the unavoidable tension between “our confident, quasi-Cartesian proclamations of lucid judgment and mastery of objects and circumstances” and “our necessarily finite, fallible, all-too-human shortcomings” (Blanchfield 2019, p. 201). Ultimately, then, as impressively as guns *can* extend our powers, they can never provide the control and safety so many avid gun owners desire and fantasize about.

5 Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that guns can become incorporated into the feeling body and hence reframe their carriers’ everyday experiencing. To flesh out this view, I have examined some of the key motives and affective dynamics involved in the incorporation of guns, the practices by which this incorporation is established, and its impact on gun carriers’ habitual comportment. I have also elaborated on two contradictions in incorporation: first, between one’s desire for the *power* afforded by guns and the *lack* in oneself that this power implies, and second, between one’s *seemingly beneficial* feelings of control/safety and *potentially harmful* changes in one’s perceptions of real-world dangers.

In addition to giving a systematic analysis of the incorporation of guns, there is another way in which the article advances research on technology and the embodied mind. Generally speaking, studies in this area have over-emphasized the *beneficial role* played by extra-bodily resources in supporting affect and cognition. Indeed, as Slaby (2016) and Aagaard (2021) have shown, the discussion has skewed towards the ways in which agents *intentionally* and *harmoniously* use resources for their own ends, e.g., by listening to music to lift their spirits or employing mnemonic devices to remember things. This benign “user-resource model” (Slaby 2016) neglects cases where, on the contrary, external resources operate to *undermine*, *subvert*, or *exploit* the individual (see, e.g., Coninx 2023; Timms and Spurrett 2023).

My analysis adds to this critique by highlighting two hitherto undiscussed problems in the user-resource model. First, the model implies that individuals’ motives for employing external resources are relatively simple and transparent, and therefore neatly definable. Second, the model assesses the outcomes of resource use in similarly uncomplicated terms: a resource either works or it doesn’t, depending on the individual’s presumed straightforward motives for its employment. Having scrutinized the contradictions and tensions underlying the self-proclaimed affective benefits of gun carrying, my analysis has demonstrated the inadequacy of both assumptions. One’s explicitly stated motive for gun carrying might be to feel safer, but this motive is likely accompanied (and complicated) by desires and wishes that are not as easily penetrable or articulable. The affective outcomes/benefits of carrying are correspondingly complex. On the

face of it, the ‘resource use’ might be deemed successful if the individual reports feeling safer; yet, considering its less advantageous effects on one’s sense of security and threat, and how it suppresses one’s shortcomings more generally, assessing the value of carrying becomes a much more complicated issue.

To conclude on a more practical note, one might wonder whether my account provides any useful tools to deal with real-world gun problems. It would perhaps be presumptuous to suggest that the account can deliver concrete solutions or contribute directly to ongoing gun policy debates in the United States or elsewhere. But I do believe it can help in another, somewhat more subtle way. By detailing how affective incorporation contributes to deep attachments between individuals and their firearms, and by explaining how habitual carrying—as the primary manifestation of that incorporation—engenders various experiential changes, many of which are pernicious, the analysis enables a better understanding of the motivations and implications of devoted gun ownership. In other words, it can inform us of the bodily-affective factors that not only bind people to guns but also lead to harmful predispositions and misjudgments vis-à-vis others and the world. A significant part of the problem with guns is *precisely* that they can become so deeply incorporated—an aspect of gun ownership that deserves more critical attention than it has previously garnered.

Moreover, the fact that incorporating a firearm can produce seemingly positive experiential transformations in one’s habitual engagements and sense of self urges us to reconsider what is truly at stake in gun debates. Revealingly, Blanchfield observes how liberal gun control advocates often “fail to appreciate how the pleasures and confident self-states [that] guns as prostheses generate *matter* to their owners”. Due to this, “important needs that must be acknowledged, addressed, or transformed one way or another” are essentially glossed over (Blanchfield 2019, p. 202). Simply put, if gun policy discussions neglect the role of the feeling body and bodily incorporation in firearm ownership, they may well end up wide of the mark.

Acknowledgements I would like to thank fellow researchers for feedback received at the University of Osnabrück reading club and the Asymmetric Encounters research project meeting at the University of Jyväskylä. I would also like to thank the Finnish Cultural Foundation for funding this work, and the two reviewers of the manuscript for their detailed suggestions for improvement.

Funding Open Access funding provided by University of Jyväskylä (JYU). This research was funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation.

Data availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. The author has no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

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