

Individualism as a factor in the American gun control debate :  
A discourse analytical study of two political events

Henna Nivakoski  
Bachelor's Seminar and Thesis  
English Philology  
Faculty of Humanities  
University of Oulu  
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## 1 Introduction

The question of citizens' right to obtain and carry firearms is continuously under debate in the United States of America. What drives the discussion, unfortunately, is the fact that gun-related death rates are several times higher in the United States than they are in other high-income nations (Kelto, 2015). The issue of national gun regulations in particular has been under intense debate for decades (Braman & Kahan, 2006), and Americans of all ages, political orientations and social classes take part in the discourse. The unique gun culture in the United States also fascinates people all over the world, which makes this national phenomenon a topic of debate outside the United States as well, and this is the discussion I am attempting to contribute to in my paper.

Although violence in the United States has been declining since the 1990s (Soffen, 2016), the "Great American Gun Debate (Braman & Kahan, 2006, p. 569) has remained topical, because despite relentless negotiations and attempts to reform national gun laws, Americans have not been able to entirely solve their gun problem ("A history of violence", 2016; Beckett, 2016). In fact, the debate has been running in circles for a long time, and this lack of progress has become a new topic of its own. Law professionals Donald Braman and Dan M. Kahan (2006) approach the issue from a socio-psychological perspective, attempting to discover some of the deeper causes of the conflict. They hypothesise that drastically different *cultural worldviews* lie at the core of the issue, and that Americans possess social values that are incompatible with one another (p. 570), which may have contributed to the lack of progress in gun policies.

This paper continues Braman and Kahan's work by examining the concept of incompatible worldviews of American citizens in regard of their national gun debate. In their discussion on the cultural theory of risk, Braman and Kahan (2006) argue that the competing social orientations of *individualism* and *collectivism* could explain why Americans continuously fail to find common ground in firearm issues. Typically, cultures emphasise either individualism or collectivism as the social orientation norm,

although both coexist dynamically in each culture and each individual's worldview (Su-Yuen & Rubin, 2000). Individualism is the dominant philosophy in Western cultures, and many experts argue that Americans are generally individualists rather than collectivists (Kim et al., 1994; Su-Yuen & Rubin, 2000). Individualist values emphasise individual autonomy, rights and self-sustainability, which is why its subscribers often oppose governmental regulations that interfere with an individual citizen's lifestyle (Kim et al., 1994).

Studies suggest that regulating firearms decreases gun-related violence and accidents ("A history of violence", 2016), and I as well am convinced that the American gun market and ownership should be regulated more heavily to improve the safety of public areas as well as American homes. Despite my personal pro-regulation bias, the focus will still be on testing Braman and Kahan's hypothesis of clashing world views as objectively as possible. Relying on previous studies conducted on the topic (Braman & Kahan, 2006; Kim et al., 1994; Su-Yuen & Rubin, 2000), the hypothesis of this paper is that proposed firearm regulations in the United States fail under individualistic arguments that value individual rights to own guns at the expense of both public and domestic safety.

The study was conducted by analysing some of the current political discourse concerning guns and gun ownership in the United States of America. The data used in the analysis is comprised of two events: an interview with the current president of the United States, Barack Obama, and a debate between the presidential candidates of 2016, Donald J. Trump and Hillary Clinton. The transcripts of these events were studied through the method of discourse analysis in order to discover linguistic features conceptually linked to individualist or collectivist thinking.

The analysis found several examples of individualistic principles being used as justification, particularly for opposing limitations to gun ownership, even if they were designed to save lives. In some cases, egocentric values such as non-interference were regarded more important than, for example, domestic safety: many argued that the American citizen is entitled to a firearm for self-defence or sportsmanship purposes. This stance was often justified with the Second Amendment of

the United States Constitution that some people argue guarantees gun ownership as a right on a constitutional level (Braman & Kahan, 2006; Charles, 2016). Collective values such as responsibility for other people's safety and respect for the state appears to be sometimes overlooked by Americans, if the other option was to have to go through the allegedly inconvenient registration process, or even worse, to have some of their firearms confiscated by the government. Although this study does not aspire to offer a solution for the whole debate, it offers a new perspective to the issue regarding the socio-psychological factors that so far have gone somewhat unrecognised.

## **2 Guns in the United States of America**

To be able to analyse any American gun debate, one must be familiar with the rudimentary aspects of the history of firearms in the United States and why they are so significant and controversial in the nation. The never-ending topicality of guns and gun laws in the United States is a result of several factors, but two have arguably been more influential than others. Firstly, firearms are a central aspect of the American national identity. This is largely a result of the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), in which resistance to gun regulations by the British colonialists was an essential phenomenon, ultimately contributing to the victory of the colonials (Wallace, 2015). Indeed, the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution states:

“A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed” (U.S. Const. amend. II).

The American gun debate is partly due to different interpretations of the appropriate application of the Second Amendment to the modern American society (Braman & Kahan, 2006; Charles, 2016). This has essentially divided the American people into two opposing groups: one group argues that the Second Amendment gives every citizen the right to own firearms, the other argues that it does not (Gopnik, 2015). Interestingly, the division between these groups largely correlates with which political party an individual supports, as supporters of the Democratic Party tend to be for increased gun

control and those of the Republican Party often oppose it. It must be noted, however, that there is also a large number of people who fall outside of this polarised division and subscribe to a more moderate view on the issue. (Braman & Kahan, 2006.) They tend to be less vocal in public than the strongly pro- or anti-gun Americans, which is probably due to the intensity and polarised nature of the debate. I personally believe that gun regulation should be stricter in the United States, and there are also studies that support this view (“A history of violence”, 2016). Coincidentally, my stance on the American gun debate cannot be claimed to be objective, but this study is not an attempt to argue for either of the sides of the debate. Instead, my focus will be on analysing the effects of the socio-cultural and political values on the discourse, namely those of individualism and collectivism.

The second reason why firearms are under constant discussion in the United States is that the country has a more severe gun violence problem than other Western nations. Firearm death rates were more than five times higher in the United States in 2015 compared to the second Western country on the list, Portugal, which had 0.66 deaths per 100,000 people. In the United States, the number was 3.55. (Kelto, 2015.) Violent deaths, including gun-related ones, are also disproportionately affecting the minorities and the poorest in the United States, which has made the gun debate a broader social issue (Beckett et al., 2016). Socioeconomic status and cultural heritage plays such an important role in how much gun-related violence affects an individual American citizen that the gun debate has become an issue concerning general inequality and racism in the American society and its policies. Unfortunately, this paper will hardly be comprehensive enough to solve any of these complicated cultural phenomena. However, it can contribute to the debate by developing the socio-psychological perspective suggested by Braman and Kahan (2006).

### **3 Theoretical background: Individualism and collectivism**

There is hardly any improvement to be expected with the American gun debate without a new approach to the issue, which is what Donald Braman and Dan M. Kahan took on in their paper *Overcoming the Fear of Guns, the Fear of Gun Control, and the Fear of Cultural Politics: Constructing a*

*Better Gun Debate* (2006). They are hoping to find potential solutions to the bankrupt debate by introducing a socio-psychological perspective, which they argue to be an unrecognised but crucial factor in the phenomenon. As statistics and other fact-based arguments continue to fail to change the discourse, Braman and Kahan call for investigation of human psychology and socio-cultural values. They hypothesise that conflicting *cultural worldviews* lie at the core of the dilemma, and this is the theory that inspired my analysis.

To explain the concept of a worldview, I am relying on William Cobern's monograph *World View Theory and Science Education Research* (1991). An individual's psychology, including their worldview, is a result of their personal history: their cultural heritage, status in the society and individual events from their past. Ultimately, a person's need to relate to the outside world is why a worldview forms. (Cobern, 1991.) The definition of a worldview varies slightly in different fields of science, but in anthropology, it refers to the "culturally dependent implicit, fundamental organization of the mind" (Cobern, 1991, p. 19). In other words, an individual's worldview is comprised of their foundational beliefs and presuppositions about the world. This causes predictable patterns of feeling and behaviour (Cobern, 1991), which is the phenomenon of interest in this analysis regarding the American gun control debate, as I will attempt to discover manifestations of individualism and collectivism in the debates. From a practical point of view, Charles Kraft (as referenced by Cobern, 1991, p. 19) describes a worldview as an organisation of the mind that explains how and why things happen. It also validates goals, institutions and values of a society, providing the individual with means for evaluating outside influences (Cobern, 1991).

People with diverse worldviews can often coexist, interact and form functional and satisfying relationships with one another. Furthermore, a political philosophy, such as individualism or collectivism, can be a part of a variety of worldviews (Cobern, 1991). This is because an individual's political orientation is only one of the factors that constitute their perception of the relationship they have with their surroundings and other people. Consequently, there are several kinds of individualistic and collectivist people. Unfortunately, ideological disputes can also drive people into separate groups,

where the importance of acceptance and belonging in a group become essential driving forces for the individual. The chasm between philosophies disturbs exchange of ideas, which can further amplify the division and make these groups unwilling to cooperate with one another and make compromises, thus hindering political progress. Personal values and worldviews are generally immune to instrumental arguments, which often dominate debates on social issues, such as the American gun debate (Braman & Kahan, 2006). Therefore, perhaps Braman and Kahan's theory of incompatible worldviews could explain why Americans have failed to make progress in firearm issues.

Cultural worldviews can differ in several aspects, but in the case of the American gun control debate, one of the main themes I have noticed is the argument over individual rights versus the common good. The different interpretations of the rights protected by the Second Amendment are only one manifestation of the competing visions of the appropriate relationship between self and state. In a situation of conflict of interest between the individual and the community, which outweighs the other? As far as gun laws in the United States are concerned, can the rights of an individual to acquire and bear arms be sacrificed for common safety? To understand this dichotomy one needs a rudimentary understanding of individual-oriented and group-oriented values, which is why Braman and Kahan's paper (2006) on cultural worldviews functions as the primary inspiration for this paper.

To understand the theory of *individualism* and *collectivism*, I am using the definitions of these phenomena by Uichol Kim et al. (1994). Typically, those favouring the benefit of the community are called *collectivists*. These people emphasise social harmony and interrelatedness between individuals who all share a common fate. In collective societies, the individual is expected to commit to obligations and duties that are prescribed by their specific role in the society based on innate attributes such as gender, age and cultural heritage through family. Failing to fulfil these duties leads to shame and losing one's "face". Collectivism is generally most prevalent in societies outside Europe and North America, such as those in Asia and Africa. This study, however, is concerned with the American culture, where *liberalism* is the dominant philosophy, and has served as the foundation for



the prevalence of *individualism* as opposed to collectivism. (Kim et al., 1994.) Therefore, I am expecting to find more individualist than collectivist argumentation while analysing the data.

According to Kim et al. (1994), the liberal and individualist philosophies rely on the concept of rational individuals who are free to make their own choices in life and define their own goals. The individual is judged based on these personal choices and achievements, which ultimately define their role in the society and the groups they associate with. Individual autonomy, self-sufficiency and uniqueness are highly valued. Morality is expected to stem from mutual respect of others' rights as individuals, and interaction between people is based on principles such as equality and non-interference. (Kim et al., 1994.) To be able to recognise individualist influences in my data, I will attempt to semantically detect if the analysed arguments appear to be based on the abovementioned values.

It must be emphasised, however, that an individual's psychology is rarely as rational as abstract philosophical theories; in everyday life, there are several contradictive perceptions of the world that influence an individual's choices and lifestyle. Similarly, individualism and collectivism are not exclusive philosophies. They can and do coexist on both the macro-level of societies and the micro-level of individuals' personal worldviews. (Su-Yuen & Rubin, 2000.) Political discourse on a national level tends to stress either individualist or collectivist ideals depending on the circumstances and the issue at hand. Individuals also tend to carry tendencies of both individualism and collectivism. These rather opposite philosophies can either merge more or less fluently into a personal sense of right and wrong—or they can be ambivalent, potentially causing dilemmas in decision-making. (Kim et al., 1994.) Therefore, one can expect to detect values inspired by both individualism and collectivism during the analysis in this paper, although the referenced works lead to the prediction of a higher turnout of individualist reasoning.

## **4 Research material**

The data used in this study is comprised of two debates concerning the American gun laws and attitudes: one with President Barack Obama and another with politicians Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. In both of these debates, the discourse revolves around the dispute over whether or not there should be stricter gun control policies enforced by the government and other authorities in the United States, which justifies both Braman and Kahan's (2006) and my approach through social worldview theories. I wanted to select debates or interviews with people who are involved with the gun debate by profession, so that they could be presumed to understand the political discourse on firearms as well as the current state of gun laws and gun-related phenomena in the United States. The emotional and belief-based reasoning that dominates the debate among ordinary Americans would not only be harder to analyse due to its colloquial register and the agitated state of the debate but would also rule out much of the equally important educated argumentation. Therefore, I intentionally chose debates with American politicians. However, the first debate in particular also incorporates questions and responses from common citizens. I am hoping that the selected data represents the most prevalent arguments in the political discussion that addresses gun control in the United States.

### **4.1 The approach**

There are several interesting aspects to the American gun debate; this study attempts to identify the prevalence and effects of individualistic reasoning on the discourse through semantic analysis of the data. The utilised concepts of socio-psychological and ideological theories combine into a rather interpretative, qualitative approach to the topic. Based on previous studies (Braman & Kahan, 2006; Su-Yuen & Rubin, 2000) that suggest that Americans are primarily individualists, one can expect to detect more individualistic than collectivist values in the data, especially in the arguments against increased gun control. Therefore, the question this study is attempting to answer is whether or not the presumably higher prevalence of individualistic values appear to be hindering the progress of

introducing laws that make buying, owning and carrying firearms more regulated. Although I already have justified expectations of what kinds of arguments in particular express individualist values, I cannot come to an objective conclusion without analysing all of the data, so the analysis is directed towards arguments from both sides of the debate. After all, there is no reason why anti-gun arguments could not be individualistic as well.

Although the theoretical background of this study encourages to primarily focus on individualism, the phenomenon can only be explained in relation to its counterforce, collectivism. Therefore, I am also paying attention to potential representations of collectivist ideals in order to compare the prevalence of the two competing philosophies in the American gun control debate. The study is not conducted to label any of the individual debaters as individualistic or the opposite, but I attempt to discover manifestations of individualism in relation to collectivism in the American gun control debate on an extrapersonal level. The data is arguably not comprehensive enough to make any inclusive conclusions about the general nature of the phenomenon, but perhaps the analysis could at least make an educated suggestion of it.

Examples of the analysis are presented through two selected excerpts of the transcripts that I believe demonstrate the key aspects of the analysis as well as the main findings. The arguments most relevant to this analysis are those who either express support for increased gun control or point out problems that these stricter policies may introduce. To analyse these arguments from the perspective of individualism versus collectivism, the initial plan was to utilise Wu Su-Yen and Donald Rubin's list of individualistic and collectivist writing features, which they incorporated in a study comparing argumentative writing between Taiwanese and American college students (2000, pp. 157–158). However, this tool did not seem fit for the analysis after all, because the data appears to call for a more semantic interpretation, and Su-Yen and Rubin's list better serves the purposes of syntactic analysis. However, their method can be applied to my analysis in a couple of ways. Firstly, I will be paying attention for *egocentric sequences* (Su-Yen & Rubin, 2000, p. 162), in which personal experiences are used as justification for public policies, which is a quintessentially individualistic

argumentation method. To discover the potential collectivist values in the data, I will follow Su-Yen and Rubin's method of analysing debaters' use of proverbs, humaneness and collective virtues.

Luckily, there is a method to analyse my data in a way that better acknowledges the effects of personal values on argumentation. This method, as described by Carl Graumann (1990), is a rather pragmatic approach to discourse analysis. It does not only allow a more efficient analysis of the semantic features of the data, but it also acknowledges the importance of the progress of dialogue and how each party reacts to one another's arguments. In the case of the American gun control debate, I argue that examining these sequences of response should be acknowledged better than in classic discourse analysis, which typically sees utterances or arguments as separate, independent units. This method will be discussed in more detail in the sixth section of this paper.

## **4.2 Debate #1**

The first debate is a town hall conversation with the current President of the United States, Barack Obama, who responds to questions from both the moderator and the audience. The discussion took place at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia and was broadcast by CNN on January 7, 2016 with CNN's Anderson Cooper as the moderator. The transcript of the discussion by CNN is used as the data for the analysis (Guns in America town hall with Obama transcript (full text), 2016). However, the complete event can be found in video form on Youtube (Ari Bernays, 2016). The video can also be accessed on CNN's online streaming platform at [go.cnn.com](http://go.cnn.com) with an American cable television user name and password.

## **4.3 Debate #2**

The parties of the second debate are the presidential candidates for the United States in 2016: Donald J. Trump (Republican) and Hillary Clinton (Democrat). For the analysis, I will be using the transcript by

CQ Transcriptwire that can be read on The New York Times website (Transcript of the Third Debate, 2016). The debate took place at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas on October 19, 2016, and was moderated by Chris Wallace of Fox News. The analysis will not cover all of the debate, because only a part of the discourse concerned firearms, which makes it the only one relevant to this study. The debate can also be watched in video form on YouTube (RBC NETWORK BROADCASTING, 2016). In the video, the discussion analysed in this study takes place at 05:27-10:22.

## **5 The method: discourse analysis**

In linguistics, a semantic interpretation of data often utilises different methods of discourse analysis. I am using Carl Graumann's *dialogical* approach to discourse analysis as the primary method, based on his *Perspectival structure and dynamics in dialogues* (1990). Graumann defines dialogue as "togetherness of talking" and "mutuality of exchanging ideas" (1990, pp. 105–106). This stems from the Greek word *dialogos*, which translates as speaking and thinking together about something in the way that, although the speakers may talk about different things, these things become something common between them. This creates the dynamic of moving from separate positions toward a shared one—if the speakers are willing to change their stances in the spirit of genuine dialogue. In addition to what happens in input and output in dialogue, Graumann argues that one should also pay attention to what happens between them, because he considers that to be an equally important factor. To him, the truly interesting phenomena happen as utterances build up on one another. (Graumann, 1990.)

When analysing any type of dialogue, Graumann argues that utterances should not only be analysed separately, because their relation to one another is where the progress of the discussion and the exchanging of ideas truly shows (1990). The human language is unique in its ability to indicate ideas that are not explicitly stated in words (Chilton, 2004). In linguistics, this aspect of language is analysed through semantics. This study attempts to unveil some of the underlying psychological factors in the American gun control debate, namely the social orientations of individualism and collectivism, which

do not only show in individual utterances but also in their relation to one another as parties respond to each other's arguments. This is why Graumann's approach appears the most suitable one for the analysis. In order to understand the effects of social orientations manifesting on a semantical level, this study needs to take an interpretative, descriptive approach to the data. This better acknowledges the subtleties of the English language as well as the implicit socio-psychological factors.

## 5.1 Analysing political discourse

People discuss politics in a slightly different manner than they do other topics, and I wanted to take the unique features of this style of discourse into account in this paper. Naturally, there are some similarities between all human discourse, such as the fact that the *referent* or the issue at hand is typically shared (Chilton, 2004). In the case of this study, the referent is guns in the United States of America. Shared meanings and values are also important in building a constructive political debate, although the friction between different values is what initially creates the need for debate. The American gun control debate is particularly interesting, because Americans are divided into two distinct groups whose comprehensions of *facts* concerning firearms are quite opposite. Therefore, the debate is not only about competing values, but also of competing perceptions of reality. However, to keep my analysis concise, I will only be focusing on the conflict between Americans' values in this paper, namely the social values about the appropriate relationship between self and state, which is characterised by the rivalry of individualist and collectivist ideals.

Politicians often represent drastically different values and objectives that are exaggerated through their political party's ideology and campaign. Furthermore, in politics, opposing views are often intentionally highlighted for debate and juxtaposition. This shows in visibly different conceptualisations of the referent, and the syntax can vary wildly between speeches (Chilton, 2004). This phenomenon is in the centre of my analysis, as I will be looking for representations of an individualistic social orientation in particular, because hypothetically they should be more prevalent in

Americans' argumentation than collectivist ones (Braman & Kahan, 2006; Kim et al., 1994; Su-Yuen & Rubin, 2000).

Political discourse is fundamentally argumentative in nature. Speeches serve to assure adversaries and the undecided as well as to reinforce advocacies. In democratic nations, opposing political stances are typically presented as representations of values and preferences of larger groups of citizens, although due to corruption and other by-products of political power it may not always be the case. Fortunately, the success of this study does not depend on whether the analysed arguments genuinely represent what the politicians think on a personal level, so theories of corruption can be left without deeper analysis. The focus of the analysis is on *what* people in the data argue and *how* the social values of individualism and collectivism appear to influence their reasoning.

Especially in the political context where every word spoken is scrutinised to the letter by journalists, one can assume that most of what is said has been designed and rehearsed beforehand, which means that even single words have been specifically selected to have an influence on those who hear them. Therefore, it is harder for politicians to withdraw what has already been said as "only semantics". At least in Western politics, single words can be highly significant, and failed spontaneous responses can lead to undesirable publicity and loss of political authority. The assumption of premeditated speech and the genuine attempt to convince listeners makes discourse analysis in politics easier in some aspects, as one can expect the speech to be coherent as well as simplified enough for everyone to comprehend.

The fact that political language differs from natural face-to-face conversation needs to be taken into account when analysing it. This factor brings both potential advantages and challenges to analysing political discourse. Points may be more coherently and concisely made, although excessive rehearsing of phrases or whole arguments can eliminate crucial aspects of natural human discourse. A politician may appear to only be reading a script, causing them to fail to convey genuine pursuit for agreement

and progress, both of which are essential concepts in a democracy. If parts of the discourse used as data in this study appear scripted or unnatural, it may pose challenges to the analysis.

## **5.2 The perspectival dynamics of dialogue**

According to Carl Graumann (1990), the context of an object significantly influences how the subject perceives it. The subjects' approach also affects how the object is ultimately understood by them, because a certain viewpoint determines the aspects through which the object is seen. In other words, how a person perceives an object is not simply a representation of the object itself, but a sum of the specific aspects determined by the subject's viewpoint and the object's immediate surroundings. Therefore, a representation is not only of the object itself, but of the subject as well. In fact, this concept of perceptual experience is essentially the case with all cognitive experiences. (Graumann, 1990.) The relevance of Graumann's theory to this paper is that the analysis will be based on the idea of subjective perspectives that should, in theory, reflect certain values of the speakers. It is also noteworthy that in politics, this phenomenon of perspectivity is intentionally highlighted, because people are expected to debate over which of the suggested policies are best suited for the society.

The "perspectival structure of experience" affects the dynamics of dialogue, which is characterised by "mental locomotion in a cognitive field" (Graumann, 1990, p. 110), namely the process in which the subject changes their position within the conceptual field, the topic. The perspective moves along the subject as they move from (subjectively) actual to potential truths about the object proposed by other people, which is the essential dynamic of perspectivity. The exchange of ideas in dialogue should approximate the different parties' perspectives on the object, ultimately leading to agreement. However, people tend to get stuck with their habitual perspectives. Changing one's perspective through dialogue is a cognitive skill, and understanding a general attitude of a larger group is an even more challenging cognitive step to take. (Graumann, 1990.) This concept is particularly relevant to this study, because one of the questions I am attempting to answer is whether or not this phenomenon



also applies to Americans in regard of the gun debate: are they unwilling to change their habitual stances and therefore unable to find common ground on the issue?

In my analysis, I am utilising Graumann's (1990) categories for structural analysis of the perspectival dynamics of dialogue. This framework helps to examine arguments in relation to one another, allowing a better structured study of people's responses and, ultimately, how these responses reflect different worldviews and values. These categories are designed to describe different patterns in the dynamics of dialogue. I will express my personal interpretations of them, because Graumann's article did not discuss them individually very much, probably because the titles are rather self-explanatory. The categories are as follows:

1. The topic of the dialogue
2. Aspects of the topic (or subtopics)
3. Explanations of differences
4. Acceptance (of an argument)
5. Rejection (of an argument)
6. Yes—but reaction (i.e. partial acceptance/rejection)
7. Question (information-seeking utterance)
8. Positive versus negative evaluation (of a position or, generally speaking, the referent of an utterance)
9. Identifying with versus distancing from (a position or attitude)
10. Emphasising versus de-emphasising (a position or attitude)

(Graumann, 1990, pp. 114–120)

The topic of the dialogue is the one that is addressed one way or another throughout the discourse. The aspects or subtopics include the presumed facts and issues brought up in the dialogue considered relevant. One introduces an aspect as a potential viewpoint to others, although they may not accept it fully or at all (Graumann, 1990). I understand the third category as the one that represents those

utterances in which different stances are juxtaposed and analytically compared to one another. Particularly in the case of introducing new aspects to a discussion, I think the aforementioned problem of habitual stances becomes evident, because in political debate, different aspects are, unfortunately, often introduced to support one stance and disprove the others as if the function of the debate was to determine the “winning” stance as opposed to genuinely seeking consensus. As I will only be concentrating on different manifestations of individualist versus collectivist values, hidden agendas will not need to be further discussed in this paper. In fact, in political debates where gaining and sustaining power is such an important factor, I argue that one can presume these hidden agendas to be present by default.

Categories 4–7 were designed by Graumann and his team (1990) to demonstrate the flow of the discussion as the parties react to one another’s arguments through acceptance, rejection and information-seeking. The categories help in mapping the sequence of arguments as they build up on each other, changing the flow and direction of the discussion. Categories 4–6 indicate the reactions of acceptance and rejection towards other parties’ arguments that can either be accepted fully or partially or rejected as irrelevant or false. Category 6 represents reactions in which one may conditionally accept an argument, but prefers a different approach to it or thinks there is an argument or fact that makes the previous argument irrelevant. Category 7 describes utterances in which one party is asking another questions to better understand their perspective.

The last three categories help to relate the parties’ positions to one another according to how they equate and differ (Graumann, 1990). In my personal interpretation, category 8 indicates turns at talk in which a position or the referent is evaluated based on its perceived pros and cons. This evaluation is dependent on the individual’s perspective (and agenda), and is therefore a subjective one, which I argue characterises at least categories 4–10, if not all of them. The 9<sup>th</sup> category describes how a party can either express sympathy for another position and identify with it or distance themselves from it. They can also either emphasise or de-emphasise a position or attitude in correspondence to their values, which justifies the 10<sup>th</sup> category. In the case of this study, all of these ten categories are just as

important in attempting to discover effects of the cultural orientations of individualism and collectivism.

## **6 The analysis**

The data used in this study was too vast to be analysed in only two parts. Especially the town hall conversation with President Obama was better divided into topics, which structured the data for easier analysis. This method also allowed me to incorporate excerpts of the analysis in this paper without misrepresenting the dynamics of the discussion. Including the introduction in the beginning, the discussion was divided into eleven topics. This division was conducted based on when the discussion clearly changed to a different subtopic, often after introducing a new question from the audience. To give an example of the conducted analysis, I will present the part of the discussion in which the former astronaut Mark Kelly takes part in the conversation. This excerpt showcases some of the manifestations of individualism in relation to collectivism I detected in during the analysis. The debate between Trump and Clinton was concise enough for me to analyse and present as a whole in this paper, so that piece of data did not require any dialogical subdivision.

The excerpts of the data will be presented as they are in the utilised transcripts. I did not correct any of the spelling or obvious typos, except for one part in which an additional line break was needed for clarity. However, in order to draw the reader's attention to the most relevant parts of the discussion in regard to this particular analysis, I added underlining to the phrases that I argue imply individualistic (I) or collectivist (C) values. Because of the subjective nature of semantic analysis such as this one, the reader may disagree with how I have interpreted the data, though I conducted my analysis as objectively as possible, utilising the theory discussed in previous sections of this paper.

In order to incorporate Graumann's (1990) list of categories of the dynamics of dialogue in the analysis, I studied each argument in relation to the previous ones, which allowed me to determine the general dynamics of the dialogue and the dialogical structure of the debate as a whole. In the

examples, the number of the corresponding category from Graumann's list follows each underlined phrase in parentheses. Some of the actions described by these categories are also discussed in the analysis wherever I considered it relevant. In these cases, the number of the category follows the phrase in which the category is alluded to.

Because the selected parts of the data presented are rather long, the analysis is merged into the breaks in the discourse in the way that best structures the analysis into a comprehensible form. I subjectively decided where to add the bits of analysis so that it would not break the flow of the discourse too much. Although the data is divided into parts, nothing has been removed from between the breaks, so the two examples of the data are presented with their original sequences of dialogue. The marking "[...]" indicates breaks in the data and where it continues afterwards.

## **6.1 Town hall conversation with Obama**

This section presents an example of the analysis conducted on the transcript of the interview with President Barack Obama, including the moderator Anderson Cooper and the audience (Guns in America town hall with Obama transcript (full text), 2016). This particular part of the discourse concerns a question presented by a member of the audience who inquires President Obama about his plans to confiscate firearms from some American citizens and his plan for executing such operation. This example illuminates the friction between individualistic and collectivist values, and one can also see how both of these two philosophies dynamically affect an individual's reasoning, combining into arguably coherent arguments in spite of their rather opposite natures.

*COOPER: I want to bring in Mark Kelly, as you know, former astronaut, husband of former Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, who we're proud to say is here tonight. Five years ago this week, in Tucson, Arizona, Congresswoman Giffords was shot, six others were killed. Captain, your question? (7)*

QUESTION: Thank you for being here, Mr. President. As you know, Gabby and I are both gun owners, we take gun ownership very seriously. And, you know, really think about the voices of responsible gun owners in this debate (I). (9)

But, I want to follow up to something Father Pfleger said, and you answer to his question. And, it's about expanded background checks. Often what you hear in the debate of expanding background checks to more gun sales, and, as you know, Gabby and I are 100% behind the concept of somebody getting a background check before buying a gun (C). (9) [...]

Kelly opens his turn at talk by identifying as a gun owner and expressing his solidarity with pro-gun Americans (9). Thus, he is also implying that he supports the concept of individuals' rights to firearms. However, he also appears to accept some governmental regulation and control over gun ownership, namely background checks. This makes him a great example of how individualist and collectivist values often coexist and balance one another in an individual's political opinions (Su-Yuen & Rubin, 2000). In other words, one can see that Kelly sympathises with both sides of the debate and could therefore be labelled as one of the so-called moderates.

[...] But, when we testified in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee, we heard not only from the gun lobby, but from United States Senators that expanding background checks will, not may, will lead to a registry, which will lead to confiscation, which will lead to a tyrannical government (I). (8)

So, I would like you to explain with 350 million guns in 65 million places, households, from Key West, to Alaska, 350 million objects in 65 million places, if the Federal government wanted to confiscate those objects, how would they do that (I)? (7) [...]

Regardless of his support for background checks, Kelly does express his concern about the prospect of tyrannical government emerging from expanding current background checks (8), which gun lobbyist and some senators assured him would eventually happen. This anxiety about the government confiscating citizens' property is individualist in nature, as it considers an individual's possessions to be theirs alone by the principle of freedom (Christman, 1991). Kelly phrases his question (7) in a fashion that is clearly affected by the aforementioned warnings, as the question implies that the

government is indeed attempting to confiscate all firearms across the country. However, I would argue that Kelly's own stance on this issue cannot be determined from the text, because one could also argue that his question was phrased sarcastically to ridicule the fear of a nation-wide gun confiscation, as he emphasises large numbers indicating that such a manoeuvre would prove to be impossible. Therefore, it is hard to say whether Kelly's sarcasm is addressed to President Obama or, in fact, the rather anti-government pro-gun Americans.

[...] (APPLAUSE)

*OBAMA: Well, look, first of all, everytime I see Gabby I'm just so thrilled because I visited her in the hospital (I), and, as I mentioned, I think, in the speech in the White House, as we left the hospital then to go to a memorial service, we got word that Gabby had opened her eyes for the first time. (9)*

*And, we did not think she was going to be here, and she is, and Mark's just been extraordinary. (10)*

*And, by the way, Mark's twin brothers up in space right now, and is breaking the record for the longest continuous orbiting of the planet, which is pretty impressive stuff. (9)*

*What I think Mark is alluding to is what I said earlier, this notion of a conspiracy out there, and it gets wrapped up in concerns about the Federal government. (10)*

*Now, there's a long history of that, that's in our DNA, you know? The United States was born suspicious of some distant authority (I/C)... (9) [...]*

Obama responds by sympathising with Kelly and his family's struggles and reminiscing about their shared past (9), through which he is attempting to associate with the man as friends. As a president, he could choose to respond with authority, but instead he is building mutual understanding, which could be interpreted as a manifestation of the individualistic value of equality between people (Kim et al., 1994). He is also pointing out that Kelly's concern of tyranny is something they as Americans inherit through cultural heritage (9), which is arguably another attempt by Obama to establish unity

with Kelly. However, his argument is not exclusively individualistic, because he is also alluding to shared ancestry since the founding of the United States, their motherland. The concept of shared ancestry is essential in many forms of collectivism, primarily nationalism, through which solidarity is largely based on the idea of shared ancestry and a common fate (Anderson, 2006).

[...] COOPER: ... *now, let me just jump in here, is it fair to call it a conspiracy...* (5)

OBAMA: ... *well, yeah...* (5)

COOPER: ... *because a lot of people really believe this deeply (l), that they just don't...* (9)

OBAMA: ... *no...* (5)

COOPER: ... *they just don't trust you (l). (10)*

OBAMA: *I'm sorry, Cooper, yes. It is fair to call the conspiracy, what are you saying? Are you suggesting that the notion that we are creating a plot to take everybody's guns away so that we can impose martial law...* (5)

COOPER: ... *not everybody, but there's certainly a lot of...* (6)

OBAMA: ... *but a conspiracy? Yes, that is a conspiracy! I would hope that would agree with that (l). (10)*

(APPLAUSE)

OBAMA: *Is that controversial? Except on some website...* (10)

COOPER: *There are -- there are certainly a lot of people who just have a fundamental distrust that you do not want to get -- go further and further and further down this road (l). (10) [...]*

Cooper continues the conversation by impugning Obama's allegation of conspiracy against the Federal government. One can only speculate about the source of Cooper's argument, but he implies to be speaking for a large number of American citizens who are concerned about the government

confiscating their private possessions. According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, a conspiracy “implies a secret agreement among several people usually involving treason or great treachery” (Conspiracy, n.d.), in which case Obama’s claims seem exaggerated. Cooper’s emphasis on Americans’ distrust of the government (10) could be interpreted as an example of individualism’s effects on politics, because liberal and individualistic societies are based on the idea of equality and politically active citizens (Anderson, 2006), and some Americans appear to be suspicious of the nation’s leaders’ intentions and are therefore publically challenging it. In a more collective and hierarchical community such protesting would arguably be less acceptable. Again, Obama chooses to appeal to these sceptics on an individualistic level by requesting agreement as equally politically competent adults (10), thus forgoing an authoritarian approach despite his status as the leader of the nation.

[...] *OBAMA: Well, look, I mean, I'm only going to be here for another year. I don't know -- when - when would I have started on this enterprise, right?* (9)

*I come from the state of Illinois (I), which we've been talking about Chicago, but downstate Illinois is closer to Kentucky than it is to Chicago. And everybody hunts down there. And a lot of folks own guns. And so this is not, like, alien territory to me. I've got a lot of friends, like Mark, who are hunters. I just came back from Alaska where I ate a moose that had just been shot, and it was pretty good (I). (9)*

*So, yes, it is -- it is a false notion that I believe is circulated for either political reasons or commercial reasons in order to prevent a coming-together among people of goodwill to develop commonsense rules that will make us safer while preserving the Second Amendment (I). (5)*

*And the notion that we can't agree on some things while not agreeing on others, and the reason for that is because, "Well, the president secretly wants to do X," would mean that we'd be paralyzed about doing everything. I mean, maybe when I propose to make sure that, you know, unsafe drugs are taken off the market that secretly I'm trying to control the entire drug industry or take people's drugs away, but probably not. What's more likely is I just want to make sure that people are not dying by taking bad drugs. (C/I) (9)*



Obama continues to appeal to pro-gun Americans by expressing sympathy and acceptance towards those who use firearms for hunting purposes (9). Individualistically, he uses another *egocentric sequence*, an anecdote from his past (Su-Yen & Rubin, 2000, p. 162), as support for his argument and a means of building a symbolic bridge between himself and the American hunter communities whose members have apparently criticised his policies. He also continues to underline his requisition for increased cooperation and discussion between the different positions on the issue (9), again, to reach a compromise or consensus democratically, not relying on executive orders. Thus, he is refraining from taking advantage of his power as a leader, but seeks collaboration and mutual understanding instead in accordance to individualistic values (Kim et al., 1994). Obama justifies his gun regulation policies with people's safety, which is not an exclusively individualist nor collectivist stance, because individual people's lives are valued in both of these philosophies, although from slightly different perspectives.

## **6.2 Trump and Clinton's debate**

Here, I am presenting the analysis conducted on the debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, with Chris Wallace as the moderator (Transcript of the Third Debate, 2016). In this segment of a more extensive public debate, the parties are discussing the Second Amendment and its correct interpretation as well as the value of this historical document today. The discourse illuminates the dispute over the meaning of the amendment and how these clashing perspectives appear to stand in the way of progress on gun policies that could decrease the disadvantages and dangers caused by the high number of firearms in the United States.

*WALLACE: We now have about 10 minutes for an open discussion. I want to focus on two issues that, in fact, by the justices that you name could end up changing the existing law of the land. First is one that you mentioned, Mr. Trump, and that is guns. (1)*

*Secretary Clinton, you said last year, let me quote, "The Supreme Court is wrong on the Second Amendment." And now, in fact, in the 2008 Heller case, the court ruled that there*

*is a constitutional right to bear arms, but a right that is reasonably limited. Those were the words of the Judge Antonin Scalia who wrote the decision. What's wrong with that?* (7)

*CLINTON: Well, first of all, I support the Second Amendment. I lived in Arkansas for 18 wonderful years. I represented upstate New York. I understand and respect the tradition of gun ownership (I). It goes back to the founding of our country (C). (10) [...]*

Clinton is objecting Wallace's implication that she is not a supporter the Second Amendment, which in the American culture translates into citizens' constitutional rights to own firearms (Braman & Kahan, 2006). Clinton is emphasising here that she does, in fact, support and respect this presumed right (10). Thus, she is attempting to appeal to people who are concerned about gun ownership rights being under threat. She is expressing individualist values through respect for individual citizens' ownership rights, which she is further accentuating through an *egocentric sequence* (Su-Yen & Rubin, 2000, p. 162) as support for her argument. This can be interpreted as classic individualistic reasoning, in which personal experiences and opinions are considered relevant in debate over communal issues (Su-Yen & Rubin, 2000). However, Clinton's ending phrase also shows the dynamic between individualist and collectivist values, as she emphasises her respect for the constitution and history of her motherland (10).

*[...] But I also believe (I) that there can be and must be reasonable regulation. Because I support the Second Amendment doesn't mean that I want people who shouldn't have guns to be able to threaten you, kill you or members of your family. (C) (6)*

*And so when I think (I) about what we need to do, we have 33,000 people a year who die from guns. I think (I) we need comprehensive background checks, need to close the online loophole, close the gun show loophole (C). There's other matters that I think (I) are sensible that are the kind of reforms that would make a difference that are not in any way conflicting with the Second Amendment (I). (3)*

*You mentioned the Heller decision. And what I was saying that you referenced, Chris, was that I disagreed with the way the court applied the Second Amendment in that case, because what the District of Columbia was trying to do was to protect toddlers from guns*

and so they wanted people with guns to safely store them. (3) And the court didn't accept that reasonable regulation (C), but they've accepted many others. So I see no conflict between saving people's lives and defending the Second Amendment (I). (10) [...]

After reassuring and emphasising that she does not want to violate the right to gun ownership, Clinton does however continue to argue that this right should not apply to everyone (6), namely those who use firearms to harm other people. This shows how Clinton supports certain forms of governmental regulation over American citizens' lifestyles, so her proposal is not entirely individualistic (Kim et al., 1994; Raz, 1986). Most importantly, however, Clinton is expressing here that she considers safety to outweigh individual gun ownership rights when a citizen can be expected to eventually hurt another (3). This demonstrates the classic dilemma in liberalist communities, in which governmental regulation is fundamentally viewed negatively, but from a practical standpoint it is considered justified or necessary in some cases (Christman, 1991). Clinton is implying that the practice should also be applied to gun ownership in the United States in order to control violent crime. She is also, again, using personal experiences (*I think/believe...*) as support for her arguments, which is supported by the individualist concept of every adult being equally capable of taking part in communal debates from their personal standpoint (Su-Yen & Rubin, 2000).

[...] WALLACE: *Let me bring Mr. Trump in here. The bipartisan Open Debate Coalition got millions of votes on questions to ask here, and this was, in fact, one of the top questions that they got. How will you ensure the Second Amendment is protected (I)? You just heard Secretary Clinton's answer. Does she persuade you that, while you may disagree on regulation, that, in fact, she supports a Second Amendment right to bear arms (I)? (7)* [...]

Wallace is asking Trump if he trusts Clinton to protect the right of American citizens to own firearms (7), which is probably an attempt to represent a larger concern among citizens that this constitutional right may be under attack by the government. The question is individualistically loaded, as it presupposes that this right of citizens' should be protected (Kim et al., 1994; Raz, 1986). What is more interesting here than the question itself is that the issue of Clinton's honesty and Trump's trust in her

is considered relevant enough to be discussed. The value of mutual trust could be seen as a manifestation of the individualistic concept of equality. In a hierarchical culture trust on an individual level would be less relevant than the collective respect for people of certain positions of power. (Kim et al., 1994.)

[...] *TRUMP: Well, the D.C. vs. Heller decision was very strongly — and she was extremely angry about it. I watched (I). I mean, she was very, very angry when upheld. And Justice Scalia was so involved. And it was a well-crafted decision. But Hillary was extremely upset, extremely angry. And people that believe in the Second Amendment and believe in it very strongly were very upset with what she had to say (I). (9)*

*WALLACE: Well, let me bring in Secretary Clinton. Were you extremely upset (I)? (7)*

*CLINTON: Well, I was upset (4) because, unfortunately, dozens of toddlers injure themselves, even kill people with guns, because, unfortunately, not everyone who has loaded guns in their homes takes appropriate precautions (C). (8)*

*But there's no doubt that I respect the Second Amendment, that I also believe there's an individual right to bear arms (I). That is not in conflict with sensible, commonsense regulation (C). (10)*

*And, you know, look, I understand that Donald's been strongly supported by the NRA. The gun lobby's on his side. They're running millions of dollars of ads against me. And I regret that, because what I would like to see (I) is for people to come together and say: Of course we're going to protect and defend the Second Amendment. But we're going to do it in a way that tries to save some of these 33,000 lives that we lose every year. (C) (9)*

[...]

Wallace takes on Trump's focus on Clinton's reaction to the juridical decision, which is interesting in the sense that in politics, emotional factors are often expected to be superseded by rational, utilitarian judgement. As Braman and Kahan discussed in their paper, many political debates are driven by instrumental, quantifiable arguments (2006). Therefore, politicians' personal emotions are often disregarded as illogical and irrelevant. In individualistic communities, however, feelings are

considered more relevant than in collectivist ones (Su-Yen & Rubin, 2000), and the dialogue here incisively showcases this specific effect of individualistic values on American politics. Clinton's response does not dismiss the relevance of her instinctive reaction, but she attempts to shift the focus of the discussion to the fact that firearms are often stored unsafely (8), thus expressing her concern for the safety and benefit of everyone. She appears to be referring to responsibility being an intrinsic aspect of any right, which is an essential concept in social philosophy and liberal ethics (Epstein, 2011; Raz, 1986). Typically, individualistic people emphasise individuals' rights, but can easily overlook responsibility which is a key principle in collectivism (Su-Yen & Rubin, 2000). In this case, as argued by Clinton, the most individualistic of Americans only exercise their gun ownership right without taking proper safety precautions (10). These people may think the government should have no power in regard to how they treat their material possessions, which would be an intrinsically individualistic position (Christman, 1991; Raz, 1986).

[...] WALLACE: *Let me bring Mr. Trump back into this, because, in fact, you oppose any limits on assault weapons, any limits on high- capacity magazines. You support a national right to carry law. Why, sir?* (7)

TRUMP: *Well, let me just tell you before we go any further. In Chicago, which has the toughest gun laws in the United States, probably you could say by far, they have more gun violence than any other city. So we have the toughest laws, and you have tremendous gun violence.* (8)

*I am a very strong supporter of the Second Amendment* (I). *And I am — I don't know if Hillary was saying it in a sarcastic manner, but I'm very proud to have the endorsement of the NRA. And it's the earliest endorsement they've ever given to anybody who ran for president. So I'm very honored by all of that* (C). (9)

*We are going to appoint justices — this is the best way to help the Second Amendment* (I/C). *We are going to appoint justices that will feel very strongly about the Second Amendment, that will not do damage to the Second Amendment* (C). (10)

Trump appears to subscribe to the individualistic position on firearms, as he opposes any limits on gun ownership. He mentions the hypothetical correlation between a high prevalence of gun-related violence and firearm regulation, which can be considered a popular pro-gun argument. He then continues to emphasise his support for the Second Amendment (10), which in the American context usually translates as an argument for unlimited gun ownership. (Braman & Kahan, 2006; Raz, 1986.) A different interpretation could be that Trump's emphasis on this amendment stems from respect for common rules, which would be a collectivist stand. However, those familiar with Trump's policymaking may not lean towards this interpretation, and I am not either. As another example of the dynamic between individualistic and collectivist values, Trump also mentions the concept of honour (9), which is typically most valued in collectivist cultures (Uskul et al., 2010). Lastly, one could also argue that the respect for a constitutional law that Trump expresses could stem from collectivist values of respecting common rules and federal prerogative (Kim et al., 1994).

## **7 Discussion of the findings**

The results of the analysis align with the theory suggested by Braman and Kahan (2006) that American citizens have conflicting cultural worldviews regarding national firearm policies, particularly in terms of the desired level of firearm regulation by the government. The analysis implies that some Americans fundamentally disagree on how free the national gun market ought to be and how it should be regulated—if at all, as per Trump's arguments in the data (Transcript of the Third Debate, 2016). This addresses the question of the appropriate relationship and the distribution of power between the citizen and the state in accordance to the ratio of individualistic and collectivist ideals in each individual worldview, which originally also justified this paper utilising and applying the theory of these ideologies.

The findings of the analysis also support the hypothesis that individualistic argumentation should prove to be more prevalent than collectivist argumentation in the United States, particularly against stricter gun control. The excerpts of the data selected for presenting the analysis correspond with the

whole data, in which individualistic values appeared far more prevalent than collectivist ones (Guns in America town hall with Obama transcript (full text), 2016; Transcript of the Third Debate, 2016). Ergo, this study aligns with many others on the social orientations of individualism and collectivism and their prevalence in different part of the world (Braman & Kahan, 2006; Kim et al., 1994; Su-Yuen & Rubin, 2000). The effects of individualistic ideals show, for example, in how President Obama spoke to the members of the audience in the town hall conversation as equal, fellow Americans, implying individualistic values of equality and democracy (Kim et al., 1994). Obama, as well as Clinton, also attempted to connect with their audience on an intimate level through expression of emotions and beliefs as well as personal anecdotes, which is arguably another manifestation of the ideal of equality (Kim et al., 1994). The data also included several cases of personal anecdotes and expressions of emotions and beliefs (i.e., *I think*), which are more accepted and therefore more prevalent as argumentation techniques in individualist societies (Su-Yuen & Rubin, 2000). Throughout the data, there were also numerous cases in which gun ownership was discussed as a right, as something that American citizens are fundamentally entitled to. The concept of rights is often highlighted in liberal, individualistic societies, which typically regard the state as the one who should serve the individual, whereas in collectivist cultures the attitude is often the opposite (Kim et al., 1994; Raz, 1986).

The analysis has given support for the hypothesis of dominance of individualistic values in the American gun debate. However, the practical effects of this phenomenon still need to be discussed separately. The initial presupposition and one of the hypotheses of this paper was that if Americans are more individualists than collectivists, it should show in opposition to governmental regulations over firearm ownership. Indeed, several examples of this can be detected from the data, such as the anxiety about President Obama's government confiscating all firearms nationwide, which was, for example, brought up continuously by Cooper during the town hall conversation (Guns in America town hall with Obama transcript (full text), 2016). Relying on the presumption of the significance of the debates analysed in this study, one could conclude that a substantial amount of Americans *do* object to limiting guns in the United States on individualistic principles such as individual autonomy and non-interference (Kim et al., 1994). Furthermore, even those who support stricter gun control,

such as Obama and Clinton, still emphasised their respect and support for the right of American citizens to bear arms (Guns in America town hall with Obama transcript (full text), 2016; Transcript of the Third Debate, 2016), which aptly demonstrates how most people possess both individualistic and collectivist values that dynamically affect judgement and decision-making (Su-Yuen & Rubin, 2000). Unfortunately, more data would have been needed for this study to provide enough evidence for the hypothesis that the prevalence of individualism hinders progress in the American gun policies, so that question has to be left for further research.

This study was arguably insufficient to make justifiable conclusions about how stuck Americans are with their habitual stances, because the data did not exactly show many cases of the *perspectival* dynamics of dialogue (Graumann, 1990). Although the different responses in the dialogues were detectable, whether a shift in someone's individual perspective took place, it was not evident in the data. In order to find answers to this question one should perhaps interview the participants of the debates personally. There were certainly some instances in which the dialogue turned into a dispute over facts, for example when Cooper and Obama argued about the existence of a conspiracy (Guns in America town hall with Obama transcript (full text), 2016), which suggests some level of adamantness in these people. Nevertheless, the analysis does not prove the hypothesis that Americans get stuck with their habitual stances in terms of the gun debate, although it may allude toward such a judgement.

## **8 Conclusion**

Arguably, the most significant merit of this study is its support for Donald Braman and Dan M. Kahan's (2006) theory of Americans' incompatible worldviews in terms of their national gun debate. The analysis discovered several cases in the data in which American politicians and citizens alike base their arguments on individualistic values such as non-interference and individual autonomy. To some Americans, these individualistic principles appear to outweigh collective ones like what would be considered the common good, such as in the case of the court decision discussed in the debate



between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. Practically speaking, the dominance of individualist values over collectivist ones appears to have caused some Americans to disapprove of governmental propositions that strive to decrease the relatively high numbers of gun-related accidents and deaths in the country through gun ownership regulations. To at least some of those who oppose these actions the government is seen as a threat to American citizens' constitutional right to gun ownership, which they argue is protected by the Second Amendment of the United States Constitution.

The dispute over the Second Amendment of the Constitution is arguably the most significant culprit of the American gun debate, and solving the dichotomy probably requires a more pragmatic approach than abstract theories of the human mind, such as this study. However, my analysis provides material for the important conversation regarding the socio-psychological aspects of the conflict, and can therefore be considered a contribution to the general discussion about the psychological factors that Braman and Kahan (2006) argue to be more significant factors to the dispute than generally acknowledged. Furthermore, it is also undeniable that because these deductions are only founded on my personal semantic interpretation of a small amount of data, the results cannot be claimed to be conclusive in regard of the American gun debate as a whole, nor will any of these findings resolve the polarised, agitated debate. The issue is too vast and complicated to be resolved on a theoretical level, let alone by a Bachelor's thesis. Nevertheless, this paper has reached its objective if it manages to give its readers a new perspective to the debate, which has so far built around statistics and other instrumental arguments, and has arguably been bankrupt for a long time because of it.

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