SECURITY ALL THE WAY DOWN?

EVALUATING THE ‘VERNACULAR TURN’ WITHIN SECURITY STUDIES[1]

This article seeks to situate, evaluate and advance the recent ‘turn’ toward the ‘vernacular’ within security studies. It argues that vernacular security studies has three significant advantages over alternative ‘bottom up’ approaches. First, its conceptual emptiness allows for genuinely inductive research into public experiences, understandings, anxieties, and fears. Second, by refusing to prioritise particular populations by virtue of identity claims or socio-political (dis)advantage, it offers engagement with a potentially far richer tapestry of everyday (in)securities. And, third, such an approach avoids the universalism inherent within more explicitly cosmopolitan approaches to security. The article begins by situating vernacular security studies within relevant intellectual and (geo-)political dynamics from the late twentieth century onwards. A second section then distinguishes this approach from six alternative traditions with a similar emphasis on individual human referents: human security; Critical Security Studies; postcolonialism; feminism; ontological security studies; and, everyday security studies. The article then elaborates on the significance of vernacular approaches to security, before outlining core conceptual, methodological and ethical questions for future research.

Key words: vernacular security; everyday security; human security; critical security studies; feminism; postcolonialism; International Relations

[1] The title is adapted from Chris Brown (2014).

Introduction

A little over ten years ago, Nils Bubandt published an important, and prescient, article appealing for a reconceptualization of security: a concept, he argued, that is 'conceptualized and politically practiced differently in different places and at different times' (Bubandt 2005: 291). Focusing, specifically, upon the diverse ways in which Indonesian communities responded to national security discourse, Bubandt (2005: 276) noted that security is 'neither unchanging nor conceptually homogeneous'. What is more, he suggested, understandings of this especially powerful signifier at 'local' or 'lower' levels of analysis have considerable capacity to shape the working of (top-down) security politics. Bubandt (2005: 291) concluded by arguing for greater 'comparative analysis of the ontological grounding and political management of socially specific fears and uncertainties', advocating situated, context-specific research into 'the idioms of uncertainty, order and fear, as well as the forms of social control associated with particular discourses on security, whether these discourses are 'global', 'national', or 'local'' (Bubandt 2005: 277).

Taking inspiration from anthropological work, Bubandt (2005) advanced the term 'vernacular security' to capture such particular and specific security problematics. Although it attracted moderate early interest, the concept's visibility has clearly accelerated in contemporary research, including within empirical investigations of concrete cases of security politics. Stuart Croft and Nick Vaughan-Williams (2016), for instance, describe a 'vernacular turn' within Security Studies, emphasising the importance of the 'security speak' of individuals traditionally marginalised in stories around global politics. Such an approach, in their view, might profitably focus upon 'how citizens…construct and describe experiences of security and insecurity in their own vocabularies, cultural repertoires of knowledge and categories of understanding' (Croft and

Vaughan-Williams 2016: 11). Jarvis and Lister (2013b), similarly, employ the term in an effort to sketch the diversity of ways in which different UK publics conceptualise security and make sense of security threats. As they argue, doing this serves as a potentially useful corrective to the tendency within contemporary – including critical – scholarship to 'speak *for*, rather than *to* (or, perhaps better, *with*) 'ordinary' people and the conditions of (in)security they experience, encounter or construct in everyday life' (Jarvis and Lister 2013b: 158).

This growing interest in vernacular securities is important, in part, because it resonates with a diverse range of related research programmes on the ordinary, mundane, everyday and quotidian experiences of security as encountered and understood by citizens in the context of daily life. It speaks to a wider recognition that the stories we tell about security – and about social and political life more generally – are 'never innocent or obvious but always intensely political' (Wibben 2011: 2). And, therefore, to a common corollary of this recognition which is a demand for acknowledgement of security's heterogeneities despite the temptation toward generalization and universalization within traditional studies of this phenomenon. In this article, I argue that this mooted 'vernacular turn' has genuine potential to build on work within existing security paradigms that share a similarly 'bottom up' approach to security as something which concerns – at least at some level – individual or 'ordinary' people and their daily existence. It also, I suggest, has potential to avoid some of the pitfalls of better established attempts to take this ordinariness seriously, and to open up considerable new research areas within Security Studies.

In making these arguments, the article offers three contributions to contemporary debate. First, it provides a comprehensive account of the enormous diversity of research that seeks – in different ways, and for different purposes – to reconsider the politics of security from the bottom up. In so doing, the discussion juxtaposes literatures infrequently considered together, shedding light on pertinent similarities and differences therein, and situating this research within relevant

historical, political and intellectual dynamics.[2] Second, it offers the fullest elaboration to date of what the 'vernacular turn' in security might look like, and what it might offer to the analysis of security vis-à-vis more established and better-known paradigms. As argued below, 'vernacular security studies' has considerable potential for addressing and avoiding some of the limitations of its most proximate rivals – such as human security – and there are significant theoretical and analytical reasons for pursuing it. Third, this article also attempts an agenda-setting contribution by elaborating on a series of promising research questions, avenues and agendas for this most recent 'turn' within Security Studies. In so doing, it focuses attention on a number of significant conceptual, ethical and methodological questions it both raises and faces.

The article begins by situating 'bottom up' or people-centric work on security at the intersection of four dynamics that coalesced toward the end of the Twentieth Century: a scepticism toward systemic theorising within the discipline of International Relations; a growing concern with the global South amid the collapse of the hitherto-dominant East-West antagonism; an increasing interest in methodological and theoretical developments taking place International Relations – previously the uncontested home for research on security; and, an increased willingness amongst researchers to articulate and explicate their own normative and political commitments. The article's second section then explores six distinct literatures that have been key in contributing to, and constituting, the 'bottom up' research agenda that emerged from these dynamics: human security; the Welsh School of Critical Security Studies; postcolonial security studies; relevant feminist work; ontological security studies; and, everyday security studies. Although this discussion obviously cannot do justice to all relevant contributions to each of these literatures, it does, I argue, point to the variety, vibrancy and importance of pertinent existing work. The article then turns to the 'vernacular turn' within Security Studies, elaborating the value of such an approach for a richer mapping of global (in)securities than that offered by

[2] As detailed below these refer to work on: human security; (the Welsh school of) Critical Security Studies; postcolonial security studies; feminist security studies; ontological security studies; everyday security studies; and vernacular security studies.

alternative 'bottom up' paradigms. Such an approach has additional value, moreover, in avoiding the universalistic assumptions of more explicitly cosmopolitan approaches. And, its starting emptiness, finally, allows for greater fidelity to the diversity of everyday stories of anxiety and fear than facilitated by approaches which begin with a concrete conceptualisation of security. The article concludes by tracing several agendas for future research, reflecting, in particular on the intellectual, normative and pragmatic questions raised by vernacular security studies.

Security from the ground up

The contemporary efforts to re-theorise security that are of interest to this article must be understood and situated within an opening up across the field of Security Studies that began to gather pace in the late twentieth century. Although stories about the emergence and evolution of academic fields are precisely that – stories that select and plot particular events to the exclusion of alternative events and plots[3] – four developments of this period are of particular relevance to that which followed.

First, was a growing scepticism toward the systemic theorising that had dominated International Relations – and, by implication Security Studies, then widely viewed as the former's sub-discipline – toward the end of the twentieth century. Most famously associated with the structural realism of Kenneth Waltz, systemic theories seek to 'explain how the organization of a realm acts as a constraining and disposing force on the interacting units within it' (Waltz 1986, 60). Although positioned by its advocates as a movement away from the traditionalisms of pre-positivist approaches to international politics (Waltz 1990), neorealism's structuralism, and that of its then major competitor liberal institutionalism attracted sustained and now-familiar critique from a range of alternative approaches. Critical theorists such as Robert Cox (1996: 55) challenged their ahistorical reductionism and the search for a single, determining driver of global

[3] The continuing narration of International Relations as a discipline organized around a series of 'great debates' – as well as the increasing contestation of this particular narrative – offers a useful example (see Lake 2013).

political outcomes. Constructivists, notably Alexander Wendt (1987, 1992), elaborated on the co-constituted character of structure and agency; while post-structuralists questioned the determism within structural theorising and the exclusion of contingency from analysis of global outcomes this implied (e.g. Doty 1997). Although marshalling diverse intellectual influences, critiques such as these questioned the determinism within the 'neo-neo' debate's reified, deified, understanding of anarchy. Their significance, therefore, was in part their rendering legitimate the study of global politics – and, therefore, security – at lower 'levels of analysis' than that of the international, or even the state.

A second relevant dynamic was a growing scholarly concern with the 'global South' and its security challenges toward the end of the twentieth century. Crucial here, of course, was the collapse of Cold War bipolarity, and the concomitant re-orientation of dominant political imaginations from East-West to North-South relations (Dannreuther 2007: 20-28). Multiple drivers contributed to this, including a belated recognition of the significance of pervasive, and often less dramatic, 'structural violences' (Galtung 1969) blighting the lives of people in the global South and beyond. As the 1994 United Nations Development Project report, for example, argued:

> For too long, the concept of security has been shaped by the potential for conflict between states. For too long, security has been equated with the threats to a country's borders. For too long, nations have sought arms to protect their security. For most people today, a feeling of insecurity arises more from worries about daily life than from the dread of a cataclysmic world event. Job security, income security, health security, environmental security, security from crime – these are the emerging concerns of human security all over the world (UNDP 1994: 3).

Also significant here was a growing recognition of humanity's inter-connectedness (Axworthy 2004: 348), and the potential 'migration of nightmares' (Nassar 2010) from the global South to

the global North in a globalizing world. From such a standpoint, the lives, insecurities and fears of (other) people are of pragmatic and self-interested concern, as much as of ethical or intellectual interest.

A third, more recent, factor has been a growing concern with theoretical and methodological developments taking place beyond International Relations and Political Science. Recent years have witnessed a gradual de-coupling of Security Studies from those disciplines, with security becoming increasingly studied by those with backgrounds in fields as diverse as anthropology, sociology, development studies, geography and area studies (Croft 2008: 571). Perhaps most exciting here is the emergence of what has become known as the 'Paris School' of 'international political sociology', and its sympathetic yet critical engagement with securitization theory (see CASE Collective 2006: 449). As some of its more prominent advocates argue: 'international political sociology questions the rationales through which international relations has defined the international, political science has understood politics, and sociology has conceptualized society' (Basaran *et al* 2017: 4). This increasing eclecticism has, on the one hand, stimulated interest in the diverse internal security practices and discourses *within* states, for instance in relation to policing. It has also contributed to a relaxing of the assumptions and strictures of state-centric models of the international system through which transnational threats and risks had been previously understood and addressed.

Fourth, has been a growing confidence around the legitimacy of discussing one's own political and normative commitments within relevant published research. Many of the 'bottom-up' approaches considered below emerge from a profound normative commitment to re-centre humans within the study of security. As such, this work is often accompanied by explicit reflection on the purposes and value of such an effort, what it entails and why it might matter. Christine Sylvester's (2013: 614) appeal for greater engagement with people, for instance,

combines a normative critique of International Relations' neglect of human experiences, with an argument about the limited explanatory purchase this neglect engenders:

> Individuals aggregated into data points cannot share their voices, their power, their agendas, and their experiences with international relations. And that is my point: in IR, individuals are studied using someone else's script, not their own, which might be a reason why IR is on the back foot when it comes to anticipating people as stakeholders, actors, and participants in international relations.

Refusing to disregard the voices, power, agendas and experiences of individual people is clearly vital to Sylvester's appeal here for greater engagement with what Foucault (1980: 82) termed 'subjugated knowledges: 'a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity'. The commitment to greater reflection on the practice of reflection that this sort of reckoning often engenders is one widely associated with a feminist research ethic, summarised by Ackerly and True (2008: 695) as:

> …a commitment to inquiry about how we inquire. The research ethic involves being attentive to (1) the power of knowledge, and more profoundly, of epistemology … (2) boundaries, marginalization, and silences, (3) relationships and their power differentials, and (4) our own situatedness as researchers.

Taken together, the above four dynamics have contributed to a sustained, yet heterogeneous, attempt to decentre the statist/militaristic/positivist assumptions of Security Studies as traditionally constituted. Their importance is in providing the intellectual, historical and political backdrop for the earliest efforts to establish a 'critical security studies' programme (e.g. Krause and Williams 1997), and, therefore, the backdrop within which the human-centric approaches to

security with which we are here concerned also emerged.[4] In the following, I explore a number of responses to this opening, charting the evolution of six discrete bodies of work that have, in different ways, sought to highlight the importance of everyday experiences of (in)security. Upon this, we will be in a position to evaluate the distinctiveness of the 'vernacular turn' as a more recent engagement with these dynamics.

Rethinking security's subject

Although there exists a long history of initiatives designed to prioritise the protection of people within the international system (Axworthy 2001), the notion of 'human security' – almost certainly the best known of the approaches considered here – really came to prominence following publication of the 1994 United Nations Development Report. This report, famously, conceptualised the term as 'freedom from fear and freedom from want' (UNDP 1994: 24), arguing that this involved a shift away from the pursuit of security via militaristic technologies, and a re-casting of security's referent to individual people (UNDP 1994: 24). The concept came to constitute a central rhetorical plank within the foreign policy discourses of several mid-power states in the international system, and has offered a productive 'normative reference point for human-centred policy movements' (Newman 2016: 2).[5] For critics, however, these 'successes' – which may be tied to the concept's ambiguity[6] – offer problematic evidence of its potential for co-option in the service of more traditional security frameworks (e.g. Booth 2007: 323-325; Browning and McDonald 2011: 243-244). In other words, ''human' security may be sufficiently malleable to allow itself to be used to legitimize greater state control over society in the *name of protection*' (Shani 2011: 59, original emphasis).

[4] The question of what to include or exclude from 'critical security studies' continues as a live one. While some of the approaches considered in this article – such as Ken Booth's Critical Security Studies (capitalized) – are near-universally included under this umbrella, others – such as work on human security – are more ambiguously placed. Compare, for example, Browning and McDonald (2013) with Hynek and Chandler (2013).

[5] For an exploration of the concept's declining purchase within and beyond the United Nations, see Martin and Owen (2010: 211).

[6] I return to this in the article's following section.

In the twenty years or so since publication of the UNDP report, work around human security has proceeded in diverse directions. Newman (2001) identifies four distinct, yet overlapping, approaches: basic human needs; those with an assertive or interventionist focus; those with a social welfare or developmentalist focus; and, 'new security challenges' interpretations with an emphasis on non-traditional security threats. Kaldor (2007) distinguishes between two approaches: that of the Canadian government and the 2005 *Human Security Report* with their emphasis on political violence, on the one hand; and, the UNDP approach with its emphasis on development, on the other. Shani (2011: 57), more recently, elaborates on this distinction between 'narrow' and 'broad' approaches to human security. Where the former conceptualises human security 'negatively in terms of the absence of threats to the *physical* security or safety of individuals' (Shani 2011: 57), the latter offers 'a more 'positive' definition of human security as encompassing the vital core' of all human lives: a set of 'elementary rights and freedoms people enjoy' and consider to be 'vital' to their well-being' (Shani 2011: 57). Despite these differences, conceptions of human security clearly share a commitment to security's universality. This universality bridges a claim, on the one hand, to the existence of common human vulnerabilities, wants, or needs. And, on the other, a cosmopolitan ethics that, 'ascribes intrinsic value to each and every human being regardless of nationality, sex or any other marker of identity and difference' (Marhia 2013: 22). Each of these claims is evident in the UNDP's (1994: 22) well-known summary of the preventative aspects of human security:

> In the final analysis, human security is a child who did not die, a disease that did not spread, a job that was not cut, an ethnic tension that did not explode in violence, a dissident who was not silenced. Human security is not a concern with weapons – it is a concern with human life and dignity.

A second attempt to reconceptualise security from the 'bottom up' is found within the so-called 'Welsh School' of Critical Security Studies (CSS), the roots of which include Frankfurt School

Critical Theory and Peace Studies literatures. The focus of this approach is upon the breaking of security from its more traditional collocates such as sovereignty, order and power, and a determination to re-configure the term around emancipation (Peoples 2011: 1116-1119). Importantly, the meaning of emancipation – and its relation to security – has morphed over time here, becoming increasingly detached from any concrete, discernible set of living conditions (Browning and McDonald 2011: 245). In Ken Booth's (1991: 319) early, crucial, formulation of his ideas, for instance:

> 'Security' means the absence of threats. Emancipation is the freeing of people (as individuals and groups) from those physical and human constraints which stop them carrying out what they would freely choose to do. War and the threat of war is one of those constraints, together with poverty, poor education, political oppression and so on. Security and emancipation are two sides of the same coin. Emancipation, not power or order, produces true security. Emancipation, theoretically, is security.

More recently, Booth (2012: 70) has drawn on the writings of William Lovett – a nineteenth century Chartist – to characterise emancipation as 'bread, knowledge and freedom', referring to 'iconic struggles against oppression: struggles for material necessities ('bread'), struggles for truth in the face of dogmatic authority ('knowledge'), and struggles to escape from political and economic tyranny ('freedom')'.

This reconfiguration of security clearly shares the sort of thematic breadth associated with human security. CSS, however, has a less straightforwardly deductive emphasis for two reasons. First is a recognition of security's derivative status, in that the term's meaning is seen here to vary according to one's broader conceptual, normative or political commitments (Booth 2007: 109-110): 'What it means to be or to feel free – or relatively free – from the absence of threats in world politics depends upon whether the security issue being considered is by a political realist, a Marxist, a feminist theorist, a racist, a liberal internationalist, or whatever'

(Booth 2005: 21). Second, is an insistence that security analysis should begin with the very concrete insecurities and fears that are experienced in the everyday life of real people (Booth 2007: 98). As Booth (2012: 71) summarised in a recent interview:

> … what I am concerned with in the first instance in is removing those brutal, demeaning, and determining constraints on peoples' lives such as poverty, racism, patriarchy, war and so on. The starting point for thinking about security/emancipation must be insecurity. Insecurity is synonymous with living a determined life. Such a life is one of daily necessity not choice.

Despite their differences, work on human security and CSS alike continues to attract criticism for a perceived, and often explicit, universalism; a universalism traceable, perhaps, to an implicit and often-unacknowledged Eurocentric worldview. Such criticism comes, importantly, from post-colonial and feminist critics with a related, but distinct, approach to rethinking security from the ground up.

Work bringing a post-colonial ethos to bear on the concept of security constitutes a less prominent, but no less important, challenge to the claims of 'mainstream' security research, which 'provides few categories for making sense of the historical experiences of the weak and the powerless who comprise most of the world's population' (Barkawi and Laffey 2006: 332). Central to postcolonial work on security is, therefore, an escape from explicit or latent Eurocentric assumptions, which are still seen to haunt traditional, and perhaps even critical, research trajectories such as those above (see Acharya 1997; Ayoob 1997; Sabaratnam 2013). One means of enacting this is via 'a careful engagement with the experiences and critical political consciousness of those who are rendered as 'objects' of power … engaging with the ways in which different people politicize various aspects of their experiences, narrate the terms of their situations and critically interpret the world around them' (Sabaratnam 2013: 272). For Hönke and Müller (2012: 395), this suggests the need for richer, thicker, and more localised

understandings of security politics, whereby, 'a postcolonial methodology implies gleaning the meanings that the people we study attribute to their social and political reality'. Thus, although the idea of postcolonial security studies might, in a sense, seem oxymoronic whereby postcolonialism seeks to question the very field of security research and its established theoretical and methodological frameworks (Laffey and Nadarajah 2016: 137), this dissonance actually highlights the scope that exists for decentring Security Studies (Barkawi and Laffey 2006: 330), and engaging its inadequacy for 'addressing the security and strategic concerns of the weak, the vast majority of the people living on the planet' (Barkawi and Laffey 2006: 352).

Where the post-colonial literature on security emphasises the experiences of those within the global South, there is a similarly significant, yet far more established, tradition of feminist literatures concentrating on gendered insecurities in everyday life. Although feminist work on international security is vast and diverse (see Sylvester 2002; Sjoberg 2009; Steans 2013; Shepherd 2015), aspects of this research have long highlighted the importance of the routine, the unexceptional, the seemingly pre-political and the inconsequential within global politics (Enloe 2011); demonstrating, in other words, that 'the mundane matters' (Enloe 2011) for making sense of security. As a consequence, feminist work has been vital in highlighting how violences and insecurities are narrated, experienced and lived through assumptions, categories and behaviours that are intrinsically gendered (Sjoberg 2009). Doing so, as Shepherd (2009: 215, original emphasis) notes, requires us to ask profound questions about '*which* violences are considered worthy of study and *when* these violences occur', and, in the process, to pull attention to 'the politics of everyday violence…the violences inherent to times of peace' (Shepherd 2009, 209) that remain frequently overlooked within International Relations. The standout contribution to this literature remains Cynthia Enloe's (2014) *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, and its re-mapping of the boundaries of global politics in such a way that the lives, thoughts, and experiences of diverse women be taken seriously. Annick Wibben (2011: 103), more recently, argues for a

narrative feminist approach prioritising meaning-making practices within 'what IR considers to be marginal stories – the stories of prostitutes, poor, indigenous, and of those far from the centers of power'. In her recent work on war experiences, similarly, Christine Sylvester (2012: 484) also argues for a focus on 'real people' and their bodies, in that 'war cannot be fully apprehended unless it is studied up from people and not only studied down from places that sweep blood, tears and laughter away'.

A fifth, and more recent, effort to take seriously security's more mundane dynamics is within the growing literature on 'ontological security'. Drawing inspiration from R.D. Laing's (1960) original conception, as well as from interlocutors such as Anthony Giddens (1991), this literature emphasises the importance of the routine and taken-for-granted. To be ontologically secure is to enjoy a relatively stable sense of self-identity, and thereby to avoid the anxiety or dread that would accompany constant confrontation with life's major existential questions. Put otherwise, the ontologically secure individual, 'must be more or less able to rely on things – people, objects, places, meanings – remaining tomorrow, by and large, as they were today and the day before (Skey 2010: 720). Although some of the earliest efforts to work through this concept within International Relations sought to transpose it from individuals to states (e.g. Mitzen 2006; Zarakol 2010), more recent contributions have instead concentrated upon the lives of individual people caught up in global political dynamics. Stuart Croft (2012a: 220), for instance, employs it in an exploration of British Muslim identity, and the ways in which 'dominant notions of Britishness…have become means of insecuritizing those categorized as 'British Muslims''. In his summary, 'ontological security…focuses on the relationship between identity, narrative and security…[and is] achieved through the creation of a series of relationships performed through everyday routines and practices' (Croft 2012b: 17). Delehanty and Steele (2009), in contrast, situate their analysis somewhere beyond the state and individual, exploring how the former's identity is secured via dominant autobiographical narratives which

rely upon the exclusion of alternative conceptions of national identity. Such alternatives – which may be associated with marginalised groups – may become more visible in times of crisis leading to contestation over dominant ways of storying the (here, national) self.

Finally, there have also been several contemporary efforts to work more explicitly with the notion of 'everyday security', again out of a concern with the mundane's minutiae. Although rhetorically appealing – 'everyday security' so vividly distances the concept from its traditional elitism – the term does need to be approached a little carefully. First, because, as Jef Huysmans (2009: 197) notes, 'the everyday' functions in multiple ways within security politics, constituting both a 'realm of practice' – a site in which actions take place – and a concept employed within (often elite) security discourses, for instance in post-9/11 demands for a 'return to normality' (Jarvis 2009). Moreover, there also already exists a considerable – and diverse – body of scholarship on 'the everyday' beyond the remit of Security Studies (Stanley and Jackson 2016) with which contemporary work on security using this terminology will have to grapple. Focusing solely on work within International Political Economy, for instance, Seabrookes and Tomsen (2016) distinguish between very different literatures on everyday life, everyday autobiography and everyday politics, each with their own conceptual moorings and connotations.

Research within international political sociology has been particularly productive in thinking through 'everyday security', with much emphasis upon the work done by risk, surveillance, and security practices, techniques and technologies across daily life, whereby: 'Credit cards, CCTV, filling in forms for a myriad of services, monitoring workers, consumer data, advertising that sustains precautionary dispositions and products associated with risks (e.g. fertilizers) intertwine profiling, control and national security with daily activities' (Huysmans 2011: 377). Such work often collapses the distinction between everyday and elite politics (Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016: 44), focusing attention on 'how practices of security governance are *experienced* by different people and groups 'on the ground so to speak, and how

they are implicated in, forged through and find expression via quotidian aspects of social life' (Crawford and Hutchinson 2015: 2). Doing so enables emphasis upon the 'micro-practices of security' (Crawford and Hutchinson 2015: 3) and 'the lived experiences of individuals and groups who interact with security measures and practices' (Crawford and Hutchinson 2015: 7). In Huysmans' (2011: 377) summary, 'Many little and banal daily activities, meetings, regulations are actively part of the shaping of securitizing processes'

Bottom-up security research: An assessment

As the above suggests, there exists a rich and diverse scholarship engaging with security at the level of the banal, normal or everyday. This work emerges from – and mobilises – distinct conceptual traditions and political ambitions, although bridges between some of these approaches have been sought or attempted (e.g. Hudson 2005; Newman 2010; Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2016). Despite their meta-theoretical and normative differences, these literatures have undoubtedly shaped the parameters and direction of research and teaching within security studies. This is particularly true of work around human security which features prominently in overviews of the field, often warranting its own chapter in introductory textbooks, for instance (e.g. Collins 2013; Williams 2013). Introductions which self-identify as 'critical', moreover, draw also on many of the other above literatures (e.g. Jarvis and Holland 2015; Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2015) in exploring and contesting the boundaries of contemporary Security Studies. This success might be attributed to two broad reasons.

In the first instance, these approaches have found readerships because of their calling into question hitherto paradigmatic assumptions about security politics: because they offer, in other words, a distinctive alternative to what was previously 'mainstream'. Such assumptions include, *inter alia*: the state's capacity and willingness to act as security's provider; the pre-eminence of warfare – and especially inter-state warfare – as a contemporary security challenge; the utility of

military power and technologies for security's pursuit; the impartiality or objectivity of established ways of thinking about international security; and the conceptual association of security with survival in the absence of existential threats.

This is not, of course, to suggest that (all of) the above engagements with the everyday argue for a complete dismantling of the state/military or power/security constellation. Indeed, although the concept of human security 'raises questions regarding the relationship between the individual and the state, and regarding state sovereignty' (Newman 2004: 358), more 'assertive' versions of this approach are quite forthright in supporting military interventions *on behalf of* the security of humans located elsewhere (Newman 2001: 244). Yet, these reconfigurations of security do serve to highlight the limitations – and the partiality – of seemingly axiomatic and universal claims that are made about security. As Laura Sjoberg (2009: 192, citing her earlier work) puts it in a summary of the contribution of feminist security studies: 'objective knowledge is only the subjective knowledge of privileged voices disguised as neutral by culturally assumed objectivity, "where the privileged are licensed to think for everyone, so long as they do so 'objectively"'. Ken Booth's (2007: 35) pithy critique of political realism – 'realism is not realistic (it does not provide an accurate picture of the world)' – does something similar in the context of his CSS approach.

A second reason for the successes of these approaches is their concern to bring previously marginalised or camouflaged experiences into the centre of security analysis (Crawford and Hutchinson 2015; Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016). All of the above share a genuine effort to centre individual human subjects and their lives within the field's core debates and evolution. Although the need to escape elitism – which is evident, for critics, in both the state-centrism of traditional security studies, and in much constructivist work on security discourse – has been discussed for some time now, bottom up research of the sort pursued or advocated within the above work poses real potential to re-draw our maps of international

security. Depending on where we look, we see a highlighting within it of the experiences and insecurities of women (in some feminist research); of subjugated citizens within the 'global South' (in postcolonial work and in much human security literature); and of security professionals and bureaucrats (in literature on 'everyday security'). This attention to security's non-traditional subjects is often normatively motivated, and offers real scope for a far richer tapestry of security's variable working across different times, spaces and contexts.

Toward a vernacular turn

The large and diverse scholarship considered above clearly has value in seeking to take the individual and their own experiences of (in)security seriously. My argument here, however, is that the recent vernacular turn within security studies has significant potential for building on, and advancing these works. Although further elaboration of this turn remains needed, I suggest that the move toward the vernacular poses genuine intellectual and normative potential for future research.

As noted in the article's introduction, the concept of 'vernacular security' was introduced by Bubandt (2005), in an exploration of the sometimes-circuitous routes taken by elite security projects: circuitous because of the intervention of diverse local security conceptions and practices. Bubandt's article was important because it, first, brought attention to the multiple conceptions or constructions of security that permeate everyday life (at least in his research context). And, second, because it pointed to the importance of these 'vernacular' or localised conceptions or constructions for 'elite' politics, as well as for daily existence. Security, clearly, does not mean the same thing, nor do the same thing, in different contexts. There is no singular, universal 'logic' to security, whatever the efforts to tidy these multiplicities away beneath a single, essentialised, formula – whether 'traditional' (e.g. Wolfers 1952: 485), or 'critical' (e.g. Buzan *et al* 1998: 27). What is needed – as Browning and Macdonald (2013: 248) have argued,

is, therefore, 'to develop understandings of the politics of security that are context-specific; that recognize and interrogate the role of different security discourses and their effects in different settings; and that come to terms with sedimented meanings and logics without endorsing these as timeless and inevitable'.

Vernacular security studies, then, must approach the meaning and consequences of security discourses, practices, and technologies as specific to particular configurations of time and space. It must begin, as far as possible, devoid of ontological assumptions about the discursive and political 'work' done by (in)security practices or discourses, and investigate, instead, how (in)security is understood and experienced at all levels of socio-political life – especially as lived by non-elite communities. To truly take seriously the diversity of fears, anxieties and threats with which all of the above research paradigms are in some way interested, it is necessary to do more than to engage in meta-theoretical debate about security's referents or subjects, important though this has been in shaking the traditional foundations of Security Studies. What is needed is to speak *with* rather than *for* different publics (Jarvis and Lister 2013b: 158): to engage in conversation with those we might view as security's subjects in order to begin exploring fundamental questions around: what security *means*, how security is *articulated* or constructed in specific (research) environments, how security *feels*, what conditions or relationships *create* security and insecurity, with which *values* security is associated (for instance, order, freedom, equality or justice), and other first order questions.

From such a starting point, research might then proceed to a series of related yet more complex issues. These include, amongst others, epistemological questions relating to everyday knowledge of security: How is this articulated?; From where does such knowledge derive? What role is played by mainstream or alternative media, anecdote, hypothetical scenarios, and so forth in explanations of everyday (in)security?. The role of security in drawing, remaking and contesting socio-political boundaries offers another potentially rich stream of research here: Do

publics expect others to share their experiences and understandings of (in)security?; Moreover, do publics even care whether and how others experience such dynamics? Much might be done in the way of comparative analysis across time and space to investigate whether and how vernacular understandings of (in)security change, and if so under what conditions?; while the connections – or lack thereof – between elite and everyday constructions of (in)security – and the role of non-elite constructions of (in)security in reproducing or challenging elite-level discourses – again requires much greater work. For, as Vaughan-Williams and Stevens (2016: 41) argue in making their case for this turn: 'relatively little is known about *how* citizens conceptualize and experience 'threat' and '(in)security', whether they are aware of, engage with and/or refuse governmental attempts to enlist them in building societal resilience, and what the implications of these initiatives might be for social interaction'.

A vernacular approach to security of this sort, I suggest, has capacity to build on the work undertaken in some of the alternative paradigms discussed above, as well as scope for responding to some of their limitations. In the first instance, and most obviously, such an approach avoids the universalism implicit – and sometimes explicit – within more obviously cosmopolitan approaches such as human security. By beginning with public understandings or imaginaries rather than with pre-configured frameworks of security's key issues or sectors, such an approach takes seriously the differences between, and particularities of, lived experiences in all of their heterogeneity. There is no *a priori* reason to assume that security is equally understood – let alone equally desired – by people living in different times and places; just as there is no reason to assume people will take similar routes toward its satisfaction. This is, especially, the case given the dearth of empirical work actually investigating such dynamics until very recently. Vernacular security studies, then, should be characterized by: a recognition of variability in the work that 'security' discourses, practices and technologies do in diverse contexts; an acknowledgement that security might mean different things in different places;

acceptance that different individuals and groups will confront different threats, risks and insecurities – and that there is no inevitable hierarchy of importance or magnitude between these; and, by a desire to investigate how 'elite' security discourses and technologies are understood and responded to in diverse ways.

Second, a vernacular security studies approach also offers a potentially far richer conception of the everyday politics of security than its obvious alternatives because it eschews any pre-defined starting point. Notwithstanding their importance in forcing Security Studies to confront its traditional conceits, such an approach avoids the prioritization of gendered insecurities or subaltern experiences, for instance, that provide common foundations for feminist and post-colonial research. By beginning with the diverse experiences and worldviews of *people* – rather than with the dispossessed or disenfranchised – vernacular security research avoids reproducing constructed vulnerabilities and problematic binaries (for example, between rich and poor; north and south; insecure and secure). It also offers a significantly broader tapestry of (in)security stories for researchers to hear (or, better, co-construct), given that none of these stories and their carriers are normatively or politically privileged at the outset. Such an approach importantly, moreover, may reduce the temptation to present one's research as the 'authentic' voice of marginal or subjugated communities, given its applicability to majority or privileged populations and their own understandings of (in)security, as much as to minority or disadvantaged communities.

Because a vernacular approach to security treats this term as a fundamentally empty concept – one that is capable of 'filling' in a potentially infinite number of ways – it has seemingly counter-intuitive value in avoiding the vagueness of terms such as 'human security' which suffer from the multiple incarnations and formulations described above. Vernacular security is precisely, and only, whatever people understand or construct security to mean in the context of their everyday lives – and perhaps, therefore, might be better seen as an approach

rather than a concept. It should not be understood any more narrowly or broadly than this, and, in the process, has less scope for misunderstanding or misapplication than some of its obvious competitors. This is important, because it enables researchers to avoid the ontological – and often essentialist – assumptions of approaches such as ontological or human security. This, in turn, facilitates connections between 'bottom up' work on security and other constructivist research, and thereby opens scope for engagement with a considerable history of scholarship on how security discourses are put together and understood by their audiences (absent the elitism associated with much 'traditional' constructivist work). On top of this, the emptiness of vernacular security studies also allows researchers to circumnavigate the conservative connotations of terms such as 'human security' and the risks of (perhaps wilful) misapplication in the service of other interests given its lacking any obvious immediate instrumental value for foreign policy communities.

Finally, vernacular security studies also has real potential for adding methodological vitality to security research, including by working with and through a host of 'bottom-up' research methods from participant observation through to autoethnography[7] and focus group research. By beginning with, prioritising, and refusing to generalise across, the views and experiences of others, the approach forces engagement with issues of researcher positioning, privilege and reflexivity, encouraging – as Elizabeth Dauphinee (2010: 806) puts it in her discussion of autoethnogaphic work: 'a reflexive awareness of the [academic] self as a perpetrator of a certain kind of violence in the course of all writing and all representation'. This, in turn, encourages reflection on the limitations of the 'academic gaze [which] is an all-encompassing gaze [seeking]… to make sense of everything it encounters' (Dauphinee 2010:

[7] Autoethnography is an approach to research privileging the researcher's autobiographical experiences and knowledge as a way into greater understanding of the research problem at hand. As Ellis *et al* (2011: 1) summarise, autoethnography, 'seeks to describe and systematically analyse (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)'.

806), thus opening 'potential to re-center our attention on the individual lives and deaths of people whose names we would otherwise not know' (Dauphinee 2010: 806).

To summarise, briefly, vernacular security studies has much to contribute to the ongoing broadening and deepening of security studies. This is the case in relation to traditionally elitist configurations of the field as well as its more contemporary critical refashionings. At a minimum, research in this tradition must allow non-elites to conceptualise (in)security for themselves, as well as offering opportunity for publics to articulate their own threats and concerns in their own idioms and vocabularies. This may have potential for enabling or assisting resistance to elite-level security politics (Vaughan-Willams and Stevens 2016), but it certainly offers scope for a far richer 'map' of global (in)security by moving beyond any a priori topography whether thematic (for instance in feminist prioritisations of gendered (in)securities) or demographic (for instance in human security and CSS emphases on the world's dispossessed. This, of course, leaves considerable agenda-setting work to be done, and the following section therefore concludes this discussion by outlining opportunities for a more concrete research approach within vernacular security studies, focusing upon some of the core challenges likely faced by those that might be tempted to work with this turn.

A Vernacular Security Studies Research Agenda?

Sketching a research agenda for the 'vernacular turn' within security studies is complicated for two reasons. First, is the risk of unnecessary prescriptiveness: of closing potentially promising avenues of enquiry while prioritising particular research questions or subjects. Second, and more importantly, because vernacular security studies of the sort sketched above should begin precisely with the understandings, imaginaries, conceptions, fears and insecurities of real people as experienced and lived within daily life. Future research should, therefore, begin with, and be responsive to, precisely these understandings and imaginaries, rather than being mapped out in

advance. While mindful of these complications, decisions will inevitably have to be made about security's subjects (which people to work with), objects (which fears or insecurities to explore), and methods (how to access these if the 'vernacular turn' is to be productive of significant future research). Such decisions raise considerable conceptual, analytical, ethical and methodological questions. In this section, I elaborate on some of the more pressing and immediate of these, although resolving them fully is, clearly, some way beyond this article's scope.

Beginning with the conceptual, more work is needed to set out the meaning of, and ontological commitments associated with, 'vernacular security', and – in the process – to differentiate this from some of its alternatives such as the 'human' or 'everyday'. The local, ordinary, and informal connotations of the term 'vernacular' offer useful starting points here, but the term's reach requires consideration. For instance, do authoritative actors and their employees such as police officers, military personnel or political executives have their own 'vernacular securities', or is the term better reserved for non-elites? Its origins might require greater reflection here, too, given that Bubandt's (2005) initial framing took its cue from anthropological work: a discipline with a problematic historical relationship to security practices (Huysmans and Aradau 2014: 608). There is a risk that work conducted under a 'vernacular security' banner may lack the political cachet, or policy clout, of more established alternatives such as 'human security'. Here, the concept's limited obvious potential for immediate translatability into a set of specific indicators, policies or demands may deter some researchers, and indeed non-academic research partners and users. Although the term perhaps lacks the familiarity of alternatives such as 'everyday security', its conceptual appeal, I think, is from the greater precision it offers because of its emptiness: its ability, in other words, to focus attention simply on how (in)securities become meaningful for specific individuals. It is this distinctiveness that is likely to be key in determining the vernacular turn's value for future research.

A second set of questions which follow the above are more analytical in nature, and relate to the design and conduct of research around this term. Such questions involve the need to make decisions regarding whose vernacular securities matter (most – or, at least, most immediately), to whom, and why; and, on which spaces and times research into vernacular security should concentrate its efforts. Is the 'vernacular turn' better suited to the study of (in)security in ostensibly stable contexts absent, for instance, inter-state conflict or pandemics of violence of one sort or another which may dominate public fears and experiences. Or, should studies of vernacular security focus on highlighting (in)securities that may otherwise go unnoticed in situations where specific forms of violence do dominate attention, as has been the case in much feminist work on war, for example? The value of the former approach is in its contribution to the broadening of existing understandings of security: of highlighting security's quotidian, everyday manifestations. The value of the latter is in its capacity to problematise seemingly self-evident security problematics.

Related to – and emerging from – the above, are questions about the relationship between vernacular security studies and other research agendas with an ostensibly similar ethos. What complementarities are there, and how might overlap be avoided, between work on vernacular, everyday and human security, such that we might avoid constant reinvention of security's 'wheel'? As important are questions about how vernacular security studies might work with, draw upon, and – fundamentally – learn from research practices and findings in other fields of study, for instance in relation to work on oral histories, or autoethnographic studies situated in anthropological or sociological paradigms? What are the opportunities – practical as well as intellectual – for interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary research – and what are the most appropriate strategies, forms and outlets for disseminating work of this sort?

Third, are methodological questions about how best to capture the types of imaginary, experience and fear in which advocates of vernacular security studies tend to be most interested.

Existing work in this ‘tradition’ has tended to employ focus group or interview methods, typically followed by content or discourse analysis of the spoken knowledge produced in those environments (e.g. Mythen *et al* 2009; O’Loughlin and Gillespie 2012; Jarvis and Lister 2013a; Vaughan-Williams and Stevens 2016). Such a strategy fits with the verbal connotations of a ‘vernacular’ turn, but suffers from at least three limitations. First, it is entirely reliant upon the ability and willingness of research participants to articulate their experiences, emotions, values and so forth – and, perhaps, to recollect these in some way. Although it is the richness rather than the ‘truth’ of such articulations and recollections that matters most to many of the above researchers, such an approach may be better suited to working with particular communities than others. A second issue with this type of work is its limited capacity to capture the broader – non-linguistic – aspects of (in)security, rendered more readily visible, for instance, by ethnographic approaches emphasising performativity or the importance of non-verbal communication. A third issue is the artificiality of such research environments which may take place in unfamiliar settings, be structured according to questions established by the researcher, and be otherwise impacted by reminders that one is, indeed, partaking in a research project, such as the presence of recording equipment or requests for completion of consent forms, and any other research paraphernalia.

Such challenges – sometimes discussed in the context of the ‘researcher effect’ are, of course, far from unique to this sort of work. They do, however, raise broader questions regarding the linguistic or cultural capacity – or capital – of researchers engaged in work around vernacular securities. Possible strategies to address some of these include working with ‘participant researchers’ recruited from within communities of interest to a research project, or engaging such communities as partners in initial decisions around research design including the formulation of research questions and identification of research sites. Yet, all of this, at least implicitly, suggests that the ‘vernacular turn’ will be a primarily qualitative one, which raises a

further set of questions about the desirability and scope for quantification here. In either case, long-standing questions around validity and reliability will have to be confronted by those drawn to this turn (see Milliken 1999); as will issues around the criteria by which work within vernacular security studies might be evaluated – whether epistemological, political, aesthetic or some combination thereof.

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, are the ethical questions raised by research into vernacular securities, and the importance of the researcher/researched relationship that is fundamental to this 'turn' (e.g. Hammersley and Traianou 2012; Miller *et al* 2012). Such questions have been debated at length elsewhere, but centre here on the consent of those subject to this turn: those whose stories, in other words, are sought by researchers. Such issues include: how to inform participants of the research purposes; how precisely to include participants in research design decisions; what consent is owed to those mentioned – but not themselves present – within research on vernacular securities; whether – and how – to protect the anonymity of research participants, where appropriate, and – conversely – whether and how to credit participants as co-producers of research; and, finally, questions of dissemination and purpose, including how best to manage demands relating to research impact or relevance without sacrificing the integrity of a piece of vernacular security research. Such questions cannot be resolved here and perhaps cannot be resolved beyond the parameters and negotiations of specific research projects. They will, however, need confronting if this 'turn' manages to capitalise on the potential it has for those concerned with enhancing the extent of 'bottom up' research on security.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the recent, and ongoing, 'vernacular turn' within security studies has genuine potential to generate alternative, and perhaps richer, understandings of the politics of

security. The turn's importance, I argued, derives from its concern to centre non-elite individuals – or 'ordinary' citizens – within security research, and to treat their understandings and experiences of the (in)security challenges of everyday life as vitally important. In making this argument, the article sought, first, to situate the vernacular turn within relevant (geo-)political and intellectual dynamics; second, to distinguish it from a number of alternatives with a shared concern with individual (in)security; third, to elaborate on this turn's significance; and, fourth, to sketch possible future research agendas for those attracted to its possibilities. This, as suggested in the article's introduction, offers three contributions to contemporary debate. First, it provides a detailed and comprehensive account of the diversity of research that seeks – in different ways – to rethink security from the 'bottom up', and the value and limitations of such research. Second, it offers the fullest elaboration to date of what the 'vernacular turn' in Security Studies might look like, and what it might offer to the analysis of security vis-à-vis more established paradigms. Third, it offers an agenda-setting contribution by elaborating on the significant conceptual, ethical and methodological questions raised by this new 'turn'.

Despite the importance of greater engagement with the voices, experiences, imaginations and fears of 'ordinary' people, further work on vernacular securities will also, finally, have to negotiate two further and substantial challenges raised by this 'turn'. First, is that contributing to an already diverse research agenda with at least six proximate approaches (considered above) risks further fragmenting and thereby weakening a significant body of broadly sympathetic research (see also Sylvester 2013). Indeed, the existing heterogeneity of 'bottom up' work on security already potentially renders it rather more easily ignored or dismissed than its advocates might hope (see also Sylvester 2013). A second challenge is that this scholarship will – like its alternatives – be primarily conducted amongst academics and researchers situated in the global North; a situation which poses obvious normative as well as epistemological questions. Neither of these challenges should prove terminal to this 'turn'. Although effort will be needed, each of

these will be capable of address by the types of networking, capacity building, and forging of (interdisciplinary) relationships that contribute to the ultimate success of any intellectual or critical projects This article, then, offers a first attempt to facilitate such work, and to outline some of the directions it may take going forward.

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