

Vernacular Securities and Their Study: A Qualitative Analysis and Research Agenda

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Abstract

This article draws on primary focus group research to explore the differing ways in which UK publics conceptualise and discuss security. The article begins by situating our research within two relevant contemporary scholarly literatures: The first concerns efforts to centre the ‘ordinary’ human as security’s referent; the second, constructivist explorations of security’s discursive (re)production. A second section then introduces six distinct understandings of security that emerged in our empirical research. These organised the term around notions of survival, belonging, hospitality, equality, freedom and insecurity. The article concludes by exploring this heterogeneity and its significance for the study of security more broadly, outlining a number of potential future research avenues in this area.

Keywords

constructivism, critical security studies, human security, insecurity, security, vernacular security

This article contributes to contemporary scholarship on the concept of security. It does so by highlighting and seeking to address this literature’s propensity 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.¹ Drawing on findings from a recent series of focus groups, the discussion concentrates on three questions. First, how do different publics understand and discuss security (and insecurity) within the contemporary

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UK? Second, what does the language of security do when employed in everyday contexts? And, third, what might an engagement with these public understandings contribute to the academic study of this concept?

This article begins with a brief overview of two prominent contemporary themes within relevant scholarship. The first, associated with human security and ‘Welsh School’ Critical Security Studies (CSS), concerns efforts to situate the human individual as security’s referent. Despite their significant differences, we argue these literatures contribute a powerful ontological and normative justification for escaping the state-centrism that continues to dominate mainstream studies of security. The second literature involves explorations of security’s discursive (re)production through social practices such as language. Associated with constructivist and poststructuralist research, the significance of this work is in its identification of security’s ontological unfixity. We conclude the section by pointing to a lack of conceptual or empirical research combining these insights and outlining the value such work might pose.

This article’s second section begins our effort to address this lacuna. Following a discussion of the underpinning research project and its methodology, we offer a detailed, qualitative account of our findings. Here, we explore six distinct images of security that emerged in our focus groups, in which the concept was organised around notions of survival, belonging, hospitality, equality, freedom and insecurity. These images are discussed as examples of that which Bubandt terms, ‘vernacular securities’.² These refer to socially specific articulations of security that are contextually and historically situated. In the discussion below, we seek to demonstrate how these localised conceptions of security take shape in relation to concrete experiences of uncertainty and insecurity, on the one hand, and imagined social and political cartographies, on the other.³

This article’s third section begins by arguing that the heterogeneity we chart within public conceptions of security ought to stimulate circumspection towards the universalist claims traversing much human-centred discussion of this term. We then suggest that public efforts to speak security are significant for two further reasons: First, because they contribute to the positioning of the self within external material, social and political worlds and, second, because they pose potential for revealing hitherto under-explored functions of this language, including its ability to stimulate efforts at empathy towards others. This article’s conclusion, finally, argues that academic studies of security might benefit from further research of this kind for scholarly, policy-related and political reasons.

Security: referents and realities

The fact that security is a much-contested term in academic debate is something of an understatement, wherever one stands on the essential nature of this contestability.⁴ Although beyond the scope of this article to review these ‘bulging archives’⁵ in their entirety, this section highlights two strands of research, which point to the importance of examining ‘lay’ conceptions of security. These are recent attempts to refocus security’s referent away from the state, and efforts to reconceptualise security as social or discursive construction.

Bringing people into the study of security

One of the most prominent attempts to decentre the state within contemporary Security Studies emerged with the publication of the 1994 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report.⁶ Although not entirely unprecedented,⁷ the report proved hugely influential in popularising the notion of 'human security' among policy and academic audiences.⁸ This basic needs-based approach to security⁹ as 'freedom from want and freedom from fear'¹⁰ affords similar significance to long-term, structural harms, as to the sudden, disrupting challenges to life (notably war and the threat of war) that had hitherto-dominated security analyses.¹¹ Seven distinct categories of threat were highlighted in the report, explored further in subsequent work on this concept, to indicate the plurality of potentially relevant harms.¹²

This effort to refigure dominant notions of security combines a claim to the centrality of the individual (socially located) human as security's appropriate referent,¹³ with an appeal to the universality of human needs, and, hence, security.¹⁴ Importantly, discussions of human security also incorporate a strong normative emphasis, with the concept's value tied, for some, to its power for critique as much as to any concrete policy agenda it facilitates.¹⁵ This critical ethos, for advocates, spans its capacity to prioritise and challenge non-traditional, non-military and violences and to problematise views of the state as security's guarantor.¹⁶

A related, yet largely distinct effort to centre individuals within the study of security occurs in the 'Welsh School' of CSS.¹⁷ Building on Ken Booth's initial effort to rethink security around emancipation,¹⁸ proponents of CSS share a number of common commitments with advocates of human security.¹⁹ Among the most significant of these include taking concrete sources of human insecurity as a starting point for scholarship;²⁰ acknowledging security's subjective and objective dimensions;²¹ a rejection of individualistic atomism given the significance of human relationships for the realisation of personal security;²² an explicitly normative stance towards security as a desirable (if, here, never fully achievable) condition;²³ and, most importantly for this discussion, emphasising the significance of people over states as security's final referent.²⁴ In contrast to the human security literatures, however, advocates of CSS tend to view security's value in primarily instrumental terms.²⁵ Security is, here, desirable not as an end in itself. Rather, as a *means* to enhancing life opportunities, especially the opportunity to choose to live otherwise.²⁶ As Booth summarises, security, 'frees people(s) to some degree to do other than deal with threats to their human being'.²⁷

Constructing (in)security

Constructivist thought has had a major impact on contemporary international relations (IR), Security Studies and beyond.²⁸ Although a broad, fluid, designation,²⁹ constructivist approaches coalesce around a common ontological claim to the social constitution of reality and our knowledge thereof.³⁰ Viewed thus, there exists no direct correspondence between the world's subjects, objects and institutions, on the one hand, and their meaning or significance, on the other. The behaviour, identities and interests of actors (self and other) are produced, enabled, and conditioned via social interaction.³¹ Thus,

where an extra-discursive, material, reality is posited in much constructivist literature, it is viewed typically as having limited independent causal impact upon social processes.³² As such, conditions of security or insecurity are not reducible to any brute materiality, for, as Wendt illustrates: 'Five hundred British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the US than five North Korean ones because of the shared understandings that underpin them'.³³

Two particular strands of this literature merit mention for their influence on recent security debate. The first is the 'Copenhagen School' approach,³⁴ with its attention to the discursive mechanisms through which issues are created as security challenges – or 'securitised' – by appropriately positioned actors.³⁵ Here, security is reconceptualised not as a 'thing' but as a speech act.³⁶ A 'particular kind of social accomplishment',³⁷ in other words, by which existential threats are designated to posited referent objects. A second strand of literature – poststructuralist security studies – not only works with a broader conception of the discursive as constitutive of the social and its attendant identities, threats and risks.³⁸ It also differs from thinner versions of constructivism in the attention it places on moments of incompleteness, ambiguity and exclusion within efforts to stabilise security discourses.³⁹ David Campbell's work on US foreign policy offers one prominent example.⁴⁰ As, more recently, does Hansen's reading of Western discourses on the Bosnian war as, variously, Balkan issue or genocide.⁴¹ Thus, in spite of their (considerable) differences, what Copenhagen School and poststructuralist literatures share with other constructivist work is an engagement in 'performative' as well as 'analytical' conceptual analysis:⁴² a desire, in other words, to ask not only what security means but also what it *does* when articulated.

Vernacular (in)securities

The above brief overview fulfils two functions. The first is to highlight a contemporary effort, particularly prominent within the CSS and human security projects, to reorient security analysis around the everyday experiences of people. This is grounded, we suggest, in two shared, and powerful, arguments. The first concerns a recognition of the state's limitations as a provider of security within and outwith its borders. Here, an ontological claim about the diversity of states⁴³ combines with an acknowledgement of the numerous examples of state implication in violences: direct or enabling, internal or external and military or non-military.⁴⁴ The second argument is a normative appeal to amplify the voices of marginalised actors through the provision of space for people to speak (in)security as a means of contesting and altering oppressive structures and practices.⁴⁵ Here, a cosmopolitan ethics marries with a recognition of security's discursive power for galvanising political interest in a range of sources of insecurity: traditional and otherwise.⁴⁶

The review's second aim is to demonstrate the significance of broadly constructivist literatures for rethinking security's ontological fixity. These literatures, we argue, encourage a redirecting of the analyst's gaze away from security's specific content and towards its production, meaning and enunciative functions. In so doing, they add conceptual sophistication, first, to our understanding of how security threats emerge for particular actors in specific historical contexts.⁴⁷ And, second, to our understanding of how

designations of (in)security are implicated in other social dynamics such as identity formation (individual and collective) and the (re)production of political exclusions.⁴⁸

This article argues it is both possible and desirable to combine these two insights. Despite the lack of existing empirical research attempting to do so, there is considerable value, we suggest, to be gained from exploring ‘everyday’ understandings of (in)security as articulated by different publics. Epistemologically, scholarship of this sort poses potential to significantly broaden our knowledge of security’s social meanings and roles. It offers an opportunity, put otherwise, to offer a fuller genealogy of how and by whom security is spoken, performed and experienced away from the elites that typically capture constructivist attention.⁴⁹ Normatively, research into vernacular securities addresses the concomitant risk that other voices – and, ultimately, other insecurities – are marginalised, camouflaged or excluded by a focus on the speech acts or discourses of structurally privileged actors. Here, Booth’s critique of the Copenhagen School approach may legitimately be extended to much other relevant constructivist research:

Securitization studies therefore suffer from being elitist. What matters above all for the school is ‘top leaders’, ‘states’, ‘threatened elites’ and ‘audiences’ with agenda-making power. Those without discourse-making power are disenfranchised, unable to join the securitization game.⁵⁰

In sum, our concern in this article is to offer a space for lay understandings of security to enter academic debate. And, in the process, to explore from where these understandings derive and how they are articulated. While this implies an ontological scepticism towards the state-centrism implicit even within much constructivist work,⁵¹ it is these epistemological and normative ambitions that motivate our discussion. This is not, of course, to argue that ‘top-down’ analyses of dominant security discourses and practices have no place within Security Studies. Rather, that there is – or there should be – space for distinct, and distinctive, ‘bottom-up’ research agendas of the sort offered here too.

Vernacular securities in UK discourse

The primary research on which this article draws derives from a project examining public attitudes towards security, citizenship and anti-terrorism policy within the UK.⁵² The project employed a focus group methodology organised around two primary variables: ethnicity (Black, White, Asian) and geographical residence (metropolitan, non-metropolitan). Fourteen groups in total were conducted throughout 2010 in the following sites across England and Wales: London and Birmingham (as metropolitan sites), and Oldham, Swansea, Llanelli and Oxfordshire (as non-metropolitan sites). Eighty-one individuals participated in the research: 48 women and 33 men; 31 Asian participants, 28 White and 22 Black. Participants were selected via a purposive sampling strategy and recruited through a combination of enumeration, snowballing and organisation sampling techniques.⁵³ Each group employed open-ended questions to maximise opportunities for individuals’ own attitudes to come to the fore.⁵⁴ Although follow-up questions varied according to a group’s conversation, five core questions on security and insecurity structured each discussion: (a) What kinds of security threats do people in this country face? (b) What are the main issues or threats to your own security? (c) In what ways do you

think threats to security have changed over time, if any? (d) What does security mean to you? (e) Who do you think is responsible for providing security?

Ethnicity and geography were selected as independent variables for this research for several reasons. First, where this project also explored public attitudes to anti-terrorism policy, these variables were chosen to complement the emphasis on religious (and particularly Muslim) identities in much existing work on this policy context.⁵⁵ Second, these variables also enable analysis of the extent to which different communities imagine or experience (in)security differently, and, indeed, the significance of historical legacies (of migration, discrimination, policing, and so on) within these experiences. Third, the selection also represented a pragmatic choice for reasons of methodological feasibility given the size of this research project. A range of other variables, of course, could also legitimately have been chosen. Some, such as gender, were included as secondary criteria, as indicated above. Others, such as socio-economic status or age were excluded because of the trade-off between parsimony and complexity that characterises research design.⁵⁶

Given that the vernacular securities discussed below derive from a project that also explored attitudes to anti-terrorism policy, it is possible a researcher effect runs through our findings.⁵⁷ That is, as our focus groups were recruited in this particular research context, the prominence of terrorism and anti-terrorism policy as conversation topics therein may be exaggerated. The absence of *ceteris paribus* conditions within qualitative research of this sort prohibits any complete denial of this possibility.⁵⁸ At the same time, we note, first, that the conversations on security from which this article draws took place prior to discussion of (anti-)terrorism within our groups. And, second, that neither researcher was aware of a pull towards these particular issues throughout the project. Indeed, in response to our core questions noted above, participants identified a very broad range of security threats. These included terrorism and anti-terrorism powers, but extended far beyond this to incorporate, *inter alia*, the impacts of migration on local communities, reductions in state benefits, unemployment, policing strategies and direct forms of discrimination.

While the design and sample size of this project render claims to statistical representativeness untenable, the focus group method is a useful one for qualitative research for a number of reasons. Specifically, it allows analysis of the following: how individuals understand and articulate (in)security; group dynamics within conversations on (in)security; the rigidity or flexibility of public views on this topic (for instance, do these change in conversation); and the significance of particular knowledge sources within public understandings of, and opinions on, (in)security (are these, for instance, articulated by reference to films, media coverage, personal or vicarious experience and so forth).⁵⁹ Following completion of each focus group, our transcripts were subjected to descriptive content analysis. From this, a thematic framework was produced, out of which were identified the six 'vernacular securities' explored below.⁶⁰ In an effort at fidelity towards our findings, our analysis of these reproduces participants' own words as directly as possible.

Six images of security

Table 1 summarises the six conceptions of security presented to us within our focus groups. The first, and most straightforward, account of security provided by our participants

formulated this term as a synonym for survival. In this conception, the individual person surfaced without exception as security's relevant referent. Minimally, security was simply re-described as the continuation of one's existence: 'security means like to protect your life'.⁶¹ More detailed explications fleshed out this understanding by cataloguing the diversity of basic human needs – typically deemed universal – required for life. For one participant, for example: 'I think there are objective standards that everybody should have. A basic standard of water supply, and food supply ... of care, healthcare, basic standard in housing, basic standard of living ... those are what we need'.⁶²

A second view of security – as belonging – shifted the term's focus from the meeting of basic human needs to the satisfaction of feeling situated in a particular spatial or human community. As one participant put it, security relates to: 'the ability to feel comfortable where you are ... from ... walking down the street in a city if you're safe to ... feeling comfortable with the people that you're with and in your job situation and in your

Table 1. Public views of security: a typology.

Security as:	Key features	Internal variances	Example
Survival (plus)	Assured existence Materiality of needs Presumed universal Parsimony	Continuation of life Meeting of basic human needs	'Everybody should have [a] basic standard of water supply, and food supply ... of healthcare [and] housing'
Belonging	The comfort of needs met Familiarity with physical and human surroundings	Positive accounts Negative accounts	'the ability to feel comfortable where you are ... from walking down the street in a city ... to feeling comfortable with the people you're with ... and in your job situation and in your life situation, with your health'
Hospitality	Positive recognition by others	None encountered	'I think if we feel welcome we'd probably feel more secure'
Equality	Social, political and/or legal parity between individuals and communities	Of opportunities Of treatment	'you are secure if you are treated the way others are treated without ... any preferential treatment'
Freedom	Self-authorship within legally- circumscribed parameters	Positive freedoms Negative freedoms	'I equate [security] ... to freedom really; to feeling that you can do what you want and be where you want within the confines of the law ... without fear'
Insecurity	Security's implication in undesirable or unjust social/political practices	Primarily around agency: accounts centred either on media or governmental elites	'[When] they say we're going to increase security. I think of martial law'

life situation, with your health'.⁶³ For another, similarly: 'Security means feeling happy where you are, feeling that, you know, there's no one to threaten you ... you're not feeling like, oh, I can't [go] there ... I don't belong there'.⁶⁴ Discussions of security in terms of belonging were couched, by some, in positive terms, with the importance of familiarity with one's locale a prominent concern: 'It's [security is] your surroundings though, isn't it? When you come to the local community, I mean, you feel safe'.⁶⁵ Others, in contrast, framed this understanding negatively, via comparison with perceived spaces of insecurity:

if you're living a bit outer, where maybe you've got all white or just all black [people] or whatever ... you think, there are eyes following me ... they're not going to say anything obviously, but you do feel that, kind of, sense of they're watching'.⁶⁶

If less tangible than expressions of security as survival, the importance of this sense of inclusion was profound for many participants. In the words of one Asian individual:

Security is like ... I would really like to belong somewhere, you know, like my house or my town or my country and be accepted and that sort of thing. I don't feel [this, even though ...] I've been here for forty years ... I don't have the security of belonging ... I'm a Paki middle-aged woman. That's how they see me, Paki.⁶⁷

This view of security is explicitly relational, inasmuch as interaction with others constitutes a prerequisite for its achievement. At the same time, advocates of this understanding typically imposed only minimal demands on people nearby. In the words of a participant in Swansea, for instance: 'For me, security is when you can be anywhere ... even if people don't welcome you and greet you, but at least you can feel comfortable in that place. That's security, I would say'.⁶⁸

Third, a number of non-White participants in our study, in particular, presented a more expansive account of security by employing the language of hospitality.⁶⁹ In so doing, this term was organised around a need for others to recognise one's own right to belong in a shared social space. As one individual argued: 'I think if we feel welcome we'd probably feel more secure'.⁷⁰ This linkage of security to hospitality was frequently couched in discussions of racial prejudice or ignorance. A particularly powerful example emerged in one individual's account of her recent relocation from London to Swansea. Following a group discussion of racism as a driver of insecurity, the participant recounted her recurrent experience of having to define and defend moving to this new home:

They said why are you here in Swansea? I said, I've just come to stay like everybody else. And he said, are you asylum seeker? I said, no. Are you refugee? I said, no. Are you student? No. Why are you here then? ... [W]e all have names. Either you're asylum seeker, either you're a refugee, either you're a student. That's all you can live in Swansea.⁷¹

A fourth conception, again more prominent among non-White demographics, connected security to equality. As one participant put it: 'To my own understanding, you are secure if you are treated the way others are treated without ... any preferential treatment or whatever ... if there is equality, everybody would feel secure and safe'.⁷² For a

participant in a different group, similarly: 'security is equality, to have all the same rights. You are as a human. There shouldn't be any difference between the black, white, foreigner ... and these things. This is the meaning of security'.⁷³

Fifth, a number of participants attached security to the category of freedom, departing markedly from recent dualisms between the two values.⁷⁴ For one individual, for instance: 'I equate it [security] ... to freedom, really; to feeling that you can do what you want and be where you want within the confines of the law ... without fear'.⁷⁵ Another male in London described security in similar terms, self-identifying as a Muslim in voicing a fear of racial profiling articulated by a number of those participating in our discussions:

I think liberty and freedom is an essential component of actually feeling secure ... I am quite wary now, especially with the sort of hype on Muslims per se, I'm quite wary about an attack on my freedom or individual liberty, in the sense that I might walk down the street one minute, a black van might just come and I am taken away, whisked away by MI5 or MI6. So, this is the sort of ... it is a fear, because I'm kind of quite outspoken in a sense, but then again I have to sort of [limit] what I say because of the possible repercussions. So, for me to feel safe I need to know that my liberty and my sort of liberty is still alive. It's a real component.⁷⁶

Here, security's *political* significance becomes clear, where feared repercussions to one's own views are met with a self-imposed silence. Those arguing similarly – particularly in the context of contemporary counter-terrorism powers – offered numerous examples of self-censorship because of anxieties such as these. Such practices stretched from an outright withdrawal from political debate, as in the above, to more mundane, yet conscious, decisions within everyday interactions:

If we're talking on the phone or chatting online, we avoid taking this terminology, bomb and this and that. Why? There might be someone recording that. They might be keeping an eye on it. And if we mention those terms, they'll think, yeah, they were talking about that.⁷⁷

A final account of security offered to us departed dramatically from the desirable connotations of the above five. Here, a number of individuals responded to the term by highlighting its negative associations, voicing fears that security's invocation may legitimise the suspension of (frequently their own) civil and political rights. In one group with Asian participants in Birmingham, for example, security was directly associated with martial law:

Participant 1: Well, that's security to me, it's an affiliation with military, martial law. That's instantly what I believe [when] they say we're going to increase security. I think of martial law.

Participant 2: I see it as suspicion, from the point of view, to be secure.

Participant 3: I see it as an excuse.⁷⁸

When discussion in this group turned to the recent installation of surveillance cameras around two predominantly Muslim suburbs of Birmingham, participants expanded this account by describing the insecurity potential of security technologies.⁷⁹ As the following indicates, these cameras (funded by anti-terrorism monies), raised significant questions over the relevant security referents for inhabitants of these areas:⁸⁰

- Participant 1: But you guys, don't you think it's more safe and secure, they're doing that. I mean, it's our housing, isn't it?
- Participant 2: No, it's an invasion of privacy.
- Participant 1: It's an invasion of privacy, but there is some sense of security, because there are some loonies out there. Not the cameras, but just generally, you know, if there is tight security.
- Participant 2: It's not for our security though, it's for others.⁸¹

Speaking also to this more sceptical view of security, finally, a number of participants also expressed concerns over the representation of purported security risks. One individual, for example, contrasted the depiction and reality of threats such as terrorism, arguing such risks were manipulated for political gain:

I think there is this pulling of the levers to severe, not so severe, high risk etc ... because when you count the figures of the people that are arrested and the huge media hype by the tabloid newspapers when somebody is arrested, out of 100% of people who are arrested 94% are released without charge, 6% are convicted of any terrorism related offences. So, when you sort of tally up the figures the sort of media hype really doesn't make much sense.⁸²

In the words of a participant from a separate London-based group, similarly:

[Y]ou can't feel secure unless you have trust for your institution and the people around you ... I mean the one terrorist, or well the big terrorist event that happened in London, I think allows the government to kind of manipulate, and the media kind of to manipulate ... [to] take that fear and say, don't worry, you're secure, trust us to take care of you.⁸³

Those with longer memories, finally, couched their concerns over contemporary security technologies within comparative historical contexts:

What concerns me with security is it gives a government that's in trouble all sorts of open-handed ways, or closed-handed ways. Now, I go back to the miner's strike. Now that we are going through the history, the whole of MI6 was mobilised to fight them. I mean, these are facts. They'll say, oh don't be so stupid – [but] they did.⁸⁴

Vernacular securities and their study

This section of our article considers the implications of the above findings. It does so by asking, first, what does security *mean* in (UK) public discourse? And, second, what does security *do* when invoked or enunciated?

From security to securities

At the risk of stating the self-evident, our empirical research indicates considerable heterogeneity in public conceptions of security across the UK. Although the statistical recurrence of the six above images is of limited relevance with this project's sample size,

none were restricted to solely one individual or group. Not only, therefore, do individuals perceive or experience different security threats in the context of their everyday lives, as borne out in quantitative studies.⁸⁵ But, more significantly, the very meaning of the term security appears itself inherently contested within public as much as within academic discourse. We encountered very little evidence of the pertinence of geographical location or ethnic identity as factors directly underpinning an individual's own conception of security. And, as with related research, we encountered numerous examples of participants negotiating two or more of the six above images, pointing, importantly, to the term's malleability within public life.⁸⁶

This heterogeneity indicates security's ontological (and normative) precariousness in everyday life within the UK. This is important, we argue, because it should engender further circumspection towards the claims to universality that run through much of the human-centred literature identified in the opening section. Unless we are to resort to a purely objective approach to security⁸⁷ – a comparatively rare position in contemporary debate – it is important to recognise that security both means and *is* very different things for different people. As Booth argues, 'security is a condition that is not difficult to define; in each case, the starting-point should begin in the experiences, imaginings, analyses, and fears of those living with insecurity'.⁸⁸ At the level of the individual, then, our findings suggest that how security is experienced, what is required for security's satisfaction, whether security is even a desirable phenomenon; all this, and more, appears remarkably more varied than is implicit (and, at times, explicit) in recent efforts to foreground the human within this term's analysis.

Second, the above images of security also evidence a considerable proximity between public and contemporary scholarly discourse. As our findings indicate, public conceptions of security as survival, and associated efforts to catalogue its preconditions, bear striking similarity to notions of human security. Efforts to link security to freedom, and the import of human communities raised by a number of our participants, evoke CSS literatures and the emphasis on emancipation therein. Anxieties over the manipulation of security threats by political or media elites do likewise with Copenhagen School accounts of securitisation, while concerns with security technologies and professionals highlight the pertinence of Paris School discussions of insecurity for some within the UK. Given the diversity and malleability of vernacular securities we encountered, it is unsurprising, but important, that no single conceptual apparatus resonated more powerfully than others even within our small sample size. That said, the capacity of each of these diverse contemporary views to capture public anxieties, fears and visions of the socio-political adds credibility, we argue, to their common concern with rethinking security beyond its traditionally narrow parameters. As the above indicates, very few participants in our research explicated or even implied an account of security wedded to the statist/militaristic parameters of Security Studies as traditionally constituted.⁸⁹

Significant here too, finally, are security's 'adjacent concepts':⁹⁰ those terms that connect this particular concept to others through relations of opposition, complementarity or equivalence. Across our focus groups, as the above suggests, we encountered a public willingness and ability to collocate security with a diversity of different values. Some, such as survival and freedom, will be familiar to students of security of varying

persuasion. Others, particularly hospitality and equality, have been far less explored in scholarly expositions of this term and its distinctiveness vis-à-vis other social or political values. This, we argue, further indicates the value of greater engagement with public articulations for those reflecting on security's appropriate conceptual, discursive and political location.

From meaning to doing security: positionality and empathy

The constructivist literatures introduced at this article's start are important, we argued, for exploring security's performative functions as much as for tracing competing interpretations of the term.⁹¹ Pursuing this insight, we argue now that each of the six images encountered in our research does more than 'fill' this particular signifier. In everyday discourse, the language of security has important constitutive roles, such that things happen when it is employed. Two such examples are here explored.

In the first instance, the above images of security all offer attempts to position the speaking self within the external world. Participants in our focus groups, we suggest, discussed and articulated this concept as a way of establishing and locating their own subjectivity, albeit in different ways. So, discussions of security as survival, for instance, may be read as an attempt to position the self as a corporeal subject in possession of somatic and (for some) extra-somatic needs. Focused, primarily, on the individual as security's referent, participants invoked this understanding as a means of drawing attention to their own requirements for the continuation of life. In the words of one individual: 'To have security, like a family that loves you and a house to live in and a job that pays you money that you can live on it, is really important to everyone I think'.⁹² Discussions of security as belonging, on the other hand, represented an exposition of ontological security,⁹³ an effort to articulate the need for a stable and rooted sense of identity. As the analysis above demonstrates, however, this particular image was most frequently invoked by virtue of its absence; the language of security employed to express a desire, not experience. As one participant put it:

You know, they've got this mentality that the moment they see you, you're a black person or you're from an ethnic minority, they've come here for the benefits. They're talking about this all the time. They've come for the housing, come for ... all this, which is not entirely true.⁹⁴

Descriptions of security drawing on notions of hospitality worked to position the self socially by reflecting on the responsibilities owed to, and legitimately expected from, others (whether met or otherwise). As with discussions of belonging, this language was most frequently employed to describe security's absence; often with reference to perceptions of differential treatment between communities. As an Asian participant told us:

I have experience of Polish people, many Polish people. But they are most welcome because they are in Europe, they're most welcome here. They're welcome like the thousands and thousands every year; no skills at all, no qualifications at all. My parents, they are both highly qualified; they won awards. But when they applied to a school somewhere, they say, no, sorry,

you're overqualified or something like that, or you have this much experience or this much experience.⁹⁵

Discussions of security in the language of equality, freedom and insecurity, finally, work to position the self politically. Participants employed these three images to articulate support for, or opposition to, political values or projects and their everyday implications. In the former two, security was invoked to express the need for, and desirability of, equitable treatment or a protection of liberties; in the latter, to concretise the undesirability of contemporary security practices, whether closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras or policing strategies.

Public expressions of security, then, are important because of their implication in efforts to carve out and express one's relations to the external world, whether material, social or political. In vernacular usage, therefore, security seems to offer a powerful language for articulating support or opposition for political projects, for exploring social cartographies and for expressing the diversity of an individual's needs. Although under-researched, this may be expected given the connections between security and identity construction explored within constructivist analyses of elite-level security discourses. Where vernacular securities may be more interesting still, however, is in their illumination of this language's enunciative functions hitherto unconsidered within academic study. To illuminate, we finish with one final example from our focus groups wherein discussions of (in)security led directly to efforts at empathy with individuals identified as other. This, we argue, indicates that security may possess under-recognised potential for forms of political encounter or imagination potentially far removed from the emphasis on suspicion, mistrust and othering that has dominated discursive studies of this language.

The search for empathy via the language of (in)security took two forms in our focus groups. In the first instance, in response to questions on security's meaning, a number of participants moved very swiftly from describing this term's ambiguities to problematising its ostensibly axiomatic meaning. Having done this, these ambiguities were then employed to infer the possibility of security's *plurality*. The possibility, put otherwise, that security might be experienced or thought differently by individuals or communities located elsewhere in the social. In the words of two participants in a London-based focus group:

Security, yes, it's such a broad ranging word I suppose but I mean, from the kids that, you know, in the city of London, their security is a lot ... very different idea to what ours is for example, you know, family life, being secure there, that's always a good start.⁹⁶

I suppose if somebody's unemployed and they've got three or four kids and they don't want to get a job or, you know, they can't work, I don't know how secure they're going to feel. But I suppose the state looks after them, which is a good thing, so they then feel secure.⁹⁷

Another participant, although more ambiguous on the (in)securities of others, argued similarly, again differentiating their own concerns from those of distinct demographics:

I think if you were doing a survey, you know, in the middle of a huge city centre housing estate you would get a different perception of, you know, what frightens people, what people are

concerned about. I mean, really, [we live in] almost like a sleepy little town ... there's not a lot happens.⁹⁸

The above comments, of course, essentialise the populations (and their fears) deemed other to each speaker's self-identity. In each example, this essentialisation twins a spatial with a social demarcation:⁹⁹ 'inner city' demographics are believed to confront risks of an entirely different order to the self, for example of familial instability. At the same time, however, these efforts to speak on behalf of different communities and their everyday challenges may also be viewed as an effort to humanise the posited others; to position their members as fully human by dint of their possessing genuine fears, needs and anxieties. In so doing, an equivalence is thus drawn (or attempted) between the experience – if not the content – of insecurity; an equivalence that, read optimistically, transcends the differential identities being invoked.

A second variant of this security/empathy coupling centred more precisely on the impacts of contemporary security practices. Here, it was the experience of insecurity itself, not a confrontation with security's conceptual instability, that grounded efforts to empathise with the problems of others. In the context of anti-terrorism policy, for example, one participant extrapolated from their own identity as 'a black person' to reflect on the effects of such measures on other minority communities: 'you know, I'm a black person, but gosh, if I was a Muslim, I think that would be even more ... I'd be even more nervous about travelling, even if I was an innocent person'.¹⁰⁰ Others pointed similarly to the possible impact of broader European debates over Islam upon minority communities:

you see in the news, like, the Muslim group and that. How they're being forced, for example, in France not to wear their full covering and that, and different things ... I'm not a Muslim, but if I were a Muslim, I think I would be feeling a bit, you know, a bit nervous about that.¹⁰¹

Others still, finally, explained their own experience of discriminatory treatment by virtue of the fears likely held by others, presenting these as entirely comprehensible:

I do understand. You know, our town 30 or 40 years ago was mostly English, wasn't it, and now there are more and more other families and the children are growing up, more families, and then they feel a bit threatened by too many foreigners.¹⁰²

As in the first variant, these efforts at empathy were stimulated directly by our participants' reflections on the concept and experience of (in)security. If similarly essentialist in their framing of difference ('Muslims' and 'the English', respectively), a genuine attempt to understand others' fears and concerns again here emerges. In this sense, the accuracy, or validity, of these efforts is less important than what they reveal about the language of security itself. Specifically, its potential to generate opportunities to recognise the needs, fears or insecurities of individuals deemed separate from, or other to, the self. If this is the case, the dominant scholarly emphasis on the negative consequences of security in speech and discourse might usefully be complemented by further reflection on the rather different perlocutionary powers of this language in sites not populated by political or other elites.

Conclusion: vernacular security studies

This article's primary aim was to supplement the wealth of contemporary conceptual work on (in)security with an empirically detailed account of the ways in which different publics understand, experience and articulate this condition in their everyday lives. In so doing, we have sought to demonstrate, first, the heterogeneity of vernacular securities that exist within the UK today, and second, the different functions that security performs when enunciated by non-elite actors. By mapping this heterogeneity, and its articulation, in as much detail as possible, we present these findings, ultimately, as an appeal for further research of this type. Our argument, here, is that speaking on behalf of the security of others – even within progressive or 'critical' political projects – should, fundamentally, involve speaking *with* others. Without this, Security Studies as an academic pursuit greatly reduces its authority to discuss contemporary sources of insecurity, or indeed, the interpretive dynamics through which such insecurities are understood and enunciated. Publics, as our findings indicate, experience and perceive (in)security in a plurality of ways and contexts.

This article's conceptual argument is that research of this type poses capacity to bridge two prominent themes within contemporary scholarship: First, the efforts to decentre the state's (still) privileged status within studies of security and IR more broadly and, second, explorations of security's socially constructed character. Non-elite conceptions of security are particularly valuable, we suggest, because they offer an opportunity to do precisely this. And, in the process, to work towards a, '... bottom-up history of world politics ... that includes listening to the stories and explanations of those currently rendered insecure by the prevailing global order'.¹⁰³ At the same time, research of this type also poses potential for assessing the public resonance of scholarly debates around security, including, not least, this term's meaning, appropriate referent(s), preconditions and adjacent concepts. Importantly, as indicated above, there may be considerable proximity between public understandings and those offered by several contemporary schools of security thought.

Beyond the assessment or bridging of conceptual frameworks, we argue there are further policy-related and political grounds for greater research on vernacular securities. In the first instance, research of this sort has a genuine conjunctural significance given the character of contemporary security practices. Efforts to enhance public security, at least within states, have been characterised by two trends in recent years. On the one hand, a specific focus on augmenting and expanding public perceptions of security; evident, for example, with the inclusion of public fear in measurements of police efficacy. And, on the other, an increasing reliance on public participation in the provision of security itself;¹⁰⁴ one that is justified via claims to the emergence of new unpredictable threats and demands for more active citizenries.¹⁰⁵ Against these two trends, qualitative research into vernacular securities facilitates an assessment, in the first instance, of the potential success of efforts to enhance public experiences of security. And, in the second, of likely responses to demands for participation in the provision of collective security.

Second, opening space for 'ordinary' individuals to speak on security also presents important political potentialities. As global politics has become increasingly characterised by dynamics of technologisation and depoliticisation, security decisions and their

justifications on a spread of issues have become increasingly grounded in abstract, technical analyses.¹⁰⁶ Issues are securitised, responses are formulated and pretensions to scientific, calculable knowledge replace public debate. This creeping monopolisation of security by ‘experts’ is troubling precisely because it conceals the inherently *political* character of security itself. What this term means, how it might be achieved, and whether it possesses inherent or instrumental desirability both is, and *should be*, the terrain of a struggle.¹⁰⁷ Bringing the voices of ‘real’ people into discussions of security, therefore, presents one technique for rendering visible, and perhaps re-energising, this dynamic of contestation.¹⁰⁸ A technique, put otherwise, for opening up the politics of security so central to many contemporary conceptualisations of this value.

Given the relative lack of comparable empirical work, we conclude by noting the considerable scope for future research in this area to add context and detail to the above analysis. Are these vernacular securities, for example, distinctively British, or do they cross national boundaries, or shared experiences? Does the language of security do similar things in different contexts, and how does it interweave with other practices of identity construction, for instance? How do other populations such as security practitioners (police officers, army privates, airport security staff, etc.) understand (in)security, and are there grounds of convergence with the images explored above?¹⁰⁹

The nature of the research from which this article derives is such that no claims to statistical significance can be made for our findings. Therefore, there is also considerable scope, we suggest, for future quantitative research informed by the above.¹¹⁰ Work of this nature would be able to identify distributive ranges in conceptions of (in)security across and within population groups and to isolate variables correlating with these. Thus, where our own research found geographical location and ethnicity unreliable predictors of vernacular security,¹¹¹ quantitative studies with larger sample populations would allow assessment of the representativeness of these findings. They would also, moreover, enable exploration of temporal trends in the ways security is imagined and experienced. Research agendas such as these are, of course, some distance beyond the scope of this article’s discussion. Our hope in writing it, however, is that future research will further bring public voices and views into discussion around the meaning, limits, sources and functions of security.

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Notes

1. For examples of the few existing exceptions to this broad tendency, see Nils Bubandt, ‘Vernacular Security: The Politics of Feeling Safe in Global, National and Local Worlds’,

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2. Bubandt, ‘Vernacular Security’.
 3. Bubandt, ‘Vernacular Security’, p. 291.
 4. Compare Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd ed. (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) with David A. Baldwin, ‘The Concept of Security’, *Review of International Studies*, 23(5), 1997, pp. 5–26.
 5. Jef Huysmans, ‘Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 4(2), 1998, pp. 226–55, p. 227.
 6. UNDP, *Human Development Report* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
 7. Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 51.
 8. Steve Smith, ‘The Contested Concept of Security’, in Ken Booth (ed.) *Critical Security Studies and World Politics* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2005), pp. 27–62, p. 53; Marlies Glasius, ‘Human Security from Paradigm Shift to Operationalization: Job Description for a Human Security Worker’, *Security Dialogue*, 39(1), 2008, pp. 31–54.
 9. Edward Newman ‘Human Security and Constructivism’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 2(3), 2001, pp. 239–51, p. 243; Glasius, ‘Human Security’, p. 35.
 10. UNDP, *Human Development Report*, p. 24.
 11. Glasius, ‘Human Security’, p. 32; also, Johan Galtung, ‘Violence, Peace, and Peace Research’, *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 1969, pp. 167–91.
 12. UNDP, *Human Development Report*, pp. 24–5. These concerned economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security. For subsequent discussion of this concept, see, for example, Caroline Thomas, ‘Global Governance, Development and Human Security: Exploring the Links’, *Third World Quarterly*, 22(2), 2001, pp. 159–75; Taylor Owen, ‘Human Security – Conflict, Critique and Consensus: Colloquium Remarks and a Proposal for a Threshold-Based Definition’, *Security Dialogue*, 35(3), 2004, pp. 373–87; Glasius, ‘Human Security’.
 13. UNDP, *Human Development Report*, p. 23; Newman, ‘Human Security and Constructivism’, p. 239; Edward Newman, ‘Critical Human Security Studies’, *Review of International Studies*, 36(1), 2010, pp. 77–94; Thomas, ‘Global Governance’, p. 161.
 14. UNDP, *Human Development Report*, p. 22; Gary King and Christopher J.L. Murray, ‘Rethinking Human Security’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 116(4), 2001, pp. 585–610; Alex J. Bellamy and Matt McDonald, ‘The Utility of Human Security: Which Humans? What Security? A Response to Thomas & Tow’, *Security Dialogue*, 33(3), 2002, pp. 373–77, p. 376. A tendency towards universalism may also be identified within CSS approaches and some feminist contributions to security studies, see Ken Booth (ed.), *Critical Security Studies and World Politics* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2005); Matt McDonald, ‘Emancipation and Critical Terrorism Studies’, in Richard Jackson, Marie B. Smyth and Jeroen Gunning (eds.) *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 109–23; Heidi Hudson, ‘Doing’ Security As Though Humans Matter: A Feminist Perspective on Gender and the Politics of Human Security’, *Security Dialogue*, 36(2), 2005, pp. 155–74.
 15. Compare Bellamy and McDonald, ‘The Utility of Human Security’; Owen, ‘Human Security’, pp. 378–79; Glasius, ‘Human Security’; Newman, ‘Critical Human Security Studies’.
 16. Bellamy and McDonald, ‘The Utility of Human Security’, p. 376; Andrew Mack, ‘A Signifier of Shared Values’, *Security Dialogue*, 35(3), 2004, pp. 366–67.

17. Hereafter, simply CSS (capitalised).
18. Ken Booth, 'Security and Emancipation', *Review of International Studies*, 17(4), 1991, pp. 313–26.
19. Despite his concerns over state co-option of the human security agenda, Booth explicitly highlights similarities between these two approaches. See Ken Booth, *Theory of World Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 322; also Newman, 'Critical Human Security Studies'.
20. Ken Booth, 'Security', in Ken Booth (ed.) *Critical Security Studies and World Politics* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2005), pp. 21–5; Booth, *Theory of World Security*, p. 98; Paul D. Williams, 'Thinking about Security in Africa', *International Affairs*, 83(6), 2007, pp. 1021–38.
21. Booth, *Theory of World Security*, pp. 105–6.
22. Booth, *Theory of World Security*, pp. 269–73.
23. Booth, *Theory of World Security*, pp. 101–8.
24. Paul D. Williams, 'Critical Security Studies', in Alex J. Bellamy (ed.) *International Society and Its Critics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 135–50; Booth, *Theory of World Security*, pp. 225–8.
25. Booth, 'Security', p. 22.
26. Booth, *Theory of World Security*.
27. Booth, 'Security', p. 22.
28. Stefano Guzzini, 'A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 6(2), 2000, pp. 147–82.
29. Maja Zehfuss, *Constructivism in International Relations: The Politics of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 7.
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32. For example, Alexander Wendt, 'Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics', *International Organization*, 46(2), 1992, pp. 391–425; Wendt, 'Constructing International Politics'; Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 41.
33. Wendt, *Social Theory*, p. 255.
34. Ole Wæver, 'Aberystwyth, Paris, Copenhagen. New 'Schools' in Security Theory and Their Origins between Core and Periphery' (paper presented at International Studies Association conference, Montreal, 17–20 March 2004).
35. Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1998), pp. 23–6.
36. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde, *Security*; Matt McDonald, 'Securitization and the Construction of Security', *European Journal of International Relations*, 14(4), 2008, pp. 563–87.
37. Michael C. Williams, 'Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 47(4), 2003, pp. 511–31.
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40. David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).
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42. Guzzini, 'The Concept of Power'.
43. Booth, 'Security and Emancipation'; Karin M. Fierke, *Critical Approaches to International Security* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 45.
44. Bellamy and McDonald, 'The Utility of Human Security', p. 374.
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46. See Jon Barnett, *The Meaning of Environmental Security: Ecological Politics and Policy in the New Security Era* (London: Zed, 2001), p. 25.
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49. See Michael Dillon, *Politics of Security: Towards a Political Philosophy of Continental Thought* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 14–8.
50. Booth, *Theory of World Security*, p. 166; also Lene Hansen, 'The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 29(2), 2000, pp. 285–306.
51. See Ben Rosamond 'Constructing Globalization', in Karin M. Fierke and Knud E. Jørgensen (eds.) *Constructing International Relations: The Next Generation* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), pp. 201–19; Fiona B. Adamson and Madeleine Demetriou, 'Remapping the Boundaries of 'State' and 'National Identity': Incorporating Diasporas into IR Theorizing', *European Journal of International Relations*, 13(4), 2007, pp. 489–526; Kevin C. Dunn, 'Contested State Spaces: African National Parks and the State', *European Journal of International Relations*, 15(3), 2009, pp. 423–46.
52. The ESRC-funded project, *Anti-terrorism, Citizenship and Security in the UK* ran from September 2009 to January 2011 (RES-000-22-3765). For reasons of space and coherence, this article focuses solely on the first of these topics: public attitudes towards security. Fuller details and outputs on the project are available at: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-000-22-3765/read>. Our data is also available from the UK Data Archive at www.data-archive.ac.uk under the following study number and title: *SN 7045 Anti-Terrorism, Citizenship and Security in the United Kingdom, 2010*.
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55. For a discussion of our findings here, see Lee Jarvis and Michael Lister, 'Disconnected Citizenship: The Impacts of Anti-terrorism Policy on Citizenship in the UK', *Political Studies*, advanced online publication 2012, DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00993.x
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57. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer for bringing our attention to this point.
58. For a useful discussion, see Martyn Hammersley, “‘Analytics’ are No Substitute for Methodology: A Response to Speer and Hutchby”, *Sociology*, 37(2), pp. 339–51.
59. See Morgan, ‘Focus Groups’; David L. Morgan, *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SAGE, 1997); Jenny Kitzinger and Rosaline S. Barbour, ‘Introduction: The Challenge and Promise of Focus Groups’, in Rosaline S. Barbour and Jenny Kitzinger (eds.) *Developing Focus Group Research* (London: SAGE, 1999), pp. 1–20.
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62. London, White, Male, 21 May 2010
63. London, White, Female, 21 May 2010.
64. Swansea, Black, Female, 14 May 2010.
65. Birmingham, Asian, Female, 9 June 2010.
66. Birmingham, Asian, Female, 9 June 2010.
67. Oldham, Asian, Female, 10 December 2010.
68. Swansea, Black, Female, 14 May 2010.
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75. London, Asian, Male, 8 March 2010.
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87. See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, 'Post-Marxism without Apologies', in Ernesto Laclau (ed.) *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 97–132.
88. Booth, *Theory of World Security*, p. 152.
89. As Glasius notes, statist approaches to security actually represent a comparatively recent etymological shift from the term's original, human, emphasis, see, Glasius, 'Human Security', p. 31.
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91. See Rita Taureck, 'Securitisation Theory and Securitisation Studies', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 9(1), 2006, pp. 53–61.
92. London, White, Female, 21 May 2010.
93. See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990); Catarina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity and the Search for Ontological Security', *Political Psychology*, 25(5), 2004, pp. 741–67; Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12(3), 2006, pp. 341–70.
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96. London, White, Male, 21 May 2010.
97. London, White, Male, 21 May 2010.
98. Oldham, White, Male, 10 December 2010.
99. See Hansen, *Security as Practice*.
100. London, Black, Female, 11 December 2010.
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109. Our thanks to one of the anonymous reviewers for this point.
110. See also Hansen, *Security as Practice*, p. 219.
111. Ethnic identity did, however, acquire greater importance in other aspects of this research, see Jarvis and Lister, 'Disconnected Citizenship'.

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