5

PROXIMITY[1]

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Proximity and practice in security studies

Critical security studies are frequently considered as a project of gaining distance to the discourses of policy and its practitioners. Such a mode of (dis)engagement underlying much of critical security studies arguably can be traced back to early disciplinary formulations in international relations of what it means to do critical research. Robert Cox introduced an influential understanding of 'critical' by suggesting a classification of two types of theory: critical theory and problem-solving theory. In Cox's formulation problem-solving theory 'takes the world as it finds it' (Cox 1981: 130), while critical theory 'is critical in the sense that it stands apart from the prevailing order of the world' (Cox 1981: 130). Cox's delineation of two types of theories became remarkably influential in international relations as well as in security studies not the least since the distinction was immediately apprehended by scholars such as Kenneth Waltz (1986). Waltz regarded the distinction to be a 'nice' one, and laconically responded that 'Cox would transcend the world as it is, meanwhile we have to live in it' (Waltz 1986: 338). In his understanding, 'Critical theory seeks to interpret the world historically and philosophically. Problem-solving theory seeks to understand and explain it' (Waltz 1986: 341). Whether Waltz had misunderstood Cox's distinction or not – it is likely he had – critical theorizing has become understood as a detached practice of historicizing and intellectualizing. Here, scholarship gains its worth through distance: the good critical scholar engages in philosophical reasoning, large-scale histories and genealogies and seeks distance from security practitioners and the processes of making security.

In this chapter, we challenge such an understanding. Our main claim is that, rather than distance, what should define security scholarship is a well-negotiated *proximity* to practice. Underlying our argument is a redefinition of critical

scholarship that has been introduced variously as 'practice turn', 'praxeology' or 'praxiography'.[2] A return to practice stresses the need for seeking proximity to the world of practitioners and their activities, and more carefully listening and talking to those whose lives are at stake. Security from such a perspective is best understood by a focus on the practices constituting security, and the variety of diffused and mundane actions and objects – some of them of a profoundly oppressive character – by which security practice is performed.[3] Security studies then are a project of proximity and close engagement with the flow and the infrastructures of the everyday and the mundane, and those discriminated by security practices.

For at least three of the major approaches of contemporary security research such a re-definition is central. This includes, first, the study of security as fields of insecurity expertise in which security worlds are analysed through the lens of 'fields of practice',[4] and second, the study of security as a (or series of) performative act(s),[5] and, third, the study of communities of security practice.[6] In building upon the works of anthropologists (such as Pierre Bourdieu), performative linguists (including John Austin) and organizational ethnographers (such as Etienne Wenger), these three approaches agree on the importance of paying attention to the empirical details of the sites of security, the priority they give to acts, objects and practice as analytical units, and the burden they put on empirical work. While much ink has been spilt on elaborations of theoretical apparatuses and vocabularies (or the 'what' to study), less attention has been given to the question of the 'how' – the methodological questions of how in research practice, scholars can engage with the world, seek proximity and study it in an empirically rich and sensitive way (see also Chapter 1 in this volume).

In the remainder of this chapter, we draw on contemporary practice theorists and pragmatist thinkers to investigate in more detail the move towards a critical security methodology driven by proximity. We discuss the importance of recognizing and strengthening the multifaceted networks in which research is embedded, the practical value of academic knowledge and how our understanding of theory and methodology transforms from such a perspective. We then proceed to outline how participant observation provides a repository of terms and modes of engagement for negotiating proximity in such a way (section three). Drawing on examples of participant observation on security we explore core dimensions of negotiating proximity.

Academic research and its networks: towards proximity

Conceptual and meta-theoretical debates in critical security studies have been increasingly supplemented by an engagement with method and practice. This is thanks to the considerable effort in formulating a deeply empirical perspective of discourse analysis (e.g., following Hansen 2006), and indeed the increasing visibility of practice-driven investigations. Yet, there remains a widespread glorification of meta-theory and a hesitation to breathe the dust of archives, get dirty hands doing fieldwork, or become intoxicated by contact with bureaucratic demons, 'evil'

policymakers, threatening security professionals or simply, the mob, the everyday people. Recognizing how deeply problematic a reluctance to engage in empirical work is, practice-oriented approaches offer a redefinition of the critical project. The practice–theoretical perspective resists purifying and isolating critical discourse, and instead lays out the task to multiply and intensify the various social ties researchers have to their empirical material, but also to their 'peers', 'funders' and 'clients'. Such a position aims at moving security studies in the midst of societal problem-solving, strengthening the ties to empirical work while retaining critical intentions.

Our argument is *not* against theory, nor does it equate to an over-glorification of empirical work (which for some even has to be purified from theory). Nor is it an argument for a simple upgrading of the amount of empirical work conducted to test some hypotheses in the so-called real world. The argument here is for recognizing how deeply empirical and theoretical work interpenetrate, the commitment that a good theory is, to draw on Latour (2004b: 63), about 'how to study things, […] or, rather, how to let the actors have some room to express themselves', and that good abstractions rely on good empirical reconstruction work (Latour 2010). In other words, it is to argue that a well-negotiated proximity between academic practice and the practices studied is needed. Two moves are crucial to develop such a position. The first is to shift from an understanding of security studies as merely intellectual exercise towards the richer understanding of academic research as a social practice as it has been developed in science and technology studies (e.g., Rouse 1996). The second move is to rely on an instrumental understanding of academic practice as productive of social change and innovation.[7] Such a pragmatist re-reading of social science as social inquiry redirects security studies towards 'problems', that is, issues that require intellectual attention not because they are 'matters of fact', but because they are 'matters of concern' (Latour 2004a). We will now exemplify these two core moves.

Similar to other cultural domains, academic research is a social practice (Rouse 1996). As participants in this practice, academics are deeply (and inescapably) entangled in a rich network of relations comprised not only of peers and fellow practitioners but also diverse actors including funding agencies, advocacy organizations, state bureaucracies, or professional politicians (Bueger and Gadinger 2007). Research in social studies of science has well documented how all researchers are entangled in a web of relations to a degree that it does not make sense to split between any scientific (or disciplinary) 'inside' and an (non-scientific) 'outside' (Latour 1999; Pickering 1992). Against the assumption of a scientific hard core which requires protection from any external influence in order to guarantee the untainted, objective possibility of knowledge, practice-theorists suggest that dense relations are not a problem, but instead a precondition for successful academic research. Hence, the multiple connections of academic research to actors, fields and practice are actually its strength and not a distortion that requires correction. Such an understanding takes up formulations of the character of academic practice by early pragmatists, such as John Dewey. While pragmatists mainly formulated a prescriptive argument, sociologists of science have forcefully shown through case

study work that successful research depends on such strong network ties. The stronger the ties of the network are, the more robust the knowledge will be.

Making these ties visible and arguing for paying attention to them is not necessarily an argument for more awareness and reflexivity (although not unimportant, it risks returning to a purification exercise). It is, instead, an argument for building even stronger ties between researchers and other actors and ensuring that they are sustainable. Put another way, identifying the extended social networks in which any academic research is embedded is not important because the ties need to be regulated and controlled as they might distort the production of pure, objective knowledge: by identifying ties, researchers are attempting to strengthen them in order to produce more robust and practically valuable knowledge. Critical security studies have identified the relationship between academic security knowledge and processes of securitization as inherently problematic, starting from early poststructuralist arguments that identified security expertise as productive of security realities (e.g., Klein 1994) and Huysmans's (2002) outline of the dilemma that any type of security analysis performs a security reality, even if it wants to counter it. Yet, these arguments have hardly been carried forward into a more extended research programme that studies how forms of security expertise are linked to security realities, the types of performative effects security expertise has or how security experts can be assisted in creating better, stronger ties with the diverse audiences of security knowledge (Berling and Bueger 2013).

To take the robustness and practical value of the knowledge produced as a core quality criterion for academic practice stresses that knowledge should have resonance for other practitioners than immediate peers (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009). This position transcends the Coxian dichotomy, and foregrounds the importance of critically engaged academic expertise for addressing problematic issues. A recognition of the performative effects of scholarship that emphasizes the importance of research as bringing issues and objects into being and understanding the relation between the knower and the known as a process by which the research object is changed, finds its roots in pragmatist understandings of scientific practice. Such an understanding has been outlined originally by scholars such as John Dewey and is echoed in contemporary practice theories (e.g., the work of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon).

Pragmatists have long stressed an instrumental understanding of theory as a tool for providing insights on how means and ends might be adapted to each other. It stresses the importance of thinking where problems come from and allows new purposes to develop through the process of inquiry (Joas 1996). For Dewey, the core function of academia was to construct and reconstruct problematizations. Problematizations were considered to be the outcome of a process by which indeterminate and ambiguous situations are translated into actual public problems which, in turn, can be mastered by distinct coping mechanisms (Brown 2009). The goal was to advance coping mechanisms for society through the process of inquiry. Centrally, Bruno Latour (2004a, 2010) has carried this argument forward. He suggests that given the performativity of scholarship, academics should turn towards

what he calls 'matters of concern' (2004a) and invest more energy in 'composing' new and better realities, rather than deconstructing and destroying common wisdoms and societal truths (2010).

Understanding social science in such instrumental terms is again rooted in the idea that academic research is a social practice. As such it is a refined version of everyday knowing and experience. It is more a way of thinking than a particular body of knowledge. As Brown summarizes it, 'for Dewey, science is a refinement of common sense inquiry – its potential enormously magnified through methods, techniques, and instruments, but otherwise basically similar to everyday efforts to resolve problems by intervening in the world' (Brown 2009: 160). Brown gives the example of water: 'by translating "water" into "H_2O", scientists open up a range of possible connections and transformations that remain hidden to the common sense' (Brown 2009: 152). Hence, the value of science over common sense lies in its greater 'practical power' (Dewey 1958: 385).

How significantly such a position changes our understanding of the relationship between theory and methodology has been maybe the most forcefully stressed by actor-network theorists (ANT) further developing Deweyan insights. Latour (2005), for instance, speaks of theory as 'infra-language', as an enabling conceptual infrastructure. Annemarie Mol (2010: 262) goes as far as fully conflating theory and methodology. As she phrases it, 'a "theory" is something that helps scholars to attune to the world, to see and hear and feel and taste it. Indeed, to appreciate it'. Then theory can be understood as 'a repository of terms and modes of engaging with the world, a set of methodological reflexes. These help in getting a sense of what is going on, what deserves concern or care, anger or love, or simply attention' (Mol 2010: 262).

Others following the pragmatic path prefer to uphold a separation of theory, methodology and methods but, nonetheless, stress their close connection. Organizational theorist Davide Nicolini (2009), for instance, speaks about 'packages of theory and method' in which theory provides pivotal 'sensitizing concepts' for research. As he argues, 'for studying practices one needs to employ an internally coherent approach where ontological assumptions (the basic assumptions about how the world is) and methodological choices (how to study things so that a particular ontology materializes) work together' (Nicolini 2009: 121). Ontology (or theory) provides sensitizing concepts which help to 'orient the interests [...] by guiding the collection of data and the process of writing up the results of inquiry' (Nicolini 2009: 122). Nicolini describes academic practices as constantly moving between data and theory. And methodology provides the toolkit for such moving. For him, theorizing begins with the choice of what to represent when moving from observation to representation (Nicolini 2009: 127). Methodology then 'provides tools for working through the data and allowing the emergence of theoretical considerations of the local "whats" and "hows" of the production of [...] effects. It is, in effect, a tool for zooming in on details and a device for taking stock, so that patterns, regularities, and provisional "phenomena" come to light' (Nicolini 2009: 127).

In such an understanding, methodology is the *movement* from the world to academic practice (and back) by which, to use a Latourian expression, the world is *mobilized*. In such a mobilization, chains of references are built between concepts, academic practices and the world studied. Methodology then becomes the art of building chains of references stable enough to survive peer criticism and disputes about their reliability. Through such chains of references, academic statements about the world are produced. Building references is also a process of translation. Various procedures of translation are necessary to produce a network of references that are enduring. What happens in one situation must be represented in another. A social scientist has to extract, generalize and abstract aspects of security-related events, processes and actions to turn them into a product such as an article intelligible to his peers. The world is mobilized in academic discourse and turned into an academic artefact – a PowerPoint slide, a lecture script, an article, or a book (Latour 1987; Bueger and Gadinger 2007). As Freeman (2009: 430) understands it,

> the research process can be described as one of successive translations, from theoretical formulation to operationalisation, transcription, interpretation and dissemination. Theorisation is a process of reciprocal back and forth between theory and fact, in which conceptions of each are revised in order that one comes to fit the other.

In the conduct of methodology, academics describe, categorize or generalize, abstract, calculate and model. In these practices, scholars negotiate with the world they study. They translate the world. They represent it differently.

Such an understanding has profound consequences for security studies. It raises questions such as: Which problems do we want to reconstruct in using which sensitizing concepts? Which links do we want to strengthen towards whom or what? How do we move and translate and thereby produce realities? All three of these questions stress the need to be closer to the problems, to the problematization practices and the actions and objects that constitute them. They require us to think through proximity and how it can be negotiated well.

In the next section we discuss how participant observation provides us with a key repository of sensitizing concepts, guidelines and rules of thumb for addressing these issues. In following the arguments made by practice theorists, pragmatists as well as actor-network theorists (authors discussed above),[8] we suggest that participant observation is capable to spur a new type of security studies attuned to problem coping, practices and criticality. We discuss core features of participant observation and draw on examples of security research, which has already utilized this set of sensitizing negotiation and translation concepts.

Participant observation: Negotiating proximity

Participant observation has come to be understood as one of the most promising means for studying the problematizations, practice, actions and objects that

constitute it.[9] The central tenet is to initiate the research process from the point of view of the 'natives', the practitioners or the actors participating in a practice. Rather than limiting oneself to conceptual development, the intention is to understand from within, to seek proximity to the mundane and to start the translation between theory and fact while standing knee-deep in empirical material. Hence, this is an invitation to security studies scholars to drag themselves out of the university and attempt to talk to the natives. However, the concern is not only with ordinary language, but also with the many bodily movements and artefacts which are part of social interaction. Knowledge claims are hence based on 'being there' – of having a grasp of the situations, structures and artefacts in which meaning is situated.

There is a growing body of literature that documents how participative observation can provide telling insights to understand security practice. There are at least two types of literatures documenting the promises of participant observation: *participant observation in violent settings* and in *institutional* or *office settings*. The former has been developed as a rich body of research at the crossroads of anthropology, development studies and criminology.[10] The latter has been formulated at the intersection of policy studies, comparative politics, international relations and policy anthropology.[11]

Anthropologists who study political violence and its implications attend to the victims of everyday forms of political violence including civil wars, state repression, gender oppression or paramilitary activities. Juliana Ochs's (2011) account of how security permeates every fibre of daily life in Israel provides a major example for a study of everyday security practice through participant observation. Drawing on fieldwork during the 'second Intifada', Ochs explores the myriad forms that security takes. She lived among people and talked to them in an effort to outline their everyday practices and their 'subjectivities and experiences' (Ochs 2011: 15). Working from a more direct confrontation with violent settings, Lee Ann Fujii (2010) asks how questions of the veracity of personal narratives and local histories can be dealt with in post-violent societies. Relying on a nine-month period of fieldwork in Rwanda to investigate the involvement of 'ordinary' people in genocide (Fujii 2008), she reveals 'the spoken and unspoken expressions about people's interior thoughts and feelings, which they do not always articulate' in regular interviews: rumours, inventions, denials, evasions, and silences (Fujii 2010: 232).

Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) and Teresa Caldeira (2002) provide examples of research in Brazil. Scheper-Hughes reveals how, in Brazilian society, violence and death become anonymous and taken for granted. She points out how murders, kidnappings and tortures are horrifyingly routine. Perpetrated by the police, by 'death squads' acting under state sponsorship, or by gangs, this violence is often carried out against specific marginal groups (Scheper-Hughes 2006: 154). Her fieldwork among such groups revealed how race and class stigmatize individuals as dangerous; racial hatred, she argues, becomes a justification for extreme violence (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 216–260). Yet this fieldwork was complemented by an active participation in the political life of the communities exposed to violence.

Scheper-Hughes worked with a peasant union in north-east Brazil and gradually earned the trust of her respondents by working alongside them. Her 'interviews' were not conducted in the standard manner of direct questions, but through a great deal of listening, trying to become integrated within the community, living with, and learning the ways of the people she was interested in (Kreisler 2000). In a similar vein, Caldeira looks at state-sponsored violence in Brazil, and argues that Brazilian citizens consider it to be an exception rather than the rule for the police force to respect their rights (Caldeira 2002: 241). Using participant observation, she documents how poverty can become criminalized and how a large part of the population actively supports and demands a tough stance from the State (Caldeira and Holston 1999: 699; 705). Caldeira used participant observation as a tool for gaining proximity to the everyday lives of people, as well as the spaces they inhabit. Most of the participatory work was performed in the areas of 'working class periphery', where she engaged in the local social movements (Caldeira 2000: 13).

Such studies, however, are not necessarily always set in conflict zones. Loïc Wacquant's studies of urban marginality in Chicago and Paris identify the intersection of class and race in the systematic exclusion and criminalization that occurs in the Chicagoan ghettos and French *banlieues*. He argues that 'ethnographic observation emerges as an indispensable tool [...] to capture the everyday reality of the marginal city dweller' (Wacquant 2008: 9). His work is an account of how insecurity is rendered an 'organizing principle' of daily collective life in advanced democracies (Wacquant 2008: 119), and how the welfare state is making room for a punitive, penal state (Wacquant 2009). He refers to his methodological tactics as 'observant participation' – acquiring as much proximity and immersion within the field, and at the same time maintaining the 'capacity for reflexivity and analysis' (Wacquant 2011: 87). More concretely, in the course of his study, Wacquant joined a boxing gym in Chicago and participated in boxing competitions; he used the gym as a 'platform for observation inside the ghetto, a place to meet potential informants' (Wacquant 2011: 84).

Other authors have paid attention not so much to the interplay between security and the everyday life permeated by violence, but more to the ways in which security is being framed and reinforced by security elites, and to the production of security within Western offices, among elites and experts. Rather than visiting distant places, this second line of participant observation – research in *institutional* or *office settings* – studies everyday practices in the acclimatized and comfortably furnished offices of (Western) elites, experts, bureaucrats and politicians.

Richard Fenno (1986, 1990) was one of the first to use participant observation in a political science context to study the daily life of US senators and congressmen. Scholars continuing such a line of research on politicians include Frank Nullmeier and his team working on committee decision-making and education policy (Nullmeier and Pritzlaff 2011; Nullmeier *et al.* 2003), R.A.W. Rhodes's (2011) complex multi-year study of British government, or Ruth Wodak's (2009) research on the European parliament. A second set of researchers is more concerned about the daily life of bureaucrats. This concerns street-level bureaucrats in all forms and locales

(e.g., Wagenaar 2004; Mosse 2004, 2006) or high-level bureaucrats in institutions such as central banks (e.g., Holmes and Marcus 2005; Riles 2011), United Nations negotiations (e.g., Dimitrov 2010; Riles 2006), international organizations such as the International Financial Institutions (e.g., Harper 1998), the United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations (Barnett 1997) or diplomatic culture and foreign ministries (Neumann 2012). Hugh Gusterson's (2004) work on the American 'nuclear complex' is maybe the best example of such a type of research directly attending security in the stream of office ethnography. Gusterson's fieldwork is in the 'tribe' of nuclear security experts. Through participant observation he explores how these experts socialize in and around 'the lab'. His contribution lies in the way he converges the 'results' of his multi-sited field research with his theoretical reflections and analyses into a key conceptual tool, which he calls the 'securityscape' (Gusterson 2004: 66), and which illustrates the key role played by security experts and defence intellectuals in the 'nuclear complex'. The concept has been picked up and applied to 'African' security by Niklas Hultin, who argues for explicit attention to be given to how 'security actors constitute themselves as such' (Hultin 2010: 109). This implies that in order to understand how security works, participant observation is needed among those with 'the power to define the security agenda'. In the case of African security, the absence of such focus has serious implications, as Hultin argues that this contributes to the 'othering' of Africa, alongside accounts that depict the everyday violence and security deficit that powerless groups are exposed to (Hultin 2010: 118). This argument can be extended to Europe as well, as the dominant security institutions – such as those pertaining to the EU (including ESDP, EDA, and FRONTEX) – are promising subjects to be exposed to thorough participant observation driven research (see Kurowska and Tallis 2013).

These two sets of literature highlight the creativity of research that draws on participant observation and how our understanding of what it means to do critical security studies changes. These studies reveal that participant observation brings us closer to the problems and practices, and offers strengthened ties to the objects of research. However, they also encounter major criticisms that have been levelled against participant observation more generally. First, these studies document that violent actors, including gangs, paramilitaries, the police and indeed also terrorist groups (Mahmood 2001; Dolnik 2011) can be examined by participant observation, although some distinct precautions and ethical considerations for 'fieldwork under fire' are necessary (see Sriram *et al.* 2009). Second, these studies encounter the idea of inaccessibility: the notion that cultures of secrecy prevailing in security-related fields make these fields inaccessible to the participant observer. Instead, this literature suggests appreciating secrecy and disclosure as a basic problem faced by any type of participant observation: it might be as difficult to get access to life in the slaughterhouse as to the Pentagon. This is not to argue that access to security-related fields is not difficult, yet, there is no foundational difference compared to other fields. Let us draw on these examples and others to exemplify the different forms of movements, translations and negotiations that participant observation entails and that leads to security studies driven by proximity.

Participant observation is 'immersing oneself and being there' in order to be capable of 'appreciating, understanding, and translating the situated, temporal, creative, interpretive and, above all moral and committed nature' of practice (Nicolini 2009: 134–135). It is the attempt to get as close as possible to the 'field' studied and the data from which one can learn about its practices. Participant observation involves a range of negotiations of how to intensify relations. We draw attention to the following ones: the multiplication of experience, the negotiation of the field, the negotiation of control, and performativity and representation.

In the first instance, participant observation is an attempt to utilize all of the available human senses to collect data and interpret it. It involves feeling around, seeing, hearing, and tasting. As a research practice deeply immersed in a local context, participant observation allows recording very specific types of data which otherwise stay hidden, or are not immediately visible: bodily movements, emotions and smiles, utterances and silences, the handling of artefacts and machines.

'Dwelling' implies doing a lot of talking – interviews, discussions, asking 'off-topic' questions – but it also implies listening (Gerard Forsey 2010). Some things are not said in interviews, and this is why listening to informal speech and to actors that talk among themselves in their own environment is crucial for understanding what is going on (Walsh 2009: 170–171). It is worthwhile paying attention to jokes, curses, jargon and even gossip. It actually matters little if the actors are honest or lie or are even not able to remember things. The task of participant observation is not to ascertain the truth, but to understand the way meaning is produced. In her fieldwork among survivors of wartime violence, Fujii (2010) found that a significant number of her interlocutors were lying, or mixing lies with truth. Yet, the value of testimonies lies in the interpretations provided, and their unspoken meanings that can be deciphered, not by their accuracy or truth (Fujii 2010: 234).

Crucially, not only human agents bear meaning, but also the nonhumans and the inanimate environment. Spaces and infrastructures can be interpreted as part of the analysed situation. Examples of meaningful spaces in security studies are: border spaces, public spaces with intense surveillance such as embassies or public squares, gentrified neighbourhoods, air or maritime space. For instance, dwelling in the central train station of Milan allows one to unravel that the ensemble of the station – its architecture, location, neighbourhood areas, and CCTV network – plays a crucial role in the 'securityscape' which nests the vigilante groups that act in the area (Mireanu 2011). The material elements that are present in the spaces that are part of the analysed situation are often crucial (Chapter 3 in this volume). Such material elements include body movements, buildings and monuments, surveillance and weapons technology cameras, advertisements (Ochs 2011; Graham 2010), fences and barriers, clothes and uniforms, or forms and documents (Riles 2006; Walters 2002).

Participant observers are capable of experiencing what actors do and say to a degree they would not be able if studying from distance, or relying only on the representations (texts, or visual products) produced in such situations. In doing what others are doing they come as close as thinkable to the tacit knowledge

relevant in the practices at play in situations. Phrased otherwise, participant observation allows for increasing the resolution and making visible the tacit side of practice as well as the material one. It allows for capturing forms of meaning other than the one inscribed in texts and artefacts such as documents, or policy papers which are conventionally the object of analysis. Participant observation multiplies experience and hence the modes of engaging with the world studied. Participant observers have to juggle various forms of experience. Juggling, however, also involves negotiating how many balls can be kept simultaneously in movement. Hence, participant observation foregrounds the 'negotiation of selectivity', that is, the question: Which of the corpus of material compiled in participant observation is to be put on stage? It requires decisions about which material is to be included in the narrative produced in the research.

Second, in terms of gaining proximity to the 'field', participant observation is often equated with field research. It is understood to be a process of entering a 'field' and conducting research *in* it. In at least two regards such an understanding is problematic; first, field research is a larger umbrella term that does not necessarily involve participant observation. For instance, field research often comprises of (expert) interviews in distant places. Second, if one finds the concept of 'a field' productive, a field is not already set or simply 'out there'. The classical participant observation study in anthropology was designed to maximize the amount of time spent in the field, often one year minimum. The argument was that as much time as possible had to be spent with the 'interlocutors' in the field. Classically, field research took place in a territorially-bounded site, that is, primarily a village, but also a laboratory, a city, or a nation state. Since the 1980s anthropologists have successfully challenged such understandings. Following this critique, the 'field' is best conceived as an artificial construct, its boundaries are negotiated and produced in the conduct of research design.[12] Yet, if a field is in essence the outcome of the negotiation of researchers with their material, the space of the field can have other topologies than that of a region demarcated by boundaries.

WHAT IS THE FIELD?

The 'field' can be a network, a fluid space, a rhizome or an assemblage (Law 1994; Nicolini 2009; Collier and Ong 2005). In the latter, participant observers adopt a strategy of following people, artefacts or objects to observe the flows, traces and circulations that make up the field.[13] They visit multiple sites, rather than just one site. Consequently, this strategy has been described as 'multi-sited research' (Marcus 1995). How important such an understanding of the field is in a security context has been shown by many. For instance, Carol Cohn has studied US security and nuclear practices and discourses and her 'subject has been a moving target' (Cohn 2006: 92), and therefore she had to use a multitude of approaches and to visit multiple sites. Often, there will be

also an overlap between different topologies of the field. Iver Neumann (2007), for instance, reconstructed the practice of diplomatic speech writing. While he worked as a participant observer *in* the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (a bounded site), he was following the outline of a speech across offices. By following the connections and flows between offices, he revealed the structures of circulation in which the document is twisted and transformed to stand for the Ministry as a whole. Participant observation hence involves the negotiation of topologies and structures in the conduct of research.

Third, working with participant observation is to give up partial control over the research process. Many researchers underline that the experiences of the 'field' have significantly altered their initial research questions (Coleman and Hughes in this volume; Pachirat 2011; Zirakzadeh 2009). Yet, this is not a deficit, but the strength of this methodology – versatility and flexibility allow for a more dynamic research experience driven by surprise and spontaneity. Working with a palette of 'sensitizing concepts' (Nicolini 2009; Mol 2010) or an analytical 'infralanguage' (Latour 2005), allows the researched subject a significant influence over the meaning of these concepts. It is, to paraphrase Latour (2005), the attempt of letting the actors do the theoretical work themselves. As Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012: 73–74) suggest:

> Rather than being research 'subjects' who participate in (positivist) research on the researcher's terms, in interpretive research it is the researcher who participates in the local's activities, in their settings, on their turf. [...] This means that they are understood as having the power to affect initial research designs actively in various ways.

Participant observation then leads to a different form of representing the subjects studied in academic discourse. Rather than imposing meaning on the researched, more voice is given to them and they are also allowed to speak for themselves. Yet, this shift in control also entails a higher degree of complexity. In tracing meaning across different sites, the participant observer can grasp the multiplicity of meanings or the multi-vocality of situations. Such a cacophony of voices can be as Alvesson and Skoldberg (2009: 33) argue, referring to Latour, 'fun to read – for a while. Then the amount of describing voices becomes a bit wearying'. Leaving writing style aside, sacrificing control has the benefits of allowing researched subjects to resist and to represent themselves and their worlds, but it also allows the researcher to be open to surprise (and hence tell fascinating, surprising narratives, rather than boring verification ones). In sum, participant observation foregrounds the importance of the constant negotiations between the researchers and their research projects on the one side, and what is to be researched on the other. It is the negotiation of control.

The politics of proximity

Participant observation embraces a specific type of reflexivity. This concerns firstly positionality. It is to reflect on 'the ways that a researcher's demographic characteristics and personal background may be critical' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 67). Positionality 'can profoundly affect what the researcher sees or does not see, learns and does not learn' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 68). Reflexivity towards positionality is hence crucial not only to increase trust in the narratives told, but also to be transparent towards any biases that participant observation entails. There is a play of constant negotiations of the author's subjectivity in a dialogue with the environment in which the research is conducted. The 'data' is not merely gathered, but processed, internalized and experienced by the authors, who in turn are forced to change the initial parameters of their research in the light of the new experiences on the field. All these elements are part of the situatedness of the researcher vis-à-vis those actors and contexts that are under scrutiny. While doing participant observation, the authors themselves become embedded in the vast array of social interactions that constitute the field(s) of research, and this embeddedness gets internalized and reflected in the experience of the fieldwork. Positionality also increases awareness towards the problem that the knowledge the observers bring to the field interacts with the local knowledge of the 'subjects' of research and with the resulting (published) knowledge in ways that are always contingent and unpredictable.

Second, 'participation', goes beyond the immersion in situations with the aim of observing, recording and gathering data. If we take the argument that knowledge affects social relations a step further, we will have to ask the question of the actual influence of the presence and participation of the researcher within the field(s). If participation leaves traces, what kind of trace do we want it to be? If participation is able to shape social reality, can one render this influence to have positive effects? Understood in such a way, participatory observation is a mode of engagement that can take the form of direct political interventions (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 38–9; Coutin and Hirsch 1998). It holds the potential to transform the lives of the subjects studied, whether it is the experts in ministries making security, or parts of the society marginalized or oppressed by security practices. Indeed, participating in security practices means that there are other stakes involved, besides the generation of knowledge or the careers of scholars. For instance, in challenging the oppressive nature of the security apparatus, an entire array of state institutions and discourses that legitimate the existing order can be contested. Counter-expertise can be developed and perform a different security reality. For instance, Amedeo Policante argues that his participation in groups of protestors that were kettled by the police provided him with a way to counter the hegemony of authoritative expert knowledge that shapes the discussions about police violence (Policante 2012: 66).

The focus on the performative effects of research is meant to provide empowering means for the subaltern groups, as Dana-Ain Davis argues: 'participatory research provides people with the analytic and practical tools to

document their lives and offers a language for articulating the unique strengths of a group. Using this model we can ensure that the voices and expertise of our constituents are not lost in the effort to achieve scientific validity' (Davis 2008: 233). There are different forms in which this empowering may take place, from 'speaking up' for the oppressed groups and making their struggles public and known to wider audiences, to actively engaging in the everyday struggles and actively being in solidarity with these groups (Schaumberg 2008: 211; Colectivo Situaciones 2005). Some authors posit the possibility of a 'third space' between activism and academia, 'a space that enables the disruption of both sites in both directions' and that generates the possibility of politically engaged academic research in which participatory observation plays the central role (Routledge 1996: 402, 406; Coronado and Staudt 2005).

The participant observer can have the capacity to directly engage the discrimination and exclusion felt by marginalized groups. Through participation, he or she can 'shoulder the burden' of the struggle fought by these groups (Selmeczi 2009, see also Graeber 2008), or merely be a vehicle for their oppressed voices (see Coleman and Hughes in this volume). These considerations are based on the idea that participant observation is not just another way of generating academic knowledge for its own sake, but has an interventionist character with an emancipatory scope. Securityscapes have particularly high stakes in this respect: conducting participatory observation in a field where security is being performed raises not only concerns of safety for the researcher, but also serious ethical problems for how this participation reinforces the violence of security. While seeking to approach the practices of Italian patrols and Hungarian civil militias, Mireanu (2011, 2013) found that to join vigilante groups in their patrols would contribute to increasing the marginalization and violent exclusion of certain groups. These patrols were acting in neighbourhoods with high concentrations of 'undesired' minorities (immigrants, Roma people). Thus, being 'one of them' in this case would imply an undesired complicity with the acts of intimidation performed by vigilante groups.

While the degree to which participant observation should be a device of political activism, is and will remain contested, the above reflections bring the discussion of the effects of scholarly analysis right where it belongs: to the heart of researching and writing practices. Often such reflection on scholarly effects has been delegated to sub-discourses and separate debates. The debate on participant observation instead stresses that the reflection on effects is better understood as an integral part of any scholarly practices. Researchers are situated among a myriad of vectors of power, contexts and histories, to which they bring their own background and experiences (see Coleman and Hughes in this volume). It is usually assumed that there is a power asymmetry between the observers and the researched group that dates back to the times when anthropology was the assisting discipline of colonialism. There is always an implicit privilege of the participant observers in relation to the ones they are observing, if only for the fact that at the end of the day researchers can always exit the field at their own will and return

to their career, while for everybody else the 'field' constitutes everyday reality. This is obvious in settings where violence is a tragic part of people's lives, while for the observer such experience is only temporary.[14] There is the need for reflexivity and lucidity about one's situatedness in such contexts, and the effects that research produces.

Yet asymmetry can function in reverse as well. The participant observers might find themselves – even against their will – in a position of power inferiority. For instance, if the interlocutors are high-positioned actors – politicians, leaders, and generally people with more capabilities than an academic – this risk is permanent. Such actors might even attempt to make the researcher adhere to their agendas. The danger of becoming 'co-opted' and beget a form of intimacy leading to a lack of distinction between the researcher and the researched, raises major questions on the effects of participation. The case of anthropologists partaking in military operations (Zehfuss 2012; Gusterson forthcoming) or providing evidence in court (Mahmood 2001) are revealing in this regard. In the security field, participation may easily translate into 'complicity' in the political and military situations that one researches (Zehfuss 2012: 185).

COMPLICITY OR PROXIMITY?

Katherine Verdery conducted several ethnographical research projects in Romania during its Socialist period. In the mid 1970s she obtained access to Romania and began her work by spending 16 months in a Transylvanian village. Her ethnographical tools were typical: interviews, dwelling, crafting social connections and performing some archival work. In the resultant book (Verdery 1983), she admits that doing fieldwork was less complicated for her than reporting and interpreting the data she had obtained. This difficulty was caused by her situatedness as an American researcher in a Socialist country and the foreseeable stereotypes that she had to juggle. But it was also caused by her reticence regarding the protection of her informants, since these were people that 'could later be made accountable for what they said or might have said' (Verdery 1983: 22–3).

The Romanian secret police ('*Securitate*') were operating a vast and invisible network of surveillance across the country and even abroad. The *Securitate* was a repressive apparatus whose job was to collect and process information from and about the entire population, in order to serve 'national security' and to strengthen the Communist Party's position. This apparatus can be seen as a productive form of applied social science and gathering knowledge, rather than merely as a repressive security force (Poenaru 2013). After Romania became capitalist, the archives of the secret police were made public, and Verdery was astonished to read her own file, containing numerous reports about her activities in Romania (Verdery 2013).

The *Securitate* closely examined Verdery's behaviour and reported their findings. In doing so, they employed a specific interpretive lens that was influenced by the Cold War binaries, which led to Verdery's actions being perceived as suspicious. She was thought to be a spy, because of her information-gathering practices, which they likened to their own: collecting socio-political information, taking field notes on things that were not her direct object of research, using a special code in writing these field notes, writing in excess about the contexts in which her discussions were taking place, and even using a mini-cassette recorder that was similar to the ones used by the secret police. Both Verdery and the *Securitate* recruited and used informers, and referred to them as such (see also Verdery 1983: 374, fts. 12 and 13).

Reflecting on her experience, Gusterson writes: 'Verdery was not only an object of the [secret police's] regime of surveillance, she was an involuntary instrument for it too' (Gusterson 2012: 26). This forces us to rethink the relation between proximity and security. In the name of national security, the *Securitate* was using tools that can be deemed ethnographic (Verdery 2013). These tools were serving the purpose of gathering all possible information on people's lives. But they were also used for repressive purposes, as the *Securitate* was responsible for identifying and purging the 'enemies of the people'. Proximity may be misused by certain agencies for suppressive purposes. On the other hand, Verdery's proximity also ended up endangering people. Her 'informants' were now suspicious in the eyes of the regime, and could either be seen as traitors, or recruited as informants for the secret police. Too much ethnographic detail can jeopardize people's lives, especially in societies with such dense and repressive security apparatuses.

What does this say about ethnographic tools and about the extent of their invasiveness when such tools are used by a repressive apparatus to gain knowledge for dictatorial uses? Verdery's experience shows that intimacy can be problematic and proximity is not a virtue in itself, because some of the knowledge that is gathered by the participant observer may be compromising for the individuals observed if it is wrongly appropriated. The danger of appropriation also underlines the potential power inferiority position that the participant observer can find him- or herself in. All these considerations feed into our continuous stress on the negotiation of proximity.

Upon return from the field, the participant observer turns the 'cacophony of voices' into academic narratives. As discussed, this translation process is everything but linear in that the researcher follows an orderly progression from access and observation to writing up. The process of participant observation is circular and the researcher will go through several cycles of access, observation, analysis and reflection. In this course, researchers will tinker and adjust their positions, their forms of participation or their sensitizing concepts. This process of turning the

world into observations and experiences involves constant negotiations and re-negotiations. It is a process of continuous sorting in and sorting out. It is a negotiation between the observed and unobserved (due to field access, choice of field, position in field, cultural blindness, or resource restrictions). It is a negotiation of which observed material becomes written down, turned into a field note and becomes part of the narrative. And it is a negotiation of what of this narrative is turned into an academic artefact available to the public and stored in libraries and collections, and which parts remain private or go in the bin.

In summary, participant observation provides us with a key repository of sensitizing concepts, guidelines and rules of thumb for the negotiations increasing the connectedness of practice and security studies. The multiplication of experience, the negotiations of the field, performativity and representation are all dimensions of these negotiations. They broaden our understanding of the ties that are made and unmade in the movement of methodology. Participant observation, thus, holds the capacity to spur a new type of security studies attuned to problem coping, practices and criticality. To suggest that a new type of security studies is possible that continuously builds better connections in the negotiations of participant observation is, however, not to argue for simply turning to anthropology. While anthropology has spearheaded many discussions on the negotiations in participant observation, security studies requires defining for itself and its own purposes the methodological potential of participant observation.

Conclusion

In this chapter we argued for a methodology for security studies, which takes the negotiation of proximity as one of its core concerns. Our starting point was that too much of critical security studies has cut loose connections to the world and has pursued a mode of (dis)engagement which appraises the philosophical and abstract. Encountering such an understanding through the lenses of practice theory, pragmatism and actor-network theory we argued for a methodology that moves security studies in the midst of societal problem-solving, multiplies the connections to other actors than scholarly peers and suggests that the basis for abstractions has to be good empirical reconstruction work. Methodology in such an understanding is the constant movement between the world studied, the matters of concern and academic communities. It is an art of translating these worlds into each other by building chains of references that last. We have suggested that participant observation provides a repository of terms and modes of engagement, which sensitize us to the world, indeed allow us to appreciate it, and, most importantly, give us an understanding of what is at stake when negotiating proximity.

We outlined an extended understanding of participant observation, which is more than a technical tool that can be used in any type of study. Participant observation is a practice that provides a distinct way of translating what is not immediately present in a field of research. Participant observing is a sensory technique of recording what can been seen, smelled and heard. It is an interpretive

device; by participating we can learn the tacit knowledge underlying the practices at a site and the problems and problematizations at stake. Participant observation is also a commitment. Using what we record and learn through participating leads to a different form of representing once we develop narratives. Often, it will mean strengthening the voice of the participants. Practising participant observation increases our awareness for the performative effects that scholarly analysis has. It sensitizes to the intended and unintended consequences of research.

As we have argued in this contribution, participant observation is a device of negotiating proximity. It enables, or indeed even forces, researchers to think, to reflect, to talk about and to justify what modes of proximity they are relying on and what kinds of worlds they are producing. Its importance as a device that triggers reflexivity on proximity, movement and translation is the real value of participant observation, even in contexts where it initially appears that participation to observe is not feasible. This is the reason why participant observation is, for us, the methodological heart of redefining the critical project as a project of proximity that engages with practice.

Notes

1 For comments and suggestions we are grateful to Nadine Voelkner, Jef Huysmans and the other participants in the International Collaboratory on Critical Methods in Security Studies.
2 See, among others, Reckwitz (2002), Spiegel (2005), Adler and Pouliot (2011a, b), Bueger (forthcoming), Bueger and Gadinger (2008). The term 'praxiography' was coined by Mol (2002).
3 See for instance Huysmans (2011), Doty (2007), or Aradau (2004).
4 See, among others, Berling and Bueger (2013), Bigo (2005), Villumsen (2008), or Huysmans (2006).
5 See the discussion around securitization theory in Waever (1995), Stritzel (2007), Vuori (2008), or Balzacq (2005).
6 See, among others, Adler (2008), or Pouliot (2010 a, b).
7 To foreground the instrumental character of academic practice should not be confused with the emphasis of the positivist project on gaining objective knowledge and control over social reality (Steinmetz 2005: *passim*). Nor should it be reduced to lobby work and influencing policymakers or to generate solutions to the problems defined by policy agendas (for a criticism of such positions, see Burawoy 2005: 511–523). As will be developed later in this chapter, our understanding of instrumentality research is in line with politically and academically engaged research that is aware of, and works within, the specific situations in which the researcher is embedded (Jackson 2011: 176).
8 Specifically, see Schatzki (2012), Reckwitz (2008), Joas (2004), Czarniawska (2008), Latour (1987), Nicolini (2009) and Bueger (forthcoming) for an elaboration of this argument.
9 Participant observation has often been equated with ethnography or anthropology. Yet it is important to keep these terms separate. Ethnography is a larger umbrella term and an ethnographic study conventionally would involve more than participant observation or eventually could even survive without any direct participant observation in a classical sense (see the discussion in Yanow 2009). Participant observation has been the defining methodology of anthropology, yet it is neither useful to equate participant observation with anthropology, which is a scientific discipline in the first place, nor does all of anthropology conduct participant observation. Our understanding stresses that participant observation is more than just a technique and represents a methodological position centred on the problem of proximity.

10 Richards (2004) provides a useful survey as do Sriram *et al.* (2009) and Avruch (2001).
11 A growing number of edited volumes address these intersections, including Schatz (2009) and Shore *et al.* (2011).
12 For a discussion and critique of the village-based 'field' terminology see Gupta and Ferguson (1992, 1997).
13 A discussion of the strategy of 'following' is provided in Czarniawska (2008).
14 Although see Scheper-Hughes's account (2010) of how she was invited to return to her initial field on account of her previous experiences with identifying the victims of death-squads (on the issue of 'returning to the field' see Burawoy 2003).

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