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Human Security – What's the use of it?

On boundary objects and the constitution of new global spaces

One of the outcomes of the political struggles of widening and enlarging security has been a new consensus to understand security as 'human security'. The intriguing feature of human security is that although it is consensual to some degree, it has not been naturalized and as such fixed security discourse. Instead, political struggles concerning the 'what', the 'who', and the 'how' of security continue. Why is the history of human security such a success story of institutionalization, although it apparently seems to be a useless, fraught or at least ambivalent concept? And how was it possible that new forms of transnational spaces (such as the Human Security Network) emerged around the concept of human security? In the paper I address these questions from the perspective of symbolic interactionism. I suggest understanding human security as a 'boundary object' that connects several 'communities of security practice', without anyone of them being able to attach a stable meaning to it. Understanding human security as a boundary object raises the question how this 'new' concept of security re-configures the landscape of communities of security practice, how it affects the identity of new (and old) communities, and in what way it constitutes new trading zones, or transforms earlier ones. I scrutinize firstly if human security qualifies as a boundary object, rather than as a fully 'naturalized object' or a 'monster'. Secondly, I investigate, by drawing on some illustrative examples, how human security has reconfigured the landscape of communities of security practice, and in what way this goes along with the constitution of new global security arenas.

Keywords: Human Security; Symbolic Interactionism; Boundary Object; Participation; Global Security Arenas

The Human Security Puzzle¹

Over the last decade the idea of human security has acquired the status of a new orthodoxy among many practitioners and students of security studies and international relations more broadly. For a concept which, is often (unfairly) argued, constitutes two words in search of a meaning this is quite an accomplishment (Mc Grew 2007: viii).

The concerns of widening, deepening and enlarging the concept of security are in the last decade increasingly merged in the concept of 'human security'. A wide range of professionals, activists, journalists, bureaucrats, diplomats and professional politicians adopted it in the 1990s, whether on a nation state, regional or global level. Human security has significantly shaped the foreign policy agendas of states, such as Canada, Japan and Norway (Bosold and Werthes 2005; Jolly and Ray 2006; Shani et al. 2007), has influenced the development of the European Union security strategy, is a key reference point in the current debate on a new NATO strategy, and major doctrine for the organizations of the United Nations family (MacFarlane and Khong 2006). Human security has come to the fore in initiatives combining non-state and state actors in campaigns, such as the global campaign to ban landmines (Matthew et al. 2004), or the campaign for the International Criminal Court.

Two matters are intriguing about the spread of human security: first, the speed by which it entered very different discourses and policy agendas, second, the way it allows for the coordination of very heterogeneous, new *and* traditional security actors. Under reference to human security, it is no longer a disclosed universe of military strategists, high level politicians and security technocrats defining the security agenda, but a wide range of intergovernmental organisations and non state actors are participating. Also, academics actively participate in shaping the new (human) security agenda. Usually we speak of a gap between academics and other social actors, which is only rarely bridged (e.g. George 1993). But in human security discourses academics appear to be equal participants that do have something to say, cooperate with other (whether state or non-state) social agents, and (perhaps most importantly) co-produce human security knowledge with them. It seems, then, that human security has opened a new global space for security, one with wider possibilities for participation.

However, together with this true success story of institutionalization and the ongoing usage of the concept, serious (academic) criticism has risen, claiming that the concept is too vague and ambiguous to be useful for analytical purposes and political guidance. For instance, Roland Paris (2001, 2004) argues that human security distracts analysts from a proper understanding of strategic affairs (2001: 88), that human security is "sprawling and ambiguous", a "hodgepodge of principles and objectives" (2001:92), is "so vague" that it verges on the meaningless (2001: 101) and does not help policymakers, who want to know what to do. With the proliferation of human security, it has become a craze among many (critical and traditionalist) security professionals to sideline the concept with arguments of these kinds. What appears puzzling then are two matters: Why is the history of human security such a success story of institutionalization, although it apparently seems to be a useless, fraught or at least ambivalent concept? And secondly, how was it possible that new forms of transnational spaces (coalitions, platforms and networks) emerged around the concept of human security?

In this paper I suggest that we can answer these questions by drawing on symbolic-interactionist theory. From a symbolic-interactionist perspective human security has been so successful because it

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serves as a 'boundary object' that is useful for several 'communities of practice'. Each community can use the concept for their own purposes, while coordinating actions with other communities the same time. Thus, the symbolic-interactionist perspective suggests that it is not the content of a concept – the elements, priorities and boundaries of it – that matters in the first place. Instead a focus on the practical usage of a concept becomes central. Concepts are, hence, understood as practical knowledge and only by being acted upon a concept becomes meaningful. Rather than problematizing the content of the concept of human security, as earlier intellectual work has done, a symbolic interactionist perspective focuses on the agents of security discourses, how they use 'security' in practice and cooperate with each other by using it. Consequentially, this understanding stresses the sociality of any concept, and emphasizes the primacy of practical knowledge over theoretical.

I shall set off with a short review of contemporary symbolic interactionism and introduce the key concepts 'communities of practice', 'boundary objects' and 'arenas' or 'trading zones'. Secondly, I discuss how these analytical terms throw a different light on security concepts in general and the history of human security in specific. I shall argue that the value of human security lies in how it leads to new kinds of transnational arenas and enables the cooperation among heterogenous state and non-state agents. I shall conclude with a discussion of the consequences such a perspective has for (future) academic practices related to human security. I suggest that academics should avoid naturalizing or objectifying the concept, and thereby claiming cognitive authority over the meaning of the concept. Instead academics can usefully act as 'discursive managers', which guarantee the prevailing ambiguity of the concept. Rather than attempting to draft better definitions or measurements of human security, the task becomes one of contributing to the design for maintaining and managing the cooperation among security practitioners enabled through human security.

Towards a symbolic-interactionist perspective for International Relations

Symbolic-interactionism finds its roots in American pragmatism and Chicago Sociology, and is first of all a *cultural theory*. In difference to rational-interest based theories of action, which assume that social order is a product of the coordination of individual actions, or norm-oriented theories of action, which assume that action becomes coordinated by overarching norms and rules on which actors agree on, cultural theories are interested in what enables agents to suppose the world as being ordered and as such gain the capacity to act (Reckwitz 2002: 288). As social theorists Andreas Reckwitz (2002: 245) points this out, cultural theories are interested

“in explaining and understanding actions by reconstructing the symbolic structures of knowledge which enable and constrain the agents to interpret the world according to certain forms, and to behave in certain ways. Social order then does not appear as a product of compliance of mutual expectations, but embedded in collective cognitive symbolic structures, in a 'shared knowledge' which enables a socially shared way of ascribing meaning in the world”

In IR terms, symbolic interactionism is then a *critical theory* in the first place. As understood by Ashley (1987:403), “in contrast to positivistic approaches to social inquiry, approaches meriting the label 'critical' stress the community-shared background understandings, skills, and practical predispositions without which it would be impossible to interpret action, assign meaning, legitimate practices, empower agents, and constitute a differentiated, highly structured social reality”. Furthermore contemporary symbolic interactionism falls into the broader category of the family of *practice theories* (Reckwitz 2002) that have gained a strong foothold in social theory (Schatzki et al. 2001; Spiegel 2005) and are currently reaching IR (Adler 2005; Neumann 2002; Pouliot 2008). Practice theories

trace shared knowledge, as emphasized by Ashley, by focussing on practical knowledge and by understanding social order as the outcome of practice.

Following these broad assumptions, symbolic interactionism grasps in its classical formulation by Anselm Strauss (Strauss et al. 1963) ‘shared knowledge’ by applying four central analytical terms. It is argued that different ‘social worlds’ ‘negotiate’ with each other ‘social order’ in ‘several arenas’. Social worlds can be understood in following Adele Clarke (1991:128,132) as “groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals and building shared ideologies about how to get about their business. [...] Social worlds are the principle affiliate mechanisms through which people organize social life.” Clarke (1991:131) defines an arena as “a field of action and interaction among a potentially wide variety of collective entities. It [...] includes all collective actors [...] committed to acting within it.” Arenas are thus social sites where representatives from different social worlds engage with each other in negotiation.

Although key constructivist scholars in IR, such as Wendt (1999) have relied on readings of classical symbolic interactionists authors (e.g. George H. Mead), symbolic interactionism has not been applied in IR in a straight forward manner.² Yet, the symbolic interactionist vocabulary carries the advantage of having a relative flexibility as it works with scarce presumptions, but provides a necessary infra-language. For instance, we do not have to assume the existence or emergence of a global society, to employ its sociological vocabulary. The notion of ‘social worlds’ allows to grasp agencies on different levels. Social worlds can be for instance nation states, but also transnational agencies, such as activist networks and advocacy collations, or international organization bureaucrats and diplomats. In the following I shall discuss recent updates of symbolic interactionism. Contemporary reformulations offered by authors such as Adele Clarke, Joan Fujimura, Lucy Suchman, Susan Leigh Star or Etienne Wenger have incorporated writings inspired by the linguistic turn and hence, made symbolic interactionism compatible with recent academic theorizing. Such a revision is promising, as many of the themes associated with ‘postmodernism’, ‘the linguistic turn’, or ‘the practice turn’ have already been incorporated in the theorizing of symbolic interactionists. As Clarke (2003:557) argues, Anselm Strauss already foreshadowed many of the contemporary assumptions:

“the instability of situations; characteristic changing, porous boundaries of both social worlds and arenas; social worlds seen as mutually constitutive/coproduced through negotiations taking place in arenas; negotiations as central social processes hailing that ‘things can always be otherwise’; and so on. Significantly, negotiations constitute discourses that also signal micropolitics of power as well as ‘the usual’ meso/macrostructural elements – power in its more fluid forms.”

Contemporaries have translated the notion of ‘social worlds’ into the concept of ‘communities of practice’ to stress that practical activities are key for the constitution of social worlds, and revised the notion of ‘arenas’, by distinguishing between different types of ‘trading zones’. Moreover, theorists situated in the sociology of science, stress much stronger the importance of non-human elements and objects, understood as anything that can be used and acted upon (things, artefacts or concepts). Objects are understood as crucial for the identity of a community of practice and are pivotal in establishing trading zones. Let us explore these terms in more detail.

Communities of practice

² The only exemption I could identify is Luke (1989), and partially Adler (2005). In IR the English School writers with their emphasis on International Society come closest to a symbolic interactionist understanding, as they prioritize practice (see Auth (2005) for an argument that shows the importance of practice for concepts of international society). For a critique of Wendt’s usage of the pragmatist authors with emphasis on Mead, see Herborth (2003).

The concept of 'communities of practice' has been centrally developed by organization theorist Etienne Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). In drawing on the idea of 'social worlds', Wenger understands communities of practice as units of analysis that cut across formal organizations, institutions like family and church, and other forms of association, such as social movements. It is, put simply, a set of relations among people doing things together.

As Emmanuel Adler (2005) has argued the concept of communities of practice holds some parallels to well known IR concepts, such as those of 'advocacy networks', 'interpretative communities' or 'epistemic communities' and 'security communities'.³ While these concepts put emphasis on shared norms, values and centrally interests (Antoniades 2003), the idea of communities of practice goes beyond such an understanding of an interest community of the like-minded, in stressing that communities construct a common – although often only temporary – identity, which orients itself at common language codes, symbol systems of difference and specific perspectives – and thus limitations of perspective – organized through and maintained by practical activities. As also Adler argues, the advantage of the community of practice idea is that it explicitly centres on practical sense and knowledge as know-how – a kind of knowledge often neglected in IR (Neumann 2002, Pouliot 2008). Moreover, as it will become clear shortly the community of practice perspectives allows us to focus on the coordination, cooperation and conflicts among several communities. A strategic advantage given IR research has been over-occupied with studying single communities and their role, rather than acknowledging for the plurality of communities and their interaction.

Communities of practice find many parallels in other better known concepts of collectives, which stress equally the reliance of shared knowledge on practical activities, practical reasoning, and the situation-dependency of any social action. Most notably these are concepts from the sociology of science, such as Thomas Kuhn's notion of the paradigm as a collective of scientists and an ideal technique (practice) of problemsolving, and Ludwik Flecks concept of thought collectives (Denkkollektive) and thought styles (Denkstil).⁴

What is already central to Fleck becomes a major reference point in the concept of communities of practice: the role of things. While for Fleck the thought style translated between the object and the subject (Schäfer and Schnelle 1980), for Wenger (and others using the concept) 'common ways to cope with objects' (practices) are constitutive for communities. Symbolic interactionists cut through a idealist/materialist dichotomy in claiming that objects are always composed of a material and social dimension – they are hybridical per se.⁵ A thing, such as a computer, might have many meanings to different communities (a computer might be an office tool, a communication tool, or a toy). Hence, the material dimension of a thing cannot be detached from its ideational or representational dimension. Also ideas or concepts cannot be detached from their material engagements and manifestations. Star, for instance, gives the example of classifications – usually perceived as a cognitive, ideational construct per se – which only can become meaningful in material manifestations, such as forms, and in practices, such as collecting data by filling out the form (Bowker and Star 1999). Objects are here understood as all the tools and material arrangements that mediate activity, as "stuff, things, tools, artefacts and techniques, and ideas, stories and memories – objects that are treated as consequential by community members" (Bowker and Star 1999:298; see also Wenger 1998: 107; Clarke and Fujimura 1992). Objects are used in the conduct of action and mediate it, but also something becomes an object only in the context of action and use.

³ Adler (2005) suggests that understanding these entities as communities of practice, emphasizes that these "cut across state boundaries and mediate between states, individuals, and human agency, on one hand, and social structures and systems, on the other."

⁴ See Golinski (2005:13-27) for a very useful overview of these concepts.

⁵ For a strong argument of that kind in IR, see Walters (2002), who argues that the construction of Europe is triggered by a range of what he calls "small things", objects such as reporting forms.

The naturalization of objects

What is the relation between communities of practice and their objects? Central to communities of practice are the translations or bridging activities between representations and objects. Making and using any kind of representation is a complex accomplishment, a balance of improvisation and accommodation to constraint. As Lave and Wenger (1991) demonstrate, people learn how to do this by becoming member of communities of practice. Yet, learning induces also forgetting. Becoming a member in a community of practice, means forgetting the strange nature of categories representation, meanings and practices attached to objects. As Star and Griesemer (1999:294-5) put it, "the more at home you are in a community of practice, the more you forget the strange and contingent nature of its categories seen from the outside". Bowker and Star (1999:299) refer in following anthropology to this double process of learning and forgetting as a process of *naturalization*.

'Naturalization' is hence a process in which objects become constructed as 'natural' and the contingency, the choices, contested meanings and relations of power embedded in them are no longer recognized. If the context of creation is forgotten by the members of a community, an object is naturalized. "Naturalization means stripping away the contingencies of an object's creation and its situated nature. [...] It is in that narrow sense desituated – members have forgotten the local nature of the object's meaning or the actions that go into maintaining and recreating its meaning." (Bowker and Star 1999:299). Processes of this kind have been described in detail by studies from the sociology of science.⁶ As these studies stress, naturalization is a complex process and the creation of objects (or 'facts') should be seen as a trajectory of naturalizations. It is not predetermined if any object will be naturalized, if it stays naturalized or if it will persist in controversies. However, "the more naturalized an object becomes, the more unquestionable the relationship of the community to it; the more invisible the contingent circumstances of its birth, the more it sinks into the community's routinely forgotten memory" (Bowker and Star 1999:299).

Monsters and boundary objects

As Star stresses not all objects become naturalized. Sometimes objects refuse to be naturalized and sometimes they are only partially naturalized. Star suggests – in referring to Donna Haraways (1992) sociology of cyborgs and monsters – to conceive as 'monsters' those entities, which completely resist the naturalization by any community of practice. Monsters travel through different communities without any community being able to attach a stable meaning to them.⁷ For objects that become partially naturalized by different multiple communities, Star has coined the term of "boundary objects". The notion of a 'boundary object' was originally introduced (Star and Griesemer 1989,

⁶ For instance Hughes (1983) described how much effort was necessary to establish electricity in New York – something that is taken for granted by citizens of the city these days. Latour (1988) describes detailed the efforts that were necessary to establish microbes as being an object. Latour (1987, 1999) refers to this process as setting up a blackbox that is not opened and questioned anymore. In Büger and Villumsen (2007) we tried to describe the research on the democratic peace as such a naturalization project by which the statement "democracies rarely fight each other" is translated into a fact. Potentially many other objects of International Relations, such as the 'state', the 'international system' or 'globalization' can be seen as having undergone such a translation. In all these cases we can observe a collective forgetting of the contingent messy work (of researcher and other social actors) these objects replace.

⁷ Star and Bowker have a somehow different understanding of monsters, than I refer to here. While Bowker and Star rely on Haraway's basic definition, as a monster being an object that refuses naturalization, they largely refer to monsters as those members of communities of practices that do not manage to gain legitimacy in any of them. Their prime case of a monster is a person of mixed race, who as such does not fit into any category and thus community of practice. Haraway herself in applying a stronger symmetry principle between humans and non-humans (granting actant status to both), does not give emphasis to either human or non-humans.

Bowker and Star 1999) to talk about the ways in which scientists manage to cooperate with each other, without agreeing about the classification of objects or actions.⁸ Bowker and Star (1999:297) define boundary objects as those objects

"that both inhabit several communities of practice and satisfy the informational requirement of each of them. Boundary objects are thus both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. They are weakly structured in common use and become strongly structured in individual site use."

Boundary objects hence have, first, an inherent quality: a certain robustness and a degree of plasticity. Second, through the creation and maintenance of these qualities coherence is developed and maintained across intersecting communities. Boundary objects evolve from the communication and deliberation processes between different communities of practice and their naturalizations. They can be understood as arising over time from durable cooperation among communities of practice. They are working arrangements that resolve anomalies of naturalization without imposing a naturalization of categories from one community or from an outside source of standardization. The function of one community can be connected by a boundary object with a wide range of communities of practice and entities without a specific shared practice.⁹ Wenger (1998:107) gives the simple, but telling example of a forest: "A forest can be a boundary object around which hikers, logging interests, conservationists, biologists, and owners [all being different communities of practice] organize their perspectives and seek ways of coordinating them".

Trading zones

To recall the basic ideas of symbolic interactionism, social worlds, or what we have called now communities of practice, meet and negotiate in arenas. Arenas are formed through boundary objects which different communities use and thereby interact. Science studies scholars have referred to arenas as "trading zones" (Gallison 1997), "transscientific areas" (Knorr Cetina 2005) or "boundary institutions" (Jasanoff and Miller 2004). Trading zones are the sites which allow for the local coordination of activities of members of distinct communities of practice, who continue to disagree on global meaning of terms. By studying the case of the establishment of the discipline of immunology Ilona Löwy (1992:374) has argued that loosely structured trading zones sometimes become a more stabilized "pidgin zone" in which partial agreement exists. Further, in some instances such a "pidgin zone" may even be transformed into what she calls a "creole zone", that is, it may become the main new community of a group of actors. In this case the actors develop a new, hybrid role and a new identity, in sum establish a new community of practice. Boundary objects are central for these arenas, as Löwy (1992:375) puts it "boundary objects may [...] be viewed as tools which

⁸ Star follows the tradition of cultural studies of science and, hence, does not claim that science presents a principally different cultural domain from others. Thus, boundary objects should not be understood as referring to science alone, although they can be easier studied in scientific culture.

⁹ Some have stressed the parallels between boundary objects and metaphors (e.g. Sarasin 2003:217-218): Metaphors and boundary objects have similar features. While Star talks about the synchrony of singularity and multiplicity implied by boundary objects, advocates of metaphors talk about the linguistic concept of polisemy (see Black 1996, Chilton 1996). Another key feature of metaphor is their function in connecting different discourses, in the words of Bono (1990:61) they are a "medium of exchange". However, while metaphors in principle are (or can) be boundary objects, the notion of metaphors focuses to strict on linguistic aspects and tends to neglect the material side of *any* object. Differentiating between 'boundary objects', having clear material character, and 'boundary concepts', largely equated with metaphor (e.g. Löwy 1992), is equally misleading. The differentiation was however partly caused by Star herself, in differentiating between different types of boundary objects (see Star and Griesemer 1989). A notion that was later dropped in the light of the more recent discussions about the relation between humans and non-humans.

further the development of ‘trading zones’ or ‘pidgin zones’ between disciplines, specialties and professional segments.”

In this section, I elaborated several analytical categories: boundary objects, communities of practice, naturalization, monsters and trading zones. My claim is that these concepts can throw new and different light on human security, its social function and the *problematique* of its ambiguity. Let me explain.

Human Security as Boundary Object

Security has been designated an “essentially contested concept” (Buzan 1983), a “symbol” (Wolfers 1952), a “leitmotif” (Debiel and Werthes 2005), a “metaphor” (Chilton 1996), a “language game” (Fierke 1998) or a “thick signifier” (Huysmans 1998). All these notions stress the multiplicity of meaning inherent in concepts of security and their social character. They hence bare similarities to the understanding of security as a (boundary) object, I shall offer here. While an understanding of security as an essentially contested concept, suggests that security is a ‘monster’, which cannot have a stabilized meaning, the other notions give security a similar functionality as that of boundary objects. These notions stress the coordinating functionality of security in imposing a set of rules, giving guidance and orientation, while preserving a degree of vagueness

However, these approaches to the concept of security are overly focussed on the content of security and on linguistic aspects; and they understand security predominantly in terms of its systemic, structure- or grammar-like character, without paying attention to how security can achieve this status – hence, they neglect grasping how security is naturalized or transformed through action. Although security can principally receive a systemic status, for instance, if it is fully naturalized, this is not necessarily the case. Such a status is the outcome of negotiations in one or among several communities of practice. To conceive of security as an object, highlights the importance of the practical activity of communities of practice, and that the meaning of security is largely defined by and in action, not by an overarching meta-grammar or -structure. The status, security receives, is always situated and activity-related. Security becomes meaningful, becomes an object, by being used in action and by mediating action. Security, thus, needs to be understood in relation to the communities of practice attached to it, which are using it and which negotiate with each other.

Abnormal security discourse – The denaturalization of security

If we transfer the notion of communities of practice to the realms of security politics, we can speak of ‘communities of security practice’, as those collectives that relate themselves to the object ‘security’, for instance in engaging in securitization (securitizing communities), producing insecurity knowledge or in enacting security in practices of protection from insecurity. ‘Communities of security practice’ can be hence understood as covering a wide range of agencies. The potential spectrum is from classical agencies, such as those communities using weapons (military organizations), protecting borders (police, border patrol) to communities conducting analysis of security (security experts), advocating for certain interpretations of security (such as NGO’s), or relating themselves in other ways to security, such as communities from the humanitarian sector. Moreover, if security is a defining feature for the identity of communities of security practice, security and communities of security practice stand in co-constitute relation. A changed meaning of security induces a changed identity for communities of security practice and vice versa. Yet, as security is an object of more than one community, a changing practice in one community will alter or affect the other.

A good case for a naturalization process in security politics is the unquestioned nature that the understanding of security as ‘national security’ gained in the 1960s and 1970s, in what Buzan and Waever (2007) call the “Golden Age of Security Studies”. Multiple commentators have observed that in these decades the nature, content, qualities and meanings of security were rarely addressed or contested.¹⁰ Security as attached to the nation state was taken for granted and knowledge production on security focussed on rather technical issues, such as deterrence. That security had a history (Waever 2006), that it had been previously attached to very different issues and referents, such as resources and populations (Dalby 2000:3), and that this specific meaning of security was the outcome of a specific political struggle in the 1950s (Robin 2001) was collectively disremembered. Clearly in ‘classical strategic and security studies’ the contested and political nature of security was forgotten, and (national) security became something natural. It required the ‘illegitimate strangers’ of Critical Security Studies and Peace Research to question and re-open again the black box of security, which strategic studies had set up.¹¹ In our case naturalization went along with the creation of the ‘creole zone’ of strategic studies. While the debate among the new understanding of security in the post-World War II (and early nuclear) era, was initially carried out by diverse communities such as military historians, weapon specialists, physicists, international lawyers, social theorists and political scientists (a trading zone),¹² it led to the establishment of a new community of security practice: Strategic Studies, with joint collective practices, a common identity and evolving institutions, such as journals, conferences and associations.¹³

The late 1980s and 1990s widening and deepening debates can, in turn, be understood as a struggle of de-naturalizing the concept of security and attempting to re-naturalize it. However, I suggest that re-naturalization has failed so far and that the 1990s as well as the contemporary situation can be described as ‘abnormal security discourse’. With the term abnormal security discourse I refer to the situation in which not only the content of security is contested, but also its grammar.¹⁴ What is at stake in the debates of security since the 1990s is not only the “what” of security, which threats should be included in security, but also the “who” and “how” of security.

While debates question since the 1980s which threats should be included in the concept of security¹⁵, it remains centrally contested, who the subjects of security are. National security clearly identified the subject as the territorial state, and groups of territorial states (alliances). The consensus that the territorial state is the prime subject of security is contested by the rise of transnational security agents, in the shape of private military companies and regional organizations (on the ‘protecting’ side) and in the format of transnational terrorist-networks and transnational organized crime (on the ‘threatening’ side). Also, the problem of state failure to provide security for its citizens, and situations in which the state ceases to exist (paradigmatically Somalia), have called for the recognition of other

¹⁰ E.g. Booth (1997); Krause (1996); Huysmans (2006).

¹¹ This is not to argue that it is only the merits of Critical Security Studies and Peace Research to have de-naturalized security. See below.

¹² See e.g. Lawrence (1996) and Robin (2001).

¹³ For a history of Strategic Studies see Buzan and Waever, (2007)

¹⁴ The notion of abnormal discourse is borrowed from Richard Rorty (1989). In drawing on Thomas Kuhn’s concept of paradigms, he suggests distinguishing between normal and revolutionary discourse, yet suggests that “abnormal” is a more suited term, given the connotations of the term “revolutionary”. The notion of abnormal discourse has recently been applied to global justice by Nancy Fraser (2005). In contrast to concepts such as the securitization approach, I propose that no meta-grammar of security exists, or that this grammar is at least temporarily contested. For a similar position, de-essentializing the grammar of security, see Albert (1998).

¹⁵ It is usually argued that the widening debates (see especially Buzan 1983), were triggered by 1) the easing of tension between the cold war superpowers, 2) the recognition of economic interdependence and the importance of economic aspects (especially natural resources) for national security concerns (see Daase 1991) and 3) the fact that most security aspects under the paradigm of national security were of minor concern for most Third World countries. Yet, the 1980s debates did not centrally challenge the subjects of security, an issue that arose only with the end of the cold war.

subjects than states. The strive of who is a legitimate subject of security, is accompanied by a struggle for finding alternatives to the Westphalian map of territorial states. Consequently, different topologies, such as the notion of networks have been introduced to the security discourse.

The consensus on the “how” of security is equally at stake. Security practice was in the 1990s equated with either (state) practices of deterrence and signalling, or practices of inter-state cooperation in the collective security frame, and if these practices failed practices of interstate war faring. Contemporary, there is wide disagreement on which practices to pursue. The menu of choice has widened on the one side, to include practices of sanctioning, preventing, intervening, pre-empting, torturing, surveillance, building and reconstructing, as represented for instance by the paradigms of ‘crisis prevention’, ‘humanitarian intervention’, ‘peacekeeping and –building’. On the other side, the meaning and success of these practices is contested. If it comes to reconstruction and peacebuilding efforts the overall record seems to be negative. The possibilities for success of practices such as peacekeeping, sanctioning or pre-empting is contested. In sum, the contemporary situation can be described as an open political struggle, an abnormal discourse in which arguments persist about legitimate contents of security, about what constitutes a legitimate community of security practice, and which practices are legitimate security practices.

One of the outcomes of this political struggle is the concept of ‘human security’. As already suggested, human security constitutes something like a new security consensus. Yet, the intriguing feature of human security is that although it is consensual to some degree, it has not been naturalized and fixed security discourse. Instead, political struggles continue. This is, I suggest, due to its character as a boundary object. Understanding human security as a boundary object raises the question if and how this ‘new’ concept of security re-configures the landscape of communities of security practice, how it affects the identity of new (and old) communities, and in what way it constitutes new trading zones, or transforms earlier ones. Let me in the following scrutinize, firstly, if human security qualifies as a boundary object rather than as a fully naturalized object or a monster. To do so I ask, if human security reflects the criteria outlined for a boundary object. Secondly, I investigate, by drawing on some illustrative examples, how human security has reconfigured the landscape of communities of security practice, and in what way this goes along with the constitution of new global security arenas.

Human security – Monster, naturalized, or boundary object?

While a range of definitions proliferates, agreement exists that human security means to give the individual or people the primary status as referent of security. This already suggests that human security is not a monster. Such a view is further supported by the successful institutionalization of human security. While human security’s *intellectual* history is usefully traced back to earlier conceptualizations of ‘positive peace’¹⁶, its contemporary *institutional* history set off with the redefinition of development as human security outlined in the 1994 *Human Development Report* of the *UN Development Programme*. Drafted for the 1995 World Summit on Social Development, human security became adopted for development in the 1995 Copenhagen declaration, the outcome document of the World Summit. Further steps of institutionalization included the success of the *International Campaign to Ban Landmines* leading to the 1997 *Ottawa Convention*, in which human security provided a key argument; the creation of the *Human Security Trust Fund* as part of *Office for the*

¹⁶ To be found for instance in the League of Nation campaign of the 1920s, the UN Charter and the UN Declaration on Human Rights, the work of 1970s peace research (such as the “civilizational hexagon” of Dieter Senghas or the “structural violence” concept of Johan Galtung), the 1970 and 1980s peace movements, as well as initiatives in changing the global security agenda, such as the Brandt report. For a discussion of these intellectual sources and the intellectual history of human security more general see the powerful narrative provide by MacFarlane and Khong (2006), who trace human security back to ancient times and also provide a more careful historical reconstruction.

Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) funded by the Japanese Government in 1999; the founding of the *Human Security Network*, a network of like-minded states coordinating their actions on a regular base. The intellectual work of the *International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (ICISS, 2000-2001), the *Commission on Human Security* (CHS, 2001-2003), and the *UN High Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change* (HLP, 2003-2004) and the 2000 and 2005 Reports of UN secretary general Kofi Annan “We the people” and “In larger Freedom” set the stage to institutionalize human security and make it official UN doctrine. It led to a range of organizational platforms inside and outside the UN – the *Human Security Network* being only one of them. The CISS report led to founding the *Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect* based at New York University; the CHS report to the *Advisory Board on Human Security* in 2003 and the *Human Security Unit* as a sub-unit of OCHA in 2004. In parallel to this institutionalization in the UN environment a range of think tanks and research centres devoted to the study of human security has been founded – especially in Canada, Scandinavia, UK and Germany.

While the case can be made that human security is not a monster, the fact that serious disagreement exists on the exact meaning of it indicates that institutionalization does not induce naturalization or at least only partial naturalization. As contemporary contributions eagerly note, different versions of human security circulate. Put bluntly, there is divergence over three dimensions.¹⁷ This concerns firstly the content of human security. “While all proponents of human security agree that its primary goal should be the protection of individual human lives, they differ as to what the individual should be protected from” (Shani 2007:4). This leads to differentiating between a narrow and a broad understanding. The narrow understanding claims to prioritize insecurities and to include only physical or military threats to survival. The broader understanding aims to integrate a wider range of threats and centrally adds non-physical aspects and notions of injustice, such as economic (mis-)distribution, socio-cultural (mis-)recognition and political (mis-)representation. Secondly, conceptions of human security differ over who the subjects of human security are. One version prioritizes the territorial state. In upholding Westphalian sovereignty it is claimed that states have to be the primary provider of security for people and if states fail to do so, groups of states have to intervene to protect them. A second version attempts to give primacy to people protecting themselves and stresses the role of non-state or sub-state organizations in *assisting* them to do so. Thirdly, human security is either conceptualized in negative or in positive terms. The negative one understands security as the absence of threats, usually framed by understanding security as ‘freedom from a threat’. The positive one defines security as the existence of possibilities to protect, usually framed in terms of ‘empowerment’ or ‘emancipation’.

It has been rightfully argued that the different understandings, I only could provide here a sketch of, are advocated by or attached to different communities. For instance, a narrow, state centred, negative version has been associated with Canadian activities and the Human Security Network. Also, military organizations (such as the US military or NATO) tend to make use of such a narrow understanding. The doctrine of the Responsibility to Protect centrally relies on the idea of a narrow understanding of human security. The wider, non-state centred, negative version is supported by Japan, finds foothold in development communities and is centrally advocated by the UN. The positive version is mainly attached to academic communities such as the Welsh School in Security Studies (Booth 2007), but also to (cosmopolitan) political theorists and philosopher communities more broadly. A clear-cut differentiation of versions and agencies makes however only partially sense, at least if the criteria of usage is applied. For instance, the Human Security Network, heavily borrows, as Gaspers (2005) notes, from a broader understanding, which is confirmed given that it engages in issues such as

¹⁷ For more sophisticated overviews of the different versions of human security see Alkire (2003), Gaspers (2005) and Jolly and Ray (2006: section 1).

health. Hence, we cannot conclude that any community has fully naturalized one version of human security. Rather which version is useful is defined in situations.

Let us turn to the formal question of giving human security the status as a boundary object. Boundary objects have a number of characteristics, which we can use as a checklist: They have 1) a degree of *modularity*: each perspective of a community of practice can attend to one specific portion of the boundary object (for example a newspaper is a heterogeneous collection of articles that has something for each reader); 2) a degree of *abstraction*: all perspectives are served at once by deletion of features that are specific to each perspective (for example in a map); 3) a degree of *accommodation*: the boundary object lends itself to various activities (for example an office building, where several communities of practice work); 4) a degree of *standardization*: the information contained in a boundary object is in a respecified form so that each community knows how to deal with it locally. If we apply these four criteria of a boundary object it becomes clear that human security is an object that is neither clearly naturalized nor a monster: 1) human security is modular in the sense that it allows for different communities of security practice to attend to it. It has something for development workers, military strategists and so on; 2) human security has a degree of abstraction, in uniting different issue areas under the conduct of it; 3) it has a degree of accommodation in focussing on very different activities from humanitarian aid to the use of military force. 4) It forms a principle that unites different measures but allows for communities of security practice using it very differently in individual sites. Thus we can justifiably speak of human security being neither a naturalized object or black box nor a monster, but a boundary object.

Several advocates of human security have already stressed human security's usefulness in allowing for integrating heterogeneous actors.¹⁸ For instance, Peter Uvin (2004:352) argues that due to human security "increasingly scholars and practitioners from different professional disciplines are seeking to go outside the confines of their usual professional boxes to develop a better understanding of the relations between different fields of social change". For him, human security triggers the involvement and connectivity of different organizational worlds. Others stress that human security offers "opportunities for creative synthesis and theoretical eclecticism" (Acharya 2004:356) or that it is "precisely because of the imprecision in the use of this term that it has become an attractive mandate in the conduct of foreign policy" (Liotta 2004:363). Such a line of reasoning is also central in Sabina Alkire's (2003:25) working paper for the CHS; she argues that "human security does bridge a number of previous concepts" and sees the concepts worth in its capacity for analytical integration. Similarly, Des Gaspers (2005:242) suggests that human security is a "promising framework" for "connecting different disciplinary and organizational worlds, and embedding priority human concerns into analytical and political agendas".

Which different worlds or communities of practice does human security link? This concerns as Uvin (2004:353) argues, the traditionally separated fields of "humanitarianism, development, human rights and conflict resolution", with each a different set of practitioners attached. Hence, human security brings together, philosophers and intellectuals, relief and reconstruction workers, development theorists, bureaucrats, and workers, legal practitioners and activists, security scholars, military strategists, defence bureaucrats and soldiers.

As Gaspers (2005) suggests the introduction of human security has maybe so far the strongest effect on the transformation of the identities of development, humanitarian and human rights practitioners. These have been prior relatively unconcerned about or de-linked to security. Yet these three fields have found earlier a common concern in the concept of human development. The career of human

¹⁸ Thus, I am definitely not the first to argue that the usefulness of human security lies in its ambiguity; however the perspective of boundary concepts gives us a way of systematically describing and re-thinking why this ambiguity actually is helpful. See also the discussion in Gaspers (2005: 234-242) who draws in a similar way on the notion of a boundary concept.

security can be read in this sense as the incomprehension of security concerns in development and human rights agendas. In consequence, these communities became effectively communities of *security practice* by using human security. In what way human security has had a transformative effect on classical communities of security practice is more contested. MacFarlane and Khong (2006), for instance, suggest that security scholarship has been largely untouched from human security concerns. Yet, the fact that military organizations increasingly engage in non-military activities, e.g. in the case of the provincial reconstruction teams in Afghanistan, and that NATO officials talk about human security, raises at least doubt that classical communities of security practice are not affected by human security.

New Global Security Arenas

Having said that human security allows for convergence and coordination of different communities, let us next investigate, symbolic interactionism's second claim, namely that boundary objects constitute arenas and trading zones. Has human security enabled arenas, and do these differ from traditional ones?

Traditionally we conceive of security decision making as being conducted in the smoky rooms so brilliantly described in Graham Allison's (1971) analysis of the Cuban missile crisis, or Michael Barnett's (1997) study of the UN bureaucracy and its failure to react to the events in Rwanda. Security arenas are in the majority a disclosed universe in which only elites, advisors, civil and defence bureaucrats have access. Didier Bigo (2002, 2005) argues for the case of European Security policy making, that even if formal decision making is carried out in more public visible arenas, or involves parliamentary procedures, major decisions are largely taken prior, in a disclosed arena of insecurity professionals – what he calls following Bourdieu, a 'field'. This 'field of insecurity professionals' intentionally excludes any outside source of knowledge, which is based on experience instead of analysis. Bigo and related scholars (such as Huysmans 2006) argue hence that security arenas are essentially technocratic and that the possibilities of civic participation are systematically narrowed down. Conducting decision making in arenas that are disclosed to analysts and bureaucrats are, as Steven Turner (2001) argues, without accountability. Second, the knowledge that might be needed for an adequate problem solution (e.g. local or experience based knowledge) might be not available, due to the boundaries drawn (Wynne 1999). Consequently policy risks failure by drawing on the 'wrong' knowledge.

At a first sight the picture of the arenas of human security seems not to fundamentally differ. UNDP's 1994 Human Development report setting up the stage for the current discussions was drafted inside the bureaucratic walls of UNDP. Many of the organizational platforms created, such as the *Human Security Unit*, the *Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect* or the *Advisory Board on Human Security*, operate similar in an academic-bureaucratic nexus. Yet, human security has a much more inclusive function.

This concerns firstly the integration of various academic perspectives from the above mentioned fields. This can be most clearly seen in the construction of the commissions, the CISS, the HLP and the CHS, that played a decisive role in the dissemination of human security. Who participated in the work of these commissions? It is a wide range of representatives of different world political communities of practice, researcher, civil society representatives, representatives from the North and the South.

Secondly, the case for the inclusive function of human security can be made stronger, if we direct our attention to two arenas that are usually associated with human security, the Global Campaign to Ban Landmines, and the Campaign for the establishment of the International Criminal Court. In both cases under the flag of human security arenas have been established combining state actors and non-state actors (Matthew et al. 2004).

Further, the case can be made that human security has led to the transformation of existing security arenas, for instance the Security Council. The primary body of international security, which effectively defines in terms of international law, what constitutes a “threat to international peace and security”, who constitutes a legitimate subject of security, and when action is legitimately taken, has over the last decades continuously widened its agenda in taking humanitarian aspects of security into consideration. Yet, the concept of human security has allowed the Security Council to take also action on non-military aspects. Instances include the resolution on HIV and Aids, in which the Security Council addressed issues of global health for the first time (Prins 2004).

Summary

To sum up, seen in the light of boundary objects, human security has facilitated newly evolving and traditional communities of security practice, as well as cooperation between states and between state and non-state agencies. Human security helped to untie security from the military instrument and opened the security discourse to other groups, such as citizen groups and development and aid agencies. However, although organizing the cooperation of these heterogeneous groups it has not led to a new orthodoxy, or naturalization of a security paradigm. Controversy about the meaning of human security persists. Different communities of security practice can adjust human security to their local needs and contexts and there is an open inclusive debate on which action to take in local situations and sites. The de-naturalization of security led to this process, but coordination became only possible in sorting the various post-cold-war security proposals by a loose and fuzzy concept, by a boundary object. While this points us to the positive features and indeed the useful function of human security’s ambiguity, we shall next address the arguments that have been raised against it. These arguments have either stressed that human security is, because of its ambiguity, not useful at all – these we have encountered already –, or argued that we are better equipped with a fixed definition, a clear list of priorities and a check list of tasks. These arguments I shall address in the next section, and highlight how symbolic interactionism points us to a re-defined understanding of security scholarship.

Consequences of Reading Human Security as a Boundary Object

The state of the current debate encountering the value of Human Security in world politics is marked by largely two positions. One claiming that the ‘international community’ is in need of a shared guiding security understanding, to direct the attention implied by the security signifier to appropriate areas, and to enable political actions correspondently. This is a position broadly arguing for fixing security discourse and re-naturalizing security. It is proposed by peace researchers, working in a policy-oriented environment and also by (British) Critical Security Studies. While the latter suggest that human security is not well developed enough, because it is unclear which (emancipative) norms and values it should incorporate, policy oriented peace researchers have criticized the ongoing incoherence and fuzziness of the concept, which makes it incapable to guide political action appropriately.

A second position is proposed by scholars essentially calling for preserving the genuine openness of security discourse. In emphasizing the contingency of any concept of security and recalling the lessons to be learned from the concept of ‘national security’ they raise awareness for the dangers any hegemonic concept (or new orthodoxy) of security implies. Most notably they point to the dangers and consequences of relating security to human rights, democracy, development and everyday life.

Hence, the present state of the human security discourse might be described as a position arguing for the *conditional* usefulness of the concept – if its definition is fixed or if it incorporates the right, ‘good’

norms and values – facing a position, which rejects human security – as any other ‘concept’ of security – and argues for processes of desecuritization, instead.

The symbolic interactionist argument is a third position – a position that respects the position of contingency, but highlights the *pragmatic* value of human security in changing the conditions for participation in security discourse and enabling international policy coordination. Rather than joining the calls for naturalization, understanding human security as a *boundary object* calls for preserving conceptual indeterminacy. Being unstable, ill-defined and open for re-definitions in concrete situations, a boundary object enables coordination among heterogeneous communities, gives security discourses a genuine openness and potentially leads to a long term institutionalization of such a situation, if appropriately maintained. As argued above, the fuzziness of human security has opened the possibility for (new) communities to participate in security discourses – participants, such as non-Western communities and transnational and local advocacy communities that have been long excluded by the dominance of ‘security professionals’. Human Security understood in this way is a powerful tool to enable the multiplicity of security thinking, and an initial step to liberate it from any specific Western, liberal rationality and norms, while still allowing for the coordination of global action. Understood in such a way, the value of human security lies exactly in its indeterminacy, and action is needed to prevent attempts to take over the concept and hegemonize it, in whatsoever rationality. The notion of a security concept, developed here, then differs from current critical security theory in that it neither claims radical contingency, nor claims superiority for a certain set of values, but tries to re-link discourse and action, while preserving the major insights of theorems of contingency. Let me clarify these points by addressing the arguments for transforming and naturalizing human security, and proposals rejecting any concept of security.

Encountering naturalization arguments

Consider the thought experiment that it would indeed be possible to create a universal hierarchy of threats, a universal list of tasks that deserve priority, and an exact definition of human security. Although such a case is highly unlikely, what would change in contemporary security discourse and practice, if such an established, hegemonic definition would exist? Critics of the current proliferating version of human security have argued that in this case human security would be, first, of greater analytical worth, and second, would allow for giving professionals of politics better guidelines. Analysts such as Buzan (2004), Paris (2004), Krause (2004), Mack (2004) and MacFarlane (2004) have strongly argued along these lines, by suggesting that human security lacks conceptual clarity and is consequently politically useless.

Let us go through these arguments from a symbolic interactionist perspective. The first, on conceptual clarity, is an *epistemological* argument. The second is a linked argument on the relationship between theory/science and practice/policy, hence, an argument Jackson (2008) considers to be a *philosophical ontological* argument.¹⁹

The *epistemological* argument, is raised, for instance, by Mack (2004), Paris (2001, 2004) or MacFarlane and Khong (2006). They argue that the concept of human security blurs independent and dependent variables and thus makes causal analysis impossible. Violence and threats can be studied as independent *and* as dependent variable, thus it becomes impossible to trace the causality from one to the other. This is an argument that assumes that reality can be causally traced and split into variables. However plausible it is from their epistemological position, human security exactly points us to the

¹⁹ Those arguments have to be considered as interdependent. Theory, epistemology or academic practice in general cannot be de-coupled from the ‘real-world’. As famously stated by Cox (1981), (academic) theory always has a social purpose. Political practice and scientific practice are interrelated (Smith 2004, Büger and Gadinger 2007), hence an epistemological position is always political to some degree. As Jackson (2008) exemplifies epistemological positions make ontological assumptions about the relation between science and politics (hence the term “philosophical ontology”).

interrelated and complex character of insecurities that cannot be easily split in parts, but have to be understood in their complexities. Thus, this is not an argument against human security in principle, which is a different (messy) way of ordering the world. It is rather an argument against positivistic research designs: The analysis of security might not be easily open to causal analysis. However, the fact that academics such as Mack and Paris can relate to the concept in principle, although it does not represent their epistemological stance, again demonstrates the boundary-object character of human security: it allows for these academics to participate in the debate.

The *philosophical ontological* argument suggests that without “analytical rigor”, useful policy advice cannot be given. This is a suspicious argument, firstly, as there is hardly any case where an exact academic definition has increased policy usefulness. Those studying the relation usually argue for the opposite relation.²⁰ Instead of abstract generalization, political (“practical”) judgements requires context dependent (culturally situated, time and space related) statements (Kratochwil 2006).

A third group of arguments raised against human security concerns the political usage of it. The *political* argument suggests that a too broad understanding of security, which widens the spectrum of threats included to non-military, and subjects non-state agency, diverts attention from what is ‘urgently’ needed. As Krause (2004) puts it, human security turns security into something like a list “of bad things that can happen”. This is essentially a *securitization* argument, stressing that certain types of threats should be lifted above the agenda of normal politics. The claim is, if rather everything can potentially be seen as security issue it steals the specificity of security. The notion of security should be reserved instead for existential threats that require extra-ordinary measures. This argument relates or even reserves security for those kinds of phenomena that should be dealt with extra-ordinary measures, such as the military instrument. Yet, security understood as a specific object, performs other political function than granting an extra-ordinary status to certain phenomena. For instance, as I demonstrated, security can facilitate cooperation among heterogeneous agencies and communities.

To return to our thought experiment of the beginning, what would happen if we would have a shared consensus on a better or even exact defined concept? Maybe most importantly, a shared exact definition of human security would mean a naturalization process, a collective process of forgetting the political debates that are currently taking place. Most likely it would also mean that the pidgin zone, human security currently is establishing, has been turned into a creole zone (as in the case of Strategic Studies) or one of the communities of security practice in the game has gained hegemony over the interpretation of human security. This in sum would mean disclosing the discursive environment of security politics once again, excluding those who do not share the official consensus, or those who do not have the power to raise their voice. It would mean a de-liberation of security debates and in turn a step back to framing security measures in purely technical, rather than political terms.

To sum up, given this disadvantageous scenario, we might be better equipped with an ill-defined, ambiguous concept of human security that at least gives us the guarantee that contemporary security discourses stays open for all kind of participants and a technocratic closure under whosever hegemony is avoided.

Addressing radical contingency arguments

While the above discussed arguments stress the need for revising human security in a better defined and easier manageable concept, another group of security studies scholars, rejects the notion of human security altogether. By stressing that any kind of security concept has a negative impact on political life, it is argued that political life has to be de-securitized in general and freed from the

²⁰ See George (1993), Erikson and Sundelius (2005), and Büger and Gadinger (2007) for an overview.

grammar of security. Such a position can be broadly ascribed to the post-structuralist reasoning on security. The merger of development and security is read as a takeover of development by security. This is firstly not necessarily the case as human security has the potential to transform the identity of both communities, security as well as development communities. Who would have expected that German and Australian soldiers build houses in Afghanistan and hand out cookies rather than preparing to fight?

Secondly, the disappearance of security, although maybe wishful in theoretical terms, is in practical terms no more than a fantasy, as the (classical) communities and institutions of security, such as the military will most likely not disappear in the next decades. Instead of trying to discard any concept of security from the intellectual landscape of politics, analysts should rather acknowledge for the transformative potential of human security. As discussed above, the ambiguity of human security has prevented so far a successful securitization of issues. Hence, human security has decoupled security from the extraordinary nature. If we prefer de-securitization over securitization we should hence rather embrace human security for being a security concept, on the one hand, but, on the other hand, for not being able to give priority to certain phenomena over others. New concepts are some sort of an indicator for a process of securitization. This might be the case for human security too as it argues that several issues should be put on the security agenda. But can we speak of any successful securitization due to human security so far? No, exactly because the concept includes too many issues and argues for the securitization of too much the same time without a coherent justification. Thus the ambiguity of the concept has so far prevented any successful securitization of new issues. As Krause (2004) rightly notes, making everything a security threat in effect prioritizes nothing. We might add, prioritizing nothing on a general, abstract level, leaves prioritization open to a pluralistic debate and judgement in concrete situations and local circumstances.

Summary

“Rather than lamenting the lack of workable definitions, we should be more concerned with security studies’ pathological obsession with the quest for definitional universality and practicality that serves to circumvent politics (as an ethical and moral enterprise concerned with the legitimacy of dominant relations of power) in the discussion of what security can and should be in an era of shared global vulnerabilities” (Grayson 2004: 357)

In summarizing the debate “What is Human Security?” in *Security Dialogue* that gave voice to 21 commentators from different professional backgrounds (although most of them academics), Taylor Owen argued that we should learn from the history of political realism (and national security) that any concept is better equipped if theory and policy are compatible. “The theory and policy of human security are surely better together than apart” (Owen 2004:377). The question, however, persists on which grounds such a ‘happy together’ should be established. To put it otherwise, what should be the role of academics in the future development of human security? Here the history of national security is an ill-suited role model. If one of the advantages of human security is that it opened the debates on security, that it allowed for the participation of usually marginalized political voices, that it opened the possibility of a loosely structured, participative discursive environment, national security was (or is) rather the opposite. National security discourses have largely been dominated by an academic-bureaucratic nexus: the security professionals of the creole zone of Strategic Studies, together with various state bureaucratic agencies (such as the military forces, police agencies or defence bureaucracies) have been the ones that managed to exert their (expert) power in a way that they dominated the security discourses and limited the participation and power of professionals of politics and citizens alike – at least that is the conclusion that can be drawn from the work of Didier Bigo

(2002, 2005) and Jef Huysmans (2006). If such a technocratic politics is to be avoided in future, the growing social role of human security clearly presents an opportunity for change and for a further opening of contemporary security discourses.

However, the calls for conceptual clarity discussed in section four, already put this development in danger. These calls are technocratizing moves; they are attempts to claim cognitive authority over human security and attempts to establish scientific criteria of relevance. The fuzziness of human security, its limited naturalization and its status as a grey-box and boundary object, guarantees that any participating community has only partially control over the interpretation of it. Critical academics should thus try to guarantee the open character of human security and resist the temptations of providing utopian, sublime, abstract value-hierarchies or engage in truth-speaking, assuming that ordinary (non-academic) citizens or professionals are empty vessels that need to be filled with better (academic) knowledge.

Engaging in the future development of human security as such cannot mean to establish better knowledge about it or to claim cognitive authority for parts of it. Rather the task becomes one of re-thinking knowledge production and designing human security for usage. Designing to be used however means designing for participation rather than just used. Understanding human security as a boundary object, as a nexus of different community perspectives, means to develop the role of academics as designers of this corporation enabled by the open and participative character of human security. As Etienne Wenger (1998:108) clearly puts this task: "It is then the imperative to consider the range of connections beyond the [object] itself, both to reconcile various perspectives in the nexus and to take advantage of their diversity."

Conclusion: Boundary Objects and International Relations

In this paper I outlined a symbolic interactionist perspective for international relations. I focused on how symbolic interactionism throws a different light on the status we give to concepts. Instead of focussing exclusively on the content of concepts, symbolic interactionism puts stronger emphasis on how they are used and which functionality they have. Centrally, objects are important for the identity of communities of practice. Yet, in principle they do not have to be naturalized by a distinct community, but they also can be monsters or boundary objects. I made use of this idea in discussing the use and function of human security. As I suggested human security fits relatively neatly into the frame of a boundary object. From such an understanding the ambiguity of the concept is its strength, and not as often argued its weakness. I outlined how human security connects and coordinates very heterogeneous communities of practice and leads to new and transformed global security arenas. Especially the new arenas, enabled by human security, are much more inclusive and open for broad participation than traditional security arenas. Further, I suggested that if such security arenas are preferred, academics should avoid both claiming authority for human security and thereby narrowing the security discourse down, as well as sidelining the human security concept, by rejecting any notion of security. Instead, symbolic interactionism points us to a different role of security academics. The role of academics lies neither in truth-speaking, nor in merely criticizing the state of affairs, but in serving as 'cooperation designers' and 'discursive managers' that work to maintain the ongoing cooperation between different communities of practice, as well as the genuine openness for participation.

Let me end by stressing that the perspective developed should not be understood as restricted to security discussions. Rather it opens up and contributes to the discussion to acknowledge for different communities of practice in IR, to re-emphasize practice and re-evaluate practical knowledge, as well as to re-consider the functionality of world political concepts, beyond their epistemological or ontological value.

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