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A Relational View of Ontological Security in International Relations

THEORY NOTE

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I propose a relational understanding of ontological security, based on a synthesis of pragmatist philosophy and relational sociology. This relocates the referent of ontological security from the self to the social arrangements where action takes place. It implies that actors seek not to secure the coherence and stability of *self* in particular, but rather of their broader social context. By taking this relational approach, international relations scholars may avoid methodological difficulties in accessing or defining the cognitive or affective processes shaping certain actors, while honing in on the social embeddedness of action. I outline three causal mechanisms for theorizing ontological security in particular cases: *refereeing, performative deference*, and *obstructive resistance*. I do so with reference to prominent methodological frameworks in relational sociology—namely, those based on fields and on figurations, respectively. Finally, I connect this new approach to theorizing ontological security to existing trends in relational international relations research. I argue that it provides a theoretical architecture more sensitive to action and agency than is offered by many existing relational approaches, and is especially well suited to the study of precarious forms of transnational life.

Introduction

Early work on ontological security argued that concerns over the maintenance of the self, rather than simple "material interests," drive foreign policy and international relations. Scholars working on ontological security argue that it explains why international actors (such as states or policymakers) do things that, from a traditional security perspective, appear costly or even directly compromise their physical security. They contend that actors must secure their social existence before they are able to do anything else, and that this offers important insight into well-known dynamics in international security, such as the persistence of mutually destructive conflicts and the pervasiveness of security dilemmas under conditions of uncertainty (Mitzen 2006b; Mitzen and Schweller 2011).

However, to the extent that these scholars offer explanations with reference to psychological processes—that is to say, with an emphasis on particular thoughts and feelings—they encounter two kinds of methodological problems. First, they must assume that actors' speech and expression *authentically* and *reliably* provide access to their inner selves, whether in terms of moral commitments or experienced emotions. Second, they must begin with defined views about the nature of those inner selves in the first place, and about the causal relationship between ethical beliefs and feelings, on the one hand, and the particular actions or outcomes under investigation, on the other. In some circumstances these assumptions prove unproblematic, but in others they are unwarranted or limiting.

These assumptions are not essential to the study of ontological security, however. By defining the referent of ontological security through the terms of relational sociology, we can retain the critical and explanatory themes of the research program, but reorient them around factors and processes less dependent on the specific beliefs or feelings of actors. In this note, I propose such a reformulation.

I begin by tracing the themes of existing ontological security scholarship, defining both its critical contributions and its most prevalent explanatory modes. This examination shows why an emphasis on psychological or affective dimensions—that is, on the beliefs, values, and feelings of actors—runs up against methodological limits, and how an alternative drawn from relational sociology would be preferable for some research problems. I then offer one such alternative by relocating the referent of ontological security from the self to the broader contexts in which selves emerge and interact, termed "social arrangements." If this is the referent of ontological security, then actors are not trying to secure the coherence and stability of *self*, but rather of their broader social context. To further develop this alternative, I outline three relational ontological security mechanisms: *refereeing, performative deference*, and *obstructive resistance*. By building theories with these mechanisms, scholars can provide ontological security explanations without reference to the routines and anxieties of selfhood, and thus orient causal analyses primarily around non-psychological factors.

Ontological Security in International Relations

Early ontological security scholarship in the field criticized narrow realist and liberal views of security and of security-seeking actions. It also questioned, from within, the liberal bias of existing constructivist theorizing. It argued that behavior that appears, in conventional frameworks, irrational—such as engaging in costly, risky, and apparently unnecessary conflict—appears as entirely rational, when construed as an attempt to "experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time. . .in order to realize a sense of agency" (Mitzen 2006a, 342; see also Steele 2008). Put differently: "Ordinary day-to-day life. . .involves an ontological security expressing an autonomy of bodily control within

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predictable routines. . .of what are in Goffman's term 'protective devices,' which sustain the mutuality implied in trust via tact and other formulae that preserve the face of others" (Giddens 1984, 51). For scholars of international relations, then, the concept of ontological security provides a way of understanding the relationship between values, identities, and routinized actions. As implied by the term "ontological," this approach to conceptualizing security mainly works by embracing a more holistic understanding of *what* is being secured—namely, a more expansive view of what *aspects of being* matter in international relations. The framework explains why some states remain trapped in apparently self-destructive rivalries or military adventures. It also directs attention to the principles and prerogatives of any given actor, because these are what define identities and therefore what must be secured.

Since its introduction to the field, we have seen an evolution in the way that scholars cash out—and apply empirically—ontological security. Initially prominent was the approach pioneered by Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984), in which the concept plays a key role in knitting together the "duality of structure and agency" definitive of his structuration theory. Even in loyal Giddensian form, it delivered on this critical promise: by challenging notions that actor identity primarily orients around material preservation, ontological security provided a new avenue of inquiry into world politics otherwise closed by the rationalist paradigm debates of the 1980s and 1990s.[1] But scholars of international relations have pushed beyond Giddens in search of greater traction, incorporating a wider range of psychological and affective forces. This is evident in Mitzen's (2006a) study of European identity as a civilizing force and in Kinnvall's (2004) research into how the transnational popularity of religious social movements stems from their role in alleviating existential anxiety.[2] That trend has continued, with more recent work focusing on emotions and affect (Solomon 2013), and on the cognitive role of self-affirming narratives (Subotic 2015).

As it stands now, the ontological security literature may be roughly divided between research focusing on the socially situated constitution of identity and selfhood (Mitzen 2006a; Rumelili 2015) and research focusing on the affective dimensions of the human figures who steer state policy (Steele 2008; Zarakol 2010). However, even the former rests upon explorations of subjectivity and psychology, in order to underwrite the causal explanations in which ontological security features.

Within this literature, psychological and affective factors receive particular emphasis. The concept of ontological security mostly encompasses processes of self-perception and self-experience. These provide mechanisms for averting existential dread or anxiety. This theme was present in early ontological security scholarship (see Kinnvall 2004) and remains prominent in more recent work as well (see Croft 2012; Kay 2012; Subotic and Zarakol 2013; Subotic 2015). Some ontological security theorizing departs from this by incorporating a broader range of "external" factors—such as discursive formations and interactions[3]—but this work represents a minority position in the research program. That is, the core concepts around which most ontological security scholars arrange their work are ideational constructs, habits, and emotions associated with the maintenance of the self and perturbations thereof.

Why a Relational Theory of Ontological Security?

Setting aside debates over paradigmatic commitments,[4] I see two practical, methodological reasons to develop a relational view of ontological security—one that does not emphasize psychological and affective factors.

First, studies into these factors require that researchers assume that actors communicate their authentic beliefs and feelings in *some* reliable way. Of course, actors need not always be honest or even self-aware. But the researcher usually, in the end, infers the mental and emotional states of actors' expressions. Hence their expressions must accurately and authentically serve as a window into their thoughts, feelings, and motives. This remains true even of ontological security scholarship that is otherwise very attentive to relational dimensions.[5] Yet these assumptions often prove problematic. Political elites are generally highly conscious of the need for image management, as well as practiced and experienced in dissembling, obfuscation, or hedging. In consequence, their statements may not be reliable indicators.[6] In instances where scholars analyze testimonies by elites, the possibility always remains that the "self" on display amounts to a deliberate misrepresentation—one designed to convey a false image of who the actor is and what they want. In such circumstances, we should treat assertions as forms of rhetorical (or discursive) maneuvering in the context of public procedures or structures of legitimacy (see, for example, Krebs and Jackson 2007; Goddard and Krebs 2015; Goddard 2006, 2009, 2015). Beyond this, we face broader questions about the validity of narrative accounts. Actors' narratives tend to retrospectively organize their actions into a more coherent, consistent, and deliberate set of thoughts, feelings, and choices than was in fact the case (Tilly 1999). In other words, actors' interests and perspectives may be different from what researchers assume, we often lack clear ways of inferring from their words what they actually think

[1]For example, Steele (2005) drew on Giddens to explain British neutrality during the American Civil War, arguing that Britain's liberalism and opposition to the slave trade precluded helping the Confederacy despite it having other interests in doing so. Ayşe Zarakol (2010) takes a more macro-historical view of ontological security to explain Turkish and Japanese unwillingness to acknowledge historical crimes dating back to the world wars, despite the benefits that making such apologies would offer.

[2]Kinnvall (2006) later gives the same subject a book-length treatment, and focuses in particular detail on religious nationalism in India.

[3]For example, Solomon (2014) is interested in the manipulation of affect through social interaction, and Rumelili (2015) treats the referent of ontological security as a narrative relation rather than a psychological construct.

[4]From a philosophy of social science perspective, psychological or motivational accounts of action, such as those associated with rational choice theory (Elster 1989) or hermeneutic approaches (Weber 1997; Habermas 1968), treat reasons as causes (von Wright 1971). In doing so, they are open to contention from a number of approaches, both realist and anti-realist, that call into question the validity of any explanation based upon them (Calhoun 1998; Boudon 1998). However, I see no good reason to launch this meta-theoretical broadside, both because it does not in any case cover all existing ontological security literature and because my intention is to contribute to, rather than explode or significantly redirect, an existing project of research.

[5]Steele (2008), for example, infers feelings of shame and the desire to maintain a self-perception of potency (2010) in the public statements and policy choices of decisionmakers.

[6]Consider, for example, the range of possible moral or affective interpretations one might reach in examining how Israeli defense officials justify the use of assassination (Pratt 2013).

and feel, and we may have good reasons to avoid such inferences in the first place.[7]

This problem is hard to solve through a deeply hermeneutic or interpretive explanatory approach to theory, as opposed to explanations oriented around broader intersubjective processes or social structures (Habermas 1968; Ricoeur 1970; see also Clarke 2006). Scholars must use communicative gestures to identify, describe, and assign causal weight to mental and affective content. Not all cases may feature strong incentives for actors to dissemble, while documentary evidence may help preempt retrospective and self-interested narrative "massaging." However, for scholars studying sensitive and controversial policies—such as those related to national security, military and counter-terrorism practices, or post-conflict justice and reconciliation—the assumption of authenticity places research on shaky foundations. Skeptics might sweep those foundations away with a single dismissive expression of doubt by questioning the assumption that politicians are being honest. The concern here, then, is that the validity of an ontological security lens may rest too heavily on whether to trust actors' expressions of moral or emotional force, making it potentially inappropriate for some kinds of research problems simply due to data reliability issues.

The second potential methodological weakness concerns whether actors think and feel in a way amenable to ontological security analysis in the first place. Scholars working on ontological security have already questioned whether their approach is appropriate for the study of corporate agents (Krolikowski 2008), and this skepticism is bolstered by other well-known criticisms of anthropomorphized views of states. One defense of analyzing corporate entities is to emphasize the relational character of selfhood, but this still entails explicit, operative premises about the psychology of actors (Mitzen 2006a). Another is to confine ontological security analyses to persons only (see for example Steele 2008, 2010). Yet even focusing on specific persons of influence can be problematic; as relationally minded scholars have observed, people may act *as institutions*, meaning that the form of selfhood salient to analysis can vary across settings and transform along with them (Jackson 2004). This is a larger problem of psychological theorizing in the field: it necessarily foregrounds individuals over their meso-level social setting. Even proponents of psychoanalytic social theory have recognized in their approach an under-theorization of broader socio-structural dimensions and processes (Elliott 2014, 140–55). For some theoretical tasks this is a strength rather than a weakness (Craib 1990, 178), but it nevertheless rests on a host of psychological assumptions. For studying ephemeral, dynamical, polysemic, or simply poorly understood kinds of actors—such as might be found in settings undergoing rapid change, transnational communities such as diasporas, or highly formalized or ritualized exchanges—these assumptions may not be justified. Indeed, it is an interesting empirical question whether an actor in a given case possesses a self that admits of psychological or affective analysis. Hence, and as with the authenticity assumption, there are cases where ontological security theorizing runs into methodological trouble, when it entails an emphasis on psychological and emotional factors.

At this point, we confront two questions. First, what would be the explanatory value-added of an alternative approach? Second, even if it were valuable, can such an alternative even be coherent? Can there be an analysis of ontological security and security-seeking without taking on board meta-theoretical premises assigning an operative role to these factors? Put simply, isn't tracing the effects of psychological and affective processes on security-as-self the essential basis for ontological security scholarship?

To answer the first, I argue that scholars working on ontological security engage in a central critical project: explaining why international actors (such as states or policymakers) behave in ways that appear costly and dangerous, at least when security is more narrowly understood as territorial integrity and invulnerability to attack. Moreover, the definitive ontological security explanation is that actors must secure and maintain their social existence before they are able to do anything else. This constitutes a distinctive analytical theme: the vocabulary of realist or rationalist international relations theory—replete with talk of security, strategy, and purposive, self-interested action—is used to articulate a constructivist, culturally and historically situated narrative. This narrative in turn undermines the assumptions of those approaches without sacrificing their epistemic goods, such as causal inference or observer-independent referents.[8] Put differently, ontological security theorizing in the field of international relations is *only contingently linked to psychological and affective factors*. Since emphasizing these factors may lead to the potential methodological problems just discussed, the ontological security project would be improved by the availability of an alternative approach—one that sustains its critical intervention through a different theoretical vocabulary. Moreover, such an alternative may open up a broader theoretical horizon.

The second question, on the coherence of wholly relational view of ontological security, in which thoughts and feelings receive little emphasis, can be answered by examining *the theoretical purpose* of ontological security as a concept. The sociological function of "ontological security," at least in Giddens, is to account for the durability of structure and system, by assigning to actors a need for stability in social routines (Giddens 1984; see also Loyal 2003; Archer 1982). For Giddens, and for scholars who have taken the concept further than Giddens himself did, the mechanism by which it does so is through the human need for stable and trustworthy routines of self-expression and self-perception. If other, non-psychological mechanisms could also account for the durability of social settings, and for the way actors secure their own continuity of being, scholars would not need to craft explanations based on detailed examinations of thoughts and feeling.

I argue that such mechanisms do exist, but to understand them, scholars must shift to a different meta-theoretical vocabulary. The concepts and theoretical approaches from relational sociology make it possible to talk about ontological security in ways that foreground the specifics of mind and affect as the focus of explanation. Theories do not need to refer to particular kinds of thoughts and feelings; people have both, but their

[7] See, for example, the central research problem in Zarakol (2010, 4): "The reluctance of both Turkey and Japan to apologize for past state crimes is puzzling, because in both cases there are significant material incentives to apologize, and high costs attached to not apologizing." But Zarakol has merely assumed that such benefits and costs are salient to Turkish and Japanese policymakers, explaining their intransigence through macro-historical psychoanalysis. Perhaps these policymakers are pandering to more specific constituencies, or have some broader strategic vision? If so, the problem dissolves.

[8] In other words, ontological security scholars can be critical without being relativist; they are able to talk about a world "out there."

content is not salient. In the next section, I explain how this could be so.

Implications of a Relational View of Ontological Security

A relational view of ontological security implies something potentially counterintuitive: regardless of the particular form, substance, and expression selfhood takes, the security of the self is only conceivable within the context of durable social arrangements. While relationality is a broad and common theoretical concept, and is already present in the ontological security literature,[9] this implication becomes clearest by approaching the concept through a specific tradition of thought. Commonly referred to as relational sociology, it is characterized by a focus on process and influenced heavily by pragmatist philosophy (Emirbayer 1997; Dépelteau 2013; Powell and Dépelteau 2013; Jackson and Nexon 1999). In particular, relational sociology provides a way of drawing out and building upon nascent dimensions of relationality already present in the overarching themes of ontological security, but not currently emphasized in existing work.

In this section, I will concisely set forth what the concept of ontological security implies when approached through the lens of relational sociology, and how it is that the referent shifts from the self to the social arrangement. I propose three relational mechanisms by which ontological security may be attained. In doing so, I hope to outline the particular value-added that the relational view brings to the ontological security project in the field.

Relational Sociology and the Definition of Ontological Security

In the relational view I propose, the referent of ontological security is not the self but the social arrangement. By this term, I mean a structured configuration of transactions between actors, which both serves as the social environment in which action occurs and provides the social material out of which actors—as subjects imbued with dispositions and capacities—are constituted. The implication of this shift in referent is that actors are not trying to secure the coherence of *self*, but rather the coherence and stability of their broader social context. To understand why actors would do this, we should bear in mind three principles of relational sociology.

First, social arrangements are *wholes*. They feature formations and patterns, but are not, strictly speaking, made up of discrete or stratified spaces capable of hosting actors while remaining unaffected by actions. Therefore, actions taken in pursuit of ontological security must be placed within a broad social context, and must be understood as part of a complex institutional and cultural tapestry. In this sense, they are *forms of life:* bundles of practices featuring continual, dynamic transformations of the conventions that define them and the actors that emerge out of them—for there is no clear difference between the two.[10] Hence the stability of a social arrangement is the result of a careful balancing act, as actors, with greater or lesser degrees of intent, manage to sustain "a fluctuating, tensile equilibrium…moving to and fro, inclining first to one side and then to the other" (Elias 1978, 131).

Second, *selfhood is processual*—that is, the cognitive and affective emerge out of an unfolding action process.[11] Hence, from the perspective of relational sociology, the boundaries of self-identity and self-experience exist not just psychologically or emotionally, through anxieties and aversions to disruption, but also conceptually and institutionally, as a condition of possibility for selfhood making any sense as an idea. Investigating the more psychological dimensions of ontological security thus gains greater depth if accompanied by an examination of social setting. Conversely, theorizing ontological security with a particular focus on the mental or affective dimensions of selfhood is entirely consistent with the broader metatheoretical commitments of relational sociology, and need not be a paradigmatically different approach. In other words, a relational view of ontological security is already commensurable with more psychologically oriented research.

Third, *agency is transactional*. That is, agency arises out of an unfolding process of mutually constitutive engagement between actors and their worlds—neither specified apart from the other, and without either one independently pre-existing (Dewey and Bentley 1949, 137; see also Dewey 1983: 117–18; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Hence seeking or maintaining ontological security works through actions that are not merely discrete choices or routinized habits, but "situational structures rather than individual reflexes, psychic associations, or repeated actions" (Alexander 1987, 142). Rather, actors and the social arrangements in which they live are a packaged deal: the one needs the other to continue to exist as such. Simply put, a major destabilization of social arrangements threatens actors' agency.

Together, these principles imply that ontological security is inseparable from social stability. There can be, therefore, an approach to theorizing ontological security that is not limited by empirical or conceptual problems in defining particular selves, and not reliant on references to psychological or affective factors.

Two methodological approaches are particularly promising as frameworks for crafting ontological security explanations around relational mechanisms. While the mechanisms themselves are the same, they lead to significantly different ways of theorizing ontological security. The first and foremost approach is field theory. Though there are a few varieties of field theory (cf. Fligstein and McAdam 2012), they all converge on an appreciation for fields as "social order[s] in which actors…interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purposes of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action" (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 1).[12] In the context of fields, the three mechanisms I propose—refereeing, performative deference, and obstructive resistance—offer

[9]See, for example, Rumelili (2015) and MacKay (2013).

[10]See Wittgenstein (1958), not only on the term "form of life," but also on "language games."

[11]Specifically, "perception and cognition [exist] not as acts preceding action but as part of the action process that is inherently connected to the situational context" (Joas and Beckert 2001, 273). Or, as Dewey puts it, "[Mind] never denotes anything self-contained, isolated from the world of persons and things, but is always used with respect to situations, events, objects, persons and groups…*Mind is primarily a verb*" (Dewey 1987, 268; emphasis mine).

[12]Field theory is more famously associated, however, with Pierre Bourdieu (1993), and Bourdieu in particular informs significant IR engagements with fields in both method (Pouliot 2007) and substance (Go 2008).

ways of explaining the origins and outcomes of discrete episodes of contention. They thus deliver one of the key critical benefits of ontological security theorizing as a whole: a way of understanding the rationale of actions that appear costly or self-defeating when viewed through a conventional realist or liberal lens.[13]

The second prominent relational framework is Norbert Elias's concept of the "figuration": an interwoven complex of individuals living within a form of life,[14] "characterized by socially and historically specific forms of habitus, or personality-structure" (van Krieken 1998, 52–53; see also Elias 1994, 1978). Fields and figurations differ in some ontological premises,[15] but also typically in the temporal and spatial breadth of the cases to which they're applied. Studies of fields most often, though not exclusively (Gorski 2013), focus on shorter-term, tactical jockeying for position and power by competing actors, in cases where the broader social arrangement remains relatively stable. By contrast, figurational theorizing most often tackles change over a historical *longue durée* (see, for example, Linklater 2011; Jackson 2006).[16] However, a figurational approach to ontological security may open a broader horizon of theorizing. As relational mechanisms are important instruments of ontological securing, examining their evolution over time—their development and transformation as practices or repertoires for sustaining social arrangements—brings new empirical domains into the historical study of security and conflict.[17] The key takeaway is that a relational view can extend the insights of ontological security theorizing into research areas that have previously been methodologically or ontologically out of bounds.

Three Relational Mechanisms of Ontological Security

To show how substantive theories of ontological security may be developed through a relational lens, I here discuss three possible mechanisms by which ontological security may be attained or preserved. All mechanisms might be called attempts at "game-keeping," in both metaphorical senses—of preserving the "rules of the game" and of securing a (social) ecology from foreign threats to its contents or challenges to its internal authority structures.[18] They ensure that a given social arrangement continues to exist as such, maintaining the stability of its practices in the face of insurgent attempts at normative or institutional revision, or against external forces that could end those practices entirely. While there may be other mechanisms that could cause this, I have focused on three that seem obviously relevant to current international relations research: *refereeing*, *performative deference*, and *obstructive resistance*.

Refereeing occurs when actors intervene into disputes to which they are not an immediate party or obvious stakeholder, to pressure those involved to adhere to existing normative arrangements, preserving those arrangements as future contexts for action. A refereeing actor might impose themselves as a mediator through several ways: pure coercion, an appeal to the legitimacy of taking on such a role given existing norms, or—and perhaps most likely—a combination of the two. Situations featuring voluntary mediation by apparently non-interested actors appear puzzling, but they make sense if understood as the pursuit of ontological security. Crucially, by taking a relational view of ontological security, scholars do not need to assume that refereeing is done on the basis of an emotional or moral conviction to adopt a mediating role. Refereeing is rational if evidence suggests an actor is cynical or begrudging in their intervention, because it props up a broadly valuable order of things. What matters is not the specific motive but the general impetus to maintain a social arrangement necessary for a given form of life to go on.[19]

Performative deference occurs when actors publicly show respect for extant normative arrangements, bolstering those arrangements and signaling credible commitments to remain within them. For example, a "strong" actor might acquiesce to the demands of a "weak" actor on the basis of public moral claims, to reinforce the legitimacy of an underlying moral order and signal the potency of something other than coercion as a motivating force. This action is sensible even if evidence suggests that acquiescence is only to create the superficial appearance of moral commitment, and does not reflect the genuine values of an actor as they pertain to the particular issue in question. One example of this is "rhetorical coercion" (Krebs and Jackson 2007), where one party in a discourse can talk another "into a corner" through public argumentation. Rather than accept a claim due to rationally motivated persuasion, here actors are obliged to endorse claims simply to appear reasonable to an audience—for appearing unreasonable entails social costs. Essentially, performative deference is demonstrating commitment to upholding norms without any necessary belief or feeling that they are categorically legitimate and motivating, because failing to uphold them would threaten the broader normative basis for a given form of life.

Obstructive resistance occurs when actors impede attempts to transform social arrangements, by blocking status-quo-altering actions. This may involve reactionary violence, such as through oppression directed at insurgent movements. Yet it also may be seen in "passive" attempts by communities to resist transformative interventions "from above," such as through what James C. Scott (1985, xvii) memorably describes as "foot-dragging" by villagers looking to impede state governance without provoking violent confrontation. While obstructive resistance is by no means a novel concept, viewing it as a way to seek ontological security places it in a different light. Challenges to "tradition" do not need to be immediately dangerous, and indeed may promise narrow benefits (such as through changing the structure of an organization to make it more efficient); rather, they are threatening because they undermine the settled and robust character of social arrangements in their holistic sense. If

[13]See, for example, Go (2008) and Adler-Nissen (2013)

[14]"Form of life" being another term borrowed from Wittgenstein.

[15]Notably, Bourdieu's theory of practice carries the assumption that actors, while wide open in terms of the kinds of social arrangements they are disposed to (re)create, do experience some need to conform to social expectations.

[16]Note that field theory can also be used to study macro-historical change (Gorski 2013), and that the contrast between the two approaches drawn here is of emphasis rather than categorical analytical possibility.

[17]For example, the emergence of diplomatic cultures may be understood as a result of performative deference, shifting alliance configurations as a (possibly unforeseen) dimension of refereeing, or imperial and colonial governance as responses to obstructive resistance from peripheral communities. In the next section, I explain what I mean by this.

[18]Akin, that is, to officials of a sport who force players to follow the rules and to foresters who protect the woods from poachers, respectively.

[19]One example that may qualify is the involvement of certain smaller states, such as Norway or Canada, in peacekeeping and conflict resolution initiatives in places where they otherwise have a low level of investment.

one tradition can be changed, why not all traditions? Hence actors may engage in reactionary maneuvers even if they are not passionately attached (and may even seem ambivalent) to the particular features of the world they are preserving.

Notably, all of these mechanisms offer ontological security explanations without emphasizing convictions, passions, and anxieties, but nevertheless establish a rational and causal basis to otherwise costly or seemingly irrational actions. Methodologically, this means that disputes over the reliability of narratives or the existence of corporate selfhood do not need to determine the appropriateness of an ontological security lens. They refer to social interactions that can look the same whether they are motivated by categorical moral commitment to each action involved, or whether they are cynical and "purely strategic." This in turn opens the door to a broader set of research approaches for studying how social arrangements rest on particular practices or evolve in holistic ways, and go beyond the search for motive or affect in specific actors. In other words, the methodological key to a relational analysis of ontological security lies in understanding how particular actions are essential components of a broader transactional context, out of which actors and their worlds emerge. If this is made the focus of analysis, the question of whether actors "really believe/feel" the moral and metaphysical truth of a norm, identity, or routine fades in salience; either way, the resulting form of ontological security theorizing refers to dynamics that go beyond particular actors in transactional and temporal scale.

Moving Forward and Making Theory

Relational approaches to understanding security already feature in ongoing research in the field of international relations, and in a variety of theoretical orientations.[20] Meanwhile, some scholars have already drawn upon the concept of ontological security to examine security and power in relational terms.[21] If this is the state of the field, then it may not be clear what is so new or helpful about bringing ontological security into the picture.

Yet there are several benefits to the relational view proposed here that make it a worthy addition—as opposed to alternative—to the existing body of theory on ontological security. The first relates to methodological limits and problems of explanations emphasizing thoughts and feelings, and the benefit to ontological security theorists of a more thoroughly relational approach. This has already been discussed at length, and need not be re-litigated. However, relational theorists also stand to benefit from the confrontation with ontological security, at least as it is presented here. Ontological security, as a theme or project, calls attention to dimensions of action they might otherwise ignore.

Those in the field who have drawn upon relational sociology have often focused on the macro-historical level (see, for example, Nexon 2009; Linklater 2011), rather than on theorizing action. Meanwhile, the prominence of Bourdieu within the "practice turn" in the field (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Büger and Gadinger 2015)[22] obliges the scholars associated with it to confront his structuralist limitations.[23] Finally, for critical international relations theorists, relational scholarship often consists of synchronic analyses of semiotic and performative structures—of how embodied textual and conceptual formations provide bases for some claims or practices and deny them to others[24]—and is genealogical or linguistic in methodological scope.[25]

The relational view of ontological security I propose offers those theorists a causal vocabulary for connecting practices (of social arrangement maintenance) and forms of situated agency to their symbolic worlds. This does not subsume or prioritize one over the other, but instead links two angles on tracing the scope of creative possibility within power-saturated and culturally defined forms of life. In other words, and more so than with existing attempts at doing exactly this with ontological security concepts (Rumelili 2015), the proposed approach establishes a broader horizon for investigating the causal underpinnings and implications of what existing critical security theorizing reveals.

A relational view of ontological security also speaks to at least one concrete topic of ongoing inquiry: it is especially well suited to studying precarious forms of transnational life. Entities such as diasporas, nomads, and newly emerging social movements—or, in previous eras, pirates (MacKay 2013)—often extend through communities that cross borders, great physical distances, and multiple cultural contexts (Agnew 1994; Adamson 2016). They exist, in other words, in social arrangements that lie outside of many key normative infrastructures designed to protect, regulate, and steer international politics. They introduce new forms of security concerns hard to grasp with more conventional methodological frameworks in the field (Adamson 2016), pose governmental challenges to existing international institutions, but also offer new possible solutions to existing problems (such as to climate change—see Hoffman 2011), and disclose new possibilities for the constitution of supra- or non-national polities (Abraham and Abramson forthcoming).

The relational view offers a way to answer basic questions about the organizational kinds, processes, and

[20]For example, both Bigo (2011) and Pouliot (2010) have used Bourdieu as a starting point for investigations of different dimensions of power politics, while a recent volume edited by Guillaume and Huysmans (2013) contains a range of perspectives on processes of citizenship negotiation as a set of multidimensional and hierarchical relations among states and their associated polities. The Copenhagen School of security studies is explicitly oriented around what is, at its core, a processual transaction: the "securitizing" of a referent object or good—supposedly under threat—by an agent to an audience (Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998, 26). Limitations of space preclude an extensive discussion of these other forms of relational theorizing, but it is worthwhile to note that they proceed from varying views of action, and thus are not necessarily commensurable with the relational view proposed here.

[21]For example, Steele's aesthetic theory of power and "counter-power" as emerging out of the affective consequences of certain kinds of discursive exchanges upon elites (2010). Indeed, Steele has also explicitly suggested that one advantage of a psychoanalytic approach is precisely that it focuses attention on 'internally driven" mechanisms that may be obscured by the relational sociological lens (Steele 2008, 125).

[22]As Büger and Gadinger (2015) note, there are other prominent conceptions of practice that fewer IR scholars have used, but which may promise greater traction on certain problems. Among them are views derived from pragmatist philosophy.

[23]As others have observed at length (Margolis 1999; Bohman 1999; Jenkins 2002), Bourdieu's brand of relationalism provides relatively little space for reflective and creative agency—his theory of practice remains at least partially beholden to the determinism of structuralism and Marxism, despite the many ways in which it is an improvement on both.

[24]This being a defining feature of Foucauldian and post-structuralist critiques.

[25]See, for example, Walker and Cooper (2011) and De Goede (2008). For further discussion of extant critical security approaches, see Van Munster (2007).

contexts constitutive of these forms of life. It helps us understand their conditions for continued existence, and how actors within them navigate an international environment with few resources for those who dwell outside of state institutions. If the referent of ontological security is the social arrangement, then precarious transnational actors may engage in activities oriented largely around *sustaining that precariousness*, even if this is dangerous in other ways and unrelated to any specific moral commitments they hold. That is, resisting (re-)integration may be the function or purpose of a whole range of acts, and studying how this works in practice illuminates actors' and communities' boundaries, capacities, and trajectories. Through the approach proposed here, scholars can examine what kind of coherence-producing work actors engage in without many assumptions about the thoughts and feelings of people in diverse cultural and institutional settings.

Conclusion

I have proposed a relational view of ontological security oriented around the premise that actors attempt to secure their social arrangements, in a holistic sense, as a precondition to further action within them. I suggested three causal mechanisms—*refereeing*, *performative deference*, and *obstructive resistance*—suitable for theorizing particular cases of this. These mechanisms refer to enacted, intersubjective, and mind-external ways that actions maintain configurations of relations, and address a need for ontological security. In other words, as with existing ontological security theorizing, there is a clear object in need of securing, a clear causal dimension to acts of securing, and a clear way one outcome of those acts could be behavior that does not conform to traditional understandings of how states pursue security. The approach I propose thus expands the meta-theoretical resources available in the existing conversation on ontological security in the study of international relations, providing an expansive relational basis for delivering its definitive theoretical interventions. As a result, that conversation should be open to a wider range of perspectives and explanatory tools, such as from the growing number of international relations scholars interested in pragmatism and relational sociology.

This approach also contributes to broader relational theorizing of international politics. Many relational accounts in the field proceed via social-theoretical terms that make it difficult to locate the creativity and indeterminacy of action. While such terms do not entirely preclude effective discussion of agency, the ones at stake in a relational understanding of ontological security emphasize agency and contingency to a fuller degree. Moreover, what I offer here grants greater prominence to the pragmatist dimension of relational sociology. This dimension has received comparatively limited attention—even from those relational scholars who have drawn directly or indirectly upon pragmatist sources. Both of these areas of contribution show the flexibility of ontological security as a lever for uncovering—or prying apart—dynamics of situated action that fall into the cracks between other conceptual frameworks. Hence, it confronts other relational views of security with critical themes of the ontological security literature, and therefore challenges scholars in those traditions to engage those themes. In other words, joining the projects of ontological security and relational sociology, and elaborating upon points of sympathy between them, expands both in theoretical scope and sensitivity.

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