Human Security Research Practices: Conceptualizing Security for Women’s Crisis Centres in Russia

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In ongoing discussions surrounding the issue of human security, the security of individuals has become entangled in conceptual debates that are preoccupied with notions of appropriate variables, measurements and issue areas. This article suggests and illustrates a basis for human security research that is distinct from such objectivist empiricism. A case study of crisis centres in northwest Russia is used to demonstrate that human security is not only a matter for objectified generalizations, but also a question of practices. Feminist security theory and the work of Pierre Bourdieu are used to address methodological concerns raised during fieldwork on crisis centres in northwest Russia. Three dimensions are discussed: the conceptualization of security for the specific-actor approach of crisis centres, the ways in which relevant empirical data are established, and the subsequent interpretation of such data. The discussion shows, first, that rethinking security for crisis centres reveals contingencies in the research process that are relevant to the establishment of human security knowledge; second, the practice of human security research reflects the fragility in the understanding and production of security in everyday contexts. Accordingly, when we examine human security, our analysis ought to be directed at security as an ambiguous practice.

**Keywords**  human security • international relations • feminist security theory • Pierre Bourdieu • Russia • women’s crisis centres

Introduction

**Human Security** defines the individual as the referent of security and challenges security analysts to take account of the relationship between people’s perceptions of security and objective conditions of security. The focus on the individual subject has been identified
as being one of the most important and interesting aspects of human security (Krause & Jütersonke, 2005; Darby, 2006; Ewan, 2007). But it is the selection of variables and measures to expose a coherent, objective understanding of human security that dominates the research agenda (Grayson, 2008). Though such research has been quite complex and full, it generally suffers from an apparent schism between the two opposing poles of objectivist and subjectivist perspectives. This schism demands a rethinking of how both of these poles are integrated into human security knowledge production, not only in terms of theory but in regard to practical human security research. The task of this article is therefore to focus on human security as a practice of empirical research and to discuss methodological choices pertaining to a people-centred security perspective. Through a discussion of concrete methodological concerns in a case study of crisis centres addressing violence against women in northwest Russia, the article explains human security not as an objectified generalization but as a matter of practice.

Crisis centres have been established in northwest Russia since 1997, and through their work of institutionalizing structures of assistance they have changed the context of security for women in that region. The centres are generally small entities operated by nongovernmental organizations, often run voluntarily on rudimentary financial resources. My original interest in learning about local security initiatives through the context of women’s crisis centres led me to confront the various choices that are made when such centres are conceptualized as providers of security. This conceptualization of security was developed in an interview project, which is described here for the purpose of exposing practical challenges in human security research. Interviews were conducted in 2006 and 2008 with representatives of seven crisis centres in five cities across northwest Russia. The region is a relatively rich part of Russia, whose wealth stems from natural resources and the presence of the military in the region. The region is now attracting attention because of the prospects of oil and gas production.

A key point in any analysis of the practice of empirical human security research is to explain how subjective interpretation is part of every methodological step in the research process. At the same time, the role of subjectivity is an important element that has been sorely neglected in human security research. Feminist security theory acknowledges subjectivity and represents a leading approach in recognizing the importance of (marginalized) people’s views and experiences. The intersections between feminist security theory

1 I refer to the NGOs that run crisis centres interchangeably as crisis centres and women’s groups. Not all women’s groups are crisis centres, but all crisis centres in this study are NGO women’s groups.

2 The role of the military has affected the region in many ways, one being the presence of so-called closed cities. These are closed to the general public, requiring a special permit for legal entrance. The status of northwest Russia’s closed cities is undergoing change, however, with the requirements of mobility in relation to increased commercial activities in northern harbours putting pressure on this administrative structure.
and human security have been acknowledged and discussed (e.g. Hoogensen & Stuvøy, 2006), but how a feminist approach can broaden human security research has yet to be explored in terms of the latter’s research practice and empirical contributions. The work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is relevant in this regard because of Bourdieu’s focus on empirical research that integrates subjective and objective aspects, along with his discussion of the methodological challenges involved in so doing. Accordingly, by drawing upon feminist security theory and Bourdieusian methodological considerations it is possible to analyse the practice of human security research. The nuanced perspective that evolves addresses people’s subjective experiences but also critically examines these in context and history. This is what Vincent Pouliot (2007b) has recently introduced as a sobjectivist perspective in the field of international relations. Using these theories, I address in a methodological discussion the identified lacuna in human security research regarding the integration of subjects’ views and perceptions in analyses. The state of human security research is examined in the first section of the article, while a second section explains in detail and empirically the methodological reflections involved in practical human security research by drawing on the example of the work of crisis centres in northwest Russia.

Human Security as Object

The wider and broader security agenda associated with the introduction of the human security concept in the 1994 Human Development Report on New Dimensions of Human Security (UNDP, 1994) has become entangled in a conceptual debate preoccupied with appropriate variables, measurements and issue areas pertaining to the security of individuals and communities. In this debate, the concept of human security is defined by tensions between objectively, top-down defined criteria and individual-oriented, bottom-up perspectives on security. These tensions are expressed in regard to the reach, content and value of the human security concept. The empirical descriptive-ness of the concept – that is, the number of issues that a consideration of people’s subjective views can potentially describe and incorporate into security thinking – is for example identified as a problem: ‘If the term “insecurity” embraces almost all forms of harm to individuals – from affronts to dignity to genocide – it loses any real descriptive power’ (Mack, 2004: 367). This is the view reflected in demands for a delimitation of the concept, in terms of

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3 These concerns unfold also within broader debates in international relations. For example, the debate between insider and outsider perspectives addresses how observation is biased towards agency in the first perspective and towards structure in the second (Hollis & Smith, 1990: 204). To circumvent this, it is the interplay of agency and structure that is the core concern of Colin Wight (2006), who emphasizes empirical research as the key to addressing how this interplay is contingent on practice.
issues, causal inferences and values (Buzan, 2004; Krause, 2004; Mack, 2004; Paris, 2004). Lack of conceptual clarification is a focal point of critique of the concept of human security. Sabina Alkire (2004) remarks that there are thirty or more definitions of human security, and that the key conceptual challenge is to name priority issues that represent the vital core of security. This aspect of the concept’s character forms the basis for a critical view of human security as a framework of analysis, because the concept is considered too vague to generate specific research questions (Paris, 2001). One way in which many have dealt with the problem of conceptual clarification is to define human security in terms of a limited set of issues, such as, for example, political violence (Human Security Centre, 2005: 67). In order for human security to be quantifiable, it must be defined and operationalized, and thus a narrow conceptualization is needed to enable the employment of quantitative measurements. By choosing this exclusive emphasis on political violence, the Human Security Report falls ‘broadly within the realist rubric’ (Roberts, 2006: 257). Alternatively, Booysen (2002) operationalizes human security by including all the seven components listed by UNDP (economic, food, health, environment, political, community, personal) in an Inefficiency Ratio. In other attempts at composite indexing – for example, those of Steve Lonergan, Kent Gustavson & Brian Carter (2000) and Gary King & Christopher J. L. Murray (2001/02) – the difficulties of choosing which dimensions to include and, importantly, problems in regard to the availability of reliable data are displayed (see Tadjbakhsh & Chenoy, 2007: 241). The indexing is a task for the researcher(s), as seen in King & Murray’s (2001/02: 592) technical definition of human security: ‘We define an individual’s human security as his or her expectation of years of life without experiencing the state of generalized poverty. Population human security is then an aggregation of individuals’ human security.’ This displays how definitional quarrels become distant from the views of the subjects to whom human security matters as the logic of objective indexing unfolds and takes over. In yet further suggestions, the specification of human security is linked to a certain threshold (Owen, 2004a,b) or to a scale of severity (Roberts, 2006). Thus, all threats can be considered potential human security issues, but it is only when they accumulate to a certain threshold or severity that they are acknowledged. Motivated by concerns for analytical clarity, rules such as a specific threshold to be observed empirically are established for the purpose of establishing the ‘truth’ about human security. As Kyle Grayson (2004: 357) stresses, these suggestions of ‘precise/scientific/workable’ definitions that dominate human security research reflect an

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5 Lonergan, Gustavson & Carter (2000) explain that ‘most countries did not have complete time series [1970–1995] for most indicators’. King & Murray (2001/02: 601) indicate difficulties related to data collection when noting that ‘measuring population human security requires as its starting point good information on the current and past levels of income, health, education, democracy and political freedom’.
understanding of knowledge production defined and operationalized from above in indexes and other measurements. Human security knowledge is characterized as a ‘quest for precision, measurement, causality and policy relevance’ (Grayson, 2008: 383). This has consequences not only for the definitional debate but also for thinking about agents of human security. The individual-oriented and people-centred norms at the core of the concept are not integrated into the practice of researching human security. This is because the paradigm shift introduced by the human security concept – from a focus on objective, state-oriented security towards a subjective-oriented focus on security in people’s life-worlds – is contentious. It becomes clear that security as perception has been excluded by epistemological choice. This tendency in the human security debate unfolds despite the recognition that the subjective aspect is the most interesting, albeit difficult, aspect of human security (Glasius, 2008). The interconnection of objective and subjective aspects in the security concept is resolved by emphasizing analytical rigour and objectivist research practices.

Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh & Anuradha M. Chenoy (2007: 241) describe how the intertwining of subjectivity and objectivity affects human security research:

Thresholds and measurements of human security are especially complicated, given the distinction between objective (real) and subjective (perceived) fear, because security, on any scale, will remain a feeling, and because thresholds of tolerance can be different and culture/space/time/circumstance specific.

The relevance of both objectivist and subjectivist modes of knowing security is the core of the problem. A subjectivist perspective addresses people’s experiences with (in)security, whereas an objectivist approach identifies structural impediments to security in terms of thresholds and indexes. The basic proposition in the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is that the emphasis on this dualism is distracting. Bourdieu’s research practice concerns how to circumvent thinking in antagonistic pairs such as objectivism/subjectivism, micro/macro, empirical/theoretical (Bourdieu, 1988; Wacquant, 2008). One means to such an end is to continuously reflect on epistemology, and thus how knowledge is established throughout the research process. The concern with subjectivity not only introduces subjects’ viewpoints but is also concerned with how social objects are objects of knowledge. Such a rethinking of concepts and understandings of ‘how things are’ is a core topic of feminist security theory.

In contrast to state-centred security studies, feminist analyses have exposed interconnections between the roles of housemaids and state-building (Chin, 1998), prostitutes and international security operations (Moon, 1997), and wartime sexual violence and soldiers’ experiences (Baaz & Stern, 2009). Everyday practices – for example, domestic service, prostitution and rape
– are studied to gain insight on broader phenomena such as security. In this article, I will combine a Bourdieusian perspective that highlights three modes of knowledge (subjective, objective and practical) with the feminist security perspective, and use this combination as a basis for discussing epistemology and practical challenges in human security research practice. To make this concrete, I draw upon a case study of Russian crisis centres and how they work to produce security. In this empirical work, I conceptualize human security as a research practice that questions the choices made in regard to fieldwork pertaining to the selection of agents and means of observation.

Human Security as Research Practice

To exemplify an alternative approach to producing human security knowledge, I examine methodological queries in my study of the work of crisis centres in northwest Russia (Stuvøy, 2009). In the preceding section, I questioned the current means of research in human security analyses. This section exposes human security as a practical matter of choosing between actors and perspectives, where the choices that are made affect the kinds of knowledge that are produced. It thus diverts attention away from establishing the reality of human security. Through the exposure and discussion of these choices, human security is more accurately revealed in terms of its contingency, fragility and ambivalence.

The section proceeds in four steps wherein the concept of security in relation to this specific case, the selection of empirical data material, the choices during fieldwork, and the analytical results from the case are each discussed in turn.

Conceptualizing Security for Crisis Centres in Northwest Russia

Northwest Russia’s first crisis centre was established in Murmansk in 1997. Helped by the provision of Norwegian assistance and funding in the context of an emerging cooperation over the Barents Sea, a crisis centre was set up that also provided physical security by offering the opportunity of overnight stay to victims of domestic violence. Such ‘shelters’ are a rarity among Russian crisis centres, however, and given the limited availability of safe housing for female victims of violence, the security practices of Russian crisis centres have been described as providing ‘shelter without a shelter’. Despite their inability to provide true physical shelter, these centres offer a

6 The Barents Euro-Arctic Region was launched in 1993 with the objective of enhancing integration in the Barents region. It incorporates the 13 northernmost counties of the countries of the Barents region: Norway, Russia, Finland and Sweden. The Barents Secretariat is located in Kirkenes, in the north of Norway, with regional offices in Russia (Murmansk, Archangelsk and Naryn Mar).

7 This characterization originates from Johnson (2008).
discursive space for discussing personal experiences of violence, a space in which victims can seek advice and make choices pertaining to their insecurity. Prior to the establishment of crisis centres in urban areas in the 1990s, and in the regions from the late 1990s onwards, this kind of space was not available to female victims of violence in Russia. In 1999, the Russian government noted in its fifth periodic report to the commission of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Commission) that 14,000 women are killed annually by a close male relative, and 30% of married women are regularly subjected to physical violence (CEDAW, 1999: 37). In the first decade of the new millennium, the Russian government conducted a campaign on domestic violence that contributed to the success of the crisis centre movement (Johnson, 2009), with the number of crisis centres reaching a peak of around 200 in 2004. The state-centric nature of the political agenda of Vladimir Putin’s presidency has not led to any further increases in the number of NGO crisis centres, however, particularly given the decline in international funding for the issue.

The crisis centres in northwest Russia have experienced structural constraints pertaining to lack of material resources and limited professional knowledge within police, medical and juridical entities on how to deal with incidents of violence against women. Further difficulties are associated with the understanding of what violence is and prevailing traditions and norms on enduring and maintaining silence over such incidents. These complex constraints on women’s security came to preoccupy my conceptualization of security.

In my work on crisis centres in northwest Russia, a primary concern of the empirical study was to enter the field and define the case. As established during a three-month preparatory research trip to the region, one of the most obvious but also most challenging approaches to the security of women in northwest Russia revolved around the issue of violence against women. Crisis centres for women represent the region’s key security producer in this context, and they strive to erect and institutionalize a response system for victims of violence. To begin with, I was critical of the idea of focusing on women, however. I felt that drawing upon women’s experiences of insecurities to extract a gendered concept of human security entailed a victimization of women. To frame these women’s daily practices of organizing life, ensuring food security and financial safety for their families, for instance, in terms of security (in the sense of identifying threats) would draw attention away from how they were in fact dealing with these issues amid the difficulties experienced in context of the ongoing transition in Russia. Projecting the concept of human security onto the situation of women automatically attaches to their situation the negative label of insecurity as opposed to a positive focus on how such women are in fact managing and/or overcoming the challenges they face.

Exposing forms of oppression is a feminist means of emancipation. However, in the particular case of contemporary women in Russia, who during the last
two decades have dealt with enormous disruptions to families and socio-economic structures, I questioned whether it would be adequate to focus on identifying insecurities when the impressions I had gathered from travelling in Russia and talking to Russians mainly concerned women’s responses to economic and social challenges. Accordingly, I became preoccupied with the inventive life strategies of women in Russia. Such strategies were immediately evident to me as a visitor to Russia in the early 21st century, as women dominated the marketplaces in the streets, ran (very) small businesses and/or worked several jobs, while also engaging in and running social activities, schools, etc. During the initial stages of approaching the empirical field, such contextual aspects caused me to critically reflect on security as a negative concept. This enforced a positive perspective, whereby I began to ask not how insecurity is felt but how security is produced (see Hoogensen, 2005).

Notwithstanding my scepticism, I identified two factors that made it more relevant to my research interest to focus on Russian women’s groups: the wide attention given to violence against women by Russian women’s groups themselves, and the international recognition of the work of Russian crisis centres. I chose therefore to focus upon these very activists and engage them in my project. This relieved me of the challenges – not least for the women themselves – involved in directly engaging women who have personally experienced violence, and also allowed me to focus on the very groups that had already garnered attention: women’s crisis centres. The narrowing of my focus on NGO crisis centres was important because of critical assessments by Russian civil society that questioned whether NGOs really existed or were simply façades. The establishment of the Russian women’s movement during the 1990s has received international attention (Sperling, 1999), and women’s crisis centres were identified in the literature as being rather exceptional in comparison with other Russian NGOs (Sperling, 1999; Richter, 2002; Sundstrom, 2002; Johnson, 2006). I wondered how women organize in Russia in the 21st century and which women’s groups I should approach. These were practical empirical questions addressed while in the field. Addressing women actively engaged in crisis centres is both useful and practical, I reasoned, as they can be identified relatively easily and approached for the purpose of interviews. I aimed to ‘identify and locate’ actors – specifically women’s groups – that I thought might have useful knowledge related to my analytical interest.8 This interest was captured in the question, ‘How do crisis centres for women in northwest Russia produce security?’

The focus on practice – that is, the production of security – reflected a key objective of a Bourdieusian perspective that has in recent years been increasingly employed in security analyses. Examples of empirical research on security in which Bourdieu’s work is applied include studies of NATO (Williams,

analyses of private military companies (Leander, 2005) and security professionals in Europe (Bigo, 2000; Bigo et al., 2007), and studies of security cooperation between states (Pouliot, 2004, 2007a). Such projects expand security studies through detailed studies of actors and what they do, their practices, as well as advancing the analytical perspective on security actors. Gendered (in)security and, more specifically, the actors emphasized by feminist security theory – for example, ‘marginalized’ people (see, for example, Tickner, 1992; Enloe, 1996; Sylvester, 2004) – are absent from these studies, however. The analysis of crisis centres in northwest Russia is inspired by an interest in exploring this absence.

Empirical Human Security Data

Locating and identifying local practices of security thus informed my entry into the field. The methodical technique by which I accessed women activists’ experiences with such practices was that of the interview. I interviewed representatives from seven local crisis centres in five cities across northwest Russia. The leaders of all of the centres were interviewed, and on three occasions I also interviewed psychologists working at the centres. All interviews were conducted in Russian. With regard to interview technique, Tami Jacoby (2006: 154) asserts that ‘experience is a problematic unit of analysis’, and the recording of experiences through interviews is formed by the relationship between interviewer and interviewee. This empirical research technique is not just a matter of going into the field and collecting data, as Dvora Yanow & Peregrine Swartz-Shea (2006a: xviii) remind us, but a matter of observing and making sense of the observed. It is therefore not people themselves, events or conversations, but the researcher’s recording of these that constitutes the ‘data’, as the data are co-produced in the conversational interaction between researcher and researched (Yanow & Swartz-Shea, 2006a: xix). Empirical data are therefore not merely collected, but accessed through interpretation. In regard to how interviews constitute a source of knowledge, the interview situation is the crux of the process of constructing ‘data’. As Joe Soss (2006: 142) notes, in-depth interviewing is methodically a ‘good fit for interpretive projects in which researchers are concerned with hard-to-locate phenomena’. Considering my research interest in understanding local security production, a concern was how to design an interview guide that represented a system of questions drawn from this research interest. Such a concern with how the object of analysis is constructed through the kind of information that is collected is emphasized by Bourdieu, Chambredon & Passeron (1991: 248) as being key to questioning. The adaptation, or translation, of my theoretical-analytical interest in local security practices into an interview guide was in fact not effortless. I could not ask, for example, ‘What is human security to you?’, because human security is not a term used in this context. I needed to
translate it into questions more relevant to how security might be produced by the women’s groups in this particular context. My theoretical interest in Bourdieu’s practice approach, in subjective and objective constraints on local security production, could also not be directly transferred to practical questions. For example, a question such as ‘What subjective constraints do you face?’ would not make much sense to interviewees. Instead, I decided that I would ask the women activists to talk to me about their work, achievements, challenges and disappointments, and thereby describe to me situations that I could subsequently analyse by means of an analytical apparatus pertaining to subjective and objective constraints on practice. In my work on grounding human security empirically, I thus found it difficult to pin down the questions that would be most relevant to my analytical interest. The challenge was to find out what questions would allow me to get a depiction of how security is produced for women in this specific context.

Bourdieu’s work on forms of knowledge was a main theoretical guide in this work. Bourdieu (1973) outlines three modes of knowledge: the subjectivist, objectivist and practical modes of knowledge. Bourdieu (1988: 781) associated the objectivist position with Emile Durkheim and the guideline to ‘treat social facts as things’. This position aims at uncovering objective mechanisms and deep, latent structures, and does not reflect on how social objects are objects of knowledge. Such reflection is introduced with a subjectivist mode of knowledge. The subjectivist position is concerned with uncovering the representations agents assign to things. In regard to the human security debate, this reiterates the importance of addressing subjectivity, because it reflects upon how objects of knowledge are constructed. Bourdieu (1988: 782) emphasized that it is important to ‘take up, describe, and analyze’ agents’ points of view, but it is equally necessary to consider the position from which such viewpoints are expressed. The two modes of knowledge, subjectivist and objectivist, are integrated in the praxeological approach that aims ‘to make possible a science of the dialectic relations between the objective structures to which the objectivist mode of knowledge gives access and the structured dispositions within which those structures are actualized and which tend to reproduce them’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 3). While the subjectivist mode of knowledge rests on a phenomenological approach that makes primary experiences of the social world explicit, the objectivist mode addresses objective relations that structure practices and representations in the social world (Bourdieu, 1973). The point is that objective structures and subjective perceptions are interconnected, because the positions that actors occupy within a certain structure affect their points of view while at the same time affecting the constitution of those very structures. Bourdieu (2000: 147) was sympathetic to

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9 Bourdieu realizes the praxeological mode of knowledge throughout his massive body of work, but the term is not used continuously. Praxeology means the science of human action, and Bourdieu’s work is known as theory of practice.
a subjectivist mode of knowledge and commended the phenomenological achievement of coming ‘close to the real’. At the same time, objective aspects must also be considered in order to see the subjective views from a distance – or, objectively.

When I began to contact crisis centres, they were beyond the first initial phase of establishment. They already had considerable experience and had established extensive networks, locally with stakeholders within municipal and regional authorities, nationally through women’s networks, and internationally with funders and collaborators. This state of affairs was summarized by an informant:

Quite a lot has already been done. We have already established many connections, and have conducted many programmes with the police, as well as educational seminars. A large amount of this has been done. Many directors of various local crisis centres work with local government. Our status has already improved. . . . And now, it is difficult to say how we may sustain this.

As this quote suggests, the first phase of euphoria, enthusiasm and starting from scratch had passed for the crisis centres when I entered the field. I soon became aware of this and decided that the purpose of my interviews would be to learn from the experiences of women who had been actively involved in the women’s groups in northwest Russia during the previous decade. The idea was to ask them to assess their work in terms of both positive and negative experiences. Their experiences with the processes involved in institutionalizing an assistance structure for female victims of violence would then be used as basis for analysis. I therefore designed an interview guide with the aim of addressing the experiences of past achievements, seeking the activists’ own reflections on their activities, struggles and achievements so far, in order that these might shed light on how nongovernmental crisis centres establish security within a local context. By addressing the experiences of the crisis centre representatives with their clients – what stories victims convey to crisis centre co-workers – I could address subjective experiences of the clients. By asking representatives of women’s groups to explain their forms of interaction and experiences with local stakeholders, I hoped to better understand the structural constraints and capabilities in the context that surrounded these groups and their work. Thus I could objectify subjective views by addressing the context in which they were embedded. In this crude manner, the theoretical-analytical interest unfolded through my work on the interview guide.

Clearly, my intention with the interviews was to direct them towards a focus on security practices. Yanow & Schwartz-Shea (2006b: 118) label this ‘purposive conversation’ and emphasize that open-ended interviews most often have such a direction.\(^\text{10}\) The format of semi-structured interviews is

\(^{10}\) It is therefore incorrect, as Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2006b:118) underline, to depict ‘open-ended’ interviews as the opposite of ‘close-ended’ survey questionnaires, thereby leaving the impression that ‘open-ended’ interviews are without direction and structure.
particularly useful for creating such an interpretive ground for analysis, or rather for creating ‘text’ or ‘word data’ (Schwartz-Shea, 2006).

There are no predefined Bourdieusian approaches that can be (uncritically) applied to various research objects. As Paul DiMaggio (1979: 1472) has noted, making use of Bourdieu’s work in regard to a specific research interest – such as, for example, human security – implies a transformation that involves a process of assimilation and productive misreading. It is also suggested that the usefulness of a Bourdieu-inspired process of knowledge production should be assessed in terms of the specific analysis and not in regard to theory-building (Müller, 2002). The process of developing a case study is a crucial aspect of the research process and the integration of subjectivist and objectivist modes of knowledge. Given the objectivist bias of most contemporary discussions of human security, Bourdieu’s exploration of the role of meaning-making represents a crucial contribution to the debate. His work on modes of knowledge provides food for thought in regard to epistemological reflection on human security, offering another basis for discussing research practices than objectivist empiricism.

Stepwise in the Field

As my fieldwork progressed, interaction with informants led to an exploration of new and additional questions that I found more appropriate or interesting at various times, though the initial direction that I had decided upon for the interviews was maintained throughout the process. Adjustments were made, for example, to allow for greater elaboration by the interviewees. Although the interview guide was designed to give the lead to the interviewees to explain and reflect upon their work, I sometimes adjusted the questions because I thought a different way of asking would make it easier for the person to respond.\(^{11}\) This sometimes implied asking more questions. I also aimed to ensure that the interviewee felt comfortable in the interview situation. As a result, the interview setting demanded a degree of openness both on my part and on the part of the interviewee. Such a process highlighted the unpredictable nature of interviewing, at times necessitating, for example, a reordering of the questions set out in the guide. On other occasions, an interviewee might talk for a long time without interruption, leaving me as an active listener to process the information given, to make sense of the assessment presented, to formulate follow-up questions in an attempt to have assessments speci-
fied and broadened, and to establish a dialogue around my impressions of the information expressed. This illustrates how interviewing ‘means working hard to encourage elaboration, clarification, reflection, and illustration’ (Soss, 2006: 136). Through the mechanisms of giving interviewees time to develop and dwell on their own experiences, spontaneously posing new questions, and following lines of argumentation that broadened my views, such an interview format provided the means to continuously think about and develop my analytical interest in exchange with the empirical field. This process can be said to contain more than the act of interviewing: In-depth interviewing ‘is an evolving dialogue between fieldwork and framework, mediated by concrete activities of transcription, memo writing, purposive reading of literatures, and the like’ (Soss, 2006: 137). My thinking about practices of security was in this way continuously shaped by interactions during fieldwork, which underlines how the interpretation of interview material begins while the material is still being collected, while the researcher is still in the field. Nevertheless, although the field research required discussing the nature of my research and engaging various sources that caused me to continuously reflect on my overall analytical-theoretical interest, these exchanges did not provide me with a ready understanding of my analytical results at the end of fieldwork. Soss (2006: 137) is critical of any such ‘narrative of progressive enlightenment in the field’, which he finds misleading because it understates the importance of systematic analysis after one has exited the field. It was through such processing of the empirical material, an in-depth content analysis conducted on the basis of Bourdiesuan analytical concepts, that I could reinterpret and convey my understanding of how security is produced in this specific context. This content analysis produced an in-depth analysis of the views and reflections of interviewees, and contributed to objectifying subjective experiences through the use of analytical tools, since, as Bourdieu (1968: 703) highlighted, subjective views and lived experience need critical, methodological reflection. This is to ensure that subjective views are examined from a distance.

Vincent Pouliot (2007b) has drawn on Bourdieu’s work to propose sobjectivism as a research practice in international relations, whereby subjective meanings are connected with context and history. Accordingly, security researchers are enticed to move along a continuum of induction and deduction. Sobjectivism entails three steps between which the researcher can move back and forth, as each step casts light upon the others. In one step, the task is to address subjects’ understandings and uncover the insider perspective, and thus to work as inductively as possible. In a further step, the insider perspective is interpreted in regard to a larger (social, practical) context and thereby objectified as intersubjective meaning. The unfolding meaning also needs to be connected with time and historicized to provide analytical abstraction. Through this format, the theoretical perspectives and concepts applied and
interpreted in a specific case ensure the emanation of a form of abstraction that distances the knowledge produced from the views of the subjects. In the analysis of the security practices of crisis centres in northwest Russia, such an interpretive process contributed to my rethinking and discussing the conceptualization, agents and practices of security. For example, one assumption guiding my research design and leading me to crisis centres in northwest Russia in particular was that, in a local context, I presumed that interviewees would readily and openly express their views, positive and negative, on their struggle to produce security in relation to violence against women. Sarah L. Henderson (2002: 161), however, has exposed how Russian women activists are at home at international conferences but distant from their local communities. Through interaction with international women campaigners, many Russian women’s groups have become acquainted with international views on the issue of violence against women and have adopted, among other things, the language of human rights and patriarchy. What it means to be focused on the local must therefore be specified in regard to the case. My focus on women’s groups in the periphery was primarily focused on according legitimacy to these local women’s groups and their experiences in regard to security theory (Yanow, 2006: 22; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006b: 119). I made local knowledge the subject of reflection and discussion. This represents an approach to human security that is distinct from top-down-defined concerns with, for example, establishing parameters related to who should come to the rescue of local people and when. Such an approach, however, is not devoid of theoretical thought guiding the research. I acknowledge the expertise of my interlocutors, their knowledge of their own situations, and thereby the legitimacy of their local knowledge. However, giving priority to encountering interviewees’ understandings on their own terms does not imply acceptance of their descriptions or their understandings (see Soss, 2006: 133). Indeed, Soss emphasizes that engaging local knowledge involves ‘carefully distinguishing’ between insiders’ conceptions and the interpretation of these in terms of social-scientific concepts. This distinction is entailed in the understanding of the importance of carefully distinguishing between emic (insider) views and etic (outsider) concepts in interpretation. The point is that congruence between emic and etic views and conceptualizations is not necessary for proceeding with analysis of local knowledge, but rather can be an element of analysis (Soss, 2006: 133).

Bourdieu’s perspective implies a reflection on the development and use of methods at every step of an empirical analysis. This is equally evident in the idea of subjectivism as a research practice that also emphasizes the need to move back and forth between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives. The process of developing a case study is a crucial aspect of the research process,

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12 Soss (2006), for example, explains that he applied the concept of ‘political action’ to his interviews, while many interviewees conceived of themselves as apolitical.
and of the integration and reflection of subjectivist and objectivist modes of knowledge. In the light of the objectivist bias of much contemporary debate on human security, Bourdieu’s exploration of the role of meaning-making in regard to the three modes of knowledge provides a basis for discussing research practices other than objectivist empiricism. Instead of objectively mapping and documenting human security issues for the purpose of illustrating the necessity of certain policy practices, the consideration of subjectivity exposes the role of interpretation and doubt with the very methods adopted to approach the empirical field, as explained above. By exemplifying practices involved in processes of constructing knowledge of a particular case – in this case, the study of women’s crisis centres in northwest Russia – I expose the premises for producing human security knowledge. Human security research must focus upon such processes and practices of research if it is to challenge the narrow, objectivist-oriented research practice termed ‘cosmological realism’ by Grayson (2008). In result, it (re)establishes the critical space for reflection on human security. A key point in this regard is to explain how subjective interpretation is part of every methodological step in the research process.

Analytical Results

With the establishment of crisis centres in northwest Russia, the context of security for women in the region changed, but how do these centres produce security? The centres represent an information hub for victims’ processes of re-describing their selves and thus for recreating a situation of security. They are concerned with guiding and providing assistance to victims of violence against women by interacting with the police, justice and health systems, as well as with providing advice and impetus to their clients on how to change their life situations to a more secure state.

Ackerly, Stern & True (2006: 6) define ontology as ‘an understanding of the world; for instance, what constitutes relevant units of analysis’. Accordingly, the choice of NGOs/women’s groups as a relevant unit of security analysis reflects an ontological decision. This choice can in itself be seen as a critique of mainstream thinking about what constitutes a relevant unit and level of analysis. The story of security that lives with this choice solidifies this critique by providing a local-actor approach. In regard to the human security debate, this approach is relevant to thinking about how we naturalize what security is, how it is produced (military/non-military) and by whom (state/non-state, local/international). For example, in this particular case, crisis centres were defined as security producers, and the research interest was in understanding how they produce security. This positive framing of the practices of such centres in ‘creating’ security obliterated the insecurities (focus on threats) involved in those practices. The security that crisis centres
contribute to producing is based on interaction between the centres and their clients, victims of violence against women. It is also contingent upon the way in which interaction between the centres and their clients is welcomed and dealt with in the various state bodies relevant to individual clients’ cases. The institutional infrastructure is crucial, but the choices made by the clients are crucial too, and it is in relation to this decisionmaking that crisis centres provide assistance, information and room for reflection over one’s own life situation. Crisis centre representatives are particularly concerned with the choices that clients have to make on their own. For the clients, this implies responsibility, and the manner in which crisis centres place responsibility on their clients can also be thought of as an interaction that produces insecurity. In such a situation, clients face new and difficult choices and priorities. In this, the responsibility placed on them represents a form of symbolic domination of clients.

The analytical results of the case study are affected by the decision to focus solely on crisis centres as actors. Other actors – such as the police, health personnel or politicians – were not interviewed. This choice had the effect that it somewhat decontextualized the work of crisis centres. Although additional material – brochures, newspapers, statistics, etc. – were also reviewed and consulted, the reflections of the crisis centre representatives formed the core data of the analysis. Yet, who is included in a study and who is not is crucial to conceptualizing security. The reasons for such analytical choices should always be admitted to reveal contingencies in the human security reality. Discussing such choices and their effects on analytical results is a transparent way of dealing with the complexities involved in empirical research: ‘To be able to see and describe the world as it is, you have to be ready to be always dealing with things that are complicated, confused, impure, uncertain, all of which runs counter to the usual idea of intellectual rigour’ (Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron, 1991: 259). Few doubt that the reality of human security is complicated, confused, impure and uncertain. Therefore, a key concern becomes the description of how doubts originating from complexities of human security reality are dealt with during the research process. Explaining the thoughts behind the methodological choices and developments in the process of data collection contributes to transparency about how analytical results are established and makes clear that this is human security as research practice. Such methodological reflection and transparency can provide a basis for comparison of diverse empirical analyses. As this article indicates, analysis of the security practices of crisis centres in northwest Russia, although particularly actor-specific, can contribute to abstraction and discussion of how human security knowledge is produced.
Conclusion

Human security research is assessed as a space of biopolitics (Grayson, 2008), reflecting an objectivist bias in security studies (see Pouliot, 2007b) that privileges methods aimed at mapping the human security reality for the purposes of providing manageable policy advice. This process, however, avoids the subject and subjectivity in regard to human security, despite the fact that such subjectivity was addressed in the UNDP conceptualization of the term and later acknowledged as being a most interesting, novel part of this security paradigm, albeit one that has been only weakly explored empirically (Krause & Jütersonke, 2005; Darby, 2006; Ewan, 2007; Glasius, 2008). Emphasizing this element of the human security debate, rather than favouring objectivist modes of knowledge that neglect subjects and their experiences, I have suggested a methodology that exposes the subjective work of conceptualizing and producing knowledge of security through practical research.

The discussion of practical considerations related to my research on crisis centres in northwest Russia exposed contingencies involved in producing knowledge of human security in that context. I conceptualized human security as a research practice that questions methodological choices made in regard to fieldwork pertaining to selection of agents, subjects’ experiences, and how to establish data throughout the research process. By examining my own experience with interviewing representatives from crisis centres in northwest Russia, I exposed human security research in that case as a practical matter characterized by an ambiguity involved in specifying the kind of security that is produced for the women. The clients of crisis centres are offered help, but whether they are helped also depends on the responsibility that they are able to take themselves. The responsibility that clients have to take can imply further insecurity, as pressures to take action can be distressing for vulnerable clients. There is therefore considerable fragility in the understanding and production of security in the everyday context.

Various methods are available for approaching subjects and their experiences, and the qualitative interview project on security outlined here provides only one example of how epistemological concerns affect the practical process of human security research. An important matter that this case study highlights is that, as a point of departure for examining local security practices and understandings of security, human security research should focus on security as an ambiguous practice instead of as an object for precise measurement. The aim is to understand this ambiguity as it relates both to structural constraints and to subjective experiences relevant to achieving security. The case study of crisis centres in northwest Russia has exposed some methodological challenges related to the process of uncovering these constraints on security production in that particular context. On this basis, however, it is
possible to analyse expressions of security, insecurity and forms of security production in a local context. Methodologically, this involves exchanges with individuals and how these agents themselves determine what is important to their own sense of security and how it is produced. Such a local- and micro-level focus contributes to the patchwork picture of the human security condition or the ‘human security reality’. Although the analytical systematization and interpretation may be more complex with such a focus, such analysis contributes importantly to the human security debate by uprooting the idea of universal, objective knowledge as a basis for ‘best’ and ‘necessary’ policies. Instead, it provides a basis for reflection on how knowledge of security is produced in the first place (within subjective and objective confines), and thereby also points at questions related to how security policy ought to be designed to concretely address (and prioritize) the ambiguous realities of human security.

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