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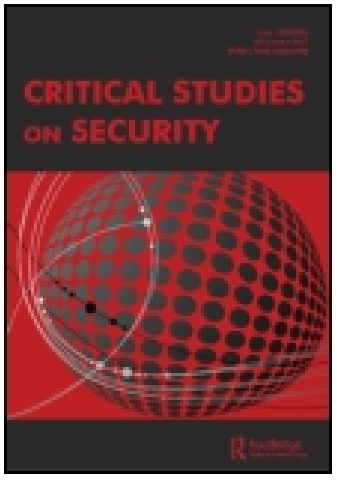

Critical Studies on Security
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcss20

Instrumentality and engagement in the CSS 'methods turn'

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Published online: 17 Dec 2014.

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To cite this article: Xymena Kurowska & Manuel Mireanu (2014) Instrumentality and engagement in the CSS 'methods turn', Critical Studies on Security, 2:3, 359-361, DOI: 10.1080/21624887.2014.982397

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2014.982397

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Critical Studies on Security, 2014
Vol. 2, No. 3, 359–361, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2014.982397

Routledge
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Instrumentality and engagement in the CSS 'methods turn'

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Has CSS become about social science methods? Recent contributions in the field (Salter and Mutlu 2013; Shepherd 2013; Aradau and Huysmans 2013) point to a 'methods turn'. This development has the potential to bring about a much needed ontological–methodological consistency in CSS. If the methods that we apply are derived from the research questions we ask, CSS methods should ideally instantiate particular political assumptions with the analytical apparatuses being constructed accordingly. As thematic debates settle within certain parameters, however, and authors invest in the refinement of particular arguments, the institutional and social expectations of what it means to be scientific seem to dictate the necessity for methods as a means of legitimate scholarly participation. Yet as critical security scholars, can we subject our politicality to the same methodological rigour as in conventional social science?

In CSS, methods are defined as 'devices that we can use in the research process to collect and analyse data' (Shepherd 2013, 1). This is in line with the King, Keohane, and Verba (1994) understanding of methods as tools that operationalise rigorous access to knowledge and to the 'real'. Methodology is the repertoire of 'techniques' and 'strategies' at our disposal when we investigate the empirical world (Balzacq 2011, 31–32. See also ftn. 2, p. 53). It serves to organise the rigorous accumulation and display of knowledge. Methods may also be 'devices that interfere in the worlds in which they are deployed' (Aradau and Huysmans 2013, 8). Both goals assume a controlled use of methods as tools, implying a chasm between the reality 'out there' and the possibility of epistemological mastery by a researcher who knows a priori the range of instruments that are applicable and which should be optimal in order to represent the observed reality in an intelligible way. Such instrumentality is informed by the Cartesian 'view from nowhere', shared by problem-solving and critical social scientists alike (Bueger and Mireanu forthcoming). To the extent that CSS research 'embraces an overt normative commitment to progressive social change' (Neufeld 2001, 130), this instrumentality could be embraced more explicitly and thus serve as a foundation for cumulative knowledge production.

Methods in CSS could hence be used, as proposed by Aradau and Huysmans (2013), to facilitate political engagement but also to gather knowledge about the ways in which oppressive powers work. Rather than rejecting instrumentality while at the same time operating within its logic and its vocabulary, embracing this ambiguity can in fact help identify 'the practices of power that appear only in the abstract value-neutral conceptual framework favoured by dominant social institutions' (Harding 2005, 355). Harsh critiques of rigorous science are a luxury that the unprivileged cannot afford. Their political struggles require the legitimisation that scientific knowledge provides. The self-indulgence of the

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epistemological distrust for positivism in this context has the potential to turn into a cynical and arrogant position (Harding 2005, 359).

Such an explicitly strategic use of methods gives substance to the critical ethos. Yet this ethos becomes demobilised by the common tension in current approaches where the ontology of the everyday is politically and methodologically approached, via a surgical intervention by the researcher, through the exceptional. Security practices are seen as non-intentional acts or unintended consequences that emerge from dispersed sites of sovereignty. The daily routine through which they are performed are scattered, improvisational and indefinite. If, however, everyday practices are 'little security nothings' (Huysmans 2011) while methods are simply disruption and turbulence (Aradau and Huysmans 2013), who is the one doing the disrupting? Is the researcher the only strategic agent endowed with intentionality and political sense? What would it mean to align the strategic use of methods in CSS with the messy and indeterminate world of everyday practices which cannot be controlled, considering that the very conduct of research/intervention is equally undetermined? How would the practice of critical security research look like if we indeed embraced 'performative, fragmented and incomplete' methods (Aradau and Huysmans 2013, 12)?

Our suggestion is that the very notion of method as we know it from conventional social science – i.e. a pre-determined tool pulled out of the existent pool – would dissolve. The condition of making this possible is a greater sensitivity to situational knowledge production, meaning a moving away from the empiricist idea of having to have the same experience as our interlocutors in order to pin down their feelings. Rather, it is about social engagement in the spaces we share but no party controls. Doty's research strategy, for instance, includes 'go[ing] there, hang[ing] out, talk[ing] to some folks, see[ing] what happens' (2010, 1050), thus dropping the pretence of epistemological control (see Kurowska and Tallis 2013) and embracing the lack of method in order to make sense of other people's experience of security practices. If we are interested in the everyday practices, both the site and fodder of analysis become situated meanings and meaning-making practices of actors in a given setting rather than generalised meanings abstracted from particular contexts. Conducting such research starts in the realm of the mundane mechanisms of oppression (Harding 1991, 150) so in order to make sense of how security permeates daily life we need to situate ourselves as researchers in the multiplicity of flows that constitute daily life (Sylvester 2012). Doing so requires re-negotiating critical sociology's traditional penchant for distance. A high level of abstraction and remoteness from empirical research (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000, 110–111) has been seen as a necessity for achieving the 'critical distance' that serves as the basis for critique (Selgas 2004, 294–295). CSS has followed this in its distrust of engagement despite an increased reliance on the everyday practice (Bueger and Mireanu forthcoming).

To summarise, the 'method turn' in CSS is promising for achieving ontological–methodological consistency. Yet it may also give too much concession to conventional social science methodology, which is at odds with the post-positivist commitments of the field. We suggested instead that the apparent instrumentality with which methods are approached could be embraced more explicitly and even politically radicalised in accordance with the critical ethos. The obstacles to doing so involve the de-subjectification of security subjects, the assumption of the epistemological control of the researcher and contending with the incongruity of approaching the everyday practice by applying the exceptional. Breaking through hostility towards experience and sharing the social space with our interlocutors can bring greater sensitivity to the process of making sense of security practices. Going in that direction, however, means dissolution of the methods as

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we know them. How to make sense of experience can only be figured out in the process of doing so and in close engagement with others who share the spaces that we are researching.

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