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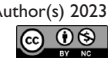

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Accounting for inequalities: divided selves and divided states in International Relations

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Abstract

Ontological security studies have added complexity to the state level of analysis in International Relations (IR) by embracing an approach that permits moving across and between levels of analysis without calcifying an assumption as to who or what constitutes the key actors of international politics. I draw on a case study of gender-based violence and subsequent responses to argue that ontological security studies in IR have thus far failed to fully account for intersectional inequalities within social narratives of security. I argue that the state is incapable of providing ontological security because of inherent inequalities that underlie national identity. It is only in attending to those inequalities that we can attend to the biases at the heart of the state. Looking to ontological insecurity in the context of trauma provides a delineated means of accessing these dynamics in a way that is formulated around a pathologised ontological insecurity (rather than an existential, and therefore normalised, process of ontological insecurity). Through the case study of the murder of Sarah Everard and the responses, the value and necessity of an intersectional approach is made clear: trauma responses that are positioned as transgressive by the patriarchal and White supremacist dominating narrative are used within that narrative to undermine the credibility of alternative narratives of security. The state adopts a technique of dividing identity and constructing normatively oppressed identities as transgressive to consolidate the state narrative of security.

Keywords

Ontological security, intersectionality, gender, violence, trauma

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Introduction

One of the key contributions of ontological security theory in International Relations (IR) is the scope it provides to add complexity to the analytical unit of the state in IR. Steele (2008), in his germinal work on ontological security theory in IR, defended his adoption of the state level of analysis. He pointed to the potential offered by ontological security to theorise emotions at the level of the state, for which it is necessary to travel through the 'emotional connection that fetishizes the authority of a nation state to promote the "national interest" . . . the citizen's existential experience can only be completed through the state itself' (Steele, 2008: 16). More recently, Vieira (2016) adopted a Lacanian discursive approach, acknowledging that this permits moving across levels of analysis from individual to state, without calcifying an assumption as to who or what constitutes the key actors of international politics. Rumelili (2020) described ontological security as 'pragmatically' situated across levels of analysis, again recognising the flexibility this offers with respect to constituting the state both as composed of individual citizens and *simultaneously* as a unitary entity that can be understood to act and feel. Edjus and Rečević (2021) connect these separate dimensions of the state, moving through levels of analysis to conceptualise ontological security as an 'emergent phenomenon' that is produced in a bottom-up way starting with the individual, spreading through a community and reaching a tipping point to manifest at the state level. Moreover, ontological security theorists have critiqued the centrality of the state in IR; for example, Delehanty and Steele (2009) note the masculine bias at the heart of state-dominant autobiographical narratives. Kinnvall (2006) demonstrates how subnational groups that challenge an ontologically securing identity become constructed as threatening Others. Mac Ginty (2019) targets the everyday of ontological security, pointing to the domestic space of the home as the foremost referent of security for an individual. Rossdale (2015) argues that the power relations at the heart of ontological security narratives are reproduced within IR theorising and preclude the possibility of recognising the political potential of fractionalised identities, that is, a political potential that can counteract the chauvinism of state-based and patriarchal narratives of security.

This research builds on these critiques of the centrality of the state and of state-based discourses of security. I argue that ontological security theory thus far has failed to fully account for intersectional inequalities within social narratives of security. Looking to trauma theory, and trauma as a producer of ontological insecurity, I seek to critically examine the added potential of ontological security in IR if one decisively rejects the conventional levels of analysis in IR as a framework for theorising the international social and political world. The objective in this sense is to avoid the reification of the state and to contest the power narratives of the state, while simultaneously acknowledging the empirical positioning of the state in international politics. The motivation for this dyadic rejection and acknowledgement of the conceptual power of the state is to better address the form and functioning of social inequalities in security theorising. This move can be replicated across IR theory as a means of counteracting the extant biases attached to the state. There are important transnational, supra-national and extra-national inequalities that reveal complex social forces in international politics. These inequalities might manifest differently in different states but are also continuous across state borders (such

as gender, race, the complicated category of ethnicity, ableness, religion, political identities, cultural identities and others) and represent important modalities of power in IR. I contextualise this move in collective trauma for two reasons: (1) the debates regarding trauma, subjectivity and collectives grapple with the pitfalls of jumping from an individual (psychological) to a collective (psychosocial and socio-cultural) level, and this can offer insight into the same jump in ontological security; and (2) in conventional renderings of ontological security, trauma or crisis that can sufficiently threaten the *self* is a provocation for ontological insecurity. While the process of ontological security seeking and the prevalence of ontological insecurity have been subject to debate within the sub-paradigm (e.g. see recent work on existential anxiety and ontological insecurity by Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, 2020; Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020; Subotic and Steele, 2018), the connection between trauma and an ensuing ontological insecurity is generally accepted (Innes and Steele, 2013; Kinnvall, 2017; Pace and Bilgic, 2018). I argue that trauma obliterates the self both in its lived experience (because collectives with internal inequalities produce unequal experiences of trauma) and in its theorisation (because trauma disrupts a continuous narrative identity). In the moment of trauma, space is created for other speaking subjects of security to be heard.

In what follows I will briefly position this research in the context of its orientation to the oft-cited debates on the utility of adopting a single level of analysis in IR. I draw on work critiquing the adoption of essentialised identity, most notably Epstein's (2011) Lacanian model, and on feminist critiques of the way the discipline is organised. I will give examples of where ontological security studies has successfully moved beyond this constraint and works across levels of analysis, adopting instead the relationships between phenomena from across the conventional organisation of individual-state-system, or adopting alternatives to these analytical constructs as the focus of analysis. I will then turn to the question of collective trauma and ontological security as a means of responding to some current debates regarding the conceptualisation of ontological security, the divided selves of states and normalised existential anxiety. I discuss a case where state practice was implicated in a trauma that resonated with a particular social group yet where narratives evoking trauma and ontological security seeking were notably absent at the state level. The case in question is that of the abduction and murder of Sarah Everard in London in February 2021, the vigil that was held to memorialise the victim and to acknowledge violence against women, and the suppression of that vigil. There is scope for this course of events to be understood as a collective trauma based on the indiscriminate nature of the violence that was directed only at a woman on the basis of her being female, the subsequent use of physical force to suppress the vigil held to honour the tragedy and the prosecution of the perpetrator which raised significant failings on the part of police vetting practices. However, rather than this course of events producing ontological insecurity at the national level related to identity and gender-based violence, the response that was offered at the national level was to increase police powers, falling back on a very conventional and patriarchal idea of security provision. I use this as an illustrative case study to build the argument that adopting a discursive conceptualisation of the subject and a narrative framework of security in ontological security theory can offer an analysis of security that incorporates the ability to recognise and theorise intersectional inequalities at the heart of security and the alternative narratives they produce.

Attending to the ways in which they state responds to these narratives offers a means of revealing how the dominant (state-based) discourse uses characteristics considered transgressive to undermine the credibility of alternative narratives of security.

The utility of levelling analysis

As is well known in the field of IR theory, the designation of the levels of analysis or 'three images' of international politics emerged from Waltz's (2018) originative text 'Man, the State, and War' and established the analytical levels of individual, state and international system. Of course, this is limited to the causes of war and reduces the complexity of the international system to only observable phenomena and outcomes, with the objective of prediction rather than explanation. Singer (1961) argued that the value of this epistemological choice is to establish the correct degree of observation for the question posed, without staking an ontological argument about state agency. Rather, it is a means of harnessing the massive entity of the international and allowing for parsimonious analysis of a single segment and avoiding what Singer terms 'vertical drift' up and down various levels (Singer, 1961: 78). Of course, there have been many moves in IR to contest and problematise the levels of analysis as a means of organising work in the discipline. A key problem with the state level of analysis as the default is its need for a conceptualisation of identity. Charlotte Epstein (2011) traces the moves in the field to grapple with identity, notably the shift towards constructivist approaches, yet finds that core constructivist texts uncritically adopt a notion of a stable state identity that essentialises the 'self' of the state. Epstein's main concern is to theorise the functioning of identity without essentialising it; to do so, she makes a case for a Lacanian concept of identity. Lacanian identity is made through the discursive narration of the self: selves are continuously articulated into being. This has the benefit of allowing an empirical self to be observed without the need to adopt an essentialised and static identity. Rather than solving the problem of whether states have essentialised identities, a Lacanian identity renders this unknowable. Instead, there is a constant empirical basis for self-hood that does not need to be ontologically defended (Epstein, 2011). The Lacanian subject is particularly meaningful in the context of a conceptualisation of security that is mapped onto identity, such as ontological security, because the projecting of the self onto the order in which the articulation becomes visible is always inducive of insecurity, that is, the *lack* whereby the true self is lost to the limitations of the structure in which the self becomes legible to others (Epstein, 2011, citing Lacan, 1977). In this way, the empirical basis for the self – the only way in which the self can be known – is always relational. The narrative of the self exists in a structure, or a set of rules, that pre-exists the self and that provides the forum in which the self-other relationship continuously constitutes identity. In IR theory that subscribes to a discrete level of analysis, the theory itself provides the structure and therefore imposes the rule of who can speak. Yet, a multiplicity of collective identities might speak in the global, international or transnational forum – their discourse might be modified to fit the framework, but excavating this framework, to allow non-state-based identities to be heard, is – or should be – the work of IR theory. Ontological security theory, because it is already embedded in a narrative articulation of identity, offers scope for this excavation in the context of a key concept of IR, that is,

security. Nevertheless, the insights offered by ontological security theory in this context are more broadly applicable in security studies and IR.

The Lacanian concept that allows for a non-essentialised identity coheres with moves in feminist IR to deconstruct the levels of analysis to better uncover what is obscured by them. As True (2010) argues, 'Gender analysis undermines the divisions between the individual, state, and international system by showing how each level is preconditioned by an image of rational man that excludes women and femininity' (p. 253). Indeed, the state is articulated into IR as a masculine construct and a political actor that provides security for the domestic world held within in Wibben (2010). Attending to the articulation of security by the state reveals security itself as a gendered concept constructed in the discourse of the state-as-actor. As Sjoberg (2011) argues, assuming the analytical tool of the levels of analysis is gender neutral masks the practice of assuming bounded levels of analysis, which is also an ontological choice about the hard boundaries of the international world. If we accept the three images of individual, state and system, we are suggesting that sub-state collectives do not do meaningful international politics of their own accord. Or that transnational relations are only meaningful in the sense of the foreign policy outcomes, rather than the identities they might constitute. By accepting the state as the unit of agency, we obscure the power relations that constituted the state in the post war world, and the histories of colonialism that constructed the state as the ethical unit of international politics and suppressed other identity-meanings in the world. Work that fails to scrutinise this is making assumptions at an ontological level and reproducing extant biases and hierarchies. Thus, the level of analysis implicates an ontological choice, rather than an epistemological tool.

Ontological security theory in IR has grappled with these questions, and consequently with the levels of analysis by refusing to subscribe wholeheartedly to that ontological choice, instead seeking to uncover the processes behind perceptible state agency (there are too many excellent examples of this to do justice, but they include Abramson, 2019; Agius, 2017; Cash, 2017; Edjus and Rečević, 2021; Steele, 2019; Subotic and Steele, 2018). To foreground how ontological insecurity is produced in a way that interacts across and between the conventional individual-state-system triad and additional units and levels of analysis enhances the explanatory capacity of ontological security studies in IR. Adopting gender as an analytical tool and understanding gender hierarchy as a structural feature of the international system, the state, and the worlds in which individuals are embedded demands critical consideration of how individuals relate to states: How do people experience the gendered security dynamics of the state? How do non-state-based collective identities articulate security in alternative ways, narrating themselves into being within the paradigm of security theorising? How do state security identities relate to manifestations of security by alternate identities, and when are these articulations of security suppressed by the state? The insights of a non-essentialising approach to identity, coupled with a deconstruction of gender hierarchies, reveals the gendered nature of discourse in which the international or the concept of security is made. Attending to those hierarchies makes visible the modes of oppression whereby the agency of non-state-based identities and their self-defined security interests are oppressed by the state. This is a theoretical basis for the practice of critical empirics that examine how individuals are embedded within the international, how marginal identities are formed and maintained, and how historical processes have led to intersectional marginalities in the world.

Ontological security and collective trauma

It is worth briefly summarising the current state of the sub-paradigm of ontological security theory in IR. Research has identified multiple facets of ontological security both in *provision* and *experience*. This can be viewed laterally in the sense that one is ontologically secure by experiencing a secure and consistent internal identity against a backdrop of routinised social expectations and institutional framework. Or it can be conceptualised both at the various levels of analysis, or across the levels of analysis of IR. For example, states are providers of ontological security to their societies. They provide the external environment that offers routinised behaviour and stable institutions. The identity, though, is held by society hence ontological security needs to be conceptualised across the levels of analysis. On the contrary, unitary states might possess a biographical identity narrative (Steele, 2008) and can be understood as possessing an endogenous ontological security. They act in stable and routinised ways or can be positioned as acting within the routinised behaviours of the international system. Hom and Steele (2020) theorised the international system, or third image of IR, as constituting an internal identity narrative and therefore as an additional dimension of ontological security. The outputs of this theorisation have allowed for insight into the relationship between social change and ontological security; for example, as globalisation propels a perceived recession in the importance of the state, there is a potential crisis of ontological security as it is fixed to state identity (Kinnvall, 2004). It has allowed for insight into the historically contingent relationship between political authority and ontological security to allow for comparison between societies across time in terms of ontological security seeking and ontological security provision (Zarakol, 2010, 2017). Where ontological insecurity has been linked closely to crisis and destabilisation, this has offered a theorisation of constant ontological security seeking or ontological security maintenance as the status quo of the state, which can be explained by a pervasive anxiety. Trauma and crisis have been engaged in this context to look at where traumas disrupt or upset political identities, leading to ontological security seeking at the state level, or ontological insecurity (Subotic, 2018). Particularly salient for this research, Kinnvall (2017) theorised how gendered experiences within the state are securitised. This happens responsively to the forces of globalisation, and as a means of securing a subjectivity that feeds into national identity. In her case (India in the wake of the Delhi gang-rape crisis), a gendered insecurity prevails as a function of the dominant security narrative. Kinnvall maps inequalities into the functioning of this insecurity that is produced as knowable in the context of trauma. Here, the gendered insecurity is pervasive: the governing of female bodies is required as a source of security making and maintenance at the national level.

A shift in recent ontological security scholarship has sought to examine the political potential of ontological insecurity by looking at the context of a normalised existential anxiety (Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2020; Rumelili, 2015, 2020; Subotic and Steele, 2018). This responds to some degree to the concern that there is a status quo bias at the heart of ontological security theory, in the context of securitisation of identity in particular (Rossdale, 2015). Understanding ontological security seeking as an ongoing practice of making the self – including particular collective selves like states that require active and continuous making – permits the incorporation of a more politicised and malleable

process of ontological security that responds to anxiety as a natural state of being rather than as exceptional. In this context, one can embrace Rossdale's (2015) argument that ontological insecurity can offer space for political potential, rather than oppressive control. Rossdale argues that the conceptualisation of ontological security that fixes identity to a linear plane – insecure to secure (and always moving towards security) – misses all other potentialities. He argues that the self may be divided by design rather than mishap and suggests that the particular limitation in ontological security theorising – the need to enclose the subject along this linear plane, and to securitise that subjectivity in a way that it can only be made in orientation to security – is fatally limiting to the concept. Radical articulations of the self recognise multiplicities, hybridities and contradictions to the patriarchal hetero-normative self of the state but are not legible in the linear expression of subjectivity that ontological security relies upon. While certainly sympathetic to this critique, rather than dismissing the potential of the concept of ontological security, I offer a point of entry that presupposes a rupture of subjectivity in the context of trauma. I adopt ontological security theory as a critical concept that can make lucid the expressions of intersectional and multiple selves in and across states and the international world.

In representing trauma as a key point of rupture in subjectivity for an analysis of ontological security, I depart from some of the more recent moves in ontological security in IR. Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi offer a reflexive reconceptualisation of ontological security for IR, remaking the concept for the discipline in a way that thickens the linear axis of ontological insecurity – security. They argue that IR has consistently used ontological security in a way that evokes existentialism and anxiety: a framework that they argue informed Laing's use of the term and is also consistent with Giddens' development of ontological security in social theory. Laing (2010) was particularly interested in pathological anxiety, that is, a disordered anxiety as a result of acute psychological conditions that disrupted the individual's very ability to *be* and, for Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, focusing on Laing's quite specific use is not the best way to reap the benefits of the concept for IR. The authors review ontological security studies in IR to demonstrate that the majority of work has conceived of ontological insecurity as more closely akin to a normalised level of existential anxiety. This is of course a useful and productive framework through which to develop the future of ontological security studies in IR scholarship and one that shifts the axis away from a linear continuum towards security, by thickening and adding complexity to what might compose insecurity. However, here I explore an alternative option, which is to consider where a pathological ontological insecurity can be relevant in IR, and if so, what is the value of conceptualising this as a collective ontological insecurity. To do so, I draw on trauma theory and its relevance to ontological security studies.

Turning to trauma, I argue that there are *exceptional* cases and experiences that produce a pervasive ontological insecurity that is separate from the normal ontological security seeking of the state or other collectives, which therefore deserves separate analytical attention. In these instances of pervasive ontological insecurity – precipitated by a major trauma – the self is ruptured to an extent that it is undone. From the subsequent social and political vacuum, new selves emerge from the rupture of the old, but this happens against the backdrop of efforts to re-make and re-build a semblance of the self. The old identity narrative ceases to exist, and the old self cannot be reconstituted in a way that absorbs

and accounts for trauma. In the face of trauma, there is no rehearsed and appropriate response. While I build here on Kinnvall's (2017) work that situates the everyday re-experiencing of trauma as co-constitutive of the expression of a dominant identity narrative, I focus specifically on the tension between the attempt to reconstitute the old self and the ways in which new selves are felt, expressed and performed as an articulation of the traumatic experience. The following section offers theories of social and collective trauma as a means of establishing trauma as constitutive of an exceptional form of ontological insecurity that more closely resembles Laing's pathological condition of disordered anxiety. I propose that trauma in this way gives rise to a security seeking that is not the conventional identity-making that emerges from a collective existential anxiety; rather, the security seeking comes from a place where the self is fundamentally compromised. States and collective selves in this instance resemble more closely the *divided* selves that were of interest to Laing. I then move to pinpoint why this understanding of the divided self can offer a means of accounting for or incorporating social inequalities: something that not yet been thoroughly unpicked in ontological security theory in IR.

Accountability and transgression

While the study of trauma has been associated with psychology and psychiatry, the progression of the concept of trauma and the trajectory of knowledge of trauma is closely intertwined with international politics: the first recognition of trauma symptoms was identified in men who had fought during the 1914–1918 war and suffered long-term ill effects of their exposure to the lived horror of war (Edkins, 2003; Lerner, 2022). In a useful account of trauma studies and its development adjacent to international politics, Lerner (2022) argues for a narrative approach to identity at least at the macrosocial level in international politics that can locate the construction of a narrative with a degree of fluidity. The advantages of narrative identity for Lerner mirror in some ways the advantages of a Lacanian discursive identity for Epstein: that is, narrative identities are not essentialised, they are empirically observable, they situate actors relative to others, that is, they might produce individual or collective selves, but they produce those selves in a social space. Narrative identities also, crucially, permit both stability and the possibility of change. Lerner then maps trauma onto narrative identity to effectively argue that 'violence accelerates the emotional and symbolic resonance of narrative othering' (Lerner, 2022: 90). To understand the interplay between trauma or violence and narrative identity-making, one has to deconstruct the unit of the state in international politics. Violence and trauma both make and unmake the state. On one hand, they produce the relationship of enmity that constitutes the in-group (Lerner, 2022; Volkan, 2008). On the other hand, they can also expose the failure of the state to perform its definitional role of providing security and stability, and expose the state as ineffective (Edkins, 2003; Lerner, 2022; Zhukova, 2016). Indeed, in Kinnvall's (2017) example of the Delhi gang-rape case of 2012, the culpability for the trauma is redirected towards female transgression, deflecting culpability from the state. The tendency to deny culpability for violence by establishing transgression on the part of a victim is a familiar technique in violence victimisation associated with race, gender and minoritised characteristics. The narrative must clarify a victim does not embody the normative stereotypes and negative associations of their constructed

racial category in order to elicit sympathy. Take, for example, the killing of Trayvon Martin, whose social media accounts were later trawled for evidence that he was a public menace associated with gangs rather than a teenage victim who was murdered because he wore a hoody (Alcindor, 2012; Mackey, 2012).

Zhukova (2016) emphasises the element of accountability in the discourse of trauma where she argues that retrospective trauma is produced when a perpetrator is held to account by the framing of morality in relation to a crisis. Identifying a perpetrator in the public sphere – whatever the crisis *type* – means there can be a breakdown in established beliefs and this breakdown leads to what Zhukova (citing Alexander, 2004) conceptualises as a retrospective cultural trauma. It is retrospective because the trauma is only induced by the identification of a perpetrator, or someone whose mis-actions produced the human suffering attached to the crisis. In the language of ontological security, this is a point of rupture in a collective identity narrative that requires a re-narration of identity to account for the rupture and heal the wound, or a public *re*action to right the wrongdoing. Of course, not every trauma or identification of public perpetration leads to a cultural trauma: this is only the case if it disrupts established beliefs, identities or routine practices. This is key when considering the under-explored role of social inequalities whereby the state might perform effectively for a core group, but ineffectively for other groups who are constituted as insiders only insofar as they conform to an identity dynamic that might involve the denial of forms of violence: colonial violence, racialised violence, violence against women and violence against minorities. This violence is often directly evident in socio-economic disparities, or as structural violence that emerges from such disparities.

In trauma theory, there is discussion not just to the psychological versus the socio-cultural forms of trauma, but also how the content of the trauma itself contributes to meaning-making. This can also be key to tracing the impact of inequality on trauma and identity. For example, in terms of collective traumas, there is a basis to differentiate between collective responses to natural disaster, man-made accidental and indiscriminate disaster, and intentional acts of war or violence against a specific population (Hamburger, 2020; Pupavac, 2013; Volkan, 2013). Conventionally, natural disaster has been thought of as an 'act of God' (Pupavac, 2013) and therefore response tends towards a stoic acceptance and often international solidarity produced through relief efforts (although it is worth noting that this response is shifting to a 'blame' response targeted at environmental degradation and climate change; Pupavac, 2013). Social traumas that involve accidental or intentional crisis instead might reference against a dynamic of enmity and/or blame. As discussed above, a collective trauma that is referenced against a collective enemy can serve to consolidate one group against another, and this enmity becomes set in the psychosocial dynamics of a group identity, therefore the trauma and resulting enmity reproduces across generations (Volkan, 2013). The psychosocial dynamics of a collective trauma are also reproducible in the establishment of victimhood, or a victim identity narrative that can be exploitative in the form of paternalistic governance of crisis victims without establishing a basis for political agency. For example, a collective victim of mass displacement might receive ongoing paternalistic support that helps with day-to-day existence but does not resolve the ongoing political crisis and therefore does not create a basis for an equal footing as citizens of a polity (Ferreira, 2013).

While the identity implications of trauma have been dealt with relatively widely in IR and have been referenced in ontological security studies, the traumatic moment, the psychological or psychosocial effects on the group and the impact on ontological insecurity have not been substantially differentiated from other provocations of ontological security seeking in ontological security studies. If we assume that states are ontological security *seeking* as their natural way of being in the world and this is conceptualised as a process driven by normalised existential anxiety, in what circumstances does trauma effectively make that seeking impossible? As I will explore in the next section, in cases of trauma, the resultant ontological insecurity becomes pathological and has implications for the possibility of reclaiming or reproducing a stable identity.

Ontological security, narrative identity and trauma

Hom and Steele (2020) pinpoint the two elements of ontological security: the biographical narrative against which the collective identity is constituted, and the external environment that provides the stable structure and routinised behaviours in which the ontologically secure identity holder exists. A case of trauma disrupts both of these things: identity might need to be reconstituted following a traumatic experience that calls to question the biographical narrative, recalling Mitzen's (2006) example of the rape victim who asks 'how can this happen to me'. Living an ontologically secure existence leads one to believe that one is immune from being the victim of trauma. Trauma thus negates that identity and induces ontological insecurity. This is a definitive rupture that is different from state ontological security seeking as a constant project that is particular to a social collective or polity. An example at the collective level might be the events of Hurricane Katrina in 2006 where a common response was 'how can this happen *in the United States*'. The way that rupture is dealt with is meaningful and can either restore ontological security or prolong ontological insecurity. Maria Mälksoo's work on collective memory takes on the dual constitution of ontological security, particularly attending to the recognition trauma needs in order to produce cohesion between the internal biographical narrative and the external environment in which it sits (Mälksoo, 2009). Trauma cannot be resolved if unacknowledged, leading to a prevailing insecurity that is produced by the conflict between self-identity and an exogenous social identity. Kinnvall (2017) uses a trauma as a point of entry into the gendered security narratives that both securitise a gendered and classed subjectivity and govern the behaviour of those articulated into that subjectivity. For Kinnvall, the traumatic moment allows an opening to then understand how gender becomes securitised in the everyday with the operation of gendered narratives at global, state and more localised levels. In what follows I build on this, but also adapt it to consider the trauma as a provocation of a pathological insecurity. Kinnvall focuses on how securitising gender restores or solidifies the dominant identity narrative. Here, I acknowledge those forces but attend to how that identity is undone and how alternate, new selves articulate themselves in the space produced by trauma: how the self is divided.

Here, it is worth pausing to acknowledge again the necessary move beyond the levels of analysis, to clarify who is the holder of identity (state, society, individual and so on) and who is the subject of trauma: are they one and the same? This has implications for

the constitution of collective trauma – whether individual trauma is analogised for the state, or whether a socio-cultural trauma is an event at the level of the state (or national collective). The latter is probably least problematic for a collective as big as the state: the common experience of trauma is produced by the way the events are narrativised. Rather than assuming everyone experienced the trauma equally, there is instead a shared understanding of an event as traumatic. Trauma in this context is at the level of society but not the state. Perhaps whole states can be traumatised and this will impact their international behaviour (Steele, 2008), but this is only one facet of the impact of collective trauma. Collectives internal to states or collectives that exist across state borders can equally be traumatised, and this trauma will also impact their international and transnational behaviour, the international behaviour of the relevant state and the way that the international realm relates to the state and to the collective. Where social inequalities create differential experiences of trauma, and trauma leaves a vacuum in the place of a previous 'self', new international subjects might be solidified, whereby a counter voice responds to the trauma and narrativises the trauma in a way that counteracts the dominant state narrative. Black Lives Matter, as it has emerged into a global movement built around common experiences of trauma and systematised oppression, is a good example of this. An approach to the subject that avoids essentialising identity and permits the discursive production of different types of identities at the international level allows for these identities to be heard in the international realm or provides a means of accessing the narrative response of a collective identity oppressed by the state.

It is worth considering two articulations of trauma as they impact on the collective level and interact with ontological (in)security. The first is discursive: how has the pathologisation and popularisation of the diagnosis and discourse of trauma affected public sensibilities of crisis? Lerner (2022) talks specifically of war and political violence, yet narratives of other types of crises may be retroactively subject to diagnoses or conceptualisations of trauma that produce particular public narratives around collective identity or collective victimhood. Second, while collective trauma might be constituted as a public event, not all members of a population will subjectively experience trauma in the same way. Some may be more directly connected to a traumatic event than others. Reactions to trauma vary at the individual level, and there is also evidence to suggest that life post trauma impacts the processing of a traumatic event (Rieck et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2020). Social inequalities have potentially meaningful implications in this particular context: states with high levels of inequality are likely to have different post traumatic responses across the population. To translate this complexity to a collective is challenging because collectives are composed of diverse individuals whose intersectional identity characteristics produce their individual experiences of a collective trauma. Here, where social inequalities generate meaningfully different experiences, the subgroup collective identity experience might problematise the re-making of identity at the level of the macro-collective, for IR purposes, the state (or society therein). The sub-group might then offer an alternative narrative of trauma, and an alternate identity produced by the trauma that becomes legible at the international level. The state, to remain cohesive as an actor, has an interest in either adopting this narrative or suppressing it. At a moment of trauma, these voices that are alternative to the state are more able to be heard, because the trauma undoes – even temporarily – state identity. Directing our analytical attention

to these voices, discourses or identity narratives allows ontological security theory to address social inequalities that under normal circumstances are obfuscated and oppressed by the state.

In this way, trauma creates a different platform from which to understand ontological in/security. Individual trauma creates an ontological insecurity and a pervasive anxiety that may develop into an anxiety disorder that needs to be managed and treated. The collective level is more difficult to conceptualise because of the subjective nature of trauma and reaction to it, and because these subjectivities, in the patriarchal and power-laden state, are often a product of social histories and extant inequalities. In terms of the disruption trauma incurs to the processing of time, collective practices of memorialisation can preserve in time the emotional aspects of a trauma, functioning in a way that mirrors the dissociation from emotions in an individual sufferer of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (e.g. see Ogden et al., 2006; Schimmenti and Caretti, 2016). As Lerner (2020) describes, the 'process of "acting out" trauma is not simply a form of remembering, which involves engaging with past events from a distance. Rather, it is a form of *re-experiencing*' (Lerner, 2020: 3). For the individual, this takes the form of vivid dreams or flashbacks. At the collective level, the reproduction of the emotional experience of a trauma is brought about by collective rituals and practices of memorialisation. In other words, the practical identity of a collective that has experienced trauma may function in a place and time, while the emotional identity is connected to and reproduced only in reference to a past trauma. Yet, these rituals and practices of memorialisation can also function as a means of ordering what was disordered by trauma. Yet, not every crisis becomes a traumatising moment; therefore, it is useful to adopt the boundary that to be constituted as a collective trauma normal beliefs, identities or routines must be disrupted and that there must be some scope for political blame and accountability. The endogenous rupture of identity – particularly in the context of a retrospective trauma that requires such a call for accountability – reveals inequalities and the forms of oppression that maintain them.

Ontological security and inequality

Disproportionate suffering in the case of crisis is often borne by the people who are already worse-off in an unequal society. To put it in practical terms, while natural disasters are often described as 'equalisers', in reality they often enhance the vulnerability of already vulnerable people. For example, the cost of rebuilding a home following a natural disaster is prohibitive to people who live in poverty, or who may have been less likely to have savings or insurance systems in place. It might be an equaliser in the sense that people from all social strata lost their homes or loved ones, but the ongoing costs, the ability to rebuild a home and rebuild a life is experienced unequally. Returning to Zhukova (2016), a natural disaster might be seen retrospectively as a trauma if there is a moral failing on the part of a responsible party to act properly to alleviate the worst suffering of the crisis. Similarly, a crisis caused by a man-made accident might not become a national trauma unless it involves a narrative of moral failure. The constitution of an event as a trauma might vary according to the processes of accountability in society; therefore, inequality comes into play according to the political capacity to hold those

responsible to account, whether via the media, as a voting public, as a collective action process, or another route. In cases of trauma that the population experiences unequally, outcomes are biased towards the powerholders because they hold the resources to rebuild identity and ontological security. Thus, ontological insecurity produced as a result of trauma rarely affords political or economic *potential* to anyone other than the elite, who as a rule bias towards the status quo (or enhance the forms of exploitation at the heart of the status quo). Kinnvall (2017) articulates this relationship in the context of gendered spaces, identifying the bordering processes that reinstate patriarchal power: the state is produced as a secure masculine self that protects vulnerable female bodies. Understanding how individuals and collectives relate to the state or relate across the state in the case of transnational individuals and collectives is essential to better understand how exploitation is enhanced by trauma and crisis, and how ontological security processes reflect that.

In the case of an intentional man-made crisis such as war or ethnic cleansing, the crisis itself is often based on membership of a collective identity group. In cases of war that become national traumas, the collective identity group is already constituted through national identity and a unifying act of securitisation is to constitute the trauma against a narrative of enmity – often a dyadic narrative of identity and enmity that is retrospective, solidified against a wartime foe with repeated historical traumas constituting identity on both sides (Volkan, 2008). Nevertheless, inequality is still relevant here. For example, minority populations within a state may suffer new exclusions if the national identity is hardened along ethnic or religious lines. Immigrants, or the offspring of immigrants, may suffer particular prejudices and exclusions. Because minorities and immigrants are often over-represented in the poorest sectors of society, the lived experience of division is more apparent in communities with higher levels of deprivation, or the community experience might just not reflect the national narrative, hence creating a sense of division between the community and the national level. These examples refer to events that are generally uncontroversial in their designation as a collective trauma. Here, I turn to traumas that are experienced internally that might be attributed, in part, to the organising principles of the state. Intimate partner violence and the intersectional inequalities that render some groups more at risk than others are a major source of ontological insecurity. If state-based ontological security is about the state being able to maintain security for its population, this is relevant to IR. Moreover, gender-based violence, intimate partner violence and the consequent insecurity is an international issue: gender-based violence happens across the globe. Responses to such violence are often organised at the state level, but the phenomenon itself is global in scope, is referenced in four separate organs of the UN and is a key concern of four additional UN specialised agencies and programmes. The insecurity that is generated by intimate partner violence and by gender-based violence transcends the state while happening at the micro, individual or domestic level.

Theorising the relationship between ontological security and trauma at the state or national level invites a bias towards only considering collective traumas that guarantee national identity, without giving critical attention to the schisms in society that mean people are written out of collective suffering. For example, considering the hyper-local domestic space of the home, as Mac Ginty (2019) points out, it is conventionally a place of sanctuary and, in the context of his research, is also a key referent for peace and security. Nevertheless, this is easily reversed with reference to domestic violence, in which

the home becomes the key location of insecurity, where doors are closed to scrutiny. Efforts to provide domestic security happen at the level of national policy and local practice in the form of social work, yet this is rarely referenced as part of a national security narrative. With a transnational lens, domestic violence or gender-based violence does not generally meet the criteria as persecution with a nexus reason to race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion to qualify people escaping violence from their intimate partner or a family member a candidate for refugee status. Nor is gender a protected innate characteristic referenced in the law (although it would be remiss to point out that this is not without significant ongoing legal challenges).

The state's inability to guarantee security in domestic spaces generally does not reflect on the state-power identity narrative. Scholars in critical security have pointed to the broadening and deepening of security conceptualisations that permit various forms of insecurity. Drawing from Zhukova (2016), things can be retroactively designated a national trauma with the identification of a perpetrator. But for this to happen, the group that suffered the trauma need to have the resources to follow a pathway of accountability, and the accountability must be recognised by the state. *And* the socio-structural environment must produce agreement that the suffering caused by the perpetrator compromises the cultural identity narrative of the state or national collective. That this does not happen does not mean that there is no collective trauma and therefore no ontological insecurity. It instead produces a pocket of ontological insecurity that is not scaled up to the state level: just because the trauma and insecurity is not constituted at the national level does not mean it is not experienced by the collective. It still exists but the collective is constituted otherwise to the state. To be clear, this does not mean the collective is constituted within the state. Identity and belonging manifests in religion, ethnic and cultural identities that have often been disrupted by borders, racialised identities, gender identities and political identities. The latter are of growing global importance, visible in, for example, human rights campaigns and the climate movement. Focusing on pockets of trauma and ontological security experienced within and by these identities that are not contained by the state makes visible the structures of patriarchy and White supremacy that continue to dominate state-based identities. These structures make and maintain inequalities that underlie national identity narratives. An intersectional approach requires an awareness of the normative structure of patriarchal and White supremacist power (MacKinnon, 2013). Rather than adding categories of potential insecurity, intersectionality is cognisant of power relationships and of the instability of political representation and the security that affords (Yuval-Davis, 2011). Here, I focus on the moment of destabilisation (trauma) as a means of making visible inequality. The case discussed below illustrates one instance, but the theoretical argument suggests this is a process that should *always* be adopted to counteract the normative entrenchment of patriarchy and White supremacy in the stable politics of state security. While the insecurity in this case was discursively constituted and narrativised in the public domain, this voice was not heard by the state. I use this lack to demonstrate the importance of acknowledging inequality to understand and conceptualise the incapacity of the state to provide security while accounting for heterogeneous experiences of a population through an intersectional lens that acknowledges normative modalities of power and oppression.

Sarah Everard and gendered insecurity

Thirty-three-year-old Sarah Everard was walking home at about 9.30 p.m. on the evening of 3 March 2021 in South London when she was stopped by a plain-clothes police officer, Wayne Couzens, who told her he was arresting her for breaching Covid regulations. He then proceeded to drive her to a location near Dover where he raped and strangled her, then later burnt and buried her remains. This is of course unquestionably a trauma for the victim and for the people who were close to her. The case drew national attention, particularly because the assailant was a police officer employed in London Metropolitan Police (hereafter London Met) and assigned to the Parliamentary and Diplomatic Protection branch. He used his privileged position as a person associated with providing security and safety in order to undermine that position in the worst possible way. The ensuing identification of failings on the part of the London Met to identify him as a potential risk starts to allow the tragedy to take the shape of a collective trauma. The case of course inspired varied discussions of women's safety in London and in the United Kingdom. Everard was walking on a busy well-used route between 21.00 and 22.00 when it was dark, but not late. She was not taking any risk that millions of women do not take every day. She had no relationship with her assailant at all. The choice of her as a victim was totally random and therefore produced a collective trauma in an analogous way to a terrorist attack: the indiscriminate nature of violence makes everyone in the target group a little less subjectively secure. The incapacity of the state to provide security for women was made evident by the fact that the assailant was employed directly as an instrument of state security. When it emerged that Couzens had not undergone the appropriate vetting level associated with his appointment and had previously been under investigation for sexual assault and indecent exposure, the link to the moral failing of an authority – that is the failure of the police force to properly vet employees – was made, satisfying Zhukova's additional criteria for a tragedy to become a trauma. In this case, the lack of ability of the police to provide safety and the wanton abuse of policing is at its most stark.

The national response by political leadership to this event was – at best – incoherent. The then Home Secretary Priti Patel condemned the violence and assured the nation that women should feel safe on the streets. Yet, despite the fact that it was a police officer who committed the brutal rape and murder of a woman under the guise of enforcing the law, she then proposed increased funding and powers to the police, sponsoring the 'Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill' and advancing it to parliament in March 2021. The Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for North Yorkshire resigned after suggesting that women should be 'streetwise' and educate themselves as to the legal process on arrest to avoid falling victim to a similar situation. The police response was condemned and even ridiculed after the London Met suggested women being arrested by a plain-clothes officer should question the officer's credentials, call 999 or even flag down a passing bus (this was widely covered in the media. An example can be found in the *Evening Standard*, 1 October 2021). The national narrative could fall back here on a gendered structure of protecting women, yet the only recourse for protection was the conventional police-security system. The discursive moves by people and institutions of authority attempted to reconstitute the police as the providers of security despite the empirical failure. The

response of increasing police powers while warning women to act defensively when confronted by a police officer is actively constituting the inability of the police to provide security, while simultaneously denying this same inability. Here, there is a contradiction, made legible by acknowledging the trauma that the state is denying.

On 13 March 2021, vigils were held across the country, including a vigil and rally on Clapham Common, a green space that Everard had crossed on her route towards home. At this vigil hundreds of women gathered to remember and to protest the insecurity of women on the streets – attempting to hold the government and the policing authority to account. Here, the response to state failure is collective and constitutes a counter-narrative to the state. The vigil was broken up with physical resistance from the London Met with the reasoning that the people were gathering in contradiction to Covid regulations – the irony that these were the very laws that Couzens used to carry out his bogus arrest is impossible to ignore. A particularly powerful image of an arrested woman, constrained, at the feet of male police officers circulated across the media. Despite the apparent backlash against the police, a watchdog inquiry was ordered and found 'no wrongdoing' and ruled that the police had acted properly in response to the protest. This forms another discursive constitution of the police as providers of security and a denial of the legitimacy of the counter-narrative. The watchdog report linked the risk of violence to the presence of protesters affiliated with Sisters Uncut, a feminist organisation initially formed to protest government cuts to support for victims of domestic violence and that publicly supports the Black Lives Matter movement (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services [HMICFRS], 2021). This report came in the wake of a previous, more comprehensive, report that investigated police response to protest, focusing on Xtinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter. A member of the reporting body served a detailed complaint that this investigation was not representative (with only two women and one person of colour on the investigating committee) and was biased particularly against Black Lives Matter, which was considered a 'leftist organisation' (Bright, 2021). The whistle-blower who issued the complaint was then removed from the investigative committee examining the police response to the vigil in honour of Sarah Everard. Rather than the murder of Everard being established as a trauma, or emblematic of the ongoing trauma of endemic violence against women, the response at the national level was to support the methods of policing that suppressed protest at the vigil remembering Everard. This could have been a moment at which ontological insecurity for women was accounted for at the national level. Instead, women's voices were devalued at the national level, while policing (and simultaneously the patriarchal ideology of protecting women *from themselves*) was reinforced. These same women's voices narrativised an experience counter to that of the state.

Here, there is a trauma that involves national attention and a national narrative. The trauma can be considered collective and is felt at the national level – but only by a population sub-group (women). The puzzle is why Everard's murder was not associated with the processes of shame and identity-interrogation that are characteristic of ontological insecurity. Yet, this is not a puzzle. It is evidence that that chauvinistic basis for national identity does not consider violence against women – female insecurity – as a national failing. Here is a different cultural context from the Delhi rape case that Kinnvall (2017) analyses, yet a similar response and outcome. There is an intersectional basis

for understanding this lack on the part of ontological security narratives whereby the dominant national population (in the case of Western states, White males) owns national insecurity. Drawing from Peterson's (2007) method of triad analytics, which demonstrate how forms of subjugation are produced, this case is produced as a result of the nation state's institutionalised codes, rules and norms of gender, race and class bias. These take the form of normalising violence against women by reproducing such violence in the patterns of response to Everard's murder in the form of the vigil. The justification for oppressive force presented in the report document constructs it as a response to the presence of protesters affiliated with Black Lives Matter (referenced in the commissioned Inspection report as 'Sisters Uncut', who are a group known for targeted, high impact protest movements against domestic violence and violence against women). There is a clear distinction made between the peaceful vigil earlier in the day (attended by the Duchess of Sussex) and the rowdy protest later that involved 'microphones and public address equipment'. A small group that are described in the report as 'thought by the Silver Commander to be Sisters Uncut' were accused of 'whipping up' the crowd. The use of excessive force by the police is explained away by accounts of verbal abuse directed at police, and the police being outnumbered by protesters. Here, the value and necessity of an intersectional approach is made clear: the responses that are considered transgressive by the patriarchal and White supremacist dominating narrative are used to undermine the credibility of the response overall. The reliance on policing attests an inability to see beyond the prevailing normative structure; being cognisant of the differential operation of power as it acts on different assumed identity characteristics is revelatory.

One could consider gender-based violence in the conventional male-patriarchal narrative of the society of men failing to protect women, but gender-based violence is normatively entrenched within identity so the fact of it does not threaten national identity. This remains true even when applied to the most privileged of oppressed groups – White women. It is even more starkly evident in the cases of Sabina Nessa, a British Asian school teacher who was murdered in a similar attack in South London in September 2021, and the murders of sisters Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman in a park in June 2020. The deaths of these women of colour did not generate collective action or national outcry and were not as widely covered in the media despite evidence of serious police misconduct in relation to the latter case that resulted in one officer being discharged, one resigning and several more being disciplined (see Grierson, 2020). The normative entrenchment of the expectation of violence is clear in how sub-group targeted violence is treated in public discourse. For example, police violence against Black Americans leaves a deep and persisting *insecurity* but it is not ontological at the level of state identity because the norm of racialised violence is entrenched in the structural form of the state. Even where this has been nationally called to question in the Black Lives Matter protest movement and surrounding press coverage of publicised trials of police officers who have murdered Black citizens, a dominant response is that national identity is rendered insecure by the *very suggestion* that its inherent racism is a problem, devaluing the clear evidence that society and the institutions that govern it are inherently racist. Yet, the trauma at the level of the sub-group is clear. In other words, at the state level, there is no trauma or security crisis, rather there is an event that gained national media attention.

That event must be managed to avoid insecurity, but the management of the event relies upon the continued insecurity of the particular collective. The trauma and ensuing ontological insecurity among the collective remain but are devalued at the state level where it is not a self-damaging trauma but is dealt with via a reliance on the available institutions (policing). Yet the trauma and ontological insecurity that exists within the affected collective exists both within and across borders. The potential dissociation of a particular collective from national identity and the meaning-making systems and institutions held therein both requires and showcases social division.

Attending to ontological security in this context could take two (or more) potential forms. The first is that guided by Rossdale – to acknowledge that understanding identity on an axis of insecurity to security is inherently limiting to political potential. Nevertheless, this case suggests there is scope for a security argument that can be cognisant of the failings of ontological security that Rossdale (2015) identified, yet can make use of the concept while accounting for these failures. Adopting a subject that is not the state but is narrativising security allows recognition of the incoherence at the heart of state discourse that cannot speak itself without reiterating the masculine constructs of police and physical security even when the role of these constructs is actively and performatively contested by events. The alternative narrative, the discourse of state failure constituted in the vigil that the state remade as an unruly protest, is still one generated by an ontological insecurity, but this alternate narrative is produced by unequal subjects of insecurity who are not accounted for by state narratives. Furthermore, the state adopts a technique of dividing identity and constructing normatively oppressed identities as transgressive (evoking Black Lives Matter and Sisters Uncut in this case) to better undermine the gendered experiential insecurity and to consolidate the state narrative of security by endorsing the police response.

Conclusion

In this research, I have built on ontological security studies in IR to identify further explanatory potential that can account for inequalities in national or societal identity narratives. Ontological security studies have the proven capacity to move beyond the conventional levels of analysis and examine threads of security that blur between state and sub-state, individual and transnational or international. By focusing ontological security on a discursively constituted, non-state-based identity group, we can see forms of ontological insecurity and identify the international political implications. Focusing on inequality can pinpoint where inequalities within the state that are exacerbated by trauma and produce ontological insecurity are ignored by the state level of analysis. By blurring the levels of analysis in a way that incorporates multiple levels, layers and intersections and that focuses on relations between them, we can see where trauma implicates national identity because the security of sub-groups, non-state-based collectives and so on is not protected by the state. These collectives that are not defined by the state are excluded from national identity rather than identity being remade inclusively. This is not to argue how states can do identity better, but to argue that the state is incapable of providing ontological security because of inherent inequalities that underlie national identity. It is only in attending to those inequalities that we can attend to the biases at the heart of the

state. Trauma, or post-trauma, provides a delineated means of accessing these dynamics in a way that is formulated around a pathologised ontological insecurity (rather than an existential, and therefore normalised, process of ontological insecurity). The value and necessity of an intersectional approach is made clear: trauma responses that are positioned as transgressive by the patriarchal and White supremacist dominating narrative are used within that narrative to undermine the credibility of alternative narratives of security. The state adopts a technique of dividing identity and constructing normatively oppressed identities as transgressive to consolidate the state narrative of security.

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