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**Vernacular Theories of Everyday (In)Security:  
The Disruptive Potential of Non-Elite Knowledge**  
*Security Dialogue*, forthcoming (accepted 9/7/15)

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**Abstract**

Citizens increasingly occupy a central role in the policy rhetoric of British National Security Strategies (NSS) and yet the technocratic methods by which risks and threats are assessed and prioritised do not consider the views and experiences of diverse publics. Equally, security studies in both ‘traditional’ and ‘critical’ guises has privileged analysis of elites over the political subject of threat and (in)security. Contributing to the recent ‘vernacular’ and ‘everyday’ turns, this article draws on extensive critical focus group research carried out in 2012 across six British cities in order to investigate: 1) which issues citizens find threatening and how they know, construct, and narrate ‘security threats’; and 2) the extent to which citizens are aware of, engage with, and/or refuse government efforts to foster vigilance and suspicion in public spaces. Instead of making generalisations about what particular ‘types’ of citizens think, however, we develop a ‘disruptive’ approach inspired by the work of Jacques Rancière. While many of the views, anecdotes, and stories reproduce the police order in Rancière’s terms, it is also possible to identify political discourses that disrupt dominant understandings of threat and (in)security, repoliticise the grounds on which national security agendas are authorised, and reveal actually existing alternatives to cultures of suspicion and unease.

**Introduction**

Q: Do you know how the government sets its security strategies?

Sahil: It certainly doesn’t come from us [group laughter]

(Group 15).

*Political activity* [...] makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where there was only place for *noise*; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise (Rancière 1999: 30, emphasis added).

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Citizens are increasingly enjoined to occupy a central role in the national security architecture of Britain. In the 2008 National Security Strategy (NSS) the then Labour government stated its commitment to finding ‘new opportunities to seek views from members of the public’, which was presented as ‘the next step in a process of engagement designed to ensure that government thinking on national security constantly keeps pace with the rapidly evolving global security environment (Cabinet Office, 2008: 61). The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government’s 2010 NSS, entitled *A Strong Britain in an Age of Uncertainty*, reiterated the ‘need to build a much closer relationship between government, the private sector and the public when it comes to national security’ and claimed that ‘we all have a part to play in keeping the country safe – be it from terrorists, cyber attack or natural disasters (Cabinet Office, 2010: 5). Continuing this familiar theme, the First Report of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy (JCNSS) has called for greater ‘public engagement’ in the formulation of national security policy ahead of the next NSS (JCNSS, 2015: 10).

Despite the centrality of the citizen, however, successive governments have not sought actively to engage the views and experiences of diverse publics in the assessment and prioritisation of risk and threat (Hagmann and Dunn Cavelty 2012; see also McCormack 2014; Ritchie 2011). Indeed, Jonas Hagmann and Miriam Dunn Cavelty (2012: 87) argue that the purportedly ‘scientific’ assessment and presentation of security threats in the NSS and accompanying National Risk Register (NRR) reflect a ‘distinct security rationality that “depoliticises” security politics’ (see also Leander 2013). By prioritising risks according to their probability of occurrence and scale of impact at the national level, the NSS presents a seemingly neutral and value-free basis for determining national security policy – one that closes off ‘debates about values, purposes, and formulations of security’ (Hagmann and Dunn Cavelty, 2012: 87). While this methodology may be read as part of a wider crisis of

representation and legitimacy (McCormack, 2014: 2; see also Ritchie, 2011), there are nonetheless various initiatives designed to enlist the support of citizens in the risk management cycle throughout society (Jarvis and Lister, 2012). For example, posters and announcements in public spaces enjoin ‘citizen-detectives’ to be vigilant at all times and to report any behaviour that they deem to be ‘suspicious’ (Vaughan-Williams 2008). At ports, airports, and international railway stations, ‘trusted’ travellers are expected to interact willingly with biometric technologies such as ‘e-Gates’ in order to facilitate identity-based risk management (Amoore, 2006). Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) invite individuals to feed into local community risk registers in order to identify the greatest risks in a given area and then plan and exercise to help mitigate against those risks (Adey and Anderson, 2011).

Nevertheless, relatively little is known about *how* citizens conceptualise and experience ‘threat’ and ‘(in)security’, whether they are aware of, engage with, and/or refuse governmental attempts to enlist them in building societal resilience, and what the implications of these initiatives might be for social interaction among multiethnic publics. While there is a long tradition of large-scale quantitative analyses of public opinion towards war and foreign policy, Security Studies in both ‘traditional’ and ‘critical’ guises have for the most part privileged the rhetoric, speech acts, and (in)securitizing moves of politicians, policy-making communities, security professionals, private security companies, and other *elites*: the views, cultural repertoires of knowledge, and testimonies of the political subject of (in)security remain largely invisible. More recently there have been efforts to address this analytical deficit in the context of two so-called ‘turns’ within critical security studies – ‘the vernacular’ and ‘the everyday’ – but these have developed largely in parallel rather than in conversation with each other, which, as we shall go on to outline, has led to several blind spots. Responding to calls for the further development of both trajectories – and seeking to connect and build upon their respective insights – this article draws extensively on original

critical focus group research carried out in 2012 across Britain, which addressed two questions: 1) How does ‘non-elite’ knowledge, understanding, and experience of security threats relate to and/or disrupt ‘official’ knowledge and prioritisation as reflected in the NSS? 2) To what extent are diverse publics aware of government attempts to shape their behaviour in public spaces, how do they interact with initiatives designed to foster vigilance, and do their accounts offer any alternative starting points for analysing the contemporary politics of threat and (in)security?

Beyond the well-established insight that citizens and governments often differ in their understanding of threat and (in)security, we argue that vernacular constructions, experiences, and stories of (in)security have the *potential to disrupt* ‘official’ accounts and repoliticise the technocratic foundations of national security policies. Inspired by the work of Jacques Rancière (1999), our distinctive conceptual contribution is to focus on the disruptive capacity of *certain* non-elite knowledge to challenge the dominant framework – or ‘police’ logic – within which these policies are shaped. Importantly, as we will demonstrate, not *all* non-elite knowledge of threat and (in)security *inevitably* disrupts the police order – often that order is reproduced, which scholars of the ‘everyday’ tend to emphasise more so than those of the ‘vernacular’. However, we find that some views, experiences, and stories – understood precisely as vernacular theories of everyday (in)security – are antagonistic to the policing work of the NSS and give rise to what Rancière (1999: 33) calls ‘scenes of conflict’. Instead of mere ‘noise’ – to return to the opening quotation – it is possible to discern ‘political’ discourses within the six-hundred pages of transcript material generated by twenty-six hours of group discussions, which provide a rich ‘counter-archive’ of knowledge about contemporary threats and (in)security (Shapiro 2013: 85).

## **The political subject of threat and (in)security: the limits of elitist approaches**

In order to provide the historiographical context in which security studies have become vulnerable to the ‘everyday’ and ‘vernacular’ turns, we first consider the persistence of elitist perspectives and the implications of excluding the political subject of threat and (in)security.

Miriam Dunn Cavelty (2008) argues that during the Cold War era ‘threat images’ were largely taken ‘as a given’ and understood to be ‘measurable’ and therefore states’ security policies were interpreted as responding to ‘an objective’ understanding of threats (Dunn Cavelty 2008: 8). The dissolution of the USSR, the rising significance of non-state actors, and the broadening of the security agenda beyond state-centred militarism set the conditions for new understandings of threat – not least those associated with securitization theory (Buzan et al 1998). But while this approach demonstrated that there is no essential meaning or intrinsic value to any given threat outside of its socio-linguistic construction by elite political actors, various interlocutors have pointed out that the role of audience reception remains underdeveloped in securitization theory and many applications of it (Balzacq, 2010; McDonald, 2008; O’ Meyer, 2009). According to Thierry Balzacq (2010: 19), securitization theory has tended to ‘skirt the distinctive role of the audience’ because of a prior focus on the *utterance* of a speech act (the illocutionary act) rather than its *effects* (the perlocutionary act) (Balzacq, 2010: 19). Likewise, Christoph O’ Meyer (2009: 650) argues that securitization theory does not adequately address ‘different levels of risk perception and fear among different types of audiences’. For Johan Eriksson (2001: 9), the securitization frame does not account for the way in which certain threat images acquire wider ‘societal salience’ whereas others do not: the focus on elite speech acts overlooks the ‘cultural context in which a threat image is identified’ (Eriksson, 2001: 222). With its prioritisation of elite securitizing actors, particular understanding of threat in existential terms, and tendency to downplay the interrelationship between speech acts and audience response, securitization theory ultimately

pays scant attention to the political *subject* of threat and (in)security that is both produced by and helps to shape attempted acts of securitization.

R. B. J. Walker has argued that only by recognising that ‘the subject of security is the *subject* of security’ – in other words that discourses of threat and (in)security seek to ‘tell us who we must be’ and then ‘how we might stay that way’ – might it then be ‘possible to envisage a critical discourse about security’ (Walker, 1997: 72; 78). International Political Sociology (IPS) perspectives have responded to Walker’s challenge by focusing on how diverse *practices* of (in)security attempt to (re)produce political subjectivities as part of what Michel Foucault (1979) referred to as logics of governmentality. Though diverse, IPS perspectives offer a sociologically ‘thicker’ understanding of dynamics of (in)securitization in ways that identify and seek to work with—rather than bracket off and sideline—cultural contexts occluded by securitization theory (Bigo, 2008). This research agenda, as is well known, has given rise to studies of the (in)securitizing moves not only of national governments, but also the knowledge and practices of non-state actors including security professionals (Bigo 2000) and private security companies (Leander 2005, 2013). Diverse attempts to produce governable subjects have been investigated in the context of, *inter alia*, risk management and dataveillance (Amoore and de Goede, 2005); the cultivation of unease and suspicion (Bigo, et al 2007; Bigo and Tsoukala, 2007); and the use of exercises and resilience training in civil contingency planning (Anderson and Adey 2011; Aradau and van Munster, 2012). But while the IPS research agenda – with which we are sympathetic – has problematised the range of actors involved in (in)securitizing moves, the ability to draw neat lines around the cultural contexts that delimits them, and the attempt to produce certain types of political subjects for the purpose of governmental logics, these dynamics have been least explored from the embodied perspectives *of* those subjects (Bröckling et al 2011: 13; Gillespie and O’Loughlin 2009a: 681; Jarvis and Lister 2013: 1).

As a growing number of analysts have sought to emphasise from a range of vantage points, the prevalent elitist focus on politicians, security professionals, and private security companies – even in the ‘critical’ study of the politics of threat and (in)security – is analytically and politically problematic in excluding the political subject of (in)security for a number of significant reasons. First, if meanings of (in)security are intersubjectively produced by, culturally embedded in, and politically contested via ‘processes of identity construction in which the self and other, or multiple others, are constituted’, then the role of diverse publics in shaping that field of understanding is of central concern (Weldes et al 1999: 10). Second, to prioritise elites silences the voices of individuals and groups marginalised by their socioeconomic, gender, racial, and ethnic status – political subjectivities who may also be disproportionately affected by discourses and practices of security – which in turn serves to perpetuate their exclusion (Booth, 2007; Hansen, 2000; Jarvis and Lister, 2013). Third, as Jef Huysmans (2014: 59) has argued, elitism also has the effect of reducing ‘the visibility of the pervasive presence of exceptionalist securitizing in everyday life and intimate relations’ such that the latter is bracketed off from security politics, which is assumed to be the preserve of an ‘exceptional class’. Where might we find critical resources for countering elitism and bringing the political subject of (in)security back in to security studies?

### **The vernacular, the everyday, and the disruptive potential of non-elite knowledge**

The insistence in a range of feminist and gender perspectives on the importance of the embodied experiences of political subjects offers a tradition of thought that recovers the individual as the referent object of threat and (in)security. However, as Annick Wibben has argued, the maxim ‘the personal is political’ has in large part not been ‘perceived as contributing to the debate on security’ beyond gendered violence (Wibben, 2011: 7). More

recently, the ‘vernacular’ and ‘everyday’ turns produced by critical literatures in security studies have sought to work with and negotiate this maxim.

A small but growing literature has sought to explore what it might mean to begin the study of threat and (in)security from the perspective of popular – or ‘vernacular’ – constructions. Inspired by an eclectic mix of ethnographic (Bubandt 2005; Gillespie 2007; Gillespie and O’Loughlin 2009; Gillespie et al 2010), emancipatory (Jarvis and Lister 2013), cosmopolitan (Gillespie and O’Loughlin 2009), and constructivist perspectives (Moss and O’Loughlin 2008), this work has typically focused on how *particular* individuals and groups articulate their attitudes and understandings especially – though not exclusively – in the British context. For example, the 2004-6 ‘Shifting Securities’ project drew upon audience ethnography in order to explore how the media shapes multiethnic publics’ perceptions of threat and (in)security (Gillespie 2007; Gillespie et al 2010; Gillespie and O’Loughlin 2013; Hoskins and O’ Loughlin, 2007; Gillespie and O’ Loughlin, 2009; Moss and O’Loughlin 2008). Similarly, in 2010 Lee Jarvis and Michael Lister organised focus groups varied according to ethnicity and geographical location in order to investigate the relationship between anti-terrorism policy, experiences of citizenship, and human security (Jarvis and Lister, 2012, 2013). Both studies found that public perceptions and constructions of threat differed according to identity, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, location, and generation, and make normative arguments for ‘bottom-up’ qualitative research agendas that recover ‘marginalized voices’ (Jarvis and Lister 2013: 162) and politically progressive forms of ‘everyday cosmopolitics’ (Gillespie and O’Loughlin 2013: 110).

Running in parallel with the ‘vernacular turn’ is that of the ‘everyday’. The everyday turn in the humanities and social sciences has its roots in French cultural thought of the 1980s (Sheringham 2006). Influenced by the diverse works of thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Karl Barthes, this heterogeneous body of work finds common ground

in giving greater importance to the *quotidian*: to the ‘spaces, rhythms, objects, and practices’ around us (Sheringham 2006: 2). In critical security studies a number of scholars have embraced these insights in order to develop IPS beyond an elitist focus (Guillaume 2011; Guillaume and Huysmans 2013; Huysmans 2014; Noxolo and Huysmans 2009; see also Bajc and de Lint 2011). Conceptually, as Huysmans (2009: 197) has argued, much of this work has shown that security is not only about exceptional politics, such that a distinction can be drawn between ‘high’ and ‘low’ politics: the everyday is fundamentally ambiguous and has a ‘double analytical status’ in which it is possible to trace *both* (in)securitizing moves and arenas in which these moves are negotiated and resisted by individuals and communities.

Although they both seek to recover the political subject of threat and (in)security, it is nevertheless possible to delineate several tensions between the ‘vernacular’ and ‘everyday’ turns. The first concerns the use of operating distinctions between high/low and elite/everyday politics: scholars associated with the former largely work within these dichotomies whereas those working in the context of the latter tend to refuse them. The second follows on from this because while the former align emancipatory and cosmopolitan potential with a ‘bottom-up’ perspective the latter are more circumspect about the everyday as a site for progressive politics while at the same time emphasising that it is not a somehow passive or inert realm. The third relates to methodological differences: those seeking to ‘access’ the views and experiences of particular groups of citizens draw extensively on ethnographic and focus group work and are sometimes critical of what they consider to be the absence of such empirical engagement in IPS-related work (Gillespie and O’Loughlin 2009: 681). Finally, whereas the vernacular turn has taken the linguistic constructions of citizens’ accounts of threat and (in)security in their daily lives as their primary object of analysis those influenced by the everyday typically privilege security practices negotiated in the context of citizenship more generally (Noxolo and Huysmans 2009; Guillaume and Huysmans 2013).

By concentrating on the disruptive potential of non-elite knowledge arising from critical focus group work, this article synthesises certain aspects of both the ‘vernacular’ and ‘everyday’ turns in order to produce a novel theoretical perspective. While we agree with approaches that stress the fundamental ambivalence of the everyday, we maintain the distinction between elite and non-elite knowledge in order to identify the specificity of the latter in containing the capacity to disrupt the former. Conceptually, we depart from extant work above by drawing on Rancière’s understanding of disruption as that which comes about as a result of an encounter between the contending logics of the police and politics. Rancière is apposite for understanding what is at stake politically in the attempt to bring the voices of the governed – his central concern is the relationship between the authority to govern and the governed and the possibility of the latter to challenge the former on the basis of the principle of equality – and yet so far his work has not been applied in the vernacular study of everyday threat and (in)security.

In *Dis-agreement* (1999: 28) Rancière recasts what is conventionally referred to as ‘politics’ – ‘the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution’ – as the logic of the police. By ‘police’ Rancière does not refer to police forces in a literal sense, but rather to the dominant social order with everyone and everything in its proper place: ‘an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, and ways of seeing, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task’ (Rancière 1999: 29). This move allows Rancière to give analytical precision to (his particular conceptualisation of) politics as that which has the capacity to *disrupt* the police order. Political activity on this view challenges the dominant way of seeing on the basis of the principle of equality via the introduction of a wrong, which reveals the contingency of the social order. Rancière gives the example of the story of the plebs gathered on the Aventine Hill in 450BC who exercised their non-existent right to speak out against the

patricians. In speaking those who had no right to be counted made themselves count and the recognition of both parties *as* speaking parties drew attention to their radical equality and the absence of any transcendental foundation for the hierarchy. By making heard what is otherwise discounted by those who govern as mere noise, politics ‘demonstrates the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being’ (Rancière 1999: 30). As we outline below, our ‘disruptive’ approach to critical focus group work was inspired by Rancière’s notion of listening to voices otherwise thought of as ‘noise’ in the context of debates about national security policy and was designed to stage a potentially disruptive encounter between the contending logics of the police and politics.

### **Critical focus group research: a disruptive approach**

Focus group research (FGR) has a controversial history. It was developed in the 1940s by the US military as a method of assessing the impact of wartime propaganda on serving military personnel (Bloor et al, 2001). In the 1950s FGR became the preferred method for testing attitudes towards new products among consumers (Rodriguez et al, 2011). Uptake among social scientists since the 1970s and 1980s has not gone without criticism due to these earlier associations (Barbour and Kitzinger, 2009). Traditionally, Tracey Coule (2013) argues that FGR has been dominated by two perspectives: social psychology, which privileges direct questioning and offers few opportunities for group interaction; and clinical psychotherapeutic approaches, which prioritise group tasks and discussions. Both work within an epistemological framework dominated by deductive theorising and hypothesis testing whereby participants are typically viewed as ‘passive subjects, who hold opinions and preferences that are considered to be objective “facts”, best expressed in group situations under the “control” of the moderator’ (Coule, 2013: 151).

By contrast, interpretivist research agendas have opened up a range of critical approaches to FGR, which typically explore the intersubjective, culturally embedded, and politically contested social construction of meaning (Coule, 2013; Kitzinger and Barbour, 2009; Rodriguez et al, 2011). Critical FGR does not aim to produce a consensus based around fixed attitudes, but to create a reflexive forum for investigating ‘how knowledge, ideas, storytelling, self-presentation and linguistic exchanges operate within a given cultural context’ (Kitzinger and Barbour, 2009: 5). Particular attention is paid to: the use of ‘contrastive others’ in identity-making claims (Wilkinson, 2009: 67); the articulation of views and experiences in relation to ‘wider societal debates’ (Waterson and Wynne, 2009: 130); and the ‘categories of experience’ that people use to discuss ‘feelings, responses [...] and world-views’ (Myers and Macnaghten, 2009: 174). The assumption in critical FGR work is not that the subject and his/her views preexist the situation in which the discussion takes place, but that it is via the interaction with others that this identity and knowledge are constituted.

Our ‘disruptive’ approach inspired by Rancière develops the openings created by existing critical FGR research. We pursue Rancière’s notion of an alternative logic of research that investigates voices that potentially antagonise and disrupt the dominant police order (1999: 28). Crucially, Rancière differentiates between two types of opinion that may be voiced by the governed: the first is merely ‘the reproduction of the governmental legitimizations in the form of “feelings”’, which leaves the dominant police logic intact; the second, referred to as ‘*political* public opinion’ is distinct in introducing conflict between these legitimisations and feelings and instantiates a dispute (Rancière 1999: 33, 48). For this reason we therefore consistently refer throughout this article to the disruptive *potential* of non-elite knowledge because, as we shall go on to analyse in the subsequent section, not *all* of the material generated by our critical FGR reflects ‘*political* public opinion’ in the sense to which Rancière refers above – much of it reproduces police logics.

Because we make no claims about the scientific validity of our research design or the generalisability of our findings – and due to the team-based nature of the research – the question of the ‘researcher effect’ has different implications for our study (Jarvis and Lister 2013: 163). In engaging with this question we reflect here on the relationship between our ‘disruptive’ approach and the nature of the discussion guide that we designed for the team of researchers. Our primary organising principle was to maximise free-flowing discussion of participants’ views, experiences, and stories of threat and (in)security using their own vocabularies and cultural repertoires of knowledge. Discussions began by exploring both the range of issues that individuals and groups felt were the most pressing ‘security threats’ to them in their everyday lives and *how* they approached these issues. We asked open-ended questions such as: What comes to mind when you think of ‘security threat’? Which issues are security concerns for you and your family? Why are certain issues more important than others? Tell us a story about how a security threat has affected you? To begin with we imposed no particular conceptualisation of ‘threat’ or ‘security’ as we wanted to find out how our participants thought about these issues. We then juxtaposed their answers with the list of ‘Priority Risks’ contained in the NSS, which was intended to stimulate critical reflection on the issues they had identified and the rationale for that selection, whether they agreed with the government’s prioritisation of risks and its underpinning methodology, and the extent to which the two converged or diverged. Towards the end we focused in greater depth on participants’ awareness of and views about government efforts to enlist the support of citizens in the risk management cycle – particularly with regards to vigilance and surveillance – and the impact on their daily lives and society as a whole.

## **Repoliticising the subject of threat and (in)security**

In 2012 we coordinated twenty discussion groups with the assistance of researchers from TNS-BMRB across six British cities: Bristol, Cardiff, Glasgow, Leicester, London, and Oldham. Groups consisted of three people in each and varied according to gender, socio-economic background, faith, and age – not for the purposes of generalisability, but for diversity. Sixty participants were involved (thirty-one women and twenty-nine men) and we paid them for their time and any travel expenses (see Appendix 1). Discussions were held in a mixture of venues including hotels, community centres, and residential houses. Sessions lasted between sixty and ninety minutes, were recorded, and transcribed. Different researchers led at each location and we were present – sometimes individually, on other occasions together – at ten of the meetings.

Many of our findings about how citizens perceive security threats – as well as the kinds of issues that they feel threatened by – support the conclusions of past studies associated with the ‘vernacular turn’. Like Jarvis and Lister (2013) and Gillespie and O’Loughlin (2013), for example, we also found that the most common referent object of security was the individual and his or her family. In this regard, the conversation between Ben and Angela in Glasgow is indicative of the way in which the perceived salience of a threat was typically expressed in terms of spatial proximity:

Q. I mean, if you had to prioritise the security threats we’ve been talking about, what do you think are the main priorities?

Ben: For me it has to be personal security, you and your family because that's who you are and that who you are all the time so you have to secure that first before anything else.

Angela: Yes, I’d agree. I think like safety, it’s about myself, my family, what

could impact on me. I would probably think of global stuff second, third, fourth. First and foremost would be personal security (Group 12).

Because of their own vernacular theories of everyday (in)security, the kinds of issues that groups discussed as threatening their security on a daily basis differed markedly from the ‘Priority Risks’ of the NSS, which commonly appeared strange and aloof. For instance, while *organised* crime features in various guises in the NSS across each of the three tiers of significance, the type of criminal activities that Ben and Angela find threatening are ‘broken windows’, ‘being jumped or robbed’, ‘having your car stolen’, ‘home security’, or just walking the streets: ‘Well, you know if you walk down any high street in Scotland it’s just full of zombies, you know, junkies on drugs, and any one of these could just snap at you and pull out a knife’ (Ben, Group 12).

Given the timing of our study – two years after the nationalisation of Northern Rock and in the context of austerity measures introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government – the issue of economic insecurity featured more prominently as a threat among our group discussions than those reported in previous research. For Kieran in London the fear of unemployment and financial insecurities – issues to which the NSS is also oblivious given its alternative referent object, purpose, and methodology – were of most significance:

I think money is at the forefront, because [...] money is great security. Like, 20 years ago you would come out of school and you would kind of have a plan, rent a flat, and know that in five years’ time you could afford to buy a flat or a

house. You have no sort of security nowadays, most people will rent for the rest of their lives now (Kieran, Group 1).

But while these vernacular accounts substitute the individual for the state and identify several issues of pressing public concern that are excluded by the NSS – personal safety, local crime, unemployment, and so on – they do not fundamentally disrupt the police logic of national security in Rancière’s terms. As Mustafa Dikeç (2005: 175) has argued, the logic of policing can accommodate complaints of this nature, which are made by particular individuals or groups who are to be expected to have different interests from each other and the state: the police ‘tolerates and recognizes these parts as long as the parties are real parties, identified with the very individual or social group, and as long as they are placed properly’. For this reason, it is not simply the case that to *include* the voices of citizens who have hitherto been largely *excluded* from public debates about national security policy is a disruptive move, *per se*. Further still, as we show in the next section, it is not only the case that not all non-elite knowledge is disruptive: it also contains the potential to *reproduce* and further entrench police logics.

### *Reproducing police logics*

Echoing Huysmans’ (2013, 2014) argument that the ‘everyday’ is not a pure realm that can be straightforwardly disentangled from ‘elite’ politics and (in)securitizing moves, we found many instances where the priorities of the NSS – and governmental logics of (in)security more generally – were reaffirmed in our group discussions. For example, Janet, Bob, and Sally in Leicester not only agreed with the government’s prioritisation of the issue of border security – a Tier Three risk in the NSS – but expressed strong views beyond ‘official’ concerns relating to ‘*illegal* immigration’:

Q. What is the implication of weak border control, what is it that you're worried about?

Sally: Letting the wrong sort of person in.

Bob: Yes, that's a fair description, and I'm not racist for one second, but infestation of foreign bodies of people that don't really need to be here, because their own country can't look after them. We are too soft with them.

Janet: Yes. Let anybody in (Group 13).

The group referred to a generalised fear of weak border control without articulating what exactly constitutes the 'wrong sort of person' or on what grounds 'they' might pose a security threat. Bob's use of medicalised imagery implies the existence of a pure body politic that 'deserves' to be 'here' and whose very security depends on the prevention of 'contamination' by those who he says – without specifying any criteria – do not. His insistence that he is 'not racist' despite making remarks of this nature was a common disclaimer across our groups as illustrated, for example, in comments also made about 'immigration' by Abbas in Oldham and, separately, Steve in Bristol.

Abbas made similar identity-based claims to Bob about immigration as a security threat, but he introduced a further division within the category of the 'immigrant' between those (such as his parents) whom he considered to have made a positive contribution to British life and those (such as 'the Romanians') whom he deems to be 'taking advantage' of society and thus a threat:

When our parents came over we contributed to society. These are different, they're not here to do that, they're here for a totally different reason. Purely to take

advantage of our society. *I don't want to discriminate*, but basically at the moment I think it is the Romanians. I think we're the hardest working ethnic minority group in Britain right now. It's a national security issue. I don't know how many people have slipped under the radar. I don't know what kind of security we are running here (Abbas, Group 15, emphasis added).

Steve went further than Bob and Abbas, however, by making a performative association between the very presence of 'immigrants' in Britain today and the threat of international terrorism:

Well obviously you know the biggest security threat is from all these illegal immigrants and immigrants that we've got in this country, *I'm not going to say I'm racist* but I just wish they'd all go back home because they're ruining this country, they have for many years [...] We just let it go on and on and on and therefore you're causing a situation whereby there's threats and terrorism (Steve, Group 10, emphasis added).

What is common to these views is that they are all examples of non-elite views, experiences, and knowledge that reinforce dominant identity-based (in)securitizing logics about self and other and the alignment of threat with the latter. The content of this material reaffirms ways of seeing the nation and its security that are reflected in the government's vision of tough border security as articulated in the NSS and associated policies. Such a mode of perception, to return to Rancière, polices existing arrangements of power, the distribution of places and bodies, and ultimately serves to legitimise them. This reproduction of police logic is also

illustrated in the context of several group discussions about government attempts to foster the role of citizens in maintaining vigilance in public spaces.

Steve, Roger, and Ken in Bristol strongly endorsed a culture of surveillance. In their exchanges on the topic they said that ‘CCTV is brilliant’, that ‘it should really be everywhere’, and that ‘the more the better, isn’t it’ (Group 10). Similarly, while they had not previously heard of anti-terror hotlines, Richard, Mike, and John – also in Bristol – thought that they sounded a good idea and said that they would be happy to use them. John rejected the notion that measures based on some citizens being suspicious of others could be worrisome: ‘I worry about terrorism, not counter-terrorism’ (John, Group 9).

Equally embracing of vigilance in public spaces, Dave in Glasgow commented: ‘I always watch people in subways and on buses [...] I wouldn’t say I’m scared, but I’m always thinking: “What’s that character up to?” [...] I’m not racist by any manner or means, but if I see Asian guys going about with backpacks on, I’m constantly looking at them (Dave, Group 11). Despite his initial insistence on being neither ‘scared’ nor ‘racist’, Dave’s general sense of unease quickly translates into the specific targeting of ‘Asian guys’ wearing backpacks. The same mode of perception – focused around the backpack as a cultural object of fear when worn by ‘Asians’ – features in an exchange on the theme of safety and public space between Sally and Bob in Cardiff:

Sally: I remember after 7/7 I didn’t panic but I looked at people getting on the train with backpacks and you think God those poor people did exactly what I am doing. You know what they saw. They didn’t know they had a bomb in their backpack and you stood next to them, you wouldn’t know [...]

Q: You said after 7/7 you noticed backpacks?

Sally: Okay, I noticed, you are looking at the type of person, aren't you. I'm not looking at a student, let's be honest, I am looking at somebody who may look like Afghan, Indian [...] You know he's a foreign student, has he come over here for a reason, is he a suicide bomber [...] I am not really thinking like that but it just, you are looking at people around you.

Bob: It's an understandable assumption (Group 13).

Initially, Sally refers to 'the backpack' as shorthand for identifying the type of person that she finds threatening when boarding trains, but without naming any specific identity traits. When pushed, the backpack is then associated with 'Afghans', 'Indians', 'foreign students', and ultimately 'suicide bombers'. That the perpetrators of the attacks on the London transport network on 7 July 2005 were all British citizens with no family connections in Afghanistan or India and either working or unemployed – rather than studying – at the time of the bombings are not details that feature in Sally's account.

*Disruptive openings for an alternative politics of threat and (in)security*

As we have already seen, introducing Rancière's distinction between the logics of police and politics allows us to complicate the notion that the vernacular is a uniformly disruptive site of analysis. At the same time, however, we argue that 'non-elite' knowledge uniquely holds the potential to disrupt police logics and open up the possibility for an alternative politics of threat and (in)security. In this section we explore this disruptive potential of non-elite knowledge in the context of political discourses that, following Rancière, introduce a series of 'wrongs' into debates about national security policy: fundamental disagreement over the meaning of 'security' and the move to scandalise its effects; the refusal of identities ascribed

by the police order; and calls for desecuritizing moves based upon principles of equality.

One of the ways in which our counter-archive of participants' views, anecdotes, and stories disrupts the authority of the NSS and repoliticises the national security agenda is by taking issues contained within NSS and twisting their meaning. Notably, many of our group discussions highlighted the ambiguities surrounding what it means to prioritise 'international terrorism' as a security threat – with its radically different connotations and effects among diverse publics – and this reintroduces difference back into the otherwise homogenising national frame of the NSS. The threat of Islamophobia – arising from associations made between terrorism and Islam of the kind we saw earlier – is unlikely to ever feature in the NSS, but it structured many of our participants' narratives about wider social relations in contemporary Britain. Narratives about living with the threat of Islamophobia scandalise the taken-for-granted assumption within the NSS that prioritising 'international terrorism' is a neutral and consequence-free move for all British citizens and that highlights the inherently sacrificial logic of 'security'.

Zain in Oldham, for example, reflected on how the connection that is made between being a British Muslim and being a potential terrorist places limits on everyday interaction such as the use of dark humour in the workplace:

Four or five years ago you could go about your daily business with no problem. Now you've got to watch what you say, watch what you do. [...] Even just a couple of weeks ago someone in my workplace joked about getting a bomb and blowing everyone up. I just turned around and said well you know you're alright saying something like that; *I couldn't say something like that and get away with it. White colleagues can say that and it's not a problem.* And I wouldn't even say something like that so it's things like that that you're really uncomfortable, you

can't get involved in a conversation like that anymore (Zain, Group 15).

Similarly, Sahil in Oldham gave the example of a situation that arose when he and one of his friends, a charity worker, went knocking on doors to raise money in their local neighbourhood. As they approached one of the houses some Asian youths walked past with a backpack and one of them began shouting at the pair. Sahil's friend immediately told them to 'tone it down because there's police across the road [...] you don't want to be shouting the way you're shouting with a backpack on' (Group 15).

This form of self-censorship about what can and cannot be said in the context of dominant modes of perception was echoed in the discussion between Pamet, Kareem, and Aban in Leicester. Links made performatively between Islam and terrorism structure their daily lives and curtail the range of permissible emotions – such as anger – that they are able to express in the context of the prevailing partitioning of the sensible. The fear of being misunderstood and of being accused of 'planning or plotting something' not only shapes their public personae, but also their intimate moments with friends:

Pamet: But we don't, we can't – sorry. We can't talk openly about the issues anymore, you always think is somebody listening to you or making two and two together or thinking oh, you are – because you happen to be Muslim are you actually planning something or plotting something.

Q: Okay so you're afraid of sounding angry about things?

Aban: Yes.

Kareem: Yes, actually afraid of talking about this on the phone even, you know, you don't communicate with your friend, you can't express your feeling with your friend through email, because you don't know

whether somebody (Group 3).

Illustrating how Islamophobia fuels distrust and suspicion among local communities and securitizes ‘neighbourliness’ (Buonfino 2013), Kareem told a story about an encounter between two people living on his street: a ‘British Muslim’ and a ‘white Christian’. Every week when it was time for the refuse collection the Muslim man used to regularly clean the bin belonging to his Christian neighbours. Over time, the bin-owner noticed that after each collection his bin would always be returned not only empty, but looking as if it had been cleaned. Not expecting this from the council and without knowingly paying someone to do it he became suspicious about why this was happening. One day, determined to get to the bottom of what was going on, the bin-owner watched through his window and spotted the Asian man cleaning his bin. He asked: ‘Why are you doing this to my bin? I’m not paying you?’ ‘I don’t need your payment, my religion teaches me to do this’ he explained to which the neighbour replied: ‘Oh, I thought you were one of *Bin Laden*’s religion’ (Kareem, Group 3).

Narratives about Islamophobia and its effects on society of the kind offered by Zain, Sahil, Kareem, and others are political discourses that confront and thereby repoliticise the technocratic and supposedly neutral risk assessments of the NSS. Security may be diffuse and ‘insecurities pervade how we relate to our neighbours’, as Huysmans (2014: 4) has argued, but vernacular stories of threat and (in)security demonstrate that this condition is not known, experienced, and felt in universal terms. In a similarly disruptive manner, listening to testimonies of the multiple effects of cultures of suspicion, vigilance, and surveillance in public spaces holds a mirror up to dominant police logics. For example, testifying to the personal impact of what Sherene Razack (2008) has referred to as ‘race thinking’, Hitala reflects on her experience of being made an object of suspicion in public places:

When I do go to London, when I go with my nieces shopping on the tube or something I am very wary of who I am sat next to [...] and there will be other people on the tube, and somebody watching you, they are probably not looking at you, but you have that feeling out of the corner of your eye that they are watching you (Hitala, Group 4).

Such an account illuminates the lived reality of a racialised gaze which separates people along different axes of worthiness ‘according to descent’, creeps into public discourse and dominant modes of perception, and gradually becomes a norm – as reflected in the unreflective views of Sally, Bob, and others above. These dynamics were especially pronounced in discussions of daily encounters with authority figures in spaces such as airports as illustrated in this exchange between Zain and Sahil in Oldham:

Q: It sounds like there’s quite a lot of racial comments that are made or things that are said to people?

Sahil: When you go to places like the airport you can’t challenge anything anymore. In the past if you weren’t happy about something you could challenge it. Now you don’t want to attract any attention you just say oh I’ll keep quiet, I just want to get through this and go home. [...]

Zain: Yes I totally agree with you I think we are treading on eggshells.

Sahil: People just like, rather than attracting the attention they just leave it rather than challenge them and say hang on a minute this is not right, before you know it things are exaggerated and you’ve got the police there, he said this, he said that.

Zain: As soon as the authorities approach you I think they’ve got a certain image of you they put a label on you and you’re already guilty.

Sahil: Especially if you've got a beard (Group 15).

The airport is a privileged site of analysis in contemporary studies of surveillance, suspicion, and (in)security, but rarely do we hear the narratives of those targeted by racialised forms of perception and policing. Describing the effects of 'race thinking' at a Midlands airport, Sahil told the story of two of his Asian friends, both young men, who were going on holiday to a hot country. To avoid the cost of excess luggage charges they put their jackets on to check-in and proceed through to security. However, when they got on the plane they were ordered to leave by airline officials who were suspicious that, in the light of their destination, they were deemed to be wearing too much clothing. In Sahil's words: 'I think had they been white it would have been a totally different outcome. The attitude would have been totally different and they would have carried on as normal'. Similarly, Abbas referred to his cousin's repeated encounters with airport security in Western countries. As a company director he travels the world regularly and experiences no difficulties when visiting the Far East or Dubai, but is frequently taken aside or even off planes in the US and UK and interrogated for up to two hours (Abbas, Group 15). Prompted by Sahil's and Abbas' comments, Zain remembered: 'Actually, my missus had to drink the baby milk when we went on holiday in April [...] and when you think about it [...]' (Zain, Group 15).

Juxtaposing the differential effects of government initiatives to enlist citizens in cultures of suspicion mobilises diverse and often contradictory encounters between subjects and apparatuses of security in ways that confound the idealised image of the 'citizen-subject familiar in nation state-centric discourses' (Shapiro, 2013: 116). Several of our interviewees who thought that their own religious and ethnic profiles are targets of suspicion were not persuaded by efforts to enlist them in surveillance activities on behalf of the state. Whereas Richard, Mike, and John from Bristol were openly enthusiastic about calling counter-

terrorism hotlines, for example, Abbas expressed fears that in doing so he might attract unwarranted attention from authorities:

The problem is when you report something like this then they're always after you – they come to your house everyday, they phone you everyday, and that annoys people and puts them off. If I report it I know I'll be under police surveillance all the time (Abbas, Group 3).

As well as making a scandal out of the ways in which some elements of national security policy can lead to societal insecurities (which in turn may undermine national security), our counter-archive also demonstrates how certain non-elite knowledge refuses identities ascribed by police logics and makes appeals for alternative political visions. The latter are political discourses characterised by critiques of the principles underpinning governmental policies and practice, dismissals and/or rejections of cultures of surveillance, and contrasting visions of how society might be in the name of equality among citizens. These discourses constitute openings for negotiating the contemporary politics of threat and (in)security in ways that further disrupt the content and methodological underpinnings of the NSS and the policing logic it represents. Such discourses also underscore the more general point often made in literature associated with the 'everyday turn' that citizens are not passive subjects under conditions of the unbinding of security, but can and do shape (in)security politics throughout their daily lives. For example, Aysha in Bristol made connections between atmospheres of unease and British foreign policy. As a Muslim she felt unfairly targeted by racialised modes of perception and in response mobilised her British citizenship to critique policies pursued in her name:

The UK foreign policy made me feel unsafe in my own country. It made it worse for us the Asian community because a white person coming down the street is not going to know if I'm a Muslim or a Hindu. I could be from anywhere, but they might assume I am Muslim and attack me for that reason [...] And that has – it did happen to a lot of people. It's when you interfere in it that it becomes a bigger threat. Again, it's like Iraq, if the West hadn't interfered in it, we would feel a lot safer, basically' (Aysha, Group 7).

In this way Aysha is not simply seeking for her voice to be included as part of the whole: she make a claim 'to be the whole' – to be equal among citizens and yet disproportionately affected by British foreign policy – and thereby confronts the wrong that perpetuates her insecurity (Ranci re 1999: 177). Another mode of critique, contestation, and disruption can be found in narratives of disinterestedness and indifference to government messages about security threats and efforts to foster vigilance in public spaces, which refuse the attempt to script individuals as 'citizen-detectives'. Aysha said that she does not take threat advisory notices seriously because, in her words, 'I think the government does try to scare us a bit [...] I think they exaggerate things' (Aysha, Group 7). For Stacey in Leicester attempts to enlist citizens in the risk management cycle belie her understanding of the role of government: 'They get paid a lot of money to cope with a lot of pressure [...] I just want to finish work, go home, and watch trashy TV [laughing] I don't want to have to think about how I'm going to defend my country' (Stacey, Group 5). Similarly, in discussions about whether citizens should be expected to call counter-terrorism hotlines if they see any suspicious behaviour, Susan in Glasgow quipped: 'I think being weird on a Glasgow bus is normal' (Susan, Group 11). Paul in Cardiff could not identify with what being 'suspicious' actually meant in the context of the London Met's 'If you suspect it, report it' poster

campaign and demanded more detailed and contextual information about the behaviour that those behind the campaign had in mind:

I think they need to be a bit more specific on what they think suspicious activity is. Otherwise you would be constantly on the phone. Anything suspicious, it could be someone in a white van driving past that slows down, is that suspicious? It might be suspicious to me but it might not be to someone else (Paul, Group 14).

Other interviewees, such as Jack in Cardiff, actively objected to the police logic of unease and suspicion on the grounds that he does not wish to take part in and thereby endorse (and reproduce) a society based on distrust among citizens:

If you are constantly looking out at other people and things like that, you are going to be suspicious of everybody. That would be such a horrible place to live in. And what is suspicious to one person could be totally different to another person (Jack, Group 14).

Similarly, Aysha voiced her refusal to participate in the surveillance of other citizens on the grounds that she believes in the presumption of innocence and fears the societal effects of falsely accusing people of crimes they have not committed: 'you'd get vans of people coming and police and all their gear [...] and so many innocent people have already been punished for things' (Aysha Group 7). Shazi expressed an alternative vision of political community not based on suspicion, unease, and distrust, but equality between British citizens: 'to treat everybody as a human being [...] and don't be a threat to other people yourself' (Shazi, Group 7). The views of Jack, Aysha, Shazi and many others we listened to

not only indicate refusals of identities ascribed by dominant police logics, but actually existing counter-currents to cultures of (in)security fed by unease and suspicion: political discourses that otherwise remain hidden by a continued bias towards elite knowledge and practice.

## **Conclusion**

Our central argument in this article is *not* that all non-elite knowledge will inevitably be disruptive of the technocratic and depoliticised nature of the NSS. Drawing on Rancière's (1999) distinction between police logics and political discourses, we have stressed the fundamental ambivalence of diverse citizens' views, experiences, and stories. Many of our group discussions may be interpreted not only as operating within but also as reproductive of the police order as reflected in the NSS and attempts to cultivate suspicion and unease throughout everyday life. However, what is unique to non-elite knowledge is that it also contains political discourses that disrupt policing by refusing seemingly taken-for-granted meanings of security and associated identities, illuminating the 'wrongs' experienced by some British citizens in the name of national security, and revealing already existing counter-forces of critique and contestation in the name of equal citizenship. In adopting a novel methodological approach to critical focus group work – one that does *not* seek to generate representative data about how *particular* individuals and groups perceive security threats – we sought to create space for these disruptive discourses. While a powerful case has been made by Jenny Edkins (2013) for turning to literary works and narratives of an auto-ethnographic nature in search of the disruptions envisaged by Rancière, we have sought to treat vernacular theories of everyday (in)security as an alternative genre and ground for critique: these theories also perform a double function of illuminating dominant and counter-currents in society. As Edkins (2013: 292) underscores, beyond the logical disruptions

performed by such texts it is impossible to know for sure what their political implications might be: ‘What they do is what counts – and how we judge that politically’. In one direction, the feedback from some of our participants suggests that the very act of taking part in debates around national security was disruptive of what they considered to be politically possible:

Sometimes you feel marginalized and we feel our voices are not being heard.

These kinds of sessions need to be organized across the country on a much bigger scale (Azza, Group 2).

We have also fed the content and approach of our critical focus group research into wider public policy debates about the future of national security policy. By submitting evidence to the Joint Committee on National Security Strategy in September 2014 and presenting our arguments to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in June 2015, for example, we attempted to force an encounter between the voices of many of our participants and prevalent police logics in a different context. Equally, our on-going collaboration with The Ammerdown Group (2014) has meant that the views and experiences of many of our participants have already fed into broader efforts in civil society to open up the question of what a new vision for national security might look like. Whether or not these interventions ultimately achieve the kind of disruption we have in mind may indeed never be known, but if we as critical security scholars do not aspire to be disruptive of police logics – and be prepared to experiment in our methods of engagement – then to what extent are we ‘critical’?

## Appendix 1: Focus group profiles

Stage	Number	Area	Age and life stage	Gender	Faith
1	1	London	18-25	Male	
	2	London	Older parents	Female	
	3	Leicester	Older (40+)	Male	Muslim
	4	Leicester	Younger	Female	Hindu/Sikh
	5	Leicester	18-25	Female	
	6	Leicester	Retired	Mixed	
	7	Bristol	Younger (26-40)	Female	Muslim
	8	Bristol	18-25	Female	
	9	Bristol	Young parents	Male	
	10	Bristol	Retired	Male	
2	11	Glasgow	Older	Mixed	
	12	Glasgow	Younger	Mixed	
	13	Cardiff	Older	Mixed	
	14	Cardiff	Younger	Mixed	
	15	Oldham	Younger (26-40)	Male	Muslim
	16	Oldham	Young parents	Female	
	17	Oldham	Older parents	Male	
	18	Oldham	Retired	Female	
	19	London	Older (40+)	Female	Muslim
	20	London	Older	Male	Hindu/Sikh

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