Centering Security Studies Around Felt, Gendered Insecurities

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Abstract

This article draws on two decades of work in feminist security studies, which has argued that gender is necessary, conceptually, for understanding the concepts of war and security; important, empirically, for analyzing causes and predicting outcomes in the field of security; and essential to finding solutions to insecurity in global politics. The work of feminist security studies suggests that one of the most persistent features of the global political arena is gender hierarchy, which plays a role in defining and distributing security. The argument in this article moves from talking about the security of gender to discussing the gendered sources of insecurity across global politics. It then builds on existing work in Feminist Security Studies to suggest a felt, sensed, and experiential notion of the security/insecurity dichotomy as a new way to think about global security (studies). A (feminist) view of “security as felt” could transform the shape of a number of research programs in security studies.

Keywords: gender, security, feminist theory, experience

To Shane Savage, his first four tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan felt like brotherhood, camaraderie, travel, and adventure. On his fifth tour, on September 3, 2010, his armored truck hit a roadside bomb and exploded. He had a severe concussion and twenty-four crushed bones in his foot. Since then, war has felt like pain, exacerbated by post-traumatic stress. Savage was prescribed a dozen drugs—for pain, depression, anxiety, trauma, and attention. Then war felt like the need for more pills. As the pain built, war felt life-ending: he tried to overdose. His wife saved him, and after treatment, Savage decided to quit the drugs. Still, every day, he continued to feel the pain in his foot. Facing an amputation, war felt dismembering. Now that his life has stabilized to a place where he will always feel the pain but has learned to live with it, to Savage, war feels permanent.

Shane Savage’s experiences of war have been complex and varied, both positive and negative. Like Savage, millions of people live wars, conflicts, genocide, and everyday violence every day in global politics, with millions of different (sensory) experiences of war and conflict. As Swati Parashar (2013, 618) explains, “war does not appear extraordinary for the thousands of people who live inside wars and confront the gory images and the sight of blood and bodies on a daily basis.” In that sense, Savage’s story is not distinct at all—he is one among millions who live with and feel war. On the other hand, Savage’s feelings of war—like the feelings of each of those millions of people living wars—are personal. For Savage, like for many people, the international is personal, and the personal is international.

Readers might wonder why Shane Savage’s feelings of war start this article. After all, articles about gender and security rarely start with a white, American, married, heterosexual, middle-class man. Throughout this article, though, Savage’s story will serve as an exemplar of the gendered dynamics of war and conflict, the need for gender analysis to fully understand the nature and impacts of war and conflict, and the benefits of a feminist analysis of security, all while being deployed to push analyses of gender and security into new directions.
including but not limited to innovative thinking about the nature of gender and the nature of felt (in)security.

The central argument of this article is that gender analysis has transformative potential for security studies beyond urging the field to consider women (e.g., Hunt and Posa 2001; Rehn and Johnson-Sirleaf 2002) or even gendered narratives and constructions of security (e.g., Sjoberg 2006; Wibben 2010). I make that argument by engaging both the general contributions of gender analysis and one specific contribution: understanding security as felt and experienced in gendered ways. Gender analysis can reveal previously invisible actors in security, previously invisible structures of security and/or insecurity, and previously invisible dynamics within those matrices. This article sketches out that case on a macro-theoretical level, drawing on a long tradition of work in feminist security studies (FSS), which has argued that gender is necessary, conceptually, for understanding the concepts of war and security; important, empirically, for analyzing causes and predicting outcomes in the field of security; and essential to finding solutions to insecurity in global politics (Sjoberg 2009, 184). In parallel, it engages the story of Shane Savage (Meier 2014) to explore the micro-experiential insights that can be drawn. It argues that feminist work can tell a unique and useful story at both levels. In so doing, it argues that a feminist conception of security as felt can contribute to security studies more broadly, and applications thereof can produce key lessons about what security is and how it functions.

In presenting that argument, I begin with the contention that one of the most persistent features of the global political arena is gender hierarchy. Building on previous feminist thinking about gender hierarchy in global politics, I argue for its central nature not only for feminist security analysis but also for security analysis more broadly. This argument is important for understanding the suggestion that gender analysis is relevant to all of security studies, rather than the part of security studies that might be interested in where women are or what happens to women. The second section of this article then addresses why it matters that gender hierarchy is persistent in the global political arena—shaping what is and what counts as security or insecurity and the distribution of securities and insecurities. The third section of this article makes the argument that seeing insecurity as gendered not only points to the importance of security as felt and experienced, but does so in a way that adds dimensionality even to accounts of emotion and security less engaged with gender. This article closes with discussion paths forward for this sort of feminist analysis, as well as ways that a feminist-inspired understanding of security as sensed might be of use across security studies.

### The Persistence of Gender Hierarchy in Global Politics

As a foundation for the argument that gender hierarchy in global politics is persistent, I briefly lay out working conceptions of gender, gender hierarchy, and what it means to claim its persistence.

I use “gender” to denote three things. First, gender is an imputed characteristic or a group of imputed characteristics attributed to people, states, non-state actors, international institutions, and even inanimate objects based on their association with sex categories. Second, to gender is to assign or associate those imputed gender traits (Peterson 2010). Third, gender logics use gender as a tool to make distinctions and to order thinking. Sex and gender assignments and associations are ways to distinguish actors in global politics and their relative power. All three of these uses of gender are imbued with hierarchy, where those things understood as female and feminized are often devalorized and infantilized (Enloe 2004, 6; Hawkesworth 2006, 132; Peterson 2010).

As Mary Hawkesworth (2006, 132) describes, “underlying the logic of feminization ... is a vindictive construction of femininity” as “weak, violated, silenced, docile, humiliated, and craven.” Masculinizing and feminizing people, states, and other actors orders them—both in the sense of classification and in the sense of hierarchy. In Savage’s story, the joy, glory, and desirability of war are related to masculinization (Enloe 2007; Higate 2012) and the misery and helplessness of disability are associated with feminization (Yuval-Davis 2006). Those associations are gendered and hierarchical.

Gender-based associations can be seen and reflected in two main forms of gender-based hierarchy in global politics. The first is gender hierarchies—where assumptions about maleness and femaleness, masculinities and femininities, serve to order global social and political relations. It is gender hierarchy that made it possible for Savage to fight in a military that formally excluded women from its combat ranks. In other words, hierarchical gender norms influenced the composition of the military the United States fielded and Savage joined. The second is gendered hierarchies—where assumptions about masculinities and femininities serve to describe and reify orders of social and political relations in global politics. It is gendered hierarchy that added dimension to the meaning of the prison abuse perpetrated at Abu Ghraib (while Savage was in Iraq, but nowhere near the prison) by American women against Iraqi men (Razack 2007; Sjoberg 2007; Eisenstein 2007). Gendered hierarchy, which organizes race, nationality, and religious hierarchies along gendered lines and yields gender to
organize those hierarchies, mattered both for what war crime was committed and for what it meant. The descriptions of gender hierarchies and gendered hierarchies may seem similar, but they describe two different things: orders based on gender associations, and orders based on class, nationality, religion, race, or some other axis (in part or in whole) that are pinned to gendered descriptions and significations.

My argument that gender hierarchies are persistent in global politics suggests that gender hierarchies are substantively important (they matter) and ontologically stable (they are not going anywhere). This claim is open to two obvious challenges, the rebuttal of which help establish the claim’s plausibility. The first challenge is that gender is irrelevant to security in the global political arena. Feminist security studies has worked to rebut this claim, providing evidence that gender is causal in war (Cockburn 2010; Sjoberg 2013), a motivation for soldiers to fight (Goldstein 2001), a key part of security narratives (Cohn 1987; MacKenzie 2009; Wibben 2010), a condition of possibility of militarization (Alexander 2010; Kronsell 2012), an influence on military selections (Moon 1997; Niva 1998; Hansen 2000; Wilcox 2009), and a structural feature of how war is lived and experienced (Cohn 2012; Pain 2015). This work serves as evidence both that gender is relevant to security, and that gender hierarchies can be seen in many places in the security arena in global politics.

The second challenge is that gender dynamics in global politics are constantly changing, so how can gender hierarchy be understood to be a persistent feature of global politics? The short answer is that changes in what genders matter and how those genders operate do not threaten the existence of gender hierarchies that—though the genders within them change—define security and distribute security (and insecurity) to actors in global politics. Feminist work has looked in depth at both the consistent presence (e.g., Tickner 2001; Sjoberg 2012) and varying instantiations (Banerjee 2012; Bevan and MacKenzie 2012; Belkin 2013) of gender hierarchies in global politics. While it is outside the scope of this article to rehash those claims, the next section makes the argument that one manifestation of the persistence of gender hierarchies in global politics is the gendered distribution of insecurity in the global political arena, from the international system level to the bedroom.

**Gendered Insecurities in Global Politics**

Many elements of the story Meier (2014) tells of Shane Savage show the gendered distribution of security and insecurity. The news article starts with, and emphasizes, male bonding as a key reason for soldiers’ enjoyment of soldiering. The discussion of Savage’s wife and children as care accessories implies that the (masculine) soldier is the referent of security, and his security can be supported by the performance of feminized care labor. Savage’s story does not include any Iraqis or Afghans, though doubtless many of them were a part of the wars that he fought. These elements of Savage’s story could be understood as sex-neutral, but feminist scholarship shows that they rely on gendered assumptions about security, war, and conflict.

Particularly, I argue that sex categories (male/female), related gender expectations (masculinities/femininities), and gender logics (of masculinization and feminization) are constitutive of Savage’s experiences of gendered (in)security in global politics, as well as gender (in)security more broadly in two ways. The first is definitional (shaping what is and what counts as security or insecurity), and the second is distributive (shaping the allotment of securities and insecurities). This section will discuss each in turn, using Savage’s case to highlight both contributions of and ways forward for gender analysis.

First, feminist scholarship has shown that gender often constitutes what counts as security and what does not. It has shown that the violence around the masculinized soldier/battlefield has counted in the study of security while violence around the feminized civilian/homefront has produced rarely noticed insecurity (Copelon 2000; Karam 2000). Feminist work has suggested that the image of the male threat to and/or defender of security and the female outside the security arena are constitutive features of national security stories (Huston 1982; Elshtain 1987), but unreflective of national security practices, where women often perform political violence and cause insecurity outside the analysis of traditional approaches to studying security. The impact of these and other gender assumptions about what constitutes security and who acts in it secure security analysis.

Second, gender hierarchies distribute insecurity in the global political arena. It is well documented that women experience disproportionately the results of spikes in household violence during armed conflict (Razack 1995; Jacobs, Jacobson, and Marchbank 2000), as well as increases in economic turmoil (True 2012), increases in sexual violence (Hansen 2000), increases in demand for care work (Enloe 2010; Robinson 2011), and interruptions in infrastructure stability, access to healthcare, and access to nutrition (Raven-Roberts 2012). Traditional notions of gender function to exclude many of women’s insecurities in war, conflict, and everyday life from
the vocabularies of scholarly and policy work on security. At first, many of these distributions appear to be based solely on sex and look like they could be accounted for by collecting and analyzing sex-disaggregated data about conflict violence (e.g., Reiter 2015). Seeing such an approach as adequate, however, requires assuming that there is some natural (or naturalized) difference between men and women that acts as the causal distributive force. Instead, feminist scholars have suggested that it is not (only) women, but feminized spaces and feminizing impacts, that are left out of or pigeon-holed into stereotyped spaces in traditional security narratives (Huston 1982; Ekshtain 1987; Wibben 2010). Looking for different people in war and conflict shows that security and insecurity happen in different places and in different ways than can be imagined by traditional accounts of what it means to be secure/insecure. Savage shows this as an insider to the state military complex in different ways than looking at the margins might. Security and insecurity happen in homes as much as on battlefields, in hospitals as much as in helicopters, in the act of sex as much as in the act of shooting a gun, and in food provision as much as in munities provision. This is true for soldiers as well as for civilians.

While some research outside FSS addresses security in non-traditional locations (e.g., Booth 2007; Kaldor 2007), that work often fails to account for gender both distributing everyday/international insecurities and making invisible those distributed to feminized spheres. In other words, it is not because women are of the female sex and men are of the male sex that women disproportionately suffer as civilians in war and men bear the brunt of battle deaths. Instead, women’s specific experiences of war are based on the presumption that women are feminine and the permission that femininity gives for feminization. Men’s specific experiences of war are based on the expectation that they fulfill roles traditionally associated with masculinity. Understanding these dynamics is key to understanding the production and distribution of human insecurity.

Looking for women, feminized spaces, and gendered insecurities in global politics suggests different ways to define security and to think about distributions of insecurity. Particularly, it suggests asking who is made insecure in global politics, what the conditions of possibility of those people being made insecure are, and how insecurity is experienced. It also helps identify who is allocated security, as well as insecurities within allocated security. Feminists studying global politics have consistently argued that global politics cannot be accounted for without an empirical and political focus on what happens at the margins of the global political arena. I suggest that a similar logic underlies feminist inquiries into security: gender analysis approaches security by arguing that it cannot be accounted for without an empirical and political focus on insecurity and vulnerability, their distribution, and the conditions of possibility of that distribution. Such a focus gives analytical purchase both for understanding those margins and for understanding the global security realm more generally.

Looking at the distribution of vulnerability and insecurity in global politics shows that they often map onto gendered categorizations, assumptions, and logics. Take, for example, an excerpt from a sentencing hearing from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY, 2002), which concludes that

> Women were raped . . . [the rapes] weren’t an expression of sexuality or sexual need or sexual gratification. It was an attempt to demonstrate the sexual act as an expression of violence . . . The lucky ones in camp, those who were not forced to participate in a loved one’s murder, or sexually mutilated, or beaten to death over a period of agonizing days, or subject to other torments, nevertheless endured conditions that drove them to the brink of death.

There are a number of gendered conditions of possibility of the rapes that occurred in this description: a linkage between women, femininity, and purity; a linkage between a family’s honor and the purity of its women; a linkage between women’s purity and group dignity; and a linkage between sexual violation and ultimate humiliation. For the above events to have happened and to have been prosecuted, those linkages have to be shared by both perpetrator/group and victim/group (see, e.g., discussions in Hansen [2000]; McLeod [2015]). Understandings of both femininity and feminization are key to understanding who was vulnerable to the committed war crimes, what acts capitalized on that vulnerability, and how those people came to be vulnerable. These gendered conditions of possibility hold across perpetrator sex—that is, regardless of the fact that the person being held responsible for the abuse, insecurity, and violence described in the passage is a woman. The woman causing gendered insecurities, like the man experiencing the rewards and punishments of a particular militarized masculinity, is living her life in and through global security.

Seeing the events described above as gendered vulnerabilities allows for complexity and depth in the
description of what counts as insecurity, how insecurity comes to be, and who it is possible to make insecure. Whether it is in the former Yugoslavia with these rape victims, at Fort Hood with Shane Savage and his family, or in Iraq and Afghanistan where Savage fought, looking for gendered insecurity provides insights about security unavailable without the deployment of gender analysis. One of those (many) dimensions is thinking about what insecurity is. So often, both security and insecurity are understood as knowable when seen, and security is seen as a qualifiable and quantifiable desired end. I argue that gender analysis can reveal more depth, showing the importance of a feminist-inspired understanding of insecurity as felt, sensed, and experienced, which is discussed in the next section in more detail.

The Everyday Experience of Gendered Insecurity

Feminist work has long suggested that war is personal, felt, and experienced. Shane Savage’s war was all of those things—it happened on battlefields and in cities in Iraq and Afghanistan, in a hospital, in his bedroom, in his bathroom, and in a horse stable. Savage’s war felt like joy, then like pain, like addiction, like the desire to die, and then like the courage to live. Shane is one of billions of people who have lived war. Feminist scholar Ronni Alexander (2008) suggested that asking simple questions about how war is experienced might increase both the complexity and accuracy of war theorizing. Alexander (2008) asked what war sounds like, what war tastes like, what war feels like, and what war smells like—its everyday, sensed experience.

As Christine Sylvester (2012, 483) explains, war is “something ordinary people observe and suffer physically and emotionally depending on their locations.” In this view, “part of experiencing war . . . is what happens to people, the choices they have, and the constraints placed on them,” but the experience of security cannot be reduced to those events (Sjoberg 2013, 268). Instead, “war is not something that people can participate in without being affected by it . . . particularly in terms of feeling and sense” (Sjoberg 2013, 268, 270).

This realization, of course, is not unique to feminist theory. For example, Hall and Ross (2015) recognize the importance of affect to acthorhood at the individual level, and, by extension, to collective dynamics, in global politics. They treat affect as a variable, suggesting the ways that affect provides direction for behavior, influences judgment, orients priorities, reacts to external stimuli, and may impact outcomes even without actor awareness (Hall and Ross 2015, 10). Bleiker and Hutchison (2008) argued that there had been limited discussion of how to construct a research program on studying emotion in global politics and looked to engage the study of emotion. In a forum in Critical Studies on Security (Ahall and Gregory 2013), scholars discussed emotions as feelings, what emotions do, and emotions as affect for security studies.

As Ben Anderson (2014, 6) explains, “the affective turn is not new. Its condition is the dictum that the ‘personal is political,’ and it is enabled by a long tradition of feminist scholarship on emotional life.” That “affective turn” in International Relations (IR) has done a lot of work to figure out how people, individually and collectively, feel, generally and in politics. The feeling and sense that I am interested in here is affect in the broadest sense, “a body’s capacity to affect and be affected” (Anderson 2014, 9). In fact, with the work of other feminist theorists, this article sees the body as “a key receptacle of experience,” both materially and in terms of symbolic expectations (Sylvester 2012, 498). That reception of experience can be seen to “emerge from and express specific relational configurations” and is not unilateral, as its subjects are also always “themselves becoming elements within those formations” (Anderson 2014, 11).

In other words, whether or not work on affect and security explicitly engages feminist work, it often builds on feminist insights and theoretical constructs. Where dialogue between those who focus primarily on gender and those who focus primarily on emotion exists, it is productive; where it does not exist, it could be productive. For example, much of the work on the ways that feelings are “an active component of identity and community” and “situate us in relation to others” could engage with the question of the ways that emotion is a component of gender identity and the emotions that (hierarchical) gender relations produce in (insecure) international interactions (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008, 123, citing Ahmed 2004). The work that addresses the ways that “emotions, and the situation in which they become political, are linked to particular historical, political, and cultural circumstances” could trace the emotions linked to gender-based security and insecurity in global politics (citing Crawford 2000; Lebow 2005; Bleiker and Hutchison 2008, 122).

At the same time, there is purchase to be gained by taking an explicitly feminist look at insecurity in war as experienced to see it as a gendered experience (Parashar 2013; Sjoberg 2013; Sylvester 2013), and in turn by looking to Savage’s gendered experiences to enrich gender analysis. Feminist attention to the everyday at the margins of global politics provides theoretical leverage.
for a deeper understanding of war as product and producer of gendered insecurity. The logic of war—including bodily harm, bodily humiliation, and body killing—relies on felt pain, felt despair, and felt humiliation, as well as the perpetrator’s inability to see or empathize with those experiences. Those logics of war expand the security arena from the globe to the intimate (Pain 2015). Gender analysis reveals these logics by looking at women’s, and feminized, experiences, feelings, and senses of insecurity. Feminist attention to relationality of experience in global politics (e.g., Sylvester 1992) shows that the experience of insecurity is neither individualized nor depersonalized—it is both personal and collective. The combination of attention to marginality and relationality comes from and points to the study of war as a gendered experience—gender matters in how war is sensed, felt, and lived in ways that cannot be bracketed out of attempts to theorize security and insecurity as experienced.

Returning briefly to Savage, he sensed, experienced, and felt a wide variety of things around the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. If Savage’s experience in Iraq and Afghanistan for his first four tours was anything like other soldiers’, his experience was not entirely pleasant even in those times that he now idealizes. He likely sensed oppressive heat, heavy weight to carry, dehydration, hunger, and sleeplessness. He likely experienced many of the challenges of battle and occupation. He likely felt afraid, frustrated, and uncertain. Even if he did feel those things, though, as Savage’s story is related (Meier 2014), his experiences with his first four tours felt overall positive, and he desired to return for a fifth tour. Savage’s feelings changed, though, when he was seriously injured—pain, disability, hatred, and internal conflict dominated his feelings about the war(s). To Savage, war is not good or bad—it is both/and (Weber 2002). Good and bad, brotherhood and hatred, camaraderie and pain, adventure and disability. It is complicated, and both/and good and bad.

In the previous paragraph, the physical experiences and emotional experiences that Shane Savage had of war are written as if they can be understood without reference to gender, gendered militarism, and gendered war. The brotherhood that Savage experienced in his first tours was possible only with a gendered understanding of the masculinity of citizenship, men’s responsibility to serve their countries militarily, and ties between masculinities and full citizenship (Yuval-Davis 1997). Expectations about masculinity are also necessary to account for soldiers’ willingness to endure fear, pain, risk of death, and many of the other unpleasant things about the experiences of war and conflict (Goldstein 2001; Belkin 2012). It is a sense of the expectation of bravery that goes with the expectation of masculinity that recasts pain, fear, and hunger as victories of adventure rather than as experiences to be avoided. And it is the role of masculine citizen-soldiers in state militaries and state politics that brings honor to suffering for one’s country and the innocent, feminized others within it.

It is not just Savage’s positive experiences of war that require gender analysis, however. The recounting of Savage’s story shows that his experience of injury and disability was also gendered, as was his road to recovery from that injury and disability. The account of Savage’s struggle with disability is tied to how bad he felt because he could not perform his military duties or provide for his family—both things that had become tied to his identity, which was associated with a particular militarized masculinity (Aciksoz 2012; Meier 2014; Caddick, Smith, and Phoenix 2015). Savage’s injury, and resultant underperformance, was experienced as a failure of soldiering, of fatherhood, and of manhood—experiences that together contributed to his desire to end his life. This account of Savage’s war experiences shows that living war is experiencing it in gendered ways. Thinking about Savage’s war as not only gendered and experienced, but as gendered experiences, adds analytical levers to accounts that either separate the two or neglect one or both. Both the good and bad about Savage’s war experiences are gendered—the good is brotherhood and adventure; the bad is disability and emasculation.

The notion of gendered insecurity in the last section and this one, however, is not either limited to or primarily focused on finding people’s experiences of war and understanding their multidimensionality and/or complexity. War can be of insecurity, which can be of war. Analyzing the gendered insecurities of war is certainly an important part of seeing security as sensed, felt, and experienced to understand the ways that happenings in the (traditional) security arena constitute and are constituted by feelings, senses, and experiences. But that articulation leaves the (false) impression that security and insecurity are distinguishable from the feelings that are constituted by them.

In other words, it is not just war (or terrorism or any other security event) that is subject to affective consideration. War is a subset of security (and insecurity), which should be subject to affective consideration when studied in political science. In other words, it is security (and insecurity) that are themselves, and that are themselves constituted by, experience—the gendered lives, senses, and feelings of ordinary people. Events in the security
arena are not the only things that are felt and sensed—instead, security and insecurity are feelings and senses. While it is not within the scope of this article to determine or lay out the ontologies of the feelings of security and insecurity, it can lay out a few important ways in which it is important to theorize them.

First, security is not a first-order sense, like taste, smell, touch, or hearing. Security may be associated with those first-order senses, but does not map onto them directly and universally. Second, security as a feeling or experience is not reducible to good feelings or feelings of stability—that is, just because one feels good does not mean one is secure, and insecurity as a feeling or experience is similarly not reducible to bad feelings or feelings of instability. Third, feelings of security and insecurity are not dichotomized or mutually exclusive. Instead, those feelings are not stable constants existing on one side or the other of an imagined secure/insecure dichotomy; they are floating parts of security assemblages—collected, gathered, but not necessarily coherent. Those assemblages exist on a spectrum. Fourth, feelings of security and insecurity are not contained within, limited to, or after the constitution of the body. Instead, as Wilcox (2015, 198) suggests, “security is ... a performance that attempts to create the illusion of the body’s integrity and wholeness” in the face of the insecurity of vulnerability and partiality. In other words, bodies are constituted by security and insecurity as much as they experience it and feel it (Butler 1993).

In this sense, people personally live security and insecurity—not one or the other. They live it as receivers, and they live it as they feel it—security as an event, as a state, and as a feeling are important to think about. In all three sorts of security, Shane Savage was both insecure and secure. Savage participated in the events of international security, traditionally defined—he fought for a state military in two wars. As he participated in these security events, he was both physically secure and physically insecure—protected and vulnerable, healthy then disabled, off the battlefield then on it then off it again. As he experienced these states of security and insecurity, Savage felt secure at points and insecure at others. Yet, secure/insecure was not an either/or dichotomy for Savage, nor is it for anyone. At Savage’s most secure moments—on his first four tours of duty to Iraq and Afghanistan—he was constantly vulnerable to attack, and certainly felt that vulnerability. At his most insecure moments—as he tried to take his own life—he had the security of the support of his wife, the hospital staff, and even the US military. His experiences of security and insecurity, then, were on a spectrum, and an assemblage. Security events cause insecurities, states of security are never fully secure, and feelings of security and insecurity coexist in complicated, gendered juxtapositions.

Generally, security theorizing addresses what it would mean to be secure—from human security theorizing’s understanding of food, community, political, environmental, and health security (Kaldor 2007) to critical security theorizing’s understanding of security as emancipation (e.g., Booth 2007). Centering these approaches to security around experience would suggest a broader focus on embodied, ordinary people. Centering them around gendered experience would serve two further functions: seeing the gendered nature of experiences of both security events and the feeling of security, and turning the gaze of security to the margins of global politics, and to the underside of (gendered) hierarchies of actors in the security arena. This has the impact of turning the gaze of security theorizing from the positive of security (who is made secure, who feels secure, and how security is obtained) to the negative of insecurity (who is made insecure, who feels insecurity, and how insecurity is distributed).

That is why this article has focused to this point on gendered insecurity, and here focuses on what it means to feel insecurity. Insecurity, as I mentioned above, cannot be mapped onto (or derived from) a general set of negative feelings. But that does not mean that it is not discernible. Feminist scholars have repeated theorized insecurity as related to vulnerability. Sylvester (2013) discusses the experience of war as including the risk that bodies are killed or injured, and Wilcox (2015) talks about bodies being rendered killable. Wilcox (2015, 2) explains that “war is actually inflicted on bodies” such that “bodily violence and vulnerability” can be seen “as the flip side of security.” Insecurity can be seen as found in the constellation of pain, fear, hunger, physical vulnerability, violation, disease, injury, deprivation, poverty, homelessness, disempowerment, voicelessness, and hopelessness—issues that have variously been the focus of feminist approaches to theorizing security at the margins of global politics. These are experiences of gendered insecurity, and they are lived every day both in forums traditionally understood as war and outside of them (McLeod 2013, 460–61; Pain 2015).

Centering Security Studies

The approach in this article both synthesizes and builds on existing research in both FSS and security studies more broadly. It looks to engage FSS work on gender, gender hierarchy, and gendered hierarchies in global politics, focusing on the implications of gender in distributing security and insecurity in global politics. The focus on the distributional impacts of gender here has
three parallel purposes: looking at the gendered mappings of security and insecurity in global politics, looking at the experiences of those to whom security and insecurity are distributed, and looking at what is distributed as security and insecurity. These three foci enable the incorporation of several recent insights in FSS (like war being felt and experienced) and several new insights (like the language of security as a feeling and the both/and logic of recent queer work in security applied to the security/insecurity dichotomy). Using the story of Shane Savage throughout, this article locates gender hierarchy in experiences of security events, in the distribution of his security and insecurity, and in the ways that people’s experiences and feelings of security and insecurity are experienced and felt. These observations, and the approach that inspired them, suggest several directions for research programs in security studies. This concluding section will discuss five, incorporating both previous work in FSS on which this piece builds and the original work in this piece.

Gender as a Key Part of Thinking about Security

First, as I mentioned in the introduction to this article, the study of security—whether it is security events, security distribution, or security experience—is incomplete without reference to gender-based and gendered dynamics. It is not that security cannot be related, explained, or told without reference to gender—even the account of Shane Savage’s (gendered) experiences of war can be told without reference to gender. Instead, it is that such a genderless account of security—Savage’s, or anyone’s, or even any country’s—is necessarily an incomplete description without an account of the assumptions about gender that are conditions of the possibility of the situation. That is why theorizing gender hierarchy, gendered hierarchy, and gendered insecurity in global politics is appropriately seen as transformative of, rather than modular in, security studies. By “transformative,” I mean to encourage both the expansion (to include these concerns) and recentering (to include them across security studies research) of security studies. Experiences of security/insecurity and/in security events are inseparable from the logics that make them possible, including but not limited to the logics of gender hierarchy that privilege masculinities and devalorize femininities and the logics of gendered hierarchy that associate privileged entities with masculinities and masculinization and devalorized entities with femininities and feminization. Savage’s disability, for example, can be seen as gendered insecurity—insecurity both because it made him unable to fulfill his soldierly functions and because that inability is best understood within the gendered context where his disability was compounded by the ways that it made him feel like he did not measure up. This is a microcosm of the many ways in which security can be read more richly, and in more depth, when it is understood as gendered—always, rather than just in the places where gender analysis has come to be commonplace (like women’s roles in military service).

Gendered Experiences of Security

Recent feminist research, including the theoretical work done in this article, suggests that paying attention to gendered dynamics is important, but that there is both intellectual and political payoff to going further to engage gendered experience. Looking at gendered experience teaches us things we did not know, or could not see, about wars—like Savage’s both/and experiences of security and insecurity. Still, experience is multifaceted, and the work in this piece has only begun to scratch the surface of the (gendered) experiences of (in)security. Research looking at how people live wars could touch a wide variety of components, including questions of fundamental constitution (embodiment and affect) and their instantiations in material manifestation (injury, deprivation, destruction, and profit), sense (tastes, smells, sounds, sights, and touches), physical feeling (pain and adrenaline), and emotion (bonding, brotherhood, excitement, mourning, humiliation, celebration, and fear). Seeing these experiences as gendered experiences matters and can be expanded not only from understanding security and insecurity as experience, but from seeing experience in realist power politics (e.g., Waltz 1979, 2000), liberal identification (Russett 1994; Doyle 2005), liberal negotiation (Odell 2000), constructivist social norms (Farrell 2002), emancipation from oppression (Booth 2007), and international practice (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Bueger and Gadinger 2015). This article suggests that the two elements of its theoretical takeaway—that security is lived and that lived security is gendered—add theoretical purchase across research programs in security studies, pushing forward knowledge about security.

It is in this way that the example used in this article is more than an example. Looking at the gendered war experiences of Shane Savage tells us about different dimensions of war experience than previous analyses have revealed. Savage’s story sheds light on the role that gender played in motivating Savage to (repeatedly) risk life and limb. This is an important dimension for those interested in the efficiency of military recruitment and training. The role that gender played in Savage’s struggles
with his injury and disability is revealing about the complexities of gendered experiences of military logistics and infrastructure. That the nationalism Savage experienced and felt was gendered in important ways reveals the ways that gender could be an important factor in understanding (soldier or civilian) support for war. Those looking to understand the social norms of militarism would present a fuller picture of those norms by understanding gender as a norm of militarism and as a structural part of other norms of militarism. The gendered nature of the comradery, pride, and disappointment that Savage felt helps account for the seemingly antiquated gender and sexuality structures of military life and military strategy. This is, of course, only a quick and preliminary list of the ways that seeing security as a gendered experience could pay dividends across the (traditional, critical, and even feminist) concerns of security studies.

Recentering the Subject and Object of Security Studies

This approach has important implications for both the subject and object of “international” or “global” security studies. Shane Savage is the international—not in a representative way or in a cross-applicable way, but in the sense that seeing security as a gendered experience demands attention to those who experience it as the international. When Cynthia Enloe (1990) made the argument that the personal is international and the international is personal, she was suggesting that ordinary people make up the international arena, and that the international arena is in turn constitutive of the lives of ordinary people. Attention to experience only accentuates the ways that the subject of global security studies is people, individually and collectively, rather than primarily states (Waltz 1991), institutions (Keohane and Martin 1995), or global structures (Waltz 1979). Neither I nor the approach laid out in this article would encourage ignoring non-state actors, states, institutions, or structures in the security assemblage that is global politics. My intent is not to argue that some of the current work in security studies is irrelevant and should be stopped. Rather than an argument for changing what security studies is, this is another argument for expanding and recentering security research—expanding it to include more and more serious work on gender, sense, and experience, and recentering it to focus on the people who live those genders, senses, and experiences.

That recentering catches the subject of security as well as the object. Security is often understood as a catch-all phrase for anything military (or securitized) for emergencies and for wars—you know it if you see it. More often than not, though, the word security is used either to describe an event or to describe a problem—human insecurity (food, water, social, health, economic, environmental, or cultural insecurity), or the security dilemma (a spiral model of states’ increasing protective measures that causes other states to follow the same). When security is not describing an event or a problem, it is often describing a state of being (where deterrence created nuclear security, for example). Without abandoning those uses of the term, this article has suggested two more: first, with other FSS scholarship, it has argued for the extension of research on security as felt, as experienced, and as sensed—as discussed above. This includes security constitutions, material manifestations, physical feelings, and emotions. The second use of the term, explicitly introduced in this article, is security itself as a feeling. Using Cynthia Weber’s (2002) understanding of queer concepts as both/and rather than either/or, this article suggested that one can feel secure and feel insecure, and that the two feelings are not mutually exclusive. In fact, feelings of security and of insecurity can coexist, and even fuel each other. For Savage, the insecurity of battlefield risk contributed to the security of brotherhood and the security of returning home alive did nothing to abate the insecurity of the emasculation of disability. In everyday language, the words secure and insecure are used frequently to talk both about people’s material well-being and about their emotional state. This article has suggested that gender analysis provides a roadmap for using this sort of analysis in security studies—not only to explore ontological security (e.g., Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008) but also to explore how that ontological security is lived, experienced, and felt.

Who Speaks Security and Why It Matters

Relatedly, another potential takeaway from the approach presented in this piece is a reminder about, and a new perspective on, a question that feminist and postcolonial work in security studies has taken seriously for a long time—the question of the authorial voice of security studies. In a recent debate with (or debate to, I suppose) Michael Desch (2015a), he suggested that the appropriate target—the authorizing audience—of security studies is the Washington Establishment in the United States. The suggestion that “inside the beltway” might not only be a narrow interpretation of authorial audience, but actually a security threat to most people in the world (Sjoberg 2015), was met with a quick mention of the potential for other actors to matter as well (Desch 2015b). On the other hand, feminist scholar Christine
Sylvester (2013) suggested that any attention paid to American security studies (much less “inside the beltway”) was too much attention—that it should be “passed” over in favor of more interesting work. I find both positions to be extreme, but see Sylvester’s critique as keeping alive an important discussion about who speaks security, and what audience they are addressing.

Even though war, security, and insecurity are everyday experiences of millions of people, security theorists often look at (in)security from the position of (actual or perceived) outsiders—they write about war(s) they do not experience, or write about wars as if they do not experience them. On the flip side of the coin, many of the people who experience war(s) most directly rarely write about them, and even more rarely do those writings receive recognition from scholars of war and security. In other words, elites to whom wars are rare and distant are often the authorial voices about wars, while the people to whom wars matter most are often unintelligible, both as bodies and as emotional subjects to war theorists. Those authorial voices can have the (even unintentional) impact of reifying insecurity.

As Annick Wibben (2010) reminds us, it is important to pay attention to the narratives of security inherent in our theoretical work in security studies, not just for their accuracy, but for how they come to construct the lives of the subjects of the narratives. I am not (nor do I think Wibben is) suggesting that there should be people, or theorists’ voices currently regarded as legitimate speakers of security, whose voice should be delegitimized. Instead, I am suggesting another recentering—if security studies should be centered around (in)security as felt and lived experience, it should center around the voices and experiences of those who live (in)security every day. Such a recentering would draw attention both to gender and to other dynamics, some of which are positioned at the margins of security and others at the center. It would mean increasing the prominence of research on different actors, theorists, and voices than security studies generally privileges. It would also mean paying attention to different facets of the actors that security studies traditionally privileges. For example, militaries are within the traditional purview of security studies, but the emotional journey of a single soldier through enjoyment and hatred of wars is not. Soldier recruitment, retention, and distribution are within the traditional purview of security studies, while masculinization in training and combat and emasculation in disability are not. If security studies is as Walt defined it (1991), the study of the threat and use of military force, then the gendered experiences of military forces, those threatening the use of those forces, and those being threatened are all key parts of a recentered security studies. If security studies is as Krause (1998) discussed it, the enterprise of determining the construction of the object of security, then gendered social norms that influence that construction and their gendered impacts on security’s subjects matter. In other words, it is my suggestion that it is important both to add the dimensionality of gendered experience to the traditional purview of security studies and to refocus scholarly energy on those dimensions—to center the study of security on people’s gendered experiences and the narratives thereof.

Learning from (and as) the Personal

That brings me to the fifth, and final, takeaway from this article—learning about war and (in)security from people who live it the ways that they live it. In this article, I engaged with the story of Shane Savage as told by New York Times reporter Barry Meier (2014). Savage’s lived experience helped tell the story of why gender matters in war, why lived experience of war matters, and how we see more when we see gendered experience of war. But its “help” was a different sort of knowledge—experience as knowledge—than security studies traditionally uses to analyze global (in)security. That experience as knowledge is itself a contribution to security studies, as are the added dimensions of analysis that security studies can explore given its contribution. In other words, both Savage’s experience as knowledge and the research questions it can inspire should be constitutive of security studies.

It is not just the knowledge of Savage’s experience or the research questions that it inspires that constitute security studies, however. It is also the experience of the researcher learning and researching that makes the field. If security studies’ subject is lived, felt, and experienced, then so, necessarily, is security studies research. Feminist scholars have suggested that scholars have emotional investment in, take emotional risks for, and are emotionally involved in their research choices and research practices (Jacoby 2006; MacKenzie 2011; Sylvester 2011). It is not only security that is felt, but security that is felt within security research in a variety of ways. These emotional connections with our research can take a variety of forms, including attraction, empathy, vulnerability, apathy, frustration, doubt, grief, guilt, and fear, among others. Realizing that researchers across paradigmatic approaches to security have emotional relationships with their research—that security theorists feel security and insecurity, both as actors in the global security arena and in their research about it—adds important dimensions to considerations of both appropriate voices for security studies and considerations of how
it is possible to learn from the personal. We do not just learn from the personal of the abstract, often racialized, marginalized other, but also from our personal and the interaction (discursive or actual) between personal/global (in)security.

For example, D’Costa and Lee-Koo (2008; 2013, 452) “explored what it might mean to be a critical feminist scholar in the Asia-Pacific.” In an edited volume, they “asked our contributors to reflect upon how their own identities shaped their work, their ethical engagements with others, and their representations of those lives” (D’Costa and Lee-Koo 2013, 452). This work is based in both the experience of security of the research “subject” and the experience of security of the researcher—which are linked but not the same. Learning from the personal, then, is multilayered and multilocational, and each layer, each location, is inherently political.

Conclusion

The theoretical and empirical suggestion to recenter security studies around gendered experience is one that is inherently political—it is constituted by a politics of critical concern with gender, with hierarchy, with oppression, and with how those things are felt and lived. That is a politics of security studies, however, not the politics of security studies. A feminist politics of security studies, to reach its full potential contribution to the field both substantively and politically, needs to be matched with, interspersed with, and incorporated into other politics of security studies—from the local to the international to the global, from realist to postcolonial, from core to periphery. This integrative task would make a productive way forward for security studies generally, and FSS both within and critical of it, in the coming years.

References


