

This article was downloaded by: [University of Tromsø]

On: 26 November 2008

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 789283820]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Medicine, Conflict and Survival

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713673482>

The science of human security: a response from political science

David Roberts ^a

^a Magee College, University of Ulster, Derry

Online Publication Date: 01 February 2008

To cite this Article Roberts, David(2008)'The science of human security: a response from political science',*Medicine, Conflict and Survival*,24:1,16 — 22

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13623690701775189

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13623690701775189>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

The science of human security: a response from political science

David Roberts*

Magee College, University of Ulster, Derry

(Accepted 5 September 2007)

The concept of human security has developed in significance in the last decade to the point that its meaning and validity is hotly contested in the field of international relations, security, and development studies. A key consideration relates to its ambiguity at best and its amorphousness at worst. Medical scholarship proposes approaches that may render more meaningful the concept. However, collaboration and co-operation between political scientists and medical practitioners offers even greater potential to this vital programme. The latter offer the technical and methodological skills and approaches lacking in political science, whilst the former develop political frameworks to shift the causal focus towards human, institutional and structural agency in mass avoidable global civilian mortality.

Keywords: epidemiology; human development; human security; mortality; political science; political violence

Recently, Taback and Coupland¹ proposed a ‘new branch of science’, which they refer to as ‘the science of human security’. Their discussion of human security moves between ‘broad’ or ‘maximalist’ interpretations and those of the ‘narrow’ and ‘minimalist’ schools. One goal is to develop a relevant and utilitarian research agenda that creates a compact between data, causation and responsive policy to improve human security. Their work addresses mainly a narrow approach to defining and understanding human security, and also presumes that human security is a recent concept. Whilst fully laudable in ambition, Taback and Coupland’s analysis is overemphatic on narrow perceptions and neglects a host of older scholarship from which human security has emerged. Furthermore, the referent terms ‘security’ and ‘insecurity’ are used seemingly interchangeably, whereas emerging scholarship has used the distinction in response to critics who argue that anything other than a narrow approach is indefinable.

*Email: Dw.roberts@ulster.ac.uk

The evolution of 'human security': a brief overview

Scholarship dating back to the 1960s shaped the notion of human security and insecurity, when Johan Galtung proposed the concept of 'structural violence'. His approach referred to anything that prevented a human being's potential development². The breadth of this concept ensured it was not considered seriously in the security literature dominated by the field of International Relations (IR). However, since then, much critical feminist literature has built on this approach and 'invaded' the IR literature, identifying the structures, institutions, priorities, ontology and epistemologies as masculine, violent and self-replicating through an international system that mirrors state and system compositions and priorities^{3,4}.

The concept of human suffering from poverty as a security issue (rather than merely a 'development' problem) gathered momentum and gravitas through the 1994 United Nations Human Development Report (UNHDR), a landmark publication that developed indicators of human health and development and demonstrated, with reliable methodologies, the extent of avoidable illnesses and which also created the Human Development Index, a scale that measures state development in social terms rather than purely financial statistics⁵. Whilst other development reports have done similar tasks, the 1994 UNHDR rendered clear a security-development 'nexus' and moved the debate closer to mainstream security studies. Since the late 1990s, the debate has gathered further momentum and credibility, although for many a definition of broad human security remains elusive⁶⁻⁹. It is superficially this which excludes broad human security from the wider security debate and ensures the lower prioritization of millions of avoidable deaths, below the much smaller number that die from more conventional conceptualizations and definitions of human security.

The problem of definitions for political and medical science

Taback and Coupland's literature survey picks up the debate from where human security is divided into two camps: the narrow and broad. They refer to the 2005 Human Security Report (HSR), which defines human security as 'the complex of interrelated threats associated with civil war, genocide and the displacement of populations'¹⁰. The HSR conceptualization of human security, whilst generally slightly broader than the remit of mainstream International Relations, is narrow and focuses mainly on political violence. The datasets they identify draw mainly on 'battle-deaths . . . between 1946 and 2002 in conflicts where a government was one of the warring factions'¹⁰. This school of thought challenges the practicability of broader interpretations because it risks losing meaning and utility. Buzan remarks that broadening and deepening the human security debate 'endanger the intellectual coherence of security, putting so much into it that its essential

meaning [becomes] void'⁶. It is this view, common amongst traditional Realists, that ensures the exclusion of a wider, and potentially far more influential, version of human security. Taback and Coupland's attachment to this rather narrow perspective obviates a wider human security paradigm.

This wider conceptualization of human security is well enunciated by Thakur, who argues that 'the reformulation of national security into human security ... has profound consequences for how we see the world, how we organize our political affairs, and how we relate to fellow human beings'⁸. Thakur's position articulates the concern that structures are causing part of the human insecurity condition, that men with guns or machetes are not the causal agents of most avoidable deaths of civilians, and that human agency is deterministic of avoidable human insecurity^{8,11}. Booth also notes a structural dimension to the human security issue. He argues that:

Human society in global perspective is shaped by ideas that are dangerous to its collective health ... It is revealed in the extent of structural oppression ... it is apparent in the threats to the very environment that sustains all life; it is seen in the risks arising out of unintended consequences from developments in technology; and, as ever, it is experienced in the regular recourse to violence to settle political differences¹².

It seems that, whilst not obviously visible in much of the literature, Galtung's notions of human-built structures that cause violence unintentionally (as well as intentionally) persist in the development of the concept of human security². However, 30 years after Galtung published on structural violence, a practical definition remains elusive. Neither Booth nor Thakur's arguments were completed by a definition, and most other scholars attempting to bring policy relevance to this ambitious project have thus far failed to move beyond concept and into a reasonable and practicable definition. This is perhaps why Taback and Coupland have not engaged more fully with this broad, humane, but as yet ill-defined concept. However, this is well worth remarking upon because, although the deeper and wider approach to human security has been mostly excluded from some of the more substantial IR debates^{7,13,14}, both versions could be sustained with the tools and methodological means Taback and Coupland propose for engaging with narrow human security. Furthermore, there is clearly a framework within which medical and political science can co-operate to the benefit of broad human security in terms of data development. At least one way in which political science could draw from medicine is in terms of epidemiological methodologies and research.

Recent developments confirm these intellectual trajectories and develop connections and relationships between human insecurity and causation¹⁵. Concentrating on civilian deaths alone, with no military role, Roberts defines broad human security as emanating from human-directed international institutions functioning in line with contemporary ideologies that

determine priorities which unnecessarily kill millions of vulnerable men, women and children¹⁵. This includes both direct and indirect violence: infanticide and intimate partner killing are examples of the former. Indirect violence from economic distribution systems resulting in millions more avoidable deaths exemplify the latter. All have institutional and structural determinism, clearly visible to critical observation. Whilst this approach is framed by preventable mortality and exists at the far end of the human security spectrum from its narrow partner, medical science, epidemiology and statistical analysis already hold the key to this perspective, but also to the next evolution in the human security debate. This involves identifying positivist parameters for judging determinants of predictable early mortality; perhaps assessing how the absence or presence of particular health strategies and economic policies reliably influences viable life span.

The opportunities for political and medical science

Across these ranges of concepts and definitions, a commonality exists in that 'people's health is the irreducible element'¹. Deaths from political violence (narrow human security) totalled approximately 223,000 in 2002 and in the same year, mostly avoidable deaths in the under-fives amounted to ten million. There is a potential for a powerful and utilitarian conjoining of disciplinary interests and abilities leading to policy challenges. Where Taback and Coupland prefer to remain within the narrow concept of human security and draw on medical methodologies including epidemiological surveying, their discipline's methodologies and medical understanding could be moved across into the broader field of human security, subject to a definition becoming apparent. Sharing positivist methodologies such as epidemiology and surveys and identifying causation from typologies of suffering/death would have clear implications for international public policy choices not merely in the health sector, but also in areas that politically and economically determine health and human security provision. Furthermore, both broad human security and medical science condone the use of similar evidential sources, such as the UN Development Reports, the World Health Organization (WHO) and other able and respected international data collection instruments.

This process is not without challenges, however. Taback and Coupland rightly raise the issue of source location and generation. They note that the necessary material may derive from primary or secondary sources, with the attendant pros and cons for both. However, their concerns in the paper are limited to what is termed 'direct violence'. Some of the examples they cite are deaths from cluster bombs, landmines and other ordnance, at time of dispersal or after war; and the use of sexual violence, which might include mass rape for ethnic dilution, amongst many others. From this, they note the challenges involved in primary data collection in such

environments; and that this may just be the sharp end of the wedge of available data on a wide interpretation of human in/security. The authors then turn their attention to the collation of secondary data, which is easier to harvest than that which requires dedicated and often expensive field work in inhospitable locations, referring us to the widespread availability and accessibility of news reports undertaken by journalists and the application of this to human security hypotheses. They remind us of the problems of bias or validity, as well as the problems of fitting data generated for one purpose to another, or the representativeness of the data. The authors note that the use of secondary sources, such as the Iraq Body Count, for human security concerns have already demonstrated their credibility.

However, regarding broader human security, they do less to note the utility of globally available UN agency data in terms of indirect, structural violence that aggravates, for example, poverty and avoidable ill health amongst vulnerable categories of people such as the under fives. This primary material made available in secondary form for easy access derives from international governmental organizations (IGOs) such as the United Nations Development Programme and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) such as Oxfam and Save the Children. Nor do they discuss the reliability of various independent but field-based bodies such as Amnesty International and the various religious and social international institutions that have consistently provided the only credible data on a range of situations in sometimes inaccessible situations. Furthermore, there is a range of journals that have developed primary material or analysed secondary data that provide crucial and reliable data with which to test human security issues and formulate state/government/systemic policy. These include, but are by no means limited to, *British Medical Journal*, *Chronic Poverty Research Centre*, *Development and Change*, *Human Reproduction*, *Journal of Assisted Reproduction and Genetics*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Population and Development Review*, *Reproductive-Health-Matters*, *Society for Medical Anthropology*, *The Lancet*, *Third World Quarterly*, and *World Development*. In addition, there has been quite an outpouring of books by scholars on the subject of global inequality which, although mainly of a secondary nature, contain much primary material. Annually, the UN and World Bank produce dozens of authoritative research documents easily accessible at their websites which contain a useful range of secondary data. The extent to which one might view either of these sources as subjective is a further issue to be taken into consideration; but a decision has to be taken somewhere if only because so few individuals or institutions have the agency, will and skill to conduct the comprehensive primary evidence gathering needed to ensure human security conclusions are not marred by suspect evidential findings. In general, there is sufficient cross-corroboration from enough reliable sources to validate the findings and conclusions to date.

Conclusion

In essence, although human security is debated frequently, the broad human security aspect is largely excluded from the priorities of mainstream security studies and policy. The millions of deaths from avoidable poverty-related causes remain beyond the serious concern of the most influential schools of International Relations. Taback and Coupland's proposed medical science intervention is similarly framed. Perhaps their narrower approach is only a reflection of their limited coverage of the broader peace, feminist and development literatures that have a longer but less public pedigree regarding health and poverty as issues of human security. Or, as Owen puts it, it is because 'people are not dying from interstate war, they are dying from disease, starvation, environmental disasters, violence and civil war'¹⁶. In supporting only one dimension of the human security debate, Taback and Coupland's approach misses the potential for the contribution of medical science to both narrow and broad dimensions, because the medical methodologies required for both are similar and much essential primary data is already available. Both medical and political science have a significant opportunity to engage in a wider and more humane debate. Yet more importantly, they can both contribute to generating definitions and methodologies that will instigate analysis and policy that will simultaneously buttress and also exceed the potential of the narrow school. In not presenting the wider and deeper origins of the concept of human security, Taback and Coupland have demonstrated only half the potential of human security and of the potential influence medical and political science have to offer. But a start is a good place to be.

The emphasis on conventional security whilst millions die without good reason reflects the power relationships threaded throughout international relations, between rich and poor, males and females, marginal and included, vulnerable and secure. Dostoevsky considered that the level of civilization of a country could be discerned by observing the conditions in its prisons, a reflection of relative strengths and insecurities. And FD Roosevelt declared that 'the test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little'. Implicit and explicit in the inhumane manner in which the most vulnerable are ignored and killed is the necessity and justification for the reconceptualization of the security referent – from the traditional to the modern, the human being.

To this end, it would seem that Taback and Coupland's interests in adding epidemiology to politics, the natural sciences to the social sciences and the methods of the former to the analysis of the latter could, if conceived of more broadly, advance not just the human security debate but also the research approaches and agendas that would make it a more meaningful concept. Methodological propriety and medical comprehension of the causes of health insecurity, coupled with political interpretation of the

determinism of global institutions and structures involved in distributing or denying through markets or state choices, vital health resources and strategies, could make for meaningful 'data-to-policy' changes that increase human security in its broader senses. It is intellectually and methodologically worthy and has the potential to make the kind of differences that legitimate a desire for global social justice.

Notes on contributor

David Roberts is lecturer in international politics and peace and conflict studies at Magee College, University of Ulster. He has published widely on political transition and stability as well as statebuilding. His latest work is in the field of human security.

References

1. Taback N, Coupland R. The science of human security. *Med Confl Surviv.* 2007;23:6–9.
2. Galtung J. Violence, peace and peace research. *J Peace Res.* 1969;6(3): 167–91.
3. MacKinnon C. *Are women human? And other international dialogues.* Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press; 2006.
4. Anglin MK. Feminist perspectives on structural violence. *Identities.* 1998;5(2): 145–152.
5. United Nations Development Programme. *United Nations Development Report.* New York: UN; 1994.
6. Buzan B, Waever O, de Wilde J. *Security: a new framework for analysis.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner; 1998. p. 58.
7. Stoett P. *Human and global security: an exploration of terms.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press; 1999.
8. Thakur R. A political worldview. *Security Dialogue.* 2004;35:347–348.
9. Thomas N, Tow WT. The utility of human security: sovereignty and humanitarian intervention. *Security Dialogue.* 2002;33(2): 177–192.
10. Mack A. *Human security report: war and peace in the 21st century.* Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2005. p. 8.
11. Kohler G, Alcock N. An empirical table of structural violence. *J Peace Res.* 1976;XIII:343–356.
12. Booth K., editor. *Critical security studies and world politics.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner; 2005.
13. Sheehan M. *International security: an analytical survey.* Boulder: Lynne Rienner; 2005.
14. Friedman L. International security: changing targets. *Foreign Policy.* 1998;110(Spring): 48–63.
15. Roberts D. Human security or human insecurity? Moving the debate forward. *Security Dialogue.* 2006;37:237–249.
16. Owen T. *Human security mapping: a new methodology.* Oslo: Peace Research Institute; 2003 [cited 2007 Sept 28]. Available from: http://www.prio.no/files/file44641_human_security_mapping.pdf?PHPSESSID=b8a30ac