Deakin Research Online

METHODOLOGIES IN PEACE RESEARCH

A conference exploring methodological, empirical and ethical aspects of research into peace, conflict and division

CPS WORKING PAPERS NO. 10, 2007

METHODOLOGIES IN PEACE RESEARCH

**A conference exploring methodological, empirical and ethical
aspects of research into peace, conflict and division**

21 – 23 March, 2007

Conference Papers

*) Lorna Tychostup was in the end not able to attend the conference, but we are grateful to her for allowing us to publish her contribution as part of this volume of working papers.

You Say Security, We Say Safety: Speaking and Talking "Security" in Kyrgyzstan

Claire Wilkinson[*]

Abstract

The Copenhagen School's notion of securitization is widely recognised as an important theoretical innovation in the conceptualisation of security, not least for its potential for including a range of actors and spatial scales beyond the state. However, its empirical utility remains more open to question due to a lack of reflexivity regarding local socio-cultural contexts, narrow focus on speech and inherently retrospective nature. Drawing on fieldwork conducted by the author in Kyrgyzstan between September 2005 and June 2006, this paper will examine the implications of these limitations for conducting empirical research on "security" logistically and methodologically. Centrally, the question of how "security" can be researched in the field will be discussed. Consideration will be given to the researcher's role in talking "security" and how "security" can effectively be located and explicated through the creation of ethnomethodological "thick description". Issues of contingency, multiple voices and power loci, and inter-cultural translation will be addressed. The paper will conclude with a consideration of how local knowledge can be used to inform our research and help find ways to bridge the divide between the field and theory.

Introduction: Meanwhile in Kyrgyzstan…

> *…here [in Kyrgyzstan] everything's done on paper,*
> *but in actual fact there is no security/safety.*[1]

Kyrgyzstan, the smallest of the five former-Soviet Central Asian republics, has been the subject of heightened international attention ever since the events of early 2005, which culminated on March 24 with the overthrow of then-president Askar Akaev's government in the so-called "Tulip Revolution".[2] Since then the socio-economic and political situation in this mountainous ex-Soviet republic have remained unstable. Social unrest has remained high: according to official data, 2006 saw 726 unsanctioned protests, demonstrations and marches, whilst estimates put the number of similar events in 2005 at around 2000.[3] Certainly, going on statistics, the situation looks quite severe, even allowing for the number of protests in 2006 being a vast improvement on the 2005 figure. This impression is only strengthened by the fact that both mass media and analytical coverage of post-Akaev Kyrgyzstan has tended to focus on the prevalence of phenomena associated with instability: public demonstrations, assassinations, the "criminalisation" of the country, the inability of the government to carry out reforms or respond to the demands of the public. After the initially positive reaction in the West, seen in the characterisation of the "Tulip Revolution" as a continuation of the "colour revolutions" that had occurred in Georgia and Ukraine, enthusiasm rapidly waned as the "revolution" remained unfinished. This change of mood was clearly evident in the title of the International Crisis Group's December 2005 report, *Kyrgyzstan: A Faltering State*[4]*,* and, later in 2006,

---

[*] *PhD Candidate, Centre for Russian & East European Studies (ERI), University of Birmingham, UK:* cxwilkinson@googlemail.com
[1] Interview with representatives of youth educational NGO Peremena, Bishkek, 24/11/2005
[2] For a concise overview of events leading up to March 24, 2005, see International Crisis Group (2005a) *Kyrgyzstan: After the Revolution* Asia Report 97, 4 May 2005.
[3] Karimov, Daniyar (2007) "Bolee 700 nesanktsionirovannykh aktsij protesta zafiksirovano v Kyrgyzstana v 2006 godu" [More than 700 unsanctioned protest actions recorded in Kyrgyzstan in 2006], 24.kg news agency, 08/01/2007. http://www.24.kg/community/2007/01/08/20281.html (accessed 13/03/2007)
[4] International Crisis Group (2005b) *Kyrgyzstan: A Faltering State* Asia Report 109, 16 December 2005.

Kyrgyzstan's high ranking in The Fund for Peace's *Failed States Index 2006*, which was based on data collected between May and December 2005.[5]

In light of these circumstances, security is inevitably a topic that is often mentioned, be in terms of state viability or territorial integrity, high corruption levels or, at the human end of the scale, the continuing high levels of poverty[6] and poor health indicators.[7] But with "security" being mentioned so frequently and in so many contexts: how to study this arguably "contest concept" in a reasonably meaningful way? What does it actually mean to research "security"? Is there a danger that we may in fact contribute to perceptions of *in*security by focusing on security?

These questions are especially pertinent for research that attempts to bridge the divide between the theoretical and the empirical, as in the case of the fieldwork discussed in this paper. Following a brief outline of the theoretical framework that was initially intended to provide a guide for fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, the rest of this paper will consider how the field researcher can begin to locate "security". What sources can be used and what must be considered when choosing sources and informants? Can the fieldworker, post-fieldwork, responsibly claim to simply be reporting what "security" was found, as the Copenhagen School suggests?[8] Discussion will be grounded in the author's experiences of conducting fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan between September 2005 and June 2006 (September 2005 – January 2006 in the capital, Bishkek, March – June 2006 in the republic's second city in the south, Osh).[9]

The penultimate section will focus on the role of interviews, highlighting how ambiguities of meaning and context can be used reflexively to inform both the fieldwork process and the theoretical framework. This notion of reflexive and abductive fieldwork will then be extended with a consideration of how an interpretivist approach to constructing "security" could enhance the empirical potential of securitization, despite the epistemeological implications. It will be argued that "security" cannot be seen as an objective phenomenon that can simply be located and reported; rather, the researcher must situate herself and her research within local contexts, showing how her data has been constructed and her role in this process.

The paper concludes by suggesting that local knowledge may provide a way to bridge the empirical, methodological and theoretical divides: it is only by focusing on processes and their specificities that it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of "security" beyond the direct application of theoretical approaches.

"Outside" the Field: In the Virtual Reality of Theory

The problem with reality is that it interferes with my theory[10]

The Copenhagen School's concepts of securitisation and societal security were chosen to provide the theoretical framework for an investigation into interrelationships between various community groups and their perceptions of threats and sources of threats to their community identities. The original pre-fieldwork rationale for this choice was that in principle the Copenhagen School's framework provides the means to consider referent objects (that which is threatened and whose preservation is presented as being worthy of extraneous measures beyond the realm of "normal" politics) other than the state, such as the economy, the environment or the nation. It is, therefore, theoretically possible to look beyond the state and broaden the security agenda to conceptualise threats to non-state-centric referent objects on a variety of levels, from

---

[5] http://www.fundforpeace.org/programs/fsi/fsindex2006.php (accessed 20/02/2007). Kyrgyzstan ranked 28th in 2006 with a score of 90.3 out of a possible 120. In 2005 the Republic ranked 65th, with a score of 80.4 out of a possible 120.

[6] The State Statistics Committee's most recent figure for the percentage of the population living below the poverty line is 44% (2002). See http://www.stat.kg/Rus/Home/MonBedn.html (accessed 15/03/2007).

[7] The most recent (2004) WTO core health indicators for Kyrgyzstan are available at http://www3.who.int/whosis/core/core_select_process.cfm?country=kgz&indicators=selected&language=en (accessed 20/03/2007).

[8] Eriksson, Johan (1999) "Observers or Advocates? On the Political Role of Security Analysts" *Cooperation and Conflict* 34(3): 314-315

[9] Fieldwork was funded by the Economic & Social Research Council as part of award number PTA-030-2003-00646.

[10] Comment from a political scientist during lunch-time conversation, Copenhagen, April 2005.

the domestic to the global. This is obviously quite a seductive prospect for the significant number of scholars dissatisfied with the narrow focus of "traditional" (i.e. Realist or neo-Realist) International Relations (IR) and Security Studies on the state; whilst proclamations of the state's demise have undoubtedly been premature, few could dispute that its status as the fundamental unit of the world order is still unchallenged in the post-Cold War era of glocalisation.

As a way of broadening the focus of security studies to include non-state units, the Copenhagen School developed the concept of sectoral security in their 1998 work *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*,[11] building on Barry Buzan's work in the second edition of *People, States and Fear.*[12] A system of five security sectors is presented, each with its own referent object: two sectors – the military and political – keep the state as their referent object, while a third – the economic sector – is also likely to be state-centric. The other two sectors, the environmental and societal, move away from the state, having as their referent objects the environment and societal identities respectively. The purpose of the sectors is to break down the widened security into more manageable sections in order to facilitate analysis, with each sector "looking at the whole but […] seeing only one dimension"[13]

The societal sector is arguably the clearest example of the challenge to the state's dominance in IR, with a particular community identity forming the referent object rather than the state in some form. The Copenhagen School posits that "in the present world system, the most important referent objects in the societal sector are tribes, clans, nations (and nation-like ethnic units, which others call minorities), civilizations, religions and race."[14] The Copenhagen School recognize that such identities are likely to intersect with "the explicitly political organizations concerned with government", but argue that they are distinct in that "society is about identity, the self-conception of communities and of individuals identifying themselves as members of a community."[15] It is worth clarifying here that the terms *society* and *societal* are not used to refer to the population of a state per se, but rather to refer to "communities with which one identifies".[16]

Securitization, whereby security is conceptualized as a "speech-act",[17] is then used to locate "security" in each sector. The concept hinges on the idea that speaking "security" is an act in itself, it is more than just an utterance. The "security" part of the act is taken to signify the presence of an existential threat to a referent object, or, more simply, a threat to its continued survival. This (real or perceived) existential threat is then used rhetorically to argue for the implementation of measures not sanctioned within "normal" politics. In the words of the Copenhagen School, securitization "is the move that that takes an issue beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special sort of politics or as above politics."[18] Only if this move is accepted – i.e. the proposed measures are approved of by the audience – then a securitization has occurred. If the invocation of "security" is not accepted, then it is only possible to talk of a "securitizing move", in which case an issue does not, in the end, count as "security".

On a purely theoretical level these conceptualizations are not unproblematic, as the considerable and growing body of literature critiquing different aspects of the Copenhagen School testifies to.[19] However, attempting an empirical investigation of "security" utilizing the

---

[11] Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver & Jaap de Wilde (1998) *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* Boulder, CO: Lynne Reinner
[12] Buzan, Barry (1991) *People, States and Fear* (second edition) Brighton, Sussex: Wheatsheaf
[13] Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver & Jaap de Wilde (1998): 8.
[14] Ibid: 123.
[15] Ibid: 119.
[16] Ibid: 120.
[17] Ibid: 26.
[18] Ibid: 23.
[19] McSweeney, Bill (1996) "Identity and security: Buzan and the Copenhagen school" *Review of International Studies* 22: 81-93; Idem (1998) "Durkheim and the Copenhagen school: a response to Buzan and Wæver" *Review of International Studies* 24:137-140; Williams, Michael (1998) "Modernity, identity and security: a comment on the 'Copenhagen controversy'" *Review of International Studies* 24: 435-439; Idem (1998) "Identity and the Politics of Security" *European Journal of International Relations* 4(2): 204-225; Huysmans, Jef (1998)

framework provided by the Copenhagen School has arguably proved even more problematic: theoretical concerns about the privileging of the public voice over other forms of expression[20], the reification of identities[21], the inherently retrospective and outcome-orientated nature of securitization[22] and the role of the analyst[23] are made more immediate. Whilst the theory requires that events have already taken place and the outcome know, fieldwork requires attention to be paid as much to process, recalling Kirkgaard's axiom that life must understood backwards but lived forwards. In the field, strategies to cope with this Kirkgaardian paradox, both generally and specifically in relation to the theoretical approach of the research must be found/improvised, as will be discussed.

In the case of my research, even once "out" of the field, it is still necessary to find ways to negotiate and mediate between the theoretical and empirical, this time linguistically. Virtually all fieldwork was conducted in Russian, but the research is being written up in English and uses concepts defined and explained in English. Specifically, and centrally, the word "security" presents a problem: whilst English draws a distinction between "security" and "safety", Russian has only one word, *bezopasnost*, literally meaning "without danger" and defined as "not threatened with danger, protected from danger".[24] It often appeared to me that people talked more about safety in an immediate physical sense than security in the sense of an existential threat. It is often difficult to distinguish between the two at the sub-national level, particularly in light of the unstable socio-political situation. Similarly, the societal dimension, with its focus on group identities, allows for greater overlap between safety and security than would be the case with inanimate, institutional referent objects such as the state, since discussion with people will be framed by whichever understanding of *bezopasnost* is more relevant to them, regardless of theoretical criteria. Throughout this paper I have preserved and highlighted this ambiguity of meaning in quoted interview excerpts by using the combination "security/safety" in quotations, rather than lay claim to "knowing" or correctly interpreting what my respondents meant.[25] Whilst this deliberate ambiguity may seem unnecessary to some, I maintain that it is justified for the purposes of decentring both theory and the researcher and helping illustrate how "security" is understood in the fieldwork context.

The Researcher and "Security"

> *So there are very many different aspects of security/safety, of course there is security/safety in the sense of the country, the security/safety of an organisation, the security/safety that you and I are sitting here and have the opportunity to talk peacefully, that you have the opportunity to carry out your research. I simply didn't know which [sort of] security/safety you had in mind (emphasis added – CW).[26]*

Both theoretically and practically, speaking "security" is a value-laden venture. Ole Wæver goes so far as to suggest that the Copenhagen School's conceptualisation of security, in contrast to the majority of mainstream approaches, has the distinct advantage that it "points to the inherently political nature of any designation of security issues and thus it puts an ethical

---

"Revisiting Copenhagen: Or, On the Creative Development of a Security Studies Agenda in Europe" *European Journal of International Relations* 4(4): 479-505.

[20] Hansen, Lene (2000) "The Little Mermaid's Silent Security Dilemma and the Absence of Gender in the Copenhagen School" *Millennium* 29(2): 285-306; Williams, Michael (2003) "Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics" *International Studies Quarterly* 47: 511-531.

[21] McSweeney, Bill (1996).

[22] Wagnsson, Charlotta (2000) *Russian Political Language and Public Opinion on the West, NATO and Chechnya – Securitization Theory Reconsidered.* Stockholm: Akademitryck AB, Edsbruk; Wilkinson, Claire (2007) "The Copenhagen School on Tour in Kyrgyzstan: Is Securitization Theory Useable Outside Europe?" *Security Dialogue* 38(1): 5-25.

[23] Eriksson, Johan (1999) "Observers or Advocates? On the Political Role of Security Analysts" *Cooperation and Conflict* 34(3): 311-30; Behnke, Andreas (2000) "The Message or the Messenger? Reflections on the Role of Security Experts and the Securitization of Political Issues" *Cooperation and Conflict* 3(1): 89-105.

[24] Ozhegov, S.I. & N.I. Shvedova (eds) (1997) *Tolkovyj slovar russkogo yazyka* [Explanatory dictionary of Russian] Moscow: Azbukovnik: 41

[25] All interviews were conducted in Russian. All translations are the author's own.

[26] Interview with Country Director, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Bishkek, 06/12/2005

question at the feet of analysts, decision-makers and political activists alike: why do you call this a security issue? What are the implications of doing this – or not doing this?"[27] However, all too often these questions have not been answered satisfactorily beyond epistemologically-based arguments that have little empirical application.

Thus the field researcher is left with a very fundamental question: how to approach "security" in the field? The fieldworker no longer has the "advantage" of merely "observing how others advocate [security]" to paraphrase Eriksson[28]: he is now on the ground alongside his research subject and faces many of the same issues as his informants as he tries to make sense of events going on around him. Contrary to what theory often suggests, events do not happen in a stepwise, logical, measured fashion. Rather, they are "messy" – seemingly unpredictable, random, spontaneous, and in the field have to be dealt with in unedited, complex, multiple form.

Unfortunately, the final research account, framed by theory, is most often stripped of process, of the fieldwork experience. It is a depersonalised, "objective", step-wise account of completed research that is concerned with "facts" that have largely been sterilised – in effect decontextualised, simplified, edited for presentation. At best we can expect a formal methodological description of the fieldwork, stripped of serendipity, chance and spontaneity. In the same manner, too often the application of theory provides no place for the researcher, either as Researcher or simply as a person. Yet in the field the researcher is an integral part of her research. Her decisions and actions impact on her material, even if only in subtle ways such as how people respond to her. Take for example the quotation at the start of this section: "I simply didn't know which [sort of] security/safety you had in mind." Regardless of my efforts to keep the question as neutral and non-personal as possible, my respondent instinctively wished the frame his answer to meet my inferred requirements – in this case the requirements of a junior Western researcher asking a journalist writing for an international audience about "security".

Our respondents implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – write us into our own research; their responses are given within the context of what they know or have inferred about us, as well as their own personal context. The change in dynamics this can create, with the respondent at times holding the dominant position, further draws us into our research data, making us an integral part of the material we create and subsequently present. It was an exchange during an recorded interview with an ethnic community leader that made me feel my pretence of "objectivity" and, perhaps more importantly, impartiality, was decontextualising my research: the "security" that we were discussing implicitly through reference to the threat of religious terrorism was grounded in our perceptions of each other as much as in my respondent's personal experiences, as the following excerpt shows:

> CW [interviewer]: *So you have already spoken about extremism, terrorism. How real, from your point of view, is the threat of religious extremism or terrorism? States are about always talking about it.*
>
> Ittipak Representative [respondent]: *You know, I'd say once again, if it wasn't for the machinations of the special services, well, we'll be open, who gave rise to Bin Laden?*
>
> CW: *I'd say the Americans.*
>
> IR: *Well, then, you see, it's politics again. And then evidently something somewhere didn't work out, or may be it's still something, some kind of continuation of that game. And today, to say that, supposedly, religious fanatics are ruling, well then, let's acknowledge that these problems have been in the Christian world. Ulster, right, and it still is [a problem]. But yet again I understand that they [the problems] have occurred where? That means where a certain Catholic minority has been subject to discrimination. If this wasn't the case, then there wouldn't be these problems. ...[29]*

My respondent firstly drew me in, turning the tables on me as interviewer by asking me a question, forcing me to take a position that one way or another had the potential to affect our rapport and therefore what opinions he expressed in the remainder of the interview. Implicitly

---

[27] Wæver, Ole (1999) "Securitizing Sectors? Reply to Eriksson" *Cooperation and Conflict* 34(3): 317.
[28] Op. cit.
[29] Interview with representative of the Uighur Association Ittipak, 19/12/2005.

my answer, which in this case corresponded to his perception of events, created a degree of shared understanding about the subject being discussed. Secondly, his use of Northern Ireland as an example of religious-based conflict further personalised and contextualised our conversation. On a basic level it reflected his awareness that he was talking to someone of British nationality but, as he had previously established by asking about Bin Laden, who was not uncritical of Western foreign policy. It also permitted him to keep control of the conversation as he explained his views to me using "safe" examples from a political point of view, before moving to talk about the more politically-sensitive topic of China's labelling Uighurs as religious extremists.

Reflecting on the transcript of this interview and others, I was struck by the dishonesty of using excerpts as evidence of "security" without contextualising how this "security/safety" was created. Firstly, there is the ethical matter of how we represent our informants and their words. Particularly with people who could be identified and whose position is politically or socially sensitive, not making the context of their comments clear would be highly irresponsible. This contextualisation does not just extend to using longer excerpts of transcripts to situate what is said. It also needs to involve reflection on the interviewer/researcher's position and how this may have affected what has been said. Particularly for groups that feel marginalised or discriminated against, talking to a foreign researcher or journalist can be a way to be heard, to have a "voice" in some respects. Beyond the basic level of feeling that someone is paying attention, appealing to a foreign or international audience is often seen as a potential way to get one's narrative accepted and demands met.

One example of this concerned people involved in long-term protests demanding that the government allocate land on the outskirts of Bishkek after the protesters had moved from rural areas to Bishkek and seized land. After several months of fruitless protests both on-site and in the city centre outside the main government building, the White House, the protesters started including placards in English (see photo below), rather than Kyrgyz and Russian.

Land protesters outside the White House, Bishkek, 26 October 2005

This would seem to imply that this group of protestors had decided to focus on an international audience, most probably in the form of international organisations such as the OSCE, UNDP or USAID which all have a presence in the republic, in the hope that they would endorse their protest and help elicit a favourable response – usually unsuccessfully.

Returning to the theoretical framework of securitization in instances such as these proved largely unhelpful. After all, given the unstable socio-political state of post-Akaev[30]

---

[30] I use this term to avoid the more controversial and politically-loaded appellation "post-revolutionary Kyrgyzstan".

Kyrgyzstan, virtually all issues were being framed in existential terms on multiple levels: the future existence of the country was being questioned, as was the future of many societal groups, including the Kyrgyz themselves, and on the personal level people did not know how they would live in the future. Indeed, many people were quick to tell me that there was no security in Kyrgyzstan, reflecting the mood of extreme uncertainty in the face of a seemingly endless stream of crises that the government often appeared unwilling, or unable, to respond effectively to, in spite of occasional and often belated pronouncements to the contrary.

At the same time, there was no shortage of groups demanding immediate solutions to their problems regardless of the legality of their demands. Such demands were often expressed publicly and loudly through public demonstrations, some times with threats of violence, including self-immolation on several occasions. Effectively, "normal" politics – the Copenhagen School's default starting arena for the launching of a securitization – did not exist, as could be expected following the overthrow of the president and his apparatus. In effect, there was no vertical of power that would act as a filter for securitizing moves by establishing who had sufficient social capital to effectively speak "security". Instead, the situation was one of multiple voices struggling to be heard on multiple geographic, social and even political levels. Reference to theory here was little use as the framework and even the basic criteria could not capture the nuances of the situation.

One possible way to "filter" the mass of primary field data that can be observed and documented would be to see which narratives are reported by the mass media. This would, in principle, provide a benchmark if not for securitizations, then at least for "significant" securitising moves, echoing the Copenhagen School's recognition of the impact such moves can have on the broader situation.[31] However, this method is not without its problems either, as Hans-Henrik Holm notes, pointing out that what makes the front page is determined by local cultural, historical and ideological context.[32] In this respect the media act as a gatekeeper, with their own agendas to pursue and promote. The editor of the independent local newspaper *Itogi nedeli* in Osh was blunt on this matter, noting at his choice of front page was dictated by what would sell the most copies. For example, a recent issue uncovering the awarding of incorrect degree certificates[33] apparently sold very well, whilst "when there is a political theme, there are far fewer copies sold."[34] Similarly, IWPR's Country Director noted that the material published reflected the interests of the international audience, explaining that

> …we want to tell people what is happening in the world through the voice of simple journalists. Usually it happens that some correspondent or other comes from abroad, spends two or three days in the Hyatt, files his story and leaves. That is, he's here for one event or another. We try to make sure that local voices are heard on the international level, and this predetermines our choice, that is, we want to cover those stories that are understandable to an international reader, […] sometimes it might be topics that are exotic and interesting for an international reader.[35]

As can be seen, different audiences receive different information, and, particularly in the case of "speech acts", the media effectively filters what narratives get heard. One further way the researcher may seek to triangulate her impressions is through the use survey and public opinion data. Aside from the problem of direct comparability between data sets, there is also the issue of the contingency of results. The magnitude of contingency's effect should not be underestimated, as the following example illustrates. In both Bishkek and Osh I arranged to have a social survey about perceptions of identity carried out.[36] In addition to questions about native language, nationality, religion and aspects of personality, a general question on political views was included: "Are you for a democratic society or for strong power (or other)?" As

---

[31] "A better measure of importance is the scale of chain reactions on other securitizations: How big an impact does the securitizing move have on wider patterns of relations? A securitizing move can easily upset orders of mutual accommodation among units." Buzan, Barry, Jaap de Wilde & Ole Wæver (1998): 26.

[32] Holm, Hans-Henrik (2002) "Failing Failed States: Who Forgets the Forgotten?" *Security Dialogue* 33(4): 464.

[33] Jorobekova, Nargiza (2006) "Nenuzhnyj diplom stoit 50 000 somov" [A unnecessary diploma costs 50,000 som] *Itogi nedeli* 15(47) Osh, Kyrgyzstan: 14 April 2006.

[34] Interview with editor of *Itogi nedeli*, Osh, 05/05/2006.

[35] Interview with Country Director, IWPR, Bishkek, 06/12/2005.

[36] Bishkek survey conducted December 2005, n=291; Osh survey conducted June 2006, n=253.

Table One below shows, there was a large difference in the responses from Bishkek and Osh.

	% of respondents in Bishkek (Dec 2005)	*% of respondents in Osh (June 2006)*
For democratic society	25.4	71.9
For strong power	48.5	17.8
For both	19.2	0.8
Other	5.5	3.6
No answer	1.4	5.9

Table One. Responses to the question
"Are you for a democratic society or for strong power (or other)?"

One might expect some differences between responses in the northern, more secular, more Russified capital and the southern city of Osh, with its large Uzbek population[37] and reputation for being more religious and conservative, but the results seem to be counterintuitive: it would seem logical for support for democracy to be higher in Bishkek than in Osh, as the former is less traditional, more socially liberal and more open to external influences. However, the statistics suggest the opposite is true.

In this case, it is possible to suggest that the timing of the survey had a significant effect on the results. In Bishkek on October 28, 2005, there had been a large public rally under the slogan "Peaceful Citizens for Kyrgyzstan Without Organised Crime". This was the culmination of a series of protests by competing groups that was sparked by the murder of a parliamentary deputy on October 20. The leader of one of the protesting groups was the murdered deputy's brother, the known criminal authority Ryspek Akmatbaev. After several days of protests demanding the immediate resignation of the then-Prime Minister, Feliks Kulov, President Kurmanbek Bakiev agreed to meet with a delegation from the group protesting against his Prime Minister. Understandably, this raised fears amongst the public that the government was weak and in danger of becoming criminalised. Given the resonance of this situation, as well as evidence that residents of the capital are relatively more aware of crime and concerned about instability,[38] it is perhaps less surprising that a relatively low proportion of respondents said they were solely in favour of a democratic society.

Similarly, a consideration of the situation in Osh, as well as Kyrgyzstan more widely, in June 2006 suggests that the survey data is highly contingent. On a local level protests in Osh had been extremely limited in number and size and generally related to local issues such as perceived unfair arrests. There was also a general sense of "protest fatigue" even when speaking about opposition-led rallies being held in Bishkek, if indeed people were aware of them.[39] In the same way, nationally the situation had been less tense and there had been fewer protests overall, with those that *did* occur taking place predominantly in the north. Perceptions of instability may also have been lower due to different and more limited media coverage of protests in favour of more local concerns. In these circumstances democracy is more likely to be seen in positive terms, such as a guarantee of being able to practice one's religion, rather than an ineffective form of government in the face of serious threats.

The researcher is therefore not necessarily any better off in relying on the media or statistical data as an indicator of securitizations. Once again, it is a question of slowly building up a composite picture using as many sources as possible and taking care to critically evaluate

---

[37] As of 2005, according to official data Uzbeks comprised 31.25% of the population of Osh oblast. (Figures from the Osh *Dom druzhby*, 23 May 2006.)
[38] IRI, Baltic Surveys / The Gallup Organization *Kyrgyzstan National Voters Study* April 2005: 11, 14.
[39] Informal interviews, Osh, 26 April 2006.

all information and associated assumptions. Broadly speaking, an ethnographic approach is likely to be most suitable for this, even if it requires setting aside one's theoretical framework to ensure one does not simply find what the theory suggests should be found. Adopting such an approach is not the anathema many theoreticians suggest. Rather, as Bayard de Volo and Schatz point out, "The irony is that although political scientists, as students of power and politics, are well positioned to consider these links, the discipline tends to ignore them."[40] Similarly, the Copenhagen School is not fundamentally opposed to empirical studies; indeed in Buzan and Wæver's most recent book there is explicit recognition of the current lack of empirically-based case studies of securitization.[41] The question, as we have seen, is how to conduct such a study.

Talking *bezopasnost,* Security and/or Safety

> *Q: What, in your opinion, does the word bezopasnost mean?*
> *A: The government has in mind the absence of war with neighbouring countries, we have more in mind… all this bloodletting, inequality, it's frightening. There's such a sense of fear now.[42]*

In light of the centrality of reflexivity to undertaking a successful empirical study of "security", ambiguities that arise must be particularly closely considered. I was already conscious of any "interviewer effect", or simply of potentially contributing to perceptions of insecurity due to my (junior) status as a Western researcher. Widespread distrust of the government and authorities has resulted in people expressing a preference for information from non-governmental or non-Kyrgyz sources, extending to asking the opinion of visiting contractors on issues such as water cleanliness rather than trust published statistics, for example.[43] It was necessary to be careful, therefore, to ensure as far as possible that I was not seen as an expert in any way. In terms of appearance this was largely uncomplicated due to being perceived as very young and previously having been known as a student by several key contacts.[44] When talking to people I generally avoided calling myself a political scientist, which is considered quite academically prestigious*,* preferring to refer to my background in Russian language and literature (academically not prestigious), or sometimes calling myself a sociologist. Furthermore, during interviews and conversations I described my research in very broad terms, stressing that I wanted to hear what people thought and learn. I tended to present the issue in a number of ways, usually mentioning the words "society", "perceptions of security", "relations with the state", "identity" and "communities", avoiding defining any particular sort of "security", or indeed, "safety". I feel this approach was warranted in light of the value-laden nature of words like "security", but on the other it meant that locating "security" became a very context-dependent venture, both in terms of what events had recently happened, and potentially how exactly I framed the question.

To help address this issue I introduced a check question during interviews: "what does "security" mean to you? On its own this question would have been wholly inadequate, but within the wider context it proved to be very important in picking up nuances, contradictions and ensuring I did not leap to conclusions on the basis of limited information. In addition, from a theoretical perspective, it further highlighted the need to understand what we – and others – mean when we use certain words, since no word is value-neutral and our usage informed by a myriad of socio-cultural factors that require explicit interrogation by the fieldworker.

---

[40] Bayard de Volo, Lorraine & Edward Schatz (2004) "From the Inside Out: Ethnographic Methods in Political Research" *PS: Political Science & Politics* 37(2): 268.

[41] Buzan, Barry & Ole Wæver (2003) *Regions and Powers* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 74.

[42] Interview with representative of the Osh branch of the Uzbek National-Cultural Association "Orzu", Osh, 05/06/2006

[43] Reported in conversation with a DFID contractor, Bishkek, November 2005.

[44] For a fuller account of positionality issues encountered during the fieldwork, see Wilkinson, Claire (2007) 'Positioning "Security" and Securing One's Position: The Researcher's Role in Investigating "Security" in Kyrgyzstan' in Wall, Caleb & Peter Mollinga (forthcoming 2007) *Fieldwork in Difficult Environments: Discussing the Divergence between Theory and Practice* Berlin: Lit Verlag.

Of all the interviews I conducted in Bishkek and Osh, only members of Kel-Kel, a youth organisation that was a high-profile actor in protests leading up to the "Tulip Revolution", immediately moved for a definition related to the state rather than considering a number of levels first. Answers ranged from a largely abstract consideration of "security", as in the case of the above quotation from IWPR's Country Director, to very personal accounts, such as that given by a member of Labrys, an NGO supporting lesbian, bisexual and male-to-female transgendered people:

> For me security/safety means when nobody intrudes into my personal life, when nobody hurts me, when my rights and beliefs are respected. And security for me is when it is quiet on the street, when I can walk around alone at night, when I do not fear meeting my husband somewhere around the corner (which I often did). Security/safety is when you just know that your day will be calm, free of stress or negative experiences. My husband used to beat me up constantly… So when I go to bed without having been told off or beaten up or having had my mood spoiled by anyone, I think I have had a safe day. That is, security/safety is when nothing threatens you.[45]

Several respondents were keen to stress the absence of security/safety in Kyrgyzstan: "Security/safety, it seems, means that there is such a system in the country so that there is respect towards individuals and that people are permitted to be themselves, because at the moment we don't have this. So, in this sense, we have no security/safety" reasoned one youth activist in Bishkek.[46] Another youth activist who also worked as a journalist framed his answer with reference to an attack he had recently suffered:

> Safety/security isn't even a topic here now, I'll just say one thing, everyone, most likely, knows, there's been attacks on deputies, they have openly made threats by telephone, openly said to me that if I don't leave Osh they'll come and get me. I did a sort of hidden interview with them, the border guards come in, even in the open they're not afraid of me and openly beat me badly. That was in Osh not long ago, around the 6th or 7th of December. Well then, what sort of talk about security/safety can there be?[47]

Most frequently, however, interviewees were keen to stress the range of possible definitions, often contextualising their answers in considerable detail. For example, the president of one local NGO working on conflict prevention and mediation explained how definitions of "security" have changed over time, but that currently different actors – in this case the Kyrgyzstani government and the NGO sector respectively – are using differing definitions of security:

> … this is possibly from my experience of work. Now we already have several understandings in the region of what SSB is, incidentally thanks to international organisations, that earlier by SSB we always had in mind state SSB or regional SSB and today we focus on the term human SSB. I think that this understanding [of the term] is getting through to a certain elite, to a certain section of the elite. Secondly, who answers for it, if earlier, as we said there was such an understanding, a *sovkov* understanding, as state SSB, then the institutes of state were responsible for state SSB. As a rule this is the Ministry of Defence, the police, the Committee for National Security, and so on. Today, since we're now talking about human SSB, there is also the notion that not only state institutions are responsible for it [i.e. SSB], but that the civil sector should also carry responsibility. … Further, since we're talking again about state SSB, it is borders, one's territory, the territory of the country, maybe it's natural resources, it's intelligence officers, the CIA and the like as a threat. Today we include in SSB such things as a quality education, for example, equal access to resources, ecology has become a very serious matter, and, well, quality of life in general. So we're already changing the component parts of the word SSB. Well, and, if earlier when we talked of SSB then, as a rule, we were looking as an external enemy as a threat, some form of inter-state war. But today, when we talk about SSB, here , undoubtedly, we're talking about internal political chemistry, put it this way, about the interrelationships between the authorities, the opposition and citizens,

---

[45] Interview with member of LBT NGO Labrys, Bishkek, 14/12/2005.
[46] Interview with representatives of Birge! Youth Movement, Bishkek, 23/11/2005.
[47] Interview with representative of KelKel Youth Movement, Bishkek, 22/11/2005.

about the presence or absence or weakness or strength of mechanisms of state institutions or other institutions that are capable of resolving disputed, conflictual problems.[48]

The researcher is thus faced with a problem. All of these interviewees were selected as representatives of communities who had in the past been able to effectively act as securitizing actors (successfully or unsuccessfully), invoking a societal referent object and presenting a threat narrative in the public domain (usually via the mass media). Yet, as can be seen, when interviewed they often spoke in far more personal terms than solely as a community spokesman. The Copenhagen School's assertion that societal identities can be viewed as largely stable or "sedimented"[49] is therefore problematic, since the degree of stability does not preclude other identities intersecting with them and indeed shaping the societal identity in question. The inherent relativity and contingency of identities, both those of the people in the field and our own, place the researcher in a unique and often uncomfortable position between the field and theory.

Once identity is viewed as more flexible, multiple and co-constitutive with events, then we once again see the importance of contingency in securitization and therefore the necessity to consider the relationships between individual securitizing moves, which often operate across multiple levels, appeal to multiple audiences and may be in direct conflict. This is especially true in Kyrgyzstan, as in other so-called "weak" states, where there are multiple loci of power, both official (various levels of government, political opposition, national-cultural organisations, the NGO sector) and unofficial (local criminal authorities, sections of the mass media), meaning that non-state actors with sufficient social authority have as much "voice", or even more "voice" as state-recognised actors such as politicians. The researcher cannot simply locate "security", or indeed any other phenomenon. Rather, she must build up sufficient description around it so that it is made "visible", in much the same way as an artist may draw an object using negative space. The negative space in this case is "security", which is interpreted in relation to that surrounding it, namely the field context and theoretical framework.

Interpreting "Security": Local Knowledge Between Theory and Fieldwork

> *CW: What, in your opinion, are the most acute social problems in Osh?*
> *PG: Oh, but I'm not a sociologist…*
> *CW: No, but from your perspective as a journalist?*
> *PG: I won't take… I'm not going to talk about it, it would be unfair, I'm not a researcher or statistician. The last few months I've just been the manager of the newspaper, I demand that my journalists tell me what's happening. I don't have any right to even talk about it because I just switch on the TV and watch the news, I'm just a consumer.*[50]

Ironically, given the lengthy illustrations of the importance of context, positionality and reflexivity I have provided so far, much of the clearest explanation comes directly from the people being researched. Accessing this "local knowledge" is perhaps the most vital component for ensuring our work is fully contextualised and focused on the subject of research, not on the researcher. In this sense it is up to the researcher to present this knowledge and use it to both contextualise and decentre herself and her research. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from an open letter to President Kurmanbek Bakiev on November 30, 2005, by two representatives of the NGO sector that was circulated by email:

> If the courts worked, and citizens' problems were solved by competent state administration system specialists who were not indifferent, then there would not be any need to go out onto picket lines, demonstrations and protests. People decide to do this only when all other methods have been exhausted – letters, meetings, dialogues, appeals to the mass media.

---

[48] Interview with representative of Fund for Tolerance International, Bishkek, 30/11/2007.
[49] Buzan, Barry, Jaap de Wilde & Ole Wæver (1997): 243.
[50] Interview with editor, *Itogi nedeli* newspaper, Osh, 05/05/2006

> […] in any case when people take to the streets and squares, it is vital for the government to pay particular attention to the reasons that led to such a step. This will give the opportunity to be in the course of all events, and a dynamic solution to the problems will facilitate the gradual recovery of society.[51]

This letter concisely elucidates both the context – the failure of state institutions to address the needs of the people, the problem – public protests and immediate demands, as well how it can best be addressed in the authors' opinion – understanding how the situation arose and keeping abreast of events as they happen. If, therefore, we are seeking to investigate a phenomenon that is fundamentally linked to events such as protests, using knowledge from the field to inform not only our conclusions but our methods would seem a logical step.

According to an opinion poll conducted in April 2005, "security" was rated as being the most important value to Kyrgyzstani people.[52] Yet, as has been explored in this paper, such a "fact" is largely meaningless when taken out of its socio-political context. Recourse to theoretical frameworks cannot replace the detailed and careful interrogation of the object of study within a specific locale, paying attention to local understandings. Moving the local to the foreground of study, permits us to focus on specificities, ambiguities and the disjunctures between theory, method and the field. For the study of social phenomena, such an approach is likely to be far more revealing and nuanced than a focus on commonalities both theoretically and empirically, as well as facilitating the bridging of the gap that too-often exists between these two integral parts of research.

---

[51] Sasybekova, Asya & Natalya Ablova (2005) "Pismo Prezidentu po povodu mitingov" ["Letter to the President about Protests"]. Distributed by email 30 November, 2005. Received by email.

[52] "Security" was given a mean score of 7.48, where 1 – "important to me" and 9 – "most important to me". IRI, Baltic Surveys / The Gallup Organization *Kyrgyzstan National Voters Study* April 2005: 45.