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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Re-creating ontological security: Flow and optimal experience

Brent J. Steele

Department of Political Science, The University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT, USA
Email: brent.steele@utah.edu

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Abstract
This article utilises the work of the late Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and his concept of 'flow' or optimal experience, to re-theorise ontological security as a process. Explored through empirical contexts where flow has already been applied or could be, such as in elite decision-making or soldiers in combat, the article not only situates flow as a contrast to other accounts of the subject but also suggests that flow has been part of subject formation in global politics for some time and deserves attention for its creative promises.

Keywords: creativity; flow; focus; immersion; ontological security

As the special issue editors observe in their introduction, while ontological security is assumed to be a core drive for late modern subjects, from individuals to groups to states to even regions or systems, the actual study of these processes has tended to focus on its lack. Part of the purpose of the special issue is therefore to pivot from ontological security studies' (OSS) increasingly default position of an ontologically *insecure* subject, a pivot the current paper hopes to accelerate. The editors address how an emphasis on ontological *in*security has been present in OSS, even from the early studies in the 2000s.

Even in the origins of ontological security, long before it was introduced into international relations, definitions point to its elusiveness. Ronald Laing's well-cited chapter of the *Divided Self* was titled, tellingly, ontological *in*security. But his definition of the affirmative, ontological security, occurs whenever an

> individual, then, may experience his own being as real, alive, whole; as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question; as a continuum in time; as having an inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness, and worth; as spatially co-extensive with the body; and, usually, as having begun in or around birth and liable to extinction with death. He thus has a firm core of ontological security.[1]

Giddens addressed ontological security in two sections of his *The Constitution of Society*. First, in the context of how 'Ordinary day-to-day life … involves an *ontological security* expressing an *autonomy of bodily control* within *predictable routines*'.[2] Further, 'ontological security is achieved

[1]R. D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (2006), Penguin, p. 43.

[2]Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (University of California Press, 1984), p. 50, emphasis original.

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and sustained by a *bewildering* range of skills which agents deploy in the production and reproduction of interaction'.[3] In a concluding chapter for his 1991 book, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, what Giddens described as 'life politics' involved a 'politics of self-actualisation in a reflexively ordered environment'. Here one is presented with an even more precise understanding of what ontological security might be: wherein 'only if the person is able to develop an *inner authenticity* – a framework of basic trust by means of which can be understood as a unity against the backdrop of shifting social events – can this be attained'.[4]

Taken together, such descriptions seem to set a high 'bar' for ontological security. What is an 'inner authenticity'? What consistency is 'co-extensive' with a body? And when do subjects (especially across genders) ever have an 'autonomy of bodily control' that isn't being impacted by Others? As researchers who use this concept, it also proves challenging to access this methodologically, precisely because ontologically, 'ontological security' is so fleeting that we may only come to know it *when it is not there*.

Indeed, as also treated in the Introduction, there has perhaps been no more powerful thread in OSS for providing an account of pervasive ontological *in*security than the Lacanian one,[5] where subjects are typically drawn towards fantasies of fulfilment.[6] Fantasies mobilise a sense of ontological lack and deficiency. The problem according to Lacanian renderings of OS is that fantasies fail to deliver and an empirical 'lack' is never resolved by acquiring the objects that promised to fulfil it. The result for subjects is a pleasure or enjoyment that is elusive because those objects have been taken by an Other. That sense of falling short typically only reactivates the desire for something that will resolve the lack.[7] Insecurity leads to further insecurity leads to further insecurity. Lacanian arguments have been leveraged in OSS to provide powerful understandings of nationalist appeals, and especially within forms of populism.[8] It is not only that Lacanian accounts effectively understand such dynamics but also that they help explain the repetitive, seemingly inescapable populist 'loop' that political communities have experienced throughout the 2010s and especially 2020s.[9] This theorising of ontological insecurity helps make the Lacanian strand of OSS so compelling.

So, if one is to find ontological security, to re-create it so to speak, we need to look elsewhere. I examine two questions in this paper. First, how might one re-theorise ontological security if it is examined as not an elusive outcome but rather a process? Put another way, what enables the *creating* of OS and thus what might OS 'look like' and feel like as a process? Second, if we turn towards the study of how, where, and when OS is created rather than just what generates its lack, what might that entail? If, as Kinnvall summarises, 'a Lacanian approach means to accept the fragile nature of a constant becoming – *of learning to live with a constitutive lack*',[10] might subjects still find fulfilling experiences even if the 'lack' remains? To answer these questions, I draw from work in positive psychology that has been of increasing focus for the past few decades, work that centres strengths in humans and groups, rather than just weaknesses. This foregrounds creative processes that build

[3]Ibid., p. 78.

[4]Ibid., pp. 214–15, emphasis added.

[5]John Cash, 'Psychoanalysis, cultures of anarchy, and ontological insecurity', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 306–21; Catarina Kinnvall and Ted Svensson, 'Trauma, home, and geopolitical bordering: A Lacanian approach to the COVID-19 crisis', *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:3 (2023), sqad053.

[6]Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (W. W. Norton & Co, 1979).

[7]Christopher S. Browning, Pertti Joenniemi, and Brent J. Steele, *Vicarious Identity in International Relations: Self, Security, and Status on the Global Stage* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

[8]Catarina Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries: The emotional appeal of populism', *Humanity & Society*, 42:4 (2018), pp. 523–43; Catarina Kinnvall and Ted Svensson, 'Misrecognition and the Indian state: The desire for sovereign agency', *Review of International Studies*, 44:5 (2018), pp. 902–21.

[9]Marina Vulović and Filip Ejdus, 'Object-cause of desire and ontological security: Evidence from Serbia's opposition to Kosovo's membership in UNESCO', *International Theory*, 16:1 (2024), pp. 122–51; Catarina Kinnvall and Ted Svensson, 'Exploring the populist "mind": Anxiety, fantasy, and everyday populism', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24:3 (2022), pp. 526–42.

[10]Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries', p. 531.

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strength, resilience,[11] competency, and fortitude, all skills, processes, and contexts for making life in global politics *more fulfilling*.[12] By redirecting our attention to the experiences of 'creating', we hearken back to the focus in earlier OSS works on the 'health' of routines and practices,[13] which now might be titled, following Heinrichs, 'adaptive' versus maladaptive.[14]

In doing so, the paper is purposed to contrast with, but also complement, accounts of the ontologically insecure subject. I use the concept of 'flow', one first developed by Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Csikszentmihalyi would define 'flow' as 'a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it'.[15] My argument develops what I title 'ontological security as flow', to refocus our attention on *different* expectations for the Self and the subject of ontological security. Rather than outcomes, it calls attention to *process*. Rather than elevating devices that help (re)order a Self in the face of pervasive anxiety – narratives and routines most prominent among them – it requires ontological security analysts to dig deeper into meanings for an active subject, and what formations of a subject can and do occur through repeated optimal experiences.

Therefore, this paper is primarily a theoretical intervention in OSS, but I do hope to provide some empirical illustrations along the way. I advance this argument in four more sections. The next multilayered one provides an overview of 'optimal experience' as studied by Csikszentmihalyi. I then present what I call the 'takeaways' that ontological security as flow provides OSS; I also propose spaces where the experimentation that is the core of flow can be fostered, specifically within homes and homespaces, as both structures for exploring being and broader intersubjective settings for becoming.[16] The third section briefly examines two empirical contexts where flow has already been applied or could be – the 'doodling' of presidents and leaders, and flow in soldiers and military training. My purpose there is not only to introduce flow as a contrast to other accounts of the subject but also to suggest that flow has been part of subject formation in global politics for some time and deserves attention for its creative promises. That said, in the penultimate section, I acknowledge flow's political and ethical limitations noted in other fields, such as feminist ethics[17] and military studies,[18] and how they might be addressed. These focus on flow's analytical and methodological, as well as political, limitations, yet also its promising possibilities. I conclude with a call for OSS as a research community to increasingly investigate flow as an experience intelligible to all late modern subjects in an increasingly, seemingly, 'anxious' world.

[11]Marco Vieira's study is an exception (that perhaps proves the rule?) within OSS in examining resilience and in the context of the non-aligned movement; Marco Vieira, 'Understanding resilience in international relations: The non-aligned movement and ontological security', *International Studies Review*, 18:2 (2016), pp. 290–311.

[12]Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 'Positive psychology: An introduction', *American Psychological Association*, 55:1 (2000), p. 5.

[13]'If, for example, a friend breaks a promise, or a rival acts generously, actors with healthy basic trust can respond to the new information flexibly, even if it means restructuring the relationship'; Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70.

[14]Pauline Heinrichs, 'Energy security, climate change, and routines as maladaptive politics', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4:3 (2024), ksae050.

[15]Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (Harper & Row, 1990). Readers will notice that there could be a troubling set of phenomena following from this definition, which I deal with in the second section.

[16]This helps connect that section, and this paper, to the themes of 'being as becoming' sketched in the introduction and expressed directly by Cornelia Baciu in her contribution to the special issue; Cornelia Baciu, 'Express your self: Expressivism and ontological security', *European Journal of International Security,* (2026), this issue.

[17]Karen M. Fox and Gordon Walker, 'Reconsidering the relationship between flow and feminist ethics: A response', *Leisure Studies*, 21:1 (2002), pp. 15–26.

[18]Yuval Noah Harari, 'Combat flow: Military, political, and ethical dimensions of subjective well-being in war', *Review of General Psychology*, 12:3 (2008), pp. 253–64.

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Flow, optimal experience, and ontological security

My introduction revisited some foundational definitions of ontological security. I mentioned that they come with a lot of expectations for achieving that state or condition. But what I appreciate about both Laing and Giddens's understandings of ontological security, with emphases on being 'alive' (Laing) and 'self-actualisation' in a reflexively ordered environment (Giddens), is that ontological security should *not* be confused with 'static' forms of being – such as mundane contexts of 'stability'. Even in its origins, ontological security is active, dynamic, and creative. *This* is the direction I want to take us in analysing (and even realising) ontological security, so that focus is not necessarily on how it is a product being sought but rather a lively process being *enacted*.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi began thinking about what would become known as 'flow' as he reflected on his own personal experiences in Europe during World War II (he was born in 1934 in what was then Italy but is now Rijeka, Croatia). He would remark how 'many of the adults I had known as successful and self-confident became helpless and dispirited once the war removed their social supports … *yet there were a few who kept their integrity and purpose despite the surrounding chaos*'.[19] Csikszentmihalyi wanted to find out what 'sources of strength' this latter group drew from, how those 'few people who kept their decency during the onslaught of WWII held the key to what humans could be like at their best'.[20] This would lead Csikszentmihalyi in a number of directions, and ultimately to a focus in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in work with Martin Seligman, the other 'founder' of positive psychology. The two of them would in a January 2000 co-authored essay 'remind' their 'field' that 'psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness and damage, it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken, it is nurturing what is best.'[21]

Csikszentmihalyi identified a number of features associated with flow, anywhere from the six he described in his 1975 book, to the nine in the 1990 study. I want to draw out what I see as the seven that, together, provide a foundation or set of 'takeaways' for OSS, which I list in the following subsection. First, flow is a 'merging of action and awareness',[22] where the mind does not wander during optimal experience. This intense concentration is made possible by a second feature of flow, the 'centering of attention on a limited stimulus field'.[23]

The next two features contain 'paradoxes', in that there is a 'loss of ego' and even a 'transcendence of individuality', or what Csikszentmihalyi would later call a 'loss of self consciousness', that resulted in a 'paradox' where, thirdly, 'the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over'.[24] Fourth, the agent in flow has 'control of his actions and of the environment',[25] which at the same time comes with its own 'paradox' that involves release of worrying *about* losing control.

Fifth, and related to this 'centring of attention' feature is that flow manifests because of 'clear feedback'.[26] The feedback is not the goal itself but rather what happens in the process towards a goal, for even the latter can sometimes be unclear or even 'vague'.[27]

Sixth, just as goals are less important than the feedback in the process of action, so too are 'rewards external to the activity' insignificant or less significant. This Csikszentmihalyi describes as the 'autotelic' nature of flow, wherein 'the purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking

[19] Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 'Positive psychology', p. 6, emphasis original.

[20] Ibid., p. 7.

[21] Ibid., p. 4.

[22] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (Jossey-Bass, 1975), p. 39.

[23] Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom*, p. 40.

[24] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 49. To paraphrase Patrick Swayze's character in the 1991 film *Point Break*, this feature of flow is akin to the spiritual experience of surfing – 'that place where you lose yourself and find yourself'.

[25] Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom*, p. 44.

[26] Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom*, p. 46.

[27] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 55. Here one finds a potential intersecting theorisation with Lacanian understandings of the 'fantasy' of fulfilling ontological security. See for example the signifier of 'winning' as an ambiguous aspiration for the US subject in its vicarious identification with Israel as treated in the Lacanian-inspired OS study by Browning, Joenniemi, and Steele, *Vicarious Identity*, esp. chapter 3.

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for a peak or utopia but staying in the flow'.[28] In his 1990 study, Csikszentmihalyi defined autotelic as a 'self-contained activity, one that is done not with the expectation of some future benefit, but simply because the doing itself is the reward'.[29]

Seventh, there is a unique mixing of temporalities within flow, in a couple of ways. One is the importance of the present over the future, of even 'being in the present' at the expense of what has been or might be. A second is the passing of time, which often happens without regard to clock time or, to invoke Hom's important intervention in this area, timings.[30] Time is 'transformed' so that it passes quickly: 'often hours seem to pass by in minutes'.[31]

These seven features, taken together, give us a clear picture of flow, yet one point of clarification is still appropriate to mention. With a definition (mentioned in my introduction) of it as a state of engaging in an action 'so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it', flow may at the same time be confused with unhealthier repetitive practices, such as addiction.

There are, however, distinctions between flow and addictive, self-harmful, or self-defeating practices. One merges in the difference between pleasure, which can be provided by, for instance, more transgressive behaviours, and what Csikszentmihalyi understands as enjoyment. The former is provided by 'sleep, rest, food, and sex', but pleasure 'by itself cannot create new order in consciousness'. Enjoyment, however, 'is characterised by … forward movement, by a sense of novelty'. Enjoyment is not 'homeostatic' but rather a state of growth. While similar practices and activities can produce both pleasure and enjoyment, the latter is a more challenging state to achieve, because it requires 'an investment of attention' and full concentration.[32]

The problem occurs when opportunities for enjoyment dissipate over time. To fill the void, pleasure is substituted as 'the only source of positive experience'.[33] Even writing in 1975, Csikszentmihalyi asserted how 'the opportunity to satisfy pleasure and to obtain material comforts' was 'unprecedented'; it was not a coincidence that the levels of 'crime, mental disease, alcoholism, venereal disease, gambling, dissatisfaction with work, [and] drug abuse' were 'steadily worsening'. A second substitute for enjoyment is when a subject turns to external rewards. As Csikszentmihalyi describes, such a subject can 'work harder for 'extrinisic' rewards … Status, power and money are signs that one is competent … but these are secondary rewards that matter only when the primary enjoyment that could be had from action itself is not available'.[34]

The secondary literature on flow has examined this distinction even more closely. Works in media neuroscience, for instance,[35] differentiate addiction and flow, where 'addiction is associated with bottom-up processing from subcortical areas and a lack of cognitive control, whereas flow is a rewarding experience associated with focused attention'.[36] Addictive activities, furthermore, enable a 'disorder and passivity' that then leave subjects needing 'to relearn abilities within a structured, goal orientated lifestyle'.[37] Conversely, the reintroduction of optimal experiences for those

[28]Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom*, p. 47.
[29]Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, p. 67.
[30]Andrew R. Hom, *International Relations and the Problem of Time* (Oxford University Press, 2020).
[31]Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, p. 66.
[32]Ibid., p. 46.
[33]Ibid., p. 47.
[34]Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom*, p. 199.
[35]Rene Weber, Richard Huskey, and Britney Craighead, 'Flow experiences and well-being: A media neuroscience perspective', in Leonard Reinecke and Mary Beth Oliver (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Media Use and Well-Being* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 183–96.
[36]Ibid., 192.
[37]Karen Helbig and Elizabeth McKay, An exploration of addictive behaviours from an occupational perspective. *Journal of Occupational Science,* 10(3), 140–145.

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recovering from substance abuse seems promising, since flow 'may be employed therapeutically to reintroduce a sense of intrinsic, healthy 'satisfaction'.[38]

Ontological security as flow

The above delineations of flow lead to at least six takeaways for what this account might illuminate for ontological security as well as work in OSS that can be revisited along these lines.

First, and picking up from the previous subsection's distinction between pleasure and enjoyment, there is an immediate conceptual distinction with the Lacanian perspective on jouissance. This term has been understood as 'enjoyment' as well. Initially, there is overlap between the two understandings, with both the fantasy of enjoyment and its 'promise of fullness,'[39] and flow as enjoyment, pushing subjects forward in creative ways. However, that promise of fullness is itself a fantasy in Lacanian OSS; it is a state 'that can never be fulfilled'.[40] And the reason for that lack of fulfilment is that the jouissance is found in the Other. The experience of 'closing in on that illusion exposes its false promise and, accordingly, approaching the source of enjoyment paradoxically regenerates anxiety'.[41] There is nothing like this in the enjoyment of flow. It is not an object to be 'possessed' but rather a 'holistic sensation' of being totally involved in an action. It is, again, a process, rather than an outcome. And an essential one, for while 'life can be endured' without enjoyment, 'it can be so only precariously'.[42]

Second, Csikszentmihalyi's account contrasts with more 'libidinal' takes on the subject, as well as the overwhelming importance of anxiety therein. As Csikszentmihalyi characterised it, 'for Freud, the libido is the source of all pleasure; but since the requirements of social life conflict with libidinal desires, discontent is the lot of civilized man'.[43] Political psychological accounts that draw in various ways from the subject's struggle to control libidinal impulses include Lacanian expressions,[44] as well as those following from Jung that render libido as a broader 'psychic energy' that can overwhelm agentic restraint.[45] These perspectives lend themselves again to what the editors of this special issue, in their Introduction, render a theorising of ontological *in*security (rather than security) as a default for late modern subjects.

Whether one sees the generation of such insecurity as a 'conflict' between libidinal desires and social life resulting in 'discontent [as] the lot of civilized man', as Freud saw,[46] or anxiety itself as not only a condition of individuals but also built into the structure of the global, late modern system,[47] it is in most accounts of ontological security the *avoidance* of anxiety that propels agents.[48]

[38]Amy R. Krentzman (2013). Review of the application of positive psychology to substance use, addiction, and recovery research. *Psychology of addictive behaviors*, 27(1), 151.

[39]Marco A. Vieira, '(Re-) imagining the "self" of ontological security: The case of Brazil's ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity', *Millennium*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 142–64.

[40]Catarina Kinnvall (2019). Racing to the Bottom„ Squeezing through the Cracks: Imagining unbordered space. In Jenny Edkins, editor, *Routledge Handbook of Critical International Relations* (pp. 231–245), *Routledge.*

[41]Bahar Rumelili and Batur Ozan Togay, 'Emotions and ontological security', in Simon Koschut and Andrew A. G. Ross (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Emotions in International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2025), pp. 359–74 (p. 365).

[42]Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, p. 48.

[43]Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1975) Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: The Experience of Play in Work and Games. Jossey-Bass.

[44]See especially C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki, 'The positions of ontological (in)security in international relations: Object relations, unconscious phantasies, and anxiety management', *International Theory*, 17:1 (2025), pp. 118–50; Jakub Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression: Fantasy as a factor in international politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22 (2019), pp. 243–68.

[45]Brent J. Steele, *Restraint in International Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[46]Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom*, p. x.

[47]Bahar Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety: Existentialism and the current state of international relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1020–36; Brent J. Steele, 'Nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide: Inescapable dread in the 2020s', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1037–43.

[48]See the Introduction to this special issue on work rendering anxiety as a fuel for living an 'authentic' life – Gustafson and Krickel-Choi, 'Going back to the roots' – for how 'normal anxiety' can enable creativity; and Gabriella Gricius and Renato

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A flow-inspired theorisation of the subject, conversely, focuses on the study of 'play' and how people 'involved in a great variety of activities which provide none of the rewards that a closed model predicts *must* be there'. As a result, 'one soon begins to realize that almost any object or any experience is potentially enjoyable'.[49]

Third, and related, the distinctions flow brings to ontological security accounts that centralise anxiety can potentially be profound. These were first spelled out in Csikszentmihalyi's 1975 book, so titled *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. Csikszentmihalyi added flow as a state beyond those two but also utilised them as affective bookend categories. As he described, 'when a person is bombarded with demands which [they] feel unable to meet, a state of anxiety ensues … if, however, skills are greater than the opportunities for using them, boredom will follow'. In between these is 'flow activity … one which provides optimal challenges in relation to the actor's skills'.[50] Anxiety is an *unproductive* form of using one's 'psychic energy', diverting creative force towards other, more 'unwieldy' ends.[51] Similar to OS accounts, Csikszentmihalyi asserted that 'every piece of information we process gets evaluated for its bearing on the self'.[52] Routines still work within and against anxiety, as well as boredom, but as forms of what Csikszentmihalyi' calls 'micro-flow'.[53] What transpires in flow as optimal experience goes beyond the ordering of a routine – the self (it)self becomes 'complex as a result of experiencing flow. Paradoxically, it is when we act freely, for the sake of action itself rather than ulterior motives, that we learn to become more than what we were.'[54]

Furthermore, this dynamic quality of flow vis-à-vis an ever more complex self, one of 'growth and discovery', is why *going back to old routines* that worked in the past fails to deliver on the fantasy of a 'whole' Self in the present and aspirational future. A politics of 'going back' that is, for instance, championed by regressive populist movements as seen in the United States under Donald Trump,[55] Brazil under Bolsanaro,[56] and/or Britain leading up to,[57] and through,[58] Brexit, is premised on going to 'old routines' from the past. These are not only problematic because of their romanticisation of a past that likely never existed. They are premised on a 'Self' that is of a more complex present and won't find enjoyment in 'doing the same thing at the same level'. As Csikszentmihalyi characterises it, 'flow activities lead to growth and discovery' and can't be regained by going back to a past where the Self experienced it via activities which were less complex,[59] let alone when those are institutionalised in a broader societal setting that removes the spontaneity, challenge, and 'play' that characterised an optimal experience of the past.[60]

Fakhoury's contribution to this special issue for how communities come about through eco-anxiety: Gabriella Gricius and Renato Fakhoury (2026) 'Eco-anxiety and the self in a warming world: Conceptualizing ontologically insecure communities,' *European Journal of International Studies*, 49:5 (2023), pp. 905–23.

[49] Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom*, p. x.

[50] Ibid., p. 50.

[51] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, p. 36.

[52] Ibid., p. 39.

[53] Micro-flow refers to 'activities that help us negotiate the doldrums of the day'; Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, p. 52.

[54] Ibid., p. 42.

[55] Alexandra Homolar and Ronny Scholz, 'The power of Trump-speak: Populist crisis narratives and ontological security', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 344–64.

[56] Martin Maitino and Marco Vieira, 'Ontological security and climate policy in Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil: Understanding the emotional underpinnings of environmental destruction', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4:3 (2024), pp. 1–13; Deborah Barros Leal Farias, Guilherme Casarões, and David Magalhães, 'Radical right populism and the politics of cruelty: The case of COVID-19 in Brazil under President Bolsonaro', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2:2 (2022), pp. 1–13.

[57] Martin L. Kirsch, 'What's the deal with elites? The role of political elites in identifying critical situations in ontological security theory', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 5:1 (2025), pp. 1–12.

[58] Christopher Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 222–44; Christopher Browning, 'Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in)security', *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 336–55; Lauren Rogers, 'Cue Brexit: Performing global Britain at the UN Security Council', *European Journal of International Security*, 9:1 (2024), pp. 122–40, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2023.27

[59] The 'natural connection between growth and enjoyment tends to disappear with time … the excitement of mastering new skills gradually wears out'; Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, p. 47.

[60] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, pp. 74–5.

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It is in this context that a fourth takeaway from flow emerges. Ontological security as flow not only arises from creative play but itself also enables creativity. Here I am calling out the importance of the next step that follows, as the special issue is titled, 'creating ontological security'. Csikszentmihalyi's first interviews that fostered the concept of flow were with artists in the 1960s. As he noted in one 2012 interview, it was

> those artists who started out with least preconceived notion of how the actual finished product would look like, they started actually with just a kind of a dimly felt … problem … and who as they began to put colors and shapes on the canvas began to think oh well wait a minute I could do this I could do that … They allowed the problem to emerge through the interaction with the medium … they didn't bring to the canvas an already established aesthetic idea.[61]

Recall the optimal experience feature of 'clear feedback' in this context. It is not the outcome or goal but rather in the *interaction* with the canvas that the artist experiences flow. In short, we should note then not only what it takes to 'get' to an optional OS experience through flow but also what ontological security as flow, as a *process* rather than *endpoint*, creates.

In this interactive context arises a fifth takeaway in optimal experiences – their *phenomenalism*.[62] Jackson's contribution to international relations via his 'philosophical wagers' helped to define phenomenalism as a category of philosophies that all share a 'reluctance to go beyond experience in the construction of knowledge' and also a 'desire to ground knowledge in the experience of concrete phenomena'.[63] Flow's essence of 'centering attention on a limited stimulus field' is thus comfortably positioned within phenomenalism. So construed, it should not surprise us that the more 'playful' understandings of space in works on 'phenomenology' in IR see 'spaces' as much more dynamic 'embodied experience[s] of the local'.[64] Finding contexts for such play, as discussed at the end of this section via 'home', remains paramount for a subject's development of optimal experiences.

A sixth and related feature of Csikszentmihalyi's approach is that it starts its focus almost solely within the 'endogenous' sources of ontological security-seeking, contrasting with the environmental or socially embedded 'exogenous' ones that Kinnvall and Mitzen delineated in their overview of OSS in a 2020 study.[65] This dichotomy was first referred to by Zarakol in her crucial 2010 intervention as an early 'agent-structure debate' that emerged in OSS.[66] Steele summarised these in a more recent study as to whether ontological security is influenced 'more by the Self's work on the Self, where historical memory, cognitive and/or group moods or psyches play a large role, or by social structures or the social environment/relationships with others?'[67] While this 'debate' seemed to resolve in OSS towards a set of analytical choices about where ontological security-building resources emerge for agents, self vis-à-vis past or future aspirational selves, or self within the relational space of international society, Csikszentmihalyi's emphasis on the 'autotelic experience' of

[61] Classroom Media, 'Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi – Flow: Psychology, creativity, & optimal experience', YouTube (9 October 2012), available at: {https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cuZi2YCtcJs}.

[62] Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom*, p. 26.

[63] Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics*, 2nd ed. (Taylor & Francis, 2016), p. 52.

[64] Mauro J. Caraccioli, 'Spatial structures and the phenomenology of inter-national identity', *International Political Sociology*, 5:1 (2011), pp. 98–102 (p. 98).

[65] Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 240–56.

[66] A. Zarakol, 'Ontological (in)security and state denial of historical crimes: Turkey and Japan', *International Relations*, 24:1 (2010), pp. 3–23 (p. 19).

[67] Brent Steele, 'Foreign policy analysis and ontological security studies', in Juliet Kaarbo and Cameron G. Thies (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Foreign Policy Analysis* (2024), (Oxford University Press), pp. 115–33.

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flow means that the first analytical location for it is *within* agents.[68] He justified this focus in his 1990 study:

> Most enjoyable activities are not natural; they demand an effort that initially one is reluctant to make. But once the interaction starts to provide feedback to the person's skills, it usually begins to be intrinsically rewarding. The autotelic experience … lifts the course of life to a different level …When experience is intrinsically rewarding life is justified in the present, instead of being held hostage to a hypothetical future gain.[69]

Csikszentmihalyi's aforementioned interviews with artists in the 1960s, in which they would describe a process that involved starting with not a plan but rather a 'dimly felt' sense of what they were going to paint, also led to another broader set of assertions about the importance of the autotelic experience. He observed how:

> Despite the fact that almost no one can make either a reputation or a living from painting, the artists studied were almost fanatically devoted to their work; they were at it night and day, and nothing else seemed to matter much in their lives. Yet as soon as they finished painting or a sculpture, *they seemed to lose all interest in it*.[70]

It was not, then, *the product* of the painting. In fact, most of the artists Csikszentmihalyi interviewed 'did not go to museums' or even 'decorate their homes with art'. Rather, what excited them was *the process* of making it: 'what they did love to do was talk about small technical details … the actions, thoughts and feelings involved in making art'.[71] This is not an unreflective routinised pattern, however. As other treatments of flow as a form of immersion note, optimal experience 'does not erase thinking, but it does inhibit thoughts about anything *outside* an activity while concentrating our thoughts on the activity itself'.[72]

Creative processes in OSS: Nurturing growth and home (space)

While I know of no work in OSS in IR that has utilised flow, some recent work in OSS does bring out a processural focus on creativity, experience, and growth, as well as ways to move beyond anxiety that still allow for subject formation. Jason Ralph's recent intervention was aptly titled 'Securing the Self: Embracing Anxiety, or Nurturing Growth?'[73] Drawing from the pragmatisms of Dewey, James, and Mead, Ralph says it should be about the latter – nurturing growth. He did so by first returning to the focus in earlier ontological security works on 'healthy' routines and habits.[74] Pointing out, rightly, that there is a normativity in OSS on 'healthy' routines, it is one that still shirks the issue because of a quandary in OSS itself, that is, 'how can it ground a normative position when it knows

[68] Brent J Steele(2008) *Ontological Security in International Relations*. Routledge. Chernobrov's work bears the strongest mark of 'endogenous' ontological (in)security formation, to wit: 'My claim is that a self is stimulated from within to (mis)recognize new events as conforming and validating its narrative, even if this necessitates a distortion of reality (an imprecise narrative)'; Dmitry Chernobrov, 'Ontological security and public (mis)recognition of international crises: Uncertainty, political imagining, and the self', *Political Psychology*, 37 (2016), pp. 582–96.

[69] Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, pp. 68–9.

[70] Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom*, p. xi, emphasis added.

[71] Ibid., p. xii.

[72] B. Soderman, *Against Flow: Video Games and the Flowing Subject* (MIT Press, 2021), pp. 147–8; also quoted in Aggie Hirst, *Politics of Play: Wargaming with the US Military* (Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 261.

[73] Jason Ralph, 'Securing the self, embracing anxiety, or nurturing growth? How the pragmatism of Dewey, James, and Mead speaks to ontological security studies', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4:2 (2024), ksae032.

[74] See especially Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity: Habits, capabilities and ontological security', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), pp. 270–285.

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values are historically and socially contingent'?[75] Ralph argues that John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy brought forth two helpful concepts for resolving the dilemma – experience and growth. Dewey's understanding of experience, Ralph observes, was 'double-barrelled', in that it's not just a 'feeling or affect' (it is that) but also 'an acquired competence that enables people to improve their lives'.[76]

There is a shift here, then, in both ontological security as flow and Ralph's articulation. No longer is the ontological security story only about 'being' but rather the 'experience of being'. The focus on experience especially does not 'tell agents what to think, but it helps them value their experiences and to improve those experiences'. Notably, it helps 'empower agents who may be suffering – because they are operating under an assumption that their identity or role is the only one possible – *to think more creatively and purposefully*'.[77] So considered, OSS's focus shifts slightly from 'security-as-being'[78] to creation as the *experience of being*.

Where else do we find creativity, creation, and creating within OSS? To study creation, it is important to examine how the experience of being comes about, where it happens, and what it involves. One setting found more centrally within the OSS research community is work on 'home'. Long an interest in broader work on ontological security,[79] home and 'homespace' has been especially pronounced through Jennifer Mitzen's early work in the mid-2000s as well as more recently at the end of the 2010s. Home, according to Mitzen (and other psychologists and sociologists she draws from), is a place of refuge,[80] where the chaos of social life can be minimised (albeit never eliminated):

> Homes provide constancy, stable spaces to perform the routines of daily life and thus to reproduce self-conceptions. Knowing there is a space in which it is possible to be one's self provides the confidence necessary to assert one's self and to experiment with new identities.[81]

Home is integral to the sustaining of being in ontological security, and especially for psychological needs. But a home is not only a 'container' or structure to reduce chaos; it is also a place for experimentation of new visions and possibilities – where narratives are reformed, new potential routines are formulated, a temporality where new rhythms can emerge, and an environment where subjects can educate themselves on thinking through new directions for social action.[82]

So stated, there are other moods and 'routines' in homes (especially as bordered contained spaces) that of course can be and are often negative and traumatising. This includes 'domestic' violence, the isolated feeling of being separated from society, and those homebound due to health or depression. Kinnvall and Svensson, utilising their Lacanian lens, see home in more ominous terms:

> It concurrently, and even more crucially, reinforces a flawed conception and experience of the Self – whether thought of as enacted on the level of individuals or collectives – according to which the home might be related to and potentially inhabited as a delimited and, by the

[75] Ralph, 'Securing the self', p. 1–11.

[76] Ibid., p. 5.

[77] Ibid., p. 3, emphasis added.

[78] Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*; Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[79] Ann Dupuis and David C. Thorns, 'Home, home ownership and the search for ontological security', *The Sociological Review*, 46:1 (1998), pp. 24–47.

[80] Jennifer Mitzen, 'Feeling at home in Europe: Migration, ontological security, and the political psychology of EU bordering', *Political Psychology*, 39:6 (2018), pp. 1373–87.

[81] Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity', p. 274. Bohdana Kurylo in this issue also explores the concept of 'homecoming' in the context of the Ukrainian Railways as its 'symbol'.; Kurylo, Bohdana Kurylo (2026) 'The iron road home: Ukrainian Railways, resilience, and ontological security under Russia's terror', *European Journal of International Security,* 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2026.10073.

[82] Mitzen, 'Feeling at home'.

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> subject, fully 'owned' space. Even in the most mundane sense, the home, however, stands for the imposition of a close monitoring of bodily movement, communication, and, even, inner thoughts.[83]

And Mitzen rightly notes that home as a 'bordered container of the Self' has itself negative connotations, a securitisation of subjectivity that is exclusive. Thus Mitzen moves us to both 'home' as well as 'homespace', the latter a more 'permeable' setting where engagement happens. Whereas the former suggests a structured and even bordered space, the latter according to Mitzen is a space of not just 'being' but also 'being with becoming' and an 'interplay of subjective, intersubjective and material'.[84] Subjectivity can still be centred even as homespace provides a place of 'encounters' with others. Home, then, is not just a container but should be considered more broadly as a place for self-centring (but not a place to be self-centred). She argues that the EU could become such a space, among other homespaces where permeability can enable a feeling 'at home' without being exclusive.

It is of course important to highlight the problems with home, houses, domestic violence, and the right-wing authoritarian discourses that draw upon the signifier of 'home' and homeland to justify exclusionary policies. Alexandria Innes's work and especially her recent article vividly demonstrate how states can manipulate even resources for victims of domestic violence to further marginalise migrant communities.[85] But are the problems with home pervasive enough to jettison its promise altogether?

Home can of course also be a context for boredom and isolation. But boredom is not always a problematic mood, for there is a vibrant literature in positive psychology,[86] intimated above, and even before that through philosophers,[87] on the connections between boredom and creativity. Even 'home as container', with its connections to firm 'structures' of a house, for instance, can represent for some subjects a coming into being, a place to feel comfortable and to explore. For some, home can be an *incredibly* dynamic place, one of play, discovery, and experimentation. Home can enable creativity precisely because expectations for how to 'uphold' routines and find a Self are less clear, subject to less societal opprobrium and the shackles of peer pressure. Children and youth know this all too well.[88] As Graham Smith characterises it: 'We say that a child may play alone, but watch and listen – they are not alone. For the child in play everything is alive once again … creation is occurring afresh, and strange new worlds are being populated.'[89]

I also want to note that we should not be confined to *just* social scientific or even humanities literatures to explore how homes are places for play and creativity. As mentioned, Csikszentmihalyi

[83] Kinnvall and Svensson, 'Exploring the populist', p. 5.

[84] Mitzen, 'Feeling at home', p. 1375.

[85] Alexandria Innes, (2023) Accounting for inequalities: divided selves and divided states in International Relations. *European Journal of International Relations*, 29(3), 651–672.

[86] Sandi Mann and Rebekah Cadman, 'Does being bored make us more creative?', *Creativity Research Journal*, 26:2 (2014), pp. 165–73.

[87] Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (1987), chapter 4. Kierkegaard also saw boredom as stimulating creativity, writing in one chapter of *Either/Or* that boredom is the *basis* for the 'Creation' itself: 'The gods were bored so they created men. Adam was bored because he was alone, so Eve was created'; Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* (HarperCollins, 198), George Allen and Unwin p. 77.

[88] This is a recurring theme in Csikszentmihalyi's work, i.e., the play of children, which he characterises instead as 'interact[ing] with the environment on a level at which their skills match opportunities. Left to themselves, children seek out flow with the inevitability of a natural law.' Conversely, the ennui of adolescent existence is a result of fewer and fewer opportunities 'to use what they do have'; thus, 'they are starved for the experience of flow' and what emerges instead is a 'leisure technology' better characterised by pleasure or extrinsic rewards; Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom*, pp. 199, 201. I return to this theme briefly in my penultimate section.

[89] Graham Smith, 'Sixteen fragments on friendship and play', *Critical Studies on Security* (2022), 10(2), pp. 102–5 (p. 104). Considering Ralph's Dewey-inspired pragmatism, the importance of play in 'nurturing growth' as flow intersects with the related pragmatist thought of Jane Addams, whose views on children and play inspired the playground movement in the twentieth-century United States; see 'Playground Association of America', VCU Libraries Social Welfare History Project, available at: {https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/organizations/playground-association-of-america-earlly-days/}.

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would often interview artists about their creative processes and use those to instruct his approach to positive psychology.[90] In that vein, one might reflect upon a type of music once considered 'antisocial' that emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s via groups like Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, and Mudhoney, among others. It's been oft-remarked but I think is important to recall again the relationship between the climate and location of Seattle as enabling what was first known back then (and I remember it as such) as 'the Seattle sound', before it became the music revolution we nowadays call grunge. As one *Rolling Stone* expose on Seattle in 1992 would observe, 'Seattle is a relatively isolated northern city with heavy precipitation and little to do but drink beer and jam in the basement'.[91] Yarm's *Oral History of Grunge* concludes the thought: 'So in effect, musicians in that region had to make their own fun. The bands had a lot of time to hone their sound before the rest of the world heard them (remember, this was before the advent of World Wide Web).'[92] Basements, or garages, the homes of young adults, were places for individuals and small groups to gather to experiment with music, to encounter new visions, to experience 'flow', and to create.

Homespaces that involve visitors, interactive and more permeable 'borders', where anyone feels 'at home', can and do generate environments for experimentation and innovation.[93] There is a lot of experience as being that happens within a home. Both home and homespace(s) can therefore be a place where creation happens, where experience as being occurs, and where flow is possible. A theorisation of home in OSS, in short, should consider how it enables subject formation via flow.

Studying flow in the objects of global politics: Decision makers and the 'happy warrior'[94]

Based on the overview of flow delineated so far, this section examines what ontological security as flow might appear like in the subjects of international relations.

One context where flow can be examined is in individuals long considered to be the central 'actors' in foreign policy decision-making literature.[95] As a jumping off point, it should be noted that some ontological security scholars, such as Mitzen and Larson, and more recently Steele, have pointed to under-utilised affinities between foreign policy analysis (FPA) approaches and OSS

[90]'Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi – Flow: Psychology, creativity and optimal experience'.

[91]Michael Azerrad, 'Grunge City: The Seattle scene', *Rolling Stone* (16 April 1992).

[92]Michael Yarm, *Everybody Loves Our Town: An Oral History of Grunge* (Three Rivers Press, 2012).

[93]They admittedly can also be locations for unacknowledged or underappreciated labour, especially if we think about feminist interventions that have rightly called attention to private spaces and the labour of the feminine subject; see more recently Katharine A. M. Wright, Toni Haastrup, and Roberta Guerrina, 'Equalities in freefall? Ontological insecurity and the long-term impact of COVID-19 in the academy', *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28 (2021), pp. 163–7.

[94]Wordsworth's poem concludes with the following lines, with 'finds comfort in himself and in his cause' most notable in the context of flow:

For ever, and to noble deeds give birth,
Or he must fall, to sleep without his fame,
And leave a dead unprofitable name –
Finds comfort in himself and in his cause;
And, while the mortal mist is gathering, draws
His breath in confidence of Heaven's applause:
This is the happy Warrior; this is he
That every man in arms should wish to be.

William Wordsworth, 'Character of the happy warrior', Poetry Foundation, available at: {https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45512/character-of-the-happy-warrior}.

[95]Valerie Hudson, 'Foreign policy analysis: Actor-specific theory and the ground of international relations', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 1:1 (2005), pp. 1–30.

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that could be explored further. For the former, FPA and OSS can be combined to provide additional 'causal depth and generate new implications'.[96] For the latter, there are 'dialogues' that can be engaged because both ontological security and FPA provide 'resources for studying global politics', including especially leaders and other foreign policy decision makers.[97]

Yet instead of the 'outputs' of those decisions, or even the bureaucratic political routines or small group dynamics that have long served as processes highlighted by FPA scholars as important in that decision-making, a focus on ontological security as flow would examine whether there is evidence in archives, memoirs, or interviews of leaders exhibiting optimal experience and any of the aforementioned features of flow. Here one does not have to stray from the individual, autotelic nature of flow as conceived by Csikszentmihalyi, but rather examine how leaders during periods of decision-making exhibited features of, for instance, intense concentration or a transcendence of the self.

Michelle Weitzel, in a work on 'making' and creativity in international relations, asked scholars to examine 'experiential aspects of making' that 'merit closer attention'. One of these she identified was 'doodling' as a 'method' of the analyst.[98] It provides, she notes following anthropologist Michael Taussig, an activity of 'ongoing, dialogic, and kinesthetic demand'.[99] But what of doodling by those we analyse? Csikszentmihalyi indeed found processes like 'compulsive doodling' to be akin to 'esoteric private rituals that have the same purpose to impose order in consciousness'.[100] It is not the product of the doodle, but rather the process employed by the subject, that aids their concentration through a challenging activity. And it does appear that at least amongst US presidents, doodling has been a quite popular activity, done not only in private but also during key meetings throughout US foreign policy history.[101]

One doodle drawing in particular by Dwight D. Eisenhower during the US (and specifically CIA-led) overthrow of the Guatemalan democratically elected leader, Jacobo Arbenz, deserves mention here. Reprinted in Paul Collins's book, with an excerpt of it published in the *Atlantic* in 2006, Eisenhower's notes and doodles were on an agenda item titled 'Legislative Leadership Conference', dated 28 June 1954. While Guatemala was not on the agenda, Eisenhower wrote the name of the country on the margins, with naval ships on water and a self-portrait, along with the words 'Internal Security' underlined in cursive writing. As Collins described it, 'the president sketched himself as a trim young man with big gunboats backing him up – a strong leader restoring order to the strife-torn Latin nation'.[102] Putting aside Collins's somewhat problematic psychoanalysis of why Eisenhower drew what he did, who he did, and when he did, we can see that doodles as forms of 'micro-flow' express what O'Rourke called 'the private, unfiltered, contemporaneous reactions of policy makers'.[103]

[96]Jennifer Mitzen and Kyle Larson, 'Ontological security and foreign policy', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (2017) Oxford University Press, pp 1–26.

[97]Steele, 'Foreign policy analysis and ontological security studies', p. 121.

[98]Michelle D. Weitzel, 'Making political science: Material–aesthetic approaches to knowledge production', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3:4 (2023), ksad060, pp. 1–11.

[99]Michael Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[100]Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, p. 52.

[101]Paul Collins, *Presidential Doodles: Two Centuries of Scribbles, Scratches, Squiggles & Scrawls from the Oval Office* (Basic Books, 2006).

[102]As printed in the *Atlantic* (September 2006), p. 4, also found in Lindsay O'Rourke, 'Details in the doodles: Documenting cover action', in Peter Krause and Ora Szekely (eds), *Stories from the Field: A Guide to Navigating Fieldwork in Political Science* (Columbia University Press, 2020), p. 146, available at: {https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2006/09/all-the-presidents-doodles/305115/}.

[103]O'Rourke, 'Details in the doodles', p. 144.

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The point here is not necessarily that Eisenhower's doodles perfectly reflect a flow state. More than likely, since Eisenhower was advanced in age, the 'subject formation' experience of that particular event, for him, was likely minimal. However, it is important in a couple of further ways. First, the doodling was an example of 'ontological security as micro-flow' via a routine he relied on during deliberations over foreign policy decisions. Second, it also illuminates a moment when subjectivity is at issue – as he reflected upon his own sense of Self (the 'portrait') caught up in the decision-making regarding Guatemala. Taken together, the doodling thus discloses Eisenhower's broader decision-making style and practices that exhibited features of ontological security as flow for his concentration in the decision-making moment. Recalling the 'centering attention on a limited stimulus field' feature of flow, Eisenhower preferred, according to one presidential historian, 'to concentrate on a limited set of strategic issues', which included 'foreign affairs' and the 'domestic economy'. In order 'to have time to think, learn, plan and act in these policy subjects meant that Eisenhower had to concentrate his attentions'.[104] In cabinet meetings, where Eisenhower exerted control (another flow feature), he would 'listen intently' even though he was also often doodling, drawing, and writing notes, 'interrupting now and then with a quick and penetrating question that brought the whole question into clearer focus'.[105]

The examination of flow starts with an individual, but it does not have to remain there. A second context for examining flow is in organisations, including one extensively studied in international security – the military. Here we do see some of the very limited work in international relations that marshals flow to understand such dynamics, such as Aggie Hirst's work on 'wargaming',[106] as well as the 'absorption' that is found in 'combat situations, in which it [flow] contributes both to the subjective well-being and to the efficiency of soldiers'.[107] Hirst's study of the former saw flow as integral to its effective practice:

> Key to efficacious [war]gaming, then, is the cultivation and maintaining of a self- forgetting state of Immersion … states of flow and immersion are productive of subjectivity...[G]aming both subverts particular reflective dimensions of subjectivity and cultivates new reflexes in their stead.[108]

Yuval Noah Harari examined combat contexts to see if something like 'combat flow' existed amongst soldiers in battle. Surmising that 'combat may well be particularly conducive to flow, because in combat the necessity of focusing on the present moment is a matter of life and death',[109] Harari inventoried a number of memoir-based accounts by soldiers. This included Philip Caputo's *Rumor of War*, which included reflections of moments of combat that involved 'an eerie sense of calm' for the author, wherein his 'mind was working with speed and clarity'.[110] It also included Mark Bowden's well-known *Black Hawk Down*, about the October 1993 Battle of Mogadishu, with one subject, US soldier Shawn Nelson, likening combat flow to what he described as surfing, to only 'focus intently on holding his balance and riding it 'out'. Evincing the 'subject formation' dynamic of flow, Nelson would say that 'he felt like he would never be the same'.[111]

[104] John W. Sloan, 'The management and decision-making style of President Eisenhower', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 20:2 (1990), pp. 295–313 (p. 307).

[105] According to Sherman Adams, *First Hand Report: The Inside Story of the Eisenhower Administration* (Hutchinson and Company, 1962), pp. 19–20.

[106] Hirst, *Politics of Play*.

[107] Harari, 'Combat flow', p. 253.

[108] Hirst, *Politics of Play*, p. 256.

[109] Harari, 'Combat flow', p. 255.

[110] Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), p. 266; Harari, 'Combat flow', p. 255. Note in this sense a similar dynamic found in Kurylo's aforementioned contribution to this special issue on Ukrainian railways. One subject interviewed in her study noted how 'In this train compartment, I am calm for the FIRST TIME in the last thirty days. Movement gives the illusion of salvation from any danger, because you are in the middle of a manoeuvre'; Kurylo, 'The iron road home', emphasis original.

[111] Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down* (Signet, 1999), pp. 301–2; Harari, 'Combat flow', p. 254.

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We know that military experiences are intensely formative. The assumption is usually social – that the bonds of solidarity and loyalty that develop in the 'few', the 'happy few', the 'band of brothers' forged from service on and off the battlefield shape or alter forms of self-identity. Drawing from those experiences, a veteran, their loved ones, and their communities can draw out a narrative of 'who' or 'what' the former solider is. What an ontological security-as-flow account provides is the possibility that subject formation in the military begins *much* earlier, and with the seemingly 'mundane' but increasingly challenging exercises of drill, tasks, and battlefield 'SNAFUs' that add complexity to the soldier's subjectivity over time. And it also extends as a form of optimal experience in social contexts, a possibility indicated in subsequent research studies.[112]

In addition to flow within the military, flow may also be useful for understanding the dynamics of *militarism* more broadly, as evidenced in Wegner's 2021 study on the rhythms and rituals of commemoration. Using the examples of Canadian commemoration through the Highway of Heroes and the Portraits of Honours tour, Wegner argues that such practices 'make resisting militarist discourse and practice … difficult due to ethico-political relations forged in militarist rituals'.[113] When describing the affectively mobilised environment of these rituals for those watching them, Wegner uses the Durkheimian term of 'collective effervescence',[114] which Csikszentmihalyi in his first study on optimal experience also likened flow to in social situations (like dancing, one of the empirical areas he observed along with rock climbing, chess, and surgery).[115] Wegner described a 'rhythmic' dynamic not unlike flow in the commemoration contexts: 'People feel a rush of somatic energy that cannot easily be articulated as a specific emotion, yet this emotional drive also evokes a sense of *what to do*.'[116]

Flow's limitations, and promise

Even with the aforementioned contributions of rendering ontological security as flow, there are at least an equal number of limitations. I discuss two sets here. The first set of flow's limitations are analytical and methodological. It can be somewhat challenging translating flow into the typical ontological security study research design in two ways. First, in a 'levels-of-analysis' conundrum, and as the examples above disclose, flow was only discerned in individual actors rather than corporate, collective selves, where contestations over, for instance, the group self or national selves remain an unexplored and difficult terrain for flow-like experiences.

Second, most ontological security studies examine how subjects attempt to repair their insecurity through routines, narratives, or other practices, such as vicarious identity or turning anxiety into fear.[117] Specifying the subject, as well as a routine and narrative (and any critical situations that might upend those), is key to this research design.[118] The challenge here is that while routines and narratives are possible in the context of ontological security as flow, they serve different purposes than normally rendered in OSS. For in flow activities, subjects can have difficulty precisely describing what they experienced. Routines, furthermore, may only 'order' but not provide the types of challenges that are an important step beyond boredom. This does not mean, however, that flow

[112]Charles J. Walker, 'Experiencing flow: Is doing it together better than doing it alone?', *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 5:1 (2010), pp. 3–11; Dario Páez and Bernard Rimé, 'Collective emotional gatherings: Their impact upon identity fusion, shared beliefs, and social integration', *Collective Emotions: Perspectives from Psychology, Philosophy, and Sociology,* in Christian von Scheve and Mikko Salmella (eds), (2014), pp. 204–16, Oxford University Press.

[113]Nicole Wegner, 'Ritual, rhythms, and the discomforting endurance of militarism: Affective methodologies and ethico-political challenges', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:3 (2021), p. 1.

[114]Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields, Free Press, (1995).

[115]Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom*, p. 106.

[116]Wegner, 'Ritual, rhythms', p. 6.

[117]Christopher S. Browning, (2018). 'Je suis en terrasse',: political violence, civilizational politics, and the everyday courage to be. Political psychology, 39(2), pp. 243–261.

[118]Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27; Eberle, 'Narrative'; Linus Hagström, 'Great power narcissism and ontological (in)security: The narrative mediation of greatness and weakness in international politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 65:2 (2021), pp. 331–42.

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experiences are not important for subject formation – quite the opposite – but rather that they may be more difficult to 'capture' than in typical OS research designs.[119]

Yet, as Csikszentmihalyi's interviews with various subjects illustrate, it is still meaningful interpretively that subjects attempt to 'construct and understand the worlds in which they are embedded'.[120] The 'narrative', then, is about a flow experienced by the Self. That Self is in flux during the optimal experience but emerges more complex than before. This can be difficult to narrate precisely, but finding ways to get subjects to articulate that process is important. Is an optimal experience autobiographical? Perhaps. Is an optimal experience meaningful in ways that create an increasingly complex self subject to eventual formation of autobiographical narratives? Most definitely.

A second set of limitations is found in the politics of flow. The promise of redirecting our focus for ontological security within processes comes coupled with a drawback of depoliticisation. Highlighting agentic experience may overlook or ignore structures within which that effort occurs, let alone what outcomes contributing to those structures it leads to. In the words of feminist critics of flow, 'to simply posit the experience of flow as how one ought to live without consideration of the systems that structured the experience, replicates numerous normalizing and oppressive patterns'.[121] In other words, the outcome or product of effort may be less important to an agent, but it definitely matters for those who benefit from or are marginalised or even threatened by it. Indeed, both contexts examined in the previous section – Eisenhower's micro-flow practice of doodling during a CIA-led coup, and combat flow amongst soldiers – are no doubt problematic for appraising flow due to the problematic and violent practices they enabled. That flow was popular among even 'fascist writers of the 1920 and 1930s' who 'often described experiences of combat flow' that turned out to be 'positive turning points in their lives',[122] as Harari documented, seems quite ethically and politically daunting.

The political challenges of ontological security as flow are important and evince the categorical tensions over 'order versus justice' found in OSS more broadly.[123] That is, do forms of flow or 'micro-flow', like routines and other ordering devices for ontological security-seeking agents, marginalise or occlude opportunities for justice or more 'just' forms of order? What I offer by way of rejoinder, with four sets of possibilities for addressing these limits, I would suggest are simply starting points for deliberation on this issue.

A first, more philosophical, counter-intuitive albeit also potentially conservative insight that comes from flow is how the *inability* to change the structure can for some agents itself be *liberating*. This is an answer to Kierkegaard's 'Dizziness of Freedom' that generates dread or anxiety, or Heidegger's 'Being-free' that leads to the same, themes that have been treated throughout OSS's history in international relations,[124] and part of the creative process of 'expressing ontological security' detailed in Cornelia Baciu's contribution to this special issue.[125]

[119]One study exploring flow in women 'knitters' in Edinburgh identified a potential gendered barrier to narratives. While the research found ample evidence of creativity, autonomy, pride, and enjoyment by the subjects studied, it also disclosed a difficulty in them expressing this to the researcher. As noted, 'The women interviewed here seem to so consistently underestimate or downplay their creative ability and creativity, and this bears a relationship to wider value systems surrounding craft and art, home and studio, and male and female that requires further examination'; Kate Lampitt Adey, 'Understanding why women knit: Finding creativity and "flow"', *Textile*, 16:1 (2018), pp. 84–97 (p. 90).

[120]Lee Ann Fujii, *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach* (Routledge, 2018), p. 74.

[121]Karen M. Fox and Gordon Walker, 'Reconsidering the relationship between flow and feminist ethics: A response', *Leisure Studies*, 21:1 (2002), pp. 15–26 (p. 18).

[122]Harari, 'Combat flow', p. 255.

[123]Brent J. Steele, 'Order and justice in ontological security studies', *Cooperation and Conflict* 60(2), pp.213–236, (2025).

[124]'We feel anxiety not about those things that are outside of our control, but about those we perceive to be in the realm of our possible agency'; Steele, *Ontological Security*, p. 61; see also Bahar Rumelili, 'Integrating anxiety into international relations theory: Hobbes, existentialism, and ontological security', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 257–72, esp. pp. 260–1.

[125]Baciu, 'Express your self'.

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Csikszentmihalyi's focus in *Flow* was to appraise certain institutions, like marriages or the home, precisely because they provided built-in limitations: 'Like all rules, they exclude a wide range of possibilities so that we might concentrate fully on a selected set of options … in other words, accepting limitations is liberating.'[126] As conservative as this may sound, the counsel here would be for those facing an array of choices in international society to take counsel in the possibility that their political communities do not have to do *everything*, to make *some* things meaningful and important. Put more starkly via Hom's work on the ethics of 'reflexive realism' within open conceptions of time and temporality, if 'the future hangs over us like a sword of Damocles, [as] the moment when our principles, hopes, and policies may lead to rupture and ruin', flow's focus on 'being in the present' provides a way forward 'as the means to *continue existing* and to preserve the possibility of improvement in the open flow of time'.[127] A disordered world, then, does not have to mean a disordered Self. The dangers classical realists feared regarding hubris become countered in Hom's work, and other 'reflexive realist' studies,[128] by the necessity to 'install limits and prudence' in 'wills to time [that] can only ever be pragmatic proposals'.[129]

Second, following from the importance of 'home' in enabling the play and creativity centralised in flow, one can deepen critiques of the destruction of homes during warfare. In addition to civilian infrastructure being generally 'off limits' under the jus in bello principle of non-combatant immunity,[130] there is the *importance of the home itself*. It enables flow especially in children as 'beings in becoming'. In a report detailing the destruction of Gaza by Israeli strikes throughout the first six months of the Israel–Hamas war, the United Nations special rapporteur on adequate housing, Balakrishnan Rajagopal, asserted: 'When people lose their homes, they lose more than physical structures. A home is more than property; it is also the repository of memories, hopes and aspirations.'[131] Rajagopal's report reiterated his push since 2022 for a special recognition on the right to housing, the violation of which he called for being termed 'domicide'.[132]

A third rejoinder examines flow's universal possibilities. This was, as mentioned, a claim Csikszentmihalyi repeatedly made, based on both the theory of flow as crucial to subject formation and its presence in empirical studies across time and space.[133] That is, if flow is part of the human condition, evident in regressive or oppressive forces, groups, or individuals, it is also 'there' in progressive movements as well. Thus, what might flow look like amongst the marginalised and the vulnerable? Two contexts here could be further studied as occasions where one can observe flow.

One returns us to the aforementioned (via Wegner's work on militarism) concepts of ritualised and rhythmic actions in the context of social movements and mass protests. These practices, considered more 'sacred' forms of ordering embodied actions of the social agent than routines,

[126]Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, p. 179.

[127]Andrew R. Hom, 'Truth and power; uncertainty and catastrophe: Ethics in international relations realism', in Brent J. Steele and Eric A. Heinze (eds), *Routledge Handbook on Ethics and International Relations* (2018), (Routledge) p. 140.

[128]Hartumut Behr and Felix Rösch, 'The ethics of anti-hubris in the political philosophy of international relations 1: Hans J. Morgenthau', in *Religion and the Realist Tradition* (Routledge, 2013), (Jodok Troy) pp. 111–28.

[129]Hom, 'Truth and power', p. 140.

[130]Brian Orend, *The Morality of War* (Providian Press, 2006), pp. 110–11.

[131]United Nations, 'UN rights expert condemns "systematic" war-time mass destruction of homes', (2024), available at: {https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147272}. See also the importance of 'unstructured play', noteworthy especially when it is removed, as in the case of the detained migrant children so poignantly addressed in Tyra Lennie's recent study; Tyra Lennie, 'Detained migrant children, autonomy, and positive duties', *Ethics & International Affairs*, 39:3 (2025), pp. 259–84.

[132]This was defined as 'the systematic or widespread violation of the right to adequate housing'; United Nations, '"Domicide" must be recognised as an international crime: UN expert' (28 October 2022), available at: {https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/10/domicide-must-be-recognised-international-crime-un-expert}.

[133]In his 1990 study, Csikszentmihalyi summarised his cross-national studies by that time as evincing something 'surprising', including that 'regardless of culture, stage of modernization, social class, age, or gender, the respondents described enjoyment in very much the same way'. What they did varied, but the experiences they described in doing it were described 'in almost identical terms'; Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, p. 49.

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have increasingly been incorporated in OSS,[134] including through examining protest movements. Ty Solomon's work has examined both rhythms in the example of the Arab Uprising protests of 2011,[135] and the ritualised atmospheres in the context of the George Floyd and broader Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements.[136] In the case of the former, Solomon described something quite like a feature of flow in mass protests and collective gatherings, in that they 'produce affective investment in the foci of attention'.[137] In the case of the BLM protests, Solomon described their features of 'mass rhythms and repetitions of sights, sounds, and movements, call-and-response chanting, [and] specifically stylized and affectively charged bodily performances such as dancing'.[138] While Solomon rightly notes that the rituals were adapted across the world to speak to local conditions,[139] call-and-response chanting was a nearly universal feature, and in the case of the Arab Uprisings he quotes protestors who recalled the importance of it.[140] Chanting has been considered a key feature of, and also as producing, flow in ritualised practices. As one study has noted, 'when individuals enter flow states, the attentional focus narrows to the stimulus (the sound in the case of chanting) and an experience of merging with the activity occurs where there is no division of attention'.[141] My point here is that while the machinations of mass protest are many, while it may not be called as such, chanting and other mass protest practices involve flow.

How else do the marginalised find the courage to go on? Csikszentmihalyi argued that the 'traits that mark an autotelic personality are most clearly revealed by people who seem to enjoy situations that ordinary persons would find unbearable'.[142] In this spirit, one recent study observed how work on the subaltern agency of refugees highlights a distinction between 'resistance' and 'persistence':

> While subaltern resistance among refugees is not always possible (or desirable from the perspective of subaltern refugees themselves), expressions of *subaltern agency as persistence* are more common as refugees around the world find ways to navigate and subsist in often grueling circumstances.[143]

The authors continue by noting how this as expressed by *identity* makes 'persistence as continuous claims to *self-identified* rights and solutions, and retaining life trajectories *on their own terms over time* … to sustain the refugee identity over 40 years is in itself a form of power – the power of persistence'[144] Thus, *persistence*, which is a cornerstone of flow, in addition to resistance or resilience, not only becomes a way to 'cope' with challenging and even oppressive conditions but is also an expression of ontological security.[145]

[134]See Joanne Wallis, 'Displaced security? The relationships, routines and rhythms of peacebuilding interveners', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 55:4 (2020), pp. 479–96; Derek Bolton, 'The unbearable lightness of being? Reconfiguring the moral underpinnings and sources of ontological security', *International Theory*, 15:2 (2023), pp. 234–62.

[135]Ty Solomon, 'Rhythm and mobilization in international relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 63:4 (2019), pp. 1001–13.

[136]Ty Solomon, 'Up in the air: Ritualized atmospheres and the global Black Lives Matter movement', *European Journal of International Relations*, 29:3 (2023), pp. 576–601.

[137]Solomon, 'Rhythm', p. 1004.

[138]Solomon, 'Up in the air', p. 585.

[139]Ibid., pp. 588–9.

[140]Solomon, 'Rhythm', pp. 1005–6.

[141]Gemma Perry, 'Chanting across traditions' (PhD diss., Macquarie University, 2022), p. 101.

[142]Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, p. 90.

[143]James Milner, Merve Erdilmen, and Megan Bradley, 'Through the localization looking glass: Seeing subaltern power in the refugee regime', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 5:1 (2025), emphasis original; see also Malaka Shwaikh, 'Beyond expectations of resilience: Towards a language of care', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3:2 (2023), ksad030, p. 5.

[144]Erdilmen, Milner, and Bradley, 'Through the localization'.

[145]David Cortright (2008). Peace: A history of movements and ideas. Cambridge University Press, comprehensive integration of various philosophies into what he titled 'pragmatic pacifism' discloses a number of 'flow' type features. Gandhi's pacifism drew from the 'Jain belief system', which included 'selflessness', and also focused on 'means' rather than ends, similar to flow's focus on activity not outcomes. pp. 213–216. See.

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Fifth, and finally, flow's importance for refocusing a subject's purpose enables one to build resilience over time *without* becoming apathetic or disillusioned over a lack of tangible progress or outcomes. Here, too, the example of protest movements is instructive. How can such movements continue without 'burnout' or dejection after past failures? Dovetailing with recent work on regaining hope in times of disillusionment,[146] the contribution of ontological security as flow for political agents is not (or not only) whether they can celebrate tangible markers of progress as outcomes from their actions. It is a refocus on how optimal experiences can be cultivated when an agent exerts increasing effort for each activity towards those goals, illusive though they may be.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that ontological security is not only possible but also something even experienced regularly across of number of agents and individuals. It results not from an 'outcome' achieved but rather as an optimal experience in the process of challenging activity. This article treated in the previous penultimate section some limitations and then responses to those, regarding studying ontological security as flow. All of this I see as only a start of a conversation about the study of creating ontological security, one that this special issue provides ample examples to also consider.

I conclude here with two provocations considered in tandem, for the research community of ontological security studies and critical security studies scholars more broadly.

First, what has the focus on insecurity over security produced? Second, what might a continued focus on insecurity (ad nauseum) do if OSS continues to exclude creative processes? Owing to what interpretivist pioneer Dvora Yanow rightly notes, we *construct our subjects* through our 'Research designs, formulations of questions, choices of observational sites and persons interviewed, analytic frames, *and writing* … all construct perceptions of the subject of study'.[147] The ontologically insecure subject is *so* entrenched in OSS, not least because of over two decades (and counting) of its explication in studies within the OSS research community. Further study for how ontological security as flow unfolds, how creative processes lead to and come from that sense of security – all of it *requires* creative scholars.

In the context of intervening in a now fairly well established research community like OSS, this may present a challenge. Further, some early career scholars, in being justifiably anxious while facing the structural challenges of an academia that leaves fewer secure jobs each year for those seeking them, may find being 'creative' to present a number of risks. And yet, because OSS has been a somewhat flexible and open research community for newcomers, there is an opportunity here. And being early in one's career also means that scholars have yet to be 'fully disciplined'. Their routines are, in some ways, more 'adaptive', flexible, and, dare we say, *creative*. Such a position(ing), I hope, as someone later in their career, might leave those earlier in theirs to be empowered and even secure to approach our seemingly established research community, and its concepts, in refreshingly creative ways.

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[146] Maša Mrovlje and Alex Zamalin (eds), *Revolutionary Hope in a Time of Crisis: Political Disillusion, Democracy, and Utopia* (Taylor & Francis, 2024).

[147] Dvora Yanow, 'Thinking interpretively', in Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (eds), *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, 2nd ed. (M.E. Sharpe, 2014), pp. 5–26 (pp. 16–17, emphasis in original).

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Brent J. Steele is the Francis D. Wormuth Presidential Chair and University Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the University of Utah, and the co-editor in chief of *Global Studies Quarterly*. His most recent book is *Vicarious Identity in International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2021), and he is currently finishing his next book project, *Militarized Insecurity: Soldiers, Veterans and US Ontological Security*. His recent articles have appeared in *Cooperation and Conflict, Global Environmental Politics*, the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, and the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. He teaches courses on international relations, US foreign policy, interpretive methods, and international ethics.

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