THE EMERGENCE OF HUMAN SECURITY:
A CONSTRUCTIVIST VIEW

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Abstract

In response to the end of the Cold War and the increasing pace of globalization, the concept of human security has taken on greater importance in international relations. This article argues that while conventional approaches to security studies focus on security community or security culture, the constructivist perspective offers additional conceptual tools through its insight into the issues of human consciousness, national identity, and interest formation. Hence, various phenomena of importance to international society can be better understood by applying the insights of constructivism to the concept of human security.

The main purpose of this article is to explore human security as elucidated by the constructivist perspective. In light of this analysis, specific issues will be examined, including the relationship between human security and constructivism, the interpretation of human security by constructivist scholars, and the implications of human security for constructivism.

"The state remains the fundamental purveyor of security. Yet it often fails to fulfill its security obligations….That is why attention must now shift from the security of the state to the security of the people—to human security. "

—Commission on Human Security, 2003

Introduction

The end of the Cold War and the increasing pace of globalization have given rise to fundamental changes in many of the paradigms employed in the social sciences. Amongst the various new ideas which have emerged, "human security" has become somewhat of a buzzword. It's been embraced by the United Nations (UN) and countries such as Canada and Japan have proclaimed it as the guiding principle of their foreign policies (Tsai and Tan, 2007).

Beginning in the mid 1990s, the concept of human security has begun to visibly influence and challenge global politics, institutions, and governance. (Oberleitner, 2005: 185). However, over a decade after its emergence, the definition of human security remains contested in its scope and utility. (Oberleitner, 2005: 186; Acharya, 2002).

The main purpose of this article is to explore the concept of human security by making use of the constructivist perspective. In contrast to conventional approaches to security studies which focus on security community or security culture, the constructivist perspective offers insight into a number of additional dimensions, including human consciousness, national identity and interest formation. Hence, the concept of human security is more meaningful when viewed through the theoretical lens of constructivism (Wendt, 1992: 391–425; Ruggie, 1998: 856–858).

This article analyzes issues relating to the relationship between human security and constructivism, such as the definition of human security, the basic assumptions of constructivism, and the interpretation of human security by constructivist scholars.

A Definition of Human Security

In 1994, the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) *Human Development Report* (HDR) presented a new way of thinking about the integration of security issues and globalization. This report defined human security according to seven dimensions: personal, environmental, economic, political, community, health, and food security (UNDP, 1994: 24–25). Moreover, the report adopted a "people-centric" security concept as its focus instead of the traditional state-centered concept (UNDP, 1994: 24–33). This new emphasis on human security supplements the traditional concept of security and represents the emergence of a new paradigm in the field. Human security

emphasizes the individual's rights and interests, which are often ignored by the international community. Real security entails the protection of individuals from such threats as disease, hunger, unemployment, political oppression and environmental degradation (Tsai and Tan, 2007: 8–9). As a multi-level, wide-ranging security concept, it includes both the traditional and non-traditional elements of security. It not only serves as a blueprint for solving human problems, but also offers solutions which middle powers can put into practice (Paris, 2001: 88). The notion of human security as freedom from want has been promoted by Japan, and has been promoted as freedom from fear by Canada, Norway and members of the Human Security Network (HSN) (Shinoda, 2007; Dedring, 2008).[1] Thus Kofi Annan (2005) has pointed out the three pillars of this wider conception of human security: freedom from want, freedom from fear, and freedom to live in dignity.

The Basic Assumptions of Constructivism

Compared to the concept of human security, the theory of constructivism has gained greater prominence within the field of international relations since the 1990s. Although there are a number of different schools of constructivism, they all share some common characteristics and basic assumptions. The main differences between the constructivist and the mainstream approaches to international relations are as follows:

(A) Constructivism points out that social facts are human creations, and that the social structure is manifested by not only the material structure, but also by the international community. The social structure has three components: shared knowledge, material resources and practices (Wendt, 1995: 73). Without denying the material basis of society, constructivism stresses the function of ideas, for ideas are the building blocks of the material world, and can change the behavior of human beings.[2] Human activities are conducted through the sharing of knowledge, with the material culture being a manifestation of such activity (Adler and Barnett, 1998: 8).

(B) Constructivism believes that norms, customs, culture and learning can change the behaviors and interests of a country's citizenry. Unlike rationalism, which sees anarchy as the inevitable result of self-help, constructivism sees anarchy as created by the state, and as susceptible to change by state intervention (Wendt, 1992: 391–425).

(C) Constructivism asserts that the process of international politics alters interests and identity in the international system, instead of the material structure. In contrast to the mainstream approaches to international relations, constructivism believes that it is the interactions between countries which generate interests and identity; identity, in turn, becomes the basis of interests (Mercer, 1995: 231–235; Katzenstein, 1996a: 2).

(D) The actors of the international community and the structure of the international political system exist in an interactive relationship of interdependence which determines the evolution of the international system. The interaction between structure and agent is a two-way process dependent on both sides (Ruggie, 1983: 261–285).

(E) Constructivism emphasizes the sociological concepts of ideas, norms, identity and culture. For it is through ideas, norms, rules, and understanding that countries shape their identities and redefine their interests (Finnemore, 1996: 128).

The Constructivist Interpretation of Human Security

By using the concept of constructivism to reinterpret human security, six observations can be made:

(A) All knowledge is composed of social structures which guide the nature of knowledge and social significance. Both of these rely on human perception, which plays a decisive role in all human actions (Kowert et al., 1998; Onuf, 1989). The concept of human security has gradually developed through a series of initiatives and academic reports by multi-national, independent commissions of experts, academics and intellectuals. For example, non-governmental organizations (NGO) and civil society in general play a major role in the study and advocacy of human security concerns, and are involved in practically all human security issues (Sané, 2008: 11). Over the years, the collective efforts of various ad hoc campaigns have led to the signing of the 1997 Ottawa Convention which banned anti-personal landmines, and the creation of the International Criminal Court in 1998 (Tadjbakhsh, 2007: 23).[3]

(B) The emergence of the concept of human security reflects the influence of values and norms on security studies, as opposed to the influence of national security. This also demonstrates a change in international relations, identities and interests, and is best explained with reference to constructivist thought. Tadjbakhsh (2007) considers that human security can thus be read as an attempt to reconstruct the interpretation of the

roots of insecurity, underdevelopment, and poverty. These same themes have also been examined by constructivism (Tadjbakhsh, 2007: 88–89).

(C) Human security is a new language and a new symbol. Because language constitutes social facts, any fact entails the element of language. Language constitutes the consensus, which generates the collective image, and further forms institutions and norms. The concept of human security derives from the use of language, images and symbols. For instance, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS)[4]—reflecting Kofi Annan's remark that the language of intervention needs to be changed from the right or duty to intervene, to the responsibility to protect—shifted the focus to those in need of support. It also asked the UN Security Council to face up to the consequences of inaction: increasing inappropriate intervention by states or ad hoc coalitions which would threaten the legitimacy and credibility of the UN (Tadjbakhsh, 2007: 193; MacFarlane and Khong, 2006: 161; Kaldor, 2007: 17, 173, 184).

(D) As an idea shaping of the concept of human security, constructivism believes that national interests are forged in the process of mutual interaction. The process determines the interests and identity, and the identity constitutes the interests. During the process, the value of human security is established when states transfer their attention to common interests. A case in point is the way in which human security is being promoted by the Canadian and Norwegian governments as a new guideline in foreign policy following a bilateral meeting in Norway of foreign ministers Lloyd Axworthy and Knut Vollebaek in May 1998. Both governments have used the term as an umbrella concept to cover a humanitarian agenda that includes support for the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC), the ban on landmines, and a prohibition on child soldiers and small arms (Suhrke, 1999: 265–266; Krause, 2008: 76).

(E) Since they are constructed out of concepts, identity and interests are neither unchanging nor endless, and vary with the emergence of new issues and concepts. This can be seen as a revision of human security, raising questions concerning political economy, sovereign states, and political community (Newman, 2001: 247). When people start to think of common interests, the definition of security will become "people-centered." On the one hand, there is the conviction that states are responsible for regulating the actions of its individual citizens, and on the other hand, individuals are responsible for violating international human rights and humanitarian law (Benedek, 2008: 8). The ICC demonstrates that the international community has long aspired to

create a permanent international court, and in the 20th century it reached consensus on definitions of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes.

(F) In the 1990s, realism and liberalism were criticized for their overemphasis on material concerns and for failing to take into account subjective, psychological, and human elements. Constructivism attempts to challenge established world views which have been set in place by material concerns (Wendt, 1992; 1999). Constructivism and human security have much in common, and human security can be seen as an application of the tenets of constructivism. Constructivism reinterprets traditional material, state-centric society; similarly human security reinterprets traditional theories of military force and national security.

The Interpretation of Human Security by Constructivist Scholars

This section adopts a number of concepts from several constructivist scholars to interpret the meaning of human security and outline the relationship between constructivism and human security, as summarized in table 1.

First of all, Alexander Wendt has stressed the link between power and knowledge. He agrees with the view of structural realism, and has applied its system and structure to his research on international politics. Wendt emphasizes the mutual interactions of each actor and considers that the nation-state plays an essential role in the international community. Wendt adopts the scientific approach of rationalism as a basis for the theory of knowledge, recognizing the validity of the basic elements of international politics provided by mainstream theories of international relations. Those elements are as follows: the pursuit of power, wealth and security by the state; the anarchy of the international community; self-interest and a rational actor; acceptance of the rule of conclusion; and adoption of the view of reflectivism as a basis for ontology (Wendt, 1995: 71–81). Wendt also considers the interdependence among nations that contributes to the shaping of collective identity (Wendt, 1999: 347), asserting that a nation defines its national interests according to its own conditions, including system factors and internal factors (Wendt, 1994, 387–388). Collective identity changes according to the influence of events, time, and place, determining which factors will continue to exist and exert an influence. Following the formation of a collective identity, these factors further promote cooperation among nations. At the same time, Wendt has indicated that international

politics is also about the reconstruction and transformation of identity and interests (Wendt, 1996: 59–62). Hence, the consensus of human security and collective identity is built on the basis of cooperation and common values (Tadjbakhsh, 2007: 4–6), as well as on the practices, interactions and cooperation of the nations which generate them. The promotion of the concept of human security is not an attempt to lessen the importance of the sovereign state, but rather aims to awaken recognition that the main objective of all political acts is the protection of human life (Bedeski, 2007: preface).

Table 1:   The Application of Constructivist Views to Human Security

Constructivist scholar	View	Assumption	Application to human security
Alexander Wendt	Collective identity	Interdependence shapes collective identity and promotes cooperation	Human security is derived from the values of collective identity
Martha Finnemore	National preference	Rules, institutions, and values alter a country's preferences	The practice of human security is derived from alterations of a country's preferences
Nicholas Onuf	Language and norms	The power of knowledge shapes norms through the process of interaction	Human security comes from knowledge-building transformed from language
Peter Katzenstein	Cultural identity	National identity alters a country's interests and actions	Human security is derived from the shaping of culture and identity

Next, in her 1996 *National Interest in International Society*, Martha Finnemore uses a sociological methodology to analyze positioning in the international community

network, concluding that the concepts, institutions, and values of the international community not only limit a country's actions, but also change its preferences.[5] Mainstream international relations theory assumes that a country's preferences and national interests are exogenously given under inherent objective and material conditions. Finnemore (1996), however, reconciles liberalism and constructivism by showing how norms can be socially reconstructed and how international organizations reshape state acts. She also asserts that the structure of the international system not only includes the material and power structures, but also the meaning and value structures. National interests are not a given, but rather are discovered and constructed through social interaction (Finnemore, 1996: 1–33). In other words, the rules, institutions, and values of the international community affect national interests, limitations on a country's actions, and alterations of a country's preferences. For example, human rights, democracy and the rule of law are core values of the European Union. Already embedded in its founding treaty, they have been reinforced by the adoption of a Charter of Fundamental Rights. Respect for human rights is a prerequisite for joining the Union and a requirement for countries who wish to conclude trade and other agreements with it.

Human security is constructed and implemented by the international community. However, does each country see this value as a national interest? In Finnemore's view, national interest is defined according to the approval of norms and understandings in the international community. To take human security as an example, in 1994, the UN formulated the seven major dimensions of human security, and attempted to promote international common interest as the basis for the establishment of a human-oriented international community. Their adoption has resulted in some countries changing their preferences and has led to the establishment of the Human Security Network (HSN).

Next, Nicholas G. Onuf (1989) employed the constructivist approach in his research on social relationships. His basic point of view is that we live in a "world of our making," suggesting that social relations form us into the kind of beings that we are. In other words, we are part of a two-way process whereby social relationships generate human beings, and human beings create society. Human practices produce the rules which link together people and society (Onuf, 1989: 58–61). Onuf took the relationship between people and society as the starting point for his study, emphasizing the role of rules. People use language to interpret the rules which create a normative society. Language is the most important way of building society, for through it we expand our influence and achieve the purpose of knowledge-building. On the other hand, a human

being is also a rational agent. The rules of society guide ongoing practices, which constitute the most important element among human activities. These rules also determine how humans maintain social life, and the gradual internalization of the rules produces a unique form of social culture (Onuf, 1989, 60–62; 229–233). Onuf emphasizes language and the role it plays in constructing human beings, interests, and society. He takes language and rules as the core of constructivism, and regards the human being as the starting point of research and the center of human security. Through its transformation of knowledge, language has become one of the key elements of building human security. From personal-cognitive to social-practical knowledge (Bedeski, 2007: 45–48), the ongoing practices and interactions of human society eventually generate international norms. For constructivists, the end of the Cold War was due to a cognitive reformulation of the external environment by the political elite, for instance, Mikhail Gorbachev.

Finally, Peter J. Katzenstein (1996a) challenges traditional theories of security by taking the norms and culture of constructivism as his main research approach in exploring the unsolved security issues of mainstream international relations theories.[6] In light of developments in regional integration, Katzenstein applies the concepts of system and identity to comparative politics and regional research. He asserts that the concept of culture is a set of normative and cognitive standards which define the actors in the system and the interactive relationships among actors and society (2005: 6). Katzenstein defines culture as a collective model of the authority and identity of the nation-state, as represented by social customs and laws. Neo-realism and neo-liberalism failed to foresee the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War due to a lack of analysis of internal factors within the Soviet Union, including identity and interests.

Katzenstein challenges the view of the nation-state as a unified entity with predetermined interests, preferring to see it not as a single actor, but rather as a conglomeration of competing interests. For him, national interests are a product of the cultural environment generated through social interactions. However, culture alters with changes of leadership, environment, institutions, and decisions, and identity and interests are gradually constructed from cultural concepts and institutions (Katzenstein, 1996a: 59–62). Taking Japan as an example, after going through a period of extreme militarism and eventual defeat in World War II, various divergent memories and interpretations gave rise to intense debate. Following a period of internal political struggle, an

undisputed collective identity was generated, and economic policy and security became the nation's main priorities (Katzenstein, 1996b).

This paper takes the position that human security is a function of culture. Through its influence on nations, regions, and even on the entire world, culture alters concepts and generates identity. Thus culture has a major bearing on a nation's concepts, institutions, and respect for human rights and international law. The protection of human rights is a prominent example, for human security entails extensive moral and policy-oriented rules and obligations. Moreover, human security can be defined as a combined and integrated matrix of requirements and rights. Through this matrix, individual and social values grow, social organizations gradually develop, and collective questions are resolved (Ginkel and Newman, 2000: 60).

It is the position of this paper that the perspective of constructivism constitutes a useful supplement to traditional international relations theory (Tsai and Tan, 2008: 151–153; 166), as evidenced in its application to the concept of human security. This reflects the inadequacy of the traditional research tools employed in the field of international relations in the post-Cold War era. The belief that power is the sole determinant of national interests, preferences and actions is no longer a tenable approach to international politics. It is necessary to also consider various factors relating to human security, as is well elucidated by the constructivist approach.

Conclusion

This article holds that constructivism can be adopted as a way of interpreting human security. With their emphasis on concepts and identity, constructivism and human security represent a new language, a new symbol, and a new way of thinking about security studies and international relations. On the one hand, constructivism helps to explain such phenomena as values, the emergence of non-state forces, and the significance of agent-oriented processes (Newman, 2001: 247–248). On the other hand, constructivism provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding the true nature of such issues relating to human security as violence, class, gender, and race (Conteh-Morgan, 2005: 72–73). In contrast to structural realism, constructivism can serve as a useful research tool in approaching the concept of human security.

In international relations, constructivism and human security function in similar ways, which is why this paper proposes adopting constructivism as the theoretical basis of human security.[7] As table 2 indicates, according to constructivism, the shaping of knowledge is an important element of human security, with social meaning moving outwards from the individual to society, and from the state to the international community. This interactive process generates interests and determines identity. Identity is also the basis of the common interests which generate collective identity and respect for the individual in the international community. In the final stage, the interaction of the international community becomes a system and norm for realizing the concept of deterritorialization in human security.

Table 2:   A Constructive Analysis of Human Security

Unit	Knowledge	Identity	Space
individual	cognitive	blood	family
society	practical	nation	community, clan
state	consensual	citizen	territory
international society	institutional, norms	human	planet

By adopting the view of constructivism it is possible to reinterpret the concept of human security. Undoubtedly, constructivism and human security are attracting increasing attention in the post-Cold War era. The concept has developed quickly in the face of the complexities of the 21st century, and the traditional analytic tools are becoming increasingly inadequate. Many scholars of international relations have begun to reassess the role of constructivism in international relations theory, and human security is increasingly seen as an emerging issue in security research. Undeniably, human beings will increasingly face crises of population pressure and environmental deterioration, underscoring the importance of human security. Despite its theoretical advantages, however, the actual application of the concept of human security in international relations is still rare. In view of this situation, this paper represents an attempt to incorporate the insights of constructivism and human security into research on security and international relations. It is hoped that this attempt will generate future research on human security.

Notes

1.   The Human Security Network is a group of like-minded countries from all regions of the world that, at the level of Foreign Ministers, maintains dialogue on questions pertaining to human security. It was founded in 1999 on the initiative of Canada and Norway. Members of the Network include Austria, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Greece, Ireland, Jordan, Mali, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, Slovenia, and Thailand, with South Africa as an observer.

2.   Here constructivism emphasizes the important of the non-materialist aspects of international society, but without denying the substance of society, such as economic development or material needs and wants.

3.   On July 17, 1998, the International Criminal Court (ICC), governed by the Rome Statute, became the first permanent, treaty based, international criminal court established to help end impunity for the perpetrators of the most serious crimes of concern to the international community. More information can be found at the following website: http://www.icc-cpi.int/Menus/ICC/About+the+Court/ (last accessed May 2009).

4.   Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in his report to the 2000 General Assembly, challenged the international community to try to forge consensus. He posed the central question starkly and directly, "…if humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica—to gross and systematic violations of human rights that affect every precept of our common humanity?" The independent International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty was established by the Government of Canada in September 2000 to respond to that challenge (ICISS, 2001: VII-VIII).

5.   Finnemore (1996) focuses on international organizations as one important component of social structure and investigates the ways in which they redefine state preferences. She provides three detailed examples in different issue areas. Regarding state structure, she discusses the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the changing international organization of science. Regarding security, she analyzes the role of the Red Cross. Finally, she focuses on the World Bank and explores the changing definition of development in the Third World.

6.   In his *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, Katzenstein applies the concept of culture to security studies and demonstrates its influence on building national identity and changing national interests and behavior (1996a).

7.   To be sure, constructivism is not the only theory capable of interpreting the implications of human security. In fact, theories such as liberalism, global governance, and critical theory offer relevant insights into human security. Here, the main purpose is to emphasize the emergence of human security in relation to constructivism, and to generate further scholarly discussion.

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