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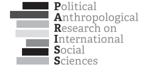

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Expanding boundaries: Unmaking and remaking secrecy in field research

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Abstract

This paper empirically retraces and conceptualizes secrecy in the study of security. Building on 27 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with social scientists about their field research experiences, we use Gieryn's concept of "boundary work" to rethink secrecy not as a self-evident separator between clearly demarcated spheres but as something that is negotiated, suspended, or circumvented in social situations. A boundary perspective allows us to highlight how contextualized social interactions draw and redraw lines between what can be known and what remains classified. Our analysis identifies three ways in which boundaries around secrecy can be expanded: fallibility, co-optation, and ambiguity. Explicating and empirically substantiating these forms of boundary work portrays secrecy as continuously performed and reconfigured. The paper contributes to current debates about field research by providing a different conceptual angle: one that favours performativity rather than individual capacity to reflect how access to security sites and actors comes into being.

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Keywords

secrecy – security – field research – boundary work

Introduction

> He said 'there is no reason for you to talk to my staff'. And at that point it was of course a little bit… I mean, I was very, very disappointed because I went to that border to do these interviews, and then I went out and sat on the sidewalk, thinking about what am I going to do because this is an important research field for me and I really need to do these interviews and if this person says 'no' and with one phone call, no one will talk to me. […] To my surprise, things developed in a rather unexpected way. […] At some point, one of the border police officials came out with a cup of tea and he asked me what I was doing there.
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In the study of security, scholars have increasingly turned to the sites and actors that are involved in the 'making' of security. In doing so, they seek to create first-hand perspectives on lifeworlds, practices, and modes of meaning-making rather than relying on mediated sources such as policy documents, reports, or datasets. These trends go hand in hand with a methodological recalibration that takes inspiration from adjacent disciplines such as Sociology, Anthropology, or Science and Technology Studies and favours qualitative methods such as narrative interviews, participant observation, or the study of infrastructures and technologies in-the-making.[1] The growing willingness to engage with security 'in the field' does, however, come with particular challenges. Most notably, security tends to be connected to forms of secrecy that shield its sites and actors from outside scrutiny. Methodological literature has, in turn, dealt with the question how academic researchers can overcome secrecy and resulting access restrictions. While this literature is timely and addresses practical challenges in the research process, it tends to conceptualize secrecy as a given, almost natural barrier between security and academic research.

1 Claudia Aradau et al., eds., *Critical Security Methods: New Frameworks for Analysis* (London/New York: Routledge, 2015); Mark B. Salter and Can E. Mutlu, eds., *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies: An Introduction* (Milton Park/New York: Routledge, 2013); Matthias Leese, "Die Sache mit der Technologie: Zur Neuordnung eines analytischen Bereichs in den International Beziehungen," *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 28, no. 1 (2021).

Accounts from field research itself do, however, paint a more nuanced picture. In research practice, secrecy is not a self-evident separator between clearly demarcated spheres but can be negotiated, suspended, or circumvented in social interactions. Building on a total of 27 qualitative interviews with social scientists, we propose to conceptualize secrecy in field research as the result of "boundary work"[2] and highlight the contextualized social interactions that draw and redraw lines between what can be known and what remains classified. Notably, our analysis reconstructs secrecy as a fluid notion that can become subject to what Gieryn calls "boundary expansion", i.e. the temporary or permanent inclusion of outsiders into a previously closed sphere. We identify and empirically substantiate three ways in which boundaries can be expanded: (1) fallibility; (2) co-optation; and (3) ambiguity. Rethinking secrecy through the concept of boundary work, so we argue, allows us to go beyond statist readings of inside/outside and instead portrays differentiations between security and non-security as continuously performed and reconfigured.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, we review the literature that has dealt with methodological questions vis-à-vis field research. We focus here on work that has engaged notions of secrecy as a key characteristic of security and the ways in which resulting challenges for field research have been dealt with by the academic community. We then introduce and discuss the concept of boundary work and show how it can be mobilized to think about secrecy in more practice-oriented terms. Finally, we empirically retrace and substantiate how boundaries are transformed in research practice. We conclude with some considerations as to what a boundary work perspective on secrecy means vis-à-vis research practices and wider methodological implications.

Security and Secrecy

Security and secrecy are closely connected concepts. Their relationship becomes visible first and foremost in relation to the state and its institutions. As Horn argues, secrecy tends to be portrayed as a central tenet of statecraft, as it is set to "protect and stabilize the state, and as such it is the precondition for the functioning of the law."[3] What needs to be protected, from such a perspective, are the inner workings of the state, its vulnerabilities, and the means

2 Thomas F. Gieryn, "Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 6 (1983).

3 Eva Horn, "Logics of Political Secrecy," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 8 (2011): 106.

to safeguard these vulnerabilities. Public revelation of the secret would thus threaten the foundations of the state and has the potential to create a "fundamental disturbance of political order".[4] From the point of view of state actors, the exposure of secrets must, therefore, be carefully avoided. Among the most pertinent spheres of secrecy are those actors and institutions concerned with security matters, i.e. the military, police and intelligence services, border control, but also industry sectors and research activities that contribute to these domains. Revelations of their capacities, strategies, and tools are considered to undercut the effectiveness of security provision.[5]

At the same time, the removal of information from the public domain has been criticized as a strategy to obscure potentially problematic practices by state actors (and their private contractors) and to suppress debate and critique.[6] Secrecy must in this sense be understood as constitutive of differentiated forms of knowledge and as productive of power.[7] As Horn puts it, a critical reading of secrecy draws attention to how it creates "a space of exception from the rule of law, an exception that can breed violence, corruption, and oppression."[8] Whistle-blowers such as Edward Snowden or Chelsea Manning have in fact in the recent past laid bare the legally and morally questionable, clandestine practices of governments by publicly exposing classified documents and have thus managed to (at least partially) subject the lawless space of secrecy to public scrutiny and accountability mechanisms.[9]

Whether it is perceived as a necessity to ensure the survival and the functioning of the state or as a power tool for differentiation and obfuscation, accounts of secrecy tend to primarily treat it in ontological terms. It is in this sense seen

4 Horn, "Logics of Political Secrecy," 104.

5 Alasdair Roberts, *Blacked Out: Government Secrecy in the Information Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

6 Ann Florini, ed., *The Right to Know: Transparency for an Open World* (New York/Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2007).

7 Oliver Kearns, "State Secrecy, Public Assent, and Representational Practices of U.S. Covert Action," *Critical Studies on Security* 4, no. 3 (2016); William Walters, "Secrecy, Publicity and the Milieu of Security," *Dialogues in Human Geography* 5, no. 3 (2015); William Walters and Alex Luscombe, "Postsecrecy and Place: Secrecy Research Amidst the Ruins of an Atomic Weapons Research Facility," in *Secrecy and Methods in Security Research: A Guide to Qualitative Fieldwork*, ed. Marieke de Goede, Esmé Bosma, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins (London: Routledge, 2019).

8 "Logics of Political Secrecy," 106.

9 Thomas Olesen, "The Politics of Whistleblowing in Digitalized Societies," *Politics & Society* 47, no. 2 (2019); Zygmunt Bauman et al., "After Snowden: Rethinking the Impact of Surveillance," *International Political Sociology* 8, no. 2 (2014); David Murakami Wood and Steve Wright, "Editorial: Before and After Snowden," *Surveillance & Society* 13, no. 2 (2015).

as an almost natural barrier that separates what can be known publicly from what must remain classified – independent of contestations about which specific information should fall into either sphere. This trend is also reflected in methodological literature that often starts from the assumption that in security research "classification and obfuscation are the rule"[10] and thus present challenges for the researcher to overcome. Security actors are thereby usually conceptualized as guardians that seek to protect information from exposure and public scrutiny by means of bureaucratic rebuff, remote and physically guarded sites, or a general lack of willingness to engage with researchers.[11]

Research practice, according to this view, must deconstruct secrecy through the application of specific tactics and strategies, notably by involving trust-building measures but also formalizations of research interactions such as consent forms or non-disclosure agreements.[12] Inspiration has thereby been drawn from ethnographic discussions on methodology and methods that foreground the importance of proper communication strategies and the framing of research goals.[13] As Gusterson has argued in the context of his research on US nuclear weapons scientists, academic researchers entering the field "must get the angle of approach just right, or the resultant friction may burn up the mission."[14] While practical tips and crafty strategies provide a valuable and

10 Esmé Bosma, Marieke de Goede, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins, "Introduction: Navigating Secrecy in Security Research," in *Secrecy and Methods in Security Research: A Guide to Qualitative Fieldwork*, ed. Marieke de Goede, Esmé Bosma, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins (London: Routledge, 2019), 1.

11 Katarina Kušić and Jakub Záhora, eds., *Fieldwork as Failure: Living and Knowing in the Field of International Relations* (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2020); Xymena Kurowska, "When One Door Closes, Another One Opens? The Ways And Byways Of Denied Access, Or A Central European Liberal In Fieldwork Failure," *Journal of Narrative Politics* 5, no. 2 (2019); Kathleen M. Vogel et al., "Knowledge and Security," in *The Handbook of Science and Technology Studies*, ed. Ulrike Felt et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017); Brian Rappert and Chandré Gould, *Dis-eases of Secrecy: Tracing History, Memory and Justice* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2017); Brian Balmer, *Secrecy and Science: A Historical Sociology of Biological and Chemical Warfare* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012).

12 Marieke de Goede, Esmé Bosma, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins, eds., *Secrecy and Methods in Security Research: A Guide to Qualitative Fieldwork* (London: Routledge, 2019); Walters, "Secrecy, Publicity and the Milieu of Security."; Torin Monahan and Jill A. Fisher, "Strategies for Obtaining Access to Secretive or Guarded Organizations," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 44, no. 6 (2015).

13 Hugh Gusterson, "Ethnographic Research," in *Qualitative Methods in International Relations. A Pluralist Guide*, ed. Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Edward Schatz, ed., *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

14 "Ethnographic Research," 96.

much-needed resource for field research, they do, however, tend to (involuntarily) reify an ontological understanding of secrecy. Secrecy is, in other words, still perceived as an obstacle that cannot be removed but must instead be overcome.

More recently, scholars have started to challenge such assumptions and have instead opted to treat secrecy as performed by those involved in its production and maintenance.[15] For example, Jones reminds us that secrecy does not simply equal "depth and authenticity of knowledge."[16] Instead, part and parcel of the secret seems to be what Masco calls the state's "theatrical performance as a means to power."[17] A focus on performance suggests the need for a *relational* understanding of security, secrecy, and publicity that acknowledges the paradoxical nature of secrecy as it "must itself be performed in a public fashion in order to be understood to exist."[18] Similarly, scholars have investigated the complex and generative forms of knowledge between opacity and transparency that are always unstable, relational, and transitory.[19] From a performative perspective, secret information becomes repeatedly de- and re-classified, post-secret, or semi-public.

By following such an understanding, we suggest going beyond secrecy as a barrier to 'true' knowledge about security and as a stable ontological category that obscures the powers of security actors and institutions. Instead, we propose tracing and reconstructing how borders between what can be known and what must remain hidden are performed and how these borders are reconfigured through the interactions between researchers and security actors. To conceptualize these interactions, we turn to Gieryn's notion of boundary work and discuss how it can be mobilized to study the unmaking and remaking of secrecy in field research.

15 Michael Herzfeld, "The Performance of Secrecy: Domesticity and Privacy in Public Spaces," 2009, no. 175 (2009); Graham M. Jones, "Secrecy," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43, no. 1 (2014); Joseph P. Masco, "The Secrecy/Threat Matrix," in *Bodies as Evidence: Security, Knowledge, and Power*, ed. Mark Maguire, Ursula Rao, and Nils Zurawski (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2018).

16 Jones, "Secrecy," 61.

17 Masco, "The Secrecy/Threat Matrix," 175.

18 Herzfeld, "The Performance of Secrecy: Domesticity and Privacy in Public Spaces," 135.

19 Walters and Luscombe, "Postsecrecy and Place: Secrecy Research Amidst the Ruins of an Atomic Weapons Research Facility."; Huub Dijstelbloem and Annalisa Pelizza, "The State is The Secret: For a Relational Approach to The Study of Border and Mobility Control in Europe," in *Secrecy and Methods in Security Research: A Guide to Qualitative Fieldwork*, ed. Marieke de Goede, Esmé Bosma, and Polly Pallister-Wilkins (London: Routledge, 2019).

Boundary Work

Gieryn has originally developed the concept of boundary work to study how borders between science and non-science are constructed and defended.[20] Boundary work starts from the assumption that those differentiations are neither clear nor self-evident, but that they are contested and negotiated. Practices of making and re-making boundaries are thus crucial objects of social scientific inquiry. Notably, as Gieryn puts it, analyses of boundary work are interested in the "messiness, contentiousness, and practical significance"[21] of those activities that substantiate science by separating it from other domains (e.g., practices that are considered to be scientific or define who gets to be a scientist). In his reconstruction of John Tyndall's attempts to expand scientific authority in Victorian England, Gieryn shows how boundary work operates through diverging lines of argumentation: while demarcations of science from religion emphasized the practical usefulness of scientific applications, those between science and mechanics stressed an assumed supremacy of scientific thought.[22] Taken together, both practices of distinguishing science from non-science enabled Tyndall and the wider scientific community to successfully establish what Gieryn calls "the ideology of 'the practical benefits of pure science'" to "justify public support for scientific research."[23]

Notably, Tyndall's case shows that the analytical focus of boundary work is not so much on scientific practices (e.g., laboratory work, academic publishing) themselves, but rather on "situations where answers to the question, 'What is science?' move from tacit assumption to explicit articulation."[24] If the notion of science is connected to what Gieryn & Figert call "cognitive authority,"[25] i.e. the acknowledged expertise to understand, explain, and modify natural and technical phenomena, then boundary work is about creating and maintaining

20 Gieryn, "Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists."

21 Thomas F. Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," in *Handbook of Science and Technology Studies* (*Revised Edition*), ed. Sheila Jasanoff et al. (Thousand Oaks/London/New Delhi: Sage, 2001), 393.

22 Gieryn, "Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists."

23 Gieryn, "Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists," 791.

24 Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," 405.

25 Thomas F. Gieryn and Anne E. Figert, "Scientists Protect their Cognitive Authority: The Status Degradation Ceremony of Sir Cyril Burt," in *The Knowledge Society: The Growing Impact of Scientific Knowledge on Social Relations*, ed. Gernot Böhme and Nico Stehr (Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster/Tokyo: Reidel, 1986).

a position of power towards society and larger trajectories of social ordering. In this vein, Gieryn sees boundary work primarily as "the attribution of selected characteristics to the institution of science [...] for purposes of constructing a social boundary that distinguishes some intellectual activity as non-science."[26]

Such a focus on power and authority moves away from the ontological question what science is and instead reconceptualises it as a "space [..] that acquires its authority precisely from and through episodic negotiations of its flexible and contextually contingent borders and territories."[27] This is not to say that a boundary perspective would deny science any substantive characteristics, but it is analytically primarily interested in the quarrels over its position and function within society.[28] This perspective suggests that the social concept of science is endowed with authority as a result from the negotiations about its boundaries. It resonates with the more fundamental assumption that no essential definition of science exists in the first place but that different actors or institutions are involved in ongoing struggles about science's continually changing meanings. At the same time, Gieryn is careful to avoid the trap of radical constructivism, i.e. "that every episode of boundary-work occurs de novo, and that there are no patterns at all from one episode to the next."[29] Instead, previously successful demarcations of science form a "repertoire of characteristics available for selective attribution on later occasions."[30]

In summary, by moving away from an ontological perspective and towards the study of differentiation activities that establish and fortify the status of science within society and politics, boundary work analytically opens up to the frictions, the contestations, and the strategies mobilized to do so. As such, it offers a thinking tool that translates well to the study of security and secrecy. Scholars have similarly explored how security is essentially contested and

26 "Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists," 782.

27 Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," 405.

28 Julie Battilana, "The Enabling Role of Social Position in Diverging from the Institutional Status Quo: Evidence from the UK National Health Service," *Organization Science* 22, no. 4 (2011); Silke V. Bucher et al., "Contestation about Collaboration: Discursive Boundary Work among Professions," *Organization Studies* 37, no. 4 (2016); Thomas F. Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Charlene Zietsma and Thomas B. Lawrence, "Institutional Work in the Transformation of an Organizational Field: The Interplay of Boundary Work and Practice Work," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2010).

29 Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," 406.

30 Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," 406.

comes to be filled with contextualized meaning through different strategies.[31] Notably, from a political point of view, security matters have been deemed different from 'normal' politics, ascribing them a form of authoritative power to act in the face of danger. Over the past decades, a good deal of the security studies literature has, accordingly, paid attention to questions of how security politics are constituted and legitimized, taking on a constructivist perspective that similarly focuses on the erection of boundaries between security and non-security and analyzes the manifold discursive or bureaucratic strategies of involved actors.[32]

Secrecy can, in this context, be understood as a preeminent tool to successfully demarcate security from non-security. It should, as argued earlier, however not be mistaken for a self-evident barrier between what can be known and what must remain hidden. Instead, through the lens of boundary work, it is subject to negotiation and change. This allows us to understand secrecy not as an exclusively methodological issue but as a performative question that changes form vis-à-vis changing conditions – whether these have already materialized, are imagined, or strategically staged.[33] Secrecy is thus turned into a *trading zone* of (inter)actions between actors and collectives that engage, (re-) draw, and extend boundaries to defend and justify the rationale that separates them. Paying attention to the (at times implicit) forms of boundary work by security actors, organizations, and institutions then attunes us to how their (inter)actions unmake and remake secrecy in research practice.

Analytically, Gieryn identifies four ideal types of boundary work: monopolization, expulsion, protection, and expansion.[34] When geared towards monopolization, firstly, boundary work tends to be a straightforward confrontative battle over different scientific interpretations, resulting in the 'victory' and survival of one paradigm over another.[35] Expulsion, secondly, characterizes boundary work that "involves insiders' efforts to expel not-real members from

31 Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (Boulder: Rienner, 1991); David A. Baldwin, "The Concept of Security," *Review of International Studies* 23, no. 1 (1997). Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*; Baldwin, "The Concept of Security."

32 Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Rienner, 1998); Didier Bigo, "Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 27, no. 1 (2002); Nina Klimburg-Witjes, "Shifting Articulations of Space and Security: Boundary Work in European Space Policy Making," *European Security* 30, no. 4 (2021).

33 Stephen Hilgartner, *Science on Stage: Expert Advice as Public Drama* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

34 Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," 424.

35 Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," 424.

their midst."[36] It refers to actors and practices that are deemed unacceptable to a specific community. Protection, thirdly, pertains to boundary work that "involves the erection of walls to protect the resources and privileges of those inside", thereby "[preventing] the control of science by outside powers."[37] In contrast to expulsion, protection thus aims to maintain and stabilize existing boundaries.[38] Such work can, for instance, be found in peer-review practices that maintain the boundaries of certain theoretical schools or disciplines and in the ways that journals can act as gatekeepers for specific scientific audiences.

The most pertinent form of boundary work in the context of this paper is expansion. It refers to practices that aim at the inclusion of individuals, ideas, and belief sets into existing practices and procedures.[39] Conventionally, we find this form in projects with different epistemic cultures that are encouraged to collaborate and must, to some extent, merge. They thus extend the respective boundaries of scientific practices to include other forms of knowledge production. In the case of secrecy, as we demonstrate in the following, we can see how security actors occasionally include researchers in different ways.

Methodological Note

The empirical material that informs the analysis presented throughout the remainder of this paper consists of 27 qualitative, semi-structured interviews with academic researchers who engage (or have in the past engaged) in field research on security matters. Our interview partners were colleagues whom we knew either personally through conferences or joint projects, who were recommended to us by other colleagues, or who we contacted based on our familiarity with their published work. They situate their work in different disciplines, including Sociology, Science and Technology Studies, Political Science, International Relations, Anthropology, and Criminology. Moreover, they occupy different career stages, including PhD and postdoctoral researchers, assistant and tenured professors. The sites and actors they studied are located in various empirical domains, including borders, domestic policing, cyberspace, surveillance, drone regulation, nuclear weapons, bioterrorism, violent conflicts, and paramilitary activities. Sampling bias was partially

36 Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," 432.
37 Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," 434.
38 Matt Carlson, "Metajournalistic Discourse and the Meanings of Journalism: Definitional Control, Boundary Work, and Legitimation," *Communication Theory* 26, no. 4 (2016): 3.
39 Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," 429.

mediated by the use of snowballing technique (i.e. we started by contacting colleagues we knew personally and continued to 'snowball' ourselves forward by asking our interviewees for further contacts we had hitherto not known or considered) and interviews were conducted until no more new code categories and clusters emerged analytically from the produced material, suggesting a certain level of saturation had been reached.

The interview structure loosely followed several larger themes around methodological and practical issues in field research practice, with secrecy and access being one of the core themes. All interviews were subsequently transcribed and coded thematically using qualitative data analysis software (MaxQDA). Coding is a key analytical strategy in qualitative research to sort and structure large amounts of text data (in our case 100+ pages of interview transcripts), whereby these data "are broken down into component parts" and later reorganized in accordance with thematic patterns.[40] Specifically, an open coding approach was employed to identify concepts which were in a second step grouped to form categories.[41] In the context of our research, coding facilitated the exploration and interpretation of interview data, i.e. the establishment of links between different fieldwork experiences and their relation to emerging concepts and categories. In concrete terms, throughout the analysis, transcribed texts were disassembled and re-assembled in correspondence with clusters that emerged within the code structure, highlighting particularly pertinent themes throughout the material. These clusters are reflected in the empirical section of this paper, as they relate to different ways of boundary expansion around secrecy. Quotes from interviews not conducted in English were translated by the authors. We have opted to fully anonymize all empirical references to protect our interviewees and their trust relations with their respective informants.

The methodical approach and the resulting data, although not representative in a statistical sense, allow us to address a common reproach in methodology debates, i.e. that field interactions are usually limited to idiosyncratic experiences of the author(s), thus constituting anecdotal evidence at best and not providing a suitable basis for proper theorization.[42] Aggregating the number of cases and taking into consideration the experiences of a larger number of researchers provides us with the opportunity to identify common or similar

40 Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods. 4th Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 468.

41 Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Newbury Park/London/New Delhi: Sage, 1990), 61.

42 Joan W. Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991).

boundary-expanding interactions around secrecy. Although we do not seek to generalize from a small qualitative data sample that reflects our own positions in our respective fields and our geographical and thematic scopes, we do believe that the patterns identified in the interview data hint at cross-cutting field experiences concerning secrecy and the – sometimes surprising – expansion of its boundaries. A caveat is presented by the fact that our data are limited to cases where boundaries were actually expanded. It is important to keep in mind that in other instances secrecy remained in place and researchers were not able to receive access to security actors or institutions. We can, in other words, only 'see' those instances of boundary work that represent a transformative effect in field research.

Expanding Boundaries

In the following we describe and empirically substantiate how secrecy becomes unmade and remade through field interactions. From our interview data, three forms of boundary expansion can be identified: (1) fallibility; (2) co-optation; and (3) ambiguity. The first form relates to moments when chaperons, porters, or security officers on duty (temporarily) suspended, neglected, or ignored pre-established rules, regulations, or infrastructures. This allowed researcher to transcend the still existing divide between security and non-security and access classified information or restricted spaces. The second form relates to situations in which boundaries are expanded to appropriate the work of researchers in the interest of specific individual or organizational agendas. The third form relates to the often ambiguous status of secret knowledge or material that expands boundaries through idiosyncratic interpretations of the status of such information.

Fallibility

The first form of boundary expansion that we identify pertains to the fallibility that is an inherent part of any performance. There is, in other words, no guarantee that performative acts will succeed in bringing into being what they relate to. On the contrary, the lack of any naturalness of specific categories and the required boundary work around them means that there is always a potential for failure. For Butler, "fallibility is built into the account of performativity"[43] and thus always already present in the form of "seams and fissures"[44]

43 Judith Butler, "Performative Agency," *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3, no. 2 (2010): 152.

44 Butler, "Performative Agency," 149.

that hint at the constructed-ness of ontological effects. Such a perspective opens up an analytical avenue to explore the labour necessary to uphold boundaries around performatively produced categories. As Kaiser claims, the notion of performativity "requires continual guarding and policing [...] to prevent the gaps and fissures performatively produced from becoming ruptures that threaten to expose the unnatural, nonessential, contingent conditions of the signifier's becoming."[45]

The ways in which secrets are safeguarded in everyday practice are often mundane. Differences between those who are allowed to know and those who are not are usually enacted through formal roles and status ascriptions such as security clearances or access authorizations. When approaching the demarcation line between security and non-security, those without clearance or authorization need to comply with a set of rules, for example being accompanied while moving around facilities, or facing restrictions in data collection (e.g., no recordings of conversations, no photography). Non-compliance with these rules comes with the threat of disciplinary measures and/or the loss of access for researchers. However, our analysis also suggests that in many cases established rules and protocols are not, or only partially, enforced by security actors or institutions themselves, thus opening up intermediate spaces that are technically defined by secrecy rules, but where research is nonetheless rendered possible.

The following encounter by one of our interviewees illustrates how secrecy was only performed up to a certain point and then ceased to be enforced. Its collapsing status enabled research activities that would otherwise have been impossible. The researcher was, in this case, permitted to conduct observations at a camp for refugees and asylum seekers. The camp was a highly sealed sphere accessible only with permission from local authorities and in the company of an official. What our interviewee referred to as having a "watchdog" (Interview 15) is in fact a familiar instrument at security sites that must ensure that visitors do not go off-limits or overstep the boundaries by obtaining information for which they have no access rights. Being subjected to the watchful eyes of the chaperon limited the possibilities for observing the practices within the camp. This restricting constellation did, however, suddenly change at the end of the researcher's tour:

45 Robert J. Kaiser, "Performativity and the Eventfulness of Bordering Practices," in *A Companion to Border Studies*, ed. Thomas M. Wilson and Donnan Hastings (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 523.

> [The official] dropped me off at the gate, we said goodbye, and he turned around and left. But I had not yet passed through the gate. And so I simply went back to the camp and stayed there for another one and a half hours, kind of hidden, and kept observing and collecting data. [...] I tried to act as inconspicuous as possible, just standing in a corner and pretending to wait for someone, like I was a staff member from some NGO. In the end, everything turned out well. And after a while, when I noticed that more people started to be around, I decided to leave.
>
> INTERVIEW 15

There is no certainty as to why the official did not ensure that the researcher left the camp through the gate. Their motives, however, are not a prime concern for our analysis. Instead, our focus is on how boundaries were successfully performed for most of the field visit, only to be abandoned at the very end of the tour. As the chaperon left the researcher without ensuring their departure, the distinction between regulated and irregular behaviour was no longer maintained and previously forbidden research activities (i.e. roaming freely for an extended time) became possible.

Other interviewees recounted similar experiences. One interviewee had obtained permission to attend a military exercise on response mechanisms to a terrorist attack. The exercise was supposed to take place within a heavily guarded military site. Upon arrival at the site, there was some confusion as to how the military personnel in attendance should deal with the presence of a researcher and whether/how protocols would apply to *academic* visitors. Subsequently, the researcher was informed about several rules to regulate their behaviour within the military sites – however only to be later informally instructed to break these rules. For instance, the researcher was told that no formal clearance to enter the relevant site where the exercise was to take place could be given. At the same time, however, they were told to simply let the guards at the check-point know where they were going in order to be allowed to pass. Once inside the building, the researcher was told not to move around freely — only to be subsequently instructed to proceed through the facility unaccompanied. Being confronted with such a lack of enforcement, our interviewee wondered "whether [the military] really believed in what they were preaching. [...] These little things: being allowed to enter a space which I was originally told is off limits" (Interview 01).

Again, the reasons for the lose interpretation of usually hard and fast rules in military contexts were not entirely clear. It might have been difficult for the authorities to pin down the status of a 'researcher' in the context of otherwise clearly demarcated roles and authorizations, or it might have been a

lack of resources during the military exercise's exceptional circumstances. The decisive point here is that protocol was not adequately enforced and thereby offered loopholes that allowed for access to a shielded setting: even without clearance, the researcher was able to attend the exercise and collect data on security practices.

In other cases, the absence of enforcement of access restrictions was even considered disturbing by our interlocutors. One interviewee who studied refugee camps as sites of security practices and mobility management more generally recounted the lack of protective measures surrounding the camp infrastructure. As they framed it, they were

> genuinely shocked by that fact that there was this huge registration site with huge security architectures with thousands of people in incredibly vulnerable positions – unaccompanied children, severely traumatized women – and anybody could just walk in [...] and sort of claim that they were doing research, or that they were a journalist, or they were humanitarians giving assistance.
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> INTERVIEW 20

Even though, in theory, the camp should have been subject to access restriction and security clearances, measures of guarding the boundary between outside and inside were virtually non-existent. This site was in fact so open that the researcher wondered if they "wanted more security" and the protective measures that would have come with it (Interview 20).

Our interviewees' encounters draw attention to how secrecy relies on the active performances of on-the-ground personnel tasked with the enactment of protocols and regulations. Boundary expansions in practice emerge through the seemingly mundane competencies of chaperons, porters, or officers on checkpoint duty. The discretionary power of these "petty sovereigns"[46] to make secrecy decisions in mundane interactions with researchers can account for the *fallibilities* that, as our examples illustrate, suspend boundaries and render security sites and actors accessible and knowable. What we see here is a lack of secrecy performance that leads to an involuntary or unplanned boundary expansion, i.e. researchers being able to transcend the demarcation line between security and non-security, if only for a limited period of time. Rather than trying to understand the specific circumstances that motivated involved

46 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London/New York: Verso, 2004).

actors to behave in certain ways, we suggest understanding these instances as *breakdowns* that highlight how secrecy is always already riddled with inherent 'holes' and create research-ability in ways that are mediated by interactions in research practice.

Co-optation

The second theme of boundary work relates to the co-optation of researchers by those actors or institutions that they investigate. Co-optation usually refers to the appropriation of critique by those in power, thwarting emancipation or revolution and instead making critique work in the interests of the establishment. For instance, Turner et al. argue that the concept of human security has been subdued to support global capitalism, militarism, and neoliberal forms of governance and, in this context, fails to serve its original purpose as a safeguard for individual and community safety.[47] Co-optation can, however, also become an issue in research when critical engagement with security practices is appropriated by research participants, thus posing a risk that academic knowledge can sustain established institutions and power relations rather than challenge them.[48] In the context of field research, co-optation draws attention to the strategies through which security actors appropriate academic researchers to secure their own institutional or political power by granting access in exchange for credibility and legitimacy. Boundary expansions are here understood as 'strategic' choices that dissolve the border around secrecy for a specific purpose, i.e. to lend support for internal or external power struggles. Speaking about their research on border and police actors, one interviewee recalled how their fieldwork had coincided with a power struggle within a police organization:

> I had fallen into a completely contingent moment where the Head of the drug police was trying to make his image completely clean: "Look at me, I'm talking to civil society and talking to an academic, talking to an international actor from a donor community. I have nothing to hide." And he opened up everything. He based me in the airport, where the most

47 Mandy Turner, Neil Cooper, and Michael Pugh, "Institutionalised and Co-opted: Why Human Security Has Lost Its Way," in *Critical Perspectives on Human Security: Rethinking Emancipation and Power in International Relations*, ed. David Chandler and Nik Hynek (London/New York: Routledge, 2010).

48 Nik Hynek and David Chandler, "No Emancipatory Alternative, No Critical Security Studies," *Critical Studies on Security* 1, no. 1 (2013); Matthias Leese, Kristoffer Lidén, and Blagovesta Nikolova, "Putting Critique to Work: Ethics in EU Security Research," *Security Dialogue* 50, no. 1 (2019).

> important drug control unit is, so I could see what their methods were. I interviewed them; I got embedded with the drug police at the border with [country], which is the second most important border for cocaine trafficking between the two countries. [...] And so, then he was, this Head of the drug police, was subsequently promoted. And the person that took his place was a rival, and he wanted to play in the game as well. So, I was a pawn essentially in this competition of who could give the researcher more access. And the new Head of the national drug police embedded me directly into the airport police, and they gave me all of the data that I wanted. They showed me every single thing!
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> INTERVIEW 19

What the interviewee here referred to as "being a pawn" in the game of publicly demonstrating openness did, although coming with considerable normative implications, not necessarily interfere with their research objectives and data generation in the field. On the contrary, it expanded boundaries by creating access to sites and revealed information that would otherwise likely not have been within reach. The goal of boundary expansion, performed by the involved security actors, turned police work into a matter of public concern vis-à-vis their own personal agendas. In the process, the boundary of secrecy that would have usually shielded such work from scrutiny was deliberately deactivated, rendering the activities of the police accessible and knowable.

However, co-optation can also turn out to be more problematic, especially when it comes to the positionality of the researcher vis-à-vis the field. One respondent, researching humanitarian organizations, provided an account of security actors that mobilized the researcher's status as an allegedly independent, third-party voice to express discontent with certain practices and procedures. As they told us, they felt that their presence in the field was actively used by members of the organization to promote a critical perspective on search and rescue operations, including the practices of the organization itself:

> I just wrote an email to their general email address, basically saying "Hello, I work on this and that, and I would really like to talk to you" – not expecting a reply. And within 5 minutes I had two emails: one from the general director and one from the head of communications, being like "That's great! Are you free now?" And I was like "Yeah, OK!", and I thought they'd speak to me for like 10 minutes, but I ended up spending the whole day there. They told me "Come back whenever you want. Come back tomorrow!" [...] And I look back on that now, and I think I was somebody who was voicing criticisms that they also had internally. I was the useful

> person that was able to say things that they could not say officially as an organization.
>
> INTERVIEW 22

This account illustrates how the researcher was perceived as an external, allegedly impartial voice that would "speak truth to power"[49] and positioned to publicly point to the organization's normative, operational, or economic shortcomings. To empower such critique, the organization had chosen to expand the boundary that usually protects the details of operational practices and instead to open up to external scrutiny. Similar experiences were reported by several other interviewees (Interviews 01, 10, 20, 23). For instance, one respondent studying emergency response organizations felt that their critical academic stance, while slightly stifled during actual interview situations, was encouraged by the organizations when they were writing policy papers based on their research (Interview 10). Across all of the reported cases, for the involved security actors, speaking "through" a researcher provided a way to express a form of (auto-)critique that would otherwise not have been possible to articulate.

For our interviewees such experiences would not always be pleasant ones. One respondent reflected on their role vis-à-vis a border control agency as a "useful idiot" whose reports about border officers' struggles at the frontline could be mobilized to the advantages of the organization (Interview 20). This account also draws attention to the role of social science research as a particular (strategic) angle that can be incorporated by security actors to refine future boundaries around the subject matter of their work.

Another challenging form of boundary expansion through co-optation was reported by one interviewee whose research on peacekeeping missions took an unexpected turn when being confronted with knowledge that should not have been made public:

> At some point, very delicate information was brought up by the [commander of the task force]. And I was so in shock, and I looked at my recorder, and I thought "Ok, he's saying that, he knows it's being recorded." [...] I'm not a journalist, of course. But if you say that... This guy is the task force commander; everything he says is measured. [...] Personally, I think that the public in [country] would love to have this kind of information

49 Aaron Wildavsky, *Speaking Truth to Power: The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979).

> [...]. I have not yet done anything with it, because it is outside of the scope of my research. [...] But I feel like he told me that for me to say it.
> INTERVIEW 23

It appears that the researcher was in this context seen as some sort of journalist who would be able to disseminate delicate details about a particular mission to the general public. Although the researcher did not comply with this implicit request, we arguably find here another instance of co-optation where the boundaries around secrecy were expanded to instrumentalize research and produce specific effects in public. As the above account illustrates, co-optation raises ethical concerns as to whether, and to what extent, researchers become implicated in political agendas *in exchange for* access opportunities. Our data suggest that most of our interlocutors took a rather pragmatic stance by being fully conscious about the fact that access might, in some occasions, come at a price. As one respondent critically reflected, "when things go smoothly with regard to security actors, if someone is giving you access, it's not because that person trusts you — it's because you're a resource to them" (Interview 19). At the same time, researchers would clearly differentiate between contexts and audiences that enable and constrain their 'usefulness' to security professionals and organizations. Two interviewees recalled, for example, that their critiques of emergency response organizations (Interview 10) and police practices (Interview 12) were much welcomed in the form of internal reports, but not so much as part of publicly accessible documents that would have forced these institutions to be held accountable for their shortcomings or vis-à-vis their mandate.

In summary, the co-optation strategies discussed here demonstrate how security actors can deliberately facilitate access by choosing to expand boundaries in a way that serves particular goals or political agendas. What unites the individual accounts of our interviewees is that in their stories boundary expansions were predicated upon personal or institutional agendas that defined to what extent secrecy could be suspended and how. In each of them, we find a form of *strategic behaviour* that enabled the deliberate suspension of pre-existing boundaries. Security actors in this sense appeared to perceive the research situation as a form of *quid pro quo deal*. This in turn provides researchers with certain research opportunities within the field that co-exist with or support various political goals of security actors.

Ambiguity

The third and final form of boundary expansion that emerged from our data relates to the ambiguity of information. Ambiguity usually refers to uncertainty

of meaning, for example in communication or in classification practices. In her work on international organizations and knowledge making, Best has argued that ambiguity marks an important avenue into some of the contradictions and messiness in otherwise largely standardized bureaucracies, directing our attention to "what slips out, does not fit or gets lost in translation."[50] This ties in with de Lint and Virta's argument that from a political point of view, security is not only itself characterized by ambiguity but thrives on this characteristic because ambiguity contributes to the successful performance of demarcation lines between security and non-security.[51]

It is in fact at times unclear whether a particular site or particular data (should) fall within or outside of the category of security, and whether this distinction has implications for questions of visibility and accessibility. Presumably sensitive information is often *not* explicitly marked as secret or classified. Instead, it tends to be characterized by a tacit understanding of what an organization deems acceptable to reveal to the outside and what should be kept from external eyes. This information need not be particularly controversial or alarming or involve explicit secrets. On the contrary, it might pertain to details that, from the perspective of a security organization, might seem trivial and that actors in the context of security performances would just "let slip" (Interview 05) without questioning whether these details could be shared with externals. In this context, ambiguity primarily relates to different perspectives on the status and relevance of information, thus potentially expanding boundaries.

Our interviewees told us about various instances that pertained to uncertainty or misclassifications surrounding secrecy, for example cases in which received information was not clearly allocated for the researchers to know, leaving them puzzled about how to deal with such information. Those boundary expansions arguably point to the relatively strong interpretive flexibility of what must be considered a secret and what should not. Ambiguity itself can here be seen as a boundary-expanding concept: it foregrounds that even in security contexts not everything is regulated and that everyday practices are subject to interpretation which might differ considerably between one institution or person and the other.

One interviewee's experience vividly illustrates such a situation. During field research with a border control organization, the researcher received numerous documents that they considered should have been inaccessible

50 Jacqueline Best, "Bureaucratic Ambiguity," *Economy and Society* 41, no. 1 (2012): 86.

51 Willem de Lint and Sirpa Virta, "Security in Ambiguity: Towards a Radical Security Politics," *Theoretical Criminology* 8, no. 4 (2004).

for an academic researcher. It was relatively clear for the researcher from the nature of the documentation that it was not meant for public distribution, as it pertained to the organization's operations, internal guidelines, manuals, and procedures. Border control officers themselves did, however, apparently not consider this information as particularly worthy of being guarded. As our interviewee recalled, "one of them gave me a flash drive and I could copy all that data. That was completely crazy!" (Interview 15).

The liberal use of data could be understood as an epistemic and/or normative incongruence between the researcher and the officer. While for the researcher, the information presented an unprecedented window into the structures of the organization and their operational rationales, it appears that the border control officer might not have regarded it as particularly spectacular data. This might be because organization-specific knowledge, even if it is treated as tacit rather than explicit, is often considered common-place within a specific field and not particularly noteworthy. Such "hidden transcripts" (Interview 02) pertain to an uncommunicated, yet inscribed character of information in a security organization's particular procedures or modes of behaviour. Moreover, the nature of such information can be *transitory*, i.e. the classification status can change and render formerly secret information "post-secret."[52]

A similar experience was shared by another interviewee who recalled how police organizations would be very open about sharing concrete details on tactical and operational aspects. As they remembered, "[police officers] talked about their operations in a very straightforward fashion. So I could have told people about how their risk profiling algorithms work, how to play the algorithm. [...] The question is whether I can speak about certain information, who can I speak to, and at what cost?" (Interview 06) Again, in this case, there was an apparent mismatch between perceived categorizations of information. The operational details of specific policing strategies meant different things to different actors: for police actors, they spoke to the successful implementation of operative measures while for the researcher, they provided an insight into organizational knowledge practices. And for the public, they could have presented an opportunity to devise counter-measures against police actions.

The account of our interviewee, vis-à-vis such ambiguity, draws attention to how information sits at the boundary between the security sphere and the public and the question how it should be handled. When understanding security as a public good, it can be argued that information about threats and response

52 Walters and Luscombe, "Postsecrecy and Place: Secrecy Research Amidst the Ruins of an Atomic Weapons Research Facility."

strategies should be kept out of the public sphere in order not to undermine security agencies' operational capabilities. However, when considering that security can just as well be mobilized as argumentative carte blanche to legitimize specific forms of social ordering, equally strong arguments can be made that the public should have a right to know who does what in the name of security. As becomes apparent throughout our empirical data, the ambiguity of information tends to leave this decision with the researcher.

This can be illustrated with the case of sharing documentation about border control discussed above. Our interviewee was not explicitly told that the documentation was classified or that documents should only be used as background information. Nonetheless, they were "very careful because, to me, it wasn't entirely clear how I could use the data. It definitely contained internal material from [organization] that [was] not meant for a wider public. On the other hand, I did not receive any instructions by anyone telling me not to use it" (Interview 15). In the end, our interviewees rather unanimously agreed that in such situations, they would use ambiguous information as input for their ongoing research and maybe even as part of the analytical process. Still, researchers would be reluctant to directly refer to this kind of information as "evidence" in reports or academic manuscripts (Interviews 06, 11, 15, 20, 25).

At times, ambiguity can also work the other way around. One interviewee, reflecting on their research, explained how they would obtain classified information without even realizing it. In this case, security actors were more mindful about how they should have performed a stricter boundary around specific details. As our interviewee recalled:

> You don't know it when you hear it. That's the problem. Because sometimes, stuff is sensitive, but you don't know that it is. And even if it were, it's not as mind-breaking or scandalous as we might associate with something that we call sensitive information. [...] I always thought: "Well, I will know one day when somebody tells me something they should not". You know, it's going to be like "Oh my God, they gave me the nuclear codes by accident". But it's more like about how a particular X or Y person reacted to a particular counter-terrorism project. And then it's like "Oh wait, I should not have said that". Or: "Oh wait that should be off the record". And then you think "Well if I had... I would not have even known that that was supposed to not be said".
>
> INTERVIEW 11

In this account, information can be considered not-for-outsiders when it pertains to the inner workings of an organization, including the personal relations

of those within the organization. In a sense, the experience made by our interviewee resembles accidental gossiping, i.e. when the person backtracks as soon as they realize that a statement about someone else might be attributed to them afterwards. Such an interpretation was backed by other interviewees who were approached by security actors after conversations in order to retrospectively redact particular details of their research material (Interviews 01, 09, 20).

In summary, ambiguity pertains to the status of information and the ensuing uncertainties of *how security boundaries should be interpreted*. Our interviewees frequently encountered material that was found to be sensitive but, at the same time, neither explicitly classified nor explicitly public. Instead, information sat in-between sealed and transparent spaces, causing confusion about whether and how it belonged in categories of secrecy. Ambiguity thus speaks closely to the classification work around security and the constructed-ness of inside/outside boundaries. In many cases, boundary expansions based on ambiguity were not directly relevant to the researchers' goals. Their research was usually not directed toward the discovery of spectacular secrets, but rather toward an understanding of the organizations and practices concerned with the production of social order. Many interviewees accordingly focused less on secrecy as "hidden truth" but were interested in reconstructing the life-worlds, rationales, and practices of the social settings they studied. Subsequently, they rather foregrounded the status, meaning, and importance of certain information for the involved security actors.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have empirically explored how secrecy becomes reconfigured in the interactions between academic researchers and security actors during field research. Drawing on recent methodological developments that favour a focus on actors, practices, technologies, or infrastructures in the study of security, as well as debates that have foregrounded the particular challenges that come with these approaches, we have suggested to rethink secrecy through the notion of boundary work. As a concept, boundary work, in the words of Gieryn, allows us to "appreciate the socially constructed, contingent, local, and episodic character of cultural categories such as science."[53] Gieryn thereby argues for shifting our analytical focus toward "how and why people do

53 Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," 439–40.

boundary-work—how they define 'science' by attributing characteristics that spatially segregate it from other territories in the culturescape."[54]

We have argued that security and secrecy are characterized by a similar lack of self-evidence, requiring active work to establish and maintain a demarcation between what can be publicly known and what must remain hidden and classified. Working through the notion of boundary work allows us to problematize ontological understandings of secrecy (i.e. accounts where secrecy is accepted as a given parameter that must be circumvented for purposes of field access) and instead focus on the interactive, mundane performances of secrecy. Following Gieryn, analyses of boundary work should be broadly understood as "cultural interpretation of historically changing allocations of power, authority, control, credibility, expertise, prestige, and material resources among groups and occupations."[55] This ties in with work that treats secrecy as key to social ordering and power relations based on differentiated access to knowledge.

At the same time, the idea of boundary work also offers an analytical avenue to scrutinize how demarcations are not only actively constructed, but can be torn down, temporarily suspended, or redrawn. Building on the notion of boundary expansion, we have therefore empirically substantiated how secrecy boundaries can be subject to multiple forms of contingency. The first form refers to what we have here, building on Butler, called fallibility, i.e. the instances in which secrecy performances break down and create (temporary and unstructured) boundary expansions. The second form refers to co-optation, i.e. the strategic choices of security actors to grant access to researchers and appropriate their work in the interest of individual or organizational agendas. The third form refers to ambiguity, i.e. unclear classifications of information that expand boundaries in accordance with idiosyncratic interpretations. Taken together, they foreground how secrecy, much like science, is predicated upon "contingent, flexible, pragmatic, and (to a degree) arbitrary borders-and-territories"[56] and calls for critical examinations of how these borders are performed and reconfigured in practice.

In this capacity, our analysis provokes reflections on what boundary work means for field research practice. A first reflection concerns research ethics in the nexus of confidentiality and public interest. In a way, boundary expansions put the researcher right in the middle of the initially outlined conflict between secrecy as a functional necessity of the state and the public interest

54 Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," 440.
55 Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," 440.
56 Gieryn, "Boundaries of Science," 440.

to remove secrecy as an enabler of misconduct and skewed power relations.[57] From an academic perspective, reflection is thus required about the question what can be published and in which forms/outlets. In the social sciences, there is a long tradition of anonymization to protect research participants. While this is largely standard best practice, it has originally emerged primarily around the protection of vulnerable populations. Accordingly, in the literature on methods and ethics, some have argued that research participants in power positions (e.g., high ranking officials or decision-makers in private sector companies or public agencies) would not be by default entitled to the same level of protection – with repercussions as to which information can be made public by researchers.[58] While much more space would be required to go more in-depth into this complex thematic, we should note that there is indeed a pertinent common theme in our empirical data that reflects how strongly our respondents were concerned with "walking the tightrope between doing what they feel is right by their own research and what is expected of them according to the professional ethical codes of the academic profession."[59]

A second reflection is in order with regard to social status and power relations. In the context of boundary-expanding interactions, one might object that not only security is shrouded by a special status ascription, but also science as an activity of allegedly neutral and authoritative knowledge production that is underpinned by superior intellectual capacity.[60] The researcher would, in extension, be perceived by security actors not as part of the general public at which secrecy is usually aimed, but inhabit a peculiar space of in-between-ness that impacts on the ways in which boundaries between security and science can be expanded in the first place and how such expansions come into being in practice. While such interferences between different forms of social status cannot be ruled out, throughout our empirical material we found no indications that security and science would be more at eye level as compared to security and journalism or security and the general public. Our empirical data rather indicate that boundary expansions emerge from contextualized social

57 Benjamin Baez, "Confidentiality in Qualitative Research: Reflections on Secrets, Power and Agency," *Qualitative Research* 2, no. 1 (2002).

58 Liz Tilley and Kate Woodthorpe, "Is it the End for Anonymity as we Know it? A Critical Examination of the Ethical Principle of Anonymity in the Context of 21st Century Demands on the Qualitative Researcher," *Qualitative Research* 11, no. 2 (2011).

59 Tilley and Woodthorpe, "Is it the End for Anonymity as we Know it? A Critical Examination of the Ethical Principle of Anonymity in the Context of 21st Century Demands on the Qualitative Researcher," 208–9.

60 Gordon Gauchat, "The Cultural Authority of Science: Public Trust and Acceptance of Organized Science," *Public Understanding of Science* 20, no. 6 (2010).

interactions and more often than not take on forms and directions that could not have been anticipated.

In this sense, our analysis contributes to debates about field research and its challenges by providing a different conceptual angle that favours performativity rather than individual capacity to reflect how access to security sites and actors comes into being. While single cases of fallibility, co-optation, and ambiguity might be dismissed as idiosyncratic experiences of specific field constellations, we have seen them emerge as notable patterns across our data. Rather than relying on anecdotal evidence, this paper thus provides an attempt at widening the scope and systematizing accounts of field research across various sub-fields of security and different academic disciplines. In summary, our analysis shows how secrecy boundaries can become expanded in different ways that have not yet been included in methodological discussions. We take this as an encouraging sign for field researchers that access can manifest in unforeseen ways and yield data production opportunities that contribute to a better understanding of how security is produced and operates in different contexts, settings, and through various practices of boundary work.

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