

**SCREENING
ASYLUM**
in a **CULTURE**
of **DISBELIEF**

*Truths, Denials and
Skeptical Borders*

OLGA JUBANY

*Foreword by
John Solomos*



Screening Asylum in a Culture of Disbelief

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Truths, Denials and Skeptical Borders

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*In memory of Stanley Cohen;
Intellectual compass, life mentor and dearest friend*

There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.
Leonard Cohen

Foreword

In the period since the 1990s public policy debates about migration, refugees and asylum seekers have come to the fore in both elite political discourses and in everyday political language. The images of refugees and migrants who have drowned in the Mediterranean whilst attempting to reach the shores of Europe are a constant reminder of the human costs of the emerging migration regimes in Europe (Schwartz 2015; Packer 2015). Although this is most evident in Europe and North America it is also clear that these are issues that are truly global in their scope and impact (Andrijasevic 2010; Walters 2004; Massey 2013). As Castles, Haas and Miller have pointed out we live in a global environment that can be seen as the ‘age of migration’ (Castles et al. 2014). More importantly perhaps, nation-states as well as supra-national institutions have been forced to address not only such issues as growing economic and forced migration and the movement of refugee asylum seekers but wider concerns about the impact of new patterns of migration on social and cultural difference and integration.

At the same time we have seen growing signs of political tensions and conflicts around immigration and asylum, symbolised by mobilisations in favour of greater controls on borders and the growth of openly racist and xenophobic movements. This is evident in the ways in which both the traditional mass media and digital media are now engaged with questions about migration and asylum (Andersson 2016). It is also clear that

in this situation states have increasingly sought to highlight their role in both controlling immigration and in expelling those who are seen as 'illegal'. In this situation regimes of exclusion and deportation have come to the fore. Tanya Golash-Boza's research on deportation from the United States reports that from 1997 onwards five million people were deported, mostly to Latin America and the Caribbean (Golash-Boza 2015).

The centrality of immigration and asylum within the contemporary global environment has led to growing bodies of research and scholarship in both contemporary European societies as well as in North America. Much of this research has been focused on the growth of border regimes and the politicisation of immigration within contemporary societies. But we have also seen a wealth of research about the experiences of the people who have become caught up in the web of border controls and detention regimes that have become part of the everyday experiences of migrants and refugees. Yet, it is important to note that relatively little research has been done within the institutions that states have set up to control and regulate immigration.

It is within this wider political and intellectual context that we should see Olga Jubany's book on *Screening Asylum in a Culture of Disbelief: Truths, Denials and Skeptical Borders*. It draws on detailed ethnographic research in the UK among border control officers who are at the front line of implementing the policies of regulation and control that have been developed by successive governments over the past three decades. It thus looks at the processes involved in controlling and managing immigration through the lens of the language of the officers who participated in Jubany's research by allowing her an insight into their view of the realities of border controls. Given the difficulties of gaining access to this group of actors it is perhaps not surprising that this is one of the first studies that is based on an ethnography of border control officers.

Given this rich ethnographic material Jubany's account is a welcome and somewhat unique addition to our knowledge of the everyday realities of border controls. It is both a carefully researched book that draws on a wealth of original ethnographic research while at the same time showing a clear awareness of the broader field of scholarship and research. What is perhaps the most interesting about Jubany's account is the nuanced and carefully researched insight into the ways in which the

border control agencies of states are shaped by the decisions and actions of border control agents.

The core arguments of the book are organised around three main themes.

First, Jubany's account highlights the rapid growth of the emerging border regimes in European states such as the United Kingdom. The first two chapters of the book provide readers with an analysis of the background and context of the emergence of border controls as a political and policy issue. In developing this part of her analysis Jubany manages to weave together the background of Europe's emerging border regimes and she is thus able to situate the wider policy environment within which immigration officers operate. Jubany's analysis draws out the wider social and political processes that have helped to shape the growth of immigration control as an important sector of state spending over the past three decades.

The second theme that runs through the book focuses on the everyday training that helps prepare immigration officers to oversee the whole process of asylum screening. This is perhaps the part of the book that benefits most from the depth of her ethnographic research. A recurrent refrain in this part of the book is the argument that much of the research in this field does not explore the important role that immigration officers play in both constructing and maintaining the culture of disbelief and denial that helps to maintain strong controls on asylum and immigration by states. In giving voice to the ways in which immigration officers make sense of their everyday work as well as the world around them Jubany's analysis provides both a unique insight into their subcultural values.

It is also in this part of the book that Jubany is able to highlight the important role that discourses about security have played over the past two decades in shaping the work of immigration officers. She is able to show convincingly that immigration officers self-perception is often times framed through the lens of safeguarding the nation from the threats posed by high volumes of unregulated migration in an uncertain global environment. The meshing together of migration and refuge with issues such as terrorism and security has taken a variety of forms in the past two decades, and I found this part of Jubany's analysis really helpful in thinking through how the language of securitisation has become a commonplace justification for the creation of ever tougher border controls across both Europe and North America as well as other parts of the globe.

The third important theme in Jubany's account is evidenced in the concluding two chapters that provide an account of the voices and experiences of immigration officers as they oversee the everyday decisions that put into practice mechanisms of control and exclusion that underpin policy and political agendas. This part of the book explores in some detail the ways in which immigration officers' views of their role emerge through their everyday experiences, actions and interactions. The importance of experience and interaction in shaping their views and decision-making is perhaps the most important line of analysis to be found in this part of the book.

It is also important to note that a recurrent theme that runs throughout *Screening Asylum in a Culture of Disbelief* reminds us that such a 'culture of disbelief' has important material consequences on the life chances of refugees and asylum seekers. Everyday decisions about the 'truth' of asylum seekers' claims are at the heart of how controls at the border are put into operation. As Jubany reminds us we need to go beyond generalisations if we are to comprehend the everyday actions at the border that create the mechanisms of exclusion and control that force both refugees and migrants to make risky choices. In using her rich ethnographic insights to address the impact of the 'culture of disbelief' at the front line of the screening processes Jubany has produced a book that should be required reading for those who want to provide alternative political and policy agendas. She has also helpfully 'pulled back the screen' to provide the kind of detailed critical analysis of the workings of immigration regimes that are much needed in this time of uncertainty.

John Solomos

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1

Asylum Screening from Within

Rethinking Asylum

I just think it's like if you are sitting here opposite me and you. Either you believe what I'm telling you or you don't believe it.

Chief Immigration Officer¹

The ability of states to claim exclusive sovereign control over their borders is increasingly challenged. This is connected with the unconvincing idea that a state signifies a homogeneity of cultural, economic and military interest under a guise of 'national interest', an increasingly unstable conception in

¹ DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO: In this, and all subsequent quotes, there is a code that indicates that it is empirical material from immigration officers, expressed either as extracts from in-depth interviews (indicated as DI/V); from briefer interviews (indicated as I/V) or from notes from participant observation (indicated as P/O). Part of the code also indicates the category of the person interviewed: HMI: Her Majesty's Inspector; CIO: Chief Immigration Officer; IO: Immigration Officer; AIO: Assistant Immigration Officer; TO: Training Officer; and NR: new recruit. The rest of the code is for data management purposes only. The codes do not follow a clear pattern so confidentiality and anonymity are assured.

a globalised world. Despite the dimensions of the relational changes, the practices of national politics have largely remained territorial, connected to mythical ideas of ‘national communities’. Yet in this regard there is a stark contrast in the ways that global economic decline and recession are categorised politically as ‘out of our hands’ and the approaches taken in Europe to human crisis at the frontiers. In these contexts, the hard borders that belie the globalisation narrative have been brought firmly back into focus as the ultimate expression of state power.

The connection between the concept of refuge and the nation state is contingent. The relationship between the state and the process of becoming a refugee is largely addressed and conceptualised as a one-way street, with state sovereignty as the ultimate object of power. This relationship compels refugee protection to rely on a system of interconnected state signatories of the 1951 Refugee Convention (the Convention). This abstract account of state power characterises certain liminality,² transforming the production of migrant subjectivities through the law into insignificance (Gill 2010; Lazaridis 2015). In this process refugees and asylum seekers are not the only subjects overshadowed by essentialist accounts of state power, as the roles of so-called state actors engaged in the complexity of human controls are similarly eclipsed.

At the symbolic site of the border, the unmistakable expression of a ‘space of control’, the roles of immigration officers and a growing network of managers are blurred beyond distinction. The work of these individuals who embody state power is largely overlooked and, as a result, the way the laws regulating the arrival of asylum seekers is interpreted, reconstructed and reworked at ports of entry remains concealed. The influence of these law enforcers, and in particular the world of reconstructions that takes place in the initial asylum interview at ports, is critical to the outcome of asylum applications and asylum processes. Yet their presence remains hidden from the public eye and ignored by academic and political debate, which are largely unaware of how asylum screening decisions are taken

²The concepts of liminality or liminal are understood here, and in later references within the book, in their anthropological sense of dynamic and dialectic processes of transition. These are grounded on Victor Turner’s work on liminality, drawing on Van-Gennep’s conception of the Rite of Passage. (see Turner 1969) ‘Liminality and Communitas’ in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction Press.

at ports of entry and the cultural significance of this process. Despite much focus being placed on understanding the symbiotic relationship between the state and asylum seekers, most considerations looking at these intersections have focussed on how asylum seekers are subjectified by the law (see Lazaridis 2015). Across the majority of these accounts the roles of those individuals and groups who embody state power at the border have been largely underplayed (notable exceptions include Vila 2003; Gupta 2006; Mountz 2010). In this way, those administering national citizenship and conducting asylum screening at the border, are effaced as their roles are deceptively reduced to simple bureaucrats.

Moreover, immigration enforcement has become one of the fastest growing sectors for state spending over the past three decades, and immigration officers are the front line in sovereign state 'defence' against migration (Brotherton and Kretsedemas 2008). As the legitimacy of states sovereign power becomes more difficult to maintain, with increasingly existential and remote threats, governments have taken new approaches to control at a distance through border externalisation (Brenner 2004). Simultaneously at the symbolic border, as sovereignty is challenged from all angles, a clamour to reinforce the hard borders and reassert some 'control' and protect the nation from outside threats has become ubiquitous within the EU. Refocussing on the border, immigration officers across the EU are tasked with the strenuous duty of keeping out the 'other' (Brotherton and Kretsedemas 2008). While many of these emerging powers are established under the mask of anti-terrorism legislation, the lack of scrutiny of officers' social reality fails to take account of the policy outcomes of extending immigration officers' powers. Furthermore, establishing immigration officers as the nation's front line of social control agents, a focus on the securitised nature of contemporary border regimes assumes a crucial responsibility in framing asylum processing practices.

On these lines, officers in the UK reproduce a world on the ground that embodies the tenets of the Home Office and connects to normative debates and moral panics about 'the migration problem' (Hollifield 2000; Faist 2006). These are the narratives that resonate most strongly with officers as they are tasked with screening the borders, faced with the perceived threats associated with the task. Increasingly since the 2005 London bombings, immigration and asylum law in the UK have been

written through a securitised mind embracing these concerns. This, coupled with the current refugee upsurge caused by the civil wars of Syria and Libya and the growing fear of the ‘other’, factors which featured strongly in the recent Brexit success, has helped consolidate the nexus between asylum seekers, extraterritorial threats and terrorism in the public eye. In as much as there is an asylum crisis at the border, as this book argues, within the officer’s world, the crisis exists only in the form of numbers and abuse of the system.

In contemporary Europe officers’ roles go far beyond simply managing migration figures, or recording basic data, as they are increasingly gaining discretionary powers to detain, deny and ultimately deport unwanted migrants at the border. As border practices have been outposted and the EU distances itself further from migrant-producing nations, a new problem has emerged and been elevated to the status of a crisis. The construction of an ongoing refugee ‘crisis’ highlights the problem of determining a path for asylum seekers to enter a state of their choosing with reference to the Convention.³ The principle of *non-refoulement* has also been undermined to the point where the extension of third country networks into nations such as Libya and Turkey puts ‘the spirit of the Convention’ in serious doubt.⁴ Furthermore, following ‘the crisis’ states have been increasingly concerned with protecting the mobile rich, turning anxieties about the poor into an excuse to strengthen borders and decrease permeability for the global poor. This exposes the paradox of a globalising world (Sassen 2013) where international travel is reduced in cost and simplified in action, whilst European states make sure that the world’s poor do not move and do not cross borders (Guild and Bigo 2005), irrespective of international commitments, including the Convention.

In the analysis of this phenomenon, despite much focus being placed on understanding the symbiotic relationship between states and asylum seekers, most accounts underplay the roles played by those individuals and groups who embody state power, particularly at borders. It is the immigration officers themselves who are the Charon of refuge, determining

³The Interpretation of the Convention is discussed further in Chap. 2.

⁴The idea of the ‘spirit of the Convention’ is something contested but it does illustrate a prevailing perception despite much evidence to the contrary (Saunders 2014).

who passes to the next stage of the process and filtering out the majority under the tag of undeserving asylum seekers. But how are these decisions taken at states' ports of entry, and what is the basis for determining the 'right to seek asylum' in contemporary Europe?

This book evidences the critical role of state agents, as axiomatic to asylum screening and asylum decisions at ports of entry. Immigration officers undertake complex decisions on asylum screening on a daily basis yet, as the research in this book shows, their work is largely detached from the rule of law when it comes to asylum screening in the UK. As will be argued and evidenced throughout the chapters, to officers the Convention means very little. The asylum seeker is just another classification of traveller and the immigration officers' role is to safeguard the nation from the threats posed by high volumes of unregulated migration. As the relationship between migration and all manner of threats has been securitised, the roles of officers have evolved. Almost all forms of irregular migration and what is classified as clandestine entry into the state have become criminalised (Lazaridis 2015). Asylum seekers and refugees have been objectified to increasingly prejudiced and racialised stereotypes, no longer seen as needing protection. Immigration officers construct their world from their professional vantage point and asylum seekers' subjectivities emerge from the reproduction of this social reality. As the concept of refuge has been perverted, from an ethos of protection to that of prevention, asylum seekers prospects for a brighter future in the West vastly diminish and they become transformed into a class of undocumented and dangerous travellers.

As the levels of fear have risen, legitimated by securitisation strategies of the European states, the structuration of 'the other' has evolved leading to asylum seekers and migrants being depicted as the enemy (Guild and Bigo 2005). For immigration officers their roles are increasingly aimed at identifying threats and enforcing social control. Asylum seekers represent a menace to the state and society that officers must identify, be that a welfare cheat, asylum shopper, bogus refugee, criminal or terrorist. As this book shows, responsibility has been transferred from the immigration officer for ensuring the safety of the asylum seeker, to one of protecting the state and society. Their 'expected' roles are transformed into social control agents, to essentially become policers of asylum. Beyond

the extension of their legal powers, officers' worlds are framed by the states explicit perspective that migration must be reduced. In this world, the reduction in numbers is rationalised as those arriving are subjectified through meta-messages highlighting abuse of the asylum system. It is through these discourses about threats that denials and disbelief are established as the core of officers' work. The organisation plays a key role in insulating officers, allowing them the space to establish professional rules that come to rationalise decision-making processes in asylum screening. Despite this, the state's goals in relation to denial of asylum status are clearly transmitted to the officers and play a significant role in directing their professional behaviour.

The book reveals how border officers act as an autonomous group within a complex subculture, enclosed within an organisational paradigm, and apply their own rules and values to the asylum screening process. From the most operational 'definitions' and technical actions, to the known subjective interpretations, officers' decisions are far removed from their techno-legal frameworks. Developing the analysis through the phenomenological understanding that subjective meanings give rise to an apparently objective social world, the arguments presented here delve into the construction of asylum decisions as a profoundly cultural process. This approach reveals how the initial stage of asylum screening, far from being a self-evident transposition of unambiguous rules is essentially a subjective exercise, largely unaffected by legal and policy regulations, yet saturated by the legitimated meta-message of disbelief and denial. This highlights the need to challenge the essentialist perspective on 'the state' by evidencing the complexity of human controls, and supposed primacy of static state power, a perspective developed in this book.

It is the quotidian practices that show us how immigration officers' actions and decisions are largely unaffected by legal and policy regulations. Officers come to rely on a corpus of values, norms, and common actions related to the professional relationships of a hierarchical order. In this light, the border 'site' is constructed through multiple discourses from the top down and the bottom up, and as Cohen notes 'at each level – ideas, organisations, professionals and political economy – are deposits that take the form of descriptions (stories) and casual theories,

which are drawn upon and leave behind real forms of power' (Cohen 1985). Here legal definitions of 'asylum seeker' or 'refugee' have little value and less practical use in the screening of asylum seekers. In their place a set of criteria is applied from what is constructed, consolidated and reproduced as 'professional knowledge'. Asylum seekers are measured against standards that outside of the immigration service subculture stand for a range of prejudices and essentialised views entrenched in postcolonial stances that recognise the non-western migrant as the 'other', the enemy, on grounds of racism and moral panics. In breaking into these professional shells the common bureaucratic myth is unravelled.

The aim of this book, however, goes a step further, to expose and condemn a fluid time-space object by highlighting the relative inertia from policy evident in officers' work. The idea that policy determinations can overcome the engrained subculture on the ground is questioned as the book underwrites the construction of border processes and asylum screening practises beyond the institutional fallacy that portrays them as undeniable. This reveals them as the complex subjective cultural constructions that they are. Arguably, beyond the process of screening, the granting of asylum in contemporary societies is not just a matter of administrative citizenship but also a very significant cultural construction of social acceptance and rejection.

As the empirical grounds of this book demonstrate, this is not an individual or exceptional process but one that takes place within a socio-cultural, political and organisational context, in which a very specific subculture develops. The extent to which officers are the protagonists of asylum screening can only be exposed by revealing the way in which they operate on a daily basis, uncovering the approaches and methods they use to reach their decisions. Recognising the challenges and difficulties faced by officers, the cynical space that the subculture controls is shown to develop and reproduce itself on a daily basis. This is a complex process that connects state goals with the professional development of law enforcement at borders in the context of a fearful state. An equation that relies on an omnipresent fear mobilised by officers and subsequently directed towards asylum seekers, to view them as deceptive and undeserving individuals, and

as potential threats to the social, cultural and economic security of the state.

Securing the Border

Problematising borders is crucial to conceptualise the state, not as an essentialist object, but as a socially produced entity that is constantly evolving. It is within this context that this book looks at how border agents are actively involved in the social (re)production of the state. Relying on the incorporation of post-structural approaches to ‘bordering’ a wider comprehension of contemporary state power is adopted.⁵ This approach reconsiders the construction of border management regimes with the EU, addressing the many ways that borders are enacted and brought into play (Anderson 2000; Bigo 2002a, b; Klepp 2010; Kasparek and Wagner 2012). By introducing this critical account, the idea of static state power is challenged, and replaced by a more fluid representation of internal and external border reordering (Harvey 2015). In contemporary, changing, fluid and anxious societies the state can no longer guarantee the provision of a secure future, yet it can legitimise the use of power through rationalising a ‘war against foreign job-seekers and alien gate-crashers, the intruders into once clean and quiet, orderly and familiar, native backyards’ (Bauman 2001). As Bauman persuasively argues, state powers are rendered more fluid in controlling the immediate and material enemy at their borders when the task ‘to round up and deport the unwelcome aliens’ (Bauman 2001) is rationalised as necessary to protect the state and society.

This is necessitated through the political system that demands the state to regain control of migration, whilst simultaneously lays the blame for societal problems at the feet of immigrants and asylum seekers. The message that refugees have a negative impact on the economy and culture has forged a profoundly anti-immigration sentiment in the UK, with the media embracing and furthering the myths that waves of refugees will take British jobs, children’s school places, and destroy ‘their way of life’. Along

⁵ For further debate see Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002.

these lines, much has been written about the extent to which a ‘crime complex’ (Garland 1996, 2001) is developing in most modern societies with foreign bodies often bearing the brunt of this focus. As this narrative has developed in the UK, successive governments have turned refugees and asylum seekers into the targets of the ‘war on crime’, a process that Simon (2007:10) argues has eroded ‘democratic capacity by destroying social capital and trust’. The non-citizen in this fixture becomes a target, as the state attempts to reassert control over national, economic and social security. The distinctions between legal and illegal travellers, like those of citizen and non-citizen (Bauman 2007), have been more firmly defined and in so doing a particular vision of ‘national identity’ (Bosworth 2008) is used to define who is welcome in the UK (see Bloch and Schuster 2005). This is largely determined by designating migrants as unwelcome and the construction of the global poor as a threat on many levels (Sassen 2013). The alignment of these ideas with fears and government policy in the UK has generated an atmosphere where moral responsibility is eliminated from the asylum equation. This is replaced with a focus on weeding out the ‘other’ as identified by former Prime Minister Tony Blair as ‘those who come and live here illegally by breaking our rules and abusing our hospitality’.⁶

This is clearly impressed in the control and management of asylum seekers, as the connection between practices of ‘bordering’ to citizenship has expanded to address both the internalisation and externalisation of border control, illustrating how borders are reimagined beyond the law through ‘societal practices and discourse’ (Paasi 2009, 215). In this way power is a fluid idea that forces a conceptualisation of borders as culturally complex phenomena in terms of their cultural, economic and social roles (Haselsberger 2014; Paasi 2009; Popescu 2012). As in Blair’s earlier statement, the links between crime, deviance and foreigners have been a fairly common theme in government reports and the media in the UK (Welch and Schuster 2005) and the social construction of ‘illegality’ is a pressing question. While the government’s stance tempers the almost uniformly negative portrayal of asylum by mentioning the virtues of multicultural enrichment (Bosworth 2008, 204), there remains an overburdened focus on the perceived threats to society evident in asylum policy (Mulvey 2010). In terms of practice and

⁶The Foreword to the government white paper on immigration, 2005.

procedures applied in controlling the border, this has seen a major increase in the number of immigration related offences (Aliverti 2016), alongside the creation of one of Europe's largest detention estates (Silverman 2017). A further impact of this, however, relates to the social construction of the border, the space where officers determine why someone is detained and through which the process of detention is normalised, and asylum seekers further criminalised.

Furthermore, as evidenced by the *Vote Leave* campaign in the UK Brexit referendum, the borders are actively being remade through populist discourses that openly distort facts to blame entire groups of people—considered ‘others’, for the troubles of the nation. Alongside the problematising of asylum and the ‘folk devil’ (Cohen 1972) refugee propagated by the press, a breed of white nationalism appears to be embracing the perspectives of cultural, social and economic victimhood, and a profound distrust and apathy for the political establishment. Moreover, discourse about asylum seekers and refugees are moving away from the ambiguous meta-messages of ‘the burden’ and the ‘drain on society’, towards an explicit anti-immigration stance, crossing the line to racism, as clearly exemplified in the discourse embraced by the UKIP’s shameful ‘breaking point’ poster of the mentioned campaign. The negative image of refugees is no longer transmitted to support wider security arguments in a subtle way, but became the bedrock of an openly anti-immigration message.

Despite the reality that immigration and refugees have always been beneficial to the UK, the leave campaign relied largely upon on the assumption that all of society’s problems will be solved by keeping ‘the other’ out. Furthermore, following the victory for *Vote Leave*, what were once considered latent sentiments such as racism and xenophobia have gained a semblance of social tolerance. The success of a legitimated anti-immigration campaign, has projected the moral message that anti-immigration behaviours are also to be legitimated, as exemplified by the increased numbers of hate crimes and racist abuse reported to the police⁷ immediately after the referendum. Clearly, the direct effects of Brexit are also articulated on the new borders that are being erected along the lines

⁷The National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) reported that in the week following the Brexit vote reported hate crimes increased by 500 per cent.

of ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentalities. For those embodying border controls this is a professional narrative subsumed in a world of security risks, yet it is also directed by the political will of the government transmitted through the Home Office. Beyond this, and more importantly as the book reveals, officers’ social construction of ‘reality’ is more dependent on images of folk devils and myths about immigration and asylum seekers than any specific policy development. It has been clear government policy since the late 1990s to reduce the numbers of asylum seekers entering the UK and in this sense we can expect little to change. Furthermore, as this book reveals, while officers are in no doubt about their roles in relation to immigration policy, they are tasked with implementing policy within governance structures that extends a great deal of autonomy to officers on the ground (see Chap. 2). Given the relative freedoms extended to officers to decide on, and determine how asylum applications will proceed, there is a need to understand how legislation and policy contribute to the criminalisation of asylum seekers and undocumented travellers arriving in the UK. Furthermore, it is only by understanding how immigration officers perform their day-to-day that the efficacy of policy can be assessed and judged on its bureaucratic merits, or potentially reveal itself as a screen behind which racism and prejudice thrive. In the context of a seemingly divided post-Brexit ‘reality’ it is critical to understand how the border is socially constructed, paying particular attention to the significance of wider societal practice and discourse within implementation spheres.

Enacting Abstract Borders

Whilst research into the ‘bordering’ of asylum is burgeoning, the off-limits nature of the ‘border’ remains intact. This has further contributed to the taken-for-granted notion that immigration officers at the border play an inconsequential role in processing asylum seekers. Established in the Convention and by law, asylum decisions are supposedly not taken at ports, nor do the officers play a substantive role. Even in established and insightful research into asylum in the UK, immigration officers’ roles is largely underplayed and hidden within the nexus of asylum processing. Gill’s recent study, for example, focussing on ‘border control decision

makers, including frontline officers' (Gill 2016, 12) while presenting a relatively comprehensive account of the UK asylum web it does not acknowledge the role that the Border Force plays in the processing of asylum seekers. The asylum-screening interview, when conducted at port, belies the true extent of the immigration officers' roles as the state promotes the idea that officers 'don't decide' and buries their role amongst policy churn and institutional distancing. A major concern is the reproduction of this perspective within uncritical academic debates, especially given the paucity of research into immigration officers' worlds. This fallacy established behind the bureaucratic screen, denying the nature of officers' power in immigration and asylum control, is not only consolidated and transmitted by the government, but legitimated by the reproduction of this perspective in normative discourse.

As borders are re-created, control is moving away from the notion of the state as a discrete container to become a process of disengagement 'remote control' (Zolberg 2003), alongside more intensified control and management of migrant groups inside the state (Engbersen 2001). The power of governments to control their territories and populations under their administration is waning (Bauman 2007). The exteriorisation of states' migration control and management places its emphasis on the legislative authority, as the basis and generator of power. The creation of European agencies like Frontex, to police and manage borders, and mechanisms like the European Neighbourhood Fund (ENP), further extend the reach of the EU's border management regime and network of third countries (van Houtum 2010; Bialasiewicz 2012; Loftus 2015). Despite the transfer upwards of certain responsibilities, the idea that the state maintains *de facto* administrative control of borders is reinforced, whilst the roles of those creating and enforcing the law is persistently overlooked.

The emphasis on legal frameworks and structuralist principles reproduces the state as the exclusive authority of its borders. Even beyond the 'upward' trends in border externalisation, which have changed the dynamics of state control at and beyond the border, networks of migrants, human traffickers, support groups and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have a direct influence on the practices of border management regimes (Lazaridis 2015; Loftus 2015; Triandafyllidou and Maroukis 2012; Tsiános and Karakayali 2010; Salt and Hogarth 2000).

This underlines the permeability of borders that are still largely perceived to be under the exclusive control of the state, endorsing the dualistic relationship between state and society (Abrams 1988; Mitchell 2006; Ferguson and Gupta 2002).

This perspective, however, disregards the complexities of asylum seekers' movements' and obscures key questions such as how they choose their pathways and routes, their reasons for moving, or how they decide where to move. This oversimplifies essential phenomenon such as irregular migration trends, confusing the categorisation of economic migrants and asylum seekers by being 'unlikely to address the difficulties which both migrants and governments are experiencing in the current crisis' (Cummings et al. 2015, 6). This partial representation restricts the analysis of asylum seekers' realities and, moreover, impacts the ability to design effective policy (Cummings et al. 2015) as reflected in the EU's incoherent responses to the current refugee needs (Trauner 2016). This has tied closely together with security debates, currently being played out across Europe, and to include a vast range of actors such as the media, politicians, security experts and Frontex, amongst others (Broeders and Hampshire 2013; Leonard 2010; Schuster 2010; Bigo and Jeandesboz 2010).

Even as the border has become more of a focus within the public imaginary, the impact of embodying state power at the border remains overlooked. This leads to a 'tendency to reify the state in asylum and refugee research' (Gill 2009, 627) portraying asylum screening and border control as part of an established normative and essential cycle. Furthermore, assumptions that the state is enacted in law and not by those embodying the position of key gatekeepers in the search of refuge, liquidates the nature of state power by assuming it is uniformly distributed (see Allen 2003). The globalising language and imaginaries fail to engage and account for the localised outcomes and performances that legal directives depend on, and moreover their consequences. Thus, the tendencies to under-represent the influence of state actors and 'civil society' is a common fallacy of the 'territorial trap' (see Agnew 1994), which reproduces the idea that the state and society are two distinct spheres (Abrams 1988; Mitchell 2006; Ferguson and Gupta 2002). State power is ascribed to institutions and bodies ex-ante, working vertically in society

rather than emerging from socially produced spaces and debates like those that have developed around Brexit.

The state as a definable object has been questioned from a variety of perspectives acknowledging the diversity of social interests and divergent opinions that make up the state (Skocpol 1985; Nordlinger, Theodore and Fabbrini 1988; see also Law 2002). The notion that state bodies are insulated from social influence, and driven solely by the rule of law has become outdated and unrealistic (Mitchell 1991; Jessop 2001). Indeed, within contemporary border control, a complexity of social and professional roles are played out as government departments compete for budgets and control over asylum, immigration and security issues (Bigo 2002b). Thus, failure to meaningfully engage with a social analysis of migration or asylum phenomena has the effect of obscuring the roles that social forces and social actors may have in relation to asylum seeking communities (Gill 2010, 632). This interpretation, furthermore, contributes to shield the impact of those working at the borders, consolidating the image of the immigration officers as bureaucratic civil servants rather than as the relevant social actors they are. In this light the decisions taken at the border are often uncritically assumed to be state practices by virtue of having been undertaken by 'state actors'. Given the increased levels of control and management of migrant populations there is a clear need to understand how 'exclusionary' practices in control are performed within the state, particularly at the border.

Embodying State Power

Adopting a manifold approach to state power and social relations reveals that so-called state actors might be more accurately observed as performing social roles, particularly where these are developed alongside professional interests (see Fuggerlud 2004; Carr 2012; Horii 2012; Van Houtum 2010; and Bigo 2014). While border control remains largely under-researched there have been a number of authors that have recently addressed the social realm of border creation (Vila 2003; Doty 2007; Khosravi 2010; Mountz 2010; Carr 2012). Highlighting the ways that so called state-actors are more accurately observed performing social roles

suggests a need to understand how they position their professional roles in relation to the state, and how they make their decisions. From this perspective, state actors become the core of control synergies, decentring the ways we understand state power and shifting the focus to how governance involves the volitional as opposed to the disciplined subject (Foucault 1979; Lukes 2005). Looking at the human controls behind the ‘banality of evil’⁸ of contemporary capitalism (Arendt, 1963), as the thoughtless process of professionalised border control, reveals a world where moral panics and cultures of disbelief (Jubany 2011; Anderson et al. 2014) combine with the complicit state-sanctioned processes of exclusion designed to keep out the existential threat of the ‘other’ (Lazaridis 2015; see also Wilkinson 2014). Furthermore, the conflict between political narratives of asylum and their embodied border performances (Fuglerud 2004) are a crucial part of the complex assemblages that makes territories real (Mountz 2010). In this light, the bureaucratic application of the rule of law becomes increasingly irrelevant, constituting an unrealistic and fetishised account of the asylum-screening process.

This implies the need to critically understand the spatiality of the state through a lens that accounts for social practice without privileging the vertical understanding of globalising narratives over embodied activity (Marston et al. 2005; Allen 2011; Ferguson and Gupta 2008). The state is here considered beyond an object of study (Law 2002), to be re-conceptualised as an assembly of the multitude of performances by individuals and institutions. Thus, uncovering the quotidian daily activities in the (re)production of the state becomes fundamental to understanding the spatiality of power (Hyndman 2001; Koch 2011; Mountz 2010; Allen 2011; Painter 2006).

The growing complexity of the state and society duality is seen in how state and societal security are inherently intertwined in democratic states and border control, which, as Doty (2007) points out, are made up of the

⁸ The concept ‘Banality of evil’ is used here in Hanna Arendt’s terms (Arendt 1963) to refer to the thoughtless and unquestioned actions that hide behind the state of modern bureaucracies: ‘It is this pseudomysticism that is the stamp of bureaucracy when it becomes a form of government. Since the people it dominates never really know why something is happening, and a rational interpretation of law does not exist, there remains only one thing that counts the brutal naked event itself. What happens to one then becomes subject to an interpretation where possibilities are endless, unlimited by reason and unhampered by knowledge’ (Arendt 1968:125).

‘nebulous realms where sensibilities, ideologies, desires, and numerous other forces that constitute “statecraft from below” are played out’ (Doty 2007, 118). These ‘nebulous’ concepts illustrate the significant ambiguity that remains in relation to the idea of what constitutes ‘state behaviour’. Considering this, the specific ‘societal histories and circumstances that can also affect the ways in which state policies are implemented on the ground’ (Gill 2010, 634) become central to the spatiality of state power. This is a spatiality re-constructed and reinforced daily, as quotidian practices reveal state institutions and bodies as ‘powerful sites of symbolic and cultural production’ (Ferguson and Gupta 2008, 105). Challenging the verticality of established state theories (Ferguson and Gupta 2008; Gill 2009, 2010; Painter 2006; Mountz 2010) this comprehensive notion of territorial sovereignty is therefore dependent upon the:

routine and everyday production of territory through the maintenance of border crossings, the decisions of immigration officials, the issuing of visas, the policing of smuggling, the drawing of maps... because territory has no real existence independent of all these various markers, it needs to be constantly reproduced, in the active sense of being re-made each day (Painter 2006, p. 764; see also Mountz 2010).

This exposes tensions and contradictions between politicised border narratives and the ways agents embody and perform their roles in maintaining and protecting the border, as evidenced by Fugerlud in Norway (2004). Looking at the state through embodied practices, rather than through its verticality, it becomes clear that ‘legislative and policy enshrined objectives of states are reflective of complex processes of political sociology... involving an array of competing actors with conflicting and diverse objectives’ (Gill 2010, 633). Law-making is contingent on the ways laws are enforced and enacted through the everyday ‘prosaics’ of the state (Painter 2006), and on accounting for agency amongst individuals and social groups within the state. The need to account for borders as human controls, hence to account for the actions and interactions of the individuals involved becomes critical in the context of asylum decision-making where concepts like accountability are “reworked” by representatives of the state from the position of their own experience’ (Fugerlud 2004, 29).

Far from suggesting that state power is chaotic and is generated solely within a localised 'site', this understanding recovers the 'presence and affective capacity of relatively stable orders and practices' looking to understand how they 'continuously draw each other into relation and resurface in social life' (Marston et al. 2005, 425). Considering the closed circuits of state bodies, exploring to what extent the rules of law are literally transposed in the complex socio-cultural constructions of borders becomes the key to unravelling how decisions are made on who is and is not deserving of refugee status. Or to put it another way, to determine who today constitutes a socially acceptable asylum seeker and refugee. This inevitably implies looking at how officers embody their roles and engage in making borders 'real', focussing on the interactions between the actors, and crucially exploring all the nebulous factors that are used to rationalise their actions and values.

Ethnography of the Border

Examining the 'quieter registers of power' draws attention away from the abstracted border 'to the actual workings of power' (Allen 2011, 291). The asylum-screening interview represents the core action of a particular border world where the key actors: the officers and the asylum seekers, use their resources and abilities towards a certain goal directly related to their assumed roles. Within this 'border world', or 'site', the immigration officers occupy the dominant position, but it is how this is embodied and performed day in, day out that gives a sense of reality to this power. By examining immigration officers' social construction of the 'border', 'power is understood as inherently spatial and subject to the contingences of events and relationships that may lie outside the immediate "here and now"' (Allen 2011, 291).

The border as a 'site' is understood by its anthropological interpretation of space and context, 'always folded into the object-order, literally as part of the context and the relata'. It is by entering specific sites, like borders, that the states' inner workings become visible within the 'contextual milieu of tendencies composing practices and orders' (Marston et al.

2005, 427), and officers reveal themselves as ‘quieter registers of power’ (Allen 2011, 291). These ‘frameworks of the lower range’⁹ call for an in-depth examination of the actions and interactions of the key agents within the border control process. This poses a conceptual and methodological challenge that is to be addressed by the paradigms of social constructionism and symbolic interactionism, embedded by the anthropological tradition of ethnography.

There is no knowledge taken for granted, and instead spatiality of power is addressed through the complexity of the social site. Sites of state power are thus constructed, interpreted and institutionalised through the actions of the actors embodying, and reconstructing state power with their quotidian actions and interactions. The border ‘site’ itself is understood as a construction comprised of those *longue durée* features left behind over time,¹⁰ and the daily unfolding of information, which may or may not be a source for change and reinterpretation (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). This analysis, therefore, concentrates on the relationship between the actors in the field, and how they respond to the organisational demands established, working within state institutions. To this aim it seeks to understand how officers create their own understandings of these demands, turning to personal and group experience in the form of stories that justify and rationalise the actors’ behaviours. It is within this framework that these experiences are shown to constitute ‘professional knowledge’ and set the boundaries for what actors in control of the site believe establishes their privileged position. The ‘attention to the intimate and divergent relations between bodies, objects, orders and spaces’ (Marston et al. 2005, 424) defines the site. This relates to the foundations of organisational demands, permeated by the meta-message of disbelief and denial that obscurely rule the context.

⁹Notes from the opening papers at the American Sociological Association Conference, 1981.

¹⁰Features such as the law, the essentialist ideas about borders and nationality that underpin everyday life, the ‘professional knowledge’ of experts, and other factors taken for granted and recognised as knowledge.

Researching at a Hard Site

In spite of the evident need and reiterated call for ethnographic research at borders, the lack of previous or current ethnographic work in this field is certain. Much of this gap is due to the complexity of gaining access to institutional organisations charged with border control, not only in the UK but in any modern western state. These difficulties follow parallels with early field research into what Goffman referred to as total institutions and the problems of access to closed organisations (Goffman 1959) related to social control (Innes 2003). It also needs to be considered that states have an understanding of total control over sovereign issues, such as border control and, as such, this understanding is transferred to the enforcing institutions. As a result, it is not in the state's interest to reveal the procedures and frameworks that they believe would weaken systems of control. In addition, access to borders raises issues relating to the politically sensitive nature of practices undertaken in the name of a state, particularly those which might implicate the state in cases of discrimination, racism and in circumventing human rights laws.¹¹ Obviously, states are none too keen to be shown to engage in profiling or screening of anyone based along religious, or ethnic grounds, despite politicians increasingly framing difference as a threat to national 'identity' or culture as part of securitisation debates (see Ibrahim 2005). This is furthered through the political interests that operate on all aspects of the border.

Essentially, borders are politicised sites from all angles; as being under attack and serving to protect the nation and 'national identity'; when being confronted by criticisms of state policies that restrict migration and free movement; through the vested interests of officers and the potential

¹¹ Consider, for instance, the case of Brazilian, David Miranda who was held under anti-terrorism laws while in transit at London Heathrow in 2013, having been suspected of carrying files containing information obtained by Edward Snowden. Mr. Miranda was held for nine hours under the Terrorism Act of 2000, by the UK Border Force and this became a major diplomatic flashpoint between the UK and Brazil. Mr. Miranda was held under schedule 7 of the act, which allows border security forces to hold any passengers they might suspect of involvement in terrorism. Essentially no evidence is required, only suspicion and some 60,000 'stop and searches' of this nature are carried out each year at UK ports. In January 2016 these powers were reviewed and found to be incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights. This section of the law has previously been challenged by a number of NGOs such as The Federation of Islamic Student Societies (FOSIS) and Liberty UK.

fear of stigmatisation by the disclosure of a subculture, amongst many other arguments. In light of this, the hard borders of the state, both in the UK and elsewhere, have become almost inaccessible prohibited 'sites', particularly for ethnographic work.

Gaining access to the field for this research was no less challenging than these deliberations may anticipate, and the lengthy and arduous process brings light to panopticon-border debate itself. To this aim it is worth examining the process of access to conduct the ethnographic work, both for getting in and getting on with the fieldwork at borders. Beyond a methodological note, the process of gaining access to borders paints a vivid picture and becomes a valuable indicator of the control fortresses established around state security functions.

While the preliminary formal attempts to gain access to the field—UK border controls, were met relatively positively, the initial support and acceptance of the research was gradually undermined, before eventually political intervention bought the investigation to a halt. My first approach was made to the Home Office, outlining the purposes and benefits of my research, to which I received no reply. In light of this, after some months of waiting and persisting with no response, I requested written backing from the UNHCR¹² UK office who were aware of my investigation and provided me with a letter of support, which I attached in a subsequent attempt to gain Home Office approval. The support letter from the UNHCR appeared to facilitate the beginning of the field research, as eventually I received a letter from senior management in the UK Immigration and Nationality Directorate¹³ approving my access and formally clearing my research. Contrary to what it might seem, at this point the process of actually gaining access to the site became bogged down in months of delay with great wastage of efforts and resources. Whilst not giving me a definitive negative response, the lengthening of the periods between replies, and the non-conclusive responses were

¹² The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

¹³ The Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) has undergone a number of changes since the initial research was conducted. Responsibilities are now split between two agencies, UK Visas and Immigration and UK Border Force that deal with asylum in different ways; for further explanation, see Chap. 2.

clear attempts to dissuade me to carry on with the investigation, without overtly saying so.

While, in principle, the Home Office was receptive to the research they appeared to be purposefully avoiding granting access to proceed with the interviews and the participant observation, without ever giving a clear answer as to why. Two years after I had begun the process of formally gaining access to the field, the UNHCR informed me that they had been 'advised' by the Home Office to 'lessen' their support for my research and fieldwork, and withdrew their backing for the research. I fully understood the reaction of the UNHCR as I was aware that around the same time their role in the UK supporting immigration officers was being reduced. Most significantly in this regard the UNHCR were no longer invited to participate in the training programmes for new officers, where they had been contributing in previous years, and thus had no voice in presenting the case for asylum.¹⁴ Aside from the problems with access, I always counted on the support of the UNHCR's UK office throughout the research.

Acknowledging the lack of political and official support to the research, the whole investigation was put into question, with much uncertainty. Paradoxically, this difficulty provided me with a stronger motivation than the academic challenge itself, increasing my commitment to the research project. At that point, and against all odds, I redoubled my efforts to gain access to the field adopting an off-the-record approach. I started exploring access through informal avenues to Border Agents at all ports in the UK. With some research work I identified a number of line managers directly, whom I contacted to explain the purpose of my investigation, stressing the confidentiality and anonymity provisions. The process took more than six months and a great deal of correspondence, without any sign of return. Finally, more than three years after starting with the access procedures, the first positive response arrived from a senior port officer willing to be interviewed on an anonymous basis. This signalled not only the beginning of the investigation, but also the more personal reading of human controls,

¹⁴The immigration officers' induction, which had never previously been observed for independent research purposes, remains the same to this day.

demonstrating that officers did feel the need to make themselves heard and that personal experience, however prejudicial, always needs to be voiced.

From this point I gained access to other officers, either because they were responding to the initial petition letter—always ad hoc, or following ‘recommendations’ from colleagues. Initial respondents invariably displayed a personal interest in my study and all held senior positions (other positions were impossible to even contact at first due to anonymity of sources). These officers granted me informal permission to ask immigration officers working under their command if they wished to be interviewed. This permission had a ‘legitimation effect’ on my presence and not only allowed me to observe the site but moreover it appeared to enhance the willingness of staff to participate in the research. Yet, the access was always provided on an individual and voluntary basis. It was thanks to those working in the field, on the front line of the hard borders that the fieldwork materialised, both for ethnographic interviewing and for participant observations and casual conversations.

Once in the field, the number of those participating in the research snowballed and I was able to arrange more interviews with officers from all key categories: senior immigration officers, immigration officers and assistant immigration officers. Unlike immigration case-workers at Lunar House, or third-party actors like immigration legal advisors or interpreters, these border officers at ports had never been interviewed for any study before. They were rather puzzled by my interest in their work, and once they started talking they were obviously keen to share their experiences and views.¹⁵ On the whole, officers were pleased that someone was interested in their job and in their assessments of the tasks, particularly in relation to asylum screening. Aware of the importance of their decisions, they were satisfied to be acknowledged and to have their voices taken into account. They were also very respectful of my work as I showed them that I knew enough about immigration and asylum without seem-

¹⁵ All interviews were recorded and transcribed on an anonymous basis and commitment of guaranteed confidentiality. No officer expressed any concerns with being recorded whilst interviews were being conducted.

ing that I knew too much, asking significant questions whilst appearing uneducated in the details.

These ethnographic interviews—some of which took place over more than one meeting, gave me the opportunity to conduct participant observation at ports, again on an ad hoc basis. As officers' work fluctuated, the interviews tended to be scheduled and re-scheduled several times. It was in the waiting room,¹⁶ doing the interview and at the intervals between interviews, or at the time I could manage to 'stay around' after the interviews, that participant observation was richest. The site is so secluded that just for the mere fact of being there, talking to senior officers, I was considered rather risk-free, both to officers and to bystanders. This also generated certain complicity with officers, which made them more open to talk to me freely. During these visits officers were not 'performing' but continued in their everyday life at ports, dealing with their different problems and challenges in a routinely way. As the fieldwork progressed, the confidence of the interviewees in my work and my reliability increased, and I discovered the unofficial side of the organisation: the best times to talk to people, the best ways to wait around, and how to access offices and rooms. I slowly built a relationship and trust with the officers, which allowed me to conduct the fieldwork more effectively, although knowing that I could be asked to leave at any moment.

Somewhat unexpectedly through this process, a fortuitous event unlocked access to one of the most concealed sites in border controls: the UK Training and Development Unit (TU). This would become the source of a participant observation of unparalleled intensity, unprecedented in ethnographic border studies. Some of the senior officers I contacted and interviewed at ports were also trainers at the TU or had colleagues that they 'recommended me' to contact and who were stationed at the TU and preferred to be interviewed

¹⁶The interview rooms from port to port could vary quite considerably, but invariably they were grey and 'cold' places. These perspectives were actually reproduced by some officers during the research, particularly in relation to Heathrow Terminal 3. 'The arrivals hall at Heathrow Terminal 3, it's completely dark, there's no light, the way the place is run it's very much a, I mean you work in prisons you know, what an old lag is, you know, the lag system, you know, if you have seniority you can get away with anything. So when you start there they absolutely treat you like shit, you know, excuse my French. But everything is built up that way and it's a punishing place to work, you know' Chief Immigration Officer.

there. I first visited the TU with the sole purpose of interviewing officers who had agreed to be interviewed, and happened to be of high seniority within the organisation. On arrival at the TU at Heathrow, these officers had suddenly become inundated with other work and had no time to devote to my interview. Instead, as a practical alternative of what I could do once there, they offered me to have a look around and gave me the option to talk to staff within the TU. Accordingly, they introduced me to the Heads of the Unit, who, in turn, introduced me to the trainers, the secretarial services and to the whole training group, following a distinct hierarchical order. Having been asked by top management—with whom I had an obvious fluid relationship, to help facilitate my research work, the rest of the staff had no problems with talking to me. The implicit endorsement of the officers in senior positions reassured the rest of staff that their cooperation was acceptable.

Having achieved such unprecedented access, in such an unexpected way, I seized the opportunity and went back to Heathrow the next day with a 'taken for granted' approach. This was probably the most difficult day in the field, as I was perfectly aware that not only I would most likely be denied access, but I could also receive an antagonistic reaction from any new senior officer, or even cause an internal commotion for being perceived as a possible breach of security: their most valued concern. Yet, with so much at stake, I had to try. Mentioning the senior officer's previous authorisation and reminding them that this officer had already explained to them the purposes of my investigation, as well as the anonymity, confidentiality, etc. was just enough to get me a badge. With this I got in that day, and the next day, and the next—to my incredulity and that of Professor Stanley Cohen. After a few visits I found out that the compulsory immigration officers' course was just about to start. By then, having conducted some interviews and taken some coffee breaks with officers of different hierarchies, I was relatively familiarised as an 'ordinary' actor in the site. Hence, as the course started, I asked permission to sit quietly at the back of the room in the first session of the training, to observe. As the course developed, my familiarity increased and I went back to the TU almost every day for the whole

six-week duration of the course.¹⁷ This was my most valuable and unique ethnography, grounded in an intense and indeed enriching participant observation.

I sat in on nearly all the training sessions from the beginning to the end of the induction course (see Chap. 4). Essentially I was ‘trained’ as an immigration officer. I was provided with all the course material and guidance; and I was given the same lectures as the new immigration officer recruits and participated in the same practical exercises, including role plays, job shadowing and mentoring. During this time, observation was not restricted to the course sessions but included the breaks when I mingled with the new recruits and trainers. During this ‘free’ time, future immigration officers commented on the content of sessions, on the performance of the trainers, on their formal and informal expectations and, on the whole, on their perceptions of the job. I spent more than two months in the TU and this participant observation¹⁸ was extremely fruitful, providing unique insight of a usually concealed world.

This course remains today the most comprehensive and lengthy course for officers within the Immigration Service. Within the Home Office it is only comparable to the induction course undertaken by police officers. This is exactly the same training course that the UNHCR and the British Refugee Council had been denied from providing a tutorial on refuge and asylum after years of doing so, and were refused access to the site. Not surprisingly, this observation became one of the most revealing aspects of the research, and I joined the trainees after work when they were quite outspoken and unguarded, discussing their

¹⁷The observation of the training took place between March 2000 and July 2000.

¹⁸Aside from the training course, Participant Observation of the Training Unit was conducted at intervals during six months. Further Participant Observation was conducted at ports when leading the interviews: on arrival, in between interviews and after the interviews too. In both cases of Participant Observation, often the circumstances did not allow to take complete notes on site but brief references were written down and full notes were written up at the end of each day in chronological order to form a consistent research diary. This was transcribed, coded and classified at the end of the fieldwork. For the analysis of the data, variables and indicators were correlated to create family codes and connected so that subcategories emerged. Some of these were repeated at times for each relevant category depending on the context, as all categories were tailored and aimed to reflect the world of the respondents. Finally, these were integrated at a conceptual level of analysis to allow associations between attitudes, behaviours, motivations and experiences. Through the evaluation of plausibility of the associations, new connections between them were developed to acquire more abstract generalisations.

initial experiences. On these occasions, I was also introduced to more field officers and was able to observe them in their roles as mentors in giving support to new recruits and not just as immigration officers. The observation developed relatively well, and most training officers, as well as new recruits, increasingly perceived me as a colleague as the days went on. However, some hesitation always remained and in the course of the last sessions, as new trainers were introduced, the tension grew;

I went to the classroom to prepare for the observation. The trainer was the new one, the same who before had asked me to go and observe another group. As soon as I arrived she approached me and asked me to leave the room, she specifically said that she did not want me in her room observing and that she was not obliged to have me there.

Participant Observation Diary: Training Session

This was deeply embarrassing for me and for those whom I had shared the course with. I was tempted to leave the building—fearing also major reactions from senior officers, yet I waited at the coffee room to say farewell to my ‘colleagues’. Many of them were concerned about me and asked me how I felt, as they knew how uncomfortable this incident was for me. There were colleagues with whom I shared weeks of conversations—often personal ones. In spite of them knowing that I was conducting an independent research they still considered me almost like one of them, building on all the confidence and experiences we shared.¹⁹ I had extended the fieldwork both in depth and in time, well beyond the most optimistic expectations, but that afternoon I realised that my time had come, and that it was time to abandon the field. Although exceeding expectations, leaving the field was hard, as I was not really prepared for letting go. It took me a few months to detach from it, and before I could really go back to the data in an analytical way.

During the fieldwork I faced many obstacles, including the problems of access to the field, the difficulties of gaining officers’ confidence, the

¹⁹ For the research a full ethical consideration plan was developed and implemented adhering to the London School of Economics standards, including all aspects of confidentiality, anonymity, as well as data management and storage.

perpetuation of a 'normality' in a situation that was everything but normal. Yet undoubtedly the main personal challenge was trying to be both a friend and an outsider, as well as trying to be fair and truthful. Engaging officers in conversations about casual topics, spending leisure time with them and realising that I was accepted almost as a colleague was an unforgettable experience that enriched the study, and me personally, in an invaluable way.

The results of this fieldwork comprehend an extraordinary volume of exceptional data. This was managed and analysed from the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2003, funded by the ESRC, and guided by the hugely valuable advice from Professor Stanley Cohen. However, although the observation and core of the fieldwork concluded the research did continue in different stages. In the following years the analysis of such a large volume of data (more than 1,000 transcription pages), was being triangulated and enhanced with additional evidence and approaches. This included the exploration of asylum case-files, interviews with professionals involved in the asylum process, and analysis of further secondary data sources (see Jubany 2011). After a thorough exploration of the large amount of data, applied to wider debates, the research reached a second stage. In 2013 a second main investigation began, in which the researcher Aidan McGovern actively contributed, to extrapolate the conclusion of this work to a wider a framework. This involved interviews with professionals in the asylum field and the subsequent analysis of the official UK Border Force position on current screening of asylum seekers at ports of entry, particularly in relation to the work of immigration officers in the UK. These included several formal consultations with the Home Office, following the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) on the right to receive information held by public sector organisations. The results of this fieldwork, desk research, analysis and overall remarkable experience are reflected in the evidence, analysis and arguments put forward in this book.

Looking Out From Within

Having introduced the conceptual and methodological stances, the book begins by tracing the changing conceptualisation of asylum and refuge over time in *Asylum Seeking and the Threatened State*, Chap. 2. A number of key events have contributed to the current ‘plastic’²⁰ version of asylum in most border narratives. These accounts constitute the basis for the persistent meta-messages of deterrence and disbelief that define the relationship between immigration officers and asylum seekers at borders. Since the 1970s asylum seekers have increasingly been seen as a burden on the state and the noble deed of granting refuge has been transformed. Asylum seekers have increasingly had to prove their claims in an environment that appears ever more hostile to their arrival; an environment of disbelief and denial. First they were considered a burden, then bogus refugees, before they became asylum shoppers: a whole range of labels that began to emerge during the 1990s that called the concept of refugee into more obvious doubt in the public imagination. Moreover, in the aftermath of 9/11 unregulated migration has become relativised as a major aspect of state security, establishing new forms of governance and ways of managing these ‘threats’ and ‘responsibilities’ (Guild 2006).

The organisational structures of border control in the UK are analysed, to highlight how border officers’ power is obscured within the structures of the state and the institution: The Home Office. Whilst immigration officers are shown to be fully cognisant of their roles, these are scarcely related to legal or technocratic constructions. Moreover, the empirical evidence analysed exposes how the ‘gaps’ between concepts, the law and the organisations, promotes a degree of autonomy amongst officers, enhancing the development of subcultural life connected to so-called professional knowledge. The book traces the emergence, transmission and consolidation of this ‘professional’ world in relation to the screening of asylum seekers and the culture of disbelief. As will be evidenced, argued and substantiated, immigration officers at the border do play a

²⁰ The term ‘plastic’ is used in the vein Lazaridis’ defines as ‘plastic citizenship’. In this context ‘plastic’ refers to something that is fluid and mutable whilst maintaining a roughly defined shape. While it is something that changes and shifts, it never returns to its original form (Lazaridis 2015, 5).

critical role in screening asylum seekers and processing asylum claims, as Chap. 2 thoroughly explains.

Chapter 3: *Subcultures of Social Control*, traces the applications of social constructivism to studies applied to state institutions, particularly those of social control functions. The influence of anthropological 'classic' scholars is discussed, with particular attention to the labelling, categorisation, othering and identification processes, as these are seen as leading to criminalisation and exclusion of asylum seekers through social control agents. This chapter reviews research into law enforcement cultures to show the shifting in the approaches from control to deviance discourses. These can be compared to the processes applied in contemporary asylum screening. It is argued that the concept of criminalisation is connected to the meta-messages of disbelief and denial that permeates immigration officers' worlds. Moreover, the chapter analyses and evidences the extent to which these messages and meta-messages impact border control and shape the roles and responsibilities of those working at the border. This is as relevant to the worlds of immigration and border control as it is to the police, particularly as their roles converge. The social control analogy becomes even more relevant and representative of the worlds of border control and immigration officials, as the analysis goes beyond the common bureaucratic myth.

Trained to Spot the Truth, Chap. 4 of the book, takes us to the heart of officers' formal and informal training, as well as to their complex socialisation processes. This examines officers' experiences from the moment they join the immigration service to the time they become experts and take responsibility for their decisions. Analysing the training course from the inside, this chapter reveals the manifestation of a specialist or professional subculture, which is subsequently explored. The introduction of new recruits to this subculture, is the backbone of the socialisation process within the immigration service and its 'subculture of disbelief'. The meta-messages that provide officers with the ethos of the subculture during their socialisation are revealed. This not only instructs them about their role in relation to reducing immigration numbers and the protection of borders from enemies of the state, but moreover it becomes a frame of reference to establish and reflexively reinforce the 'professional knowledge' of the subcultural group. In this chapter, officers' professional

function as decision-makers in the asylum process is exposed through the explicit training they receive about the asylum interview and asylum seekers' interrogation. In addition to the field proceedings, a further element that evidences that border officers do decide is the content of the official training they receive. The Border Force training course is largely directed towards security issues, approaching the asylum-screening interview as an investigation to uncover the truth and screening out undeserving asylum seekers, as revealed in Chap. 4.

As this chapter concludes, training has the further function of introducing officers to something of the subcultural world that they will come to occupy when they enter the field. It is upon entering this world that provides us with the final piece of evidence that officers do indeed make decisions; here on the ground it is revealed that officers' quotidian practices evidence how decisions are indeed socially constructed, and ratified by officers as a group. In the process, as the empirical data shows, the existence of a subculture of disbelief and denial that clearly operates beyond the 'fallacy' that officers don't decide is revealed. Furthermore, officers are tacitly encouraged to reproduce a world that connects asylum and migration to threats and fears, and in light of this it would appear presumptive to uncritically accept the idea that our borders are controlled by perfectly disciplined bodies. Ignoring officers' worlds is to ignore another layer in the subjectification of migrants and asylum seekers, not through the law, but through the social construction of the world specific to the application of the law (see Schuster and Solomos 2004).

Chapter 5 enters the realm of the asylum interview and the relationship between asylum seekers and immigration officers. It uncovers officers' worlds under an ethnographic logic that places the emphasis on the experience, the actions and the interactions. This explores officers' social construction of asylum seekers' narratives through labelling and categorisation applied during the screening process. This chapter uncovers and analyses the specific criteria and parameters by which asylum seekers are evaluated and measured against by immigration officers, during the initial asylum interview, thereby highlighting how the labelling and typification processes operate and are applied on a daily basis. This chapter demonstrates how these are consolidated and legitimised within the values and norms of the immigration service subculture. Its analysis

reveals the ways labels are constructed and applied, showing how through their routinised application, these become accepted by the officers and legitimised by the subculture as the ‘truths’ at the core of ‘professional knowledge’. Here officers’ shared rules and routines become their ‘professional recipes’ for screening asylum seekers and the basis of making decisions about the applicant and their story. The complexities of asylum decisions reveals the extent to which officers’ judgements are defined by prejudices grounded on the poisoned sediments of racism, colonialism and the construction of ‘the other’ (Solomos 2001). These are used as the ultimate rationale to officers’ ‘intuition’ on asylum interviews, whilst nourished by the normative public discourse about mistrust and suspicion of asylum seekers, built on political anxieties and moral panics.

The way this process is standardised, consolidated and reproduced within the immigration service subculture, and the immediate consequences of this is exposed and debated in Chap. 6. *A Subculture of Disbelief* explores officers’ understanding and use of credibility to justify decision-making as a ‘professional making sense’ of asylum seekers’ stories. This chapter reveals how the formation and application of the criteria determines the outcome of the interview, used as part of a wider rationale to justify whether applicants are deserving or undeserving individuals. Central to this are the ways officers use credibility as a means to rationalise to what extent asylum seekers stories ‘make sense’, as a professionalised version of ‘common sense’. Officers discuss accountability and responsibility and their sense of duty emerges as one of the clearest and most complicated themes.

This analysis contributes to the understanding of how moral distancing works through bureaucratic justification. It reveals not only how subjects are distanced from decision-makers, but also how decision-makers are detached from the subjects, stressing how these processes ‘stretch the distance between action and its consequences beyond the reach of moral impulse and dissembling [...] to ensure that actions can be freed from moral evaluation’ (Bauman 1989; 215). Crucially, as officers discuss their roles within the ‘system’, the gap between them and the Home Office umbrella is shown to leave officers with a great discretionary margin to consolidate subcultural beliefs. Despite this, the organisational and legal shield constructed to deny powers features strongly as responsibility, accountability and officers’ idea

of duty are discussed. This strength of the immigration service subculture is essential, beyond the making of the decisions, for asylum seekers and the immigration officers themselves. Paradoxically, however, when officers discuss responsibility the act of denial is shown to underpin the exercise of decision-making. This denial is reinforced by organisational structures, which in turn generate a detachment between officers and the outcomes of their action, obliterating all questions of moral concern.

To conclude, the book briefly reviews the debates, assertions and findings presented throughout to recapture the abstract arguments, on the critical role of immigration officers as social control agents. This review reiterates how the voices and experiences of immigration officers open up a powerful subcultural world that underpins control approaches to UK borders. By exposing the intersections of state power, the alignment of officers' professional interests with state goals emerges from the governance of fears ascribed to asylum seekers. In this closing chapter the evidence presented confirms the importance of focusing on the everyday actions of border control and the need to challenge the fallacy that officers don't decide. Moving beyond what has been discussed throughout the book, in here the emphasis is placed on explaining how, far from being incidental, the gap between officers, the law and the organisation is purposefully developed to ensure policy outcomes are achieved, directing law enforcers to enter into grey areas. This relies on the meta-messages of deterrence that, as argued in this last chapter, have to change, to be replaced with a culture of rights and a renewed focus on protection, in order to overcome the unfunded fears that permeate our culture of disbelief.

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2

Asylum Seeking and the Threatened State

The Skeptical Border and Asylum

The abuse of the Convention has led to a lot of expense and unhappiness on the part of the people living in this country and the fact that the values that we grew up with, which were anybody that looks like they're in need of help and refuge, you must give it to them, whether it's overt or covert, has been taken advantage of by a lot of people that milk the welfare system.

Chief Immigration Officer¹

The concepts of asylum and refuge have been constructed and reconstructed in diverse and even opposing views following economic, social and geo-political transformations over the past four decades. From approaches in international relations through to public perception, asylum and refugee have been drastically reimagined to the extent that the principle of protection, as the essence of these notions, has faded from view. Addressing the developments of the concept from the founding of the Convention through to today, reveals a distinct trend towards

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securitisation of asylum and migration policies. Emerging in the late 1970s this transformation begins with a gradual shift, from a focus on humanitarian protection, as enshrined in the original document, to one of prevention, deterrence and control.

Migration control today hardly recognises asylum seekers and refugees as the extraordinary migrants they are, and the concept of refuge as a charity becomes pervasive. The development of this understanding emerges in the late 1970s, becoming emboldened to give rise to the contemporary image of the asylum seeker as a threat to host nation states. 'Folk devil' images of asylum seekers have become commonplace in the normative discourse, the media and the public imagination (Cohen 2002). Equally, negative stereotypes have been used to reinforce the narrative that migration is a threat to the economic, social and political stability of the state (Ceyhan and Tsoukala 2002). By exploring the everyday of immigration officers' worlds, it becomes evident the strength that 'folk devil' images and narratives of moral panic have on the officers' construction of asylum seekers, and their role in protecting the country from an existential threat.

An overbearing focus on security has emerged as the *modus operandi* of European border control, and within this web, asylum and refuge have lost their original meaning. Border control has become a professional realm of beliefs, values and powerful myths to the detriment of asylum seekers striving to find security and safety far from their homes. Beginning with the deconstruction of the concept of refuge emerging in the 1970s, immigration officers operate in a world that establishes a socially constructed image of asylum seekers as 'professional knowledge'. As immigration officers' have become more akin to contemporary social control agents, their professional attention has been unreservedly directed to security and control. While 9/11 is clearly a watershed moment in the development of the securitisation debate, growing fears about unrestrained global migration have existed since the late 1970s. Undoubtedly the narratives directly linking migration, and by extension refuge, to terrorism and security threats have been emboldened and have become a further justification and excuse to cut back asylum and refugee 'privileges'. Moreover, as

Brexit and the presidential elections in both the United States and Austria have shown, anti-immigration platforms are making grounds beyond their traditional voter bases, as a politics that embraces racism becomes normalised.

While these latest developments are a cause for concern, the presence of asylum seekers in the UK has long been problematised through the policy sphere that has contributed to the deconstruction of the concept of refuge, alongside the construction of asylum as a threat (Mulvey 2010). This chapter highlights the changing dynamics of refugee protection over the past forty years, to evidence the impact these transformations have had on the conceptualisation of refuge and asylum and, in turn, for border enforcement and asylum seeking. Discussing the asylum process in the UK it will be argued that while legal and policy changes contribute to shaping immigration officers' worlds, it is the messages and meta-message about asylum seekers as threats that have the greatest impact on officers' actions. Furthermore, this chapter reveals how the contemporary conceptualisation of asylum is grounded on officers' understandings of their role, legitimised by the umbrella organisation of the Home Office. For officers on the front line, the impact of the changing approaches to asylum and refuge is driven by the Home Office's stated goals in relation to reducing immigration numbers. The Home Office determines that officers have an important role to play in reducing migrants' entries, and the asylum-screening interview becomes a key mechanism to enforce this directive.

In asylum screening today, the lack of consensus in defining the concepts of asylum seeker and refugee becomes evident when unraveling how officers discuss the role of the Convention and the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR). Officers are detached from the factors supposedly forming the asylum 'terrain' at the border; neither the law nor the apparent organisational frameworks play a significant role. Rather, as this chapter introduces and the whole book evidences, the gap between policy, organisation and individual implementation, is filled by a subcultural world of professional interpretations. To officers the meta-messages of disbelief and denial about the other and the development of the omnipresent threat that asylum seekers constitute, has become the 'true' meaning of asylum. In a world where immigration officers are tasked with screening asylum seekers to secure borders and

safeguard the national interest, and the roles of organisations like the UNHCR and the Convention itself are seen as entirely irrelevant to their professional realities. Asylum and refuge can no longer be seen as having anything to do with the enactment of human rights.

From Protection to Prevention Asylum Seekers: from Heroes to Threats

I think the Convention was designed to look after the casualties of the world war and we're not in that situation anymore.

Chief Immigration Officer²

All member states of the European Union (EU) are signatories of the Convention, and should therefore recognise and uphold the rights of refugees, as outlined in this document. This implies that all member states are committed to 'guaranteeing a right to claim asylum and to have that claim considered under due process irrespective of whether the applicant entered the territory legally or not' (Karamanidou and Schuster 2012, 169). Despite this 'commitment', the concept has come under significant strain in the last forty years, and today it can barely be seen to represent its most basic principles. The greater paradox is that in the process of this transformation, the weight has drastically shifted from one of refugee protection to one protecting the state from refugees and the arrival of asylum seekers.

The dilemma of asylum seekers and refugees has been incorporated into regular migration policy and is seen less and less as a form of extraordinary migration. This is far removed from the original idea envisioned by the League of Nations following World War I, when the problem of stateless persons was recognised as an issue deserving of special treatment and coordinated international protection and action (Gil-Bazo 2015). Despite this recognition, definitions enshrined in the Convention differentiate between asylum seekers and refugees from a legal standpoint. Under the Convention the qualifying features of who is a refugee and the terms of their protection are defined as matters of

²DI/V-UK20-MY00-CIO

international law. Asylum seekers, on the other hand, are those fleeing persecution, something that must be proven and accepted by factors determined by the nation state (Gil-Bazo 1998 and 2015). This has left a wide margin for states' reinterpretation of asylum, most often emerging from shifting social, economic and geopolitical events. In this sense, the admissibility procedures and recognition rates across the EU highlight the incoherent nature of asylum policy from state to state (see Neumayer 2005a), suggesting policy outcomes may be driven by significant socio-cultural factors.

The Geneva Convention and Definition of Refugee: 1950s to the 1960s

The grounds of the Convention were forged in the wake of the Russian Revolution, where more than one million people were displaced within Soviet borders between 1917 and 1921. This unprecedented flow of refugees surpassed the competence of individual states, as nations sought to ensure the creation of a legitimate international system for the protection of stateless persons (Gil-Bazo 2015). After thirty years and several failed attempts,³ the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was established on 28 July 1951 (see Joly 1996) to provide a universal definition outlining the conditions of those deserving of humanitarian protection:

The term 'refugee' shall apply to any person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country: or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fears, is unwilling to return to it.⁴

³The first attempt began in 1921 when the League of Nations accepted responsibility for assisting Russian refugees and continued until the outbreak of World War II in 1939.

⁴Text of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Other agreements include the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Convention Relating to the Status of Seamen, 1957 and its 1973 Protocol. Other universal treaties are relevant to asylum such as the UN Convention against Torture, 1989 and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Beyond a need to rebuild Europe by supplementing the workforce in the post-war world, granting refuge was seen as a noble deed in light of the atrocities of the war. It was seen as the modern states' duty to create a humanist project that would prevent the events of the war from ever repeating themselves. What's more, the Cold War generated an additional geopolitical and ideological divide between the East and the West. In this new reality, the Soviet Union and the Iron Curtain became a sign of oppression, behind which was a state that denied civil, economic and political freedom to its 'citizens'. The response to the refugee crisis at the time was seen as a modern response not just to the problems of those suffering, but in relation to a political and economic project of advancing freedom, which would become part of free market ideals.

Asylum seekers and refugees of this era were welcomed to Europe and seen as contributing enormously to the rebuilding in the post-war years. Furthermore, the idea that those fleeing were escaping political oppression and a lack of freedom was fundamentally tied to the polarised world vision of 'good' and 'evil' that remained present until the end of the Cold War. Immigration officers recall these Cold War days and hark back to another reality, contrasted with the complexities of current asylum circumstances:

In the old days, when I first started the job, there used to be quite a detailed *pro forma* cause, somebody who claimed asylum in those days was entirely different from the kind of people we're getting now. It was spies and people like that. And so there were these questions like have you been in touch with a foreign intelligence agency or a counterintelligence, all this nonsense which somebody now from the backwoods of Kosovo, wouldn't know what I was talking about. Whereas before there were some leader questions, well we had a confidential sheet which told us what to get out of the interview or whatever. But now it just says well it's over to you basically.

Immigration Officer⁵

Most officers, like this one who had been working at ports for more than twenty-two years, subscribe to the concept of an ideal refugee as being someone fleeing from the former Soviet Union, for whom the asylum

⁵DI/V-UK3-AR00-5-IO

system was to some extent created.⁶ What emerged in the post-war years through the polarised world vision was a stable concept of the refugee, essentially contextualised within Cold War realities. In this era, refugees were exiled, unable to live within a particular system and forced from their homes as they were embraced generously by the West. As realities changed, however, state goals were reprioritised, and the definition of refugee became increasingly irrelevant as states began to reinforce sovereign control over border issues.

In this shift one of the main problems with the Convention has become inexorable, and continues to undermine the strength of the document today. While the Convention's definition of a refugee is widely accepted internationally, the concept of asylum seeker is purposefully vague and no 'essentialised' definition in relation to the state is provided. Whereas international treaties oblige states to recognise an individual's 'right to asylum', within international relations this has become understood as the right to apply for asylum, but not to receive it. In effect, the 'right to asylum' is ultimately determined by the state, as the path for an asylum seeker to be recognised as a refugee must be interpreted within the limits set by the state. Hence asylum seekers are essentially left outside of the law because, as Bauman explains, 'they have no state of their own but neither are they part of the state to which they have fled' (Bauman 2007).

While the Convention outlines 'the international regime for the protection of refugees' it is international human rights law that has strengthened the 'legal framework by allowing refugees to invoke the protection of norms whose scope of application may be wider than those in the refugee regime' (Gil-Bazo 2015, 13). Nonetheless, recognising asylum seekers as deserving refugees from the 1970s onward would become increasingly problematised. As the relative social and economic stability achieved through the reconstruction of Europe faced new challenges, so too asylum was reinterpreted and its utilitarian approach to Western nations diminished. Thus, a further reinterpretation was made on the 'right to asylum', which marked the beginning of a reinterpretation as the right

⁶The figures by country of origin illustrate that the vast majority of asylum seekers during the decade following the Convention's establishment were men from the Soviet Union. The only other large-scale refugee movements took place as a result of the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and the Czechoslovak crisis of 1968.

to apply rather than receive asylum (Worster 2014). This undoubtedly contributed to the fact that as the crisis of the 1980s took hold, migrants and asylum seekers became amongst the first groups to be identified as part of the emerging problems of migration.

The Welcome Guest Becomes a Burden: 1970s to the 1980s

In the immediate years after the war, migration into Europe was seen as a way to fill labour shortages and, as previously discussed, the granting of refugee status was largely perceived in a positive light. The numbers of refugees brought to Europe under resettlement plans remained significant until the early 1980s and continued to fill labour gaps. However, during the OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) oil crisis and the subsequent recession, which led into the 1980s, the scale of resettlement was dramatically curtailed (Cornelius et al. 2004). As unemployment rose across Europe and recession signalled the retrenchment of the welfare state in almost all of its faculties, the demand for a migrant workforce disappeared. Furthermore, in the context of the curtailment of welfare programmes, asylum seekers were increasingly being seen as a burden on the state. In contrast to the previously managed image of refugees arriving in Europe to fill labour shortages, the arrivals of undocumented asylum seekers were used to suggest the idea that borders and the welfare state were under threat (Widgren 1989).

This debate developed within the context of growing nationalistic influences, post-colonialist stands and racist arguments about the failure of multiculturalism and the notion that cultures and societies were under threat from an outside influence (Cohen 2002). At this time, the perceived threat was not widely associated with state 'security' perspectives, but developed along the lines of the asylum seeker as a cultural menace and a burden to the already beleaguered state. The immediate response of most European nations was to remove resettlement programmes, marking the end of any convergence of interest in the previously symbiotic relationship (Koser 2001). This era was the point where refugees became transformed into asylum seekers that, as Koser argues, 'now had to arrive

independently and prove their claims' (ibid: 88). This major conceptual shift developed alongside the notion that asylum was a charity offered by the state, and not a right of the asylum seeker. A further effect of this has been the blurred distinctions between economic migrants and political refugees, which continued to develop and take new turns during the 1990s, providing new avenues by which the denial of asylum seeker rights could be pursued (Cummings et al. 2015; Loescher 2001).

The flexibility of the term 'asylum seeker' began to emerge and, throughout the 1990s, it would become a key tool states would use to achieve their immigration goals as they moved further away from the ethos of the Convention (Lazaridis 2015). The deconstruction of the concept of refuge thus began, and the loose interpretation of the 'right to asylum' led to further inconsistencies in asylum politics and policies (Koser and Lutz 1998; Joly et al. 1992). Furthermore, since the 1980s calls began to be made to link issues of migration to wider understandings of security as the prospect of the collapse of the Soviet Union became more real (Huysmans 2006). As the EU also began to prepare to expand security policies analysts began to address issues of border control, terrorism, crime, drugs, human trafficking, migration and asylum within the same narratives (Lazaridis 2015).

More than a Burden: 1990s to the 2000s

The end of the Cold War saw the end of any ideological and strategic motivations behind refuge and resettlement programmes (Hathaway 1996). In light of these transformations, political and economic migrants began to see their routes into Europe curtailed, forcing them into the route of asylum seeking (Koser 2001). Simultaneously, a process of criminalisation of migration began to aggressively converge with the process of securing Europe's borders, as messages about those trying to reach Europe became fused with labels about criminals, asylum shoppers and bogus refugees. Furthermore, geopolitical changes following the end of the Cold War solidified the alignment of security and migration issues (Gibney 2002). By the early 1990s migration had been declared a problem requiring immediate political action (Hollifield 2000), and was mobilised as

such in the media and by political elites (Weaver 1995). Asylum was no longer a humanitarian problem but emerged as a domestic political issue.

As the patterns and numbers of migration shifted internationally, major changes in asylum politics and policies of European states were being implemented. The early focus on securitisation, which began to grow in the 1990s, was given impetus through the construction of the internal market, and the need to control its outer borders. As the single market was becoming a reality the Soviet Union was also falling apart and fears began to grow of criminality and other spillover effects from its collapse. As migration into Europe began to rise in the early 1990s, and internal border checks in the Schengen area were largely removed (see Carr 2012), new fears began to emerge. The securitisation debate incorporated regular migration and asylum into its remit, and EU policy became characterised by its contradictory approaches to providing humanitarian protection alongside controlling migration into the Soviet Union.⁷ This already had been grounded through the diminished and weakened concept of asylum and refuge that emerged throughout the 1980s, and these tensions continued to become more pronounced up to the present day.

While free movement within the Schengen zone was seen as one of the key achievements of the EU during this period, this is contradicted by the approach to migratory flows from third countries increasingly seen as security concerns (Weiner 1992; Lohrmann 2000). This has had significant impacts in relation to the EU's asylum policy (see Huysmans 2000; 2006) and laid the foundations for building more barriers and introducing more stringent immigration laws across Europe⁸ (Lazaridis 2015). The moral panics about 'bogus' refugees of the 1990s developed alongside the growing image of an immigration crisis at the EU's borders. Rising

⁷ Core documents of the EU project, such as the Treaty of Amsterdam, the Lisbon Treaty and the Charter of Fundamental Rights (art. 19) all reiterate the EU's commitment to the Convention and the right to claim asylum (Pirjola 2009; Teitgen-Colly 2006). On the other hand, the EU has increasingly made accessing and arriving at the EU a more arduous and difficult task through the externalisation of its hard borders. Beyond that through the sharing of information about passenger movements, asylum applications, threats and criminal databases for those moving, and an increasing network of deputies performing various control functions, the EU's commitment to human rights issues is one based more on principle than practice.

⁸ The extension of third country networks and new procedures, such as fast-track procedures and detention emerge in this period and become normalised in the processing of asylum application (Webber 1996).

numbers of applicants were compounded by civil wars in Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Germany, upon reunification, also extended the 'right of return' to those from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, which further contributed to the image of masses of people hurtling towards the EU. Within Western security approaches, migrant populations were elevated to an existential threat not just to the host society, but also to the state itself (Huysmans 1995, 60–61). The image of waves of migrants clambering to reach Europe served as the excuse to label migrants as 'foreigners' and 'strangers', regardless of their legal status or otherwise.

Within the EU, for example, concerns about 'asylum shopping' had resulted in the first attempts under the Maastricht Treaty to harmonise asylum policies, and ensure that no single state was more attractive than another for claiming asylum. Different perspectives exist as to whether these were attempts to raise standards of asylum processing Europe-wide (Teitgen-Colly 2006; Thielemann and El-Enany 2009), or constituted a race to the bottom (Hatton 2005; Noll 2000). Either way, what is clear is that as sovereign states maintain their right to decide who is deserving of asylum the folk devil image of the 'bogus refugee' has become further politicised, and constituted as a drain on society (Koser 2001, 89).

Still, the major problem remained the lack of an inclusive definition of contemporary refugees and asylum seekers, accounting for the 'contemporary dynamic relationship between geopolitical and geo-economic changes and processes of migration' (Koser and Lutz 1998:8). The outcome of this failure was the retrenchments in the standards of protection offered by western countries (Wallace 1996). This in combination with increasing internal controls lead 'to multiple forms and degrees of exclusion, and to the *abjectification* of migrants, who, constructed as a threat, are the subjects of securitisation' (Lazaridis 2015, 108).

The War on Terror

Following the events of 9/11 the connection between security debates and asylum became even stronger and were reflected in the EU's desire to insulate 'Fortress Europe' from potential threats. Emerging from the

new climate of fear the control of borders became categorised by the 'professional management of unease' (Didier 2002: 64–65), suggesting a new professional interest in border control. In light of this, the strength of the Convention was subject to 'who is defining the terms and who benefits by defining the terms in a given way' (Choucri 2002: 97). Moreover, this new approach re-defined the meaning of asylum admission and differences in refugee welfare rights in many states (Jubany 2002). Thus, the development of professional interest circulating around the border has had a direct impact for all migrants, and in particular for asylum seekers as a vulnerable group.

The EU migration policy approach, post 9/11, can be characterised by threats and fears in the context of a perpetual crisis. This has created a perfect storm in which migration and asylum have become part of a securitised meta-narrative, whereby migration itself is extensively used to link societal problems, such as crime and unemployment, to security issues (Faist 2006). This idea drew links between migrants and asylum seekers to organised crime, connected to the perception of asylum shoppers, which emerged in the 1990s. This leads to the overall impression that asylum seekers search for the best financial option, shared by most and expressed even by the highest ranking officers:

I strongly believe that there is, there is a market out there, run probably by criminal gangs to sell the United Kingdom as an attractive asylum destination for money Her Majesty's Inspector.⁹

Closely related to this fear is one that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s linking fears of a growing demographic imbalance and the related over-emphasis on the threat to the resident society. This was connected to the rhetoric used by the far right and nationalists and linked to the fear of the development of 'parallel societies' and the lack of integration, and a threat to the resident population and the categorisation of difference as an attack on 'national identity', cultures and 'values'. Finally, the links between terrorism and migration which, following 9/11 have become an increasingly salient perspective in the media and politically have been

⁹DI/V-UK2-AR00-HMI

deployed and come to constitute a meta-narrative connecting all of the above factors. While the perceived degree of threat of these factors varies between countries, the securitisation narrative has generated a 'shared sense of awareness of the necessity for stronger interstate cooperation in order to achieve more effective border controls' (Lazaridis 2015, 111).

The connection of migration and asylum to terrorism is made 'not because all immigrants are terrorists but because all, or nearly all, terrorists in the west have been immigrants' (Leiken 2004, 6). While this perspective is certainly changing in light of the attacks in Paris and Brussels of 2015 and 2016 the link between terror threat and a 'foreign' population residing in a host nation has been strengthened. Migration and particularly asylum, have been declared a security problem demanding immediate political action (Hollifield 2000), with the media keen to seize any stories linking asylum seekers to delinquent behaviours of all sorts. Again, in the context of Brexit in the UK, the extent to which these perspectives went unchallenged by either side of the debate illustrates the salience of immigration issues in the UK, and the strength of the myths long established about asylum seekers. As politicians on both sides of the argument agreed that the UK was under unprecedented and unmanageable pressures from migrant and asylum seeker arrivals, an assumed crisis is established as a 'fact' and is played out in public. There is no interest in exposing the roots of societies' fears or debunking the myths, but instead, the media and politicians perceive and portray asylum seekers as the easy target (Bauman 2007). Keeping asylum seekers out, as Bauman argues, has become a political tool, underpinned by an increasing intolerance towards the desperate other (Bauman 2007), perspectives clearly enunciated throughout the Brexit referendum on both sides of the debate. Moreover, across recent local, national and supranational elections in the EU, nationalist and far-right groups have made significant gains largely riding on anti-immigration platforms that appear to be more open about their flagrant racist perspectives, as these have become legitimised through the political majority.

While the EU has actively taken a much stronger role in enforcing border control since 9/11 the most recent immigration crisis, coupled with the unscrupulous campaign of the Brexit referendum, have refocused the wrong attentions on border controls. While the EU has extended and

externalised its border control programme by reaching out to neighbouring countries through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP),¹⁰ the idea that Europe's borders are porous and unpoliced remains commonplace. In terms of irregular migration and asylum the ENP extends safe third country criteria in a process of re-bordering and re-ordering of risks that insulates Europe from refugee producing countries. At the heart of the ENP is a key focus on border management issues, something the EU is very clear about, as exemplified by looking at the militarisation of Europe's Mediterranean (Bigo 2014; Karamanidou and Schuster 2012; Tsianos and Karakayali 2010; Lutterbeck 2006) and Eastern European borders (Tremlett and Messing 2015; Carr 2012). The adoption of these programmes and the extension of safe country status to states with questionable human rights records, like Libya and most recently Turkey, raises serious questions about the EU's commitments to the Convention:

The implementation of the co-operation programmes with Libya is not relocating the asylum system outside the EU external borders, 'but rather deprives asylum-seekers of the possibility to access the asylum determination procedure'. The result is not the externalisation of the asylum system but its abolishment. (Klepp 2010, 8)

While legal debate celebrates the value of international human rights laws as enshrining the Convention's spirit at a regional level at least, what is clear at the border is that 'state practice is replete with examples of asylum given; the human rights practice exists, but the sense of obligation is missing' (Goodwin-Gill and McAdam 2007, 369).

¹⁰The ENP 'promises neighbours to develop and become more democratic and economically strong in order to help protect the EU from what is often defined as spill-over threats from imagined unstable neighbouring countries, by which largely irregular immigration and terrorism is meant' (van Houtum 2010, 961). Beyond the strengthening of the EU's hard borders, funds are also provided for anti-immigration campaigns in neighbouring countries. In terms of irregular migration and asylum the ENP extends safe third country criteria in a process of re-ordering of risks. The ENP engages with border nations to foster stability, security and prosperity whilst extending the activities of the EU through increased political, security, economic and cultural cooperation (van Houtum 2010; see also Emerson 2004). In the process of extending border management practices the EU has not only involved its own agencies and capacities, but has sought to reach into civil societies beyond the borders 'to deter asylum-seekers and prevent the exit of the "huddled masses"' (Guiaudon 2003:191).

The debate on measures to restrict asylum seekers' entry to European states directly affects border immigration officers' work. This occurs not by officers being constrained by specific jurisdiction, but mainly by the reinforcement of the principle of deterrence behind the measures. It is common knowledge amongst officers, for instance, that certain countries are 'safe', and hence they cannot produce deserving asylum seekers. To substantiate this idea, officers are given lists of safe countries whose applicants would consistently be considered non-genuine and their claims be assessed as unfounded, without exploring the cases. This practice is not just a classification of 'black' and 'white' lists of countries that states produce (see Van Houtum 2010) but moreover a way for officers to ascertain the irrelevance and inconsequential nature of the Convention:

There are all these attempts to stop people getting on planes and trains and all sorts in the asylum producing countries. And that's just part of the general dishonesty of their signature to the Convention. They're not really signatories to the Convention wholeheartedly really; I mean they don't want to be signatories to it anyway.

Senior Immigration Officer¹¹

It is no longer a question of EU states' concerns for refugee rights, as it was when the Convention was formulated, but of protecting the interests of the states from a growing number of consequences associated with migration.

Regardless of these restrictive policies and the idea of building a fortress around Europe, the actual impact of these regulations at the initial stage of the screening process is very low. Instead, it is the concealed message of prevention, denial and control that is powerfully transmitted. That, as we have seen, relies on the transformation of a concept designed to protect the vulnerable individual. The paradox is that border guards are placed on alert and see themselves as protecting the state, and not vice versa. They are predisposed towards denying entrance and disbelieving refugees, driven by the meta-messages of reducing numbers and asylum seeker delinquency (see Joly et al. 1997). An unreceptive atmosphere fuses with an omnipresent threat, building a consciousness fearful of the arrival of asylum seekers.

¹¹DI/V-UK-P24:19 -482:497-IO

An arrival perceived as a threat that, as Bauman argues, is even magnified by the fact that asylum seekers ‘unconsciously remind us of global instabilities that most of us would rather forget about’ (Bauman 2007).

The meta-narratives about asylum and immigration as social threats permeate all spheres and have the greatest influence in establishing professional roles and rules amongst field operatives. They rely on the reinterpretation of the concept of asylum seeker developed to reduce immigration numbers, which has crucially extended into debates that purport to substantiate the ‘abuses’ and ‘fragility’ of asylum. This is a perspective that rationalises the need to control borders above the notion of refugee protection, grounded on a perverse construction of asylum that consolidates a message of suspicion and disbelief, rather than one of commitment and trust. This is the principle that guides the professional understanding of asylum, not only accepted but also legitimised within the Home Office organisation, as border agents’ discretionary powers are extended. Far from the bureaucratic levels of control, border officers are, by and large, left to formulate their own procedures and protocols in processing asylum applications. Whilst the Home Office hides behind the fallacy that officers’ sole role in relation to asylum is a bureaucratic gathering of information, the empirical fieldwork evidence reveals how officers’ decision-making roles are the essence to asylum seekers’ applications at ports of entry.

Asylum Processes in the UK

The deconstruction of the concept of asylum occurs in a complex assemblage that generates a process of disaffection between immigration officers and asylum seekers. In the UK the political, media and public discourse about asylum and immigration has consolidated the ‘invasion complex’, firmly established in government policy (Tyler 2013, 87). As increased pressure has been placed on each subsequent government to control the problem of unrestrained migration, the amalgamation of spongers, cheats, terrorists and criminals (Squire 2009) provided grounds for tougher controls, in spite of the spurious links between these factors and migration. Indeed, Mulvey (2010), has pointed out that the

problematization of asylum issues observed in the UK today has its roots in policy that encourages the social reproduction of asylum ‘crisis’ through discourse, as well as spatial arrangements like detention and dispersal. As the media and politicians have developed the ‘crisis’ mentality, the atmosphere for receiving and integrating asylum seekers has become more unreceptive, further contributing to the overt hostility towards migration evidenced by the ruthless *Vote Leave* Brexit campaign.

Asylum seekers are constructed through policy narratives as deviants (see Chaps. 1 and 3). Through this construction, the removal of moral responsibility is rationalised for those on the front line. The UK system is one characterised by incessant ‘policy churn’ relating to asylum, citizenship and terror legislation. Furthermore, since 2007 the bodies controlling border management and asylum processes have largely been separated, with the Border Agency recast as a uniformed police force rather than as civil servants. The thickening of the institutional landscape managing asylum and refugee issues, increasing the layers of middlemen and dissipated responsibility, generates an increasing anomie of the bureaucratic process.

Furthermore, establishing moral distances and limiting responsibility is not only ensured through the system but is tied to officers’ professional roles and development. The ‘systems of (dis)incentivisation promotes the rational pursuit of self-interest over moral concerns’ (Gill 2016, 45). This is a process geared towards establishing governance structures, where officers are compelled to embody policy through their social control roles, rather than simply enact it. As will be shown, particularly in Chaps. 5 and 6, this form of governance can be tied to the development of distinct subcultural beliefs over time, which constitute the ‘professional knowledge’ of the officers.

What’s more, in the intersections of policing the border and processing asylum claims, the Border Force’s explicit role has been buried by the new institutional arrangements. While the nomenclature, formal arrangements and organisation chart of the bodies controlling asylum administration in the UK have been subject to numerous modifications,¹²

¹²The Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) has undergone two fundamental changes since the research was undertaken. The first was the change to become the Border Agency, representing a modernisation process relating to UK border management. The Border Agency was responsible for both border control and processing asylum and naturalisation requests. The Agency

policy goals have not changed. Indeed, if anything, in this period the Home Office's goal of reducing immigration and the locus of 'asylum' has been strengthened, with immigration officers directed to find their own ways to enforce policies. In this context officers' understanding of their roles as asylum screeners has not changed, and asylum and refuge continue to be related to their social control roles and ever increasing threats (see Chap. 3). A close analysis of these formal procedural and organisational transformations, show the irrelevance that these so-called reforms have had with regard to asylum. Rather than the reflective transformative long-term measures needed to respond to the complexities of the migration debate in the UK, these recurrent changes have been a display of spasmodic actions with a short-term view. Whilst the 'renewal' purpose has been persistently argued by the Home Office as fundamental to improve the system, a close analysis of the impact of these changes evidences the inconsequential impact they have had, both on the outcomes and on the front-line actions.

The extension of immigration officers' discretionary powers and consolidation of their social control roles (see Chap. 3) leaves little doubt of how they understand their roles within the organisation, regardless of the changing official versions that the Home Office has deployed. Formally, the Border Force representatives only gather information about an asylum claim.¹³ However, as explicitly evidenced throughout this book, officers are not only permitted but actually compelled to use their discretionary powers, circumventing legal frameworks, particularly on

became something of a symbol for the failings of the UK in controlling its borders and having been declared 'unfit for purpose' the agency was split. This led to the second change and the establishment of UK Visas and Immigration, which is headquartered in Croydon in the old IND offices, and the UK Border Force. The asylum process itself has undergone two major reforms. Firstly the New Asylum Model (NAM) was introduced in 2007 with the aim of speeding up asylum processing, to create a process with the aim of being fairer and more accountable. This established a caseworker who would be responsible for every step of the application following the screening interview. NAM has recently been replaced by the New Operational Model (NOM), which has seen the caseworker model return to a process resembling the old structure. Similarly, since the research was conducted the detention of asylum seekers in the UK has been normalised, and recently suspended as it breached EU human rights laws. The fact that asylum seekers are no longer eligible for legal assistance further illustrates the political attitudes towards assisting applicants, and ensuring their claims are dealt with fairly.

¹³ This includes personal information such as country of origin and date of birth, details of the travel route taken into the UK, and most significantly the reasons for claiming asylum in the UK. See Chap. 2 for a detail exploration of the so-called *pro forma* template currently used.

asylum decisions. Moreover, this gap between the officers and the Home Office versions of border roles ensures officers' high degree of autonomy to make decisions and formulate 'knowledge'. In effect, the main purpose for border officers to conduct asylum-screening interviews is to make asylum decisions, and this essence, as will be shown, has not changed by any means in the last decades.

The Home Office Umbrella

Regardless of the lack of impact of the Home Office legal provisions for asylum screening at ports, the importance of the Home Office in consolidating and reinforcing the meta-messages of deterrence and denial cannot be underestimated. This is even more relevant considering the organisation's lack of transparency, which leaves a great deal of margin for officers to develop discretionary 'professional' behaviours.

UK immigration rules are made by the Home Secretary and approved by Parliament in a closed process that is not subject to public scrutiny. The Home Office, with the Home Secretary ultimately responsible for overseeing the procedures, is in charge of all aspects of immigration and asylum control: entry, in-country applications for leave to remain, monitoring compliance with immigration conditions, and coordinating enforcement including detention and removal. Currently within the Home Office there are two bodies that have direct responsibilities on asylum screening: On the one hand asylum decisions are formally made by UK Visas and Immigration, more specifically by members of the Asylum Casework Directorate who conduct interviews and investigations into the veracity of claims. On the other hand, the UK Border Force is responsible for implementing migration controls, asylum screening and customs functions at the UK borders. Contrary to what is argued and evidenced here, the formal version establishes that this body does not produce official decisions on asylum, yet it still plays a key role in deterring and preventing 'individuals and goods that would harm the national interest by entering the UK'.¹⁴

¹⁴These are the UK Border Force's stated goals.

In procedural terms, an application for asylum in the UK can be made either at the border upon arrival, or at the Asylum Intake Unit (AIU) in Croydon, London.¹⁵ Once an application is made at the border, the process states that an immigration officer from the UK Border Force will conduct a screening interview to gather basic information about the claim. Following the asylum screening interview, the border officer completes a formal report. The current report template (so called *pro forma*) was introduced in 2014, along the lines of the several models used in previous years. The *pro forma* report template alone is more than ten pages long. This begins with a section for recording the so-called basic data, followed by a large space for more specific information in a section entitled 'Bases of claim', which includes subheadings such as 'reasons for applying'. This section is followed by the 'criminality and security screening' section and then a large part with extra pages is left at the end for further explanatory information. After the screening interview, once the *pro forma* report is completed, this is sent to the National Asylum Allocation Unit (NAAU) that decides which route the claim will take by assessing the report of the screening interview that they receive.

Regardless of the formal insistence by the Home Office to establish that these reports are inconsequential, the close explorations of what happens in practices reveals the opposite. The official protocols establish that it is at the NAAU largely that the decision will be legally endorsed and from the AIU the verdict will be sent to the applicant. Indeed, caseworkers in these units are the only ones officially recognised to make decisions, which they do based on the reports that border officers send them. Yet, these reports arrive to them with a complete interpretation of each asylum case including, of course, a subjective 'appraisal'. In practice, caseworkers or immigration officers at the NAAU just endorse border officers' decisions of applications at ports. There are several reasons why caseworkers do not contradict these reports. In the first place, because by the time they receive the reports caseworkers have not met the applicant or seen any of the so-called objective evidence, and so they have not been able to put forward any specific questions either. Therefore, a caseworker has to rely on the subjective narrative presented by the interviewing officer as the

¹⁵ A claim can also be made from a detention centre if the individual has been detained.

only facts. Obviously the report that the AIU caseworkers receive, is not an objective list of information but an account of the officer's perspective, opinion and, furthermore, an implicit decision on the case:

If the immigration officer has bad feelings about the asylum seekers then sometimes they deliberately write things which when those at the central office read the notes, lead them to the conclusion that, you know? it's a fabricated story...nothing makes sense.

Training Officer¹⁶

Officers' assessments about the applicant and the narratives determines what to include and what to exclude in the reports, and how to present it, which to caseworkers is factual information. This makes the role of the caseworkers in these cases largely redundant, as mere 'rubber-stamps' of decisions already made. Another relevant fact is that, as caseworkers belong to a different body within the Home Office, challenging a decision of a border officer does not only imply challenging the opinion of an individual but the proficiency of another body within the organisation. This is undesirable both for the individual and for the institution and makes it more unlikely that a caseworker will contradict the 'suggested' outcome of the application. Following on from this, caseworkers are knowingly overwhelmed with their workload and bureaucracy they are already facing with 'in-land' cases, which makes this process seem unproductive and leading to wasted resources. In light of this, the last thing that they need or want is to have to make a decision on cases 'already decided'. To revise completed cases from ports will result in an obvious increase in their workload, slowing down the process dramatically and hence contradicting the objectives of the asylum-screening process.

Clearly, border officers' narratives and assessment of the granting of asylum included in the formal reports are equated to decisions that will be formalised as official decisions at the NAAU. A way of working that, regardless of the alteration in nomenclature of the different units involved, has not changed in the last two decades, consolidating the fallacy that officers do not decide throughout these superficial structural changes.

¹⁶I/V-PUK22J-T5-TO

This is further evidenced as the Home Office currently issues detailed practical guidance for asylum decision-making with a wide range of issues covered alongside guidelines on approved interviewing techniques, directed towards decision-making at ports. The Home Office's Credibility document instructs officers on how they can evaluate claims, even though they are not actually supposed to play a role in decision-making. Given that Border Force employees are not authorised to make decisions and are formally present to gather information it is contradictory that they would need to be trained to judge credibility, or have an investigatory role.

Behind the Shield

In addition to the organisational proceedings of asylum applications at port, which reveal how border officers' reports become decisions, a further element that evidences that border officers do decide is the content of the official training they receive. UK Visas and Immigration and the Border Force have different training courses though there is a great degree of convergence when it comes to the key practice of interviewing asylum seekers. The Border Force compulsory training is largely directed towards security issues, approaching the asylum-screening interview at ports as an investigation to uncover the truth.¹⁷ Furthermore, credibility training establishes that the screening interview itself constitutes evidence, and can become the basis of any decision. As Chap. 4 argues and demonstrates, all the instructions in the training course¹⁸ are geared towards making decisions about asylum applications. Border officers, for

¹⁷ Border Force employees are now all trained in a 21-week course. Officially termed Border Officers they perform a number of roles and must be able to invoke the legal basis for their powers when performing these roles. Alongside they are also classified as customs and revenue officers. It is their powers as immigration officers that have been extended and amplified through the Terrorism Act 2000, and recent immigration reforms.

¹⁸ Besides the training in interview techniques, officers learn how to 'act' in a number of ways. Classroom-based activities like role-plays allow officers to assume the role of investigator while the trainers help them recreate scenarios to get into the role. In these scenarios trainers present themselves as asylum seekers and it is the officers' tasks to determine whether they are credible or not, deserving or undeserving of asylum (See Chaps. 4, 5 and 6). Beyond this, officers visit the ports and shadow experienced officers in the field, taking on board advice and returning to the training to communicate their experiences with colleagues. Furthermore, when the training course officially ends, an officer is assigned a mentor who will introduce them to the local particularities of the 'site'.

instance, are trained in PEACE¹⁹ methods, a police interview technique that is aimed at gathering evidence and confessions. Yet, regardless of the clear focus on asylum, training pays no special attention to the obligation to extend protection to those fleeing persecution.²⁰ In this regard, the key asylum decision-making role of immigration officers is not evidenced by exploring what officers are supposed to do according to the Home Office, or by what the EU or UK law establishes that border officers should do. Is not an argument grounded on what international relations recognise the role of border agents, or on what many theoretical diagnoses take for granted. This is evidenced by the empirical analysis of everyday practices of immigration officers at borders; focussing on the actions and interactions that take place at ports of entry (see Chaps. 4, 5 and 6).

This book establishes that immigration border officers perform asylum screening and make decisions as a key part of their role to control borders. What is more, it shows that whilst officer's roles focus on asylum screening, attention is not given to the asylum outcomes. The asylum-screening process is stripped out from the Convention connotations, and so, in professional terms, it just becomes a drawn-out process that many officers want to avoid:

I work shifts. Sometimes, you know, I don't see my wife for a couple of days, and you're there late, you're there at nine o'clock and your shift finishes at ten o'clock, you know. And more than anything else you just want to get home, you know, and then at five past nine 15 asylum seekers arrive on the train. Now your personal relationship to them becomes one of extreme dissatisfaction because they, whether you like it or not, they are keeping you there when you could be going home. If there were no asylum seekers, you'd be going home, you'd be happy. If there are asylum seekers, you feel pissed off because they're keeping you in the office. Chief Immigration Officer²¹

This is one of the elements that trainers from the Home Office freely admit that they cannot control, and highlights the importance of localised practices.

¹⁹The PEACE model (Prepare and Planning, Engage, Account, Closure and Evaluation) provides trainees with a rational and proven strategy for gathering information to make judgements, and in the first stage directs officers to plan an interview focussing on the questions that will highlight discrepancies in the story, as it is used in interrogations of further law enforcement agencies.

²⁰For a further explanation on how these concepts are used in training refer to Chap. 4.

²¹DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

In this way asylum seekers constitute part of the unwanted element that officers must identify, and become a ‘problem’ to address in their job, a setback that is seen as a chore. The fact that power is disseminated through the Home Office’s subdivisions merely obscures the locus of state power. At the intersections between immigration officers and asylum seekers, however, this abstraction is made ‘real’, as officers act as they see fit to get the job done. However, while the border is made real, it is not uniform, as officers maintain different professional standards ensuring that even at the borders power is applied fluidly:

Always avoid the last passenger cause the last passenger will invariably be trouble. So with them, that’s where you start to play the queue. You can see the queue and you can see, and it’s not just the last person but if you don’t like the look of someone and you think he might be trouble, you know, you just keep the person you’ve got with you a bit longer and you know, and when he’s gone to somebody else, you let the person go.

Immigration Officer²²

In this context, as highlighted above, the most recent iteration of the UK’s border management agency continues to receive the same training, whilst the UNHCR remains excluded from the process. Thus, the overall goal of reducing the UK’s perceived ‘attractiveness’ to asylum seekers remains a top priority. Similarly, throughout reforms immigration officers themselves are aware that this constitutes a performance aimed at communicating to the public that something is being done about the problems at the border:

They are experts in those areas of the world and only deal with people from those areas working in Croydon. So you have a two-tier system. Somebody who’s a complete expert in that country and can phrase questions accordingly might interview one applicant who applies ‘in-country’. An officer who knows nothing about the country an applicant comes from interviews somebody applying for asylum at the port. Same legislation, same country. I find that absurd but that is how the system works. Immigration Officer²³

²² DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

²³ DI/V-UK-P18:428-176-IO

Officers are fully aware that changes to the organisational structure of border control are more of a political action than a procedural one aimed at improving the processes. Like this officer, who has worked for more than twenty years in the organisation, the majority consider that politicians are too concerned with short-term impacts and with the image of reducing numbers, and as such they underestimate what happens in the field:

Politicians will never say that in public but that's definitely the line, you know, that's definitely the policy, to refuse as many applications as possible.
Immigration Officer²⁴

Failing to connect to the Convention in a meaningful way, the Home Office purposefully allows a great degree of autonomy in establishing the profiles of asylum seekers and refugees. In this way, the directives to reduce immigration numbers are fused with the meta-messages of disbelief, suggesting that asylum seekers are criminals, burdens, thieves and terrorists. These powerful messages and the establishment of officers' policing roles, as the book goes on to show, become the biggest influence in constituting asylum decisions made by officers at the border. An influence denied by the official line that relies on a fallacy of officers' roles, which critically detaches these control agents from their decisions, pushing them towards the edges of the organisational and legal spheres.

Who Are the Officers?

As has been pointed out, there is a notable difference between immigration officers working at port and inland. UK Visas and Immigration a specialised body dealing with asylum, nationalisation and regularisation processes in what is considered the 'regular' asylum process.²⁵ UK Border Force, in comparison, performs a variety of roles in security, migration and customs-related issues, and employ somewhere in the region of 8,000 staff enforcing border control. The agency operates at 140 port locations, within and outside the UK. As with other law enforcement agencies, job

²⁴DI/V-UK-P14:86-479:480-IO

²⁵Home Office data from 2016.

applicants in both bodies must be UK citizens with no restrictions, and have resided continuously within the UK for at least the last five years. In addition, there are a range of security checks that they need to pass. Stemming from the understanding that immigration officers are the key actors in the construction of asylum decisions at ports, the organisational roles, descriptions and overall profile become defining features in how asylum decision are made.

The Home Office has a broad approach to recruitment, and has recently come under criticism for hiring ‘gap-year’ students to work within UK Visas and Immigration processing asylum claims.²⁶ These recruitment practices are also reflected in the Border Force where students as young as eighteen years old are eligible to apply through apprenticeship schemes. The Home Office has defended these practices pointing to the strength of the training course in creating ‘professionals’ who are directed to ‘always act in a way that is professional and that deserves and retains the confidence of all those with whom you have dealings’.²⁷ Candidates interested in working at the border are responsible for ‘making decisions to admit non-EEA passengers under the Immigration Act’. The Border Force focusses particularly on the need for applicants to have investigatory skills, either achieved as part of the awarding of a degree, or as part of their previous work experience:

Experience will need to include conducting interviews in order to obtain evidence as well as analysing evidence and making sound decisions based upon evidence obtained in a rules based environment. Border Force Information for Candidates Sheet 2016²⁸

On the same lines, job adverts within the Border Force make clear that officers’ roles are enforcing the law and protecting the country’s security.²⁹ For entry-level roles within the Border Force there is no requirement for

²⁶ This was uncovered as part of an investigation by the Observer Newspaper, accessible online at: www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/feb/27/gap-year-students-deciding-asylum-claims.

²⁷ Border Force, Information for Candidates; Border Force Officer.

²⁸ Border Force, Information for Candidates; Border Force Officer, 2016.

²⁹ See National Careers Service website for a description of an Immigration Officer’s profile. <https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/advice/planning/jobprofiles/Pages/immigrationofficer.aspx>.

formal qualifications, but they do need to pass a selection test. Once in the organisation the Border Force has distinct and very powerful hierarchies.³⁰ A candidate enters as a Border Force Officer, however legally this is termed an Immigration Officer when exercising immigration, nationality and asylum functions. In this regard, in all Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to the Home Office about the Border Force the organisation invariably avoids acknowledging that the term ‘immigration officer’ applies to border officers. This is especially puzzling given that it is a statutory requirement for officers to be able to explain where the basis for exercising their powers comes from.

Besides, as empirical evidence shows, many officers are also critical of the organisation, and understand or even challenge, their role in reducing immigration. Despite this, they are often just as critical of the Convention and the role of the UNHCR and, as a group, officers do not put forward a uniform interpretation of the concepts of asylum or refuge, as this next section will show.

Taking Officers on Board

Amongst border immigration officers, there is a wide range of perspectives about the value of the Convention and organisations like the UNHCR and the Home Office. As a clear trend, when officers discuss ‘the system’ they are cynical about the gap between policy and politics, and what happens on the ground. They see the Home Office and UK politicians as operating in a discursive sphere that is detached and indifferent to their daily lives. As pointed out earlier, politicians, according to officers, are far too concerned with politics to take into account the reality of what happens in the field. Whilst officers are convinced that policy-makers and

³⁰ There is a distinct hierarchy of roles within the Border Force. Amongst immigration officers these roles are: Administrative Assistant (AA), Assistant Immigration Officer (AIO), Administrative Officer (AO), Immigration Officer (IO), Executive Officer (EO), Chief Immigration Officer (CIO), Higher Executive Officer (HEO), Her Majesty’s Inspector (HMI), and Senior Executive Officer (SEO). When new officers join training this is delivered by the Home Office Learning and Skills department. All trainers have a background in immigration and are presented as experts. This reinforces a further hierarchy crucial to knowledge transfer, establishing the ideal profile of new recruits. For more debate on this subject refer to Chap. 4.

politicians are aware of some of the more practical issues of dealing with asylum, they believe that they actually choose to remain ignorant of what happens on the ground:

I don't think they're really interested in us, the people who make the policy aren't really interested in what our opinions are.

Immigration Officer³¹

Officers are in no doubt that the political goals of the government become those of the Home Office, but question the understanding of policy implementation at all levels. In the same way, they often mention their own lack of awareness of what happens at wider levels of operation as part of this problem, and refer to their lack of access to relevant documentation. However, even in cases of officers with access to documents related to political debates they still feel that politicians talk a 'different language', which has little bearing on how they perform their roles:

You have to sit down to understand the harmonisation of EU policies or else you do not understand anything of what they are talking about. Even if you do understand the words, even if you can translate the words into your own language, you don't know what is behind them, you still won't understand it.

Immigration Officer³²

The core of the problem, as this officer outlines, is that immigration officers are not part of the debate, and so they feel as outsiders looking into a world of policy development alien to them. This detachment from legislation and policymaking develops into a feeling of discontent, as they believe that their work and experience are undervalued. This is damaging to the whole system, as in facing the situation day in, day out, the detachment of politicians from the reality on the ground heightens some officers' awareness of the political propaganda that emerges from border issues:

If only they were more honest. I tell you, they are starting to spin immigration figures in a way I hadn't noticed before. There was a thing in

³¹ DI/V-UK-P14:178 -536:537-IO

³² DI/V-UK-P5:2 -21:25-IO

the Financial Times last week, it said that 15,000 people were refused last year and 7,500 were removed. That is just a lie, it's just a lie. I think maybe 500 might have been removed. Frankly, most of the people who get removed are the ones who just want to go anyway. I mean these are the facts of the situation.

Chief Immigration Officer³³

As a result, as this Chief Officer explains, officers believe that politicians do not care about the distance between them and policy-makers, and this perspective invariably puts forward the meta-messages about controlling the border and reducing the numbers as being the only consideration that matters. Reducing the number of applications is the main political target and the only way politicians, and therefore the Home Office, relate to officers' work. As officers argue, these are political moves not even based on the real figures or facts, never mind on politicians consulting those with real experiences. Even in the few cases where high-ranking officers are trying to be positive about the political narratives, it is easy to discern some resentment:

Well I think the current government is more serious about getting results. I think the last government in respect of this department was interested in the propaganda but not in getting results. I think the current government are interested in the propaganda as well, obviously, but they are taking the problem more seriously. But that's because the problem has landed on their plate.

Immigration Officer³⁴

The result of this detachment is a resignation on the part of the officers and, by and large, to their role within the system. This is a disengagement that not only allows but forces the autonomous functioning and construction of officers' worlds.³⁵

Officers' sense of detachment is one of the key factors that again emerges when they are asked about their decisions (see Chap. 5).

³³DI/V-UK-P12:346 -560:572-CIO

³⁴DI/V-UK-P14:281 561:567-IO

³⁵DI/V-UK-P14:280 -536:540-IO

This is emphasised by the fact that officers do not see the outcomes of their roles within asylum processes, which further detaches them from the consequences of their actions:

I don't think the system is fair and I don't think it's unfair. It's the system that's developed over a number of years. I don't think it's going to change. I don't think the principle is going to change. I think that at the end of the day maybe it's not really that relevant what goes on at the interview stage.

Immigration Officer³⁶

These situations do not leave everyone indifferent, and throughout the ethnography a few dissenting voices appeared. These are officers that express concern and show unease with the way the system works, and recognise the reality of asylum seekers and migration controls. It is on these lines that some officers express their apprehension at what they see as meaningless discourses and the clear waste of resources that they often involve:

I think that facing up to the reality that they are not going to be leaving, I think more resources should be put into what you do with these people once they arrive.

Chief Immigration Officer³⁷

In addition, there are also voices that take this a step further, suggesting that asylum seekers should be admitted and accommodated based on some form of 'social contract':

Personally, I think that there isn't anything wrong with saying to someone - you come here, you want something from us, you want a better life in theory over here. OK, we have certain standards that you may not be able to get in your own country, right? But the trade-off is that you have to learn English, for example, you know. I mean that should be absolutely mandatory. It doesn't have to be done in a sort of draconian way. I don't think there's any reason why we shouldn't place restrictions on them if that's what they want. It's a trade-off, isn't it? It's a contractual arrangement between individual and

³⁶ DI/V-UK-P14:232 -612:615-IO

³⁷ DI/V-UK-P12:365-805:829-CIO

the state, you know. And I don't see any reason why you can't look at it that way, you know. I think to be honest with you, that would actually put a lot of people who are not genuine off coming.

Chief Immigration Officer³⁸

Whilst these views are marginal, they do occasionally come through. What is interesting in this officer's comments is that they actually return to the meta-messages of deterrence, suggesting an alternative means of denying applications, by means of a trade through 'the social contract'. In any case, regardless of the different officers' approaches to the position of the Home Office and politicians, there is no doubt of officers' decision-making roles, and the importance of the powerful messages that emerge from 'official' sources:

They don't take us into account, I think they don't take notice of us, maybe the mandarins but I think they also have their own agenda. I don't think it's relevant what any of my colleagues think. We're servants of government policy and I don't think we're here to influence government policy obviously. I don't want to sound like the Nuremberg trials, but we're here to obey orders basically.

Immigration Officer³⁹

Officers not only believe that their experiences are not relevant to the system and that their opinions do not count, but also agree that this is the way things have been for a long time and the way they will remain. They believe the system is a bureaucratic device, unchangeable and outdated, and in turn most officers have the impression that it has reached the point where even the actual system is alien to the enforcement level:

The Home Office is a dinosaur or the organisation of the Home Office is a dinosaur and it will take many, many years before somebody as low a grade as me is heard within the civil service, never mind by the politicians.

Immigration Officer⁴⁰

³⁸DI/V-UK-P12:365-805:829-CIO

³⁹DI/V-UK-P18:325 -776:781-IO

⁴⁰DI/V-UK-P18:135 -797:799-IO

This lack of perspectives for change also relates to the Home Office concerns. While the Home Office appears to have little control in directing officers' actions, the meta-messages that emerge from the body about reducing numbers strongly permeates and determines immigration officers' roles, functions and ultimately their responsibilities.

Officer's Views on the UNHCR and the Convention

As pointed out earlier, the gap between policy, organisation and individual implementation, which shapes officers' role and legitimises a high degree of autonomy to make decisions, is not expressed in relation to the UK context only. The disconnection with the international institutions and mechanisms regarding asylum and refuge is also remarkable in officers' views of the system. Officers perceive these institutions and their functions as far removed from the everyday realities and functions. Thus, they see their objectives, moreover, their tools as irrelevant, to the extent that this can be used to justify their actual work. In this way, for officers the most significant tangible effect of the Convention in their everyday role is that it instigates a particular procedure for processing clandestine travellers to all other routes:

As soon as the individual arrives and invokes the 1951 Convention, then it goes into this whole different chain of events.

Immigration Officer⁴¹

In this way, regardless of the officer's view of the Convention's unsuitability, no asylum seeker will be considered for refuge unless explicit elements of persecution included in the Convention are presented. Still, probably the clearest indication of the minor impact of the Convention is not its vague application, but the fact that at some point most of them admitted that they had not even read it:

I wouldn't necessarily have said that it is a Convention claim but then again, I haven't read the Convention.

Immigration Officer⁴²

⁴¹ DI/V-UK-P22:155 -266:267-IO

⁴² DI/V-UK-P13:73 -673:674-IO

On these lines, one of the greatest exhibitions of this detachment relates to the treatment of the existing official guide produced by the UNHCR entitled ‘Handbook for Determining Refugee Status and Guidelines on International Protection’, elaborated initially in 1992 with a latest re-edition of 2011 (UNHCR 1979). The aims of the UNHCR handbook are to define the basic guidelines used to determine refugee status and to clarify the definition of the term ‘refugee’ for the purposes of the Convention. This is specifically addressed ‘to those who in their daily work are called upon to determine refugee status’,⁴³ mainly immigration officers. The importance of such an interpretation is stressed by the UNHCR in stating that ‘erroneous decisions taken by immigration officers may result in asylum seekers returning to the country of origin, in breach of international and domestic law’.⁴⁴ The handbook is aimed at protecting the rights of asylum seekers at the initial stage of the screening process and guiding immigration officers in this task. Yet the UNHCR has elaborated the guidebook and its updates without any accounts of border officers’ experiences or engagement—most likely as they were not able to access them. Subsequently, the great majority of immigration officers at borders are completely unaware of the existence of the handbook in the first place:

Not only do we not know about it [the handbook] but we’re not really interested in it. Because it’s, well it’s not for us. I mean, you know? Our management could give us copies or they could put a copy in the library or something but they don’t. And I certainly don’t think many people would read it anyway.

Immigration Officer⁴⁵

Paradoxically, the majority of those for whom this tool was created for have no knowledge about the handbook, no awareness of its existence and furthermore no interest in it. What is more, when officers are informed about the handbook it provokes a response of rejection as it is perceived to be a redundant tool that officers believe they do not need at all:

⁴³ Conclusion, point 223, UNHCR Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status.

⁴⁴ UNHCR Report on European Union reception standards, (UNHCR 2000).

⁴⁵ D/I-UK14-AR00-5-IO

Oh, the handbook, I've never actually seen it. I mean I don't even know if there's one in the office. I suppose that it says somewhere in the Geneva Convention that the port of entry cannot be responsible for consideration of the claim. So in one sense it's kind of redundant to us.

Senior Immigration Officer⁴⁶

Similar to this officer, some others officers expressed knowledge of the handbook yet this just corroborates the fallacy of the official discourse that 'officers do not decide'. This emphasises the problem of lack of knowledge about so-called key international instruments or organisations, such as the UNHCR, whose role has been diminished significantly in the UK over the past fifteen years. Clearly, both the UNHCR and the Convention are increasingly irrelevant to the officers' world as their social control and securitised roles are developed.

By and large, officers consider that politicians and policy-makers at all levels operate in detached spheres, not interested in knowing, understanding or improving conditions in the field. Furthermore, they feel that as long as this situation remains there is never going to be a policy that qualitatively affects the initial stage of the asylum-screening process, or a policy that actually works.

A Cog in the Machine

This chapter has connected the political, legal and organisational approaches on asylum and refuge, to the worlds of immigration officers at borders. It has challenged many assertions that are too often taken for granted. Starting with the deconstruction of the concept of refuge, showing how since it emerged in the 1950s it has evolved to become almost the opposite of what it was set up to be. A process that does not simply occur through the policy and legal spheres, as much research contends, but also on the ground where, contrary to formal expectations, the Convention is seen as irrelevant and weak. In moving beyond deliberations that focus on the rule of law, these

⁴⁶ DI/V-UK6-AR00-8-IO

explanations begin to highlight the importance of the construction of the categories of asylum and refuge, and the understanding of the process by those working in the field.

On the ground the normative debates that circulate beyond officers' professional worlds play a crucial role in determining how asylum seekers and refugees as a group are imagined and conceived. The conceptions of asylum and refuge at all levels are, as this chapter has shown, far too ambiguous and unrealistic, leaving the concept to be subjectively reconstructed through various mediatised and blinkered debates. In the context of the border, the 'folk devil' images perpetuated by the media, and embraced by ruthless political campaigns like Brexit, come to take on a very real meaning as officers reproduce a 'reality' that belies the notion of protection enshrined in international law. Beyond the Convention definitions, evidence shows how officers are far more influenced by the organisational goals of the Home Office, and know that these are inherently connected to the wider political goals of the government. Hence the policy, at either the international or European level, is also focussed on making the arrival and entrance of refugees as difficult as possible rather than on protecting them, and immigration officers assume this position in their role.

The lack of communication and care between the levels of information and interpretation reveals the detachment between the political and legislative spheres and what happens in the field. Politicians express little concern about how the system is enforced or about the initial asylum interview when designing asylum policies. This is despite the importance that the enforcement level has in practice as stressed by many officers:

The interview is the key part not only of the screening process but of the whole asylum system, in the same way that in any juridical system the interview is the key, in asylum too ... it is the key to the system because without the interview there is no questionnaire, there is no file, there is no knowledge about the case. So the quality of the asylum system could be judged according to the quality of the interview.

Immigration Officer⁴⁷

⁴⁷D/V-UK-P8:126-753:758-IO

This gap works both ways: Politicians are not interested in enforcement in the same way as officers are not interested in learning or implementing policies and legislation. The most dangerous aspect of this is that all efforts aimed at improving legislation to make it more compatible with human rights principles seem wasted. Furthermore, it indicates a potential danger for any foundation of a counter-culture of rights, by which the immigration service subculture reveals itself to be against the ‘culture of rights’. In its place, a culture of denial and disbelief emerges from the underlying messages of deterrence and control. Officers ‘view all requests for political asylum against the backdrop of ongoing international migration’ (Loescher 1992:3) and asylum is no longer seen as an extraordinary facet of this:

The government’s sort of unofficial policy is that the asylum system is being exploited for immigration purposes. They’ll never say that in public but that’s definitely the line, the policy is to refuse as many applications as possible. I’m not necessarily saying it’s the right policy but it’s the policy that’s been followed by each government of whatever political persuasion for a long time.

Immigration Officer⁴⁸

This generates an antagonism between what officers practice and what they believe is best, developing into a resignation to reducing numbers of refugees as part of their professional role. An antagonism that makes officers feel disconnected and irrelevant, resigned to accepting the system they are faced with:

If I put forward the suggestion that I was making about disseminating the information downwards tomorrow, I know it would never happen. It just would not happen. I’m not important enough or my grade isn’t important enough to be heard.

Immigration Officer⁴⁹

Not only do officers believe their experience is undervalued but such persistent denial creates frustration, widening the distance between the political and enforcement levels of operation. This feeling of powerlessness

⁴⁸ D/V-UK-P14: 279-478:484-IO

⁴⁹ D/V-UK-P18:431-658:667-IO

makes officers adopt the conservative approach that ‘things will never change’. Their experience of working for years with different political parties in power, tells them that nothing changes radically. This resentful condition develops into an underlying cynicism about the whole process, with obvious negative repercussions on asylum applications.

However, little happens to improve the situation. Policy improvement does not happen because it seems there is no real interest in recognising how the system works. From a political standpoint, the system works because it achieves results, and the less analysis of how these results are achieved the better. This plausible deniability that insulates both the state and the officers is, on the contrary, rather convenient in the current functioning of the system. Far from looking to vilify immigration officers, the Home Office’s complicity in transmitting meta-messages and portraying asylum seekers negatively will be shown to direct the professional development of officers’ roles. The volitional subject, tasked with working in a zone of fear, is compelled to act in certain ways which the subculture goes on to establish as ‘professional knowledge’.

Regardless of the complexity of the spheres where asylum is constructed and the gap between them, the negative meta-messages of disbelief and denial remain. Hence, without a transformation of principles and interest in what happens in the field, most efforts made towards improving asylum screening and guaranteeing asylum seekers’ rights seem wasted.

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3

Subcultures of Social Control

Beyond the Fallacy of Social Control Technocrats

The basic issue for us is to try to focus primarily on identifying asylum claimants who are genuine refugees. We mustn't lose sight of that. I think it's sometimes quite difficult because we've had such a pounding with the numbers arriving and claiming asylum, and we know from those whose appeals are turned down, the numbers and the percentages, who don't succeed in their asylum claim but still the vast majority are not seen by the authority as genuine refugees. It really is quite important that we remain focused on our job.

Her Majesty's Inspector¹

The numerous laws regulating the arrival and applications of asylum seekers are interpreted, reconstructed and reworked by those enforcing them at ports of entry, and in particular by the world of reconstructions

¹DI/VUK2-AR00-HMI

that takes place at the initial stage of the asylum screening. The influence of these officers is critical to asylum applications and asylum processes, yet their presence remains largely hidden from the public eye and is mostly ignored by academic and political debate, so we remain unaware of how officers undertake their activities and make up their decisions. This chapter traces the development of research into subcultural worlds, with a particular focus on law enforcement, control and the role of state agents. By placing a lens on social and everyday practices this chapter reassesses state power, to recognise it not as static, or absolute, but as fluid and socially constructed (Marston et al. 2005; Allen 2011; Ferguson and Gupta 2008).

When looking at specific sites like borders the states' inner workings become visible within the 'contextual milieu of tendencies composing practices and orders' (Marston et al. 2005, 427). Hence, the milieu of immigration officers' social worlds becomes crucial to understanding how asylum policy is performed and enacted. At the border this draws attention to the weight of actors' roles in the complex assemblages that make territories real (Mountz 2010), where the bureaucratic application of the rule of law becomes an increasingly unsuitable analogy. Drawing parallels with law enforcement research emerging from the 1960s, the existence of subcultural worlds and labelling practices as professional knowledge is examined. As labelling theory and organisational studies developed from the 1960s, unsheathing the myths of bureaucratic fallacy, the powerful and potentially self-serving roles played by professional groups became clear. Furthermore, the roles that agents played in the subjectification of individuals began to emerge, as unchallenged professional knowledge was shown to reproduce engrained social and racial stereotypes (Pilivain and Briar 1964; Werthman and Pilivain 1967), develop social stigmas (Goffman 1963; Becker 1961) and breed prejudice through the application of the most unshakeable labels (Becker 1961; Matza 1969; Rosenhahn 1973).

The paradigm of social constructionism, adopted from the anthropological tradition of ethnography, is fundamental to the understanding of the work of state professionals, although it was not applied to those managing asylum claims at borders, but to those in charge of law enforcement (Loftus 2015; Broeders and Hampshire 2013; Mutsaers

2014; Rock 2010). Drawing parallels with research into police subcultures, particularly in uncovering the abuses of unfettered concentrations of power, immigration officers are presented as social control agents. These immigration officers are professionals constructing their roles, their actions and interactions—their professional knowledge in relation to their place at the border (Weber and Bowling 2004). Research into law enforcement cultures emerged from shifting approaches from control to deviance, which questioned the role played by social control agents ‘traditionally characterised by a concern to expose the culture and practices of operational police work’ (Loftus 2015, 119). This approach reveals the importance of the social worlds of law enforcement, illustrating the importance of subcultural beliefs and practices, in assuming their roles. A logic that is as relevant to the world of immigration and border officers, especially as the gulf between the roles played by immigration officers and the police converges.² This evidences social control analogies and is more representative of the worlds of border control and immigration officials than of bureaucratic imagery. This idea is explored when discussing the roles that officers undertake at the borders, highlighting the ways professional roles are clearly developed and connected to the idea of ‘specialist’ knowledge.

In asylum screening the concept of ‘state actors’ has outlasted its value, as contemporary research highlights the importance of looking at the ways that decisions are socially constructed and enacted within closed and reticent state institutions. The conceptual gap that exists between the images of the technocrat bound by a rule-based world has helped disguise the significance of the prosaic and routine practices that constitute the socio-cultural space within which they

²The crossover between roles of police officers is certainly converging. As discussed in Chap. 1 as border controls are internalised so too are the extensions of powers to border agents, which sometime exceed those of regular police forces. Broeders and Hampshire (2013) describes how as immigration controls have moved up in the political agenda in Europe rising pressure from voters has been coupled with the appearance of more security at the borders. In the UK the rollout of biometric borders coincided with the establishment of the UK Border Agency to meet the new border challenges. Up until then border agents wore civilian clothing, however at this point police-style uniforms, badges and insignia were introduced reflecting the extension of the powers as much as communicating that the borders are under control. Similarly, as processes of internal bordering are intensified, the police, alongside other commercial actors like property owners, banks and even medical professionals, are being asked to perform more ‘proactive’ immigration policing roles (Loftus 2015; Mutsaers 2014; Weber 2011).

work (Marston et al. 2005; see Chap. 1). It is in the unfolding of this space that 'sites' reveal themselves as fundamental to the existence and development of subcultural worlds, which when unchallenged, may reflexively recreate the worlds they exist in. By adopting a close and rigorous look at the everyday practices that colonise these sites the construction of these subjective exercises are revealed. It is only in doing so that the reticent worlds of social control in the past have been revealed, and so too should this be the case when uncovering attitudes of those policing the borders.

These are the sides to institutional life that the ethnographic approaches of the 1960s exposed by embracing the tenets of social constructivism, recognising that the social construction of knowledge emerged as crucial to the development of professional classes. This revealed the importance of socially constructed roles and reinforced assumptions as a basis for developing labels and categories, which would form the foundations of what was conceptualised as 'professional knowledge' (Becker 1973). A particular way of looking at and understanding the world, which professionals believed to exist, that is made real by turning assumptions into fact within the organisational and state frames (Goffman 1974). Approaching the worlds of border agents from a phenomenological perspective allows us to extract parallels between the professional development of knowledge within the closed sites of the borders, asylum-screening departments, and detention sites and the classical worlds of social control agents and professional knowledge.

Border worlds exist in a grey area where the uncontrolled development of professional knowledge and interest results in dubious policing practices, yet this is largely ignored, in political terms. The roles played by immigration officers and border agents are shown to be far removed from the bureaucratic worlds of 'pencil pushers', with far more parallels with contemporary social control agents. Producing evidence to illustrate this, highlighting the differences in organisational approaches of the UK Police and the Border Force (UK-BF), it becomes clear that the technocrat image is not a casual fallacy. This projection serves a political purpose of deniability, which ensures that immigration officers work outside of

the Race Relations Act and operate using largely discretionary margins in the application of the Convention.

Agents of Social Controls: Policing the Police

The development of law enforcement research, particularly on the subject of the police in the UK and the US, is intrinsically linked to the emergence of ethnographic works in the context of organisations and state bodies, helped by the opening out of the social constructionist approach from the 1960s onwards. In US academic debate, the police came under closer scrutiny as calls for ethnic justice made by the civil rights movement became the dominant political issues of the time (Reiner 1997). Researchers began to ask questions about the nature of policing, recognising that the police would frequently depart from legal standards and definitions when performing their law enforcement roles (Rock 2010). Contextualised by the concerns for social justice, this body of work looks closely at the ways that enforcement practices might result in abuse and discrimination, particularly amongst African-American communities (Graham 1970). Fundamental to gaining understandings were approaches, which entered their worlds, looking to understand the inner constructions of social control agents' 'realities'.

Simultaneously the development and broadening of 'labelling theories', largely inspired by Becker's (1964) ethnographic work on jazz musicians and marijuana users, challenged long-held assumptions about deviancy and criminal justice. Previous approaches contended that deviancy and criminality were a symptom of the anomie and disorder of the modern city, alongside the loss of traditional social controls like the community and the family. The positivist approaches, which had dominated criminology and control theories relatively unchallenged since the late eighteenth century, purported that the remedy to disorder was increased social controls. Scholars began to apply constructionists' theories (Lemert 1967; Matza 1969; Cicourel 1973) to policing practices questioning to what extent 'the processes by which the responses of social control agents could make it more, rather than less, likely that such an act would be repeated' (Hudson 1997, 454).

The recognition of the importance of discretion in law enforcement in the early 1960s originated a defining moment in policing studies as

it brought up the possibility that officers did not enforce the law fully 'because the volume of incidents that could be regarded as breaches of the law would always outstrip police capacity to process them' (Reiner 1997, 1008–1009). While the exercise of discretion was identified as an important part of police work in 'maintaining the peace' (Rock 2002), constructionism and labelling theories became concerned with how the application of the law would discriminate against those 'who are more likely than others to be on the receiving end of the exercise of police power' (Reiner 1997, 1010). In the US context this addressed the apprehension that policing practices were reflecting long-held social prejudices, and in turn were subjugating communities due to their 'social powerlessness which makes them prey to police harassment [and] also allows the police to neglect their victimization' (ibid.).

This research uncovered the practices of labelling that existed behind the bureaucratic shield, illustrating how the police might further subjugate populations already living on the edges of society. What's more, as professional knowledge these practices were self-fulfilling, ensuring a cycle of crime, profiling and targeting would continue to yield the same results. Namely, in the US context at the time, police brutality was fed on by the legitimisation of racism, prejudice and stereotypes as professional knowledge.

Trajectories in the UK were somewhat different where the police had traditionally held a rather admired position in society (Gorer 1955). Faced with a number of scandals in the late 1950s this privileged position in British society came under threat as the post-war Labour/Social democratic consensus towards law and order as representative of post-war society, came under ideological threat (Taylor 1981; Cohen 1985). These were not attacks on the state but, as Taylor highlights, on the apparent ideological consensus that existed amongst politicians about law and order. This was despite the indications that crime and delinquency were actually on the rise. Furthermore, as scandals broke, the police became the target of this ire with allegations of corruptions encompassing rank-and-file officers as well as their superiors, making it difficult to lay the blame at the feet of a 'few bad eggs'.

The trends of early approaches on either side of the Atlantic were now more driven by the immediate issues of politics and policing rather than

by academic developments of new sociological theory.³ Social anthropology approaches addressing this subject first emerged in the UK as scholars like Michael Banton began to ask questions about the exercise of discretion and its connection to the ‘values embedded in the informal culture of the police themselves’ (Reiner 1997, 1001). Converging on the ethnographic approach, Banton (1964) provided empirical knowledge about the police subcultures. This would be essential to what was to become an axiomatic development on comparative ethnographies of government decision-making around the criminal justice system (Rock 2010). Beyond previous work on the topic, these ethnographies focussed on the in-depth analysis of everyday actions, addressing questions about the interaction orders between the formal and informal factors that influenced the exercise of police discretion. The results of this work revealed the importance of informal structures and internal logics of police subcultures that had previously not been revealed, nor taken into account. These approaches soon found expression in the United States as early labelling theorists began to reflect on ‘how the police role, organisation, culture, personality, and socialisation structured deviation from due process’ (Reiner 1997, 999).

The importance of informal structures within police cultures had major effects in the United States, and key scholars⁴ began to investigate the informal processes of socialisation that influenced law enforcement practices. This work revealed that behind the public face of policing lie a world that was not tied to the acme of bureaucracy, but was actually a ‘fluid world, seething with tensions, spontaneity and deviance’ (ibid.; 1002). Drawing parallels with studies into industrial bureaucracies, the allegory of a ‘mock bureaucracy’ began to hold increasing weight (Gouldner 1954). Banton’s research had succeeded in identifying a number of characteristics within the police culture that helped to reveal the complexities behind decision-making and the exercise of discretion amongst the police. As this

³For a critical review of British criminology and the inclusion of ethnographic accounts, refer to Paul Rock Paul ‘Chronocentrism and British criminology *British Journal of Sociology*’ (2005) 56 (3). 473–791.

⁴For further readings on this area, see Stinchcombe (1963), Skolnick (1966), Bitner (1967a, b).

debate was engaging other scholars and expanded to diversity of situations,⁵ it became clear that, while the context behind policing from country to country might be different, there were a number of shared characteristics and meta-messages such as suspiciousness and the use of targeted profiling, that were crucial to shaping law enforcement officers' realities.⁶

Social Control at the Border

Arguably, much of this is analogous with immigration officers' 'realities', starting with some of the guiding principles behind the organisations in relation to security and the fact that the first aspects of policing shared by border agencies and law enforcement are their security and control functions. In this regard policing refers to the provision of security through visual presence, deterrents, surveillance and the threat of sanctions, amongst others (Spitzer 1987; Shearing 1992). These factors are commonly associated with the police and are increasingly becoming an important part of state immigration policies, as migration, and by definition asylum, become subsumed into state security policy (Castles 2014; Bigo 2014; Prokkola and Ridanpää 2014).

While the police provide a broad range of services to the public, including but not limited to the provision of security and crime prevention, their legitimised role had been theorised as that of peacekeepers (Cumming et al. 1964; Martin and Wilson 1969; Punch 1979; Becker and Stephens 1994). Border control organisation objectives, however, tend to focus specifically on security issues as key concerns. In this context, the discourse and narratives about security objectives are 'carefully intertwined with the language of human security and the saving of lives' (Aas and Gundhus 2014, 5). Arguably, there is a fundamental need to conduct research into the worlds of immigration officers in order to recognise immigration officers' approaches to asylum seeking and unravel to what extent these reflect the humanitarian

⁵ Banton's research had far-reaching impacts and his approaches were adopted by many other UK and US scholars, like Stolnick (1966), Wilson (1968), Bayley and Mandelsohn (1968). Reiss (1971) and Manning (1977).

⁶ Refer also to Skolnick (1966), Reiner (1992), Skolnick and Fyfe (1993).

concerns enshrined in the Convention or whether all migratory practices fall under the one umbrella of border security and control.

This line of enquiry also engages with evidence given from within the UK that highlights the differential approaches to victims of human trafficking adopted by the UK Border Force and those of the law enforcement within the country. The treatment of victims of human trafficking identified within the UK by the police are supported and assisted through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)⁷ that provides individuals identified as trafficked with access to a wide range of support services.⁸ The police do not pressure victims to cooperate with criminal investigations, although this is the ideal, and in such cases, victims are offered a residency permit for a year.⁹

This contrasts with the Border Force approach to trafficked persons where the approach suggests a lack of care for victims, with Detained Fast Track (DFT) frequently used to speed up deportation processes reflecting the organisational goals of reducing migration. As of November 2015 the DFT process has been suspended with the High Court describing organisational practices which ‘created an unacceptable risk of unfairness to certain categories of vulnerable or potentially vulnerable applicants’¹⁰ resulting in the unlawful detention of victims of human trafficking. In these instances, the failure to comply with legislation relating to the NRM was compounded by the fact that officers did not recognise the individuals as victims of trafficking, thus further criminalising victims of trafficking, torture and sexual abuse through incarceration and denial of support services they were legally entitled to. This would appear to suggest the High Court’s acceptance that labelling and targeted policing practices

⁷The NRM is a framework set up by the UK government to protect victims of human trafficking as defined by the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Human Trafficking.

⁸Within this framework an individual identified as trafficked is provided with housing, material assistance, medical care, counselling and emotional supports, and importantly assistance and advice on immigration policy and their right to claim asylum.

⁹The differences in approaches become more pronounced in relation to prostitution and sexual abuse cases. Here the Association of Chief Police Officers has published departmental guidelines, which clearly highlight the priority should be on protection of vulnerable individuals over the disruption of crime.

¹⁰Lord Chancellor v Detection Action [2015] EWCA Civ 840.

directed immigration staff towards certain groups using blacklists and whitelists.¹¹

The differences in approaches to victims¹² are illustrated by the significant gap between practice and discourse within the organisational cultures of law enforcement and border control agents. In this regard, we must question to what extent humanitarian values actually influence the operational functioning of border control agencies. While little empirical data exists on the symbolic interactions between formal and informal values shaping operational procedures, research conducted within Frontex illustrates how messages of humanitarian concern may feature prominently in formal documentation and trainings, yet have placed little weight to the risk analysis and results-based concerns of the organisation (Aas and Gundhus 2014).

The prevailing image of the worlds of border agents remains one of bureaucratic rules and regulations. An approach that rarely satisfies a critical description of police activities, yet somehow it remains ‘acceptable’ relating to border management regimes. This functional image of a bureaucracy serves to obscure the internal conflicts and practices that occur behind the scenes by presenting itself as both ‘definitive’ and ‘rational’ (Heyman 1995, 264). Communication strategies with the public, and internal communication of goals and objectives, further ‘reinforce concealment in their work to craft a united, coherent narrative’ (Mountz 2010, 58). While this image may serve some political functions communicating a notion that ‘everything is under control’, it does not speak of the actual practices and performances of immigration officers, or their assumptions of roles within the organisation:

¹¹ Under the process an applicant referred to the DFT process either by UK VI or UK BF would be referred to the National Asylum Intake Unit, making reference to the reasons why they were processed under DFT. The screening interview was the key in making these decisions early on in the process.

¹² Furthermore, within the UK policing sector, professional organisations such as the Association of Chief Police Officers have been vocal in attempts to influence departmental cultures to focus on victim protection above prosecutions recognising the difficulties in gathering information about traffickers from victims. They have also engaged with NGOs like Crimestoppers and the UK Network of Sex Workers to raise awareness and for guidance when engaging with sex workers.

They don't care about us. We're just the people at the bottom of the ladder. We're just names or numbers. We're not important to the process at all. Immigration Officer¹³

Indeed, as this officer who has been working in the organisation for more than thirteen years illustrates, the wholesale effect of this approach is one that not only ignores the agency of the individuals working within state bodies, but also the power dynamics at play between the state, and the stateless individual. Once again the vulnerabilities emerging for those who are socially powerless are, like in the 1960s, too great to ignore. Increasingly, from the 1990s onwards, scholars researching both the police and bureaucratic cultures have addressed the intersections of state-sanctioned powers (Townley 1993; Heyman 1995; Bevir 1999) and the potentials for abuse that exist around the unfettered control of power. Immigration officers sit at just such an intersection of reticent state power.

Like the social and political changes of the 1960s, the renewed focus on law enforcement activities that developed throughout the 1990s revealed an intimidating power of the supposedly sterile bureaucratic worlds. Originating in the United States through the beatings of Rodney King and subsequent race riots in Los Angeles, and followed in the UK by the revelations of rampant institutional racism within the Metropolitan Police, as revealed in the MacPherson Report. In these contexts police cultures returned firmly to the public view. Both these cases served as a reminder that police powers do not operate in a cultural vacuum, which ensures the bureaucratic application of the law, but rather highlighted the significance of organisational subcultures, and how they might direct from within as acceptable law enforcement practices.

Whereas law enforcement officers had come under increased attention following the Brixton Race Riots in the UK during the 1980s, the idea that their policing roles were tied to organisational values and professional knowledge was not considered. Rather the approach was that the police service was not racist, although 'racial prejudice does manifest

¹³DI/V-UK4-AR00-IO

itself occasionally in the behaviour of a few officers in the street'.¹⁴ How could the organisation be responsible for the feelings of isolated officers? In this rationale, all traces of racism were reduced to the individual and their feelings of prejudice and racism, facilitating the deployment of the 'one rotten apple' argument, thus furthering the idea of bureaucratic process. This was strikingly similar to Home Office responses to claims made against the immigration service relating to cultures of disbelief and denial.¹⁵ In the 1990s, the Stephen Lawrence case and MacPherson report changed this approach drastically, highlighting to the general public how ingrained institutional and reflexively social racism and prejudices were (Cohen 2002). By illustrating the roles that were played by key gatekeepers not just within the policing communities, MacPherson highlighted the importance of wider socio-cultural contexts in the performance of everyday life, and how these issues might influence policies and roles assumed by the police and other state bodies. The impacts of the MacPherson report must not be underestimated—as racism was recognised as a broad societal problem for the first time, sweeping changes to the Race Relations Act ensured that all public bodies, not just the police, would now be legally bound to promote racial equality.

This brings us back to the need to adopt the ethnographic lens to expose the basis of knowledge formation in these contexts. As noted allegorically in relation to DFT, even where policy goals are clear the performative agency of those processing claims suggests something beyond legislation and the transposition of rules is informing how decisions are made. The parallels with the development of law enforcement research highlights the necessity to enter the world of immigration officers and their organisations in order to understand what shapes their goals and objectives, and how they assume roles within the organisations. Given the Home Office's recent commissioning of yet another report relating to the charges of institutional racism in the Metropolitan Police force stemming from the MacPherson report, it is puzzling why when presented with evidence of organisational failings at the border, the 'one

¹⁴ Lord Scarman. 1982. *The Scarman Report: The Brixton Disorders*, 10–12 April 1981. Pelican, London.

¹⁵ Find House of Commons details on Culture of Denial/Disbelief response.

rotten apple' response returns to the fore. This is particularly the case in relation to humanitarian concerns, which tend to be dismissed and paid less attention than domestic political pressures, such as queues at the border.¹⁶ This substantiates the argument that asylum has been subsumed into immigration policy, rather than embracing the humanitarian values of the Convention. The question that emerges now relates to how these attitudes and perspectives are internalised within the subculture and by border agents themselves.

Breaking Through Professional Shells

While the organisation performs a critical role in communicating state goals in relation to asylum and immigration, it insulates those on the ground from the potential consequences of their actions. In the UK, the Home Office operates at a distance from the Border Force officers, maintaining that they play no significant role in processing asylum requests. In this process, officers come to take ownership of the asylum interview as an area of their 'professional expertise'. This becomes a hidden, yet legitimised, autonomous space in which asylum decisions are made, subject to how agents understand, embrace and perform their roles. These organisational frameworks, which operate behind professional shells, become the most essential space to explore, in order to understand how initial asylum decisions are made. As noted, to unravel the reality of these subcultural settings the anthropological tradition of ethnography, embraced from the paradigms of social constructionism and symbolic interactionism, are no doubt the most valuable approaches. This is not only to disclose officers' unwritten norms, values and patterns but also to provide an understanding on how this knowledge is internalised and institutionalised by the concealed structures of state bodies (see Hofstede 1980; Tayeb 1988; Lane 1989).

¹⁶In relation to the UK Border Agency, these checks are framed by an appearance of less security, and thus more concern. The fact that when humanitarian issues are raised and subsequently denied further supports the claims that approaches to asylum are nowadays subsumed into the states' general migration policy and bear much closer relations to prevention rather than protection factors.

In this sense, certainly the richest scenario to reveal how officers exercise their everyday routines and endeavour to subculturally articulate, systematise and transmit their roles, whereby the 'true values and rules' are transmitted through formal and informal channels of communication. This implies a setting formally established to transmit the 'professional proceedings' and, more importantly, to educate new officers into the norms and values of the subculture that will eventually shape their judgements. Training frameworks within the organisation are articulated by the way that the institution captures the time and interest of the officers, whilst introducing them into something of a world in a parallel with the wider synergies of total institutions (Foucault 1970). These are universes where the transmission of institutional meanings implies control whilst also involving the legitimisation of procedures attached to the institutions administered by the transmitting agents (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

The professional groups of law enforcement officers constitute a group where members hold common interests and undertakings (Banton 1964), they tend to maintain a joint cognitive attention, often taking the form of profiling (Chan 2011; Satzewich and Shaffir 2009). What is more, they mutually ratify each other's perspectives as being representative of certain characteristics like social isolation and the solidarity that this promotes amongst members (Goffman 1967). It is these 'common interests' and the groups' common cognitive attention that ratifies what might be termed as professional knowledge in law enforcement worlds, providing the basis for the subculture. Within the realms of closed professional worlds, the emphasis lies on the internal logic of the subculture rather than on its external connections.¹⁷

In contrast to a common understanding of subculture as a casual notion, involving an informal and variable social response (Gelder and Thornton 1997), in this instance, subcultures refers to formal processes embracing the bureaucratic policy and legal frameworks. Blumer's conceptualisation of subcultures and professions is particularly helpful to understand how joint actions of specific groups are guided by established consistent

¹⁷ Most relevant in this regard are subcultural studies, which focus on closed subcultures and particularly professional subcultures, such as Becker (1961, 1973), Gelder and Thornton (1997) and Blumer (1969).

meanings, such as language (Blumer 1969), and becomes essential when analysing the generation and consolidation of the immigration service subculture. As Becker explains, most established occupations require their own knowledge and skills, including their own way of thinking and acting. These must be learned through either official or unofficial channels, which in turn shape subcultural values and practices (Becker 1961). Considering humanitarian concerns feature relatively heavily in the formal channels of socialisation at the border, but infrequently in the measurement of operational efficacy (Horii 2012; Aas and Gundhus 2014), the role that informal processes of socialisation play at the border remains unaddressed. The socialisation process is key to introducing new members to the norms and values of subcultural life.

As argued, within organisational frames the assumption of certain roles relates closely to the ability of the individual to embody the identity demands generated by the subculture (Goffman 1961a, 1974; Becker 1961; Blumer 1969). In this way, a socially constructed set of expectations and norms becomes 'the knowledge' of the group, as the ability to distinguish them becomes the sign of being a 'true' group member (Gardner 1994) and functionally relevant 'to adopt[ing] the group norms' (Snyder and Miene 1994, 37). The professional development of criteria, classifications and labels offers a cohesive element to the group and determines communal standards (Wright 1984) presenting members as 'legitimated labellers' (Mercer 1973).

In this analysis, the influence held by those controlling the setting and implementing the procedures is key to setting the frames (Goffman 1969, 45). Thus, these early frames of reference establish and reinforce amongst new recruits the organisational goals and objectives establishing 'identificatory demands' that specifically relate to the routine of the group and the ways of performing the 'job'. The communication of organisational goals and objectives serves as a frame to structure the experience of the individuals with their new roles often transmitted as complex and contradictory messages (Bateson 1955; Goffman 1961a), constantly reinterpreted within the context of the site and the relationships of the communicators. At the border, these messages are invariably converging towards meta-narratives of security, access and control:

I felt also was that anyone who really merited real political asylum, say a high up politician somewhere or a member of the security service, probably wouldn't have to go through us anyway. Immigration Officer¹⁸

The communication of organisational goals and objectives are constantly reinterpreted within the context of the site and the relationships of the communicators, allowing messages to take on multiple meanings. At the border, these messages converge towards the meta-narratives of security, access and control as immigration and borders increasingly become a politically salient issue (Castles 2004; Cornelius et. al. 2004; Bigo and Jeandesboz 2010). In response, securitisation trends have physically imposed themselves at border by increased personnel presence alongside the latest technologies reinforcing the messages and meta-messages of control (Andreas 2012; Ferrer-Gallardo 2008).

In avoiding the 'territorial trap' (Agnew 1994, 1999) a focus on the 'site', as it is socially produced, offers the chance to critically develop insights that account for power relations between objects and subject as they continually unfold. This explanation of state power allows for the differential spatial expressions of power, highlighting the importance of individual and collective agency. Thus, in looking at the actions and performances of border agents, the 'contextual *milleux* of tendencies composing practices and orders' account for the 'presence and affective capacity of relatively stable objects and practices that continuously draw each other into relation and resurface in social life' (Marston et al. 2005, 425). More specifically, the application of social constructionism must not be linked solely to 'everyday knowledge' but also to the social construction of narratives and 'truths', established by the cultural, historical and organisational context. The site in this instance is not an isolated container of experience, but an assemblage:

At each level – ideas, organizations, professionals and political economy – these deposits take the form of descriptions (stories) and causal theories, which are drawn upon and leave behind real forms of power... [which] draw upon existing social, political and economic arrangements (as well as

¹⁸ DI/V-UK5-AR00-IO

previous ideas) and then, in turn, leave behind their own deposits which are drawn up to shape later changes, reforms and policies (Cohen 1985, 89).

These factors set important precedents within subcultural worlds, establishing ‘fundamental assumptions about the nature of being and comprehensible forms of action’ (Heyman 1995, 265) illustrating the extent to which organisational values and processes of socialisation institute agents’ roles (Goffman 1961a; see also Butler 1990A). As Mountz has shown in her ethnographies of the state ‘civil servants act on their personal conception of the nation-state and expectations of its role in the global community’ in relation to asylum (Mountz 2010, 58). Yet, the ways these roles are internalised relates to the framing of the messages communicated through processes of socialisation. As such, the modicum ‘To Protect and Serve’ may be subject to caveats that delineates who is being protected and who is being served. Nagel’s (2003, 5) identification of the tensions between the *performed*, being ‘concrete, obvious, purposive, deliberate’, and the *performative*, being the ‘abstract, hidden, unthinking, habitual’, helps illustrate just how different roles may be assumed within different professional worlds, even those addressing areas with significant crossover (Mountz 2010; Mountz and Loyd 2013; Gill 2009).

This distinction, once again, highlights the need to understand how processes of socialisation influences the roles that individuals assume within organisational systems. What is most pertinent here is to ask about the unfolding process of socialisation, and the construction of different roles. This is particularly relevant in relation to border agents dealing with asylum seekers as their role, directed to reducing immigration, demands a distancing between them and asylum seekers. The ability of the individual to maintain distance becomes crucial as agents are socialised and learn to perform their roles as professionals, a factor clearly identified amongst Frontex border agents when discussing their roles (Aas and Gundhus 2014).

The expression of professionalism becomes the defining factor of membership of the subculture, with the training and early socialisation of officers serving as an introduction to the ‘ideology’ of the site (Cohen 1985, 1010). Considering the impacts of training scenarios, particularly the roles of those controlling the setting and implementing the procedures (Goffman 1974) raises issues of reflexivity and consciousness guid-

ing those who ‘control the settings’ established through the ‘routinisation of communication’ (Riggins 1990). It is through official and unofficial channels of communication that new officers learn what is expected from them at the border. As these roles are embraced by members of the sub-culture, the values and weights attached to criteria and labels become crystallised as ‘professional knowledge’ based on the shared *social presuppositions*—characterised by ‘tacitly taking something for granted...and also unabashedly, even unthinkingly, counting on others involved in the action to do likewise’ (Goffman 1974, 167).

By challenging the underlying assumptions about realities of immigration officers, as in the 1960s with the professional classes, the construction of knowledge in the closed circuits of the state emerges as heavily influenced by anecdotal observations. This tends to come through from senior officers, some of whom have been working in the field for over twenty years, as is the case below:

You tend to see people as stereotypes and that affects everything you do in the job, particularly with asylum. Immigration Officer¹⁹

These assumptions clearly stem from the ‘corpus of cautionary tales, games, riddles, newsy stories, and other scenarios which elegantly confirm the frame-relevant view of the workings of the world’ (Goffman 1974, 162–3). These ‘deposits’ form the basis for the shared expression of this experience that allows members to further ‘buttress, and perforce’ (ibid.) their expertise and position within an organisation. It is by entering the professional worlds that individuals are compelled to learn and internalise logics and rationales corresponding to their professional roles as social control agents.

Within the UK, both the Border Force and the Visas and Immigration Body play a key role in the screening of asylum seekers. With both organisations focussed on the ‘borders’ evidently the stated goals of each body has a heavy focus on security concerns. UK Visas and Immigration’s operational priorities, for example, connect to the Home Office’s overarching goals of ‘securing out borders and reducing immigration, cutting crime

¹⁹ DI/V-P13:329-546:548-IO

and protecting citizens from terrorism'.²⁰ Yet, with the lack of research about what constitutes professional knowledge amongst border agents and immigration officers many questions remain unanswered: what importance do professionals in the field give to asylum cases? By what means are asylum applications screened out? To what extent are asylum seekers considered victims or elective international migrants? These show just the tip of a worrying gap in the knowledge about professional values within border operations and decision-making influences on asylum seekers. Yet this gap is by no means an oversight, it too serves its political purposes by insulating the state through a false-naivety to the potential legal and policy abuses, which happen for the sake of reducing migration entries.

It is by looking at the asylum and political engineering of the state, that we identify the different states of denial that are rationalised as professional knowledge. In terms of asylum, the state adopts an ambivalent whilst proactive approach by subsuming asylum control within the normative framework of border security, whilst simultaneously offering an alleged route to asylum, seemingly fulfilling their obligations towards the Geneva Convention. In this way, while the Home Office presents an image to the public of being tough but fair on border control, evidence from ports highlights the wide-ranging applications of officers' discretionary power and the potentials for malpractice (Weber 2003). It is precisely because the authority for deciding asylum claims is dissipated through a distanced system of governance that the Home Office is able to assuage system wide culpability, and rest blame with the poor performance of individuals. This is a major issue in asylum claims in the UK as the poor quality in initial asylum-screening decisions is evident (Asylum Aid 2011), and further highlighted by situations where an unaccompanied twelve-year-old from Afghanistan can have their credibility called into question because they do not have their papers.²¹ In

²⁰ www.gov.uk/government/organisations/uk-visas-and-immigration/about.

²¹ Case brought to appeal by Colin Yeo with the judge finding that the caseworkers' 'repeated assertion that the appellant has no documents to prove various parts of his case is absurd. I agree that it would be inherently unlikely that a 12-year-old smuggled to the UK would be left in possession of any documents on his arrival in the UK or that he would be able to obtain such documents from Afghanistan after his arrival'. www.freemovement.org.uk/12-year-old-refused-asylum-because-not-carrying-documents-to-prove-case/.

this case, amongst many others, the outcomes are reduced to individuals not doing their jobs correctly, or a lack of clarity in formal policy and procedures. Examples that illustrate the guiding of organisational meta-narratives of security, prevention and control that, in turn, reproduce the organisational goals of security, prevention and control. Yet when pushed on the performances of those making decisions, or presented with evidence of malpractice a standard response akin to that of the 1970s days argues that—‘One bad apple spoiled the whole bunch’.

To all appearances this suggests that asylum is incorporated into the overarching border narratives, based on the standards of denial and disbelief (Jubany 2011; Souter 2011; Anderson et al. 2014), rather than on protection as established by the Convention (Karamanidou and Schuster 2012). Decisively the states standard denial of the culture of disbelief at the border deflects attention towards individualised explanations in much the same way as the Scarman report reduced racism down to individual prejudice rather than to institutional or social factors following the Brixton riots.

One Rotten Apple

The states’ maintenance of the bureaucratic functionality of border control, coupled with the illustrations, provided a compelling case to levy a charge of *democratic racism* against the state (Henry and Tator 2006). This claim could be underpinned by the deceptive apathy of the general public towards asylum issues, and the concomitant rise in concerns for border and national security (Castles 2004; Cornelius et. al 2004). By effectively turning a blind eye, a charge against the immigration service of racism or prejudice is condoned, whilst the Home Office does an excellent job of neutralising the claims and maintaining the veil of bureaucracy over the face of border management. By denying the existence of subcultural life within the immigration service, the Home Office deflects criticism on asylum injustices as it becomes subsumed within the normative immigration policies of the state. A fallacy that Becker (1967) referred to as the *hierarchy of credibility* that helps maintain the apparent credibility of those

in powerful positions or institutions, whilst denigrating the accounts of the ‘underdog’ and bringing their credibility into question.

This is not to say that the Home Office disregards every charge raised, but rather that in order to be heard much work is needed, to gain some traction with society and making an issue where the Home Office does not see one. Equally so, that is not to say that the Home Office is oblivious to the existence of subcultural lives in the immigration service, but rather that the state of denial serves the political purpose of insulating the state bodies from the practices that contribute to a denial of asylum seekers’ rights. In both cases, the Home Office approach to applying the Race Relations Act diminishes human rights frameworks connected to contemporary debates about citizenship (Shachar 2014). Clearly, on asylum claims a number of tactics are in place, which range from a wholesale denial of the existence of cultures of disbelief through to a denial suggesting the claims are being made due to a difference of interpretation of the situation (Cohen 2002).

Perhaps more worrying in the context of the current crisis are approaches that attempt to justify the denial of asylum seekers’ rights under the Convention. These ‘denials’ may be enshrined in policy documents, like the Dublin accords, but have recently taken a precarious turn towards a denial of responsibility for protection of asylum seekers in Europe as the EU’s borders are externalised (Boswell 2003; Bialasiewicz 2012; van Houtum 2010; Levy 2010; Gammeltoft-Hansen 2014; Goodwin-Gill 2011). While the so-called asylum crisis of the turn of the century has affected the Mediterranean, actual practices have been ongoing for a number of years. This is evidenced mainly by pushbacks of Italian and Greek coast guards (Levy 2010; Aas and Gundhus 2014; AIDA 2014), and the externalisation of Europe border control being tied to economic assistance and aid (Saunders 2014; Bialasiewicz 2012; Tsianos and Karakayali 2010; Karamanidou and Schuster 2012). In this context, cohesive securitised discourse encourages skepticism towards asylum seekers by negating the severity of the situation in countries like Afghanistan, Syria and Libya,²² and by attempting to blur the lines

²²A recent report by the Overseas Development Institute (2015) has highlighted the similarities behind asylum seekers and so-called economic migrants’ reasons for moving. While the UK gov-

between economic migrants and asylum seekers (Mountz 2010; Lazaridis 2015), as far back as in the 1990s.

As is analysed in Chaps. 4 and 5, states of denial are socially constructed within the 'site' and these invariably reflect the guiding principles behind the Home Officers' goals of immigration reduction by (almost) any possible means. As will be argued, these do not come through as accepted positions of the normative discourse but as meta-messages of denial and disbelief that permeate every corner of officers' work. As discussed at length in Chap. 6, through the socialisation process various 'states of denial' (Cohen 2001) are rationalised as professional knowledge. Whether it is through the presentation of asylum seekers as a suspicious group in training (See Chap. 4), or the consolidation of labels as prior knowledge, as officers learn their roles, they learn categories and establish labels for particular groups. In the quest to deny and disbelieve, new labels like terrorist and cultural saboteurs become more socially acceptable and false fears are legitimised, as evidenced by the Brexit results. For asylum seekers these trends have significant consequences, as the cumulative practices of labelling leads to exclusion at the border through the mobilisation of fears and folk-devil caricatures.

The connection of border control settings to those of total institutions and reticent state bodies are relevant to understanding by what means the subcultural values of border agencies are transmitted, establishing a dominant worldview through which asylum claims are processed. If border agents assume social control roles at the border then some form of cognisance is facilitating and structuring their actions, which, as Goffman would suggest (1974), goes beyond the transposition of the law. While the Home Office in the UK would attest that individual rotten apples, or interpretive differences, might be the cause of bureaucratic anomalies, the growing evidence amongst political discourse²³ shows how not only do these cultures exist, but that they

ernment has attempted to make clarifications about who is an economic migrant the report illustrates the ambiguity of the differentiation. www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/10157.pdf.

²³ Lord Hansard has previously expressed his belief that cultures of disbelief exist within the immigration services – 22 December 2015: Column 2496.

are pervasive at every level of immigration processing. Addressing the changing approaches to asylum during the 1990s, as prevention rather than protection became the defining meta-message (Karamanidou and Schuster 2012; Lazaridis 2015), we must look to uncover how these 'denials may be initiated by the state, but then acquire lives of their own' (Cohen 2002, 11).

It is in this sense that the immigration service gets to signify the makings of a total institution. This is, following Michel Foucault (1970) on the understanding that total institutions are aimed beyond punishing and correcting to control and spread a disciplinary system on both social behaviour and intention. It is, therefore, not a literal implication of total institutions as provided by Goffman (1961a), but much more on its everyday interpretation. Still, parallels can be drawn in the development of the research from the 1960s into psychiatric hospitals, which help highlight how states embodied the roles performed within the mental hospital. Rosenhahn's (1973) social anthropological research into the diagnostic and treatment practices across eight psychiatric hospitals in the United States illustrates how the perspective of the world becomes reified to the extent that the practitioners appear unable to see beyond the remit of their professional knowledge. The world seen through this lens becomes the maddening place, wherein everything from normal and stable familiar relationships could be 'translated in the psychopathological context' through the site (1973). Furthermore, the development of knowledge within the closed site of the border, as will be debated in the coming chapters, displays many similarities with those of total institutions described by Goffman and his peers. In the contexts of the institutionalised rationales of border officers, asylum seekers present themselves at the border and stake their claim for admission, whilst officers come to embody their roles as contemporary social control agents.

The Underlying Control

Throughout this chapter, the relevance of social constructivism has been shown to be critical to understanding the workings of state institutions, particularly those of social control functions. Tracing the development

of research into subcultural worlds, with a focus on law enforcement and the role of social control agents, the importance of applying the ethnographic lenses has been evidenced. The principle of not taking knowledge for granted is central to reveal the underlying assumptions about professional worlds. In the same way, the approach on symbolic interaction becomes a crucial bridge to understanding how the closed worlds of subcultural 'truths' and 'facts' are constructed. These become the guiding principles of 'professional knowledge' and inform the everyday practices of these professionals.

Arguably, much of the long tradition on the studies of law enforcement is analogous with immigration officer's 'realities'. However, despite the obvious parallels between roles and organisational structures of the police and contemporary border control agencies, little attempts have been made to incorporate the worlds of immigration officers into the study of policing and law enforcement. The debate on social control that dominated the 1960s and 1970s, designed to make sense of the social construction of knowledge, placed the focus on closed organisational frames and secretive professional worlds such as law enforcement. While calls for closer analysis of border agents' increase (Weber 2003; Fugerlud 2004; Gill 2010; Prokkola and Ridanpää 2014; Loftus 2015) as their powers extend, the convergence of organisational structures and professional roles between the police and border control are fast becoming undeniable. The roles played by immigration border agents are far from just technocrats, with more parallels with contemporary social control. Yet this is still denied by the organisation and the state.

As Cohen discusses, the official act of denial may precede the development of cultural denial (Cohen 2001). When considering the shifting on the concept of asylum, from protection to prevention, it is evidenced that official denial began to develop long before cultural denial. In this context, as immigration officers were not perceived as social control agents, the nature of border policing attitudes remained largely hidden. Yet, this concealment of decision-making processes and power has not been incidental. As evidenced throughout the chapter, there are universes where the transmission of institutional meanings implies control, whilst involving the legitimisation of procedures attached to the institutions, administered by the transmitting agents (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In these settings, the importance of becoming a 'professional' requires officers

not only to learn skills, but also to become members of the subculture. The training and early socialisation of officers serves as an introduction to transmit the 'ideology' of the site (Cohen 1985, 101), and provides coherent tools as rationalising methods to process requests (Foucault et al. 1988). Hence, in spite of how challenging the access to border 'sites' might be, clearly it is only by exploring from within that we can deconstruct the bureaucratic and technocratic myth, and disclose what goes on in these state contexts, revealing the formation and rationalisation of 'knowledge' and the development of the embedded subcultures of social control agents.

Drawing parallels between immigration and law enforcement worlds, the unfettered deposits of power legitimated by the law are shown to take on an autonomous life on the ground. Whilst the law makes certain powers explicit, it has very little to say about how, why and when these powers are exercised to screen asylum seekers and determine asylum applications at border. As the next chapter will explore, it is not only policy or the law that directs officers' attention towards targeted groups or established their roles in securing the border, but largely the state messages and meta-messages of disbelief and denial that ensure complicity of action. These logics are as relevant to the worlds of immigration and border control as they are to the police, particularly as their roles begin to converge with their initiation and training as social control agents.

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4

Trained to Spot the Truth

An Essential Induction Course

The immigration officer's duties involve mostly interviewing, so again we will cover the fundamentals of immigration legislation, the immigration service, what it does, its place in the whole migration issue and then focus in on various interviewing skills. Interviewing is a big part of the job so we have very many sessions on the different interviewing skills. Immigration Training Officer¹

This chapter explores the official training immigration officers receive, to argue how the meta-messages of denial and disbelief permeates throughout the induction course as these are transmitted both in the classroom and at the border. The UK Immigration Services determines that all new personnel that will form part of the immigration Borders Agency Service² has to complete a six-week induction course before being qualified to perform their jobs as immigration officers. The responsibility for this task

¹DI/V-UK9-MY00-TO

²The designation of this unit has been changing throughout the last two decades, but the purpose and functions have remained the same all through, as explained in Chap. 2.

is with the Immigration Training Unit³ (TU) where the actual course is taught by experienced senior immigration officers, specialised as trainers. These officers use a wide range of methods, from formal class-room based activities, to more informal exercise like role-plays, port visits, and job shadowing. When the course ends newcomers are assigned a mentor—a senior immigration officer, who will continue to coach them on a one-to-one basis as they acclimatise to the ‘reality’ of the job.

The main focus of the training is presented as the delivery of the officially regulated processes and procedures, communicating official rules, and describing the organisational structures whilst establishing the profile of immigration officers. From the very first day it becomes clear that most new recruits have very little idea about what immigration officers do, and about what is expected from them:

The first day in the course students are very confused. Their knowledge about the areas they are talking about is extremely basic, mostly gathered from references from the press and information from personal experiences with immigration when travelling. They do not know even the most basic things like what countries are part of the EU.

Participant Observation Diary: Training Session⁴

The induction course serves to make explicit the professional roles and expectations of immigration officers, whilst teaching them the skills

³ At the beginning of the research the Training and Development Unit (TU) was based in Lunar House, Croydon. The changes to organisational structure of the last decade mean that UK Border Force is now conducted by the Home Office Learning and Skills department and is delivered in line with the Border Force Operating Mandate. The agents involved in the preparation and delivery of the course can be divided into (i) the creators: TU senior officers; (ii) the executors: official trainers and (iii) the recipients: the new recruits. Senior managers of the TU are responsible for the creation, functioning and development of the induction course. This is mainly an administrative task as they are not involved in the day-to-day delivery of the courses, but they play an active role in supervision and recruitment. At the time of the research all training was coordinated by a single department, with a specialised course for those immigration officers involved directly in border control. Despite the institutional changes the training has remained largely unchanged under the latest mandates, with aspects like Credibility training becoming more formalised and a further focus on detention highlighting the extension of officers’ social control roles. In this sense, the training observed is more akin to the training of officers within the UK Border Force than those working at UK Visas and Immigration. There is discussed further in Chap. 2.

⁴ P/O-UK05-06-00-ME-TS

required to do the job. Training is portrayed as essential to reaching the 'required standards' of understanding and performing the immigration officer's job.⁵

Despite having clearly stated operational goals and learning outcomes, the course deviates significantly from the official message by nature of the informal scenarios used to develop learning outcomes. In this process, trainers play a crucial role in guiding new recruits throughout acting simultaneously as educator, officer and colleague. As mentioned, these are usually experienced officers who have years of experience working in the field, having later specialised as trainers. Several trainers are responsible for teaching the course, ensuring a variety of perspectives are presented by officers who specialise in topics in which they have personal experience. Presenting a range of learning scenarios, the transmission of knowledge in the course occurs as much through informal settings as in the classroom. It is by mixing informal/formal training settings and official/unofficial messages in a multifaceted process that a more open 'official' agenda is presented and delivered to newcomers. In this way, trainers can fluidly adopt different stances to various situations, allowing them to detach from their 'official' role when they need to pass on 'practical' information. By adopting a dual role (Goffman 1967), as officers and colleagues, trainers transmit a sense of complicity and sincerity when discussing operational life at the border, offering individual perspectives and sharing their views in the classroom and on a one-to-one basis during breaks.

The non-hierarchical approaches the training course adopts promotes storytelling and sharing in a relaxed environment. Significantly, the easy-going atmosphere in which these techniques are presented, predisposes new recruits to expect a certain degree of complicity with the trainers. Therefore, new recruits anticipate that trainers have their own unofficial opinions, and expect that these will be conveyed to them during the course;

⁵ As established in the official training guide for managers on the training and development of staff (IND internal training documents).

I've got mixed feelings also about the fact that the trainers are immigration staff themselves and I think, I think only immigration staff know, know the job inside out. Assistant Immigration Officer⁶

While the course initially focusses on the bureaucratic tasks involved in immigration control, the approach to the job becomes much more elaborate as the focus moves towards asylum screening. As new recruits transfer from the classroom to the field they are gradually introduced to unofficial practices. Once the asylum interview is introduced the perspectives and attitudes that are required to perform their new roles at the border change, as the course increasingly focusses on the investigatory, and ultimately interrogatory, role of the agents. As this process occurs, trainers become guides, tacitly verifying and validating the practices and opinions of their trainees. As the course continues it becomes evident that much of these personal opinions, alongside the clarifications that trainers give about concepts, form the core of the immigration officers' 'prior knowledge'. This relates to the construction of the professional knowledge of the group, particularly characteristic of state bodies and total institutions, as discussed in depth in Chap. 3. Throughout the course the value of this information is revealed by trainees' interactions with experienced officers. In time, the official training messages become fused with the personal opinions and unofficial perspectives of the trainers and officers, rendering official and unofficial messages mutually dependent on each other.

Although, as pointed out, the official line that permeates the opening of the course stresses the importance of the bureaucratic tasks, training soon develops into an introduction to the values and practices of the subculture, particularly once the investigatory role is addressed. The course has an 'educational' function, though not to the legislation, but rather towards the subcultural values. In this switch of approaches—from formal to informal, the different settings are important. Initially the core content of the course suggests that professional learning will take place in the classroom, yet as the course develops it is the informal situations, such as job shadowing and role-plays that promote learning in an informal and convivial way, and emerge as key to knowledge transfer.

⁶DI/V-UK5-AR00-AIO.

Trying to promote enjoyment of new recruits, learning is developed through role-plays and games, which help to create a non-hierarchical atmosphere. Once an open atmosphere is established, the importance of unofficial approaches to situations becomes obvious as trainers share personal stories and anecdotes, providing insights into the professional knowledge of the group. The ‘off-the-record’ explanations, are key elements in the presentation of the course material, and often contain the most important pieces of information. These are always geared to transmit, in different ways, the meta-messages of denial and disbelief through teaching new recruits the norms, rules and values of the professional subculture. While training exercises ensure the presence of the official discourse in most potential learning situations, the importance of this is constantly being diminished as the course progresses. This reaches a point where, as the following senior officer and trainer presents, even knowing the formal regulations is considered totally irrelevant;

Well, you know, obviously the official line is it’s taken into account. But I don’t know that it is that important myself ... We’re not really party to what the current policies are at the Home Office. I mean, I could tell you what I think the policy would be. But I’m not sure what the exact policy is.
Senior Immigration Officer and Training Officer⁷

Trainers consistently remind new recruits that they should replicate what they see in the field, and experienced officers are well aware that the skills acquired in training constitute a rather defective exercise. Moving between formal and informal learning environments, new recruits begin to gain a sense of the ‘real’ operational practices as their roles become more clearly defined.

This chapter explores the training exercise and exposes the course content, to show the weight that the meta-messages of denial and disbelief have in shaping immigration officers’ views, from the very moment they join the Immigration Border Service. In following new recruits through the training course the foundation, training and learning of ‘prior knowledge’, which makes up the core of the unofficial perspectives, is shown

⁷ DI/V-UK4-AR00-IO

to be the defining legitimisation of the formal course content. This is most significant with regards to the interview and credibility assessments, which directs new recruits to rationalise and internalise their role in the screening of asylum applications. This process is revealed as relying on the social construction of certain 'truths as knowledge' and the legitimisation of certain protocols, which new recruits embrace in order to perform their roles. Thus the analysis of the training course reveals not only the importance of these agents' socialisation, but the underlying logic and rationale that exists within the immigration service subculture itself.

Beyond Functions and Duties

It surprised me the amount of freedom that you have got especially with the time scale. In my previous job I used to have to account for every single minute of my job. Here you have so much freedom to take your time and make your decisions. New Recruit⁸

Trainers play a crucial role as the legitimate transmitting agents of the institutional messages during the course (Berger and Luckmann 1966). By assuming multiple roles, they not only teach the official material but also endeavour to articulate, systematise and transmit what they expect from newcomers. The attitude of experienced officers outside the TU highlights the multiplicity of trainers' roles in this process. Field officers have the impression that trainers enter an elitist 'old boys network' when they 'should be doing their job' (Immigration Officer).⁹ As trainers, they feel obliged to transmit the official line through the course material, whilst as officers they reinforce the subcultural principles, which they believe are imperative to getting the job done. It is a situation that experienced officers are all too aware of, with their opposition to trainers inherently related to the perception that they become detached from day-to-day working life. Trainers are similarly skeptical of the mentoring practices at the ports and recognise a weakness arising from the lack of control over mentoring at the port setting:

⁸I/V-UK-T27/06/00.1-NR

⁹DI/V-UK4AR00-4-IO

The mentor, it's part of the system that we don't have as much control over in terms of end-to-end process in as much as the trainee gets posted to their new home port, they become owned by that port and that port provides the mentor to finished this person's training off. Chief Immigration Officer and Trainer¹⁰

Mentoring, most trainers recognise, depends very much on the subjectivity of the individual, particularly in terms of their interpretation of the rules. It is clear when trainers talk about mentoring that they see it as a potential beneficial part of the training system, but nonetheless one that can have negative impacts in passing down working practices to officers:

The guy who mentored me was a funny bloke. He would say to me for example, now this is very good advice, if you're dealing with, really you don't want, well there's some people that do, but I don't want to deal with cases. I don't want to deal with problem passengers particularly. I like the path of least resistance, you know, quiet like. He said to me, never ever take the last passenger off a plane. Chief Immigration Officer¹¹

The outline of officers' roles presented by the trainers is crucial to constructing the image of the ideal immigration officer. Throughout the course recruits are instructed on what is expected from them in the workplace, as different elements of the job are introduced. As noted, to begin with, newcomers receive the official message that presents the job of immigration officers as enforcers of border controls. Port visits start in the first week of classes and continue until the end of the induction course, familiarising students with the practice of what they are being taught. In the early stages, trainers highlight the diversity of officers' duties with students overwhelmed by what they see as the variety of the job;

It is more variable than I thought, there are many different duties. The job is so challenging, there are many more things to do than I thought, but you also need a lot of skills to do it. New Recruit¹²

¹⁰DI/V-UK20-MY00-CIO

¹¹DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

¹²I/V-UK-P/O:P41:69-43-NR

This impression of a challenging job is reflected in their first port visits where the bureaucratic framework appears to be extremely relevant as a setting for officers to perform their jobs correctly. New recruits see the variety of tasks that officers undertake, with a clear focus on the more 'regular' aspects of border checks, such as inspecting passports, visa and customs duties. Trainers also introduce new recruits to the prospect of working in other areas, such as embassies or with law enforcement agencies. Students are usually excited by these prospects and their initial impressions are overwhelmingly positive, although this changes quickly.

While the initial visits serve to capture the interest of the officers by highlighting the different areas that they will work in, this perspective begins to change as officers become familiar with the repetitive nature of many port duties. Officers are initially introduced to their bureaucratic functions, and early observations from the field highlight the daunting reality associated with monotonous bureaucratic tasks, leaving students 'shocked by the paperwork'.¹³ In addition, as the early experiences intensify and they interact with field officers, new recruits are initially taken aback by their behaviours and attitudes, commonly noting the cynicism and general 'bad' manners that many of the officers have:

I was surprised by the different types of people that there are amongst the immigration officers. The attitude changes very much amongst immigration officers. Some of them you could tell had chips on their shoulders, but in general they were quite diplomatic with us. New Recruit¹⁴

Initially new recruits see immigration officers as being alien to them, and consider that their practices do not follow the 'right procedures', they see them almost as contaminated by experience. Recruits do not see these attitudes are largely requirements of the job and are closely associated with the professional approaches adopted by the officers. Revealingly, when experienced officers tell new recruits to 'get a good union' they are also highlighting the internal subculture in opposition to the outside world:

¹³ P/O:P41:69:43-72

¹⁴ I/V-UK-P/O:P41:69-47-NR

It surprised me the negative attitude from the people at ports, they are very negative, in comparison to other aspects of the Home office. They say things like ‘first of all get yourself a good union’. It was a bit extreme their cynicism. New Recruit¹⁵

A few days into training, once new recruits had been through several experiences at ports and interacted with other immigration officers, they begin to adopt many of these attitudes themselves. Moreover, as will be shown, the trend voiced in student interactions is totally reversed by the end of the course, changing from distrust to admiration for those working in the field. While new recruits are clearly overwhelmed at first, noting the number of ‘unexpected’ elements, they become comfortable as their socialisation continues. This is a process very much influenced by the ‘off-the-record’ approaches at the border, which become invaluable for officers to perform their roles efficiently and correctly in the eyes of the subculture. In these lines, as the course advances, student’s impressions that immigration officers at ports do not apply ‘correct procedures’ shifts to embrace the notion that they use ‘practical procedures’.

I mean the job changes all the time now with different legislation, you’ve got the sort of domestic and the European legislation. So it changes all the time and the only way you’re going to learn that is to be you know, at the fore, at the front line, I would say anyway. Immigration Officer¹⁶

This shift in perspective largely pivots around the introduction of the officers’ investigatory role, which makes a break from the bureaucratic elements. By the end of the course the initial perspective about how officers proceed has completely reversed, and the prevailing idea is that what is seen at ports is what should be done. The idea of being ‘professional’ is ultimately linked to what officers see at ports, rather than what they learn in the classroom.

This is not perceived as detrimental to the training course but just the opposite. New recruits are constantly reminded to learn from, and replicate their colleagues in the field. This idea becomes central to learning

¹⁵I/V-UK-P/O:P41:69:60-NR

¹⁶DI/V-UK4-AR00-IO

the ins and outs of the investigatory elements of an officer's work, and becomes the main focus of the training course. Thus, as officers learn to perform their roles they do not confine themselves to what they have been taught, but they imitate what they observe. Newcomers receive these 'lessons' from the field eagerly, as the following conversation between a trainer and students back from port shows:

- Senior Trainer: From last Friday, are there any problems or stories to tell about the port visits?
- New recruit I: One person asked for a work permit but we got suspicious because he asked for holidays first and then changed his mind so at the end, he was sent back.
- New recruit II: We had a man who said that he was here only for two days but when we searched his luggage he had four pairs of shoes so it was very suspicious.
- New recruit I: In a search I found a piece of evidence that proved that he had been in another country when he wasn't supposed to be.
- Senior Trainer: Well done. Any other interesting thing?
- New recruit I: I was on my own because the IO was with the inspector and it was very scary.
- New recruit III: I was with an IO, and I started writing things down on a landing card. He asked me what was I doing and I explained that I was reporting what was happening on the landing card as I had been told in the training. He said that in that shift I didn't need to do that at all.

Participant Observation Diary: Training Session¹⁷

The influence of port practices is highly valued as is the perspective presented by trainers when they reiterate the need to learn on the job. As the course develops, for instance, the need to know the law fades in importance, whilst the need to uncover 'truths' becomes crucial to learning their roles at the border. The importance of the whole training scenario

¹⁷P/O-TO-UK07JN-T/S1-TS

rests upon the transfer of the meta-message and the understanding that this is a 'professional' requirement of the job.

As the investigatory elements of officers' roles are further developed, the course introduces interview skills and techniques, as central to the asylum interview.¹⁸ At this relatively early stage in the course, the interview becomes the dominant theme, with questioning strategies focussing on the establishment of credibility in asylum seekers' narratives. Both the interview strategies and credibility sessions form a core part of the course content. While these are presented as rational and replicable skills sets that could be applied in nearly any situation, it is the meta-messages of the 'site' that has the greatest impact on officers' approaches to interviews. In this regard, to impart the investigators profile, trainers complete the official approaches by suggesting the attitudes that officers should adopt towards asylum seekers:

Your role as immigration officer is to allow them [asylum seekers] to give you the full account of the case. You have to be objective and sensitive but don't forget that you are there to challenge any inconsistencies. You have to challenge the credibility of the individual as well as the actual case. Training Officer¹⁹

While credibility is officially presented as an objective means of establishing facts,²⁰ this is soon revealed to be a superficial message, easily overridden by the overarching meta-narratives of suspicion and distrust. The first sign of it is that trainers have a hard time explaining what exactly credibility is and rely largely on informal commentaries. Either way, explanations leave students in no doubt that their role in the interview is to mobilise credibility as a means of rationalising the denial and disbelief of asylum

¹⁸ Both UK Border Force and UK Visas and Immigration officers undergo interview training, yet both agencies use slightly different approaches. The UK Border Force continues to develop interview skills around the PEACE methods, while UK Visas and Immigration have used a modified version of PEACE called Dialogical Communication Model. This strategy is tailored to engage with children and vulnerable persons. The different interview methods used raises questions about the ways officers' roles are constructed in relation to asylum seekers, which is especially concerning given the focus on security rather than humanitarian concerns at the border.

¹⁹ I/V-PUK22J-T5-TO

²⁰ For an extensive discussion on credibility, refer to Chap. 6.

claims. This plays a key role for new recruits as they begin to learn more about their roles and are faced with the daunting tasks of refusing individuals entry, and embracing their roles as social control agents.

Throughout the course the meta-messages of disbelief and denial continually circulate, taking a central role in the approach to rationalising refusal. As they begin to internalise their roles as refusal agents and construct an image of those at the border, the value of ‘professional knowledge’ becomes essential, exposing the limited relevance of legislation or policy. Moreover, as the course progresses it becomes clear that these unofficial perspectives invariably reflect the state’s political goals regarding the refusal and denial of asylum. An illustration of this are the comments provided by a Senior Trainer during the course, highlighting how it is ‘hard to be objective’ in such a cynical atmosphere:

New Recruit: It seems there is a very fine line between discrimination and prosecution?

Trainer: It is a fine line. Discrimination exists whether you like it or not. I’m not saying that you have to accept it but it may not be prosecution. We are obliged to work within the criteria that we have and discrimination is in every country, culture and office.

Participant Observation Diary: Training Session²¹

In this regard, the creation of the concept of a ‘folk devil’ asylum seeker becomes critical to the ‘prior knowledge’. It creates a ripple effect where any sense of ‘objectivity’ linked to credibility becomes highly questionable. It is the meta-narrative around asylum seekers that comes to have the most significant outcome from training. Not only does it become crucial to the validation of ‘prior knowledge’ for the subculture, but it is made clear that without embracing these perspectives new recruits will be unable to perform their roles, let alone speak the same language as those at the border.

Considering the gap between policy, course content and practice, it is clear that officers are trained only in passing semblance to the formal

²¹ P/O-UK-22-6-00-NR/TO

regulations, or the Conventions principles.²² Rather, this liminal process constitutes an introduction to a ‘way of doing things’ which, as Marcel Mauss (1925) would say, defines a specific context that only members of a group can understand and apply. To experienced officers this is second nature, something which new recruits have to become initiated into, beginning with training. As the next section illustrates, the core of this concealed message is to doubt and deny asylum seekers’ humanitarian protection, normalising this process as part of officers’ professional duty. This serves as a frame within which officers’ roles are developed, whilst it remains one of the aspects hidden behind the shield of the organisation and the seemingly ‘innocuous’ approach to asylum decision-making.

Interpretations: Consolidating Language and the Meta-Message

About language and style, those who have been unfortunate enough to work in the civil service before know that there is a precise style, quite dull and un-emotive, you should keep it this way. Training Officer²³

The construction and use of language within the immigration service, as in most professional settings plays a key role (Becker 1973), and is fundamental in shaping officers’ actions and interactions. As officers start the induction course they are introduced to a set of occupational terminology, which is essentially a dictionary of authorised jargon.²⁴ The abbreviations in the guide vary from technical terminology to confidential and casual conceptualisations. Following this division, a large number of concepts refer to bureaucratic terminology—mainly abbreviations and acronyms, whilst other sets of words and phrases provide greater insight into terms that gain a new meaning in the immigration service.

²² See Chap. 2 for an in-depth debate on the Conventions and further legislation regarding asylum.

²³ P/O-UK-TO-P: 03/07/00.8

²⁴ This is an explicit booklet handed out by trainers during the early sessions of the training course.

The guide to this specialist language and specific terms beyond all legal handbooks exposes the existence of a subcultural life (Gelder and Thornton 1997). A great part of the re-conceptualisation of technical concepts tends to emphasise the role of the immigration officers as border security agents, recognised in much official rhetoric about border control (Aas and Gundhus 2014). For instance, the words ‘smart’ and ‘suspect’ at the border have particular meanings relating to security. The word ‘smart’ can relate to either an identification card for authorised users of the Suspect Index,²⁵ as well as other ‘smart border’ management systems such as EURODAC (Sparke 2006, 163; Vavoula 2015). It is an officer’s duty to check an asylum applicant’s biometric details against other Europe-wide databases, ranging from third-country checks to criminal databases. New agents are obliged to learn and use the systems to perform their roles in safeguarding national security. These tasks are an element of the officers’ job, which emphasises the overriding aim to instil a sense of threat about potential applicants. Furthermore, given the fact that officers have not been instructed on the Convention criteria, even from a legal perspective ‘it appears that asylum-seekers are a priori considered a group of people suspected of committing criminal offences’ (Vavoula 2015, 247). In the process of learning the language, trainers also introduce new recruits to the ‘unofficial’ terms that students will pick up when they enter the field, in a casual way:

You have to be clarifying and challenging inconsistencies all the time. It is best to do it towards the end, the point is ‘natural justice’ – you will hear this term a lot in the port, it means that there may be an inconsistency but there also may be a reasonable explanation for it. Training Officer²⁶

In addition, from what is considered technical terminology there is a whole language learning process that determines the way offices’ roles are shaped, which is charged with additional meaning. By way of being inducted into the idiosyncrasy of the subcultural language within the working environment, newcomers become aware of the need to

²⁵ This is an IT system that records the names of all asylum seekers that have applied for asylum in the past or have criminal records anywhere in Europe. Asylum seekers whose names are on such a list are considered suspicious.

²⁶ P/O-UK-P-UK20JN-T5-TO

learn this as fundamental to performing their job. Understanding the consistent meaning behind the common language is revealed as essential to performing their roles, as well as assuring their membership of the subculture (Blumer 1969; Mercer 1973).

Concepts as fundamental as 'refugee' or 'asylum seekers' are re-constructed and introduced by the training in ambiguous ways. Trainers begin by recreating the social reality that new officers will reproduce once they become members of the subculture. This is illustrated by referring to the trainers' definition of who is a refugee, obviously key to the interpretation of the whole asylum interview. When the Geneva Convention definition of a refugee is introduced, an emphasis is placed on the fact that a well-founded fear of persecution is the only admissible grounds for claiming asylum. In training, this is linked to credibility and trainers frequently argue that 'it is very important that you have this in mind when interviewing as this is the right criteria'.²⁷ The essential definition is deconstructed by the trainers as they 'clarify' what the 'real' meaning is. The session begins identifying a 'well-founded fear of persecution' as the dominant criteria behind all successful applications, but the trainer 'clarifies' the meaning of this sentence by providing further information:

This fear is very subjective. You have to concentrate on their experience and assess if that is reasonable or not, to assess if the individual is credible or not. You have to look at what they are telling you and think if it is reasonable to you that this person has a fear for his life. Another aspect to question is if that fear is strong enough not to send them back to their country, regardless of the situation in the country. The situation of the person is what counts, their personal fear and it has to be 'well-founded'. If someone says that they are afraid for their life, you need to discuss further and assess if what they are telling you is credible or not. Senior Training Officer²⁸

As this trainer clarifies to new recruits, asylum seekers not only have to prove they have been persecuted, as the Convention establishes, but they must demonstrate fear about what they have suffered and of what they might suffer if they are sent back. According to the trainer they must show

²⁷ P/O-UK-P-UK22/JN00-TA-2-TO

²⁸ P/O-UK-P-UK22/JN00-TA-2-TO

literally that they are ‘scared to death’ and be able to transmit that fear to the officers. This is clearly a difficult task and highlights that officers expect asylum seekers to satisfy their behavioural expectations, excluding a range of possible emotional displays²⁹—an issue that has elsewhere been raised in asylum decision making (Herlihy et al. 2010). In addition, the meaning of this concept tends to be presented in a contradictory and invariably confusing way, furthering the distinction between asylum seekers and refugees:

[an asylum seeker is] anyone who makes an application for asylum, whilst a refugee is someone that has been accepted within the Convention criteria, so the application has been decided and they have been recognised as refugees. Training Officer³⁰

Even when intended to be straightforward, as shown in the previous trainer’s explanation, objective definitions are presented about key terms, and these are always complemented with a further important ‘clarification’ by trainers:

This distinction has been in the news a lot because of bogus refugees, the Convention excludes economic migrants so you need to look very closely at why they need to leave the country. An asylum seeker has to convince the country where they apply with documentary evidence and a credible account to establish well-founded fear of persecution. Training Officer³¹

In this way, when trainers provide the basic explanations of key concepts like asylum, additional messages are filtered through. In providing these definitions a negative connotation is always attached to asylum seekers, such as ‘bogus refugees’ and ‘economic migrants’, providing grounds for excluding rather than protecting applicants.

Also, by referring to public debates the trainer mixes the concept of economic refugee with the concept of asylum seeker, and tacitly validates the socially constructed image of the asylum seekers as ‘other’, sponger,

²⁹ For an extensive discussion on this subject refer to Chap. 5.

³⁰ P/O-UK-P-UK12JN00-T2-TO

³¹ P/O-UK-P-UK12JN00-T2-TO

welfare cheat and potential terrorist.³² By engaging with these debates in a glib way the image of the folk devil is introduced to the discourse to allude to all refugees and asylum applicants. Fundamentally, the officer embodies the role of protectorate of the border, while potential asylum seekers appear as the threat.

Another important definition constantly re-conceptualised within immigration language relates to the term persecution. New recruits are taught that refugees are victims of ‘injustice but not of justice’. In other words, that if asylum seekers have been prosecuted rather than persecuted they do not fit with the concept of refugee:

think that if they have committed an offence and the police are looking for them for punishment for common law offences in the country, they are persecuted, but they are not, they are being prosecuted, so they are not refugees. Training Officer³³

In explaining this situation, the trainer refers to asylum seekers in very general terms, taking for granted that this is a very common situation, and further suggests that those claiming to be asylum seekers may in fact be criminals and law offenders. This is related to cases that involve state-sanctioned violence, which illustrates even further how powerful messages of mistrust and disbelief are in overriding humanitarian concerns. Students are told that the only possible situation where the state is the persecutor occurs when the individual ‘is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country’. Trainers then ‘clarify’ how in these circumstances refugees may be victims of corrupt states or

³²The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights recently published a memorandum condemning the use of anti-migrant language and rhetoric by Ministers in the UK, including Prime Minister David Cameron and Home Secretary Theresa May (Muiżnieks 2016). The Council criticises UK policy towards asylum stating: ‘The UK government’s lack of readiness to show more solidarity with other European countries is also at odds with the very small share of asylum seekers in net migration in the UK, which since 2005 has ranged between 3% and 10%. It appears that UK government policies in this context are determined by a flawed assumption that migration flows are strongly linked with asylum seekers rather than with labour migrants, who make up the vast majority of new arrivals in the UK’ (Muiżnieks 2016).

³³P/O-UK-P39:5-73:75-TO

military regimes³⁴ who have been targeted due to their involvement in social or political movements, neglecting to mention the fact that most contemporary asylum seekers fall within this bracket. Even in cases where there has been torture, as discussed in Chap. 5, asylum seekers must prove why they have been tortured before the fact they have been tortured can be accepted.³⁵

Concepts such as race, nationality, religion, social group and political opinion are introduced, as these are explicit possible reasons for persecution in the Refugee Convention. Yet, the definitions are always re-constructed within the immigration language infused by the overarching message of distrust. For instance, in the cases where nationality or political opinion are discussed, trainers stress the importance of the asylum seekers being able to produce documentary evidence to support their claims. This implies that asylum seekers should be able to produce some papers, suggesting a failure to do so will damage their credibility. As training continues this definition is further complicated to suggest that officers shouldn't take papers at face value and that asylum seekers will require further verification of their reasons for applying:

their personal experience, exactly what it is that led them to leave the country. This is the first question that you will be asking them. Training Officer³⁶

In addition, trainers make a clear distinction between what asylum seekers 'say' and the 'facts', underlining the need to be wary of applicants' intentions. Recruits are told not to take for granted any information or documents presented by the asylum seekers. So, when the trainer points out what the asylum seeker says they always refer to a narrative that needs analysing before anything can be taken as a 'fact'. The asylum seeker is simply presenting a 'version' of reality whilst the immigration officer

³⁴ The Home Office has recently been commended for its stance towards Syrian refugees. What is clear, however, given the number of successful appeals in Syrian cases up until the passing of the new legislation, is the role of the subculture in applying a low burden of proof to these types of cases. What happens in Syria could of course happen in the future to refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria or any other country. For more discussion on this see Chap. 3.

³⁵ This has been highlighted by a number of reports from NGOs in the UK (Asylum Aid 2011, 2013; AIDA 2014; Detention Action and Phelps 2011).

³⁶ P/O-UK22JN00-A.3-TO

has the exclusive task of establishing what that reality is. The different grounds for making claims through the Convention are re-interpreted in the immigration subculture language by planting a seed of doubt—when discussing religion, for example, the trainer uses an anecdote about Catholics from China not ‘having a clue about the most basic Catholic thoughts’,³⁷ to show how ‘abuse’ of asylum occurs:

There is an abuse of all things through the declaration of human rights. Just because you belong to a particular minority does not justify that there is persecution. There has to be something specific on persecution. Chief Immigration Officer³⁸

The idea of suspicion and disbelief is transmitted, hence, from the beginning of new officers’ training also through language in the formulation of new terminology as much as in the re-conceptualisation of common language, even of the most fundamental terms.

Naturalising Officers’ Roles as Social Control Agents

The first time that the term human rights is raised during the course, it is introduced in an abstract and negative context, detached from officers’ roles despite their clear mandate in processing human rights-based asylum claims:

you don’t need to know an awful lot about the Convention, just a grasp so you can categorise the claim. Very rarely the case will come back to you, they normally deal with what they have got. Training Officer³⁹

As stated by this senior officer, they not only play down the importance of the Convention but also re-assure newcomers on how rarely they will have to elaborate on any of their decisions. Portraying the process as

³⁷ P/O-UK22JN00-A.3-TO

³⁸ DI/V-UK22JN00-A.3-CIO

³⁹ P/O-UK22MY-TA.6-TO

bureaucratic, grounded on a representation of 'natural justice', trainees learn and internalise the idea that:

when someone creates doubts and tells lies it is difficult to know if anything he told you is true or not. It makes you doubt the whole story. Chief Immigration Officer⁴⁰

Despite the fact that officers formally exercise a low burden of proof when analysing a narrative, new recruits are told not to believe the stories in principle. In detaching themselves from the consequences of a decision students are expected to 'keep an open mind' as 'you cannot predict what will happen if they are sent back'.⁴¹ The idea that this might be something to keep officers awake at night is never touched upon during the course, and it is assumed that officers will have no problems performing this aspect of their role, as will be explained when discussing issues of responsibility and accountability in detail in Chap. 6. As such, officers still have a tendency to justify their decisions but not to explain the effects, other than immediate ones such as detention. In this context risk is expanded to include suicide prevention and awareness amongst the staff, yet this is the first time that asylum seekers wellbeing is really considered. Furthermore, these explanations are presented at the end of the course when students are already embracing their roles and have come to feel part of the immigration service.

When the accountability of officers is raised, the approach of the course invariably focusses again on the bureaucratic nature of the job, with the investigative and decision-making role minimised. In fact, it is only in this context that trainers refer to the fact that somebody else within the Immigration Service will review the case and endorse the decision. Accountability is hence portrayed as something that ends once the file has been dispatched to a superior officer. The sheer number of applications newcomers will have to deal with is presented as making it 'impossible' to individualise cases. Newcomers are told that they may not even be informed of the final outcome due to the over-burdened systems and they are encouraged not to worry about what happens after the fact.

⁴⁰ DI/V-UK22JN-T3-CIO

⁴¹ P/O-UK22JN-T3-TO

The significance of creating deviant profiles and developing a limited sense of accountability is most evidenced when detention is discussed.⁴² Detention is presented as a standard step in the screening process, as far as the course is concerned. The extent of this oversimplification of detention is illustrated by trainers' comments when explaining that if an asylum seeker 'spends a long time maintaining some false claim, we'll detain them'.⁴³ Trainers attempt to detach the job of officers from the potential impacts of detaining asylum seekers by highlighting the illegal circumstances that might commonly be ascribed to detainees. In an exercise carried out during a session on asylum and detention, students are asked to think of possible reasons to detain an asylum seeker, which are subsequently validated by the trainer:

Trainer: Who do you think should be detained?

- Criminals
- Violent people
- People that have been refused previously
- Previously absconded
- Non or Forged documented
- Terrorists

Participant Observation Diary: Training Sessions⁴⁴

The message throughout this presentation is a description of a person with a deviant profile. As trainers neglect to explain the extraordinary

⁴²Detention strategies above all else have changed substantially since this research was carried out. The process of detaining asylum seekers has become far more widespread and its use has been of great concern to NGOs and immigration lawyers (Detention Action and Phelps 2011; Asylum Aid 2011, 2013). As this chapter highlights, detention is an under-developed concept within the IS and is explained in terms of operational goals rather than humanitarian concerns. As of July 2015, Master of the Rolls, Lord Dyson, the UK's highest civil judge, ordered that Detained Fast Track procedures, which had been in practice since 2000, were unlawful and contributed to a system that is 'structurally unfair and unjust' (EWCA Civ 840 2015). The programme, introduced under the New Asylum Model (NAM) had been criticised in particular in relation to the difficulties effectively screening cases that can be expedited 'when the UK Border Agency (UKBA) has little or no information about the asylum claim' (Detention Action and Phelps 2011). This highlights the implausibility of expecting screening officers to make balanced and fair 'recommendations' against the backdrop of the working culture at the border, when their whole investigative role is constructed with the goal of uncovering discrepancies and lies in the asylum seeker's narrative.

⁴³I/V-P36:80 -207:209

⁴⁴P/O-UK-20-00-ME-TS

circumstances around asylum-detention, the process reinforces the idea that newcomers will encounter criminals, terrorists and violent people. By presenting the information in this way, trainers make it easier to establish that asylum seekers should be detained,⁴⁵ as detention is normalised and applicants criminalised. The concept of criminality is not analysed deeply but simplified to refer to anyone found outside the law creating a catch-22 situation where overriding officers' suspicions and doubts is almost impossible. Given this scenario the concept of a 'low burden of proof' becomes inconsequential to officers' decisions. This is further evidenced when considering the high level of successful appeals, and in the presiding judges' reports around many successful appeals in the UK.⁴⁶

The idea that asylum seekers constitute a threat is powerfully present throughout the course, mainly correlated to security and social concerns. These perspectives are constant, not only to introduce the idea that asylum seekers are a deviant group, but to denigrate the whole concept of asylum and refuge. The concept of protection and the value inherent in saving a life is not something ever discussed, however. The ultimate effect of what immigration officers could be accountable for in the worst-case scenario, such as return and even death of an asylum seeker, is never discussed. There is no session devoted to the officer's responsibility for the life of the asylum seeker or to the plights they face in their home countries. Risk is presented as something that relates to the possible consequences of officers letting the wrong person into the country, and the various social and security threats associated with the 'folk devil' image. Yet, in analysing this part of the meta-narratives, it is also important to recall that there are multiple actors involved in the interviews, such as interpreters and legal representatives.

⁴⁵In medical terms this would be called a type-2 diagnosis, where a doctor prescribes a patient medication despite being compelled to confirm a diagnosis due to the fear of the consequences if they do not. This question is raised by Rosenhahn (1973) in relation to mental health diagnosis and committal to asylums. At face value the suspension of DFT processes appears to support the suggestion that this type of bias, much like in the medical community, illustrates the subcultural legitimacy in deciding asylum outcomes.

⁴⁶Issues have been raised by Amnesty International and Still Human Still Here (2013), Asylum Aid (2011), Detention Action and Phelps (2011) and the UK Lesbian and Gay Immigration Group.

In some cases people will exaggerate about the time they were kept by immigration officers, but by keeping notes this can be checked. Also, copies of the notes can be given to the legal representatives, so don't use things that can be used against you in the appeals cases, such as exclamation marks and question marks. Training Officer⁴⁷

This calls the attention to the different roles and audience segregation that takes place in the immigration officers' worlds, which can easily be contradictory whilst concurrent (Goffman 1959). For instance, opposite qualities are needed to appear fair in front of a lawyer as when engaging solely with the asylum seekers. In training it becomes clear that the social construction of every concept and actor has a significant impact on all learning experiences. While early stages of the training serve to transmit the 'ideology' of the site (Cohen 1985, 101) to the new recruits, the later stages provide them with coherent tools and seemingly rational methods to establish power relations and evaluate individuals (Foucault et al. 1988). It is the interview techniques and skills that appear to represent the official training approach to interviews, yet their ultimate outcome is to validate the perspectives and actions of the subculture to the trainees.⁴⁸

However, while embracing the meta-messages of disbelief and denial, the full ideology of the subculture is by no means guaranteed. In this regard training scenarios create situations where roles can be more fully embraced, with an aim to identify lies or character flaws in the interviewee. The message that asylum seekers will lie and will be deceptive comes across clearly as it is made explicit that it is the officers' goal to find out the truth. This illustrates further to new members the demands of the subculture in internalising these roles as key learning outcomes of the training. As students learn their role as interviewers, concepts like credibility, which are at the core of asylum decisions, become attached to the concept of distrust.

Establishing how these skills and criteria are constructed within the context of the 'site' highlights how the apparent objectivity of a concept like 'credibility' substantiates the creation of complex categories and

⁴⁷ P/O-TO-UK-T6-TO

⁴⁸ This process is described in Chap. 6, which addresses how the subculture is consolidated and reproduced, and how immigration officers deal with the consequences of their actions.

labels for asylum seekers, as will be discussed at length in Chap. 5. The interview will form the basis of any ‘recommendation’⁴⁹ and interviews are presented as the essence of this. This will become the defining feature of officers’ roles, much internalised and consolidated through training experiences.

From Interview to Interrogation

The interview is the key part not only of the screening process but of the whole asylum system, in the same way that in any juridical system the interview is the key, in asylum too ... it is the key to the system. Immigration Officer⁵⁰

On reaching the course meridian, interviewing tasks and roles had taken the entire focus of the training. At that point, new recruits have a fairly clear image of asylum seekers and, as explained, the core concepts of ‘asylum’ and ‘refuge’ have been thoroughly re-conceptualised to refer to disbelief and denial, closely linked to credibility. Through the training of interview techniques, officers’ roles as investigators are developed, with the concept of credibility presented as the key way to make an ‘objective’ judgement about a case. It is from now that it becomes explicit that the role of officers is not simply to interview but to interrogate applicants:

It is necessary to challenge the truth. You should try to explore this in an open way. Not to be confrontational or sarcastic, and don’t use judicious comment. Much of it is common sense, you will have the opportunity to try out your skills, next Thursday you will be interviewing real asylum seekers. Training Officer⁵¹

⁴⁹ The internal structuring of the immigration service maintains that officers do not decide immigration truths. As will become clear in subsequent chapters this is a fallacy that is maintained by the Home Office for operational purposes. Whilst on paper, asylum-screening officers do not make decisions, the reality is such that it is very unlikely that a recommendation made by a screening officer will be overturned by a member of the Asylum Intake Unit. The term ‘recommendations’ was used whenever the bureaucratic nature of the officers’ job is being communicated but rarely when discussing interview techniques or credibility. See Chap. 6 for further discussion.

⁵⁰ DI/V-P8:126-753:758-IO

⁵¹ P/O-UK20JN-TO

Interrogation techniques are presented as means for deconstructing the narratives to assess the credibility of each case before establishing what they see as ‘facts’ and ‘fictions’. All officers at the border are trained in the PEACE model (Prepare and Planning, Engage, Account, Closure and Evaluation), which follows a police technique of interrogation used to obtain ‘criminal evidence’. In this scenario, asylum seekers are regarded as ‘suspects’ and border agents as the ‘investigators’. The correlation between asylum seekers and offenders is recurrent throughout the course and, building on this, the setting of the interview operationalises the need to mistrust applicants. Interrogation skills provide new recruits with strategies for engaging and questioning applicants about their stories. In these sessions, credibility is straightforwardly introduced as a means of evaluating the narratives within the structure of the interview. That is to say that in dealing with interviewing techniques trainers focus on the need to make sure that officers uncover the lies within the narratives, a message repeated at every step of their induction:

if you find inconsistencies you are less likely to believe and so to give them entry. Some people think that exaggerating makes the story more credible and in fact it is the opposite, because then they mix lies with truths and create inconsistencies. Training Officer⁵²

Establishing the line of questioning is always presented as the method to identify weaknesses inherent in a story. The fact that trainers always refer to discrepancies in stories further diminishes the idea of a ‘low burden of proof’, which is presented as central to a fair assessment of credibility:

Credibility is estimating the evidence, bringing out the real reasons, testing the evidence. You must give them a chance to say what they need to say and afterwards you test what they have actually said. Point out the discrepancies and find out discrepancies, that’s your job. Training Officer⁵³

To facilitate the investigation, officers are instructed to engage openly with asylum seekers and present themselves as approachable. This idea is linked to the aim of the officers’ work, as the more information they

⁵²P/O-UK22MY-T6-TO

⁵³P/O-UK12J-T3-TO

gather the more ways an account's credibility can be challenged. Officers are encouraged to ask open-ended questions that allow asylum seekers to talk, whilst they investigate; so they review and question the veracity of what is said to them:

Your job is to test the credibility of all they say, so let them say it. Once they have explained for three pages you can start testing the story. Training Officer⁵⁴

The interrogation techniques rely on asylum seekers' ability to recount all the details of the story they have told. Officers oblige the applicant to do so in an unstructured and non-linear way as a verification method. The open attitude of the border agents illustrates the segregation of the roles of the officer from the asylum seeker with the irrevocable aim of this approach being 'to test the credibility of all they say'.⁵⁵ At this point it becomes evident that the interview is no longer an exercise in information gathering but an interrogation of potential frauds and cheats who are ubiquitous within the system.

Hence, the credibility of the narrative becomes crucial in framing and rationalising asylum interviews, and ultimately in shaping officers' decisions. Despite being presented as objective knowledge by officers, this is a concept grounded in the meta-message of disbelief, constructed within the subcultural language to meet the aims of the officers' work.⁵⁶ The fact that within the immigration service subculture credibility becomes synonymous with 'truth' has implications for the ways that officers

⁵⁴ P/O-UK22BJ-6-TO

⁵⁵ P/O-UK22BJ-6-TO

⁵⁶ At the time of starting the research, credibility was not an officially recognised criteria for making asylum decisions. As, formally, Immigration Officers do not decide, and there was no recognition that they conducted interviews in an investigatory manner, the Home Office was able to present their roles as largely bureaucratic. Credibility has since been officially acknowledged as a key concept by the Home Office by which asylum cases are decided. However, in continuing to deny the existence of subcultural life there is an assumption that credibility is constructed on the basis of the training documents alone, taking into account specific cases and stressing the need for a very low burden of proof in making judgements. This underplays the significance of the subcultural worlds that clearly exists in the border agency. The high numbers of successful appeals in recent years, and the abundance of qualitative evidence from asylum appeals courts, continues to illustrate how subcultural definitions of 'credibility' are still informed by the cultures of distrust and denial that exist within the immigration service. Chapter 5 discusses how credibility is constructed in more detail.

internalise the ‘skills’ they are taught to do their jobs. An interview is always discussed in relation to the need to establish credibility, check ‘facts’ and ‘challenge truths’, and as such credibility is introduced to new recruits from the beginning of the course:⁵⁷

The first thing that you evaluate is the story, to me the story is fundamental, the credibility of the story I mean. Immigration Officer⁵⁸

Trainers transmit the message that with the ‘knowledge, more or less theoretical and also a lot of practical, well, you establish what we call credibility’.⁵⁹ So, to officers credibility is not a quality inherent in the individual or in a story, but a quality that officers attach to them. Only when an officer can attach credibility to a story, can they then begin to address the details of the story itself.⁶⁰ Trainers establish varying definitions, which show the subjective and opaque nature of the concept within the subculture. An illustrative example of clarifications that trainers give to students is that they have to ‘feel satisfied’ with the story as opposed to ‘being convinced’ by it. As long as officers ‘feel satisfied’, the story is genuine, although no indication of what that satisfaction might involve is given. The paradox is that trainers instruct students to be satisfied with a story that is credible whilst they tell them to take a story as credible only if they were ‘satisfied’. Regardless of these confusing and contradictory explanations, the abstract principle that the more ‘likely’ a story is to have happened, the more ‘credible’ the applicant is, still remains:

You should ask yourself – would this story be reasonable to myself, would it be reasonable to do so? This is what credibility is about. It is credible if it is reasonable... look at the whole picture and ask yourself if it is reasonable, if it is credible. Training Officer⁶¹

⁵⁷ The importance of the subcultural definitions is revealed through interactions with more experienced officers. For a further debate on this refer to Chap. 6.

⁵⁸ DI/V-UK-P2:2-51:70-IO

⁵⁹ P/O-2:23-70:79-TO

⁶⁰ Chapters 5 and 6 deal further with how officers account for their decisions, returning to the concept of credibility, as well as how within the interview the narratives are deconstructed through factors such as the recollection of details, coherence and consistency.

⁶¹ P/O-UK10JN-T5

Overall, hardly any unaffected explanation is given to what is meant by words like credible, probable, reasonable or sensible, leaving recruits to determine this by what they see in the field as a guide. However, the concept of a ‘low burden of proof’ is constantly brought up to undermine the commentaries of the trainers and the field officers. This makes the task of interviewing easier, as the person they are questioning is considered suspicious from the start. Stemming from this pejorative picture about the people that officers will be dealing with, role-play games reinforce the distinction between interrogators and suspects in a ‘fun way’. These encourage new recruits to embrace the performance of law enforcers. With trainers performing the asylum seekers’ roles, recruits have to determine the credibility of their stories. This is the first scenario where a clear hierarchy of control emerges as officers are encouraged to take control of interviews, steering them to challenge discrepancies and probe anything that they might suspect as even a half-truth. This consolidates further the power relations between the actors, and the messages of distrust and suspicion get explicit expression in the interview room.

Trainer: ‘What did you think of it?’

New Recruit: ‘I was very nervous. If I had a second chance I would check the third country case, the employment history, much more’.

Trainer: ‘I thought that in general it was good but the worst was that you didn’t let me talk, you kept on interrupting me every time I was in the middle of an explanation’.

Participant Observation Diary: Training Session⁶²

New recruits’ attempts to show authority are fairly good, as they tend to appear confident with their interrogation skills. Whilst they are still nervous about their performance, they are also clearly enjoying the game. Students are told about the kind of intimidating stories they may encounter, and they are still visibly shocked when distressing events such as torture are mentioned, further illustrating the lack of understanding officers had about the job at the beginning of the course. Trainers perceived this as a ‘normal’ reaction that would be overcome with the sense of detachment

⁶² P/O-TO-UK22JN-T/S6-TS

that comes with experience. During the session breaks students vocalise how proud they are about their investigator's skills and ability to detect inconsistencies and lies, for instance by uncovering 'hidden messages'.

The key importance given to the interview in training reveals to new officers how the core function of their job is to 'reduce the number of asylum seekers' through interviewing and screening out the applicants. The scant attention paid to humanitarian issues illustrates how organisational goals eclipse the principle of protection, reducing 'asylum' to just another facet of controlling migration. Interview techniques that may appear to be a rational tool lack substance behind concepts like 'credibility', which leads trainers to constantly remind officers of the need to learn professional knowledge and 'common sense' in order to perform their roles. On these lines, upon entering the field, officers' ability to perform their new roles quickly becomes contingent on their ability to internalise the subcultural values that will direct their actions. Whilst training offers them skills that they believe they will use throughout their careers, in time only the meta-messages of distrust and suspicion remain as the most important learning outcomes from the training course.

Becoming a 'Good Officer'

Unravelling the formal and informal training proceedings in the UK from the inside, this chapter has exposed the true value of the training exercise and course. While bureaucratic tasks initially serve to define immigration officers' roles, highlighting the 'importance' of keeping accurate paper trails, these perspectives soon give way to much more complex social control roles and tasks. Once the asylum interview becomes the focus of training, the true weight of the meta-messages of denial and disbelief circulating in the 'site' is revealed.

This chapter has demonstrated the importance of such meta-messages, transmitted to officers from the beginning of their training, to constantly encourage them to disbelieve everything in their quests for the 'truth'. As soon as officers join the border service, and as they progress into the field, the 'ideology' of the site serves as a frame of reference that reminds them of what that state's goals are in relation to immigration and asylum

policy (Cohen 2002). The messages of ‘control’, ‘denial’, ‘prevention’ and ‘safeguarding’ replace the idea hinting towards the protection of asylum seekers, setting the tone for the continued development of an officer’s ‘professional knowledge’. These messages become the essence of the immigration service subculture, and provide the strongest bond between the policy, legal and implementation levels. The bureaucratic framework remains somewhat prominent, but only to the extent that officers are able to meet performance criteria and targets aimed at clearing the backlog of cases. Yet, as evidenced, it is the meta-narratives and the interview that come to define the world where immigration officers work, leaving them in little doubt about what their purpose at the border is.

Through training and socialisation into the subculture, officers come to understand asylum itself as a ‘pattern of immigration’⁶³ being relentlessly encouraged to find inconsistencies, irregularities and incongruities that rationalise their denials to the fundamental right of asylum. These tasks become the main purpose of their role, hence the core of the training becomes to teach new recruits how to investigate a case in order to ‘extract the truth’:

You should ask how it is possible that this person could go through airport controls in her country without being detained, if all the police is looking for her. Why did she have the passport with her if the police went to raid her house? You should also ask what PKK is. Some of them will not even know or not know what PKK stands for. You should also ask about the national leaders, names and specific information. If you feel stuck in a question you can make a break and read back the interview and ask extra questions afterwards. You should also go on to look for more information.
Senior Training Officer⁶⁴

Moreover, the meta-message of disbelief and denial provides officers with a bridge between the Home Office’s goals and the purpose of their job, replacing the jurisdictional connection. This, in turn, facilitates the creation of a working environment that otherwise may appear detached from political inference whilst it serves the political goals

⁶³ DI/V-P13-33:35-IO

⁶⁴ P/O-UK-22-6-00B-TO

of the state. It is in this context that the organisational perspectives and the weight of the law adds legitimacy through a hierarchical order. Moreover, by maintaining a degree of detachment between the political narratives and the quotidian activities of immigration officers, autonomous self-sufficient spheres are promoted on both sides (see also Fuggerlud 2004). As Simmel would say, it is precisely this conflict with the out-group that helps promote internal cohesion and defines the group boundaries (Simmel 1966).

As this chapter has argued, officers construct and consolidate a set of shared values, norms and actions that will ultimately conform their professional knowledge, on the basis of which they will screen out asylum seekers. Yet, legal definitions of 'asylum seeker' or 'refugee' have little value and practical use, and in their place a set of criteria is applied from what is considered 'prior knowledge'. Asylum seekers are measured against standards that outside of the immigration service subculture embody a categorisation of individuals, grounded in an exacerbated ethnocentrism and essentialist views that have been articulated through a historical construction of otherness and moral panics.⁶⁵ This is a message that comes across even sounder as trainers embark on transmitting the unofficial version of the immigration officer's responsibilities. In this light, a principle of a 'low burden of proof' becomes functionally irrelevant, and the subcultural rules take over to guide officers' actions.

It is the informal and unofficial channels of communication that have the powerful effect, to the detriment of any of the complex training objectives. Training becomes more effective as a way of introducing new recruits to the subculture and unofficial practices than as a means of making them subscribe to the official perspective. That is not to say, however, that the training course itself is irrelevant, but rather to highlight the effectivity of this formal instruction in transmitting and consolidating the subcultural roles and norms, as well as reinforcing the weight of the job on the grown. The influence of experience is far more significant than the interview techniques and, as has been evidenced here, the importance of subcultural interpretations and applications of formal training.

⁶⁵Refer to Chap. 2 for further discussion on moral panics and the 'other'.

Establishing the role of interviewer, of the interrogator, is central to the training programme, and with this the transmission of 'prior knowledge', a process that will carry on beyond the induction course.

As the subcultural world takes shape, new recruits embrace their roles and the internal logic becomes the guiding principle for their actions. In the short time of the induction course a subcultural representation of the asylum seekers as deceitful and a threat is strongly constructed in opposition to their role safeguarding the border. This is a representation strengthened as the new recruits enter the field and continue to be instructed into the subculture and the application of the 'prior knowledge'. As the next chapter will reveal, the extent to which these messages contribute to the group knowledge is critical, as it constitutes the categorisation and labelling processes in the screening of asylum seekers.

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5

Deconstructing Asylum Seekers' Narratives

Getting to Know You

I try not to sound judgmental. But we're all judgmental I'm sure. For me the best result is when I've done an interview which has demolished a story but without them feeling that I've demolished the story. I like to feel, when they've gone out, that they don't think they've done badly.

Immigration Officer¹

The social construction of the asylum seeker's narrative that takes place during the initial asylum interview at ports is a critical step in determining how an application will be resolved. As discussed, the legal definitions and frameworks stress the bureaucratic aspects of officers' jobs, however, by the time training ends newcomers are in no doubt of the primacy of the investigatory element of their roles. Official training makes it explicit to newcomers that their job is far from a transposition of legal frameworks and rules. The message that officers learn from their colleagues, reiterated during training, becomes more manifest

¹DI/V-UK5-AR00-IO

when officers leave the safety net of the induction course and enter the field themselves. It is not only the training, however, but also the everyday practices that evidence how immigration officers' actions and decisions are largely unaffected by legal and policy regulations. Their full immersion into the subculture will depend upon the extent to which they will be able to learn to categorise and apply the recognised criteria to label asylum seekers. This exercise constitutes the groundwork of the 'prior knowledge' of the subculture.

Immigration officers develop and embrace a set of asylum interpretations built on a complex identification and labelling process guided by the construction of certain 'truths as knowledge'. To inform their complex decisions they come to rely on a corpus of values, norms, rubrics and common actions related to the professional relationships of a hierarchical order. This refers to the set of skills that officers believe are inaccessible to those lacking experience, as discussed in Chap. 3. Prior knowledge is analogous to what in other professional settings is referred to as 'knowledge formation' or 'knowledge taken-for-granted', such as the police force and those professional characteristics of total institutions (Freidson 2001). This knowledge, as in other professional contexts, can refer to information acquired outside the work place and put to work on the job, or to information learned on the job² as is the case with the immigration service subculture.

The cumulative experience of officers' work is deposited in the site constituting, over time, a set of information and practices considered 'facts'. As such, these are unquestioned and eventually form the foundation of the 'professional knowledge' (Cicourel and Knorr-Cetina, 1981). In the context of the immigration service, professional or 'prior knowledge' relates directly to officers' experience and the validation of certain practices comprising what officers consider to be their qualified expertise. As officers 'know from experience', knowledge is generated and reproduced with their own experiences and that of others, as well as transmitted to the new members whilst consolidated within the subculture. In this consolidation

² Professional knowledge in the context of this study is not to be confused with Freidson's concept of 'specialised formal knowledge', which refers to the learning of specific technical skills (see Freidson 1994, 2001).

process, the 'ranking' of the officers becomes particularly relevant for the transmission of such 'knowledge' as the backbone of the subculture: the norms, the values and the expectations. This is not only related to the position they hold, but, most importantly, to their seniority in relation to the length the individual has worked within the organisation. Prior knowledge is therefore not evident to those who have just joined the group, regardless of being referred to at the compulsory training. This gap implies that the pressures when starting the job—particularly on entering the field—can be almost unbearable to newcomers:

I thought I was joining a job where I just stamped passports. I didn't know we actually sent people back and things like that. I remember thinking that, you know? how on earth am I going to tell them that? So it is quite, quite a terrifying prospect.

Immigration Officer³

This insecurity and pressure is gradually overcome through interaction with colleagues, and also through the contact with senior officers that transmit their experience and 'knowledge' to 'beginners', as they gain their confidence and express their loyalty.

This chapter begins by examining the realisation of officers' roles, and most particularly how these are performed at the asylum interview, shaped by the interactions and the power relations between the actors. Within the interview, officers embrace their professional roles and detach from the implications of the narratives that asylum seekers present, as well as from the outcomes of their decisions. Through analysing officers' everyday practices and behaviours, clear role patterns appear, evidenced from the smallest action to the most obvious expressions, always reflecting a reproduction of the subcultural values of denial. Furthermore, in this process of negotiation of reality, the importance of the site is revealed as a discrete container where officers can perform their professional roles free from the judgement of the 'uninformed' outside world.

Moreover, by exploring the corner of each constituent and procedure that composes the asylum interview at ports, this chapter evidences that a complex set of criteria is developed into a cumulative labelling process.

³DI/V-UK3-AR00-IO

This process will eventually provide officers with the rationale for deciding on asylum seekers' applications and a justification for their outcomes. In doing this it exposes how, in the process of the interview, officers' 'professional knowledge' is used to evaluate asylum seekers' narratives not as unique experiences, but as part of a wider rationale. Legitimised by their subcultural norms and values, the criteria that officers apply to re-construct asylum seekers' narratives embodies a range of common social Western prejudices about asylum seekers as 'the other'.⁴ As discussed in Chap. 2, this is saturated by an inherent ethnocentrism, grounded on the heritage of colonialism linked to contemporary migration processes (Schuster and Solomos 2004). This essentialist view assumes there is a Western normality, which represents the right way of understanding the world, and considers the non-Western one as the inferior—and even dangerous—'other' (Cohen 2002). This, promoted by a renewed trend of cultural relativism (Boas 1911) that is spreading across Europe, leads officers to assume Western values and beliefs as the norm (Boas 1911). Furthermore, it is precisely through this assumed normalisation that officers still perceive their views as fair and just:

I'm not saying that people of other cultures have different values but I think that if you all have the same basic values, the same set of beliefs, it helps with general integration, you all know where you're going. But no, I suppose there are so many different strands. A lot of people seem to worry that this country is being, in inverted commas, taken over wholesale by Islam.

Immigration Officer.⁵

These subjective criteria, as illustrated by the case put forward by this immigration officer who has worked in the ports for more than twenty years, are nourished by the normative public discourse about mistrust and suspicion of asylum seekers. This builds on political anxieties and moral panics, portraying asylum as 'another avenue for abuse' and, on the whole, asylum seekers as the 'enemies of the state' (Cohen 2002). A discourse that rather than diminishing is actually proliferating in the UK, as

⁴ For an extensive debate on the construction of 'the other' related to asylum and refuge, refer to Chap. 2.

⁵ DI/V-UK5-AR00-IO

evidenced in the content of the Brexit referendum. A conceptualisation of asylum, saturated with racism and false fears that is used to reinforce the organizational goal of prioritising the reduction of asylum numbers, guided by performance targets, and ultimately turning prejudiced practices into professional logic. The message of disbelief is so prominent in the immigration service subculture that on occasions officers openly express their conviction that applying for asylum in itself is an indication of deception:

My feeling, my prejudice perhaps, is that if you really deserved asylum, you wouldn't want to ask for it. You'd be busy doing the work and other things. I feel also that anyone who really merited real political asylum, probably wouldn't have to go through us anyway. They would simply have approached a contact somewhere else.

Immigration Officer⁶

In light of this, asylum seekers are portrayed as deceptive and suspicious, albeit to officers' eyes these criteria are endorsed by the fairness of an 'independent professional knowledge'.

The Writers, the Players and the Stage

I don't think it's particularly authoritarian, I mean we don't wear uniforms, or anything like that. We don't have guns, etc. I don't think it's very authoritarian at all. I mean sure, we sort of impress, we have a room which is locked, I suppose you would say.

Immigration Officer⁷

The complexity of the whole process that takes place during initial asylum interviews at ports is such that even the spatial dynamics are a significant factor (Allen 2003). In material terms, these are rather threatening sites for applicants where, particularly in the interview rooms, officers embody their role as a conduit of state power. Beyond the 'institutional spatial arrangements that serve to separate, distance, de-familiarise and sever them from the asylum seekers over which they hold discretion' (Gill

⁶DI/V-UK5-AR00-3-IO

⁷DI/V-UK4-AR00-IO

2009, 225), the asylum interview reinforces the distinctions between officers and interviewee:

When a person is frightened, no amount of trying to explain what the immigration officer is for will have any difference at all because that's the whole reason they're here is because they're frightened of authority. Frightened of someone who has power over them and can hurt them. So apart from well you can try but recognising that in the person's frame of mind, apart from saying to them well if you're frightened of the British immigration officer, why are you seeking the protection of the United Kingdom?

Chief Immigration Officer and Training Officer⁸

As applications at port are dealt with immediately once the person lands, neither the officers nor the applicants have much time to prepare on the reality that is going to be 'negotiated'. For applications at the border it is unlikely that asylum seekers will have received any legal advice, or that they will be informed about the requirements that officers are looking for when writing their notes and completing the pro-forma reports.⁹

Legal representatives are aware of the significance of planning the interview, noting that in a port asylum seekers will frequently 'declare different major things at once, such as the fact that their country has been devastated by war and they have nothing to eat',¹⁰ while they may neglect to mention 'they may have suffered other problems such as persecution for religious or ethnic reasons that they do not mention'.¹¹ By focussing too much on what is important in their experience, fleshing out the details of why their children cannot attend school or eat for example, asylum seekers fail to articulate the specific Convention grounds upon which they can apply for asylum. This is, of course, an avenue of questioning that will not have to be taken by the immigration officer, not even one of the highest ranking:

⁸ DI/V-UK20-MY00-CIO and Trainer

⁹ For detailed explanation often pro-forma and interview reports, refer to Chap. 2.

¹⁰ I/V-29:10.288:294-LR

¹¹ I/V-29:10.288:294-LR

It is quite difficult to interview people. I know we've had real difficulties recently with interviewing some Chinese, they were clearly far from educated. They were illiterate Chinese from very remote districts in Communist China. And they say nothing at all because they've been told to say nothing. They're told to come here and then, sometimes they don't even say asylum. They just, they won't say anything. Well if they don't say anything, they just get refused entry.

Her Majesty's Inspector.¹²

It is in this regard that legal representatives and interpreters when present in the interview scenario can play a significant role.¹³ Every player has a defined role in the asylum interview and, as officers know, a good asylum interview becomes contingent on everyone playing their part. Although the presence of legal representatives and interpreters tends to be perceived by officers as having little importance, their attendance may in fact have both an impact on the officer's construction of the asylum seekers' narrative, and on how the asylum seeker recalls the narrative. The main influence is determined by the patterns of the interactions, as the relationship between legal representatives and officers can generate a positive or negative influence on the flow of the interview and on the officer's perception of the applicant.

I mean I think there are sort of three strata of lawyers. There are the good ones, there are the total cowboys. In the middle there are the sort of okay ones or ones that do somewhat well and some work very badly.

Her Majesty's Inspector¹⁴

In general terms, the presence of a legal representative is considered beneficial for asylum seekers as the representative may help them articulate their answers focussing on the the most relevant elements of their stories to meet officers' expectations. Also, their presence provides certain guarantees that the interview will proceed in the correct way.

¹²DI/V-UK2-AR00-HMI

¹³As pointed out earlier in the book, in the UK asylum seekers are no longer eligible for legal assistance at ports of entry. This change has been introduced in recent years and has received much criticism as it is considered a measure that violates a fundamental human right of access to justice (Asylum Aid 2013).

¹⁴DI/V-UK14-MY00-SIO

However, the attendance of these actors may also have a negative impact on the officer's decisions. Many officers perceive legal representatives as an obstruction to their work creating an antagonistic atmosphere. Of course, part of this goes back to the different approach to asylum that these two actors have.

An illustration are the criticisms that the Immigration Law Practitioners' Association in the UK have put forward publicly, criticising immigration officers for being unprepared and skeptical decision-makers 'whose aim is to refuse rather than facilitate a claim' (ILPA 1999, see also Asylum Aid 2011, 2013). Hence, whilst at face value the presence of legal representatives is an advantage, in practice this is not necessarily the case, as officers perceived them more as a threat than a help:

Solicitors have no rights or legal representatives have no rights to interrupt or make comments. They are only there to observe. And the immigration officer does have a right to exclude a representative from an interview if the representative insists on interrupting.

Her Majesty's Inspector ¹⁵

In the understanding of immigration officers a legal representative's role is to help them collect the data from the applicants and to be cognisant of current legal requirements, but never to interrupt or interfere in the investigatory tasks. Legal representatives are seen as bureaucrats, in the best-case scenario, although officers understand that they are 'just employees who are being paid a pittance and are sent down by the solicitor's firm... they're just doing a job'.¹⁶ The roles of these actors, their function and ultimately their power is in general disregarded within the immigration service subculture, and at no time considered essential to the interview. They are mainly perceived as obstacles in the interview setting, who are seen to be 'interrupting all the time'.¹⁷ Yet, when legal representatives adopt a more active role, by instructing or counselling the applicant, they are perceived as adversaries to the officers' work. Hence, although the presence of the legal representative should be beneficial to the asylum

¹⁵ DI/V-UK2-AR00-HMI

¹⁶ DI/V-P18.366:374-IO

¹⁷ DI/V-P14.196:204-IO

seeker, it can become detrimental by creating 'sides' and building tensions. This may have an effect on how the applicant presents their story, as some officers admit that:

In an interview inevitably there's going to be a dynamic between the interviewer and the solicitor and if there's some friction there from the outset, it can have a bearing on the way the story comes out.

Chief Immigration Officer¹⁸

However, even in the cases when the interaction between legal representatives and officers creates a negative atmosphere, from the legal representatives' point of view, their presence is always advantageous to the applicant. Legal representatives argue that when they are not present, as is currently the case in all screening interviews, that interviews become shorter, translations are often incorrect, questions are irrelevant due to the officer's lack of knowledge about the country of origin, applicants are interrogated more than interviewed for which they are unprepared, and notes made from the interview lack vital information. They believe that without their presence officers focus more on areas that are detrimental to the applicants, such as details of the journey, rather than those likely to be beneficial to the application, such as the substance of the claim. Either with or without legal representatives there are some negative connotations, but it is the perception that at least with the legal representative the process becomes more transparent.

The role of third parties also refers to the official interpreters involved in the asylum screening system. As discussed in Chap. 2, interpreters not only translate but they 'filter' the dialogue 'because between the officer and the applicant there is something that can't be overcome, which is the language'.¹⁹ Whilst an official's views that the role of third parties has no real impact on how the narratives are presented and perceived, evidence shows that their presence may have an influence. This is not only in how applicants present the narrative but also the way officers listen to the story, and therefore arrive at the outcome of the interview.

¹⁸DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

¹⁹I/V-P6-512:536-IO

Regardless of the actors involved in an interview, officers are always in control of the interview scenario, and they check rigidly what they consider to be the limits of the roles performed by each actor. Social hierarchies are clearly defined in the interview; officers are placed at the top of the hierarchical order, and third parties are only seen as positive when assisting officers in their professional role. The importance of the ways these roles are acted out is key to the subcultural construction of a 'good' interview, to the extent that expected behaviours of each party are fulfilled in a clear way (Goffman 1967). What's more, their authoritative roles are reinforced by the obvious power dynamics at play in front of asylum seekers, and this ultimately serves as the legitimation of their professional objectives and the means to achieve them. In this context it is not surprising that officers have a broad margin for developing and applying their criteria and labels, as the following section shows.

Professional Knowledge: Labels and Expectations

Having done a lot of interviews as I say, you kind of realise that in a lot of cases you're in an area somewhere between truth and fantasy, you know. But, as I'm sure you know, if you tell yourself something enough times that isn't necessarily true, you end up believing it yourself. So if you're in that situation, you're sitting in an asylum interview, telling the immigration officer a story, and you've gone over it in your head a hundred times, so you can make it work and it almost becomes true, you know?

Chief Immigration Officer²⁰

The process of negotiation of reality that takes place during the interview between the asylum seeker and the immigration officer is grounded on the development of the immigration officer's criteria to establish the truthfulness of the asylum seeker's story. From a position of power, officers follow a well-established set of criteria developed overtime into their so-called professional knowledge. Whilst officers' pre-established categorisation routine is not something openly admitted within the subculture,²¹ this

²⁰ DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

²¹ In the context of labelling theories, Schutz's arguments and his theory of subjective agency are particularly informative (1967 and 1974). This addresses the analysis of social definition of rule-making,

comes though unmistakably as soon as they are questioned about the methods. They then use these categories to distinguish deserving from underserving cases, as the answer is always linked to professional knowledge. Officers' knowledge is accumulated and goes unchallenged whilst the 'site' reproduces a reality that is substantiated by a reflexive classification. This is a 'process of perception' whereby officers socially reproduce the world around them based on their expectations about the people they will meet and the stories they will hear (Lippmann 1946).

A role model is constructed against which all other cases will be judged. This archetypal asylum seeker is steeped in negativity as the official policies and normative debates establish the consensus that 'we should keep out as many refugee-type of foreigners as possible' and that 'these people always lie to get themselves accepted' (Cohen 2002; xxii). This is the 'normal case' that establishes the basis for the further elaboration of asylum seeker as 'deviant' or the 'enemy', through links to terrorism and other 'threat narratives'.²² There is no realistic alternative presented by the system on what constitutes a positive 'normal case', and the negative construction of 'the other' becomes the 'truth' within the subculture. Furthermore, as discussed in Chap. 4, the common recognition of this unwritten ideal type, strengthens the communal standards for the group and, in turn, the significance of the subculture is reinforced and preserved (Wright 1984).

The way this process underpins the cohesion between the members of the group is by providing a sense of belonging and dependability. Those that form part of the subculture are the only professionals able to understand and apply this ideal type and the 'implicit criteria' against it. The ability to understand and distinguish elements meaningful only to the group, as Gardner explains, is core to the idea of becoming a 'true' group member (Gardner 1994). 'Professional knowledge' and officers' criteria are the grounds provided for this, hence the comprehension of these criteria equates to a demonstration of experience, and vice versa. Therefore, the learning process leading to the recognition of these ideal types, and the acceptance of the criteria itself is simultaneous to adopting the group values (Gardner 1994). In this process there are many ele-

through processes of interaction and the construction of types and standards (Schutz, 1974).

²²The construction of asylum seekers as 'the enemy' is discussed at length in Chap. 2.

ments, notably the use of language, that help clarify and enhance the function of the group (Schur 1971). Faced with the daunting task of interviewing asylum seekers, the subculture supports and guides officers' revealing factors to them that are considered imperceptible to those on the outside of the subculture.

Beyond the evidence that demonstrates how officers apply a wider range of criteria and categorisation processes to screen out asylum seekers, it is even more remarkable to learn how each of these criteria is formulated. In exploring this, the data reveals that the basis for most of these categories is fundamentally entrenched in postcolonial stances, which recognise the non-Western migrant as 'the intruder'. These categories, rationalised by officers on the dual constructions of origin, gender, religion or even level of education of the applicants, reflect Western prejudices nourished by racism and moral panics about 'the other' (Cohen 2002). These are ultimately identity labels re-interpreted by officers as 'professional clues' about the truthfulness of the narratives and the credibility of the applicant. Officers become legitimate labellers for they have learned to read the hidden clues that reveal the complete nature of the asylum seeker's story. They see themselves as objective agents, professionally equipped with the expertise to decipher whether applicants are lying or telling the truth, are pretending or genuine, are deserving or underserving of asylum status.

Country of Origin: Everything Is a Clue

Amongst the many features that are rationalised by officers and used as evidence in the labelling of asylum seekers, the most constant and recurring is the applicant's country of origin. Labelling individuals by country of origin does not imply that someone from a particular country has more or less grounds to apply, but this is a much more complex presumption that officers gather grounded on what they 'see as differences in the nationalities'.²³ Applicants' country of origin prompts officers to unravel a whole set of characteristics that members of that country are believed to share, which influences

²³ DI/V-P12-396:396-IO

how the officer will interpret each aspect of their claim. Through a cumulative labelling process, officers determine what types of people from certain countries will apply, and what types of stories they will bring with them. The main sets of features attributed to applicants with the same country of origin relate to: a) self-evident traits, such as the personal characteristics of the individuals; and (b) the nature of the story, which can only be recognised with experience in the job. In the first case, officers build up a cumulative image of applicants from a country, as their experience informs them what to expect from applicants, against a 'normal case'. Prior knowledge generates such specific expectations towards each interview, as 'they know' what type of person to expect, and failing to fit these expectations is a factual sign of falsehood. For instance, officers expect that 'Kenyan women invariably glare at you' and that 'they are not very friendly',²⁴ or that Turkish applicants 'talk forever':²⁵

I think it's pretty generally understood amongst officers that if you're interviewing a Turkish asylum claimant, that will be a long interview. Now that might be because of the particular culture of the country but often Turks will want to go back to their childhood in submitting an asylum claim. It's quite difficult to actually focus them.

Her Majesty's Inspector.²⁶

Determining asylum seekers' profiles based on the country of origin is fundamental to group knowledge as most officers, like the senior officer just quoted, believe that the country of origin is inextricably linked to 'the kind of mind that one brings'.²⁷ Based on this information, officers distinguish full profiles that characterise the individuals and their narratives, signifying roles and attitudes that they expect applicants to present in the interview.

In the second case, the country of origin informs officers about the type of narrative rather than about the applicant. To this aim, officers develop and apply shared profiles relating to the country of origin that

²⁴ DI/V-UK5-AR00-15-IO

²⁵ DI/V-P13-158:159-IO

²⁶ DI/V-UK2-AR00-HMI

²⁷ DI/V-P2-139:159-CIO

will then inform them of what to expect from an applicant's story. This profile establishes what 'normal narrative' can be expected from an applicant from that country. The construction and use of these categorisations relies, again, on what officers consider a legitimated prior knowledge, 'you've heard all the stories before...there's such a marked similarity between every nationality'.²⁸ While officers take personal characteristics and traits at face value, believing that the general public would see the same thing, it is clear that narrative assessments emerge within the immigration service subculture. As officers gain more experience they increasingly come to recognise that 'in every country there are different patterns'²⁹ of immigration, whereby certain countries 'patterns' are based entirely on asylum. What the officer refers to as patterns are features that the subculture uses to categorise specific countries. By labelling countries officers create expectations about the types of stories they to expect to hear and, as shown, failing to match these expectations is taken as evidence of deception:

It is true that stories repeat themselves, so thirty applicants are all claiming five things exactly the same...so it is not so difficult, it is just a bit of common sense and experience.

Chief Immigration Officer³⁰

In this setting, labels are rarely challenged and officers come to see their observations and labelling processes as objective truths. This 'truth' is often articulated as common sense that comes determined from experience in the job, free from any form of bias. These expectations give them clues about the credibility and the probability of a story being true, based on what they 'already know'. While some recognise the negative connotations of this, the generation of labels and categories is imperative to their work:

²⁸ D/I/V-P13-33:35-IO

²⁹ D/I/V-P13-33:35-IO

³⁰ DI/V-UK-P2:4-95:114-IO

What happens is that sometimes this common sense appears to have a bad reputation, it seems that common sense has to be synonymous with pure simplicity in its worst meaning, but it is not like that. Immigration Officer³¹

Besides, even when officers recognise that it 'might be an immigration officer's cliché that everyone tells you the same story',³² they are in no doubt of the value of their observations as 'professional knowledge'. In any case, officers always leave room for their 'interpretation' so whilst they expect narratives from the same countries to be reiterated, if details between narratives are too similar, for instance, these may easily be deemed false.

if the last six people from a particular nationality have told you exactly the same story, but they've come from different parts of the country...this can't be right.

Her Majesty's Officer³³

The fact that narratives are similar is negative in terms of the credibility of the applicants because they are expected to have personalised experiences. This negative label can be attached not only to an individual, but to a group of applicants or even to a whole world region, regardless of the specific personal situations of the applicants:

Youngsters from Africa do not present a very articulate story because it is the one they have been provided with. Maybe if they presented their real story, although it would be much more incredible, well, I don't know but probably it would be better.

Immigration Officer³⁴

By building up profiles of a country officers expect narratives to be tied to certain local 'phenomena', which contributes to the officer's stock of knowledge. In the case of Turkish applicants, for instance, officers expect the majority of cases to involve an allegation of police brutality:

³¹ DI/V-UK-P6:145-501:504-IO

³² DI/V-UK4-AR00-9-IO

³³ DI/V-UK2-AR00-12-HMI

³⁴ DI/V-P6-785:792-IO

It's like all the Turks who've been beaten up so many times, you know? or not so much the women, but the men, every time they go out they seem to have been beaten by the police. I don't believe it. You know, I just don't believe it happens quite that much.

Immigration Officer³⁵

When officers 'don't believe' a story they are not only disbelieving a particular case or individual, but they are making a much wider generalisation about a 'type' of applicant. As this senior officer explains, many officers do not believe that Turks (any Turk) can be beaten up as many times as recounted, and considers that this disbelief is grounded on objective facts. The cumulative impact of 'professional knowledge' in this instance is to ensure that officers will deny the veracity of any claim made by a Turk that involves police or state violence, unless the claimant can go to extraordinary lengths to prove this. The fact that officers have 'heard all the stories' illustrates the importance of 'prior knowledge', and this also extends to their evaluation of any material evidence that may be provided.

Reasons for Applying

Another criteria that officers regularly apply to assess asylum seekers' narratives refers to what they define as the 'reasons for applying'. Most officers openly admit that the argument that the applicant provides when asked about asylum at the beginning of the interview is used to categorise the applicants claim:

the initial reason is the most important because from there they explain to you the rest, you can see if they have really suffered persecution although of course afterwards you have to test it out.

Immigration Officer³⁶

Regardless of the fact that, as noted, more often than not asylum seekers have no idea about what it is that they are expected to explain about their stories, these initial 'reasons' are considered by officers as valuable clues that lead them to establish if a case is likely to be false or genuine. Although the

³⁵ DI/V-UK5-17-IO

³⁶ DI/V-P7-40:58-IO

initial reason presented may not be representative of the entire experience of the asylum seeker, in general this is taken as such by the officers. Moreover, if the initial reason presented is considered to be unfounded, regardless of later clarifications, it is most likely that the story will be treated as groundless. This is particularly the case when a narrative changes after the first reason has been presented. This often happens, perhaps because the applicant realises that what he or she considered fundamental—lack of access to food—is not what the officer is considering essential—fear for their life in the streets:

I mean some people might be telling you one story and then the story changes. So at some point they're not clear in what they're saying, you know, where somebody is actually really what you would say genuine, they probably have it clear in their mind, you know?

Chief Immigration Officer³⁷

This does not mean, however, that if the reason given by the applicant at first remains throughout and fits the officer's expectations, the narrative will be treated with any less suspicion. In this instance, the presentation of a valid reason prompts officers to carry out a full investigation into the narrative. Thus, when the label applied on the 'reasons for applying' is positive, the narrative's credibility still needs to be 'tested'. However, when the initial reason presented is considered to lack grounds, the negative label is clipped and no further attempts will be made by the officers to unravel that story:

A bad case you can detect more easily than a good case... they [asylum seekers] directly claim economic reasons, they are people who tell you directly that they have economic reasons, that they have been fired, that they can't find work and that they haven't got the means to survive. So obviously it is much better to detect bad rather than good cases, because in a good one, although it may seem it has the feeling of a good case, well, then you have to test it...you've got to find out if it's true or not...they have to prove it.

Immigration Officer³⁸

³⁷DI/V-UK8-MY00-CIO

³⁸DI/V-P7:12-195:217-IO

As in this case, officers often search for reasons to disbelieve a case and deny a claim from the beginning of the interview. The main problem is that often applicants consider immediate difficulties to be main reasons for applying, such as the lack of means, but this does not imply that behind this lack there may be many further reasons as to why they had to leave their country, reasons that may be explicitly expressed in the Convention.³⁹ Yet, at the interview these will be discounted leaving the initial economic aspect to lead officers in their investigation. As soon as applicants mention economic factors, given that these are perceived as ‘non-reasons’, they are labelled as non-deserving refugees. Once an asylum seeker is labelled as undeserving an officer will begin to doubt or simply discount the credibility of the entire narrative. Even where positive labels are attached to the initial reason given by the applicant, they are only taken as an introduction for the officers to investigate and challenge, rather than as the basis for a credible story.

Because of the high number of cases where applicants’ claims are dismissed on the basis that their reasons are economic, officers often feel the need to justify further their criteria. A way of doing this is by removing the blame from the applicant and explaining that, although ‘they haven’t economic resources to survive in their country and it is very sad...it’s no good’.⁴⁰ This does not imply that officers believe considering applicants as economic migrants and not refugees is wrong (Wright 1984),⁴¹ but rather that they are uncomfortable with the high number of cases in which this situation arises.

The Essence in a [Lack of] Detail

A further way that officers use to assess applicants’ narratives emerges from the details that the story integrates. This is not in terms of evaluating the relevance of every detail, but rather pondering the amount of details, the nature of the details and the way these are presented. The actual ability to

³⁹ For a debate on the reasons for asylum established in the Refugee Convention refer to Chap. 2.

⁴⁰ DI/V-P7-478:480-IO

⁴¹ For further discussion on moral principles and implications refer to Chap. 6.

record details by the applicants is extremely important to officers. On the one hand, it is important that applicants remember specific details about their journey and the events that led them to leave their homes, but furthermore it is fundamental for officers that applicants present such details throughout the interview in a flawless and coherent way:⁴²

When they are able to tell you something specific like: 'I was arrested on such and such a date, at such and such a place for such and such a reason, taken to such and such a place', or they can give you detail. Not that it was the dead of night in the hills of Kurdistan and some bloke came and knocked on my door.

Immigration Officer⁴³

Officers have pre-defined group expectations about the presentation of the story, according to the subcultural logic. A lack of details or the wrong recollection of details is a reason to doubt the story and will lead officers to question whether what they are listening to is 'possibly not a genuine case'⁴⁴ without considering other mitigating factors that may inhibit the applicants' ability, or willingness, to retell their story. Most officers do not take the possible disorientation, or the different interpretations and meanings that applicants give to details into account. Only a few officers would admit that applicants are unable to give details due to their lack of memory may be due to the traumatic nature of their experience:

Certainly sometimes we try to do something about that [getting details from asylum seekers] but it's not always possible. I think particularly when you get into some African cases you can sense that they just haven't got any detail. They can't, you can ask for it until you're blue in the face but they can't give you it. They can't tell you where it was or they can't tell you what day it was, because they just don't remember, they don't know. Of course that'll lead to frustration with some immigration officers. I'm sure most

⁴² Although the screening interview is officially classed as only to collect information to assist with processing the application, what an applicant tells the interviewer here will be re-tested at various stages in the substantive interview to ensure they continue to tell the same story.

⁴³ DI/V-P18:139-513:528-IO

⁴⁴ DI/V-P18:139-513:528-IO

officers will think they [asylum seekers] are being deliberately sort of evasive and not answering the questions but I'm sure it's not the case at all.

Chief Immigration Officer⁴⁵

The recognition of factors that may affect the recollection of details is, however, contemplated by a minority of officers, but the general understanding is that applicants who do not provide details have something to hide. Hence, as with other labels, the contradiction is always present. Whilst a story has to make sense to be credible, if a story makes perfect sense it can be considered false, which emphasises how labels can be geared to discredit narratives. The extent to which the story has to make sense is subjective and relates almost fully to officers' expectations. Yet, identifying a story as lacking detail can call everything into question and linking it to 'patterns' of corruption, deception and abuse of the system is common place:

There were a lot of cases of African people who were not from Rwanda but had a story about Rwanda that they had been given. That's a classic deception, people who come from a neighbouring country claiming to be from a country which has a civil war. You get loads of Kenyans who say they're Somalis or Rwandans. You get lots of obviously Albanians saying they're Kosovans. You get a lot of Pakistanis saying they're Afghans. Lots of those come in with a whole identity, whole falsehood that they bring with them.

Chief Immigration Officer⁴⁶

In addition, it is 'common knowledge' amongst officers that applicants tend to adopt a false identity and present fake stories in order to deceive the system. They believe that applicants get hold of manufactured narratives through the involvement of third-party actors with economic interests, namely illegal trafficking or smuggling organisations.⁴⁷ Therefore, when a manufactured story is identified, in addition to the fake conception there is a further negative label attached, which is the potential link with the trafficker, implicating applicants into a process of criminalisation.

⁴⁵ DI/V-P12:353-745:754-CIO

⁴⁶ DI/V-P12:520-CIO

⁴⁷ The impacts of this are discussed in Chap. 2 in relation to Detained Fast Track processing in the UK (see also Detention Action and Phelps 2011).

Nevertheless, however difficult it is to reach officer's expectations in terms of the amount and character of the details in the narrative, even in cases when all details are consistent and reliable, a story can still be deemed untruthful. The justification officers give in these cases is that they still have to apply so-called further criteria, always guided by a meta-message of doubt and disbelief:

I will check if there are inconsistencies, obviously. I'm going to ask you about them because otherwise if I'm not going to question it, if I'm not going to assess the evidence that's being presented to me, there's no point in me being here.

Chief Immigration Officer⁴⁸

Officers consider that to be 'good' professionals, their obligation is to always test the story for inconsistencies. This testing of the narrative is, for many officers, the purpose of why they are there in the first place, as the previous Chief Officer argued. In this way, the coherence and the credibility of the narrative can be easily overruled by new information that the officer gains relating to new intersected labels between the details and the country of origin. Both labelling processes are guided by officers' suspicion, considered the only objective segment of the interview, as it is grounded on 'professional knowledge'.

Questioning Objective Proofs

Amongst the few things that the applicant could consider in their benefit, the one that would seem most straightforward, should be the presentation of material evidence supporting the arguments of the claim. However, when considering what takes place at the interview this also becomes a complex factor. Documentary evidence is taken by officers as a further element that needs to be deconstructed and interpreted as positive or negative criteria through the officers' rationale. The value and weight placed on the material evidence is determined by the officers, taking into account the applicant's story, often related to the country of origin. Officers will express their belief that physical proofs will assist

⁴⁸DI/V-UK15-AR00-CIO

the credibility of an applicant's narrative because 'proof is an element that supports the story'.⁴⁹ Yet, the importance that officers give to evidence depends on the fact that they perceive it as objective 'real' data, which will have to be evaluated through 'professional knowledge'. Hence, while a narrative substantiated with evidence may confer a positive label, this is only once the reliability and relevance of the evidence has been established.

Grounded on officer's prior knowledge there are also expectations about documentary evidence relevant to determining the credibility of the story. For instance, it is common that if applicants arrive at ports with all their paperwork ready, they will be treated with suspicion for having too much prepared documentation, or they may be deemed not to be from the country they claim to be:

A girl arriving from Africa normally won't bring a passport, won't bring any identity documents, and won't even bring any documents to support what she is claiming.

Immigration Officer⁵⁰

The paradox in this situation is that if the applicant arrives with no documentation officers may similarly be suspicious. The negative rationalisations that officers use in assessing narratives lose any semblance of consistency when addressing how officers judge material evidence.

Whilst there is a negative value attached to a narrative without any sort of documentation, the positive value that should be attached to those with supporting evidence is always tempered as 'proof can have a good or a bad influence, it can be good or bad, it depends on the country, it depends if it is fabricated'.⁵¹ Thus, submitting evidence is not guaranteed to assist a claim, as any suspicion about the veracity of documentary evidence becomes further reason to suspect all other elements of a narrative. This can have the confusing effect of turning any material evidence presented by the asylum seeker into 'disconfirmatory evidence' (Milne and Bull 1999).

⁴⁹ I/V-P9-154:155-IO

⁵⁰ DI/V-UK-P7:37-IO

⁵¹ DI/V-P1-349:360-CIO

As with other labels, the rationalisation of documentary evidence is also linked by officers with the country of origin. Firstly, this occurs because the feelings of suspicion and distrust officers have towards asylum seekers does not end with the presentation of 'documentary proof'. In certain cases, officers might doubt just how the applicant obtained an exit visa or passport, something that they learn to recognise as being difficult in certain countries. In this sense an officer's first questions to an applicant with all the correct paperwork may focus on how these were obtained, rather than their acceptance as objective information. In addition, if someone presents what officers consider 'too much' physical evidence, they will suspect that this is likely to have been fabricated. In these cases the label can be even more damaging because the whole story is likely to lose credibility. From this suspicion a third reason is created, based on the idea that if an applicant submits several items of documentation to support the narrative it can be as a result of the applicant's involvement in criminal networks or with traffickers:

When someone is properly documented, with a passport, with permit to exit, visa etc. and it's well-known that in that specific country they are not making passports for the kind of people of the profile of that person, well, in principle it seems that there is something suspicious there.

Immigration Officer⁵²

Therefore, while officers initially state that presenting evidence is an indication of a truthful story, this may easily work in the opposite way, depending on the prior knowledge of that country. Overall, the weight that evidence may carry can easily be undermined by any further criteria, even if the officer accepts them as genuine:

Proof can either support the story or hinder it but the important thing is the story. I don't care what proof they bring, if I'm not convinced by the story, the papers are irrelevant.

Immigration Officer⁵³

⁵²DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

⁵³PI/V-P9-157:161-IO

The margin for officers' interpretation of the evidence is expansive, mainly shaped by the correlation of the evidence with further labels. What initially appears as an undeniable advantage may become a negative factor for the applicant, or simply an irrelevant one. Combined with other criteria, like reasons for applying and country of origin information, documentary evidence comes to determine the application of labels that invariably reflect the meta-message. Significantly, officers believe that what prevails is their knowledge as a professional group.

Emotions, Behaviour and the Presentation of the Self

As seen so far, subjectively interpreted criteria like the country of origin and reasons for applying are well-defined labels used by officers. As part of their cumulative knowledge, these determine expectations that will be negatively rationalised, to reinforce the disbelief of the asylum seekers' narratives. Even in the unlikely cases when expectations are perfectly met, so that the narrative ticks all the boxes, officers can—and often will—look for further criteria to justify their disbelief of the narrative. To unravel this further subjective exercise we must focus on the most personal features of the applicants and on officers' interpretations of gender constructions, the display of emotions and the presentation of the self.

Gender Constructions and Displays of Emotion

Sex-gender constructed traits, as per contemporary Western heteronormative constructions (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974), are commonly assumed and applied by officers as grounds for classifying asylum seekers, although this is not always openly recognised. Applicants have to meet officers' essentialised views on the features and behaviours that their dualistic gender constructions entail. Explicit behaviours, performances or even appearances are expected from men and from women by the officers as per the sex-gender identities formed by the ethno-androcentric views of the West (Butler 1990b). These beliefs, obviously shaped by officers' own experiences, conform to what are

seen as 'normal' expectations from any man or woman. This tends to imply that women are expected to behave in a nourishing, submissive and sensitive way, whilst men have to behave in a stronger, persistent and rational way (Ortner 1974). This genderised Cartesian dualism, represents not only a deceitful approach to the complexity of the applicants, but again it implies an imposition of Westernised heteronormative constructions.

Moreover, these constructions are intersected by officers with expectations constructed through other categories, such as country of origin or religion. This intersection of cultural traits in the identity constructs of the applicants: gender, origin or religion, denotes officers' dominant universalistic approach. Not only does it neglect the complexity of the intersectional identity of the applicants,⁵⁴ but also reflects the groups' engrained ethnocentrism, colonialism and patronising assumptions about gender roles in other cultures. For instance, officers commonly differentiate between men and women from Arabic or Muslim countries because:

you can't expect the same information from a man as from a woman, it is just like this because usually a woman from an Arabic or Muslim country is in a position where she can get very little information about the husband's activity.

Immigration Officer⁵⁵

As we can see by this senior officer's statement, the sex-gender construction and expectation is applied to both men and women and, like this officer, most expect women from certain countries to be silent as they believe that women's role in certain cultures is not to disclose information. By implying that women in non-Western societies cannot get information they are portrayed as somewhat naïve, whilst it is inferred that men should be treated with more suspicion. In this context, gender and religious labels are intersected, informing officers about the personal traits of the applicants. In this way, a common perspective is presented of the Middle East as a 'male-dominated world' where 'women who travel tend to be either daughters or wives',⁵⁶ assuming a subjugated role.

⁵⁴ For a debate on intersectionality in the construction of identity and the person refer to Kimberlee Crenshaw (1989), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Nira Yuval Davis (2006) and Floya Anthias (2011).

⁵⁵ DI/V-UK-P10-100:135-IO

⁵⁶ DI/V-UK5-AR00-10-IO

Officers correlate what they 'know' about a specific country, with the expectations they apply to Western sex-gender constructions, echoing their inherent ethno-androcentrism (Martin Casares 2007) in their decisions. Through this, they come to concur that there are certain 'truths' that must be present within a narrative and if a detail contradicts these 'truths' the plausibility of the story is placed in doubt:

there are things that can't be, and if they can't be, they can't be.

Immigration Officer⁵⁷

Such things that 'can't be' in the eyes of officers will make them doubt the whole story. The officers' own experiences are inherent cultural understandings of sex-gender roles, which will inform them of what *is* credible in terms of gendered identities. It is not only what they are told but also how it is told that informs officers, according to their ideal expectations of gender performances (Butler 1990b). When a narrative falls outside of these performances and expectations, this will be doubted.

The expectations held by officers about displays of emotions often intersect with the expectant gender roles. This means that applicants have to express the 'right' intensity, within 'normal' limits (Herlihy et al. 2010). As with other labels, 'appropriate' emotional expression is associated with a higher likelihood of being credible, and the opposite too, as illustrated by the following officer:

the fact is that they are peroxide blondes, you know? They cry easily and I think maybe they don't mean to affect the immigration officer's reasoning, but I'm sure there's something in it.

Immigration Officer⁵⁸

The label created on the ground of emotional displays suggests that the applicant is lying and many officers believe that with experience they can detect this as 'you can see when they are crying as a crocodile'.⁵⁹

This is in fact one of the most important elements or criteria applied to establish the truthfulness of the asylum seeker's narrative, as it

⁵⁷ I/V-UK-P19:303-IO

⁵⁸ DI/V-UK-P10-100:135-IO

⁵⁹ DI/V-UK-P1-382:385-IO

often comes to question when traumatic experiences are involved. The inclusion of traumatic experiences within the story and the display of emotions that these explanations evoke during the interview is fundamental for credibility. Torture and/or rape are considered the most intense experiences and so a more intense demonstration of emotions is expected, to the extent that without a display of emotions the credibility of the story will be impaired. For instance, the conviction that women that have been raped must cry when recounting their experience is such that officers believe that often women will not even talk about sexual assault in front of men. The general practice is that when a woman's story involves sexual assault, a women officer is assigned to the interview:

If we suspected that someone wanted to tell us more than they were telling us, and we had a male officer interviewing a female, then we'd look around and think well hang on, perhaps this person would speak more openly to a woman.

Her Majesty's Inspector ⁶⁰

While the assurance that a woman officer will display a greater degree of empathy towards the applicant, women are allocated most cases of sexual assaults in order to encourage the applicant to share information. This implies that, due to the limited number of women officers interviewing asylum seekers, they will have to listen to stories of rape or sexual assault on a more regular basis than their colleagues. Paradoxically, this creates a tendency for women officers to be skeptical and desensitised because they hear these allegations so frequently. In line with this, most men in the immigration service tend to be more compassionate and sympathetic towards victims of rape. Officers consider that it would be difficult for a woman to lie about a sexual assault, and tend to sympathise with women who have suffered such experiences:

Women tend to suffer, the women always tend to be the ones that have to bear the brunt of it... the war, being attacked or whatever, you know? So when women come they normally are going to have had a harder time than men.

Her Majesty's Inspector ⁶¹

⁶⁰ DI/V-UK2-AR00-12-HMI

⁶¹ DI/V-UK-P16-229:231-HMI

Women officers, however, tend to treat narratives containing rape or assault with suspicion convinced that ‘an awful lot of women will tell you they’ve been raped, but who knows’.⁶² This creates a circle in which women officers become even more insensitive and even skeptical. Hence, in order for an applicant to convince them that the rape is ‘real’ the story must be particularly persuasive, usually involving an expected display of emotions:

When she got to the point where she said that the soldiers had sexually assaulted her, and I suspect touched her up or something, she started crying and I felt that it was so genuine, you could see because she was embarrassed about it. She was trying not to cry, fortunately they were all women in the room. And I knew something had happened, I didn’t believe the general story but I knew something had happened.

Immigration Officer ⁶³

As we see with this senior officer’s views, most officers are inclined to believe applicants, not because of the applicant’s account but because of the display of emotions. Although officers receive no psychological training, the ability to see that applicants get embarrassed or scared when recounting their narrative is a sort of validation of officers’ opinions. It is not just about the ‘right’ story, but also about the ‘right’ display of emotions. For instance, in order for the display of emotions to serve as a positive label for the credibility of the applicant, it is expected to be constant during the time that the applicant is on the premises where the interview is being carried out. Otherwise, if a different emotion is displayed their credibility is questioned, as seen by the following explanation:

There are some that as soon as they see you they start crying, they probably bring a piece of onion with them. Afterwards you may see them sitting outside smiling, but as soon as they see you they start crying again.

Immigration Officer ⁶⁴

⁶² DI/V-P13-608:609-IO

⁶³ DI/V-UK5-AR00-IO

⁶⁴ I/V-P4-870:879-IO

Although the applicant has been crying when explaining his or her traumatic experiences, this is labelled negatively because of inconsistency in their attitude:

You see a lot of hang dog expressions, you know? and then half an hour later they're on the telephone to their friend and they're laughing.

Chief Immigration Officer⁶⁵

This officer's attitude goes back to the idea of asylum being charity and not a right, and demonstrates the precise degree of distress that the officers expect from asylum seekers in order to believe the story. These expectations are openly recognised by women in the immigration service who reason that rape and sexual assault are such traumatic experiences that no one could possibly explain them in an indifferent way. These expectations clearly inform the duality of gender constructions that officers share and expect others to adhere to when explaining traumatic stories:

I went through a phase where particularly the Kenyan girls would say they'd been raped, and I didn't believe it. Looking at it from a woman's point of view, something like that must be so terrible that maybe people cope with things differently but I'm sure however they cope with it, they will be able to convey the horror because, because it will be a lasting horror to them. And these girls just used to say it as, almost as if it was 'oh and by the way, I was raped, and then I was raped by six men' or whatever, you know? Please, I don't believe them. And someone once said to me 'oh perhaps in their culture it's not that bad'. That's bollocks, if you'll pardon my French. Rape is always rape. I don't believe there is a single culture which accepts being taken in that way by force as the norm.

Immigration Officer⁶⁶

As in previous cases, in the case of gender roles officers are skeptical about applicants that lack an anticipated degree of emotions in telling the story. When the officer justifies her standards as being 'from a woman's point of view' this is understood as coming from a very specific ethnocentric

⁶⁵DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

⁶⁶DI/V-UK5-AR00-IO

perspective, very much informed by her socio-cultural upbringing. The officer actually suggests the applicant's lack of emotions could be justified by cultural differences, but this is mentioned in order to reinforce the dominance of her own culturally informed perspective. Thus, the significance of the applicant's socio-cultural context is denied, or the potential of different gender-role constructions dismissed, despite the fact that it is the applicant telling *their* story.

Interestingly, there are also cases where positive labels are applied, consistent with expectations about the asylum seeker's demeanour and display of emotions. These are particularly related to visible signs of distress, and palpable relief, as officers are convinced that:

If someone starts crying in an interview, which I have seen, I would almost automatically assume that they had suffered a great deal.

Chief Immigration Officer⁶⁷

This, however, does not relate to officers having greater sympathy with asylum seekers but rather to officers complying with wider social expectations and expressing emotions in a convincing performance. This reinforces officers' suspicions in cases where an applicant may only be able to recount the details of a story in a more pragmatic, or 'detached way'. Moreover, as we will see, officers' ethnocentric views are projected towards asylum seekers' presentation of themselves, such as the education and demeanour of an applicant. This follows a rigid set of criteria that corresponds to behaviours that officers expect, which directs and auto-justifies their attitudes towards asylum seekers.

The Presentation of the Self

The applicant's presentation of the self at the interview also has a significant impact on the interaction between them and the officer, and the way officers will perceive asylum seekers, setting standards for the rest of the interview. Two of the clearest ways this is observed relates to the demeanour and what officers consider is the level of education that the applicant displays.

⁶⁷DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

Officers believe that demonstration of a certain education level is an important element, particularly in terms of the presentation of the narrative. Officers openly admit that 'the applicant's education clearly influences the interview' and that 'a higher education is better'.⁶⁸ Because education is conceived as a personal asset that officers use to classify the applicants as eloquent and convincing, noting that:

what makes a difference between a good and a bad story, is the level of education. If you've got a good education, you've probably got a better memory and you can make a deeper story, more background to it.

Immigration Officer⁶⁹

The belief that the higher the education of the individual, the better articulated the story and the more believable the narrative is a fundamental principle within the service that suggests a well-articulated story is more likely to have happened. Yet, skepticism remains that a well-articulated story will not necessarily be considered more truthful, as a high-ranking UK officer pointed out, 'whether you're educated to class five or ten or to graduate level, I don't believe this determines your ability to be truthful'.⁷⁰ Hence, despite an overriding message of disbelief, officers have a clear preference for interviewing educated applicants, relating mostly to their professional roles in processing people:

if you are dealing with educated people, then it's reasonable...to expect that they will present their claims in a more structured and more cogent way.

Her Majesty's Inspector⁷¹

There is also the shared belief that the more education an applicant displays the more likely they are to pass this 'exam', so the more challenging the questions should be. What's more, officers tend to recognise certain sympathy towards educated and refined individuals:

⁶⁸ DI/V-P2-218:219-IO

⁶⁹ DI/V-UK5-AR00-IO

⁷⁰ DI/V-P11-203:204-IO

⁷¹ DI/V-UK2-AR00-12-HMI

I wondered afterwards whether I was prejudiced in their favour because they were both educated and sophisticated, and, although this is the wrong word, they were kind of refined people

Chief Immigration Officer ⁷².

Similarly, officers expect applicants who are well educated to be able to answer these tougher questions, and failing to fulfil the expectations will result in further disbelief:

I was interviewing someone last week and I just got a bit fed up with it and this girl had been to university and I said you're telling me that you are university educated, and yet you have no idea in what country you would have got on a train to come here?

Chief Immigration Officer ⁷³

Evidently, where the education of the applicant generates a negative label, officers would neglect to consider that other factors might have influenced the applicant's ability to present their story coherently. Although asylum seekers tend to attempt to improve their self-delineated image in interview scenarios (Goffman 1961b), most officers believe that applicants 'underplay their education when they arrive'⁷⁴ as they know that if they show they have been better educated they will be given a harder interview. This implies that applicants are creating a false persona for the interview. Education is, therefore, a label that can also prove to be detrimental to the application depending on the officer's overall assessment. This is also the case of another important label grounded on the person, that of self-presentation, which relates to the individual's comportment before, during and after the interview, in the attitude and the appearance of the applicants, their so-called demeanour.

The demeanour⁷⁵ of the applicant during the interview is considered by officers as important information to determine the truthfulness of the

⁷² DI/V-UK5-AR00-12-IO

⁷³ DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

⁷⁴ DI/V-P12-388:388-CIO

⁷⁵ This refers to the application of demeanour as identified by Goffman (1967) in his study on 'The Nature of Deference and Demeanor', in: *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*,

story. Officers use demeanour⁷⁶ diagnostically to evidence whether an applicant is lying or telling the truth, associating it to what they believe the applicant is generally like at other times and as a performer of other activities. Closely linked to education, demeanour is a more subtle concept that officers apply almost as a second nature to their work. This appears as such a vacuous concept that when officers are asked about the relevance of the applicant's appearance and attitude, they tend to categorically deny any link between these elements and the criteria used to judge applicants:

Occasionally you will conduct an interview and you will make a judgment about that person but I mean, I've done a lot of interviews recently but I couldn't tell you a lot about the people interviewed, for example, what they're like as personalities. But appearance? No, no, it never really occurs to me, doesn't really register what people wear or anything like that.

Immigration Officer⁷⁷

Clearly, not only does this officer deny that classification of applicants by their manners or physical characteristics takes place, but he also denies that this has ever crossed his mind, let alone shaped any of his judgements. Yet the idea that someone's 'first impression' may have an effect on officers' criteria was something more openly admitted, as a high ranking officer explains:

If someone makes a very good impression straightaway, that may well influence your acceptance or non-acceptance of their claim.⁷⁸

Hence, whilst not stated explicitly, the impression of the applicant, based on appearances and demeanour, has an impact that is taken for granted, which reinforces, how essential the first minutes of the interview are in influencing an officer's decision on deserving or undeserving applicants.

Doubleday, Garden City, New York, pp. 47–95.

⁷⁶Demeanour is an important aspect of studies on social identification of deviant behavior and interviewing situations (see Loffland, 1969) comparable to the asylum interview. In studies about police and court interviewing it is particularly evident how relevant the demeanour of the actors is during contact with 'imputation specialists' (see Piliavin and Briar 1964).

⁷⁷DI/V-UK-P14-301:303-IO

⁷⁸DI/V-UK-P11-159:160-IO

However, this is still difficult to admit as the same officer who in the previous quote denies demeanour would ever be a factor, would later make the following claim:

I think it's to do with that person's general demeanour, how they say things, how upset they feel but they could just be good actors of course.

Immigration Officer⁷⁹

This illustrates the extent to which 'professional knowledge' is applied uncritically as an objective truth, revealing that as officers become more invested in the descriptions of their professional roles, some labels that are difficult to justify, such as demeanour, openly surface as a determining factor.

To comply with the 'normal' label of demeanour officers expect applicants to appear miserable and downtrodden. There is a shared belief that if you are a refugee you must look unhappy, regardless of your culture, personal situation or even how relieved you might be to arrive in a safe country. This is shaped by the ethnocentric Western belief that refuge is a form of charity, and that those arriving should be effectively destitute. Yet, a story will not necessarily be more credible because an applicant looks miserable, but the story of a cheerful smiling person will certainly be treated with skepticism. If those applying for asylum are begging for help from the country, they should, in the eyes of the officers, also look 'in need'.

The labels attached to the display of emotions of the asylum seekers are indeed ambiguous, but are always chosen to suit the argument of the officers. If the officer is suspicious, perhaps because of the applicant's country of origin or gender, the display or absence of emotions is likely to support such a suspicion. Moreover, the way someone is dressed will give officers clues as to whether a person really is in need, or whether their claims should be doubted. For instance, an officer talks about African applicants dressed like Europeans:

You have the Somalis who I would say are all European residents and I can only imagine they're coming over here for benefits or whatever but I don't see them as asylum seekers anyway. You can't take those people seriously,

⁷⁹ DI/V-UK5-AR00-18-IO

we see the way they're dressed when they arrive, they haven't just come from Mogadishu, not by the way they're dressed.

Immigration Officer ⁸⁰

This officer is stating that because an asylum seeker is not dressed as would be expected for an 'African', this creates doubts about the suitability for asylum and suspicions that they might already reside in Europe reaching the conclusion that they are 'here for benefits', all based on the appearance of the applicant. Not only is the applicant not dressed as an 'African' but he or she is not dressed as an asylum seeker should be in the eyes of the officer; either in traditional clothing or simply in a careless or scruffy way. A perspective that is reproduced day in, day out by the officers as a group, yet is still not considered to be a stereotyping exercise but rather the application of professional knowledge.

Another relevant aspect is what is perceived as a positive or negative attitude of the applicant, most particularly during the interview. Officers take a story told in a confident manner in a positive way, as a good sign especially, as this officer explains:

If the applicant lets you ask the questions and when they answer, they restrict themselves to answering the questions and it's a logical thought out response.

Immigration Officer ⁸¹

Yet in the same way as education leads officers to expect a more straightforward interview, demeanour is only positive if it makes the officer's job easier. When demeanour complicates an officer's job it becomes a negative label, as the same officer, who has been working at ports for more than fifteen years, goes on to illustrate how:

Some people give the same answer to all the questions so at that time you'll be thinking, oh come on, let's get moving on this one.

Immigration Officer ⁸²

⁸⁰DI/V-UK-P18-546:560-IO

⁸¹DI/V-UK-P14-343:344-IO

⁸²DI/V-UK-P14-343:344-IO

The majority of officers do not take into account the disorientation of the applicant and only a few officers ever expressed this as a reason for why asylum seekers might not present their story fully. However, even these officers expressed the extent to which frustration could lead to a negative label being applied to the applicant's story:

I think particularly when you get into some African cases you can sense that they just haven't got any detail. They can't, you can ask for it until you're blue in the face but they can't give you it. They can't tell you where it was or they can't tell you what day it was, because they just don't remember, they don't know. Of course that'll lead to frustration with some immigration officers. I'm sure most officers will think they are being deliberately sort of evasive and not answering the questions but I'm sure it's not the case at all. Chief Immigration Officer ⁸³

Clearly the applicant's demeanour is an important label for officers to classify asylum seekers, and furthermore will provide an officer with a frame through which to rationalise other criteria. When a label is conferred from the demeanour of the applicant that inhibits the process of extracting information, it will confer a negative label. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this label is how most officers have a very clear idea about how someone distressed, nervous or anxious should present themselves. In this regard, the idea of a 'good case' is almost always associated with the applicant's demeanour, or more specifically in how this relates to how straightforward it will make the officer's job. Officers believe they can spot a genuine case immediately not just because they fulfil subsequent criteria, such as the inclusion of details, but because of the way asylum seekers tell their stories:

I would say the genuine, most genuine cases would be able to give an interview within ten minutes. Because they would go straight to the detail if they could in ten minutes. They would be able to tell you what it's all about. I don't know, it's not just what they're saying, it's the way they say it as well.

Immigration Officer ⁸⁴

⁸³ DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

⁸⁴ DI/V-UK-P18:139-513:528-IO

Following this logic, presented by an officer that has worked in the organisation for more than twenty-two years, the more senior an officer is, the more their 'eye' is tuned to determine the truthfulness of a story at a glance. Clearly the applicant's overall presentation of themselves influences much of their rationalisation through other criteria. This is also in line with classic behavioural studies, which has shown that the demonstration of personality traits (such as being warm, cold, detached or otherwise) has a powerful effect on how subsequent information ascribes meaning in forming an impression of the subject (Asch 1946). The idea that officers ascribe wider assumptions about asylum seekers in their everyday life from their general demeanour within 'ten minutes' of the interview is certainly worrying for asylum seekers. Inevitably the application of this label comes from the officer's intuition.

The construction of all these labels guides officers towards determining the credibility of a narrative and of the individuals that seek asylum. They are applied in common grounds, and also in a coherent and consistent way by the great majority of officers. They reveal a clear pattern of criteria for decision-making grounded on the so-called professional knowledge. Yet, from the country of origin and gender roles that officers apply to groups on a large scale, down to the personal labels that arise from factors like demeanour and education, officers always leave room for professional interpretation. Officers believe that almost everything that is said can be a fabrication, and this is most evident in cases where a positive label might be initially conferred. When the narratives and the applicants fulfil all expectations there is always a sense of professional instinct whose opaque rationale is only meaningful to the immigration service, extending beyond commonly held stereotypes and even the most basic 'truths' that are attached to each label. When immigration officers are asked how they would recognise that a perfect applicant was deceptive at any asylum interview, with a narrative that contained all their requested criteria, the answer was linked to professional knowledge. Whilst the majority of officers are reticent in articulating explicit labels to determine credibility of a story, they were all clear that their expert instincts and their professional knowledge served to legitimate their criteria.

The Be All and End All: Officer's Intuition

I would not know how to tell you but you do feel it, you just know it.
Immigration Officer⁸⁵

The criteria applied by officers to label asylum seekers discussed in this chapter are formed by complex aspects of the applicant and of the narrative, which officers perceive as clues. These 'clues', as evidenced, when analysed closely are essentially the result of a labelling process constituted by prejudices and the construction of the other, saturated by an inherent ethnocentrism and androcentrism. These are grounded on the duality of culturally constructed identity traits, such as those relating to gender, religion, education and origin. There are pre-conceptions integral in officers' construction of 'the other', which they interpret as certainties to define an applicant's credibility (Zanna and Olson 1994). These labels are indeed the lowest common denominator of officers' criteria, yet they are not the only ones that officers apply. Beyond these essentialist prejudices, there are further sets of criteria, which it is assumed, that experienced officers learn to identify through the complex indicators only they can observe in the interview. To officers, these further factors are not perceptible to everyone and involve a more professional understanding and a good comprehension of the subculture. To unravel the concealed clues that may reveal further information, officers believe that they must apply an 'intuitive attribute', based on their own experiences and professional knowledge.

Instances of how these hidden labels are constructed and applied, have been interwoven throughout this chapter and contribute to show officers' rationalisation of their decisions. Officers operate by the subcultural double standards of applying a negative rationalisation to almost all aspects of a narrative, alongside being dependent on assumptions and expectations that are subjectively constructed about how the asylum seeker must behave. Yet, when these two fundamental aspects of their rationale coincide to create a perfect story, officers are still able to establish further reasons to disbelieve, resorting to their professional intuition. Interestingly, whilst this could

⁸⁵ DI/V-UK-P1- 232:233-IO

be deemed the most subjective and abstract criteria, the use of so-called professional instinct, or intuition, is the one openly recognised by all officers:

I guess at some point you get the feeling that something's wrong, the story, you know, feeling yeah, everything makes sense but there's something wrong in this story.

Her Majesty's Inspector⁸⁶

What this Senior Chief Officer refers to as 'the feeling' is precisely what is explored in this last section. Officers struggle to articulate what they mean by this 'intuitive feeling' they invariably refer to the 'fact' that you 'just know. I would not know how to tell you but you feel it, you just know it.'⁸⁷

Officers refer to intuition as a 'sixth sense' that they hold for unravelling truths. It is so 'natural' for officers that the only requirements to apply such intuition are professional sense and experience. However, when referring to the basis of their 'feelings' as being professional common sense, this does not necessarily denote social common sense⁸⁸ but rather a label re-constructed within the organisation. Building on Cicourel's arguments, the 'common sense' to perceive and interpret the world is just an assumption of the world as it appears at a specific time and place. As for officers' professional common sense, it is just a way for the actors to construct their daily existence by a set of proven recipes (Cicourel 1973). Officers' common sense is based on their own work and social experiences, within the immigration service subculture. The mere fact that a story is perfect is very difficult to use as a reason for considering the story false, and it is in these cases that officers' 'intuition' becomes relevant:

I can assure you that you feel it perfectly, but I mean totally, you can see when they are crying as a crocodile or not because in addition they often haven't any tears.

Her Majesty's Inspector⁸⁹

⁸⁶DI/V-UK2-AR00-13-HMI

⁸⁷DI/V-UK-P1- 232:233-IO.

⁸⁸For further discussion of the concept of 'social common sense' refer to Cicourel (1973).

⁸⁹DI/V-UK-P1-382:385-IO

The argument that they just ‘feel it’ is in most cases as far as the rationalisation of their criteria will go, informing officers as to whether someone is not telling the truth about their country, to ‘feeling’ that someone is just pretending to cry:

In the case of Kosovo and Albania I guess at some point you get the feeling that something is wrong, the story, you know? You feel it, everything makes sense but there’s something wrong in the story.

Her Majesty’s Inspector⁹⁰

The fact that most labels could be applied by resorting to a ‘feeling’ underlines that these labels are simply a justification of the application of racialised prejudices, institutionalised within the subculture, lacking any legal reference beyond the target of denying applicants. An explicit illustration of this is that officers often may have this feeling towards a particular country rather than towards specific individuals:

I think particularly when you get into African cases you can sense that, you know that they are lying.

Immigration Officer⁹¹

Although the justification for their criteria is inevitably the application of the cumulative labels and stereotypes taken from previous cases. It is also notable how officers often use their ‘intuition’ even before the applicant begins the narrative, even before they start talking, relating to criteria based on the country of origin or on appearances: ‘Well, instinctively you get yourself ‘on guard’, you take into account the country of origin and so on’.⁹² This internalisation and the magnitude of this ‘feeling’ is immense, and so is its potential effect on officers’ final decisions:

You feel it, you feel it perfectly, I could be wrong, but in case of doubt I would say it [the narrative] is false.

Immigration Officer.⁹³

⁹⁰ DI/V-UK2-AR00-12-HMI

⁹¹ DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

⁹² DI/V-UK-P2-421:428-IO

⁹³ DI/V-UK-P1:239-IO

Another important aspect of this intuition is the cohesive value it has for the group, as it is the consensus amongst members of the group that validates this behaviour (Zanna and Olson 1994). Officers tend to justify their intuition and feelings on the experiences of fellow officers: 'Well, I actually got this feeling from other colleagues that feel the same thing'.⁹⁴ This sharing of the feeling with colleagues confers a higher degree of legitimacy and acceptance of the concept of 'intuition' within the group. The feeling or intuition is based on shared group values, criteria or formulae that are not only accepted but in fact consolidated by common professional knowledge.

Evidence shows also some exceptions, in cases when officers expressly detach themselves from the shared conception of having a 'feeling'. This occurs with assumptions that may appear just too radical to some individuals making them feel uncomfortable:

There are a lot of people in the job who feel that these people have no rights, full stop.

Immigration Officer⁹⁵

In the same exceptional way, some officers may use the 'feelings' to the benefit of the applicant:

There are some stories that don't really make sense but you may have the feeling that it is authentic, somehow.

Immigration Officer⁹⁶

These, however, are exceptions that highlight even more the common acceptance of the opposite negative use of 'feelings' in the classification of asylum seekers. Either way, whether they are referring to intuition, feeling or instinct, officers are resorting to abstract means for legitimising all previous criteria without a need for elaborating on their rationalisation. This enables officers to subjectify asylum seekers to a labelling process whose professional goal is to reduce numbers. Officers apply these criteria, clues and labels falling back on their 'professional knowledge', fully legitimised by a subculture that, in addition, provides a cohesive function for the group.

⁹⁴DI/V-UK5-AR00-IO

⁹⁵DI/V-UK5-AR00-IO

⁹⁶DI/V-UK-P13-596:598-IO

Enforcing the Normal Type

As this chapter has argued and evidenced, both the immigration service and the asylum screening process rely on a well-established subculture whose professional drive is the efficient processing of asylum applications, directed towards cutting numbers. The lack of any factual inference of official guidelines or legislations generates the need to procure a so-called professional knowledge within which all norms, rules and rubrics are established. In this transformation the nature of the asylum interview changes as the subculture takes over the everyday process of the interview; replacing the initial information-gathering approach with the confession-obtaining method (Stephenson and Clark 1997). The arguments put forward by classic scholars such as Schur (1971) are corroborated here, to demonstrate that labels applied within specific organisations become actual rules for the group.

An archetypal asylum seeker is constructed through the everyday practices to become the guiding principle behind the interview. The connection of official perspectives with the 'folk devil' image validates officers' views on the ground, giving a sense of credibility to their so-called professional knowledge. Even before the interview starts, a number of labels related to the setting of the interview and the profile of the individual are being applied. The extent to which these labels are subculturally defined by Western prejudices about other cultures, poisoned by the sediments of racism, colonialism and the construction of 'the other' (Solomos 2001) is evident in this process. The feelings of mistrust and suspicion are used as the ultimate rationale for officers' 'intuition' on asylum interviews, and are nourished by the normative public discourse about suspicion of asylum seekers. Yet, to those working at the 'site', labelling based on country of origin, religion or sex-gender roles is not of a moral concern, but rather an exercise connected to 'professional knowledge'. Furthermore, this vision of the world is firmly deposited in the control logics of the 'site', presenting itself as the only rationale to get the job done.

This labelling process has a direct effect on officers' criteria and on their predisposition towards the outcome of the interview. Besides, the analysis of the content of the interview and the negotiation of reality that takes place, reveals how officers' criteria develop into preconditioned expecta-

tions on the asylum seekers' narratives, through which the credibility of the applicants is determined.

This is a process that takes place within the routine of implicit norms predetermined within the immigration service subculture, underlining the importance of immigration officers' sharing of common rules, norms and 'professional recipes' for screening asylum seekers (Cicourel 1973; Cicourel and Knorr-Cetina 1981). In addition, these common values serve the cohesive function of the groups' professional role in reducing immigration figures. As a subculture 'the very survival of the central patterns of the group may depend heavily upon the kinds of support that the subculture can provide' (Schur 1971, 77–78). The support of colleagues and experienced officers is crucial not just in the formative weeks on the job, but in the social reproduction of the officers' worlds. This involves not only sharing unofficial rules and norms, but also using common linguistics and techniques to conceptualise the stock of their knowledge. This 'concealed' agreement on particular values and norms not only supports the subculture but also helps to ensure the approved actions of all members. The labels officers depend on become fundamental to controlling their behaviour in making asylum decisions.

In exposing the way immigration officers' criteria is developed from the application of specific labels, this chapter has unravelled the complex labelling process of classifying applicants into undeserving and deserving asylum seekers. However, the way in which these labels and criteria are woven together to arrive at an overall judgement is still to be reviewed. This is the essence of the next segment of the interview, when the information is powerfully consolidated for officers to reach not only their concluding decisions, but also with the accountability for such outcomes. A critical step into the heart of the process of asylum screening that is revealed and analysed when scrutinising the *subculture of disbelief* in Chap. 6.

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6

A Subculture of Disbelief

To Believe

I just think it's like if you are sitting here opposite me and you.
Either you believe what I'm telling you or you don't believe it.

Chief Immigration Officer¹

Grounded on the previous analysis of the asylum interview at borders, which has evidenced how officers develop complex criteria to construct asylum seekers' narratives, this chapter explores the way this process is standardised, consolidated and reproduced within the immigration service subculture. The formation and application of the criteria officers use are critical to the outcome of the interview, as part of a wider rationale that will justify to the subculture, and to officers themselves, whether applicants are deserving or undeserving. To this aim, officers reach a stage when they must interlock all their labels as pieces of a perfect puzzle, in order to rationalise their decisions and reach a conclusive outcome. In this exercise the concept of credibility becomes essential, providing the

¹ DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

glue that officers use to hold together all their observations about the truthfulness of the applicant and the story:

Well, I think a good indicator is the person's general credibility.
Immigration Officer²

This chapter argues how, beyond the making of decisions, the weight of the immigration service subculture is essential, not only for asylum seekers but also for the immigration officers themselves. Following the analysis of the decision-making exercise, the extent to which officers are responsible for the consequences of their actions unravels how, paradoxically, the subculture relies on the denial of the exercise of deciding. This denial is legitimised by organisational structures, which, in turn, generate a detachment between officers and the outcomes of their actions. This legitimised detachment, coupled with the legal gap to justify decisions, implies that officers are not only allowed, but actually forced to generate alternative rationales corresponding to their professional roles. This has a further effect by which the sense of disengagement and lack of accountability that officers feel towards actors on the outside of the subculture further contributes to consolidate their collective accounts.

In the exercise of their professional role, officers' responsibility and accountability is not directed to the asylum seekers but to the immigration service and the organisation. Officers' responsibility is almost invariably related to their feelings of professional duty, and the immigration service subculture proves to be at the core of such duty. Regardless of any sense of potential conflict, the practices of immigration officers are shown to effectively reproduce the organisational goals of reducing immigration numbers. Besides, as mentioned, the autonomy of this process serves as a cohesive element (Simmel 1966) that defines the group boundaries and directs actions. In order for the group to reach this bonding point it must first ensure that all members of the group subscribe to the same routines (Goffman 1967), directing the processes of labelling to become the basis

²DI/V-UK-P11:126-IO.

of the final decisions. These routines also reflect the concealed labelling practices that officers use to determine claims, presented in Chap. 5, and return to the legitimised techniques, most particularly those relating to the concept of credibility.

However, despite the powerful evidence of the subcultural detachment and denial, which shelters officers from the legal responsibility for their actions, there are still cases where personal subjective accountability emerges:

He was killed in the airport when he got off the plane. I mean, that is hard to live with.

Chief Immigration Officer³

Whilst most officers toe the line, alienating themselves from the outcomes, a few agents like this chief immigration officer above, express the heavy consequences that the decision-making process carries at a personal level.

Credibility: From Labels to Decisions

The first thing is to establish general credibility, something more ethereal, more general, you know? So that you think, ‘this thing he is telling me is impossible’.

Chief Immigration Officer⁴

As established, officers require a set of common standards that they are able to refer to when rationalising their decisions. Following the introduction that new recruits receive during training,⁵ officers’ attempts to rationalise decisions tend to return to the concept of credibility, much related to their understanding of a narrative’s *coherency* and *consistency*. Credibility is established as the guiding principle within the subculture by which an officer makes a decision referring to the truthfulness of the applicant’s story. The importance given to this term is such that the language of the subculture often refers to the initial asylum interview as the

³ DI/V-P12:107- 687:695-CIO.

⁴ DI/V-UK-P2:183:192-IO.

⁵ For further analysis of the training course for new recruits refer to Chap. 4.

‘credibility interview’. Accordingly, in training this is presented as the main avenue for determining asylum ‘truths’. Yet, on the ground, officers find it difficult to explain how they establish such credibility, as seen in the previous quote, particularly to those on the outside of the subculture. Consequently, regardless of the importance of the concept to the officers, it is only through exploring further issues that their idea of credibility becomes more fully defined.

Officers deem a story to be credible depending on how likely or unlikely it is to have happened, when compared to their standards and own experiences. As officers often start from the premise that whatever they are told in the interview is unlikely to have happened in the first place, overcoming this ‘fact’, is a major obstacle for the asylum seeker. This is especially the case where officers’ essentialised views of society and their expectations on ‘normal behaviours’ set the limits for what they believe is possible, and thus credible, in a story.⁶

I’m not saying that people of other cultures have different values but I think that if you, if you all have the same basic values, the same set of beliefs, it helps with general integration, you all know where you’re going. But no, I suppose there are so many different strands. A lot of people seem to worry that this country is being, in inverted commas, taken over wholesale by Islam. I get a lot of this at home from my mother who is a very devout Polish Catholic. You must be used to this. She genuinely doesn’t believe she’s prejudiced but she doesn’t like Muslims, she doesn’t like Sikhs, she doesn’t, it’s not the colour, it’s, I suppose it’s the face. And I do see her point of view and I see the point of view of people who go on about rivers of blood and things like that.

Immigration Officer⁷

To officers things that do not conform to their socio-cultural expectations lack credibility, which they often refer to as not ‘making sense’ to them. Most officers, for instance, would consider how likely it is that an applicant claiming to have been in a hideout for weeks without food, has actually lived that event, based on their socio-cultural understanding and

⁶A further analysis is given of the ways that officers construct and use the concept of credibility in relation to their professional knowledge in Chap. 5.

⁷DI/V-UK5-AR00-IO.

personal awareness and internalisation of that experience. If these criteria along with other expectations are not met, the story will be considered false, creating another reason to doubt:

Well, you must take into account that they always have perplexing stories, they always have contradictions, they always have obscure points, but they may also have certain logic within the story, they must have a certain internal logic.

Chief Immigration Officer⁸

Credibility relates to what seems to be ‘logical’ or ‘normal’ to the officers. So a story needs to be logical for officers in order to be considered credible and ultimately deserving. On these lines, despite admitting that asylum stories are ‘naturally’ chaotic, with contradictions and obscure points, officers still wear the rose-tinted glasses of ‘common sense’⁹ to extract some logic from the chaos. Previously formed labels about certain countries and cultural contexts, for instance, are used as ‘prior knowledge’ to judge the overall credibility of the contextual coherence within stories. This is then questioned against officers’ ‘logic’ to rationalise whether the story even took place:

The individual tells you that he has come from Nigeria, all the way by car, and you say ‘excuse me but that can’t be’, and they say; ‘but yes, yes, I have come all the way by car’, and you say ‘excuse me but you must have boarded the car on a boat elsewhere’, and they say; ‘no, I have come just by car’, and that is it then.

Immigration Officer¹⁰

In this case an experienced officer attempts to explain how the concept of coherence and credibility works in practical terms at the borders, always determined by an officer’s establishment of what can and cannot be. The fragility of a concept of credibility is most evident in cases of rape or torture, where officers may deny alleged events could have taken place, usually because of pre-attached labels, like emotional displays, and as such

⁸ DI/V-UK-P2:36-82:86-IO.

⁹ For a further debate on the meaning of ‘common sense’ within the immigration service subculture, and its connotations for officer’s decisions see Chap. 5.

¹⁰ DI/V-UK-P1022-51:64-IO.

these are considered in a negative light.¹¹ Even in cases where physical evidence is presented to support the claims of abuse,¹² officers' 'logic', 'coherence' and 'common sense' still prevails in determining credibility:

Can you establish that it is genuine? Because in certain locations, certain countries, official looking documentation can be produced at the drop of a hat, it's very difficult to say what is genuine and what's not genuine.

Chief Immigration Officer¹³

As shown in Chap. 5, despite being one of the few objective indicators that asylum seekers can present, much physical evidence can be used to the detriment of the narrative. This is accentuated further at this stage, when the label is combined with other clues or labels in order to reach a decision.

The Importance of 'Making Sense'

Coherence and 'making sense' are vague aspects that officers use to substantiate and confirm their overall explanation of 'credibility'. Despite being blurred and ambiguous ideas officers still treat them as determining factors to establish credibility, as they appear to further legitimate the subcultural 'professional knowledge'. As new recruits are recurrently reminded, it is 'professional knowledge' that they use to judge whether the story is accurate and 'true'. Most officers, like this one who has worked at ports for more than twenty years, believe that it is from their experience that they are able to make objective determinations on any aspect of a story:

¹¹ For a further discussion of how immigration officers deal with cases where rape or torture are raised by the claimant, see Chap. 5.

¹² This is also evidenced in relation to the DFT and the negative rationalisation of evidence within the immigration service. In one such case, despite documentary evidence presented to support that the applicant had been tortured, the caseworker denied the events even took place noting that the evidence of torture did not prove this had happened to the applicant. As the event was not accepted as having taken place at all, the officer denies that the rest of the story happened either.

¹³ DI/V-UK15-AR00-CIO.

I believed every word of what he was telling me, I have a knowledge of the country so I just wrote, 'I believe this person's story'.

Immigration Officer¹⁴

When pressed for answers, officers almost invariably raise the consistency or coherency of the applicant's story, often used interchangeably, as the main reason for their decision on credibility,¹⁵ or the lack of it. A subtle difference exists between these two terms, with coherence relating more to a case 'making sense' at face value, while consistency tends to refer to the recurrence of facts within the story and the uniformity of the narrative. Officers do not find these criteria difficult to disclose as they consider them to be part of a rational 'skill set' for conducting interviews. Officers overlook, evidently, that these 'facts' are substantiated by applying labels and use either coherence or consistency to deconstruct the applicant's narrative. For instance, once all labels have been applied, officers explain that if the 'facts' change at different points of the interview, the narrative loses its credibility. Yet, as with other labels, the negative rationale prevails and a coherent/consistent story may be considered true, but an incoherent/inconsistent story will be deemed a false story:

Because then they mix lies with truths and create inconsistencies. So we can see that by 'creating inconsistencies' the applicant is making the story unbelievable.

Immigration Officer¹⁶

Moreover, for a story to be considered credible, this cannot have any doubtful part at any point of the narrative. Moreover, what is often perceived as a combination of truths and lies will make the story inconsistent, hence not credible. For instance, in relation to coherence, the applicant's ability to remember a logically sequenced story is a key factor:

¹⁴DI/V-UK-P18:66-588:590-IO.

¹⁵In more 'straightforward cases' officers would sometimes distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' cases as a simpler means of rationalising their decision. This is usually in cases where officers find applicants' story to be manifestly unfounded, e.g. in the case where an applicant clearly states economic grounds for applying, and where a negative label could be conferred almost straight away. In some European countries, such as Spain, the manifestly unfounded clause has been used to pre-screen asylum seekers, thus making decisions on who has and who has not the right to seek asylum (Jubany 2006).

¹⁶DI/V-UK-P37:54-267:269-IO.

If they can't remember when, the place or other important things of the case, it is likely that the claim lacks credibility. These are very important things and they should definitely remember them.

Immigration Officer¹⁷

A lack of coherence calls a story into question not only because all the pieces have to fit together, but also because the right amount of elements have to be included. In this way, once officers have all the pieces of the puzzle, they still rely on their own assumptions to make these conclusions, depending on an extrinsic ability to identify the incoherence and inconsistencies in narrative acquired from their experience. Accordingly, once a multitude of labels are applied officers will use coherence or consistency as a means of determining credibility, 'wrapping up' their reasoned decisions. In using their apparent 'skills' to rationalise their decisions, it is their 'professional instincts' that leads them down the expected path:

Depending on the kind of case, the kind of story, you can give more or less relevance to the details. For instance, the person may be telling you problems with absolute coldness and detachment but precision, so as you see there are cases where it is actually more complicated than that.

Immigration Officer¹⁸

Arguably the value of the coherence ascribed is dependent on factors that officers relate to even more encrypted elements, such as the 'kind of case'. This is all determined by officers, referring to the notions of coherence, consistency and logic, which can be applied to almost any aspect of a case, or a combination of them. What is more, in the same way that officers can dismiss either factor, the narrative has to 'make sense', but not 'too much sense':

You can't necessarily expect them to be able to, you know, to link these things or have them together in this coherent manner. Perhaps the less coherent it is, the more, the more authentic it is. You know?

Chief Immigration Officer¹⁹

¹⁷ DI/V-UK13J-5-IO.

¹⁸ DI/V-UK-P10:48-83:97-IO.

¹⁹ DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO.

However vague and subjective the concept of ‘making sense’ may appear, officers rely on it to determine what makes a story credible, hence an applicant deserving. If a story is coherent, this is credible and vice versa, as when something ‘is plausible it is credible’,²⁰ grounded on experience and common sense, transmitted and consolidated particularly by senior immigration officers, like the following one:

You must have lots of experience, and have spent many hours with them, and listened to many, many stories and many things. It is a lot of experience and common sense. I always say that common sense is fundamental.

Chief Immigration Officer²¹

The use of these concepts is clearly a further way of rationalising unreservedly a decision already made. This is established from the beginning of their experiences in the immigration service; within the training and the first incursions in the field²² where ‘common sense’ is introduced as an objective assessment that officers will only be able to make once they are experienced. Moreover, as officers determine credibility they reconstruct and place together any, and every, aspect of the applicants’ narrative and self-presentation, clearly guided by the norms, values and procedures of the subculture.

Consolidating a Decision: Who Is Deserving?

Considering the subjective and abstract nature of the concept of credibility, it is easy to recognise how its concealed understanding and application serves as a cohesive element for the immigration service subculture. Having completed a complex process of categorisation and labelling, officers reach a point where decisions need to be summed up and legitimated. In these scenarios, credibility and its component parts become the tool that officers use to rationalise their decisions, and ratify them as objective diligent outcomes of their professional skills. At this point, regardless of officers’

²⁰I/V-P34:22-84:84-TO.

²¹DI/V-UK-P2:30-288:290-CIO.

²²For an exhaustive analysis and discussion on officers’ formal training refer to Chap. 4.

insistence on the maturity of experience needed to fully grasp and apply credibility, it is important to recall that it is not through years of experience that the concept emerges. As shown extensively in Chap. 4 the concept of credibility is presented to officers as key in their incursion into the immigration service at the induction course.²³ However, while the ways to assess credibility are communicated to new recruits during training, these explanations only seem to become relevant once an officer has to explain their decisions, and the labelling undertaken as professional knowledge. In this sense, certainly this final step in the interview process engages with a subjective exercise linked to individual trajectories, experiences and perceptions, and closely connected to the officers' 'intuition', as previously discussed.²⁴ This means that even in what officers may consider a perfectly coherent, logical and even 'credible' story there is always a discretionary margin by which an officer makes their final decision, almost inevitably to deny an asylum seekers' 'right to have rights':

Well, I may feel that the law is wrong but they still have the right to claim and if they have the right to claim, they have the right to be.

Immigration Officer²⁵

In proceeding with this decision-making exercise, the most common references are the narratives that officers consider straightforward cases, referring to the so-called bad cases, which unmistakably are not deserving of humanitarian protection.

It's not that I felt that none of them are genuine, but I suppose I see, or I used to see a distinction between political refugees and not necessarily even economic refugees, but just refugees, displaced persons. Thinking of Somalis, I understand why so many of the Somalis were on the move or still are on the move. There's no infrastructure. I understand all that but what they're after is a refuge rather than to be refugees.

Immigration Officer²⁶

²³ Please refer to Chap. 4 for the introduction of the concept of credibility in the induction course.

²⁴ This is further explained and evidenced in Chap. 5.

²⁵ DI/V-UK5-AR00-IO.

²⁶ DI/V-UK5-AR00-IO.

Interestingly, while officers subscribe to the idea that applicants have a ‘right to be heard’, and even when they judge the story to be true, they can still consider the applicant undeserving by placing the focus on the merit of the narrative, according to their own standards. Hence a story may seem credible, logical and coherent to officers, but may still have the wrong background, leaving room for denial. The previous officer, for instance, highlights how Somalia is identified as a country that produces migrants, but explains that these are not refugees, thus they do not have asylum rights.

This paradox further illustrates how credibility is a manufactured indicator, which officers construct to articulate their ‘perception’ of the truthfulness of the story. Officers tend to simply believe or disbelieve a story, based on their own expertise, experience and perceptions. In the same way, their criteria to believe an applicant or not is established by experience within the subculture. A particularly illustrative analogy of these deposits of knowledge is a comparison with common law practices. Accumulation of knowledge within the site that is specific to the way the organisation works is simply followed and accepted by all members, without needing any validation (Cohen 2001). Those unofficial routine practices that have been accepted and internalised by the organisation arising not from the theoretical content of the organisation but from the ‘truths’ officers establish through their own experiences. Officers believe these practices are based on knowledge gathered by having to deal with different daily situations:

You get into a pattern of assuming that everyone who says they’re Kosovan probably isn’t. But we get into routines of being able to deal with that.

Immigration Officer²⁷

Routines become the norms, and the norm becomes the truth, within the subculture, and as such these are transmitted to the new officers, becoming unchallenged practices. These norms are rooted in an officer’s practice that is transmitted and deposited in the ‘site’ over the years until it is perceived as knowledge, which is what ‘prior

²⁷ DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO.

knowledge' means to the subculture. Once experience is established as a norm, it becomes integral to officers' roles. As these experiences are not delimited by any agent independent of the subculture, and although values can be prejudicial, this is seen as a factor of the job, related to 'professional knowledge'. Whilst this does not dismiss the value of their knowledge, it does expose a more pragmatic perspective of 'the way things work' at the border:

I genuinely believe that my prejudices are borne of experience rather than prejudice.

Immigration Officer²⁸

Even admitted Westernised prejudices are not rejected but rather considered to arise from 'professional knowledge' and so an inherent part of the values of the subculture transmitted through meta-narratives and performed by the officers through their actions. These essentialist views on racialised and gendered identities, are not challenged by the new members, nor by experienced officers, and become part of how officers approach the asylum interview:

You tend to see people as stereotypes and that affects everything you do in the job, particularly with asylum.

Immigration Officer²⁹

Knowledge gained by experience can have negative connotations at an abstract level, and can lead to it 'affecting everything in the job', but this does not mean that they are wrong. It is ironic how the six-week training course ultimately pivots on two key elements: a meta-message based on suspicion, fear and mistrust that forms the basis for officers' professional beliefs, and; a means by which officers can 'justify' shared beliefs of the group by referring back to vacuous concepts like credibility to legitimate their decisions.

For the immigration service subculture, as debated extensively in Chap. 5, the set of expectations and norms to follow are mostly constituted by the labelling process applied by officers when deciding on

²⁸ DI/V-UK-P13:328-536:53-7-IO.

²⁹ DI/V-UK-P13:329-546:548-IO.

an applicant's story. However, these remain concealed and instead the mutable and ambiguous concept of credibility is presented by the group as their legitimate way of deciding. This is not only a matter of subscribing to the actual values of the subculture but of a common language used to conceptualise their stock of knowledge, to demonstrate cohesion of its members.

However, as the next section addresses, these decisions are not gratuitous and, once taken, still require a further endorsement action, both personal and institutional. Beyond the fallacy that 'officers don't decide', that is discussed at length in Chap. 2, the subculture provides for a rationalisation of the decision-making exercise grounded on detachment, widening officers' degree of autonomy in how they perform their roles.

Detachment: 'Don't Overthink It'

And the decision was taken, and my decision was wrong, I don't like making wrong decisions. But you know, put it to one side, move on. Learn something from that. Learn something from that and move on.

Chief Immigration Officer³⁰

Regardless of the power that officers hold over all other actors in the interview, the fact is that they do perform a difficult job in very arduous surroundings. In terms of psychological support and counselling, whilst there appears to be some recognition of the mental and emotional strain that immigration officers are subjected to, there is very little discussion or recognition of these types of support, which tend to be organised on an ad hoc basis. This concealment is, in part, because formally officers are not supposed to be dealing with asylum cases nor with the outcomes of these decisions.³¹ So whilst open provisions for psychological support have been recently incorporated for case-workers at UK Visas and Immigration, this type of counselling has not even been considered for immigration officers at ports of entry. When entering the field, the task

³⁰D-UK15-AR00-CIO.

³¹For an extended explanation on the formal and informal responsibility of officers at ports, refer to Chap. 2.

of interviewing asylum seekers is so nerve-racking for new officers that professional support from their colleagues,³² and embracing and applying the ‘professional knowledge’ of the group is critical to being able to perform the job. It is through these interactions that officers learn to detach from the significance of their roles in processing asylum applications, and the potential outcomes.

Don't be burdened, don't burden yourself with this, don't carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, you know? If you do this, if you take this on board, if you take it personally, you'll drive yourself mad.

Chief Immigration Officer³³

However, it is important to note that this detachment does not generate from officers' need and it is not incidental, but results from a mediated strategy by the organisation to shield officers from the outcome of their own decisions.³⁴ This creates a paradox by which the organisation denies whilst legitimates the autonomy of officers' decision-making, forcing them to generate a way to account for the outcomes of their own actions. In reviewing the process of making decisions on the ground, it becomes clear that these governance structures are geared to conceal the accountability of immigration officers on asylum decisions. Effectively, as explained at length in Chap. 2, officers are not obliged to follow individual cases, nor is this possible due to constant political pressure and backlogs in the system. This gap distances officers even more from the ultimate outcome of their roles, further enhancing their detachment from their decisions. This disconnection increases officers' indifference towards asylum seekers and enhances their perception of applicants as statistics rather than individuals, with negative connotations evident, even to the officers themselves:

³² The process of entering the field and the first experiences of professional socialisation are discussed in depth and presented in Chap. 5.

³³ D-UK15-AR00-CIO.

³⁴ This is with the exception of those cases involving deportation or detention of asylum seekers, which are directly endorsed and implemented at ports.

It is most likely that you won't hear of it again, so you spend a lot of time doing this report but then you don't ever know the outcome of it, it is a very bad system but this is how it works.

Immigration Officer³⁵

Officers are placed under great pressure to perform efficiently and the benefits of detachment in this aim are clear. In this regard, some officers express that they would like to be more involved in subsequent case-work but tend to accept the situation as this 'is how it works', sheltering behind organisational protocols. Furthermore, the unawareness of officers about what happens to the asylum seekers once their decision is delivered develops into a lack of empathy and personal involvement on the part of the officers, creating this sense of indifference. This builds on the 'importance of ignorance' as identified by Becker (1973), and correlated with the 'lack of disturbance' by Wright (1984). As many actors may only feel guilt for their actions if they are disturbed by these actions, they choose not to be aware of them. Officers prefer not to be aware of the outcome of their actions so they are not disturbed by them. Yet in many cases this can create a high degree of job dissatisfaction and leads to professional frustration, even at the highest levels of the organisational ladder:

You'll do an interview and you may never see the outcome. Any of us doing a job, we like to do it and then see the outcome. To do an interview and not know what the outcome is, that's not very satisfying.

Her Majesty's Inspector³⁶

However, aside from a lack of job satisfaction and the lack of recognition of their power, which most officers perceive as a weakness inherent in the decision-making process, in general they get used to it and take it as part of the job.

³⁵DI/V-UK-P31:105-411:413-IO.

³⁶DI/V-UK2-AR00-12-HMI.

Coping with the Outcomes: Responsibility and Accountability

No, as an individual I can't feel responsible because I think if you become too personally involved, you're losing, you may lose your objectivity.

Chief Immigration Officer³⁷

As has been argued, the official perspective strongly promotes and maintains the fallacy about officers' lack of liability and need to account for initial asylum decisions. The official line presents officers as bureaucrats, cleared for asylum decisions, forcing them to deny their decision-making power. Yet, there are still reasons why officers may still have the need to account for their decisions. This relates to the personal feelings that officers may have for a case, but is more relevant when it comes to justifying their position about a case in which other actors have been involved, such as legal representatives. In addressing this topic officers raise the idea of being responsible to some degree for their decisions, at a personal level, and introduce the reality of dealing with the consequences of asylum screening rather than with its mere legal parameters.

Constructing Officers' Accounts

In the same way that officers' construction of the asylum seekers' narratives is not an individual action but much more of a complex subcultural process, officers' responsibility for the outcome of the interviews is also formed within the subculture. Building on what Cohen refers to as a communication and learning process of accounts (Cohen 2001), the power of ordinary cultural transmission emerges in officers' accounts. As Cohen explains, an account can be accepted as proper justification just because the majority of the members of the subculture subscribe to it. Furthermore, the fact that the official line does not recognise the need of officers to account for their decisions signals that this can only be communicated and learned as part of 'professional knowledge'.

³⁷DI/V-UK15-AR00-CIO.

There are different ways in which officers construct the accounts on their responsibility for the outcomes of decisions, tending to justify their actions in two different tempered ways, which correspond with Cohen's proposed models:

justifications are accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the act in question but denies the pejorative quality associated with it, whereas excuses are accounts in which one admits that the act in question is bad, wrong or inappropriate, but denies full responsibility (Cohen 2001, 59).

On the one hand, officers argue that their actions are not negative as they do not 'really' affect the lives of asylum seekers. In this instance they accept responsibility for the act, but not for the outcome, by maintaining that their role is inconsequential (Cohen 2001, 59). On the other hand, officers may admit the consequences of the act, but argue that they are not responsible as they are obliged to follow instructions, that they are not to be held accountable, but rather this is the responsibility of their superiors (Cohen 2001, 59). Beyond these general approaches, in line with Cohen's categories of denial (2001),³⁸ officers' accounts can also reveal specific patterns. The first and most common type of denial is a 'denial of responsibility', which is often the route that officers take when initially discussing their responsibility. This is put forward even from those officers that have been in the field for a long time, like this officer that has worked at different ports for more than twenty-two years:

I don't think there's any decision we make when they arrive at our desk that's going to adversely affect them. So I don't think we feel any great responsibility. But we've all, we feel no greater responsibility to an asylum seeker than to anybody else we're dealing with.

Immigration Officer³⁹

³⁸ Before applying these to immigration officers it is noteworthy that Cohen's explanations focus mainly on accounts from those considered deviants because of their actions outside the law, whilst this research focuses on the accounts of those charged with implementing the law. However, immigration officers are still acting outside the main regulations and hence are deviants from the official version of what is supposed to take place within the organisation.

³⁹ DI/V-UK3-AR00-IO.

However, it must be noted that often officers convey a total denial of responsibility, this is not towards the act of deciding but towards the effects this will have on the asylum seekers, linked to a further ‘denial of injury’ (Cohen 2001). This is a type of account geared towards justifying officers’ subjectivity and potential mistakes in their interpretation of a narrative, by declaring that their decisions have no real further consequences. In this regard, officers commonly state that their decisions are totally irrelevant, as these are considered ‘inconsequential’, based on the argument that regardless of what they decide no one is going to be removed from the country anyway.⁴⁰ This is not a denial of the potential impact of the officers’ decisions, but a denial on the fact that these decisions have any real effect at all:

You see, at the end of the day the whole system is geared up to this myth that we are controlling these people and they’re leaving the country and they’re not. So we’re just shuffling paper around. But we all know what the outcome is going to be. This is why I get cheesed off when I hear the government saying you know; we are going to get these decisions made faster because it doesn’t make any difference in the end anyway. The decision gets made and the result is the same.

Chief Immigration Officer⁴¹

This links to a further collective argument for neglecting responsibility, is the ‘denial of the victim’ (Cohen 2001). This is a type of account presented by officers who believe that asylum seekers are not victims at all but rather the system is the victim. Hence, any negative outcome from the screening process is a good outcome for the system. This is linked primarily to the securitisation debate⁴² and the false preconception that the UK has such good welfare state provisions that they are in danger of being exploited by fraudulent applicants. This is based on officers’ conception of refugees and asylum seekers, informed by the securitisation discourse, correlating the issue of national security to wider issues of social, cultural

⁴⁰ Although the number of removals in the UK is not high compared to the number of applications, there are still many asylum seekers deported back to a ‘safe country’ or to their country of origin.

⁴¹ DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO.

⁴² Refer to Lazaridis (2015) for an excellent analysis of the debates on the interpretations and re-interpretations of refuge and asylum.

and human security. There is much evidence that shows how the search for refuge has been reinterpreted over the past thirty years, particularly in the gradual shift from protection to prevention.⁴³ Besides, contemporary practices of exclusion do not simply happen at the border itself but are internalised, politicising and constructing walls around social security and services (Lazaridis 2015, 22). Still, in the UK, as in much of Europe, the image of the asylum seeker has become negatively linked to those who are seen to take advantage of ‘British generosity’. As it has been illustrated by the Brexit campaign, discussed in Chap. 2, which relied on the urge to increase ‘security’ to cover ‘a threat to the social body’ (Masocha and Simpson 2011) and the welfare state:

Tests of economic migration, have always been set by immigration officers, always. That is our stock in trade. And we will still put those tests to people who claim to be asylum applicants because we must look at the same criteria for everybody. But as I said to you a few minutes ago, you mustn’t ever lose sight of the fact that amongst the bogus cases there will be genuine claimants.

Her Majesty’s Inspector⁴⁴

This comes through in most accounts, as officers’ sense of duty is inextricably linked to defending the system. In this sense the meta-narratives, which circulate about asylum seekers as shown, invariably construct a negative image of the group as a whole. This reinforces the idea that asylum seekers are a particular group of passengers who officers professionally need to screen in order to exclude wherever possible:

Well I suppose the main difference is that the initial interview is designed to sort of, it’s fundamentally a pejorative interview, a negative interview from their perspective because we’re trying to find out how we can boot them out. In fact, we’re looking for a way, that’s what all the questions are geared towards you know. I mean you know about the third country, you know, how they operate.

Chief Immigration officer⁴⁵

⁴³For further analysis see Chap. 1.

⁴⁴DI/V-UK2-AR00-HMI.

⁴⁵DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO.

Higher Loyalties

The most common rationale put forward by the officers to justify their roles and behaviour, and present in all rationale exposed so far, is what Cohen (2001) refers to as the ‘appeal to higher loyalties’. The immigration service subculture sustains that officers’ actions are not to be justified before asylum seekers but before the law, organisation or society where an application is made. It is unusual to find an officer who would believe that their actions should, if at all, be accountable to the asylum seekers. Rather, these accounts are usually directed towards the law, the organisation and the country. It is evident that officers recognise, to some degree at least, that they have some responsibility for their decisions:

I don’t feel perhaps completely responsible but I feel that I’m relevant to their claim.

Immigration Officer⁴⁶

Disguising any sense of responsibility towards asylum seekers, officers repeatedly justified the nature of this responsibility by citing their commitments to ‘higher loyalties’ and their sense of duty.

The Letter of the Law

The most common high loyalty that officers would raise is their responsibility to comply with domestic legislation, although this is also the one with the least convincing arguments. Firstly, according to the law, officers are not even supposed to decide; secondly, the law and jurisdiction have very little impact, if any, on the work of immigration officers. As evidenced, most immigration officers are not even aware of the specific regulations included in current asylum legislation,⁴⁷ but tend to refer to it as a general principle. Therefore, when immigration officers use compliance with the law as justification for denying any responsibility for their decisions, they are just presenting an ‘emphy case’:

⁴⁶ DI/V-UK-P:13:179-693:694-IO.

⁴⁷ Officers’ awareness of the law is discussed in more detail in Chaps. 2 and 5. Similarly, Chap. 4 illustrates the lack of relevance of the law as presented in the training course.

I do not feel responsible because I must do my job to comply with very specific procedures that are determined by the law, by the normative. I mean, I am sorry I am such a 'soviet', such a bureaucrat, but I only feel responsible to the law.

Immigration Officer⁴⁸

To present the law as a way of justifying their decisions is so forced, that even for officers themselves it is hardly a convincing argument, but rather an example of the underlying cynicism that often permeates the perspectives of their role:

I am responsible to the extent that I am aware I must be firmly compliant with the proceedings of the law and, well, the truth is that up to now I have my conscience reasonably clean, because I am doing what I have to do, in the way the law tells me to do it.

Immigration Officer⁴⁹

Interestingly, this statement was made by an officer who had previously declared a lack of knowledge on asylum legislation, hence when the officer now refers to the law it is clear that this really means the rules and norms of the subculture.

Commitment to the Organisation

Together with accountability towards the law, being responsible towards the organisation is the second most common argument put forward by officers to account for their decisions. Officers admit to being accountable for the decisions they make to the extent that they have to fulfil the expectations of the organisation:

They are effectively justifying their actions because they have to do their job properly: I suppose you are, you are responsible, you're responsible in a way that you've got to do your job properly.

Immigration Officer⁵⁰

⁴⁸DI/V-UK-P6:170-908:913-IO.

⁴⁹DI/V-UK-P6:21-908:924-IO.

⁵⁰DI/V-UK-P14: 268 -498:499-IO.

However, they tend to admit only to a limited degree of responsibility for their decisions. Moreover, often officers present this ‘organisational justification’ as a way of endorsing their position within the system, and rationalising their lack of personal involvement in their decisions, as a high-ranking officer states:

I would have to say I don't feel personally responsible in terms of asylum applicants but I do feel responsible in terms of the professional attitude of my staff.

Her Majesty's Inspector⁵¹

The recognition of a degree of responsibility to the organisation whilst using the idea of ‘professional attitude’ to deflect personal accountability for the decision, is a common strategy. It is here that the concept of duty becomes very important in dealing with personal accountability (Cohen 2001). As pointed out earlier, officers use the organisation as a shield to protect themselves from dealing with the consequences of their decisions (Cohen 2001). This is regardless of the fact that formally the organisation denies officers’ power to decide and therefore the need to account for their decisions. The paradox of this justification is even greater when we consider that until now ‘the organisation’ did not seem to have any influence on any other sphere of the officers’ actions.

Loyalty to the Country

Finally, officers admit to being accountable for their decisions to the extent that they are responsible for the security of their own country and its citizens. They believe that they must protect their country from so-called false asylum claimants, potential terrorists and outsiders.

As explained in Chap. 5, most officers claim to be able to recognise these so-called false refugees through applying their asylum screening criteria and labelling processes. The reason why officers present these ‘false refugees’ as a threat to the security of the country is mainly because of their

⁵¹ DI/V-UK2-AR00-12-HMI.

alleged association with terrorism and common crime.⁵² Officers perceive part of their role as safeguarding the border from terrorists, making a link between migration and terrorism that is inherent in the securitised narratives present at the border. In any case, this part of their role is not only assumed by officers but is explicitly transmitted during the UK training course, as the following trainer explains:

Of course there are cases where you've got a terrorist who actually has been granted asylum, who might even have blown up a British tourist in some cases.

Chief Immigration Officer⁵³

Officers feel obliged to protect British citizens by keeping the potential threat constituted by asylum seekers out of the country. This argument aims to justify officers' actions, without assuming any direct responsibility for the decision. By stating that the ends justified the means, there was no point in analysing further the consequences of those means. Furthermore, officers' prejudiced and essentialised perspectives often come to the fore when protecting what they see as 'national identity', largely aimed towards difference:

But what I worry about is that Islam seems to be, it seems to be a, I can't think of the word, a militant force, whereas Christianity generally nowadays isn't, if you overlook the Crusades and so on.

Immigration Officer⁵⁴

The idea that officers must protect their country gives them the perfect justification for their potentially 'inaccurate' decisions, and in these instances they appear to fully embrace their role as social control agents:

What happens to some guy, we release him on TA [temporary admission], he's turned up with no passport but we release him on TA and he goes and

⁵² For a further analysis of the association with terrorism and common crime and migration, refer to Chap. 2.

⁵³ DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO.

⁵⁴ DI/V-UK5-AR00-IO.

commits a foul crime somewhere in London. You know? and then who gets it, who takes it in the neck is us, you know?

Chief Immigration Officer⁵⁵

That is to say, officers worry about the possibility of being held accountable for letting ‘criminals’ into the country, and the potential consequences of their actions in this regard. In contrast, few officers seem to have concerns about letting genuine asylum seekers be sent back to their countries, without benefiting from refugee protection. This clearly corroborates the bias that officers display towards denying asylum and how this is attached to their self-perception in protecting the nation from an existential threat, rather than say as a care-giver.

Although only a few officers stated their responsibility towards protecting the country from criminal asylum seekers, this is a core idea rooted within the immigration service subculture. From their training course to their socialisation into the subcultural norms, officers are made to understand that the priority of their job is to prevent asylum seekers from entering the country, rather than to protect them, which is the aim of the principle of asylum and refuge. Through the securitisation debate the concept of ‘security’ has been expanded to more clearly include social, economic and human security, creating a sense of risk attached to letting ‘false asylum seekers’ into the country for a myriad of reasons. This risk is not only about defrauding the system but also about jeopardising citizens’ security:

We do know, I think, I envisage some huge social problems in the UK not because of numbers coming over or economic refugees coming, I mean that might happen anyway, I don’t know, not necessarily. But I can see individual social problems because we don’t know who we’re letting into the country. So there might be somebody today walking around safely in the streets of London who might be dead next week because as we speak, there’s somebody on a train coming to the UK who’s going to tell, who’s a convicted murderer who’s going to tell us, give us a completely different identify and we allowed into the country. Now we don’t who he is coming in. Somebody, somewhere is going to suffer. I’m not talking about riots in the street but I’m talking on an individual basis, I can see great problems which wouldn’t have happened

⁵⁵ DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO.

otherwise if we could have stopped them. But we can't stop it, because we don't know who is coming into the country.

Immigration Officer⁵⁶

Neither the organisation nor the law drives officers to consider what may happen to those asylum seekers sent back to their countries. The idea of officers' higher loyalties is clearly seen in this regard, as officers fear more the potential impact their decisions have on 'citizens' than on asylum seekers. Regardless of the subcultural need to account for officers' actions, officers are not made accountable for the outcome of their decisions by the law and certainly not by the system. As such, officers' accounts for making a decision are constructed within the subculture, based on subjective and unfounded claims about 'asylum and its abuse', permeated by the meta-messages of denial and disbelief. However, in exploring in depth officers' approaches, exceptional voices also appear. As the next section explains, there are very few officers who assume a degree of individual accountability for what may happen to asylum seekers, and feel the need to deal with this personally.

The Courage of Being Responsible

Having identified most of the preconceptions and practices on which the immigration service subculture is founded, it is not difficult to understand that admitting to being responsible for the effects these decisions may have on the asylum seekers' life implies a strong degree of courage. This does not only involve an admission of the individual officer's power but a recognition that the fate of the individual asylum seeker is tied to the actions of the officers. Here, we find a clear distinction in the officers' worlds between *being* responsible and *feeling* responsible, which tends to relate most specifically to personal feelings that may arise from a particular case. This also shows that there is a more 'human' side to the process and that the closer they get to the individual the more likely it is that they are going to feel responsible for him or her:

⁵⁶DI/V-UK3-AR00-IO.

His son, his five-year-old son got up earlier than the rest of them one morning and he went to play outside and I think it was that they had a dog and the dog's throat had been cut and he turned to me and he said in English, having spoken in Kikuyu or Swahili, can you imagine what it does to you when you hear your five-year-old child screaming with horror, seeing something like this. And I kept, I was almost in tears because I could actually see it through my children's eyes.

Immigration Officer⁵⁷

Interestingly, higher-ranking officers tend to assume less personal responsibility for the decisions. An explanation for this may be found in the fact that these officers no longer deal with individuals, but rather they treat applicants as 'paper' cases. The extended ethnography does not show high-ranking officers admitting much personal distress at having to deal with what may happen to asylum seekers once a decision is implemented. For those officers who admitted a degree of concern or remorse, there was no option of further justification. They simply assumed this was an element of their job that could not be renounced and that they had to live with. This was never expressed in a cynical way but rather as a difficult question of conscience that they had to handle in a very personal way. The subculture of disbelief does not address this side of officers' work, instead it seems to overlook or simply hide it, but it certainly does not do away with it.

Actions and Reactions

This chapter has exposed the way in which officers negotiate the reality of the asylum seekers' narratives presented at ports, by using professional constructions, namely coherence and consistency. It has shown how whilst these concepts lack informative content, still they provide officers with the validation that disguises the labelling process, making sense of these as one single outcome. Moreover, regardless of the tendency of officers to present these facets of credibility as the basis for their judgements

⁵⁷ DI/V-UK5-AR00-IO.

in an objective way, evidence shows that when applied on the ground these are 'legitimation strategies' to justify officers' pre-established labels.

As shown throughout the chapter, credibility is a further way of rationalising unreservedly a decision already made. The relevance of this concept of credibility becomes essentialised, as it is seen in the conceptualisation of immigration officers' 'common sense', and further conceived as an objective assessment that officers are only able to make once they are experienced. While credibility does relate to what is 'logic' or 'normal', this is only within the context of the officers' subcultural construction of 'reality' at the border. In this regard, officers' sense of normality is acquired through 'professional knowledge', as a professionalised version of 'common sense'. To officers a normal story has to be logical and then it can start being considered credible and ultimately deserving. It is at this point that officers are able to reach their decisions, masked by a broad rationale that justifies whether applicants are deserving or undeserving individuals.

Beyond this, the sections presented have revealed the cohesive function that these labelling techniques represent for the group, serving the governance purposes of establishing a 'common world view' (Jessop 2002). This places asylum seekers as a threat at the heart of their professional worlds and roles. Sharing of these values and conformity with the use of these protocols and norms strengthens and consolidates the immigration service subculture. Furthermore, the censored nature of the subculture, with limited access to professional worlds, shadows the complex nature of officers' work. The subculture relies, therefore, on an underlying message of mistrust and the assumption that all asylum seekers are lying, consolidating the link between the concept of credibility and the idea of disbelief.

This concealment of officers' work and consequent detachment has, however, a further purpose within the subculture, which relates to the processes of accounting for the decisions made every day, and for the outcomes that these entail. As the evidence put forward has shown, whilst officers do not have to account for their roles in the asylum process at a professional or formal level, on an everyday basis they do. The most common way that they account for their decisions is by appealing to 'higher loyalties', namely through their responsibility towards the law, the

organisation or the country. This shows that at the heart of the subculture a professional rationalisation connecting border roles to a sense of duty is crucial to officers' understandings of their tasks. By and large, it is the sense of duty and the feelings amongst officers that they are performing a noble role in protecting UK citizens from existential threats of all kinds that ensures the complicity of their actions. Moreover, the governance systems ensure officers are never placed in a scenario where they are given the opportunity to discuss responsibility for an asylum seeker's life in the same way. This clearly delineates the lines between citizens' rights and asylum seekers' lack thereof. The degree of autonomy afforded to the subculture in this scenario forces officers to generate their own ways of dealing with asylum from a professional and detached standpoint. Furthermore, as noted, this detachment reinforces officers' standpoint that they are not responsible as they just follow instructions, and so the responsibility lies with their superiors.

In this entangled web of interest, there is also the personal weight of the experience, which comes across occasionally. In these cases, where officers did express concerns about accountability, this was tied to personal feelings and a sense of proximity that was gained during the interview. Although not common within the system, these cases remind us that officers are complex and diverse individuals too, and that the moral distances between them and asylum seekers is not built on indifference or malice. While there are no elements within the organisation or the law that make officers responsible for what happens to asylum seekers, on a personal level this distancing does not always hide the officers' decision-making power.

Not surprisingly, to officers who recognise their power this is the most difficult part of their job, which they have to learn to live with individually, not as professionals. The subculture of disbelief simply does not see the need to, nor does it have the capacity to deal with, such a personalised part of the screening process, and is only related to the professional task and not the officers' private lives. This is emphasised when revising the key subcultural principles and understanding how the system operates as a whole. While concepts of disbelief and mistrust permeate all spheres of contemporary society, particularly around 'folk devils', as the empirical evidence shows.

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7

Pulling Back the Screen

Why do we have a UK immigration control system? one to prevent terrorists and other unacceptable people; two to protect the resident work force; and three to control the rate of immigration.

Immigration Officer¹

The voices and experiences of immigration officers evidence the subcultural world that underpins asylum controls at UK borders. Behind the bureaucratic shield is the alignment of officers' professional interests with government goals in the management of threats constituted by migrants and asylum seekers. The shared objectives are built on the common and assumed beliefs that granting refuge is a dangerous game. The official perspective strongly promotes and presents officers as bureaucrats, cleared of asylum decisions, leaving them with no legal provisions to enforce their decision-making power. Instead, it is the

¹DI/V-UK-P32:81-208:212-IO

denial and disbelief of asylum seekers' stories, rationalised through the detection of lies and the application of 'professional knowledge' that leads their actions. So whilst frontline agents 'feel responsible to the law',² with a strong sense of duty and loyalty, what they mean by 'law' does not refer only to the strict jurisprudence frameworks, but to the imperatives that emerge from the wider world of border control. The normative idea that the law generates power holds little meaning on the ground, particularly in the organisational context of the site, where officers' discretionary powers and autonomy of actions are legitimated within a web of higher authorities and interests.

In place of the 'law' are the organisational structures and subcultural values that frame officers' duties and actions at the borders. In this exercise, the Home Office umbrella plays a cardinal role in establishing and maintaining the fallacy that immigration officers don't decide on asylum cases, purporting that theirs is an inconsequential task in the processing of asylum seekers. The letter of the law falls far short of disclosing the true nature of officers' roles in the bordering of asylum, particularly through the screening interview. This is clearly seen when exploring officers' discussions regarding accountability and responsibility in asylum screening. The bureaucratic system removes the influence of their actions from asylum screening outcomes. This generates a degree of detachment, strategically developed through governance structures, to provide officers with a rationale to disconnect from the outcomes of asylum applications. The fallacy that officers don't decide ensures that they rely on a legal buffer between the outcome of an interview and their significance in the process. This, however, also generates feelings of frustration and resignation towards the job, which tints the atmosphere of the whole subculture. Moreover, this disregard widens the distance between the political and enforcement levels, reinforcing the development of autonomous spheres of interest:

They make all these policies but they don't really know what's happening on the ground, and it is just not right.

Immigration Officer³

²DI/V-P6:170-908:913-IO.

³DI/V-UK-P16:150:561-IO

In this context, while the majority of officers reflect on their role in the organisation playing down their impact in decision making, others struggle to carry the weight on their own shoulders. There are the few officers that are not able to disengage from the dramatic outcomes that asylum decisions at ports may entail, particularly in cases where it involves detention of individuals. Despite the fact that detention practices had not yet become normalised within the service⁴ the idea of detention still posed serious concerns:

I mean the detention thing is, the detention issue is really one of complete and utter inconsistency. You know, they just are so inconsistent. They haven't got proper grounds for doing it. They won't tell you what they are.

Chief Immigration Officer⁵

The fact that deserving asylum seekers might get caught up in detention centres, together with the idea of returning 'genuine refugees' to their countries, as the senior officer above explains, can be a problem for some officers to deal with. Yet, this concern is only articulated by a minority of officers, as this is not an aspect of the job that is addressed by the subculture, the organisation or the system itself, but rather the opposite is the case.

The system is, in fact, geared to detach those presented as bureaucrats from the moral considerations of their work, by dissociating the job of those conducting the interviews from the individual whose future they are deciding. This distancing does not simply occur between the officer and the applicant, but also between the officers and the political debates. It is a detachment that goes both ways: Politicians are not interested in enforcement in the same way that officers are not interested in learning or implementing exacting policies or legislations. Moreover, in exploring this disengagement in depth it becomes clear that, far from incidental, the disaffection between officers, the law and the organisation is purposefully developed to ensure policy outcomes are achieved. This is based on the predisposed perspective of the Home Office, where there is no regard for implementation, directing law enforcers to enter into grey areas.

⁴ This is not to the extent that practices implemented under the Detained Fast Track subsequently achieved – Refer to the Detention Action and Phelps 2011.

⁵ DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

This is essentially the world of immigration officers, who have seen their discretionary powers directed towards asylum as their roles have been recast with securitised debates. As officers' autonomous decision-making spaces increased in the UK, the Home Office statement that immigration officers at the border simply play a functional role gets reinforced. As a result, the detachment between policy and operational levels is legitimised, and further promoted by the development of self-sufficient domains on both sides. The politicians and the organisations talk a different language, and officers express dismay at the disregard of their everyday experiences, whilst finding 'protection' in a subculture that 'understands' them. Nonetheless, the meta-messages of deterrence and denial do come across and are internalised by the professional subculture. Even though officers invariably complain about the Home Office and the politicians, they share their goals in cutting numbers and comply with their duties of keeping out the other. This complicity generated between officers and the Home Office, denying officers decision-making powers is crucial in this regard, and makes the whole strategy even more guarded.

Even more concerning is how this deceitful representation of officers' roles has largely been unchallenged by normative discourses, and has been left unquestioned by the academic debates that, by and large, has tended to take the bureaucratic reading mechanically. In this way, both the public eye and the academic and political spheres remain largely unaware of how asylum screening decisions are taken at borders. Furthermore, this neglecting of officers' work not only overlooks the cultural and subjective constructions according to which asylum screening is conducted, but reflexively contributes to legitimating the fallacy that the Home Office presents.

The Power of Meta-Narratives

The social construction of asylum seekers by border 'professionals' absorbs the perspectives and the normative debates about asylum as a major social threat. An approach that has been evidenced in UK government policy over the past decades, increasingly placing asylum seekers on the fringes of society; blocking routes to 'citizenship' (see Lazaridis 2015), while

governing their presence and access to the UK through risk and fear (Wilkinson 2014; Vickers 2012; Lynn and Lea 2003). This is depicted as a policy response that seeks to make the UK 'less attractive' as a destination country (Schuster and Solomos 2004), 'keeping out the other' (Brotherton and Kretsedemas 2008).

This meta-message forms the backbone of the subcultural beliefs about asylum seekers. The extent to which a criteria grounded on ethnocentrism and essentialised views, where cultural differences become a privileged concept, have become a means of excluding the 'other' (Solomos and Back 1996). The fact that no counter narrative within the Home Office or leading political debates exists to confront this is a worrying trend. A prejudiced and culturally essentialist narrative underpins the meta-message of disbelief that dominates the asylum system, and reinforces perspectives that suggest that the UK is the holy grail of asylum seekers across the EU. In the continual denial of officers' powers, where moral concerns for the individual are not taken into consideration, the Home Office ensures this message permeates the enacting of policy. In this process a policing context emerges, where officers are encouraged to produce rationales to refuse, deny and disbelieve asylum applicants, in an autonomous way.

UK government policy to reduce immigration numbers over the last decades has relied on the development of an 'invasion complex' (Tyler 2013), which has become pervasive. The distinct meta-message of disbelief contributes to perverting the principle of protection through media-tised moral panics and the development of contemporary 'folk devils' (Cohen 1972). Asylum seekers in this context are the new deviants and the new threat on the stability of already unstable contemporary lives. In the context of instability and the perpetual crisis that is played out at the borders, asylum seekers and foreign 'others' are once again being socially constructed as the enemy of the states. What's more, these perspectives in a post-Brexit landscape appear to be more readily accepted and continue to go unchallenged in a meaningful way, suggesting that the granting of refuge is increasingly being seen as at odds with societal and political values. More worryingly still is the extent to which blatant racism has underpinned these beliefs and once again become mobilised as a salient political issue.

Whilst the Home Office reinforces the idea that officers don't decide there is an explicit concern to ensure the message of reducing numbers, denial and disbelief are embraced. In stressing the importance of officers' roles at the border, training hones in on the fact that officers safeguard the border from threats. Threats to the economy, threats to society and threats to security (Bauman 2007); all these are social menaces that immigration officers have to face on a daily basis, and out of which they gain a broad sense of their importance at the border. Learning to rationalise and embrace the meta-messages of cutting numbers, denying applicants and disbelieving claims through training and socialisation, immigration officers firmly come to see asylum as a 'pattern of immigration' ripe for abuse. In establishing a world view that communicates the messages that asylum seekers are a threat to all walks of society, the Home Office legitimates the perspective that officers are expected to find reasons to deny applicants:

Your job is to test the credibility of all they say, so let them say it. Once they have explained for three pages you can start testing the story.

Immigration Officer⁶

The development of securitisation of migration on a professional level becomes a defining feature in determining the roles of officers and their subjectification of asylum seekers at the border. These are taken as irrefutable proof that all asylum seekers should be judged as a group, and not as individuals with unique stories. The complexities of migration flows and contemporary crises are used to further the idea that advanced Western states should not be responsible for the spill-over effects of localised problems. In the midst of these arguments 'genuine' asylum seekers are sure to exist but they are mixed up with economic migrants, the uneducated and all the other classifications of undeserving poor (Bauman 2007). The perverse understanding of asylum as a charity, removes all semblance of rights from the concept, instead connecting to the use and abuse of the welfare system. Furthermore, the idea of rights is being brought further into question as political campaigns across Europe begin to turn virulently anti-immigration and openly embrace racism.

⁶P/O-TOUK22BJ-6-TO

Professionalism and the Subculture of Disbelief

Through the deconstruction of asylum, via its abuses and dangers, a gap develops by which concepts like credibility become subcultural constructs of the officers to rationalise their beliefs. As this task becomes the priority in the asylum screening interview the deviant character of asylum seekers is further legitimated by a culture of denial and disbelief. Establishing their roles as contemporary social control agents, immigration officers do not simply process travellers but play a key role in safeguarding the state. Their sense of duty is clear when they discuss what drives them to do the job. The role of immigration officers is so complex and concealed that even formal training proves to be rather inconsequential in time.

The strength of the subculture takes over and officers act almost unthinkingly once they embrace the subcultural values and beliefs. They assume the role believing that it is they who hold the moral high ground in the interaction with asylum seekers, as it is they who are protecting the nation from a threat. As a clear instance of the unquestioned 'banality of evil' (Arendt 1963), officers never see the tragedy of the cumulative outcomes of their actions, and are unlikely to ever take it upon themselves to find out, instead choosing to ignore or deny their ultimate power. Assuming these perspectives is shown to be central to officers' professional roles, and once embraced it is unlikely they will ever express doubts or concerns about the handling of an asylum claim. Immigration officers are free of professional responsibility for asylum seekers as training establishes the impunity of their actions both legally and through a narrative that deconstructs asylum:

So in that context, I mean it's not fair on the refugees really cause they won't get a fair shot. And there's even, it gets to a state where people have competitions to see who can finish their interview quicker. Which is another reason it seems to me why we should do away with interviews altogether. And the onus should be put entirely on the asylum seeker, do you know what I'm saying?.

Chief Immigration Officer⁷

⁷DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

It is the subculture, above the law, that ensures that officers act towards a common goal of reducing immigration through the internalisation of certain 'truths as knowledge'. This is through the development of 'beliefs' and 'values', which emerge from the socialisation processes that are not connected to any empirically established facts. The collection of basic information during the interview becomes an act of uncovering truths, lies and deceptions, and it is also at this point that the interview is revealed as the core of the asylum process and the backbone of officers' job:

Without the interview there is no questionnaire, there is no file, there is no knowledge about the case. So the quality of the asylum system could be judged according to the quality of the interview.

Immigration Officer⁸

Moreover, the information collected in this exercise goes on to form the grounds for refusals, as the screening interview is operationalised to reach these goals. Officers rationalise the denial of applicants' narratives through the cumulative labelling process, imprinted by an inherent racism, ethnocentrism and an entrenched set of preconceptions about other cultures. This is not only a collective but an individual exercise forming the grounds of a 'prior knowledge' that is blinkered and built on prejudice and labels:

Well I suppose the main difference is that the initial interview is designed to sort of, it's fundamentally a pejorative interview, a negative interview from their perspective because we're trying to find out how we can boot them out.

Chief Immigration officer⁹

It is not, however, at the officer's choosing that this takes place but due to the lack of inference of official guidelines or legislations, which generates the need to procure a so-called 'professional knowledge' to achieve the organisational goals:

⁸DI/V-P8:126-753:758-IO

⁹DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

But you realise so much of what's done and very much here as well is so ad hoc, you know, and situations arise and no one really knows the answer to what's supposed to be done.¹⁰

Chief Immigration Officer (CIO)

It is to cover for this reality that new norms, rules and rubrics are established, in a process that takes place within the routine of implicit norms predetermined within the immigration service subculture. A process that, in turn, consolidates the importance of immigration officers' sharing of 'professional recipes' for screening asylum seekers. As these are formulas that only professionals are able to understand and distinguish, they go on to become key factors establishing the subcultural requirements central to the idea of becoming a 'true' group member.

It is within this professional subculture that criteria are constructed to screen out asylum seekers, grounded on a complex labelling process used to classify applicants into undeserving and deserving individuals, evidenced on officers' everyday actions and interactions at ports. This refers to the construction of complex labels that guide officers towards determining the credibility of a narrative, which through a routinised application, becomes accepted by the officers and legitimised by the subculture as the 'truths' at the core of 'professional knowledge'. From their 'prior knowledge' officers come to rely on certain expectations to which asylum seekers have to live up to. Significantly, these expectations can relate to an aspect as wide as the asylum seekers country of origin; as personal as gender; as subjective as demeanour; or as subtle as the way evidence is presented. Yet these are labels that, as the book has shown, will always leave room for officers to apply their professional interpretation.

In this process, the negotiation of reality that takes place during the interview between the asylum seeker and the immigration officer is grounded on the development of the immigration officers' criteria to establish the truthfulness of the asylum seeker's story, 'professional knowledge'. This is unchallenged whilst the 'site' reproduces a reality that is substantiated by a reflexive classification, which over time are considered 'facts'. Yet the basis of these categories is nurtured by an inherent racism and the articulation of social prejudices about the origin, the gender, the religion

¹⁰DI/V-UK6-AR00-CIO

or even the level of education of the individuals interviewed. Categories are re-interpreted by officers as 'professional clues' about the truthfulness of the narratives and the credibility of the applicant. Using a strategy by which almost everything becomes a clue, it is only the officers, with their specialist knowledge, who know how to read and uncover the true nature of the asylum seeker's story. This is a complex process of decision-making, grounded within a subculture geared towards the social control perspective of keeping out the other.

Subjectivities of Social Control

As these social control perspectives become ingrained in the subculture of denial and disbelief, officers recreate the world around them, reflecting their securitised perspectives. In doing this, the concept of credibility, which is conceived as an objective means of assessing facts, establishes a basis for the prejudiced application of 'socially acceptable' group beliefs. Moreover, the knowing and sharing of these labels becomes essential to becoming recognised as a member of the subculture, providing further rationale and legitimation to the collective practices of the group. It is precisely this conflict along with the denial from above of their powers, that helps promote cohesion amongst the officers as a group (Simmel 1966).

Beyond this, the fact that the subculture of denial and disbelief is imprinted by the principles of the Home Office shows the 'success' of governance approaches towards border control in the UK. Over the long history of deconstructing asylum, immigration officers' roles have gradually shifted to those of contemporary social control agents, tasked with identifying and refusing entry to certain classifications of travellers. Changing state perspectives towards asylum have depended on increasingly loose definitions of asylum and refuge, used to validate normative discussions forging an unreceptive atmosphere to asylum seekers. This is a process very much embedded at the border where it attains a particular socio-cultural attachment to the 'site'.

In contemporary Europe the gates are firmly in the process of being locked, as 'Fortress Europe' is physically and socially insulated through border making, across the EU. All the while the problems at the frontiers

remain, the plight of refugees, asylum seekers and the displaced persons of the world appears to increase without any coordinated efforts to resolve them. As the EU's borders are further securitised, and the arrival of asylum seekers is problematised, a clear message to keep out the 'other' is emerging from a gated continent. To the border officer this is clearly connected to the existential threats envisioned at the border, and their shared perspective that asylum screening is about uncovering truths, lies and deception. In their professional worlds the historical subjectification and labelling processes of asylum seekers has contributed to the concept being emptied of nearly all of its original meaning. For individuals and groups seeking asylum there are many factors at play that will determine the outcome of their claim. From racism and the UK's colonial past, to economic interests, alongside falsified security fears and the perceived threat to British 'culture'. Factors that have played a major role in the unscrupulous Brexit campaign and will continue to influence not just asylum policy, but the social construction of asylum and refuge in the professional worlds of border control.

A factor that will not feature in the consideration of an asylum claim is the idea of asylum as a right, or a duty of a state. This concept never reaches the desks of the officers that are screening asylum seekers every day, as all overarching laws and frameworks contribute to the continual perversion of the principle of protection. The human face on the other side of the table for the majority of officers becomes just a number, as officers learn to disbelieve and rationalise refusal. This dehumanisation occurs through the narrative (Bauman 2013), the policies and the law, leaving asylum seekers' stories to be re-constructed within the subcultural milieu of the immigration officers' worlds (Cohen 2001). It is this 'knowledge', established as the foundations of the subculture, that social control agents rely on to consolidate their actions and values, legitimated by the bureaucratic myth, which allows the process to continue undisturbed.

However, this construction of subculture, detached both from the law and from the reality of asylum seekers, is still what provides officers the support for their unforgiving reality, embracing the frameworks that reinforce denials of moral responsibility for asylum seekers. As this book has shown without reservations, officers construct asylum seekers' narratives within the subcultural milieu of the immigration service, as individuals

rationalise their behaviour within the ordinary cultural transmission of the border subculture (Cohen 2001). In this context, the securitised vision of border control developed from the start by the Home Office sets the tone for the interpretation of most scenarios at the border. With regards to asylum screening this results in a perverse process, articulated and consolidated throughout the system, to serve the purpose of concealing the practices on the ground in the name of 'getting the job done'.

The fact that policy and the law at the border are reduced to ad hoc arrangements, designed to deny asylum seekers rights is not only accepted but actually promoted by the Home Office. Ensuring a common world view on the dangers of migration and the threat constituted by asylum seekers, the detachment established between the operational and organisational spheres creates a space where officers must work out for themselves the rationales behind their denials. Furthermore, the bureaucratic structuration of the asylum process, typified by the sound of paper being shuffled from department to department, ensures that responsibility for an applicant is dissipated throughout the system. This is not simply a problem at the border but throughout the asylum process in the UK. In order for asylum seekers to exercise their rights at the borders, a focus on deterrence and migration control needs to give way to a culture of rights.

Clearly the liability cannot be laid at the feet of the officers, but rests within the entire system of governance, established to disperse decision-making capacities and disconnect asylum seekers from those 'responsible' for their claim. Thus, for things to change the message coming from government needs to be categorically reversed, yet accounting for the reality of frontline agents. As this book has established, in order to transform policy and legal frames there needs to be an interest on those on the ground, with more recognition and knowledge of the realities of border control. This necessarily means adopting new approaches to asylum that move away from the securitised social control perspectives that currently confront asylum seekers at the border.

It is not only in the UK, but across all societies in Europe, that a culture of fear and control threatens the fate of asylum seekers. It is these perspectives that must give way to a comprehensive implementation of the right to refuge. There is no economic threat in asylum seeking and

no ‘folk devil’ enemies on the horizon, nor are masses waiting to milk European welfare systems – as critical scholarly and policy work reveals.¹¹ Furthermore, there is no empirical debate that supports the idea that not granting asylum status or ‘being tough on borders’, as Betts (2016) argues, discourages people from arriving. It is not that asylum seekers are ‘motivated’ to travel, but rather they have no choice but to leave, in the first place. Beyond the denial of rights, the negation that asylum seekers are fleeing wars, famine and other atrocities is furthered through the myth of the ‘pull factor’. This narrative belies the struggles of asylum seekers, despite academic interest on how this extraordinary form of migration is not a matter of receiving benefits, or of calculating paybacks, but a matter of survival and endurance (Goldin 2011). Indeed, the ‘push’ factors, when further explored, illustrate the ever-increasing hardships faced by asylum seekers, especially when considering the difficulties of those refugees from regions like the Middle East (see Goldin and Mariathasan 2014).

Beyond the borders and the roles of the officers involved, this is a cause for wider societal reflection; on the complicity of the vast majority in the railroading of asylum through silence while normative discourses and political agendas have been set on slowly dismantling refugee protection. However, despite the divisions across Europe people continue to move in search of safety, employment, education, and many other reasons that are at the core of our increasingly heterogeneous, dynamic and fluid society. There is no enemy to fear, but the fear is of the cultural impact of foreigners: a culture of scapegoats, of essentialism, of divide and conquer, directed towards ‘the other’. These are perspectives that can, and have in the past, lead society in Europe to the brink of collapse. As a heterogeneous Europe continues to grow, cultural differences become a springboard for a more dynamic and fluid society. This cultural difference has long underpinned European societies, as inspiration and creativity have consistently been triggered by the arrivals of newcomers. This is an empirical understanding that should be situated at the heart of any message, as beyond the utilitarian arguments that focus on the demographic requirements or economic

¹¹ Alexander Betts, *Global governance and forced migration* Routledge Handbook of Immigration and Refugee Studies, 2016: 312–319

gains a further fact remains: that everyone has the right to claim asylum. What needs to be recaptured is a sense of this notion that escapes the normative discourse and the meta-messages of denial and disbelief, to be replaced with a culture of rights and a focus on protection.

Ensuring this transformation reaches the ground is undoubtedly one of the most challenging tasks, given the extent to which a professional culture has been established *longue durée* and legitimised at the UK borders by all instances. For this to occur it is not enough to transform the message but the whole paradigm, connecting all spheres of governance and government, to a message that values the granting of asylum, and recognises the essential human right that asylum seeking represents. As this book has argued and demonstrated, for any policy or legal change to impact the ground it is critical that it recognises and incorporates what happens in the frontline of asylum screening. Securitised perspectives must take a back seat in the processing of asylum claims, critically changing professional subcultures of border control towards the original ethos of asylum. In this process it is critical to ensure all actors are accomplices in these new perspectives, overcoming the unfounded fears that permeate our *Culture of Disbelief*.

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