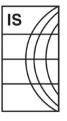# Constructing truths in a culture of disbelief

Understanding asylum screening from within

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abstract: While a multitude of immigration officers enforce the numerous laws and policies regulating the arrival of asylum seekers, their work is often hidden from the public eye and ignored by academic debate, leaving fundamental questions unanswered: Is the migration debate blinded by bureaucracy or oblivious to the complexity of the asylum screening process? This article originates from an ethnographic study, which included over 80 interviews, six months of participant observation and four years of familiarization with the main actors, framed by a triangulation scheme that allowed in-depth exploration of the field from within. The study's conclusions expose how identifying immigration officers' subculture is key to understanding asylum controls and to reach beyond the legal shield and the rhetorical concepts of political debate. Based on this empirical research, this article exposes how officers' criteria for screening individuals are not derived from regulations or laws but their own categorizations, rules and values derived from ambiguous stereotypes nurtured by officers' experiences and social prejudices.

keywords: asylum and refugees ✦ applied sociology ✦ ethnography ✦ migration ✦ social anthropology ✦ social control ✦ subculture

Introduction

Issues relating to control and management of migration flows are the focus of significant political and academic debate, internationally. New or modified agreements both national and international are continually reached, to adapt to the needs of a changing situation, while the expansion in focus on the field of migration and asylum emphasizes its politicized

nature. Today, there is a relatively long history of research about what has come to be called the sociology of migration, deliberating mainly on the underlying causes of refugee and migration movements, socioeconomic impacts of migration, content of legislation, human rights implications and asylum and migration public policy trends. While these have provided numerous writings on the control and management of refugee flows in the social, legal and economic context, there has been surprisingly little research-based discussion of the understanding of the asylum screening process and many questions remain unanswered. Are policymakers and academics aware of or concerned about this complex decision-making process? Do they know how asylum seekers are 'selected' on arrival, whose criteria are applied and how these influence the outcomes? Is the legal framework the base for asylum screening decisions, or is it the social, cultural and political context that shapes them? Is the migration debate blinded by the letter of the law or simply oblivious to the complexity of asylum seeking and asylum screening?

This article argues that exploring the work of those implementing the rules, enforcing the laws and making frontline decisions is key to understanding the asylum screening process, but too often is hidden from the public eye and ignored by academic and political debate. This article urges the need to adopt a sociological approach to unravel the rules regulating migration controls and asylum seekers' lives to look beyond the surface of the legal shield and the rhetorical concepts of political discourses.

The Sociological Debate on Asylum

Sociological research on asylum in relation to control and management has long concentrated on migration movements, resettlement and the establishment of diasporas (see Castles and Miller, 1998; Cohen, 1997; Deacon and Schwartz, 2007; Holmes, 2007; Penninx et al., 2006; Schuster and Solomos, 2001). Particularly predominant in recent times have been discussions connecting globalization, citizenship and border controls (Burnett, 2002; Dauvergne, 2004; Drake, 2007; Harvey, 2000; Kibreab, 2003; Sassen, 1998). While constructive, these debates consider asylum screening as part of an established normative and legalized cycle. Also, they tend to perceive the different migration groups as a single category, often neglecting the role of individuals within these groups. Further discussions arising from the sociological perspective address issues of integration, multiculturalism, racism and social prejudice, in relation to migration control (see, for example, Jones, 2001; Kessler and Freeman, 2005; Solomos and Wrench, 1993; Zanna and Olson, 1994). In addition, there have been prolific developments in research on asylum and border control management attitudes as a result of the intellectual and political turmoil resulting

from the September 11 events in the USA (see Boswell, 2007; Coutu and Giroux, 2006; Fekete, 2002; Huysmans, 2006; Lyon, 2003). This analysis and subsequent debates are too complex to express fully in this article but are vital to understanding the reality of asylum seekers in terms of integration, although they often overlook the significance of the screening processes that so crucially shape their destinies.

Further legal and policy perspectives perceive the screening process as a bureaucratic stage and the work of officers as a routine exercise for implementing regulations. These studies are closely linked to wider policy and political debates, often focusing on the structure, principles and compliance with legislation (e.g. Clayton, 2004; Juss, 2005; Norman, 2007; Phelan and Gillespie, 2005; Rawlings, 2005), and the wider implications of asylum seeking and human rights violations (e.g. Clark, 2004; Fullerton, 2005; Goodwin-Gill, 1983; Harvey and Barnidge, 2007; Hathaway, 2002; Sawyer and Turpin, 2005). This macro approach is adopted by most social policy observers who examine the underlying causes of refugee movements (e.g. Betts, 2006; Cohen, 1996; Manning, 2004), analyse the trends on asylum policies and politics (e.g. Boswell, 2000; Brinkmann, 2004; Joly, 1996; Nyers, 2006; Schuster, 2003) and the role of key asylum institutions such as the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) (see, for example, Kagan, 2006; Lindstrøm, 2005). This research trend has expanded greatly in the last decade, closely linked to everyday migration politics emphasizing the inherently politicized nature of these perspectives. This highlights the importance of the social, legal and economic impact of regulating migration movements, but again tends to omit the voices of the agents involved in the screening process that make daily decisions on asylum seekers – namely the immigration officers.

Research from Within

To unearth the internal reality of asylum screening, this article takes a sociological ethnographic perspective. It investigates the interaction between immigration officers, the practices and norms they adopt, and their social construction of asylum seekers' narratives, to argue that it is only by going beyond the legal, political and macro-social surface that we are able to explore the influence of those on the frontline. It claims that we must explore both the interaction between officers and asylum seekers, and the engagement and 'encounters'[1] among officers themselves to reveal the common interests and beliefs that provide the foundation for their decisions (Goffman, 1961), and thereby fully understand the asylum screening process.

Based on the results of a four-year investigation, drawing fundamentally on ethnographic observation and interviews, this article focuses on

how immigration officers construct and reach their asylum screening decisions.[2] The framework of the study converges on Spain and the UK, using this comparison as a vehicle for investigating the context in which social institutions operate (Swanson and Swanson, 1977). Both countries have a similar legal and procedural context,[3] providing the basis for accounting for empirical regularities and for interpreting the substantive nature of the cases, but with essentially different developments of asylum flows (Jubany-Baucells, 2006).

Research methods follow a qualitative triangulation scheme (see King et al., 1994), exploring the field from diverse perspectives and gathering data from different sources, including in-depth interviews, in-field discussions, elite interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis, as is explained below.

Undoubtedly, a main reason for the lack of ethnographic investigation in this field is the difficulty of gaining access to institutional organizations charged with border control, in any current modern state. In this study I faced difficulties both in gaining gatekeepers' approval for the fieldwork – 'the getting in' – and in obtaining social access to prompt the individuals to talk – 'the getting on'. In both cases the official channels proved to be complex, repetitive and unproductive but once contact and a subsequent relationship with the individuals was established, the rest of the fieldwork flowed in a surprisingly straightforward manner.

In Spain, after many approaches, the Ministry of Internal Affairs granted authorization to interview 'selected' people – mostly politicians and bureaucrats of higher ranks. I used these 'formal' interviews to ask individuals for access to specific departments on the basis that I needed explicit procedural information, and then used this access to reach front-line locations, where I was initially allowed with the purpose of gathering 'uncompromising information' through several casual and brief consultations. I became familiar with officers' routines, showing that I knew enough about asylum without seeming that I knew too much, asking significant questions while appearing uneducated in the details. Once I gained their trust and changed the approach and language from formal to colloquial, individuals started talking to me and finally, after a few months in Madrid, I arranged the first in-depth interviews. By that stage I was perceived more as a colleague than as a researcher.

In the UK, initial contact with the main gatekeepers was relatively unproblematic and initial official approval arrived after several lengthy but straightforward procedures, facilitated by a UNHCR[4] letter of support. However, this developed into a drawn-out process, the result of a bureaucratic strategy of discouragement, as the research was increasingly perceived as a challenge to the Immigration Service. Two years and significant effort after the initial approach to the UK Under-Secretary of

State, the UNHCR informed me that they were 'withdrawing their letter of cooperation' as they had been 'advised' by the Home Office to 'lessen' their support for my investigation. At this point a very different approach was adopted, and I started the process again by means of informal channels. I contacted the line managers directly and unofficially, stressing the confidentiality of the research. After several months and a great deal of correspondence, I received a positive response from an officer willing to be interviewed on an anonymous basis. Once in the field it was much easier to convince other officers to participate, although often they did so rather reluctantly.

All interviewees were working or had worked in an international port of entry: Heathrow, Waterloo, Gatwick, Dover and Manchester in the UK, and the OAR (Oficina de Asilo y Refugio) headquarters and Madrid Barajas in Spain. The number of interviews conducted was 83, of which 35 were in Spain and 48 in the UK. The sample had some drawbacks with regard to reliability as interviewees participated on a voluntary basis, accentuated by the problems of my own interference, for which I carried out a process of continual reflexivity during collection and interpretation of data. Also, to minimize such impact, I established a triangulation scheme for methods of data collection, including participant observation[5] where individuals observed were not aware of the purposes of my work.

Observation was one of the most fruitful parts of the investigation, as I was granted unparalleled access to the UK Immigration and Nationality Directorate Training and Development Unit (TDU), almost unintentionally. Some of the senior officers I contacted at ports were also trainers at the TDU and preferred to be interviewed there. As I had to visit this Unit several times to collect procedural information, they introduced me to the heads of the Unit, who in turn introduced me to the group of trainers in very casual terms. Individuals within the group were not told who I worked for or what my aims were and, due to my seemingly friendly relationship with the senior officers, they never questioned my presence. I sat in on nearly all the training sessions from the beginning to the end of the induction course, including the so-called instructional role-plays. I had the impression that both, trainers and students, believed that I was employed by the Immigration Service perhaps to identify ways to improve the training course and system, or to learn and replicate the course in another country, which made them more relaxed. I was given all course material, including the induction pack, and daily handouts such as the guide to structuring an interview and interviewing techniques (2000), the credibility workbook (2000), the credibility handbook (2000), and a guide to jargon (2000), among others. In effect I was 'trained' as an immigration officer in the most comprehensive and lengthy course run by the Immigration Service. Within the Home Office this is comparable only to

the induction undertaken by police officers, and had never been observed by any researcher from any discipline before.

I took full daily notes to form a consistent research diary which, together with the interview data, was transcribed, coded and classified. I used Atlas.TI to create a hermeneutic unit, maintaining a systematic yet creative approach to analysing the unstructured textual data. For the initial exploratory analysis, I generated a list of major substantive topics, rather than an index, which allowed me to generate categories from key concepts, such as 'the setting', which in turn integrated variables like 'space/environments' each with their own potential indicators such as *setting*, *border*, **port*, *space*, *area*, *place*, *zone*, *room*, *desk*, *table*, *chair* and *surroundings*. Certain categories appeared very clear, such as 'official instructions', and included many variables and a long list of indicators. 'Written regulations', for instance, included over 40 indicators such as *question**, *norm**, *official*, *strategy*, *plan*, *guide*, *procedure*, *parameter*, *formula*, *principle*, *mentor*, *method*, etc. Other categories appear with many variables but not many indicators, such as the category of 'third actors' with the variable 'representatives and clerks' and the indicators *solicitor*, *law*, *legal*, *court*, *prosecute*, *judge*, *litigate*, *repr**, *firm*, *lawyer*, *defen**, *clerk**, *right**, *advise*, etc. Some of these were at times repeated per each relevant category depending on the context, as all categories were tailored and aimed to reflect the world of the respondents. Variables and indicators were correlated to create family codes and connected so that subcategories emerged. 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 generalizations.

During the four years of fieldwork I faced many obstacles, including the difficult access to the field, but undoubtedly the main personal challenge was trying to be both a friend and an outsider, as much as trying to be fair and truthful. Engaging officers in conversations about casual topics, spending leisure time with them and realizing that I had become accepted almost as a colleague was an unforgettable experience that enriched the study in an invaluable way.

Hiding behind the Shield

The jurisdictions both in the UK and Spain establish that immigration officers do not decide on asylum seekers' applications. This denial of legal responsibility is supported by the institutions which maintain that officers have a 'bureaucratic role' in the process. This is not instructed by empathy or individual responsibility but rather, as Bauman explains, guided by a bureaucratic morality that relies on obedience and duty. Also,

policies concerning asylum screening tend to minimize and overlook officers' work. Hence it is easy to understand how debate on asylum screening is blinded by the letter of the law or by political discourses. The paradox is that by doing so, academic debate reflexively contributes to strengthen the patterns within which these decisions are made.

This discrepancy occurs because on paper immigration officers' decisions are legally classed as recommendations and only become official decisions once ratified by a higher ranking officer. These officers have no direct knowledge of the facts and have not met the individual or listened to the story,[6] hence, understandably, what immigration officers write down and the initial decisions they reach are taken as objective facts.

To ask officers whether they decide or not has no sense once you are in the field. The whole immigration service works on the assumption that the initial interview is conducted in order to reach a decision, as all officers know: 'The interview [asylum seekers' interview] is the key part not only of the screening process but of the whole asylum system . . . 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' (P8:126-753:758). But perhaps the clearest and most simple depiction of this paradox is the fact that while the legal version establishes that officers do not decide, the content of official training is devoted to learning investigative skills and reaching decisions at the interview, as explained to new recruits: 'You must bring out the real reasons, test the evidence. You must give them a chance to say what they need to say and afterwards you test what they actually say. Point out the discrepancies, that is your job, find out the discrepancies in what they say and decide' (P35:93-132:133).

This conflict engenders two detached and contradictory versions on asylum screening: the officer's version, and the legal and political discourse. Officers believe that this detachment is not only due to unawareness but also lack of concern: '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' (P14:280-536:540). This creates a high level of personal frustration and indifference, and forges an internalized image that all politicians care about is reducing the number of refugees: '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' (P18:325-776:781). This grows into a feeling of discontent, a sense of apathy towards the fairness of the system, promoting autonomous self-sufficient spheres, which in turn provide

officers with the freedom and need to develop their own norms and values, which then form the foundation of the immigration service subculture.

Trained to Disbelieve

In the daily asylum screening process immigration officers follow a well-established set of criteria that develop from so-called 'professional knowledge' or 'knowledge taken-for-granted', which is typical of many professional groups, particularly those within major organizations (Freidson, 2001). Officers are told that they don't decide but are forced to make decisions, and to reach these they establish their own rules, or 'adapt' the existing ones, similar to what Schmitt many years ago considered the decision on the exception, by which a set of 'exceptional unwritten rules' becomes professional knowledge (Schmitt, 2006 [1927]). This knowledge can be acquired outside the work place and put to use on the job, or can be learned on the job,[7] as is the case with immigration officers. This information, which may only be meaningful to the group, is not challenged and eventually is considered to be factual knowledge for the group (see Cicourel and Knorr Cetina, 1981).

The main purpose of officers' official training is educating recruits in 'prior knowledge' and introducing them to the practices knowing that the real learning will happen in the 'field', as trainers constantly point out: 'you can't learn working skills from a handbook, the real skills about the work in the field you learn by working in the field' (P8-39:41). The training course encourages trainers to share their personal experiences: 'do not assume that they [asylum seekers] are married; they may say they are married but it is only common law. This is something you will get with local knowledge' (P/O-UK.JN-T3). This 'local knowledge' is always passed on with an unwritten (meta) message of mistrust towards asylum seekers, which makes officials view all requests for political asylum against the backdrop of ongoing international migration (Loescher, 1992: 3).

Many states feel compelled to grant asylum because of their supposed democratic nature, but are no longer interested in the principle of asylum, which some authors such as Loescher (1993) and Cohen (1996) have referred to as 'distortion' of asylum policy principles. The meta-message articulates states' goal to deter asylum seekers from entering a country: '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' (P32:81-208:212). This message is conveyed in different ways, such as discourses on welfare exploitation or artificial equations on refugees and crime and is inherent in almost every official declaration related to asylum and diffused from

policy and organizational levels, to become the driving principle at the implementation level.

Hence, new recruits are not taught about refugees in terms of their rights and options, but through techniques to 'identify the lies' in asylum seekers' narratives: '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' (P/O-UK22MY-T6). This idea intensifies once new officers come into contact with the field from the first week of the induction course with the 'visits' to Heathrow once a week, which come with direct instructions from trainers: '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' (P/O-UK20JN-T). As Goffman explained, the institution captures the time and interest of its new members, while introducing them into something of a world (Goffman, 1970). In the field recruits reproduce what they see and learn this 'professional knowledge'.

Deciding Asylum Truths

Immigration officers' criteria evolve from a correlation of all cases with what they consider a 'normal case', whose common standards are shared by all officers and reinforced and preserved by the immigration service subculture. Officers categorize individuals into different types,[8] according to certain 'patterns', used as indicators to determine how deserving of asylum status applicants are. These can be distinguished as 'explicit and implicit criteria' (Jubany-Baucells, 2006). 'Explicit criteria' refers to those principles that officers gather from 'evident' characteristics of the applicants which can be perceived and understood by anyone, including the public, regardless of whether or not they subscribe to them. To officers these are the obvious clues and include factors such as 'Country of origin', 'Gender', 'Family situation', 'Demeanour' and the 'Level of education' of the applicant, among others.

The set of 'implicit criteria' are characteristics requiring a 'subjective understanding', complex clues only revealed to those with experience in the job that must be learnt through work experience. Their very nature increases the odds that no officers will question their veracity. These include 'Demonstration of emotions', 'Reasons for applying', 'Recollection of details', 'Coherence of manufactured stories' and 'Professional instinct', among many others. As an illustration of the content and use of such criteria I have extracted a small sample of material from an extensive set of fieldwork data.

Each example has been randomly selected from several similar ones, and represents just the tip of the empirical material that supports such arguments and has lead to their formulation.

Where You Come From Tells Me Who You Are

Among the many features used to label asylum seekers, the most constant and clearest is their country of origin, not implying that someone from a particular country has more or fewer grounds to apply, but a more complex presumption. To officers, the country of origin informs them about the nature of the applicants' stories, for instance all individuals from Turkey claim that they have been tortured without foundation, or can also inform them about the personal characteristics of the individuals, for instance, all applicants from Africa are shy. These characteristics can be compared to common social stereotypes attached to different native groups (see Gilbert, 1951), such as, Germans are industrious and Italians are artistic (see Karlins et al., 1969). The main difference is that officers' classifications are used as the basis to decide the asylum seekers' future.

In the case of applicants from China, for instance, officers believe that they simulate anguish or distress, and tend to invent stories of maltreatment: '99 times out of 100 the Chinese haven't actually been physically mistreated or persecuted, they haven't lost their job but they are unwise enough to tell you that they haven't had a job recently' (UK5-AR00-14). Chinese are considered to be untrustworthy and it's understood that they commonly lie about their religious background: 'Almost all the Chinese claim that they practise Falun Gong because the Chinese founders of the Falun Gong movement are in exile somewhere in the states I think and it does have some kind of ideal behind it' (P13-475:479).

Applicants arriving from Sri Lanka, India and Pakistan are pooled into one single group, reducing the odds of individual circumstances being taking into account, and the same happens with most African states: 'I think particularly when you get into African cases you can sense that, you know that they are lying' (P12-746:747). Applicants from Africa are considered to be antagonistic, distant and fantasists: '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' (P6-785:792). Those from the Indian subcontinent group are considered to be incoherent in their narratives and are alleged to present artificial stories: 'Everyone tells the same story from a particular country, like in Sri Lanka they would say we fled because the army invaded and they thought we were sympathizers of the Tamil Tigers, something like that' (UK4-AR00-9). And also: 'If you take Tamils from Sri Lanka they'll all tell you the same story with minor variations. Always the same basic story, but the beauty of their story is the fact

that it's so vague. It can't be proven but equally it can't be disproved' (P12-423:424). What these two officers state is quite ruthless, but for them it is application of 'professional knowledge', rendering it impersonal.

Applicants arriving from Turkey are classified as being cunning and exaggerated in presenting their stories: '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. If they didn't guild the lily' (UK5-17). When the officer says 'I don't believe it' it is not linked to a particular case or individual but a generalization directed at Turkish applicants. The officer simply does not believe that Turks (any Turk) can be beaten up as many times as recounted.

As the few examples above highlight, in all cases the values attached to individuals' countries are perceived as knowledge to officers. Following the meta-message of deterrence, the interpretation of the criteria is nearly always slanted towards the disbelief of the narrative and the discrediting of the applicant.

The Hidden Implications of Gender

Similar to the countries of origin, labels related to gender over time become expectations for officers, very closely related to role expectations (Goffman, 1959). Officers connect the applicant with a specific role and the applicant has to live up to these expectations.[9]

Officers had preformed opinions about female applicants, and the way they are supposed to behave are based on stereotypes and conventional portrayals of sex and gender, reshaped by the officers' work practices: 'I know from experience that Polish women cry quite often because they think it will soften officers' hardened hearts. I don't know whether that's necessarily a cultural thing' (UK5-AR00-18). Officers believe that experience is the key to knowing that it is common for Polish women to cry and also that this is a charade.

Narratives that include sexual aggression are assigned to female officers as they believe that women do not talk openly to male officers: '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' (P17-126:126). Due to the limited number of female officers, they will more often than not have to listen to stories of rape or sexual assault on a regular basis, which creates a tendency for them to be sceptical and desensitized: 'An awful lot of women will tell you they've been raped but, who knows?' (P13-608:609). In order to convince these officers that the rape is 'real' the story must be particularly persuasive, often involving a display of emotions:[10] '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' (P13-528:530). Clearly this officer is convinced that the applicant is, in part, telling the truth not because of the account but because of the display of emotions.

Expectations of this sort are openly recognized by female officers who reason that sexual assaults are such traumatic experiences that no one could possibly recount them in an indifferent way: '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' (P13-611:613). This shows the level of desensitization and how this can depend on the particular country of origin rather than the circumstances of the applicant. 'Gender labels' are not based on legal requirements but on common social prejudices or even personal experiences, but the failure to match officers' expectations and comply with a 'normal' case will almost always lead to officers disbelieving the story.

Appearances Can be Deceptive

The demeanour of the applicant during the interview is another clue to construct an image of the applicant and determine the truthfulness of the story.[11] Most officers would initially find it unacceptable to judge the credibility of a narrative merely on the basis of the applicant's appearance or behaviour:[12] 'Appearance? No, no, it never really occurs to me, doesn't really register what people wear or anything like that' (P14-301:303). As most officers would do, this one denies that appearance has any influence, let alone shaped his judgements. However, the same officer later said: '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' (UK5-AR00-18), admitting that people may project a 'good or bad impression' at the interview, in order to justify his decision. In addition, linked to the widespread perception of asylum as an act of charity and not as a right, there is a shared belief that if you are a refugee you must look unhappy, regardless of how relieved you might be to arrive in a safe country. Officers expect applicants to be miserable and downtrodden, and the story of a cheerful person will be treated with scepticism.

The Power of Emotions

As mentioned, one of the most common criteria is the display of emotions at the interview. This is not because of empathy but rather compliance with wider social expectations: 'If someone starts crying in an interview, which I have seen, I would almost automatically assume that they had suffered a great deal' (P12-502:504). Officers often demonstrate sympathy towards the applicant's suffering so that they are not perceived to be heartless.

However, the display of emotions can be perceived as negative because an applicant that is too ready to display emotions may make the officer uncomfortable: 'The fact is that they [asylum seekers] 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' (P13-633:635). In these cases officers often assume that applicants exaggerate their emotions in order to make their story more believable: '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' (P1-382:385). Officers detach themselves from overt displays of emotions in order to demonstrate self-control, resulting in further alienation of the applicants. The display of emotions has to suit the argument of the officers.

Intuition – Professional Instinct

Paradoxically, perhaps the most powerful criterion applied by officers relates also to the most ambiguous one: what officers refer to as 'intuition' or 'feeling'. As Gardner explains, the ability to understand and distinguish elements meaningful only to the group, is linked to the idea of becoming a 'true' group member (Gardner, 1994).

When officers hear a 'perfect' story, even by their high standards, it is difficult to classify it as false, and it is then that 'intuition' becomes relevant: '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' (P17-135:135). The fact that an officer 'just knows' is in most cases as far as the rationalization will go. This 'intuition', recognized by all officers, is also referred to as having a 'feeling': 'As soon as you've been here for a while you feel it, you can feel the good and the bad cases' (P1-97:101). Often officers do not find it easy to articulate what they mean by this 'intuitive feeling' and they keep on referring to the fact that you 'just know': 'I would not know how to tell you but you do feel it, you just know it' (P1-232:233). The nature of this intuition is buried so deeply that it is almost inexplicable even to themselves: 'Yes, sometimes it's just like this. Inevitably you just go on

instinct' (P12-465:465). This knowledge is almost a burden for officers to carry, yet so 'natural' for officers that the only requirements to apply such intuition to their criteria are common sense and experience.

This 'feeling' as the validation of officers' judgements highlights the idea that most criteria are a justification for the application of standard labels, lacking any legal reference, always to the detriment of applicants. For instance, if an officer is interviewing someone from Eastern Europe with documents showing the applicant's political involvement, it is likely that the officer will have 'the feeling' that they are false. Also, officers often have this feeling towards a particular country rather than individuals as it is easier for the officer to talk about intuition rather than prejudice based on the country of origin: 'Well, instinctively you get yourself "on guard", you take into account the country of origin and so on' (P2-421:428). Officer's 'instinct' is a main source of information, an indicator of the credibility of applicants, but always carrying a deterrence message: 'You feel it, you feel it perfectly, I could be wrong but, in case of doubt, I would say it [the narrative] is false' (P1:239). The importance of such 'feelings' for asylum screening is extraordinary, however its legitimacy or rationalization is never called into question. The most common justification of this feeling is the sharing of experiences with fellow officers: 'Well, I actually got this feeling from other colleagues that felt the same thing' (P13-226:267), which makes it more clear that there is no other base but what officers decide to establish as the group criteria, consolidated as professional knowledge. This is arguably a codification of personal stereotyping as 'experience' and 'expertise', applied and legitimized by the subculture of disbelief.

The sample of the criteria outlined is just a review of a long list of well-articulated criteria that officers apply, most of which are closely comparable with common stereotyping and prejudices. These enable officers to apply their subjectivity without any justification other than a set of preconceptions determined by the group. On the basis of these categorizations, as a hypothetical example, an uneducated woman arriving from Turkey, appearing insecure, claiming to have been assaulted but not crying will have almost no chance of being believed by an officer and hence of entering the country.

During the fieldwork several officers expressed concern about this partiality of the system and their unease about the potential repercussions of their decisions, especially the possibility that genuine asylum seekers might be sent back to their countries. These worries were at times expressed by rather disturbing illustrations: 'there are quite a lot of decisions that I don't know how to make, that are very difficult. There was a case of a man who was removed. They returned the guy to Zaire, I think it was, he

didn't even make it out of the airport. He was killed in the airport when he got off the plane. I mean that must be hard to live with' (P12:107-687:695). Those few officers who admitted a degree of remorse simply assumed that this was an element of their job that they had to live with. This was never expressed in a cynical way but rather as a difficult question of conscience that they each had to handle in a very personal way. Neither the system, nor the subculture of disbelief addressed this side of the officers' work, but instead it was ignored or simply denied. The majority of officers were indeed concerned about the impacts and implications of their roles and the functioning of the wider system, and it is these individual insights that have informed this research and for which I will always be indebted.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article demonstrates how the initial stage of the asylum screening process is relatively unaffected by legal and policy regulations, and operates detached from current debates on migration. Instead, it is shaped by the criteria, values and influence of the immigration service subculture in the screening process, informed by a meta-message of disbelief and deterrence. This shows how an ethnographic approach is fundamental not only to open migration debate to the reality of the field but to advance more effective policies and ultimately to enlighten a more competent and just system and society.

An illustrative final example of the importance of the disconnect between legal and policy debates, and the implementation level relates to the UNHCR handbook on procedures and criteria for determining refugee status. This tool is designed and regularly updated as the essential guide for immigration officers to interview asylum seekers, but when officers were asked about it they all showed a startling lack of knowledge: 'we don't know anything about that handbook. No, I mean not only do we not know about it but we're not really interested in it, basically' (P14-287:145); 'we do not know about it [the handbook] . . . 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. I certainly don't think people would read it anyway' (UK4-AR00-5), '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 that 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' (UK6-AR00-8).

Through the direct experience of those involved in the process, this research argues that the principle of asylum is nowadays almost lost in favour of 'efficient' politics and policies. It maintains, as have other authors

such as Joly (1996), Schuster (2003) and Cohen (2002), that by the time policies are implemented, the principle behind them has been transformed from asylum to deterrence.

By approaching asylum screening from a micro-social perspective we become aware of the implications of drawing up policies from these flawed initial premises. Furthermore, it is from this unique field perspective that research can propose ways to look forward and call for an efficient and realistic system informed by enforcement officers, so that policy-makers are aware of the actual problems occurring and officers feel their roles matter. It is not realistic to have policies with a permanent focus on reducing the quantity of refugees and speeding up the system, while ignoring the quality of the service for asylum seekers. The more the system is expedited without proper backup at the frontline, the less effective the system becomes. Without knowledge of what happens in the field, most efforts towards improving asylum screening and guaranteeing asylum seekers' rights are wasted.

As argued throughout this article, beyond the meta-message of deterrence and disbelief, policy and legal regulations are not the main instruments directing the actions and decisions of immigration officers, but rather the officers' interaction order. This is not only revealed by the data analysis but further confirmed by the comparative element of the research, which demonstrates the very few relevant differences existing between the way officers construct asylum seekers' narratives in the UK and Spain. It is this lack of variance between the two cases at the implementation level that reveals the limited influence that diverse structural, historical and legal frameworks have on these practices. It is within the immigration service subculture that officers construct asylum seekers' narratives, apply their criteria, establish their rules and reach their decisions.

However, regardless of the overwhelming evidence that this article has revealed about the existence and influence of an immigration service subculture, migration debate, policies and legislation choose to either deny or simply downplay its importance. The more this is denied and ignored by the system, the more the subculture will work on an autonomous basis, without monitoring of the uses of prejudice and other unfair measurements.

This article argues that instead of denying or ignoring the existence of this immigration subculture, an attempt should be made to understand the reasons for its existence and its core values. In this way this subculture could be influenced to include more just and effective principles and monitor the uses of prejudice and biased outcomes. Analysing the asylum screening process from a sociological perspective is vital, not only to reveal its true nature but also to expose the way decisions are reached, that affect those seeking protection as well as the political, social and even

economic situations of the host states. There are a multitude of immigration officers employed to enforce the numerous laws and policies regulating the arrival of asylum seekers, controlling the initial stage of asylum screening, dealing with applications, making detentions and even deporting people. Yet little effort seems to be made to understand and include what takes place in the field, nor to debate and address this reality in a critical way.

Notes

1. This term is mostly associated with Goffman (1959) but has also been used in specific situations such as the one discussed here by authors like Hallam and Street (2000), Burr (1995), Giddens (1995) or Shooter (1993) to refer to central focus interaction.
2. This research was generously supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. For the full investigation refer to Jubany-Baucells (2003).
3. The UK joined the EU primarily for economic reasons as a means of making the economy more competitive and to remain a world power (Bideleux and Taylor, 1996), and adopted the EU's immigration control scheme, tightening its own policy on asylum accordingly (Bloch, 2001), yet it still maintains an image of 'tolerance' towards immigration. As Colin Holmes explains, 'British society is knitted together from many diverse strands . . . of immigrants, refugees and the minorities associated with such immigration' (Holmes, 1991: 14). In contrast, Spain applied for EU membership in 1986 to leave behind its isolated position in Europe, shifting from being a refugee-producing state to being a host country. Today Spain has rigorous legislation, similar to that of the UK, introduced in a much shorter period bypassing the corresponding social development (Jubany-Baucells, 2006).
4. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, London Bureau.
5. In addition to other mentioned ethnographic methods for data collection, as well as thorough literature and documentary reviews, and a basic statistical analysis.
6. Both in the UK and Spain, asylum interviews are neither audio-recorded nor videotaped.
7. Professional knowledge in the context of this study is not to be confused with Freidson's concept of 'formal knowledge', to refer to learning specific technical skills (see Freidson, 1994, 2001).
8. In the context of labelling theories I refer to Schutz's arguments of subjective agency (Schutz, 1967, 1974) to address the analysis of rule making, through processes of interaction and construction of types (Schutz, 1974).
9. Role expectations concern the prospects anticipated by an individual when engaging in a specific role. The expectations of its functions and meanings are undertaken with the role.
10. The importance of applicants' demonstrating emotions at the interview is discussed later on, in greater depth.

11. I refer to demeanour as 'the element of the individual's ceremonial behaviour typically conveyed through deportment, dress and bearing' (Goffman, 1967: 77).

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

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