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# Banal bordering: Everyday encounters between migrants and security officers

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## Abstract

The encounter between a migrant and the state is almost always fraught. The power of the state to approve or deny immigration status produces a power imbalance whereby the migrant is subject to the whim of the state. This research extracts encounters between migrants, police, immigration officers, and interpreters in the UK to conceptualise how the minutia of these encounters, and the standardised practices they involve, might impact the ability of migrants to express themselves and exercise their own voice in interactions. Adopting a reflexive ethnographic methodology, and using data gathered with police workers as a pilot case, I consider how the varied objectives of agencies and actors in the migration sector intersect with migrant experiences in practice. Ultimately, implications for migrant security lie in the recognition that migrant voice can be obscured as a result of mundane and everyday procedures. Banal bordering processes can go unnoticed and unaddressed by policy makers, but are often loaded with meaning for migrants subject to them. The vulnerability of migrants and the unbalanced nature of encounters between migrants and the state highlights how state power manifests at an everyday level, suggesting that insecurity is not unique to migrants without documents, but is present in all encounters between migrants and the state. Nevertheless, the professionals who are interacting with migrants are often in a position whereby they have the experiential expertise to offer workable, though limited, solutions, although they do not always have access to the channels or the resources necessary to implement them.

**Keywords:** migration; borders; security; everyday life; policing

## 1. Introduction

The encounter between a migrant and the state is one that is almost always fraught. The power of the state to approve or deny an immigration status produces an unavoidable power imbalance in which the migrant is subject to the whim of the state. While

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immigrants are protected by the rule of law, the state has the power to make, adapt, and change the law. Further to that, during encounters, migrants might be subject to ‘discretionary judgements’ of an immigration officer on particular counts. For example, officers may exercise discretionary judgement on assessing applications of leave to remain with regard to the ‘good character’ of the applicant (UK Home Office 2018). This means that every encounter with a state official—not just the moment of assessment—becomes loaded because outcomes might affect this type of discretionary judgement. For example, if an immigrant encounters a police officer in the context of a minor infraction, such as a speeding ticket or disorderly conduct, this may later affect a discretionary immigration decision. Thus, encounters between migrants and the state are loaded with meaning and this meaning is one-sided. These encounters tend to be far more meaningful for the migrant than for the officer.

This research extracts encounters between migrants, police, immigration officers, and interpreters in the UK to get an understanding of how the minutia of these encounters between the migrant and the state, and the ways in which they are subject to systematic standardised practices, might impact migrant voice. The encounters studied specifically here are all a form of interview in which a migrant in the UK has a direct interaction with the state, whether that is in an immigration interview, as a witness, or in a criminal context. The power imbalance is such that these interviews are, for the officers, a banal and procedural part of their job where they follow standardised practices in order to extract the relevant narrative from an interview participant. For migrant participants, they are often loaded. Outcomes might be life-changing. This has not gone unnoticed in literature that might cast interviewers as ‘petty sovereigns’ wielding unchecked the power of the state (Butler 2004; Crawford, Leahy and McKee 2016; Hughes 2016; Nair 2009), or might examine these state agents in their capacity to change outcomes as ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky 2010; Dorrenbacher 2017). Here I am interested in the very banality of these interviews and the small details of procedure.

I understand the agent him or herself as a person working in a professional capacity. The data I use is based on reflective focus groups in which police and immigration officers were asked to reflect on their experiences of interviewing using interpreters. These officers have experiential expertise that places them uniquely to comment on and give insight into policy and standardised practices. While there is a certain irony in turning to officers of the state—the potential agents of oppression—in order to locate migrant voice, I seek their insight into policy and practice. This particular perspective has not been accessed and can contribute to the existing body of work that foregrounds migrant perspectives (e.g. see Khosravi 2010; Innes 2014; Johnson 2014; Kaytaz 2016; Sanchez, 2016; Brigden 2018) by offering critical insight from people who work at the specific point of communication between migrants and the state. Rather than observing and analysing their actions, I approach this from the assumption that these officers, while representing the state are not *only* the state, are able to reflect on their experiences and on their professional role. Specifically, I seek to locate spaces where migrant voice is obscured by state practices, with a view to mitigating this obscurity. Collaborating with experts working in state practice on the ground is one way to pursue this objective that will add to the vital research that enrolls migrant voice in such endeavours.

The project is based on participatory action research produced in collaboration with participants from both the police and from professional organisations representing translators and interpreters. Participatory action research enrolls stakeholders and participants and collaborators in the research project, and aims to practice research in an active way to produce goal-oriented outcomes that are both academically informed and practically useful in solving problems both experienced by stakeholders and identified through carefully designed research (for more, see [Lawson 2015](#)). In what follows in this article, I trace the relationship between migration and security, with an emphasis on how encounters with the state play out in the context of control, criminalisation, and policing of migrants. I then move to a specific case study that examines everyday encounters between police, interpreters, and migrants. It is important to note that these ‘everyday’ encounters are not generally mundane to the migrant participants. They are likely to be significant moments for migrants, but for police and interpreters, they form a large part of their daily professional lives. Yet, excavating this banality is a key to understanding how it operates in practice. I offer data from focus groups with police and home office workers that were taken immediately following a standard training session provided by professional police and home office training officers covering best practices for police working with interpreters. The session lasted ~2.5 h and formed part of the two-week-long Professionalising Investigation Programme (PIP) training course undertaken as a part of staged training for investigative officers. The focus groups were reflective in nature, designed to ask officers to reflect on some of the interviews they have participated in and whether the training session they had just attended shifted their perspective or generated new insights. I argue in this article that it becomes clear that even the minutiae of everyday professional practices can impact migrant experience and migrant voice. By focusing on the frontline worker as the intermediary between the migrant and the state, adopting the approach that frontline workers are whole people rather than simply agents of the state, we can uncover a location where the competing interests of migrants and the state—or of humanitarian concerns and security—come head to head in an embodied experience. This can help to address the obstruction of migrant voice that is apparent in collaborative practices of care and control.

## 2. Security aspects of migration: threat and vulnerability

Migrants seeking security and states securing their borders adopt very different conceptualisations of security, which are reflected in academic literature: on one hand, security studies examine the implications of porous borders for states, allowing the movement of potential transnational criminals and terrorists ([Charnysh, Lloyd and Simmons 2015](#); [Friesendorf 2007](#)). On the other hand, work in critical security studies has looked to the ways in which state security actively harms migrants, or rejects migrant humanity. Further to that, critically oriented work has turned to conceptualisations of security that privilege an understanding of the security of migrants, or security as something that individuals or groups seek that can be prevented by the state ([Bigo 2002](#); [Huysmans 2006](#); [Johnson 2014](#); [Innes 2014](#)). Indeed, the thematic study of migration has consistently called to question the referent of security or even the way security is conceptualised in

both critical and conventional security studies (for a detailed discussion, see [Innes 2015](#)). I use security as an entry point here because this academic contestation can be seen replicated more practically. For example, border forces and immigration officers are charged with protecting the border, while humanitarian workers often take on the role of protecting migrants. Research has begun to explore this confrontation (or collaboration) in various forms, with notable work by [Pallister-Wilkins \(2015\)](#) examining the internal contradictions visible in the practice of Frontex border guard actions who must protect the border of Europe, but simultaneously have a human duty to provide assistance to humans in dire need. Maurice [Stierl's \(2018\)](#) project takes an alternative angle, looking at how humanitarian aid workers in the Mediterranean interact with security forces and journalists. In this case, distinct objectives work in tandem, which means that at times they work in opposition to the migrants that the humanitarian aid agencies seek to assist. [Ford and Lyons \(2013\)](#) similarly examine how Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) aid workers collaborate with security forces to assist in removals in South East Asia. [Isleyen \(2018\)](#), building on [Aradau \(2004\)](#), and [Pallister-Wilkins \(2015\)](#) identifies not a confrontation but a collaboration between humanitarian and security interests, or a culture of 'care and control' in border practices ([Isleyen 2018: 851](#)). The concept of 'care and control' marks the recipient as simultaneously a threat and vulnerable, 'both at risk and a risk' ([Pallister-Wilkins 2015: 60](#)). Consequently, security and humanitarian workers seek common objectives that can protect borders while respecting human life. However, these practices can produce a 'saviour-victim' mentality ([Isleyen 2018: 861](#)), which positions migrants as recipients of care who need protecting from themselves, rather than agents capable of making decisions about their lives. A similar dynamic is observed by [Williams \(2019\)](#) who investigates public information campaigns designed to deter migration from Mexico and Central America towards the USA. These campaigns seek to save migrants from themselves. The wants and needs of the migrant—other than the very basics—are overlooked as border control remains the first priority. Thus, state security is protected, whereas migrant security is diminished to basic bodily integrity, without considering the various other aspects of an experiential, holistic, and long-term security for migrants. The lack of protection afforded migrants is not always directly intended (although, at times, it can be considered as such given the European preference for policies of deterrence, see [Bigo 2007](#)) yet it is a visible outcome. This research has looked to identify processes where this outcome is brought about unintentionally, through standardised processes and practices.

## 2.1 Making illegality; encounters with the state

De Genova argues that migrant "illegality" has risen to unprecedented prominence as a "problem" in policy debates and as an object of border policing strategies for states around the world' ([De Genova 2002: 419](#)). Yet, such 'illegality' is the result of changing (contracting) legal ways in which one can migrate. For example, legal work that has examined the process of seeking asylum finds that the ability to exercise one's right to seek asylum under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Refugee Convention has eroded over time, particularly over the last 2 decades, thanks to the increasing development of mechanisms designed to prevent asylum seekers from reaching a territory in

which they can exercise such a right (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Gammeltoft-Hansen 2008; Klepp 2010; Moreno-Lax 2008, 2012). This international governance of immigration is replicated and intensified in state governing strategies to control immigration, specifically deterrent policies.

The forms of social control realised by deterrent policies in the context of immigration has been widely studied. For example, legal literature itemises the adoption and solidification of deterrent policies throughout the 1990s in Europe (Stevens 1998, 2001; Schuster 2003). Drawing on Foucault's biopolitics and Agamben's *homo sacer* in particular, research has variably identified and analysed the discursive production of immigrants as a threat, permitting harsh immigration controls to be established and augmented (Bigo 2002; Huysmans 2006; Innes 2010); the impact of deterrence policies on border crossings, which is negligible (Bigo 2007; Doty 2003; Squire 2011); and the severe impact on the wellbeing of migrants who are either entangled in the immigration system (Haddad 2008; Mayblin 2017; Squire 2011) or thrust outside of it (Innes 2014).

Leerkes (2016) extends the research that looks at migrant experiences specifically to incorporate immigration into the broader theme of the social classification of the poor, providing an analysis of change in the methods of criminalising and controlling the location of migrants without status produces poor immigrants who are unable (legally) to help themselves. Sager (2017) extends this into the banal injustices that immigrants endure, such as inability and unwillingness to seek medical care, legal support against abusive landlords or employers, and indeed victims of domestic abuse being forced to stay in unsafe relationships and homes because they are unable to seek support for fear of immigration enforcement.

Policing is a particularly problematic area in the context of migration, given that immigration law has extended into the criminal sphere over time. The slippage of the governance of immigration into the criminal sphere has been well-documented in criminology, sociology, and law. Much attention has been focused on the USA, particularly in response to George W Bush's immigration enforcement regime, which prosecuted undocumented migrants on charges such as identity theft and fraud for working under incorrect or false social security numbers (see Coleman 2007; Kanstroom 2004; Miller 2005). Furthermore, in the UK the Home Office's 'hostile environment' has vastly increased the reach of criminal penalties in immigration-related crimes, targeting people who assist unauthorised immigrants to enter, or to find accommodation and employment in the UK. Due to the increased criminalisation of immigration, it follows that it is more likely that immigrants find themselves in an interaction with the police.

Police often have the impetus to enforce immigration laws and policies differ according to geographic location. For example, in the USA, state and city-level police are not legally required to enforce federal law, yet many units do so. This can explain why people without status avoid the police and bureaucratic authority as noted above (Kalir, Achermann and Rosset 2019; Leerkes 2016; Sager 2017). Armenta (2016) cites a genuine effort on the part of the police to make inroads in Latinx communities, but that effort is disrupted because of the role of officer discretion in the enforcement dynamic, which is permissive of racist practices. Thus, it is important not to overstate the benevolence of the police. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile looking at the everyday practices of police to understand how policy and standardised practice exacerbate problems.

Finally, Darling (2011) traces the biopolitical apparatus of social control to attend to the governmental impetus to classify and arrange migrants as data points that can be processed accordingly. This reduces the migrant to a proportional measure of threat that must be processed by a governmental official. Indeed, reconfiguring migrants in this way is designed precisely to *dehumanise*, to ensure that the immigration officer or official is not imagining an encounter with a person, but is making an unbiased assessment of risk that might be posed to the state by permitting entry. Furthermore, the nature of an encounter with the state does not only suggest a direct interaction with a state official. There are myriad ways in which the state might assert itself in an encounter; for example, in a request for state-issued identity documents to attend a dental appointment, or even to retrieve a 'click and collect' order. At the academic level, De Genova (2002) considers how the study of 'undocumented migrants' perpetuates a separation between legality and illegality, characterising this as a form of epistemic violence. Such violence is apparent in encounters between migrants and the state or proxies for the state that produce and perpetuate such categorisations and in doing so negate the complexity of human experience. All immigrants who do not hold citizenship are, to some extent, made vulnerable in potential encounters with the state precisely because the state reserves the right to withdraw leave to remain. Of course, different immigration statuses and different life experiences invite different experiences of precariousness and vulnerability.

In what follows I examine specifically the interactions between police and immigration officers in the UK, focusing on the interview procedure. These interviews can be high stakes and they represent moments in which the migrant comes into contact with the state, and therefore the opposing interests and the imbalance of power are in direct contact.

### 3. Methodology: accessing the everyday of migration

In a 2011 reflection Enloe notes that a study of female factory workers revealed to her how the structuring of their working lives by factory bosses did not accommodate the various pressures in their lives. The system of international trade intersected with female everyday life, and to truly understand the whole system of international trade, Enloe realised she needed to understand female experiences not just in the workplace, but outside of it, in personal lives and in the home. This was the only way to successfully uncover how the gendering of international trade functioned. This replicates the feminist methodology of 'studying up' a term coined by Laura Nader (1969): to research the practices of a powerful institution, turning towards hidden hierarchies within the institutions of immigration control. I adopt the perspective of the (relatively) powerless: those people are cogs in the machine of the institution and therefore know it intimately and who can reveal the location and operation of said hierarchies as they happen in the daily context of their work.

I engage with the experiences of frontline workers, following studies in social services that have successfully generated policy-relevant knowledge in local governance using ethnographic techniques (Durose 2007). Rather than interviewing elites or examining policy decisions from the perspective of powerful policy makers, I look to those people who are responsible for implementing policy, who use and refer to the laws regarding

human trafficking and smuggling in their everyday professional experience, and who engage with people who have crossed borders illicitly and are closest to the ‘front lines’. They use the law and consequently, they have a practical understanding of how it works and operates. They also are subject to professional protocols, standards of practice, institutional norms and procedures, and other routine things that affect how they do their jobs but are often obscured from consideration in policy analysis. Research that examines the practices of street-level bureaucracy examines this in the context of the practical outcomes of policy, in terms of evaluating agency of frontline workers to affect policy or to affect individualised outcomes, and in terms of the motivations that frontline workers might have that impact how they assess particular cases in compliance with the law (Dorrenbacher 2017; Ottosson, Eastmond and Schierenbeck 2013). In this research, I do not seek to critique or uncover the professional practices of frontline workers, or ‘street level bureaucrats’ but to acknowledge their expertise. As people who use law and policy, they are best placed to understand it and to understand best practices. Their professional objectives of course need to be accounted for; however, following the feminist perspective rather than isolating and analysing singular objectives or motivations I seek to understand how they form part of the process and practice of migration governance as it affects all parts of life. I conceptualise the state as institutions, laws, policies, and practices. The people that populate these institutions are multidimensional individuals with lives, ties, pulls, and pressures. They are complex people who have a professional role. They are not the state, but are people who reside in the state, and who have full lives. A single facet of these lives is their job, working for the state. It would be a mistake to think they are only relevant in their capacity as state employees, when their separate, diverse, and unique experiences in the world give them a perspective on the role for which they hold expertise. It is this perspective I seek to harness in this study.

### 3.1 Frontline workers, experiential knowledge

Frontline workers who come into contact with people who have been trafficked and smuggled, and/or the laws governing illicit movement in their everyday professional lives are experts in the knowledge of the practical execution of immigration rules that happens on an everyday basis. They are not policy makers yet they use policy in their professional lives in order to do their jobs. They are responsible for informing people of their options, helping people access legal and social support, providing professional services such as interpreting and social care, providing healthcare, and well-being services, and at times identifying victims and perpetrators. They feel the effects of policy and they often work as activists highlighting needs. They have first-hand experience of how immigration policy works in the context of both security interests and the needs of victims, what it achieves, and what side effects it might have. Experience of this type is a largely untapped resource for both the practice and the theory of the governance of immigration.

The approach of focusing on frontline workers to address areas where migrant voice is suppressed in encounters with the state may seem counterintuitive. The obvious question to ask is, why not go directly to migrants themselves? Although much research studies, the state on one hand or migrant experience on the other, there has been little study or conceptualisation that investigates the content and character of migrant encounters with

the state on the everyday level. These encounters are mundane moments for the frontline workers but are often beset with meaning, often with trepidation, for migrants. This even includes migrants with an immigration status that is relatively secure as more and more often seemingly secure statuses are being revealed as insecure during or following encounters with state officials. Furthermore, engaging frontline workers reflects an ethical stance as immigration zones are often congested with workers, volunteers, and researchers. These zones represent spaces of hardship and vulnerability for migrants. While workers and volunteers deliver much-needed support, they also contribute to strain put on overcrowded zones that often have few structural resources in place. While engaging migrant voice in these locations is of course crucial, a combination of researchers and journalists seeking stories but offering little in the way of material benefit or recompense, is emblematic of the extreme power imbalance that keeps migrants confined to these zones while allowing their stories to circulate for western media and academics. My approach represents an effort to avoid contributing to congestion in migration zones while still offering resources for foregrounding migrant voice; however, the objective is to interrogate the presence and absence of migrant voice in encounters with the state specifically.

Most of the existing work on frontline workers, or what is more commonly termed ‘street-level bureaucracy’ following Michael Lipsky’s (2010) coining of the phrase in 1969, looks at how workers in various positions can use leeway and ambiguity to interpret law and policy in practice, at times affecting outcomes of immigration decisions (and outcomes in other relevant sectors). Research in this area has found diversity in interpretation and action from individuals who work according to their own moral preferences within the scope of their position (e.g. see Dahlvik 2017; Dorrenbacher 2017). This indicates that they should not be considered as *only* agents of the state, but as actors in their own right, embedded in their own lives and worlds. Similarly, Mountz’s (2007) ‘ethnography of the state’ situates the researcher within a state department as a participant-observer. Of course, this involves observing and talking to state employees. I am interested in gaining insight of these frontline workers or street-level bureaucrats with regard to their expertise. Nevertheless, I do not observe what they *do*; rather, I ask them what they *think*. I hold their knowledge as critical expertise on the working of the state. It is necessary to acknowledge that frontline workers are subject to competing pressures: they have to perform in line with the objectives of their job; they are acutely aware of both the difficulties faced by migrants and the lack of resources available; they might hold personal views or have had personal experiences that affect their interpretation of the cases they work with; they might be subject to various conscious and unconscious biases. Only by thinking about migration as a phenomenon that involves the migrant, the frontline worker, and the state can we incorporate this intermediary perspective. By focusing on the frontline worker as the intermediary between the migrant and the state rather than simply representing the state or being a mechanism of the state, we can uncover a location where the competing interests come head to head in an embodied experience. By further breaking down the various organisations, authorities, and objectives that frontline workers must respond to, can we then understand the strength of various pulls and how this affects outcomes both at the level of policy and politics, at the level of public opinion, and at the level of migrant experience. Focus groups provided the ideal way to do this, as they allowed me to stimulate and participate in conversations that the officers were having

with each other. This provided a more diverse and in-depth perspective that I could have achieved in interview alone as the speakers agreed, disagreed, corrected each other, and cut in to elaborate on experiences. In this way, the research accounted for a variety of experiences and perspectives.

## 4. Case study

The data I use in what follows was gathered across four training sessions, two with immigration officers employed by the UK Home Office, and two with the London Metropolitan Police. The training provided in these sessions comprised the content of a module on working with interpreters aimed at police and immigration officers. These were the first sessions in which this module was taught, and officers who received the training were aware that they were part of a pilot study. The training was integrated into the PIP-2 level training for investigative interviewing, thus the officers took it as part of a longer course that was, in one of the three cases, a two-week-long residential course. It was later recommended by both the trainers and the participants that the training covered fundamental basic information that would be better placed at the PIP-1 level. The sessions were provided by official Home Office and London Metropolitan Police training staff who worked in consultation with the academic researchers prior to delivering the training and also provided feedback following the training. Immediately after the session ended the participants were divided into two focus groups in order to discuss the content of the training with academic researchers. The groups comprised three to five participants who were all either police officers or all immigration officers (although several of the immigration officers had formerly worked as police or had been seconded from the police and reflected on experiences from both professional perspectives).

During the focus groups, we asked the police and immigration officers to reflect on their practice of working with interpreters before the training, and to identify issues they faced and reflect on whether they were addressed by the training. We asked whether the training introduced new issues that law enforcement officers had not considered, and what additional thoughts they had. For the context of this article, I coded this data for specific issues or concerns relating to the code 'migrant voice'. Using this code, I looked for instances in which the practice of using interpreters suggests that migrant voice or agency had been or could be compromised, and specifically where this is due to routine practice versus lack of standardised practice, and whether both of these things were addressed by the training. This can allow for critical insight into the training practice, as well as critical insight at the procedural and policy levels. For the purposes of this article, I also use the sample to demonstrate the methodological utility of engaging with the everyday expertise of frontline workers. While five out of the nine focus groups involved officers from the London Metropolitan police, the remaining four were Home Office workers, which allowed for a balance of suspect and witness interviews, and immigration interviews.

The focus groups were all recorded and then were transcribed systematically by research assistants. During the transcription process, the data were anonymised and the focus groups and participants were organised by number to preserve anonymity. The academic researchers then quality-checked the transcriptions and addressed any queries that had

**Table 1.** Banal bordering: everyday encounters between migrants and security officers

Problem	Implications for migrant voice	Addressed in training
Lack of interpreters available means using inexperienced/untrained interpreters?	Some people receive better quality interpretation and a more straightforward process than others	Outside of scope
Lack of standardised training and certification provided to interpreters working with police	Some people receive better quality interpretation than others	Outside of scope
Concerns about quality of interpretation	Migrant voice may be obscured as interpreter does not convey all aspects of conversation	Strategies for quality assurance
Set up of room, best position for interpreter	The position of the interpreter affects how the interviewer engages with the interviewee and can affect the way the interviewee perceives the room	Advice on best practices for seating arrangement
Objectives at cross-purposes, loses elements of humanity	Goal-oriented working sees workers focused on their own targets and objects so best interests of migrants (or of other workers) might not be prioritised	The overarching goal of the training was to facilitate working between officers and interpreters, essentially highlighting the common objectives and easing the working environment.

been flagged by transcribers to resolve them where possible. For the purposes of this article, the transcripts were coded around the concept of ‘migrant voice’, which then generated sub-codes that have been incorporated into ‘problems’ identified in Table 1. While the table characterises these as problems, it is relevant to note that they are not all without a solution, and some of the solutions were discussed in the focus groups as having been addressed by the training, or being available through ad hoc practices that the training could then incorporate.

The concept of migrant voice in the coding referred to practical ways, in which migrants may or may not be able to speak, therefore is quite a literal concept. It also

examines ways in which words might be filtered through translation and interpretation, or the ways in which the dynamics of an interview using an interpreter or translator might affect the ability of a migrant to speak honestly, openly, and accurately. The focus here is on structural and procedural issues in this context; the research focuses quite practically on issues that can be addressed and is solution-oriented. That said, it is worth noting that resolving these problems will not resolve *every* potential problem and make the migrant interview setting a perfect space. Rather, the research acknowledges that there are major structural flaws in the politics and procedure dealing with migration but limits the focus in this particular paper to the mundane, the banal borders that are practiced, unnoticed, precisely because the problems that are produced are not sensational but are the everyday practical problems of skilled workers carrying out their daily roles.

Across the focus groups, there were five main areas where officers either reflected on their own practices in the past and acknowledged that migrant voice may have been compromised, or reflected on places in which they think migrant voice had been or could be compromised by either the actions of an interpreter, or more specifically through a lack of proper communication between the interpreter and the officer. These included some very direct and clear examples, as well as some less tangible examples. Table 1 summarises these issues, and indicates whether such issues had been addressed in the training preceding the focus group (the latter being either further discussed or acknowledged by the participating officers).

The most common problem that officers mentioned was that of a lack of accessible interpreters. It was often difficult to access interpreters at short notice or within a geographic area of the location of the interview so as to allow for travel within a timely fashion. This meant, at times, people who did not have the relevant training and experience were used. In worst-case scenarios, family members of the interviewee were used informally as interpreters. The officers participating in the focus groups reflected on the problems with using family members. This might compromise the freedom with which a person felt able to talk. Indeed, in criminal interviews, interpreters must formally indicate any prior knowledge of the participant as anonymity is protected. On one occasion, a participant said that when an interpreter was inaccessible she was forced to release a detainee without an interview. Of course, this may seem in some ways preferable in the case of migrant contact with police, but it highlights a broader problem whereby migrants cannot access interpretation and while a detained suspect might be pleased of being released without interview, a vulnerable subject of trafficking might be made more vulnerable as a result of the lack of interpretation available.

#### 4.1 Quality of interpretation, consistency, and standard practice<sup>1</sup>

One of the most commonly mentioned practical problems that arose in focus group was concerns that the officers expressed about the quality of interpretation. This is a common issue when working across languages, because of course, not all parties in the room can understand every word spoken. Officers indicated feeling a loss of control when they did not find interpreters to be faithfully interpreting every word. For example, as focus group participants described:

(P.3/2) When you ask a simple question and you are expecting a short answer and you get a lot of talk. You get a lot of talk between them, especially when there are two or three bits of conversations and they go backwards and forwards and you think: well, what's going on?

*(Interviewer) And does the interpreter not interpret each of those bits?*

(P.2 and P.3/2): No, no

(P.3/2) It's like: 'What colour is his shirt?' Blah Blah Blah, two minute conversation. 'Blue'

... (P.3/2) ...I just turn round and go: 'Sorry, can you explain what you just spoke about?' Nine times out of ten the interpreter will turn round and go: 'Oh I just had to explain this then he asked me this, so I clarified that'. But I had one time when: 'don't worry, I'll deal with it'

The participant goes on to talk about how he recorded the interview so he could have it checked by an additional translator who was competent in the foreign language. However, another focus group notes how this is not standard practice, contrary to standard practice in quality assurance for other forms of professional knowledge, such as peer review of expert analysis:

(P.1/9) the question came up, should they get their interpretation checked? – so you go to the lab, the drug expert has his analysis work checked. The phone download done by the lab used to be checked – but don't worry about that, don't worry the police officers, if they are not checked there may be problems at court. So to make it more professional then if you do get a peer review or a peer to check your work, that is a cost involved, there is time involved, but then when you get to court the stakes aren't there for the case to be chucked out. ...

... (P.2/9) it's maybe how, as a police service across the whole of the UK, we start addressing the use of interpreters, the qualifications of interpreters, the sharing of experiences and making them an expert group if you like. Like you would do with the drugs lab that you've got or the finger print experts. Interpreters are a pool of officers that could be done and the NCA or the National Police Training could all do that - and I don't think that's unachievable – and accrediting people.

The idea that interpreting is skilled work and that consequently a necessary standardised accreditation for working in police or home office interviews (but particularly police interviews) would be helpful emerged across the focus groups. The officers recognised that the trust issues emerge from working across languages and, to alleviate those problems standardised training for interpreters and standardised practices for peer review of work (either officers or interpreters work) would help. Indeed, in Focus Group 2, cited above, the officer who doubted the interpretation he received recorded the entire interview so as to have it reviewed. The training dealt with quality control in this way, and, equally invited offices to introduce their knowledge and experience so as to address problems in the training and improve officer practice in a standardised way. Further to that, officers indicated that if interpreters possessed skilled knowledge specific to working with police, it would facilitate and streamline the process, which would of course facilitate the officer in doing his or her job, but it would also ensure fairer practice for migrant

interviewees and in that sense protect migrant voice in these situations. For example, one immigration officer talked about how when he first started interviewing through interpreters he expected that the interpreter would have been trained in Home Office procedures:

(P.5/2) I just presumed that they would have gone through a certain level of training and professionalism . . . if they were working for the Home Office interviews and statements, that they would have done training on interviews and statements.

This was echoed by a police officer (Participant 3/Focus Group 2), who outlined the process of making statements. Normally in a single language interview, the officer would write the statement structure during the interview then ask the participant to check and sign it. When working with an interpreter, he notes, best practice would be for the interpreter to write the statement structure in the foreign language during the interview, the participant would sign it, and then it would be translated to English. However, because the interpreters were not trained in a standardised way, this best practice was often impossible to follow. He found that often, instead, he would interview via the interpreter, and write the statement in English because the interpreter was not familiar with the process of writing a statement. This English statement would then be translated to the foreign language, and signed by the interviewee. While this might not seem to be large or meaningful difference, the statement is being filtered back and forward through language, interpretation, and standard practice thus there are more places in which the true words of the interviewee can be lost, hence migrant voice in this sense is in danger of becoming diluted. This problem can be overcome with training to an available pool of interpreters. Here the relevance of asking officers to reflect on their experience is evident. This is a standard practice that officers have identified as problematic, yet the nature of the problem might not be clear to policy makers or researchers without engaging with officers to learn about their experiences.

As another participant in the same focus group referred to immigration interviews and pointed out:

(P.1/2) ‘There is no consistency. We are meant to be one big team over the country and everyone – and I understand that. It depends where you are, your resources, access to certain things. But yeah, not sure if it’s because of the fact that they are all in different places or what, but we all have different ways of doing things don’t we?’

It was common for officers to indicate a problem that was specifically related to a lack of available resources, in which case the training could not properly alleviate the problem. In this sense, the first-hand experiential expertise of officers highlights a specific issue with working practice that researchers potentially can escalate to a higher level, engaging experiential expertise as a means of improving standard practice. Officers tended to express frustration with the lack of available resources which compromised their ability to do their job. In compromising their ability to do their job, it also compromises the access to a fair interview carried out with competent and trained interpretation for the migrant interviewee, hence indicating that resource cuts have had a meaningful and negative

impact on the presence of migrant voice in life-changing situations. It is no surprise that austerity measures might have had such an impact, yet to recognise the potentially life-changing nature of that impact demonstrates clearly how policy can manifest in everyday life in a very meaningful way.

The lack of trust in the competency of an interpreter is highlighted still further when officers reflect on the question of fair practice for migrants. One participant raised the issue that at times, she has felt the interpreter to not be properly competent in English, commenting 'sometimes I think, Oh My God, the interpreter needs an interpreter'. This was further emphasised in the context of interviews where jargon and specialist knowledge of a language:

(P.1/3) 'the interpreters need to be aware that when you interpret for a criminal investigation, you know, you need to know what you are talking about because of the technical terms and perhaps explaining the caution. It's not that simple. Knowing that I speak a different language as well it's not sort of word for word. You need to understand what you're interpreting before you can actually interpret that kind of - you know those kind of words, that kind of situation - what you are trying to put across correctly. And I think some of the interpreters we use, they are not particularly OK with that and I do have concerns as to whether or not the suspect is not actually getting a fair interpretation; a correct interpretation of what is actually being said to them, you know, in such kind of sensitive subjects, at a crucial time when they are actually being tested for getting a fair trial basically'

The officer who raised this point was dealing primarily with criminal investigations and compared the stakes to that of an asylum interview or an immigration interview. While at first glance, it may seem that providing a fair trial is of course of greater concern, asylum interviews can equally compromise a person's freedom. Immigration interviews are often life-changing. The officer was using his own experience in the police force to highlight the example, but care should be taken to recognise that asylum and immigration interviews are recognised as life-changing moments for the people involved. As one officer commented in Focus Group 3:

(P.1/3) 'Most interpreters. . . they are legitimate and they take great exception to members from their home communities, their home countries, coming here and committing crime or. . .

*Interjects* (P.2/3): Yeah, they do don't they

(P.1/3): . . .talking absolute nonsense and lying their way through an asylum interview. So most interpreters are pretty much legitimate I think'.

However, this becomes a significant concern for migrant voice, whereby the officer assumes an interpreter is making judgements about the case in point. In context, this statement is designed to recognise the professionalism of interpreters who will not show bias in a case. Nevertheless, it indicates a form of judgement in the sense that the officers are making a judgement as to whether someone is lying and are assuming that interpreters are making the same judgement. While immigration officers have had training in the latter in terms of making credibility determinations, interpreters have not received such

training and officers are aware of this, having discussed how the lack of standardised training is a problem. Therefore, there are some blurred lines in terms of assessing what a neutral and unbiased professional position for an interpreter ought to be (on the part of the officers—it is necessary to note that this is not reflected in the official codes of practice for interpreters that are clear on objectivity and biases).

#### 4.2 Procedural issues, objectives at cross-purposes

Police officers and immigration officers noted, in reference to the training they had received, the importance of maintaining control of an interview. To introduce an interpreter into an interview, situation can change the dynamic of the room. The training that officers received prior to the focus group dealt with the ideal placement of an interpreter in the room. The training advised that officers sit perpendicular to the interpreter so that the interview is carried out directly with the interviewee and the interpreter simply interjects the interpretation of the words. If an interpreter sits beside the interviewee, the temptation is for the officer to speak and make eye contact with the interpreter, compromising the migrant's voice as they become a secondary participant. If the interpreter sits beside the interviewer, this can construct an intimidating situation for an interviewee sitting at the other side of a table, and again compromise the interviewee's ability to comfortably express him or herself, impacting migrant voice. Officers reflected on this:

When they are in custody it would be more, you know, when you are talking to them about when they go into custody and when you are interviewing you have to think about the room layout and where your suspect would be sitting and where you're sitting and where the interpreter is sitting, so it will be that sort of thing

(P.2/5) Where the solicitor will sit and you are in control of the room sort of angle on it as the person in charge of the interview in maintaining control.

The officers reflect on how the presence of interpreters in the room can change the balance and the interviewing officer must maintain control. This was addressed in the training and generally, across the focus groups, the officers found this useful to note, commenting that room layout was something they were trained to take into consideration and it is useful to think of how an additional person might affect that. In that sense, the space of the room itself becomes a bordering process.

The focus groups at times demonstrated how officers prioritised their own objectives, often to the detriment of other participants. For example, on reflection a participant in Focus Group 9 commented:

(P.1/9) I have left the interpreter sitting there for hours in the old canteen. And it kind of makes – you know you think back throughout your career how many times you have done it and probably, unfortunately, I fall foul to that and I take that on board and I will incorporate them more in the job I think.

(P.4/9) ... When you are using these interpreters you are just focused on your end result and what you want to get out of it. And that's doing it between different jobs and when you are using them, you know it's quite right raising these

considerations. Most of them you would like to think that you extend the courtesy but there are certain things that you just may not consider because you are rushing.

The participants in this focus group recognised that in being goal-oriented they often did not take the interpreter into account, using them only as a resource. The overarching objective of the training was to address these counter positions, whereby the officers only see as far as the resource rather than seeing the person. The idea that the professional objective can outweigh recognition of humanity even at the level of workers who have counter objectives highlights the worrying trend that professional objectives can become all-consuming. Thus, the humanity of the interview participant equally may not be protected particularly in working across languages where there are so many small gaps into which migrant voice can be lost. The banality of the professional process, unseen, and unconsidered is producing bordering effects that are very real in their outcomes. As demonstrated above the training can address some of these gaps, but some of them are based on larger structural and resource issues and, in order to be addressed, need to be escalated to a policy level. Hence the importance of engaging with frontline expertise is clear. Diversity continues to increase and cross-border communications are necessary and needed more and more frequently. In this sense, resources for translation and interpretation are vital and there are insufficient resources available. The experiential knowledge of frontline workers offers insight into necessary actions to better protect migrant voice (and simultaneously to protect the procedures that are guaranteed fair law enforcement), that can be usefully escalated to higher levels.

## 5. Conclusion

In this research, I considered how banal professional practices can produce bordering effects in which migrant voice can be diluted or obscured completely. There is an extant and unavoidable power imbalance in migrant encounters with the state, whereby the state holds the ultimate authority over immigration status, and this is an authority that can be exercised in ways that are unclear or murky to migrants themselves. Nevertheless, for those who practice that authority on a day to day level, it is part of the mundane and everyday tasks of their professional role. Therefore, migrant encounters with the state are often exceptional for the migrant while mundane for the particular individual they are encountering. Consequently, I sought to look inside these encounters, to understand how the banality of everyday professional practice might impact migrant experience and migrant voice.

I drew on data gathered with police and immigration officers reflecting on immigration and criminal interviews that involve migrants and in particular take place through an interpreter. In terms of security, this research acknowledged the role of police and immigration officers in their interaction with and production of the mundane and everyday security: both at the level of state and transnational security, and individual security in terms of migrant experience. While the data I draw on here are more specific than the objectives of the paper it offered some initial insights into how examining the level of frontline workers permits a clear picture of places in standardised practice that migrant

voice can be lost. This of course has implications for migrant security. Officers who participated in focus groups diagnosed some of the clear problems that caused difficulties and that, ultimately, obscure migrant voices. These issues, such as lack of resources or a lack of quality control, have implications for state and transnational security in terms of the governance of immigration-related crimes such as trafficking and smuggling. The suppression of migrant voice also of course impacts the individual and experiential security of migrants. The issues raised by officers included areas that could be addressed by the training practices that were designed as part of the *Transnational Organised Crime and Translation* project that funded the research, including practical manoeuvres such as taking care to use a particular room layout, and broader strategies such as checking interpretations and practicing quality control, and also reminding the officer that the interpreter is not simply a resource but is a human participant. Other areas could not be addressed by the training itself, such as noting the significant lack of resources directed towards interpretation and translation services despite them being crucial needs and growing needs, and also the lack of standardised training for interpreters that would facilitate the officer experience (of course, interpreter perspective is missing from the latter insight). This demonstrates a place where frontline worker expertise could potentially be escalated to a higher policy or procedural level in order to improve practice for both frontline workers, and to protect migrant voice.

Ultimately, the implications for migrant security lie in the recognition that migrant voice can certainly be obscured as a result of mundane and everyday procedure. Banal bordering processes can go unnoticed and unaddressed by policy makers, but are often loaded with meaning for the migrants subject to them. The vulnerability of migrants and the unbalanced nature of encounters between migrants and the state highlights how state power manifests at an everyday level and suggests that insecurity is not unique to migrants without documents, but is present in all encounters between migrants and the state. Nevertheless, the professionals who are interacting with migrants are often in a position, whereby they have the experiential expertise to offer workable solutions, although not always the channels through which to enact solutions, nor the resources. Of course, this is imperfect and there are areas that would require larger structural changes, or more critical analysis of the functioning of the state. Nevertheless, further participatory action research with frontline workers in all areas of migrant experience can be of great value, and can potentially allow for the identification of areas in which migrant voice is obscured, and identification of strategies to alleviate that problem, without causing an additional or an exploitative burden to migrants themselves.

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## Endnotes

1. Where quotes are taken from participants, the data has been organised by numbers referring to the participant and the number of the group, therefore P.1/4 refers to ‘participant one, focus group 4’. The use of numbers in place of names allows the data to remain fully anonymised.

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