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# The emotional governance of immigration controls

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## ABSTRACT

Emotions produce the borders between the self and other. They are also constitutive of national border practices and politics. This article considers the 'affective governance' of the UK's immigration system, arguing that an emotional register that is both splenetic and indifferent is evident across migration policy, decision-making, and operational practice. It draws on 15-years of research on immigration administration, detention, and judicial spaces to explore the circulation and management of emotion by immigration practitioners. It argues that four emotions (anger, disgust, suspicion, fear) dominate across spaces, scales, and actors. Simultaneously, migrants' purported emotions and affective lives are met with disinterest and disbelief, their emotional displays are ignored or punished, and immigration practitioners engage in their own emotional detachment. The article argues that by examining the emotional government of immigration systems, we can interrogate the role of affect in techniques of subjectification and the creation of deportable and disposable Others.



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**KEYWORDS** Migration; border controls; asylum; detention; legal; affect

## Introduction

In 2010 I accompanied a young man to Lunar House, a tall, imposing tower block in London. Gebre (all names are changed) spoke little English but had been advised by the Home Office helpline to go there to find out if his asylum claim was still open. As I recorded in my field diary, we arrived to bewildering mayhem of:

...a cacophony of shouted and often contradictory instructions. We are continuously berated by immigration officers and several times I follow one set of barked directions only to be immediately told off for doing so . . . Officers snap instructions at us, shouting if we do not respond quickly, although because they rarely make eye contact, it is difficult to know who they are talking to.

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I eventually realize that amongst the competing voices, the shouts to go upstairs are directed at us. So, we start climbing. At each landing we are wordlessly shooed higher, until eventually we are let into a chaotic room and ushered over to three immigration officers towering at a raised desk with high walls. They were surly and 'immediately alternate between barking questions, rolling their eyes and shouting instructions'. Before we have the chance to say anything, they start aggressively firing questions:

Officer 1: 'Where were you supposed to report? Where were you supposed to report to? Why didn't you report?'

Me: 'Did you have to sign your name anywhere? Like a police station?'

Officer 2: 'Obviously he did! We wouldn't have just let him go!'

Officer 1: 'Where were you supposed to report? Why didn't you report?' Whilst the questions are fired, Gebre stands silently, looking petrified.

Officer 1: 'Why don't you answer? It's not going to help you to stand there like you're stupid. You're going to have to talk'.

As I try to explain the questions to Gebre, one officer turns to me angrily: 'We speaking different languages? Your English different from mine?' Disconcerted by the level of aggression and suspicion, and trying to halt the circular accusations, I suggest that they might want to know Gebre's details. Without showing Gebre what I am writing, one demands: 'Is that your *real* name? Don't lie to us, is that really what you are called?' Another adds: 'Are you lying? If we find out you're lying we can arrest you. I'm going to look up on the computer and then we'll know what your *real* name is'.

While we wait, another man arrives and tries to give the officers papers, saying it's evidence for his case. The officers are dismissive: rolling their eyes, refusing to touch the papers, and shouting for him to go to Liverpool, 250 miles away. In limited English, the man tries to explain that he is desperate and has no accommodation or money. The officers respond angrily, saying it's not their job to help him. He perseveres, trying to explain he's homeless and asks to be detained rather than continuing to sleep rough. They refuse, saying immigration detention is expensive and shout at him until he leaves.

Once we were dismissed, Gebre and I got out as fast as we could. Gebre said they were 'like army' and had been horrible, but he was not surprised. He

already knew that the UK's immigration system is often one of collective, unprompted hostility, particularly for illegalized and racialized people.

As this example illustrates, bureaucracies of migration controls present a charged affective register. In both policy and practice, at individual and systemic levels, and across different kinds of spaces, the immigration system is beset with chaos, contempt, rudeness, mistrust, and fear, mixed with a chilling coldness and disinterest. Immigration systems are invariably presented as rational bureaucracies, with its agents led by law and policy in their practices, motives, and decision-making. But emotions are embedded in, and constitutive of, social worlds. Policy is necessarily emotional and emotions inherently political.

This article explores the affective tapestry of migration controls by looking at everyday practices and technologies of emotion within immigration bureaucracies, focusing on people working in the system. It draws on 15-years of research across the UK's immigration, detention, and asylum sectors. This includes research on: identity disputes within the asylum and immigration detention systems (Griffiths 2012a); mixed-citizenship families facing a member's deportation (Griffiths 2019)<sup>1</sup>; and asylum appeal hearings (Gill et al. 2022).<sup>2</sup> It is also indirectly informed by voluntary and paid work in the sector, including within civil society and parliamentary spheres. The ethnographic and participatory methods employed and the lengthy, repeat experience of multiple faces of the UK's immigration system are an effective way into understanding their 'affective atmospheres' (Anderson 2009).

This article looks across immigration institutions, spaces, and agents, to examine how the immigration system 'feels'; which emotions are circulated, valued, obscured, or deemed threatening; how emotions are regulated, evaluated, and rejected; and who is permitted, expected (even required), or prohibited from displaying emotions. Amongst a complex medley of affect, the article identifies four predominant emotional registers, before going on to examine how practitioners manage and govern the emotions of themselves and others, including assessing, refuting, invoking, and denying emotion. As such, this article asks questions about emotional government of self and others within the immigration system and how the expression, control and erasure of emotions reflects and constructs power relations, boundaries, and subjectivities.

### **Emotions, bureaucrats, and statecraft**

Whilst recognizing the difficulties of pinning-down definitions in this field, I broadly conceptualize emotions as affective states felt within bodies. But rather than individualized internal possessions, I consider emotions to be produced in relationship, through interaction with things and persons. They are something you *do* rather than *have* and

are necessarily embedded in culture, language, history, and power (Ahmed 2014; Clarke, Hoggett, and Thompson 2006). As social phenomena, emotions are inevitably constitutive of social boundaries, including racial, gendered, and class-based power hierarchies (Wilkins and Pace 2014). Affect, although certainly overlapping with emotions, are a broader flow of energies and arguably more bodily and pre-conscious than emotion (Åhäll and Gregory 2013).

Affect and emotions are not only the 'substance of politics' (Stoler 2004, 6) but 'constitutive of the political itself' (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2018, 7). Political philosophers have long argued that the 'passions' play an integral role in law and politics (Ure Frost 2014). Constituting the nation is deep emotional, with national identities built upon the 'emotional glue' of collective expression of emotions (Åhäll and Gregory 2013). Border politics are especially emotive, reflected by the rise of nationalist xenophobic politics. At the time of writing, the UK government engaged in near-weekly border hysteria over the number of irregular boat arrivals, with frequent claims of 'crisis' and 'invasion'. However, the nation-state is produced as much through indifference and apathy, and the subtler emotionality of engaging with state officials and enacting state policies, as through the febrile language of border politics. Max Weber et al. (1948) infamously presented modern bureaucracies as impersonal and rational forms of organization, run by detached, objective bureaucrats. The stereotype of the unfeeling, amoral bureaucrat focused on technicalities over humanity endures (e.g. Bauman 1989). The contemporary design and operation of immigration policies is similarly presented as emotionless work, but, as the opening vignette illustrates, the agents, spaces, encounters, and legislation of immigration control are deeply affective.

Emotions can be strategically, instrumentally employed and certainly some immigration policies contain direct attempts to govern through emotion. This includes fear-mongering overseas campaigns warning would-be migrants to stay away; Operation Vaken, under which vans with 'Go home or face arrest' messages were driven around ethnically-diverse boroughs; and the 'hostile environment', which is explicitly intended to frighten and distress people into leaving (Griffiths and Yeo 2021). More commonly, however, the bureaucracies of immigration politics are actualized through less explicit or conscious wielding of affect. This unplanned, unspoken circulation of emotion within the immigration system is the focus of this article. It considers a range of actors, institutions, and spaces to examine emotional governance: the government of the emotions of self and others; how emotions are controlled, managed, manipulated, and denied; and how in so doing political subjectivities and power hierarchies are sustained.

## Emotional registers of the immigration system

As the opening vignette demonstrates, the administrative spaces of the immigration system are intensely and complexly affective. In that case, that emotional tapestry included feelings of chaos, overwhelm, aggression, threat, and confusion. By approaching these episodes as 'affective atmospheres', we can consider them as communal events with a dramatizing of emerging emotions and unfolding of complexes of feelings (Anderson 2009). This is as much true of the immigration system's judicial spaces as its administrative ones. The Asylum and Immigration Tribunal, where asylum, deportation, and visa appeals are heard, are intended to be calm, measured spaces overseen by law-led immigration judges acting as independent arbitrators. But alongside the silence, procedure, and waiting, more splenic feelings also circulate, and not only among the appellants. The emotions of the judges dominate proceedings, and they vary considerably. Amongst the 70-plus I have observed, some were friendly and sympathetic to appellants, others appeared bored (listless, sighing repeatedly, or staring out the window), or were aggressive, impatient, and irritable, as illustrated by my notes from a sexuality-based asylum appeal in 2013:

The judge starts the appeal. The appellant stands out of respect when she speaks. She shouts at him to sit down. He doesn't hear at first and she shouts again, annoyed. She launches straight into the hearing, without explaining the procedures or her role and independence, as she is supposed to.

The appeal immediately became mired in misunderstanding and miscommunication, a common occurrence in immigration appeals (Gill 2016). The judge's anger and appellant's anxiety rise.

When the appellant does not understand her questions (which are often opaque or overly-complicated), or cannot answer a question (or not in the form she wants), she becomes visibly and audibly cross, repeating herself with exaggerated hostility and volume. She also becomes irate when she cannot understand him. She keeps screwing up her face in a parody of incomprehension, looking at others to translate. She blames the appellant for her incomprehension, saying she has no idea what he's talking about. The Home Office Presenting Officer (HOPO) joins in, shaking his head and saying that he doesn't understand either. (I can understand him perfectly.) The judge reads aloud what she has written as his answer. The appellant doesn't understand it. She ends up asking him angrily if he can hear or if he has problems with his ears. When he replies, 'Not really', she gets very cross, bellowing, 'DO YOU HAVE PROBLEMS WITH YOUR EARS?'

The unease continued when the HOPO began cross-examination by asking questions about gay magazines the appellant says he saw as a teenager. Despite guidance that sexually-explicit content is inappropriate, 'the immigration judge intervenes to ask for specific details of the sexual acts depicted

and keeps pushing him, so the appellant ends up being quite graphic'. He squirmed uncomfortably but felt forced to answer their questions about intimate sexual acts and body parts. I noted that throughout the examination, the judge spoke with 'sarcasm and incredulity. Her tone is accusatory. She is sneering and frowning deeply, scrunching up her nose almost in disgust'. The HOPO colluded in ridiculing him, including giggling as he repeated and corrected the appellant's English. Eventually the appellant's own lawyer joined in; repeatedly publicly scolding him for comprehension problems that were not his fault. I wrote that by the end of the appeal the court room was filled with 'Silence and deep shame'.

As both vignettes indicate, a wide range of emotions circulate within the immigration system. This can include hope, pride, institutional loyalty, generosity, friendship, and humour. Afterall, there can be love and satisfaction in nationalism, domination, and racism (Bonilla-Silva 2019; Pardy 2010), and excitement working in pressured, politicized arena. The thrill of a high-adrenalin job, for example, was evident in my interview with the Home Office manager of an Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) in 2009: 'No day's the same. You might get an incident! One day I had a death in custody, a demo outside, a man self-harming and a hunger-strike!', they said, describing the telephone ringing non-stop and media bombardment. Sustained human contact within IRCs can also nurture concern, kindness, and sympathy (Hall 2012). Without downplaying the coercion and cruelty of detention, relationships between those working-in and detained-in IRCs may sometimes be relatively friendly. I have seen moments of mutual joking and softness, and spoken to officers who received thankyou cards after people's release. The private-company manager of one IRC I interviewed spoke with respect and empathy, imagining the men's fear, frustration and confusion:

'[I] try to get staff to understand how you would feel in their shoes. And I certainly wouldn't be very well behaved . . . The *hope* and *drive* these people have is unbelievable. You'll walk around and they'll be smiling! And I'd be going mad'.

However, such emotions and encounters are embedded in inescapable power dynamics. Care can be co-opted to make subjugation and violence palatable (Gill 2016) and pity masks responsibility for suffering, thereby reinforcing hierarchies (Åhäll and Gregory 2013). Even compassion can be fickle, partial, paternalistic, and disempowering (Ure and Frost 2014).

Notwithstanding the plethora of emotions in circulation in the UK's immigration system, there are four that dominate: anger, disgust, suspicion, and fear. These are evident in almost-garish abundance across its breadth and depth, and not only characterize but actively produce the immigration system.



*Anger:* Both vignettes encompass unprovoked rudeness, antagonism, and aggression. The officers spoke to Gebre with hatred before they knew anything about him, and the judge appeared 'harsh and stern' as she entered the hearing room. Other immigration judges were variously described to me as 'fiery', 'lively' and 'hot headed', with one I observed shouting and banging his desk during hearings. HOPOs also often display short tempers and hot tongues with appellants. One told me it was difficult to do her job without ending up angry, and that once she had lost her temper in an appeal and had to apologize. Anger exists at various intensities, from annoyance, argumentativeness, and bitterness, to rage or fury; and in different formats, including contempt (dislike and superiority) and resentment (anger with grievance) (Ekman 1999). Triggers for anger, such as perceived rule breaking, injustice, or threat (Ekman 1999) may be particularly salient within immigration fields, with feelings of injury converted into hatred for others (Ahmed 2014). The UK's immigration system has a reputation for being brutal and hateful, including at its highest levels. As Home Secretary (2010–16), Theresa May not only introduced controversial immigration policies that officially-deployed the words 'hostile' and 'cruel', but also had highly antagonistic relationships with her civil servants. Her successor Priti Patel (2019–22) was accused of bullying staff and used Home Office social media to publicly attack human rights lawyers (Trilling 2021).

*Disgust:* Feelings of revulsion are also widely evident. Practitioners in both vignettes displayed the characteristic signs of disgust: wrinkled noses, lowered eyebrows, raised upper lips, and an aversion to touching or interacting (Ekman 1999). Disgust ranges from dislike and distaste to abhorrence and repugnance against somebody/thing deemed offensive or contaminating and is often associated with anger or contempt (Ekman 1999). Asylum and deportation cases, particularly those involving sexuality-based claims, are especially prone to disgust, shame, and humiliation, as reflected in the appeal above. The UK's isolation of irregular arrivals in military barracks and ships also reflects themes of distaste and contagion. Disgust is anchored to wider social structures including power and politics, making it an enduring weapon of exclusion (Nussbaum 2001), racism, and xenophobia (Tyler 2013). Revulsion and the sense that certain people are dirty, disgusting, or polluting are culturally-taught and bound-up with boundaries and power relations, and thus deeply political and abjectifying (Douglas 1996, Kristeva 1982; Tyler 2013). This association of disgust with people 'out of place' or between states makes it particularly primed in mobility contexts.

*Suspicion:* Both vignettes also reflect the ingrained and unbridled mistrust of migrants and their narratives, documents, identities, intentions, and emotions. A 'culture of disbelief' operates, in which border guards, Home Office personnel, and immigration judges assume people to be liars and cheats (Souter 2011). Love and relationships are presupposed to be

deceptive or opportunistic (d'Aoust 2013; de Hart 2006) and refugee claims revolve around appraisals of claimants' 'credibility'. A judge I observed in 2013 'visibly rolled her eyes' at one appellant and, 'raised her eyebrows in disbelief, seemed to sneer at him, her questions became increasingly incredulous, if not sarcastic'. The appellant was an 18-year-old possible trafficking victim who spoke no English and was accompanied by social workers. Such scepticism extends in all directions, with systemic errors, inconsistency, and contradiction meaning that those subject to immigration rules are equally mistrusting (Griffiths 2012b). An immigration detainee, for example, once described the Home Office to me as 'vile liars and truth distorters'. Indeed, uncertainty, disorder, and mistruth are so pervasive, they can be considered core techniques of asylum and immigration systems (Griffiths 2013; Whyte 2011).

*Fear:* The immigration system is also saturated with fear; ranging from trepidation and nervousness to terror. This is not only so for migrants. Several of the reasons fear is so prevalent in modern society, including not knowing what will happen ('ignorance') and being unable to influence it ('impotence') (Bauman and Donskis 2013, 100), are characteristic of both being subject to and working within the immigration system. The 2012 newspaper 'naming and shaming' of immigration judges who granted appeals continues to cause worry at the Tribunal, including that observers like me might be journalists. Home Office Ministers and senior civil servants are also paranoid of media accusations of being 'soft' on immigration and are haunted by historical allegations of the department being 'unfit for purpose'. A former senior civil servant described being a Home Office Minister as 'a terrifying business', waiting for the next political crisis or frontpage attack (Trilling 2021). Home Office responses to crisis tend to be internal infighting, division, and recriminations, with Ministers and senior civil servants turning against each other or blaming operational divisions (Trilling 2021). Anxiety and insecurity are thus passed onto frontline officers, who are underpaid, undertrained, and performing emotionally-taxing, traumatic work under hyper-critical gazes and ongoing threats of disciplinary action and departmental crises (Gill 2016). One HOPO told me they work under constant pressure and unfair expectations, facing a 'talking to' or worse if they fail to meet their (unrealistic) targets.

## Managing emotions

Emotions are felt by embodied individuals, but they should not be understood as internal possessions residing within separate persons. Emotions are not only embedded in, but produced through social interactions, within affective atmospheres. They are intentional ('about' something/someone) and lie at the heart of how we make sense of the world and other people,

make decisions, and influence each other (Ahmed 2014). Emotions are objects of knowledge, targets of power, and integral to technologies of the self (d'Aoust 2014). This section considers the political sociality of emotions within the immigration system, asking how practitioners read, evaluate, provoke, and employ emotions.

### **Emotional evaluations**

People subject to immigration rules are prone to requirements regarding the abstinence or display of particular emotions, including evaluations of the validity and weight of their feelings. Some immigration categories *require* evidence of certain emotions and intimacies, which must be demonstrated in specific ways, at specified times and places, with the absence of expected emotion (or displays in culturally-unfamiliar ways) taken to demonstrate failure or deceit. Those deciding spousal visas and Article 8 applications, for example, evaluate the veracity and strength of love, attachment, and sexuality, with applicants needing to perform love, gender, attraction, and family in ways that align with cultural and normative expectations (d'Aoust 2013). Refugee claims entail practitioners emotionally reading narratives and bodies by studying emotional reactions, displays, and demeanour, so to assess fear, persecution, and trustworthiness (Baillot, Cowan, and Munro 2013; Kobelinsky 2014). 'Genuine' refugees are expected to express emotion in a certain way (not exaggerated but not cold), have been motivated solely by fear, and to conform to assumptions of vulnerability (appear victimized and coerced), leading to fetishized figures of passive 'suffering bodies' (Griffiths 2015). Moreover, sexuality-based asylum claims necessitate meeting decision-makers' expectations about queer identities and relationships, which often resort to normative and stereotypical assumptions around clothing, deportment, and social lives.

In other cases, immigration applications require the *absence* of feelings and intimacy. Work, study, and visit visas, for example, risk rejection if 'sullied' by emotional motivation. I knew a international student whose visa application for an English-language course was refused because her plan to stay with her UK-based mother drew doubt as to the pure rationality of her application. Several families I have interviewed had visit visas rejected because the applicant had a partner or child in the UK (factors considered indicating risk of overstaying), leading one mother to tell me: 'You can only come here as a paying customer'.

### **Employing emotions**

Those working in immigration systems utilize emotions; drawing on and 'performing' emotions, as well as invoking and manipulating those of

others. Despite the cloak of legal rationality, immigration judges rely on their own emotions in deciding cases; most evidently feelings of suspicion, but also drawing on compassion, admiration, and empathy to dispel doubt and grant appeals (Kobelinsky 2014). The emotional governmentality of immigration systems requires not just the 'emotional work' of everyday interactions, but also the heavy 'emotional labour' compelled by employers and institutional cultures (Hochschild 1983). HOPOs are particularly adept managing emotions, and deploy impatience, insult, and belligerence as part of their legal tactics. Although they can come across as breath-takingly rude, many described engaging in conscious acts of affect. Several said they need to embody thick skin and excessive combativeness, scepticism, and confidence, and cannot be seen to be 'soft' or trusting. One said he had to get into an emotional mindset before appeals to enable him to behave in socially-unacceptable ways, like calling people liars to their face. They also perform unemotionality, as discussed below. For example, although at one asylum appeal nobody reacted to the distraught and vocally suicidal appellant, after the hearing the shaken HOPO confessed to me, 'It's never nice, the emotion'.

HOPOs (and appellants' legal representatives) are particularly attuned to the feelings of immigration judges, which, as noted above, dominate legal hearings. They carefully monitor and manage judges' mood and patience; frequently glancing up to gauge their interest and tolerance, and accelerating, decelerating, or shortening their intervention in response. They can also encourage, exploit, and manipulate judges' emotions, particularly frustration and fear. Counter to expectations that all involved in a hearing are working collectively for smooth running, HOPOs often appear to revel in misunderstanding (Gill 2016, 108). As in the appeal vignette above, they may exacerbate communication difficulties to increase the judge's exasperation with appellants. They also elicit judges' fears. In many ways, engaging in fearmongering is integral to deportation proceedings, with the Home Office accentuating the danger posed by someone as part of justifying removal. However, this can extend into provoking judges' feelings of danger before the appeal has even started, contrary to the rules. For example, whilst waiting for the appellant to arrive at one deportation appeal, the HOPO found an excuse to casually list the man's convictions to the judge. Another 'innocently' inquired about security arrangements, explicitly noting my presence in the room as a lone female. Through such mobilizations of fear, the charged and racialized figure of 'the stranger' is 'in' the room before their body (Ahmed 2014, 217).

Emotional management can also entail positive connection-building. Unlike HOPOs, Home Office interviewers must nurture trust to elicit narratives from asylum seekers. And IRC managers may encourage friendships amongst

detainees, including assigning bedrooms to people of the same nationality, ethnicity, or language (albeit only up to a point, with transfers used to disrupt 'undesirable' friendships). A private company IRC manager I interviewed in 2009 spoke of building 'trust', 'respect', and 'positive relationships' with the men detained. They spoke of 'emotionally getting to know' them so to detect brewing problems:

I will always be quickly tasting, smelling, feeling the centre. Are the people out and about? I know who should normally be smiling. I'll know their faces and I'll be able to say, 'Are you ok?'

They presented these emotional ties as a resource: 'Make friends in times of peace, not times of war. So, when you've got a disturbance, those relationships are built'.

Those subject to migration rules are often least able to read or manage the emotionality of highly-charged immigration spaces and actors, but are nonetheless active in this economy. In addition to needing to perform certain feelings as part of immigration claims, some also try to anticipate the moods of practitioners in timing their interventions. When asking me to call the Home Office for information, for example, people often instructed me to wait until the afternoon, when, as one asylum seeker said, 'Their bellies are full and they're happy'.

### **Emotional denial**

The government of emotion in the UK's immigration system is also predicated upon the repression of feelings of both self and others. As this section explores, migrants' emotional displays are frequently prohibited or ignored, and their purported emotions refuted or disregarded. In parallel, practitioners engage in their own emotional distancing and suppression.

### ***Disputing and disregarding***

Ambivalence and disinterest are a form of violence characteristic of immigration systems. As reflected by the officers' apathy towards the destitute man in the opening example, bureaucracies are exemplified by callous indifference (Herzfeld 1992). Unlike Bentham's 'panopticon' of excessive control and surveillance, many people's experience of immigration and even detention systems is of carelessness and oversight (Whyte's 2011)). IRCs are said to run through 'neglect' of detainees' wellbeing; from poorly ventilated, dirty spaces to 'forgetting' to provide medicines or torture assessments (Gill 2017). Sheona York (2022) argues that decades of backlogs, errors, and failure to follow its own policies, demonstrates such routine and extreme indifference by the Home Office, that it should be considered a (racialized) 'policy of indifference'.

Alongside general disinterest and neglect, is a specific tendency to lessen, deny, and restrict migrants' emotions and emotional lives. I've argued that suspicion runs rife and that refuting or undervaluing purported feelings lies at the heart of negating asylum and family-based immigration applications. Certain groups are particularly prone to having their emotions rejected. Racialized and criminalized men, for example, routinely have their roles and feelings as fathers and husbands dismissed as fictitious, opportunistic, or insignificant (d'Aoust 2013; Griffiths 2015). As a father facing deportation told me: 'The Home Office don't believe that men have emotions or can love somebody'. Often family ties are simply ignored: Home Office decision letters may inexplicably fail to acknowledge children or spouses, and detainees invariably have the 'no close ties' box ticked on paperwork. An NGO interviewee said he had *never* seen this box unticked, for which he blamed a 'complete disregard for really wanting to find out whether someone's got a family and assuming they haven't. Almost wanting to assume they haven't'.

At other times, emotional lives are acknowledged, but dismissed as instrumental or deceptive attempts to circumvent immigration controls. The veracity of relationships, feelings, and weddings are routinely questioned. However, even when accepted as 'genuine', they may still be undervalued and deemed sacrificial to the 'public interest' of border controls. As a father I interviewed explained:

They're not bothered about what the kid or the mother says. They're not bothered about all that. They accept that I've got family ties. But that don't matter. The thing is I've got a Deportation Order, that's all that matters.

Stanley Cohen's (2001) full typology of denial is often evident within the same decision letter or legal argument. Literal denial: the relationship doesn't exist or isn't genuine. Interpretive denial: the relationship isn't significant or subsisting. And implicatory denial: families can relocate overseas, relationship can continue across borders, border controls take priority.

### **Prohibiting**

There is also systemic distaste of migrants *displaying* emotions, particularly more splenetic feelings. Such displays are met with impatience, disregard, judgement, or even punishment. This includes immigration judges ignoring appellants' emotions, showing little patience or understanding for feelings such as irritation or distress, or even explicitly forbidding them from bringing feelings into the hearing ('The court is no place for emotion!' (Gill 2016, 109)). As I reflected after one asylum appeal, 'There is no space for appellants to be angry or frustrated'. IRCs also operate through institutional dislike of strong emotions, particularly exasperation, rage, protest, and despair. The three IRC

managers I interviewed all presented detained men as simultaneously dangerous and vulnerable, emphasizing the importance of keeping them fed, occupied, and active to 'keep their mind off things' and avoid disturbances or self-harm. A system of strikes and privileges encourages 'good' behaviour (docility, eating, following instruction) and punishes missing meals, shouting, aggression, and not 'cooperating'. Some people believe they are encouraged to take antidepressants or sleeping pills for pacification. As one detained man explained: 'As long as you sleeping you don't cause trouble!' (Griffiths 2013, 274)

If emotions in detention are met with disapproval or sanctions, then there are implications for their display. In 2011, I was asked to visit an intensely agitated man. He was shocked to be detained, insulted by accusations of lying, afraid of threats to remove him, and beset with worry for his country descending into civil war. Lost in emotional turmoil, 'Basam' would gesticulate wildly and speak loudly, alternating between crying and shouting. Over my visits he became increasingly distressed, saying he was going mad, suffering panic attacks, and would kill himself. The officers seemed worried for Basam but also feared he would cause trouble, so sought to restrict his emotions. They gave him sleeping pills and told him not to think too much. Basam's suggestions for safe ways of displaying his feelings (such as a single room for venting his anger) were refused. He eventually became so agitated that even the Welfare Officers would turn him away; telling him to calm down before they could talk. I arrived one day to find Basam in isolation because, as an officer told me, 'He's been a naughty boy'. When we later spoke, he was audibly drugged and explained he had been agitatedly telling people about a journalist murdered in his country. This was considered protesting. He was quickly transferred to a higher-security IRC and then removed from the country. Due to his strong emotions, Basam was viewed as both dangerous and childish. Ultimately, he was too administratively and emotionally difficult, leading to his isolation, transfer, and removal. There are gendered, racialized, and classed undercurrents to the interpretation and tolerance of others' emotions. With women and racialized groups prone to having their feelings deemed irrational, dangerous, and excessive, emotionality as a claim about others is embedded in power relations (Ahmed 2014).

### **Blindness**

In addition to disputing and forbidding emotions, immigration practitioners may appear blind to people's feelings. For example, a Home Office IRC manager I interviewed joked that people meet long-lost friends and relatives in detention, comparing detention with the social-networking site Friends Reunited. 'We've got one that's been here over two years. He's quite happy, bless him!', they said of a man who would cry non-stop during my visits.

Obliviousness towards suffering can be collective. My fieldnotes from one asylum appeal<sup>3</sup> described the detained appellant brought in, 'Shuffling, hunched over, head bowed. He looks weak and in a terrible way'. He sat 'Hunched right over, face down on the table, eyes closed'.

Despite signs of distress, no one comments on his state. The judge begins, telling him he has no legal representative but that's alright because there are no complicated issues. The appellant remains head down on table, not looking at anyone. When asked if he'd like to ask questions, he gives the tiniest shake of his head. The judge asks if he's read his Reasons for Refusal letter? The appellant barely responds, whispering so quietly that the translator must bend his head right down to hear him. He doesn't know about the letter. The judge summarises it in a couple of lines and asks the appellant if he has anything to say? He doesn't sit up or even hold up his head. He is curled up and speaks very quietly into the table. He remains head down when the HOPO questions him, mumbling his answers increasingly quietly.

Forty minutes into the hearing and still no one has remarked on the appellant's demeanour or checked he's alright. Suddenly, the man says 'I cannot speak more. I have severe pain'. As though a veil has lifted, everyone can now see that he is ill.

After several minutes of collective shock and uncertainty, the judge decided to expedite the appeal. He sped-up proceedings and sent the man back to detention with a request to be checked over. There were six people at this hearing and although the initially jovial atmosphere altered markedly when the unwell appellant first entered, they then blocked and buried their emotional reactions, with none giving any indication that anything was amiss until the man voiced his pain. Group denial need not reflect conscious cover-up. People can spontaneously collude to collectively avoid difficult information and create mutually-reinforcing blind spots (Cohen 2001, 64). Indeed, organizations often depend on concerted ignorance. Through 'groupthink', collective mindsets protect from uncomfortable truths, suppress personal doubts, and foster unspoken ignorance (Goleman 1998). Led by the judge, those at this appeal spontaneously colluded to overlook suffering (and then continued to give it little regard after being forced to confront it).

### **Disconnect**

Detachment and disengagement are emotional coping strategies, blocking off unbearable information, responsibility, and feelings (Baillot, Cowan, and Munro 2013). Freud theorized *Verleugnung* (disavowal) as protective dissociation through which disturbing knowledge is filtered from reaching consciousness (Cohen 2001). Such defence mechanisms can be conscious or unconscious, active (e.g. repudiation), or passive (e.g. inattention), but are not simply 'private states of mind' (Cohen 2001). Apathy and disconnect are



embedded in culture and politics and critical to the reproduction of nation-state modernization (Herzfeld 1992). To understand the ethical indifference of immigration practitioners, we must situate them in migration bureaucracies. In addition to the general encouragement of disengagement characteristic of bureaucracies (Bauman 1989; Weber 1948), the specifics of immigration systems, including the repetition of horrifying cases and routinization of life-and-death decision-making, leads to the erosion of emotions (Kobelinsky 2014).

Moreover, structural mechanisms such as spatial distancing insulate immigration practitioners and foster detachment. It is often argued that geographical distance produces weaker moral attachment (Bauman 1993). The UK immigration system is characterized by 'remote control', with downward transfer and outward exteriorization of responsibility to local levels and non-state actors (Gill 2016, 52). The growing reliance upon subcontracted agencies means Home Office practitioners may never directly interact with applicants, who in turn struggle to achieve the proximity required to elicit compassion. Layers of administration and middlemen buffer contact, leading to impersonality and emotional estrangement, making it easier to act immorally without having to face the human consequences (Bauman 1989; Herzfeld 1992).

At IRCs, for example, detainees can request meetings with on-site Home Office representatives, but these practitioners do not make immigration or detention decisions. They are (as one told me) simply the 'intermediaries', who 'liaise between the detainees and their caseworkers'. The caseworkers *do* have decision-making powers, but remain distant and largely uncontactable for detainees. Moreover, much of the day-to-day interaction in IRCs is contracted-out to private companies. These officers cannot avoid emotional proximity and yet, as a private manager told me, they 'have no control over their case at all. It's quite difficult sometimes because we don't get involved, but we have to deal with the consequences'. These officers may struggle to resolve the reality they see with the decisions made by those at a distance: 'I'll think, you haven't even *met* them! You haven't *actually* seen the scars on their back'. As Michael Lipsky (1980) argued, public-facing street-level bureaucrats face an unavoidable conflict between doing right by the subjects they meet and doing their job effectively.

This can also be true of those Home Office and judicial practitioners who cannot avoid proximity. These frontline personnel may display moral indifference as they listen to harrowing tales, call people liars, or enact callous decisions, but this reflects an emotionally conflicted state in which other emotions override empathetic compassion, rather than a lack of emotional sensitivity (Gill 2016, 143). Working against the theory that close encounters necessarily engender ethical connection (Bauman 1993), such practitioners can sustain emotional distance despite spatial proximity. Normalization,

desensitization, trivialization, and dehumanization help protect against moral connection and the feelings of the job (Cohen 2001, 51; Gill 2016). I have observed HOPOs achieve this by being overly-aggressive, dehumanizing people, or creating a barrier to eye contact. Tactics of deflected gaze included staring at the table or documents rather than the appellant, directing themselves to the translator, angling their chair away from appellants, or even closing their eyes when facing them. This 'emotional labour' of frontline work risks not only leading to 'surface acting' (changing the appearance of one's emotions) but 'deep acting' (altering inner feelings), causing emotive dissonance and self-alienation (Hochschild 1983).

### Emotional governance

Integral to neoliberal modern nation-states is an affective regime of anxiety, insecurity (Bauman and Donskis 2013), disgust, abjection (Tyler 2013), contempt, and indifference (Herzfeld 1992). The immigration system is similarly produced by wide-spanning undercurrents of suspicion, anger, disgust and fear, alongside emotional repression and apathy. Such affect is constitutive of the system's operations, roles, and relationships, the intelligibility of people and cases, and the processes of managing and deciding applications. A 'culture of denial' encourages conclusions of dishonesty and failure without requiring full appraisals (Souter 2011). Disgust reasserts the importance of borders and self/other distinctions by identifying transgressive threats to norms and boundaries (Douglas 1996; Kristeva 1982). Hate is an effecting soothing strategy for those employed in institutions that alienate (Pardy 2010), and contempt removes the need to engage with others by asserting moral supremacy (Ekman 1999). Emotional disavowal and repression enable those making and operationalizing policy to deny victims, minimize injury, and shift responsibility, making migrants to blame for the harms they suffer. An appreciation of affect allows us to observe this materialization of power and the political at the micro-level, and the role of affect in techniques of subjectification (d'Aoust 2014; Penz and Sauer 2019).

The weaponizing of affect is a constitutive feature, not an accident, of the immigration system. Unrelenting disbelief, aggression, humiliation, fearmongering, and indifference affect people's mental health, relationships, legal cases, and personhood. It frustrates, worries, confuses, shames, distresses, and angers people, disarming their ability to represent themselves, argue their cases, remain engaged, think clearly, or communicate effectively and consistently. This restricts people's ability to navigate the system, trust the process, or appear 'credible' or sympathetic. Scores have told me they believe that their emotions are purposefully manipulated, heightened, and then ignored in order to provoke them to surrender or rebel. They point to forced unemployment, destitution, indefinite detention, cruel policies, unfair

decisions, lengthy limbos, and separation from family as ways by which they are made passive, hopeless, or desperate enough to break rules or lose tempers, through which they are framed as dangerous, criminal, deceptive, or otherwise undeserving. An interviewee separated from his daughter for years by immigration detention and then bail accommodation told me how his housing, reporting conditions, and forced worklessness meant that financially supporting, visiting, or living near her would entail 'working illegally' and 'absconding'. He felt the Home Office was using his daughter as bait to 'break' him into transgressing his conditions: 'Starve him of the things he wants! Deprive him! So he's going to mess up and then we'll justify detaining him!'

Affect is fundamental to social stratification and subjugation, with emotional hierarchies contributing to social inequalities, and social hierarchies affecting the distribution and experience of emotions (Penz and Sauer 2019; Wilkins and Pace 2014). There is a racial economy of emotions (Bonilla-Silva 2019), with ethnicity, gender, and class affecting the interpretation and tolerance of people's feelings and emotional lives, and the degree of state-inflicted emotional harm considered legitimate. Racialized male migrants, for example, have long had their feelings, relationships, parental roles, and intimate lives met with suspicion or disregard, including men migrating for marriage (d'Aoust 2013; de Hart 2006), and husbands and fathers fighting deportation (Griffiths 2017b). The socio-economic status and gender of citizen sponsors also affect assessments of the validity and value of their relationships to foreign nationals. Marriage registrars I interviewed in 2015 portrayed these British women as 'girls' and 'vulnerable'; emotionally naïve, led by the heart, susceptible to sham marriage trickery, and requiring 'saving' by the state (Griffiths 2019). An association of women with over-emotionality was also reflected by my observation of ethnic minority female appellants bearing the brunt of judicial impatience with emotionality. Emotion is often conceptualized as 'beneath' reason and associated with the primitive (Ahmed 2014), with women, children, and people racialized as non-white prone to characterization as emotionally immature, incontinent, or irrational.

The 'emotional skeleton' of othering is also integral to xenophobia and racism (Bonilla-Silva 2019). Casting some people as not belonging is an affective judgement and tangled in racialized history (Ahmed 2014). The immigration system endows migrants with emotional content that produces racial categorization and domination. (Certain) white migrants are treated with more trust, respect, and compassion, evidenced by the UK's simplified EU Settlement Scheme for Europeans after Brexit and the UK's granting of nearly 250,000 visas to Ukrainians within a year of the war starting in 2022.<sup>4</sup> Migrants racialized as non-white are delegitimised through affective registers that cast them as untrustworthy, savage, violent, infantile, and 'too' emotional. A counsellor I interviewed in 2010 was regularly referred young, male

asylum seekers by Social Services because their frustration with the system was considered a pathological problem of their own. Affect is also used to informally classify immigration detainees into gendered and racialized stereotypes, with IRC officers describing detained Jamaican men as 'trouble' and Chinese as quiet and docile (Hall 2012, 41). Emotional discourses 'stick' to some people more than others, with socio-political anxieties connected with certain bodies, which take on fetish qualities as objects of fear (Ahmed 2014, 78). The UK's 'moral panic' in 2006 over the release rather than deportation of foreign national prisoners, for example, drew on longstanding associations of racialized men with criminality, violence, and hyper-sexuality (Griffiths 2017a). Such emotionality is imagined as inherent to the Other but is a projection of one's own emotional state and embedded in historical and racialized power hierarchies (Ahmed 2014).

Subjectification operates through affect, with emotions creating the sense of boundaries between self and others (Ahmed 2014; d'Aoust 2014). By projecting feelings of injury into fear, disgust, mistrust, anger, and repression, affect aligns people into groups, producing the 'threatened nation' and embattled border brigade, and sticking-together 'figures of hate' such as 'migrants'. The emotional governance of the immigration system subjugates and dehumanizes, making some people dispensable, dangerous, and deportable, thereby (re)establishing the power and indifference of the state and its hierarchies of personhood and belonging.

## Conclusion

State bureaucracies operate through the production and circulation of emotions, with the mobilization (and suspension) of emotion central to governmentality and the materialization of power (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2018; Penz and Sauer 2019; Stoler 2004). This article has shown that despite the facade of overarching legal rationality, the spaces and encounters of migration bureaucracies are deeply affective atmospheres. I have argued that within this affective tapestry, four emotions are particularly evident across the system's breadth and depth: anger, disgust, mistrust, and fear. I have shown that there is a complex and unfolding emotional economy, in which emotions are invoked, exchanged, harnessed, evaluated, and refuted. Different groups experience different rules about which emotions can, cannot, or must be displayed, and in what settings and forms, and differing ability to anticipate, manipulate, and employ emotions. There is widespread disinterest, disbelief, and displeasure of the emotions of those subject to the immigration system, as well as obfuscation of the emotions of immigration practitioners. Through both individual tactics and structural elements, those designing and operationalizing immigration policies are emotionally insulated through

suppression or avoidance of the emotionality of their work and shielded from the possibility of developing emotional connections. Rather than suggest the absence of emotion, this points to the heavy 'emotional labour' required of immigration practitioners.

This affective register is foundational to the rationale and functioning of mobility governance, as well as helping distract from political ineptitude and cruelty. Affect creates the immigration system's categories, hierarchies, and prejudices, aligns collectivities, and underlies the systems' encounters, policies, and operations. By degrading, dehumanizing, and disarming those subject to immigration rules, emotional governance creates people deemed simultaneously threatening, polluting, and irrelevant. The immigration system employs emotional governance as one of its techniques of subjectification and disenfranchisement, to produce racialized, illegitimate, and disposable people, and to make them responsible for their own suffering. As such, affect is employed to legitimize domination and state violence (Åhäll and Gregory 2013). If we hope to challenge the status quo, we must demolish the 'emotional skeleton' of racism and xenophobia (Bonilla-Silva 2019) and challenge the power relations and disconnect between the objects and subjects of feeling (Ahmed 2014, 193) within immigration discourses and policy encounters. By using affect transformatively, we can unmake oppressive hierarchies.

## Notes

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2. ESRC-funded project, Exeter University, PI Nick Gill (ES/J023426/1).
3. See also Gill et al (2019).
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-december-2022/statistics-on-ukrainians-in-the-uk>

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