

# Encounters of Despair

## Street-Level Bureaucrat and Migrant Interactions in Sweden and Switzerland

Lisa Marie Borrelli

Volume 63, Number 1, 2021

The Bureaucratic Practices of Migration  
Les routes bureaucratiques de la migration

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1078583ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021272>

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Publisher(s)

University of Victoria

ISSN

0003-5459 (print)

2292-3586 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Borrelli, L. M. (2021). Encounters of Despair: Street-Level Bureaucrat and Migrant Interactions in Sweden and Switzerland. *Anthropologica*, 63(1), 1–28.  
<https://doi.org/10.18357/anthropologica6312021272>

### Article abstract

Encounters between street-level bureaucrats and the so-called “client of the state” – here the migrant individual with precarious legal status – are characterized by great power imbalances. The dependency relationships that emerge out of public administrative encounters need to be understood as spaces of continuous asymmetrical negotiations. Emotions play a crucial role, not only as a translation of how migrants and bureaucrats mutually shape, contest, and reproduce migration control, but also as a strategic component and a tool for negotiation. Supported by ethnographic data from a Swiss Cantonal Migration Office and a Swedish Border Police Unit, collected between 2016 and 2017, I argue that emotions interweave all migrant-bureaucrat interactions. Their analysis discloses not only the emotional labour of migration enforcement, but also how it is translated into bureaucratically enacted practices, which include physical force, vocal exchanges, documents and spatial means, leading to what Walters (2006) coined “political economies of violence” (438).

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# Encounters of Despair

## Street-Level Bureaucrat and Migrant Interactions in Sweden and Switzerland

Lisa Marie Borrelli

*University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Western Switzerland*

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**Abstract:** Encounters between street-level bureaucrats and the so-called “client of the state” – here the migrant individual with precarious legal status – are characterized by great power imbalances. The dependency relationships that emerge out of public administrative encounters need to be understood as spaces of continuous asymmetrical negotiations. Emotions play a crucial role, not only as a translation of how migrants and bureaucrats mutually shape, contest, and reproduce migration control, but also as a strategic component and a tool for negotiation. Supported by ethnographic data from a Swiss Cantonal Migration Office and a Swedish Border Police Unit, collected between 2016 and 2017, I argue that emotions interweave all migrant-bureaucrat interactions. Their analysis discloses not only the emotional labour of migration enforcement, but also how it is translated into bureaucratically enacted practices, which include physical force, vocal exchanges, documents and spatial means, leading to what Walters (2006) coined “political economies of violence” (438).

**Keywords:** migration; ethnography; emotions; street-level theory; violence, bureaucracy

**Résumé:** Les interactions entre les bureaucrates de la rue et les soi-disant « clients de l'État » – en l'occurrence des individus migrants au statut juridique précaire – sont marquées par de grandes inégalités de pouvoir. Les relations de dépendance engendrées dans les rencontres avec les administrations publiques doivent être comprises comme des espaces de négociations asymétriques et continues. Les émotions y jouent un rôle central, non seulement comme reflet de la manière dont les migrants et les bureaucrates façonnent, contestent et reproduisent le contrôle migratoire, mais aussi en tant que composante stratégique et outil de négociation. Sur la base de données ethnographiques recueillies entre 2016 et 2017 dans un office cantonal de la migration en Suisse

et une unité de police des frontières en Suède, je soutiens que les émotions imprègnent toutes les interactions entre les migrants et les bureaucrates. L'analyse de ces dernières donne à voir non seulement le travail émotionnel du contrôle migratoire, mais aussi comment celui-ci se traduit en pratiques bureaucratiques, lesquelles comprennent la force physique, les échanges verbaux, les documents et les moyens spatiaux, conduisant à ce que Walters (2006) a appelé une « économie politique de la violence » (438).

**Mots-clés :** migration ; ethnographie ; émotions ; bureaucratie de la rue ; violence

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## Introduction

Much focus has been placed on the study of migrant individuals, street-level bureaucrats (SLBs; Lipsky 2010) or street-level workers (Brodkin 2012) and their experiences of and within the migration regime (Eule et al. 2019; Hall 2010). These studies have highlighted the illegibility and disaggregatedness of the state (Das 2004; Hoag 2010), the violent effects on marginalized subjects (cf. Gupta 2012), or the moments of resistance embedded in an increasingly restrictive migration regime (Ellermann 2010). Yet, the emotional immediacy of direct interactions between migrants and SLBs, and thus the relevancy of emotions as strategic tools, has not been sufficiently problematized. When studying power imbalances and asymmetrical spaces of negotiation (Eule, Loher and Wyss 2017), the role that emotions play is crucial to forming an understanding of what Walters (2016) has termed a “political economy of violence” (see also Eggebø 2013; Fassin et al. 2015; Wettergren 2010).

Analyzing migrant-bureaucrat encounters for what emotions are conveyed and through what means is important. The observed encounters revolve around the threat of deportation, a practice known for being emotionally laden because of the exceptional violence it mobilizes (Ellermann 2009; 2010). Here, emotions are not only manifestations of power imbalances, but can be invoked or used strategically. They become tools of navigation within the immediate encounters to enable a forceful regime that is particularly interested in upholding the acute threat of deportation.

The following encounters depict (re)actions to bureaucratic processes and routines. They are derived from ethnographically collected data on encounters

with migrant individuals whose stay is deemed irregular by state agencies and decision-makers, and whose cases are processed by so-called “SLBs.” The material is based on participant observation in Swiss and Swedish migration enforcement agencies tasked with informing and discussing planned deportation procedures with migrant individuals.

After a brief methodological discussion, a theoretical section follows. Here, street-level bureaucracy theory is combined with the anthropology of emotions – in particular, despair. The section further expands William Walters’ (2016) concept of a “political economy of violence” by arguing that bureaucrat-migrant encounters prior to the physical and forceful act of deportation are already part of this economy. The analytical section provides three examples for this theoretical expansion: 1) banal but emotional everyday encounters; 2) emotions interrelated with administrative forms associated with medical issues; and 3) encounters defined by their exceptional desperation and precarity. Within the context of those encounters, the threat of force, and thus violence, is inherent and becomes expressed through emotions (or the lack thereof). The conclusion discusses the findings and links back to broader research themes.

## Method

The encounters presented here are derived from four months of participant observation at one of seven Swedish Border Police Regional Offices, as well as 15 semi-structured interviews with the head of the Regional Office, legal decision-makers who decide on detention and back up street-level decisions, police officers and civil staff. Besides numerous informal talks, the research is supported by case files and policy documents. In Switzerland, participant observation was conducted for three months at a Swiss Cantonal Migration Office, focusing on the unit in charge of asylum and return. Both units are tasked with the enforcement of deportation orders, including informing migrants about their deportation and preparing for it (and to a very small extent, implementing the deportation). SLBs process cases of individuals whose stay in the territory is deemed illegal due to, for example, a negative asylum decision, a visa overstay or (as depicted in the first field note) illicit work. Visited units are in charge of “finalizing” the deportation decision. They encounter migrants at a very late stage of their journey through the respective national migration regime. The presented encounters are connected to broader contexts, namely, national migration regimes that aim for the deportation of unwanted migrant individuals. At the same time, local

and national structures are connected to international regulations<sup>1</sup> and have direct effects on the global regimes of mobility (Marcus 1998). Although organizational differences exist between both countries (for example, federal versus central governance), the use of two case studies highlights similarities and thus allows an extensive description and explanation of emotional labour beyond nation states and contributes to a general understanding of emotions within the migration regime.

Due to the overall focus of the study on SLBs, the informed consent of migrant individuals and other actors with whom SLBs interacted could not always be ensured. Because part of the research interest included how SLBs made sense of the researcher's presence, I decided to allow SLBs to introduce me. Although the bureaucrats knew that I was a PhD student researching their work, they alternately introduced me as a police researcher or an intern, and at times, they asked if my presence was okay or did not mention anything at all to other actors. This strategy allowed specific insights into the different stages of access, which made unintentional deception impossible to avoid (Borrelli 2020b; Lavanchy 2013).<sup>2</sup> This poses an ethical dilemma that can only be solved partially. The personal data were kept anonymous at all times. By bringing forward the struggles within bureaucratic encounters I highlight the agency of migrant individuals while aiming to respect their dignity through my critical analysis. To maintain anonymity for both sides, I changed SLBs' and migrants' names and I do not provide specifics of where the research took place.

All interviews and notes have been conducted in the respective national language and translated into English by me. Field notes and interview transcripts were coded (Thiel 2014) by using the verbal exchanges as well as taking into account the physical positioning and bodily interplay of the exchanges (Neuman 2012, 278) and use of (digital) devices, such as computers and forms. Accounting for the plurality of processes that occur during migrant-bureaucrat interactions allows a researcher to study how behavior is modified and constantly created through the framework of social interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1991). This research is thus interested in particular features of certain spaces and can capture temporal and context-specific dimensions of emotions (Beatty 2014, 545).

## **Emotions in Bureaucracy: A Theoretical Introduction**

Migrants and bureaucrats attempt to navigate ever-changing migration regimes, partly caused by the vicissitude of laws and policies (Eule et al. 2019). Both migrant individuals and SLBs react emotionally to such an ambivalent system

and towards each other. Although both maintain some agency, SLBs possess significant discretionary decision-making powers (Bouchard and Carroll 2002; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000) that strongly influence migrants' lives, often causing a feeling of intangibility experienced by the "client" of bureaucracy (cf. Gilliom 2001). The supposedly professional and disinterested system is ridden with emotions and depends on mobilizing hope, anxiety, fear, despair and irritation, further underlined by heated political debates on migrants with precarious legal status (Ataç 2019; Chauvin and Garcés-Mascreñas 2014; van Oorschot 2006). Emotions materialize in interactions and during bureaucrats' decision-making processes, often playing a crucial role in the outcome of a case (Borrelli and Lindberg 2018).

The role of such "emotional work" or "labour" has been highlighted in previous works. Campbell (2010) ascribes an "emotionality of rule" (Campbell 2010, 44) to states, which "propose and suggest ways of feeling about the world – how we should feel about ourselves and others" (Campbell 2010, 52). Emotions mobilize an oppositional relationship between self and 'harmful others' and thus become political, circumstantial, and capture historical structural regimes and processes (D'Aoust 2018, 44). Within the migration regime, fear and contempt are partially shaped by a production of affective politics through securitization and unease (Bigo 2002; Hall 2010). Certain sensibilities are nurtured "and enfolded through specific governmental technologies and practices" (Campbell 2010, 52). One recurring example is the governmental focus on "sham marriages," in which love and relationships become sites of negotiation, heavily intertwined in emotional practices of control and exclusion (D'Aoust 2013).

Following Campbell (2010), my work examines the emotional life of governmental power through street-level encounters. I argue that emotions can be consequences and causes (Beatty 2014, 548), linked to a context or structure (Svašek 2010), but also to an individual's history. The observation and analysis of the performativity and construction of emotions (see Geoffrion and Cretton, this issue) allows them to be linked to state violence and structural inequality (Beatty 2014; Lavanchy 2013). They are part of the governmental machine but can also disrupt and contest it (D'Aoust 2013, 266).

This contribution underlines Hochschild's (2012) work on emotional labour, arguing that there are jobs in which one is expected to deal with the emotions of others (Hochschild 2012, 11), at times causing dilemmas and unease. SLBs, similar to flight attendants, are expected to manage feelings (more specifically, delivering "bad news"), and they are expected to convey a certain message with

authenticity in an otherwise “emotion-deaf arrangement” of bureaucracy (Hochschild 2012, xii). Due to this arrangement, emotional labour is not a formal requirement of the job, but becomes a crucial aspect of SLBs’ everyday work. At the same time, “job-specific requirements often construct migrants in specific ways that push particular modes of emotional interaction” (Svašek 2010, 872). Migrants might be depicted as vulnerable subjects of humanitarian compassion (Ticktin 2016), a threat, or asylum abusers. Hence, SLBs’ emotions shape sense-making practices and appear as forms of judgements (Hall 2010, 881, 886) that are classed, gendered, and often bring up racial frictions (Tefahune 1998). Moreover, emotional judgements reinforce power relations, translated into action and “engagement with others” (Hall 2010, 886). Emotions are thus evoked by administrative procedures and occur on both sides; migrant individuals and bureaucrats each feel a set of emotions.

Emotions further exist outside of pure, direct interactions – they also become embedded in and expressed through formalities (Darling 2014). Paperwork “can reveal social manoeuvres” (Pigg, Erikson and Inglis 2018) and shows how emotions are translated into documents, banal questionnaires, and routines by both parties involved. Paperwork becomes a channel that transports emotions but also possesses its own emotionality, formalizing and increasing social control rather than being a neutral carrier of emotions (see Fassin 2005 on the medicalization of asylum cases).

Consequently, the study of emotions during encounters in which deportations are planned, prepared, and negotiated allows us to further grasp how they pave the way for political economies of violence (Walters 2016). The depicted encounters are sites of power along a deportation continuum (Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2014; Kalir and Wissink 2016), often culminating in the forced removal of individuals. “This economy of violence exists on a spectrum with the economy of assisted removal and voluntary return” (Walters 2016, 442). Instead of offering cash incentives to persuade individuals to cooperate, it makes use of physical force. To expand this concept, I argue that coercion is applied before and beyond bodily force through SLBs’ emotional labour. This coercion, prevalent during deportation talks, is not “naked” violence *per se*, “but instead one that has been calibrated and calculated in terms of its relationship to law, medicine, organizational ethics, publicity and so on” (Walters 2016, 438). It is pre-emptively transported through emotional encounters between the bureaucrat and the migrant, and exists before the actual deportation is enacted. Consequently, violence is

understood as “nonlinear, productive, destructive and reproductive” (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004, 1). In the described cases, it has a structural element, functions as an exclusionary mechanism, and deprives migrant individuals of the ability to act fully (Galtung 1969; Gupta 2012). It is also symbolic because violence is used to judge and make others feel ashamed of their behaviour (Leerkes, van Os and Boersema 2017). Here, emotions become a particularly powerful driver of action, which advances the political economy of violence in the way that excludes unwanted migrant individuals who claim rights in and support from the state in which they reside.

## **On Despair**

Hochschild (2012) describes bill collectors for airlines who make use of emotional work to deliberately deflate the status of a customer with distrust and anger. Their emotions ‘communicate information’ (Hochschild 2012, 17) strategically, similar to how SLBs handle emotional encounters and make use of emotions – despair, in particular. Despair, defined as “the complete loss or absence of hope” (Oxford Dictionary), materializes in crying and tears but also in apathy or detachment. When a person becomes deportable, despair can translate into somatized reactions including dizziness, feelings of confusion, and other physiological symptoms (Andersson 2014).

Migrants’ emotions, in turn, can be responded to with ignorance, as well as care-taking to calm the situation, potentially softening or aggravating the inherent violence of the encounters. Nevertheless, policy measures force “‘voluntary’ repatriation through the sheer weight of hopelessness and despair” (Weber and Pickering 2011, 113), and governments have announced explicit intentions to make lives intolerable for those deemed undeserving (Suarez-Krabbe, Lindberg and Arce 2018).

What follows is an analysis of “practices [that] are ridden with such conflicting ideas, ideals and interpretations, which each give rise to hope, rumours [...] – but also to despair” (Eule et al. 2019, 61). Despair is thus embedded within the migration regime as an emotional reaction to the predicted violence of deportations. Also, despair is used as a resource by SLBs and migrant individuals alike for navigating the political economy of violence in deportation processes. The following encounters include moments of detachment, despair, ignorance or hope; emotions used strategically to navigate an often intangible migration regime and reclaim agency.



## Manifestations of Emotions: An Analysis of Bureaucrat-Migrant Encounters

The following field notes depict the nexus between institution and individual, wherein the encounter between migrant and bureaucrat becomes the point in which emotions towards and between human subjects are translated and reflected in practices, tools, documentation and routines. At times, certain practices produce remarkably similar feelings in both the migrant and bureaucrat, whereas in other moments individuals follow their individual agendas to convey their hopes, needs or orders. Here forms become a special means of translating emotions into material evidence, proving the non-deportability of individuals. Encounters can be extreme as well as banal. Despair is a “graspable” emotion and builds up throughout the meetings – partly induced by SLBs, partly a reaction of migrants in precarious legal situations.

### Navigating Emotions

A Swedish border police officer, Ylva (Y), who is part of the mobile unit mostly in charge of detecting and detaining migrant individuals with precarious legal status, interviews a woman (Lina; L) who was found in a hotel, where she worked as a sex worker. Selling sex in Sweden is not a crime but the purchase of it is, which is why the interview follows two aims in tension with each other. The first aim is to start an investigation against the man who paid for the sexual interaction (L being the witness). The second aim is to investigate an administrative offence committed by L by ‘illegally working’ without a valid work permit (here, L becomes the offender and an irregularized migrant). The interview takes place at the local border police station and follows a standardized set of questions. Ylva sits at her desk across from Lina in a sparsely furnished investigation room. I am seated at the far end of the desk. In the middle of the desk is a telephone, through which the Russian translator can be heard.

Y: Can you report a bit about the man in the hotel room?

L: I do not understand.

Y: You are not the suspect of a crime here, but the witness. How did you get in contact?

L: Via the website. [...]

Y: What is your name on the website?

L: Lina. He called.

Y: What was it you arranged, like a quickie...?

L: He was supposed to come over. Quickie.

Y: How much?

L: 1000 [SEK].

Y: What time did he arrive?

L: A couple of minutes before the police arrived.

Y: What did you do when he arrived?

L: We were supposed to have one contact.

Y: Did he give you the money?

L: Yes, but nothing had happened yet. [...]

Y: What happened then? [Lina laughs a bit.]

Y: I have worked on this for many years; there is nothing you need to be ashamed of.

L: He did not have time to do anything. We took off the clothes, nothing more.

Y: Who took off the clothes of whom?

L: He did.

Y: Did you touch each other? In what way?

L: Yes. He touched my arms, then the police arrived.

Y: He says something entirely different.

L: What?

Y: He says you had oral sex before the police came.

L: No, that we did not. Truthfully, I would have reported that. Why should I lie?

Y: Did you kiss?

L: Yes

Ylva asks for a telephone number and Lina's address. They exchange small talk and Ylva says a couple of words she knows in Russian, after which she quickly summarizes the interrogation.

Y: We found another profile, Monika.

L: Yes, that is also one of my profiles.

Y: How many do you have?

L: Three.

The interrogation now switches to the "migration" part, in which Lina is no longer a witness but instead becomes the suspect of an administrative offence within migration law (illegal work without a work permit, being a third-country national without a residence status).

Y: What is the purpose of you being here in Sweden?

L: Tourist.

Y: What was your first country entered in the Schengen Area?

L: Lithuania.

Y: When did you enter?

L: Lithuania?

Y: Yes, your journey from Ukraine.

L: I had a Schengen Visa, which I got from Lithuania. I was there a year ago.

Y: It is valid for one year?

L: Yes.

Y: What was your itinerary? When?

L: From Kiev to [Swedish city]. 25 April 2017.

Y: How long did you want to stay?

L: Two weeks.

Y: In total?

L: Yes.

Y: How come you have a sex ad as a tourist?

L: I was here as a tourist, but then I thought I could earn a little bit of money.

Y: Have you done this before?

L: No.

Y: Have you been to Sweden before?

L: Yes.

Y: When?

W: I cannot remember.

Y: Do you have a return ticket?

L: No.

Y: How much money do you have?

L: 300-400 euro and 3000 SEK.

Y: Did you earn the 3000 through prostitution?

L: No, I changed some euro. I did not manage to earn more.

Y: How many customers did you have?

L: Three, maybe.

Y: Was that in another hostel, hotel in [city]?

L: Yes. It is called [hotel name].

Y: How long did you stay?

L: One day.

Y: Why did you change hotels?  
 L: I thought to move to a private apartment.  
 Y: Which one? Where is it located?  
 L: Via Booking.com. [She mentions the street's name.]  
 Y: Can you show me the money? [She shows 350 euro and 460 SEK.]  
 Y: Do you work in Ukraine?  
 L: No.  
 Y: How can you have so much money if you do not have a job?  
 L: I work for an online enterprise.  
 Y: Can you describe this a bit?  
 L: I sell products online.  
 Y: How much do you earn there per month?  
 L: It depends, varies. At least 2000 dollars cash.  
 Y: I have your visa application. On the application, you wrote "manager."  
 L: That is correct; this job counts as a manager.  
 Y: You also mentioned [...] Hotel in Vilnius as a reference for the application...  
 L: No, I rented an apartment. I must have forgotten that in this case.  
 Y: What is your position to return back to Ukraine?  
 L: I thought about continuing to work for this enterprise. I understand that it does not work this way [referring to sex work].  
 Y: Do you want us to contact your government?  
 L: No.  
 Y: Do you want us to contact the Ukrainian embassy? Do you wish us to do that?  
 L: Why? What will happen now?  
 Y: We are just obliged to ask you that.  
 L: No.  
 Y: Do you have any family here?  
 L: No.  
 Y: Have you been anywhere else than in [city]?  
 L: Yes, one day in [other city].  
 Y: If you were able to leave this office, what would you do?  
 L: I thought about buying a return ticket to go home. I do not want to do this any longer.  
 Y: You have a child?  
 L: Yes.

Ylva explains that it is now up to the decision-maker whether she will be freed or detained according to the Foreigners Act. Ylva writes part of the report and fills in the form, making a preliminary decision (it is always detention), which is later discussed with a superior for approval.

Y: In case you have to go to detention, we will take your documents and you will receive them when you are on your way back.

L: OK.

Ylva asks her to sign the interview report and explains the possibility that she will spend one night in jail if no space is available in detention. Ylva adds that she understands Lina's situation and assumes she is not working in this field of her own free will.

L: I just do it for my child. [Lina starts crying.]

Y: We are here if you want to talk to us. [Lina thanks her.]

Y: We do not do this to treat you badly, to do this against you. It is the opposite. The goal is to get you out of prostitution.

Later on, the officers decide on detention, a decision legitimated by arguing that Lina "provided for herself dishonestly" (*oärlig försörjning*). Further, they suspect that she would continue her work if she was not detained. Another officer, Ole, casually mentions to me, "The decision may be changed, later on – that is possible if she says, 'I swear and promise.'" (Field notes, Swedish border police unit 2017)

Ylva adds more depth to the standard set of questions (details about the exact events that occurred, details of Lina's job and family) in both sections of the interview. After an interrogation around sex work, the investigation turns to the administrative offense of engaging in paid work while being on a tourist visa. While this switch is not demarcated by a change in Ylva's attitude, it is crucial for Lina as her position changes from being treated like a victim to being treated like an offender. The duality underlines how officers require different approaches to questioning, but also different forms of emotional support, from creating an atmosphere of trust in which Lina may speak about the details of her sexual encounter to accusing her of having worked illegally. SLBs are expected to master this fine line, despite the diverging interests of the interviews. Yet, Ylva easily phrases the latter part in a positive light, arguing that her interest lies in getting Lina out of prostitution and assuming that Lina is the victim of trafficking (and thus in need of help). Framing Lina's detention in the light of helping her out of prostitution reshapes the repressive measure (detention)

into a precautionary necessity, which allows Ylva to master the potential gap between both roles she inhabits (enforcer and victim support). This measure is not only an attempt to convince Lina of the police's good intentions, but may also function as self-deception to reduce role discrepancies that come up during encounters with migrant individuals.

At the same time, Ylva uses moral judgement when assuming that Lina is a victim of trafficking. Officers generally believe that women do not freely choose to engage in sex work (field notes 2017). Ylva's question about whether Lina has a child, irrelevant to the case, is a judgement on the wrongfulness of sex work. The question serves to deter her from this work, appealing to Lina's emotions and reminding her of her responsibility to take care of her child "properly." This is a convergence of the emotionality of rule (Campbell 2010) and emotional labour (Hochschild 2012). The state not only suggests how one should feel about sex work, but judges it by legal consequences, while officers deliver the bad news and induce a certain feeling in the migrant. At the same time, their judgement reflects how SLBs have internalized certain migrant images, influencing modes of emotional interaction (Svašek 2008).

Questions become ways of invoking emotions, at times connected to SLBs' desire to sympathize with the migrant's situation and other times to manipulate "the other" to receive certain answers (see Leerkes, van Os and Boersema 2017). Yet in other moments, questions disclose irony and contempt, often when suspicion and distrust are expressed (see Ole 2017).

The ways in which SLBs (and migrants) handle encounters reveal the broad range of techniques, all built on emotional (re)actions, used to control interactions. The migrant subject is formed within those encounters, and images of "the vulnerable" or "undeserving" are created but also negotiated. Lina's tears when talking about her child show how troubling the encounter with the police officers was for her; even stronger than when talking about her sexual encounters in detail, reflecting shame and guilt, partially induced by Ylva's question. This dynamic brings forward the symbolic violence of the dialogue (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004), which is generally based on routinized questions.

Personalized questions support the investigation's goal by creating bonding moments, but also cause further intrusion, scrutinizing what otherwise remains private. While tourists from certain countries need to show they have sufficient "liquidity" in order to spend their holidays in Sweden, here the money becomes proof of the transactional sex; a material shame towards a specific type of work

deemed “dishonest” and thus linked to feelings of negative judgment and discomfort. It becomes “dirty money.” The conveyed emotions disclose gendered expectation that comes with social roles (for example, the female irregularized migrant who is selling sex versus the male migrant who works on construction sites or other low-profile jobs), but also the ambivalence of emotions: Officers feel the need to take her out of sex work and help, while they judge her actions as morally questionable. The threat of deportation underpins Ylva’s interview. Besides the moment of empathy, the migrant individual is framed within the political economy of violence since the threat of moving her out of the country is a graspable reality. The morality underpinning the violence, judging her “illegal” behaviour, legitimizes the removal.

The interview introduces the body to a future force it will need to endure, translated through the legitimization of sex work as “dishonest” (and thus illegal). This legitimization also becomes translated in the interview protocol, proof of her suffering, of moments of empathy as well as of judgement, followed by decisions. Since the interview needs to be signed, the migrant individual agrees to the interpretations presented (Borrelli and Lindberg 2019). The emotions are translated into written text, which makes the information visible and available to be read and used by others in the future (see Darling 2014). At the same time, the transcript becomes detached from emotions and instead attached to formalized practices, leaving out gestures, tears and voices.

### **Medical Forms as Manifestation of Pain**

A Liberian man has been summoned to the Cantonal Migration Office, because his asylum claim has been rejected, so he has to leave Switzerland. Tinu, the caseworker, follows some standard questions (whether the man possesses a passport; how he will obtain one with the help of his family and the embassy contact; whether he wants to leave the country).

Tinu: Do you have any medical problems?

Response: No, no problems.

Tinu: All OK?

Response: Yes.

Prior to the encounter, Tinu, just like many other caseworkers, explained to me that often “they come in here without any problems and then suddenly they start to tell us what is not all right” (Swiss Cantonal Migration Office 2016).

If medical conditions become part of the case, caseworkers need to receive a release of the physician-patient privilege to inquire about the medical condition and thus “deportability” of the individual, meaning their ability to travel. A medical report has to be drafted by the physician, sent to the office, and later evaluated by a medical agency working for the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration. At times, according to the caseworkers, physicians refuse to write such a report for the migration office to avoid becoming responsible for a deportation. However, the medical report is necessary to proceed with a case, causing much hassle for the caseworkers.

Tinu has a case in which the migrant is in detention. He had to call for the medical service three times.

Tinu: Because of pain in his knee, he says he cannot be detained. He is also one of those who has a screw loose somewhere [*einen Knall haben*]. He was also in psychiatry, where he forgot to limp. I am in frequent contact with the psychiatrist and the staff, and they say he did not limp but was happy as a lark [*quietschfidel*].

I am told he got hit by a car in Calais, “probably while he was trying to board a truck. But we need to take all of this seriously, which is the worst.”

Last time I gave him shit because he wants to go home and I said, “every time you come up with new medical problems, always new things, and that means we need forms.” Since then, he does not have any problems anymore. (Swiss Cantonal Migration Office 2016)

Similar to the medicalization of asylum cases, which inherit an underlying suspicion about the truthfulness of the person’s identity and medical story (Fassin 2005), SLBs generally mistrust the stories of respective deportees. Already subjected “to all sorts of truth tests, [...] those seeking the precarious residence permit [...] tend to develop their own tactics” (Fassin 2005, 101) to remain (see examples above), often in opposition to SLBs working in migration enforcement. Medical issues, caused by episodes of violence experienced during the migratory journey or in the countries of origin, may become a valid reason to stop violence in the present. With each new medical issue, new forms need to be filled out and a new investigation assesses any issues that might complicate a deportation. The use of medical forms translates the physical pain of the migrant into papers of evidence, which later become “bureaucratic pain” for SLBs.

These documents, which prove physical as well as psychological trauma, illnesses and traces of violence, become emotional triggers for bureaucrats.



While not equal to the physical and emotional trauma experienced by migrants, SLBs mention them as factors that impact their actions (see Tinu). Caseworkers feel stressed because they have to run after physicians and follow up with them on the reports. Here, the political economy of violence manifests in the discourses of SLBs, who get annoyed by the bills sent by medical practitioners or by the thought of the costliness of “sick” individuals if they were granted residency. Violence becomes “calibrated and calculated in terms of its relationship to [...] medicine” (Walters 2016, 438).

Furthermore, SLBs at times express more positive feelings towards those stories that involve a migrant who conforms with the expected behavior (Fassin 2005), thus judging the condition and identity of their patients. Yet, even despite potentially “truthful claims,” caseworkers also believe there is not much that can be done, assuming they are “the last in line” of procedures (Borrelli 2020a). This power imbalance between the two actors materializes when, for example, Tinu uses his knowledge about the length of detention against the detainee. He discourages him from filing further medical issues and the accompanying paperwork, combined with an emotional outcry towards him to increase unease and fear. Tinu does not show sympathy for the man’s physical pain – just irritation. Although this strategy can help the caseworker put some distance between himself/herself and the client, the combination of emotions and paperwork is used to deter people from seeking not only medical aid but also justice (Pigg, Erikson and Inglis 2018, 171), therefore highlighting the structural violence present in such emotionally heated encounters. Emotions and paperwork are combined and become a powerful tool to manipulate the actions of migrant individuals.

Yet, the demand that migrant individuals document their physical and mental pain also offers a possibility to make emotional suffering visible. Once recorded on paper, prior violence experienced may hinder the use of force (and thus deportation) at a later stage, as if one experienced violence voids the other. These medical pains need to be translated into emotional pain (and voiced) to make them real and recordable for the bureaucrat. The preparatory deportation interview pushes the individual to relive emotional distress and to produce documents of proof. As argued by previous scholars (Canning 2017; Fassin and d’Halluin 2007; Fischer 2015), feelings of anxiety, fear, and hopelessness may somatize and create new medical conditions caused by the uncertainty of the migration regime (Andersson 2014). Most of the children I encountered during the “deportation talks” had a psychiatric diagnosis, which manifested upon their arrival, becoming reasons for a potential stay.

In this process of translating between different languages and pains, SLBs and migrant individuals often become adversaries in a fight for recognition (of fears and trauma versus workload and resources). Matteo, another Swiss cantonal migration caseworker, explains that medical cases have started to increase drastically, leaving the caseworkers with more paperwork and intermediary actors to depend on. Migrants learn how to perform and show trauma in an expected way (Fassin 2005), and how to create narratives of violence and persecution in a legitimate manner through the expected vocalization of their pain and suffering, combined with documents of proof. “People will use their psychological diagnoses as evidence of severe trauma, injury reports as evidence of violence...” (Thomson 2018, 228).

As such, medical reports carry hopes for the respective deportee to be chosen and spared, while the required medical reports and documents contribute significantly to the political economy of violence. They assess the ability of the respective deportee to be transported, and therefore become the means for “legitimate” use of force.

### **Open Despair and Reactions of Ignorance**

Migrants’ credibility and legitimacy are constantly questioned, assessed and judged; voiced through emotional exclamations and negotiations. These emotions are embedded in and expressed through formalities (Darling 2014) and within SLB-migrant interactions and their reflections. In the everyday work of SLBs in migration enforcement, despair prevails within the migration regime and is addressed and created by SLBs strategically:

Marco has summoned a family of five: parents, two children and a toddler from Lebanon. It is a spontaneous meeting since they just came from the Return Advice office<sup>3</sup> and Marco seals the moment “so it is done:” The family received a Dublin decision to go back to Italy, which is the country in charge of their asylum claim. Despite their appeal, the decision to deport is legally valid and remains in effect. The translator, a man who seems to be in a permanent state of confusion and unease, translates most of the conversation when not spoken in English. Marco organizes the necessary documents to conduct the preparatory interview regarding deportation. This is a procedure carried out for both adults that follows the same set of questions. The parents are not willing to leave Switzerland, especially the mother, who is vehemently against it. During the meeting, her agitation grows and is directed towards her husband (“father” in the following).

Father: I am in a country of human rights and was expecting a positive decision. I want to have a guarantee because I have three children. In Italy, nobody will welcome us.

Immediately, the arbitrary position of the father gets cut off by the mother. The translator summarizes: "She is not willing to leave at all. She feels like she is in hell, has stress and psychological problems. Here, human rights do not exist, what kind of country is that?" However, the father mentions he would leave with a guarantee (that they will not be deported back to Lebanon).

Marco: So yes or no to Italy, if there is a guarantee and a house, or what?

Father: If I was alone, I would go back, but I have a family. We do not want to live like animals. It is not enough: food, water and a roof over our heads. We are facing deportation back to Lebanon.

Marco decides not to delve deeper into this discussion, despite an unclear answer as to whether they are willing to leave. "Do they have other documents besides their identity cards?"

Father: No.

Marco then conducts the medical inquiry. Both the mother and her two older children receive psychological treatment. Marco receives some documents, while the translator conveys what the father says: "I am not responsible for this – if something happens to them. You are responsible." The translator grows increasingly uncomfortable, while one child starts to tear up.

Marco simply ignores this, answering: "Yes, sure." And continues in his procedure, asking: "You communicate in Arabic?"

The conversation circles back to their willingness to leave for Italy if a guarantee for their accommodation was given. Both parents would need to sign it.

Father: If there is a 100% guarantee, then yes, but alone. I want to make sure that my family can live there under good conditions. Not in a camp, not under those conditions. We are humans.

Marco: And you will send for your family later on?

Father: Yes, if I see that everything is in order. We are happy in Switzerland, but I was not allowed to work here. I know many families from Lebanon who ended up on the streets.

Marco explains that there are some good collaborative programs between Italy and Switzerland, as well as organizations that take care of families; “that is my opinion, but I have made good experiences.” The mother starts laughing cynically upon translation. Marco repeatedly asks, “What is the final statement? Because they need to sign it. [...]” He also comes back to the medical question, causing the family to list their issues. Marco: “Yes, like the last time, it gets more and more.” The father mentions high blood pressure and ear pain. In the case file, later, one can see that he suffers from tinnitus. The toddler has a heart condition. Marco studies the file. At some point, the father starts speaking after a quiet discussion with his wife. Meanwhile, the crying child gets increasingly nervous and the mother more agitated, now walking up and down in the office with the toddler in her arms.

Translator: He is now against leaving. The family does not want to, the children do not want to.

Marco finalizes the statement, prepares the opening of a potential entry ban and copies the medical documents. He also needs to inform them about a potential detention and says, “The order is clear, you need to go to Italy. There are different ways. You may abscond, go back to Lebanon with the return aid or without help, or you get Dublin now [meaning a return to Italy according to the Dublin procedure].” He briefly explains that if all involved medical practitioners give the OK, “there will be a voluntary flight, we are not at detention yet.”

Marco then turns to me and says: “If we were playing cards, he would have the better hand. One child was born here, the other two do not have papers.” Furthermore, there are medical issues, the children go to school, and the deadline to execute Dublin is six months, after which the case becomes a Swiss responsibility. He then turns back to the family and asks about a car with a [different city’s] number plate, which the father has been seen driving around. Before, Marco told me he would ask this question to increase pressure, and as soon as the question is translated, the mother gets more agitated and angrier, as if she knew

that it would cause trouble. It is a cousin's car, who lives in [city] and the father is allowed to use it from time to time. Marco threatens that a spatial limitation could be invoked if he is seen with the car more frequently. (However, he tells me: "This is just poker on my side. If he does not do anything, stealing or stuff, we cannot do anything. We have less pull. The car belongs to his cousin, he is allowed to drive it..."). He then explains that if the case becomes a national responsibility, they might face a direct deportation to Lebanon and then lists the different measures of force that could be taken (forceful deportation, accompanied on a special flight). After finalizing the meeting and receiving all signatures, the mother gets louder. She starts speaking in English: "Hello, you tell police, police – you give me too much stress. You say, 'Polizei, Polizei,' you have my address, you can come to my home with all the police of Switzerland. No Italy, no Lebanon." The father tries to calm her down, speaks quietly, while she moves away from him in a rather threatening manner. Then Marco accompanies the family out. Another officer comes in, asking what had happened and addresses me: "Were you scared?" (field note, Swiss Cantonal Migration Office 2016; partially cited in Borrelli 2018)

In contrast with Leerkes et al. (2017), who observed a strategic pairing of case-workers and migrant individuals throughout their entire case assessment in order to increase return decisions, Marco only meets the family after a long bureaucratic procedure. The situation increases in intensity and the violence of deportation becomes translated by Marco's (non)verbal communication as he describes various measures on the continuum of "soft" to "hard" deportation (Leerkes, van Os and Boersema 2017). Besides sharing necessary information, the meeting is also used to secure compliance through induced fear of detention. Marco strategically uses threats (even bluffing) to increase emotional pressure to receive a decision. SLBs are expected 'to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild 2012, 7), for example, the willingness to leave the territory (see Leerkes, van Os and Boersema 2017 on government strategies to induce feelings of procedural legitimacy in respective deportees). His behaviour becomes the "reason that one can speak of a political economy of violence [...] because the force that is wielded by the guards is not random but invested by various forms of calculation" (Walters 2016, 442). This violence is an inherent

feature of the enforcement system based on the assumed non-compliance of migrants and their undeservingness, even if not played out fully during each encounter.

The structure and topic of the encounter often cause strong reactions in the deportees, such as despair, towards which SLBs respond; often by distancing or ignoring emotional outbursts (see Borrelli 2018). The uneven knowledge dispersal and strategic ignorance cause stress for migrants, hindering them from acting in an informed manner, even though they can also actively ignore information (Stel 2016). The expression of emotions or lack thereof thus unveils a space in which power relations materialize and are contested.

Ignorance, besides managing emotions of the self, also supports the management of the other. By ignoring the despaired other, one assures that no false hopes will come up.<sup>4</sup> It becomes part of enforcement practices and allows for emotional distancing in a job, which is connected to massive people processing (Hochschild 2012). Detachment, as such, becomes a “good thing” within SLBs’ negotiation regarding their work roles and is used to navigate the often uncontrollable emotions of their “clients.”

Next to ignorance, despair is prevalent during most meetings in the offices, since all individuals face detention and deportation. They have arrived at the end of a long line of procedures and face an imminent threat that it might be over. As such, despair becomes not only a reaction to deportation, but also a way of performing and contesting state decisions (for example, by medicalizing the case or by sheer bodily resistance) in order to, for example, negotiate (as the family does) potential return arrangements. Yet, despair is also used as a resource against migrant individuals. Caseworkers have an interest in implementing Dublin deportations within a certain timeframe to prevent the case from becoming a national responsibility and thus financially more expensive.

The immanent violence of the encounter especially manifests through the embodied experience of despair: The children become increasingly unsettled due to their awareness of the severity of the situation. They also become observers of the internal frictions and tensions between their parents. This unrest and experienced stress manifests in the physical illbeing of the family. Tinnitus is often depicted as a sign of harsh stress (cf. Andersson 2014), reflecting feelings of despair and hopelessness, anxiety and fear, causing a somatized reply from the body. The two older children and the mother suffer from psychological

illnesses caused by the imminent threat of deportation, as the mother explains. Ironically, while Marco induces despair through his threats, it is also the embodiment of despair that he partly ignores and complains about, since he is forced to translate it onto paper to be assessed (potentially becoming a valid medical reason for the hindrance of deportation and thus allowing an assessment of the case in Switzerland).

## Conclusions

Despite an increasing interest in street-level techniques and strategies to manoeuvre daily workloads and emotional personal encounters, little has been said about how emotions materialize in the direct interaction between migrants and bureaucrats. In contrast to case managers in welfare offices who are “attuned to signs of nervousness, to expressions of despair” (Zacka 2017, 238) in order to see deeper problems, this work has shown a different angle.

It has presented encounters between SLBs and individuals with precarious legal status and studied how, in the immediacy of the encounter, emotions are expressed, negotiated, manipulated, and contested. Furthermore, the article shows how these emotions can be translated but also transported through further, more material means, such as paperwork or formalized questions. My work brought forward the micro-interactions of migrants and bureaucrats in the migration regime. As such, this contribution argues that pre-deportation encounters are pregnant with the threat of force; an inherent feature of the state and its governing of populations (Walters 2016, 443). The permanent threat creates a forceful and violent environment and a lingering fear, causing further suffering in migrant individuals.

The three analytical sections took up modes of governing through emotions, emotional strategies and their navigation. SLBs rely on a mixture of friendly emotional encounters to receive information and, to a great extent, on inducing fear and unease to pressure people to leave. At the same time, SLBs’ documentation practices become part of the discursive legal production of migrant subjectivity, in which the “state is enacted through patterns of desire, attachment, hope, and fear” (Darling 2014, 485). As such, emotions can be suppressed and ignored, but also reacted to by migrant individuals, who also try to negotiate and contest state practices. All encounters are characterized by deep power asymmetries, in which migrants fear deportation and possible restraints, such as detention. However, hope remains a graspable feeling, which is also supported by the

system, for example, by allowing respective deportees to produce documents that demonstrate a legitimate form of suffering.

While Walters (2016) studies deportations via aircraft, I argued that the political economy of violence already lingers, more or less hidden, in the encounters which precede the forced deportation. Formal procedures allow the bureaucrat to switch between treating migrant subjects as victims and raising suspicion around them. Strategically induced emotions help to advance a rather violent type of governance that relies on both the creation of despair to reduce resistance and, conversely, the feeling of despair that actually causes people to develop illnesses, which eventually hinders deportation. In these presented encounters, the threat of violent action supports a view of the political economy of violence as a continuous process; a force that is not blind but calculated.

**Lisa Marie Borrelli,**

*University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Western Switzerland,  
lisa.borrelli@hevs.ch*

## **Acknowledgments**

This research was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (51NF40-182897) within the nccr- on the move and under Swiss National Science Foundation grants 172228 and 153225. I would like to thank Viviane Cretton, Karine Geoffrion and the anonymous reviewers for their thorough and highly supportive comments.

## **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> For example the Dublin Regulation, according to which the first country of entry within the Schengen Area becomes responsible for processing the asylum claim of an applicant (Borrelli, Wyss and Eule 2019).
- <sup>2</sup> See Becker (1967) for a more elaborate discussion on positionality and Liempt and Bilger (2012) for a more detailed perspective on research with vulnerable groups.
- <sup>3</sup> This office offers advice and (monetary) support to individuals who want to leave “voluntarily.”
- <sup>4</sup> See Hochschild (2012) on flight attendants smiling as reassurance that the plane will not crash.



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