

# **Living with Uncertainty: Indefinite**

## **Immigration Detention**

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*Immigration detention is a central tenet of the British government's response to immigration but remains under-theorised in academia. This article uses testimonies drawn from anthropological research conducted with detainees at an Immigration Removal Centre to examine lived experiences of immigration detention and explore the relationships between detainees and the British state. It suggests that despite being a space of extreme control (both in terms of legislation and daily practice), immigration detention is beset with uncertainty and confusion. Examples are given of chronic instability in relation to mobility, violent 'incidents', time frames and access to information. The article examines the repercussions of such instability on individuals and coping strategies employed. It argues that immigration detainees live in a context of continual crisis, in which profound uncertainty becomes normalised. This disorder should be understood as a technique of power, with governance through uncertainty constructing certain immigrants as expendable, transient and ultimately, deportable.*

❖ Key words: Uncertainty, Immigration detention, Asylum, State.

### **Introduction**

Mark was a Ugandan man whose asylum claim had been refused. I spoke to him frequently during the six months he was detained in the UK. He had been

in the country for more than a decade and had a Ugandan wife and child who were pursuing their own asylum claims. Without a solicitor, Mark struggled to understand his legal position and was unsuccessful in his multiple attempts to be released from detention on bail or to be given the right to remain in the UK. Several times he went through the acute distress of being told that he was about to be removed to Uganda,<sup>1</sup> only for this to fail to happen. After three months he was transferred, without explanation, from an immigration removal centre in Oxfordshire, to one in London, disrupting the fledging support networks that he had established with his MP and a local NGO, and annulling his long wait to be assessed by local immigration lawyers. Then, much to his distress, his wife and their young daughter were picked up at their home and also incarcerated, at a different detention centre. This had happened to them a year earlier and this time, as previously, his wife and toddler were released after a few, albeit difficult, days. However, two months later Mark's family were detained for a third time. On this occasion, all three were given removal directions for a flight to Uganda.

When I spoke to Mark on the day of his scheduled removal, he had been moved to the induction area, in preparation for being taken to the airport. He was in telephone contact with his partner and they had also been prepared for the flight. However, although Mark waited anxiously, nobody came to collect him. He was never actually informed that his removal was cancelled. Mark realised that it was not going ahead when the time of the flight came and passed. His relief was tempered however by being unable to contact his wife. After a sleepless night, Mark received a call from his wife from Kampala, where she had arrived penniless, distressed and alone except for their frightened daughter, who had never been out of the UK. In tears she explained that at the airport in the UK their child had been taken away from her and they were only reunited just before take-off, after she had been escorted onto the airplane alone and in handcuffs.

To add to the confusion, at 09.30 hours that morning Mark was told he had a bail hearing –which he apparently had not requested – at 10:00 hours. Although by now desperate to join his wife, he attended the hearing and was shocked to find the Home Office barrister telling the judge that the reason Mark was not removed with his family was because he had been violent and disruptive at the airport. When Mark pointed out that he had not even been to the airport, let alone violent, the representative simply shrugged her shoulders and said 'that's what I was told.' Outraged at the treatment of his family, he later complained to me: 'They mix up. They mix... they don't know what they're doing.' Two weeks later, Mark was also deported.

Mark's experience introduces many of the themes that this article explores. Immigration detention and deportation are exceptional state practices that operate under extreme regulation, controlled by a plethora of legislative and legal standards. They are spaces where the state is felt heavily by individuals. Although theorists have largely replaced the material, concrete and personified states envisaged by Marx and Gramsci (Abrams 2006; Hansen and Stepputat 2001), with notions of the state as illusory, distant and imagined

(Anderson 1983; Hobsbawm 1990), individuals often continue to picture states as 'real' entities with centralised control (Mitchell 2006). This article considers the state to be both a material force and illusionary creation, recognising that although state practices such as border control and incarceration are spaces in which the state is highly present, they are also inevitably sites of systemic ambiguity and heterogeneity. By approaching the state from the micro-level of everyday practices and encounters (Foucault 1991b; Gupta 1995), the article examines how the state is made coherent and tangible through immigration detention, whilst simultaneously allowing space for the complexity and chaos of governmental institutions and practices.

There were ten Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs) in the UK at the time of my research in 2008-2010. In many ways these centres are similar to prisons, with patrolling guard dogs, locked doors and high razor wire topped fences, suggesting the bleeding of immigration and criminal strategies (Bosworth and Guild 2008). Immigration detention is experienced by detained individuals as prison-like and is also imagined to be similar by the general public. However, IRCs differ from prisons in significant ways.

Firstly, technically speaking, immigration detention is not punitive, even if it is experienced by individuals as punishment, and it does not indicate that an individual has broken any law. Rather, immigration detention is an administrative power designed to maximise bureaucratic efficiency, such as removal from the UK, and can be performed on non-citizens at any stage of the immigration process. Secondly, immigration detention has no sentence and in the UK does not even have a maximum term time limit. Immigration detention is literally indefinite. Thirdly, detention is overseen by UK Border Agency (UKBA) civil servants rather than the judiciary. If a detainee does not apply for bail, they may never go before a court. And in any case, immigration judges hearing bail applications at The Asylum and Immigration Tribunal<sup>2</sup> do not need to be officially qualified judges, but are instead what was previously referred to as 'adjudicators'. At least one detainee I spoke to knew this and felt that there was a parallel legal system for immigrants, describing them as 'kangaroo courts'.

It is also worth noting that the UKBA caseworkers who make decisions to detain and decisions on immigration claims are generally based in offices far from the IRCs and are generally difficult for detainees to contact. Although there are a handful of UKBA representatives located at IRCs, these individuals simply pass messages between detainees and caseworkers, in addition to overseeing the private companies that run the vast majority of IRCs. These subcontracted private companies deal with the detainees on a day-to-day level, and manage the difficult reality of incarceration and preparing people for deportation.

A number of tensions are at play here, ones that make immigration detention a unique practice with its own legal and political logic (Silverman

and Massa 2012: 678). A study of immigration detention provides insight into various social values and phenomena, from the judicial-political system, to the construction of the nation. IRCs illuminate the distinction between citizens and their Others, with indefinite detention without charge, for example, being an exceptional power that is deemed unacceptable for citizens, even for the most denigrated of British terrorist suspects.<sup>3</sup> The article will suggest that although conceptually speaking the state is highly present in immigration detention, in practice it is distant, acting through intermediaries, and is beset with confusion and miscommunication. Likewise, immigration detention may be a very controlled, prison-like space, but it lies outside of the criminal justice system and operates under chronic uncertainty and instability.

Until relatively recently there was little qualitative research on how people manage situations of chaos and crisis. Risk and uncertainty have tended to be underrepresented in anthropological research.<sup>4</sup> With some exceptions, most notably the Manchester School's work on social conflict and change (Gluckman 1955; 1963), anthropologists have largely approached stability as the 'normal' state by which societies exist. In the last couple of decades however, anthropologists have increasingly presented breakdown, trauma and emergency as routine rather than exceptional, including in relation to warfare, poverty and political breakdown (see Davis 1992; Parkin 1999; Scheper-Hughes 1993; Spencer 2007).<sup>5</sup>

There is however still a tendency to consider disorder in retrospect and with hindsight, rather than as the lived present. A move towards examining the experiential aspects of uncertainty heralds a profound shift in analysis and this article joins Henrik Vigh in arguing that anthropology offers a unique contribution to this study of crisis (Vigh 2008). Although working with people experiencing significant uncertainty raises many ethical and methodological concerns, an examination of the ways people manage their lives in the face of chronic instability and randomness provides critical insights into how people make sense of their worlds and form relationships in hostile environs.

By exploring the perspectives of immigration detainees then, this article argues that although insecurity and mistrust is associated with refugee systems across the globe (Colson 2003; Daniel and Knudsen 1995), immigration detention emerges as a particularly unstable arena. Despite a 'common sense' assumption that detention is ordered and definite, it can be profoundly uncertain and unpredictable, a time of 'crisis' which stretches for weeks, months or even years. In making this argument, the article considers four sources of uncertainty for detainees – mobility, 'incidents', time and information – before turning to the lived repercussions of such instability.

### **Ethnographic Context**

Campsfield House has been an IRC since 1993. Like most such centres, it is overseen by the UKBA but has the day-to-day management contracted out to a private company. It is located just outside Oxford and holds up to 216 adults,

all of whom are male foreign nationals but are otherwise extremely diverse. Campsfield is a relatively low security centre, allowing detainees freedom of movement within part of the centre during the day. There is a range of facilities, including a small gym, library and computer room. There are 'activities' such as art and craft sessions but no education or courses and many detainees complain of having nothing to do. Like all detainees, those at Campsfield can be held indefinitely. Over the course of my research the average length of stay at Campsfield increased from 14 days in 2006, to 46 days in 2008 (HMCIP 2006: 72; 2008: 78). Some people however are held for months or even years.

Given the inaccessibility of IRCs to the general public, I was unable to conduct 'traditional' in-depth participant observation. As with researchers of other closed institutions, I had to use a variety of access points (e.g. González 2012). This included 18 months working for a local NGO and two years working as the immigration caseworker for the MP in whose constituency Campsfield was located. Both were aware of my research. Through these routes I spoke to around 160 immigration detainees, from over 50 countries. I saw more Nigerians than any other nationality, followed by Afghans, Iranians and Iraqis. About a third had previously served prison sentences, usually for immigration or identity offences, the majority had claimed asylum, and all were 'deportable'.

Significant methodological and ethical difficulties exist in conducting research with precarious migrants<sup>6</sup> and I particularly question to what extent incarcerated people can ever give full consent (Brown 2002: 232). There are also challenges in researching uncertainty without succumbing to the anthropological (and human) tendency to make 'sense' of chaos (Holdsworth 2004), or to contribute to the confusion of the system. In sensitivity to the emotional vulnerability of the detainees, and to try to reduce any confusion presented by my various different roles, I restricted myself to informal, individual-led conversations with detainees. However, I conducted formal interviews with volunteer visitors, ex-detainees, independent monitors, NGO employees, and (after receiving permission from the Home Office) representatives at Campsfield from UKBA and the private company running the centre. I also interviewed an anonymous UKBA representative, visited Campsfield multiple times and became familiar with the wealth of procedures and documents surrounding detention.

In addition to accessing Campsfield's 'front-stage' spaces (cf. Goffman 1971), such as the reception and visits room, I caught glimpses of the less accessible 'back-stage' when interviewing staff, attending on-site carol services or having tours with the NGO or MP. Although these were only ever brief, incomplete and chaperoned peeks into a closed and heavily regulated world, they were valuable in fleshing out the lives of people I otherwise only knew through telephone calls and formal visits. Although most of my attention was

directed at Campsfield, I visited other IRCs and kept in contact with ex-Campsfield detainees after they were transferred to other IRCs. Most of the examples given in this article draw from Campsfield but the issues are not specific to this one centre but are common to immigration detention more broadly.

### **Uncertainty and Unpredictability**

Although detainees often consider Campsfield as one of the better IRCs, being incarcerated is almost uniformly experienced as unpleasant, frustrating, depressing and frightening. IRCs are described by detainees as a place of intense uncertainty, instability and arbitrariness. Intended as a short-term administrative aid to ease removal of unwanted foreigners, some people end up being incarcerated for long periods of time, without knowing how long their detention might last and with the constant threat of deportation.

Despite language and literacy problems and often without legal representation, detainees fight complex legal battles and negotiate ever-changing policy environments, often complaining that the information available to them is minimal, contradictory or erroneous. Riots, fights, escapes and hunger strikes make detention a periodically unsafe space, whilst frequent transfer to other IRCs cause further disruption. In this section, I shall summarise four sources of instability: involuntary mobility, ‘incidents’, unknowable timeframes and poor availability of information.

### **Enforced Mobility**

Given that immigration detention by definition restricts people’s movement, it is perhaps surprising that one of people’s central uncertainties relates to mobility. It begins with entry into immigration detention, which is generally described as traumatic and disorientating. People claim to have had little information about what was happening, and to have endured long journeys, with deprivation of sleep and sustenance. For example, Bernard told me that he was arrested at 09:00 hours when reporting to the police but was then held at the police station until 21:00 hours, after which he was driven to Campsfield and only arrived at 03:00 hours, tired and confused.

Once detained, people can be transferred to other detention centres, removed from the UK or released, all potentially occurring without warning. The vast majority of detainees I spoke to had been moved between IRCs, often multiple times. Transfers are associated with lost possessions, allegations of physical abuse and disruptions of stability and networks of support. Transfers can also be unexpected, unexplained and involve long journeys (HMCIP 2006:17; Independent Monitoring Board 2009: 14). This includes being moved during the night, as was the case for an African ex-detainee:

I was moved around United Kingdom. All around... They come two o'clock in the morning. Say "pack your stuff". You don't know where you are going to, when you ask they say "you'll find out when you arrive, not before."

Transferring detainees in this way has been described as a technique of dehumanising people as transitory and unimportant (Gill 2009).

The majority people leaving Campsfield however, are removed from the UK rather than transferred within the detention estate (HMCIP 2008: 64). Deportations and removals are usually points of particular stress and confusion. Most detainees are given just 72 hours' notice of their removal, which is rarely enough time for individuals or their legal representatives to effectively challenge the process. Sometimes even less warning is given, which can be highly traumatic. Until recently for example the Home Office could remove vulnerable people such as the suicidal or unaccompanied children, with no notice (Webber 2010). Likewise, people deported on special charter flights are only told that the flight will be at some point within ten days, and those who have already had several failed attempted removals may be given no warning at all.

Removals can be heavy-handed and sometimes involve allegations of violence (see HMCIP 2009), or even the occasional death (Lewis and Taylor 2010). For example, Kizza, an African detainee I knew well emailed me after his removal to claim that he had been taken from detention at 02.30 hours, sedated in a van for several hours, then forced onto an airplane by several officers, who 'managed to put handcuffs on me and they put me at the rear of the plane - also they shackled my two feet. They even refused to let me go to the toilets so that I shat my trousers.' Kizza told me he had been prevented from cleaning the faeces and was forced to spend the long journey with his arms handcuffed behind him, which resulted in scarred wrists and a dislocated shoulder. To put this experience in perspective, Kizza was about 5' 2" and although I passed his story onto an NGO seeking such examples for their report *Outsourcing Abuse* (Birnberg Pierce & Partners et al 2008), Kizza's experience was not extreme enough to be included.

As with Mark, removals are often unsuccessful, resulting in individuals enduring several attempts before finally being removed. This can include being taken to the airport or even onto an aeroplane before being returned to detention. For example, Cameroonian Diallo had seven sets of removal directions in the five months he was detained and told me that the UKBA had twice attempted to remove him without giving him warning and sometimes during the night or at the weekend, when his solicitor could not be contacted. People often were given little explanation for why removals failed, as was the case for Jonathan who experienced multiple removal attempts. On one occasion he told me: '[at] midnight they told me flight was cancelled. They

didn't give me any reason'. The next time, he was taken up to the aeroplane before being returned to detention, later complaining to me: 'I don't know what they trying to do... they didn't say anything to me.' A week later he remained just as confused: 'they haven't said anything since then... I just be patient, just wait and see. I've no choice, just wait and see.'

Similarly, Tagbo had repeated removal directions set and cancelled over the 17 months he was detained. When I last saw him at Campsfield he was due to be deported the following day but had no idea if it would take place, saying: 'I'm not sure. I can't be sure. Because the man is not saying yes or no. They are not telling me anything concrete... I'm just going to have to wait until Saturday night and see what happens.' Such uncertainty about the outcome of these significant events, coupled with great unwillingness and fear around removal, makes it very difficult for people to imagine or plan their future, resulting in some being removed without having been able to consider what they would do once expelled.

### **'Incidents'**

A sense of instability and precariousness in immigration detention is heightened by the occasional suicide attempt, escape, riot, fire, fight and hunger-strike, events which are euphemistically called 'incidents' by the authorities. Campsfield has periodically experienced such disturbances from its inception, with the first major hunger-strike occurring just four months after the centre opened and the first riot three months later (Pirouet 2001: 87). During the period of my research there was a riot and fire in March 2007, and over 150 detainees were on hunger-strike by the summer. August 2007 had several separate major incidents, including fires, riots and the escape of 26 detainees. A fire and riots occurred in June 2008, followed four days later by the escape of seven detainees (Independent Monitoring Board 2009: 11). Despite being portrayed by the media as threatening scenes of anarchy (for example see Lewis and Wigmore 2008) detainees are extremely vulnerable in such situations and people caught up in 'incidents' speak of chaos and panic.

An illustrative example of this is provided by Godfrey, a Trinidadian detainee I knew through my work with the local NGO. Godfrey discussed with me the details of being caught up in an 'incident' at Campsfield. He described the fear of being locked into the building after the fire alarms sounded, of the guards initially refusing to let him and the others out, then being freed to run out into the yard, where a portacabin was also on fire and from which there were sounds of explosions. He said that he climbed onto the roof to escape the flames, only to discover further fires. Eventually he and the others were taken to a field, where they remained for over four hours. Because the instigator was Jamaican all Caribbean detainees were then transferred to other IRCs, meaning that Godfrey missed a long awaited meeting with a potential new solicitor. In addition to the fear and danger of the event itself, he resented being treated as a culprit as a result of his nationality and the disruption it caused him, telling me: '[it] is a lot to bear...



when you just want to get on with your life.'

### **Temporal Uncertainty**

Although immigration detainees encounter uncertainty in many aspects of their lives, one of the greatest sources of insecurity is that of time. Many aspects of the immigration system, including claiming asylum, is characterised by a dead, suspended time of waiting (Kobelinsky 2010). Although detention is generally intended to facilitate removal after a person has exhausted any claim to remain in the UK, detention can occur at any point in immigration processes and many people are detained despite having extant claims or whilst waiting for court hearings. Others are legally 'deportable' but are effectively irremovable, for example, due to disputes over their nationality or because conditions in their country are too unsafe. These factors are likely to lengthen detention, producing a stasis that is compounded by the slowness of communicating with the UKBA and of the waiting necessary for court hearings to be scheduled, for the UKBA to enact court decisions, for identity documents to be issued, and for other decisions to be made.

The UK is not signed up to the European Union's Return Directive and thus is not constrained by a maximum time limit on detention.<sup>7</sup> I knew more than 20 people who were detained for over a year and many more who were held for over six months. However, even relatively short detention experiences are extremely uncertain experiences because unlike prison sentences, individuals have no idea how long their time in detention might be. This lack of a timeframe, of a point to work towards, leaves people unable to imagine a future. This was clearly described by a Nigerian detainee who was willing to be returned and frustrated at the delays: 'Once you have been given a date, you have an agenda. But if they have not given you a date, you have nothing.' Several detainees who had previously been in prison told me that the presence of a sentence made prison easier to endure than immigration detention. This included an Eritrean detainee who was detained several years after a much shorter prison sentence: 'They could keep me another 10 months, I don't know. Or they could release me, I don't know... Prison I know what I was doing, you know the release date.'

In addition to this long, endless wait, however, immigration detention is also a space in which change can be sudden and dramatic. One might be unexpectedly deported or transferred, or even released from detention so suddenly that there is no time to arrange somewhere to stay. Detainees making fresh asylum claims can receive decisions on the same day. Appeals against negative decisions have to be submitted within a few days of a refusal. Some detainees – albeit generally not at Campsfield – are considered so unlikely to be successful in their asylum claim that they are placed on the 'fast track' and their asylum case decided within days, often before they have had

time to obtain advice or understand their situation.

All of this contributes to a fast, frenetic sense of time in which little can be anticipated. As an African detainee told me: ‘maybe tomorrow they will take me. You don’t know what tomorrow will hold for you’. This quick changing, frenzied time, combined with the potentially lengthy, indefinite wait of detention, results in a dual temporal uncertainty. People are simultaneously afraid both that their detention will end at any moment without warning, and that they will remain forgotten in detention forever. Many men I spoke to felt unable to plan more than a day or two ahead – perhaps a surprising sentiment for someone incarcerated. Several said they waited months to contact NGOs or join activities in detention because they did not know where they might be day to day.

### **Information and Knowledge**

Access to information is central to how people cope with managing risk and uncertainty (see Caplan 2000). This makes it particularly pertinent that a pervasive complaint of immigration detainees is a lack of information and understanding of their situation. Echoing the comments of many others, Ade, a Nigerian detainee who had lived in the UK for over two decades asked me: ‘Why are they doing this to me? Why am I being punished? Why are they making my children suffer like this? I don’t know what is going on. I don’t understand. Why am I here?’ Although immigration detainees are supposed to receive an explanation for their continued detention each month, some claim not to receive them, mirroring a concern of being ‘forgotten’ in the system that has been noted for asylum seekers in Denmark (Whyte 2011). Others receive the reviews but complain that nothing except for the date ever changes on them.

People also struggle to communicate with their UKBA caseworkers, if they even know that they have one. Telephones go unanswered, caseworkers do not have answerphones and faxes are not always replied to. The staff on-site at Campsfield may be more accessible but they have no decision-making powers over individual cases. Detainees often do not know where they are in the immigration system, if their asylum claims have been refused or if they have any pending applications or court hearings. Even when people do obtain information about their case, it is often impenetrable for those without solicitors, literacy, very good English or understanding of the legal system. Some detainees feel their ignorance or naivety is actively used against them in order to ensure they fail in their immigration applications, as this young Somali man believed:

They ask you these questions and when you answer it, they ask you again. They set you up like that... They set it up for me. They know what they're doing. I didn't know the system! I didn't know how it works.

Although detainees without solicitors are particularly hindered in their cases, misinformation and uncertainty also exists for those who do have legal representation. Many detainees spoke of being unable to get hold of their solicitors or obtain information from them, and many felt their solicitor was doing nothing for them. A surprising number did not even know if they had a solicitor or not. For example, Iranian Amir spoke no English but told me through a translating fellow detainee that he thought he had legal representation after a solicitor visited him five months previously and asked him to sign something. He showed me the paperwork and I had to explain that the document he signed stated that they were not taking his case on and that he had therefore wasted the last five months waiting for someone to help him. Another time I met an Afghan teenager who was very confused because his flight scheduled for the previous day had not materialised. He believed it had been cancelled by a solicitor, but was not sure he had one and was further mystified when the following day he received an unrequested visit by a solicitor from another firm. As his translating friend told me of this visitor: 'We don't know who [it was]. Or why.'

In addition to a lack of information, many detainees complain that the information they receive from the UKBA is full of mistakes or 'lies', issues I explore in more detail elsewhere (Griffiths 2012). This includes correspondence with the wrong name, date of birth or nationality, letters with multiple reference numbers, or letters that contradict each other. For example, Amir (introduced earlier), believed that the UKBA were playing games with him because they had variously claimed that he was Afghani and Iranian, and accused him both of entering the UK illegally and of arriving with a valid passport. As with so many conversations with detainees, I was extremely confused about Amir's situation and prospects. He had reams of paperwork, none of which he could read and which mostly consisted of near identical monthly detention reports.

It is certainly the case that the UKBA makes errors. Indeed, in 2009 the UKBA admitted to losing 17 thousand files of asylum seekers, including identity documents and personal information (Hansard 2008). One Kurdish man I knew seriously questioned the competence of the UKBA, alleging that on two separate occasions his brother had been informed that his Home Office file had been destroyed by floods in a government basement; an excuse that he believed had been invented to cover-up the repeated loss of the file. Some detainees complain that UKBA mistakes can even become 'facts' that must be complied with. For example, a man I knew through my work with the MP claimed that his date of birth was incorrectly copied by a UKBA officer. Although he quickly pointed out the mistake, he claimed that rather than acknowledge and correct the error, the discrepancy between the dates of birth was used for four years to demonstrate his untrustworthiness, despite his – and the MP's and solicitor's – repeated instances that an officer had simply made a

mistake.

Detainees offer many examples in which decisions appear to be inexplicable and describe a system that feels unfair and unfathomable. This includes people who are released from detention only to be promptly re-detained, or people due for removal who are instead inexplicably released. Some people feel that the authorities actually lie in order to undermine their immigration cases.. One man claimed that his roommate had been suddenly deported despite having no removal directions and suggested that staff could 'ambush you' for removal at any time, outside of the procedure, creating a sense of precarity and unfairness that goes beyond simple confusion and misinformation.

## **Repercussions**

The compounded forms of uncertainty presented have various impacts on detainees. It is common for individuals to describe themselves as 'stuck' and unable to progress or control their own lives. For example, a Chinese detainee who remained in detention for many months before his embassy issued travel documents for his deportation told me: 'I don't know what's happen, I don't know what's going on. He control me. Not my control.' This is often described in gendered terms, including as obstacles against being capable adult men or good fathers and husbands. The passivity and emasculation emerging from chronic uncertainty may be the unintended by-products of a system that limits individuals' self-determination or ability to plan their future. However, it may also be encouraged by practices of immigration detention designed to facilitate the smooth running of the centres. For example, a system of strikes and privileges encourages 'good' behaviour such as being compliant and keeping bedrooms tidy, and at least one detainee felt they were given sleeping pills in order to be docile, telling me: 'As long as you sleeping you don't cause trouble! As long as you don't cause trouble!'

Some of the most obvious impacts of living with uncertainty relates to people's mental health. Problems that detainees complain of span from stress and insomnia to self-harm, suicide attempts and hearing voices. Many detainees are on medication to sleep and studies have demonstrated higher rates of mental health problems or self-harm amongst detained asylum seekers as compared to other high risk populations such as prisoners (Cohen 2008) or asylum seekers living in the community (Robjant et al. 2009). Amongst those I spoke to, causes of such problems related to fear of forced return, stress about one's immigration case, worry about being taken during the night, and the profound instability caused by the dual temporal uncertainty.

George, for example, whose disputed nationality meant he could not be deported for some months, said he was depressed and threatened suicide, telling me: 'Let me be free! I'm not feeling good here. I don't want to die here... I'm not well here, I'm depressed here... I kill myself [in] this place. I don't want to stay here, I don't want to commit suicide here!' George had a medical report that testified he was 'stressed, depressed' and on multiple

medications. Being separated from partners and children has a particularly strong impact on mental health, producing feelings of shame and impotence. For example, Talib, who had lived in the UK for 13 years and faced deportation away from his infant child was described by a volunteer visitor as being in ‘a state of complete breakdown... He rants and raves and cries continually, mostly about his son’. Campsfield detainee Brice made the local media when after nine days of hunger-strike and in fear of removal to the DRC, he slit his throat with a plastic knife on New Year’s Day 2009. He survived and was removed a few days later. In 2012 however, a man at Campsfield tragically succeeded in killing himself.

### **Coping with Uncertainty**

The article has suggested that immigration detainees feel trapped in a system that is uncertain and arbitrary. Becoming accustomed to detention and instability is a process. The initial period is one of crisis, in which people tend to be outraged and struggle against their predicament, insisting that they have been detained by mistake. Many protest or fight to be released, faxing reams of letters to MPs, the Prime Minister or even the Queen. At these early stages the sense of unfairness is acute and the rupture from ‘normal’ life most obvious. In resisting their detention, individuals often ‘buy into’ the system, arguing their case through the official rationale and language. This includes using key legislative phrases or arguments, such as ‘well-founded fear’ or appeals to Human Rights articles. For example, a non-legally trained detainee showed me a letter he sent to the UKBA in which he wrote:

I cannot understand why I should be treated this way. This is contrary to the United Kingdom’s obligations and would be in contravention of Article 6 of the ECHR [European Charter on Human Rights]... Asking me to leave the UK is unlawful under section 6 of the Human Right Act 1998 (c.40) as being incompatible with the convention rights.

Over time however, detainees generally become increasingly resigned and hopeless, with the initial crisis transforming from an aberration to the normalised order of their new lives. At extremes, the passivity produces detainees who become literally forgotten in the system and who put up little resistance to their treatment. An example of this trajectory is provided by George, who was originally very angry about his detention, insisting ferociously that mistakes were being made and widely requesting help to right the injustice he believed had occurred. He became increasingly passive over the six months he was detained, however, and eventually stopped pleading his case: ‘I am very tired.... I don’t forcing anyone to believe. If they want to

believe what I am telling them, they can, if they don't, I cannot force them. I am not their God.'

Even those not broken by despair tend to retreat into themselves and their endless waiting, focusing primarily on survival and the basics of sleep, food and physical health. For example, when I met a southern African refugee shortly after his release from 14 months detention, he said of his time at Campsfield: 'It's just like being dead, just dead.' He described the detainees as 'zombies' simply trying to survive. Like others he struggled to regain his social skills and rebuild relationships after his release. He said that his young child considered him a stranger, he felt unable to do simple tasks such as catch a bus or to communicate or reconnect emotionally with his wife. In fact, like others in this situation, the transition proved too difficult and his pregnant wife left him a few months after his release.

Although the impacts of the chronic uncertainty of detention are almost exclusively negative, I do not wish to portray refugees as simply traumatised, helpless or dependent (Loizos 2002). Rather, and following Davis (1992), Scheper-Hughes (2008) and Vigh (2008), I consider crisis as the 'context' and question how in face of this, life is maintained and uncertainty made sense of. Nancy Scheper-Hughes identified various tactics of resilience and sources of strength, including 'narrativity' (story-telling to provide order), reframing, instrumental relationships and black humour (Scheper-Hughes 2008). Although responses to trauma are culturally specific, and despite the ethnic diversity of my participants, there are some shared motifs of managing immigration detention. These include the manufacture routine or purpose, distraction and attempts to buy-into or co-opt the system.

Some people latch onto a single sympathetic person, such as a volunteer visitor. Others turn in on themselves and eschew fellow detainees and even their own families, due to shame or to avoid upsetting them. Many develop psycho-somatic complaints and become obsessed with their health. Several detainees told me they restricted themselves to the present, ignoring their painful pasts and unimaginable futures. Some try to 'keep busy' or distract themselves with music or physical activity. The importance of distraction is recognised by those managing IRCs, with the private company running various 'activities' at Campsfield, such as bingo, Sports Days and a controversial work scheme.

Even in the most chaotic of situations, people tend to seek or create spaces or order (Von Benda-Beckmann and Pirie 2007). Perhaps unsurprisingly then, a common response among immigration detainees is attempts to rationalise their situation. This includes finding meaning for their otherwise seemingly purposeless detention, or explanation for decisions that appear irrational or arbitrary. For example, some individuals told me that they believed that detention decisions reflect political concerns over statistics, the cycle of the financial year, a need to boost the economy or even the UK's hosting of the 2012 Olympics. One man said he believed that it cost over a thousand pounds to detain someone for a week, telling me: 'It's all about business'. Another man suggested that the apparent chaos within the UKBA

was financially motivated.’

Mark, introduced earlier, blamed governmental targets. He claimed: ‘They just want to make the numbers of people they deport.’ Detainee Joey alleged: ‘It’s all about figures... So at the end of the day they can say ten thousand, 15 thousand were deported... That’s how it is. I’ve been in the system too long. I know how it works.’ Some people alleged that the UKBA drew on the uncertainty of indefinite detention to wear people down. For example, ex-detainee Akiki claimed: ‘Long term detention is a policy I think of frustrating you.... they are frustrated, they are tired. They have gone insane. They decide to go home’, and Ade stated this belief: ‘I think they are doing this to speed up the cases. They are just exaggerating.’ Some detainees even accused UKBA of lying. These included an African detainee who claimed: ‘this is like some kind of gymnastics. They can twist and turn. They are very clever...’

Rather than seek systemic rationale however, many immigration detainees explain the apparent arbitrariness of detention decisions as being down to the whim of individual bureaucrats or as reflective of what appeared to them to be an unprofessional and understaffed government department. In this way, one man would ask me to call the UKBA for him in the afternoon: ‘so they’ve had their lunch... and their bellies are full’, saying it was ‘a black comedy’ that his future depended upon these strategies.

A large proportion of people used religion to give detention meaning and reassure themselves that someone was in control and aware of their plight, telling me that their detention was part of God’s plan. These sentiments were bolstered by some religious staff, including a priest at a carol service at Campsfield, who described detention as a wilderness through which individuals were being tested by God. Likewise, Nigerian Tagbo who I introduced earlier in connection to the uncertainty of removal, was so powerless to either influence or predict his immediate future that he attributed the outcome to a higher – and benevolent – power, rather than the chaotic, unpredictable and cold considerations of a bureaucracy: ‘It’s God willing and it’s going to be the best. It’s with the authority of God... If it’s not the wish of God, even if they have travel documents, the plane won’t start.’

In addition to his Christian faith, Tagbo found meaning behind his detention by identifying patterns in events. For example, he pointed out that his removal was set for two years after he was originally arrested, asking ‘is it coincidence is exactly two years later?’ The line between rational explanation and over-interpretation of signs is subjective and for some people unrelated factors become hyper-meaningful. For example, some detainees erroneously imagine that there is a relationship between outcome and the length of time one waits in detention, complaining if people are released quickly, ‘out of turn’. In many ways however, those people that appeared to fare the best accepted that there was little rationality to the system and did not attempt to

predict outcomes.

### **Techniques of state**

Foucault and others have written of the state as a disciplinary force, utilising punishment, correction, labour, bureaucracy and ‘biopolitics’ in exercising power over the body of society (Agamben 1998; Dean 2001; Foucault 1980a; b; c). In particular, the prison is presented as a site in which discipline is exercised through surveillance, with the actions of prisoners observed and prescribed in detail (Foucault 1977). Although immigration detention centres and prisons share similar techniques of incarceration and symbols of power, there are significant differences between the two types of institution. These points of difference can help us think about immigration detention and the place of systemic uncertainty within it.

Firstly, whilst prisons illuminate the distinction between the law-abiding and the criminal, immigration detention differentiates between the citizen and the alien. IRCs are sites in which the state and her boundaries are created. National borders and the control of mobility over them have long been associated with the imagining of sovereign states and national cohesion. In a world divided into nation states, those people that cross borders without permission are considered particularly threatening to national sovereignty and security (Fuglerud 2004; Pirouet 2001), and their detention and deportation is largely considered justifiable in the name of the national interest.

Immigration detention then is an extension of the national border, with state sovereignty symbolically achieved through the ‘spectacle’ of detention and deportation (Anderson et al. 2011; Bosworth and Guild 2008; Leerkes and Broeders 2010). As such, immigration detention – rather than the prison system – is critical to the construction of citizenship and the nation. The relegation of these denigrated non-citizens to a site that is not only a contained space of incarceration away from mainstream society, but is characterised by the unpredictable and unstable, is informative as to how these foreigners are perceived in contrast to citizens. Whilst many citizens bemoan the inefficiency of government bureaucracy, the sheer scale of uncertainty experienced by immigration detainees suggests that they are considered transitory, undeserving and expendable in a way that is less true of British citizens.

Secondly, whilst prisons can be understood as a means of punishing wrongdoers or reshaping them into respectable members of society (Garland 1994; Morris and Rothman 1995), immigration detention is focused narrowly on expelling the unwanted and is not concerned with rehabilitation or the nature of those that leave the centres. They simply ‘warehouse’ individuals until they can be deported (Coutin 2010:356), with little incentive to protect detainees’ mental health and little institutional interest in redemption. There is also little need for the total surveillance and individualisation of the panopticon (c.f. Foucault 1977). Rather, and very much mirroring Zachary Whyte’s findings for Danish asylum centres, British immigration detention



operates through inconsistency and a short-sighted, blurred view of subjects (Whyte 2011).

Instead of excessive surveillance and knowledge of detainees then, there is an absence of supervision and occupation, with little emphasis on what people do with their time, as long as they do not cause trouble or self-harm. A common complaint of detainees is institutional indifference, of being 'forgotten' in the system. So, whilst prisons can be seen to focus on the thoughts and behaviour of individual criminals (whether to punish or change them), immigration detention is more concerned with housing large numbers of potential deportees and expediting their removal (in addition to providing a warning for any would-be migrants considering the UK as a destination).

Despite the repeated 'crises' and overhauls experienced by the Home Office, the inconsistency of the detention system remains constant. As Whyte (2011) found for Denmark, this instability and institutional 'myopia' appears to be less an accidental feature of the immigration system and more a technique fundamental to the functioning of the state and its deportation project. In this space, the British government exerts extreme control over people, and yet does so through systemic uncertainty and disorder, through which individuals are made powerless, hopeless and 'deportable'. The institutional uncertainty is largely obscured, if not actually justified, through symbols of rational power, such as legalistic language, references to policy, unemotional bureaucratic techniques and the paraphernalia of the judiciary and parliament. The British asylum and detention system portrays itself as consistent and impartial, with UKBA representatives presenting the system to me as fair and effective. Whilst non-UKBA experts in the field tend to acknowledge the inconsistency and irrationality, the most a UKBA representative conceded to me was that chance played a role in immigration decisions, with outcomes depending upon the individual UKBA caseworker, and that 'caseworkers can be a bit of a lottery'.

### **Conclusion: Governing through uncertainty**

One might imagine that for those confined, immigration detention, with its restrictions and prescriptions, is a fundamentally stable and certain experience, even if it is undesired and resisted. However, the article has suggested that immigration detention – if not the whole immigration system – operates on a basis of instability and uncertainty, characterised by the unexpected, whether actually in the form of unplanned events or simply the threat of such over indefinite periods. Detainees lack routines and imaginable futures, experience high – and largely unpredictable – mobility, struggle to access information and often disagree with official versions of the 'truth' produced by those managing their immigration cases. They speak of feeling marginalised, stuck and 'abnormal', with long, uncertain periods of waiting.

Within this broader instability, those detainees held for months or longer are particularly prone to uncertainty, living with the seemingly endless threat of immediate change, normalised only through the lengthy periods in which it is experienced.

From its inception, anthropology has examined the mechanisms societies use to symbolise and establish order. As described, many immigration detainees strive to find or create order where it seemingly does not exist. Those that do not give up, try to reassert a rationale to their lives, from finding meaning by which to understand the purposeless, to creating distractions and comforting routines. Interestingly, such coping strategies are primarily conducted at the individual level, even if there are strong commonalities in people's responses. The precariousness of detention, the degree of mobility and the diversity of languages and cultures involved, mean that although detainees tend to get along relatively well and help each other with informal translation or advice about forms, friendships are somewhat rare and on the whole people experience detention as individuals. Indeed, rather than speak of obtaining support from other detainees, it was more common for people to tell me that they isolated themselves in order to avoid other people's tensions, stresses and despair.

Qualitative researchers have increasingly accepted that not only is disorder 'normal' for much of the world, but that states can be the source of chaos, particularly when they are weak or in retreat. Interestingly, immigration detention provides an example in which instability is generated instead where the state is particularly heavily present. Giorgio Agamben argues that spaces such as refugee camps or detention facilities are materialisations of the 'state of exception', in which law is suspended and the state assumes direct care of biological life (Agamben 1998: 174). Whilst I would not agree that there is no rule of law in IRCs, it is true both that immigration detainees have restricted access to legal rights and that the state is symbolically highly evident and powerful in detention centres. However, the article has also presented immigration detention as an ambiguous space of privatised state power – one in which the state is both heavy-handed and weak, simultaneously highly present and yet always out of reach.

This article suggests that uncertainty is not only an accidental aspect of the immigration detention system, but is critical to its functioning. Governing through uncertainty may not be a consciously designed aspect of the system but it is more than just symptomatic of the chaos of the process. Rather, it has become a fundamental part of governmentality (c.f. Foucault, 1991a), serving to keep people insecure, passive and pessimistic and to reiterate the indifference and power of the state. Of course, despite the apparent contradiction, chaos itself can provide certainties. Von Benda-Beckmann and Pirie (2007) have argued that the difference between order and disorder is subjective and often revolves around predictability, with people accepting and adapting to chaos as long as they know to expect it. Those immigration detainees that accept that there is little institutional sense or certainty seem to fare the best, suggesting that chronic uncertainty becomes the context by

which their lives are structured. In contrast, those that expect the systems and representatives of the British state to be fair and compassionate, struggle with the disjuncture between this and the reality that they find. It was these individuals that bemoaned to me how disappointed they were to discover that human rights abuse and excessive exercise of sovereign power are possible in the UK as in the countries they left.

It is this relationship between individuals – diverse as they are – and a version of the British state as domineering but chaotic that the article has explored. It has considered crisis and uncertainty as the background context that immigration detainees live in, recognising that disorder resembles an on-going plateau in their lives rather than a brief schism from normality. However, such assessments require the benefit of hindsight. A central issue for immigration detainees is that they have no idea how long their situation of uncertainty and trauma will continue on for – whether it will be a peak or a plane – because they are so unsure of the timeframe, the decisions being made about them and spatially, where they will be taken next. Unlike prisoners, they do not have the luxury of a sentence.

### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the team at the Journal of Legal Anthropology for their help and advice. Thanks also go to all those who took part in the research and offered their time and stories.

### **Biographical Notes**

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> ‘Deportation’ and ‘removal’ are processes by which non-citizens are forcibly ejected from the UK. Although they are legally distinct, both involve uncertainty and stress and for the purposes of this article can be considered equivalent to each other.

<sup>2</sup> The Asylum and Immigration Tribunal was superseded by the First-Tier and Upper Tribunal (Immigration and Asylum Chamber) in 2010, after my fieldwork ended.

<sup>3</sup> Government attempts in 2008 to extend the length of time terrorist suspects could be held without charge to 42 days was met with public and political outrage.

<sup>4</sup> Risk has been fairly extensively considered by sociologists (for example see Beck 1992; Drake 1992; Giddens 1991), but has had less attention from anthropologists. Exceptions include some early work on the role of magic in negating uncertainty (for example Felson and Gmelch 1979; Malinowski 1974) and more recent work, including on economics, the environment and political change (Boholm 2010; Caplan 2000; Douglas 1994; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983, Von Benda-Beckmann and Pirie 2007).

<sup>5</sup> This includes considerable ethnographic research on post-Soviet Union societies (for example Holdsworth 2004; Weldes et al. 1999).

<sup>6</sup> For more on these issues see Franck Duvell et al's piece on working with illegal immigrants (2010). In respecting the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre's ethical guidelines for research with forced migrants (Refugee Studies Centre 2007), I tried to anticipate any harm my research could cause, negotiated informed consent and ensured confidentiality and anonymity. I did not record sensitive information, password protected my notes and am omitting all identifying information.

<sup>7</sup> The 'Return Directive' (Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals) limits immigration detention to a maximum of 18 months.

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