



Paperwork Performances

Legitimizing State Violence in the Swedish Deportation Regime



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Governing Migration through Paperwork

Paperwork is a key feature of statecraft and plays a crucial role organizing and performing power in ‘complex and unequal societies’ (Heyman 1995, 261). It is essential to state actors’ efforts to render populations legible and governable (Scott 1998), while it also serves to render the state readable and accountable to the population (Bierschenk, this volume; Horton 2020). It is also constitutive of difference, a key function of borderwork: the various state technologies put in place to record, categorize, verify and analyse the identity of individuals and which simultaneously delineate the citizenry and produce categories of ‘wanted’ and ‘unwanted’ others (Herzfeld 1992; see also Joppke 1998). For people attempting to cross borders, papers produce and legitimize the conditions of vulnerability, discrimination and exclusion *and* inclusion (however precarious or subordinate) in the nation-state (Coutin 2020). Those classified as ‘unwanted’ are, in turn, exposed to different forms of coercion and social marginalization via illegalization, criminalization, detention, formal abandonment and deportation. Such coercive state practices require legitimation work (Ellermann 2009); in the contemporary European migration regime, this is achieved in part through the

strategic linking of migration to transborder crime, insecurity and terrorism (Salter 2006), and in part through the ways these coercive, discriminatory and essentially punitive measures (Bosworth, Parmar and Vázquez 2018) are enforced through mundane administrative practices.

In this chapter, we explore the role of administrative paperwork in enforcing and legitimating coercive migration-control practices, and in constructing and rationalizing bureaucratic power as such (Das 2004). Given states' heavy reliance on paperwork in the coercive control of populations, studies of the concrete ways in which paperwork, as a symbolic and material practice, produces the social world remain relatively few – albeit with notable exceptions (Gupta 2012, 55; Horton and Heyman 2020; Hull 2012). In consequence, the chapter contributes to the limited but growing literature on the role of paperwork in the enforcement of border and migration policies (Cabot 2012; Coutin 2000; Horton and Heyman 2020; Rozakou 2019). Empirically, the chapter focuses on the documentary practices that inform the everyday work of Swedish border police and migration custody officials, whose work entails controlling, incarcerating and deporting people whose presence has been illegalized and classified as 'unwanted'. It thus adds to the scholarly literature exploring documentation practices as a form of statecraft (Corrigan and Sayer 1985; Gupta 2012; Navaro-Yashin 2007; Riles 2006; Stoler 2004) and to deportation studies (Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2015), respectively.

The empirical material is based on qualitative, ethnographically informed fieldwork with street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980) working within border police units and migration-related detention centres in Sweden.¹ The research was undertaken as part of our respective doctoral studies, which traced the enforcement of deportation policies in Sweden (Lindberg 2022) and street-level officials' discretionary practices and moral dilemmas in enforcing control over illegalized migration (Borrelli et al. 2023; Borrelli 2018). Throughout our research, we found paperwork – forged and authenticated – to be central to the operation of state power to differentiate and control people whose presence had been illegalized. It was also used to resist and subvert state power to exclude, detain and deport (Eule et al. 2019; Horton 2020) – for instance, by destroying papers, borrowing those of others or forging identity documents, illegalized people made themselves illegible to the state (see also Horton 2020). Importantly, however, these practices mimic and appropriate 'official' practices of paperwork production, including forgery done by state actors and bureaucratic misrepresentations by state institutions. Our entry into the field was one of student-observers – although we later, upon completion of our fieldwork, came to engage in various platforms and initiatives by grassroots movements and organizations for migrant rights, wherein we shared and discussed our empirical

insights. We learned from these engagements that instead of seeking to identify fraudulent or faulting practices by state actors, it was more fruitful to critically study the ‘truths’ that state-produced documentation helps to produce and their often drastic and violent implications. Bearing this in mind, we collectively analysed our empirical material, and identified four distinct ways in which paperwork is used by street-level officials to produce a sense of order, to forge facts and to legitimate state actions. The first subsection covering the Swedish deportation regime, below, illustrates the productive role of paperwork in shaping the unequal and often asymmetrical relations between the migration-control apparatus and migrants seeking permission to enter or remain. While the uses of documentation generally have a disempowering effect on people classified as unwanted migrants, and are crucial for officials to produce and exchange information about them, in our second subsection we show how paperwork can be tedious and ‘unreadable’ also for state officials. Yet, uncertain information is nevertheless used as a basis of bureaucratic decision-making. In a third subsection, we show how paperwork is used to obscure the violence inherent to detention and deportation procedures. Our final example demonstrates how documentation justifies discriminatory state practices. Such discrimination acquired a structural dimension through two documentary practices. On one hand, structurally abandoned urban areas designated as ‘vulnerable’ by the police, with a higher share of minority-racialized residents, lead them to return and repeat controls. On the other hand, border police officials rely on so-called hints that come in through calls from the population, reporting allegedly suspicious behaviour. These hints are noted down, thus formalized, and then evaluated according to their relevance – finally enshrining discrimination. These four examples and related arguments are summarized in a conclusion, where we discuss the importance of paperwork in producing legitimacy for the Swedish deportation regime and for the enactment and normalization of state violence more broadly.

The Centrality of Paperwork to Statecraft

We conceive paperwork quite literally as the work done with and upon material artefacts or documents, which ‘are among the primary paraphernalia of modern states [and] are its material culture’ (Navaro-Yashin 2007: 84). Practices of writing, producing statistics and reports, are all ‘a constitutive function of the state’ (Gupta 2012: 144). Paperwork plays a crucial role in state-making, because ‘state-like structures make themselves evident to the persons who inhabit their domains in the form of materialities’ (Navaro-Yashin 2007: 94). Indeed, documents and formularies are among the most common forms in which the state materializes in the everyday life

of (non)citizens (Horton and Heyman 2020). Documents, such as identify cards or passports, are ‘concrete distillations of the law in time and space’ (Horton 2020: 5), while the law itself is changing and ‘living’. Hence, paper trails simultaneously produce and justify the (unequal) distribution of rights and resources (e.g. as some documents are associated with certain resources, see Heyman 2009), and enable bureaucracies to ‘establish . . . a seemingly neutral, objective vantage point that stands “above” or “outside” the social order, watching, preserving, safeguarding’ (Nugent 2010: 683). In consequence, while often associated with lengthy and frustrating administrative procedures (Mathur 2016), tediousness, obscurity (Kafka and Bell 2009) and even stupidity (Graeber 2012), paperwork is a crucial, constitutive element of bureaucratic authority and of its ‘social engineering’ of populations (Bierschenk 2014).

In this context, it is important to emphasize the colonial script upon which state efforts to order, classify and control populations build. For instance, practices of fingerprinting were historically used by Western imperial states to identify, order and control ‘unknown’ imperial subjects, thus rendering them available for exploitation and enslavement (Cole 2009). These techniques were then transferred to the metropolises and used to identify and govern subordinate groups, including minoritized groups, vagabonds and the poor (see also Heyman 2009 on the connection between the looks of a person and the type of document they have, leading to various degrees of control). Contemporary efforts by Western states to govern the unwanted mobility of certain people similarly build on these colonially rooted practices – and, similarly to their historical precedents, their function is to render visible and legible to the state primarily poor, racialized groups in order to control, exclude and expel them from territories and resources (Anderson 2011). Documentation practices thus support state efforts to ‘give unitary and unifying expressions to what are in reality multifaceted and differential historical experience of groups within society’ (Corrigan and Sayer 1985: 4). Through processes of classification and simplification, they render individuals into legal subjects and reduce their position to singular identities as for example ‘unwanted’ or ‘illegalized’. In this way, social inequalities become codified into law and bureaucratic documentation. As Philip Corrigan and Derek Sayer note, paperwork and other ‘state forms are always animated and legitimated by a particular moral ethos’ which supports and normalizes existing social inequalities that are structured ‘along lines of class, gender, ethnicity, age, religion, occupation, locality’ (Corrigan and Sayer 1985: 4). Paperwork, we contend, should therefore be understood as a complementary instrument to direct coercive practices for producing state power and maintaining an unequal social order (Gupta 2012; Sharma 2020). Documents thus ‘uphold control’ (Pigg, Erikson and Inglis 2018:

169): as such, “paper shuffling” is the source of an essential power’ (Latour 1988: 55; see also Vohnsen 2017).

In the past few decades, there has been a steadily growing interest among anthropologists and sociologists in bureaucracy as a form of organized power (Heyman 1995) and a site where societal inequalities are managed (and reproduced and contested). Researchers have demonstrated the central role of paperwork in enforcing and justifying these powers (Gupta 2012; Hull 2012). While far from all the work of bureaucrats follows formalized procedures (Heyman 2009), and while paperwork can be perceived as both constraining and enabling for bureaucrats, it is fundamental to the core function of bureaucracies: to render populations legible and to enforce order. Through bureaucratic simplification (Lipsky 1980) and the reduction of social identities and relations to forms and classification schemes, societal structures and their inequalities are managed and often sustained (Gupta 2012; Handelman and Leyton 1978). In the moment when documents are handed further, their circulation creates an official discourse which reinforces the ‘state effect’ (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2014; Mathur 2016). Documentation practices further serve to depoliticize and obscure the violent nature of state interventions into the lives of those classified as unwanted, deviant or illegal (Canning 2017). While paperwork is daunting and at times despised among bureaucrats (Latour 1988), it is part of what enables street-level bureaucrats to distance themselves from the often violent consequences of their work – especially in the case of detainment and deportation, where the administrative framing of the bureaucratic decisions that underpin these measures stands in contrast to their often life-altering effects. Indeed, as argued by Michael Herzfeld in his study of national bureaucracy in Greece, the standardization and codification of state–(non)citizen encounters enables street-level officials to reject a ‘common humanity’ with their so-called clients and thereby renounce the ethical consequences of their own decisions and actions. This way, paperwork is key not only to the production of difference but also of social indifference (Herzfeld 1992). This arguably has particularly severe implications when coercive state power is mobilized against noncitizens and in particular illegalized persons, who generally hold weak rights claims on the state (Ellermann 2009; Veters, this volume). Moreover, and as we will demonstrate in this chapter, paperwork both shapes and is the result of officials’ perception of their own discretionary power (Pratt 2010) – that is, the possible range of actions or inactions available to them – even though the papers themselves are at times more important to the organization than to the officials putting them to work (see Heyman 2009). As such, paperwork becomes a tool for reifying the power and the ‘truth’ of the state, for its multiple possible interpretations and for its contestation (Eule et al. 2019).

Documenting the Swedish Deportation Regime

The research underpinning this chapter was conducted at a time when the detention and deportation of illegalized and ‘unwanted’ noncitizens re-emerged as a political priority in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe (Rosenberger and Koppes 2018). The Swedish government’s promise to increase the rate and speed of deportations in 2016 was followed by increased investments in the border police and the expansion of migration-related detention (Lindberg 2022). While this did not constitute a radical change from prior policy, the bureaucratic agencies enforcing the detainment and deportation of illegalized persons experienced an intensified politicization of their work (Lindberg and Borrelli 2019). Moreover, and like elsewhere in Europe, policy changes in Sweden also led to a proliferation of liminal legal statuses (see Horton 2020). As temporary legal status became the new norm, the looming threat of future deportation also came to encompass people who obtained legal residency (Philipson Isaac 2022), who subsequently also faced increased uncertainty, surveillance, bureaucratic control and pressure to document and prove their deservingness of continued right of residence.

In this context, officials tasked with enforcing border and migration-related policy measures also faced increased pressure – or, in some officials’ view, moral and political authorization – to use their discretion to step up arrests, detention and deportations. Our research participants encompassed street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980), including border police officers tasked with detecting, detaining and ensuring the expulsion (whether ‘voluntary’ or forced) of persons who received a deportation order, and civil personnel working in migration-related detention centres (administered by the Swedish Migration Agency). Detainment and deportation entail the use of violence, both direct and indirect; they cause significant harm to those affected (Canning 2017), regularly spark controversy among the public and provoke resistance from people threatened by deportation (Ellermann 2009; Gibney 2008). Bureaucrats were thus to balance political demands for more efficient enforcement with an ambivalent public opinion while also seeking to ensure the ‘cooperation’ of the people threatened by deportation and a ‘smooth’ deportation process. Therefore, bureaucratic agents had incentives to downplay the violent nature of these procedures, to ensure their smooth enforcement (Walters 2016) and to make up for their inherent ‘legitimacy deficit’ (Bosworth and Slade 2014). Given the welfare state’s heavy reliance on bureaucratic inscription to both legitimate and question coercive state powers (Lindberg 2020), the Swedish deportation regime emerges as a critical site for examining documentation practices that mediate, enforce and challenge the operation of such powers. In this chapter, for reasons of space,

we study paperwork in a relatively narrow sense: namely, as practices of writing (as opposed to an expansive understanding of bureaucratic inscription that encompasses biometric and other technologies for rendering populations legible; see Horton 2020). In the following four examples, we trace the ambiguous yet profoundly productive role of paperwork in deportation processes.

The Productive Power of Paperwork

Official documents are not just material manifestations but are also productive of the power of state actors, as they are the means through which the latter produce knowledge of populations – which, in turn, becomes a ‘reference for truth or authenticity’ (Navaro-Yashin 2007: 84). That authentication of knowledge goes via paperwork is true both for bureaucratic procedures as such and for (non)citizens standing before the bureaucracy. In the context of migration bureaucracy, paperwork supports bureaucrats in their work to record, classify and simplify information with a view to rendering a given population legible and governable (Gupta 2012; Scott 1998) as (temporarily) legalized or illegalized subjects. In our research, we found that the time that bureaucratic officials engage with the *person* in question (often via a translator) is marginal compared with the time they spend filing information and producing documents for their case file.

Lisa would often sit with the Swedish border police units in their offices after they had ‘closed’ a case (meaning brought the apprehended, illegalized individual to detention), because their work was not done. Office hours extended late, because of the reports that had to be written and filed; paperwork was often referred to as a burden that officials wished to be spared from (Borrelli’s field notes, 2017). As such, the apparently ‘action-rich’ patrolling was always accompanied by a caesura of paperwork, and the time it would take for officers to process documents not only frustrated the officials but was also one of the causes why detained or illegalized people would spend a prolonged time in limbo (Cabot 2012), waiting for documents to arrive, anxious about what they would bring. This waiting time could be used strategically by both bureaucrats and migrants (Eule et al. 2019), as asking for or filing additional documents could buy them time to figure out alternative courses of action; yet prolonged bureaucratic procedures often had a disempowering effect on migrants.

For the person applying for permission to enter or remain, engaging in paperwork is both a necessity and a risky endeavour (see Coutin 2020). During an application procedure, they are asked to provide excessive paperwork to render their identity and claims on the state ‘credible’ (Tuckett 2018). Yet, migrants can also engage in practices of subverting, mimicking

and appropriating documents with a view to enhancing their chances of navigating the often obscure and hostile bureaucracies they face (see Nakueira, this volume). However, documents may also betray the applicant's original intentions: for instance, the identity papers and other documentation that they are required to present can, in the case of an unsuccessful application, later be used to enforce their deportation. A train ticket, necessary to verify payment and the right to travel, can be used by migration authorities to deflect responsibility for a case onto another country (Borrelli's field notes, 2017). Once filed, documents acquire a life of their own: for instance, a caseworker's note in the case file of a person seeking asylum regarding their general behaviour towards bureaucratic authorities (e.g. 'non-cooperative', 'withdrawn' or 'aggressive') can be used as grounds for detention by other actors, such as the border police (Borrelli's field notes, 2017–18). At the same time, migration officials may voice doubts about certain paperwork and its validity. This might be based on internally shared information (again, another set of paperwork) that informs them about recently received passports or other documents which were identified as fraudulent. Consequently, certain nation-state documents will be seen as more or less valid than others (Borrelli's field notes, 2017).

Thus, not only 'formal' signifiers but also the affective traits and personal characteristics of individuals become inscribed into the bureaucratic red tape and might justify coercive bureaucratic action. Through the process of documentation, these ascribed and inscribed characteristics become fixed in time (often to the applicant's disadvantage) because 'papers, especially written and official documentation, bear the symbolism of permanence' (Navaro-Yashin 2007: 84). Moreover, and importantly, bureaucratic officials retain the authority to decide what information is relevant for the case, which as such constitutes a form of symbolic violence (Graeber 2012), and which might be used to enforce decisions that do further violence to the individual (e.g. detention or deportation). While documentation is often perceived as an essential component of 'fair', 'just' and 'rational' bureaucratic decision-making, it simultaneously reflects and reproduces power inequalities between noncitizens seeking the right to enter or remain, and the bureaucratic authorities processing their requests. Not only is this true because rules, procedures and requirements on documentation keep changing; the unpredictability and illegibility of decision-making processes are also used as a way of sustaining power inequalities. For instance, unpredictability is at times used consciously, when authorities seek to prevent applicants from gaining full insight into the grounds of decision-making, which would enable them to adapt their stories and documentation accordingly. This results from the (un)intended yet systematically differential application of law onto different cases (Eule et al. 2019).

The bureaucratic standards to which documents are required to conform also vary significantly depending on the identity of the traveller. For example, Swedish border police officers explained to Lisa that being a young Albanian man will trigger suspicion at the airport, since Albanian nationals are 'known' to want to travel further to the United Kingdom to find work. When entering the country, they need to present not only a hotel booking, sufficient funding, a return ticket and knowledge about the places they want to visit; they will also need the signature of a financial guarantor. Such bureaucratic demands are directed towards 'suspicious' travellers, who are compelled to provide excessive documentation to 'prove' the authenticity of their identity and intentions. These demands create substantial paperwork hurdles and can be instrumentalized by state actors as a deterrence strategy (see Grinberg 2018). This example also demonstrates how paperwork hurdles target particular groups whose mobility is considered suspicious by default (Borrelli, Lindberg, and Wyss 2021). Here, nationality, class and race, as well as gender, intersect and create the 'need' for officers to control, whereas in other cases there is less action taken and less documentation required (see also Heyman 2009).

State authorities also hold discretionary power to decide which documents can be produced and mobilized under different circumstances. This can be used strategically to ensure the docility of those facing deportation. For instance, during a formal meeting between a border police case officer, a detained person and his lawyer, the border police revealed that documents had been produced which allowed for a detained man's deportation. The man was surprised and shocked that this could be done without his knowledge or signature (Borrelli's field notes, 2017), while the border police now hoped that he would accept the deportation order. This 'surprise' mobilization of documentation pushed the deportable man to react – to accept the deportation order or to enter into the bureaucratic game by producing further paperwork that attested his inability to travel (e.g. through medical certificates), or by appealing the deportation on new grounds. The deportation process here becomes a race for the right paperwork.

Paperwork practices thus both create assertiveness of the bureaucratic apparatus and uncertainty for those standing before it. Indeed, documentation practices are profoundly productive, as Talal Asad has pointed out, 'because only documents can confirm the required facts needed [to access e.g. legal residency or citizenship]' (2004: 284). More paperwork is required to eliminate the suspicion that is inherent to documentation procedures; more institutional structures, regulations and bureaucratic agents are required to enforce the procedures; and so on. At the same time, bureaucratically created paperwork accrues higher trustworthiness than documents produced or handed over by those facing detention or deportation.

Paperwork is thus profoundly productive of a state power that operates through an ‘unstable interplay of truth and illusion’ (Taussig 1984: 492). Contrary to the promises of guaranteeing equality before the law and predictability in legal procedures, excessive documentation practices often aggravate the uncertainty for people making rights claims on the state, and for noncitizens in particular (Cabot 2012; Eule et al. 2019). However, as we will explore in the next section, paperwork can also appear as obscure to the bureaucrats producing it.

The Illegibility of Documentation Practices

As Josiah Heyman contends, bureaucracies order and routinize what he calls ‘thoughtwork’; as a result, bureaucrats are faced with the conundrum of being compelled to ‘think for themselves because of the nature of their tasks, yet they must be controlled as thinkers in order to ensure the regular production of control duties’ (Heyman 1995: 263). At times, however, the formalized order materialized in documents and protocols is also illegible to the bureaucrats putting it to work. To illustrate this, the next example follows border police officers at a police station in a large city in Sweden.

Lisa attends one of the regular meetings of the Swedish border police unit that she has been following during her fieldwork. It takes place at the ‘conference hub’, where the border police reconvene to exchange information on recent events – including (statistical) information on how many people have been apprehended by the mobile unit roaming the streets or at the airport, how many people were detained and who are to be deported. Participants also discuss more general issues, such as collaboration with other state agencies and internal communication. Usually, the head or deputy head of the police station guides these meetings – in which, ideally, all the heads of the subunits participate (there are mobile units, a unit for investigation, one for case processing and one for manhunts, as well as someone in charge of strategic planning and communication). At this meeting, the officers bring up a collaboration meeting that took place in the autumn, in which all agencies participated. They then return to a discussion on workplace inspections and how these should be conducted. The inspections can be planned or randomly conducted by the mobile units, who search workplaces where people are suspected to work unauthorized; other units will then take over the rest of the investigation. Yet, there is little communication between the units and, besides a general procedure on how to record cases, no clear written guidelines exist.

Sven,² responsible for strategic planning and analysis, argues, ‘Each group works on their own island. They are all a little bit sovereign, but that does not work’. Regarding the manhunt and mobile units, he adds, ‘They have

the same orders and assignments and should inform each other'. Two other officers agree: 'It is weird, actually, because they have the same assignment'. Martha (the head of investigation) mentions: 'They [mobile units] wonder what we write down, but we just take in what they hand over to us. The content is decided by [the mobile unit]. The people who do the investigative interviews are in the mobile unit [right after they apprehend an undocumented or deportable person]'. Martha explains that mobile units have at times been irritated with the work of the investigation unit and the outcome of its casework, while the latter was irritated with the mobile units since they did not give those working in the investigation unit enough documentation or the documentation was of bad quality, hindering them in doing their job in a satisfactory manner. Martha suggests deepening the competences of the mobile units and developing their skills regarding criminal investigations (*brottsutredning*). Her idea is that competence training will give mobile units a better understanding of what will hold (apply and be valid) in court and what will not, in order to write better reports. 'We do not see more than them; they often send us bad quality pictures, incomplete descriptions of situations or interrogations, and so on'.

Martha criticizes the information they receive from mobile police units besides the recorded data on the person found in their databases, including notes from the interview with the person apprehended and the short reports about what happened. She finds this material bundle of paperwork insufficient for her unit to be able to keep working with the cases.

The group generally agrees that the mobile units need to do their job more thoroughly and understand that their colleagues, the investigators who will follow up on the cases further, depend on their information. This means more paperwork, something which no one in the mobile unit is particularly fond of. Lisa's observation of this issue is later confirmed – especially since the technology is slow and computer programs not up to date. After some more discussion, Sven concludes: 'There is not a single sheet of paper telling us how we should behave. We work a lot on ad hoc basis, fast, quick, *zack-zack*. We do not go back and ask what we have learned from our previous jobs and experiences, but just start with a new task' (Borrelli's field notes, 2017).

In the meeting, we hear how bureaucrats demand better organization of the paperwork, especially in situations where their work depends on each other. The field note illustrates how the state, which dictates the production of documents (Hull 2012), is itself in need of documents to produce a sense of order in its operations. In the case described, the concern of the police was not with the documentation of illegalized persons (or lack thereof) but rather the lack of coherent documentation and guidance for their own work, which rendered the quality and standards of their own operation

internally contested and the paperwork they produced unreadable to other police units. Despite an abundance of different forms to fill out (or to be filled out by those facing detention or deportation), there was, as Sven acknowledged, little formal guidance on how they should do their job. The officers contended that the documents they currently produced were not of much help; rather, documentation had become an end in itself (see also Pigg, Erikson and Inglis 2018). Indeed, the abundant paperwork that *was* produced was perceived as unsatisfactory, if not unreadable; meanwhile, there was an absence of documentation where the officials needed it. Yet, regardless of its quality, the paperwork was used as a basis for bureaucratic action. Hence, the lack of formalized guidelines, internal frictions and the uneven quality of bureaucratic paperwork does not undermine the efficacy of the state's operation. Even in cases where the officers in the field note struggled to follow the paper trails and make sense of their colleagues' documentation practices, they acted on the inadequate or incomplete information and carried out their decisions to detain and deport apprehended migrants. The deportation regime thus remains 'functional', regardless of its perceived internal dysfunctions.

The field note further demonstrates how paperwork serves to create an 'illusion of explanatory depth' (Rozenblit and Keil 2002; see also Pigg, Erikson and Inglis 2018) and an 'image of proof, stability and durability' (Navaro-Yashin 2007: 84), which allows bureaucratic agents to retain a sense of bureaucratic order even in situations where documentation practices make little sense to them. Just as argued in the previous section, the documents create their own 'truths', which become legitimated through their circulation among different bureaucratic agents and units and are eventually acted upon (see Navaro-Yashin 2007; Nugent 2010; Trouillot 2001). The literal paperwork – the labour put into the production of documents – thus allows officials to maintain a performance of rational power even in situations where there is, as the police officer Sven concluded, no formalized basis for this power (Hull 2012). This internal perspective on official uses of paperwork demonstrates its powerful function in bureaucratic work. The internal illegibility of paperwork experienced did not prevent officers from using it as a basis for decisions. Intelligible or not, the power of paperwork seems to lie in its mere existence, which is considered enough to inform, shape and legitimize actions.

Paperwork as Legitimation Work

In some cases, more paperwork is required to lend legitimacy to a certain state action. Such is the case for migration-related detention, which entails the forced deprivation of liberty of people for reasons related to

their migrant status. Prior research has shown that while it is 'administrative' in nature, detention is often experienced as punitive by detained persons (Bosworth and Slade 2014). The Swedish detention regime, which is designed to ensure the 'humane and dignified return' (DeBono, Ronnqvist and Magnusson 2015) of deportable persons, is consciously designed to downplay the violent and punitive elements of confinement (Canning 2019; Lindberg 2022). Paperwork here served a crucial function in mediating and covering up for the violent nature of confinement.

In the detention centre where Annika conducted fieldwork in 2017, staff liked to see themselves not as anything akin to guards or prison officers but rather as social workers performing a caretaking job (see also Canning 2019). The role of staff was routinized and monotonous: detention officials had little or nothing to do with the detained persons' immigration cases and spent most of their work time tending to administrative or logistical tasks, which included registering new arrivals and deregistering those who were deported or released, conducting inspection rounds, lending personal-care items (such as scissors and shaving razors) to detained persons, serving meals and communicating administrative decisions. Importantly, all these actions required them to fill out sheets documenting that they had performed the task. Filling out forms and reports is 'the prototype of bureaucratic writing', as Akhil Gupta (2012: 144) notes. It makes bureaucratic work traceable, evidencing that 'something' has been done irrespective of what exactly has been done and of the effects of the action taken.

Of particular importance was providing records of every coercive action taken against a detained person, including confiscation of personal belongings, body visitation, visitation of rooms and belongings, and decisions on solitary confinement. For every such decision, two copies of each document were printed and the person concerned was asked to sign that they had understood why this action had been taken against them. According to staff, this was done to ensure correct procedures and to justify practices that often appeared highly invasive to those detained. Greta, a senior official, explained to Annika that practically all coercive actions could be justified with reference to a 'threat to order and security': 'It's a standard formulation we use here, anything can be excused with this reason' (Lindberg's field notes, 2017). Hannah, another detention official, said the paperwork was important in order to ensure that detained persons knew their legal rights were respected, even if they often experienced the detainment as such as unjust.

Frequently, detained individuals would refuse to sign the forms, but this did not change the outcome as the decision was still enforced. Among those detained, this only reinforced the impression that paperwork was a symbolic act that protected the system but did little to guarantee their

rights (Lindberg's field notes, 2018). Mary Bosworth (2016) has made a similar observation regarding administrative power in the UK detention system, arguing that paperwork ultimately serves to protect staff rather than the people detained. Her interlocutors – much like the Swedish detention officials – would deplore the significant amount of paperwork they had to fill out, and told her, 'It's all just an exercise in cover-your-arse', or, 'We need to be able to show we did all the right procedures . . . so if there is a problem, they can see it wasn't our fault'. Hence, paperwork lends an air of legitimacy to tasks that are contested, discomforting and sometimes perceived as questionable even among the bureaucrats themselves.

Aside from its legitimating function, paperwork was also used to obscure the violence inherent in detention and to contain its harmful effects on the persons detained (Canning 2017). We turn to another example from our empirical material on suicide screenings. These were mandatory for detention staff to fill out for each detained person upon arrival. In order to assess whether the person in question was suicidal, staff had to follow a detailed protocol which included questions such as 'Have you ever attempted suicide? Have you ever been treated for depression?' and, 'Have you ever felt like life is not worth living?' Staff found it awkward and highly intrusive to ask these questions. The protocol, as Annika was told, had been developed by a detention official who had experienced a detained man dying by suicide during her work shift. It was, on the one hand, intended to prevent similar acts of self-harm, and any suspicious answer to the stated questions could result in the detained person in question being taken into solitary confinement under observation or moved to a psychiatric clinic. On the other hand, the protocol was intended to prevent detention officials – and the detention institution as such – from becoming liable in case a detained person died by suicide. In other words, it enabled officials to (literally) write themselves free of responsibility for some of the direct, violent consequences of detention (see Lindberg 2022). Nicolas Fischer (2015) has similarly pointed out how detention is itself often the cause of the anxiety and depression that provoke self-mutilation among detained persons in the first place, noting that the rigorous suicide programmes put in place to prevent detained persons from committing acts of self-harm enable the detention institution to present itself as a humanitarian rather than violent realm. What is more, the presumed protective piece of paperwork justifies expansive coercive powers, such as placing a person in solitary confinement based on speculations about their mental conditions.

Paperwork performances thus serve important legitimization functions and constitute a way for bureaucratic officials to deflect responsibility for violent state interventions and their harmful effects. In this case, the people detained were rarely aware of the practical or legal implications of putting

their signatures on a visitation order (here, the implications were practically none) or their accounts of their own mental condition (in these cases, the consequences were considerable); meanwhile, the forms themselves gave bureaucrats expanded powers. The paper trails could, however, also be used to hold the institution accountable: some detention officials explicitly said they wished for more detained persons to legally contest their decisions so that the bureaucrats would ‘know whether they were doing things right’ (Lindberg’s field notes, 2017). However, the belief in paperwork showing the way to ‘right and wrongs’ in officials’ work presupposes that the information and the formalized procedures that generate them are free from bias, discrimination and other ‘wrongs’. This is, as we demonstrate in the next section, often not the case.

Paperwork Squared: The Role of Documentation in Legitimizing and Maintaining Structural Discrimination

When Lisa joins the police on a day shift in 2017, she reads through a document listing the different ‘hints’ the police have received. ‘Hints’ are defined as information on suspicious events or persons shared with the border police by the public (e.g. private individuals or businesses such as hotels) or by other state agencies such as the tax office. All received hints are translated into forms. Based on these forms, officers plan to conduct raids or inspections in sites where illegalized persons are suspected to reside or work. Hints are generally sorted into categories, with ‘B’ being the ‘mostly reliable’ (reliability depends on the source of information and how detailed the description is, as well as whether the person giving the hint has shared their contact details). The description is followed by sections which mention the type of crime; for instance, involvement in narcotics, burglary or being an illegalized migrant who resides and works somewhere. It is followed by a table with three sections: notes, circumstances (*omständigheter*) and evaluation (1–4). In the form Lisa looks at, nothing is written in the first section, while the second one shows the source of the information (here external) – saying ‘Afghan man [name redacted] smokes cannabis with friends’. The evaluation mentions that the source is not reliable, but that the relevance is evaluated as quite high. An attached appendix contains documents with further information on the man, including his dossier/case number and abbreviations (*BR*, *MR*, *snavteri*)³ about his criminal record.

The mobile unit within the Swedish border police with which Lisa conducted research in 2017 had made it its major task to conduct workplace controls. It based its selection of control sites either on its own ‘intuition’ (which essentially meant it would visit low-paid workplaces such as hair salons, car workshops, small grocery stores and fast-food restaurants, espe-

cially those frequented and run by people with a ‘non-Swedish background’) or on the kind of hints outlined earlier. Lisa was told that hints from hotel staff usually pertained to suspected sex work, which the mobile unit planned to collect in a database in order to make better use of them; the same went for restaurant owners and tips from private individuals, who were sorted into more or less reliable sources. This way, the police came to mentally map the city and its day- and nightlife – and any ‘suspected’ sites, persons or activities – and noted where people had been apprehended.

Through hints and calls from third parties – thus, people who are outsiders with respect to the bureaucratic system – structural discrimination is supported and upheld as broader stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes become translated into calls to the border police, which sorts them according to relevance. As such, anyone can denounce anyone, yet given that hints were given to the border police, they involved assumed ‘foreign nationals’, often profiled by their assumed nationality and potentially becoming ‘suspicious’ due to their skin tone. Hints are translated into documents, which now become clues on which (non)action is taken (see also Heyman 2009). This translation process into documents then allows for discrimination and legitimizes controls which might have been purely based on racial stereotypes in the first place.

During a shift with the mobile unit, the team plans to follow up on some hints it had received about two to three ‘dark-skinned women’ (the term was written by the police as a direct translation of the ‘hint’ they had received from a private individual) who had raised ‘suspicion’ because of where they were located in the city. The police suspect they run a brothel in an industrial area, because for them it seems unlikely that someone would live there. It remains unclear to what extent their skin colour plays a role in their decision to follow up on this hint, until one officer says, ‘They are surely Nigerians.’ According to the officers, sex work is often done by women from the former Soviet Union and Nigeria (as much as Nigerian men were ‘known’ for selling drugs). It is discussed when officers should check this address as it will take time, and it is decided they might check after lunch. Some other hints are received but discarded because of their vagueness (being about a person selling coffee on the streets) and the address being far out of town. (Borrelli’s field notes, 2017)

As such, suspicion is an essential part of police work (O’Brien-Olinger 2016) – and of migration bureaucracies (Borrelli, Lindberg and Wyss 2021) – yet supported and legitimized through paperwork and documentation. The field note illustrates the process whereby suspicion amongst the public informs the police, and the police, in turn, translate it into documentation that is mobilized as ‘evidence’ for their own suspicions. Once translated into official forms and documentation, this ‘evidence’ becomes

the grounds upon which police decide where and whom to control – and whom not to control (indeed, decisions on ‘when and on whom not to act’ form an equally important part of police and other forms of bureaucratic power; see Heyman 2000). The reports based on public ‘hints’ thus become technologies of power – both through their content and material form, and through the powers they extend to the police (Pigg, Erikson and Inglis 2018). Unsurprisingly, this means that popular attitudes and ‘moral panics’ (Cohen 2001) over illegalized migration inform the assumption of whose presence and behaviour in the city is problematized, if not criminalized, and who goes unnoticed. (For an account of the police’s moral and emotional reactions to tasks that involve criminalizing people who are simultaneously potential victims of crime, see Borrelli 2020.) These suspicions, in turn, come to inform bureaucratic practice and co-produce spaces of criminalization; illegalization; and, ultimately, potential arrest and deportation.

The field note further shows how these suspicions are based on gendered and racial tropes. In this example, it was the skin colour, gender and ‘suspicious’ location of the persons in question that raised mistrust among members of the public, which was in turn confirmed by the police officers. Since the police officers were acting on pre-existing documentation, they were further able to denounce criticism for racial profiling; they were not the ones initiating the searches but were simply following up on existing ‘evidence’ (see Parmar 2018, 2019). The police whom Lisa followed recalled having been criticized by shopkeepers in certain areas of the city, who felt discriminated against as their shops were regularly targeted by police controls due to their location and ‘multicultural’ clientele. During one patrol, one shopkeeper suggested the police officers should conduct workplace controls in larger supermarkets and other areas instead. Yet, the officers insisted they would not find ‘those we are looking for’ anywhere else besides the area where the shopkeeper worked (Borrelli’s field notes, 2017).

The shopkeeper’s criticism highlights the racial discrimination embedded in the police’s gaze, and the officer’s response suggests that their mapping of the city and its people into ordinary/deviant, legal/illegal also takes place irrespective of the ‘hints’ from the public. The interaction further shows how the police, through their reporting and controls, produce notions of ‘deviant’ and suspicious parts of the city as well as the dis-belonging of inhabitants and commercial actors in these neighbourhoods: as the shopkeeper pointed out, their racialized bodies are rendered suspect not only of criminal activity but also of being ‘foreign’, illegalized migrants. The field note thus also demonstrates how public suspicion against illegalized migration, which as such relies on racialized (and gendered, and class) stereotypes, becomes codified through documentation and distributed among state agencies. This distribution of information, in turn, allows for a collective sense-making

throughout the administrative body (see Hull 2012) and a reproduction of racialized suspicion codified into ‘objective’ knowledge through paperwork (see also Pratt 2010).

Conclusion

Sarah Bronwen Horton speaks of ‘bureaucratic inscription’ as ‘social and material dynamics through which migrants are inscribed into official bureaucratic systems at various scales of government’ (Horton 2020: 3). We have taken up this interpretation of inscription and expanded on it by studying how documentation works upon and affects migrants’ and bureaucrats’ subjectivities alike – and how contradictions inherent to policies, but also forms of harm, are inscribed in such documentary practices. In our chapter, we have traced the role of paperwork in producing and legitimating bureaucratic power and enabling coercive state action within the field of migration control in Sweden. Drawing on our ethnographic research with various bureaucratic actors involved in the deportation process, we identified four distinct functions and uses of paperwork. First, and in line with previous research (see, e.g. Scott 1998), we detailed how documentation practices are fundamental to rendering people legible and classifiable as (il) legal (or liminally legal, see Horton 2020). At the same time, bureaucratic paperwork is supposed to render the practices and decisions of the state legible and accountable to the public; yet we found that documents are unreliable artefacts, often taking on a life of their own in the bureaucratic process as bureaucrats hold the power to decide how they are interpreted and when and how they are acted upon. Hence, we showed how documentation practices render state power obscure and, indeed, ‘illegible’ for migrants (Das 2004; see also Eule et al. 2019).

In our second example, we demonstrated how documentation practices may also appear as unreadable for bureaucratic officials – yet the documents produced, no matter their quality, nevertheless constitute the basis for decisions that have life-altering consequences for migrants. At the same time, paperwork does important legitimation work for bureaucrats, allowing them to show that they have done *something*, and in some cases enables them to (literally) write off personal responsibility for bureaucratic actions that are intrusive or violent.

Using examples from Swedish migration-related detention, the third example showed how documentation practices protected staff from being ascribed responsibility for the harms that incarceration inflicts on detained persons.

Finally, we used examples from border police work to show how documentation practices render suspicion – on the part of the police, but also

emanating from the public – into ‘evidence’ against supposed criminalized and illegalized people. The ‘evidence’ that police officers would act upon drew on and reproduced racialized and gendered borders of the city and contributed to the symbolic, if not juridical, criminalization and illegalization of people’s presence in certain places. This example also underscored how paperwork is not an isolated task of bureaucracy but co-produced by non-state actors, who partake in the ‘internal bordering’ (and ordering) of society (see Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2018). These bordering practices not only render certain people, behaviours and areas as suspicious, deviant and illegal but simultaneously produce a framework for the trustworthy and normative citizen, who is distinguished by the privilege of ‘[b]eing the beneficiary of non-action’ (Heyman 2009) and non-recording by state authorities. Hence, bureaucracy does not act upon but co-produces and enforces an unequal social order along the lines of race, class, nationality; (il)legality is but one of several classification systems whereby this order is enforced.

To conclude, our examples all highlight the crucial yet often overlooked role of paperwork in the enforcement and legitimation of coercive state powers such as the policing; detainment; and, ultimately, deportation of illegalized persons. For anthropologists and other scholars studying bureaucracy, notably those concerned with coercive state functions, it is of vital importance to understand documentation practices as an essential – albeit relatively obscured – part of what puts this state violence to work. Importantly, while we have given examples of how paperwork can take on a life of its own, this does not cancel out individual bureaucrats’ agency or responsibility for their practices. On the contrary, paper trails can expand the range of actions and inactions made available to bureaucrats.

We thus concur with the calls by researchers on bureaucracy to not accept the ‘truths’ produced through bureaucratic paperwork (Graeber 2012). Despite – or also because of – its corrective systems, bureaucratic classification ultimately remains reductive if not ‘incompatible with humane social life’ (Handelman and Leyton 1978, 136). Therefore, rather than forging a closed system, bureaucratic practice is made up of a multitude of interpretive actions; therein lies its power, but also the possibility for contestation. Indeed, our findings underscore how documents, rather than signalling a form of ‘permanence’ (Navaro-Yashin 2007), are continuously reinterpreted, reconfigured and acted upon. Our chapter has shown how this open-endedness of paperwork can facilitate unpredictable and arbitrary uses of power within states’ deportation regimes.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (under project 153225) and the National Center of Competence in Research nccr – on the move (51NF40-182897).

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Notes

1. Lisa Borrelli conducted fieldwork for four months in one of seven Swedish border police units, supported by fifteen semi-structured interviews and four field visits at a second border police unit with seven semi-structured interviews (2016–17). Annika Lindberg conducted ethnographic fieldwork with detention officials inside one of Sweden's six migration-related centres (one month, 2017) and additional field visits to three detention centres, including thirty semi-structured interviews (2017).
2. All names of interlocutors are pseudonyms.
3. Short for *brottsregister* (criminal record), *misstankeregister* (directory of suspected criminal activity) and shoplifting.

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