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Kalir, B.

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Barak Kalir
University of Amsterdam

Repressive Compassion: Deportation Caseworkers Furnishing an Emotional Comfort Zone in Encounters with Illegalized Migrants

The treatment of illegalized migrants in Western liberal states has been often characterized by a duality of compassion and repression. Within this dyad, repression is said to be applied with the right hand of the state by the police, border control, refugee status determination units, etc., and compassion with its left hand by social workers, medical staff, as well as civil society organizations and humanitarian agencies. Drawing on the toil of deportation caseworkers in the Netherlands, this article argues that compassion is prevalent not only among those who show benevolence and support illegalized migrants but also among many who work on the repressive side of the divide. However, expressions of compassion by deportation caseworkers do not seem to mitigate an otherwise repressive bureaucratic work. Instead, compassion often helps caseworkers to furnish a comfort zone in which emotions can be discharged and from which caseworkers neutralize potentially disruptive affective dynamics by experiencing them as intrinsic to the law they implement. Compassion not only fails to produce vertical commonality with deportable migrants in vulnerable positions; it also willfully fosters the self-image of civil servants as humane and sensitive actors as they effectively implement controversial state policies. [deportation, illegal immigration, compassion, repression, the Netherlands]

In February 2015 I interviewed the Dutch Secretary of State for Justice and Security, Fred Teeven, a prominent member of the right-wing *Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie* (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy). I asked Teeven about the difficulties he identified in the deportation of “illegal migrants” and “rejected asylum seekers”—two categories that he recurrently referred to. After mentioning legal and diplomatic hurdles, as well as his aversion to Dutch activist groups fighting deportation policies, he asserted: “Let’s be very clear about one thing, this [deportation] is one of the most emotional areas of government policy, and civil servants naturally feel it.”¹ Clarifying what he meant by “emotional,” he further explained:

Migrants and asylum seekers invest and risk a lot when in search of asylum or a better economic future. I understand that there is resistance when those who fail to get a status have to go back and that they protest, but that doesn’t mean I cannot execute it [deportation].

Studying caseworkers at the *Dienst Terugkeer & Vertrek* (Dutch Repatriation and Departure Service, hereafter DT&V), I was indeed struck by the frequent appearance and mentioning of emotions as an integral part of their work. Caseworkers often characterized their job

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as “humane work” that ensured fair and dignified procedures to “clients”—a formal label given to illegalized migrants at the DT&V. This label underscored the process by which state bureaucracies categorize and treat certain people as “illegal.” It included so-called failed asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, visa over-stayers, and migrants with a criminal record.

Caseworkers’ contact with clients, however, was clearly the source of strenuous emotional tension, as vented by one caseworker during an interview:

It is not easy . . . especially when you get to know someone, because then it’s no longer a dossier or a number, but Jan or Muhammad. Then, I find it difficult, for example, when I know that back in their own country they would not receive medical assistance. You remain as nice as you can, but you are telling them horrible things.

The challenge for caseworkers was not simply to “stay as nice as you can” but also to diffuse emotionally challenging situations that could otherwise affect them and lead to disruptive cognitive dissonance when performing the job. The administration of restrictive migration policies, specifically the detention and deportation of illegalized migrants, is a field in which “bureaucrats are challenged as ethical beings, perhaps more so than in other bureaucratic organizations” (Eggebø 2012, 302). Increasingly, illegalized migrants, together with other “activist citizens” (Isin 2009), have been contesting oppressive migration policies and sensitizing greater publics to their horrendous consequences in the lives of vulnerable individuals and entire families (Griffiths 2013; Hinton 2015; Kalir 2012; Krause 2008; Nyers 2003). Consequently, “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 1980) in this ethically contested field are forced to contemplate the overall legitimacy of their work and to reflect on the personal motivations and moral justifications that propel them to enforce deportation policies on the ground. In Norway, for example, the work of the Directorate of Immigration has been publicly portrayed as “a particularly evil form of heartlessness,” leading its general director to defend civil servants, proclaiming in an open letter that they are “ordinary people—parents and grandparents, and members of different political parties” (Fuglerud 2004, 30–31).

In the burgeoning field of the “anthropology of removal” (Peutz 2006) and the study of “deportation regimes” (Coutin 2015; De Genova and Peutz 2010), much attention has been paid to limiting deportable migrants’ access to basic state provisions (Ellermann 2009; Kalir 2017a) or using the criminal justice system to punish them (Barker 2017; Stumpf 2006). Much less attention has been given to the manners by which state officials handle clients’ despair, accusations, and anguish, and how these emotional responses might push officials to cast doubts about the fairness and legitimacy of deportation policies or, at the very minimum, about the suitability of certain bureaucratic procedures they are forced to follow. Caseworkers must, therefore, learn how to tame potentially unsettling affective dynamics, and the DT&V, as an organization, must “develop emotional regimes that make perfect sense to members, [although they may] appear paradoxical and even morally outrageous to non-members” (Wettergren 2010, 400). Face-to-face interactions should thus be seen as affective dynamics in which both caseworkers and clients can experience spontaneous and sudden emotions. The challenge is that in studying affect “we need ethnographic accounts that are specific about how humans’ perceptions are social all the way down” (Martin 2013, 157).

This article zooms in to examine the practices, dilemmas, and emotional struggles of Dutch caseworkers who exercise discretionary power in executing the deportation of illegalized migrants. As Fassin (2005) has argued, the treatment of illegalized migrants in

Western liberal states is characterized by a duality between “compassion and repression.” Within this dyad, repression is applied with the right hand of the state (status determination officials, deportation caseworkers, police agents, etc.) while compassion is offered with its left hand (medical doctors, psychologists, social workers, and so on, and civil society organizations and humanitarian agencies) (Cabot 2014; Kalir 2017b; Kalir and Wissink 2016; Ticktin 2006). Drawing on the toil of deportation caseworkers, I argue that compassion is prevalent not only among those who show benevolence and support illegalized migrants but also among many who work on the repressive side of the divide. However, as I show, expressions of compassion by caseworkers did not mitigate an otherwise repressive bureaucratic work. Instead, compassion often helped caseworkers to furnish an *emotional comfort zone*, a safe space not only for the clients to discharge their emotions but also for the caseworkers to position themselves as empathic beings. An emotional comfort zone then became a point from which caseworkers can deflect potentially disruptive affects of the law and move ahead with effectively implementing controversial state policies.

I proceed with a note on methodology, followed by a discussion around the role of emotions in the implementation of controversial state policies. I then ethnographically explore the different ways in which caseworkers—by showing compassion toward their clients—justify their work, cultivate a sense of righteousness regarding their role, and shore up legitimacy for their actions.

Studying State Deportation Bureaucracies

Starting with its inauguration in 2007, the DT&V employs around five hundred officials, mostly recruited from other units and ministries involved in the migration field.² Caseworkers are thus familiar with the immigration arena, but they also receive professional training from the Ministry of Security and Justice for their specific job at the DT&V. According to DT&V statistics, in recent years around ten thousand people have been “repatriated” from the Netherlands each year.³ Caseworkers are responsible for a caseload of clients whose deportations they must facilitate, either by convincing clients to “voluntarily return” or by arranging with the *Marechaussee* (military police) for their forced removal. Clients are illegalized migrants who have been issued a formal order to leave the country by the Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst (Immigration and Naturalization Service, hereafter IND) after their legal attempts to acquire a status in the Netherlands were rejected. Depending on their case, clients are placed in detention centers, other state designated facilities (for instance, for entire families), or allowed to live in their private homes on the basis of attending periodical meetings with DT&V caseworkers.

In principle, caseworkers prefer voluntary to forced return as specified in the DT&V mission statement: “Our goal is to have foreign nationals repatriated voluntarily in as many cases as possible.”⁴ They offer clients assistance with the issuing of necessary identity documents, purchasing airline tickets, arranging for medical assistance, and even providing a monetary bonus at departure. Depending on each situation, caseworkers meet clients in different locations: asylum centers, limited free movement locations, municipality buildings, or detention centers. Client meetings are held every two to three weeks, and can last anywhere from twenty minutes to two hours depending on the complexity of the case and client’s collaboration. After assessing the outcome of each meeting, caseworkers reevaluate and decide the next steps.

Notably, DT&V caseworkers are not part of the police, and they do not wear uniforms. This plays an important part in their interaction with clients. It has also compounded in me a sense of informality and familiarity with many of them. A rather equal gender balance among the DT&V personnel neutralized the fact that I was a male researcher, and it appeared

that we shared a certain age, middle-class background, white skin color, and at times also a critical take on the contemporary difficulties of states to manage flows of migrants and refugees. My discussions with caseworkers often became pleasantly more personal and surprisingly similar to talks I had with some of my Dutch friends and colleagues at the university; in fact, some caseworkers had studied social science in the university where I teach. The commonalities I shared with them and their disarming openness buttressed a puzzling question: How can caseworkers execute controversial deportation policies that evidently cause much harm to vulnerable people without apparently encountering ethical setbacks? In the next section, I suggest that they do so through carefully managing emotions while executing ethically charged bureaucratic tasks.

Efficiency Versus Emotions in State Bureaucracy

Like many other state projects, deportation can suffer from an implementation “deficit” or “surplus” (Kalir 2010, 2014), largely depending on the practices of those who staff the bureaucratic system that manages its operation (Bosworth 2014; Hall 2010; Kalir and van Schendel 2017). The case of deportation is particularly interesting because governments often deliberately delegate extensive power and discretion to the executive branch in order to pursue levels of implementation that are impossible to draft as formal regulations. This is because they are either in violation of international law and human rights conventions (Fekete 2005; Kanstroom 2007) or are plainly too racist and violent to be publicly announced (Amnesty International 2008; Fekete 2011).

For Weber (1946), the essence of modern bureaucracy is its reliance on formal rationality and professionalism, to the point that “the honor of the civil servant is vested in his ability to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities, exactly as if the order agreed with his own conviction” (95). Herein, emotions are seen as interfering with the cool-headed execution of policies, as “bureaucrats are not supposed to think or feel. If they did, their job, whether it is the administration of mass murder program or one to help the poor, would not get done” (Feingold 1980, 50). Civil servants are often portrayed as cogs in the machine, evading reflections over the ethics involved in their actions. Under challenging ethical circumstances, it is “the ability to banish the Other’s face from their consciousness” (Waxman 2009, 100) that can transform bureaucrats into effective implementers. According to Bauman (1991, 102), the callous efficiency of modern bureaucracy is not only predicated on the “dehumanization of the objects of bureaucratic operation” but also on a distancing mechanism that eliminates direct contact between Others and the bureaucrats who administer their situation. That distance allows emotions among bureaucrats to be structurally managed.

It appears that in the aftermath of World War II, the treatment of undesired Others by state authorities has undergone a process of individualization and personalization in order to avoid effacement and deter forms of distancing. Thus, for example, Article 4 of Protocol No. 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights prohibits the “collective expulsion of aliens” and requires at any rate “a reasonable and objective examination of the particular case of each individual alien.” In addition to paperwork, in the case of illegalized migrants, for example, the sanctioning of detention and deportation necessitates meaningful face-to-face interaction with them. Consequently, the treatment of clients is fraught with emotions that are potentially disruptive for the smooth implementation of deportation policies (Graham 2003; Eggebo 2012; Khosravi 2009).

The Dutch treatment of illegalized migrants has been a polemic issue on the public and political agenda in recent years (Nicholls 2016; Woude, v. d. Leun, and Nijland 2014).

For example, with respect to the conditions in detention centers, the Dutch Ombudsman adamantly stated:

I think this situation is serious and worrisome, and I ask whether it is decent—whether it is humane—to lock up those yet to be convicted in this way. I am not alone in raising this critical question. Human rights organizations [. . .] have regularly criticized the way in which the Netherlands imprisons foreigners without residence rights.⁵

The implementation of contemporary detention-deportation policies can be thought of as a form of “legal violence” (Menjívar and Abrego 2012) that inflicts much unnecessary suffering on vulnerable subjects whose only violation of the law is administrative in character: the failure to secure an orderly registration with the state authorities. Given the public hostile perception of their work, some DT&V caseworkers avoided talking about their job at social gatherings. As one caseworker put it: “People don’t get why we do this. They think we are evil or something.” Another caseworker remarked, “You are seen as just being wrong, a Nazi, everything that has anything to do with expulsion” (quoted in Prins 2015, 30).

Being situated at the implementation forefront of a tense field that is ethically controversial, state officials are forced to deal with the emotions that emerge in their daily work. Rather than acting as cool-headed cogs, DT&V caseworkers struggled to balance their commitment to the job and their own ethical considerations. As one veteran caseworker told me, she was torn in cases when clients were deported but she believed they should have been granted a legal status:

I sometimes tell my boss: “Don’t tell me that I’m not right, listen to me scream and shout, and then after two minutes tell me that there is no other way.” Then I say: “Okay, I’ll do it.” If you can’t do it, then this job is not for you. [. . .] You get accustomed to it. You become blind to the fact that it’s emotionally difficult.

Studies on emotionally charged interactions between bureaucrats and socio-legally marginalized Others (Fassin 2005; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Hall 2010; Ticktin 2006) often emphasize the acute need for Others to evoke compassion among state agents in order to receive favorable treatment and an accommodating interpretation of laws. As Ticktin (2006) puts it: “Because the law is so open-ended, those asking for the protection it affords are entirely dependent on eliciting the compassion or pity of those enacting it” (37). As I illustrate in the next section, it appears that showing compassion is indeed central to the work of caseworkers, although in ways that do not necessarily lead to enhanced protection. On the contrary, manifested compassion by caseworkers toward clients appeared to support the production of an *emotional comfort zone* where potentially disruptive affective dynamics are handled according to familiar emotional repertoires that are considered part and parcel of law enforcement. In this manner, manifestations of compassion are conducive to a strict implementation of the law while exonerating the implementers from appearing as insensitive or inhumane actors.

“Rules Are Rules” and “Case by Case:” Caseworkers’ Discretionary Power

In explaining the essence of their office duty, caseworkers regularly insisted that it was about “solving problems” and not about deporting people. Nevertheless, they often underplayed their discretionary power, telling clients that “rules are rules” or “I don’t make the rules, I

only implement them.” At the same time, many caseworkers used the phrase “case by case” to underline the fact that face-to-face interactions significantly influenced their discretion. For example, an experienced caseworker confessed she had “an allergy to foreigners who walk in to my office and say: ‘I have the right to this and that.’ Then, I’m immediately done with these kinds of people.” Another caseworker affirmed: “If I sit for a talk with a client and immediately feel strong resistance, I begin the process of a forced removal faster.” Some caseworkers admitted working with predetermined ideas of the “attributes” and “deservedness” of certain categories of clients; for example, referring to Iranians as being hysteric and to Sudanese as being quiet and responsive.

Caseworkers attempted to establish trust relations with clients who, given an entrenched “culture of disbelief” (Jubany 2011) among civil servants in the immigration-deportation field, must prove to be honest, deserving, and grateful to every obliging gesture made by caseworkers (cf. Moulin 2012). One caseworker, who joined the DT&V after having worked as a social worker in reception centers for asylum seekers, confessed to initially having plenty of empathy for their “sad stories.” However, the caseworker added:

But then you also start to hear the side of the IND agents, that the stories of asylum seekers are full of contradictions, unreliable. . . . [Asylum seekers] are all unfortunate and have a reason why they came to the Netherlands, but with time I became increasingly aware that a serious number of them, and here I mean 80 percent, well 90 percent, simply come here for a better life.

The language of “new managerialism” (Clarke 2004) transforms illegalized migrants into clients of services offered by the DT&V bureau. In a neoliberal spirit that treats individuals as autonomous and fully responsible for their situation, clients were considered in charge of their destiny, as articulated by one caseworker:

There are people who waste their time here. They are illegal. They have no chance of acquiring status and they have no life here. They suffer and I really think that the best for them is to go back to their country. There are sometimes families with children that insist on trying everything to stay, but they just make their children’s lives more miserable. It is their responsibility. They should know that this is not good for them. Their children should have certainty and grow up with stability, not with unrealistic expectations of living in the Netherlands.

In conversation with me, caseworkers were fast to moralize parents and to dismiss their efforts to secure for their children a better future, and perhaps to prevent them from returning to and growing up in life threatening conditions. It is evidently in handling cases of families with children that caseworkers found it hard to control their emotions in face-to-face interactions. There are two teddy bears in the DT&V office at a family reception center in the north of the Netherlands. Adnan,⁶ a four-year-old boy who was born in the Netherlands and suffers from postnatal brain damage, cuddled one of the teddy bears while a caseworker interviewed his mother, Jamila, an asylum seeker from Somalia. The caseworker explained to Jamila that the doctors had now diagnosed Adnan’s condition as stable:

We will make sure that you are provided with the medicine for the coming years, but apart from this, there is no legal reason allowing you to remain in the Netherlands because your application for [prolonged] asylum was not approved.

Jamila's eyes instantly filled with tears. She sobbed and mumbled:

But how can you send us there? Don't you see the news? They kill people. It's terrible. We cannot go back there.

The caseworker first insisted that there are safe places in Somalia, but then changed her tone and told Jamila:

I understand your fear. This must be very difficult for you, but the doctors' report is decisive. . . . I can imagine that this is hard for you to hear. Why don't we stop now and you go back to your room to rest. Shall we talk again in two weeks?

After Jamila left, the caseworker turned to me looking desperate, and asked rhetorically:

What can I do? I don't envy her. They let her stay here for six years and now they decide that she should return. I don't know [she sighs] but, well, the case is now quite clear. There is not much she can do. She has to go back. Is that fair? I don't know. I'm happy it's not my decision.

Talking about "they" and locating the decision and responsibility for deportation elsewhere—at the hands of the IND, medical staff, or federal courts—partially relieved caseworkers from the consequences of their direct actions. Nevertheless, the deference of responsibility to other state authorities is effective only when the state system is perceived to be righteous. As Bauman (1991) argues, executing a segment in a chop-down process relieves functionaries from connecting a direct line from their personal action to the outcome of the complete process. Caseworkers, however, are well aware of the ends to which their job contributes. It is therefore crucial that their sense of righteousness and trust in the fairness of the state system are well cultivated and internalized. Caseworkers clearly view the Dutch state as being fair and tolerant toward foreigners. They regularly refer to the Netherlands as a liberal Western country where laws are voted on democratically and are on par with international conventions and human rights standards. Caseworkers thus view themselves as implementers of a fair procedural justice and, more broadly, as guardians of a just migration-deportation regime that is guided by high moral standards. As one caseworker expounded:

The Netherlands has a very liberal policy toward foreigners and I think this is the way it should be. If you come here, there's a guarantee that we will look into your case carefully, and if you deserve to get a status, you can be sure that this will be done. But, if we process your case and the result is that you are required to leave the country, then we must make sure that this happens too. We must ensure that nonrefugees are removed so that real refugees can get a place here. Otherwise, those who deserve to stay here lose out. For the system to be fair, we must make sure that all decisions are followed through with action. Many people think that if you do this job you are against human rights, but it really is the opposite. I do this work because I strongly believe in human rights and in the rule of law.

The image of "real refugees" serves here to justify the deportation of illegalized migrants who allegedly deceitfully occupy a limited space. Clearly, caseworkers invest emotions not only in face-to-face interactions with clients but also in the very idea of performing an

important and essentially ethical job. A commitment to a perceived moral state might be a derivative of the broader socialization of caseworkers as citizens of the Dutch nation and state. Arguably, as one of the last functioning Western welfare states, the Netherlands still enjoys a high degree of commitment and pride from many of its citizens and civil servants. Herein, formal training is vital in compounding the link between the righteousness of the state and the morality of caseworkers, as can be seen from the following parable I repeatedly heard from caseworkers who had learned it during their job training:

Let's say that someone rings the bell at your house. You open the door and they walk into your living room and sit down on your sofa. You ask them who they are, what they came here for, what they want and so on. You offer them something to drink, a cup of coffee, etc. Then, they ask for something else to eat and to drink. At a certain point you expect them to leave, right? This is what happens in the Netherlands. We say to them: "Okay, you are here, what do you want?" We give them shelter, food, etc., and we look into their case, their asylum application. But then, if the state decides that you cannot stay here for whatever reason, you have to respect it. You can't say, "Okay, but I'll stay on the sofa in your living room." It's a basic thing. These people have to realize that if the Netherlands decides they cannot stay, then they have to leave. It can't work otherwise.

In her study of "the banality of evil," Arendt (1963) interrogates the motivational structure of the Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, who was responsible for the deportation of millions of people. For Arendt (1978), Eichmann was mainly guilty of "thoughtlessness" for not allowing his own moral considerations to interfere with his work. However, as Waxman (2009, 98) rightly insists, individuals neither act in an "ethical vacuum" nor in one that is of their own making. Heyman (1995) highlights the notion of "thought-work" as "an inevitable struggle: bureaucratic workers must think for themselves because of the nature of their tasks, yet they must be controlled as thinkers" (263). Thus, caseworkers' "thought-work" is significantly produced and conditioned by contexts of socialization, training, and control. Oscillating between "rules are rules" and "case by case," caseworkers reinforced the morality of the political system as humane and tolerant, while de facto minimizing their own critical discretionary power and potential for unsubordinated action. Getting trained in and endorsing the state's formal narrative about the ethical treatment of illegalized migrants undoubtedly disposes caseworkers to justify and commit to their work.

However, formal training might not be sufficient because managing face-to-face interactions with clients remains an emotionally charged test. As the system is never hermetic, there is always the risk that uncontrolled emotions could undermine caseworkers' identification with their role and produce a critical and threatening distance. It is therefore caseworkers' general conviction that the fairness of the legal system must be regularly nourished and maintained through reassurance and moral support from superiors and peers. Caseworkers can then collectively establish specific "feeling rules" (Hochschild 1979); that is, culturally constructed and shared ideas about how they should feel in given sensitive interactions.

By routinizing deportation operations, caseworkers manage to control intense emotions through "various types of interaction rituals [. . .] that provide[s] employees with a sense of authenticity, meaning and organizational loyalty" (Wettergren 2010, 400). Indeed, as Mazzarella (2009) claims, if one considers "institutional practices as a form of performative ritual, then we might also conclude that, contrary to the ideological discourse of rationalized modernity, the labile terrain of affect is not in fact external to bureaucratic

process” (298). The challenge, therefore, is to create routines that domesticate potentially disruptive interactions in ways that facilitate bureaucrats’ implementation of controversial policies while justifying and motivating their role in them. It is here that the production of an *emotional comfort zone* becomes vital.

“Keeping It Nice:” Routinizing Tense Encounters

Caseworkers customarily welcome clients with a warm handshake and kindly seat them down at one side of a plain office desk, where the client’s file lies next to a telecommunication machine for contacting an interpreter. DT&V office walls carry little if any decoration, creating a business-like atmosphere. In meetings, clients manifest their stress, anger, frustration, and anxiety in different ways, from raising their voice to falling into long moments of silence, and from piercing stares directed toward caseworkers to lowering their heads and bursting into tears. After showing clients out of the office, caseworkers usually remained with me to discuss the meeting. They seemed to appreciate my attempts to observe the interaction from both sides of the table. As one caseworker put it: “I know that I’m sitting at one side of the table with all that this means and clients sit at the other side, but I always try to put myself in their shoes. I try to think what clients are thinking and what situation they are in.” Indeed, during meetings, caseworkers regularly practiced perspective-taking and showed much compassion toward clients, making statements such as: “You are caught up in an enormously painful situation” or “I know this must be very difficult for you.” There was even sympathy for attempts by some clients to sabotage their deportation with statements such as “I understand what you do”; “In your place, I would have probably done the same”; or “You have all the right to dissent.”

A high-ranking DT&V official once e-mailed me a recent newspaper article portraying the work of the DT&V.⁷ He assured me that I would find it interesting and representative of the work done by the agency. The lengthy article followed the work routine of two caseworkers, Jannes and Jitske. It depicted the close and trusting relationship that Jannes built with his client, Ahmed, an asylum seeker from Iraq who, after six years in the Netherlands, was sentenced to deportation. Ahmed said he trusted nobody in the Netherlands except Jannes, whose advice he considered similar to “advice from a father to son.” Jannes urged Ahmed to go back to Iraq: “You are still young. Make the right decision [to go back]. You could have been my neighbor, but there is nothing I can do about it.” What Ahmed did not know was that Jannes had already reported him to the military police for removal. The journalist then described the departure scene: Jannes accompanied Ahmed to the gate at Schiphol Airport, gave him an envelope with one thousand Euros, and a big hug. Ahmed, visibly upset and in tears, could not let go of Jannes’s last hug. As the airplane taxied away from the gate, Jannes explained that he always waited for takeoff because the “foreigner” may still pull something at the last minute to sabotage the expulsion. With his eyes on the departing flight, Jannes said it had been difficult for him. He then sighed and uttered: “But, I’m over it already now. When it’s done, it’s done. It has to be like that. Otherwise, you get too sentimental and new cases just keep on coming.”

The other caseworker portrayed in the article was Jitske, whose photograph hugging a lamb on a farm appeared next to the quote: “I don’t hunt down foreigners. Here, we deal with people.” The journalist followed the warm relationship between Jitske and Twane, an asylum seeker from Sierra Leone, who first had received temporary protection, but his status now had been revoked. Jitske could have reported Twane to the Foreign Police, but had preferred to work with him on a “voluntary repatriation.” She met up with Twane to explain that he had to leave the country. “In my country, I saw death. Soldiers wanted to slice my limbs,” he cried to Jitske, who showed much compassion but insisted that his fears

could not justify staying in the Netherlands. In her car on the way back from the meeting, she contemplated:

It's always a balancing act between my humane-being and my bureaucrat-being. As a humane-being, I understand that he doesn't want to go back. I can identify with his struggle. But, eventually I have to turn on the bureaucrat switch. And if he gets his travel documents but doesn't depart on his own account, then he will be forced to leave. This is the policy.

The newspaper article clearly aimed to present caseworkers as sensitive and compassionate professionals, while distinctively showing their uncompromising commitment to enforce the deportation of their clients. This is very much in line with my observations of caseworkers. They used compassion during interactions with clients in order to diffuse tension and get their messages across; namely, that deportation was inevitable. Thus, establishing warm and trusting relationships with clients did not seem to be contradictory for many caseworkers; in fact, it appeared to be conducive to the successful completion of their job.

Clearly, different caseworkers experience different emotions in face-to-face interactions with different clients. Caseworkers can feel distress at the fate of families with children, distaste toward clients who make assertive demands and show little respect, or pleasure when they manage to help and relieve "deserving" clients. Notwithstanding such differences in personalities and situational circumstances of the interaction, caseworkers are cognizant of the fact that clients accept their authority more easily when that authority is used alongside compassion. Caseworkers often demand from clients to reciprocate the gift of perspective-taking, making statements such as, "But you need to understand me as well. This is the law. I have no other way." By showing compassion, caseworkers, whether consciously or not, produce an emotional comfort zone from which they can perform their tasks without being directly sanctioned during face-to-face interactions with clients. In reproaching unjust policies and sharing their grievances with caseworkers, clients forget that it is specifically those caseworkers who incarnate and enact an otherwise abstract state. However, caseworkers seem to be aware that being compassionate might set them apart from the police, but not in the sense of accomplishing repressive policies. As one caseworker put it: "We are not the police (pausing), but perhaps we are worse than the police." She went on to explain that many clients failed to realize that caseworkers, although usually nice and understanding, were no less strict and goal-oriented than the police.

It was, however, among the police that I heard the most striking expressions of compassion. During a meeting at Schiphol Airport, a military officer in his mid-fifties, who was in charge of escorting deportees on flights, told me with a grin, "I love the foreigners. I don't think you could do this job otherwise." Somewhat puzzled, I asked him what he meant by "love."

Well, I mean that you enjoy the contact with them—that they don't irritate you. Otherwise, this job would be horrible. I used to be a street agent in Amsterdam and I had a lot of contact with the illegals. I always had good contact with them. It's not that I don't like them or I don't understand them. But they also have to understand us. There are some laws that say who can be here and who can't. If it were up to me, I wouldn't mind it if they stayed, but we live in a democracy and these are the laws of this country made by our government. If tomorrow another government decides to let everyone stay, I'd have no problem at all.

Just like many caseworkers, he equated the legitimacy of deportation with its legality. This allowed him to morally justify his work even when voicing a different view about the supposed inevitability of deportation. The agent also shrewdly delineated a fictional symmetry between the ability and even obligation of state agents and clients to understand each other. This is a form of moral gymnastics that elegantly dismisses power differentials between the involved positions, and instead places them squarely on a flat moral plain that is reduced to simple symmetrical logic: “If I can understand your position, then you must understand mine.” By pointing to a democratic legislative system as a shining example of society’s moral right and wrong, the officer not only sacralized the law but turned the table in a manner that positioned the deportee and the deporter on the same side against an abstract state. This blending between the object and subject of the legal system enabled the manufacturing of a scene in which the client and he, as the state agent, were united as actors in the same deportation spectacle.

Another senior deportation officer told me he that has two small children, and he can “perfectly understand deportees who have families and are concerned about their children’s future”:

They have to do what they believe is in their best interests, but we have to do the same as well. If they start shouting and sabotaging the flight, it will mean that all the planning was for nothing and my entire schedule will have to be rearranged. But I understand it. It’s their right, and I can’t say that I wouldn’t have done the same.

He then showed me the paraphernalia for dealing with deportees who resisted removal: handcuffs, straightjackets, and other kinds of advanced militarized equipment. However, the need to work with empathy precisely in order to accomplish an emotionally taxing and potentially violent task appeared to be rather straightforward for him:

We always do our best not to use force. The most important part of the process is to talk to foreigners as human beings before we take them on board, in order to establish a relationship. When they see that we are also simple human beings who have a job to do and that we are not insensitive people, then they usually calm down. The most successful flights I had were the ones in which I talked with the foreigner for hours. Then, we really got to know each other. Sometimes, they open up and tell you intimate stories. [. . .] It does make it difficult to then hand them over when we arrive and forget everything, but that’s just part of the job.

Oscillating between expressions of compassion and acts of repression appears to be the ideal *modus operandi* of those who need to manage emotional face-to-face interactions with illegalized migrants. Herein, the instrumentality of an emotional comfort zone proves to be essential, as openly articulated by one energetic young caseworker:

It’s part of the interaction. They become angry or emotional, or whatever—and, yes, that’s precisely our professionalism that we know how to go along with it and give them this space, but at the same time, do our job.

A deep conviction about the societal significance of accomplishing their task seems to be an important ingredient in substantiating caseworkers’ internal motivation for the job. While one cannot discount issues related to the quality of their employment as civil servants in

the Netherlands (job stability, well-paid salary, pension rights, middle-class status, and so on), some caseworkers explained their ability to endure an emotionally taxing and socially unrewarding job by a deep personal commitment to doing what is right. One caseworker explained:

I don't do my work for the state. I do it for myself. I hate politics, and I don't believe in it at all. I vote but with reservations. Last time I voted for the PVDD [a party for animals' rights] because I sometimes find animals to be nicer than people. I do my work because I think it is a useful work.

In caseworkers' worldview, deportation was a necessary mechanism to manage immigration and secure a place for the "real" migrants or refugees. Concomitantly, they were firm about the need to ensure fair procedures and what they considered to be a dignified treatment of clients. When pondering over his motivation, one caseworker concluded:

Well, it's a kind of—maybe it's very strange but it has to do with justice. We need an immigration system that is just, but which also ensures that not everyone enters and stays because then in ten years it will become unlivable here.

Another caseworker told me that:

If I think that the IND has unfairly sentenced someone for deportation, I sometimes put my clients in touch with good lawyers whom I know. I'm not allowed to do it and I'm not responsible for it, but sometimes I do it because I care so much.

Indeed, some caseworkers anxiously wanted to make sure that the cases they handled were legalistically thoroughly processed by the IND. In case of a doubt, they sometimes called up their colleagues at the IND to have another look at a file. The need for certainty about the rightfulness of their actions arose because face-to-face interactions intersubjectively and simultaneously construct not only the figure of the removable subject but also, crucially, that of the caseworker. As Balibar (2009) contends, constructing "the figure of the citizen [. . .] is possible only if other figures of the 'subject' are violently or peacefully removed, coercively, or voluntarily destroyed" (192). In this respect, it is telling that caseworkers insisted on their self-image as compassionate and nonviolent during moments of potential aberration. At a focus group I held with three caseworkers, one confessed to being driven by a hardline approach:

I started at the military police, so the issue of security is in my head. I went for this job because it came my way, but at the end of the day, you work with everyone to make sure that our society is safe for your children—you don't want garbage on your streets, ah, I don't want to say that all people here are garbage, but you can base this on facts. If you're not allowed to be here, then obey the law and go away! Sometimes, it seems that in the Netherlands everything is allowed and possible. Everyone just comes here. But, in the Netherlands, this is what we don't want, or at least what I don't want here, so this is perhaps what's always at the back of my mind.

As he finished the last sentence, a colleague immediately intervened that she did not feel that security was the most important motivation for their work, stating: "Clearly, making

sure that rules and regulations are observed and respected is very important, but we must also ensure that we treat fairly those with whom we deal.”

A third colleague jumped in, saying, “Security is important although it’s not the most important motivation for doing our work.”

Quickly consenting, the caseworker who first spoke qualified his earlier statements: “I didn’t mean that security was the most important motivation. I simply say it’s one of the important things we do, making sure that everyone is treated well and according to the rules.” His two other colleagues nodded in agreement and smiled at him.

Conclusion: Compassion as Repression

Caseworkers in the DT&V are clearly trained and controlled by their superiors and peers in ways that dispose them to consider deportations as emotionally taxing but indispensable. Being reflexive and informed of larger public debates about the legitimacy of deportation, caseworkers insistently valued their discretionary power in “making a difference” and were proud to ensure what they perceived to be a just and dignified deportation procedure for their clients. Maneuvering carefully their own agency as compassionate implementers of fair and democratically legislated state policies that dictate the deportation of their clients, caseworkers were able to furnish an emotional comfort zone to forestall troubling ethical concerns. The comfort zone should be seen as a collective achievement of caseworkers and managers at the DT&V, who supported and reassured each other about the fairness and importance of their job. Placed in a broader context, it can be argued that for the implementation of ethically controversial policies by reflexive street-level bureaucrats, states must allow room for the production of emotional comfort zones within its frontline bureaucratic apparatus (cf. Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2000).

Nevertheless, the affective dynamics that are produced in face-to-face interactions carry a jolting *potentiality* for the administration and execution of deportation by reflexive caseworkers. The challenge for institutions at the DT&V is therefore, to tame potentially unsettling affective dynamics by having caseworkers experience them as intrinsic emotions *of* the law rather than extrinsic affects *against* the law. As Hochschild (1990) argued, emotions are never simply installed; instead, they await to be triggered and are largely produced in social interactions. Thus, in managing sensitive face-to-face interactions with clients, much depends on caseworkers’ ability to experience tense emotions as culturally accepted “everyday understanding of affects” (Thrift 2008, 221).

In an insightful account of the emotional interactions between detainees and staff at a United Kingdom immigration removal center, Hall (2010) describes “occasions when empathy flourished,” and she concludes that “at heart, then, compassion involves a notion of common humanity, and thus has a radical potential to disrupt” (894). While recognizing the same potentiality, Ticktin (2006) insists that compassion and humanitarianism cannot stand in for the “failure of political rights discourses and practices” (44). This is true not merely because compassion works only at the margins as an exception that confirms the rule or because it masquerades the repressive state policies as “humane.” Compassion, as Hannah Arendt insists, arises in those who hold power toward those for whom they feel a sense of pity. As Arendt (2006) wrote, “suffering indeed breeds moods and emotions and attitudes that resemble solidarity to the point of confusion” (84). In fact, Arendt ostensibly posits compassion as the opposite of solidarity. For her, any meaningful connection between those having (some) power and those suffering is superficial when based on compassion and not on political principles. Herein, the purpose of emotions—expressed as compassion or humane treatment—is usually invested elsewhere.

As I have argued, by showing compassion and dealing empathically with clients, caseworkers craftily constructed an emotional comfort zone from where they could diffuse the disruptive potentiality of intensive affective dynamics. Working with compassion, caseworkers not only lowered the chances for anxious clients to direct their anger and frustration straight at them, but they were also better placed to consider intense emotions as intrinsic of the law, as harmless expressions of dignified and transparent procedures. In this way, caseworkers offset potential doubts that may otherwise have crept into mind with respect to the legitimacy of their work. Thus, the consideration of emotions as intrinsic to their work reassured caseworkers they were humane beings. It furthermore shored up a sense of pride in their professional role and it fostered strong in-group unity and a sense of comradeship among those who implemented challenging policies. Precisely because caseworkers' commitment to their job was not chiefly driven by right-wing political inclinations or general antimigrant or antirefugee attitudes, they justified their practices by morally evoking notions of fairness and care.

It thus appears that the functioning of repression by the right hand of the state is not necessarily at risk of disruption by the potentiality of compassion among bureaucrats. Anthropologists must pay increased attention to emotions among agents who execute questionable humanitarian missions or restrictive state policies and thus detect and highlight the circumstances under which emotional comfort zones are produced to harness affective dynamics in ways that, somewhat paradoxically, guarantee docile implementation and neutralize the potentiality for a radical change from within the bureaucratic system. This situation should not be understood as a Weberian iron-cage. One should consider that social contexts are always imperfect in their conditioning of bureaucrats (Hoag 2010). Anthropologists must therefore be attuned to the limitations of the institutionalization of affective dynamics within culturally accepted emotion repertoires, and pay attention to disruptive excesses that may linger and evolve into extrinsic affects against the law. At the moment, it appears that human rights discourses and compassion toward illegalized migrants have been skillfully absorbed by civil servants who use these varying moral appeals and ideological constructs to rationalize, justify, and execute deportations.

Notes

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1. All interviews in the Netherlands were conducted in Dutch and were translated to English by the author.
2. I spent twenty-seven hours taking part in such meetings between caseworkers and clients, who were always informed about the purpose of my research and consented to my presence. I held lengthy interviews with eight caseworkers, and I interviewed three of them more than once. I also supervised the research projects of two students who examined and interviewed other civil servants within the Dutch migration-deportation administration. In addition to DT&V caseworkers, I interviewed civil servants in the following institutions: IND, Centraal Orgaan Opvang Asielzoekers (the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers), the military police, the Ministry for Security and Justice, and the local government in Amsterdam. In addition, I spoke to numerous clients

- about their feelings and views regarding the interactions they had with caseworkers. Finally, there has been vast media coverage of the DT&V since I began my fieldwork. I consulted a number of reports in newspapers and an hour-long documentary (*Het is Uw Land; This is Your Land*) on the daily work of caseworkers. While not trying to reduce the variety of approaches among caseworkers, and being aware of difficulties in generalizing my findings, I offer an analysis that is substantively grounded in my primary sources and largely corroborated by other sources.
3. For more statistics on the numbers of illegalized migrants and deportation in the Netherlands, see Kalir 2017a.
 4. <https://www.dienstterugkeerenvertrek.nl>
 5. Dutch Ombudsman, *Vreemdelingenbewaring [Foreigners' Detention] Report 2012*, 105.
 6. All names are pseudonyms.
 7. "Dienst Terugkeer en Vertrek" (Dutch Repatriation and Departure Service), *NRC Handelsblad*, April 4, 2010.

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