Rationality and the Culture of Disbelief

Credibility Assessment at Application Centre Zevenaar

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Introduction

The platypus

A creature that seems a mix of more familiar animals, the duck, beaver and otter, it defied classification when discovered. When this animal first made its introduction in the world of Western science, the first reaction was disbelief. Dr George Shaw, who first described it scientifically in 1799, took a scissors to its pelt to check it for stitches. It was not uncommon in those times for travelers to bring back forged animals such as the mermaid, fabricated by attaching the body of a monkey to that of a fish (Australian Platypus Conservancy).

Credibility assessment

Refugees making their way to the Netherlands to ask for asylum will have to respond to categories set by the law and by those whose job it is to assess their claims. In this thesis, I look at the different parties that are involved in this process. Particularly, I look at how the credibility of asylum claims is assessed and the different perspectives people have on this practice. Credibility is not a legally defined concept but a there are number of criteria, relating to the external and internal consistency of statements and their general plausibility (IND, 2014:5).

I first got interested in this topic when I worked for the Dutch Council for Refugees (Vluchtelingenwerk). Working on their Country of Origin Information department I saw how apparently reasonable rules were used to make unreasonable demands of asylum seekers with regards to proving their credibility. I suspected ethnocentric assumptions might underlie the demands that immigration officers make of refugees' stories. Some of the literature on this subject affirm these suspicions. Barsky, for example, argues that the Canadian refugee determination process favours those who are more familiar with Western argumentation and ways of truth finding (1994:119). As in the case of the platypus, those that fall outside our own cultural categories of classification are met with disbelief. Cultural difference is the starting point of this thesis, and the way bureaucratic rationality affect cultural boundaries. The exact form and depth of cultural differences, however, are not topics of discussion in this thesis.

In this study, I aim to move beyond often formalistic analyses of asylum procedures and provide a view from inside one of the places where bureaucratic rules are enacted, at the application centre in Zevenaar. I see credibility assessment not as a product of an individual mind but as a

group process that involves different institutions. It is a rationalized procedure that involves a striving towards harmonization and neutrality. This neutrality is included in the word 'credibility' itself. The verb 'to believe' is replaced by a more general notion of what can be believed, thereby neutralizing and depersonalizing it.

My object of study is not so much the content of decisions but the circumstances in which these decisions take place. The central question of my thesis is how different parties within the application centre relate to the credibility of asylum claims in a bureaucratic context.

As much as it is an analysis of this practice, it is also an illustration of broader themes of bureaucracy, borders and rationality. I will show that the rationalization of this procedures creates distrust and uncertainty.

After a short description of the general asylum procedure and the different parties within the application centre, I describe my methodology.

I describe the neutrality of bureaucratic rationality in chapter one. This neutrality takes the form of uniformity, anonymization, a strict separation of person and official role and a paradoxically connected flexibility. This neutrality has a physical presence as well.

In chapter two I show how the trust and cross cultural understanding between groups is hampered by the physically present bureaucratic rationality that excludes Gadamer's "fusion of horizons." Chapter three describes the power division between the bureaucratic institutions and their clients, created by the manipulation of uncertainty.

In chapter four I argue how despite these strict divisions, there are commonalities between parties with regards to the distrust directed at other parties and the adherence to bureaucratic practice.

The general asylum procedure

The first step in the asylum procedure is for the prospective asylum to go to Ter Apel to report to the immigration police. Before the application process there is a period for rest and preparation, which takes a minimum of six days. There is no maximum time for this first step in the procedure (Centrum voor Migratierecht, 2013). During this time, an asylum seeker gets to see a lawyer that is provided by the state. In order to prepare for the procedure, the applicant gets to see his or her lawyer at the lawyer's office. The Legal Aid Board (RVR) organizes the matching of lawyers and asylum seekers (Raad voor de Rechtsbijstand, 2014). The Dutch Council for refugees (Vluchtelingenwerk, VWN) also provides informative meetings for asylum seekers, carried out by volunteers (Vluchtelingenwerk). The Centraal Orgaan opvang asielzoekers (COA) is responsible for the housing of asylum seekers and during this first step asylum seekers stay at the reception centre at ter Apel (COA).

The application process formally starts when the Immigration Service (IND) invites the asylum seeker for the first interview. Day one of this eight day general procedure (AA) is about determining someone's identity, nationality and travel route (IND). The reasons to apply for asylum are not asked about yet during this first interview. If the applicant brings travel documents that are found to be genuine, credibility is not an issue. However, this is often not the case. Especially many Eritrean asylum seekers often do not have identity papers. To ascertain someone's nationality in this case, questions are asked about someone's country of origin. An imputable lack of documents can be reason for heightened demands for the credibility of the applicant's asylum story (Rafi, 2014:68).

On day two, the asylum seeker gets the chance to meet with his or her lawyer to discuss the report of the interview to correct mistakes and to provide supplementary relevant information. Day three, the day of the 'detailed interview', is when the asylum seeker is interviewed about what the reasons were to leave the country of origin and apply for asylum (IND). The applicant gets to provide his own account of why he or she fled to find protection in the Netherlands. After this, a number of questions are asked to probe the credibility of the applicant's claim and to find out other reasons someone might be eligible for protection.

Again, this report is discussed with the applicant's legal representative on the following day. On day five there are three possible outcomes. If the asylum seeker is found to be eligible for protection, he or she will be notified of this. It also happens that the IND needs more time to decide on someone's application. In this case, the asylum seeker is sent to the extended asylum

procedure (VA). If the IND intends to reject the application, a 'voornemen' is brought out that describes the reason for rejection.

In the last case, the asylum seeker gets to discuss the IND's intended decision with his or her lawyer. The lawyer can provide his view on the case ('zienswijze') based on this meeting. The IND can decide to reject the lawyer's view. In that case, the general application procedure ends and a decision ('beschikking') is given to the asylum seeker. There are possibilities for appeal at different levels of courts after this (IND). This happens outside of the application centre and is therefore not part of my research.

The application centre and the groups within it

The application centre (AC) where I carried out my fieldwork is located in Zevenaar, a small town in the east of the Netherlands. This thesis concerns the activities that are carried out in this centre relevant to the asylum procedure. Asylum seekers do not stay there but are brought there for their interviews and other meetings by a bus that arrives at eight every week day.

The building is divided in different wings for each of the parties that have a part in the application process. The largest part of the building is held by the IND. Most of the interviewing rooms are at the first floor of the building. The second and third floors is where officials have their offices. Lawyers hold their meetings in a different wing of the building. This part is managed by the RVR and has its own reception desk. The RVR is an organization that provides legal aid to those that cannot afford it. Every application centre has a RVR presence. Besides arranging the matching of lawyers and asylum seekers, they make sure there are interpreters for meetings between lawyers and their clients (RVR, 2014).

Asylum seekers enter the building through a different entrance than the other parties. When they are not in meetings or interviews, they wait in a room with a number of benches, chairs and tables. There are day care facilities for small children. The largest groups of asylum seekers at the application centre in Zevenaar are from Syria and Eritrea. Legally, they are only called refugees when recognized as such at the end of the asylum procedure (Vluchtelingenwerk). VWN has a small office in the back of the building. VWN is a non governmental organization that defends the rights of refugees in the Netherlands (Dutch Council for Refugees). Their main tasks in the application centre are answering questions in the waiting room for asylum seekers and attending their interviews to make alternative handwritten reports of them.

Interpreters have a small room where they can rest in between interviews or other meetings. They do not have fixed contracts with any party but are employed on a task basis.

There are a number of meeting rooms, a large courtyard, a lunch area and offices for security, cleaning staff and other facility services.

The different parts of the building are closed off by doors that can be opened with access passes. Interpreters and asylum seekers do not have these, and have to be escorted through the hallways by someone who does.

The Dublin Treaty

Although not part of this study, I will sometimes mention the word 'Dublin' in reference to the Dublin treaty. Roughly, this treaty describes which country is reponsible for the application of a particular asylum seeker. In principle, this is the first EU country the asylum seeker arrives at. If the Dutch government can prove the asylum seeker in question has entered the EU through another country, the other EU member state can be asked to take back this person and process his or her asylum claim (Vluchtelingenwerk).

Methodology and reflection

To attempt an alternative way of looking at the way laws are applied in the Dutch asylum procedure I have applied the method of participant observation. Emerson et al. point out that participant observation entails immersion in the field of study. As much as was possible within the confines of my role as a researcher, I have tried to become involved in the day to day activities of IND officials, lawyers, asylum seekers and other participants in the application centre (1995:3). I attended many interviews and meetings between asylum seekers and representatives of the institutions at work in the centre.

It is argued that there is no merit to being a 'fly on the wall' type invisible researcher. Active participation in the activities that people undertake will help to create the immersion to understand people's daily lives and activities (ibid., 4). Of course, I could not be a completely active participant as I lack the qualification and training necessary to fulfill any of the professional roles within the centre. My positioning was mostly comparable to that of an intern, learning through observation and explanation by senior professionals.

This active participation can also mean aligning yourself with people more at one side of political lines than the other (ibid.). Having formerly worked for Vluchtelingenwerk I entered the field loaded with political baggage, I did not choose to hide this. My commitment to promoting the rights of marginalized groups inspired this thesis and I disagree with many policies that guide the actions of officials and other actors. However, this does not mean that there cannot be any understanding between me as a researcher and the people whose practices I describe. By becoming involved I hope to understand and bring across the perspective of people well, even though I might not agree with their political standpoints. With this thesis, hope to diminish the opacity that is often attributed to hegemonic positions of power (Stoetzler, Yuval-Davis, 2002:319). Moreover, I also hope to show that there is no fundamental divide between the bureaucratic 'Other' and the NGO worker 'Self', and that bureaucratic rationality affects all participants in the asylum system. With this recognition comes the possibility of self criticism as well.

As Seymour Smith points out (in: Robben, Sluka, 2012:24) neutrality as non involvement is not always ethically acceptable. My study mainly concerns the institutional perspective. But is this a bad thing? Laura Nader advocated 'studying up' in 1972, not only marginal groups need to be studied by anthropologists. Studying the powerful does not need to entail moral identification. Nancy Scheperd-Hughes, for example, interviewed both the oppressors and the oppressed in

her study of the illegal trade in organs. Anthropologists, being 'professional strangers' have a unique role in this: as insider-outsiders they can show multiple perspective. Sometimes, however, the traditional cultural relativist stance will have to be replace by a 'hermeneutics of suspicion', a critical look at those in power (2004:60).

As I describe neutrality, I do not mean that I have a completely neutral position in this. To move beyond the often formal settings of the application centre, I did not do any formal interviews. Instead, I made notes of the many informal conversations I had with the many parties in the centre. In the process of writing, I involved the people I was writing about by sharing the text I was writing with them and opening it up to comments.

This is not a study aimed at a completely objective and value free analysis. Instead, I hope to represent different perspectives and provide understanding.

Obviously, the aspects of language are very important in the asylum procedure but I hope to also make observations about the material culture of the aanmeldcentrum. Studying material culture implies studying the ideas of a certain community or society through artifacts (Prown, 1982:1), which includes, for example, clothes (ibid., 3). This will also work in favour of triangulation of data. I look at architectural dimensions of the application centre as well, seeing how they impact the dealings of different parties within the centre.

Anonymity and style

I have tried to minimize the risk of situations I describe being traceable to specific people. All the letters I use to replace people's names I assigned randomly. The consequence of this way of anonymizing is a textual style that is reminiscent of the anonymized reports that are brought out by the IND. On the whole, this thesis might come across as more depersonalized than many anthropological writings. Partly, this is because of the limitations of privacy and confidentiality that are required when writings about a professional environment where the political stakes are considerable. However, it is also a conscious choice to represent the kind of bureaucratic environment textually as well.

With this choice, there are also limitations. By choosing to focus on different parties, I miss some depth of one perspective that could be acquired by for example focussing on just the perspective of asylum seekers. The building of rapport between me and this more marginalised group has been difficult and not always successful.

Neutrality

Bureaucratic rationality in its outward representations is about neutrality. In this chapter I will describe the particular meaning that neutrality gets within the application centre. I will argue that it takes the form of uniformity and anonymity. The exchangeability of people that is implied by this anonymity corresponds to a strict division of someone's person and official role. Furthermore, neutrality depends on unproblematic neutral communication that allows for flexibility between and within this role division. Flexibility is, paradoxically, intimately connected to this rigid seeming bureaucratic rationality.

Uniformity and anonymity

Several attempts are made at presenting a neutral image of decision making within the IND. Bureaucracy is not just about rational and consistent decision making. Bureaucratic rationality is also represented physically. Neutrality is both an ordering principle of bureaucratic practice as well as a physical presence. This physical presence is characterized by uniformity and anonymity.

The building in which the application centre is housed can be seen as a representation of neutrality. The logo of the Ministry of Security and Justice is noticeably present at the entrance of the building. The rooms in which the interviews take place are all nearly uniform. Once, I attended an asylum seeker's second interview. Although his first interview took place in a room on the first floor and the present one on the second floor, he thought he was in the same room as before. The only form of decoration that is present in the interviewing rooms is a world map that is always situated to the back of the asylum seeker so that the official can see it and the applicant cannot. One interpreter I talked to once remarked that these rooms are the same everywhere he goes.

At various stages of the decision making process, reports are brought out that share information with the relevant persons or organizations. Asylum seekers get a copy as well, but this kind of communication is mostly meant for legal representatives. The reports are written in Dutch and full of legal jargon. The first thing you see when you look at the presentation of documents that are meant for the world outside of the IND, is the logo of the Dutch State. It is printed on every page. Consistency is not just an ideal for the content of decision making. The reports of encounters between asylum seekers and state officials are also represented in a uniform way.

The names of the people involved in the decision or interview are left out as much as possible. What is presented in these documents is not a personal judgment. It is a judgment or representation made in the name of the State, more specifically, in the name of the State Secretary of Security and Justice. Although the man has a name, Fred Teeven, he is left anonymous. The name of the decision maker or interviewer is mentioned in small print in the margin of the first page and at the end of the document. Only his initials and last name are mentioned. He is interchangeable. It is not his person that matters but his function.

The name of the asylum seeker, called 'betrokkene' ('the person involved'), is mentioned once at the beginning. For the rest of the document he is not called by his name. What is present at every page of the document is his V-number, client number and case number. These allow for efficient processing. Names can be the same but numbers are always unique. Whenever I wanted to look up someone's file, the V-number would be the first thing I ask for. Some asylum seekers even know their V-numbers by heart.

Especially Arabic names are often a source of confusion. Sometimes, names are spelled wrongly in the eyes of the asylum seeker at the initial contact with the Dutch authorities. There is no uniform way of transcribing these names so there can be debate about the way this should be done or there can simply be mistakes at the entering of names into computer systems. Changing a name in the administrative systems of the parties involved in the asylum procedure can be troublesome and asylum seekers are often told they can only change it with the help of official documents. Documents which they often don't have. Numbers, on the other hand, are unambiguous. They allow for both precision and efficiency but also have the effect of anonymizing those involved in the asylum process.

This is not to say that the application is seen to be uniform and impersonal by all. A lawyer told me he could recognize the author of a decision by its style and content. Representations of uniformity and anonymity are therefore not always successful, as experienced participants in the bureaucracy of asylum procedures can discern persons in the texts they produce.

Separation of person and official role

Neutrality in the asylum procedure also means a separation of applicant and application to some. When talking about asylum seekers that are found to lie about their origins, one official remarked: "Sympathy is not a criterion, that sympathy was wasted when not handing in the right documents. *It is the application, not the applicant, that is assessed.* Some people [officials] find this hard to accept. [...] He names an example of a young lady, all they see is a 'sad little mess.'"

This particular official relates the assessment of a person to sympathy, which is an irrelevant consideration in his eyes. Also, he associates the handing in of false documents with the loss of grounds for sympathy. The handing in of false documents or not handing in documents at all goes together with the loss of sympathy. Not all officials think this way, however. One official I talked to said that he would never blame someone for lying, and that maybe he would even do the same in their situation. Another said in relation to an asylum seeker whose case she assessed that she even felt sorry for him since he had made so many mistakes in his interview. Nevertheless, no one ever told me they saw sympathy as a reason to accept or reject an application.

Not only the application and the applicant need to be separated according to many officials. The decision maker and the decision as well. I was involved in a small meeting between two colleagues that concerned the application of an Iranian convert. My field notes say the following:

> Walking back, I talk to official F. who is meeting his colleague B. about a case of an Iranian woman who converted to christianity and joined the Jehova's witnesses. F. says you can't use your own personal views about faith to judge someone's case. " I am a catholic myself but here I draw a line." The official who did the second interview used her personal judgement, and moreover wrote how she didn't believe her which is supposed to be the rule of the deciding official.
> We meet in F.'s room. B. comments that the asylum seeker relates the things that happened in her country of origin to her conversion.
> F. explains that in the case of a conversion, they test on the basis of:
> 1 knowledge of faith
> 2 conversion process
> 3 how the person intends to experience her faith if he/she were sent back
> They discuss something that the asylum seeker said about Maria Magdalena and Jesus who said that who believes she is a sinner, should cast the first stone. Apparently it doesn't exactly say this in the bible but they say this might be a thing of the Jehovas.
> F. says that this story does convince him.
> B. speculates that the interview might have been tiring. Converted asylum seekers can be very imposing, making statements with their hands on the bible. The official who did the interview might have been annoyed with her, Y tells me. (Field notes 10/4)

Here, official F. uses the notion that the personal views of the decision maker should be left out of the decision making process to criticize another decision maker. Moreover, he speculates that the other decision maker's emotions might have impacted her decision making skills. She also didn't respect the boundaries of her role as an interviewer and not a decision maker.

Decision maker F. has stumbled upon a very fundamental point here. Being a functionary of the State, he has to leave behind his private beliefs and enter the neutral public space he works in. Tariq Modood discusses neutrality in *Multiculturalism* (2013) in reference to the theories of political thinkers like Will Kymlicka and John Rawls. The starting point of his discussion is the neutrality of the state with regards to religion (2013:20). Rawls argued that the State could only function if it stayed neutral between the many religious and ethical beliefs of the country. Kymlicka disagrees with this historical interpretation of the liberal state, arguing that this view cannot hold in the light of nationalism and ethnic minorities demanding for groups rights (2013:21).

Modood traces back the separation of church and state and religious neutrality back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and argues its centrality to liberalism (2013:22,23). Kymlicka, however, argues that complete neutrality is impossible. The State always has to make certain choices, for example which holidays to recognize. Moreover, this neutrality cannot be extended to the rights of cultural groups. Certain cultural ideas will inevitably be promoted by the State, and others thereby disadvantaged. Complete neutrality is therefore impossible.

Neutrality, in Modood's view, means an *absence* of State intervention. It is characterized by a lack of intervention, an indifference if you will. What I want to argue here is that there is also a *physicality* to state neutrality, or the representation thereof. This physicality is a very real presence and therefore not an absence. It is not an idea (or the absence of an idea) that drives policy but can also be seen very concretely, in reports, decisions, signs and even the rooms in which the interviews are held. This physicality, then, relates back to the division of roles and the representation of authority and power.

This concreteness of the space of the application centre is reflected by other academic literature on the phenomenon of the border. Steven van Wolputte points out in the introduction to *Borderlands and Frontiers in Africa* (2013) that the borderland is both an analytical tool and something 'real' and concrete (2013:3). The doors, gates, cameras and security personnel all serve as markers of this space, and this applies both in the many African contexts the book describes as well as in the context I describe in this thesis. Not all markers of borderlands are markers of neutrality, security presence for example can be a symbol of outright distrust, but many do represent a kind of neutral uniformity.

Lawyers have their own way of separating function and person with regards to credibility assessment. Many told me when asked that it does not matter what they believe. They're here to represent the client and not to question the integrity of their claims. Whether this position is shared by all lawyers and if it translates to complete trust is another matter, and I will come back to this later.

One asylum seeker whose procedure I followed, M. from Syria, came to the Netherlands together with his brother. I attended his first interview with the IND. The following day he was to see his lawyer and discuss the report of the interview with him. I went to see him in the waiting room before his lawyer went to pick him up.

When I see him, he is sleeping on one of the benches. He wakes up. He says he does not know when the meeting with his lawyer will be. I left him to rest and went looking for his lawyer. When I find him, he just came out of a meeting with an Eritrean client of his. I go with him on his fast paced walk through the corridors of the centre. We first pick up the interpreter, and then M. and his brother.

Once in the room where the meeting is held, their reports are discussed one by one. Wherever there are discrepancies between the brothers' accounts, their lawyer tries to clear up whatever happened. At some point during this meeting, the lawyer decides to try switching of roles:

> An important part of the travel story of both brothers is the part where they have to give their IDs to their travel agent before boarding their plane from Warsaw to Amsterdam. Assuming, explicitly, the role of an IND official, their lawyer says that he could have kept his ID. Poland is considered a safe country and he could have asked for protection from the authorities. F. explains that at that moment, you don't want to make any trouble. Moreover, he did not even know they were going to go through Warsaw. Their lawyer warns them that this element of his story might have consequences now or later, if their asylum claim is re-assessed if the security situation changes. Their lawyer asks him if he was forced to do it or not. F. says no. At some point during this discussion, F. confuses Oslo and Warsaw and the interpreter comments that this indicates how little he knew at that time. F. pleads that this was a fearful and rushed moment but their lawyer replies that it doesn't matter if he believes him, but that the IND believes him (Field notes 25/2).

In order for his client to get his story right and to prepare his client for questioning, the lawyer decides to assume the role of an IND official. The meeting shortly becomes a kind of play, not in the sense of being not serious but in the sense that there is a temporary switching of social roles. In contrast to other plays, however, the function of it is merely functional towards the purpose of the meeting. This actually affirms the role division within the centre. When M. seems

not to see the irony of his performance, he decides to make it explicit. He does not actually have to convince him, he has to practice convincing the IND official.

The building also divides different groups such as lawyers, officials, NGO workers, interpreters and asylum seekers in different wings of the buildings. These wings are separated by doors that can only be opened by those that are insiders to the centre.

Neutrality and this strict spatial separation of different functions within the centre is found especially important in relation to interpreters. A standard passage of every interview reads that: "[...] the interpreter is completely independent and will only occupy himself with the translation of submitted relevant documents and that what is said during this interview." The interpreter is seated at the end of the table, between the asylum seeker and the official. His positioning symbolizes his role as a neutral intermediary.

Their neutrality is not only enforced during the interview but also outside of it. There is a special room near the entrance of the centre where interpreters wait in between different appointments. Even during lunch, in the common lunch area of the centre, interpreters rarely talk to officials or other parties. The impression of partiality needs to be prevented. Informal relations between officials and interpreters can be source of a conflict of interest. I attended a course on the role of the interpreter in which it was explained that the interpreter should never be left alone in a room with the asylum seeker. This could be a reason for an asylum to say that he was pressured or even beaten by the interpreter.

The aforementioned separation of someone's personality and his or her task is facilitated by the physical separation of groups that have different roles in the asylum application procedure. Entering a certain space means fulfilling a certain role. A mismatch between someone's role and the space that he is in can be viewed as suspicious. One official I talked to said she personally knew a lawyer and decided to meet her in the lobby of the building. She told we this was seen by some and viewed as slightly suspicious. Again the space matters in this context. The meeting took place on 'neutral' ground, namely the lobby of the building where all people who are not asylum seekers pass through.

Uniformity and the separation of role and function are both core values of bureaucratic practice. They relate because a conflict of the personal and the official functional is connected to arbitrariness and partiality. An interpreter spending too much time for example having lunch with officials might be viewed as being 'on their side.' This might lead to unequal decision making.

Luck would determine if your interview is held with an interpreter who cares more about the IND than about you, decreasing your chance of getting a permit.

This example also makes clear that neutrality cannot be viewed in absolute terms. There are 'sides' during an interview in which the interpreter is supposed to be an intermediary. The official, then, is not a neutral arbiter anymore but a party in a conflict. This is of course especially true when the IND has to defend a judgement they made when it is appealed. There is a paradoxical situation here where the IND is represented to be both a neutral representative of the state as well as a party in a conflict.

This paradox is reflected in the architecture of the building. The IND is not the only institution that imposes a visual consistency on its representations. The wing of the building that is associated with the legal representation also features uniform rooms and a sparsity of decoration. There are multiple 'neutralities' within the centre.

The anonymization in reports, the separation of person and task and spatial separation the uniformity of both documents and rooms can all be seen as symbolically representing neutrality in the application centre. Neutrality, then, is characterized by the clear functional but also spatial separation of person and function as well as uniformity in both architecture and the representation of decision making in the form of reports and the publication of decisions in 'voornemens' and 'beschikkingen'.

Contrary to what Modood seems to imply, however, neutrality cannot only be characterized by an absence. In my research context, the divorce of the function and the person and uniformity have a very concrete physical presence. Moreover, neutrality is situational. An official can be both a neutral representative of the State as well as a party in a conflict.

The physical space in which credibility assessment takes place matters in the sense that it symbolizes a space of uniform and impersonal decision making. Uniformity and impersonality are both sides of neutrality. It tries to make clear that individual idiosyncrasies and personal biases play no role here. The only thing that matters is someone's function.

Bureaucracy, according to Max Weber (1947), is the most efficient and rational form of control over a population. It trumps any form of organisation with respect to precision, stability, strictness and reliability. In order for its practice to fit this ideal type, the personal needs to be replaced by a neutral idiom that describes the goals and means of bureaucratic practice. This is not only a matter of language, but also a matter of architecture and other material

manifestations. The sameness and strict division of functions that can be found in the application centre flows from this bureaucratic rationality.

Neutral language

Neutrality within the application centre is not only projected outward but also inward. Once the asylum seeker has gone through the first steps of the eight day procedure, it is time for an official to make a preliminary decision on the case. At day five of the procedure, the IND decides to either accept or reject the claim or to decide that more time is needed to research the case. These decisions are mostly based on the reports that are made of the two interviews between the IND and the asylum seeker. The reports use the same uniform formatting I mentioned earlier. The three person conversation of the interview is reduced to a dialogue, with the questions of the IND official printed in italics. The report gives off the impression of a literal representation of what is said.

These reports are not literal transcriptions of what is said during the interview. Officials can decide to deviate from the standard remarks that are prewritten in the report formats that they have saved in their computer systems. I have never seen that the official follows the exact wording of these standard formulations. Sometimes they even leave elements out of it. IND officials are flexible in their choice of what they write down. This also has to do with the fact that interpreters hardly ever translate full sentences. People often speak in fragments and sometimes interpreters have difficulty bringing across clear sentences. This can be a source of frustration for them. After a particularly confusing interview where the asylum seeker at the end thought that I was his legal representative, the interpreter complained that it was hard translating because "people from the Caucasus often do not finish their sentences (Field notes 13/3)." It is the task of the official to make legible sentences out of the often fragmentary translations of what the asylum seekers say. Sometimes there are still quite unintelligible sentences in the report but often they are made to look coherent and understandable.

Mistakes can be made in this process, such as in the case of an Eritrean asylum seeker who I followed throughout his dealings in the application centre:

> There is a small confusion between the official and the interpreter. Some of the things B. says go untranslated. The interpreter asks what she wants to know. She says she wants him (B.) to explain, two sentences at a time and that everything be translated. Throughout the interview, the official misunderstands the interpreter. I even see her making a mistake around years (mistaking 2000 for 2002). I make a remark about this at the end of the interview, and it is corrected.

I usually did not intervene during interviews but for this clear mistake I made an exception. The VWN volunteer who was present might have also seen the mistake. VWN volunteers in the application centre make shadow reports of the interview that they send to the lawyer to see if there are any discrepancies between what is said during the conversation and what ends up in the report. Not all interviews are attended, however, so mistakes like this can end up in reports without it going noticed. In the meetings that asylum seekers have with their lawyers they can be corrected but large discrepancies are not necessarily accepted by the IND.

The mechanisms that are in place to ensure the filtering out of these kinds of mistake show that there is a realization that the transcription process is not unproblematic. Still, it is assumed that a transcription of an interview is enough to base a decision on. In spite of the many different meanings that people might attribute to a word, the report is seen to be enough for a decision on someone's asylum application. Meaning, in a bureaucratic procedure, can be carried over from one official to another in an unproblematic way. This can be understood with reference to the concept of universal conceptual currency as described by Gellner.

He describes two core concepts that describe rationality: consistency and efficiency. These two sides are essential to bureaucracy as well. They come together in bureaucratic practice, as bureaucratic efficiency implies always choosing the same solution to the same problem. This also entails symmetry of treatment (2008:20). Implementing the principle of order assumes the use of a general and neutral language that describes the goals and means of bureaucratic action.

Gellner uses the concept of 'universal conceptual currency' (2008:21) to describe the underlying thoughts of these bureaucratic principles. This concept presupposes a logically continuous space in which facts can be related to each other. One language describes a internally congruent world. The idea of a homogeneous rational language has deep social roots according to Gellner. The unity of ideas in this language is connected to the internally fluid culturally continuous societies (2008:22). What Gellner describes is the social genesis of the world of fact and objectivity. The assumption is that there are neutral facts about the world that can be known. Through reason, we can know things about the world and connect them to each other. This kind of scientific neutrality does not stand on its own but can be seen in the way bureaucracies work

on a daily basis. The practice of interviewing and reporting can be seen in this light as well. The report that is the basis of decision making can stay with an asylum seeker for a long time. It can be used in appeal procedures and even later when residence permits are withdrawn. The report is treated as a list of facts about someone's case. The context of the interview is left out of it. There is some room for altering the report but after the few days in the application centre, it is taken to be an accurate representation of the facts around someone's case. No matter where it is read or by whom, the same 'facts' can be read out of it. This is not to say that there is no awareness at all of the fact that there are no differences of meaning. That is, after all, why there are lawyers, NGO workers, judges etc. There is some indication of the realization that there is room for interpretation in these cases. Generally, though, the report is used as a neutral representation of statements.

Bureaucratic practice needs a kind of neutral language to function. If there are to be similar outcomes to similar cases, the facts in a case cannot just be a matter of individual interpretation. This language is also a condition for flexibility. If a case is to be carried from one of the official to the next, there has to be an assumption of relatively unproblematic communication. This neutral idiom also allows for the relatively short training that officials need. The way officials are supposed to work is included in manuals. In the case of credibility assessment, there is an official work instruction on how this is done (IND, 2010).

Flexibility

The neutrality of language I described above allows for a degree of flexibility. This flexibility might seem contradictory to the rule bound rigidity of bureaucratic rationality but I here I will argue it is central to it. IND officials can take up any one subfunction throughout their work week. An official could decide to do multiple interviews throughout the week or to just focus on decision making. There is a variety of types of cases, from regular standard procedure cases to repeated asylum claims to family reunion cases. It is not the case that there is complete freedom or that any official could fulfill any task but there is a large degree of flexibility in the tasks that can be fulfilled. This flexibility, however, is dependent on political circumstances as well. In the light of the recent increased numbers of asylum seekers, the flexibility of officials has been curtailed. The IND workforce has had to adapt to this increased inflow and all kinds of measures are put into practice to cope with it. These measures delimit the range of choice in tasks. In this thesis, however, I will describe the situation as it was when I did my fieldwork, from February to the end of April.

Flexibility of functions does not only exist within the IND. Despite the sometimes rigid seeming barriers between the different institutions in the application centre, people do sometimes switch from one organization to another. Some of the officials I knew had worked for Vluchtelingenwerk in the past.

Gellner discusses the concept of mobility in industrial societies. He argues that in spite of the highly specialized division of labour that exists in these societies, training is usually quite general. Specializations depend on general training (2008:26,27). He likens this kind of education to training within an army. First, all the recruits get the same general training. In this training, they are to learn the common rituals of the army at large. Only after that they get the kind of specialized training that allows them to carry out specific tasks. Retraining only takes a limited amount of time (ibid., 27). IND officials too, can be trained in a limited amount of time. Changes in the always unpredictable flow of migrants can be partly countered by the hiring of new staff that can be prepared for the job in a relatively short time. Many also work through temp agencies and have flexible short term contracts.

In the ideal type of bureaucratic ordering, officials are generally interchangeable. Not from one moment to the next, but relatively easily. This corresponds with the anonymity and uniformity of representations that I mentioned earlier.

The flexibility of functionaries within a bureaucracy is not contradictory to the principles of rational bureaucracy but central to it. In order for credibility assessment to be effective in the eyes of the IND, it needs to be unpredictable and creative. The uniformity and anonymity of representations in the application centre and flexibility are different side of the same coin. Bureaucratic rationality is represented to be neutral and anonymous and at the same time flexible. This flexibility is perceived to be necessary for effectiveness.

Neutrality, then, is an essential element of the reality I describe in my fieldwork. It is intimately connected to the rationality of industrial society. The flexibility that can be seen in some practice seems to form a paradox to the rule bound uniformity of bureaucratic practice but is actually connected to it. This is not to say that neutrality is an accurate description of what actually happens in the application centre but it has a clear symbolic and material presence.

Plain tickets

I go straight to the waiting room to see M., who I saw yesterday during his first interview. I find him sleeping. He doesn't know when the appointment with his lawyer is. I leave him to rest and look for his lawyer.

The lawyer (N.) is an experienced lawyer, a friendly man dressed in a suit. He just came out of another meeting with an Eritrean client of his. The evaluation of his first hearing is held together with his brother F. We briskly walk through the hallways and pick up the interpreter and afterwards M. and F. F.'s evaluation goes first. Before we start the conversation I have a little discussion about the secrecy of the conversation, nothing is to be said about it especially to the IND.

One of the first things we discuss is picking up documents from home. This is dangerous, because of the presence of snipers and artillery strikes. N. writes this down. F. explains that all mail is checked by the security services.
N. looks at the report when reading it to him, and looks at the two brothers whenever he finds an apparent contradiction or unclarity. The brothers sometimes converse among each other, this is not translated. F. had a Portuguese ID when travelling through Europe, whereas M. had a Greek one. He was asked something in Portuguese at some point, and that was when they found out he wasn't actually Portuguese. M. and F. sometimes travelled together, and sometimes separately for longer or shorter periods of time.

Like other conversations, there are discussions about the meanings of different words between the interpreter and the different parties (for example the word taxi). F. emphasises he is quite attentive to these issues of meaning because he doesn't want there to be contradictions within his story and between his and his brother's.

An important part of the travel story of both brothers is the part where they have to give their IDs to their travel agent before boarding their plane from Warsaw to Amsterdam. Assuming, explicitly, the role of an IND official N., says that he could have kept his ID. Poland is considered a safe country and he could have asked for protection from the authorities. "At that moment, you don't want to make any trouble," F.explains. Moreover, he did not even know they were going to go through Warsaw. N. warns them that this element of his story might have consequences now or later, if their asylum claim is re-assessed if the security situation changes. "Were you forced to do this", N. asks, F replies he wasn't.

At some point during this discussion, F. confuses Oslo and Warsaw and the interpreter comments that this indicates how little he knew at that time. F. pleads that this was a fearful and rushed moment but N. replies that it doesn't matter if he believes him, but that the IND believes him.

N. explains to F. that his possession of a plain ticket from Warsaw might be enough for a Dublin claim. Right now this is not an issue, but you never know what the IND does tomorrow.

F. asks what he should say when confronted with the fact about the forced/not forced surrender of his ID to the travel agent and N. replies that he cannot make up a story for him. M. comments that he know of many people who traveled by plane whereas they claimed they traveled by truck. "At least we were honest about this." N. repeats that the missing ID will be a point of objection once the war in Syria is over. F. says it is easy to talk about these things in hindsight, but that at that moment he was really frightened.

N. also explains that the IND will think, considering both brothers' level of education, that they are supposed to have knowledge of their surroundings.

Another point of contention is that F. did not apply for asylum within 48 hours, which is obligatory within Dutch law. N. looks at F. when pointing this out. You should know that you have to report yourself to the authorities. This point, and the point about the IDs will not matter right now, because of the lenient policy regarding Syrians, but later it might be important. He explains that, if you don't report immediately, they might think 'other things.'

F. asks his lawyer if he has any tips or advice on how to do his second interview. N: "we already went through this," he says that he should especially talk about events before his departure.

M.'s evaluation is started with the remark that we have to pay attention to possible contradictions between his and his brother's story. He explains to them that the more family members there are, the more problematic an asylum application becomes.

M. points out that the address, as it is mentioned in his brother's report, is not complete, lacking the indication of a neighbourhood. They again mention the issue of the official address not being the same as the real address. N. emphasises that he should mention it whenever something is not entirely clear.

The interpreter has translated many things wrongly, M. says, naming the example of sending his ID and driver's license through DHL. Later it also seemed that the interpreter confused voluntarily and involuntarily. This is why he tried to say things in English. N. says it isn't so bad. About this, M. says that he didn't keep the DHL envelope, and asks his lawyer rhetorically if he wouldn't do the same. N. honestly replies he would have kept the envelope, and that this might be because he is a lawyer but recommends that M. do this. M. says he learned his lesson.

In the report it says that M. has said that he has always had a Syrian passport, but by this he means that he had the Syrian nationality. He is not exactly sure when he got his own passport, but this was probably at the age of fifteen.

M. tells his lawyer that he got the impression that the official found it quite annoying that he used his phone to remember the date of a certain event. He advises him not to do this again, as this might negatively impact his credibility.

After the meeting, I talk a little to N. about credibility assessment. He claims that sometimes people even ask him to make up asylum stories. His services obviously don't go that far, he explains. With regards to his own assessment of credibility, he often distinguishes between the travel story and asylum motives. There are often many issues with the travel story. He sometimes has his own doubts about his clients' stories. Sometimes the IND believes a client and decides positively, whereas he doesn't believe him/her, and vice versa.

Talking about this case, he said that handing in the airplane ticket wasn't very smart. This might have been a little too honest. He notices that sometimes asylum seekers tell different stories to the IND, VWN, and lawyers.

In the new fast procedure, there is little room for further investigation, which can have both negative and positive consequences with regard to credibility. He says that credibility often comes down to the power of one or two officials, they have the power to make a case be 'about semicolons.' He tells me a story about someone who claimed it was a four hour walk to a certain place whereas he meant four hours to the border, a minor detail in his view but deciding in this case.

A culture of disbelief: Distrust and Misunderstanding

Trust

Muhammad Abdelhamid Abdulrahman, a journalist and refugee from Sudan, asked for asylum in 1998 in the same application centre where I carried out my research. He describes how he met two other Sudanese: "I told my story, after which the oldest asked if I told all this to the interviewer. When I affirmed this, he looked at me with pity. It appeared that he had been in the Netherlands for two years as a recognized refugee and now he was here to visit a friend. 'Listen, my dear', he said, 'those who interrogated you there in Zevenaar represent the Ministry of Justice and the police! It is very unwise, or actually a big mistake, to tell the truth to people like that!!' I was perplexed (Amnesty International, 2001:46)." The kinds of claims of which the credibility has to be assessed are of a sensitive nature. Refugees often flee from countries where governments can't be trusted, but in order for their asylum claims to be successful they have to trust their interviewing official and interpreter to handle the information they give in a confidential manner. The environment in which people tell their story, however, is not particularly conducive towards trust. This is not because officials are always impatient and skeptical, although they can be, but relates to more general characteristics of the asylum procedure as carried out within the application centre.

Trust in a bureaucratic environment can be defined as predictability (Grey, Garsten, 2001:231). A trustworthy person in a bureaucratic environment is someone who performs according to the expectations that are had of him. The socially constructed credible refugee fits within this image. It is a person who confirms the neutral facts described in country reports and provides a consistent and predictable account of what has happened to him. This is an ideal type, of course, and it is not said that every asylum seeker should have to confirm to this ideal type to gain refugee status.

Khosravi describes the 'culture of disbelief' as one solely aimed at finding discrepancies in the asylum seeker's account of his reasons to flee (2011:112). Finding discrepancies, however, is not necessarily done with the intention of rejecting someone's claim. As a senior official explained, finding discrepancies at an early stage, during the interview, allows someone to clear up his account before the deciding stage. Changes made at that point are much less likely to be accepted. This way of questioning does mean, however, that mistrust becomes apparent during the interview. I read a report in which the following question was asked: "This is what bewildered

me today. You make a very eloquent impression and explained that freedom of expression is important to you. You distanced yourself from Islam and still you decide to join a very strict faith with like rules. I don't understand that. Can you explain this?" Instead of choosing for an open ended process of understanding, the official clearly expresses her distrust.

Whether it is in the asylum seeker's best interest or not, an image of distrust is presented immediately. I recall the 'machine gun' questions that Syrian asylum seeker H. described, and a Syrian woman who felt that she was questioned like a criminal. It might be hard to make the distinction for some between an interviewer and an interrogator. H. kept referring to officials as 'detectives.' One official explained that often people would see the IND as a kind of secret service. All this points to a structural absence of trust.

Khosravi describes the criminalization of migrants in this same chapter. Asylum seekers are an object of security technology from the moment they enter the application centre. Security cameras watch them and they have to be reported to security personnel at their entrance and exit. Signs prohibiting certain actions, eating and drinking in certain areas for example, abound in the waiting area. The outside area is fenced off. Security concerns can be a justification for disbelief as well:

> This morning I attend a second interview with Georgian asylum seeker G. and official E. It was planned for 8am but it starts half an hour later. A VVN volunteer (W.) also attends. I first arrange with VVN that it's okay that I attend and it is. When I come back I see P. from the first interview talking to E.
> D. says his origins are not entirely clear. For example, he doesn't speak Abkhazic. Since he doesn't have any documents, 'we' have to watch for who we give a permit. They could be war criminals or even ordinary criminals. He tells a story of an asylum seeker from Gambia who was supposedly searched by Interpol. He says we give him the Georgian nationality since we (the Netherlands) don't recognize Abkhazia as an independent state. He wonders if he really is ethnically Abkhaz.

The uncertainty about someone's origin is defined as a risk here. The 'other' could be an ordinary criminal or even war criminal. A context of distrust is created, even before the interview begins. This happens in other cases as well. In one case, of an interview with an Iranian woman who asked for asylum because she claimed to have converted to christianity.The interviewing official expressed his distrust even before the interview. "He explains that this is their third attempt to ask for asylum. If it is true that she only converted after her application was rejected, she is '1-0 behind', his gut feeling about the case will not be good (Field notes 25/4)."

I do not want to accuse the individual official of personal prejudice. Pre-judgements are not fleeting products of the individual mind but maintained by both ideological and material structures that are present within the centre. Despite the official's possibly good efforts to take away some of the inequalities during the interview, structural force are against mutual trust and understanding. The emphasis on security technology is an expression of the wish to control. Control is negatively associated with trust (Hudson, 2004: 83).

Control through managing is an important part of bureaucratic action at the application centre. The 'unit' I worked in usually started the day with a small meeting. New trends in immigration are discussed but mostly the emphasis is on numbers and processes. Charts are placed at both sides of the wall where schedules and production targets are put. Cases get their meaning in managerial terms when presented in terms of production goals. At a meeting I attended, concerning the then warning new numbers of asylum seekers, officials expressed their concern. The manager, though, ended the meeting with the remark that a lot of things went well too, referring to numbers that represented the unit's productivity.

The bureaucratic environment of the application centre is not directed towards trust but towards control. The product of this structure is an absence of trust. In the following chapter I will explain the consequences for mutual understanding.

Understanding

Trust relates to understanding in the sense that a degree of trust needs to be established for two parties to bridge each other's cultural horizons. Gellner describes how our particular idea of rationality has deep social roots. Defining rationality as a non transcendent and therefore not universal but culturally constructed idea show the limits of our way of understanding the 'other', the asylum seeker. I do not want to argue, however, that understanding is not possible at all. Understanding is possible, but very limited because of the limited and unequal encounters between asylum seekers and bureaucratic institutions. Using 'objective' Country of Origin Information to understand the other remains limited because it involves no encounter with the 'other' and cannot contribute to a broader collective imagination within any organization.

How can people understand each other in an unequal environment, with a spatial separation of the 'self' and the 'other?' I use Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons to make way for a different way of knowing than through the positivistic frame of knowing neutral 'facts.' It involves seeing one's own cultural horizon as fluid and mutable (Nielsen, 2013:2). Before I explain his way of seeing understanding I wish to point out that here is also a danger in seeing

understanding through the lense of culture. Definitions of culture can often take a nationalist or otherwise essentialist form. During one case discussion, an official referred to 'African culture' to explain someone's strange seeming statements. Although in this case it was used to broaden the number of explanations for a statement, this remains a limited way of seeing culture as bound by the geographical borders of a continent.

Gadamer's notion of cultural horizons with fluid boundaries allows us to go beyond this bordered definition. He emphasises the dialectical nature of understanding, moving beyond an ethnocentric or culturally relativist approach. His notion of understanding goes beyond that of the scientific, as it concerns "human experience of the world in general (Gadamer, 1961:11,12)." His approach has three main characteristics: bilateralism, party-dependance and openness to goal revision (Nielsen 2013:3). He views understanding in terms of experience. An experienced person, according to Gadamer, is someone who is open to new experiences and capable of being surprised, who is willing to doubt his own assumptions (Nielsen 2013:8).

According to the French philosopher Etienne Balibar, borders are about controlling the movement of people (2004). Bureaucracy is can be seen as a powerful instrument to achieve this control. As Weber argued, bureaucracy is one of the most rational and effective means of control over a population (1947:227). Credibility assessment, as it is practiced at the application centre, can also be seen as acquiring control over someone's story. Nielsen identifies intellectual control over an object as contrary to Gadamer's conception of understanding (2013:5). Understanding remains fluid and open. Fixing 'facts' can be seen as the exclusion of surprises (ibid.,: 4).

To illustrate the difficulty of applying this model of understanding I come back to the example of asylum seeker G. from Georgia.

> We resume the interview and one of the first things E. asks is what would happen if he would go back. His question is apparently not understood and G. replies he would never go back. After E. reformulates the question, he does understand.
> G. explains that Georgia is a different reality, and might be hard to understand for those outside of it. It is difficult to explain and hard to imagine. E. says that is why he asks so that G. can clarify.
> Throughout the interview, E. mostly looks at the screen when asking his questions and sometimes at the interpreter and G.
> At some point, G. shows his leg and where he got beaten with a club by a Russian border guard. E. doesn't look at it (Field notes 18/3).

Here, the official puts the responsibility for mutual understanding in the asylum seeker's hands. If there is misunderstanding, it is the 'other's' responsibility to clarify. This goes against the dialogical method of understanding that Gadamer proposes. He is not willing to let the 'experience', in Gadamer's sense, recast his own assumptions. Instead, it is up to G. to convince him of his reality. His role is as a reader of G.'s 'text' is essentially passive. The practice of credibility assessment allows for the blocking of 'experience' as it can always dismiss surprising statements as incredible. A senior official pointed out to me that the longer you work here, the less you believe. If we assume Gadamer's definition of experience, officials can be argued to become less experienced as they work longer. This is not to say that this is true for all officials. An experienced interviewer told me that when he started he used to be very strict on dates, but that over time he came to realize that the limitations of memory might justify a more flexible way of seeing this. Another more senior officials says that looking back over his career, he would not exclude the possibility that some claims had been falsely rejected. This goes to show that there is nothing automatic about the fusion of horizons. It requires effort, and the willingness to be challenged by the other's perspective (Nielsen, 2013:11). Earlier I described how the separation of the person and the official role is an essential part of bureaucratic rationality. This official separation, however, could run the risk of disregarding where official judgements and personally held prejudices do merge. By making them explicit, it could become clear how they mismatch with the other's assumptions. This is difficult in an environment where 'self' and 'other' are separated spatially.

> We take a lunch break. I briefly talk to O. He says that the story will not be very convincing to the IND. The story is quite short, and he can't give many concrete answers to G.'s questions. Many Dutch people will not understand his stories but if you see documentaries, for example those by Corstius you can imagine it, it comes to life. He also comments that E. ("the official") repeats a lot of questions and doesn't seem to understand the situation.
>
> Back to E., he says it is not looking well for him, he's blocking. For example, naming street names isn't going well for him. He can't really clarify things. This starts with the language, he doesn't accept his explanations of why he doesn't speak Abkhaz, nor does he understand why the other people in his life, especially the uncle, speak the languages they speak.
>
> Also, if Gali were Georgian, what was the uncle (being Abkhaz) doing there? He says this doesn't match with the info he has. He further names the fact that 40% of Abkhaz people are Muslim, G. doesn't mention this (Field notes 18/3).

If we see the interview as a performance, an anthropological aid to this fusion of horizons could be the 'suspension of disbelief' (Conquergood, 1989:83). In order to investigate the other's point of view, we have to shed our usual scientific scepticism and temporarily suspend our disbelief. I remember making the comparison between an interview and a play in a conversation with official E. He laughed and said that there sure was a lot of improvisation and bad acting involved in these plays. The 'suspension of disbelief', though, puts some responsibility for believing in the hands of the spectator of the play. A broadened imagination might therefore help in achieving this. As VWN volunteer O. demonstrates, documentaries, such as those about the Caucasus by Jelle Brandt Corstius (2014) can serve as a way of broadening one's horizon. Another VWN volunteer pointed out his fear that with the hiring of a lot of young employees, credibility assessment might be done by people with less life experience who are therefore more prone to exclude things they find implausible on the basis of a limited worldview. However, the way credibility is assessed can also function to block experience from functioning in Gadamer's sense. There is no uncomplicated link between the kind of experience gained in the application centre and the way it is described by Gadamer.

During a course I attended on the functioning of interpreters, I asked if there were ever any information sessions between interpreters and IND officials since they could possess valuable information. My suggestion was dismissed saying that their information is 'not objective.' A similar situation occurred when I attended a small course on determining someone's origins. When I suggested to the course leader that separating between someone's culture and geography is not always justified and that the IND could use more information than just maps, he explained that the IND is really not so much concerned with 'cultural' information but more with 'hard' evidence and objective sources. The search for objectivity, in this way, can also bar the influx of information as it dismisses 'experiential' knowledge as subjective and therefore not relevant. This same search for objectivity can be found with critics of the way credibility is assessed as well. In a recent UNHCR report, similar criticisms are leveled at the practices of different EU Member States, among others the Netherlands, that are directed towards asylum claims that are not found credible. There is inconsistency within and between asylum systems and there are discrepancies between practice and official policy. The reports ends with a call for a more structured and harmonized approach and with a rejection of the subjectivity of decision makers (UNHCR, 251).

There is resistance to the dominant way of assessing credibility as well. I joined some Ugandan asylum seekers at their table in the waiting room to ask them about their experiences with the IND:

> Going back to the waiting room, I talk to the man whose interview I was supposed to attend. His application was rejected earlier and is now applying for the second time. I learn his name is E. He says that the environment is good, and that they comfort you. The problem is not that but the interview. This seems to be not about your problems but about how you present them. They don't take into account the circumstances in which the interview takes place. Moreover, they only look at mistakes.
> About the circumstances, he says people have gone through hell, but they expect you to tell and remember everything.
> If the 'flow' of your story is not correct, they don't accept your claims. They take the situations as it is in Europe and project it on Africa. For example: in Europe you have to know the date of birth of your partner. In Uganda, your age is a secret, it only appears when someone dies. The same counts for your father's and mother's ages.
> Culture and situations of refugees have to be taken into account in the judgment about someone's story. Another example: here, you would go to the police for protection. There, it is normal to hide with someone else. In the Netherlands, people wouldn't help you if they would risk their work. In Uganda, this is normal. They also asked him how someone from the government would help if you if you are anti-government? This is acceptable in Uganda, but unimaginable in the Netherlands.
> They also think you know everything about your country. For example, someone from a northern district might not know where lake Victoria is which they do presume you do. Also in Uganda, for example you would not know all the ministers. You would know your local politician but not the whole party, like you would the PvdA here.
> What they ask, he and N. repeat, is not about your problems.
> They ask what I would do as a researcher. What do they (IND) base themselves on? I tell him they use several internet sources. They ask, why don't they go there to see for themselves? They only sit at their desks and look at the internet, it is a desk job. Another problem is that they also only ask the government [in the countries of origin of refugees].
> They presume you know all sorts of things, and if you don't they reject your application.
> He explains how things went wrong with his medical examination. His leg was broken but they did not believe he was hurt. He starts arguing for earlier medical examinations.

The Ugandan asylum seeker explains that although the circumstances of the interview can be good and comforting, he has fundamental doubt about the way people are understood. He argues against the desk-job nature of the way officials function and against government centered information. They argue for going and being there as a good way of understanding the situation, instead of just using government centered sources.

The separation of the personal and the professional can be a source of misunderstanding, as it blocks letting in the 'other', seeing the person as separate from the application. This disjuncture is understandable, when confronted with misery every day there cannot be too much of an emotional continuity between the professional and personal identities:

> W. and I talk shortly after we say goodbye to the very friendly interpreter. He seems to want to go back to his work. "We just do our work here", he says. We all have our 'tefal-jacket' he says, after so many years of working for the IND. He compares himself to Tony Blair, who also supposedly had a 'tefal-layer' (10/2).

The separation between person and official role that is promoted within a bureaucratic environment can be a barrier towards mutual understanding. In spite of the sometimes good intentions of officials to create an atmosphere of trust, distrust is directed towards asylum seekers and conversations take place in a context of inequality.

Power and uncertainty

The separation between the 'genuine' and 'fake' refugee involves all parties, in the following chapter I will elaborate on this shared struggle. This is not to say that all parties have equal power to do so. I will argue here that power takes the form of flexibility and exception making and is expressed materially as well. The structure of the application centre involves uncertainty to different degrees for different parties. What might seem as a rational and predictable system to a participant in one organization or group, might seem like a lottery to the other. Rationality and predictability, are bounded concepts, tied to one's social positioning within the field of the application centre.

The functioning of bureaucracy is sometimes quite the opposite of Weber's characterization of precision, reliability and efficiency (1947:337). Instead bureaucratic organizations are often seen as inefficient and unreliable. Other anthropological writings have focused on the encounter with bureaucracy of asylum seekers through the eyes of its clients. Melanie Griffiths, for example, describes how the rules of credibility seem not to apply to the bureaucratic institutions themselves. These institutions seem incomprehensible, incongruous and unreliable to them, and a double standard is employed in valuing inconsistencies by asylum seekers and UK border officials (2012:8). It is not that the asylum bureaucracy is in itself irrational, but its rationality is not accessible to its clients. This relates back to Bauman's view of the manipulation of uncertainty (2006:42). If the rationality of bureaucracy is only comprehensible to the bureaucrats themselves, there is a large potential for unequal power relations. Some more sinister interpretations of bureaucracy see keeping clients in the dark. Zachary Whyte suggests that uncertainty is inherent to the bureaucracy surrounding asylum (2011:18). He uses the concept of the myopticon instead of the Foucauldian panopticon to emphasise the rather limited view of the state. Instead of tight surveillance, the gaze of the "watchdogs of the nation state" is kept limited. He considers the myopic bureaucracy not as a failing or inept system but as an integral part of the exercise of state power. By keeping asylum seekers in the dark, an environment is created that makes forcibly returning asylum seekers easier. They are kept at a distance, not transformed into citizens and through their social isolation their possible deportation is facilitated (2011:21).

Many lawyers I spoke to found the process of credibility assessment quite arbitrary. One interpreter I talked to even compared the system to a lottery. This is a commonly used metaphor. The European Council on Refugees and Exiles, for example, shows the differences between the

percentage of admittance between different EU countries (ECRE). In spite of many European efforts to harmonize asylum systems, large discrepancies exist. These discrepancies are there at the individual level as well, between different officials.

Material representation of power

It is up to the official to represent the asylum seeker's words. The interview is set up in such a way that the computer screen is facing the official. As the interview progresses, information from other officials can come in through email. For example, statements by the asylum seekers can be checked by the RIC, the Regional Information Centre, by comparison with public sources. These emails remain hidden to the interviewee and to other parties sitting at the other side of the table. As I mentioned earlier, the interview uses the official's terms to describe the situation of the asylum seeker. It is in his or her hands to represent his words. There is no source independent of this, except when a shadow report is made by VWN. The inaccessibility of information is symbolically represented by the world map and the computer that face the official and not the asylum seeker.

The official sits in a comfortable chair, in contrast to the slightly less comfortable chairs used by the asylum seeker and the interpreter, and other parties if present. Interview can take a whole day, and breaks are only kept every couple of hours. Often after a few hours, interpreters and asylum seekers can be seen shifting in their seats. An interview can be a physically uncomfortable event, which I experienced myself too. The official, seated in a large ergonomically responsible desk chair, is given a slight edge in this.

The material environment of the interviewing gives off an impression of impersonality and neutrality. When seated, the official roles of everyone are clearly represented in their positioning. Outside of these formal settings, when the asylum seeker is picked up from the waiting room and the interpreter escorted through the halls, there is usually silence. There are usually some words between the interpreter and the official but the asylum seeker is usually not part of the conversation.

Power and uncertainty

Power differences, as Bauman (2006) explains, are often about the manipulation of uncertainty. This happens not only in relation to credibility assessment, but during the whole procedure. An example of this is timekeeping. Asylum seekers are expected to be on time for their interviews, and failure to be there on time can have negative procedural consequences. At one instance, an

asylum seeker was supposed to be at the application centre for a repeated asylum claim. After one hour of waiting, the official decided to cancel the interview. There would be too little time to decide on his case.

Asylum seekers, on the other hand, are often kept waiting. Many of the interviews I attended started late, sometimes even by an hour or longer. The asylum seeker is mostly kept in the dark about why the interview starts late. The same happens to many meetings between lawyers and asylum seekers as well. The uncertainty of waiting for a decision on an asylum claim is reproduced on a smaller scale in the application centre as well.

The power of flexibility

There is not only flexibility between tasks that I described earlier but also within tasks. Asking 'creative' questions is often recommended when probing someone's credibility. During a course I attended on the determining of origins, this was pointed out by a course leader:

> Before, the official comments, this check used to take form of a list of questions about flag, colours of the flag, currency, current president etc. This was found problematic because people could prepare for these questions. A story was told of someone finding a map of a certain place in Iraq that people supposedly used to prepare for the questions in the interviews. The course leaders therefore recommended the course participants to be creative with their questions so that they can't be prepared for (Field notes 3/3).

It might seem contradictory that in order to be a good bureaucrat, you need to be flexible and creative. Flexibility, however, is not antithetical to bureaucratic functioning. The general education of officials allows for moving beyond a standard checklist of questions. The ability to ask creative questions is dependent upon a generalized education that allows for an understanding of the general goals of bureaucratic action. Paradoxically, sameness is a condition for creativity and flexibility. This is because ideally, the IND bureaucracy works according to a set of principles, and not endlessly specific rules. Principles allow for flexibility because they are about goals and not explicitly described means. This can be seen in the following example:

> An important part of the interview revolves around his objections to military service. R. asks a lot of questions about this when he hears that C. is against bearing arms. After some explanation R. calls this an 'outspoken ideology', hinting at pacifism. He asks a quite creative question asking if he would be against UN peace missions (he was against those, 'weapons can't create peace') (Field notes 13/2).

This example shows that there does not need to be a standardized way of ascertaining 'pacifism', which is what is at stake here. Refusal to participate in military service can be grounds for asylum as well (UN Commission on Human Rights). Understanding of this principle is necessary for a creative way of asking questions.

Flexibility is not unique to the bureaucratic context I describe. Bauman (2006) cites the example of a study by Michael Crozier (1963-4) that argues against the universal applicability of the Weberian model of bureaucracy as characterized by rationality. Instead, he found that his particular case was defined by irrationality as officials constantly sought to stretch or even subvert rules to gain power (2008:41). According to Bauman, this flexible power of officials is not a particularity of Michael Crozier's study but a universal in the exercise of power. Flexibility allows for the manipulation of uncertainty, which is a potent "tool of power (2008:42)". His description of the functionary as someone as "an adversary whose moves cannot be predicted and defy expectations (2008:42)" could not be more fitting in this context. This unpredictability, however, is not absolute irrationality but perceived uncertainty and actually flows from the principles of bureaucratic rationality.

There are examples to the contrary as well. Some officials choose to contextualize the questions they pose. They explain why they ask the questions they do. In one example, during a first interview, the official explained why a lot of questions were asked about someone's place of birth. He explained that this was needed because the Eritrean asylum seeker could not prove his nationality with documents because he did not have any. The point is not that the reason why questions are asked are always kept obscure but that it depends on the person if this is done or not. The contextualization of questions is also often not included in the rapport. The official representation seems to give off an appearance of uniformity that often does not match with the actual practice.

Power, though, is not always oppressive and harmful. Deviations from standard procedures can be done with the best intentions towards the interests of the asylum seeker. This involves a realization that some questions might be appropriate in some circumstances and not in others. An official explained to me the reason why she deviated from the standard order of questions in the following way.

> Back in the interviewing room, V. explains why she left some questions out. She decided to ask the
> questions on his origins after he explained his reasons to leave Eritrea, as this is the most important part
> of the hearing and this is what he's been prepared for. She names an example of a question that she

Noticeably, uncertainty might actually be at both ends of the interviewing process. As the relevance of questions only becomes apparent during the course of the interview, the unpredictability of the interview affects all parties in it.

Power is exercised in the application centre through flexibility. The asylum seeker is faced with an adversary whose moves cannot be predicted. This power, however, is not necessarily harmful to the asylum seeker's claim.

Secrecy

The use of Country of Origin Information is another example of the exercise of bureaucratic power. Recent media attention was especially focused on the increased numbers of Eritrean asylum seekers. In a televised interview with the State Secretary of Security and Justice, Fred Teeven (Één op één, 2014) there was also talk of Ethiopian asylum seekers who pose as Eritreans. These people were called 'fortune seekers' by both the interviewer and the interviewee. The misrepresentation of their nationality is immediately identified with migration for 'economic' reasons. One of the main source for questions around credibility is the ascertaining of asylum seekers' country of origin. A different country of origin means different country bound policy so it is essential to categorize people by their nationalities. This often happens in the absence of documents. In order for effective bureaucratic categorizing of these people to succeed, the IND needs to rely on non public sources of information. An official explained to me the use of information in the determination of people's origins:

Most information comes from public sources. Besides that, we have non public sources, such as the reports from BLT (Bureau Land en Taal). With regards to Eritrea, a lot depends on the determination of someone's origins, unless there are contra-indications (Dublin, safe third country, proof of legal exit). He takes the example of a hearing I attended with asylum seeker B.

The HIS system and google maps are used to look at people's places of origin. He shows me the BLT report for Eritrea, including a number of cities with illustrations and descriptions. The danger of this check is that asylum seekers can prepare these things. So what we try to do is to individualize the questions. For example, they ask to describe the route from their home to a certain place and this is used to determine credibility. There are limits to this, since there is quite little information about Eritrea. Often, these

Again, the asylum seeker is faced with someone who cannot be predicted because the sources of information he uses are not accessible to him or her. The same counts for lawyers and other defendants of asylum seekers' cases. If an interview were completely predictable, the asylum seeker could pass through the system with made up stories in the eyes of this official. Determining someone's origins can be like an exam. The general aim of the questioning, determining one's country of origin, is clear but the questions are not. One Sudanese asylum seeker whose interview I attended used this same exam metaphor to describe his nervosity before the interview. This was a man who was highly educated, in law even, and spoke multiple languages.

The power of exception

Exception making can be an instrument of power too. Bauman (2006) explains that if a power is to be sovereign, it has to have the capability to be flexible about its own rules. It can't be a slave of its own regularity. It will become clear that flexibility and exception making have the same kind of basis for its power. The discretion officials have can be related to this flexible have power. Discretion can be used both negatively and positively. One experienced official I talked to, when faced with an Eritrean couple who had just gotten a child who was possible HIV positive, she decided these people could not be sent back. This in spite of a lack of evidence that the couple actually came from Eritrea and not Ethiopia. Moving within the law, looking for exceptions, she found a way to do this. She explained to me that she could have just as well rejected their claim. A way to make exceptions and to be flexible is with reference to someone's frame of reference:

> Official L. says he is doing a Syrian case and is willing to explain the process. The person in question has
> no passport or ID. He will not look so much at credibility as a credible story can only lead to a a-ground
> asylum which is not the case. What he will look at is the 31 lid 2f optional grounds for rejection
> (facultatieve afwijzingsgronden).
> He says he will take into account his age (he is from 1954, which is considered old in Syria according to
> L.) and the fact that he worked in a kitchen most of his life. He is therefore not very likely to know a lot
> about his environment.
> [...]

> There were some contradictions in what the applicant had said about his passport. His story about his ID was not too clear either but he decided he was not going to blame this on him. However, the fact that he did not take his train ticket he will be held accountable for (Field notes 25/3).

Because of the human rights situation in Syria, nobody is sent back there because of an incredible asylum claim. Credibility is assessed, however, but the assessment is kept in the internal 'minuut' document. The only thing the claimant and his lawyer will see is the acceptance document. The front of formality hides the kind of flexibility that bureaucrats are often accused of having a lack of.

The official in this case refers to the claimant's frame of reference to justify his exception. This shows that a literal reading of someone's report is but a representation of what goes on during the decision making process. Officials are aware that not everything that is said can't be taken literally, and that someone's individual circumstances will have to be taken into account.

The extent to which this taking into account of circumstances is applied is left to the discretion of the official. There is a part of the 'minuut' where someone's frame of reference can be filled in but this is mostly used to write down a short sentence about someone's education level. If contradictions are disregarded, this is not represented in the 'voornemen' or 'beschikking'. The walls of formality obscure the exception making that goes on inside the IND.

The frame of reference is an interesting element of the asylum application. It allows for a connection between the applicant and the application. Despite the emphasis on separating the two, they find a connection here. Ascertaining someone's frame of reference can be a reason to accept a statement from one person but not another. If the applicant were highly educated, then a similar kind of flexibility could not have been applied. Already in its own principles, the asylum procedure produces a kind of paradox. The practice of recording someone's frame of reference, however shortly, allows for a measure of seeing the applicant and application as intertwined.

Power through exception making is described by Zygmunt Bauman in *Modern Athens and Ancient Jerusalem.* He begins his argument with the description of cosmic fear. He defines this as the kind of fear experienced in the face of something that cannot be known or predicted. People experience uncertainty because of their inability to comprehend this great universe (2006: 107). Later this indifferent universe was replaced by a God that has control over its own conduct. This seemed to represent a step forward in the uncertainty felt by human beings compared to cosmic fear. If God would keep his promise of being kind to those who obey him, he would be

bound by the rules he himself set. This would contradict his power. The story of Job, that tells of how God punishes Job in spite of his piety, shows that God is not bound by his own rules and therefore remains omnipotent. According to Bauman, the same is true with regards to the State: the power of the state is derived from its power to make exceptions. Just like God, it is not bound by its own rules. A biblical metaphor with regard to the uncertainty faced by the 'clients' of the IND was also used by a lawyer. At the end of a meeting with a Syrian client he said that they will probably accept his claim. However, "de wegen van de IND zijn ondoorgrondelijk," (analagous to 'God works in mysterious way').

With this example, I do not mean to say that the power exercised by the IND is in any way God-like or that the IND continuously does not abide by its own rules. Especially the practice of credibility assessment allows for a great number of positions that can be taken within the rules so that the breaking of rules is not necessary. It can be a source of great anxiety and uncertainty if there is no knowing if an exception is going to be applied or not. Because the kind of benevolent exception making is done behind closed doors, it cannot in any way be counted on. It could be different from one official to the next.

One official told me about the practice of collegial testing (CT), where colleagues compare their views on a case. This CT takes the form of an informal meeting between two colleagues, usually working within the same 'unit'. CT used compulsory in the case of a claim acceptance but is now just seen as 'good practice'. She told me she was paired with another official who had a very different line of thinking. This pairing seemed to be very ineffective because they would not care about each others' points of view. CT often takes place between colleagues who know each other well. This runs the risk of enforcing someone's personal take on cases more than challenging it. However, CT can be an opportunity for debate and the exchange of different points of view:

> Later that day I join three colleagues for the Egyptian case, where homosexuality and mental problems
> played a role.. We start the meeting in a good, joking atmosphere. The more senior official jokes about
> her shoes.
> The deciding official (S.) already wrote the minuut, doubting between accepting and rejecting but deciding
> for rejection.
> The senior official critically asks her why S. doesn't believe he is a homosexual.
> First, S. argues, he was not internally consistent about when he had sex and when he got married. The
> junior official F. says she does not agree, it depends on how you read it. S. drops the point.

The senior official (I don't know if she is officially senior but she is definitely more experienced) asks for other reasons. S. says she was curious about his relation with his family, which wasn't asked about enough. She proposes U. to ask more about this next time. U. continues and says that he was afraid of the authorities but went back anyway. The senior official points out this is about his fear and not his homosexuality.

Moreover, S. argues, he first says he is bi and then says he is homosexual. I offer the explanation of translation issues. She goes on to argue that being bisexual cannot be matched with having difficulties having sex with his wife.

The fact that he was wrong about homosexuality being punishable in Egypt she won't hold him accountable for, he corrects this interpretation. However, he said very little about how it is to be gay in Egypt.

U. says that it is strange he found out he was gay when he was raped. The senior official argues against this, saying they shouldn't 'psychologize' his statements.

The senior official says that it is strange that he only reported his homosexuality to his therapist in 2014, when he knew long ago that he was gay.

S. says she will use this point under his credibility and not under 'c' (niet onverwijld melden). You can't use the same thing twice, to avoid circular reasoning (like, I don't believe you because you don't have documents and because you don't have documents you have to be positively persuasive).

The senior official says that S. should take into account that there are psychological and medical reports about him. The lawyer might use this.

S. agrees, but the reports do not affirm his credibility. Moreover, the lawyer said he could be interviewed and the latest reports do not contradict this.

The senior official says she should omit the reasoning about bi- and homosexuality. S. agrees. On the whole, the argumentation is quite thin. She asks about what she will do with the declarations of his friends (attesting his homosexuality). She will not take these into account, anyone could have written those.

They go over the case again. S. repeats most of the points. The senior official says the minuut is a bit too thin, S. agrees but says that otherwise she will have to accept it or send it VA. She eventually decides to go with the last option.

The senior officials jokes around again and says this is a common problem with homosexual asylum seekers, there are elements in his story you can use against him (good!, she adds, rubbing her hands together) but these can't be used to make his homosexuality incredible (Field notes 9/4).

In this encounter, interpretations of the asylum seeker's story were discussed freely. There was no formal barrier separating the different parties in the conversation. This in contrast to the often formal letters of lawyers.

This meeting shows the kind of internal debate that shows that credibility assessment is not just a matter of personal judgement. It is a common judgement, often made by multiple people. One official explained to me that there are no 'islands' within their departments. There is ample room for discussion between colleagues. However, the kinds of groups in which decisions are taken can vary greatly. Some officials prefer to make decisions on their own in their rooms. It is up to the official's personal preference. CT is not compulsory in the case of an rejection of a claim. A senior official explained to me that an acceptance represents a more irreversible decision, and that a rejection can always be fought in court. In other words, in terms of CT, more room is left for personal discretion in the case of a rejection than in the case of an acceptance.

I do not mean to say that credibility assessment is a purely personal effort even if the decision itself is taken alone, in someone's room behind a desk. The law obviously has its limits within which a decision is made. Moreover, as shown in the example, the ways in which decisions are taken have to be learnt by junior officials from more senior officials. The way decisions are made, in other words, depends on the education someone gets within the IND and cannot be seen as the product of an individual mind. In the best case, it is a product of the 'collective imagination' of a collective of officials. With imagination I do not mean, in this case, a faulty or illusionary image of the behavior of someone whose case is assessed. Imagination can be conceptualized as functional to a rational ordering as well (Stoetzler, Yuval-Davis, 2002:322). The representation of this decision, however, is taken in the name of one official. In official representation, the decision is brought back to the product of an individual official. Discussions between colleagues and informal exchanging of opinions happen behind closed doors.

Formality is a way of dividing those who can be and those who cannot be trusted. The encounters between different parties are characterized by the upholding of this barrier of trust. VWN, legal representation and IND have different but similar ways of maintaining social distinctions.

With this, an opportunity a 'fusion of horizons' remains very limited. There are shared imaginations within the IND but they are limited by the spatial separation of groups. It is also important to realize that imagination can also work to create boundaries, to separate plausible and credible behavior from incredible and irrational demeanor. Imagination can have both a inclusionary and an exclusionary effect (Stoetzler, Yuval-Davis, 2002: 324). What unites IND, VWN and lawyers is that asylum seekers are kept spatially separate and most encounters are characterized by unequal power relations. Flexibility of function exists between these

bureaucratic worlds but hardly between that of the asylum seekers and others. With respect to bureaucratic integration, the main border is therefore not between the IND and the rest but between the asylum seekers and the rest. This distinction is actively maintained through spatial separation and techniques of depersonalization. As a consequence, a perception of irregularity and irrationality is part of the way groups are defined as separate.

Documents

I sit between the interpreter and Kurdish Iranian asylum seeker M., with my chair slightly removed from the desk. The interview starts with the question if M. received the brochure on the asylum procedure which he read but didn't discuss with his lawyer. The official asks if he has any questions and M. makes clear that he expects clear questions if they want him to give clear answers.

M. talks to the interpreter when he answers, and looks at the official when he's asking questions. The standard remarks on the Dublin treaty prompt M. to say that he thought that Greece wasn't part of the treaty and that the Netherlands don't send people back to Greece. The official corrects him.

The part of the interview is introduced where M. tells his story, the free narrative ("vrije relaas"). The official says that exact dates of when he was where don't have to be repeated, and that this part is about the essence of the reasons why he left for the Netherlands.

M. is silent for a moment, says he doesn't know where to start. The official tells him to focus on a chronological narrative, naming as many persons and events as possible.

He starts talking and every few sentences he leaves room for the interpreter to translate. The interpreter and M. have a small discussion about the spelling of the name of a political leader. Whenever M. mentions names, they are written down by the interpreter. M. has a big pile of documents, he spreads them out over the table and points to them when he tells his story.

M. explains that he wanted to use his studies (computer science) to strengthen the Kurdish cause. The official: "that is interesting but the present interview about proof of your impossibility to turn back to Iran." M. shows a proof of his membership of a Kurdish student movement, the official moves his chair towards AS and looks at the documents. He says he's sorry he interrupted him.

Later he shows a number of photos with the leaders of a Kurdish party. After M. shows a couple of them, he has quite many, the official says this is not really that relevant. M. keeps showing photos and the official lets him do this. He tries to interrupt but as soon as he starts his sentence (ok…), M. is already talking. M. explains these are proof of his contact with Kurdish parties.

The official asks of M. to continue talking where he was (the part on Greece). M. continues his story. He sits upright, explaining elaborately what he has been through. For a large part of his story, he keeps his passport in his hand while talking, rifling through its pages.

The interpreter sits slightly slumped in his chair, with his arms folded. The official sometimes asks him to clarify things and he clarifies things to M. too. He looks at M. when he wants to indicate he wants him to keep talking. He sometimes interrupts M. when he wants to translate what's been said. As the interpreter usually has to translates large amounts of speech, the official is usually still typing when M. talks. Sometimes the official looks through the report of the first interview or what's been said before before asking a question.

M. shows the holes in his passport, made by the Iranian embassy in Athens.

At different parts of his story, he uses documents to buttress his claims, and he rifles through them when making his arguments. When M. starts talking too much about the general situation of dissidents in Iran, he puts his finger in front of his mouth and asks him to go back to talking about his own problems.

M. shows an article with a photo of a Kurdish girl that was murdered in his hometown in Iran. After a number of similar articles the official moves his chair to his right, and says: "sorry, just a question, are these articles about you personally or about the general situation?" M. keeps showing different articles.

The official interrupts him and explains to M. that he ("by this, I mean the IND") is especially interested in articles that include M. or a family member. M. says that no, these articles are mostly about the suppression of the authorities. The official says that this information is known to the IND, after which M. emphasises that only a small part of what's going on is brought to the outside world.

The official explains he wants to separate background information from personal circumstances. M. also shows a short audio fragment on his phone, with a statement from the head of the judicial forces in Iran, saying that they will come after dissidents.

Before taking a break, the official explains that he sometimes has to interrupt the conversation to keep M. from sidetracking.

During the break, the official says he doesn't doubt the M's credibility, with the amount of documents he can show.

After lunch, he slightly changes his tone. He says he finds one aspect of his story, that he was blackmailed through a fake drug charge in Greece, not completely credible.

We pick up the interpreter and walking through the hallways the official explains he is going to ask about this to the interpreter. He also comments to him that before applying for asylum, they spent a week in Germany and a week in the Netherlands, giving them ample time to prepare a story.

A common struggle

In the previous chapters I described the neutrality of bureaucratic rationality and the culture of disbelief it entails. In it, we have seen clear functional divides between people that are maintained by spatial barriers and in unequal power relations. Taking this role division at face value, however, would obscure the degree to which all parties are part of the same struggle, the separation of the 'genuine' refugee from the lying 'fake' asylum seeker. Michael Herzfeld puts in the following way: "While people often act as though clients and bureaucrats were two separate classes of human beings, separated by some Manichean division of good from evil, they are demonstrably participants in a common symbolic struggle, using the same weapons , guided by the same conventions (1992:5)." Asylum seekers also accuse others of lying, and the same kinds of divides that separate the IND from asylum seekers separate them from other parties as well. The application centre forms a context where others are distrusted and kept at a distance through spatial barriers and walls of formality.

The moral dividing line

A strict moral division between the asylum seekers' legal representatives and the IND might be a poor representation of the commonalities of the IND and legal representation within the application centre but it can serve as a strategic tool in representations in media.
Take, for example, an article on the website of NRC Handelsblad about the recent suicide of an Armenian asylum seeker (NRC, April 23, 2014). This is a highly politically charged subject. The earlier suicide of Alexander Dolmatov, an asylum seeker from Russia, led to calls for his resignation as the State Secretary for Security and Justice. A repetition of this kind of incident might mean the end of his political career. After Dolmatov's tragic death, a report was brought out that not only blames the individual malfunctioning of officials involved in the case but also the reliance on computer systems that do not communicate well enough among each other (Inspectie Veiligheid en Justitie, 2013).
The Armenian asylum seeker's lawyer Van den Hombergh comments in this article that the IND mindlessly applied the rules, without regard for his precarious mental health circumstances. He had applied for asylum in Germany before, and was therefore to be sent back there under the Dublin treaty. Lineke Blijdorp, the contact person for asylum lawyers at the application centres commented that this case is 'worse than Dolmatov' because it is not an error of the system but a human decision.

The IND defends its decision in this article by saying that was seen by doctors of the medical services for asylum seekers. Moreover, he was already receiving treatment in Germany.

The IND is presented as an anonymous entity in this article. The Armenian man's legal representative's name features prominently. A picture emerges of a righteously indignified individual against a cold, formalistic and bureaucratic organization. This anonymization is also self imposed, as the IND chooses not to divulge the names of the officials involved in the incident.

What I hope to show in this chapter is that the image of the cold mistrusting IND versus other parties is not necessarily true, and that the struggle of finding out who is the genuine asylum seeker within a bureaucratic context involves every party in the application centre.

Common Ground

Herzfeld argues that bureaucrats and their clients are part of the same symbolic struggle (1992:5). With this, he warns against an a priori moral classification.

Mistrust is not only present within the IND. One day in the waiting area for asylum seekers I met an asylum seeker from a West African country who fled because of his sexual identity.

> L. is here for an 'aanvullend gehoor', having to comment on his fear for return. They know he speaks the truth, he says. It is like a cat and mouse game, he tells me, commenting on the asylum procedure. We start talking about credibility. Many people lie, he says. People also lie about being gay, and this is offensive to actually homosexual people according to L. He claims he can easily recognize who lies about being gay. They would know certain words and have certain email addresses and social media profiles, many gay people in Nigeria have two facebook profiles. He says he would like to work for the IND because he can easily identify who's gay. He names another example of someone who demonstrably lied about his origin. People also lie about their age. L. says it is important to ascertain nationality. Everyone has scars in Africa, he mentions, and this is no proof for torture. He claims 60% of people (asylum seekers) lie (field notes 6/2).

His frustration corresponds with that of many IND officials. He not only says that people lie about their identities but also that he feels offended by those who do so. An official I talked to told me she was frustrated that within the current procedure, some who deserve to get a permit do not get it and some who do, don't.

Later in March I attended a workshop on LGBT rights in the asylum procedure (field notes 27/3). There, I followed a workshop that was led by a Ugandan gay refugee and a Jamaican lesbian

refugee. The Jamaican woman had previously carried out LGBT rights activist work in Jamaica. Her explanation of how credibility of LGBT asylum seekers should be assessed was very similar to that of L. She commented on the use of certain words that people might use that are only understood within a gay community.

Noticeably, both the Jamaican refugee and the West African asylum seeker looked at social aspects of gay identity, not at sexual practice. They seemed to argue that being LGBT is about being part of a community, that is defined in terms of the use of language and in the West African country's case of digital signifiers as well.

H., a refugee from Syria, also made evident that accusations of lying are not only directed from the IND towards asylum seekers. I went to see him at his asylum seeker residence. Even within groups of Syrian refugees, there is a classification of liars and 'deserving' refugees, as explained by H. when I went to see him at his asylum seeker centre:

> He says that many people from Armenia are not believed.
>
> Armenians sometimes lie about their origins, he says. They say they are from Syria whereas they're not. They let the officials feel sorry but the officials are not stupid.
>
> He suspects that people who dislike other ethnicities are not wanted here. He thinks that maybe the IND doesn't want people who live isolated from other groups. Armenians, he says, speak about persecution but this is not true. Syria respects other groups, he names examples of British and Danish people who live among Syrians. Christian Syrians (Armenians) build stories about hate and persecution that aren't true. Syriani people, by contrast, are accepted and have no reason to lie.
>
> IND has good experience he says, dealing with different cultures. 'Detectives' (as he calls officials) know when someone's lying. They can tell if a story is different or special.
>
> Maybe, he says he might be wrong, people who don't accept diversity are not accepted, especially when they lie. Some people build stories on hate, not on the basis of reality.
>
> He doesn't know if many people lie but some have problems and build stories to stay here permanently. They think the Netherlands might become responsible for them, but this isn't so. People come here with dreams, and build stories, although he doesn't know why.
>
> He thinks it is expected of people to have good culture, to be respectful, to contribute to the community. Some people are unlucky, but some get sent back because they didn't integrate well, or were involved in criminality. A lot of people are disappointed, because they have to start from scratch and their diplomas aren't valid, especially many dentists.
>
> IND officials should have a lot of experience working with people and different cultures , he says. He was surprised by the stories of Armenian Syrians. They build stories about persecution that aren't true (field notes 20/3).

H.'s story is not that of the 'victim' refugee against the 'evil' IND bureaucracy. He trusts the professionalism of the IND and instead directs his mistrust against Armenian asylum seekers that he finds to be lying. Here again, the discourse of lying is directed against the societal other to define himself apart from them. He uses the same kind of rhetoric that officials use of separating the emotional ('they make the officials feel sorry') from the procedure ('but the officials are not stupid'). Moreover, he connects lying with a kind of moral blame. People might build stories on the basis of hate instead of reality. They are not respectful and do not exhibit 'good culture'

One lawyer I talked to provided the following categorization of IND officials. He made these statements in an informal setting. He had just finished a meeting with his client and seemed more relaxed and less formal than during it:

> In fact, he says, any asylum application can be rejected. There are two types of officials: those who think and those who don't. Some honestly assess someone's credibility and use juridical means to support their views and some just test juridical aspects of the testimony unthinkingly. It is like a game of chess he says. Officials look for the way of the least resistance and often giving a permit is easier than denying one. He names one official in particular who seems to be bent on denying applications because he believes everyone lies. Some are also just to stupid to realise what they are doing and a few just have bad intentions.
> In some exceptional cases there is contact between the lawyer and the deciding official. He names an example of an asylum seeker who seemed to be unable to testify rationally. He then attended the hearing and conferred with the official what had to be done about this.
> He also talks about the influence it has on him if he believes an asylum seeker or not. If he doesn't believe the asylum seeker, he will do his job correctly but will not take any extra steps, such as taking the case to the European Court for Human Rights.
> He jokingly tells about a case of a Russian asylum seeker who claimed to have invented a cannon that launches a person in a space where the rules of time and space are changed. He also names the case of a Somalian client he really didn't like.
> Talking about the IND, he says the higher up people are, the more they realize the limitations of their procedures. He complains about inexperienced temporary employees who do first interviews (Field notes 11/2).

By providing this very person oriented categorization of IND officials he argues against the organization being a purely rational machine but a system dependent on the persons who work within it. What I find interesting in his comments about the IND's practice of credibility assessment is not so much the fact that he finds officials incompetent. After all, being a lawyer it

is his job to criticize the functioning of the organization he is supposed to check. It is the accusation of the person interfering into the practice of assessing asylum claims. He seems to want to criticize the IND by not conforming to the impersonal, reliable Weberian model of bureaucracy. Ironically, he admits himself that his personal beliefs might impact the way he works himself too. Ironically, while dismissing IND decisions as arbitrary and personal, he himself admits that his personal beliefs impact the work he does.

Lawyers have their own way of being impersonal and bureaucratic too. B., an asylum seeker from Eritrea who I went to see in his asylum seeker centre is an example of this. When I went to visit him he was about to have his third interview with the IND. After the two interviews at the application centre in the regular procedure, it was decided that more time was needed to decide on his case. I went to see him where he lived and he told me he did not exactly know what he was going to be asked about during the third interview. We tried calling a few times but every time the lawyer was in a meeting. We were told he would call back but he never did.
B. finds himself in quite an absurd situation here where he is kept waiting for months for an interview, the purposes of which are unknown to him.
This goes to show that an accusation of unreliability cannot be leveled at the IND alone. Projecting uncertainty is not the prerogative of the Immigration Services. Lawyers can be just as much part of this.
There are obvious similarities between the material circumstances of interviews and meetings with lawyers in the application centre. Also, they sometimes use similar ways of putting distance between themselves and their clients. The meetings often take the form of reading the report to the asylum seeker, and there is often little room for the asylum seeker to further supplement what he has said. The emphasis is on the text of the report, and making sure it is correct. Interviewing rooms and the rooms that lawyers use for meetings are very similar.
There is a desk between the asylum seeker and the lawyer with a chair for the interpreter in the middle and a computer screen pointed towards the lawyer. Before the meeting, the client is picked up by the lawyer and let through a series of doors that can only be opened with the help of an access pass. During the meeting, doors are kept closed to ensure a measure of privacy and confidentiality. The same markers of neutrality I described in chapter one come back in the encounter between asylum seekers and lawyers.
That is not to say that the encounters are equally impersonal. The first meeting I attended started in quite a friendly way. The casually dressed lawyer and his Syrian client were there to discuss

the second interview he had with the IND. At some point during the meeting, the lawyer commented that the ring he was wearing came from Syria and was connected to a historical period of the country. The asylum seeker smiled and laughed at this remark. The second meeting the lawyer had that day, with another Syrian asylum seeker, started with some jokes from the part of the asylum seeker.

Despite this air of friendliness, there was also a clear emphasis on efficiency. I noted the following about the meeting.

> Before the talk starts E. emphasises the evaluation has to be efficient, and for N. to only interrupt if its really necessary. N. nods silently as the translation of the most important parts of the report are read to him. Whenever he is asked questions he replies softly. Compared to interviews, the conversation has little silences or pauses (Field notes, 4/2).

Efficiency is not only part of the way IND functions. Lawyers often have two clients a day and they have to work fast in order to get the corrections on reports done on time. The focus of the meetings is often not a different view of the asylum story but the correction of mistakes. Meetings can sometimes consist of only reading the report to the asylum seeker without any supplementary questions. The ability to catch mistakes depends on the attentiveness of the asylum seeker.

Sometimes this ability to be attentive is hampered, for example because of medical conditions. G., an asylum seeker originally from Armenia who spent most of his life in Russia repeatedly complained of dizziness and high blood pressure. The day after his interview, the meeting with his lawyer was scheduled. It started quite late because his lawyer, S., had a meeting with another client that morning. During the second interview with the IND, a lot of questions were asked about the loss of his Armenian passport. At some point they found a slightly strange translation in the report of the interview.

> The interpreter explains the translation 'passport table', she does not find it an elegant translation. The lawyer listens to her translation and concludes it is a police institution. Mr. G. says it was difficult. S. asks more questions about the passport situation and he grabs his head, says 'I don't understand, I don't know!' The lawyer says that then we should stop. G. says that if you have concrete questions I can respond to them. If you read the report to me it passes me like background noise.
> G. asks him what exactly his role is and if he is present at the decision about his case. He says he is not. S. explains some more about his role (Field notes 4/2).

G. seemed to not fully understand what the role of his lawyer was. All he heard was the 'background noise' of the report being read to him. The problem here is not only the medical circumstances of the asylum seeker but also the centrality of the report and not the person. The report was read to G. and mostly he nodded in silence until he could no longer conceal his confusion.

Sometimes, the evaluation of an interview can take the form of an interview too, with similar techniques of questioning. The lawyer in the following case with another asylum seeker called G. and his lawyer U. made an impression that was very similar to an interview. The lawyer used a similar confrontational way of drawing statements from G.

U. remarks that he has to be detailed in his explanations, and that otherwise he doesn't stand a change in the procedure. He seems to be annoyed with G.

After this remark U. starts asking more questions about what happened on the bridge. He at some point announces that he is going to ask a very concrete question, and asks G. to let the interpreter finish her translations. The lawyer tells G. he doesn't understand that an acquaintance of his uncle could free him. This acquaintance would also be threatened if he worked with his uncle. He explains that the IND will not find this credible. It later appeared that G. had never met the person and only supposed that he must have been an acquaintance of his uncle.

G. says that illogical things happen there, and that the situation is hard to explain. U. then says that he has to be able to explain things to the IND, and that now he can't. When G. says something apparently unrelated to the question, U. says he isn't interested in general information but in information specific to his case. For example, he wants to know what uniform the acquaintance wore and what he looked like. After a couple of unclarities, U. says: "mister A., you really have to answer my questions [directly], otherwise things will become confusing!." He seems to be very annoyed with G. now. After this, the lawyer repeats a number of times that he has to give clear answers. He also repeats that he can't explain this story to the IND, and moves on. G. starts talking, but U. raises his hand, commanding him to be silent. He says he doesn't have all afternoon.

U. asks him in what language he communicated with the soldiers who held him on the bridge. He first says he doesn't know Ossetian, and that they talked Abkhaz. After U. repeats the question he says they talked Georgian with him.

U. remarks that they have passed the time limit, which he is willing to extend by half an hour and repeats that G. shouldn't tell general stories, but to be specific.

The interpreter and G. talk back and forth after a question from the lawyer.

G. adds to one of his answers that his neighbour's child lived in Russia. U. asks him what the relevance of this is. He says that a lot of old women live alone. U. moves on.

U. says that G. probably did not tell enough for a positive decision. There will be little chance at an positive decision. His best chance is the extended procedure, which the lawyer will try to accomplish. He says

there is also a good chance the IND will reject his application.

At the end of the meeting, U. say he hoped G. didn't find it an unpleasant conversation but that he got annoyed because he didn't give clear answers. He shouldn't take this personally. He says he is telling a different story than what it says on the report.

U. and I go back to the room where the meeting was held. He first asks me what I thought of the conversation and I said it was quite tough, compared to other meetings between clients and lawyers. He explains that he wanted to bring some specificity in the story that he was told. There has to be more to tell, if you read it like this it seems improbable. Paradoxically, he does believe the story but G. can't explain much. Many of the years, dates and places according to his information.

G.'s statements kept meandering, while the clock was ticking. He explains that he likes to involve clients in their own cases, letting them search for information themselves.

If the IND comes with a 'voornemen', his case is lost.

The lawyer here almost seemed more confrontational than the official who interviewed him the previous day. His way of approaching the asylum seeker, although purported to be in his best interest, corresponded to the way a particularly skeptical IND official might interview an asylum seeker.

VWN and bureaucracy

VWN has a similar position to the legal representation. Although they aim to represent the interests of asylum seekers and refugees there is a spatial distance between them and asylum seekers as well. While attending their meetings, a lot of attention goes to writing the report. This is not to say that they do not intervene in case an asylum seeker gets emotional or when the rules of the interview are not abided by the IND. However, there is a similar emphasis on the text and not the person. It was a VWN volunteer who told me she didn't see herself as completely opposite to the IND. The relation between VWN and asylum might be slightly different, as they have more time to talk to asylum seekers, but all this happens within the possibilities of the law.

Meetings between asylum seekers and VWN volunteers in the waiting room take place with a desk in between, and a computer screen facing the volunteer. Nevertheless, VWN manages to achieve the least distance and impersonality, joining asylum seekers at their tables and waiting with them. This is a matter of degree, however, and not of kind between them and other organizations.

A common struggle

The similarities between the different parties at the application centre show that there are not necessarily categorical differences between the attitudes and ways of approaching clients. Lawyers and VWN volunteers are also part of the system of bureaucracy and asylum seekers can be just as distrusting as those who assess their claims. Although attitudes do differ, it is important not to reify the borders between different groups as being absolute. This obscures the degree to which the bureaucratic environment affects the attitudes of every party.

VWN, an organization that is supposed to be independent and critical, can also form part of the culture of bureaucracy. When I started my fieldwork I often erroneously used the word interrogation ('verhoor') instead of interview ('gehoor'). It was often VWN volunteers who pointed out my mistake and corrected my use of language. At many interviews I attended, there was often more eye contact between IND officials and asylum seekers than between VWN volunteers and their clients. A lot of attention went to writing down the statements of both parties. Although intentions are benign, making sure that the statements of the asylum seeker are written down correctly, the impersonality of the system also affects the relations between VWN and other parties.

The 'culture of disbelief' affects all parties. The creation of formal boundaries between groups can obscure how the bureaucratic struggle to separate the 'genuine' from the 'fake' refugee can obscure the degree to which all parties adhere to the same discourse.

Conclusion - a rational culture of disbelief

> This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shattered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought - our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography - breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a "certain Chinese encyclopedia" in which it is written that "animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies." In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that* (Wicks, 2003:81)*.*

This quote from Michel Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses* (*The Order of Things,* 1966) aims to show how bizarre another classification of knowledge can be to a reader from a completely different cultural context. At the same time, it shows the limits of our thinking as not universal but constrained by the categories that constitute it. The limits of our categories can have very real consequences for those that are excluded from rights within a national community, such as those asylum seekers whose stories are not believed to be veracious.
The platypus I mentioned, reduced to an object of scientific classification, shows how our categories can do violence (in the form of a scissors taken to its pelt) but that they can also be broadened to achieve inclusion. We no longer believe that the platypus is an impossibility.
This broadening can take the form of a dialogical truth (Stoetzler, Yuval-Davis, 2002:327) that overcomes both universalistic and relativistic tendencies. However, this implies a degree of trust and equality that is lacking in the structure of the application centre.

According to the French philosopher Etienne Balibar (2004) borders are dispersed everywhere where there is movement of people and controlling of it. This controlling of people is facilitated by the rationality of bureaucracy. As I hope has become clear in this thesis, this control is not without consequences. The apparently reliable and predictable nature of rules does not seem to apply in the application centre, where uncertainty is present in all parties. All parties within the application centre contribute to the creation of a 'culture of disbelief' where spatially separated groups form a series of black boxes. In spite of the rules that govern different institutions, we

never really understand what exactly goes on inside. The front of formality that is created by every organization does little to take away this uncertainty. On the contrary, it can be used to hide its dealings from each other. Borders do not only define the relations between those inside and those outside the nation state, but also between the different organizations involved in the process of refugee determination.

The language and practice of objectivity and neutrality can serve to hide an exclusion of what defies classification in a rational system. As Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis put it: "Hegemonic, 'universal' knowledge has tended to ignore and render invisible marginalized experience, imagination and knowledge (2002:327)." I would call for a moving beyond this language and moving towards a language of understanding. Understanding, defined by Gadamer, implies a degree of closeness to the 'other' allowing for dialogue and the building of trust.

The 'culture of disbelief' affects all participants in the centre. It is a common struggle, and although it may seem only antagonistic, there is a common adherence to the bureaucratic culture of rationality, though in varying degrees. This counts as much for the relation between asylum seekers and the IND as between other organizations.

More research could be carried out from the perspective of the 'clients' of bureaucratic systems in order to avoid misunderstanding and distrust. Cultural differences exist, but through an open ended dialogue they can be overcome. This would entail moving beyond positioning the asylum seeker as passive object of bureaucratic scrutiny but as active subject and as participant in the creation of knowledge on their particular circumstances.

Countering the exclusionary consequences of this rationality will need a crossing and redrawing of boundaries. Formal boundaries between organizations and groups of people can hamper mutual understanding and the transformation of knowledge. An awareness of socially constructed and physically maintained boundaries can help to see their limitations. The fact that this study has taken place is in itself a sign of hope in that formal barriers can be overcome, and that black boxes can let in a little light.

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