

Chapter 7

The Human Individual vs. the Faceless Case



Another structural contradiction inherent in the asylum procedure is the conflict between a focus on the asylum claimant as a human being and a faceless case. This chapter examines how officials try – or do not try – to reconcile these. I explore what shapes their practices and how these practices shape the interaction with claimants.

In his treatise on bureaucracy, Weber (1978:959) argues that the ideal public servant is to be “devoted to impersonal and functional purposes.” While the administrative processing of large numbers of applications provokes impersonality, at the same time, the asylum procedure and the asylum interview in particular need to focus on the individual claimant. The interview situation seems to be the only time and place where claimants are perceived and recognized as individuals. Throughout the procedure, asylum claimants are otherwise constructed as abstract cases and productivity-related numbers in the sense of New Public Management. Examining the situation from the perspective of Parsons’ (1951) orientation alternatives, caseworkers find themselves in a dilemma between universalism and particularism. On the one hand, deciding upon an asylum claim requires that officials follow general principles; on the other hand, they have to consider the particular case. While the law requires that every asylum claimant be treated on an equal basis, officials also have to attend to the claimant’s specific situation. In addition, the dilemma is related to a choice between an orientation at neutrality or affectivity (Parsons 1951); whereas some roles and situations require emotional commitment and action motivated by feelings, others demand functional, sober behavior. In this context, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000:329) identify two coexisting narratives of discretion among officials: on the one hand, they are “state agents who act in response to rules, procedures, and law”; on the other hand, they are “citizen agents who act in response to individuals and circumstances.” The latter, caseworkers’ practices of “dealing with faces,” has often been muted in street-level bureaucracy

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research thus far (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). In a similar Dubois (2010) argues that most dilemmas “alternate between involvement and detachment, assistance and domination.” Officials’ practices with regard to these structural tensions will be explored in this and the following related chapter on responsibility versus dissociation.

7.1 The Face in Face-to-Face Interaction: A “Human Aspect” vs. Organizational Aims

As a face-to-face interaction, the asylum interview is characterized by the visibility and presence of the claimant as an individual. It seems to be the only situation in which caseworkers see their “clients” as “faces” instead of abstract cases or numbers. In this bureaucratic encounter, where the official (usually) leaves her desk and performs “front line” work (Lipsky 2010), the appearance and performance of the claimant (and all other involved actors) gains importance. As explored above, officials tend to pay attention to claimants’ behavior and ways of talking, and their impressions influence the decision-making process.

The individual and her experiences are the focus, particularly when claimants call intersubjectivity into question. Referring to the idea that an official is not only an organ of the authority but also a human being, claimants may appeal to the official’s empathy for and understanding of their situation. Examples include the questions mentioned in Sect. 4.2 toward one caseworker, asking whether she had ever been raped or had ever experienced a war. In one of the observed interviews, the claimant directs the latter question to the caseworker “from human to human” (o.i. 6). Instead of addressing the interviewer in her official role, embodying state authority, the claimant alludes to the human level, asking her, as an individual, a personal question. However, the official notes that one can also have understanding without having the experience. While the caseworker reflects critically upon her position, regarding herself as an “inhabitant of the island of bliss” (Sabine) and being aware that she does not have certain experiences, she finds that her investigation possibilities compensate this lack of intersubjectivity.

I mean, of course one also has to think in the people’s shoes ... For us, it’s also difficult, I’d say. We live here, yes, we have no idea, let’s be honest, what’s happening in another country. Now, we as inhabitants of the island of bliss, if I may say so, decide upon someone who comes from a country where there’s really no security, no legal system, no security police, functioning police, right? But how can we know that if we’ve never been there, right? And one [claimant] criticized me for that; I don’t have a clue what I’m actually talking about, right? It’s true, but for that, we do have our research (Sabine).

The official also believes that “if you have a family at home yourself, you maybe also think differently than if you are a single, and a male single.” She explains that when she started working at the FAO in what is now the IRC, she “always had toys for the children in the interview rooms” and provided snacks for the children, thereby creating a more relaxed interview situation not only for the children but also for the parents. Her statement also implies that there is a gender difference in

officials’ attitudes and approaches when addressing asylum claimants and their claims. Referring to intersubjective comprehensibility, she believes that female caseworkers or those who have their own family might be more understanding toward claimants, especially if they have children. Another official’s account also underlines that the official’s approach in the interview can make a difference and that it can be related to gender. Gabi reports a situation in which the claimant appreciated her interview style. At one point, the official had to inform the male claimant that he had the right to be interviewed by a male official. However, the claimant wanted to continue the interview with the female official (and the female interpreter) “because we were so friendly and so empathetic,” Gabi remembers.

However, physical closeness in the interview also includes the possibility of conflict. Two caseworkers mention specific memories of conflictual interactions with asylum claimants. A claimant became verbally aggressive during the interview and threatened the caseworker that she would “see what [she] get[s] from it,” implying that the official’s decision would have consequences for her. Sabine explains that she felt intimidated: “They marched him [the claimant] off with the security ... and I said to the boss, ‘I don’t dare to sign the decision notification.’” Another official mentions that she was informed that a claimant was supposed to be aggressive and “a danger to the public” and that “they took a knife off him outside” (o.i. 1). Therefore, she did not want to conduct the interview on her own and thought it would be “better if a man does it” (ibid), again highlighting the relevance of gender in the interview context. As Dubois (2010) notes, violence, whether real or feared, affects officials and their work.

Violence has the effect of making the agents’ individuality resurface against their own will. When they are threatened, sometimes physically exposed ... agents lose their relative control of the alternative use of their physical body and of their bureaucratic role, which usually allows them to control the situation (Dubois 2010:171).

These examples of experiences of physical nearness and individuals’ aim for intersubjective comprehensibility illustrate the difficulty of this human interaction in the form of a bureaucratic encounter. These and similar situations, which highlight the potential for conflict that this interaction bears, have already been analyzed in Chap. 4 on asylum interviews. For officials, one way of dealing with this challenging face-to-face situation is to reduce complexity by being less responsive to the claimant and focusing on the “factual” level of the asylum claim.

Thomas explains that before he started working at the FAO, the “human aspect” in interpersonal relations had always been “very important” to him. However, after only 2 years of experience as a decision maker, he reflects that “the work shapes you,” implying that he has incorporated new values through socialization in the organization. The official remembers that in the beginning, he made sure that there was “a very, let’s say, human, maybe not cordial, basis” and a “very good atmosphere.” He emphasized “that the person feels comfortable and simply can speak freely.” However, after some time, that “faded away a little bit” (Thomas).

According to the caseworker, there are two reasons why this occurred. First, he finds that there is not enough time to invest this additional effort because there is a certain workload that has to be fulfilled. He finds that it would take more time to

“build a human [basis] or a basis of trust” in the interview. Second, he realizes that there was a point when he thought, “Okay, it doesn’t make any difference if I spend the energy and create a human basis of trust or if I really treat it factually.” After conducting interviews on a purely factual basis – implying a concentration on the content and the questions of the interview and not on the individual and the atmosphere – he feels that “it’s faster; so, it definitely saves time if you don’t add this ... human supplement.” The fact that the caseworker prefers saving time and energy to creating a trusting atmosphere highlights how the logic of NPM permeates the organization. The organizational aims focus on efficiency and efficacy, not on the individual and the “human aspect.” Thus, the organization provides decision makers with a clear orientation in the dilemma between the human individual and the faceless case or number.

Even if the official claims that it makes no difference for him, it is likely to make a difference for many asylum claimants if he creates a more or less comfortable atmosphere, taking and giving enough time for the interview. Although it is doubtful that an asylum claimant will really “trust” a government official, the findings highlight that claimants appreciate a “human” approach in the interview. Thomas mentions that he recently “tried it again on that level, to build up trust.” He explains that he liked it: “It was also good for me because I thought, okay, I can still open up, it’s still possible; I can still build up a certain basis of trust with people.” This example shows that as the “head of the official act” (*Leiter der Amtshandlung*), he has the power to define the interview situation. The official’s behavior toward the claimant, including which aspects of the interaction he focuses on and which he does not, largely determines how the interview situation develops. He adds that the claimant was grateful and appreciated that he took the time for the interview. The caseworker recalls that he answered, “Well, of course I take the time for everyone ... it’s also my task.” This ambivalence between taking time and saving time emphasizes that although officials are required to take every individual asylum claim seriously, there are organizational norms that push them toward processing cases more quickly. The study shows that understanding in all its dimensions is a key factor in the interaction between caseworkers and claimants, but time pressure does not seem to be a good breeding ground for understanding.

These practices of focusing on the content and the “facts” of the case rather than on the individual can be understood as a process of making the human invisible. To some extent, this process of “invisibilization” is reinforced through a sort of proxy communication in the asylum interview. The fact that communication is mediated through an interpreter adds to this tension. As we have seen above, interpreters are often addressed directly by the speakers instead of the actual conversation partner. However, this practice implies that the actual communication partner is not addressed directly but in the third person. For example, officials say to the interpreter, “Tell him that that doesn’t make any sense” (o.i. 2) or “Ask her why she didn’t say that before” (o.i. 5) instead of addressing the claimant directly. This form of interviewing may not only influence the claimant’s answer, but is certainly also

detrimental to the recognition of the present claimant. It was observed in several asylum interviews that the official and the interpreter talked about the claimant or her assertions without the interpreter informing the claimant about the content of the conversation. This practice is problematic since the claimant usually cannot understand what the two are talking about and is thus not taken seriously as a communication partner.

In addition, the fact that the claimant’s account is reproduced – and potentially modified – by the interpreter contributes to this process of “invisibilization.” The translation can be understood as a way of empowering the speaker in the sense of giving someone a voice, but it is simultaneously disempowering when a statement is rephrased twice before it is put to paper. This process was analyzed as the “filtering” of messages through different actors in the production of the interview transcript. More generally, the interview situation can be understood as a proxy communication, a situation in which nobody speaks for “themselves”; the interpreter speaks on behalf of the claimant or the caseworker and is thus acting “in the name of” both parties, whereas the official acts “in the name of” the authority, and a potential legal representative acts “in the name of” the claimant.

Although both the claimant and the caseworker depend on the interpreter, implying a disempowerment of both parties because they cannot speak entirely for themselves, the power relations are still maintained since the official is empowered by being an institutional actor. The fact that caseworkers act in the name of the authority seems to culminate in an official’s statement, “I am the authority” (Veronika). Although asylum interviews are held in an official setting, inside a government building, an official’s authority is not visible at first sight. Since caseworkers do not wear a uniform or any other recognizable symbols, even when entering the interview room, the caseworker could be mistaken for a secretary or any other person. The linguistic level thus represents one key to authority in this interaction. To position herself and to make her role clear, the official explains to an asylum claimant that she is not to be regarded as a person but as the authority in the sense that she is acting as the decision-making institution. Thus, she contributes further to the elimination of the human aspect from the interaction. While she is personalizing the authority as an institution, the interviewer depersonalizes herself with her statement. The question of an official to a claimant in an observed interview regarding why the claimant “lied to the authority” (o.i. 0401) also represents this impersonalization. The caseworker is obviously referring to a prior interview – an interaction between the claimant and an official, who is then regarded in an impersonalized manner as the authority. Officials symbolically impersonalize themselves through objects and language while simultaneously personifying the institution that employs them (Dubois 2010:79). In addition, these examples illustrate the expandability of power in formal organization through its detachment from concrete persons (Coleman 1982).

7.2 Making the Human Invisible: Claimants As Categories and Cases

In dealing with asylum claimants, decision makers are confronted with a structural tension that requires a focus on the individual on the one hand and a “processing of the masses” on the other. While attempts to maintain a “human element” can be observed in some officials’ practices, according to Weber (1978:225), the bureaucrat’s work is dominated by “a spirit of formalistic impersonality.”

“Sine ira et studio,” without hatred or passion, and hence without affection or enthusiasm. The dominant norms are concepts of straightforward duty without regard to personal considerations. Everyone is subject to formal equality of treatment; that is, everyone in the same empirical situation. This is the spirit in which the ideal official conducts his office (ibid).

Impersonality as a characteristic of bureaucracy can have positive effects on an asylum claim when it implies a neutral, unbiased stance of the official toward the claimant and her assertions. Since decisions are generally regarded as fairer when they are made on a neutral and unbiased basis, proof of objectivity and impartiality in decision making increases perceived fairness (Tyler 2003). However, such treatment also includes the risk of reducing persons to cases and turning them into objects by reducing them to their files (Felstiner et al. 1980:631). Whereas impersonal treatment can thus have negative consequences for the client, for organizational work, impersonality has both necessary and desirable effects (Prottas 1979). Alluding to the interview situation and illustrating this impersonality, caseworkers often refer to claimants in a rather neutral but still telling way as “the person on the other side.” However, the findings also show that empathy, sympathy and antipathy can play a role in the relation between caseworker and claimant even if the law prescribes impersonality and objectivity. As in any other direct face-to-face interaction, participants gain a picture of the other, and decision makers are, at least to some extent, influenced by their impressions, as discussed above. For example, asylum claimants are sometimes perceived by caseworkers as orderly and decent people or as poor, particularly when they are seriously ill. However, “poor” is also used in an ironic manner to criticize people with a critical opinion on a topic who do not know much about the “reality” of the cases according to the caseworker. The media is also blamed for publishing distorted accounts and portraying asylum claimants as poor victims. However, media analyses demonstrate that the opposite is true, and asylum claimants are often criminalized and stigmatized (Statham 2002, Alia and Bull 2005).

The approach of impersonality, a feature of bureaucratic “people-processing” (Prottas 1979), is closely related to processes of categorization and generalization, especially when officials try to determine who is “in the same empirical situation” (Weber 1978:225). The ambivalence between the individual and the group or the masses is a major issue. Although Gabi notes that one has to adjust to every claimant afresh, there is a clear ambivalence in her comment, “of course, every human is different, everyone is individual ... but the stories are also always the same.” She differentiates between the individual and individuals’ assertions, highlighting that

the former is unique but the latter often resemble each other. Caseworkers tend to emphasize that claimants' "stories" repeat themselves, usually without reflecting that this might be related to the fact that the reasons for granting protection are equally limited to persecution on certain grounds. Another interesting differentiation is made by Veronika, who thinks that for political and societal discussions, "one has to see the mass," whereas in her everyday work, she finds the opposite is true, explaining that ideally, she wants to act as though every claimant was her first case. On the one hand, officials emphasize the necessary attention to every individual claimant and her particular assertion; on the other hand, asylum claimants are categorized and regarded as homogenous groups (despite their heterogeneous lived realities).

Impersonalization can also be understood as making the human invisible through practices of constructing asylum claimants as administrative units, such as cases, records, or numbers, and "output." As soon as a person files an asylum application and a record is opened, she receives an individual number that makes her case identifiable within and beyond the institution, regardless of her name and characteristics of her claim. When talking about a claimant and her claim, caseworkers talk about "the case," which is ascribed its own characteristics, such as "protracted," "complicated," "intractable," or "relatively easy" and "run-of-the-mill." Typical in the bureaucratic context, categorization, as a means to reduce complexity, fulfills the organizational aim of promoting reproduction and processing claims in a standardized and efficient manner. As Amsterdam and Bruner (2002:33) note, "[T]he bureaucrat prefers categories that are clear, definite, and free of ambiguity." However, the treatment of people as cases and categories also leads to a "banalization of suffering" (Weiler 1992). As Zetter (2007:172) argues, "[T]he 'convenient images' of refugees, labelled within a co-opting humanitarian discourse in the past, have been displaced by a fractioning of the label, which is driven by the need to manage globalized processes and patterns of migration and forced migration in particular." Public policy and practice increasingly prescribe and invent new labels, thereby institutionalizing specific categories. Zetter emphasizes the role of government agency, arguing that "state action mobilizes bureaucratic labelling to legitimize the exclusion and marginalization of refugees" (ibid:189).

In addition to the reduction of individual claims to cases and political and legal labeling, FAO caseworkers employ different kinds of categorizing: claimants are understood as clients, recipients, duty bearers or – more rarely – rights holders, and they are often subject to cultural essentialism. Officials tend to conceive of asylum claimants as homogenous groups, especially with regard to national origin or cultural background. Claimants are often equated with their countries – or even continents (e.g., Africa) of origin or with their "population of origin" (e.g., "the Russians"). These generalizations are partly based on officials' experience or perception that claimants' assertions resemble each other. Both cultural essentialism and gender stereotypes are prevalent in caseworkers' practices of characterizing and evaluating asylum claimants, highlighting the intersectionality of prejudice and potential discrimination. One official, for example, talks about a Chechen woman who claims to have been raped but was married shortly after the incident and then

also became pregnant. The caseworker mentions her doubts about the woman's credibility, saying that "normally it's not like that with Chechen women; for them, [being raped] is a disgrace" (o. 0429). Since the woman was married and pregnant shortly after the rape, the official, invoking a cultural reason, thinks it is unlikely that the rape occurred. Such complexity-reducing mechanisms are thus especially problematic in the asylum procedure because they tend to influence caseworkers' assessments of the claimants' credibility. Categorizations influenced by stereotypes and officials' own value systems lead to a classification of asylum claimants that questions their legitimacy and thus not only depersonalizes them but also dehumanizes them.

The findings illustrate how categories are entrenched in practice and institutionally anchored. In legal decisions, "entrenched categories are privileged not only against precipitous amendment but against presumptuous inquiry" (Amsterdam and Bruner 2002:36). Nevertheless, the praxeological approach, including the theories of social construction and structuration, suggests that categories are always made, never found and never final. The definition of categorical boundaries as well as the content of conceptual categories with which officials work can thus change over time and develop with experience. As social constructs, they are subject to modification; old categories are altered or discarded, and new ones are continuously constructed. However, category systems do not change easily since categorizing is always an act of meaning-making. Categories automatically imply a world that contains them (theories, stories, legal systems); hence, the choice of a particular category "implies (often unintentionally) some conception about where and how that something fits into a broader vision of the world" (ibid:29). Categorical mechanisms are embedded within the infrastructure of the social institutions, cultural practices, and conceptual understandings upon which markets rest (Massey 2007:xvi).

7.3 Sources, Functions and Risks of Categorization

According to Amsterdam and Bruner (2002), categories are usually abstracted from various kinds of theories, from stories, or from the regulative and normative sphere. Theories in this context are intended to be verifiable or falsifiable; they and the categories derived from them carry authority. By contrast, stories derive their convincing power from plausibility rather than from verifiability; they include different genres of narrative, such as myths. Storytelling and myths play a key role in sense-making in organizations (Gabriel 2000; Brown et al. 2005). For example, in the context of the asylum procedure, "the lying asylum claimant" can be argued to be an established category that is socially useful and a necessary myth, also for the political system (Rousseau and Foxen 2006). Both theories and stories can be understood as part of an organizational ideology or culture since particular category systems impose ideological structures on everyday work. Socialization within the organization will thus influence the way caseworkers perceive the world and construct social reality, often with the consequence of a *déformation professionnelle*: officials' work leads to their thinking in and using specific categories. However,

theories and stories from outside the organization, such as media reports or an official's personal environment, can also affect categories that are regarded as useful and employed in daily work at the FAO.

The third key source of categories is found in regulative or overtly normative frameworks such as the law or administrative and other organizational norms. Normative knowledge is "a system not only of rules or commands but of justifications for them informed by some conception about what is right and wrong in the conduct of human affairs" (Amsterdam and Bruner 2002:32). Normative accounts can also be expressed by narratives or theories, but they are generally ethically axiomatic (*ibid.*). Law represents an established means of categorizing individuals and defining identities, especially in the administrative field. To some extent, the law defines and fixes categories into which reality has to be made to fit – also, and especially, in the administrative processing of applications. Douzinas and Warrington (1991) argue that refugees, when they "come to the law," are treated as faceless entities.

In this process of abstraction and generalization, the individual is sacrificed to the concept in a display of another common type of violence that the law and judgements deal in. The law is about rules and universals. Its categories and concepts, self-enclosed and auto-referential, form a normative grammar that multiplies endlessly according to its internal logic ... In its performative aspect, the judgement abstracts the particular, generalises the event, calculates and assesses individuals and distributes them along normative and normal(ised) paths under a rule that subjects the different to the same and the Other to the self (Douzinas and Warrington 1991:136).

To ensure a consensus regarding category systems, both societies and organizations "obey the rules laid down by precedent in the law, by the institutionalization of customs, by tradition or entrenched protocol or immemorial convention" (Amsterdam and Bruner 2002:24).

What are the functions of and reasons for categorization? According to Berger and Luckmann (1975:45), "the reality of everyday life contains typificatory schemes in terms of which others are apprehended and 'dealt with' in face-to-face encounters." Such typification is reciprocal and has an ongoing effect on the interaction (*ibid.*:44). In an asylum interview, for example, when a caseworker and an asylum claimant enter into direct face-to-face contact, the asylum claimant might think of the official as "a white person," "an Austrian," "a staff member of the authority," or "a representative of the state." By contrast, an official might regard a claimant, for example, as "a Georgian," "a Muslim," or "a sick person." However, it is more difficult to impose rigid patterns of typification in face-to-face interactions than in other, more remote forms of interaction. As Lipsky (2010:59) notes, in bureaucratic encounters, unique individuals with different life experiences and circumstances "are transformed into clients, identifiably located in a very small number of categories, treated as if ... they fit standardized definitions of units consigned to specific bureaucratic slots." Bureaucrats thus see their clients' problems as calls for categories of action and perceive individual demands as components of aggregates (*ibid.*:60).

Individuals use these schemes to interpret and evaluate themselves as well as others, social roles, groups and events; categorizations are thus used to make social judgments in encounters (Massey 2007:9). While individuals always build their

interpretations on categories, categorical judgment is even more crucial under conditions of threat or uncertainty. Since an asylum interview represents a situation characterized by both threat (mostly for the asylum claimant) and uncertainty (for both parties, albeit in different ways) and is a place where social judgments – as well as legal judgments – are made, categorization is a key tool for structuring. Following Berger and Luckmann (1975:48), “social structure is the sum total of these typifications and of the recurrent patterns of interaction established by means of them. As such, social structure is an essential element of the reality of everyday life.”

In general, categorization is a means of structuring and meaning-making for our experience and analysis of the world. Hence, categorizing has several functions, such as mental economy, pragmatic utility, reference group relevance, communal power, personal gratification, and risk regulation (Amsterdam and Bruner 2002). Mental economy describes the process of “using the past to manage the present” (ibid:21) since categorizing minimizes surprise and allows actors to treat things as if they were the same as things previously encountered. Only when there is a special need do actors violate the principle of economy and resort to a non-ordinary category. This practice leads to another function, pragmatic utility, which refers to the deployment of useful categories for doing a certain job or pursuing a particular interest. Implicit in this function of categorization is the possibility of redrawing categories from time to time, such as in situations that disturb the mindlessness caused by the mental-economy function. In addition, categories used by individuals are grounded in conceptions of what matters to those individuals as well as to reference groups. Category systems are instruments for relating to different reference groups such as profession or social class; thus, they vary according to whom and what a person has in mind (ibid:32). “In figuring out who a person is,” caseworkers ascribe to the person “a social identity or group belonging that carries with it significant meaning and consequence and becomes unchanging” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003:78).

Concerning category systems, which serve a culture, community or society, two main functions can be distinguished that sometimes occur simultaneously: cohesiveness and domination (ibid: 34). Categories promote cohesiveness within cultural groups, such as organizations, by maintaining cognitive solidarity. Group members tend to see the world in a similar manner, creating a solidarity that gives the group a unique identity. By contrast, establishing hegemony over others is another consequence of categorizing since the domination of other groups is linked to imposing one’s own category system on others. According to Massey (2007), categorization is the basis of social inequality, which is usually expressed by discrimination and exclusion. However, discrimination, such as gender- or race-related categorizations, is often part of implicit category systems rather than explicit categories.

Amsterdam and Bruner (2002:49f) identify three additional risks of legal categorization in particular that are relevant to the work of decision makers at the FAO: the appeal to similarity, the appeal to natural kinds, and the rhetoric of categorization. The observation that things are similar – for example, a precedent having something in common with a case at hand – provides an available ground on which to treat those things in a similar way, but only if an actor deems this commonality relevant.

Which commonalities are deemed relevant mostly depends on other factors, such as values or principles. For asylum claimants from a particular country, one official finds, for example, that “they have, let’s say, five main assertions” (Roland). However, the danger inherent in such generalizations is that they may represent a barrier to examining claimants’ individual assertions in detail. The appearance or claim of naturalness for certain categories represents another hazard of categorization; by defining a category as natural, such as by using faulty logics regarding reasons for flight, “society is absolved” (ibid:50). However, “‘naturalness’ itself is a creature of our conceptions and our circumstances, of our theories and our praxic understandings about how things work” (ibid). The third identified risk lies in the rhetoric of categorization, such as the distinctions implicit in daily vocabularies and lives. Language can work as “institutional cement” in this process of entrenchment (ibid:31). This risk can only be approached by raising awareness of habitual categories through conscious scrutiny. The aim should then be to become aware of “the broader, value-loaded narrative and conceptual frameworks from which particular categories are being derived for the purpose at hand” (ibid:51).

In conclusion, through caseworkers’ practices of social construction and categorization, asylum claimants are made invisible as individuals in the procedure. In managing the dilemma between “attention and avoidance,” officials reduce individual lives to cases and files; “incidents translated into computer codes are then not only functional necessities, they are elements that allow the agents to limit their involvement as a person” (Dubois 2010:133). In addition, asylum claimants are frequently subjected to stereotypes and thus reduced to, for example, their countries of origin or religious groups. According to Lipsky (2010), clients are socially constructed within a bureaucratic “client-processing mentality.” Whereas bureaucrats are required and trained to respond to people’s individual needs, in practice, claimants tend to be dealt with collectively since the conditions of work impede individualized responses. In the ideal case, bureaucrats create “modes of mass processing” that allow them to treat the public in a more or less fair, appropriate and thoughtful way. In the worst case, they give in to stereotypes, convenience, and favoritism, serving only their own purposes or those of the agency rather than those of the “client” (Lipsky 2010:xiv).

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