

# NEGOTIATING RESEARCH IN THE SHADOW OF MIGRATION CONTROL: ACCESS, KNOWLEDGE AND COGNITIVE AUTHORITY

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Article published in: *Social Anthropology / Anthropologie Sociale* 27(S1)

First published: 30 July 2019

DOI:10.1111/1469-8676.12644C

Rosset, Damian and Christin Achermann (2019). Negotiating research in the shadow of migration control: access, knowledge and cognitive authority, *Social Anthropology* 27(S1), 49-67, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12644C>

## Abstract

This article recounts the failure to gain access to the Swiss asylum agency's 'country of origin information' (COI) unit and how it negatively impacted access to similar research sites in Europe. As producers of indispensable expert knowledge, these units play an important instrumental and symbolic role in asylum procedures and policies. Interpreted as a situated case of knowledge control, rather than a general resistance to research within the institution, the denial of access reveals how the intended research challenged gatekeepers' idealised construction of COI – both as a type of knowledge and as a field of practice. The negotiation about access gradually shifted to other topics, such as the researcher's competence, the field's situation and the nature of legitimate knowledge – all related to politics of expertise and the COI units' legitimising functions in the wider migration apparatus. The negotiation became a competition over cognitive authority and the monopoly of legitimate knowledge production about the field. By black-boxing country information, the gatekeepers fostered the illegibility of bureaucratic processes and the legibility of the state as discourse. Analysing the 30-month negotiation process also reveals the difficulties to seize the contours of the state when encountering transnational bureaucratic fields.

KEYWORDS : access; cognitive authority; country of origin information ; refugee status determination ; state.

## Introduction

Far away from the frontline of migration control and management, where border guards, prison staff and miscellaneous street-level bureaucrats perform their tasks and enact the state, other actors of the migration apparatus (Feldman 2011) operate in its shadow, relatively immune to public and scientific attention. It is the case of country analysts who produce ‘country of origin information’ (COI) relevant to the migration authorities, particularly to those responsible for refugee status determination (Gibb and Good 2013; van der Kist *et al.* 2018). This expert information is fundamental in evaluating the credibility of asylum seekers and assessing their eligibility for international protection (Rosset 2015). In most European countries, country analysts are located in dedicated ‘COI units’ within the national asylum administration.

In order to observe the daily practices of bureaucratic knowledge production and discuss them with their performers, we planned to conduct ethnographic research in several such units. Instead, this article recounts a failed 30-month negotiation to gain access to the COI unit of the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration and, to a lesser degree, its Norwegian counterpart, Landinfo. We interpret this denial of access not as a general resistance to research, but as a situated case of knowledge control and discipline.

Although entering and exiting research fields are considered ‘standard anthropological tropes’, their analytical importance has long been neglected (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) and only recently gained attention (Chaudhuri 2017). It is widely recognised that the field itself has the capacity to control the knowledge produced about it, as researchers are confronted with various gatekeepers at multiple levels, formal and informal, internal and external, who hold the metaphorical (or actual) key to the ‘research field’ and the informants, institutions, interactions and artefacts within (Chaudhuri 2017). Thus, analysing the conditions of access encountered and the ensuing negotiations of entry can shed light on the realities and social structures of the field (Di Trani 2008: 259).

In attempting to study the specific bureaucratic setting of COI units, we concurred with Bourdieu's claim that a sociology of the state is necessarily a sociology of knowledge since the task should consist of re-appropriating the categories of thinking produced by the state. This is especially important as the state remains ‘the unthought principle of the greater part of our thoughts, including those on the state’ (Bourdieu 2012: 173). Knowledge production is at the heart of both bureaucratic practices and representations, contributing to performing the ‘state’ into being (Sharma and Gupta 2006), or as Hoag puts it: ‘producing knowledge – reams and reams of it indeed – is what bureaucracies do best’ (2011: 81).

However, while attempting to study practices that enact the state, we found ourselves entering into a competition over the legitimacy to claim knowledge and produce discourse about our field (Lézé 2008). Initially, the object of the interaction was physical access to persons and places. Over time, the research project and its epistemology became the object

of the negotiation, along with ourselves as the researchers, our definitions of ‘the field’ and, ultimately, the nature of legitimate knowledge (production). Consequently, our questions and interests also evolved, shifting from the bureaucratic knowledge work of specific units towards the nature and functioning of bureaucracies and questions of knowledge production and control by the state itself. We interpret our access negotiations as a journey in the legibility (Scott 1998) and illegibility (Das 2004; Eule *et al.* 2019) of the state. Casting light on the interrelationship between these two notions – where the illegibility of bureaucratic processes shields the legibility of the state as discourse – we contribute to the anthropological literature on the state by connecting it to the sociology of knowledge concept of *black-boxing* (Latour 1999). Indeed, the unequal access to knowledge that results from illegibility prevents outsiders from producing and claiming knowledge about the state, thus reinforcing the state's narrative about itself.

The first part of this article presents an overview of the initial research project and describes the strategy developed to access the field, followed by a chronological account of the negotiation process.<sup>1</sup> The second part outlines and analyses the negotiation phase, and the matters at the heart of these interactions: cognitive authority – the capacity to impose meaning and knowledge differentials over a topic (Lézé 2008: 264) – and the power to produce legitimate knowledge about the field.

## Negotiating access

### Defining the field and the access strategy

The first author of this article,<sup>2</sup> Damian, submitted a PhD proposal in 2014 for a three-part investigation into the production and utilisation of COI in the asylum administrations of three countries: Switzerland, Norway and France.<sup>3</sup> These COI units were selected because of their contrasting characteristics in terms of resources, recruitment, communication and position in respective asylum procedures. The first part of the project focused on the institutional history of each COI unit to understand the rationalities of the actors involved in their creation and development and to account for the differences in institutional layouts

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<sup>1</sup> The material we analysed in this article emanates mainly from interviews, field notes and e-mail correspondence. We are conscious of the ethical questions raised by the use of this specific material. Thorough reflections and discussions on ethics, especially how to avoid harming the safety, dignity or privacy of our interlocutors despite recounting a difficult interaction, have guided the writing process to ensure respecting ethical research standards.

<sup>2</sup> This article deals with the experiences of its two authors. It is written in the first-person plural. When describing situations, actions and interpretations that only concern one of the authors, the third-person singular, *he* or *she*, is used.

<sup>3</sup> Following the developments described in this article, the project changed, and the French COI was ultimately never contacted.

across European asylum administrations. The second part aimed to analyse the everyday work of COI analysts through participant or non-participant observation and in-depth interviews. It focused on categorisations of information and sources and the construction of the authority of knowledge. The third part, focusing on the practices of decision-makers, examined the mobilisation of COI in refugee status determination.

The project proposal left space for themes to emerge inductively from fieldwork and the research design was purposefully broad for a single PhD project, as it was expected to evolve. This breadth was also based on the pragmatic consideration that almost no social scientific research existed on the actual practices related to COI in asylum administrations.<sup>4</sup> While hopeful of offering the first comprehensive analysis on this topic, we were also conscious that we might fail to access some of the places, people and information we envisaged and would thus have to adapt the project.

### **The access strategy**

Planning access necessarily involves calculations with unclear variables, such as locating the most relevant and favourable gatekeepers, assessing the best way to approach them (in)formally, or defining the most appropriate way to present ourselves to our interlocutors. Given the uncertainty, these calculations – resulting in the definition of general strategies to achieve access, as well as more short-term *ad-hoc* tactics – are inherently subjective and influenced by our representations and habitus (Kalir 2006: 238).

Going into our field, we knew that European COI units were densely interconnected. Fifteen units had been involved in producing common methodological guidelines (EU 2008; ECS 2010), for example. Coordination of COI production and circulation was also among the first tasks of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) established in 2010 to replace older platforms (Rosset 2019a) alongside other more informal transnational networks (Engelmann 2015). The Swiss COI unit was well-integrated in these networks; its Head, Mr Gerd Apel,<sup>5</sup> was the coordinator of a working group on COI at European level. We identified him as a crucial gatekeeper to his own unit and with influence among his European counterparts.

Our access strategy was consequently to first gain access to the Swiss COI unit, before contacting the Norwegian and French units. We believed it would be easier to convince other gatekeepers once cleared by an authoritative peer. Considering the inductive nature of the research, it was also probable that the scope of access to the first research field and

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<sup>4</sup> A notable exception was the work of Gibb and Good (2013) on the role of COI in the French and British asylum systems.

<sup>5</sup> All names were anonymised using the ‘German names generator’ of the website [www.fantasynamengenerators.com](http://www.fantasynamengenerators.com)

the initial results would influence the access needed to the other fields. Confidence in this access strategy was drawn from the knowledge that other PhD students were currently completing extensive ethnographic fieldwork on decision-making in the asylum procedure – conducting interviews with caseworkers and heads of units, accessing internal documents and observing of the everyday work of the agency – in various units of the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) (Affolter 2017; Miaz 2017; Poertner 2018). Our confidence was further bolstered by the numerous positive experiences of Damian's supervisor (and second author, Christin) in her research on migration and penal administrations, and by the fact that the SEM had earlier mandated her with commissioned research. Further, while Damian was not an *insider* of the SEM, he was not a total *outsider* to the COI community. The idea for this PhD topic had matured while working as a country analyst in the COI unit of the Federal Administrative Court (FAC), the only appeal body of the Swiss asylum system. However, despite similar missions, the two COI units did not work together and contacts were scarce.

When defining an access strategy, it was difficult to predict whether Damian would be considered an *insider*, familiar with the work of COI producers, or as a suspicious *outsider*, as an academic and a COI researcher from another unit of the same asylum system (Chaudhuri 2017). To some extent, it was probable that he would be considered *both* (Wolf 1996: 15). These fears would soon be put to the test. Damian first met the crucial gatekeeper, Mr Apel, in late 2013 while still working at the FAC. Damian approached Mr Apel after a workshop held by the SEM and told him about his academic plans. Mr Apel replied that he was not opposed in principle, but Damian must make an official request to his hierarchy with a concrete project proposal.

## Reaching out

In July 2014, six months after leaving his FAC position, Damian sent an official request to conduct field research at the SEM to Joachim Mutz, Head of the Asylum Directorate. The request included a brief description of the research project and explicated the researcher's needs: interviews with 8 to 10 country analysts, 8 to 10 caseworkers, and Mr Apel; non-participant observation of these persons' work (without specifying the duration, but indicating especially relevant situations such as trainings and internal presentations); and access to internal documents to trace the history of the COI unit.<sup>6</sup>

Mr Mutz responded negatively to this request, citing the heavy 'investment' the research would involve while assessing the potential 'return on investment' for the agency as 'relatively limited'.<sup>7</sup> He nevertheless suggested that Damian should contact Mr Apel to discuss how the project could be made less resource-intensive and which 'aspects should be

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<sup>6</sup> E-mail from Damian to Mr Mutz, 2 July 2014.

<sup>7</sup> E-mail from Mr Mutz to Damian, 14 July 2014.

covered additionally so that such research would present a more concrete interest for the office'.<sup>8</sup> He also asked if the two other agencies envisaged as research fields had already given him an answer.

At the time, we thought this refusal was largely based on a misunderstanding of the actual burden the research represented for SEM's resources.<sup>9</sup> Damian contacted Mr Apel in September 2014 to set up a meeting to discuss how the project could be adapted to be less demanding and more beneficial to the SEM.<sup>10</sup> Mr Apel asked for a revised research proposal before the meeting could take place,<sup>11</sup> which Damian sent in late-September.<sup>12</sup> Finally, their first meeting took place on 11 November 2014 in the SEM's cafeteria.

### Meeting the gatekeeper

The meeting started positively with Mr Apel telling Damian he was 'brave' to leave his position at the FAC to embark on a PhD. However, the tone changed quickly when Mr Apel stated 'I think you are being instrumentalised by the people from the Centre for Migration Law'. It turned out that Mr Apel had previously met a Professor from this Centre who allegedly had 'a project to establish a Swiss Landinfo'.<sup>13</sup> Mr Apel referred to the Norwegian COI unit, Landinfo, whose broad organisational autonomy is distinctive in the landscape of European COI units. The comparison seemed charged with intent: 'So, the conclusion of your thesis will be that we need to introduce a system like Landinfo in Switzerland?'<sup>14</sup>

Mr Apel asked again if the two other COI units had confirmed participation, agreeing that his counterparts would likely contact him before giving an answer. He further stated that the project remained excessively vague to garner his support at this stage. According to Mr Apel, organisational structures were of secondary importance; the research should instead aim at comparing the COI units' resources, room for manoeuvre, knowledge management practices, or access to different networks.<sup>15</sup>

Mr Apel explained that he works and thinks like a manager dealing with limited resources. Therefore, his staff also needed to be convinced before he would get back to his superiors. He suggested that Damian should present his project during a team meeting the following

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<sup>8</sup> E-mail from Mr Mutz to Damian, 14 July 2014.

<sup>9</sup> E-mail from Christin to Damian, 15 July 2014.

<sup>10</sup> E-mail from Damian to Mr Apel, 5 September 2014.

<sup>11</sup> E-mail from Mr Apel to Damian, 16 September 2014.

<sup>12</sup> E-mail from Damian to Mr Apel, 29 September 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Field notes 11 November 2014. Damian had never met this person who later denied having any opinion on COI structures.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

month. The presentation took place on 15 December 2014 in a meeting room on the SEM's premises. It was attended by members of the COI unit and their colleagues from another team. Mr Apel's direct superior, Mr Haas, was also present. Damian's field notes describe the meeting in this way:

I don't feel much enthusiasm towards my presentation, but the audience seems to listen quite attentively. After a few minutes, Mr Apel leaves the room – I will be told afterwards that he had an emergency. I finish my presentation fifteen minutes later and receive questions on the choices of my research sites. [One person] says the project is overly ambitious. One man asks many questions, all targeted at defining whether I am 'a critical researcher'. Mr Apel gets back to the room and repeats many questions that had already been discussed. He concludes the meeting by asking me with a smile if I felt I had convinced his analysts. I reply that I had not expected boundless excitement but that my research questions seemed relevant to the analysts.

I am irritated when I leave the meeting one hour and forty-seven minutes after entering, as I realise the SEM has already devoted more resources on this negotiation than I needed to conduct my entire fieldwork, including the waste of time of people who had nothing to do with it.<sup>16</sup>

### **Negotiating at multiple levels**

A meeting between Mr Apel, Mr Haas, Damian and Christin was scheduled for 21 January 2015, in anticipation of which Mr Apel wrote that the project was 'still very vague and to a large degree dependent on external factors', stating that he hoped the researchers would have received responses from the Norwegian and French COI units by then.<sup>17</sup> Damian replied that the other COI units would not be contacted right away, and that: 'In the current situation, I am unable to further clarify and adapt my [project] without making promises I will be unable to hold at a later stage.'<sup>18</sup>

We met Mr Apel and Mr Haas in the latter's office. Mr Haas suggested that we may have been unaware of the resources that had already been spent on the research request. As the previous field notes excerpt shows, we were very aware of it. The discussion was frank and open, and we left the SEM feeling relieved as Mr Haas eventually said that Damian could count on his fieldwork. Per his request, we sent a final project proposal with specific indications of time and resources needed and a confidentiality agreement. Unexpectedly,

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<sup>16</sup> Field notes 15 December 2014.

<sup>17</sup> E-mail from Mr Apel to Damian, 22 December 2014.

<sup>18</sup> E-mail from Damian to Mr Apel, 23 December 2014.

on 30 March, we received a negative response from Mr Haas, explaining that the burden was too heavy for the SEM's limited resources.<sup>19</sup>

Christin called the Head of the SEM's Asylum Directorate, whom she personally knew from previous professional contacts, for clarification. Mr Mutz said he was reluctant to allow participant observation because former experiences with ethnographic research had proven too demanding of resources. However, he did not object to us conducting interviews and demanded a new formal research request, which Damian sent on 18 May 2015.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly in the context of increased numbers of asylum seekers arriving in Europe during the summer of 2015, Mr Haas replied in July that due to the exceptional workload and several absences in the COI unit, any interviews before mid-September would be impossible. The first interview would have to be conducted with Mr Apel.<sup>21</sup> Over the following six months, Damian sent e-mails every month suggesting possible dates for the interviews. They were met with either excuses and postponement or no reply.

As months passed, we revised our initial approach strategy and reached out to Daniel Wald, the Head of the Norwegian Landinfo.<sup>22</sup> The reply stated 'We are able to accommodate your wish to speak to some of our country analysts and also with our Head of Unit.' The details would be discussed on arrival in Oslo in January 2016.<sup>23</sup> Although the e-mail also specified that 'Unfortunately, we cannot offer you non-participatory observant status in our offices, due to resource situation and other more principled considerations',<sup>24</sup> there seemed to be at least potential for access into this field.

After a meeting with Mr Wald and a Landinfo country analyst, Damian sent two confidentiality agreements<sup>25</sup> and a document describing the foreseen interviews. However, Mr Wald's reaction was rather reluctant. It included the following excerpt:

Landinfo considers your proposed research to be a most ambitious undertaking into a field that, in our experience, requires in-depth prior familiarisation to the subject field and a highly sensitized and open approach in order for the outcome to succinctly mirror actual circumstances in the COI domain. We also have a particular concern about the present non-engagement of any other European COI units/resources in your study, and recognise a clear uncertainty as to which, if any, other such sources will be engaged. Thus – at present – your proposal, your

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<sup>19</sup> E-mail from Mr Haas to Mr Apel, 30 March 2015.

<sup>20</sup> E-mail from Damian to Mr Mutz, 18 May 2015.

<sup>21</sup> E-mail from Mr Haas to Damian, 9 July 2015.

<sup>22</sup> E-mail from Damian to Mr Wald, 22 October 2015.

<sup>23</sup> E-mail from Landinfo collaborator to Damian, 26 October 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> In both Norway and Switzerland, the confidentiality agreements we were asked to draft were never used.

presentation of the research plan at our offices and the previously published papers (of which Landinfo was unaware of having been subject to evaluation), raise several hesitations on our part.

As previously agreed, Landinfo will contribute to your study. However, in consideration of the above constraints and hesitations, we will restrict interviews to a limited number of staff.<sup>26</sup>

This e-mail represented a change in tone from Landinfo, questioning Damian's capacity to 'succinctly mirror actual circumstances' of a field he had been involved in for over four years. Additionally, it repeated Mr Apel's argument that obtaining access was dependent on having access to other sites. The 'previously published papers' that contributed to Mr Wald's hesitation referred to an article written in 2015 by Damian and a Norwegian colleague while waiting to enter the field. The four-page paper dealt with controversy over a report about Eritrea published by the Danish COI unit in late 2014 (Rosset and Liodden 2015). Based on this report, the Danish authorities announced a restrictive turn towards Eritrean asylum seekers before backpedalling and returning to their former practice. Using Boswell's typology of expert knowledge utilisation (2009), the article put forward that besides its *instrumental* utilisation in decision-making, COI could also have *symbolic* functions – in this example to deter potential asylum applicants. It also discussed how the Danish report circulated in asylum policies in Norway and the UK.

Damian was eventually able to conduct three interviews in Oslo, with Mr Wald and two country analysts. Before leaving Oslo, Damian asked Mr Haas and Mr Apel whether his research at the SEM was still considered a possibility. He received the following response:

Dear Mr Rosset,

We can meet on Tuesday 22 March, 14-15, and discuss the next proceedings.

Your tendentious article about the alleged instrumentalisation of Eritrea COI has provoked considerable irritation in my team, so that no Analyst is ready to willingly conduct an interview with you or support your work in any other way.

Best wishes,

Gerd Apel<sup>27</sup>

Christin found it necessary to re-establish some boundaries, making Mr Apel aware of her 'deep irritation' towards the 'displeasing and disrespectful, baseless denigration' of the article. She also requested clarification of the purpose of the proposed meeting.<sup>28</sup> In the

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<sup>26</sup> E-mail from Mr Wald to Damian, 15 January 2016.

<sup>27</sup> E-mail from Mr Apel to Damian, 22 February 2016.

<sup>28</sup> E-mail from Christin to Mr Apel, 17 March 2016.

absence of an answer, Damian met Mr Apel in his office without a clear understanding of the agenda. Mr Apel complained that we had persisted with his superiors after receiving a clear, negatory response. He also came back to the article he had called 'tendentious' in his e-mail:

[He said we] should have withdrawn our article before its publication, as a Danish parliamentary commission had reviewed the case and found no problem at all. I didn't respond as I wasn't sure what he was referring to. It turns out he was probably speaking of the Ombudsman's report that was published after our article that didn't say there was no problem at all, but that the law had not been broken.<sup>29</sup>

After expressing his complaints, Mr Apel unpredictably asked: 'So, do you have questions?' Damian interviewed him for an hour and forty minutes. After thirty months of negotiating access, he had finally been granted one official interview. It was also the last time he talked to Mr Apel.

### **The last encounter**

Damian's last encounter with Mr Apel and Mr Wald took place in November 2016, on the premises of the Geneva-based 'Intergovernmental Consultations on Migration, Asylum and Refugees' (IGC). This platform for informal exchanges between officials of its member states runs a dedicated working group where heads of COI units meet for off-the-record discussions (Rosset 2019a) and Damian was invited by the organisation's Secretariat to attend one such meeting and present his research. In a sense, this was the first time Damian could conduct 'observation' of COI professionals at work. During a break, however, he was requested to stop taking notes. Another participant had complained that it went against the 'Chatham House rules' that IGC meetings followed.

Mr Apel and Mr Wald were present but did not speak to Damian, even after he presented his research project, which had evolved significantly. Nevertheless, the event had unexpected consequences for Damian's research, as Mr Apel subsequently opposed IGC allowing him to consult its archives.<sup>30</sup> At the time of submitting this article, in March 2019, Damian has still not received a final decision about access to these archives.

## **Negotiating competence, cognitive authority and knowledge**

The chronological account of the negotiation process indicates that some level of mistrust from the most important gatekeeper existed from the outset. Despite our awareness of Mr Apel's wariness and our best efforts, we were unable to change the course of the interaction.

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<sup>29</sup> Field notes 23 March 2016.

<sup>30</sup> E-mail from IGC Secretary General to Damian, 27 January 2017.

While it is impossible to know what the outcome may have been with a more successful negotiation, it *is* possible to identify patterns in the negotiation process and use them as windows into local meanings, norms and perspectives in and on the field.

Analysing the process, we realised that the negotiation shifted from the topic of access to that of cognitive authority, i.e. the capacity to produce and impose legitimate meaning about the field. Displays of gatekeeping power (not replying to e-mails, sanctioning the researcher for a publication, or questioning competence) revealed the rationales and logic of the actors within the field and of the field itself. Indeed, the former and the latter are bound together by an *institutional habitus* – the set of ‘schemes of thinking, acting, feeling and desiring’ (Affolter 2017: 2) produced and constantly re-enacted by the organisation through the work of individual officials.

### Negotiating competence

Our cognitive authority as researchers was constantly challenged during negotiations through dismissal of our ability to conduct quality research and criticism of the project itself. Damian was rarely recognised as an expert *insider*, despite his previous experience as a country analyst. This experience was only ever mentioned by Mr Apel to stress that his research would be incomplete should it not include his former workplace, or to criticise the FAC's role and practices in terms of country information.<sup>31</sup> While Mr Apel and Mr Wald questioned our authority as researchers to produce knowledge over *their* field, they felt legitimate in their right to assess the academic project in *our* field.

The interconnectedness of the European COI community made it possible for one reluctant gatekeeper to block research not only into his own unit but also to those of his counterparts. Yet, Mr Apel argued his reluctance was partly due to the absence of commitment from his French and Norwegian counterparts, criticising the research for relying excessively on ‘external factors’. Meanwhile, he acknowledged that his colleagues would likely turn to him when contacted.<sup>32</sup> This attitude created a ‘race to the bottom’, where the multi-sited nature of the research design would legitimise spending less time and resources than the other sites. We thus found ourselves caught between two dimensions of our research field(s) – the national field of each COI unit and the transnational field of the COI community – that our interlocutors were able to strategically manoeuvre to achieve their interests.

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<sup>31</sup> Field notes 11 November 2014; e-mail from Mr Apel to Damian, 1 December 2014; interview with Mr Apel, 22 March 2017.

<sup>32</sup> A role he played consciously, for example confirming his role in Landinfo's reflections on Damian's research: ‘Mr Wald and I are friends. I assume he also told you that. He also called me if he should talk to you or not’ (interview with Mr Apel, 22 March 2016).

Bigo (2016) observed similar capabilities to operate simultaneously in national and transnational bureaucratic fields among actors in the security domain. He identified the emergence of 'transnational guilds', defined as 'actors whose struggles and solidarity at a distance are connected with a profession and, inside this profession, with a specific craft explaining the common dispositions between individuals who are very distant from each other' (2016: 407–8). Arguably, the COI community, through the shared experiences, challenges, values and methods of COI units, as well as their intense interactions over three decades (Engelmann 2015: 189–99; Rosset 2019a) can be apprehended as a transnational guild with common dispositions and habitus. The duplicity of the field created the conditions for the catch-22 situation we experienced.

This inextricable situation echoes another argument for refusing entry into the field. Recounting his attempts to access immigration judges in the UK, Campbell quotes a 'somewhat ironic' reply: 'Your research is not based on a detailed and accurate knowledge of the system as it is and a genuine, open-minded attempt to discover more about it' (2017: 11). As seen in Mr Wald's e-mail, Damian faced the same paradox where alleged inaccurate or insufficient prior knowledge about the field was reason to prevent him from accessing the field.

The 'genuine, open mind' expected from Campbell also echoes the 'highly sensitised and open approach' mentioned in Mr Wald's e-mail<sup>33</sup> that implicitly (but quite evidently) stressed Damian's supposed lack thereof. Such expectations are familiar to anthropologists who are particularly interested in informants' *emic* perspectives on the world. Arguably, COI professionals could be interesting potential partners for para-ethnographic research, to draw on their self-conscious, reflexive representations and narratives of the organisational cultures they evolve in (Holmes and Marcus 2005). Their expert position requires some level of reflexivity, especially as their training and everyday practices involve reflecting on their positionality regarding the asylum procedure (Rosset 2019b). Nonetheless, in our case, being 'sensitised' and 'open' to the field's representations seems to mean adhering to them even before entering the field.

Our failure to access the field prevented us from reaching the *emic* or the *para-ethnographic* in the representations at work within, but it does reveal the importance of the *strategic* of the field's gatekeepers with regard to their control over the discourse about it. Beyond our interlocutors' personalities and their distrust towards the proposed research, we can draw two hypotheses to explain why these specific actors gave such weight to preserving the field from potentially competing discourse – both related to the politics of expertise at play. First, as sites of expert knowledge production, COI units may be particularly sensitive to controlling discourses that surround them. The authority of the knowledge (COI) they produce relies on external recognition of the validity of the production processes (van der Kist *et al.* 2018). Second, as heads of these units, these actors have strategic interests in

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<sup>33</sup> E-mail from Mr Wald to Damian, 15 January 2016.

controlling these representations (Deeb and Marcus 2011). As the following section shows, cognitive authority over the field was at play.

### **Negotiating cognitive authority over the research field**

As mentioned before, the SEM had demonstrated openness towards ethnographic research in recent years. We assumed that the production of COI would constitute a less delicate area than decision-making on asylum claims, where previous research was conducted. While acknowledging that the interpersonal dimension influenced the access negotiation, it is relevant to look at the symbolic position of COI units and their staff within asylum administrations to understand why our assumption was flawed.

The work of asylum caseworkers is regularly contested (e.g. in judicial appeals or advocacy campaigns), but the difficulty of their position is acknowledged. In a sense, research into their practices does not carry significant risk of de-legitimisation. In contrast, we view the position of country analysts as a rather prestigious one within the SEM. In discussions with other civil servants, we observed country analysts' image as highly skilled specialists holding unique expertise on exotic countries and 'on the ground' experience. They also occupy a higher pay grade than caseworkers. As experts, they foster the legitimacy of asylum institutions by facilitating well-informed decisions based on what are considered objective facts.

In this context, reluctance to display how COI is produced may be interpreted as an obvious case of *black-boxing* (Latour 1999), i.e. the process by which scientific facts are made autonomous from the social conditions and practices that lead to their construction or 'the way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success' (1999: 304). In this respect, it is noteworthy that the COI units also mobilise the language of science. The Swiss unit's website, for example, explains that 'Country Analysis follows international standards of quality' and 'findings are documented in keeping with scientific practice' (SEM nd). It thus appears that, in comparison with caseworkers, COI professionals have much more to lose from letting someone 'unveil' their everyday practices because of the particular work of knowledge production they engage in.

However, the inner workings of the 'COI black box' were not the primary concern our interlocutors brought up. Instead, the box's *location* was an issue, as the project was repeatedly criticised for approaching the work of COI units as an element of asylum procedures. This may seem quite incongruous as these units were created to produce and disseminate knowledge for refugee status decision-making and this remains their core business. To make sense of this apparent paradox, one needs to understand some central assumptions within the COI profession.

Over the years, producers of COI in Western countries' asylum administrations have gone beyond developing networks, resources and capabilities to gather better information more efficiently (ICMPD 2006; Engelmann 2015). They have also engaged in a substantial epistemological endeavour to develop 'COI standards' – quality criteria defining what constitutes 'good COI' in terms of methods and content (EU 2008; ECS 2010; EASO 2012). One important norm that emerged from this process is that the production of COI should be independent of its utilisation. This strict separation fosters the legitimacy of the actors, procedures and institutions involved (Rosset 2019b). Accordingly, actors within the field saw an exclusive focus on the COI units *per se* as a more relevant level of analysis.

Reflecting on his access to psychoanalysts as research partners, Lézé writes, 'Like philosophers who confer their discipline with a status of [social] exterritoriality (Bourdieu 1997: 54), psychoanalysts' understanding of their practices is not only an idealised construction, but also outside the world' (2008: 263). The civil servants we interacted with held a similar 'idealised construction' of the COI community's professional practices and a strong belief in the autonomy of the COI units from their social, political and bureaucratic context. Continuing the black box metaphor, our interlocutors would only allow us to open it if it were extracted from its environment. Such shared understandings and perceptions relate to the transnational institutional habitus of COI producers who 'exchange not only information but also meanings of life and ways of framing the world' (Bigo 2016: 411) across European asylum administrations. As we shall see below, elements of this institutional habitus shifted our interactions further towards the nature of research and the understanding of what constitutes relevant and legitimate knowledge.

### Negotiating legitimate knowledge

In his academic context, Damian's initial research project had been evaluated positively and validated by his faculty. However, Swiss civil servants systematically dismissed it as 'vague' during the same period. This discrepancy is partly the result of diverging understandings, on the part of COI civil servants and ourselves, over fundamental epistemological questions.

At the end of Damian's interview with Mr Apel, the civil servant said, 'Now we will see if your work meets the criteria.'<sup>34</sup> It was evident on previous occasions that the research was being evaluated through the positivist cognitive apparatus of the COI world rather than that of Damian's academic field. Mr Apel made this clear while criticising Damian's presentation of the research project to his team:

You have done a very bad presentation. You may have underestimated your audience because analysts always analyse. They always do source criticism and so

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Mr Apel, 22 March 2017.

on. And maybe you were also not prepared to be questioned like they question people on a fact-finding mission.<sup>35</sup>

According to Mr Apel, Damian's capacity to convince the COI field of his project's worth depended on the evaluation of him as a valid source based on the criteria applied to sources in COI reports. Thus, according to Mr Apel's reasoning, as Damian was considered a bad source, he should not be granted access to COI production. In the absence of explicit reproaches, it is difficult to assess why the presentation was bad. It is perhaps more interesting to examine what would have made Damian a 'good' source by COI standards.

### Epistemology and the COI institutional habitus

The very practice of COI relies on a positivist epistemology assuming the existence of an external world made of objective facts that can be reported neutrally. For example, the EU COI Guidelines aim to offer 'basic common criteria on how to process transparent, objective, impartial, and balanced factual COI' (EU 2008: 8).

In COI epistemology, facts are either *found* in so-called 'fact-finding missions' or *collected* from available sources – data is like mushrooms in the forest waiting to be picked (Bensa 2010), the opposite of a qualitative approach that assumes data does not exist independently of the context of interpersonal relations (Lavanchy 2013: 678) and that meaning is socially constructed. Our interlocutors' repeated demands for clarifications of research aims and procedures and requests for specificity in the 'concrete [interview] questions' that would be asked not only signalled suspicion and intention to control the research but also hinted at their misconceptions about how qualitative and interpretive social sciences conceptualise data. The gatekeepers thus assessed the question of granting access by evaluating the research project according to their own professional standards.

How data would be 'processed' or 'analysed' was another point of contention. A 2012 EASO methodological document defines analysis as 'A neutral evaluation or study of [the information collected and summarised in the report], usually made by breaking a subject down into its constituent parts and then describing the parts and their interrelationships' (EASO 2012: 13). Furthermore, this report asserts 'the collected information should be analysed by explicitly validating the sources as well as the information' (2012: 13). While the analytical process includes the 'codification' and 'classification' of data, COI epistemology draws a line before two further key steps of qualitative analysis – 'interpretation' and 'theorisation'. Instead, the 'interpretation' of facts for refugee status

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<sup>35</sup> Interview with Mr Apel, 22 March 2016. His subordinates' opinions were repeatedly mobilised by Mr Apel who spoke on their behalf to justify his reluctance in letting Damian in.

determination is the role of decision-makers – caseworkers and asylum judges – and crossing this line is considered malpractice (Rosset 2019b).

In the COI institutional habitus, authority and legitimacy over knowledge relies on adhering to this positivist epistemology. Commenting on the PhD project's objectives, Mr Wald wrote:

Based on our initial exchanges, Landinfo was asked to contribute with factual information on the development of COI and of COI units over the past decade, the methodological advances that COI units have made in the same period, and the everyday practices that COI units are engaged in. ...

The topics above have been subject to in-depth and qualified review, analysis and efforts of professionalisation throughout the last decade – a vast amount of research (and outcome) has been produced and shared by individual COI units, and – more recently – by EASO. Also, standards for COI production have been established and described through various guidelines, authored by EURASIL ([on fact-finding missions]), ACCORD, individual COI units, ECS and EASO, to mention a few.<sup>36</sup>

It is hard to interpret by what standards the above-mentioned review was considered ‘in-depth’ and ‘qualified’. To our knowledge, no empirical research has ever been conducted on professional practices within COI units. The proposed references are either descriptive or normative texts on COI – all but one produced by state organisations. The only non-governmental actor referenced, the Austrian Red Cross’ COI centre ACCORD, played an important role in the methodological development of COI standards and their dissemination (ACCORD 2013). The ‘vast amount of research (and outcome)’ that Mr Wald refers to is essentially the codification of methods and best practices for producing COI, written by authorised institutional actors. These documents importantly contribute to how COI units produce knowledge about themselves.

Following actor-network theory scholars, these normative and descriptive documents, as well as COI units’ websites and their publicly available reports, can be understood as inscriptions, i.e. artefacts ‘through which actors seek to translate the messiness of the world ... into usable, mobile knowledge’ (Best and Walters 2013: 333). By rendering ‘the ideas and practices contained in them commonsensical’, the producers of these inscriptions ‘translate them into a black box that no one seeks to examine too carefully’ (2013: 333). Therefore, the public transparency that COI units engage in is not discordant with their reluctance to external scrutiny but is instead another side of the same black box.

On a more self-reflexive note, it became clear to us that we had failed to foresee and prevent a mismatch between respective epistemological positions. The constructivist, interpretative and inductive nature of the planned research was irreconcilable with the positivist

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<sup>36</sup> E-mail from Mr Wald to Damian 15 January 2016.

epistemology grounded in our interlocutors' institutional habitus. We clearly miscalculated the breadth of this gap, mistakenly assuming that we could count on shared backgrounds and understandings, partly because all our interlocutors had a social sciences education. Perhaps somewhat naively, we had not considered that the project would be put into question because of diverging methodologies.

## Black-boxing the state

Analysing 30 months of vain negotiations to access a research field is an ambiguous endeavour. It forces us to reflect on personal failure, methodological shortcomings and also wasted time, energy and opportunities. However, it also allows us to make sense of the process and provide valuable information on the field, its nature, functioning and dynamics (Di Trani 2008: 259).

Several specific elements of the politics of expertise around COI units came to the front during our negotiation for access. First, the positivistic posture of our interlocutors reflects the epistemic stance on which COI relies as an expert knowledge: a collection of objective facts allowing rational and de-politicised decision-making. Second, to guarantee this objectivity, the production of knowledge is separated from its utilisation and interpretation. The idealised construction of the field as a distinct entity from the rest of the refugee status determination regime explains why our interlocutors actively contested our situation of it within a wider apparatus of migration control. Last, our research threatened the field's monopoly over the production of meaning and knowledge about itself and according to its own premises. Questioning the competence of *outsiders* to grasp the complexities of their work reflected a competition over the legitimacy and power to talk about the field.

Attempting to enter the COI field challenged its monopoly of legitimate discourse over itself. Our experience confirms the importance of understanding gatekeeping at the threshold of the state as determining not only *what* one is allowed to see, but also *how* to see it (Abrams 1988) and the difficulty 'to talk about bureaucracies without allowing bureaucratic ideals to predetermine the analysis' (Hoag 2011: 85) when adherence to specific cognitive frameworks conditions the physical access to the research field.

It will come as no surprise to anthropologists of the state that we encountered a research field that did not match the Weberian hierarchical, rational and impersonal ideal-type of bureaucratic organisations. Instead, we faced messy and often contradictory processes shaped by institutional and structural codes as well as individual subjectivities and personalities. This experience illustrates the way state actors exert power through illegible bureaucratic processes that produce asymmetries of knowledge with outsiders (Das 2004; Eule *et al.* 2019).

Despite the illegibility that characterised our interactions with the field's gatekeepers, we contend that our failure to gain access can also be interpreted as a case of legibility production. Scott (1998) revealed how states engage in 'legibility practices' by generating knowledge and language that allows them to regulate and govern. But states also make themselves legible to society by projecting self-representations and performance of objectivity, transparency and rationality (Sharma and Gupta 2006). Arguably, COI units produce both legibility *for* the state (producing operational knowledge) and legibility *of* the state (performing rational and objective decision-making). Indeed, the expert knowledge they produce plays an instrumental role in refugee status determination and asylum policies, as well as a symbolic role in legitimising the procedures and the institutions in which they evolve (Boswell 2009; Rosset and Liodden 2015; van der Kist *et al.* 2018; Rosset 2019b).

The particular function of COI as sites of expert knowledge production facilitates interpretation of the same processes in terms of black-boxing. By black-boxing the production of facts on the countries of origin, our interlocutors arguably also contribute to black-boxing the state as a fact. This process combines the opaqueness of the actual processes of knowledge production and the proactive production of knowledge about the same processes through transparency. Bureaucracies, like science, can act as 'objectivity machines, generating vision from nowhere and everywhere' (Hoag 2011: 84) – performing the state as a neutral 'viewpoint on viewpoints ... [making] believe that it is not itself a viewpoint' (Bourdieu 2012: 56).

Reflecting on access to the state as a research field allows us to reflect on its contours. While the bureaucratic postures within the Swiss administration appeared disarticulated, our relationships with the heads of the two COI units bear striking similarities. The coherence of the beliefs and (self-)representations, as well as the informal communications, solidarities and personal bonds displayed in these transnational spaces questions the pertinence of the level of analysis of national state bureaucracies (Bigo 2016; Infantino 2019). Our experience with the Swiss and Norwegian COI units shows that bureaucratic actors also drew on the ambivalence between the national and the transnational to deny access, playing on both the interconnectedness of the COI community and the maintenance of these institutions' national boundaries.

## Acknowledgements

A first version of this paper was presented at the 14th IMISCOE Annual Conference in Rotterdam in June 2017. The participants of the double panel 'What does access do to knowledge?', as well as Camilla Alberti, Luca Pfirter and Michelle Higginbotham, provided comments on previous versions of the article. Barak Kalir and two anonymous reviewers commented on successive versions. We are extremely grateful to all these persons for their invaluable help in improving the article. This research was supported by the nccr – on the

move funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. It has also benefited from a grant from the University of Neuchâtel's 'Fonds des donations'.

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