

Power and Purpose in an Immigration Removal Centre

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How is power manifest inside an immigration removal centre (IRC), and does the basic function of the institution align with staff's sense of purpose? Drawing on interviews with employees at Brook House IRC, I argue that power is simultaneously present, absent and elsewhere. Staff acknowledge the presence of power in their 'immigration prison', but routinely feel an absence of authority, and note that decisions about immigration cases are made elsewhere. I then analyze how employees speak about the purpose of their work, which they see as providing both security and welfare. I conclude that the twin realities of power and purpose, security and welfare, create a dilemma for staff, IRCs and the liberal state as a whole.

KEY WORDS: immigration removal centres, power, security, care, welfare

INTRODUCTION

From a distance, Brook House epitomizes power. The immigration removal centre (IRC), built to Category B prison specifications,¹ is surrounded by high walls, fences and razor wire. A biometric system controls entry to and exit from the building. Visitors must show identification upon arrival and may be searched as they enter. In the gatehouse, staff collect their keys and radio for another long shift, while people in suits wait to be escorted through the 'sterile area' to speak to the senior management team. Safety notices give stern warnings to newcomers, and inspirational posters declare the private security firm's corporate values.² All the while, several hundred metres away, planes can be heard taking off from Gatwick Airport runway, a reminder to the detained foreign nationals inside of the fate that awaits many of them.

Underpinning this elaborate system is the power of the sovereign state. While the running of IRCs is often outsourced to companies like G4S, Serco and Mitie ([Bosworth and Zedner 2022](#)),

¹ In England and Wales, prisons are classified from Category A high security prisons to Category D 'open prisons'. Category B prisons are either local prisons, which house remand or sentenced prisoners from the local courts, or training prisons, which hold long-term and high security prisoners.

² G4S Care and Justice Services (UK) Ltd ran Brook House from its opening in 2009 until 2020. Brook House and the adjacent site, Tinsley House, opened in 1996, are now run by Serco, and the two sites are collectively known as Gatwick IRC. Brook House is the larger of the two centres and is considered a far more challenging place to work.

border control is ultimately the responsibility of the Home Office. In the United Kingdom, IRCs are secure holding zones that facilitate the ‘removal’ of people with no legal right to remain in the country, including the deportation of foreign nationals who have served a prison sentence of 12 months or more (see [Hall 2012](#); [Bosworth 2014](#)).³ Despite its physical resemblance to a prison, an IRC like Brook House is not formally a place of punishment. Its primary function is administrative, not penal: it exists to make removals quicker and easier. ‘The goal is not reintegration into society, so central to liberal penology, but rather expulsion from it’ ([Wilsher 2011](#): 278–279). To this end, detention may also buy the state time to establish a person’s identity, settle a disputed asylum claim or prevent absconson ([Home Office 2023](#): 6). Immigration detention is thus one part of the administrative state’s toolkit for removing unwanted people from its territory ([Thomas 2023](#): 246–253).

At first blush, the sovereign state’s power to coerce, detain and expel, combined with multinational corporate profitmaking, commands our attention. But from within Brook House is a recognizably human environment: painful or tragic one moment, baffling or absurd the next. Despite the seemingly simple function that detention serves—holding foreign nationals securely while their immigration case is settled—employees often seem unsure about their purpose at work and what they are supposed to do all day ([Bosworth and Slade 2014](#): 173). Rather than revel in their dominant status, staff stress their weak authority and despair of the fragile nature of order in IRCs, where ‘things can go wrong very quickly’. They tend to reject the ‘old school’ model of the brutish prison guard who delights in dishing out pain, and express concern about a minority of authoritarian colleagues who are ‘in the job for the wrong reasons’. When asked to describe their role, staff often suggest that their purpose at work is to provide both welfare and security. At times they are reluctant parents, or untrained social workers, or clueless psychiatrists. ‘A Tesco customer service desk in a prison environment’, said one jaded soul. Whatever the analogy, they are a tribute act, not the headline band. Power—*real* power—lies elsewhere.

How is power manifest inside an IRC, and does the basic function of the institution align with staff’s sense of purpose? With ‘no assured outcome or inherent purpose’ ([Bosworth 2014](#): 210), only the instrumental one of facilitating removals, what guides employees as they muddle through each shift, feeling under-appreciated by detainees inside and misunderstood by ‘do-gooder’ critics outside ([Hall 2012](#): 126–130)? These are the central questions I address in the paper, and my argument proceeds as follows.

I begin by claiming that power is empirically elusive from the perspective of those working inside immigration detention, and suggest that power in various forms is at once present, absent and elsewhere. At times, Brook House staff acknowledge the presence of coercive power in their establishment as a whole, which they often describe as an ‘immigration prison’. They also recognize the sovereign power of the state, specifically the Home Office, to make decisions about individual cases and set overarching policies, which their private employer must deliver on the Home Office’s behalf. As individual employees, they are aware of their formal authority to enforce rules and maintain order, particularly their ability to use force, including approved techniques of control and restraint (C&R), against detainees in certain circumstances.

Yet staff speak of the absence of power more frequently than they mention its presence. Every day, employees spend hours responding to detainees’ requests and performing small tasks for them, which fuels a perception that the ‘residents’ of Brook House are ‘needy’, ‘ungrateful’ and ‘dependent’. Rather than running a strict regime by command and control, workers find themselves providing a service for a population they tend to distrust, but to whom they owe a legal

3 In the United Kingdom, ‘deportation’ refers specifically to forced removals that are conducive to ‘the public good’, usually following a prison sentence. Despite the legal distinction, in practice many people use the more familiar, evocative term ‘deportation’ as a synonym for ‘removal’.

duty of care. These feelings of impotence are compounded by the fact that key decisions about immigration cases, which is by far the most important issue to detainees, are made elsewhere by off-site Home Office caseworkers who have little personal interaction with the people whose fortunes they determine. Fundamental questions about power—where authority lies, who is really in control, and how decisions get made—are pervasive but hard to resolve, leaving staff to encounter all manner of problems and hope they can impose a provisional solution.

The protean character of power in immigration detention is the beginning, but not the end, of the story. In the latter part of the article, I consider staff testimonies about their purpose at work, and observe that in interpersonal relations with detainees, employees are pulled in different directions by principles of welfare and security. Workers talk about ‘looking after’ detainees during their ‘stay’ in Brook House, but their efforts to build rapport with them are qualified by concerns about being manipulated or ‘conditioned’ by the men ‘in their care’. They say that their main role is to help detainees and treat them with decency, yet they must also remain hard-headed realists who accept that people are ultimately held in Brook House pending removal. The result is a default state of security-focussed ‘hypervigilance’ (Hall 2010: 890) among staff mixed with acts and expressions of genuine concern for detainees’ welfare, which I call the dilemma of power and purpose. In an institution where facilitating removals is the primary objective, when the coercive power of the sovereign state confronts staff’s purpose of welfare, the former tends to prevail over the latter, irrespective of its consequences for detainees’ wellbeing. Prioritizing expulsion while also humanizing detention is a difficult matter of conscience for individual employees, but also a contradiction within the institution and immigration system writ large, whose policies proclaim respect, dignity and inclusion, but whose practices fall far short of these ideals.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

At the time of writing, there are seven IRCs and three residential short-term holding facilities operating in the United Kingdom, in addition to prisons that can hold foreign nationals post-sentence under Immigration Act powers, and various other forms of secure accommodation for migrants. The average daily population in the detention estate peaked at 3,531 in the third quarter of 2015, a year in which a total of 32,447 men and women passed through IRCs. The number of immigration detainees dropped markedly towards the end of 2017, a trend later accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic from spring 2020 onwards, but since 2021 has rebounded to pre-pandemic levels (Silverman *et al.* 2022: 3–6).

Opened in 2009, Brook House can now hold up to 508 adult men. In the beginning, it was notorious within the detention estate for being a volatile centre with a disciplinarian staff culture. There was, among other things, a riot, hunger strikes and heavy criticism from an independent oversight body (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2010). Following a period of relative tranquillity, Brook House came into the public eye in September 2017 when a BBC Panorama exposé captured staff violence, racism and detainee drug taking on camera, as well as a host of other problems in the centre (Shaw 2018: 99–114). Some filming took place during my research period in June and July 2017, and the programme was broadcast on 4 September 2017, shortly after my fieldwork was finished. The Brook House Inquiry was established on 5 November 2019 to investigate these events, and I was called as a witness to give evidence on 8 December 2021. There were significant delays to the proceedings, but the final 711-page, three-volume report was published in September 2023. It made 33 wide-ranging recommendations in total, calling for the Home Office to monitor contract performance more robustly, introduce a time-limit on detention, and make various changes to use of force policies in IRCs (Eves 2023).

In summer 2017, I carried out 1 month of doctoral fieldwork in Brook House. The specific aim of the research was to understand how IRC staff responded to self-harm and suicidal behaviour

in a coercive institution with a high-risk, fast-changing population. In a context where there are many competing demands on their time, and limited training and resources available to them, how do employees provide care in custody? More generally, the research explored what it is like to work in an IRC, how staff understood their role, and the relationship between the individual agents immersed in detention centres and the wider power structure of immigration control in the United Kingdom. The latter, broader questions are my main concern here.

On average, I was in Brook House 4 days a week for 4 weeks, from approximately 09.30 until 17.30. Drawing keys, I spent an initial fortnight observing the centre, speaking to dozens of detainees and staff located on all the wings and the activities corridor, as well as in courtyards and staff rooms. I attended several management briefings, sat in on three Assessment, Care in Detention and Teamwork (ACDT) meetings for men at risk of suicide, shadowed individual members of staff, and was generally able to move around the centre at will. For the next 2 weeks, alongside continuing observations, I carried out semi-structured, qualitative interviews with staff of all levels of seniority, including five detainee custody officers (DCOs) and 11 managers (both detainee custody managers (DCMs) and senior managers), as well as two interviews with non-custodial personnel. Participants included seven women and 12 men,⁴ and ranged from those who had worked in Brook House for less than a year to 'the originals' who had joined in 2009 when the site was still in its construction phase. In total, I gathered 21 hours of interview material, and the average length of an interview was 70 minutes.

As the duration of my fieldwork in a single IRC was relatively limited, and since staff did not always speak with one voice, I have used appropriate qualifiers throughout to distinguish views that were widely held ('many staff', 'most participants') as compared to those that were more idiosyncratic or contested ('one employee', 'unlike their colleagues'). Where possible, I have corroborated participants' testimonies with other interviews or observations, and have provided supporting evidence from existing scholarly work and various official sources. The empirical research on which the article is based cannot be described as comprehensive, but is instead used to illustrate broader themes of power and purpose in an IRC.

POWER

Presence: an immigration prison?

'Power', according to social theorist Barry Barnes, 'is one of those things, like gravity and electricity, which makes its existence apparent to us through its effects, and hence it has always been found much easier to describe its consequences than to identify its nature and its basis' (1988: ix). In Brook House, the effects of power were plain to see, and related ideas about authority and control, discipline and behavioural management, surfaced continuously in observations and interviews. One consistent way that Brook House employees alluded to these themes was by analogy to the prison, a paradigmatic institution of power in modern society, and to some participants a benchmark for how IRCs ought to be run. An interviewee explained how they would describe Brook House to a layperson:

I normally describe Brook House as built like a prison, prison wing-style accommodation, holding nearly 500 adult men of any nationality that you could possibly name on a day. Some of them have been here for a very long time, some of them get very frustrated. There are days when there can be incidents of violence, assaults, fights, self-harm. There are kind of

4 Interview 17 was with two members of staff, so the total number of interviewees was 19. All other interviews were one-to-one, and a small number of participants were interviewed twice, typically because of time constraints in our first conversation. All interviews were conducted in private, with the exception of one that took place in a staff room where DCOs and DCMs were regularly passing through.

underlying cultural issues that can cause problems at any given time. So it's really ... it feels sometimes like a bit of a melting pot of just lots of people who are very frustrated with their situations and don't want to be here. (Interview 3)

Like Colnbrook and parts of Harmondsworth at Heathrow IRC, Brook House is physically almost identical to a modern Category B prison (Eves 2023: 22–41), and at the time of the research in summer 2017, 45 per cent of Brook House detainees were ex-prisoners. The basic coercive power of Brook House is evident in the fact that men are detained against their will, taken away from family and friends, and forced to sleep in shared cells. On the wings, cell doors can be locked externally by custodial staff, who use viewing panels to observe detainees in their rooms if necessary. Detainees are 'banged up' in their cells for 11 hours from 21:00 to 08:00 every night, and again for brief spells during the day to allow wing officers to complete the roll call (Eves 2023: 56–59). '[F]or all intents and purposes, it walks, talks, breathes like a prison, doesn't it?' (Interview 14).

The site also includes a small segregation unit, officially the 'care and separation unit' (CSU) or, less euphemistically, 'the seg', where detainees can be removed from association (Rule 40) or temporarily confined (Rule 42) under the Detention Centre Rules 2001. Located at the back of E Wing, where vulnerable or problematic detainees are typically held, the CSU is the deepest end of the detention estate and has the austere quality of a prison environment. If, using Robert Dahl's 'intuitive' sense of the term, 'A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do' (1957: 202–203), then Brook House's coercive power is embedded in its prison-style design and implied by staff's non-negotiable authority to impose rules, backed by physical force if necessary.

During observations, the spatial organization of Brook House, with poorly ventilated cells and regular booming noise on the wings, contributed to the sense that immigration detention was simply imprisonment by another name. 'I always say it's a prison for illegal immigrants, basically, that's how I describe it' (Interview 4), said one participant. A colleague agreed, 'I treat it more like working in a prison. It practically is a prison' (Interview 12). These impressions were reinforced by cultural markers of formal authority, such as officers wearing G4S uniforms and black boots, while walking around the centre carrying keys and a radio. In passing conversation, detainees consistently resented being 'treated like criminals' and complained about being held 'in jail'. Indeed, it was common to hear ex-prisoners claim that indefinite detention with the prospect of deportation was 'worse than prison', in part because of the uncertainty of their future, a hardship Jason Warr calls the 'deprivation of certitude' (2016). The distinction between the hard coercive power of incarceration and the ostensibly soft administrative nature of detention was blurry, with detainees arguing that they suffered the worst of both worlds. To quote one employee, 'People are losing chunks of their life while someone tries to get a bit of paperwork for them' (Interview 18).

Being subjected to the coercive power of the state caused a great deal of hardship for detainees, and feelings of worry, frustration and helplessness were expressed forthrightly to anyone who would listen (Shaw 2016). Detainees spoke of their anguish at being separated from their families; their fear of the future and where it would be lived; their betrayal by the UK Government, especially the Home Office; their powerlessness as racialized, foreign subjects; their disgust at being reduced to a national statistic in removal figures, rather than a human being rooted in a particular time and place. Held in a country with no upper time-limit on detention, men spent their days walked around the centre aimlessly, clutching their immigration papers and anxiously phoning their solicitors.

Above all else, detainees feared expulsion (Hasselberg 2016). Unlike monetary or custodial punishments, removal is an all or nothing, here or there outcome. There is no proportionate

mid-way point on a sliding scale: the sovereign decision is ultimately to detain, release or expel. These prospective problems were aggravated by the here and now indignity of incarceration. Detainees lacked freedom, ate cheap food, and slept in cramped cells, with little privacy, surrounded by strangers. Whatever their differences of background and circumstance, men in Brook House all experienced the corrosive psychological damage of having their lives disrupted and their futures in limbo. As one laconic worker put it, 'I guess I'd say it wasn't a very happy place...' (Interview 1).

In addition to the centre's physical resemblance to a Category B prison and the sovereign state's power to detain then expel, staff were also conscious of their explicit powers of physical coercion, which brought into sharp relief the distinction between those in uniform and the detained population. In interviews, many employees mentioned their authority to use approved techniques of C&R in certain circumstances as a noteworthy feature of their role (Eves 2023: 133–173). One participant explained, 'If you're gonna go and do a planned removal, you are, really, you're going in to assault somebody. You're doing it legally, but you are going in to use force on somebody against their will' (Interview 14). Others mentioned getting 'kitted up' or 'dressed up' in personal protective equipment (PPE) for forced removals (Eves 2023: 146–149), and recounted formative experiences of restraining detainees in distressing circumstances. There was a steady flow of unprompted references to these practices, suggesting that the power to use physical force, although exercised infrequently, was an important part of the professional identity of IRC staff (Bosworth 2014: 190–199).

Since C&R is often used in high stakes situations, where events move unpredictably and decisions must be made quickly, participants' memories of it were vivid (Hall 2012: 113–126). One interviewee, who was suspicious of the moral character of many men in Brook House, recounted a particularly visceral 'spontaneous C&R' performed without PPE. All available officers were called to A Wing during dinner time lock up to deal with a 'very large, muscular Nigerian male' who was resisting forced removal and had cut himself severely with razor blades:

I've never seen so many deep cuts on a torso in my life. Anyway, we sort of had to jump in. He was bleeding everywhere, all over the wing. I don't know how he got out of his room but he did. And I ended up I guess taking control of his head. He had razor blades in his mouth, he had razor blades in his boxers, and he was trying to get the razor blades in his teeth to cut his shoulders and try and cut me. [...] So, yeah, we just had to grab him. I know a couple of officers had to change, cos they were just so tired. And the blood. Blood is so slippery it's unreal. And I was scared. I was scared. Cos he had blades in his mouth. I had to physically hold his head and he was very muscular. [...] But, yeah, I just remember all the blood. I had all blood on my arms, just blood was everywhere, on my shoes. And we handed him over to Tascor, the escort agent, to go on his Nigerian flight. They said they were gonna take him regardless and that riled him up even more, but we handed him over. And, yeah, I had blood all on me. Yeah, I won't ever forget that. Cos you never know what some of these people have. Hepatitis or some of these guys have HIV. So, yeah, again that's a worry, that's a stress on your mind. But yeah you're expected to just do it without stopping and thinking, 'Actually, what could go wrong here?' But there's been various situations like that. (Interview 13)

Modern penal power is in many ways 'lighter' but 'tighter' than in the mid-to-late 20th century (Crewe 2011), and similar observations can be made about administrative immigration detention, with its off-site Home Office decision making, labyrinth bureaucracy and dubious legal grounds of justification (Costello 2015). To be sure, extreme situations such as those described above are rare, although there is evidence that force is sometimes used inappropriately, excessively, or not recorded properly after the fact (Eves 2023: 137–138, 164–165). It would be

misleading to suggest that the use of sheer physicality against large numbers of detainees is an everyday occurrence or empirically representative of ordinary life in Brook House. Force tends to be used sparingly and selectively, calibrated by circumstance rather than wielded indiscriminately for its own sake. As in border policing and other immigration control contexts, ‘Through experience, immigration officers develop a fine grasp, an intuition, to anticipate physical violence’ (Aliverti 2023: 353). Such episodes do, however, capture the stark reality of sovereign power acting through its private subcontractors, and show how the ultimate resort to physical coercion is a constant possibility inside IRCs.

As Alexandra Hall explains in her ethnography of immigration detention, ‘The capacity to unleash physical force in the face of crisis (however irregularly) [is] a vital requirement of working in any secure environment’ (2012: 116), with C&R acting as ‘the symbolic and material restoration of the masculine and disciplinary order of the detention centre’ (2012: 123). Echoing John Scott’s analysis, IRCs show how, ‘Power – like knowledge and money – can be held in readiness for use whenever it is needed’. He continues, ‘The anticipation of its use, furthermore, means that power can have significant social consequences even when there is no explicit and overt intervention by the principal’ (2001: 5).

These scenes also remind us that the absence of open conflict and semblance of order in immigration detention should not be mistaken for detainees ‘consenting’ in any meaningful sense to their incarceration, despite the ‘institutional semiotics’ (Aliverti 2023: 351) of ‘voluntary’ returns and detainee ‘choice’. As Ben Crewe writes about a medium security men’s prison, ‘the contemporary prison may be “softer”, more civilized and less authoritarian than in the past, but that power operates within it in ways that are insidious, intangible, opaque and highly effective’. Overt defiance of the regime is therefore ‘generally considered imprudent and ineffective, leading to an outward appearance of calm and compliance’ (2007: 256). Whether or not Brook House is simply ‘an immigration prison’ by another name, staff’s capacity to use force, coupled with detainees’ lack of freedom, reduced contact with important relationships, loss of possessions, limited privacy and routine feelings of anxiety, frustration and insecurity, all allow us to infer the presence of power in immigration detention.

Absence: a ‘dependent’ population

Brook House staff recognized the presence of coercive power in their ‘immigration prison’, the sovereign power of the state to decide individual cases and set overarching policies, as well as their own contextual powers of physical force. Moreover, detention employees have a significant degree of discretion at work, meaning that detainees can be subject to more or less power, depending on staff’s ‘affective moods, contextual perceptions and shifting local agendas’ (Hall 2012: 136).

These general sources of power, and their specific manifestation in high drama displays of force, did not, however, mean that staff thought of themselves as commanding figures. For all that many staff compared Brook House to a prison, one interviewee was clear that, ‘It’s not a prison. We don’t run around with batons, we don’t beat anybody up. We literally try to make the best of the situation and, y’know, you’re there to be friendly but not friends’ (Interview 9). Others made it clear that their formal authority did not necessarily mean that detainees followed instructions or obeyed the centre’s rules. If anything, first-hand practical experience, which was widely revered above more abstract classroom-based training, consistently taught staff about their lack of influence. An experienced member of staff at Brook House described the gulf between new recruits’ theoretical knowledge of immigration detention and the reality of working in a live operation:

[I]t’s overwhelming to walk off an initial training course for six weeks where you look at a PowerPoint presentation. It’s completely different to walking through the gate with your keys

and your radio and your shiny boots. Then someone comes up to you and says, 'I want this' and you go, 'Er...'. Then you look at the size of the wing, and there's the echo of the wing, and detainees are talking about 'cells', but on my training course we never called them 'cells'. Do I call it a 'cell' or do I call it a 'room'? [...] Then I need to search him, but how am I gonna tell him I need to...? (Interview 15)

In its early days, Brook House was described as 'fundamentally unsafe' (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2010: 6) and criticized for its 'excessively punitive' approach to detainee discipline (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2011: 5). Over time, efforts had been made to soften the appearance of the centre and lessen the severity of the regime (Eves 2023: 22–41). As Jonathan Hearn explains, 'Power is not a matter of agency *versus* structure, but of agencies *in* structures, which is part of the account of its variable distribution' (2012: 212). Compared to prisons, IRCs like Brook House permit more visits, freer communication with the outside world (e.g. detainees can use centre-issued, camera-less mobile phones), greater mobility within the centre, and relatively unrestricted access to recreation and welfare services (Home Office 2005). Given how detainees spend their time, and the goods and services available to them, staff conceived of Brook House as a more generous, less demanding institution than a prison, but such permissiveness came at the expense of their authority.

In principle, the provision of care and welfare was seen by many employees as a laudable aim, but some also pined for more explicit disciplinary powers over detainees and 'lamented the general erosion of prison powers over convicted prisoners' (Hall 2012: 125). Given the previous convictions of some men, several participants resented having to respond to the demands of a 'needy', 'ungrateful' and 'dependent' population. An interviewee who had previously worked in a prison claimed that men in Brook House, whether ex-prisoner or not, would say they were being treated unfairly. 'No one appreciates how well that they're treated in here either way. [...] You can't win, no one appreciates it. Ex-prisoners push their luck cos they know it's not as strict' (Interview 11). Another worker, who was considering leaving Brook House having grown disillusioned with G4S and the lack of an 'appropriate deterrent' for bad behaviour, stressed the extent to which detainees were 'dependent' on staff:

You're multiple things in this place for these guys. You're literally their go-to to the outside. You organise everything. You feed them, you clothe them, you could be their counsellor. You can act as a light version of their solicitor. There's so many traits that they expect from you. You do become a jack of all trades for these guys. They do expect so much from you. You are such a crutch to them. (Interview 12)

Detainees' dependence on staff is a consequence of their incarceration and corresponding loss of autonomy, and such involuntary infantilization led some staff to complain about men 'acting like children' and 'wanting everything done for them', similar to the 'unreasonable', 'over-emotional' subjects derided by staff in other IRC research (Hall 2012: 92–97). Participants often mentioned the importance of building 'rapport' with the men in Brook House, but the nature of staff–detainee relationships was largely transactional and superficial. DCOs spent much of their time handing out pool cues and paracetamol, returning charged phones and fetching bleach for a cell toilet. These interactions typically lasted a few seconds and often coincided with similar requests from other men, such that there were few opportunities to form meaningful staff–detainee relationships.

Organizing the minutiae of detainees' life created dozens of small problems for employees to deal with, often relating to men's property, information sharing, food, visits and access to medicine. Seemingly trivial tasks bound staff and detainees together in chains of cooperation where officers were in some sense 'serving' the 'residents' of the centre (Infantino 2022:

157), more like working in a hotel than a prison, some complained. The implicitly feminized character of such work (Eves 2023: 235–237)—which required staff to listen and respond to detainees’ needs, underpinned by an ethic of care—contrasted sharply with the hierarchical relations of authority and subordination needed to do ‘the proper “masculine” work of protecting the regime’ (Hall 2012: 75). For some, regularly following detainees’ requests was tantamount to indulging them and confirmed staff’s lack of power. To be at men’s beck and call was to concede that ‘the detainees are the ones who are really in charge’, inverting the natural relationship between uniformed superior and detained subject. Despite the prison-like architecture, constant jangling of keys and formal authority to use force if necessary, many employees felt their own absence of power far more routinely than they noticed its presence.

Elsewhere: Home Office casework

Decision making power about individual immigration cases is located outside of the centre (Infantino 2022: 158–159), allowing the state to govern detainees at a distance, while also weakening the authority of those working inside IRCs. Power and control in immigration detention, as Mary Bosworth notes, ‘are rendered simultaneously more complete and precarious than in other custodial institutions’ (2014: 208). Two interviewees explained how they saw the relationship between inside and outside:

Immigration detention is something which is run by the Home Office. G4S are *only* here to look after detainees. I think that’s the most important thing. [...] So the example that I usually give is, if the Home Office asked G4S to jump, we can’t say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, we have to ask them, ‘How high?’ (Interview 7)

We’re not the decision makers around cases, and that is detainees’ prominent issue. Whereas the Home Office are, and there is a lot of frustration in the detainee population with case owners. (Interview 16)

Others echoed the idea that Brook House was ultimately subservient to the will of the Home Office, alluding to ‘politics’, ‘the system’ or ‘the numbers game’ to convey the sense that decision making power was located elsewhere, inevitably in the wrong hands. As Robert Thomas says of the enormous volume of administrative immigration casework in general, ‘The mundane reality is that executive power is exercised on a day-to-day basis by armies of junior civil servants working in office blocks in Croydon and Sheffield’ (2023: 100). At the end of one interview, I was advised, ‘To be honest with you, [...] I would base most of my research in the Home Office, because it’s impersonal and because it is the main reason for this place existing’ (Interview 9). Another participant described the centre’s changing relationship with the Home Office more precisely:

Home Office objectives change, and that changes some of our business strategy. For about a year, Home Office objectives were all about welfare. So we shifted some of our resources to welfare. They kind of forgot about it. They said, ‘We wanna do voluntary departures’. Okay, well, we’ll change things for you. Their business focus changes. Then they’ll say, ‘We want you to really focus on delivering audit plans’. So we have to change that. We’ll become a charter centre. Home Office says, ‘You’re right near the airport, all the charters will come to Brook House’. Okay, so we re-profile lots of people. We change a lot of how we work to respond to what their needs are. (Interview 15)

Rule from without marginalizes those within, compounding the feelings of powerlessness, frustration and confusion that both staff and detainees articulated every day. Men in Brook House were subject to sovereign power they could rarely access and struggled to understand, while Home

Office decisions were often communicated poorly by remote caseworkers, the low-visibility on-site Home Office team, or G4S employees with limited information (Eves 2023: 225–227). An interviewee compared the casework situation in immigration detention to the prison estate:

If I was managing this population in a prison, my staff would be offender supervisors. They would have access to all the case notes, all the casework. We would manage the offender from the time they walk in to the time they walk out. We would be an influential part in managing that process and we'd know everything. Here it's different. So effectively we're just looking after people. All the casework is done remotely. There are Home Office on site to do some work, but ultimately people's caseworkers here are people that work in an office. [They've] probably never stepped foot in an IRC. (Interview 2)

To officers and managers, off-site decision making by Home Office officials was evidence of how limited a role G4S workers played in 'the removal process'. While interviewees readily pointed out that their power to do harm was tempered by playing such a marginal role in decision making, they rarely acknowledged that so too was their capacity to do good. In certain high stakes situations (e.g. responding to emergencies, using C&R and making split second decisions during forced removals), staff power was clear, direct and consequential, and the abuse of such power by some employees has rightly been the subject of public criticism (Eves 2023: 133–173). But outside of these extremes, it was staff's absence of power and its location elsewhere that was most striking. Despite the good intentions of many employees, including frequent references to 'care' and 'welfare', in the main Brook House staff had a relatively marginal effect on detainees' experience and almost no power to affect their immigration case, the source of so much hardship and an endless topic of conversation between detainees and staff (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2012). Compared to their primary function of administering a secure site prior to removal, individual actions by well-meaning employees were secondary at most.

PURPOSE

Security and welfare

Since IRCs' core function is to facilitate removals, they are primarily places of security and control. During observations, Brook House staff spoke of their simple desire to get through each day without a riot, an escape, a death or any other catastrophic event. Realists by inclination, they became hardened by their environment and experience over time, and were highly attuned to potential threats lurking in the centre (see also Hall 2012: 36–52; Bosworth 2019). Such adaptations are unsurprising in a coercive institution that detains, among others, a large minority of time-served foreign national offenders. Moreover, the prison-like design of the establishment breeds suspicion towards its population (Eves 2023: 227–233), which is reinforced by some detainees' association with crime, hyper-masculinity and racial-ethnic otherness (Bosworth 2018). An immigration detention centre, like a prison, is not a place where one 'just happens to be' (Rowe 2014: 411), and staff-detainee relations were coloured by mutual distrust and limited compassion.

According to one employee, who warned me about the risks of being 'conditioned' by detainees, 'Most of them are here for a reason. Most of them will say they're not. [...] They're not all as innocent as they say they are' (Interview 13). Concerns about 'conditioning' were often distinctly gendered (Bosworth and Slade 2014), as when a participant described their 'protective side' in monitoring some 'high profile' men's interactions with female colleagues:

Sometimes the females can be a calming influence, but then sometimes they can be the opposite, they can incite. Just the female presence. We have got detainees here that are a danger to

women and children, and a female walks on the wing [...] I'm more alert, I'm more conscious that there's a female on the wing. (Interview 8)

Brook House employees prided themselves on being discerning in their dealings with men in the centre, and felt duty-bound to establish clear professional boundaries with detainees, lest they be appear naïve and vulnerable to manipulation (Hall 2012: 72–78). Their testimonies conveyed a security mindset in which detainees were an ongoing problem to be managed, reminiscent of the 'hypervigilance' among staff that Alexandra Hall describes, where 'the idea that risk might best be contained by anticipating an ever-emerging threat is a matter of common sense' (2010: 890).

But security and control were not the only principles that guided Brook House employees. During fieldwork, staff repeatedly told me an unexpected story about how they saw themselves and the purpose of their work. Although they explained, when interviewed, that they tended to think of Brook House as an 'immigration prison', they also consistently emphasized the importance of empathy, interpersonal skills and the emotional nature of their labour (Hochschild 1983). In observations and interviews, participants stated that a major part of their role was to 'care for' and 'help' the captive population of the IRC. Ultimately, they said, their job was to 'look after people' and address detainees' welfare needs while the Home Office dealt with their immigration case.

In these accounts, immigration detention was construed as an interim form of secure accommodation for people in a difficult situation (Bosworth 2014: 210). Regrettably, detention could be prolonged because of Home Office bureaucracy, legal complexities or diplomatic obstacles. But such problems were regarded as unfortunate matters of personal frustration for detainees, or cautionary tales about the irrationality of 'the system' (Hall 2012: 130). They were not seen as serious ethical concerns in a contentious area of public policy. According to numerous Brook House staff, their main purpose at work, on top of providing security and maintaining order, was simply to offer care and welfare to the 'residents' of the centre. Consider the following excerpts from four participants:

[U]ltimately, we look after and care for people who are due to be removed from the country. (Interview 2)

Come to work because you enjoy working and you enjoy serving the detainees, cos primarily that's what we're here for. We are only here to look after the detainees. Yes, obviously there's a money aspect to it etc. etc. But I think you should come in here and work wholeheartedly, making sure when you leave at the end of the day you are happy with yourself that I've actually helped someone to do something positive in their life. That's how I see it. (Interview 7)

[T]his is a job about connecting with people, and while there are many extremes in the job that we do – be it self-harm, suicide, C&R – it's all just literally about being human and dealing with humans, so connecting with people. It's that simple. (Interview 9)

In prison, you're very professional. In here, you give a lot more support. You help people a lot more because they need more support. That is very different. (Interview 11)

For all their differences of tone, each of these accounts stresses the importance of staff agency in providing a humane environment. Participants were fully aware that the men in Brook House suffered, but it is telling that, when explaining what IRCs are for, employees reached for normative, aspirational claims about their own sense of purpose, rather than descriptive, factual statements about the function of immigration detention within 'the removal process'. The discourse of care and welfare foregrounds their good intentions and sense of ethical vocation. At the same time, it relegates difficult moral objections about state power, private security and physical coercion to the background. 'In here, they're *lucky*. Visits all day. Doesn't take long to book a

visit. They're lucky. It's very easy' (Interview 11). Presented in this way, the lopsided, conflictual nature of the relationship between the sovereign state and the incarcerated foreigner is recast as essentially charitable and benign.

Whereas state power is a necessary foundation of immigration control, staff's purpose is more contingent and socially constructed. Institutions and their employees can claim to promote all sorts of values, even if they depart substantially from the harsh reality of detention and removal on its subjects. As Ana Aliverti explains in the context of border policing, 'Feelings of empathy and compassion, which are stirred up by physical closeness to others' suffering and common paths and identities, are mixed with suspicion and concerns about order' (2020: 1129). When dealing with individuals who were distressed about their immigration case, Brook House staff drew their attention to the many goods and services that they could access, suggesting that a seemingly austere environment was in fact permissive and relaxed. The existence of a welfare unit, on-site healthcare, a gym, education classes, a library, computer suites and other recreational facilities was all evidence of the centrality of care, not custody.

To their credit, employees could cite plenty of examples of the important work they did on violence reduction, or the large share of their time they spent listening to detainees talk about their troubles. Staff's commitment to treating people well was often reflected in their actions, and during fieldwork there were regular episodes of patient problem-solving and calmness under pressure. With few resources and little training, employees managed a detainee who was detoxing from alcohol, for instance, and officers did their best to deal with men who had been diagnosed with serious psychiatric conditions. When asked about job satisfaction, interviewees usually cited small gestures they had made that alleviated problems for detainees, such as getting glasses prescribed for a visually impaired man or helping non-native speakers complete official forms in English. IRC staff thus fulfilled their purpose of providing care and welfare by limiting the pains of immigration detention, and through their interpersonal relations, they humanized the sovereign power to detain.

The dilemma of power and purpose

In Brook House, staff's purpose of care and welfare, alongside values professed in management meetings and policy documents, were hard to reconcile with the effects of detention on incarcerated men (Shaw 2016). New initiatives sought to promote detainees' 'autonomy' and encourage them to 'take responsibility for their case', but these ideas obscured the asymmetrical nature of immigration processes in practice (Infantino 2022). Brook House also promoted sanitizing values like 'respect', 'dignity' and 'inclusion'. Dotted around the centre were traces of identity politics, including a few officers wearing rainbow flag lanyards as a symbol of LGBT pride, and posters on the walls from detainee workshops celebrating Black History Month. Smoothing over the rough edges of coercive power with slick branding was a consistent feature of institutional communication by G4S and the Home Office, resulting in an insidious system of compulsion and domination that claimed to promote individualized care and welfare. Like the humanitarian governance used to police vulnerable migrants in the community (Aliverti 2020: 1120–1123), such corporate spin seemed kind to be cruel.

This tension is what I call the dilemma of power and purpose. On occasion, the dilemma appeared in staff testimonies, when interviewees tried to reconcile the institution's effects on detainees with their individual desire to do the right thing. One example comes from an interviewee who compared their current detention role to previous workplaces. 'Professional development' had originally drawn them to Brook House, but they admitted to having some misgivings about UK border control. They could not deny the power of the Home Office to detain and expel foreign nationals, nor could they plead ignorance of the suffering that detainees endure. They described the workings of 'the removal process' thus:

Really the function here is to look after people safely while their immigration case is being progressed and then ultimately to assist with their removal from the country. So it is a bit kind of harder-nosed in terms of the function. [...] So I had to get my head around the value-based issue for me. Where I get my value from was not from rehabilitating [people] anymore but was from making sure that we deliver a contract with the Home Office in a humane and caring, safe way. So that's really where I had to shift my motivation to work with this kind of client group. I found it to be a very challenging experience, actually. [...] [We have] a clientele that are in very desperate situations, certainly that is their felt experience. It's desperate in some ways. Desperate not to be removed, desperate to find an outcome to their case, and that drives behaviours sometimes that are quite extreme. (Interview 16)

This testimony captures the dilemma of power and purpose at the level of an individual employee who wants to act virtuously, but who also acknowledges that the Home Office's 'hostile environment' policy is at odds with detainees' fundamental interests. Revealingly, the mention of a 'harder-nosed [...] function' is later cushioned by their desire to deliver 'a humane and caring, safe' contract. Aware that the basic function of immigration detention is to contain and manage a 'desperate' population, the raw truth of conflict and coercion is repackaged in the more palatable managerial language of cooperation and consent (Infantino 2022).

Care and welfare are of course not objectionable purposes *per se*, and they did inform many employees' behaviour as they carried out everyday tasks. But their moral and practical limitations became apparent whenever they collided with the sovereign state's power to detain and expel. During a management meeting about a charter flight that was scheduled to remove over 20 detainees that night, these values disappeared when discussing how to orchestrate a clean exit on behalf of the Home Office:

So many issues discussed at the charter flight meeting this afternoon. 'Who is on 'the manifest' (i.e. the list of people due to be removed)? Who do they think 'will walk' and who will 'put up a fight'? Have any of them refused to comply with 'removal directions' before or been disruptive on a plane? How many of them know they are going? How did those men respond to being told? When you spoke to them, were they on their own or with other people? How will they manage to move the detainees around the centre without creating a scene? How many people on the charter haven't yet arrived in the centre? (Some are coming from prison, some from other IRCs.) Is there enough space on the wings? Will there be lunch packs made for them? Can people please not mention where the flight is leaving from? What do we do about the 'high-risk' man who has said if he is deported he will (try to) kill himself? Do any of them have any health problems we need to know about? Are there any visits planned for the afternoon or evening? If any of them go onto the netting, will we have enough negotiators in? Have we already arranged for some overtime? Are there funds for that? Could we get an extra nurse in? In what order will we take them out? What time are the two coaches arriving? Do local police know what motorways we'll be using? How long is our window to get them out the door and onto the coaches? What do we do if the escorts show up late? Have they said how many staff they are bringing? Can we try to discharge them when everyone else is locked up? Can we please not use the term 'bang up' when we mean 'lock up'? This isn't a prison.'

Staff in Brook House usually portrayed themselves as reflective practitioners who were aware of detainees' vulnerability (Aliverti 2020). It was important to have empathy, I was always told, but not to feel sympathy (Bosworth 2014: 197). A bright-line distinction was drawn between *recognition of* another and *feeling as* another. Sympathy—feeling as another—brought staff and detainees too close together, blurring the boundary between 'us' and 'them'. Indeed, participants

often stressed the importance of placing limits on their empathy as much as they recognized the value of empathy itself.

In the charter flight meeting, however, detainees were mere numbers in the game of removal targets. The senior management team and DCMs anticipated dozens of practical problems they might encounter and swiftly came up with contingency plans. There were knowing nods whenever someone pointed out potential flaws in the preparations, a reflection of their familiarity with the processes involved and their awareness of the inherent dangers of forced removals. Drawing on a wealth of institutional expertise, managers used their knowledge of the centre and its population to think through the minutiae of the operation. Much of the time during fieldwork, life in Brook House seemed confusing and unpredictable, but the charter flight meeting was a rare moment of clarity. When all was said and done, the function of the detention centre was to facilitate removals on behalf of the sovereign state, and expulsion was a matter that required action, not feeling.

CONCLUSION

Political theorists have long observed that liberal states—to be more precise, liberal, democratic, constitutional, capitalist nation-states—are committed to a mixture of closure and openness in immigration policy (Hampshire 2013). Popular democratic pressures to expel time-served foreign national prisoners, failed asylum seekers and illegal immigrants are resisted by liberal principles such as respect for human rights, the rule of law and open labour markets. What is more, carrying out removals is a complex, lengthy, costly and contentious process for states, the results of which are unpredictable. These contradictions limit the state's power to rule over its territory and population, and are one of many reasons why migration policies often fail (Castles 2004). If IRCs 'exist purely as a means' to the end of removal (Bosworth 2012: 134), they are a blunt instrument, and it is clear that detention centres exhibit many of the dysfunctions of immigration control more generally.

It is tempting, based on the observations outlined above, to regard power as the central, over-riding characteristic of IRCs like Brook House, and to dismiss staff's talk of care and welfare as mere ideological mystification. Perhaps the disconnect employees felt between their private values and their professional actions was just the sound of a guilty conscience talking, or a confession that their apparently clean hands were in fact dirty. To interpret their testimonies in this way would fit into a broader critical reading of border control as institutionalized xenophobia and racism (Barker 2012: 116–118). Surely it is no coincidence, the argument runs, that immigration detention flourished in the new millennium of mass mobility and contested national sovereignty. As the United Kingdom received increasing numbers of asylum applications at the turn of the century (Gibney 2008), participated fully in the security politics of the 'War on Terror' (Bosworth and Guild 2008), and dealt with historically high levels of immigration in the early 21st century (Consterdine 2018), detention and deportation were used as national security measures to placate a hostile public. Border control, according to this view, is a symbol of strength in a world that weakens states, and immigration detention is one of its most pernicious institutional forms.

While there is undoubtedly some truth in this potted history, it is insufficient for making sense of actually existing IRCs. Immigration detention requires the awesome power of the modern state and, especially in Anglophone countries (Mainwaring and Cook 2019: 463–466), often enlists the help of private security actors in its administration (Bosworth and Zedner 2022). Yet IRCs themselves are riven with contradictions and routinely struggle to achieve their basic aims. The seemingly straightforward task of holding detainees in a 'no man's land between the polity and the globe' (Bosworth 2013: 161) is, in practice, difficult to execute, since governments

cannot simply exert brute force at all times to control immigration. Over and above these theoretical insights, my empirical research suggests that when staff are faced with a vacuum of institutional purpose, they fill it with something. In Brook House, this meant providing security and order alongside some semblance of care and welfare.

In sum, facilitating removals is the IRC's *raison d'être* but, like all coercive institutions, to legitimate itself Brook House needs a human touch. The impersonal nature of sovereign power, the painful reality of coercive administrative detention, and the questionable involvement of private companies in such processes seems more acceptable when subjects are treated with courtesy and respect by hard-working, well-intentioned individuals. The tension between power and purpose was apparent when speaking to staff, who were professionally obliged to serve 'the removal process', while personally driven to administer a centre that was 'secure but humane', to quote Rule 3 of the Detention Centre Rules 2001. Power and purpose thus created a dilemma for Brook House and its employees, who had to do the unglamorous work of enforcing borders all the while insisting that providing care and welfare was the institution's number one concern.

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