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methodological challenges in the production of knowledge on
immigration detention

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The absent presence of the deportation apparatus: methodological challenges in the production of knowledge on immigration detention

Due to the difficulties in accessing detention facilities, the discussion on immigration detention often draws on limited empirical data with varying degrees of attention paid to the heterogeneity of the detained population and their different stakes in an impending removal. Although a closed institution, various legal and administrative processes related to the enforcement of immigration decisions render immigration detention a relational field. Drawing on my fieldwork experiences while conducting multi-sited ethnographic research on the immigration detention system in Finland, I discuss how methodological choices, theoretical presuppositions and circumstantial factors affect the production of knowledge on immigration detention. I address the relevance of: 1) the case selection among detainees with considerably varying immigration histories, social situations and detention times; 2) a multi-sited research setting to conceive the various processes of immigration enforcement during detention; 3) an engaged research strategy to access detainees' first-hand knowledge of their immigration cases beyond dramatic representations; and 4) the employment of administrative data in contextualising empirical findings. I argue for the importance of examining detainees' negotiations with the deportation apparatus, which shapes available options for detainees as well as determines the outcome of detention from the 'outside', despite its absence in everyday life in detention.

Key words ethnography, immigration detention, methodology, migration, multi-sited research

Inside immigration detention?

Due to the difficulties in accessing detention facilities, research on immigration detention – the administrative deprivation of liberty as a pre-emptive security measure for the enforcement of immigration decisions – usually draws on limited empirical data or secondary sources and retrospective accounts (Esposito 2017; Turnbull 2019). According to Bosworth, 'Only by going inside can we try to make better sense of IRCs [immigration removal centres]. Bearing witness to daily life, and observing how women and men interact, reveal the trials of living and working in such a liminal space' (2014: 17). Several empirical studies have highlighted detainees' lived experiences of uncertainty, distress and waiting inside immigration detention (e.g. Griffiths 2014; Lietaert et al. 2015; Puthooppambal et al. 2015; Turnbull 2016). Occasionally, scholars have brought up dramatic events, such as suicide (Khosravi 2009) or self-mutilation (Fischer 2015), whereas others have addressed detainees' negotiations with the deportation apparatus (Campesi 2015; Leekers and Kox 2017; Turnbull 2019). While empirical research predominantly draws on individual testimonies, often little information is provided about the logic of case selection or the representativeness of the data within

a highly complex institution, where detainees' immigration cases can vary from unauthorised entry to rejected asylum applications, and from deportable offences to irregular residency. Instead, detainees' accounts are often contextualised only by gender, age and nationality (e.g. Bosworth 2014; Turnbull 2016), without information of their detention times – possibly ranging from days to years – or the grounds of detention. Moreover, statistical data are rarely used to contextualise empirical findings even when available, complicating assessment of the representativeness of the findings.

While negotiating a research permit to the sites of migration governance requires considerable effort (Bosworth and Kellezi 2017; Esposito 2017; Lindberg and Borelli 2019; Rozakou 2019) and can be dependent on voluntary work (Hasselberg 2016), legal assistance (Le Courant 2013) or luck (Kalir 2019), getting access is only the first step. Notwithstanding restrictions in conducting research, fieldwork inside immigration detention can even produce diverging interpretations, depending on the methodological choices, research questions, circumstantial factors, timing and length of the fieldwork, and the case selection. Moreover, conducting ethnographic research presupposes a theoretical understanding of the constitution of the field: 'the locus of study is not the object of study' (Geertz 2000: 22), nor is 'truth confined to the fieldsite' (Burawoy 2017: 262). Considering the potentially enormous variety of detainees' individual immigration histories and residence times, detainees (and deportees) comprise an 'accidental community' (Malkki 1997: 99) rather than a particular bounded group (also Peutz 2006). Even if immigration detention as a closed institution provides well-defined spatial constraints for research, there is no 'ethnos' to be described in the classical sense of ethnography, nor can the place of detention itself be assumed to carry a shared meaning for detainees, despite the fact that they may develop belonging to a community in detention (see Bosworth 2014). As Goffman notes about closed institutions, 'the full meaning for the inmate of being "in" or "on the inside" does not exist apart from the special meaning to him of "getting out" or "getting on the outside"' (1961: 13). In addition to detainees' varying residence times and social ties in the detaining country, 'getting out' of detention can designate even completely different places: detention can result in release or bail, whereas in Europe removals can be made from one EU member state to another due to the detainees' previous migration histories, instead of their country of citizenship.

According to Desmond (2014), even more important than access in ethnographic fieldwork is the selection of the basic object of analysis, which shapes the derivable arguments. By overlooking the relational and processual nature of social reality, implicit group- or place-defined fieldwork settings risk becoming mired in substantialism (Desmond 2014). Likewise, de Genova argues for the necessity to 'distinguish between studying undocumented people, on the one hand, and studying "illegality" and deportability, on the other', warning of 'the familiar pitfalls by which ethnographic objectification becomes a kind of anthropological pornography – showing it just to show it, as it were' (2002: 422). This insight remains pivotal in the context of immigrant detention, not only because detained migrants may be undocumented but because of the risk of conclusions being drawn from everyday life in immigration detention, rather than by examining the various preceding and ongoing processes related to immigration enforcement determining the outcome of detention from 'the outside'. As a pre-emptive security measure for the enforcement of immigration decisions, immigration detention is not a discrete event, nor does it exist apart from the processes concerning detainees' residency requirements often begun long before the detention order. Moreover,

several actors involved in the deportation apparatus (Peutz 2006; Campesi 2015) – such as police, immigration officials, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), border guards and the judiciary – also participate in the operation of immigration detention, rendering it a relational field despite their presence inside detention units usually remaining invisible. Immigration detention can be understood as a materialised instance of the border regime and of the asymmetrical relations that characterise the migration process; as Foucault writes, even if power relations are ‘embodied and crystallized in an institution’, their ‘fundamental point of anchorage’ is to be found outside the institution (2000: 343). Therefore, immigration detention cannot be examined in isolation of immigration policies, which produce detainable and deportable migrants in different ways (de Genova 2002), resulting in individualised fields of struggle for detainees inside immigration detention (Könönen 2019).

In this article, drawing on my fieldwork experiences when conducting multi-sited ethnographic research in the immigration detention system in Finland, I discuss how methodological choices, theoretical presuppositions and circumstantial factors affect the production of knowledge on immigration detention. I focus on four methodological issues which, in my experience, can shape the conception of immigration detention: 1) the case selection of detainees with varying immigration histories, social situations and detention times; 2) a multi-sited research setting addressing detention from the perspective of another involved institution; 3) an engaged research strategy to access detainees’ first-hand knowledge on their immigration cases beyond dramatic representations; and 4) the employment of administrative data in contextualising empirical findings. The title of this article, the absent presence of the deportation apparatus, refers to the methodological challenges in grasping the enforcement of immigration decisions, which usually remain invisible in everyday life in detention facilities, as well as more generally to the lack of information on the grounds and outcomes of detention in research on immigration detention. Consequently, I argue for the importance of multi-sited and long-term research settings that approach immigration detention as a relational field and address the administrative processes of immigration enforcement, which shape available options for detainees and determine the outcome of detention from the ‘outside’. In other words, it is important to pay attention to detainees’ immigration cases, the actual outcomes of detention and the different actors involved in order to better understand detainees’ struggles and negotiations during detention, as well as to perceive the operations of detention system itself. Notwithstanding the differences in the scale and organisation of immigration detention across countries and the benefits of the small scale of detention and the accessibility of administrative data in Finland, I hope that the remarks presented here contribute to the methodological discussion concerning the production of knowledge on immigration detention and other complex institutions.

Research on the detention system in Finland

In Finland, immigration detention is used mainly to prepare or enforce removal decisions for non-compliant non-citizens based on an estimated risk of absconding; only a minority of detention orders are issued by the border guard at entry points, based on a lack of entry requirements. In addition to the detention of non-citizens unwilling to return voluntarily or cooperate with the authorities during the removal process, the

police can also detain non-citizens in connection with crime control and immigration checks for the preparation of removal decisions. The detention orders issued by the police or the border guard are supervised only afterwards at the district courts: the first court hearing is organised within 96 hours and thereafter 14 days at the earliest, by request. The threshold for detention in Finland is relatively low because the authorities possess wide discretionary powers to order detention, due to the ineffective judicial review process and the rather vague legal grounds for detention stipulated in the Alien Act (Könönen 2017). In 2016, a total of 1,073 non-citizens were detained, most of them were young men between 20 and 35 years old; around 12% were women. The largest detained groups by citizenship were Estonian (181), Romanian (126), Gambian (75), Iraqi (69), Russian (48), Indian (47), Moroccan (40), Nigerian (37), Somalian (33) and Belarusian (31) citizens, covering a variety of different immigration cases and residence times in Finland. The average detention time in 2016 was around 15 days, with durations ranging from a few hours to almost a year, which is the maximum detention time in Finland.

While the state is in charge of immigration detention in Finland, it is carried out in two rather different institutional settings. The Metsälä unit, in a former office building in Helsinki, has a capacity of 40 detainees, whereas the Konnunsuo unit near the Russian border is located in a former prison and had 30 places in total, including 10 places on a separate floor for women and families. In Metsälä, which operated under the Social Services and Health Care Division of the City of Helsinki until 2017, most employees had degrees in social services; in the Konnunsuo unit, managed by the Finnish Immigration Service, security concerns are a priority. The Metsälä detention unit is the primary logistical centre of the deportation apparatus in Finland, where recently detained persons arrive and removals are implemented almost daily. Non-compliant detainees and deportable migrants who have completed prison sentences are usually housed in Konnunsuo, with consequently considerably longer average detention times compared to Metsälä. Additionally, Metsälä is a more social space compared to Konnunsuo due to the different architectural settings. In Konnunsuo, detainees have their own rooms, each with a small television and fridge. In Metsälä, detainees are accommodated in shared rooms and spend more time in the common area; they eat together in a common dining room, joined by the detention centre workers.

I conducted the fieldwork mainly in 2016; in total, my fieldwork covered 300 hours over 75 visits in the detention units. To conduct research in Metsälä was subject to a formal research permit application to the Social Services and Health Care Division of the City of Helsinki after a round of discussions with the detention unit. Access to Konnunsuo was granted by the director of the unit, who was quite reserved towards my request at first. My aim was to examine the operation of immigration detention as a whole, starting with fieldwork in the detention units but not taking detainees' experiences as my primary object of analysis. Instead, I tried to understand immigration detention by taking into account the processes and negotiations related to immigration enforcement, which ultimately are connected to the processing or implementation of detainees' immigration decisions. After starting my fieldwork in the detention units, I soon realised that all the processes determining the outcome of detention took place out of sight, making it necessary to extend the research to other related fields. I started to follow the juridical review process on the extension of detention at the Helsinki and Imatra district courts, which supervise detention in Metsälä and Konnunsuo, respectively. In total, I followed 112 hearings during 21 visits. I also completed interviews

with detention unit workers (N=18) and detention lawyers and other involved actors (N=12). To get an overall account of immigration detention, I made after my fieldwork a formal application to get all the detention orders issued in 2016 from the police database. It took more than six months to receive detention records because the police were initially reluctant to provide the requested data. My analysis of detention records – including information on the legal grounds for detention, detention times, number of releases and removal countries for all non-citizens detained in 2016 proved to be valuable because it enabled me to better understand the various processes and negotiations taking place during detention, filling the empirical gaps of my fieldwork.

Legal and social heterogeneity in immigration detention

Before starting my fieldwork, I shared the view, based on the migration literature and a few articles published in the Finnish media, of immigration detention as a distressing institution where rejected asylum seekers await removal. Exaggerated security concerns on the part of detention staff also contributed to my initial perception of immigration detention as a potentially risky environment. A part of my lengthy negotiations to get research permissions involved proving that my university insurance covers physical harm. Contrary to the dominant narrative and my expectations, everyday life in detention was rather undramatic and ordinary – notwithstanding the presence of some visibly distraught detainees, mainly in Konnunsuo, due to the often long detention times. Indeed, I often struggled to make sense of the seemingly incomparable situations of detainees. During my first visits to Metsälä, I talked with North African men who had lived in various places around Europe with irregular status for years; an African woman detained with her child; West African men waiting for their ‘flights’ to Italy, where they had legal residence status; asylum seekers from Iraq about to be transferred to Germany under the Dublin Regulation; a man from the USA, who had lost his residence right because of a divorce; and Eastern European nationals, including a young Romanian man who wanted to discuss the nightlife in Helsinki and Estonian men, who were stressed about getting back to Finland on time due to their upcoming work shifts. To my surprise, instead of objecting to their removal, some detainees with enforceable removal decisions expressed hopes to be deported as soon as possible. Though confined in the same space, it seemed as if detainees lived in completely different worlds due to their diverging immigration histories and social situations preceding detention.

Due to the considerable variation in the detainees’ individual immigration histories, residence periods and social ties in the detaining country, and current immigration cases, there were no straightforward criteria for the selection of research participants. For example, the category of asylum seeker has limited analytical usefulness in immigration detention because, in addition to pre-removal detention, asylum seekers can be apprehended on arrival (due to uncertain identity), during the asylum process (in cases of disappearance from a reception centre) or for transfer to another EU member state (under the Dublin Regulation). Moreover, any detained person can apply or reapply for asylum during detention, including detainees who have committed deportable offences. Similarly, detainees with the same nationality may find themselves in

different legal situations, ranging from cases of unauthorised entry to deportable long-term residents; they may also be removed to different countries due to their previous migration history in other EU member states. Additionally, detainees' residence times in the country varied from hours to more than 20 years. Compared to non-citizens detained at arrival who have never visited Finland, many long-term residents awaiting deportation had lived their whole adult lives in the country and had family members, partners or even children in Finland. Bosworth (2014: 211) highlights detention units as places of 'hyper diversity' due to detainees' differences related to religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age and class. Notwithstanding individual vulnerabilities, immigration detention constitutes an incomparable reality that primarily depends on detainees' varying immigration histories and social ties in the country, on the one hand, and perceived threats or opportunities in the country of removal, on the other.

In addition to causing practical challenges during the fieldwork, significantly varying detention times – from hours to almost a year, depending mainly on the detainees' compliance with the authorities and the country of removal – have implications on the perception of immigration detention. Indeed, it took me some time to recognise the distorted visibility in immigration detention caused by the high turnover of detainees. Contrary to the common imaginary of indeterminate detention, immigration detention units – like prisons (Armstrong 2018) – are also mobile spaces due to often short detention times. Whenever I went to Metsälä, I could not be sure whether the same detainees would be present or how many new people might have arrived. Though Estonian and Romanian detainees accounted for almost a third of all detention orders in 2016, the groups with the greatest presence in the detention units were mainly African nationals due to their considerably longer detention times; the average detention time for Estonians was only 2.1 days and 4.4 days for Romanians in 2016. Consequently, I spent more time and developed closer relationships with long-term detainees compared to short-time detainees, whose presence I often missed altogether, despite my best intentions. Key informants play a significant role during fieldwork in facilitating access to the field and providing information about incidents that occur between visits, yet their testimonies also affect the researcher's conception of the examined field (e.g. Agar 1980). In the case of detention research, however, key informants are most likely long-term detainees, which can lead to an unbalanced view of immigration detention, as prolonged detention times exacerbate anxiety and distress. Based on my fieldwork experience, detainees in desperate situations were usually the most willing to share their experiences. Moreover, detainees and detention staff often directed me towards apparently desperate detainees, assuming they would be of the most interest for me.

In addition to various practical and circumstantial factors affecting the selection of research participants, the choice of the object of research has far-reaching consequences for derivable arguments in empirical research. Instead of focusing on lived experiences or everyday life in the detention units, it felt necessary to pay attention to detainees' preceding immigration histories and different prospects regarding the outcome of detention in order to make sense of incommensurable realities in detention – in other words, to examine immigration detention as a relational space. Although many detainees were frustrated and distressed in detention, their main concern usually involved their immigration case and impending removal rather than detention itself. Indeed, detainees' immigration decisions and the potential country of removal significantly shaped their future horizons as well as their present experiences in detention, as I learned during my fieldwork. While most detainees had an enforceable removal

decision, others had pending asylum or immigration decisions, consequently including a possibility of release. Yet deportable non-citizens were also engaged in negotiations with the police concerning the implementation of removal, usually resulting in a controlled exit (i.e. escorting the detainee to the airport or harbour) from the country due to their compliance, instead of escorted removal. Nevertheless, these processes of immigration enforcement and detainees' negotiations with the deportation apparatus remained difficult to grasp in everyday life in detention.

Extending the research beyond ethnography of waiting

The main problem in conducting fieldwork in immigration detention is that the processes determining the outcome of detention take place out of sight. From the perspective of research participants, the police comprised the main actor in the detention and immigration system; detainees often used expressions such as 'Finland is a police state' to refer to the broad discretionary power of the police. Yet, the police were rarely visible in the detention units, despite their regular visits to deliver new detainees, conduct pre-removal hearings and implement removals. With few exceptions, I saw police or border guards only when their arrival or departure at the detention unit coincided with my own coming or going. I was not able to witness most removals, which were usually carried out in the early hours of the morning for logistical reasons. Those I saw were rather undramatic: deportees said their goodbyes to fellow detainees, and often to the workers and me as well, before departing with the police, who had been waiting out of sight. Similarly, when new detainees arrived, they usually just acquainted themselves with the facilities and quickly identified others who spoke the same language. Detention and removal appeared to be an almost normal part of many detainees' migration process, rather than an unexpected measure. Indeed, many detainees had been detained and deported several times earlier, either in Finland or elsewhere in Europe; during my fieldwork, I reconnected with many previously deported individuals who had been caught after coming back to Finland – mainly Estonians, but also other Eastern Europeans or African nationals who had legal resident status in Italy.

Ethnography as a research method implies participation in everyday activities in the field; however, immigration detention is a peculiar institution in this respect due to the rather non-eventful environment. As Hasselberg writes about anthropological study of removal: 'the nature of this phenomenon means that often there is little available to observe and participate in' (2016: 155). Detention facilities are places of waiting (e.g. Turnbull 2016): most days, detainees played games, browsed the internet and social media with their smartphones, watched television or movies, or otherwise killed time. Daily life in detention followed prescribed times for dining, outdoor, gym and visiting hours. Long-term detainees in particular were frustrated by the lack of activities; the only organised programme was the supervised hour outdoors in the afternoon and, in Metsälä, bingo on Fridays. The timing of research visits also affects the researcher's perception of detention: to conduct fieldwork only during office hours would have resulted in a more asocial view of immigration detention. My visits were generally about four hours long, usually stretching from the late afternoon into the evening. Detainees usually woke up late; when I occasionally visited in the morning, only a few detainees were available. The possibilities for participatory observation are dependent on research permission. In both units, I did not have my own keys and had to arrange

my visits beforehand. My requests to stay overnight – by invitation of several detainees – were declined for ‘security reasons’. In Konnunsuo, I spent more time with the detention unit workers in the control room, compared to Metsälä, where I mainly hung around in the common space due to the different architectural setting. While fieldwork in immigration detention provides a platform to observe relations among detainees or interactions between workers and detainees, to capture the enforcement of immigration decisions required attention to other actors involved in the deportation apparatus (see Peutz 2006).

Methodologically, multi-sited research settings extending the study to another involved institution are valuable in order to conceive relational spaces (Desmond 2014). Soon after beginning my fieldwork, I decided to attend the judicial review process on the extension of detention in order to get information on detainees’ struggles and observe the relations between detainees, the police and the judiciary. The court hearings were another source of frustration for detainees, who urged me to bear witness that ‘the court works for the police’. It turned out to be easier than I thought to attend court hearings, due to their public nature in Finland. I followed hearings at the Helsinki and Imatra district courts, whereas detainees together with their legal assistants and interpreters participated in the hearings from the detention units via a video link. In practice, the judicial review was a mere formality because of the short processing times – sometimes just a few minutes – and the unlikelihood of release. Just one of the 112 hearings I observed resulted in release, this being the case of a man whose children were at risk of becoming wards of the state because of his detention. In 2016, the courts released only 15 detainees, resulting in a modest 1.2% release rate. The court hearings, which were ostensibly organised to guarantee the rights of detainees, communicated the opposite message: detainees felt abandoned outside the protection of the law. Indeed, the legal assistants I interviewed also considered the judicial review to be a ‘theatre’ or ‘rubber stamp’. (Könönen 2017.)

Observing the court hearings during my fieldwork enabled me to better comprehend the different processes taking place during detention, as I learned about upcoming removals, pending immigration decisions or criminal charges as well as detainees I had not yet met. The outcome of the hearings was also palpable in the detention centres, as those who had been optimistic about their chances of release were frustrated afterward. The court’s remit is limited to supervising the legal preconditions for detention, and it does not have the authority to intervene in pending immigration decisions. Nevertheless, the judges were surprisingly indifferent to the detainees’ concerns about their immigration cases; sometimes they did not even reply to questions posed by detainees, who seemed unaware of the nature of the hearing. Despite the routine nature of the court hearings, monitoring them confirmed three initial observations regarding the operation of immigration detention: (1) Many detainees explicitly stated that they did not oppose removal and instead often requested the police to expedite the removal process. (2) In addition to EU citizens, many third-country nationals were awaiting removal to other EU member states based on the Dublin Regulation, or valid residence permits elsewhere. (3) The police had wide discretionary powers in the detention and removal process; invariably, the court accepted the security concerns presented by the police without further questions. The multi-sited research setting also helped me to recognise ongoing negotiations with the immigration system that I might have otherwise overlooked in discussions with detainees.

Production of knowledge with detainees

It is one thing to get formal access to detention facilities, but a whole other matter to negotiate access to detainees who have first-hand knowledge of the processes of immigration enforcement taking place in detention. In addition to high turnover, language barriers excluded some potential research participants. I spoke with detainees mainly in English, but sometimes using Finnish with Estonians and long-term residents. Command of Arabic, which was another common language among detainees, would have been a useful asset. More importantly, immigration detention is a low-trust environment (Bosworth and Kellezi 2017), where every outsider is treated with caution and suspicion. While detainees were not hostile towards my presence, many were initially rather indifferent towards the research project and hesitant to discuss topics beyond everyday life in detention. The fear of negative consequences for their immigration cases affects migrants' participation in research (e.g. Düvell et al. 2010); this is exacerbated in immigration detention, where unconfirmed identity can prevent the implementation of removal. Unsurprisingly, I encountered and had to overcome accusations of being an undercover police officer. As most detainees had smartphones, they used the internet to verify my identity. While I spent a lot of time discussing my research project with detainees, they were ultimately more interested in my views on detention: is it right to detain asylum seekers, children, people who are parents and employees? In other words, whose side was I on? To appeal to an imaginary objective position implies being on the side of the authorities (see de Genova 2013); thus, I rather openly shared my critical views on the legitimacy of immigration detention and answered their questions about my work and personal life.

Interviews are an obvious way to address the various processes and actors involved in immigration detention; during my fieldwork, I conducted more than 100 informal ethnographic interviews with detainees on their migration histories, immigration cases and views on immigration detention. My initial plan to do recorded interviews proved difficult to rationalise to detainees, who wondered why I did not just ask my questions right away. They also associated formal interviews with the removal or asylum interviews conducted by the police and immigration officials during detention. The fieldwork period included several spontaneous group discussions concerning detention, the police, the European border system and my research project, exemplifying how ethnographic fieldwork provides a platform for the co-production of knowledge and an opportunity to get feedback on research hypotheses. The roles of researcher and informant were sometimes swapped, as detainees began to interview other detainees on my behalf, or interviewed me on the immigration system. Due to the difficulties involved in reaching their lawyers, or distrust towards detention staff based on their assumed cooperation with the police, detainees often asked me about asylum proceedings, the residence permit system, the Dublin procedure, assisted voluntary return and the judicial review process on the extension of detention. As some detainees were unsure of the exact content of their immigration decisions, they asked me to translate the decisions from Finnish into English. In addition to allowing me to do something useful for detainees, translation work became a valuable form of participatory observation during my fieldwork, as it provided first-hand insights into the detainees' ongoing negotiations during detention.

Making contact with more cautious detainees – whose detention was often related to criminal offences – required a devoted research strategy and active engagement in everyday activities. I spent a lot of time playing games with detainees, because non-participatory observation, in particular, exacerbates suspicion. Smoking also became an important part of my fieldwork, since the smoking area was the easiest – and sometimes the only – place to initiate informal conversations. In my experience, being a young male was an advantage in gaining access to the field, considering the rather masculine and sometimes openly sexist culture prevailing in detention (similar to prisons; see Ugelvik 2014). While gender differences may affect which detainees talk to researchers and what they say (Esposito 2017), the most important thing is to find an inconspicuous way to act in an uncomfortable environment under constant observation. In addition to affecting detainees' readiness to share their views, in my experience long-term fieldwork made a significant difference also in the information provided by research participants. Indeed, detainees often initially highlighted their legitimate claims for release, portraying themselves as victims of arbitrary treatment using rather dramatic language, or claimed that they were unaware of the grounds for their detention. Yet, the same people provided different accounts of their situations after several encounters, often revealing, for example, their involvement in criminal activities, or telling about their previous detentions or upcoming removals. Similarly, some detained asylum-seekers talked extensively about precarious situations in their country of origin, only later to disclose that they were awaiting transfer to another EU member state under the Dublin Regulation. Therefore, discussion with detainees on several occasions was important in order to learn about their immigration histories and current situations, as research participants appeared to talk more openly only after confidential relationships were developed.

During my fieldwork, I often wondered how accurate detainees' accounts on their immigration cases really were; sometimes detainees seemed to invent apparently fictitious stories about their asylum claims, or they provided contradictory information. While the aim of the academic researcher is not to act as an immigration officer, questioning migrants' narratives and insisting on truthful accounts, scholars need to make decisions about what information is regarded as reliable and which examples are selected for publication. According to Haraway (1998: 582–3), while situated knowledges and partial perspectives provide a privileged standpoint for objectivity, the standpoints of the subjugated are not 'innocent positions' exempt from critical re-examination. There are several reasons for discrepancies in detainees' accounts besides fear of negative consequences for one's immigration case. In interviews, respondents often shade their responses to present a positive picture of themselves, leaving out unfavourable issues (Weiss 1994: 147–50). Moreover, detainees in desperate situations may hope that researchers will provide assistance or generate publicity for their immigration cases (Bosworth and Kellezi 2017) and therefore present their situations in a light intended to arouse empathy or provide strategically manipulated accounts (Le Courant 2013). Detainees may also invoke narratives of arbitrary detention to keep up their fading hopes of release despite having an enforceable removal decision. Immigration detention is also a place of rumours due to the lack of reliable information, such as what has happened to fellow detainees. While detainees talked to varying degrees about their negotiations with the immigration system, administrative data provided an opportunity to reflect empirical findings.

Contextualisation of empirical findings

Several scholars have highlighted the stress and anxiety caused by the uncertainty of how and when detention will end (e.g. Bosworth 2014; Turnbull 2016), yet the actual length and outcome of detention among research participants usually remains unclear in detention research. Ethnographic fieldwork provides opportunities to potentially accompany the same person from arrival to departure and also observe changes in their conduct and position during detention. While maintaining a regular presence in detention units may allow researchers to observe the operation of the deportation apparatus, it is dependent on being in the right place at the right time. In practice, research participants often disappear unexpectedly, but instead of removal they may be transferred to another detention facility or even released. Detention is also the setting for various processes related to the right to residency: in addition to pending asylum applications, detainees may submit new residence permit applications during detention in Finland. For example, I was invited to be a witness for a civil marriage ceremony in Metsälä (although it ultimately did not take place, as the person was deported before he could get his certificate of no impediment). Rather than passively waiting for the outcome of detention, detainees assess available options and the costs of non-compliance, sometimes opting for assisted voluntary return when they realise their chances of release are dwindling (Könönen 2019; also Leekers and Kox 2017). After all, detention is a relational field for detainees themselves; immigration detention occupies a liminal space between the past and the future, not-here-anymore but not-yet-elsewhere.

Though I met a few detainees in Helsinki after their release and others sent me messages after their removal, I often wondered what happened to detainees – especially those with pending applications or appeals – and to what country they may have been removed. My analysis of the detention records after the fieldwork proved to be valuable as they revealed the legal grounds for detention as well as the duration and outcome (release/removal) of detention for all non-citizens detained in 2016, providing also information on short-term detainees, whose presence I often missed during the fieldwork. Additionally, detention records contain, to varying degrees, information on detainees' immigration histories in Finland and elsewhere in Europe, including criminal charges and effectual entry bans. Indeed, immigration detention in Finland is related to crime control on a much larger scale than I expected: almost 500 detention orders referred to suspected or committed criminal offences as grounds for detention (although including immigration violations and completed criminal sentences). According to detention records, more than 84% of detentions resulted in removal, yet also the majority of third-country nationals were removed to other EU member states (in particular, Sweden, Italy and Germany) based on their legal residence status elsewhere or the Dublin Regulation (Könönen 2020). Police and border guards released 122 detainees, mainly based on processing of asylum application or appeal against removal order, or it turned out that unidentified detainees had legal residency. Others were released because of insufficient grounds for a removal decision or because police could not implement the removal within the maximum detention time. Additionally, a few were transferred to prisons to serve criminal sentences.

While my purpose is not to reconstruct detainees' migration trajectories in detail, analysis of detention records facilitated my understanding of the operation of immigration detention. In addition to social ties in the detaining country and diverging vulnerabilities, the country of removal plays a significant role in defining the dynamics of

immigration detention. Detainees usually complied with the removal order to European countries or nearby areas, resulting in short detention times; however, compliance was often motivated by remigration plans. In fact, detained EU citizens can leave to another EU member state, provided that they pay the travel expenses themselves. Instead, long-term detainees were usually awaiting removal to African or Middle Eastern countries; some did try to prevent their removal to precarious and unsafe conditions by refusing all cooperation with the police (also Campesi 2015). Progress in the enforcement of removal decisions directly affected detainees' lived experiences in detention, although this was often difficult to fathom during my fieldwork. For example, the police organise pre-removal hearings during detention to persuade detainees to return voluntarily and to assess the need for escorted removal. The police sometimes confiscate detainees' mobile phones and computers or organise visits by representatives of foreign embassies to identify non-compliant detainees. Additionally, the removal process includes negotiations with receiving countries regarding the re-admission of deportees as well as the recruitment of police escorts, acquisition of transit visas and travel documents, booking flights and making high-risk passenger notifications to airlines, all of which can cause delays in the implementation of removal. Though the legal and administrative relations between detainees and immigration authorities are usually intangible in everyday life, they nevertheless shape the dynamics of detention and ultimately determine its outcome.

Multi-sited research settings and the application of administrative data provided me an opportunity to contextualise and reflect my empirical findings in the wider context of immigration policies: after gaining information on the enforcement of immigration decisions, immigration detention appeared less arbitrary than many detainees had implied. Indeed, self-reported attitudes and behaviours often lead to 'attitudinal fallacies' and do not provide reliable information on what people actually do (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Based on my fieldwork experiences, reliance solely on individual testimonies without attention to varying detention times and legal and social situations carries a risk of reproducing uncontextualised 'accounts of suffering' (see Coutin and Vogel 2016). Therefore, attention to detainees' varying immigration cases and social situations, as well as their detention times, could reduce the ambiguity characterising lived experiences in detention. Even without access to administrative data, detainees' removal decisions and detention orders can be utilised during fieldwork for reliable information on detainees' various negotiations during detention, assuming they want to share them. Moreover, long-term fieldwork mitigates the risks of naïve empiricism or 'spontaneous sociology' (Burawoy 2017) by allowing the researcher to converse with research participants several times and get insights into their struggles by sharing their hopes and fears, consequently enabling the researcher to reflect on detainees' accounts based on his or her own observations.

Conclusions

In this article, I have discussed the methodological challenges in the production of knowledge of immigration detention by drawing on my fieldwork experiences in conducting research on the immigration detention system in Finland. In addition to various practical challenges, I struggled during the fieldwork to make sense of the seemingly incommensurable situations of detainees due to their considerably varying

backgrounds, personal situations, residence times, immigration cases and detention times. While immigration detention is often a non-eventful space, long-term fieldwork was necessary for creating confidential relations with detainees, as they usually knew much more about their grounds for detention than they initially reveal to an outsider. The processes related to the enforcement of immigration decisions usually remained invisible in everyday life in detention and were difficult to grasp through interviews or ethnographic fieldwork alone. Therefore, a multi-sited research setting including other involved actors, in this case the district courts supervising detention, enabled me to better perceive immigration detention as a relational field consisting of various negotiations and processes affecting the outcome of detention. Additionally, my analysis of the detention records after the fieldwork helped me to contextualise the empirical findings and revealed a much higher share of short-term detentions, detention orders related to criminal offences and removals to other EU member states than I had assumed. Indeed, my conception of the detention system changed considerably during the fieldwork, as I extended the research outside the detention units and learned more about the outcomes of detention and processes of immigration enforcement taking place in detention, which I would not have been able to fully recognise by conducting research only inside the detention units.

In addition to the different institutional settings and varying restrictions for conducting fieldwork across the countries, limited information about methodological choices in detention research complicate wider conclusions about the production of knowledge in immigration detention. Notwithstanding differences between the detention practices and specific dynamics in the EU member states (for example, the high share of detention of Estonian EU citizens in Finland), detainees' immigration histories, resident periods, social ties, current immigration cases, detention times and attitudes towards removal and prospects thereafter potentially differ considerably. In order to avoid risks of hasty generalisations and inductive fallacies, it is important to devote attention to the logic of case selection and reflect the representativeness and generalisability of the empirical findings in a demanding research environment. In addressing methodological problems in refugee research, Jacobsen and Landau underline that researchers must 'make a concerted effort to ensure that the limits of their data and analyses do not create the wrong impression' (2003: 190). While many deportable migrants face considerable risks and precarious circumstances in the country of removal, the tendency to focus on long-term detainees or other vulnerable groups in immigration detention may unintentionally result in disregarding short-term or distrustful detainees. In addition to enabling a reflection of the representativeness and reliability of empirical findings, administrative data provide information on the detention system that can be difficult to obtain during fieldwork, with implications for the conception of immigration detention. For example, drawing on an analysis of detention and removal orders in Italy, Campesi and Fabini (2020) have demonstrated the role of immigration detention as a flexible instrument in controlling presumably dangerous populations outside criminal proceedings. While long-term and multi-sited fieldworks are difficult to organise and getting access to administrative data can require considerable effort, there is a need for comprehensive empirical research paying attention to the grounds and outcomes of detention, including removals to other EU member states, in order to better understand the role of immigration detention in the European border regime.

Naturally, my point is not to suggest that there is one right way to conduct research in immigration detention; rather, I argue that immigration detention cannot be understood by focusing only on lived experiences inside immigration detention,

because the processes related to the enforcement of immigration decisions inform everyday life in detention and determine the outcomes of detention from ‘the outside’. In addition to methodological choices concerning the execution of fieldwork – starting from the selected research strategies and the allocated time to empirical research in an uncomfortable and low-trust environment – a theoretical understanding of the constitution of the field and the selection of the basic object of analysis shape derivable arguments (Desmond 2014). In the context of immigration detention, place- or group-based research settings focusing on lived experiences in detention, or privileging a suffering subject as an object of analysis (Robbins 2013), risk disregarding the various relations constituting the examined field and the multiple actors involved in the deportation apparatus that shape available options and life choices for detained non-citizens, despite remaining absent in everyday life. Therefore, devoting attention to processes related to the enforcement of immigration decisions is important in understanding detainees’ varying stakes in detention, as well as the wider dynamics of the institution. This is not to neglect individual suffering and anxiety caused by detention; rather, it is necessary to address the legal production of detainable and deportable migrants and the structural violence inherent in the border regime, which is materialised in immigration detention. After all, the main concern for detainees usually pertains to the risks and ramifications related to the impending removal, rather than detention as such.

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La présence absente de l'appareil d'expulsion : défis méthodologiques dans la production du savoir sur la détention des immigrants

En raison des difficultés d'accès aux centres de détention, le débat sur la détention des immigrants s'appuie souvent sur des données empiriques limitées. Celles-ci accordent plus ou moins d'attention à l'hétérogénéité de la population détenue et aux différents enjeux d'un renvoi imminent. Bien qu'il s'agisse d'une institution fermée, divers processus juridiques et administratifs liés à l'exécution de décisions d'immigration font de la détention d'immigrants un domaine relationnel. Inspirée par mes expériences de terrain lors d'une recherche multisites sur le système de détention des immigrés en Finlande, je discute comment des choix méthodologiques, des présupposés théoriques et des facteurs circonstanciels affectent la production de connaissances sur la détention des immigrants. J'aborde la pertinence de: 1) la sélection des cas parmi les détenus ayant dont des antécédents en matière d'immigration, de situations sociales et de durée de détention; 2) un cadre de recherche multi-sites afin de concevoir les divers processus d'application des lois sur l'immigration pendant la détention; 3) un site stratégie de recherche engagée pour accéder aux connaissances vécues des détenus sur leur cas d'immigration au-delà des représentations dramatiques; et 4) l'utilisation de données administratives pour contextualiser les résultats empiriques. Je soutiens qu'il est important d'examiner les négociations des détenus avec l'appareil d'expulsion, ce qui façonne leurs options ainsi que détermine les résultats de détention de « l'extérieur », malgré son absence dans le cadre de la vie quotidienne de détention.

Mots-clés détention d'immigrants, méthodologie, migration, ethnographie multi-sites