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**Trained to Disbelieve: The Normalisation of Suspicion in a Swiss Asylum Administration Office**

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**ABSTRACT**

In Switzerland, as in many other countries of the Global North, most asylum applicants are rejected because they are not believed. This has led many scholars to criticise the so-called ‘culture of disbelief’ in asylum administrations. On the basis of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Swiss Secretariat for Migration (SEM), this article explores what this ‘culture of dis- belief’ consists of, how it plays out in everyday decision-making and how, at the same time, it is constituted by these practices. Drawing on a practice-theoretical approach to administrative work, the article proposes conceptualising disbelief as practice rather than a state of mind. It brings to light several aspects which either form part of this practice itself – decision-maker’s implicit knowledge and routinised strategies for questioning applicants in asylum interviews, for example – or which shape this practice of disbelief – such as organisational socialisation and decision-makers’ role as state agents and ‘guardians of a restricted good’. The article reveals how suspicion does not unilaterally shape decision-makers’ practices, but how it is also reaffirmed through everyday decision-making. Building on this, it argues that decision-makers’ practices are both constituted by and constitutive of public political discourse and migration governance.

**Introduction**

In Switzerland, the majority of asylum applicants are rejected because they are not believed. Or rather, the applicants are not perceived as being credible which is a precondition for being recognised as refugees and receiving asylum. This trend towards rejecting most asylum applications on the basis of non-credibility is not specific to Switzerland. It has also been observed in other countries, such as Canada (Tomkinson [2018](#_bookmark107), 186), France (Fassin [2013](#_bookmark68), 47; Probst [2012](#_bookmark97)), Germany (Probst [2012](#_bookmark97)) and the UK (Kelly [2012](#_bookmark85), 759). Such observations have led scholars and NGOs alike to criticise what they call the ‘culture of disbelief’ (Anderson et al. [2014](#_bookmark55); Jubany [2017](#_bookmark82); Marfleet [2006](#_bookmark92), 233), ‘suspicion’ (Alpes and Spire [2014](#_bookmark53); Bohmer and

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Shuman [2008](#_bookmark58), 14), ‘mistrust’ (Griffiths [2012](#_bookmark75); Probst [2012](#_bookmark97)) or ‘denial’ (Souter [2011](#_bookmark104)) in asylum administrations (see also Sweeney [2009](#_bookmark106), 702 f). Amongst NGO activists in Switzerland, I have often come across the view that this has to do with asylum caseworkers’ personal political opinions. Asylum case- workers are believed to be right-wing and hostile towards migrants and this is perceived as influencing their daily decision-making. At the same time, NGO representatives have told me that they believe that this common out- come of refugee status determination is linked to fixed quotas set by either the Swiss Secretariat for Migration (SEM), which is the state administration in charge of taking first instance asylum decisions in Switzerland, or possibly even by the Swiss Federal Council. However, findings from my fieldwork in the SEM suggest that there is no fixed quota for granting asylum. Furthermore, nearly all asylum caseworkers I spoke to in the SEM clearly distanced themselves from right-wing politics, telling me that their main motivation for doing their job was to ‘help people’. Yet, despite this, deci- sion-makers – even those considered to be the most lenient – end up rejecting the majority of asylum claims. So how can we explain this regular- ity? This is not a question this article can fully address. Many authors have criticised that existing legal frameworks for asylum and refugee protection themselves exclude many people in need of protection, and do not do justice to the changing causes of forced migration (see Benhabib [2020](#_bookmark57), 84-87; Dummett [2001](#_bookmark64); Hathaway and Foster [2014](#_bookmark76)). Yet, the regularity that this article addresses, and which contributes to the majority of asylum applica- tions being rejected, is how disbelief becomes normalised.

My starting assumption – an assumption that is at the core of most social science approaches to studying administrations[1](#_bookmark37) – is that in order to under- stand everyday practices of administrative work, we must look beyond the individual attributes and attitudes of decision-makers, on the one hand, and beyond top-down (political) orders and policies, on the other (see Eckert [2020](#_bookmark65); Eule et al. [2019](#_bookmark66); Heyman [2004](#_bookmark78); Lipsky [2010](#_bookmark89)). In recent years, numerous in- depth studies of asylum administrations that build precisely on such a premise have been conducted (see Dahlvik [2018](#_bookmark62); Johannesson [2017](#_bookmark81); Jubany [2017](#_bookmark82); Liodden [2016](#_bookmark88); Miaz [2017](#_bookmark93); Mountz [2010](#_bookmark94); Poertner [2018](#_bookmark96); Probst [2012](#_bookmark97); Scheffer [2001](#_bookmark101); Tomkinson [2018](#_bookmark107); and the edited volumes byGill and Good [2019](#_bookmark72) as well as Lahusen and Schneider [2017](#_bookmark86)). My case study of decision- making and particularly credibility assessment practices in the SEM adds to this growing body of literature. Many of the above-mentioned scholars have convincingly shown how the political environment in which asylum adminis- trations operate has an impact on practices of decision-making (see Alpes and Spire [2014](#_bookmark53); Dahlvik [2018](#_bookmark62); Fassin and Kobelinsky [2012](#_bookmark70); Heyman [2004](#_bookmark78);

Johannesson [2017](#_bookmark81); Jubany [2017](#_bookmark82); Liodden [2016](#_bookmark88); Miaz [2017](#_bookmark93); Mountz [2010](#_bookmark94)). The ‘culture of disbelief’ is thus linked to public political discourse and the political-ideological context in which refugee status determination takes place.

Writing about the Home Office in the UK, James Souter, for instance, claims that

the culture of disbelief has arisen from the Home Office’s acceptance of the familiar and widespread assumption among politicians and the general public that large numbers of asylum claims are unfounded, mendacious or ‘bogus’, and are made by ‘economic migrants’ as a means of improving their standard of living, rather than by ‘genuine’ refugees. (2011, 48)

In this article, however, I argue that the ‘culture of disbelief’ should not only be understood as the outcome and expression of anti-immigration politics and of public-political discourse which depicts asylum seekers and migrants as a ‘problem’ and as a ‘threat’ to national security and a country’s economy, culture and identity (see Boswell [2007](#_bookmark60), 589; Dahlvik [2018](#_bookmark62), 9; Gill and Good

[2019](#_bookmark72), 5 f; Jubany [2017](#_bookmark82); Miaz [2017](#_bookmark93), 11–14). These contexts matter, of course. Nevertheless, we should also take into consideration how routinised and pragmatic behaviours (re-)produce the political-ideological environments in which caseworkers act (see also Eule et al. [2019](#_bookmark66); Poertner [2018](#_bookmark96)). Hence, I analyse the self-sustaining tendencies of and in administrative work and how they shape the ‘structures’ within which administrations operate through the creation of particular institutional ‘truths’ (see also Fassin [2013](#_bookmark68), 59). I do so by adopting a practice-theoretical approach to administrative work.

A ‘practice’, according to Andreas Reckwitz, ‘is a routinised type of beha- viour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, “things” and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge’ (2002, 249). Understanding adminis- trative decision-making as practice thus means recognising such everyday actions as an assemblage of all these different elements. Not only bodily activities matter – which in the case of administrative work mainly consist of activities such as writing, reading and talking. Different forms of knowledge, including implicit or tacit knowledge which refers to the things we simply know or can do, without being able to say how and why, also form part of what a practice is (see Dahlvik [2018](#_bookmark62), 57; Reckwitz [2003](#_bookmark99), 290). Or, in the words of Hendrik Wagenaar, it is ‘the taken-for-granted routines: the almost unthink- ing actions, tacit knowledge, fleeting interactions, practical judgements, self- evident understanding and background knowledge, shared meanings, and personal feelings that constitute the core of administrative work’ (Wagenaar [2004](#_bookmark110), 643). Practice theory is helpful in that it points to the collective, socialised and self-perpetuating nature of such unthinking actions, practical judgements and implicit knowledge. Referring explicitly to ‘bureaucracies’ in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Pierre Bourdieu claims that

social collectives such as bureaucracies have built-in propensities to perpetuate their being, something akin to a memory or a loyalty that is nothing other than the ‘sum’ of

routines and conducts of agents who, relying on their know-how (métier), their habitus, engender [. . .] lines of action adapted to the situation such as their habitus inclines them to perceive it, thus tailor made (without being designed as such) to reproduce the structure of which their habitus is the product. (Bourdieu and Wacquant [1992](#_bookmark61), 139-140)

Hence, in order to understand the relatively stable outcomes of administrative work that can be observed from the outside, we must pay attention to the routinised behaviours and implicit knowledge that administrative caseworkers develop and acquire on the job. It is from this perspective that I approach the ‘culture of disbelief’ in asylum administrations, asking how suspicion is taught, learnt and incorporated and how it becomes a self-evident (and largely un- reflected) guiding principle of decision-makers’ everyday practice. Therefore, what I consider in this article is how suspicion ‘become[s] viewed by [decision- makers] as [a] perfectly natural response [. . .] to the world of work they inhabit’ and how, through everyday practices, suspicion reproduces itself as a ‘natural response’ (Van Maanen and Schein [1979](#_bookmark109), 210). This ‘natural response’ manifests itself not only through what decision-makers consciously believe to be right, but also through their routinised actions. Thus, rather than being perceived as a (political) stance or mindset, disbelief is better concep- tualised as a *practice*. Yet, the aim is not primarily to challenge the notion of ‘culture’ often used to describe disbelief in asylum decision-making and administrations, but to contribute to these discussions by shedding light on asylum decision-making from a practice theoretical perspective. This implies paying attention to not only the decision-makers’ surroundings, and the routinised and largely unthinking actions of asylum decision-making, but also to its material components.

Empirically, as stated above, this article focuses on decision-making prac- tices in the Swiss Secretariat for Migration. The paper is based on ethnographic material from fieldwork for my PhD, which was conducted in the SEM during several stays between 2013 and 2015. During those stays, I accompanied decision-makers from various asylum units in their work, observing them as they wrote decisions, prepared and conducted asylum interviews, chatted with colleagues in hallways and during coffee breaks, helped each other with difficult ‘cases’,[2](#_bookmark38) performed administrative tasks and participated in team meetings. Furthermore, I took part in a three-week training session for new decision-makers, conducted semi-structured interviews with decision-makers and superiors from nine different units in the SEM and analysed casefiles.

The first section of the article provides the necessary contextual informa- tion for understanding how decision-making in the Swiss asylum procedure works. The article then goes on to discuss asylum caseworkers’ role percep- tions and how these translate into the professional norm of suspicion. The third section addresses how through organisational socialisation the role of ‘gate-keeping’ and corresponding ideas of how to professionally behave are passed on to new decision-makers. Finally, in the last part before the

conclusion, I show how practical and pragmatic considerations in everyday decision-making further contribute to normalising the rejection of the majority of asylum applicants on the basis of non-credibility. By doing so, the image of the ‘bogus’ refugee who is trying to abuse the system is constantly reinforced, as are professional endeavours to approach refugee status determination with sufficient suspicion.

**Asylum Decision-making in the SEM**

Asylum applications in Switzerland are filed with the Swiss Secretariat for Migration. The SEM is responsible for examining all asylum applications and reaching first-instance decisions. Decision-makers working there carry out asylum interviews and write decisions. Before their decisions are sent out to the asylum seekers, they are countersigned and sometimes also checked by the superiors from the different asylum units in the SEM. Normally, SEM officials interview asylum seekers twice during the course of the proceedings. The first interview usually takes place a couple of days or weeks after asylum seekers’ arrival. In these first interviews, the asylum seekers are questioned about their personal data (e.g. family ties, education, place of residence, etc.) as well as their reasons for applying for asylum and their travel routes. The second, longer asylum interview takes place weeks, months or, in some cases, even years after the first interview.[3](#_bookmark39) In these second interviews, the decision-makers interrogate the applicants in detail about their reasons for fleeing and for applying for asylum in Switzerland. In rare cases, a third supplementary interview is carried out. It is on the basis of these two (or, in some cases, three) interviews that SEM officials reason and determine their decisions.

In terms of decision-making, the SEM officials’ work comes down to assigning asylum seekers to one of four legal categories: refugee with asylum, refugee with temporary admission, non-refugee with temporary admission and non-refugee without temporary admission. This article deals solely with determining who are ‘refugees’ and ‘non-refugees’, regardless of whether they are granted temporary admission or not. In order to make this decision, the two questions decision-makers must answer are: Are the applicant’s claims credible, and are the criteria for refugee status fulfilled? According to article 3 of the Swiss Asylum Act (AsylA), refugees are defined as

persons who in their native country or in their country of last residence are subject to serious disadvantages or have a well-founded fear of being exposed to such disadvan- tages for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or due to their political opinion. (Art. 3, paragraph 1, AsylA)

However, in order to be recognised as a refugee, asylum seekers have to ‘prove or at least credibly demonstrate their refugee status’ (Art. 7, paragraph 1, AsylA). Article 7 of the Asylum Act further stipulates that one’s

[r]efugee status is credibly demonstrated if the authority regards it as proven on the balance of probabilities [and that] [c]ases are not credible in particular if they are unfounded in essential points or are inherently contradictory, do not correspond to the facts or are substantially based on forged or falsified evidence. (Art. 7, paragraphs 2 and 3, [AsylA](#_bookmark56))[4](#_bookmark40)

In practice, since material evidence for corroborating reasons for having fled often does not exist, credibility assessments are largely based on the applicants’ statements as they were recorded in writing during the asylum interviews. It is then up to the decision-makers to interpret for each specific case what it means for the narrative to be sufficiently founded or inherently contradictory, for example.

**Filtering Out the Undeserving: the Role of Gate-keeping and Professional Suspicion**

Like James Souter ([2011](#_bookmark104)) who I quoted at the beginning of this article, I observed a widespread assumption amongst decision-makers in the SEM that most asylum seekers are ‘bogus’. Decision-makers believe that most applicants are ‘economic migrants’ who are trying to manipulate the system in order to stay (see also Kelly [2012](#_bookmark85), 755). While this is deemed understand- able – anyone in that situation would do it, I was often told – decision-makers nevertheless see it as their duty to combat such fraud and to distinguish between those deserving and undeserving of asylum (see also Bohmer and Shuman [2018](#_bookmark59), 160). This is reflected in the following statement found on the SEM’s website:

It is the duty of asylum proceedings to identify those asylum seekers among the new arrivals who are entitled to protection under the terms [of the Geneva Convention]. Many asylum seekers cannot be classified as refugees or persons displaced by war. On the basis of their situation, they clearly belong to the group of migrants. They are in search of a better place to live in Switzerland. Knowing that they would hardly obtain an entry or work permit, they cross the border illegally. Many of them invent a dramatic story of persecution for the hearing by the authorities. With such tactics they hope to be granted refugee status. From the viewpoint of the person concerned, this behaviour is under- standable, from the perspective of asylum legislation it constitutes abuse of asylum proceedings. The authorities must reject such applications without delay and execute removal systematically, making asylum proceedings unattractive for foreigners seeking employment.[5](#_bookmark41)

The paragraph from the website depicts the role of the asylum office – and thus of its caseworkers – as that of ‘guardians of a restricted good’ (Heyman [2009](#_bookmark79), 381; see also Hoag [2011](#_bookmark80), 82; Lipsky [2010](#_bookmark89), 4; Marfleet [2006](#_bookmark92), 235). This is not specific to asylum administrations but has also been described for other administrative institutions, particularly if they are perceived to ‘deliver goods’ (Lipsky [2010](#_bookmark89), 3; see Lavanchy [2014](#_bookmark87), 99; Watkins-Hayes [2009](#_bookmark111), 50 f).

Didier Fassin’s conceptualisation of the ‘humanitarianization of asylum’ (2005, 387) explains how asylum becomes such a restricted good. He shows how asylum today has become something that is no longer perceived as an internationally protected right that individuals have, but rather as a ‘favour’ (Fassin [2016](#_bookmark71)), an ‘act of generosity’ (Fassin [2005](#_bookmark67), 376) by the receiving state, or an ‘obligation in terms of charity’ (Fassin [2005](#_bookmark67), 387). Paradoxically, by limiting access to this restricted good of asylum, its value is enhanced. Hence, as Fassin and Carolina Kobelinsky argue, ‘[t]he less frequently [asylum] is granted, the more precious refugee status becomes’ ([2012](#_bookmark70), 464). Rejecting asylum seekers and filtering out those ‘undeserving’ is thus seen as a necessity for upholding the value of asylum and of the whole institution (see also Affolter, Miaz, and Poertner 2019, 273 f; Liodden [2016](#_bookmark88), 293). This professional necessity is taught in different ways. As shown above, it is quasi inherent in decision-makers’ job description. Furthermore, it is implied in the way in which caseworkers are taught to conduct asylum interviews and to ‘test credibility’, as I will discuss in more detail below. It is also taught through the passing on of professional experience or practical ‘truths’, for instance by instructors saying things like this to the novices during the training sessions: ‘But you will soon see, most asylum seekers lie’ (training instructor, fieldnotes, my translation). The impli- cit message that is conveyed through this is that it will be up to the new decision-makers to identify those ‘liars’. Moreover, during the training ses- sions, the novices were repeatedly reminded that they had to make sure that they did not create a ‘pull-effect’ with their decision-making or, in other words, to make sure that Switzerland did not become an attractive (and thus ‘easy’) country for applying for asylum. Together these different rationales of wanting to protect the humanitarian value of asylum, on the one hand, and preventing the Swiss asylum system from becoming ‘too attractive’ and from ‘too many’ people applying for asylum in Switzerland, on the other, translate into what I call the professional norm of suspicion.

That ‘to be suspicious is a sign of professionalism’ (Alpes and Spire [2014](#_bookmark53), 269) is not only characteristic of administrative work in the SEM. It has also been described for other administrations where people make (rights) claims on the state (Borrelli, Lindberg, and Wyss, this volume), such as French consulates (Alpes and Spire [2014](#_bookmark53), 269), German asylum administrations (Scheffer [2003](#_bookmark102), 456), Swiss registry offices (Lavanchy [2014](#_bookmark87)) and welfare offices in the US (Watkins-Hayes [2009](#_bookmark111), 50 f). For the SEM, I deduce this norm not so much from how caseworkers are told to behave, but rather from what they are told not to do. Or, in other words, I deduce this professional norm from what is considered bad or unprofessional decision-making. Naivety is considered one such attribute. It is mainly ascribed to newcomers to the office but also to those experienced caseworkers who are considered to be very – or too – lenient in their decision-making and who are often mockingly referred to as ‘softies’ by their co-workers. Overly suspicious caseworkers who are referred to as

‘hardliners’ or ‘naysayers’ (*Neinsager*) are likewise denounced for doing their job badly (see Miaz [2017](#_bookmark93), 372–376). They are criticised for entering asylum interviews with closed minds and for already assuming from the outset that everything will be a lie. While individual caseworkers tend to be more critical of either one of these ‘extremes’ – depending on how they position themselves in relation to others –, I observed that a certain amount of suspicion or scepticism remained the unquestioned middle ground so to say. Thus, good decision-making is readily equated by caseworkers with not believing asylum seekers ‘too easily’. Or in the words of caseworker Helen,[6](#_bookmark42) it means not choosing ‘the easy way out’ by not checking asylum claims thoroughly enough for indicators of so-called non-credibility:

And then this case with *in dubio pro [refugio]* (‘when in doubt, for the refugee’).[7](#_bookmark43) Sometimes you feel really bad [doing this]. Because [. . .] people speak about you behind your back: ‘Oh, she chose the easy way out; just quickly taking a positive [decision]’. But maybe you really struggled with [the decision]. Because sometimes, even though the story is not at all convincing, you don’t find any arguments – truly not and not just out of laziness – your only choice is to take a positive [decision]. (Helen, caseworker, interview transcript)

Furthermore, what struck me as an interesting difference between the two critiques of bad decision-making was that whereas naïve decision-making is regularly equated with being unprofessional, I have never observed that criti- cism being expressed about cynical decision-making (see also Affolter, Miaz, and Poertner 2019, 281). Rather, the term normally used to describe an overly suspicious and cynical attitude is *déformation professionelle*. SEM officials use the term to describe how the views of decision-makers can become distorted by long service on the job, particularly when it comes to assessing the veracity of asylum claims.[8](#_bookmark44) Thus, critics of cynical decision-making do not reproach their co-workers for being unprofessional and not fulfiling their gate-keeping role, but for taking this role too far and losing sight of those who are ‘deserving’.

**Trained to Be Suspicious: the Role of Organisational Socialisation**

Assuming the role of a sceptic – in keeping with the professional norm of suspicion – is something decision-makers learn, amongst other things, from their superiors. While observing some superiors check asylum decisions, I realised that they do not revise all their employees’ decisions to the same extent and they also do not check all types of decisions with the same intensity. In particular, there is a marked difference between how newcomers’ credibility decisions are checked in comparison to those of their more experienced colleagues. Of course, that new decision-makers decisions are scrutinised more thoroughly is hardly surprising. Furthermore, it is not just their

credibility decisions that are checked this way; other parts of their decisions are also reviewed thoroughly. However, what appears to be unique with regard to credibility decisions is that those taken by experienced decision-makers are hardly ever scrutinised by superiors. Superiors trust experienced employees to get these decisions right. With new decision-makers, this is different. In these cases, superiors see it as their duty to make sure that their new employees learn not to naively believe stories without properly checking them.[9](#_bookmark45) The following quote by a superior should be read in this context:

All these terms [like ‘plausible’, ‘comprehensible’, ‘logical’ and ‘realistic’ for example] are used [for reasoning positive decisions]. For me that is ok. [. . .] I mean, if someone uses a word like that who only started [working here] three months ago, I might ask: ‘Hey, what does that mean for you?’ But if [the decision] comes from someone whom I consider to be a valuable, serious, good employee, then I’ll allow it, because I know, I can imagine what it means for them. (Nora, head of asylum section, interview transcript)

Nora’s quote illustrates the common stance amongst superiors that newco- mers have to be formed, whereas experienced employees can mostly be trusted to get credibility decisions right. Nora claims that she shares an understanding with her experienced employees of what it means for an asylum seeker’s story to be ‘realistic’, for example. What this implicitly shows is that she trusts experienced decision-makers not to naively assume an asylum applicant’s statements are ‘realistic’ without thoroughly testing their credibility. With new decision-makers, on the other hand, this trust must first be established through supervision. Thus, in practice this means that when a newcomer grants an asylum seeker asylum, claiming that the applicant’s statements were plausible, coherent and realistic, superiors are inclined to go through the minutes of the asylum interview to check whether the decision-maker asked enough and adequate questions in order to grant asylum. If they are not satisfied, the casefile is returned to the decision-maker. With time, through this supervision, new decision-makers come to anticipate their superiors’ assessments of their decisions and try to take decisions accordingly, so as to get them past the superiors at first go (see also Miaz [2017](#_bookmark93)).

In addition to superiors, peers also contribute to the reaffirmation of decision-makers’ role as sceptics. On the one hand, this happens through peer pressure, as Helen’s example above illustrates. On the other hand, it takes place through the passing on and sharing of professional experience. The following two examples illustrate this sharing of professional experience and knowledge. The first example comes from one of the training courses for new decision-makers in which the instructor made the following remark in passing: ‘Lots of Iranians say that they have been politically active in Switzerland, participating in protest actions and rallies against their

government. It’s like they’ve invented this becoming politically active in exile [which would make them eligible to refugee status]’ (training instructor, field notes).

The second example reveals a moment of everyday office banter:

I am sitting in the break room with some decision-makers when one of their colleagues walks in somewhat bemused by a Nigerian applicant he has just interviewed. He comments, ‘This one had the full program: ghosts, voodoo, homosexuality . . . ’, making it clear that he does not believe anything the applicant has told him. The applicant’s story had consisted of what ‘all the Nigerians are saying’, for instance, that they are being persecuted on the grounds of their sexual orientation. (field notes)

Both interlocutors make pejorative comments, suggesting that there is a ‘typical’ story. The implication is that the applicants have created stories they believe would lead to asylum being granted. In the first example, the instructor’s comments served as a warning to novices, whereas in the second example, the decision-maker related his story with no specific purpose: the story was merely a brief moment of office banter. New decision-makers listening to such stories will learn to expect and to anticipate ‘Iranians pre- tending to have become politically active in Switzerland’ or ‘Nigerians pre- tending to be homosexuals’, for example. They will know to be alert and that they will be expected to thoroughly test credibility in these cases in order not to come across as being naïve.

Upon joining the SEM, every new recruit is allocated an individual coach who is usually an experienced decision-maker from the same organisational unit. In their first weeks or months on the job, new decision-makers spend a lot of time working with their coaches, observing them conducting inter- views as well as preparing and discussing asylum interviews together with them. These coaches play an important role in teaching new recruits *how* to be sufficiently suspicious, as Teresa’s example illustrates:

New [officials] often don’t work with the criterion of ‘contradiction to the inner logic of action’ [for reasoning non-credibility decisions]. To give you an example: In one case, an applicant said that his father had asked him to deliver letters to another person. And he didn’t just do that once, but more like four to five times a week for about half a year. Now the [new] decision-maker did not think to ask the applicant what was in those letters, so when we were preparing the interview together I told her she had to ask him that. When she did, the applicant said that he had never asked his father that out of respect. And that is just not logical. If I were your father and I gave you a letter to take to someone nearly every day, you would ask me, even if you respected [me]. You would say: ‘Of course I’ll take the letter, father, but what are those letters you’re asking me to deliver?’ That’s the obvious thing to do. Now, say the applicant had asked his father and the father had said: ‘That’s none of your business’, that would have been relatively plausible. But that he didn’t even ask his father is just not logical. And that’s a strong argument [for the decision]. So that’s what I mean when I say that [new caseworkers] need to learn to ask good and suitable questions. (Teresa, caseworker, interview transcript)

The example shows how, when preparing the asylum interview with the trainee, Teresa felt that the trainee had missed a crucial detail which, if probed, might provide useful information for making the decision and producing a solid argument. By teaching the novice to spot such details, she is also teaching her to be sufficiently suspicious and alert about indicators that there might be something off about any given story. Furthermore, she is conveying a clear idea of what merits suspicion and what assumptions are deemed ‘common sense’ when defining behaviour as ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ or ‘logical’ and ‘illogical’.[10](#_bookmark47) The novice is taught that this particular common- sense assumption (of it being illogical to not ask about the letters, which is based on an ethnocentric assumption regarding the relationship between fathers and their children in other cultures) will make for a strong argument, but that coming up with such arguments is dependent upon the questions she asks. In this way, the novice is taught the common practice of searching for untruths, which I describe in the following.

**Searching for Untruths: The Pragmatics and Practicalities of Everyday Decision-making**

Decision-makers use a very specific technique for testing credibility in asylum interviews. They usually begin the part about applicants’ reasons for applying for asylum with what they call an ‘open question’: ‘Why did you leave your country and apply for asylum in Switzerland?’ After that, decision-makers follow up with specific ‘wh-questions’[11](#_bookmark48) and some yes or no questions. Thus, they might ask about when a certain event took place, how many people were present or what an aggressor was wearing, for example. At the end of the interview, the asylum seekers are usually confronted with contradictions found in their story. This is a formal requirement, since it counts as granting applicants the right to be heard. The open question at the beginning is intended to give asylum seekers the opportunity to tell their stories. It is considered useful for seeing how much detail asylum seekers provide when they tell their stories, since narratives which are rich in detail are regarded as an indicator of credibility. Furthermore, several caseworkers told me that this strategy of starting with an open question was useful because in their “free narrative” (*freien Erzählung*) asylum seekers tended to get tangled up in contradictions (see also Jubany [2017](#_bookmark82), 136; Poertner [2018](#_bookmark96), 161 f). One purpose of the follow-up questions is to enable the decision-makers to collect all the necessary information for taking their decisions. Thus, in order to be able to assess asylum seekers’ eligibility for refugee status they must, for instance, know who the persecutors were and what the motives for persecution were. At the same time, these questions serve to assess credibility. They are used to see whether asylum seekers can talk in detail about certain events (e.g. ‘Please tell me in detail about the daily routine in prison.’) or to generate answers

decision-makers can then compare with facts they can look up (e.g. ‘What was the name of the church that was bombed?’). Both these things – depending on whether asylum seekers manage to answer them adequately or not – serve as indicators of credibility or non-credibility. Finally, decision-makers ask ques- tions that allow for comparisons between statements asylum seekers make at different stages of the asylum proceeding or at different moments during an asylum interview, in order to test the narrative’s consistency. These strategies have led scholars writing about refugee status determination procedures in different countries of the global North to criticise that the focus of asylum interviews tends to be on ‘uncover[ing] lies’ (Jubany [2017](#_bookmark82), 137), ‘checking for discrepancies’ (Bohmer and Shuman [2008](#_bookmark58), 136), ‘identify[ing] weaknesses inherent in [asylum] stor[ies]’ (Jubany [2017](#_bookmark82), 135) and ‘searching for untruth’ (Kelly [2012](#_bookmark85), 765). In addition, other authors criticise that the focus in cred- ibility determination is on establishing facts about the ‘truth’ of past happen- ings and argue that instead, in order to assess applicants’ well-founded fear of persecution, credibility assessments should concern only whether a person is believable, not whether they are believed (see Good [2015](#_bookmark74), 123, 137; Kagan [2003](#_bookmark83), 370, 381; Sweeney [2009](#_bookmark106)). In the following, I thus attempt to explain these tendencies that I also observed in the SEM. The professional norms, identities and role perceptions discussed above play a role herein, as do practical considerations in and of decision-making as well as emotional motivations. My intention here is not to try and determine what comes first: the assumption that most asylum seekers are ‘bogus’, the ‘politics of deterrence’ (Poertner [2017](#_bookmark95)), the role as ‘gate-keepers’, the professional norm of suspicion, the techniques and knowledge used to test and assess credibility or practical considerations as to how best reason an asylum decision, for example. Rather, my interest lies in how these different factors constitute each other. Yet, before going on to discuss these practicalities and pragmatics of decision- making two important points with regard to the ‘quest for untruths’ must be raised.

First, it is actually not always the case that decision-makers meticulously search for indicators of non-credibility in asylum interviews (or what deci- sion-makers themselves simply refer to as ‘test credibility’). Sometimes they also refrain from doing so, either if a case very clearly does not fulfil refugee status requirements or if it is obvious to the caseworker that an asylum narrative is ‘clearly credible’. The latter is something that caseworkers usually ‘simply’ know or feel without really being able to put into words why (see Affolter 2021). Decision-makers described credible accounts as those which ‘just came pouring out’ and where all one had to do was to ‘lean back and listen to them talk’ (Daniel, caseworker, interview transcript). But this, I was told, was not something that happened very often. In the absence of this ‘feeling’, the normal thing to do is then to meticulously test credibility in the way described above. Therefore, such ‘feelings’, in line with a practice-

theoretical understanding of administrative work, crucially shape casewor- kers’ decision-making, including the questioning techniques they employ in asylum interviews. At the same time, caseworkers’ implicit knowledge – these ‘feelings’ – are shaped by the routinised questioning techniques deci- sion-makers employ in asylum interviews and the outcomes these question- ing techniques produce. Hence, as several authors have argued, these questioning techniques do not merely lead to the passive discovery of the mistakes or so-called indicators of non-credibility they seek to uncover. Rather, they actively generate them (see Dahlvik [2018](#_bookmark62), 142–148; Scheffer [2001](#_bookmark101), 184; Sweeney [2007](#_bookmark105), [2009](#_bookmark106), 725; Trueman [2009](#_bookmark108), 296).[12](#_bookmark51) I will briefly consider this phenomenon by examining ‘substance’ and how it is tested in asylum interviews. In the case below, the decision-maker is trying to find out whether it seems credible that the applicant worked for a particular member of parliament (MP) in Sri Lanka, which would make him eligible for refugee status. The caseworker does so by testing the level of detail the applicant can provide:

Q What is MP X like as a person? [. . .]

A What do you mean by that? I don’t quite understand.

Q You worked closely with him for three years. How did you experience him as a person? What’s his character like? How did he treat you?

A He was nice to his people. What should I tell you? He was good. He was a good MP. It only started to go wrong when he decided to support Y.

Q What else can you tell me about him? About his habits, what he was like as a boss?

A (Applicant repeats the same things several times). He was a good MP. He looked after his people. For instance, he opened up an eye clinic in Z. He was very nice to me. He was from the TNA party. He was one of 22 members.

Q But I want to know what he was like as a person. That he was one of 22 members I can also find on the internet.

A He protected my family. And he helped me flee. That I am sitting here now and can move around freely is thanks to him.

Q What was he like as a person? Did he drink, smoke, throw tantrums? You worked with him for three years and shared an office with him.

A Yes, he smoked and sometimes drank with me. He was friendly to me. It’s enough to know he still protects my family today to know what his character is like.

[. . .]

Q Did you experience any other [special] moments with him? Things that affected him deeply or things that were a success for him?

A (Applicants answers in abbreviated form). Yes, for instance: In the parlia- ment, they tried to kill him. They came, they protected him. I experienced this personally. That is unforgettable. Yes, I remember this. It was very unsettling.

Q (Caseworker gives examples of how he experiences Swiss members of parliament). Can you tell me something similar about MP X? (minutes of asylum interview, casefile)

We can see in this example how the decision-maker pushes the applicant to supply a detailed account. He already seems to have a clear idea what this means, what such a detailed account should look like and what the applicant should be able to tell him about his working relationship with MP X. In this case, the applicant fails the test. The applicant’s answers, which because they were recorded in writing in the minutes of the asylum interview become ‘authoritative facts’ (Dahlvik [2018](#_bookmark62), 133), then provide the decision-maker with arguments that he can use to reason his negative decision. Thus, by referring to the criterion ‘lack of substance’ in his final decision the official writes:

To start off with, your account of your tasks working for MP X and of your propaganda activities in connection with this work were very superficial. Even though you were asked about this several times, you did not manage to provide detailed information on your working relationship with MP X and your actual tasks. (final written decision, casefile)

Then, the decision-maker goes on to refer to the passages from the minutes of the asylum interview I quoted above to prove his point. By doing so he creates what I call, drawing on Didier Fassin ([2013](#_bookmark68)), an institutional ‘truth’. These ‘truths’ produce certain images of ‘bogus’ and ‘genuine’ refugees and the kind of narratives they are able to provide which, again, have an impact on decision-makers’ ‘gut feelings’ and contribute to guiding caseworkers’ deci- sions on how meticulously to ‘test credibility’.

The second important point I wish to raise with regard to the ‘search for untruths’ is that, in their initial training, caseworkers not only learn the three- step questioning strategies for testing credibility that I have discussed above. They are also taught about Criteria Based Content Analysis (CBCA), which is a method/theory from forensic psychology that was originally developed to evaluate testimonies of ‘victims of child sexual abuse’ (Amado et al. [2016](#_bookmark54), 201). CBCA identifies nineteen ‘reality criteria’ (*Realkennzeichen*) that are seen as indicators of the statements being based on events that the narrator has experienced. According to this theory, narratives need to be systematically

analysed in order to determine whether any reality criteria can be found, which should then be read as indicators for credibility. The reverse, as I heard two forensic psychologists that were invited to teach upgrade training courses in the SEM say, is not possible. Hence, the absence of reality criteria does not automatically mean that the narrator has not experienced the recounted event. I have elsewhere argued that this method – and the fact that decision-makers are trained in it – on the one hand, gives credibility determination in the SEM a scientific legitimation (see Affolter 2021). On the other hand, the reality criteria that decision-makers learn about also seem to shape their implicit knowledge about what credible accounts look or ‘feel’ like (see Affolter 2021). The question that I am, however, interested in here is why CBCA is not ‘applied’ in practice in the sense that asylum seekers narratives are systematically searched for such reality criteria. Instead, as argued above, the opposite is done. My research suggests that this mainly has to do with how asylum decisions must be reasoned in writing.

The formats for reasoning positive and negative decisions are distinct. For positive decisions, caseworkers are requested to fill in an internal form which must be countersigned by their superior but which never leaves the office, in order to prevent applicants from learning from others how to present a successful claim. On the form, caseworkers must indicate who the persecu- tors are as well as the motives for and means of persecution that the applicants have suffered or are in danger of suffering. Furthermore, caseworkers must justify their credibility decision. This can be done in a rather free way and often consists of only a few sentences as in this example, where the decision- maker wrote:

The applicant’s statements are well substantiated, detailed and shaped by experience [*erlebnisgeprägt*]. In particular, the applicant was able to describe in great detail his training in Sawa [military camp in Eritrea] and his subsequent duties in the national service. There is no doubt as to his Eritrean origins (country knowledge was tested thoroughly in the interview) and the applicant handed in his original passport, drivers licence and baptism certificate. (internal request form for positive decisions, casefile)

For negative decisions, the process is different. Negative decisions must be reasoned with text blocks that caseworkers have at their disposal. Such text blocks are fragments of pre-written text that exist for the pre-defined criteria of non-credibility and non-eligibility for refugee status from Swiss asylum law. For non-credibility, these criteria are: ‘lack of substance’, ‘contradictions to known facts’, ‘contradictions to general experience’, ‘contradictions to the inner logic of acting’, ‘inherent contradictions’, ‘belated assertions’, ‘no longer mentioned assertions’, ‘forged evidence’ and ‘unqualified evidence’.[13](#_bookmark52) For instance, for the criteria ‘lack of substance’, the text block decision-makers can copy into their decisions, reads as follows:

Asylum claims are not sufficiently substantiated if they are not told in a tangible, detailed and differentiated way with regard to crucial points [of the story] and, thus, give the impression that the applicant hasn’t really experienced the story himself. (asylum decision, casefile)

In order to substantiate their arguments, decision-makers then connect these text blocks to applicants’ statements as they were recorded in the minutes of the asylum interview. What this means in practice is that for efficiently taking decisions, caseworkers must already always have their written decision in mind whilst interviewing applicants. Hence, several caseworkers told me that in the interviews they would question the applicants for as long as was needed until they were confident that they had enough arguments for rejecting the claim or were sufficiently certain that it was credible.

Of course, these practicalities of decision-making do not alone explain why most asylum applications end up being rejected. To the contrary, I was told by caseworkers that, in terms of efficiency, taking positive decisions is often the fastest and ‘easiest’ thing to do in that not much information is required for filling in the internal request forms. Furthermore, positive decisions need not be as thoroughly reasoned as negative decisions, because there is no need for them to hold up if the decision is appealed. Yet, taking positive decisions is only pragmatic as long as decision-makers can count on their casefiles not being thoroughly examined by their superiors. Because if the latter do check the casefiles thoroughly and find that the caseworker did not test the applicant meticulously enough, the casefile is returned to the decision-maker to work on again. Hence, retaining their superiors’ trust is important, as exemplified by Claire explaining to me that if she had several cases she wanted to decide positively, she would not give them to her superior all at once, but would keep some of them back for when she also had some negative decisions. This was important because she did not want her boss to think she took positive decisions easily and simply waved cases through without properly checking their credibility. Moreover, it is not only pragmatic considerations that matter. As shown above, several other factors also contribute to making the granting of asylum not necessarily an ‘easy’ thing to do.

However, pragmatic considerations do play a crucial role – together with emotional motivations – in normalising the rejection of asylum claims on the basis of non-credibility rather than based on non-eligibility for refugee status. Shedding light on these pragmatic considerations on how to best arrive at a final decision is thus important because, as Ephraim Poertner writes, the fact that most negative decisions are based on non-credibility for pragmatic rea- sons ‘indirectly sustains or even fuels the discourse of abuse by giving the impression that applicants are actively and knowingly trying to deceive the asylum office in most cases’ ([2018](#_bookmark96), 205). This, in turn, reaffirms decision- makers’ role as ‘guardians of a restricted good’ (Heyman [2009](#_bookmark79), 381) and the professional norm of suspicion. In the SEM, rejecting asylum claims on the

basis of non-credibility whenever possible is an unwritten policy since such decisions are considered more difficult to refute on appeal. This has to do with the type of ‘facts’ created through ‘credibility testing’ as discussed above (see also Sweeney [2009](#_bookmark106), 725). The ability to produce such ‘facts’ also provides decision-makers with decisional certainty, as Daniel and Samuel’s statements illustrate:

Testing credibility is especially important if they [the asylum seekers] come from states that act in an arbitrary manner [*willkürliche Staaten*]. [. . .] Or broadly speaking, the worse the situation in a country, the more we have to focus on the credibility of the claim, or the more we tend to argue on the basis of credibility. I guess we have to. Because in such countries even a minor political activity can quickly result in the person being persecuted. (Samuel, caseworker, interview transcript)

For instance, a mafia story: is it relevant for asylum or not? [. . .] Because [. . .] the state [of origin] is not really capable of protecting the applicant. [Yet,] there is no real motive for asylum behind it. But the applicant might still be kind of persecuted. But if you just say, this is all not credible, then you cover your back. (Daniel, caseworker, interview transcript)

We can see from their statements that for decision-makers it is often easier to assess credibility with certainty than to claim with certainty that asylum seekers would not be persecuted upon return to their home country and thus that they do not fulfil refugee status (see also Poertner [2018](#_bookmark96), 205). The latter is seen as very difficult, especially in light of the ever-changing contexts in politically unstable countries. Furthermore, by claiming that ‘you cover your back’, Daniel seems to be explicitly referring to non-credibility decisions’ greater ability to withstand on appeal. Interestingly, for the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board, Audrey Macklin ([1998](#_bookmark91)) found the exact opposite. Hence, she writes about her own experience as an asylum adjudicator:

Credibility determination is hard. It is frequently difficult to articulate in rational terms why one does, or does not, believe another. Decision makers may put a lot of faith in their ‘gut feelings’ about credibility, but recognize that gut feeling does not amount to a legally defensible basis for a decision. As a practical matter, this does not pose much of a problem when the decision is positive. The situation is more complicated when the decision maker is inclined towards the negative. Indeed, there is a temptation to avoid basing negative decisions on credibility, even though that is the real reason for the rejection. This avoidance usually manifests in reliance on some other ground for turning down the application, such as availability of state protection, or internal resettlements options, etc. (Macklin [1998](#_bookmark91), 134 f)

Of course, as administrative caseworkers in charge of taking initial asylum decisions, Samuel and Daniel are in a different position to that of a judge dealing with contested appeals (as Macklin describes). I was often told by decision-makers that they were glad to have the Federal Administrative Court as a kind of ‘safety net’ that had the final say. Nevertheless, the contrast in

terms of what is regarded as ‘rational terms’ is striking. In the SEM, the ‘objective criteria’ decision-makers have at hand, as well as the questioning techniques they learn, provide them with what is regarded as a strong rationale for arguing non-credibility decisions. It is, on the one hand, this that Patricia seems to be referring to when she claims that it is easier to point out someone’s contradictions than it is to argue that there is no well-founded fear of persecution:

In a way, it’s easier to reason with Article 7. Because it can be quite difficult to say to someone from Syria for example: ‘Well, you have no reason to be afraid.’ That makes me attackable. But if you point out his contradictions, if you can raise doubt about the whole story, that’s easier. (Patricia, caseworker, interview transcript)

On the other hand, an emotional motivation can also be discerned from her statement. Rejecting asylum claims on the basis of non-credibility is emotion- ally easier in that the responsibility for the outcome of the decision is shifted to the asylum seekers. It is the applicants’ fault for not telling ‘the truth’:

I can also tell you why [I prefer arguing negative decisions on the basis of non- credibility]. It’s for my conscience. If someone tells you rubbish [*dir einen Stuss erzählt*], then you don’t have such a guilty conscience. (Helen, caseworker, interview transcript)

**Conclusion: the Normalisation of Disbelief**

In their introduction to this special issue, Lisa Marie Borrelli, Annika Lindberg and Anna Wyss

propose a conceptualisation of *states of suspicion*, which allows us to grasp how suspicion has become the institutionalised, normalised modus operandi of migration law enforce- ment, and which entails studying suspicion as legally and institutionally embedded *states of mind* that permeate policy-making, laws, and bureaucratic procedures, and inform and shape the perceptions, subjectivities, and practices of state officials, migrants, and researchers alike. (Borrelli, Lindberg, and Wyss, this issue, emphasis in the original)

In this article, I have analysed the shaping of perceptions, subjectivities and practices of state officials, namely of asylum decision-makers working in the Swiss Secretariat for Migration. For SEM decision-makers, as I was able to observe, being *state* agents means that they must act in the interest of the state. This is interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, it is perceived as meaning that Switzerland’s so-called ‘humanitarian tradition’ and the noble value of asylum that must be upheld. On the other hand, it stands for protecting the Swiss asylum system from being abused and making sure it does not become ‘too attractive’ (see Affolter 2021). In a seemingly para- doxical way, these different role understandings call for restrictive refugee status determination that ensures that asylum is reserved for those ‘truly

deserving’ (see also Fassin and Kobelinsky [2012](#_bookmark70), 464 f). Borrelli, Lindberg and Wyss argue that suspicion is a ‘normalised modus operandi of migration law enforcement’ which becomes ‘institutionally embedded’ in caseworkers’ minds. The role conceptions and corresponding ideas about how to behave professionally discussed in this article are a reflection of this. By adopting a practice-theoretical approach to administrative work, I have, furthermore, shown how suspicion becomes part of caseworkers’ mindset in the form of the implicit and embodied knowledge which they acquire through organisa- tional socialisation and their everyday interactions on the job. Suspicion inheres in caseworkers’ ‘gut feeling’ which indicates to the caseworkers whether a story is ‘clearly true’ or whether there is ‘something off about it’. And it inheres in their common-sense assumptions, for example regard- ing what it means to tell a story with ‘enough detail’, which contradictions are crucial enough to count as indicators of non-credibility and which are not, or what behaviours are considered plausible and which are not. However, as a practice, administrative work consists of more than what caseworkers think and know. Rather, it is an assemblage of ‘bodily activities, forms of mental activities, “things” and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motiva- tional knowledge’ (Reckwitz [2002](#_bookmark98), 249). I have thus suggested in this article that we should conceptualise disbelief and suspicion as practices instead of reducing them to states of mind. Beyond caseworkers’ minds, suspicion is also embedded in their routinised and largely unthinking actions, particu- larly in the ways in which asylum interviews are carried out. Moreover, suspicion inheres in material components of decision-making, most notably in Article 7 of the Swiss Asylum Act which codifies ‘credibility’ only in a negative way. This means that it only defines what non-credible claims are, but not what credible claims entail (see Art. 7, paragraph 3, [AsylA](#_bookmark56)). Credible accounts are thus implicitly conceptualised as the reversion of non-credible accounts, which implies that a claim is only credible if it is not non-credible. That, in turn, is precisely how credibility determination works in practice.

Of course, as Didier Fassin has argued, administrations do not operate in a vacuum. Rather, administrative caseworkers are ‘confronted with explicit and implicit expectations formulated in discourses, laws and rules while keeping sizeable space to manoeuvre in the concrete management of situations and individuals’ (Fassin [2015](#_bookmark69), 4). In this article, I have analysed for the SEM how the political and ideological contexts in which decision-makers work have an impact on their practices. At the same time, I have shown how through their everyday practices, administrative caseworkers structure their environ- ments. Hence, the idea that most asylum seekers are ‘bogus’ and want to abuse the system not only comes from outside asylum administrations. It is also a social truth created by asylum administration offices themselves. Through the creation of certain ‘facts’ in refugee status determination – for example,

that an asylum story is not credible because of contradictions ‘found’ in the minutes of asylum interviews – this ‘truth’ reinforces the idea that there are indeed many ‘liars’ which need to be exposed. It thus contributes to the institutionalisation and normalisation of suspicion within the office and also reaffirms and potentially shapes public political discourse. In other words, and in revisiting the introduction to this special issue, what this article has thus shown on the basis of an empirical case study is how suspicion is ‘at once cause and [...] effect of increasingly restrictive and repressive migration [govern- ance]’ (Borrelli, Lindberg, and Wyss, this issue).

**Notes**

1. The terms bureaucracy and bureaucrats carry negative connotations. They are often associated with red tape and officialism and used as criticism (see Eckert [2020](#_bookmark65), 7; Poertner [2017](#_bookmark95), 12). It is for this reason that I instead employ the term administrations, except when referring to literature that explicitly makes use of the words bureaucracy and bureaucrats.
2. ‘Cases’ is an emic term. Of course, what SEM caseworkers really deal with are not cases but people whose lives are greatly affected by their practices and decisions. However, for better readability I continue to use the word without inverted commas.
3. This changed with the introduction of the accelerated procedure on 1 March 2019. Today, the whole procedure normally lasts for a maximum of 140 days, with sixty to seventy percent of all asylum applications being dealt with in this way. The remaining thirty to forty percent of all asylum applications – namely, those deemed more complicated and needing more time to be examined – are assigned to the extended procedure, which works more or less the same way as the ‘regular’ procedure did at the time of my research. Another substantial change induced by the reform has been to drastically cut the deadline for appealing first- instance asylum decisions to the Federal Administrative Court: from thirty days down to seven days for those asylum seekers going through the accelerated procedure. For those assigned to the extended procedure the deadline remains at thirty days.
4. As one of the anonymous reviewers pointed out, the standard of proof outlined in Article 7 of the Swiss Asylum Act, namely that ‘[r]efugee status is credibly demon- strated if the authority regards it as proven on the balance of probabilities’ (Art. 7, paragraph 2, AsylA) is higher than that applied – or supposed to be applied – in other countries, which ‘merely’ demands ‘a reasonable degree of likelihood’ (see Good [2015](#_bookmark74); Kelly [2012](#_bookmark85); Sweeney [2009](#_bookmark106)). This thus seems to be an important issue to be addressed by legal scholarship. The English translation of the Swiss Asylum Act which I cited from above starts with the following disclaimer: ‘English is not an official language of the Swiss Confederation. This translation is provided for infor- mation purposes only and has no legal force’ ([https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classi](https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/19995092/index.html) [fied-compilation/19995092/index.html](https://www.admin.ch/opc/en/classified-compilation/19995092/index.html), accessed October 16, 2020). Yet, considering the original wording in German and French, this does not merely seem to be a problem of translation. In the German version the sentence states that ‘*glaubhaft gemacht ist die Flüchtlingseigenschaft, wenn die Behörde ihr Vorhandensein mit überwiegender Wahrscheinlichkeit für gegeben hält*’ whereas the French version states that ‘*la qualité de réfugié est vraisemblable lorsque l’autorité estime que celle-ci est hautement probable*’. Moreover, the refugee definition in the Swiss Asylum Act also deviates from the wording of the English version of the 1951 Refugee Convention in

that it replaces ‘persecution’ with ‘serious disadvantage’. However, whether, in practice, this lowers the threshold for being recognised as a refugee remains a matter of empirical inquiry.

1. <https://perma.cc/ZG4B-NN6U>, accessed October 11, 2020.
2. All the names in this article are pseudonyms. The ethnographic material used in this article has been translated from Swiss German into English by the author.
3. The principle *in dubio pro refugio* (the benefit of the doubt) means that if decision- makers do not know whether an applicant’s claims ‘are’ credible or not they should decide in favour of the applicant (see also Good [2015](#_bookmark74)).
4. In academia, the term *déformation professionelle* can be traced back to the sociologist Daniel Warnotte, who used it to describe how bureaucrats become ‘intellectually and emotionally damaged by their roles’ (Maccoby [2007](#_bookmark90), 62).
5. Superiors do, of course, also check that decision-makers’ credibility assessment is not ‘too strict’. However, as discussed above, this is perceived as less of a problem for new decision-makers.
6. For a critical discussion of the role of such ethnocentric common sense assumptions in refugee status determination, see Doornbos ([2005](#_bookmark63)), Good ([2011](#_bookmark73)), Kälin ([1986](#_bookmark84)), Herlihy, Gleeson, and Turner ([2010](#_bookmark77)), Rousseau et al. ([2002](#_bookmark100)), Shuman and Bohmer ([2004](#_bookmark103)) and Sweeney ([2007](#_bookmark105)).
7. ‘Wh- questions usually start with a word beginning with wh-, but “how” is also included. The wh- words are: what, when, where, who, whom, which, whose, why, and how’ (Cambridge Dictionary. Wh-question. [https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/wh-question) [englisch/wh-question](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/englisch/wh-question), accessed October 11, 2020).
8. For a detailed analysis of this, see Scheffer ([2001](#_bookmark101)).
9. ‘Contradictions to general experience’ and ‘contradictions to the inner logic of actions’ are usually used together and stand for the plausibility of certain actions.

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**Contribution For Special Issue**

States of suspicion: How institutionalised disbelief shapes migration control regimes

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