Men and the Emotional World of Immigration Detention
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The refused asylum seekers and immigration detainees involved in my doctoral research differed from each other in almost every way, except, that is, for their gender. Examining the interplay between masculinity and emotion, and how people working in the immigration system speak of, treat and expect these men to behave, offers insights into the imagery of noncitizen and refugee men, and the place of this within the operation of Immigration Removal Centres (IRCs). It was meeting one particular detained man that illuminated for me these gendered assumptions, the dissonance between expectations and practice, and the institutionally problematic place of male anger.

In 2011, an Oxford charity asked me to urgently visit a Libyan immigration detainee who I will call Basam. Unusually, Basam had been referred to the charity by concerned IRC welfare officers. I was warned that he was highly emotional and potentially suffering from mental health problems. A day or two later, I went to the centre to meet Basam. As I approached the visits hall, a Detainee Custody Officer (DCO) came over to reiterate concerns over Basam and the hope that my visit might help him. Shortly afterwards, a thin man in his mid-20s came and sat down.

Basam was an intense and agitated individual. He was clearly shocked to be detained, insulted by repeated accusations from the Home Office that he had lied, and deeply afraid of their threats to remove him from the UK. He was also beset with guilt and worry about being far from Libya, a country descending into conflict and whose plight played out on the television in the corner of the visits hall. Lost in his emotional turmoil, Basam gesticulated wildly and spoke in an increasingly loud voice, oblivious to the ripples his shouts caused in the IRC's anodyne visits hall.

Although I was relatively experienced at visiting detainees, the fierceness of Basam's fury shocked me. I could feel the stares from the DCOs, visitors and other detainees, and felt pressure knowing I was expected to prevent Basam's outbursts from escalating. At that first meeting, I could do little more than listen. It was not until the second, equally intense visit that I suddenly realised Basam's response was not dysfunctional but immensely rational. His family were trapped in a country entering war, he had no legal representation, his asylum claim was failing, he was being called a liar and he had been indefinitely deprived of his liberty. Basam had every reason to be incensed.

In fact, I realised that rather than being shocked by Basam's furious reaction, I should instead be surprised by how rare such responses are amongst immigration detainees. More commonly, people turn inwards, becoming passive and despondent. So I stopped worrying about the watching eyes and instead reassured Basam that his anger was reasonable. Although I was treating him as an adult with a valid emotional response to an awful situation, I felt guilty. I knew I was expected to quieten Basam, and hoped the DCOs did not overhear my 'irresponsible' words.

Meeting Basam and becoming aware of my complicity in a system that needs detainees to constrain their splenetic emotions made me conscious of the institutional fear of angry men. The DCOs seemed genuinely worried about Basam, but also feared he might be a trouble-maker and sought to restrict his anger. They checked on him throughout the day, they apparently encouraged him to take sleeping pills and started each conversation by imploring him to 'calm down'. Even Basam's suggestion they move him to a single room, so that he could have some private space in which to shout and let out his aggression, was refused.

However, the same DCOs that constructed Basam as being dangerously angry, also repeatedly emasculated him. After a few weeks of escalating tensions, for example, I arrived at the IRC to be told by the receptionist that I could not visit Basam because 'he's been a naughty boy', telling me, in a patronising tone: 'he's had a bit of a protest in one of the yards, had a banner up and a bit of a shout.' When I later telephoned, Basam explained that he had written down the name of a murdered journalist and had shown this to other detainees, albeit – as he acknowledged – in an agitated state. This had been interpreted as a protest and resulted in him being 'removed from association' and the next day transferred to a higher security IRC, before being removed from the UK. His nonviolent but outward focused actions were treated heavy-handedly, at the same time as they were viewed condescendingly.

Basam's treatment provides insights into the sometimes contradictory gendered expectations and institutional needs operating within IRCs. Managerially speaking, introspective emotions are easier to manage than outbursts. The Foucauldian institutional requirement for docile bodies means small acts of dissent or non-cooperation threaten the wider IRC. There is little room for the anger of detained men.

The problematising of the agency and emotions of migrant men goes beyond institutional concerns,
however, to imbue the whole asylum system. As a counsellor I interviewed in 2010 explained: ‘There is very little space [for asylum seekers] to be bad, in a healthy way’, claiming that Social Services regularly referred asylum seekers in the community for counselling because their anger was considered pathological. Men (especially those of certain ethnicities and age groups), are prone to being conceptualised as active agents: capable and strong, but potentially criminal and threatening. This disadvantages male asylum seekers, who imperfectly fit the feminised and victimised imagery generally employed by refugee advocates (Judge 2010).

Despite the systemic fear of the outward display of strong negative emotions from male detainees, however, and although some men are clearly angry about their treatment, depressive responses are much more common. Furthermore, the same discourses that construct refused asylum seeking and detained men as dangerous when angry, are also emasculating, a tension I have explored elsewhere (Griffiths 2013). In parallel to being construed as a ticking time bomb, Basam’s emotions were dismissed and his actions belittled. As such, he was Othered as simultaneously dangerous and infantile. Recognition of detained men’s emotional lives helps illuminate the ambiguity of these spaces, ones in which problematic assumptions regarding gender, age, race and immigration status converge.

References