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Title

'Stuck in the middle': Waiting and uncertainty in immigration detention

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Biography

Sarah Turnbull is a postdoctoral research fellow with the Centre for Criminology, University of Oxford. She has published articles on punishment in Canada and immigration detention in the United Kingdom, and is currently completing a book entitled *Parole in Postcolonial Canada: Gender and Diversity in the Federal System*.

Abstract

A defining feature of immigration detention in the United Kingdom is its indeterminacy; that is, there are no statutory constraints on the length of time an individual can be detained. As such, detention is uncertain and unpredictable; it may last a few hours or a few days, or weeks, months, and even years. Consequently, the lived experience of detention is one of waiting: waiting to know both *when* and *how* detention will end (i.e. release to the community or expulsion from the country). The denial of liberty and the conditions of confinement present additional challenges for detainees, as they must contend with significant limits to their agency as they await the decisions of a variety of other actors. Waiting has been conceptualised as an exercise of power, one that manipulates others' time. Although it is a common human experience, for immigration detainees, the lived experience of waiting in the uncertain and unpredictable context of detention is especially challenging. Passing time in immigration detention raises important questions about affect, identity, agency, and resistance within this unique quasi-penal space. This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork, including 89 semi-structured interviews with detainees, carried out in four immigration removal centres in the UK to explore the lived experiences of waiting. The analysis demonstrates the relevancy of time and agency in immigration detention.

Key words

immigration detention, waiting, ethnography, uncertainty

Word count

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‘Stuck in the middle’: Waiting and uncertainty in immigration detention

Introduction

A defining feature of immigration detention in the United Kingdom (UK) is its indeterminacy; that is, there are no statutory constraints on the length of time an individual can be detained (Bosworth, 2013). The British government chose not to adopt the European Union Returns Directive, which limits the duration of detention to a total maximum of 18 months (Stefanelli, 2011). As such, detention is uncertain and unpredictable; it may last a few hours or a few days, or weeks, months, and even years. Consequently, the lived experience of detention is one of waiting: waiting to know both *when* and *how* detention will end (i.e. release to the community or expulsion from the UK). The denial of liberty and the conditions of confinement present additional difficulties for detainees, as they must contend with significant limits to their agency as they await the decisions and actions of a variety of others: immigration caseworkers, judges, detention custody officers (DCOs), and solicitors.

Waiting, Khosravi (2014) observes, is an exercise of power, one that manipulates others' time. It is one way people experience the effects of power (Bourdieu, 2000, cited in Auyero, 2011), and is unevenly distributed along lines of race, class, gender, and citizenship (Bayart, 2007). In the west, the increasing bureaucratisation and regulation of time over the twentieth century has produced various settings of waiting (e.g. traffic jams, queues, welfare offices) (Jeffrey, 2010) which shape how people experience social life. Through processes of globalisation, conditions and experiences of long-term waiting have become commonplace for whole populations, particularly for those who are 'stockpiled and forced into latency' (Bayart, 2007: 269). Experientially, waiting has been described as painful (Schwartz, 1975), as a phenomenon associated with a lack of respect and dignity (Zerubavel, 1981), and as an experience often related to hope (Gasparani, 1995; Reed, 2011) and being 'alive with the potential of being other than this' (Bissell, 2007: 277). There is, as Hage (2009: 3) notes, a 'rich plurality of the social forms that waiting takes in social life and the social and political relations that shape and flow from it'.

Although waiting is a common human experience, the passing of time within custodial settings poses special challenges for incarcerated individuals (e.g. Matthews, 1999; Kohn, 2009). As Matthews (1999: 39) observes, '[i]nstitutional confinement changes the ways in which time is experienced'. In prison, for example, time is negated; it is about 'doing' or 'killing' time, as (determinately-sentenced) prisoners look towards their release dates and return to a world 'outside'. However, for those who are held indeterminately, time is 'stretched' as prisoners must contend with considerable anxiety due to the uncertainty of their release dates (Matthews, 1999). Yet, Reed's (2011) research has shown that remand prisoners passed the indeterminate periods of time waiting for court through a sense of hope, as did the death row inmates described by Kohn (2009) who awaited execution. So although time and waiting are key features of incarceration, how individuals cope varies depending on their status and the types of custodial setting they find themselves in.

For immigration detainees, as a unique type of incarcerated population, the lived experience of waiting in custodial institutions characterised by high levels of uncertainty and unpredictability is especially challenging. At present, the UK's detention estate includes eleven immigration removal

centres (IRCs),¹ with a combined capacity to detain roughly 4,100 individuals. At any given time, approximately 2,800 individuals are confined as immigration detainees,² with over 30,000 individuals entering detention in 2013, an increase of 5% from 2012 (Home Office, 2013). Although the centres vary in terms of architectural design and the regimes on offer (e.g. some have been converted from prisons to detention centres, whereas others are purpose-built), all are secure facilities that detain individuals for indefinite periods of time.

The UK detention estate is the primary system to ‘manage noncitizen flows and to enclose “illegal” populations from “legal” ones’ (Martin, 2012: 326). The majority (62%) of detainees in 2013 were held for less than 29 days. However, a third (33%) were detained for over one month and 6%—nearly 1,900 individuals—were in detention for over four months (Home Office, 2013). Despite the renewed political focus on removal and the framing of detention as temporary and fleeting (Hart, 2011), confinement can last a significant period of time. As Dauvergne (2007) points out, the indeterminate nature of detention exists because some people cannot be removed and many others cannot be removed easily.

Those who are detained in Britain’s IRCs include asylum seekers (those with failed claims and those whose detention is part of the detained ‘fast-track’ asylum process); foreign national ex-prisoners who have completed their sentences and are facing deportation; visa over-stayers; individuals who are accused of breaking the conditions of their visas; and undocumented migrants. Many are long-term British residents, some with significant ties to the UK, having grown up and/or having family members, including children and spouses, here (Bosworth, 2013). Although they come from all around the world, the majority of those in detention are young men of colour from the global south.

Individuals are confined for administrative reasons, such as to determine identity, prevent absconding, facilitate removal or deportation,³ or as part of the Detained Fast-Track scheme (Hall, 2010; Griffiths, 2012; Silverman and Massa, 2012). Immigration detention is therefore best understood as part of a process, rather than an isolated measure (Caloz-Tschopp, 1997). Since detention is carried out through administrative power, these individuals are not being punished for criminal wrongdoing.

IRCs are unique quasi-penal institutions that are simultaneously, and confusingly, both like and unlike prisons. The architectures and security practices of immigration detention mimic those of prisons, even as detainees are typically provided greater freedom than prisoners. Yet, as Bosworth (2013: 150) observes, ‘there is no obvious purpose of detention that inheres in the institution’. Whereas prisons may seek to rehabilitate prisoners, deter future offending, or communicate denunciatory messages about wrongdoing, immigration detention is largely about incapacitation—termed ‘accommodation’ by the British government.⁴ Because detainees are ostensibly going to be removed, detention is not oriented around (re)integration (Leerkes and

¹ Through the enactment of the *Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act* in 2002, detention centres were renamed ‘removal centres’ (Bosworth, 2007), suggesting (at least in name) that detainees are not supposed to be housed in such institutions for very long.

² An additional 1,000 people are held in prisons post-sentence under immigration authority.

³ In the UK, removal and deportation are legally distinct categories, although both involve the expulsion of individuals to another country and restrictions on re-entry.

⁴ Perhaps reflecting this terminology (and/or the gender composition of the detained population), the detainees at Yarl’s Wood are called ‘residents’.

Broeders, 2010) or an investment in their 'futures'. Detainees are purposefully kept at a distance and isolated from the community (Whyte, 2011), both spatially in terms of the physical location of the centres and through various rules and regulations that make it difficult for detainees to connect to family, friends, legal representatives, and advocates.

The activities on offer within IRCs are primarily aimed at keeping people occupied as they wait, although some centres aim to assist women and men with skills that could help them in their 'home' countries, once they are sent 'back'. Detention is fundamentally concerned with 'holding' individuals deemed unwanted and illegal, not producing citizen-subjects for inclusion in the British community (Bashford and Strange, 2002; Bosworth and Turnbull, forthcoming). This feature of detention has important implications for how detainees spend time as IRCs offer little in the way of meaningful activities, thereby contributing to a sense of boredom and monotony in everyday life.

Section 3(1) of the Detention Centre Rules 2001 states that the purpose of immigration detention is 'to provide for the secure but humane accommodation of detained persons in a relaxed regime with as much freedom of movement and association as possible, consistent with maintaining a safe and secure environment, and to encourage and assist detained persons to make the most productive use of their time, whilst respecting in particular their dignity and the right to individual expression'. This description conjures notions of rationalised, ordered spaces and regimes (Hall, 2010). Yet, detention is best described as highly affective and emotional, complex and ambiguous, unpredictable and monotonous. It is characterised by confusion, and (real or imagined) inconsistency and arbitrariness. This unique context shapes how detainees cope with detention, including how they experience time and wait for release.

Passing time in immigration detention thus raises important questions about affect, identity, agency, and resistance within this unique quasi-penal space. Given the importance of the decisions that detainees anticipate, waiting in detention is contradictory, both in terms of affect and temporality. Emotionally, waiting is highly anxiety-provoking and stressful for most detainees, yet is also associated with the boredom and monotony of life in detention (see also Griffiths, 2014). Temporally, the experience of waiting tends to mark how time in detention is spent, with detainees' everyday lives organised around bureaucratic and institutional timeframes not of their choosing.

This paper explores the theme of waiting by drawing on the lived experiences of those confined in immigration detention in the UK. I argue that the material and structural conditions of detention shape how detainees pass time, exacerbating the difficult aspects of waiting for decisions that have the potential to fundamentally alter their life courses. By drawing on detainees' narratives of how they experience and understand their confinement, I highlight the affective aspects of waiting and the unique temporal features of coping with uncertainty in this context, as well as the strategies that detainees deploy to exert their agency and resist the bureaucratic and institutionally imposed restrictions on their time.

The present study

This paper draws on ethnographic data gathered in the UK as part of a larger, ongoing project involving both the in-detention and post-detention experiences of (im)migrants. The fieldwork data are based on my time spent at four IRCs, and with released detainees in the UK community, from September 2013 to August 2014. Methods include participant observation based on informal

encounters, observation and engagements (149 days of fieldwork), formal semi-structured in-detention (n=89) and post-detention (n=8) interviews, and focus groups (n=3) with male and female detainees. The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and, along with the fieldnotes, entered into NVivo for analysis. The names and details of participants have been anonymised. Although the primary focus of this ethnographic study relates to issues of identity, home and belonging in and through immigration detention rather than time or waiting, these themes emerged through the analysis as a key experience and integral part of everyday life in immigration detention.

The four fieldwork sites⁵ for this study are diverse in terms of population detained, regime, security and architecture. The first centre, Campsfield House IRC, is an all-male institution that offers, compared to other IRCs, a less restrictive regime and layout, with detainees free to associate from 7:00 to 21:30, with the overnight period of 'closed' association meaning detainees are locked in their residential blocks, but not in their rooms. The second fieldwork site, Yarl's Wood IRC, is a predominantly female centre that also has a family unit and a male-only unit for short-term detention. Detainees are free to associate in their respective common areas from 8:30 to 12:00, from 13:30 to 17:00, and from 18:30 to 21:00. Like Campsfield House, during periods of closed association detainees are locked in their residential units but free to associate within. The third centre, Colnbrook IRC, is built to Category B prison security architecture, meaning that male detainees⁶ are subject to a restricted regime and spend 13 hours per day locked in their cells, including the overnight period from 21:00 to 8:00. The fourth centre, Dover IRC, is an all-male facility that has a 'campus' style layout. Detainees are locked in their rooms overnight from 20:40 to 7:45 yet during the day have open association in the IRC's common areas.

At all four IRCs I was able to draw keys and had free access to wander the spaces of the centres and to observe and interact with both detainees and staff. I spent an average of three to four days per week at each centre. The majority of my time was spent in the common areas where most activities and 'hanging out' took place, including the art and crafts room, games room, library, IT/English room, and other common areas. I also observed various events offered at the centres, including first aid classes, music workshops, bingo and other social activities, football matches, and consultative meetings with members of staff and detainee representatives.

In what follows, I draw on participants' narratives to explore four interconnected themes emerging from the study: how detainees pass time in conditions of uncertainty, the experience of being stuck, how some play the 'waiting game', and what is at stake for those who wait. The selected data have been chosen which illustrate best these analytic themes.

Passing time in detention

As noted above, the defining feature of immigration detention in the UK is its indeterminacy. In addition to not knowing *when* detention will end, most detainees do not know *how* it will end; that is, whether they will be released into the community or will have to leave the UK. This has important implications for how detainees pass time. Eshan (early twenties, Bangladesh, Campsfield House) summed up detention simply. I asked him, *'So how are you doing here?'* His answer: *'Not special*

⁵ The following descriptions of the fieldwork sites reflect conditions of operation at the time of fieldwork. IRCs are not static institutions; regimes change, as do the private companies operating the centres.

⁶ Colnbrook IRC has a small short-term female unit that operates a more relaxed regime.

anything. Just waiting. For Eshan, detention was about waiting and not much else. Attending college on a student visa prior to being detained, Eshan was anxious to return to his studies and eagerly anticipated a decision that would let him do so. The lived experience of passing time in immigration detention is primarily about waiting in conditions of profound uncertainty and unpredictability. Yet, what detainees await are not minor matters. Most detainees are anticipating vitally important decisions that have the potential to alter their life courses. This shapes how time is passed as the stakes are high and detainees do not know how long they will have to wait.

The experience of 'not knowing' was extremely challenging for most of the detainees I spoke with, although not everyone experienced waiting to know in the same way. Many made sense of time in detention vis-à-vis idealised conceptions of the prison and the determinate nature of most criminal sentencing. Aroleoba (early twenties, Nigeria, Campsfield House) explained it this way:

You don't really know, it's even more torturing than a prison, because in a prison, if you're there for two years, you know you're there for two years. After two years, you'll be out. If it's three months, you know you're there for three months. After three months you'll definitely be out. So you already know when you're going in, you already know your date, only they give you parole before the date. Yeah, but most likely you already know. This is the highest I can, you know, this is the longest I can be in. But in a detention centre, where your case is being decided, you don't know. You're just like that, hoping for the next day can bring something rapid, you know, different.

For Aroleoba, not knowing the duration of his detention was especially difficult and shaped his sense of time in the centre. As this quote makes clear, immigration detention is marked by profound uncertainty as detainees await decisions about their cases. Similar findings have been highlighted in research by Griffiths (2013, 2014) and Bosworth (2014). Griffiths (2013: 280), in particular, contends that 'uncertainty is not only an accidental aspect of the immigration detention system, but is critical to its functioning' (see also Whyte, 2011). Through detention, the state governs through uncertainty, producing insecure subjects who do not belong (Bosworth, 2014) and are, therefore, deportable (De Genova, 2002). Indeed, several detainees claimed that the enforced uncertainty and indeterminacy of detention was one way the British government achieved its objectives of getting rid of people. By keeping them confined, and in a state of ignorance and anticipation, people would weary of waiting, of coping with prolonged uncertainty, and eventually agree to 'go home'.

The uncertain nature of detention shaped how detainees passed time. Some tried to impose a sense of order on the day to align their anticipation to the bureaucratic and institutional workings of the Home Office, the IRCs in which they were confined, the courts and immigration tribunals, their solicitors, and third sector organisations. For example, Sanjay (late twenties, India, Campsfield House) described his sense of time as being dictated by the hours in which he might hear news from his solicitor and/or the Home Office. His day was thus divided by periods of waiting: for the time after breakfast but before lunch; then for the time after lunch but before dinner; then after dinner he would wait for the next morning, hoping the new day would bring news. Several others reported that the weekends and holidays as being a different sort of time than the normal work week because it was not likely that these days would bring news because key decision-makers would be off. Griffiths (2014) refers to this experience of time in detention as 'sticky', highlighting the slowness and stillness of detainees' confinement.

Some described the experience of waiting and passing time in detention as being constantly on edge. Henry (mid-thirties, Malawi, Colnbrook) explained it this way: *'I mean you're sitting there in your cell. Every footsteps you hear of, you know, like an officer, you're thinking "Is she, or is he coming for me?" You know. It's like that. And it's like you don't leave your mind in peace, because it's thinking like what's going to be next?'* For Henry, waiting evoked a sense of unease. Priya (mid-twenties, India, Yarl's Wood) described her feeling of anticipation as she awaited (and hoped) for release: *'I'm just waiting that somebody should come and say, "okay, you can go out." I'll be so happy. I will run. I'll scream. I will just... You know, I feel very bad when anyone, they say released. They just scream, you know. Because I know the feeling.'* Priya desperately wanted to experience this happiness—and the accompanying relief—too.

In detention, the deprivation of liberty, and the accompanying constraints on agency, meant that detainees' time was scheduled by others; they had to wait in conditions not of their choosing. Many remarked about the frustration of having to wait until the appropriately determined points in time to do certain things, such as when to eat, exercise, use the internet, or attend social visits. This was a pain of confinement that a number of detainees experienced as infantilising and was linking to the perceived illegitimacy of their detention. Jennifer (mid-twenties, Caribbean, Yarl's Wood) observed:

If we want to eat, we have to wait for the appointed time to eat. Some of us, we don't eat this early. [...] You got to do everything in accordance to them. You ask an officer "Well can I do this?" "No, you have to wait till this time." "Why?" "Because you have, because we can." We're adults; some of us are older than them. And then we get talked to them like we're babies. We need to say to them "Oh I need my Pampers changed." "Why you got... as soon as I have the time." It's not fair on us. We're used to surviving our own self, and you bring us here and reduce us to kids.

An adult woman used to taking care of herself, Jennifer found the detention centre's control of her time extremely frustrating. The lived experience of waiting in detention is therefore marked by significant restrictions on detainees' agency and choice of how they can pass time.

On being 'stuck'

Immigration detention is, at least in theory, the last 'stop' in a person's migration. 'Immigration removal centres' implies mobility; those being held will not be confined for long. Yet, detention may last for significant lengths of time. Many detainees report being 'stuck', in 'limbo', as if detention was some sort of purgatory in which they were forced, against their will, to wait. According to Aroleoba (early twenties, Nigeria, Campsfield House), *'Being here [in detention] is like, you can't go forward; you can't go back; you're stuck in the middle, and you don't even know what's gonna happen next. Drives people crazy.'* Detainees frequently described this experience as mental or psychological 'torture'. Although they typically recognised that their basic material needs were being met, many worried about the impact of prolonged waiting on their mental health.

A large proportion of detainees coped with this liminality through their faith (see also McGregor, 2012). Mary Jane (early thirties, Zimbabwe, Yarl's Wood), having been issued and then cancelled removal directions (flights) on five separate occasions, indicated: *'My source of strength is from God. If I didn't believe in God... because that's where I get my strength from. Cos I'm pretty sure when you're being tortured like that, you have to have some kind of... you know, another strength. Because if you're just not relying on anything, there's no way... you'll go crazy.'* For Mary Jane, what she

termed the 'mental torture' of detention, through its uncertain and unpredictable conditions of waiting, was survivable because of her faith. Likewise, Arthur (mid-twenties, Congo, Dover) made sense of his detention as being part of a higher purpose: *'I believe certain things in life we cannot change, where God want us to be. [...] I believe that whatever you find yourself doing, or whatever place you may find yourself, God always have a plan for you to be there. It might not be good for you, but you might learn something somehow.'* Arthur found some peace while waiting in detention through his faith and belief that this experience could teach him something and make him a better person.

The ability of the British government to dictate detainees' time also featured in some participants' lived experiences of detention. As Sutton and Vigneswaran (2011) have observed in their fieldwork with detainees in South Africa, detainees experience state power as threatening. Several younger detainees told me how their lives were being wasted by the time they spent in detention, particularly as they saw others their age moving on with their lives. For them, confinement is experienced as a 'negation of time' as it marks their removal from the normative domains of education and the labour market (Matthews, 1999: 39). Oliver (mid-twenties, Zimbabwe, Dover), for example, was exceptionally frustrated at having spent three years in detention. He anticipated his detention would come to an end when a judge finally accepts he cannot be deported: *'I've done three years and then someone just come along and said, "Oh removal's not imminent, I shall release this person." Now, I don't get it, right, that, so why have I done all that time in detention just to wait for that one day of someone saying, "Oh, you're not deporting him, he should be out there," like? That should have happened a long time ago and I'm still in here.'* For detainees like Oliver, the ability of the British government to take away this time was viewed as punitive, unfair, and incomprehensible.

Of course, detention is only one locale in which those without regularised statuses must wait. Others wait in the community on immigration bail and temporary admission. Although waiting in the community may seem preferable to detention, for some, it presents other challenges such as destitution and frustrations associated with being prohibited from working. For Hussain (mid-twenties, Pakistan), in detention, he had everything (i.e. food, shelter, activities) yet no freedom, whereas in the community, he has freedom but nothing else. Similarly, Amira (mid-thirties, Oman) was frustrated about her ongoing wait in the community for a decision about her asylum case. *'It's just driving me insane,'* she said, *'just hanging around and living like this, if they allow me to work at least and live with some dignity but no they are making me suffer in every way'* (personal communication). The experience of waiting followed former detainees like Hussain and Amira into the community and to difficult socioeconomic conditions where they had their liberty but little else. Thus, while detention is characterised by profound uncertainty, this does not necessarily end when detention ceases; waiting often continues into the community through temporary admission and immigration bail. Many former detainees remain 'stuck'.

Playing the 'waiting game'

Khosravi (2014) cautions against equating waiting with passivity. Indeed, the detainees I spoke with employed a variety of strategies to exert some control over their lives and respond to the uncertainty of their situations. For some, agreeing to return to their countries of origin was one way to put an end to prolonged waiting as they struggled with the Home Office over their immigration

cases. Others continually chased up the courts and their immigration case-workers, placing phone calls and sending faxes to request information in an attempt to speed the process along. Some took more drastic measures. Frustrated with the indefinite wait to be released from detention or returned to his home country, Yousef (late thirties, Ethiopia, Colnbrook) took to calling the police from the detention centre to report his kidnapping: he had agreed to leave the UK but was still waiting, with no movement by the Home Office to either deliver on his removal to Ethiopia or accept that he cannot be returned and to release him from detention.

In contrast, Henry (mid-thirties, Malawi, Colnbrook) did not want to return to his country of origin. After spending ten years in the UK and having been refused asylum and exhausted his options to stay, he waited, as patiently as he could, in detention for the Home Office to act on his case. His strategy of waiting was purposeful. When I asked him if he was applying for bail or temporary admission, he remarked that it was better to wait and see because these sorts of applications were like provocations that would force the Home Office to make a decision, which in his case would likely be to issue removal directions.

Such patience was exercised primarily by those who did not want to leave the UK or by those who felt confident that they were people the UK government could not easily get rid of. Often these individuals were ex-prisoners, who were, arguably, more experienced at, and coped better with, waiting. Marco (mid-thirties, Portugal, Colnbrook), a former prisoner, adopted a similar approach to Henry, referring to detention as a 'waiting game'. Like Henry, Marco strategically chose to be patient, to wait rather than try to force the Home Office into a hasty decision. I first met Marco in Campsfield House in September 2013. At the time, he asserted: *'I'm not gonna rush. Because I want a judge, I want to convince the judge that this time I'm, you know... I even said, "If it takes a year, and I have to wait in here, and it means that my life will be sorted when I come out, I'll take that. I will take it." You know, I don't care.'* When I met Marco for the second time in Colnbrook, nine months later, he was still waiting.

Another ex-prisoner, Michael (early twenties, Rwanda, Colnbrook), was also resigned, at least for the moment, to wait. After being denied bail on multiple occasions, he said:

I'll be honest with you, see, right now, they can keep me in here. They can keep me in here. Like, you know, at least I'm not in jail. At least I'm not in a hostel. Know what I mean? Like I'm here, and I'm doing license. Know what I mean? I'm still reducing on my license. So to be honest with you, I can't complain, like. I been fighting and fighting and fighting to get out, but really and truly, I've realised that they're gonna let me out. They're gonna probably give me the strictest conditions on this earth, just because it's me. They're gonna tell me to sign, and I don't know how many times a day. They're gonna tell me to live in another hostel. They're gonna tell me to do all these things. They're gonna tell me I'm not allowed to work. So what? What, what, what am I gonna do, then? Hello.

For Michael, trying—and failing—to get released from detention was frustrating. He decided instead to just wait, confident that the Home Office would eventually release him. Indeed, as Jeffrey (2010: 4) notes, individuals may 'readjust their temporal horizons' based on their circumstances. For detainees like Marco and Michael, this readjustment meant prioritising long-term (a definitive end to their immigration cases) over short-term goals (getting out of detention). In this context, some detainees strategically chose to wait.

For others, waiting in detention felt acutely arbitrary and unfair. The day I met Benjamin (late forties, Rwanda, Colnbrook), he was agitated because he had been granted bail by an immigration judge two weeks prior but was still detained. Benjamin explained: *'So the reason I'm upset today is because the judge ordered me to be released, and it's taken two weeks—I'm still here. So I'm stopping my medication. I'm stopping... I don't feel like eating. It's not hunger strike or anything. I don't feel right. I become numb. How can I be here, and I know I should be out there? How can a human being take that? For me it's like kidnapping. As long as you don't have no life, you're nothing. You're just a number.'* After two years in detention, this additional two weeks of waiting was too much for him to bear.

Waiting, Benjamin observed, was not equitably distributed in detention: *'When they want to lock you, they'll do it quick. But when is your time, you ask them for something—tomorrow, five minutes later, these five minutes... this kind of situation every day for two years. So I'm confused at the moment. I phoned my caseworker, he's telling [me] "Don't worry. When we ready we gonna release you." But it's two weeks now.'* Here, Benjamin points to the often arbitrary nature of waiting in detention where detainees' needs are subject to others' timeframes and preferences. *'Why am I still here then?'* he asked. This waiting was causing him to suffer, affecting him physically and mentally, making each moment in detention that much more difficult as he anticipated his release: *'But now I no feel like eating. I don't want their medication, I don't want nothing from them now.'* Benjamin felt there was a limit to his ability to wait, that this two weeks of additional time in detention was unfair, which made him angry: *'Sometimes now then it's like the more you became patient, people they take advantage of you. [...] Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow. There's patience when you're angry not to punch somebody or to go and do something stupid. I've got that patience. But I've given them my patience for them to make decision when they gonna release me, but they taking for granted now.'* In response, he stopped complying with the system in terms of eating meals and taking the medication prescribed by the IRC.

Other detainees, having agreed to go 'back', were exasperated by Home Office delays in getting them on a flight. Abdul (mid-thirties, Pakistan, Campsfield House) wondered what the Home Office was up to. *'I got my every single thing [travel documents],'* he said, *'but they're still waiting. Why I am being waited by them? What the hell are they doing? My case is very easy, actually. [...] I want to go as soon as possible. [...] What the hell are they doing?'* Similarly, Mario (early twenties, Albania, Campsfield House) wondered what was taking so long, why he would have to spend more time than he thought necessary in detention when he was eager to get back to see his grandmother who was hospitalised. *'Keeping me one month just to send me in Albania?'* he wondered. *'Because we have, every single week, we have a flight in direction. It's London to Tirana. And I think it's just to pick up me from here and send me back. [...] Just I waiting to go back.'* For Mario, this imposed period of waiting in detention did not make sense to him because he was being compliant with the Home Office and wanted to return to Albania.

A number of women and men questioned why they had to wait for judicial and other decision-making processes from detention. Henry (mid-thirties, Malawi, Colnbrook), for example, observed: *'So if the Home Office fully knowing how long it can take for the court to decide, for my hearing or anything, I think I should have got released or something like that while I'm waiting for the decision from the court.'* Detainees regularly remarked that it did not make sense for them to be held in detention when they could be waiting for court and immigration decisions in the community. Many

felt that their waiting in detention was a matter of economics; that is, the private companies that operated the detention centres profited as they were forced to wait inside, rather than outside.

For some, the waiting in detention became unbearable and they felt they could no longer cope. Priya (mid-twenties, India, Yarl's Wood) lamented: *'[I'm just] waiting for one hope. Just really, I'm just waiting. You know, so many negative things that happen. [...] It's just like one shock, second shock, third shock. So I'm not able to take any more shocks now. So I'm just waiting now, things should work in the right way, 'cause enough.'* Priya's words highlight the uncertainty and unpredictability of waiting in detention and the deleterious impacts that this situation can have on one's health (see, for example, Robjant et al., 2009). So although detainees employed a variety of strategies to cope with this 'waiting game', the lived experience of waiting in the context of detention was especially challenging and interacted with the perceived (il)legitimacy of their confinement (see Bosworth, 2013).

What is at stake

'People are waiting,' Marco observed about detention. *'You know, they've got my life and a lot of lives in their hands [...] It's a very serious matter. It's a family, you know. It's everything that you would fight for, that they can just take away from you. It's not, you know... I can't even put it into words what it is, what it means to people. There's no words to describe it'* (mid-thirties, Portugal, Campsfield House). Marco's words underscore the affective implications of detention and what it is that detainees await. For this man, a long-term British resident, the wait as to the outcome of his battle against deportation provided time for him to consider all that could be lost, including permanent separation from his family and the country he has known as home for over twenty years. Likewise, the stakes were incredibly high for Trevon (late twenties, Guyana, Dover), as the breadwinner for his family. He explained angrily: *'Basically what I'm trying to say to immigration is if I'm the one who works in my family, for my wife and my kids. So if they deport me, who will actually pay the bills in my house? Are my kids gonna be homeless then? Will my family be homeless?'* For Trevon, detention was the site from which he waited a life-altering decision as to whether he could continue caring for his family as he so desperately wanted. Detainees like Marco and Trevon are waiting for life as they know it; their futures, and that of their families, are in the hands of the Home Office.

Waiting in detention is especially challenging as people are subject both to the decision-making of the Home Office and their (often) limited resources (financial and otherwise) to respond to decisions that are not in their favour. Indeed, detention itself was viewed by detainees as a practice that figuratively 'handcuffs' them, preventing them from mounting effective cases against their removal or deportation. Their time in detention is subject to various bureaucratic and institutional processes that are typically slow and cumbersome, and in many cases unintelligible and counterintuitive. Waiting for such high-stakes decisions in conditions of limited agency was experienced by most as excruciatingly difficult.

Throughout my research, I observed the emotional and physical tolls of prolonged waiting. I met many individuals who were shattered by their detention, yet also others who showed remarkable resilience. I also witnessed the repercussions of detention and removal on people as their lives fell apart: careers, studies, and vital relationships ended; belongings were lost; futures were unknown. As Milton (mid-thirties, Sierra Leone, Dover) stated simply, *'Cos of the immigration [Home Office]*

I've lost so much.' What detainees wait for in immigration detention is no small matter; much is at stake in this particular 'waiting game'.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the lived experiences of immigration detention around the theme of waiting. Drawing on detainees' narratives and my observations in British IRCs, I have highlighted the ways in which detention is largely about waiting, yet the conditions of confinement and the unique aspects of the system of detention make this context especially uncertain and unpredictable. My analysis shows that for many participants, detention is a place of liminality where they are 'stuck', for indeterminate lengths of time, while they wait to know what will happen to them and their futures. Some detainees coped with this liminality better than others, turning to their faith or pressing their caseworkers for action. Others coped by strategically embracing the waiting game, choosing to pursue the long-term goal of case resolution over getting out of detention. Some detainees did not cope well, unable or unwilling to accept bureaucratic delays and the uncertainty of their situations. These findings support previous research by Bosworth (2014) and Griffiths (2013, 2014) which underscore the temporal and affective impacts of immigration detention in the UK.

Perhaps one of the interesting aspects of waiting in detention is that the vast majority of detainees are compliant; that is, they wait—albeit with various levels of patience⁷—for the Home Office to render its decisions so they can decide on subsequent steps. Auyero (2011), in a fascinating paper on waiting amongst clients in an Argentinian welfare office, suggests that being a (poor, female, and racialised) welfare recipient creates and recreates relations of domination and subordination. Waiting is thus about being subordinated to the will of others—an exercise of power that is enacted and re-enacted through acts of waiting. Such relations of power are especially marked in the context of immigration detention where those who wait are involuntarily confined and subordinated to the decision-making of others.

Although detainees are not powerless, the context of detention imposes significant restrictions on their agency and ability to change the circumstances and parameters of their waiting. A variety of mechanisms of control exist within IRCs to discipline those whose practices of waiting do not align with bureaucratic expectations and institutional guidelines: transfers to other centres, temporary confinement in segregation, and withholding of privileges such as paid employment. Release from detention does not always bring an end to uncertainty; many former detainees continue to wait in the community under a variety of conditions and restrictions associated immigration bail and temporary admission. That detainees and former detainees, as a group, are largely compliant suggests that the practice of detention may be productive of detained subjects who acquiesce to the dictates of the British government as they wait patiently, hoping for decisions in their favour. Yet, in practical terms, few have any other choice but to wait.

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⁷ There are, of course, instances of self-harm, attempted and 'successful' suicides, and hunger strikes as detainees respond to the difficult conditions of waiting while being detained indefinitely in the UK (see, for example, Athwal and Bourne, 2007; McGregor, 2011).

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