

## Experiencing Deportation as Dirty Work? The Case of Dutch Escort Officers

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### Abstract

In addition to guarding national frontiers, some border patrol officers also escort illegal immigrants abroad. This article analyses this work from an interest in officers' (moral) experiences and how these relate to the circumstances in which they work, such as occupational culture, policy and procedures. Therefore, the notions of dirty work and moral injury are used as conceptual frameworks, and 14 Dutch escort officers were interviewed about their experiences. This article adds to dirty work analyses by developing an understanding of how workers' experiences relate to both formal and moral legitimacies and a possible tension between the two. In addition, it extends the literature on moral injury by describing context-dependent forms of impact that escape clinical diagnoses. Theoretically, this article shows that the occupational resources that are elsewhere seen as tools for navigating 'necessary evils' can in fact hide the impact of this kind of work.

### Keywords

dirty work, impact, legitimacy, escort officers, moral injury

### Introduction

I've been doing this for a very long time, and I've been through it all, from blood, to [deportees] cutting [themselves], [soiling themselves] with excrement, you name it. But there is violence, and then there's what's in your head.

– Escort officer, Brigade for Irregular Migration

At the Dutch airport of Schiphol, military police officers work to guard the Dutch border. Most of these officers are known to the public for passport checks, but a specific group of

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them has a different line of work. These are the escort officers of the Brigade for Irregular Migration who escort people between various countries and an important part of their work consists of escorting immigrants who are declared illegal on their forced return.

In this article, this work is discussed with a specific interest in the impact it might have on officers themselves. Therefore, the question posed regards to what extent this occupation is experienced as ‘dirty work’, as it can be understood to have morally impactful elements – such as deporting families with children who are born and raised in the Netherlands – while still being in line with legal principles (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1958; Margolis and Molinsky, 2008). Many dirty work analyses focus on workers’ so-called ‘taint management’ strategies, describing how workers retain a positive sense of self, relying on resources such as occupational ideologies and supportive team cultures (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, 2014; Rivera, 2015; Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Tracy and Scott, 2006). However, it seems that ‘moral dirty work’ is especially difficult to manage, as doing work ‘with a dubious virtue’ or work that is otherwise morally impactful poses a more severe identity threat than other forms of dirty work (Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014; Petriglieri, 2011; Tracy and Scott, 2006). In this respect, it is remarkable that dirty work studies discuss workers’ taint management techniques and how they ‘struggle for a favourable sense of self’ (Grandy, 2008), but leave the impact of potentially moral dirty work on employees largely undiscussed.

Simultaneously, there is a rapidly growing field of studies that *do* address the consequences of doing morally impactful work by using the notion of ‘moral injury’. These studies analyse the impact of moral transgressions in high stakes situations (often military) in terms of lingering feelings of guilt, shame or betrayal (Litz and Kerig, 2019; Litz et al., 2009; Nash, 2019; Shay, 2014). Therewith, moral injury has become a new staple in the literature on deployment-related distress. However, these studies mostly overlook the relevance of dimensions that make potentially morally injurious events bearable – such as the aforementioned occupational ideologies. Moreover, by defining moral injury in clinical and binary terms, most studies on moral injury leave various shades of moral impact undiscussed.

This article brings these two strands of literature together and aims to enrich both through the particular case study of Dutch escort officers: how do they experience their work and, specifically, its morally impactful aspects, and what is the role of occupational circumstances in navigating these aspects? As such, the contribution to theory on dirty work lies in exploring more thoroughly the relevance of the occupational context. This article will show that by focusing on workers’ instrumentalization of occupational circumstances, such as formal policies or shared ideologies, dirty work theory overlooks how these circumstances might hide the impact from view. My contribution to the theory on moral injury lies in analysing the impact of work in terms that are richer than strict clinical designations of ‘moral injury’, while incorporating the relevance of occupational circumstances.

## **Doing dirty work in migration law enforcement**

### *Doing moral dirty work: Formal and moral legitimacies*

‘Dirty work’ is a common term to designate work that is considered disgraceful, disgusting or stigmatized; for instance, because of its association with physically dirty or

dangerous circumstances, contact with stigmatized groups, or through its dubious virtue (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1958). One reason why work in law enforcement or the military is considered specifically morally dirty, is an inherent suspicion that comes with the use of coercion. Although these workers are legally entrusted with the monopoly on the use of violence, applying coercive authority remains a taboo as ‘routinely exercising coercive authority [. . .] would otherwise be exceptional, exceptionable or illegal’ (Waddington, 1999: 299; cf. Dick, 2005). This is most evident when officers have to implement policy that might publicly be seen as immoral (Molendijk, 2018; Rivera, 2015).

Both formal and moral (street-level) legitimacies play crucial roles in dealing with such work. These legitimacies are here distinguished through a distinction between being formally allowed to do a job or being instructed in specific ways (formal legitimacy) versus how workers themselves morally account for their work (moral legitimacy). Thus, an occupation’s formal legitimacy might lie in tasks, procedures, policy and organizational structures, and involves being part of a bureaucratic organization and an organizational diffusion of tasks. This might shield employees from moral appeals (Weick, 1993, 1995), induce an experience of being a ‘cog in the system’ (Eule et al., 2019; Kalkman and Kramer, 2019) and deflect moral responsibility because of a large number of institutional actors, such as in the ‘migration regime’ (Eule et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, workers *themselves* morally legitimize their work in ways that do not necessarily concur with these formal legitimacies. Thus, the focus here is on morality as it is defined and experienced by street-level bureaucrats; what they personally think is right and wrong. Even though formal legitimacies might encompass moral dimensions, and policies might be grounded in ethical principles, the focus here is on frontline workers’ *personal* moral justification for their job and the decisions they make. Workers might morally engage *within* their assigned roles, or use their own ‘moral compass’ while navigating procedures and formal requirements (Lipsky, 2010; Margolis and Molinsky, 2008; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003). While doing this, workers often tap into shared occupational ideologies that serve as collective resources (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 414).

Likewise, research on the role of discretion in migration law enforcement points out that a limitation of formal responsibilities does not rule out a sense of moral responsibility (Borrelli, 2022; Borrelli and Lindberg, 2018; Eule et al., 2019; Kalir, 2019; Rivera, 2015; Rivera and Tracy, 2014). Officers have a lot of moral leeway in deciding on – for instance – what coercive means to apply, or when to bend the rules (Eule et al., 2019). Moral categorizations of ‘deservingness’ might also help them cope with their work, and induce them to work harder for advantageous outcomes for specific migrants (Borrelli, 2022; Eule et al., 2019: 210; Feldman, 2016; Kalir, 2019). This article equally focuses on these street-level practices and categorizations. Far from being mere operational executors of policy, border patrol officers (Rivera, 2015), deportation/escort officers (Kalir, 2019) and migration case workers also ‘insert their own personal values’ in their work (Borrelli and Lindberg, 2018: 167), engage in emotional labour to deal with public criticism (Rivera, 2015: 214) and employ various ‘taint management strategies’. This also means that what is ‘dirty’ is obviously in the eye of the beholder (Douglas, 2002); workers in migration law enforcement might not consider their work dirty (Rivera and Tracy, 2014; cf. Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014; cf. Simpson et al., 2019).

### *Moral emotions, moral injury and moral dirty work*

The focus on how workers instrumentally apply sense-making techniques in navigating the possible taint of their work also means that most studies do not move beyond the observation that judgements on migrants' worthiness and deservingness are rife with ambivalence and tensions (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Dick, 2005; Grandy, 2008; Paharia et al., 2009; Rivera, 2015; Simpson et al., 2019). Thus, most studies on enforcement officers acknowledge that the construction of a positive identity might be problematic, but predominantly focus on how these workers *overcome* threats to their social identities (Rivera, 2015; Thumala et al., 2011; Tracy and Scott, 2006).

Herewith, a more detailed exploration of where and when a 'favourable sense of self' (Grandy, 2008) is harder to maintain is missing, whereas being formally entitled does not preclude an experience of 'dirty hands' (De Wijze, 2005; Molendijk, 2021). As such, workers in border patrol or migration might experience moral emotions in their work – such as compassion, empathy, shame or guilt – that can be overwhelming and hard to compartmentalize (Rivera and Tracy, 2014; Vega, 2018). Escort officers, especially, might experience 'being the first ones accused of any wrongdoing' that is related to being at 'the most visible' end of the migration chain and of 'being unfairly held accountable for decisions that were not theirs' (Eule et al., 2019: 198). Moreover, these moral emotions are not explored further in what these might tell us about these jobs.

This article will show that the notion of 'moral injury' can be of help here. Moral injury is used to describe the lasting impact of moral transgressions on frontline workers (Litz et al., 2009: 695) and can be seen as a reevaluation of the moral dimensions and challenges of war for those who have to fight it (Litz et al., 2009; Shay, 2014). At the same time, many use moral injury in strict clinical terms to describe moral trauma above a threshold level of 'minimum severity' (Litz and Kerig, 2019). By applying this notion to understand the impact of doing potentially moral dirty work, I deliberately stretch the notion of moral injury and use it to elicit workers' reflection on what Rivera and Tracy (2014) call the callous or scar that is a result of the moral predicaments they sometimes find themselves in. Thus, instead of diagnostically using moral injury as a clinical and binary 'either you have it, or you don't' -label, it is here used as an interpretative lens to draw attention to the lasting impact of morally impactful work as such, albeit without wanting to diagnose workers in terms of moral trauma. This also implies interpreting moral injury as a contextual phenomenon, and *not only* seeing it as an individual response to singled-out morally injurious events. Therewith, moral injury is taken out of clinical space, and into workers' everyday practice. Methodologically, it means this notion will not be tested. Instead, it is used as a reflective tool to help respondents talk about a largely hidden aspect of their work.

In sum, studies on migrant law enforcers are mostly about 'how can you do it' and a functional or instrumental vision on workers' 'taint management techniques' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Rivera, 2015) or 'emotional repertoires' (Kalir, 2019). Therewith, these studies leave less instrumental and lingering moral emotions undiscussed, and how these depend on their occupational context. In adding to this field, this study aims to look beyond the functionality of workers' arguments and emotional labour, into where this work causes moral friction and what this might tell us.

## Escort officers at the Brigade for Irregular Migration

Central to this article is the work of Dutch escort officers at the Brigade for Irregular Migration (*Brigade Vreemdelingenzaken*). This brigade is housed mainly at Schiphol airport, Amsterdam.<sup>1</sup> This case was primarily selected because of the expected moral sensitivity of these officers' work. This sensitivity is related to the scrutiny this brigade received after past allegations about the use of disproportionate violence and the inhumane treatment of deportees, and to several (sometimes mediatized) cases of deportations of families with children born and raised in the Netherlands who are deported after years of litigation.<sup>2</sup>

The brigade is at the operational end of the Dutch asylum and immigration policy and works closely together with other offices and departments, such as the Immigration and Naturalization Service (*Immigratie en Naturalisatiedienst* or *IND*) that decides on individual cases and the coordinating Office for Repatriation and Departure (*Dienst Terugkeer en Vertrek* or *DT&V*). Employees at the brigade work in five teams, of which the Escort Team (*team begeleidingen*) is primarily – but not exclusively – responsible for escorting deportees.

The work of escort officers is highly regulated, for a significant part, as a result of critical scrutiny by various committees, addressing, for instance, alleged disproportionate violence, sedation and the use of means for restraining deportees (see above). These committees have led to adaptations in work processes, to more detailed de-escalation procedures and to what is known as the 'humanization' of the process of removal. Also, the monitoring of the brigade has been standardized over the years, and is now done by the Inspectorate of the Ministry of Justice and Security. The most important changes were made in 2004, with an adaptation of the instruction of officers for coercive means. In the same year, the brigade also moved to a better equipped location with more comfortable detainment rooms. Also, violent incidents are monitored better, the exchange of information and coordination between various offices is improved and deportees are informed better.

A flight is prepared based on information from the Office for Repatriation and Departure on physical properties, behaviour and possible criminal antecedents of a deportee. Officers arrive three hours before take-off, and are briefed and handed a file on the deportee. Next, officers receive deportees at the brigade who are brought in from an asylum or detention centre, search them, and bring them to the detainment space. Escort teams have rules for their composition and accompaniment of deportees and are led by an 'escort commander' who is in charge during a flight. An important part of the time leading up to the flight is spent conversing with the deportee(s). Just before the actual departure, the Escort Team accompanies the deportee with a special transportation van to the platform. In the airplane itself there is a strict seating plan, based on IATA (International Air Transport Association) rules. Some flights require a transit, and some an overnight stopover. In those cases, officers stay overnight with the deportees in a hotel on the 'airside' of the transit airport.

Upon arrival, deportees are handed over to local authorities, such as immigration or police officers. The deportation is concluded by handing over documentation (the deportees' passport, a laissez-passer and/or EU documentation). Depending on the flight and its duration and due to regulations on working hours, an escort team is sometimes required to stay overnight for an obligatory break, either in the destination land, or during a stopover on the flight back.

## Methodology

In spring and summer of 2021, 14 escort officers were interviewed, supplemented with exploratory consultations with the brigade's commander and adjutant, three military chaplains and a psychologist. Access to the brigade was obtained via one of these practitioners and through the then commander and adjutant of the brigade. These contacts served as gatekeepers to the employees of the brigade. Of crucial importance in gaining access was the experience of these contacts that past reports solely addressed (mental) wellbeing of deportees, whereas this study enabled attention to officers' wellbeing. It was therefore heralded as a welcome addition to these reports. In addition, the brigade's staff was especially curious to learn more about the moral (and hidden) impact of this work.

Most interviews in this case study were held with officers from the Escort Team. Respondents were selected through purposive sampling and in close cooperation and consultation with the brigade's adjutant, aiming for variation in age, experience and gender so as to collect a wide variety of views (Silverman, 2011). Eleven respondents were male and three were female, all were aged between 20 and 56, and varied in family situation (married, single, with and without children). Important to mention here is that the goal of this variation was to collect insight into a diverse range of experiences and opinions, and not to causally link these to specific demographic characteristics. A letter was shared, providing information on the research and nature of the interviews. In addition, an informed consent procedure was followed by presenting interviewees with a form that assured anonymity and the right to revoke consent. In general, respondents needed little to no convincing to partake in interviews, as the emphasis was on *their* experiences, and their commander agreed to the research – even though it was stressed no personal details would be shared.

This study is part of a research project on moral injury,<sup>3</sup> but this concept was only used as a general framing of the interviews. The reason for this is that this notion might not correspond with workers' own experiences, ideas and narratives. Moreover, developing rapport might be hindered when asking respondents to identify as 'morally injured' – especially in environments with a stigma on mental health issues (Ben-Zeev et al., 2012; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Thus, although the notion of moral injury was introduced during the explanation of the study, it was highlighted that the interest was primarily in how officers relate to their work and its potential impact, and not in diagnosing them in whatever way. By prudently introducing this overarching theme, the intention was to elicit respondents to reflect on the moral impact of their work. To further unearth their views and experiences and the relevance of their occupational context, questions were asked about various subjects. These concerned their motivation, their daily work, the organization of their work, the impactful encounters they might remember, how they remember these encounters and what is the role of occupational circumstances, such as formal tasks, co-workers, seniors and support during and after flights. Especially in follow-up questions, impact was further scrutinized, albeit – again – without explicitly using 'moral' as a category.

Data analyses happened inductively and iteratively, and were aided by using Atlas.ti software as a tool. In a first phase, data were coded open, at first guided by the questions that I asked during interviews, but largely staying faithful to respondents' terms and

categories (Gioia et al., 2012). This led to a first range of inductive sub-codes, grouped in categories that were defined by the categories used during the interviews. In a next phase – the second order analysis – these sub-codes were then compared while seeking similarities and differences among them through a form of axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). This phase led to the first inklings of the concepts used below. In this phase, for instance, the importance was noted of ‘personal’ and ‘professional’ as important concepts to understand the stories of officers. The process of developing the concepts discussed below stretched out well into the writing phase of this article, by moving back and forward between the codes and the emerging concepts.

Results were communicated with several stakeholders through a presentation that focused on findings and several recommendations. These stakeholders were the brigade’s commander, his successor, the adjutant, an integrity policy officer, two (staff) psychologists and various military chaplains.

## **On being an escort officer: Balancing the professional and the personal**

### *Staying in control: Deportations as professional challenges*

I entered the Brigade for Irregular Immigration with the presumption of harsh, emotional work. Confrontations with immigrants declared illegal who could strongly resist their forced return, as well as having to escort children, and being confronted with societal disapproval of specific cases, I figured, might designate working as an escort officer as ‘dirty work’.

Most employees, however, considered working for the brigade to be an honour. This widely shared sentiment flipped the initial assumptions, but affirmed the occupational esteem observed in other studies (cf. Deery et al., 2019). In fact, upon talking with employees about their motivations, none of them expressed they had initial doubts about the potential impact of the work. Instead, many officers claimed they are interested in travelling, or in other cultures. Together with functional assets, such as the supplement for travelling and the possibility to stay over in other countries, this makes this brigade a popular and exciting workplace in the views of these officers.

These sentiments do not mean officers are insensitive to the image their job might have. One officer explained:

Not everyone in my street knows what kind of work I do. There might be people in my street who really oppose it [ . . . ] You’ve got these activists who really oppose our work, they really don’t bother me. Of course, I wouldn’t want to be on camera. They are making a documentary now, but none of my colleagues wanted to be on camera, recognizable.<sup>4</sup>

Escort officers see their work as unique and challenging and experienced relatively high levels of work-related stress, as is also evident from internal reports. As such, all interviewees easily recalled one or multiple cases in great detail, even if these happened years ago. These ‘impressive moments’ mostly revolved around the same kind of confrontations: removals of families with (young) children or extreme resistance and the use

of high levels of coercion. Officers recounted these stories with a lot of attention to detail and sometimes even vigour: employees share several iconic stories to affirm the unique type of work they are doing. However, it is not deportees' despair or physical resistance that made a big impression, but the strain to 'stay sharp for a long time', in words of an escort officer. Respondents recounted that deportees might try anything not to be sent back, such as a last-minute re-appeal for asylum, extreme physical resistance or threatening to harm themselves or their children. This demands constant attention, as one officer said: 'You have to be vigilant constantly, constantly profile and analyse their behaviour. And that takes a lot of energy.'

Employees recounted they are explicitly trained for these moments. As a result, when remembering these cases, many officers thought back to events as 'challenges' that appeal to their professionalism: how to de-escalate this situation, how to calm down these children, or how to put down the rebellion among other passengers? In addition, officers actively framed most violence as 'non-personal'. In the words of an officer: 'In 99% of flights that involved violence, [deportees] shake your hand afterwards. You have to realize, it is not directed at me.' Therefore, many officers claimed extreme violence and seemingly heart-breaking stories 'do not really bother' them. Regardless of whom they have to escort and what happens before or during a flight: it is part of the job. In fact, officers stated it is of the utmost importance not to be overruled by emotions, and claimed they are 'emotionally armoured', know how to 'close the door behind them', or go about their work quite 'matter-of-factly'. Thus, to keep impact at bay, some officers explicitly use a strategy of detachment that appears to be grounded in a shared occupational ideology of being emotionally armoured.

Although these rationalizations might be meant as factual descriptions, some officers also used explicit moral categorizations for deportees. Adults 'had their chance', in the words of one officer, especially when they are here 'purely illegally'. Moreover, they can personally be held accountable for starting long juridical processes to stretch their stay and for the fact their children are removed too. Even clearer moral legitimations were used for deportees with a criminal record. Officers stated they happily remove these 'rotten apples'. In addition, officers seldom spoke with compassion about deportees who hurt or degraded themselves. Instead, they remarked, for instance, 'you must have sunk very low', when remembering someone who desperately soiled or cut himself and expressed irritation at the deportee because it creates a lot of 'fuss'.

Escort officers indicated that specific organizational circumstances make doing this work easier. In this case, a division of tasks and associated procedures were also referred to in keeping impact at bay – and can be considered another specific resource for taint management. As a result of a strict division of tasks, officers know what to expect: decisions are made on one end of a 'chain' and forced return happens on the other end. Therefore, they stated they do not have to feel responsible for decisions, and they can 'lean' morally on the humane aspects of their work and the alleged thoroughness of asylum procedures. In words of an officer:

The rules give you a lot of grip. They protect you. And they are binding. Putting tape on [a deportee's] mouth is impossible. So, all these committees with their recommendations make it easier.



Officers are obviously only legitimized to do a specific task. It means, in the words of another officer: ‘When we’re at the checkpoint, and we did the handover, it’s done for us’. In this respect, officers trust decisions made elsewhere, sometimes also when witnessing morally dubious situations. Therewith, quite a few officers appeared to equate moral legitimacy with the formal legitimacy of their work. An officer recounted a transfer of a deportee in which the latter is maltreated upon arrival by local authorities:

That police officer was annoyed and threw him to the ground [. . .] But we already did the handover and so it’s not up to us anymore. I also heard from colleagues [. . .] that [deportees] get beaten up in some countries. But it’s not up to you anymore.

Respondents also mentioned the culture of the brigade, and pointed to the tight-knit team culture where many things can be addressed, and where ‘the management’s doors are always open’, in the words of an officer. They applauded the solidarity, and claimed this makes dealing with potentially impactful events easier; again, a specific resource for managing the taint that might come with their work. The nature of the work – being away from home in the company of small groups of colleagues, dealing with intense events – enhances cohesion and solidarity among officers, they stated. Officers claimed that this is also related to the high incidence of violence, as they ‘need to have each other’s back’. In this respect, many officers distinguished themselves from other brigades, where ‘employees are a number’. They lauded the mutual contact and the ease with which officers can lean on each other. An officer explains: ‘The human aspect of this brigade, the social aspect, it is one big family’.

The type of impact and rationalizations described thus far give the impression of a controlled way of dealing with potential moral challenges in this work. In these accounts, formal and moral legitimacies match. This does not mean officers are necessarily morally detached, but it makes it possible to do this work in the first place. They are aided by taint management strategies that tap into various occupational circumstances, such as a shared ideology of being ‘emotionally armoured’, formal policy that limits their moral responsibility and the support officers provide each other. Hence, many employees did not seem to see their own work as ‘dirty’, but instead claimed they get pride out of the high demands they have to meet.

### *Blurring the lines between the professional and the personal: Humane deportations*

However, this is only part of the story. If anything, escort officers emphasized they invest a lot of time in making a personal connection with the deportees, getting to know them, making them relax and putting them at ease. This might seem at odds with what has been described, but personal investment must for a large part also be seen in the perspective of changes in the policy of deportation. Owing to several mediatized incidents and the interference of various research committees, the brigade has invested in what is known as ‘humane deportation’ (see above). This has led to more rules on the use of coercive means, but it has also had consequences for the interaction with deportees, giving them more time to get accustomed to their return.

For the officers, this has also meant a professional and formal standard in which personal connection and acquaintance with deportees is key. First and foremost, this seems to be heralded for its pragmatic value: it becomes easier to do the job. An officer explained how this is a combination of formal requirements and personal interpretations:

We learn a protocol, what the boss thinks is best. But you also give it your own spin. I'm really into investing in these people. So, by talking to them, convince them that I am trying to help them. In all possible ways. [. . .] I stop short from rolling out the red carpet, but at times I make some toast for them [. . .], cup-a-coffee, smoke a ciggy, the small things get you a long way. Some colleagues say, you can't smoke here. Well, whatever suits you, if you want to board with a fight. Mine [deportees] can smoke, simple as that. I smoke myself, but it's that little human moment.

Many officers repeated this idea of 'giving them the red carpet treatment'. An officer explained he sees this as 'a game', to cool down deportees who are angry or aggressive. In this respect, 'humane deportation' appeared to be an informal slogan for this brigade, and all officers subscribed to this approach and the underlying policy, and it also seemed to have worth as a resource for managing the possible taint of this work.

Various officers stressed that this approach is reflected in the brigade's occupational culture. Not only are 'the people who work here [. . .] all empathic people [*gevoelsmensen*]', in the words of an employee, but some state that 'because the humane is part of the DNA [. . .] it also influences the way you interact and you take each other into account'. As part of this culture, many officers also mentioned the mandatory multiple-day stopovers during intercontinental flights. During these stopovers there is an 'informal debriefing' to share experiences. An officer explained how these work:

You go out for dinner, we have a beer first, first one is on me as commander. And then right away you take the bull by the horns. 'I saw this, and what you did was good.' So you go through the whole process, from briefing to handover. But also, what do you think about those kids, running around there now, probably without a roof over their heads. So, these things are discussed. And we tend to think, it sucks for those children. How can our country decide those kids have to go back?

Over the course of time, these moments have grown into important opportunities to look back upon the flight and many officers praised these informal debriefings for mitigating impact.

Nevertheless, personal involvement should be understood in more than mere instrumental terms. The personal connections officers described are often also grounded in forms of engagement that go beyond pragmatic tricks to influence behaviour. It was sometimes hard to tell why or how officers are personally involved with deportees, but the devil is in the detail of their accounts. They do not only use personal investment for the instrumental reason of a hassle-free flight, but also appeared to frame this in terms of an *additional* moral legitimacy, and therewith – again – a means to keep impact at bay, this time by more personal commitment and care. Thus, officers compared their work-style and approach with various situations where deportees allegedly come off worse, such as their treatment in detention or by escort officers from other countries, or the

bygone times of their own brigade with the unregulated use of coercion. In other cases, officers seemed prone to ‘moral compensation’; for example, by investing extra in deportees or by trying to ‘justify’ certain deportations, in the words of another officer, when confronted with moral unease. As such, officers often find meaning in personal contacts, in exchanges with deportees about what they have been through.

Here, moral legitimacy is specifically sought after outside and in addition to formal legitimacies. Herewith, a subtle but crucial divide is crossed: from formal requirements for humane deportations, to an involvement with deportees that seems grounded in sincere and deeply felt connection.

### *The professional becomes too personal: Doing a ‘weird job’*

It is this personal involvement that opens up the possibility of work becoming ‘too personal’. Because officers and deportees share a lot of time on long flights and because officers deliberately choose to interact personally with deportees, they develop a lot of insight in deportees’ stories and the life they had in the Netherlands.

This also implies officers’ own disposition and background are important. Several officers who have children themselves reported the impact that escorting families has on them. An officer remembered a family and connected this case with ‘so many deportations that stick with him’. He also related to the notion of moral injury, and identified with the father of that family:

I was touched so much, by his gaze, by his despair. It’s an example that really sticks with me. It made me think, seriously, what am I doing? But it’s also part of my job. That’s also why I totally get the concept of moral injury . . . you’ve got your own . . . it is not about, I’m not sure if it’s right, it’s great we get to fly to Kabul, you get a stopover in Dubai, you get two days there to recover. Of course, that’s great, but does it go at the expense of that family? Are you doing anything to get that family out, so you can go lie in the sun in Dubai? [. . .] Those kids [. . .] should get a decent future. And when those parents ruin things for those kids. I have kids myself, I would also want the best for them.

Thus, personal investment opens the door to questions about the impact of this work. Although none of the officers reported moral injury, several could relate to that notion from their own experiences.

In this respect, there are several situations that do have a profound impact, even though this remains hard to pin down exactly. Here, only after conversing for a longer time with respondents, several officers admitted memories of deportations weigh heavy on them. Some officers actively reflected on the moral impact of their work. Thus, forced returns of children were mentioned most as making ‘a big impression’, as well as those where employees had the feeling deportees would be facing a difficult future. Several officers looked back on these cases with a troubled conscience. Such as a case in which a deportee is beaten up after he is handed over:

They closed the curtain of the office. And we heard a terrible racket. So, what do you do? We looked at each other, ‘Oh my, this ain’t good’. You’re in [a country], where they have different ideas of law. Eventually we walked on. At first I thought, ‘I’m gonna go in’, but he might as

well beat you around his office too. These are the things [. . .] what's the right thing to do? And it's hard, and I think back on this moment quite a lot. You really feel powerless. Because you can't do a thing, because our cultures are so far . . . he had been so relaxed during the flight, no trouble at all, and the next thing you know he is beaten to shit. That is really hard.

Even though escort officers know they are not responsible, some employees experience feelings of powerlessness or a troubled conscience. They know that they cannot change a deportee's situation, but officers fear at times a removal will end badly.

In fact, it seems the formal legitimacy for their work and the apparently advantageous occupational circumstances cannot prevent these emotions and, in a way, precludes reflection on these matters. Thus, various officers indicated their occasional lack of trust in the decision process and recalled cases where they felt 'something wasn't right'. Even though these officers cannot influence this process, this arouses strong emotions, especially where – again – the professional becomes personal. A (female) officer remembered the case of a woman who feared for her life:

I felt the emotion, and I saw the despair in her eyes, and I think [her story] was true. And it was also from woman to woman. Also for me personally, she really took me along in it [. . .] At one point, we arrived in [country], and she fell to the floor, and grabbed me by my ankles, and [cried] don't do this to me, I won't survive [. . .] So, in tears, and with her hands around my ankles, I had to hand her over to the authorities. That will leave a mark on you, as in, I don't know whether she's still alive. So, you have to assume the research here in the Netherlands was done thoroughly, but it's such a huge difference with how things are arranged over there. In her case, I really had my doubts.

In other cases, relying on 'humane deportation' and procedures even appears to feed the moral unease of some employees. A former employee – who left the brigade because he could not live with this way of dealing with deportees – uses a specific example of a hamburger bought by his former colleagues for deportees while waiting for a flight:

A burger feels like a bribe. Because on the one hand we try to make things comfortable for him, but on the other hand, I think, Jesus, we buy it off with a burger [. . .] easing my conscience and bring him such a thing, and then taking him to a place I'm not sure he will survive. And I'm not sure if it's all true, but I heard some stories, and yet we decided to take him there.

Thinking back, these officers wondered how things will have ended for the people they escorted. The respondent quoted before stated he is not ashamed of his work, nor does he feel guilty, but did ask himself: 'What kind of work are you doing? You are deporting people, what do you think of that?' He continued, showing the ambivalence he is feeling towards his job, repeating the notions of guilt and shame that were used to introduce the concept of moral injury:

It's weird, it's a weird job. A lot of people don't appreciate it, but some do. But if you try to stay close to yourself, try to do the right thing, respect someone, try to explain, you can look yourself in the mirror. Guilt and shame, those are heavy words, but I understand, if you get a connection with someone, and you drop them off, and those kiddies look over their shoulders and call out,

'Byeeeee [mentions own name]!', you think to yourself, 'Oooohhh . . . I just dropped them off'. But, well, what's the alternative?

Thus, many officers told me about their personal changes. Although they avoided the term burden (in Dutch: *last*), some used related terms. The officer quoted above, for instance, at one point said he does not feel bothered by his work (*geen last*), but does state it may be 'burdensome' (*belastend*), and that there were times he left the airplane feeling 'totally fed up' and wishing for 'a couple of normal weeks'. Moreover, there are said to be several employees who left the brigade for reasons of moral impact. Unfortunately, however, these were particularly hard to find; something that might in part be due to taboo on these issues that prevents people from sharing such considerations. What is more, this points to a difference between various respondents, as those quoted above do not seem to be bothered by such events. Unfortunately, the sample in this study was too small to infer definite connections between individual characteristics and felt impact, but most likely the latter also depends on, for instance, officers' own family situations, moral convictions or life histories.

Most importantly, however, although only a small number of the respondents interviewed here report such impact, the brigade itself does not appear fully geared to discussing this. There are several formal forms of support for employees who would want to share their burdens, such as the formal briefing after a deportation, a peer support officer, and a military chaplain and social worker who support military police personnel. However, the officers all stressed these forms of support are barely used by officers to share their issues, whereas during briefings the emphasis lies on 'operational issues', and in case of escalation or extreme violence 'everybody will say, it was kind of a weird flight, but it was ok', in the words of an officer. Likewise, employees indicated that the peer support officer, who has a list of the most common incidents, is a valued colleague, but does not touch upon the issues mentioned here.

The close team culture of the brigade cannot overcome this. Quite on the contrary, although many officers stated things are arranged well, and celebrate the culture of togetherness, the brigade lacks structural attention on the experience of a rift between legitimacies. Moreover, during stopovers, whether issues are discussed depends a lot on the commander, and his or her attention would only concern that particular case not the build-up of previous flights. As an officer stated, 'So many things happen here, but there is so little attention for these things'.

Regardless of the solidarity, there are apparent taboos on these issues: colleagues are unlikely to report the impact of their work, let alone to request to be scheduled on 'less heavy' flights. Several officers stated they do not want to be known as 'a sissy', and it is expected of you to do this as it is 'part of your job'. In the words of one officer, 'It's such a macho culture here. Yes, really, they are all tough guys', and the phrase that 'the door is always open' rings rather hollow to some, which only applies 'as long as you take the right route', stated another officer. Yet another officer was insightful in this respect when he talked about the added value of the informal briefings during stopovers (*italics added*):

When we come back, we don't need that peer support officer or the [formal] debriefing, *because I already did those things*.

Put simply, occupational health and peer support are assumed to be covered, while in reality the words and space to address moral impact are lacking.

## Conclusions

### *Dealing with dirty work*

'How can you do it', Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) pondered in their analysis of how workers maintained a positive sense of self while doing a job that some might consider 'dirty'. Like their foundational study, this case study has paid attention to workers' strategies as an answer to this question (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Heinsler et al., 1990; Rivera, 2015). The strategies described here tap into various resources: a shared occupational ideology of being emotionally armoured, a formal division of tasks, the support that officers provide each other and the notion of humane deportations with an ensuing ideology of care.

The latter, especially, is one of the most conspicuous of these resources as it contradicts stereotypical images of tough, cynical and emotionally detached enforcement officers (cf. Reiner, 2010). This study clearly refutes these stereotypes and shows that caring for and empathizing with deportees can be interpreted in various ways (cf. Björk, 2008; Rivera, 2015). For one part, the stress on care for deportees is policy-driven – 'humane deporting' requires officers to care for deportees – and is often applied instrumentally to assure a quiet flight in which soft approaches are thought to limit the use of coercive means. In addition, officers also care for deportees out of the personal, moral legitimation they give to their job, thus compensating for the apparently inhumane aspects of deporting people. As such, emphasizing care for migrants might also make it possible to do this work as this restores workers' 'moral authority' when they implement ostensibly harsh decisions (Vega, 2018: 2550). Engagement and care might even be seen as strategies for workers' own comfort that help cultivate their 'self-image [. . .] as humane and sensitive actors' (Kalir, 2019: 68) and shirk moral questions. Moreover, as empathy and compassion appear to correlate with the categories of (un)deservingness officers assign to deportees, these very moral emotions might feed the street-level arbitrariness of the treatment deportees receive (Borrelli, 2022; Fassin, 2013), also because officers use specific moral categorizations to distance from deportees in other cases (cf. Ashforth and Kreiner, 2014; Tracy and Scott, 2006). Important to note here is that workers' explanations could also be interpreted as ways to give meaning to their work. This is related to what Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) call 'infusing' specific aspects of the job with prestige, and is also observed elsewhere (Tracy and Scott, 2006). Moreover, this appears to have implications for the way these officers construct their professional identities: they take pride in these approaches.

The strategies discussed here also have important collective and shared characteristics, and can sometimes be seen as shared 'status shield' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014; Hochschild, 1983). Thus, their occupational status among other officers seems to work as a way to reduce dissonance (Lai et al., 2013). In addition, officers seem to strive for validation through a strong internal culture, in which elitist notions of this brigade as a special team play an important role. As in comparable lines of work, these officers appear

to enjoy a community of ‘affirmative peers’, where a high level of entitativity and being a ‘family’ are said to distinguish them (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, 2014; Kreiner et al., 2006). ‘Having each other’s back’ can thus also be understood in terms of affirmative moral support.

### *Impact: Beyond binary notions of moral injury*

At the same time, however, this case study shows compassion is more than an instrumental, legitimizing technique for a ‘quiet flight’ or a moral pardon for repressive tasks. Instead, various accounts in this case study show ambivalence at the heart of the felt moral legitimacy of these workers (cf. Borrelli, 2022). Thus, this material reveals a middle ground between two common ways of looking upon these types of occupations, between analyses that focus on workers’ controlled engagement and strategic emotionality (Kreiner et al., 2006; Rivera, 2015; Tajfel and Turner, 1986), and moral injury studies of severe trauma as a result of moral transgressions (Litz et al., 2009).

The present case shows that morally impactful work cannot always be strategically controlled. Even though these workers might not suffer from moral trauma, a focus on officers’ personal engagement in terms of strategically controlled emotionality overlooks ‘the destabilizing power that intense thoughts and emotions have to submerge and derail task performers’ (Margolis and Molinsky, 2008: 850). Key in this analysis is the particular perspective on frontline workers’ morality that is used here. That is, this article focuses on morality as part of street-level practice, in the way workers might morally legitimize their job and decisions, and – particularly – in the moments when this quest for moral legitimacy is at odds with their occupational demands and responsibilities.

Thus, this work is not solely instrumentally legitimized in terms of ‘humane deportations’, but is experienced much more ambivalently in which sometimes *both* pride and guilt play a role (cf. Rivera and Tracy, 2014). Therewith, this material shows a precarious balance between instrumental personal involvement on the one hand and emotional labour that might boil over to intense and lingering moral emotions on the other. Here the moral transgressions at the heart of definitions of moral injury come to mind. Although it was not the intent of this article to diagnose workers along those lines, some examples given here do pay witness to specific, subtle moral transgressions. These include the felt despair of deportees whom officers identify or empathize with because they feel – morally – the decision on their deportation was unjust, of children whom they felt should not suffer from the outcome of the asylum procedures their parents went through, or of deportees whom they think might have to fear for their lives after they are left behind at the border control post of another country. Mostly, it is the exact impact of such moral transgressions that are hard to discuss and locate because of the very subtleness of their impact and because of the complex role organizational circumstances might play here.

### *Occupational circumstances and moral emotions*

Thus, instead of only seeing these circumstances as (collective) resources that help manage this work, this case study *both* shows workers do not always instrumentally use these

resources to legitimize their work *and* that these circumstances might in fact preclude reflection on impact. Although, for some, moral legitimacy is in line with formal legitimacies, it is through confined responsibilities, ‘humaneness’ and the appearance of openness that a more thorough understanding and attention to the potential tension between the two is lacking. In this respect, some officers appear sensitive to the idea they are ‘buying off’ their troubled conscience, or feel they have a ‘weird job’; for instance, when they do not trust the procedures and policies, moving back and forth between occupational pride and pangs of conscience.

Most importantly, it is exactly this common knowledge of having to escort children, the formal legitimacy to do so and the existence of an ostensibly ethically agreed-upon framework that might preclude shared reflection on the impact this could have. Although individual officers sometimes reflect on what specific cases meant to them, the collective sentiment might be, put simply, you know what you signed up for, and we invest in ‘the deportee’, so what are you complaining about? As such, humane policy – having to meet demands of humane deportations – might even have counterintuitive results for workers themselves as they are required to personally invest in their work (cf. Rivera, 2015: 213). In sum, thus, this study’s contribution to dirty work theory lies in a reconsideration of occupational circumstances as resources for dealing with possibly dirty work – in this case, a diffusion of responsibilities, ‘humane policy’ and an alleged supportive occupational culture. For one part, it has shown that these help to legitimize a job with morally impactful aspects. As such, many officers might not experience their work as ‘dirty’, but instead take great pride in it. For another part, this article has pointed out that officers are not always fully willing or able to morally legitimize their work by referring to these resources *and* that these hide impact, even if (or, actually *because*) it is done ‘humanely’.

Thus, this article has shown that the impact of moral dirty work is in no way solely an individual affair that can be solved by more training or yet another desk for referral. Instead, addressing these forms of impact starts with moving beyond the ‘ticked boxes’ of having a military chaplain, a psychologist or peer support officer at hand and by paying more attention to, and creating (shared) reflection on, the occupational circumstances that hide these forms of impact from view. This involves creating the conditions for discussing moral impact. This is in line with the point made by McAllister et al. (2019: 267) that current military ways of looking upon emotions tend to manage, control or monitor these. Adding to this, this article has shown that impact comes in various shades, and that this might well result from less conspicuous events than the evident cases of extreme resistance, such as having to escort families or individuals to putative unsafe places. Acknowledging this implies more than the slogan that a change in military occupational culture is needed. The widely shared belief that ‘the doors are always open’ especially rings hollow and might even prevent structural attention to these matters. Instead, creating awareness and a more developed form of moral professionalism starts with addressing fundamental occupational circumstances on a more material level, such as time and space to discuss these matters. Part of this could also be a further orientation on how officers’ own personalities and backgrounds influence these experiences, and how these could be attended to. This latter point is an obvious limitation of this study – due to the size of the sample – and an avenue for further research.



Lastly, this article points to the importance of taking moral emotions seriously for a fundamental moral reason. Moral emotions might be valued as signposts for the morality of this occupation, and as expressions of humaneness that should not be managed away. Thus, these experiences deserve attention not only for reasons of occupational health, but as crucial access to a reflection on the morality of procedures and the moral meaning of deporting people in the first place. The experienced ambivalences and moral emotions described here might ‘cue that moral codes or practices are askew’ (Waldron, 2012, in: Rivera and Tracy, 2014: 217). In yet other words, a diffusion of responsibility through many hands also runs the risks of creating its own evil (Eule et al., 2019: 201), and – might I add – suppress reflection on the moral intuitions of the people who are personally involved in this. This is not only relevant in high stakes occupational contexts where workers are expected to invest personally in their work, but also for the very people who are subjected to these ‘necessary evils’.

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### Note

1. The Brigade for Irregular Migration is part of the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee (*Koninklijke Marechaussee*), a policing organization with military personnel.
2. See for instance reports by the Van den Haak committee in 1993 (*Humane uitzetting: een paradox? - humane deportation: a paradox?*), the Dutch Ombudsman in 2003 (reportnumber 2003/209), the Havermans committee in 2005 (*Commissie feitenonderzoek uitzettingen naar de Democratische Republiek Congo - researchcommittee on deportations to the Democratic Republic of Congo*), or the Zaal committee in 2007 (*Toepassing van geweld door de KMar bij uitzetting vreemdelingen. Onderzoek naar aanleiding van uitzendingen van Netwerk. - the use of coercion by the KMar. Research following episodes of TV-programme Netwerk*)
3. Entitled ‘Understanding and preventing moral injury among military and police personnel: Interdisciplinary research and intervention’, and supported by the Dutch Research Council (NWO; grant number NWA.1160.18.019), the Netherlands Defence Academy, the Netherlands Veterans Institute, the Netherlands Police Academy and ARQ National Psychotrauma Centre.
4. Although it is also part of standard procedure to film personnel unrecognizable

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