

‘When I look at this van, it’s not only a van’: Symbolic objects in the policing of migration

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Abstract

The ‘Go Home Van’ was the centrepiece of the UK government’s 2013 immigration enforcement campaign. Vehicles were driven around ethnically diverse London neighbourhoods clad with giant posters offering irregular migrants a choice between ‘voluntary departure’ and criminal arrest. Abandoned shortly afterwards in response to complaints, the GHV nonetheless had a significant impact on migrants. Through interviews and focus groups, this article investigates what was conveyed by the van, and the means by which it achieved these effects. We find that the GHV communicated meanings about the illegitimacy and criminality of migrants, with its material characteristics (visibility and mobility) as important as the words and pictures on its surface. Migrants sought to resist the van through hiding, while support organisations rejected dominant meanings and crafted alternatives. The article establishes a research agenda around the wider role of symbolic objects, in the context of the global migration crisis.

Key words

Irregular migrants, Go Home Van, Immigration, Interpretivist Policy Analysis

Introduction

Driving around ethnically diverse London boroughs in the summer of 2013, the British Government's 'Go Home Vans' were clad with posters stating: 'In the UK illegally? Go home or face arrest. Text HOME for free advice... 106 arrests in your area last week'. Behind the words is a picture of a pair of handcuffs resting on a white hand. Undertaken with the official aim of promoting voluntary departures among illegal migrants, the vans have since been banned by the Advertising Standards Authority on the grounds that the arrest statistics were misleading, but not that the language was offensive or could harm race relations. Our research shows, however, the long lasting and deeply negative impact of the vans upon migrants. We argue that this impact relates to the meanings associated with the white van itself as a symbolic object. The van is not just a 'platform' for the text and images, but is itself part of the discourse of policing. The van reflects, but also helps constitute, meanings associated with 'little England' sensibilities and prejudice (the 'white van man' courted by the populist right), whilst at the same time calling forth (and magnifying) the memory and trauma of police raids, forced deportation and original clandestine journeys among refugees and asylum seekers. Theoretically and methodologically, the article challenges 'linguistic reductionism' in policy analysis (Wagenaar, 2011: 80), taking on the challenge to better understand the role of non-linguistic policy artefacts in the policing of migration. We start by introducing the Go Home Van (GHV) campaign and go on to explain our theoretical and methodological approach. Data from interviews and focus groups with migrants (and migrant support organisations) are then analysed in relation to three questions. First, what meanings does the GHV communicate, and to whom? Second, how does the GHV communicate these meanings? Third, can these meanings be resisted, or alternative meanings generated? The article concludes by considering the wider significance of the case, establishing a research agenda around the role of symbolic objects in immigration policy and enforcement, as the global migration crisis continues to unfold.

The 'Go Home Van' campaign

The GHV was launched by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government as the eye-catching centrepiece of its immigration enforcement campaign in summer 2013. Influenced by the Conservative Party's 2010 election manifesto, the government had pledged to reduce net migration by tens of thousands per annum, through a more selective

immigration system and ‘getting rid’ of unwanted immigrants (Cameron, 2013). The 2013 Immigration Bill (and 2014 Act) unashamedly promised to create a ‘hostile environment’ for illegal migrants. ‘Illegal migrants’ is not an official category, but has become a catch-all-term used to refer to a heterogeneous group of migrants without legal rights to remain in the UK, which includes (but is not limited to) migrants who have overstayed or bridged the conditions of their visa and those who have been refused asylum. Reliable data about the size and composition of the population of irregular migrants do not exist (Sigona, 2012; Boswell, 2012). In the absence of evidence, irregular migrants are invariably portrayed (in both policy and public discourses) as highly threatening, imagined to be abusing public services to which they are not entitled and posing a challenge to the livelihoods of UK citizens by taking ‘their’ jobs and ‘giving unscrupulous employers access to cheap labour’ (Anderson, 2013:27; Immigration Act, 2014). Aiming to address the problem of ‘bogus asylum seekers’ and ‘illegal immigrants’, the Home Office launched the ‘Go Home’ campaign as a communication strategy to promote voluntary departures. Specifically, the campaign involved white vans decked with giant posters driving (between 22 July and 28 July 2013) through six London boroughs of Hounslow, Barking and Dagenham, Ealing, Barnet, Brent and Redbridge (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 about here

Despite the short time that the vans were actually in use, their image circulated rapidly, generating public outcry, ranging from complaints by local authorities regarding the government’s failure to consult on the campaign (Casciani, 2013), to waves of online debate and street protests by pro-migrant and human rights activists (Jones and Forkert, 2014), and even dispute between the Coalition political parties (Syal, 2013). Indeed, the Advertising and Standards Authority (ASA), the UK’s independent regulator for advertising, received 224 public complaints, which contributed to its subsequent decision to ban the vans, even though the wider campaign ran until 22 October 2013. However, the campaign was banned on the basis that the number of arrests stated on the vans was misleading; complaints that the van was potentially harmful to race relations were disregarded (ASA, 2013).

Meanwhile, the Home Office Evaluation Report rated the campaign as a success, claiming that it resulted in about 60 voluntary departures (plus a further 65 individuals in the process of leaving the country). The GHV was cast as a cost-effective method, comparing

the costs of enforced removals against those of voluntary departures (a notional saving of £830,000 for 60 individuals) (Home Office, 2013). But Refugee Action, a migrant support organisation, has challenged these claims:

We found a clear misuse of statistics and misrepresentation of facts to justify a hostile approach that so obviously failed on many counts... It is not possible to directly attribute these people having left as a result of the scheme. (Bernhaut, 2014)

This article analyses the effects of the GHV on those migrants who refused its 'invitation'. We see the GHV as part of a broad process of 'migration policing', involving patterns of social control associated with the governance of inclusion and exclusion (Weber and Bowling, 2004; Peterson and Akerstrom, 2014).

Theorising the role of symbolic objects in the policing of migration

To understand the impact of the GHV, we develop an interpretivist framework that focuses on the meanings that shape public policy (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003). Meanings are seen as more than the expression of actors' beliefs and sentiments, but rather as constitutive of social and political phenomena. The practice of 'interpretive policy analysis' (IPA) requires that we identify a specific policy artefact, those groups for whom the artefact has meaning, the nature of these meanings, and the points of contrast and contest between them (Yanow, 2000: 20). IPA does not seek to establish the 'real' interpretation of a policy problem; rather, its aim is to better understand the interplay between plural sets of meanings, which are themselves associated with different positions of power (Griggs, et al 2014: 17). An interpretivist approach to policy analysis considers 'not only "what" specific policies mean but also "how" they mean' (Yanow, 2000: 8). IPA explores processes of 'artefactual interaction', through which meanings are communicated symbolically. It acknowledges that policy artefacts can take a physical form as well as the more conventional linguistic one (laws, policy statements, guidance, rules, etc.). Indeed, Wagenaar (2011: 573) enjoins researchers to look beyond language to identify those objects that help to constitute social visions and identities.

Symbolic objects can be analysed as 'text analogues', in which the meaning of the object derives not just from the intention of the 'author' but also from what the 'reader' brings to it (Yanow, 2000: 17). The meaning of a policy artefact is not 'given' but emerges

out of the interaction between author, text and reader. Because there are always many authors and many readers, interpretations are also multiple and contested. Yanow (2000: 36) observes that 'interpretive positions "dance" around artefacts'. But the 'dance' of interpretations may be better seen as a battle, or at least a contest, as different interpretations map on to distinct power positions. Indeed, Wagenaar (2011: 5) argues that IPA is necessarily an 'emancipatory endeavour' and cannot be 'morally neutral'. By surfacing the multiple and contested nature of interpretation, IPA makes it clear that 'things don't have to be one way'. The techniques of IPA are well suited to surfacing relations of domination, showing how power is implicated in the play of multiple meanings and making more visible the meanings that policy artefacts have for marginalised or exploited groups.

We can expand upon IPA's concern with policy meanings via the associated concept of policy narrative (Boswell, 2013; Hajer, 1995). Narratives seek explicitly to persuade, weaving evidence and events together in such a way as to make specific outcomes seem inevitable. Narratives have a specific setting, a cast of characters (who may reflect archetypes like villains, victims or heroes), a plot (often conforming to well-worn scripts) and a purpose (or dominant normative message). The concept of policy narrative brings to our framework a link between *communicating meanings* and *communicating agency*. Narratives signify purpose and intention. But we cannot prejudge what audiences will make of them: will they achieve narrative traction, or will they be 'misunderstood' or deliberately resisted or subverted? While policy narratives seek to control the framing of events and outcomes, they also open up spaces for new interpretations. Storytelling creates a 'shareable world', in which 'we are subject to narrative as well as being subjects of narrative' (Kearney, 2001: 3-4).

For the purpose of our research, the GHV is seen as a policy artefact in the form of a symbolic object. We analyse the language and pictures that embellish the van, but also seek to understand the ways in which the materiality of the van itself works within the process of artefactual communication. The relevant 'communities of meaning' are identified broadly as migrants and non-migrants. Our research seeks to identify, and contrast, the discourses about migration that are communicated to them by the GHV. We examine the GHV's attempt to offer a persuasive narrative that establishes 'inevitable' outcomes in the context of a dramatic plot involving specific characters and settings. Migrants are implicated in the GHV's narrative (as actors or characters) but they are also readers and interpreters of that story, and become storytellers in their own right as they reflect upon the meaning and purpose of the

narrative. Our research focuses on respondents' active and critical deconstructions of the meanings associated with the GHV, and looks at the extent to which dominant meanings can be resisted and alternatives crafted. As Bloch et al (2014: 139) argue, irregular migrants are not 'passive agents' within the policing process. We consider the proposition of philosopher James Tully (2008) who argues that 'practices of governance' and 'practices of freedom' are necessarily intertwined, as actors' subjectivities are never wholly shaped by the dictates of public policy.

Methodology

This article is based on qualitative research conducted between January 2014 and October 2014. We used in-depth interviews and focus groups to work with forty-seven research participants. Two focus groups (consisting of 7 and 5 participants respectively) and 35 interviews were conducted. Of these 30 were migrants (16 men and 14 women), including refused asylum seekers and those who had overstayed their visas. 17 were with professionals working with asylum seekers and migrants without legal leave to remain. These were accessed through 12 migrant support organisations in the UK. Snowball sampling and existing contacts facilitated research access but the selection of organisations was purposefully determined to ensure the inclusion of the different types of support organisations present in the UK. Thus the sample comprised community based organisations (CBOs), faith-based organisations (FBOs), mainstream support organisations (MSOs) (including those that receive funding from the Home Office) and ethnically based support organisations (EBOs). Sampling approaches were designed to suit a research population that was vulnerable, hidden and hard to reach (Bloch et al., 2014: 137; Pande, 2014: 382).

A picture of the GHV was used as a starting point to generate rapport. Research encounters were audio recorded and transcribed before analysis using thematic and conversational techniques. Conversational approaches were suited to our theoretical framing, enabling the exploration of the different meanings that participants associated with the van and the way it communicated with different audiences. This article employs quotations and excerpts from migrants and migrant support workers; respondents are anonymised through the use of pseudonyms. A limitation of our research was that it did not engage directly with non-migrants; we are only able to analyse migrants' views of how the non-migrant population regarded the van.

Using the conceptual framework elaborated above, we analyse our research findings in relation to three questions: What is the van doing? How does the van work? Can the van be resisted?

What is the van doing: what meanings does it communicate, and to whom?

For migrants themselves, the GHV conveyed meanings about exclusion, difference and powerlessness. These had cognitive effects, in the sense of generating and/or reinforcing categories of thought: frames through which migrants could interpret their situation and the nature of the policy regime. As a female refused asylum seeker, Norah, put it: 'Though I literally have somewhere to sleep now, I take myself to be 'homeless' because it (the van) has made it clear that this is not my home...'. The GHV 'plays' with the multiple meanings that surround the notion of 'home', exemplifying Yanow's 'dance of meanings'. The Home Office is telling people to 'go home or face arrest', with the implication that asylum seekers' current home in the UK is illegitimate and that there is another place the government considers to be their 'real' home - even though this is the place from which migrants have fled. As the founder of a women's EBO, and former asylum seeker, Anna, explained:

The van has played a major role in labelling certain people as offenders of the system... When they label you this way they are already neutralising your power; they are stigmatising you, so that you feel that you have offended... you feel socially excluded ... you feel you are not supposed to be with others therefore you hide. ...you feel like someone who has committed a crime, someone who is liable to be detained.

It appears that the van doesn't just speak to pre-existing communities of meaning but actually works to create and consolidate interpretive communities ('stigmatising' and 'labelling certain people'). At the same time, the 'dance of meanings' is not a random one but is allocating power through the process of artefactual interaction and interpretation. The excerpt above shows how migrants reconsider their identity when they confront the van, 'feeling as if' they have committed a crime, are liable to be detained - *are not supposed to be here*. The GHV is a lucid example of the way in which symbolic objects, as policy artefacts, embed 'identity stories' (Yanow, 2000: 88). The shaping of subjectivities is also linked to the shaping (or rather restricting of) agency. Our respondent explains how feelings of

exclusion, isolation and illegitimacy lead to ‘not engaging with the wider community’ and, ultimately, to a decision: ‘therefore you hide’.

Sarah, a volunteer from a CBO, confirmed that: ‘We know of many people who have gone into hiding due to fear of deportation. Some people have stopped coming to our drop-in sessions after seeing the van.’ In effect, the van casts irregular migrants as a ‘suspect population’ subject to ‘pervasive forms of collective exclusion’ (Peterson and Akerstrom, 2014: 4). As the secretary of another group (MSO) explained:

The van has created an environment where those without papers have been forced to go under the radar... The van has been very instrumental in denying a particular group of people the opportunity to become a part of our community (Tim).

The GHV also speaks to non-migrants as a separate community of meaning, conveying the message that their ‘home’ is being illegally occupied by strangers. Dorica, a female overstayer argued that:

The van... draws people’s attention to the issue of Britishness, that is to say, ‘look here, these people are foreigners and these ones in particular are offenders so we don’t need them here’. Obviously the (British) public will say these are offenders or criminals, so it doesn’t matter even if they are mistreated.

A volunteer for a CBO argued that: ‘I think you’ve got to recognise that the van wasn’t necessarily aimed at asylum seekers alone but it was also aimed at the British public’ (Rachel). Another respondent, Tracey (MSO manager) put it like this:

I think they’re running a scare campaign. They like to get people afraid of floods of immigrants, and they like to scapegoat immigrants... to let the public feel there are too many migrants here and make them to resent anyone who doesn’t appear like them... by driving the van, the government is seen to be doing something.

The GHV communicates with multiple communities of meaning, not separately but in a relational or dialectical manner. The GHV works to create inclusions and exclusions through a series of binaries: migrants and non-migrants, good and bad migrants, those who fight and those who comply, those who enforce the law and those who are subject to it. As Fiona, a migrant support campaigner (CBO) put it: ‘Setting boundaries of belonging is the

key motif of the van'. The van works to demarcate and also consolidate communities of meaning in opposition to one another. Liz, the manager of a CBO reflected on how the van influences not just cognitive frames but also the emotive aspect of meaning-making about migration: 'images like this make migrants feel frightened. ...it singles them out'. The sense of fear and surveillance was palpable in responses from migrants:

... if you are an illegal migrant it's risky to seek medical support. You can't even go to the hospital because they will ask to know your immigration status and ... they will immediately phone the Home Office and you will be detained and deported (Elias, EBO campaigner).

The van's appeal to non-migrants also had an emotional dimension, tapping into feelings of economic insecurity, identifying culprits, and conveying government intention to act on non-migrants' behalf:

It (the van) probably reinforces mistrust, to those members of the public who are already feeling suspicious, and let's face it a lot of members of the British public...are already feeling insecure maybe... they're worried about losing their jobs... about their homes and where they're going to get the next meal, and if they see someone here who they're being told shouldn't be here it's encouraging them to scapegoat those people...The van is giving that impression that the government is taking action (Rose, MSO manager)

How does the van work: in what ways does it communicate these meanings?

We have looked at the work the GHV does as a policy artefact within the policing of migration – at the meanings it conveys and generates, and how these vary for different groups. But *how* does the van do this work? This question is of particular interest given its unconventional character and the relative lack of attention given in existing research to symbolic objects compared with linguistic policy artefacts. We start by looking at the role played by the images on the van's surface and then go on to consider the van's material and physical characteristics, particularly its visibility and mobility.

The words and pictures on the van (see Figure 1) were widely seen by respondents as telling a story. A narrative emerges, with characters, plot, purpose and setting. Key narrative

characteristics are present, as identified by Martin Hajer (1995): universality, accessibility, selectivity (cherry picking events and evidence to establish what is significant) and drama (the possibility of choice, the presence of emotion, and the potential for renegotiation). The narrative sets out to distinguish bad migrants from good migrants ('in the UK illegally?'), presents selective evidence (the arrest figures, which were subsequently challenged by the ASA), and offers illegal migrants the chance to make good choices ('go home') or suffer bad consequences ('face arrest'). The other characters are the immigration or law enforcement officer (holding the handcuffs) and, out of the direct picture, those British people who can legitimately claim to call the country and community 'home'. The picture uses visual contrasts, drawing on and reinforcing ethnic stereotypes through the portrayal of a white enforcement officer (we see their hand), placing handcuffs on the wrist of a black asylum seeker. Archetypes of hero and villain, cop and criminal, are called forth. The drama of the narrative comes from the tension associated with the need for migrants to choose a course of action. There is a clear plot, which will be physically enforced, and the setting is the streets of the UK's multi-ethnic cities. The 'moral' of the story is clear, as our respondents explained:

... this picture is carefully crafted. ... there are the handcuffs there... see whose hands are they in ...that is a white hand there... perhaps to tell you who is in charge... it's just relaxed there, perhaps to show that the person in-charge has the power over you... and if you don't take responsibility to surrender yourself...you know it's a serious matter... there is the word 'arrest' there... The message I get here is 'there is no place for you here... and if you fight this we will arrest you...' That's how I understand the van. (Amos, male overstayer).

Imagery can feed into stereotypes... For migrants, the images are quite traumatic; ...the picture of handcuffs and the van itself makes it really threatening (Treavor, CBO volunteer)

In interpreting the van as a 'text analogue', both migrants and non-migrants drew on their prior experiences. For non-migrants, the GHV taps into an ongoing policy narrative about the presence of 'illegals' who constitute a threat to local communities and, indeed, a sense of Britishness (the classic 'moral panic' described by Weber and Bowling [2004], among others). For migrants, the GHV contributes to building a cascade of ever-more

authoritative meanings, through links to previous experiences and knowledge of other policy ‘texts’. As our respondents explained:

It is a code or a hidden language because the sight of a van means danger or detention... So the picture of handcuffs on that van quickly rings the bell that they are after you... for people like us the van speaks a particular language which is hidden to others (Maria, female refused asylum seeker)

For those who know the system, this van speaks a certain language... I was once raided in the night and taken to jail in a van where I spent about 10 weeks. While in detention at one time they took me in a van to the airport and they drove me around there to watch planes landing and taking off. I couldn’t avoid imagining myself being sent back home. So... seeing this van... causes the bad emotions to come back because I know this is not a joke (Stella, female overstayer)

... when I saw these images on telly these threats actually brought back the feelings which I had in 2002.... The police used to come, they would knock on your door, and if you don't open, they used to barge in... So the sight of the van made these experiences to come back so vividly... it brought those, nasty memories, old and unhappy memories (Prosper, male refused asylum seeker).

These testimonies show how meaning is created out of contextually specific interactions between author (Home Office), text (GHV) and reader (refused asylum seeker or overstayer). Migrants form a specific ‘community of meaning’ (‘people like us’) to whom the van ‘speaks’ in a very specific way. The authority of the GHV’s meanings is built in reference to other texts and policy artefacts that migrants have encountered. Our respondents note that the meanings they find in the van may be ‘hidden to others’. ‘Knowing the system’ leads migrants to interpret the GHV in particular ways. Harnessing the effects of ‘intertextuality’ (Yannow, 2000: 17) adds power to the GHV policy narrative. Our respondents explain this clearly by linking the GHV with the other vans they have known, and talking about how seeing the GHV provoked both distressing emotions and very specific cognitive processes: ‘I couldn’t avoid imagining myself being sent home’. The GHV doesn’t need to ‘do anything’- no one needs to get out of the van or interact directly with a migrant for it to have its effect. Just seeing the van is enough (even second-hand as ‘images on the

telly') for those who can interpret its 'certain language'. In the manner argued by Wagenaar (2011: 573), the van is being used as an instrument of power, exercising a capacity to 'create social visions, constitute identities, create publics, and influence individual and group relationships'.

Analysing our data, it was clear that what we could call the 'van-ness' of the van was very important in conveying meaning and generating action. As we see from the remarks above, vans play a very significant role in migrants' experience. They may have arrived in the UK, or travelled out of their country of origin, in a van-like vehicle. More importantly, anyone who has been in detention has been transported in a van, and immigration raids and deportation activities inevitably involve being forcibly bundled into a van. The van symbolises the power of the state to control migrants, often with the use of violence. Migration researchers have often looked at the role of metaphor in policy statements, identifying the role of images of flood, disease and war (Biria, 2012; Cisneros, 2008; Charteris-Black, 2006). But what we see in the GHV campaign is not metaphor but metonymy. With metaphor, there is an attempt to transfer qualities from one referent to another (occupying different conceptual domains); with metonymy, meaning is developed through establishing an association between two elements within a shared conceptual domain, which look like each other but are not the same (the GHV itself and other more sinister white vans). One of our respondents provided a concise and compelling account of the device in action: 'The van is not only an ordinary vehicle but it represents something. It is a code or a hidden language because the sight of a van means danger or detention' (Sidhara, female refused asylum seeker).

Metonymy enables simplification and concision, reducing complex risks and dilemmas to straightforward choices. The GHV is supposedly offering illegal migrants the opportunity for voluntary return, but understates what might actually be involved in such a decision:

It's such a complex thing for an individual to want to go through. They already made a very complex and difficult decision to leave their country, went through very complex journeys and now because of the van they're entering into a new decision which is probably the second-most big decision they'll ever make after making the decision to leave. And it's not going to be as easy as 'One, two, three', as the imagery as well suggest. (Malcolm, MSO volunteer)

Gina, a manager of a CBO noted that there is plenty of information already available about voluntary return schemes: ‘Genuine voluntary return programmes are all over the place and they are not a secret as the migrants we support are fully aware of their existence, so there was absolutely no point for having this (the van)’. The purpose of the van was not, in their view, to inform but rather to create and communicate meanings about migrants’ criminality and exclusion within a broader process of migration policing. The van-ness of the van is significant in this process, communicating in different ways with specific communities of meaning. While the van conveys meanings about detention and deportation for migrants, for non-migrants it resonates with the cipher of the ‘white van man’ who represents working class Britishness. The white van links via other texts to meanings associated with the anti-migrant UK Independence Party (UKIP), notably Labour MP Emily Thornbury’s infamous tweet during the 2015 Rochester by-election campaign which showed a picture of a white van parked outside a small terraced house draped with Union Jack flags (Boffey and Helm, 2014). The GHV mobilises but also extends the meanings associated with the symbolic object of the white van. This white van goes beyond the demarcation of identity; it communicates active intent – in the sense of locating and disciplining irregular migrants.

Research on the built environment shows how meanings are carried by the size, scale and siting of structures (in relative and absolute terms), by their composite materials and aesthetics, and by contextual links (what they ‘stand for’ historically or in different settings) (Yanow, 2000: 67). In a similar way we can think about the communication of meaning via the physical characteristics of the van. The characteristics that emerged repeatedly in our research were the van’s *visibility* and *mobility*. As Tanya, the manager of a MSO explained: ‘The choice of the van was a calculated one. I would say just because it’s bigger and mobile and more people could see it’. Migrants themselves referred to ‘sightings’ of the van. As a policy artefact, the van had the capacity to stand out and catch migrants’ attention – whether in real life or on the television. Its visibility contrasted with migrants’ response to its presence, which was to reduce their own visibility (‘go under the radar’ or into hiding), stopping attending support groups or even accessing health care and other public services. The van’s mobility as a symbolic object reinforced migrants’ sense of threat and surveillance, magnifying the effects of its visibility. This worked in two ways. On the one hand, respondents inferred intention in the van’s mobility – that it would come and ‘find them’, actively imposing its narrative. On the other hand, the van’s mobility also gave its presence a random quality (it could potentially turn up anywhere), which amplified meanings

about there being ‘nowhere to hide’. The effect of the van’s appearance in mundane places (new ‘sites of enforcement’, as Weber and Bowling [2004] put it) shows the capacity of the GHV as a symbolic object to extend the reach of conventional policy artefacts. Its shock value could actually precipitate behaviour on the part of migrants which would reveal their identity (‘you find yourself fleeing’). As Muradali, a male overstayer, explained:

As far as I see it, the Home Office knows the power that this object has, and that’s why they drove it around the places where they suspected illegal migrants to be hiding... I have heard of people who were raided by the Home Office in supermarkets and other common places, but in most cases the sight of the van singles you out... when you see it you find yourself fleeing and the officials will then know that you are illegal.

One male refused asylum seeker, Muzi, described the GHV as ‘a non-verbal object with the power to single you out of the crowd’, explaining that the ‘sight (even on television) of this object being driven around makes you feel like fleeing because you understand its sign language... and you know it’s speaking to you directly’. Like Bentham’s panopticon, the van is a symbolic object that allows the state to observe migrants without them knowing that they are being observed. A mobile panopticon has yet further reach than Bentham’s stationary look-out tower: ‘being driven around’ is central to the van’s communicative power. The GHV is understood by migrants (and non-migrants) as actively policing boundaries, as constructing (as well as reflecting) inclusions and exclusions. Just as Yanow notes the ‘command of space’ expressed by certain buildings (via their design, size or situation in relation to other buildings or spaces), we can see how the GHV communicates meaning about who has a right to space – to call a neighbourhood their ‘home’ and even to move around its streets without fear of surveillance or intimidation.

We have looked at some of the specific ways in which the GHV was able to both communicate and generate meanings – through the visual narrative painted on its side, through its association with vans used in raids and deportations, and through its physical characteristics of visibility and mobility. We have started to answer the question related to us by one of the refused asylum speakers we interviewed: ‘people say, this van doesn’t speak so why are you scared? (Muzi)’. As well as deepening our understanding of how non-linguistic policy artefacts work, the analysis raises the issue of how policymakers select artefacts. What role might symbolic objects play in a strategic repertoire for migration policing?

Respondents saw the GHV as more than a ‘stunt’ or a ‘gimmick’, noting that it was ‘calculated’ and ‘deliberate’, pointing out also that it ‘was not fun’ but actually ‘harsh’ and ‘cruel’, with significant power to influence emotional and cognitive responses. Our research suggested that non-verbal policy artefacts may be particularly targeted at migrants for two reasons. First, objects may be effective because of the limited English language skills of some migrants. As Rachel, a migrant support worker (CBO) put it:

Images communicate strongly... And if English isn't your first language, then the image might be the first thing that you really take on board. So it certainly is a threat in the handcuffs, a threat of being locked up, and of being branded a criminal.

Second, non-verbal policy artefacts may communicate meaning effectively because of migrants’ experience of psychological trauma. There were many references to the sight of the van ‘bringing back memories’ and ‘triggering’ particular types of response, making clear migrants’ susceptibility to subliminal messages and subconscious meaning-making. Here a male refused asylum seeker explains his reaction to the van:

I suffer from post-traumatic disorder and anxiety and I didn’t find this (the van) fun. One thing that the Home Office doesn’t know is that asylum seekers are people who internalize a lot of things... The image of the van puts you under more stress, they are small things but they have the power to trigger things. They just trigger those layers of fears that have been building one on top of the other in many years (Ghalia).

Can the van be resisted: can alternative meanings be generated?

Having established the meanings conveyed by the van and its modes of meaning-making, we now consider whether these meanings can be resisted, and alternatives generated. We saw at the start how IPA is premised on the idea that policy ‘doesn’t have to be one way’, and is committed to unearthing marginalised meanings and alternative narratives. Here we can also follow Janet Newman (2005) in noting the intrinsic instability of governance strategies (like migration policing), which are subject to challenge and contestation, generating new sources of agency for ‘performing citizens’ to act on their own terms. As John Clarke (2004: 158) explains, new subjects may be ‘called’ but may not necessarily respond, choosing instead to ‘refuse to listen or tune into alternative hailings’. Our research found that migrants were fearful and angry in the face of the GHV’s narrative and that their resistance to these

meanings took the form of hiding or ‘going under the radar’: they literally sought to escape the gaze of the van’s mobile panopticon. However, migrant support organisations were engaged in the active rejection of the GHV’s dominant meanings and the crafting of alternative narratives. Those who led migrant organisations (often associated with the Church) expressed outrage at the van’s perversion of what they saw as core British values (hospitality, inclusion, democracy), and rejected the van’s attempt to incorporate them into an anti-migrant community of meaning:

This (van) makes one to question our values and hospitality... Our politicians produce policies that make it hard for the people we claim to be hospitable to which in turn produces a society that some of us don’t want to be a part of... The van sits at odds with democratic values that we often bravely acclaim and hugely take pride in as a nation. (Gina, CBO manager)

Respondents felt the need to subvert the ‘choice’ offered by the van (‘go home or face arrest’) and to puncture the either/or drama of the narrative:

The van is pressing people to make a decision, and it's offering two fairly negative options. We then offer these people a third one – to come to the drop in centre and engage with others in a friendly environment and find ways of making another application if you were previously refused. (Treavor, CBO volunteer)

Generating and communicating an alternative set of meanings (‘a friendly environment’, ‘engage with others’, practical support) was seen as key to reassuring vulnerable migrants, offering them what Clarke’s (2005: 158) ‘alternative hailings that speak of different selves, imagined collectivities and futures’. These new (or renewed) sets of meanings offer migrants an alternative to hiding and the opportunity to re-engage with the community and, indeed, the immigration system.

In the manner of James Tully’s ‘practices of freedom’, a senior clergyman (FBO leader) crafted an alternative narrative of inclusion, showing a keen understanding of the power of imagery and historical resonance. He expresses his clear intent to ‘deconstruct the binary opposition’ (between migrant and non-migrant) that characterises the policing of migration, and forge a new inclusive identity, reclaiming meanings like ‘family’ and

‘community’ in its service. He uses storytelling to reject the subjectivities (and associated behaviours) ‘called forth’ by the symbolic object of the GHV:

...the story of the Jewish holocaust in Denmark... when all the Danish Royal family sewed yellow stars onto all their uniforms and clothing and the very next day started walking on the streets wearing yellow stars... The king said, ‘I am king of every Dane, and I am therefore subject to every law that is imposed on a Danish person and every Jewish Dane needs to know that I will suffer in the same way as them’ ...it was instantly dropped by the Germans because someone in power had identified with the excluded group and blew it apart... We’re going to need to deconstruct migrant as a way of labelling people and one of the ways that can be done is by people with power associating with migrants and saying ‘This is my family’. ‘This is my community’. ‘We’re in this together’ (Tony)

Among those who resisted the meanings offered by the GHV, views differed about what should happen next. One support organisation manager, who saw the van as an attempt to rehabilitate outdated and negative meanings, proposed an apology:

Instead of telling us that the campaign was a success, our politicians owe a big apology to both the migrant communities and the British population at large for inciting division and reviving racist attitudes which we all for a very long time have tirelessly laboured to eradicate (Liz, CBO manager).

Looking forward, another respondent argued for a less aggressive stance on the part of the Home Office, proposing consultation with migrants and other interests before launching new initiatives. Proposing ‘appropriateness’ contrasts with the provocative strategy of the GHV which worked to consolidate oppositional communities of meaning and ferment an environment of fear and mistrust:

I think that our politicians need to step back and think carefully before they could introduce campaigns such as the ‘go home van’. They need to consult with communities and organisations that work with migrants in order to assess the appropriateness of the so-called new initiatives. (Marie, CBO manager)

Finally, another support organisation reacted to the GHV by rejecting consultation and collaboration with the Home Office, reinforcing its own identity as a separate and oppositional community of meaning, linked to a capacity to exercise agency on behalf of migrants in a specific attempt to redistribute power:

We don't work with the Home Office anyway... we exist for our beneficiaries, for our clients that would be irregular migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. We're very clear about that... We think we have some level of power and influence and try different things to stand for the people we represent (Sue, MSO worker)

Conclusion

The case of the Go Home Van campaign has provided an opportunity to study the role of non-linguistic policy artefacts in the policing of migration. But our research findings also point to a research agenda around the role of symbolic objects in immigration policy and enforcement more generally, in the context of the unfolding global migration crisis.

In short, the case of the Go Home Van illuminates the multi-level, multi-actor and multi-modal character of contemporary migration policing. Operating at the local level, the GHV patrolled and reinforced boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, communicating meanings about the illegitimacy and criminality of migrants. The urban neighbourhood provided another 'site of enforcement' (Weber and Bowling, 2004: 200) alongside national borders and transnational frontiers. There is scope for more research on the relationship between policing interventions at different levels, and how this shifts over time in relation to changes in migration patterns and, more significantly, in the political salience attached to different phenomena. In the UK in 2015, we have seen attention shifting from the policing of internal boundaries (the concern of the GHV in 2013) to the national level (how many refugees can be 'let in'), alongside a refusal to engage with the transnational European project of coordinating access and settlement. The van is also indicative of the trend for migration policing to involve a diverse range of actors, beyond the police themselves or immigration officials (the designers and drivers of the vans, for instance). Key research questions concern the roles played by non-conventional actors (at different levels) including private companies and indeed, people smugglers - with whom immigration officers may even

do ‘deals’, as in the alleged paying off of smugglers to return migrants to Indonesia by Australian authorities (Phipps, 2015).

Most significantly, however, the van exemplifies the multi-modal character of migration policing. Coercive measures such as indefinite detention and forced deportation are accompanied by ‘softer’ (or at least more subtle) approaches (Peterson and Akerstrom 2014: 3) in which images and objects may assume a particular importance. We found that the GHV, communicating via emotional and cognitive means, had particular traction with its target groups. The words and pictures carried by the van generated a narrative in which migrants faced an inevitable but simple choice, with enforceable penalties. In addition, the materiality of the van (its ‘van-ness’) connected with migrants’ experience of vans used in raids and deportation and with non-migrants’ notion of the white van as a symbol of Britishness. The van’s physical qualities of visibility and mobility amplified its communicative power, especially with migrants suffering psychological trauma. Research is needed into a wider range of symbolic objects within migration policing, and their capacity to both reflect and constitute meanings and identities. Trains, for instance, are icons of hope for migrants risking their lives to cross the English Channel or leave central Europe towards Germany; but are also the physical representations of power play between different European governments (will the trains be allowed to depart/arrive?). Similarly, boats are symbolic objects with a range of contested meanings, from the people smugglers’ dinghies in the Mediterranean to the naval ships (do they represent protection for borders or migrants?) and even the yachts of voluntary rescuers or bemused, but inevitably implicated, tourists.

But how do symbolic objects fit within the repertoire of migration policing? The GHV may have been a rational attempt to amplify and/or better target the Home Office’s key messages. But it may also be indicative of a kind of politics in which gesture and theatricality come to ‘eclipse or substitute for public policy’ (Ezrahi, 2012: ix). Might immigration policy itself be no more than what Ezrahi calls a ‘necessary political fiction’, given the persistent gap between immigration numbers and proclaimed political intentions (Reinish, 2014)? It is also possible that the symbolic significance of objects may emerge (rather than being designed in) in the context of interactions between migrants and those who police them (as with the boats and trains referred to above). And migrants have their own symbolic objects, artefacts that have both practical and symbolic significance as they struggle to complete their journeys. These vary over time, but currently include mobile phones,

international phone cards and money-wiring facilities. People smugglers confiscate these objects in the process of exerting control from the migrants they traffic, and makeshift shops grow up around refugee camps across the globe to provide (at a price) these precious items.

Our case study made clear that migrants are not passive victims of migration policing. Despite the fear and anger induced by the GHV, migrants were able to critically deconstruct its meanings and reflect upon why the van was, in essence, ‘not only a van’ (as one respondent put it). Migrants were ‘subjects of’ as well as ‘subject to’ the van’s narrative, and exercised their agency by fleeing or hiding to escape its gaze. At the same time, local support organisations actively rejected the van’s dominant meanings. Such a fundamental difference in responses demonstrates the different positions that citizens and those living outside the confines of national membership hold especially in relation to the scope of state’s power. As Ellermann (2010) argues, due to lack of the right to physical presence, illegal migrants have the weakest claim against the state and are therefore only made visible through restrictive policies that claim to reflect citizens’ preferences. Thus, without legal standing, ‘resistance is usually exercised by isolated individuals, rather than collectively... is oriented toward short-term, rather than systemic change; it is individualized, rather than collective; and it is fought by means that present an indirect, rather than direct, challenge to state power’ (Ellermann, 2010:4012).

By contrast, organized publics, because of their privileged position, could actively challenge the state’s power. Migrant support organisations crafted alternative narratives (and practical support) that were linked to a different interpretation of ‘British values’ stressing tolerance, hospitality and community. National campaigning groups, like Liberty and Southall Black Sisters, have used social media to circulate parodies of the GHV, with satirical re-workings of the text and images (Jones and Forkert, 2014). However, the vans also received widespread disapproval from the unorganised British public whose interests they were meant to serve. This reveals limitations in the ways that the state claims to know its public, with diverse publics revealing themselves in unexpected ways.

Further research is needed on the meanings that the artefacts of migration policing have for migrants themselves, with a view to strengthening their discursive resources and their capacity to generate empowering alternatives. As this article has demonstrated,

interpretive policy analysis provides a fruitful methodology for this task, given its insistence that ‘things don’t have to be one way’ (Wagenaar, 2011:5).

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Leverhulme Trust (RP2011-SP-013), and the time given by the research participants. Thanks are also due to Saul Becker for his input to the initial development of the project and to Brigitte Nerlich and three anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments. Earlier versions were presented at the European Sociological Association and Policy & Politics Conferences (2015), where the authors benefited from discussion.

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Figure 1: The Home Office Go Home Van



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