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Everyday Re-Bordering and the Intersections of Borderwork, Boundary Work and Emotion Work amongst Romanians Living in the UK

Abstract

This paper explores the intersections of borderwork and boundary work in everyday encounters in the UK. It focuses on the experiences of Romanian nationals, who between 2007 and 2014 were subject to transitional controls, which are understood as a form of everyday re-bordering of the de-bordered space of the EU that denied equal access to the labour market and state support. These controls were accompanied by a range of bordering discourses in the media and political circles that firmly situated Romanians outside of the UK's contemporary political project of belonging. This paper argues that in order to understand borderwork in everyday life, we need to explore how it relates to boundary work, i.e. the differential positionalities of Romanians within social hierarchies, as well as their experiences of and engagement with emotion work. The data analysed comes from participant observation with Romanian communities in London and the North East of England in the period from 2009 to 2014.

Keywords: Bordering, boundaries, emotion work, European migration, transitional controls

Introduction

In this paper I argue that the everyday discourses used to exclude Romanian nationals in the UK in the period from 2007 to 2014 should be understood as emerging at the juncture of borderwork and boundary work. Recent scholarship in border studies has focused upon the increasing internal reach of bordering practices and processes (Balibar, 2004; Yuval-Davis et al 2018, 2019) and the growing involvement of residents in formal borderwork, i.e. checking the immigration status of others to determine their access to a range of services (Yuval-Davis et al, 2018; Cassidy, 2018). However, the efficacy of the internalization of state borderwork is heightened by b/ordering and othering (van Houtum and van Naersson, 2002) processes and practices, which normalize not only everyday bordering (Yuval-Davis et al, 2018) itself but also the orders underpinning it. These b/orders seek to create hierarchies of belonging, which are co-constituted with socio-cultural boundaries, i.e. they intersect with class, race, gender, sexuality (Yuval-Davis, 2013).

Whilst firewall bordering, i.e. the filtering of would-be border-crossers through formal immigration (or bordering) regimes (Walters, 2006; Yuval-Davis et al, 2019), may permit movement across borders for certain groups, socio-cultural boundaries can continue to prevent such border crossings long after formal barriers are removed. In addition, even when international borders have been crossed, residents (new and old) find themselves b/ordered in everyday life by such hierarchies that would cast them as 'out of place' or less 'in place' than others. In this paper, I focus on the period of transitional controls, when Romanians had the right to move to and take up residence in the UK but had restricted permission to work and limited access to social security. I explore the ways in which Romanian citizens living in the UK at that time were not only subject to border-and-boundary work but also actively *contested* this work in everyday encounters. I argue that engagement in these dialogical practices of contestation is shaped by self-management of emotions or 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1983). By focusing on the agency of minoritized groups to contest

b/ordering discourses, I seek to re-consider analysis (Verhage, 2014), which suggests that border-and-boundary work sediments over time and is carried unconsciously by members of minoritized groups.

I begin with a summary of theoretical work that considers the interplay of borderwork and boundary work before moving to the question of emotion work, emotional bordering and emotional borderwork. This conceptual framing is then followed by a short methodology and brief description of the transitional controls for Romanian and Bulgarian nationals, which were in place in the UK from 2007 to 2014. The final section of the paper presents analysis of empirical data drawn from ethnographic fieldwork with Romanian communities in London and the North East of England.

Borderwork and boundary work

[I]n any consideration of borders and power relations we need to ask further questions, such as who is doing the enclosing and who is in a position to create a border? In short, who performs the borderwork? (Rumford, 2008: 2)

Rumford (2008) highlights that borderwork is very much undertaken by ‘ordinary citizens’ and argues that this means that ‘the border’ is something over which the same ‘ordinary citizens’ have control. However, recent changes in immigration legislation in the UK, mean that *formal* or *state* borderwork is now required of many more residents as a result of the increasing internal reach of bordering processes and practices, or *everyday bordering* (Yuval-Davis et al, 2018). As other residents undertake checks of the immigration status of others in a range of everyday encounters – opening a bank account, registering with a doctor, renting a property, getting a job – they undertake the work of bordering the state. The incorporation of more and more people into state borderwork is far more extensive than the voluntary reporting on others undertaken by ‘citizen-detectives’ (Vaughan-Williams, 2008). The embedding of state bordering practices more deeply into everyday life has been accompanied by increased sanctions – civil and criminal – for those who do not comply (Yuval-Davis et al, 2019; Cassidy, forthcoming). Therefore, whilst more and more residents may be undertaking borderwork, if that borderwork is mandated and potentially punishable by the state, we need to consider the very real constraints and how much ‘control’ we can really consider residents to have over this.

Yet, Rumford does not limit borderwork to that undertaken formally on behalf of the state.

The importance of borderwork is that it causes us to rethink the issue of who is responsible for making, dismantling and shifting borders, rather than rely upon the assumption that this is always the business of the state. (Rumford, 2013: 170)

Borderwork is part of a wider set of processes and practices through which the state becomes normalised in everyday life (Navaro-Yashin, 2002). Reeves (2014: 6) defines borderwork as ‘the messy, contested, and often intensely social business of making territory “integral”’. Her focus is on an emergent international border, but she highlights that ‘the work of state spatiality is not confined to the physical edges of the cartographic limits, or those wearing the border guard’s uniform’ (ibid: 245).

Therefore, we cannot see borderwork *within* the UK as being restricted to those co-opted into undertaking immigration checks in everyday life on behalf of the state over which they have limited control. State bordering is embedded in internal social processes and practices of ordering and wider discourses of ‘othering’ (van Houtum et al, 2005; van Houtum and van Naersson, 2002). Such hierarchies may appear to be stable at times but are often contested and dynamic. Boundary work is undertaken by individuals and institutions in order to situate themselves and in relation to others according to categories, such as gender, class and race (Bartkowski & Read, 2003; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 2005) and involves processes and practices of differentiation, inclusion and exclusion. Examples of this interplay of borderwork and boundary work that frequently emerge in the UK media include the questioning of the ‘genuineness’ of young male asylum seekers (Griffiths, 2017) and the use of racialized and impoverished images of Romanian Roma to place Romania outside of the EU as a political project of belonging (Wemyss and Cassidy, 2017).

Emotional Borderwork and Emotion Work

Potter and Meier (2020) have developed the concept of *emotional borderwork* to explore the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) of undertaking the state borderwork described above for professionals within the UK’s national health service. In Hochschild’s original thesis, a distinction is made between the self-management of ‘emotion work’ and the more public display of emotional labour, often within organisations and workplace settings. It is this self-management of emotions or emotion work within some settings with which I am concerned here. In particular, the ways in which some Romanian nationals, but not others, performed emotion work ‘unconsciously in personal relationships in everyday life’ (Kawale, 2004: 567).

Our reactions to others are not individual but shaped by our socio-cultural context.

[I]n our social interactions with other people, we observe conventions and we obey the demand for a particular rhythm of encounter. In this manner we are caught in an intersubjective dance that smoothly takes place within a certain sociocultural milieu. (Verhage, 2014: 98)

Verhage (2014) argues that dominant groups and their assumptions about minoritized populations can ‘occupy’ the bodies of the minoritized, so that they carry these b/orders around with them. Through these ‘occupations’, socio-cultural boundaries sediment; that is to say they become habitual over time and shape a dominant flow. They mean that our encounters with others are often pre-determined, unconscious and reinforce these flows rather than challenge them. Yet, Verhage’s description, seems to marginalise the agency of minoritized groups to shape these boundaries in their emergence. Whilst dominant groups may seek to ‘embrace’ different bodies unequally, not all minoritized bodies are equally positioned. Yuval-Davis (2015) argues that it important to explore not only social positioning in relation to axes of oppression, but also to consider the specific context; helping us to understand how those who may similarly positioned socially develop differing situated gazes in a specific time-place. Some bodies are better-positioned to exert control in relation to borderwork in certain circumstances than others. Whilst some categorisations, e.g. race, gender, can be viewed as systematic asymmetry (Verhage, 2014, 99), others are better understood as momentary, fleeting, specific to the time-place.

Methodology

This article is based primarily upon participant observation with Romanians living in South London from April 2009 to April 2014¹. The research developed through contact with a number of Romanians from a village in Suceava county in Romania, where I had undertaken participant observation from June 2008 to January 2009. When I returned to the UK, some people from the village had already moved to South London for work and got in touch with me, often to ask for help and support with employment, taxes and schooling. From April 2009, when I was based in London, I was frequently invited to and attended social occasions at the homes of these families at weekends. Informed consent was obtained verbally from all participants following a thorough explanation of the research. The findings presented here have also been discussed with some of the participants and refined based upon feedback and clarifications received. Participant observation enabled not only informal, unstructured interviewing, but also observation of non-verbal communication and embodied, affective responses to both interactions with myself as the researcher and with other people present. All these data were recorded every day in fieldwork notes and were essential to understanding the emotionality of the field.

Everyday Re-Bordering and Romanian Citizens in the UK

The de-bordering of the UK for Romanian nationals that came with EU membership in 2007 was accompanied by an intensification of everyday re-bordering, which sought to 'border' the UK from within by preventing equal access to employment and state welfare benefits through what were known as the 'transitional controls'. The controls resulted from political campaigns and media discourses against EU migration to the following the Union's 2004 enlargement (Yuval-Davis et al, 2018). Until 2014, Romanian nationals had to gain worker authorization for employment and after 12 months of paid employment were discharged from the scheme and gained the 'right to reside', which enabled them to access state welfare benefits. The need to gain authorization in order to be employed was an important part of the uncertainty that framed life and its emotionality for Romanian migrants in the UK during this period.

Following the removal of the transitional controls in 2014, the UK government continued to border the welfare state by giving citizens of other EU member states looking for work access to Universal Credit² for just three months. Failure to find work in this period would lead to a denial of the 'right to reside' and, consequently, of access state support.

In addition to state bordering once they are in the UK, Romanian citizens, in particular, were also the focus of intensive bordering discourses in the media prior to the removal of the transitional controls in January 2014 (Wemyss and Cassidy 2017). Coverage in the press used words such as 'swamp', 'flood' and 'flock' to describe the removal of the controls and the potential for higher levels of migration from Romania and Bulgaria to the UK (ibid). Reports in the media also drew upon images of poverty in both countries, particularly amongst Roma communities, in order to support their

¹ Some further participant observation took place with Romanians living in the North East of England from 2014 based primarily on connections to those I had met during the initial phase of fieldwork in London, as well as on return visits to London whilst I continued to work on a London-based research project until the end of 2016.

² Universal Credit is the support offered by the UK government to those with low incomes or who are out of work.

narratives, as well as making specific reference to the labour market as ‘overstretched’ and nationalising labour market opportunities through terms such as ‘UK jobs’ (ibid). As we shall see in the final section of illustrative examples below, these discourses entered into everyday encounters, where we can explore the intersections of borderwork, boundary work and emotion work.

Borderwork, boundary work and emotion work in everyday life

Nelu was a man in his thirties from a village in Suceava county, who moved to London in 2007 and by the end of 2014 was working on a temporary basis in a logistics warehouse in the North East of England. He, and other Romanian nationals, often described difficulties in developing relationships with colleagues, who were from white British backgrounds. It emerged that some of these difficulties were the result of what they felt to be misconceptions about them, which were based upon dominant public discourses (Wemyss and Cassidy, 2017). When re-produced in everyday encounters, such discourses often emerged as attempts to situate Romanian nationals disadvantageously within particular settings.

One of those guys at work, do you know what he said to me? He said, “It’s all horses and carts over your way isn’t it?” And he laughed. So, I replied. Do you know what I said to him? I said, “We are free to go and live anywhere in the EU. I chose to live in Paris and London. You chose to stay in [small, market town in the North East of England].” He didn’t respond to that! (Nelu, December 2014).

In this interaction, we see Nelu’s colleague intersecting borderwork with boundary work by positioning Nelu within a particular hierarchisation of workers; migrants from Romania, are situated as lower than others within the same workplace, based not solely on being ‘from there’ (borderwork), but because ‘there’ is economically deprived (classed boundary work). Nelu’s colleague, like others, drew upon bordering discourses from popular media in referencing the poverty he has seen on news reports³ covering the end of the transitional controls for Romanians and Bulgarians. Nelu’s position was further undermined by state bordering, as unlike his colleagues, who were employed on permanent contracts with their employer, he was once again working for an agency. In his previous work in London, he had also been forced for a number of years to access work through an agency, because of the transitional controls. Through this ‘false self-employment’ (Ruhs and Wadsworth, 2018), he was paid less and received no holiday or sick pay for doing the same work as his co-workers.

Consequently, when he found himself subjected to this border-and-boundary work in his workplace in the North East, Nelu did not accept this positioning and contested it. This contestation (Reeves, 2014) illustrates that far from being carried unconsciously (Verhage, 2014), bordering and boundaries are not only consciously noted by some members of minoritized groups, but are actively challenged; border-and-boundary work leads to the dialogical construction of bordering and boundaries. Driven by his experiences of the intersections of structural inequalities emerging from state bordering and bordering discourses in the media, Nelu mocks the man for remaining in the small,

³ Towards the end of 2013 and into 2014 when the transitional controls were removed, there was coverage in the UK media of some of the most impoverished communities in both Romania and Bulgaria (see Wemyss and Cassidy, 2017). This frequently included rural scenes with people travelling by horse-drawn cart.

deprived market town, and highlights that he has lived in two of Europe's global cities, clearly using his mobility to challenge the boundaries his colleague seeks to establish. For Nelu, immobility in a de-bordered EU situates his colleague below him. His colleague may belong in this small town, but Nelu asserts his belonging to a larger space – the European Union.

I begin with Nelu's example specifically because he did not engage in the emotion work (Hochschild, 1993) that would enable the perpetuation of the b/orderd hierarchies and boundaries within the UK that his colleague sought to (re)produce. Yet, I came across many examples of situations in which Romanian nationals, when confronted with similar discourses, did not contest them as Nelu had done. Denisa, Nelu's older sister, encountered similar attitudes in her workplace, where Nelu had also worked for a period of time, but she did not engage in challenging the boundaries imposed upon her in the same way.

Yes, everyone at work thinks we all live like those pictures they show of gypsies⁴ in Romania. They think we have nothing (laughs). Seriously, my work colleagues think I live in some kind of shed. I don't tell them I have a house and land there. They think we are all living like gypsies. (Denisa, London, 2013)

Denisa's reference to 'all', shows that she understood these comments to be generalisable, i.e. about Romanians as a group, illustrating the ways in which this border-and-boundary work is both directed at an individual but at the same time pertains to and identifies a collective. Whilst Denisa did not directly contest this positioning of Romanians in the encounters within her workplace, she made it clear in the derisory tone with which she told the story that she did not accept this positioning. So, whilst she may have observed the conventions that smoothed the 'intersubjective dance' (Verhage, 2014: 98) of the encounter, this was neither unconscious nor natural (ibid). Denisa was, in fact, employing emotion work, i.e. self-managing her emotions.

This use of emotion work was not novel for Denisa. She frequently engaged in emotion work within her home life. She had moved to London in 2009 after the birth of her first child in order to join her husband, whom she suspected of having an affair. Amongst other micro-aggressions in their domestic life, Denisa's husband frequently humiliated her in front of their son, who, as he grew, adopted his father's attitudes towards his mother. Denisa rarely contested this behaviour in the home; when her son called her stupid, it was the friend who spoke up to chastise the child. She never openly challenged this positioning of her as less than her husband, which reflected the patriarchal structures and boundary work to which she had been subjected since infancy. Denisa's everyday encounters at work and her (non)responses when subjected to border-and-boundary work can be understood as similarly shaped by emotion work.

⁴ The reference to Roma is something I have explored elsewhere with my colleague Georgie Wemyss (Wemyss and Cassidy, 2017).

Conclusion

At a time when we are seeing a proliferation of formal or state borderwork in everyday encounters in the UK (Yuval-Davis et al, 2019), it is important that we analyse how underpinning b/ordering processes and practices and socio-cultural boundaries are shaping such work. Such analysis suggests a need to revisit a broader understanding of borderwork (Rumford, 2008; Reeves, 2014) that recognises the messiness of state spatiality as it is *worked out* in everyday life. In this paper, I have illustrated that for Romanians living in the UK, borderwork performed by the majoritized population towards them can be better understood as an intersection of border-and-boundary work, through which they are excluded not only because they come from 'there', but because there is impoverished, somewhere economically deprived and therefore other. Whilst the borderwork described here may not be that of formal, state borderwork, through which residents determine the rights of others to access various key services and support, it often reflects and (re)produces the discourses that have emerged to justify everyday re-bordering in the UK (Wemyss and Cassidy, 2017).

The border-and-boundary work described is, at times, contested in everyday intersubjective encounters (Reeves, 2014). It has been my contention that in order to better understand why contestation emerges, we need to analyse everyday encounters through the lens of emotion work. In considering the examples of Denisa and Nelu, I suggest that *direct* contestation is less likely to emerge in the moment of the intersubjective encounter when an individual has grown accustomed to the self-management of their emotions, i.e. emotion work, in other settings. For Denisa, emotion work had become habitual in her home life and relationships with her immediate family. Therefore, I contend that it is the emotion work, which becomes unconscious (Kawale, 2004) and smooths the intersubjective encounter, rather than an acceptance of the imposed b/orders and boundaries (Verhage, 2014).

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