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Methodological reflections on studying border policing

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Methodological Reflections on Studying Border Policing

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Guest post Eva van Gemert & Maartje van der Woude. Eva van Gemert is a postdoctoral researcher and lecturer at the department of Organization Sciences, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Maartje van der Woude is a Professor of Law & Society at the Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance & Society, Leiden Law School, the Netherlands.

This is the first post of a themed series focusing on [methodological reflections on studying border policing](#). This blog series is a product of the Thematic Group on Border Policing & Emotions. Those interested in joining the group or staying updated on events and initiatives are warmly invited to contact Maartje van der Woude via email at m.a.h.vanderwoude@law.leidenuniv.nl.



“Everything is data,” a well-worn methodological mantra, takes on renewed relevance in the study of migration and borders. Access—often elusive or tightly controlled—is typically seen as the gateway to empirical insight. Yet moments of rejection, conditional openness, or strategic inclusion are themselves deeply revealing. These encounters shed light not only on the institutions under study but also on the ways in which researchers are positioned within the very systems of power they seek to critique. This blog series brings together five contributions that interrogate access, trust, complicity, and ethical entanglement in border criminology fieldwork. The authors reflect on the methodological and epistemological challenges of engaging with institutions involved in border control, from military operations and police forces to ethics committees, bureaucratic review structures, and state information regimes. Whether researchers are excluded from the field, selectively included, or fully embedded, each situation generates data that can inform critical understandings of how bordering is enacted and maintained.

Steph Hanlon examines how institutional suspicion and the convergence of criminal and immigration law shape the university ethics review process when researching ‘marriages of convenience’ in Ireland. The case reveals how bordering practices can be internalized by research governance systems, reinforcing criminalizing logics even before fieldwork begins.

Irene Vega highlights the importance of cultivating empathy—without sympathy—when studying immigration enforcement agents. Her

contribution underscores the value of engaging with unsympathetic actors not to excuse, but to explain the moral and bureaucratic orders sustaining state violence.

Eva van Gemert offers an ethnographic account of stakeholder meetings hosted by EUNAVFOR MED Operation Sophia. These SHADE MED gatherings, though framed as inclusive forums, operate as sites where openness functions to consolidate exclusion. Researchers attending such events are themselves constituted as ‘stakeholders’, raising questions about complicity and the racialized performance of European border control.

Maartje van der Woude reflects on a decade of access to the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee, analyzing how sustained institutional openness may foster trust—but also risks co-optation. Her contribution explores how researchers navigate a shifting terrain of collaboration, critique, and ethical ambiguity.

Amalia Campos Delgado explores the methodological affordances and affective labor of using Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to study migration governance in Mexico. Rather than treating FOI as a passive data-retrieval tool, she frames it as an active research method—one that both reveals and performs the state’s practices of opacity, bureaucratic resistance, and strategic visibility. Campos Delgado shows how the delays, formatting barriers, redactions, and denials encountered in FOI processes constitute a field in themselves, illuminating the state’s selective narration of legitimacy and control. Her piece demonstrates how transparency itself becomes a contested terrain in border research.

Taken together, the blogs argue for a more reflexive approach to fieldwork in border criminology. Rather than viewing access as a neutral precondition for data collection, these reflections reframe it as a methodological lens in itself. Ethics boards, military invitations, institutional partnerships, bureaucratic queries, and interpersonal negotiations all become part of the research archive. They reveal the contested politics of knowledge production in a field where exclusion, suspicion, and surveillance are core dynamics—not only for migrants, but also for those seeking to study them. By foregrounding methodological dilemmas and ethical tensions, this series contributes to ongoing conversations about power, positionality, and the responsibilities of critical scholarship. The aim is not only to analyze borders, but also to reflect on how borders shape research practices, access, and academic complicity in systems of control.

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