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Author(s): Horsti, Karina; Pirkkalainen, Päivi

Title: Emotions and Affect in Deportation : The Transformative Power of Social Relationships

Year: 2023

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Horsti, K., & Pirkkalainen, P. (2023). Emotions and Affect in Deportation : The Transformative Power of Social Relationships. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 13(4), 1-10.
<https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.714>



Emotions and Affect in Deportation: The Transformative Power of Social Relationships

KARINA HORSTI

PÄIVI PIRKKALAINEN

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

**SPECIAL ISSUE
EDITORIAL**

HUP HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

In the wake of the “refugee reception crisis” of 2015, forced removals – that is, deportations – of non-citizens, asylum-seekers in particular, have become a divisive public issue in Europe’s migration management and the broader media discourse. Emotional responses to issues around asylum seekers and deportations have become increasingly polarized, from compassion to deportees and anger towards state officials to hate towards asylum seekers and their supporters. Emotions also tie together deportees and citizens of the countries that deport, even if these ties are often rendered invisible in asylum processes by the state actors.

Related to invisibility, the deportation regime is founded on the assumption that the deportees’ social presence in Europe would cease after removal and that deportability need not concern citizens and other legal residents. Deportability is a condition entailing the possibility of the subject’s deportation at any moment (De Genova 2002; Dreby 2010; Drotbohm & Hasselberg 2015; Khosravi 2018).

This multidisciplinary special issue focuses on the Nordic countries of Finland, Sweden, and Denmark to examine how deportability, or the actual removal of a person, affects specific communities in these countries that deport. The four articles in the special issue examine how diverse facets of social life, crucial among them family, community, and a mediated national public sphere, are shaped by deportations. More specifically, we ask: How do members of religious communities in Finland respond to the threat that someone in that community might be removed? How do professionals involved in the actual labour of removal manage their emotions? In what ways do families resist deportations, immigrant detention, and deportability? How are deportations debated and resisted in the public arena, and how social media affords resistance? In all articles, emotions, affect, identity, belonging, and trust in authorities and the nation-state are relevant.

**CORRESPONDING
AUTHOR:**

Karina Horsti

University of Jyväskylä,
Jyväskylä, Finland

karina.horsti@juu.fi

KEYWORDS:

Deportation; forced
removal; migration; asylum
seekers; relationships;
affect; emotion

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Horsti, K and Pirkkalainen,
P. 2023. Emotions and
Affect in Deportation: The
Transformative Power
of Social Relationships.
*Nordic Journal of Migration
Research*, 13(4): 1,
pp. 1–10. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.33134/njmr.714](https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.714)

Deportations have a long history concerning foreign citizens from a variety of countries and situations (see, e.g. on deportations from Finland Pirkkalainen, Lyytinen & Pellander 2022). Post-2015, however, is a phase in which the desire to enforce removals has increased and the issue has received publicity in the Nordic setting more than before. Several European countries changed laws to facilitate removals as a response to the sudden increase in asylum seekers arriving to Europe in 2015. Denmark amended the alien's act by introducing a new "temporary refugee status" for people whose protection was considered not individually based but due to a general situation in the country of origin (Brekke, Vedsted-Hansen & Stern 2020; Syppli Kohl 2023). Similarly, Norway introduced "individual temporary protection" as a core principle in its' asylum policy (Brekke, Birkvad & Erdal 2021). Also, Sweden, which has been internationally known for its rather generous asylum system, restricted its asylum and family reunification law by introducing a temporary asylum law (Migration Policy Institute 2018). Finland followed Sweden by implementing several restrictions to the Aliens Act with the argument of making policies coherent with other EU-countries, especially Sweden (Ministry of Interior, Finland 2018). Also in 2016, the EU significantly increased the Frontex budget and broadened its rights to organize joint removal flights.¹ Nevertheless, despite the desire to deport, states are rather unsuccessful in their attempts. Deportation is a costly, time-consuming, difficult, and potentially controversial procedure in Europe, particularly because of the legal barriers that prevent the removal of people. Thus, there is a significant gap between the number of decisions on removal and the actual removals of people (see, e.g. Gibney & Hansen 2003).

States' determination to use deportations as one of the key migration management strategies has nevertheless increased since the early 2000s. This shift in practice is known in academic literature as the "deportation turn" (Gibney 2008). Governments in the Global North have begun to escalate the enforced returns of unauthorized immigrant populations in sheer numbers and scope (Coutin 2015; Nyers 2003). Increased desire to deport has been explained by a growing fear of terrorism, political shifts to nationalism and far-right mobilization, privatization of the prison industry, and interest in exploiting low-skilled workers (De Genova 2002; Peutz & De Genova 2010; Welch 2006). Overall securitization of managing migrants has led to various measures of policing immigrants, such as detection and detention in addition to deportation (see, e.g. Franko 2019; Menjivar 2014).

The Nordic countries have followed this global paradigm, albeit not at an equal pace nor with an equal public visibility. Notwithstanding similarities, particularly, in the three countries examined in this special issue, public discourse and policy orientation with regard to asylum vary. Within the Nordic countries, Denmark is traditionally relatively restrictive, and Sweden treats asylum-seekers more liberally, while Finland lies somewhere in the middle. However, the electoral success of nationalist populist parties with an anti-immigration agenda in Finland and Sweden has in recent years shifted the political opportunity structure – what was considered unacceptable previously has become mainstream politics today (Horsti & Saesma 2021).

The Nordic region at large has gained a reputation for valuing humanitarianism, gender equality, and human rights. In addition, the region is often characterised as displaying

¹ The Frontex budget grew from an initial EUR 6M for 2005 to EUR 320M for 2018. Frontex started to play a more substantial role in organising return flights after 2016. Its sharp budget increase from EUR 142M for 2015 to EUR 302M for 2017 is directly related to the increase in deportation flights (Bremer 2017; Frontex 2020).

the world's highest levels of trust between the state and its citizens (Andreasson 2017). At the same time, the Nordic countries continue deporting people and try to develop 'effective,' yet 'humanitarian' practices of removal (Backman 2023; Khosravi 2018; Kynsilehto & Puumala 2016). Thus, the Nordic region serves as an interesting testing ground for delving into questions related to the broader consequences of deportation, matters that remain under-explored internationally.

CONTRIBUTION TO DEPORTATION STUDIES

Migration research has examined the consequences of deportation mainly from the perspective of deportees and their immediate communities, which are the most strongly affected. Criminalising and dehumanising aspects of deportation are known to affect deportees' family members – for example, fear, shame, and anger are commonly felt (Dreby 2010; Drotbohm 2012; Golash-Boza 2019; Plambech 2014; Schuster & Majidi 2015). Additionally, deportation and deportability are forms of slow violence (Nixon 2011) whose ripples extend to those who have created social ties with the deportees (Horsti & Pirkkalainen 2021). Deportability involves a cruelty that does not carry the appearance of violence in the conventional sense.

The violence of deportation is often understood to mean physical constraint in the moment of detainment or during a deportation flight. Deportation has led to at least 17 deaths in Europe between 1991 and 2015 (Fekete 2015), which has prompted several European countries to monitor deportation processes. In Finland, the Office of the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman has since 2014 been responsible for sending monitors to accompany deportees on flights. Since 2017, the European border control agency Frontex requires that a monitor accompany every joint deportation flight. However, this common, limited view of violence in deportation, with monitoring taken up as its solution, does not fully encompass the diverse mechanisms of violence in deportations. Instead of the limited temporality of a violence act, deportability is slow violence (Nixon 2011; in the context of deportation, see Horsti & Pirkkalainen 2021): a condition that can last for years, and its consequences can persist over time and expand across space. It includes mechanisms of structural violence (Galtung 1969) that can manifest itself in administrative and bureaucratic processes (Abdelhady, Gren & Joorman 2020; Beaugrand 2011; Spade 2011; in the context of deportability, see Näre 2020).

The ways deportation shapes the society engaged in it necessitate further empirical and theoretical research, however. The need is particularly pressing in that a narrow perspective could well lead to uncritical migration research that continues propagating a division between "us" and "them." With this special issue, we continue to develop the "de-migrantisation" perspective (Dahinden 2016) in deportation studies. Its objective was to explain the social consequences of an intensified desire to deport rejected asylum-seekers. This perspective means that migration research should "break out of its 'migration container'" in order to avoid naturalising "migration-related differences" and nation-state-oriented categories (Dahinden 2016: 2208). In the context of deportation, this means that we should not view deportable people only as victims of the system but acknowledge and analyse their agency in difficult situations. In so doing, we can expand to examine the consequences of deportations to people and communities around deportable people.

This convivial perspective (Convivialists 2014) is suited well to this undertaking. Each article in this special issue proceeds from an understanding that entails a

more equality-based and global relationship in “being together” in the world. This perspective is intended to transform our understanding of deportations by demonstrating that they cannot be compartmentalised, tucked away neatly into the sphere of “others.” Rather, they affect “Europe” as a whole.

Attention to social relationships is one key focus of our approach to study deportations from a convivial perspective. Academic literature on anti-deportation protests has demonstrated that relationships are crucial for protests in at least two ways. First, they are a factor in speaking out successfully against state-ordered deportation (Bader & Probst 2018: 147; Kirchhoff et al. 2018: 130, 134; Rosenberger & Winkler 2014), through media and other means (Horsti 2013; Nielsen & Myong 2019), so they weigh into the likelihood of deportability. People with established social ties are less likely to be effectively removed. Second, these ties are an important mobilising force in anti-deportation protests (Hinger, Kirchhoff & Wiese 2018; Horsti & Pirkkalainen 2021; Mokre 2018; Näre 2020; Pirkkalainen 2021). This special issue confirms that social relationships mobilise and emotionally protect people nearby those deemed deportable in situations that are not specifically about public protesting but about more subtle support and dissent to deportation orders.

Sypli Kohl’s article titled “Disrupting family life: The invisible families and commuting parents of Denmark’s departure centres” shows how residents of a Danish departure centre and their family members suffer from separation but at the same time resist isolation by maintaining family ties despite the restrictive living conditions of the centre. By analysing a case of asylum seekers who converted to Christianity in Finland, Horsti and Pirkkalainen, in their article “Deportability of Christian converts and the controversy over faith in Finland,” show how members of Christian congregations resist administrative deportation decisions and act publicly to correct perceived injustices. Relationships created through membership in the same congregation necessitate action for “our brothers and sisters,” as Finnish members define the newcomers. Kotilainen’s article “Resisting deportation live: Affective witnessing and intersectional conditions for recognition in airplane deportations protests” examines the visual elements of live streamed protests on deportation flights. Kotilainen claims that the publicity and media affordances of such protests evoke varied emotional reactions from citizens of the deporting country. The transformative social relationship in this case is produced through mediation. The case examined in Backman’s article “The labor of chartering a deportation journey” demonstrates how staff at a Swedish detention centre avoids creating genuine social relationships, but this practice needs active affective labour. The staff works with their own emotions so that they would not become emotionally destabilised in carrying out tasks designed by state authorities.

EMOTIONS AND AFFECT AS TRANSFORMATIVE POWER

The affective and emotional dimensions of the actions following from deportations and deportability connect all four articles in the issue. In this special issue, we lean on the “practice” approach to affect, which understands affect and emotions as intertwined: emotions are expressions of affect produced and circulated in discourses, practices and interactions (Wetherell 2012: 39). Thus, instead of seeing affect merely as a pre-conscious bodily reaction, we underline that affects, like emotions, have cognitive and cultural elements.

In this context, the productive power and the management of affects and emotions are different depending on the people and groups that engage with deportees. First, emotions and affects can mobilise people to resist deportation: they produce transformative action. Horsti, Pirkkalainen and Kotilainen demonstrate how emotions and their sharing at the community level and in the public sphere mobilise people to action. Second, emotions can result in labour that has the opposite aim: that of preventing any productive force or transformation. As Backman demonstrates, those who work in the deportation structure need to actively labour in order to not be affected. In detention centres, this type of labour is also used as a “tactic” to carry out deportations smoothly without resistance. Third, Sypli Kohl shows how family members who navigate the slow violence of deportability in Denmark negotiate and manage their emotional and affective responses to have calm moments of normalcy. In all these three types of situations, the management of affects and emotions is labour (see original concept of emotional labour by [Hochschild 1983](#); concept of affective labour see [Hardt 1999](#)) that aims to produce something. This labour also shapes the sense of self and community for those who either suppress or mobilise their emotions and affective responses.

While the desire to deport might be evoked in the direction of a politicised collective fear, deportability yields not only ontological security but other waves of fear in society at large. As the articles in this special issue show, deportations and deportability evoke emotions and affect not only in relation to individual deportees or on their behalf but also in relation to the authorities and the state overall.

LIMITS OF TRANSFORMATIVE POWER

The dynamics among deportations, deportees, and the deporting country (encompassing its various communities) require a critical perspective and acknowledgement of limitations on their transformative power. In focusing on the deporting country and its citizens, there exists a danger of shifting the framing of the problem from mechanisms that foster inequality and the pain of deportees to inconvenience experienced by the “white majority.” This may also lead to normalising deportations. For instance, studies in connection with schools have highlighted teachers sometimes “softening” the worries evident among students whose classmates have been deported and pinpointed educators’ worries about students having to witness removal first-hand. These concerns about the emotions of those who remain may end up facilitating the deportation regime ([Martin et al. 2018](#); [Svensson 2019](#)).

Moreover, emphasis on public resistance to only select deportation orders – such as those pertaining to migrants who are “integrated” or “worthy” of remaining – may result in the strengthening of exclusionary practices ([Horsti 2013](#); [Nielsen & Myong 2019](#)). As previous studies have shown, public anti-deportation protests and their mediated representations often do not demand structural and political changes to deportation regimes but rather tactically demonstrate conformism (see, e.g. [Abdou & Rosenberger 2019](#)).

It is therefore necessary to acknowledge these pitfalls in the framework of “transformative relationships.” Not everyone has relationships, not everyone is welcomed into communities. A relational perspective is always to some extent selective. In addition, the focus on society that deports should merely add to deportation studies that focus on the deported, those threatened by deportation, and

their immediate families. Instead, in line with the novel perspective that we propose in this issue, a critical approach focused on revealing system-level practices that foster inequalities is central.

Articles in this volume elucidate how state-level policies and practices condition the lives of individuals and communities. Based on ethnography in the Kærshovedgaard Departure Centre, Syppli Kohl (2023) conceptualises departure centres as affective borderwork that aim to induce “voluntary” return by making life intolerable. Backman’s (2023) ethnography in Swedish detention centres shows how the staff produces deportability through affective labour so that removals can be carried out in a way that fits the Swedish deportation regime’s humanitarian framework. Horsti and Pirkkalainen (2023) argue that the state’s suspicion of the genuineness of asylum seekers’ Christian faith also conditions the citizens’ fundamental right to define one’s faith. Kotilainen’s (2023) analysis of mediated protest during deportation flights illustrates how public awareness and attention are conditioned by the intersectional conditions for recognition. However, despite conditionalities, each article also highlights the agency of individuals and their capacity to negotiate a meaningful life and organise more structural solidarity action at the civil society level. Increasingly strict state-level migration policies have led to different kinds of disruptions between citizens and state institutions and may ultimately change citizens’ sense of belonging, identity, and attachments to the nation.

CONCLUSION

This multidisciplinary special issue makes visible various aspects of deportations and deportability, which in the state’s bureaucratic processes are often rendered invisible. Emotional ties between deportees and citizens of the deporting countries, emotional reactions of people engaged in administrative deportation processes, and wider emotional and affective consequences for citizens of deporting countries who witness deportation processes are issues that are often left aside in migration and deportation research. The special issue develops and critically discusses the notion of “transformative relationships” in the context of deportations. With a focus on how deportations shape deporting societies, this special issue is intended to contribute to critical migration research by aiming to diminish unequal divisions between “us” and “them” and avoiding “othering” deportees and deportable people.

FUNDING INFORMATION


The Special Issue received funding from the Academy of Finland project Deportation in a Mediated Society.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Karina Horsti  orcid.org/0000-0002-3700-6380
University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

Päivi Pirkkalainen  orcid.org/0000-0003-3705-0899
University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

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*Nordic Journal of
Migration Research*
DOI: 10.33134/njmr.714

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Horsti, K and Pirkkalainen, P. 2023. Emotions and Affect in Deportation: The Transformative Power of Social Relationships. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 13(4): 1, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.714>

Submitted: 17 April 2023

Accepted: 02 November 2023

Published: 07 December 2023

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