



2009 WORKSHOP

IDENTIFYING THE PERSON: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

St Antony's College, University of Oxford

25 September 2009

Abstract

Identifying Asylum Seekers

MELANIE GRIFFITHS, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

Those within the asylum system are repeatedly pressed for evidence of their identity, from solicitors, judges, MPs, companies running detention centres, foreign embassies and most particularly the UK Border Agency. The question of who one is and how this can be proven is fundamental to the asylum system and is increasingly framed as an issue of criminality. I have recently finished 18 months of fieldwork with asylum seekers and refugees living in Oxford and detained at Campsfield House Immigration Removal Centre just outside Oxford. Whilst still at the preliminary stages of analysing my data, it is abundantly clear that the problems of identification are central to the immigration system - both from the perspective of governments and the individuals claiming asylum. I give examples of some of the problems created by the UK Border Agency's assumptions and bureaucratic requirements of identity verification, from the difficulties of handling money without identity documents to the forced invention of dates of birth and surnames for those who don't know or have them. I will particularly focus on the power of fingerprints to override asylum claims, the impacts of disputed nationality and the almost inevitable but complex slide into illegality for those without identity documents. As objects, such documents often become the basis of asylum decisions and eventual removals from the UK, and have the power to criminalise when absent and yet tend to be dismissed as fabricated when present.

The Documentation of Individual Identity: Historical and Comparative Perspectives since 1500

An international network of academics sponsored by The Leverhulme Trust

<http://identinet.org.uk>