Of “old” and “new” ways: Generations, border control and the temporality of security

Karine Côté-Boucher
Université de Montréal, Canada

Abstract
Whether it insists on the significance of anticipation or interrogates the centrality of pre-crime to security practice, current scholarship misses how security professionals make sense of their work’s temporality. Borrowing its theoretical tools from the sociology of generations and evaluation, this article focuses on how Canadian border officers rely on generational categorizations to negotiate change in their work. It proposes exploring the coexistence of competing temporalities in border control through the notion of generational borderwork. Produced by different paths of professional socialization and embedded in tensions over social status in ports of entry, generational borderwork makes more explicit the security field’s logic of aging, the internal dissensions over policing methods and the decisions these differences sustain. Whether it concerns nostalgia for economic protectionism or disagreements over the respective value of intelligence, technologies and interview skills, the contested nature of time in border control invites investigation into officers’ transforming policing sensibilities.

Keywords
Anticipation, borders, generations, policing, security, temporality

Despite a wide literature concerned with border control, the everyday work of border officers is poorly understood and little theorized. Nevertheless, in a context of restructuring in border agencies, paying attention to what border officers do and how they see their...
work appears essential for studies of border control. Some empirical investigations held in North America, West Africa, Europe and Australia describe this work as a street-level policing activity characterized by monotonous paperwork and repetitive questioning of travelers (Gilboy, 1991). It is an occupation with its own set of political challenges (Mountz, 2010), from anticipated pressures by politicians over sensitive decisions (Gilboy, 1992) to demands coming from exacting headquarters (Chalfin, 2010). How border officers’ work shapes their subjectivity and the plurality of meanings they give to their job has also attracted limited attention (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015)—from their sense of uselessness (Casella Colombeau, 2015) and of their privileged position (Heyman, 2002) to their ethos of suspicion (Pratt and Thompson, 2008).

This article examines another aspect of border guards’ “mundane forms of professional and personal self-understanding” (Aas and Gundhus, 2015: 2), that is how they see themselves as pertaining to different generations. Younger and more experienced officers argue they practice and see border policing differently. When describing their daily routines, officers refer to “generations” or to what they consider to be “old ways” and “new ways” of doing borderwork. If “old ways” refer to a variety of dispositions (i.e. ease with trade and national regulations on goods, traditional border enforcement skills such as interviewing and detection of behavioral “risk indicators”) as well as interests, affinities and preferences (i.e. public service, taxation, economic protectionism, good relations with local communities), officers were seen to embrace “new ways” when they supported the adoption of the firearm and risk management principles, showed an ease with databases and detection technologies as well as focused their attention on law enforcement.

There are two reasons why examining more closely how officers speak generationally about their practice matters. The first reason has to do with a recent paradigmatic shift in border control. It is characterized by lesser taxation on global trade, a global agenda for securing people’s mobilities as well as significant investments in detection and information technologies—trends well covered by the literature. It has been argued that, to take the full measure of these changes, they must be studied in practice (Côté-Boucher et al., 2014; Loftus, 2015). But how border guards experience the consequences of this changing political script is less well known. My research shows that doing border control under these new conditions is the topic of daily discussion and disagreement in ports of entry. Officers often attribute their divergent points of view (about topics such as the use of technologies or the importance of protecting the economy) to the notion that they belong to different generations, with their respective work experience and professional socialization. This article takes security actors’ talk about generations seriously because it sheds light on how officers’ conduct is shaped by these disagreements. Ultimately, investigating generations tells us about how border officers justify their decisions, achievements and failures (and that of their colleagues), and whether, and when, they find their work meaningful.

How border guards speak of their daily labor of law enforcement, risk management, trade regulation, taxation and administration exposes the different “temporal scales” (Valverde, 2010: 12) in which security unfolds. Accordingly, I make a second intervention in the following pages. Border guards’ characterization of their work as generational invites us to reconsider the question of temporality in security. An influential scholarly interpretation proposes that security is concerned with anticipating threats (Pickering and
McCulloch, 2009) or even with “act[ing] in the face of uncertainty” (Amoore, 2013: 62). In areas such as border control, counterterrorism, cybersecurity and criminal justice, security actors would not as much aim to intervene after a crime has been committed but are concerned with predicting and preventing “that which has not yet occurred and may never do so” (Zedner, 2007: 262). However, empirical studies show variations in the temporality of security as it remains shaped by political context, bureaucratic and budgetary constraints, organizational culture as well as by the continuing significance of long-established, more reactive policing habits (Amicelle, 2014; Sanders et al., 2015).

I add to these findings by inquiring into how, under conditions of organizational instability in security agencies, such variations also express themselves in the changing subjectivity and professional dispositions of security workers. To do so, the article presents a take on the sociology of generations that is inspired by the sociology of evaluation and boundary work (Lamont, 2012)—which insists that people engage in interpretive work about their lives. A good part of this interpretation rests on activities of categorization that evaluate practices and distribute social status. In interview, officers had recourse to this popular cultural repertoire (“generations”) and applied it to border policing—saying something like “there is such a thing as young and old generations of border officers and let me explain to you the lesser value of what the other generation does”. By doing so, officers not only temporalize their work (those are “old ways”; this is “the future of the border”) but also attribute positive or negative meaning to belonging to one or the other generation. Accordingly, officers classify their skills, training, regulatory knowledge, professional attitudes and work methods along a temporal scale of worth from which they determine what constitutes a job well done. It is this work of categorization, and the practices it both reflects and sustains, that I call generational borderwork. Accordingly, I propose to investigate how, in a context of transformation, border officers “make sense” (Chan, 2007) of their work by associating it with differentially valued temporalities of border control. These diverse temporalities count: they are entangled in the day-to-day implementation of changing policies, regulations and programs and they are central to the distribution of status and privileges at the border.

Drawing on 32 semi-structured interviews with frontline personnel working “commercial” (assessing trucks, truck drivers and goods) at the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), the remainder of this article unfolds as follows: first, it provides a short explanation about the notion of generations. After a quick historical overview of recent organizational change in border control in Canada, it then illustrates generational borderwork along three themes: some officers’ nostalgia for an honorable and economically sensitive occupation, their accounts of the comparative value of interviewing and technological aptitudes as well as instances of social demotion for older officers. Building on these conclusions, the last section takes us beyond debates about anticipation and considers how generational borderwork presents an alternative insight into the temporality of security, as well as into the evolving practice of security actors.

While I acknowledge that borders remain spaces where mobile individuals are subjected to the full sovereign power of the state (Côté-Boucher, 2008), this article approaches border officers as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010 [1980]) faced with paradigmatic border policy changes. Contributing to the scholarship concerned with the temporality of security and the changing subjectivities of border security professionals,
it stresses the importance of engaging with how generations make up contemporary security.

About generations

Since Mannheim’s (1952 [1923]) classic text, “The problem of generations”, the interest in generations in the social sciences stems from a wish to better appreciate the swift pace of change in modernity as well as its effects upon individuals. We may be tempted to ask: what is a generation? For Foster (2013: 197), the question is misleading: “I ask not ‘what is a generation?’ or even ‘what are the characteristics of this or that generation’, but rather ‘what do people think it is, and what are the consequences of such thinking?’”.

Sociologically understood, generations elude the equation with birth cohorts—those demographically pre-established groups sharing birth years and which echo popular designations (e.g. Baby Boomers, Generation X or Millennials). Since they are not cohorts, their boundaries cannot be clearly drawn. As Boltanski (2009: 65–70) suggests, people form collectives through overarching categories; they are “necessary fictions” that actors use to speak of their reality in terms that make sense of their experience. These fictions have concrete consequences on how people feel, act and think. Accordingly, during interviews with Canadian border officers, it was not only specific groups of workers that became accounted for as generational but more precisely skills, aptitudes and work ethics which officers saw as shaped in close yet distinct historical moments. Through their “generational narratives” (Foster, 2013), border officers make sense of their shifting work experience and build forms of “self-identification” (Aboim and Vasconcelos, 2014) with those they see as peers and which are enacted in everyday interactions in ports of entry.

As border control becomes a security, law enforcement and trade facilitation endeavour, this self-identification is made possible by real-life transformations in the structural conditions in which border officers work. Generations in security settings are formed through what has been already studied as the shared experience and patrimony of dispositions acquired by security professionals throughout their work experience (Bigo, 2014). Canadian officer hiring and training now favors certain types of behaviors, skills and credentials that are seen as more likely to fit contemporary understandings of border control—such as interest to carry a firearm and for law enforcement. After integrating into ports of entry, officers begin to compare, evaluate and classify each other’s practices. As shown in the next section, the familiarity (or lack thereof) with technologies is also giving shape to this idea, so is the notion that border policing has “entered another phase” or that border control should be about security and not about taxation. Further, the moment you cushion yourself in a collective (“older” and “younger” generations) helps your claims to be taken seriously—as we will see, it helps substantiate the assertion that you are being demoted by new officers or that your own group thinks many older officers are no longer up to the task of securing borders. Generations also shed light on the logic of aging in security, which expresses itself in distributions of statustitles and resources (Bourdieu, 1984: 152)—where newcomers pit against seniority their higher educational achievements and their alignment with current border policy.
In short, securitized spaces are made by actors who conceive and experience them through historically situated dispositions, feelings and investments in security projects. Security professionals share common historical circumstances but they experience them differently. Detached from strict chronology, generational borderwork alludes to lived and socially constructed experiences of time. Mannheim’s (1952 [1923]: 283) curious but heuristic formula, “the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous”, speaks to this synchronicity of diverse generational experiences: “[d]ifferent generations live at the same time. But since experienced time is the only real time, they must all in fact be living in qualitatively quite different subjective eras.”

Generational narratives about daily tasks and work ethics coupled with readings of difference in policing dispositions hint at these distinct temporal worlds in which border officers work. The last section of the article offers a number of conclusions as to what this means for theorizing the temporality of security. But first, let us examine how these narratives have an impact on border control as it is practiced and experienced in Canadian ports of entry.

Revisiting the passage from protectionism to “secure trade”

Border agencies evolve in a context of organizational instability that trickles down to training, technologies, procedures and regulations. Generational borderwork is thus at the center of the dynamics of full adoption, strategic adaptation, partial indifference and even resistance to change in border policing. In fact, after more than a hundred years of economic protectionism and even longer as taxation bodies, there has been a massive global effort to overhaul border and customs agencies into a trade facilitation, law enforcement and security endeavor in North America. Beyond the usual historical mark of 9/11, the depth of organizational change in border control in Canada can be traced back to major policy shifts involving free trade negotiations with its powerful neighbor, the United States. The Canada–US Free Trade Agreement (1988) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (1994; also including Mexico) introduced a pro-market approach to border regulation and put an official end to more than a century of economic protectionism. Since then, more recent plans such as the Smart Border Declaration (2001) and the Beyond the Border Initiative (2012) articulated border security to trade facilitation. Following this change in mandate, the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) was created in 2003. Historically under the responsibility of the Ministry of Revenue, the new Agency passed under the purview of the new Public Safety Department. In contrast to other countries where customs and border enforcement are placed under the purview of different agencies, whether they do immigration enforcement and customs compliance or process travelers, all Canadian border officers work for the CBSA.

By the mid-2000s, the CBSA had become a “secure trade” enterprise, at least on paper. In light of this reform, frontline officers have been asked to set aside taxation and economic protectionism for counterterrorism, law and immigration enforcement as well as trade facilitation. Yet, the conversion has not been immediate. It entailed a complete restructuring of the organizational and technological culture of border services, a process that is still ongoing. It included the automation of customs and travelers processing, the
centralization of risk evaluation, the multiplication of security actors involved (e.g. federal police and integrated border enforcement teams) as well as the transfer of some border control responsibilities to transportation companies through trusted trader programs. Taken together, these trends challenge officers’ traditional discretionary powers and denote the diminished relevance of local ports of entry in overall border policing (Côté-Boucher, 2016).

This project also entails interventions in security professionals’ subjectivation. Counter to assumptions of smooth enactment of a preemptive border policy, the fact that officers refer to themselves as belonging to different generations tells us about the messy unfolding on the ground of a political project to make the border “smart”. These interventions and their effects on officers carry implications for conceptualizing how border-work generates its own specific forms of classification about what a good job looks like and about the worth of everyday street-level border policing. As mandates are redesigned and the latest programs, regulations and technologies are rolled in, enthusiastic and enforcement-minded border officers fresh out of Customs College integrate close-knit work teams that have experienced the brunt of these transformations. “New ways” and “old ways” meet, sometimes clashing, thus altering border policing. Taking into account how security professionals talk of the timeliness of their ways sheds light on a job in transition where security is not as future-oriented as usually thought.

**Border nostalgia**

Generational narratives show up in some interviews in the form of nostalgia for an imagined more respectable past of border control. As they praise how things used to be, these officers offer comparative moral judgments that shed a critical light onto what border policing has become, and provide them with an honorable sense of self. They reflect on the sometimes aggressive attitude displayed by their younger colleagues eager to find opportunities to enforce the law and “catch bad guys”. In contrast, their memories evoke a time when visitors were greeted with “Welcome to Canada”—an epoch without batons, guns or handcuffs, a time before computers when officers had full control of the border, knew their paperwork, fostered trust with locals, made complete use of their discretionary powers and knew how to interview a lie out of a border crosser. Such nostalgic recollections have also been found in research with patrol officers who reminisce about simpler times when “there was ‘no need’ for technology to do good police work” (Tanner and Meyer, 2015: 389).

A particular form of this nostalgia exposes doubts about younger officers’ commitment to their job and about their law enforcement capacities. During these nostalgic moments, officers long for the dignity of a modest work life committed to the protection of Canada’s borders. In their grievances, officers complain about this new group of officers, unwilling to display the dedication they feel they have shown throughout their career.

While it is primarily older officers who discuss this distinct affective relationship to their work, a rookie also expresses yearning for a time he has not known:

I really have trouble with that. You know, someone who has done 35 years at the border, as a customs officer, I respect that. It’s wonderful. And I think we are in a generation, those under
30, under 35, they come in and they already see themselves: “I intend to become an investigator” \[i.e. attached to the CBSA intelligence unit\]. So in less than two years, they apply. [...] You see, I can say that in our generation we don’t have… I had good discussions with people of my age in relation to that and I am one of the only ones who hold this point of view. [They ask:] “You see yourself doing shifts all your life?” [mimics sarcastic tone]. Well, if it ends up that way, yes.

(Thomas)

Thomas remarks on what he conceives as his young colleagues’ disrespect for a life spent working as a border officer. He disapproves of these recruits’ wish to quickly move up the hierarchy and associates their desire for a swift promotion—and escape from night–day shifts—with a depreciation of the profession.

In what is expressed as a forlorn attempt to teach rookie officers the importance of duties and taxes, William, an experienced officer describing himself as someone “tattooed with the organization”, is dismayed at the lack of interest displayed by his junior colleagues in the matter of cross-border trade regulation:

William: But the young officers to whom I speak of economy, they don’t give a damn. [...] So the young ones, they will say: “We do law enforcement. We catch bad guys, that’s what we do.” And the collection of duties and taxes, the economic protection aspect of our work: “Let’s leave that with old Hush Puppies, you know, they don’t feel like running after the ball anymore, we’ll leave them that.”

Karine: Hush puppies are going to retire.

William: So we will be left with the new generation. So I said: “Let me ask you a question. You are my little Dobermans. You are good, it is true that you have flair. You work well. Can you swear that in 30 years, you will have the same determination, the same motivation? [...] Let me doubt that. Let me doubt that.” So we left it there, you see. It is all suppositions. But it is part of the conversation that we must have between generations who live together.

Nostalgic narratives also offer a grounded critique of the ways in which border control makes space for security professionals who are more receptive to antagonistic forms of policing. Running against, or at least, across this trend, nostalgic evocations inform a more or less veiled critique of the land border’s contemporary political economy. Given a strong border policy orientation toward trade facilitation for Canadian border services, one would expect to find officers who primarily value their law enforcement responsibilities and adopt a conception of their role that reflects their legislated mandate. But for a majority of the experienced officers I talked to, their understanding of their work’s purpose is at variance with this official language. They lament a time when land ports of entry were seen to be essential to local economic life. Career officers speak of how they offer support to neighboring communities, helping with customs papers and enforcing taxation to protect their businesses from US competitors. More than 20 years after free trade, these experienced officers still regard economic protectionism as a significant
aspect of their work and associate the protection of Canadians’ livelihood with a more virtuous take on border policing than law enforcement. These officers indicate a clear disjuncture with established free trade policy, a disjuncture not pointed out in the border literature.

William’s protectionist assertions are echoed by Ronald’s. Customs is a second career for Ronald. This is not exceptional. Four of my interviewees became border officers either after being laid off because of downsizing or after working during one or two decades in economic sectors that ended up in difficulty. This experience shaped Ronald’s outlook on the purpose of his work as a border officer. He discusses at length the interrelations between the 2008 economic downturn and the current decline of the manufacturing sector in the Eastern Canada–US borderland (a former car-making and steel powerhouse) and reflects on the consequences of these structural economic changes upon his work. For Ronald, his job is also about keeping Canadian workers employed:

Ronald: The big thing we got to watch for is cabotage in Canada. Point to point moves. If we’re worried about employment. I’m always worried about it. I try to protect the drivers. I figure that’s our job here, to protect… Not only to check for contraband but to protect the industry. […] I want to find out if they’re trying to steal Canadian jobs. Because what stops a company once they start “cabotaging” to do it all the time? And then, our drivers don’t have any work. Right? […]

Karine: Do you find your colleagues also have that concern?
Ronald: They don’t have the background. They don’t understand. They don’t… And it’s not my job to educate them.

These officers express nostalgia for what they picture as the honorable past of border security. Of course, whether these recollections are factually correct is beside the point (Sandberg, 2010). Officers’ generational narratives about how the border used to be delineate conflicting policing identities and complexify our understanding of the temporality of security. In this sense, by fostering a reading of the present anchored in a sentimental reconstruction of the past, nostalgia, writes Davis (1979: 10), “tells us more about present moods than about past realities”. There is nothing particularly “regressive” or “progressive” about this nostalgia but it does expose a sense of loss within a changing profession (Loveday, 2014: 724). Further, officers’ nostalgic evocations activate temporal assessments of borderwork that do not wholeheartedly embrace contemporary security trends. This sheds a new light on border officers’ subjectivities; whether we encounter “chivalrous” attitudes (Pratt and Thompson, 2008), humanitarian approaches (Pallister-Wilkins, 2015) or contemporary experiences of discretion (Mutsaers, 2014; Pickering and Ham, 2014) at the border, it is fruitful to inquire into the historicity of these ordinary forms of self-understanding.

“I want to look you in the eye”: The generational character of border policing methods

A major point of contention encountered during fieldwork concerns the appropriation of security technologies, and particularly the importance they are given in contrast to other
border policing methods. Interestingly, interviewees associated my questions about their work routines with the respective effectiveness of computers, enforcement data, interviewing skills and the aptitude to interpret behavioral, oral and visual “risk indicators”. While the two latter abilities were valued by all, they were understood by older officers to be the result of their training and experience—an experience that younger officers would never acquire because of their dependence on computers. Meanwhile, the lack of technological proficiency was seen with pity by colleagues of those showing difficulties to assimilate these tools—generally older officers. These views were almost always expressed in generational terms and pointed to a regime of distinction where divergent understandings of valuable border policing skills compete.

When it comes to the role of technologies in border policing, my interview with Arthur is particularly revealing. It presents lessons for considering the diverse temporalities in which borderwork unfolds and a cautionary tale for those enthusiastically embracing an overly anticipatory take on border security. Arthur calls himself an “old fart”. Displaying limited technological literacy, he admits typing very slowly and having difficulties using the databases at his disposal. Further, he distrusts intelligence. For him, “nothing has changed” since he started as an officer 20 years earlier. When one is skilled at interviewing, no intelligence or risk category is really necessary to evaluate a traveler or a shipment: there is only the truck driver, the officer and the relation they establish in a 30-second interaction at the booth. Throughout his interview, Arthur keeps insisting on his proficiency with visual and behavioral assessments, thus privileging face-to-face interactions with drivers:

Arthur: That’s what I’m here for. To protect. I try to do that every interview. […] How do I know who’s high-risk or low-risk without an interview? [Short pause] Do I know you’re high-risk or low-risk? Without knowing you?

Karine: Maybe you received intelligence, or…

Arthur: Well receiving intelligence is different. If I have the intelligence in front of me, I listen to the intelligence, I send them in. But if I don’t have intelligence… our intelligence system is weak. We have a program out front and where we run everybody’s ID but only… what’s in there is what we input into there. […] So the guy from Texas, first time here, we have nothing on him. So now I have to really concentrate on his eyes. And a lot of young officers, because they’re not used to it, they’re more used to computers… So when I’m interviewing—as a young officer now, keying: “Where do you live? How long you’ve been away?” [Arthur mimics typing and looking at the computer while asking questions]. The eye contact is missed. […] And I try to learn… like I… I can do very well on the computers. I learn. I’m not… I’m not afraid of them. I will learn, but I just… old ways. [short pause] I want to look you in the eye.

My interviewees’ narratives are replete with evidence that the introduction of a variety of enforcement-related technologies is productive of new bodily dispositions that
challenge established borderwork practice centered on seeing. As illustrated by this excerpt, Arthur has strong views regarding the greater emphasis put on information technologies by his younger colleagues and the diminished importance given to visual evaluations in border decisions. These views are widely shared and many career officers expressed variations on this theme. They explicitly and deliberately drew attention to what they saw as the gradual loss of interviewing skills and of the ability to recognize visual “indicators of risk”—such as signs of nervousness in drivers. In practically the same terms and gestures, these officers mimicked an imaginary rookie officer concentrated on his computer screen, entering information provided by a truck driver but failing to make eye contact. They doubted the efficiency of young officers’ over-reliance on often dated—and sometimes unreliable—computer-generated data in their evaluation of travelers.

It should not, however, be assumed that experienced officers do not rely on the technologies at their disposal. In fact, most of those interviewed—experienced, mid-career and rookies—believe customs and enforcement databases to be useful. It is the particularities of their use and the significance they give to these technologies that differed. For Richard, a mid-career officer, “the backbone of our job is the interview”. Yet, he disagrees with giving more worth to interviewing skills over other technological enforcement devices:

Some people put a little more weight in the tools that we have. And some people don’t. It all depends, it may vary... we have a tool that’s called ion scan. That’s the perfect example. I mean sometimes it’s a great tool to... I guess you’d say... rule out a client. Let’s say you check the guy out and he comes back negative on the ion test. Fantastic! [But] let’s say he comes back positive for marijuana. Ok, so now I’m thinking: “OK this guy at the very least uses marijuana. Ok, well let’s gage his credibility now.” How are we going to gage credibility? I’m going to bring the guy in and I’m going to start interviewing him.

(Richard)

Deploying another repertoire of justification, younger officers also insist on deep-seated differences in work methods. Yet, for them, technologies positively support an assumed break with the past. These officers question the reticence toward technologies (or lack of skill) of some of their experienced colleagues now that “customs has reached another phase”—as argued by Thomas, also quoted above.

Borderwork speaks to the complex socio-technical assemblages of border detection that make up technologies and officers’ traditional know-how. Officers’ traditional “techniques of listening” (Salter, 2007: 58) are certainly losing their appeal as primary means of examination, but they are not disappearing. Despite the introduction of computers, random referrals and the centralization of intelligence in border agencies, border scholars would be well inspired to study the various ways in which the interactions between street-level borderwork, surveillance technologies and regulations shape decision making. I suggest that the generational reliance on different methods of profiling and examination at the border tells an important part of this story.
Social demotion

Tanner and Meyer (2015: 391) remark that “technology [has] destabilized the authority of elder [police] officers”; the latter would see this authority “undermined by the need for the technological skills that the younger generation seems to understand spontaneously”. Similar devaluation can be found at the border, featuring differential technological abilities and unequal academic credentials.

During their interviews, these officers worked quite hard to conceal their symbolic (or effective) demotion in their port of entry either by understating their difficulties with computers or, as Nathan did, by insisting on former feats: “I was the number one enforcement officer. Guns and drugs [he lies back on his seat and boosts his chest in pride]. I got a kidnapper, I got bank robbers, I got plaques on the wall.” Others go through social demotion as their experience, gained after years of “working the line”, gradually becomes at odds with changes in the techno-material culture of their port of entry. They may be pushed to the margins in everyday interactions with coworkers, singled out for their anachronistic “old ways”. Arthur complains of occasional stigmatization and mockery: “I know they tease a lot […] Young people think old people are old, right? And they have no respect to begin with.” On the other hand, it is organizational practice that may downgrade “out-of-the-game” officers. Years of alternating between day and night shifts in those ports create a long-term fatigue that can affect attention and focus. An officer’s suggestions may also be increasingly ignored and her expertise ceases to be sought and recognized by management. This officer is passing from a position of authority, which granted her esteem, to that of an aged officer who is smiled at patiently, sometimes mocked and generally not taken seriously.

Older officers react differently to their delegitimation. Some show resentment toward younger colleagues’ attitudes and promotions—an experienced officer bitterly told me that he had “regressed” after a younger colleague became supervisor instead of him: “I was his boss. He took my place.” Others are resigned at what that same officer called being “out of the game”. Older, as well as a few younger officers, also nostalgically longed for what they saw as disappearing practices. Some career officers view of themselves as qualified border workers is seriously challenged when they are removed from the position in which they excelled, when those who knew about their achievements do not follow them in this new position or simply retire, when new technologies are introduced or when rookies bring in “new ways” learned in Customs College. Much of what characterized their work environment and provided them with a sense of purpose is challenged and, for various reasons (e.g. difficulties with technologies, health problems, ageism or lack of continuous training), they find themselves unable to keep up. Associated with a past temporality of border control, they see themselves as being pushed away from the center of action and into the margins of the security field.

Security and temporality: Shifting the discussion

Against a backdrop of theoretical understandings that portrays the temporality of security as future-oriented—notions like preemption, pre-crime and anticipation come to mind—it came as a surprise that border officers met during this research kept associating
different work methods, bordering devices, security mandates and aspects of their occupational identities with the past, the present or the future of border control. Why was this surprising? For criminologists, geographers and international relations scholars alike, high and intelligence-led policing is preoccupied with preemption. Admittedly, a variety of techniques of anticipation are deployed in the name of national security with the aim of forestalling threats before they occur. As a result, security is seen as “a technology of the future” (De Goede, 2012: xxi; see also Mythen and Walklate, 2010: 34). Amoore (2013: 9) suggests that risk governance authorizes the emergence of modes of calculation where preemptive thinking builds on the capacity to include into decision making the uncertainty of an “array of possible projected futures” raised by a coming event. Similarly, Ratcliffe et al. (2014: 207) announce that with intelligence-led policing (ILP), the police have moved from being

reactive responders to proactive risk managers of a security environment […], integrating the “old knowledge” of policing, such as criminal informants and information gleaned from suspect interviews, with the “new knowledge” of policing, crime analysis, and the surveillance of national databases.

Security would thus rest on a suspicious sensibility which dovetails with a preemptive approach harnessing the very unpredictability of a catastrophic future into security imaginaries (Aradau, 2015; McCulloch and Wilson, 2016).

However, assuming that security work necessarily leads to preemptive risk management—or that it mirrors the goals of anticipatory thinking—is a leap all are not willing to take. In fact, a growing number of scholars invite us to distinguish security authorities’ preemptive rhetoric from the more complex reality of security work. In the area of counterterrorism, Amicelle (2014) shows how preemption acts as a “narrative of legitimation” for obtaining increased investigative powers while security practices continue following a classical criminal investigative model—where intelligence is used after the commission of a crime. Counter to a perception of ILP that would now target crime through predictive analytics, policing continues to be reactive, more preoccupied with responding to calls for service than with “examining problems in advance of their occurrence” (Manning, 2008: 65). Similarly, Sanders et al. (2015) have found that ILP has been converted into a budgetary accountability tool for policing organizations faced with demands to justify their effectiveness.

If current studies untangle how, and to what extent, anticipation permeates security, they nevertheless overlook how security professionals make sense of their profession, how they imagine their practice as immersed in the social time of a security field where discontinuous temporalities coexist, from a disavowed but lingering past to a sometimes tense everydayness and an uncertain future. Instead of assuming that security projects are necessarily future-oriented, Valverde (2010: 18) invites us to investigate the “kind of temporality [that] is built into or presupposed in each concrete instance” of these projects. Indeed, social time is by definition contested and plural, “actively produced by and through various social practices” (Crawford, 2015: 473). If security professionals locate their practice in different social times (and not only according to a preemptive logic), what does this mean for theorizing the temporal orientation of security?
Making sense of borderwork through generational classifications

The varied subjective experiences of time that make up generational borderwork bring together a host of competing and conflicting views on how we should name, define and speak about border control. These views also betray contradictory classifications of border control methods. Ample scholarship has illuminated how borders classify things and people along risk scales that become articulated with judgments on belonging, citizenship and economic value (for an excellent illustration of this argument, see Aas (2011)). These classifications respond to their own temporal logic. As argued by Mezzadra and Neilson (2013: 132), categorizing things and people through borders creates “borderscapes where the compression, elongation, and partitioning of time exerts effects of control, filtering and selectivity” that differentially impact how quickly migrants and commodities may cross borders.

Little explored by the border and security literature, however, are the ways in which classifications internal to security agencies authorize, promote or dismiss specific security practices and knowledges by anchoring them in different social times—thus painting a picture of what a “job well-done” looks like. Yet, such categorizations are key to understanding border control. As in the case of temporal categorizations of what crosses borders, generational classifications shed another light onto the regulation of mobilities through borders. These categorizations may influence whether, when committing a customs infraction, a truck driver will receive a penalty that will go on record or be given a mere warning. They can also have bearing on whether information contained in databases about a driver, a shipment or an importer will be considered essential or partly disregarded in favor of an officer’s skill at establishing an interview that facilitates disclosure. Or, they may well influence how thorough an officer might be with a search recommended by a colleague depending on how she values this colleague’s border control abilities.

Consequently, border officers might belong to the same “universe” of border control (Bigo, 2014) but they may enter in competition with and criticize one another. In fact, border officers do not make up a single, cohesive “culture”, but offer competing perspectives about border policing, its practices and its goals. Generational borderwork represents a unique dimension of border control which illuminates the oft-silenced differences of views that shape border policing on the ground. A similar argument has been made about “management cops” and “street cops” (Reuss-Ianni, 1983: 4) where the competition between the two illuminates the “incongruent value systems” and mismatched expectations that characterize policing. Beyond representations of border officers as a monolithic occupational group, the notion adds to this literature by underscoring another, little studied feature of internal dissension in policing—the contentious coexistence of divergent sensibilities in security environments, and the decisions these variations sustain.

Of course, “old” and “new ways” do not come neatly packaged in single individuals but often indicate conflicting views on procedures and practices. For instance, I have met an officer who gave equal importance to basic border enforcement skills and public service (old ways). Another one was technologically savvy and open to carrying a firearm (new ways) yet still cared for the implementation of French labelling on products entering the country despite what he saw as the lack of official interest for enforcing this type
of national regulation in a free trade era (old way). But what generational borderwork tells us is that border guards’ work is shaped by these temporal categories. In fact, these labels are intrinsically comparative, where a generation is positioned as lacking in something (skill, attitude, know-how) that another generation putatively excels in (Pritchard and Whiting, 2014: 1620). Referring to these labels thus means stressing difference in terms that deploy moral assessments about what counts as “good” or “ineffective” borderwork. To claim that a security practice is innovative or that another comes from a previous era is to pass a judgment on its efficacy and relevance.

This is far from innocuous. Lamont tells us that valuing one’s group identity involves sharing a specific understanding of its worth that aims to both sustain its social position and negotiate “in daily interactions the negative meanings associated with one’s group” (Lamont, 2012: 2). Accordingly, generational categorizations serve to establish leverage in security settings; being in tune with the “future” of security can grant promotions and peer recognition. Inversely, it is also a way to disqualify, even render obsolescent, those associated with an anachronistic past. Insisting on the avant-garde character of specific ways of acting, feeling or thinking security may further marginalize those unwilling or unable to adopt these ways. Relegating people, practices and ways of life to bygone times has historically been a powerful othering mechanism in western thought (Fabian, 1983). Such thought processes—whereby differences between practices are temporalized and read as separating contemporaries from those who are associated with the past—confirm the influence within security settings of classificatory modes that distribute individuals along scales of success and failure, of development and anachronism, and where they are judged against a present standard that is imagined as harnessing the best of security’s future.

**Generational dispositions and professional socialization**

How did these classifications emerge? Davidshofer et al. (2015: 205) argue that “rendering security in practice terms first involves interpreting processes of (in)securitization as the effect of the activation of specific patrimonies […] of social dispositions in a given context”. How security professionals understand threat and risk, interact with technologies and make decisions is in great part the result of a process of socialization particular to security agencies (Bonelli and Raggazi, 2014: 485). Throughout their career, security professionals develop a “repertoire of practical justifications” (Bigo, 2014: 211) that “resists the evolving conditions of the field, creates tensions, and is shaken by new experiences” (Bigo, 2011: 242). Whether or not educational dispositions and those acquired in training facilitate or impede reform, has interested students of high and low policing. Security and police reform requires not only policy and structural amendments, but transformation in attitudes and behavior (Chan, 2004; Nolan, 2013). Change in organizational culture involves “altering the entrenched values, beliefs, and assumptions of officers” or it “runs the risk of leaving existing dispositions intact” (Loftus, 2009: 19).

My research indicates that when some level of attitudinal conversion is reached through the professional socialization of security workers, it likely produces distinct ways of doing security on the ground. In fact, the different approaches to borderwork encountered during fieldwork can be traced back, in great part, to the CBSA’s remodeling of hiring procedures
and training programs following the paradigmatic transformation of border control in the 1990s and 2000s. New hires are selected nationally, rather than among borderland residents looking for a stable federal job at their local port of entry—as it was the case before 2007. Training eschews a concern for taxation and economic protectionism, instead promoting law enforcement capabilities and familiarity with police, customs and immigration databases. Reformed CBSA training also includes arrest and seizure skills, detection of high-risk behavior as well as control and defense tactics. Future trainees must show a willingness to carry a firearm, thus attracting more policing-oriented individuals. In contrast, old-timers were mainly instructed in customs compliance and taxation by their colleagues. Many resist the adoption of the firearm as they do not consider it necessary to do their jobs.

Dispositions may vary from one officer to another according to individual interest and capacities. Yet, after years of working together under similar historical circumstances, my research shows that officers adopt a shared understanding of security practice. In this sense, the different skills, dispositions and attitudes for which rookies and experienced officers have been recruited and qualified, have contributed to the emergence of generational borderwork. Experienced workers try to pass some of their practical expertise onto their younger colleagues, who, in turn, introduce dispositions for which they have been hired or which they learned in their preparatory training. Therefore, the adaptation of both recruits and career officers to their new work environment encounters challenges that have consequences for theorizing what counts as a border policing sensibility. Professional socialization thus plays a central part in shaping “old ways” and “new ways” of doing border control.

Status and the dynamics of aging in the security field

To follow the development of temporal classifications in border policing is also to get a foothold into how dynamics of occupational change affect security professionals’ prestige. Following the common assertion that use of force represents an important but not definitional aspect of policing (Brodeur, 2007), French sociologists of policing Proteau and Pruvost (2008: 8, author’s translation) argue that the everyday practices of policing and security professionals “are less marked out by […] physical violence than by a variety of registers of distinction, conscious or unconscious, which allow one to impose oneself—or to attempt to—as a ‘real’ professional”. Tensions over classifications of work methods and representations of border control mobilize such registers, producing informal rankings called upon in disputes over status.

Because officers, as well as border policing organizations, attribute status and esteem through generational categorizations, it ultimately affects individual careers in the security field. Generational scales of distinction organize status through mechanisms that facilitate the reaching of valued positions, or reduce and even prevent their access (Bourdieu, 1984). Accordingly, the security field provides policing actors with both individual and organizational resources (Chan, 2007) which they mobilize in their competition. These contests can be concerned with what should be securitized and by whom, what is considered to be an appropriate security practice or which role security professionals should be playing. In addition, officers struggle over positions and advancement based on a different valuation of seniority and academic credentials.
For an older officer, showing ill-adapted adaptation to novel conditions within border control—something akin to what Bourdieu designates as the hysteresis effect—brings about a lack of recognition of her dispositions and abilities. What these officers often contest are “test formats” (Boltanski, 2009: 55), that is institutionalized selection mechanisms that grant access to coveted positions. At the CBSA, this translates into changes in hiring standards that emphasize higher education—similarly to efforts made by policing organizations to professionalize their officers (Lee and Punch, 2004). Most career officers I met during fieldwork had acquired a high school, and in some cases, a college degree. Meanwhile, mid-career and rookie officers were college graduates (often in Law and Security) or had graduated university in disciplines ranging from economy to education and labor studies. In the CBSA promotional system rewarding university education and being based on civil service competition, better diplomas ensure greater possibility of advancement.

Such a system tends to privilege testing abilities over years of experience and operational abilities, thus favoring those fresh out of school. I have seen this promotional dynamic to sometimes create awkward situations where younger officers with less experience are promoted to a supervisory position, overseeing the older, experienced colleagues who trained them. This distribution of status, access to perks and better wages, produces tensions between newer and career officers. As a result, the dispositions of border officers can also be conceptualized as a terrain of conflict where the dynamics of aging are played.

Security scholarship would be well served to investigate the ways in which ideas, but also technologies, methods, training and individuals, become older in the security field, by focusing on the internal history of this field—its “laws of aging”, that is on the dynamics that shape its transformation, ensure its stability or generate discontinuity (or what Bourdieu (1984: 144) calls, the mode de génération of a social field). Indeed, scholarship on security and borders often leave us with a sense that security is the realm of potentiality and perpetual newness—with its preemptive approach and its adoption of technologies. This is not surprising since it mirrors security agencies’ official outlook who support approaches to security associated with youth and novelty—such as computing skills, physical strength, quick learning abilities and capacity of adaptation. But it also means a security professional (or a technology, an enforcement practice, etc.) can appear quickly outdated. By being productive of—and being produced by—generational dynamics, perhaps security reveals as much its concern for the future as its own logic of aging.

Conclusion

I have argued that whether it insists on the significance of anticipation or calls into question the centrality of preemption in contemporary security, current scholarship disregards some unique dimensions of the temporalities in which security professionals locate their action—and those of their colleagues—on an everyday basis. I have shown how the contested nature of time in border control is expressed in competing yet transforming policing sensibilities. How security professionals make sense of and categorize borderwork through generational narratives thus expands the register of variables conceivably at work in shaping security practice. These narratives show how, far from constituting a
homogeneous group of security professionals, border guards diverge in how they qualify and evaluate what good borderwork means.

This generational talk thus offers a unique gateway into the daily reality of ports of entry as officers cope with reform. Approaching changes in security through a sociology of generations and of evaluation helps shedding light onto the dynamics of a transforming professional milieu, with its changing dispositions, emerging occupational sensibilities and novel patterns of professional socialization. Border control is thus also made up of disputes over status within border organizations which, as they are related to classifications of practices and normative understandings of borderwork, uncover the logic of aging specific to the security field. These struggles indicate that the pace of change in border control might not have been as quick as some would assume. As border and security scholars, we may take policy pronouncements about border security too seriously; proper investigations of street-level borderwork act as a welcome caveat to assumptions of immediate and unquestioned implementation of paradigmatic border policy imperatives.

Officers’ accounts also suggest that borderwork evolves in a more multifaceted temporal world than previously thought—from nostalgia for a simpler past and accusations of anachronism to overconfidence in technologies as tools of the future. These subjective dimensions of social time in security provision indicate that security professionals, despite being contemporaries, may nevertheless see themselves as belonging to different eras of border policing. Such imaginings have an impact on whether the pre-crime rationales on which security projects are built, find their enactment in practice. In fact, border control also builds on a yearning for a simpler, less technological and more honorable past.

Border policing is thus far from a monolithic endeavor. If we wish to come up with effective critiques of border control, we cannot ignore what is significant for border actors. This means paying attention to the inner workings of border agencies as well as to how these actors categorize not only mobilities but also their own practices and actions. As new border programs and technologies are developed and the remodeling of professional socialization continues, diverse skills, aptitudes and interests are likely to show up in ports of entry that leave open to investigation how security actors enact border policy, make sense of their work and shape their subjectivity in the process.

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Notes

1. Interviews were held during 2010 and 2011 in five land ports of entry located in Eastern Canada along the border with the United States border. They were carried out in French and
English—French excerpts have been translated for this article. Interviewees comprised two clerical workers (responsible for paperwork and customs-related administrative duties), one data analyst, one chief of operations (the main local management figure for a major port or a series of smaller ports), five supervisors (border officers’ immediate superiors) and 23 frontline border officers. Included in the latter were two targeters and one machine-release officer (low-level intelligence analyst and customs compliance analyst) as well as others who had held these positions in the past. Mainly in order to preserve the confidentiality of my interviewees (for instance, there are few targeters in each visited region), this article refers to all interviewees as “border officers”. Interviewee names were changed for the same reason. In contrast with airports located in major Canadian cities, all but one interviewees were white. This reflects the demographics of the Canadian borderland, and demonstrates the continuation of a local politics of appointment at the land border; this topic will be explored elsewhere.

2. The ion scan detects drug particles on a person (hands, clothes) or an object (dollar bills, steering wheel, etc.). The border officer swipes with a cloth the object or body part to be tested and gets it analyzed by the scan. These drug detection devices are also used in airports and prisons.

3. The CBSA “arming initiative” was first introduced in 2007. The arming of land, marine and inland officers was completed in 2016. A supervisor confirmed that the arming requirement discards potential applicants interested in public service employment and who, after learning of the necessity to be armed, decide not to pursue their plan to become border officers.

References


Author biography

**Karine Côté-Boucher** is Assistant Professor in the School of Criminology at Université de Montréal and a researcher at the Centre international de criminologie comparée. Her work focuses on the interactions between economy and security in border control, as well as interrogates diffuse borders as socio-technical environments and their impact on people’s lives.