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The Illegal as Mundane: Researching border-crossing practices in Indonesia's Riau Islands

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Abstract

Ways of studying illegal behaviour are important in the context of Indonesia, a country well known for its failure to deal adequately with the corruption that permeates every level of society. They are perhaps even more salient at the peripheries of the nation-state where government agencies struggle to contain the illegal practices that necessarily emerge where nation-states meet. This article reflects on our experiences conducting a decade-long study of an Indonesian borderlands that, while not initially focused on illegality, came – as a consequence of its ubiquity – to include it as a key construct. This experience led us to grapple not only with methodological questions about *how* to research illegality but also with assumptions about what illegality is and does. We argue that the only way to recognise and account for the quotidian nature of many kinds of illegal activity in the borderlands is to eschew an ethnography of exception in favour of an ethnography of the mundane.

Keywords

Border studies, ethnography, gender, illegality, methodology

Introduction

Accounts of illegality that focus on the underworld have the capacity to titillate, but they sometimes obscure the quotidian nature of much illegal activity and its location in relation to everyday life. As a consequence, too exclusive a focus on the otherness of illegal activities brings with it epistemological and methodological pitfalls, most significantly the risk of over-determining the meaning and significance of the 'illegal' in the lives of informants. In this article, we engage reflexively with the ways in which we researched and documented illegal activities in Indonesia's Riau Islands, a Southeast Asian border zone located just half an hour by boat from Singapore and Malaysia.

In the classic borderlands literature of Southeast Asia, the border zones described are generally isolated; constituted by arbitrary lines drawn through remote jungle or off a sparsely populated coastline (cf. Wadley and Eilenberg 2005; Horstmann and Wadley 2006; Ishikawa 2010). Here cross-border practices, such as the illegal movement of people and goods, are routine and only sporadically attract the interest of one or more state agencies, if at all. By contrast, cross-border activities may be the subject of more intense scrutiny by states in cases where border zones are militarised, are home to state-driven economic development programmes, or are the focus of competing state and private interests.

The Riau Islands' location has ensured that it is firmly in the gaze of not just one but rather multiple states, and thus under constant surveillance. Its location along the southern edge of one of the world's busiest shipping lanes has ensured that this border is under constant surveillance (see Figure 1). Yet, legacies of a long history of border crossing – much of which is now considered to be illegal (Ford and Lyons 2012) – remain. Despite being under close observation from the military and government agencies such as customs and immigration, the Riau Islands are known for gambling, the drug trade, and the size of the commercial sex industry, as well as the presence of a large number of irregular labour migrants, who use the province as a stepping stone to and from Singapore and Malaysia. But these are not the only forms of unsanctioned activity in the border zone; a host of otherwise unremarkable activities that involve crossing the border are also deemed illegal. Indeed, despite growing barriers to unfettered mobility, illegal border crossings remain part of the everyday experiences of a significant minority of Riau islanders.

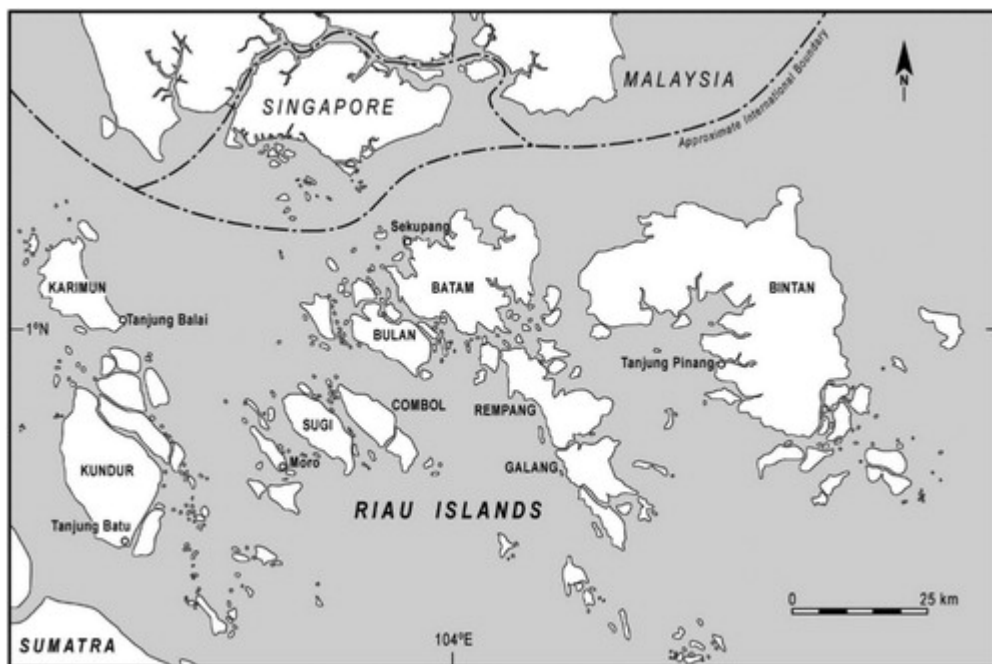


Figure 1. The Riau Islands. Map by Peter Johnston. Copyright Michele Ford and Lenore Lyons.

We began to engage in a sustained way with these everyday practices of illegality while conducting a large-scale research study into cross-border relationships between Singapore and the Riau Islands, called 'In the shadow of Singapore'. Our research framework was built around three forms of cross-border engagement, namely kinship, leisure and work. When we developed this framework, we knew that illegal activities would be an element of our study. It was clear from the very start that work and leisure activities in particular frequently involved an illegal dimension, such as workers crossing the border into Singapore or Malaysia with fake passports or without any documentation; smuggling of goods; or engagement in the 'sin industries' of sex work and gambling. At the beginning, however, illegality was not one of our primary analytical constructs.¹ But, as a consequence of its ubiquity, it became one of the most important aspects of our research.

¹ Fieldwork for the project took place in both Singapore and the Riau Islands. We conducted some interviews together in both locations, though primary responsibility for fieldwork was split according to country expertise.

In the early stages of the project, we assumed that careful, discrete enquiries would reveal key informants who would provide us with access to elements of the Riau Islands' underworld that had some salience for our research. In other words, we entered the research field with a conventional understanding of the separation between the legal and illegal worlds. Over the course of the project, we spoke to corrupt politicians, brothel madams, and a karaoke bar owner whose business was forced to close after a journalist threatened him with blackmail, and we visited brothel areas and illegal gambling dens. We also sought out a former domestic worker who had spent time in prison in Singapore for attempting to re-enter the country using false documents. Very quickly, however, we discovered that the illegal was all around us – that the grandmother who walked her grandchildren to the street corner to catch their school bus, the Chinese vegetable stallholder in the market, and the respectable retired school teacher down the road, had crossed the border without papers, received stolen goods, or established lucrative smuggling businesses.

In short, most of the 'criminals' we encountered lived very ordinary lives, and were more or less law-abiding in most respects. It was these less 'exciting' forms of illegality that led us to grapple not only with methodological questions about *how* to research illegality but also with assumptions about what illegality is and does. It would have been easy to dismiss our informants' illegal behaviours (the majority of which were victimless crimes) as being inconsequential and unworthy of serious scholarly attention. In doing so, however, we would have precluded from our analysis many of the most significant ways in which our field site was shaped by illegality. Instead, we came to understand that what we needed to develop – if we were to understand life in these particular borderlands communities – was not an ethnography of exception but an ethnography of the mundane.

An ethnography of the mundane

Borderlands scholars are well attuned to the absurd legal distinctions that result from the presence of an international boundary. In their important work on the nature of cross-border flows, Abraham and van Schendel (2005) identify overlapping regimes of (il)legality and (il)licitness that shape borderland communities and their engagements with one or more states. Abraham and van Schendel (2005) use the concept of 'licitness' to take into account the gap between the state's understandings of illegal activity and those understandings deployed by individuals within borderland communities. This characterisation of many cross-border practices as 'illegal but licit' – or what one of Galemba's (2008: 19) informants described as '... not *legal* legal ... It's a bit legal, a bit illegal' – reflects a disjuncture between what the state (or states) deem(s) to be illegal activity and the views expressed by individuals within borderland communities about the special nature of border life. As Abraham and van Schendel (2005: 17) argue, then, scholars must identify the origins of regulatory authority and distinguish between political authority (whether something is legal or illegal) and social authority (whether it is licit or illicit) if they are to understand the nuances of the legality and licitness of cross-border activities.²

Illegality was not a topic of importance or an issue that shaped the Singapore component of our fieldwork: while there are certainly 'spaces of non-existence' occupied by undocumented workers in Singapore's construction, service and sex industries; we did not talk to these workers in Singapore but on their return to Indonesia.

² In the case of our work on the Riau Islands, such an approach reveals a local ecology of licitness in which practices that break the laws of one or more authority are deemed by some to be warranted on the grounds that the laws themselves are 'bad' (Ford and Lyons 2012).

The concept of the mundane provides a way to think about the character of illegality in the Riau Islands because it draws attention away from definitions based on laws and statutes, and focuses instead on the meanings of particular actions for the individuals involved and for the community in which they live. Holloway and Hones (2007: 556) offer a useful definition of the mundane, which they say is:

not so much a quality inherent in an object or event but is instead an appearance or affordance generated at the intersection of object, subject, and location. Obviously, whether or not an object appears mundane will always depend to a considerable extent on its context and location and on the expectations of the viewer. Issues of appropriateness, usefulness, and convention suggest, for example, that a plain plastic raincoat will be encountered as relatively mundane in the context of a rainy city street and as relatively extraordinary in the context of a gala night at the opera: it is unexceptional in one context and unconventional in another.

The vast majority of illegal acts we characterise as ‘mundane’ fit comfortably within Sztompka’s (2008: 31) definition of ‘everyday life’. These include acts of ‘everyday corruption’ of the kind described in India by Jeffrey (2002) and Anjaria (2011), and ‘mundane crimes’, a term that Gibbons (1983: 214) uses to describe ‘a variety of commonplace, low visibility, and often relatively innocuous instances of lawbreaking that make up a generous portion of the crime problem in modern societies’ such as petty vice and public disorder offences, folk crime (for example, traffic offences) and low-level workplace crime (fiddling and perks), as well as environmental abuse offences such as littering or vandalism.

Importantly, what makes an illegal act mundane is not frequency nor repeatability but rather the attitude towards that act held by the person involved, and by the people (sometimes, even institutions) around them. While many mundane crimes are routine, others are sporadic or even one-off occurrences. In addition, not all mundane crimes are trivial. While authorities may recognise some mundane crimes as ‘folk crimes’ (cf. Ross 1960, 1973), others may constitute serious infringements of the law. For example, human trafficking is a serious crime. Yet, on the Lao-Thai border, the ‘ordinariness’ of trafficking makes this highly visible practice paradoxically invisible (Molland 2013: 301). In the Riau Islands, too, practices that identified as highly illegal are so imbricated in everyday life as to be entirely ordinary even where they pose a risk of some kind to those involved. Methodologically, then, our examination of practices deemed ‘illegal but licit’ required that we pay attention not just to flagrant examples of illegal activity, but also to the hidden and unremarked.

Searching for a methodology

Studies of illegal behaviour pose distinct methodological challenges. In some contexts, such research requires unconventional approaches and can involve significant personal risk.³ Examples include work within organised crime syndicates, criminal and youth gangs, and street communities (see, for example, Ferrell and Hamm 1998; for Indonesia, see Siegel 1998, Wilson 2015). The difficulties of working in such spaces should not be

³ This is not always the case, however. See, for example, Wong (2015), who argues that such research is not necessarily dangerous.

underestimated and are difficult to prepare for. As Nordstrom (1997: xvi–xvii) observes, reflecting on her fieldwork in Mozambique:

Because there was little information available on how to conduct ethnography in violent areas, I did not have preconceptions of what was or was not possible ... I encountered several situations where luck, quick reflexes, and the foresight of those around me protected me from physical violence I had not anticipated. While the data I collected were invaluable, hindsight has led me to conclude that our discipline would be well advised to provide its researchers with a more realistic and critical methodology than I first took with me to the field.

In many ways this kind of research is analogous to ethnographic work in highly politicised settings of the kind described by Thomson (2010: 32) in post-genocide Rwanda, in that it ‘further amplifies the usual challenges of fieldwork’. Nordstrom and others call for research training that better prepares researchers with the skills to deal with risky fieldwork situations (see also Howell 1990; Kovats-Bernat 2002). Yet, as Ferrell (1997) notes, even the most experienced researchers can be caught off guard when they least expect it in such situations.⁴

In seeking to develop skills to deal with the unexpected, it is important not to fall into the trap of making too great a distinction between the illegal and the conventional. As Ruggiero and South (1997: 61) argue, the ‘overlap between legal and illegal spheres of work has always been more substantial than is usually recognized’. It is therefore necessary to ‘challenge the static and unimaginative vision of such boundaries [between the legal and illegal] as borders found in much discourse on crime’ (ibid.). Coutin (2005: 7), too, emphasises the blurriness of the boundary between legal and illegal activity:

In reality, because law-breakers do not spend all of their time committing crimes, individuals move between these categories. Attending to movements and interconnections between the licit and the illicit highlights the social costs and theoretical inadequacy of policies and accounts that locate ‘the criminal’ and ‘the law-abiding’ in separate social and physical spaces.

This observation is even more salient when illegal activities are firmly located in the everyday (Thomas and Galemba 2013). In many cases, the tendency to quarantine legal and illegal activity is exacerbated by the traditional separation within the academic literature between analyses of informal and illicit economies, ‘with the former detailing the strategies of the urban poor, women or household labor ... while the latter is fused with literature on criminology, law, corruption and gangs’ (Galemba 2008: 20–21). Such separations also encourage us to overlook the extent to which illegal and informal activities ‘merge with more formal economic networks further in the exchange chain’ (Galemba 2008: 20).

The Riau Islands has the potential to be dangerous, with its concentration of ‘sin industries’ and the criminal networks that control them. Indeed, Johan Lindquist’s (2009) account of Batam, the largest urban centre in the Riau Islands, paints a picture of a frontier town, wild

⁴ Jacobs (1998), among others, argues that for this reason the best form of preparation for research in dangerous field sites is lengthy periods of in-depth ethnographic fieldwork. He acknowledges, however, that even then the researcher cannot underestimate the ongoing potential for violence when researching illegality.

and unpredictable – a space characterised by excessive drug-taking and illicit sexuality.⁵ At times, we consciously engaged with those parts of the economy, formal and informal, that rely on these clearly identifiable forms of illegal activity. We chose, for example, to visit illegal casinos and brothel districts. Our ethnic background (Anglo-Celtic) and gender (female) influenced our opportunities in these milieus. The fact that we were not Singaporean Chinese meant that we were immediately identifiable as unwelcome guests in the illegal casinos. The fact that we are women made it just as impossible for us to remain unobserved in the brothel districts. With regard to the latter, the impact of our gender cannot be overstated. Lindquist, who is also white but male, was able to visit brothels without comment and even covertly film there. By contrast, our presence in the brothel area at night was met with overt hostility.

As part of this project, we consciously tested the impact of gender on our capacity to access information in an informal experiment in Singapore. We recruited an older white male academic to ask several travel agents what activities were available for tourists to Batam. On a separate occasion, we visited the same agents and asked the same questions. Whereas our male recruit was presented with a broad range of options that included offers of sexual services, we were told that there was nothing for us in Batam, and that we really should go to the Singapore-controlled resort zone in neighbouring Bintan if we wanted to spend time in the Riau Islands. But our gender also gave us otherwise elusive insights. For example, when we returned to brothel areas by day with an NGO worker, we were able to speak at length with current and former sex workers, and elicit information that would be more difficult, perhaps even impossible, for a man to obtain.

Our gender also influenced the risks we were willing to take in the field. Unlike Lindquist, or Ferrell (1997: 15) – whose fieldwork involved passing through a ‘series of informal tests of [his] willingness to participate in the dangerous pleasures and excitement of graffiti writing’, and ultimately arrest and a court appearance – we were not prepared to become observer-participants in some kinds of activities, whether they be related to the sex industry or to people smuggling. It was also clear that, as a result of our gender, we were exposed to risks that a male researcher would be unlikely to face. Most commonly, we experienced sexual harassment, which sometimes reached levels where we had to cut short an otherwise informative interaction in the field. These limitations notwithstanding, we are confident that the fact that we chose to limit our exposure to dangerous situations did not limit our understanding of the place of illegality in the everyday life of communities in the Riau Islands, but rather enhanced it by giving us the space to shift our gaze from the overtly criminal to everyday practices of illegality.

Our focus on the everyday did not mean, however, that the methodological challenges associated with researching illegality simply disappeared. Even where research into illegal practices is not at all physically threatening, it ‘unavoidably entangles those who practice it in complex and ambiguous relations to subjects and situations of study, to issues of personal and

⁵ These phenomena certainly exist, but we think that it is a mistake to see Batam as a place set apart. Life there is for the most part not unlike life in the more established urban communities on the neighbouring islands of Bintan and Karimun, and to some extent in other towns of a similar size elsewhere in Indonesia. Indeed, low-level corruption and many other illegal practices found in the Riau Islands are ubiquitous in the archipelago (see, for example, McCarthy 2002). See Schulte-Nordholt (1991) for a discussion of the role in the state in relation to illegality in the Dutch East Indies. For broader discussions of the role in the state in relation to illegality in contemporary Indonesia, see Aspinall and van Klinken (2011). See Trocki (1998) for a discussion on Southeast Asia more broadly.

social responsibility and to law and legality' (Ferrell 1997: 8). For example, many difficult legal and ethical questions were raised by the research of a doctoral candidate who needed as part of her fieldwork to monitor online chat rooms frequented by Singaporean men who travelled to the Riau Islands as sex tourists – an activity which involved the risk of accidentally viewing online accounts of sex with minors, something which must be reported under Australian law (Lyons et al. 2010).⁶ Many questions were also raised by the University's ethics committee about her physical and psychological safety during fieldwork periods in Batam. Yet, although this more physically risky phase of her fieldwork involved frequenting seedy karaoke bars and discotheques, and speaking to sex tourists as well as sex workers and others involved in the industry, it was ultimately less difficult to gain approval than for the legally fraught online component. These and other examples demonstrate that a detailed analysis of methodology in difficult field sites is indeed a necessary part of any discussion about approaches to researching illegality.

We also faced the quandary of knowing what to look for. Attention to mundane forms of illegality requires greater openness to the 'intrinsic elusive quality' of everyday life (Jenkins 1994: 444) than is required when identifying the more visible forms of lawbreaking associated with the criminal underworld. Indeed, knowledge of the everyday cannot be acquired through a disinterested gaze, but instead requires 'an apprenticeship of signs' which engages the researcher's skills, perceptions, memories and desires (Jenkins 1994: 445). This kind of active observation provides a means to develop new categories of understanding, that more accurately reflect the meanings and significance informants attach to their behaviour, and thus avoid the tendency to use one's own (often mistaken or inappropriate) categories of understanding. As Hirschkind (1991: 240) argues:

The usual ethnographic account of the mundane betrays one of the fundamental weaknesses of standard research methodology: it permits ethnographers to fill in the gaps in their knowledge with preconceptions derived from their own imaginations or cultural experience ... By assuming they can understand a behaviour without having behaved that way themselves, they blind themselves to the holes in their knowledge, and are convinced by the explanations and models composed upon personal and academic foundations.

Hirschkind argues that her lived experience working as a farmer in highland Ecuador has given her insight in pathways not open to a 'standard' anthropologist seeking to chronicle the mundane, in many ways parallel to Ferrell's long-term participation in the activities of a graffiti gang. Similarly, our research in the Riau Islands built on many years of dipping in and out of life in Tanjung Pinang, where Michele has family through marriage. This long-standing prior engagement meant that we had served our 'apprenticeship of signs' before beginning the project. Linguistic capacity, cultural literacy, and a willingness to engage in unusual ways were also important. One of Michele's most memorable interviews took place in the central market in Tanjung Balai Karimun. Squeezed into a space behind the display so narrow that she had to stand at an angle and with liquid from a plastic bag containing what smelt like yesterday's fish dripping on her shoulder, she helped the stall-owner sell his vegetables for over an hour. As the transcript of the interview attests, this unusual sight drew a rush of customers, several of whom insisted on being served by the foreigner. Given the prestige – and extra profit – on offer in this unusual situation, the delighted stall-owner was most expansive, and more than happy to be interviewed at length. It was through such

⁶ For a discussion of some of the findings of this work, see Williams et al. (2008).

processes that we began to identify the subtle signs that Jenkins (1994) sees as the key to unlocking the 'elusive' character of everyday life.

Conversations about everyday illegality

When the illegal is ubiquitous, everyone becomes a potential informant. This poses a range of methodological dilemmas including the question of who one should speak to, and how one should seek to elicit information about illegal activities. As sociologists who have embraced the ethnographic turn but not the level of embeddedness that anthropology demands, the rigor of our methodology hinges on the quality and scope of the questions we ask. The open-ended interview techniques that we employed gave us the scope to allow the everyday to take centre stage. But, even with these tools, it is impossible to gather such information in a systematic way; serendipity necessarily plays an important role in uncovering tales of illegal activities that take place as part of the everyday.

As noted earlier, we specifically targeted some informants because of their involvement in illegal activities. However, most of the conversations we had about illegality occurred within the context of more broadly focused semi-structured interviews whose primary purpose was to discuss the impact of Singapore's proximity on everyday life in the Riau Islands. To generate this larger pool of informants, we created a purposive interview sampling strategy that identified over 200 informants on the basis of four key socio-economic indicators, namely age, ethnicity, residency, and class, which we implemented in the towns of Tanjung Pinang (on Bintan island) and Tanjung Balai (on Karimun island), in addition to supplementary interviews in Batam. While we thought it possible that either the informants or someone they knew may have been involved in illegal activities, we did not consider these interviews to be the primary means through which we would obtain this kind of information.

During the course of these interviews, informants were routinely asked about their attitudes towards sex tourism, gambling (which is forbidden under Indonesian law), smuggling and irregular labour migration, and their assessment of the impact that these activities had on life in the Riau Islands. In order to approach the delicate question of the sex industry, we routinely used terms like 'open secret' (*rahasia umum*), to assure informants that we understood that knowledge of the industry did not imply involvement. In all but a very few cases, informants were immediately forthcoming. Where informants were less willing to speak, gentle prodding inevitably overcame any initial resistance. In general, however, the people to whom we spoke took a very pragmatic stance towards the 'sin industries' of sex work and gambling, with even most of those who expressed a strong in-principle religious or moral opposition to them recognising their economic importance to the region.

Our informants were even more uniformly sanguine about illegal cross-border activities. In some cases, this was because they simply did not realise that a particular activity was unlawful. Take, for example, the different responses of two Hokkien men from Tanjung Balai Karimun, both of whom were successful businessmen, to a question about the islands' Chinese working illegally in Singapore.⁷ The first, a restaurant owner who had previously worked in large hotels in Batam, responded by saying that many of the large number of the islands' Chinese working in Singapore were doing so illegally. He went on to give a quite detailed account of the sectors in which they were employed – noting, for example, that very few Indonesians worked in construction, and many worked in the food and beverage services

⁷ For more information on Chinese living in the Riau Islands, see Lyons and Ford (2013).

industry.⁸ By contrast, the second man, who owned an auto repair business, asserted that while plenty of the islands' Chinese worked in Singapore, they had permission to do so. On further questioning, however, he revealed that they work for two weeks and then return – the classic pattern of a foreigner entering Singapore on a visitor's visa in order to work illegally. In most cases, however, informants understood that particular activities were unlawful but rarely considered them to be illicit.⁹

A similar range of responses were given by the – initially surprisingly – large proportion of our informants who had themselves engaged directly in illegal cross-border activities. Among this group, a small minority took great delight in recounting their brushes with the law. Raja Basri, an elderly former school teacher, told wonderful tales of high intrigue and grand clandestine schemes in the 1970s, when he couriered thousands of watches from Singapore to Jakarta for the son of an Indonesian general, stopping only when he was detained by officers of the national intelligence agency, and was recruited as a spy to track illegal money and drugs coming in from Singapore. This story emerged around a quarter of the way through an extremely long conversation, by which time Michele had been regaled with stories of his interactions with foreign investors in local granite and several highly placed civilian and military officials in both Singapore and Indonesia.¹⁰ A similar narrative approach was adopted by a 78 year old Malay woman in Tanjung Pinang when telling of her experiences on the high seas. When Fatima and her retired public servant husband were interviewed – an exchange of well over three hours, during which time Fatima did most of the talking – she told the story of the joyride she took with people-smugglers to Malaysia at the age of 62, speaking in great detail about the journey she and her sister-in-law took on a small boat in the middle of the night, of their surviving a police raid on the safe-house where they were hidden on their arrival, and their return by the same route two weeks later.

However, performances like these (and they were undoubtedly performances) were few and far between. Most accounts of illegal cross-border activity began simply as asides. Innocent remarks or casual comments took on a different measure of significance and often became the starting point for lengthy discussions about a range of different forms of illegality. Attention to even the most fleeting asides was thus crucial lest we miss a passing reference to activities that were important to us but unremarkable to our interlocutors. We could never predict when these topics would emerge, or who would reveal them. Instead, we had to rely on our capacity to seek out these more ordinary tales of illegality. This meant that deep knowledge of the field site was vital in making sense of what we were told. It would be entirely possible for a researcher using a different approach, or with less knowledge of the field, to speak to the same informants without eliciting a single shred of evidence of illegal activity.

Three main approaches were evident in the responses of most informants who had engaged in illegal activity. The first, evident in the responses of people like Nengsih – the former domestic worker mentioned earlier, who had run away from her placement before returning

⁸ These observations tally with anecdotal data obtained from a spokesperson of Singapore's National Trade Union Congress (interview by Michele Ford, March 2010).

⁹ As we have argued elsewhere, many border-related activities are commonly believed to be illegal not because they are inherently bad but because of misguided policymaking on the part of the central government (Ford and Lyons 2011).

¹⁰ Many of our older informants in Tanjung Balai Karimun had stories of incidents of their past involvement in smuggling. The experiences of most were, however, far less exciting than those of Raja Basri. Raja Basri's stories are plausible since school teachers comprised a significant proportion of the local Karimun elite in the 1940s to 1960s, and because of evidence of very significant business interests developed after resigning from his position as headmaster.

to Singapore as a smuggler with a real-but-fake (*asli tapi palsu*) passport and ended up in prison – was a lack of understanding of the consequences of their actions.¹¹ Although Nengsih was aware that her second passport was in another name, at the time she did not understand that this was problematic – a fact that may seem ludicrous, but is actually logical in the Indonesian context where (as she reminded us) it is quite normal to have several identity cards. What Nengsih failed to understand, however, was how serious foreign immigration officials may consider their transgressions to be.

A second approach, commonly adopted by recipients of illegally smuggled goods, was either to pretend not to want to know or, alternatively, to assign responsibility for the transgression to the intermediary involved. For example, Anai Oi, a Teochew vegetable seller in his early 30s, appeared at first not to understand that his stock came in illegally from Malaysia, while later admitting that he was aware that he did not pay tax:

Michele: Where do you get your vegetables from?

Anai Oi: From Malaysia.

Michele: From Malaysia? Do you bring them here through official or unofficial channels?

Anai Oi: Official channels.

Michele: Official channels?

Anai Oi: Yes, but we don't pay customs duty. We just pay the boat-owner.

Michele: Oh?

Anai Oi: We just pay the transportation costs. It's only vegetables. Customs don't really care. It'd be different if it was meat.¹²

Others were happy to admit that they were avoiding customs duty, but assigned responsibility to intermediaries. For example, Gusril, a 36-year old Tanjung Balai-born Minang man who owned a computer retail business, made no attempt to hide the fact that he does not pay customs duty on the stock he personally purchased in Singapore. To his mind, however, it was not him but rather the boat crew that brings the goods to Tanjung Balai Karimun that were culpable:

Gusril: It's much cheaper to get my stock from Singapore.

Michele: How do you get your goods in? Do you use official channels? Do you pay tax?

Gusril: I'm not sure you'd say that it was official. I don't really know. The important thing is that the stock I buy in Singapore arrives on the boat.

Michele: I see.

Gusril: Everything from there is a matter for the boat crew.

¹¹ See Ford and Lyons (2011) for a discussion of 'real-but-fake' passports, and Ford and Lyons (2013) for an account of NGOs' role in monitoring Indonesian nationals returning illegally by sea.

¹² All interviews were conducted in Indonesian or in a combination of Indonesian and the local Riau Malay dialect. The translations here are by the first author.

Michele: A matter for the boat crew?

Gusril: Yes. We just buy the goods and pay the transportation costs.

The most interesting group were, however, the many people who have personally crossed the borders in order to smuggle goods or work illegally – and who were fully cognisant of the legal status of their irregular border crossings but did not see their actions as remarkable.¹³ This third group included Dasril, the owner of the vegetable stall in Tanjung Balai Karimun's central market in which Michele became a sales assistant. Dasril first mentioned that he had been an undocumented migrant worker in Malaysia when discussing his reasons for leaving school so early and his stint working in a tin mine in the 1980s:

Dasril: Our wages were really low. I remember in 1986 I earned 55,000 [rupiah per month]. I decided that if I kept going like that things would never change. I was still working there, but I had a lot of younger siblings so I decided to leave the company. I worked for three years in Malaysia. It was really easy to get into Malaysia in those days. Those of us from [Tanjung] Balai just went there in a little boat.

Michele: Oh.

Dasril: It was great going by boat. At that time it only cost about 10,000 [rupiah]. If we knew the people we could go for free.

Michele: Really?

Dasril: Yes, we'd go with the smugglers. People from Tanjung Balai would go back and forth to Malaysia as many as three times a day with cigarettes and so on.

Dasril went on to explain that he had travelled back without a passport to see his family on three occasions during his time in Malaysia. Even after the Malaysian government began cracking down on Indonesians travelling without passports, he observed that Riau islanders were relatively safe as officials would ask people where they were from, arresting those from Sumatra and Java but allowing locals through. Later in the conversation, Dasril casually mentioned also that he had used the money he saved from working in Malaysia to set up a business with his brother, taking fruit into Singapore and smuggling in second-hand goods on the return journey.

Another case involved Mukyu, a Teochew woman in her 40s who manages a small supermarket in Tanjung Pinang. Several minutes into a conversation about her experiences in Singapore as a tourist and visiting relatives, she casually mentioned that in the past she had worked there illegally:

Mukyu: I used to work there.

Michele: What sort of work did you do?

Mukyu: I sold clothes.

Michele: Did you go back and forth to Tanjung Pinang to get stock or did you stay there?

¹³ They occasionally described these crossings using the English-derived word *illegal* but more commonly referred to as unofficial (*tidak resmi*) or underground (*gelap*, lit. dark).

Mukyu: I stayed there. I had a Singaporean boss. I'd bring the clothes from Tanjung Pinang every couple of weeks and then sell them there.

Michele: Did you have an official permit?

Mukyu: No. I didn't use an official permit.

In yet another example, Yusuf, a Bugis man living in Tanjung Pinang, was talking about what work he did in the initial stages of an interview when he mentioned that he had been involved in illegal trade to Singapore:

Michele: What work do you do?

Yusuf: I take radios from here to Singapore.

Michele: Oh. Do you go back and forward a lot?

Yusuf: Yes

Michele: How long have you been doing this?

Yusuf: Around a year. It's not really regular. I just go when I have some stock.

Michele: How often do you go?

Yusuf: Around twice a month. It really depends on what stock I have, and also on the weather. You can't take goods across if there are strong winds.

Much later in the conversation, Yusuf mentioned his earlier (and less routine) experiences with illegal border crossings. When asked if he had been to Singapore before setting up his current business, he explained that he had entered the country without a passport to work illegally in construction in the city state for two years in the early 1990s, only to be arrested and imprisoned for three months upon returning for another stint not long after. As the conversation meandered on, it transpired that Yusuf's experiences with Singaporean immigration did not end there. On another occasion he had been forced to swim for eight hours to get out of Singaporean waters when his boat, carrying a load of contraband cigarettes, was instructed to stop for inspection. Rather than let themselves be caught, he and his crew threw their cargo in the water and jumped in after it. The customs officers threw them flotation devices, but Yusuf instead grabbed one of the palettes of cigarettes and swam to Tanjung Sengkuang on the island of Batam. Three of his crew survived but two others died. It was only much later again in the conversation that Yusuf mentioned that he had been recently banned from re-entering Singapore because he was caught with two passports, each in a different name. As a result, he was now forced to send other people in with his radios.

These kinds of accounts were not simply a product of male bravado, as Fatima's story of her joyride to Malaysia confirms. Nor did only men see them as unremarkable. Kasiyem, a resident of Tanjung Balai Karimun, told a story not unlike Dasril's during a conversation in her home. Having been complimented on her nice house, she explained that she and her husband had spent 20 years in Malaysia working on a palm-oil plantation:

Michele: When you worked in Malaysia, did you go through official or unofficial channels?

Kasiyem: When I first went there, I didn't have a passport.

Michele: Is that so?

Kasiyem: So I had to go illegally by boat. We went there for work. We needed to earn a living. I only just got a passport recently.

Michele: So you left late at night?

Kasiyem: Yes, we left at night.

Michele: Were the boats full?

Kasiyem: No

Michele: No?

Kasiyem: Not so many people went to Malaysia in those days. It's not like now. In any case, it was a small boat.

Kasiyem went on to tell Michele very matter-of-factly and in some detail about her experiences over the course of the 20 years that she and her husband travelled back and forth to Malaysia without papers.

These examples demonstrate the routine frequency with which informants brought up their involvement in illegal cross-border activities. In some cases, the topic emerged as if by accident or through a casual remark. In others, interviewees would describe at length practices about which they professed to have no knowledge of the legal status, but which we knew to be illegal. Sometimes this response reflected their reluctance to acknowledge personal involvement in criminal behaviour, while in others it was a product of their confusion over the legal status of their actions. In most, however, informants simply felt that their actions were unremarkable. At the same time, the majority almost certainly would not have volunteered their stories if they had been asked directly whether they had been involved in illegal activities – primarily because they do not really see them as such. Indeed, with the exception of Raja Basri and Fatima, who delighted in old age at their memories of their former transgressions, informants who recognised their cross-border practices to be 'illegal' spoke about their activities in the context of what they saw as a mutually shared understanding of the nature of everyday life in the Riau Islands.¹⁴

Conclusion

Studying criminal behaviour exposes the researcher to a range of risks, as well as presenting them with ethical and moral dilemmas that necessitate careful attention to issues of methodology and research training. But these are not the only challenges facing scholars interested in the illegal and the illicit. In some instances, illegal activities go unnoticed, not because they are covert or underground but because they are commonplace and ordinary.

When illegality dominates some forms of economic and social exchange within a community, its presence can become unremarkable. This is certainly the case in the Riau Islands, where

¹⁴ Their behaviour is in stark contrast to some of the women we spoke to who had been involved in the commercial sex industry and who were at pains to protect their identities and those of their families – not because commercial sex is illegal, but because it is *haram* (morally forbidden). Similarly, the smuggling of household goods and foodstuffs is discussed openly because it is considered to be an unremarkable part of life on the border, whereas the smuggling of illegal drugs is not.

most smuggling activities that involve people and goods are considered by local residents to be a necessary and commonplace feature of life on the border. For many Riau islanders, crossing the border without a passport and/or appropriate visa, holding real-but-fake passports and/or multiple identity cards, and working overseas without official paperwork, represents the easiest and most cost-effective way of seeking employment, doing business, or engaging in leisure pursuits. Similarly, engaging the services of an intermediary to bring in goods from Singapore or Malaysia, paying a local official to assist with any paperwork, or buying (illegal) imports from a local shopkeeper, ensures that the local community has access to ready supply of fresh food and quality products. Even those sectors of the local economy that rely on the 'sin industries' of gambling, commercial sex, and illegal drugs, are seen by many Riau islanders as an undesirable but inevitable and ordinary part of borderlands life. Similarly, the identification of patterns of mundane illegal border-crossing is methodologically challenging precisely because it relies on incidental references to illegal activities within the context of other interactions.

In many ways, the ubiquitous character of this everyday illegality in the Riau Islands makes it an easy topic of investigation. Unlike places where illegal activity revolves around the secret and violent world of underground criminal gangs, everyone is a potential informant. In contrast to interviews with known underworld figures, where access may be difficult and the risk of physical danger perhaps greater – but knowledge of their involvement in illegal activities is predetermined – the difficulty here lies in identifying the kinds of illegal acts that are embedded in the everyday. The process of identifying individuals involved in illegal practices is further complicated by the *lack* of stigma associated with most kinds of illegal border-crossings in this border zone. Paradoxically, the fact that there is little or no stigma attached to illegal border-crossings or deportation meant that our informants were willing to discuss their experiences, sometimes at great length, once they were unearthed.

As this suggests, attributing an act to the mundane rests on a shared language of licitness. The fact that illegal border-crossings are so widespread, and have such a long history in the islands, gives the act of crossing the border illegally the status of an ordinary occurrence. As a result, the majority of our informants, including those who have been arrested and deported from Singapore or Malaysia, do not see themselves as criminals. They understand their actions as operating in a grey zone where the law makes little sense or is imposed by governments that have no understanding or sympathy for local conditions. In short, our informants had no hesitation in describing their activities to us in great detail because of their belief that 'illegality' is more often than not a concept imposed by an authority that they do not recognise, and has little connection with their everyday lives.

This does not mean, however, that studying illegal cross-border activities is simple or easy. When some forms of illegal activity become so ordinary as to be unremarkable, there is a risk that they will remain unobserved or overlooked. In these circumstances, what is needed is an approach that seeks to uncover the unexceptional and which allows the everyday to take precedence over the unusual or the exotic. Attention to the mundane requires an open and active gaze; an approach that explores the meanings and significance that informants attach to their own behaviour; and a deep understanding to the nuances of everyday life in a particular place. It is only then that the mundane becomes legible, and thus open to academic scrutiny and consideration.

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