

Field reflections from training Finnish asylum officials

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Abstract

Evaluating asylum claims has been described as one of the most challenging forms of decision-making in the modern state. Recent research has highlighted concerns both with how asylum seekers are heard and how their accounts are assessed. Recently, we developed a novel training program in investigative interviewing and legal psychology for asylum officials in Finland. During the training, the officials reported several organizational constraints and everyday challenges that they face in their daily work of interviewing asylum seekers. These concerns can have a considerable negative effect on interview quality and the work-related stress experienced by officials, with potential negative effects on their work. This aspect has largely been unexplored in research until now. In this field reflection, we aim to describe the key challenges that we observed, and which were formulated by the practitioners, discuss them in relation to empirical research and propose recommendations for future research and practice.

Keywords: *asylum adjudication procedure, asylum interview, asylum official, training, organizational constraints*

Introduction

Asylum officials face the daunting task of assessing asylum seekers' claims of past persecution and evaluating the risk of future harm based mainly on the applicant's oral testimonies, as documentary evidence (e.g. warrants) in asylum cases is rare (European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA] 2024a; Kagan 2003). Hence, the interviews conducted with the applicant are of key importance to the adjudication procedure. Accurate and effective asylum determination procedures are vital for protecting both the fundamental human right to international protection and the integrity of the asylum system. Therefore, it is of uttermost importance that asylum officials are trained in evidence-based methods for interviewing and evaluating asylum claims. Our novel training program in investigative interviewing and key legal psychology topics for asylum officials was found to have a large positive effect on the officials' skills and knowledge (Skrifvars, Antfolk, et al. 2025). However, during the training, several challenges in the everyday work of asylum officials as well as organizational constraints were brought up by the officials. The aim of this field reflection is to describe and discuss these concerns in relation to empirical findings and propose solutions for future practice.

Previous research on asylum interviewing and decision-making

Previous research on asylum procedures has highlighted concerns with both the quality of the interviews and the decision-making processes. Archival studies have found that officials rely heavily on closed and yes/no questions, whereas recommended open questions tend to be rare (Skrifvars et al. 2020; van Veldhuizen et al. 2018). An overreliance on closed questions is problematic as it limits the specificity and informativeness of the statements, which may, in turn, negatively affect the perceived credibility of the account (Skrifvars 2024). Analyses of interview transcripts have also identified various communication challenges in asylum interviews,

including overly complex questions and misunderstandings between the official and the asylum seeker (Skrifvars, Antfolk, et al. 2022; van Veldhuizen et al. 2018). These results highlight the need for more training in investigative interviewing for asylum officials.

Based on the information collected in the interviews, the official is tasked with assessing the credibility of the claims and determining if the legal criteria for granting asylum are met (EUAA 2024a). The credibility assessment of asylum claims has widely been criticized for lacking an evidence-base, as the commonly relied upon credibility indicators only has partial empirical support (Bruïne et al. 2023; Herlihy et al. 2010; Maegherman et al. 2018; Skrifvars, Sui, et al. 2022). The credibility criteria rest on the faulty assumption that individuals always recall experiences in a detailed, consistent and plausible manner. Whereas some criteria, such as detailedness, on group-level have some support in research, the appropriateness of the criteria in cross-cultural interpreter-assisted contexts is unclear (Bruïne et al. 2023). Plausibility has also been criticized for being fundamentally subjective and based on individuals' culture-dependent previous experiences and knowledge (Herlihy & Turner 2009; Maegherman et al. 2018). Studies have found that officials rely on these partly unsupported assumptions and lack the necessary knowledge in topics such as memory, trauma and culture to apply the criteria in a valid way (Herlihy et al. 2010; Selim et al. 2025; Skrifvars, Sui, et al. 2022).

The novel training program in legal psychology for Finnish asylum officials

To address the need for more training in investigative interviewing and key legal psychology topics, we recently developed and evaluated a novel training program for asylum officials (Skrifvars, Antfolk, et al. 2025). The aim of the training program was to complement the existing training offered by the EUAA to asylum authorities in the EU and further deepen the officials' understanding of the underlying principles. The training was developed and run in

collaboration with the Finnish Immigration Service¹ and consisted of seminars, supervision sessions and an online self-administered course, delivered over 5 months. The aim of the seminars and supervision sessions was to encourage discussions and reflection and provide expert feedback to participants on practical challenges. Key topics of the training were memory, the impact of trauma and cultural background on memory and communication, human information processing and decision-making, investigative interviewing, rapport-building, cross-cultural communication, mental health and trauma, lie detection and credibility assessments.

We evaluated the training program in a quasi-experimental pretest posttest study with a waitlist control group (Skrifvars, Antfolk, et al. 2025). The participants ($n = 55$ asylum officials working at the Finnish Immigration Service) completed an online test consisting of a knowledge quiz and two practical exercises measuring interviewing skills before and after the training. The training had a large positive effect ($d = 1.67$) on test scores for both groups immediately after completing the training and the improvements remained after five months, supporting the efficiency of the training in a test setting. Although the program is not part of the normal training curriculum of the Finnish Immigration Service yet, there are plans to re-organize it.

The current paper

As there is still a limited amount of research in legal psychology focused on asylum procedures, particularly from the perspective of asylum officials, there is a need to better understand the nuances of collecting and assessing evidence in the asylum context. The aim of the current field reflection is to describe the everyday challenges and organizational constraints reported by Finnish asylum officials during the training. The officials were asked to write down their reflections on this topic before discussing it at the concluding seminar (both in small groups

¹ In Finland, the Finnish Immigration Service is responsible for processing asylum applications, whereas the UNHCR has an advisory and advocacy role, as in the other Nordic and Baltic countries (EUAA 2024c).

and all together). The current paper is based on these reflections as well as discussions with the officials during the supervisions and seminars, and the authors' personal observations. A further aim of this paper is to discuss the areas of concern in relation to empirical literature and propose solutions and recommendations for future practice and research.

Reflections

Interviewing procedures

Some of the most frequently reported concerns by the officials related to structural aspects of how the interviews are organized and conducted in practice. Most officials agreed that interviewing asylum seekers is a demanding task that is further complicated by various organizational constraints. These concerns related both to organizational procedures, such as the physical interviewing facilities and how online interviews are carried out, and to the practical task of interviewing, such as the high workload during the interviews and the challenges in the collaboration between professionals in the interviews (i.e. interpreters and legal representatives).

High workload during interviews

A key concern identified by several officials related to the high workload during interviews, mainly due to the multitude of demanding tasks that officials are expected to complete during the interviews. This includes overseeing and conducting the interview mainly without a structured interview protocol, instructing all parties (including the asylum seeker, the interpreter and sometimes a legal representative or a support person), and manually transcribing everything that is said.

Firstly, whereas a structured interviewing protocol is used for gathering information about the identity and origin of the applicant, no protocol is used for the applicant's experiences of persecution and fear of future harm. Officials are encouraged to let the asylum seekers freely

describe their experiences and not restrict the applicants by asking pre-determined questions. Eliciting a free recall is an important part of best-practice interviewing (Méndez et al. 2021), however, not preparing any questions in advance puts pressure on the official to come up with relevant follow-up questions and ask them in the recommended open-ended format. This may be more challenging than the officials believe, as studies have found that knowledge of recommended question techniques does not necessarily translate to actually phrasing questions in an appropriate manner (St-Yves et al. 2014). This may be one reason for the overreliance on closed questions identified in Finnish and Dutch asylum interviews (Skrifvars et al. 2020; van Veldhuizen et al. 2018). Therefore, to lessen the cognitive load of the officials and ensure that the recommended interviewing techniques are followed, adhering to a semi-structured interview protocol with a few pre-planned open questions, as well as open-ended question stems to adapt and use for relevant follow-up questioning would be worth evaluating. This has been proven effective in other interviewing settings, such as with child interviews (Benia et al. 2015).

Further increasing the cognitive load for the officials is the requirement of manually transcribing what is said while during the interview. Many officials found this disruptive for rapport-building (i.e. establishing and maintaining a positive working alliance) with the asylum seeker, which is a crucial part of best-practice interviewing, particularly with vulnerable interviewees (Gabbert et al. 2021; Méndez et al. 2021). Studies have found that a lack of rapport-building may be a key factor hindering asylum seekers from giving full disclosures (Bögner et al. 2010; Skrifvars, Ilmoni, et al. 2025). Therefore, alternatives to manual transcribing (such as using automated transcribing tools) should be considered, to minimize the negative effects on rapport. On a positive note, some officials found transcribing to protect them from secondary traumatization, by allowing them to keep a distance from the applicants.

Finally, a full day is reserved for asylum interviews in Finland, meaning that an interview can last as long as six hours. Although it is positive that asylum seekers are given ample time to present their claims, interviews lasting several hours are cognitively and mentally demanding for all parties. Additionally, asylum seekers often report feeling nervous or afraid during the interviews, which can likewise be taxing and lead to difficulties concentrating (Bögner et al. 2010; Skrifvars, Ilmoni, et al. 2025). Splitting the interview over more than one occasion may help mitigate these negative effects, as well as help establish rapport. However, the interview should always be seen as one interview, with the same professionals involved. This is unfortunately not always the case in Finland. Not utilizing the same interviewer and/or interpreters may break rapport and lead to the applicant repeating information, despite instructions not to, as it may feel unnatural to continue an interaction from the middle when one of the participants is completely new to the discussion. A change of officials can be especially harmful for asylum seekers in vulnerable positions, who may struggle even more to trust the authorities and give full disclosures.

Physical environment

Another concern mentioned by the officials is that the physical environment and room where the interview is held are often unwelcoming and formal, with simple furniture consisting of a desk and chairs. Several officials believed this negatively affects the atmosphere in the room, and may hinder rapport-building, as it may strengthen some applicants' preconceptions of the interview as an interrogation. One official mentioned that they sometimes sit on a sofa outside of the interview room for small talk to create rapport and then move into the room for the main interviewing part, as this may help the asylum seeker relax and trust the interviewer. Increasing the comfort of the room by adding decorations on the walls, plants or changing the

furniture to a more informal sofa or comfortable chairs, may have a positive effect on rapport-building.

Online interviewing

Officials presented both positive and negative views on online interviewing. Some officials saw benefits for the applicant in terms of increased accessibility and flexibility. Also, online interviewing allows applicants to be interviewed in a place where they feel safe, in case applicants show severe mistrust toward authorities, or express a strong fear of visiting the interviewing facilities. Nevertheless, several officials reported difficulties with establishing rapport with the asylum seeker as well as with perceiving the asylum seeker's mental wellbeing during the interview. Officials also expressed concerns about whose responsibility it is, and in practice how to handle potentially dangerous situations for the applicant during a remote interview, for example, in case the asylum seeker experiences strong negative emotions or a panic attack during the interview. Likewise, the confidentiality of the interview must be guaranteed. It is thus important to ensure appropriate locations for the applicants to be interviewed in.

Finally, and importantly, officials agreed that the still regularly occurring technical issues (e.g. unstable internet connection or unsuitable software) must first be solved, before online interviews can be considered a valid alternative. Similar concerns and benefits of online interviewing have been raised in relation to online interviewing in other settings (e.g. child interviewing (Korkman et al. 2024)). Although many researchers are carefully optimistic about the benefits and added flexibility that online interviewing brings, more research is needed to create clear recommendations for when and how online interviewing should be conducted to

ensure that the access to justice of the persons heard remotely is not negatively affected (Korkman et al. 2024).

Collaboration with legal representatives

Although many officials highlighted that legal representatives usually provide vital assistance for the applicant during the asylum process, particularly with helping the applicant disclose their experiences, others reported that the collaboration could at times be challenging. Uninvolved legal representatives who behave unprofessionally, for example, by ignoring their key tasks, such as instructing the applicant about the process and the legal grounds for asylum, were not unheard of. Officials also reported concerning instances of inappropriate or untimely questions during the interviews, which can be highly disruptive to the interviews. Finally, officials sometimes perceived the legal representatives to hold a general mistrust toward the immigration authorities, which may color the views of the applicants, further hindering trust- and rapport-building. Introducing basic requirements in, for example, education or work experience for legal representatives in the asylum setting could be worth considering to address these concerns.

Collaborating with interpreters

Likewise, the collaboration with interpreters received mixed comments from the officials. In general, officials agreed that interpreters play a crucial role in the interviews, and that skilled interpreters are invaluable. On the other hand, many also reported challenges with untrained interpreters, both related to language and communication skills and adhering to professional guidelines (e.g. interpreting everything that is said in the room; (EUAA 2024b)). A common concern related to mistrust between the asylum seeker and the interpreter, due to, for example, the ethnicity or religious belonging of the interpreter. In Finland, the asylum seeker is only

allowed to make a request regarding the interpreter's gender, and not about any other personal characteristic, such as ethnicity. Officials mentioned that this can be particularly problematic in asylum cases based on sexual identity or religious conversion, as for example, disclosing one's sexual orientation to an interpreter from the same ethnic community may be difficult. Similarly, disclosing experiences of persecution committed by members of an opposing ethnic group, to an interpreter belonging to that exact group, may also be difficult. The officials expressed concern for these issues but also found the current principle understandable, as keeping and sharing a registry of several sensitive personal characteristics of the interpreters working in Finland would not be legally suitable. Importantly, the interpreters' professional guidelines include the key principles of professionalism, confidentiality, and impartiality (EUAA 2024b). Therefore, the ethnicity or religious background of the interpreter should not matter, as the interpreter should be trusted to adhere to professional principles regardless. Nevertheless, it is understandable that this may be difficult to understand and trust for an asylum seeker, who may have limited trust in authorities in general (Skrifvars, Ilmoni, et al. 2025). Therefore, especially for particularly vulnerable applicants, exceptions regarding requesting an interpreter should be possible to make, for example, via a legal representative.

Finally, preparing for the interview together with the interpreter, which is recommended in other interview settings (Korkman et al. 2024), was seen by many officials as a positive thing in theory. However, in practice, this would require an official update of the current procedures regarding the paid working hours of the interpreters. Another concern expressed by the officials related to increased mistrust of the applicant toward the official and the interpreter, in case the applicant sees that the interviewer and interpreter have met and discussed the case before the interview and perceive them as "sharing an agenda". To conclude, to ensure skilled interpreters,

the officials called for stricter requirements on the education of the interpreters, or even a registry of qualified interpreters that primarily should be hired for asylum interviews.

Questioning techniques

Finnish asylum officials are trained in adhering to a rapport-based information-gathering interviewing style, allowing the asylum seeker to in their own words describe their reasons for applying for asylum (EASO 2019; Skrifvars, Antfolk, et al. 2025). In general, our impression of the Finnish asylum officials was that the vast majority seemed well-aware of the recommended interviewing strategies. However, officials mentioned different practical challenges with adhering to the recommendations in practice. These challenges often related to instructing the applicant effectively, while maintaining the questioning strategy and rapport with the applicant.

Firstly, officials mentioned that some applicants struggle with providing free recalls. According to the officials, these applicants tend to answer any question with a few words or a few sentences and often request that the official ask specific questions instead. Officials struggled with instructing these applicants, as continuously asking the applicants to “tell me more” was experienced to lead to frustration for both the applicant and the official, harming rapport while not eliciting more information. This issue is not uncommon in other interviewing contexts, and techniques such as narrative practice (Lamb et al. 2007) or the Model Statement (Leal et al. 2015), have been developed to address this issue. In child interviews, narrative practice is used to engage the child in a discussion about a neutral topic, to accustom the child to the style and structure of the interview. The Model Statement, in turn, consists of a pre-recorded model answer about a neutral topic, giving an example of the level of detail expected from the interviewee. An adapted version of either technique could be a beneficial tool in the asylum setting, provided that the specific features of the asylum interview setting, mainly the presence of

an interpreter, the cross-cultural setting, and the vulnerable position of the applicant, are carefully considered.

On the other side of the spectrum, officials noted that some applicants talk *too* much, which can also pose a challenge to the interview. These applicants often give lengthy descriptions of topics irrelevant to the legal decision, such as past experiences of family members, family history, or the general situation in their home country. Officials struggled with instructing these applicants to keep the focus on relevant topics, without harming rapport. From the applicants' point of view, the need to ensure that the officials understand their full story or are aware of the current situation in their country of origin, is understandable. As one official recognized, for some applicants, what is crucial for their personal lives is not necessarily what is crucial for the judicial decision. For instance, an applicant whose family has been subjected to persecution or other forms of harmful treatment for generations might strongly feel that this is the most important reason for which they seek asylum - whereas there may be other details of more relevance for the asylum process. Likewise, from the official's perspective, it is not always practically feasible or possible to allow unlimited time for discussions about events that are not relevant for the decision, as this may take considerable time and resources.

A solution to both challenges lie in instructing the applicant in a clear and rapport-based manner before and during the interview. However, this may be easier said than done. Detailed instructions are sent to all applicants in advance, including information about the purpose of the interview, the rights and obligations of the applicant, and practical arrangements. However, not all applicants are able to read the instructions before the interview, and despite reading them, the instructions can be difficult to understand and remember. Some of the instructions in Finland are available in video format, in different languages, which is a good starting point. Additionally, the

instructions are usually repeated at the beginning of the interview. Yet, asylum seekers have reported feeling so stressed and anxious that they have difficulties processing all the information at that time (Skrifvars, Ilmoni, et al. 2025). Particularly, instructions about what to focus on in the free narrative may be difficult to fully grasp at this stage of the interview. Importantly, for an official to be able to steer the asylum seeker toward the relevant topics during the interview, creating and maintaining rapport with the applicant throughout the interview is crucial, and the applicant should have developed some level of trust in the official.

Therefore, it would be advisable to carefully examine and develop the instructional phase as well as effective rapport-building techniques for the asylum interviews. Research should explore how asylum seekers and officials experience the current instructions and what changes could be beneficial, as well as experimentally testing different sets of instructions for redirecting the focus and eliciting more details through, for example, the Model Statement. Finally, these techniques should be evaluated in the real-life asylum interview setting before being incorporated to a larger scale.

Conclusion

To summarize, the task of interviewing asylum seekers is complex, and officials may face additional challenges both before and during the interviews. The Finnish asylum officials reported concerns with procedural aspects of the interviews, such as the high workload during the interviews, the setup of interviewing rooms, concerns related to online interviews and the collaboration with both interpreters and legal representatives. It is important to document and address these experiences, which are perceived as structural barriers to conducting interviews in the way the officials themselves consider they should be conducted. Perceiving that one's own moral compass is overridden by contextual constraints poses an ethical dilemma that may cause

moral stress (Demoulin & Stinglhamber 2025; Heikkilä et al. 2023). In combination with a high workload and lack of support, this may in turn have a negative impact on the quality of and motivation for the work and increase employee turnover rates (Demoulin & Stinglhamber 2025; Hyllengren et al. 2016; Rostad & Langvik 2025). As the turnover of employees at the Finnish Immigration Service is known to be significant, addressing these concerns is of high importance.

Other challenges reported by the officials related to questioning techniques during the interviews, mainly struggles with instructing the applicant in an effective and rapport-based manner. As these challenges are not unique to the asylum setting, applying and adapting knowledge from other legal interview settings may be beneficial. To conclude, the observations made in this field reflection call for closer collaboration between researchers and practitioners to develop and evaluate science-based solutions for improving and effectivizing the current asylum interviewing procedures.

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