

Psychology at the Frontiers: Asylum Interviewing and Decision-Making (Psych-AID)

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Scientific quality, renewal and impact

Scientific quality. Yearly, half a million individuals flee harm to apply for asylum in the EU¹. This year, the EU witnessed the largest number of asylum applications since the crisis of 2015-2016, not counting displaced Ukrainians². This situation has exposed the EU's unpreparedness to evaluate large numbers of applicants³ and highlighted an urgent need for collaboration between researchers and legal practitioners to devise efficient and valid asylum practices to uphold the integrity of the asylum system and guarantee the rights of applicants.

The legal puzzle. Although the rights to asylum are clearly defined, adjudicating asylum claims is a complex undertaking that is susceptible to errors. The UN Refugee Convention states that anyone with a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” who is “unable or unwilling” to return to their country⁴ must be granted asylum. This legal definition is applied within the Common European Asylum System, which Finland adheres⁵. The asylum procedure consists of three steps⁶: The first step is to gather information about the asylum seekers' claims. As there rarely is any external evidence⁷ (e.g., identity documents, warrants), information is usually collected in interviews with the asylum seeker. In a second step, this information is assessed by officials to decide which claims are credible. In a final step, officials determine if the legal conditions for refugee status are met. To reach a correct conclusion, it is of paramount importance that the interview and decision-making methods are based on empirical research. Yet, placing individuals into rigid legal categories is highly complex task given the variability of human identity, experience, and behavior⁸. In the asylum context, the task is even more complex due to the cross-cultural nature of asylum procedures, as differences in communication, notions of what constitutes the truth, and how one relates to authority figures affect communication⁹. Asylum officials may struggle even more when interviewing particularly vulnerable applicants, such as individuals belonging to a persecuted social group. Social (e.g., sexual or religious) identity is not a visible trait and cannot conclusively be demonstrated through documentation¹⁰, which further increases the need for skilled interviewing and decision-making. At present, however, methods are considered flawed to the extent that researchers have called them an “asylum lottery”¹¹, posing grave risks to individual asylum seekers and undermining the rule of law and the integrity of the asylum system.

To solve this problem, we will combine psychology and law to improve the validity of asylum procedures by adapting and empirically testing interviewing and decision-making techniques to maximize the accuracy of asylum decisions. Courts will also benefit from these standards when re-evaluating these decisions, thus promoting applicants' rights to fair appeals. Hence, the project will contribute to reducing the risk of granting asylum to applicants that do not fit the criteria for international protection, and more importantly, the risk of rejecting applicants with a genuine reason for asylum. Failing to rightfully grant an asylum is a serious breach of a refugee's right to protection as it can cause the person to be returned to a territory where they might face future persecution, compromising *the right to non-refoulement*, the cornerstone of international refugee law. Fortunately, the risks for wrong decisions can be reduced by effective interviewing and decision-making.

Investigative Interviewing. Research in the criminal context has produced ethical and science-based investigative interview-approaches that facilitate detailed and accurate memory recall and help evaluate the truthfulness of the provided accounts^{12,13}. These are based on building a trusting relationship with the interviewee and asking questions in an *information-gathering style*, rather than the common *accusatory style*^{14,15}. The former is preferable both for eliciting more accurate and detailed narratives as well as signs of deception¹⁴. The latter makes the interviewee uncooperative and hinders detailed and honest answers^{14,15}. Also, the accusatory style uses closed, confirmatory questions (often to establish guilt) that can easily be answered using short denials—paradoxically containing few signs of deception¹⁵.

Independently of interview style varying on the information-gathering/accusatory dimension, individual questions can be formulated as either *open-ended* or *closed*. Open questions signal the interviewer's interest in the interviewee's story and encourage them to freely recount their experiences, leading to longer and more accurate responses compared to closed questions that convey the expectation that responses should be limited to a few words¹³. In addition, open questions yield more diagnostic signs of deception¹⁶. This is because truth tellers, who rely on their actual memories, can provide more detailed accounts than liars, who find it harder to provide long narratives, for fear of inconsistencies¹⁷. By asking closed questions, neither truth tellers nor liars can provide detailed answers¹⁵. Researchers agree that some closed questions are needed in interviews to elicit all relevant facts and clarify misunderstandings, whereas *option-posing* ("Did you see the shooting?"), *forced choice* ("How did you flee; by car or by foot?"), and *suggestive questions* ("They forced you into the car, right?") are discouraged, as they steer responses in a potentially incorrect direction and damage their validity^{13,16}. Unaccompanied children and other vulnerable applicants may be especially prone to distortions of their testimonies¹⁸.

Our previous studies are the only ones to have studied how well investigative interviewing principles are used in asylum cases^{9,19–29}. In one of these, members of the current research team²⁴ asked asylum officials to form questions in response to *fictive* written descriptions of common asylum narratives. In this case, most questions were open and asked in an information-gathering style. But, when examining 40 *real* Dutch asylum cases³⁰, less than 20% of the questions were open and as much as 80% were closed. Alarming, almost half were option-posing questions (i.e., providing response options and discouraging the interviewee's free narrative) which are associated with increased error. Increased use of open questions improves the quality and the quantity of the information provided in the interviews²². To investigate the use of interview style and question type in Finland, we analyzed 8,469 interview questions in 80 asylum cases from the Finnish Immigration Service. We found that 80% of the questions were closed questions, and only 10% were open¹⁹. These troubling findings were echoed in our study of LGBTQ+ asylum cases²¹ where the asylum interview plays an even more central role. This overreliance on questions that limit the diagnostic value of the interview and the asylum seekers' right to freely tell their story is highly problematic. We will address this by adapting and testing interview techniques developed in within-culture criminal contexts in the cross-cultural asylum context. This includes the Cognitive Interview that consists of memory-retrieval and communication techniques to facilitate free recall³¹, and the novel Model Statement that provides interviewees with an example of a detailed account, eliciting longer answers containing more signs of deception^{32,33}.

Decision-making. Asylum decision-making rests on a credibility assessment, in which the official assesses the applicant's claim and determines which facts to accept as credible⁶. This is often considered the most cognitively and legally challenging aspect of asylum adjudications^{8,34}. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recommends using four indicators to evaluate applicants' statements: *detail and specificity*, *internal consistency* (i.e., within the applicants' statements), *external consistency* (i.e., with other people's statements or information from external sources), and *plausibility*⁶. Psychological science has, however, contested the accuracy of these indicators. Lacking evidence-based credibility indicators, officials must rely on flawed criteria, including non-verbal cues such as asylum seekers' demeanor and emotions⁶. Additionally, undetailed testimonies should not immediately be discounted, as the limits of memory, cultural differences in communication, and the presence of an interpreter can all decrease the information provided^{34,35}. Indeed, officials often make wrongful assumptions about human behavior^{34,36}. Our study of 56 Finnish asylum cases showed that officials' assumptions about how truth-telling applicants present their claims were contrary to research on memory and intercultural communication. For example, officials incorrectly deemed implausible that an applicant could remember the date of his mother's death, but not those of other mundane events, or could describe a significant event in only a few words³⁵. In a systematic review of credibility assessments of LGBTQ+ applicants' claims in several Western countries, we found that assumptions about sexual identity formation often relied on stereotypes and disproven psychological models. Worryingly, officials also referred to their "gaydar" in deciding which claims to reject or accept, and gay men have been returned to their home country as they were not seen as effeminate enough²⁷. We also recently studied 68 rejected Finnish asylum claims based on sexual orientation and found that even if officials accepted the applicants' accounts of persecution, officials often rejected that the reason for this was the applicants' sexual-minority status²⁵. In our review of credibility assessments of claims based on religion, officials' assumptions were unsupported by psychological evidence regarding, for example, motives behind religious conversion²⁶. This was especially frequent in claims of belonging to less common or non-Western belief systems. We will adapt and test methods for assessing credibility developed in within-culture criminal contexts in the cross-cultural asylum context, such as the Criterion-Based Content Analysis³⁷ and the Verifiability Approach that both effectively distinguishes true and untrue claims made by crime victims³⁸.

Renewal and impact. Despite the urgent need for evidence-based methods for asylum interviewing and decision-making, this research topic has been woefully ignored in legal psychology. There is a concerning lack of empirical studies investigating methods that can counteract risks that stem from psychological processes in the asylum procedure while considering the legal boundaries. Hence, our project has considerable potential for scientific breakthrough and renewal. The combination of experimental psychological studies and legal reasoning in asylum research has only recently gained momentum. Our multi-disciplinary team has played a crucial role in this, being responsible for most internationally published work. Our objective is to test and develop evidence-based interviewing and decision-making techniques to improve the accuracy of asylum procedures by working across scientific disciplines.

This research can influence both national and international policies and practices and have a lasting social impact. Our research has been met with enthusiasm by practitioners, such as the Finnish Immigration Service, with whom we have collaborated closely regarding both

data collections and training programs. We have, for example, created, run, and evaluated the efficacy of a specialization course in legal psychology for Finnish asylum interviewers. Recognizing the psychological challenges in their task, asylum authorities have requested help in training for interviews with particularly vulnerable applicants. Members of our team have had similar collaborations (i.e., material development, small-scale training) with asylum authorities in their respective countries. In this project, we continue our close collaboration with the authorities, namely the UK Home Office, the Dutch Immigration Services, the Swedish Migration Agency, and the Finnish Immigration Service. This lets us ground the research in actual requirements, provides access to valuable data (interview transcripts, decision protocols), and facilitates training practitioners. Our approach guarantees direct, widespread societal impact. To inform policy and legal practice, we will also disseminate results to international authorities, such as the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) and UNHCR. To achieve this, the team's asylum law expertise is central.

Research questions and/or hypotheses

Despite a large body of research having produced investigative interviewing and decision-making methods for the criminal context, it remains unclear how effective these are in the asylum context. Hence, it is therefore of vital importance that evidence-based methods for asylum interviewing and decision-making are established and implemented on a large scale. We will be the first research team to extensively test the hypothesis that adapting these methods to the cross-cultural asylum context can significantly improve the accuracy of asylum determinations. To do this, we will address the following research questions:

- i. How can existing interviewing techniques be adapted to asylum interviews to elicit detailed answers and signs of truthfulness in cross-cultural settings?
- ii. How can existing criteria for credibility assessments of applicants' claims be adapted to the asylum context to limit undue influence of within- and cross-cultural stereotypes and personal beliefs about human behavior?
- iii. How can particularly vulnerable applicants (such as sexual minorities) be interviewed, and their credibility be assessed in claims made by particularly vulnerable applicants?
- iv. Based on steps i-iii, we will develop novel standards against which any individual determination process can be evaluated in court, allowing courts to overturn decisions based on a flawed interview or credibility assessments, and
- v. Create and test a training program for asylum officials and scale these internationally, which includes adapting novel software for interview training to the asylum context.

Feasibility and expected results

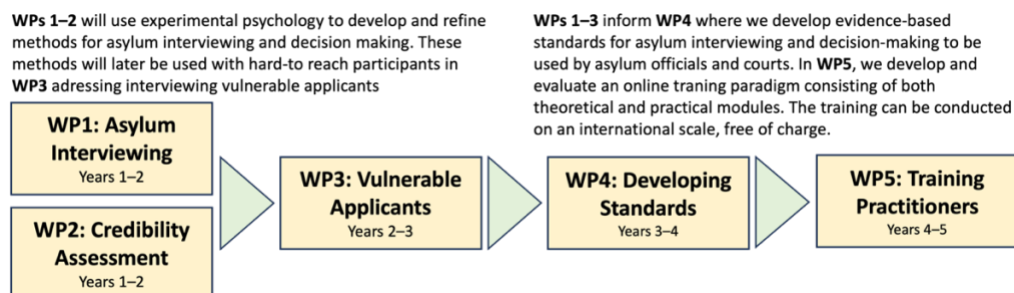


Fig 1. Flowchart of the Included Work Packages.

Implementation. The project consists of five work packages (WPs). WPs 1–3 combine different methods to address *asylum interviewing*, *asylum credibility assessment*, and

vulnerable applicants. We will continue analyzing real-life interviews and decisions (using transcripts from actual interviews obtained from asylum authorities) with asylum seekers with different claims and of different backgrounds, including particularly vulnerable applicants, such as sexual minorities. Based on these transcripts, we also conduct a legal analysis of how officials apply the different criteria of the refugee definition (e.g., the seriousness of the harm feared, the availability of state protection in the applicant's country) and investigate how much weight asylum authorities give to country-of-origin and supporting evidence when making decisions. We will also survey asylum officials, interpreters, and applicants already granted protection about their experiences of the asylum procedure to identify obstacles in the process and study how well current practices fit with evidence.

As the ground truth (i.e., whether a claim actually is true) is unknown in real asylum cases, the above methods cannot test whether an interviewing technique or a decision-making criterion has diagnostic utility (i.e., whether it effectively separates between true and untrue claims). To solve this, we develop and adapt an incentivized lie-paradigm (see methodological innovation box below), based on a known-groups approach previously used to evaluate interviewing techniques in criminal contexts.

Methodological Innovation: Incentivized-lie paradigm in a cross-cultural context. In the known-groups experimental design, we recruit participants representative of the asylum population—these are not actual asylum seekers—and conduct online mock interviews (i.e., simulating a real interview situation). We instruct 50% of participants to tell the truth about a certain event of interest that they have actually experienced (e.g., how they traveled from point A to point B; how they were harassed by the local police; or realizing that they belong to a sexual minority). The other 50% have not had these experiences but are instructed to *lie and try to be perceived as having had this experience*. This lets us 1) measure how truth tellers' and liars' responses differ depending on interviewing style and question types and 2) identify diagnostically useful signs of truthfulness in a claim. This method also lets us ask asylum officials (blind to whether a response is truthful) to read the interviewees' responses and decide which are true and untrue (deception detection methodology), and to measure the officials' accuracy. Asylum officials can be trained to identify signs of truthfulness and their performance can be compared to untrained officials. This lets us study 3) how asylum officials naturally evaluate claims and 4) whether training can improve accuracy. We will conduct power analyses to determine the number of participants needed in each study to detect small effect ($d = 0.3$) with a statistical power of at least 80%. To increase the studies' ecological validity, we use an incentivized-lie paradigm where liars and truth-tellers perceived as truthful by officials receive a desirable award³⁹. We inform participants that their involvement in the studies contributes to improving the quality of asylum procedures. This well-established paradigm involves dedicated measures (e.g., outright information that deception is part of the task, full debriefing) to protect research participants. It will allow us to evaluate the diagnostic utility of both questions and signs of truthfulness in answers. These paradigms have been found valid and ethically justifiable in the criminal context^{40,41}.

Work Packages. In **WP1**, *asylum interviewing*, we study how investigative interviewing techniques can be adapted to the asylum context to elicit informative answers and signs of truthfulness. First (identification), we continue our previous analyses of interview transcripts to map the question types that are currently asked and the most common claims. In

a second step (adaptation), we adapt interview techniques (e.g., the Cognitive Interview and the Model Statement) that have been supported in other contexts (e.g., interviews with crime victims) to the asylum context. In a third step (evaluation), we use the incentivized-lie paradigm to test these techniques against the “Typical Interview” that is based on our studies of current interview practices (i.e., 20% open and 80% closed questions, half of which are option-posing etc.). We will repeat this across different common claims (e.g., being threatened for one’s political view) to test which technique and which question types are most effective given a certain claim. To recruit participants to these studies, we invite people who reside in their home country and have experienced adverse life events like those often reported by asylum seekers, such as racial discrimination. Data are collected as online oral interviews which then will be transcribed. This lets us situate the interviewer and interpreter in Finland while interviewing informants abroad. To consider the cross-cultural context, studies can be conducted in the informants’ own language, with an interpreter trained for this purpose. Online interviews have high ecological validity, given that, since the pandemic, asylum authorities already use online interviews (including remote interpretation), and plan on using them even more⁴³. In a fourth step (validation), we test the usefulness of these interviewing techniques by training a group of asylum officials to use them in representative real-life interviews with actual applicants and study transcripts to compare these to their interviews prior to training.

In **WP 2**, *asylum credibility assessments*, we investigate evidence-based criteria for credibility assessments of applicants’ claims to limit undue influence of stereotypes and personal beliefs about human behavior. In a first step (identification), we analyze decision documents of rejected applications (an explicit motivation for a decision is only mandatory in cases where asylum is not granted). This lets us study the most common decision grounds and possible sources of bias. In a second step (development), we ask untrained asylum officials and asylum officials (random 50%–50% assignment) trained in using evidence-based credibility criteria (e.g., CBCA) to decide which accounts are credible and which are not and motivate their decision. In a third step (evaluation), we train another set of asylum officials to use these credibility criteria in real-life interviews with actual applicants and compare their decision-making before and after training. To ensure that performance is not worse than it currently is, new criteria will be used alongside current criteria in each interview. In another set of studies, we will investigate how supporting evidence and country-of-origin information is used to evaluate the credibility of asylum claims. We test this by studying real-life asylum cases and by experimentally varying (e.g., country-of-origin) fictive but realistic asylum transcripts.

In **WP 3**, *vulnerable applicants*, we extend WP 1–2 to cover interviewing and credibility assessment with hard-to-reach applicants, e.g., LGBTQ+ individuals or religious converts. We also mitigate the surprising lack of knowledge on how people of different cultures experience and talk about their social identity (such as descriptions of the development of their sexual identity, or their reasoning behind leaving religion). For example, in an incentivized lie-paradigm, we ask gay Middle Eastern men (50%) to describe their sexual identity formation and ask straight Middle Eastern men (50%) to feign having experienced a gay sexual identity formation. Likewise, we ask Middle Eastern atheists (50%) to describe their process of leaving Islam and Middle Eastern Muslims (50%) to lie about having left Islam. To recruit participants, we will use ads on support organizations’ websites (e.g., bedayaa.org, a support website for sexual minorities in Egypt and Sudan) as well as posts on Reddit communities dedicated to

sexual minorities and atheists from the Arab world (e.g., r/LGBTArabs, r/ex-Egypt, and r/exmuslims). The applicant has successfully used the latter method to recruit hard-to-reach study participants⁴². Later, we will ask untrained and trained officials (random 50%-50% assignment) to decide which responses are true and untrue and explain their decision. This lets us test the intriguing hypothesis that lying is more likely to lead to a positive asylum outcome than telling the truth when the truth does not conform to the officials' stereotypes. In this WP, we also survey vulnerable applicants (e.g., individuals suffering from PTSD, adults who were interviewed as unaccompanied minors) already granted asylum about possible obstacles in the asylum process. Moreover, we use real-life asylum cases to investigate how the presence of documents attesting to an applicant's vulnerability influences the asylum decision.

In **WP 4**, *developing standards*, we apply results from WPs 1–3 to create a European standard to be used by officials and against which first-instance decisions can be evaluated in court. The standard will allow courts to make informed decisions based on evidence. The aim is to produce a point-by-point protocol that outlines a structured way of assessing the asylum interviews and gives appropriate weight to different aspects of the credibility assessment. Concretely, this implies assessing the types of questions eliciting information used in the decision-making and critically evaluating information elicited by suggestive questions. It also implies assessing discrepancies in the responses based on what these discrepancies consist of (e.g., peripheral details can be contradictory in true accounts, whereas central details are less likely in true accounts). Asylum officials and courts can then be instructed to follow this protocol as a best-practice guideline. The protocol will help guide the asylum officials' work in using evidence-based interviewing methods (comparable to the internationally used and endorsed protocol used in investigations of suspected crimes against children⁴⁴) and in assessing information against criteria backed up by science. To achieve this ambitious goal, attention must be paid to the international legal context and national regulations across Europe.

In **WP 5**, *training practitioners*, we create a scalable, online training program with video-based self-study modules for European asylum officials. This program will be informed by our training studies in WPs 1-3 on interviewing techniques and credibility assessments but also include modules on memory, communication, and sexuality in a cross-cultural context, as well as how to work efficiently with interpreters. We have run a similar course in Finland and found that it increased asylum officials' know-how and questions formation.

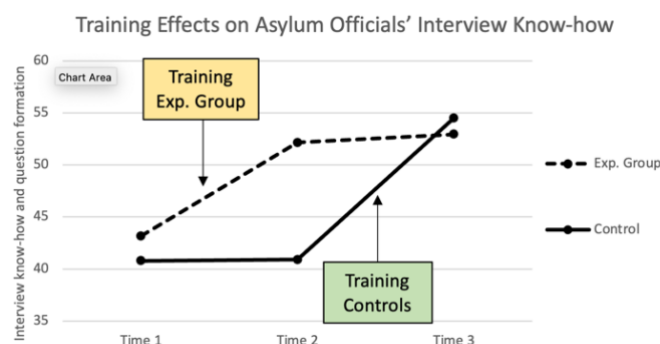


Fig 2. Findings from our training of asylum officials in Finland. After training, both the experimental group, trained between times 1 & 2) and the waiting-list control group (randomly assigned to be trained only later, between times 2 & 3) had improved interview know-how and question formation. The Group x Time interaction effect was statistically significant, $F[2, 55], 49.28, p < .001$.

To ensure that training effects transfer to actual interviews with asylum seekers, we will create and use avatar-based training. This module is predicate on the well-established finding that theoretical training is insufficient to improve actual interviewing unless it is continuous and paired with feedback⁴⁵.

Methodological Innovation: Avatar-based Training for Asylum Practitioners

We will create a training module where practitioners can practice interviewing asylum applicant avatars. This will involve an adaption of an existing software, [Empowered Interview Training](#) (EIT), developed to train forensic interviewers to interview children in investigations of alleged child sexual abuse. The responses of the child avatars in this system are driven by algorithms taken from empirical evidence of how actual children respond to interviewer questions. The interviewers repeatedly interview avatars and are provided with immediate feedback on the appropriateness of the questions they use, as well as if they correctly identified whether the avatar had been representing an abused profile or not. The EIT has been successfully used to train child interviewers⁴⁶ and can be programmed to have interviewees of different backgrounds and with different narratives⁴⁷. EIT has been developed and tested by Prof. Santtila and the applicant. Here, we will create avatars for each of the asylum claims (e.g., sexual identity) investigated in WP1 and WP3 so that they provide valid signs of truthfulness in their narratives with the same probability as interviewees in WP1 and WP3. These probabilities are conditional on the questions used by the interviewees, that is, if WP1 and WP3 show that certain types of questions are more likely to elicit signs of truthfulness than other types of questions, this will also be true of the asylum applicant avatars. Practitioners will be asked to interview four avatars one after the other and be provided with feedback on both the appropriateness of the questions they used as well as whether they paid attention to available signs of truthfulness in the avatars accounts while making a correct or incorrect conclusion about the case. To test the effectiveness of the training method, a waiting-list control group will not receive any feedback. EIT can be fully self-administered online⁴⁷ and scaled to train all European asylum officials.

Using a pre-post design with a waiting-list control group, we investigate how much the program increases the participants' knowledge in key psychological issues, actual interviewing performance with the avatars. We will also study how well interview training transfers to real interviews in a subset of trained asylum officials.

Expected results. As asylum seekers rarely have external evidence to support their claims, interviews with the asylum seeker are of great importance. Yet current interview and decision-making methods are not based on science. The project will bridge this gap. Results will be disseminated in high-impact peer-reviewed journals in psychology and law (e.g., *Law and Human Behavior*, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *International Journal of Refugee Law*). We will publish ~30 scientific articles and 4 PhD-theses (as double degrees between ÅA and our collaborating institutions). To ensure societal impact, we will disseminate knowledge directly to practitioners and stakeholders, including actors such as the EUAA and UNHCR. To succeed, we will collaborate with the Academic Network for Legal Studies on Immigration and Asylum in Europe (the Odysseus Network). We will also deliver an Open Access handbook for practitioners, accessible short reports in practitioner-oriented outlets, interview protocols, policy briefs and decision-making tools for practitioners and courts, as well as a training program to be implemented on an international scale, free of charge. We expect this output to profoundly shape this novel area of research and impact asylum determinations across Europe.

Research environment. This cross-disciplinary project fits well into the Minority Research profile that is one of five devoted major research foci at ÅA and builds on ÅA's longstanding position as a leading research center in legal psychology and asylum law. The ÅA

Institute for Human Rights is the first academic human rights institute in Finland. The Institute conducts outstanding academic research of high societal relevance and offers research-based education in cooperation with national and international partners. The current main areas of research are social justice and the protection of economic, social, and cultural rights; the protection of the rights of vulnerable groups, such as minorities, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants; and global development through human rights-based norms and strategies. The ÅA Institute for Human Right maintains a strong collaboration with the Faculty of Law at the University of Turku and researchers from both law departments have considerable experience in policy-relevant research and have previously cooperated in several projects regarding asylum law, which strengthens the possibility for societal impact of the current project.

The research group for Legal Psychology at ÅA (LePÅ) is led by the applicant and the co-applicant. LePÅ conducts empirical research applicable to various aspects of the legal system. LePÅ has conducted research on investigative interviewing (with a particular focus on interviewing children), decision-making in the legal context, and on how to solicit accurate memory-based information from victims, suspects, and witnesses. LePÅ is the leading research group for legal psychology in Finland and one of the leading groups in Europe. LePÅ has excellent national and international networks, including well-established ties to practitioners.

Research ethics, risk assessment and exit plan

Research ethics. We have several strategies to mitigate ethical risks. Each risk must be weighed against the widespread benefits to the integrity of the asylum system, promoting the rule of law, as well as protecting the rights of individual asylum seekers, including the most vulnerable. Identified risks concern 1) recruitment of participant, 2) data security, and 3) cultural sensitivity. To recruit participants to studies with a known-groups approach, we invite people who reside in their home country and have experienced an event that could constitute an asylum claim. We will recruit participants from countries where these experiences may lead to discrimination, but not rise to the level of persecution (e.g., Lebanon). We will not include individuals who currently seek asylum and might be in a particularly vulnerable situation. In this way, participation cannot be misconstrued as a step towards being granted asylum. The most important risk mitigation strategy is, however, ensuring clarity and transparency about the aims and purpose of the studies in the recruitment process. This will involve clarifying that the research team is in no way involved in the registration and evaluation of asylum applications, and that participation in the study will not constitute a step towards applying for and being granted asylum. This will be made clear both in the recruitment phase and when obtaining written informed consent, translated into all languages of recruited participants.

Prospective informants will also be guided to evaluate their capacity to participate in the study. Those who will be instructed to honestly disclose true negative experiences will be informed that recalling the experiences can temporarily create discomfort. However, most evidence-based therapies center around narration of negative experiences and integrating them into one's life story. It would be reductive to assume that all participants who recount negative events necessarily experience re-traumatization. In cultures that prioritize resilience in the face of adversity, this value may act as a protective factor against trauma reactions⁵⁰. No participants will be instructed to lie about any traumatic experience they have had. Participants will only be asked to lie about experiences that they have not had (e.g., straight men being asked to pretend having been persecuted because of a gay identity). Participants who will be asked to

lie about a specific experience, will be given an opportunity to discuss potential discomfort associated with this and the nature of the task will be clearly described at the point of recruitment and again when obtaining informed consent. Previous research employing this methodology has not documented disproportionate harm for either lie-tellers or truth-tellers⁴¹. We will use GDPR-approved end-to-end encrypted platforms to gather data in the mock interviews, meaning that participants' information cannot be accessed by a third party. We will use the platform [Signal](#) and record only voice to decrease the likelihood participants are identifiable. Data collected for the known-groups paradigm consists of the recorded interviews and a limited number of sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., age bracket, gender, nationality). No other personal data (e.g., names, IP-addresses) will be collected. To contact us, potential participants will be instructed to create and use an e-mail address that does not disclose any personal information. The address will be used to contact participants regarding the study and will be deleted after participation. The research team will provide their contact information so participants can obtain information about the project. We have the infrastructure needed to work with *data safety procedures* at this level, e.g., encrypted computers without Internet access in a surveillance-camera equipped room accessible only to approved and registered team members. The Board for Research Ethics at ÅA has given permission for our previous studies on asylum case files.

To ensure cultural sensitivity and avoid simplistic cultural dichotomies, we will involve members of relevant communities in study planning and recruitment. Several team members have previously worked with universities in Africa and the Middle East^{48,49}, which attests to the team's capacity to successfully engage in cross-cultural work.

Risk assessment. Access to participants willing to describe sensitive experiences that form the basis for an asylum claim is an important challenge to the implementation of a subset of the planned studies of the project. Despite our belief that it is feasible to recruit the desired number of participants over a 3-year period, we propose an alternative implementation in which we use European participants with immigrant backgrounds. This also decreases ethical risks. Very little is known about how people with different backgrounds truthfully and untruthfully talk about negative life experiences. Hence, this alternative strategy would already be very valuable. Likewise, there is a virtual absence of knowledge about how people of any cultural background—whether within or outside an asylum setting—describe their sexual identity development and their religious conversion. Even studies confined to investigating how Europeans describe such experiences (including the variability within their accounts) and how officials evaluate the credibility of such testimonies would provide valuable knowledge to asylum officials. It is also possible that in some cases, implementation will require more time and effort than anticipated. For example, a study involving three different interviewing approaches (i.e., the Typical Interview, the Cognitive Interview, and the Model Statement) requires many participants. If recruiting enough participants for three techniques proves difficult, the design can be adapted to include only two contrasting techniques. Importantly, relying on diverse methodologies lets us balance the risks associated with different studies. Several of the planned studies are associated with minimal risks to participants. We also have a track record of successfully completing experimental research of the suggested types.

Exit plan. We will ensure the sustainable continuity of the project outputs and use of human resources in the following ways. Datasets based on experimental studies will be

thoroughly anonymized and, with the informed consent of participants, made openly available to the scientific community through the Open Science Framework. Data on real-life asylum cases will not, on the other hand, be made publicly available. Such data will be securely stored in encrypted files at offline computers at ÅA and destroyed no later than 5-years after relevant article publications. Developed guidelines and training materials (in Swedish, Finnish, English and Dutch) will be made freely available on-line to stakeholders and beneficiaries to be used in their orientation trainings and regular workflow. We will allow free translation of these materials into other languages. Senior project members will mentor the postdocs to ensure the continuity of their academic career and strengthen their collaborations with societal stakeholders. This will include helping them apply for personal grants and create international networks. Four PhD students will defend their theses and create a solid basis for an academic career with strong ties to society. To promote continuity and extension, the applicant and team will apply for extra-mural funding (e.g., Academy of Finland and European Research Council Consolidator Grant) throughout the project implementation period.

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