

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Interviewing asylum seekers: A vignette study on the questions asked to assess credibility of claims about origin and persecution

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Abstract

The aim of the current vignette study is to map the style, type, and themes of questions that are asked when assessing the credibility of asylum seekers' claims. Sixty-five officials from the Swedish Migration Agency (*Migrationsverket*), were asked to respond to one out of four different vignettes that contained fictitious asylum narratives. Each vignette presented the types of problems often encountered by officials at the migration board. Two of the vignettes contained no evidence of the origin of the asylum seeker. The other two contained no evidence for the claim of persecution. The asylum officials were asked to formulate five questions that would help them to assess the veracity of the applicant's claim. Our analyses showed that they mainly formulated open questions in an information gathering style. A thematic analysis of the questions revealed that when a claim about origin was assessed, asylum officials mostly asked questions about life in the country of origin, identity documents, and the flight to Europe. When the claim about persecution was assessed, in contrast, asylum officials mostly formulated case-specific questions (e.g., how the applicant was arrested). Hence, when the credibility of claims about origin is assessed, there seems to be a typical set of questions that asylum officials use. The asylum officials seem to assume that if the applicant is truly originating from a specific country or area, he or she should have ample knowledge about that area, its customs, and frequently encountered objects.

KEYWORDS

asylum procedure, credibility assessment, question style and type, thematic analysis, vignette study

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1 | INTRODUCTION

With the high influx of asylum seekers (Eurostat Press Office, 2015), the pressure on European immigration authorities is increasing as they need to determine who is genuinely in need of international protection and who is not. For each application, asylum officials have to assess and decide whether the applicant is eligible for international protection according to the criteria that are set out in the Geneva Convention (United Nations, 1951) and the EU qualification directive (Qualification Directive, 2011).

The decisions of asylum officials are significant. A wrongful decision can have tremendous consequences for all parties involved. An incorrect rejection may potentially result in *refoulement*, a forbidden return of an individual to a place where they are persecuted, tortured, or executed (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2001; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2003). In contrast, an incorrect decision to grant asylum may result in providing international protection to so-called bogus refugees, to people who have committed crimes in their country of origin and were prosecuted rather than persecuted, or even the people who are guilty of war-crimes or crimes against humanity (Bond, 2012; UNHCR, 2003).

The assessment of an asylum application is complicated by the general scarcity of evidence to corroborate the asylum seekers' narratives (e.g., Byrne, 2007; Gyulai, 2013; Noll, 2005a; Rousseau, Crépeau, Foxen, & Houle, 2002; UNHCR, 2013). In many cases, asylum seekers cannot provide evidence of who they are, where they come from, or what has happened to them. In addition, the documents that they have may not be recognized as official documents by the authorities in the receiving country (Doornbos, 2004; European Migration Network [EMN], 2013; Goodman, 2013; Koser, 2011; Szypszak, 2000).

Consequently, asylum officials usually have to rely on the statements of the asylum seeker and decide whether or not they trust those statements. Thereby, the credibility of the asylum seeker's story becomes the main focus of attention during the asylum procedure (e.g., Byrne, 2007; Doornbos, 2004; Gyulai, 2013; IND-Werkinstructie nr. 2010/14; Kagan, 2002; Noll, 2005b; Sweeney, 2009). One of the few tools that asylum officials can use in the process is asking questions to the asylum seeker. The aim of the present vignette study is to form a first impression of the questions that asylum officials typically ask in order to assess whether an asylum narrative is credible or not.

1.1 | Credibility assessment in the asylum procedure

As the asylum seekers' narratives often constitute the only piece of evidence in asylum cases, both researchers and practitioners (e.g., immigration authorities, NGO's, and legal representatives) in the field of international protection have primarily focused on how the credibility of the statements should be assessed. For example, according to guidelines by the UNHCR, statements should be plausible, sufficiently detailed, and consistent over multiple interviews with statements of other applicants and witnesses, and with other available information about the country of origin in order to be credible (UNHCR, 2013).

Even though these indicators seem to be endorsed in practice (Granhag, Strömwall, & Hartwig, 2005), they are disputed. Scholars argue that statements that are vague, inconsistent, or lack detail may be a result of a failing memory as opposed to deception (e.g., Juliet Cohen, 2001; Graham, Herlihy, & Brewin, 2014; Herlihy, Jobson, & Turner, 2012; Herlihy, Scragg, & Turner, 2002; Herlihy & Turner, 2006; Herlihy & Turner, 2009). The UNHCR also recognizes that, when using the credibility indicators, asylum officials should take into account the possibilities and limitations of human memory and the personal background and circumstances of the applicant (UNHCR, 2013).

1.2 | Asking questions to assess credibility

Less attention has been paid to how statements are elicited. Asylum seekers' statements are produced in response to questions in an institutional setting. The statements are obtained in an interaction with an interviewer and translated

by an interpreter. All these aspects can influence what information is provided by the asylum applicant (e.g., Bögner, Brewin, & Herlihy, 2009; Doornbos, 2004; Ewens et al., 2014).

Asylum officials try to obtain as much information as possible from the asylum seeker by asking questions about who they are, where they came from, how they traveled to Europe, and what they have experienced in the country of origin (Doornbos, 2004; Wettergren & Wikström, 2013). During this process, the asylum seeker essentially becomes an eyewitness of his or her own life, and the statements obtained through the questions form the input for the credibility assessment. The credibility assessment, in turn, is often at the core of the decision to grant or reject international protection. Thus, in the asylum interview, information is sought that can be used to discriminate truthful from fabricated claims, and the questions asked should match that objective. In order to evaluate whether current interviews are likely to be successful in this respect, we study the style, type, and content of questions formulated by Swedish asylum officials in response to fictitious yet realistic vignettes.

1.2.1 | Question style

Two types of interview techniques are generally distinguished: the information-gathering style and the accusatory style (Vrij, Hope, & Fisher, 2014; Vrij, Mann, & Fisher, 2006). With the information-gathering style, interviewers actively seek information by asking open questions, whereas with the accusatory style, interviewers seek to confirm guilt of the interviewee by primarily asking closed questions. The former style is beneficial for the interviewee as he or she is allowed to search his or her memory and accurately reconstruct past experiences. This style also provides longer, more detailed, and more correct answers as opposed to the accusatory style. An information-gathering interview will also be more demanding for people who are fabricating a story, because for them, it is probably easier to just provide short answers than to provide a full narrative (Vrij et al., 2014).

The accusatory style may also make the interviewee feel uncomfortable (Vrij et al., 2006). Asylum seekers are often already anxious as they enter the interview, due to their past experiences with authorities in their home country or because they know that their future largely depends on the interview (Herlihy & Turner, 2009). Subsuming asylum seekers in an accusatory interview under additional pressure and stress therefore seems ineffective and is sometimes considered unethical. The stress induced by the interview may further impair recall (Smeets, 2011). The information-gathering style thus seems more suitable to obtain information from the asylum seeker that can be sensibly used in a credibility assessment.

1.2.2 | Question type

Different types of questions can also influence how much accurate information is obtained in the interview. Interviewers who ask open questions and do not interrupt the interviewee tend to be most successful in obtaining comprehensive and accurate answers (e.g., Bull, 2010; Jacob Cohen, 1968; Fisher, Milne, & Bull, 2011; Memon & Bull, 1991; Memon, Holley, Milne, Koehnken, & Bull, 1994; Milne & Bull, 2006; Snook, Luther, Quinlan, & Milne, 2012). Closed questions, that only require a yes or no response, and forced-choice questions, which require the interviewee to choose from a limited number of alternatives, result in less information (Horselenberg, Merkelbach, Crombag, & Van Bergen, 2010; Snook et al., 2012; Thoresen, Lønnum, Melinder, Stridbeck, & Magnussen, 2006). The risk that interviewees start guessing also increases in response to closed and forced-choice questions (Milne & Bull, 2006). A last category of questions, suggestive questions, communicate what answer is expected or ask for a clarification or confirmation of information that was not previously disclosed by the interviewee (Johnson et al., in press; Thoresen et al., 2006). With such questions, the interviewer may steer answers into a particular direction and reduce the extent to which answers accurately reflect the interviewee's memory (e.g., Henkel, 2013; Milne & Bull, 2006; Rassin & Candel, 2010; Smeets et al., 2006).

If the information obtained in asylum interviews is to be used for credibility assessment, it would be best to primarily ask open-ended questions. Open questions may aid the memory search of an honest applicant. With appropriate memory cues, it is most likely that a rich, detailed, and valid narrative is obtained. Liars, in contrast,

may experience difficulties when asked open questions. Providing long and detailed answers is more cognitively demanding than providing short answers (Vrij & Granhag, 2012). Furthermore, sometimes a liar tries to say as little as possible (Vrij, Granhag, & Mann, 2010); a strategy that is more difficult to maintain in response to open questions than in response to closed questions.

1.2.3 | Question content

Besides question type and style, the amount of information obtained in the interview also depends on the memory of the applicant. A lack of knowledge or detail may infringe on the applicant's credibility (e.g., UNHCR, 2003). However, people do not encode, store, and remember all the information that is enclosed in a single situation. Instead, they select and encode the salient information of an event (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Knudsen, 2007; Levine & Edelman, 2009). Any event or object that diverges from expectations, is novel, or is otherwise irregular is likely to be more salient than an ordinary, often encountered event or object, and therefore more easily remembered (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987; Bluck & Habermas, 2000; Pillemer, 2001). Details that are less relevant, for example, time-markers and visual details in the periphery of an event, are typically more difficult to recall (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000).

Hence, when assessing the detail of a statement, it should be considered whether or not the interviewer asked for information that the asylum seeker can be expected to remember. The questions in an asylum interview should be tailored to the semantic and autobiographical memory of the applicant. In order to assess whether this is currently the case, it is necessary to map the content of the questions that are typically asked.

1.3 | The present study

As reviewed above, the style, type, and content of questions asked during the asylum procedure can significantly affect statements made by asylum seekers (e.g., Bull, 2010; Fisher et al., 2011; Snook et al., 2012; Vrij et al., 2014; Vrij et al., 2006). Thus far, however, the questions asked to assess the credibility of asylum claims have not been studied. As a first attempt to fill this gap, we conducted an online vignette study in which Swedish asylum officials formulated questions in response to fictitious cases. Our first aim was to evaluate the style and type of the formulated questions. Our second aim was to organize the questions thematically to assess whether there is a thematic overlap in the questions formulated in response to similar cases.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Participant selection and sample

In cooperation with the Swedish Migration Agency (*Migrationsverket*), 100 asylum officials equally divided over four different locations in Sweden were invited to participate in this study. A total of 74 case officers entered the survey and agreed to participate. Of them, 65 officers completed the substantial part of the study, meaning that they formulated questions to ask the asylum seeker and made a judgment about the likelihood that they would grant an asylum status. Two case officers dropped out after making this judgment, therefore 63 officers fully completed the study. The drop-out rate was 15%. The nine officials that dropped out before formulating questions were excluded from data analyses. There was an unequal distribution of drop-outs over the vignettes. Of the nine drop-outs, four were presented with vignette 4; one was presented with vignette 2; one was presented with vignette 3; and the other three dropped out before any vignette was displayed.

2.1.1 | Demographics

Sixty-three participants (15 males, 48 females, age 25 to 53 years, $M = 32.59$, $SD = 6.62$ years) completed the study. There was a large range of working experience represented in the sample (range 0–21 years). The

distribution was skewed, with the most participants working a relatively short period for the Swedish Migration Agency (*Mdn* = 2–3 years, *Mode* = 1–2 years). Thirty five of the participants were case officers and are in that function responsible for interviewing asylum applicants. One participant was a case officer for minors. The other 27 participants were decision-makers, who decide on the granting of a refugee status based on the case-file including transcripts of the interviews. Twenty five of them had previously been a case officer and were thus experienced in interviewing in the asylum procedure as well.

2.2 | Vignettes

The credibility assessment in asylum cases tends to center on two elements. First, the origin of the applicant (i.e., the nationality and hometown) has to be deemed credible in order to assess the risk that the applicant faces upon a return to that country (EMN, 2013). Second, if the origin of the applicant is known, the persecution story (i.e., what has happened to the asylum seeker in the country of origin that instigated the flight) has to be found credible (UNHCR, 2003). We wanted to represent both cases that center on the origin claim and cases that center on the claim of persecution in this study. Hence, two vignettes described cases in which evidence for the origin of the applicant was absent, and two vignettes described cases in which evidence for the persecution of the applicant(s) was absent. We designed two different vignettes within each type of case to examine whether there is a thematic overlap in the questions formulated in response to vignettes that had the same investigative focus (i.e., credibility of origin vs. persecution story) but were otherwise diverse. All vignettes differed from each other in terms of nationality, sex, and age of the applicant(s). Furthermore, in the origin, vignettes we alternated between an urban (Vignette 1) and a rural background (Vignette 2), and in the vignettes focusing on persecution, we changed the ground for fear of persecution from membership of a social group (Vignette 3) to political views (Vignette 4).

As such, we designed four different fictitious case vignettes (see Appendices A–D for the vignettes' text): Vignette 1, in which the origin of a southern Sudanese woman fleeing with her children was questioned; Vignette 2, in which the origin of an Eritrean young man was questioned; Vignette 3, in which the persecution story an Afghan Sikh family fleeing victimization and extortion by the Taliban was questioned; and Vignette 4, in which the persecution story of a Turkish young man who flees after participating in protests against Erdogan was questioned. To make sure that the vignettes were realistic, they were first checked by an experienced Swedish case officer who did not further participate in the study.

The four vignettes had a similar structure (see also Appendices A–D). They started with a brief paragraph about the applicant(s) identity, origin, and motive for fleeing. The story continued with a paragraph with more information about the flight (in the origin cases) or about what had happened in the country of origin (in the persecution cases). Finally, the relevant country of origin information (COI) was provided, and the absence of evidence was made explicit. The vignettes concluded with a task description for the participant in which the focus of the case was explicated.

2.3 | Procedure and materials

The study was designed with the online survey software Qualtrics. The asylum officials were invited to participate by means of an e-mail, including a link to the study. The study was fully translated to Swedish. Participants were informed that they were allowed to leave the study at any point if they wished so.

After participants consented to participation, they were randomly assigned to one of the four vignette conditions: 17 participants read Vignette 1; 18 participants read Vignette 2; 18 participants read Vignette 3; and 12 participants read Vignette 4. Immediately after the participants had read the vignette for the first time, they were asked to rate on a scale from 0 to 100 to what extent they thought the story of the asylum seeker was plausible. The *plausibility rating* was followed-up by a task to encourage deeper processing of the story. The asylum officials had to read the story a second time and *highlight 5 aspects* of the story that they wanted to elaborate on in the interview (see Appendices A–D for the phrases that could be highlighted).

Now, the participants were asked to *formulate five questions* that they would like to ask the asylum seeker to assess the veracity of the claim about origins or persecution. These questions formed the input for the main analyses of the study. We only asked the participants to formulate a limited number of questions for two reasons. First, by only formulating five questions, the officials could focus on what they thought were the most relevant aspects in the story to assess the credibility of the claim. Consequently, their answers gave us an idea of what the officials typically find important elements to assess claims about origin and persecution even though we could not analyze full interviews. Second, considering the high workload that migration boards currently face, we wanted to limit the time that asylum officials had to spend on the study in order to minimize interference with their everyday work.

Next, participants were asked several *meta-cognitive questions* about the questions they had formulated. Specifically, they were asked to rate on a scale from 0 to 100 to what extent they felt confident that these questions would help them to assess the veracity of the claims, to what extent they had based the questions on knowledge rather than intuition, and to what extent they expected their colleagues to ask the same questions. They were also asked to rate on a scale from 0 to 100 to what extent they thought that the answers to their questions might be affected by *contextual factors*, such as circumstances of the interview (e.g., time-pressure or stress induced by the interview), characteristics of the interviewee, characteristics of the interviewer, the way in which questions are asked, and the mediation of an interpreter.

Before continuing to the last part of the study, participants were asked to make a *judgment about the asylum status* of the applicant. Specifically, they were asked to rate on a scale from 0 to 100 to what extent they would be inclined to grant an international protection status to the applicant, based on the available information. In the last part of the study, participants were asked several *demographic questions*.¹

2.4 | Question coding

The questions formulated by the asylum officials in response to the vignette were subsumed to the following analyses.

2.4.1 | Style

Initially, two styles were distinguished, based on existing literature (e.g., Moston & Engelberg, 1993; Vrij et al., 2006) but slightly reformulated to better fit with interviewing practice in the asylum procedure. *Information-gathering questions* allow asylum seekers to describe their actions and experiences in their own words. The interviewer seeks information and clarification of previously provided information. An *accusatory style* of questioning communicates disbelief and distrust in the asylum seeker's story. The interviewer seeks to confirm skepticism. A third style was discovered during the analyses: the *burden communication style*. These questions explicitly communicate the burden of proof to the asylum seeker. The questions stipulate that it is the responsibility of the applicant to establish the veracity of his claims.

2.4.2 | Type

After the questions were coded in terms of their style, questions that required multiple responses were identified and were split into multiple single questions. For example, the question "Tell me about the documents that were handed over to the smuggler, how they have been issued and what they looked like?" was split into one question about how the documents were issued, and one questions about what the documents looked like.

All the single questions were then typified with codes adapted from Thoresen et al. (2006) and were similar to Johnson et al. (in press). Five types of questions were distinguished. Questions allocated to the *open or cued-recall* category prompted a free recall. These questions did not delimit the answer except in a general way. Cued-recall

¹All the materials, including the specific formulation of the meta-cognitive-, contextual-, and demographic questions, can be provided by the first author upon request.

TABLE 1 Outcomes and classification of the inter-rater reliability analyses for each vignette

| Vignette | Analysis | κ | Classification ^a |
|----------|-----------------|----------|-----------------------------|
| 1 | Style | 1.00 | Perfect agreement |
| | Single/multiple | .96 | Almost perfect agreement |
| | Type | .86 | Almost perfect agreement |
| | Theme | .86 | Almost perfect agreement |
| 2 | Style | .82 | Almost perfect agreement |
| | Single/multiple | .68 | Substantial agreement |
| | Type | .97 | Almost perfect agreement |
| | Theme | .93 | Almost perfect agreement |
| 3 | Style | .66 | Substantial agreement |
| | Single/multiple | .79 | Substantial agreement |
| | Type | .79 | Substantial agreement |
| | Theme | .89 | Almost perfect agreement |
| 4 | Style | .30 | Fair agreement |
| | Single/multiple | .79 | Substantial agreement |
| | Type | .92 | Almost perfect agreement |
| | Theme | .85 | Almost perfect agreement |

^aThe Kappa statistics were classified according to the classification of Landis and Koch (1977).

questions sometimes also included specific contextual cues or details, either introduced by the interviewee or by the interviewer to refocus the attention on specific details, aspects or situations, or to request additional information.

The second category, the *limited cued-recall category*, held questions that delimited the answer, for example, because there could logically only be one correct answer. The questions in the limited cued-recall category did not require or stimulate a lengthy response, but rather a short answer. Examples of questions in this category were "Where did you live?" and "When did it happen?"

Two types of closed questions were distinguished: *yes/no question*, were questions that merely requested a yes or a no and no further explanation, for example, "Did you go to the market?". Questions that could potentially be answered with yes or no but were clearly intended to invite the interviewee to provide an extensive answer are coded as open-ended questions (e.g., "Can you describe..."). *Forced-choice* questions included utterances that gave explicit or implicit options from which the interviewee should choose.

The last category of questions that was identified was *suggestive questions*. Questions were allocated to this type when they were stated in such a way that the interviewer strongly communicated what response was expected, asked for a clarification or confirmation of information not previously disclosed by the asylum seeker, or quoted the asylum seeker incorrectly.

2.4.3 | Theme

The thematic analyses followed the procedure recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step of the analysis was to generate a code for each question that captured the essence of the content. For example, the question "Tell me something about your husband's job as a politician?" would be initially coded as "husband's job." Hereafter, codes were collated into potential themes and subthemes. The structure of themes was then refined multiple times to reach an optimal solution with good homogeneity within the themes and enough heterogeneity between themes. Once the optimal structure was reached, meaning was given to each theme, and the themes were described.

²Note from Table 1 that for the analysis of style in Vignette 4, only fair agreement between the first and second coder was reached. The inconsistencies were solved with a third coder. Still, we will keep the relatively low inter-rater reliability in mind when interpreting the results, and we discuss this more in depth in the Section 4.

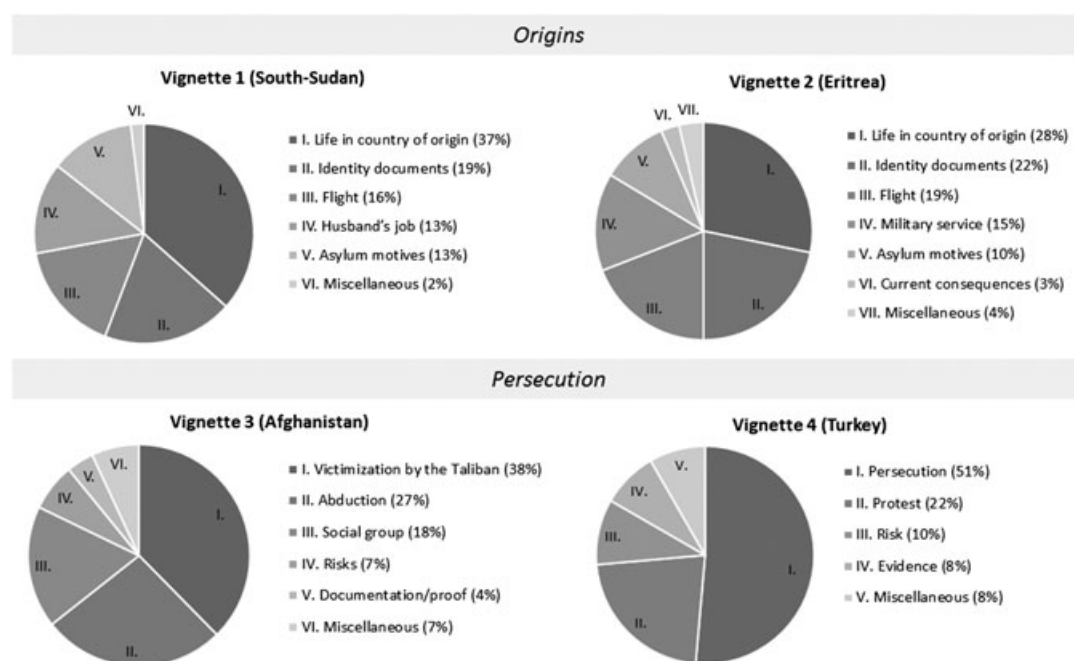


FIGURE 1 The thematic structure for each of the vignettes with the corresponding percentages of questions that were allocated to each theme

2.5 | Inter-rater reliability

To minimize subjectivity in the coding of questions, a second coder was asked to code all the questions. For theme inter-rater reliability measurement, we gave the second coder the thematic structure and explanation of the themes and asked her to categorize all the questions according to that coding scheme. The outcomes of the inter-rater reliability analyses are presented in Table 1.² A third coder clarified differential outcomes. A few questions were assigned to a different theme ($n = 2$) or subtheme ($n = 2$) by all three coders and were coded as miscellaneous because no consensus was reached.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Question style and type

The large majority, 92%, of the 325 formulated questions was posed in an information-gathering style. Only 2% ($n = 8$) of the questions was accusatory in style, with most accusatory questions ($n = 4$) being formulated in response to Vignette 4. Burden communication questions comprised 3% of all questions ($n = 10$), and they were mostly asked ($n = 7$) in response to Vignette 2.

Of the 325 questions, 56 contained multiple ideas. The 387 questions that resulted after splitting the multiple questions into single questions were mostly categorized as open or cued-recall questions, with 75% of all the questions falling under that type. Of the remaining questions, 11% was categorized as limited cued-recall questions ($n = 43$), and 8% of the questions was closed yes/no questions ($n = 32$). Vignettes 2 and 4 together accounted for a large proportion of all the closed questions ($n = 25$; 78%). There was one forced-choice question, and two questions were suggestive.

3.2 | Thematic analyses

The results from the thematic analyses including a description of the themes for each vignette are displayed in Figures 1–5. Questions that did not fit any theme—some were too general and some did not connect to any other questions—were placed in a miscellaneous category. Similarly, if questions were too general to fit to a specific subtheme, they were categorized as “no subtheme.”

There was a considerable overlap in the kind of questions that asylum officials formulated when the origins of the asylum seeker were questioned (see Figure 1). Both in response to Vignettes 1 and 2, the majority of the questions (72% and 69%, respectively) were about the *life* of the asylum seeker in the country of origin, identity documents, or the *flight* from the country of origin to Europe. From Figures 2 and 3, it becomes clear that also several of the subthemes under these three overlapping themes are similar. This shows that when the credibility of the origin of the asylum seeker is assessed, asylum officials tend to formulate similar questions, even though the cases are different (i.e., difference in nationality, sex, age, and rural/urban background). The other questions in these cases were case-specific.

In cases where the credibility of the persecution narrative was assessed, there was less overlap in the questions (see Figure 1). Two themes seemed to be recurring in these cases. In response to both vignettes, questions were formulated about the *risks* that the asylum seekers would face upon a return to the country and about *evidence* (documentation/proof) or the lack thereof to support their story. The recurring themes in the vignettes about persecution only comprised a minority of the questions (11% and 18%, respectively). The large majority of the questions in response to Vignettes 3 and 4 were case-specific. Questions in response to Vignette 3, for example, addressed the victimization by the Taliban, the abduction of the father, and the family's social group (see Figure 4). In response to

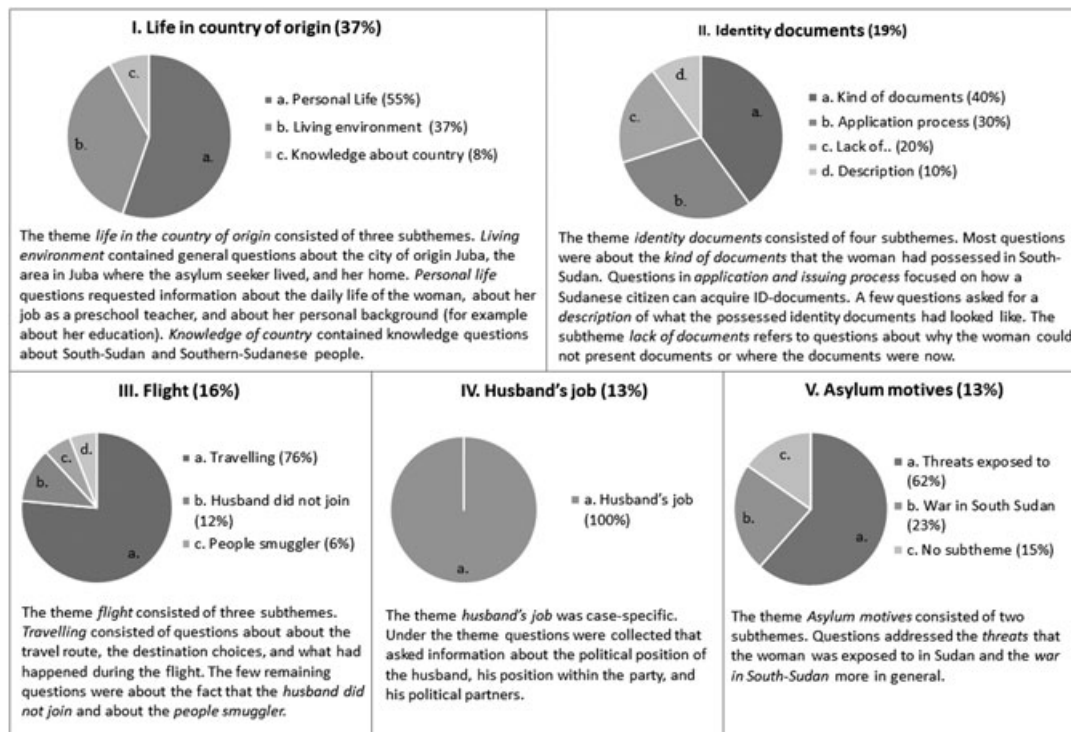


FIGURE 2 Description of the themes and subthemes that captured the questions formulated in response to Vignette 1, with corresponding percentages of questions that were allocated to each subtheme

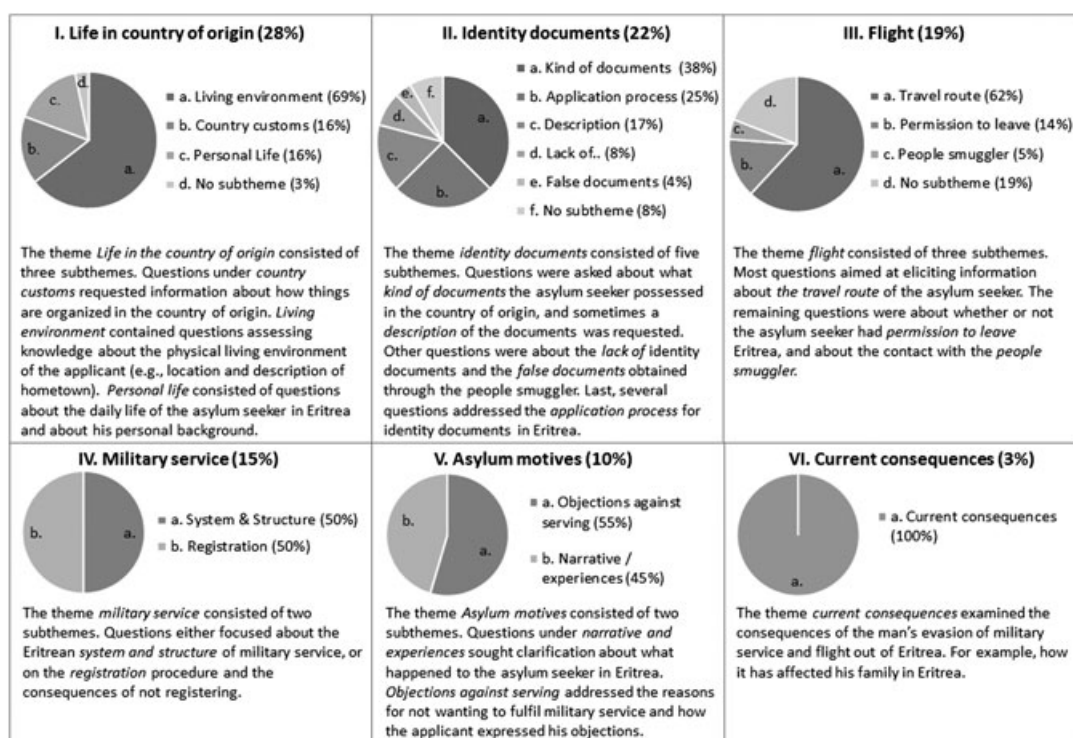


FIGURE 3 Description of the themes and subthemes that captured the questions formulated in response to Vignette 2, with corresponding percentages of questions that were allocated to each subtheme

Vignette 4, questions were mostly about how the Turkish authorities had persecuted the man and what he did in the protests against Erdogan (see Figure 5).

3.3 | Confidence ratings and contextual influences

A MANOVA with vignette as a between subjects' factor and the three confidence questions as dependent variables showed that there were no differences between the groups on the confidence ratings, $F(9,144) = 0.32$, $p = .97$, Wilk's $\Lambda = 0.95$. On average, the asylum officials were relatively confident that their questions would aid the credibility assessment, with a mean of 67.08 ($SD = 18.23$) on a scale from 0 to 100. Our participants also reported that the questions were based on knowledge rather than intuition ($M = 66.80$, $SD = 17.32$), and that they expected their colleagues to ask similar questions ($M = 71.88$, $SD = 19.54$).

A repeated measures ANOVA with vignette as the between subjects factor and the five contextual influences as the within subjects variable yielded a main effect of the contextual influences, $F(4, 58) = 23.64$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = .62$. Pairwise comparisons showed that our participants felt that characteristics of the interviewee ($M = 70.49$, $SD = 19.38$), the way questions are asked ($M = 74.60$, $SD = 16.64$), and the intervention of a translator ($M = 74.34$, $SD = 16.27$) would influence the responses to the questions more than the characteristics of the interviewer ($M = 58.71$, $SD = 18.82$) and the circumstances of the interview ($M = 59.60$, $SD = 20.89$).

3.4 | Plausibility and asylum judgments

In general, participants found the vignette stories plausible, with mean ratings ranging from 60.92 to 74.29. An ANOVA on plausibility ratings with vignette as the between subjects factor showed no significant differences

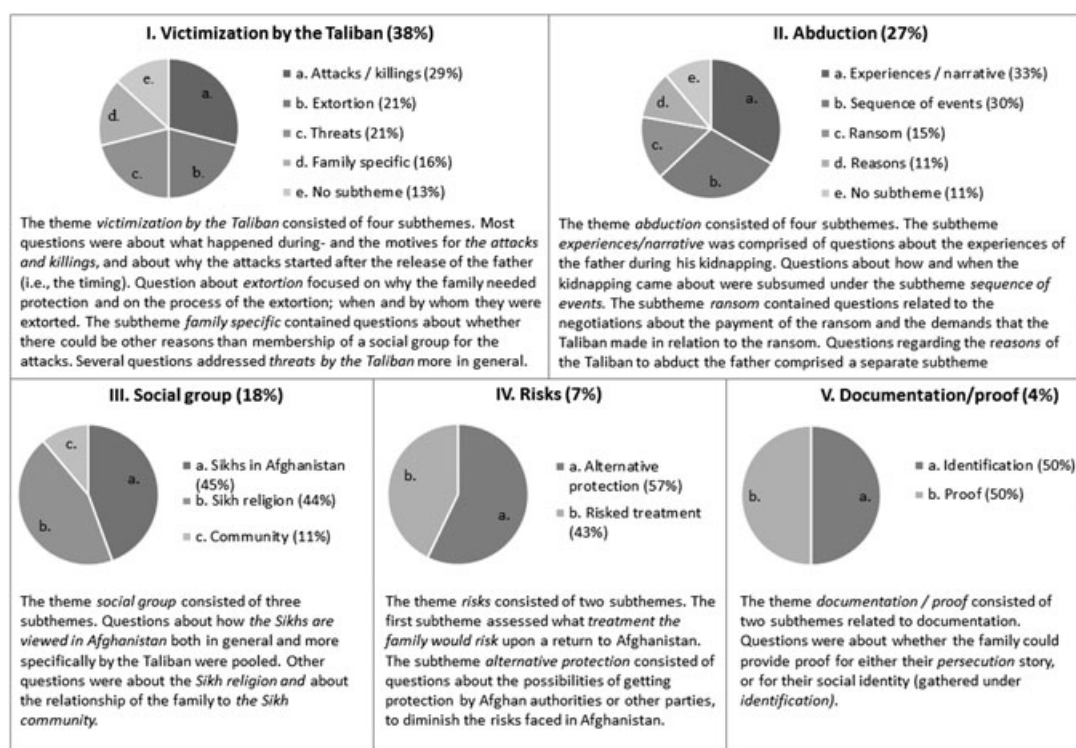


FIGURE 4 Description of the themes and subthemes that captured the questions formulated in response to Vignette 3, with corresponding percentages of questions that were allocated to each subtheme

between the plausibility ratings, $F(4,65) = 2.08$, $p = .09$. There was, however, a significant difference in the extent to which participants were inclined to grant a refugee status to the asylum seeker, $F(3,61) = 9.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .33$. Post hoc comparisons showed that participants who responded to Vignette 4 were significantly less likely to grant asylum than participants who responded to the other vignettes (all p 's < 0.003). The corresponding means are displayed in Table 2.

To examine whether the initial plausibility judgment could predict the judgment about refugee status, a regression analysis was conducted. The snap-judged plausibility predicted the extent to which asylum official estimated the chances of granting a refugee status to the asylum seeker, $\beta = .40$, $t(63) = 3.41$, $p < .002$. The model with only plausibility as a predictor was significant, $F(1, 63) = 11.63$, $p < .002$, $R^2_{\text{adjusted}} = .14$, and the plausibility judgment explained 14% of the variance in the judgment to grant or reject a refugee status.

4 | DISCUSSION

The aim of the present paper was to examine how asylum officials interview to assess the credibility of asylum seekers' claims. We evaluated the type, style, and themes of interview questions formulated by Swedish asylum officials in response to fictitious case vignettes. Two main conclusions can be drawn. First, Swedish asylum officials at least know that they should predominantly ask open questions in an information-gathering style to elicit information from asylum seekers. Second, when the origins of the asylum seeker are assessed, Swedish asylum officials seem to rely primarily on questions that assess knowledge about life in the country of origin, identity documents, and the flight. Such a thematic overlap was not found when the interview was held to assess the credibility of claims about persecution.

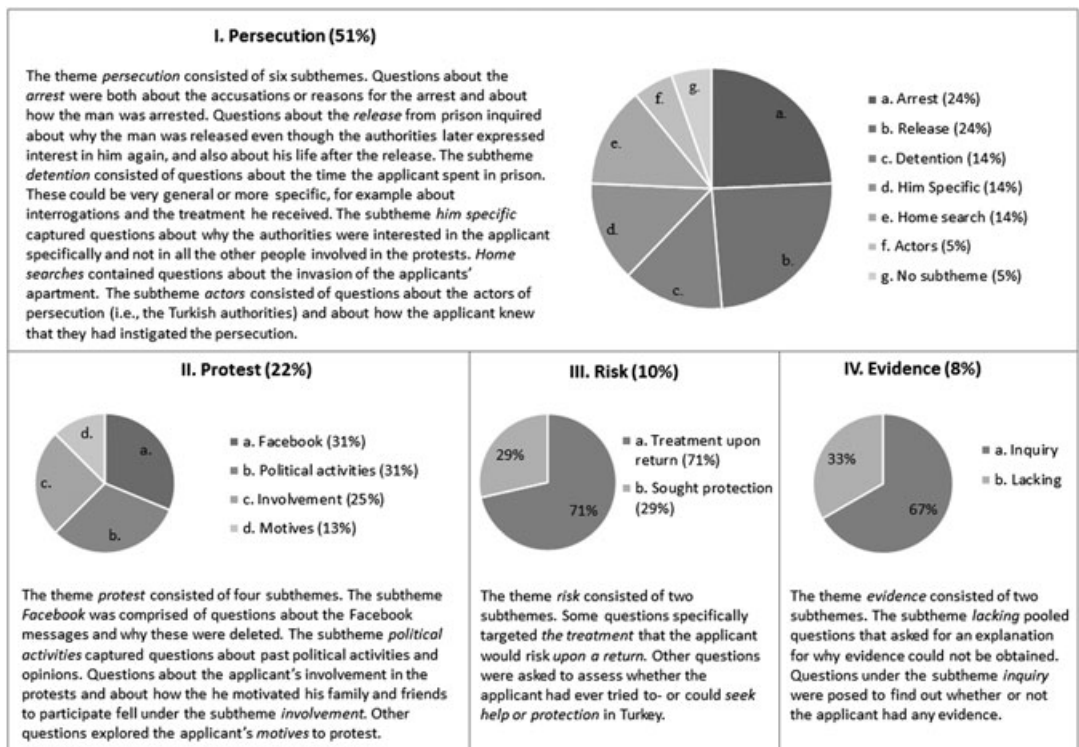


FIGURE 5 Description of the themes and subthemes that captured the questions formulated in response to Vignette 4, with corresponding percentages of questions that were allocated to each subtheme

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics of plausibility judgments and likelihood to grant a refugee status for each of the four vignette stories

| Condition | N | Plausibility judgment | | Granting refugee status | |
|--------------------------|----|-----------------------|-------|-------------------------|-------|
| | | M | SD | M | SD |
| Vignette 1 (Sudan) | 17 | 74.29 | 13.40 | 63.12 ^a | 27.93 |
| Vignette 2 (Eritrea) | 18 | 77.50 | 15.99 | 66.33 ^a | 29.82 |
| Vignette 3 (Afghanistan) | 18 | 74.00 | 14.31 | 76.78 ^a | 20.43 |
| Vignette 4 (Turkey) | 12 | 60.92 | 22.97 | 26.17 ^b | 22.23 |
| Total | 65 | 72.63 | 17.07 | 60.97 | 30.56 |

^{a, b}Post-hoc tests showed that means with the superscript a differed significantly from means with the superscript b at the $p < .003$ level.

4.1 | Questions style and type

We found that Swedish asylum officials primarily formulated questions in the information-gathering style, as opposed to the accusatory or burden communication style. The likelihood that an interviewer will elicit ample and accurate information with information gathering questions is higher than with accusatory questions (Vrij et al., 2014; 2006). The questions formulated by the asylum officials were primarily open or cued-recall questions. Only a small proportion of the questions was typified as closed, and almost none were forced choice or suggestive questions. This finding is promising because open and cued-recall questions elicit the most, and most accurate, information in investigative interviews (e.g., Bull, 2010; Jacob Cohen, 1968; Fisher et al., 2011; Memon & Bull, 1991; Memon et al., 1994; Milne

& Bull, 2006). We must be cautious in concluding that asylum officials ask predominantly open and information-gathering questions in practice. It may be possible that our results overestimate the prevalence of information gathering and open questions in asylum interviews.

This study was an imitation of a real asylum case. Our set-up is void of one essential factor: the interaction between the applicant and the official. The consequence of the absence of interaction in the current study is that asylum officials have unlimited time to think about what questions they want to ask. They do not have to respond quickly to what the asylum seeker has said or think about follow-up questions while listening to the answer. Asking open questions is difficult and cognitively demanding (Memon et al., 1994). It may be the case that in real asylum interviews, asylum officials lack the time or cognitive resources to formulate open questions and instead ask more closed questions.

Another reason that the proportion of open-ended questions may be overestimated is the number of questions the case officials were asked to formulate. Our participants were asked to create only five questions, which may have limited the types of questions they would ask. For example, a typical interview tends to start with a few open-type questions, but questions become more closed as the interview progresses (e.g., Fisher, Geiselman, & Raymond, 1987; Wright & Alison, 2004). The style and type of questioning may also change during the interview as an effect of the interviewee's answers. In this study, the asylum officials did not receive answers to their questions. We do not know whether the style and type of questions would change in quality depending on the answer given.

All the vignettes were deemed as plausible in the eyes of the asylum officials. It is possible that the style of questioning could also become more skeptical or accusatory if the official thinks that the asylum seeker's story is unlikely to begin with. That is, the beliefs of the interviewer may influence the style of questioning in investigative interviews. Previous research in a police investigation context has, for example, shown that people formulate more guilt presumptive questions when they think the suspect is guilty, as opposed to believing in the suspect's innocence (Hill, Memon, & McGeorge, 2008). Thus, to be more correct in the interpretation, one could say that the results indicate that asylum officials mostly ask open and information-gathering questions at the start of the interview and when the applicant's story seems relatively plausible at first sight.

The large proportion of open-ended questions formulated by the participants in our study does imply that Swedish asylum officials at least know that they should ask open questions to obtain accurate information. This interpretation is in line with our finding that asylum officials think that the way in which questions are asked influences what information is obtained in the interview. Knowing how one should set-up an interview, however, does not guarantee that asylum officials will also translate that knowledge or intentions into practice. Research has shown that translating knowledge and intentions into effective practice is often difficult (Sheeran, 2002). To examine whether the asylum officials' knowledge is also systematically incorporated in practice, it would be valuable to study real asylum interviews. That way, the questions across different cases can be investigated; all the questions in an interview can be analyzed.

The identification of a burden communication style, although presented in only a few questions, is interesting, and it may be explained by the standard of proof in asylum law. It is up to the asylum seeker to establish a well-founded fear of persecution (Asylum Procedure Directive, 2013; Qualification Directive, 2011), and asylum authorities merely have the duty to assess the relevant elements of the application in cooperation with the asylum seeker. With questions in the burden communication style, asylum officials possibly want to emphasize that the main responsibility lies with the applicant, and thus that the initiative to make their claims believable also lies with them. Whether such questions are effective is a different matter. There is currently no research regarding burden communication questions and if they elicit valuable information; however, our estimation is that they would not. Questions that communicate the burden of proof implicitly emphasize the different positions of the interviewer and interviewee. Thereby, the questions may negatively influence the rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee; one of the important requirements for effective investigative interviews (e.g., Fisher et al., 2011; Memon, Meissner, & Fraser, 2010; Vrij et al., 2014).

4.2 | Recurring themes in origin cases

Besides mapping the type and style of questions formulated by Swedish asylum officials, the second aim of this study was to analyze the kind of questions that are typically asked to assess the credibility of asylum claims. We were looking for the presence of typical question categories that may recur in an asylum interview. The presence of such categories would make it possible to evaluate whether the questions request knowledge that people can ordinarily be expected to have when taking into account how human memory functions. In cases where the asylum officials focused on examining the veracity of claims about persecution, we only found a few similar themes that were also small in size. Most of the questions formulated in response to the persecution cases were case-specific. For these questions, it will be difficult to assess whether the questions are answerable for veracious individuals, as targeted memory may differ from case to case.

We did find a set of questions that were typically formulated in cases where the origin of the asylum seeker was questioned. In the two different origin cases, many questions were formulated about objects and places in the living environment of the asylum seeker. Questions also focused on country customs and history and what identity documents looked like in the country of origin. The questions implied that asylum officials held the assumption that persons truly originating from a specific country or area should have ample knowledge about that area, its history, its customs, and frequently encountered objects. Whether that assumption holds true is questionable when taking into account how human memory functions. Events that are routine or objects we encounter regularly are not necessarily encoded and stored in memory in great detail (e.g., Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Knudsen, 2007). For example, the question "Please describe what your passport looked like?" may seem valid to assess the credibility of a claim about origins, but it may be difficult to answer in sufficient detail. It would really depend on how much attention people normally pay to the lay-out of their passport.

Our participants were generally confident that their questions aided the credibility assessment. Future studies will have to provide support for whether that confidence is justified through empirical evaluation of typically asked questions and if they truly help to discriminate between truthful and fabricated accounts.

4.3 | Limitations and future directions

As previously mentioned, our thematic structures resulted from a limited number of questions. Because asylum officials formulated only five questions, the questions were broad in content and sometimes even contained statements about what the asylum official would like to ask (e.g., Posing general knowledge questions about Eritrea), rather than a real question. In a full real-life interview, several more specific and concrete questions would most likely be asked, which would allow for a more in-depth analysis of which questions are normally asked. Nevertheless, the results provided the first global overview of the themes that are typically addressed in asylum interviews to assess the credibility of claims about origins and persecution.

Another limitation in this study was the difficulty of coding individual questions for style. Previous research has focused on the style of a full interview as well as the proportion of open and closed questions contained in the interview (Hartwig, Granhag, & Vrij, 2005; Vrij et al., 2014; Vrij et al., 2006; Williamson, 1993). Although we attempted to code the style of individual questions, it was difficult because a question may be interpreted differently depending on how it was asked (i.e., in what tone), or in context to previously asked questions and responses. This difficulty was also reflected in the low inter-rater reliability for style in Vignette 4. In future studies, it would be preferable to use video or audio recordings of interviews for the analysis of question style, or at least interview transcripts.

A final direction for future research concerns the relationship between plausibility ratings and the final decision to grant a refugee status. We found that an initial snap judgment of plausibility regarding the asylum story predicted the final decision of the asylum officials. These findings could imply that the first judgment of plausibility biases the subsequent assessment of the claim, in the sense that asylum officials seek to confirm their first impression. Such a confirmation bias has been repeatedly found in police interviews and criminal investigations (e.g., Ask &

Granhag, 2005; Hill et al., 2008; Kassin, Goldstein, & Savitsky, 2003; Nickerson, 1998). Note, however, that in this study the participants did not receive any additional information between the plausibility judgment and the eventual judgment. They only had the time to think more about the story and to formulate questions; therefore, more research is needed to draw the conclusion that asylum officials are prone to a confirmation bias. For example, an experiment in which asylum officials receive affirmative, neutral, or contradictory information between the two judgments, to investigate whether plausibility functions as an anchor for the eventual decision to grant or reject a refugee status.

5 | CONCLUSION

The assessment of credibility is inevitable in the asylum procedure. Statements of the asylum seeker are oftentimes the only available evidence besides general information about the situation in the country of origin. It is important to take into account how the statements were elicited in order to decide whether or not the statements of the asylum seeker should be deemed credible. A first step to a careful credibility assessment is to make sure that the methods of questioning are of a high standard. For instance, by asking open questions in an information-gathering style and asking questions that only a truthful asylum seeker, and not a deceptive asylum seeker, can answer.

This study is the first to systematically evaluate the style, type, and kind of questions formulated by asylum officials to assess the credibility of a claim about origin or persecution. Our results are promising. We found three recurring themes in the questions for the cases that focused on claims about origins. Especially, the prevalence of questions belonging to the theme life in the country of origin implies that asylum officials hold the assumption that a credible claimant should have ample knowledge about the area or origin, its history, and its customs. The question that remains unanswered is whether it is reasonable or not to expect a genuine asylum seeker to reproduce such knowledge. Swedish asylum officials also tend to formulate primarily open questions in an information-gathering style. Even though we do not know whether the same proportions of open and information gathering would be found in full interviews, the results do indicate that Swedish asylum officials at the very least know how a careful interview should be set-up.

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APPENDIX A

English translation of vignette 1. Bold phrases could be highlighted in the highlighting exercise

A female asylum seeker claims to **originate from Juba**, the **capital of South Sudan**. She was a **teacher in a primary school**, and her **husband was a politician**. Because of his job, they were **endangered during the war**, and they decided to **flee to North Sudan**.

During their flight, they were shot at, and another car was destroyed by a **roadside bomb**. When they arrived in the north, her husband told her **that she had to flee to Egypt with her two children** (she was **pregnant of a third child**). From there, she traveled with the **help of a people smuggler to Europe by airplane**. Her husband was supposed to come 2 months later, but **she has not heard from him since**.

Because of the **time pressure** under which **she left Sudan**, the woman **does not have any evidence for her origins**. Furthermore, she claims to have **handed in her identity documents to the smuggler** and to have **traveled to Europe with false documents**.

It is known from **COI** that the **situation in South Sudan** is indeed very **dangerous for politicians and their close family**. Furthermore, **southern Sudanese people** are often the **target of discrimination, arrests, threats, and violence by North Sudanese authorities** (among which the **police and security services**), so **Northern Sudan would not be a safe place to settle for a southern Sudanese woman either**.

However, an important question arising from her story is whether the woman is truly originating from South Sudan. *This is why in the detailed interview you want to investigate whether the woman truly originates from South Sudan.*

APPENDIX B

English translation of vignette 2. Bold phrases could be highlighted in the highlighting exercise

An 18-year-old asylum seeker claims to originate from Dukambiya, a small village in the south of Eritrea. He fled Eritrea because he does not want to fulfil his obligatory military service. He claims that his brother was arrested 5 years ago when he refused to serve the army, and that he subsequently disappeared. Still, because the man has conscientious objections against serving, he decided not to register at the registration office when he turned 18.

At first, he hoped that the authorities would not find out. However, one night, he heard uproar outside, and his mother came running in the room. She was panicked, explained that there was a raid to find deserters, and urged him to flee. He managed to outrun the police forces, and after walking for 2 days, he crossed the border with Ethiopia. From there, he traveled with the help of a people smuggler by truck via Sudan to Egypt, from where he flew to Europe.

Because he did not plan his flight, he has no evidence for his origins. He claims to have handed in his identity documents to the smuggler and to have traveled to Europe with false documents.

It is known from COI that ad hoc raids are often held to arrest deserters in Eritrea. Deserters face prison time, and detained deserters often disappear. Furthermore, people who flee the country to evade military service also face prison time and still have to fulfil their obligatory military service when they return.

However, an important question arising from his story is whether the man is truly originating from Eritrea. *This is why in the detailed interview you want to investigate whether the man truly originates from Eritrea.*

APPENDIX C

English translation of vignette 3. Bold phrases could be highlighted in the highlighting exercise

An Afghan family consisting of a father and mother in their 50s and a son in his 20s flee to Europe together. They claim to fear their lives because the Taliban threatens their lives and the Afghan government is not able to protect them.

They used to live in Jalalabad and owned a small clothes shop there. They claim that every day the Taliban would come to ask for money in exchange for protection. The family needed protection because they belonged to the Sikhs, a religious minority. The Taliban men would bring large weapons, and if there was not enough money, they would use the weapons to beat the father and son up. One day, the Taliban kidnapped the father and demanded a ransom in exchange for his release. Only after 2 months, the son was able to pay this money, in between his father was being tortured.

After his release, the Taliban began attacking the family and other Sikhs, because they felt that Sikhs do not belong in Afghanistan. Many family members were killed. That is when the family sold their shop and used a people smuggler to get away. They traveled via Peshawar and Dubai to a European country, in which they now ask for protection.

It is known from COI that Sikhs in Afghanistan often have to fear people in their environment. They experience discrimination and are sometimes violently harassed. The Afghan government does not offer protection against the harassment.

However, the family does not have evidence for their claims of harassment by the Taliban. *This is why in the detailed interview you want to investigate whether the family is veracious about their past experiences and their fear for the Taliban.*

APPENDIX D

English translation of vignette 4. Bold phrases could be highlighted in the highlighting exercise

A Turkish 25-year-old man claims to have fled his hometown Istanbul because he fears persecution by the Turkish authorities.

In the end of May and beginning of June 2013, he participated in the protests at the Taksim square in Istanbul against the authoritarian policies of premier Erdogan. The police used tear gas and rubber bullets to quell the protests. This made the man angry. Therefore, he tried to motivate his friends and family to protest against the governing-style of Erdogan through his Facebook page. A day later a police force invaded his apartment and he was arrested. He claims to have been repeatedly beaten by prison guards during his time in detention, and when he complained about this he was put in solitary confinement.

After 2 months, he was released. Hoping to end this horrible chapter of his life, he continued his studies and was very careful in what he said to whom. However, since his release, his house has been repeatedly searched by authorities, and he has been threatened with a trial if he would provoke any more protests against the government in the future. The man claims to fear persecution in the future and feels that his right to freedom of speech is violated. Furthermore, he feels that the Turkish government was the instigator of this injustice.

It is known from COI that the protest actions in May 2013 led to a tough response of the Turkish government including arrests of provokers of the protests. However, evidence for the man's participation in the protests or his arrest is lacking. For example, the Facebook message was deleted, and he claims that he never got an official arrest warrant. *This is why in the detailed interview you want to investigate whether the man is veracious about his past experiences and his fear for the Turkish authorities.*