

“Tell me about your reasons for seeking for asylum” –  
An Analysis of Questions used in Finnish Asylum Interviews

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Master’s Thesis in Psychology

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<p>Abstract: Interviews with asylum seekers are often the most important part of investigating the applicant’s need of international protection. Few studies have examined if the questions used in interviews allow detailed and accurate narratives from the asylum seekers. In the current study, we analyzed question style, question type, and question order from 80 real-life asylum cases conducted by the Finnish Immigration Service in 2017-2018. We coded all questions from all interviews and conducted a qualitative analysis. The results indicate that the questions were predominantly asked in an information-gathering style, which is in accordance with best-practice. However, four fifths of the questions were closed questions, and only roughly one tenth of the questions were open questions. Open questions were somewhat more common in the beginning of the interviews, whereas yes/no questions and summaries were somewhat more common as the interview proceeded. The effects of time, were, however, small and of little practical relevance. Regarding question type, we recommend that more open questions and less closed questions are asked. Further recommendations for improving the quality of asylum interviews are discussed. Future research should assess the type of questions that are most efficient in eliciting relevant information as well as examining the quality of the interpretation.</p>	
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<p>Abstrakt: Den viktigaste delen av asylutredningar är ofta intervjuerna med asylsökanden eftersom flera asylsökanden anländer till mottagarlandet utan identitetsbevis eller övriga dokument som kan stöda deras berättelse. Få studier har tidigare undersökt om frågorna som ställs i dessa intervjuer är utformade på ett sätt som möjliggör detaljerade och sanningsenliga svar. I den föreliggande studien undersöktes frågestil, frågetyp och ordningen på frågor i 80 verkliga asylfall från det finska migrationsverket mellan år 2017-2018. Vi kodade samtliga frågor från intervjuerna i samplet, och noterade även kvalitativa observationer. Resultaten visade på att majoriteten av frågorna ställs i en informationssökande stil, vilket är i linje med riktlinjerna för bästa rådande praxis. Fyra femtedelar av frågorna var slutna frågor, medan en tiondel var öppna frågor. Angående ordningen på frågor visade resultaten att öppna frågor var något vanligare i början på intervjuerna, medan ja/nej frågor och sammanfattningar var något vanligare i slutet på intervjuerna. Vidare analyser visade dock att dessa effekter var små, och att den praktiska betydelsen därav var liten. Angående frågetyp, skulle en högre andel öppna frågor och en lägre andel slutna frågor rekommenderas för att höja intervjuens kvalitet. Övriga rekommendationer för hur kvaliteten på asylintervjuer kunde höjas diskuteras. Framtida forskning kunde fokusera på vilka frågor som effektivast tar fram viktig information i intervjuerna, samt på att utvärdera kvaliteten på tolkingen under asylintervjuerna.</p>	
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## **“Tell me about your reasons for seeking asylum” –**

### **An Analysis of Questions used in Finnish Asylum Interviews**

The increasing number of asylum-seekers reaching the European Union (EU) has greatly increased the pressure on state authorities to correctly distinguish between people in genuine need of international protection and people not in need of protection. Before 2012, the number of asylum applications in the EU from citizens of non-member countries was relatively stable, with around 200 thousands applications per year (Eurostat, 2019). The next five years saw a vast increase, culminating with 1.3 million applications in both 2015 and 2016, after which the number of applications to the EU has slightly decreased. Finland received approximately 3000-4000 asylum seekers each year until 2015, when 32 477 applications were made (Finnish Immigration Service, 2018, 2019b). Since 2016, the number of applications in Finland has decreased to just above 4000 per year. During the last few years, the most common countries of origin of asylum seekers reaching the EU have been Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq (Eurostat, 2019). The massive influx exposed shortcomings in Europe’s asylum system, and has forced the EU and its Member States to revise the asylum rules and procedures in order to handle the current crisis as well as prepare for possible future crises (The European Parliament, 2017).

The centerpiece of international refugee protection today is the United Nations Convention, adopted in 1951. A refugee is defined as a person with a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion—or a person being subjected to indiscriminate violence, degrading treatment, or torture in their country of origin (Qualification Directive, 2011; United Nations, 1951). Despite this clear theoretical definition, the process of determining whether or not a person is in need of international protection is in practice complex. Immigration boards are restricted by factors that seldom can be influenced by the board itself, as they are bound by international and national laws, and often must cope with the limited amount of evidence provided in asylum cases (Gyulai, 2013). Many asylum seekers arrive in the receiving country without documents to substantiate their claims, and consequently, much of the evidence in the asylum proceeding is testimonial (Goodman, 2013; Gyulai, 2013; Kagan, 2003; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013). Immigration boards can, however, affect the context in which the testimonial information from asylum seekers is elicited, as well as how this information is evaluated. Research in legal psychology has targeted similar issues in the criminal context, and much knowledge exists on, for example, effective interview

techniques for witnesses, victims, and suspects (Fisher, Milne, & Bull, 2010; Memon, Meissner, & Fraser, 2010; Snook, Luther, Quinlan, & Milne, 2012; Vrij, Hope, & Fisher, 2014). This knowledge has only recently, and so far very sparsely, been applied to the asylum context (van Veldhuizen, 2017). The aim of the current study was to apply research on effective interview strategies in the criminal context to the context of asylum proceedings, more specifically, to asylum proceeding cases from the Finnish Immigration Service. The current interviewing practice in Finnish asylum proceedings was evaluated in light of the contemporary knowledge of best practice guidelines in investigative interviewing. The aim was also to provide suggestions to the Finnish Immigration Service on how to improve the interviewing practice, if needed.

### **Interviews with Asylum Seekers**

Even though the asylum context differs from the criminal context, many key characteristics are similar (Herlihy & Turner, 2009). Parallels can be drawn between an asylum seeker in the asylum interviews and an eye-witness, a suspect or a victim in police interviews (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013; van Veldhuizen, 2017). Asylum seekers are essentially eye-witnesses of their own life, and must actively search their autobiographical memory to tell a detailed and consistent story of their identity, origin, and past experiences (Herlihy, Jobson, & Turner, 2012; Herlihy & Turner, 2009; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013). Moreover, as is the case in interviews with suspects, identifying cues to deception is often an important element of the asylum interview. Asylum seekers may be inclined to lie in order to increase the possibility of them receiving protection (Beneduce, 2015; Herlihy et al., 2012). Finally, an asylum seeker can be compared to a victim in interviews, as asylum seekers often have experienced stressful and even traumatic events in their home countries or during their flight, and may suffer from trauma- and stressor-related disorders (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011). Research has shown that, for example, post-traumatic stress can impair a person's ability to provide detailed and coherent statements (Graham, Herlihy, & Brewin, 2014; Herlihy & Turner, 2007; Moore & Zoellner, 2007). It might, therefore, be fruitful to apply research findings from the criminal context to the asylum procedures.

In cases where the asylum applicant cannot provide documented evidence of their identity, origin, or reason for needing international protection, asylum officials must rely on statements from the applicant and decide whether or not to believe those statements (Goodman, 2013; Gyulai, 2013; Kagan, 2003; United Nations High Commissioner for

Refugees, 2013). The credibility of the applicant's statements thus becomes a key part of the examination for asylum. Knowledge and guidelines on how to conduct the credibility assessment exist; the latest guideline from the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) was published in 2013 and contains detailed information about credibility indicators and how to apply them in asylum cases (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013). Less focus has, within the context of asylum cases, been placed on how the statements that underlie the credibility assessment are elicited. The way the interviews are conducted is, however, detrimentally important to the quality of the applicant's statements. The statements are formed by an interactive process with an interviewer asking questions and the applicant responding to them. Additionally, there is often an interpreter present, translating both the questions and the responses of the applicant. All these elements can influence how much and what kind of information is provided by the applicant (Ewens et al., 2016).

The ultimate goal of the asylum interviews is to seek information that can determine if the applicant is in need of international protection or not. To properly do this, immigration boards must gather information that can be used to discriminate between fabricated and truthful narratives. It is therefore vital that the interviews are conducted according to the best available practice guidelines. To examine if current interviews match the best available practice guidelines, the current study analyzed question style, question type, and question order in asylum interviews.

### **Training of Asylum Officials**

First and foremost, it is important to consider the training that the asylum officials receive. The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) is responsible for establishing and providing national authorities with training programs for asylum officials in the EU (European Asylum Support Office, 2018). Member States of the EU are, in turn, obliged to include the key components of the EASO Training Curriculum in their training programs for asylum officials. The curriculum is a common training system with several interactive modules in the format of both face-to-face sessions and self-studies, covering all fields of international protection (European Asylum Support Office, 2018). A course including the core modules inclusion, interview techniques, and evidence assessment takes approximately 108-138 hours to complete. Asylum officials working for the Finnish Immigration Service complete the EASO training during their first year in office. During a four-week long familiarization period, new employees at the Finnish Immigration Service learn about basic

refugee law, the asylum process, and the administrative practice in general (Finnish Immigration Service, 2018). The new officials also observe interviews conducted by senior officials and familiarize themselves with the decision-making procedures. Although there are no requirements regarding previous education or work experience for employment at the Finnish Immigration Service, these factors are considered during recruitment (Finnish Immigration Service, 2018). No academic field or vocational training in Finland directly corresponds to work in the asylum domain, and it is stated that much of the competence is learned by observing and participating in the daily operations. In sum, when analyzing the quality of interviews, different aspects, such as training, might have an impact on how thoroughly the best practice guidelines are followed.

### **Best Practice Guidelines in Investigative Interviewing**

Legal psychological guidelines on best practice in investigative interviewing commonly focus on two key factors; question style and question type. Research on question style has identified two frequently used styles, an *information-gathering style* and an *accusatory style* (Meissner, Redlich, Bhatt, & Brandon, 2012). The information-gathering style is characterized by establishing rapport and using open, exploratory questions to promote a detailed and honest account from the interviewee. The accusatory style is, on the other hand, confrontational and uses closed, confirmatory questions to establish guilt or yield a confession (Hartwig, Granhag, & Vrij, 2005; Vrij et al., 2014; Vrij, Mann, & Fisher, 2006). Importantly, the information-gathering style elicits more elaborate and accurate narratives than the accusatory style (Hartwig et al., 2005; Vrij et al., 2014). Whereas the accusatory style usually makes the interviewee anxious and uncooperative, the information-gathering style creates less discomfort and may reduce stress (Vanderhallen, Vervaeke, & Holmberg, 2011; Vrij et al., 2006). Furthermore, the information-gathering style is perceived as more cognitively demanding for liars than for truth tellers. The information-gathering style may for example require the applicant to provide more details than they prepared for, which makes it more difficult for a liar to appear credible (Meissner et al., 2012; Vrij et al., 2006). It also generates more diagnostic information about the truthfulness of the narrative in that the longer answers it elicits are likely to contain more verbal cues to deception than short answers (Meissner et al., 2012; Vrij, Mann, Kristen, & Hsher, 2007). A third question style, called the *burden communication style*, was identified in a study analyzing question style in the asylum proceedings by van Veldhuizen (van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, Granhag, van Koppen, & Landström, 2016). This style emphasizes explicitly that the burden of proof lies on the

interviewee and signals that it is the interviewee's responsibility to prove the veracity of his or her narrative. More research about this last question style is needed to investigate its prevalence and relevance to the field.

Researchers have, in different guidelines and handbooks, for a long time recommended the use of open questions in forensic interviews (Fisher, Ross, & Cahill, 2017; Granhag, Landström, & Nordin, 2017; Memon et al., 2010; Thoresen, Lønnum, Melinder, Stridbeck, & Magnussen, 2006; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013; Walsh & Bull, 2010, 2012; Yuille & Cutshall, 1989). Open questions tend to yield longer and more accurate responses (Bull, 2010; Fisher et al., 2010; Granhag et al., 2017; Oxburgh, Myklebust, & Grant, 2010; Snook et al., 2012). Asking open questions signals the interviewer's interest in the interviewee's story and gives the interviewee a chance to freely give a narrative from their own point of view (Fisher, 1995; Hartwig et al., 2005). This may also enhance rapport (i.e., a sympathetic relationship with mutual understanding and good communication; Walsh & Bull, 2012). Moreover, open questions are also preferred from a deception detection perspective (Vrij et al., 2006). Truth-tellers, who can rely on their actual memories, are usually more forthcoming in interviews, whereas it is more difficult for liars to provide long, detailed narratives based on false information. Liars tend to keep their stories short and simple to decrease the risk of inconsistencies in their statements. This strategy may be more difficult for liars to maintain in response to open questions (Vrij, 2004). Closed or directive questions tend to generate limited and short answers and often convey an expectation to the interviewee that the responses should be limited to a few words only (Bull, 2010; Fisher et al., 2010; Snook et al., 2012). However, researchers do agree that some directive questions are needed in all interviews to acquire all relevant facts and clear misunderstandings (Granhag et al., 2017; Memon et al., 2010; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013). Forced-choice and suggestive questions are inappropriate and discouraged, as they may steer responses in a specific direction and damage the validity of the statements (Granhag et al., 2017; Snook et al., 2012; Thoresen et al., 2006). Taken together, to ensure a detailed and accurate narrative, interviews should consist of a majority of open questions, a limited number of closed questions, and no inappropriate questions. For a review of different typologies used in research, see Oxburgh et al. (2010).

A third important aspect in the guidelines for best practice in investigative interviewing is the order of the questions. Many models have been outlined during the last decade, and most of them follow the general principle of starting the interview with open

questions (European Asylum Support Office, 2015; Fisher et al., 2017; Memon et al., 2010). This encourages the interviewee to provide a free narrative from his or her own perspective about the topic. After the free narrative, the interviewer proceeds with directive questions to acquire more details and fact-checking questions to gather more information about specific aspects of the story and to clarify possible misunderstandings. At the end of each topic, the interviewer should provide a short summary of the topic, and the interviewee should have the possibility to correct it, if needed. Moreover, the practice of providing a summary in the end of an interview is the recommended way of concluding an interview (European Asylum Support Office, 2016; Fisher et al., 2017). It wraps up the topics discussed and creates a positive end to the interview. Most importantly, it is an easy way of ensuring that the relevant details have been covered in the interview and the asylum seeker has been correctly understood by the official (European Asylum Support Office, 2015). It is recommended that this free narrative model is followed through the entire interview, beginning again from the start of each topic discussed (European Asylum Support Office, 2015; Fisher et al., 2017).

### **Previous Research on Question Type and Style in Asylum Interviews**

To our best knowledge, only two empirical studies have focused on analyzing questions in asylum interviews in the past. In one of these studies, Swedish asylum officers were asked to form five questions they would ask an asylum seeker in a fictive, but realistic, asylum narrative (van Veldhuizen et al., 2016). In total, 65 officials responded to one of four vignettes that contained a fictive asylum narrative with common challenges encountered by immigration boards, for example, to establish the country of origin or to substantiate claims of persecution. The authors found that a majority of the formed questions were in an information-gathering style and open. Bearing the study's low ecological validity in mind, the researchers concluded that asylum officials at least seem to have some knowledge about best practice guidelines in investigate interviewing. A second study from van Veldhuizen and colleagues examined real life asylum cases from the Dutch Immigration Service (van Veldhuizen, Maas, Horselenberg, & van Koppen, 2018). The authors analyzed question style, question type, and question content in interviews conducted with asylum seekers from 40 case files. The researchers analyzed a total of 3735 questions from 106 interviews. The authors found that less than a fifth of all questions were open or cued recall questions, and approximately four fifths were closed questions. Almost half of the total number of questions was so called option posing questions, which only request a yes or no answer. On the other hand, suggestive and forced choice questions were rare. A majority of the questions were

asked in an information-gathering style with only a few in an accusatory or burden communication style. There were no differences in the distribution of either question style or question type based on case outcome. The researchers concluded that a higher use of open questions in combination with a free-recall invite in the beginning of the interview would improve the quality and the quantity of the information provided in the interviews.

### **The Current Study**

The current study aimed to replicate and extend the study by van Veldhuizen and colleagues from 2018, by analyzing cases from the Finnish Immigration Service. There is a need for more research in this area to form a more comprehensive picture of the quality of the asylum interviews in Europe. Information on how interviews presently are conducted is necessary to improve the guidelines and training practices used in the EU and contribute to fair and equal asylum processes based on the best available knowledge. With this in mind, we investigated question style, question type, and question order from a sample of real-life asylum cases from the Finnish Immigration Service during 2017-2018. We expected similar results as those presented by van Veldhuizen and colleagues (2018), with a low number of open questions, a high number of closed questions, and only a small number of suggestive and forced choice questions. We expected the information-gathering style to be the most predominant question style. We also analyzed whether the burden communication style, was used in the interviews. Moreover, we analyzed question order to see if it followed the free narrative model. We finally explored correlations between case outcome, question style and question type.

## **Methods**

### **Ethical Permission**

The study received permission by the Ethical Review Board of the Faculty of Arts, Psychology, and Theology at Åbo Akademi University.

### **Case Selection**

We retrieved documents from 200 randomized and anonymized real-life asylum cases conducted by the Finnish Immigration Service during 2017-2018. These case files included the asylum decision, as well as all available transcribed interviews underlying the decision. We included 80 of the 200 cases in the final sample. A total of 46 cases were excluded because of the lack of at least one transcribed interview, or the lack of an explicit decision regarding the asylum claim (i.e., expired or not investigated cases). Because of a considerable imbalance in the outcome of the remaining 154 cases, we decided to include equal numbers of

granted and rejected cases. The rejected cases were matched with the granted cases for country of origin. Furthermore, we decided to only include cases with applicants originating from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia, which are the most common countries of origin among asylum seekers reaching Finland. The final sample of 80 cases thus included 40 granted and 40 rejected cases. In total, the sample included 58 cases from Iraq (29 granted and 29 rejected), 16 from Afghanistan (8 granted and 8 rejected) and 6 from Somalia (3 granted and 3 rejected). The included granted cases were randomly selected from all granted cases that fit the inclusion criteria.

### **Coding of Case and Applicant Characteristics**

For ethical reasons, all personal information such as name, age and gender about the applicants was deleted by the Immigration Service before extraction. We coded the remaining applicant characteristics such as number of previous applications or appeals. We also coded relevant case characteristics, for example, the number of interviews conducted with the applicant. Moreover, we coded the outcome of a case in three categories; *asylum*, *other status* and *rejected*. In the current study “*other status*” includes the outcomes subsidiary protection status and residence permit on other grounds. Subsidiary protection status can be granted to a person if the requirements for granting asylum are not met, but there is a substantial risk of the person suffering from serious harm in his or her home country. Residence permit on other grounds can be granted based on compassionate grounds (e.g., medical conditions or personal ties to the country) or on the basis of work or studies (Finnish Immigration Service, 2019a). These two outcomes are often included in the category *asylum*; however, in the current study we decided to have them in a separate category to obtain a more comprehensive analysis.

### **Selection of Questions**

We selected and coded all questions from all interviews of the included cases. We coded questions that contained two or more subjects (e.g., “When did you leave your home country and did you go alone?”) as one question, instead of separating such questions into two questions. These questions were coded as *multiple* in a separate variable. Further, we coded all utterances from the interviewer as questions, which mean that also statements, opinions and comments were coded as questions.

### **Question Coding**

We coded all selected questions for the variables theme, style, type, order, and other characteristics.

**Theme.** We coded the question theme in three categories; *procedural questions*, *persecution story*, and *background information*. The first category, *procedural questions*, contained all standardized questions that did not relate to the asylum claim. These questions and statements, mostly found in the beginning or in the end of the interview, typically addressed the aim of the interview, the rights and obligations of the applicant, the communication with the interpreter and the current health of the applicant (e.g., “Have you understood the interpreter?”). The questions from this category were not included in the analyses for style, type, and question order. The second category, *persecution story*, contained all questions examining the applicants’ claims and reasons for seeking asylum, whereas the third category, *background information*, addressed themes such as the applicant’s identity, country of origin, family and travel route.

**Style.** We decided to code style for individual questions rather than entire interviews to create a clear distinction between the coding of style and type. The concepts were operationalized so that style refers to the interviewer’s way of approaching a question, and type to the technical characteristics of a question, modeling van Veldhuizen and colleagues (2016, 2018). Further, we used the same question styles as van Veldhuizen and colleagues (2016, 2018); that is, the *information-gathering style*, the *accusatory style* and the *burden communication style*, with one addition, a new style called the *critical style*. The *information-gathering style* is characterized by questions that allow the asylum seeker to describe their experiences in their own words as well as questions asked to seek further information or clarification of previously mentioned facts. The *accusatory style* refers to questions that communicate disbelief and distrust in the asylum seekers’ story, and questions where the interviewer clearly seeks to confirm skepticism (e.g., “It puzzles me how it would be possible that your wife’s ex-husband can threaten you when he is in prison?”). The *burden communication style* was defined as questions explicitly reminding the asylum seekers that they themselves are responsible for providing a truthful narrative to corroborate their claims (e.g., “I remind you that it is your duty to provide evidence to support your claims.”). During the data collection we decided to include a fourth question style, called *critical style*. This style was defined as questions that in their formulation conveyed skepticism or an unnecessarily critical attitude towards the applicant, but not explicitly accused the applicant of anything (e.g., “Why would they still be interested in you after 2 years?”). See appendix A for a more thorough definition and more examples of the different question style categories.

Question style was coded by two coders, who reached a sufficient agreement ( $\kappa = .664$ ). Inconstancies were solved by discussion.

**Type.** Our coding for question type was largely based on van Veldhuizen's study from 2018, with a few alternations adapted from a review by Oxburgh and colleagues (2010). We coded multiple questions according to the principle that if one of the questions was of an inappropriate type (i.e., a forced choice question or suggestive question), the question was coded according to that category, otherwise it was coded according to the answer.

We coded question type in eight different categories. Two varieties of open questions were specified, *invitations* and *cued invitations*. *Invitations* prompt free recall and invites to a lengthy response (e.g., "Tell me about your home country."). *Cued invitations* also prompt a free recall but include a specific detail or contextual cue previously mentioned in the interview to elicit more elaborate or additional information about that detail (e.g., "Tell me more about when you were assaulted."). Importantly, none of the aforementioned question types limits the answer in any way. *Directive* questions in turn, are probing or limited recall questions that require a specific answer. These questions are so called "wh"-questions, which often start with what, where, when, why, or who (e.g., "When did you leave your home country?"). *Yes/no* questions request a confirmatory or non-confirmatory answer without an explanation (e.g., "Did you see the shooting?"). *Directive* and *yes/no* questions are in this study classified as closed questions. In *forced choice* questions the interviewer explicitly or implicitly gives the respondents a choice between two or more alternatives that they must choose between (e.g., "How did you flee; by foot, running or by car?"). *Suggestive* questions strongly communicate what kind of answer is expected. These questions might ask for confirmation of a not-before-mentioned fact, or quote the respondent incorrectly (e.g., "I do think you remember the events that took place a little more clearly...?"). *Forced choice* and *suggestive* questions are inappropriate and discouraged. Further, we coded statements, opinions, comments and facilitators to the category *utterances*, as well as questions that were intended as facilitators (e.g., "I repeat the question." and "Would you please like to continue?"). The final category *summaries*, was defined as a minimum of two sentences that summarized a discussion or part of a discussion.

Question type was coded by two coders, who reached an almost perfect agreement ( $\kappa = .860$ ). Inconsistencies were solved through discussion.

**Order.** We mainly used the original numbering of the questions from the transcripts for the coding of question order. We renumbered all follow-up interviews so that each new

interview started from question number one. We also added numbers to questions that did not have an original number in the transcript. Additionally, we calculated a relative number for each question in each new theme to facilitate the order analysis.

Further, we decided to include a rough estimate of order by coding the question type of the first question in the first interview in all cases as well as whether there was a summary present in the interview or not. We also coded the question type of the first question regarding the themes persecution story and background information.

**Other Variables.** We documented *multiple questions* and *difficult questions* in the variable *other characteristics*. The definition of a difficult question was a question that seemed to be too complicated for either the applicant in the interview, or for the author of this study, to understand. In most cases, the applicants mentioned in their answer that they had not understood the question.

We coded the *length of the answer* for a few specific questions in each case. Firstly, for the first invitation-type question in the first interview of a case, and secondly for the first question regarding the *persecution story* as well as the first question for the *background information* in all cases. The measure was roughly divided in six categories; 1-2 sentences, 3-5 sentences, 6 sentences to half a page, more than half a page to one page, more than one page to two pages and more than two pages. This coding was a gross estimate of the length of the answers. For more detailed descriptions and examples of the question coding principles, see appendix A.

### Statistical Analyses

All analyses were conducted using the statistical software R (R Core Team, 2008). For one-way ANOVA analyses comparing groups of cases based on their outcome, we used the *aov*-argument and followed up with *TukeyHSD* tests. Means and standard deviations were computed using the *describe*-function in the package *psych* (Revelle, 2019). Results from the *TukeyHSD* tests were only reported if the one-way ANOVA analysis was significant.

To analyze question order, we removed theme 1 (i.e., procedural questions), and calculated the relative position in which a question appeared ranging from 1-100, with 100 representing the final question in the interview. Further, we rescaled the variable duration by dividing it by 100. After this, we conducted a multi-level binary logistic regression with relative position as a linear predictor and the question type of interest as outcome. For example, to analyze if open questions were more likely to appear at the beginning (vs. the end) of the interview, the outcome was operationally defined as a dichotomous variable (open

question vs. any other type of question. In these analyses, we were interested in open questions, directive questions, yes/no questions, inappropriate questions, and summaries. To appropriately address that questions were clustered within cases in these analyses, we used the package *lme4* (Bates, Maechler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015) with random intercepts for cases. To calculate the probability of a question type being asked in the beginning of an interview, we converted the logOdds into probabilities using the expit function  $\exp(x)/(1+\exp(x))$  of the intercept. To compute 95% confidence intervals we added or subtracted the *SE* multiplied with 1.96 to/from the logOdds estimate. To compute similar probabilities for the end of the interview, we reversed the predictor and repeated the above procedure.

## Results

### Case and Applicant Descriptives

We first documented descriptive statistics for both cases and applicants.

**Cases.** Each case contained between one and six interviews with the applicants; 44 cases contained one interview, 23 cases had two interviews, six cases had three interviews, three cases had four interviews, three cases had five interviews, and one case had six interviews. The total number of interviews in the sample was 140.

We identified a total of 8469 questions. Most questions were asked in the first interview (65%). The first and the second interviews together corresponded to 85% of all questions. The number of questions asked in each interview varied from 3 to 224 questions. The number of questions per case varied from 28 to 429 questions. Few questions were coded as *multiple* ( $n = 157, 2.1\%$ ), and even fewer as *difficult* ( $n = 26, 0.4\%$ ).

Of the total 8469 questions, 1126 questions belonged to the theme *procedural questions*. These questions did not relate directly to the asylum claim, and were thus excluded from all further analyses. The total number of questions included in the main analyses was thus 7343 questions. Of these, 6265 questions were originally coded as *persecution story*, and 1078 as *background information*. The relatively small proportion of questions relating to the theme *background information* can be explained by the fact that this topic is mostly covered in the police hearings that take place when applicants arrive in the country, which were not part of our sample.

Of the included cases, 34 cases were processed in the unit of the Finnish Immigration Service called “South”, 15 in the unit “West”, 18 in the unit “North” and 13 in the unit “East”. In total 84 officials were involved in the cases, most often two officials per case. The majority of the officials were involved in only one or two cases, with the exception of one official who

was involved in 11 cases. Most cases were registered in 2017 ( $n = 65$ ) with only a few in 2018 ( $n = 15$ ).

**Applicants.** The premise for the application indicated whether the applicant was a minor ( $n = 7$ ) or an adult ( $n = 73$ ) at the time of applying, and whether the application was from an individual ( $n = 61$ ) or a family ( $n = 19$ ). If the applicants had provided documentary evidence of their identity, the identity was deemed confirmed ( $n = 51$ ), and if not, it was deemed unconfirmed ( $n = 29$ ). This was the first application and decision for 47 applicants, whereas 33 applicants had appealed a previous decision or registered a new application based on new grounds. For 30 applicants, the current decision was the second decision, and for three applicants it was the third.

### Quantitative Analyses

**Question Style.** Of the 7343 questions, 97.3% was asked in an information-gathering style. Only a small portion of all questions were asked in a critical style (2.2%) and even fewer in an accusatory style (0.4%). The burden communication style proved to be close to non-existent with  $< 1\%$  ( $n = 2$ ). All non-information-gathering questions were collapsed into one category called *accusatory* for the further analyses. Further, at least one accusatory question was asked in 63% of all cases. This means that just slightly more than a third of all cases contained no accusatory questions at all. The distribution of question style did not differ depending on case outcome ( $F[2] = 1.62, p = .205$ ). This means that there was no difference in the proportion of accusatory questions in cases with different outcomes.

**Question Type.** Of the 7343 questions, 12.2% were *invitations* (1.7% *invitations* and 10.5% *cued invitations*). Almost half of the questions were *directive* (47.1%) and a third was *yes/no* questions (34.2%). There were few *inappropriate* questions (1.9% *forced choice* and 0.4% *suggestive*). The category *utterances* consisted of 3.7% of the questions and *summaries* of 0.5%. The distribution of question types is illustrated in Figure 1.

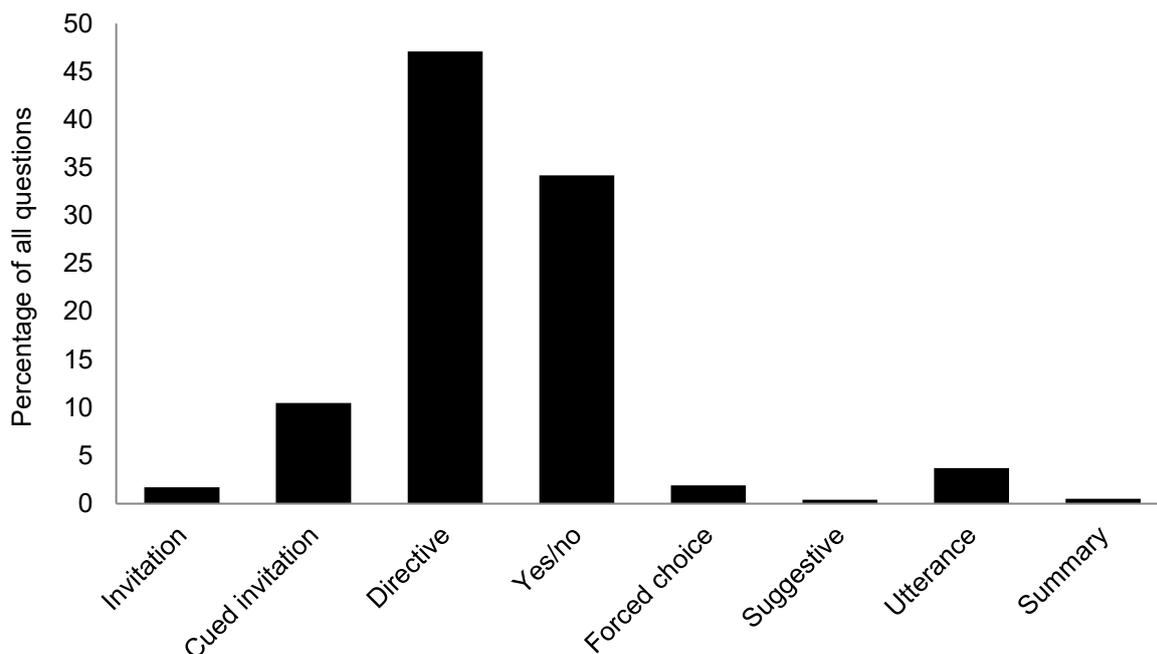


Figure 1. Distribution of question types in percentage ( $n = 7343$ ).

There was no difference in the proportion of any of the different questions types based on case outcome; the proportion of open questions did not differ based on case outcome ( $F[2] = 1.07, p = .347$ ), neither did the proportion of directive questions ( $F[2] = 1.98, p = .146$ ), nor the proportion of yes/no questions ( $F[2] = 0.83, p = .439$ ). Further, the proportion of inappropriate questions did not differ based on outcome ( $F[2] = 0.79, p = .459$ ). This means that all cases, regardless of outcome, generally contained similar distributions of the aforementioned question types. There was, however, a difference in the proportion of summaries based on case outcome ( $F[2] = 6.73, p = .002$ ). A Tukey post-hoc test showed that the significant difference was found between the outcomes asylum ( $M = 0.49, SD = 0.65$ ) and other status ( $M = 1.76, SD = 2.13, p = .004$ ), as well as between other status and rejected ( $M = 0.46, SD = 0.88, p = .002$ ), indicating that there was significantly a higher proportion of summaries asked in cases with the outcome other status compared to both the outcome asylum and rejected. There was no significant difference between the asylum outcome and the rejected outcome ( $p = .989$ ). The average ratio of open questions to closed questions is 0.16 ( $SD = 0.08$ ), indicating that for every ten closed questions, there were on average one or two open questions. There was no significant difference between the ratios of open to closed questions in different outcomes ( $F[2] = 1.68, p = .194$ ), which means that the ratio of open to closed questions did not differ for cases with different outcomes.

**Question Order.** We analyzed question order to test whether different types of questions were more or less likely to appear at the beginning or the end of interviews (Table 1).

Table 1

*The Association between Question Types and Interview Phase*

Question Type	Intercept	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>
Open Question vs. Other Types	-1.72	-0.51	0.13	-4.01	<. 001
Directive Questions vs. Other Types	-0.03	-0.06	0.08	-0.67	.502
Yes/No Questions vs. Other Types	-0.70	0.21	0.09	2.49	.013
Inappropriate Questions vs. Other Types	-3.93	0.11	0.27	0.42	.675
Summaries vs. Other Types	-7.91	3.96	0.76	5.17	<.001

Note: Positive estimates for *B* means that the question type of interest becomes more and more common as the interview progresses, and negative estimates means that the question types become less and less common.

The results indicated that open questions were significantly more common in the beginning of the interviews, and yes/no questions as well as summaries were significantly more common in the end of the interviews. The effects of directive questions as well as inappropriate questions were not significant. The results were then converted into probabilities to better illustrate the impact of the significant effects (Table 2).

Table 2

*Probabilities for Different Question Types in Interview Phases*

	The beginning of the interview					Effect of time	The end of the interview				
	LogOdds	SE	Prob.	Lower CI	Upper CI		LogOdds	SE	Prob.	Lower CI	Upper CI
Open Questions	-1.716	0.080	0.15	0.13	0.17	-0.509	-2.225	0.085	0.10	0.08	0.11
Directive Questions	-0.037	0.059	0.49	0.46	0.52	-0.056	-0.093	0.059	0.48	0.45	0.51
Yes/No Questions	-0.703	0.061	0.33	0.31	0.36	0.217	-0.486	0.060	0.38	0.35	0.41
Inappropriate Questions	-3.926	0.187	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.114	-3.812	0.181	0.02	0.02	0.03
Summary	-7.909	0.080	0.00	0.00	0.00	3.960	-3.950	0.638	0.02	0.01	0.06

*Note:* LogOdds were converted to probabilities using the expit function.

The probability of an open question appearing in the beginning of the interview was almost as low as the probability of it appearing in the end of the interview. For both yes/no questions and summaries, the probabilities were also similar both at the beginning and at the end of the interview. In other words, the differences in the probabilities were small, and it can be concluded that the practical impacts of the significant effects from the question order analysis are minor.

The results of the analysis of the rough estimate of question order yielded the following results. The question type of the first question (non-procedural question) in the first interview in each case was in 22.5% an invitation, 2.5% a cued invitation, 42.5% a directive question and 32.5% a yes/no question. The question type of the first question regarding the theme persecution was in 93.8% an invitation, 3.8% a cued invitation and 2.5% a yes/no question. The question type of the first question about the background information was for 2.5% an invitation, 3.8% a cued invitation, 43.8% a directive question, 33.8% a yes/no question, 1.3% a utterance and in 15% of the cases there were no questions about the theme. In sum, the theme persecution story seemed to be introduced by an invitation-type question in the majority of the cases, but the background theme seemed to more often be introduced via closed questions. The first question in the first interview is generally a closed question. In 61.3% of the cases no summary was present, in 32.5% of the cases one summary was present and in 6.3% more than one summary was present.

**Other Analyses.** The total number of questions in a case differed based on outcome ( $F[2] = 9.62, p < .0001$ ). A Tukey post-hoc test showed that the significant difference was found between the outcomes asylum ( $M = 124.13, SD = 69.86$ ) and other status ( $M = 46.40, SD = 20.26, p < .001$ ), as well as between asylum and rejected ( $M = 78.88, SD = 47.89, p = .002$ ) indicating that there was significantly more questions asked in total among individuals who were granted asylum. There was no significant difference between the rejected outcome and the other status outcome ( $p = .226$ ).

The total number of interviews in a case also differed significantly based on outcome ( $F[2] = 8.89, p < .001$ ). A Tukey B post hoc test showed that the significant difference was found between the outcomes asylum ( $M = 98.12, SD = 1.91$ ) and other status ( $M = 97.98, SD = 2.46, p = .025$ ), as well as between asylum and rejected ( $M = 96.61, SD = 4.76, p < .001$ ), indicating that more interviews were conducted in total among individuals who were granted asylum. There was no significant difference between the rejected and the other status outcome ( $p = 1.000$ ).

There was a significant difference in the outcome based on the number of applications the asylum seeker had previously submitted or appealed ( $F[2] = 10.51, p < .0001$ ). A Tukey B post hoc test showed that the significant difference was found between the outcomes asylum ( $M = 1.63, SD = 0.61$ ) and rejected ( $M = 1.2, SD = 0.41, p = .002$ ), as well as between rejected and other status ( $M = 1.9, SD = 0.57, p < .001$ ), indicating that more applications or appeals had been submitted among individuals who were granted asylum or residence permit on other grounds. There was no significant difference between the asylum and the other status outcome ( $p = .334$ ).

**Length of answer.** The length of the answer of the first question introducing a new theme seemed to depend on the question type of the first question. The length of the answer of the first invitation-type question ranged from more than half a page to four pages in 65.3% of the cases. For roughly 29.3%, the length was between six sentences and half a page, and for 4.3% the answer was five sentences or shorter. This means that an invitation-type question that introduces a new theme yielded an answer that was at least six sentences long in 95% of the cases. The answers to a closed-type question introducing a new theme was for all of the cases five sentences or less, and for 74.6% only one or two sentences long. The result of this gross estimate can thus be interpreted as an indication that the invitation-type questions tend to yield longer responses than closed-type questions.

### **Qualitative Analyses**

During the data coding, we made some qualitative observations about common issues within the interviews. The observations were divided into the following categories: difficult questions, questions inviting to speculation, cultural differences, as well as sensitive and non-sensitive approaches. Additionally, issues found in the transcript were also documented. Short descriptions of these issues as well as some examples from the interviews are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

*Qualitative Observations from the Interviews*

Observation	Characteristics	Examples
Questions inviting to speculation	Questions that invited the applicant to speculate or guess an answer, or give an estimate about something.	<p><i>"Can you give me an estimate of how long you stayed in the country?"</i></p> <p><i>"What benefits can you imagine that you could have gotten?"</i></p>
Difficult questions	Questions that were difficult for the applicant to understand. These questions often included terms and expressions that appeared unfamiliar for the applicant. In some cases, the interviewer made an effort to explain the terms and expressions, whereas in others, the interviewer simply moved on. Both these types were coded under this category.	<p>I: <i>"Have you done a lot of so called fieldwork?"</i></p> <p>A: <i>"I don't understand."</i></p> <p>I: <i>(moves onto the next question)</i></p> <p>I: <i>"I'm trying to understand better how your own (sexual) identity developed and what kinds of thoughts you had about that."</i></p> <p>A: <i>"I don't understand. I don't understand the interpreter or the question."</i></p> <p>I: <i>(moves on to the next question)</i></p> <p>I: <i>"What values have Christianity given you?"</i></p> <p>A: <i>"Value? What does that mean?"</i></p> <p>I: <i>"Value means something that is important in your life, something that does not need to be concrete."</i></p> <p>A: <i>"No money or gifts have been given. Do you mean that they give us money?"</i></p> <p>I: <i>"No, I don't mean that. A value is something that is not concrete. Money is concrete. I will ask in another way. Can you tell me how a good person is according to Christianity?"</i></p> <p>A: <i>"A good person? A person, who does no sins, does not have sex and helps people. Respect and forgiveness."</i></p>
Cultural differences	Examples of instances when the interviewer and the applicant failed to understand each other because of a cultural or linguistic difference. These instances	<p>I: <i>"Did you contact your parents through your aunt in Finland?"</i></p> <p>A: <i>"If the aunt had gotten information about my parents, she would have called me. She hasn't called, so I believe that she hasn't gotten any information about them."</i></p>

commonly started with the applicant misunderstanding a question, and consequently answering in a different manner than the interviewer expected. In some cases the interviewer then managed to explain the question again, but in others, it led to the use of inappropriate questions styles or types by the interviewer.

I: *"How did your aunt contact them?"*

A: *"I don't know."*

I: *"Haven't you asked her about this?"*

A: *"Last time she called, she said that my parents have gone back to their home village. When I asked her about how she knew, she didn't tell."*

I: *"So you really don't remember the name of the aunt?"*

A: *"I don't know her name."*

I: *"Why do you call her your aunt?"*

A: *"Because she is a woman, she is called aunt."*

I: *"What is your family relation to her?"*

A: *"It is not a close relative at least, because then we would have been in contact more."*

I: *"You said you left Iraq from the airport in Bagdad. Tell me as closely as you can how you traveled to Bagdad."*

A: *"I don't know how to get there, but this person brought me there."*

I: *"Tell me more closely about the trip?"*

A: *"Do you mean the trip from X, how I left?"*

I: *"I mean that trip from X to Bagdad."*

A: *"We left with this person. I don't even know the names of the places we passed. I paid him money so that he would take me."*

I: *"Can't you at all remember anything else? For example how you traveled?"*

A: *"We went by car, it was his."*

Sensitive approaches

Interviewers sometimes managed to address difficult topics in sensitive ways for example by taking into consideration how hard it might be for the asylum speaker to address a topic. In such cases, interviewers apologized for bringing up a difficult topic, expressed sadness for the asylum seeker's losses or gently tried to calm upset applicants.

I: *"You don't have to tell us more than you can manage. We understand that you are ill and that you are having a hard time speaking of these things. (...) You can relax, everything is fine. (...) We are here for you, to look into your story, and you can tell us as much as you can (...) Thank you for telling us the difficult parts of your story."*

Non-sensitive approaches	Interviewers sometimes asked questions without taking into consideration the possible trauma the applicants had experienced. In these cases, interviewers asked very bluntly and directly about traumatic experiences, and sometimes with clear disbelief in their wording, or in an accusatory style.	<p>I: <i>“Why did they rape you?”</i></p> <p>I: <i>“Why have your brothers threatened you?”</i></p> <p>A: <i>“I don’t know because we haven’t lived in the same place. Dad loved us a lot and everything was well, but when we moved to X he was with us for a year. I don’t know what suddenly happened when he left us.”</i></p> <p>(...)</p> <p>I: <i>“Can you at all imagine for what reason they would want to hurt you?”</i></p> <p>A: <i>“I don’t know, Mum hasn’t told us why dad left us. Mum hasn’t told us anything.”</i></p> <p>(...)</p> <p>I: <i>“I ask again about the reason. I really do think that you have some idea of why your own brothers would want to kill you?”</i></p> <p>A: <i>“I don’t know. I don’t know anything about these things because my mother and the stepmother are cousins.”</i></p> <p>I: <i>“But still, you must have at least sometimes asked your mother why your brothers want to kill you?”</i></p> <p>A: <i>“I haven’t asked.”</i></p>
Issues with the transcript	The format of the transcript was sometimes found to be misleading. What seemed as, and was counted as one question and a long answer, consisted in reality of several unnumbered questions and several unnumbered answers.	In one interview, what was counted as one question and one answer was in reality 15 short questions from the interviewer as well as 15 short answers by the applicant. In the entire interview, the number of questions according to the official count in the transcript was 53; but in reality there were 151 questions. The majority of the unnumbered questions were closed questions.

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*Note:* I = Interviewer, A = Applicant. All quotes are translated from Finnish by the author.

We observed some questions that explicitly or implicitly invited the asylum seeker to speculate. These questions were often asked if the applicant previously had said that he or she did not remember a specific detail; commonly about times or durations. Another observation was that the majority of the difficult questions seemed to contain some formulation, or choice of word that the asylum seeker was not familiar with. This seemed to be especially common in interviews regarding sexuality and religion, as many asylum seekers seemed to only possess a limited vocabulary about these themes. Additionally, we noted some cultural misunderstandings in the interviews. Often, it seemed like the applicant had understood the question, or concept, in a different way than how the interviewer had intended. Some interviewers managed to explain the question again and reformulate the question in an appropriate way, but in other cases these cultural misunderstandings were followed up by inappropriate questions or questions asked in an accusatory style. Further, both sensitive and non-sensitive approaches in the interviews were observed. Some interviewers managed to address difficult topics in a sensitive way, for example creating a relaxed and safe atmosphere, by apologizing for asking about a difficult theme, or taking into consideration how hard it might be for an asylum seeker to address some topics. Other interviewers did not take into consideration such things, and asked about possibly traumatic events in very direct and blunt ways, or even in an accusatory style. Finally, some issues with the transcripts were observed. What in the transcription was written and counted as one question and one answer, sometimes in reality contained several short questions and answers.

### **Discussion**

This was, according to our best knowledge, only the second study to examine question type and style in real-life asylum interviews and the first study to analyze question order. The results showed that officials at the Finnish Immigration Service predominantly use an information-gathering style when interviewing asylum seekers and seldom employ an accusatory style. The interviews mostly consisted of closed questions with only a few open questions asked. Neither the distribution of question style nor the different question types differed depending on outcome. The aforementioned results are in line with the findings from van Veldhuizen's study of real-life asylum cases from the Dutch Immigration Service (van Veldhuizen et al., 2018). The question order analysis showed that open questions tended to be asked somewhat more often in the beginning of the interviews, yes/no question as well as summaries somewhat more often in the end of the interview. The effects were, however, small, and the practical implications thus minor.

The results regarding question style showed that the vast majority of the questions were asked in an information-gathering style, with few questions belonging to any other categories. This is a positive finding and in line with the guidelines on best practice in investigative interviewing. The information-gathering style contributes to more detailed and honest answers by the asylum seeker as well as more diagnostic information about the truthfulness of the narrative (Hartwig et al., 2005; Meissner et al., 2012; Vrij et al., 2014, 2007). These results are predominantly equal to the results from the study by van Veldhuizen and colleagues (2018). However, in the current study we decided to include the new question style called *critical style* based on both the current researcher's and van Veldhuizen's previous difficulties with the coding of accusatory style. While van Veldhuizen coded ambiguous cases as information-gathering rather than accusatory, in the current study we decided to code the ambiguous cases as critical. This led to a small difference in the results between the current study and van Veldhuizen's study (2018) regarding the distribution of clear-cut accusatory questions, as the category critical questions accounted for the majority of the non-information-gathering questions in the Finnish sample. In theory, this means that the number of clear-cut accusatory questions used in the Finnish sample was somewhat smaller than in the Dutch sample. It is, however, possible that this difference exists because of the different coding principles used in the studies. An aspect worth noting regarding style is also that only approximately a third of the cases contained only information-gathering questions. It seems that even if the accusatory questions are few in number, they still exist in some proportion in two thirds of the cases. The impact of only a few accusatory questions in an interview has not been examined, but it can be speculated that even one clearly skeptical statement, especially in combination with many closed questions, might affect at least some asylum seekers in a negative way. Finally, as in the study by van Veldhuizen and colleagues (2018), almost no examples of the burden communication style were found and it can thus be concluded that its relevance to the asylum context is minor.

The distribution of question types indicated that Finnish asylum officials primarily ask closed questions, limiting the answers given in the interviews. Approximately one tenth of the questions were open questions, whereas roughly half of all questions were directive questions and about a third yes/no questions. On average, there were only one or two open questions for every ten closed question. The guidelines for best practice in investigate interviewing recommends the use of open questions in favor of closed questions (Yuille & Cutshall, 1989). Open questions tend to yield more elaborate and longer responses and should thus be used to

introduce new topics and to invite interviewees to give additional information about aspects of their story (Bull, 2010; Fisher et al., 2010; Granhag et al., 2017; Oxburgh et al., 2010; Snook et al., 2012). Closed and fact-checking questions should only be used to clarify details, collect specific information and clear misunderstandings (Granhag et al., 2017; Memon et al., 2010; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013). The high number of closed questions in the current study can partly be justified based on the context of the interviews. The complex interaction between all parties in the interview, as well as the cultural differences, often demand more direct questions to effectively gather the necessary information. However, based on the results of the current study it is clear that a more balanced distribution with more open questions and less closed questions would be preferable. It should also be noted that while invitations can sometimes be considered too broad in terms of getting at the crucial information, *cued* invitations can be used to focus on the area of interest but not lead the interviewee too much into any direction.

A positive observation was on the other hand that inappropriate questions, that is, suggestive and forced choice questions seem to be asked very seldom. The results from the current study are mostly in line with the results from the study by van Veldhuizen and colleagues (2018), the slight difference being that the Finnish sample seemed to contain more directive questions and less yes/no questions compared to the Dutch sample. Commonly, these two categories are both classified as closed questions, so the practical importance of this difference is minor.

We analyzed question order to better understand the actual impact of different question types. The results of the question order analysis indicated that the interviews seem to at least partly follow the recommended order of moving from open questions to closed questions and ending with a summary. The results showed that open questions were somewhat more often asked in the beginning of the interview, and both yes/no questions and summaries were somewhat more often asked in the end of the interview. The effects of directive questions and inappropriate questions were not significant. When interviews are conducted so that open questions are asked in the beginning, applicants are invited to first give open, un-restricted narratives about their own experiences. The interviewer then has the possibility of following up these narratives with closed and fact-checking questions, to seek further information and clarify possible misunderstandings. The transformation of the results into probabilities illustrated, however, that the significant effects were extremely small. For example, the probability of an open question occurring in the beginning in the interview is

only slightly higher than the probability of it occurring in the end of the interview. The case is the same for all other significant effects. In other words, despite the significant results of the statistical analyses, the impact of the results is minor. The results can, however, be interpreted as a step in the right direction, and are in that way promising. It is also important to be realistic about the interview setting and structure, and to remember that in practice it would be impossible for an interview to follow the recommended structure perfectly. It is crucial that interviewers are allowed to be flexible.

The results of the analysis of the rough estimates of question order showed that almost all initiating questions about the persecution story were invitations. Further, the analysis of length of answer showed that these invitations in a majority of the cases yielded a response that was longer than half a page. Even though we do not know the exact number of important details mentioned in these long answers, as this was not the focus of the present study, it can be assumed that they contain a considerable amount of relevant information. If one question yields a very long answer, it can be understandable for the next ten to twenty questions to be of directive or fact-checking nature. Ideally, interviewers would systematically question different topics after the free narrative, and these new topics should be introduced with a cued invitation. This would also significantly improve the balance between open and closed questions. However, for the theme background information, the first question was most commonly a closed question, and the length of the answer for these questions was seldom longer than a couple of sentences. In these cases, it is not appropriate for the rest of the questions in the interview to be closed questions. The second aspect examined in the rough question order analysis was whether the interviews included a summary or not. The results showed that an alarmingly low percentage of all interviews included a summary. It is important that the asylum seeker is given the opportunity to correct possible misunderstandings, and this is easily done by regularly summarizing the core aspects of a topic.

Finally, it is important to consider the meaning of the significant difference between case outcome and both the number of interviews and number of questions. These results indicate that the outcome asylum in total contained more questions as well as more interviews than the other outcomes. It is possible that the difference in the number of questions only depends on the number of interviews, so that a higher number of questions are a natural consequence of more interviews having been conducted with the applicant. Further, some of the cases with various interviews were cases that were being processed for the second or even

third time, often because of a court-granted appeal. In these cases, it is fully understandable that the case includes more questions than first-time cases, since more elaborate information about the case was clearly needed for the decision making. A final, more concerning interpretation, is that cases, where the interviewer has made substantial efforts to cover all aspects and get an as full as possible understanding of the applicants' situation, are more likely to result in a granted asylum. This would indicate that the outcome might depend on factors other than the individual claim for asylum, which would be concerning.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Analyzing real-life asylum cases from the archives of the Finnish Immigration Service gives important insight to how the interviews are conducted in practice. Real-life data from this particular context is hard to obtain and highly valuable. The context and conditions of the interview situations were real and thus, we were able to assess true aspects of the asylum system. The interviews were visibly affected by common real-life aspects such as time pressure and the presence of an interpreter, while not affected by factors sometimes hampering the setup of experimental research, such as social desirability. An advantage of using full transcripts was also that the context of all questions was available, as well as comments and notes about for example, things happening in the room. Further, since all included cases were from 2017 or 2018, it can be expected that these cases were processed during a period when the situation had already been normalized after the immigration crisis of 2015. During 2015-2016, the pressure on the migration board in Finland was enormous, and it is likely that many newly recruited interviewers lacked necessary experience from the asylum field. The current sample, however, can be considered representative of interviews conducted by the Finnish Immigration Service in the present day.

A downside of using transcripts is that it was impossible to determine how well the transcripts correspond to the real situation, since transcripts might not always give a verbatim representation of what has been said. A study examining the written summaries from police hearings showed that summaries of the same police hearing differed considerably from each other (Keijser, Malsch, Kranendonk, & Gruijter, 2012). It is likely that similar issues exist within the asylum context. Moreover, even small alternations to the exact written formulation might have consequences; for example questions that start with "tell me about (where you lived)" and "tell me (where you lived)" differs significantly from each other, in that the first one is an open question and the second a closed. What even further complicated this is the quality and accuracy of the interpretation. How exactly the words of both the interviewer and

applicant are translated and transcribed is impossible to know at this stage, and this has not been researched in Finland. Further, some concerning differences in the format of the transcripts was noted during the data coding, especially regarding long answers. Most long answers were written as a coherent narrative, without any interference such as questions or facilitators from the interviewer, the interpreter or the support person. However, in some interviews, what seemed as, and was counted as, only one question and a long answer, in reality contained several additional questions and answers written within in the answer. It seems probable that that long answers contain un-transcribed facilitators, comments and questions that possibly might distort the results of this study.

### **Recommendations and Further Research**

In many aspects, interviews conducted at the Finnish Immigration Service follow the guidelines for best practice in investigative interviewing reasonably well. The current study has pointed at several aspects that should be taken into account when guidelines for investigative interviewing from other legal fields are applied to the asylum setting. The results also gives rise to several recommendations about future practice as well as future research conducted within this area. To begin with, even if the question style is predominantly in line with recommendation, it is concerning that so few interviews are entirely free from accusatory questions. This can partly be understood in light of the fact that some of the skeptical questions seemed to arise from repeated misunderstandings between the interviewer and the applicant. Reformulating these questions into less skeptical ones would nevertheless be preferable, for example by reformulating a question starting with “I’m puzzled with why you would...” to “Please explain again to me how it came to be that you...”. Another improvement would be to reformulate all “why”- questions into “what” or “how” questions, since questions starting with “why” is easily interpreted as skeptical. For example, “Why did the trouble only start in 2014?” could be reformulated to “What is, in your opinion, the reason that the trouble started in 2014 and not before?”.

Second, asking more open questions in the interviews would yield longer and more detailed answers. A common argument in credibility assessments is that the asylum seeker’s claim was too superficial and lacked details (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013). For this argument to be valid, the asylum seeker should have been provided the opportunity to give a detailed and elaborate narrative. An interview that consists of a disproportionate number of closed questions is not likely to have given the applicant a proper chance to do this. Moreover, it seemed as though the intention of the interviewer often was to

ask an open question, for example by beginning with “Tell me”. However, then the interviewer often continued with a very specific closed question (e.g., “Tell me how you fled Iraq?”), instead of continuing with asking about a broader theme (e.g., “Tell me about your flight from Iraq?”).

Third, questions inviting to speculation or guessing could be avoided by adopting a clearer do-not-guess policy. Asking an applicant to give an estimate or guess, might convey the message that guessing is always acceptable (Fisher et al., 2010). Incorrect or guessed information is difficult to distinguish from actual knowledge and memories, which might cause problems in the credibility assessment. Moreover, research from the asylum context about the limits of the human memory shows that memory for exact dates, times and durations is notoriously unreliable and difficult to recall (Cameron, 2010; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013). Instead of inviting the applicant to speculate about for example times and dates, the interviewer could ask specifically about the first time something occurred, and then about the last time it occurred. Importantly, highlighting to both the interviewers and the interviewees that guessing and speculation should always be avoided would improve the overall validity of the answers in an interview.

Fourth, regarding question order; open questions should more frequently be asked in the beginning of the interviews, and the majority of the closed questions should be asked more towards the end in order to maximize the applicant’s possibility to give as much information as they remember. Further, a summary should be provided after each topic and in the end of the interview. Interviews following this structure are considered as giving the best opportunity for asylum officials to gather as much and as reliable as possible. Moreover, the first question regarding a new topic should always be an invitation. Regarding the theme persecution story, this was almost always the case. However, regarding the background theme, it was far more common to ask directive or yes/no questions. As the analysis of length of answer showed, the invitation yielded a great deal longer answers than the closed questions, which would be a preferable development to see in all topics that are discussed in the interviews.

Fifth, misunderstandings between the interviewer and the applicant seemed to be somewhat common, and these miscommunications sometimes lead to inappropriate questions or a skeptical interviewing style. Moreover, sometimes critical questions are necessary to ask. For example, regarding inconsistencies, the guidelines clearly state that asylum seekers should be given the opportunity to clarify and explain themselves. It is important that the

interviewers knows how to ask about such issues in a non-skeptical way, using appropriate questions. Clearer guidelines and more training in how to proceed in these situations are undoubtedly needed.

Finally, all discussed issues could probably at least somewhat be improved by developing and extending the training period of the asylum officials. Based on research from other fields of legal psychology, to successfully train interviewers to in practice follow the guidelines of best practice of investigative interviewing, extensive training, continuous feedback and follow-up sessions is required (Powell, 2018). The training programs for asylum officials in Finland and in the EU countries should take this matter in consideration more closely. Compared to the training of interviewers in other legal fields, the four week long training period that the Finnish asylum officials takes part in, is very short. As an example, police officers who interview children that are suspected of being victims of sexual or physical violence are in Finland required to complete a year-long training period (Korkman, Pakkanen, & Laajasalo, 2017). More training could improve the quality of the interviews even further, and with that the quality of the entire asylum proceedings. Also, the training should incorporate knowledge about human memory and how to conduct interviews in a manner that is optimal in order to achieve as much and as correct information as possible.

Future research should focus on the answers given to the questions asked in asylum interviews. The preliminary analysis in the current study gave a small hint of what results such an analysis could provide, but a more comprehensive data collection, where more than just a few questions per case is evaluated and more exact categories are used, is needed. Such a study should aim at assessing the type of questions that are most efficient in eliciting relevant information. It would be interesting to assess the number of important details coming from a free recall invitation in the beginning of a topic compared to important details discovered later in the interview by closed questions. An additional analysis could examine the details used in a credibility assessment, and assess in what context those details are told. As discussed previously, information elicited through inappropriate questions and questions inviting to speculation is likely to be less valid, and should be used carefully in the decisions. Moreover, future research could analyze question order for specific topics within for example, the broader theme of persecution story. As previously mentioned, ideally, interviewers would introduce each specific topic with an open question and only after that proceed with closed and fact-checking questions. Finally, a very important next step in this field would be to examine the interpretation. The first step would be to simply check with a native speaker how

correct the transcripts are in comparison with the audio recordings. It would be important to note both exactly how the questions of the interviewer and the answers of the applicant are translated as well as whether the interpreter adds any comments and clarifications to the applicant or the interviewer.

### **Conclusion**

The similarity of the results of the current study and the study of van Veldhuizen (2018) allows for some conclusions about asylum interviews in the two countries – and to a lesser extent also for other EU countries – to be drawn. It is promising that migration boards in both Finland and the Netherlands seem to follow the common EU guidelines, based on the EASO training program, to a satisfactory level. Importantly, the questions in the two samples are predominantly asked in an information-gathering style and very few inappropriate questions are used. The interviewers in both countries seem to struggle with similar issues. The key challenge seems to be to increase the number of open questions and decrease the number of closed questions in the interviews as well as dealing with issues related to cultural differences. A further problem relates to how interviewers introduced new topics. In neither sample did the interviewer address new topics through asking open questions, with the exception of questions about the persecution story. This was recently addressed by the Dutch Immigration Service by adding a recommendation of introducing the topic of origin with an open question. Possible solutions to the aforementioned issues, and recommendations of how to proceed when facing a problematic situation, could easily be addressed by the EASO or the UNHCR and included in the training modules.

**Swedish Summary – Svensk sammanfattning**  
**”Berätta om orsakerna till att du söker asyl” –**  
**En analys av frågor som ställs i finska asylintervjuer**

Antalet asylsökanden som anlände till länder inom den Europeiska Unionen (EU) ökade kraftigt under 2015 (Eurostat, 2019). Ökningen märktes även i Finland, där antalet asylansökningar steg från cirka 3000-4000 per år till 30 000 under 2015 (Migrationsverket, 2018, 2019b). Kraven på migrationsmyndigheterna är höga och asylbesluten är ofta utmanande eftersom en stor del asylsökande saknar identitetsbevis eller övriga dokument som stöder deras anspråk på asyl. I dessa fall är intervjun med asylsökanden viktig, eftersom beslutet till stor del fattas baserat på informationen som framkommer ur intervjun (Goodman, 2013; Gyulai, 2013; Kagan, 2003; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2013). Syftet med asylintervjuerna är både att avgöra om en person är i genuint behov av internationellt skydd eller inte, samt att bedöma utsagans pålitlighet. Därav är det av stor vikt att asylintervjuerna utförs enligt bästa rådande praxis för utredande intervjuer.

Forskning inom rättspsykologi har länge fokuserat på att utforma handböcker och riktlinjer för bästa praxis för utredande intervjuer (Fisher m.fl., 2010; Memon m.fl., 2010; Snook m.fl., 2012; Vrij m.fl., 2014). Handböckerna för bästa rådande praxis fokuserar ofta på två faktorer i intervjuerna; frågestil och frågetyp. Forskning om frågestil har identifierat en informationssökande stil samt en anklagande stil. Den informationssökande stilen uppmuntrar till fritt återberättande och tenderar att ge detaljerade och ärliga svar, medan de anklagande stilen kännetecknas av tydlig misstro och skepticism gentemot sökanden och tenderar att ge upphov till korta svar samt stress hos sökanden (Hartwig m.fl., 2005; Meissner m.fl., 2012; Vanderhallen m.fl., 2011; Vrij m.fl., 2014, 2006). Frågetyper delas ofta in i tre övergripande kategorier; öppna frågor, slutna frågor och olämpliga frågor. Öppna frågor begränsar inte svaret och ger sökanden möjligheten att berätta fritt om sina upplevelser, medan slutna frågor är specifika, eller kräver endast ett kortfattat ja eller nej svar (Bull, 2010; Fisher m.fl., 2010; Granhag m.fl., 2017; Oxburgh m.fl., 2010; Snook m.fl., 2012). Olämpliga frågor har antingen fasta svarsalternativ eller är suggestiva, genom att de tydligt förmedlar vilket eller hurdant svar som förväntas. Sammanfattningsvis ska utredande intervjuer enligt bästa rådande praxis bestå främst av öppna frågor, ställda i informationssökande stil.

En tredje aspekt som riktlinjerna ofta tar upp är ordningen på frågorna. Gemensamt för de flesta intervjumodeller som utarbetats är att det rekommenderas att varje tema i intervjun inleds med öppna frågor (European Asylum Support Office (EASO), 2015; Fisher m.fl., 2017;

Memon m.fl., 2010). Efter de öppna frågorna kan slutna frågor ställas och till slut bör varje tema avrundas med en sammanfattning. Sammanfattningen är ytterst viktig för att sökanden vid behov ska kunna göra korrigeringar (European Asylum Support Office, 2016; Fisher m.fl., 2017).

Enligt vår vetenskap har endast två tidigare studier undersökt frågorna som ställs i asylintervjuer. I en studie av van Veldhuizen och kolleger (van Veldhuizen m.fl., 2016) ombads svenska asylförläggare att skriva ner fem frågor som de skulle vilja ställa asylsökanden i fyra fiktiva asylfall. Resultatet visade att de allra flesta frågorna var öppna frågor, som var ställda i en informationssökande stil. En ny frågestil, kallad ansvarsfokuserande stil, som explicit eller implicit lägger ansvaret över asylnedredningen på asylsökanden, identifierades även. Studien begränsades av låg ekologisk validitet. Samma forskargrupp undersökte i en senare studie frågestil och frågetyp i 40 verkliga asylintervjuer från den nederländska migrationsmyndigheten (van Veldhuizen m.fl., 2018). Resultaten visade att frågorna främst var ställda i en informationssökande stil, samt att fyra femtedelar av frågorna var slutna. Ytterst få olämpliga frågor identifierades överlag i de båda studierna. Slutsatsen från dessa studier var att riktlinjerna för frågestil följdes till en tillfredsställande grad, men en mera balanserad fördelning av flera öppna frågor och färre slutna frågor skulle ha varit önskvärd.

Syftet med den föreliggande avhandlingen var att upprepa van Veldhuizens studie från 2018 med asylfall från det finska migrationsverkets arkiv, samt att utöka analysen med att kartlägga ordningen på frågor. Liknande resultat som van Veldhuizens förväntades. Målet med forskningen var att undersöka kvaliteten på finska asylintervjuer samt vid behov kunna ge migrationsverket rekommendationer till förbättringar.

### **Metod**

Studien erhöll etiskt tillstånd från den forskningsetiska nämnden vid Fakulteten för humaniora, psykologi och teologi vid Åbo Akademi. Från migrationsverket i Finland erhöles 200 anonymiserade, verkliga asylfall från åren 2017-2018. Av dessa inkluderades 80 fall i studien; 40 fall med positivt beslut (personer som beviljats asyl eller uppehållstillstånd på övriga grunder) och 40 fall med negativt beslut (personer som avvisats). Asylsökandena i de inkluderade fallen härstammde från Irak, Afganistan eller Somalia.

Vi samlade ihop tillgänglig deskriptiv statistik för de inkluderade fallen. Samtliga frågor från intervjuerna inkluderades i studien. För varje fråga kodade vi frågans tema, stil, typ och ordning. Kategorierna för frågetema var *procedurfrågor* (d.v.s. frågor om

intervjuförfarandet), frågor om *förföljelse* (d.v.s. frågor om orsakerna till asylansökan) samt *bakgrundsfrågor* (d.v.s. frågor om hemlandet, flykten etc.). Vi kodade frågestil enligt van Veldhuizens studier (van Veldhuizen m.fl., 2016, 2018), med andra ord i kategorierna *informationssökande stil*, *anklagande stil* och *ansvarsfokuserande stil*. En ny kategori, *kritisk stil*, lades till under datainsamlingen som ett mellanalternativ mellan den informationssökande och den anklagande stilen. Kategorierna för frågetyp baserade vi på van Veldhuizens studier samt på Oxburghs översiktsartikel (Oxburgh m.fl., 2010). Öppna frågorna kodade vi i kategorierna *inbjudande frågor* och *styrda inbjudande frågor*, slutna frågorna i *specifika frågor* och *ja/nej frågor* samt olämpliga frågor i *suggestiva frågor* och *flervalsfrågor*. Ytterligare inkluderade vi skilda kategorier för *uttalanden*, *sammanfattningar* och *oklara frågor*. För analysen av ordningen på frågor, kodade vi ordningstalet för varje fråga samt lade till ett ordningstal om frågan saknade det. Vi kodade även *multipla frågor* (d.v.s. frågor som bestod av två eller flera teman) och *svåra frågor* i en skild variabel. Utöver detta kodade vi frågetypen på den första frågan för varje tema samt ett grovt mått på dessa frågors svarslängd.

### Resultat

Vi identifierade sammanlagt 8469 frågor. Efter att procedurfrågorna exkluderats inför de huvudsakliga analyserna bestod samplet av 7343 frågor. Resultaten för frågestil visade att 97,3 % av alla frågor var ställda i en informationssökande stil, 2,2 % i en kritisk stil och 0,4 % i en anklagande stil. Så gott som inga frågor (<1 %,  $n = 2$ ) var ställda i den ansvarsfokuserande stilen. Resultaten angående analysen av frågetyp visade att 12,2 % var öppna frågor (inbjudande frågor 1,7 % och styrda inbjudande frågor 10,5 %), medan 81,3 % var slutna (47,1 % specifika frågor och 34,2 % ja/nej frågor). Andelen olämpliga frågor var 2,3 % (flervalsfrågor 1,9 % och suggestiva frågor 0,4 %), uttalanden 3,7 % och sammanfattningar 0,5 %. Fördelningen av frågestil och frågetyp skilde sig inte för olika asylbeslut.

Analysen av ordningen på frågor visade att öppna frågor förekom i högre grad i början av intervjun än i slutet av intervjun. Ja/nej frågor samt sammanfattningar förekom i högre grad i slutet av intervjun än i början av intervjun. Dessa effekter var dock mycket små, och därav var den praktiska betydelsen av dessa resultat endast liten. I 95 % av fallen för temat förföljelse var den inledande frågan en öppen fråga, och svaret på den frågan var i 95 % av fallen längre än sex meningar. För temat bakgrundsfrågor, var den första frågan i 80 % av fallen en sluten fråga, och svaren på dessa frågor var i samtliga fall högst 5 meningar. Sammanlagt hade 61,3 % av fallen en sammanfattning. I övrigt noterades kvalitativa

observationer på svåra frågor, frågor som inbjuder till spekulaton, kulturella missförstånd, sensitiva och icke-sensitiva förhållningssätt samt problem med transkriberingen.

### **Diskussion**

Studiens resultat visade att intervjuare i asylintervjuer i Finland främst använder sig av en informationssökande stil, och sällan ställer frågor i anklagande eller kritisk stil. Detta är i linje med rekommenderad praxis, eftersom en informationssökande stil leder till mera uttömmande och ärliga svar av asylsökanden. Analysen av frågetyp visade att intervjuare främst ställer slutna frågor i asylintervjuer. Detta går mot rekommenderad praxis, enligt vilken öppna frågor föredras och slutna frågor endast ska ställas för att ta fram specifik information och bekräfta detaljer. Den stora andelen slutna frågor i dessa intervjuer kan delvis förstås av asylkontexten och det komplexa samspelet mellan intervjuare, tolk och asylsökande. En positiv observation är att få olämpliga frågor ställdes i finska asylintervjuer. Resultatet från analysen av frågeordning indikerade att den rekommenderade ordningen av att inleda en intervju med öppna frågor, sedan ställa slutna frågor och avsluta med en sammanfattning, endast följs till en viss grad i finska asylintervjuer. Den sekundära analysen visade att öppna frågor ofta ställs för att introducera temat förföljelse, men inte för temat bakgrund. Dessa resultat visade även tydligt att en öppen fråga ger ett betydligt längre svar än en sluten fråga. Överlag kan det konstateras att det finns rum för förbättringar med tanke på frågeordning.

En fördel i att analysera verkliga asylfall var att intervjuerna var utförda under realistiska omständigheter och därmed ger studien verklighetstrogen information om hur intervjuerna utförs i Finland. Att analysera hela transkriberade intervjuer gav fördelen att kontexten till frågorna och svaren kunde beaktas i problematiska fall, detta var exempelvis viktigt för kodningen av frågestil. En nackdel med att använda transkriberade intervjuer var att det är svårt att veta i vilken utsträckning den nedskrivna texten motsvarar vad som verkligen sades i intervjusituationen. Att transkriberingen av intervjuerna är korrekt är av stor betydelse eftersom även små skillnader i hur frågorna är ställda kan ha stor inverkan på vilken frågetyp och stil det är; exempelvis skulle frågan "Berätta om var du har bott?" klassas som en öppen fråga, medan frågan "Berätta var du har bott?" skulle vara en sluten fråga. En annan nackdel var att vi inte vet hur ordagrant tolkarna översatt det sagda i intervjun, samt hurdan interaktionen mellan tolken och asylsökanden varit.

Studiens resultat visade att även om Migrationsverket till en acceptabel nivå verkade följa bästa rådande praxis för utredande intervjuer, finns det rum för förbättring. För det första

skulle det vara gynnsamt om intervjuarna strävade efter att eliminera samtliga frågor ställda i anklagande stil från intervjuerna. Speciellt frågor som börjar med 'varför' kunde enkelt omformuleras till 'vad' eller 'hur' frågor. För det andra skulle det vara att föredra att fler öppna och färre slutna frågor ställs. Eftersom det ofta förutsätts en detaljerad och lång motivering för att beviljas asyl, borde även intervjufrågorna vara ställda på ett sätt som möjliggör och gynnar detta. För det tredje skulle det vara önskvärt att samtliga teman skulle introduceras med en öppen fråga. Ytterligare borde det införas en klar regel om att gissningar och spekulationer ska undvikas, eftersom validiteten på svaren då skulle förbättras märkbart. Avslutningsvis skulle det vara nyttigt med klarare riktlinjer och mera kunskap om hur missförstånd bättre kan undvikas, samt om hur intervjuare kan omformulera frågor utan att frågorna blir olämpliga eller anklagande.

Framtida forskning kunde på ett mera omfattande sätt undersöka svaren som ges till frågorna i asylintervjuer. Att analysera vilka frågor som ger upphov till de viktigaste detaljerna i asylberättelsen vore nyttigt. Ett annat viktigt steg i denna forskning skulle vara att undersöka kvaliteten på tolkingen, främst hur ordagrant frågorna och svaren översätts.

Sammanfattningsvis kan det konstateras att resultaten från denna studie till stor del liknar resultaten från van Veldhuizens studie (van Veldhuizen m.fl., 2018). Migrationsverket i de båda länderna verkar följa bästa rådande praxis för utredande intervjuer till en acceptabel nivå. Intervjuerna i båda länderna verkar ha liknande utmaningar, främst med att ställa mera öppna frågor samt att hantera utmaningar som uppstår i den stundvis komplicerade interkulturella kontexten. Dessa utmaningar kunde europeiska och nationella utbildningsprogram ta fasta på genom att utveckla och förlänga utbildningstiden för intervjuerna vid migrationsverket.

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## Appendix A

### Coding principles for multiple questions, question theme, question style, question type and other characteristics:

#### Multiple questions

We coded question type for multiple questions according to the following principle:

1. If the multiple questions contained an inappropriate question (i.e., suggestive or forced choice type question), we coded question type accordingly.
2. If no inappropriate questions types were observed, we coded the type according to the answer, so that the question that the applicant gave an answer to was coded. For example, if the question was “Did they come often and what did they look like?”, and the answer that followed was “They had military uniforms on”; the question was coded as a directive question.
3. If the applicant answered both questions, we coded according to the more limiting question type used. If the answer to the previously mentioned question had been “Yes, they came often, and they had military uniforms.” the question would have been coded as a yes/no question.

#### Question theme

##### Procedural questions

Definition: Standardized questions asked in the beginning, middle or ending of each interview that did not relate to the asylum claim. Procedural questions and statements in the beginning of an interview typically addressed the aim of the interview, the rights and obligations of the applicant, the communication with the interpreter and the current health of the applicant. Procedural questions in the end of the interview often asked about whether the applicant has understood the interpreter or if he or she has anything to add. Further, questions regarding breaks during the interview, or reiterations of the information told in the beginning were also included in this category. Procedural questions were always assessed in light of the answer, so that questions that did give relevant information about the applicant’s claim or reasons for seeking asylum, was not coded as procedural questions and instead as persecution story or background information. For example, if the applicant answered “no”, to the question “Do you have anything else to add?” the question was coded as a procedural question. If the applicant however, did answer with new information, the question was coded as the appropriate theme.

Examples:

“Have you understood the information about your rights and obligations?”

“Do you understand the interpreter?”

“Do you suffer from any illnesses or diseases that might affect this interview?”

“Did you have lunch during the break?”

“How are you feeling now?”

“Do you have anything else to add?”

##### Persecution story

Definition: All questions that examined the applicants' claims and reasons for seeking asylum. All questions belonging to this category were asked in order to gather information about the asylum claim. A few standardized questions that were asked from all applicants were included in this category instead of the first, because the question was clearly meant to gather information about the asylum claim.

Examples:

"Tell me about your reasons for seeking asylum."

"The law obligates me to ask the following question: if the decision is negative, how do you respond to being deported?"

#### Background information

Definition: Questions asked to gather information about the applicant's background. The vast majority of these questions addressed the identity, country of origin and living environment, family members and travel route of the applicant. A few questions addressed issues that had occurred after the applicant arrived in Finland (e.g., problems at the reception center etc.).

Examples:

"Tell me about your family."

"Where did you live?"

#### **Question style**

For the coding of question style both the question itself and the context was always considered. The context was analyzed by examining the questions and answers before and after the question itself. The perceived intention of the interviewer was also assessed in problematic cases. Problematic questions were always solved by discussing. If the question was still perceived as problematic after the discussion, the question was coded in favor of the interviewer.

#### Information-gathering style

Definition: Questions that allows the applicant to describe their actions and experiences in their own words as well as questions asked by the interviewer to seek further information or clarification of previously mentioned facts. Further, questions that address problematic issues such inconsistencies in the narrative in an open and direct way, without any skepticism or criticism are classified as information-gathering.

Examples:

"Tell me about your reasons for seeking asylum."

"On one hand, last time you said that your uncle worked as a spy for the government and on the other hand, you also said that nobody from your clan can to work for the government. Tell me more about this."

#### Critical style

Definition: Questions that in their wording seem to convey skepticism or an overly or unnecessary critical attitude towards the applicant, but not that not quite fit the definition of accusatory questions. These are questions that clearly could be asked in a more information-gathering way. Questions that did not seem information-gathering, but not clearly accusatory either, was coded to this category.

Examples:

“Why did you finally leave Iraq? You said that you had problems during many years?”

“Why did the trouble only start in 2014?”

“Why would they still be interested in you after 2 years?”

“...Only the writing, nothing else?”

“Is there a special reason to why you remember dates so clearly? From what I have understood you are an analphabetic?”

“I mean, in 2014 when the militant had come to your house. Your brother was home alone. Why didn't they take him then?”

“Did you know the judge from before? It sounds like a big step that the judge requested a phone operator to look into the identity of the caller and ask for a recording of the phone call.”

### Accusatory style

Definition: Questions that communicate disbelief or skepticism in the content towards the applicant. Based on the context, the interviewer clearly accuses the applicant of something, or explicitly states that the interviewer does not believe what the applicant has said.

Examples:

“Why do you think that there wasn't any problem when you had left your work and hit your college, you would think that there would be problems after this and that your name would be on some list?”

“It puzzles me how it would be possible that you wife's ex-husband can threaten you when he is in prison?”

### Burden communication

Definition: Questions that explicitly remind the asylum seeker that they themselves are responsible for providing a truthful narrative that corroborates their claims.

Examples:

“I remind you that it is your duty to provide evidence to support your claims. I recommend you to answer my questions... ”

## **Question type**

### Invitation

Definition: Open questions prompt a free recall and do not limit the answer in any way. These questions invites to a lengthy answer.

Examples:

“Tell me your reasons for applying for asylum?”

“Tell me more, please”

“What happened next?”

“What else can you tell me?”

“Please continue on your free narrative”

### Cued invitation

Definition: Cued invitations are open questions that prompt a free recall, but they include a specific detail or contextual cue previously mentioned in the interview to refocus the attention to that detail or elicit more elaborate or additional information about that detail.

To decide between cued invitations and directive or yes/no questions we always considered if the question was asked in a way that allowed the applicant to freely talk about the topic or if the question limited or restricted the answer. Questions that began with “Tell me...” and continued with a very specific question for example “where you lived?” were not categorized as cued invitation since they clearly limited the answer.

Examples:

“Tell me more about when you were assaulted!”

“You said that you had converted to Christianity; tell me more specifically about this.”

“Tell me more; when the bullet hit your leg, what happened then?”

“What are you afraid that would happen to you if you were to return to your home country?”

“Can you tell me more about your cousin’s situation?”

“Tell me more specifically, how was it to move around in an area that ISIS controls?”

### Directive questions

Definition: Probing or limited recall questions that limits the answer and does not invite to a lengthy response. These questions are sometimes called the 5WH since they commonly start with “what, where, when, why, who”. In many cases there is only one logical answer to limited recall questions. All questions regarding whether the applicant remembered or knew something about a certain topic were coded according to the answer. For example, the question “Do you remember what time it was?” was coded as a directive question if the applicant answered a time (e.g. “Yes, it was 9 o’clock”), but coded as a yes/no question if the applicant only answered yes or no.

Examples:

”What made you go outside?”

“How close was the army when you decided to leave?”

“Can you describe your emotions at that moment?”

“Tell me what the places were?”

“Tell me when you got sick?”

“Tell me where you have lived during your life?”

### Yes/No questions

Definition: Closed questions that request a confirmatory or non-confirmatory answer without explanation. All questions regarding whether the applicant remembered or knew about a certain aspect were coded according to the answer as explained previously.

Examples:

“Would it be possible for you to live in another area in your home country?”

“Did you see the shooting?”

“Did your family stay in the same house?”

“Have there been other forms of racism where you live?”

“Did they belong to the same group or did they have anything to do with each other, could you tell?”

### Forced choice questions

Definition: Questions where the interviewer gives the respondent explicitly or implicitly a choice between two or more alternatives that he or she must choose between. If the question

seemed to contain a forced choice, but the alternatives expressed the same idea in different manners (e.g., “Did you go by foot, or, I mean, walked?”), the question was not coded as a forced choice question.

Examples:

”How did you flee; on foot, running, or by car?”

“Is it as big as Helsinki, New York or something like this city; Lappeenranta?”

“Can you estimate how much time had passed, 5 minutes or an hour?”

### Suggestive questions

Definition: Questions that strongly communicate what kind of answer is expected or asks for confirmation of a not-before-mentioned fact or quotes the respondent incorrectly.

Examples:

“I think you remember the events that took place a little more clearly. At what time did they come, and when were you in contact with your family members again? What happened during the day?”

“If these persons who come into your home would have been personally interested in you, and wanted to get you and would instead get your wife, it feels strange to me that you dare to presume that your wife wouldn’t be harmed or that nobody would ask her about your whereabouts, or?”

### Unclear

Definition: Questions that were so unclear that they could not be put into any of the above mentioned category were also put in this category. Also questions that for some reason were impossible to code because of the state of the transcript were coded as unclear.

### Utterances

Definition: Statements rather than questions. Many statements were observations made from the interviewer or facilitators. Statements and questions directed to the interpreter or supportive person were all coded as utterances. All questions that were intended to be facilitators, for example “Do you want to continue?” after a pause in the interview, was coded as utterances.

Examples:

”You said that the kidnapping happened in 2014.”

“Yes”

“Continue”

”Do you want to add anything?”

”Do you want to continue?”

“Does the support person have anything to add?”

### Summaries

Definition: More than two sentences together that are clearly intended to be a summary of a topic and not for example to ask for clarification of a detail. Always contains a comment of it being a summary.

Example:

“Let me summarize what you have told me so far...”

## **Other characteristics**

### Multiple questions

Definition: Questions that contain two or more different ideas were coded as multiple questions in the variable. A question that expressed the same idea in different manners was not coded as a multiple question (e.g. “Where did you go after XX, I mean, where did you travel next?”)

Examples:

“Where did you live and when did you live there?”

### Difficult questions

Definition: Questions that seemed to be too hard or complicated for either the applicant in the interview to understand, or for the researchers. For example if the applicant mentions in his or her answer that he or she has not understood the question.

Examples:

“How would you define your sexual orientation?” Answer: “I don’t understand the question.”

## PRESSMEDDELANDE

**I finska asylintervjuer ställs främst slutna frågor i informationssökande stil.**

Pro-gradu avhandling i psykologi

Fakulteten för humaniora, psykologi och teologi vid Åbo Akademi

Resultaten från en Pro-gradu avhandling vid Åbo Akademi tyder på finska asylintervjuer till största del består av slutna frågor ställda i en informationssökande stil. Den stora andelen slutna frågor är problematisk eftersom slutna frågor inte är lämplade för att frambringa detaljerade, informationsrika och pålitliga utsagor. Ett positivt resultat är dock att mycket få frågor verkar ställas i en anklagande stil, samt att olämpliga frågor, exempelvis ledande frågor, förekommer mycket sällan. Resultaten visade även att frågeordningen endast till en del följer den rekommenderade strukturen av att inleda varje tema i intervjun med öppna frågor, därefter ställa slutna frågor samt avsluta med en sammanfattning.

Syftet med studien var att utvärdera de finska asylintervjuernas kvalitet i jämförelse med bästa rådande praxis för utredande intervjuer. I studien analyserades sammanlagt 8469 frågor från 80 verkliga asylutredningar gjorda av finska migrationsverket mellan åren 2017-2018. Studien fokuserade främst på att undersöka frågestil, frågetyp och frågeordning i intervjuerna men även kvalitativa observationer noterades. Samtliga asyldokument var anonymiserade av migrationsverket innan de överläts till forskarna. Undersökningen utfördes av pro gradu-skribent Jenny Skrifvars under handledning av projektforskare Julia Korkman och biträdande professor i tillämpad psykologi Jan Antfolk.

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