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(In)credibly queer? Assessments of asylum claims based on sexual orientation

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Abstract

Purpose: Queer asylum-seekers should be given an opportunity to have their claim evaluated in a fair and unbiased manner. Despite this, research shows they risk having their claims rejected based on stereotypes about sexual minorities. In the present study, we investigated how the Finnish Immigration Service evaluated credibility in asylum claims lodged by sexual minorities.

Methods: We analysed 68 negative asylum decisions to assess the arguments made to reject the asylum claim. To do this, we developed a detailed coding scheme to investigate the specific themes and credibility indicators cited in the asylum decisions.

Results: We found that the asylum claims were most often rejected because the applicant's account of their sexual orientation was not found to be sufficiently detailed, consistent, or plausible. Officials appeared to hold assumptions around sexual identity development and interpersonal relationships that are partially unsupported by established psychological science.

Conclusions: Assessments of SOGI claims would benefit from a greater consideration of the factors affecting queer asylum applicants' ability to describe their claims, including cross-cultural differences in understandings of sexuality, variability in human behaviour, and practical barriers within the asylum procedure.

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KEYWORDS

asylum interviews, asylum-seeker, credibility assessment, decision-making, queer, sexual orientation

INTRODUCTION

Persecution of queer people is an issue of grave international concern. Over 70 countries explicitly criminalize same-sex sexual activity between consenting adults (ILGA World: Mendos et al., 2020), while transgender people suffer criminalization of gender expression in 14 countries (ILGA World: Chiam et al., 2020). Moreover, queer people experience societal harm through inadequate state protection against hate crimes, as well as restrictions to their rights to liberty, privacy, and freedom of expression (UNHCR, 2012). Many queer people are thus forced to flee their countries and seek international protection abroad.

The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as someone who is outside their country of nationality and is unable to return there due to a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion' (United Nations, 1951). Sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), although not explicitly mentioned in the refugee definition, have since the 1990's gained wide acceptance as fundamental characteristics warranting protection (Millbank, 2013). Despite this, considerable evidence suggests that evaluations of SOGI asylum claims are often based on stereotypical assumptions about sexual minorities rooted in Western culture, leading to inaccurate credibility judgements (e.g. Berg & Millbank, 2009; Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011).

Finland adheres to the Common European Asylum System, which recognizes SOGI-based persecution as grounds for asylum (Qualification Directive 2011/95/EU, 2011). The official guidelines of the Finnish Immigration Service emphasize the need to assess the credibility of the asylum-seeker's testimony of persecution and of their queer identity (Finnish Immigration Service, 2017). Previous research in Finland has investigated SOGI asylum decision-making through qualitative interviews with asylum officials (Vanto, 2022b) and NGO workers (Vanto, 2022a). Yet, little is known about the explicit arguments that officials make when evaluating the credibility of SOGI claims. In the present study, we quantitatively analysed written justifications for rejecting SOGI asylum cases in Finland to identify patterns in officials' credibility assessments.

Credibility assessment of SOGI asylum claims

Establishing a credible claim of persecution is inherently difficult, as most asylum-seekers flee their origin country without supporting evidence (Gyulai, 2015). Queer asylum-seekers face the added burden of having to demonstrate that they belong to a sexual minority based on their oral statements alone (Millbank, 2009b). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2013) recommends using five indicators (i.e. *sufficiency of detail and specificity*, *internal consistency*, *external consistency*, *plausibility*, and *late disclosure*) to assess the credibility of asylum claims. Yet, researchers in psychology have questioned the validity and reliability of these indicators in discriminating between truthful and fabricated statements, especially in cross-cultural settings (e.g. de Bruïne et al., 2023). Importantly, asylum-seekers only need to demonstrate they have a reasonable likelihood of facing persecution to obtain protection, and they should be given the *benefit of the doubt* regarding aspects of their claim they cannot establish with certainty (UNHCR, 2019).

Barriers to queer asylum-seekers' disclosure

Queer asylum-seekers face considerable challenges in describing their reasons for leaving their home countries and their fear of persecution. Like other applicants, their oral accounts are vulnerable to the

normal limits of human memory, which lead to naturally occurring inconsistencies and gaps in information (Cameron, 2010; Herlihy et al., 2012). Applicants with histories of traumatic experiences may avoid recalling these distressing events, to the detriment of their asylum outcome (Herlihy et al., 2012). Moreover, queer applicants may never have previously disclosed their sexual orientation before the asylum interview in fear of repercussions, which can prevent them from giving a coherent and elaborate account (Giametta, 2017). The interview setting itself contains factors inhibiting disclosure, namely the applicant's potential distrust in authorities, the presence of an interpreter who might belong to the asylum-seeker's community, and mismatched cultural expectations among the interview participants (Herlihy & Turner, 2009). Finally, terms used by queer applicants for self-identification differ between cultures; Western labels, including 'gay' and 'lesbian' may not exist in their languages, and applicants might regard them as irrelevant or stigmatizing, sometimes rejecting them altogether (Murray, 2015). Some applicants may feel compelled to use these labels to convince officials that their claim is credible (Giametta, 2017). Others may use terms a Western official might consider derogatory due to a lack of neutral vocabulary in their own language (Danisi et al., 2021).

Challenges affecting asylum decision-makers

Decision-making in legal contexts is cognitively demanding and time-consuming, and legal decision-makers often rely on mental shortcuts, or heuristics, to ease this cognitive load (Peer & Gamliel, 2013). Heuristics affect how decision-makers process information, what information they attend to, and the weight given to different pieces of information in reaching a decision (Dror, 2020). Although they facilitate decision-making in day-to-day life, heuristics may lead to serious errors when reaching legal decisions. For example, asylum officials may rely on assumptions about human memory and behaviour that contradict established psychological knowledge (e.g. Skrifvars, Sui, et al., 2022), threatening the accuracy of their credibility judgements. Granting asylum to an applicant who does not meet the refugee definition diminishes the integrity of the asylum process, while incorrectly rejecting an applicant with a genuine risk of harm can result in deportation and have devastating consequences on their lives.

Evaluating SOGI asylum claims presents considerable challenges for decision-makers. Several psychological models have been elaborated to describe how queer identities typically develop over time (see Eliason & Schope, 2007), which officials have relied on to assess applicants' testimonies (Berg & Millbank, 2009). Persistent models of sexual identity development suggest that queer people go through a linear path involving specific stages, namely feelings of difference, disclosure, pride and rejection of heterosexuality, and an eventual integration of the sexual orientation within their overall self-concept. However, psychological research rarely accounts for cross-cultural variability, as it is overwhelmingly based on samples drawn from White, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (i.e. WEIRD) populations (Henrich et al., 2010). Sexual identity development models are therefore not universally generalizable, especially to queer people of a non-WEIRD cultural background. For example, the models emphasize the 'coming out' process without considering how family values, social norms, and expectations promote or inhibit disclosure (Eliason & Schope, 2007). Recent ethnographies have documented the diverse life trajectories of sexual minority asylum-seekers (e.g. Raboin, 2016), challenging the notion of a universally linear process of identity formation. Expecting non-Western applicants' accounts to conform to restrictive psychological models narrows the range of asylum testimonies considered 'credible', potentially excluding the most vulnerable applicants from protection.

Previous research

Patterns in SOGI asylum decision-making

Previous studies have analysed SOGI asylum decision-making in various contexts, including Norway (Gustafsson Grønningseter, 2017), The Netherlands (Jansen, 2019), the UK (Asanovic, 2018;

Millbank, 2009a, 2009b), Australia (Millbank, 2009a, 2009b), Canada (Hersh, 2015; Millbank, 2009b), and New Zealand (Millbank, 2009b). These studies show a general progression in the evaluation of SOGI asylum claims: Earlier research found that SOGI cases were commonly rejected based on the expectation that asylum-seekers could avoid persecution by concealing their sexual orientation in their country of origin. This 'discretion reasoning' was eventually banned by several high courts (e.g. X, Y, and Z v. Minister voor Immigratie en Asiel, 2013), who argued that expecting applicants to conceal a fundamental aspect of their identity was a serious breach of their human rights. Conversely, more recent studies found that the majority of SOGI claims are rejected because the applicant's sexual orientation is disbelieved. This shift from 'discretion to disbelief' (Millbank, 2009a) has been documented in several asylum countries.

Until the early 2010s, intrusive interview questions about sexual conduct and stereotypes about queer people's appearance and behaviour were common across asylum countries in Europe, North America, and Australia (e.g. Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011; Millbank, 2009b). Some officials went as far as relying on their gut feelings and their 'gaydar' when evaluating asylum-seekers' testimonies, leading them to reject claims from gay men who were not effeminate enough (Selim et al., 2023). In response to these problems, the Difference, Stigma, Shame, Harm (DSSH) interviewing was developed to aid officials in formulating relevant and appropriate questions. The DSSH model encourages officials to focus their interview questions on applicants' perceptions of difference and the stigma and harm experienced, rather than their sexual conduct. Despite being endorsed by UNHCR (2012) and applied in several European countries, including Finland (Åberg, 2023), scholars have criticized the DSSH model for introducing new stereotypes based on a Western understanding of sexuality development (Dawson & Gerber, 2017). For instance, applicants who deny feelings of shame regarding their sexual orientation – an important area of inquiry within the model – have been disbelieved (Åberg, 2023). Alarming, asylum-seekers may stand a better chance of convincing an official by conforming to Western stereotypes about sexual minorities than by telling their true story. Conversely, matching a stereotype too closely has, in some cases, also led to disbelief (Selim et al., 2023).

The Finnish asylum context

Finland has received relatively stable numbers of asylum-seekers in the last decades, with approximately 3000–4000 yearly applications, except for 2015, in which 32,477 applications were lodged (Finnish Immigration Service, 2023). Following the spike of applications in 2015, the proportion of asylum rejections rose from 16.4% in 2015 to 50.6% in 2016 (Finnish Immigration Service, 2023). This shift increased the academic interest in asylum decision-making. Vanto et al. (2021) examined differences in justifications for rejecting applications lodged by Iraqi asylum-seekers before and after 2015 and found that the Finnish Immigration Service was increasingly sceptical about claims lodged after 2015. This growing disbelief could not be explained by a meaningful change in applicants' profiles, the nature of their fears, or the circumstances in their home countries. The authors concluded that officials used their discretionary power to apply the law more stringently for border control. Another study found that the justifications for denying asylum fell short of illustrating the reasoning behind the rejections (Bodström, 2020). Evaluating asylum decisions, Skrifvars, Sui, et al. (2022) identified assumptions about human memory and behaviour that were only partially in line with established psychological knowledge.

The current study

No previous quantitative studies have investigated credibility assessment patterns in SOGI asylum cases in Finland. In the present study, we analysed written decisions to identify officials' justifications

for refusing asylum, as well as any assumptions about sexual minorities that may have affected their decision-making. As Finnish officials are not required to justify their positive decisions, our analysis focused on rejected cases. We compared the findings against existing guidelines, biographical studies involving queer asylum-seekers, and psychological evidence. We analysed how the cross-cultural nature of asylum procedures shapes applicants' disclosure and officials' evaluations. Scholars typically distinguish between two broad cultural orientations: Western societies, to which most European officials belong, are characterized by a tendency to prioritize an individual's needs over those of the collective (individualism), a low level of deference to authorities (low power distance), and a preference for direct, implicit (low-context) communication; in contrast, Eastern (e.g., African, and Middle Eastern) societies, from which most asylum-seekers in Europe originate, are characterized by a tendency to prioritize the needs of the collective over those of the individual (collectivism), a tendency to defer to authorities (high power distance), and an indirect, implicit (high-context) communication preference (see Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001). While acknowledging the limitations of this distinction, we deem it a valuable framework for analysing asylum decision-making.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Ethical permission

The current study was part of a collaboration between the University of Turku and Åbo Akademi University, granted ethical permission by the Ethics Committee for Human Sciences at the Humanities and Social Sciences Division at the University of Turku. The Finnish Immigration Service granted a research permit to the research team and anonymized all private information before releasing the documents.

Case selection

In 2020 we requested a randomized sample of asylum cases, and 1 year later we obtained 218 official asylum cases from the Finnish Immigration Service's internal repository, marked with the keyword 'LGBTI' and processed between 2014 and 2020. The casefiles included the interview transcripts – analysed in a forthcoming study – and the corresponding decisions. We selected 129 cases for coding, of which 61 were positive outcome and 68 negative outcome cases. For the present study, we analysed all 68 negative outcome cases, 66 of which were rejected and 2 were granted residence based on medical grounds or family ties. Forty (58.8%) of 68 cases were first-instance decisions and 28 cases (41.2%) had had the initial negative decision overturned by a court and returned to the Finnish Immigration Service for re-evaluation, who again found the applicants ineligible for international protection. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the selection process of the cases included in the present study.

Procedure

Four coders participated in coding the 129 asylum cases over 2 years. Coders A and B were involved from the start of the project and built familiarity with the sample of documents by coding one of the documents together with a consulting researcher. Coders C and D joined at a later stage. The researchers regularly discussed challenges and experiences to develop the coding scheme, described below, and ensure the coding principles were applied uniformly ([Appendix A: Table A1](#)).

We developed a coding scheme composed of four categories (case information, interviewing techniques, decision-making patterns, and reasons for late disclosure) that was slightly altered after investigating the material obtained (see [Figure 2](#) for an illustration of our coding scheme). To analyse

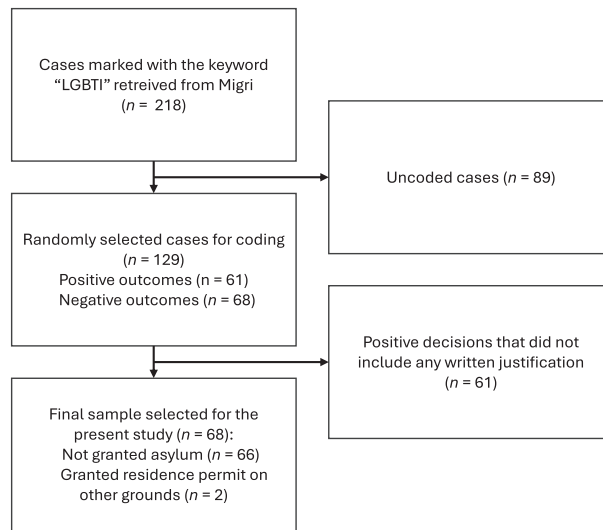


FIGURE 1 Case selection.



FIGURE 2 Structure of the coding scheme.

decision-making patterns – the focus of this study – we coded the official's justifications given to either support or undermine the credibility of the claim. A discrete justification was defined as a unit of information within the credibility assessment, which referred to a thematic aspect of the applicant's story, whether that thematic aspect was deemed credible or not, and the credibility indicators cited by the official. For example, 'Your account of your sexual identity development [theme] was not found to be believable [credibility judgment] because it lacked sufficient detail [indicator]'. For each asylum decision, we also coded whether the applicant's SOGI in its entirety was found credible and whether the fear of persecution was considered well-founded. Finally, we coded whether the credibility of the claim was accepted entirely (all material facts found credible), rejected entirely (no facts found credible), or partially accepted (a combination of facts found credible and not credible). For example, the credibility of a case could be partially accepted if the official found the applicant's claim of harm at the hands of armed militia credible but rejected their claim that their family had discovered their sexual orientation.

To assess inter-rater reliability of our coding scheme, Coder D double-coded 25% of the 68 negative cases analysed in the present study (i.e. 18 cases, composed of 6 cases each from the caseloads of Coders A, B, and C). Statistical analysis of inter-rater reliability was performed on the coding of *question theme* from the interview transcripts, as this variable contained 2327 observations, producing enough data for analysis. The 20 coding options for *question theme* are identical to the coding options for the variable *themes invoked in the decisions*. Agreement between the coders for *question theme* was substantial ($\kappa = 0.68$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$).

Coding of themes

We coded the content of the asylum decisions by developing a list of themes that we expected to arise in the credibility assessments, based on previous research (e.g. Jansen, 2019). The preliminary list of 16

themes was supplemented with 4 additional themes based on the content of the casefiles. The themes pertained to the applicant's SOGI (e.g. their sexual identity development and history of relationships), the asylum process (e.g. late disclosure of SOGI identity and absence of supporting evidence), the account of persecution, and any additional reasons for seeking asylum other than SOGI (e.g. religious conversion). The themes included in the coding scheme and examples of how they were expressed in the asylum decisions are reported in [Table 1](#).

Coding of credibility indicators

The coding of the credibility indicators was based on UNHCR recommendations of how to evaluate an asylum-seeker's statements (UNHCR, 2013), namely *detail and specificity*, *internal consistency* within the applicant's statements, *external consistency* with country-of-origin information and witness statements, *plausibility* of the statements, and *late disclosure*. We also accounted for potentially inappropriate indicators for assessing SOGI claims, namely *demeanour*, *appearance*, and *amount of emotion expressed* (e.g. crying in the interview), based on existing literature. [Table 2](#) reports a list of the credibility indicators included in our coding scheme, along with actual examples from the data or, alternatively, fictitious examples when these indicators did not appear in the case materials.

Statistical analyses

We analysed the data using R (R Core Team, 2021) by calculating the frequencies of specific themes and credibility indicators as well as how often individual indicators were used to justify the credibility judgement regarding specific themes. We performed Pearson's chi-squared test on the outcome of the credibility assessment of the different themes to investigate whether certain themes were more likely to be believed than others. We performed Fisher's exact test to identify possible associations between the themes and the use of each credibility indicator.

RESULTS

Descriptive results

The asylum-seekers' ages at the time of application ranged between 16 and 55 years ($M = 26.74$, $SD = 8.57$). The most common countries of origin were Iraq ($n = 29$), Russia ($n = 10$), and Cameroon ($n = 6$), with the remaining applicants originating from 13 other countries. Most applicants self-identified as men ($n = 60$ [88.2%]), 5 as women, 1 as transgender (without further specifications), and the gender of 2 applicants was unclear. Most applicants self-identified as gay or lesbian ($n = 39$ [57.3%]), 9 as non-heterosexual (no specific label referenced), 9 as bisexual, and 4 as heterosexual but perceived as queer. The remaining applicants ($n = 5$) reported other ways of identifying their sexual orientation. Two applicants did not report their sexual orientation. The Finnish Immigration Service accepted the credibility of the applicant's sexual orientation in 17 (25%) cases, disbelieved it in 47 (69%) cases, and did not explicitly evaluate the applicant's sexual orientation in 4 (6%) cases.

Overall, we identified 418 discrete justifications cited by officials and corresponding to portions of applicants' claims, which were subjected to a credibility evaluation. The distribution of justifications given per case ranged from 1 to 18 ($M = 6.18$, $SD = 3.60$). The Finnish Immigration Service accepted the credibility of the applicant's entire claim in 6 cases, partially accepted the claim in 37 cases, and fully rejected the claim in 24 cases. The claim of one applicant was not assessed as they had received protection in another country.

TABLE 1 Categories of themes invoked in the credibility assessments found in the decision documents.

Theme	Example
Individual realization/ development of sexual orientation	'Your statements about your sexual identity have remained very superficial. You have in barely any way been able to describe any thoughts and feelings caused by your sexual identity and you have said that you became a homosexual by changing your attitude and deciding to enjoy life'. (Case 184)
Applicant's feelings about their own sexual orientation (including psychological impact)	'You have nonetheless told us that accepting yourself has not posed any bigger problems. Considering the predominantly forbidding atmosphere towards sexual minorities in your home country, the Finnish Immigration Service does not find it credible that the discovery of homosexuality would not have led to more thoughts or feelings in you'. (Case 20)
Sexual behaviour/acts	'Your statements about having had sex with men are internally consistent. The Finnish Immigration Service accepts this as factual. Sexual behaviour alone cannot be considered enough evidence of sexual identity'. (Case 187)
History of same-sex relationships	'Your statements about your relationship in [country of origin] have in their entirety been very impersonal. In your statements, the Finnish Immigration Service has taken into consideration that your relationship had not lasted for very long. However, considering attitudes towards homosexuals in your country of origin, the Finnish Immigration Service finds it implausible that you would not have been able to tell us more clearly about you getting to know each other, developing trust and a relationship as well as keeping the relationship secret'. (Case 106)
History of male–female relationships	'Your story is further weakened by the fact that you have been married to a woman during your stay in Finland and that you had been married to a woman during your stay in [country of origin]. When questioned you have stated that you married a woman in order to get a residence permit in Finland and to show your family that you are married and are not homosexual. The Finnish Immigration Service pays attention to the fact that after your divorce, you have stalked your former Finnish wife and she has gotten a restraining order [against you], which does not support the notion that your marriage was tied only to your family and residence permit'. (Case 182)
Social/community support	'However, you have, according to your statements, also had friends in your friend group who knew about your sexual orientation and did not react negatively to it'. (Case 194)
Coming out/disclosure to others	'You have very briefly described how you told your parents about [your relationship], and you have not described the situation in a more detailed way. Although your own family background would be more liberal than a normal family from [country of origin], the Finnish Immigration Service believes that, considering the generally conservative attitudes of the society of [country of origin], a person could be reasonably required to be able to describe more precisely their own feelings or conflicts connected to their sexual orientation'. (Case 79)
Situation of sexual minorities in the home country	'Your statements about what it is like to live generally as a member of a sexual minority in [country of origin] (around the age of 12- Your account about what it's like to live generally as a member of a sexual minority in [country of origin] (around the age of 12–16 years) is also short and general. You described experiencing fear because society did not accept homosexuality. When you were asked to describe your experienced fear more closely, you only said that you were afraid that your secret would be revealed and either you or your friend would be hurt'. (Case 70)
Applicant's life in Finland	'The Finnish Immigration Service has noted in its assessment that the previously mentioned changes have rather stemmed from contrasts in lifestyle and culture between the countries. Your statements regarding leading a free life in Finland are based more on the adoption of a Western lifestyle than on changes in your homosexual identity'. (Case 74)
Connection between sexual orientation and religion	'You have also been asked how you experience the relationship between your religion and your sexuality. You have responded narrowly, that you do not see that as a problem, because although you are Muslim, you do not practice Islam'. (Case 27)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Theme	Example
Meaning of the sexual orientation to the applicant	'You have described your sexual orientation in a narrow and brief manner in the asylum interview, even though you have been asked to describe it more specifically multiple times. You have not brought up any personal experiences from your life as a representative of a sexual minority nor have you managed to tell us about your identity in a consistent manner'. (Case 69)
Knowledge about and involvement in queer culture in Finland ^b	'Your own understanding of your sexuality has remained brief in your narrative, and you do not know much about the circumstances of homosexuals in Finland even though you have come to Finland in September 2018. You have also stated that you have not contacted SETA in Finland because you would have had to pay for it. The Finnish Immigration Service does not find it believable that you would not have been able to use Google in the state-owned reception center to look for information about SETA for free'. (Case 202)
Concealment/discretion of sexual orientation in the past ^a	'When you were asked to describe your life in [country of origin] when you could not reveal your true sexual identity, you have responded in a brief and unfocused manner, that it was difficult when you had to hide. Later during the interview, you were asked the same thing again, to which you have only responded ambiguously, that it was difficult for you when you had worries and fears'. (Case 75)
Concealment/discretion of sexual orientation in the future ^a	'Neither does concealment of [your sexual relationships] in [country of origin] feel bad to you, because it is a question of your private matter. The Finnish Immigration Service does not find it credible in your statements, that experiencing homosexual feelings would not have raised more contradictory feelings in you, coming from a country where homosexuality is generally condemned'. (Case 23)
Reasons for late disclosure	'The Finnish Immigration Service has further paid attention to the fact that you have only brought this claim [your sexual orientation] up in the appeal to the Administrative Court in September 2017. You said that this stemmed from you being afraid of talking about it. You had at the time, however, been in Finland for almost 2 years and according to your statements met other men in Finland for about one and a half years'. (Case 76)
Internal consistency of interview statements	'In your application for international protection you have said that your father had disappeared, and that you do not know where he is. In the asylum interview you have said that you lied about this, because the smuggler ordered you to say so, even though your father has not actually disappeared. [...] The Finnish Immigration Service notes that the fact that you have changed your story during the asylum process decreases the credibility of your whole claim'. (Case 58)
Corroborating or supporting evidence	'According to your statements your current boyfriend is in the pictures [you showed us]. The Finnish Immigration Service notes that the evidentiary value of a picture is low, because you cannot verify the person in the pictures, nor can they be assumed to represent sexual orientation'. (Case 31)
Persecution faced in the past or fear of future harm	'You have also told us that you had to leave your hometown because you were afraid of the abuse continuing. This is contradicted by the fact that you said that the abuse happened at the beginning of 2018 and you only left your town in January 2019'. (Case 215)
Other issues related to applicant's sexual orientation or persecution ^a	'Your statements about your sexual orientation as an identity are in the previously presented ways in their entirety superficial, general and unbelievable. Taking into consideration the previously presented facts, the Finnish Immigration Service does not accept as a fact that you are a homosexual as your sexual orientation'. (Case 68)
Other grounds for seeking asylum (e.g. religion, political opinion) ^a	'The Finnish Immigration Service has noted in their decision dated [redacted], that Sunni Muslims may experience infringements according to the country information regarding [city]. The Finnish Immigration Service has nevertheless noted that the country information does not support a conclusion that every Sunni Muslim living in [city] is in danger of persecution solely due to their religion'. (Case 67)

Note: Involvement in queer culture in Finland had not been taken into consideration in earlier drafts of the coding scheme.

^aTheme added to the coding scheme after accessing the documents.

^bTheme modified after accessing the documents.

TABLE 2 Credibility indicators used by the officials in the credibility assessments found in the decision documents.

Credibility indicator	Example
Detail and specificity	'Awareness of your sexual orientation only in adult age is possible, but your statements about realizing your sexual orientation are very superficial. Feelings and thoughts about realizing your homosexual orientation remained very brief also when considering that the realization only happened recently'. (Case 192)
Internal consistency within applicant's own statements	'You told the Finnish Immigration Service in the first interview, that you left [country of origin] soon after the Army had come to look for you at your home. In the new asylum interview you told us, that you still dwelled in [country of origin] for 5 months' time and that you received new threats connected to your bisexuality'. (Case 43)
External consistency with country of origin information or statements made by others	'Although homosexuals may, according to the previously presented country information, experience discrimination in [country of origin], up-to-date country information does not support the notion that homosexuals would be persecuted in [country of origin]. According to country information, protection by authorities is also available in [country of origin]'. (Case 186)
Plausibility	'The Finnish Immigration Service also finds it inconsistent, that you would not have dared to tell the authorities or your representative or your assistant about [your sexual orientation], when according to your statements you have, in spite of trying to conceal it, formed sexual relationships in Finland and through them understood being a homosexual soon after arriving in Finland'. (Case 20)
Late disclosure	'The Finnish Immigration Service notes that considering your responsibility for cooperating in the investigation of your claims for asylum, you should have understood to present the central claim in question already at an earlier stage of your asylum process'. (Case 62)
Demeanour ^a	'You did not make eye contact while telling your story'.
Appearance ^a	'Given your feminine appearance, your claim of being a lesbian is considered to be unlikely. A lesbian would choose to express their sexual orientation through more masculine clothing'.
Amount of emotion expressed ^a	'While telling us about the hardships you have faced due to your relationship with your friend in school, you did not express any sadness or anger at the way you have been treated'.

Note: The examples for these indicators are fictional, as none were found in the sample.

^aUnrecommended indicators in credibility assessment based on previous studies on SOGI asylum claims.

Quantitative analyses

Credibility judgement of different themes

The most frequently cited themes in the decisions were the applicant's persecution ($n=106$), other reasons for asylum ($n=70$), history of same-sex relationships ($n=52$), individual realization of sexual orientation ($n=37$), and psychological impact of the identity ($n=37$). In total, 346 (82.8%) aspects of the applicants' stories were deemed not credible and 72 (17.2%) were deemed credible. Within each thematic category, most aspects were deemed not credible. Certain themes were more likely to be disbelieved than others, $\chi^2(19, 418) = 54.24, p < .001$. Themes associated with the applicant's SOGI identity were more often discredited than themes associated with other reasons for asylum (e.g. religious conversion) or with the fear of persecution. For example, statements regarding applicants' realization of their identity were disbelieved in all 37 mentions of the theme, while statements regarding the applicant's fear of persecution were found credible in 27 of 106 mentions of the theme. Table 3 reports a full frequency distribution of the themes referred to in the decisions and their assessed credibility.

Use of credibility indicators

The most frequently used credibility indicator was (*a lack of*) *detail and specificity*, which was cited in 88.2% of the asylum cases. *Internal (in)consistency* was referred to in 58.8% of the cases, (*im*)*plausibility* in 50% of the cases, and *external (in)consistency* in 48.5% of the cases. *Timing of disclosure*, which is only

TABLE 3 Distribution of themes, their assessed credibility, and the credibility indicators used to support/undermine their credibility.

Theme	Credible		Not credible		Total		Detail and specificity		Internal consistency		External consistency		Plausibility		Late disclosure	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Individual realization/development of sexual orientation	0	0	37	100	37	36	97	5	14	0	0	2	5	0	0	0
Applicant's feelings about their own sexual orientation (including psychological impact)	1	3	36	98	37	35	95	3	8	1	3	5	14	0	0	0
Sexual behaviour/acts	2	13	14	88	16	10	59	1	6	0	0	1	6	0	0	0
History of same-sex relationships	5	10	47	90	52	45	87	16	31	2	4	4	8	0	0	0
History of male–female relationships	2	50	2	50	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	50	0	0	0
Social/community support	1	50	1	50	2	1	33	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Coming out/disclosure to others	1	11	8	89	9	4	44	4	44	0	0	4	44	0	0	0
Situation of sexual minorities in the home country	2	29	5	71	7	4	57	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Applicant's life in Finland	0	0	5	100	5	4	80	1	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Connection between sexual orientation and religion	0	0	1	100	1	1	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Meaning of the sexual orientation to the applicant	1	14	6	86	7	3	43	3	43	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Knowledge about and involvement in queer culture in Finland	0	0	2	100	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	50	0	0	0
Concealment/discretion of sexual orientation in the past	0	0	4	100	4	2	50	0	0	0	0	1	25	0	0	0
Concealment/discretion of sexual orientation in the future	1	50	1	50	2	1	50	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reasons for late disclosure	0	0	14	100	14	3	21	3	21	0	0	7	50	10	71	0
Internal consistency of interview statements	0	0	5	100	5	0	0	3	60	1	20	0	0	0	0	0

(Continues)

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Theme	Credible		Not credible		Total		Detail and specificity		Internal consistency		External consistency		Plausibility		Late disclosure	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Corroborating or supporting evidence	0	0	21	100	21	43	9	43	3	14	8	38	4	19	1	5
Persecution faced in the past or fear of future harm	27	25	79	75	106	62	66	62	26	24	24	22	26	24	1	1
Other issues related to applicant's sexual orientation or persecution	6	35	11	65	17	53	9	53	4	24	1	6	1	6	0	0
Other grounds for seeking asylum	23	33	47	67	70	56	39	56	16	23	23	33	6	9	3	4

Note: Proportions of credibility indicators used do not add up to 100% due to the Finnish Immigration Service being able to cite multiple or no credibility indicators at all when assessing the credibility of one aspect.

relevant in cases where the SOGI claim was brought up with a delay, was mentioned in 22.1% of the cases. In our sample of 68 cases, we found no mentions of the unrecommended credibility indicators pertaining to non-verbal cues, namely demeanour, appearance and amount of emotion expressed by the applicant.

The Finnish Immigration Service was significantly more likely to refer to *detail and specificity*, *external consistency*, *plausibility*, and *late disclosure* when evaluating certain themes than others (all $p < .001$). In contrast, there was no significant association between the different themes and the credibility indicator *internal consistency* ($p = .12$), indicating that this indicator was not more likely to be used to evaluate certain themes than others. The Finnish Immigration Service cited *detail and specificity* more often when assessing the credibility of themes connected to the applicant's sexual orientation than themes connected to their experiences of persecution and other reasons for asylum. [Table 3](#) reports the frequency and distribution of credibility indicators in relation to the themes cited in the decisions.

Qualitative observations

To shed more light on the identified credibility assessment patterns, we supplemented our statistical analyses with qualitative observations of how frequently occurring themes and credibility indicators were expressed in the decisions.

Detail and specificity

The Finnish Immigration Service often cited a lack of detail when discrediting some portion of a claim, particularly regarding the applicant's realization of their sexual orientation, the psychological impact of their identity, and their history of same-sex relationships. For example, we noted an assumption about applicants' ability to describe a current or previous partner in detail:

According to your statements, you have had a long-term partner since high school named [name] with whom you have discussed homosexuality. When asked more closely about this person, your answers have been *very brief*.

(Case 203)

When citing detail and specificity in connection to themes of sexual acts and behaviour, the Finnish Immigration Service tended to refer to applicants providing too many, rather than too few, details about this aspect:

The credibility of your story regarding your sexual identity is further weakened by the fact that you have told *very generally* about your homosexual relationships and focused your story almost purely on having sex. The Finnish Immigration Service notes that sexuality is about more than merely having sex.

(Case 23)

Consistency

The use of the indicator *internal consistency* was not statistically skewed towards certain themes rather than others. Qualitatively, however, we identified topics in which the Finnish Immigration Service referenced applicants' internal inconsistency to cast doubt over their credibility, such as a seemingly contradictory identification with different identity labels:

In your appeal to the Administrative Court, you have declared yourself to be homosexual. In the asylum interview you nonetheless told us that you are bisexual. When you were asked why you only mentioned being homosexual in your appeal and did not indicate that you were interested in both genders, you responded by saying that homosexuality and bisexuality are the same thing.

(Case 27)

Plausibility

In the sample of cases, the Finnish Immigration Service made several references to the feelings they expected applicants to describe in connection to their sexual orientation. For example, applicants originating from countries with a hostile atmosphere towards sexual minorities were expected to report ambivalent feelings towards their sexual orientation. When the applicants reported that their SOGI felt ‘natural’ to them, this was a basis for discrediting their claim:

When you have been asked to describe the feelings that the discovery of your sexual orientation awakened in you, you have confined yourself to briefly stating it being great and yourself being free. You have never felt any worries about it. Considering the predominantly forbidding atmosphere towards sexual minorities in your home country, the Finnish Immigration Service *does not find it plausible* that the discovery of homosexuality would not have awakened any feelings in you, and that you would relate to homosexuality in the uncomplicated way you have described.

(Case 106)

The Finnish Immigration Service also referred to other types of emotional content in the decisions, such as assumptions about feelings of being different:

You have told us that homosexuality has not been difficult for you, nor has it been a problem, because you exercised it in secret. [...] The Finnish Immigration Service therefore does not find it credible that the realization of a homosexual sexual identity in a society with forbidding attitudes towards homosexuality would not be associated with experiencing any feelings of being different.

(Case 59)

The Finnish Immigration Service also cited *plausibility* to challenge accounts of certain behaviours by the applicants in their home countries that were considered too ‘risky’ to be credible:

Also considering that you told us that you feared the surrounding society and its attitudes towards relationships between men, the Finnish Immigration Service does not find it generally credible that you would have had sex in a public space in the middle of the workday and forgotten to lock the door to the store.

(Case 68)

The Finnish Immigration Service commented on the plausibility of more general behaviours connected to encountering other queer people:

Considering the previously presented country information and stories about the attitudes towards homosexuals in your home country as well as discussions about homosexuality in your home country, the Finnish Immigration Service *does not find it plausible* that you would

have approached another person from [country of origin] and asked him if he has had sex with another man.

(Case 74)

According to the Finnish Immigration Service, same-sex sexual behaviour may have been motivated by sexual gratification, money, or other gains, rather than a genuine queer identity. In such cases, the Finnish Immigration Service appeared to perceive personal gains as superseding an intrinsic motivation towards same-sex relationships:

Your statements [about your sexual relationships] give in their entirety the notion that the situations in question have stemmed from your circumstances and not that you would have engaged in relationships with your own initiative guided by your sexual orientation.

(Case 187)

Late disclosure

In the sample, the Finnish Immigration Service assumed that applicants should be able to disclose their sexual orientation at the earliest possible time as they were informed of the confidentiality of the interviews. Officials cited applicants living in same-sex relationships without having told the asylum authorities about their sexual orientation as undermining their credibility:

The Finnish Immigration Service also finds it inconsistent in your statements that you had not dared to tell the Finnish Immigration Service about your sexual orientation in your asylum interview, because your uncle and his friends were in Finland, but on the other hand you dared to have multiple homosexual relationships in Finland including with other [nationals of country of origin]. The Finnish Immigration Service states that considering your own responsibility in cooperating with investigating your claims for asylum, you should have understood to present this central claim to your asylum application in question *at an earlier stage*.

(Case 70)

DISCUSSION

In this study of 68 SOGI asylum cases, we found that most applications (nearly 70% of the sample) were rejected because the applicant's sexual orientation was not found credible. Conversely, few applicants were rejected based on expectations that they could conceal their sexual orientation in their countries of origin. These findings are consistent with evidence from studies in Norway and The Netherlands, which found that in 74% (Gustafsson Grønningsæter, 2017) and 85% (Jansen, 2019) of the asylum rejections, respectively, disbelief in the applicant's sexual orientation led to the negative decision. SOGI-related themes, including the applicants' sexual identity development and their relationships, were more likely to be disbelieved than themes concerning the applicants' fear of persecution or their other reasons for seeking asylum. In other words, officials were more sceptical of applicants' identities than their experiences of harm in their origin countries. This finding, again, is in line with previous studies on SOGI asylum claims in Europe (e.g. Asanovic, 2018; Jansen, 2019). The most cited credibility judgements were *detail and specificity*, *consistency* within the applicants' statements, and *plausibility* of their behaviour. The indicator *detail and specificity* was used more often to assess the credibility of the sexual orientation than their experiences of persecution. Encouragingly, no indicators related to demeanour, appearance, or emotions displayed were present in the sample.

The number of decision justifications included varied considerably, ranging from one to 18. On average, the decisions contained six discrete justifications. In some cases, an extensive assessment was not needed as the applicant had been granted asylum in another country, or their SOGI was found credible, and the decision focused on evaluating the risk of persecution.

Psychological implications of observed credibility assessment patterns

Expectations of detail and specificity

Asylum officials expected applicants to be able to provide detailed and specific testimonies of their sexual identity development. One may question whether this expectation is reasonable, considering research on cross-cultural communication preferences. Hall's (1976) prominent theoretical framework distinguishes between high-context (individualistic) cultures in which communication is explicit, direct, and focused on the content, and low-context (collectivistic) cultures, which favour a more implicit, indirect communication style reliant on contextual information. Illustrating these differences in investigative interviews, Vrij et al. (2021) found that Arab eyewitnesses provided less detailed and specific statements in response to open questions than their British counterparts. Moreover, individuals from collectivistic societies are more likely to use indirect language, such as euphemisms, as a face-saving strategy when discussing sensitive topics (see Hope et al., 2022). In the asylum setting, mismatched expectations regarding the level of detail and specificity in asylum claims might lead Western officials to falsely disbelieve the statements of asylum-seekers who favour an indirect communication style.

Further, we argue that officials' assumptions are misguided given the limited psychological evidence on the content and level of detail in people's descriptions of their sexual orientation, especially in high-stakes, cross-cultural settings. In fact, the experiences of sexual minorities are likely highly individual and culturally variable. Supporting this, Nagoshi et al. (2022) interviewed 11 queer people in the United States and noted an absence of a 'master narrative' in how they describe their sexual identity development. People also vary considerably in the relative importance of their sexuality in their overall self-concept (Zhao et al., 2022); those who do not prioritize this facet of their identity may be unable to provide extensive accounts. Notably, scholars have argued that people from collectivistic societies may be less likely than those from individualistic societies to overtly identify as a sexual minority, as they tend to form their identity primarily in relation to others and may value family obligations and honour over personal preference (Quach et al., 2013). Considering the scarce knowledge on the experiences of sexual minorities, particularly in non-WEIRD societies, officials are encouraged to give more consideration to possible variations in identity construction in their credibility assessments.

We also identified scepticism regarding applicants' accounts of their same-sex relationships, which were often considered insufficiently detailed and personalized. This underlines the importance of providing evidence of a stable romantic partner to obtain protection, an expectation that may penalize those who are not in a relationship. Problematically, applicants may even feel compelled to provide evidence of a partner (Danisi et al., 2021) to make their experiences more recognizable to a Western official. Yet, asylum-seekers' experiences in their host country are determined not only by their sexual orientation but also by their ethnic background, socioeconomic class, educational level, and their familiarity with the host culture (Giametta, 2017). For instance, Murray (2015) interviewed asylum-seekers who cited racial prejudice in Canada as a barrier to finding a partner. Focusing narrowly on assessing the credibility of applicants' sexual orientation is therefore unlikely to yield accurate credibility judgements. Officials should instead conduct a multidimensional analysis by considering how the different facets of an applicant's identity shape their experiences and how they describe them.

The Finnish Immigration Service considered applicants' overly detailed accounts of their sexual relationships to undermine their credibility. Although officials are rightly discouraged from asking intrusive questions about sexual behaviour (Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011), some applicants may themselves choose to focus on this dimension. They may, for instance, have been restricted in how they

were able to express their sexual orientation, as public recognition of the relationship and marriage were unavailable to them (Hersh, 2015). Moreover, in certain cultures, sexual attraction is not a basis upon which individuals construct their identity, as in the case of men who have sex with men despite self-identifying as heterosexual (Rahman et al., 2020). Individuals who do not identify as sexual minorities may thus attach greater importance to the behavioural dimension of their sexual orientation than the identity dimension (Katyal, 2004). These possibilities were not given sufficient regard in our sample. Instead, when applicants described their sexual behaviour, the Finnish Immigration Service either dismissed the claim altogether or considered the relationship to be motivated by sexual gratification or mere circumstance rather than a 'genuine' sexual identity. These findings echo previous research on the evaluation of religion-based asylum claims, which found that officials tend to prioritize the applicants' motivations for religious conversion rather than observable manifestations of their faith (e.g. Selim et al., 2022). Officials should focus on concrete facts objectively raising queer applicants' risk of persecution rather than seeking to narrowly establish the genuineness of their sexual identity (e.g. Dustin & Ferreira, 2021).

Expectations of consistency

Applicants' claims were deemed inconsistent if they used multiple labels (e.g. gay and bisexual) in their asylum interview, despite several plausible explanations for this conflation of terms. First, bisexual applicants have been found to have comparatively unfavourable asylum outcomes; this is likely due to the enduring myth that bisexuality does not actually exist (Rehaag, 2008). Asylum lawyers may have thus counselled applicants to 'simplify' their claims by identifying as gay. Second, in using labels interchangeably, the applicant may have been referring to the persecutor's motivations for harming them, rather their self-identification. Gay and bisexual individuals are, in fact, both likely to be persecuted for their interest in persons of the same sex. Further, applicants may have initially identified with one label before adopting another in the host country. Research has, in fact, shown that important life events, including migration, change how one perceives their sexual identity (Izienicki, 2021). Finally, one cannot rule out the risk of interpreters introducing potential inconsistencies within the asylum interview. Misunderstandings are especially likely in asylum cases involving specialized vocabulary, such as those based on membership in a religious group (Selim et al., 2022). To avoid incorrect credibility findings, officials are encouraged to formulate different explanations for the conflicting aspects of the claim and consider which one has the most support (for more information on 'scenario thinking', see van Veldhuizen, 2022).

Expectations surrounding plausible behaviour and feelings

Finnish officials cited (*im*)*plausibility* of the claim when motivating their credibility judgements of queer applicants' behaviour and feelings. They discredited applicants who had engaged in sexual acts in their countries as too risky to be believable. Although these credibility findings do not overtly mention a requirement of discretion, they underly an expectation that genuine SOGI applicants would have acted more discreetly to avoid potential harm (Asanovic, 2018). These findings echo previous studies, which have shown that officials make unsupported assumptions about what constitutes plausible behaviour by applicants, their family members, and state actors in the country of origin (e.g. Dowd et al., 2018). For example, applicants are expected to behave rationally and predictably in response to a threat of harm, despite wide variability in how people perceive, assess, and respond to risk, especially across cultures (see Cameron, 2008). Finnish officials assumed that applicants should internalize the disparaging attitudes of their home society and report negative feelings (e.g. guilt and shame) in connection to their sexual orientation, echoing findings from other European countries (e.g. Gustafsson Grønningsæter, 2017; Jansen, 2019). This assumption

reflects an oversimplistic divide between non-Western societies as unanimously homophobic and Western countries as entirely liberating (Raboin, 2016). Challenging this, asylum-seekers participating in ethnographic studies in Canada and the United Kingdom have given a more nuanced account of their experiences by describing encounters with supportive communities in their origin countries and continued experiences of homophobia and racial prejudice in the countries of asylum (Giametta, 2017; Murray, 2015).

Notably, Murray (2015) interviewed asylum-seekers who reported a lifelong affirmative attitude towards their sexual orientation, denying any desire to have been heterosexual. The notion that queer people invariably experience suffering in connection to their sexual orientation contradicts not only biographic evidence but also available psychological knowledge. In fact, individuals have been found to display varied emotional responses to adverse life events, and the extent to which one perceives a negative event as traumatic is partly influenced by their cultural background (Vredeveltdt et al., 2023). Cross-cultural differences in emotional responses, in turn, make it more challenging for an individual to judge the emotions of people from another cultural background (Wang, 2021). Thus, a mismatch in cultural expectations surrounding the psychological impact of negative life events, including sexuality-based persecution, can lead to scepticism among Western asylum officials. In the absence of a robust knowledge base regarding people's feelings towards their sexual orientation and their history of persecution, officials should be more willing to accept the plausibility of testimonies that deviate from Western-centric expectations.

Expectations of timely disclosure

Delayed disclosure of sexual orientation contributed to the rejection of over 20% of cases in our sample. Consistent with previous findings in Europe (e.g. Asanovic, 2018), asylum-seekers in Finland were expected to disclose their SOGI claim at the earliest possible time. Following UNHCR guidelines (2013), the Finnish Immigration Service did not discredit cases solely based on delayed disclosure, although in practice this factor may have overly influenced officials' judgements.

Previous research has investigated the reasons behind asylum-seekers' late or non-disclosure of sensitive personal information in asylum interviews. Based on 27 semi-structured interviews, Bögner et al. (2010) found that the decision to disclose sensitive experiences was related both to personal factors as well as interpersonal and structural factors related to the asylum system. The authors identified interviewer qualities as the main variable impeding or facilitating disclosure, highlighting the importance of building a positive working alliance with asylum-seekers. The interpreter's gender and cultural background, the interview setting, and the presence of a support person also influenced disclosure. Interviewing queer asylum-seekers, Danisi et al. (2021) noted that several respondents were unaware that SOGI constituted valid grounds for seeking asylum, leading many to delay or altogether omit the disclosure of their identity.

In the present study, applicants reported, among other reasons, not wanting to reveal their sexual orientation due to their relatives' presence in Finland. Interdependency (i.e. defining oneself primarily in relation to others in society) is characteristic of collectivistic societies and has been shown to inhibit disclosure (Vredeveltdt et al., 2023). Queer asylum-seekers may thus regard disclosing their sexual orientation as riskier than silence, both for themselves and members of their community. Officials in Finland placed much weight on their instructions to the applicant about the confidentiality of the asylum interview. Yet, the duration of the asylum interview may be insufficient to establish a relationship of trust promoting disclosure (Bögner et al., 2007). In fact, a verbal commitment to confidentiality may be difficult for applicants to accept if their origin society does not uphold these values (Bögner et al., 2010). Further, individuals from hierarchical cultures with high power distances, which prioritize respect for authority figures, may be reluctant to disclose personal details to officials (Hope et al., 2022), especially if they have suffered harm at the hands of public authorities, as the interview may trigger memories of their persecution (Giametta, 2017). Therefore,

asylum officials should carefully consider cross-cultural barriers to the disclosure of sexual orientation claims and allow applicants to explain any delays. Moreover, they should apply the *benefit-of-the-doubt* principle when evaluating delayed claims by applicants who were otherwise forthcoming in the asylum interview.

Strengths and limitations

This was, to our knowledge, the first study to quantitatively analyse a sample of SOGI asylum cases in Finland and one of the few to do so worldwide. In cooperation with the Finnish Immigration Service, we accessed a sample of asylum casefiles, allowing us to base our findings on the actual practice. The quantitative approach allowed us to identify patterns in the assessment of SOGI asylum cases, which might have failed to emerge in qualitative analyses of smaller samples.

Several limitations should be noted. Despite our efforts to standardize the coding process, our chosen methodology is prone to subjectivity. Although we found substantial agreement in the double-coded cases, some disagreement stemmed from an interview question containing 2 or more themes (e.g. simultaneously asking about the applicant's relationship history and sexual identity development). Moreover, the conclusions drawn from the decisions are limited to what officials chose to write down and may not accurately represent the actual cognitive processes influencing their judgements. Nevertheless, written justifications for rejecting applications are valuable as they carry legal weight and form the basis for asylum-seekers' appeals of first-instance decisions. Finally, we were unable to analyse assessments of claims by women and transgender applicants, as our sample contained too few such cases.

Future research

Future studies should continue exploring the factors influencing asylum officials' assessments of claims based on invisible identity markers, which are particularly vulnerable to stereotyping. This includes the under-researched claims of queer women, transgender applicants, and claims based on religious identity. Importantly, the methodology of future studies should be diversified. Whereas case analysis informs about *decision writing*, experimental studies may reveal implicit (e.g. appearance-based) stereotypes influencing officials' *decision-making* (Rehaag & Cameron, 2020).

Second, the present study drew attention to the limited diagnostic value of existing credibility indicators, especially in cross-cultural settings. Future research should explore alternative methods of evaluating the credibility of asylum claims. Research on criminal investigations has tested and validated several cues for truthfulness – the presence of which increases the likelihood of an account being true – including the prominent Criteria-Based Content Analysis tool (Vrij, 2005). Despite clear differences between criminal investigations and asylum determinations, the applicability of these truthfulness cues to the asylum context warrants exploration.

Finally, there is a clear lack of evidence on how people, especially in non-WEIRD societies, describe their experiences as sexual minorities. More evidence in cross-cultural psychology is needed to support officials in conducting fair, accurate, and culturally sensitive asylum credibility assessments.

Conclusion

We identified disbelief of applicants' sexual orientation as the primary reason to reject SOGI asylum claims in Finland. Much of the reasoning behind rejected SOGI cases focused on the applicants' inability to provide sufficiently detailed, coherent, and plausible narratives of their sexual orientation. Yet, these justifications were not sufficiently supported by psychological research and showed limited consideration for applicants' barriers to disclosure. We argue that officials have unrealistically high

expectations surrounding asylum-seekers' abilities to provide detailed and consistent narratives about their sexual orientation. Assessments of SOGI claims would benefit from a greater understanding of the factors affecting queer asylum applicants' ability to describe their claims, including cross-cultural differences in understandings of sexuality, variability in human behaviour, and practical barriers within the asylum procedure. This would ensure more sensitivity and accuracy when evaluating queer applicants' eligibility for asylum.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Hedayat Selim: Conceptualization; investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; formal analysis. **Pia Lindblad:** Investigation; writing – original draft; methodology; formal analysis. **Johanna Vanto:** Writing – review and editing. **Jenny Skrifvars:** Writing – review and editing. **Anne Alvesalo-Kuusi:** Writing – review and editing. **Julia Korkman:** Writing – review and editing; supervision. **Elina Pirjatanniemi:** Writing – review and editing; supervision. **Jan Antfolk:** Conceptualization; writing – review and editing; data curation; formal analysis; supervision; resources.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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APPENDIX A

TABLE A1 Coding scheme used to analyze the decision documents.

Variable	Description	Coding options
Case number	Based on the Finnish Immigration Service's random numbering	1–218
Reason number	Number the rows depending on the number of specific themes invoked	e.g., 1, 2, 3...
Credibility of applicant's sexual orientation	Whether or not the official accepted the credibility of the applicant's sexual orientation	NA = Not specified 1. = Sexual orientation accepted as credible 2. = Sexual orientation not accepted as credible
Specific theme invoked	Which theme (if any) within the claim was brought up by the official in the decision	NA = None/not specified/general 1. = Individual realization/development of sexual identity 2. = Applicants' feelings about their own sexuality (including psychological impact) 3. = Sexual behavior/sexual acts 4. = History of same-sex relationships/partnerships 5. = History of male–female relationships 6. = Social/community support 7. = Coming out/disclosure to others 8. = Situation of sexual minorities in the home country in general 9. = Applicant's life in Finland 10. = Connection between sexual orientation and religion 11. = Lack of clarity regarding the meaning of the sexual orientation to the applicant 12. = Knowledge about and involvement in queer culture in Finland 13. = Concealment/discretion of sexual orientation in the past 14. = Concealment/discretion of sexual orientation in the future 15. = Inability to clarify reasons for late disclosure 16. = Inability to clarify credibility issue in interview statements 17. = Inability to provide corroborating or supporting evidence 18. = Credibility issue about persecution faced in the past or feared in the future 19. = Other issue related to the applicant's sexual orientation or persecution 20. = Other ground for seeking asylum not believed (e.g. religion, political opinion)
Credibility of specific theme	Whether the specific theme in question is accepted as true or rejected as not credible	NA = Not applicable 1. = Accepted as credible 2. = Rejected (not credible)

(Continues)

TABLE A1 (Continued)

Variable	Description	Coding options
Credibility indicators ^a	What indicator or criterion was invoked in the decision	NA = Not applicable/not specified 1. = Detail and specificity 2. = Internal consistency (within-statement consistency) 3. = External consistency (consistency with country-of-origin information, with statements made by others) 4. = Plausibility 5. = Late disclosure 6. = Demeanor 7. = Appearance 8. = Amount of emotion expressed or displayed
Assessment of well-founded fear of persecution	Does the Finnish Immigration Service conclude that the applicant has a well-founded risk of persecution?	NA = Not applicable 1. = Well-founded fear of persecution 2. = No well-founded fear of persecution

^aThe scheme accounted for the ability to code multiple credibility indicators, as Migri could cite multiple credibility indicators when assessing the credibility of the same theme.