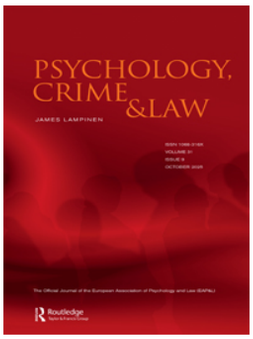

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'How would you define your sexuality?' analyzing the questions asked in official asylum interviews with sexual minorities

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ABSTRACT

Asylum applications lodged by sexual minorities are expected to continue increasing in the future. Asylum interviews should be conducted in a way that supports fair and accurate asylum decision-making. Yet, psychological research has identified shortcomings in current asylum interviewing techniques. In this study, we analyzed interview style, question type, and question content in 129 Finnish asylum cases based on sexual orientation. Officials mainly used the information-gathering style of interviewing and rarely used the most unrecommended (i.e. suggested and forced choice) question types (3%). However, only 12% of all questions were open questions, whereas focused and yes/no questions were predominant. Over half of all questions sought to establish the credibility of the applicants' sexual orientation, whereas 29% of questions inquired about their accounts of persecution. To assess the credibility of sexual orientation, officials primarily asked about applicants' relationships, their feelings, and their sexual identity development, reflecting Western understandings of human sexuality. Asking more open questions and focusing more extensively on assessing applicants' persecution risk would improve current interviewing practice. To support fair and accurate asylum decision-making, future research should investigate how queer people worldwide experience their sexual identity development. Training programs could also support asylum officials in conducting interviews in this context.

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Introduction

Globally, people experience severe harm based on their sexual orientation (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2012). Penalties imposed for same-sex relations in over 70 countries range from imprisonment to capital punishment (Human Dignity Trust, 2023). Moreover, sexual minorities routinely face societal harm along with an absence of government protection (UNHCR, 2012). It is therefore unsurprising that asylum applications from sexual minorities have risen in recent years and are expected to continue increasing (International Commission of Jurists, 2016).

International law defines a refugee as any person who is 'unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing 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, p. 3). It is now widely accepted that sexual minorities qualify for international protection, generally based on their membership of a particular social group (UNHCR, 2012). Despite this, the procedures for determining their eligibility for asylum are riddled with complexities.

In Finland, the Finnish Immigration Service is the institution responsible for processing first-instance asylum applications. During the full-day-long asylum interview, as well as any follow-up interviews deemed necessary, the applicant is given the opportunity to describe the reasons why they are unwilling or unable to return to their country of nationality. The interviewing official later examines the testimony of the applicant to assess the credibility of the claim and their eligibility for refugee status or subsidiary protection (Finnish Immigration Service, 2025). As of 2023, the Immigration Service employed approximately 120 asylum interviewers across four different work units, most of whom held a master's degree. Upon being recruited, Finnish asylum officials must complete the basic training modules delivered by the European Union Agency for Asylum, in addition to an eight-week induction training offered by the Immigration Service (Skrifvars, Antfolk, et al., 2025; Skrifvars, Ilmoni, et al., 2025).

Conducting fair and accurate asylum determinations is vital, as rejecting applicants with a genuine risk of harm can lead to their deportation and future persecution. As documentary evidence is scarce, asylum decisions are often solely based on applicants' testimonies. Assessing the credibility of oral narratives is, therefore, a necessary component of asylum decision-making (UNHCR, 2013). Applicants are expected to provide detailed, consistent, and plausible narratives about their identity, place of origin, and flight motives (van Veldhuizen et al., 2018). However, the quality and amount of information gathered depends on the asylum official's interviewing technique. In the current study, we analyzed the questions asked in interviews with sexual minorities in Finland and assessed them against best practice guidelines in investigative interviewing.

Applying investigative interviewing guidelines to asylum interviews with sexual minorities

Research in legal psychology has generated extensive knowledge on effective interviewing techniques, primarily for criminal investigations (Brandon et al., 2018; Meissner, 2021; Memon et al., 2010; Vrij et al., 2014). Such techniques focus on formulating questions that promote trust between the interview participants and aid in eliciting reliable information

from the interviewees. In contrast, poorly conducted interviews can narrow and distort interviewees' accounts, contaminate the investigative process and, at worst, lead to a miscarriage of justice (Vrij et al., 2014). Despite marked differences between asylum determinations and criminal investigations, interviews within these frameworks share important characteristics (Herlihy & Turner, 2009). For instance, asylum applicants, like victims and witnesses of crimes, may suffer from psychological distress and are required to access their autobiographical memories to retrieve information relevant to their claim (Herlihy et al., 2012). The asylum official, in turn, must formulate questions that aid the applicant in describing their fear of harm. Investigative interviewing principles typically focus on *interview style* and *question type*. *Question content* is also relevant as it influences the substantive focus of the interview.

Interview style

Scholars typically distinguish between the information-gathering and accusatory styles of interviewing (e.g. Meissner et al., 2012). In the *information-gathering style*, the interviewer asks predominantly open questions, inviting the interviewee to present their narrative freely, in a non-confrontational setting (Vrij et al., 2014). This approach is more likely to yield detailed answers, promote rapport-building, reduce stress, and make the interviewee feel respected (Vrij et al., 2006). Moreover, as it is generally easier for truth-tellers to provide elaborate answers than persons who are fabricating a claim (Verschuere et al., 2021), the information-gathering style is also more useful for conducting accurate credibility determinations. In contrast, the *accusatory* style is characterized by closed and confirmatory questions, which convey doubt or disbelief (Vrij et al., 2014). The interviewee may become uncooperative or anxious (Vrij et al., 2006) or give evasive answers that wrongly diminish their perceived credibility. Maintaining an information-gathering style is particularly crucial within asylum procedures, especially considering that applicants only need to establish a *reasonable likelihood* of facing persecution, and they should be given the *benefit of the doubt* regarding aspects they cannot establish with certainty.

Question type

It is widely agreed that *open* (i.e. free recall) *questions* elicit more information than *focused* or *closed questions* (Fisher et al., 2011; Oxburgh et al., 2010). *Open questions* (e.g. 'Please describe your experience in your home country') allow the interviewee to tell their narrative from their own viewpoint, prompting more detailed and accurate responses (Fisher et al., 2011). Asking open questions signals interest in the interviewee's account, which typically has a positive effect on rapport-building (Walsh & Bull, 2012). Moreover, open questions encourage the interviewee to take an active role in telling their story and spontaneously generate the topics of discussion (Brandon et al., 2018; Vrij et al., 2014).

Focused (i.e. *directive* questions*, starting with wh– or how*), on the other hand, can be answered with only a few words (e.g. 'How old were you when you met your partner?'), and *closed questions* only invite a yes or no answer. Asking a limited number of focused and closed questions in asylum interviews may be necessary to acquire all relevant facts and clear misunderstandings (Granhag et al., 2017; UNHCR, 2013). However, relying extensively on such questions can interfere with memory retrieval (Vrij et al., 2014) and convey the impression that interviewees are expected to give short responses (Fisher et al., 2011).

Finally, two types of questions should be avoided altogether (see Granhag et al., 2017; Oxburgh et al., 2010), that is, *suggestive questions*, which strongly communicate what kind of answer is expected (e.g. 'One may think in a situation like this one would feel like an outsider?') and *forced-choice questions* that restrict the answers to a limited number of options (e.g. 'Are you gay or bisexual?').

Question content

Asking relevant questions to elicit a sexual orientation narrative is a challenging task for asylum officials. Interviewers' question content may reveal their assumptions about what it means to belong to a sexual minority, and which dimension of one's sexual orientation (e.g. behavior, identity, or feelings) they deem most relevant. Historically, asylum interviewers have relied on intrusive questions about sexual activity to elicit a claim based on sexual orientation, and applicants' evasive responses were believed to diminish their credibility (Spijkerboer, 2011). High courts (e.g. CJEU, 2014) eventually banned questions that infringed on applicants' right to dignity and privacy. To steer the interview away from inappropriate topics, the Difference, Stigma, Shame and Harm (DSSH) Model of interviewing was developed, which recommends asking questions about the applicant's experience of being different, as well as any experiences of stigma, shame, or harm endured in connection with their sexual orientation (see United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees et al., 2011). Despite being endorsed by the UNHCR (Gyulai et al., 2015), this model has been criticized for promoting Western stereotypes about sexual minorities (e.g. Dawson & Gerber, 2017). Troublingly, applicants fearing negative asylum outcomes have reported feeling compelled to adjust their narratives to match the officials' expectations, further reinforcing the stereotypes (Murray, 2015).

Previous research

To our knowledge, only two studies have analyzed asylum interview questions from a legal psychological perspective (Skrifvars et al., 2020; van Veldhuizen et al., 2018). The authors found that asylum officials predominantly asked questions in an information gathering style. However, they mainly asked focused, fact-checking questions, with open questions only constituting approximately one-fifth and one-tenth of all questions, respectively. Suggestive and forced choice questions were relatively rare. Importantly, neither of the previous studies systematically recorded the flight motives of the applicants included in their samples or analyzed dimensions related to sexual orientation as a ground for asylum. van Veldhuizen et al. (2018) analyzed questions related to the applicants' place of origin, and Skrifvars et al. (2020) analyzed the type, style, and order of questions asked in a broad sample that included only a limited number of cases based on sexual orientation.

The current study

The current study expanded existing psycho-legal research on asylum interviewing techniques by analyzing the questions asked in cases based on sexual orientation. We investigated interview style, question type, and question content in a Finnish sample of asylum interviews drawn from 129 cases adjudicated between 2014 and 2019. Based on the

findings of Skrifvars et al. (2020) and van Veldhuizen et al. (2018), we expected to identify a predominant use of the information-gathering style of interviewing, a limited use of open questions, a high proportion of focused questions and an infrequent use of the most unrecommended question types.

Materials and methods

Ethical permission

The current study was conducted within the framework of a joint research project between Åbo Akademi University and the University of Turku, granted ethical permission by the Ethics Board of the University of Turku. The Finnish Immigration Service anonymized the casefiles by deleting any identifying information.

Materials

The Finnish Immigration Service granted the research team access to 218 asylum casefiles marked by the caseworker with the keyword 'LGBT'. The material included the interview transcripts and corresponding decisions. We included 129 cases in the sample of the current study, namely 66 negative outcome cases (not granted asylum), 61 positive outcome cases (granted asylum), and 2 cases granted residence on other (e.g. family or medical) grounds.

Procedure

Three graduate and one undergraduate student with a relevant academic background (psychology or international law) and proficiency in the Finnish language were recruited as research assistants at different stages of the two-year project (2021–2023). The research assistants were closely supervised and trained by the first author to ensure a uniform application of the coding principles. Coders A, B, C, and D were assigned 10, 14, 10, and 95 cases, respectively.

We developed a detailed coding scheme and coded all interviews included in the selected cases. We selected all questions, utterances, and comments inviting details that were directly relevant to the asylum claim. These included questions evaluating the credibility of the applicant's claim regarding their sexual orientation, questions assessing the harm already experienced or feared in the future, and questions exploring other reasons for seeking asylum (e.g. religion). Questions deemed irrelevant to the legal decision (e.g. asking whether the applicant needed a break) and those posed by the applicant's legal representative remained uncoded. Qualitative examples from the interview transcripts were translated into English by the second author.

Coding of applicant and case characteristics

We coded relevant applicant and case information, namely applicants' year of birth, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, relationship status, religion, the application and decision dates, and whether the case had been returned to the Finnish Immigration Service for re-evaluation after a first-instance refusal.

Coding of questions

We distinguished between the *information-gathering* and *accusatory styles*, in line with previous research (Meissner et al., 2012, 2014; Vrij et al., 2006). In their study of Dutch asylum interviews, van Veldhuizen et al. (2018) highlighted the difficulty of coding the style of individual questions based only on written transcripts, as the intonation with which the question is asked may alter how it is received by the applicant (for example, asking 'why didn't you leave your country sooner?' may be interpreted either as a confrontational question or one that seeks a simple clarification). We therefore opted against systematically coding the style of each individual question, but rather assigning a style to individual interviews instead. In practice, this meant we were more interested in calculating the proportion of accusatory (vs. information-gathering) interviews, rather than the proportion of accusatory (vs. information-gathering) questions within the sample. Since questions are not posed in isolation from one another, even one question posed in an accusatory manner may affect how the interviewee responds to subsequent questions. Thus, we adopted a strict definition of interview style, according to which an interview was coded as accusatory in its entirety if it contained at least one confrontational question conveying disbelief. Conversely, an interview was deemed information-gathering if it was entirely free from accusatory questions.

We coded question type for each selected question. Basing our categorization on the study by Skrifvars et al. (2020) we distinguished between 9 question types (see Table 1): two varieties of open questions (*invitations* and *cued invitations*), focused (*directive*) questions, closed (*yes/no*) questions, and two varieties of inappropriate questions (*forced choice* and *suggestive questions*). *Other* categories specified were *utterances*, *summaries,* and *unclear questions*. We generated 20 content categories based on a comprehensive review of the literature on credibility assessment of sexual orientation asylum claims across jurisdictions (Selim et al., 2023) and an inspection of the case materials (see Table 2). For further analysis of question content, we collapsed the 20 themes into 3 meta-categories: *sexual identity*, *persecution,* and *other grounds*.

Table 1. Classification of question types.

Question types	Description	Example
Invitation	Questions inviting a free recall.	'Tell me about your reasons for seeking asylum.'
Cued invitation	Questions inviting a free recall but including a cue to elicit more information about a specific detail.	'Tell me more about your thoughts in that moment.'
Directive	Limited recall questions beginning with who/what/when/where/why/how.	'When was the first time you had sex with a man?'
Yes/No	Restricting the answers to yes or no.	'Do you have a profile on Grindr?'
Forced choice	Questions that provide predetermined answer options.	'Would you rather have a boyfriend or a girlfriend?'
Suggestive	Questions conveying what kind of answer is expected, introducing details not previously mentioned by the applicant, or quoting the applicant incorrectly.	'Wasn't your uncle afraid of the shame that it would cause the family, if he tells the tribe about your sexual orientation?'
Utterances	Statements, comments, opinions, or facilitators.	'Mhmm.'
Summaries	At minimum a two-sentence recapitulation of statements the applicant has already provided.	'I will summarize what you have said so far… '
Unclear	Questions that are so unclear they do not fit within any of the above categories.	'But when I just asked if before the letters, but after your departure, you said there had not been anything?'

Table 2. Question content categories.

Content	Example
Realization and development of sexual identity	'How do you see your future when it comes to your sexual orientation?'
Applicants' feelings about their sexuality	'How did your thoughts and feelings develop after you realized this about yourself?'
Sexual behavior	'Did I understand correctly that you started having sex during the taxi ride?'
History of same-sex relationships	'Tell me about your life together, can you describe what you did together?'
History of opposite-sex relationships	'Until then, had you been interested in girls the way you are interested in boys now?'
Community support	'How does your family relate to women who are interested in other women?'
Disclosure to others	'Who was the first person you told that you like boys?'
Situation of sexual minorities in the home country	'What is this law based on, that gay people don't have to serve in the military?'
Experience in Finland	'How does your homosexuality show in your life in Finland?'
Connection between sexual orientation and religion	'Is your sexual orientation the reason why you don't pray as much anymore?'
The applicant's self-identification of their sexual orientation	'Let's talk about your sexual identity. How would you define it yourself?'
Knowledge about the rights of sexual minorities and involvement in queer culture in Finland	'How did you get to know about the activities of the organization?'
Past concealment of sexual orientation	'What was your life in Iraq like when you couldn't reveal your real sexual identity?'
Future concealment of sexual orientation	'If we think about your future, what do you think, to which degree would it be possible to keep your sexual orientation a secret from people you don't know?'
Request for clarification about reason(s) for late disclosure	'Why did you not tell us about your homosexuality earlier?'
Request for clarification about credibility issue in earlier statement	'But you said you have been more with girls since your childhood and now you say that you have always been with men. Can you explain what you mean by this?'
Request for corroborating evidence	'Do you have a doctor's certificate corroborating the event?'
Other questions concerning sexual orientation	'How did you know someone was homosexual?'
Experiences of persecution or fear of future harm	'What do you fear will happen to you if you return?'
Other reasons for seeking asylum (e.g. religion)	'You mentioned earlier that you are an atheist, could you tell me more about this?'

Interrater reliability

Coder D double-coded 18 cases, composed of 6 cases each from the caseloads of Coders A, B, and C. Agreement between the coders was substantial for both *question type* ($\kappa = 0.73$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$) and *question theme* ($\kappa = 0.68$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$) across 2327 observations for each variable.

Statistical analyzes

All analyses were conducted in SPSS and R. We analyzed the proportion of interview styles, question types, and question content categories descriptively. We compared the mean number of interviews and questions across the positive and negative outcome cases using Welch's Two Sample t-test. We used Pearson's Chi-squared test to conduct the following analyzes: comparing the proportion of open, focused and unrecommended questions in positive and negative outcome cases; comparing the distribution of the three meta-categories (*sexual identity*, *persecution,* and *other grounds)* across the positive and negative outcome cases; and comparing the proportion of different question types across the two main content meta-categories (*sexual identity* and *persecution*).

Table 3. Sociodemographic characteristics of applicants.

Characteristics	*n*	%
Gender		
Male	115	89
Female	8	6
Other	4	3
Not stated	2	2
Sexual Orientation		
Gay	85	66
Bisexual	14	11
Non-heterosexual but no label used	11	9
Lesbian	4	3
Straight but perceived as queer	4	3
Other	11	9
Country of origin*		
Iraq	87	67
Russia	11	8
Cameroon	6	5
Other	26	20
Religion		
Muslim	52	40
Christian	24	19
Atheist	14	11
Other	6	5
Not specified	33	26

Note. Coded in line with applicants' self-identification. **n* adds up to more than 129 as some applicants reported more than one nationality.

Results

Case and applicant descriptives

The cases were filed between the years 2014 and 2019. The vast majority of applicants were male (89%, $n = 115$). Applicants' mean age at the time of applying for asylum was 25.73 years ($SD = 7.40$) and ranged from 16 to 55 years old. For more applicant demographics, see Table 3.

Of the 129 cases, 66 applicants were denied asylum, 61 applicants were granted asylum, and two were granted residence on other grounds. Forty-six cases were adjudicated for the first time, whereas 83 cases were subjected to re-evaluation. One case did not include any interviews as the applicant had already been granted asylum outside Finland. The remaining cases contained between 1 and 5 interviews ($M = 1.73$; $SD = 0.91$). In total, the material contained 222 interviews and 15,955 questions. The number of questions per interview ranged from 14 to 412 ($M = 125.4$; $SD = 69.48$). A total of 2749 questions were deemed irrelevant to the legal decision and remained uncoded. We thus included 13,206 questions in the analyses.

Neither the number of interviews ($t[118.42] = 0.78$, $p = .43$) nor the number of questions per case ($t[123.96] = 1.5$, $p = .13$) differed significantly depending on the case outcome.

Interviewing methods

Interview style

Of the 222 interviews in the sample, 91% ($n = 203$) contained no accusatory questions and 9% ($n = 19$) contained at least one accusatory question. Three accusatory interviews were

held within 3 positive outcome cases, and 16 accusatory interviews were held within 9 negative outcome cases. Thus, it was common for an accusatory interview in a negative case to be followed by one or more subsequent interviews conducted in an accusatory style. At the case level, 12 (9%) out of the total 129 cases contained at least one interview conducted in an accusatory style.

Question type

Out of 13,206 questions, 12% were open questions, that is, *invitations* (e.g. 'Let us begin so that you get to speak of your new grounds for seeking asylum, go ahead') and *cued invitations* (e.g. 'Tell me more about the time your husband went missing'). More than half (51%) of all questions were focused (i.e. *directive)* questions (e.g. 'Why did you not tell us about your homosexuality earlier?'), whereas closed (*yes/no)* questions accounted for 31% of all questions (e.g. 'Was the matter of your sexuality brought up with the psychiatrist?'). Unrecommended questions, that is *forced choice* (e.g. 'Were these relationships restricted to just sexual acts or were there deeper feelings attached to them?') and *suggestive questions* (e.g. 'So at no point did you want to change yourself or try to be with girls?') constituted 2.5% of all questions. Three percent of the questions were *utterances* (e.g. 'Would you like to continue?'), 1% were *unclear*, and 1% were *summaries* (See Figure 1).

Question content

See Figure 2 for a distribution of the 20 content categories within the interview questions. The interviewers asked the most questions about the applicants' fear of persecution (29%), followed by their same-sex relationships (18%) and any additional reasons for seeking asylum (14%).

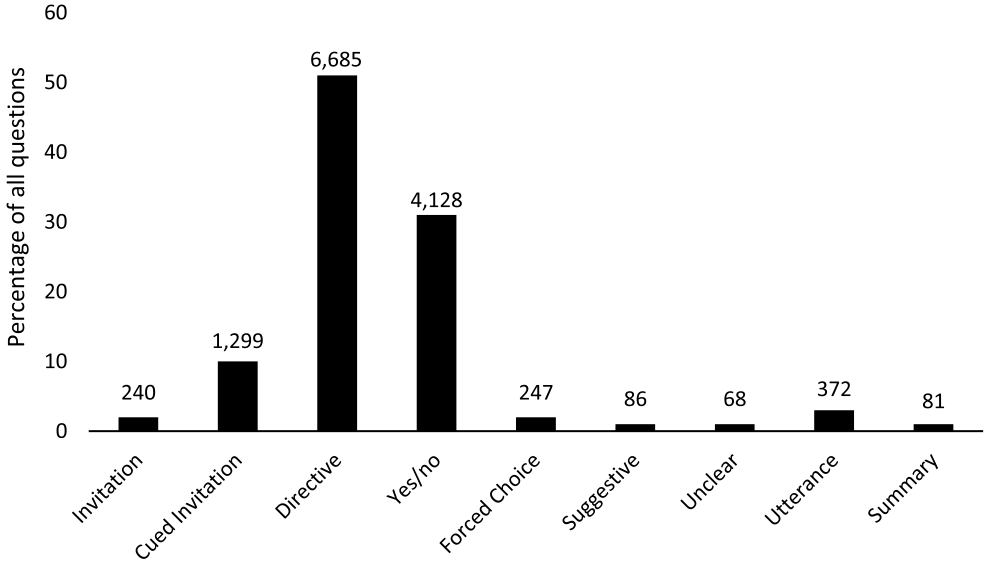

Figure 1. Distribution of question types by absolute number and percentage ($n = 13,206$).

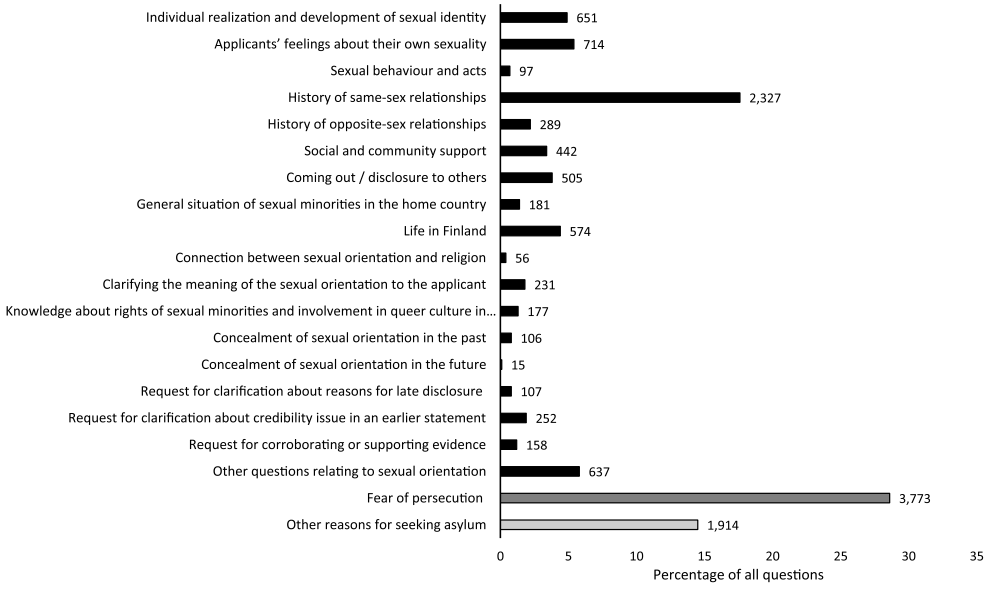

Figure 2. Distribution of question content by absolute number and percentage ($n = 13{,}206$).

Notes: Values next to the bars indicate the number of questions asked within each category. Bars are color-coded according to the three meta-categories: sexual identity (black), persecution (dark gray) and other grounds (light gray).

We combined the 20 content categories into three meta-categories: *sexual identity*, *persecution,* and *other grounds*. The interviewers asked most questions within the category sexual identity (57%, $n = 7519$), followed by persecution (29%, $n = 3773$) and other grounds (14%, $n = 1914$). There was a significant difference in the distribution of the three meta-categories across the case outcomes ($\chi^2[2] = 150.85$, $p < .001$). Officials asked more questions about sexual identity and fewer questions about persecution in positive outcome compared to negative outcome cases (see Figure 3).

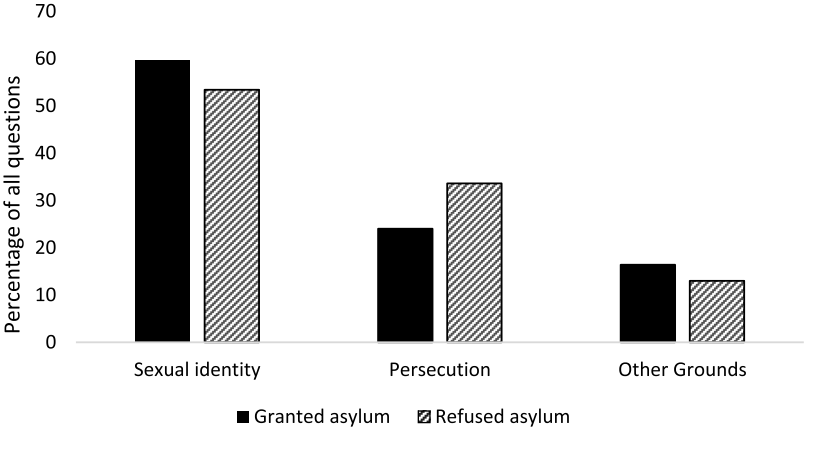

Figure 3. Proportion of questions asked within the three thematic meta-categories in granted and rejected cases.

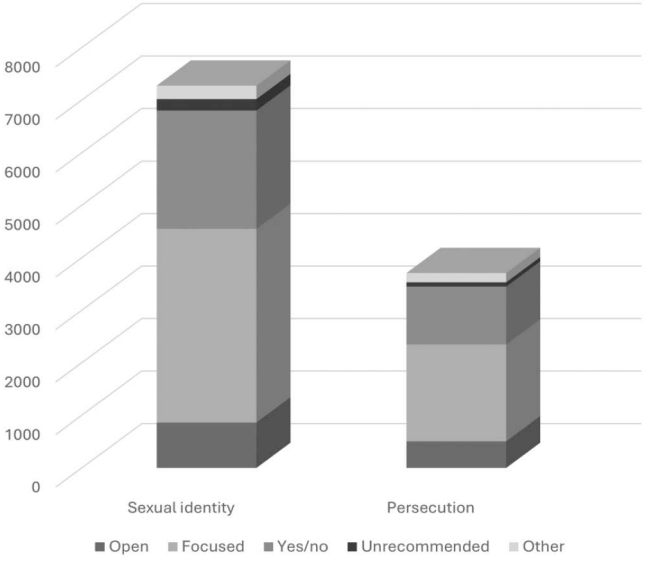

Figure 4. Distribution of question types within the meta-categories 'persecution' and 'sexual identity'.

Distribution of question types across main thematic meta-categories

We compared the proportion of different question types across the two main content meta-categories, *sexual identity* and *persecution* (see Figure 4). The proportion of open questions (invitations and cued invitations) was significantly higher within the meta-category *persecution* (14%) compared to *sexual identity* (12%, $\chi^2[1] = 7.10$, $p < .01$, OR = 1.18 [1.04, 1.32]). Moreover, officials asked a larger proportion of unrecommended (forced choice and suggestive) questions about *sexual identity* (3%) than about *persecution* (2%, $\chi^2[1] = 5.82$, $p = .02$, OR = 1.38 [1.07, 1.80]). Conversely, we found no significant differences in the proportions of focused ($\chi^2[1] = .99$, $p = .32$) and yes/no questions ($\chi^2[1] = 1.61$, $p = .2$) across the two main thematic meta-categories**.**

Discussion

This was, to our knowledge, the third study to analyze the questions asked in official asylum interviews according to investigative interviewing principles, and the first to focus on asylum cases based on sexual orientation. Consistent with the earlier studies (Skrifvars et al., 2020; van Veldhuizen et al., 2018), Finnish asylum officials were found to only partly adhere to guidelines in investigative interviewing when eliciting claims based on sexual orientation. We discuss the implications of our findings below.

Interview style

Encouragingly, most interviews in our sample followed the recommended *information-gathering style*. This finding aligns with those of Skrifvars et al. (2020) and van Veldhuizen et al. (2018), who identified small proportions of accusatory questions in their samples in Finland and The Netherlands, respectively. However, Skrifvars et al. (2020) reported a considerably larger proportion (i.e. two-thirds) of Finnish asylum interviews containing at

least one accusatory question. This could be due to the more general sample of asylum claims included within in their study. Alternatively, different interviewers could have conducted the interviews included in our respective samples.

Although rare, several accusatory questions in our sample strongly communicated skepticism or judgement (e.g. 'How did you dare to suggest that, if you knew homosexual relationships are forbidden?'). In the most problematic cases, the official seemed to expect an admission of lie-telling from the applicant (e.g. 'So you admit to lying to the police'; 'If they really wanted to get you into their hands, they could probably figure out where you work.'). Such confrontational statements should be entirely avoided, as they may damage rapport and make the applicant reluctant to disclose further information (Vrij et al., 2006).

Before reaching a negative credibility decision about an asylum claim, officials are required to provide applicants the opportunity to clarify potential credibility issues (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2024). This may make it challenging to maintaining an information-gathering style throughout the entire interview; applicants may perceive such confrontations as an indication that their claim is not believed, impacting the delivery of their testimony. Several practical steps can be taken to avoid this. First, when establishing the ground rules of the interview, the official should explain that requests for clarification are intended to support fair and accurate decision-making, rather than indicating the official's disbelief in the claim. Second, the clarifications themselves should be formulated in an open-ended manner (e.g. 'Can you please help me to understand by clarifying the discrepancy between your description of […] and your earlier statements about […]?'). Crucially, the interpreter should also be instructed to avoid asking questions in an accusatory manner, to ensure the official's interviewing style is accurately conveyed in the target language.

Finally, we stress that although adhering to an information-gathering style is important in all asylum interviews, it may be especially critical in cases involving sexual and gender minorities due to the potentially sensitive nature of their claims. Queer applicants have reported barriers in describing their narratives to authorities and interpreters from within their own community, due to mistrust, reluctance in disclosing their group membership, and concerns over confidentiality (e.g. Spijkerboer, 2011; UNHCR, 2019). In a study by Bögner et al. (2010), asylum applicants were interviewed regarding factors that hindered the disclosure of sensitive personal information, including experiences of sexual violence. Interviewer quality was cited as the most important factor impacting willingness to describe their narratives, and several participants reported that the interviewer made them think of the authorities in their home countries. Therefore, maintaining an information-gathering style within the asylum interview can counteract a resilient feeling of mistrust for authority figures stemming from past persecution.

Question type

Against best practice recommendations, only around one-tenth of officials' questions in interviews with sexual minorities were open-ended (i.e. invitations or cued invitations). Alarmingly, a recent study analyzing Finnish asylum *decisions* in cases based on sexual orientation found that the most common justification for rejecting applicants' claims was that their narrative of their sexual orientation lacked detail (Selim et al., 2024). However, for the criterion of level of detail to be grounded in a more solid basis,

applicants should be given the opportunity to elaborate on their claim through interviews containing primarily open questions (see van Veldhuizen, 2022).

ur findings were consistent with those of van Veldhuizen et al. (2018) and Skrifvars et al. (2020), who found that open questions constituted 18% and 12% of all questions in their respective samples. A further study by Skrifvars et al. (2022) analyzing question-answer pairs in Finnish asylum interviews found that open questions elicited more new facts about persecution than any other question type. Failing to ask enough open questions thus carries the risk of limiting the amount of critical information obtained. Notably, in experimental studies involving vignette asylum cases, officials formulated more open questions than in real-life asylum cases (Kask et al., 2023; van Veldhuizen et al., 2017). This indicates a gap between officials' knowledge and their practical application of recommended interviewing principles. To encourage the use of more open-ended questions, a large-scale training program was delivered between 2022 and 2023 to nearly half of all asylum officials employed at the Finnish Immigration Service (Skrifvars, Antfolk, et al., 2025). The training was found to substantially increase interviewers' knowledge of relevant legal psychological principles; however, whether said knowledge translates to actual practice remains in question. As our sample for the present study included cases filed up until 2019, future research should investigate whether the training in legal psychology has led to an improvement in officials' interview questions, including within cases based on sexual orientation. Moreover, according to a recent survey conducted in Finland, half of all asylum interpreters reported that they favored closed (vs. open) questions (Skrifvars et al., 2025). This indicates that further training on (in)appropriate question types should be extended also to asylum interpreters.

We identified a concerning overreliance on focused (directive) and closed (yes/no) questions, which together constituted over 80% of all questions. It is generally recommended that these questions be used sparingly and only as a complement to open questions, to acquire additional relevant facts (Brandon et al., 2018; UNHCR, 2013). Asking too many such questions can interfere with memory retrieval (Vrij et al., 2014) and communicate unreceptiveness on behalf of the interviewer. The applicant might also believe that they are expected to refrain from elaborating, and thus crucial information might be omitted (Fisher et al., 2011). It is possible that the context of asylum may call for using such questions to a slightly larger degree than within criminal investigations, for example, to confirm specific details or resolve misunderstandings (e.g. 'Did I understand correctly that it was your uncle who threatened you?'). However, misunderstandings can also be settled using more suitable question types, such as cued invitations (e.g. 'I did not fully understand who threatened you; could you please explain that to me again?'). Moreover, whereas criminal investigations typically involve eliciting accounts of isolated criminal events, the focus of asylum interviews is a potentially lifelong experience of harm. This is especially likely when an individual's sexual identity development trajectory is central to their claim. It may thus be necessary to narrow the scope of the interview and ensure the limited time available is used to gather the most legally relevant information. Again, this aim can be achieved by asking cued invitations, which specify the topic of discussion without overly restricting applicants' answers.

On a positive note, the most clearly discouraged question types, that is, forced choice and suggestive questions, were considerably rare. Officials did, however, ask more unrecommended questions and fewer open questions about *sexual identity* than about

persecution. In practice, this manifested in expecting the applicant to choose an identity label (e.g. 'Are you gay or bisexual?') or to report certain feelings in connection with their sexual identity (e.g. 'Did you feel that there was something wrong with being interested in boys?'). Officials may, thus, be more inclined to confirm their prior beliefs when evaluating the credibility of an applicant's sexual identity than their experiences of persecution, and conversely to invite more free narratives about the applicant's experiences or fears of harm. Increasing the proportion of open-ended questions about identity-related topics (e.g. 'Could you please describe your experience of informing your childhood friend that you were gay?') could minimize the influence of stereotypical expectations on the interview and subsequent evaluation.

Question content

Over half of all questions aimed to evaluate the credibility of the applicant's sexual identity, whereas less than one third of all questions inquired about past or future persecution. This distribution echoes findings of earlier studies, which have highlighted that officials elsewhere in Europe tend to focus overwhelmingly on establishing whether the applicant is 'genuinely' queer (Dustin & Ferreira, 2021). On the one hand, this emphasis stems from the requirement under asylum law to identify a causal link between the risk of persecution and one of the five Convention grounds (e.g. membership in a particular social group). However, scholars have cautioned that focusing excessively on establishing the credibility of applicants' sexual orientation or gender identity increases the risk of resorting to stereotypes and sidelining evaluations of the actual threat of harm. Notably, whether an applicant truly belongs to a sexual minority may not even be relevant to the assessment; instead, the critical question is whether they would be perceived as such by a potential persecutor (Dustin & Ferreira, 2021).

Within the meta-category *sexual identity*, asylum officials primarily asked about applicants' relationships, their feelings regarding their sexual orientation, and their sexual identity development. Notably, these were also the themes most often cited to challenge the credibility of applicants' sexual orientation, according to a recent analysis of 68 SOGI asylum decisions (Selim et al., 2024). In line with evidence across Europe, Finnish officials' questions underlie the expectation that queer applicants should be able to describe profound thoughts and feelings regarding their sexual identity to be considered credible. Qualitatively, we noted that questions soliciting abstract emotional narratives (e.g. 'How did your thoughts and feelings develop after you realized this about yourself?') often led to misunderstandings in the interview. Further, several questions conveyed an expectation of negative emotions regarding one's sexual orientation (e.g. 'Is there a feeling of shame or other negative feelings related to this?'), which some applicants refuted by reporting they had never struggled with self-acceptance. The current thematic focus of the interview questions, coupled with a predominant use of focused and closed questions, risks narrowing the range of asylum narratives considered credible and leaving critical aspects of the applicant's claim potentially unexplored.

Strengths and limitations

There are several limitations with the present study that should be noted. Although we requested a random sample of asylum cases, we had no control over how the cases were

selected. Moreover, what officials chose to write down might differ to some degree from how the questions were formulated. Furthermore, our study is vulnerable to the common limitation in (queer) asylum research that the findings are predominantly based on cases involving gay, cisgender male applicants. Future studies based on interview data should consider requesting a minimum number of cases from female and gender non-conforming applicants. Finally, analyzing interviews based on predefined coding principles involves some degree of subjectivity. We did, however, draw largely on the principles outlined in previous studies to ensure the validity of our coding scheme.

Conclusion

In line with best practice, Finnish asylum interviews with sexual minorities were predominantly conducted in an information-gathering style and the most unrecommended types of questions were rare. However, only one-tenth of all questions were open-ended, limiting the length and informativeness of applicants' testimonies. This is especially concerning given that insufficiency of detail has been identified as the most cited indicator when rejecting the credibility of asylum claims based on sexual orientation. To evaluate the credibility of sexual orientation, officials primarily asked about applicants' interpersonal relationships, their feelings regarding their sexual orientation, and their sexual identity development, reflecting assumptions about human sexuality rooted in Western culture. Future psychological research should support asylum decision-making by expanding the available evidence on the heterogeneous experiences of queer people, especially across cultures. Moreover, further training in investigative interviewing, including in cases based on sexual orientation, could improve officials' adherence to best practice guidelines.

Author's note

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