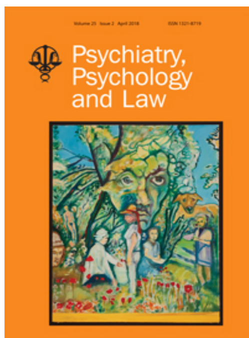

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Establishing Origin: Analysing the Questions Asked in Asylum Interviews

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In the absence of evidence, asylum seekers are interviewed to assess the credibility of their stories. Few studies have examined whether or not the questions asked in such interviews stimulate the applicant to give lengthy, detailed, and accurate answers. The style, type, and content of the questions asked in order to assess a claim about origin were analysed in 40 case files from the Dutch Immigration Service. A large proportion of the questions were closed and fact-checking questions. Less than one fifth of questions were open or cued recall questions. The results show that to assess credibility of origin, knowledge questions were posed about the immediate living environment, flight to Europe, identity documents, country of origin, and personal background of applicants. Possibilities for increasing the quantity and quality of information obtained in asylum interviews are discussed. Future research should validate the assumption that truthful claimants have substantial knowledge about their country and town of origin.

Key words: asylum procedure; credibility assessment; investigative interviewing; origin claims; question content; question style; question type.

Introduction

The interviewing practices used in European asylum-seeking procedures are sparsely studied (van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, Landström, Granhag, & van Koppen, 2017). This is surprising given that, due to a general scarcity of evidence in asylum cases, the oral statements of asylum seekers carry much weight in determining refugee status (e.g. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2013). By contrast, much is known about the most effective interviewing techniques to elicit information from witnesses, suspects, and victims of crimes (e.g. Fisher & Geiselman, 2010; Fisher, Milne, & Bull, 2011; Milne & Bull, 2006; Tekin et al., 2015; Vrij, Hope, & Fisher, 2014). In the present study, this knowledge is applied in order to evaluate the interviewing practices used in asylum cases.

Interviewing Asylum Seekers

Despite the differences between refugee status determinations and criminal contexts (Noll, 2005), asylum interviews share characteristics with police interviews (Herlihy & Turner, 2009). Asylum seekers are essentially

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eyewitnesses of their own lives (Herlihy, Jobson, & Turner, 2012; Herlihy & Turner, 2009). In order to appear credible, they have to give detailed and consistent statements about their identity, origin and past experiences, for which they have to search their autobiographical memories (Cameron, 2010; Herlihy et al., 2012; UNHCR, 2013; van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, & van Koppen, 2017). Hence, similar to interviews with eyewitnesses, one objective of asylum interviews should be to enhance accurate memory recall. Concurrently, asylum interviews share characteristics with suspect interviews (Doornbos, 2006). Although for different reasons than suspects in police interviews, asylum seekers may be motivated to lie during interview (Beneduce, 2015). By lying about their identity, origin or flight motives, they hope to increase their chances of acquiring refugee status. Officials have to decide whether or not to believe an applicant's statements before assessing eligibility for asylum status (UNHCR, 2013). Consequently, as is the case in suspect interviews (e.g. DePaulo & Morris, 2004), detecting deception is an important element of asylum interviews (Herlihy et al., 2012).

Lastly, besides being treated as eyewitness and suspect, an asylum seeker may be considered a victim with corresponding vulnerabilities. Many asylum seekers have witnessed or experienced horrific events in their country of origin or at some point during flight (UNHCR, 2011). They may suffer from post-traumatic stress, and as a consequence their ability to provide detailed and coherent statements may be compromised (Graham, Herlihy, & Brewin, 2014; Herlihy & Turner, 2007; Moore & Zoellner, 2007). Even without post-traumatic stress, the asylum interview may be a stressful experience (Bögner, Brewin, & Herlihy, 2009; Sourander, 2003). Such stress should be minimised, as it may impair memory recall (Smeets, 2011).

Thus asylum interviews are complex. Asking the right questions can help to elicit accurate information, make the applicant feel comfortable, and elicit information on the basis of which the credibility of the asylum story can be assessed.

Best Practice in Investigative Interviewing

Question Style

The question style relates to the way in which an interviewer approaches an interviewee. Information-gathering questions are preferable to accusatory questions. With an information-gathering style, the interviewer is searching for the truth in an open and non-confrontational way, whereas the accusatory style is characterised by confirmatory questions, posed to elicit a confession (Hartwig, Granhag, & Vrij, 2005; Vrij et al., 2014; Vrij, Mann, & Fisher, 2006). More comprehensive and accurate narratives are obtained in information-gathering interviews than in accusatory interviews (Hartwig et al., 2005; Vrij et al., 2014), even from reluctant suspects (Meissner, Redlich, Bhatt, & Brandon, 2012). In an accusatory interview, the interviewee can also become anxious, defiant and uncooperative, which hinders the working alliance between the interviewer and the interviewee. The information-gathering style, in contrast, promotes rapport-building, makes the interviewee feel respected, and reduces stress (Vanderhallen, Vervaeke, & Holmberg, 2011; Vrij et al., 2006).

This does not mean, however, that information-gathering questions are easy to answer for liars. They are more cognitively demanding than accusatory questions because they encourage liars to provide more detail than they may have prepared for (Vrij et al., 2006). Accusatory questions can be answered easily with short denials and do not require much thinking on the part of a deceitful interviewee. In addition, interviews conducted in an information-gathering style also yield more diagnostic information about the truthfulness of the suspect (Meissner et al., 2012; Vrij et al., 2006; Vrij, Mann, Kristen, & Fisher, 2007).

Question Type

In general, open questions are preferable to other questions types (Clarke & Milne, 2001; Thoresen, Lønnum, Melinder, Stridbeck, & Magnussen, 2006; Walsh & Bull, 2010, 2012). They invite an interviewee to give a long answer in his or her own words and usually elicit more and more accurate information from the interviewee than closed or direct questions that only require a short answer (Bull, 2010; Fisher et al., 2011; Milne & Bull, 2006; Snook, Luther, Quinlan, & Milne, 2012). Forced-choice and suggestive questions may steer the answers of the interviewee in a particular direction and consequently undermine their validity (Horselenberg, Merkelbach, Crombag, & van Bergen, 2010; Snook et al., 2012; Thoresen et al., 2006).

The use of open questions may also be important for rapport-building (Walsh & Bull, 2012). Asking many direct questions implicitly conveys the message that the interviewee should limit his or her answers to a few words. Asking open questions, in contrast, demonstrates that the interviewer is interested in the interviewee's story and communicates to the interviewee that he or she is in control of the flow of information (Fisher, 1995).

The last advantage of asking open questions is that it may be more challenging for liars to give long answers than for truth-tellers, who are forthcoming most of the time and can rely on their memory to give elaborate answers (Granhag, Hartwig, Giolla, & Clemens, 2014; Hartwig, Granhag, Strömwall, & Doering, 2010; Strömwall, Hartwig, & Granhag, 2006). Liars are typically less forthcoming; they like to keep their story simple and give concise answers with limited detail because giving rich but false statement puts them at risk of contradicting themselves and the evidence in the case (Strömwall et al., 2006). In response to closed questions they can probably successfully maintain this strategy without arousing suspicion, but this strategy may be more difficult to maintain in response to open questions that invite the interviewee to elaborate on his or her previous statements (Vrij, 2004), although fact-checking probes can lead to more statement–evidence inconsistencies (Hartwig et al., 2011).

Question Content

Besides question style and type, the content of the questions asked should also be considered. In asylum cases, a lack of knowledge about the applicant's hometown and country, as well as a tendency to give undetailed and vague statements, can infringe on the applicant's credibility (UNHCR, 2013). However, if questions are asked about events, places and objects about which the applicant does not possess knowledge, it is unreasonable to expect correct – let alone extensive – answers.

Human memory is selective; people generally attend to and store information that is novel, distinct or otherwise salient rather than ordinary and expected information (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Knudsen, 2007; Levine & Edelstein, 2009). As such, memories for ordinary information or the periphery of an event may be less pronounced. Memories are also malleable and can be sabotaged even without conscious awareness (Loftus, 2005). They fade over time (Wagenaar, 1986), and people can fail to access a memory due to stress (Smeets, 2011) or ineffective retrieval cues (Smith & Vela, 2001; Tulving & Thomson, 1973). Hence, an incorrect, short or vague statement can be indicative of a lack of knowledge or genuine memory errors just as well as being indicative of deception.

The Interviewing Practices of Asylum Officials

To obtain as much valid information as possible for a credibility assessment in asylum cases, asylum officials should ask predominantly information-gathering and open questions, and refrain from asking suggestive and forced-choice questions. Questions should address topics that the applicant can be

expected to have knowledge about. Before the validity of the questions in asylum interviews for the assessment of origin can be tested however, it has to be established what kind of questions typically are asked.

To the authors' knowledge, only one empirical study has previously focused on the style, type, and content of questions asked by asylum officials: van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, et al. (2017) asked Swedish asylum officials to respond to one out of four fictitious case vignettes presenting an asylum seeker's claim. In two of the vignettes, The applicant had no evidence for his or her origin; in the other two vignettes, the applicant could not corroborate his or her persecution story with evidence. The asylum officials formulated five questions that they would like to ask to assess applicants' claims about origin or persecution. The results show that the asylum officials predominantly formulated open questions in an information-gathering style. Furthermore, to assess the credibility of a claim about origin, asylum officials tended to formulate questions that assess knowledge about life in the country of origin, identity documents, and the flight. They seem to assume that persons truly originating from a specific country or area should have ample knowledge about that area, its history, its customs, and frequently encountered objects. Such a set of typical questions was not found when the persecution story was the central element of the credibility assessment.

The findings pertaining to the proportion of information-gathering and open questions are promising, but the study has several limitations. The asylum officials only formulated a limited number of questions in response to a fictitious case without any time restrictions. In a real interview, more questions are asked and there is an ongoing interaction between the applicant and the interviewer. As such, the interviewer has limited time to think about the next question. It is concluded by van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, et al. (2017) that although asylum officials seem to have knowledge of best practice for investigative interviewing and seem to use knowledge about the applicant's hometown to assess credibility of claims about origin, more research is needed to draw conclusions about the actual interviewing practices used in asylum cases.

The Present Study

The present study seeks to replicate the findings of van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, et al. (2017) by conducting an archival study on the case files of Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS). The style, type, and content of the questions asked in asylum interviews are analysed and evaluated in terms of whether or not they facilitate the credibility assessment by eliciting a high quantity of accurate information. Compared to previous research (van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, et al., 2017), more closed questions were expected since interviews tend to start with a few open questions and become more closed as they proceed (Fisher, Geiselman, & Raymond, 1987; Wright & Alison, 2004). In line with the findings of van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, et al., it was expected that asylum officials would be found to use a similar set of knowledge questions to assess the credibility of applicants' origins regardless of any differences in their nationality and background. Cases were selected in which applicants could not corroborate their origins with evidence.

Method

Case Selection

A total of 40 files from the Dutch INS were selected with a purposeful sampling procedure. A list was created of all applications filed in 2014 in which the asylum seeker initially could not provide (authentic) documents to corroborate his or her origin, which ensured homogeneity in presence of evidence. Applicants who claimed to be from

Eritrea or Sudan were selected to ensure variation in applicant background. For each nationality the list was further split into granted and rejected cases to ensure variation in case outcome. A total of 10 cases from each list were randomly selected to add up to 40 cases in total. The random selection in the final step was used to obtain a high variation of cases within each group.

Case Characteristics

Applicants

The asylum seekers were on average 24.45 ($SD = 5.38$) years old at the time of applying. Of the Eritrean applicants, 10 were male and 10 were female, and of the Sudanese applicants, 17 were male and 3 were female. Most Eritrean applicants ($n = 19$) were Tigrinya are Tigrinya and Coptic Orthodox Christians, and 1 applicant was a Muslim belonging to the Tigre people. The Sudanese applicants are of 11 different ethnicities but are all Muslims. Most applicants from Eritrea claimed to come from a village ($n = 14$), rather than a city ($n = 5$); one applicant explained that her town of origin was too large to be considered a village but too small to be considered a city. Sudanese applicants equally often came from a city or a village.

Interviewers

A total of 85 asylum officials were involved in the 106 interviews from which the questions were selected (see also Table 1). As a result of the diversity of interviewers, the findings are likely to be reflective of the general interviewing practices of Dutch asylum officials.

Asylum officials who have a permanent position in the INS receive training provided by the INS knowledge centre and follow at least three basic e-learning modules from the European Training Curriculum offered by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO; see Adviescommissue voor Vreemdelingenzaken, 2016). The three modules are entitled 'Evidence Assessment', 'Inclusion', and 'Interviewing Techniques'. In the module on interviewing techniques, the appropriate structure of an interview is addressed (EASO, 2014a). In line with investigative interviewing best practice as discussed in the introduction, the importance of using rapport-building techniques, an information-gathering style and a free-recall phase are taught. Different types of questions (e.g. open vs closed) and their effectiveness are not discussed in the module. Asking open questions is encouraged in the EASO practical guide about personal interviews (EASO, 2014b), but it is unclear to what extent the instrument informs the training of Dutch asylum officials.

Table 1. Overview of the focus of different interviews in the Dutch asylum procedure and the number of different interviewers that conducted each type of interview within the sample.

Interview	Focus	Number of interviews	Number of interviewers
Application interview	Identity, travel route (Dublin Regulation requirements), origin	25	20
First interview	Identity, origin, nationality, travel route	40	38
Substantial interview	Clarification of first interview, flight motives	40	37
Additional interview	Clarification of substantial elements, e.g. origin and flight motives	1	1

Note: The first and substantial interviews are prerequisites for deciding on a case while the application and additional interviews are optional.

Content and Length of Procedure

In the Dutch procedure, asylum applicants are interviewed several times (Table 1). The *first interview* and *substantial interview* are prerequisites to decide on a case and are therefore conducted in all cases. The *application interview* and *additional interviews* are not always conducted.

The average number of days between the asylum application and the first interview was 58 ($SD = 29$). The average time taken to reach a decision was 44 days, but the length of the asylum procedure varied greatly ($SD = 53$). The length of the asylum procedure does not predict the odds of the case being granted or rejected, $p > .30$.

Credibility of Origin

In all cases, credibility of the applicant's origin was assessed via interviews. In the Eritrean cases, credibility of origin also formed the main input for the INS decision. In the rejected cases the origin of the applicant was contested, whereas in the granted cases the origin was deemed credible. In the Sudanese cases, the origin of the applicant was not decisive for the asylum status, as Sudanese applicants also had to establish a genuine fear of persecution in Sudan to be eligible for asylum status.

Of the 10 Eritrean cases in which the applicant's origin was contested by the INS, in 6 cases the origin claim later proved to be veracious (either before or during the appeal procedure). In these 6 cases, the applicant presented authentic identity documents that had not been possessed at the start of the procedure but were subsequently collected from family members in the country of origin during the course of the procedure. These documents invalidated the outcome of the credibility assessment.

For 2 Sudanese rejections the outcome of the appeal was unknown at the time of the present analyses; the other rejections were all appealed but withstood judicial review.

Selection of Questions

All interviews were recorded in transcripts in a question–answer style and divided into several sections to organise the different topics addressed in the interviews. In total, 3735 questions were extracted from the transcripts ($n = 1782$ for the Eritrean cases; $n = 1953$ for the Sudanese cases).

Most questions ($\approx$ 90%) were asked in the application interview and the first interview. Questions were extracted from sections that were directly related to the country, region, and place of origin of the applicant, including questions about *(documentary) evidence* for the origin and/or outward journey, questions about the *last address* in the country of origin, and questions about *origin and recent leave*. Questions about the *travel route* were also included, even though one could argue that these questions are asked to determine which country is responsible for handling the asylum application (in the context of the EU Dublin Regulation No 604/2013). They were nevertheless included because previous research has implied that questions about the travel route are also used to assess the credibility of claims about origin (van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, et al., 2017). Questions about *personal data* and *ethnicity* were also extracted because they are sometimes used to assess the veracity of the origin claim. Questions under the headings of *family members*, *religion*, and *marital status* were not systematically included. As an exception, individual questions about these topics that were asked under the origin-related headings are included in the analyses. From the *substantial interviews*, only those questions were selected that ask for clarifications of the statements made in the *first interview* and are directly related to origin or identity documents.

The number of questions pertaining to origin in each file ranged from 46 to 160. On average each file contained 93 ($SD = 30$) origin-related questions. The number of origin-related questions in the Eritrean cases were somewhat lower ($M = 89$, $SD = 30$) than in the Sudanese cases ($M = 98$, $SD = 30$).

A total of 71 questions were not included in the analyses because they were utterances rather than questions. Most were statements about an observation that the interviewer made (e.g. 'You first said *x*, now you say *y*') or an action of the interviewer (e.g. 'I repeat the question'). Hence, a total of 3664 questions form the input for the main analyses.

Question Coding

The questions selected from the case files were coded for style, type, and content.

Style

The definitions used to code the questions for style are taken from van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, et al. (2017), and similar to this study three different styles are distinguished between. *Information-gathering questions* allow asylum seekers to describe their actions and experiences in their own words. The interviewer is open-minded and seeks information and clarification of previously provided information. An *accusatory style* of questioning communicates disbelief and distrust in the asylum seeker's story. The interviewer seeks to confirm scepticism. *Burden-communication questions* explicitly communicate the burden of proof to the asylum seeker. They stipulate that it is the applicant's responsibility to establish the veracity of his or her claims. All questions were coded by two coders who reached a substantial agreement, Cronbach's $\alpha = .64$. Inconsistencies were resolved by a third coder (except for one question, which therefore was excluded).

The 'why' questions were difficult to code, as they could be interpreted differently depending on intonation. Asking why someone made a choice can come across as sceptical (i.e. 'why would you do that?'), but 'why' questions can be asked just as well with the intention of gathering information about the reasons behind certain actions. To resolve these difficulties, the context in which the question was asked is taken into account (i.e. previous questions and answers). If the context could not abate the ambiguity, the questions were coded as information gathering.

Type

Of all the questions, 3559 (97%) contained only one idea and could be used for further analyses without any changes. The other 105 questions (3%) contained multiple ideas and were split into multiple questions, resulting in 3771 questions that were subsumed to the type, and to the content analyses. Following van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, et al. (2017), five types of questions are distinguished between.

Open or cued recall questions prompt a free recall, and do not delimit the answer except in a general way. Cued recall questions include specific contextual cues or details – introduced either by the interviewee or by the interviewer – to refocus attention on specific details, aspects or situations, or to elaborate and elicit additional information. The question 'can you describe the church that you just mentioned?' is an example of a cued recall question.

Limited cued recall questions delimit the answer, for example because there can logically only be one correct answer. They can also be called fact-checking questions, and do not require or stimulate a lengthy response, but rather a short answer. Examples of questions in this category are: 'where did you live?' and 'which villages surround your hometown?'.

Yes/no questions are closed questions that merely request an affirmative or disconfirming answer without any further explanation, for example: 'did you go to the market?'. Another type of closed question – the *forced choice* question – gives explicit or implicit options from which the interviewee must choose (e.g. 'is there much vegetation or are there only buildings in the area?').

Lastly, *suggestive questions* strongly communicate what response is expected, ask for a clarification or confirmation of information not previously disclosed by the asylum

seeker, or quote the asylum seeker incorrectly. For example, the question 'not originally from another country?' implies that the interviewee named the wrong country when asked for the origins of his or her tribe.

All questions were typified by two coders who reached a substantial agreement, Cronbach's $\alpha = .79$. Inconsistencies were resolved by a third coder.

Content

The content of the questions was analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two separate thematic structures were made for the Eritrean cases and the Sudanese cases to examine the thematic overlap in origin-related questions asked to applicants from different claimed nationalities. The initial structures were made collaboratively by two researchers. The questions were first sorted broadly by topic. The different topics were collated into potential themes and subthemes. The structure of the themes was refined multiple times to reach an optimal structure with sufficient homogeneity within the themes and sufficient heterogeneity between the themes to categorise the questions. Finally, the themes were described.

The two resulting thematic structures were given to a third researcher, who coded all the questions in 10 randomly picked files (5 Eritrean files and 5 Sudanese files). An almost perfect agreement between the first two researchers combined and the third researcher was reached for the Eritrean cases (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$) and a substantial agreement was reached for the Sudanese cases (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$), indicating that the thematic structures adequately describe the content of the questions.

Results

Question Style

Of the 3664 questions, 97% were posed in the information-gathering style. Only a small proportion constitute accusatory questions (2%) and even fewer questions ($<1\%$, $n = 15$) were asked in the burden communication style. The proportions of question style differ depending on case outcome, $\chi^2(2) = 13.60, p < .002$. The standardised residuals show that burden communication questions were asked in granted cases less often than expected (0.1%, $z = -2.27, p < .025$), and in rejected cases more often than expected (0.7%, $z = 2.33$, $p < .01$). There are no differences in the distribution of information-gathering and accusatory questions.

Question Type

Of all 3771 questions, 18% are open questions. A larger proportion of the questions delimited the answers of the applicants, either by requesting a short or factual answer (36%) or by merely asking for a yes/no response (42%). Of the remaining questions, 3% are coded as forced-choice questions and 1% as suggestive questions. The distribution of the question type is illustrated in Figure 1.

The distribution of the question type differs for cases with different outcomes, $\chi^2(4) = 12.52$, $p < .02$. An inspection of the standardised residuals yielded, however, that compared to what would be expected, none of the question types are overrepresented or underrepresented in either the rejected or the granted cases.

The average ratio of yes/no questions to open questions is 2.68 ($SD = 1.03$), indicating that on average for each open question two to three closed questions were asked. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) shows that the ratio of open-ended versus closed questions is the same for rejected and granted cases, $F(1, 38) = 1.97, p > .16$.

Thematic Analyses

The two thematic structures describing the content of the questions asked in the Eritrean cases and the Sudanese cases are similar (see Figures 2 and 3). In both types of case, questions were asked about the living environment,

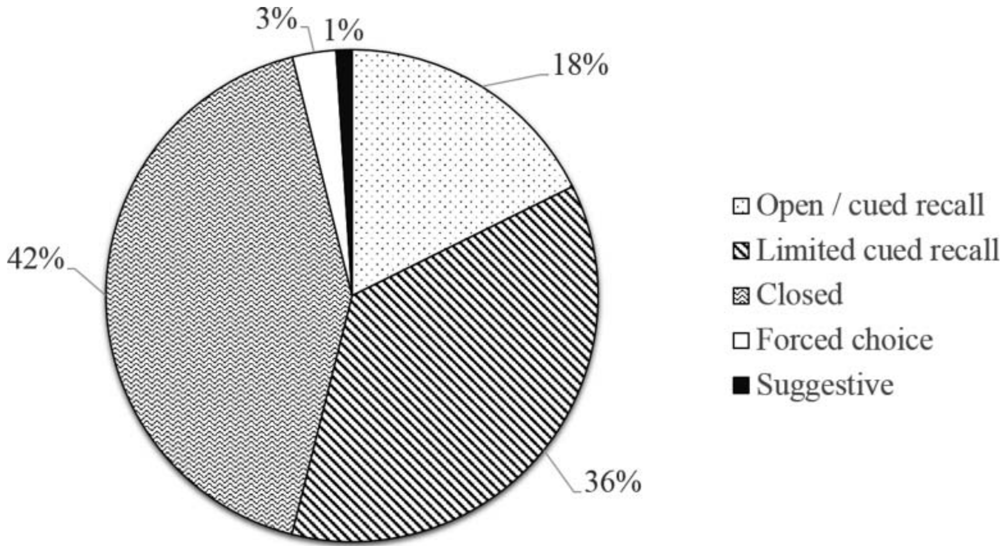

Figure 1. Question-type distribution with corresponding percentages ($n = 3771$).

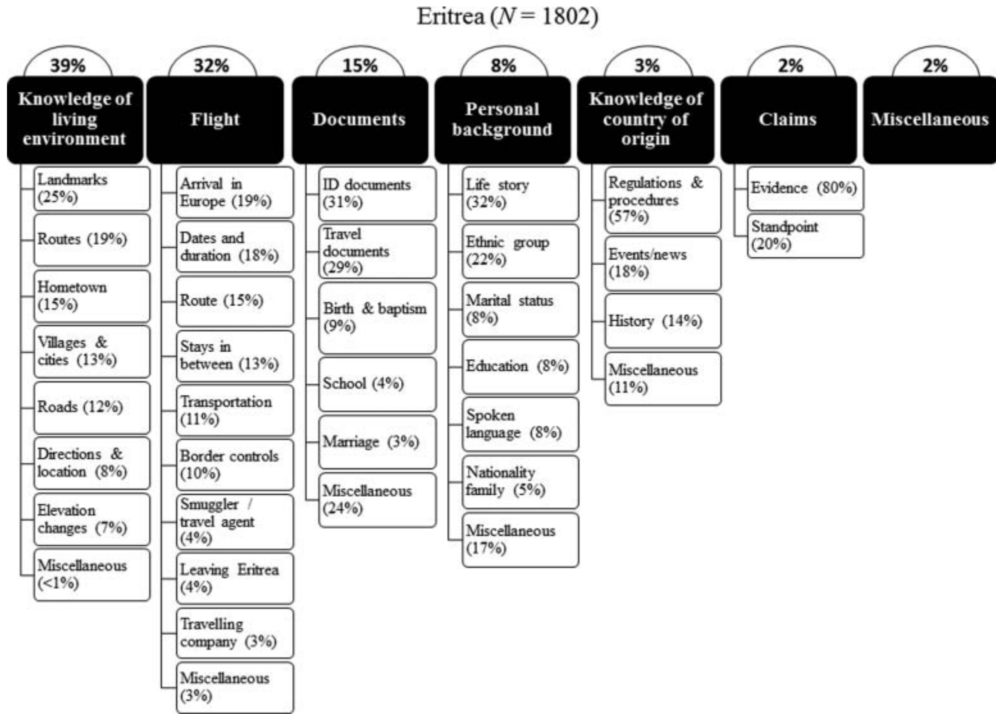

Figure 2. Content of the questions asked in the Eritrean cases.
Note: Subthemes are displayed below each theme. The themes and subthemes are organised based on their size (i.e. frequency of occurrence in the interviews), with the exception that the 'Miscellaneous' subtheme is always listed last.

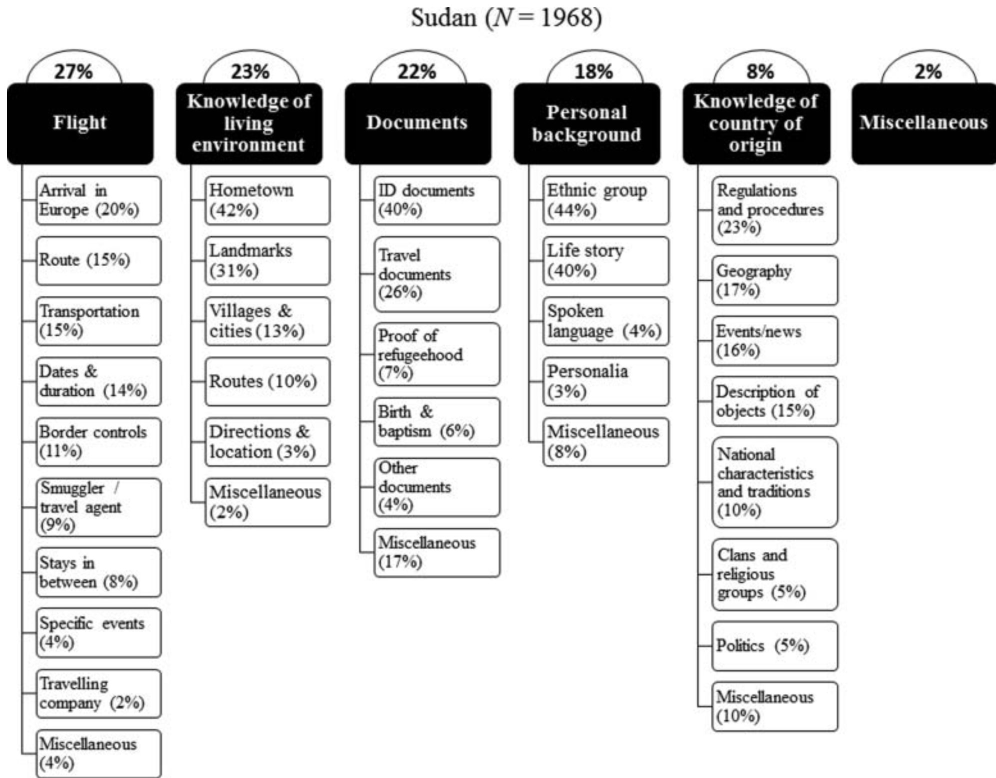

Figure 3. Content of the questions asked in the Sudanese cases.
Note: Subthemes are displayed below each theme. The themes and subthemes are organised based on their size (i.e. frequency of occurrence in the interviews), with the exception that the 'Miscellaneous' subtheme is always listed last.

the flight, documents, the applicant's personal background, and the country of origin. In the Eritrean interviews an additional theme was identified concerning the specific standpoint of the applicant (not further discussed in detail). Questions are coded as miscellaneous if they are too general to fit into one of the themes, or if they are singletons in the sense that they did not recur in other interviews. Despite the minor differences in subthemes between the Eritrean and Sudanese cases, the questions collated under the themes are relatively similar for both types of case.

Knowledge of the Living Environment

The theme *knowledge of living environment* contains questions that assess the applicant's autobiographical and semantic memory about his or her direct living environment in the country of origin. This could either be the place where the applicant grew up or the place where he or she had lived prior to fleeing the country. Questions were asked about things visible in that particular environment, as well as its defining characteristics and geography. For example, a considerable proportion of the questions in both the Eritrean and the Sudanese cases address knowledge about landmarks, such as water sources, mountains, churches and specific buildings and facilities. Other questions seek information about surrounding villages and cities, and routes to and from specific points in the environment. Many Sudanese applicants had lived in a refugee camp inside their

home country (internal dislocation) for a long time. In those cases, questions were often asked which treated the refugee camp as a surrogate for the hometown. Typical for the Eritrean cases are questions about elevation changes in the environment and names and characteristics of specific roads.

Flight

Questions subsumed under the theme *flight* refer to the period between leaving the country of origin and arriving in Europe. Many questions focus, for example, on the route taken to Europe, the moment of arrival in Europe, the means of transportation used, and the smuggler or travel agent. In both the Eritrean and the Sudanese cases, a considerable proportion of the questions (18% and 14%, respectively) are about specific dates and the duration of events.

Documents

The theme *documents* comprises questions about the documents that the asylum seeker had previously possessed. Applicants were often asked whether or not they had possessed identity and travel documents, and where these documents were located. Sometimes applicants were asked for a description of their identity documents. Other documents that could potentially substantiate origin – such as marriage certificates, baptism documents, and school passes – were also regularly addressed.

Personal Background

Questions about the life of the applicant in the country of origin and his or her social identity are combined into the theme *personal background*. These questions focus on gathering information and assessing knowledge about the applicant's ethnic background. With other questions, an image is sketched of the applicant's life story. For example, questions were asked about where the applicant had lived at specific times during his or her life, along with questions about major life events and the applicant's educational and professional background. Questions about language and the nationality of family members are also collated under *personal background*.

Knowledge of Country of Origin

Questions about the country of origin, rather than the direct living environment, also constitute a theme. These questions test the applicant's autobiographical and semantic memory about the home country. Most questions address customs and formal proceedings in the country of origin. Applicants were, for example, asked how the military service is organised or how identity documents are obtained in the country of origin. Questions about recent events or news from the country of origin were also regularly asked. Sudanese applicants were sometimes also asked other questions about the country of origin, for example about politics, clans and ethnic groups other than their own social group, geography, and national characteristics and traditions. They were also asked to describe Sudanese objects, such as vehicles, money, or the flag.

Differences between the Eritrean Cases and the Sudanese Cases

A closer inspection of the proportion of questions constituting each theme shows that the themes are represented differently across the two types of case. Whereas in the Eritrean cases 39% of the questions assess *knowledge of the living environment*, this topic is less often addressed in only 23% of the Sudanese cases. In contrast, in the Sudanese cases more attention is paid to the personal background of the applicant (18% as opposed to 8% in the Eritrean cases) and knowledge of the country of origin (8% as opposed to 3% in the Eritrean cases). The different emphasis may be explained by the observation that Sudanese applicants often lived in refugee camps for a

considerable period of time prior to fleeing to Europe, which made their memory for their original living environment less recent.

Other Observations

During the coding process, some questions stood out because the interviewer's approach seemed either helpful or unhelpful in relation to aiding the applicant to provide a good statement. Several examples are given below. Note that these are examples that are not necessarily exemplary of the general interviewing style, neither did they recur in each interview.

Cultural Misunderstandings

One dialogue illustrated the cultural differences between the interviewer and the applicant:

> Int: How could you explain to me where I could find your house? I go to Jukma, and then…?
>
> App: When you arrive, you ask the very first person where I live, and then you will be given directions.
>
> Int: But there isn't a kind of explanation like 'I live behind the Mosque, just before the hill…'?
>
> App: That we do have. We have very tall trees, so a tree will be indicated.
>
> Int: And about your house, can you give such an explanation about that?
>
> App: There are no trees where I lived with my wife. There is a draw-well close by.

Initially, the answer given by the applicant did not match the intentions of the interviewer. The interviewer could have stopped there and concluded that the applicant was being vague about where he lived, which would be a negative credibility finding. Instead, the interviewer noticed that there might be a difference in how directions are provided in the interviewer's culture compared to the applicant's culture, and that the applicant may not understand what sort of answer is expected. The interviewer adequately clarified what information he was searching for and eventually elicited the information that there was a draw-well close to the applicant's house.

Intuitive Assessments

In asylum cases the language barrier is normally overcome by using an interpreter. Sometimes, however, there is no interpreter who speaks the dialect or tribal language of the applicant, and the interview is instead conducted in one of the official languages of the claimed country of origin. An exchange from such an interview is presented below, in which the interviewer tries to assess the applicant's proficiency in the tribal language to inform the credibility assessment:

> Int: Could you please translate the following sentences for me in your tribal language Fur? 'The house is green'.
>
> App: Don [house]; kerro [green] (phonetic representation).

Since the INS had no Fur-speaking interpreter and since the answers were not audio-recorded but merely reported phonetically, the applicant's answers could not be verified. Hence, the answers could not prove or disprove the applicant's origin. Thereby, the question only seems to serve an intuitive assessment of the credibility of the origin claim.

Complicated Questions

Most questions were posed in clear language and understandable. Sometimes, however, questions were hard to understand. For example:

> My question was about the West. Imagine that you are in Merandi. The sun rises in the East. You stand with your back towards the direction in which the sun rises. Then you look towards the West. Could you now describe what you see then?

In order to answer the question correctly, the applicant has to (1) understand what the interviewer is asking for (i.e. a description of the visible environment from a specific point of view), (2) have a basic understanding of compass points, and (3) conjecture correctly in which direction he or she ought to look according to the interviewer. In case an unsatisfactory answer is given – for example an inaccurate or a vague description – it will be difficult to rule out that the lack of detail or accuracy was caused by a misunderstanding rather than dishonesty.

Questions Inviting Speculation

Some questions seemed to encourage applicants to give an answer even when the answer is not known. At times, interviewers invited applicants to speculate, e.g. 'why didn't your father tell you more about that, you think?'. At other times they stimulated the applicant to estimate or guess to follow-up an 'I don't know' answer, for instance by asking 'could you give an estimation?'. Asking such questions can convey the message that guessing is also acceptable in response to other questions (Fisher, 2010).

Discussion

The current study is the first in which the style, type, and content of questions asked in real-life asylum interviews are examined. The results show that Dutch asylum officials predominantly ask information-gathering questions and only scarcely employ an accusatory or burden communication style. They also show that the interviews mainly consist of closed and fact-checking questions, whereas open questions occur less frequently. The analyses of question content reveal that asylum officials tend to assess the credibility of origin claims by testing applicants' knowledge about their claimed country and area of origin. The findings are evaluated in the light of knowledge about best practice in investigative interviewing.

The question style is coded to examine how asylum officials approach applicants (open-mindedly or sceptically). In line with the findings of van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, et al. (2017), the present study shows that most questions were asked in an information-gathering style. Using an information-gathering approach is good practice, since this method of questioning generally elicits more accurate information (Hartwig et al., 2005; Vrij et al., 2014) and more cues to deception from interviewees (Meissner et al., 2012; Vrij et al., 2007) than an accusatory approach. Employment of an information-gathering style also makes interviewees feel more comfortable (Vanderhallen et al., 2011; Vrij et al., 2006).

The distribution of different question types in the interviews paints a different picture. The Dutch asylum officials primarily asked closed and fact-checking questions, thereby delimiting applicants' answers. No room is given to applicants to provide a free narrative about their origin. A different balance – with more open-ended than closed questions– would be preferable, as these questions generally enhance memory recall and accuracy (Bull, 2010; Fisher, 2010; Milne & Bull, 2006). Posing more open questions can also positively affect the rapport-building between interviewer and interviewee (Walsh & Bull, 2012). On a positive note, forced choice and suggestive questions seem to be asked only sporadically.

A greater proportion of open questions were asked in response to fictitious case vignettes (van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, et al., 2017). A possible explanation for the divergent findings is that asylum officials are aware that they should ask open questions and are capable of doing so under the controlled circumstances of a vignette study, but the high cognitive demand of a real interview impairs them to do so in practice. Asking open questions is more cognitively demanding than asking closed questions and requires practice (Memon, Holley, Milne, Koehnken, & Bull, 1994).

The content of the questions was studied to examine whether the asylum officials used a typical set of questions in their credibility assessments of origin. The overlapping themes in the Eritrean and Sudanese case files indicate that, in order to assess origin, asylum officials tested applicants' knowledge about their immediate living environment, country of origin (for example, customs, news facts, national symbols, and objects) and descent. Thereby, asylum officials seem to assume that people who genuinely originate from the claimed country of origin have ample knowledge about that country, their hometown, and their ethnic background.

The question is whether or not people have such extensive knowledge about their country and town of origin. In 6 out of the 10 Eritrean cases in which the origin claim was contested by the INS after a 'knowledge test', documentary evidence could later prove the origin of the applicant. This implies that truthful applicants may not always be able to answer the knowledge questions satisfactory. Asylum officials may overestimate the capacities of human memory. Take for example the substantial number of questions asking for specific dates or the duration of events; people are generally very poor at remembering such information (Friedman, 2004), and may not be able to answer those questions correctly. Another example is that people may not be able to give a very detailed description of commonly used objects such as their identity documents and the local currency because the specific layout of objects like coins is not particularly relevant to their day-to-day living and needs (Nickerson & Adams, 1979).

Interviewing tactics that either helped or hindered the elicitation of an accurate narrative were also identified. There are risks associated with using the answers to *complex questions* and *questions that invite speculation* in a credibility assessment, because when an incorrect answer is given to such questions memory errors and misunderstandings cannot be ruled out (Fisher, 2010). Additionally, questions of which the answers can only be *intuitively assessed* do not result in evidence that can be used to build a case. In contrast, an open mind and alertness to cultural differences can help elicit more accurate narratives (Powell & Bartholomew, 2003). As suggested by previous research, cultural differences may influence the specificity of asylum seekers' statements (Jobson, 2009) and effective communication (Doornbos, 2006), and may hamper the assessment of truthfulness (Taylor, Larner, Conchie, & van der Zee, 2014). The example in the current study shows that cultural misunderstandings indeed occur easily, but their consequences can be minimised when interviewers are sensitive to cultural differences and willing to adjust their questions to better fit the applicant's understanding of what is being asked.

Strengths and Limitations

By analysing questions that were asked in real cases instead of questions that asylum officials formulated in response to fictitious case vignettes (as in van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, et al., 2017), insight into what happens in practice is obtained. One advantage of using interview transcripts is that the questions were asked in a realistic setting and affected by factors such as time pressure, the presence of an interpreter and the working relationship with the applicant, but without having an extra person present in the room observing the interview. As such, the actual interviewing practice could be evaluated without the potential influence of social desirability induced by the presence of a researcher.

Another advantage of using transcripts is that the context in which questions were asked (i.e., their relation to previous questions and answers) can be taken into account. Within this context, it becomes easier to code the questions for style. This advantage is reflected in a higher inter-rater agreement for style than in van Veldhuizen et al. (2016).

A possible downside of using transcripts is that they are created during the interview

and may not always give a verbatim representation of what has been said. However, since the questions are written down before they are translated by the interpreter, it is posited that the questions are a relatively good rendition of what has been asked by the interviewer. It is by contrast impossible to determine to what extent the questions were also literally translated to the applicant – that is, even when the interviewer poses an open question, the interpreter may translate this into a closed question, thereby (unintendedly) delimiting the answer of the applicant. The answers of the applicants are not studied in the present study, but when assessing credibility it should be taken into account that the process of translation may affect the kind of answer that is elicited (Ewens et al., 2014).

It was decided that individual questions would be coded for style rather than coding the style of the interview as a whole. One of the often-used indicators in coding the style of a full interview is the balance of open versus closed questions, with a high proportion of the latter being indicative of an accusatory style (e.g. Vrij et al., 2006). Although in the current sample the questions are mostly non-sceptical and therefore coded as information-gathering questions, most of the interviews would probably be coded as accusatory considering the high proportion of closed questions. However, in the present operationalisation of style and type a clear distinction is made between the two concepts, with the former referring to the way in which the interviewer approaches the interview and the latter referring to the technical characteristics of questions. As such it is believed that the present results concerning both style and type are meaningful.

In the results for style and type, the number of accusatory questions and suggestive questions may have been slightly underestimated because the utterances that are statements rather than questions are not analysed. Many of these 71 utterances confronted the applicant with an inconsistency and would probably be coded as accusatory. Other utterances stated ‘I repeat the question’ and would have been coded as suggestive if analysed. Since this only affects approximately 2% of the total number of questions, including these questions would not affect the results or the interpretation thereof.

Recommendations and Future Research

Comparing the findings with scientific knowledge about best practice in investigative interviewing gives rise to several recommendations for practice and future research. To start with, although the style of questioning is generally in line with best practice, the working alliance between interviewer and applicant may be further improved by reformulating ‘why’ questions into ‘what’ questions. Take for example the question ‘why did you only decide to leave the country on 7 November 2011?’. Depending on the manner in which the question is asked, it may be an information-gathering question or rather a sceptical, accusatory one. Reformulating the question into ‘what was the immediate cause for your decision to leave the country on 7 November 2011?’ renders it neutral and no longer likely to be perceived by the applicant as accusatory, making it easier to classify it as purely an information-gathering question.

Second, asking more open questions facilitates the assessment of comprehensiveness of a statement. In asylum cases, the applicant’s credibility is sometimes undermined by vague statements that lack detail. It is questionable whether this is justified if this observation is the result of an interview which consisted of a disproportionate number of closed questions. If a comprehensive account is expected from the applicant then the questions should invite the applicant to elaborate and provide detail. The Dutch court pointed this out in the case AWB-13_18748 (2013) of a Somali woman seeking asylum; the judge explicated that if the officials wanted to obtain more elaborated answers then fewer closed question should have been used in the interview.

To increase the proportion of open questions throughout asylum interviews, the provision of additional practical training for asylum officials might be needed. However, there is insufficient insight into the training that asylum officials receive to provide concrete recommendations for improvements as a result of the present research. Considering that asylum officials do seem to know that it is best practice to pose open questions (van Veldhuizen, Horselenberg, et al., 2016), there may not be a problem in the acquisition of knowledge and skill in the training; rather, there may be difficulties with applying this knowledge in practice. However, more research – for example focusing on the effectiveness of the training that asylum officials receive – is needed to justify this conclusion.

Third, the validity of the information obtained in the interview may be further improved by incorporating a do-not-guess instruction, emphasising that applicants should not guess when they do not know the answer (Fisher, 2010). Different questions that invited the applicant to speculate or give estimations in their answers, as well as closed questions that seem to stimulate guessing (Waterman, Blades, & Spencer, 2001), were found in the sample of questions analysed in the present study. If applicants start guessing then it is difficult to assess to what extent their statements reflect their actual knowledge; inaccurate answers and inconsistencies may arise from incorrect guesses.

Fourth, including a free-recall invitation in the interview may also elicit more comprehensive narratives about origin. In this way, the applicant gets the opportunity to speak about his or her country of origin and previous living environment without being interrupted (Davis, McMahon, & Greenwood, 2005; Memon, Meissner, & Fraser, 2010). A free-recall phase is beneficial for several reasons, including more accurate recall, more time to search memory, and inviting the applicant to use his or her own words and concepts (Powell, 2002). A free-recall phase is already used by the INS to elicit the persecution story in substantial interviews. The following instruction is used:

> You will now get the opportunity to tell in your own words about the immediate reasons for you to leave your country of origin. I want to ask you to tell as much as possible in a chronological order, and where you can, to include names, places, and dates.

A similar invitation for free recall may also help the asylum official to tailor follow-up questions to the experiences and memory of the applicant. In current INS practices, a frame of reference seems to be used to determine what level of comprehensiveness can be expected of the applicant. This frame of reference consists of a short description of the course of life and educational background of the applicant, for instance: 'Young, unmarried man who partly completed primary education. Can read and write. No other education. Worked as farmer with horse and carriage'. The content of the questions, however, seems to be guided mostly by the available information on the country of origin and the set of questions that is typically asked to assess the credibility of origin claims. The asylum official might know of a river close to the claimed village of origin and therefore ask questions about that river. The risk associated with this approach is that if the applicant cannot provide comprehensive statements about the river, it is difficult to determine whether this lack of comprehensiveness is the result of a lie about origin or a genuine lack of knowledge about the river. By eliciting a free narrative about the area of origin, in contrast, the interviewer obtains leads about places and concepts that the applicant has knowledge of. If the applicant spontaneously mentions the river in his or her free narrative then the asylum official can elaborate on the river in the remainder of the interview.

More scientific knowledge about what people generally know about their country and town of origin would also be valuable.

Just as it is known that that human memory for certain details such as peripheral visual details (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000) and temporal details (i.e. time and duration; Friedman, 2004) is notoriously poor, there may be information about people's environment that is or is not typically remembered. Future research could focus on what specific knowledge is and is not possessed about the hometowns of honest applicants. Also, the validity of the knowledge questions typically asked to assess origin could be tested, with validity referring to the extent to which they accurately discriminate between those who are being truthful about their origin and those who are lying.

Conclusion

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to systematically evaluate the questions asked in real-life asylum cases. Asylum officials often assume that testing the asylum seekers' knowledge of their home country aids the credibility assessment of a claim about origin. Asylum seekers are expected to provide detailed information about their living environment, their descent, and their country in general. When asking for such knowledge and detail, two preconditions should be fulfilled by the immigration service. First, interviewing techniques should be utilised that give the applicant the opportunity to satisfy the requirements of comprehensiveness and high detail – that is, the predominantly open and information-gathering questions should be asked in order to encourage the applicant to give comprehensive statements. Second, only knowledge that a genuine applicant can be reasonably be expected to have should be addressed. Looking at current interviewing practices in the asylum procedure, a better balance of open versus closed questions in combination with a free-recall invitation could increase the amount and accuracy of information obtained for a credibility assessment. In the meantime, more empirical studies are needed to examine what people typically know about their origin.

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