Experiences of asylum interviews by asylum officials, interpreters and asylum seekers in Finland

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Abstract

Purpose – *Recent legal psychological research has highlighted shortcomings in asylum interviews; however, few studies have examined how the interview participants (interviewer, interpreter and asylum seeker) experience and perceive the interviews. The purpose of this study was to explore how these interview participants experience rapport and communication within asylum interviews, as well as to investigate how well interviewers' and interpreters' views align with empirical evidence regarding best-practice interviewing.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Interviewers (*n *= 62), interpreters (*n *= 63) and asylum seekers (*n *= 49) answered an online survey with mainly closed questions about preparation, rapport, interview content, interpretation and overall experiences of the interviews. Interviewers and interpreters reported experiences from interviews conducted in 2021, whereas asylum seekers referred to their interview experiences from 2016 to 2022. Data were explored descriptively.*

Findings – *The views of interviewers and interpreters were mostly aligned with evidence-based interviewing recommendations. However, contrary to recommendations, interpreters reported favouring closed questions over open prompts. Most asylum seekers reported feeling nervous or afraid during the interviews, and three-fourths reported difficulties in sharing their experiences and disclosing personal information. This indicates that more work on how to build rapport in cross-cultural, interpreter-assisted interviews is needed. The interpreters' preference for using closed questions presents a risk to interview quality that should be mitigated through training for interpreters as well as improved collaboration between interviewers and interpreters.*

Originality/value – *To the best of the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to explore experiences of asylum interviews from the perspectives of interviewers, interpreters and asylum seekers.*

Keywords *Asylum interview, Asylum seekers, Investigative interviewing, Interpretation, Rapport, Cross-cultural interviewing*

Paper type *Research paper*

Millions of individuals are forced to flee war, violence and persecution each year and seek protection outside of their home countries. In 2023, over one million people sought asylum within the European Union (EU; Eurostat, 2024). Despite the clear theoretical definition of a refugee (United Nations, 1951), the procedure of adjudicating asylum claims is complex, as physical evidence supporting the applicants' testimonies is rare [European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), 2024; Thomas, 2006]. Consequently, the interviews conducted with the asylum seekers are often the basis for the entire application. To reach correct asylum decisions, it is vital that the interviewing methods are based on empirical research.

Despite this, asylum interviews have only recently received more focus from researchers in legal psychology (see, e.g. Bruïne *et al.*, 2023; Skrifvars *et al.*, 2020, 2022a, 2022b; van Veldhuizen, 2017). Although the asylum context differs from the criminal context,

parallels can be drawn between an asylum seeker and 1) an eyewitness (as both must remember and describe personally witnessed experiences), 2) a victim (as both may be in vulnerable positions and have experienced negative life events), and 3) a suspect (as both may be inclined to lie, e.g. to increase the chances of receiving asylum; van Veldhuizen, 2017). Importantly, research on investigative interviews in a variety of settings show that relying on certain principles is advisable, such as building rapport and asking open questions in an information-gathering style (Brandon *et al.*, 2018; Meissner *et al.*, 2023; Méndez *et al.*, 2021). However, asylum interviews are characterized by a multitude of complicating factors, such as differences in cultural background between interview participants, interviewees with experiences of negative life events, and the presence of an interpreter (Bruïne *et al.*, 2023; Herlihy and Turner, 2009). This interplay may impact memory recall and hinder effective communication and full disclosures in interviews (Vredeveldt *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, the interviews are affected by the increasingly sceptical and hostile socio-political environment, sometimes described as a "culture of disbelief" (Jubany, 2011; Ottosson *et al.*, 2024). Thus, more research is needed on how to adapt recommended interviewing strategies (e.g. rapport building) to interpreter-assisted, cross-cultural interviews with vulnerable witness, such as asylum interviews.

Previous studies have examined the quality of asylum interviews focusing on the questions asked (Skrifvars *et al.*, 2020, 2022a; van Veldhuizen *et al.*, 2018). The quality of the interpretation in asylum interviews has also been the focus of several authors (see, e.g. Pöllabauer, 2023 for a review of the literature), and a recent review summarized research on asylum-seeking youth (Chilliak *et al.*, 2024). However, there is a lack of studies including the perspectives of how all interview participants (i.e. the interviewer, interpreter and the asylum seeker) perceive the interviews. These perceptions may have much to say about how well evidence-based interviewing strategies are implemented and perceived within this context. Therefore, the current study aimed to expand the knowledge on how asylum interviewing procedures can be improved by collecting experiences and views about the interviews from interviewers, interpreters and asylum seekers in Finland.

Asylum in Finland

Finland receives between 2,000 and 5,000 asylum applications yearly (The Finnish Immigration Service, 2024a). This number has been relatively stable since 2015, when over 30,000 applications were registered in Finland. In 2024, the acceptance rate of asylum applications was 38%, whereas the rejection rate was 21% (The Finnish Immigration Service, 2024a). The rest of the applications were either dismissed (15%), indicating that the application was not processed in Finland (e.g. due to the Dublin Regulation) or expired (26%), indicating that the applicant has withdrawn the application or left the country (The Finnish Immigration Service, 2024b). The processing time of an application is 6 months (The Finnish Immigration Service, 2024b).

Finland adheres to the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), which defines the basic procedures and principles of the asylum procedure within the EU (European Comission, 2024). Asylum seekers in Finland register their asylum application with the border control or police upon arrival. Next, the applicant is invited to a full-day-long asylum interview with the Finnish Immigration Service. If necessary, more interviews can be arranged. The interviews are conducted in line with the guidelines on interviewing principles and techniques provided by the EUAA (EASO, 2019).

Evidence-based interviewing recommendations

To ensure the acquisition of reliable information, it is crucial to employ evidence-based interviewing techniques (Brandon *et al.*, 2018; Méndez *et al.*, 2021). The guidelines and training materials for asylum interviewers in the EU, provided by the EUAA, are largely in line with empirical research on best-practice interviewing (EASO, 2019). In what follows we

outline evidence-based interview phases, including preparation, introduction, rapport-building, questioning strategies and interview closure (Brandon *et al.*, 2018).

Preparation

Previous research (Brandon *et al.*, 2018) and the EUAA guidelines (EASO, 2019) stress the importance of thorough preparation before an interview to reduce the risk of errors of judgement and the effect of bias. Recommended preparation for asylum interviews includes physical (e.g. technical and seating arrangements), mental (addressing personal beliefs and values) and case-related arrangements (e.g. outlining relevant topics and identifying missing information). Furthermore, establishing the asylum seeker's background, for example, their educational history, is vital for tailoring the interview questions to maximize the amount of information gathered (EASO, 2019).

Despite this guidance, self-report studies have identified a lack of regular planning and preparation for interviews observed in the criminal and legal context (Walsh *et al.*, 2020; Walsh and Bull, 2011). In view of the fact that asylum interviews take place in a setting where the interviewer and interviewee represent different cultural backgrounds and the interviews are conducted with the help of interpreters, thorough preparation is, if anything, even more important (Hope *et al.*, 2022; Vredeveldt *et al.*, 2023).

Interview dynamics and rapport

Rapport is defined by Vallano *et al.* (2015) as the bond or connection between the interviewer and the interviewee. Building rapport can lead to a positive interaction between the interviewer and interviewee and, in addition, facilitate cooperation and eliciting information in an interview (Abbe and Brandon, 2013; Gabbert *et al.*, 2021). The EUAA manual highlights the importance of rapport-building during asylum interviews (EASO, 2019). Tactics that have been highlighted in the criminal context for improving rapport building include verifications, such as showing a correct understanding of the interviewee's narrative (Davis *et al.*, 2016), or trust tactics, which may include offering a bottle of water, food or a break (Matsumoto and Hwang, 2018). Furthermore, non-verbal cues such as smiling, using a fitting tone of voice and maintaining a relaxed body posture are all associated with increased rapport (Gabbert *et al.*, 2021). However, to date there has been limited research to understand how rapport can be built and maintained within an asylum context, especially given the added challenge of various cultural backgrounds that may differentiate what behaviours are appropriate to build rapport. For example, maintaining eye contact to build rapport may be perceived as intimidating for applicants from some cultures (Hope *et al.*, 2022). Thus, this research is novel to explore how interviewers and interpreters use rapport-building within the asylum context and how asylum seekers perceive this.

Questioning techniques

Best-practice guidelines recommend the use of an exploratory and rapport-based information-gathering interviewing style over the confrontational accusatory style of questioning (Meissner *et al.*, 2023; Vrij *et al.*, 2014). The information-gathering questioning style is preferred, as it elicits more detailed and accurate information compared to the accusatory style (Vrij *et al.*, 2014). Furthermore, research on questioning techniques advocates the use of open questions as it allows the interviewee to freely describe their experiences. Open questions also tend to yield longer, more detailed and more accurate answers, compared to closed questions (Brandon *et al.*, 2018; Fisher, 2010). Closed questions, in contrast, are more directive in the answer they wish to obtain and elicit less details than open questions.

Moreover, interviewers are recommended to use a free-recall phase at the beginning of the interview, allowing the interviewee to give a free account of everything that is relevant for the purpose of the interview (Brandon *et al.*, 2018). For the interviewer, this phase involves employing effective communication strategies, such as active listening, attentive body language and the use of open phrases such as "Tell me more". Once the free recall is obtained, the recommendation is to use open follow-up questions to focus on topics that need more elaboration (Brandon *et al.*, 2018). When reaching the end of the interview, the recommended approach is for the interviewer to give a summary of what has been said, or a verification, as this tactic can elicit further memories and has also been associated with increased rapport (Brandon *et al.*, 2018; Davis *et al.*, 2016). In general, the EUAA guidelines adhere to the aforementioned principles.

Recent research in legal psychology has identified shortcomings in interviewing practices in asylum interviews. When van Veldhuizen *et al.* (2016) and Kask *et al.* (2023) asked asylum officials and police cadets to form questions to vignettes of fictive asylum narratives, most participants seemed to be aware that open questions are preferable in interviews. However, this knowledge does not necessarily translate into actual interviewing practices, as analyses of real asylum interview transcripts in Finland and The Netherlands (Skrifvars *et al.*, 2020, 2022a; van Veldhuizen *et al.*, 2018) found that the majority of all questions were closed and fact-checking questions. On the other hand, most questions were asked in the recommended information-gathering style. This indicates that asylum interviewers only partly follow best practice guidelines.

To date, little is known regarding how the interviewers subjectively experience the interview situations. The current study will extend previous research by exploring the interviewers' subjective perceptions of the preparation, rapport-building and questioning phases in asylum interviews.

Interpretation in asylum interviews

Interpreters are more often than not needed in asylum interviews across Europe (Pöllabauer, 2015). The EUAA emphasizes that a professional interpreter should be impartial, neutral, and maintain confidentiality (EASO, 2019). Impartiality involves not interpreting in cases where the interpreter is directly involved, while neutrality requires accurate interpretation without adding or omitting information. In addition, the EUAA manual highlights that the interpreter should possess language proficiency, listening skills, familiarity with the asylum interview method (e.g. open questions, the free narrative phase) and an understanding of the asylum seeker's cultural background.

Research from the criminal context has found that interpreters can negatively affect the interview, for example by limiting interviewees' disclosures or hindering rapport (Ernberg *et al.*, 2022; Ewens *et al.*, 2016; Gomez-Bedoya, 2024; Korkman *et al.*, 2024; Walsh *et al.*, 2020). Research on interpretation within the asylum context has found similar concerns (Amato and Gallai, 2024; Dubus and LeBoeuf, 2019; Jiménez-Ivars and León-Pinilla, 2018; Keselman *et al.*, 2010; Pöllabauer, 2023). In addition to issues related to incomplete or incorrect interpretations and a widespread lack of trained interpreters, the role of the interpreter and the interpreter's influence on credibility ratings are often discussed in the literature (Pöllabauer, 2023). Whereas guidelines highlight the neutrality of interpreters, research has found that interpreters sometimes take on the active role of intercultural agents or cultural liaisons, and that in practice, the idea of interpreters as passive conduits is impossible (Amato and Gallai, 2024; Dubus and LeBoeuf, 2019; Pöllabauer, 2023).

Other concerns relate to mistrust between interview participants and power imbalance in the interview setting due to shifting degrees of cooperation and loyalty between the interpreter, the official, and the asylum seeker (Amato and Gallai, 2024). Furthermore, analyses of a sample of interview transcripts from asylum-seeking minors in Sweden found that interpreters consciously or unconsciously distorted the format or content of the questions, often turning open questions and

free narrative requests into closed question types (Keselman *et al.*, 2008, 2010). The authors found that 33% of all the statements from the interviewer or interviewee were modified by the interpreters. In addition, Jiménez-Ivars and León-Pinilla (2018) found that interpreters in Spain were not happy with their working conditions, and refugees described negative and frustrating experiences of interpretation. The current study builds upon this research to focus on experiences of interpretation by interviewers, interpreters and asylum seekers in Finland.

Asylum seekers' experiences of asylum interviews

A recent review of the literature on asylum seeking minors included a number of qualitative studies on their experiences of asylum interviews (Chilliak *et al.*, 2024). Central findings were that minors often mistrusted the officials and reported feeling stressed and anxious before the interviews. Youth also described being asked unclear and closed questions and not fully understanding the asylum process (Chilliak *et al.*, 2024). Similar findings have been described in studies on the experiences of adult asylum seekers (Bögner *et al.*, 2010; Chaffelson *et al.*, 2023). Bögner *et al.* (2010) interviewed 27 asylum seekers in the UK and found that the majority reported difficulties with disclosing personal details, such as experiences of sexual abuse, because they felt too traumatized or too ashamed. Two-thirds of the respondents reported negative experiences, for example, that the interviewer's reaction made them feel like criminals, which increased their anxiety and interfered with their ability to disclose. What most impeded or aided disclosure was interviewer qualities of empathy, patience, acceptance and non-judgemental listening, alongside situational and contextual factors.

Chaffelson *et al.* (2023) interviewed eight asylum seekers about their experiences with asylum interviews in the UK. Participants described the asylum interviews as destructing and psychologically damaging, and viewed the interviewers as unnecessary cruel. For nearly all participants, granting of asylum did not alleviate the negative psychological consequences of the asylum process. Most participants perceived the system to be designed to ensure that applicants are rejected. These findings highlight the need for further research of how asylum seekers experience the interviews, particularly with asylum seekers in other countries.

The current study

To improve the quality of asylum interviews, more research investigating the subjective experiences of the interview participants is needed. To our best knowledge, this is the first study to investigate experiences of asylum interviews from all three perspectives – interviewers, interpreters and asylum seekers (albeit, not necessarily from the same asylum interview). Therefore, the current study aimed to explore 1) perceptions of interview practices used within asylum interviews and how well the perceived practice corresponds with empirical evidence regarding best-practice interviewing guidelines; 2) experiences of rapport and communication within the interview by all three stakeholders. Due to the limited previous research on this topic, our aim was to obtain descriptive information to explore trends within this context and provide a base for future research.

Method

Ethical considerations

The study received permission by the Joint Research Ethics Board for Psychology and Speech and Language Pathology of Åbo Akademi University.

Participants

To participate, asylum interviewers ($n = 62$) had to be over 18 years old and had to have worked as an interviewer in at least five official Finnish asylum interviews conducted by the Finnish Immigration Service during 2021 (see Table 1 for descriptives for all participants).

Table 1 Participant demographics

Participants	*Gender*	*Age*	*Years of education*	*Years of working with asylum interviews*	*Years of working as interpreter*	*Country of origin*	*Current asylum status*	*Year of application*
Interviewers ($n = 62$, completion rate 90%)	Female $n = 52$ (84%) Male $n = 8$ (13%) Do not want to answer $n = 2$ (3%)	$M = 34.2$ SD = 6.63	$M = 18.2$ SD = 1.76	$M = 2.87$ SD = 2.92				
Interpreters ($n = 63$, completion rate 51%)	Female $n = 35$ (56%) Male $n = 25$ (40%) Do not want to answer $n = 3$ (4%)	$M = 47.0$ SD = 9.49	$M = 16.4$ SD = 3.30	$M = 8.80$ SD = 6.70	$M = 14.7$ SD = 6.66			
Asylum seekers ($n = 49$, completion rate 80%)	Male $n = 32$ (67%) Female $n = 16$ (33%)	$M = 31.48$ SD = 7.63	$M = 8.5$ SD = 6.26			Afghanistan $n = 20$ (43%) Iraq $n = 12$ (25%) Turkey $n = 8$ (16%) Iran $n = 6$ (12%) Yemen $n = 1$ (2%)	Approved asylum $n = 40$ (82%) Rejected asylum $n = 2$ (4%) Ongoing process $n = 1$ (2%) Ongoing appeal $n = 1$ (2%) Other $n = 3$ (6%)	2016 $n = 10$ (20%) 2017 $n = 2$ (4%) 2018 $n = 8$ (16%) 2019 $n = 8$ (16%) 2020 $n = 2$ (4%) 2021 $n = 11$ (22%) 2022 $n = 8$ (16%) *Mdn* = 2019

Source: Authors' own work

Interpreters ($n = 63$) had to be over 18 years old and had to have worked as an interpreter in at least three official Finnish asylum interviews conducted by the Finnish Immigration Service during 2021.

Asylum seekers ($n = 49$) had to be over 18 years old and had to have participated in at least one official Finnish asylum interview as an applicant. No requirements on the year of the interview were specified to ensure a sufficient number of respondents. However, we later decided to exclude participants who had been interviewed before 2016 or who had not reported the year of their interviews ($n = 6$), to ensure that all participants referred to interviews conducted under similar circumstances. This resulted in a final sample of 49 asylum seekers. Moreover, the participants had to know one of the languages the survey was available in (Finnish, English, Arabic, Dari and Somali).

Materials

We created two online surveys on the platform SurveyAnalytics, one survey for interviewers and interpreters and another survey for asylum seekers. The surveys consisted of multiple-choice questions, rating scale questions using a Likert scale of 1–5, and a limited number of open questions. The rating scales were used to measure a participant's level of agreement: 1) disagree, 2) somewhat disagree, 3) neither agree nor disagree, 4) somewhat agree and 5) agree; or frequency: 1) almost never/never, 2) seldom, 3) sometimes, 4) often and 5) almost always/always. Open questions were included to provide additional insights beyond the multiple-choice format. These were optional to answer. The surveys took approximately 20 min to complete.

The survey for interviewers and interpreters included a section for demographics and the following five main topics about experiences of working in asylum interviews: 1) preparation, 2) rapport, 3) interview content, 4) interpretation and 5) general experiences. Slightly different questions were asked of the interviewers and interpreters. Mainly, interpreters were asked more questions about interpretation within the asylum interview. The survey was available in Finnish.

The survey for asylum seekers was available in Arabic, Dari and Somali (which were three most common languages spoken among asylum seekers in Finland in 2021; The Finnish Immigration Service, 2021) as well as Finnish and English. In addition to a section on demographics, five main topics were included in the survey: 1) participants in the interview, 2) interview dynamics and rapport, 3) interview content, 4) interpretation and 5) general experiences. No questions were compulsory to answer.

The full surveys are available in the Online Supplementary Appendix A (https://osf.io/axm57/?view_only=7229f7fecc694c2ea542949c5ddfb564).

Procedure

Interviewers and interpreters. The survey was co-developed by the research team together with the Finnish Immigration Service and two asylum lawyers. Participation in the study was entirely anonymous and voluntary. In December 2021, we sent the survey to our contacts at the immigration service, who passed it on to all of their employees working with asylum interviewing at the time ($n = 85$; The Finnish Immigration Service, 2021) as well as the organizations from which they purchase their interpretation services. We also sent the survey to 1) all interpreters listed in the Register of Legal Interpreters in Finland (except interpreters only interpreting in Western European languages); and 2) interpreters listed on the webpage of the Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters interpreting to the following languages: Arabic, Dari, Persian, Somali, Kurdish and Turkish.

Asylum seekers. The survey was developed in cooperation with the research team, two refugees who have previously taken part in official Finnish asylum interviews and obtained

refugee status, two persons who have acted as support persons in asylum interviews, two legal representatives of asylum seekers and three translators who translated the survey to the previously mentioned languages. Participation in the study was entirely anonymous and voluntary.

We used a snowball sampling method to recruit participants. We shared the survey with several organizations, personal acquaintances of the research team and on Facebook. In addition, after completing the survey, participants were asked to share the survey with others who fit the inclusion criteria. To ensure that asylum seekers did not mistakenly believe that responding to the survey could have any effect on past or present asylum applications, we did not involve the immigration service or reception centres in recruiting asylum seekers. As a reward for participation, participants could choose to participate in a lottery of three gift cards worth €50 each.

Data analyses

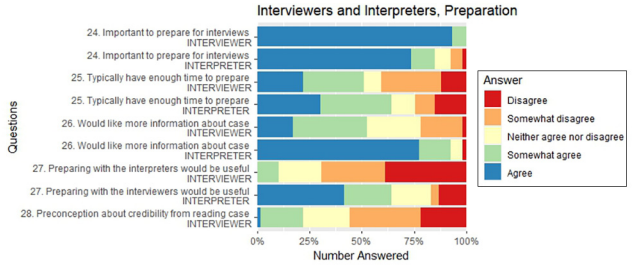
Descriptive statistics were aggregated for each group (interviewers, interpreters, asylum seekers) in the statistical software program SPSS and graphs were created in R. The data were explored via distributions and frequencies of the responses. Due to the differences in methods, the results for asylum seekers are presented separately from the results for interviewers and interpreters. Due to the size of the data aggregated from all three surveys, we do not include all results in the current paper (e.g. responses from open questions). All results are available in the Online Supplementary Appendix B (https://osf.io/axm57/?view_only=7229f7fecc694c2ea542949c5ddfb564).

Results

Interviewers and interpreters

Preparation. All interviewers and 85% of interpreters either agreed or somewhat agreed that preparation is important for each interview (Figure 1). Interviewers and interpreters reported different challenges with preparation. Almost half of the interviewers (41%) reported that they do not have enough time to prepare, whereas nearly all interpreters (93%) reported that they would like to have more information about the case before the interview. Over three-fourths of the interviewers (77%) and interpreters (81%) reported that they seldom or never prepare together with someone else. However, where over half of the interpreters (64%) reported that they would like to prepare together with the interviewer, few interviewers (10%) agreed with this.

Figure 1 Interviewers' ($n = 59$) and interpreters' ($n = 53$) agreement with statements on preparation



Source: Authors' own work

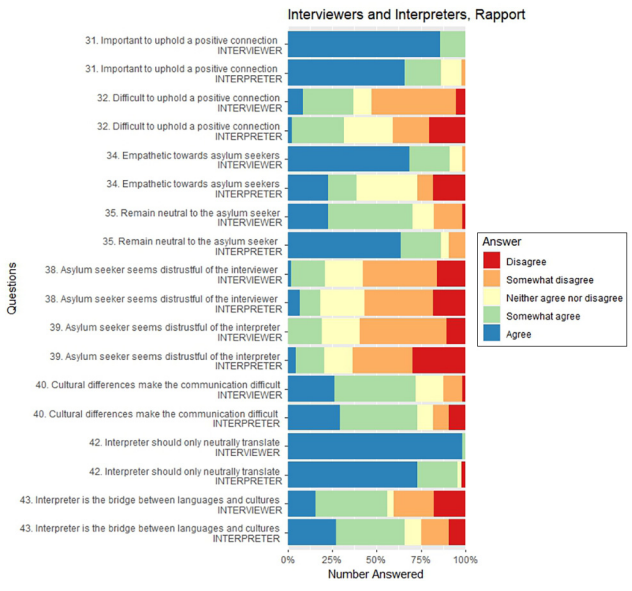
Amongst the interviewers, 87% received at least some information about the case or applicant before the interview, and on average, interviewers spent 4.1 h preparing for an interview ($SD = 1.41$, range = 2.0–8.0). Contrastingly, half (51%) of the interpreters received no information about the case or applicant before the interview and they spent on average 1.01 h ($SD = 1.01$, range = 0.0–6.0) preparing for each interview.

Rapport. All interviewers and 86% of interpreters either agreed or somewhat agreed that it is important to uphold a positive connection with the asylum seeker (Figure 2). When asked about the difficulty of maintaining this connection, the responses varied, with roughly one-third of the interviewers (37%) and the interpreters (32%) reporting that they did find it challenging and roughly half of both groups reporting that they did not (53% of interviewers and 42% of interpreters). Almost all interviewers (91%) agreed or somewhat agreed that empathy should be shown towards the asylum seeker; however, 70% also agreed that interviewers should remain neutral. Contrastingly, the interpreters mostly expressed neutrality towards the asylum seeker (86%).

Interviewers and interpreters revealed a positive attitude towards the typically predominating atmosphere in asylum interviews, noting however, rare occurrences of distrust between the participants. Three-fourths of both interviewers (72%) and interpreters (73%) agreed or somewhat agreed that cultural differences complicate the communication with the asylum seeker. Regarding the role of the interpreter, the reports were somewhat contradicting. All interviewers and almost all interpreters (95%) agreed that the interpreter's role is only to neutrally translate the conversation. Nevertheless, more than half of the respondents from both groups (interviewers 56%; interpreters 66%) also agreed or somewhat agreed that the role of interpreters is to act as a bridge between languages and cultures in the interview.

Interview content. Interviewers and interpreters generally acknowledged the importance of the free narrative phase, although one-third of the interpreters (34%) also agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement that the free narrative phase is "too long to be worth it"

Figure 2 Interviewers' ($n = 57$) and interpreters' ($n = 44$) agreement with statements on rapport



Source: Authors' own work

(Figure 3). No interviewers preferred closed questions over open questions and three-fourths (77%) did not agree that closed questions are as effective as open questions in eliciting detailed and honest answers. Contrastingly, almost half of the interpreters (43%) preferred closed questions over open questions, and more than half (56%) agreed or somewhat agreed that closed questions are as effective as open questions in eliciting detailed and honest answers. One-third of the interviewers (35%) and two-thirds of the interpreters (68%) agreed or somewhat agreed that very specific questions are needed to get the information required for the decision-making.

Other noteworthy findings were that many respondents (both interviewers and interpreters) found that asylum seekers often need a lot of instructions or guidance to focus on relevant aspects of their story, that asylum seekers largely differ in how detailed answers they provide, and that it seems difficult for asylum seekers to discuss sensitive and personal topics.

Interpretation. Most interviewers (88%) but around half of the interpreters (57%) agreed or somewhat agreed that the interpretation in Finnish asylum interviews is generally of high quality (Figure 4). Interviewers (84%) and interpreters (67%) generally agreed that interpreters possess sufficient skills in Finnish and the target language. Most interpreters (84%) reported that there are large differences in the competence among interpreters in Finland, and half of the interviewers (59%) agreed or somewhat agreed with this.

Almost all interpreters (97%) reported that they do not add any explanations of their own to the asylum seeker or the interviewer regarding the conversation (Figure 5). Around three-fourths of the interpreters (83%) reported they seldom or never had difficulties understanding the asylum seekers' responses or finding the correct words in either language. None of the interpreters mentioned linguistic difficulties in understanding the interviewer or finding the questions inappropriate.

Figure 3 Interviewers' ($n = 57$) and interpreters' ($n = 38$) agreement with statements on interview content

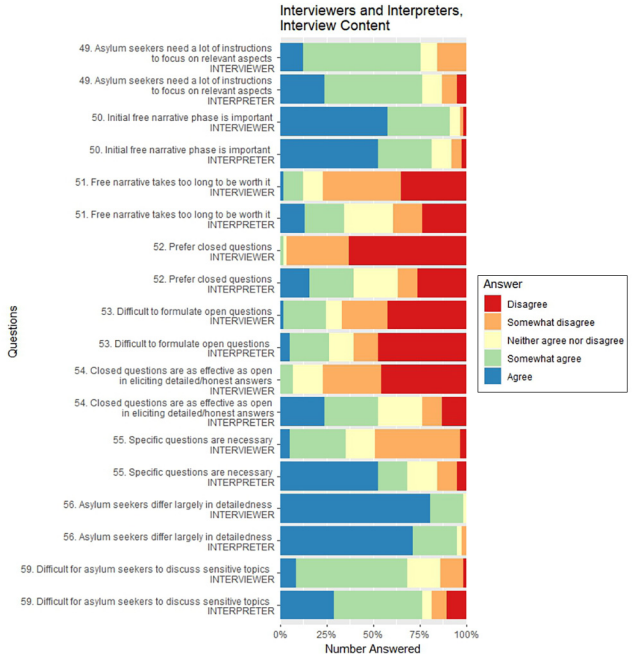


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Figure 4 Interviewers' ($n = 56$) and interpreters' ($n = 36$) agreement with statements on interpretation

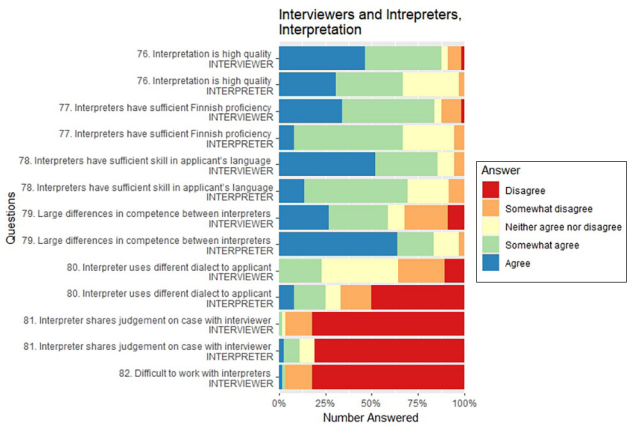

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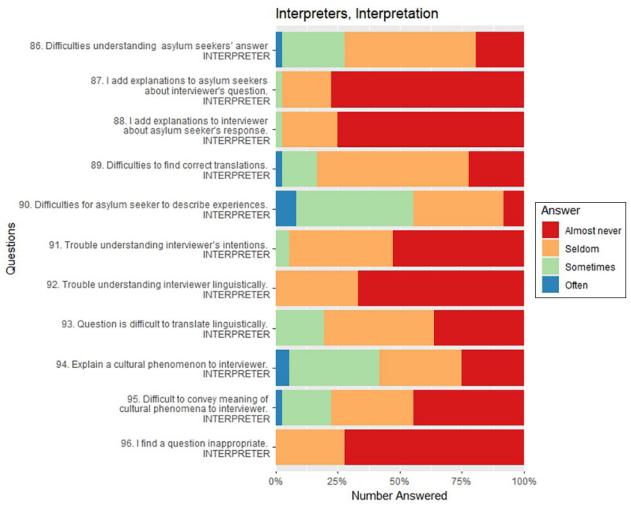
Figure 5 Interpreters' ($n = 56$) reported levels of frequency on statements on interpretation



Source: Authors' own work

Asylum seekers

Participants in the interview. Overall, most female asylum seekers (86%) were interviewed by a female interviewer, whereas only one-third of all male asylum seekers (31%) were interviewed by a male interviewer. The gender of the interpreter varied for both female and male asylum seekers (40% of female applicants had a female interpreter, 72% of male applicants had a male interpreter). Most asylum seekers did not express a request regarding the gender of either the interviewer (91%) or the interpreter (87%), largely due to lack of awareness of this option (90% interviewers, 83% interpreters) or lack of opportunity to express a preference (90% interviewers, 90% interpreters). Moreover, over half of the

asylum seekers (56%) expressed that they made or would have liked to make a request regarding other aspects of the interpreter than gender (e.g. nationality, religious group), but only 28% of the requests made were accepted. When asked how a denied request affected the interview, roughly one-fifth of the asylum seekers reported that it made them uncomfortable (23%) or hindered them in sharing their story (18%). In addition, a small group of asylum seekers (8%) reported that they knew the interpreter personally.

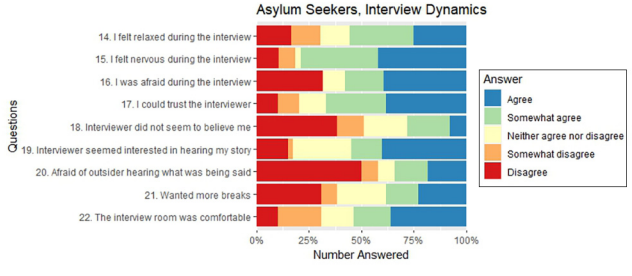
Interview dynamics and rapport. Half of the asylum seekers (54%) agreed or somewhat agreed that they felt relaxed during the interview (Figure 6). On the other hand, most asylum seekers (80%) either agreed or somewhat agreed that they felt nervous during the interview, and over half (59%) reported that they were afraid. Two-thirds of the asylum seekers (68%) agreed or somewhat agreed that they felt they could trust the interviewer, whereas almost one-third (30%) reported they felt that the interviewer did not believe in their account. About one-third of the asylum seekers (36%) agreed or somewhat agreed they were afraid that an outsider would be able to hear what was being said, whereas over half (56%) did not have any such concerns.

Interview content. Asylum seekers generally agreed that they were asked to freely tell their story from beginning to end (88%) and that they were given enough time to give their account (83%; Figure 7). Nevertheless, over half of the asylum seekers (58%) reported that they were interrupted while speaking, and almost half (42%) agreed or somewhat agreed that they had been instructed to keep their answers short and concise. Whereas about half (54%) agreed or somewhat agreed that they knew what they were expected to talk about in the interview, one-third (31%) reported not knowing what was expected of them.

Half of the asylum seekers (53%) stated that they almost always or often received clear instructions during the interview (Figure 8). Most asylum seekers rated that the questions were often or almost always asked in a polite (85%), and sensitive manner (75%). However, almost one-third (30%) also reported that the questions were often or almost always asked in a distrustful manner. Moreover, about half of the asylum seekers (46%) reported that the questions were often or always difficult to understand, and that they often or almost always had to ask for clarifications (53%). In addition, half of the respondents (47%) indicated that they often or almost always had to explain their answers several times and two-thirds (64%) stated that the same questions were often or almost always asked repeatedly.

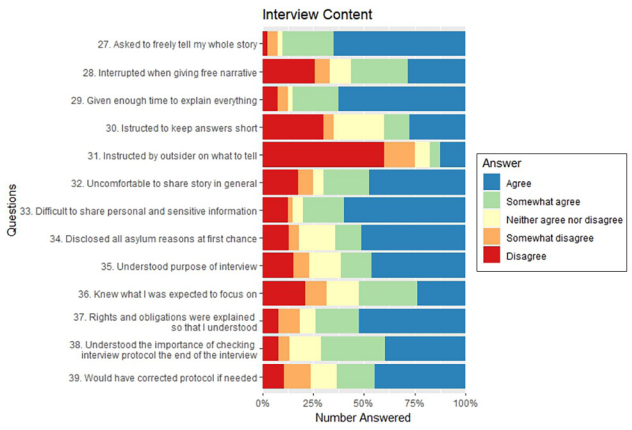
Almost three-fourths of the asylum seekers (71%) indicated that it felt uncomfortable to talk about their experiences in general and that it was especially difficult to share more personal and sensitive experiences (81%). The most common reasons reported by asylum seekers for finding it difficult to share experiences were that they were afraid to be judged negatively (54%), they were so stressed that they could not remember everything (46%), they had

Figure 6 Asylum seekers' agreement with statements on interview dynamics (sample size varied between $n = 37$ and $n = 41$)



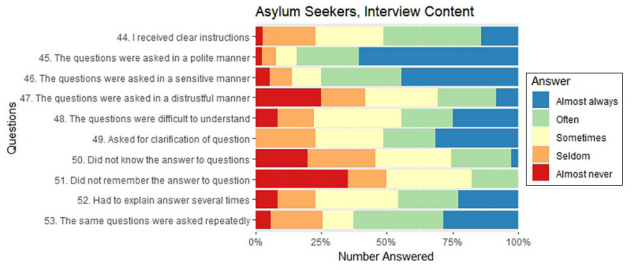
Source: Authors' own work

Figure 7 Asylum seekers' agreement with statements on interview content (sample size varied between $n = 39$ and $n = 41$)



Source: Authors' own work

Figure 8 Asylum seekers' reported levels of frequencies with statements on interview content (sample size varied between $n = 35$ and $n = 39$)



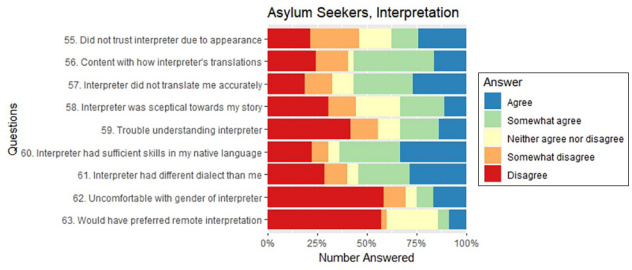
Source: Authors' own work

never told anybody about what had happened to them before (44%), they were afraid that the interpreter would share their story with people they knew (44%), and the fact that it is not acceptable or common to speak about the things that had happened to them (34%).

Finally, one-fifth of the asylum seekers (20%) reported that they did not tell the interviewer about all their reasons for seeking asylum at the earliest possible time. The most common reasons for not sharing everything immediately were that they did not know what was important to tell (50%), they did not remember everything (38%), and they found it too difficult to talk about their experiences (23%).

Interpretation. Just under half of the asylum seekers (42%) agreed or somewhat agreed that they were not satisfied with how their account was translated (Figure 9). Over half of the asylum seekers (58%) agreed or somewhat agreed that the interpreter did not translate what they said accurately and about one-third (35%) reported that they had trouble understanding the interpreter. Although over half of the respondents (62%) stated that the interpreter had sufficient skills in their native language and over half (56%) also reported that their interpreter spoke a different dialect. Just under half of the asylum seekers (40%) reported that they did

Figure 9 Asylum seekers' agreement with statements on interpretation (sample size varied between $n = 36$ and $n = 38$)



Source: Authors' own work

not trust the interpreter because of their appearance and one-fourth (24%) were uncomfortable with the gender of their interpreter.

Discussion

The current exploratory study was the first to shed light on the experiences of (Finnish) asylum interviews from the perspectives of interviewers, interpreters and asylum seekers (albeit, not necessarily from the same asylum interview). The findings highlight several interesting features as well as concerning trends in asylum interviews that should be explored more thoroughly by researchers. Although the results are based on only Finnish data, the findings may be of relevance in other European asylum contexts, as the Finnish asylum procedures follow the standards outlined in the CEAS, and officials are trained using the common EUAA training manuals. In addition, to some extent, the study illustrates interesting characteristics of the challenges of building-rapport and communicating in any interpreter-assisted interview in cross-cultural settings.

Creating rapport and establishing expectations to facilitate disclosures

A key finding of the current study relates to the importance of, and challenges associated with, creating rapport with applicants and ensuring that applicants know what is expected of them. In line with recommendations (Abbe and Brandon, 2013; Gabbert *et al.*, 2021), most interviewers and interpreters considered establishing rapport with the asylum seeker to be important and generally described the interview atmosphere as positive. The asylum seekers on the other hand, commonly reported feeling nervous or afraid during the interviews. Similar to reports from the UK (Bögner *et al.*, 2010; Chaffelson *et al.*, 2023), most of the asylum seekers reported feeling uncomfortable when sharing their experiences in general and particularly when disclosing sensitive information. Other concerning reports included applicants not trusting the interpreter or even knowing the interpreters personally, applicants doubting the confidentiality of the interview, and applicants feeling stressed and anxious to the extent that it affected their ability to remember and tell their story. It is difficult to determine the extent to which this stress is caused by factors that the interviewers and interpreters can affect (such as rapport-building) compared to, for example, past negative experiences with authorities or the interview situation in itself. The influence of the increasingly repressive political framework and hostile environment for asylum seekers in many European countries, including Finland, is also important to note as it may limit the effect of individual officials' efforts to improve the interview dynamics (Bodström, 2020; Ottosson *et al.*, 2024). Nonetheless, it is clear that more efforts are needed to create a trusting and safe interview environment for asylum seekers to facilitate full disclosures.

Full and timely disclosures is particularly important in the asylum setting, as claims added late in the asylum procedure may affect the credibility of the applicant in a negative way (Skrifvars *et al.*, 2022b; UNHCR, 2013). Asylum seekers are obliged to give a full description of their asylum claims at first chance (although guiding documents also state that late disclosures should not immediately be dismissed; EUAA, 2024). Importantly, our results showed that one-fifth of all asylum seekers reported not having disclosed all claims immediately. The reported reasons for this related to applicants not feeling safe and comfortable in the interview situation as well as not being informed about what details are essential to disclose when applying for asylum.

The interviewers and interpreters generally agreed that applicants often needed a lot of instructions to focus on relevant aspects in their narratives. Asylum seekers, in turn, reported that they were often asked the same questions repeatedly and had to explain the same events over again. This indicates a troubling trend of difficulties in instructing the applicant in an effective way without harming rapport. Future research should focus on developing and testing appropriate reporting instructions, such as the ground rules used in the criminal context, and how these may be used to better establish expectations within the asylum context.

Creating rapport and establishing expectations in asylum interviews is further complicated by the fact that asylum seekers are likely to have experienced stressful, potentially traumatic experiences in their past (e.g. war, fear or persecution, sexual violence). Exposure to high stress influences memory negatively (Shields *et al.*, 2017) and the emotions evoked can make it difficult to talk about experiences even when they are well remembered. Psychiatric disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression can impair one's ability to provide clear and coherent statements, which may impact the credibility of the testimonies (Graham *et al.*, 2014; McVane, 2020). Experiences with sexual elements are particularly sensitive as many victims experience them as shameful (Aakvaag *et al.*, 2016) which may constitute a hindrance for disclosure.

Another complicating factor is the impact of cultural differences between the interviewer and asylum seeker, as these may have influenced what the asylum seekers felt comfortable disclosing. Moreover, the presence of an interpreter belonging to the same nationality or ethnicity can create doubts about the confidentiality of the interview and increase feelings of shame, hindering disclosures (Hope *et al.*, 2022; Jansen, 2019) Within the current study, almost one-third of the asylum seekers stated that it is not accepted or common to talk about the things that they have experienced in their culture or country of origin, and half would have wished to have another interpreter due to religious or cultural reasons. Recent work considering culture within interviewing has synthesized that culture is associated with the social dynamics, rapport building and power formation within an interview, as well as an asylum seekers comfort to discuss potentially sensitive details (Hope *et al.*, 2022; Vredeveldt *et al.*, 2023).

Future research is needed to explore effective techniques for building-rapport and setting the expectations in the specific context of asylum interviews. Importantly, to be able to contribute to real improvements in the quality of asylum interviews, this research must take into account the broader socio-political context, the complex cross-cultural setting and presence of an interpreter, as well as the impact of negative life experiences hindering applicants' ability and willingness to disclose sensitive and personal information.

Implications of questioning style

Another key finding of the current study related to perceptions of the use of questions in the interviews. Whilst interviewers seemed to be aware of the recommended practice of using information-gathering and open questions, interpreters expressed views that were less aligned with this. Asylum seekers, in turn, reported both positive experiences of polite

questions and being given enough time to explain their experiences, but also concerning experiences of distrustful questions, being interrupted, and even instructed to keep answers short; which is not indicative of a recommended rapport-based, information-gathering interviewing approach.

The encouraging finding that interviewers report favouring open questions over closed prompts echoes previous research on fictive vignettes (Kask *et al.*, 2023; van Veldhuizen *et al.*, 2016). Nevertheless, these findings differ from studies analysing real-life asylum interviews, which have shown that, in practise, only one-tenth of all questions were recommended open prompts (Skrifvars *et al.*, 2020; van Veldhuizen *et al.*, 2018). The interviewers in our sample may have responded in the manner that they perceived to be correct and recommendable, rather than reflecting on how the interviews realistically are conducted. In addition, researchers have found that whilst interviewers can articulate what is best practice, this does not always translate to skills on the ground (Orbach *et al.*, 2000; St-Yves *et al.*, 2014). In other words, interviewers may *know* how they should interview and *think* that they perform interviews accordingly, but yet fail to transform the knowledge into practise. Interviewers may also unconsciously during interviews favour closed questions to obtain specific information in situations where asylum seekers seem to talk in a very contextual way, not getting to what the interviewer sees as the "core topics" (as noted in, e.g. Hope *et al.*, 2022; Vredeveldt *et al.*, 2023). Nevertheless, to elicit detailed and accurate narratives, and to afterwards be able to assess the credibility of the narrative, it is vital that most questions in asylum interviews are open prompts. Therefore, whilst interviewers appear to understand which questioning strategies are supported by psychological evidence, more work is required to ensure this is implemented in practice.

Contrary to the interviewers, the interpreters' views on questioning strategies were less aligned with best-practice guidelines. For example, half of the interpreters considered closed questions to be as effective as open ones. This is problematic as previous research has found that interpreters may consciously or unconsciously change the formulation of the interviewer's questions, influencing the amount and quality of information asylum seekers provide. It is possible that interpreters feel the need to interrupt and ask more focused questions because they struggle to manage the memory load of long and continuous narratives by interviewees (Ernberg *et al.*, 2022). Nevertheless, to ensure that best-practice interviewing techniques used by the interviewers are properly translated, it is vital that the interpreters are instructed in the principles behind the techniques. Currently, it seems that there is rarely a requirement of adequate training for interpreters, be it in the asylum or the criminal justice context (Korkman *et al.*, 2024; Pöllabauer, 2023). Future research should therefore focus on if and how training of interpreters can improve their performance and thus the quality of interviews.

Interpretation in the asylum context

Both the interviewers and interpreters shared a mostly positive view of the interpretation in Finnish asylum interviews, considering it to be of high quality and acknowledging the interpreters' proficiency in both Finnish and the target language. Notably, a higher proportion of interviewers expressed positivity towards the interpretation compared to interpreters. Most interpreters acknowledged large differences in the competence among interpreters in Finland. Compared to previous research, these views are similar, albeit slightly more positive (Pöllabauer, 2023), as previous studies have often highlighting significant deficiencies in the training and language skills among interpreters. Similar to other studies (e.g. Jiménez-Ivars and León-Pinilla, 2018), asylum seekers in the current research expressed several difficulties with the interpretation, including difficulties understanding the interpreter, feeling unsatisfied with how their account was translated or feeling that the interpreter was sceptical or critical of their account.

The findings of the current study highlight several challenges of interpreter-assisted interviews, including the role and impact of the interpreter regarding rapport-building and asylum seekers' willingness to disclose sensitive information. In addition, in line with discussions in previous research, different views were expressed by both interpreters and interviewers in the current study on both whether the interpreter should take on the role as a cultural liaison, and to what extent the interpreter should express empathy toward the asylum seekers. More research is needed to understand how to effectively conduct interpreter-assisted interviews with witnesses in vulnerable positions, based on which appropriate recommendations and training may be implemented to improve the quality of asylum interviewing.

Limitations

First, as asylum seekers were difficult to reach, we welcomed all asylum seekers, regardless of when they had participated in an asylum interview, to take part in the study. As a result of this, whereas the interviewers and interpreters report experiences from interviews conducted in 2021, the asylum seekers refer to interviews conducted between 2016 and 2022. This should be considered when interpreting the results of the study.

Moreover, a main limitation of the study relates to the limited and geographically restricted (solely Finnish) sample. As all participants were recruited through convenience sampling, they are not necessarily representative of the general population of asylum interviewers, interpreters and asylum seekers in Finland. Nevertheless, our sample of asylum interviewers consisted of approximately three-fourths of the entire population of asylum interviewers in Finland at the time. Our sample of asylum seekers resemble the general population in relation to age and gender distributions (The Finnish Immigration Service, 2024a). The countries of origin among our asylum participants were also among the most common countries of origin of the general population of asylum seekers in Finland. Although the survey for asylum seekers was only available in a limited number of languages, it covered a large part of all asylum applicants in Finland.

Furthermore, only half of the interpreters completed the survey, which may have skewed the results, as those who decided to answer the entire survey may have had different opinions than those who dropped out. A possible reason for the large dropout was that the beginning of the survey consisted of questions that may have been perceived as more relevant for interviewers than for interpreters.

Moreover, to ensure that asylum seekers would feel comfortable responding to the survey (mainly regarding anonymity), we decided to only collect basic demographic information about the asylum seekers. Therefore, we did not ask about the length of the asylum procedures (i.e. number of appeals or re-submitted applications). This information could have been useful in analysing the results, as prolonged asylum processes are associated with distress (Hvidtfeldt *et al.*, 2021) which may also have led applicants to be less satisfied with their overall interview experience.

As the aim of the study was to descriptively collect the target group's self-reported experiences of asylum interviews, the surveys were not created in manner that would have allowed for further statistical analyses (such as analysing group differences or factor analyses). Keeping this in mind, all results should be interpreted with caution and mainly used as a basis for future studies and more confirmatory analyses.

Recommendations for practitioners

The findings highlight the need for sufficient training in best-practise interviewing for both interviewers and interpreters. As a first step, all interpreters should be required to have completed some formal training in interpretation. Additional training for both interviewers

and interpreters should include modules on rapport-building, ground rules instructions, questioning strategies and the impact of culture and trauma on reporting. Joint training sessions for interviewers and interpreters could improve their collaboration and ensure that they have a shared understanding of the recommended techniques. As in other settings, it can be recommended that interviewers should prepare for the interview jointly with the interpreter (e.g. Korkman *et al.*, 2024 for a summary). This joint preparation could include planning rapport-building strategies and open questions in advance to ensure they are translated appropriately and suitable for the asylum seeker's cultural background.

Moreover, interviewers and interpreters need sufficient time to prepare and conduct the interviews. A means for ensuring that interviewers have sufficient time to prepare could be, for example, to decrease the number of interviews conducted per interviewer per week and establish recommendations for interviewers on how to plan their interviews (in line with the Mendez principles (Méndez *et al.*, 2021). In addition, more staff could be onboarded and trained to ensure sufficient time for each applicant.

Conclusions

The current study highlights the demanding nature of asylum interviewing. The results revealed that the views of both interviewers and interpreters were mostly in line with best-practice recommendations. However, several challenges that need to be addressed were also identified. Asylum seekers commonly reported feeling afraid, distressed, too uncomfortable to disclose their experiences, or being unaware of what was expected of them, which is a clear indication that more work is needed to improve rapport-building and the instructing of the applicants in the interviews. This calls for more research in how to effectively create rapport in cross-cultural, interpreter-assisted interviews with individuals in vulnerable positions, while also acknowledging the effects of the increasingly hostile environment for asylum seekers. The finding that interpreters reported favouring closed questions over open prompts highlights the need for more training for interpreters in best-practice interviewing, as well as more active collaboration between the interviewer and interpreter in terms of preparing for the interview. Establishing an interview setting that maximizes the chance of eliciting complete, detailed and truthful asylum narratives is vital to ensure valid asylum decisions.

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Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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