

Analyzing the Questions Asked in Finnish Asylum Interviews with Sexual Minorities

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INTRODUCTION

- **Persecution of sexual minorities** is an issue of international concern. There is increasing recognition of sexual minorities' **eligibility for refugee status**.¹
- Reaching **fair and accurate asylum decisions** is of utmost importance, both for the applicant and the country of asylum. In the absence of documentary evidence, asylum credibility assessments are often **solely based on the asylum-seeker's testimony**.² Applicants are expected to provide detailed, consistent, and plausible statements about their identity, origin, and flight motives.³
- The **interviewing techniques** used by the asylum official can greatly influence the quality and amount of legally relevant information gathered.⁴
- In the present study, we investigated question type, question content, and interview style in **129 Finnish asylum interviews with sexual minorities**, to assess officials' practices against established guidelines in investigative interviewing.

METHODS

We developed a **coding scheme** to investigate 3 aspects of asylum interviewing techniques.

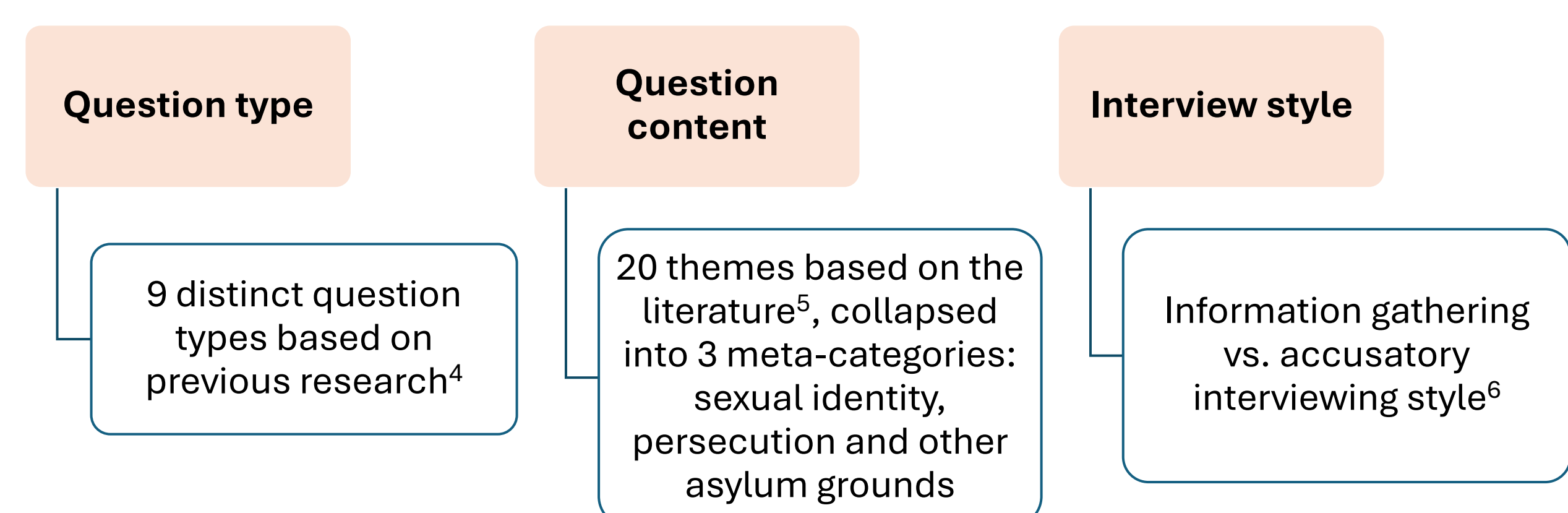


Figure 1. General structure of our coding scheme for the asylum interviews

RESULTS

Table 1. Asylum-seekers' sociodemographic characteristics

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

Note. Based on applicants' self-reports. *n adds up to more than 129 as some applicants reported dual nationalities.

Figure 2. Proportion of different question types

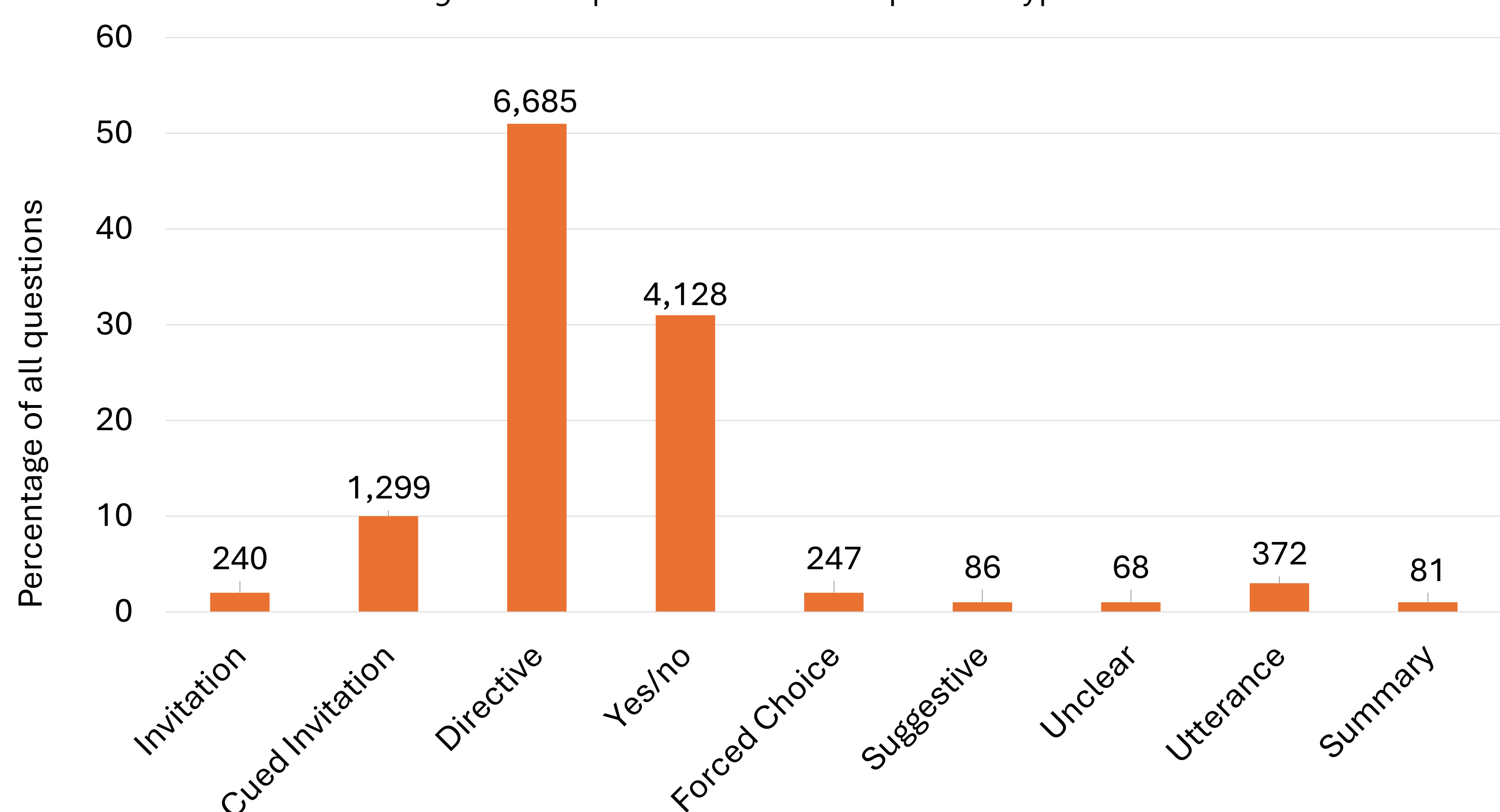
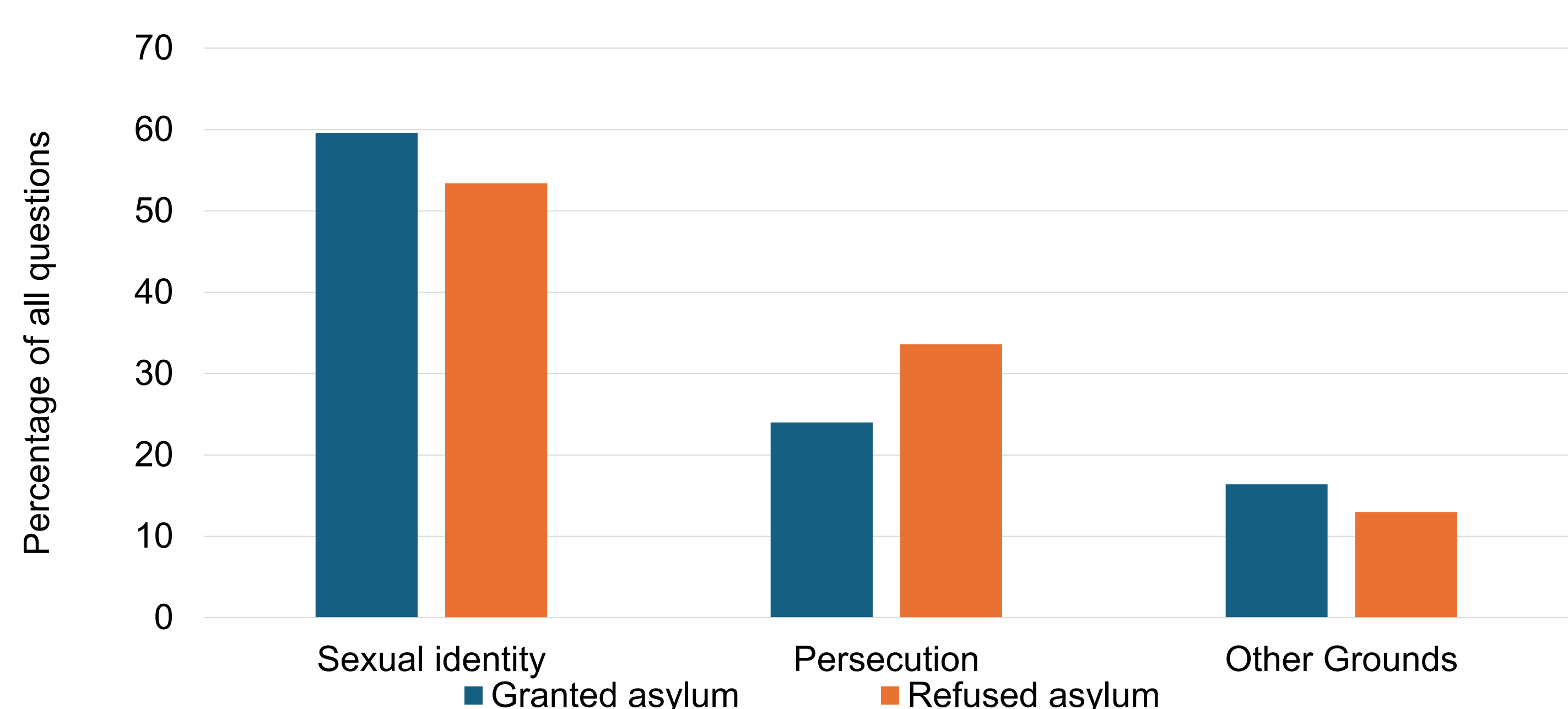


Figure 3. Proportion of questions asked within the 3 meta-categories in cases granted and refused asylum



CONCLUSIONS

- In line with best practice, interviewers mainly used the **information-gathering style** of interviewing. **Accusatory questions** were nevertheless present in **10%** of interviews.
- **Only 12%** of all questions were **open-ended**. **Directive questions** accounted for **over 50%** all questions. **Unrecommended question types** (yes/no, forced choice, and suggestive questions) constituted **33%** of all questions.
- **Over half** of the questions aimed at assessing the credibility of the **applicant's identity**. **Less than one-third** inquired about the **fear of persecution**, and the remaining questions focused on other reasons for seeking asylum (e.g., religion).
- To assess the credibility of sexual orientation claims, officials predominantly asked about the applicant's **same-sex relationships**, their **feelings about their sexuality** and their **sexual identity development**. The questions reveal **assumptions** about human sexuality rooted in Western culture.
- To improve current interviewing practice, asylum officials should ask **more open-ended questions**, **avoid accusatory questions** altogether and focus more on establishing the applicant's **fear of persecution**, rather than focusing predominantly on assessing the credibility of their sexual identity.

REFERENCES

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