

# Developing and Evaluating a Training Program in Legal Psychology for Finnish Asylum Officials

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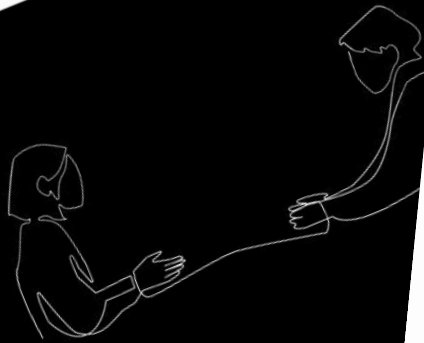
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*Psychology at the Frontiers: Asylum Interviewing and Decision Making [Psych-AID]*

# Doctoral thesis on quality of Finnish asylum interviews, 2024

## Jenny Skrifvars Investigating and Improving the Quality of Asylum Interviewing and Decision- Making Practices in Finland



PSYCHOLOGY, CRIME & LAW  
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### Developing and evaluating a training programme in legal psychology for Finnish asylum officials

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#### ABSTRACT

Recent research has questioned the accuracy of asylum decisions, as asylum officials only partly follow evidence-based interviewing methods and hold assumptions regarding human memory and behavior that are not supported by psychological science. To need more training in evidence-based interviewing, asylum officials making methods. We developed a novel 75-hour-long hybrid training programme in legal psychology for asylum officials and evaluated its effectiveness in a quasi-experimental pretest-posttest study with a waitlist control group. We measured the participants' knowledge about relevant legal psychology topics such as memory and interviewing, and their ability to identify, evaluate, and produce appropriate interview questions in an online test. The training had a large positive immediate effect ( $d = 1.67$ ) on the test scores and the improvements remained support for the utility of the novel training programme. Future studies should assess the transfer of the acquired knowledge to actual asylum adjudications.

#### ARTICLE HISTORY

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#### KEYWORDS

Asylum procedure; interview training; investigative interviewing; credibility assessments; effects of training

Asylum procedures have only recently begun to receive more attention in the field of legal psychology, with researchers recognising shortcomings in the way in which asylum seekers are heard and the way in which their accounts are assessed. There is an urgent need to develop and test evidence-based interviewing and decision-making methods from the criminal justice context to the asylum context (van Veldhuizen, 2017). Adjudicating asylum applications is a challenging task, despite the clear definition and criteria for granting asylum outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the ensuing EU Qualification Directive (Qualification Directive, 2011; Thomas, 2006; United Nations, 1951). Asylum seekers seldom have corroborating evidence to support their claims and therefore, the interview(s) conducted with the asylum seeker is of crucial importance

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# Analyses of Finnish asylum interviews & decisions

## Analyses of real-life **asylum interviews** (Skrifvars et al., 2020;2022a)

- Information-gathering style
- Only 12% open questions
- Open questions elicited more details and more key information
- Mis-matched answers and difficult questions

## Analyses of real-life **asylum decisions** (Skrifvars et al., 2022b)

- Lack of knowledge about memory, the effect of trauma and culture on memory, intercultural communication, decision-making

# Experiences of asylum interviews

Survey to asylum interviewers ( $n = 62$ ), interpreters ( $n = 63$ ) and asylum seekers ( $n = 49$ ) in Finland (Skrifvars et al., 2025)

- Interviewers' and interpreters' views mostly aligned with evidence-based interviewing recommendations
- Interpreters favored closed questions over open questions
- Asylum seekers reported feeling nervous or afraid
- 80% reported difficulties in sharing their experiences and disclosing personal information

# Training asylum officials in legal psychology

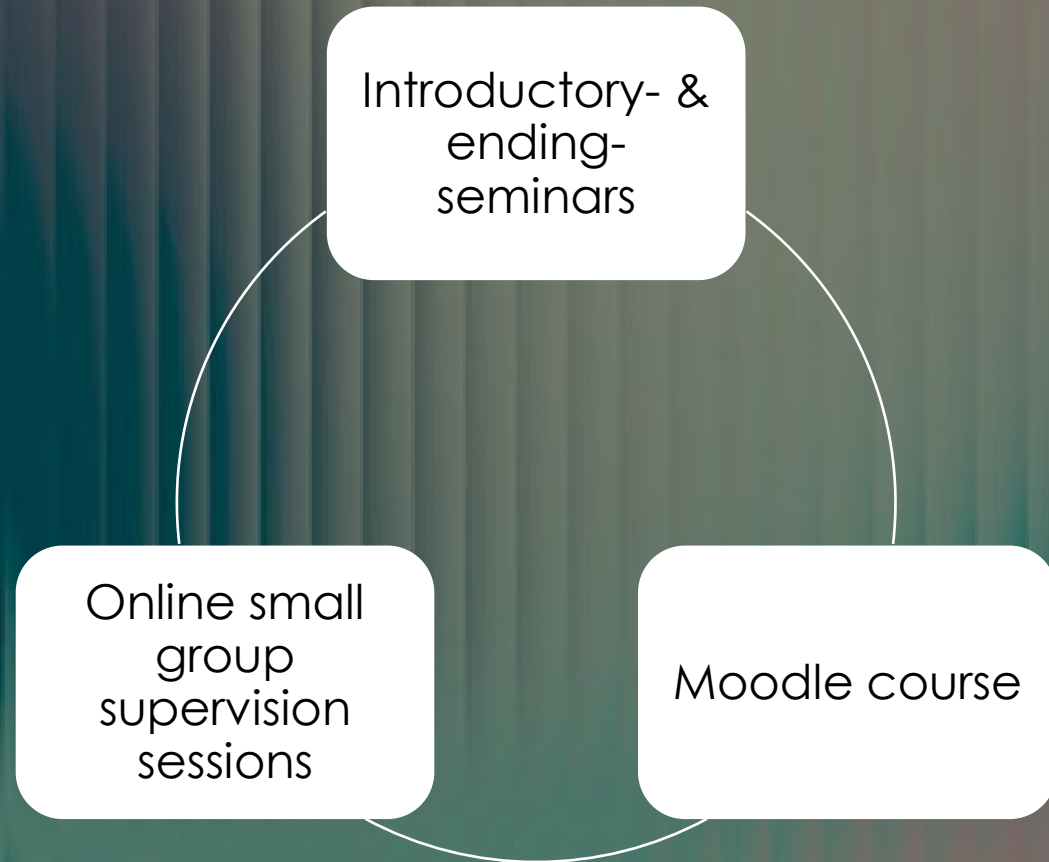
## OBJECTIVE:

Develop and evaluate a novel training program in legal psychology for asylum officials

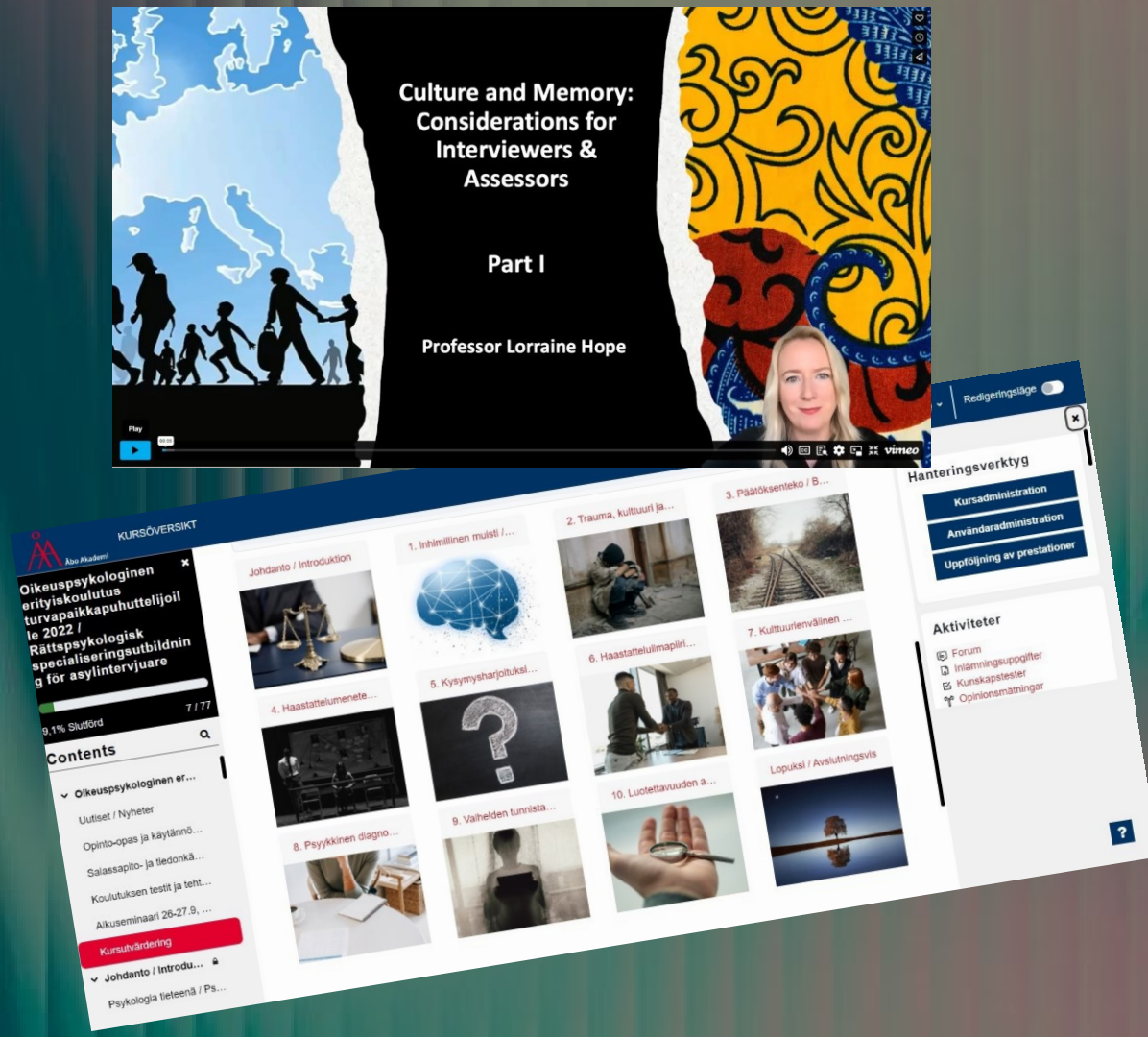
1. Evaluate the effectiveness of the training program
2. Evaluate effects after 5 months



# Materials – Training content



# Materials – Training content



## Key topics

Best-practice interviewing

Memory

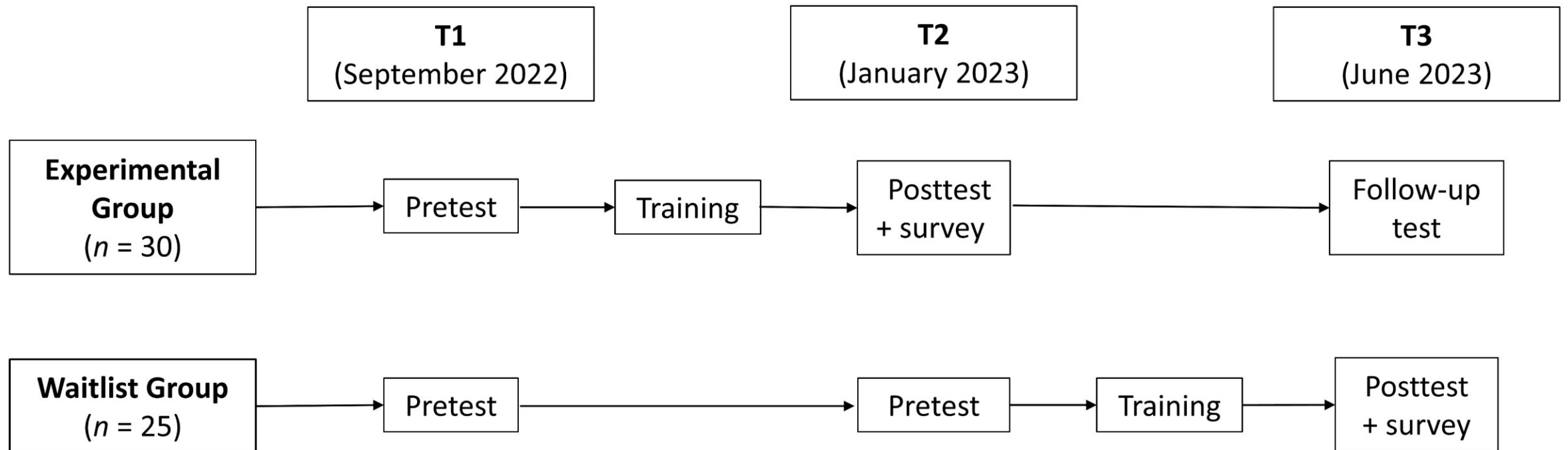
Decision-making & bias

Trauma & mental health

Culture & communication

Lie detection & credibility assessments

# Methods – Quasi-experimental design





# Methods – Participants

## 55 asylum officials from the Finnish Immigration Service

- Completed internal training
- Min 6 months working experience
- 68 recruited

## Demographics

- 84% female
- Mean age = 36.8
- Mean years of working experience = 3.3
- 4 work units: Helsinki, Turku, Lappeenranta, Oulu
  - No sig. differences between units

# Materials – Evaluations

Online, 3 tasks:

1) Knowledge quiz (30 p)

10 true/false statements

10 multiple choice questions

2) Producing follow-up questions (20 p)

Listen to interview scenarios and produce a follow up question under time pressure.

3) Transcript coding (20 p)

Identify appropriate and inappropriate questions in transcripts, improve inappropriate questions.

+ Feedback questionnaire

# Analyses

Series of mixed linear models

- Time & group as fixed effects, participant as random effect
- Interaction effect of time x group
- Separate analyses for total test scores and each subpart of the test

Effect size (Cohen's d)

- 'immediate' pre-test score and 'immediate' post-test score

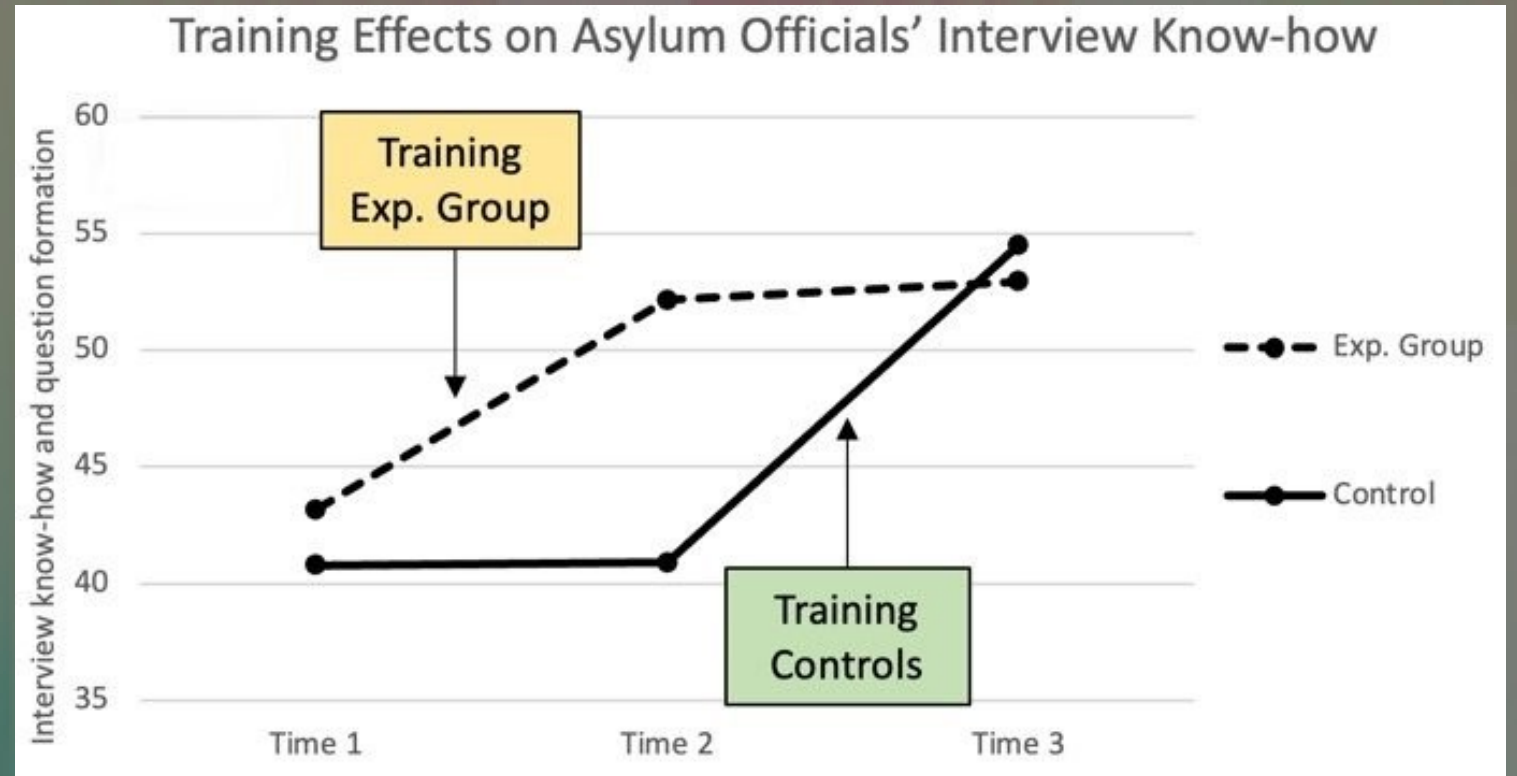
Exploratory analyses: effect of work unit on test scores, associations between demographics and improvement

# Results

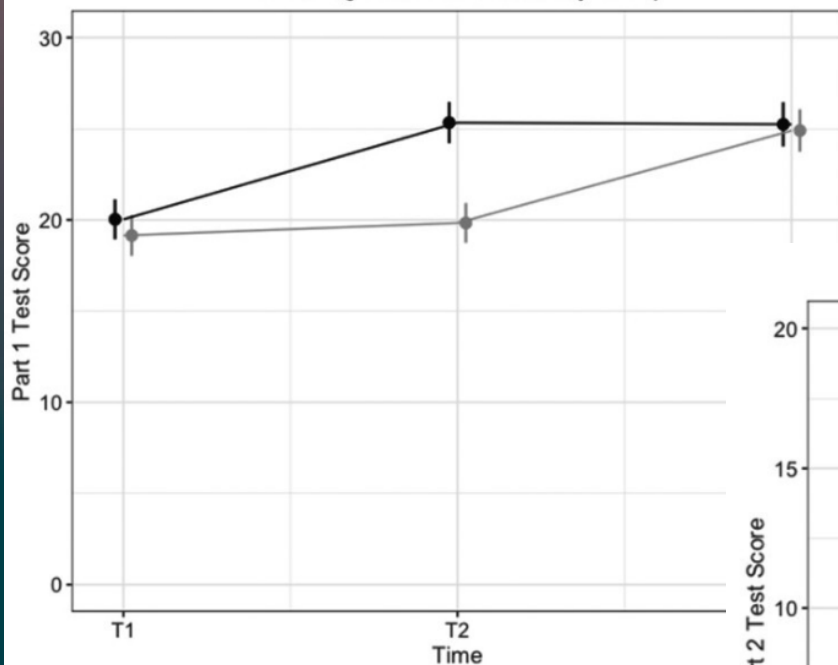
Significant interaction effect of  
Time x Group on total test scores

( $F[2, 100.7] = 50.26, p < .001$ )

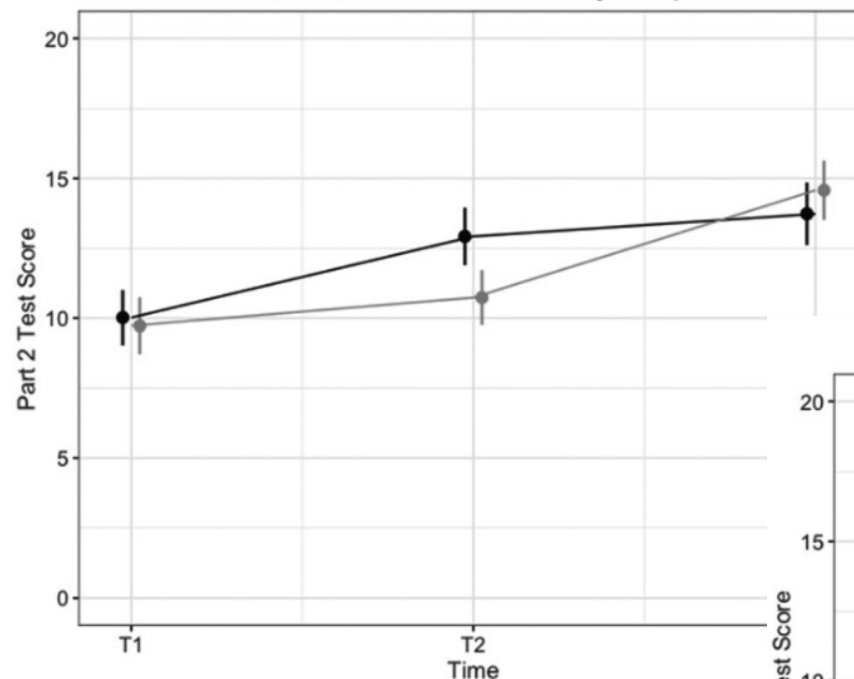
Cohen's  $d = 1.67$



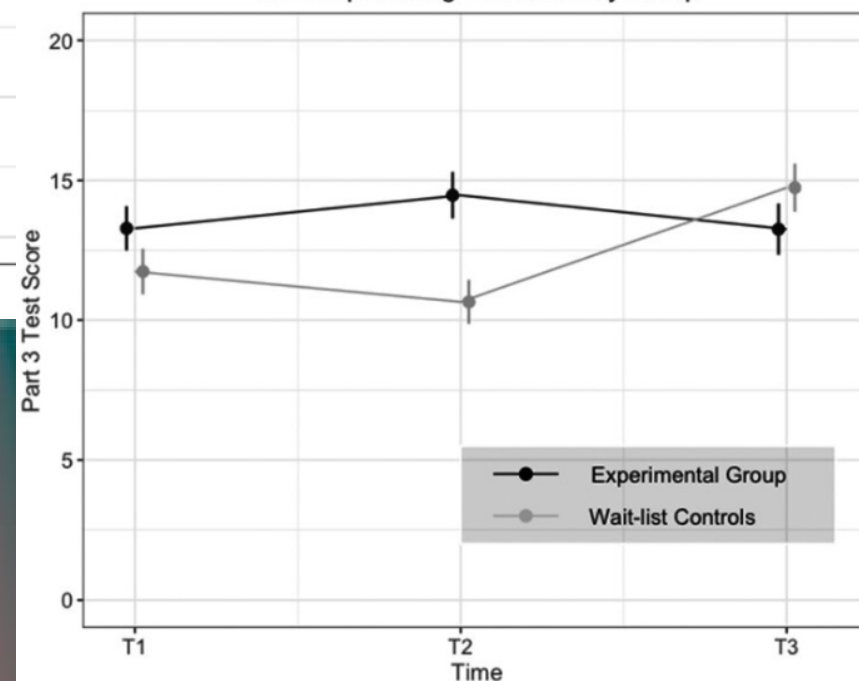
Knowledge Quiz Test Score by Group



Audio Scenarios Test Score by Group



Transcript Coding Test Score by Group



Significant interaction effects in all subparts  
 Part 1 & 2 – improvements immediately post training  
 Part 3 – no improvement for experimental group



# Exploratory analyses

Differences in test scores between work units?

No

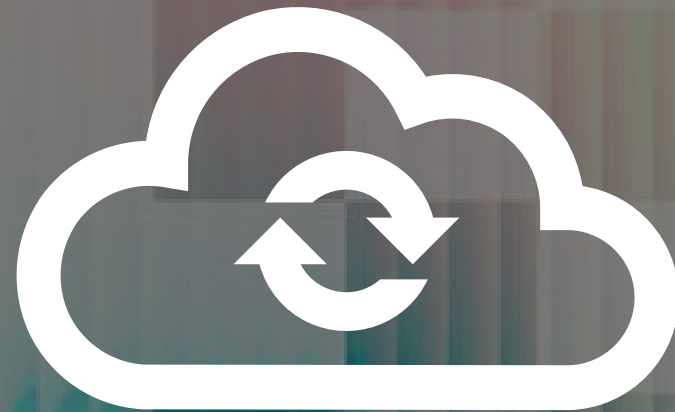
Associations between demographics and improvement?

Age  $r = .34$ ,  $p = .014$

# Implications



Training works!



Transfer to real-life  
interviews and  
decisions?

# Reflections and future research

1. Interviews
  - a) Adapt techniques (e.g., Cognitive Interview, Model Statement)
  - b) Rapport-building techniques
2. Credibility assessments
  - a) Credibility indicators of practical use
  - b) Cross-cultural differences

# Thank you!

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