An Investigation of Asylum Officials' Beliefs about Cognitive Bias and how they Control it.

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

Decision-Making

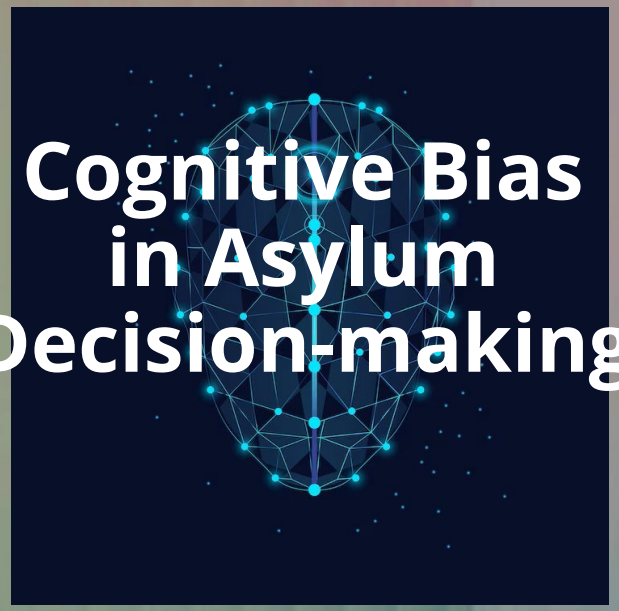
In making decisions, humans are limited by time, information, and knowledge.

This helps us make quicker decisions while ignoring certain information. However, using ineffective and unreliable heuristics can lead to errors.

As such, we form habits and use mental shortcuts (heuristics).
(Gigerenzer & Todd, 2001; Todd & Gigerenzer, 2000)

These systematic errors are known as cognitive bias (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).
E.g., confirmation bias, blind spot bias, gambler's fallacy, etc.

Cognitive Bias in Asylum Decision-making



Working under significant time pressure and heavy workloads (Skrifvars et al., 2024)

Using partially unsupported assumptions about human memory and fear (Selim et al., 2025; Skrifvars, Sui et al., 2024)

Focusing on an aspect of a claim by asking more closed-ended questions (Skrifvars et al., 2020; Van Veldhuizen et al., 2018)

Influence of political atmosphere (Raman et al., 2022; Spirig, 2018; Riedel & Schneider, 2017)

Little is known about the strategies officials use to mitigate against the negative effects of these biases in the asylum context. Hence, the necessity for this study.

Dror (2020) has highlighted six misconceptions held by forensic experts.
1. Cognitive bias is an ethical issue

Misconception about cognitive bias

4. Technological protection,

5. Bias blind spots

6. The illusion of control

2. Those influenced by cognitive bias are bad apples,
3. Experts are immune to cognitive bias,

These factors influence the awareness and strategies employed to mitigate the negative effects of cognitive bias.

Kukucka et al. (2017) and Zapf et al. (2018) found among forensic examiners and forensic mental health professionals that:

Misconception amongst forensic officials

They considered cognitive bias a cause for concern and admitted that their prior beliefs and expectations affected their decisions.

Experts were very confident about decision-making in their field (74 -96% perceived accuracy)

There was a presence of a bias blind spot and an illusion of control.

Training and experience were associated with the beliefs.

These highlight the need for training.

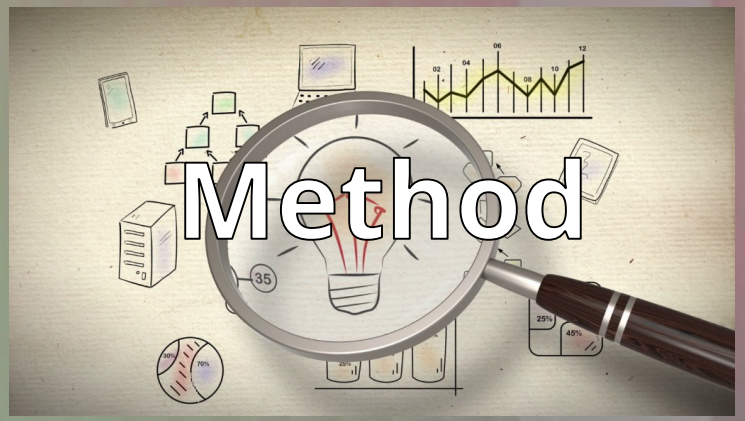
Current study

We aim to conceptually replicate and extend the study by Kukucka et al. (2017) and Zapf et al. (2018) on the beliefs of cognitive bias of asylum decision-makers.

We aim to:

- Explore their perceived accuracy of decisions.
- Investigate their beliefs about cognitive bias.
- Examine how training and experience affect their beliefs.
- Explore their strategies for controlling cognitive bias.

Method



Design:
Survey questionnaire composed of closed and open-ended questions.

Preregistered
Analyses script & data will be available on OSF

1. Bias blind-spot
2. Questions on beliefs about cognitive bias
3. Training, years of experience and Strategies for controlling cognitive bias

Officials received a definition of cognitive bias with two examples

We recruited 110 participants.

71 females, 37 males, and 2 Undisclosed.
56 Asylum officials, 54 Judges

Mean age: 41 (SD=13) years

35 Germany, 34 Sweden, 29 Finland, 12 from 5 other countries.

Perceived Accuracy

Perceived accuracy of asylum decision in their country: 84% (SD = 12)

Does this differ from 50% perceived accuracy? Yes, BF10 = 4.7011×10^{50} (very strong evidence)

Bias Blind Spot

To what extent do you think your own asylum decisions are influenced by cognitive bias? 39% (SD = 22)

To what extent do you think your colleagues' asylum decisions are influenced by cognitive bias? 44% (SD = 22)

Questions are counterbalanced

Do officials consider themselves less biased? Yes, BF10 = 1.83×10^5 (strong evidence in favour of our hypothesis)

Results

Do officials subscribe to the misconception?

Item [On a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)]	M(SD)	Ans	BF10
1. Prior beliefs and expectations affect the evaluation of credibility	5.49(1.11)	No	2.04×10^{23}
2. Prior beliefs and expectations affect the final decision for international protection.	5.09(1.22)	No	1.34×10^{13}
3. Asylum officials have a strong impression before interviewing.	4.40(1.52)	No	7.81
4. Having a strong impression about a case can affect the decision to grant asylum.	4.69(1.45)	No	1.24×10^{4}
5. Experienced asylum official are less influenced by prior beliefs and expectation than new official.	3.49(1.54)	No	0.02

Test: Is the mean different from the midpoint (4: neither agree nor disagree)?
The direction of the Bayes Factor speaks for (BF10 >1) or against (BF10 < 1) the proposed hypothesis.

Results

Do officials subscribe to the misconception?

Item [On a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)]	M(SD)	Ans	BF10
6. Asylum officials who consciously set aside their prior beliefs and expectations are less likely to be influenced by them.	5.62(1.22)	Yes	8.10×10^{22}
7. Decisions on asylum cases can be unduly influenced by previous cases.	4.89(1.13)	No	2.16×10^{9}
8. Using AI for credibility assessment ensures decisions are not unduly influenced by prior beliefs and expectations.	2.80(1.52)	No	2.23×10^{10}
9. A computerized system that compares facts can ensure prior beliefs and expectations do not overly influence decisions.	3.69(1.53)	NAD	1.07

Test: Is the mean different from the midpoint (4: neither agree nor disagree)?
The direction of the Bayes Factor speaks for (BF10 >1) or against (BF10 < 1) the proposed hypothesis.

Effect of Training on beliefs about cognitive bias

How many officers have received training on cognitive bias
Yes = 32 %, Related concept = 16 %, No = 45 %, Don’t know = 7 %

Effect of training on Beliefs about cognitive bias

- Training did not moderate the bias blind spot perception.
- Except for item 3, training did not affect the other 8 items.
- Paired-wise comparison revealed that officials who answered 'yes’ (M = 4.9) to item 3 agreed they had a strong impression about a case before interviews, compared to ‘no’ respondents (mean = 3.98), who were neutral. Other comparisons were not supported.

Effect of experience on belief about cognitive bias

Mean Work Experience: 9 (SD=11) years

Effect of experience on Beliefs about cognitive bias

- Experience was not associated with the bias blind spot perception.
- Only 2 of 9 items were associated with experience.
- As experience increased, officials were more likely to disagree with having a strong impression before interviews (item 3, β = -0.04).
- As experience increased, officials were more likely to agree that experienced officials were immune to cognitive bias (item 5, β = 0.03).
- These indicate experienced officials endorsed certain misconceptions.

Strategies officials use to mitigate against the influence of cognitive bias

More Effective

- Considering alternative explanations
- Two people assessing a case
- Asking for clarification
- Explicitly identifying facts
- Unique case assessment

Less effective

- Conscious control
- Self-reflection
- Awareness of bias
- Relying on experience
- Group thinking

Related to work practice

- Applying the law
- Comparing cases with country-of-origin information and other sources
- Having a positive attitude (open-minded, objective, curious, etc).

Discussion

- Officials recognized that cognitive bias affected their decisions and that AI-based credibility assessment cannot fully eliminate this influence.
- However, they believed they were less biased than their colleagues and could consciously control their biases– reflecting two common misconceptions.
- Many officials reported no training on cognitive bias.
- Trained officials were more aware of how their impression influenced their decisions than untrained officials.
- As experience increased, officials were more likely to endorse certain misconceptions.
- These findings highlight a strong need for training on cognitive bias and strategies to manage it among asylum officials.

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Thank you for your attention!

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Questions?

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