

Cognitive Bias in Asylum Decision-Making in Europe: An Investigation of Asylum Officials' Beliefs about Its Nature and Scope

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



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

Decision-Making



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.



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

Cognitive Bias in Asylum Decision-making

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

2. Those influenced by cognitive bias are bad apples,

3. Experts are immune to cognitive bias,

4. Technological protection,

5. Bias blind spots

6. The illusion of control

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.



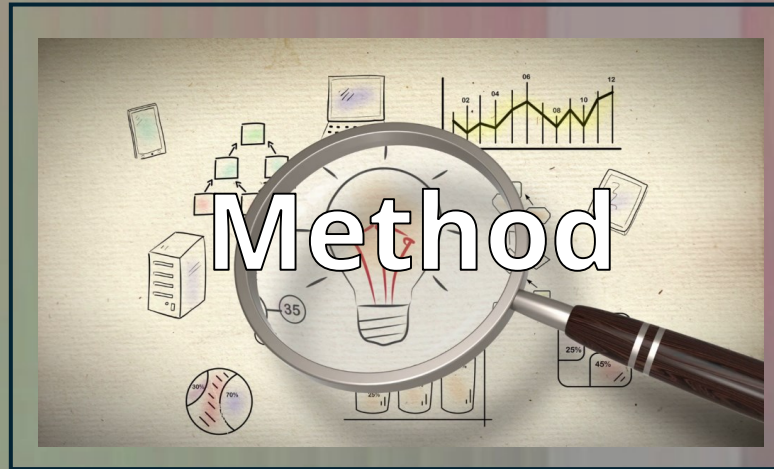
Current study



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.
- Explore their training and strategy for controlling cognitive bias.



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

Preregistered

1. Bias blind-spot
2. Questions on beliefs about cognitive bias
3. Training and Strategy for controlling cognitive bias

Officials received a definition of cognitive bias
with two examples



The results presented here are only preliminary.

We expect 150 participants from selected European countries to achieve a power of 80% and a medium effect size.



Sample size: 12 participants;
10 females, 2 males
7 Judges, 5 Asylum officials

Current countries: Finland and Sweden.
Also, European members of the International Association of Refugee & Migration Judges

Mean age: 40 years

Work Experience: 5 years

Perceived accuracy of asylum decision in their country: 92% out of 100%



Bias Blind Spot

To what extent do you think your own asylum decisions are influenced by cognitive bias?
30% out of 100%

To what extent do you think your colleagues' asylum decisions are influenced by cognitive bias? 32% out of 100%

Questions are counterbalanced

Do officials consider themselves less biased? No $BF_{10} = 1$ (inconclusive evidence, more data needed)



Results

Do officials subscribe to the misconception?

Item [On a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree)]	M(SD)	Ans	BF10
1 An asylum official's prior beliefs and expectations can affect how they evaluate the credibility of an asylum case.	5.08(1.31)	No	4.16
2 An asylum official's prior beliefs and expectations can affect their final decision about an individual asylum claimant's eligibility for international protection.	4.45(1.24)	NAD	0.81
3 Asylum officials sometimes have a strong impression about what asylum decision they are expected to reach before interviewing an individual asylum applicant.	4.50(1.44)	NAD	0.49
4 When an asylum official has a strong impression about what asylum decision they are expected to reach, it affects their decision on whether to grant asylum to an individual applicant.	4.33(1.44)	NAD	0.38

Test: Is the mean different from the midpoint (4: neither agree nor disagree)?

The direction of the Bayes Factor speaks for ($BF_{10} > 1$) or against ($BF_{10} < 1$) 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
1 An asylum official's prior beliefs and expectations can affect how they evaluate the credibility of an asylum case.	5.08(1.31)	No	4
3 Asylum officials sometimes have a strong impression about what asylum decision they are expected to reach before interviewing an individual asylum applicant.	4.50(1.44)	NAD	0.49

Test: Is the mean different from the midpoint (4: neither agree nor disagree)?

The direction of the Bayes Factor speaks for ($BF_{10} > 1$) or against ($BF_{10} < 1$) 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
5 An experienced asylum official is less likely than a new official to be influenced by prior beliefs and expectations in their decision-making.	3.67(1.72)	NAD	0.35
6 An asylum official who makes a conscious effort to set aside their prior beliefs and expectations is less likely to be influenced by them.	5.42(1.00)	Yes	79
7 An asylum official's experience with previous cases can unduly influence the decision that they reach on a subsequent case.	4.25(1.36)	NAD	0.34
8 If an asylum official were to use artificial intelligence for credibility assessment, it would guarantee that their prior beliefs and expectations would not overly influence their decision-making.	2.75(1.36)	No	6.70
9 If an asylum official were to use a computerized system to compare facts from cases to a reference material such as country-of-origin information, it would guarantee that their prior beliefs and expectations would not overly influence their decision-making.	3.83(1.19)	NAD	0.32

Test: Is the mean different from the midpoint (4: neither agree nor disagree)?

The direction of the Bayes Factor speaks for ($BF_{10} > 1$) or against ($BF_{10} < 1$) 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
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8 If an asylum official were to use artificial intelligence for credibility assessment, it would guarantee that their prior beliefs and expectations would not overly influence their decision-making.	2.75(1.36)	No	

Test: Is the mean different from the midpoint (4: neither agree nor disagree)?

The direction of the Bayes Factor speaks for ($BF_{10} > 1$) or against ($BF_{10} < 1$) the proposed hypothesis.



Is cognitive bias a concern in asylum decision-making?

Yes = 45%, No = 36%, Don't know = 18%

Why?

It is a concern because it affects the accuracy of decisions

“Cognitive bias is something that everyone is affected by and therefore it has an impact on the decisions we make even though we are supposed to be objective. it can lead to wrong decisions.”

It is not a concern because officials are cautious

“...I do not think it is a cause for concern because your thoughts can constantly change and be refuted.”



Have Officials received training on cognitive Bias?

Yes = 27 %, No = 55 %, Related concept = 9 %, Don't know = 9 %

Type of training

- Training given by UNHCR, lawyers, and psychologists
- Trainings mainly focus on awareness and the effect of cognitive bias.



What Strategy do you use to mitigate against the negative effects of cognitive bias?

More Effective

- Considering Alternative explanations
- Two people assessing a case
- Double-checking

Less effective

- Being curious
- Not relying on previous experience
- Knowing oneself
- Awareness
- Keeping an open mind

Not related

- Being objective and applying the law
- Comparing cases with country-of-origin information



Discussion

- Officials are aware that their decisions are affected by cognitive bias and that using AI for credibility assessment cannot entirely remove the effect of cognitive bias on their work.
- However, they wrongfully believe they can wilfully control their bias (very strong support).
- They also express a strong need for training.



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Thank you for your attention!

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Questions?



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