

European Asylum Decision-Makers' Perception of the Influence of Impressions on Their Decisions

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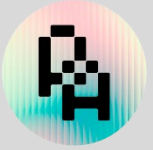
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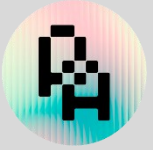
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Introduction

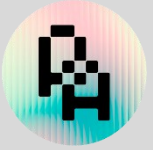
- **Physical characteristics and decision-makers' expectations can influence judgements, leading to cognitive biases (i.e., errors arising from reliance on unreliable mental shortcuts, e.g. the halo effect and confirmation bias; Dror, 2020; Thorndike, 1920; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).**
- **Understanding these biases is critical in asylum processes, as asylum decisions have profound consequences for applicants' lives (Goodwin-Gill & McAdam, 2011).**



Asylum Processes

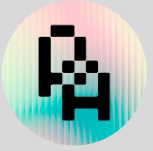


Asylum decisions should be objective and fair (UNHCR, 2013, 2019).



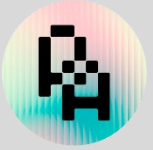
Asylum Decision-Making Demands

- Limited information from asylum applicants, heavy workloads, time pressure and other factors (Gyulai Gábor et al., 2013; Kagan, 2002; Skrifvars et al., 2025).
- These challenges may increase reliance on heuristics and heighten vulnerability to cognitive biases, leading to erroneous asylum decisions and undermining asylum principles (Dror, 2020).
- Therefore, further research is needed to understand cognitive biases in asylum decision-making better.



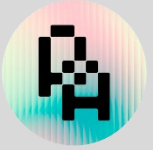
Beliefs about Cognitive Bias in the Asylum Context

- Our recent research found that asylum decision-makers were aware that cognitive bias may affect their decisions (Appiah et al., Unpublished manuscript).
- However, they viewed themselves as less biased than their colleagues (the bias blind spot) and were more likely to believe they could consciously set aside their cognitive biases through conscious control (the illusion of control; Appiah et al., Unpublished manuscript).



Cognitive Bias in Asylum Decisions

- Alongside the formal credibility assessment criteria used by asylum judges, Schlueter (2024) identified two informal criteria: case comparison and general impression (see also UNHCR, 2013)
- These criteria may not be explicitly discussed in judges' written decisions (Schlueter, 2024), highlighting the need to examine further whether decision-makers recognise how their impressions influence their decisions.

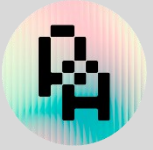


Current Study

This current study examined how asylum decision-makers in some European countries perceived the impact of impressions on their decisions.

Research Question

How do asylum decision-makers describe the role that their overall impressions of asylum claims play in their decision-making processes?



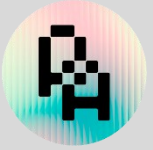
Method

Study design

Qualitative study using open-ended survey responses collected as part of a larger research project on cognitive biases among asylum decision-makers.

Survey Question

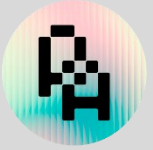
We asked decision-makers, “Please explain what role (if any) your general impression about a claim plays in your decision-making.”



Method

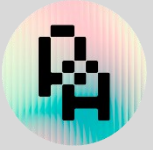
Open science practice

Preregistration, data, and analysis scripts relating to the current study and the larger project will be openly available on the project's Open Science Framework (OSF; Appiah et al., 2024).



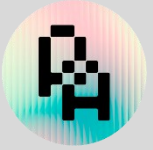
Participants

- 140 asylum decision-makers across Europe
- 79 asylum officials and 61 appeal court judges
- Mean age: 41 (SD=13) years.
- Average 8 years of work experience
- 91 females, 47 males, and 2 Undisclosed.
- 56 from Sweden, 36 from Germany, 36 from Finland, and 12 from 5 other EU countries.
- 120 out of the 140 responded to the question.



Data Analysis

- The first author conducted the thematic analysis.
- Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2022) six-step approach: familiarisation with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production.
- Inductive coding: codes were derived from participants' responses rather than predefined categories.



Results

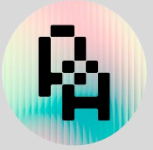
3 broad themes identified

Role of Impression on Decision-Making

**Hierarchical
role of
Impressions**

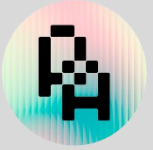
**Dynamic
Nature of
Impressions**

**Strategies for
managing
Impressions**



Hierarchical role of Impressions

Sub-theme	Explanation	Quotes from participants
Little to no Influence.	General impression had little effect on the decisions.	"Not really. You know that the law determines the outcome. You might feel more or less sympathy for an applicant, but I wouldn't say that influences my decisions."
Stage-Specific Influence.	General impression influences a specific stage of the asylum process (e.g. interview or credibility assessment).	"If an applicant has been able to provide a detailed account of the facts, I may consider their application more credible than one in which the applicant gives only a very brief account, even if they are asked to elaborate further through open-ended questions."
Integral Role.	General impression has a substantial influence on decision-making.	"People tend to form a 'quick first impression'. Experience shows that such an impression may well be accurate, but it needs to be examined and subjected to critical reflection."



Dynamic Nature of Impressions

Explanation

General impressions are not static but change throughout the decision-making process.

Quotes from participants

“My impression of how difficult or easy the task seems can influence how much time I spend on it. But even an initial general impression can change once you’ve got to grips with the task.”

“I feel that a general perception primarily constitutes a way of understanding a matter in a certain way. This initial perception must then be revised in light of the evidence and facts gathered regarding the matter.”



Strategies for managing Impressions

Sub-theme

Explanation

Quotes from participants

Critical Reflection and Justification of Impressions

Decision-makers were aware of their initial impressions and critically evaluated and justified them before making a decision.

“It usually gives me the hint of which way the decision might go. But since the decisions must be based on objective assessment, I will have to write out those assessments. So sometimes I would begin writing a negative decision, but as I go through it more carefully and learn more about the specific claims, I find that it is very difficult to give the reasons for the negative decision. If I start feeling like I am struggling to come up with persuasive arguments to reject the claim, that is usually a strong hint that the decision should likely be positive instead.”



Strategies for managing Impressions

Sub-theme

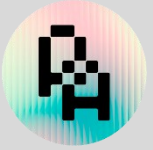
Explanation

Quotes from participants

Assessment by
Multiple
Decision-
Makers.

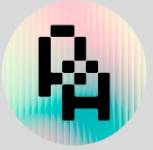
Multiple decision-makers evaluated a claim to help reduce the influence of individual assessors' subjective impressions.

"I realize it is impossible not to have a general impression about a claim. I have general trust in the system and that there are balancing factors against general impressions/bias etc: there are usually many people involved in deciding a case (especially in cases that are difficult to decide), continuous training, experience, possibility to appeal."



Discussion

- The findings provide insight into how asylum decision-makers conceptualise general impressions in practice.
- The results reveal variation in decision-makers' awareness of how impressions influence their decisions.
- Overlooking the influence of general impressions may increase susceptibility to cognitive biases, especially under constrained conditions.
- Future research should examine the effectiveness of the reported strategies for managing the influence of general impressions on decision-making.



Conclusion

Overall, the findings underscore the need for training in evaluation and use of impression-based information in asylum decision-making processes.



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