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Refugees' Experiences of Home Office Interviews: A Qualitative Study on the Disclosure of Sensitive Personal Information

Diana Bögner, Chris Brewin and Jane Herlihy

Decisions on refugee status rely heavily on judgments about how individuals present themselves and their histories. Late or non-disclosure of sensitive personal information, for example, may be assumed to be a result of fabrication by the asylum claimant. However, if incorrect, such assumptions can lead to genuine refugees in need of protection being refused asylum. A study employing semi-structured interviews with 27 refugees and asylum-seekers with traumatic histories was conducted to explore the factors involved in the disclosure of sensitive personal information during Home Office interviews in the UK. Many reported difficulties with disclosing personal details, and interviewer qualities emerged as the strongest factor in either facilitating or impeding disclosure. The interview data showed that disclosure was not just based on personal decisions and internal processes, but was also related to interpersonal, situational and contextual factors. Recommendations for improving Home Office procedures are also discussed.

Keywords: Refugees; Self-Disclosure; Asylum Interviews; Trauma; UK Home Office

Introduction

The UK is one of the many countries worldwide that has legally committed itself to the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers. To be recognised as a refugee and granted asylum under the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the asylum applicant has to show a 'well-founded fear of being persecuted

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in his or her country of origin for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion' (UNHCR 1992: 8).

The UK asylum system has undergone substantial changes since 1993, including the detention and fast-tracking of applicants, support offered to asylum-seekers, and the granting of refugee status. Most asylum-seekers have to attend a Home Office interview, which is key to deciding on their application. The purpose of the interview is to establish whether or not an applicant is at risk of persecution for one of the five reasons outlined in the Refugee Convention, and to assess their credibility (since there is often little documentary or other supporting evidence about the asylum-seeker). During the interview, asylum-seekers are expected to disclose all information relevant to their application, such as their history and reasons for seeking asylum. Applications are assessed in terms of the claimant's credibility, information supplied, current political situation in their country of origin, evidence of the country's human rights record and, if applicable, medical evidence of torture and abuse (ICAR 2007).

Late disclosure—incidents described in later interviews of which no mention was made in the first—is commonly cited as a reason against an asylum-seeker's credibility (Asylum Aid 1999). For example, a Home Office refusal letter stated:

... in the event a well-prepared statement seven months after the asylum interview has little weight on his claim. Had Mr Z. a genuine fear of persecution he would have said so in his (first) interview (Cohen 2001: 25).

It is understandable that the addition of new evidence could be seen as proof against the claimant's honesty. However, this assumption may fail to take into account other reasons for not disclosing at the outset:

... concealment of parts of the story does not necessarily detract from the credibility of the applicant. A genuine refugee may not be willing to tell his or her full story for fear of endangering relatives or friends, or for fear of sharing this information with persons in position of authority (UNHCR 1995: 34).

However, states are not obliged to follow this guidance.

The Home Office has been criticised for the poor quality of decision-making over asylum claims. This poor quality has been related to pressure to meet targets (National Audit Office 2004), as well as to a failure to consider relevant evidence such as medical reports, the basing of decisions on inaccurate and out-of-date country information, and poorly reasoned decisions about people's credibility (Amnesty International 2004; Asylum Aid 1999). Smith (2004) found that, when discrepancies or mistakes were identified in people's accounts, they were not given the chance to address these or explain them, despite UNHCR guidance to this effect. In 2004, the UNHCR was invited to assist the Home Office in improving the quality of first instance decision-making through auditing existing practice. An overview of the findings and recommendations of this so-called Quality Initiative Project has been published on the Home Office website. The UNHCR has since then worked with the Home Office on the issues of determining credibility.

Many refugees who arrive in the UK have experienced or witnessed torture and organised violence (Amnesty International 2000; Burnett and Peel 2001; Eisenman *et al.* 2000). Disclosure is specifically an issue with torture survivors due to their difficulties of trust in authorities and their avoidance of painful memories (Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture 2002). The interview situation can bring about feelings of powerlessness and other similarities to torture situations (Laws and Patsalides 1997). Interview rooms can be small and bare, reminding interviewees of places where they were previously tortured (Herlihy 2003), which may serve to increase survivors' anxiety and affect their ability to disclose. Even in the absence of experiences of torture, people subjected to extreme conditions in their country of origin often suffer anxiety and distress on arrival about being refused, or do not know how much to reveal to British authorities on their arrival and thus may conceal important details that would have helped them with their asylum application (Turner 1989).

Asylum-seekers often come from cultures with different attitudes towards sexuality and the role of men and women in society. Sexual violence and rape are often taboo subjects, and survivors may feel very uncomfortable discussing their experiences (Burnett and Peel 2001). Women who have been subjected to sexual assault or rape are stigmatised in many cultures and may not disclose this in their asylum interviews, especially if the interviewer, the interpreter or others present are male (Burnett and Peel 2001). Men also tend to under-report experiences of sexual violence (Peel *et al.* 2000). Sexual violence results in feelings of shame, and women often feel personally to blame for what happened. They may be shunned by their community and family if they admit that they were raped (Asylum Aid 2001; Burnett 1999; United Nations 1997).

Our review indicates a variety of factors that could potentially impact on an asylum-seeker's ability to disclose sensitive personal information during a Home Office interview. Bögner *et al.* (2007), in the first empirical study on the topic to date, investigated the impact of sexual violence on disclosure during Home Office interviews. They found that those with a history of sexual violence reported more difficulties in disclosing personal information, were more likely to dissociate during these interviews, and scored significantly higher on measures of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) symptoms and shame than those with a history of non-sexual violence. They also found that many talked for the first time about their pre-migration trauma to Home Office officials. The Immigration Appellate Authority (IAA) states:

Delay in claiming asylum or revealing full details of an asylum claim will not necessarily be due to lack of credibility of a particular asylum claim or claimant. Torture, sexual violence and other persecutory treatment produce feelings of profound shame. This 'shame response' is a major obstacle to disclosure. Many victims will never speak about sexual violence or will remain silent about it for many years (IAA 2000: 51).

Finally, concepts such as confidentiality and privacy are alien in many cultures. Feelings of fear and suspicion can arise when an interpreter from the same ethnic

background is in the room (Tribe and Raval 2003). Interpreters can sometimes be torture victims themselves and working professionally with trauma victims could re-traumatise them (Haenel 1997). This may lead them to close off certain questions and/or answers and to inadvertently give non-verbal cues to the interviewee, discouraging elaboration of detail.

The data for the current study were collected between December 2004 and May 2005 as part of the above-mentioned study by Bögner *et al.* (2007), which mainly focused on the emotional impact of disclosure during Home Office interviews. In this paper we present the findings from the semi-structured interview on refugees' and asylum-seekers' experiences of the Home Office interviews. It differs from the first paper in that it systematically investigates the interpersonal, situational and contextual factors that have been identified in the literature as potentially impeding or facilitating refugees' disclosure during HO interviews.

Method

Participants

Twenty-seven refugees and asylum-seekers were recruited from a central London traumatic stress clinic (N=17) and two London-based community services (N=10). The clinic offers outpatient treatment for refugees suffering from PTSD and other specific psychological reactions to trauma. The community organisations, chosen due to their link with the clinic, provide a range of services for refugees, including advice and advocacy, weekly drop-in sessions and links to local organisations providing specialist help.

Participants—11 men and 16 women aged between 22 and 73 (mean=40.7, sd=12.6), who had arrived in the UK between 1995 and 2003—were invited to take part in a research study about refugees' and asylum-seekers' experiences of legal interviews. Age of arrival in the UK was between 18 and 68 years (mean = 37.7, sd = 12.3). Fourteen participants were granted indefinite leave to remain, three had exceptional (temporary) leave to remain and 10 were awaiting a decision on their application. Of the 17 participants granted some form of leave, 10 had been granted it following appeal and seven on first application. The asylum-seekers were all under appeal at the time of the interviews. These data are in line with findings from the literature showing the high proportion of refusals and successful appeals (National Audit Office 2004). Participants originated from 14 countries in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, reflecting the diverse population of refugees and asylum-seekers in the UK. The study went through the relevant NHS procedures for approving research. It was granted ethical approval by the Camden & Islington Community Local Research Ethics Committee (REC),¹ and approval to commence the research was obtained from the Trust Research and Development (R&D) unit. Written (translated) informed consent was obtained from all participants.

All participants had a history of pre-migration trauma. There was a considerable overlap in participants' reported traumatic experiences, which included rape, sexual torture, non-sexual torture, being shot, beatings, and witnessing the killing of family members. Participants were not asked directly about their various experiences of trauma to avoid inducing distress. Instead this information was obtained, with consent, from the person's clinician, caseworker or medical notes.

Clinicians and caseworkers were involved in identifying participants, who were approached in several ways. Some were sent a patient information sheet and a covering letter informing them that they would be contacted by phone to discuss the study. Some were approached by their clinician or caseworker, who then passed on contact details to the researcher where people were interested in participating. Others were approached face-to-face at drop-in sessions or community group meetings.

The length of time between the original Home Office interview and the research interview was variable, ranging from nine months to over nine years (mean time lag in months = 45.1; sd = 26.0).

Measures

We used an hour-long semi-structured interview with the first author (DB) to collect the qualitative data. Officially accredited interpreters were used at the request of seven participants. Interviews were taped (permission was sought in all cases) and transcribed in order to facilitate analysis of the qualitative data. Four participants did not want their interview to be recorded and in these cases process notes were taken instead. Most participants had had a Home Office screening interview shortly after arrival, followed by one or more further interviews. We questioned participants about their main HO interview and, in cases where they had had several interviews, the first was discussed. Questions included both open-ended and closed items and were based on issues identified in the literature as potentially affecting asylum-seekers' disclosure during interviews. These issues were grouped into five main categories:

- general impressions;
- reactions towards people in authority;
- situation- and context-specific factors;
- other issues;
- recommendations.

Limitations

This paper is based on a dissertation which formed part of the first author's requirements for a doctorate in clinical psychology at University College London in 2005. This means that time limits were imposed on completion of the study, which has compromised and restricted its methodology, as outlined below.

The sample size was small, so this restricts the generalisability of the findings; the tentative conclusions outlined in this paper should be considered with this in mind. Ideally all participants should have been interviewed with the assistance of an interpreter in order to facilitate internal reliability; however, funding issues made this impossible. Another limitation was that the sample was not randomly selected and there is the risk of a potential sampling bias. However, this study set out to be an applied study of a real-life situation, representing the diverse population of refugees going through asylum interviews in the UK. This influenced our decision to include multiple nationalities from a variety of settings.

Another limitation concerns the accuracy of self-reported emotional experiences that occurred several months or even years ago. There is evidence that autobiographical memories can be distorted or false (see Loftus 1993). However, memory recall can also be improved over time, a phenomenon called hypermnnesia. Emotional states can have an impact on memory processes (see Williams *et al.* 1997), as well as the type of memories recalled (see Brewin 2007, for a review of the empirical literature on autobiographical memory for trauma).

Furthermore, the outcome of the Home Office interview may have influenced participants' recall and perception of the interview—for example, those who had a positive result may have had a more positive memory of the interview. However, analysis of data does not support this and showed that participants still experienced the interview as difficult even when they were granted indefinite leave to remain in the first instance. Moreover, there were no statistically significant differences between asylum-status groups in terms of self-reported difficulty in disclosure.

Differences in belief and value systems in relation to one's cultural background may be factors impacting on a person's willingness to self-disclose personal information. However, the literature on this is sparse. Toukmanian and Brouwers (1998) distinguished between individualistic versus collectivistic value orientation in self-disclosure. They argue that an individual raised in a culture that holds up collectivistic values may be more reluctant to self-disclose abuse due to increased concerns regarding the negative impact this disclosure would bring upon their family and ancestors. Investigating the impact of cultural factors in disclosure was beyond the remit of this paper, but would present an important subject for future research.

Results

The data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Aronson 1994), which focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of personal experiences. In the current study, the data for each question were analysed separately, though for a minority of questions the data were combined due to similarity. Participants' responses were pooled and patterns of experiences were listed by paraphrasing common ideas. Major response themes were then drawn out from these patterns. The results were then arranged under the pre-existing categories outlined in the method section.

Following recommendations by Elliot *et al.* (1999), credibility checks were provided in several ways. To confirm reliability, a second marker audited the data from each question, looking at the themes created. Any differences in opinion were discussed and rectified. Furthermore, the findings were triangulated by comparing the outcome of the qualitative data with the results of the quantitative data (reported in Bögner *et al.* 2007) and drawing parallels between the two. The validity of the conclusions drawn is enhanced in several ways. First, by presenting direct quotes from the interviews to demonstrate the relationship between themes and the source data. Second, to indicate how representative the themes were of the sample as a whole, the proportion of participants for each theme is outlined. Third, the analysis includes a negative case analysis, which means reporting on minority as well as majority responses.

Our study particularly investigated aspects of the Home Office interview procedure that may be either impeding or facilitating disclosure. The Borders and Immigration Agency (BIA) has published detailed guidelines on conducting asylum interviews, such as the Asylum Process Manual (APM) and the Asylum Policy Instructions (API). However, evidence from our study suggests that these guidelines are not always adhered to, as highlighted in the following excerpts from these guidelines, which are then compared with our interview data:

General Impressions

Q: What was the asylum interview like for you? How did it feel to be asked personal questions during the interview? Only five of the 27 participants seemed to have a positive attitude about the interview; they said they did not feel pressured too much, found it easy to answer questions in the hope that it might help their application, and that the questions were what they expected and they felt the Home Office had a right to know the truth:

I told them everything that happened to me, it was not difficult. My experiences were true; there were not any reasons to lie. It was my story. It was the truth (P11).

The majority of participants (N = 22), however, felt that the interviews were difficult, and 12 reported difficulties in disclosing personal details. Frequently cited reasons for this were related to the emotional impact of disclosure, including feeling too traumatised, afraid and ashamed to talk about the past. For a more detailed analysis of this, see Bögner *et al.* (2007).

The Conduct of Interviewing Officers and Applicants' Reactions Towards People in Authority

The APM advises that 'interviewing officers should be sympathetic and understanding of the feelings of the applicant, for whom the interview and subsequent decision will be a matter of great importance'. Indeed, interviewer qualities of

empathy, patience, acceptance and non-judgemental listening emerged as the strongest factor in facilitating disclosure in the current study. However, many reported that they did not feel physically safe and that they felt that the interviewer made them feel persecuted, suggesting that further training on interviewing skills may be required and that officials could benefit from regular supervision to help them with these issues.

Q: How did you imagine the officials would react to hearing your story? What did you think would happen? Nine of the 27 respondents imagined that the interviewer would be understanding and sympathetic, have pity on them, protect them and believe their story. Eighteen imagined a negative reaction and were worried that the interviewer would not believe them, would not be interested in their case, would send them back to the country of origin or to prison, or would pass information on to their government:

I came from Iraq and when we left there was a war, but it was a very different kind of war. Saddam's hand is longer than anyone else's and can reach everywhere. He said that everyone who leaves the country will have to die 'cause they are no patriots. We left because we would have died anyways and we were really scared in the interview that he would have one of his men somewhere around and kill us (P3).

One person imagined that the interviewer would not want to hear his story for fear of getting upset, and a woman with a history of rape worried about shaming reactions from the men in the room, fearing that they might leave if she disclosed that she was raped.

Q: How did the officials react? Eight people felt that the interviewer was nice and polite and made them feel comfortable and relaxed. The majority of people (N = 19), however, reported negative experiences:

The Home Office officials have a 'diplomatic way' of torture. The Home Office interview was worse than the repeated rape and detention I suffered. The rape was physical, at least I could close my eyes while it happened and try to forget about it. I developed ways to deal with the physical torture. When you have a cut or a wound it heals after a while, but what the Home Office does and the government ensures that those wounds they inflict on you will never heal. They tell you: 'We do this interview in your interest'. You open up then, let down your mask and become fragile. But then they torture you inside, for example I was asked by a female interviewer: 'How come you don't have any sexual diseases like syphilis or AIDS, but you tell me that you were raped?'. I was thinking at the time, maybe if I had AIDS then they would accept my case. They take my fragile part and destroy it. They know how to do this well, they are trained in it (P14).

The HO officials are strangers and carry out a routine. Therefore you can tell them many heartbreaking stories and it does not affect them. And because they don't show any emotions or sympathy it is very hard to feel relaxed and open. Maybe if I was encouraged to talk more about it and if they understood me better and I saw that they showed any sympathy, maybe I would have said more. The HO official I had was very cold. I felt she did a job, following a routine, asking questions (P9).

When I started talking I felt like I was dying. You tell them everything, you feel naked. But once I saw that they were not really interested and ignorant I stopped talking (P2).

Eight people said the officials reminded them of police or officials from their home country and that this increased their anxiety and interfered with their ability to disclose. Four people stated feeling like criminals and that the interviewer did not believe them, and one reported being openly accused of being a liar:

They don't make you feel comfortable. I wanted to leave the room it was so bad. I still have nightmares thinking back how they treated me. They treat us like criminals, like rubbish. They know how to destroy us and break us, they are trained in it. It feels like they kill you slowly in this interview (P13).

Others felt that the interviewer looked at them in a 'funny' way and that they felt 'watched' (N = 4). One woman reported that the interviewer made her feel low, dirty and ashamed, accusing her of wrong-doing in not telling her husband that she was raped. One person felt he could not trust the interviewer, no matter how s/he behaved.

Q: Were you afraid the officials would judge you negatively? Eighteen people reported that they were afraid this would happen. Reasons included: disclosing a history of rape or other past traumatic experiences, being a refugee, not being able to express oneself properly and physical appearance. For example, one person had a scar on his face from a gunshot wound and he was worried that the interviewer would think that he looked cruel and therefore refuse him. One woman described an experience of feeling openly judged by the interviewer, which she said increased her feelings of shame:

The woman asked me: "What kind of a mother are you to leave your family and children behind?" But they were taken away from me, I had no choice. I ended up feeling like a bad mother (P15).

Gender-Specific Interviewing Officers and Interpreters

The API states that 'if the representative or the claimant requests a gender specific interviewing officer or interpreter, this should as far as possible be accommodated'. Our data suggest that the choice of same-sex interviewers and interpreters is crucial in cases when there is a history of rape. However, claimants may not always be aware of this option.

Q: I wonder whether the sex of the interviewer had any impact on you? Eight people reported that the sex of the interviewer had an impact on their ability to disclose; six of those were men and women with a history of rape. All agreed that it would be easier to speak to a member of the same sex, especially when talking about sexual experiences. Women in particular (N = 5) expressed shameful reactions when talking about rape to men they did not know:

It was so hard to speak to men that were not related to me. I just can't explain how hard it was. And I did not explain everything because I could not. I never talked about what happened to me in my whole life, not even to my mom. So suddenly I had to talk to three men I did not know. It was so hard. I just could not say what I wanted to say (P10).

Those who reported indifference about the sex of the interviewer stated that the way they were treated by the person was seen as a more important factor in facilitating disclosure (N = 5).

The Substantive Asylum Interview: Best Practice Processes

The APM has a detailed section providing guidance on the processes to follow when opening the interview, during the interview, and concluding the interview. However, many participants reported that interview procedures were not well explained to them and that they did not know what to expect. To reduce anxiety and stress levels prior to the interview, it is important that claimants have access to information about what to expect on the day of their Home Office interview, and that the interviewing process is explained to them again at the beginning of the interview.

Situation- and Context-Specific Factors

Q: Did you get a chance to meet the interviewer before the interview? If no, would you have felt more comfortable if you had met the interviewer before? None of the participants got a chance to meet the interviewer before the interview. Sixteen said that they would have liked the interviewer to introduce him/herself and give them some information about what was going to happen in the interview, which would have helped interviewees to feel more relaxed. Some stated that the interviewer's personality and how participants are treated are more important than meeting the interviewer beforehand (N = 6).

Q: Did you feel that the procedures were well explained to you? Eighteen people felt that they were not well explained; they did not know what was expected of them or what was going to happen during the interview. Most agreed that they would have liked some advice or information before the interview to know better what to say and what not to say. Two people felt that they should have received this information from their solicitor.

Q: Did you feel safe during the interview? Nineteen people reported that they did not feel safe during the interview. Eleven commented that they were scared about being refused, sent to prison or being accused of lying. Twelve people—of whom 11 had a history of sexual violence against them—also commented that the effects lasted long after the interview, giving them nightmares and causing them to have physical problems and mental health difficulties such as anxiety, depression and paranoia, for which they had to seek professional help:

Even after the interview I was scared the police was coming after me. I felt very suspicious. I went to see a psychiatrist who told me that nothing was wrong with me. When I told him he said it was normal. I was thinking I was going mad (P18).

The Interview Room

Although the APM has a section on the interview room, no guidelines regarding the size or aspect of the room were mentioned.

Q: Was there anything about the setting/place of the interview that made it difficult for you to open up? Eight people reported that the setting made it more difficult. Seven felt that the room was too small. Two women reported feeling uncomfortable as they were sitting too close to the male interviewer, and two others said that the room reminded them of their prison cell. One person reported that she was interviewed in an open area, which made it difficult for her to open up as she found it hard to concentrate and feel confident.

Friends or Other Companions

The APM guidelines state that ‘Where an applicant wishes to bring a friend or other companion to the interview to provide emotional or medical support they may do so at the discretion of the interviewing officer. No request will be unreasonably turned down.’ Claimants in our study did not seem to be aware of this option.

Q: Were you interviewed alone or with other members of your family? If alone, would you have preferred to have family members/others with you? If with family/others, would you have preferred to be interviewed alone? Out of the 22 people interviewed alone, 18 reported that they would have liked a family member or a friend in the room, which they said would have made them feel more relaxed, secure and confident. Five people specifically would have liked their solicitor—who was seen as a person whom they could trust and who knew about their case—to be there. Four said that they preferred to be interviewed alone as they did not want to bother their family with their problems or did not want others to know what they had been through. One woman was interviewed with her husband initially and was unable to disclose that she was raped in front of him.

Other Issue

The Role of the Home Office Interpreter

One major issue, raised by 15 participants, was difficulties with interpreters. The API guidelines state that ‘interpreters employed by the Home Office are required to translate accurately and impartially what is said at interview. IND interpreters are not expected to enter in any discussion regarding the merits of the claim, although they may intervene to ask for clarification, to point out that a party member may not have understood something, or to alert the parties to a possible missed cultural inference’.

The APM guidelines further state that ‘When opening the interview, the interviewing officer should confirm that the applicant understands the interpreter and understands the interview procedure’. The quotes below clearly indicate that these guidelines are not always adhered to. Clear guidelines on the role of the interpreter need to be conveyed to the asylum-seeker, and to the interpreter, before the start of each interview.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to tell me that I have not asked you about? Seven reported that the interpreter spoke a different dialect, which made it hard for them to understand everything that was said in the interview, and six that the interpreter was from a different tribe or political group, which made it hard for them to feel safe, have trust and disclose in the interview. Many reported that in their country these different groups were at war with each other. Another six felt that the interpreter did not interpret everything word-for-word, and even took over the interview:

The HO interpreter was of English background. She could speak Turkish but had no background knowledge of Turkey. While she interpreted I had to explain things to her (i.e. about the political situation in Turkey). She interpreted very badly. Out of 10 words I said she only interpreted one, and that was not even related to things I was saying. She only really interpreted the gist of the story. I give you an example: I was detained and tortured and kept in a dark room. However, she only interpreted that I was kept in a dark room. And obviously if you don’t interpret everything I have said then it does not make sense. My English is getting better now and so I am able to understand a lot more (P10).

The interpreter actually stopped me from talking, she said: ‘Tell that to your solicitor’. It felt like the interview was run by the interpreter and the HO official took second place; he even left the room at various points (P23).

These data are in line with the findings by Tribe and Raval (2003), which revealed that feelings of fear and suspicion can arise during the interpretation process, due to ethnic factors.

Interview Notes

The applicant is required to sign the original copy of the interview record and to confirm receipt of a photocopy. The APM guidelines highlight that ‘the applicant should be advised that the signature does not indicate that the contents of the asylum interview have been agreed’. Several participants have commented that their Home Office statement was only translated to them in the appeal court, which suggests that applicants may not regularly seek a translation of their interview record. We believe that claimants should be aware of what they are signing and have a genuine opportunity to correct any errors of fact. This becomes of particular importance when, as cited by one participant, discrepancies are noted between this interview record and subsequent accounts.

Many non-English-speaking refugees and asylum-seekers raised this issue and reported having to sign the statement, which is in English, without knowing what they were signing. They complained that there were incorrect details on their statement, which they only found out afterwards when they translated the statement after being refused leave to remain in the country:

What happened was that after my refusal my statement was translated into Turkish for me. My statement during the interview was written down in English. I could not read it, but I had to sign it. What happened then I had to go to court and the judge picked up on inconsistencies in my story between the HO interview and an earlier statement. When they read the statement that was produced during the interview at court I told the judge that I did not say these things. They actually apologised to me in the end for making a mistake (P11).

They did not write down correctly what I said in the interview. For example, they asked me how the people were dressed who raped me. I told him, but he wrote down that I did not know. When he asked me again later what they looked like I said I did not really know as it was dark at the time. He then said: 'But how could you have known who these people were if you could not see them?' The interview protocol was wrong! I tried to show him my scar in the interview and he asked me to stop undressing. In the report he wrote, 'She tried to show me her vagina' (P12).

Finally, many also reported difficulties with other interviews they attended as part of their claim process. These difficulties were not explored further as the aim of this study was to focus only on the main Home Office interview. However two comments are of note:

The screening interview was the worst time in my life. The HO official was so cruel. I was very sick at the time, I had a stabbing wound. He was shouting at me and ripped a paper that I filled out to pieces in front of me. I was trembling. He accused me of being a liar and that I was not sick. I wanted to show him my wound, but he did not want to see it. It was hard to focus my mind on the interview. I was told that I was in a safe country, but I was admitted [to a psychiatric hospital] as a result of the stress I suffered from the HO interview. I still remember him now in my dreams (P13).

The screening interviews are even worse. The attitude of those people needs to change. Their job is to ask you simple questions, but they make it harder for you. They don't do their job. They don't even smile, introduce themselves. But they shout at you and give orders. They should explain more rather than give orders. That has to change, but the actual interview is not that bad. The screening interview and how they treat people needs to change (P27).

Recommendations

Participants were asked to make recommendations of what would facilitate disclosure during Home Office interviews. In line with previous research by Brown *et al.* (1999), which showed that therapists' qualities of concern, acceptance and non-judgemental

listening were cited by their sample of eating-disordered inpatients as important facilitators of disclosure, the most frequently cited factor related to interviewers' qualities of empathy, patience, acceptance and non-judgemental listening (N = 11).

Q: Is there anything that would have made it easier for you to open up? What would be a better setting/place to be interviewed in? How could the interviews be changed to make it easier for people to open up? One interviewee summarised his response thus:

During the interview try to be more understanding. Show the person more that you feel sorry for them, but not judge them in any way. It makes a big difference how you are spoken to, some people make you nervous and scared and some don't. And remember that for some people it is hard to speak. Make them feel more welcome and give them time and a chance to talk about the past (P26).

Recommendations regarding the setting included using bigger rooms, sitting in a circle rather than behind a desk, making the room look more homely, and making people feel more welcome when entering the Home Office building by having signs up in different languages.

Other recommendations included using female interviewers and interpreters for women, especially in the case of suspected rape), allowing someone in the room the person can trust, having more knowledge about the person's country of origin, providing some information about the interview procedure, having an interview protocol, making the interviews less formal, and taking the person's psychological symptoms into account. In addition, recommendations regarding interpreters were mentioned by four people: use interpreters speaking the same dialect and from the same background as the applicant, and make sure the interpreter's role is solely to translate everything that is being said. Finally, four people also mentioned that the immigration system has to change to make a difference, not only the interviews:

I know that some people get detained. Knowing this made me feel stressed in the interview. So the system has to change, not only the interview. You hear stories from people saying that they were arrested. I feel scared all the time (P17).

Conclusion

Bögner *et al.* (2007) discussed the implications of their findings for the asylum process and the current UK immigration policy. They highlighted that asylum-seekers need time to process past traumatic events and to establish a level of trust and confidence in order for them to disclose. However, this is contrary to the current UK immigration system that requires asylum-seekers to make a claim shortly after arrival, and to disclose all relevant personal sensitive information to, effectively, a stranger. Immigration policies aimed at identifying asylum-seekers fabricating their story may have detrimental implications for legitimate asylum-seekers. Supervision and training of immigration officials was suggested to help them to recognise stress reactions in asylum-seekers, and to increase their awareness of the link between claimants' psychological health, emotional states and ability to disclose.

The APM annex Protocol Governing the Conduct of Substantive Interviews and the Roles of Interviewing Officers, Representatives and their Interpreters is a document that has been agreed with members of NGOs. It states that ‘... all interviews conducted by caseworkers or case owners in the IND (asylum and non-asylum) should be conducted in accordance with the guidance set out in the Protocol’. However, a striking observation from participants’ interviews was that the Home Office questions seemed to vary greatly from one person to another. Some reported that they were mainly asked for factual information about their home country, whereas others were allowed to talk more openly about their past trauma. Why this inconsistency between interviewers should be so is a question for further research.

Our study is the first to systematically investigate what specific factors of the interview process impede or facilitate disclosure. The majority of our participants seemed to experience the Home Office interviews as difficult, especially when obliged to disclose personal details of a particularly sensitive nature such as rape. Eighteen people reported that they were afraid the interviewer would judge them negatively, which relates to Gilbert’s (1998) concept of external shame. These findings are in line with studies showing that non-disclosure is related to themes of a sexual nature, violence and abuse (Hill *et al.* 1993; Kelly 1998; Norton *et al.* 1974; Weiner and Shuman 1984). They also support the empirical literature on the link between shame and disclosure (Hook and Andrews 2005; Swan and Andrews 2003). However, it also needs to be noted that the activation of feelings of shame seemed not only based on imagined or anticipated scenarios of what would be shaming; there were also indications from our interview data that some of the reactions and comments of Home Office officials directly activated shame responses.

Furthermore, the majority of people reported that the interviewer did not make them feel very good, and reminded them of police or officials from their home country, which, they said, affected their ability to disclose. The findings are in line with results by Brown *et al.* (1999) showing negative emotions post-disclosure in their sample. They are also consistent with McNulty and Wardle (1994), who suggested that disclosing sexual abuse might be a cause of primary psychological distress in itself.

Although this has not specifically been investigated in the current study, people’s pre-existing beliefs and experiences of Home Office interviews might have impacted on their ability to disclose. Many reported difficulties with the earlier screening interview, which they felt had had an impact on their mental state and affected their ability to disclose during the main Home Office interview. Some participants also told the interviewer that they had been warned about the Home Office interview by others who had previously undergone one, which raised their stress and anxiety levels. Future research could investigate the impact of the initial screening interviews and people’s pre-existing beliefs on their ability to disclose information in subsequent Home Office interviews.

We have suggested in this paper that late or non-disclosure in a Home Office interview does not necessarily signal a lack of honesty, but that disclosure is

influenced by a multitude of factors which can outweigh any individual's requirement to reveal personal details in their Home Office interview. Interviewer qualities emerged as the strongest disclosure factor in the current study, which indicates that how people are treated is crucial in facilitating disclosure.

Note

- [1] NHS RECs are independent advisory bodies convened to protect the rights and dignities of research participants and to facilitate ethical research. They are appointed by and answerable to Strategic Health Authorities, and include up to 18 members: two-thirds expert/professionals, and one-third lay members.

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