

Fair Judgements: Reasons for Inconsistent Accounts in UK Asylum Applications

Summary rationale, aims and objectives – for more details and full references for this research, see the Research Protocol – available from j.herlihy@cseel.org.uk

1. Overall aims of CSEL:

To develop and disseminate an objective evidence base to improve the quality of asylum decisions, by undertaking empirical, methodologically rigorous psychological research. Through this, to promote community cohesion, safety and wellbeing through development of a better informed asylum process.

This project is being run in partnership between CSEL and the Refugee Therapy Centre – www.refugeetherapy.org.uk

2. Aims of this project:

To investigate psychological factors in inconsistencies in asylum seekers' claims, which are typically interpreted by decision makers as indicating fabricated histories.

3. Objectives:

To disseminate findings through high impact academic publication, accessible reports and training. Through these to enable findings to directly influence new asylum decisions and help inform decision makers about the mechanisms involved in discrepancies in asylum seekers' recall of personal information.

4. Need for this research:

The 1951 Geneva Convention for Refugees was formulated following World War II to provide protection to people who were in genuine fear of persecution. The UK is a signatory to this Convention. In 2006, over 28,000 individuals claimed asylum in the UK. People applying for asylum have to convince officials that they have a genuine fear of persecution. This is often based on a claim that they have been persecuted already in their home country. This is one of the most difficult legal decisions; often the asylum seeker has no witnesses, documentation or other corroborating evidence. It is inevitable therefore that this decision often turns on the credibility of the applicant. In the absence of objective evidence, this can be hard to determine, and often depends on untested assumptions about normal behaviour. A common lay belief, frequently articulated by asylum decision makers, is that a true story - especially of a traumatic experience - does not change.

However, there is a respected body of evidence to undermine this belief and these assumptions on the part of decision makers (see full protocol for details). A pilot study of refugees who had been given permission to stay without undergoing formal asylum processes (Herlihy, Scragg & Turner 2002) – and who therefore had not ostensible motivation to lie – showed that

- over 30% of details in accounts changed between the two interviews with each participant;

- details reported by the participant as peripheral were more likely to change between accounts of traumatic events;
- longer delay between interviews meant more inconsistency for people with more PTSD symptoms.

This new research will test a number of hypotheses suggested by previous research:

- i. That mood can cause a change in the way an event is described, resulting in apparent discrepancies.
- ii. That dissociation during an interview can contribute to inconsistency.
- iii. That intrusive memories ('flashbacks') during recounting an event can affect the quality of information given in interviews, and contribute to inconsistencies.
- iv. That inconsistencies can be attributed to interpreter effects, and
- v. That similar patterns of inconsistencies can be found in refugee and non-refugee populations.

5. Methodology:

The research will consist of two interviews each with people with a history of at least one traumatic experience. The refugee group will have leave to remain (refugee or other status). Participants will be asked about past experiences (memories) and current state (measures of mood, intrusions and dissociation – hypotheses (i) to (iii)). Participants will be recruited through community and clinical settings. The researchers (see below) will consult with a Refugee Expert Panel recruited from the refugee population, who will be particularly consulted about recruitment strategies, the design of the project, interviewing, dissemination to the refugee population and decision makers, and about ethical issues. They will also be asked to analyse discrepancies in interpreted interviews (hypothesis (iv) above).

The results of the study will be submitted for publication in a peer reviewed journal and summary reports will be written.

6. Personnel:

Chief Investigator: Dr. Jane Herlihy, Chartered Clinical Psychologist, Director, Centre for the Study of Emotion and Law.

Partner Lead / Collaborator: Dr. Aida Alayarian, Chartered Clinical Psychologist, Refugee Therapy Centre.

