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Methodological Aspects of a Quantitative and Qualitative Survey of Asylum Seekers in Germany – A Field Report

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Abstract

This field report presents and discusses methodological issues and challenges encountered in a mixed-methods research project on asylum seekers in Bavaria, Germany. It documents the research design of, and field experiences in, a quantitative survey based on a quota sampling procedure and a qualitative study, both of which were conducted in collective accommodation for asylum seekers at selected locations in that federal state. Standardized PAPI multiple-topic questionnaires were completed by asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Iraq ($N = 779$); most of the questionnaires were self-administered. In addition, 12 qualitative face-to-face biographical interviews were conducted in order to gain an in-depth understanding of attitudes and experiences of asylum seekers. This report focuses on the following aspects: the use of gatekeepers to facilitate participant recruitment; sampling procedures; the involvement of interpreters in the data collection process; response bias and response behaviors among asylum seekers; and the experiences gained from data collection in collective accommodation for asylum seekers.

Keywords: asylum seekers in Germany, mixed methods, surveys, biographical research, gatekeeper approach; methodological issues; use of interpreters



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In 2015 and 2016, about 1.16 million asylum seekers were registered in Germany (BAMF, 2018, p. 3). During this period – and due to the distribution of asylum seekers among the German federal states according to a quota system known as the “Königstein key” (*Königsteiner Schlüssel*) – Bavaria was allocated 15.33% of persons seeking asylum in Germany. In absolute figures, this meant that 67,639 first-time asylum applications were registered in Bavaria in 2015 (BAMF, 2016b, p. 16) and 82,003 in 2016 (BAMF, 2017a, p. 16), resulting in a total of almost 150,000 registrations. The increased number of asylum seekers in Germany, and the societal and political implications thereof, heightened the need for empirical data on these new arrivals. In 2016, the Ostbayerische Technische Hochschule Regensburg (OTH Regensburg) initiated a mixed-methods pilot study entitled “Asylsuchende in Bayern” (Asylum Seekers in Bavaria; see Haug, Currle, Lochner, Huber, & Altenbuchner, 2017) on behalf of the Hanns Seidel Foundation in order to gain a better understanding of the asylum seekers who arrived in that federal state in 2015 and 2016. The objective of this study was to enhance understanding of the motivations, sociodemographic characteristics, and attitudes of asylum seekers.

Prior to the qualitative and quantitative surveys carried out within the framework of the study, expert interviews were conducted with persons entrusted with the accommodation, distribution, and integration of asylum seekers. The findings of these interviews facilitated the design of a standardized quantitative questionnaire, which included questions on sociodemographic characteristics, value orientations, religiosity, and intentions to remain in Germany. Data collection was supported by interpreters, who delivered the questionnaires to asylum seekers in collective accommodation centers and were available to clarify in the respondents’ mother tongue any issues regarding the survey questions. In total, 779 asylum seekers participated in the quantitative survey.

In addition, 12 qualitative, face-to-face interviews were conducted with asylum seekers in order to collect exemplary biographies with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of their reasons for flight, value orientations, attitudes, and

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future aspirations. Time-line analysis and mapping was used to visualize the asylum seekers' biographies and the routes they took when they fled.

This article discusses methodological issues and challenges of collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data from a vulnerable group, in this case asylum seekers. The following sections describe the procedures and research instruments used and discuss issues and challenges such as sampling, response bias, the use of interpreters and gatekeepers, data visualization, and research ethics.

Quantitative Methods

Sampling strategies for surveying asylum seekers in Germany: Issues and challenges

Standard methods for surveying persons with a migration background in Germany based on address and telephone registers were not applicable in this study. These methods include, first, the drawing of representative samples from addresses listed in municipal population registers. Register sampling requires cooperation with municipal statistics offices, which have access to the population registers. These registers contain addresses that could be used for postal or face-to-face surveys.

As in the case of migration background, the existence of a refugee background can be determined only in screening procedures after the survey. In the case of asylum seekers, the problem of collecting data on rare populations within the framework of a general population survey is particularly pronounced (Schnell et al., 2013a, pp. 285–288): An immensely large sample size would be needed in order to ensure a sufficient number of asylum seekers in the sample. Hence, this method was not a viable option in the present study.

A second method of surveying persons with a migration background in Germany entails drawing a disproportionate stratified municipal population register sample with prior classification of the population according to migration background using MigraPro (VDSt, 2013, p. 18; Haug et al., 2014, pp. 308–309). MigraPro is a German software tool that enables the classification of the population of persons with a migration background – especially first-generation migrants – in the municipal population registers based on citizenship and place of birth. However, as asylum status is not recorded in the municipal population registers, drawing a sample of asylum seekers using MigraPro would require an additional screening procedure within the random sample of persons with a migration background in order to identify asylum seekers. Hence, this method, too, was not feasible in the present study.

A third approach to surveying persons with a migration background in Germany is to use onomastic (i.e., name-based) methods to draw stratified samples.

The challenge here is to filter out on the basis of names as many persons as possible from certain countries of origin (Humpert & Schneiderheinze, 2002). As the onomastic method has the advantage of reduced screening effort, it is primarily used in Germany to pre-select migrants from certain countries of origin, for example Turkey or Poland, or from groups of countries, such as the former Soviet Union or former Yugoslavia, that have a shared history and a set of common typical names. The onomastic approach was used, for example, in Haug, Müssig, and Stichs' (2009) study on Muslims with a migration background in Germany, which considered almost 50 countries of origin with a predominantly Muslim population. The onomastic approach is more accurate for some countries of origin, such as Turkey, than for others, for example Russia (Schnell et al., 2013b). A test of the onomastic method using data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) revealed that it could assign almost all available full names to a country-of-origin-of-the-language group (Liebau, Humpert, & Schneiderheinze, 2018).

The advantage of the onomastic method is that the language likely spoken by the respondents can be predicted on the basis of their names, so that interviewers with a knowledge of these heritage languages can be deployed for the process of data collection (Haug & Vernim, 2015). However, in the case of this method, too, prior screening would be necessary to determine the actual country of origin and the asylum status. Because we did not have access to any registers containing recent asylum seekers, it was not possible to employ the onomastic method in the present study.

The fourth method of surveying persons with a migration background in Germany is to draw samples of asylum seekers from the Central Register of Foreigners (Ausländerzentralregister, AZR), which is centrally managed by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) in Nuremberg, Bavaria. The advantage of AZR-based sampling is that asylum status is available as a sampling characteristic – in addition to citizenship, sex, date of birth, year of entry, federal state (but not place) of residence, and the competent foreigners authority. However, as the AZR does not contain addresses, the competent foreigners authorities must be contacted individually in a further step in order to obtain the addresses of the persons in the sample (see Worbs, Bund, & Böhm, 2016 for a first application of this method). The IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (Brücker, Rother, & Schupp, 2016c) and the qualitative preliminary study (Brücker et al., 2016a), which was conducted by a team including the BAMF research group, used the AZR pursuant to a statutory provision that came into effect on February 2, 2016 (§ 24a (5) of the Act on the Central Register of Foreigners, AZR).¹ Access to the AZR for university research purposes is subject to strict statutory restrictions and requires the permission of

1 The transfer of data on foreigners from BAMF to research institutes is permitted if the data are needed to conduct collaborative scientific research pursuant to §75 (4) of the German Residence Act (Aufenthaltsgesetz, AufenthG).

and cooperation with BAMF. At the time of design of the present study in October 2015, permission was denied.

Although the AZR is the best sampling frame for a nationwide, multi-stage stratified random sample of asylum seekers (Schnell et al., 2013a, p. 260), it was only partially valid in 2015 and 2016 due to the rapid increase in the number of persons seeking asylum in Germany. Inaccuracies in the AZR resulted from the delayed registration of asylum seekers and from the use of two separate registration systems: (a) the AZR and (b) EASY, the then newly established system for the initial registration and distribution of asylum seekers among the German federal states on the basis of the above-mentioned quota system, the Königstein key. The use of two registration systems can give rise to duplicate records and to the underestimation of the number of cases (BAMF, 2015). Furthermore, it can be expected that a certain percentage of refugees will have left Germany without applying for asylum. The use of EASY data for research purposes is problematic because sex and age are not recorded. Asylum seekers nationwide are registered in the AZR when they file a formal application for asylum. The number of asylum seekers registered in the EASY system in 2015 (1,091,894) was more than twice as high as the number of first-time asylum applications filed in that year (441,899; BAMF, 2016b, p. 10). Whereas BAMF (2016b, p. 10) attributed this discrepancy to registration errors and double registrations in the EASY system, Kroh et al. (2017, p. 7) also drew attention to the so-called “EASY gap,” that is, the time lag between initial registration in the EASY system and the filing of a formal application for asylum, which was particularly pronounced in 2015. The introduction of a “proof of arrival” (Ankunfts nachweis, AKN) card for asylum seekers, as well as the integration of the registration systems of the individual authorities at federal, regional, and local level into a so-called “core data system,” enabled the number of asylum seekers who arrived in Germany in 2015 to be determined more precisely. As a result, the revised figure (890,000) was considerably lower than the previously assumed 1.1 million persons (BMI, 2016). By refreshing the sample several times, the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees was able to overcome the discrepancies in the AZR (Kroh et al., 2017, p. 7).

For the reasons mentioned above, the AZR was not considered a suitable database for sampling. Hence, even if we had been given access to the AZR for this purpose, a representative sample could not have been drawn for Bavaria. However, the AZR was used in the present study as a data basis for quota sampling, as it enables the drawing of statistics on the number, nationality, and age and sex structure of asylum seekers aggregated at the level of foreigners authorities in cities and rural districts.

To sum up: As other methods of random sampling for rare populations were not applicable, a quota sampling design (Schnell et al., 2013a, p. 294) was used for the survey conducted within the framework of the present study.

Target Population and Sampling

The target population of the sample consisted of asylum seekers who arrived in Germany between January 2015 and February 2016 and who, in the light of high protection rates, had prospects of remaining in the country. At the end of 2015, when the pilot study was designed, this applied to asylum seekers from Syria (protection rate: 97.9%), Eritrea (92.2%), Iraq (70.2%), and Afghanistan (55.8%) (BAMF, 2017a, p. 50). In order to represent the differing circumstances among asylum seekers in Bavaria, legal asylum status was not a criterion for selection into the sample. Therefore, the target population comprised persons who had already applied for asylum and persons who had not yet had the chance to apply for asylum due to administrative delays.

According to AZR data, more than half of the asylum seekers who arrived in Bavaria between January 1 and September 30, 2015 were from Syria; 23% were from Afghanistan, 14% from Iraq, and 11% from Eritrea (see Table 1). These four countries were therefore the target countries of origin in the present study. At the time, the sex ratio among all asylum seekers in Bavaria irrespective of country of origin was 20 females to 80 males, yet the percentage of females among the asylum seekers from the aforementioned four target countries of origin was 25.6%.

While awaiting a decision on their asylum application, asylum seekers live in collective accommodation located in urban districts and rural communities. The research sites for the present study were selected with the aim of including heterogeneously structured areas and surveying a sufficient number of asylum seekers from the four target countries of origin, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Eritrea. The city of Nuremberg was chosen to represent urban areas and the district of Ebersberg, situated on the outskirts of Munich, to represent rural areas.

The target population included all residents aged 18 years or over living in collective accommodation for asylum seekers at the selected locations. The quota sample controlled for country of origin and sex (see Table 3). Although unit non-response was not reported systematically, the interpreters who delivered the questionnaires reported that almost all the target residents participated in the survey. However, in future studies, more exact measurement of nonresponse rates would be useful for further analysis.

Due to the quota sampling frame employed, the present study does not claim to be representative. However, as a pilot study, it provides an initial insight into the motives, attitudes, and intentions of asylum seekers. Due to controlled residence allocation – asylum seekers are supposed to be distributed among German federal states according to the Königstein key and irrespective of personal attributes – little selection bias was expected. It is therefore assumed that the motives and attitudes of newly arrived asylum seekers are not related to their current place of residence. Nevertheless, there may be bias: Some asylum seekers may have left the place of

Table 1 Sex ratio of asylum seekers from selected countries of origin in Bavaria (January–September 2015)

Country of Origin	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Syria	6,041	82.4	1,290	17.6	7,341	51.8
Iraq	1,385	67.9	655	32.1	2,044	14.4
Afghanistan	2,687	81.5	609	18.5	3,306	23.3
Eritrea	1,150	77.7	331	22.3	1,487	10.5
Total	11,263	74.4	2,885	25.6	14,178	100

Source: AZR/BAMF, as of December 10, 2015; aggregate data on asylum seekers in Bavaria, January 1–September 30, 2015; own analysis of special analyses made available to the authors by BAMF.

Table 2 Population of asylum seekers at the research sites (as of April/May 2016)

Country of Origin	Nuremberg		Ebersberg		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Syria	1,488	34.5	220	14.3	1,708	29.2
Iraq	1,162	27.0	61	4.0	1,223	20.9
Afghanistan	68	1.6	220	14.3	288	4.9
Eritrea	0	0.0	255	16.6	255	4.4
Other countries	1,591	36.9	784	50.9	2,375	40.6
Total	4,309	100	1,540	100	5,849	100

Source: (a) Fachstelle für Flüchtlinge (Specialist Unit for Refugees) at the Social Welfare Office of the City of Nuremberg (as of April 30, 2016). (b) Landratsamt Ebersberg (Ebersberg Administration Office; as of May 10, 2016).

residence allocated to them after their arrival and moved elsewhere (within Germany or abroad). As a consequence, asylum seekers in Bavaria might be different from those living in other federal states, for example Berlin or North Rhine-Westphalia. It has also been reported that asylum seekers sent to other federal states have sometimes returned to Bavaria. Moreover, it is possible that asylum seekers are allocated to collective accommodation based on their nationality. One indicator for this assumption is that there are only small numbers of asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Eritrea in Nuremberg (see Table 2).

Table 3 Quota plan by country of origin and sex

Country of Origin	Male	Female	Total
Syria	300	100	400
Iraq	190	60	250
Afghanistan	50	–	50
Eritrea	50	–	50
Total	590	160	750
Percent	78.7%	21.3%	100%

The survey design implemented was aimed at interviewing all asylum seekers from the target group allocated to the collective accommodation centers that were selected as research sites. As legal asylum status was not a selection criterion, persons who had already applied for asylum and persons who had not yet had the chance to apply for asylum due to administrative delays were eligible to participate in the survey.

As mentioned above, an analysis of the locally registered asylum seekers revealed that there was a relatively small number of persons from Afghanistan and Eritrea residing in Nuremberg (see Table 2). Moreover, in the rural district of Ebersberg near Munich, there were hardly any women among the asylum seekers from the target countries.

A separate evaluation of subpopulations, such as Eritrean or Afghan women, was not possible due to the small number of cases. It was therefore decided to limit the target female population to women from Syria and Iraq. A quota scheme based on country of origin and sex was designed for the sampling procedure (see Table 3). The study was scaled for at least 750 interviews, 20% of which were to be conducted with female respondents.

Standardized Survey Design and Data Collection

After conducting expert interviews with persons entrusted with the accommodation, distribution, and integration of asylum seekers, a standardized questionnaire was designed and translated into the most frequently used languages in the target population: English, Arabic, Farsi, and Tigrinya. When necessary, the interpreters translated the Arabic-language questionnaire into Kurdish (especially Kurmanji-Kurdish, the dialect spoken in Syria and northern Iraq), as Kurdish is rarely used as a written language. Based on existing literature (see Becher & El-Menouar, 2013;

Halm & Sauer, 2015; Pollack & Müller, 2013; Haug et al., 2009; Wetzels & Brettfeld, 2007) and the findings of the expert interviews, the following topics were included in the survey: place of origin and family structures; reasons for flight; intentions to remain in Germany; resources for structural integration (language skills, level of education, work experience); and perceptions and attitudes (toward gender roles, religiosity, tolerance, antisemitism, terrorism, democracy).

A self-administered paper-and-pencil (PAPI) mode was used to interview respondents. The advantage of a self-administered survey is that it reduces interviewer effects, such as response bias based on social desirability (Schnell et al., 2013a, p. 359). However, in an exclusively self-administered survey, the high rate of non-formal education among asylum seekers (Rich, 2016, p. 5), especially those from Afghanistan and Eritrea, would have led to bias due to educational background. Therefore, respondents with no literacy skills were able to complete the questionnaire with the help of native-speaker interpreters in a face-to-face interview setting.

A pretest with 10 respondents was conducted in a collective accommodation center for asylum seekers in Nuremberg in April 2016. After an initial evaluation of the results of the pretest, questions and items were modified. The pretest highlighted challenges relating to the organization of the field phase in collective accommodation for asylum seekers: The inclusion of “gatekeepers” was essential in order to gain access. Gatekeepers in relevant key positions were local government employees and employees of welfare organizations, as well as accommodation center managers and volunteers. Permission to access the collective accommodation had to be obtained from the agency responsible. The management of each accommodation was contacted and given information about the project and a description of the research design. Prior to the field work, information sheets in the relevant languages were posted in the collective accommodation in order to inform residents about the purpose and content of the study, as well as the survey period.

Eight native-speaker interpreters for Arabic/Kurdish, Farsi, and Tigrinya, who were also fluent in German, were hired to approach potential respondents. They informed them about the content of the study and data protection and anonymity issues, and they handed out the questionnaires in the relevant language. To prevent response bias, interpreters were specifically instructed to emphasize that participation was voluntary and independent of the legal asylum process. Addressing asylum seekers in their mother tongue proved to be a crucial element in establishing trust and ensuring participation in the survey. Interpreters were instructed to remain nearby while respondents completed the questionnaire, so that they could clarify any issues regarding the questions. All interpreters had an academic background; they had either completed a university degree in their home country or were currently studying at a university in Germany. In training sessions prior to the data collection process, interpreters were informed about the study and trained in the

use of the research instruments and in appropriate behavior in collective accommodation centers for asylum seekers. Most interpreters had already been involved in the process of translating the questionnaires and were familiar with the content.

Fieldwork and Challenges

The fieldwork for the study was conducted in June and July 2016. Asylum seekers showed strong interest in participating in the study; this has also been the case in other surveys on asylum seekers (see, e.g., Brücker, Rother, & Schupp, 2016c). Participation incentives, such as pens, writing pads, and cloth bags, were offered to the respondents.

The illiteracy rate turned out to be only 5% of the entire sample, which meant that 95% of the respondents were able to self-administer the questionnaire. The interview duration ranged between 10 and 20 minutes. A total of 779 interviews were conducted with asylum seekers from Syria, Eritrea, Iraq, and Afghanistan at the two research locations, Nuremberg and Ebersberg (see Table 4).

As the quantitative study was designed as a self-administered survey, the influence of the interpreters, and therefore interviewer effects, were assumed to be marginal. This assumption was tested and proven.²

The analysis of the interpreters' field reports revealed that the respondents initially displayed a tendency to respond to questions about attitudes and values (e.g., concerning gender roles) in a socially desirable way (Paulhus, 2002, p. 50): During the interviews, they asked the interpreters for their opinions on appropriate answer patterns. The presence of the interpreters was important to explain to the respondents that their personal opinions were relevant and perfectly acceptable responses.

Some respondents tended to rely on country-specific response patterns instead of on their own opinions. Therefore, the cultural context must be taken into account when adapting survey instruments. Another option could be to give recently arrived respondents separate answer options regarding Germany and the country of origin in order to enable the expression of ambivalent attitudes in relation to the country of origin and the host country. For example, some respondents did not support the idea of women going out on their own at night. A deeper examination of this attitude item in the qualitative interviews revealed that this answer has to be interpreted in a political/cultural context: The security situation in countries of origin such as Iraq or Syria would not allow such behavior for safety reasons. Other respondents

2 In the case of most of the attitudinal items, intraclass correlation (ICC) showed unremarkable values ranging from 2.6% to 6.3%. Some items showed higher ICCs; however, this was due to value discrepancies related to the country of origin: When controlled for country of origin, the interviewer effects proved to be marginal. Item nonresponse bias was a problem in the case of the item on antisemitism, as respondents from Eritrea had no concept of Jewish people (see Haug et al., 2017, p. 69).

Table 4 Sample by sex and country of origin

Country of Origin	Male	Female	Total
Syria	306	107	413
Iraq	190	62	252
Afghanistan	52	-	52
Eritrea	62	-	62
Total	610	169	779
Sex ratio	78.3%	21.7%	

Source: Dataset collected within the framework of the quantitative survey for the present study, *Asylsuchende in Bayern* (Asylum Seekers in Bavaria; Haug et al., 2017).

accepted this behavior on the part of women, but qualified their acceptance with reference to Germany; they argued that in their home countries this behavior would not be compatible with social norms and values.

Interpreters’ reflections on the data collection process also indicated that religious and ethnic conflicts in the country of origin affected response behavior in the survey. For example, two respondents who self-identified as Sunni Muslims were clearly identified by the interpreters – on the basis of their hometown in Syria – as Alawis.

A further challenge arose from the interview setting in large collective accommodation centers for asylum seekers and, in particular, in emergency accommodation. Recruitment gained momentum when the presence of the interpreters attracted the interest of a number of residents: A whole group of asylum seekers could be informed about the survey at the same time, which significantly facilitated the recruitment and information process. On the other hand, conducting interviews in a collective residential setting can lead to socially desirable responses influenced by the proximity of other residents. The intervention of the interpreters was sometimes necessary to control these influencing tendencies by pointing out that the questionnaire was to be completed individually. Therefore, interpreters played an important role in avoiding bias due to socially desirable responding related to value concepts specific to the home country. The interpreters’ explanations about how to complete a questionnaire were highly relevant because, for many respondents, it was the first survey of their lives.

Qualitative Methods

The qualitative study employed semi-structured face-to-face interviews with biographical elements. The interviews were conducted between June and October 2016 with the support of consecutive interpreters.

Qualitative research methods are used in cases where research topics cannot be investigated well using standardized methodological procedures and where an in-depth understanding of phenomena and their interpretation is required (Helfferich, 2011). The present study employed qualitative methods to explore attitudes and value orientations of asylum seekers, their reasons for flight, and their aspirations for the future. The study included (retrospective) biographical research techniques, which can be used to describe and analyze changes in (behavioral) patterns over time and cause–effect relationships (Fuchs-Heinritz, 2009; Rosenthal, 2004). The biographical approach allowed a contextual understanding of reasons for flight and other relevant dimensions in the genesis of biographical experiences. It was used to explain and interpret current phenomena, for example employment or training opportunities, and intentions to remain in Germany.

Participant Selection and the Use of Gatekeepers

The selection of 12 participants for the qualitative study was based on a theoretical sampling strategy (Marshall, 1996) that aimed to ensure diversity in the sociodemographic profiles of the interviewees with regard to country of origin, sex, age, and research location (see Table 5).

The use of gatekeepers (Creswell, 2003; Helfferich, 2011) in this study had a positive effect on obtaining access to asylum seekers in collective accommodation. The recruitment of research participants required official approval at the political and administrative levels, as well as the support of the accommodation providers, accommodation management, and security services on the ground. Gatekeepers, for example integration commissioners, were also helpful in finding potential interview candidates, coordinating and organizing the interviews, and recruiting asylum seekers according to the specific criteria of the sampling frame. In order to control for possible bias due to selection effects (e.g., high motivation to participate), an additional three participants were approached and recruited in situ at collective accommodation centers. As in other qualitative studies on asylum seekers (e.g., Brücker et al., 2016b), high motivation to participate in the qualitative interviews was observed.

Table 5 Cases in the qualitative survey

	Country of Birth	Sex	Age	Arrival in Bavaria	Asylum Application	Marital Status
1	Syria	M	18	2015	submitted	unmarried
2	Syria	M	21	2015	submitted	unmarried
3	Syria	M	37	2015	submitted	married, 3 children
4	Syria	F	27	2015	submitted	married, 4 children
5	Iraq	M	19	2016	submitted	unmarried
6	Iraq	M	27	2016	submitted	unmarried
7	Iraq	M	51	2015	submitted	unmarried
8	Iraq	F	32	2015	submitted	married, 3 children
9	Eritrea	M	19	2015	submitted	unmarried
10	Eritrea	M	41	2015	approved	married, 3 children
11	Afghanistan	M	22	2015	submitted	unmarried
12	Afghanistan	M	25	2015	submitted	unmarried

Qualitative Data Collection

All interviews were conducted with the support of consecutive interpreters by a 38-year-old male German researcher experienced in the field of qualitative biographical data collection. The interviews took place in collective accommodation for asylum seekers or at facilities of supporting local councils; interviews were audio-recorded.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher informed the interviewee about the study and stressed that his or her personal data would be anonymized. The respondent was asked to sign a consent form, which had been drafted in his or her mother tongue. It was also emphasized that the study was not related to the interviewee’s personal asylum procedure. The interviews lasted up to three and three quarter hours; a semi-structured interview guide was used, which focused on themes such as personal biography, experiences during flight, experiences in Germany, attitudes and value orientations, and future aspirations.

Visualization techniques were used to minimize memory effects on biographical data. A “life history guide” was developed, which facilitated structured biographical data collection (see Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). The life history guide is a paper-and-pencil technique that shows a simple time line on which biographical events are recorded. The time line follows the life course as it develops, and it allows the researcher to make structured notes as anchor points that can stimulate further memories of the respondent.

In addition, maps were given to the interviewees to enable them to locate geographically significant locations in their home country and on the route they took when they fled. Reporting the individual way stations proved difficult for most participants, which suggests that orientation on the route could depend more on external factors and actors, such as traffickers or fellow refugees.

The Role of Interpreters in the Research Process

The literature suggests that interpreters play an important role in the qualitative interview process with asylum seekers (see, e.g., Brücker et al., 2016a; Brücker et al., 2016b). Interpreters were trained prior to data collection, and it was advantageous that they had already been involved in the translation of the semi-structured questionnaire and were familiar with the content of the study.

Ten interviews were conducted in Tigrinya or Arabic with male interpreters; two interviews were conducted in Farsi with a female interpreter. All interpreters were native speakers of the respective languages and were also fluent in German. The fact that the interpreters and asylum seekers had a common cultural and language background helped build interviewees’ confidence in the study project and make the interviews more enjoyable and effective. Moreover, the fact that some of the interpreters originally came to Germany as asylum seekers themselves had an additional confidence-building effect.

The use of interpreters can influence interviews (the so-called “interpreter effect”; see Jentsch, 1998). Interpreters can affect response behavior due to their presence, behavior, and external characteristics (e.g., sex and age) and thus create bias. Negative effects on the interview process due to different cultural/religious backgrounds on the part of interpreters and respondents (e.g., Kurds, Shia Arabs, & Sunni Arabs) could not be observed in this study (but see, e.g., Jacobsen & Landau, 2003).

Two Arabic-speaking female asylum seekers were interviewed by a male interviewer with the support of a male interpreter. In one case, the husband was present at the interview but did not interfere with the interview process. A female also acted as interpreter at interviews with male asylum seekers. In both constellations, no significant gender effects in the form of refusal or response bias could be determined.

Another issue was the discrepancy between literal and free translation, which can significantly influence the interview situation. The present study used an approach that gave the interpreter the option to translate interview questions and answers largely freely. This was also helpful because differing cultural backgrounds, as well as low levels of education on the part of interviewees, sometimes made it necessary to provide explanations for certain terms, such as “integration”.

In some cases, native-speaker transcribers were hired to check the translations of interpreters during the interviews (see Merkmens, 1997). In these cases, the Arabic content of a recorded interview was additionally translated by a native-speaker transcriber. The comparison of the Arabic originals with the control translations did not reveal any relevant differences. The transcriptions of the other interviews focused only on the German text.

Research Ethics

The principles for research ethics drawn up by the German Data Forum (RatSWD, 2017) focus in particular on interviews with vulnerable groups. Studies on asylum seekers present specific research-ethical challenges concerning research design and the process of data collection (Hugman et al., 2011; Jacobsen & Landau, 2013), a fact that played an important role in the present study.

All persons involved in this study (including researchers, interviewers, interpreters, and transcribers) were obliged to maintain strict confidentiality of the information obtained in the course of the study. Survey respondents and qualitative interviewees were given written information on the content and objectives of the interview and on data protection, as well as a guarantee of confidentiality of interview contents and personal data. The explanatory note on the quantitative survey pointed out the study’s voluntary nature and anonymity, as well as the fact that participation in the study would have no effect on the asylum procedure. For the qualitative study, a declaration of consent form was prepared and translated into the relevant languages. The declaration of consent form mentioned that participation in the study was voluntary, and expressly emphasized that the survey was unrelated to any possible asylum procedure. All qualitative interviews were subject to written consent to participation in the study. Depending on the educational background of the interviewee, an extensive explanation of the concept of declaration of consent was necessary.

To ensure interviewee anonymity in the evaluation process, the names of the persons were changed, and other data (e.g. places and chronological time lines) were represented so imprecisely in the results that re-identification is not possible. Here, the blurring of the data material presented was consciously weighed up against the requirement to protect the privacy of the respondents. The original

data material (audio files, transcripts) was stored securely and will be deleted after completion of the project. The anonymized transcripts were stored and handed over to Hanns Seidel Foundation as an appendix to the final report. Whereas the final report was published (Haug et al., 2017), this appendix was not.

As asylum seekers are a vulnerable group of research subjects, difficult interaction situations may arise during the research process (Helfferich, 2011). Both traumatic events in the country of origin and experiences when fleeing to Germany may cause post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and this should be taken into account during biographical interviews, which may cause interviewees to relive traumatic events. None of the respondents showed obvious negative emotional responses to the interviews or exhibited signs of an emotional crisis. In order to fulfill their ethical responsibility, the researchers made sure that information on psychotherapeutic care facilities was passed on to the participants in the course of the study.

Conclusion

In many respects, research on asylum seekers is not easy to conduct. As a pilot study, the research project “Asylum Seekers in Bavaria” offered the opportunity to test methodological approaches to conducting a quantitative and qualitative survey of persons who had recently arrived in Germany in search of asylum. In particular, the use of gatekeepers and interpreters proved to be an essential feature of the research process. The cooperation of native speakers and transcribers was also essential for the interpretation of the data. In order to build trust among the potential respondents, it was important to reduce uncertainties by explaining the rules and concepts of data protection and anonymity and to point out the strict separation of the present research from the asylum procedure. The majority of asylum seekers greatly appreciated being approached in their native language; this was reflected in a high willingness to participate.

One challenge was the sampling of asylum seekers in the quantitative survey. Due to the strong influx of asylum seekers between autumn 2015 and spring 2016, there was no sufficiently valid database at time of the project design that included all asylum seekers who entered Bavaria. The AZR database lists all asylum seekers in Germany, but, as explained above, the deviations between the AZR and the EASY registration database (the so-called “EASY gap”; Kroh et al., 2017, p. 7) were particularly pronounced in 2015. Furthermore, due to statutory restrictions, samples can be drawn from the AZR only within the framework of research projects conducted in cooperation with BAMF, which was not the case in the present study; hence a pilot survey was conducted in two research areas in Bavaria.

The use of qualitative interviews in a mixed-methods approach proved helpful, in particular, to interpret the response patterns of research participants in the

quantitative survey. For example, findings from the qualitative interviews suggest that it was problematic for interviewees to answer questions on attitudes to religiosity, freedom of opinion, and gender roles, which were also asked in the quantitative survey.

In 2017, a second wave of qualitative interviews took place in order to collect exemplary integration biographies (Haug & Huber 2018). However, as the 2016 quantitative study was designed as a cross-sectional study, no statements can be made about general integration processes or the determinants of integration based on the presented case study. The IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, a German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) study, will provide such data for future research.

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