Volunteers' strategies for supporting asylum seekers with information challenges

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper examines the strategies that volunteers use when supporting asylum seekers with their information challenges to be able to develop services for asylum seekers and promote their access to reliable information in the most suitable way.

Design/methodology/approach – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven volunteers who help asylum seekers with their asylum cases in two cities in Finland. The interview data was thematically coded and analysed.

Findings – Six types of information-related strategies were identified: information mediatory, language adjustment, spatial and non-verbal communicative, inclusive, and supervisory strategies, as well as strategies with shifting roles. These strategies holistically support asylum seekers' information practices, considering the challenges of their situation and emotional needs.

Originality/value – This study creates new knowledge about volunteers' role in the information practices of asylum seekers, highlighting their unique position both in and outside the asylum system. Information-related strategies are a novel way of examining the ways to holistically support other people's information practices, by understanding that information is intertwined in all kinds of everyday actions and interactions.

Keywords Information-related strategies, Information challenges, Information practices, Asylum seekers, Asylum process, Volunteers

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

This paper examines the strategies, which volunteers use when working with asylum seekers to help them with information challenges. Asylum seekers are individuals who pursue international protection (UN High Commissioner for Refugees, 2006). As in many other European countries, Finland received an exceptionally high number of asylum seekers in 2015, over 32,000 applications, and although the number of applicants has since fallen to approximately the same level as before 2015 (2,545 applications in 2021) (Finnish Immigration Service, 2022), the situation in 2015 still has an impact on the asylum system in Finland today. Since 2015, there have been many changes in the legislation and practices in Finland. These changes have largely made asylum seekers' situation increasingly difficult, leading to increased numbers of people falling outside the system, leaving them without asylum services or a residence permit (Pirjatanniemi *et al.*, 2021). While waiting for their decision, asylum seekers do not have access to all the services that other immigrants have in Finland, and the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration (FINLEX, 2011; Integration.fi, 2021) does not apply to asylum seekers, excluding them from integration

services. The asylum processes are long, which may create an almost permanent situation of liminality and uncertainty for many asylum seekers (Lyytinen, 2019, p. 20).

Asylum seekers have challenges related to information that significantly affect their asylum processes. The challenges essentially form their information practices, i.e. socially and culturally established ways to identify information needs, seek, use and share information (Savolainen, 2008, p. 2). There are multiple stages and levels of information needs, which are not fixed but flexible (Oduntan and Ruthven, 2019, p. 803). Information needs are complex, associated with the asylum process (Honkasalo, 2017) and different services and aid (Merisalo, 2017). People going through the asylum process are not a homogeneous group and therefore have individual information needs. For this reason, generic information is not always helpful (Martzoukou and Burnett, 2018), and neither is simply providing information enough to fulfil asylum seekers' information needs (Oduntan and Ruthven, 2020, p. 7). Navigating the new information environment is not easy, not least because of insufficient language skills (Aarnitaival, 2012; Gillespie *et al.*, 2016) and the system's bureaucratic language (Caidi *et al.*, 2010; Ikonen, 2013). Different social networks are an important part of asylum seekers' information practices (Borkert *et al.*, 2018; Dekker and Engbersen, 2014; Elsner *et al.*, 2018). Social networks are also a question of equality among asylum seekers, as not all networks are equally good (Lloyd *et al.*, 2013). Access to useful services, again, help with the asylum processes (Oduntan and Ruthven, 2020, p. 12).

Asylum seekers cannot always trust the credibility of information (Caidi *et al.*, 2010, p. 503) and they come across various kinds of misinformation, including official information, outdated information, misinformation via gatekeepers and information intermediaries, misinformation causing false hope and unrealistic expectations, as well as rumours and distorted information (Ruokolainen and Widén, 2020). Moreover, the timing with information is often off, i.e. asylum seekers receive too much information at the wrong time and information is no longer available when they could mentally process it (Lloyd *et al.*, 2013; Mikal and Woodfield, 2015). Significant factors affecting information practices are diverse issues related to mental health and well-being, including, trauma, stress and social isolation (Quirke, 2011), liminality (Dekker *et al.*, 2018; Lloyd, 2017) and uncertainty (Brekke, 2004; Kooy and Bowman, 2019).

Volunteers' active role in supporting asylum seekers is generally acknowledged (Jauhiainen, 2017, p. 9). In Finland, volunteering activities became especially popular in 2015, and volunteers were an immense asset to the more established actors, but they also needed coordination (Gävert, 2016, p. 49; Niemi and Siirto, 2017, p. 44). In the past few years, volunteers have increasingly assumed responsibility for services and activities that authorities have failed to fulfil (Karakayali and Kleist, 2016, p. 66), and volunteering and humanitarian action in this context have become widely political (Ahonen and Kallius, 2019, p. 93). Indeed, volunteers have a distinct role in supporting the asylum seekers (Jauhiainen, 2017, p. 9); they help with asylum applications and appeals, act as support persons in the asylum interviews, and help with, for example, housing and education [1]. Previous studies have concluded that volunteers are important sources of everyday information, especially (Kennan *et al.*, 2011, p. 197; Lloyd *et al.*, 2013). Le Louvier and Innocenti (2021) found that volunteers and charity workers can bolster asylum seekers' integration in society and support navigation in the new information environment, but only if asylum seekers recognise them as important information sources.

Sotkasiira (2018) found that volunteers exercise different kinds of expertise than other actors in the asylum system. Her five dimensions of expertise, based on Bauman (1987, 1992, 1996), Raitakari (2002), Smith (2011) and Garrett (2012), are legislative, interpretative, neutral, critical and activist. *Legislative expertise* refers to experts who often follow external rules and perceive to have the right information, which they disclose to clients. *Interpretative expertise* involves understanding asylum seekers' diversity of views and respecting them, and experts

and clients come to conclusions in collaboration. When applying *neutral expertise*, experts see themselves as neutral actors who do not judge nor solve matters for their clients. In this case, the clients are solely responsible for their own lives. In *critical expertise*, the experts take a stand on matters and deliberately aim to dismantle power structures. *Activist expertise* aims to make the world more equal together with different actors. In other words, activist expertise also emphasises collaboration. Critical and activist expertise question the neutral expertise, especially. Sotkasiira (2018, pp. 304–305) also found that authorities often balance between legislative, interpretative and neutral expertise, whereas volunteers exercise critical and activist expertise.

In this paper we focus on how volunteers support asylum seekers' information practices in diverse ways. This approach can be compared to the concept of *information intermediaries*. There is a growing body of research on information intermediaries within the context of marginalised and/or vulnerable populations. Recent literature has begun to consider more diverse groups as intermediaries; they are not information professionals only (Buchanan *et al.*, 2019). Intermediaries include support workers (Buchanan *et al.*, 2019), social workers (Sabelli, 2012), nurses (Buchanan and Nicol, 2019), care workers, volunteers and family members (Cruickshank *et al.*, 2020). According to Buchanan and Nicol (2019, p. 174), information intermediaries "facilitate information needs recognition and considered [sic] purposeful action within problematic situations, are a key source of information in themselves, and a key integrative connection to other external sources not otherwise accessed; and tailor and personalise information for relevance, and communicate via incremental and recursive cycles that take into account learning needs".

This definition of intermediaries is similar to our understanding of *information-related strategies*, which are diverse ways to create safe spaces and places, inclusion, as well as respect and trust. These, again, facilitate information flow and help asylum seekers tackle with information challenges, such as misinformation and misunderstandings. However, with the strategies, we shift focus from the individuals, i.e. volunteers as information intermediaries, to their actions. This enables us to holistically approach numerous factors related to information. For example, as the situation has a strong impact on information practices in the context of forced migration (Oduntan and Ruthven, 2020), the strategies help us understand how to make the situation easier by supporting information practices. We argue that obtaining timely and accurate information involves various factors, which are not necessarily directly linked to information. Therefore, it is not only a question of information transfer but also of a more holistic approach to support information practices. This approach contributes to the Library and Information Science (LIS) research on forced migration, where Oduntan and Ruthven (2019, p. 792) have identified two kinds of research gaps: firstly, there is a tendency to exclusively focus on information, without linking it to the surrounding phenomena (see also Cibangu, 2013) and secondly, information studies on forced migration do not have the level of analytical depth expected for LIS research (see also Lloyd, 2017).

The following research questions form the basis of the present study:

RQ1. What types of strategies do volunteers use when supporting asylum seekers with information challenges?

RQ2. How are the strategies connected to information and information practices?

This paper presents findings based on interviews with seven volunteers, including two non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers, two Church employees and three activist–volunteers/independent volunteers. All of them worked outside the official asylum system. Six different types of information-related strategies were identified in the data: *information mediatory*, *language adjustment*, *spatial and non-verbal communicative*, *inclusive* and *supervisory strategies* as well as *strategies with shifting roles*. We use the nuanced

understanding of information and misinformation as well as the Social Information Perception model (SIP) by Ruokolainen and Widén (2020) to link the strategies to asylum seekers' information challenges and practices. Volunteers use critical and activist expertise (Sotkasiira, 2018) to ensure that asylum seekers' rights, e.g. the right to information, are fulfilled. We show that respect and trust are vital components of the strategies but, at the same time, outcomes of them. As stated, they can possibly enhance asylum seekers' well-being and access to information.

2. Methods and participants

We used a semi-structured method to interview the volunteers working with asylum seekers. The method offers both freedom to the participants to discuss the subject at hand on their terms and enough structure for the interviewer to address the research questions. The interviews consisted of open-ended and targeted questions (Galletta and Cross, 2013, pp. 1–2, 45; O'Reilly and Dogra, 2018, p. 37). The guiding principle in this study was pleasant, comfortable discussion allowing the participants to freely discuss the matters they felt were important. This also meant that the interviewer did not necessarily ask all of the questions in the same way. The participants could reveal as much background information as they wished. The interviewer guided the discussion gently. A loose interview guide (Table A1) was used, and the questions were related to job description, the asylum process and system, networks, access and barriers to information, rumours, misinformation and feelings. Emphasis was given to relaxed discussion, and the interviewer modified the questions based on the issues arising in the discussion. The primary aim was to obtain data on misinformation, information challenges and the surrounding topics through relaxed discussion and more targeted questions.

We interviewed seven volunteers in six interviews, which were conducted from September 2019 to February 2020. The participants were working with asylum seekers in two cities in southern Finland. Two of them were NGO workers, two working for local churches and three activists and/or volunteering at an NGO or independently. The participants networked with or had knowledge of each other. They attended same trainings, and therefore followed the same guidelines and best practices. None of the participants had recent personal experiences of forced migration, but some of them had experiences with immigration. They all had native-level or very good skills in the local languages. It should be noted that not all of the participants' background information is provided here to protect their anonymity, because the circle of volunteers is small in the area and in Finland. Some participants were contacted directly, some were found through snowball sampling. The interviews took place at the participants' workplace, home or at the local university, and they were conducted in three different languages (Finnish, Swedish or English [2]), according to the participants' wishes. The interviews were 1 h 49 min long on average. The dataset is a part of a larger study focusing on misinformation and information challenges in the context of marginalised communities.

The research was limited to actors who helped asylum seekers with various issues, such as the asylum applications and appeals, housing, the threat of deportation, education, employment and personal issues, including mental health. The participants acted as support people during asylum interviews and at the police station where rejected applications are issued. Some of the participants were involved in coordinating other volunteers. Although some of the participants were working professionally with these issues (at NGOs or churches), we use the term *volunteer* for all of them to separate them from actors who have a more official status in the asylum system [3]. Volunteers are, in many instances, able to speak more freely about their work than professionals in the field, which was considered important as questions concerning the asylum process and system are sensitive in Finland's political

climate. Some of them also had other clients, such as people with a refugee status or undocumented migrants, but the interviews mainly focused on the asylum questions. People who volunteered for the recreational activities only were excluded from the study so that as many issues as possible could be discussed.

The sample in the present study was small. Small samples may be justified when homogeneous groups are concerned and the study is in-depth in nature (Boddy, 2016). Guest *et al.* (2006) found that almost all (94%) commonly expressed themes occurred within six interviews. The study context and the scientific paradigm affect what can be considered a sufficient sample size (Boddy, 2016). Interview structure, content, participants sharing common experiences and narrow objectives of the study (Guest *et al.*, 2006), as well as participants' expertise in the subject (Romney *et al.*, 1986) can help reach the saturation point more quickly. In our study, the objective was to understand misinformation and information challenges in the context of the asylum situation, forming a rather focused area of study. The people helping asylum seekers with all aspects of the process form a relatively tight network, and in practice the participants represent all key actors in the chosen area. They were chosen due to their level of activity and expertise, although some of them had volunteered a shorter time (less than a year). All the participants helped or had helped several asylum seekers, not just with individual cases. Their volunteering activities focused on the entire asylum process and not, for example, on recreational activities. The interviews were long, and the in-depth discussions on the volunteering activities and information-related factors were exhaustive. Despite the loose structure of the interviews, the same themes and topics were covered in all of them. Although the participants worked/volunteered at different places, their experiences were fairly similar. Bearing all this in mind, the seven participants' expertise and experiences were considered to form a valuable and sufficient basis for the data analysis, although the findings cannot be generalised to all volunteers in Finland, let alone in other countries.

The interviews were voice recorded and the recordings transcribed by professional transcribing services. The transcripts were thematically coded (Mills *et al.*, 2013) with NVivo. Although the interviews touched upon information-related issues on a large scale, the initial focus of the analysis was on misinformation and information-related challenges. The thematic framework for coding was the nuanced understanding of information and misinformation in the context of marginalised populations by Ruokolainen and Widén (2020), while applying an inductive approach (Mills *et al.*, 2013), as well. The theme of the volunteers' strategies emerged during the analysis process when we noticed that the participants described information-related issues through their own actions for preventing and managing information challenges. Therefore, in the context of this paper, the coding can be described as data-driven/inductive, although our coding otherwise was a combination of theory/concept-driven/deductive and data-driven/inductive coding (e.g. Decuir-Gunby *et al.*, 2011, pp. 137–138; Gibbs, 2007; Mills *et al.*, 2013). The data-driven approach allows the creative and innovative discovery of new concepts organically (Steppins, 2008). As is typical with the data-driven approach (Decuir-Gunby *et al.*, 2011), the data was revisited multiple times and the coding was refined. In the end, the analysis resulted in six codes, the information-related strategies, which are presented in the following section.

3. Findings
The findings in the present study constitute six information-related strategies to manage challenges with information. They are: (1) information mediatory strategies, (2) language adjustment strategies, (3) spatial and non-verbal communicative strategies, (4) inclusive strategies, (5) supervisory strategies and (6) strategies with shifting roles. The strategies partly overlap. The participants discussed all the strategies, except for one, in the interviews; the spatial and non-verbal communicative strategies were discussed by five participants out

of seven. Therefore, despite the limited findings due to the small sample, the strategies well represent the experiences of the group at hand.

3.1 Information mediatory strategies

Information mediatory strategies are complex and describing them exhaustively is difficult. The participants are aware of dealing with information and the importance of it. Mia's [4] quote summarises the power of information: "And sometimes even when there is nothing to do and I'm like, the best I can do is get information if they deport you." The participants feel that it is extremely important for their clients to have as much information about their situation as possible and that all situations are explained exhaustively and honestly, even if the situation seems complicated or even hopeless. They try to give alternatives, be honest about the complexity and uncertainty of information and explain everything so that the clients themselves can make informed choices. However, at the same time, they also balance the amount and quality of information they give to their clients, if they consider it to be irrelevant for the client at a particular moment or if the client is unable to process it:

> I'm also thinking all the time—OK, do I need to pass this info on to the client? Is it necessary for me to tell him or her a bit? (Mia)

This paradox in information mediation can be explained by the holistic and client-driven approach, which is well demonstrated in all the following strategies.

There are multiple challenges with information. Issues related to understanding, on both sides, were mentioned in all interviews. Sara describes the relationship of information and understanding: "So, giving information and understanding information. What we have told you, and if you have understood it, are two completely different things." The participants try to make sure that the clients understand the information they receive, wherever it comes from. This is especially important in the context of receiving asylum decisions, which also causes many misunderstandings.

> We and our volunteers are there on a routine basis when the decisions are given. To make sure the person understands what it means. You see, many people get the impression that they will be deported in 30 days. And what was actually said is that you have 30 days for a so-called voluntary return, and you will not be deported anywhere. But people go, in a way, all crazy in that moment. (Emma)

At the same time, the participants also report hearing the police give misinformation or misleading information in these situations. For example, information may be given in an intimidating way. The participants correct misunderstandings that their clients have and the misinformation they receive but try to do it in a sensitive way. Sofia describes how she deals with situations where the clients are misinformed about how converting to Christianity could help their case:

> A while ago, there were quite many who thought that you have to convert to Christianity to get asylum. It was really a shame because then you have to explain it. If you say you are a Christian, they have to process your case, but it's not something you have to say. You should absolutely not go against your own faith. [. . .] And it becomes difficult to say that information. Especially when you do not have much common language to explain it with. (Sofia)

The participants are quite careful not to give any misinformation themselves, but some acknowledge that they have sometimes given the wrong advice and corrected it afterwards. However, they underline that they often refrain from giving advice before checking its accuracy because information connected with the asylum process is very complex.

Rumours circulate among asylum seekers and volunteers.

These kinds of rumours can be quite challenging, like how do you get asylum and if we will have a readmission agreement with Iraq and these kinds of things. It causes a huge amount of distress when something spreads and, if somebody gets returned, everybody knows it. (Emma)

Rumours among volunteers are important as they can give hints about changes in the legislation or practices. However, they are met with caution. The participants use wide networks to obtain and verify information. The credibility of rumours is judged by the source or the network where it spreads. The volunteers also explicitly state whether the rumour is credible or uncertain when sharing it with others.

Some concrete ways of dealing with information challenges are double-checking and getting second opinions, as Mia states: "I always try to double-triple-check as much as I can." Education and training help volunteers understand and tackle the complexity of the asylum system. When communicating with the clients, repetition is one of the key methods:

When a person is in a stressful and difficult situation in life, you have to repeat things and go through them again. (Emma)

I probably just go on and on with it for a long time. If I do not really understand, I just ask again and again what you mean. (Maija)

Information mediatory strategies are time-consuming and require sensitivity. The findings clearly show that the participants understand the complexity and sensitivity of information, and the importance to deal with it carefully. Emma summarises the information mediatory strategies well:

Nothing is so exact. [. . .] I think that I give information quite carefully because you never know the outcome. So many things affect it, but most likely you can give different alternatives. So, this involves constant learning, something that applies now is not valid anymore after a while. (Emma)

To summarise, the information mediatory strategies refer to direct interactions with information. The participants give and share information, balance the amount and extent of it, (culturally) interpret and explain information to their clients, repeat important information, verify information and rumours, and correct misinformation and misunderstandings.

3.2 Language adjustment strategies

The participants have many ways of adjusting language. They state that they change the way they speak, depending on the situation, and they appropriate language culturally and situationally. This could mean concrete examples, metaphors, drawing and simplifying language. Sara describes a situation where she felt that her client was not able to tell everything to the lawyer, which had to do with complicated language.

Then I explained it to her with easier language, the same thing the lawyer asked but a bit differently. Then she had a lot to tell, I wrote to the lawyer that there was this, this, and this. (Sara)

Sara found it helpful if the volunteers did not have Finnish as their first language: "I noticed that people understand more or better if you do not have Finnish as your first language. I use basic words when I notice that someone does not understand." Maija points out that people working closely with asylum seekers learn to understand many ways of speaking Finnish: "Maybe with understanding it is like, when we are with them a lot, we understand and think that they speak really good Finnish."

Adjusting language also refers to using several languages simultaneously. Marianne describes a strategy that is common among the other participants, as well: "We use these Finnish terms and then we speak English in between. We use harjoittelu [internship] and so on." Terms that are associated with the asylum process, education or work, bureaucracy, and Finnish society, especially, are used in Finnish.

The participants have a fairly good understanding of the level of language their clients master in different situations and intervene if they notice that the clients' interests are at risk because of difficult language. Often, the participants act as go-betweens between the clients and other actors, such as Migri [5] officials. They coach their clients in "Migri language", which means, for example, being as descriptive, precise and coherent as possible. This kind of language use is important in asylum interviews.

> And then I say, imagine that the person who listens to you at Migri or reads your text is like a blind person, who has become blind, or has always been blind, and you have to explain to this person what it's like when a human walks. So first, a human has two long things called legs and long arms and a head and a body. And then, the walk starts like this. And try in a figurative way, in a visual way to explain everything. First the leg: one leg starts, and it moves ahead, and then it touches the ground. Then the weight shifts. And because the weight shifts, you go to the other leg, and explain the connections. (Mia)

With authorities, the participants themselves try to sound as authoritative as possible by using bureaucratic language.

As language is a central issue, the participants make sure that they have an (un)official interpreter present when important matters are discussed to ensure their clients fully understand their own case. Sofia points out that interpretation is not merely about words and their meanings but requires cultural interpretation: "You do not just need word-for-word translation but also something like cultural translation with this information. Like, what does it mean." Sofia mentions professional confidentiality as one question that could be misunderstood because of lack of trust towards authorities.

Language adjustment strategies depend much on the client: the clients' needs and wishes are the basis of communication. Balancing with language issues takes time and a lot of effort. The participants stated that language is one of the common problems, which goes beyond practical issues. Emma states: "I think that language is a problem for the clients. They are in a subordinate position, both because of language and the system. It also makes our everyday job more difficult." Therefore, the participants clearly understand language as a mechanism of power.

3.3 Spatial and non-verbal communicative strategies

The participants discussed power issues and their concrete manifestations, which include considering questions related to space and place and how to make different situations safe for the clients. They describe how they sit together with the clients, not necessarily facing each other with a computer in between them but next to each other, on an equal level. They also mentioned being *together* and making sense *together*. They show friendship and caring through their body language.

> It's also how you organise the space, how you speak to the person. We do not sit like me here, you there and I'm here behind a computer. You try to sit together and ask how do you feel today, how is it going. (Mia)

They are also aware of other kinds of situations where their clients might not feel safe. Kaisa describes how she also spatially prepares her clients for the asylum interviews:

> One thing I say plainly is that we go to the second floor, then we go to that room. The room is white, and there is a computer desk, and the interviewer is there in front of you with a computer. We often emphasise that they should not be offended if the interviewer does not look them in the eyes the whole time when they are writing at the computer. I say these things step by step, what happens there, and people often feel some relief. (Kaisa)

The participants not only use spatial and non-verbal communicative strategies with their clients but also with the authorities. Two kinds of non-verbal communicative strategies were

mentioned: on one hand, they show power and authority, and on the other hand, they act benignly.

> I've seen even with the client how some people at the police or Migri could be speaking to me, talking to me, dealing with me, looking at me in the eyes or speaking normally, and then not even look at the client or like, go there, do this. I'm trying to translate both language-wise and information-wise between the authority and the client, and the authority is looking only at me and speaking about the client in the third person, even if the client is there and listening the whole time. I try to be the mouth of the client by looking at the client. When I look at the authority, I'm next to the client. (Mia)

> I try to be as benignant as possible. [. . .] I try to show that I'm not there as a threat, because I think that would affect the interview negatively. Somehow I also show that I'm 100 per cent on the asylum seeker's side. (Sofia)

To summarise, physically being at the clients' side becomes a symbolic action in supporting the asylum seekers at the grass-roots level, and often this support means being against the authorities.

3.4 Inclusive strategies

The clients' well-being is a guiding principle for the participants, who show they care in many ways and aim to make their clients feel safe. The clients' needs are the basis of any help or service, as Marianne states: "Our activities very much start from the individual's needs". Encountering the clients first and foremost as human beings is important for all the participants, being a client or an asylum seeker is always secondary.

> You meet people and sometimes people speak a lot about the process, sometimes they do not. So, I approach these people as people. I take asylum into consideration but it is not the main issue in our interactions. (Mia)

The participants manifest their care by showing interest in the clients' well-being, being friendly and giving emotional support. Some tangible ways of increasing the inclusion of the clients include being available, flexible and investing time, as Marianne describes: "I have shown that I'm available. I answer messages in Messenger in the evening. I could be strict as well, but I have not been". The participants contact their clients just to catch up and hear how they are doing.

The inclusive strategies are strongly associated with building trust, which often takes a long time and involves persistent work. Mia describes her ways of building trust even when difficult matters are discussed: "But even if it's hard, I always ask, are you OK, is this OK, do you want a break, am I doing it the wrong way." Some participants feel that trust is also built-in everyday situations, such as when they cook or do the dishes together. Trust is created through patience and openness, such as Sara describes:

> We are a service where you can come and cry if you have a bad day. And then, little by little, when you have asked many times if everything is OK, is everything OK, is everything OK, suddenly there is a no. Then there is a story. (Sara)

The inclusive strategies are often described through non-inclusive strategies, even exclusion. All the participants refer to interaction with Migri and the police, especially. Emma describes the problematic setting of asylum interviews:

> If you think from the basic social work point of view, I would never work with clients like that. Like, you see a person three times for one hour and then you expect that, hey tell me everything. And then like, there is a camera by the way, there is an interpreter and then I will record this and then we'll write this down and then we'll see if it went right and then we ask all the time but wait a minute, didn't you just tell me that it was like this. [. . .] I think that what maybe makes the situation so unnatural is

that when you tell someone something horrible, normally, the person you tell it to somehow shows that hey I'm sorry that you've been through this and it must be really hard to talk but we still have to ask these questions because we investigate this. [. . .] Unfortunately, it has gone to the point where the person feels that they just ask and ask, and it makes them feel like they're an underdog. (Emma)

Unempathetic behaviour is so common that both the participants and their clients are positively surprised when they encounter appropriate treatment, as Mia describes: "I've even had clients ask if I could please send an e-mail to the person who is working there because he or she behaved normally. And I'm like, OK, we are at the level that I have to thank someone for behaving normally." Unkind behaviour may also affect the situations where the police issue negative decisions to the asylum seekers. The situations are difficult enough as such for the asylum seekers, but unnecessary intimidation by the police may even lead to misunderstandings concerning appeals, deportation or voluntary return.

3.5 Supervisory strategies
The supervisory strategies are partly related to the inclusive strategies but they go deeper into the human agency of the clients. The participants balance between supporting the clients' human agency and initiative, on the one hand and, on the other hand, speaking on the clients' behalf and making sure they do not speak against their own interests. Supervision involves having an overall picture of the client's situation and acting based on it. In many cases, this means focusing on basic needs first. Emma describes this balancing in two parts of her interview:

> Our aim is to support the inclusion of people who are in a very vulnerable position. We think that the way to support this inclusion is to provide them with an overall picture of their situation. [. . .] I have heard social workers in reception centres say that they support the person to make their own decisions, and why are you guys helping. If you really start to think, that person is traumatised. This is not the time to make them to stand on their own two feet. This is the time when they need help so that they can at some point stand on their own two feet. It does not happen overnight. (Emma)

The supervisory strategies are sometimes contradictory. The participants give advice based on their educated knowledge but, in the end, the clients are responsible for their own choices. The fact that there are seldom easy answers makes these kinds of contradicting decisions problematic. Nevertheless, the participants feel that it is their responsibility is to give the clients their educated opinion:

> You can't burden a person with all the decisions. If you yourself very clearly know what is better, you have to say so. And not be, like, well you can decide. (Sofia)

Many concrete supervisory strategies have to do with asylum interviews and rejected asylum applications, but also with, for example, housing or health. Using power of attorney was mentioned in some interviews, and Mia explains as follows: "We use power of attorney a lot, and we can do quite a lot of stuff with it. And I have to say that people mostly trust me, so it's never been a problem." Preparing the asylum seekers for asylum interviews is very common, as described earlier. The participants are in contact with lawyers and Migri, and they act as support persons in asylum interviews. For example, one participant stopped an interview with a minor because a lawyer was not present. Thus, the participants take initiative when their clients are not aware of important matters. Different volunteer actors also coordinate help among themselves to ensure resources are used effectively. If no other options are available, the participants help with preventing deportation.

Although the participants sometimes feel a need to decide something on the clients' behalf, they try to negotiate and come to various conclusions together with the clients. If they have to

override the client, they try to explain the situation and make sure the client receives sufficient information. Trust is important in this process.

> I was with this client at Migri, and three employees came one after the other to talk to me. And the client was silent and I'm like, I'm really sorry, now I'm going to talk for 20 minutes in Finnish. I will tell you what was said. Please trust me. I'm doing this in your interest. And the person was fine, because there was this very strong trust. (Mia)

The supervisory strategies are necessary, as many things can be complicated. The participants feel that their clients cannot be expected to understand everything in their own asylum processes, and therefore taking control of the situation is often better for the client than letting them juggle on their own. Mia states that there are problems with the attitude behind supervisory strategies: "And sometimes I feel bad because I think that I speak in a way that portrays people in the asylum process like they don't know, they don't understand. And it's wrong because it's not respectful, it's generalising. But it's also true that the process is not made to be understood and appropriated."

3.6 Strategies with shifting roles

The participants balance between different roles that organically intertwine in their work. They have a clear professional role in the volunteering work, as Mia describes: "When I say work, it's volunteering, but it is work in the sense that it's effort. It's the things you do. It's time. You need to have knowledge, and I think, I feel we work in different positions." Volunteers provide services that should be covered by the official asylum system. They feel responsible for their clients and their cases, and they work intense hours. They are aware of their personal limits and the limits of their own expertise. For example, some of them focus on specific topics, such as deportation or family reunification. They attend regular training and counselling.

The participants hope their work is recognised as a part of the process, as Emma states: "Our aim is to build a third-sector, external actor that supports asylum seekers throughout the whole process." Thus, the participants see a need for an actor that is separate from the authorities and the official system, people who are there for the asylum seekers. Emma continues: "I often think that here in Finland we are still in our infancy when we talk about multi-professional cooperation and not obtaining expert knowledge from anyone else than the authorities." The volunteers' role as non-authorities can help asylum seekers trust them. Furthermore, clients can often trust and use the information they receive from volunteers rather than, for example, listening to rumours circulating among asylum seekers.

Apart from the professional volunteering role, the participants have different (professional) backgrounds that affect and support their work. They use tools and techniques to cope with stress and vicarious trauma.

> But then again, all volunteers have their backgrounds. Some have their social worker background or their psychologist background or their nurse background, and all of these bring about somewhat different things. And then also many researchers. (Sofia)

Some volunteers also have a background as asylum seekers or refugees, or are themselves in the process but, at the same time, help others. These people are often able to provide peer support.

> It can be that there is not a clear-cut boundary between the clients and volunteers, because people have skills, they have knowledge, they have some resources, so over time they may be in several roles. (Mia)

Interesting are also the participants' roles as friends, friend-like persons or mothers. One participant [6] identifies herself as a mother to the young men she is helping. She has, for

example, attended parents' evenings at schools and has herself received help at home from her clients. Her work, indeed, resembles parental caregiving:

> I believe that having someone who cares has an impact. They can say like, Mom, I would not be here without you. That is a huge thanks for just texting and visiting and talking and listening. I have not done anything special.

Some participants see many of their clients as friends, others have a stricter attitude with clients. Nevertheless, they use the same kinds of friendship strategies. They spend time with the clients very informally and help them at the same time.

> It is clear that some of them have also become my personal friends. And sometimes we meet and do something together or invite each other over. And suddenly half an hour goes by when we fill in a form. (Marianne)

Friendship with the clients is also something that gives strength to the volunteers. Strategy-wise, the role as friend or mother supports information sharing, as Maija points out: "In many other cultures, you do not go to professionals in the same way. If we have problems, we go to a professional, like to a social worker, but in many other countries you go and ask a relative for advice and help." Thus, their role as a friend or mother is extremely important in the asylum system, as authorities do not have the same possibility to apply similar strategies. The roles coexist, shift, are fluid and support each other.

4. Discussion
This paper introduces volunteers' strategies to help asylum seekers with information challenges. Volunteers use information mediatory strategies to support asylum seekers in understanding information, accessing accurate and timely information, and navigating in the complex information environment. Behind language adjustment strategies there is an understanding that language on multiple levels can be a barrier to receiving and understanding information, and volunteers adjust their language accordingly. When applying spatial and non-verbal communicative strategies, volunteers aim to create safe spaces, places and situations where information sharing becomes possible. Inclusive strategies guarantee that asylum seekers are encountered with sensitivity, as human beings, and their emotional needs are recognised and fulfilled in different situations. Supervisory strategies highlight the human agency and rights of asylum seekers. Lastly, volunteers use strategies with shifting roles to organically and fluidly choose the best possible ways to encounter asylum seekers.

Although our focus is not on asylum seekers' information practices, our findings are similar to the information challenges identified in earlier research (e.g. Caidi *et al.*, 2010; Lloyd *et al.*, 2013, 2017; Oduntan and Ruthven, 2019, 2020). Our study elucidates the phenomenon from the perspective of volunteers, i.e. people who closely work with asylum seekers. Volunteers are – partly consciously, partly unconsciously – aware of information challenges. They recognise that information in the asylum system changes, is not precise and is hard to understand. They notice misunderstandings and even direct misinformation. They are aware of challenges in understanding between different parties, for example, due to issues with language on different levels. They understand that not all information or information sources are equally relevant and that they may affect individual asylum processes. Volunteers also acknowledge that the mental state of asylum seekers affects their ability to understand and use different kinds of information.

4.1 Nuanced information and the social information perception model
The volunteers' awareness of information challenges lies underneath the strategies presented in this paper. The complexity of information and information practices in the context of

asylum seekers can be discussed with the help of the social information perception model (SIP) (Ruokolainen and Widén, 2020), which depicts the process of perceiving information and its accuracy. The model shows that people encounter all kinds of information, i.e. accurate information, misinformation and disinformation, which is then interpreted and used in different ways. When a person interprets information, different factors, i.e. social, historical and cultural aspects, as well as situation and context, affect how information is perceived. A person then understands the information as accurate information, misinformation or disinformation and uses it in constructing reality and problem-solving, even when the piece of information is dismissed. Figure 1 shows this simplified model, which can help to understand the process of receiving and perceiving information, and the strategies show that volunteers are – consciously or unconsciously – aware of how asylum seekers perceive and use information, why information is often challenging, and in what ways these challenges can be made easier. The strategies are essentially founded on understanding another person's ways of dealing with information and acting based on it.

In the context of the asylum process, information is often fragmented and unclear, and as legislation and practices change, knowing whether a piece of information is accurate is difficult. Asylum seekers come from different backgrounds and information environments, and they are often in a challenging and liminal situation in the host country. Their contacts affect the kind of information they receive and how they perceive it. An example of a cultural factor affecting information perception and practices could be the impact of collective culture (Baldwin, 2014, p. 78) on information practices. This often means trusting family and friends as the main sources of information (Kainat *et al.*, 2021). The strategies with shifting roles consider this cultural difference and enable people to share information in everyday occasions with people who can be considered friends or family. The situational factors are particularly interesting in the context of asylum seekers, also noticed by
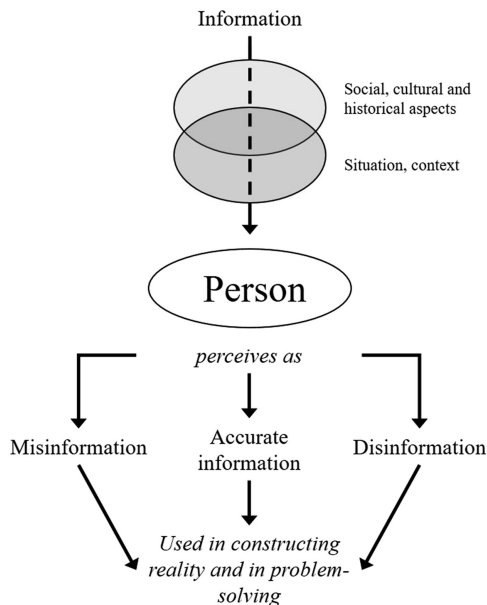
Source(s): Ruokolainen and Widén (2020)

Figure 1.
Social information
perception model

Oduntan and Ruthven (2020), as the legal status of asylum seekers also outlines information needs and use. For example, situation is an evident factor when the police issue negative asylum decisions. Even if the police present the decision correctly, the situation itself, the mental state of the applicant and the attitude of the police can affect how the asylum seeker perceives the information about the decision. Volunteers applying, for example, inclusive, spatial and non-verbal communicative, as well as supervisory strategies may make these situations easier.

We underline that different perceptions of information should by no means be dismissed as false. However, asylum seekers are forced to function in a social, cultural and situational context where dealing with information is not often easy. We argue that the strategies are a sensitive way to consider this process of information perception and help asylum seekers navigate in a complicated information environment, while still showing respect to them and their views.

4.2 Multi-level expertise
The strategies are formed on multiple levels, and it is useful to understand the different dimensions of expertise behind the strategies. Volunteers evidently exercise *critical* and *activist expertise*, confirming Sotkasiira's (2018, pp. 304–305) results where critical expertise is used to question power structures, and activist expertise highlights activism together with other actors. We argue that the fact that the volunteers use these strategies for supporting the asylum seekers and their rights is in itself a manifestation of critical and activist expertise. They question many factors and practices in the asylum system and power structures and consider the asylum seekers' rights as their guiding principle. They accentuate collective actions in their work, i.e. they work together with different actors in the field: other volunteers and activists, lawyers, NGO workers and different kinds of officials. We highlight that this collaboration includes asylum seekers who are, of course, often clients and people in need of help but also actors who have skills, knowledge and resources.

Expertise is related to information. The use of critical and activist expertise starts from the idea that asylum seekers have rights, including the right to accurate and timely information, which help in the asylum process. The supervisory strategies, especially, accentuate the asylum seekers' human agency, and having a holistic picture of one's own situation is a vital part of it. Asylum seekers need different kinds of information to "stand on their own two feet". Human agency, again, influences information practices and enhances access to information, creating a virtuous circle.

4.3 Respect and trust as cross-cutting themes
The culturally and situationally sensitive strategies to help others with their information practices extend past activities directly linked with information. The cross-cutting themes in the strategies are *respect* and *trust* [7], which the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (2018) understands as key components of social inclusion, in addition to livelihood, services, information and knowledge, skills, activity and shared meanings. Respect, i.e. individual perception of worth to a group, sense of inclusion in a group, and fair treatment within a group (Huo *et al.*, 2010, p. 200), supports two aspects of social life: striving for status and recognition as well as the need to belong and feel included (Huo and Binning, 2008, p. 1572). People in the margins of a group have a stronger need for respect (De Cremer, 2002), and lack of perceived respect can further marginalise them (Huo and Binning, 2008, p. 1573). Respect can lead to improved social engagement, higher self-esteem and better mental health (Huo *et al.*, 2010; Huo and Binning, 2008). In the same manner, trust has a positive impact on well-being, and its impact is more advantageous among people belonging to discriminated and disadvantaged populations (Helliwell *et al.*, 2016, pp. 14–15). Trust is evidently connected to

vulnerability: it can be defined as relying on others when vulnerable and believing that no harm will be done (Sasaki and Marsh, 2012, p. 9). Trust is vital for relationships and social groups, and small details can be decisive when an individual takes the risk to trust another person (Curtis, 2011, pp. 54–55). Trust is needed for effective information sharing, and it influences information practices and perception of information (Huvila, 2017). Asylum seekers often have difficulties with trusting people due to past experiences, being accustomed to not trusting people, being mistrusted by others, not knowing people and concerns about telling the truth (Raghallaigh, 2014).

In the context of asylum seekers, these aspects of respect and trust are extremely important. Asylum seekers are actively shut out of the society due to their status and belonging to a group or social recognition are not self-evident for them. In Finland, they are not provided with official integration services. Active confirmation of belonging through acts of respect could positively affect their well-being. In a new cultural, social and situational context, it can be hard to know who to trust, or even take the risk to trust a strange person, in the first place. At the same time, asylum seekers are dependent on other people's help. The strategies are ways to create respect and trust, which affect information practices and support the asylum seekers' well-being. Well-being, in turn, has a positive influence on information practices (Zou, 2021). Thus, respect and trust, information and emotional well-being can be seen as factors influencing one another and creating a virtuous circle. Respect and trust are the underlying motives behind and guiding principles for the strategies but are also the outcomes of them.

4.4 Theoretical and practical contribution
After presenting all these aspects of the information-related strategies, we come to the essence of them. Information-related strategies do not only involve information mediation but are a holistic approach to support other people's information practices, which are socially and culturally established ways to identify information needs, seek, use and share information (Savolainen, 2008, p. 2). Information practices are a part of people's social practices, and they are habitual ways of dealing with information (Savolainen, 2007), with emphasis on social relationships and social contexts (McKenzie, 2003). In the context of migration, information practices can be seen as the social process of learning to function in a new information environment and understanding how to deal with the information in a new setting (Lloyd *et al.*, 2013). Although not all of the strategies seem to be directly linked to information and information practices, they definitely revolve around them. In other words, information practices are intertwined in all kinds of everyday interactions, and therefore information-related strategies should also be a part of everyday interactions. The strategy approach acknowledges complex information processes and enables and supports information practices at large, with various actions that make situations safe and respectful. In the context of asylum seekers, these include information mediatory, language adjustment, spatial and non-verbal communicative, inclusive, and supervisory strategies, as well as strategies with shifting roles. In other contexts, there could be other kinds of strategies to support the information practices of other people and groups.

Information-related strategies are a novel contribution to the information practice discourse. Information practice approaches do consider the context and situation (e.g. McKenzie, 2003; Savolainen, 2006; Talja *et al.*, 2005). Research on information intermediaries, again, tackles the same kinds of issues as our understanding of information-related strategies. However, we shift the focus from the individuals, volunteers as information intermediaries, to their actions. We also argue that the strategies help examine the activities around information from a broader perspective. True access to reliable and useful information is enabled by many diverse actions, which take into consideration different

cultural, social, contextual and situational factors. Thus, information-related strategies are actions and processes around information that enable and support sustainable information practices for other people.

Understanding the strategies and the volunteers' role in asylum seekers' information practices also contributes to the everyday work with asylum seekers and possibly with other groups that may also be considered marginalised. Authorities and all actors in the asylum process cannot fully adopt the same kinds of strategies as volunteers because, for example, building personal relationships is not possible in all situations. In the Finnish context, where changes in the legislation and practices as well as long asylum processes cause people to fall outside the system (Pirjatanniemi *et al.*, 2021) and where asylum seekers are not entitled to official integration services (FINLEX, 2011; Integration.fi, 2021), the expertise of volunteers could be acknowledged and utilised more officially. In any case, volunteers and the third sector provide services, which are not covered by the official system (Karakayali and Kleist, 2016). The volunteers' role as an outside actor can also seem more trustworthy to the asylum seekers, and this could be considered an asset, and not as a threat to the official asylum system. The strategy approach may also give a new perspective to helping volunteers to examine processes and actions in their work in Finland, perhaps in other countries, also. Awareness of these strategies, which is perhaps partly unconscious, may make it easier to improve the existing work practices and coordinate work among volunteers more efficiently, while still bearing the clients' interests in mind. However, despite the special role of volunteers, the strategies are not limited to volunteers only. Many of the strategies could be applied in all positions in the system. Inclusive behaviour, appropriate language use and sharing information in an understandable way are at least relatively easy ways to increase the well-being of asylum seekers.

5. Conclusions

This paper presents six types of strategies, which volunteers use to help asylum seekers with information challenges and support their information practices. Volunteers use information mediatory strategies to make sure asylum seekers obtain information in the best possible way and understand it. Language adjustment strategies consider various challenges with language, such as when bureaucratic language is used. Spatial and non-verbal communicative strategies are used to make asylum seekers feel safe and cared for in different spaces. Volunteers aim at encountering individual asylum seekers in an inclusive way, even when difficult matters are discussed. With supervisory strategies, the human agency of asylum seekers is supported in a way most suitable for their individual situation. Lastly, volunteers have different roles, such as the professional work role, the role as a non-authority and the role as a friend or parent. These roles are fluid and make it easier to help asylum seekers in different situations.

The information-related strategies are a novel way of understanding factors around information practices. Merely giving information is not enough in asylum seekers' challenging situations. Rather, information practices should be supported holistically by showing respect, sensitivity and caring, thus, creating a basis for accessing and processing reliable and timely information. Quality human interaction is the basis for sustainable information practices. The strategies contribute to the overall situation of asylum seekers and make it easier for them to deal with information and challenges with it. The strategies are not simple nor stable; rather, they are flexibly and organically applied and adjusted according to the situation and needs of the individual asylum seekers.

This study has its limitations. Not all aspects of the asylum situation in Finland could be discussed, although they could have created additional depth to the analysis. Since the

asylum situations in different countries are not the same, the findings do not necessarily directly apply to other countries. However, with necessary modifications, these contexts could be studied with the help of the strategy approach. Due to the small sample, the findings must be put into the limited context. A larger sample could render better grounds for generalisation, i.e. provide indications of whether these findings apply to volunteers on a larger scale, as well. Combining semi-structured interviews with other methods, such as observation, could have given further confirmation to the findings. Now, the data relies solely on the participants' verbal accounts of their experiences and therefore, the voice of asylum seekers is not present in this paper. Anything mentioned about the feelings and views of the asylum seekers are interpretations by the people working with them. As Lloyd *et al.* (2013, p. 132) point out, asylum seekers may not have any other choice than to trust volunteers and rely on them as trustworthy information sources.

Despite the limitations of the study, the strategy approach can help understand different factors. The asylum system and situation of asylum seekers are indeed complicated and receiving help is vital. The strategies aim at giving sensitive support. As the volunteers put it themselves, the goal is to make people more independent, but the process is long and complicated. Inequality among asylum seekers is also great, as receiving help may depend on how active they themselves are – or it depends on pure luck. Further holistic studies pertaining to the kind of (informational) support and services asylum seekers need and prefer and who should provide these services are needed. The limited findings provide an interesting new approach, and further studies could investigate various aspects of volunteers', and other information intermediaries', ways of supporting access, interpretation and use of information. With the help of the strategy approach, future research can more easily examine groups that support information practices for other people and communities. For example, it would be interesting to see how more official actors in a given context apply different strategies when their role is apparently narrower. We also encourage further research on inclusive behaviour and respect and their role in information practices.

Notes

1. There are many ways of volunteering, and some volunteers focus mainly on recreational and social activities. However, in this paper we focus on activities connected with the asylum system as the role of volunteers has become more and more important in it.

2. The citations in Finnish and Swedish were translated to English by the researcher and checked by two other researchers. The translations attempt to depict similar ways of speaking as in the interviews, but they are not word-for-word translations to better guarantee clarity and readability.

3. The intention of this study is not to create or increase any contrasts between different actors in the asylum system. The participants in this study had collaborated extensively with many actors, such as lawyers. However, they did express their criticism towards the system and authorities, including the officials at the Finnish Immigration Service and the police.

4. All names are pseudonyms to insure the anonymity of the participants and their clients.

5. The abbreviation of the Finnish Immigration Service, which is often used in everyday language.

6. To further protect the identity of the participant, her pseudonym is left out in this section.

7. Both respect and trust are broad concepts, which are discussed here only briefly and superficially. A more thorough review on the concept of trust in LIS research can be found in Huvila (2017) and in refugee studies in Lyytinen (2017).

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Appendix

Work/volunteering	Could you tell me about your work?
Asylum process/situation	Do you have an overall picture of the situation? What about your clients?
Clients	What kind of information needs do your clients have?
	Who do your clients turn to when they have questions?
Networks	What kind of networks do you have?
	What contacts do you lack?
	What kind of networks do your clients have?
Rumours	Are there rumours circulating? What kind?
Misinformation	Do your clients sometimes misunderstand things? What are they?
	Are there cases when you do not know what to do or how to give advice?
	Is some information difficult for you?
	Have you received information that was incorrect?
	Have you misunderstood something?
	Have you given misinformation to your clients?
	Is some information conflicting?
	Are there misunderstandings between you and your clients?
Emotions	What kind of feelings do your clients show you?
	Do you like your work?
	What do you enjoy? What frustrates you?

Table A1.
Interview guide

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