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Abstract
To receive international protection, people with diverse sexualities and genders are required to produce a narrative about their sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) and their fear of persecution that is found credible by the asylum authorities. While the use of Western stereotypes during the asylum assessment has extensively been researched, little attention has been paid to the support groups that applicants turn to before their asylum interview. In light of my research on SOGI in the Belgian asylum procedure, I volunteered with two LGBTIQ+ organisations that offer support to LGBTIQ+ applicants in preparation of their asylum interview. Using an autoethnographic approach, this article reveals the ambiguity of support groups' solidarity practices. I outline some of the tensions experienced while navigating individual support and structural violences, which in turn reveal how some of these structures might be (re)produced.

The need to prepare

The outcome of an asylum case not merely depends on whether an applicant meets the refugee criteria, but whether they are able to *credibly demonstrate* that they meet these criteria (Smith-Khan, 2020). And yet, the legal and institutional stipulation of these criteria and what constitutes a credible presentation of them are often unknown to the applicants (Coutin, 2000; Jacobs & Maryns, 2022). Especially when there is a lack of evidence, which is characteristic for applications on the ground of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI), the applicant's personal narrative becomes the cornerstone on which the asylum decision is based. The possibility to prepare for the asylum interview hence increases an applicant's chances for a positive outcome, as they learn to (re)shape their narrative in accordance with the authorities' expectations of a credible SOGI claim. A Venezuelan applicant repeatedly stated 'I noticed how privileged I was to possess so much guidance and support and information'[1]. However, when I started volunteering with an LGBTIQ+ support group as part of my research on SOGI in the Belgian asylum system[2], I realised that preparing the applicants for their upcoming asylum interview meant replicating parts of the official interview I had been so critical of beforehand. In this article, I assess the ambivalences in supporting applicants for international protection in LGBTIQ+ support groups in particular, which bears resemblance to solidarity practices with people on the move more broadly (Picozza, 2021).

In Belgium, applicants file their application for international protection at the Immigration Office (IO), which is followed by a brief interview to assess whether Belgium is the country responsible for processing the application. The second phase of the asylum procedure consists of a much longer interview at the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS), on the basis of which refugee status may be granted or denied[3]. On average 4% of applications assessed by the CGRS have a SOGI ground, amounting to 945 cases in 2022[4]. Applicants have to wait several months or even years until they are invited to the CGRS, in anticipation of which they turn to other applicants, lawyers or support groups to prepare.

Research on SOGI asylum has extensively critiqued the Western perceptions of asylum authorities both in relation to the stereotypical LGBTIQ+ identities and the kind of linear, coherent, emotionally reflective narrative that determines credibility (Berg & Millbank, 2009; Jansen, 2022; Jansen & Spijkerboer, 2011; Jordan, 2009; Luibhéid, 2008; Murray, 2014; Nasser-Eddin et al., 2018; Saleh, 2020; Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2020). Preparing then does not mean inventing a narrative, but recounting the truth in such a way that it chronologically presents those elements that meet the expectation of an LGBTIQ+ identity and a fear of persecution based on that identity (Giametta, 2016; Murray, 2020). The coordinator of one of my partner organisations explained it as follows:

> [T]he more informative aspect, that's the first part [of our work]. The second part is really the construction, not the invention but the construction of the story. In other words, explaining to people how to turn their story into a narrative.

> Remi (5/07/2022)[5]

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[1] Interview 10/12/2021.

[2] See also Peumans (2018) and Dhoest (2018) for previous research.

[3] A negative decision can be appealed with the Council for Alien Law Litigation (CALL).

[4] Personal communication CGRS 12/05/2023.

[5] Names have been adapted to ensure confidentiality. Interviews in French have been translated by the author.

In contrast to research on the role of asylum authorities and their assessment of SOGI narratives, attention has only recently shifted to the influence of other actors on applicants' narratives (Chossière, 2021; Dustin & Held, 2021; Giametta, 2018; Murray, 2020). One prominent actor is LGBTIQ+ support groups. Those who received support from LGBTIQ+ support group workers and volunteers often referred to it as invaluable (Dustin & Held, 2021; Giametta, 2016). This is not to say that no critical reflections should be made about the role of these organisations and volunteers within the asylum system. Schwiertz and Schwenken (2020) point out how even pro-migrant initiatives could reproduce national boundaries and exclusive solidarities. The concept of solidarity, understood as practices that support forced migrants *and* transform social and political contexts, offers a useful lens to analyse the preparatory work of LGBTIQ+ support groups. Critical analyses of solidarity reveal how restrictive migration regimes can be sustained through apolitical, patronizing and exclusionary humanitarian actions (Ticktin, 2011). Bearing this critique in mind, solidarity allows us to investigate the main tension underlying the work of LGBTIQ+ support groups in general and researcher-volunteers in particular, namely between individual support and structural change. In order to help applicants navigate an exclusionary asylum system, LGBTIQ+ support groups resist, question, imitate and reproduce the exclusionary categories employed by the state (Cesaro, 2021; McGuirk, 2018; Murray, 2020; Witcher, 2021). To move beyond dichotomies, there is a need to investigate the grey zone between apolitical humanitarian action and political activism, which Schwiertz and Schwenken (2020) have termed 'inclusive solidarity' and Vandevoordt and Verschraegen (2019) defined as 'subversive humanitarianism'.

In addition, intersectionality is an indispensable lens when considering the experiences of SOGI applicants, which are mutually constituted by the gendered, raced and classed societal structures. These same structures permeate the role of and relationships within LGBTIQ+ support groups (Chossière, 2021; Held, 2022). Not only are SOGI applicants faced with 'complex intersectional experiences of exclusion' (Lee & Brotman, 2011, p. 259), for example by facing/fearing homophobia in their national communities and racism in LGBTIQ+ communities, they are repeatedly confronted with what Crenshaw (1991) termed 'representational intersectionality' within the asylum system and the groups that purport to support them. I hereby refer to the (re)production of what constitutes a credible SOGI claim, and how a Eurocentric expectation of sexual orientation, gender identity and fear of persecution might fail to recognise the intersectional experiences of a SOGI applicant. Lastly, I contend that these expectations and representations are informed by a chronic suspicion of asylum applicants, typically termed a 'culture of disbelief' (Cesaro, 2021; Ferreira, 2022; Griffiths, 2012). This suspicion and disbelief can be found among all actors of the asylum system, from the authorities to support volunteers and even applicants themselves.

Previous research on support groups was mostly based on interviews with volunteers and applicants, often in the context of ethnographic fieldwork as a researcher-volunteer (Cesaro, 2021; McGuirk, 2018; Witcher, 2021). This article adds to – and deepens – previous insights via an in-depth analysis of the underlying thoughts and everyday actions of support group volunteers through an autoethnographic research of *my own role* as a volunteer. Taking into account the helpful and harmful implications of providing support, I analyse how the asylum system is subverted and expanded through LGBTIQ+ organisations. Put differently, I consider to what extent the preparatory work of the LGBTIQ+ support groups (and me) can be considered as subversive humanitarianism by 'establishing more horizontal relations of solidarity with newly arrived migrants, challenging the subject categories produced by the migration apparatus' and is not substituting failing government policies but 'publicly criticising' them (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019, p. 106). Concretely, I want to understand the relation between LGBTIQ+ support group workers and applicants, how the preparation for the asylum interview challenges the 'SOGI refugee' category and in how far the asylum authorities' assessment of credibility is questioned.

After a brief description of my autoethnographic methodology, I present my two partner organisations and what it involved being a volunteer-researcher. Thereinafter, I provide some examples of the difficulties in preparing an applicant, from embodying the assessor to assessing credibility, discussing self-identification and providing a 'homonationalist' letter of support. I conclude that working within the asylum system, despite aiming to make the system more inclusive, might reproduce some exclusionary practices.

Working with(in) LGBTIQ+ organisations[6]
Inserting the ethnographic self in the text
Ethnography has evolved from being enabled by colonialism and perpetuated by its underlying ideas[7], to being critical of the position of the researcher and the production of knowledge (Rooke, 2009; Tedlock, 1991). Queer theory is one of the postmodernist approaches (besides the influential work of postcolonial and feminist authors) that has destabilised the notion of a neutral and objective researcher (Hemelsoet, 2014; Okely, 1992; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Wall, 2006). Whereas the ethnographic self was long confined to field diaries and erased from publications, ethnography is now characterized by transparency and reflexivity (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Tedlock, 1991). Okeley (1992, p. 23) summarized

> In its fullest sense, reflexivity forces us to think through the consequences of our relations with others, whether it be conditions of reciprocity, asymmetry or potential exploitation. There are choices to be made in the field, within relationships and in the final text. If we insert the ethnographer's self as positioned subject into the text, we are obliged to confront the moral and political responsibility of our actions.

One ultimate way to consider the researcher's position and relationship with others 'in the field', is the ethnographic turn to the 'observation of participation', also known as *autoethnography* (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Tedlock, 1991). Over the past decades, a multitude of terms and meanings[8] have been introduced to refer to various concurrences of the auto (self), ethno (culture) and graphy (the research process) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 739) describe autoethnography as 'an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural' where '[i]n conversation with ourselves, we expose our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices, and values.' (2000, p. 748).

> I am both excited for the possibilities [that] following someone more closely through their procedure could offer for my research, but I am also a bit afraid of the responsibility to provide adequate support and help to [them].

Fieldnote (7/05/2021)

Like other ethnographies, this research is mostly based on fieldnotes, personal documents, interview transcripts etc. (Wall, 2008). Given that autoethnography researches the self within a social context (Reed-Danahay, 1997), I decided to include more data on this context. I

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[6] Neither the LGBTIQ+ acronym nor the rainbows and organisations it is associated with, capture the diverse ways that sexuality and gender can be experienced. By sampling my participants through LGBTIQ+ organisations, I was able to access those who *do* identify themselves as LGBTIQ+ and are excited to socialize with other LGBTIQ+ people.

[7] Cabot (2019) critiques how this evolution does not entail the abandonment of colonial ideas but simply their adaptation, as new categories of oppressed and marginalized people (such as migrants and refugees) are made the object of study.

[8] For a more in-depth overview, see (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997.) The term 'autoethnography' will be used as this has become the preferred term.

complemented my fieldnotes with follow-up interviews with forty applicants[9], two coordinators and one fellow volunteer, with whom I shared my personal experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Some might call this a 'conservative' autoethnography due to the multiplicity of sources used to support the personal narrative (Wall, 2006). Concretely, the vignettes take my own role as a volunteer as a starting point, while the ethnographic fieldwork allowed me to further analyse the preparation of applicants for their asylum interview.

Intersectional organisations and individual meetings

At the heart of this article is my volunteer experience with two LGBTIQ+ organisations in Brussels between April 2021 and June 2023, conducting 150 one-on-one meetings with almost seventy applicants. Although research projects primarily benefit the researcher, it is the researcher's responsibility to equally 'add value to the lives of the people they are researching, recognizing them as subjects in the process and not simply as sources of data' (Pittaway et al., 2010 referencing Hugman, 2005, 2010). I therefore contacted a handful of organisations that worked on the intersection of LGBTIQ+ issues and migration to inquire if I could volunteer with them, motivating that I wanted to get in contact with some of the SOGI applicants they received while doing something useful for their organisation (and hopefully for their target audience). There is a variety of organisations that wholly or partially focus on this topic in Belgium, ranging from well-known LGBTIQ+ organisations to smaller community-led ones and some that do not use the LGBTIQ+ terminology. Lee and Brotman outlined the 'complex intersectional experiences of exclusion' (2011, p. 259) SOGI applicants face in their search for belonging and support, encountering both racism in LGBTIQ+ communities and homo- or transphobia in their national communities. In response, the authors foreground the importance of refugee-led LGBTIQ+ organisations or LGBTIQ+ groups supporting migrants, given that organisations and support groups that recognise the intersectional experiences of SOGI applicants 'broke social isolation, fostered self-affirmation, and built community' (2011, p. 261). However, to be able to speak of an intersectional support practice, it is necessary to consider not only the intersectional position of the individuals being supported, but also the structures in which they are embedded. For one, the two LGBTIQ+ organisations that responded positively to my application to volunteer were located in the Brussels' 'Gay Neighbourhood', which is dominated by white gay men while 'the exclusions in homosexual public space reproduce and perpetuate structural inequalities', specifically based on race, gender and class (Huysentruyt et al., 2015, p. 168). Similarly, research on refugee support groups reveals a differentiation in the roles of volunteers based on their profiles, with mostly white volunteers carrying out authoritative tasks as opposed to the subordinate role of volunteers with a migration background (Cesaro, 2021; Witcher, 2021). Yet, our volunteer team was a diverse mix of people with and without a migration background: Belgians, international students and employees, recognised refugees and applicants still awaiting their decision. Nonetheless, our embeddedness within an organisation founded and funded by (white) Europeans irrefutably had an impact on how applicants were supported. In this light, Held (2022) identified LGBTIQ+ support groups as 'ambivalent spaces', as they offer valuable support while being shaped by 'intersectional differences and power relationships' (p. 3).

My main partner organisation was an LGBTIQ+ asylum project which combines (1) trainings on LGBTIQ+ asylum, (2) discussion groups and activities for LGBTIQ+ applicants and (3) individual meetings to support LGBTIQ+ applicants with the preparation of their asylum interview[10]. My second fieldwork site was a trans and intersex organisation which similarly organises trainings, discussion groups and individual support for all trans, intersex

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[9] The interviews with the applicants broadly covered their experiences with the Belgian asylum system, including their experience with the asylum interview and preparation for it.

[10] The first two elements were subsidies by the French Community, the third was completely volunteer-based.

and genderfluid people that reach out to them, which includes some applicants for international protection. The one-on-one meetings were deemed instrumental to establish a relationship of trust and support applicants more fully (New, 2015).

> [T]he individual moments are more [important] because you also create a space to listen, a space of safety too. And I think that's essential. … [H]aving a first place where you can make mistakes … I think that's really important. … Helping people to structure their thinking in a more European way. In other words... helping them to translate something that had been experienced and told in a certain way so that it would be comprehensible and intelligible in the language of the administration.
>
> Rose (29/06/2023)

I started at the project at a tumultuous time in April 2021, after it had been on hold for a while due to personnel changes and COVID-19 restrictions. A new project coordinator, Rose, had been appointed only two weeks before. After having observed Rose carry out six meetings, it was already my turn to take the lead. Having received no further training, I felt quite insecure about my capabilities to provide support, stemming from my limited French and legal knowledge, and my non-existent experience in creating safe spaces and handling emotional stories. This insecurity would never completely go away. Thankfully, I was able to learn from our growing volunteering team and continuously developed my support practice. Because the trans and intersex organisation's support is not limited to the asylum procedure but entails a broader psychosocial support, carried out by professional psychologists, my role with them was mostly limited to observing.

Incorporating two roles

My partner organisations knew I was volunteering in function of my research, which I announced through emails, outlined in our Memorandum of Understanding, and consistently referred to while being there. To the applicants I introduced myself as 'Lisa, volunteer at the LGBTIQ+ support group and researcher at Ghent University', handing them an information letter about my research and asking permission to take pseudonymised notes of our meeting – stressing that their response would not impact the support they would receive. In the end, *everybody* gave me permission to take notes during our meetings, which made me wonder in how far they really experienced it as a voluntary decision and fully understood what they were consenting to (Hemelsoet, 2014; Pittaway et al., 2010). Several applicants commented that they were happy to do something back for 'the community', upon which I immediately nuanced the impact my research could have as an academic dissertation.

I noticed multiple overlaps between my volunteer and researcher roles: listening to the applicants' stories, asking questions, providing information, taking notes, struggling to do all of this in French. My dual role was often mutually beneficial. As a volunteer, I was able to provide information about the asylum procedure thanks to the research I was conducting[11]. As a researcher, I was able to profit from the relationship of trust I had built over time while working as a volunteer.

> I feel like doing these interviews for my PhD … doesn't only help me for my research, but it also helps me to do a better job as a volunteer at the [LGBTIQ+ asylum project] and better prepare people for their interview – since I understand better how it happens.
>
> Fieldnote (29/10/2021)

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[11] For example, reading (research on) the publicly accessible negative decisions taken by the CGRS and CALL (Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2020).

Then there were the moments when embodying two roles became untenable. As a researcher, I was critiquing and refuting the stereotypical questions and assessments used by some asylum officials, while I was using these same questions and assessments as a volunteer to help applicants prepare. This resonates with one of the tensions Hemelsoet (2014, p. 223) described: '[A] view may be theoretically sound, it is not evidently so in lived, day-to-day experience. Does the desirability of … seeking structural ameliorations exonerate us from the duty to help those in need in an … imperfect … way … ?'.

Nonetheless, I was not merely a researcher-volunteer. Sometimes I was a gatekeeper, an interpreter, a therapist (which I strongly denounced), an activist or even a friend. At my partner organisations I never hid my political views, be it on the restrictiveness of migration or the importance of self-identification. By contrast, I vehemently struggled with disclosing personal facts that related to my relationship, my comfortable home and the way I was able to enjoy holidays with family or abroad. I realised how much the applicants shared in comparison to how little I did, which contributed to the inequality of our relationship. One applicant exclaimed 'It's not fair, you know so much about me and I don't know anything about you!'[12]. Ethnographic encounters are often richer when the ethnographer is open about their personal life (Giametta, 2018; Wyss, 2022), but I was afraid of my privileges as a white, cisgender, bisexual woman being too confronting. A shared sexuality has been found productive in establishing a relationship of trust (Giametta, 2018; Lewin, 2016; Rooke, 2009), but I found myself mostly performing a mysterious self which left my sexuality up for interpretation until an opportunity arose to mention my bisexuality. This reminded me of how a queer identity 'require[s] constant attention and negotiation; identities may come across as "singular, fixed, or normal" in an interaction but may not be singular, fixed or normal across all interactions' (Jones & Adams, 2016, p. 208).

In the next part, I analyse more in-depth what preparing an applicant for their asylum interview entails: the struggles, questionable approaches and relative impact.

Preparing for the asylum interview: three autoethnographic reflections
Embodying the assessor

> [The LGBTIQ+ asylum project] helped me with the … I would say the rehearsal of the interview. And it was a very good and helpful thing. And actually my interview with [volunteer's name] and my interview with the officer was quite the same.
>
> Giorgi (29/04/2022)

This Georgian applicant's description of the individual meetings as a rehearsal for the asylum interview appropriately reflects the performative aspect of the asylum procedure. The aim of the rehearsal is for the applicant to adapt their personal narrative to a 'recognisable script' (Giametta, 2016, p. 58). Murray (2020, p. 72) describes how '[c]laimants thus learned that … [it] was not simply a matter of telling their "life story" as they saw it; rather, there was a particular structure or framework for this narrative, and it must include important features or components that addressed the jurisprudential objective of determining credibility of a refugee claim'[13]. In this process, the role of the volunteer is on the one hand that of counsellor, providing a listening ear and information on what makes a recognisable script (Cabot, 2013; Jacobs & Maryns, 2022; Smith-Khan, 2020). On the other hand, the volunteer also acts as an interrogator by anticipating the performance of the asylum authorities themselves. Through

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[12] Paraphrased from an individual meeting conducted on 18/10/2021.

[13] Although Murray's research refers to the Canadian (written) procedure, the construction and assessment of narratives is an inherent part of *all* Refugee Status Determination procedures.

this process, the volunteer helps the applicant to (re)shape their narrative from an experiential into an institutional one, and to rehearse its performance (Jacobs & Maryns, 2022).

> [F]or me, it was like really obvious that I was gay. … But I was like more specific for the interview ... like I was telling every [part of my] story in regard of my queerness.

> Giorgi (29/04/2022)

At the support groups, there was a general idea of (what the authorities considered) a credible SOGI narrative: chronological and detailed, in relation to their fear of persecution and their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. There were three main tools we used to help the applicants structure their narrative. First, there was the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees outlining the criteria for being a refugee. This helped to determine the focus of their narrative on the elements relating to their SOGI and the persecution feared because of that. Second, we would draw a timeline to mark important life events on. A chronological mode of storytelling ánd the way this presents a linear narrative of 'coming out' is typically Western and therefore foreign to many applicants (Berg & Millbank, 2009). Third, there was the list of questions frequently asked by the CGRS, compiled by the previous project coordinator. The list reflected the stereotypically Western understanding of sexual orientation heavily critiqued in queer migration studies, with questions focussing on the applicants' discovery of their sexuality, partners and relationships, and their LGBTIQ+ knowledge (Roels & Casteleyn, 2023; Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2020).

> I check if it is okay for him to get started with the CGRS questions. I apologize that I don't like all the questions but that I hope it is useful to ask them anyways in preparation. I give some tips: don't lie (seems stupid and paternalizing) because if they discover one small lie, they might doubt everything else. They also like a chronological story and as much details i.e. names, places, dates as possible, because that also makes it seem like it isn't made up. (I'm not sure about giving these 'tips' because I don't know how much it influences their narrative and makes it less 'natural' and how much it might actually help them).

> Fieldnote (18/06/2021)

My approach was tailored to the CGRS's method of first establishing the credibility of the applicants' narrative, specifically of their SOGI, before assessing the well-foundedness of their fear of persecution. A volunteer colleague and recognised refugee, Aleksandr, found it incorrect to state that people fled their country of origin and applied for international protection because of their sexuality and gender identity: it is because *they fear being persecuted* because of their sexuality and gender identity. Therefore, subconsciously in line with recent SOGI research recommendations, he focussed on the feared *persecution*, which is inextricably connected to their sexuality and gender identity (Dustin & Ferreira, 2021; Jansen, 2022; Rehaag & Cameron, 2020).

> The way I perceive it, I am not applying for asylum because I am gay. I am applying for asylum because of the actions, the events [that] happened to me, and the events happened to me because I am gay. So [actually] the main thing is the events.

> Aleksandr (11/02/2022)

While asking similar questions as the CGRS, I found it important to differentiate our meeting from their upcoming asylum interview. In McGuirk's research on NGOs that provide services to LGBT asylum seekers, she describes how they in effect replicate the asylum interview 'albeit with more compassionate framing and less apparent scepticism' (2018, p. 5). When an applicant would comment after their CGRS interview that it went just like our meetings

did, I was simultaneously pleased that our meetings had been useful and disappointed that they had the same emotional impact.

> You are very, very good. … When I say something to you, you say the same questions like the Commissioner. If you [want to] go work there, you can!

> Luiz (16/07/2021)

Helpful anticipation or harmful assessment

Adopting the role of interrogator not only occurred by asking similar questions as the authorities but equally by focussing on weaknesses and inconsistencies in the story (Coutin, 2000). The unpredictability of the authorities' assessments makes it however difficult to anticipate what would be considered a weakness or inconsistency (Griffiths, 2012). Additionally, the interrogative approach that comes with this might affect the relationship of trust previously built (Jacobs & Maryns, 2022), which influences the way the applicants consider the advice they receive (Smith-Khan, 2020). When interrogating an applicant I wondered if I was motivated by my belief that the *authorities* might not believe them, or if this was merely an excuse for *me* not believing they would be recognised as a refugee?

Every now and then some volunteers complained of applicants they did not believe and they struggled with the best way to support them. The chronic suspicion of those applying for international protection as 'opportunists' and 'frauds' is referred to as a 'culture of disbelief' and lives amongst asylum authorities, support volunteers and even applicants themselves (Cesaro, 2021; Griffiths, 2012). Research on LGBTIQ+ support groups reveals that civil society workers and volunteers assess the claims of the applicants coming to them, to determine which cases they select or how much effort they put into them. This scrutiny stems from both the organisational constraints and the volunteers' individual beliefs (Cesaro, 2021; McGuirk, 2018; Murray, 2016).

I initially denied that I was struggling with supporting applicants I did not find credible. I was always quick to nuance that we were simply using different cultural frameworks and that it ultimately was not our job to make assessments. Reading and analysing my notes now, it is clear that I equally struggled with an incontrollable urge to assess the credibility of what I was being told. I noted when I thought something was so detailed and heartfelt that the CGRS *had to* believe it. I was easily persuaded by more educated, articulate and reflective applicants who held the necessary knowledge and behaviours to present a 'credible' self (Giametta, 2016). An intersectional lens here reveals that an applicant's credibility is not merely influenced by a chronological and linear story, but equally by their class, education and language skills. I also noted when I found something inconsistent, implausible, vague or strangely unemotional - subconsciously using the same criteria as the CGRS. When these unwarranted assessments crept up, I tried to turn them into a useful preparation for their CGRS interview. Nonetheless, I never knew whether I was anticipating the authorities' assessment in a correct and helpful way, or whether my assessment was more harmful.

> Reflection: I can't help but think at the end of the interview that it was … kind of hard to believe [his] story … which sounded like … a movie script. … [N]ot only the content of his story, but also the way it was told: I sometimes felt like some details changed or were absent or didn't quite fit. But this could all equally well be explained [by the fact] that we misunderstood each other at some points, that he started remembering other things as he was talking about it, that he didn't remember completely and was trying to fill in the gaps etc.
> Fieldnote (3/09/2021)

Jacobs and Maryns (2022) analysed how lawyers first try to gather as much information as possible to adequately represent their client. Similarly, when doubts crept into my mind I

would ask some questions to see if it would resolve itself. However, when you start asking too many follow-up questions, the resemblance with an interrogation might impact the relationship of trust. For this reason more 'meta-communicative effort' about *what* is being said *why* could be beneficial. Not sharing this strengthens the interviewer's dominance and leaves the interviewee powerless (Jacobs & Maryns, 2022). Enabling applicants instead to view their story through the eyes of the assessors gives them a better understanding of the way the procedure works – and the way they can navigate it (Coutin, 2000). Whenever I was not reassured by the applicants' answers, I would occasionally point out how the authorities might consider this an inconsistency and ask if they could explain it differently. However, 'the risk is that different standards, expectations and definitions of honesty are at play' (Griffiths, 2012, p. 12). In this specific game, applicants are held to a higher standard of truth-telling than others, including those that make erroneous assessments of their application (Griffiths, 2012).

In their foundational work, Berg and Millbank (2009) criticise how the credibility assessment of SOGI applicants departs from a Western understanding of sexuality, where one's sexuality is central to their identity and the result of a linear coming-out process. Consequently, many applicants need to translate their personal experience of their sexuality and gender into a Western identity category to obtain international protection (Nasser-Eddin et al., 2018; Offord, 2013; Saleh, 2020). To my surprise, all applicants I met at my partner organisations *did* identify themselves using LGBTIQ+ terminology, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes in response to me asking about it. While this contradicted some of the critical queer migration research, I recognised that this terminology offered them access to our organisation, was available in the shared language we spoke, and allowed them to feel less alone in their experiences. Besides these structural justifications, respect for the applicants' self-identification is a cornerstone of queer ethnography and queer migration studies, irrespective of the way it subverts or confirms Western identity categories (Lewin, 2016). I strongly believed that one's self-identification should be the only type of identification taking place – until I met Merlin and feared the authorities would misunderstand their self-identification.

During our first meeting, Merlin explained that they use the pronoun 'she' (at the time)[14] and hope to 'have operations' one day while discussing their difficulties with dating men at length. During our second meeting, they stated in various terms that they are a woman, were born a woman and want to become a woman, while sharing more about their past relationships with men and the abuse they experienced. I checked if I understood correctly that they identify as a trans woman *and* as homosexual, upon which I warned them that the CGRS might think that a woman such as herself who is attracted to men is not homosexual but *hetero*sexual. I based my estimation of the CGRS's assessment on the following case:

> [L]ittle credibility can be attached to your alleged gender identity and sexual orientation. … If you have always felt like a girl or woman and never felt like a man, it is somewhat curious that you still speak of a homosexual orientation, referring to women as the 'other sex'. (translated from CALL 217 917, 2019, p4-5).

Such a categorical separation between sexual orientation and gender identity does not align with everyone's self-identification, as someone's gender and sexuality might intersect in multiple ways, furthermore not existing in isolation but informed by the contexts they encounter (Saleh, 2020). When I asked Merlin in a later meeting what homosexuality meant to them, I was surprised to hear they did not know as they added 'I am all, I am LGBTIQ+'. When I asked what those letters then meant, they did not know. Worried about the consequences of them using labels they did not completely know the meaning of, I drew out

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[14] During our last meeting, Merlin identified as non-binary. I will therefore refer to them using 'they/them' pronouns.

the whole LGBT acronym, explaining each letter and emphasizing the distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity. At the end of the meeting, Merlin reassured *me* that I did not have to worry about the CGRS because they would understand. This demonstrates how volunteers and applicants might hold different understandings of sexual orientation and gender identity *and* of what makes a credible narrative. Reading the notes of their CGRS interview, it was ultimately not the credibility of their SOGI but the well-foundedness of their fear of persecution that was being questioned.

Proving the homonationalist discourse

Several applicants anxiously asked me 'how do they want me to prove that I am gay?'[15]. SOGI applicants are erratically asked about their participation in and knowledge of LGBTIQ+ organisations in the asylum interview (Cesaro, 2021; Dustin & Held, 2021; Roels & Casteleyn, 2023; Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2020). To substantiate their statements, they rely on evidence from these organisations, ranging from membership cards to activity records and other support letters (Murray, 2016). LGBTIQ+ organisations suddenly find themselves in a position of attesting to applicants' participation – and in some way to their sexual orientation and gender identity (Cesaro, 2021; Danisi et al., 2021). This bestowed an unwanted discretionary power on the organisations, who were receiving increasingly more requests for (letters of) support in response to which their limited teams started incorporating more exclusionary measures (Giametta, 2020; Murray, 2016; Ticktin, 2011).

When the requests for support at the LGBTIQ+ asylum project continued to increase, Rose reluctantly implemented some criteria to determine who could receive support and a letter: only those coming to the group activities could receive an appointment for individual meetings, and only after a minimal of three meetings could they receive a letter. Echoing some of the LGBTIQ+ support group workers in Ferreira's (2022) research, Rose argued that repeatedly coming to the discussion groups showed a genuine interest. A decisive factor for these restrictions was the way the asylum authorities would assess the credibility of our letters, and consequently the credibility of the project itself. The idea was that if the authorities perceived us as activists helping *everyone* get through the asylum procedure, we would be considered illegitimate and our support rendered meaningless. In order to maintain a good reputation we could only be seen providing support to 'real' SOGI applicants – an impossible assessment typically left up to the asylum authorities (Ferreira, 2022; Giametta, 2016; Murray, 2016).

> We met with the CGRS and for me it was really important to do this, not to work in confrontation, even if politically we completely are. … But I think … we have to work hand in hand. … And work on the credibility of the organisation…. Even if we are not, but we have to give the impression of neutrality so that we are taken seriously.
>
> Rose (29/06/2023)

I voiced my worries about the applicants these criteria risked excluding: those working, living far away or feeling uncomfortable in group contexts – in addition to those that do not identify with an LGBTIQ+ organisation (Murray, 2016). Our desire to provide (letters of) support to *some* applicants came at the cost of all those who were unable to receive support. This instance revealed how organisations aimed at supporting people that navigate a flawed asylum system, become implicated in this very system as an additional filtering device (Giametta, 2020; Murray, 2016; Ticktin, 2011). Rose's hope was that by building a relationship with the authorities, we would be able to create structural change over time. Ticktin (2011) has warned how organisations can work either on an individual level, that is

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[15] Interview 16/07/2021, 9/08/2021, 15/10/2021, 10/06/2022.

with(in) the governmental boundaries upholding the status quo, or on a structural level to change the status quo - but both cannot happen at the same time.

On maximum two pages, the letter of support provided an overview of the dates of the applicant's meetings, a summary of their life story, a concluding declaration of support and my personal signature. Their life story chronologically detailed the way they grew up and realised their sexuality or gender, any relationships or medical consultations they might have had, what had forced them to flee their home and the differences with their current life in Belgium. At Rose's request, I eventually added a paragraph outlining the persecution of SOGI in the country of origin.

> The Gambian Criminal Code criminalises homosexual acts, and anybody who commits this offence is liable to a prison sentence of up to 14 years. ... The condemnation of homosexuality is widely spread throughout society. There are no (legal) protections available against discrimination on the ground of someone's sexual orientation (see ILGA's 2020 report). The law and society in Gambia make it very difficult for LGBTIQ+ organisations to exist. Here in Belgium, [name] has made it clear that the [LGBTIQ+ organisation] is the place where she feels safe and like she belongs.
>
> Attestation (20/05/2022)

The idea was that we would eventually have our own database with country of origin information sampled from diverse sources, but in the meantime I reluctantly used the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's (ILGA) 'World Reports'. These reports have been critiqued for employing a Eurocentric view on homosexuality and painting homophobia as a non-European issue (Manalansan, 1995). Because ILGA is widely recognised and the information easily accessible, I used it anyway.

I disliked sustaining a homonationalist discourse[16] through these letters by (re)producing a normative LGBTIQ+ identity, an essentialized homophobic country of origin and the idea that there can finally be freedom once in Belgium. While my activism and research were aimed at critically investigating the structural inequalities of the asylum system, my volunteering practice was perpetuating them because I wanted to give each applicant I met the best chance at a positive outcome. This illustrates how state institutions, like asylum authorities, are not the only ones contributing to homonationalism: lawyers, activists and support organisations are equally producing a normative LGBTIQ+ refugee and a homophobic 'other' (Giametta, 2016; Murray, 2016). Not only does this overlook the intersectional discrimination and precarious situations applicants face in their country of arrival (Danisi et al., 2021; Giametta, 2016), it also entails profound consequences for those who do not (receive support to) fit the norm (Murray, 2016).

Conclusion: individual imitation, structural struggles
By primarily analysing my own experiences, notes and reflections as a volunteer, I have detailed how LGBTIQ+ support groups ambiguously help applicants with the preparation of the asylum interview. By writing honestly rather than euphemistically, this autoethnographic approach reveals valuable insights into the attitudes and practices of LGBTIQ+ support group volunteers, while showing the uncertainty and subjectivity of the ethnographer that is all too often edited out during the writing phase (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007). The leading motivation to work with LGBTIQ+ support groups and SOGI applicants was to carry out a more ethical research, here primarily understood as a more reciprocal research. However, engaging in this work confronted me with new ethical dilemmas. The main struggle can be

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[16] Homonationalism refers to the strategic processes of accepting and including certain gay lives and rights in the national ideology, on the one hand, while oppressing and excluding racial-sexual others from the nation state, on the other (Bracke, 2012; Puar, 2007).

located in the tension between the individual and the structural level: I aimed to understand and criticise the flaws of the asylum system while I was simultaneously committed to supporting the individual applicants I met, which often meant upholding the system's harmful ideologies and practices. The organisations I worked with faced a similar dilemma: while imitating the asylum interview at the individual level to help some applicants, they struggled to create structural changes to help those they could not support individually. The intersectional position of SOGI applicants and their support groups, trying to navigate the exclusionary mechanisms of the asylum system while respecting individual sexual and gendered experiences, is particularly valuable to consider the ambiguity of solidarity practices. This solidarity can be situated in a context of disbelief, as the support described in this article (1) originates from a suspicion of the asylum system itself and (2) unwittingly reproduces the pervasive suspicion towards applicants, which can be found *in* support groups and *through* their support work, as some asylum officers equate 'preparation' with 'falsification'.

The prioritisation of immediate, individual support is central in critiques of solidarity as apolitical, patronizing and exclusionary. Although the LGBTIQ+ support groups criticised some of the constraints of the asylum system, they continued to work *within* this system – instead of against it. Following a decade of supporting SOGI applicants, the LGBTIQ+ organisations I worked with had developed an idea of what the authorities consider to be a credible SOGI narrative and a credible presentation of it: a chronological, detailed and consistent explanation of their sexual orientation, gender identity and fear of persecution. To help the applicants reshape their narrative accordingly, the support group workers and volunteers assumed a double role of sympathetic counsellor and suspicious assessor. In doing this, the organisations paradoxically became new immigration offices (Cesaro, 2021) while the people working there became preliminary judges (Ferreira, 2022). First, there is the limited access to support (and through this to rights) and the way this is characterised by waiting times and selection procedures. Second, the preparation often takes the shape of a rehearsal interview, asking applicants to share intimate stories and subjecting them to questions while examining the chronology, consistency and credibility of what they say. Third, there are the limited ideas about sexual orientation and gender identity that shape LGBTIQ+ support group workers' attitudes and assessments.

However, I contend that a closer analysis of the individual support (and attempts at structural change[17]) reveals its potential to transform the asylum regime. It would be disrespectful and deficient to focus only on the harmful elements of the LGBTIQ+ support groups' work, much of which stems from them being underfunded and overburdened. The support groups improve access to some protection, by critically sharing information about the asylum system. One could argue that by expanding the system wide enough, it might start to include some applicants that would otherwise be excluded: those who never talked about their SOGI, those too nervous to talk about their story, those who do not know the criteria of the Geneva Convention, … Alternatively, LGBTIQ+ support group volunteers could further *reshape their preparation*, so it is no longer oriented towards the asylum authorities' expectations but to recent research recommendations that prioritise the well-foundedness of applicants' fear of persecution instead of the credibility of their sexual orientation and gender identity. This might open up the SOGI refugee category more fundamentally, or even destabilize it. Cabot (2013, p. 453) argues that 'even as they reinforce frameworks of exclusion, aid encounters may give rise to a circumscribed agency. These modes of agency may not be intentional, proactive, or revolutionary in the sense of 'political' action; indeed, they may be better described as a kind of … 'manoeuvring within' … [which] can, however,

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[17] Providing trainings to migration lawyers and in reception centres, establishing a relationship with the authorities that would make it possible to identify, criticise, discuss and resolve flaws in the procedure and their decision making and liaising with the federal reception agency to transfer trans applicants to local reception initiatives.

have powerful effects'. In the end, the applicants remain the central actors deciding to seek out, question, believe and engage with information they receive from others, such as LGBTIQ+ support groups.

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Conflict of interest
The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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