



Suspicion of Truth: a Genealogical Analysis of Credibility Assessments Within Swedish Migration Authorities

RESEARCH

TOBIAS JANSSON 

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the institutionalisation of suspicion within migration control regimes, and more specifically the Swedish migration authorities' practices of credibility assessments from a historical governmentality perspective. Through a genealogical analysis, the article analyses how suspicion towards the credibility of non-citizens' claims has historically been embedded in regulatory documents governing Swedish migration control authorities' permit investigations, linking technologies of government to suspicious states of mind. Taking the present as my starting point, I analyse regulatory documents, such as memorandums and handbooks, produced by Swedish migration authorities between 1938 and 2021. The analysis shows that suspicion towards the credibility of non-citizens' claims is deeply embedded and bureaucratised in contemporary regulatory documents, linked to the standardised practices of credibility assessments and the associated technical and legally oriented tools. Hence, migration officials are led to recurrently question and critically assess the validity of the claims of non-citizens seeking permits, particularly asylum seekers, in search of the objective 'truth' in the case. Furthermore, the analysis shows that different kinds of credibility assessments have been present since the 1930s, and there have been various shifts in their character, as well as the problems and categories of non-citizens targeted by them.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Tobias Jansson

Department of Social Work,
University of Gothenburg,
Sweden

tobias.jansson@socwork.gu.se

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In states across Europe during the 21st century, migration control regimes have been imbued with suspicion targeted towards categories of non-citizens presented as ‘unwanted’ by such states. As these regimes operate as part of a global system of inequality (Borrelli, Lindberg & Wyss 2022), this suspicion is mainly targeted at poor, racialised people, depicted as potential threats towards wealthy states’ security and welfare. Such suspicion is institutionalised through migration law and bureaucratic practices, such as asylum screenings, based on notions of risk, security and criminality (Bohmer & Shuman 2017; Jubany 2017). As a result, as Borrelli, Lindberg and Wyss (2022) argue, suspicion has become the *modus operandi* of European migration control regimes. Within this body of research, the concept of *states of suspicion* (Borrelli, Lindberg & Wyss 2022) has been used to explore this *modus operandi*, relating, on the one hand, to a general state of mind, in which suspicion is (re)produced, and, on the other hand, to the function of suspicion in governmental apparatuses. Departing from this concept, researchers have illustrated how suspicion has been enshrined in contemporary bureaucratic practices, presenting certain, often racialised and poor border crossers as suspicious, risky and unwanted (Affolter 2022; Scheel 2022).

In Sweden, as in many other European countries, such as Germany (Eule 2016), Switzerland (Affolter 2021) and the UK (Jubany 2017), suspicion is clearly institutionalised in credibility assessments in asylum cases. These bureaucratic practices operate in the context of a legal challenge. Asylum decisions are justified on the basis of evidence, similar to other bureaucratic and legal practices, and asylum applicants have the burden of proof and must make their claims probable to be granted asylum. However, they often lack reliable documents and proof to support these claims (Johannesson 2023; Joormann 2019). Against this background and following international guidelines originating from the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees’ Handbook (UNHCR; 2019), asylum decisions are contingent on credibility assessments in countries such as Sweden together with related aspects such as country of origin information (COI) (Joormann 2023).¹ Consequentially, to determine asylum status, migration officials are required to question and assess the truth of the applicants’ claims regarding, for example, identity, country of origin and need for asylum. Hence, migration officials are led to regularly question the truth of asylum-seeking non-citizens’ claims through credibility assessments, implying that these claims might be fraudulent and false.

Previous research on migration bureaucracy presents the argument that, to understand suspicion and administrative practices such as credibility assessments, we need to move beyond individual attributes and attitudes of decision-makers, as well as top-down politics and policies (Affolter 2022; Borrelli, Lindberg & Wyss 2022; Eule 2016). Building upon such a premise, numerous studies have shown how institutionalisations of suspicion in credibility assessments are impacted by political context (see, for example, Affolter 2021; Dahlvik 2018; Jubany 2017). For example, in countries such as the UK, suspicion has been legitimised by widespread political assumptions that large numbers of asylum claims are false and economically motivated (Souter 2011). However, as Affolter (2022) argues, we must also pay attention to how suspicion becomes routinised and materially embedded in migration

¹ Country of origin information refers to information on the countries from which asylum seekers originate, deemed relevant for decision-makers in asylum cases (Joormann 2023).

bureaucracies to understand how suspicion has become a ‘self-evident (and largely unreflected) guiding principle of decision-makers’ everyday practice’ (Affolter 2022: 1,072). Taking this premise as its starting point, this article focuses on how suspicion of credibility has been materially embedded through regulatory documents in the Swedish migration bureaucracy.

The Swedish setting is interesting, as the country has a long history of bureaucratic governance based on an ideology of scientific rationality and the assumption that its bureaucracies implement policies objectively and rationally (Burrell & Schweyher 2021). As both Johannesson (2017; 2023) and Hedlund (2017) show, such governance also characterises the contemporary Swedish practice of credibility assessments. Through legal language and by referring to material objects, such as COI reports – produced or complied with by the Country Information Unit within the Swedish Migration Agency – and legal casefiles, migration officials and Swedish Migration Court² judges recurrently signal that the assessments are founded on legal facts, objectivity, probability and rationality. However, the assessments presuppose and mobilise suspicion, as these professionals must regularly question asylum-seeking non-citizens’ credibility. Hence, in contemporary times, suspicion of credibility is materially embedded in the Swedish migration bureaucracy through legally oriented objects and routines. But how novel is this material embeddedness of suspicion? Guided by this question, this article contributes to the research on states of suspicion and migration bureaucracy, particularly in the Swedish setting, by problematising practices of credibility assessments from a historical governmentality perspective; this means a focus on how suspicious states of mind have been embedded in technologies of government, meaning institutionalised practices that lead people to certain behaviours (Foucault 2000).

More concretely, I conduct a genealogical analysis concerning how suspicion of credibility concerning non-citizens’ claims has been embedded in regulatory documents governing Swedish migration control authorities’ permit investigations historically. The study’s empirical data consist of 37 regulatory documents, such as instructions and handbooks, produced by Swedish migration authorities between 1938, when the first centralised migration unit was established, and 2021, when the study’s data collection was carried out. I adopt the theoretical concepts of *problem representations* and *technologies of government* in the analysis and, in a genealogical exercise, trace the constructions of problems and interventions that make contemporary credibility assessments possible back to the mid-20th century. However, my analysis also illustrates similarities and shifts in the character of these interventions, and the problems they seek to address, over time.

The first section contextualises the study by giving a historical account in relation to Swedish migration authorities. Then, the material and analytical framework guiding the analysis is described. In the sections following this I present the results of my analysis. In line with a genealogical analysis, I take the present as the starting point (Foucault 1998) and then move back in time to trace connections to past practices that make present governing possible. Finally, I discuss how historical and contemporary credibility assessments relate to each other.

² In Sweden, Migration Courts are special units at the largest administrative courts, functioning as second-instance decision-makers in asylum cases.

Historically, at least until the pivot toward implementing a “minimum-level” policy of refugee rights in 2016 (see, e.g., [Abdelhady, Gren & Joormann 2020](#)), Sweden had been seen as a country that defends human rights, with a relatively generous asylum policy and an inclusive welfare system compared with many other European countries ([Barker 2018](#); [Dahlstedt & Neergaard 2019](#)). However, Swedish migration control regimes also have a long history of bureaucratic violence ([Gren, Abdelhady & Joormann 2024](#)) targeted at, among others, Jewish and Roma non-citizens, whose rights and freedoms have been curtailed ([Abdelhady, Gren & Joormann 2020](#)). Such violence occurred, for example, through the first Swedish centralised migration unit – *Utlänningsbyrå* [Foreigners’ Bureau (FB)] – which was established within the National Board of Health and Welfare in 1938 ([Kvist Geverts 2008](#)). The unit was to enable coherent migration control, taking over administrative responsibilities previously spread across different authorities, including decision-making in permit cases. In 1944, against the background of political concerns over a potential increase in immigration to Sweden, FB was reorganised into a new and separate authority: *Statens Utlänningskommission* [State Commission for Foreigners (SCF)]. The founding of both FB and SCF took shape within nationalistic and protectionist discourses on immigration, with immigration policies aiming to protect labour and housing markets from foreign competition, as well as public order and national security ([Byström & Frohnert 2013](#); [Mörkenstam 2006](#)). After World War II, SCF’s mission was still embedded in nationally oriented discourses and policies ([Mörkenstam 2010](#)) but, following markedly increased labour market needs and political demands regarding human rights, the authority was now to allow immigration to an increased extent. Policy changes strengthened the right to asylum in the country and exempted Nordic citizens from permit requirements, while most non-Nordic citizens were exempted from visa requirements and allowed to apply for work permits after entry. However, SCF was still supposed to ensure that non-Nordic citizens residing in the country adapted to a Swedish order.

After a period of relatively free migration to Sweden from the early 1950s, there was a shift in the Swedish immigration policies in the mid-1960s to bring about regulated immigration, with requirements for job-seeking non-Nordic citizens to obtain work permits prior to entry. Hence, migration officials were to control non-Nordic labour migration more strictly. The shift was also motivated by a public discourse about a rise in unemployment and homelessness among job-seeking non-Nordic citizens in the country, for example, from Greece and Yugoslavia. The restrictive policies were depicted as necessary to enable social-democratic pursuit of equality, in terms of achieving similarities in standards of living between Swedish and non-Nordic citizens residing in the country – who were now viewed as immigrants by state authorities – as well as their adaptation to Swedish society ([Hammar 1985](#)). Thus, there was a renewed political focus on protecting the Swedish labour market from foreign competition in the 1960s, but now in the context of a discourse of equality ([Mörkenstam 2010](#)).

In 1969, the Swedish migration authority was reorganised into *Statens Invandrarverk* [National Board of Immigration and Naturalisation (NBIN)] and made responsible for permit cases but also citizenship and integration issues. During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a shift from labour to family and refugee migration to Sweden, entailing an increase in movements from countries outside of Europe, such as Iran, Syria and Somalia ([Hammar 1985](#)). This shift followed from economic crises, diminishing labour

market needs and a change in praxis in 1972, with a complete halt to non-Nordic labour migration, together with a political consensus to have generous refugee and family reunification policies, founded on discourses of human rights (Johansson 2005). However, there was also increasing political resistance to the perceived generosity of these policies among right-wing parties, linked to notions of asylum seekers being ‘bogus’ refugees. Against this background and bureaucratic rationalisation ambitions, new control practices were introduced, such as body searches and asylum investigation facilities, to ensure that asylum was only granted to people with a ‘real’ need for protection. During the 1990s, with economic crises, growing anti-immigrant sentiment and Sweden’s entry into the European Union (EU), the focus on controlling non-European asylum seekers in the union’s member states increased, as part of an EU drive to prevent illegal immigration (Huysmans 2006).

The focus on investigating asylum seekers remained after 2000, when NBIN was renamed *Migrationsverket* [Swedish Migration Agency (SMA)]. Following the 9/11 attacks and Sweden’s joining the Schengen Area in 2001, such a focus was also embedded in high-tech joint information and control systems, such as Eurodac (a database within EU for storing, processing and comparing fingerprints from asylum seekers and non-European citizens encountered at the EU’s external borders) and Schengen Information System (an information sharing system for security and border management in Europe). In 2006, the work of SMA was then restructured into a more legal order, following the introduction of the Migration Courts, responsible for reviewing SMA’s asylum decisions and re-assessing applicants’ credibility (Johannesson 2017). Lastly, there was a drastic shift in Swedish immigration policy after the so-called refugee crisis in 2015, with the introduction of strict rules for asylum, family reunifications and permanent residence permits. The shift was enacted to reduce the number of people seeking asylum in Sweden and reflected a welfare-chauvinistic discourse, in which the Swedish welfare state was depicted as reserved for national citizens, with asylum seekers seen as threats to Swedish order, welfare and security (Barker 2018). Hence, the current Swedish migration bureaucracy is strongly focused on investigating, questioning and regulating the stay of non-European asylum seekers, within a legal order.

MATERIALS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

In this study, the analytical framework departs from a Foucauldian governmentality perspective and genealogical approach to history. The genealogical approach involves taking the present as its focal point and seeking to critically examine contemporary forms of governing by drawing on historical events (Foucault 1998). Drawing on ‘practical texts’, written for the purpose of offering rules and guidelines for conduct, the idea is to illustrate how the past is present in the present time but also how certain aspects of the past have been shifted to the periphery. Hence, by analysing the past, it is possible to destabilise and question ways of thinking in the present that have been taken for granted. Furthermore, a founding assumption of genealogy is that governing, for example related to credibility assessments, is contingent on historical processes during which certain categories of people are made out to be problematic and in need of interventions (Foucault 1998). Following such problematisations, different means of governing are constructed, establishing historical connections between particular ways of thinking and doing that enable present distinctions and actions, which is of interest in the genealogical analysis.

This article is based on empirical material comprising regulatory documents with guidelines for Swedish migration officials' investigations in permit cases, thus governing the Swedish migration control authorities' permit investigations. The texts were produced by such authorities between 1938, when FB was established, and 2021, when the empirical data were collected as part of a larger research project, focused on the right to stay in Sweden from a historical perspective (Jansson 2023). The texts were selected to allow for a tracing of institutionalised suspicion of credibility from the establishment of the first Swedish migration authority to the present. The data consist of 37 bureaucratic documents, mainly stored in the Swedish National Archives, including nine memorandums and one instruction from the 1930s and 1940s; one memorandum, four instructions, one government decree and two circular letters from the 1950s and 1960s; two instructions and two handbooks from the 1970s; four instructions and two handbooks from the 1980s and 1990s; and nine legal opinions and two handbooks from around the early 2020s. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the selection of texts were that they (1) contained guidelines for permit investigations (105 texts) and (2) addressed the need to question non-citizens' claims during the investigative work (37 texts). Hence, the empirical data analysed in this article contain guidelines leading migration officials to mobilise suspicion of credibility. However, the character of the texts differs over time. Texts from the 1930s to the 1960s are generally concise (1–10 pages) and provide guidelines for delimited parts of permit investigations, for example, decisions in visa cases. In comparison, later texts are generally more extensive and detailed and come in the form of manuals and legal statements, supported by legal sources such as preparatory legal texts and precedents.

Further addressing the use of regulatory texts as empirical sources, such texts are important for the decision-making of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980), such as migration officials, as they guide the implementing of government policy in direct contact with members of the public. Furthermore, as Hull (2012) argues, such documents enable state interventions and control, as they are material artefacts that turn certain norms and classification schemes, with boundaries between different categories of people, into fixed bureaucratic objects. Hence, relating back to genealogy, it is possible to argue that regulatory documents produce, establish and circulate problematisations of certain categories of people, making interventions and governing within the state possible. While this type of data does not primarily provide insights into the justifications for migration control practices, as policy documents can, or into the impact of these guidelines on factual practices, they provide insights concerning how suspicion of credibility has been bureaucratised within the Swedish state over time.

To operationalise the genealogical approach, I make use of two theoretical concepts from the governmentality toolbox: *problem representations* and *technologies of government*. In governmentality studies, the concept of problem representations refers to the problematisation of objects produced through politics, underpinned by discourses that establish boundaries for our way of thinking and acting (Bacchi 2012). As Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) argue, it is only when something or someone is made out to be a problem within the state that it is also possible to direct state interventions against it or them. Hence, problem representations make governing possible by constituting governable objects within the framework of specific discourses. Methodologically, problem representations can be identified by taking any proposal of politics and deducing how they produce certain 'problems', based on the simple

premise that a proposal always indicates what people think the problem in need of change is (Bacchi 2012). The aim is then to critically examine the assumptions that make the problem plausible to understand ‘how and why certain things (behaviour, phenomena, processes) became a problem’ (Foucault 2001: 171). In turn, technologies of government are institutionalised practices, consisting of assemblages of various forms of thinking and practices, aiming to produce certain behaviours in the governed (Foucault 2000). Thus, the analysis of such technologies means a focus on the interventions made possible by different problem representations, which in this study are coupled with suspicious states of mind. In the analysis, I discuss technologies of verification (Robertson 2009) more closely, referring to practices focused on the comparison of theories or facts to ‘reality’. As Robertson (2009) argues, these technologies draw on bureaucratic rationality and involve standards of objectivity with which to compare objects, which at the same time produces the verifiable standards and objects the technologies require, for example, in terms of credibility. Hence, technologies of verification can be understood as making suspicion of credibility both plausible and governable.

The analysis was conducted by first examining the regulatory documents on credibility assessments from the early 2020s, focusing on problem representations and subsequent technologies of government that entailed suspicion of credibility. More concretely, I identified proposals in the documents that reflected suspicion, defined as presupposing that ‘someone is guilty of an illegal, dishonest, or unpleasant action’ (Oxford dictionary, cited in Borrelli 2022: 4), here with regard to the credibility of applicants’ claims. On the basis of these proposals, I deduced what was made out to be problems and analysed their conceptual premises and the interventions made possible by them. The next step was to trace the material embedding of suspicion of credibility back in time. This was done by identifying proposals that reflected suspicion concerning the credibility of applicants’ claims in selected historical texts and analysing their associated problem representations and technologies of government. Through the analysis, it was possible to identify connections between historical and contemporary practices of credibility assessments, as well as shifts in the constructions of problems and interventions over time.

RESULTS

STANDARDISED SUSPICION: THE EARLY 2020S

Within the contemporary Swedish migration control regime, SMA’s credibility assessments are most notably practised in asylum cases. The regulatory documents governing such assessments were produced in a political context characterised by welfarechauvinistic and anti-immigrant discourses, within which asylum seekers – primarily denoting poor non-European citizens – were linked to notions of abusing the asylum system, welfare dependency and fraud (Barker 2018; Huysmans 2006). However, such discourses are not particularly prominent in the regulatory documents, which are instead formulated in a distinct bureaucratic and legal style, in which guidelines are presented as objective facts, underpinned by recurrent references to legal sources. In the primary guidance for staff within SMA, in the approximately 1,500-page-long handbook for migration cases (2018), such guidelines are provided for credibility assessments. Here, it is stated that migration officials must make an overall assessment based on ‘the information that appears in the case, i.e. the applicant’s own story together with what is generally known about the conditions in the home

country' (no paginations).³ It is also stressed that 'the burden of proof lies with the asylum seeker', making it necessary for asylum-seeking non-citizens to substantiate their claims to gain asylum. Furthermore, the guidelines are substantiated by legal references to both preparatory work for Swedish immigration policy and international guidelines provided by UNHCR. For example, concerning asylum seekers' burden of proof, the UNHCR's handbook is directly quoted, and it is stated that, while 'the burden of proof thus lies in principle with the applicant, the obligation to ascertain and evaluate all relevant facts is shared between the applicant and the investigator'. In the following section, substantiated by the UNHCR's reasoning, SMA establishes that it 'is therefore the asylum seeker who must provide a credible and reasonable account of the need for international protection', while SMA 'is responsible for ensuring that this is sufficiently investigated'. Hence, following these guidelines, migration officials are obliged to examine, evaluate and question the credibility of applicants' claims, to make their overall assessments and ensure that they fulfil the authority's investigative responsibility. These guidelines are illustrative of how suspicion of credibility is embedded and standardised within the contemporary regulatory documents, reflecting an assumed problem that the truth of asylum seekers' claims cannot be taken at face value. Following recurrent legal references and language use, this problem representation is underpinned by a legal discourse, incorporating and standardising suspicion of credibility in legal and seemingly rational decision-making.

The standardisation of suspicion of credibility, based on problematisations of asylum seekers' truthfulness, reoccurs throughout contemporary regulatory documents. An illustrative example of this, which also shows how such suspicion is linked to a legal discourse and an extensive assemblage of technologies, is reflected in the form of a 10-page legal opinion concerning identity investigations in asylum cases. Legal opinions can be understood as expert statements from SMA (Johannesson 2017), with legally based analyses and guidelines on how a policy should be interpreted, that guide migration officials. In the legal opinion on identity investigations in asylum cases, officials are directed towards closely examining asylum seekers' identity claims, using different technological means:

If the applicant cannot prove or make his identity probable through identity documents, we may use other methods to investigate the identity and residence, e.g. verbal investigation, knowledge test, language analysis and information from reference files. The applicant's story must then be evaluated together with other evidence. [...] In order for a verbal story to be judged to be credible, it is required that the information is coherent and clear, detailed, unchanged, and reasonable. It must not be contradictory, unless there are reasonable explanations for the contradictions, or contradict generally known facts (Swedish Migration Agency 2021: 3).

As illustrated in the quote, migration officials are directed to use a set of standardised tools, such as knowledge tests and language analysis, in their credibility assessments to enable a rational comparison of applicants' stories to formalised standards. Hence, in this legal discourse, it is assumed that credibility can be discerned by rationally evaluating the logic of asylum seekers' claims and comparing them with 'generally known facts'. Asylum-seeking non-citizens are once again problematised as and made out to be potentially untrustworthy subjects who provide incoherent, unclear

³ All translations from Swedish are my own, with the aim of remaining as close as possible to the original sources.

and contradictory information. This problem representation is established and circulated through the material object of the legal opinion, in which it is also stated that migration officials must 'take into account whether the applicant has made an honest attempt to substantiate his story through written evidence' ([Swedish Migration Agency 2021: 3](#)). Thus, contributing to the problematisation, applicants are also made out to be passive and presented as not honestly contributing to the investigation. Such a problem representation makes standardised and impersonal technologies of verification possible, as they are understood as enabling these rational comparisons, but it also links them to a suspicious state of mind. Furthermore, as shown by other authors, such technologies do not merely make the discovery of untruth possible but can also actively generate it (see, e.g., [Affolter 2021](#); [Dahlvik 2018](#)), as applicants' claims are put under intense scrutiny. Hence, by materially embedding the problematisation of asylum seekers' trustworthiness in the legal opinion, migration officials are directed to use a set of technologies to assess credibility that can potentially produce untruth. In summary, we can see how suspicion towards credibility is materially embedded, standardised and legally coded into SMA's contemporary regulatory documents, appearing as necessary for migration officials to provide legal and rational assessments.

LOCAL PRACTICES OF SUSPICION: 1930–1960S

It is possible to trace how suspicion of credibility has been materially embedded in practices of credibility assessments all the way back to the regulatory documents produced by FB, the first Swedish migration unit. However, there are distinct shifts over time, concerning both the problems and the technical means to which this suspicion was linked. The documents from the 1930s and 1940s were produced within the context of World War II, and Swedish immigration policies were characterised by nationalist and protectionist assumptions. The texts mainly consist of short memorandums (around 1–10 pages) on delimited administrative issues, such as visa cases. Some texts are written in a bureaucratic style with seemingly objective guidelines for migration officials, similar to contemporary texts, albeit more concise and less firmly grounded in legal sources. Others provide general guidelines for the decision-making in permit cases, based on bureaucratic and political reasons. In the texts, suspicion of credibility was neither embedded in any standardised credibility assessments nor distinctly focused on the truth of asylum claims, even though suspicion, especially towards Jewish refugees (see [Kvist Geverts 2008](#)), was likely present within the Swedish migration authority. As stated in a memorandum on the granting of visa and residence permits, an 'alien does not in any way need to try to prove that he is a refugee' ([Foreigners' Bureau 1940](#), no paginations) to be granted a permit. Instead, as described in a later memorandum from 1946, decisions were to be based on 'the applicant's and his interested parties' own information' ([State Commission for Foreigners 1946](#), no paginations) as well as any 'statements from objective persons [such as Swedish officials or citizens with personal knowledge regarding the applicant] about the credibility of the statements'. This approach, with low requirements for evidence, was justified by perceived 'practical difficulties in obtaining satisfactory investigation or evidence' and 'the importance of satisfying the strong humanitarian demands in the majority of [asylum] cases', which made it 'necessary to take the risk of occasional failures'. The latter refers to the risk of granting asylum to applicants without genuine asylum claims. Thus, justified by bureaucratic and humanitarian reasons, migration officials were directed to mainly

base their decisions on information provided by the applicants rather than suspicion, in sharp contrast to contemporary times.

Meanwhile, in the texts from the 1930s and 1940s, suspicion of credibility can be more clearly identified in memorandums concerning visa and residence cases. The suspicion was that permit-seeking non-Nordic citizens (Nordic citizens were exempted from permit requirements) potentially concealed immigration motives. As explicated in a memorandum setting out principles for the treatment of entry cases, this suspicion was based on an assumption that applicants seldom stated such intentions, while many applicants' 'personal circumstances and the circumstances in general indicate that future residence is likely intended' ([State Commission for Foreigners 1946](#), no paginations). Against the background of SCF perceiving an 'incipient immigration pressure towards Sweden' after World War II, officials were therefore directed to closely examine applicants' reasons for travelling to Sweden to ensure 'effective immigration control'. Hence, founded on bureaucratic and political ambitions for immigration control, suspecting the credibility of visa-seeking non-Nordic citizens' intentions was embedded in SCF's general principles. This suspicion was also expanded upon in a memorandum on visa cases, which emphasised that Swedish consulates were to refer potential immigration cases to SCF and requested that applicants give motivations and exhaustive accounts of their current and previous lives:

Often, when applying for an entry permit, a foreigner tries to conceal his intention to later remain in Sweden, under the justification that the trip concerns a visit to relatives or friends or only a business trip. An examination of the person's family circumstances and living conditions in general should in many cases provide good guidance when assessing the applicant's intentions. The importance of trying to find out whether there is an immigration case as early as possible cannot be emphasised enough ([State Commission for Foreigners 1947](#), no paginations).

As illustrated in the quote, migration officials were directed to closely examine applicants' family and living conditions to discern the applicant's true intentions, presupposing suspicion concerning the credibility of applicants' claimed intentions. Here, the examination was assumed to enable a rational and empirically grounded assessment of the 'truth' of applicants' claims, justified by SCF's assumed knowledge about non-Nordic citizens' behaviours. Hence, suspicion was embedded in the memorandum, based on a problematisation of these citizens' trustworthiness, and legitimised by the authority of SCF. Furthermore, the stressed 'importance' of trying to identify such cases in the text can be seen as reflecting the previously mentioned bureaucratic and political ambition of achieving effective immigration control. This ambition related to nationalist and protectionist discourses on immigration, including classed assumptions that immigration from countries with lower wages and living standards could negatively affect Swedish citizens' jobs and safety ([SOU 1945:1](#)). Hence, the problem representation rests on a notion that non-Nordic citizens could circumvent SCF's immigration control by concealing their intentions to immigrate and thus threaten Swedish citizens' welfare and security. Following the problem representation, suspicion of credibility was linked to a technology of examination, in which officials were to question applicants' claims. However, this suspicion was only activated in cases perceived as potential immigration cases by Swedish consulates, and was thus dependent on what Robertson ([2009](#)) has described as personal and

local practices of verification – that is, practices in which the assessment of ‘truth’ was dependent on the discretion, trust and assumptions of officials, rather than a standardised and impersonal search for (un)truth.

From the 1950s to the 1960s, documents addressed issues such as the control of non-Nordic citizens’ entries and exits due to exemptions from visa requirements as well as the conditions for work and permanent residence. While these documents provided guidelines for migration control, suspicion of credibility was not clearly embedded in them. It can be assumed that this lack of suspicion was related to the liberal regulation of immigration between the 1950s and mid-1960s and political discourses in which labour immigration was depicted as necessary to meet labour shortages (Mörkenstam 2010). SCF would thus allow immigration to an increased extent, which entailed less focus on effective immigration control and, at least in the documents, suspicion of credibility.

STANDARDISATION OF SUSPICION: 1970S–1990S

There was a renewed focus on immigration control and suspicion of credibility in the texts from the 1970s, as migration officials were once again directed to search for potentially hidden immigration intentions in visa cases. These regulatory documents were produced by the new migration authority SIV in the context of stricter regulation of non-Nordic labour migration to enable regulated immigration and ensure welfare for both Swedish citizens and immigrants. As in earlier decades, the documents were written in an objective and bureaucratic style, and many of them consist of short memorandums. However, there were now also handbooks running to tens of pages that collected guidelines and descriptions of praxis in different case types, making the administrative work appear more coherent and standardised. One such handbook on permits for visits introduced suspicion of credibility by stating that officials should only grant permits for up to 3 months if the person was of working age and should always be alert to possible immigration intentions:

If the circumstances are such that NBIN does not consider itself able to give credence to the information that it is a visit for a limited time, the application should be examined on the basis that it concerns settlement. If a person of working age applies for [residence permit] for a longer period of time, it may be appropriate to ask the applicant what kind of work he has in his home country that allows such long leave. If it then turns out that the applicant in his home country is unemployed and without means of support, this may be a circumstance which means that one cannot place trust in him voluntarily leaving the country (National Board of Immigration and Naturalization 1973: 2).

The example shows how migration officials were led to be suspicious of non-Nordic citizens, particularly those of working age, who were assumed to be potentially hiding economically motivated immigration intentions. The suspicion drew on NBIN’s expert knowledge and reflected an assumed problem that poor, non-Nordic citizens in particular were untrustworthy and potentially trying to circumvent restrictive immigration policies meant to protect national welfare. This classed problem representation enabled a personal technology of verification enshrined with suspicion in visit cases, in which migration officials were always to be alert to potential immigration, particularly in relation to applicants of working age. However, closer

examinations and/or decisions based on suspicion were still contingent on migration officials' discretion.

In the late 1970s, suspicion of hidden immigration intentions became further embedded through memorandums and handbooks, and even standardised in relation to marriage cases. Concretely, the standardisation applied to cases of 'fast attachments' – non-Nordic citizens who applied for a residence permit on the grounds that they were married to/cohabitating with a partner living in Sweden whom they had recently met. A memorandum established that officials were to use a new technology of government in these cases, called deferred immigration examinations, which entailed making a final decision after 2 years, instead of 1 year as in regular attachment cases ([National Board of Immigration and Naturalization 1977a](#)). Furthermore, officials were provided with standard decision formulations to use in these cases: 'it appears that A's marriage was arranged to enable him to obtain the required residence permit' ([National Board of Immigration and Naturalization 1977b: 6](#)). Hence, deferred immigration examinations were shaped as a standardised, rather than local, practice of verification ([Robertson 2009](#)), in which applicants' private relationships were turned into evidence. This standardised procedure was justified by reference to a discussion among NBIN's board, regarding 'the increased problems inherent in the granting of permits due to attachments in the form of cohabitation or marriage' (no paginations). It was stated that 4,000 permits were granted for these reasons in 1976, with an explicit suspicion that a fast attachment could be 'a sham relationship or a temporary relationship' to enable claims for residence permits. Hence, it was implied that applicants could circumvent restrictive immigration policies, meant to protect national welfare, through marriage, which was a theme within immigration discourse at the time, including in other countries, such as the Netherlands ([Bonjour & De Hart 2013](#)). Following the memorandum and drawing on NBIN's authority, migration officials were thus directed to recurrently question the authenticity of fast attachments, reflecting an assumed problem that non-Nordic citizens were potentially deceitful and threatening to nationally oriented ambitions regarding immigration control. Hence, enabled by this problem representation, suspicion of credibility became routinised through the deferred immigration examinations, and circulated through handbooks within NBIN, becoming a more natural part of migration officials' everyday life.

In NBIN's 1980s and 1990s regulatory texts, suspicion of credibility became increasingly noticeable and standardised, especially in relation to asylum seekers. These texts were formulated in the context of economic unrest in Sweden, political pressure to limit immigration and widespread notions of asylum seekers being 'bogus' refugees ([Johansson 2005](#)). They also followed the introduction of requirements that all residence permits must be granted prior to entry, except in asylum cases, and the introduction of technologies such as body searches, identity detentions and the 'first country of asylum' principle. These interventions were introduced to make immigration control more effective and ensure that asylum was only granted to people with a 'real' need for protection while limiting the immigration routes to Sweden. Against this background, NBIN's regulatory documents reflect an increased standardisation of suspicion of credibility, embedded in manuals hundreds of pages long, with recurring references to preparatory legal texts and international guidelines, for example, from the UNHCR. In NBIN's (1995) handbook on permit cases, credibility assessments were now named as specific practices in asylum cases, used to assess the validity of asylum seekers' claims. Suspicion of credibility was taken for granted

in the text, which declared, ‘remember that the asylum regulations are to be applied in a generous spirit, although this presupposes that the applicant’s information forming the basis for the assessment appears to be reasonable and generally credible’ (section 9.1). Hence, migration officials were led to recurrently question the validity of asylum claims in the standardised credibility assessments. While the procedure of this practice was not clearly described in the handbook, it was linked to routines for verbal interviews, which officials were to conduct in asylum cases, as addressed in a short appendix:

- To prepare carefully for the interrogation:
 - read through the written story
 - prepare concrete questions, among other things based on the written story
 - verify information in country folders etc.
 - also verify travel routes using maps and timetables
 - use a UV [ultraviolet] lamp to check if submitted documents are counterfeit

([National Board of Immigration and Naturalization 1992](#), no paginations)

The quote is one example of how suspicion was routinised during the 1980s and 1990s, as officials were instructed to recurrently conduct a cross-examination of sorts and question asylum seekers’ claims, both verbally and using country folders, timetables and UV lamps.⁴⁵ Here, suspicion of credibility was embedded in an assemblage of impersonal and standardised verification technologies ([Robertson 2009](#)), through which officials were to objectively compare and ‘verify information’ with external facts, including NBIN’s country information and travel routes. Hence, the ability to provide information that matched these external facts was presented as a standard of credibility, which at the same time presupposed suspicion towards the credibility of this information. Following this standardisation, suspicion was to operate as a guiding principle in migration officials’ credibility assessments, regardless of their personal opinions and attitudes. The standardisation reflected a problem representation that (non-European) asylum seekers were an untrustworthy, and potentially fraudulent, category of people, enabling technologies with a basically inquisitorial design. This representation related to immigration discourses at the time, in which mainly poor, non-European, asylum seekers were suspected to be ‘bogus’ refugees, abusing the asylum system for economic reasons, and perceived as threatening to both national welfare and security ([Johansson 2005](#)). While such suspicions were only implied in the material, the appendix is an example of how problematisations of asylum seekers were translated into bureaucratic objects ([Hull 2012](#)) during the 1980s and 1990s, enabling standardised governing based on suspicion of credibility. Such governing has a clear connection to the present, since suspicions focused on the credibility of asylum seekers, in both periods, has been routinised, justified by an ambition to effectively control narrow immigration routes to Sweden.

⁴ Country folders contain information about the conditions in the stated country of origin.

⁵ UV lamps are used to control the authenticity of documents, such as passports, which are produced with covert marks or patterns only visible under ultraviolet light to counter counterfeiting.

This article has engaged with the Swedish migration authorities' practices of credibility assessments from a historical governmentality perspective. Taking the present as the point of departure, the analysis has shown that suspicion of credibility is embedded in legally oriented regulatory documents of contemporary times. This embedment is based on problematisations of asylum seekers' trustworthiness and enables an assemblage of standardised technologies, such as credibility assessments and associated language and knowledge tests. Through a genealogical exercise, the analysis then showed both continuities and shifts in the problem representations on which institutionalisations of suspicion concerning credibility have been founded and the technologies to which they have been linked. Regarding continuity, migration officials have recurrently been led towards suspecting credibility in permit investigations, on the basis of representations of applicants as untruthful subjects who try to circumvent immigration regulations by either concealing information and/or providing false information. Such concern was directed towards non-Nordic visa cases in the 1940s and likewise in the 1970s, with its increased emphasis on family reunification cases, and then in the late 20th century towards asylum cases. Hence, while the targets of suspicion have shifted over time, the analysis identifies a recurrent style of problem representations underpinning the material embedding of suspicion in historical and contemporary practices of credibility assessments – that is, that non-citizens subject to immigration regulations will try to hide their true intentions to further their possibilities of staying in the country, thus threatening ambitions of immigration control. Furthermore, such representations have recurrently been underpinned by nationally oriented discourses on immigration, in which effective immigration controls have been assumed to be necessary to protect national welfare and security from, in particular, poor non-citizens (Bonjour & De Hart 2013; Mörkenstam 2006, 2010). At the present time, such assumptions are prominent in welfare-chauvinistic, neo-liberal and anti-immigrant discourses, in which poor non-European asylum seekers have recurrently been assumed to threaten immigration control ambitions (Barker 2018). Thus, the analysis illustrates how the material embedding of suspicion in contemporary Swedish credibility assessments draws on historically sedimented problematisations of, in particular, poor non-citizens' untruthfulness, which is assumed to hinder effective immigration control.

Furthermore, the analysis shows shifts in the technical means to which institutionalised suspicions of credibility have been linked, in relation to practices of credibility assessments. As the analysis regarding the 1930s and 1940s and the early 1970s shows, suspicion of credibility was made contingent on migration officials' local verification practices and discretion, as applicants' claims were only to be questioned when officials suspected potential immigration. At these times, suspicion of credibility was sporadically embedded in the regulatory document, and justified by the migration authority's expertise. This sporadic, local and discretionary character of embedment differs from the material embedment since the late 1970s, from which time suspicion has been linked to legally oriented and standardised technologies of verification, such as formal credibility assessments. Given these technologies, migration officials are directed to recurrently be suspicious of applicants' claims and critically scrutinise them to enable seemingly rational assessments of their validity. This movement towards standardisation reflects an organisational trend within street-level bureaucracies since the late 20th century, in which authority is shifted from practitioner discretion to practice defined by statutes and manuals (Evans &

Harris 2004). In contrast to discretion, standardised technologies naturalise and embed politically engrained ways of thinking and doing in seemingly apolitical and technical solutions, drawing on notions of rationality and objectivity (Timmermans & Epstein 2010). Hence, as suspicion of credibility has been materially embedded in standardised, rather than local, technologies of verification in credibility assessments, we can better understand how suspicion has been made into a guiding principle for migration officials in contemporary times (Affolter 2022). Moreover, regarding the nature of standardisation, it can be argued that this also obfuscates assumptions that underpin credibility assessments under the guise of objectivity, such as problematisations of poor non-European asylum seekers' trustworthiness.

Lastly, the genealogical approach makes it possible to destabilise and question ways of thinking in the present that have been taken for granted by showing how these ways of thinking are not natural and necessary. In addition to showing shifts in how suspicion has been materially embedded over time, the analysis shows a significant shift between the early 20th century and contemporary times concerning how the credibility of asylum claims is approached. In the regulatory documents from the 1930s and 1940s, migration officials were not required to demand proof of asylum claims and critically scrutinise them owing to challenges in securing evidence in the country of origin and to strong humanitarian concerns. Meanwhile, even though there are still challenges in securing evidence in contemporary times, such requirements are now deeply embedded in regulatory documents, in which 'credibility' is constructed as a comparable, objective and legal 'fact'. Hence, while the legal challenge of proving asylum claims has occurred at different times, the importance of securing evidence has shifted from a humanitarian to a legally justified approach, in which, as Johannesson (2023) shows, credibility assessments are depicted as objective, rational and legitimate. In light of history, it can be argued that interests of evidence now take precedence over humanitarian interests, which underpins contemporary states of suspicion. In summary, as the article shows, the contemporary institutionalisation of suspicion, in credibility assessments, is not inevitable but rather is dependent on historical shifts and events, during which assumptions have been established – and are also open to future shifts.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Tobias Jansson is a social worker with a PhD in Social Work from the University of Gothenburg. His research concerns social work, immigration and integration policy, constructions of social problems and processes of inclusion and exclusion in the welfare state. Tobias also has a particular focus on critical theoretical perspectives and research methods.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Tobias Jansson  orcid.org/0009-0006-4461-6212
Department of Social Work, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Jansson
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