

'If they are
genuine
refugees,
why?'

Public attitudes to
unauthorised arrivals in
Australia

A review of the evidence for
the Victorian Foundation for
Survivors of Torture

by Harriet McHugh-Dillon

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'If they are genuine refugees, why?' Public attitudes to unauthorised arrivals in Australia. Written for the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture by Harriet McHugh-Dillon © April 2015.

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Introduction

In April 1976, the first fishing boat carrying asylum seekers to Australia sailed into Darwin with five Vietnamese men on board. Since then, opinion polls have indicated overwhelmingly negative public attitudes towards unauthorised arrivals and high levels of support for punitive policies towards them (Upton, 2015; Betts, 2001). The polls sometimes hint at the reasons behind these attitudes – for example, they chart a spike in hostility towards boat arrivals shortly after the 9/11 attacks, suggesting that many people may have associated asylum seekers with terrorism (Upton, 2015). In general, however, the polls are silent on *why* certain attitudes or beliefs about asylum seekers are widespread.

This paper explores the research that probes the basis for public attitudes towards unauthorised arrivals. Many of the studies discussed here are conducted in the field of psychology, particularly social and community psychology. Many used quantitative surveys to determine levels of negative attitudes and identify specific attitudes towards asylum seekers, while some also allowed participants to write open-ended comments explaining their views about and feelings towards unauthorised arrivals, providing rich qualitative data. The sampling methods also vary: while some studies used university students, others used random sampling within specific communities (such as Perth, the state of Western Australia, or Port Augusta in South Australia); others sought to use a representative sample from all states.

This paper begins by exploring the beliefs and concerns about unauthorised arrivals expressed by members of the public, which form the basis of negative attitudes. Negative attitudes are most commonly expressed in terms of indignation at perceived violations of fairness and justice by unauthorised arrivals. Concerns about asylum seekers' perceived 'illegality' – related to fairness and views of asylum seekers' character – also consistently ranked highly. Studies also identified fears that asylum seekers pose a threat to jobs and resources as well as an existential threat to Australian values, customs and national identity.

The second section reviews the factors that are known or believed to be associated with negative attitudes, examining the evidence for each. These include individual-level factors such as personality traits, emotions and knowledge of asylum seeking issues, along with social phenomena such as demographics, social norms and racism.

This leads to a discussion of what is known about the impacts of external sources on individuals' attitudes. In particular, the role of the media, political rhetoric and personal contact with refugees is examined. While the media has been

identified as the most important source of information about unauthorised arrivals, the jury is out on whether it plays a greater role in shaping, or merely reflecting, public attitudes; the same can be said of the influence of politicians' statements. Personal contact often improves attitudes; however, in certain circumstances it has been found to result in more negative attitudes.

A final section reviews what is known about how attitudes towards asylum seekers who arrive by boat compare to public sentiment towards other relevant groups: asylum seekers who arrive by air; refugees resettled under the official humanitarian program; and migrants in general. The paper concludes with a summary of the main findings, highlighting gaps in our knowledge and potential avenues for future research.

It is hoped that this paper will contribute towards the ongoing discussion in Australia of how negative attitudes towards asylum seekers might be addressed. To this end, some of the implications for advocacy that might be drawn from the research are discussed in the conclusion. However, the focus of this paper remains on what is known about attitudes rather than how they might be changed.

What beliefs characterise attitudes towards asylum seekers?

The research provides a wealth of information about the content of beliefs and concerns expressed by members of the public about asylum seekers. The theme of fairness and the related issue of 'illegality' are the most commonly occurring concerns. Beliefs that asylum seekers pose a threat to the nation's material wellbeing, and to Australian values, culture and national security – particularly on the basis of their perceived Islamic faith – are also strong. While each theme is considered separately here for ease of analysis, there is often a great deal of overlap between them in comments made by members of the public.

Fairness concerns

Australian research has shown time and again that concerns about fairness are central to public attitudes towards asylum seekers. (see for example Anderson *et al.*, 2015; Hartley and Pedersen, 2015; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Louis *et al.*, 2007; Pedersen *et al.*, 2006). Negative attitudes, in particular, are associated with perceptions that asylum seekers who arrive by boat commit a range of injustices against Australians and more 'deserving' refugees. This is in line with research from the Netherlands which found that issues of justice are at the heart of community perceptions of asylum seekers (Verkuyten, 2004).

The extent to which the issue of 'fairness' is paramount in negative community attitudes was demonstrated by research which asked respondents how asylum seekers should be treated upon arrival in Australia (McKay *et al.*, 2012). Three schools of thought emerged among the participants: those who advocated a 'humanitarian' approach (161 people), those who felt that asylum seekers should be treated with 'caution but respect' (207 people), and those who argued that asylum seekers should be 'sent back' (158 people) (pp.124-125).

Respondents in the first group wished to see asylum seekers housed in the community and provided with humanitarian assistance upon arrival, and framed their response in terms of 'compassion' (p.125). The second and third groups – the former relatively ambivalent and the latter openly hostile towards asylum seekers – emphasised fairness as the basis for their responses. The second group stated that asylum seekers should be treated fairly but must follow 'the proper Australian process' (p.124), usually entailing a period in detention and reduced access to social services. Similarly, respondents in the third group – which advocated sending asylum seekers back, often in extreme terms such as firing on ships if they failed to turn around – stated that asylum seekers should have

followed the 'proper channels' and that Australia must send a message to deter others from exploiting the nation.

A powerful strain of anger and indignation towards asylum seekers on the basis of perceived unfair behaviour was evident in a study comparing attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees resettled under the official humanitarian program (Hartley and Pedersen, 2015). In another study, many participants felt that their personal values were violated by the asylum seekers' 'illegal' and 'queue-jumping' behaviour (Pedersen *et al.*, 2008b).

The belief that asylum seekers are committing an injustice is typically expressed in three different ways: most prominently, that asylum seekers are 'queue-jumpers'; that they are not 'genuine' refugees but economic migrants; and that they will consume resources and services that should rightly be reserved for Australians.

'Queue-jumping'

The view that asylum seekers are 'queue-jumpers' is widespread and strongly correlated with negative attitudes. Indeed, holding a belief that asylum seekers are 'queue-jumpers' is an even stronger predictor of negative attitudes towards them than believing that they are 'illegals' (Pedersen *et al.*, 2006).

Two-thirds of Western Australian participants in a study by Pedersen *et al.* (2005a) agreed that 'asylum seekers are queue-jumpers' (compared with just over half who agreed that asylum seekers must be 'cashed up' and 41.7% who endorsed the statement that they receive 'all sorts of government handouts'). 63% of participants in a survey of Port Augusta residents also agreed that asylum seekers are 'queue-jumpers' (Klocker, 2004).

These studies explicitly asked whether participants endorsed the view that asylum seekers are 'queue-jumpers'. In studies in which members of the public were invited to provide open-ended responses, 'queue-jumping' also emerged, unprompted, as the most common (Pedersen *et al.*, 2006) or one of the most common (McKay *et al.*, 2012) characterisations of asylum seekers.

When study participants described their feelings about 'queue-jumping', two main themes emerged, both of which were framed in terms of values and concerns about fairness.

Firstly, unauthorised boat arrivals are perceived as obtaining an unfair advantage over refugees in overseas camps (see for example Hartley and Pedersen, 2015; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Pedersen *et al.*, 2008b; Pedersen *et al.*, 2006). Typical comments include:

'Asylum seekers are illegal immigrants and queue jumpers and do not deserve to be "rewarded" with preferential treatment ahead of those applying through the correct channel'. (Pedersen et al., 2008b.)

'Queue jumpers, however should have to wait their turn. I know an Iraqi refugee whose stay in a Saudi refugee camp was probably extended because of queue jumpers'. (Pedersen et al., 2006, p.114.)

Secondly, unauthorised arrival by boat is frequently characterised as an injustice committed against Australia itself. In this vein, asylum seekers are condemned for bypassing the 'proper channels', attempting to 'cheat the system', taking advantage of Australia's generosity and 'exploiting' the country's legitimate processes, systems and resources (see for example Hartley and Pedersen, 2015 and McKay *et al.*, 2012).

'Genuine' refugees

The idea that asylum seekers who arrive by boat are not 'genuine' refugees is another major theme in the research (Hartley and Pedersen, 2015; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Pedersen *et al.*, 2006; Klocker, 2004). Unauthorised entry to Australia is often viewed as proof in and of itself that asylum seekers' protection claims lack merit (see for example Hartley and Pedersen, 2015; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Klocker, 2004).

As with concerns over 'queue-jumping', statements to this effect were framed in terms of injustice, both towards Australia and towards 'genuine' refugees, defined as those who await resettlement in overseas camps (McKay *et al.*, 2012).

Members of the public commonly described asylum seekers as 'economic migrants' who make bogus protection claims for economic advantage and in order to exploit the welfare system (see for example McKay *et al.*, 2012 and Pedersen *et al.*, 2006). Representative comments include:

'I feel there are a very small percentage of genuine political refugees, mostly they are seeking a better standard of living.' (Pedersen et al., 2006, p.114.)

'I used to feel sorry for them. But that changed when I saw how they milked the system.' (McKay et al., 2012, p.124.)

'Are they genuine asylum seekers? I doubt very much if they are the moment they arrive they seem to know their "rights".' (Pedersen et al., 2006, pp.114-115.)

The belief that asylum seekers are not 'genuine' refugees impacts upon support for restrictive policies. Hartley and Pedersen (2007) found that people who endorsed this view were highly likely to regard the government's 'deterrent' policies as legitimate and to support harsh measures against asylum seekers. On the other hand, people who believed asylum seekers' claims for refugee status to be legitimate tended to support more lenient policies towards them, such as being allowed to live in the community while their protection claims are assessed. These people were also less likely to view government policies as legitimate, more empathetic towards the plight of asylum seekers in detention and more likely to feel guilt about the situation of detainees.

Unfair consumption of resources

Study participants repeatedly expressed the view that asylum seekers will unfairly consume resources and services that should be reserved for needy or more deserving Australians (see for example Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013; Schweitzer *et al.*, 2005; Klocker, 2004). 41.7% of people surveyed by Pedersen *et al.* (2005a) endorsed the belief that asylum seekers receive 'all sorts of government handouts'. As noted above, this view is related to concerns that asylum seekers are not 'genuine' refugees.

The perception that asylum seekers will be a drain on Australia's economy and welfare system is discussed below, under 'threat'. However, it is important to note that this threat was frequently expressed as a concern about fairness, as illustrated by these examples:

'When a refugee comes here, [he/she gets] more benefits than an age pensioner who has paid tax for his/her working life in Australia.' (Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013, E189.)

'A lot of people in Port Augusta cannot afford to pay for their own basic needs i.e. shelter, clothing, food, medical services. So if they see illegal immigrants getting these things for nothing it is like rubbing salt into the wounds.' (Klocker, 2004, p.10.)

'Illegality'

A perception that asylum seekers who arrive by boat are somehow 'illegal' is a potent factor in negative community attitudes towards them. Studies highlighting concerns about fairness identified similarly high levels of belief that asylum seekers are 'illegal'; (see for example Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Suhnan *et al.*, 2012; Pedersen *et al.*, 2006; Pedersen *et al.*, 2005a; Klocker, 2004).

People who believe that asylum seekers are 'illegal' are significantly more likely to hold negative attitudes towards them than people who do not (Pedersen *et al.*, 2006). Augoustinos and Quinn (2003) also found that people were more likely to agree with negative statements about asylum seekers after reading a newspaper article in which they were described as 'illegals', compared to groups who read the same article in which the terms 'refugees' or 'asylum seekers' were used.

What does 'illegal' mean?

These findings will come as no surprise to advocates who for many years have sought to challenge the myth that seeking asylum is illegal. But what do members of the public mean when they describe asylum seekers as 'illegals'? Do they believe the act of seeking asylum to be illegal? Or are they concerned about the perceived illegality of the mode of entry itself – without a valid visa, bypassing border controls, resorting to people smugglers, etc.?

The evidence from qualitative studies suggests the latter. Where participants were able to make open-ended statements explaining their views, comments about illegality tended to focus on illegal entry. McKay *et al.* (2012, p.123), for example, note that 'the use of people smugglers and boats to enter Australian waters were frequently identified by respondents as an example of an "illegal" act' and a signal that asylum seekers themselves are criminals. Participants in other studies suggested that 'illegal' arrivals pose a security threat because their identity is unknown, potentially allowing criminals or terrorists to infiltrate Australia (Pedersen *et al.*, 2007; Pedersen *et al.*, 2006; Klocker, 2004).

Members of the public frequently stated that the act of entering Australia illegally cast doubt on the genuineness of asylum seekers' protection claims:

'Asylum seekers are in most cases illegal migrants until proved otherwise. We obviously cannot throw our doors open to all and sundry.' (Pedersen *et al.*, 2006, p.115.)

'I do think that a lot of people who are illegally entering Australia are doing so for purely economic reasons. I don't think it is fair to allow these people to stay as they need to apply legally and wait their turn.' (Pedersen *et al.*, 2006, pp.115-116.)

'People who use criminal acts to gain access to Australia, should not be welcome into the country. All illegal emigrants should immediately be sent back to their country of origin. If they have been able to pay \$10,000 US dollars to get on an illegal boat then they are able to apply for genuine refugee status offshore' (Hartley and Pedersen, 2015, p.23.)

Others stated that asylum seekers' willingness to enter Australia illegally demonstrates that they have criminal or antisocial tendencies which may pose a threat to Australia's stability and security:

'Why would we welcome or agree to an extra burden from people who clearly do not respect the laws of this country, whose first instinct is to threaten, intimidate, burn, destroy and obtain their way by extreme measures???? Send them home, we cannot and do not want to take on the problems of the world. First and foremost they are illegal. Why can't they apply to DIMIA for migration in the correct way??? What gives them the right to break, breach, flaunt the rules?' (Klocker, 2004, p.6.)

To our knowledge, none of the studies discussed in this paper reported a comment by a participant stating that the act of seeking asylum is illegal.¹ As one member of the public put it:

'I believe the animosity towards "boat people" does not stem from a vehement abhorrence towards people seeking asylum, rather in the fairness of people "jumping the queue" and entering Australia illegally.' (Hartley and Pedersen, 2015, p.23.)

Moreover, the insistence by many study participants that asylum seekers are undeserving because they are not 'genuine' refugees implies that seeking asylum, if one is 'genuine', is perceived as legitimate.

Threat

Numerous studies have found that asylum seekers are widely regarded as a threat to Australians and Australia and that this perception is a strong basis for negative attitudes towards them (see for example Suhnan *et al.*, 2012; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Louis *et al.*, 2007; Schweitzer *et al.*, 2005). Accordingly, people who see asylum seekers as threatening are more likely to support harsh policy treatment of them (Louis *et al.*, 2007), whereas people who believe that Australian society is stable, and that asylum seekers therefore do not pose a threat to it, are more likely to support lenient policies (Hartley and Pedersen, 2007).

¹ Only a small number of qualitative comments can be quoted in an article, so it is possible that some participants may have made comments to the effect that seeking asylum is illegal. However, the quotes that were included in the various studies, as representative examples of the views expressed by participants, focused on the 'illegal' mode of arrival, use of people smugglers, etc.

'Realistic' vs. 'abstract' threat

Researchers sometimes distinguish between two forms of perceived threat. The first is 'realistic' (or 'instrumental') threat, related to concerns that asylum seekers threaten 'the existence, political or economic power or physical well-being' of Australia or Australians (Bizman & Yinon, 2001, p.191, cited in Schweitzer *et al.*, 2005, p.171). The second form is symbolic or 'abstract' threat: the belief that asylum seekers threaten Australian values, culture or national identity (Louis *et al.*, 2007; Schweitzer *et al.*, 2005).

'Realistic' threats frequently cited by participants include that asylum seekers will compete with Australians for jobs; that they will be a drain on public resources, such as the welfare and health systems; and that they will bring crime, violence and social problems (see for example McKay *et al.*, 2012; Klocker, 2004).

While perceptions of both 'realistic' and 'abstract' threat have been found to be associated with negative attitudes, there is some divergence between studies as to which is a more important factor. Schweitzer *et al.* (2005) found that while both forms of threat perception significantly predicted negative attitudes towards asylum seekers, people who keenly perceived a 'realistic' threat from asylum seekers were likely to be more hostile towards them than those who focused on 'abstract' threats. Louis *et al.* (2007) also found 'realistic' threat to be strongly associated with negative attitudes (although the study did not specifically test for perceptions of 'abstract' threat).

This contrasts with the finding of McKay *et al.* (2012) that while those who feared a threat to Australia's culture and values from asylum seekers were in the minority, 'the tone of their comments was extreme' (p.125). Participants who focused on 'abstract' threat described asylum seekers as individuals who were unprepared to change their dress, religious or cultural beliefs, thereby posing 'an extreme threat to Australian identity and nationhood' (p.125). Pedersen *et al.* (2008b) also highlight the importance of values: 96% of participants in their study declared that their views on asylum seekers (whether positive or negative) stemmed from their values, while qualitative data from the same study showed a widespread perception that asylum seekers threaten Australian values, typified by this comment:

'It would be detrimental to Australia to allow asylum seekers to come as they please into our country. It also compromises our way of life by an influx of different values, language and regard for our laws and customs. (p.10).'

While 'realistic' and 'abstract' threat are useful concepts, it is not always possible to draw a neat distinction between the two. This becomes clear in relation to

Islam and terrorism. People who described asylum seekers' culture and beliefs as threatening to Australian values generally referred to their perceived Islamic faith as the source of this threat. The belief that Islam is threatening may be construed as an 'abstract' threat because of the perceived menace to Australian values and national identity. Terrorism, on the other hand, might be classified as a 'realistic' threat because it threatens the physical safety and infrastructure of the community, but may also be regarded as an attack on abstract values such as democracy. Yet in reality, as discussed below, study participants consistently conflated Islam with terrorism and violence while also expressing concerns that asylum seekers' perceived Islamic faith was incompatible with Australian customs and values.

Islam

There is unambiguous evidence that asylum seekers are frequently conflated with Islam (see for example Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013; Briskman *et al.*, 2012; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Hartley & Pedersen, 2007; Klocker, 2004). The perception that asylum seekers are Muslim appears to have persisted in recent years, despite the arrival by boat of a significant number of non-Muslim asylum seekers, such as Christian and Hindu Tamils from Sri Lanka.

That Islam is perceived as a threat is also clear. McKay *et al.* (2012) noted that participants expressed particular fear towards Muslim asylum seekers, stating for example that they had 'a genuine fear of Islam' or were 'worried about the number of Muslims arriving' (p.126).

Across the literature, people who expressed a belief that asylum seekers are unable to integrate also suggested that this is due to their perceived Islamic faith (Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013; Briskman *et al.*, 2012; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Hartley & Pedersen, 2007; Klocker, 2004).

Specifically, study participants often stated that Muslim asylum seekers are unwilling to change their customs, dress, and traditions to conform to Australian culture (McKay *et al.*, 2012; Hartley & Pedersen, 2007); that they are less able to integrate into Australian society than previous generations of migrants (McKay *et al.*, 2012); that they lack respect for their host country and seek to impose their religion and culture on Australia (Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Briskman *et al.*, 2012); and that they will bring hatred, violence and extremism to Australia (Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Klocker, 2004).

This tallies with previous research on attitudes towards Islam in Australia, which found high levels of hostility towards Muslim Australians and a widespread belief in the incompatibility of Islam with Australian culture (see for example Pedersen and Hartley, 2012; Dunn and Klocker, 2007). Similarly, the 2014 Scanlon report

(Markus, 2014) shows that while community attitudes towards migration and multiculturalism are currently more positive than in previous years, hostile attitudes towards both Muslims and boat arrivals remain.

Terrorism

Comments by study participants suggest that negative attitudes towards asylum seekers are often related to fear of terrorism, and specifically to 'Islamic terrorism' or 'Muslim extremism' (see for example McKay *et al.*, 2012; Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013; Pedersen *et al.*, 2007; Klocker, 2004). Typical comments conflating Islam, terrorism and asylum seekers include:

'The anti-European-USA stance by Muslim terrorists has made me aware of being an enemy.' (Comment about 'refugees', cited in Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013, E191.)

'They choose to destroy all documentation identifying who they really are — if they are genuine refugees, why? Perhaps they are 'Al Qaeda' or Taliban members.' (Klocker, 2004, p.12.)

In one study of 653 West Australians in three different locations (Pedersen *et al.*, 2007), 51% of participants were classed as holding 'rejecting' attitudes towards asylum seekers. These people were far more likely than the 'indifferent' (24%) or 'welcoming' (25%) participants to hold strong fears of terrorism. 33 participants also made qualitative statements explicitly linking asylum seekers with the threat of terrorism.

Yet although important, the perceived threats of Islam and terrorism are consistently cited less frequently than concerns about 'queue-jumping', illegal entry, and resource threats (see McKay *et al.*, 2012; Pedersen *et al.*, 2006). One study, for example, presented participants with a list of positive and negative characteristics and asked to choose which were true of asylum seekers. The most common choices were 'illegal immigrants' (81.8% of participants) and 'unlawful' (79%). 'Terrorists' was the least frequently selected negative description, chosen by a still significant 43.5% of participants (Klocker, 2004).

Anti-people smuggling sentiment

The change of government in 2007 saw the dismantling of the 'Pacific Solution', the abolition of temporary protection visas and, arguably, less overtly hostile political rhetoric towards asylum seekers themselves. This was accompanied by a shift in focus towards 'evil' people smugglers (described by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in 2009 as 'the scum of the earth' who should 'rot in hell') (Rodgers, 2009) and the need to destroy their 'business model' (ABC, 2011).

Harsh rhetoric on people smuggling might be expected to foster public sympathy for asylum seekers themselves, who could be seen as their victims; yet the evidence suggests the opposite.

Suhnan *et al.* (2012) examined whether anti-people smuggling rhetoric makes people more or less antagonistic towards asylum seekers. They found that members of the public expressed far greater levels of hostility towards people smugglers than towards asylum seekers; however, those who were hostile to people smugglers were significantly more likely to have negative attitudes towards asylum seekers.

As the authors note, 'theoretically, these two groups should be seen as distinct from each other, especially if the public believes that people smugglers are exploiting asylum seekers.' (p.89) They argue that instead, prejudice towards asylum seekers may be legitimised through the expression of antipathy towards people smugglers. McKay *et al.*, (2012) shed more light on this connection: numerous respondents suggested that use of people smugglers to reach Australia made asylum seekers criminals themselves.

People like us'? Perceived similarity and difference

As with personal contact (detailed below), it is often assumed that attitudes toward asylum seekers would improve if Australians could be encouraged to understand that asylum seekers are 'people like us', with whom they share a common humanity and aspirations.

However, recent research suggests that there is a far more ambiguous relationship between perceptions of similarity and difference and public attitudes, and that people are not automatically more sympathetic towards people they perceive to be similar.

Pedersen and Thomas (2013) found that when participants were primed to think about the similarities between asylum seekers and Australians, they focused on common humanity and other basic needs. Perhaps surprisingly, this tended to *increase* participants' prejudice towards asylum seekers, particularly among people who stated that the similarities were 'important' to them.

The reasons for this are unclear, but the findings accord with overseas studies which found that perceived similarity can be experienced as threatening and therefore increases prejudice (the authors cite Brown & Abrams, 1986; and Gabarrot, Falomir-Pichastor, and Mugny, 2009 as examples). This perhaps reflects the findings of the studies outlined above (see 'threat') that a fear of asylum seekers posing a 'realistic' threat to jobs, resources, etc., is a potent factor in negative attitudes. The authors conclude that advocates seeking to change attitudes by highlighting the similarities between asylum seekers and Australians

may 'inadvertently communicate a threat to economic or other interests', for example by emphasising asylum seekers' skills (Pedersen and Thomas, 2013, p.261).

The same study found that the majority of participants who were primed to think about the differences between Australians and asylum seekers identified that 'Australians are privileged' compared to asylum seekers. This suggests that focusing on differences does not necessarily increase negative attitudes towards asylum seekers, and might in some circumstances be a starting point for reflection on the needs of this vulnerable group.

However, other studies have identified a more straightforward relationship between perceptions of shared humanity – or lack thereof – and attitudes towards asylum seekers. Nickerson & Louis (2008) found that people whose membership of 'humanity' was an important part of their personal identity (rather than, or in addition to, strong affiliation with their Australian nationality) were more likely to hold positive views of asylum seekers than people who did not, suggesting that a sense of shared humanity may be an important factor in attitudes. This is discussed in greater detail below under 'national identity'.

In a similar vein, Greenhalgh and Watt (2014) found that people who believed asylum seekers to fundamentally differ from Australians are more likely to have negative attitudes towards them. Specifically, people who held negative attitudes were more likely to agree that, in contrast to Australians, asylum seekers do not uphold considerateness and compassion for others, lack concern for the welfare of all of society's members, and do not raise their children to be humane.

What characteristics are associated with attitudes?

A wide range of characteristics – demographic, psychological, experiential and social – have been found to be associated with individuals' attitudes towards asylum seekers.

Demographics

Several Australian studies have identified demographic characteristics that are associated with attitudes towards asylum seekers. Overall, males (Bartlett, 2014; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Schweitzer *et al.*, 2005), people with lower levels of formal education (Bartlett, 2014; Suhnan *et al.*, 2012; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Lyall and Thorsteinsson, 2007; Pedersen *et al.*, 2005a), and people who describe their political views as right-wing (Suhnan *et al.*, 2012; Hartley and Pedersen, 2007; Pedersen *et al.*, 2005a) are more likely to express negative attitudes than women, younger people, the more highly educated and people who characterise themselves as 'left wing.'

Markus (2014) found a high level of consistency in attitudes according to gender, state, region of residence, age, educational qualification, financial situation, voting intention and place of birth. In particular, support for turning back boats was highest amongst those with education up to Year 11 only (46%); trade or apprenticeship qualifications (43%); intending to vote Liberal/National (41%); residing outside capital cities (41%); aged 35-44 (41%); and people who described their financial situation as 'struggling to pay bills' or 'poor' (41%). Support for granting eligibility for permanent residency to asylum seekers arriving by boat was above 30% in four categories: people intending to vote Greens (64%) or Labor (32%); holding a Bachelor degree or higher educational qualification (33%); and those aged 18-24 (33%).

Schweitzer *et al.* (2005) also found that men were more likely to perceive asylum seekers as posing a material threat to Australia, for example by taking jobs and being a drain on public resources. Personal contact with refugees was found to be less likely to improve the attitudes of men and the retired compared to more educated women (McKay *et al.*, 2012; see 'personal contact' for further details).

Yet as Haslam and Holland (2012) point out, the existence of organisations such as Rural Australians for Refugees demonstrates that demographic factors do not tell the full story. McKay *et al.* (2012) quoted numerous female professionals expressing negative views about the impact of asylum seekers on Australian society, such as:

'Why the hell shouldn't we be allowed to celebrate our Christmas without offending other cultures!! This is Australia!!' (Female, aged 40, professional, p.126.)

Whether age plays a role is also ambiguous. Bartlett (2014) and McKay *et al.* (2012) found that older people were more likely to express negative opinions towards asylum seekers. However, Pedersen *et al.* (2005a) found that older Australians were not necessarily more likely to have negative attitudes, although they were more likely to hold 'false beliefs' about asylum seekers. In a study on the capacity of anti-prejudice workshops to improve attitudes towards asylum seekers, Hartley *et al.* (2012) found that a mature-aged cohort (with an average age of 72) was initially more positive than younger cohorts of university students.

Location

Several studies suggest that local contexts can have an important impact on attitudes in particular Australian communities. Their findings also highlight that caution must be employed when generalising the results of the studies to encompass the wider Australian population.

Christmas Island

Ethnographic research conducted by Briskman *et al.* (2012) on Christmas Island over a ten-year period (2001-2011) documents the evolving attitudes and particular concerns of locals due to the island's unique role in Australia's asylum and detention policies. The study emphasised the diversity of views within the community, but found that overall, locals tended to be sympathetic towards asylum seekers. The *Tampa* episode was found to have a profound impact on local attitudes towards asylum and detention, as did the tragedy of the 2010 boat crash off Christmas Island which killed fifty asylum seekers, and detention centre riots and escapes in 2011.

The authors note that the 'detention industry' which burgeoned on the island following the *Tampa* incident has resulted in growing anger and resentment among locals, although this tends to be directed towards the government (particularly the Immigration Department) and detention staff rather than asylum seekers themselves. By 2010, many locals deplored the impact of a large 'fly in, fly out' population of workers associated with the detention centre, citing the effects on security, the cost of living, housing, the environment, local culture and the social fabric. 'In what has long been a close-knit, multicultural and inclusive community where "everyone knows everyone", locals began expressing feelings of alienation, exclusion and fear' (p.105). Others expressed resentment that while they face a soaring cost of living due to the presence of the detention centre, asylum seekers are fed and clothed at taxpayers' expense.

Locals also described feelings of powerlessness and anger at the government's perceived lack of consultation and imposition of unpopular policies on the island. The decision to excise Christmas Island from Australia's migration zone, for example, was particularly disquieting for many islanders of Malay and Chinese origin. One resident expressed a common view when he stated:

'They [the government] look at this community like hillbillies, "we can tell them what to do". Irrespective of what's legal or illegal. All this just builds into a crescendo, where pretty soon, I can tell you, this community is going to explode. I believe that. And it's a shame because the people that are the most local, like me, are pro-asylum seekers.' (p.106).

However, the authors observed that community attitudes towards asylum seekers deteriorated following riots, fires and a mass escape from the detention centre in March and April 2011. As a result, many locals were fearful for their safety and community security. At this time, the authors recorded a number of residents expressing hostility towards 'queue-jumpers' and the fear that their daughters would not be safe with men roaming around the island. As one female resident put it, 'We don't like them... They are taking us over. They are queue-jumpers' (p.110).

Port Augusta

Klocker (2004) surveyed Port Augusta residents in 2002, when the community faced the impending construction of the Baxter IRPC in the vicinity. The study documented high levels of distress and anger at the idea of having the detention centre nearby, despite strong support for punitive government policies against boat arrivals: 86.1% of locals surveyed supported mandatory detention – 72.8% extended this to include children and women – while 75% opposed the construction of the detention centre in the vicinity of Port Augusta. While many participants evoked threats to national security, Australian values, and fear of Islamic extremism, comments tended to focus on threats to the local community, citing the risk of riots, arson and breakouts from the detention centre, concerns that bad publicity would cripple local tourism, and fears of extra strain being placed on already stressed local medical, law enforcement and other resources.

Western Australia

Pedersen *et al.* (2007) examined the correlation between fear of terrorism and negative attitudes towards asylum seekers in three Western Australian locations: Perth, Albany and Kalgoorlie. Attitudes towards asylum seekers did not vary significantly across the three locations (51% of participants overall were classed as 'rejecting'; 24% were 'indifferent' and 25% were 'accepting' of asylum seekers). However, the correlation between negative attitudes towards asylum

seekers and fear of terrorism was significantly stronger in Albany than in Perth. The correlation was also marginally stronger in Albany than in Kalgoorlie.

The data do not shed light on the reasons for this difference between Albany and the other locations. The authors suggest that the presence of approximately 70 asylum seekers in Albany, employed at the town's meatworks, may have made the issue particularly pertinent to locals at the time the research was conducted. As Albany is a rural centre, the authors note that it may also reflect a country-city divide.

Racism

While there is strong evidence that antipathy towards Islam plays a role in community attitudes towards asylum seekers, there is little empirical evidence available that negative attitudes are based on a belief that asylum seekers belong to an inferior 'race' or ethnicity.

There may indeed be a link between negative attitudes and asylum seekers' perceived ethnicity. As described above, asylum seekers are widely presumed to be of Muslim faith and culture, while the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission has found that Muslims are often conflated with a particular ethnicity ('Arab' or 'Middle Eastern') and vice versa (HREOC 1991; HREOC 2004; see also Poynting and Noble, 2004).

Yet as Haslam and Holland (2012) point out, if racial prejudice were the main factor in negative attitudes towards asylum seekers, then public attitudes would likely be as hostile towards other non-Anglo groups, including refugees resettled in Australia through the official humanitarian program (see 'boat arrivals vs. resettled refugees' for further discussion of this issue). Instead, research suggests that asylum seekers attract considerably more negativity than other marginalised groups, including Indigenous Australians (Pedersen *et al.*, 2008b; Pedersen, 2004; Pedersen *et al.*, 2005b), Asian Australians (Pedersen, 2004) and resettled refugees (Hartley and Pedersen, 2015).

However, strong taboos around racism may make people more likely to express hostility in terms of culture and religion rather than race or ethnicity. Pedersen *et al.* (2008a) noted that a high number of participants who expressed negative views towards asylum seekers were at pains to preface their statements with the disclaimer that they were not racist. This suggests an awareness that their views may be interpreted as such, and that this is a taboo in a multicultural society, but does not reveal whether racism is in fact the basis for them.

This is not to say that racism does not play a role at all in public attitudes. However, the research conducted to date does not provide enough evidence to conclude that negative attitudes towards asylum seekers are based on

racism. It is also clear that the causes of public attitudes cannot be reduced to racism alone.

National identity

People who identify strongly with their Australian nationality are more likely to hold negative views towards asylum seekers (Pedersen *et al.*, 2005a; Nickerson and Louis, 2008; Fozdar *et al.*, 2014), unless they also feel a strong affinity with a universal concept of 'humanity' (Nickerson and Louis, 2008).

Pedersen *et al.* (2005a) first established the link between identifying strongly as an Australian and expressing negative attitudes towards asylum seekers. (National identity was measured using a survey in which respondents rated the extent to which they agreed with seven statements such as 'I feel strong ties with the Australian people.')

Nickerson and Louis (2008) built on this research by comparing the attitudes of people with a strong sense of Australian national identity with those of people who identified strongly with 'humanity' instead. The importance of 'human' and 'national' identity respectively were measured using two six-item questionnaires with questions such as 'How important is being a human [being an Australian] in your everyday life?' 'How similar do you feel to other human beings [Australians]?' and 'Are the values that are important to you related to being a human being [an Australian]?' (Nickerson and Louis, 2008, p.802.)

On the one hand, people with a strong sense of Australian identity were more likely to express negative views of asylum seekers than people with a strong 'human' identity. However, a number of participants simultaneously held strong national and 'human' identities. These participants were not more inclined to hold negative attitudes, suggesting that identification with a universal 'humanity' overrode the effects of national identity on their attitudes towards asylum seekers.

Fozdar *et al.*'s (2014) study of expressions of Australian nationalism surveyed Perth residents who fly Australian flags on their cars on Australia day. The researchers found that people who did so showed higher levels of patriotism and 'exclusionary nationalism' than their non-flag flying compatriots. (Patriotism was defined as 'love of one's country and its values, and in-group solidarity'; exclusionary nationalism, as 'pride for one's country that includes a derogation of or negativity towards others, including minorities', p.5). Car flag-flyers were also significantly more likely to express support for the White Australia Policy, to state that Australian values and culture are in danger, and to hold a 'nativist' view of Australian identity which posits that to be 'truly Australian', one must be born and raised in Australia and have Australian ancestors.

Participants were asked whether they feel positive towards a range of minority groups (asylum seekers, Muslim Australians, Asian Australians and Indigenous Australians). Both flag-flyers and non flag-flyers felt less positive towards asylum seekers than towards any other group: only 9.9% of flag-flyers expressed positivity towards asylum seekers, compared to 24.7% of non flag-flyers. The difference between levels of positivity towards other groups was also less stark than towards asylum seekers: 19.6% of flag flyers were positive towards Muslim Australians compared to 26.8% of non-flaggers; 38.8% felt positive towards Asian Australians compared to 48.6%; and 43.2% and 45.6% respectively felt positive towards Indigenous Australians.

Personality traits

A number of studies have established a relationship between an individuals' personality traits and attitudes towards asylum seekers. These studies suggest that people with particular personality traits, dispositions or outlooks may be more likely to perceive asylum seekers as threatening, or to regard them positively and support more welcoming policies.

Social justice orientation

Individuals' beliefs about social justice are related to their attitudes towards asylum seekers. People who believe that society's resources should be distributed on an egalitarian basis, with special assistance for the most disadvantaged groups, are significantly more likely to hold positive views of asylum seekers than those who believe that a just society is one in which individuals are allocated wealth and resources on the basis of their individual merit and contribution (Anderson *et al.*, 2015).

However, an unexpected finding of this study, which used a sample of undergraduate psychology students, was that while egalitarianism strongly predicted positive attitudes, people who held an individualistic/meritocratic view of social justice were not necessarily more likely to hold negative attitudes towards asylum seekers. Replication of the experiment using a representative sample of the community may help to clarify this issue.

Belief in a just world and moral disengagement

The 'belief in a just world' theory in social psychology posits that all humans believe, to a greater or lesser extent, that people 'get what they deserve'. According to the theory, this outlook is not necessarily conscious and is held irrespective of other moral or spiritual positions. This provides a sense of control and safety in a harsh and unpredictable world (Lerner 1965, 1980).

Characteristics

Under the theory, it is possible for individuals to have two simultaneously held constructs of justice: one that applies to the self and one that applies to others. The world can be seen as just for oneself but not for others, or vice versa (Lipkus *et al.*, 1996).

In the face of injustice, individuals use a variety of psychological mechanisms to maintain their 'just world' outlook. These include victim-blaming, denying or withdrawing (disengaging) from the injustice. More constructively, people may also attempt to prevent injustice or to restore justice (Lerner, 1980).

Bartlett (2014) cites a range of studies that have found that people who believe the world is just for themselves are more forgiving towards others (Strelan, & Sutton, 2011) and more likely to donate to charity (Begue, 2014), possibly because they must convince themselves that they deserve justice by treating others with compassion. Those who believe that the world is just for others are more likely to engage in victim-blaming (Begue & Bastounis, 2003) and to morally disengage from injustices (Bartlett, 2014): logical responses to believing that others deserve whatever happens to them.

The nature of an individual's belief in a just world impacts on support for asylum seeker policies, according to Bartlett (2014). This study found that people who strongly believe the world is just for others are more likely to 'morally disengage' from asylum seekers (meaning endorse statements such as 'Compared to how asylum seekers might be treated in their home country detention isn't so bad' and 'It is okay to treat asylum seekers harshly if they behave like animals'). Moral disengagement, in turn, predicted support for a harsh policy stance towards asylum seekers. On the other hand, people who strongly believe that the world is just for themselves had lower levels of moral disengagement from asylum seekers, which in turn was a strong predictor of support for more lenient policies towards them.

Social dominance orientation

'Social dominance orientation' measures an individual's preference for hierarchy in social systems and for achieving dominance over lower-status groups (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). As noted by Louis *et al.*, (2007, p.54), individuals with higher levels of social dominance orientation 'endorse the principle of hierarchies in social relations, rather than egalitarian relationships' and have been found to have more negative attitudes towards a range of groups with lower power in society, such as women and African-Americans (Sidanius, 1993). Australian studies have found that individuals with higher levels of social dominance orientation tend to have more negative attitudes towards asylum seekers (Anderson *et al.*, 2015; Nickerson and Louis, 2008; Louis *et al.*, 2007) and are more likely to support mandatory detention (Lyll and Thorsteinsson, 2007).

This finding fits with Schweitzer *et al.*'s (2005) establishment of a strong link between perception of 'realistic threat' and negative attitudes. As Anderson *et al.* (2015) point out, individuals high in social dominance orientation are more likely to perceive asylum seekers as a threat to their position in society, for example by competing with Australians for employment and access to services. Given that people with a more egalitarian outlook are less hostile towards asylum seekers (Anderson *et al.*, 2015), it is also logical that those with an hierarchical view of social relationships tend to have more negative attitudes.

Right-wing authoritarianism

In personality psychology, 'right-wing authoritarianism' is described as an individual outlook characterised by high levels of 'authoritarian submission', 'authoritarian aggression' and 'conventionalism' (Altmeyer, 1981). Respectively, these mean that an individual is submissive towards authorities they perceive to be legitimate; aggressive towards groups designated as 'deviant' by these authorities; and adheres strongly to societal traditions and conventions. 'People scoring high on RWA tend to be intolerant of societal deviance and champion social control and conformity, which in turn leads to more negative attitudes of "deviant" out-groups, perceived to be a threat to the social order and the security of their in-group.' (Anderson *et al.*, 2015, p.2.)

As with social dominance orientation, Australian studies that tested for right-wing authoritarianism found that people with this outlook tend to have more negative attitudes towards asylum seekers (Anderson *et al.*, 2015; Nickerson and Louis, 2008; Louis *et al.*, 2007; Lyall and Thorsteinsson, 2007). Lyall and Thorsteinsson (2007), found right-wing authoritarianism to be a stronger predictor than social dominance orientation of support for mandatory detention. Anderson *et al.* (2015), however, found that social dominance orientation was the stronger predictor of negative attitudes, but that right-wing authoritarianism was still significantly correlated.

Conservation and self-enhancement values

Greenhalgh and Watt (2014) explored the interaction between certain personality traits, and individuals' perceptions of threat. In particular, they found that individuals with strong 'conservation' and 'self-enhancement' values – meaning that they value adhering to the *status quo*, and putting their own interests first, even at others' expense – were more likely to 'dehumanise' asylum seekers (defined as believing that they do not uphold considerateness and compassion for others, lack concern for the welfare of all of society's members, and do not raise their children to be humane). These individuals were more likely to regard asylum seekers as threatening to Australia's security, social order and resources, and to have negative attitudes towards them.

Emotions

Researchers have commented on the polarisation of attitudes that emerges in the studies, with respondents tending to be either extremely negative or extremely positive (see for example Pedersen *et al.*, 2005a; Schweitzer *et al.*, 2005). The tone of participants' comments is highly emotive, and a number of studies have examined the nature and role of emotions in public attitudes towards asylum seekers.

Empathy

Australian studies on attitudes towards asylum seekers have examined empathy both as an emotion and as a personality trait (Hartley and Pedersen, 2007; Pedersen and Thomas, 2013, respectively). In both cases, empathy was found to be a strong factor in more positive attitudes.

Pedersen and Thomas (2013) found that people who are generally empathetic in outlook (just over half of their sample) were less prejudiced towards asylum seekers, as were people who specifically expressed empathy towards asylum seekers (again, around half of the sample).

Similarly, Hartley and Pedersen (2007) asked participants how they felt about the specific situation of asylum seekers in detention. 46.2% of their sample expressed empathy, which was strongly correlated with supporting more lenient policies towards asylum seekers.

Guilt

The same study (Hartley and Pedersen, 2007) probed the extent to which people felt guilty about the situation of asylum seekers in detention. Whereas nearly half of the participants expressed empathy (46.2%), only 12.8% expressed guilt – even though 53.1% of the total sample agreed that as Australians, they had a level of control over the situation of asylum seekers in detention. The latter finding suggests that a majority of participants who felt that the policy of detention could be changed also happened to support the policy.

Guilt was found to have a high correlation with support for more lenient policies towards asylum seekers in detention; however, further statistical analysis showed that guilt is not a significant predictor of a lenient policy orientation. Rather, guilt was correlated with two variables that did predict a lenient policy orientation: 'stability' (a belief that Australian society is stable and not threatened by asylum seekers) and a belief that the government's detention policies are illegitimate.

This suggests that unlike empathy, guilt is not a root cause of a lenient policy orientation. Rather, people who support more lenient policies are likely to do so because they believe asylum seekers are not a threat to Australia, and because

they believe the government's policies are illegitimate. Such people are more likely to feel guilty about the treatment of asylum seekers as a result of these beliefs. This point is discussed further in the conclusion under 'implications for advocacy'.

Anger

Hartley and Pedersen (2015) found that anger towards asylum seekers who arrive by boat strongly correlates with support for restrictive policy measures against them (this study, which also found that people who support restrictions against refugees resettled under the official humanitarian program, are more likely to express fear than anger towards them, is discussed in greater detail below, under 'boat arrivals vs. resettled refugees'). This finding matches comments about asylum seekers made by participants in other studies, which frequently display anger and indignation on the basis of the asylum seekers' perceived unfair and illegal behaviour (detailed under 'fairness concerns' and 'illegality').

Social norms

The evidence suggests that social norms are an important factor in negative community attitudes towards asylum seekers, and play a more significant role in shaping attitudes than individual demographic (Suhnan *et al.*, 2012) or personality traits (Nickerson and Louis, 2008; Louis *et al.*, 2007; Hartley and Pedersen, 2007; Pedersen *et al.*, 2005a). As Pedersen *et al.* (2005a) note, 'clearly, negative attitudes involve societal issues, not simply psychological.' (p.158.)

Louis *et al.*, (2007) found that people who believe that societal norms are hostile towards asylum seekers are more likely to express negative attitudes and support restrictive policies towards them. Louis and Nickerson (2008) reinforced this work, finding that people who strongly identify with their Australian nationality, and who also believe that Australians are overwhelmingly hostile towards asylum seekers, are more likely to have negative attitudes. The latter study also found that national identity and belief in hostile national norms were more reliable predictors than individual traits such as social domination orientation and right-wing authoritarianism.

Similarly, Pedersen *et al.* (2005a) found that group-based identity – the strength of an individual's attachment to their national identity – was an important predictor of negative attitudes, whereas individually-based identity (an individual's level of self-esteem) was not.

Perceptions of consensus

Perceptions of social norms are subjective, however, and there is evidence that people tend to overestimate the extent to which their attitudes toward asylum

seekers are shared by the rest of the community. It appears that the more antagonistic one's views are towards asylum seekers, the wider the disparity between the real and estimated levels of community consensus (Hartley and Pedersen, 2007).

In Hartley and Pedersen's study, conducted in July 2005, participants indicated their support for one of three policy orientations regarding the detention of asylum seekers (p.123):

1. *Asylum seekers should be sent back to where they came from right now.*
2. *Leave things as they are. The legal processing of asylum seekers in detention should remain the same.*
3. *Let all asylum seekers out of detention, after health and security checks have been processed, while their applications for refugee status are being looked at.*

(Eight participants out of a sample of 160 respondents selected a fourth and more lenient option: 'Release all asylum seekers from detention, give them a visa, and accept them into the Australian community.' Because this group was so small, its data was removed from further statistical analysis.)

Participants were asked to estimate what proportion of the Australian community agreed with their views. Group 1, which favoured the toughest policies, represented only 16.4% of the sample, yet members on average estimated that 71.6% of people shared their views, an overestimation of 55%. Group 2 comprised 37.1% of the total, yet believed that 68.5% of Australians shared their views, a disparity of 31%. Group 3, which favoured the most lenient policies, represented 41.5% of the sample but believed that 52.5% of the community agreed with them, a more modest overestimation of 11%.

A limitation of these findings, however, is that they are based on the assumption that the views expressed by the 160 sample participants are representative of the distribution of views in the Australian community as a whole. Participants were selected via a random postal survey of four suburbs in the Perth metropolitan area: one of high socio-economic status, two of middle socio-economic status, and one of low socio-economic status. The sample was comprised of 53% women and 47% men, with a mean age of 47.

Perhaps significantly, given that lower education is correlated with more negative attitudes towards asylum seekers, the sample was more educated than the overall Australian population: 30.6% of the participants were university students or had completed university, and a further 28.3% were participating in another form of post-secondary education. The authors note that Australian Bureau of Statistics data from 2005, however, found that only 49% of the

Australian population reported holding at least one non-school qualification. It is therefore possible that negative views towards asylum seekers were more widespread in the Australian community at large than within the sample group.

Knowledge of asylum seeking issues

A number of studies have highlighted the low level of accurate knowledge in the community regarding asylum seekers (see for example Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Suhnan *et al.*, 2012; Pedersen *et al.*, 2006; Pedersen *et al.*, 2005a).

Some of these studies have also found that people who believe incorrect information about asylum seekers are more likely to have negative attitudes towards them (Suhnan *et al.*, 2012; Pedersen *et al.*, 2006; Pedersen *et al.*, 2005a). They suggest that widespread 'false beliefs' among people with negative attitudes include that asylum seekers are 'queue-jumpers', 'illegal' and 'cashed up' (Pedersen *et al.*, 2005a; Suhnan *et al.*, 2012), that 'people who arrive unauthorised are not genuine refugees' (Pedersen *et al.*, 2006) and that 'asylum seekers are safe when they arrive in Indonesia or Malaysia, so travelling to Australia is unnecessary' (Suhnan *et al.*, 2012).

However, one 'false belief' tested by Suhnan *et al.* (2012) was found *not* to be correlated with negative attitudes. People who believed that 'reintroducing Temporary Protection Visas will stop the boats' were not more likely than those who did not endorse this belief to hold negative attitudes towards asylum seekers.

In one study, using a random sample of the community from all states, only 24.4% of participants believed that most asylum seekers are fleeing persecution (McKay *et al.*, 2012) even though a majority of asylum claimants who arrive by boat are found to be refugees (discussed below: 'boat arrivals vs. air arrivals').

Turoy-Smith *et al.*'s 2013 study of attitudes towards Indigenous Australians and refugees identified a great deal of confusion about what a 'refugee' is. Participants were provided with a definition at the outset, which stated that for the purposes of the study, a refugee was 'any person who seeks refuge in Australia and is granted full humanitarian refugee status'. This definition is arguably somewhat ambiguous in that it appears to apply both to people who gain refugee status after arriving in Australia and seeking asylum, and refugees who apply for protection offshore and are subsequently resettled in Australia. However, participants interpreted 'refugee' widely and made comments encompassing Muslims, immigrants and 'ethnic people' as well as asylum seekers who arrived by boat and refugees who arrive under the humanitarian program. Typical statements on the subject of 'refugees' included (p.189):

Characteristics

'My partner had contact with a Moslem lady.'

'The ethnic groups and ladies I have met...'

'[I am] in favour of migration at the appropriate time.'

'Don't like the preference being given to boat people.'

This suggests that people frequently conflate discussion of asylum seekers and resettled refugees with other issues, such as Islam and non-humanitarian migration.

A number of participants in another study were aware that they knew little about asylum seekers, and made statements such as: 'To be honest the only information that I have about asylum seekers' situation has been picked up from media representations.' (Pedersen *et al.*, 2005a, p.156).

What do we know about the influence of external sources on attitudes?

The media

There is strong evidence that for most people, the media is the main, or only, source of information about asylum seekers. When people were explicitly asked about where they obtained their information on asylum seekers, they overwhelmingly responded that they relied on the media (McKay *et al.*, 2012). In other studies that did not specifically ask about sources of information, numerous participants volunteered that their perceptions of asylum seekers and refugees are based mainly or exclusively on media portrayals (see for example Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013; Pedersen *et al.*, 2005a).

However, the extent to which the media shapes community attitudes, as opposed to reflecting them, is yet to be established. Are people influenced by media portrayals, or do they choose to consume media that support their existing views of asylum seekers?

One study suggests the former, establishing a direct link between the language used in media representations of asylum seekers and subsequent attitudes towards them (Augoustinos and Quinn, 2003). Three groups of participants read a relatively neutral article about unauthorised arrivals. Two groups were given versions in which people arriving by boat were called 'refugees' or 'asylum seekers' respectively, and the third read a version in which they were referred to as 'illegal immigrants'. Immediately after reading the article, participants were surveyed on their opinions about asylum seekers; the 'illegal immigrants' group expressed significantly more negative attitudes than the 'refugees'/'asylum seekers' groups. This suggests that the choice of language can have a powerful effect on how people perceive asylum seekers; and that media portrayals of asylum seekers not only reflect attitudes but can also influence them.

Yet a recent study by Croston and Pedersen (2013) found that people tend to 'filter out' information in the media which does not accord with their established views on asylum seekers. When presented with an article about asylum seekers, participants whose pre-existing beliefs were rebutted in the article recalled less accurate information about it afterwards. Moreover, they rated the article's authors as being significantly less 'warm' and 'competent' than did people who agreed with the contents.

Political rhetoric

Politicians' negative rhetoric and stereotyping is often cited as a reason for community hostility towards asylum seekers. Yet although research indicates a link between political rhetoric and community attitudes, the exact nature of the relationship (as with the role of the media) is difficult to establish empirically.

A number of studies found that participants spontaneously reproduced political rhetoric that had appeared in the media when commenting on asylum seekers (McKay *et al.*, 2012; Pedersen *et al.*, 2006) and related issues such as people smuggling (Suhnan *et al.*, 2012). Pedersen *et al.* (2006) noted the extent to which the community's 'false beliefs' about asylum seekers match statements by politicians reported in the media.

However, studies to date have not established whether politician's statements are the cause of negative attitudes towards asylum seekers, or whether they simply amplify and legitimate sentiments that were already widespread in the community, which may in turn encourage people to express more negative attitudes (as discussed above under 'social norms' and 'perceived consensus'). As Pedersen *et al.* (2006, p.120) point out, the relationship between political rhetoric and negative attitudes is likely to be 'bi-directional': 'while accepting these sorts of statements may increase negative attitudes, prejudiced people may also accept the statements to a greater degree.'

Political responsibility for boat arrivals

The community also appears to regard the issue of unauthorised boat arrivals as something for which government is responsible and should be held accountable. In one study (Pedersen *et al.*, 2005a) in which people wrote open-ended comments about asylum seekers, respondents often framed their opinions in political terms, such as:

'They should be returned immediately with no handouts. Australians do not want these fanatics here to ruin our way of life – government should listen to voters and take a stronger stand.' (p.157.)

Or, alternatively:

'Shut the detention centres down, they are inhumane. Sack Howard and Ruddock for consistent breaches of human right conventions.' (p.157.)

This occurred regardless of whether respondents were sympathetic or hostile towards asylum seekers, reflecting the highly politicised nature of the issues and suggesting that public attitudes may be influenced by political parties' claims that they will 'solve' the issue of unauthorised boat arrivals. The politicised commentary of study participants also matches demographic findings that

political orientation and voting intention is correlated with attitudes towards asylum seekers.

Personal contact

Only a minority of Australians is aware of having had personal contact with asylum seekers or people whose refugee status has been formally recognised (Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013; McKay *et al.*, 2012; Pedersen *et al.*, 2007). While it is sometimes assumed that bringing members of the public into contact with asylum seekers would improve community attitudes towards them, the evidence suggests that this is not always the case.

Different levels of contact have been identified in different studies. In one study, 34% of participants, drawn from a random sample of the Perth metropolitan area, reported contact with refugees (Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013). Of these, 17% stated that contact had been a positive experience; 13% reported both positive and negative experiences; and a handful reported only negative experiences.

McKay *et al.* (2012) also found that for most people who had met a refugee, the experience had resulted in more positive and empathetic attitudes. Participants stated that it had caused them to rethink their negative views, given them insight into the experiences of asylum seekers, or made them feel less fearful. In a significant minority of cases, however, contact with refugees had produced a more negative attitude, often on the grounds that refugees were perceived to be welfare frauds, had failed to learn English or mix outside their cultural communities.

Those whose attitudes became more positive through contact were more likely to be well educated, professional women of high or middle socio-economic status, or held a university or post-secondary qualification. Those whose attitudes hardened tended to be either male or retired. In all, 20.3% of the sample, or 119 people, had had personal contact with a refugee. Of these, 72 reported that their attitudes had been positively influenced by meeting a refugee, while the remainder stated that they had been negatively influenced (McKay *et al.*, 2012).

An American study (Barlow *et al.*, 2012) on the effects of positive and negative contact on prejudice towards minority groups collated data from seven Australian studies, including one that looked at attitudes towards asylum seekers (Pedersen and Watt, 2004) and conducted original research in the United States. Overall, the study concluded that negative contact with minorities (encompassing, in the Australian studies cited, Indigenous Australians, African Australians, Muslims and asylum seekers) was more likely to produce prejudice than positive contact was to decrease it; and that negative contact tended to override the effects produced by positive contact.

How do attitudes to boat arrivals compare to attitudes towards other groups?

Boat arrivals vs. air arrivals

No Australian studies have quantified community attitudes towards asylum seekers who arrive by air or asked members of the public about why hostility towards boat arrivals is apparently so much greater. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that boat arrivals are the focus of public hostility and harsh policy measures.

Some studies note the existence of asylum seekers who arrive by air but focus only on those who arrive by boat because the latter attract the most punitive policy responses (see for example Hartley and Pedersen, 2015). Others, such as McKay et al. (2012), surveyed people on their understanding of asylum seeking issues and attitudes towards asylum seekers – leaving it open for participants to discuss both boat and air arrivals – but did not specifically ask participants about their views on asylum seekers who arrive by air. The latter study asked ‘how do most asylum seekers arrive in Australia?’ 31.4% of respondents selected ‘plane’, 43.1% selected ‘boat’ and 25.5% stated that they did not know.

Yet until 2011-2012, asylum seekers arrived in greater numbers by air – generally on a valid visa, and without necessarily lodging a protection claim immediately – than by boat. Asylum seekers who arrive by boat have traditionally been granted refugee status at higher rates than those who lodge asylum claims after entering Australia by air. DIBP data show that from 2008-2009 to 2012-2013, between 88% and 100% of asylum seekers who arrived by boat in any one year were granted protection visas, while the grant rate for asylum seekers who reached Australia by other means – usually by air – was much lower, ranging from 43.4% to 51.1% (DIBP, 2013).

Bearing these statistics in mind, understanding community attitudes towards asylum seekers who arrive by air might shed light on hostility towards boat arrivals. Is community sentiment towards air arrivals indifferent? Hostile, but less hostile than towards boat arrivals? Is the public aware that asylum seekers arrive by air; and if not, is this because the phenomenon is seldom mentioned in the media or by politicians? What might this tell us about public concerns over ‘illegality’?

Boat arrivals vs. resettled refugees

Some recent research compares public attitudes towards asylum seekers who arrive by boat and refugees resettled in Australia under the humanitarian

resettlement program. The main sources for these comparisons are the Scanlon Foundation's *Mapping Social Cohesion* reports (2010-2014), and Hartley and Pedersen (2015).

The evidence suggests that there is far greater hostility in the community towards asylum seekers who arrive by boat than towards resettled refugees. The Scanlon reports document a significant increase in support for the humanitarian resettlement program between 2010 and 2012 (from 67% to 75%). During the same period, support for asylum seekers to be granted permanent residency rose from 19% to 23%. Hartley and Pedersen (2015) identified significantly higher levels of threat perception, fear, prejudice and anger towards boat arrivals than resettled refugees. Members of the public were also more likely to support restrictive policy measures towards asylum seekers than resettled refugees.

Anger and fear

Hostility towards boat arrivals appears to be underpinned by different emotions than negative attitudes towards resettled refugees. Hartley and Pedersen's quantitative data showed that people who expressed anger towards asylum seekers were more likely to support harsh policy measures against them, while people who supported more restrictive policies towards resettled refugees tended to express fear towards them.

In open-ended responses, hostile attitudes towards asylum seekers, articulated by 42% of participants, were almost always expressed in terms of anger and indignation at queue-jumping or illegal entry. Negativity towards resettled refugees, expressed by around 30% of the sample², was described in terms of fear and threat: respondents spoke of concern about refugees and migrants – particularly Muslims – being unwilling to integrate and promoting 'extremist views'. They also characterised refugees as economic burdens who take resources from needy Australians.

Boat arrivals vs. migrants

The relationship between public attitudes towards boat arrivals and immigration generally is complex and warrants further study. On the one hand, there is evidence that people tend to conflate asylum seekers, and to some extent resettled refugees, with migration in general (see for example Hartley and Pedersen, 2015; Turoy-Smith *et al.*, 2013; McKay *et al.*, 2012.)

² These percentages refer to the 86 people who responded to open-ended questions, out of a larger sample of 185 who provided quantitative data

Mode of arrival

On the other hand, opinion polls and surveys suggest that the issue of immigration is often considered separately from that of boat arrivals. As noted by Markus (2014), attitudes towards immigration in Australia have fluctuated considerably since the late 1970s, linked to levels of unemployment and the political prominence of immigration issues. Attitudes towards boat arrivals, however, have consistently remained negative since the 1970s (Upton, 2015).

Yet Markus (2014) suggests that there may be a somewhat counter-intuitive link between attitudes on immigration and attitudes towards boat arrivals. In 2014 attitudes towards immigration improved, even as unemployment rose, the first time such a trend has been observed. The proportion of people stating that the current immigration intake is 'too low' rose from 13% in 2013 to 17% in 2014; those who felt the current intake is 'about right' rose from 38% to 42%; while the percentage of people stating that the current intake is 'too high' fell from 42% to 35%.

Markus argues that this unexpected increase in satisfaction with current immigration levels may be linked to a perception that the 'boats have stopped' since the election of the Abbott government. Previous findings (Markus, 2011) of widespread misconceptions about actual immigration levels suggest that many people may believe that overall immigration has decreased as a result of harsh policies against boat arrivals.

In light of these findings, further research into the links between public attitudes towards asylum seekers and views on immigration generally might help to understand the basis for negative attitudes towards unauthorised arrivals.

Conclusions

What do we know?

Negative attitudes towards asylum seekers are most commonly framed in terms of concerns about fairness and 'illegality'. The notion that asylum seekers are 'illegal' often overlaps with fairness concerns – many people believe that arriving by boat is criminal behaviour which deprives 'genuine' refugees of protection, and that illegal entry gives asylum seekers an advantage over Australian citizens by allowing the former to exploit the country's welfare system and resources. Throughout the literature, a strong vein of anger and indignation is evident in comments about the perceived injustices committed by asylum seekers.

Asylum seekers are also regarded as highly threatening to Australia's economy, resources, social fabric, national identity, culture and values. The perceived Islamic faith of asylum seekers is seen as particularly threatening to Australian culture and values, and believed to make asylum seekers unable to integrate into Australian society. Asylum seekers are also seen to pose a threat of 'Islamic extremism' and terrorism: people who fear terrorism are more likely to hold negative attitudes towards asylum seekers.

The research strongly indicates that people with negative attitudes towards asylum seekers often focus on the supposed 'character' of individuals seeking asylum. The issue of character underlies many of the perceptions examined in this paper: that asylum seekers are criminals, potential terrorists, queue-jumpers, untrustworthy, not 'genuine' refugees, unwilling to integrate, religious extremists, etc.

A number of social and individual factors have been found to be associated with attitudes. Studies that have assessed which is more important concur that social-level factors are more influential than individual factors. Demographic factors relating to socio-economic status, level of education, gender, political orientation, location and (according to several studies) age are also correlated with attitudes.

Social norms are important: individuals who believe that societal or national norms are hostile towards asylum seekers are more likely to hold negative views towards them. Moreover, there is some evidence that people tend to overestimate community support for their own opinions and that the more negative one's attitudes towards asylum seekers, the more likely one is to overestimate community consensus. People with a strong attachment to their national identity are also more likely to express negative attitudes.

Individual psychology and personality also play a role. People with more empathetic natures and egalitarian outlooks are more likely to hold positive views of asylum seekers. Conversely, people with authoritarian and conservative outlooks, and those with an hierarchical view of social relationships are more likely to hold negative views.

We know that there are high levels of inaccurate information about unauthorised arrivals in the community, and that this is correlated with negative attitudes. Most people obtain their information from the media. There is evidence that the language used in media portrayals (such as 'illegals') can influence attitudes; and also that people tend to filter out media stories that do not support their existing attitudes. Beliefs commonly expressed by members of the public about asylum seekers – such as that they are queue-jumpers – match statements made by politicians, although the exact nature of the relationship between political rhetoric and community attitudes is unclear. A relatively small proportion of people have also had personal contact with refugees. Most commonly, this improves attitudes, although in some cases, contact causes attitudes to become more negative. Research also suggests that negative contact has a stronger effect on attitudes than positive contact.

What remains unknown or unclear?

There remains a lack of evidence of causation when it comes to attitudes towards asylum seekers. While studies have established strong links between negative attitudes and particular beliefs and social and individual factors, the relationship of cause and effect is often unclear. We have seen that a strong sense of Australian national identity is a predictor of negative attitudes; however it is unknown whether people who are already nationalistic are predisposed towards hostility towards asylum seekers, or whether thinking about a perceived threat from asylum seekers heightens individuals' sense of attachment to the nation. Another example is the correlation between holding 'false beliefs' about asylum seekers and negative attitudes: do people accept 'false beliefs' that support their existing prejudice towards about asylum seekers, or does encountering incorrect information about seekers cause people to hold negative views towards them?

We know that the media plays an extremely important role; however, the extent to which the media shapes attitudes is unclear, as it is possible that people simply consume media that reflects their existing views. The same can be said of political rhetoric: the extent to which politicians' statements (as reported in the media) influence or reflect community opinion remains to be clarified.

It is evident that the reasons for hostile community sentiment cannot be reduced to racism only; yet the issue of racism as a potential factor in public attitudes has

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not been fully explored. This may be a question of methodology: existing studies rely largely on individuals self-reporting their reasons for holding certain views. Given the contemporary taboo against openly expressing racism, it is perhaps unlikely that study participants would frame their objections to asylum seekers in terms of race – as Pedersen *et al.* (2006) found, people were highly conscious of the taboo and at pains to declare that they were not racist. Individuals may not even be aware that their views contain an element of racial prejudice, let alone divulge this to an external source.

A potential avenue for research in Australia would be to design studies that explore whether there is widespread racial stereotyping of asylum seekers at a subliminal level. This could be along the lines of research in the United States which demonstrates that although historical representations depicting African-Americans as ape-like are no longer acceptable in mainstream culture, a subconscious mental association between African Americans and apes remains. In one study, for example, white college students who were shown subliminal images of African-American faces were able to identify drawings of apes much faster than people who were primed with subliminal images of white or other non-white (such as Asian) faces; this included students who stated that they were unaware of historical racist portrayals equating black people with monkeys (Goff *et al.*, 2008).

In a related study described in the same paper, participants were shown a video of police beating a suspect and then asked to rate how justified the beating was. Some students were primed with ape-related words, and a control group was primed with "big cat" words. Participants who were led to believe that the suspect was black were far more likely to rate the beating as justified when they had been primed with ape words. People who believed the suspect was white were no more likely to see the beating as justified whether primed with ape or big cat words (Goff *et al.*, 2008). In the Australian context, adapting a similar methodology using racial stereotypes of Arab or Middle Eastern people while exploring attitudes towards asylum seekers might shed light on whether racism plays a part in negative attitudes.

Further research exploring what people mean when they state that asylum seekers are 'illegal' may be useful, given that this is a dominant theme in the literature. This could explore whether people perceive asylum seeking itself to be illegal, or whether concerns about illegality relate more to the act of entering Australia without a valid visa and related acts such as using people smugglers.

Research on attitudes towards air arrivals might help to unpack this issue: if a majority of people believes that seeking asylum is illegal, they might be expected to object to people who seek asylum after arriving in Australia on a valid visa. On the other hand, if the key issue is illegal entry rather than opposition

to asylum seeking, it is possible that asylum seekers who arrive by air are perceived as less threatening because they hold valid visas and have been 'screened' before arrival.

Research on 'illegality' could also probe whether people believe that there are any circumstances in which a person fleeing persecution might be entitled to enter Australia for the purposes of seeking asylum, including without a valid visa.

Similarly, the possibility that there may be a link between perceptions that the 'boats have stopped' since 2013 and a recent increase in public satisfaction with overall immigration levels – which goes against historical trends given that unemployment is also rising – is worthy of further exploration (Markus, 2014).

The extent to which regarding asylum seekers as 'people like us' is associated with positive attitudes is ambiguous and warrants clarification. On the one hand, there is evidence that people who are empathetic in general, and who feel empathy towards asylum seekers in particular have more positive attitudes towards them, as do people who strongly identify with humanity over nationality. Believing that asylum seekers are fundamentally different from Australians in their values, social attitudes and the way they raise their children correlates with negative attitudes towards them (Greenhalgh and Watt, 2014). Taken together, these findings would suggest that promoting a sense of common humanity and similarity with asylum seekers may be one of the best ways to foster positive community attitudes towards them. Yet Pedersen and Thomas (2013) found that highlighting similarities between Australians and asylum seekers can have the opposite effect, prompting many people to perceive asylum seekers as threatening, while focusing on differences may promote more positive understandings of asylum seekers' vulnerability and Australians' relative privilege.

What are the implications for advocacy?

It is clear that any attempts to change community attitudes towards asylum seekers must address the passionately-expressed concerns about fairness and injustice that dominate public perceptions. Fairness concerns permeate most of the negative beliefs about asylum seekers expressed by large numbers of study participants: that asylum seekers are 'queue-jumpers', 'illegal', deprive 'genuine' refugees of protection and consume resources that are rightly the preserve of Australians and people who enter through the 'proper channels'.

Psychology studies suggest that – beyond the issue of asylum seekers – conceptions of justice and fairness are fundamental to the way in which human beings navigate their way through an uncertain and frightening world (belief in a just world), understand their own and others' place in society (social dominance orientation) and what it means to live in a good society (social justice

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orientation). This may offer a partial explanation for why asylum seekers are a lightning rod for negative public opinion. It also confirms the experience of advocates that tackling community concerns about 'queue-jumping' and other fairness issues is no simple matter. That asylum seekers have become associated with injustice in the public consciousness must therefore be taken very seriously indeed if negative perceptions of them are to be changed.

A nuanced understanding of psychological factors associated with public attitudes is also crucial to avoid stoking further hostility towards asylum seekers. The strategy of humanising refugees is a good example of where the research indicates that caution should be employed. As discussed above, there is strong evidence that empathy and a sense of common humanity play a role in positive attitudes towards asylum seekers. There is also evidence that empathy with the plight of asylum seekers in detention is both more widespread and a stronger predictor of positive attitudes than the emotion of guilt. This suggests that tactics promoting empathy with asylum seekers may be more effective than attempting to foster guilt or shame about Australia's policies.

However, to complicate matters, there is evidence that for some members of the community, being encouraged to think about refugees as an asset to Australia and 'people like us' may be counterproductive, triggering a sense of threat or competition. This raises the difficult question of how to frame campaigns in a manner that promotes empathy without inadvertently provoking negative attitudes.

Given the strong association between individuals' attachment to Australian national identity and negative attitudes, campaigns based on guilt rather than empathy may be more likely to backfire by causing people to feel that a cherished part of their identity is under attack. The findings of Pedersen and Hartley (2007) also suggest that campaigns which seek to make people feel guilty or ashamed as Australians are not likely to work unless they cause people to feel that refugees are not a threat to Australia's stability and/or that the government's treatment of them is illegitimate.

Similarly, personal contact with asylum seekers and refugees is evidently not a panacea: while in a majority of cases it appears to improve attitudes, for a significant section of the community, personal experience has been shown to harden opinion. McKay *et al.*'s (2012) data suggest that advocates seeking to improve attitudes through personal contact may need to take demographic factors into account: women in a professional occupation, of middle or high socio-economic status or who held a university or post-secondary education, were more apt to be positively influenced by personal contact, whereas the significant minority whose attitudes became more negative as a result tended to be either male or retired.

Conclusions

The media is the main source of information on asylum seekers, and there is evidence that language used in the media to describe asylum seekers impacts on attitudes towards them. Yet the evidence that people tend to filter out information that does not support their beliefs suggests that simply improving portrayals of asylum seekers in the media may not be sufficient to change the views of people whose attitudes are already entrenched.

The nature of public concerns about illegality and 'genuineness' raise the question of whether it may be useful for advocates to consider different strategies for addressing fears about illegal entry, rather than reiterating that it is legal to seek asylum. Concerns about 'illegality', as we have seen, appear to be related not so much to the act of seeking asylum, but to the act of entering Australia without a visa, with the assistance of 'criminal' people smugglers. The insistence by many study participants that boat arrivals are not 'genuine' refugees implies that seeking asylum, if one is 'genuine', is perceived as legitimate.

Yet there is something of a Catch-22 in public perceptions, because while people do not appear to be saying that seeking asylum is itself illegal, many believe that the very fact of using people smugglers to come to Australia by boat signals that asylum seekers' refugee claims lack merit. Focusing on the legality of seeking asylum may not be sufficient to assuage strongly-held beliefs that people entering without visas are of bad character because they have shown a willingness to breach Australian laws and procedures; that they associate with criminals and are perhaps by extension criminals themselves; that they pose a terrorist or other security risk because their identities are unknown and they are entering Australia via the 'back door'; and that for these reasons they are unlikely to be 'genuine' refugees.

Although there is much that remains unknown about the basis for public attitudes towards asylum seekers, the research demonstrates that a nuanced understanding is crucial. It cannot be assumed, for example, that fostering awareness of the similarities between asylum seekers and Australians, or promoting more positive media coverage, will promote empathy and goodwill. Attitudes are complex, and cannot be reduced to single factors such as racism or a lack of personal experience of meeting asylum seekers. Overall, the evidence suggests the importance of careful targeting of advocacy, taking into account demographic and individual psychological factors; and the need to address the public's fairness concerns and profound sense of threat.

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