



Asylum Seekers Prejudice: Tertiary education, the media, and the government

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A review of media reports and government communications showed evidence of anti-asylum seeker sentiment and prejudicial attitudes towards asylum seekers in Australia (those arriving by boat). In the context of this background, reasons for the unexpected finding of relatively low levels of prejudice towards asylum seekers in a sample of university students from a north Queensland university are discussed, including the potential relevance of a relationship between attitudes and educational level. The salience of education in attitude formation led to a discussion of the importance of culturally aware university teaching policies to counter prejudice based on misinformation or bias. University teaching policies, in turn, have been strongly influenced by professional accreditation requirements, particularly in the health sector. Attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers are also used to illustrate the role of good journalism in attitude formation and examples of positive and negative journalism practices are described. While much greater attention to cultural awareness issues is evident in current university teaching, there is, as yet, no strong evidence to support positive outcomes as a result of this teaching focus.

Key words Asylum seekers, refugees, prejudice, university teaching, health, media



Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines refugees as people who are “...unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR, 2010, p. 3). It estimates that in 2014, of a total of 13.9 million people who had been forcibly displaced from their homes worldwide, 2.9 million were considered refugees as they had crossed international borders (UNHCR, 2015). Signatories to the United Nations conventions relating to the status of refugees (including Australia) are required to provide protection and safety for refugees who seek out their sovereign borders (UNHCR, 2010). It is legal in international and Australian law for a person to seek asylum in Australia. The term ‘asylum seeker’ is used to describe a person who has made a claim for refugee status that remains to be assessed (Refugee Council of Australia, 2012). In the 2013-2014 financial year 18,718 asylum seekers arrived in Australia, of whom 9,072 arrived by boat (Parliament of Australia, 2015).

Attitudes towards asylum seekers

The Australian literature shows evidence of negative and prejudicial attitudes towards asylum seekers (Anderson, Stuart, & Rossen, 2015; Suhnan, Pedersen, & Hartley, 2012). Public concerns associated with negative attitudes include concerns about possible terrorism risks (McKay, Thomas, & Warwick Blood, 2011; Pedersen, Dunn, Forrest, & McGarty, 2012) and fear of Muslims (Pedersen et al., 2012).

A large number of other factors have also been linked to prejudice. The list includes threats to the Australian way of life (Every & Augoustinos, 2008; Pedersen et al., 2012), the legality of asylum seeker claims (McDonald, 2011), an unreasonable burden being placed on Australians (Pedersen, Attwell, & Heveli, 2005), asylum seekers jumping the queue (Hartley & Pedersen, 2007), and asylum seeker values not aligning with the values of Australians (Esses, Veenvliet, Hodson, & Mihic, 2008).

Prejudicial attitudes towards asylum seekers have been associated with lower levels of education (Schweitzer, Perkoulidis, Krome, Ludlow, & Ryan, 2005) and being male and elderly (Pedersen et al., 2005). Perception of support for particular beliefs within the community (Pedersen, Griffiths, & Watt, 2008), a hierarchical social dominance orientation (Anderson et al., 2015), right wing

authoritarianism (Anderson et al., 2015), holding false beliefs about asylum seekers (Hartley & Pedersen, 2007), human identity salience (Nickerson & Louis, 2008), and high levels of national identity (Nickerson & Louis, 2008) are also related to prejudice.

A recent meta-analysis (Anderson & Ferguson, 2017) looked at the correlates of negative attitudes towards asylum seekers in Australia. The analyses showed that while being male, having less education, being politically conservative and having a higher level of national identity were all associated with negative attitudes, the correlations between the variables were not high and the authors noted the need for research to identify further moderators of the relationships.

It is likely that attitudes towards refugees and asylum seeker are affected by knowledge of events associated with these groups. Schweitzer et al. (2005) suggested that a number of salient incidents such as the ‘Bali Bombings’, ‘September 11’, and the ‘Tampa Baby overboard incident’ have influenced attitudes towards asylum seekers. In the latter, asylum seekers were accused of throwing their children overboard in order to be rescued by the Royal Australian Navy. This accusation was later proved to be false (Bleiker, Campbell, Hutchison, & Nicholson, 2013).

An encouraging but anomalous study

McWaters and Hawkins (in preparation) reported an innovative study design that used concepts borrowed from social psychology to assess attitudes towards asylum seekers who travel to Australia by boat. The study was innovative in that, as well as using some standard psychometric measures of attitudes (the Attitudes Towards Asylum Seekers Scale (Pedersen et al., 2005), a measure of empathy and an attitude thermometer), it also used some more indirect or subtle measures. These included an indirect behavioural measure (the distance between the two chairs that participants set up for an intended meeting with a refugee) and a measure which compared the amount of money respondents believed should be allocated to support refugees as compared with money allocations for other groups. The study also tried to reduce prejudice by comparing an experimental group who listened to an account of a refugee’s situation which was designed to be humanising and comparing this with a control group who listened to a neutral story. The study used 54 university students from a Far North Australia university. While the experimental intervention did result in increased empathy for refugees, it did not reduce the average prejudice scores. Nonetheless, the average level of prejudice found was remarkably low, especially when compared with other published results.

The Attitudes Towards Asylum Seekers Scale uses a seven point Likert-like scale with higher scores indicating more negative attitudes. The average score of 2.60 on the Attitudes Towards Asylum Seeker Scale found by McWaters and Hawkins (in preparation) is lower than the mean score of 4.66 found in a well-educated sample of the general population (Pedersen et al., 2005). It is also lower than the mean score of 3.44 found in sample of 100 Australian university students (Anderson et al., 2015) and lower than the mean score of 3.13 found in a community-based Australian study (Greenhalgh & Watt, 2015). Anderson and Ferguson (2017) found that participants who were less educated reported more negative attitudes (effect size = -.18, $p < .001$). We wondered how to best understand the low prejudice levels found in McWaters and Hawkins (in preparation) and whether the results might be attributable to higher education levels or to some other factor.

The low general levels of measured prejudice is a welcome finding and suggests that prejudice towards asylum seekers may have been little affected by the negative portrayal of these people by media and the government. It is likely, though, that the results from this university educated, predominately relatively young and female sample cannot be generalised. The finding that not all Australians are highly prejudiced towards asylum seekers prompts further consideration of the factors that mediate attitudes. While agencies devoted to supporting refugees (the Refugee Council of Australia, the Australian Refugee Association and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre) do what they can, the broader role of journalism, policies from the health sector and various professional representation groups, and trends in university teaching policies in mitigating prejudicial attitudes deserve particular attention.

Journalism

After a decade of following refugee stories, including time spend on Christmas Island where refugees by boat were being held, the journalist Page Taylor wrote of a process where she said “I lost my soul” (Page, 2017, p. 19). Her personal torment came from challenges over time to her initial position, which was clearly pro-refugee. Evidence of “liars, opportunists and innocent victims” affected her views (p. 19). Her article tracked the refugee situation over time and changes in Australian government. She described the mental health difficulties faced by refugees, the self-harm they engaged in and the distress of the people involved including Department of Immigration and Border Protection staff who are charged with their welfare. Taylor herself confronted instances of children and adults drowning. Such profoundly sad events had clearly and obviously



affected many of those directly involved and observers too. Amongst the many stories about genuine refugees were juxtaposed cases of people who simply preferred to live in Australia. Taylor described refugees refusing to eat the food provided “Do you know how much I paid to come here?” and requests for cosmetic surgery including breast enhancements. She reported that a former Labour immigration minister (Brendan O’Connor) noted that while he saw the bodies of men women and children, these people had left transit countries to come to Australia and were not, when intercepted, fleeing persecution. He said this prevented him from bringing righteousness and sanctimony to the discussion and that the situation was “very complicated” (p. 19). This complexity seems to be part of the reason that Taylor moved from being so pro-refugee to now being more hard-headed. The same complexity perhaps illustrates the importance of and need for high quality journalism to help the public understand the refugee situation in a fashion that goes beyond simplistic party line slogans.

Some time ago Romano (2004) described the role of journalists in mediating information provided to the public about asylum seekers and refugees in Australia. Her work criticised over reliance on government sources by journalists. She described research showing that “media coverage has been heavily influenced by the Federal Government's generation and manipulation of public fear for electoral gain” (p. 55). Romano reported that the Defence Minister's office instructed the department's director-general of communication strategies in 2001 that “no personalising or humanising images were to be taken” of people on boats they intercepted (Odgers, 2002, p 9). She also described reports from a journalist who received aggressive telephone calls from Federal Government media relation staff when stories had not conformed to the government-preferred perspectives.

Bleiker et al. (2013) provided evidence of dehumanisation via an analysis of 87 front pages from two of Australia’s lead newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*. The front pages featured over the periods of the 1st of August to the 31st of December 2001, and the 1st of October 2009 to the 30th of September 2011. The results revealed that only 6% of the pictures were of individual asylum seekers, which would have enabled emotion to be seen and thus evoke a compassionate response (Small & Verrochi, 2009). Furthermore, 66% of pictures were of medium (4-15) and large (16 +) groups of asylum seekers, which dilutes the distress felt by the viewer towards the asylum seekers, and therefore reduces empathy (Kogut & Ritov, 2005). The study also

criticised the Australian government for using the pictures of asylum seekers to build public fear for political gain.

Klocker and Dunn (2003) looked at the representation of asylum seekers in newspapers (*The Advertiser* and *The Sunday Mail*) and government releases, and found the portrayal of asylum seekers to be hyper negative. McKay et al. (2011) analysed newspaper articles featured in *The Herald Sun*, *The Age* and *The Australian*, over the period of the 16th to 20th April 2009, after an incident in which a boat carrying asylum seekers exploded. The results showed that the media reports covering the incident were generally negative, and reinforced moral panic in society by supporting the following ideas about asylum seekers: illegal queue jumpers, un-Australian, dishonest, exploiters of Australians through economic gain, risk to Australian society, and risk to Australian security. Some newspaper articles did not adhere to the press council's guidelines (Australian Press Council, 2011) at the time by using the terms illegal immigrants, illegal refugees, and illegal asylum seekers.

The Australian government has also been responsible for the dehumanisation of asylum seekers through its legislation, policy and discourse. The misuse of terms such as illegal, illegitimate and queue jumpers occurred extensively in parliamentary debate surrounding asylum seekers in 2011 (Rowe & O'Brien, 2014). Negative attitudes have been associated with false beliefs (i.e., inaccurate and misleading statements), which have been located in political statements (Pedersen, Watt, & Hansen, 2006). An analysis by McDonald (2011) of the political discourse leading up to the 2010 federal election concluded that negative portrayal of asylum seekers was being used for short-term political gain. Every and Augoustinos (2007) identified different ways in which the government's representations of asylum seekers were racist including unreasonably generalising about asylum seekers. While it is worth noting that government policy relies somewhat on public opinion (Haslam & Holland, 2012), the evidence suggests that the government has played a large part in perpetuating the dehumanisation of asylum seekers.

The dehumanisation of asylum seekers is important as it can have devastating consequences for both public opinion and the experiences of asylum seekers. Dehumanisation of an outgroup may produce; feelings of superiority by the ingroup over the outgroup (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014), reduced helping behaviours (Cuddy, Rock, & Norton, 2007), reduced forgiveness (Tam et al., 2007), rejection (Vaes, Paladino, Castelli, Leyens, & Giovanazzi, 2003), discrimination (Pereira,



Vala, & Leyens, 2009), and decreased feelings of guilt when any form of wrong doing occurs (Zebel, Zimmermann, Viki, & Doosje, 2008). It is evident from the literature that a large portion of the Australian public dehumanises asylum seekers (Haslam & Holland, 2012; Haslam & Pedersen, 2007), and this has contributed to justifying the widespread negative and prejudicial attitudes towards them (Greenhalgh & Watt, 2015).

There have, of course, been many notable Australian attempts at balanced journalism. For example, *The Conversation* which is self-described as an independent source of news and views, sourced from the academic and research community, has provided a research repository on asylum seeker issues (Pickering, 2012) though curiously the last entry is dated 2012. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation television program *Media Watch* has drawn attention to misrepresentation of facts about the treatment of refugees (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2011). In terms of viewer impact, the television documentary *Go back to where you came from* is noteworthy. This program made a particular attempt to humanise the plight faced by refugees. It was screened by the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). Under the *Special Broadcasting Service Act 1991*, the SBS has editorial independence from government and its Charter includes reflecting Australia's multicultural society. More than half a million people watched Series 1 to 3, which were broadcast between 2011 and 2015 (Wikipedia, 2017). These programs are still available via an on-demand television service (SBSOnDemand).

Cooper, Olejniczak, Lenette, and Smedley (2017) highlighted the importance of journalism when they said “the media has a ‘privileged’ social–cultural position, able to legitimise particular truths and shape public attitudes” (p. 87). Their analysis found what they called “dominant negative framing of refugee issues” at the national level, but in contrast the regional media used positive, humanising frames and included refugees’ personal stories. In spite of this positive feature of regional reporting, Cooper et al. (2017) concluded that “asylum seekers and refugees from regional areas still lack agency to influence how their stories are framed” (p. 87).

University teaching and influences from the professions

University teaching in Australia generally has become more responsive to the importance of cross-cultural awareness. Papers describing pedagogical theory (e.g., Gale, Mills, & Cross, 2017; Warren, 2017) have provided the background justification for cross cultural training and many descriptions



of cross-cultural teaching in particular disciplines or programs and some evaluations of these efforts have emerged.

Improved recognition of the importance of cultural responsiveness has started close to home with attempts to better understand the challenges of higher education for indigenous students in Australia (e.g., Martin, Nakata, Nakata, & Day, 2017; Rochecouste et al., 2017). Refugees too, have been given attention. Baker, Ramsay, Irwin, and Miles (2017) described the ways in which students from refugee backgrounds have managed their university studies, including their preference for support from trusted individuals rather than ‘cold’ formal and official channels of support. Singh, Tregale, Wallace, and Whiteford (2017) described the value of a refugee mentoring program at Macquarie University and Keengwe (2017) has provided a handbook on research on promoting cross cultural competence in teacher education.

Inclusion of a cross-cultural focus in university teaching has often been associated with or prompted by professional accreditation requirements, particularly in the health sciences. For example, recent revisions (August 2017) by the agency that accredits teaching programs in psychology in Australian tertiary institutions have particularly emphasised cultural awareness. There are 35 mentions of terms such as ‘cultural awareness and responsiveness’, ‘culturally appropriate’, ‘cultural considerations’, ‘culturally diverse’, ‘cultural contexts’, and ‘culturally appropriate language’, in the new 42 page accreditation document (Australian Psychology Accreditation Council, 2017). The literature on the teaching of psychology in Australia also includes a strong cultural emphasis. Geerlings, Thompson, Bouma, and Hawkins (2017) described instances of cultural competence training in clinical psychology training. They reported a marked increase in attention to cultural competence in clinical psychology practice in Australia.

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) ethics committee requires Australian psychologists to “have a high regard for the diversity and uniqueness of people and their right to linguistically and culturally appropriate services” (Australian Psychological Society, 2014 p. 11). The APS also hosts a refugee issues interest group and has published a position statement on the psychological wellbeing of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia (Australian Psychological Society, 2016). This position statement was guided by a literature review conducted for the APS (Murray, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2008) in which the practice of detention was criticised due to negative consequences



including high suicide rates, high levels of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, high levels of major depressive disorder, and poor education opportunities.

Social work programs also have a strong cross cultural focus and the accrediting body for Australian social work degrees requires that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and doing must be taught in all social work degrees (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2012). Bennett, Redfern, and Zubrzycki (2017) described co-constructing social work curriculum resources with Aboriginal communities.

The AASW has published a number of position papers, which advocate for better treatment of refugees and asylum seekers. The association has written to the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection regarding the Syrian crisis. Together with a large number of representatives from nursing, the mental health sector, the public health sector, The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists and various NGOs, the AASW has also written to the Australian Prime Minister regarding the prolonged detention of asylum seekers, particularly children, on Nauru and Manus Island (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2017).

Further examples of university focus on cross-cultural awareness are available; especially from the health sciences, e.g., midwifery (Fleming, Creedy, & West, 2017), nursing (Usher, Mills, West, & Power, 2017), occupational therapy (Yu, Brown, & Farnworth, 2017), dentistry (Mariño, Ghanim, Barrow, & Morgan, 2017) and medicine (Australian Medical Association, 2015). Other university disciplines have also been responsive, e.g., accountancy (Taylor, 2016), policing (Grossman, 2017) and online learning (Dreamson, Thomas, Lee Hong, & Kim, 2017).

To help explain the growth in cultural awareness within tertiary training, Sit, Mak, and Neill (2017) reported that nearly a quarter of onshore Australian tertiary students were international students in 2015. They noted that skills with culturally and linguistically diverse clients form part of the core competencies for all Australian health care professionals.

Attempts have been made to assess the benefits of cross cultural training (e.g., Sit et al., 2017). A recent systematic review of cultural competency training in university based professional training of health professionals (Australian and international studies) concluded that there is insufficient



evidence to provide a strong basis for recommending the inclusion of specific cultural competence education and training strategies in the professional training of university based health professionals (Clifford, McCalman, Jongen, & Bainbridge, 2017). Jongen, McCalman, Bainbridge, and Clifford (2018) described uncertainty as to whether increased practitioner cultural competence improves healthcare and health outcomes, and Truong, Paradies, and Priest (2014) found only weak evidence for improvements in patient outcomes in their systematic review of interventions to improve cultural competency in healthcare.

Conclusion

While Australia likes to see itself as the land of the fair go, and there is indeed evidence of improved acceptance of difference, as with the recent same sex marriage plebiscite and consequent legislative proposals, evidence of widespread prejudice towards refugees and asylum seekers remains. It has been argued that while such attitudes have been promoted by dehumanising media representations and government policies, a variety of influences now act in mitigation. These influences include attempts by journalists to humanise the plight faced by refugees, the promotion of culturally aware policies by various professional organisations and, in particular, a strong focus on cultural inclusion within university teaching policies and practices. Evidence of attitude and behaviour change because of these factors is not yet compelling.

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