

## Re-examining Prejudice Against Asylum Seekers in Australia: The Role of People Smugglers, the Perception of Threat, and Acceptance of False Beliefs

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*Previous research finds a relationship between prejudice against asylum seekers in Australia and negative ideas invoked through political rhetoric; these include perceptions of threat and the acceptance of false beliefs. In recent years, political debate has also seen an increase in hostility towards people smugglers. In this study, we examine whether the expected link between prejudice and perceptions of threat and false beliefs still holds, and we extend this by examining how people smuggler prejudice affects asylum seeker prejudice. A total of 138 members of the Perth community completed a questionnaire regarding their views on these issues. Regression analyses indicated that all three variables significantly and independently predicted prejudice against asylum seekers. Results also showed that prejudice against people smugglers was significantly higher than prejudice against asylum seekers. Our results are consistent with public political rhetoric on community attitudes regarding this topical issue.*

Few social justice issues in Australia have attracted as much attention and controversy in recent times as the issue of asylum seekers. Being a signatory to the United Nations Refugee Convention of 1951 (United Nations, 2007), the protection of asylum seekers and refugees is sanctioned under both international and Australian law. An asylum-seeker “is an individual who has sought international protection and whose claim for refugee status has not yet been determined” (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2011, p. 3). In contrast, a refugee is an individual whose protection has been deemed necessary by the UNHCR or a State who is a signatory to the Refugee Convention. This Convention was a response to the persecution of Jewish populations and other minority groups during WWII; it was hoped that with this in place, no individual would be without the protection of the international community when faced with persecution (Crock, Saul, & Dastyari, 2006). As such, the Australian government is obliged to process asylum

seekers’ claims and to offer them refugee status if their claims have been verified.

Despite however, Australia’s Commitment to the Refugee Convention, asylum seekers have occupied a prominent place in recent political history; since the early 2000s, a number of critical events have placed asylum seekers at the centre of the divisive border-security debate in Australia (McKay, Thomas, & Kneebone, 2011). In late August 2001, a group of 438 shipwrecked asylum seekers were denied permission to disembark at Christmas Island, the closest Australian territory, after being rescued by passing Norwegian cargo ship the MV Tampa. The then Howard Government’s refusal to allow the Tampa to dock at Christmas Island drew widespread criticism from national and international bodies for ignoring traditional maritime practices; conversely, a large proportion of the Australian community supported the Howard Government’s actions, reflecting the growing opposition against asylum seekers in the community (Marr & Wilkinson, 2003;

McKay et al., 2011). Related events like the 'Children Overboard' affair in which Mr Howard and some of his senior ministers falsely claimed that a group of asylum seekers had deliberately thrown their children from their boat in order to be rescued by Australian authorities further polarised the community's attitudes and prejudice against asylum seekers (Marr & Wilkinson, 2003).

It has been argued that the stance taken by the conservative Howard Government (1996-2007) on asylum seekers was particularly draconian (Briskman, Latham, & Goddard, 2008) given that relatively few people request asylum in Australia when compared to other countries (UNHCR, 2011). Much of the Howard Government's rhetoric on this issue focused on creating the narrative that mainstream Australia had a reason to fear asylum seekers by positioning them as 'the other'. Asylum seekers were increasingly represented as a threat to national sovereignty and identity during this period, as well as a threat to the safety and wellbeing of the Australian community (Marr & Wilkinson, 2003). Asylum seekers who arrived at Australian territorial borders without prior authorisation (i.e., a visa) were depicted as illegal or deviant "boatpeople" who undermined established legal processes (Pickering, 2004), and who were potential criminals and national security threats (Al-Natour, 2010). Furthermore, people who arrived in this manner have been described as people who unfairly disadvantaged other refugees waiting in orderly humanitarian migration programmes (Hoffman, 2010). This political rhetoric culminated in Howard's infamous 2001 election campaign slogan for harsher asylum seeker policies: "We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come" (Howard, 2001).

Although the law of indefinite mandatory detention for unauthorised asylum seekers was first introduced by the Labor Party government in 1994 (Crock et al.,

2006), it became a key border-security policy for the Liberal-National Party Coalition during the Howard era. Whereas most western countries detained asylum seekers for a short time in order to perform health, identity, and security checks before being released into the community, Australian policy required that asylum seekers travelling by boat be kept in detention for the entire duration of their claims being processed (Marr & Wilkinson, 2003). Additionally, a major procedural change to Australia's Refugee and Special Humanitarian Programme involved the linking of a part of its 'offshore' component, which resettles refugees from other countries after referral by the UNHCR, with the 'onshore' component, which allows for the assessment of claims made by asylum seekers within Australian territory (Mares, 2002). This meant that a place was taken from the 'offshore' programme for every 'onshore' asylum seeker found to be a refugee, which affected the annual quota for the selection of overseas applicants. Perhaps one of the most contentious of all the border-security practices at that time was the implementation of 'temporary protection visas' (TPVs) which only granted temporary residence status to 'boat people' found to be refugees; TPVs were the subject of much criticism as they did not, among other things, allow for immediate family members living overseas to reunite with the TPV holder in Australia, and recipients had to reapply for refugee status every three years (Briskman et al., 2008).

To mental health professionals, probably the most concerning issue about the border-security debate is the consequences that these policies have had on asylum seekers. Psychologists and researchers in allied fields have shown that these tougher policies have contributed to the increase of detrimental psychological conditions in asylum seekers over the last decade. Prolonged immigration detention has been

linked to a higher incidence of mental illness (e.g. depression, post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]), increased risk of self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Davidson, Murray, & Schweitzer, 2008; Schweitzer, Melville, Steel, & Lacharez, 2006). Furthermore, one study has shown that holding a TPV was the strongest predictor of PTSD, anxiety and depression (Momartin, Steel, Coello, Aroche, Silove, & Brooks, 2006); the restrictive conditions imposed by TPVs have been described by many refugees as “a continuing gross injustice and punishment” (Coffey, Kaplan, Sampson, & Tucci, 2010, p. 2075).

When the Australian Labor Party took office in 2007, the language of the asylum seeker debate was toned down, arguably signalling a more compassionate approach to the issue. Indeed, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2007-2010) declared that his government’s stance on asylum seekers was “tough but humane” (Prime Minister Kevin Rudd joins the 7:30 Report, 2009). Some of the more controversial border-protection practices, like the use of TPVs, were abolished (Department of Immigration and Citizenship [DIAC], 2008). However, despite the progress made on this pivotal issue, the mandatory detention of unauthorised asylum seekers has remained a cornerstone of government policy and the link between the offshore and onshore program still remains. Mandatory detention was implemented as a way to deter asylum seekers from making the boat journey from transit countries to Australia, and while there is no evidence that mandatory detention actually functioned as an effective deterrent (Edwards, 2011; Hoffman, 2008), political leaders have continued to affirm that this policy can ‘stop the boats’. Reflecting on the current situation, the Australian Psychological Society – the country’s peak professional body for psychology – has criticised the system of mandatory detention and the associated increase in psychological

problems in the asylum seeker population (The Australian Psychological Society, 2011)<sup>1</sup>.

Asylum seekers who enter Australian territory by boat have engendered a large amount of prejudice in the community, despite the fact that these asylum seekers have not broken any laws that have formally adopted the guidelines of the UN Refugee Convention (Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, 2010). There is consistent evidence that prejudice against asylum seekers is a widespread phenomenon across the Australian community (Klocker, 2004; Pedersen, Attwell, & Heveli, 2005; Schweitzer, Perkoulidis, Krome, Ludlow, & Ryan, 2005). A number of researchers have argued that political rhetoric and inaccurate media representations continue to propagate unfavourable community sentiments concerning asylum seekers (Every & Augoustinos, 2008; Pedersen, Watt, & Hansen, 2006; McKay et al., 2011). With this in mind, three concepts are particularly relevant to the present study of prejudice against asylum seekers – attitudes towards people smugglers, perceptions of threat, and the acceptance of false information as true. These three concepts will be outlined below.

#### *Attitudes towards People Smugglers*

Although much of the attention has been focussed on asylum seekers, people smugglers have become increasingly central to the Australian border-security debate. For the purpose of this paper, people smugglers are defined simply as people who transport, or attempt to transport, asylum seekers to a safe destination. In the modern context, people smugglers have been characterised in starkly contrasting ways – some argue that people smugglers are inherently immoral and pose a potential threat to border-security, while others suggest that they help to restore the security of those who seek their services (Maley, 2001). In Australia, people smugglers are legally defined as criminals, and government policy has concentrated on

punitive measures and mandatory jail sentences; furthermore, they are usually maligned in the Australian discourse (Hoffman, 2010). Hoffman (2010) further argues that there has been a discernible shift in the language of the asylum seeker debate, where the people-smuggling business is increasingly represented as the central issue in Australia's border-security discourse. If so, it is possible that the Australian community's negativity has been transferred from asylum seekers to people smugglers. Certainly, former Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd famously denounced people smugglers as "the absolute scum of the earth" and that they should "rot in hell" (Rodgers, 2009, n.p.).

This emphasis on people smugglers in the border-security debate has continued under the leadership of the current Labor Prime Minister, Julia Gillard (also see Smit, 2011, on this point). On December 15, 2010, a boat (later named SIEV 221) carrying between 70 and 100 asylum seekers sank in turbulent weather just off the coast of Christmas Island, killing at least 28 people (Rourke, 2010). Reflecting on this event and her government's approach to border-security, Ms Gillard noted: "what this is about is smashing the people smugglers' business model. I don't think Australians want to see people risking their lives on a dangerous journey. They certainly don't want to see a repeat of the kind of scenes we saw at Christmas Island around Christmas time when asylum seekers drowned in the water" (Gillard, 2011). It is apparent here that negativity has been directed more towards people smugglers than the asylum seekers themselves. As an aside, it is interesting to note that Dr Khalid Koser, the academic who developed the term 'business model of migrant smuggling', has said that "the Prime Minister doesn't appear fully to understand the model, and thus her government's efforts to 'smash' it are unlikely to be effective" (Koser, 2011, n.p.).

There is limited research into the social

backgrounds of people smugglers, especially in the Australian setting. However, it has been found that people-smuggling operations in this region are likely to arise in response to local problems (Hoffman, 2010), an observation that has previously been found in the overseas literature (Marfleet, 2006). Hoffman (2010) noted that some people smugglers have also been identified as UNHCR refugees themselves, becoming involved in people-smuggling after arriving in Indonesia; at the time of her research, people-smuggling was not yet considered a criminal offence, and these people smugglers stated that they were trying to help other refugees reach safety in Australia.

At the time of writing this article, 12 judges have spoken out to condemn the mandatory 5-year prison sentences that they were obligated to give to the crew of people-smuggling boats; as Western Australian Chief Justice Wayne Martin pointed out, most members of these crews are "impoverished and illiterate" Indonesian fishermen (Dodd, 2012). Prominent refugee lawyer George Newhouse, who represented the survivors and the families of the deceased on SIEV 221 at the coronial inquest in Perth, took these points further. Specifically, due to the government's policy of imposing severe penalties for people-smuggling, untrained fishermen are often put in charge of boats by the smugglers; further, because the confiscation of people-smuggling vessels is part of government policy, the boats used in these voyages are often not seaworthy which can have potentially disastrous results (G. Newhouse, personal communication, February 18, 2012).

While the corpus of research exploring the factors shaping people's attitudes towards asylum seekers has grown rapidly in recent decades both internationally (e.g., Lynn & Lea, 2003) and domestically (e.g., McKay et al., 2011), to our knowledge no empirical research has examined whether prejudice towards asylum seekers is influenced by

prejudice against people smugglers. Given the salience of people-smuggling in the border-security debate (for example, Rodgers, 2009), it is important to consider whether the community's perception of asylum seekers is influenced by their attitudes towards people smugglers in order to understand this issue more completely.

#### *Asylum Seekers and the Perception of Threat*

Some research regarding asylum seekers has been conducted in terms of perceived 'realistic' threats (those that are believed to jeopardise the welfare, economic status, and political dominance of the ingroup) and perceived 'symbolic' threats (those that are believed to undermine the norms, values, and culture of the ingroup) (Corenblum & Stephan, 2001; Schweitzer et al., 2005). Here, antipathy towards a particular group can be based on a purely *perceived* threat that may not actually constitute a real danger to the ingroup. To illustrate, previous research has suggested that people who are prejudiced against asylum seekers are also more likely to perceive them as a potential threat to Australian economic resources; additionally, the belief that asylum seekers present a challenge to Australian culture is an example of a symbolic threat (Schweitzer et al., 2005). It would appear that the perception of threat plays a large role in the formation of prejudice in the national discourse of asylum seekers.

#### *False Beliefs about Asylum Seekers*

Previous research has shown that false beliefs are implicated in people's attitudes about asylum seekers. False beliefs involve the acceptance of information that is factually inaccurate or incorrect – for example, the belief that asylum seekers are 'queue jumpers' (Pedersen et al., 2005). For the vast majority of asylum seekers, an actual 'queue' does not exist because originating countries often lack Australian consular assistance; furthermore, Australia employs a quota system rather than a queue in deciding on

refugee intake. The perception of 'queue jumping' is an artefact of changes to policy; as mentioned above, the Howard Government merged the 'onshore' and a part of the 'offshore' components of the Refugee and Humanitarian Programme (Mares, 2002) effectively reducing the number of places available for the resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers, and reinforcing the rhetoric of 'queue jumping' (see also Refugee Council of Australia, 2011). More recently, other false beliefs have come into widespread circulation, including the belief that it is unnecessary for asylum seekers to seek asylum in Australia due to their travelling through 'safe' countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, despite the fact that these countries are not signatories to the Refugee Convention and have no legal obligation to offer protection (Hoffman, 2010; Pedersen & Hoffman, 2010).

Such beliefs are common, and early research has found a relationship between prejudice against asylum seekers and false beliefs (e.g., Pedersen et al., 2005). This relationship has also been found with respect to other minority groups such as Indigenous Australians (Pedersen, Griffiths, Contos, Bishop, & Walker, 2000) and Muslim Australians (Pedersen, Aly, Hartley, & McGarty, 2009). Given that the Australian debate about asylum seekers is dynamic, it would be interesting to examine whether this relationship with prejudice still holds when we consider the influence of more recent false beliefs. If refugee advocates are aware of common myths, and how they relate to prejudice, this may provide a starting-point for educational interventions.

#### *Overview of the Present Study*

This study is based on community psychology principles. As noted by Dalton, Elias, and Wandersman (2007) "there are no truly individual problems" (p. 6). Hence, although we investigate individual attitudes with regard to this important social justice issue, we also examine potential social

antecedents that implicate governmental policy and rhetoric. As also noted by Dalton et al. (2007), policy research and advocacy are important issues with respect to community psychology. Community psychologists stress the need for an ecological approach (e.g., Duffy & Wong, 2003; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005) and we aim to investigate the interaction between the individual and the community within our study. We do not claim to be value-free; indeed, we wish to state plainly that we are critical of the current approach to asylum seeker processing especially concerning the mandatory detention of asylum seekers. The importance of values is a key principle underpinning the field of community psychology (Prilleltensky, 2001).

Previous research indicates that a relationship exists between prejudice against asylum seekers in the Australian community and negative inflammatory political rhetoric (Pedersen et al., 2006); most relevantly for the present study, the perception of threat and the acceptance of false beliefs about asylum seekers. Furthermore, in recent years, commentators have noted that the political rhetoric surrounding asylum seekers has changed in its content towards a more negative focus on people smugglers (Hoffman, 2010). This contextual change provides an opportunity to consider whether the expected link between the ideas circulated in popular political rhetoric and the community's attitudes towards asylum seekers still holds, especially concerning the rhetoric about people smugglers. It is possible that studying the recent political strategy of demonising people smugglers – as opposed to demonising asylum seekers – can extend our understanding of prejudice towards asylum seekers more generally and again provide useful information to activists attempting to address anti-asylum seeker sentiment. While social-psychological research on asylum seekers continues to expand, research on attitudes towards people

smugglers remains scant. Indeed, to our knowledge, there is no quantitative research linking prejudice against asylum seekers with prejudice against people smugglers.

With this in mind, our study had three aims. Our first aim was to compare prejudice levels against asylum seekers and people smugglers. In light of the relatively recent emphasis in the Australian discourse on people smugglers as a group (Hoffman, 2010), we predicted that prejudice against people smugglers would be significantly greater than prejudice against asylum seekers. Our second aim was to examine whether prejudice against asylum seekers can be predicted by social-psychological variables related to political rhetoric. We predicted that the four independent variables (prejudice against people smugglers; realistic and symbolic threat; false beliefs) would significantly predict prejudice against asylum seekers. Because previous research has found a positive relationship between holding false beliefs about asylum seekers and prejudice (Pedersen et al., 2005), our third aim was to investigate whether the relationship between prejudice and false beliefs still stood, in light of the emergence of more recent political rhetoric (e.g., “temporary protection visas will stop the boats”). We predicted that the higher the prejudice, the greater the acceptance of inaccurate or incorrect information.

## Method

### *Participants*

A total of 138 people participated in this study drawn from SCORED (the Social and Community On-Line Research Database) in Perth, Western Australia. This is a psychological research database that allows willing participants to complete questionnaires posted online by researchers. The mean age of the sample was 40.56 years, and there were more female participants (59.4%) than males (40.6%). Overall, the participants were highly educated, with 42.8% holding or currently completing

bachelor's degrees, while a further 37.0% had achieved or were completing higher university degrees. Most participants, 84.8%, were from a White European background. The majority of the sample (59.4%) was more left-leaning in political orientation, with 21% reporting that they were neutral or undecided, and 19.5% reporting a right-wing political orientation.

#### *Procedure*

Potential participants in Perth were contacted through the SCORED administrator. They were sent an invitation email which included an outline of the study, the web address to access the questionnaire, and the researchers' contact details. Participants were able to access the questionnaire for a period of approximately 2 months (June to August 2010), although most participants responded in the first few weeks.

#### *Measures*

*Prejudice towards asylum seekers and people smugglers.* This scale, adapted from Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe and Ropp (1997), was comprised of six semantic differentiation items (example of item: negative – positive) and were responded to on a Likert-like scale ranging from 0 to 100. This scale was used to measure prejudice towards asylum seekers and people smugglers separately. The original scale developed by Wright et al (1997) had an alpha of .71 demonstrating satisfactory reliability. Reliability using this scale has been even higher in the Australian community; reliability with respect to a prejudice against refugees scale was reported by Turoy-Smith, Kane, and Pedersen (in press) to be  $\alpha = .93$ . After appropriate recoding, higher scores indicated high prejudice.

*Realistic and symbolic threats.* The perception of threat was measured using a scale adapted from previous research (Corenblum & Stephan, 2001; Schweitzer et al., 2005) and tailored to be specific to asylum seekers. This scale included two

subscales containing four realistic threat items and four symbolic threat items. Responses to these items ranged from 1 (not threatening) to 7 (very threatening). An example of a symbolic threat item is: "The values and beliefs of asylum seekers regarding family issues and socialising children are compatible with the values and beliefs of most Australians" (reversed). An example of a realistic threat item is: "The quality of social services available to Australians has remained the same, despite asylum seekers coming to Australia" (reversed). In the Schweitzer et al. study, the realistic and symbolic threat scales were both reliable, with an alpha of .91 and .87, respectively. After appropriate recoding, higher scores indicated higher perceived threat.

*False beliefs.* This scale was adapted from Pedersen et al. (2005) and involved specifying how much participants agreed with given statements about asylum seekers, all with varying degrees of factuality. Previously established false beliefs about asylum seekers (for example, that they are queue jumpers; Pedersen et al., 2005) were included alongside some new false beliefs that are currently in circulation in Australia; for example, "Asylum seekers are safe when they arrive in Indonesia or Malaysia, so travelling to Australia is unnecessary" (Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, 2010; Pedersen & Hoffman, 2010). After appropriate recoding, higher scores indicated higher acceptance of false beliefs. The original scale by Pedersen et al. had an alpha of .73.

*Socio-demographics.* Information concerning each participant's gender, age in years, education level, and their political orientation was also collected. Previous research has suggested that these socio-demographic variables are related to prejudice. In particular, prejudice has been linked with low levels of education and right-wing political views (that is, a preference for

conservative politics) (Pedersen & Griffiths, unpublished).

### Results

During a preliminary analysis, a large correlation were found between the symbolic and realistic threat scales ( $r = .762$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Accordingly, we factor-analysed all of the threat items together. The obtained scree plot clearly indicated the existence of one underlying factor. After an inspection of the corrected item-total correlations (CITC), no items produced a CITC under the target value of .30. As such, a modified scale was constructed and labelled as “Threat – Asylum Seekers”, which included all symbolic and realistic threat items; no items were deleted from this scale.

#### Scale Descriptives

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics for each scale including the scale means, standard deviations, the number of items in each scale, alpha coefficients, and the potential range of scores for each scale. Prejudice was high towards people smugglers but less so for asylum seekers, with the mean just below the midpoint. The means for false beliefs and the perception of threat were just below the midpoint. Reliability for all scales was satisfactory, all being over  $\alpha = .85$ . One item, however, was removed from the false belief scale to increase reliability (the item involved the notion that issuing temporary protection visas will stop the boats).

#### Aim 1. Differences in Prejudice towards Asylum Seekers and People Smugglers

Our respondents reported more prejudice against people smugglers than

against asylum seekers  $t(124) = -14.175$ ,  $p < .001$ . This was a 31% difference between the means of the two corresponding scales.

#### Aim 2. Prediction of Prejudice against Asylum Seekers

A number of moderate and strong correlations were found between prejudice against asylum seekers and the independent variables, as presented in Table 2. Participants scoring high on prejudice against asylum seekers reported significantly less formal education and more right-wing political preferences. They were also significantly more likely to score higher on prejudice towards people smugglers, perceived threat, and false beliefs.

The extent to which the independent variables contributed to the prediction of prejudice against asylum seekers was then examined. To this end, we constructed a multiple regression equation with two blocks of predictors. As two socio-demographic variables – education level and political preference – were significantly correlated with prejudice, they were entered into the regression equation on Step 1. Following this, the three social-psychological variables – prejudice against people smugglers, perceived threat, and false beliefs – were entered into the regression equation on Step 2. Despite the high correlation between the perceived threat and false beliefs items, multicollinearity was not an issue in the analysis.

The predictors accounted for a significant proportion of variance in prejudice against asylum seekers (total  $R^2 = .640$ ) (see

Table 1  
*Descriptive Characteristics of Scales*

Scale	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>No. of items</i>	<i>α</i>	<i>Range</i>
Prejudice against asylum seekers	43.36 (23.25)	6	.94	0-100
Prejudice against people smugglers	74.42 (20.07)	6	.88	0-100
False beliefs	3.65 (1.50)	7	.86	1-7
Perceived threat	3.38 (1.43)	8	.90	1-7



Table 2  
Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Prejudice asylum seekers	1	.409***	.754***	.730***	.111	-.048	-.181*	.473***
2. Prejudice people smugglers		1	.320***	.434***	.071	-.005	-.179*	.289**
3. Perception of threat			1	.765***	-.103	-.006	-.271**	.516***
4. False beliefs				1	-.019	-.081	-.230**	.509***
5. Gender					1	.010	.149	.006
6. Age						1	-.052	-.082
7. Education							1	-.194
8. Political preference								1

Note. \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$  (2-tailed)

Table 3). Only political preference was significant on Step 1 of the regression analysis – that is, the more prejudiced the participants were against asylum seekers, the more likely they were to identify as politically right-wing ( $R^2$  change = .231). At the end of Step 2, neither socio-demographic variable was significant. However, high prejudice against people smugglers, perceived threat, and false beliefs all significantly predicted participants' prejudice towards asylum seekers at Step 2 ( $R^2$  change = .409).

*Aim 3. Whether the Relationship between*

*Prejudice and False Beliefs still stands after Changes in Government and Recent Political Rhetoric*

Generally, there was a strong relationship between prejudice and false beliefs. However, as noted previously, there was one item that did not relate to prejudice and was excluded from the false belief scale (that temporary protection visas will stop the boats). The bivariate correlation between this item and prejudice was  $r = -.137$ ,  $p = .111$ .

**Discussion**

The present study examined the relationship between prejudice against

Table 3  
Multiple Regression for Prejudice against Asylum Seekers

Variables	$r$	$\beta^a$	$\beta^b$	$R^2$ change	Total $R^2$
Step 1					
Education	-.181*	-.094	.043		
Political preference	.473***	.455***	.049	.231***	
Step 2					
Prejudice against people smugglers	.409***		.121*		
Threat	.754***		.469***	.469***	
False beliefs	.730***		.304**	.409***	.640***

Note. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$  (all two-tailed). <sup>a</sup> denotes beta weights obtained on step 1 of the regression; <sup>b</sup> denotes beta weights obtained on step 2 of the regression.

asylum seekers and the perception of threat and the acceptance of false beliefs about asylum seekers; two concepts that we argue are evoked by negative political rhetoric. We also examined the relationship between people's attitudes towards asylum seekers and people smugglers given the increase in focus on people smugglers in the present debate. As predicted, the three independent variables were implicated in prejudiced attitudes. A detailed analysis of the findings, together with implications and limitations/future research, are discussed in the following section.

*Aim 1: Differences in Prejudice towards Asylum Seekers and People Smugglers*

Following on from Hoffman (2010) who noted that people smugglers provoked more hostility than asylum seekers in the present political climate, we set out to measure the differences in prejudice against these two groups. Supporting Hoffman's (2010) observation, our results indicated that participants reported significantly higher prejudice scores with regard to people smugglers compared to asylum seekers. This is an important finding, as a quantitative comparison of these two social groups has never been performed. Hoffman (2010) argued that the Rudd Government's stance involved rhetoric that shifted negativity from asylum seekers to people smugglers by portraying the latter as morally dubious, potentially connected to criminal organisations, and as profiteering from the desperation (and the possible death) of asylum seekers who travelled by sea. By contrast, political representations of asylum seekers became more sympathetic, often making reference to their vulnerability and suffering; their position has been restructured as a 'humanitarian plight' (Hoffman, 2010) as opposed to one that centred on deviancy and criminality which had occurred in previous years (Klocker, 2004; Pickering, 2004). It is possible that our results are reflective of this change in the language and tone of the

asylum seeker debate. However, this change may not be as clear as a simple decrease in prejudice against asylum seekers; we will return to this point in the following sections.

While we acknowledge the criminal nature of people smuggling, it has been noted that most people charged with this offence are not the organisers of the people-smuggling business; instead, most are poor Indonesian fishermen who are themselves vulnerable, and merely seek to supplement their family's meagre income (Jackman, 2011; Murdoch, 2010; Pedersen & Hoffman, 2010). Regarding the organisers, most are not part of larger criminal syndicates; in fact, people-smuggling syndicates represent loose networks based on kinship and ethnicity rather than criminal organisations (Hoffman, 2010). Interestingly, Hoffman (2010) found that where most of the Iraqi asylum seekers she interviewed were critical of people smugglers, approximately one-quarter saw them positively; in their view, the smugglers helped them to safety.

It is clear that people smugglers, like other social groups, are not a homogeneous group (also see Hoffman, 2010), and that this matter is complex and nuanced. These points are vitally important in any discussion on asylum seekers and people smugglers, especially given the relationship found between these two groups in our study; it is not as easy as condemning people who supposedly prey on the weak and vulnerable. We stress, however, that we are not condoning the behaviour of criminal syndicates or people traffickers who exploit asylum seekers. We are simply addressing the complexities of the situation and how government policy may, in fact, be exacerbating the problem.

*Aim 2: Prediction of Prejudice against Asylum Seekers*

We also explored whether relevant socio-demographic variables (education, political orientation) as well as the social-psychological variables (prejudice against

people smugglers, perceived threat, and false beliefs) predicted prejudice against asylum seekers. With respect to the socio-demographic variables, only one, right-wing political orientation, was significant on Step 1 of the regression. Although all three social-psychological variables were significant at the end of Step 2, neither education nor political orientation was. Our results indicate that although the socio-demographic variables are relevant to prejudiced attitudes, as previous research has shown (e.g., Pedersen & Griffiths, unpublished), social-psychological variables are significantly more relevant.

The regression analysis showed that prejudice against people smugglers significantly predicted prejudice against asylum seekers. Theoretically, these two groups should be seen as distinct from each other, especially if the public believes that people smugglers are exploiting asylum seekers. However, as mentioned above, the results were not as straightforward as this; our data indicated a moderate correlation between people's attitudes towards people smugglers and asylum seekers and this relationship held with respect to the regression analysis. This result suggests that prejudice against asylum seekers may be legitimised through the expression of antipathy towards people smugglers. Other research has also found a link between attitudes towards asylum seekers and people smugglers. In a recent study by McKay et al. (2011), participants expressed opinions such as "if asylum seekers were genuine, they would not use people smugglers to facilitate their journey to Australia" (p. 12). As these authors noted, some participants felt that asylum seekers' willingness to use people smugglers implied that they were themselves morally dubious. Clearly, both in our research and that of others, the two prejudices are inter-linked.

A higher perception of threat (both realistic and symbolic) was also predictive of

prejudice against asylum seekers. This finding supports previous research (e.g., Schweitzer et al., 2005); participants who felt somehow threatened by asylum seekers were more likely to hold prejudiced attitudes about them. To illustrate, related studies have found that a high perception of threat was related to support for harsher treatment of asylum seekers (Louis, Duck, Terry, Schuller, & Lalonde, 2007; also see Marr, 2011, for a discussion on asylum seekers, fear and politics) and that people who felt asylum seekers were a threat to national border security also believed that they were linked to terrorism (McKay et al., 2011). With regard to the present study, participants who scored high on the prejudice scale may desire a preservation of the social cohesion, safety, and economic condition of the Australian community which may be seen as under threat. While the desire to safeguard the community is not in itself socially harmful, it can have negative consequences when, on one hand, it is used to marginalise groups of people not considered part of the mainstream, and on the other, this maintenance of the status quo is legitimised through erroneous information.

There was a particularly high correlation between the acceptance of false beliefs and prejudice. Certainly, the acceptance of information that may be factually inaccurate or incorrect has been linked to prejudice against minority groups, including asylum seekers, in prior research (e.g., Pedersen et al., 2006). The transmission of false beliefs could well exacerbate feelings of perceived threat in the community; for example, it is simple to imagine how the notion that 'Australia is being flooded by asylum seekers' (A Just Australia, 2011) could galvanise hostility towards this group. McKay et al. (2011) similarly found that their respondents had limited accurate knowledge about asylum seekers – and that the 'knowledge' that they presented as fact was dependent on media reporting.

*Aim 3. Whether the Relationship between Prejudice and False Beliefs still stands after Changes in Government and Recent Political Rhetoric*

Previous research has found a positive relationship between prejudice towards asylum seekers and holding false beliefs about this group (Pedersen et al., 2005). Generally speaking, the relationship between prejudice and false beliefs still stands. This echoes other recent research that has also found that the “queue jumping/illegal” rhetoric continues to be a common fixture in the discourse surrounding asylum seekers (McKay et al., 2011; Sulaiman-Hill, Thompson, Afsar, & Hodliffe, 2011). Similar findings were found in another Perth study investigating the role of personal contact on prejudiced attitudes (Turoy-Smith et al., in press). In the Turoy-Smith et al. study, participants were asked whether their experiences with refugees affected their attitudes. A thematic analysis of the results indicated that some participants did not report attitudes specifically concerning refugees or their experience with refugees; almost 20% of responses included common false beliefs about asylum seekers which was irrelevant to the question being asked of them. Our results, coupled with the two aforementioned studies, point to the power of political rhetoric in shaping attitudes regarding asylum seekers. It is difficult to shift attitudes once they are formed although this is not set in stone as found by Pedersen, Paradies, Hartley, and Dunn (2011) with respect to increasing positivity towards asylum seekers.

One item, however, did not support the relationship pattern between prejudice and false beliefs. This item involved the statement that the giving of temporary protection visas will stop the boats. No relationship was found between prejudice and this item; this result was later replicated by Croston (2011). Although it has been found that temporary protection visas did in fact not stop the boats when they were introduced in 1999

(Hoffman, 2008), the rhetoric in the public sphere lives on. Indeed, the idea of re-introducing temporary protection visas has recently been proposed by commentators and politicians. For example, the leader of the Federal Opposition, Tony Abbott, with his parliamentary colleagues Scott Morrison and Michael Keenan, stated in July 2010: “... the Coalition has announced it will restore the strong regime of border protection policies that were so effective under the last Coalition Government, in particular ... temporary protection visas ...” (Abbott, Morrison, & Keenan, 2010). The Howard rhetoric, even though it is not as prevalent as in years gone by, has persisted in the community.

*Practical Implications*

Our results point to how community attitudes towards asylum seekers may be shaped by negative political rhetoric. Our findings support the arguments of many community psychologists as to the importance of the ecological approach to understanding social phenomena (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Sonn & Quayle, 2012). Individual attitudes are not formed in a vacuum and political rhetoric is clearly powerful with regard to the asylum seeker issue (Gale, 2004).

We previously argued that all three independent variables are in some way related to political rhetoric. Firstly, as noted above, the public discourse currently focuses negativity towards people smugglers (Hoffman, 2010), and this was mirrored in our findings. However, given the results of the regression analysis, a lingering association existed between asylum seekers and people smugglers. At a practical level this is important. Where a political message is phrased so it will not cause general offence (e.g., by stating people smugglers are “the scum of the earth”), it is still open for interpretation and clear to those for whom the message is targeted; this can be referred to as ‘dog whistle politics’ (Marr & Wilkinson, 2003). The danger is that by not challenging

this ‘dog whistle’, the debate becomes oversimplified and fear is created; all people smugglers can be labelled as evil, and those who engage their services can be demonised through association. It also removes the focus from understanding the reasons why asylum seekers might choose to pay for a people smuggler’s services. It is clear from our results that refugee advocates and activists need to directly confront these arguments.

Secondly, there is a great deal of political rhetoric that has the potential to inflame the public’s perception of imminent threat. Around the time the present study was conducted, a headline ran: “Tony Abbott warns millions of asylum-seekers could arrive by boat” (Kelly, 2010). It is conceivable that such a headline could lead the Australian community into perceiving a heightened level of threat. Such inflammatory media reporting continues to be prevalent, with a recent article proclaiming that “thousands of asylum seekers are expected to flood the suburbs as the Federal Government rolls out bridging visas allowing boat people to live and work in the community and collect welfare” (Marszalek & Benson, 2011). Contrary to this reporting, Australia only receives a small number of people seeking asylum (UNHCR, 2011). In fact, one of the items in our false beliefs scale measured whether people believed that Australia takes many asylum seekers compared to other Western nations. Results indicated that 75% of participants believed that Australia does take a comparatively large amount of asylum seekers.

Thirdly, previous research has documented the relationship between false beliefs and political rhetoric. False beliefs about asylum seekers have been identified in the rhetoric of the former Howard Government (Pedersen et al., 2006) and it would appear that they are still present in public discourse. The perpetuation of false beliefs can be attributed to the fact that very few people (if any) are likely to have

encountered asylum seekers in their daily lives, and even fewer have encountered people smugglers. With this in mind, it is unsurprising that many people may be influenced by the rhetoric expressed by politicians (Pedersen et al., 2006; Lawrence, 2007; Schweitzer et al., 2005) as well as negatively-framed or inaccurate representations conveyed by the popular media (Gale, 2004; McKay et al., 2011). This is an important point to consider; these misconceptions persist in the absence of credible information from public figures, as well as from media outlets. Given that the community is generally not well-acquainted with the contexts of individual asylum seekers and people smugglers, a greater effort should be made to widely disseminate accurate information so that all who are involved in the national discourse are better informed and better able to combat old prejudices.

Prilleltensky (2001) has noted that community psychology is dedicated towards “the elimination of oppressive social conditions conducive to problems with living” (p. 750), as well as the cultivation of societal ‘wellness’. In light of these values, psychologists, in addition to other healthcare professionals and researchers, have frequently highlighted the deleterious effects that the policy of indefinite mandatory detention has had on the asylum seeker population in Australia. Some have observed that Australia’s system of mandatory detention does not exist in almost all other refugee-receiving countries (Crock et al., 2006). It seems that the anxiety over the asylum seeker issue, dating back at least to the 2001 Tampa Incident, is still a factor in the community and in government policy. Given the strong link found in the present study between prejudice against asylum seekers and both perceived threat and the acceptance of false beliefs, the chances of indefinite mandatory detention being abolished are relatively slim; social change

regarding this longstanding policy is unlikely to occur without the support of the wider community.

Previous research makes it clear that the perception of prejudice and/or discrimination negatively affects the health of marginalised groups (Paradies, 2007). It detracts from refugees' wellbeing (Werkuyten & Nekuee, 1999) and increases integration problems (Davidson et al., 2008). It should be remembered that most asylum seekers have been found to be genuine refugees and have been settled in Australia (Refugee Council of Australia, 2012). Decreasing prejudice against asylum seekers is beneficial for both the asylum seekers themselves and our society in general.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

The findings reported herein are not without their limitations. Firstly, participants with university training and education were over-represented in this study. Also, the views expressed in this study were from members of the Perth community and did not include views expressed by individuals from other parts of the state or country. Given the contextual nature of prejudice (Dunn, Forrest, Pe-Pua, Hynes, & Maeder-Han, 2009), further replication and extension of our study would be especially useful. Additionally, because there have been a limited number of empirical studies that specifically examine people's views on people smugglers, further research would likely contribute to the collective research on asylum seekers, and enrich the social-psychological literature more generally. In saying this, people smugglers were treated as if they were a homogeneous group in this study to gauge participants' views about the entire group; in reality, this group is fairly nuanced in terms of their individual circumstances, and future research should aim to address this. While the present study provides some new insights into this area of research, it is clear that more work needs to be done to follow up on the current findings.

#### *Concluding Remarks*

We believe that the current study makes a valuable contribution to the existing corpus of research concerning attitudes towards minorities and outgroups. It is the first study to analyse and compare participants' attitudes towards both asylum seekers and people smugglers; this is particularly novel given the recent changes in political rhetoric about asylum seekers arriving on Australian shores. Our study has also extended the knowledge about what influences prejudice against asylum seekers, and points to the role of politicians and the media in influencing attitudes. Certainly, the media plays a major role in shaping attitudes to asylum seekers (Sulaiman-Hill et al., 2011).

The asylum seeker debate has captured the attention of the collective Australian psyche for well over the last decade and is a debate that is likely to continue unabated for some time yet. The commentary in the political realm has served to polarise and foment division in the broader Australian community. In spite of this, it is hoped that research will continue in this area, as educating and informing the public is one of the goals of community psychology and science in general. It has been noted that community psychology "is concerned with understanding and disrupting ... oppression ..." (Sonn & Quayle, 2012, p. 262). We hope that, in a small way, we have contributed to the understanding of oppression and perhaps given some tools to refugee advocates to tackle the oppression of asylum seekers. In closing, we add that one of the great and admirable goals of Australian society is to live up to the international duties that it has enshrined in law, as well as to adhere to its own egalitarian tradition of the 'fair go'. Only a better understanding of the challenges that we face as a community can help us to achieve these goals.

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#### Note

<sup>1</sup> Since this article was submitted for review, a number of concerning policy changes have reinforced the border-security debate. In particular, in September 2012, the Gillard Federal government re-committed itself to offshore processing, whereby asylum seekers who have arrived in Australia by boat are transferred to Nauru for the processing of their refugee claims. Asylum seekers are also due to be transferred to Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. This policy change follows the release of the report to the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers on 13 August 2012. The Panel was provided with a number of terms of references by the government, including offering policy advice on how to best prevent asylum seekers risking their

lives by travelling to Australia by boat and the development of an inter-related set of proposals in support of asylum seeker issues, “given Australia’s right to maintain its borders” (for the full report, see DIAC, 2012). A number of key human rights organisations have condemned Australia’s offshore processing policy, including the UNHCR and Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). See AHRC (2012) for more information.

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