

Prejudice against Australian asylum-seekers and their function: Suggestions for anti-prejudice strategies

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Abstract

Over the last decade or so under the Howard Government, there has been a great deal of controversy regarding the unauthorised arrival of asylum seekers. In this study, we analysed data collected from 602 Western Australians. We investigated why people think the way they do about asylum seekers using the function of attitude literature as a base; specifically participants' values, their experience with asylum seekers, and their reliance on other sources for information. Results indicated that the Perth community overwhelmingly based their attitudes (positive or negative) on their values. Finally, we integrate these findings with other research regarding prejudice against asylum seekers, and give suggestions for attempting to present an alternative – more positive – view of asylum seekers than that often given.

Over the last decade or so, there has been a great deal of controversy regarding the issue of people applying for asylum onshore without official authorisation by Australia to do so. Many members of the Australian community are extremely negative about asylum seekers (Klocker, 2004; Schweitzer, Perkoulidis, Krome, Ludlow, & Ryan, 2005). This negative rhetoric stems from a number of sources; including at times prominent politicians (Pedersen, Watt & Hansen, 2006). Clearly, this hostility can negatively affect asylum seekers, 90% of whom are ultimately found to be legitimate refugees and are granted asylum in Australia

(Brennan, 2003). It also affects Australian society as a whole – it is much harder for refugees to integrate with such hostility directed toward them (Allison, 2007) and this is detrimental to all concerned.

One theoretical avenue of research which may be useful in addressing the question “why do people think the way they do about asylum seekers” involves the function of attitudes literature which started over 50 years ago (Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956). More recently, Herek (1987) categorised functions into four categories: *experiential-schematic* (to do with personal experience), *value-expressive* (to do with deeply held values and beliefs), *social expressive* (to do with a sense of belongingness with significant others) and *defensive* (to do with maintaining one’s self-esteem). In a Western Australian study that used this scheme, it was found that the two most prevalent functions with regard to prejudice against Indigenous Australians were experiential-schematic and value-expressive (Pedersen, Contos, Griffiths, Bishop & Walker, 2000).

Overview of the present study.

We investigated prejudice against asylum seekers within the function of attitudes literature with three main aims. The first was to identify the major function of respondents’ attitudes – why do people think the way they do about asylum seekers? Secondly, do non-prejudiced and prejudiced participants differ in the reporting of their attitude functions? Finally, we integrate the findings of the present study with past research and set out suggestions for strategies to reduce prejudice against asylum seekers.

Method.

Procedure and participants. The present data are taken from a larger survey conducted in 2004 (for more detail, see Pedersen, Watt & Hansen, 2006; Pedersen, Dudgeon, Watt, & Griffiths, 2006; Pedersen, Griffiths & Watt, 2008). A sample of 2,400 Western Australians from Albany, Kalgoorlie, and Perth was randomly drawn from the 2004 phone book, and a questionnaire was mailed to each person. Two weeks after the first questionnaire was sent, a reminder letter was sent. In total, 653 respondents returned the questionnaire (27%). There were slightly more females than males, participants were generally older (average age = 53) and were relatively well-educated.

Measures.

Prejudice against asylum seekers. Following an open-ended question on why people felt the way they did about asylum seekers, participants completed the Attitudes Toward Asylum Seekers Scale (ATAS; Pedersen, Attwell & Heveli, 2005). After recoding, the higher the score, the higher the prejudice.

Function of Attitudes toward Asylum Seekers

The Attitude Function Inventory developed by Herek (1987) was used as a model to write items to assess each of the functions of attitudes; in particular, experiential-schematic (e.g., my own experiences with asylum seekers), value-expressive (e.g., my concern that we uphold principles of justice in Australia), and a new function category developed for the present study based on indirect experience (e.g., explanations about asylum seekers that I have heard from people I know). Few respondents in the Pedersen et al. (2000) study used defensive or social-expressive functions so they were not measured here. Respondents' functions were classified as "experiential-schematic" if their score on this function was higher than their scores on the other three functions. Respondents' functions were similarly classified in the other two categories (value-expressive and indirect experiential-schematic). The higher the score, the more important the function was.

Results.

After excluding variables which detracted from the reliability of the function scales, reliability was satisfactory (see Table 1). On the ATAS scale, 75% of the sample scored above the midpoint; in other words, three-quarters of participants reported negative attitudes about asylum seekers. There were no location differences with respect to the ATAS, the value-expressive function scale or the indirect experiential function scale. However, participants from Albany scored significantly higher on the experiential schemata scale ($M=1.67$) compared with the Kalgoorlie participants ($M=1.38$) ($F(2,624) = 5.22$ $p = .006$).

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Scales

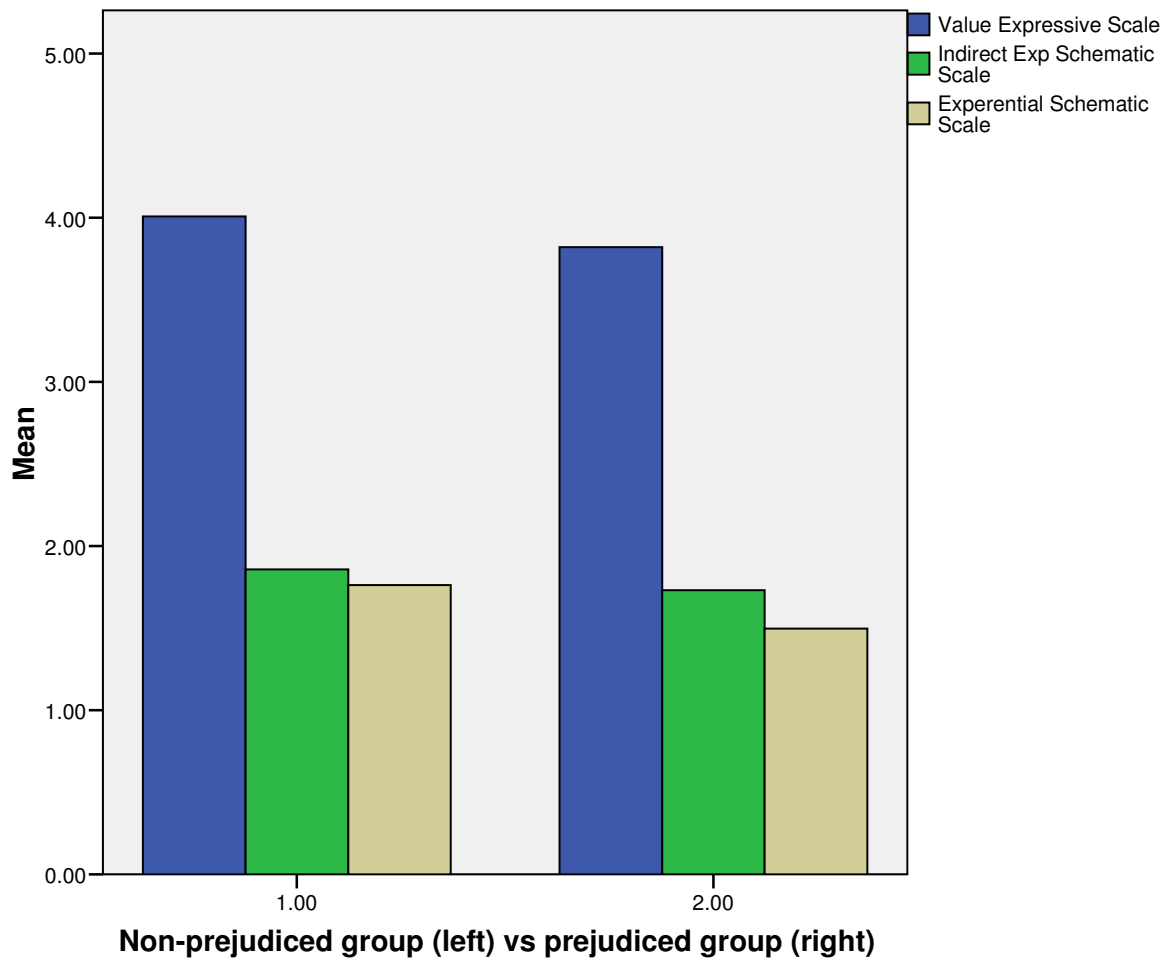
| SCALE | Mean | SD | n | □ | Range |
|---------------------------------|------|------|----|------|-------|
| ATAS scale | 4.37 | 1.42 | 18 | 0.93 | 1-7 |
| Functions | | | | | |
| Experiential Schematic | 1.56 | 0.89 | 3 | 0.79 | 1-5 |
| Indirect Experiential Schematic | 1.76 | 0.89 | 2 | 0.78 | 1-5 |
| Value-expressive | 3.87 | 0.87 | 4 | 0.69 | 1-5 |

The most frequently reported function of attitudes was value-expressive (96%), followed by the indirect experiential-schematic function (2%) and the experiential-schematic (2%) function (6.7% of participants did not fit into any one category, and were not included in the final count).

Our next question was: do these functions differ depending upon the prejudice levels of the participants? Three independent *t tests* were conducted. There was no significant difference in indirect experience ($t(245)=1.39$, n.s.). However,

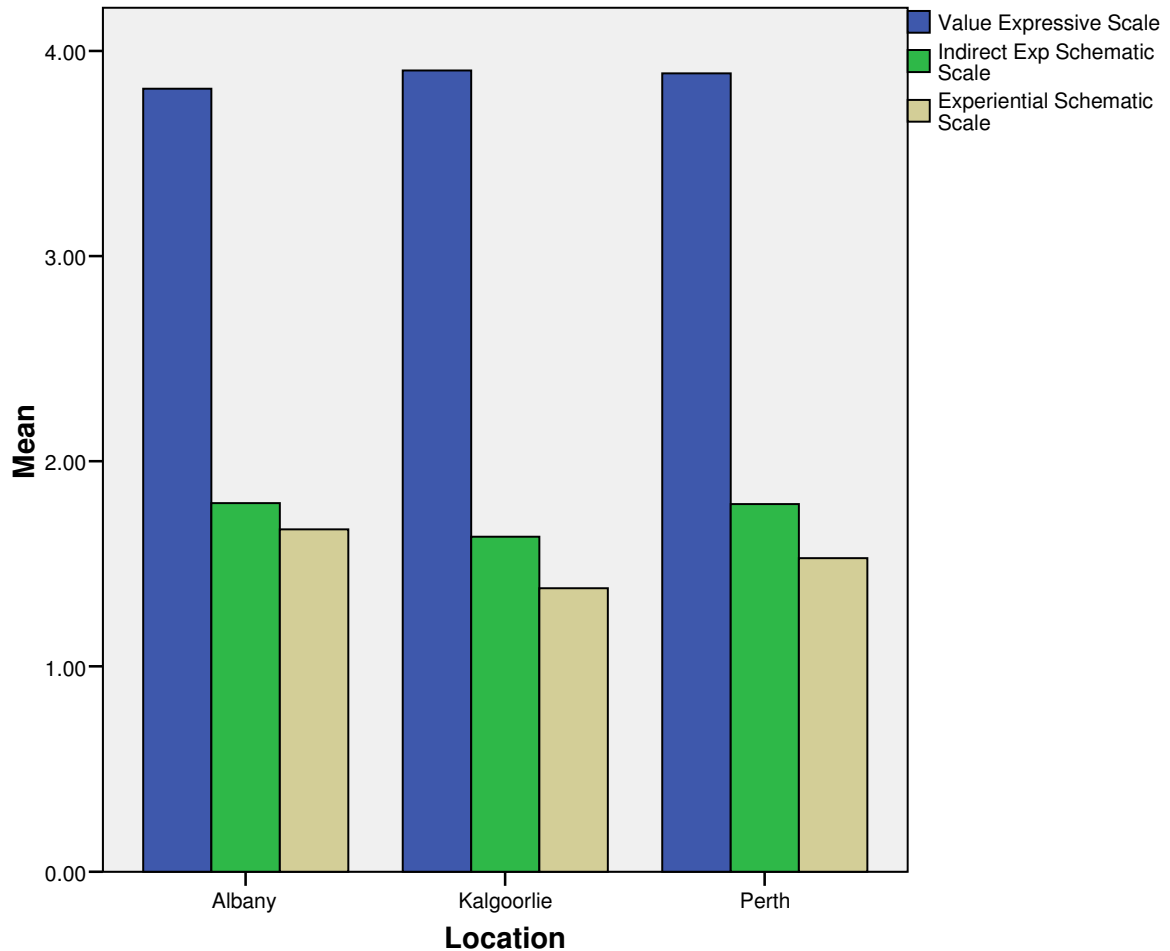
non-prejudiced participants reported more experience with asylum seekers ($t(226)=2.88, p=.004$) and they also relied more on values ($t(348)=2.76, p=.006$). It should be pointed out that although these relationships were statistically significant, they were not particularly large; the same applies regarding the location difference described above (see Table 2 for a graphic representation of function by prejudice – clearly there are more similarities than differences). Further, the functions are not mutually exclusive: as can also be seen by Table 2, even though participants clearly reported their values as taking precedence, the other two functions were not unimportant.

Table 2. The three function scales x prejudice split.



Similarly, more similarities exist than differences with respect to the significant location difference (see Table 3)

Table 3. The three function scales x location split.



Discussion.

First, we briefly discuss some results not specifically addressed in our aims. The first is that there was a location difference with the experiential-schematic function: Albany participants were more likely to have experience with asylum seekers than Kalgoorlie participants. This is not a surprising finding; a number of newly released asylum seekers moved to Albany for work in the local meat-works. This location finding supports other researchers who argue that geographical differences must be taken into account when looking at prejudice and racism (e.g., Dunn, Forrest, Burnley, & McDonald, 2004; Forrest & Dunn, 2007). However, we also showed that there were more similarities than differences between locations which are also to be expected: given the small

numbers of people seeking asylum, generally very few people in the Australian community would know them. Thus, we argue that when conducting anti-racism strategies one must look at the specifics of the target group – location may be more relevant to some target groups compared with asylum seekers (for example, Pedersen et al., 2000, with respect to prejudice against Indigenous Australians).

We now turn to our first aim which was to identify the major function of respondents' attitudes. Overwhelmingly, our participants reported the reason that they thought the way they did about asylum seekers related to their values (96%). This figure is higher than studies with other groups. Specifically, 83% of Perth respondents stated their most important function was value-expressive regarding Muslim Australians and 68% did so regarding Indigenous Australians (Griffiths & Pedersen, in press). This difference is likely to be due to the fact that often asylum seekers are kept out of sight in desert camps, and when they are released, there are not many of them for the Australian community to have experience with. It is worth noting here that there is a difference between the function of attitudes and the source of the function. While their attitude may stem from (for example) politician rhetoric (see Pedersen et al., 2006), the function may still be a perceived value violation.

So what are the implications of findings relating to this first aim? Our results indicate that attitudes toward asylum seekers are primarily driven by values regardless of whether such attitudes are prejudiced or not-prejudiced. One could be negative toward asylum seekers based on a feeling that they were queue-jumpers and stopping “real refugees” from entering Australia. Anti-racism strategists would need to discuss this topic fully and also pointing out that most asylum seekers are found to be legitimate refugees (Brennan, 2003). Alternatively, one could also be very positive toward asylum seekers based on a feeling that human rights should be respected regardless of the entry into Australia. This could also be discussed within an anti-racism strategy – including the information that seeking asylum without authorisation is legal under international and Australian law (Burnside, 2008).

Given that three quarters of the sample fell into the “prejudiced” category, and it is these participants who we would like to target in any anti-racism strategy, we concentrate on values leading to hostility. When looking at some qualitative data from the same dataset, it would appear that some participants felt that Australian values would be violated by asylum seekers. For example, *“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”*. What the threat to “Australian values” actually entails is open for interpretation - a love of cricket, perhaps? But as argued by some, a nostalgia for an ethnically homogenous culture (e.g., English; Irish) can create new forms of racism or patriotism that excludes other groups such as asylum seekers (Babacan & Gopalkrishnan, 2008). This

viewpoint has been perpetuated by prominent politicians. As Australia's Prime Minister John Howard (1995-2007) stated publicly: "we've drawn back from being too obsessed with diversity to a point where Australians are now better able to appreciate the enduring values of the national culture that we proudly celebrate and preserve" (The Age, 2006). In fact, if one examines Australian values as per the controversial citizenship test: primary values include "Judeo-Christian ethics, a British political heritage and the spirit of the European Enlightenment" (DIAC, 2008). As Fiske and Briskman (2008) point out, Australian values are still organised around exploitative beliefs and values driving imperial expansion. Thus, if anti-racism strategists are attempting to present another view of asylum seekers other than the negative view, it may be advisable for participants to examine their own values and identity and where they stem from. Every and Augoustinos (2008) show clearly that discourses regarding national identity can be used to *include* asylum seekers as well as *exclude* them. It should also be pointed out that with cultural diversity comes strength (Fiske & Briskman, 2008) even if there is a short adjustment period (Putnam, 2007).

It would also appear that some participants felt that their personal values were violated by asylum seekers. For example, "*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*". In other words, "queue jumping". This finding relates to past research which finds that prejudice is strongly related to the acceptance of false beliefs such as queue jumping ($r = .77$; Pedersen, Attwell & Heveli, 2005). As noted by Pedersen et al. (2005; 2006), there are often no queues to jump; also, former Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock collapsed the onshore and offshore queues effectively pitting one group of asylum seekers against the other. Asylum seeker advocates would be well advised to fully discuss this issue which would seem to inflame animosity against asylum seekers.

With regard to indirect experience, our results indicate that there was no significant difference between the groups. With respect to the prejudiced participants, the focus of anti-racism strategies, this indirect experience can be influenced by a number of sources which can end up in a situation known as serial reproduction; otherwise known as the game of Chinese Whispers. What may start out as an unverified source such as the internet (see Pedersen et al., 2008) may spread "urban myths" and become part of mainstream discourse. Again, it would be advisable to include this in any anti-racism strategy. With regard to experience, this was the least reported function within the present study which – as discussed earlier - is the least reported function. One may even wonder, given how few asylum seekers are in Australia, whether participants were actually referring to refugees rather than asylum seekers.

Our second aim was to examine whether non-prejudiced and prejudiced participants differed in the reporting of their attitude functions. Results indicated that there were two significant differences: non-prejudiced participants scored

higher on experience and values than prejudiced participants. Regarding experience, this is not surprising as many Australians base their negative attitudes toward asylum seekers on false beliefs (Pedersen et al, 2005). It follows that the more experience a person has with asylum seekers, the more correct information will be available which can only be beneficial. Regarding the value-expressive finding, our findings indicate that even though both groups' values were very important, the non-prejudiced values (e.g., an emphasis on human rights) were even more important than prejudiced values (e.g., queue-jumping). These non-prejudiced values should be incorporated into anti-racism strategies. We stress, however, that although these differences were statistically significant, in the overall scheme of things they were relatively unimportant.

Our final research aim was to bring together the findings of the present study with past research as an integrated whole to guide anti-racism strategists. In particular, if one is to run an anti-racism strategy, these mechanisms may be helpful in how the message is communicated. As can be seen by Table 4, there are a number of potential ways forward in this regard. Some may be more relevant to others depending on the circumstances. For example, location may be useful with some target groups more than others and discussion on "whiteness" would be less relevant if the strategy involved many participants of colour. We also stress that other more structural action also needs to be taken as well as individual strategies (see Donovan & Vlasis, 2006; Paradies, Forrest, Dunn, Pedersen & Webster, in press). We note that there are many other references which would be helpful apart from those in Table 4, but are beyond the scope of this paper. We also note that there are links between the mechanisms such as violation of values and – say – imparting of accurate information.

Table 4. Suggestions for potential mechanisms to combat prejudice against asylum seekers

| Mechanisms | Example(s) | Reference |
|---|---|--|
| Addressing people's violated personal values | Queue jumping | 1. The present study 2. Pedersen, Watt & Hansen (2005) 3. Pedersen Attwell & Heveli (2005) |
| Imparting of accurate information | The collapsing of onshore and offshore queues | Mares (2002) |
| Values and identity: Examine own identity and cultural biases | National identity | 1. The present study 2. Pedersen Attwell & Heveli (2005) 3. Every & Augoustinos |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Self-identity; "whiteness" | 1. Green & Sonn (2005) 2. Sibley & Barlow (2008) |
| Including values which participants may see as important, but are often not in the community's discourse about asylum seekers The above relates to: "Alternative talk" | The "fair go" principle Alternate (non-prejudiced) talk should be discussed which can find its way into Australian discourse. How to deal with racist talk should be discussed. | The present study Guerin (2003) |
| Include knowledge gained from others | Serial Reproduction | The present study |
| Emphasising commonality and diversity | Participants may feel that asylum seekers' cultures are too different to integrate successfully. Emphasise there are cultural differences, but many more similarities, and the benefits of a multicultural society. | 1. The present study 2. Pedersen Walker & Wise (2005) 3. Tilbury (2007) |
| Addressing dissonance | Those prejudiced against asylum seekers Those who support tough asylum seeker policy, significantly over-estimate their support in the community | Pedersen et al. (2008) Hartley & Pedersen (2007) |
| Building empathy rather than simply guilt | Too much guilt – an aversive emotion – can cause | Leach Snider, & Iyer (2002) |

| | | |
|--------------------|---|---|
| | participants to “zone out” | |
| Promoting dialogue | Giving participants space to speak their mind so controversial issues can be addressed | Pedersen, Walker & Wise (2005) |
| Positive contact | Under the right circumstances, inter-group contact is useful to combat prejudice. Sometimes, there can be a short-term “conflict” period Other stories can also be useful via other means such as DVD | Pettigrew & Tropp (2006) Putnam (2007) Pedersen & Barlow (2008) |
| Local needs | Take into account specific issues within each locality | Pedersen, Walker & Wise (2005) |
| Evaluate properly | There is a dearth of information regarding effectiveness of anti-prejudice strategies | Pedersen, Walker & Wise (2005) |

To conclude, even though the policy of mandatory detention remains, and Christmas Island is still the preferred destination for asylum seekers who land in excised islands, some positive social change in Australia has occurred thanks to a group of concerned Australians who were outraged by what was happening in their country and took action (see Mares & Newman, 2007; Pedersen et al., 2008) and a change in federal government. For example, asylum seekers are no longer being sent to Nauru and Manus Island. As reported by Immigration Minister Chris Evans, even aside from the very real humanitarianism and effectiveness concerns, this cost the Australian taxpayers \$309.8 million from 2001-2008 (Evans, 2008): an enormous amount of money. Additionally, Australia has seen the abolishment of temporary protection visas and potentially the use of community detention rather than asylum seekers being locked behind razor wire. However, we cannot become complacent – with so much violence overseas, it is only a matter of time before more boats arrive and the people on such boats need to be dealt with fairly and humanely. To deal with this, we clearly need to have structural change such as the protection of human rights

legislated in Australian law. Also, asylum seeker advocates need to be prepared for a regurgitation of past hostility. We need to know why the general public think the way they did and learn from the lessons of the last decade. Along with structural change, understanding how to counter prejudiced community attitudes is an important issue.

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