

**Attitudes towards asylum seekers – Evaluating a mature-aged community education
programme**

Journal of Racial Teaching Equality

Lisa Hartley (Curtin University)

Anne Pedersen (Murdoch University)

Justine Dandy (Edith Cowan University)

Author notes. Correspondence should be addressed to Lisa Hartley at the Centre for
Human Rights Education, Western Australia (email address Lisa.Hartley@curtin.edu.au)

Running head: Attitudes towards Australian asylum seekers

The arrival of asylum seekers and refugees across a nation's border is often the subject of contested debate in many Western nations. Australian research finds unacceptable levels of community prejudice¹ against asylum seekers² (e.g., Klocker, 2004; Suhnan et al., in press). Compared to other Western nations, Australia receives relatively few asylum seekers. For example, the UNHCR (2011) finds that of the top 15 receiving Western countries, Australia is ranked 13th. Despite Australia's comparatively small number of asylum applications, those who arrive unauthorised (i.e., without a valid visa) are subject to mandatory detention whereby they are held in an immigration detention centre until they receive a visa and security clearance; sometimes this can take years (Briskman et al., 2008). There is considerable evidence showing that mandatory detention has an extremely detrimental effect on asylum seekers' mental health (e.g., Davidson et al., 2008; The Australian Psychological Society, 2011).

Despite community prejudice against asylum seekers, few studies have addressed such negativity. In fact, few pre-test and post-test studies on prejudice reduction strategies have been conducted internationally (Paluck & Green, 2008) or in the Australian setting (Pedersen, Walker et al., 2011). Based on both international and Australian research, Pedersen et al. (2011) outline a number of principles that must be taken into account when attempting an anti-prejudice interventions such as giving factual information, and encouraging free, open and respectful dialogue. Pre-test/post-test interventions using these principles indicate that they are indeed an effective framework to use within a university setting (e.g., Pedersen, Paradies et al., 2011). Particularly relevant to prejudice against asylum seekers are 'false beliefs'; research suggests that prejudice against asylum seekers involves the acceptance of false information about

asylum seekers as being true, such as the belief that ‘asylum seekers are illegal’ (e.g., Suhnan et al., in press). What is known as the False Consensus Effect is also very relevant to prejudice. Here, research indicates that people who are prejudiced against asylum seekers also believe that their views are consensually shared by the wider Australian community (Pedersen et al., 2008) and that this often leads high prejudiced people to be more vocal (Miller, 1993), which has the potential to influence social norms in a negative direction.

However, no evaluative research has been conducted using these principles with an older community sample. It may be that the principles are not as effective in such situations as they are with younger university students. Research suggests that older people tend to be more conservative (Truett, 1993), conservatism has been linked with racism (Sidanius et al., 1996) and research finds that older people are generally more prejudiced (Pedersen & Griffiths, 2012). Nonetheless, older Australians are not necessarily more prejudiced against Australian asylum seekers (e.g., Pedersen et al., 2005). Thus, the jury is still out on the question of age.

Thus, the aim of our study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a community education programme that was conducted over five weeks regarding asylum seekers and refugee issues in Australia with a mature-aged participant base. Specifically, we were interested in examining whether there were changes in students’ attitudes towards asylum seekers; effectiveness being conceptualised as a drop in prejudice. We were also interested in whether the anti-prejudice teaching principles outlined in Pedersen Walker et al. (2011) were seen as important by the students, and whether they believed that they were covered in the lectures. Our research is guided by a social and community

psychology perspective, and based on this we had two primary research questions: first, were there changes in people's attitudes towards asylum seekers; and second, what factors contributed to the effectiveness - or not - of the programme?

Method

A total of 35 students completed pen-and-paper questionnaires at Time 1 (before the first lecture) and 27 completed at Time 2 (after the last lecture). However, because we were interested in any changes in people's attitudes from Time 1 to Time 2, we only included those individuals who filled out both questionnaires ($n = 15$). The three lecturers were all asylum seeker advocates and the research given in the lectures were linked with personal experience with asylum seekers both in detention and when asylum seekers are released into the wider Australian community.

Participants.

Participants were 17 mature aged Australians, the majority (77%) of whom were female. Their average age was 72 years; their ages ranged from 56 to 85 years. This sub-sample reflects the demographic characteristics of the class. Over half of the sample identified as Christian (59%) while the remainder were not religious (41%). In terms of political orientation, most (59%) indicated being more left-wing orientated, while 23% reported that they were neither left-wing or right-wing orientated. A minority of students (18%) were right wing. The students were fairly well educated, with 53% having a bachelor degree. Most students (88%) were Anglo-Australian. They had all voluntarily enrolled in a programme run through a learning association for older Australians.

Procedure

The community programme consisted of five 1 hour and 15minute lectures over five weeks designed as an introduction to refugee and asylum seeker issues in Australia. The content of the lectures can be seen in Appendix A.

Materials.

At Time 1, after supplying socio-demographic information, students were asked to indicate the degree of positivity or negativity they felt towards asylum seekers on an ‘attitude thermometer’ where 0 = very unfavourable and 100 = very favourable (as per Pedersen Paradies et al., 2011). They were then asked an open-ended question: “*In your own words, could you please tell us what you think about people who come to Australia by boat without authorisation and seek asylum once here?*”

At Time 2, students were asked the same questions described above, but were also asked to rate the degree to which ten principles, that have previously been considered in important for effective anti-prejudice interventions (Pedersen, Paradies et al., 2011) were implemented in the programme (anti-prejudice teaching principles; see Appendix B). These items were measured on a 7-point scale where 1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree. They were also asked to rate the degree to which these 10 principles were important for their learning. These items were measured on a 7-point scale where 1 = strongly unimportant and 7 = strongly important.

We analysed the data using a mixed methods approach which we saw as appropriate to provide a richer analysis; see Cohen (2007) on the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches. To analyse the qualitative (written) data, we used thematic analyses of common themes to form categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As occurs in the ‘real world’, some of the themes overlapped; they were not mutually

exclusive. With respect to the quantitative (numerical) data, we used a t-test for positivity at Times 1 and 2, some bivariate correlations with the positivity scores and socio-demographic variables, and descriptive statistics for the anti-prejudice teaching principles.

Results

Qualitative Data

Prejudice against asylum seekers

Scores were quite high; even at Time 1. Given this, it was deemed more appropriate to refer to “positivity” rather than “prejudice”. There was a significant increase in positivity towards asylum seekers from Time 1 ($M = 85.00^{\circ}$; $SD = 10.92$, ‘quite’ to ‘very’ favourable) to Time 2 ($M = 93.57^{\circ}$; $SD = 10.82$, ‘very’ to ‘extremely’ favourable) $t(13) = 3.379$, $p = .005$. Thus, there was a 9% increase in positivity from Time 1 to Time 2. There was no significant difference in positivity when comparing the students completed the first questionnaire only and those completed questionnaires at Times 1 and 2 ($t(13) = 5.137$, $p = .450$).

Looking at the relationship between positivity and the socio-demographic variables, we found that younger participants were marginally more positive ($r = -.52$; $p = .06$) and that left wing participants were significantly more positive ($r = -.704$; $p = .005$). There was no relationship between levels of education and positivity.

Anti-prejudice teaching principles– trying to understand the attitude change

All of the 10 anti-prejudice teaching principles were seen as *being followed by the lecturers*; no variables fell below “moderately important”. All ten variables regarding the

importance of the variables were seen as important; they were all rated as being between “moderately” and “extremely” important.

Qualitative Data

All 15 students responded to the qualitative question asking them to detail what they thought about people who come to Australia without authorisation at Time 1. While we did not use all the data from Time 1 in our analyses because we were making a direct comparison between Time 1 and Time 2, we did use the data to shape our lectures; for example, addressing some false beliefs.

Nine students completed the qualitative question at Times 1 and 2. Overall, students did not express any overtly hostile sentiments at Time 1 or Time 2 in line with the quantitative data; however, there were some subtle ambivalence at Time 1.

Specifically, at Time 1, three themes emerged; that is, in order of prevalence: empathy, ambivalence, and the perception of symbolic threat. At Time 2, there was only one theme and that was empathy; albeit somewhat conditional for some students.

Interestingly, the idea of asylum seekers potentially disrupting the ‘Australian way of life’ was not discussed at Time 2 nor was there any real ambivalence as occurred at Time 1.

Discussion

Our first aim was to examine whether there were any changes in students’ attitudes towards asylum seekers after the programme. We found positive changes with both the quantitative and qualitative data. There was a significance increase in positivity towards asylum seekers between Time 1 and Time 2 which supports past quantitative research findings that the principles outlined in Pedersen Walker et al. (2011) can be effective.

The results from the present study add to the body of literature in that our students were not university students but mature aged community members. Perhaps most importantly, our results suggest that even positive attitudes can be shifted in a more positive direction through a community education programme.

The significant relationships between positivity and age/political orientation were also illuminating. Although most research finds a relationship between right-wing orientation and prejudice against a range of different “outgroups” (Pedersen & Griffiths, 2012), the story is somewhat more complicated with our sample. While younger participants were more positive than older participants, even our older students were more positive than younger cohorts. For example, using the same anti-prejudice teaching principles, previous research with younger university students (Pedersen, Paradies et al., 2011) found a mean positivity score at Time 1 at 50°. However, the mean positivity score at Time 1 with the present sample was 85°. Thus, it is not accurate to say that older people are necessarily more negative towards “outgroups” than younger people. The situation is quite nuanced; many other factors impact on people’s attitudes such as political orientation.

It is also interesting to reflect on the qualitative data. At Time 1, the most prominent theme was ‘empathy’; some students were quite simply empathic to the situation of asylum seekers as can be seen by this quote by Student No. 7 while also showing critical thought about Australia’s involvement in international humanitarian interventions and the plight of those fleeing such countries: “*When Australia is a party to engaging in conflict in other parts of the world we can hardly complain if the citizens flee to our shores*”. These findings are important because critical thinking is seen to be an

important factor in determining constructive debates about controversial topics (e.g., Healey, 2012). Similarly, empathy interventions have been successfully used in attempts to overcome intergroup hostility (e.g., Finlay & Stephan, 2000).

The qualitative second theme was ambivalence; for example, Student No 11 said: *“they must be desperate in their current situation if they had money they should fly here and then disappear. As long as Oz [Australia] has enough fresh water and the asylum seekers keen to be Australia and work then Hurrah! Not keen on ANY religious zealots of any breed”*. As can be seen, this student could see the desperation of asylum seekers yet indicated an underlying fear that they may be religious zealots. This fear links with past Australian research with regard to Muslim Australians and the assumption that most asylum seekers are Muslim (Dunn, Klocker, & Salabay, 2007; Pedersen & Hartley, 2010). The third theme was ‘symbolic threat’; for example, Student No 4 noted: *“I want them to settle in Australia and slowly adapt Australian views and values”*. Previous research on the relationship between symbolic threat and prejudice suggests that where people are concerned that certain groups undermine or ‘threaten’ the values of a dominant culture (Corenblum & Stephan, 2001; McKay, Thomas, & Kneebone, 2012; Schweitzer, et al., 2005; Suhnan et al., in press).

At Time 2, expressions of empathy towards asylum seekers were the most common response given further weight to the quantitative change in attitudes as outlined above. For example, *“God bless them. They must be very distressed to leave everything they know - even though they need to 'escape' and find their way to where feel they'll be safe and secure”*. Having said that, this empathy was at times conditional on the asylum seekers’ cases being ‘genuine’. For example, *“Sympathy for the genuine asylum seekers”*

and “*I greatly accept genuine people meeting refugee status*”. The fact of empathy was the most common theme is heartening. However the conditional granting of empathy does raise questions as to who is constructed as ‘genuine’ or ‘not genuine’ and therefore ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ of help. More specifically, one might still be in need of international protection but might not meet the definition of a refugee. Interestingly, the idea of asylum seekers potentially disrupting the ‘Australian way of life’ was not discussed at Time 2 nor was there any real ambivalence as occurred at Time 1.

Our second aim was to examine what factors may have contributed to the effectiveness - or not - of the programme. While we cannot make definitive statements on the causality of the anti-prejudice teaching principles we measured and attitude change, it was clear that on average, students reported that the principles outlined were important and that they were followed. Thus, as can be seen by the changes in positivity, the intervention, at least at a descriptive level, can be seen to have been influential. While it was not possible to look at ‘cause and effect’ in the current research due to the sample size, future research might seek to study more closely the links between these anti-prejudice teaching principles and attitude change.

What can we conclude?

Our study shows that positive attitudes towards asylum seekers can be shifted in a more positive direction, which was evidenced both quantitatively and qualitatively. Previous research has demonstrated that the principles outlined in Pedersen, Paradies et al. (2011) are useful within the university learning context. While the students in the present study were relatively positive to asylum seekers to begin with, and clearly open to learning new information, it appears that the same principles are important. It remains to be seen

whether the principles followed here would be useful with older students who were less “on-side”; for adolescents in schools; or for people from different cultures. In view of the hostility that asylum seekers are met with in many western nations, it would also seem valuable to further explore the effectiveness of interventions based on these principles in other national contexts.

References.

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology, *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77-101.
- Briskman, L., Latham, S., & Goddard (2008). *Human rights overboard: Seeking asylum in Australia*. Scribe, Melbourne.
- Cohen, D. (2007). Methods in Cultural Psychology. In S.Kitayama&D.Cohen (Eds.). *Handbook of Cultural Psychology* (pp. 196-236). New York: The Guilford Press
- Corenblum, B., & Stephan, W.G. (2001). White fears and native apprehensions: An integrated threat theory approach to intergroup attitudes. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science, 33*,251–268.
- Crandall, C.S., &Eshleman, A. (2003). A justification-suppression model of the expression and experience of prejudice.*Psychological Bulletin, 129*, 414-446.
- Davidson, G.R., Murray, K.E., & Schweitzer, R. (2008). Review of refugee mental health and wellbeing: Australian perspectives. *Australian Psychologist, 43*, 160 – 174.
- Dunn, K., Klocker, N., &Salabay, T. (2007). Contemporary racism and Islamaphobia in Australia: Racializing religion, *Ethnicities December, 7(4)*, 564-589
- Finlay, K.A., & Stephan, W.G. (2000). Improving Intergroup Relations: The Effects of Empathy on Racial Attitudes, *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 30 (8)*, 1720–1737
- Healey, R.L. (2012): The Power of Debate: Reflections on the Potential of Debates for Engaging Students in Critical Thinking about Controversial Geographical Topics, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 36(2)*, 239-257.

Klocker, N. (2004). Community antagonism towards asylum seekers in Port Augusta, South Australia. *Australian Geographical Studies*, 42, 1–17.

McKay, F., Thomas, S.L., & Kneebone, S. (2012). ‘It Would be Okay If They Came through the Proper Channels’: Community Perceptions and Attitudes toward Asylum Seekers in Australia, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 25 (1), 113-133

Miller, C. T. (1993). Majority and minority perceptions of consensus and recommendations for resolving conflicts about land use reform. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 19, 389-398.

Paluck, E. L., & Green, D. P. (2009). Prejudice reduction: what works? A review and assessment of research and practice, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60, 339–67.

Pedersen, A., Attwell, J., & Heveli, D. (2005). Prediction of negative attitudes toward Australian asylum seekers: False beliefs, nationalism and self-esteem. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 57, 148-160.

Pedersen, A., Paradies, Y., Hartley, L. & Dunn (2011). Bystander anti-prejudice: Cross-cultural education, links with positivity towards cultural “outgroups” and preparedness to speak out. *Journal of Pacific Rim Psychology*, 5, 19-30.

Pedersen, A., Walker, I., Paradies, Y., & Guerin, B. (2011). How to cook rice: Ingredients for teaching anti-prejudice. *The Australian Psychologist*, 46, 55-63.

Pedersen, A., & Griffiths, B. (2012). *Prejudice and its relationship to socio-demographic variables over time*. Unpublished document, Murdoch University, Western Australia.

Pedersen, A., Griffiths, B., & Watt, S. (2008). Attitudes toward outgroups and the perception of consensus: All feet do **not** wear one shoe. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 18, 543–557.

Pedersen, A., Watt, S., & Hansen, S. (2006). The role of false beliefs in the community's and the federal government's attitudes toward Australian asylum seekers. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 41(1), 105-124.

Schweitzer, R., Perkoulidis, S., Krome, S., Ludlow, C., & Ryan, M. (2005). Attitudes towards refugees: The dark side of prejudice in Australia. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 57, 170–179.

Sidanius, J., Pratto, F., & Bobo, L. (1996). Racism, conservatism, affirmative action, and intellectual sophistication: A matter of principled conservatism or group dominance? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70, 476-490.

Suhnan, A., Pedersen, A., & Hartley, L.K. (in press). Prejudice against asylum seekers in Australia: The role of people smugglers, the perception of threat, and acceptance of false beliefs. *The Australian Community Psychologist*.

The Australian Psychological Society Limited (2011). *Joint Select Committee on Australia's Immigration Detention Network*. The Australian Psychological Society Limited: Melbourne, Victoria.

Truett, K.R. (1993). Age differences in conservatism. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 14, 405-411.

UNHCR (2011). *Asylum seeker levels and trends in industrialised countries*. Geneva: UNHCR.

Footnote¹

We use the term prejudice to refer to negativity towards a group or a person based on that person's group membership (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). We use the word racism as race-related forms of such prejudice (Pedersen Paradies et al., 2011). Although clearly race affects prejudice against asylum seekers, there are many races in the asylum seeker community – some of which are even 'white'. Thus, for the purposes of this paper, we use the word "prejudice" rather than "race".

Footnote²

An asylum-seeker is an individual who has sought international protection and whose claim for refugee status has not been determined yet. Like many Western states such as the USA and the UK, Australia is a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. As part of their obligation to protect refugees on its territory, it is Australia's responsibility for determining whether an asylum seeker is a refugee or not.

Appendix B: Course outline

Week 1: Introduction and overview of definitions, current trends and demographics of refugees(Author 1).

Week 2: Australia's responses to asylum seekers and refugees, Australia's refugee and humanitarian programme, a historical overview of political responses to refugees and current challenges (Author 1).

Week 3: The experiences of asylum seekers in detention and refugees settling in Australia (Author 1).

Week 4: Asylum seekers and refugees: Research, advocacy and social change (Author 2).

Week 5: A way forward: Discussing future directions for asylum seeker policy (Author 3).

Appendix B: Principles attempted to be followed throughout the course

1. Giving factual information.
2. Encouraging free, open and respectful dialogue.
3. Encouraging students to “walk in the shoes” of refugees and asylum seekers rather than feel personally guilty about their situation.
4. Encouraging students to see how asylum seekers are different, yet similar, to other Australians.
5. Being responsive to the needs and interests of students
6. Showing that our thoughts can sometimes be contradictory. For example, wishing all people a “fair go” in life, yet also sometimes having negative thoughts about asylum seekers or refugees.
7. Showing that sometimes our views are not as widespread as we would otherwise have imagined (the false consensus effect).
8. Encouraging students to think critically about how refugees and asylum seekers are represented in the media and by politicians.
9. Giving students effective tools to deal with unpleasant conversations about asylum seekers and refugees.
10. Including voices of refugees and asylum seekers.