Attitudes toward Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers: The role of false beliefs and other social-psychological variables

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Abstract
Australia has a long and chequered history regarding relations between different cultural groups. Indigenous, Asian, Yugoslav, Italian and Arabic Australians have all suffered from negativity directed toward them by "mainstream" Australia. At the beginning of the 21st century there has been much publicity about two groups: Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers. In this paper, we examine community attitudes toward these two groups, in particular the role of false beliefs in such attitudes. We then set out both the similarities and differences in these two highly related sets of attitudes, and conclude that Australia would appear not to be as accepting of a multi-cultural society as we sometimes believe, and on which we often pride ourselves. There are many social-psychological and structural issues related to negative attitudes toward Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers; much work needs to be carried out to address these.

On the surface, Australia may appear a tolerant and successful multi-cultural society. However, upon closer examination it is evident that there are many inequities that exist, and that certain cultural groups fare worse than others. In this paper, our interest is directed toward two groups: Indigenous Australians who suffer significant disadvantage in almost all measures of western well-being and asylum seekers, many of whom are locked up in detention centres, sometimes for a period of years, and are an extremely vulnerable group of people.

How do Australians, as represented by the Perth community, feel about Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers? There is a large body of research indicating that many Australians have negative attitudes toward Indigenous Australians (e.g. Pedersen et al., 2004), and there is a growing body of research indicating that many Australians hold even more negative attitudes toward asylum seekers (e.g. Betts, 2001; Pedersen, Attwell & Heveli, in press). Although Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers are different in many respects, it may be that there are commonalities between the two sets of negative attitudes; for example, being underpinned by widely held false beliefs. In this paper; we explore attitudes toward Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers in Perth, Western Australia. In so doing, we will examine the role of false beliefs in particular and will consider both the similarities and differences in attitudes toward these two groups.

Attitudes toward Indigenous Australians

Historical context

Indigenous Australians make up 2.2% of Australia's population. Compared with other Australians, they experience significant disadvantage in the areas of health, education, employment and income and housing, and are over-represented in the criminal justice system (HREOC, 2003). In a series of Perth community surveys over the past few years, almost half the respondents expressed negative attitudes toward Indigenous Australians (e.g. Pedersen et al., 2004). Given that in most community samples people with higher levels of education tend to be over-represented, and lower levels of education are often linked with negative attitudes, this is probably an under-estimation of negative attitudes. When racism extends beyond individuals and communities

and becomes institutionalised, the deleterious effects are likely to be far-reaching.

Some attitudes are worrying indeed. For example, Indigenous Australians have been characterised thus: "Generally they are pig of people (sic) who should be treated the same way as they act" (Bergin, 2002). Other views are less blatant, but equally worrying. For example, "I understand that the Government spends over $50,000 a year on each of the people who claim they are Aboriginal" (Waller et al., 2000) and "I once heard that they get an allowance for having dogs" (Bergin, 2002). One might argue that beliefs such as these are so absurd that they need not be taken seriously; however, the holding of such beliefs has serious implications which will be discussed later in this paper.

Although there is limited information about the impact of racism on the well-being of Indigenous Australians, some research suggests that the perception of community negativity significantly relates to Indigenous people's mental health problems, suicidal behaviour, non-prescribed drug use, police problems and prison experiences (South Australian Health Commission, 1991). Further, in one Perth study, results indicated that almost half of a sample of Indigenous children aged between 8 and 12 years perceived that the wider community did not like them (Pedersen with Dudgeon, 2003). It would appear that Indigenous children are becoming aware of racism at a very early age. Given the correlation between the perception of racism and poor health outcomes, and the sizeable number of Indigenous children who feel rejected by the wider community, it is important to attempt to understand what lies behind this racism.

When discussing racism and its effects on groups that are not part of the dominant group in a given society, it is useful to draw upon the work of Jones (1997). Jones distinguishes between three forms of racism that are interrelated and mutually reinforcing: individual, institutional and cultural. Individual racism – as the name suggests – includes personal attitudes, prejudices and behaviours held by individuals and groups towards members of other groups. Here, individuals hold values and beliefs that members of other groups are inferior, and markers such as physical features are important. Often this is underpinned by concepts of inferior biological attributes of the target group. Examples of individual racism would be the calling of Indigenous people "boongs" and "animal" (Doolan, Dudgeon & Fielder, 2000).

Institutionalised racism involves the systems, policies and practices of organisations in society that exclude members of non-dominant groups. For example, in 2001 the Perth Aboriginal health service Derbarl Yerrigan was forced to close one of their successful branches due to "overspending".

However, this overspending was due directly to an increase in client base from 400 to 2100. In contrast, in that same year, the Perth teaching hospitals were overspending at about 120 times that rate; however, they were "bailed out" (Mooney & Houston, 2002).

Cultural racism consists of values beliefs and ideas; the worldviews that are embedded in a culture and that are thought to be superior to the worldviews held by those from different cultures (e.g. a lack of appreciation of the primary importance of Indigenous culture and family/community obligations within mainstream Australian society).

If we wish to reduce levels of racism, it may be useful to identify some of its important correlates. Research indicates that right-wing authoritarianism and nationalism (Pedersen & Walker, 1997), lower levels of formal education, a lack of empathy and false beliefs all relate to higher levels of individual racism (Pedersen et al., 2004). In this paper, however, we intend to direct our attention primarily to the relationship between false beliefs and expressions of individual racism specifically and its wider ramifications with respect to societal norms.

False beliefs about Indigenous Australians[1]

Many Australians have false beliefs about Indigenous Australians. Three of the most common of the false beliefs about Indigenous people have been discussed in *Rebutting the Myths* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992) and are as follows.

1. *Aborigines are more likely to drink alcohol than non-Aborigines.* Pedersen et al. (2000) found that 43.5% of a highly educated community sample were incorrect on this question. The remaining respondents were either unsure or were correct. In fact, Indigenous people drink less alcohol than non-Indigenous people on a per capita basis (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992). That said, excessive alcohol consumption is a problem for some Indigenous people and communities.
2. *Aborigines only have to pay a few payments under a hire-purchase agreement for a car, and the government will meet the remaining costs.* Pedersen et al. (2000) found that 34% were incorrect on this question. This is "one of the silliest yet most persistent myths" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1992, p. 18).
3. *Being Aboriginal entitles you to more social security benefits.* Pedersen et al. (2000) found that 65.4% were incorrect on this question. This is simply not the case. A representative of the Social Securities Department suggested to us one probable explanation. That is, many people believe Indigenous people receive more social security payments because some Indigenous

people request their benefits on a weekly basis rather than fortnightly. Non-Indigenous people may see Indigenous people collecting their benefits twice as often as themselves, and therefore believe that Indigenous people are receiving more than they are (personal communication).

Importantly, false beliefs have been found to significantly relate to racist attitudes toward Indigenous people (Batterham, 2001; Pedersen et al., 2000). Even more importantly, Batterham found that the challenging of false beliefs significantly reduced the reporting of them. Participants whose false beliefs were challenged scored significantly lower on modern prejudice compared with a control group.

Attitudes toward asylum seekers

Context

First, we distinguish between the label "asylum seeker" as opposed to other labels such as "refugee" or "illegal immigrant". In the Australian context, refugees are usually accepted as such offshore through official procedures. On the other hand, asylum seekers are often people making a claim for refugee status that has yet to be determined. They are often refugees but are not recognised as such at this stage (see Refugee Council of Australia, 2003, for a more detailed explanation of this difference). We also do not use the label "illegal immigrant". Requesting asylum is not illegal; it is permitted by both international and Australian law (Einfeld, 2002).

As at February 2004, there were 1120 people, including those on Christmas Island and Nauru, in detention camps (Western Australian Refugee Alliance, 2004). Australia accepts a small number of refugees compared with the rest of the world and in fact the numbers accepted have reduced over the past 20 years (Refugee Council of Australia, 2003). These small numbers are due to the fact that Australia is far from major conflicts, and it does not share land borders with other countries (HREOC, 2003). Australia is the only developed country that detains asylum seekers indefinitely as a matter of course (Einfeld, 2002). In the United Kingdom asylum seekers are given assisted housing (British Immigration and Nationality Directorate, 2003). In the United States, most asylum seekers with a credible fear of persecution are released almost immediately (US Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2003). In New Zealand, after temporary visas are granted, asylum seekers are allowed into the community until their claim is determined. Unless claims are "manifestly unfounded", Immigration Officers may grant 12-month visitor permits as New Zealand sees itself as

having a responsibility to help asylum seekers (New Zealand Immigration Service Website, 2003).

The Australian Government has made many legislative changes to try to stop asylum seekers finding refuge in Australia. In 1999, the Temporary Protection Visa was created so that once an asylum seeker is determined to be a refugee under the Refugee Convention, she or he can stay in Australia for 3 years, after which time their situation is re-examined. Under this legislation, asylum seekers cannot return to Australia if they leave the country during this time. This was particularly hard on refugees such as Al-Zalimi, whose three daughters drowned on the *SIEV X*. If he flew home to be with his wife, his visa would be revoked (Marr & Wilkinson, 2003).

This curtailment of their personal lives has a huge negative impact. As noted by Indigenous spokesperson Lowitja O'Donaghue (2003):

> They are entitled to belong. They are entitled to form relationships and families. They are entitled to find a career for themselves. They should be able to get out and plan their futures. The children should be able to go to school and believe it will count for something, not hang around the streets until the Government makes up its mind.

Here, O'Donaghue is clearly demonstrating empathy and support for another group who is marginalised and discriminated against by mainstream Australia.

The removal of people's capacity for self-determination and self-efficacy has profound mental health implications. To begin with, detainees are often called by their number; this is dehumanising in the extreme. As one detainee wrote to us, "I am forgetting what my name is. My number is ★★★". Further, in the Villawood detention centre, 20–25% of asylum seekers suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (HREOC, 2002). Similarly, a group of East Timorese asylum seekers in detention in Australia were found to have significant levels of post-trauma symptomology in association with past torture and human rights abuses (Silove et al., 2002). In addition, they experienced a great deal of resettlement trauma, in particular with relation to their "uncertain residency status" (p. 453). As Mares (2002) pointed out, many asylum seekers detained in Nauru exhibited post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g. crying, nervousness, anxiety, withdrawal). People who have been exposed continually to trauma – as many asylum seekers have been – react adversely to lengthy detention (HREOC, 2002). For example, self-harm is common within detention. This affects not only the person in question, but also other inmates who witness it. As one detainee told us, he suffered serious distress after watching a fellow asylum seeker attempt to hang himself with razor-wire in the exercise yard. Whenever he closed his eyes, this

picture came to mind. In addition to suffering from significant psychological distress, asylum seekers often face serious medical problems (see Marr & Wilkinson, 2003).

Clearly, then, the situation for asylum seekers in Australia is unpleasant in the extreme. So why are the Australian public not insisting that the Government change its policy? Do they agree with the Government's stance? In a review by Betts (2001), it was found that people are becoming increasingly hostile toward asylum seekers. A study by Pedersen et al. (in press) found that a considerable majority of their respondents held negative – or at the very least ambivalent – attitudes toward asylum seekers. As is the case with Indigenous Australians, negative attitudes toward asylum seekers were found to be related to both individualistic variables (e.g. high levels of nationalism) and societal ones (e.g. low levels of education).

What might be the origin of these attitudes? Betts (2001) noted that while the Tampa situation was occurring, the media gave prominence to reports of the brutal rapes of young women in Western Sydney by gangs of Lebanese youth, and suggested that this may have led many Australians to generalise from one group of Lebanese youth to Middle Eastern people generally. As noted by Deen, "I have witnessed a wave of 'Islamophobia' drift across the country and seen this poison infect our policy of mandatory detention for asylum seekers, as the word 'refugee' becomes synonymous with Muslim" (2003, p. 272). However, some researchers argue that the popular support of Australians for the government's deterrence policy is based on nationalism rather than racism (Betts, 2001). Others see opposition to refugees as stemming from a lack of personal experience and hence from a lack of understanding rather than from racism or xenophobia (Jupp, 2003). Regardless of whether or not these attitudes are racist in origin, once stereotypes are in place they are very difficult to change (Sallis, 2003).

Moving away from community attitudes to the stance of the Government, it could well be argued that the Government is encouraging negative attitudes toward asylum seekers (referring to them as "illegal immigrants" is a case in point). Why would this be the case? It might be argued that encouraging community racism may divert attention from other government policies which have been seen as less than adequate (e.g. education; health; the Iraq War). Or, as argued by Jupp (2002):

> It lies in the need to regain the 1 million votes which went to One Nation in 1998. It was the natural outcome of a process begun by John Howard in 1988 of playing on popular fears of immigration and multiculturalism. It marked the revival of racist and zenophobic popular attitudes … (p. 199).

In short, these negative community attitudes may benefit the Government.

When we look at the three levels of racism espoused by Jones (1997), a strong argument could certainly be made that racism does exist. To recap, regarding attitudes toward Indigenous Australians, we noted the existence of individual, institutional and cultural racism against Indigenous Australians. These levels of racism can also relate to attitudes toward asylum seekers. For example, individual racism against asylum seekers certainly exists; on the Four Corners programme on 19 May 2003 (Inside Woomera), a prison guard was clearly heard yelling at an asylum seeker: "Fuck you're ugly. You're one fucking ugly Arab". The denial of accessible education is an example of institutional racism. Additionally, Australia is the only western society that insists on mandatory detention for asylum seekers for long periods of time, mostly in camps situated in remote areas whose temperatures can reach 50 degrees (see Four Corners, 19 May 2003). This is the treatment Australia metes out to people who have committed no crime, even though Government sources refer to them as "illegals". As Einfeld (2002) noted, even Australia's worse criminals (drug dealers, rapists, murderers) can apply for bail. This is not the case for asylum seekers – men, women and children – who have broken no law. Finally, there is also cultural racism; for example, the denigration of others' choice of clothing such as a woman's hijab (head-covering or clothes) being inferior to western clothing. So – like racism against Indigenous Australians – it would seem that Jones' (1997) levels apply.

False beliefs about asylum seekers

Given the research findings that negative attitudes toward Indigenous Australians are significantly linked to false beliefs, it seems plausible that such links also exist for asylum seekers. Certainly, there are many false beliefs that circulate about asylum seekers. Three of the most widespread of these beliefs are as follows.

1. *Most asylum seekers are queue jumpers.* Pedersen et al. (in press) found that 64.3% believed this to be the case. The truth is that there are no queues for people to jump in countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan, as there are no Australian consulates within the surrounding nations (Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education, 2002). The two main nationalities of asylum seekers in 1998 to 2001 were Iraqi and Afghan (Refugee Council of Australia, 2003). In countries such as Pakistan, being able to bribe officials is often required before one can obtain

documentation to apply for asylum; additionally, many people do not know of the queues they are meant to join (Mares, 2002). Mares further points out that the term 'queue jumper' is, by and large, manufactured by the government. Specifically, there was a change to government policy, with the former minister for Immigration Phillip Ruddock collapsing onshore and offshore intakes so that visas allocated to onshore applicants reduced the number of visas available to offshore applicants.

2. *Asylum seekers must be "cashed up" to pay people smugglers jumpers.* Pedersen et al. (in press) found that 52.9% believed this to be the case. However, often individuals or families fleeing persecution have a network of people who make sacrifices and sell possessions to ensure the safety of those being persecuted. (Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education 2002). Regardless of this, the payment of money does not negate people's legitimacy. Mares (2002) points out that many rich Jews during World War II paid Danish fishermen a fee to help them escape from the Nazis, and that people-smugglers were used to smuggle Chinese dissidents out of Hong Kong after the Beijing massacre in 1989. To our knowledge, there was no public outcry against the Jews or the Chinese dissidents because payment of money was involved. Under these circumstances, the practice was understood as necessary and not condemned.

3. *Australia provides asylum seekers with all sorts of government handouts.* Pedersen et al. (in press) found that 41.7% believed this to be the case. Asylum seekers receive little financial help until they are recognised as refugees, when they have much the same entitlements as other Australians. If they have only temporary protection visas, they have fewer entitlements in some instances (see Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2002).

Unfortunately, misinformation about asylum seekers comes, in many cases, from those in authority in Australian society. The "children overboard" scandal is one example. Here, representatives of the Commonwealth Government, in the lead-up to the Federal election, stated falsely that there was video evidence that asylum seekers were throwing their children overboard. Three hours after the then Minister of Defence, Peter Reith, was informed that there was no evidence of children being thrown overboard, he stated publicly that he would offer proof that this in fact did occur (see Marr & Wilkinson, 2003). Many argue that this Government-invoked fear of asylum seekers, and

the strong action the Government took against them, helped the government to win the election. Yet as Einfeld (2002) eloquently stated:

> There is no human right to lie. Did anyone stop to think then, do they think now, whether they know any parents anywhere who would struggle to get their kids away from terror and torture and out of wretched refugee camps of misery and horror, and then celebrate their freedom by drowning their own kids in the sea? Yet that is precisely what large numbers of Australians bought at the last federal election when the authorities knew it was not true. Are there no limits to our willingness to connive in evil? (n.p.)

In a study conducted in 2002, the relationship between the false beliefs outlined above and negative attitudes toward asylum seekers was examined (Pedersen et al., in press). Results indicated a very strong a correlation between negative attitudes and false beliefs. Interestingly, this relationship was stronger than the moderate relationship between negative attitudes and false beliefs about Indigenous Australians found previously by Pedersen et al. (2000). The stronger relationship between negative attitudes and false beliefs with regard to asylum seekers may be due to few people in Australia having personal contact with asylum seekers.

In the studies reported above, many respondents held a number of false beliefs. This prevalence of false beliefs has troubling implications in Australian society, as it can create and/or maintain racism and social inequality (see, for example, Jones, 1997). There is a potential, however, for false beliefs to be corrected and as Batterham (2001) found, debunking false beliefs about Indigenous Australians reduced the reporting of racist views.

These findings of a strong relationship between negative attitudes and false beliefs were further replicated in another study (Pedersen, 2004). This study also investigated the role of negative attitudes and explicit government misrepresentations (e.g. that asylum seekers from the *SIEV 4* threw their children overboard; when the boat sank killing 353 asylum seekers (the *SIEV X*) it was in Indonesian waters; when asylum seekers were allowed to disembark at Christmas Island none was seriously ill). As expected, the acceptance of these government misrepresentations was significantly linked with negative attitudes (see Marr & Wilkinson, 2003, for a full discussion of these misrepresentations). As an aside, when factoring the false beliefs and explicit government misrepresentations, one clear factor was found (Pedersen, 2004).

Therefore, to conclude this section, it can be seen that many Australians accept misinformation regarding asylum seekers, and that this misinformation is strongly linked with negative attitudes.

Differences and similarities between the two groups

Differences

There are five primary differences between the situation of Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers. First, Indigenous people have been – and continue to be – colonised. They did not choose to have people come to this country and settle here. Asylum seekers have chosen to come to Australia to make their claims for protection believing it to be a humane democratic and peaceful country. Having said this, many asylum seekers have very little choice in this regard: they are forced to flee their homes. Regardless of the antecedents, their experiences must necessarily be different in some ways. This is not to say that one group is worse off than another, but there is no question that Indigenous people suffer significant disadvantage; disadvantage which is the result of hundreds of years of oppression. They are suffering the effects of colonisation, and are still in recovery.

Second, while not minimising the plight of Indigenous Australians, they are not the focus of intense negativity regarding a supposed link to terrorism. Unfortunately, Australia's leaders have made the explicit and erroneous link between asylum seekers and terrorism. As noted by Marr & Wilkinson (2003), Prime Minister John Howard effectively blurred the distinction between waging a war on terrorism and waging a war on ''boat people''. Marr & Wilkinson note further that much of Australian talkback radio linked the September 11 terrorists with Muslim asylum seekers trying to push their way into Australia. Of note, only one person from over 13 000 asylum seekers in Australia was seen as a security threat in 2001, and he arrived by air (Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education, 2002). Over 50 years ago, Allport (1954) noted that for prejudice to be reduced, relevant institutional authorities must sanction the intergroup contact and must endorse a reduction in intergroup tensions. Clearly, this is not the case here.

Third, attitudes toward Indigenous Australians are formed both on values and personal experience (Pedersen et al., 2000). However, attitudes toward asylum seekers are less likely to be formed through experience, as Australians have not been able to see the human face of asylum seekers. For example, during the Tampa crisis, as a result of deliberate government policy, journalists could not get close enough to record the suffering of those rescued from the sea (Marr & Wilkinson, 2003). This is not to say that the media plays no role in community attitudes toward Indigenous Australians. This is clearly not the case (see, for example, Mickler, 1992). What we argue is that with respect to Indigenous Australians, there are other bases on which to form their

opinion such as experience which are less relevant with respect to asylum seekers. In fact, in our conversations with incarcerated asylum seekers, detainees told us that photographs were not allowed to be taken of them until relatively recently. Even now, a good reason is needed before permission is granted for a camera to be taken into a detention centre. That said, cameras are still not allowed in some detention centres, and in other centres only guards are allowed to take photographs (as an aside, photographs including razor wire are not allowed). Mares (2002) notes that many detention centres are off-limits to the media so the general public have little, or no, idea of the conditions asylum seekers are subjected to. Instead, as Deen (2003) points out, there are many stereotypic images that supposedly represent Islam (oftentimes linked with asylum seekers): ''veiled women, fierce beared men, barbaric parents, rapists and suicide bombers'' (p. 287). It does not take long for individual stereotypes such as these to enter a nation's psyche.

A fourth difference relates to intergenerational issues, as well as the issue of psychological distress. Many problems that face Indigenous Australians stem from intergenerational oppression. To take but one example, there are lasting effects from the Stolen Generations (i.e. past practices of taking ''half-caste'' children away from their families). The harm inflicted upon asylum seekers by Australia is at present restricted primarily to this generation (although denial of family reunion rights presents a serious intergenerational problem for asylum seekers). However, it remains to be seen what the repercussions will be in the next generations, both here and overseas. It should be remembered that the vast majority of asylum seekers suffered considerable oppression and hardship in their homeland; this clearly adds to the harm inflicted on them by the Australian Government (e.g. incarceration in desert prisons).

A final difference is the issue of power. Where there are many articulate Indigenous Australians who are perfectly capable of speaking for themselves, at the present time this is not the case with regard to asylum seekers in detention. As a result of federal policy, most detained asylum seekers are imprisoned in remote camps. The direct result is that the detainees have extremely limited opportunities to speak for themselves, to tell the public their stories and to make known the inhumane conditions in detention.

Similarities

As we have set out above, there are certainly differences between the two cultural groups. Within the two cultural groups, neither Indigenous Australians nor asylum seekers are homogeneous nor, indeed, is

"mainstream" Australia. Yet a number of similarities also exist, six of which will be discussed now.

First, there are similar predictors for both sets of negative attitudes. For example, socio-demographic variables such as a lack of education relate to negative attitudes. Psychological variables such as high levels of national identity and right-wing political leanings relate to negative attitudes toward both groups (Pedersen & Walker, 1997; Pedersen et al., in press). There are also similar themes emerging regarding both sets of attitudes. With respect to attitudes toward Indigenous Australians, there is an emphasis on egalitarianism and the need for fairness and equity (Pedersen et al., 2000). With respect to attitudes toward asylum seekers, there is also a similar emphasis on equity and the effect of "queue-jumping" on "real" refugees (Heveli & Attwell, 2002).

Second, in a Perth survey described in Pedersen (2004), community attitudes toward Indigenous Australians, asylum seekers and Asian Australians were measured. Results indicated that most negativity was directed toward asylum seekers, followed by Indigenous Australians, followed by Asian Australians. However, importantly, results also indicated a very strong relationship between attitudes toward Indigenous Australians and attitudes toward asylum seekers.

Third, and as we wish to emphasise here, false beliefs significantly relate to negative attitudes towards both cultural groups. It is almost certainly the case that false beliefs held by individuals are based on government sources and media reports. For example, the misrepresentation by our political leaders linking terrorists with asylum seekers, and in the case of Indigenous Australians political identities such as Pauline Hanson making misrepresentations in the press regarding Indigenous Australians. That said, false beliefs contributed to negative attitudes toward asylum seekers more so than toward Indigenous Australians; due probably to a lack of contact between most Australians and asylum seekers. Also, even though Indigenous people are oppressed, they are still seen as part of the Australian culture. Asylum seekers are not.

Fourth, the trauma experienced by these two groups has been under the spotlight of human rights agencies. That both Indigenous people and asylum seekers have suffered great distress by the failure to accord them some of the most basic of human rights has not escaped the attention of international bodies concerned with such issues. On ABC National Radio in 2001, John Highfield drew listeners' attention to the fact that a recent report by Amnesty International condemned Australia for its treatment of asylum seekers and Aborigines. Perhaps one of the important factors that has prevented the Australian people as a whole from demanding that these injustices be remedied is that false beliefs about the true situation are so widespread.

Fifth, both groups are comprised of people of colour; and racism is prevalent in Australian society with respect to both cultural groups. As Colic-Peisker & Walker (2003) found, the process of resettlement of Bosnian refugees in the Australian community seems to be facilitated by the fact that they are not "visibly different" from the majority of (white) Australians. Perhaps the ordering of negative attitudes that we have discussed previously can relate to a number of different variables such as race, language, or recency of arrival.

Many of the factors we have discussed above can be seen as individual personality variables. However, it is important to note the crucial role of the wider community in this regard. The prevalence and commonality of attitudes espoused by members of the community indicate that individual cognitive representations have taken on a life of their own (this self/society relationship is clearly bi-directional). By ignoring the often unacknowledged impact of the wider society, we fall into the pitfall of individualising what is essentially a societal problem. By so doing, we ignore issues such as the impact of white power and privilege. As Frankenberg notes, notions of white superiority have been the "alibi of racism" for hundreds of years (p. 19). Dyer (1997) further makes the point that "white" functions as the norm: white people are just people; others are "raced". In short, white power and privilege matters. However, for the purposes of this paper, we chose not to concentrate on "whiteness". "The community" is not a homogenous group, let alone a homogenous white group. Although many of the Perth studies which we have described in depth in this paper are comprised primarily of white participants, there was a sizeable minority of people who were not white among them. Further, minority groups can flit between "minority" and "majority" depending on the issue. When the spotlight is on other groups other than their own, they may well join majority opinion. Colic-Peisker (2004) makes a similar point that some groups (in her case, Bosnian refugees) may distance themselves from other groups who are seen as having lower status. However, an important question still remains: "would asylum seekers have been treated so appallingly if they had been white?". Would Indigenous Australians?

Concluding remarks

It is worth stressing that much of the information presented in this paper originates from community surveys in Perth, Western Australia. Although there is a dearth of information comparing attitudes toward Indigenous Australians with those of attitudes toward asylum seekers, it is likely that

inter-location differences will occur. In fact, these have been found in past research with respect to attitudes toward Indigenous Australians (Dunn & McDonald, 2001; Pedersen et al., 2000; Taft, Dawson & Beasley, 1970). Thus, future research will be necessary to establish whether the similarities and differences will hold over different locations.

However, tentative conclusions can be drawn. The research outlined in this paper indicates that although not all Australians have negative attitudes toward other cultural groups, it is clear that much negativity does exist toward both Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers. This is a reflection of both individual and societal processes. As such, both individual action and collective action are needed in order for social reform to be effective. Of note, while identifying that racism persists in our society is important, it is equally important to recognise the changes in the area. In the Indigenous domain a successful area is the participation of Indigenous people in primary, secondary and post-secondary education. Given that the first Indigenous graduate from any Australian university was Charles Perkins in 1966, and that in 2000 there were 7500 Indigenous people enrolled in higher education, this area is clearly an area of growth and development. With regard to asylum seekers, groups of individuals across Australia are taking action to address the situation. Letters are written to detainees, visits are made to the detention centres and letters are written to politicians. Like-minded individuals have banded together to form action groups that organise rallies and disseminate information to the wider popula-tion. However, at an institutional/government level there has been little positive government change (although the detention centres appear to be slowly emptying themselves of children in the lead-up to the 2004 election).

Racism is fluid. Historically, the Yugoslavs experi-enced negativity, then the Italians and then other Asian groups, and now Arabic and Afghan people. After a time the Yugoslavs and the Italians were well accepted. Aside from the fact that, physically, these latter two groups blended in with their ''white'' counterparts, perhaps this is because initially many false beliefs are held about the new group; gradually these beliefs are shown to be false as people get to know the newcomers. There is no question that the high levels of false beliefs found regarding Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers are disheartening. This may change over time.

This review indicates that Australia is not the ''accepting'' multi-cultural society on which we often pride ourselves. Australia's multi-culturalism is conditional and involves a strong element of institutional, cultural and individual racism. There are many social-psychological and structural variables linked to individual negative attitudes, and much work needs to be carried out to alter such attitudes.

Notes

1 We acknowledge that some people argue it is not useful to make distinctions between ''truth'' and ''falsity''; beliefs being opinions held that do not necessarily bear any relationship to facts or proof. For example, ''truth'' or ''falsity'' may be hard to ascertain, and ideologies can serve to legitimise inequality regardless of their truth/falsity (Sidanius et al., 2001). We believe, however, that there are certain societal beliefs that *are* factually incorrect and which may serve to legitimise inequality. In other words, there are some beliefs that can be verified (falsified) by making the appropriate investigations (e.g. that the moon is comprised of green cheese). We therefore use this label in line with past research (e.g. Pedersen et al., in press).

2 After the writing of this article, there has been some change at an institutional/government level. In particular, Victorian backbench MP Petro Georgiou and some Liberal colleagues threatened to introduce a Private Members Bill in 2005 in an attempt to soften the Government's hard line stance on asylum seekers. After negotiations between the Government the ''Liberal Rebels'', it would appear that the detention centres are slowly emptying. This would not have occurred without these like-mined individuals and groups taking action.

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