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“There But for the Grace of God Go We”: Prejudice Toward Asylum Seekers

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**Running head:** Prejudice against asylum seekers to Australia

**Key words:** Prejudice; racism; asylum seekers; refugees; empathy

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## **Abstract**

Australia receives relatively few asylum seekers but the public debate on this issue is intense and there is a widespread prejudice towards them. The current research considers the role of two approaches in explaining prejudice towards asylum seekers: similarity priming and affective reactions of empathy. Participants ( $N = 119$ ) were primed that asylum seekers were either “similar” or “different” to them and asked whether these similarities/differences were important. Dispositional empathy and asylum seeker empathy were measured. Results showed that priming was associated with increased prejudice when priming involved similarity and those similarities were held to be important. Moreover, cognitive similarity priming and affective empathy contributed separately and additively to the prediction of prejudice. Qualitative responses to the priming question revealed that even when “difference” was primed, two out of the three prevalent themes were positive. Results are discussed in relation to understanding the cognitive and affective bases of empathy and prejudice, and practical implications for activists working to reduce prejudice towards asylum seekers.

*“There but for the grace of God go we”: The importance of similarity and empathy in predicting prejudice towards asylum seekers to Australia*

There were 198,300 claims for asylum made in the first half of 2011 globally (UNHCR, 2011). However, civil unrest across the world and the effects of climate change mean that these numbers are likely to increase in the coming years (e.g., Reuveny, 2007). In a global context, Australia receives relatively few unauthorised arrivals. Indeed, the latest figures from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees found, when ranking the top 15 industrialised countries receiving the most refugees, that Australia was number 15 with the least unauthorised arrivals (UNHCR, 2011). However, boats have increased in the last few years, public debate on this issue within Australia is intense and there is a widespread prejudice towards asylum seekers (Pedersen, Attwell & Heveli, 2005; McKay, Thomas & Kneebone, 2011; Schweitzer, Perkoulidis, Krome, Ludlow, & Ryan, 2005). This prejudice is fuelled by both political figures and by the media (Every & Augoustinos, 2007; Suhnan, Pedersen & Hartley, 2013) and has resulted in a regime of mandatory detention that has been criticised for its severity (Briskman, Latham & Goddard, 2008, as well as many national professional associations; e.g., Australian Psychological Society, 2011). Indeed, this type of systems-based oppression has been seen by some peace psychologists as “structural violence” (Galtung, 1985; Pedersen, Fozdar & Kenny, 2012).

Given the high level of prevalence of prejudice towards asylum seekers, and the likely continuation of the global refugee crisis, the antecedents of such prejudice are worth investigation. Consistent with the objectives of peace psychology, our work adopts a systems perspective to consider the environmental context which shapes the adoption and expression of prejudicial attitudes (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sanson & O’Connor, 2012). As noted by Christie (2006; Christie, Tint, Wagner & Winter, 2008), it is vital when addressing issues such as these to use a systems approach rather than a strictly individual one. Indeed, other

research shows that attitudes to asylum seekers, and to other cultural groups for that matter, have an ecological base (Pedersen, Fozdar & Kenny, 2012; Pedersen, Kenny, Briskman, & Hoffman, 2008). Moreover, as noted by Haslam and Holland (2012), “government policy does not float entirely free of public opinion” (p. 108). That is, there is likely to be a symbiotic relationship between the attitudes of the Australian community and the political decision makers who shape them. The notion of a holistic approach to peace studies and the asylum seeker issue in particular aligns with the objectives of peace psychology.

Our paper explores two approaches which may be useful in explaining the existence and maintenance of prejudice towards asylum seekers. The first involves the priming literature and, in particular, the role of similarity and difference. Certainly, research suggests that many Australians see asylum seekers to be less than human (Haslam & Holland, 2012; Haslam & Pedersen, 2007). As Haslam & Pedersen note, this can not only rationalise the harsh treatment of asylum seekers, but it can be used to protect oneself from a full empathic comprehension of what they are going through. The second approach involves the literature regarding the role of emotion; in particular, how empathy affects attitudes towards marginalised groups. We focus on these approaches because, as we outline below, many campaigns attempt to invoke these processes in aid of their practical goal of increasing support for asylum seekers in Australia. The priming and empathy approaches thus have ready application in this context. We will also consider whether these two approaches can be considered separate or overlapping pathways to prejudice reduction. These approaches will be briefly discussed in turn.

### **Priming and Cognitive Antecedents of Prejudice: The Role of Similarity and Difference**

Many campaigns targeting prejudicial or hostile attitudes towards asylum seekers in Australia invoke notions of similarity and difference. For example, the Asylum Seeker

Resource Centre's campaign "Just Like Us" stressed the similarity between mainstream Australia and asylum seekers. Additionally, the rhetoric of activists often explicitly emphasised this similarity; for example, "For racists, here's some facts: Some Afghans are now born-again Christians, some have Australian girlfriends and you can play pool with some on Saturday night and have a beer together ...the soccer team Albany Hazara United is so called because it shows Albany and Hazara people are united" (Tilbury, 2004, p. 8). In short, emphasising the similarity between asylum seekers and the general Australian community has been a significant tactic in activist efforts to improve attitudes.

Consistent with this practical focus, evidence demonstrates the influence of priming similarities and differences in shaping prejudicial attitudes. For example, priming a particular category has been found to affect perceptions of Chinese people and women (Macrae, Bodenhausen, & Milne, 1995), African Americans (Lepore & Brown, 1997) and Aboriginal Australians (Locke, Macleod & Walker, 1994). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) suggests that where people perceive similarity between themselves and other people in a particular social context, they can use this as a basis for group formation to determine who is in their 'ingroup' and who is in their 'outgroup'.

Yet there are conflicting arguments as to whether similarity or difference promotes prejudice. Some researchers find that difference increases prejudice (Henderson-King, Henderson-King, Zhermer, Posokhova, & Chiker, 1997; Stephan & Findlay, 1999). Indeed, the minimal group experiments showed that merely categorising students in group terms was sufficient to promote behaviours that favour the ingroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Tajfel & Turner argued that such prejudicial behaviour allowed one to feel good about one's group membership ('positive distinctiveness'). However, others find that too much similarity increases prejudice because the target group are experienced as *threatening* to one's positive

distinctiveness (e.g., Brown & Abrams, 1986; Gabarrot, Falomir-Pichastor, & Mugny, 2009). If an outgroup is seen as too similar to the ingroup, the ingroup may discriminate against the outgroup to restore positive distinctiveness. Elsewhere, Motyl et al. (2011) found that similarity priming diminishes the negative, threat-based, effects of mortality salience on prejudice towards Arab people and immigrants. It was argued that priming widely shared human experiences attenuates threat (mortality salience) and reduces prejudice. And yet another study found that it depended whether interpersonal or work-related traits are made salient (Zarate, Garcia, Garza, & Hitlan, 2004). Here, when interpersonal traits were salient, difference comparisons led to negativity towards an outgroup; conversely, when work-related traits were salient, similarity comparisons led to negativity. These authors argued that difference threatens cultural norms (because “they” are different); while similarity threatens economic well-being (because “they” have a similar set of skills and can therefore compete for jobs). Clearly, the relationship between attitudes and similarity/difference is not straightforward.

The current research considers one further factor that might help explain these diverging effects of priming similarity and differences on prejudice; specifically, the degree to which those differences are perceived as subjectively important. One could certainly make the argument that if a topic or concept is not important to people, then it will not affect their attitudes on related topics. Indeed, previous research finds that important attitudes are more psychologically meaningful for the liking of other people (Krosnick, 1988; 1989). When attitudes are more important to a person, they are more strongly felt; furthermore, they are more likely to be determined by underlying values (Judd & Krosnick, 1982). Because a particular attitude is embedded in a wider structure of similar attitudes, resistance may occur to attitude change (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; also see Ajzen, 2001). The current research thus

considers the role of subjective importance in shaping reactions to similarity priming in attitudes towards asylum seekers.

### **Affective Antecedents of Prejudice: The Role of Empathy**

A second but related approach emphasises the role of emotional reactions towards outgroups and in particular the role of affective reactions of empathy in reducing prejudice. As with similarity, many campaigns attempt to evoke empathy as a means of reducing hostile attitudes towards asylum seekers. For instance, a 3-part reality television programme called “Go back to where you came from” tracked the journey of six “ordinary” Australians who witnessed, and lived to a degree, the life of refugees for a month. It would appear that empathy building was at the heart of this programme, and there was much debate as to whether people who condemned asylum seekers were lacking in empathy with one commentator referring to the goals of the program as “an empathy forced march” (Sheehan, 2011; also *Go Back to Where You Came From*, 2011).

Again, theory and research in psychology supports the utility of this focus. For example, in one study, high levels of empathy correlated with lower prejudice levels against Indigenous Australians; this was the case for affective dispositional empathy and general empathy towards Indigenous Australians (Pedersen, Beven, Walker, & Griffiths, 2004). Other research finds a relationship between sympathy and attitudes towards asylum seekers (Hanson-Easey & Augoustinos, 2011) and between empathy and opposition to mandatory detention (Hartley & Pedersen, 2007). Empathy is also argued to be at the heart of all anti-prejudice interventions (Pedersen, Walker, Paradies & Guerin, 2011). In a study which examined perspective taking and prejudice, it was found that participants who were encouraged to take on the perspective of an outgroup (indicating some level of priming) reported more positive attitudes towards that group when compared with a more “objective”

control group (Vescio, Sechrist, & Paolucci, 2003; also Batson et al., 2002). Empathy thus seems to be an important affective, prosocial response when it comes to reducing prejudice (see Thomas, McGarty & Mavor, 2009, for a review).

A separate question is whether similarity priming and the affective empathic experience constitute separate, additive paths to prejudice in this context; or whether they are overlapping and inter-related. Some literature suggests that the two processes (priming and empathy) might be independent, where the former relates to cognitive process and the latter an affective process. Psychologists have long argued for the importance of the distinction between cognitive and affective components to attitudes (e.g. Crites, Fabrigar & Petty, 1994). Cognitive and affective components have been shown to be separate and additive predictors of attitudes (Trafimow & Sheeran, 1998) and this has implications for persuasion (Fabrigar & Petty, 1999). Other research showed that cognitive and affective components of attitudes have different relationships with authoritarianism and prejudice towards homosexual people (Haddock, Zanna & Esses, 1993). Given these findings, the cognitive processes invoked in priming and affective processes related to empathy may form separate, additive pathways to the prediction of prejudicial attitudes towards asylum seekers.

However, other literature suggests that these processes and, in particular, similarity and the experience of empathy, may be interconnected and would therefore contribute overlapping variance to the prediction of prejudice. For example, Davis' (1994) work on empathy emphasises both the cognitive and affective processes that underpin empathy overall. Indeed, Davis (1994, 2004) emphasises the role of perspective taking and cognitive empathy in the generation of the affective experience of empathy and compassion. Consistent with an inter-relation between cognitive and affective components, one study found that empathic responding interacted with priming Black stereotypes (Johnson, Olivo, Gibson,

Reed, & Ashburn-Nardo, 2009). Other recent research suggests that empathy can be shaped by group membership (who is in one's ingroup and outgroup; e.g. Stürmer, Snyder & Omoto, 2005; also Thomas et al., 2009). For example, Stürmer et al. (2005) found that empathy was a stronger predictor of AIDS volunteerism for homosexual people (for whom the client was an ingroup member) than it was for heterosexual people (Study 1); and that empathy was a stronger predictor of spontaneous assistance for a person with hepatitis when that person was a (heterosexual) ingroup member than if they were an outgroup member (Study 2). Contrary to assertions regarding the separate and additive nature of cognitive and affective components to attitudes, the Sturmer et al. findings suggest suggests that the two pathways may be inter-related and thus contribute overlapping variance to the prediction of prejudice towards asylum seekers. The current research explicitly tests these two possibilities.

### **The Current Research**

It is clear from the literature described above that there is no straightforward conceptual relationship between priming and prejudice or among priming, empathy and prejudice. It is also the case that these processes have not been studied in relation to prejudice towards asylum seekers in Australia. The current research thus had two core aims. The first was to investigate the role of importance in explaining the relationship between similarity/difference and prejudiced attitudes. Importance is likely to be a significant qualifier (Krosnick, 1989); if participants do not see similarity/difference as being important, then priming those similarities or differences should have little impact on their (prejudicial) attitudes. Thus, we expect that priming should only influence prejudice when people report that similarity (or difference) is important to them. We also sought to use the qualitative responses generated by participants who have been primed with similarity/difference to shed

light on the qualitative nature of those perceived differences. That is, how do people think about and construe those similarity and differences?

The second aim was to investigate whether priming and empathy towards asylum seekers are separate or overlapping pathways to prejudice. Priming is a cognitive process, while empathy has both affective and cognitive components (e.g., Davis, 1994; Thomas et al., 2009). However, given the contradictory evidence in the field, our focus is on resolving the relative contributions of the two pathways in predicting prejudice towards asylum seekers. We explore the relative contributions of priming and empathy over and above the effects of dispositional empathy (Davis, 1983) to rule out the effects of individual differences.

A final note here relates to the role of values in research. We note that we are not “value-free” and that research and politics are often inevitably inter-linked (e.g. Pettigrew, 2011; Spears & Smith, 2001). We both support the rights of asylum seekers to be treated with respect and dignity which is often not the case in Australia’s climate (see Briskman et al., 2008). In line with the Australian Psychological Society (2011), we both also wish for structural change which affords asylum seekers this respect and dignity. However, we do not see our values as being counter-productive. Indeed, Pettigrew (2011) argues that so long as research rigour is maintained, strong commitment to the topic at hand, together with an awareness of values and their effects, can lead to a better research. We have attempted to maintain research rigour, and an awareness of our values, throughout this project.

## **Method.**

### **Participants**

Participants ( $N = 119$ ) were primarily well educated with approximately 28% completing secondary school, 20% being at least part way through a vocational training

course, 47% being at least part way through an undergraduate diploma or bachelor's degree, and 5% being at least part way through a higher degree. Their political viewpoint tended towards the left with 32% of participants at 'centre', 30% leaning towards the 'right' and 38% leaning towards the 'left'. There were more female respondents (62%) than males. Most participants were Caucasian (90%), with the remainder being Asian, Indigenous, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander with 3% reporting they were "other". The mean age was 36 ( $SD = 13$ ).

### **Design**

A two cell (priming: similar / different) between subjects design compared the effects of priming on the key dependent variables of empathy for, and prejudice towards, asylum seekers. Subjective importance of those similarities/differences was measured as the moderating variable. There were 59 participants in the similarity group and 60 participants in the difference group.

### **Procedure**

Using convenience sampling, participants were drawn from the Perth, Australia, metropolitan area in June and July 2011. A snowballing procedure was used to invite participants to participate in the study. Participants read a brief information about the study requirements and then completed socio-demographic measures and the dispositional empathy measure (see the Measures section below). They then completed the priming manipulation. Those in the similarity [difference] condition read: "Please list 5 ways in which we and asylum seekers are alike [Please list 5 ways in which we differ from asylum seekers]". Participants then completed pencil and paper measures of the subjective importance of the similarity/difference, prejudice towards asylum seekers and empathy towards asylum seekers.

### **Measures**

***Dispositional Empathy.*** 14 items were adapted from Davis' (1983) Interpersonal Reactivity Index. Participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree). Seven questions were positive (e.g., 'I feel concerned for people having a hard time') and seven were negative (e.g., 'I don't feel sorry for people with problems'). High scores indicated high levels of dispositional empathy,  $\alpha = .62$ .

***Subjective importance of similarity / differences.*** After completing the priming manipulation, participants responded to the item: "You have listed some similarities (differences) between yourself and asylum seekers. How important, to you, are these sort of similarities (differences)?" The number of responses reported by each participant were recorded, added together, and used as a quantitative measure of subjective importance. The qualitative responses were also subjected to thematic analysis following the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006).

***Prejudice towards asylum seekers.*** Prejudice towards asylum seekers was measured by a six-item semantic differential scale; for example, "negative ..... positive" (following Turoy-Smith, Kane, & Pedersen, 2013; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). High scores indicated high levels of prejudice,  $\alpha = .92$ .

***Empathy for asylum seekers.*** In order to assess the extent of affective feelings of empathy towards asylum seekers, respondents were asked three questions adapted from Pedersen et al. (2004) and Davis (1994). For example, "I often feel empathy with asylum seekers" and "I don't have much sympathy for asylum seekers" (reversed). A 7-point Likert-type scale was used (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree) where high scores indicated high levels of asylum seeker empathy,  $\alpha = .62$ .

## **Results.**

## **Preliminary Analyses**

Table 1 displays the mean scores between key dependent variables together with a comparison between the two priming groups on these variables. It can be seen that, overall, mean scores were just below the midpoint on the prejudice scale. Scores on dispositional empathy were above the scale midpoint, and scores on asylum seeker empathy were also around the midpoint. As is clear from Table 1, it can also be seen that there were no mean level differences between the similarity and difference priming conditions (all  $t$ s < .172, all  $p$ s > .36).

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Table 1 also displays the correlations between key dependent variables using data from all participants. As can be seen, there are significant correlations between all variables. Participants who scored high on prejudice also reported less dispositional empathy and affective empathy towards asylum seekers. Highly prejudiced participants were also less likely to report that similarity to asylum seekers and difference from asylum seekers were important to them.

## **The Moderating Impact of Importance on Prejudice**

*Quantitative analyses.* A moderator is a variable that affects the strength of the relationship between an independent variable (in this case, similarity/difference priming) and a criterion or dependent variable (in this case, prejudice towards asylum seekers; see Baron & Kenny, 1986). In our models, we test the idea that the relationship between priming (the independent variable) and prejudice (the dependent variable) is either strengthened or attenuated by how important those similarities/differences are seen to be (the moderator variable). In doing so we are guided by the procedures outlined by Aiken and West (1991)

who recommend conducting two step hierarchical regression analyses. In this procedure, evidence for moderation is obtained if the interaction term is a significant predictor at step 2 of the model (i.e. has a significant regression coefficient  $\beta$ ), and it contributes significantly to model prediction overall.

Before doing conducting analyses, the importance variable was centred and a product term was created (similarity = 1, difference = -1). In step 1 we regressed the two predictor variables (importance and helping) on prejudice; importance ( $\beta = .31, p = .002$ ) was a significant predictor but priming ( $\beta = .06, p = .56$ ) was not. At step 2 we regressed the two predictor variables (importance and helping) as well as the importance\*priming interaction term. Consistent with moderation, the interaction term was a significant predictor ( $\beta = .26, p = .007$ ) and adding the interaction term contributed significantly to the overall prediction of prejudice such that the  $R^2$  change was also significant,  $F(1, 92) = 7.60, p = .007$ . Importance ( $\beta = .30, p = .002$ ) remained a significant predictor while priming was not ( $\beta = .05, p = .59$ ). To decompose the interaction (as per Aiken & West, 1991) we conducted separate regressions for the similarity and differences primes respectively. These revealed that importance was a predictor of prejudice for those primed with similarity,  $\beta = .53, t(51)=4.35, p < .001$ , but not amongst those primed with difference,  $\beta = .05, t(43)=.30, p = .77$ . Figure 1 depicts the slopes. Thus, prejudice increased when participants were induced to perceive similarities with asylum seekers, and those similarities were reported to be important.

**Qualitative analyses.** To explore the reasons why these differences are being experienced as subjectively important we analysed the qualitative data generated by the respondents. Consistent with our quantitative findings, two-thirds of participants (62.3%) reported that they saw “similarity” as being important; similarly, two-thirds (66%) of participants in the difference condition saw “difference” as being important.

Because the qualitative data go to the core of what people think about when faced with questions of similarity and difference, it is worth considering this in some detail for the similarity and difference groups, respectively. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) revealed that there were three major themes with the difference condition (see Table 2). The first was that Australians are relatively advantaged (see Leach et al., 2002): they were presented as having more opportunities, have more freedoms, and have a better way of life. For example, “We come from a privileged [sic] society”. The second most prevalent theme was asylum seekers have a different culture, language, dress, religion, and food – though these statements were made without apparent judgment. For example, “I think the asylum seekers are different from me/us because they are brought up with different values, cultures & government laws are harsher”. Yet there was one overtly negative theme from the difference group which related to resentment about asylum seekers. Much of this resentment stemmed from false beliefs about asylum seekers (see Pedersen et al, 2012). For example, “We have not paid many thousands of dollars to get to Australia illegally”.

With respect to the similarity group, the most reported theme was common humanity. For example, one participant noted that “We all smile in the same language”. The second most prevalent theme involved both Australians and asylum seekers loving their families. For example, “We ALL want what’s best for our families”. The third theme involved both Australians and asylum seekers wanting to be safe and secure; for example, everybody has “a right to live a life without fear”. These themes have some intriguing implications when considered in combination with our quantitative finding above that prejudice increases where participants were primed with similarities and those similarities. Mostly, it seems, relating to common human interests were seen to be important.

### **Empathy and Priming: Separate or Interrelated Predictors?**

To investigate whether empathy (an affective process) and priming (a cognitive process) constituted overlapping or separate pathways to prejudice, we first tested the effect of the priming\*importance interaction term on empathy towards asylum seekers. If these processes are related then we would expect to see that the interaction term will contribute to prediction of empathy. As above, in Step 1, importance ( $\beta = -.36, p < .001$ ) was a significant predictor but priming ( $\beta = -.05, p = .61$ ) was not. At step 2, importance ( $\beta = -.36, p < .001$ ) remained a significant predictor but neither the interaction term ( $\beta = -.12, p = .23$ ) nor priming ( $\beta = -.05, p = .62$ ) were predictors. This suggests that the feeling of affective empathy is not related to the effects of priming\*importance on prejudice described above.

We next utilised hierarchical regression to assess the relative contributions of affective empathy and priming, over and above dispositional empathy. Dispositional empathy was entered at Step 1 and was a significant predictor of prejudice ( $\beta = -.51, p < .001$ ). Empathy towards asylum seekers was a significant predictor at Step 2 ( $\beta = -.71, p < .001$ ) and this reduced the previously significant relationship between dispositional empathy and prejudice ( $\beta = .00, p = .27$ ). Finally, the priming\*importance variable also contributed significantly to prediction when added at step 3 ( $\beta = .19, p = .005$ ), and the  $R^2$  change was also significant,  $F(1, 115) = 8.46, p = .005$ . This pattern of results suggests that the affective (empathy) and cognitive (priming\*importance) variables are each contributing independently to the prediction of prejudice towards asylum seekers, over and above dispositional empathy.

## **Discussion**

This paper sought to consider the cognitive and affective bases of prejudice towards asylum seekers in Australia. In light of research which identifies a mixed role for similarity/difference priming in prejudice, the first aim of the current research was to consider the potentially moderating role of subjective importance of those differences and in the

specific context of prejudice towards asylum seekers. We found that, while priming was not a predictor in its own right, the subjective importance of those similarities/differences contributed uniquely to the prediction of prejudice. The null effect is also consistent with the literature generally which documents a mixed role for similarity in prejudice, where some research finds that difference promotes prejudice (e.g. Stephan & Findlay, 1999); and others identify a similarity ‘threat’ (e.g., Gabarrot et al., 2009). The null effect is also consistent with other emerging research in the area of priming and asylum seekers (e.g. Croston & Pedersen, 2013).

However, and consistent with expectations, the subjective importance one attaches to those similarities/differences moderated the effect of the similarity/difference prime. Simply put, our research found that people were more prejudiced against asylum seekers when they were induced to perceive similarities, and those similarities were endorsed as important. The qualitative data revealed that participants in this condition overwhelmingly drew on narratives of common humanity. Combining the insights of the quantitative and qualitative data, it seems that similarity-primed participants focussed on their common humanity and other basic needs (security, safety), and this *increased* prejudice towards asylum seekers when those needs were seen to be important. How does this finding sit within this mixed literature?

On the one hand, this finding is consistent with the work of Zarate et al. (2004) who emphasised the different *qualities* of similarity. Indeed, their research found that when an immigrant outgroup was evaluated as similar on work-traits this heightened prejudice because it threatened economic well-being: “The essence of this threat is that immigrant groups compete for scarce economic resources” (Zarate et al., 2004, p. 104). Another possibility is that these subjectively important similarities were experienced as threatening at

some other level, perhaps to one's positive distinctiveness (as in Brown & Abrams, 1986; Gabarrot et al., 2009). On the other hand, this research forms an interesting counterpoint for the work of Motyl et al. (2011) who found that similarity priming had a *reductive* effect on prejudice towards Arab people and immigrants because it weakened the negative, threat-based, effects of mortality salience. Other work documents the ambiguous nature of human-level identity and norms in shaping social discrimination and shows that emphasising shared humanity is not uniformly positive because what it means to be human can be both malevolent and benevolent (e.g. Greenaway & Louis, 2010). Consistent with this, research recognises that there are potential problems in too much emphasis on similarity with regard to asylum seekers (e.g., Pedersen, Walker, Paradies & Guerin, 2011; Tilbury, 2007). Altogether this research suggests that subtle threat dynamics play an important role in perceptions of similarity, human-ness and prejudice.

More broadly, the impact of "importance" supports previous research which suggests that the more central the attitude, the more psychologically consequential for the liking of other people (e.g. Krosnick, 1988, 1989). The current research is thus a significant extension of work from the interpersonal 'liking' attitude literature to document a similar process in prejudice towards social groups (asylum seekers).

The second aim examined whether priming (a cognitive process) and empathy for asylum seekers (an affective process) contribute as independent or interconnected predictors of prejudice towards asylum seekers. We included dispositional empathy to control for individual differences as per Davis (1983). Results indicated that the cognitive process (specifically the priming\*importance variable discussed above) and the affective process (feelings of empathy and compassion for asylum seekers) contributed independently to the prediction of prejudice towards asylum seekers. While other work emphasises the idea that

empathy is underpinned by overlapping cognitive and affective processes (Davis, 1994; Thomas et al., 2009), the current research supports the traditional distinction between the cognitive and affective bases of attitudes (e.g. Crites, Fabrigar & Petty, 1994; Trafimow & Sheeran, 1998). That is, it is possible to consider these processes in an additive fashion and target them independently. Given that other research has shown that cognitive and affective components of attitudes have different relationships with prejudice towards homosexual people (Haddock, Zanna & Esses, 1993), an important priority for future research directions will be to explore whether these two pathways play a different role in exacerbating or mitigating prejudice. It would also be important to investigate whether our findings relate only to asylum seekers or also apply to other stigmatised or marginalised groups.

### **Practical Implications**

Although there is a great deal of prejudice towards asylum seekers amongst the Australian community and politicians (Suhnan et al., 2012), this is not inevitable. Prejudice towards asylum seekers is not universally shared within the Australian community (Haslam & Holland, 2012) and negativity towards asylum seekers can be effectively tackled in the community (e.g., Hartley, Pedersen & Dandy, 2012). In this vein, it is worth devoting some discussion to the practical implications of the current research.

Our results suggest that activists should target affective and cognitive pathways separately in the battle to combat prejudice: there is a need to attend to both affective and cognitive factors for maximum impact. Activists cannot just do one and assume that the other will ‘flow’. Regarding the role of the affective pathway, our research supports the idea that empathy is important and could usefully be at the core of all anti-prejudice interventions (Pedersen et al., 2011). Indeed, it may be – especially given the finding that affective reactions of empathy will contribute over and above similarity – that campaigns can also

focus on getting Australians to put themselves into the shoes of asylum seekers to generate affective feelings of sympathy and compassion. For example, a campaign by Amnesty International focuses on empathy “I’d do anything to save my child” (Amnesty, 2010).

Regarding the cognitive pathway, our research adds nuance to strategies which seek to emphasise similarity and difference in the asylum seeker debate. Here our results suggest that stressing the similarities between asylum seekers and mainstream Australians may be a double edged sword. For those for whom those similarities are important and threatening at some level (and perhaps particularly economically threatening; Zarante et al., 2004), this may actually *increase* prejudice. This suggests that, for those advocates who are attempting to invoke similarity and a common humanity, it is important to do so in ways that will not inadvertently communicate a threat to economic or other interests (by, for example, overtly emphasising the skills of this group). In addition to carefully deploying similarity, we note that it is also possible to productively discuss difference. The qualitative data, in particular, suggested that there are perceived to be explicit differences between the vast majority of mainstream Australians and asylum seekers. It is important for differences to be made explicit but for the Australian public to be given positive ways of *construing* those differences.

In this regard, the qualitative data suggests clear positive themes that anti-prejudice strategists can build upon – most notably “our” privilege and our common humanity. This latter theme is consistent with other work which identifies the important role of humanity in attitudes towards asylum seekers (Nickerson & Louis, 2008) while taking into account the subtleties about this topic; in particular, the ambiguities around human behaviour (Greenaway & Louis, 2010). Strategists can also emphasise the love of family which crosses cultural groups. This theme supports past research by Goodman (2007) who found this was a major

theme when discussing British asylum seekers. He argued that narratives of “loving families” act to break down the “us-and-them” dichotomy. Finally, strategists can concentrate on narratives surrounding being safe and secure which may invoke a more general human-rights attitudinal orientation (e.g. McFarland & Mathews, 2005). It is worth noting that the positive themes were not simply positive self-presentations (i.e., discursive formulations where people present themselves as being tolerant) followed by negativity as sometimes occurs with discourse about asylum seekers and other marginalised groups in Australia and elsewhere (see Augoustinos & Every, 2007).

Finally, in line with a great deal of previous research, there was a negative theme based around resentment against asylum seekers. This latter theme directly links social mores in the Australian community where the false beliefs of individual Australians are also mirrored in political rhetoric (e.g., Suhnan, Pedersen & Hartley, 2013). Although rebutting false beliefs does not go far enough in an intervention, it is an important element of it.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

There are, of course, limitations to the current research. Most importantly, it is a small sample size and – like almost all community surveys – highly educated people are over-represented in our sample. Given the negative relationship between prejudice and education (e.g., Pedersen & Hartley, 2012), this could well have affected the lack of overtly negative themes found in the qualitative data. Future research could investigate these themes with a less educated sample and further investigate what themes are most strongly correlated with the reduction of prejudice. Having said that, the positive themes are still useful for anti-prejudice strategists – they are a place to start with regard to more positive rhetoric about asylum seekers. Furthermore, especially given the inconsistent quantitative findings of similarity/difference priming, it would be an excellent idea to replicate and extend our study

with a different target group and in a different location. As noted by Forrest and Dunn (2007), context matters when it comes to prejudice.

## **Conclusions**

In a recent paper, Pettigrew (2011, p.186) refers to what he calls the ‘single process fallacy’, noting that “institutional processes are complex, and they invariably involve multiple psychological processes”. Although we found that both the priming and emotion literatures useful in developing explanations of prejudice towards asylum seekers, it is important to note that we do not mean to suggest that these provide the full explanation or solution to this complex social problem.

The current research contributes to the literature on the role of similarity/difference and affective feelings of empathy in the battle to combat prejudice towards stigmatised groups in society. We end with a quote by one of our participants which neatly illustrates the very processes we have sought to illuminate: *There but for the grace of God go we. We take far too few refugees into Australia. The second verse of our national anthem should guide us: “for those who come across the sea we’ve boundless plains to share”*. We could not have put it better ourselves.

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Table 1.

*Means (Standard Deviation) and Correlations between Key Dependent Variables*

	Similarity prime Mean (Standard Deviation)	Difference prime Mean (Standard Deviation)	Overall Mean (Standard Deviation)	Prejudice	Dispositional empathy	Affective empathy	Subjective importance
Prejudice	43.69(24.46)	42.95(21.78)	43.33 (23.1)	-	-.503***	-.771***	-.311**
Dispositional empathy	5.45(.74)	5.47(.82)	5.46 (0.8)		-	.588***	.367***
Affective empathy	4.37(1.49)	4.54(1.48)	4.46 (1.48)			-	.359***
Subjective importance	5.06(1.99)	5.09(2.10)	5.07 (2.04)				-

\*\* p < .001. \* p < .002.

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Table 2      Qualitative data: Priming with either Difference or Similarity

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**Difference Prime** (*n* = 60)

Australians have privileges that asylum seekers do not	<i>n</i> = 42	70%
Asylum seekers have different cultures	<i>n</i> = 19	32%
Resentment against asylum seekers	<i>n</i> = 11	18%

**Similarity Prime** (*n* = 59)

Common humanity	<i>n</i> = 38	64%
Love of family	<i>n</i> = 30	51%
Safety and security	<i>n</i> = 27	46%

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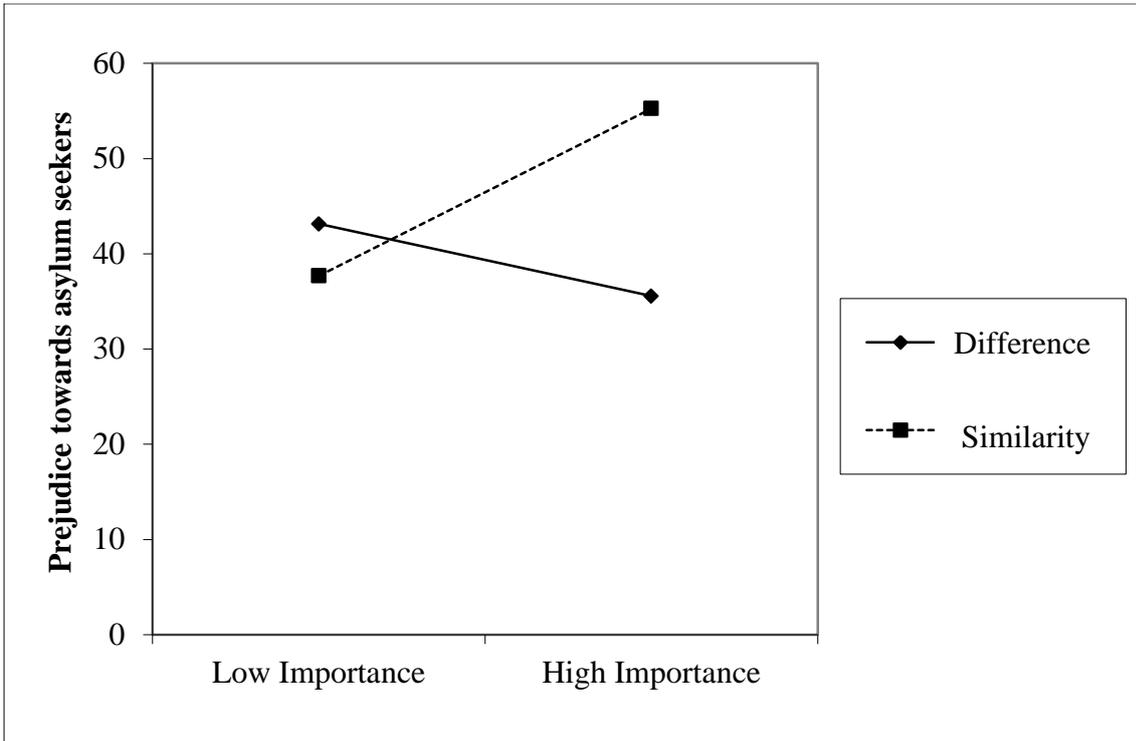


Figure 1. Moderation of the effect of similarity/difference priming on prejudice by subjective importance.