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Hartley, L.K. and Pedersen, A. (2007) Asylum seekers: How attributions and emotion affect Australians' views on mandatory detention of "the other". Australian Journal of Psychology, 59 (3). pp. 119-131.

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Asylum seekers: How attributions and emotion affect
Australians' views on mandatory detention of 'the other'

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Abstract.

There is little research regarding the social psychological processes shaping community opinions about asylum seeker policy. Here, we explored two issues by way of a random community survey of the Perth metropolitan area. We first examined whether the intergroup perceptions that occur when individuals focus upon the Australian community (self-focus) or asylum seekers themselves (other-focus) when evaluating the issue of asylum seekers in detention affected community opinions. Regarding self-focus, perceiving the Australian community as stable (not seeing asylum seekers as a threat to the stability of Australian society) predicted a more lenient policy orientation, as did perceiving the government's policy as illegitimate. Regarding other-focus, perceiving asylum seekers as legitimate, their situation in detention as unstable, and empathy predicted a more lenient policy orientation. Second, we examined the accuracy with which participants estimated wider community consensus for their respective policy orientation. As predicted, over-estimation increased as participants favoured tougher policy.

The Australian government's policy regarding asylum seekers has generated considerable debate both within Australia and internationally (Klocker, 2004). Considering the government has largely framed asylum seekers as a threat to border security and national sovereignty, their policy aims to deter unauthorised arrivals from Australian shores, which includes the mandatory detention of unauthorised arrivals in remote detention centres (Augoustinos & Quinn, 2003; Marr & Wilkinson, 2003) and in offshore facilities like Nauru. Serious concerns have been raised by numerous bodies about the negative psychological implications of prolonged and indefinite detention, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (1997) and Amnesty International (2002). Specifically, evidence suggests that detained asylum seekers present with extremely high rates of mental illness which are exacerbated the longer they are detained, and continue long after the detainees' release (e.g., McGory, 2002; Steel, Frommer, & Silove, 2004). In view of this, it is not surprising that many individuals and bodies at the time our research was carried out believed that more lenient policies should be implemented to govern unauthorised arrivals in Australia (Rural Australians for Refugees [RAR], 2005). Indeed, given that the legislation regarding unauthorised arrivals still stands at the time this article goes to press, there are many individuals and bodies *still* concerned about the whole notion of mandatory detention.

Also, there is growing evidence that many Australians hold overtly negative attitudes toward asylum seekers (e.g., Pedersen, Attwell, & Heveli, 2005; Schweitzer, Perkoulidis, Krome, Ludlow, & Ryan, 2005). It may well be that the opinions of the Australian community about asylum seeker policy influences the maintenance or modification of the Australian government's policy (see Marr & Wilkinson, 2003, who

argued that the government's tough policy stance won them the 2001 federal election). Therefore, an examination of the social psychological processes that shape the community's opinions about asylum seeker policy is an important issue to explore. There are two theoretical positions that may be useful in exploring this issue. First, the intergroup perceptions that occur when individuals focus upon the Australian community (self-focus) or the asylum seekers (other-focus) when evaluating the issue of asylum seekers in detention, and second, the accuracy with which people estimate the wider community support their respective policy orientation (i.e., tough vs. leniency). These two theoretical positions may be relevant, and will now be discussed.

Position 1: The role of self and other-focus in intergroup relations.

Whether in-group members focus on their own group or the out-group when evaluating intergroup relations has been argued to play an important role in shaping whether they support or oppose social justice strategies for out-groups (Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002). Some research suggests that self-focus leads to harsher judgments regarding out-groups (e.g., Jackson, Brown, Brown, & Marks, 2001) while other research suggests that other-focus can bridge intergroup boundaries and motivate in-group members to help disadvantaged out-groups (Davis, 2004). Whether individuals focus upon the Australian community or asylum seekers themselves when evaluating the issue of asylum seekers in detention may play an important role in shaping one's opinions about asylum seeker policy.

Theory and research based on social identity theory and the relative deprivation approach explores how specific perceptions of intergroup relations influence whether

members of disadvantaged groups support social justice strategies for their own group (Kessler & Mummendey, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Research has shown, for example, that members of disadvantaged groups are more likely to support strategies to change their group's disadvantage if they perceive their disadvantage as illegitimate and stable (i.e., unchanging), and they perceive the present intergroup situation as controllable (Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke, 1999; Tajfel, 1975). However, these approaches tend not to explore the specific perceptions as to whether advantaged group members support social justice strategies for disadvantaged out-groups, because it is assumed that challenges to inequality are most likely to come from below (Walker & Smith, 2002). Yet, as argued by Leach et al. (2002), in a democratic society the advantaged group members have the greatest power to challenge policies that disadvantage out-groups.

In highlighting the importance of examining the perceptions made by advantaged in-group members, Leach et al. (2002) propose that there are four dimensions whereby advantaged group members can perceive intergroup relations which will influence whether they will support social justice strategies for a disadvantaged out-group, these being: self versus other-focus, perceived legitimacy, stability and control. While noting that perceptions of 'self' and 'other' are interconnected concepts, Leach et al. assert that advantaged group members can focus either upon the advantaged in-group (self-focus) or the disadvantaged out-group (other-focus) when thinking about intergroup inequality. For example, it is proposed that when an advantaged member is self-focus orientated, they are likely to evaluate the legitimacy and stability of the in-group's advantage, and the control of the means by which the advantaged gained their position. By contrast, if an

advantaged member is other-focus orientated, they are likely to evaluate the legitimacy and the stability of any out-group misfortune, and the degree to which the disadvantaged out-group have control over their own circumstances.

In addition, Leach et al. (2002) assert that depending on the direction of focus and the perceptions of legitimacy, stability, and control, certain emotions are likely to be aroused. For example, if an advantaged individual is other-focus orientated, they perceive the out-group's misfortune as illegitimate and unstable, and they perceive the out-group's misfortune as beyond the out-group's control, they may feel empathic toward the out-group. If an advantaged individual is self-focus orientated, they perceive the advantage of their position as illegitimate and unstable, and they perceive the means to which they have gained their advantage position as within their control, they may feel guilt with respect to the out-group.

The theory of Leach et al. (2002), as described above, centres on how focusing on the self or the other differentially affects the perceptions that relative advantaged group members make regarding a disadvantaged out-group. It may also be useful to extend this theory to look at the relatively advantaged Australian community's views on asylum seekers in detention (i.e., they are advantaged in that they are not asylum seekers). More specifically, it may be a worthwhile line of investigation to assess whether evaluating the issue of asylum seekers in detention from self-focus (via the perceptions of legitimacy, stability, control and feelings of guilt) and from an other-focus (via the perceptions of legitimacy, stability, control and feelings of empathy) predicts the community's opinions about asylum seeker policy. It is to this that we now turn.

A. Evaluating the issue of asylum seekers in detention from a self-focus.

For the purpose of the present study, self-focus means that in-group members collectively concentrate upon the Australian community when evaluating the issue of asylum seekers in detention.

Legitimacy. Here, we focus on the in-group's perception of the legitimacy of the Australian government's policy regarding asylum seekers. Research shows that individuals are willing to accept outcomes of governmental policies that may have negative implications for out-groups if they perceive these policies to be legitimate (Kelman, 2001; Tyler, 2001). Klocker (2004) found that participants who were concerned that they as Australians were being unfairly disadvantaged by asylum seekers coming to Australia (e.g., taxes were paid to support their stay in detention) were highly supportive of the government's deterrence based policy. It is therefore likely that perceptions of the Australian government's asylum seeker policy as being legitimate or illegitimate will influence one's policy orientation.

Stability. Here, we focus on upon the in-group's perception of the effect that asylum seekers may have on the stability of the Australian society. Research suggests that individuals who hold negative attitudes toward asylum seekers also perceive asylum seekers as a threat to Australian society (Louis, Duck, Terry, Schuller, & Lalonde, 2007; Schweitzer et al., 2005). Perceiving asylum seekers as a threat to the stability of Australian society may indeed play a key role in shaping people's opinions about asylum seeker policy.

Control. Here, we focus on the perceived control that in-group members feel they as Australians have over the situation of asylum seekers in detention. There is some

evidence to suggest that perceiving one's self to have control over another's disadvantaged predicament motivates pro-social behaviour (Schroeder, Penner, Dovidio, & Piliavin, 1995). In order to build upon this, the perceived control from a self-focus warrants further investigation.

Guilt. Here, we focus on the in-group's feelings of guilt regarding the issue of asylum seekers in detention. Because guilt is a self-focused emotion, the perception of guilt should focus attention on the Australian community's responsibility for asylum seekers in detention, rather than on asylum seekers themselves. There is a degree of ambiguity in the literature regarding how motivating group-based guilt actually is in fostering support for the social justice outcomes of others. While Iyer, Leach, and Crosby (2003) found that White Americans who felt guilty about discrimination experienced by African Americans supported compensatory affirmative action (i.e., a form of restitution); the same was not found with respect to equal opportunity affirmative action (i.e., a policy that gives preferential treatment for employment). Similarly, Leach et al. (2006) found that guilt did not predict non-Indigenous Australians' willingness to engage in general efforts of political action regarding Indigenous Australians. On the other hand, guilt did predict non-Indigenous Australians' support for an official apology (McGarty, Pedersen, Leach, Anutei, Mansell, & Waller, 2005) and monetary compensation to Indigenous Australians (Reid, Gunter, & Smith, 2005).

Iyer et al. (2003) argue that guilt should only be associated with intentions to support policies aimed explicitly at providing restitution to a disadvantaged out-group, such as an official apology or monetary compensation, because this restores morality to the intergroup relation by addressing the in-group's responsibility for the out-group's

situation. It remains to be seen whether group based guilt fosters support for general policies aimed to achieve social justice for asylum seekers in Australia.

B. Evaluating the issue of asylum seekers in detention from an other-focus.

As hypothesised by Leach et al. (2002), when an individual is other-focus orientated they are evaluating the intergroup relation by focusing upon the out-group's situation.

Legitimacy. Here, we focus on the in-group's perception of the legitimacy of asylum seekers' claim for refugee status. Research suggests that Australians tend to conceptualise asylum seekers as being 'not genuine', 'illegal' (Pedersen, Watt, & Hansen, 2006; Saxton, 2003), and 'illegitimate' (Klocker & Dunn, 2003) regardless of the fact that almost 95% of all asylum seekers are eventually recognised as refugees (Brennan, 2003). Perceiving asylum seekers as 'illegitimate' may well influence people's opinions about asylum seeker policy and act to legitimise support for the government's policy.

Stability. Here, we focus on the in-group's perception about the stability of asylum seekers' situation in detention. The relationship between the perceived stability of an out-group's predicament and support for social justice strategies for that group has been conceptualised in quite contradictory terms. On the one hand, an out-group's situation may be needed to be perceived as unstable and therefore modifiable to foster support for social justice strategies for that group. However, perceiving an out-group's disadvantage as stable may also encourage helping, because a stable misfortune highlights the need for help (Leach et al., 2002). It remains to be seen whether stability affects support for general efforts to achieve social justice for asylum seekers.

Control. Here, we focus on the in-group's perception of how much control asylum seekers have over their situation in detention. There is evidence to suggest that those who attribute another's situation as controllable by them are less likely act in a pro-social manner toward the other; that is, when individuals perceive that another's predicament is controllable, they feel that their predicament is their own fault (Weiner, 1995). In view of this, the degree of control asylum seekers are perceived to have over their situation in detention may well influence opinions about asylum seeker policy.

Empathy. Here, we focus on the in-group's feelings of empathy regarding the issue of asylum seekers in detention. Empathy has been associated with a wide range of efforts to help the disadvantaged and has been argued to provide a basis for fostering support for ameliorative policies and concerns for the justice of others (Hoffman, 1991; Stephen & Finlay, 1999). Because of empathy's emphasis on the wellbeing of others, it has been conceptualised as the main psychological process that bridges in-group and out-group distinctions (Davis, 2004). If this is the case, feelings of empathy may have an important impact on one's opinions about asylum seeker policy.

Position Two: Accuracy of perceived community consensus.

The research discussed above outlines the role that self and other-focused perceptions and emotions may have in shaping one's opinion about asylum seeker policy. Another social psychological process construct which may be relevant to this issue is the tendency for individuals to overestimate the extent to which others share their own views. Inaccurate perceptions about the extent to which community members share one's views may have significant social implications. Not only can people misperceive the opinions of others by

believing that their own opinion is consensually shared than is the case, this misperception may strengthen their conviction that their position is the right one (Todorov & Mandisodza, 2004). Furthermore, Miller (1993) argues that people who falsely believe that their views are held by the majority are more outspoken and less likely to alter their views. In view of this, the accuracy with which people perceive community support for their opinion about asylum seeker policy is an important process to address.

Specific to Australia, Louis et al. (2007) found that intentions to support the harsh treatment of asylum seekers were linked to perceptions that Australian social norms openly embraced the rejection of asylum seekers. In another study, Pedersen, Griffiths, and Watt (in press) explored the relationship between attitudes toward asylum seekers and the perceptions of community support for such attitudes. Results indicated that respondents, regardless of prejudice levels, overestimated community support for their views. However, as respondents became more rejecting toward asylum seekers, their estimates of community support increased in a linear fashion. In view of this, it seems a worthwhile cause to explore whether the findings from Pedersen et al. extend to people's opinions about asylum seeker policy.

Socio-demographic variables.

The above research explored the role that social psychological processes had in shaping people's opinions about asylum seeker policy. Additionally, some research has found relationships between socio-demographic variables and negative attitudes toward out-groups. For example, being male, lower levels of education and right-wing political

position have been associated with negative attitudes toward asylum seekers (Pedersen et al., 2005). In view of this, it seems useful to assess the importance of socio-demographics with the social psychological factors described previously.

Overview of the present study.

As of July 2005, when this research was carried out, there were 168 asylum seekers in detention who had been held for longer than two years (A Just Australia, 2005). In a democratic society such as Australia, one would anticipate that the opinion of the Australian community about asylum seeker issues would have an impact on government policy. An examination of the social psychological processes that may influence community opinions about government policy is therefore an important issue that needs to be explored. Despite this, no study has directly examined these issues. To examine the social psychological processes that may shape community opinions about asylum seeker policy two specific aims were identified.

Aim 1: Self versus other focus. The first aim was to investigate whether the intergroup perceptions that occur when individuals focus upon the Australian community (self-focus) or the asylum seekers themselves (other-focus) when evaluating the issue of asylum seekers in detention affected people's policy orientation. Specifically, in an extension of Leach et al. (2002), our study investigated whether perceptions of legitimacy, stability, and control (both self and other-focus) and the group-based emotions of guilt (self-focus) and empathy (other-focus), were differentially associated with policy orientation.

Aim 2: Accuracy of perceived community consensus. The second aim of the study was to determine whether the accuracy with which participants estimated that the wider community supported their policy orientation, which ranged from ‘tough’ to ‘lenient’. Based on the findings of Pedersen et al. (in press), it was first hypothesised that the all policy orientation groups would over-estimate consensus for their respective positions in the community. Second, it was hypothesised that the magnitude of over-estimation would increase as participants favoured tougher policy orientations.

Method.

Procedure.

Using Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001) data on SES, four Perth suburbs were randomly chosen in July 2005. One suburb was low SES, one was high SES, and two were middle SES (more Perth residents are middle SES compared with low or high). A questionnaire and accompanying letter were delivered to 800 potential participants, and two weeks later a reminder letter was delivered. Half of the accompanying letters requested for a female to complete the questionnaire if were possible, the other half, male. A total of 160 questionnaires were returned, making the response rate 20% (more details on participants are given later in this paper).

Measures.

The questionnaire used was a composite of two previously used scales, both adjusted to fit the present study, and eight scales that were specifically designed for the present study. The questionnaire consisted of five sections:

Asylum seeker policy orientation. Participants read an introductory paragraph designed to familiarise them with the issue of asylum seekers in Australia, clarifying terms such as “asylum seeker” and “mandatory detention”. Participants were asked to choose one of four policy options that best illustrated their view and to provide reasons for their choice. Policy options were as follows, increasing in leniency:

1. Asylum seekers should be sent back to where they came from right now.
2. Leave things as they are. The legal processing of asylum seekers in detention should remain the same.
3. Let all asylum seekers out of detention, after health and security checks have been processed, while their applications for refugee status are being looked at.
4. Release all asylum seekers from detention, give them a visa, and accept them into the Australian community.

Guilt and empathy. Participants were asked use a check list (Leach et al., 2006) to indicate the degree to which they experienced nine emotions when thinking about the issue of asylum seekers in detention. The adjectives were rated on a six-point Likert scale (0, not at all; 5, extremely). The following six adjectives were included to assess participant’s guilt level: guilty, responsible, regretful, ashamed, remorseful, and blameworthy. The following three adjectives were used to assess participant’s empathy level: compassionate, sympathetic, and empathic. Higher scores on the guilt-based adjectives indicated increased feelings of guilt regarding the issue of asylum seekers in detention. Higher scores on the empathy-based adjectives indicated increased feelings of empathy for asylum seekers.

Self versus other-focus perceptions. 24 items were designed to measure the concepts of legitimacy, control, and stability with regard to the issue of asylum seekers in detention. Each concept was measured by eight items, four of which placed an emphasis on Australians themselves and four placed an emphasis on asylum seekers. Two items in both the self-focused and the other-focused scales were negative and two were positive. Using Leach et al. (2002) as a guiding framework, free-response (qualitative) data from a past Perth survey on attitudes toward asylum seekers (Watt & Pedersen, 2004) was taken and constructed into 24 statements. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a seven-point Likert-scale (1, strongly disagree; and 7, strongly agree).

Legitimacy. Four items measured the perceived legitimacy of the Australian government's policy in regard to asylum seekers (e.g., "The government's policy in regard to asylum seekers is unjustified") and four items measured the perceived legitimacy of asylum seeker's claims for refugee status (e.g., "Most asylum seekers are genuine refugees that are fleeing persecution"). The higher the scores on the self-focused items, the more legitimate the Australian government's asylum seeker policy was perceived. The higher the scores on the other-focused items, the more legitimate asylum seekers were perceived.

Stability. Four items measured the perceived effect asylum seekers have on the stability of the Australian community (e.g., "The different cultures of many asylum seekers would threaten the stability of society") and four items measured the perceived stability of the situation of asylum seekers in detention (e.g., "The situation of asylum seekers in

detention is unlikely to change”). The higher the scores on the self-focused items, the more stable the Australian community was perceived despite the presence of asylum seekers. The higher the scores on the other-focused items, the more stable the situation of asylum seekers being in detention was perceived.

Control. Four items measured the perceived control that Australians have over the situation of asylum seekers in detention (e.g., “Australian citizens are able to make a real impact on the issue of asylum seekers”) and four items measured the perceived control that asylum seekers have over the situation of being in detention (e.g., “Asylum seekers have the power to change the problems they experience in detention if they want”). The higher the scores on the self-focused items, the more control Australians were perceived to have over the situation of asylum seekers being in detention. The higher the scores on the other-focused items, the more control asylum seekers were perceived to have over the situation of being in detention.

Perceived community consensus. The method chosen to measure consensus is similar to that used by Kenworthy and Miller (2001). These authors asked participants about their opinion on capital punishment, and then asked how many people they believed agreed with them. It is also similar to that of Pedersen et al. (in press) who asked participants about their opinion on Australian asylum seekers, and then asked how many people they believed agreed with them. In the present study, participants were asked for their attitudes toward asylum seekers in detention, and then asked them to estimate the percentage of the Australian community that they thought would agree and disagree with their views (totalling to 100%).

Socio-demographics. Participants were asked to state their education level (1, primary school only; 5, attending or completed university), their age in years, their sex (1, male; 2, female), and their political position (1, strongly left-wing; 5, strongly right-wing).

Results.

Sample description.

The political viewpoint of the majority of the participants was moderate (32% at 'centre' on a five point scale from left-wing to right-wing) with approximately equal amounts of participants reporting moderate 'left' versus 'right' views. The mean age of the sample was 47 years and there were slightly more females (53%) than males overall (47%). Overall, 30.6% of participants were attending or had completed university, while a further 28.3% had participated or were participating in another form of post-secondary education. Compared with the population figure provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005) in which 49% of respondents reported at least one non-school qualification, the study's sample was more educated than the general population.

Operationally, there were four policy orientation groups ranging from 'tough' to 'lenient' as defined by the questionnaire. Because the most lenient group of only eight participants was so disproportionately small, it was removed from further statistical analysis, leaving group three as now the most lenient policy orientation (see Nunnally (1978) for a discussion of how small sample sizes affect the applicability of results obtained by questionnaires). The toughest policy orientation, Group one, comprised of 16.4% of the total sample, Group two comprised of 37.1%, and Group three comprised of 41.5% of the total sample.

Scale descriptives.

Table 1 presents the descriptive characteristics for each scale, setting out the scale means and standard deviations, the number of items in each scale, and what percentage of participants scored high on each scale. Participants were deemed to have scored high if they scored above four on the seven-point scales, and above two point five on the five-point scales. The table also includes the scale α coefficients. By the removal of one item from the guilt and stability (other) scales, reliabilities were increased to $\alpha = .84$ and $.75$, respectively. All scales had satisfactory reliability.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Correlations.

There was a number of moderate to strong correlations between policy orientation and the self and other-focus variables (see table 2). Participants who supported a more lenient policy orientation also perceived asylum seekers as more legitimate and their situation in detention as unstable, perceived the Australian government's policy as less legitimate, perceived the Australian community as stable inclusive of asylum seekers, and felt more guilt and empathy. In addition, a small but significant relationship was found in that participants who were more left-wing in their political position favoured a more lenient policy orientation. A strong correlation was found where participants who saw the government's position as legitimate also saw asylum seekers as illegitimate. Although significant, the correlations were much smaller with respect to the self versus other-focused perceptions of stability and control.

[Insert table 2 about here]

Hierarchical multiple regressions.

To examine the combined and the unique influences of the predictors of policy orientation from a self-focus and an other-focus, two hierarchical multiple regression equations were constructed, each with three blocks of predictors entered in succession (see Table 3). Due to the significant relationship between policy orientation and political position, political position was entered on step one in both equations (no other socio-demographic variable was significantly related to policy orientation). Following the logic of Leach et al. (2002) the legitimacy, stability and control variables (self or other) were entered on step two, and the group-based emotion guilt (self-focus) or empathy (other-focus) was entered on step three. Constructing the equations in this way allows one to see whether the beta weights obtained at the end of step one were modified by the inclusion of the self or other-focus variables, and whether the beta weights obtained at the end of step two were modified by the inclusion of guilt or empathy .

Predicting policy orientation from a self-focus. A significant amount of variance in policy orientation was explained by the self-focus variables (73%, adjusted $R^2 = 53\%$) and the other-focus variables (67%, adjusted $R^2 = 46\%$). For the self-focus scales, when entered as a first block, political position predicted policy orientation, $F(1, 149) = 3.89$, $p = .05$. When entered as a second block, legitimacy and stability predicted policy orientation, $F(4, 149) = 38.82$, $p < .001$. More specifically, those who perceived the government's

policy as less legitimate supported a more lenient policy orientation ($\beta = -.50, p < .001$), as did those who perceived the Australian society was more stable ($\beta = .29, p < .001$). When entered as a third block, legitimacy and stability remained as significant predictors of policy orientation, while feelings of guilt did not predict policy orientation when adjusted for the effects of the other self-focused scales ($\beta = -.12, p = .10$).

Predicting policy orientation from an other-focus. For the other-focus scales, when entered as a first block political position predicted policy orientation, $F(1, 148) = 3.87, p = .05$. When entered as a second block, legitimacy and stability predicted policy orientation, $F(4, 148) = 25.45, p < .001$. More specifically, those who perceived asylum seekers as legitimate supported a more lenient policy orientation ($\beta = .59, p < .001$), as did those who perceived the situation of asylum seekers in detention as less stable ($\beta = -.20, p = .002$). When entered as a third block, legitimacy and stability remained significant predictors, with feelings of empathy regarding asylum seekers in detention also predicting a more lenient policy orientation ($\beta = .33, p = .001$).

[Insert table 3 about here]

Accuracy of perceived community consensus.

An ANCOVA was conducted to obtain the means of estimated community consensus adjusting for differences in age and political position as they were correlated with estimated community consensus (both correlations = .18). Adjusted means of estimated community consensus, actual consensus means, and t-tests (which measured the extent to

which the three groups were accurate in their estimations of community consensus) are presented in Table 4 for each of the three policy orientation groups.

[Insert table 4 about here]

On average, participants in each of the groups over-estimated the perceived community consensus for their position regarding what should be done about the issue of asylum seekers in terms of policy. As can be seen in Table 4, there is a negative monotonic relationship between the three groups, where the magnitude of over-estimation increases as participants' policy orientation increased in toughness. The monotonic trend of over-estimation across the three groups, adjusting for differences in age and political orientation, was also significant ($F(3, 149) = 14.14, p <.001$) confirming that as participants' policy orientation became tougher, they progressively over-estimated the support for their views that they believe they have in the wider community.

Discussion.

The broad purpose of this present study was to examine the social psychological processes that may shape people's opinions about asylum seeker policy. This was accomplished by addressing two specific aims.

Aim 1. Predicting policy orientation using a self and other-focus.

Regarding the regression analyses, the first finding to note is that political position contributed little prediction to policy orientation in both the self and other-focused

regression equations, despite having a small correlation with policy orientation. Conversely, the self-focus and the other-focus variables used as predictors displayed strong relationships with policy orientation, with the self-focused variables accounting for 53%, and the other-focused variables accounting for 46% of the variance in policy orientations. This indicates that the perceptions that occur when a person evaluates the issue of asylum seekers in detention when focusing on the Australian community and on asylum seekers themselves are both important in predicting one's opinions about asylum seeker policy. The prediction of policy orientations using a self-focus and other-focus is now discussed.

A. Prediction of policy orientation from a self-focus perspective

Results indicated that perceiving the Australian government's policy as illegitimate and the Australian community as stable (i.e., not seeing asylum seekers as a threat to the stability of Australian society) predicted support for a lenient policy orientation.

Legitimacy. Perceiving the Australian government's asylum seeker policy as unjustified predicted a more lenient policy orientation. As noted previously, the government's policy is aimed at deterring unauthorised arrivals from Australia's shores (Marr & Wilkinson, 2003) and has 'legitimacy' at its core. Given the amount of false information accepted by many Australians especially with respect to legitimacy or genuineness of asylum seekers (e.g., Pedersen et al., 2006), our study suggests that more information is needed about issues of legitimacy. For example, asylum seekers have broken no law and that over 94% of asylum seekers are in fact found to be refugees (Edmund Rice Centre,

2002). Given this, how legitimate is it for the Australian government to lock up asylum seekers for up to seven years?

Stability. Participants who did not feel that asylum seekers would destabilise Australia were more supportive of a more lenient policy orientation is supported by research such as Esses, Dovidio, Jackson, and Armstrong (2001) who found that participants who perceived immigrants as potentially destabilising to their country were more likely to support deterrence-based immigration policies. Interestingly, a number of participants in the present study expressed overt concerns about the effect that asylum seekers may have on Australia's culture, and particular concerns were expressed regarding Muslims such as: *"to come to Australia uninvited is a recipe for disaster because a big percentage of these people are Muslims and will not assimilate into our society, creating two differing cultures and tension"*. Comments such as this link with a growing body of research that indicates Australians are becoming increasingly negative toward cultural groups that are perceived as a threat to 'the Australian way of life' (e.g., Dunn, Forrest, Burnley, & McDonald, 2004).

If the wider community does perceive asylum seekers as disrupting the stability of the Australian community, this implies two things. First, as suggested by our findings, it is likely to motivate people to support tougher policies aimed to deter asylum seekers from Australia. Second, as argued by Esses et al. (2001), threats to the stability of one's in-group may increase the salience of intergroup distinctions, making in-group members more likely to conceptualise the out-group in a more homogenous and prejudiced way. This may result in asylum seekers released from detention experiencing extreme hostility and prejudice from the general community. To counter these possible implications, more

favourable attitudes may be fostered by emphasising the resiliency of the Australian society in ‘accepting’ and benefiting from people from ‘other’ cultures historically. However, given the government and the media’s influential role in shaping community concern about asylum seekers, significant political will would be needed to develop the idea that asylum seekers do not necessarily pose a threat to the stability of the Australian community.

Control. Although there was a small zero order correlation between the level of control participants perceived Australians to have over the situation of asylum seekers in detention and policy orientation, this did not predict a lenient policy orientation in the regression equation. This seemingly conflicts with previous research which found that perceiving one’s self to have control over another’s situation may motivate one to help the individual (Schroeder et al., 1995; Weiner, 1995). However, in the current study, an individual could believe that Australians have control over the situation of asylum seekers, but also perceive that their present situation in detention is justified. In this sense, a self-focused attribution of control may only to be a valuable attribution to explore with relation to social justice issues when in-group members perceive the out-group’s predicament as unjustified. A goal of future research may lie in clarifying this issue.

Guilt. While feeling guilty about the situation of asylum seekers in detention had a moderate zero order correlation with policy orientation, once the variance in the guilt scores that was associated with legitimacy and stability was taken into account, the partial coefficient was not significant. This is likely to be because of the relationship between guilt and the other two variables included on step 2 (legitimacy and stability) which were

even stronger predictors. Thus, while past research suggests that guilt is an important variable to take into account when looking at social issues (e.g., Montada & Schneider, 1989), researchers must also look at the strength of other related variables which may be even more predictive. However, given the moderate correlation between guilt and policy orientation, feelings of group-based guilt should not be ruled out as being an important factor in shaping attitudes toward out-groups. It is possible that guilt may be a potentially important predictor of the intention or desire to take some action to change attitudes and behaviours toward the out-group.

A noteworthy observation is that feelings of guilt were reported considerably less frequently than feelings of empathy. This was also found in studies in previous Australian studies involving Indigenous Australians (Pedersen, Beven, Walker, & Griffiths, 2004; McGarty et al., 2005). This suggests that guilt is a relatively infrequent emotional response to an out-group's injustice and may therefore be limited in its ability to foster support for a wide range of social justice strategies (Iyer et al., 2003). Furthermore, because guilt is an extremely aversive emotion, people are often highly motivated to assuage this feeling by helping the disadvantage group whose predicament they feel responsible for (Leach et al., 2002). However, because guilt is a self-focused emotion, this motivation to help others may be fed by a desire to alleviate one's negative affect state. Once guilt has been assuaged, the motivation to help others may disappear (Iyer, Leach, & Pedersen, 2004). Hence, there is some debate as to whether guilt can act as an ongoing motivator in fostering social action on behalf of others (Iyer et al., 2003).

B. Prediction of policy orientation from an other-focus.

Perceiving asylum seekers as legitimate, their situation in detention as unstable, and increased feelings of empathy predicted support for a lenient policy orientation.

Legitimacy. The finding that perceiving asylum seekers as legitimate predicted a more lenient policy orientation extends past research such as Pedersen et al. (2005) who found a strong relationship between negative attitudes and false beliefs, including the belief that asylum seekers are illegitimate despite the fact that asylum seekers have broken no law, international or national. This may have implications such as legitimising and maintaining support for the government's asylum seeker policy and therefore maintaining the suffering experienced by asylum seekers in detention. However, there is always the potential to change. For example, Batterham (2001) found that giving accurate information about false beliefs about Indigenous Australians reduced prejudice scores. Similar results were found by Barlow, Louis, and Pedersen (under review) where prejudice, false beliefs, and the belief in "special treatment" regarding Indigenous Australians were reduced after a six week intervention addressing these issues. Future research may establish whether this effect extends to altering people's attitudes toward asylum seekers and asylum seeker policy.

Stability. The finding that perceiving asylum seekers' situation in detention as unstable was associated with a more lenient policy orientation was an interesting result. While it is the stable and unchanging nature of indefinite detention that is a major concern for many asylum seeker activists in Australia (RAR, 2005), this finding gives weight to the argument proposed by Leach et al. (2002) that perceiving another's situation as unstable

increases motivation to help the out-group because an unstable situation highlights that their situation is modifiable.

Control. The finding that the degree of control that asylum seekers were perceived to have over their situation in detention did not predict policy orientation (although there was a small zero order correlation) may suggest that attributions of controllability only foster support for ameliorative policies when the out-group's situation is perceived as unjust. For example, some Australians might perceive asylum seekers' situation in detention as uncontrollable, but they may also perceive it as just. Indeed, Montada and Schneider (1989) found that advantaged group members who perceived an out-group's situation as uncontrollable predicted support for pro-social policies to help the out-group, however; this relationship was mediated by the perception that the out-group's disadvantage was unjust. An avenue for future research may in lie exploring this issue further.

Empathy. Our empathy effect supports past research which suggests that group-based empathy, which implies no sense of responsibility for the out-group's situation, functions as a broader basis to help disadvantaged out-groups than the self-focused emotion of guilt (Iyer et al., 2003). On a practical level, if asylum seeker advocates can place Australians into the shoes of asylum seekers to foster empathy, opinions about asylum seekers and related policies may change in a more positive direction. Indeed, research conducted by the UN Association of Australia found feeling empathic toward refugees to be a common motivator for people to become involved in the Australian refugee movement (Reynolds, 2004). In view of this, because empathy places focus upon the suffering of the 'other', it may be the main psychological process which 'blurs' intergroup boundaries, increasing

people's willingness to reject status quo intergroup relations (Stephen & Finlay, 1999). Given that very few Australians have had any interactions with asylum seekers, opinions about asylum seeker policy are likely to be based on the media and governmental representations (Pedersen et al., 2005) which often emphasise the difference between the self (Australians) and the other (asylum seekers) (Klocker, 2004). Thus, if publicity aimed at breaking down the self/other binary by promoting an understanding of how asylum seekers suffer and continue to suffer in detention, empathy may be fostered which may lead to fostering more favourable opinions regarding asylum seeker policy. Interestingly, Verkuyten (2004) showed that when participants perceived refugees as legitimate political refugees, as opposed to the so-called illegitimate economic refugees, sympathy more strongly predicted support for a less punitive immigration policy. Therefore, it is possible that challenging the false belief that asylum seekers are 'illegitimate' may influence the level of empathy that community members feel, and consequently community opinions about asylum seeker policy.

Aim 2: Accuracy of perceived community consensus.

As indicated above, the perceptions that occur when a person evaluates the issue of asylum seekers in detention from a self and an other-focus are both important in shaping people's asylum seeker policy orientation. Additionally, the results from this study suggest that the accuracy with which individuals estimate the extent to which others share their own opinions about asylum seeker policy also influences one's policy orientation.

As hypothesised, participants in all three policy orientation groups significantly over-estimated the community support for their views about asylum seeker policy. From

a cognitive and motivational perspective, this result is as one might expect if participants over-generalised from the views of their associates and were motivated to validate their opinion by exaggerating the extent to which others are similar to themselves (Marks & Miller, 1987). Second, also as hypothesised, as participants' policy orientation became tougher, their estimation of the community support for their position progressively increased. Specifically, Group 1 significantly over-estimated consensus only by 11%, Group 2 significantly over-estimated by 31%, and Group 3 significantly over-estimated consensus by 55%. These results are consistent with Pedersen et al. (in press); here, as participants' over-estimation of community consensus for their respective attitudes toward asylum seekers increased in magnitude, the more negative the participants became toward asylum seekers.

These findings are likely to have significant implications. There is evidence to suggest that individuals who believe that their views are held by the majority are less likely to modify their opinions and are more likely to express their opinions, compared to those who perceive their views as being held by the minority (Miller, 1993). In the present study, participants who favoured the most tough policy orientation believed themselves to be in the majority, and therefore may be more less likely to change their position than those with more lenient policy orientations. Evidence also suggests that being provided with consensus information that differs from one's own perception can alter attitudes (e.g., Berkowitz, 2004; Sechrist & Stangor, 2001; Stangor, Sechrist, & Jost, 2001; Wittenbrink & Henly, 1996). Therefore, if people favouring tougher policy orientations are more outspoken with their views, community members may believe that the majority of the community support such views, and modify their opinion in the

direction of the perceived social norm. If this is the case, this social psychological process may serve to maintain and legitimise the Australian government's existing policy.

Concluding remarks

The findings of the present study should be interpreted with its limitations in mind. The results presented had a restricted sample size; hence, our findings may not be representative of the general population. While a community sample was used to increase the relevancy of the study's findings, we only targeted one location. Future research will be necessary to establish whether the information obtained in this study hold over different locations. It would also be useful to use differing approaches (e.g., qualitative; focus groups) to examine this issue in depth. Nevertheless, we believe this study makes an important contribution to understanding what social psychological factors shape Western Australians' opinions about asylum seeker policy.

To conclude, the current study found that the specific perceptions made when evaluating the issue of asylum seekers from a self and other-focus were both important in predicting people's opinions about asylum seeker policy. Perceived legitimacy – both self and other focused – was a particularly strong predictor. As one could predict, there was a strong negative relationship between legitimacy of asylum seekers and legitimacy of the government: the more participants felt the government was legitimate, the more they felt the asylum seekers were illegitimate (this relationship is likely to be bi-directional). Thus, the extension of Leach et al. (2002) theory used in this study was useful, moving beyond relative advantage to views on detention from the view of an advantaged person. It was also found that those who held tougher policy orientations progressively over-estimated the wider community consensus for their position. On a practical level, refugee advocates

could use this information to counter the large amount of negative press which has occurred over the years (see Saxton, 2003, on this point).

While few boats have arrived on Australia's shores in recent years and detention centres are slowly emptying, the policy of mandatory detention still stands, as does the law which legitimises the indefinite detention of unauthorised arrivals. Therefore, understanding the factors that shape and maintain people's opinions about asylum seeker policy remains a pertinent and relevant issue.

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Table 1. Descriptive characteristics of scales

Scale	Mean(SD)	no. of items	α	%	range
Self-focus scales					
Legitimacy (self)	4.21(2.28)	4	.93	51.9	1-7
Stability (self)	4.31(1.90)	4	.87	56.0	1-7
Control (self)	4.20(1.42)	4	.72	53.1	1-7
Guilt (self)	1.00(1.12)	6	.84	12.8	0-5
Other-focus scales					
Legitimacy (other)	3.88(1.76)	4	.83	40.1	1-7
Stability (other)	3.94(1.39)	3	.75	40.3	1-7
Control (other)	3.40(1.46)	4	.75	30.6	1-7
Empathy (other)	2.52(1.49)	3	.85	46.2	0-5

Note. % participants who scored above the scale midpoint.

Table 3. Hierarchical multiple regression of self-focus and other-focus scales predicting policy orientation

Variables entered	<i>r</i>	β^a	β^b	β^c	Total <i>R</i> ²
Self-Focus Scales					
Step 1					
Political Position	-.16*	-.16*	.07	.07	
Step 2					
Legitimacy(self)	-.67**		-.50**	-.46**	
Stability(self)	.62**		.29**	.26*	
Control(self)	.17*		.08	.06	
Step 3					
Guilt (self)	.49**			-.12	.53**
Other-Focus Scales					
Step 1					
Political Position	-.16*	-.16*	.05	.05	
Step 2					
Legitimacy(other)	.61**		.59**	.35**	
Stability(other)	-.24**		-.20*	-.13*	
Control(other)	-.24**		.03	-.07	
Step 3					
Empathy (other)	.63**			.33*	.46**

Notes. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$ (both two-tailed).

^a β denotes beta weights for variables after first step; ^b β denotes beta weights for variables after second step; ^c β denotes beta weights for variables after third step.

Table 4. Accuracy of the estimation of community consensus

	Estimate of Consensus*	Actual Support	<i>t</i> -value
Group 1	71.6% (19.28)	16.4%	$t(24) = 14.60^{**}$
Group 2	68.5% (12.99)	37.1%	$t(57) = 18.78^{**}$
Group 3	52.5% (17.11)	41.5%	$t(63) = 4.69^{**}$

Notes. * Adjusted for covariates; ** $p < .001$; group 1 favoured the toughest policy orientation, while group 3 favoured the most lenient policy orientation.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Policy orientation	1													
2. Empathy (self)	.63**	1												
3. Guilt (other)	.49**	.69**	1											
4. Legitimacy (self)	-.67**	-.66**	-.53**	1										
5. Legitimacy (other)	.61**	.74**	.57**	-.69**	1									
6. Stability (self)	.62**	.67**	.49**	-.67**	.77**	1								
7. Stability (other)	-.24**	-.26**	-.05	.20*	-.06	-.16*	1							
8. Control (self)	.17*	.27**	.22**	-.07	.20*	.19*	-.21**	1						
9. Control (other)	-.24**	-.22**	-.28**	.36**	-.25**	-.22**	.09	.21*	1					
10. Estim. Consensus	-.46**	-.43**	-.30**	.52**	-.55**	-.47**	.15	-.02	.18*	1				
11. Education	.08	.20*	.08	-.09	.10	.19*	-.33**	.10	-.09	-.03	1			
12. Age	-.15	-.16	-.13	.12	-.20*	-.24**	.13	-.15	.09	.18*	-.28**	1		
13. Sex	.07	.21**	.22**	-.08	.09	.01	.02	.01	-.03	.01	.05	-.03	1	
14. Political Position	-.16*	-.25**	-.22**	.34**	-.29**	-.20*	.14	-.05	.16*	.18*	-.04	.14	.05	1

Note: * p <.05, ** p <.001 (both two-tailed).