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

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The role of false beliefs in the community's and the federal government's attitudes toward
Australian asylum seekers

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Abstract.

Previous quantitative research has found that people who report negative attitudes toward asylum seekers also tend to report the acceptance of information that is factually incorrect (negative 'false beliefs'). In the present study, we were interested in matching spontaneously generated false beliefs with negative attitudes toward asylum seekers, and in examining the presence of such beliefs in politicians' public statements. To do this, we analysed qualitative data collected from 602 Western Australian participants. Three false beliefs were frequently cited ('boat people are queue jumpers', 'asylum seekers are illegal' and 'people who arrive unauthorised are not genuine refugees'). As predicted, the total number of false beliefs significantly correlated with negative attitudes. The same beliefs were also identified in statements made by Federal Government representatives. Our results have important practical implications. If false beliefs about asylum seekers can be identified and corrected, this may have a significant effect on changing these attitudes in a positive direction.

There is a growing body of research indicating that many Australians hold negative attitudes toward cultural groups coming from other countries that they see as not fitting in with the 'Australian' way of life. This is directed particularly toward Muslims and people from the Middle East, and to a lesser extent to those from Asia (Dunn, Forrest, Burnley, & McDonald, 2004). A great deal of negativity is also directed against asylum seekers, especially those who arrive by boat without a valid visa, many of whom are seen by the general public as primarily Muslim. Betts (2001) argued that it is too simple to put negativity toward asylum seekers down to 'racism' pure and simple; rather, public opinion revolves around doubts about asylum seekers' bona fides, the wish for a strong Australian community, and 'a common sense of peoplehood' (p. 45). While Betts' arguments can be criticised in that they are not based on empirical data, they do highlight the importance of beliefs in forming negative attitudes toward asylum seekers. The present study concerns the beliefs that Australians express about asylum seekers using empirical data as a source. In particular, we examine the role of (negative) false beliefs in supporting negative attitudes. Conceptually at least, the constructs of 'attitudes' and 'false beliefs' are qualitatively different: false beliefs are open to empirical challenge; this is not necessarily the case with respect to attitudes. An attitude is 'a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor' (Eagly & Chaiken, 1992, p.1).

The present wave of 'boat people' seeking asylum in Australia are not the first to do so. Betts (2001) describes three recent waves of asylum seekers. From 1976 to 1981, approximately 2,000 Vietnamese boat people arrived in Australia seeking asylum

(Brennan, 2003; Mares, 2002). Australia's Liberal Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser, responded to this situation by organizing resettlement to Indochine refugees in Southeast Asia, and ultimately offering a permanent home to around 15,000 Vietnamese refugees. This included giving an amnesty in 1980 to those who did not fit the criteria of refugee (Mares, 2002). Although there was certainly quite intense criticism of these refugees by some public figures, this to a large degree was kept in check by the positive stance taken by Malcolm Fraser. The second wave of asylum seekers arrived at the beginning of the 1990s and were primarily from Southern China and Cambodia. These asylum seekers were treated more harshly than those from the first wave; during this time, the Labor Government introduced mandatory detention which was, however, usually brief (Betts, 2001). The third wave of asylum seekers started at the end of the 1990s. The situation for refugees was now quite different with far more stringent measures being introduced. Asylum seekers were now placed in mandatory detention for up to seven years in remote desert centres. Data from community polls indicate that Australians are becoming increasingly hostile in their attitudes toward asylum seekers (Betts, 2001).

Research is also accumulating regarding the antecedents of negative attitudes toward Australian asylum seekers. Saxton (2003) found representations such as 'illegal', 'non-genuine', and 'threatening' within her study of the print media. Klocker (2004) found extreme negativity against asylum seekers in Port Augusta, 'home' to Baxter Detention Centre. In her study, 70% of participants saw asylum seekers as 'illegal', 'unlawful', 'an economic burden', 'problematic', 'unwelcome', and 'ungrateful'. Other terms often used were 'illegitimate', 'queue-jumpers', and 'terrorists'. Pedersen, Attwell and Heveli (2005) using an Attitude Toward Asylum Seekers scale (the 'ATAS') found a

great deal of negativity expressed toward asylum seekers, and this went hand-in-hand with the acceptance of false beliefs about asylum seekers. The ATAS scale measured both positive and negative attitudes toward asylum seeker while explicitly excluding ‘myths’ or false beliefs as defined by sources such as the Refugee Council (see Appendix A for examples of false beliefs).

Although there has been a great deal of research on the antecedents of negative attitudes toward outgroups, there has been little work with a specific focus on false beliefs. This is somewhat surprising given that researchers such as Allport (1954) have argued that negative attitudes are strongly linked with faulty and inflexible generalizations. These ‘faulty and inflexible generalizations’ are most recognizable in the modern-day social psychological literature on stereotypes. However, the small but parallel literature on false beliefs adds to the more traditional socio-cognitive models by examining how false beliefs, consensually shared, may be used to justify otherwise apparently prejudicial statements about minority groups.

Some researchers argue that ‘truth’ or ‘falsity’ may be difficult to ascertain, and ideologies can serve to legitimise inequality regardless of their truth/falsity (Sidanius, Levin, Federico, & Pratto, 2001). Researchers such as Potter (1996) argue that it is not useful to make distinctions between ‘truth’ and ‘falsity’ at all as ‘truth’ can be seen to fluctuate depending upon the perceiver. However, it has been shown that there are some widely held beliefs that are demonstrably false such as ‘the world is flat’. In the area of racism and prejudice, the notion of false beliefs has great potential as a basis for anti-racism strategies. In particular, Batterham (2001) found that challenging false beliefs about Indigenous Australians reduced the reporting of prejudice (also see Pedersen,

Walker, & Wise, 2005, for a full discussion on the role of false beliefs and the reduction of prejudice). In the following section, we give a brief overview of the false beliefs about asylum seekers most commonly endorsed in Australian culture; however, the individual beliefs are considered in more detail in the Discussion section of this paper.

Three commonly endorsed beliefs about asylum seekers are that they are queue jumpers, that they must be ‘cashed up’ to pay people smugglers (Edmund Rice Centre, 2002), and that Australia provides asylum seekers with all sorts of government handouts (Refugee Council, 2003). But these beliefs are inaccurate. There are often no queues to jump; sacrifices are often made by friends and family to provide the funds for people who flee persecution; asylum seekers receive little financial help until they are recognised as refugees and often (e.g., those on temporary protection visas) receive less assistance than refugees who applied offshore (Edmund Rice Centre; Refugee Council).

Pedersen, Attwell and Heveli (2005) examined the prevalence of these three false beliefs, and their relationship to negative attitudes toward asylum seekers. They found that many participants believed that one or more of the false statements were true. The most prevalent false belief was with respect to queue jumping with approximately two-thirds of people endorsing this belief. Just over half the participants believed that asylum seekers had to be ‘cashed up’, and approximately 40% of participants believed that asylum seekers were provided with all sorts of government handouts. Also, negative attitudes strongly correlated with such false beliefs ($r = .77$); this figure indicates that false beliefs accounted for 59% of the variance in the negative attitudes toward asylum seekers. As an aside, a significant relationship has also found between negative attitudes

toward Indigenous Australians and the acceptance of false beliefs (Batterham, 2001; Pedersen, Contos, Griffiths, Bishop, & Walker, 2000).

Where might the false beliefs about asylum seekers originate? Clearly, many Australians endorse them, including some Australian politicians who have contributed to public discourse on this topic. To take but one example, Western Australian politician Senator Ross Lightfoot defined asylum seekers thus: *'these people are criminals – worse, if they bring with them communicable, pandemic, epidemic or parasitic diseases (and they are from areas where contagious diseases are rampant), then innocent Australians could suffer'* (Lightfoot, cited in Mares, 2002, p. 28). Klocker and Dunn (2003) made the interesting point that during 2001 and 2002, when the asylum seeker issue was particularly salient, much of the Australian media unproblematically circulated the Federal Government's negative assessments about asylum seekers. In fact, these authors found that just over 90% of Government press releases regarding asylum seekers were negative. Similarly, Augoustinos and Quinn (2003) also found when analysing newspaper articles that there were significantly more negative terms (e.g., illegal) compared with more neutral terms (e.g., asylum seekers). Augoustinos and Quinn (2003) found that participants reading an article on 'illegals' were significantly more likely to endorse negative statements about that group than another group of participants reading the same article on 'refugees' and 'asylum seekers'.

With respect to the present paper, it is important to move past individual reporting of false beliefs to its more social antecedents; in this case, we examine public statements made by politicians because these statements may reflect and/or shape public opinion and policy. We wish to examine the extent to which politicians' public statements are similar

to the same false beliefs that are expressed by members of the general public. In discussing the role of political rhetoric in false beliefs, it is important to bear in mind that politicians making statements in their official capacity are expected to have more information at hand and to be better briefed than members of the general public. They are expected to have access to factual information, and to truthfully report that information in their public statements. This will be investigated within the present paper.

Overview of the present study.

Previous research shows a significant relationship between the holding of false beliefs and negative attitudes toward asylum seekers when structured questionnaires are used to collect the data. But are these false beliefs endorsed independently of the demands of a structured questionnaire? Do people indeed draw upon such false beliefs in justifying their expressed attitudes toward minority groups? If they do, it is a way forward for anti-racism strategists. If they do not, this will give strategists a better idea of what to focus upon in their programmes. As yet, there is no qualitative research examining any false beliefs that Australians may espouse. It may be that the false beliefs which are so prevalent in quantitative surveys may not emerge from participants without prompting from the researchers. The cultural life, or ecological validity, of false beliefs about asylum seekers cannot be ascertained using quantitative methods alone. The present study extended previous research which has relied on quantitative measures; our aim was to examine the role of false beliefs in justifying attitudes toward asylum seekers. In order to achieve this aim, we simultaneously collected qualitative and quantitative data in a mail-out questionnaire. By doing this, we were able to examine how false beliefs

expressed in the qualitative data related to attitudes measured on the quantitative rating scales. Our participants consisted of a representative sample of Western Australians from three locations: Albany, Kalgoorlie, and Perth.

A content analysis was conducted on the corpus of qualitative data with three aims. The first was to attempt to match the spontaneously generated responses of participants with a set of ‘myths’ or false beliefs identified in the literature (see Appendix A). The second aim was to examine whether there was a significant relationship between spontaneously generated false beliefs and negative attitudes toward asylum seekers. Although such a relationship has been found using quantitative data, it was not known whether a similar relationship would exist within participants’ own stated beliefs, rather than those elicited via a structured questionnaire. Third, we were interested in the wider picture; in particular, the statements made by government representatives. We wished to discover whether the false beliefs expressed spontaneously by participants in our study have also been publicly endorsed by politicians.

Method.

Procedure/Participants.

A sample of 2,400 residents from Albany, Kalgoorlie and Perth, 800 from each, was drawn randomly from the 2004 phone book, and a questionnaire was mailed to each. Perth is the capital city of Western Australia, Kalgoorlie is a regional centre for gold-mining, and Albany is a rural centre which was home to approximately 70 Afghan refugees (these numbers have recently dropped). The response rates from Albany,

Kalgoorlie, and Perth were 35%, 21% and 30% respectively. In total, 653 people sent in completed questionnaires, and 602 of these provided qualitative data.

After cross-checking the sample's characteristics, we found no significant difference between the three locations with respect to such variables as education and gender. The only demographic that varied was age (the average age in Albany was 57, the average age in Kalgoorlie was 46, and the average age in Perth was 54). All these differences are statistically significant but because age was not correlated with attitudes when education was partialled out, no adjustments for age were made in the analyses. There were no location differences with respect to formal education; 35% of participants held a Bachelors degree or higher which is higher than the 18% in the general population (see Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001). Regarding sex, although there were slightly more females (54%) than males (46%), this difference was not statistically significant. Thus, our participants seemed fairly representative of the community in general: they came from all walks of life and there was little difference between participants in the three locations.

Measures.

False Beliefs.

Our qualitative analysis of false beliefs comes from responses to the following question:

'In the space below, please describe how you feel about asylum seekers. Please indicate why you feel the way you do. That is, please describe and explain your attitude towards asylum seekers. Write down all of your thoughts and feelings that are relevant to your attitude and try to describe the reasons for your feelings'. Six lines were provided for

responses. Asylum seekers were previously defined in the questionnaire as ‘those people who arrive with no official authorisation of Australia and seek asylum’.

To analyse the open-ended responses, a list containing 13 false beliefs which have previously been identified in the literature was used to construct a coding manual (see Appendix A) in line with past research using content analytic methods (see, for example, Ahuvia, 2001). The occurrence of each identified false belief in the corpus of responses to the open-ended (qualitative) question was recorded. Any other theme not previously identified in the literature but appearing in the data - if reported by more than 5 participants - was included in the coding scheme. New themes were therefore defined as recognisably incorrect statements that occurred at least five times in the corpus. To ensure the reliability of the coding scheme, 10% of the data were independently coded by a second coder, as per usual content analytic standards (e.g., Millward, 1995). No significant discrepancies in the coding of the data were identified.

Negative attitudes toward asylum seekers.

Following the open-ended question, participants completed a quantitative measure of attitude, the Attitudes Toward Asylum Seekers Scale (ATAS). This asked participants to respond on a scale from 1 to 7 (1 = ‘strongly disagree’ and 7 = ‘strongly agree’) to each of 18 questions such as ‘I sympathise with the situation of asylum seekers’ (positive statement) and ‘The government’s policy on asylum seekers is justified’ (negative statement). An overall measure of agreement with positive and negative statements is obtained. Pedersen, Attwell & Heveli (2005) found the scale to be reliable ($\alpha=.94$). The higher the ATAS score, the more negative was the attitude.

Politicians' Statements.

After the most prevalent false beliefs were recorded, the authors investigated whether false beliefs could also be found in statements made by Federal Government politicians. In particular, we relied upon media representations by politicians as these are particularly assessable to the community at large. We used the internet search engine 'Google' to identify media statements released by Federal politicians from the beginning of Wave Three of asylum seekers (1999) to the time of writing the present article (2005). Specifically, we searched for relevant key phrases (e.g., 'illegal immigrant', 'queue jumpers'; 'people smugglers') and the names of pertinent Federal Government politicians (e.g., Phillip Ruddock). We also examined information from the web-pages of Federal politicians (e.g., Amanda Vanstone).

It is noteworthy that the search was necessarily restricted to negative comments because all the false beliefs identified were negative. Our interest lay in identifying the existence of false beliefs in Federal politicians' public statements; the point was not *how often* the statements were said, but if they were said *at all*. As such, we did not conduct a separate content analysis of this data; instead, we selected a number of extracted quotes from this corpus of public statements made by politicians to illustrate their use when communicating with the populace. The quotes are used in the Discussion section where we consider the results from the mail-out questionnaire together with identified instances of politicians endorsing these same false beliefs.

Results.

The following Results section presents an analysis of responses to the mail-out questionnaire. It is followed by a discussion of these responses in their broader context, with reference to public statements by Federal politicians, identified using the method described above.

Of the 653 respondents who returned the questionnaire, 92% (602 participants) completed the qualitative question. In the current analysis, we place emphasis on beliefs that were reported by a minimum of 50 participants (as shown in Table 1, there were a number of false beliefs that were mentioned by a relatively small number of people, but we focus here only on those that are the most common). This arbitrary cut-off point of $n=50$ was used regardless of whether the comments fitted the predetermined categories.

As can be seen by Table 1, the most prevalent false belief was that ‘boat people are queue jumpers (28.9% of participants spontaneously provided this false belief; $n=174$). This belief was already identified in the literature. This was followed by ‘people who arrive unauthorised are not genuine refugees’ (21.2%; $n=128$). This belief was similar to a false belief outlined in Appendix A (refugees are economic migrants who come here to get a better life, or they're not real refugees anyway). However, our participants consistently used the word ‘genuine’. The third most prevalent belief was ‘asylum seekers are illegal’ (15%; $n=90$); again, this false belief was already identified in the literature.

Once education was taken into account, there was no difference across location with respect to the number of false beliefs expressed ($F(2,634) = 0.51$, n.s.), or negativity

in the attitude as measured by the ATAS ($F(2,586) = 1.49$, n.s.). Using data from all participants, the overall mean was 4.37 (range 1-7).

(Insert Table 1 about here)

The majority of participants (61.1%; $n=369$) spontaneously expressed one or more false beliefs, while 235 participants (38.9%) expressed no false beliefs. Moreover, half of those who expressed false beliefs produced two or more such false beliefs ($n=185$; 30.7% of the sample). In total, 184 participants expressed one false belief, 135 expressed two false beliefs, 37 expressed three false beliefs, 10 expressed four false beliefs, 3 expressed 5 false beliefs.

Participants who generated false beliefs were placed in one category ('false beliefs'), and those who did not mention any false beliefs were placed in another category ('no false beliefs'). These were then submitted to an analysis of variance (ANOVA) to discover whether those who mentioned false beliefs held significantly more negative attitudes toward asylum seekers than those who did not. The results showed that those in the 'false beliefs' category had significantly more negative attitudes than those in the 'no false beliefs' category, $F(1,593) = 125.91$, $p < .001$, partial eta squared (η^2) = .175. This effect was substantial, and accounted for 17.5% of the variance on the ATAS ($F(1,593) = 125.91$, $p < .001$), $\eta^2 = .175$. The mean ATAS score for those with no false beliefs was 3.59, while the mean ATAS score for those with one or more false beliefs was 4.82. In a second analysis, we counted the number of false beliefs generated by each participant, and correlated this with attitude on the ATAS. The more false beliefs generated, the

higher was the negative attitudes on the ATAS ($r = .378$, $n = 641$, $p < .001$). This relationship still held when we excluded one ATAS item as it related (albeit loosely) with the false belief concerning genuineness ('asylum seekers are legitimate refugees and should be welcomed'). There was almost no difference in the correlation under this circumstance ($r = .382$, $n = 641$, $p < .001$).

Analysis of the individual false beliefs is revealing. Endorsing the false belief 'Boat people are queue jumpers' accounted for 11.9% of the variance in attitudes to asylum seekers ($F(1,593) = 80.23$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .119$). Those who did not generate this false belief showed significantly lower negative attitudes ($M=4.03$) than those who did ($M= 5.12$). The false belief 'asylum seekers are illegal' accounted for 3.1% of variance in attitudes to asylum seekers, ($F(1,593) = 19.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .031$), and again those who did not produce this false belief showed significantly less negative attitudes toward asylum seekers ($M=4.24$) than those who did not produce the belief ($M=4.94$). However, the false belief 'People who arrive unauthorised are not 'genuine' refugees' did not significantly predict negative attitudes ($F(1,593) = 1.87$, n.s., $\eta^2 = .003$).

Discussion.

The results show that participants who spontaneously mentioned false beliefs reported significantly more negative attitudes to asylum seekers than those who did not. This is an important result because it is possible that accepting incorrect information may be shaping negative attitudes toward asylum seekers. Three false beliefs were particularly prevalent. These were 'boat people are queue jumpers', 'people who arrive unauthorised are not genuine refugees', 'asylum seekers are illegal'. Below, we will discuss these

particular beliefs in their broader context, and with reference to public statements made by Federal politicians. It is of particular interest to discover whether politicians have publicly endorsed these incorrect and negative beliefs about asylum seekers that are demonstrably related to strong negative attitudes.

We note that some ‘myth’ statements described in Appendix A would more reasonably be seen as a ‘frame’ in that truth or falsity cannot be established (e.g., ‘refugees have no right to come here and expect us to help them’) rather than a ‘false belief’. However, this is not the case with the most relevant themes found in the present study. That is, the three themes that emerged from our study can in fact be shown to be false; therefore, we continue with the term ‘false beliefs’.

Asylum Seeker Myth No 1: ‘Boat People Are Queue Jumpers’.

Some very typical examples are: *‘Basically I feel they are queue jumpers taking advantage of our unprotected coastline’* and *‘... queue jumpers and do not deserve to be ‘rewarded’ with preferential treatment ahead of those applying through the correct channels’*. This result links with past quantitative research finding strong respondent agreement with a ‘queue-jumping’ description of asylum seekers (Klocker, 2004; Pedersen, Attwell & Heveli (2005).

There are problems associated with using the term ‘queue jumpers’. Importantly, for many asylum seekers, joining a ‘queue’ is not possible because there is no queue to jump. Another point is that asylum seekers are often forced to flee for their lives and are not in a position to travel to an embassy (if one even exists) or to wait until a claim for refugee status has been processed. Instead there is a choice between persecution or

escape using people smugglers (Crock & Saul, 2002). Many asylum seekers have no idea of their destination; they simply pay people-smugglers to remove them from the immediate danger to a 'safe' country – again; no queue exists for them to join or jump.

As Mares (2002) put it, the term is by-and-large 'manufactured by government' (p. 24) and is deeply offensive to Australians' sense of fair play. For example, one of our participants noted: *'Queue jumpers, however should have to wait their turn. I know an Iraqi refugee whose stay in a Saudi refugee camp was probably extended because of queue jumpers'*. This perception is an artifact of changes to government policy. In particular, the former Minister for Immigration, Phillip Ruddock, collapsed onshore and offshore intakes so that visas allocated to onshore applicants now reduce the number of visas available to offshore applicants. Effectively, onshore and offshore applicants are now pitted against one another. This is not something for which individual asylum seekers can be blamed.

The categorisation of asylum seekers as 'queue jumpers' is regularly endorsed by government officials, but as noted above, arises artificially from government policy. One notable example of 'political rhetoric' concerning this issue comes from the former minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock *'There is a queue for resettlement places and it ought not to be run by people smugglers'* (Lateline, 2001). More recently, Australia's current Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone stated: *'There are currently 1,161 asylum seekers registered with the IOM [International Organisation for Migration] of whom 653 are genuine refugees waiting for resettlement places in third countries. These people are waiting patiently whilst others are engaging criminal organisations to pay their way to the head of the queue by getting in a boat to Australia.'* (Vanstone, 2005).

Asylum Seeker Myth No 2: 'People Who Arrive Unauthorised Are Not 'Genuine' Refugees'.

Many participants relied on the notion of “genuineness” when describing asylum seekers. Examples from participants in our study are: *‘I feel there are a very small percentage of genuine political refugees, mostly they are seeking a better standard of living’* and *‘are they genuine asylum seekers? I doubt very much if they are the moment they arrive they seem to know their ‘rights’.* This result links with past quantitative research finding strong respondent agreement with an ‘illegitimate’ description of asylum seekers (Klocker, 2004), and participants relating asylum seekers with being ‘non-genuine’ (Saxton, 2003). This categorization of asylum seekers as ‘not genuine’ has also been found overseas. For example, Verkuyten (2004) notes that in the Netherlands a distinction is made between ‘real’ refugees compared with fortune seekers, economic refugees, bogus refugees and ethnic profiteers implying different attributions of responsibility for their actions.

The contrasting categories used by the participants to describe asylum seekers as genuine or not genuine also allowed participants to express a range of false beliefs (or otherwise potentially prejudiced statements) toward this minority group. As noted, such distinctions accomplish important rhetorical work, and imply both agency and choice on the part of asylum seekers. However, most asylum seekers are found to be legitimate (Brennan, 2003; Edmund Rice Centre, 2002; Mares, 2002). Indeed, the people claiming refugee status who are more frequently found not to be 'genuine' are those who arrive with legitimate documentation. For example, in the years 2001-2002, 36% of the

Immigration Department's decisions in relation to rejected asylum seekers who arrived without official notification were overturned by the Refugee Review Tribunal as incorrect. In contrast, only approximately 6% of their decisions in relation to applicants who arrived with official notification were overturned (Mares, 2002). Although it would appear that the Federal Government believes that asylum seekers who arrive with visas are more deserving, the above example clearly refutes this claim.

The 'genuineness' discourse can also be linked to politicians' public speech. For example, in the previous section, we quoted Senator Vanstone making the distinction between 'genuine' refugees' waiting patiently while 'other' asylum seekers engage in criminal activities in an attempt to get a visa ahead of them (Vanstone, 2005). Similarly, Australia's Prime Minister John Howard made the very public claim using the same distinction regarding the Children Overboard Scandal^{1,2}: *'I express my anger at the behaviour of those people and I repeat it. I can't comprehend how genuine refugees would throw their children overboard'* (Australian Labor Party, 2002). This links with past research finding that the representation of 'genuineness' was often alluded to in the print media (Saxton, 2003). In another study, the most frequently used term to describe asylum seekers involved 'illegitimacy'; 36% of references did so (Klocker & Dunn, 2003). Terms used within the Klocker and Dunn category included 'taking of places from genuine refugees' (p. 77) which is closely aligned to the category we discuss here.

Asylum Seeker Myth No 3: 'Asylum Seekers Are Illegal'.

As one person said: *'Asylum seekers are in most cases illegal migrants until proved otherwise. We obviously cannot throw our doors open to all and sundry.'* Another participant said: *'I do think that a lot of people who are illegally entering Australia are doing so for purely economic reasons. I don't think it is fair to allow these people to stay as they need to apply legally and wait their turn.* In the first extract, asylum seekers are described as being 'in most cases illegal' – until 'proved otherwise'. This false belief also commonly served to justify a relatively harsh response to asylum seekers (detention and 'sending them back') on the basis of the assumption of illegality, until proof to the contrary is found. The reliance on this 'illegal' discourse has also been found by other researchers in this field such as Klocker (2004) and Saxton (2003).

As Justice Marcus Einfeld (2002) points out, however, to request asylum is not illegal; this is permitted by international and Australian law alike if people state they are escaping persecution. Australia, like many other countries, is a signatory to the Refugee Convention which involves a commitment to protect refugees. Aside from never returning a person back to a country where she/he has reason to fear persecution, Australia must give people without official authorization the opportunity to prove their refugee status before removing them from Australia (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2003). In fact, if we look at people who are not Australian citizens but are here without permission, the primary culprits are those who over-stay their visas. As pointed out by Crock and Saul (2002), most of these come from the United Kingdom and the United States. These authors further point out that the Australian Government has put much more effort, finances, and attention into stopping

asylum seekers compared with the relatively large numbers of visa over-stayers who work illegally.

Analyst Hugh Mackay notes there was a change in terms where unauthorised arrivals were previously called ‘boat people’ but were not routinely called ‘illegals’. It is noteworthy that government officials have also used this term; for example, Philip Ruddock stated on 20th June, 2000 on World Refugee Day: *‘Every time someone who has the resources to pay people smugglers arrives unlawfully in Australia and is granted refugee status, a place is denied to someone else languishing in the most undesirable circumstances’* (Solomon, 2001). The term ‘illegal’ refers to those who arrive in Australia without an acceptable visa, or overstay their visas. While it is not illegal to arrive without a visa, and then apply for asylum, the distinction is seldom (if ever) made. The construction of asylum seekers as illegal links with past research finding that a significant minority of terms used to describe asylum seekers involved the term ‘illegal’ (Klocker & Dunn, 2003). Saxton (2003) similarly found the representation of ‘illegal’ as highly prevalent in the print media. Interestingly, as mentioned earlier, Augoustinos and Quinn (2003) found that participants reading an article on ‘illegals’ were significantly more likely to endorse negative statements about that group than another group of participants reading the same article on ‘refugees’ and ‘asylum seekers’.

Multiple False Beliefs.

We now move onto multiple false beliefs and give an example of a passage where multiple false beliefs are endorsed in the explanation of a negative attitude toward asylum seekers. Here, the respondent says: *‘... Asylum seekers are illegal immigrants and queue*

jumpers and do not deserve to be 'rewarded' with preferential treatment ahead of those applying through the correct channels. I don't feel Australia can be seen as throwing the doors wide open and our taxpayers and welfare system cannot afford it.'

Another false belief worth mentioning is that which mixes the more common categories with a less common category 'the people in the boat are terrorists' (this 'terrorist' discourse was also found to be prevalent with the Klocker, 2004, participants). A typical example from our data is: *'... asylum seekers are queue jumpers and should be treated with great caution, given the ability of terrorists to infiltrate our country.'* The conflation of asylum seekers as queue jumpers and illegal immigrants with other negatively valued categories such as terrorists is of significant concern. Although only 6% of our sample endorsed the explicit view that asylum seekers *are* terrorists, some respondents indicated some concern that 'illegal immigrants' or 'queue jumpers' may pose a potential criminal threat to Australia.

Such concerns have been explicitly stated by public officials. For example, John Howard PM John Howard stated: *'You can give no guarantees that asylum seekers are not terrorists'* (Tan, 2002). Also, the then Minister of Defence, Peter Reith implied that terrorists may lurk among asylum seekers by suggested that: *'If you don't have good control over people movement, then you are potentially setting up staging processes for extremist groups, and that has been a big concern from a security point of view for a very long period of time, and re-emphasises the importance of very strong border protection for countries (like Australia)'* (Tan, 2002). These politicians do not mention the fact that being locked up for years in detention may in fact be counter-productive for terrorists. There is no reason to believe that asylum seekers are more likely than other visa

applicants to be terrorists (Mares, 2002). Importantly, these sorts of myths are seldom challenged; there are few alternative views by other politicians, including those from the Opposition frontbench³. Further, they have made their way into the discourse of the Australian public; much of Australian talkback radio linked the September 11 terrorists with Muslim asylum seekers trying to push their way into Australia (Marr & Wilkinson). Interestingly, Klocker and Dunn (2003) found that Federal Government emphasised constructions such as ‘illegitimacy’ and illegality’ immediately after the September 11 bombing; this the authors argued was useful in justifying their position on border protection legislation which had just been introduced. While it may be the case that some asylum seekers are ultimately judged not to be genuine, the evidence outlined above suggests this is not the case for most. Public statements like the ones outlined in the present study can only help inflame members of the Australian community, and make salient the false beliefs outlined above.

It should be noted, however, that the Liberal Government does not speak with one homogeneous voice about the issues of asylum seekers or the use of false beliefs. For example, Victorian backbench MP Petro Georgiou very vocally introduced a Private Members Bill in an unsuccessful attempt to soften the Government’s stance. A fellow Liberal, Bruce Baird, noted the large number of ‘myths’ associated with the asylum seeker issue. For example,

‘There’s the myth that because we’ve been tough on asylum seekers that the boats have stopped – they’ve stopped around the world ... There’s the myth that the rest of the world is following us. Nonsense. I’ve been to seven countries and nobody follows the same policy as we do ... There’s the myth that these people are just

economic refugees – the fact is that most of them have been found to be genuine refugees ... So it kinds of goes through in terms of this myth-making machine and it's not viable, it's not a reality.'

Implicit in our findings is that correcting false information is a way forward. However, it needs noting that this is not the only avenue. Negative attitudes toward asylum seekers are very likely to have been influenced by other factors; for example, personal characteristics of the person making the judgment. One study found significant correlations between attitudes toward asylum seekers, Indigenous Australia, and Asian Australians; in other words, some people appear to be 'equal opportunity bigots' (Pedersen, 2004). Attitudes can also be formed by other more individual social-psychological variables. For example, research finds that attitudes toward asylum seekers relate to perceived consensus in the community: the more people believe their opinions are shared, the more harsh their attitudes toward mandatory detention (Hartley & Pedersen, under review) and the more negative their attitudes toward asylum seekers (Pedersen, Watt & Griffiths, under review). Additionally, social variables such as low levels of education impacts on negative attitudes toward asylum seekers (Pedersen, Attwell & Heveli, 2005). Thus, we are not arguing that politicians should take full responsibility for community acceptance of false beliefs. What we are arguing is that it is important that they do not perpetuate inaccurate information that links with negative attitudes.

Relationship between negative attitudes and false beliefs.

As anticipated, participants who expressed false beliefs were significantly more negative in their attitudes to asylum seekers. This relationship is in the same direction as that found in Pedersen Attwell and Heveli (2005) outlined previously, although the relationship between the variables was smaller. This is hardly surprising given that the data were collected in different ways. However, the main point found in the present study is that people who are negative toward asylum seekers are significantly more likely to not only endorse false beliefs as found in the studies mentioned previously, but they are significantly more likely to express them spontaneously.

Endorsing the specific false belief that asylum seekers are queue jumpers has a particularly strong relationship with negative attitudes to asylum seekers. As noted above, this appears to be a consequence of Government policy which directly, and against the recommendation of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), pits onshore and offshore applicants against one another, and which appears to inflame the Australian sense of 'fair play' as Australians appear to believe that those who apply offshore should not be disadvantaged because of onshore arrivals. The most sensible solution to this problem would be for the Government to adhere to UNHCR recommendations and make these two types of applications independent of one another.

Implications and Conclusions.

There are several issues which need to be taken into account when looking at our findings. Although a significant number of participants expressed false beliefs as outlined in the literature, the numbers that we report are likely to be very conservative.

In the present study, respondents were restricted to six lines to explain their attitude, and so the statements made were those most salient. However, if participants were given the opportunity to express all the reasons behind their attitudes, more false beliefs are likely to have emerged. Future studies employing qualitative methods such as focus groups or interviews are likely to yield less conservative data (as did the purely quantitative studies). It would also be interesting to examine in-depth the effects of political rhetoric on participants' beliefs within the context of focus groups.

And what of practical implications stemming from our findings? Importantly, although there is a dearth of research in this respect, one study found that the debunking of false beliefs can reduce negative attitudes. For example, as noted previously, Batterham (2001) found that participants whose false beliefs about Indigenous Australians were challenged scored significantly lower on modern prejudice scale compared with a control group. Thus, if we hope to reduce negative attitudes toward asylum seekers, the debunking of false beliefs may be a good place to start.

Asylum seekers struggle on many levels while in detention (e.g., loss of freedom; loss of home and family; often learning a new language; mental health problems). Unfortunately, these struggles often do not end with their release, especially if they are on temporary protection visas or worse, Bridging Visas E. These visas give no working rights, CentreLink rights, or medical support (see McNevin & Correa-Valez, this volume). Many still deal with loss of home and family, language, and mental health problems, but they also have employment problems such as qualifications recognition and discrimination (see Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2005), education, and much more.

Dealing with hostile and negative attitudes directed toward them can only exacerbate these problems.

Previous research finds that the perception of negativity from mainstream Australians was significantly related to mental health problems, suicidal behaviour, non-prescribed drug use, police problems, and prison experiences among Indigenous Australians (South Australian Health Commission, 1991). If we can learn from work conducted with this other marginalised group in Australia, it would seem imperative to understand - and deal with - the roots of negative attitudes toward asylum seekers. And, as Verkuyten (2004) with his work on Dutch asylum seekers found, issues of justice are central to people's thinking about these issues.

The present study, together with the quantitative studies that came before it, clearly shows a relationship between negative attitudes and false beliefs. While it has been argued by previous authors (e.g., Betts, 2001) that negativity toward asylum seekers largely involves a seemingly benign 'common sense of peoplehood' (p. 45), our study would suggest that this is a simplistic view. Negative attitudes toward asylum seekers are significantly linked to the acceptance of false information, which in turn is linked to public comments made by our political leaders (however, we are *not* arguing for a causal relationship). It could be argued that as such false beliefs, or assertions of knowledge, become more widely understood to be 'false' (cf. the Children Overboard Scandal), or become subject to public disputation, they also become more commonly recognizable as elements of a stereotype – or as misrepresentative and misleading if not outright mistaken. They are, then, less likely to be used to buttress or justify one's *reasonable* and *non-prejudiced* attitude toward the minority group in question. Thus, they are

important elements in any anti-racist strategy. This is where this study adds to previous research in a very practical way. While previous research established the link between negative community attitudes and false beliefs, our present study takes this finding further by elaborating on the specific false beliefs most prevalent in our society.

To conclude, we found that societally-prevalent false beliefs were connected with negative attitudes toward asylum seekers. These same false beliefs were identified in public statements made by politicians. We do not argue that this relationship is causal. Indeed, it is likely that the relationship is bi-directional. While accepting these sorts of statements may increase negative attitudes, prejudiced people may also accept the statements to a greater degree. That the relationship is more than likely bi-directional does not take away from our argument that incorrect information given by our political leaders is harmful (either ideas are put into people's heads; or alternatively, people are given a valid reason to believe negative and incorrect information). Whichever direction the information comes from, the practical implications of our results regarding negative attitudes, false beliefs and the public statements made by politicians is important. This is particularly the case as politicians are the most visible representatives of everyday Australians and, after all, are elected to speak on behalf of the Australian people.

Author notes. Correspondence should be addressed to Anne Pedersen at the School of Psychology, Murdoch University, Murdoch, WA, 6150, Australia (email address A.Pedersen@murdoch.edu.au). We gratefully thank our research assistant Sue (Myth Buster) Hoffman for coding and inputting the data, and for giving much appreciated advice during the process. The authors also gratefully thank Paul Bain, Brian Griffiths, Trish Harris, Sue (Myth Buster) Hoffman, and Farida Tilbury for their very useful comments on an earlier draft, although the authors take full responsibility for the views stated herein. Finally, we thank those people who contributed to this study by completing the survey.

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Footnotes.

1. The Children Overboard Scandal involved representatives of the Federal Government making public statements in the lead-up to the 2001 election that they had evidence that asylum seekers threw their children overboard, presumably to gain access to Australia's protection. They relied on video evidence which was later shown to be false.

2. We note that Coalition parliamentarians may well argue that with respect to The Children Overboard Scandal they were only acting on available information. We do not enter into this argument as it is irrelevant to the present study. What we are interested in here is the public comments made by politicians which are taken up by the community at large. Regardless of what transpired at a later date, the information outlined here regarding the Children Overboard Scandal **was** put out into the community by politicians and it our study indicates that it **was** taken up by the general public. For the purposes of this paper, we concentrate on the fact that the materials are part of the general source of information made available to the general public about asylum seekers, and in endeavouring to uncover the sources of attitudes toward asylum seekers, it would be remiss to ignore them.

3. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

Table 1. Specific false beliefs regarding asylum seekers

1.	Refugees take our jobs	4	0.0%
2.	All refugees go on unemployment benefits	1	0.0%
3.	Refugees have no right to come here and expect us to help them	7	1.2%
4.	Refugees get all sorts of handouts from government	23	3.8%
5.	Refugees cannot possibly contribute anything to us	47	7.8%
6.**	Boat people are queue jumpers	174	28.9%
7.**	Asylum seekers are illegal	90	15%
8.	There is no alternative to mandatory detention	8	1.3%
9.	If we let them in, they'll take our benefits	1	0.0%
10. *	It is not safe to let asylum seekers into the community	34	5.6%
11.**	People who arrive unauthorised are not 'genuine' refugees	128	21.2%
12. *	People who destroy their identification can't be genuine	16	2.7%
13. *	Refugees are too 'culturally different' to fit in with the Australian way of life	49	8.1%
14. *	Refugees should stay in the first country they come to and 'join the queue'	11	1.8%
15.*	The people in the boats are terrorists	33	5.5%

Number of participants who responded to qualitative question = 602

* New theme

** n>50

Appendix A

Identified false beliefs about asylum seekers

1. Refugees take our jobs (which is balanced by the contradictory myth)
2. All refugees go on unemployment benefits
3. Refugees have no right to come here and expect us to help them.
4. Refugees get all sorts of handouts from the government.
5. Refugees cannot possibly contribute anything to us

False Beliefs 1-5 were identified by the Refugee Council of Australia (2002).

6. Boat people are queue jumpers
7. Asylum seekers are illegal
8. Australia already takes too many refugees
9. They must be 'cashed up' to pay people smugglers
10. There is no alternative to mandatory detention
11. If we let them in, they'll take our benefits

False Beliefs 6-11 were identified by Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education (2002).

12. We're being swamped by hordes of boat people
13. Refugees are economic migrants who come here to get a better life. (or they're not real refugees anyway)

False Beliefs 12 and 13 were identified by both the Refugee Council of Australia (2002) and Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education (2002)