

Working with Wasim: A convergence of community

Anne Pedersen

Mary Anne Kenny

Murdoch University

Linda Briskman

Curtin University of Technology

Sue Hoffman

Murdoch University

Using the case study of Wasim, we look at the role of the Australian community in both allowing the hard-line treatment of asylum seekers by the Howard federal government, and the role of the Australian community in turning this around. In so doing, we use Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework as conceptualized by Dalton Elias and Wandersman (2007). We found that an ecological framework was useful in explaining the hard-line treatment of asylum seekers; the macro-system being the most relevant. Conversely, when looking at the community attempting to rectify this situation, all of the ecological levels were highly relevant. Drawing on the perspectives of four researchers from different disciplines, we note that the effect of the Australian policy is negative, most importantly for the asylum seekers themselves, but also for the whole Australian community. Finally, we note that communities are not helpless when attempting to address situations such as this. Although there are many issues which still need to be addressed regarding asylum seekers, change has occurred at all ecological levels. The community can make a difference.

Wasim is 33 years old. He likes spending time with his family, socialising with friends, watching Dr Who, and reading. To the intense aggravation of those nearest and dearest to him, he likes action movies. When Australia was playing Italy in the decider match to get into the Soccer World Cup quarter finals, like many other Australians, Wasim was glued to the television barracking for Australia. In most ways, Wasim is just another ordinary Aussie bloke.

However, there is another side to Wasim. He is a man seeking asylum in Australia. His father was arrested, tortured and killed by government authorities in his country of birth, and his mother died three months later. Wasim was later arrested. He was kept naked in solitary confinement, interrogated and tortured. After ten days, he was taken away in a vehicle to be transferred to the central prison with the expectation that he would soon be executed with other detainees. He escaped, and after a convoluted journey, arrived by open dinghy in Far North Queensland from Papua New Guinea in September 1998. He presented himself to the Australian Immigration

Department, and was detained immediately. On the basis of his experiences Wasim had, and still has, serious fears for his life if he returned to his country of origin.

Wasim's claims were rejected by the Immigration Department and by the Refugee Review Tribunal. In rejecting his case, the Tribunal accepted some parts of his story including the imprisonment but did not accept that Wasim had been specifically targeted and as a result was not satisfied he would be imprisoned again if he was returned. Subsequent to this decision, Wasim made a number of appeals to the Minister for Immigration. Despite the support he received from Amnesty International, the Asian Human Rights Commission, Members of Parliament from a range of political parties, Senators, and over 4,000 community members, all appeals were unsuccessful.

Once the decision was made by the Tribunal, the Immigration Department began to put into place steps to remove Wasim from Australia. Wasim had arrived without documents or proof of identity. His country of origin refused to accept him as one of their

citizens and would not allow him into the country. He was for all practical purposes, and remains, “stateless”. Still the Australian authorities refused to grant him a visa. As a result of being in this legal limbo, he spent five years in detention. Finally in August 2003 an interim order from the Federal Court of Australia declared that he should be released from detention as there seemed to be no reasonable prospects for his removal from Australia. He was married the following year to an Australian citizen to whom he is still married. In decisions made subsequent to his release, the High Court of Australia declared that it was lawful for the government to detain non-citizens indefinitely (*Al-Kateb v Godwin* (2004) 219 CLR 562; *Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs v Al Khafaji* (2004) 219 CLR 664). As a result of this decision, there were indications that Wasim would be re-detained; however, this was deferred while the Minister for Immigration considered his case once again. He was not re-detained.

At the time of writing this article in October 2007, Wasim has no visa and is waiting upon a decision by the Minister for Immigration. He has no Centrelink (social security) or access to Medicare (health benefits) nor does he have the right to work. For over four years, he has been wholly supported and maintained by his wife, a community-based refugee charity organisation, and a number of supporters. He has been in Australia for over nine years.

What are the events that have led up to this? In the present article, the authors - four refugee advocates and academics - argue that we cannot look at this situation in isolation; we must look at all aspects of the Australian community. We do this from an interdisciplinary viewpoint: Author 1 (Wasim’s primary advocate) is a social/community psychologist. Author 2 (Wasim’s lawyer) is a practising refugee lawyer and academic. Author 3 (who belongs to Wasim’s community support group) is an academic from a social work background. Author 4 (who also belongs to Wasim’s support group) is a Ph.D candidate within a sociology/ psychology framework. As is apparent, we come from

divergent disciplines. We see this as a bonus; as noted by Vidal (2005), when trying to find solutions to social problems, multi-disciplinary approaches are necessary.

We believe that it is important to be up-front with our values which are at the forefront of both our advocacy and research. As noted by Prilleltensky (2001), values “inform our personal, professional, and political behavior” (p. 751). Our values are straightforward: we believe that the Howard government’s position on asylum seekers, especially with regard to indefinite mandatory detention, is punitive and simply wrong. We are not alone here; the punitive effect of indefinite mandatory detention is noted by many others (e.g., the report on detention by the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work [ACHSSW], 2006). We do not claim to be value neutral. All work within a human rights and social justice framework adheres to research tenets that promote a social change and advocacy focus. Increasingly, this approach can be seen in the research of a range of academic professions such as community psychology, social psychology, social work, sociology, law, psychiatry, and nursing to name but a few. In asylum seeker research in particular, researchers have adopted a paradigm shift away from conventional scientific neutrality.

As noted, the whole context of the asylum seeker situation needs analysis rather than looking at the situation of individual asylum seekers alone. In the present article, we rely on an ecological theoretical framework to help explain the events surrounding Wasim’s situation and others like him. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Dalton Elias and Wandersman (2007) propose, people need to be understood within the environments or systems in which they are entrenched. Specifically, Dalton et al. notes that individuals can be affected by Microsystems (e.g., classrooms, choirs, families, friends, self-help groups, and teams), Organisations (e.g., community coalitions, local business or labour groups, schools, religious congregations, and workplaces), Localities (e.g., cities, neighbourhoods, rural areas, and towns), and Macrosystems (e.g., belief systems,

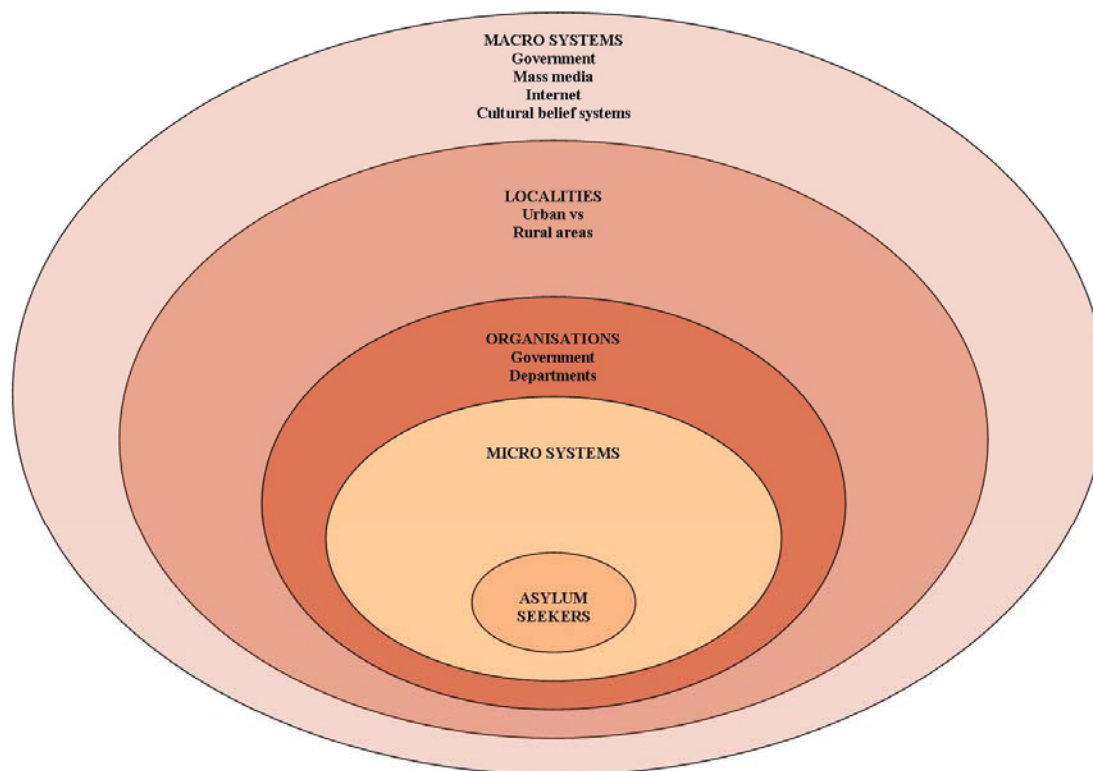


Figure 1. The role of the Australian community in allowing the punitive treatment of asylum seekers¹

corporations, cultures, governments, the internet, mass media, social movements, and societies). As Dalton et al. further notes, most community issues involve more than one ecological level.

In the present paper, we shall be analysing the system as a whole using examples from the case of Wasim when appropriate. We see the paper as a multi-disciplinary reflection on the situation of Australian asylum seekers, with particular reference to one specific asylum seeker - Wasim. Our research questions are straightforward: First we ask "What is the role of the Australian community in allowing the punitive treatment of asylum seekers like Wasim?" The second research question is "What is the role of the Australian community in making social change"? The third and final research question is "What is the effect of government policy - not just on the asylum seekers themselves - but on the whole

Australian community?"

QUESTION 1: "WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY IN ALLOWING THE PUNITIVE TREATMENT OF ASYLUM SEEKERS LIKE WASIM?"

First, we show a graphic illustration of an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dalton et al, 2007) as it relates to Wasim and the role of the Australian community in allowing the punitive treatment of asylum seekers (see Figure 1). This diagram indicates the effect of systems on individuals (for our purposes, asylum seekers such as Wasim), and this is what we concentrate on. However, it is worth noting that certain individuals also affect the lives of other individuals. By doing nothing to oppose the Howard government's policy, many individuals collaborated with its hard-line position. Other individuals were directly involved in implementing and supporting the policy, whether in their roles as politicians,

government lawyers, journalists/shock jocks who promoted the government line, Immigration Department officers, detention centre guards and the management of the companies contracted to run the immigration detention centres. Thus, we are not arguing that individuals are not important. What we are arguing is that it is too simplistic to see this issue as an “individual” issue.

Returning to our framework outlined in Figure 1, not only were individuals involved in allowing the asylum seeker situation to exist and continue, but these individuals were also linked with Microsystems such as their family and friends who may have agreed with their views on asylum seekers and supported their actions. However, Microsystems are less relevant when it comes to their effect on the asylum seekers themselves - the focus of our paper – compared to outer layers. Organisations such as government departments are indeed relevant to the issue. However, government organisations are inextricably linked with government policy; thus, we concentrate on this more within the Macrosystems section. With regard to Localities, there may well have been some that were more opposed to asylum seekers than others although there is a dearth of research on this topic. Location differences have been found with respect to other oppressed cultural groups such as Indigenous Australians (Pedersen Contos, Griffiths, Bishop, & Walker, 2000) and Muslim Australians (Forrest & Dunn, 2007). Additionally, some research that measured the correlation between the fear of terrorism and prejudice against asylum seekers found that the correlation was higher in Albany compared to Perth; most likely because the issue of asylum seekers/refugees was highly salient and politicised in Albany at the time that research was carried out (Pedersen, Griffiths & Watt, 2007). After reviewing the literature, it would appear that the biggest effect came from our fourth and outer level: Macrosystems.

Macrosystems

It is to this we now turn, concentrating on four primary Macrosystems: the Howard government (in particular their policies of

indefinite detention, detention debt, Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs), and the Pacific Solution), the mass media, the internet, and cultural belief systems.

The Howard Government

The government of Prime Minister Howard has received strong rebuke for its asylum seeker policies. These have come from a range of sources including the United Nations, NGOs, professional bodies, refugee advocates and sections of the media. In essence, the policy critiques centre on the responses to a relatively small number of unauthorised arrivals seeking asylum in Australia. The most strident criticism is of the harsh indefinite mandatory detention regime, which causes immense suffering that continues after release. Supplementing indefinite detention is a raft of policy measures designed to deter and deny entry to Australia (Briskman, 2008) including TPVs - which deny rights available to other Protection Visa holders - and the so-called Pacific Solution (both of which will be discussed more fully later).

Indefinite detention

Specifically, the Howard Government implemented a number of punitive measures aimed at asylum seekers over the last decade (Briskman & Goddard, 2007). The detention of people arriving without official authorisation is well known. That is, the current Australian law is that all persons who arrive in Australia without a valid visa are detained. Asylum seekers can remain in detention for anything from a number of hours - where they are screened out and deported - to a number of years (one Kashmiri detainee was released after almost seven years). It is worth noting that this policy was in fact brought in by the Labor government, although it was not implemented as harshly as with the Howard government. However, less well known is the treatment of asylum seekers who arrive with official authorisation; that is, arriving with a business, tourist or student visa, and then seeking asylum. They can live in the community while their case is processed; they are not detained.

Conversely, Wasim who arrived without official authorisation was detained for five years from when he was 23 years of age to 28 years of age. With respect to stateless people like Wasim, theoretically this could be for life -

indefinite detention is enshrined in our legal system (Burnside, 2008). As stated previously, the effect of High Court decisions in 2004 means failed asylum seekers can be held in detention indefinitely provided the Minister for Immigration is intending to deport them when that becomes possible. For stateless people like Wasim, this may be never. On 31st August, 2004, a media release by the then Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone announced that of the stateless people “not granted visas, 10 are already in detention and three will be required to be re-detained”. Wasim was one of those three not already in detention. Happily, for reasons beyond the scope of this paper, this did not occur.

Detention debt policy

The detention debt policy, introduced in 1992, meant that all immigration detainees are theoretically responsible for costs associated with their detention (including their “daily maintenance costs” estimated to be approximately \$115/day). Section 209 of the Migration Act 1958 (Cth) states that detainees may be liable to repay the Commonwealth for the cost of their accommodation, food and other requisites of daily life, as well as the costs associated with locking them up (see Mitchell & Dastyari, 2007). This debt is usually written off for those who are recognised as refugees and granted a TPV, but for those released on another kind of visa granted by the Minister for Immigration, it is often a condition of the grant of the visa that the ex-detainee agree to repay the debt.

Like a number of other ex-detainees now living in the community, Wasim has a debt payable to the federal government for his detention costs. He has been advised that, as at 30th June 2005, these costs are \$346,008.60. The actual detention costs are \$345,008.60 and the Refugee Review Tribunal fee is \$1,000.

Temporary Protection Visas

In October 1999 the Howard government introduced a new visa into Australian law: the TPV. Prior to October 1999, all persons found to be refugees in Australia had immediate access to a Permanent Protection Visa. The TPV is now the only class of protection visa available to asylum seekers who arrived without visas and who are found to be

refugees. The TPV is a temporary visa that allows the holder to remain in Australia for 30 months, after which time the holder may apply for a further protection visa. Through the creation of the TPV, the government has made these refugees ineligible for most of the essential settlement services it usually provides. This approach was strongly criticised by community groups and some state governments.

Research has found that TPV holders experience significant mental health difficulties due not only to their experiences of torture and trauma in their home countries, but also because of the conditions of the TPV (Marston, 2003). The granting of temporary protection only, the prohibition of family reunion, and highly restricted travel rights have compounded existing torture and trauma symptoms by denying both security and stability to the people the visas are designed to protect. This, in turn, impacts on the Australian community (Allison, 2007). That is, it is harder for these refugees to integrate into the wider society, and as a result make an effective contribution to the community.

The Pacific Solution

Finally, there is the issue of processing asylum claims offshore. In 2001, in the aftermath of the Tampa, the Howard government began taking steps to prevent asylum seekers from entering Australia and thereafter began the practice of “excision” – designating parts of Australia where the domestic law relating to refugees did not apply. Legislation was passed allowing for asylum seekers arriving in excised places to be detained and taken to an off-shore processing centre, such as Nauru or Manus Island in Papua New Guinea. This policy was to become known as the “Pacific Solution”. People seeking asylum and arriving in Australia in an excised zone were deemed to be outside the country and therefore ineligible for access to visas granted to asylum seekers who arrived on mainland Australia; they could however be considered for other visa classes (for more detail including information on offshore refugee and humanitarian visas see Crock, Saul & Dastyari, 2006).

How do these government policies affect asylum seekers? The poor mental health of

detainees is well-documented (e.g., Austin, Silove & Steel, 2007; Steel, Frommer, & Silove, 2004). Suicidal behaviour in detention is calculated between 26 and 41 times that of the national average (Dudley, 2003).

And what about Wasim's mental health? It fluctuates from reasonable to very poor as you would expect after five years in detention and over four years living in the Australian community without any means to support himself, as well as no certainty as to his future. Given the death of his father at the hands of his former government, one can only imagine how the insecurity of no visa would affect him. As noted by his psychologist in a written report to the Immigration Department, he exhibits post-traumatic stress symptoms and is often severely depressed. Even when (if) he is given a visa, it will take many years to recover from the treatment received in his birth country, as well as the years of torment in Australia.

As argued elsewhere, it could well be argued that this situation is driven by institutionalised racism (Pedersen, Clarke, Dudgeon, & Griffiths, 2005); see Jones (1997) for a distinction between individual, cultural, and institutionalised racism. As noted by Jones and Pedersen et al, institutionalised racism involves the systems that exclude members of out-groups. It is hard to imagine any group more excluded than asylum seekers; not only are their detention centres often in the middle of the desert, but whenever possible, they are now processed offshore; away from their full legal rights and the Australian community.

Mass media

The media often characterises refugees and asylum seekers as deviant and problematic, with the potential to disrupt social harmony. As noted by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the ecological systems approach is a way of looking at the socialisation of the individuals who make up a society. In other words, the media can be seen as a socialising mechanism to the Australian community generally, and is highly relevant to the ways in which refugees and asylum seekers are portrayed.

Refugees have long been a target of the so-called 'shock jocks' of talkback radio and tabloid press (Mares, 2002a). The media

played a significant role in promulgating government rhetoric which played upon anti-refugee sentiment already present in the wider community. The media often use vocabulary more fitting to descriptions of war or criminal behaviour than humanitarian need such as "invaders", "hordes", and "illegal". The relatively few media pieces that offer an alternative view are generally human interest stories. Especially in the early years, it was rare to find examples of objective journalism on the subject of refugees (Pickering 2001), apart from a handful of sympathetic journalists who have been pivotal in exposing the policies and practices of immigration detention. Regrettably, these minority views tend to affirm 'the converted' rather than the general public. In fact, when looking at the social psychological research, it is clear that people are significantly more likely to pay attention to views that support their own; otherwise known as "the selective exposure hypothesis" (Sweeney & Gruber, 1984) and the "confirmation bias" (Nickerson, 1998). Finally, at times messages picked up by media consumers are perceived negatively even when there is no apparent ill intent by the author (see Moloney, 2007, with respect to social representations of asylum seekers through Australian cartoons).

The validity of terms like "illegal immigrants" and "illegals" used by politicians and the media has been consistently challenged on the basis that asylum seekers have not broken Australian law by arriving without a visa and asking for protection (Burnside, 2008). A particular headline in the Sydney Morning Herald prompted one refugee advocate to lodge a complaint with the Australian Press Council. Her complaint was upheld. The Press Council cautioned the media against the use of "illegal" as it is "often inaccurate and may be derogatory" (Australian Press Council, 2004). In fact, one study found that when study participants read an article which used the word "illegals" rather than "refugees" or "asylum seekers", they were more likely to endorse negative statements about them (Augoustinos & Quinn, 2003).

The Howard government has attempted

to depersonalise asylum seekers with respect to the media. As pointed out by Marr (2007), the Howard government issued the following order to naval photographers in 2001: “no personalising or humanising images” (p. 41) (also, see Haslam & Pedersen, 2007, for a discussion on the dehumanisation of asylum seekers). Indeed, to obtain a photograph of Wasim in the early years of his incarceration, an advocate took advantage of an occasion when Wasim was outside the detention centre, being taken by guards from the detention facility to a dentist.

The Internet

Although recognising the interconnection between the media and the internet, we separate the media and the internet consistent with the framework of Dalton et al (2007). The internet has been instrumental in spreading anti-asylum seeker information. For example, an email circulated in 2005 was addressed “To all you refugees out there” as follows:

*“I cross ocean, poor and broke
Take bus, see employment folk
Nice man treat me good in there; say I
need go see Welfare.
Welfare say, "You come no more, we
send cash right to your door."
Welfare cheques; they make you
wealthy
Medicare It keep you healthy!
By and by, got plenty money,
Thanks to you, TAXPAYER dummy.
Write to friends in motherland,
Tell them 'come, fast as you can'
They come in turbans and Ford trucks,
I buy big house with welfare bucks.
They come here, we live together
(Cousins brothers sisters aunt uncle
nephew grandpa)
More welfare cheques, it gets better!
Fourteen families, they moving in,
But neighbour's patience wearing thin.
Finally, white guy moves away,
I buy his house, and then I say,
“Find more aliens for house to rent.”
In my yard I put a tent.
Send for family, they just trash,
But they, too, draw welfare cash!
Everything is very good, soon we own*

*whole neighbourhood
We have hobby, it called breeding
Welfare pay for baby feeding
Kids need dentist? Wife need pills?
We get free! We got no bills!
TAXPAYER crazy! He pay all year,
to keep welfare running here.
We think AUSTRALIA darn good
place! Too darn good for white man
race
If they no like us, they can scam,
Got lots of room in Pakistan.
SEND THIS TO EVERY TAXPAYER
YOU KNOW”*

Full of negative stereotypes and inaccuracies beyond the scope of this article to discuss fully, this ‘poem’ can certainly inflame tensions toward asylum seekers. Another email which has been doing the rounds in the last year or so gives “statistics” indicating that pensioners are worse off financially than refugees thanks for government handouts or as they put it “social assistance”. In fact, the information, and the precise statistics included in the email, was “total moonshine, copied from a chain email which originated in Canada” (MediaWatch, 2008, p.2).

Both emails in fact link in with some psychological literature on the topic. For example, one study found that many Australians believed that “asylum seekers get all sorts of government handouts” (Pedersen et al., 2005, p.154). However, many asylum seekers do not receive the benefits that the ‘poem’ suggests; for example, Wasim has been living in the Perth community without any access to Medicare or any form of ‘welfare’.

Cultural belief systems

Pedersen Attwell and Heveli (2005) found a great deal of negativity toward asylum seekers; negativity that significantly correlated with false beliefs or myths (e.g., they are queue jumpers). Importantly, approximately two-thirds of their community sample held false beliefs about asylum seekers; in other words, these beliefs were so consensually shared that they went beyond individual idiosyncrasies to social mores. The

correlation between false beliefs and negative attitudes was very high (.77); higher than false beliefs and negative attitudes held about Indigenous Australians (depending on location and time-frame, they range between .47 and .60). In other words, the higher the level of false beliefs, the higher the negative attitude. Similarly, Pedersen, Watt and Hansen (2006) found that spontaneously generated false beliefs about asylum seekers significantly correlated with negative attitudes toward asylum seekers. The presence of such beliefs was present in politicians' public statements, widely reported through the media. These spontaneously generated false beliefs were: "boat people are queue jumpers", "asylum seekers are illegal" and "people who arrive unauthorised are not genuine refugees". One can easily see the links between ecological levels with respect to attitudes toward asylum seekers, as well as with the ecological frameworks of both Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Dalton et al. (2007).

That these negative attitudes toward asylum seekers prevailed may account for why Prime Minister Howard was able to make the "Children Overboard" claims. Here, he informed the Australian public that there was evidence that asylum seekers on a boat intercepted by Australian naval forces threw young children into the sea. This, it was claimed, was an attempt to blackmail Australia into taking asylum seekers to Australia. Within days, the then Minister of Defence, Peter Reith, was informed that there was no evidence of children being thrown overboard. However, he publicly stated that he would offer proof that this in fact did occur (Marr & Wilkinson, 2003). Although these allegations persisted for some weeks, they were subsequently proved to be untrue.

Cultural belief systems can also affect asylum seekers who are given asylum and released. For example, some employers discriminate against certain migrant/refugee groups and feel it is defensible to do so (see Tilbury & Colic-Peisker, 2006). Also, the uncertainty for those released on TPVs can hamper their ability to find employment. People on these visas have talked of being in detention in the community (Marston, 2003).

Furthermore, it is difficult for refugees to do simple things like rent a house; not only because of discrimination, but as Curr notes, it is hard to rent when your previous landlord was Phillip Ruddock (the former Immigration Minister). Refugee advocates also receive 'bad press' oftentimes being labeled "bleeding hearts" or "latte-sipping elites" (Curr, 2007 p 146). This, of course, impacts upon their credibility.

To conclude this section, it is quite clear that the systems within Australia play a monumental role in allowing such treatment of asylum seekers like Wasim. Although we talked about the Howard government, the mass media, the internet, and cultural belief systems separately, it is clear they are inextricably linked (e.g., the government position was fed to the mass media, who regurgitated it, and this position was echoed in Australia's cultural belief systems). While individual people devise the rules, think up policies, sign on the dotted line etc, these actions create and perpetuate create a system (culture) which then takes on a life of its own.

QUESTION 2: "WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY IN MAKING SOCIAL CHANGE?"

Before going any further, we acknowledge that the Australian community is diverse. When we talk about "community" within this second research question, we are referring to the refugee advocate community; a part of the wider Australian community.

As we did previously, we show a graphic illustration (Figure 2) of an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Dalton et al., 2007) as it relates to Wasim and the role of the Australian community in making social change. Unlike the preceding discussion where the main levels involved were systemic, with respect to the refugee advocate community "fighting back" all aspects of the ecological systems were highly relevant. As occurred with Question 1, the individual was indeed important. First, Wasim himself was active throughout the whole process. To begin with, while still in detention, he immersed himself in legal books. He represented himself in the Federal Court seeking access to education in

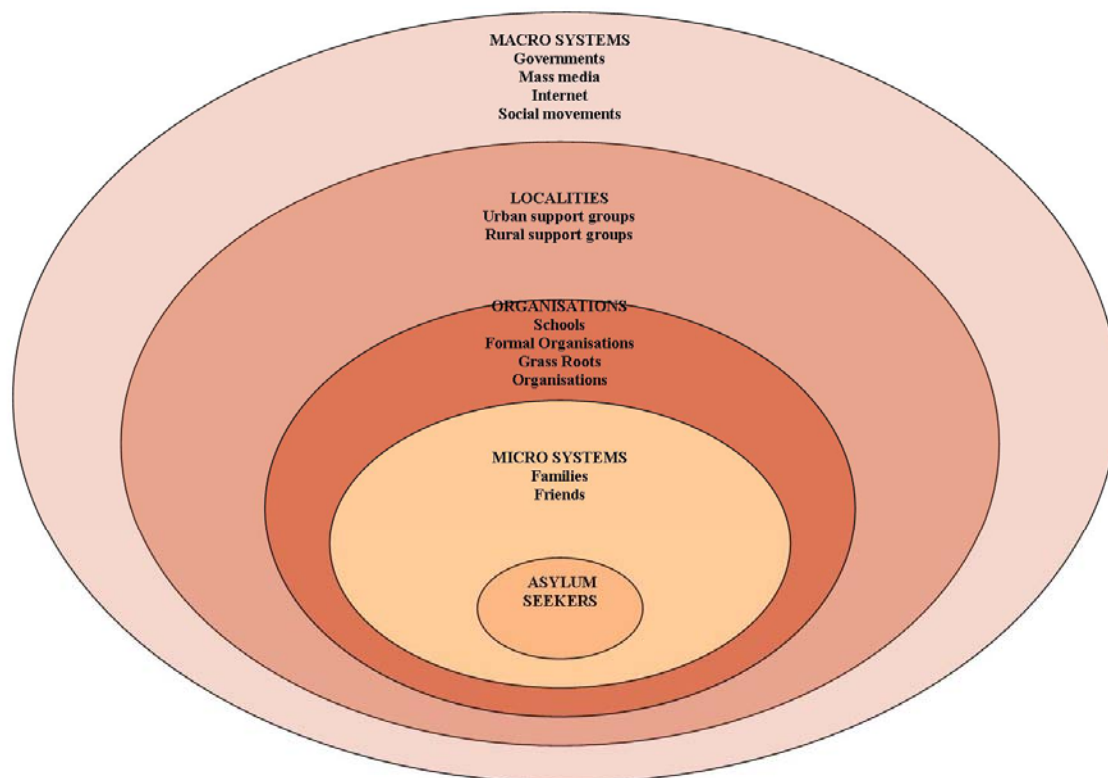


Figure 2. The role of the Australian community in making social change¹

detention. This led (albeit indirectly) to him being released from detention into the community. This is no mean feat considering that he did not speak English on his arrival in Australia.

Also, individual Australians have offered to house – and indeed have housed – asylum seekers at their homes after release from immigration detention, they have visited asylum seekers in detention, and assisted them with their legal cases (see Mares & Newman, 2007). Political commentator Phillip Adams (2007) writes of the civil disobedience campaign he instigated after the then Minister for Immigration Phillip Ruddock stated that anybody who harboured an escaped asylum seeker could be jailed for ten years; as Adams noted, this sentence would be longer than some people receive for committing murder. Within a couple of days of Adams asking his readers to sign up, he had 10,000 individuals volunteering. Individuals have also aided asylum seekers by joining refugee support

groups which sprung up all through the country (Surawski, Pedersen & Briskman, under review), including the much vaunted Rural Australians for Refugees and the Adelaide-based Circle of Friends. Often these individuals came under the auspices of other groups, including church bodies. This brings us to the next section: Microsystems.

Microsystems

Individuals, as noted by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Dalton et al. (2007), do not exist in a social vacuum. Friends and families were very much brought into the advocates' fight for justice. As one participant in a study conducted by Surawski et al. (under review) noted, "other family members joined me to actively support refugees". Conversely, some advocates found that relationships with family and friends were strained or destroyed. New South Wales advocate, Ngareta Rossell (2007) speaks of how others did not understand "that I was busy saving lives while they were busy saving frequent flyer points" (p. 2). In fact, in the

Surawski et al. study, it was found that approximately two-thirds of refugee advocates reported changes in relationships: 15% positive, 39% negative, and 46% both positive and negative. As a result of the intensity of the refugee situation, many asylum seekers and advocates became very close, close as family in many cases. This was the case with Wasim and Author 1 (Pedersen, 2007); also see Hoffman (2007).

Organisations

Influenced by individuals and their immediate networks of family and friends, work groups became involved in supporting asylum seekers. Dalton et al. (2007) speak of the effect of schools, or classrooms, on individuals. Schools have certainly been involved in refugee advocacy movement. For example, school students throughout the country contributed artwork to the SIEV X memorial project, undertaken to commemorate the death of 353 asylum seekers at sea en-route to Australia. As Biddulph (2007) notes: “beautiful artwork – arguably some of the best student art this country has ever produced” (p. 185). Many arts organisations have done their bit in fighting the asylum seeker battle; for example, Actors for Refugees. Importantly, there have been a number of grassroots organizations that have sprung up in response to Australia’s position on asylum seekers. They range from the informal Fremantle Refugee Support Project which is a local Western Australian group of concerned citizens who visited asylum seekers in detention, wrote letters to newspapers, arranged fund-raising for detainees, and basically did what they could for Wasim and for other asylum seekers. Other organizations were more formal; for example the Coalition for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Detainees (CARAD). CARAD was an invaluable resource to Wasim. Many other organisations such as the Australian Refugee Association, ChilOut (Children out of Detention), the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Asylum Seekers Network Australia, Project SafeCom and Rural Australians for Refugees sprung up throughout the country to help people like Wasim survive and to campaign for make political change. Many religious groups have

come out publicly against the Government’s asylum seeker policy and attempted to address it. For example, the Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (2002) were involved in “Refugee Sunday”; an attempt to give information to the Australian public. There were many individual religious people who also tried to make a difference to detainees (see Crowe, 2007).

Organisations have been invaluable in Wasim’s situation. For the first year that Wasim was living in the Australian community, and not entitled to work, or access financial assistance or health care, Author 1 sent an email to work colleagues and other email lists asking for people to deposit \$5 a week into a bank account which Wasim could access. Not only did complete strangers to both Wasim and Author 1 deposit money into this account, but a number of Author 1’s workmates – most of who were not refugee advocates – rose to the occasion. Without this community support, Wasim would have been destitute. After this first year, CARAD (see above) took responsibility for helping Wasim financially as much as they could.

Localities

Growing awareness within the Australian community was the trigger for the inception of groups in a variety of localities. Within three months of the inaugural Rural Australians for Refugees (RAR) meeting held in the Southern Highlands of NSW in 2001, numbers went from no groups at all to 30 groups. Within three years, there were 60 rural support groups (Coombs, 2004). In some areas residents were already aware of the issues. Port Hedland and Christmas Island RAR groups were focused on the detention centres in their locales. Albany RAR along with other local groups such as Albany Community for Refugees formed largely in response to the plight of Afghan TPV holders living in Albany because of the availability of employment at the local meatworks. The groups’ members provided practical assistance with housing, employment, English classes and visa applications. They also lobbied for TPV holders, locally and nationally. Many pro-refugee groups formed in different locations; many of which were needed to deal with localized issues.

Macrosystems

We concentrate on four primary Macrosystems: the Howard Government, the mass media, the internet, and social movements.

The Government

Over the years, a minority of politicians from all sides worked for positive change. These included politicians known as the “Liberal Rebels”. Here, Victorian backbencher Petro Georgiou and Liberal colleagues such as Judi Moylan prepared two Private Members Bills in mid-2005 in an attempt to soften the Government’s hard line stance. Their action led to negotiations which achieved some changes to the Migration Act, including that children were only to be detained as a measure of last resort. These changes, coupled with a drop in the number of boat arrivals, led to a gradual emptying of the detention centres. Other politicians were also very vocal in their opposition to asylum seeker legislation; for example, Labor’s Carmen Lawrence, the Greens’ Bob Brown and Rachel Siewert, and the Democrats’ Andrew Bartlett. These politicians, together with the Liberal Party’s Judi Moylan, all supported Wasim in some shape or form as did a number of others.

Mass media

As noted, certain journalists have been highly critical of refugee policy and were instrumental in bringing the worst excesses to light. The coverage of the Tampa incident and the Shayan Badraie case in particular were the catalysts for many advocates becoming involved in the issue, and therefore the growth of the movement. Although there have been a wealth of plays, songs and poems about the refugee issue, they tend to be appreciated within the refugee support network and are rarely played to larger audiences (one exception was Merlin Luck who made headlines when, as an evicted Big Brother contestant, he exited the house with his mouth taped shut carrying a placard bearing the slogan “Free the Refugees”). Additionally, organizations such as the Edward Rice Centre (2002) and the Refugee Council (2002) have published what they call “myths” about asylum seekers such as asylum seekers are queue jumpers to counteract the media coverage.

This links in with the Beliefs Systems as outlined by Dalton et al. (2007). In other words, shared beliefs which have a large degree of societal consensus across a society (see Pedersen et al., 2006). As discussed previously, programmes such as MediaWatch have also brought to light certain myths in the mass media.

In short, according to Mares (2002a), some journalists attempted to uncover the truth regarding refugee policy and report on the facts of this complex issue to promote genuine debate. However - in general terms - unless there is some kind of scandal, the ongoing refugee issues remain unreported.

The Internet

As noted within Question 1, the internet was used in an attempt to belittle asylum seekers. However, it was also a resource used extensively by refugee advocates to facilitate information-sharing and communication. As Curr (2007) noted, “When a detainee walked out the Baxter gate, the joy passed from Perth to Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and all points in between in minutes. The movement was blessed with a number of committed and gifted communicators who established email lists and spent their days on computers” (p.147). Coombs (2003) also spoke of the power of the internet with relation to the refugee movement in rural Australia. She wrote of the campaign of “email activism” (p.125); a particular example she gave was that that Rural Australians for Refugees could not have been such a powerful group without the internet given how dispersed people were geographically.

Social movements

As previously mentioned, the political climate of Australia involved much fear-mongering originating from the Howard government. However, as noted by Curr (2007), a number of Australians rejected this rhetoric. These were the people who made up a large social movement which has swept across the country. People in local communities and beyond extended the hand of friendship; forging connections became a political act for many advocates. Advocates were often older educated middle-class women (Surawski et al., under review), and their involvement stemmed

from reasons such as violated values (Haslam & Pedersen, 2007; Raab, 2005), empathy for asylum seekers, disagreement with Australia's policy (Reynolds, 2004), guilt (ACHSSW, 2006; Raab, 2005) and in response to perceived human rights abuses (Gosden, 2005). Their involvement has often resulted in ridicule from other quarters of the Australian community (see Mares & Newman, 2007).

Have these social movements been effective? Certainly they have, at least to some degree. For example, although it is not possible to measure the effect of individual incidents, there does appear to have been a softening in attitude toward refugees (Haslam & Pedersen, 2007) which can also be seen in an unpublished comparison of community surveys conducted by Author 1 across the years. This would not have occurred without the unprecedented social movement in support of asylum seekers and refugees described above. Having said this, as noted by Curr (2007), the Cornelia Rau scandal played a significant role in the public questioning of government. Here, a white Australian was unlawfully detained at the Brisbane Women's Correctional facility for six months, and then the Baxter Detention Centre for four months; at times in solitary confinement for 23 out of 24 hours a day. Australia appeared to sit up and take notice when it was as blonde haired, white skinned, person caught up in the detention system. But certainly, the social movements coupled with particular incidents, did make a difference.

QUESTION 3: "WHAT IS THE EFFECT OF GOVERNMENT POLICY – NOT JUST ON THE ASYLUM SEEKERS THEMSELVES – BUT ON THE WHOLE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY?"

We have already discussed the adverse affects of policy upon asylum seekers' mental health. It is worth noting most asylum seekers who were held in immigration detention were found to be legitimate refugees (Brennan, 2003; Burnside, 2008; Edmund Rice Centre, 2002; Mares, 2002b). In fact, boat arrivals from Iraq and Afghanistan who arrived in the late 1990s were almost 100% successful in their claims for refugee status (Crock et al,

2006).

A recent report found that keeping people confined for such long periods of time in offshore facilities such as Nauru and Christmas Island not only has serious detrimental effects on the asylum seekers' mental health, but that it also impacts on Australia in the long run (A Just Australia, 2007). For example, once people are finally released into the Australian community, their prolonged isolation in offshore facilities affects their integration into mainstream society which ultimately incurs higher costs to the Australian public. The offshore facilities also deprive asylum seekers of proper legal representation. Neither the facilities nor the way in which asylum claims are processed are subject to independent scrutiny in offshore facilities (AJA, 2007). All in all, there are immeasurable costs to the asylum seekers trapped within Australia's detention regime.

Also, many of those who spoke to the People's Inquiry into Detention talked about the damage to Australia's reputation by asylum seeker policies (ACHSSW, 2006). They described feelings of shame and grief at the situation of the people held in detention, and guilt when enjoying freedoms not available to asylum seekers. In fact, one Perth study found a significant correlation ($r=.49$) between guilt and support for more lenient government policies regarding asylum seekers (Hartley & Pedersen, 2007). Once advocates met people in detention, many felt they had to become more involved in advocating for them. They also reported that feeling powerless to help asylum seekers had affected their own mental health (ACHSSW 2006). As one advocate said:

The overriding thing is the shame that this is Australia. There's no way of really expressing how hurt we all feel by this happening and our powerlessness to do anything about it. Once you've been into Baxter you have to keep going. There's that obligation. So it takes over your life. It's like nothing else is more important. That obligation keeps you going beyond your burnout and through it and I think you'd have to say that that equals a mental health problem. I have to say that my mental health has suffered. That's a

combination of things - sadness, shame, lack of sleep, anxiety, absolute fear that your friends will be deported and there's nothing you can do (ACHSSW 2006, p. 59).

Surawski et al (under review) examined the stress levels and vicarious trauma experienced by refugee advocates. They found that stress and vicarious trauma levels were very high for advocates with their advocacy impacting on personal and work relationships. The levels of stress are also apparent in the stories of advocates outlined in Mares and Newman (2007).

This is not to say that most advocates regret their action (Surawski et al., under review). Many advocates were politicised through this issue and gained a greater awareness of what was going on, and a more realistic appraisal of what life is like for the marginalised. They were part of a macro movement that attempted to contain the Howard government, and in many respects it did so. On an individual level, advocates realised that people can make a difference. But should this situation have ever come to pass? Surawski et al. found that many advocates were involved in social justice issues previously - in particular, Indigenous issues - and much time was lost from that issue. With Indigenous disadvantage being as bad as it has even been, would the refugee advocates' efforts been better placed there? As noted, Australia receives only a very small number of asylum seekers compared to other countries (e.g., Pakistan). It could well be argued that this 'problem' should never have occurred in the first place. What would happen if all countries in the world took Australia's hard-line stance?

A final point we would like to make is that the policy makes no sense from an economic point of view. Since 2001, the Australian community has paid over \$1 billion to process less than 1,700 asylum seekers in offshore facilities alone (AJA, 2007). Also, to lock away able-bodied and often well-qualified people for many years and then to continue to deny people like Wasim the right to work is to also deny benefits to the community at large.

We are continually told that Australia has a severe skills shortage, but here are people willing and able to exercise their experience and potential but are instead incarcerated in a time-wasting and emotionally damaging environment.

Conclusion

To address community issues such as this one, we would argue that we must examine the situation across all systems and people (from the individual all the way through to Macrosystems). Having said that, there are certainly unequal effects. When looking at how the system affected Australia's role in allowing the treatment of Wasim and others like him, we found that the Macrosystems were far more relevant. That is, structures such as the Howard government were highly influential in causing the damage to Wasim and people like him.

However, when looking at the role of the Australian community in making social change, there was far more influence of almost all ecological levels going from the individual right up to governments and social movements. Yet although the community can – and does - bring about change, the power still resides in the Australian government. The changes that did occur (e.g., the Liberal Rebels' powerful stand on children being released from detention) and the defeat of a Bill designed to ensure all asylum seeker claims were processed offshore were in no small part due to government representatives breaking ranks after consistent lobbying by members of the refugee advocate community. So although advocates had to wait for these things to happen, and rely on the media to report them, without community persistence there would have been nothing. Although there is a limit to what the community can achieve (as we see with Wasim), without their efforts, there would be even less.

Postscript: May, 2008

Approximately one month after submission of this article, Wasim's situation changed. On Thursday 18th October, 2007, in the last few hours remaining of the Howard government before it went into "caretaker" mode (the federal election being announced for six weeks hence), Wasim was granted a removal pending bridging visa. This gives him the right to work and to receive medical and

social security support, but it also means that he cannot travel overseas, and can be deported at any time. He is now working six days a week as a manager of his wife's security doors firm. He is not entitled to obtain another visa unless the Minister for Immigration personally grants one, which he hopes will happen at a later date.

Also since the writing of this article, with the change in federal government in November 2007, the detention centres in Nauru and Manus Island have been closed, and TPVs have been abolished. It is, however, clear that the policy of mandatory detention will remain, and even the Pacific Solution has not been entirely dismantled with islands that are Australian territory still remaining excised for migration purposes. However, given the positive change that has occurred, we hope that the change in government augurs well for both Wasim and asylum seekers more generally.

References

- Adams, P. (2007). Introduction: Australian public opinion about asylum seekers. In D.Lusher & N.Haslam (Eds.), *Seeking asylum*. Sydney: Federation Press.
- A Just Australia (2007). *A price too high: The cost of Australia's approach to asylum seekers*. Retrieved 17 March, 2008, from <http://www.ajustaustralia.com/resource.php?id=216>
- Al-Kateb v Godwin* (2004) 219 CLR 562
- Allison, L. (2007). Introduction: Coming to Australia. In D.Lusher & N.Haslam (Eds), *Yearning to breathe free: Seeking asylum in Australia* (pp.50-51). Sydney: Federation Press.
- Augoustinos, M., & Quinn, C. (2003). Social categorization and attitudinal evaluations: Illegal immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers? *New Review of Social Psychology*, 2, 29-57.
- Austin, P., Silove, D., & Steel, Z. (2007). The impact of immigration detention on the mental health of asylum seekers. In D.Lusher & N.Haslam (Eds.), *Seeking asylum*. (pp. 1-13). Sydney: Federation Press.
- Australian Catholic Migrant and Refugee Office (2002). *Refugee and Migrant Sunday*. Retrieved 17 March, 2008, from http://www.acmro.catholic.org.au/docs/info_kit.pdf
- Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work. (2006). *We've Boundless Plains to Share: The First Report of the People's Inquiry into Detention*. Melbourne: ACHSSW.
- Australian Press Council (2004). *Reporting Guidelines, Guideline 262*. Retrieved 17 March, 2008, from <http://www.presscouncil.org.au/pcsite/activities/guides/guide262.html>
- Biddulph, S. (2007). Love is stronger than fear: The SIEVX memorial. In S.Mares & L.Newman (Eds.), *Acting from the heart: Australian advocates for asylum seekers tell their stories* (pp.180-185). Sydney: Finch Publishing.
- Brennan, F. (2003). *Tampering with asylum: A universal humanitarian problem*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press.
- Briskman, L. (2008) Detention as deterrence. In A. Babacan & L.Briskman (Eds.), *Asylum seekers: International perspectives on interdiction and deterrence* (pp. 128-142). Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Briskman, L., and Goddard, C. (2007). Not in my name: The people's inquiry into immigration detention. In D.Lusher & N.Haslam (Eds), *Yearning to breathe free: Seeking asylum in Australia* (pp. 90 - 99). Sydney: Federation Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burnside, J. (2008). *Watching brief: Reflections on human rights, law, and justice*. Melbourne: Scribe.
- Coombs, A. (2003). Mobilising rural Australia. *Griffith Review*, 125-135.
- Crock, M., Saul, B., & Dastyari, A. (2006). *Future Seekers II: Refugees and Irregular Migration in Australia*. Sydney: The Federation Press.
- Crowe, A. (2007). Life lessons: What refugees and asylum seekers have taught me. In S.Mares & L.Newman (Eds.), *Acting from the heart: Australian advocates for asylum seekers tell their stories* (pp.81-87). Sydney: Finch Publishing.
- Curr, P. (2007). Supporters of asylum seekers.

- In D.Lusher & N.Haslam (Eds), *Seeking asylum* (pp. 145-156). Sydney: Federation Press.
- Dalton, J.H., Elias, M.J., & Wandersman, A. (2007). *Community Psychology: Linking individuals and communities*. Australia: Wadsworth Thomson Learning.
- Dudley, M. (2003). Contradictory Australian national policies on self-harm and suicide: The case of asylum seekers in mandatory detention. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 11, 102-108.
- Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education (2002). Debunking the myths about asylum seekers. In J. Healey (Ed.), *Australia's Immigration Debate: Issues in Society* (pp. 29-31). Rozelle: The Spinney Press.
- Forrest, J., & Dunn, K. (2007). Constructing Racism in Sydney, Australia's Largest EthniCity. *Urban Studies*, 44, 699-721.
- Hartley, L., & Pedersen, A. (2007). Asylum seekers: How attributions and emotion affect Australians' views on mandatory detention of 'the other'. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 59, 119-131.
- Haslam, N., & Pedersen, A. (2007). Attitudes towards asylum seekers: The psychology of prejudice and exclusion. In D.Lusher & N.Haslam (Eds), *Yearning to breathe free: Seeking asylum in Australia* (pp. 208-218). Sydney: Federation Press.
- Hoffman, S. (2007). My pleasure and honour always. In S.Mares & L.Newman (Eds.), *Acting from the heart: Australian advocates for asylum seekers tell their stories* (pp.36-44). Sydney: Finch Publishing.
- Jones, J. J. (1997). *Prejudice and racism*. Sydney: McGraw-Hill.
- Mares, P. (2002a). *Reporting Australia's asylum seeker "crisis"*. Paper presented at 11TH AMIC Annual Conference: Media, Terrorism and a Culture of Peace, Fremantle, WA. Retrieved 2 June, 2007, from <http://www.apo.org.au/webboard/items/12748-upload-00001.doc>
- Mares, P. (2002b). *Borderline: Australia's treatment of refugees and asylum seekers*. Sydney: UNSW Press.
- Mares, S., & Newman, L. (2007). *Acting from the heart: Australian advocates for asylum seekers tell their stories*. Sydney: Finch Publishing
- Marr, D. (2007). *His master's voice: The corruption of public debate under Howard*. Melbourne: Black Inc.
- Marr, D., & Wilkinson, M. (2003). *Dark victory*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin
- Marston, G. (2003). *Temporary protection permanent uncertainty report*. Melbourne: RMIT University.
- MediaWatch (2008). Viral emails in Queensland. Retrieved 18 March, 2008, from <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s2191987.htm>
- Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs v Al Khafaji (2004) 219 CLR 664
- Mitchell, K. & Dastyari, A. (2007). Paying their debt to society? Billing asylum seekers for their time in detention. *Castan Centre for Human Rights Newsletter*, April 2007 p.13. Retrieved 17 March, 2008, from <http://www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre/newsletter/newsletter-apr-07.pdf>
- Moloney G. (2007). Social representations and the politically satirical cartoon: The construction and reproduction of the refugee and asylum-seeker identity In G. Moloney & I. Walker (Eds.) *Social representations and identity: Content, process and power*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York
- Nickerson, R.S. (1998). Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises. *Review of General Psychology*, 2, 175-220.
- Pedersen, A. (2007). The best of times; the worst of times. In S.Mares & L.Newman (Eds.), *Acting from the heart: Australian advocates for asylum seekers tell their stories* (pp.53-57). Sydney: Finch Publishing.
- Pedersen, A., Attwell, J., & Heveli, D. (2005). Prediction of negative attitudes toward Australian asylum seekers: False beliefs, nationalism and self-esteem. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 57, 148-160.
- Pedersen, A., Clarke, S., Dudgeon, P., & Griffiths, B. (2005). Attitudes toward Indigenous-Australians and asylum-seekers: The role of false beliefs and other social-psychological variables. *Australian Psychologist*, 40, 170-178.
- Pedersen, A., Contos, N., Griffiths, B., Bishop,

- B., & Walker, I. (2000). Attitudes toward Aboriginal-Australians in city and country settings. *The Australian Psychologist*, 35(2), 109-117.
- Pedersen, A., Watt, S., & Griffiths, B. (2007). Prejudice against asylum seekers and the fear of terrorism: The importance of context. In V. Colic-Peisker & F. Tilbury (Eds.), *Settling in Australia: The social inclusion of refugees* (pp.38-55). Centre for Social and Community Research, Murdoch University, Perth
- Pedersen, A., Watt, S., & Hansen, S. (2006). The role of false beliefs in the community's and the federal government's attitudes toward Australian asylum seekers. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 41, 105-124.
- Pickering, S. (2001), Common sense and original deviancy: News discourse and asylum seekers in Australia, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 14, 169-186.
- Prilleltensky, I. (2001). Value-Based Praxis in Community Psychology: Moving Toward Social Justice and Social Action. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 29, 747-778.
- Rossell, N. (2007). It was the boy. In S. Mares & L. Newman (Eds.), *Acting from the heart: Australian advocates for asylum seekers tell their stories* (pp.2-7). Sydney: Finch Publishing.
- Raab, C. (2005). *What motivates out-group focused collective action: Testing the dual pathway model of social movement participation with the Australian Refugee Movement*. Unpublished honours thesis, Swinburne University of Technology, Hawthorne, Australia.
- Refugee Council of Australia (2002). *Facts and stats*. Retrieved from the Web 28/3/2002. http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/html/facts_and_stats/facts.html
- Reynolds, M. (2004). *Australians welcome refugees: The untold story*. Retrieved from the Web 3/10/2008: <http://www.safecom.org.au/welcome-report.htm>.
- Rossell, N. (2007). It was the boy. In S. Mares & L. Newman (Eds.), *Acting from the heart: Australian advocates for asylum seekers tell their stories* (pp.2-9). Sydney: Finch Publishing
- Steel, Z., Frommer, N., & Silove, D. (2004). Part 1-The mental health impacts of migration: the law and its effects. Failing to understand: refugee determination and the traumatized applicant. *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 27, 551-528
- Surawski, N., Pedersen, A., & Briskman, L. (under review). *Resisting refugee policy: Stress and coping of refugee advocates*
- Sweeney, P.D., & Gruber, K.L. (1984). Selective exposure: Voter information preferences and the Watergate Affair. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 46, 1208-1221.
- Tilbury, F., & Colic-Peisker. (2006). Deflecting responsibility in employer talk about race discrimination, *Discourse and Society*, 17(5), 651-676.
- Vidal, A.S. (2005). Commentary: Socioethical ecology of community psychology: Communitarian values in an individualistic era. In G. Nelson & I. Prilleltensky, I. (pp. 66-68). *Community Psychology: In pursuit of liberation and well-being*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Notes

- ¹ Figure 1 and Figure 2 are based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework as conceptualized by Dalton et al. (2007).

Address correspondence to

Anne Pedersen
 School of Psychology
 Murdoch University
 Murdoch WA 6150 Australia
 Ph: 08 9360 6488
 Fax: 08 9360 6492
 email: A.Pedersen@murdoch.edu.au