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Hard Hearts: A Critical Look at Liberal Humanitarianism in Refugee Support Movements

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Increasingly, political responses to asylum seekers and refugees have become more punitive and exclusionary in many receiving countries. This hardening reflects a broader shift to the right: toward an emphasis on national security and borders, on [economic rationalism](#), and monoculturalism.

How can people who are campaigning for less exclusionary policies and laws respond? We review an ethnographic case study in the town of Woodside, South Australia and the first author's discursive research on the political speeches of Australian politicians. These suggest that pragmatic interventions emphasizing win/win solutions and mainstream appeals are useful.

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Two of these interventions, which we review in this paper, are: 1) creating social and economic benefits for both asylum seekers and residents in the communities in which they are housed, based upon an evidence base developed by establishing the social and economic impacts of asylum seeking; 2) using discourse and rhetoric that presents arguments and interventions made on behalf of asylum seekers as practical, pragmatic and moderate.

These strategies are focussed on enacting broad-based change via appeals to the mainstream, which is not the goal of all advocacy or activism, and is not appropriate in all circumstances. The interventions that we propose for community engagement also require that we reconcile the sometimes conflicting needs of asylum seekers and refugees and the residents of communities in which they are housed, which is not always possible. Despite these limits to the applicability of these strategies and interventions, our research suggests that they can create positive changes in attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF IMMIGRATION IN HOST COMMUNITIES

Previous research on responses to immigration, though not always specifically focused on asylum seekers and refugees, has identified a pervasive public belief that immigration negatively impacts the economy and social cohesion (e.g. Every et al. 2012; Esses, Brochu & Dickson 2012; Goodall 2010; Dawson 2009). Research conducted in the United States on the relationship between beliefs about economic impacts and attitudes towards immigration, summarised in Esses, Brochu and Dickson (2012), found that negative attitudes increased when immigrants were perceived to be competing with members of the host society for economic resources.

Goodall's ethnographic research in Stoke-on-Trent in the United Kingdom suggests that the relationship between economic impact and attitudes towards immigration is also likely to affect attitudes towards asylum seekers. Her conclusion, drawn from interviews and observations, was that where there are no discernible economic benefits for the host population, but rumours about asylum seekers receiving unfair benefits proliferate, hostility and violence in the form of graffiti, letters to the editor, and organised campaigns against asylum seekers escalated (Goodall 2010). In relation to social impacts, research in the United Kingdom on attitudes towards immigration found that the belief that immigration reduces social cohesion was a more significant factor in negative attitudes towards immigration than concerns about negative economic impacts (Card, Dustmann & Preston 2012).

The above research, based in the UK and the US, has predominantly focussed on immigration as a whole. The research project led by the first author (Every et al. 2012), and summarised below, sought to explore the relationship between social and economic impacts and attitudes towards asylum seekers in the South Australian town of Woodside, which houses a new asylum seeker detention facility. The project's focus on these impacts was prompted by the previous research, which demonstrates the implications of such attitudes. It was also inspired by an initial [scoping study](#) which found that opposition to new arrivals in Woodside was formulated as a concern with social and economic impacts by the host population. The interviews, ethnographic observations and analyses of media such as letters to the editor revealed that residents of Woodside argued that their town was struggling economically, suffering from poor health services and reduced education quality. They feared that asylum seekers would further weaken this social and

economic infrastructure, and the immigration facility would have negative economic and social impacts on the town. Consider the following examples from the local debate in Lobethal, South Australia about the economic and social experience of those living in the town, as compared to what they believed were those of asylum seekers:

... they will be getting 24 hour emergency services in that so called detention centre. I have two young children that I have to drive down to the Women's and Children's Hospital at midnight ... to wait in there for eight hours but they've got it at their doorstep, they don't even have to get out of their house.

... what we see from the outside looking in, is a free education...my child has a \$10 excursion and they get theirs for free...why [are] community outsiders coming in, getting a free ride and getting favouritism over us who pay taxes, the residents? [1]

...the people smugglers, what is that's actually happening that's making their lives harder, like it makes our lives harder?

...can someone give us a guarantee that our kids' education and valuable starts to life won't suffer. Can somebody give us a guarantee that they won't be pushed out of programs, that they won't, in any shape, way or form, have their education level dropped and suffer?

These extracts illustrate the fears and concerns of the local population about the social and economic impacts of the new immigration detention facility.

Were these fears borne out? The first author led the research team that undertook the social and economic assessment in Woodside to evaluate these impacts. Using interviews, ethnographic observations, media analysis and economic analysis, the assessment found that the arrival of asylum seekers did not have any negative impacts on the local economy, health and education services, policing or social cohesion (Every et al. 2012).

How is this research relevant to advocacy campaigns in relation to asylum seekers? Firstly, the findings themselves are an evidence base which can be drawn upon in debates about asylum seeking. Impact assessments can be used to allay people's fears by presenting them with research on the actual impacts. Secondly, the research also considered the factors and interventions that mediated negative impacts. This knowledge can be used for planning interventions.. The important preventive factors in Woodside included: 1) the use of targets for local employment quotas and business contracts by the management of the detention facility; 2) increased government funding for schools and health services to supply equipment and staff in areas where the new arrivals created further demand (importantly, these funds were utilised to benefit the whole of the community; for example through a new ultrasound machine and new teaching staff); and 3) local leadership from health providers, educators and the local council which provided significant opportunities for the new arrivals and for residents to meet. These initiatives were found to be critical in not only minimising any potential negative social and economic impacts, but also in reducing local residents' hostility to asylum seekers.

This research highlights the potential of engaging with and addressing the social and economic concerns of host communities, particularly in ways which create a win/win situation for both the new arrivals and the existing residents. Such an approach has also been advocated by those researchers we reviewed at the beginning of this section who found links between impacts, both perceived and actual, and negative attitudes.

Based on this, we propose that refugee supporters might engage with concerns about economic and social impacts as another way to decrease hostility towards asylum seekers. First, engagement with these concerns can occur through undertaking research on the very questions that local communities raise—namely, how do refugees and asylum seekers affect the local economy, health services, education, policing and social cohesion? Social and economic impact assessments (SEIA) can be used to do this (Every et al., 2012). Second, engagement with these concerns about impacts requires acting on this research. Whether there are negative or positive effects found, these should be communicated to the host community. Where negative effects are found, these can be addressed through programs and policies that benefit both the host and asylum communities.

In the next section of this paper, we look at another practical intervention which may be useful in campaigning and promoting or conducting activism around refugees and asylum seekers. This intervention focuses on language, discourses and rhetoric. In particular, we look at the use of the language of humanitarianism and its benefits and disadvantages. We report on our research that analysed the political speeches made by politicians in Australia that argue for more humanitarian policies towards asylum seekers.

HUMANITARISM

Much of the support for refugees and asylum seekers, and many of the campaigns created to increase support in the wider population, are based on appeals to humanitarianism (Dauvergne 2005; Every 2008; Gibney, 2004; Hyndman, 2000). That is, in establishing that they are people in need, advocates can then appeal to citizens' compassion, and call on them to uphold their national ethics of [Good Samaritanism](#) and meet their obligations as international citizens. We can see this reflected in two extracts from our research with Australian politicians advocating for more favourable policies for asylum seekers. In these speeches, politicians focus on the duty Australia (and other host countries) owe to asylum seekers as people in need:

...this is a human problem and the Christian reaction to this situation would be to care for and assist these people in need. Let us recognise that it is not just a legalistic argument; this is an issue of humanity. [\[2\]](#)

We are telling the world that international law has no place here, that Fortress Australia is more important to us than responding compassionately to human need. [\[3\]](#)

Although their advocacy is based in arguments that appeal to humanitarianism, this can be a problematic basis for creating greater support for asylum seekers. Dauvergne (1999), Gibney (2004) and Gosden (2007) propose that, historically, humanitarianism embodies two conflicting

principles: a duty to others, which is emphasised in appeals like those above, but also a concern with what this duty will cost our selves or our nation. Dauvergne (1999) translates this as a ‘minimal moral duty,’ where there is a duty to assist others only when the cost to one’s self is small. Shacknove (1988: 134) provides this definition of humanitarianism:

When persons or associations can improve the conditions of the destitute at little cost to themselves, they bear a heavy moral obligation to do so. By the same token, as the burden increases, the obligation to assist the destitute diminishes. These are the dictates of good samaritanism, known more formally as the principle of ‘mutual aid’.

Gibney (2004) argues that, although the principle of mutual aid is proposed to be a balance between these two competing ideals, it is the second (the duty to self and nation) that holds more weight. His theory is supported by discursive research mapping the dominant discourses that construct humanitarianism in relation to asylum seekers. In this research, which covers political speeches, media, interviews and focus groups in the UK, Europe and Australia, a recurring theme appears. Host countries are characterised as already doing more than enough, the research shows, whilst there are few examples where politicians, media or residents emphasise duties and obligations to the less fortunate (e.g. Corlett 2002; Jones, 2000; Wodak & van Dijk, 2000).

One theory is that these narratives dominate the discourse about asylum seeking and immigration more generally because they reflect pervasive social norms and values related to the liberal philosophical binaries of reason versus emotion, pragmatism versus idealism and moderation versus excess. This theory proposes that the values of individualism, reason, practicality and moderation are highly prized in Western liberal thought and everyday thinking, whereas emotion, idealism and excess are less acceptable (Billig 1982; Dauvergne 1999, 2000, 2005; Gergen 1991; Wetherell and Potter 1992). Thus the individualist argument, applied to humanitarianism and asylum seekers and refugees, is powerful because it can be presented as reasonable, practical and balanced. Within this narrative, those appealing to a ‘duty to others’ are often positioned as emotional, impractical and excessive in their demands by those who respond negatively to asylum seekers and refugees (Every 2008).

What does this mean for refugee advocates? One conclusion we may draw is that appeals that focus on a ‘duty to others’ may not be persuasive. Another conclusion to consider is that emotion must be used with care. In particular, statements that resonate with emotional, impractical and excessive sentiments, such as, “*We should open our arms to these newcomers*” and “*They can come and live in my house,*” [4] have the potential to be used against advocates.

Understanding how the opposition’s arguments draw upon liberal philosophical ideas can be a useful point around which to develop advocacy discourses and practices. For example, if the opposition emphasises reason, moderation and practicality, can supporters’ arguments be framed similarly? As just one example, many refugee supporters argue for increasing the number of refugees and asylum seekers under Australia’s immigration quotas. Rather than arguing for this using the rationale of fairness and humanitarianism, it may alternatively be presented as a solution that balances the needs of refugees and the claims of citizens, and may thereby be more likely to be evaluated as moderate, practical and reasonable (Gibney 2004).

CONCLUSION

This paper emphasises a reconsideration of community engagement, and presents two interventions that are based upon research surrounding the economic and social impacts of asylum seekers and the use of humanitarian language when engaging the opposition. The paper has included suggestions of using caution when employing emotional language that may alienate the opposition, and constructing campaigns and interventions that demonstrate an understanding of the social and economic concerns of the home community.

Such approaches bring significant challenges, not least of which are negotiating the long-standing tension between the sometimes competing demands of host communities and asylum seekers and, further, seeking broad-based change in the wider population and more radical campaigns and actions. However, we suggest that understanding the opposition's arguments – concerns about social and economic impacts, and the liberal philosophical basis of arguments based on practicality, pragmatism and moderation – provides more possibility for engagement for refugee supporters and advocates. Although not appropriate for all situations and issues, these interventions were found to be effective in reducing hostility towards asylum seekers and refugees in a community in Australia.

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[1] Meeting at Lobethal Town Hall, South Australia, 24 November 2011

[2] Senator Andrew Bartlett, Australian Democrats, Senate Hansard, 28/8/01, p. 26784

[3] Senator Vicki Bourne, Australian Democrats, Senate Hansard 24/9/2001, p. 27712

[4] Meeting at Woodside Town Hall, South Australia, 21 October 2011