

“The situation is hopeless; we must take the next step”: Reflecting on social action by academics in asylum seeker policy debate

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In this article, we reflect on the involvement of academics in the asylum seeker rights movement in Australia by documenting a collective action that was driven by the authors of this paper. This action was an open letter signed by 204 academics from a range of disciplines which voiced opposition to a number of asylum seeker policies proposed by the two major political parties in mid-2012. Despite the noteworthy number of academic signatories to the letter, the question of whether academics have the responsibility to voice their concerns about social injustices remains a contentious issue. This is particularly so within mainstream psychology. In the first part of this paper, we draw on the foundations of community psychology to argue that academics that bear witness to the negative impact of asylum seeker policy have an ethical responsibility to engage in social actions outside of academia in response to what they witness. We also argue that this responsibility should be coupled with a reflection on the impacts of such social action. As such, in the second part of this paper, we critically reflect on the outcomes of the open letter action as part of bearing witness and consider why members of the asylum seeker rights movement keep going on in the face of very challenging political circumstances.

The well-known quote, “the situation is hopeless; we must take the next step,” was espoused by Pablo Casals, the Spanish cellist (Adams, 2004). For many involved in the asylum seeker rights movement in Australia – non-government organisations, church groups, activist groups, academics and individuals (Gosden, 2006) – it summed up how they felt with the increasingly punitive and harsh government policy of recent years. While there seemed for many that there was no light at the end of the tunnel, to simply give up the fight was untenable. In this article, we reflect on the involvement of academics in this movement by documenting a collective action that was driven by the four authors of this article. We identify ourselves as both academics and asylum seeker advocates. This action was an open letter signed by 204 academics, from a range of disciplines, who specialise in the

refugee and asylum seeker research area. The letter raised concerns about the policy of mandatory detention, which allows for asylum seekers who arrive to Australia by boat to be held in immigration detention facilities while their protection claims are processed. The letter also raised concerns regarding the policies proposed by the major political parties in mid-2012 aimed to stem the arrival of further boats of asylum seekers such as turning back the boats to Indonesia, re-opening detention centres on Nauru and Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island, the Malaysian Solution and the re-introduction of temporary protection visas.

Despite the noteworthy number of academic signatories to the open letter, the question of whether academics have the responsibility to use the freedoms bestowed on them to voice their concerns about social

injustices remains a contentious issue (Cancian, 1993; Flood, Martin, & Dreher, 2013; Martin, 1984). This is particularly so within mainstream psychology. In the first part of this paper, we draw on the foundations of community psychology to argue that academics that bear witness to the negative impact of asylum seeker policy have an ethical responsibility to engage in social actions outside of academia in response to what they witness. We also argue that this responsibility should be coupled with a reflection on the impacts of such social action (Freire, 1972). As such, in the second part of this paper, we critically reflect on the outcomes of the open letter action as part of bearing witness and consider why members of the asylum seeker rights movement keep going on in the face of very challenging political circumstances. First, we provide a brief overview of the socio-political context in which the academic open letter was born.

Australia's Asylum Seeker Policy Debate

Australia has long demonstrated a preoccupation towards controlling its borders to deter the entry of those deemed as 'other'; particularly refugees and asylum seekers.¹ This discourse reflects what Devetak (2004) refers to as a culture of deterrence and is premised on the assumption that there are 'legitimate refugees' who enter Australia via the official offshore resettlement programme, and 'illegitimate refugees' who arrive to Australia by boat without authorisation and then apply for asylum. This dichotomy between legitimate and illegitimate is, however, objectively incorrect. Being a signatory to the United Nations (UN) Refugee Convention, Australia is obliged to process asylum seekers' claims and to offer them refugee status if their claims have been verified, regardless of how they arrive in Australia (Crock, Saul, & Dastyari, 2006).

Despite Australia's obligations under the UN Refugee Convention, mandatory detention for asylum seekers arriving without a valid

visa was enshrined in legislation in 1992 by the Labor Government. Between 1996 and 2007, under the Coalition Government, further policies designed to deter and punish the arrival of asylum seekers by boat (who do not have valid visas upon arrival) were adopted and received mostly bipartisan support. These included the excision of Australian islands surrounding the mainland for immigration purposes, the establishment of detention centres in remote locations within Australia, and offshore on Nauru and Manus Island (known as the Pacific Solution), and the introduction of temporary protection visas to all asylum seekers who could access Australia's refugee protection procedures and were found to be refugees (Crock et al., 2006). By the time of the 2007 federal election, there was opposition within some sections of the Australian and international communities to these policies and the Labor Party adopted a National Platform that included a call for asylum seeker policies that were more humane (Fleay, 2010). Soon after the election, the new (Labor Party) Minister for Immigration announced that immigration detention would be used as a last resort and for the shortest practicable time and that children would not be placed in a detention centre (Evans, 2008). However, as increasing (albeit small) numbers of boats of asylum seekers began to reach Australian shores, it was not long until the Labor Government began to abandon its commitment to more humane asylum seeker policies.

By mid-2012, as numbers of boat arrivals of asylum seekers to Australia continued to increase, both major political parties argued for solutions that would stop asylum seekers arriving to Australia by boat. While differing in content, five deterrent policy proposals were put forward by the Labor and Liberal parties. The policies proposed aroused significant alarm to those concerned about asylum seeker rights, who argued that the policies would not deter boat

arrivals, largely because they did not address the reasons why asylum seekers flee in the first place, and that they ignored both the right of asylum seekers to seek protection under international and domestic law and the harm the policies might cause already vulnerable people.

Five Deterrent Policy Proposals

The first of the deterrent policies reaffirmed by both parties was mandatory detention. For many asylum seekers, this has meant years in immigration detention and has had profound negative effects on their psychological health (Coffey, Kaplan, Sampson, & Tucci, 2010; Hartley & Fleay, 2012; Silove, Phillips, & Steel, 2010). While the Labor Government enabled, since late 2012, the release of many asylum seekers from immigration detention facilities before their protection claims were finalised, this remains at the discretion of the Minister for Immigration, and mandatory detention remains enshrined in legislation. In addition, the Liberal Party proposed the re-opening of the detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island, arguing that they had acted as a deterrent during the Howard Government's term in office between 1996 and 2007. While the number of boat arrivals declined markedly by the end of the Coalition Government's terms in office, the causes of this remain complex and contested.

For example, Hoffman (2010) argues that the factors responsible for stopping unauthorised boat arrivals in 2001 were separate from those that explain why there were so few such arrivals between 2001 and 2008. She suggests that the arrest in the second half of 2001 of certain key individuals involved in smuggling syndicates is often overlooked in this debate. Further, of the 1,322 asylum seekers who were detained on Nauru under the Howard government, some for a number of years, 573 were eventually resettled in Australia and 274 were resettled in other countries, all either as refugees or on other

humanitarian grounds, and 474 were returned to their countries of origin, mostly to Afghanistan, and many fled again soon after they arrived as it was still unsafe for them (Southern, 2011). Some of these asylum seekers have since returned to Australia and have now been accepted as refugees (Fleay, 2012). Evidence is also clear that asylum seekers (including many children) are being harmed psychologically, particularly when they spend a long time in offshore facilities (Briskman, Latham, & Goddard, 2008).

In May 2011, the Labor Party proposed an alternative offshore solution that became known as the Malaysian Solution. This policy would allow for asylum seekers arriving to Australia by boat to be swapped with asylum seekers in Malaysia. However, Malaysia is not a party to the UN Refugee Convention and does not protect the rights of refugees in practice. For example, refugees have no guarantee that they will not be returned to their countries of origin where they would be at risk of further persecution. If Australia sends asylum seekers to Malaysia without first assessing their refugee claims, it may breach the core prohibitions against *refoulement* in the UN Refugee Convention and the UN Convention against Torture.

Another deterrent policy that was proposed by the Liberal Party leader Tony Abbott in September 2011 was returning the boats of asylum seekers to Indonesia. While the Coalition Government attempted to turn back boats of asylum seekers to Indonesia in 2001, there is evidence to suggest that it was dangerous for both asylum seekers and Australian Navy personnel. Many lives were put at risk; for example, according to a *Four Corners* report, when SIEV 7 was returned to Indonesian waters in 2001, three men disappeared, presumed drowned, while trying to swim ashore from their stricken boat (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2002). Furthermore, Indonesia has indicated that it will not accept the towing back of asylum seeker boats to its shores and former Defence

Force chief Admiral Chris Barrie has serious reservations about the proposed policy (Allard & Needham, 2012).

The fifth deterrent policy proposed was again proposed by the Liberal Party – the reintroduction of Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs). The Coalition Government granted temporary visas to all asylum seekers who could access Australia’s refugee protection procedures and were found to be refugees, and denied these asylum seekers the right to apply for family reunion. Rather than deterring other asylum seekers from taking boat journeys to Australia, evidence indicates that these visas encouraged many women and children to do so. For example, most of the 353 asylum seekers who died in 2001 when the vessel SIEV X sank en route to Australia were women and children, many of who had husbands or fathers on temporary protection visas in Australia (Hoffman, 2008). Research also highlights the negative mental health consequences for refugees who were granted TPVs (Momartin, Steel, Coello, Aroche, Silove, & Brooks, 2006).

In the midst of the political debate about what policies would best deter boat arrivals, coupled with growing concerns about the number of asylum seekers losing their lives on boat journeys to Australia, on 28 June 2012 then Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the then Minister for Immigration and Citizenship Chris Bowen announced that the Australian Government had invited Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston AC AFC, the former chief of Australia’s defence force, to lead an expert panel on Australian responses to asylum seekers. The panel was tasked with making policy recommendations to the Australian Government that would prevent asylum seekers risking their lives on dangerous boat journeys to Australia. The expert panel also included Paris Aristotle AM, the Director of the Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture and Professor Michael L’Estrange AO, the Director of the National Security College at the Australian National University, and

invited public submissions.²

The Academic Responsibility to Undertake Social Action as Part of Bearing Witness

The expert panel’s call for submissions prompted the four authors to write the academics’ open letter and 204 academics researching in the area of refugee and asylum seekers became signatories to the letter. However, whether academics have the responsibility to use the freedoms granted to undertake actions regarding social injustice has been much debated. This remains particularly the case within the broad discipline of psychology.

On the one hand, mainstream psychology has long been criticised for not taking a firm political or moral stand in socio-political struggles (Scherer, 1993). This can be understood, in part, due to mainstream psychology’s positivist epistemological underpinnings that assert that ‘valid’ knowledge can only be found through observable data; that interpretation of such data should be objective and quantifiable and that academic statements should be value-free and separate from science. Similar arguments have been made with regards to science and social science more generally in that ‘valid’ research avoids implicating policy and policy dimensions (Flood et al., 2013). Thus, attempts by psychologists, and academics more generally, to engage in actions to try and foster social change is viewed by some as academically *irresponsible* and, indeed, unscholarly. Sub-specialities such as community and critical psychology, however, emerged to challenge the professional and scientific norms that excluded values and social change principles from psychology (Prilleltensky, 2001). Community psychology, for example, highlights the ethical imperative that research and practice are dedicated to “the elimination of oppressive social conditions conducive to problems with living” (Prilleltensky, 2001, p. 750). This understanding of academic

practice is consistent with an understanding of social research that gives rise to “an obligation to assist in redressing social problems, wherever possible” (Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007, p. 310). The emerging field of Peace Psychology has similar underpinnings regarding the need for a link between research, social justice and social action (Bornstein & Prior, 2012).

Community psychology elevates the importance of recognising the role that personal values play in guiding research and action (Prilleltensky, 2001; Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997). From our personal position, our understanding of academic practice, in the most part, comes from our dual identities as academics and advocates/activists. Indeed, our research into immigration detention in Australia has followed our advocacy and activism in relation to this system. That is, we first started visiting detention centres not as researchers but as individuals concerned about the system. But as we witnessed the systemic abuse within immigration detention in Australia, we began to focus our research efforts on the system. In our visiting of detention centres we have met many asylum seekers and refugees who have been subjected to punitive government policies, including mandatory detention, the Pacific Solution, and TPVs. In this capacity, we have witnessed the deleterious impact of such policies and we have carried this concern into academic life. Thus, our advocacy/activism in the area informs our research and vice versa. This is a view of academic practice where we conduct activism/advocacy *as* academic work.

Although we are an interdisciplinary team (authors one and two come from community/social psychology background; author three from a politics and international relations background and author four from a sociology background), what brings us together is our common understanding that what we are doing is bearing witness. We see ourselves as part of the broader asylum seeker rights movement in our research efforts to bear

witness and help to give at least some voice to asylum seekers’ experiences.

This is an understanding of academic practice that combines witnessing abuse with a responsibility to take action (Fine, 2006; Hugman, Pittaway, & Bartolomei, 2011). Bearing witness involves listening to and observing the experiences of another, followed by taking action in response (Cody, 2001):

Witnessing has both personal and political consequences for those who are unable to enjoy human rights. Firstly, it reassures such persons that they have not been abandoned. Secondly, witnessing acts as testimony from which action can begin (Zion, Briskman, & Loff, 2012, p. 73).

Thus to witness an abuse means to become responsible for taking some form of action in response (Peters, 2001).

We argue that the ethical imperative to bear witness is elevated for asylum seeker policy, most specifically because often asylum seekers are removed from public view within the bounds of immigration detention centres. This is particularly so for those detained in remote locations, and those offshore on Nauru and Manus Island. The length of detention that is endured by many of the men, women and children in immigration facilities, and the arbitrary nature of this detention, breaches a range of international human rights conventions ratified by Australia including the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child, the UN Convention Against Torture, the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the UN Refugee Convention. In detention, asylum seekers often become nameless and voiceless and their ability to exert influence on the system that detains them is minimal. While it is important for researchers to respect the resilience and agency of asylum seekers (Fiske, 2012), it is also necessary to

appreciate the impacts of the detention situation on the capacities of asylum seekers for autonomy (Mackenzie et al., 2007). For those in detention, their autonomy is extremely limited by the system. Bearing witness research offers a means for the concerns of asylum seekers to be voiced in the public domain. In doing so, bearing witness research can provide a form of agency to asylum seekers in detention.

Engaging in social actions on the basis of bearing witness holds a number of challenges, both professionally and ethically (Fine, 2006; Stein & Mankowski, 2004). Flood et al. (2013), for example, outline a number of challenges involved in marrying academia and activism including threats to academic advancement and output expectations. From an ethical perspective, we also become an active witness. Choices are made to bear witness in a particular way and place and, thus, inevitably choices are made to not bear witness in other ways or places (Cody, 2001). This raises important questions about whose experiences are elevated in our choices of bearing witness and whose remain hidden.

In addition, issues of power in the act of bearing witness should be acknowledged. In line with the principles of community psychology, bearing witness researchers are not 'objective' observers but become involved in the lives of the 'participants'. Relationships of friendship often develop through regular visits to detention centres. While this may allow the researcher to gain a keener understanding of the lived experiences of asylum seekers, it can be accompanied with complex power relationships between researchers and asylum seekers. In a similar way that feminists call for research reflexivity (Reinharz, 1992), researchers who bear witness should reflect upon the impact of their own personal history, values, and social status (i.e., one's position in society based on factors such as occupation) on the research itself and on relationships between researchers and participants. For example, our identity as

"white, western researchers...and the impact that this has on the research relationship" needs to be considered (Hugman et al., 2011, pp. 1283-1284). Our membership of the dominant white community in Australia and university employment may provide us with a high level of social status among those detained. All of these factors contribute to an inevitable imbalance of power between us as advocates/researchers, and asylum seekers.

However, while not detracting from the importance of considering and attending to the ethics of bearing witness, we argue that there is a much greater imbalance of power between asylum seekers and those ultimately responsible for their detention, the Australian Government. We argue that to *not* act would mean being complicit with moral wrong and harm created by the policy of mandatory detention.

Social Action based on Bearing Witness

There are a host of actions that academics, advocates and activists who bear witness to the effects of government policy on asylum seekers have taken, such as engaging with the media, writing opinion pieces, talking to government officials, and engaging in direct action such as protesting. These are all actions that we have been, and continue to be, involved in. However, we focus here on the academics' open letter.

At the beginning of July 2012, we began drafting the open letter setting out four major concerns about the proposed policies put forward by the two major parties and proposing five alternative suggestions. Once we had completed a draft, we sent it to four other people for critical review (two lawyers, one psychology academic, and one human rights academic) for their input. Upon the letter's completion, we sent it to approximately 60 research experts in the asylum seeker field (see Pedersen, Fleay, Hoffman, & Hartley, 2012, for the three-page letter). If they were interested in signing the letter, they were directed to a website where

they could give their names and affiliations (see Appendix for the cover letter and instructions). Given that we are an interdisciplinary team we had quite different contacts. We gave a cut-off of four days because the Expert Panel was already sitting but because signatures were still coming in, we extended it to six days. We used no arguments for people to sign the letter; we let the letter speak for itself. At least some of the original academics we sent the letter to forwarded it to other academics working in the refugee/asylum seeker field. Only academics who gave their full names and affiliations were included in the final count.

The Outcomes of Social Action based on Bearing Witness

While we argue that academics who bear witness to the deleterious effect of government policy on asylum seeker have an ethical responsibility to engage in social action, from a community psychology perspective it is also imperative that action is coupled with reflection (Stein & Mankowski, 2004). For example, Freire (1972) regards reflection without action as armchair revolution and action without reflection as action for action's sake. However, when action and reflection are combined, 'they constantly and mutually illuminate each other' (Freire, 1972, p. 149). In this section of the paper, we reflect on the outcomes of the open letter. While the expression of the social justice concerns of academics via public letters is certainly not new, what is less common is for such action to be coupled with a critical reflection of the act and its outcomes.

Community psychological theory offers a number of useful frameworks to conceptualise the impact of engaging in social actions at a number of levels. Ecological levels of analysis, such as those proposed by Kelly (1966), Bronfenbrenner (1979), and Dalton, Elias, and Wandersman (2001), while differing in content and emphasis, can also be used to understand the ways in which settings and

individuals are interrelated. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Dalton et al. (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 (such as classrooms, choirs, families, friends, self-help groups, and teams), organisations (for example, community coalitions, local business or labour groups, schools, religious congregations, and workplaces), localities (such as cities, neighbourhoods, rural areas, and towns), and macrosystems (including the media, and politics).

The ecological framework is useful as it enables one to undertake a critical engagement of the consequences of taking action, not only in terms of personal outcomes for individuals but also in the broader social system. As such, we use this framework to direct our critique of the impact of the open letter. However, it is important to note that some scholars have argued that actions focused on microsystem levels of the ecology do not adequately address the macro or structural level of oppression (e.g., Gesten & Jason, 1987; Moane, 2003). In the context of asylum seeker policy in Australia, the impact of action at the microsystem level cannot be underestimated, particularly for asylum seekers who are subjected to government policy (see for example, Pedersen, Kenny, Briskman, & Hoffman, 2008; Pedersen, Fozdar, & Kenny, 2012). But it is in the macro context that responsibilities lie for what we view as harmful asylum seeker policies. Ultimately, long-term changes in the macrosystem are needed in order for the rights of asylum seekers to be promoted and protected. With this in mind, we reflect on the impact of the letter at a number of levels.

Macrosystem Level Outcomes

At the macrosystem level, the academic open letter, as well as other letters and submissions sent to the Expert Panel,

appeared to have little effect in influencing policy in what we would view as an overall positive direction, as we outline below. The Expert Panel received over 500 written submissions addressing its terms of reference and consulted with parliamentarians, government and non-government experts in this area. The panel published its report on 13 August 2012 (see Houston, Aristotle, & L'Estrange, 2012). The Australian Government has endorsed in principle each of the 22 recommendations contained in the report, and has since taken steps to implement some of the recommendations. Interestingly, a number of the recommendations in the Expert Report were similar to the ones we proposed (these include proposals two, three and five as outlined in the open letter). The first recommendation in the report included first pursuing legislative amendments to allow for the transfer of asylum seekers who arrive to Australia by boat from 13 August 2012 to third countries for the processing of their claims for protection. This was followed by an announcement that Australia would double Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Programme numbers from 13,750 per year to 20,000 (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012). As at April 2013, there are more than 400 men detained on Nauru, and over 200 men, women and children detained on Manus Island, with little indication of when their protection claims will be finalised, nor where they will be allowed to resettle should they be recognised as refugees. Over 13,500 other asylum seekers who have arrived by boat to Australia since 13 August 2012 have remained in Australian detention centres or have been released into the Australian community with minimal social welfare supports and no right to work.

These changes have reinforced the false dichotomy between legitimate and illegitimate refugees, with the latter being punished for their mode of arrival. A number of key human rights organisations have condemned Australia's offshore processing policy,

including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Hall, 2012) and the Australian Human Rights Commission (2012). Despite bipartisan support for such deterrent-based policies, there have also been some outspoken politicians. In an impassioned address to the House of Representatives on November 28 2012, Judi Moylan Liberal MP (2012) stated that these changes reflect a "cunning suite of legislation and international agreements devised by government to effectively avoid Australia's obligations under the refugee convention" (p. 78). Thus, at a broader policy level, academic social action appeared to have little effect in implementing overall change. However, a number of politicians and media outlets did make reference to the letter, suggesting that it at least made some impression on actors within the macrosystem level. The most compelling political response was from The Greens who argued that academic opinion supported their opposition to offshore processing. Citing the open letter, Greens senator Sarah Hanson-Young stated that instead of offshore processing, the Federal Government should almost double the refugee intake to 25,000 a year and increase funding for asylum seekers to be processed in Malaysia and Indonesia (Bachelard & Taylor, 2012). In contrast, the Immigration Minister, Chris Bowen, is reported to have responded to the open letter by saying that the "idea that we can increase our refugee intake without any attempt at deterrence is simply unrealistic and naive" (Bachelard & Taylor, 2012).

The open letter was also noticed by a far-right political party, the Australian Protectionist Party (APP). Members in this party appear to be deeply disturbed by the open letter. For example, one person commented on their website that "someone needs to operate an online database with people like Professor Anne Pedersen on it, so when the times right (sic) we can round them up and charge them with sedition and/or treason" (APP, 2012). Another unnamed

person said “If Australia is to take in refugees, we should look at taking in the more culturally compatible people from the formerly prosperous South Africa, where Boer farmers are suffering a process of genocide” (APP, 2012). Clearly, the open letter made an impression on some of the people involved in this political party. On face-value, this negative reaction may be interpreted as a negative outcome. Alternatively, the strong responses from this far right-wing political party are another indicator that our concerns were heard.

In addition, there were a number of media reports that included discussion of the open letter, published in WA Today, the Campus Review, The Fremantle Herald, the Sydney Morning Herald, Crikey, The Age, The Green’s media release, and UNIS Australia University News and Information Service (see Trenwith, 2012, for example). Two of the authors also conducted radio interviews about the open letter. This media interest is another indicator that the open letter had made an impression on a broader audience than just the letter’s signatories, and helped to increase awareness within actors in the macrosystem level as well as the general public regarding policy options that would address the needs of asylum seekers.

Of course, the open letter, or social action in general, should not be understood in isolation; it is embedded in a history, social and political context, and within a movement where many are working to create political change. As we elaborate on below, collective actions like the open letter may not create overall political change in isolation, but they may make a contribution to broader efforts to do so. They are also important to make a public record for the fact that a collective of academics researching in refugee and asylum seeker area were in accord that they did not agree with the government’s policy proposals.

Organisational Level Outcomes

If one conceptualises social movements such as the asylum seeker rights movement as

a broad organisation, at an organisational level, we observed some positive flow-on effects from the open letter. Most particularly was the crystallisation of academic-advocate networks within the asylum seeker rights movement. One academic noted to the second author that “things could have been much worse if it wasn’t for the letter”. Although it is not articulated in what ways it could have been worse, in a sense it did not appear to matter. In this instance, taking action – even with little political impact – was regarded as efficacious in and of itself. Another group, ‘Academics and Advocates’, was set up in an attempt to better link academics who are researching in the area of asylum seeker and refugee rights with other advocates. The founder of this group noted “this is largely inspired by your efforts at getting so many academics to sign onto the submission to the Panel”. This second group is now working cohesively to challenge Government policy.

This feedback suggests to us that the open letter was important, at least in some small way, to building momentum within the academic community to engage with other actors, and to further engage in social actions expressing opposition to more restrictive policy developments. This observation supports insights from sociology (e.g., role theory, see Ebaugh, 1988), political sciences (e.g., public opinion theory, see Wilson, 1962), and social psychology (e.g., system justification theory, see Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; social representation theory, see Moscovici, 1988; see also Hartley, 2010) that all point to the role of consensus at the broader societal level in shaping individual and social behaviour. The common thread across this literature is that the degree of consensus within a given relevant context (whether it be ‘real’ or perceived) has implications for whether or not someone is likely to engage in group-based actions and be motivated to continue to take action. Thus, actions such as the open letter, where there is a collective voice of a

segment of a social movement expressing concerns, can help to build consensus within the academic realm and encourage an experience of motivation for continued engagement. Indeed, Flood et al. (2013) discuss the importance of collegial support when engaging in activist work as academics, particularly the support offered by colleagues who are involved in the same kind of work. Thus, collective actions such as signing a letter may increase feelings of solidarity and perceptions of consensus, and cannot be underestimated as a form of social action.

Second, from a social movement point of view, social action cannot be viewed as a task where there is a defined start, duration and finish; it is a process. Action around particular issues only ends when the goals have been achieved, when a change at the macrosystem level has been achieved, and even then there is a role for advocates and activists, including academics, to monitor the situation and to reinstate activities should the situation deteriorate. Many barriers will be placed before those striving to create social change because there are others who strive to maintain the status quo, and social change can be very slow. One need only consider the release from house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi and the gains the social movement that mobilised around calls for democracy in Burma have recently made to see the importance of measured endurance in the activism process. While there remain significant human rights concerns within Burma, the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners, and the unbanning of the National League for Democracy, seemed distant developments until the last few years. Similarly in the Australian context, the Australian Psychological Society lobbied the Federal Government and the Australian Medical Association for decades to have Psychology recognised under the Medicare scheme. It took about 30 years, but their efforts were rewarded in October 2006 when psychologists nationwide could finally offer their clients

Medicare rebates. Thus, the advocates and activists need to keep working towards social change even when the situation seems hopeless; it may not stay this way.

Finally, while the open letter was met with positivity by other academics involved in the social movement and by academia broadly, academics engaged in activist work can face a number of challenges from within academia, including attacks, threats to security and advancement, output expectations, and disciplinary and epistemological pressures (see Flood et al., 2013). In line with community psychology principles (Prilleltensky, 2001), we reject the notion that research can and should be inherently objective, a position in clear contrast to mainstream psychology. Given this, future research might explore how advocates of more positivist empirical psychology approaches view social actions like the open letter and whether type of action/research is perceived as valuable and/or useful. A consideration of whether objective research is possible at all in this area would also be a useful issue to engage with further.

Microsystem Level Outcomes

Responses to the letter at the microsystem level, such as from community members were mixed. Author two received a number of personal emails and comments, some of which were positive. However, what was noteworthy were members of the public criticising the role of academics in political debates. One individual wrote as a commentary on the open letter:

It is my view that if Anne Pedersen and her fellow signatories feel strongly enough that the government is violating human rights that they put their money where there (sic) mouth is and utilise the courts to mount a legal challenge. Failing that perhaps the ballot box is calling. In fact a political career may be a

more appropriate location for Anne Pedersen to espouse political views and one in which she would not rely on the thinly veiled guise of academia to attain an audience.

Thus this member of the general public considers that the academic voice does not belong in political debate – reflecting the positivist assumption that academic research and political action should remain separate.

A very important aspect to consider, however, is the impact of the open letter on asylum seekers themselves. Some asylum seekers and refugees known to the authors were aware of the open letter, as well as other forms of social action we have participated in. Indeed, some refugees put newspaper reports on their Facebook page in solidarity with the academics. Our actions emerged from the advocacy role we have taken on behalf of many individual asylum seekers over the past 12 years. Comments from asylum seekers over this time indicate the important role that such advocacy plays in communicating that at least some Australians consider many of the asylum seeker policies of Australia to be inhumane. As Zion et al. (2012) argue, this advocacy “reassures such persons they have not been abandoned” (p. 73). Public actions such as the open letter further reinforce to asylum seekers that they have allies in their struggle for asylum.

It is clear that asylum seekers have extremely limited opportunities to speak for themselves, to tell the public their stories and to make known the inhumane conditions in detention and bearing witness can offer an avenue to elevate the concerns of asylum seekers. Through the process of bearing witness there are also important ways in which researchers/advocates can facilitate asylum seekers to utilise their expertise within the severe constraints of the system. For example, it is essential to ask asylum seekers whether and in what ways they might like their stories shared. It is also important to link asylum seekers with ways in which they themselves

can advocate for themselves while in detention (e.g., discuss their situation with their case manager, write a letter to the Ombudsman).

Final Reflection: ‘The situation is hopeless; we must take the next step’

At the macro level, it might be easy to conclude that the overall outcome of the expert panel submission process, and the academic open letter, was a failure. The policies and legislations implemented since the expert panel report report’s release undermine a number of Australia’s human rights obligations and further punish asylum seekers by their mode of arrival. Yet, we saw at the different ecological levels the importance of the open letter and the impact of this action – such as a crystallisation of both support and opposition for the cause, and for elevating asylum seekers’ voices in the political arena. In addition, the social actions undertaken by academics can be considered as part of the larger social movement that has mobilised in Australia around the rights of asylum seekers and refugees. Academics and others in this movement have consistently applied pressure on the government to review and improve refugee policy and to provide better treatment to asylum seekers and refugees. Actors in the movement have sought to ensure that asylum seekers and refugees have been kept in the public spotlight and the conscience of the Australian population has been repeatedly nudged to consider the justice and treatment afforded asylum seekers and refugees in Australia. Finally, it is interesting to reflect on the tension between community psychology’s rejection of the ‘expert model’ of knowledge, and the academic letter, which could be argued to function within an ‘expert’ model by the very act of inviting only academics who research in the asylum seeker and refugee field. However, as we have argued in this paper, bearing witness to the effect of government policy for asylum

seekers is still the domain of the relatively few and academic involvement in elevating the experiences of asylum seekers is a way of providing increased transparency within the immigration system. This is particularly so given the extremely limited monitoring mechanisms that are in place in Australia to provide oversight of the immigration detention system, which is now even more of a concern with detention centres once again on Nauru and Manus Island, outside of Australia's jurisdiction. The extreme difficulties in shifting asylum seeker policy, coupled with the limited opportunities asylum seekers have to speak out for themselves, makes the ethical imperative for academics to bear witness even more salient. Alongside all of those working tirelessly for the rights of asylum seekers in Australia, it is essential for academics in the field to continue to 'take the next step' to help ensure the voices of asylum seekers are elevated in public and political debate, despite any feelings that the situation is hopeless.³

Note

¹ The term "refugee" is used here to refer to individuals whose refugee status has been recognised in Australia. The term "asylum seeker" is used to refer to individuals whose refugee status is still being determined.

² In the wake of the Coalition Government's election in September, 2013, further policies aiming to deter the arrival of asylum seekers to Australia by boat have been announced. Some of these will increase the number of asylum seekers who will experience long-term detention. In particular, the capacities of the sites of detention on Nauru and Manus Island are to be expanded to accommodate a further 3,230 asylum seekers who arrive to Australia by boat in addition to the 1,566 asylum seekers detained on the islands as at the end of September 2013 (Maley & Wilson, 2013). For asylum seekers who have already been released into community-based arrangements in Australia, there continues to be uncertainty

over how and when their protection claim will be processed and the prospect of being granted a TPV should their claim be accepted. Given the large number of claims that will now need to be assessed, it is very likely that many of these asylum seekers will remain on bridging visas without the right to work for months, if not several years, and will have the additional stress of the prospects of being given a temporary visa.

³ In view of the policies implemented since the Coalition Government's election in September 2013 now more than ever, academics, advocates and activists need "to take the next step".

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Appendix

We are refugee advocates and academics working in the field of asylum seekers. We are becoming increasingly alarmed about the politics which are playing out about asylum seekers. As you may know, there is an Expert Panel led by Angus Houston that the government has tasked with providing a report about the best way forward in dealing with asylum seeker issues; public submissions are being called for. There are also a number of concerned MPs who are meeting over the winter parliamentary recess to discuss this issue.

We would like to contribute to these deliberations and, to this end, we have put together an open letter outlining our concerns about issues such as turning back the boats, Nauru, the Malaysian Solution and temporary protection visas. We have also included recommendations that are focused on the needs of asylum seekers. As well as giving to the letter to the Expert Panel, we will also send it to some politicians.

If you agree with the content of the letter, and would like to put your name to it as an academic working in this field, please do so. You can do this by going to the web link: <http://scored.murdoch.edu.au:8008/survey/TakeSurvey.aspx?SurveyID=8232982>

Could you please note your professional title, name and affiliation? For example, "Associate Professor Anne Pedersen, Murdoch University".

We don't have much time so we will shut down this web site at 5pm, Perth time, on Thursday, 12th July.

We would also be very grateful if you could forward the link to any other academics working in the asylum-seeker field who may be interested.

Thanks very much, Anne Pedersen and Caroline Fleay