

# 'Oh you don't want asylum seekers, oh you're just racist': A discursive analysis of discussions about whether it's racist to oppose asylum seeking

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**“Oh you don’t want asylum seekers, oh you’re just racist”:  
A discursive analysis of discussions about whether it’s racist to  
oppose asylum seeking**

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**Abstract:**

In this paper we explore how speakers discuss whether or not it is racist to oppose asylum seekers. A discourse analysis is conducted on the parts of a corpus of data collected from focus groups with undergraduate students talking about asylum seeking in which they were asked if it is racist to oppose asylum. It is shown that speakers use the word 'just' as part of a contrast structure which is used to present a topic as self evidently unreasonable. While some participants orient to the taboo against prejudice it is shown that there is also an orientation to the idea that accusations of racism are unreasonable and that opposition to asylum is usually based on practical and economic reasons rather than racism. These findings are discussed in light of the growing literature surrounding the changing nature of race talk and new taboos on accusations of racism.

**Key Words:**

Discursive psychology, asylum seeking, prejudice, construction of racism, taboo on prejudice

**Introduction:**

This paper reports an analysis of talk about asylum seeking in the UK with regard to the ongoing debate about whether or not it is racist to oppose asylum seeking. Existing literature shows that the treatment of asylum seekers (both within the UK and elsewhere) continues to be harsh (e.g. Bloch and Schuster, 2005, Every and Augoustinos, 2007, Hynes and Sales, 2009, Leudar et al, 2008, Randall, 2003) which has led many to conclude that this treatment constitutes prejudice (e.g. Every and Augoustinos, 2007, Goodman and Speer, 2007, Hubbard, 2005, Lynn and Lea, 2005).

*Discursive psychology of prejudice, prejudice denial and defining racism:*

Discursive psychologists (Edwards and Potter, 1992) have criticised traditional cognitive approaches to prejudice (see Every and Augoustinos, 2007). One reason for this is that these approaches cannot account for the variation within people's talk about race and the finding that people attempt to deny that they are saying prejudicial things while stating, what can be considered, prejudicial arguments.

This has been termed the 'norm against prejudice' (Billig, 1988: 95) which is considered to be a culturally held value (Billig et al, 1988) that people attempt to maintain by denying that they are prejudiced when they may be viewed as such. Discursive psychologists have shown that speakers attempt to deny that they are prejudiced through the use of disclaimers (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975) such as 'I'm not prejudiced, but...' (Billig et al, 1988: 112).

The use of disclaimers and the associated orientation to the norm against prejudice is now an established and generalisable (Goodman, 2008a) finding within discursive psychology (see Augoustinos and Every, 2007 for a review). Nevertheless, there is growing evidence to suggest that this 'norm against prejudice' is itself being criticised and is increasingly becoming constructed as problematic to the extent that it has been suggested that there may now be a taboo against making accusations of racism (Goodman, in press). This can be seen within the immigration debate (which is often conflated with asylum, see Goodman and Speer, 2007) where there have been explicit assertions that opposing immigration is not racist (as highlighted by the Conservative party's 2005 election campaign poster).

van Dijk (1993) suggested that accusing someone of being racist can be problematic as racism is viewed by speakers as too extreme for what he calls 'modern or moderate racism' (1993: 180). He argued that the term 'racism' is reserved for only the most serious cases of racism (or for those perpetrated abroad) which has led to the use of different terms to describe this, supposedly less serious, prejudice. Support for this can be seen in this current research project where a participant says of opposition to asylum: "it's possibly approaching xenophobia, but it's not racist" (FG 2, lines 10-14).

More recently Goodman (in press) has shown in an analysis of media talk about asylum (and immigration) that opponents of asylum criticise and challenge the use of accusations of racism for being a way of stifling a legitimate debate. van Dijk (1992) has also shown that speakers from

majority groups present the taboo on prejudice as itself discriminatory to them. Goodman (in press) shows that supporters of asylum, in turn, show an orientation to this argument by going to some lengths to rhetorically distance themselves from the subject position of being someone who makes accusations of racism and/or someone who attempts to censor debate. Capdevila and Callaghan (2008) argue, in their analysis of Michael Howard's<sup>i</sup> immigration policy speech that not only do opponents of asylum deny that this opposition is racist, but offer other, purportedly more reasonable rationale for opposing it (in Howard's case it is 'common sense').

This strategy is evidence of what Every and Augoustinos describe as 'speakers attempt[ing] to maintain a "rational" subject position by strategically working up their views as reasonable ... in order to position themselves as decent, moral, reasonable citizens' (2007: 412, see also Condor et al., 2006, Rapley, 2001, van Dijk 1992, 1993). Capdevila and Callaghan (2008) claim that this rhetorical removal and separation of the racial element (and opposition) to migration (what Augoustinos and Every describe as 'discursive deracialisation' (2007: 133)) leaves those who accuse opponents of migration of racism open to accusations of 'playing the race card' (Lewis, 2004), as was the case in Goodman's (in press) analysis of supporters of asylum.

Every and Augoustinos claim that

what does and does not count as racist is a particularly salient and urgent issue for anti-racism and for refugee ... however, research on representations of racism in social psychology, politics, the media and everyday talk demonstrates that there is no single, consensual definition of racism. Rather, this ... highlights that there are multiple ways of defining racism and prejudice (2007: 414).

It is for this reason that discursive psychologists have begun to answer Figgou and Condor's (2006) challenge to focus on how members of the public construct the notion of racism themselves. In so doing Every and Augoustinos (2007) identified four contentious constructions of asylum seekers in

Australia that are considered racist by groups supporting asylum seekers yet have also been presented as not racist by opponents of asylum. These are: (1) The use of categorical generalizations about asylum seekers; (2) The unequal treatment of asylum seekers compared with other, similar, groups; (3) Talk-about-national-sovereignty; and (4) Culture-as-natural-difference talk (2007: 417). To date, no research has explicitly addressed how members of the British public talk about the racist, or not racist, nature of opposing asylum seeking despite the public debate about this. It is this question of whether or not opposition to asylum is racist that is addressed in the current research.

**Procedure:**

The data in this analysis is drawn from a corpus of data collected for an ongoing research project about how students talk about asylum. While most discursive analyses of asylum have focused on media or parliamentary data (e.g. Every and Augoustinos, 2007, Goodman 2007, 2008b, Lynn and Lea, 2003), there are few examples of data collected with members of the public (with notable exceptions of Leudar et al., 2008 and Verkuyten, 2005). The data has been gathered from five focus groups conducted with sixteen psychology undergraduate students at Coventry University collected between October 2008 and April 2009. Participants responded to notices about the research which was conducted as part of the University's research participation scheme. As participation was voluntary it is possible that only people with certain outlooks were attracted to take part and undergraduate students may represent a particular demographic; nevertheless these drawbacks are unavoidable in voluntary research and a range of opinions were expressed throughout the group. All but one of the participants was female, which reflects the makeup of the course. The focus groups were led by the first author and addressed a number of issues about asylum seeking. Of relevance for this research project are the sections of the focus groups where the interviewer explicitly asked 'is it racist to oppose asylum seeking?'

This participant generated data will be considered to be 'contrived' by some (e.g. Potter, 1997).

However, others (e.g. Speer, 2002) argue that data cannot be easily separated into 'natural' and

'contrived', particularly as talk is always simultaneously both 'natural' as speakers produce their own accounts, and 'contrived' as speakers are always attending to a particular social situation (here a focus groups) and the constraints this produces. Focus groups have been shown to be beneficial for producing interaction *between* research participants (Kitzinger, 1994, Puchta and Potter, 2004) which means that they will produce the type of interactions suitable for a detailed discursive analysis. The data were transcribed according to Jeffersonian conventions (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984: ix-xvi). Extracts were chosen as exemplars of the findings described in the analysis.

This analysis builds upon existing (broadly critical) discursive psychological (e.g. Wetherell and Edley, 1999) studies that have looked at strategies that are used to argue for the harsh treatment of asylum seekers (Every and Augoustinos, 2007, Goodman 2007, 2008b, in press, Goodman and Speer, 2007, Leudar et al., 2008, Lynn and Lea, 2003, Verkuyten, 2005). This discursive psychological (e.g. Edwards and Potter, 1992, Wetherell and Potter, 1992) approach focuses on the action orientation of talk (Edwards and Potter, 1992, Billig and MacMillan, 2005: 462), that is, what is accomplished in the interaction by what is said, rather than focusing on what this tells us about the speakers internal cognitions. To conduct the analysis the data were read thoroughly. While a number of strategies were identified, in this analysis the authors focused on the many sections of talk where speakers used the word 'just' in their accounts as this was a surprisingly common feature of the talk.

### **Analysis:**

In the analysis we show, first, that the word 'just' is used structurally to argue both for and against the idea that it is racist to oppose asylum seeking. We then go on to show how this structural use of 'just' is used to both align with the taboo against prejudice and with the more recently noted criticisms of this taboo. The analysis concludes by highlighting the dilemmatic nature of this debate.

### **1. 'Just' is used in the second part of a contrast structure to support an argument**

The inclusion of the word 'just' in the talk of participants who are restating a position is a feature of the focus groups ('but it's not racist, it's *just* not racist' (P2, FG2), 'you're being, you're *just* being racist' (P1, FG4), 'it gets, I think it *just* gets taken badly' P2, FG4) and 'if you drop that statement it's sort of like, you've *just* dropped a bomb' (P1, FG4)). This particular use of 'just' (unlike other uses of the word) has a structural position; it is inserted into repetitions of statements following a restart. This self repair (Levinson, 1983) functions not only to add emphasis to the original point but also to appeal to common knowledge to show that not only is the point self evident, but that it is obviously so, as can be seen in the first extract.

#### Extract 1. FG1

1. P2: ... now even doctors and nurses are complaining >that look< we haven't got
2. enough (.) to do (.) for them↑ .hh you have t- I ↑think you have to look at it
3. on a larger sc↓ale: rather than just saying that would people oppo-
4. >would it be racist< to oppose them. .hh if you take in to account on a
5. larger scale and you include everything like economy (.) business like .hh
6. healthcare everything hh then I'd say no:: it wasn't racist (.) to oppose
7. ↑them (1.0) [um] (1.0) if it's >just a matter of sur<vi:ving (.) like if you look

Here we see two uses of 'just'. The first (3) is used to refer to an accusation of racism. In this way 'just' is used so as to present these accusations as oversimplifications and ultimately incorrect. Such accusations are constructed as basic, and wrong, because they are contrasted with looking at the larger picture, which is brought about through the use of a list (economy, business, healthcare, everything). The footing (Goffman, 1981) used by P2 here is interesting, as she is first speaking on behalf of doctors and nurses (constructed through 'even' as an extreme voice to be opposing asylum) but then shifts back to I. The use of 'I think' suggests a fairly strong alignment with this point of view. The use of 'just' is used to suggest that there is no reasonable

or rational account for what follows: in this case making baseless accusations of racism in the midst of genuine scarcity of resources.

The second use of 'just' (7) is used to contrast (Atkinson, 1984) the act of resorting to (unfair) accusations of racism with the harsh reality faced by the people being accused of this. Instead of 'just' being racist, these people are 'just' trying to survive (this is reminiscent of the strategy of 'differentiating the self' identified by Lynn and Lea (2003). By suggesting that British people are locked in a battle to survive, the plight of asylum seekers is downplayed so that both British people and asylum seekers are presented as having an equally difficult attempt at surviving; this therefore removes the special condition of asylum seekers as people fleeing persecution. This strategy calls on notions of equality (in the form of equal rights of survival) to account for opposition to the asylum system, which is designed precisely to balance this equality of opportunity of survival. Similar strategies can be seen in use in the talk of people opposing anti affirmative action schemes (e.g. Wetherell and Potter 1992, Augoustinos et al., 2005). This second use of 'just' therefore has a different meaning to the first: here it refers to a simple, matter of fact, common knowledge occurrence. In the following extract we can see again how 'just' is used to bring about a contrast.

Extract 2: FG3:

1. P3: dunno I suppo:se (0.3) may:be it depends on why you oppose it (.)
2. so much
3. SG: okay
4. P3: if it's just like (1.8) racism's like 'cause people (1.0) how people look isn't
5. it?
6. SG: ri[ght]
7. P3?: [>(xx) xx xx xx (real)? ((laughing))

8. SG: okay
9. P3: erm (0.8) if it was just because of that then that (1.0) you could
10. understand that (.) being racist but (1.5) IF THey were a mu::rderer you
11. couldn't say .hh (.) "oh it's racist" (0.3) [(you)]'d be like "no it's 'cause
12. SG: [right]
13. P3: you're crazy"

In this extract P3 is building a case that opposition to asylum is not, at least always, racist. She does this by first building a case of what does count as racism. This is brought about through the rhetorical question (4) which is used to construct racism as something to do with only how people look. The long pause before this rhetorical question and reference to 'looks' rather than colour, for example, suggests that this is a way of avoiding explicitly mentioning race. P3 also avoids mentioning colour and race again by referring to 'that' in place of any other form of racism. After the rhetorical question the interviewer utters a continuer, which is met with an inaudible joke by P3 who then goes on to offer an extreme scenario to make her point that there are many – non racist – reasons to oppose asylum seekers.

It is at this point that P3 uses 'just' to describe racism. Here 'just' racism is contrasted with an extreme crime. This again suggests that 'just racism' (in this case 'just *that*') is a way of suggesting that racism is a basic and groundless accusation. This account of racism towards asylum seekers constructs two possible reasons for opposing asylum: (1) that people may simply (just) be racist and (2) that there are a number of possible non-racist reasons for opposing asylum. This is a hedging answer that allows P3 to avoid making a firm alignment with the position that it is, or is not, racist to oppose asylum. 'Just' is again used to suggest that racism is a basic, yet undesirable thing, and it is this construction of racism as an over simplification that is used to suggest that opposition to asylum is therefore not racist. In P3's contrast it is noteworthy that 'just' is used in the first part (that opposition is racist) which is

worked up as inaccurate. 'Just' is not used in the second part of this two part contrast structure, the part that is worked up as accurate. This suggests that the utterance of 'just' here is used to highlight the problematic and groundless nature of the position that opposition to asylum is racist, in comparison with the reasonable position that this opposition is due to other factors.

## **2. 'Just' is used to align with the taboo against prejudice and to argue that it is racist to oppose asylum**

A common feature of the use of 'just' is the way that it is used to align with, or criticise, the taboo against prejudice. In this extract P3 uses 'just' to align with the taboo against prejudice to criticise opposition to asylum seeking

Extract 3: FG2:

1. P3: ye::a:h I think u::m (1.4) >I think if I was suppose< t::o (.) >if I was sort
2. of evaluate kind of what I've hea::rd and what people think
3. SG: mmm
4. P3: I think there's just a general kind of:: (1.5) there seems to be a general
5. sort of feeling of (.) people just coming into the country
6. SG: ri::ght
7. P3: =that- weren't already (.) born in the count- (.) in england
8. SG: hmm
9. P3: and I'm not su:::r:e (1.0) whether it would matter (.) whether they were
10. asylum seekers (.) or (.) or whether they (0.6) were people who were here
11. because of educa:tional reasons
12. SG: right
13. P3: or work reason:s:
14. SG: =so you think people just don't want (.) other people here

15. P3: I:: thin- (0.3) I think so: yeah(h)
16. SG: =>so you almost think that it< (0.5) it is racist (1.0) °to oppose it°
17. P3: ↑u::m hh (1.0) I don't know >I think if I was to answer that question<
18. i ↓don't think it i:s: because [I think] you're just judging it by
19. SG: [°right°]
20. P3: what it (.) is -you're not looking at somebody's colour hh
21. SG: =right
22. P3: =necessarily it's (0.8) what ap- asylum (.) seeking actually is is to
23. let (.) .hh people into the cou:ntr:y

In FG3 P3 is selected to talk and after initially resisting replying she goes on to argue that opposition to asylum may be racist. P3 builds up her case by speaking on behalf of unspecified other people. In doing so she displays the delicacy associated with giving a dispreferred response (Pomerantz, 1984). This can be seen by the display of relatively long pauses. After the interviewer's continuer she goes on to give her account of the opposition to asylum. She does this with the use of 'I think' which is used when strong, and potentially contentious, opinions are displayed. What P3 describes is an underlying hostility towards foreigners (as is suggested by many politicians, see Goodman, 2007). It is at this point that 'just' is used: this helps to construct this hostility as both commonplace and basic. Therefore, once more, hostility towards outsiders is presented as simplistic and ordinary. The further long pause again suggests that delicacy is required in making this statement, displaying an orientation to the problematic nature of talking about prejudice, and in particular of making accusations of prejudice (see Goodman, in press).

P3's second use of 'just' (5) refers to the incoming of non-English people into the UK. This time the use of 'just' refers to a significant movement of people around the world, so it seems that the word is not referring to the act of migration, so much as the simplistic way in which

opponents of immigration (and asylum) view it. In P3's account the general public are described as having a basic (and unreasonable) opposition to immigration. P3, nevertheless, still avoids aligning with the position that this opposition is racist (as suggested in SG's reformulation). Once more we see a participant managing the ideological dilemma (Billig et al., 1988) caused by stating that this opposition is prejudicial while also orienting to the problems associated with saying that opposition to asylum is racist (Goodman, in press) by using 'just' to highlight the simplicity of this opposition.

Next the interviewer (SG) restates 'just' in his reformulation of the original account. This suggests that the use of the word is significant in the way in which this topic is spoken about. In this reformation it is the restating of 'just' that allows the interviewer to make the contentious claim that P3 *is* claiming that opposition to asylum is racist. P3 avoids making this claim by once more using 'just'. P3 first manages this ideological dilemma by claiming to have a lack of knowledge (this says nothing about P3's actual knowledge but is a discursive strategy that allows her to avoid making a definitive decision, and therefore manage the ideological dilemma). P3's next use of just (18) is used to describe the thought process that opponents of asylum use to come to their (hostile) opinions. The account that follows is a little unclear, but again the 'just' refers to something simplistic (and negative) that these opponents are doing. On line 20 P3 pauses her account and then initiates a self-repair to begin talking about what these opponents are not doing: which is judging asylum seekers by their skin colour. This tells us something about what racism means to this participant: in this case racism refers to prejudice based on skin colour. This can be seen as a form of 'old racism' (see van Dijk, 1993) which is overt racism by white people towards non-white people. The opposition to asylum here is therefore built up as something different to this and therefore not racist at all. Instead, these 'people' are constructed as opposing outsiders ('just') because they are outsiders rather than because they are of a different race.

### 3. 'Just' is used to align with the criticisms of the taboo against prejudice and to argue that it is not racist to oppose asylum

More common than using 'just' to align with the taboo against prejudice, we can see 'just' being used to argue the opposite: that making accusations of racism is unfair. In this way participants are aligning with what has previously been described as a 'taboo against accusations of racism' (Goodman, in press). We can see examples of this in the following extracts.

Extract 4: FG4:

1. SG: so if somebody (0.3) comes out with an argument that's< a- opposing
2. asylum seeking it doesn't necessarily mean that they're being ra↑ci:st
3. P2? hmm
4. P1: th[at's] how they'll be percei:ved though i:- it's usually taken (.) oh you
5. SG: [but]
6. P1: don't want asylum seekers oh you're just racist
7. SG: right
8. P1: that's how it's: sort of (.) >that's why people don't want to comment< on it
9. 'cause it's sort of li:ke (0.3) you'r:r:e looked at in a negative way like (.) you
10. know you're being you're just being racist basically .hh
11. SG: right
12. P1: but I don't think that's fai:r (.) beca:use (1.0) is- i don't think it's all down to
13. that [really (0.5) context]

In this extract, 'just' is used twice by P1 to describe a baseless accusation of racism that is made against opponents of asylum. This use of 'just' suggests that it is *accusations* of racism that are basic and unreasonable. (This is in contrast with the previous extract (3) in which it is racism that is presented as basic and unreasonable.) This presents accusations of racism, rather than

racism itself, as problematic and may suggest an orientation to the 'taboo on accusations of racism' referred to by Goodman (in press) in which it was shown how supporters of asylum were orienting to the problematic nature of making accusations of racism within the asylum debate. It is of interest that P1 makes this (relatively contentious) claim while speaking on behalf of other people (the 'oh' (4 and 6) signals reported speech, see Myers, 1999). This is a useful footing (Goffman, 1981) as speaking on behalf of other people both adds credibility to what is being said by calling on the support of others while also allowing space for the speaker to distance her/himself from the statement.

Goodman (in press) has shown that opponents of asylum portray accusations of racism as a strategy for shutting down and censoring debate. This interpretative repertoire is drawn upon by P1 who uses these accusations of racism to account for closing down debate (8). Once more this ('unfair') accusation of racism is preceded by 'just' to suggest that this is a basic and baseless thing to do, however in this case it is used to argue against accusations of racism being made precisely because they are basic and unwarranted. This can be seen by P1's following comment in which she describes this as unfair and goes on to offer alternative and non-racist reasons as to why people may oppose asylum. It is interesting to note that many participants have offered alternative non-racist reasons for opposing asylum, however P1 here is unusual in being so critical in the use of these accusations.

In keeping with the notion that accusations of racism are a form of censorship, we now see a participant drawing upon this repertoire by suggesting that it is particularly difficult for white people to voice their opposition to asylum.

Extract 5: FG4:

1. P1: [o:::h ] okay then .hh (0.3)
2. I think it i::s a lot (.) harder fo::r >white pe< (.) to (.) to put their

3. view across EVen if it's: (0.7) a fairly (.) r↑easonable view and it's
4. plausible >and it n-< there's nothing (.) r:acial about it
5. SG : right
6. P1: I think it's a lot harder for them to just come out and say (0.9) whatever
7. reason

P1 uses a three part list (Jefferson, 1990) to describe purportedly fair grounds for opposing asylum seeking: (1) it is fairly reasonable (2) it's plausible and (3) it's not racial. This three part list is used to show that despite these legitimate reasons for opposing asylum, it is difficult to freely express yourself if you are white (notice P1's footing as she speaks about 'their' (2) and 'them' (6) rather than 'us'). Once again the taboo on prejudice (Billig et al., 1988) is criticised as a way of preventing free speech (Goodman, in press). Here the 'just' (6) is used to describe the ease with which people would normally (and perhaps, should) be able to say something and it is precisely because people can't 'just' do this that this lack of free speech caused by the taboo against prejudice is worked up as problematic in this account. P1 nevertheless orients to the delicacy required in making anti asylum arguments; this can be seen in the long pause (6) and the use of the vague term 'whatever reason' which allows her to avoid stating her own reason as to why asylum should be opposed.

#### **4. 'Just' is used in the dilemma over the racist nature of opposing asylum**

In this final extract we see that the relationship between the two uses of 'just' ((1) aligning with the taboo on prejudice and (2) the notion that it is not racist to oppose asylum), which highlights the ongoing ideological dilemma between these two positions.

Extract 6: FG5:

1. P4: I ↑think a lot of people: .hh erm are against asylum because of (0.2)
2. based on race: (.) actually

3. SG: you do::?
4. P4: yeah
5. SG: oka:y
6. P4: just (.) because (0.3) of ignorance
7. and (0.3) [they don't (.)] understand
8. P1?: [ >I think it's a< ( ) ]
9. P1: =well like
10. you [just said about the bomber you said about the (.) n bomber] it's
11. P2: [ >I think some of its selfishness< ]
12. P1: about (.) you said about the bomber [you said] that was because
13. SG: [yeah ]
14. P1: it's terroris[m ] related ta:: asylum seeking (.) that's (0.8) >that
15. ?: [mhmm:]
16. P1: could be a< racist (.)
17. sta°tement° [(you know what I mean?)]
18. P2: [ >I think some of ] it's [just<] sel[fishness]
19. SG: [mhmm]
20. P1: [not from] you
21. obviously but [( [just by saying that)]
22. Various: [((laughter))]
23. P2: [I think s:: - >] I think some of< it (.) is just
24. (0.2) selfishness like (1.0) you know people see it as °oh
25. they come to our country° [they take all ou:r jobs an- yeah ]
26. P1: [they take our:: money (.) take our jobs]
27. SG: =right

28. P2: =so it's not >necessarily< (0.4) yea: I think there is times when it's
29. race (.) definitely (.) >but then I think a lot of the time< it's just like (0.5)
30. bit selfishness
31. SG: =[right oka:y]

This extended extract from FG 5 contains six uses of 'just'. Unlike other focus groups where the participants were in broad agreement that opposing asylum was not racist, there is more of a dilemma displayed in the participants' talk here. The extract begins with P4 aligning with the position that it is racist to oppose asylum seeking. Nevertheless this alignment displays some delicacy, particularly around the brief pause and restart (1-2) where P4 shifts from being about to give a direct account of opposition to asylum to saying 'based on race' (2) (the lack of explicitly saying 'racism' is noteworthy as this seems to be the obvious choice following from 'because of' (1) before the self repair). This suggests that P4 is alert to the possible difficulties associated with making a direct accusation of racism (Goodman, in press). The use of 'actually' (2) also suggests that what has gone before this is deemed to be contentious, as such 'honesty phrases' have been shown by Edwards and Fasulo (2006) to be a feature of stating a dispreferred response (Pomerantz, 1984) over a controversial topic. The controversial nature of this comment can further be seen in the interviewer's following question which seeks clarification of this point. This question is met with an agreement from the speaker, and after a further continuer from the interviewer, P4 goes on to give her explanation for this racial opposition.

This explanation takes the form of accounting for racism as a lack of knowledge (this lack of knowledge is a common explanation for both racism and opposition to asylum within this data corpus). It is at this point that the first 'just' (6) is uttered. Here, as with some of the earlier extracts, 'just' is used to construct racism as a simplistic argument that is resorted to by people who should know better: that is, people are racist because of their lack of knowledge. Directly

after this comment Participants 1 and 2 begin speaking in overlap and P4 does not speak again in this extract.

From this point P1 and P2 talk over each other making separate points. P1 makes a comment about what constitutes racism (and refers to a previous question which highlighted a link between asylum seekers and terrorism). The utterance that is of interest for this analysis comes at line 21 where P1 says that 'just' suggesting a link between these two things (terrorism and asylum) can be enough to signal racism. This is a different use of 'just' compared to some seen earlier in the analysis: this occasion is used to highlight how easy it can be to be racist. If someone can be racist 'just' by asking a question it is implied that racism is in some ways always present and all too easy to identify. This goes some way to normalising racism. P1 does not pursue this point, however, as she eventually turns her attention to P2's comments which had been in overlap with her own.

While P1 works up an account of what may constitute racism, P2 offers an alternative account of prejudice based on the suggestion of ignorance which P4 had begun with. P2 begins by accounting for opposition to asylum because of selfishness. The use of 'some' (11) allows P2 to build this account based on selfishness, while also allowing room for other possible causes of this opposition. P2 continues in overlap and restates this position (18), however this time 'just' is added to the statement.

Once more, 'just' is used to suggest that the reason for opposing asylum (here selfishness) is something basic and unjust. P2 attempts to have this point recognised again later (23) and this time P1 has finished her account and now joins in with P2. At this point P1 and P2 are building this account together and P1 adds to the list P2 is building (26). This selfishness is portrayed as being based on economic interests (jobs and money) that have been offered before as grounds for opposition to asylum. In some cases (such as extract 1) this economic opposition is

constructed as reasonable, however this is not the case here – as the use of ‘just’ (23) suggests. It is perhaps because P2 has now had some kind of agreement from P1 that P2 now summarises her point. This is a measured account that includes a concession (highlighted by ‘definitely’ 29) that opposition to asylum may be racist but that this is more often due to the selfishness which she had described above. Again ‘just’ (29) is used in the statement that favours the selfish explanation for opposition over racism. It is noteworthy that the ‘just’ is used in the second part of the contrast, the part that is being used to offer the ‘correct’ suggestion and not the first. P2 could have easily said ‘there are times when it is just racism’, but this is not the case as ‘just’ is used here, as elsewhere in these extracts, to provide the function of giving weight to the argument that is being made.

### **Conclusions:**

This analysis has focused on the use of the word ‘just’ in responses to the question ‘is it racist to oppose asylum seeking?’ We have shown that utterances of this word fit into a two-part structure where the use of ‘just’ is commonly found in the restating of a position. The analysis shows that when used this way, ‘just’ suggests that the concept being described is unreasonable and baseless. In some cases this structural use of ‘just’ is employed to align with the cultural norm of the taboo against prejudice (Billig, 1988) to highlight that it is prejudice that is self evidently problematic. However, in more cases this same structural device was used to support the idea that it is the taboo against prejudice which is the problem because it prevents free speech and glosses over purportedly reasonable – non racist – opposition to asylum.

This supports previous findings by Goodman (in press) in which it was suggested that it is increasingly problematic for supporters of asylum to use accusations of racism in justifying their opposition to anti-asylum measures. Of particular interest is the suggestion that it is difficult for white people to oppose asylum seeking without being (unreasonably) accused of racism. Not only does this support the idea of the taboo on prejudice representing a form of victimisation aimed at

majority groups (e.g. van Dijk, 1992 ) but it helps to explain why the strategy of invoking minority group status in the opposing of asylum has been identified (e.g. Goodman, in press). Again the taboo on prejudice is represented as a form of censorship and a way of shutting down reasonable debate (Goodman, in press).

It is noteworthy that while there was broad agreement amongst the participants that opposition to asylum is not racist this assertion did not necessarily coincide with support for anti-asylum measures. This suggests that, in this case at least, the notion that it is not racist to oppose asylum is not only used by those opposing asylum; instead it would seem that it has become common knowledge (Edwards and Potter, 1992) that opposition to asylum is grounded in something other than racism, amongst supporters and opponents of asylum alike. Rather than being racist, opposition to asylum is generally seen as based on practical and financial reasons. This adds evidence for what Augoustinos and Every called 'discursive deracialisation (2007: 133; see also Capdevila and Callaghan, 2008, Condor et al., 2006, Every and Augoustinos, 2007, Rapley, 2001, van Dijk 1992, 1993) and suggests that it is increasingly unnecessary to defend opposition to asylum from claims that such accusation is racist. Instead, the rhetorical burden is now upon supporters of asylum to show that they are not accusing opponents of being racist (Goodman, in press).

As Goodman (in press) argued, the increasing acceptance that opposition to asylum is not racist, and that accusations of racism are unreasonable and therefore to be avoided suggests that supporters of asylum must find new ways of justifying their support. Supporters of asylum are perhaps left with two directions to explore. First, to reclaim the notion that opposition to asylum *is* racist. However, given the increasing discursive psychological evidence for 'discursive deracialisation' this would most likely be extremely difficult rhetorically. Second, as the evidence suggests that opposition to asylum is attributed to practicalities such as economic reasons it may be wise for supporters of asylum to base their support on these grounds. This would involve tackling what has been described as 'myths' that asylum seekers are costly and idle and are commonly illegitimate (Leudar et al, 2008, Refugee

Council, 2007, Sales, 2002); and could instead focus their arguments on the harsh conditions that asylum seekers are both leaving behind (Burnett and Peel, 2001, Neumayer, 2005) and face in their country of refuge (Bloch and Schuster, 2005, Lynn and Lea, 2005, Stewart, 2005) as well as the benefits they can bring (e.g. Doyle, 2009).

It remains to be seen to what extent 'discursive deracialisation' is occurring in all areas of race talk, but as well as being shown to be the case in political debates about asylum seeking in Australia (Augoustinos and Every, 2007) and the UK (Goodman, in press) this analysis shows that the process has impacted on the discourses of students in the UK.

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<sup>i</sup> Howard was the leader of the Conservative party when this speech was given in 2005. This speech and the election poster mentioned above were all part of the anti-immigration thrust of the party's 2005 general election campaign.