Community Antagonism Towards Asylum Seekers in Port Augusta, South Australia

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Abstract
An overtly hostile response to asylum seekers was observed in questionnaire responses provided by residents of Port Augusta, South Australia in April 2002. A social construction approach to identity and representation was used to interrogate this antagonism within its social, cultural, political and geographical contexts. Asylum seekers were constructed as 'burdensome', 'threatening' and 'illegal', and opposition to them was set within the discursive framework of a 'Self/Other' binary. Enmity towards asylum seekers was articulated concurrently with overwhelming support for the Federal Government's exclusive and deterrence-oriented asylum policies. However, vehement opposition was expressed regarding the government's decision to construct Baxter Immigration Reception and Processing Centre in close proximity to Port Augusta. Factors contributing to the respondents' negative perceptions of asylum seekers include xenophobia (specifically Islamophobia), events of geopolitical significance, and problematic government and media representations of asylum seekers. An awareness of these factors is necessary to unpack and, potentially, to destabilise the negative constructions of asylum seekers circulating in contemporary Australian discourses. Their entrenchment in the national consciousness may lead to tangible social implications including fear, friction and ultimately violence between the 'Self' and 'Other', and this should therefore be countered. Community antagonism also contradicts notions of a culturally tolerant Australia and fosters electoral support for the policies of exclusion and deterrence that undermine Australia's commitment to international human rights frameworks.

KEY WORDS *Asylum seeker; social construction; representation; perception; discourse; antagonism*

ACRONYMS

ABC	The Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABS	The Australian Bureau of Statistics
DIMIA	Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs
IRPC	Immigration Reception and Processing Centre
RCOA	Refugee Council of Australia
TPV	Temporary Protection Visa
UNHCR	The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Introduction

Mid-2001 constituted a watershed in Australia's response to asylum seekers[1], characterised by increasingly severe policies (see Table 1), overtly negative asylum discourses and hardening public perceptions. Specifically, the arrival of the MV *Tampa* in Australian territorial waters in late August 2001[2] prompted a dramatic increase in the political, media and public attention accorded to the asylum question. The prominence of the asylum debate in the public consciousness was maintained over the ensuing period by ongoing disputes over contentious asylum policies, international and non-governmental condemnation of these policies, disturbances in Australia's immigration detention facilities, and the primacy of the asylum debate during the November 2001 Federal Election campaign. Furthermore, following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon, popular discourses rapidly conflated these chiefly Muslim and/or Arabic[3] asylum seekers with the threat of terrorism.

Although several insightful commentaries have discussed representations and perceptions of asylum seekers in Australia in recent years (Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), 2000; Mares, 2001; McMaster, 2001; MacCallum, 2002), there has been limited empirical testing in support of such work, particularly at the level

Table 1 Changes enacted under the September 2001 *Border Protection Legislation* (*Sources*: Adapted from Ruddock, 2001c and 2001d).

Policy Area	
Migration Zone	Christmas, Ashmore, Cartier and Cocos Islands excised from the migration zone[1]. No access to status determination procedures in Australia for asylum seekers reaching these territories.
Visa System	Asylum seekers who are deemed to have left a 'safe' country prior to coming to Australia will never be: a) granted permanent residency; b) eligible for family reunion; c) granted a right of return if they leave Australia.
Interception of Vessels	Australian authorities are able to: a) board vessels suspected of carrying asylum seekers; b) search such vessels; c) detain passengers on such vessels; and d) remove passengers from such vessels. Court challenges to these actions are not permitted.
Documentation	Adverse inferences may be drawn if asylum seekers do not have documentation and cannot provide an 'acceptable explanation' for this[2]
Definition of a Refugee	Australian courts may not extend the definition of a refugee beyond that expressed in the Refugee Convention.
Refugee Appeals Process	Scope for judicial review of administrative decisions regarding asylum seekers has been minimised. Class actions by asylum seekers are prohibited.

[1] On 8/6/02 the intention to excise 'all islands off Australia's northern mainland', from Exmouth to the Coral Sea Islands, was announced (Millett, 2002:1).
[2] Ruddock, 2001d:2.

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of the Australian populace. This paper presents the results of an investigation into the nature and bases of anti-asylum seeker sentiments expressed at the level of a local Australian community. It seeks to problematise the manner in which asylum seekers have been constructed in contemporary Australia. In doing so, it underscores the importance of a discursive shift and seeks to encourage Australian academics in general, and geographers in particular, to recognise and accept responsibility for initiating such changes.

A social construction approach to identity and representation

A social construction approach offers a useful theoretical framework from which to interrogate the Australian public's response to asylum seekers over this turbulent period. Social construction theory has gained wide recognition within the field of human geography and has been extensively deployed in literatures addressing the treatment of ethnic minorities in Western societies (Jackson and Penrose, 1993a; Dunn, 2001). It contends that identities, including 'races', nations, classes and genders are artificial and do not constitute an inherent or static reality (Dunn, 2001). Notwithstanding the innately flawed bases of the stereotypes regularly used to describe minority groups, repeated articulation affords them a 'remarkable durability' (Dunn, 2001, 306). Accordingly, a social construction approach recognises that problematic constructions of minority groups are not merely of symbolic relevance, but may lead to tangible and profound social consequences. By acknowledging the 'constructedness' of the categories used to label minority groups, social construction theory seeks to reveal their 'subaltern position[ing]' as unnatural and mutable, and to disrupt the solidification of stereotypes that reproduce uneven power relations in western societies (Jackson and Penrose, 1993b, 1993c; Kobayashi and Peake, 1994; Laguerre, 1999, 119; Dunn, 2001).

The 'Self/Other' binary, in which such discourses are regularly anchored, is central to understanding problematic constructions of minority groups. Broadly speaking, rhetoric distinguishing the 'Self' from the 'Other' suggests that immigrants must conform to a pre-existing and inherent national identity, or face exclusion from the 'national space' (Jackson and Penrose, 1993a; Hage, 1998). Such rhetoric empowers members of the cultural *status quo* as 'spatial managers', entitled to control the entry of the undesirable 'Other' into the national and/or local space, and to manage the presence of those granted entry (Hage, 1998). In the case of Australia, the 'national identity' remains indelibly linked to an illusion of Anglo-Celtic-Australian cultural homogeneity at the symbolic level (Batzias and Liffman, 1979; Jackson and Penrose, 1993b; Dunn and Mahtani, 2001). Immigrant groups that are culturally distant from this 'ideal' are regularly confronted by restrictive immigration policies (Poole, 1989; Bell, 1993; Said, 1993; Adelman, 1994; Hage, 1998; Mohammad, 1999; Johnston *et al*., 2000). Representations of the chiefly Muslim and/or Arabic individuals seeking asylum in Australia as an undesirable 'Other' who should be excluded, have been readily observed in government and media discourses in recent years (Mares, 2001; McMaster, 2001; Klocker, 2002; MacCallum, 2002; Klocker and Dunn, 2003).

Asylum seekers constitute a socially constructed group. In contemporary Australian discourse they have been categorised using negative, stereotypical and frequently misleading labels; their ethnicity and religion have been demonised; and their disempowerment has enabled their exclusion from the Australian national space, or their detention within it (RCOA, 2000; Mares, 2001; McMaster, 2001; Pickering, 2001; Klocker, 2002; MacCallum, 2002; Klocker and Dunn, 2003). The multitude of negative stereotypes invoked in anti-asylum discourses must be interrogated and destabilised, both to curb their potential for tangible implications and to establish a stronger discursive basis for beneficial community relations. A positive discursive platform is also an essential foundation for a more humane response to those seeking asylum in Australia, both legislatively and at the level of the populace.

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Method: measuring public perceptions of the asylum debate

Port Augusta, a South Australian town with a population of 13 516 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2001), was selected as the locus of this study. It was chosen as a result of the Federal Government's mid-2001 announcement that a new detention facility for asylum seekers, Baxter Immigration Reception and Processing Centre (IRPC), would be constructed approximately 15 km from the town. Accordingly, Baxter IRPC offered an ideal opportunity to examine the manner in which problematic constructions are consumed and reproduced at the local level (Dunn, 2001). A postal questionnaire was distributed using a mailing list of 1000 Port Augusta residents obtained via a random sample of the 2002 South Australian electoral roll, stratified evenly according to gender. The sample population was therefore confined to adult Australian citizens, whose voting rights position them as a privileged and empowered group within the nation state, who are entitled to express their preferences regarding asylum and immigration in Australia. This was considered appropriate given the prominence of the asylum debate as a Federal Election issue and the conversely powerless position of asylum seekers. An adequate response rate of 40.6% was obtained (McNeill, 1985; Priest, 1996).

The questionnaire was composed of both closed and open response attitudinal questions, ensuring that information of specific interest to the research was obtained while providing respondents with the opportunity to frame the asylum debate in their own terms (de Vaus, 1991). In order to assess their perceptions of asylum seekers, respondents were provided with lists of positive and negative constructions relating to asylum seekers' characteristics, behaviour (Table 2), arrival and impact[4] on Australia. These lists were developed using terms that have been articulated regularly in contemporary government and media asylum discourses (Klocker, 2002). Respondents were asked to indicate which terms and phrases they considered accurate descriptors of asylum seekers and/or their actions. A temporal element was added to the study by asking respondents whether a number of key events had influenced their perceptions of asylum seekers (see Table 7). Questionnaire respondents were also asked to indicate, in both open and closed response formats, their attitudes towards the Federal Government's treatment of asylum seekers, both in general (Figure 1) and with respect to individual policies (see Table 4), and their views regarding the construction of Baxter IRPC (Figure 2).

Direct coding of closed response questions was combined with latent (evaluative tenor[5]) and manifest analyses (Dunn, 2001) of open responses and respondent annotations. Manifest coding classified each individual negative or positive descriptive term used by respondents to label asylum seekers according to fourteen mutually exclusive and opposing categories of reference: 'illegal' vs. 'legal'; 'illegitimate' vs. 'legitimate'; 'bad character/behaviour' vs. 'good character/behaviour'; 'threatening' vs. 'harmless'; 'burden' vs. 'benefit'; 'uncontrollable' vs. 'manageable', and 'the "Other"/non-human' vs. 'like us/human'. Manifest coding also examined the use of 'ethnic' or religious labels describing asylum seekers by tallying each such term used in open responses and respondent annotations in the questionnaire. The questionnaire did not prompt respondents to discuss the ethnicity or religion of asylum seekers in any way. The coding process not only encompassed purely descriptive labels such as 'Muslim', 'Afghan' and 'Iraqi', but also sought to record use of the insidious stereotypes of Islam that circulate in western discourses (see Table 6 and Dunn, 2001). Finally, open responses and respondent annotations were examined for expressions of spatial ownership and constructions of the 'Self', focussing on terms such as 'Australian citizens', 'Aussies', 'locals', 'taxpayers', 'our town' and 'our backyard'. Only minimal demographic information was directly solicited from respondents (age, gender, level of educational attainment and period of residence in Port Augusta). Greater detail was considered unnecessary because the study aimed to interpret the respondents' own

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constructions of themselves, rather than making assumptions based upon their demographic characteristics.

The asylum discourses of questionnaire respondents

The results of the public opinion questionnaire provided an insight into three key areas of the asylum discourse of questionnaire respondents — their perceptions of asylum seekers, their constructions of the 'Self' in relation to the asylum seeking 'Other', and their attitudes towards the Federal Government's asylum policies.

Perceptions of the asylum seeking 'Other'

The postal questionnaire provided substantive empirical evidence to support observations of an antipathetic, xenophobic, discriminatory and overwhelmingly negative response to asylum seekers among members of the Australian public (Carlton, 2001; Klocker, 2002; MacCallum, 2002). When asked to indicate which terms accurately described asylum seekers from a list of positive and negative constructions provided (Table 2), questionnaire respondents selected negative constructions at a rate almost four times greater than the positive descriptors listed.

As indicated by the results in Table 2, the greatest number of questionnaire respondents identified asylum seekers as 'illegal immigrants' (82%) and 'unlawful' (79%), a perception that may have been influenced by the pervasiveness of 'illegality' as a theme within the Federal Government's asylum discourse (Klocker and Dunn, 2003). Over 70% of respondents also identified asylum seekers as an 'economic burden', a 'problem', 'unwelcome' and 'ungrateful', emphasising the perception that their presence

Table 2 Constructions of asylum seekers selected by questionnaire respondents (*Source*: Coding of questionnaire responses using the multiple-dichotomy method. See deVaus, 1991).

Negative	(%)[1]	Frequency[2]	Positive	(%)	Frequency
Illegal immigrants	81.8	327	Not terrorists	30.0	120
Unlawful	79.0	316	Good parents	26.8	107
Economic burden	74.5	298	Healthy	26.5	106
Problem	74.3	297	Desperate	24.8	99
Unwelcome	73.0	292	Victims	23.5	94
Ungrateful	71.5	286	Skilled	19.5	78
Foreign	68.3	273	Helpless	19.0	76
Illegitimate	68.0	272	Of good character	18.8	75
Violent	65.0	260	Harmless	18.0	72
Untrustworthy	63.3	253	Genuine	16.8	67
Queue-jumpers	62.8	251	Peaceful	16.8	67
Trouble-makers	61.0	244	Trustworthy	13.8	55
Economic migrants	60.3	241	Refugee	12.3	49
Dangerous	59.0	236	Grateful	11.8	47
Of bad character	55.5	222	Legitimate	10.8	43
Coercive	55.5	222	Welcome	9.8	39
Unskilled	48.5	194	Economic benefit	9.5	38
Diseased	46.3	185	Like us	9.5	38
Abusive to children	46.0	184	Not a problem	7.5	30
Terrorists	43.5	174	Lawful	3.5	14
Total Frequency	**N/A**	**5027**	**Total Frequency**	**N/A**	**1314**

[1] Percentage of respondents that selected each term (calculated on the basis of 400 completed questionnaires).
[2] Number of respondents who selected each term.

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would be of detriment to the Port Augusta community. A number of more extreme and offensive constructions that were also included in the list, such as 'terrorists', 'abusive to children' and 'diseased', were identified as accurate descriptors of asylum seekers by over 40% of questionnaire respondents. Also problematic was the finding that only 12% of respondents associated asylum seekers with the term 'refugee'. This may be related to the intense focus on constructions of 'illegitimacy' and stereotypes such as 'economic migrant', 'rich refugee' and 'queue-jumper' within Federal Government representations (Klocker and Dunn, 2003). Notably, respondents rarely selected actively positive or beneficial descriptors of asylum seekers, such as 'economic benefit', 'welcome', 'not a problem', 'legitimate', 'grateful' and 'trustworthy'. Furthermore, a strong tendency to differentiate between the 'Self' and asylum seekers emerged with 68% of respondents identifying them as 'foreign' and only 10% as 'like us'.

When asked, in a separate question, to select terms and phrases describing the arrival of asylum seekers[4] from a list provided, over 70% of respondents identified their arrival as a 'threat to the integrity of Australia's borders' and a 'threat to Australia's security'. These themes were pivotal to both the Federal Government's pre-election discourse and the policy changes enacted under the September 2001 *Border Protection Legislation* (Klocker and Dunn, 2003). Furthermore, while 64% of respondents identified the arrival of asylum seekers as a 'crisis' and 52% as an 'invasion', only 27% perceived it as 'manageable'.

Latent and manifest coding of open responses and annotations revealed that problematic and hostile constructions of asylum seekers remained prevalent when respondents were given greater discursive freedom. Specifically, the evaluative tenor of 85% of questionnaire responses was coded as 'mostly negative'. The following quotation exemplifies this potent negativity:

> Why would we welcome or agree to an extra burden from people who clearly do not respect the laws of this country, whose first instinct is to threaten, intimidate, burn, destroy and obtain their way by extreme measures???? Send them home, we can not and do not want to take on the problems of the world. First and foremost they are illegal. Why can't they apply to DIMIA for migration in the correct way??? What gives them the right to break, breach, flaunt the rules? (Respondent No.27).

Manifest coding further underscored community antagonism towards asylum seekers, with more than 92% of the terms tallied being negative descriptors (Table 3).

Table 3 Constructions of asylum seekers adopted in questionnaire open responses and annotations (*Source*: Manifest coding of questionnaire open responses and respondent annotations, see Dunn, 2001).

Positive Categories of Reference	Frequency[1]	(%)[2]	Negative Categories of Reference	Frequency	(%)
Burden	744	31.2	Benefit	17	0.7
Threat	455	19.1	Harmless	3	0.1
Illegal	332	13.9	Legal	5	0.2
Bad character or behaviour	267	11.2	Good character or behaviour	11	0.5
The Other/not-human	208	8.7	Like Us/human	27	1.1
Illegitimate	167	7.0	Legitimate or sympathetic	118	4.9
Uncontrollable	32	1.3	Ordered	1	0.1
Total Negatives	**2205**	**92.4**	**Total Positives**	**182**	**7.6**

[1] Number of terms tallied within each category of reference.
[2] Percentage of total terms tallied in all categories of reference.

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Specifically, the language adopted in open responses and respondent annotations most frequently portrayed asylum seekers as a 'burden', with this single negative category of reference containing over 30% of the descriptive terminology counted. This tendency was associated with the perceived impact of Baxter IRPC on the local community, with terms and phrases such as 'a strain on resources', 'unwanted', 'unwelcome' and 'problem' featuring heavily in questionnaire responses.

The perception of asylum seekers as a 'threat' was also prevalent with respondents regularly referring to 'escapes', 'breakouts' and 'riots', and depicting asylum seekers as 'violent' individuals who consistently 'cause trouble'. The examples below were obtained from some of the more extreme 'threat-oriented' responses:

> The airport is walking distance from the camp and when they escape they will hijack all the aircraft at the airport as many of these people are military trained and can fly an aircraft. They are sub-human fanatics (Respondent No.145).

> There [will] be more stealing, bashing, murdering because asylum seekers are animals that don't have respect for anyone at all (Respondent No.384).

Such quotations also exemplify the dehumanisation of asylum seekers by questionnaire respondents. In addition, constructions of asylum seekers as 'illegal' were prevalent in questionnaire responses:

> They are bloody illegals — send them home (Respondent No.172).

> These illegal boat people do make it hard for the people of Australia . . . I'm not against legal immigrants but I'm dead against people just walking into this country. I . . . will not stand by whilst illegal people take over (Respondent No.283).

In this manner, respondents frequently used the purportedly 'illegal' status of asylum seekers to discursively deny the right to seek asylum itself. Overall, manifest coding revealed that the constructions favoured by questionnaire respondents, when given the opportunity to couch the asylum debate in their own terms, were decisively negative (Table 3). Notably, questionnaire respondents were almost universally antagonistic towards asylum seekers and statistical tests (cross tabulations and chi square) failed to reveal any significant trends between perceptions of asylum seekers and respondents' demographic characteristics such as age, gender, level of educational attainment and period of residence in Port Augusta (Klocker, 2002).

Attitudes towards government asylum policies

Questionnaire results indicated that antagonism towards asylum seekers was expressed concurrently with high levels of support for the Federal Government's exclusive and deterrence-oriented asylum policies. As seen in Figure 1, over three quarters of respondents either supported the Federal Government's overall treatment of asylum seekers or insisted that an even 'tougher' approach was required:

> I support the Federal Government's treatment of asylum seekers 100%. They are here illegally and should be treated accordingly (Respondent No.31).

> Too soft = should escort any vessels found back into Indonesian waters by force if necessary (Respondent No.85).

High levels of support were also recorded for individual asylum policies (Table 4). More than 80% of respondents agreed with the policies of mandatory detention and the interdiction of people-smuggling vessels in international waters, and over 70% supported the detention of women and children. Even the more controversial policies enacted under the September 2001 *Border Protection Legislation*, including detention in neighbouring countries and the excision of territories from the Australian migration zone, were supported by over 50% of questionnaire respondents. In keeping with the respondents' insistence on a tougher legislative approach,

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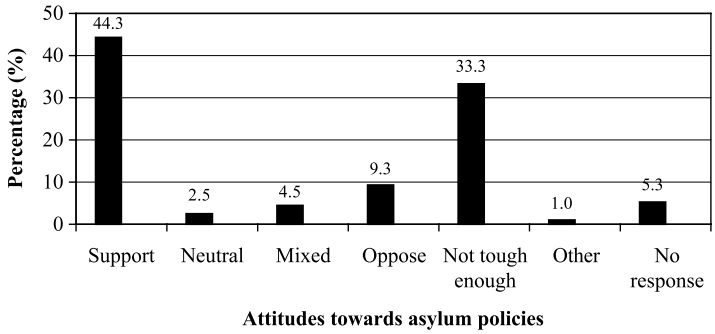

Figure 1 Respondents' perceptions of the Federal Government's treatment of asylum seekers (*Source*: Latent coding of questionnaire open responses and annotations).

Table 4 Public perceptions of Federal Government asylum policies (*Source*: Direct coding of questionnaire responses).

Government policy	Support (%)	Oppose (%)	No Opinion (%)	No Response (%)
Mandatory detention	86.1	8.8	3.0	2.8
Detention of women and children	72.8	19.3	4.0	4.0
Turning back people smuggling vessels	81.5	12.6	3.3	2.8
Detention in neighbouring countries	52.6	28.6	15.3	3.8
Granting three year Temporary Protection Visas	22.8	65.1	7.3	5.0
Excision of territories from migration zone	56.8	24.8	13.8	4.8

most respondents opposed the granting of three year Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) to asylum seekers, arguing that they should not be granted visas at all.

Questionnaire respondents were also vehemently opposed to the development of Baxter IRPC (Figure 2). Given that Port Augusta residents appear to perceive asylum seekers as 'threatening', 'burdensome' and 'illegal "Other"', opposition to a development responsible for bringing them into the local space was to be expected. In accordance with the construction of asylum seekers as a 'threat' by questionnaire respondents, security and safety issues were the primary concerns raised in relation to Baxter IRPC (Table 5).

The results also indicate that many respondents were worried that Baxter IRPC would place

Table 5 Port Augusta residents' concerns regarding Baxter Immigration Reception and Processing Centre (*Source*: Manifest coding of questionnaire open responses and annotations).

Categories of concern	(%)[1]
Security/safety concern	50.8
Strain on resources	43.5
Disturbances in detention centres	38.5
Protesters coming to Port Augusta	32.5
Port Augusta already has enough problems	19.5
Bad publicity/bad for tourism	17.5
Cultural problems	8.5
Other problems	24.3
No problems	2.8

[1] Refers to the percentage of respondents who mentioned each of the concerns listed.

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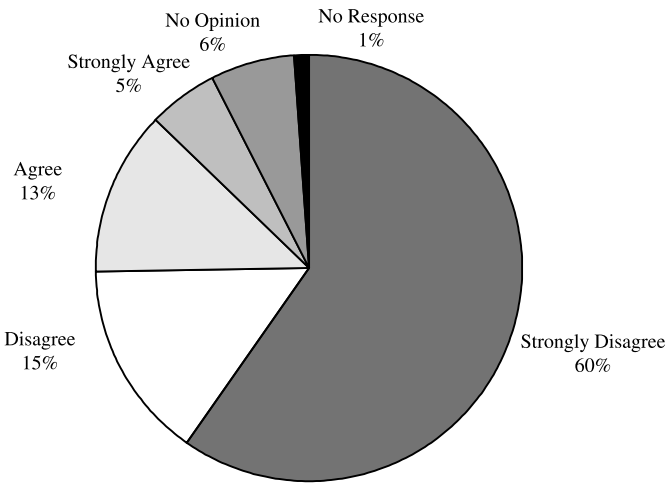

Figure 2 Respondent opinions regarding the development of Baxter Immigration Reception and Processing Centre (*Source*: Direct coding of questionnaire closed responses).

an additional strain on already stretched local health and police resources:

> We have insufficient doctors, nurses, facilities now. . . . Our old people get shipped out of the region that they have spent their whole lives contributing to because of inadequate Nursing Home facilities. . . . We have exceptionally high unemployment. The prison located adjacent to the town has already contributed towards increased crime, social [problems] and unemployment (Respondent No.27).

Respondents were also concerned that disturbances (including riots, hunger strikes and arson) would occur in Baxter IRPC, that the centre would draw protesters advocating the rights of asylum seekers, and that the town would be exposed to bad publicity leading to a decline in tourism.

Constructions of the 'Self' and expressions of territorial ownership

Port Augusta is an area of declining population with reasonably high unemployment (10.4%), a low median income and an indigenous population of approximately 15% (ABS, 2001). Questionnaire responses suggested that Port Augusta residents consider themselves disadvantaged by an apparent shortage of government services, *inter alia* in health, security and education — and confronted by 'cultural tensions' between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. These concerns were regularly articulated as part of the powerful 'Self/Other' binary around which the asylum discourse of Port Augusta residents was constructed.

Open responses and annotations to the questionnaire indicated that respondents regularly juxtaposed representations of asylum seekers as 'burdensome' and 'illegal' with constructions of the 'Self' as 'unfairly disadvantaged' by their presence:

> We tax paying law abiding Australian citizens who are covered by private health will now have to line up for hospital treatment behind jail inmates, Aboriginals and now these illegals who don't pay tax (Respondent No.20).

> There are thousands of AUSSIE BATTLERS out there who could benefit from the money

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> it costs to support these illegals (Respondent No.124).

> A lot of people in Port Augusta cannot afford to pay for their own basic needs i.e. shelter, clothing, food, medical services. So if they see illegal immigrants getting these things for nothing it is like rubbing salt into the wounds (Respondent No.171).

By highlighting their role as 'tax-paying' and 'law-abiding' 'citizens', respondents emphasised and defended their own culturally 'privileged position within the nation state' (Hage, 1998, 47) and stressed the ascendency of their entitlements in contrast to those of the asylum seeking 'Other'.

Questionnaire respondents also paired 'threatening' depictions of asylum seekers with representations of the 'Self' as potential 'victims':

> Fifty-eight escaped from Woomera and only two thirds have been caught! And anyone who would sew their kids' lips is certainly a threat to us as a community (Respondent No.82).

> With the arrival of the people here on our doorstep so to speak, all residents of our town will be sleeping a little less soundly in anticipation of the trouble which will surely eventuate (Respondent No.32).

The binary construction of 'threatening Other' and 'threatened Self' highlights the role of fear in driving respondents' opposition against asylum seekers in general, and Baxter IRPC in particular.

The language of territorial ownership was integrated into the discursive 'Self/Other' binary articulated by Port Augusta residents:

> We the people of Port Augusta including Mayor Joy Baluch do not need trouble makers living in the El Alamein Army camp [site of Baxter IRPC]. We have our own problems with our town . . . We do not need problems from other countries invading our doorsteps (Respondent No.295).

By adopting terms and phrases such as 'our community', 'our town', 'our country' and 'our nation', questionnaire respondents simultaneously identified themselves as part of a local community and as members of the broader nation-state, whose rights as 'spatial managers' are not geographically limited to the local area:

> [f]rom the average Australian . . . I think most of us voted with our preferences when Mr Howard decided to take a stand — this is democracy — the way most of us feel (Respondent No.27).

Accordingly, respondents' perceptions of the undesirability of asylum seekers encompassed the broader 'national space', rather than being confined to the local area:

> Our forefathers and women died to protect this country and make it the best place in the world. We don't want queue jumpers here and bugger the place up (Respondent No.273).

Overall, constructions of the 'Self' provided a point of reference against which to position asylum seekers and underscored the right of questionnaire respondents to express opinions regarding this 'Other'.

The contexts of negative perceptions of asylum seekers

Questionnaire responses suggest that a number of interrelated factors was responsible for the negative perceptions of asylum seekers among Port Augusta residents, and that these perceptions fostered intense opposition against Baxter IRPC. Specifically, Islamophobia, events of geopolitical significance, and problematic government and media representations of the asylum debate appeared to play influential roles. Identifying such factors is central to the disruption of these problematic perceptions of asylum seekers.

Islamophobia

Manifest coding of open responses and annotations revealed that the ethnic, cultural or religious characteristics of asylum seekers prompted considerable concern among Port Augusta residents.

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These concerns were regularly communicated via a potently xenophobic or, more accurately, Islamophobic discourse. Dunn (2001) observed that negative constructions of Muslims as 'misogynistic', 'fundamentalist', 'fanatical', 'intolerant', 'militant' and 'alien', circulate heavily in western discourses. Such stereotypes were central to the negative perceptions of asylum seekers expressed by questionnaire respondents (see Table 6). In particular, Islamophobia appeared to colour respondents' perceptions of asylum seekers as a 'threatening Other'.

For many respondents, the undesirability of asylum seekers stemmed from a perception that their laws, culture, customs and ultimately 'way of life' were not in keeping with Australian 'norms'. This belief exemplifies what has been called the 'new racism', which does not operationalise hatred and harm based upon skin colour or other physiological differences, but rather is concerned with the supposed 'cultural' attributes of minority groups (Barker, 1981; Hage, 1998; Jayasuriya, 2002; Manne, 2002). In the Australian setting, Muslims and/or Arabs tend to be placed within the category of 'least like us' and are widely perceived as being 'outside the traditional cultural definition of an Anglo-Celtic-European-Christian experience' (Shboul, 1984, 17; Deen, 1995). Within this cultural setting, Islamophobia is likely to provide one explanation for the questionnaire respondents' powerfully negative perceptions of asylum seekers.

Events of geo-political significance

During the latter half of 2001 and early 2002, the newsworthiness and political relevance of the asylum debate were maintained by a number

Table 6 Stereotypes of Islam in questionnaire responses (*Source*: Direct coding of questionnaire responses).

Stereotypes[1]	Examples from questionnaire responses
Misogynists	People from some of these countrys do not live like people in Australia. Women to them are second class and women in Australia are educated and have some not all equal rights in employment etc (Respondent No.171).
Fundamentalists	They do not assimilate, their beliefs are extreme . . . They on the whole do not follow our laws (Respondent No.121). If these people really want to live like Australians in a free country, they should learn to leave some of their customs, beliefs and religion behind them (Respondent No.171).
Fanatics	Their behaviour is obscene and fanatical and it doesn't fit with the Aussie's laid back lifestyle. These people are extremists, religious fanatics — we do not want them infecting our wonderful country (Respondent No.173).
Intolerant	I do fear people more from Arabic countries than I do from others. They don't seem to like their own countrymen at all (Respondent No.115). I worked with Muslims in Malaya, South Thailand and South Burma from 1949 until 1961 and I learnt a lot about their beliefs and that they hate Christians (Respondent No.303).
Militant	Port Augusta has enough problems socially without adding to them by having potential terrorists living less than 20 km away (Respondent No.182). What do we need — not military age, middle-eastern men! (Respondent No.219). Bombings in Coles or Woolies by Islamic extremists because their dole cheque didn't arrive on time. Our little hospital overwhelmed by diseased Islamic radicals (Respondent No.282).
Alien	These people do not respect our way of life yet we are expected to accept them and there ways . . . Some customs/beliefs will not be understood by Australians who like to be happy go lucky — she'll be right mate (Respondent No.171).

[1] Stereotypes of Islam as in Dunn (2001).

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of local, national and international events that were either directly or indirectly associated with asylum seekers. These included the arrival of the MV *Tampa* in Australian territorial waters, the September 11 terrorist attacks in the U.S.A., the 'Children Overboard Incident'[6] and riots and hunger strikes in Woomera IRPC[7]. The questionnaire results indicated that events of direct local significance, such as the riots and hunger strikes undertaken by detainees at Woomera IRPC, negatively influenced the perceptions of the greatest number of questionnaire respondents (Table 7). Specifically, the Woomera riots contributed enormously to perceptions of asylum seekers as a 'threat':

> Some residents are fearful, especially since seeing the level of violence the detainees in Woomera do . . . [there is a] fear of being used as a hostage by any who escape the Baxter facility (Respondent No.291).

Even though hunger strikes may reasonably be expected to elicit a more sympathetic reaction than riots, this was not the case in questionnaire responses.

The September 11 terrorist attacks in the U.S.A also had a profoundly negative impact on public perceptions, feeding into the existing stereotypes and fears of Islam. Over 50% of respondents acknowledged increased negativity towards asylum seekers as a consequence of this event, which exacerbated mistrust and fear of the primarily Muslim and/or Arabic asylum seekers:

> They choose to destroy all documentation identifying who they really are — if they are genuine refugees, why? Perhaps they are 'Al Qaeda' or Taliban members (Respondent No.291).

The children overboard claims negatively influenced the perceptions of a large number of respondents, but far fewer were influenced in a positive direction by evidence that asylum seekers had not thrown their children overboard. This highlights the durability of negative constructions and underscores the importance of confronting and destabilising negative representations of minority groups before they solidify.

The role of government and media discourses

Islamophobia and key political events provided a solid basis for understanding the intense anti-asylum seeker sentiments expressed by the Port Augusta residents. Nonetheless, such observations provide only a limited understanding of public perceptions of asylum seekers and do not answer several key questions. For example, how was it that questionnaire respondents so readily invoked an Islamophobic discourse in relation to asylum seekers? Why did respondents interpret hunger strikes, riots and self-harm attempts at Woomera IRPC as threatening behaviour, and not as acts of desperation deserving of

Table 7 The influence of key events on public perceptions of asylum seekers (*Source*: Direct coding of questionnaire responses).

Key events	Negative (%)[1]	Positive (%)
September 11th terrorist attacks in the U.S.A.	52.3	8.0
The war on terrorism in Afghanistan	41.0	16.8
The Tampa situation	48.3	8.0
Hunger strikes in Woomera detention centre	73.5	9.0
Reports that children were thrown overboard by their parents	46.5	3.5
Evidence that children were not thrown overboard by their parents	14.3	19.8
International criticism of Australia's asylum policy	42.3	14.8
Riots in Woomera detention centre	76.0	9.5

[1] Refers to the percentage of respondents' attitudes influenced in a positive or negative direction by the events listed.

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sympathy? The findings of inter-textuality among government documents, newspaper articles and public opinion, outlined in Klocker and Dunn (2003), suggest that negative public perceptions of asylum seekers are primarily driven by the problematic constructions circulating within the contemporary government and media asylum discourses. These representations are consumed and reproduced by the populace and given substance through their mobilisation in local political disputes surrounding developments such as Baxter IRPC, that actively bring the 'Other' into the local space (Dunn, 2001).

The current Australian Government has been widely accused of manipulating public information in relation to the asylum debate in an attempt to encourage a strong anti-asylum seeker sentiment among the populace (RCOA, 2000; Mares, 2001; McMaster, 2001; Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; MacCallum, 2002; Marr and Wilkinson, 2003). According to the former Minister for Immigration, Philip Ruddock; the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard; and the Mayor of Port Augusta, Joy Baluch, asylum seekers are making a 'lifestyle choice' (Ruddock, 2002b), 'misrepresent[ing] their identity', 'abus[ing] the refugee process' (Ruddock, 2001a), attempting to 'blackmail' (Ruddock, quoted in Maiden and Duffy, 2002, 1) the Australian public and 'holding the Australian people to ransom' with a 'deliberate campaign of criminal activity' (Ruddock, 2002c). They are 'not fleeing persecution' (Ruddock, 2001a), they are 'bastards' (Baluch, quoted in Maiden and Duffy, 2002, 5), 'unlawful' (Ruddock, 2002b) and 'barbaric', they 'force children to sew their lips together' (Ruddock, 2002c), 'abuse our compassion', 'deliberate[ly] flout our laws' (Ruddock, 2001b) and 'can run like camels if they escape' (Baluch, quoted in Maiden and Duffy, 2002, 5). If we are not vigilant, Australia's 'shores will be thick with asylum seeker boats', we will be 'invaded' (Howard, quoted in Maiden and McPhedran, 2001, 2).

Similarly, Australian media coverage of the asylum debate has been denounced as narrow in scope, lacking in detail, context and analysis, 'knee-jerk and sensationalist' (Mares, 2001, 16). Between August 2001 and January 2002, reportage in *The Advertiser* and *Sunday Mail*, the two State-based, South Australian newspapers servicing the Port Augusta region, deployed intensely negative and discriminatory constructions of asylum seekers as 'violent' 'illegals' with 'appalling behaviour', who 'trash accommodation', 'refuse to use toilet paper' and 'thr[ow] excrement at guards'. They have 'connections to Osama bin Laden' and are 'suspected terrorists' or 'zealots' characterised by 'religious fervour' and 'an entirely different mode of life'. We are being 'flooded' by a 'wave' and 'onslaught' of 'boat people' who could 'afford to fly business class'.

Viewed from the perspective of the 'propaganda model', which contends that governments exert a powerful influence over media reporting of events (Sparks, 1986; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Green, 1991; Jakubowicz, 1994), the Australian media's negative coverage of the asylum debate may be attributable to its dependence on the government's problematic asylum discourse (Mares, 2001; Klocker and Dunn, 2003), while members of the public largely rely on the media for their political and social knowledge (Curran *et al*., 1982, 13; van Dijk, 1991b; Bell, 1993; Benedix and Liebler, 1999). An hierarchical pattern of influence is therefore likely to be operating, according to which problematic representations of asylum seekers by the government are communicated, via the media, to the populace (Klocker, 2002; Klocker and Dunn, 2003). Accordingly, I contend that problematic government and media representations of asylum seekers are at the root of the negative public perceptions observed in questionnaire responses. In particular, the explanatory framework for perceptions of asylum seekers as a 'burdensome', 'threatening' and 'illegal' 'Other' is likely to be found in government and media discourses which, according to Klocker (2002), engaged heavily in problematic constructions of Islam and put a negative 'spin' on events in which asylum seekers were involved.

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Discussion and conclusions: why worry about negative public perceptions of asylum seekers?

This paper has presented evidence of disturbingly negative perceptions of asylum seekers among Port Augusta residents. It is too simplistic to denounce Port Augusta as a 'redneck town', and consider the attitudes expressed by its residents as the xenophobic diatribe of a few individuals. Such a conclusion would suggest that the intensely antagonistic response to asylum seekers articulated in questionnaire responses, and its potential for material implications, are geographically contained. It would also, however, open the research to criticism for stereotypically constructing the Port Augusta community, and potentially underestimate the magnitude of the problem of which the questionnaire results forewarn. The findings are potentially of a much broader geographical significance. Conversely, using the results of the questionnaire to draw conclusions regarding the wider Australian populace may be considered anti-geographical, too general, and contra the rationale that took the study to Port Augusta in the first place.

Baxter IRPC is a site of controversy, and so the perceptions of Port Augusta residents towards asylum seekers were expectedly negative. Klocker (2002), however, revealed that intense hostility towards asylum seekers is not restricted to Port Augusta residents. Similar concerns have also been expressed in several contemporary analyses of the asylum debate (RCOA, 2000; Mares, 2001; MacCallum, 2002; Klocker and Dunn, 2003). The outcome of the November 2001 Federal Election, which, according to several critical analysts, was decided on the basis of the asylum debate (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002; McCallum, 2002; Marr and Wilkinson, 2003), also suggests that antipathy towards asylum seekers is widespread among the Australian populace. There is a need for national empirical research into public perceptions of asylum seekers to determine whether the results of this questionnaire are indeed a harbinger of a disturbingly potent antipathy towards asylum seekers within the broader Australian populace. This is particularly important as, viewed from a social construction perspective, the overwhelmingly negative text contained in the questionnaire responses is not merely of semiotic relevance. Rather, the 'textual is critically important' since it may generate material implications for both 'Self' and 'Other' (Dunn, 2001, 306). If large segments of the Australian populace are found to share the intense negativity of questionnaire respondents, the potential for negative material impacts is both widespread and profound.

For the asylum seekers themselves, the most powerful implication of negative public perceptions lies in the asylum policies that 'greet' those seeking Australia's protection. The coexistence of antagonism towards asylum seekers and high levels of support for government asylum policies, as evident in questionnaire responses, suggests that a feedback loop is in operation. That is, negative government and media representations of asylum seekers foster negative public perceptions and fears, which in turn provide justification, legitimation and electoral support for increasingly exclusive, harsh and deterrence-oriented asylum policies (van Dijk, 1991a; Klocker, 2002). The questionnaire respondents' insistence on an 'even tougher approach' highlights the potential for public pressure to intensify this already hardline legislative response. Given the centrality of the asylum debate in the November 2001 Federal Election campaign (MacCallum, 2002), the electoral and policy implications of negative public perceptions of asylum seekers should not be underestimated. The Australian public's support for a Federal Government that has implemented increasingly draconian asylum legislation has impacted detrimentally on the well-being of those seeking asylum in Australia.

A second potential implication of negative perceptions of asylum seekers is revealed in the overtly threatening tone adopted by many questionnaire respondents:

> On Federal land the government should use real ammunition to gain respect and send the rag heads home to their own country . . .

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> The Navy should blow them out of the water. Sharks and sea lice would clean up (Respondent No.128).
>
> Shoot them all and send them back. When they got out at Woomera the police should have shot them (Respondent No.40).
>
> Being close to the camp means that some will wander our streets so I will be able to spit on and abuse them . . . I can hardly wait! (Respondent No.282).
>
> Kill them all. F*** all the c****s off home (Respondent No.304).

If similar sentiments are found to prevail among the broader Australian populace, the implications for inter-ethnic, inter-cultural and inter-religious relations in contemporary Australia are likely to be profound. Threats of violence are of grave concern since they may be acted out upon Muslim and/or Arabic Australians living within the community, including asylum seekers released on TPVs. According to a number of sources, including the President of the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board, the New South Wales Police Commissioner and the President of the United Muslim Women's Associations, violence and vandalism directed at Muslim and Arabic individuals and places of worship, respectively, have increased in response to events such as the September 11 terrorist attacks and the bombings in Bali in October, 2002 (ABC, 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; Manne, 2002). The results of this study suggest that negative perceptions of asylum seekers have a similar potential to increase racist violence.

Importantly, negative public perceptions of asylum seekers may also have problematic implications for the 'Self'. Claims that Australia has an 'international reputation for being a nation which accepts and celebrates diversity' (Ruddock, 2002a) and 'a reputation for being a compassionate country that respects human rights' (McMaster, 2001, vi), must be increasingly undermined and unsettled by strong evidence of a hostile and discriminatory response to asylum seekers. Furthermore, the results of the questionnaire indicated that negative perceptions of asylum seekers have contributed to an acute fear among many respondents. This fear was perhaps best exemplified by a respondent whose derogatory and aggressive comments about asylum seekers were followed by the statement: 'I'm sorry. I just wrote that because I am scared' (Respondent No. 385). Although similar levels of fear may well be circulating within the broader Australian populace, its potentially harmful impact on members of the cultural *status quo* has been given insufficient attention within the asylum literature to date. The current Australian government has not only done little to alleviate this fear, it appears to have intensified it through negative, stereotypical and ultimately threatening representations of asylum seekers and of Islam (RCOA, 2000; Mares, 2001; Klocker, 2002; MacCallum, 2002; Manne, 2002; Mares, 2002; Klocker and Dunn, 2003).

This paper has argued that the potently negative perceptions of asylum seekers apparent in questionnaire responses were primarily influenced by problematic government and media constructions. In recent years, the asylum debate has emerged as a major theme in government and media discourses, with those individuals seeking Australia's protection being constructed in a crudely negative, stereotypical and derogatory manner. Such constructions contributed to perceptions of an asylum seeker as an 'illegal', 'burdensome' and 'threatening' 'Other' among questionnaire respondents. The constructions are also likely to have influenced the understandings of the asylum debate among the broader Australian populace, although further empirical research is required in this direction. Social construction theory recognises the potential for negative perceptions of minority groups to generate harmful and tangible implications for both 'Self' and 'Other', underscoring the need to acknowledge, interrogate and destabilise the negative representations and stereotypes of asylum seekers that inform public opinion. Negative public perceptions of asylum seekers contribute to a potent hostility which may foster fear, friction and even violence in contemporary

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Australia. Furthermore, an antagonistic populace undermines notions of Australia as a culturally tolerant nation, and cultivates electoral support for increasingly exclusive and deterrence-oriented asylum policies. Balanced, responsible and humane asylum discourses are necessary to redress this trend. Academics in general, and geographers in particular, have an important contribution to make in this area.

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NOTES

1. The term 'asylum seeker' refers here to those individuals arriving by boat in Australian territorial waters, without having been selected for resettlement through the structured humanitarian program.
2. 438 asylum seekers en route from Indonesia were rescued by a Norwegian freighter on August 28, 2001. The rescue took place outside Australian territorial waters and a standoff followed during which the Australian Federal Government refused permission for the vessel (the MV *Tampa*) to dock at an Australian port (see MacCallum, 2002).
3. The bulk of the asylum flow in recent years, both globally and to Australia, stemmed from Afghanistan and Iraq (DIMIA, 2001; UNHCR, 2001).
4. Respondents were asked to indicate whether the following terms accurately described the arrival and/or impact of asylum seekers; 'flood', 'crisis', 'invasion', 'disorderly', 'trickle', 'manageable', 'small by international standards', 'threat to the integrity of Australia's borders' and 'threat to Australia's security'.
5. Latent coding classified each returned questionnaire as 'mostly negative', 'mostly positive', 'neutral', 'mixed' or 'no response' on the basis of the text contained in open responses and respondent annotations.
6. In early October 2001 the Australian Federal Government claimed that asylum seekers threw their children overboard after being refused permission to enter Australian territorial waters. These claims were later proven to be false and became the subject of a Senate Inquiry (see Commonwealth of Australia, 2002).
7. In late 2001 and early 2002, repeated incidences of unrest occurred at Woomera IRPC in South Australia. Detainees engaged in protests, riots, arson, self-harm and hunger strikes.

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