Greetings,

You recently participated in a study about "Australians’ attitudes to asylum seekers," and said that you would be interested in hearing about the results. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to tell you about the findings.

The study was conducted by Angela Nickerson under the supervision of Dr. Winnifred Louis. If you would like to ask questions, to comment on what you read, or to find out more, you can contact project staff by phoning (07) 3365 7295, by e-mailing w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au, or by writing to Dr. Winnifred Louis, School of Psychology, Mcllwain Building / University of Queensland / St. Lucia, QLD 4072. You can also read about other studies that we've done on political decision-making at http://www.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: AUSTRALIANS’ ATTITUDES TO ASYLUM SEEKERS
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WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR
In this study, we looked at whether people were relating to asylum seekers in terms of shared group membership (as humans), different group memberships (Australians vs asylum seekers), or as individuals. We wanted to see whether how people thought of themselves in relation to asylum seekers would have an impact on their views on the issue. We thought that it would, for two reasons. First, there is research to show that you feel worse about people when you are focusing on the fact that you are in different groups, compared to if you focus on them as individuals, and you feel better about people if you are focusing on them as part of a shared group. So people who focus on the human aspect should feel better about asylum seekers, people who focus on the individual level should be intermediate, and people who focus on the nationality aspect should feel worse. Also, there is research that shows that when you focus on a particular identity you are influenced by what other people in that group believe. If Australians are more tough on asylum seekers than most countries, people who focus on the Australian identity might feel more supported in a tough stance on asylum seekers, whereas people who focus on the human identity might feel supported in a more welcoming stance.

In addition to measuring how people usually think of themselves and relate to asylum seekers, half-way through the study we experimentally assigned people to focus specifically on their human identity, their Australian identity, or their personal identity. Then we measured attitudes to asylum seekers and looked to see if they varied in the different conditions. Finally, we looked at a whole bunch of other factors that have been used in past social attitudes research, to show that we could repeat those results as well. (Students who came into our laboratory also completed a letter-writing study but we won’t focus on those results here – just e-mail if you’d like a summary of those results!)

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS
During the time period March 4-August 26, 247 people completed the study. All participants were Australians, but some were psychology students from UQ, others were friends and acquaintances of the experimenter, and others were recruited from refugee activist groups. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 74 (but 54% were 20 or younger), and were predominantly female (65%) and Anglo/Other European Australian (90%). In terms of political affiliation, 26% indicated no political preference; 20% supported the Liberal/National Coalition, 31% the ALP, 25% the Greens; and 7% another political party. So this is a diverse but unrepresentative group!

WHAT WE FOUND
1. HUMAN, AUSTRALIAN, and PERSONAL IDENTITIES. First we took pre-measures of how people normally identified, e.g. how much they felt it was
important to think of themselves as humans, Australians, and individuals. Most people (94%) felt being an individual was very important, but so was being human (92%) and to a lesser extent, being Australian (62%). In a separate section, we asked about the extent to which people saw each identity as relevant to the asylum seeker issue. People related to asylum seekers as other individuals (87%) and fellow humans (97%) but also as foreigners vs themselves as Australians (70%).

2. SOCIAL DOMINANCE ORIENTATION and AUTHORITARIANISM. People's belief in hierarchical values for social systems and their faith in authority were also measured in this study, because we expected that these variables might be linked to social attitudes. Most participants (89%) rejected hierarchical values and were suspicious of authority (70%). We found that people who endorsed hierarchical values and trusted authority were more likely to identify strongly as Australian, as well as more likely to see asylum seekers as foreigners and less likely to relate to them as other individuals and humans.

3. PERCEPTIONS OF NORMS. Then we measured what people thought other Australians and people in the world thought about asylum seekers. Only 24% thought Australians favoured a more welcoming stance to asylum seekers, whereas 51% perceived the rest of the world was more welcoming. People who were more hierarchical and authoritarian perceived the norms to be harsher on asylum seekers. We also had a measure of how guilty people felt about the treatment of asylum seekers in Australia. Overall, few people (29%) felt guilty; these were low authoritarian/social dominance types who were more likely to see Australians and the world as favouring a welcoming stance to asylum seekers.

4. PERCEPTIONS OF THREATS. We measured the threat that people thought asylum seekers posed in four areas. Overall, few thought asylum seekers posed a threat to Australia’s resources (18%) or that differences in values created a symbolic threat (18%). Many (45%) thought they would be uncomfortable interacting with asylum seekers face to face, however, and many (51%) had negative stereotypes of asylum seekers relative to Australians. People who identified strongly as human perceived less threat from asylum seekers, whereas people who perceived more threat also were more likely to identify strongly as Australian, trust authority more, or endorse hierarchical values.

5. MANIPULATION OF FOCUS. At this stage, we introduced an experimental manipulation of identity salience. A third of the people were randomly assigned to list & evaluate things relevant to themselves as an individual (e.g., hobbies), a third to focus on things relevant to themselves as Australians (e.g., what Australians have in common), and a third to focus on things relevant to themselves as humans (e.g., positive and negative human experiences). There were a set of 12 items designed to focus people on the identity, and then everyone completed measures of:

6. ATTITUDES AND FEELINGS TO ASYLUM SEEKERS. We looked at attitudes to asylum seekers with statements like “The way in which the government is treating asylum seekers is: Too harsh / Too lenient” or “My overall attitude to asylum seekers is: Positive/Negative”. Overall, 66% had positive attitudes and thought asylum seekers should be treated less harshly; another 20% were neutral or supported the status quo; and 14% thought asylum seekers should be treated even more strictly. Then we had measures of positive and negative emotions (e.g., admiration, hostility) people felt to asylum seekers. Most people (75%) felt more positive than negative emotion; some were ambivalent or neutral (10%) and a minority felt more negative than positive emotions (15%).

In terms of the variables that we measured correlationaly, people felt more negative to asylum seekers and favoured stricter treatment when they saw asylum seekers as threatening, and when they perceived national and international support for a tough approach. People who identified strongly as Australians and related to asylum seekers as foreigners felt more negative, as
we had predicted, as well as those who were more socially dominant and authoritarian. People who identified strongly as humans were more likely to relate to asylum seekers as humans, felt more positively to them, and were more likely to favour a welcoming stance.

Finally, when we looked at the experimental manipulation, we didn’t find an effect on the emotions variable. About the same rate of people reported positive emotions to asylum seekers in each group (73% of people in the Australian condition, 74% in the personal condition, and 79% in the human condition). But we did find that when people were randomly assigned to focus on the Australian identity, fewer people (61%) reported they favoured a more welcoming stance to asylum seekers, compared to the personal (70%) or human (71%) conditions.

SUMMARY. Taken together, the results provide pretty strong support for the idea that attitudes and feelings to asylum seekers are linked to identity issues. People are more likely to favour a welcoming stance to asylum seekers when they feel less threatened and believe there is support for their views. But these perceptions are also linked to values and identities. As predicted, people who focused more on the human identity and related to asylum seekers as fellow humans were more welcoming. On the other hand, people who identified more strongly as Australian were less favourable, both because people who related to asylum seekers as foreigners perceived more threat/costs of a welcoming stance, and because people who identified as Australians were influenced by the view that most Australians favoured a tough stance. We’re encouraged that we were able to find the effects both correlationally and experimentally, but the experimental effects weren’t as strong as we’d like. In the future, we’ll try to replicate the effect and develop an even more sensitive manipulation. It would be especially good to show changes in threat perceptions or feelings to asylum seekers after an identity effect was introduced, as well as changes in policy attitudes.

THANKS AGAIN....

So that’s a description of what we found in this study. If you have any questions, or would like a copy of the longer write-up when we get that done (in several months) please get in touch. And thank you again for your participation and interest!