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. Within that study (the last 20” or so of the hour) was an experiment looking at political behaviour and group norms. We appreciate your help with our research, and we are happy to tell you about the findings.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: THE IMPACT OF NORMS ON LETTER-WRITING ON THE ASYLUM SEEKER ISSUE
Working paper, 23/9/04. This paper has not been peer reviewed. Please do not copy or cite without author's permission.

WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR
The whole first part of the study was about people’s human, Australian, and individual identities in relation to attitudes to asylum seekers – we already e-mailed you about that part of the data already and you can reread it online here: http://www2.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/wl0904_1.pdf.

In the last part of the hour, we did a second study where we gave participants information that people who supported or opposed the government’s tough stance on asylum seekers had favourable or unfavourable attitudes to a particular form of political action, namely writing a letter to a politician. We wanted to see whether that would have an impact on willingness to write a letter. Specifically, we wanted to compare two theoretical models for what would happen. The mainstream model is called social identity theory (e.g., Terry & Hogg, 1996) and says that the norms of groups you belong to (‘ingroups’) are very important in decisions, while the norms of groups that you don't belong to (‘outgroups’) are unimportant. This theory says that if people find out that there is a norm in their own group supporting an action, they are more likely to act, but if people in their ingroup oppose an action, they are less likely to act. Information about other groups has no effect. So, the model says that students who support the government will be most influenced by reports about the supporters’ (ingroup) views on letter writing, but not influenced by the views of students who oppose the government’s stand on asylum seekers (the outgroup), and vice versa. However, there is another theory (Louis & Taylor, 2001) that says that people do react to other groups’ views if the groups are in conflict with each other. In conflict conditions, according to this other research, when people think the other group opposes their action they can actually become *more likely to act. In this study, we found that the second model was supported.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS
Between May and August this year, 107 people came into our lab to complete the study. All participants were Australian psychology students from UQ or friends and acquaintances of the experimenter. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 36 (but 76% were 20 or younger), and were predominantly female (60%) and Anglo/Other European Australian (89%). In terms of political affiliation, 27% indicated no political preference; 27% supported the Liberal/National Coalition, 32% the ALP, 9% the Greens; and 4% another political party.

WHAT WE FOUND
1. PRE-MEASURES. First we took pre-measures of attitudes to asylum seekers and political behaviour. We found that about 45% of the sample favoured more welcoming policies to asylum seekers, 35% were ambivalent, and 18% favoured even tougher treatment. Then we looked at whether people had engaged in 5 political behaviours and how much they approved of the behaviour as a means of expressing political attitudes. Over 90% of participants approved of signing a petition, looking for information on the issues, and volunteering; 85% approved of writing to a politician; and 65% approved of attending a rally. Yet far fewer had acted themselves in the past – 76% had signed a petition, 71% looked for information, 25% volunteered, 22% written a letter, and 22% attended a rally. This attitude-behaviour inconsistency is very common in political
decision-making.

2. EXPOSURE TO NORM MANIPULATION. After the premeasures and the study about identity, participants were given graphs that were supposed to show the results of previous studies at UQ. The graphs showed the approval ratings for three political behaviours (letter writing, signing a petition, and attending a rally) for students who supported and opposed a tough stance on asylum seekers. In fact, the graphs were made up and manipulated the approval ratings for letter-writing. Specifically, there were four conditions: the graphs showed that both supporters and opponents of the government’s tough policy approved of letter-writing; that both disapproved; that supporters approved & opponents disapproved; or that supporters disapproved & opponents approved. Manipulation checks suggested that many participants could not understand or were not looking carefully at the graphs, though. We ended up leaving out of the analyses a full 24% of participants, who either did not answer the manipulation check questions correctly or who said they were suspicious about whether the graphs reflected students’ real opinions.

3. DEPENDENT MEASURES. In the final questionnaire, we took measures of how willing people were to write a letter on the issue of asylum seekers and actual letter-writing behaviour (signing a letter of support or opposition to the Minister for Immigration, Senator Vanstone). On average, willingness and actual behaviour were in line with people’s initial attitudes. People who had stronger opinions about the issue of asylum seekers, or who had written letters to politicians before, said they were more willing to write letters and actually were more likely to do so when we gave them the chance.

What we were most interested in, though, was the effect of our norm manipulations (graphs of attitudes to letter-writing) on people’s actions. The graphs had a big impact on how likely people were to actually write. What happened was this: people who didn’t feel strongly about the issue of asylum seekers were unlikely to write letters no matter what (fewer than 18% wrote letters in any condition). People who felt strongly about the issue were more likely to write letters when their own group approved of letter-writing – but this was especially true if the other group opposed letter writing. In fact, if both groups supported letter writing, only 40% of participants wrote letters – but if their group supported it and the other guys didn’t approve, 90% wrote letters! The fact that people react to what outgroup members think is quite interesting, theoretically, and is something that has been a focus of past research in our lab. Socially it’s important as well – it shows how sometimes when people that you’re in conflict with don’t approve of your behaviour, it produces a backlash that actually makes you more likely to act.

Remembering that over the last couple of years, before people come into our study, they would have been getting a lot of information about the asylum seekers issue that would have consolidated their attitudes and guided their actions (media coverage, friends’ views, etc), we were pleased to find effects of our graphed norm manipulations. These findings show the surprisingly strong influence of even subtle normative information on people’s decision-making. People were more likely to engage in a political action, letter writing, if they looked at graphs showing outgroup members didn’t approve of the action - a groovy finding, that we are following up in other research!

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! 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, McElwain 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/.