Greetings,

In the first semester, you 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. Sorry about the long delay in sending out this summary! Normally we try to write up within weeks of the data collection, but a combination of illness, overseas trips, and other work resulted in a few months’ delay.

The study was conducted 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) 3346 9515, 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/.

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, we also experimentally assigned people to focus specifically on either their human identity, their Australian identity, or their personal identity. Then we measured attitudes to asylum seekers and emotions and looked to see if they varied in the different conditions. We did something similar in previous years – you can read about the findings from the earlier study at http://www2.psy.uq.edu.au/~wlouis/wl0904_1.pdf.

SOME DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS
During March – April 2005, 171 people completed the study. All participants were students from UQ, who completed the questionnaire on a voluntary basis during a short break in sociology, history, or political science classes. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 59 (but 73% were 20 or younger), and were predominantly female (54%). In the analyses below however we only focus on the Australian participants (there were 135), since we were interested in looking at national identity salience and we measured national identity in terms of being Australian.

WHAT WE FOUND

1. EXPERIMENTAL MANIPULATION OF FOCUS. At this beginning of the questionnaire, we introduced an experimental manipulation of identity salience. A third of the
people were randomly assigned to list and evaluate things relevant to themselves as individuals (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). Tragically however when we asked people at the end of the study about the extent to which they had been thinking about themselves in terms of human, personal, and Australian identities as they completed the questionnaire, we found the manipulation had no impact. The only finding was that people considered their identities as individuals and as humans to be most important in relation to the questionnaire about asylum seekers, while being Australian was considered less important. So that was disappointing to us.

2. ATTITUDES AND FEELINGS TO ASYLUM SEEKERS. After the manipulation, 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, 59% had positive attitudes and thought asylum seekers should be treated less harshly; another 23% were neutral or supported the status quo; and 18% 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 (68%) felt more positive than negative emotion; some were ambivalent or neutral (22%) and a minority felt more negative than positive emotions (10%). We found the experimental manipulation had no impact on peoples’ evaluations of asylum seekers. But we did find that people’s identities were linked to their responses.

3. HUMAN, AUSTRALIAN, and PERSONAL IDENTITIES. What we found was that people who had indicated they had more positive attitudes and emotions to asylum seekers were more likely at the end of the questionnaire to say that they were thinking of themselves in terms of their human identity while they completed the questionnaire, while people who had less positive attitudes were more likely to say they had been thinking of themselves as Australians. We also found that perceptions of social norms were important in shaping attitudes and emotions. People who felt that other humans and Australians had positive views re asylum seekers were more likely to evaluate asylum seekers positively. These correlational results do support the idea that group identities and social influence shape evaluations of asylum seekers, which is what we were looking to find.

SUMMARY. Taken together, the results provide 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 they believe there is support for their views. But these perceptions are also linked to 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, perhaps 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 many Australians favour a tough stance. The experimental effects weren’t significant, though. In the future, we’ll try again to demonstrate the effect experimentally and show that if people are led to focus on particular identities, their views on this social issue can change.

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!