Experiences of ‘no advantage’: Asylum seekers living in the community

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‘the refugee situation is generally framed... by an asymmetry of power and voice between the state on the one hand and the refugees on the other’

(Korac, 2003: 53)
Research Context: International

- **Asylum seeker:** seeking protection as a refugee but waiting for application to be assessed.

- **1951 Refugee Convention:** asylum seekers should be enabled to have protection claim assessed (regardless of mode of arrival).

- **UNHCR (2001) reception condition standards:** the right to assistance to access what is necessary not only for survival but also for a life of dignity:
  - accommodation, health care, education, and employment or financial support

- Countries have discretion on type of reception conditions.
Research Context: Australia

- Reception conditions different for cohorts asylum seekers

1. Arrive to Australia with a valid visa (e.g., student or tourist visa) – processed in the community.
   - Vast majority experience homelessness and destitution, some never find work and subsequently depend on NGO support.
   - Significant impact on health and well-being (A Just Australia, 2009; ASRC, 2010).
2. Arrive to Australia *without* a valid visa (mostly boat arrivals), reception conditions include:

- Mandatory detention policy since 1991 - move to release from detention into CD and bridging visas (with work rights) in 2011.

- Bridging visas for those arriving after 13 August 2012, limited welfare, no right to work, and no processing of refugee claims (‘*No advantage bridging visa*’). [http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2013/s3760182.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2013/s3760182.htm)

- Offshore processing – Manus Island, Nauru, and PNG.

- No formal research on experiences of recent boat arrivals on ‘*no advantage bridging visas*’
Overview of research

- **Aim:** Investigate the experiences of asylum seekers living in the community on “No Advantage” bridging visa:

- **Method:** Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with asylum seekers with a BV in Perth, Sydney and Melbourne (n = 30)
  - Country of origin: Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka
  - Questions asked about experiences regarding housing, health, meaningful activities, support networks, sense of belonging, and any other issues identified as important (based on UNHCR reception standards)
1. Denial of the right to work

- Denial of important means through which asylum seekers may enhance their **self-esteem and self-worth** after lengthy periods of seeking asylum and being in detention.

- Work is ‘fundamental to human dignity. It is central to survival and development of the human personality’ (University of Michigan Law School 2010: 293).

- Consistent with other research regarding work, self-worth and empowerment (Taylor, 2000; Da Lomba, 2010).
Preliminary findings

1. Denial of the right to work

“I worry too much about my family, how am I meant to keep my mind busy here if I cannot work?”

- Despair from not being able to able to exercise any agency to provide material care for their families
- Compounding worry about their own survival of having no work rights and limited financial support.
Preliminary findings

1. Denial of the right to work

I see the Australians working very hard. On the trains going to work. I feel bad I cannot help them....

We will make good Australians. We will work hard and pay taxes and make Australian friends. We need a chance

- Felt like a burden, wanting to contribute to Australia.
- Audit on 211 asylum seekers on BV in 2005, Croucher (2007) estimated that Australian GDP had foregone between $8.7 and $22.9 million over a three year period
Preliminary findings

2. Limited welfare support

- Increased risk of *homelessness*, secondary homelessness common
- Some spoke of *exploitation* from landlords
- Social support (friends/family or access to refugee support agencies) important to securing housing
- **Destitution** – some spoke of inability to afford basic necessities.
- Such exclusion may force asylum seekers to engage in the informal labour sector (Valenta & Thorshaug, 2012) or become dependent on state welfare or community sector support (Zimmermann 2009).
Preliminary findings

3. Lack of refugee claims processing

...feeling like a rat in a wheel. 

days go by, day after day 

with my mind going around 

and round in circles. What to do?

* Much of the reported pain and uncertainty appears to be coming from feeling like they are in limbo with an uncertain fate – some reported being very worried about the Abbott government policies

* Appears to be a more salient issue for those who had been in the community for longer
Preliminary findings

4. Meaningful activities (e.g., study)

- Cannot engage in study and limited voluntary activity
- Volunteer work important for self-esteem and daily routine.
- Barriers to meaningful activities – either do not know they exist or cannot afford to go (transport costs). Compounds social exclusion
- In the absence of work or study, physical activity is important to some (e.g., running, or gym)
Preliminary findings

Other findings: Social exclusion

- Most have reported a lack of contact with Australian community, some reported just ‘existing’ in room/apartment.
- Social inclusion – ‘contingent on securing paid employment, [as well as] re-establishing family relationships, accessing educational opportunities and securing affordable and appropriate housing’ (Marston 2004: 68).
Preliminary conclusions

- The experiences of those interviewed so far reinforce the findings of earlier research that highlight the harmful effects of placing asylum seekers in the community with restrictive reception conditions (A Just Australia, 2009; ASRC, 2010; Hartley & Fleay, 2012).

- From the participant’s perspective: their experience is inconsistent with a life of dignity (UNHCR, 2001).

- A number of advocacy implications to enhance dignity – work rights, transport concessions, access to study.

- Of course, rests on political and community will...
Selected references


