

# Australian asylum discourses permeating therapeutic work with asylum seekers: A thematic analysis of specialist practitioners' experiences

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## Abstract

The current research analyses interviews that were conducted with nine specialist practitioners who worked with asylum seekers in Australia. It investigates the aspects in which the Australian asylum legislative framework impacts on therapeutic work with asylum seekers. Epistemologically, the research is grounded in a social constructionist theoretical foundation that is interested in unravelling how discourses and language construct psychological reality. The interviews were analysed by following thematic analysis. The findings of the study reveal that participants recognise that the political discourses on asylum are forcefully dominant and rigid and generate detrimental effects on asylum seekers' mental health. Likewise, they demonstrate that political discourses inform the therapeutic relationship between practitioner and client in a negative fashion and often produce an experience of professional impotence for practitioners who work with this population.

## KEYWORDS

asylum seekers, Australian asylum legislative framework, clinical work

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

During the last 30 years, the phenomenon of globalisation has profoundly shaped the socio-political landscape of the industrialised world and brought with it a migration-driven diversity. Even though globalisation as a process of integration was accompanied by "free" market forces that promoted the cross-border mobility of capital among sectors, regions and countries, intense population movement within the industrialised world, compounded by terrorism and security concerns, resulted in a growing pressure to impose strict measures that would control admission to advanced industrial countries (Richmond, 2005). This rationale gave rise to an "impenetrable sovereign fortress" philosophy characterised by extremely tight access to asylum. It is within such a complex postmodern migration context that those who manage to find their way to Australia attempt to begin a new life and seek therapeutic care for a number of difficulties and needs. More specifically, this context is distinguished by an increased control of borders for

refugees and unprecedented speed in media and communications that frame public understanding by constantly projecting and perpetuating a hostile socio-political rhetoric against asylum seekers (Anderson, Stuart, & Rossen, 2015; O'Doherty & Augoustinos, 2008; O'Doherty & Lecouteur, 2007).

Undoubtedly, therapeutic work with asylum seekers is informed by the country's dominant discourses on asylum and migration. More specifically, research in clinical work with asylum seekers documents that the asylum framework in Australia not only has significant negative repercussions on asylum seekers' well-being (Coffey, Kaplan, Sampson, & Tucci, 2010; Hartley & Fleay, 2012) but also on practitioners who conduct clinical work with them (Apostolidou, 2016; Ryde, 2011). Recent research (Apostolidou & Schweitzer, 2015) revealed that practitioners who worked with asylum seekers in Australia often felt powerless and unable to adequately support their clients. Their feelings of powerlessness were generated in response to the punitive asylum policy that informed the context in which they worked with their clients. In addition to the limitations of the asylum framework, practitioners in Australia conduct clinical work within a social context that is permeated by hostile public opinion against asylum seekers (Anderson et al., 2015; Greenhalgh, Watt, & Schutte, 2015).

The aim of this paper is to examine the aspects in which the existing network of asylum legislation and practices in Australia informs practitioners' therapeutic work with asylum seekers. This is done by examining the Australian legislative framework and the public discourses around asylum and analysing how they inform practitioners' narratives. It should be noted that this paper constitutes part of a larger research project that examined practitioners' perspectives on the use of clinical supervision in their therapeutic work with asylum seekers.

## 2 | BACKGROUND

### 2.1 | Australian asylum legislative framework and policies

Australia has one of the harshest regimes for dissuading asylum seekers. More specifically, it is the only country globally that has introduced a system of third-country processing and enforces mandatory detention for asylum seekers who enter the country without a valid visa (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017; Briskman, Zion, & Loff, 2011), that is to say that asylum seekers who arrive in Australia without a valid visa are transferred to a third country and their asylum claim is processed under the third country's laws. Importantly, there is no limit under Australian law to the length of time a person may be held in immigration detention. According to the Asylum Legacy Caseload Act, passed in 2014, asylum seekers who arrive without a valid visa and are allowed to remain in Australia, can only apply for temporary protection visas and not permanent protection (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). However, asylum seekers who arrive with a valid visa are eligible to apply for a permanent protection visa (Refugee Council of Australia, 2017); this is a law, then, that establishes discrimination based on mode of arrival. Additionally, the Legacy Caseload Act implemented a fast-track system of processing for people who arrived in Australia without a valid visa between August 2012 and January 2014. The implementation of a fast-track system means that asylum seekers whose claim for asylum is rejected will no longer have the right to make an appeal to the Administrative Appeal Tribunal (AAT) but will be referred to the Immigration Assessment Authority (IAA) (Department of Immigration and Border Protection, 2017). Significantly, unlike the AAT, the IAA will not interview asylum seekers nor consider any new information from them, a process that inevitably increases the risk of inaccuracy in decision-making with regard to granting asylum, which, in turn, results in a higher risk of asylum seekers being returned to unsafe situations (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017).

The fact that asylum seekers are denied the right to provide further information concerning the claim or even respond to it, is also a factor that increases asylum seekers' vulnerability to psychological distress and which compounds the traumas and adversities they have already suffered. It is therefore, an element that informs therapeutic work with them.

## 2.2 | Discourses around asylum

Importantly, it would be fair to examine the various discourses that are attached to the political identity of the asylum seeker and the equivocal meanings it encompasses. The concept “asylum seeker,” on the one hand, activates discourses on suffering and distress due to persecution and violation of human rights, whilst, on the other hand, it brings into action discourses of border control, restrictive measures and containment policies. Even though, by definition, the discourse of persecution constitutes the fundamental premise for a claim for asylum, the discourses on control and containment are much more dominant and readily activated, a matter that appears to reflect the current socio-political climate, and particularly the perception that asylum seekers represent a threat to national security (Hebbani, Khawaja, & Famularo, 2016; O’Doherty & Augoustinos, 2008). Evidently, the discourse of threat seems to have played a significant role in promoting negative stereotypes of asylum seekers and, similarly, in strengthening the link between asylum and terrorism in public imagination (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Qasmiyeh, 2010). This hostile environment, disguised under the pretext of national security, manifests in the tightening of the asylum system, a process that allows and enables the perpetuation of the negative atmosphere and which, in turn, reinforces the generation of discourses and practices that justify and consolidate the ground for a regime of deterrence.

A relevant study that explored how perceiving an outgroup as dissimilar to the ingroup can predict dehumanisation of asylum seekers in Australia revealed that current depictions of asylum seekers as “illegals,” and people and policies that employ the discourse of “border protection,” shape negative attitudes and promote dehumanization of asylum seekers (Greenhalgh et al., 2015). The manner in which asylum seekers represent themselves within a community of citizens or, in other words, the position they occupy in their country of relocation is also a matter that deserves consideration and one that needs to be examined in conjunction with the notion of citizenship. The political identity of asylum seekers is associated with the discourse of individuals seeking to secure a residence permit and obtain citizenship in a nation other than their nation of origin. The discourse of citizenship positions asylum seekers as “different” and creates a rather precarious distinction that eventually leads to the objectification of this group by identifying it as a “problem” (Strang & Ager, 2010). In relation to this, Soguk (1999) argued that the boundaries of identity differentiate “the inside” from the “outside,” “us” from “them,” and “the citizen” from “the refugee” (p. 17). Therefore, in the current social context, the political identity of asylum seekers is constructed in terms of the “outsider” or the “other” who attempts to access the privileges of a specific community. The construct of the “other” reflects an implication of criminality and renders asylum seekers threatening, immoral (Greenhalgh et al., 2015) and “untrustworthy until proven innocent” (Strang & Ager, 2010, p. 593).

Clearly, an examination of the Australian asylum framework and associated policies and discourses suggests that it is founded on a doctrine of national sovereignty (Goodman, 2010) that claims the right to deter and detain foreign nationals and which fosters an attitude of intolerance against asylum seekers by portraying them as individuals who exploit the country’s resources. This ideology is promoted through the policies and discourses of exclusion and detention that contribute to the disempowerment of asylum seekers. Undoubtedly, these policies and asylum legislation profoundly inform the environment in which specialist professionals work. How the legislation and a socio-political climate that is characterised by a culture of disbelief against asylum seekers impacts on practitioners’ way of working is addressed and explored in the present paper.

## 3 | THE RESEARCH

### 3.1 | Theoretical and methodological framework of study

This research is grounded in a social constructionist epistemology. Social constructionism holds that knowledge is filtered through a historical, cultural, political, and linguistic lens and that the experience of reality is predominantly constructed intersubjectively with the use of language (Burr, 1995; Dickins, 2004). It also holds that people assign meanings to reality and interpret reality and its meanings through language (Burr, 2003; Willig, 2013). Therefore,

social constructionism focuses on the examination of processes that take place within human interaction in everyday social practices. Research that is grounded in a social constructionist paradigm is fundamentally interested in unravelling how things are constructed through engaging in a process of identifying and analyzing their various components, in examining what they mean, and in interpreting what social interrelations they reflect (Phillips & Hardy, 2002).

Since the aim of this paper is to examine how the existing network of asylum legislations and practices in Australia informs practitioners' therapeutic work with asylum seekers the thematic analysis concentrated on exploring how the language that practitioners employed to describe their experiences is informed by the asylum and immigration policies that monitor and regulate asylum seekers' social and psychological life.

### 3.2 | Recruitment procedure and participants

The research participants were approached via email and were chosen on the basis of their experience of clinical work with asylum seekers. They all worked in public sector or in not-for-profit organisations that specialise in the treatment of torture survivors and provide psychological therapy to asylum seekers and refugees. The sample consisted of nine participants. Seven of them were registered psychologists (three clinical psychologists and four general psychologists), one was registered as a provisional psychologist and one was a community development worker. With regards to experience working with this client population, one practitioner had 30 years of experience; three of the practitioners had, on average, 14 years of experience; three practitioners had, on average, 7.5 years of experience; and two practitioners had, on average, 1.5 years of experience working in the field of asylum seeker and refugee mental health. The interviews were conducted in South Queensland, Australia over a period of four months. Each interview lasted on average 50 minutes. Ethical approval for the research project was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the Queensland University of Technology.

### 3.3 | Data collection and analysis

For data collection, a semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was constructed. As already mentioned, this paper constitutes part of a larger study examining the experience of practitioners' therapeutic engagement with asylum seekers and the experience of participating in supervision. For this purpose, the interview contained questions that aimed to gain information regarding the practitioners' experience of working with asylum seekers in Australia. Transcribed interviews were read several times and each interview was coded line by line with the use of Atlas.ti 7.5.6, a data analysis software.

The data analysis was done following Braun and Clarke's (2008, 2013) six-stage approach to thematic analysis which allowed "repeated patterns of meaning" to be identified and enabled the researcher to describe and interpret emergent themes. More specifically, the material was organised in major themes and sub-themes. For each theme the researcher selected extracts that reflected practitioners' experience on how the asylum legislative framework impacted on their therapeutic work with asylum seekers.

### 3.4 | Findings

The findings were derived from the analysis by examining the themes that emerged in practitioners' interviews. They are presented with the use of verbatim quotations from the transcripts; omissions are indicated by the use of bracketed ellipses; plain ellipses indicate pauses. Numbers in parentheses refer to the different interview transcripts.

Participants' narratives revealed that therapeutic work with asylum seekers is directly informed by the country's legislative framework on asylum and migration. Interestingly, the key aspects of how the Australian political frame on asylum and migration constructed therapeutic work with asylum seekers were identified and organised around three main themes: political discourses and asylum seekers' mental health; political discourses and impact on the therapeutic relationship; and political discourses and practitioners' sense of professional impotence. It should be noted that the

distinction between these three domains is not a straightforward one and, as one would expect, all domains are interlinked with each other and contain references that might belong to more than one domain.

### 3.4.1 | Political discourses and asylum seekers' mental health

The manner in which political discourses impacted on asylum seekers' mental health emerged strongly from the majority of the interviews. More specifically, the asylum discourses appeared to have a constitutive power over asylum seekers' psychological life; a position that is captured in the extracts below:

*I guess, particularly for asylum seekers, the whole part of their presentation is in the insulting process; they've become a non-person and sometimes they might use ID numbers or whatever so they go through this process where they lose their sense of self, their ability to predict, anticipate events [ . . . ] Their personal construct system is severely damaged, [ . . . ] the government does that, you know, so the government is causing these problems. (ID1)*

*When they come here, they, by being detained and by being actually treated in this way basically [ . . . ] it reinforces the message that was previously given by the government from the country they belong to, that actually you are not a person with full rights, you know, having dignity and so on, so this unfortunately, the psychological effect on them, basically they are not believed, they are not validated. (ID5)*

*You can bring the client in, you know you restate a little bit of hope but the following day or next week they have news from the Immigration Department or whatever and they just go back to . . . [ . . . ] so the government or the system is creating all these mental health issues in this population. (ID7)*

As these three extracts reveal, the legislative discourses around asylum are so powerful that they not only construct asylum seekers' psychological reality but they completely permeate their sense of identity and notion of self. This takes place both through the mechanism of detention, as well as through a process of objectification that denies asylum seekers' personal qualities and human rights and has detrimental consequences on their psychological health. Importantly, the manner in which these discourses inform asylum seekers' personal identity is interconnected with the political position they hold within the host society. As already discussed, the objectification of asylum seekers is a process that emerges in relation to their attempts to access social rights in a community (Soguk, 1999; Strang & Ager, 2010)—an attempt that automatically positions them as a threat to the social system. Thus, upon examining matters from a perspective that is interested in unravelling the constitutive force of the socio-political context in which narratives emerge, it could be argued that, in these extracts, practitioners highlight the fact that the dominant governmental discourses of asylum and the system of authority have the power to produce and regulate asylum seekers' sense of self. Along the same lines, they emphasise that asylum seekers' sense of self and mental health difficulties are the direct product of the Australian asylum framework and policy of detention. The harmful psychological effects of imprisonment and prolonged detention on asylum seekers are well documented in relevant literature (Briskman et al., 2011; Coffey et al., 2010) and are in line with practitioners' perspectives on how political discourses impact on asylum seekers' mental health.

As it appears, practitioners' views on the impact of the legislative discourses on asylum seekers' mental health also inform their own experience of working with this population. In addition, these dominant political discourses seem to have a significant impact on the way practitioners view themselves as professionals. These two aspects are explored in the following sections.

### 3.4.2 | Political discourses and impact on therapeutic relationship

As some of the practitioners explained, the experience of working with asylum seekers was located within the discourse of the impact that the political context and associated practices have on the therapeutic relationship between practitioner and client. This position is evident in the extracts below:

*Whether you like it or not, you are seen by your clients as a representative of the host society and [ . . . ] I found myself saying to my clients, you know I am not an Australian, I am a migrant too. (ID2)*

*What could end up happening is that you feel part of the system, so you are part of the system and I mean, I am part of the system, we are part of the system and this system is seen as making all these awful things. (ID7)*

*If I put myself in asylum seekers' position knowing I've trouble with the government, it's almost like "Oh yes! This organisation wants to help me but they seem to be colliding." It could be perceived as, you know, you are not really wanting to help them but only working the government's agenda. So it can break down, I guess, a bit of relationship. (ID8)*

Here, it appears that the system of authority and the political discourses around asylum create a distinction between "the inside" and "the outside," "the citizen" and "the refugee" (Soguk, 1999), a distinction that informs and colours the foundation of the therapeutic relationship. More specifically, in these passages, practitioners use the discourses of system and authority, and acknowledge that the distinction generated by the asylum discourses constructs the context in which therapeutic work takes place and informs the dynamics between practitioner and client. The passages in fact illustrate that the political discourses have a negative impact on both practitioners and clients. Therefore, practitioners find themselves in the difficult position of trying to differentiate themselves from the system that is responsible for asylum seekers' psychosocial reality, whilst they are clearly aware of the position they might quite rightly occupy in their clients' eyes. Once again, one can discern that the powerful corpus of asylum discourses pervades the therapeutic space and impacts on the practitioner–client relationship in a negative fashion. In other words, the political discourses appear to shake the very foundation of the therapeutic relationship which establishes a safe and trusting environment, by bringing into the foreground and highlighting the distinction between the "insider" and the "outsider."

Additionally, these discourses have a significant impact on practitioners' notions of their role as professionals, and particularly, their experience of representing or being part of a system they do not identify with. This finding, particularly practitioners' experience of being perceived as part of the system, is also linked to the sense of frustration and professional impotence that practitioners reported and which is presented in the section below.

### **3.4.3 | Political discourses and practitioners' sense of professional impotence**

Another way in which the Australian asylum legislative framework informed practitioners' notions of their professional role revolved around the manner in which its political discourses constructed an experience of frustration and professional impotence for the majority of the practitioners who participated in the study.

*Also verging on meaningless because you are sitting in the middle of a policy environment that doesn't budge and [ . . . ] after a while you wonder is it meaningful or it is actually meaningless? (ID2)*

*Especially with the asylum seekers because you do have this hopelessness and uncertainty of am I staying? And if I am not staying, how can they send me back knowing, you know, I'll probably die? [ . . . ] It's very difficult when you want to try and help and address asylum seekers' situation because of the huge amount of uncertainty there and the rules and regulations of what they are allowed to do and what they are not allowed to do. (ID8)*

*If they are feeling hopeless, you know, or worthless because they left their family, you know, back there, how am I supposed to tell somebody you'll be all right when, actually, I know that it's going to be between three to five years, nothing is guaranteed that you will get a permanent visa here so, you know, for me it's very difficult to help them when I know that they can't bring their family here, they can't, they don't get benefits. (ID9)*

As the first extract reveals, the asylum discourses are powerful and rigid to the extent that they shape practitioners' experience of working with asylum seekers, and at times create a sense of meaninglessness. Interestingly, this extract addresses the conflictive relationship between the two dominant discourses that interact within the context of clinical work with asylum seekers: (a) the asylum discourses, and (b) the discourse on meaning. However, it appears the asylum discourses have such inflexible boundaries that they permeate the discourse of meaning and produce experiences of impotence and meaninglessness. The experience of professional and personal impotence among practitioners is also evident in the other two extracts that draw upon the discourse of hopelessness. More specifically, asylum seekers' feelings of hopelessness produced by the socio-political context and associated discourses also inform practitioners' experiences of working with them. Relevant literature illustrates that asylum seekers' experience of uncertainty often creates feelings of powerlessness in practitioners who conduct therapeutic work with them (Apostolidou & Schweitzer, 2015; Ryde, 2011). The asylum discourses are forceful to the extent that they often override the discourse of meaning and produce an experience that lies on the verge of meaningless and hopelessness for practitioners who work with this population.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The findings of the study showed that participants acknowledge the huge impact that the Australian asylum legislative framework has on asylum seekers and, furthermore, believe that asylum seekers' mental health difficulties are the direct product of these discourses and associated practices. As participants explained, the prolonged detention that asylum seekers suffer, compounded by the continuous uncertainty regarding their status, has a highly damaging psychological effect. The legislative discourses on the subject are also responsible for producing a notion of asylum seekers as system abusers among the general population. More specifically, the process through which the governmental system of authority produces and perpetuates this notion about asylum seekers is founded on the distinction between "the inside" and "the outside" (Soguk, 1999) that portrays asylum seekers as "others" who threaten social order by seeking to take advantage of the host country (Greenhalgh et al., 2015; Strang & Ager, 2010). Importantly, as participants recognised, this political distinction between asylum seekers and citizens penetrates the therapeutic relationship and instils an attitude of distrust and disbelief towards practitioners that jeopardises the foundation of clinical work and impacts negatively on both practitioners and clients. In other words, the political discourses are not simply present in the therapeutic encounter but create a barrier between the two parties involved. Finally, participants held the view that the context and discourses of Australian asylum legislation are so dominant and rigid that they inform the working experience with clients and produce an experience of professional impotence for them. The experience of powerlessness and impotence among practitioners who work with this population is a finding that emphasises the importance of practitioners receiving adequate support and supervision in order to protect themselves from becoming disempowered and feeling deskilled (Apostolidou & Schweitzer, 2015).

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings of this study provide insight into how the political body of knowledge and power informs clinical work with asylum seekers. They demonstrate that clinical work with this population places unusual demands on practitioners, as they need to distance themselves from the system of authority in order to establish a trusting relationship with the clients. Likewise, they reveal that practitioners appear to be engulfed in a socio-political context that generates their clients' mental health difficulties and often find themselves unable to help them; an experience which in turn generates feelings of hopelessness. The findings of the study stress the importance of practitioners receiving specialised support that takes into account the unique challenges of clinical work with asylum seekers. Specialised support can be of value to both clinicians who work with asylum seekers, and supervisors who provide supervision to practitioners who work with this population.

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