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Attitudes towards Refugees:

The Dark Side of Prejudice in Australia

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Abstract

Australia has a significant intake of refugees each year. The majority enter through the humanitarian entrants program and a small percentage arrive seeking asylum. These processes have resulted in considerable debate, which has sometimes been associated with negative attitudes within the mainstream community. Research has indicated that realistic threat and symbolic threat are important components of the integrated threat theory for understanding opposition towards immigrants and refugees. Social desirability has also been indicated as potentially influential in the expression of negative attitudes. The current study examined the prevalence and correlates of negative attitudes towards refugees in an Australian sample. Participants comprised 261 volunteer university students (119 males and 142 females). Participants were assessed on a prejudicial attitude measure, measures of symbolic and realistic threat and the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale. The results indicated over half (59.8%) of participants scored above the mid-point on prejudicial attitudes. Males reported less favourable attitudes towards refugees than females. Analysis revealed both realistic and symbolic threats were influential in predicting prejudicial attitudes and, of these, realistic threat was the better predictor. The results are discussed in relation to the integrated threat theory of prejudice and in the context of addressing prejudice towards refugees in Australia.

Attitudes towards Refugees:

The Dark Side of Prejudice in Australia

Australia has endured periods of ethnocentricism followed over time by policy shifts embracing multiculturalism. Consequently, there is a spectrum of opinion towards refugees and persons seeking asylum and attempting to settle in Australia. Asylum seekers arriving on Australian shores in ways other than through the prescribed immigration channels are the subject of particular debate and disagreement regarding their right to be seeking asylum. Similar patterns of asylum seeking and debate about how to approach the situation are occurring in most Western countries at the present time, necessitating the exploration of attitudes towards refugees and the prevalence and correlates of prejudice towards refugees.

The present study will examine Australian attitudes towards refugees. Following from North American research it is predicted that intergroup processes play a major role in prejudice towards refugees in Australia. Specifically, the current study will investigate two important intergroup processes, realistic threat and symbolic threat, as well as the potential influence of social desirability in the expression and formation of attitudes towards refugees. The theoretical basis of realistic threat theory and symbolic threat theory will be reviewed and it will be hypothesised that there is a relationship between these constructs and negative attitudes towards refugees in an Australian sample. The term refugee, which was utilized in collection of data, is used in its broader sense to refer to people from afar seeking refuge in Australia. This group includes people who currently enjoy full refugee status and people who are considered asylum seekers. That is, their legal status has not yet been determined.

Australians have reportedly held overwhelmingly negative attitudes towards minority groups since their first contact with Chinese labourers (McKay & Pittman, 1994). For example, Beswick and Hills (1972) found 53% of white Australians expressed negative attitudes towards immigrants when measured on the Australian ethnocentrism scale. Similarly, contemporary research such as Walker (1994), who examined attitudes towards Aborigines, Asians and women, and Pedersen and Walker (1997), who examined attitudes towards Aborigines, have also confirmed the prevalence of prejudicial attitudes towards these groups in Australia. In both studies, males were significantly more prejudiced than females. Contrary to past research, Islam and Jahjah (2001) found young Australians' (18-29 years) attitudes towards Aboriginals, Asians and Arabs were significantly more positive than hypothesised. However, measures utilised in their study only measured blatant prejudicial attitudes, and Fraser and Islam (2000) and Walker (2001) have documented that most Australians express subtle rather than blatant forms of prejudice. These findings are consistent with Ho, Niles, Penney and Thomas (1994) who indicated that 48% of the Australian respondents agreed that there were too many migrants in Australia and the number should be decreased. Whilst this research has generally confirmed a prevalence of prejudice existing in Australia, research aimed at exploring the mediating factors specific to prejudicial attitudes towards ethnic minorities, and in particular refugees, has been limited (Walker, 1994). Pederson, Griffiths, Contos, Bishop and Walker (2000) concluded their exploration of attitudes towards Aboriginal Australians with concern regarding the degree of prejudice of most of their respondents. Similarly to Fraser and Islam (2000) and , Pederson and colleagues also concluded that a new, modern type of prejudice was prevalent in Australia mediated by false beliefs about Aboriginal people.

Research examining attitudes towards refugees in Australia and elsewhere is limited. Researchers have not explored social attitudes towards refugees but have focused predominately upon attitudes towards immigrants on the assumption that the two groups might have endured similar experiences. In more recent times and in the current political context, refugees and asylum seekers are dealing with potentially very different experiences to those that have arrived as immigrants. As such, refugees are likely to be viewed by their host countries as quite different to those individuals migrating to another country. Those studies that are available have most often examined attitudes towards a subsection of the refugee community. In Australia, McKay and Pittam (1994) measured attitudes towards Vietnamese refugees and found the perception of threat (measured via “group fictions”) was the strongest predictor of prejudicial attitudes. Curry (2000) examined attitudes towards Middle Eastern refugees arriving in Ireland and found high levels of prejudice towards refugees arriving in Dublin with respondents reporting that most refugees coming to Ireland were only seeking wealth and wishing to exploit the social system in Ireland. Curry reported that those respondents with higher levels of education were less likely to report prejudice towards refugees. These findings accord with those of Crowell (2000) who reported similar findings based on attitudes towards refugees in the U.S.A.

While empirical research on attitudes held by the public towards refugees is scant, particularly in Australia, there are numerous national opinion polls regarding the views of Australians towards refugees. A relatively recent poll on this issue was conducted with 1200 participants during late 2002, by Newspoll. Shanahan (2002) reported 48% of participants supported turning away all asylum seekers arriving on the shores of Australia and 38% agreed to allow some asylum seekers entry depending on

the circumstances. Only 10% of respondents were in favour of accepting all asylum seekers arriving on Australian shores.

Theory of Prejudice

The current study defined prejudice in terms of the radial network model of attitudes, as “a negative affective response, which includes both cognitive evaluations and emotional reactions” (Stephan & Stephan, 1993, p. 37). Within this context the radial network model proposes that stereotypes and prejudice are primarily related through cognitive and affective networks associated with group labels and traits (Stephan, Ageyev, Coates-Shrider, Stephan & Abalakina, 1994). This model has been expanded upon by the integrated threat theory of prejudice (Stephan & Stephan, 1996); thus the radial network model and the integrated threat theory of prejudice are complimentary. The integrated threat theory of prejudice proposes that there are four types of threats posed by out-groups: realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes, which act as causal antecedents of inter-group prejudice in inter-cultural relations. The postulated threats are discussed in turn.

Realistic threat has its theoretical origins in realistic group conflict theory, but is primarily concerned with subjectively perceived threats posed by the out-group. Realistic threats pertain to “the out-group endangering the existence, political or economic power, or physical well-being of the in-group” (Bizman & Yinon, 2001, p. 191). Research has demonstrated realistic threats include inter-group competition over scarce resources such as land or jobs (Jackson, 1993; Levine & Campbell, 1972) and threats to economic interest, social status or welfare of the in-group such as health threats (Sherif, 1966; Stephan & Stephan, 1996). Research has consistently demonstrated that realistic threat is a robust predictor of prejudice (Islam & Jahjah,

2001; Schwarzwald & Tur-Kaspa, 1997; Stephan, Ybarra & Bachman, 1999; Stephan et al., 1994, Strunch & Schwartz, 1989). Specifically, Stephan and Stephan (1996) demonstrated realistic threat to be a more reliable predictor of prejudicial attitudes than ethnocentrism, authoritarianism, self-esteem and attributional complexity.

Symbolic threat relates to perceiving group differences in morals, values, norms, standards, beliefs and attitudes (Stephan & Stephan, 1996). Research examining symbolic threat has demonstrated that out-groups that adhere to different worldviews threaten the in-group and are often disliked as a consequence (Stephan, Diaz-Loving & Duran, 2000). Displays of symbolic threat prejudice include condemning ethnic customs and traditions that impede upon the in-group's values and morals (Branscombe & Wann, 1994) and opposing social policies that benefit out-groups (Esses, Jackson & Armstrong, 1998). Collectively, research has demonstrated that symbolic threats are consistently found to be influential in the development and expression of prejudice (Esses, Hadcock & Zanna, 1993; McConahay, 1986; Sears & Henry, 2003; Weigel & Howes, 1985; Ybarra & Stephan, 1994).

Intergroup anxiety refers to the experience of being personally threatened while interacting socially with out-group members, because of "concerns about negative outcomes for the self such as being rejected embarrassed and ridiculed" (Stephan and Stephan, 1985, p. 158). Several studies have demonstrated a relationship between intergroup anxiety and prejudice dependent upon antagonism (Britt, Bonecki, Vescio, Biernat & Brown, 1996), prior contact (Islam & Hewstone, 1993) and dissimilarity (Stephan & Stephan, 1992). However, recent research such as Stephan et al. (2000), found intergroup anxiety was not a significant predictor of prejudicial attitudes towards Mexicans. Furthermore, the quality of contact was not found to alter reported attitudes.

Similarly, additional research has found high correlations between intergroup anxiety and prejudice, indicating that the scales may be measuring the same construct (Maio, Esses & Bell, 1994; Stephan, Ybarra & Bachman, 1999; Stephan, Ybarra, Martinez, Schwarzwald & Tur-Kaspa, 1998; Stephan & Stephan, 1996). In this way, within the context of the integrated threat theory of prejudice, the research examining the relationship between intergroup anxiety and prejudice are equivocal.

Negative stereotypes are “implied threats posed by the out-group to in-group members as they are related to expectations concerning the out-group members’ behaviour” (Stephan, Ybarra & Bachman, 1999, p. 191). Research has consistently supported the long held notion that stereotypes are related to prejudice (Esses et al., 1998; Ho & Jackson, 2001; Stephan et al., 1993). Esses et al. (1993) found if in-group members perceive members of out-groups as aggressive, dishonest or unintelligent they will expect interactions with them to be negative and as a result, hold negative attitudes. In this way, prior relations between the groups are an integral component of the creation of negative stereotypes and the subsequent threat it poses (Stephan & Stephan, 1996).

Empirical research of the integrated threat theory of prejudice

Recent research has suggested that the four threats; realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes; may uniquely be related to prejudicial attitudes, independent of the mediating role of status. For example, Stephan et al. (1998), found each of the threats uniquely accounted for a significant proportion of prejudicial attitudes reported by Spanish and Israeli people towards Moroccan, Ethiopian and Russian people living in Spain and Israel. Furthermore, when a structural equation model analysis was conducted, all threat variables were tapping the single dimension of realistic threat. Similarly, Bizman and Yion (2001) found realistic and

symbolic threats accounted for the largest unique variance (37% and 27% respectively), in predicting prejudice dependent upon participants' membership to their social group. Stephan, Diaz-Loving and Duran (2000) found that 52% of the variance was explained by realistic and symbolic threat as compared to 22% from intergroup anxiety and stereotypes reported by Americans towards Mexicans living within America.

Collectively, these results support the notion that the four threats can be classified according to their intergroup versus interpersonal emphasis (Stephan et al., 1998). Specifically, realistic and symbolic threats measure prejudicial attitudes predominantly related to the in-group as a whole, whereas intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes measure fears that are predominantly related to in-group members perceptions of each other (Bizman & Yinon, 2001). In addition, intergroup anxiety and stereotypes appear to lack the predictive capacity demonstrated by realistic and symbolic threat. Based upon these findings the current study measures the two dimensions of threat related to prejudicial attitudes concerned with the in-group as a whole: realistic and symbolic threat.

Research Rationale

Previous research has consistently shown that symbolic and realistic threats explain attitudes towards out-groups. Because refugees may be conceptualised as an out-group, symbolic and realistic threat theories may influence negative attitudes towards refugees in Australia. Social desirability cannot be ignored as a potentially influential variable in the expression of attitudes towards refugees given the political and media attention that refugee issues have received in Australia in recent times, and in light of research which has highlighted the power of political and social rhetoric both internationally and in Australia (Augoustinos, M, Tuffin, & Sale, 1999; Rapley, 1998;

Reicher & Hopkins, 1996) and the emerging literature exploring implicit prejudice (Chen & Bargh, 1997; Dovidio, Kawakami & Gaertner, 2002). The present study will explore attitudes towards refugees in an Australian sample and the relationships of attitudes with perceived threat and social desirability response bias.

Hypotheses

It is hypothesised that perceptions of realistic and symbolic threat will be related to attitudes towards refugees in an Australian sample. Specifically, participants who report high levels of negative attitudes towards refugees will score highly on measures of realistic and symbolic threat.

It is predicted that there will be a larger unique contribution of realistic threat than symbolic threat, predicted in part by the political context associated with the arrival of “unauthorised” refugees threatening the provision of services to the community.

Given that the sample is drawn from a university population, and in light of the volume of media and political attention given to refugee arrivals in Australia recently, it is hypothesised that there may be a tendency of participants to respond to the measures in a socially desirable manner, influenced by their university context. It is predicted that higher levels of social desirability may be associated with lower levels of prejudice.

The final hypothesis is that there will be an association between gender and attitude and threat scores as found in prior studies of attitudes towards immigrants in Australia (Morris & Heaven, 1986; Ho et al., 1994). Specifically, it is predicted that males may report more negative attitudes towards refugees, and higher levels of perceived threat from refugees.

Method

Participants

Participants comprised 261 undergraduate university students (119 males and 142 females). We recruited participants from a 1st year psychology pool ($n = 63$), a faculty of engineering ($n = 27$) and a faculty of law ($n = 37$) with the remainder recruited from 2nd and 3rd year psychology and social science student cohorts. The mean age of the sample was 26 years, with ages ranging from 17 to 65 years. Over three quarters (82.8%) of the sample was Australian born, with 73.9% identifying their ethnicity as Australian; 17.2% as European; 3.2% as New Zealand; 3.4% as Asian and 1.8% as other. Over half (72.1%) were employed and 79.7% were not homeowners.

Instruments

Prejudicial attitude survey. Prejudicial attitudes towards refugees ('refugees' as defined previously as people from afar seeking refuge in Australia) were assessed using the Prejudicial Attitude Survey, which contains 6 evaluative and 6 emotional reactions (Stephan et al., 1998). The response format consisted of a 10-point scale ranging from 0 (e.g., *no hostility at all*) to 9 (e.g., *extreme hostility*), which required participants to indicate the extent to which they felt these items reflected their reactions towards refugees currently arriving in Australia. Items were reversed scored where necessary to create an index reflecting the negativity of the participants' attitude, where higher values indicated higher levels of prejudicial attitude.

Realistic threat measure. An adapted version of Stephan, Ybarra and Bachman's (1999) 7-item realistic threat questionnaire was used to measure the degree to which individuals report fear regarding threats to the physical, material or welfare of the in-group or its members (items can be found in Appendix A). The modification to the

questionnaire was in respect to language. For example, “Asian immigrants” was changed to “refugees”. The response format consisted of a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 10 (strongly disagree). Items were reverse scored as necessary, with higher scores representing higher realistic threat.

Symbolic threat measure. An adapted version of the Stephan et al. (1999), 7-item symbolic threat questionnaire was used to capture the perception of threat posed by perceived differences relating to cultural values, morals and beliefs between the participants and refugees (items can be found in Appendix A). The same modification criteria and response format as the realistic threat questionnaire was used. Items were reverse scored as necessary, with higher scores representing higher reports of symbolic threat.

Marlowe-Crowne social desirability scale. The Marlowe-Crowne social desirability scale was used to determine the degree to which responses on the prejudicial attitude, realistic and symbolic threat measures were influenced by responding in a socially desirable manner. The shortened version of the original scale was used in the study (Reynolds, 1982). The 13-item format has been shown to correlate at .93 with the longer version and has demonstrated a test-retest reliability of .74 (Zooks & Sipps, 1985).

Procedure

Data was collected in the months of August 2002 and September 2002. Within the Australian context, data collection occurred after the “Baby Overboard Affair” in 2001 and prior to the Bali bombing. All participants were invited to participate voluntarily, being informed that the study would be exploring attitudes towards refugees in an Australian context. Following the provision of informed consent, participants

proceeded to fill out the questionnaire, taking approximately 10 minutes to complete. A minimal number of participants (less than 10) were not willing to participate in the study after reading the information sheet. Debriefing was offered to all participants with researchers making themselves available upon questionnaire completion to answer questions and discuss the questionnaire with participants.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The prejudicial attitude scale and the two threat scales have no quantitative cut off points to decipher low, moderate and high prejudicial attitudes. Therefore descriptive statistics (means, medians and standard deviations) were calculated for each of the scales, the attitudes measure, the realistic threat measure and symbolic threat measure. These calculations allowed for the investigation of the distribution of the sample which reported highly on the measures, important in the context of there being little empirical study in Australia in this area for many years (see Table 1).

Please Insert Table 1 about here

Tests of Hypotheses

Prejudicial attitudes

The results indicated that 59.8% of participants scored above the mid-point on the prejudicial attitude scale. This percentage highlighted the high prevalence of negative attitudes towards refugees in the current sample. However, an inspection of histograms showed a bi-modal distribution for the prejudicial attitude measure, which clustered around values of 5 and 8. Examination of the items on the prejudicial attitude scale

suggested a possible two-factor breakdown of the measure: positive attitudes and negative attitudes towards refugees. An exploratory factor analysis was performed to assess this possibility. A Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin of .94 showed the data set to be factorable. A Principle component extraction found two factors with eigenvalues greater than one. Examination of a scree plot also suggested a two-factor solution. The variance accounted for by the first factor was .64. The variance accounted for by the second factor was 14%, with the cumulative variance from these two factors accounting for 78% of the total variance in the measure. The two subscales are presented in Table 2. An oblique rotation was applied supporting a moderately negative correlation between the two factors -.58. Upon inspection of Table 2, it can be seen that the two factors consist of positive attitude items and a negative attitude items toward refugees, respectively. Therefore the bimodality of the attitudes measure distribution appears to reflect two underlying factors in the scale, a measure of positive attitudes towards refugees and a measure of negative attitudes towards refugees. Reliability analyses using Cronbach's α revealed that the items on the positive attitude ($\alpha = .92$) and negative attitude ($\alpha = .95$) measures had adequate internal consistency. Measures of realistic threat, symbolic threat, and social desirability also showed adequate internal consistency (see Table 1).

Please Insert Table 2 about here

Relationship between prejudicial attitudes, threats and social desirability

Correlations among the variables of prejudicial attitude, realistic threat, symbolic threat and the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale are represented in Table 1

with the descriptive statistics. As a result of the factor analysis, correlations between the positive and negative attitude factors were explored in relation to the original attitude measure and also reported in Table 1.

The high correlation between the independent variables of realistic and symbolic threat suggested a potential problem with multi-collinearity and singularity. However, as bivariate correlation between the two predictors was less than .9, tolerance levels were greater than .01, and variance inflation factor indices (VIF) were well below 10, collinearity was not considered problematic (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Further, as the unique variance explained by each predictor was of primary interest in the study both threat predictors were included in the analysis.

A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to predict general prejudicial attitudes towards refugees from realistic, symbolic and social desirability scores (Table 3). Marlowe-Crowne scores were entered at step 1, to assess the effect of social desirability on prejudicial attitudes.

Please Insert Table 3 about here

The results of this analysis indicated that social desirability accounted for 8% of the variance in attitudes, $R^2_{(adj)} = .08$, $\Delta R^2 = .8$, $F(1, 259) = 21.94$, $p < .001$. Symbolic and realistic threat were entered at step 2, and accounted for an additional 77% of the variability in prejudicial attitudes, $F(2, 257) = 663.00$, $p < .001$. Collectively, social desirability and the two threat variables accounted for 85% of the variability in prejudicial attitudes, $F(3, 257) = 486.70$, $p < .001$. Upon inspection of the β weights, both realistic threat, $t(260) = 17.01$, $p < .001$, and symbolic threat, $t(260) = 6.17$, $p <$

.001, contributed significantly to the regression equation accounting for 16.8% and 2.2% of unique variance in model 2, respectively. These results suggest realistic threat is a better independent predictor of prejudicial attitudes, than symbolic threat.

To assess whether the non-normal distribution of general attitude affected the results of the regression analyses, a new dichotomized general attitude variable was created, with participants scoring 5 or less designated as having low prejudice and those participants scoring above 5 as having high prejudicial attitude. A two-block forced entry logistic regression was performed on the dichotomized attitude variable, with social desirability entered in the first block and realistic and symbolic threat entered in the second block. As with the linear regression analysis above, after controlling for social desirability, both realistic and symbolic threat significantly predicted group membership (Block $\chi^2(2) = 272.66, p < .001$) correctly predicting 95% of participants' group membership. Realistic threat was the better predictor of prejudice ($B = 1.93, B_{se} = .34, Wald = 32.28, p < .001$), with participants with higher levels of realistic threat almost seven times more likely than low scorers to be high in prejudice (Odds ratio = 6.86). Symbolic threat was less predictive of prejudice ($B = .475, B_{se} = .20, Wald = 5.67, p < .05$), with participants with higher levels of symbolic threat almost one and half times more likely to be high in prejudice than low scorers (Odds ratio = 1.61). As with the linear regression analyses, the result of the logistic regression demonstrate, that whilst realistic and symbolic threat are highly correlated with each other and both are good predictors of general prejudicial attitude, realistic threat has far stronger predictive power of prejudice.

Analysis of gender differences. A series of t-tests were performed to evaluate differences between men and women on all measures (general prejudicial attitude,

negative attitude, positive attitude, realistic threat, symbolic threat and social desirability). Using a Bonferroni adjustment to control for Type 1 errors (critical p value = .008), a significant difference between males and females for both general prejudicial attitude, $t(259) = -3.39, p = .001$, positive attitude, $t(259) = 3.85, p = .001$, and realistic threat, $t(259) = -.301, p = .003$. Males reported significantly higher scores than women on general prejudice ($M = 5.20, SD = 1.93$ vs $M = 4.31, SD = 2.27$) and realistic threat ($M = 6.53, SD = 2.16$ vs $M = 5.62, SD = 2.60$). Women scored higher than men on positive attitude towards refugees ($M = 3.83, SD = 2.14$ vs $M = 2.86, SD = 1.89$). There was trend ($t = -2.55, p = .01$) for men to have greater negative attitude towards refugees ($M = 4.25, SD = 2.50$ vs $M = 3.40, SD = 2.79$). No gender differences were found for symbolic threat or social desirability.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to investigate attitudes towards refugees in a post-September 11 Australian context. The time of data collection is thought to be of pivotal importance in the results of this study, as the data was collected during the months of August and September 2002. The data collection phase fell directly around the 1st anniversary of the events of September 11, 2001, as well as following Tampa and the “Baby Overboard Affair” in Australian politics. The “Baby Overboard Affair” refers to an incident which occurred in the context of an election campaign during which the Prime Minister and some Ministers alleged that asylum seekers arriving in Australian territorial waters were not only illegals but unsuitable to be Australians. They based their conclusion on a grainy video alleging that an asylum seeker was threatening to throw his child overboard if Australia would not accede to his demands. The allegations were later shown to be false and the government was accused of

manufacturing the incident for party political purposes. There can be little doubt that these issues were potentially influential in the reported levels of prejudice and perceived threat from refugees and thus the results of the study provide not only the beginnings of a theoretical understanding of prejudice towards refugees in Australia, but also a specific insight into community sentiment and reaction to the international and domestic events of the time.

It was hypothesised that the perception of realistic and symbolic threats would be related to attitudes towards refugees in this sample. Realistic threat was predicted to have the strongest influence on attitudes towards refugees. It was hypothesised that perceived attitudes towards refugees may in turn be influenced by social desirability, with higher social desirability being related to lower prejudice towards refugees. It was also hypothesised that there would be gender differences in the perception of threat and in the degree of prejudicial attitudes reported. Specifically, males were predicted to express a higher degree of threat and also stronger negative attitudes towards refugees than females.

Negative Attitudes towards Refugees

The results indicated over half (59.8%) of participants scored above the mid-point on prejudicial attitudes that included items such as disliking, hatred, hostility, admiration and sympathy towards refugees (the latter two items reverse scored). These results indicate there is a high prevalence of prejudicial attitudes towards refugees, which is consistent with previous Australian research demonstrating prejudice towards immigrant groups and Aboriginal Australians (Ho et al., 1994; Pederson & Walker, 1997). Specifically, the reported attitudes in this study are consistent with and

confirm public opinion polls reported in Australia at the time of data collection for this study.

Realistic and Symbolic Threats and Attitudes towards Refugees

The results confirmed that realistic and symbolic threats were significantly related to attitudes towards refugees. The results indicate that participants expressing prejudicial attitudes towards refugees perceived refugees as representing a threat to Australian economic resources and culture. Specifically, participants who recorded prejudicial attitudes towards refugees were more likely to perceive refugees as representing a resource threat (realistic threat) than participants who expressed more positive attitudes towards refugees. Similarly, participants who recorded negative attitudes towards refugees were more likely to perceive refugees as a threat to Australian values (symbolic threat) than participants who recorded positive attitudes towards refugees.

The hypothesis that realistic threat would be a better predictor of prejudicial attitudes was supported by the results of the study. Realistic threat was the strongest predictor of participants' attitudes. That is, participants who expressed negative attitudes towards refugees were mostly concerned about maintaining current welfare conditions and community cohesiveness and maximizing economic and health resources for in-group members. Participants who reported high levels of realistic threat felt refugees posed a threat to the continued way of life enjoyed by many in Australia more than being concerned about the threat refugees posed to Australian values or beliefs, although this symbolic threat was still evidenced and influential in attitudes in the sample.

The demographic information revealed that attitudes towards refugees were influenced by gender. Males reported significantly higher levels of prejudice towards refugees than females. Furthermore, males scored significantly higher than females on measures of realistic threat. It may be speculated that men might perceive refugees as a greater threat to resources than women based upon traditional stereotypes of men assuming responsibility for economic resources and safety/cohesiveness in a community.

Contribution to Theory

The integrated threat theory of prejudice, whilst not a comprehensive theory of prejudice, allows comparisons of the relative contribution of each component of threat to prejudice (Stephan, et al., 1998). As such, the results of this study provide strong support for the notion that the perceptions of both realistic and symbolic threat predict prejudicial attitudes within this sample, with realistic threat emerging as the stronger predictor within the context of Australian attitudes towards refugees at the time of data collection.

The findings of the current study are consistent with previous research that has placed realistic and symbolic threats at the centre of intergroup hostility and negative out-group attribution (Stephan et al., 1999). The findings are also consistent with previous European and North American research that suggests realistic threats represent the principal source of intergroup conflict and negative out-group attribution, with symbolic threat having an important but minor role in intergroup hostility (Embers, 1981; Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996; Esses et al., 1998; Quillian, 1995; Sherif et al., 1961; Stephan et al., 2000).

Limitations of the Current Study

Previous research has shown that higher educated individuals hold less negative attitudes towards refugees (Crowell, 2000; Morris & Heaven, 1984). The present sample using university students, therefore, may have underestimated the level of negative attitudes and perceived threats within the Australian community. Furthermore, a generalisation from a university sample to a general population needs to be treated with caution.

Finally, whilst the three scales used in the present study are suitable as instruments for measuring attitudes and perceptions towards refugees, it cannot be claimed definitively that the response constitutes each individual's integral attitude towards refugees. This is largely due to attitudes being more complex and multi-dimensional than the present scales allow. It may be hypothesised that responses are related to similar attitudes to other out-groups at a deeper level (Walker, 1994). Future studies may provide a more fine-grained analysis of such attitudes.

Implications and Future Study

Whilst the strong influence of realistic threat on attitudes was predicted in this study, the results are inconsistent with commentary of attitudes towards refugees in Australia at the time. Some political and social commentary positioned the negative attitudes towards refugees as related to the differences in ethnic and religious backgrounds of refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Australia to those identified with within the mainstream Australian community. It is possible that this position, whilst appearing at first glance to reflect a predominantly symbolic threat phenomenon, has actually been the result of perceived differences posing a physical (realistic) threat to community. It is possible that the specific post-September 11 context of this study

may have been influential in heightening the perceived realistic threat at that time. In August and September 2002, with the 1st anniversary of the events of September 11 approaching, there was a heightened fear both in Australia and elsewhere of further events similar of those of September 11 being planned and it is quite probable that this heightened fear of being physically hurt, community and national infrastructure being potentially under attack and leaving Australian people vulnerable may have led to elevated scores in the realistic threat scale items. Even though the items are not directly related to these potential events, they are more identifiable than the symbolic threat items and refugees may have been coined as potential instigators of these feared events. The high correlation evidenced between the realistic and symbolic threat scales may suggest that the threat measures were examining the same, or a similar construct. Further research utilizing a more substantial representation of the theory may assist in gaining a better understanding of attitudes and of the factors underlying prejudicial attitudes.

Although there are limitations with the study, the findings from this investigation may still generalise to the wider Australian population. It is suggested that psychologists have an important role in both understanding and addressing prejudice within our larger community. In order to promote harmony between host groups and refugees, and in light of the results of the current study, there is a need for policy makers and social scientists to carefully consider the perception of threat with the view to challenging those perceptions which foster stereotypical thinking and prejudice..

Conclusions

The current study, based upon a sample of university students, offers an alarming insight into contemporary attitudes towards refugees and into the correlates of

prejudice towards out groups in Australia. Participants' responses to the questions in this study were generally polarized. In other words, participants either expressed strongly positive attitudes towards refugees or they expressed strongly negative attitudes towards refugees. This polarization contributed to the attitude measure and symbolic and realistic threat measures reflecting a bimodal distribution, predominantly negative towards refugees, which may reflect the polarization of attitudes within the broader Australian community.

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Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics for all Measures and Inter-correlations between Attitudes, Threats and Social Desirability

Measure	Prejudicial Attitude	Positive Attitude Subscale	Negative Attitude Subscale	Realistic Threat	Symbolic Threat	Social Desirability
M	4.72	3.39	3.79	6.04	6.65	5.47
SD	2.17	2.09	2.69	2.45	2.06	3.16
Alpha		.92	.95	.91	.87	.75
Prejudicial Attitude	-	-.89***	.94***	.91***	.82***	-.28***
Positive Attitude		-	-.67***	-.79***	-.74***	.22***
Negative Attitude			-	.87***	.76***	-.28***
Realistic Threat				-	.80***	-.25***
Symbolic Threat					-	-.23***

Note: $n = 261$.

Scales range from 0-9 (attitude measures) and 1-10 (threat measures) with higher scores indicative of higher prejudicial attitudes or perceived threat from refugees. The exception being the positive and negative attitude subscales in which higher scores reflect positive and negative attitudes towards refugees respectively (these subscales were constructed as a result of post-hoc analyses).

*** $p < .001$

Table 2.

Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis for the Prejudicial Attitude Measure

Scale Items	Component 1 (Positive Attitudes)	Component 2 (Negative Attitudes)
Hatred	.95	.05
Disdain	.94	.05
Disliking	.89	-.04
Hostility	.88	-.09
Superiority	.87	.05
Rejection	.78	-.16
Affection	.13	.92
Warmth	-.17	.88
Approval	-.02	.88
Admiration	-.03	.85
Acceptance	-.32	.63
Sympathy	-.33	.60
Eigenvalue	7.71	1.64
% of variance	64.28	13.64

Note: Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalisation. Boldface indicates item loading $>.4$.

Table 3

Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Prejudicial Attitudes towards Refugees (N = 261)

Variable	B	SE B	β	Sr ²
Step 1				
Social Desirability	-.19	.04	-.29***	.08
Step 2				
Social Desirability	.00	.02	-.05	.00
Realistic Threat	.61	.04	.69***	.17
Symbolic Threat	.26	.04	.25***	.02

Note: $n = 261$. $R^2 = .08$ for Step 1; $\Delta R^2 = .77$ for Step 2 ($p < .001$). *** $p < .001$

Appendix A: Realistic and Symbolic Threat Scale Items

Realistic Threat Scale

1. Refugees get more from Australia than they contribute.
2. The children of refugees should have the same rights to attend public schools in Australia as Australian children do.
3. Refugees have increased the tax burden on Australians
4. Refugees are not displacing Australian workers from their jobs
5. Refugees should be eligible for the same health care benefits (i.e. Medicare) as those received by Australians
6. The quality of social services available to Australians has remained the same, despite refugees coming to Australia.
7. Refugees are as entitled to subsidised housing or subsidised utilities (water, electricity) as “poor” Australians are.

Symbolic Threat Scale

1. Refugees should learn to conform to the rules and norms of Australian society as soon as possible after they arrive.
2. Refugee intake is undermining Australian culture
3. The values and beliefs of refugees regarding work are basically quite similar to those of Australians
4. The values and beliefs of refugees regarding moral and religious issues are not compatible with the beliefs and values of most Australians
5. The values and beliefs of refugees regarding family issues and socialising children are basically quite similar to that of Australians
6. The values and beliefs of refugees regarding social relations are not compatible with the beliefs and values of most Australians
7. Refugees should not have to accept Australian ways