Academics and Public Discourse in Countries of Resettlement/Asylum:
Humanizing the 'Bogus' Refugee and Asylum-Seeker Discourse (June 2014)

Objective: Gain a clearer understanding of how political and public discourse is influenced both theoretically and by looking at case studies. There appears to be a substantial amount of work on refugee and immigrant discourse analysis; however, a clear gap exists in **how** advocacy, particularly by academics, public intellectuals, and practitioners, can interrupt and counteract de-humanizing discourse around asylum-seekers and refugees as 'bogus,' self-selected', 'fraudulent', 'illegitimate,' 'deviant', etc., based on their method of arrival and nature of persecution. Authors overwhelmingly agree that shifting this public discourse will not be easy. But how exactly does a shift in "collective will" take place within a shrinking space for advocacy? And how can academics inform advocacy work in this area? What do counter-narratives that capture the national imagination look like?

A) Background & Context - (Re)framing the refugee/asylum-seeker discourse
Many studies in the last 30 years or so have explored the influences on public opinion towards asylum-seekers in the primary countries of resettlement, focused predominantly on Australia, followed by the UK, a number of EU states, Canada, the U.S. and New Zealand. Every is the most prolific writer on this topic (6+ articles), arguing that much of the literature deconstructs refugee/asylum-seeker discourse but does not <u>reconstruct</u> it (2008). A number of authors use a form of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in their research, which also should be made more amenable to 'sound-bites' for accurate media/public pick-up. Billig notes the dialogic nature of discourses, arguing that "[t]he argument 'for' a position is always also an argument 'against' a counter-position" (1991). One interesting photography project titled RomaRising, focuses on presenting 'ordinary' Roma to shift Roma discourse in Europe, while another project titled Singa, aims to focus specifically on changing views of refugees as assets.

1. Binaries – "us" and "we"
Fairclough (1995) points to the manipulative use of the inclusive pronouns <u>"we" and "us"</u> in a politician's speech as a ploy of claiming spurious solidarity, thus outlining the intersection between political communication, discourse, and control and the presumed construction of an Other, those outside the ideology/religion/choice of "us". Essentialist categorization and dichotomy – "you are either with us, or against us" type discourse – is challenged in Australia through the use of shaming (Every, 2013), logic, 're-lexicalization' (i.e. changing the stock of words used to describe refugees and asylum seekers), and re-grouping the "us" as including asylum-seekers and nationals against a common 'them,' like the Taliban (Every & Augoustinos, 2008). In the case of Finland, Horsti (2013) shows how asylum seekers are presented as a 'communitarian figure,' as suitable victims, un-marking their difference with nationals through de-ethnicizing and de-muslimizing them. She further notes this action by the Church to protect asylum-seekers reinforced the binary of 'us' and 'them').

In Canada for example, the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) 'fact finding' mission reports are overwhelmingly used to legitimize 'bogus' refugee rhetoric (Diop, 2014), and therefore seeking a role for academics or 'experts' in these missions/reports may be helpful. Maimona (2014) argues the Canadian government uses a strategy of combining familiarities with authoritative discourse to control the national 'common sense,' manipulate identity construction, and overhaul group reality. The overarching argument held by the Government and Citizenship and Immigration Canada is that "Canada's asylum system is broken...crippled by an ever-increasing number of new unfounded claims, which must be rooted out and removed" (Kenney, 2012). Use of metaphors/analogies resonates (compares asylum-seekers to weeds), while Kenney claims that statements from special "interest groups" like the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) or the Roma Community Centre use "overheated, ideological rhetoric" that does "a great disservice to Canada's tradition of openness and generosity." This frames these groups as "extreme" and un-nationalistic, and having vested interests in keeping the status quo, i.e. resisting change.

In the UK, a number of authors have found that particular factors negatively affect public opinion on asylum seekers, namely perceptions that immigration: reduces social cohesion (Card, Dustmann & Preston 2012); stresses already stretched social resources (Woodside, Australia, Every et al., 2012); and threatens the national identity of British 'insiders' (KhosraviNik, 2009; Matthews & Brown, 2011). In Italy, the framing is that asylum seekers 'threaten' their cultural identity (Grillo, 2002). Conversely, some community-level assessment research shows in fact the arrival of asylum seekers did not have any negative impacts on the local economy, health and education services, policing, or social cohesion (Every

et al, 2012). There appears to be minimal evidence of this research translating to the national context, beyond community consultations about the findings.

2. Appeal to humanitarian language

The language of humanitarianism used by campaigns/academics to appeal to the public and the impacts on political discourse/public opinion have been explored by a number of authors with varied findings (Dauvergne, 2005; Every, 2008; Gibney, 2004; Hyndman, 2000). Every and Augoustinos (2013) argue that this can be a problematic basis on which to build greater support for asylum seekers. Dauvergne (1999) translates humanitarianism as a 'minimal moral duty,' where there is a duty to assist others only when the cost to one's self is small. Every (2008) finds the main theme recurring throughout research that maps the dominant discourses that construct humanitarianism in relation to asylum seekers in the UK, Europe and Australia, is that host countries are framed as already doing more than enough, i.e. that they are benevolent, generous, compassionate, etc. Moreover, those advocates who appeal to a 'duty to others' are often positioned as emotional, impractical and excessive in their demands by those who respond negatively to asylum seekers and refugees (Every 2008). As such, this language may not be persuasive to public opinion and may alienate opposition. In the Australian context, Every and Augoustinos (2013) caution that emotion must be used selectively, focusing less on 'fairness' and 'humanitarianism' and presented instead as a balanced solution (win-win) that provides for the needs of refugees and the claims of citizens, and may thereby be more likely to be evaluated as moderate, practical and reasonable (Gibney, 2004). Every and Augoustinos (2008) give the example of asylum seekers being framed as valuable in filling gaps in the labour market in the UK (i.e. to do jobs that others might not want to do) and in general, contributing to economic development in countries of asylum. This finding is consistent with research suggesting that states act in their political and economic interests when addressing refugees (see Dauvergne 2005).

In the Canadian context, Stapleton (2012) argues that to engage an aging, conservative population that values authority, loyalty, liberty and sanctity, intellectuals must steer away from language of "fairness and caring" and instead engage a "wider moral palette" which recommends lasting, "publicly acceptable" ways in which increased equality across society should be achieved. In addition, while Every and Augoustinos (2013) caution use of overly humanitarian discourse, McKay et al. call for communicating a "broader humanitarian understanding and knowledge of the structural factors that influence asylum seeking" (2012) to counteract 'threat' rhetoric. Every and Augoustinos (2008) show how pro-asylum politicians utilize 'sameness' to appeal to Australians and demonstrate that in some circumstances circumventing 'normal' refugee procedures is the only option, appealing to understandings of what is practical and reasonable. 'Sameness' or assimilation discourse can also be problematic, but highlighting unity within communities could be helpful, such as through sport (e.g. football; see Booth et al., 2014). This discourse of similarity can also be reinforced by narratives of friendship as a warrant for making claims about the accuracy of 'alternative stories' about refugees (Tilbury 1998). While friendship can be a positive approach as a way to stress similarity, positive integration, economic contribution, etc., some authors note that this looks suspiciously like assimilation, by reinforcing the idea that the ideal society should be as uniform or homogeneous as possible (Blommaert & Verschueren, 2009). In the U.S. context, Steimel (2010) argues that while human-interest stories can assist in potentially contributing to views of 'sameness' by Americans towards refugees, the inherent use of the 'victim' frame can be problematic.

As a means of highlighting positive contributions of refugees and asylum seekers to the 'nation-building project', some authors or advocacy groups emphasize capturing biographies (Wroe, 2012) or narratives/stories of asylum-seekers in books (Cartner, 2009) or a public database (RCIM, 2014) to deflate negative public discourse. There is little research on the potential effectiveness of such strategies to date.

A number of authors note that refugees and asylum seekers often get lumped in with immigrants, with McKay et al. (2012) showing that in Australia, a public opinion poll revealed that more than half of all respondents thought that asylum seekers came to Australia 'for a better life,' as opposed to about one quarter who thought they were fleeing persecution. Work that attempts to decouple this link encourages highlighting economic contributions (even informal) of refugees and asylum seekers (Vecchio & Beatson,

2013). In print media in the UK and EU, refugees and asylum seekers are often lumped together with immigrants under the term 'RASIM' (Belgium: Van Gorp, 2005; UK: Baker, et al., 2008), and scholars argue these categories should be disaggregated. In describing what she calls the 'Advocate's Dilemma,' Cook (2010) argues that advocates, in the U.S. in particular, are drawn into national policy debates that are largely framed by immigration opponents through the lens of security, and as such, the 'rights approach' in terms of refugees is not effective in resonating with public opinion. Cook suggests that countering myths with facts or truth is important, adding that the work of re-framing needs to pay attention to the emotional power generated by opponents' frames that stir and explain anxieties.

3. Metaphor-making, Headlines, and Sound Bites
Smith (2014) argues that in Canada, political communication has become commodified and is designed to persuade the public. Economic resources are of obvious importance to succeed in shifting public opinion, but online networks are of increasingly strategic importance, particularly for interest groups and social movements. There seem to be opposing views of using blogs or online forums for changing public discourse on asylum seekers. Some argue it (re)produces binaries, while others argue blogs can be sites where 'bystander anti-racism' is practiced and has the potential to change people's opinions using evidence from anti-racist strategies (Fozdar & Pedersen, 2013). Referring specifically to Australia, Fozdar and Pedersen advocate utilizing anti-racism strategies (listed on p. 379-80) to: dispel false beliefs (see Pederson, Watt & Hansen, 2006), identify positive commonalities and differences between the majority and minorities, and express consensus to show that those expressing racism are not the majority. The authors make an interesting comparison, suggesting that newspaper blogs are the new talk radio, where the public can engage in a 'diablog' with journalists and the public. Hanson-Easey and Augoustinos (2012) show how talk radio in Australian and elsewhere plays a considerable role in conferring a 'permission to hate' by focusing on narratives of non-integration, with a particular focus on African refugees. However, in her research on attitudes towards Tamil asylum seekers in Canada and Australia, Krishnamurti (2013) notes that the shift in discourse requires the recognition of the refugee claimant as a legitimate, real body, and this recognition cannot happen in the virtual space of discussion boards and comments forums. While she does not suggest how this 'compassionate' recognition would occur, her concerns around comment sections playing a role in generating negative commentary on an article that positively frames refugee contributions, is seen for example in "Why Syrian refugees will thrive in Canada" (Globe & Mail, May 7, 2014).

Stone (2012) argues that the success of policy rests on how successfully changes are portrayed to the public using what she terms 'political reasoning'. This type of reasoning uses metaphor and analogy, trying to get others to see a situation as one thing rather than another. Using metaphors and categories (like family) evoke a strategic and persuasive portrayal of an issue; some Parliamentary speech excerpts by pro-asylum members in Australia (Every & Augoustinos, 2008) used this strategy. The Refugee Council of Australia (2011) adds that reinforcing frames of positive contributions of former refugees to countries of resettlement is helpful, suggesting that academics are best placed to provide evidence-based advocacy in easy-to-communicate messaging to national/international campaigns with media and provincial or national education curriculums. This recent comment piece from Canada's the Globe & Mail offers an important example of this approach: http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/why-syrian-refugees-will-thrive-in-canada/article18499108/, as does this series from Auckland, profiling positive contributions of refugees to the country: http://www.stuff.co.nz/auckland/faces-of-auckland/10135038/Faces-of-Auckland-Refugee-keen-to-help-others.

Public opinion is fluctuating and depends to a large extent on how choices are presented to different publics and by whom, and they are not always consistent (Stone, 2012). Stone notes the importance of Stuart Hall's practice of representation, using an example from a different policy context: *"They [Canadian public] think poor people are too dependent on government assistance, but believe that the government should help them anyway. They want greater welfare spending when it's called "helping poor people," and not when it's called "welfare"* (13). He emphasizes that media headlines and photo captions are often the most impactful on the public. It is important to recognize that "the public" is not a monolithic whole, but rather that it is composed of different "publics" who may be more or less receptive to particular arguments.

Brady (2011) also argues for the importance of considering the social and political contexts as well as the perception of advocates themselves in analyzing contributions to improving discourse on refugees and asylum seekers. Interestingly, Van Gorp (2005) found that the more positive mood brought on by the Christmas season encouraged UK newspapers to set the "asylum-seeker-as-intruder" frame aside and to apply the "victim" frame abundantly, highlighting the importance of context, echoed by other authors in the links between 9/11 and mass boat arrivals in Australia.

B) Further Calls for Research
1. Tyler (2006): antiracist counter-arguments or counter-narrative creation and their impacts in the UK.
2. Fairclough (1995): the passivation of the public through the ideological construction of a uniform national identity by government.
3. McKay et al (2012): overwhelmingly negative discourse linking asylum seekers, Islam and terrorism.
4. Every & Augoustinos (2013): the spatially-embedded nature of racism in Australia, to further understand the historical construction of asylum discourse.

C) Recommendations
Stone (2012) argues that decision makers need simple, actionable statements to claim control over asylum. As a result, advocates and academics appear to need practical, reasonable and moderate 'sound bites' to reclaim some control over public discourse.

Potential avenues/thoughts moving forward:
- Conducting more impact assessments, which can be used to allay people's fears by presenting them with research on the actual impacts of asylum seekers in communities (Every & Augoustinos, 2013), highlighting possible benefits to all (pragmatic interventions emphasizing win/win solutions and mainstream appeals). Send media release/briefing notes and images to media outlets to promote the assessments.
- Creating a #Hashtag that can be easily picked up and sent to Twitter influencers and big NGOs/UNHCR, who are very active on Twitter. Some media outlets will also print a small article about the creation of a hashtag with its particular meaning. These are used across other platforms as well, including #BringBackOurGirls and #YesAllWomen, which capitalize on an event to discuss issues surrounding it like violence against women. 'Public Intellectuals,' who generally have a strong digital and traditional media presence, can also be harnessed to advance a particular issue (Wiseman, 2013). Potential hashtag suggestions include: #BantheBogus; #WinWinRefugees; #RefugeesAreHumanToo, etc.
- Utilizing a Crowdspeaking platform such as Thunderclap where individuals can donate their 'social reach', which includes a status on Twitter, Facebook or other social media platforms, for a particular campaign at a given time. (See: RSC is currently using this platform to promote the release of their [Refugee Economies report](#) on World Refugee Day, June 20th). The status could then end with the #hashtag created.
- Unifying in collective action, with a cohesive narrative and greater coordination among the different organizations to increase their solidarity, visibility, credibility, and political power to shift public discourse on asylum seekers; and changing the semantic debate by using more neutral terminology to help 'depoliticize' immigration/asylum-seeking (Akthar et al. 2011).
- Encouraging politicians to advocate for 'experts' to weigh in on the national asylum debate (e.g. Australia: Hanson-Young, 2010). This appears to be the case for majority parties, and is not mainstreamed. McKay, Thomas and Blood (2011) note this is an increasing trend in Australia to pressure politicians to include a more diverse range of 'experts' in their policy-making.
- Creating a "Network of Academics for Shifting Public Discourse on Refugees & Asylum-Seekers" – resources for journalists to balance the debate with academics with alternative viewpoints and provide nuance to 'sympathy themes' by many advocacy organizations. This could be done through a knowledge cluster on the RRN, where discussion could be encouraged, particularly in gathering best practices.

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