

# The 'othering' of Asylum Seekers: How Social Work Responds.

Shannan White and Dr. Kim Robinson

- Deakin University, Geelong

## Introduction

This qualitative research explores the narrative of front line social workers and their experience of professional practice with asylum seekers. Using a critical theory lens, the research explored the participants' knowledge of the 'othering' discourse that is predominant in immigration policy, and how it affects their professional practice and the wellbeing of their asylum seeker clients.

'Othering' is a process of defining and securing one's own identity by distancing and stigmatizing another. Separating that 'other' as a point of difference to our own normality contributes to what has been identified as 'othering' discourse (Grove & Zwi 2006, p. 1933). This has occurred with asylum seekers in Australia, and contributes to justifying policy that has located claimants off shore and isolated from community support

## Background

- In 2015 – 65 million people forcibly displaced by war and persecution (UNHCR 2015b, n.p.)
- Over 20,000 people arrive in Australia via boat seeking asylum in 2013 (Phillips 2014, p. 2). Boat arrival figures after 2013 not always available due to Abbott Government decision not to release details of 'on water' matters (Phillips 2016, p. 6).
- Immigration policies introduced aimed at preventing asylum seekers from arriving in Australia such as Temporary Protection Visas (TPV), Mandatory Detention and boat 'turn backs' (Effeney & Mansouri 2014, p. 12). These policies are claimed to be stopping deaths at sea although they are strongly contested by human rights advocates.
- Deliberate hostile and language creating suspicion used in media and politics: 'illegal', 'queue jumper', 'bogus' and 'terrorist'



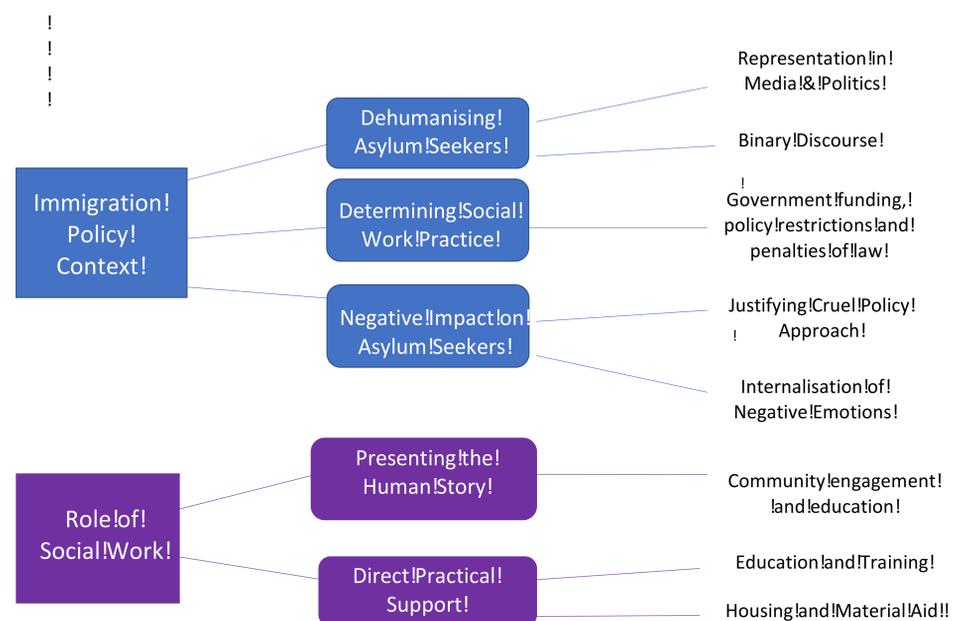
## Methodology

- Qualitative research
- Seven social work trained participants across six organisations
- Semi-structured interviews – one hour in length
- Thematic Analysis

## References

- Effeney, L., & Mansouri, F. 2014, 'Deterrence Policies and Asylum Seekers: The Case of Australia', *International journal of migration and border studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 217-230, retrieved 18 February 2016, EBSCOhost
- Grove, N., & Zwi, A. 2006, 'Our health and theirs: Forced migration, othering, and public health', *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 62, pp. 1931-1942, retrieved 26<sup>th</sup> February 2016, EBSCOhost
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- Phillips, J. 2016, *Boat arrivals and boat 'turn backs' in Australia since 1976: a quick guide to the statistics*, Parliament of Australia, retrieved 8<sup>th</sup> March 2017
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## Results - Themes



## Conclusion and where to from here?

- Participants showed critical understanding of the dehumanisation of applicants by the Australian Government's Immigration policy and a dominant discourse of disbelief
- Contradictory practice – on one hand, participants challenge the discourse, on the other hand, unintentionally reproducing it. Participant quote;  
*'There are so many limitations because we are funded by the Department of Immigration, it's hard because there is the social work aspect of things where you really want to be a good social worker but then there is also all of these guidelines you know, KPI's that you need to, that we need to actually comply with'*
- Despite this, participants finding positive ways to engage community on micro level to reframe discourse
- Effective social work practice with asylum seekers needs to be holistic and community based; promoting the rationale of asylum claims and the positive contribution made to Australian society
- Create a narrative which values and integrates those seeking asylum, and does not stigmatize and separate them as 'others'
- Further training and development for staff, and research is essential to support and facilitate these practices.