

KommonGround Inc - Cross Cultural Human Rights Theatre Company

Inquiry into Multiculturalism in Australia

Two of the points that I would like to address in part and in more depth are;

- Innovative ideas for settlement programs including refugees that support their full participation and integration into Australian society.
- Incentives to promote long term settlement patterns that achieve greater economic and social benefits for Australian society as a whole.

Both of these points are important and need addressing. However I would like to look at the points in relation to perceptions of asylum seekers, refugees and new migrants. I believe that perceptions are significant in relation to long term acceptance and inclusion of these cohorts. If participation and inclusion is achieved this may assist in greater economic and social benefits for Australian society as a whole. Basically if one has a sense of belonging in a new country or culture, their chances of achieving long terms goals socially and economically are far greater than if they feel maligned, marginalised and misunderstood. So I take a theatre makers stance as one who has worked in theatre across communities, cultures and language groups. These are my observations and recommendations based on my work over many years in this area.

I have been privileged to work in many communities and found that one of the main issues pertaining to acceptance and inclusion of a particular cohort is perception. Media reports though television; radio and politicians rhetoric are a major factors in shaping the perceptions of asylum seekers, refugees or new migrants. How they are represented is indicative of how they will be included and accepted in the broader community. The main group which is in dire need of developing sense of belonging and participation are asylum seekers and refugees

A study prepared between August 2001 and January 2002, looked at the tone of positive and negative articles and key themes used to describe asylum seekers. The authors of the study, Klocker sand Dunn (2003) also reported on the federal governments portrayal of asylum seekers and refugees within that time and expressed concerns that the media helped produce a climate of fear through pushing the notion that there was an undeniable link between

terrorists and asylum seekers. (Junior finance minister quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 September 2001; Defence minister quoted in *Insiders*, 23 September 2001) This judgement was based on the fact that asylum seekers were from Afghanistan or were people with 'strange identities', while other ministers referred to throwing their children overboard or threatening to sew their lips when demonstrating in the detentions centres. These incidences along with other stories portrayed asylum seekers as inhumane barbaric 'others' who did not possess the basic human qualities of parental devotion (Marr and Wilkinson 2003: 194-210) Of course these assertion were found to be baseless (Commonwealth of Australia 2002)

Joanne Van Selm (migrationpolicy.org/pubs/VanSelmTerrorism22.pdf) has examined public perceptions of Afghan asylum seekers as terrorists and hijackers, arguing that the Australian Conservative government fuelled these perceptions for re-election purposes. (March 1996-Nov 2007) She maintains that the construction of Muslim asylum seekers as threatening outsiders with terrorist motives, subsequently led to their systematic undermining through lack of access to proper legal advice, care and protection.

Two distinct incidents in particular, I believe were instrumental in creating distrust and negativity towards asylum seekers. In August of 2001 the [Howard Government](#) refused permission for the [Norwegian](#) freighter [MV Tampa](#), carrying 438 rescued Afghans from a distressed fishing vessel in international waters, to enter Australian waters. (*The Age* December 30 2002 Robert Manne.) On the 7th of October of the same year The *Children Overboard Affair* became an international incident when Federal Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock (11.3.96 to 26.11.01) announced that children had been thrown overboard from boat carrying asylum seekers.

The Children Overboard Affair and the *Tampa Incident* were stage managed by the Howard government, to incite fear and loathing into the minds of Australians, creating immense damage to perceptions of asylum seekers. Ward (2002) argues that the *Tampa Affair* became part of a "carefully calculated Liberal party strategy to revive its flagging electoral stocks ahead of an imminent federal election" (Ward 2002:22) The *Children Overboard* came hot on the heels of the *Tampa*, thus becoming another issue central to the Liberal Party's 2001 campaign. Both

of these affairs were later proven to be steeped in lies and deceit, but irreparable harm to perceptions of asylum seekers was already done and negative attitudes prevail today.

In their research paper *Theorising narratives of exile and belonging; the importance of Biography and Ethno-nemesis in understanding asylum*, O'Neil and Harindranth (2006) discuss the importance of narrative in understanding asylum seekers and also points to the *Tampa Affair* and the effects its had on perceptions of asylum seekers in Australia, particularly in their use of language with terms such as 'illegal's and 'bogus' and 'queue jumpers'. This type of language contributes to stereotyping and in relation to the Tampa affair, takes language to be not merely a method of communication, but also a mechanism of power. In both cases the language used by the media in concert with the liberal government was designed to discredit and alienate asylum seeker. In both of these incidents, there was almost the absence of evidence to the contrary, apart from the odd commendable reports and documentaries. O'Neil and Harindranth (Ibidem) maintain that this style of language raises issues relating to politics of representation, democracy and immigration.

In an article by Tony White (2010) on The Asylum Seeker debate, he discussed the use of language to vilify, and the ramifications on the image of asylum seekers. Language such as 'threat' to our way of life and 'health risks' and 'terrorist attacks' all warn about foreigners not accepting Australian values. The power of the word, from our politician in the media is extremely influential on the way in which asylum seekers are seen. If political figures continue to encourage negative perceptions of asylum-seekers then integration into the community will be further hindered and fear among the Australian public will thrive. This in turn creates additional difficulty in implementing effective changes in public policy.

Since the Rudd government came to power we have seen token changes in policy such as dismantling of the Pacific solution and abolishing temporary protection visas, (Emma Rogers ABC News 2011) though the opposition has contested these changes maintaining that a reintroduction of temporary visas in some form is needed. Such attitudes continue to malign the asylum seeker as criminal.

In December 2010 the Christmas Island tragedy that left about 50 men, women and children battered and drowned and sparked more debate over asylum seekers coming by boat. While there was sympathy for from the Australian people over this terrible tragedy, the usual political rhetoric and lack of compassion managed to thrive.

In a post on the Crikey Blog, an Australian had this to say “As a long suffering tax payer, I'm sick to death of having to pay for free loaders entering this country illegally. The risk of death comes with paying illegal people smugglers to try to enter Australia illegally on a leaky boat and you free loaders have brought this on yourselves. How dare you start making demands of Australian Citizens who pay for your welfare and is only going to make us want to send you back on your leaky boat even more! I for one am happy to drive you to the airport and send you all back.”

8:59 AM February 16, 2011

While a post from Paddy on *Permalink* was outraged by the government's behaviour. ‘Utterly repugnant stuff from Scott Morrison. Combined with the appalling trash of ACT senator Gary Humphries tabling a submission to parliament to ban all Muslim immigration for ten years.....’

Tuesday, 15 February 2011 at 1:26 pm

In his article, *A Christmas nightmare* (Thursday, 16 December 2010), Chris Kennett discusses the issues pertaining to perception of asylum seekers and refugees that dehumanise this vulnerable population. He states ‘We should do everything in our power to disrupt the people-smuggling trade and prevent people risking their lives in this way. But what I cannot stomach is the hijacking of humanitarianism to the anti-refugee agenda..... One need not read very far down the letters to the editor to find the more traditional forms of bigotry towards asylum seekers. Clumsy charges of being 'queue jumpers' and 'economic migrants'. Paranoid, misinformed rants about refugees receiving luxurious benefits while our pensioners are left to rot. While offensive, at least these attitudes are essentially honest. They reflect a deep seated, infantile fear of someone else getting a piece of our pie. It's not fair!’ (p. 1).

Clearly from these examples there is great concern for asylum seekers and the chronic negative perceptions of asylum seekers that are pervading our society.

Though there have been numerous advocacy groups who have worked diligently to change perceptions of asylum seekers and deflate the myths that have prevailed, these organisations are generally underfunded and have less access to media, with a primary concern to care for the basic needs of asylum seekers in order that they are fed, clothed, housed and have adequate legal representation and medical attention.

If we want to change perceptions, my proposal is that we undertake qualitative research and theatre making projects that inform and give all involved the opportunity to rethink their current views. Research methods that are participatory and combine associational, distributive and cultural justice can make for exciting and innovative projects that generate social change..

Storytelling and Social Change.

As an arts practitioner who has long used storytelling and personal narratives, I found this to be a way of knowing and comprehending the world with the capacity to capture the variety of richness of meaning in humanity. It also communicates who, what we are; our feelings; why we pursue a particular path and how the past resonates with the present, and a potential future. “A narrative involves facts, ideas, theories, and dreams from the perspective and in the context of someone’s life. Individuals think, perceive interpret, imagine, interact and make some decisions according to narrative elements and structures” (Heek Heo 2004 p. 375) As a writer and theatre maker, working with marginalised communities in storytelling and theatre making, I found that storytelling is a common thread throughout the communities in which I worked and though facts and perceptions differ widely, a deeper understanding of each culture emerged through the narratives.

O’Neill and Harindranath (2006) examine the relevance of a biographical approach to social justice as an important role that underpins their research on asylum seekers. I ask the same question but in respect to storytelling and narratives in relation to social justice in investigating and understanding asylum seekers, refugees and new migrants.

There are similarities in the approach that O’Neill and Harindranath (2006) discuss, with my work as a theatre practitioner. These include: being participatory in nature; working with lived

experiences; raising awareness and generating new knowledge from the narratives that empower the participants. In this context, social justice is functional as it engages with the everyday lives of an excluded or marginalised population, that have been criminalised as the potentially dangerous 'other' (Kearon, 2005). The media, as discussed earlier has played a significant part in stigmatising the refugee, aiming at socially excluding the 'other' and distorting reality so that the reader, audience, or listener don't have an opportunity to confront the truth of a situation, but rather alienate and assert what is considered normal (Greer and Jewekes 2005). Ultimately biographical research and narrative Inquiry counters the sanitized, demonised, the hidden aspects of a lived cultures of exile and belonging as well as the stereotypical stories accessed through the mass media. Thus these genres of qualitative research help to produce knowledge as a form of social justice.

Gribb and Gewirtz (2003) summarised the concept of social justice which as suggested in O'Neil et al. (2005: 75-76) uses and extends a model developed by Nancy Fraser (1997) and Iris Marion Young (1990). The model uses a holistic understanding of social justice and combines " distributive, cultural and associational justice and ways of standing these together – through, for example, the combined effects of affective change and compassion; new cosmopolitanism and inter-cultural bridging; and practical steps towards redistribution, recognition and facilitating the voices of marginalised to be listened to" (Cribb and Getwartz, 2003:13)

- Distributive justice: concerned with economics and is defined as the absence of exploitation, economic marginalisation and deprivation.
- Cultural justice: defined (by Fraser) as the absence of cultural domination, non recognition and respect.
- Associational justice : the absence of 'patterns of association amongst individuals and amongst groups which prevent some people from participating fully in decisions which effect the conditions in which they live and act' (Power and Gerwitz, quoted in Cribb and Gerwitz, 2003:13)

Working within the parameters of the above social justice summary, I return to points 3 and 4 regarding settlement and participation in this context. The points refer to settlement and participation programs that support integration and participation in the broader Australian community. They also ask for incentives to promote long term settlement patterns, to

achieve greater social and economic benefit.

In order to achieve these goals, I firmly believe that the perceptions of asylum seekers, refugees and new migrants need to change. Further that if these changes occur, over time, the cohorts discussed will have a much stronger sense of belonging, thus engendering a greater capacity to contribute to their new society.

Recommendations:

- More qualitative research into asylum seekers and refugees, specifically narrative Inquiry. To work with narrative as a means to tell stories to create dialogue, promote understanding and shifts in perceptions.
- More longitudinal studies in partnership with academics and theatre makers that assist in understanding the different cohorts, their needs; how they wish to be perceived and how they wish to engage and contribute to the broader Australian community.
- Engagement in community theatre programs that encourage partnerships between Australians and ethnic communities and also between the ethnic different communities.
- To use theatre partnerships, which develop performances that create awareness of the different groups and that these projects are taken into the broader Australian community, such as schools. Schools are natural environments where new learning can take place and social justice attitudes can take root.
- That in undertaking research, advocacy groups, community theatres, academics and a cross section of the Australian community (this includes ethnic communities) get involved and work in partnerships towards the common goal of inclusion, participation and long terms social and economic benefits for Australia.

It is anticipated that by involving the new communities in research and theatre projects which promotes the use of their skills, decision making and knowledge, they, in partnership with other groups develop a sense of purpose and future in Australia.

If we marry a variety of genres from qualitative research, such as narrative and performative inquiry, with social justice as its scaffolding, we also bring new knowledge into

public domain that is easily accessible across cultures and age groups. This new knowledge can inform other theatre making projects and be incorporated into future resettlement programs. In the end, when people feel accepted, involved and useful, they flourish.

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