

## No Place Like Home: Findings from Cognitive Elicitation Interviews ASO Communications



From late June to mid July, ASO Communications conducted 54 cognitive elicitation interviews in collaboration with the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. Respondents ranged from executives at major humanitarian organizations to volunteer activists who were once seeking asylum themselves. The selection criterion among participants was belief in and effort toward progressive asylum seeker policy and belief in protecting and expanding human rights.

What follows is a summary of major themes emerging from these anonymous conversations.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, it's challenging to encapsulate nearly 30 hours of transcribed speech from a range of individuals as racially, religiously, geographically and socio-economically diverse as your nation. The emphasis here, given the overall purpose and next steps in this message testing process, is on novel frameworks for making our case for improving asylum policy. Along these lines, it's important to note how these conversations evince reasoning different from the written speech also analyzed separately. While we would expect different expressions of thoughts coming off the cuff, the difference in the *ideas* themselves in what we write and read versus say is worth unpacking.

Because participants were responding to deliberately broad and foundational questions, their speech reveals underlying reasoning about asylum seekers, detention, settlement in Australia and policy related to these issues. This is critically different from rehearsed talking points or intentional policy arguments constructed to make a case. In short, interview responses are closer to what people intuitively *feel*, where writing is very much what people consciously *think*.

*Not much talk of "rights"*

Contrary to the majority of advocacy on asylum, talk of "human rights" was not very common in these interviews. Respondents gravitated, instead, toward the ideas of *protection, peace, equality* and — above all — *life*.

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<sup>1</sup> For Interview protocol see Appendix A. In keeping with promised anonymity, quotations are not cited and any potential identifying details have been removed.

And they are not asking for a free ride, they are asking to be **treated as equals** and given the chance to **live a normal life**.

It's really fundamentally a way of **preserving human life** when human life is at risk.

When they go to bed at night they are not kept up by the danger of people knocking on the door or coming to grab them.

To be able **to live a life** to be able to, you know, to basically stop being persecuted and **rebuild your life** in a place that protects you.

So the purpose of asylum is **a future free from harm**.

It's a way of enabling **people to live their lives in peace**, and to be protected rather than put up with violence and discrimination.

Desires of people seeking asylum and the objective of having asylum as a protected expectation were often rooted in *lived experience*. Note, for example, the reference above to "go to bed at night" and "people knocking on the door." As we'll explore more below, this tendency to speak in specific, commonplace terms, distinguishes this discourse from that explored in writing.

When talk of "rights" did come up, they were skillfully referenced as the *completion of an existing entitlement*, not the creation of a new obligation:

It enables people to have their **rights fulfilled**. Everyone has human rights and if you are being persecuted those rights are challenged and asylum ensures you can have those **rights back**.

This is especially important in a debate in which "free loading" or attempting to get things you don't "deserve" are opposition mainstays.

#### *Economic arguments all but absent*

Another striking difference in the interviews compared to written advocacy is the near absence of reference to economic benefits. Pocketbook persuasion, usually through reference to the expense current policy extracts, is common in written appeals. Saving money almost did not come up as a motivation or objective; censure of current actions and justifications for better policy were made almost exclusively on moral and legal terms.

## *Dignity of people*

Another word, besides money, rarely uttered was asylum seeker. Again, in contrast to written advocacy, we found respondents referencing those who are affected by this issue as *people* or *human beings*. And, beyond that, explicitly referencing humanity as reason for policy change in this arena:

How lucky we are that we get to be a safe place for **people**.

We're talking about curtailing the freedom of movement for **people**.

We have been so busy hating **people coming by boat** and drumming up fear of invasion that we're now no longer able to look at each other and feel kindly and compassionate towards each other.

**People** sometimes run away and they go to other countries and they ask them if they could look after them instead and that's what seeking asylum is.

I think it's **a person** who seeks something. Ah seeks an alternative I think.

It enables people to be safe and to actually live their lives and to have the opportunity to **flourish as human beings**.

It allows people to feel safe, and to **develop as human beings** in a safe environment.

But if you look at it logically, **the people arriving here by boat** do not try to sneak into the country, they put up their hands at the edge of our sea zone and they ask for help, they say 'here we are, please help us.'

This suggests several things as we move into testing. First, we must tease out and quantify the distinction between the labels *asylum seekers*, *people who seek asylum* and *people seeking asylum*. It's quite likely the latter is much more effective for our aims. Second, the notion of identity, humanity and personhood should form the centerpiece of some arguments for improving work that we test.

Further, it's worth examining use of the singular — *a person who seeks asylum*. Generally, when we're attempting to mitigate stereotyping, using the singular plus indefinite article (a/an) is a simple way to call to mind a particular individual rather than a class of people about whom there may be assumed traits.

## *Centrality of safety*

While certainly present in current advocacy, it's striking how prevalent *safety* emerged as go-to descriptor in the interviews. Perhaps more than any other concept, references to *safety*, *protection* and *absence of harm*, were nearly universal among our participants:

Asylum is protection, it is safety, it is being secure that one can stay in that place

Asylum is safety.

I would say that everybody has the right to feel safe.

Asylum is a place of safety.

They can't be safe from where they come from and they need some help to be safe.

Safe haven

Seeking safety in a country other than your own, or a place other than your own.

I guess asylum is finding a safe place to be, a safe place to stay.

Well, I think asylum is safety really - physical, emotional and mental safety.

It is about safety and it's about people being able to access their rights and being safe from threatening situations.

The purpose of asylum is to provide safety, to give people the chance to live a life free of persecution

Asylum allows for the safe traveling and transition of people from a place of impoverishment or socio-political or religious violence and persecution to a place of safety, or a place that is safer. So, it creates a capacity for a safe haven.

And that they want to be safe and that the children want to go to school, and so they sometimes come to Australia so they that can be safe.

Note, again, in this final example, an evocation of everyday experience.

Given the toxicity of opposition tropes about "country shopping," *safety* is a useful shorthand. Further, a person seeking *safety* is less likely to be assumed dangerous, as this is incongruent. Whereas, a person seeking "asylum" has been so entirely vilified, it's unclear what the constellation of associations is. Finally, while most members of our audiences have no personal knowledge with escaping war, torture, persecution and so on — feeling to some degree unsafe and wanting protection is a pretty universal experience.

### *Taking the gloves off*

Where in written discourse we tend to see references to “detention” and “offshore processing”, here we find more pointed terminology in the mix. Multiple respondents referred to “**off shore torture.**” While one described the current scheme as “**outsource our international obligations** in that way.”

Whether this more forceful rhetoric works is an empirical question we’ll consider in upcoming phases of research.

### *Nation as house*

A nation is commonly understood through one of three competing metaphors: NATION AS FAMILY, NATION AS BODY and NATION AS HOUSE. Thus we refer, for example, to “founding fathers” and we send our “sons and daughters” to war. On the other hand, we have a “head” of state and a strong “arm” of the law.

In this data set, respondents tended to reference the NATION AS HOUSE OR DWELLING — both through conceptual metaphor and also overtly via analogy:

An asylum seeker is somebody who has discovered that the **front door key of their house doesn’t work anymore** and there’s no way into the house and so they need to go and find another place to live.

The reality is that people have taken the initiative and risked everything to **come to our doorstep** and if someone comes to your doorstep you shouldn’t push them away. And I think government has successfully changed the narrative to eliminate that perspective. And we need to turn it back to say these **people are on our door**, asking for us to protect them from harm.

The purpose of asylum is to **gain safe harbour** from persecution by state actors and others in your native country due to the reasons that are outlined in the refugee convention or in other reasons.

So the idea, the purpose has been around a long time. And the people who provide asylum, I think, often aren’t that well equipped to do so, which is a response when someone comes **knocking at your door** or your borders asking for safe haven.

So asylum for me is probably that **first port of call** when someone is fleeing from an area or a mob, and it **might be a church**, it might be the adjoining country.

It’s not clear, of course, whether this our best metaphor for the nation. In fact, in U.S. immigration research, we found a pronounced tendency among opponents to employ the NATION AS HOUSE while advocates tended toward a NATION AS

BODY discourse. A house does bring to mind notions of boundaries and invited guests versus uninvited crashers. A body, by contrast, is a unified whole with component parts working symbiotically. While a body does, of course, have an outer boundary this is not the first thing that comes to mind about this concept. Which metaphor for nation suit our purpose best is something we can explore quantitatively.

*No place like home*

When we turn, however, from characterizing the NATION AS A HOUSE to speaking of literal home — here's we find much worth parroting from the interview discourse:

An asylum seeker is a person who has **difficulty at home**, in their home country and their home country is not looking after them properly, so they need to come somewhere where they can be looked after properly.

I think to a four-year old I'd just be saying it's somebody whose **home country** was very unkind to them and they didn't feel safe so they had to leave and come to another country where they hoped that they would be welcomed and treated kindly.

I think it would be everyday people **setting up a home** in a safe place, something along the lines of that.

I think I'd say that unfortunately in the world there are people who aren't able to live **happy lives at home** and there are some people who would like to hurt them. And if they were to stay in their home country they would be hurt or damaged, so they've come to our country, and we don't think it's good that people live lives where they're hurt and damaged, so we are very happy to protect them so they can live a life that is peaceful and happy.

An asylum seeker is someone who **leaves their home country** because they fear for their safety and they go to another country and ask for protection.

So some groups of people have a greater degree of misfortune and/or conversely opportunities than others and that's **the tyranny of the postcode** in which you were born.

And providing people with a safe place, a sanctuary at a time when there home is no longer safe.

It's also noteworthy that the bulk of the interview text is related to *leaving home* and far less to *arriving in Australia*.

There was a tendency to focus less on nation-states and more on people's fundamental association with where they live: home. To be sure, the question of the individual's relation to the state did come up:

[Asylum is] right to protection, and that takes the form in terms of **seeking that protection from a country**.

People sometimes run away and they **go to other countries** and they ask them if they could look after them instead and that's what seeking asylum is. Everyone has a right to do it and we should protect people who need our protection because **we live in a country** where those things aren't a problem.

And really what the refugee convention is about is insisting that **governments** voluntarily agree to provide an exceptional form of consideration for **people who aren't citizens of their country** because these people are losing everything they've ever known because of their experience of persecution.

However, because of how deeply politicized this debate that ought to rightly be humanitarian is, we may be well served by veering away from referencing geographic bodies and legally designated places. Moreover, national boundaries are often not useful in understanding the state and non-state actors who at times battle and at times collude to necessitate emigration and asylum seeking. Speaking in terms of "country" doesn't necessarily make sense for an issue where many times ethnic minorities effected are living across many national boundaries.

Further, almost without exception, respondents described just asylum policy as requiring multi-national collaboration, also referred to as a regional approach:

That it's fine for us to be a part of the global community when it comes to trade and travel and communication, but there are many people who think it's quite acceptable for us to opt out of any serious level of international responsibility for people in distress.

We're increasingly being seen as a country which is actually isolating itself rather than pitching in and assisting other countries who are dealing with significantly larger numbers of distressed and persecuted people. So I think the national response in Australia needs to be framed in an international context. We all benefit from an increasingly globalized society and Australia is actually one of the wealthiest nations in the world enjoying a level of wealth unparalleled in our country's history and in

the history of human society. And yet we're more closed to distressed people than we've been in a long, long time. So I think that the way we need to think about these issues needs to be framed in an international context, and we actually need to look at practical options for how Australia can shift to playing a useful role in assisting neighboring countries and countries beyond our region who are dealing with issues of displacement at a level that we can't imagine here. Because ultimately if those issues are not appropriately addressed close to the source, then they are actually going to spill over and they are going to affect us again in Australia. We don't live in isolation from what's happening around the world.

To promote this, we're likely better off referencing Australia or "country" less and "home" more.

*What's in it for Australia?*

While we're likely well served to move away from referencing where we live in national terms, it may still prove useful to engage in expanding the arguments about what ending offshore extra-judicial incarceration, sending people into harm at sea, refusing entry and so forth does to the country. And, conversely, what altering these policies could promise for Australia.

As discussed in the analysis of the written discourse, there's a tendency to either cite international law and need to follow it as a way to reduce or eliminate harm. Then, additionally, there are various exhortations about policy change as an opportunity to do good. These concepts came up among interviewees as well.

What we can add to them based off the interviews is the following:

1. Notion of falseness, not being what you seem and the toll this takes. Many respondents referenced the gulf between Australian self perception of egalitarianism and the reality of racism and inhumanity. As one respondent summed up this artifice, "we've got Australians on permanent visa's here **that are not in the lucky country at all.**"
2. Another theme that emerged that is worth testing is the chance to be united, to bring an end to an ugly and protracted debate that's done harm to Australia:

People are encouraged to come together rather than division being encouraged.



We're in a dangerous situation in this country at the moment because we are curtailing our liberties; we're allowing politicians to curtail the freedom of speech; we're talking about curtailing the freedom of movement for people. I think that we're a nation on the turn and I think it's very worrying to see what we turn out to be. We have been so busy hating people coming by boat and drumming up fear of invasion that we're now no longer able to look at each other and feel kindly and compassionate towards each other. This Government has come at the end of two decades of very, very poor governance. It's not governance that seeks to bring out the best in humanity, to bring out the best in people, it's governance who seeks to divide, to cause us to fear each other and to divide in the community.

It would be an Australia which, to re-quote John Howard in a different context, would be 'relaxed and comfortable with itself' rather than an Australia which is always seeing a stranger as a threat not as a potential friend.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

As mentioned, this represents a summary of the major themes and important underlying assumptions among the over 50 advocates with whom we spoke. These interviews offer us fertile inputs from which to craft new message frames to test alongside more traditional approaches to advocate for people seeking asylum.

## Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. What is asylum?
  2. What causes people to seek asylum?
  3. Why are certain groups of people more likely to seek asylum where others are not – what causes this difference?
  4. What is the purpose of asylum – what does it allow or enable?
  5. How would you explain who an asylum seeker is to a four year old child?
  6. If you had to select an image of asylum – what would that image be?
  7. If you could say anything you wanted about asylum seekers, what would you say?
  8. What are the ideas or myths Australians have about ourselves and our country that drive perceptions about asylum seekers and policy toward them?
  9. Switching gears here – now I want you to imagine that I give you a magic wand. It's not a perfect wand, you can't be invisible or fly. But it's a magic **policy** wand. With it, you can set up the rules and procedures for asylum in Australia. So, not a perfect world, but a just world. Tell me about it...
- (Probe – if needed – describe what the process is like for someone newly arrived, where do they go, what happens? Describe what it feels like to live in Australia after these changes are implemented – what looks, sounds or feels differently? Who benefits and how? Who is harmed and how?)
10. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me you feel you haven't had a chance to say?