

“A race to the bottom”: Refugee advocate perceptions of media and political rhetoric in Australia

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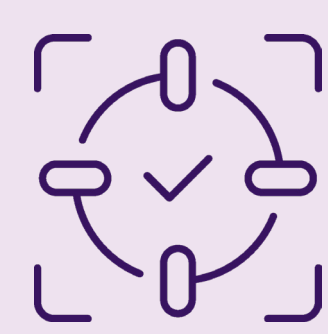
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Rationale




Within Australia, media and political attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers often contradict the general population’s attitudes. This difference can be even more stark for those who advocate for and support refugees and asylum seekers. The emotional impacts of this incongruence have not previously been explored.

Aim

To seek the lived experience of refugee supporters and advocates, exploring how they make sense of the refugee attitudes they perceive in media and political commentary, and the subsequent impact on their wellbeing.



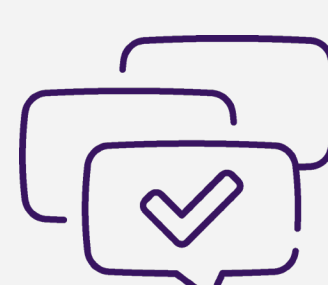
Method

-  Participants: 10 adult refugee advocates in NSW.
-  Data collection: Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.
-  Analysis: Transcripts were analysed independently and then jointly by the first and third authors to ensure robustness and credibility, following steps for Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Larkin, Flowers and Smith, 2022).

The University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee approved the study prior to recruitment.

Discussion/conclusion

This study found that opposing attitudes perceived in media, politics, and refugee policy negatively impacted these refugee advocates, through the constant uphill battle of advocating for a cause that feels immovable.



Implications

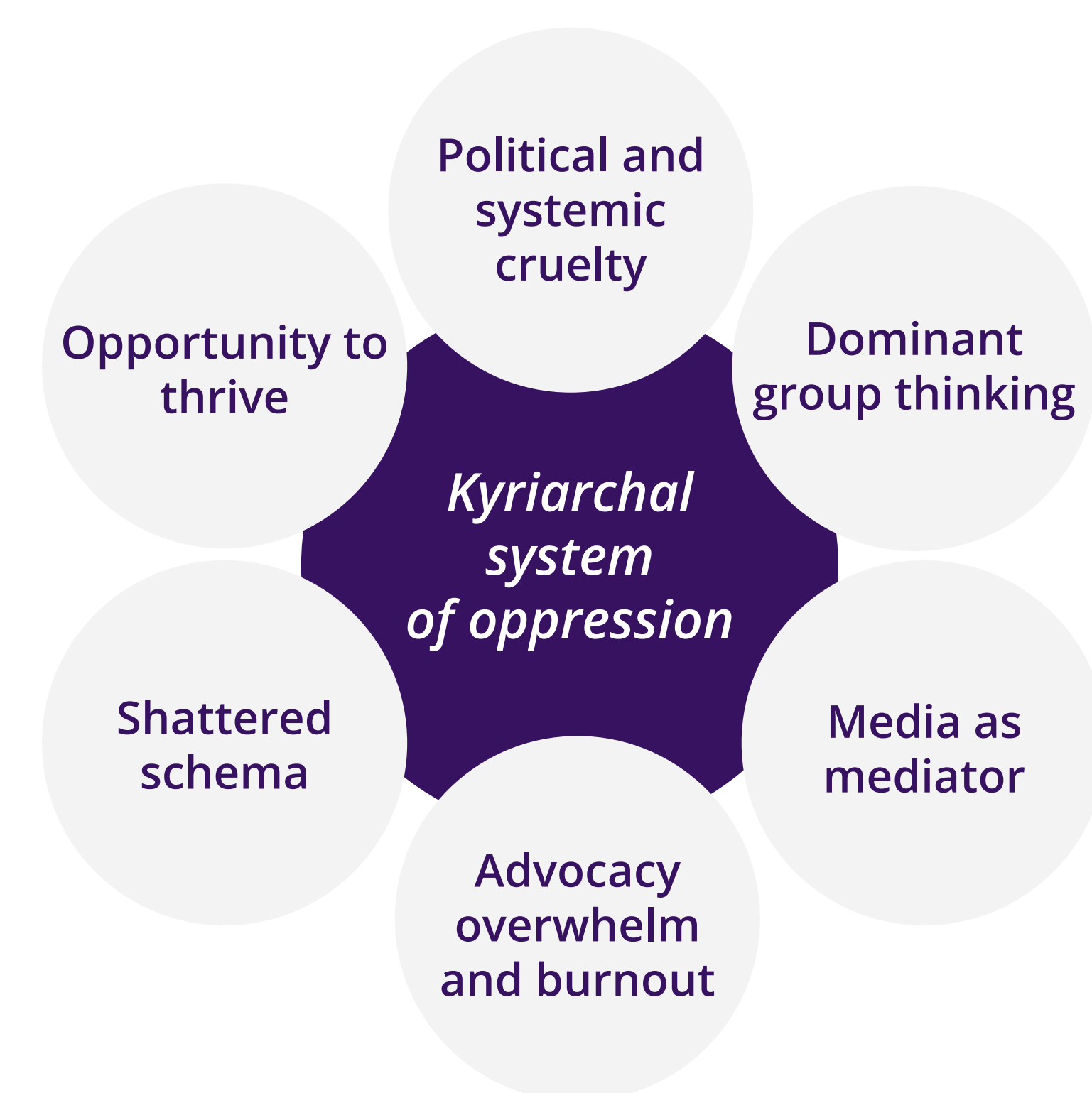
Understanding the lived experience of refugee advocates can help inform policymaking and foster a more inclusive and compassionate society for refugees, with knock-on benefits for the wider community.

Limitations

- Findings are not generalisable.
- No participants held counter/negative or neutral attitudes towards refugees.

Results and findings

Six themes emerged, with one overarching theme of the *Kyriarchal system of oppression*. This poster focuses on *Political and systemic cruelty* and *Media as a mediator*.



Political and systemic cruelty

The participants reflect on *Political and systemic cruelty* by successive Australian governments as paternalism, aimed at blocking and deterring asylum seekers and refugees, particularly those who enter by boat.

“It was like a race to the bottom of who could come up with the most cruel way of dealing with these people.”

The politicisation of refugee and asylum seeker issues is recognised for its lack of humanity and its patriarchal underpinnings.

“The only benefit was to a few bastards who wanted to hold onto power.”

Refugee policy is described “as a tool for holding onto power,” leaving the participants cynical and without trust.

“They make it sound legit, but it’s actually just part of the policy of cruelty.”

Shame permeates these reflections.

“We’ve been terribly ashamed and embarrassed... we’re in the lucky country but turn people away.”

Media as mediator

As a mediating body between politicians and the public, the media is seen as failing to be unbiased and keeping the government accountable. In making sense of this, participants interpret media imperialism through perpetuating negative narratives about refugees and asylum seekers juxtaposed with positive narratives about Australians.

“Keeping a certain level of fear, current, always, but otherwise perpetuating our own myth of ourselves.”

Flawed and incomplete reporting hoodwinks those in the general population without the skills to analyse media content critically - “if someone doesn’t have that education, that’s kind of the narrative that they believe.” Refugees and asylum seekers then become the villains of a self-fulfilling prophecy in the broader Australian community.

“As soon as you are presented in the media as first - other, and then a negative impact... [there is] no choice but to adopt that persona.”