Values and Morals in the Dehumanisation of Asylum Seekers

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Declaration

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Elizabeth Greenhalgh

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Thesis Summary

Asylum seekers face unique forms of prejudice and negative attitudes in industrialised countries, and are frequently viewed with suspicion and hostility. Depictions of asylum seekers as amoral and uncivilised can promote perceptions that they are less than fully human. This humanness denial can lead to a range of negative outcomes, such as the rationalisation of poor treatment and hard-line policies, and lack of concern or disengagement from their suffering. The present research systematically investigated how an individual's values or morals may relate to these perceptions of asylum seekers as comparatively more animal-like or less human, and drew on a range of well-established theories in these areas. The first chapter reviews theories and previous research that create a foundation for the project. The results of empirical investigations of the research questions that arise from this foundation are reported in journal article form comprising studies reported in Chapters 2 to 5. The final chapter presents an overall integration of the findings generated by the project with theoretical foundations and previous empirical findings.

The first article (chapter 2) reports survey results that explored how perceptions of dissimilarities in specific types of values can predict the dehumanisation of asylum seekers, which can then result in heightened levels of negative attitudes toward them. Further, we explored the moderating role of individual preference for consistency (PFC) in these processes. A survey of 140 Australians revealed a strong relationship between dehumanisation and prejudice. Individuals with stronger conservation and self-enhancement values, and greater perceived dissimilarity to asylum seekers on self-transcendence – self-enhancement values, dehumanised asylum seekers more and were more prejudiced towards them. The relationship between perceived self-transcendence dissimilarities and prejudice

was mediated by dehumanisation, while PFC moderated the relationship between conservation value dissimilarities and dehumanisation.

The second article (chapter 3) reports the results for the development and validation of a moral disengagement scale, which aimed to determine whether Australians adopt mechanisms of moral disengagement in their consideration of the treatment of asylum seekers. The scale was developed across two studies. In study one, a 50-item questionnaire was developed and tested with an Australian community sample (N = 401). Factor analysis suggested that a two-factor model had the best fit. Study two (N = 306) confirmed the two-factor, 16-item structure and provided support for the construct validity of the scale. This scale is proposed as a valid and reliable measure of moral disengagement in the context of the treatment and perceptions of asylum seekers, with results providing evidence for the use of moral disengagement as a means of rationalising attitudes and behaviours that may otherwise be sanctioned.

The third article (chapter 4) further explores the antecedents of moral disengagement and dehumanisation of asylum seekers. A survey of 305 Australians showed that lower levels of moral reasoning and higher levels of moral emotions (anger, contempt and disgust) predicted dehumanisation and moral disengagement. Unexpectedly, proneness to shame did not predict either dehumanisation or the moral emotions. Dehumanisation partially mediated the relationships between the moral emotions, moral reasoning, and moral disengagement. Results also showed that moral reasoning particularly affects moral disengagement when levels of hostility are low. Individuals with high levels of both moral reasoning and moral emotions reported moral disengagement comparable to individuals with low moral reasoning.

The final article (chapter 5) investigates the suggestion that the promotion of self-transcendence values (e.g., equality, forgiveness) may be an effective method for combating

humanness denial. Two studies were conducted using a manipulation of values that has previously been found to affect intergroup behaviour, aiming to promote fairness and the perceived humanity of asylum seekers. Each study manipulated exposure to instantiations of the value of equality. Exposure to an atypical instantiation increased the relevant moral foundation (fairness), and this effect was mediated by changes in the importance of equality. However, the instantiation manipulation had no effects on dehumanisation, either indirectly via moral foundations, or directly. Together, these studies suggest that, although values and moral foundations are interconnected, the activation of self-transcendence may not be an effective means of promoting asylum seekers' humanity.

The research presented throughout this thesis helps to untangle the roles that morals and values play in the denial of asylum seekers' humanness, and suggests that understanding these relationships may be helpful in promoting perceptions of their humanity. This research extends what is known about the antecedents and consequences of dehumanisation and moral disengagement. The findings carry implications for values and morality theory and research, and also provide a more sound understanding of how to combat these processes for those practicing in human rights and refugee and asylum seeker fields, who may be actively working to overcome the current high levels of negative rhetoric and pervasive negative beliefs about asylum seekers. This understanding will lead to more effective strategies in the promotion of positive perceptions of asylum seekers, who are particularly vulnerable to denial of their humanity.