

# Asylum Seeker Dispersal: Public Attitudes and Press Portrayals around the UK

## Summary of Research Project

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### Introduction

This PhD research project was undertaken from 2000 to 2003 in the Geography Department of the University of Wales Swansea. The thesis investigated local responses to the UK policy of dispersal for accommodating spontaneous asylum seekers. More specifically, the thesis aimed to understand local public attitudes and press portrayals, and to explore the relationships between them with particular reference to variations between localities. The research was carried out in five towns and cities in England and Wales: Leeds, Sheffield, Swansea, Cardiff and Barrow-in-Furness.

### Research Contexts

In the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century changes in global politics and economics led to significant changes in international migration such that a period of 'New Migration' was identified<sup>1</sup>. Western European countries all saw rises in the number of applications for asylum. In the UK the number rose from around 4,000 per annum in the 1980s to 80,000 per annum in the late 1990s. This necessitated a review of policies which led to four Acts being passed in the UK within 10 years, most recently the *Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002*.

One major issue addressed in this new legislation was how to accommodate asylum seekers. Dispersal had been used since the 1940s in the UK for accommodating quota refugee groups<sup>2</sup> but when the current policy, introduced in the *Immigration and Asylum Act 1999*, was put into place it was the first time dispersal had been employed for accommodating spontaneous asylum seekers. All asylum seekers who request accommodation assistance are now dispersed on a no-choice basis to a cluster area within one of eleven dispersal consortia around the UK.

Several reviews of dispersal have been undertaken<sup>3</sup> and have stressed the need for studies of media and community relations. As the first comparative research on local public and press reactions to the policy this thesis has responded to these calls, addressing pertinent social issues such as multiculturalism and community cohesion<sup>4</sup>.

### Research Questions

The thesis aimed to explore the following research questions:

- What are people's attitudes towards the policy of dispersal, and asylum issues more generally? How do these attitudes vary from one research location to another? How can public attitudes be explained? How can local variations in attitudes be explained?
- How have the local press portrayed dispersal of asylum seekers? How have portrayals varied between local newspapers in the research locations? How can local press portrayals be explained? How can variations in portrayals of dispersal between the local newspapers of the research locations be explained?
- What are the relationships between local public attitudes towards dispersal and local press portrayals of the policy?

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<sup>1</sup> Koser, K. and Lutz, H. (eds.) (1998) *The New Migration in Europe. Social Constructions and Social Realities* Basingstoke: Macmillan

<sup>2</sup> see Robinson, V., Andersson, R. and Musterd, S. (2003) *Spreading the 'burden'? A review of policies to disperse asylum seekers and refugees* Bristol: Policy Press

<sup>3</sup> see, for example, Audit Commission (2000) *Another Country. Implementing dispersal under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999* London: Audit Commission Publications

<sup>4</sup> see Cantle, T. (2002) *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team* London: Home Office

## Methods

The approaches and methods used in the research are summarised in the following table:

<b>RESEARCH METHODS</b>					
<b>APPROACH</b>	<i>Multi-Method Quantitative and Qualitative</i>				
<b>QUESTIONS</b>	What are the attitudes of local people to dispersal of asylum seekers? Why do they have these attitudes? How do they vary spatially? How do attitudes relate to press coverage?			How have the local press portrayed dispersal of asylum seekers? Why have they portrayed it in this way? How does coverage vary spatially? How does coverage relate to public attitudes?	
<b>DATA COLLECTION</b>	<i>Public Attitudes</i>			<i>Press Portrayals</i>	
	On-street questionnaire surveys	Focus Groups	In-Depth Interviews	Collection of local newspaper articles	Interviews with local press workers  Job shadow of senior reporter
<b>SAMPLE</b>	Stratified random sample	Purposive sample	Purposive sample	Purposive sample of newspapers and articles	Purposive sample
<b>ANALYSIS</b>	Quantitative analysis using SPSS/Excel	Qualitative analysis	Qualitative interview analysis	Critical discourse analytic approach	Qualitative interview analysis
				Quantitative analysis	Qualitative analysis
<b>LOCATIONS</b>	<i>Leeds</i>	<i>Sheffield</i>	<i>Swansea</i>	<i>Cardiff</i>	<i>Barrow-in-Furness</i>

## Key findings

### 1. Public attitudes:

- Attitudes towards asylum and the policy of dispersal constitute a moral panic.
- There is considerable prejudice towards asylum seekers who have been constructed as the Other in this period of New Migration.
- The moral panic is characterised by concern about genuineness of asylum seekers and the numbers that are arriving. Asylum seekers are associated with illegality and deviance and perceived to be economically motivated. Attitudes towards them are structured by a bogus-genuine dichotomy. Numbers of asylum seekers are seen to threaten British society (including religion, values, ethnicity and health) and economy (through criminality and increased competition).
- Participants' knowledge about the international contexts, numbers and definitions of asylum seeking was poor.
- Othering occurs on different levels according to the family status of the asylum seeker, and whether the issues are considered generally or personally.
- Counter-moral panic attitudes were seen but in a small minority.
- Dispersal was in general seen as a desirable and necessary solution to the problem of large numbers of deviant asylum seekers. However, when the policy was considered on more local and personal levels respondents rose a variety of concerns particularly in relation to the welfare of asylum seekers.

- Both personal level and structural level factors determine attitudes towards asylum and dispersal: Most positive and tolerant attitudes were associated with contact with asylum seekers; experience of (particularly international) migration; youth; high socio-economic circumstances; high levels of educational attainment (particularly at University level or above); and expressed political sympathy for the Liberal Democrats. Religion, influence of family and friends and the desire to hold attitudes in line with the majority were also important factors.
- Variations were seen in attitudes towards asylum and dispersal between the research locations. They can be ranked from most tolerant and aware, exhibiting most counter-moral panic attitudes, to most intolerant and unaware with moral panic attitudes as follows: Sheffield, Leeds, Cardiff, Swansea and Barrow-in-Furness.
- Local variations in attitudes can be explained with the concept of Local Attitudinal Cultures. Key factors in the formation of Local Attitudinal Cultures are experience of migration and minority ethnic populations including through dispersal, sense of community, political traditions and economic history.

## **2. Press portrayals:**

- In general, local press portrayals of asylum seeker dispersal follow the tone and themes of national coverage. Portrayals concentrate on numbers of asylum seekers, control, cost and conflict. Flood metaphors are frequently used. Headlines are often misleading and can be inaccurate.
- Production of local press portrayals is affected by factors external and internal to the newsroom and personal to the reporters.
- Variations were seen in local press portrayals of dispersal between the research locations. The number of articles over time and between publications is not constant: local issues attention cycles are seen in relation to asylum seeker dispersal in the local press. Stance towards asylum seekers and dispersal differs such that the local newspapers can be ranked from most positive and supportive to most negative and unsupportive as follows: *South Wales Echo*, *Sheffield Star*, *South Wales Evening Post*, *Yorkshire Evening Post* and *Barrow North West Evening Mail*.
- Local variations can be explained with reference to the local press representation and (re)production of Local Attitudinal Cultures in relation to asylum seeker dispersal; and the importance of particular factors of production in each locality.
- Most sensitive, informative and balanced reporting is found where there is a dedicated asylum reporter and where there are good links between the local press and local refugee sector.

## **3. Relations between local attitudes and press portrayals:**

- Relations between the local press and local public attitudes towards asylum seeker dispersal are significant on an individual level and on the level of the community.
- A cycle of reinforcement of local attitudinal cultures has been suggested. A number of factors are critical in normalising and socialising attitudes including existing attitudes towards dispersal, trust of the local press, and the role of the press as an agenda setter and forum for debate on asylum issues.

## **Implications/Conclusions**

This thesis has three major implications for the direction of future research and for policy formulation in relation to asylum seeker settlement:

### **1. Local Variations**

This research has identified local variations in attitudes towards asylum seeker dispersal, and in local press coverage of the policy. This is significant because it has the potential to affect the success of local implementation of dispersal in terms of the reactions of the receiving population and the experiences of asylum seekers including their desire, or not, to secondary migrate. Local variations must, therefore, be considered in future research and policy.

## **2. The Importance of the Local in the Context of the National**

Although local public attitudes and press portrayals are set within the context of the pervasive and powerful national debate on asylum distinction can be made between the local and national scales of both press coverage and public attitudes.

When the asylum issue is considered in general, on a national scale, moral panic attitudes prevail; but when dispersal is debated and the issues are considered on a local scale and a personal level, the weaknesses of the moral panic are revealed and it is to some extent broken down. The moral panic, and othering of asylum seekers, can simultaneously act independently on local and national levels. There is no reason why the more thoughtful and sympathetic local debate cannot infiltrate the national moral panic.

Local press coverage, too, differs from its national counterpart. Firstly, it deals with local issues which are most likely to invoke counter-moral panic attitudes. Secondly, in its role as a community institution concerned with maintaining community relations, the local press reconstitutes the 'problem' so that it is no longer about asylum seekers as people but about how the local population and infrastructure will manage the new arrivals.

If the asylum debate in the UK is to be widened and escape the narrow, long-run arguments of the moral panic, responsibility must be taken on both national and local scales by government, media and individuals. Although on a national scale hostile media coverage and public attitudes appear ingrained in British culture, the local scale provides a promising avenue for generating a more informed, balanced and humane discussion.

## **3. Community Relations Strategies for Asylum Seeker Dispersal**

Given the significance of local attitudinal cultures and the importance of the local scale in the asylum debate, there is a clear need for properly funded and co-ordinated local community relations strategies to be set up in preparation for dispersal. These should be nationally co-ordinated and involve local media, public and other agencies.

The findings of this research also suggest that a policy of dispersal based on ideas of community would be the most effective method of creating harmonious relations and long-term local retention and integration of refugees<sup>5</sup>. Through adequate and efficient service and information provision, informed, understanding and tolerant local attitudinal cultures can be developed. Simultaneously the asylum debate needs to be shifted so that asylum seekers are seen as potential economic, cultural and political assets<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, dispersal should be reconceptualised, and promoted, as a policy and philosophy that is not about sharing a burden, but about each locality and community sharing the benefits of multiculturalism and the responsibility of humanitarian protection.

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<sup>5</sup> in line with Refugee Council proposals, see Griggs, A. (2002) Asylum Seeker Accommodation Process. Refugee Council proposal for a community-based pilot London: Refugee Council

<sup>6</sup> supporting Robinson's conclusions in Robinson, V., Andersson, R. and Musterd, S. (2003) *Spreading the 'burden'? A review of policies to disperse asylum seekers and refugees* Bristol: Policy Press

