Researchers for Asylum Seekers

Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Conference 2017

Conference Spotlight

Forced Migration and Human Rights

9AM TO 5PM
THURSDAY 16 NOVEMBER
WILLIAM MCMAHON BALL THEATRE
OLD ARTS BUILDING
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE
CONFERENCE CONVENORS

Dr Karen Block
Ebony King

For more information about Researchers for Asylum Seekers (RAS), or to become a RAS member, please visit our website:
ras.unimelb.edu.au

SPONSORS

Thank you to the Melbourne Social Equity Institute for supporting the RAS Conference in 2017
GETTING THERE

William McMahon Ball Theatre
Old Arts Building
University of Melbourne

The Old Arts Building is located in the centre of the University of Melbourne’s Parkville campus and accessible from both the Swanston Street and Royal Parade trams.

For a map visit https://maps.unimelb.edu.au/parkville/building/149
SESSION 1
APPROACHES TO EXCLUSION AND INCLUSION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

Chair - Karen Block

9.15 Conference Welcome - Nick Haslam

9.20 Keynote Address - Caroline Fleay
Collective responses and the university: Challenging the exclusion of people seeking asylum from higher education

10.00 Kelly Soderstrom
German political identity and approaches to responsibility in German asylum policy

10.20 Asher Hirsch and Cameron Doig
Managing migration in Indonesia: The role of IOM and Australia

10.40AM – 11.10AM
MORNING TEA

SESSION 2
HUMAN RIGHTS: RESTRICTIONS AND RESISTANCE

Chair - Tom Whitford

11:10 Renuka T. Balasubramaniam
Refugee protection in Malaysia and the rule of law

11.30 Andrew Burridge
‘Signing on’ with the UK Home Office: Reporting as a site of anxiety, detention and solidarity

11.50 Farhad Arian
Iran’s mistreatment of Afghans: Human rights violations of refugees and asylum seekers

12.10 Athar Shafaei
The impact of economic sanctions in Afghan’s livelihood security in Iran

12.30PM – 1.30PM
LUNCH

Lunch will be provided, comprising vegetarian and vegan finger foods from Asylum Seeker Resource Centre Catering.
SESSION 3
COLLABORATIONS, NETWORKS AND INCLUSION

Chair - Ebony King

1.30 Shannon Owen
Imagining futures with documentary film

1.50 Louise Olliff
From resettled refugees to humanitarian actors: Motivations, modalities and implications of diaspora humanitarianism

2.10 Sanaz Nasirpour
Diasporic relations and feminist leadership: The question of women’s rights inside Iran

2.30 Anh Nguyen
Vietnamese refugee diaspora on Facebook

2.50 John van Kooy
Surplus to requirements? Local inclusion of humanitarian migrants in Australia

3.00PM – 3.20PM
AFTERNOON TEA

SESSION 4
PROGRAMS AND SERVICES SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Chair - Charlene Edwards

3.20 Ebony King
Facilitated resilience: Services and unaccompanied asylum seeking minors

3.40 Phillipa Bellemore
Arranged friendships and the potential of intercultural contact

4.00 Mikel Moss
Development and implementation of a Sanford Meisner-based drama therapy intervention in refugee communities

4.20 Tram Nguyen
The psychological cost of seeking asylum in Australia

4.40 Debbie Hocking, Suresh Sundram and Serafino Mancuso
Mental health screening tool for asylum seekers and refugees: The STAR-MH
SESSION 1
APPROACHES TO EXCLUSION AND INCLUSION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS

COLLECTIVE RESPONSES AND THE UNIVERSITY:
CHALLENGING THE EXCLUSION OF PEOPLE SEEKING ASYLUM FROM HIGHER EDUCATION

CAROLINE FLEAY

In contrast to Australian Government policies that aim to prevent the arrival of people seeking asylum by boat, and the effective exclusion of those who do arrive from being able to resettle, a range of civil society groups and individuals have responded with acts of welcome, including some within universities. People who arrived by boat since 13 August 2012, denied permanent protection even if found to be refugees, are forced to remain in limbo. For those who wish to study, their temporary visa status means that many are effectively excluded from accessing higher education. This presentation will explore a university-community research and advocacy collective that seeks to challenge this exclusion of people seeking asylum from pursuing university studies. Underpinned by the lived experiences of people seeking asylum who are part of the collective, the projects aim to develop practical and useful outcomes that enable their access to higher education. The projects also seek to elevate understandings within the university and beyond of the exclusionary impacts of government policies as well as foster the development of more inclusive education communities. This presentation will explore some of the outcomes and challenges of this ongoing project, and the role of the academic within such a collective.

Dr Caroline Fleay is Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Human Rights Education, Curtin University, where she teaches human rights and conducts research into the experiences of people seeking asylum in Australia. She has been a regular visitor to sites of immigration detention and has a range of publications about the impacts on people seeking asylum of indefinite detention and living in the community with minimal supports. Caroline has also been involved with a range of community groups and human rights campaigns over the past three decades, including those focused on the rights to seek asylum. She is currently a Board Member of the Refugee Council of Australia and continues to liaise with state, national and international refugee support organisations and activists to campaign on the rights of people seeking asylum.
The norm of responsibility is central to the protection mandate inherent in asylum policy. Norm construction and codification in legislation is tightly linked to political identity, making analysis of the connection between political identity and understandings of responsibility necessary to understand why states choose certain asylum policies. Political identity itself is understood to exist in a hierarchy, with political identities differing by level of governance (supranational, national, sub-national). This thesis investigates how differing German political identities at each level of governance influence approaches to responsibility in asylum policy. Using a vertical analysis of German political identity and related approaches to responsibility at three levels (European Union, federal, and Länder) and a case study of the 2015 March for Hope, this thesis will analyse how political identity influences Germany’s overall approach to asylum policy through the different notions of responsibility at each level.

Kelly Soderstrom is a first-year PhD student in International Relations at the University of Melbourne. Before coming to Melbourne, she received her Master’s degree in International and European Politics (Distinction) at the University of Edinburgh. She also spent three years in Germany conducting research into youth immigrant integration and supervising community engagement projects in social sustainability.
While the International Organization for Migration (IOM) portrays an image of itself as a humanitarian actor, many of its activities in Indonesia have compromised regional refugee protection. The absence of any rights-based protection mandate underpinning IOM operations means that IOM has faced criticism for carrying out migration control projects on behalf of donor states of the global north, such as Australia. Our research has highlighted the extent of Australian funding for IOM, and the impact that this has had for the human rights of asylum seekers and refugees stranded in Indonesia.

In 2000, IOM, Indonesia and Australia formed the trilateral Regional Cooperation Agreement (RCA). From 2001 to 2016, Australia has provided $238 million to IOM to conduct migration control activities in Indonesia. In 2016, Australia spent as much on funding IOM in Indonesia than it donated to UNHCR globally.

IOM Indonesia’s “migration management” projects i the detention of irregular migrants, the return of asylum seekers and refugees to their countries of origin, the strengthening of Indonesia’s border controls, and public information campaigns to dissuade people from taking boats to Australia to seek asylum.

This paper will argue that IOM’s activities undertake the sovereign function of deterrence, processing, and exclusion which have traditionally been the domain of states. In doing so, we argue that Australian support for IOM serves Australia’s geopolitical deterrence agenda, rather than prioritising the protection of asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia.

Asher Hirsch is a Senior Policy Officer at the Refugee Council of Australia, and a PhD candidate at Monash University, Faculty of Law.

Cameron Doig is a Juris Doctor candidate at Melbourne Law School, and a paralegal at Asylum Seeker Resource Centre.
SESSION 2
HUMAN RIGHTS:
RESTRICTIONS AND RESISTANCE

REFUGEE PROTECTION IN MALAYSIA
AND THE RULE OF LAW

RENUKA T. BALASUBRAMANIAM

Malaysia has engaged in the de facto and temporary protection of asylum seekers for over 40 years. In recent times, an aspect of its protection efforts that has been the subject of criticism has been the human rights violations encountered by refugees. Within Malaysia’s un-formalised approach to protection, there is also clear evidence of confusion among public actors, who are duty bound to administer the law.

This study examined the laws that govern, and the institutions accountable for, humanitarian protection in Malaysia. The object of this investigation was to employ a rule of law framework, to determine the extent to which decision-making concerning refugees by Malaysian authorities is consistent with the Rule of Law. The methods adopted were a doctrinal analysis of common law and statute, combined with a textual analysis of publicly reported secondary material, and personal observations as a practitioner.

The first intermediate finding made by this study was that the un-formalised protection that Malaysia grants to refugees can be justified; on the one hand, by the prerogative to regulate entry and, on the other, by the individual’s freedom of movement. Its next finding was that the prerogative to regulate entry and the individual’s freedom of movement have been displaced by statute for the control of immigration. Malaysia’s Immigration Act has clarified Parliament’s intent as regards the prerogative of defence in the interests of national security. As such, it displaces the Executive’s humanitarian endeavours. The symptoms of harms to refugees, and administrative dissonance to public officials, are the result of the failure to reconcile the competing forces of Parliament’s statutory intent and the Executive’s political agenda.

Renuka T. Balasubramaniam is a Malaysian lawyer. Her LLM research at La Trobe University’s school of law, was on the subject of Refugee Protection in Malaysia and the Rule of Law. Over her thirteen year career as a lawyer she has represented refugees appealing the punishment of caning for illegal entry and negative status determination by the UNHCR. She is currently consulting for The Forest Trust, a global non-profit working on reducing the negative social and environmental impacts of sourcing palm oil in Malaysia and Indonesia.
Asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their application to remain in the UK are typically required to report to the UK Visas and Immigration Agency (UKVI; formerly UK Border Agency) on a regular basis. Reporting centres are located within existing Home Office buildings, or at local police stations where UKVI officials will set up temporarily. This is a moment of exceptional anxiety and difficulty for those who are awaiting a decision. The threat of detention and removal is constant during this time, but particularly at the moment of reporting, a technology deployed by the Home Office to bring asylum seekers to them, rather than conduct increasingly unpopular home raids. This research sets out to map these sites of detention that have been overlooked within critical studies of carceral space: at both Home Office and police reporting locations Short Term Holding Facilities (STHFs) are used to detain persons before transfer to removal (detention) centres elsewhere in the UK. For those supporting asylum seekers, this can also be a crucial moment for advocacy before they are transferred. To date there is no publicly available information providing an overall picture of the landscape of STHFs used for immigration and asylum reporting.

Andrew Burridge is a political geographer, and was most recently Lead Researcher at the University of Exeter, conducting a three-year ethnographic study of asylum appeals hearings. He has also conducted research regarding border securitization, migrant deaths and humanitarian aid in the Mexico-U.S. borderlands, and at the external borders of the European Union.
The Iranian government’s strict policies, legal restrictions and bureaucratic obstacles have largely violated human rights of Afghan refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. The violation of human rights of Afghans in Iran have taken place in a variety of different ways, including forced deportation, denial of education rights, lack of employment opportunities, forced labour, lack of access to healthcare, denial of right to liberty, no freedom of movement, forced family separation, regular physical abuses, mistreatment in detention and deportation centres, and forced recruitment to fight in Syria. However, the continuous mistreatment and human rights violation of Afghans have not necessarily prevented the regular flow of Afghan migration to Iran because of obvious reasons. Most importantly, the deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of the United States-led international security forces in December 2014, widespread violent conflict, increasing political instability, lack of economic and employment opportunities and absence of rule of law and good governance have forced hundreds of thousands of Afghans to leave the country and seek refuge in other countries, including Iran.

The mistreatment and human rights violation of Afghans is in contradiction to Iran’s international human rights and refugee protection obligations because as a state party to the Refugee Convention and its Protocol as well as other international human rights treaties, the Iranian government has a legal responsibility to protect the rights and freedoms of Afghans refugees and asylum seekers.

**Farhad Arian** is a Senior Research Officer at the Edmund Rice Centre in Sydney. His research primarily focuses on refugee empowerment, human rights of people seeking asylum, and returnees experience. Farhad holds a Master of Research from Macquarie University and two additional Master’s degrees in International Relations and Conflict Analysis.
THE IMPACT OF ECONOMIC SANCTIONS IN AFGHANS’ LIVELIHOOD SECURITY IN IRAN

ATHAR SHAFAEI

Understanding how economic sanctions affect people in target countries has been of considerable interest due to the growing use of sanctions as a foreign policy tools. Previous researches within this context has examined the experiences of people in a society, while vulnerable groups within these societies receiving limited attention. Iran has experienced heavy sanctions since 1979, which intensified by multilateral comprehensive sanctions during 2010 to 2015. Whereas Iran is the second-largest host country for Afghans after Pakistan. As Afghans in Iran are particularly vulnerable, this study explores the Afghans’ life condition in Iran during intensifying the economic sanctions. This paper presents a part of the main study for PhD research conducted in Tehran drawing on the results of semi-structured and open-ended interviews with experts, NGOs, and Afghans. The paper focuses on Afghans’ livelihood security comprising housing, food, discrimination and racism. The findings indicate that sanctions have worsened the Afghans’ middle-class living conditions.

Athar Shafaei is a PhD candidate in the School of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities. She awarded M.Phil. in International Political Economy from National University of Malaysia (UKM). Her research interest includes, sanctions, refugees, asylum seekers, socio-economic, human security, resettlement, Iran, Australia, and US foreign policy.
SESSION 3
COLLABORATIONS, NETWORKS AND INCLUSION

IMAGINING FUTURES WITH DOCUMENTARY FILM

SHANNON OWEN

There are rich historical links between documentary film and social change. These links are now more prevalent than ever, thanks to increasingly accessible production and distribution technologies and the emergence of social impact documentary that formally embeds a change making ethos within mechanisms of production. At the same time, the ongoing global refugee crisis, sees stories of forced migration and re-settlement repeatedly told through a documentary film lens. These films do well to highlight pressing social issues and to emotionally engage broad audiences with otherwise inaccessible stories. In turn, many of these films have become powerful advocacy tools used to build awareness and lobby for change. But what does change look like? And who is shaping this change?

Inspired by the futurist proposition - that in order to work toward creating a future we want, we must first find ways to imagine what this future could be - my research challenges documentary filmmaking to creatively engage with possibilities of social impact in a new way.

Drawing on processes developed in the field of futures studies, this research explores opportunities for documentary film to look beyond historical and contemporary narratives and work to project alternative futures. The research centerpiece, is the production of a feature length documentary The Long Road Home, that explores alternative futures of South Sudan. This presentation reports on initial attempts to apply futures thinking and foresight processes to the documentary’s development with specific focus on the film from the future workshop that took place in early 2017.

Shannon Owen is a director/producer working across documentary and animation. Her work has been broadcast nationally and internationally, screened at festivals in Asia, Europe and North America and exhibited in Australia’s National Portrait Gallery. Her research practice engages with futures discourse and the possibilities and challenges it poses for documentary filmmaking.
Refugees resettled to Australia often establish small voluntary-run organisations to mobilise resources and implement humanitarian projects targeting displaced populations in other parts of the world. These ‘everyday humanitarians’ raise money for schools and health centres, purchase wheelchairs and water pumps, send material aid, facilitate migration outcomes, and advocate at different levels to draw attention to the plight of ‘their people’. The capacity of resettled refugees to draw on transnational social networks, contextual knowledge of humanitarian situations and systems, mobility enabled through resettlement, and (in)visibility, makes them distinct humanitarian actors. Although not ‘new’ in their actions, there is increasing interest in what role refugee diasporas could or do play in responses to forced displacement. Based on multi-sited ethnographic research in Australia, Thailand, Indonesia and Geneva, and interviews with representatives of 26 refugee diaspora organisations formed in Australia, this presentation focuses on the motivations, modalities and implications of diaspora humanitarianism.

Louise Olliff is due to complete her PhD in anthropology at the University of Melbourne in January 2018. Her thesis, ‘Refugee diaspora organisations in the international refugee regime: motivations, modalities and implications of diaspora humanitarianism’, involved ethnographic research in Australia, Geneva, Indonesia and Thailand. Louise also works as a Senior Advisor for the Refugee Council of Australia.
This paper examines the ways in which migration and the diasporic context have alerted feminist leadership of Iranian feminist activists. This is informed by transformative feminist leadership (Antrobus, 2002; Batliwala, 2010; Batliwala and Friedman, 2014) as the model of leadership which is concerned with achieving gender justice. Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews with two generations of Iranian feminist immigrants (in Australia, the United States, and Europe), who are forced to remain outside Iran, it considers the opportunities and challenges diasporic feminists face in contributing to the issues around women’s rights in Iran after the 1979 Revolution. The findings of this study revealed that Iranian feminists have undergone a major transformation in their feminist ideologies, skills as well as their leadership practices at both individual and collaborative levels. I argue that inter-generational differences have led to some tensions in transformative feminist leadership in the context of Iranian diaspora.

Sanaz Nasirpour is a PhD candidate in the School of Social and Political Sciences, the University of Melbourne. Previously, she received her Master of Arts in International Relations in Iran in 2010. Her areas of research include gender studies, digital diaspora, transnational women’s organisations, feminism and women’s leadership.
This article examines the use of Facebook as a knowledge source and its historical significance in facilitating Vietnamese refugee diaspora extended kinship network since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. It explores how their polymediated connection supports a personal and group historicisation based on refugee identity and history. The phenomenon of creating Facebook transnational communities in diaspora is not new. Migrants have been the main social actors of using ICTs to form on-line communities that transcend time and distance. However, Vietnamese refugees explicitly use Facebook to share their historical authority about their experience and identity as refugees with pride and positivism. The article explores the following questions: Whilst Facebook provides a permanent place for these on-line communities, does a refugee on-line community constitute its own distinguished form of diaspora? Furthermore, how does this migrant community on Facebook contributes to a family based history as an extended kinship? Mirca Mandianou and Daniel Miller’s theory of polymedia, Martin Sokefeld’s application of social movement approach towards a definition of diaspora, and Robert Craig’s “Facebook hermeneutics,” lend vital frameworks to this inquiry. Through a critical examination of Facebook postings about refugee reunions and moments of self and group recognition as former refugees, we witness how Vietnamese refugee extended kinship network affirms their survival in history. Facebook functions as a site of memory that provides a space for their stories, myths, memorials and community activism. This article argues that Vietnamese refugees on Facebook are creating a polymediated historical account on Facebook for their experience and present day perspective as the subjects and objects of the history in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. It further illustrates how ICTs have empowered migratory and dispersed populations with access and agency to contribute to historical knowledge. Given the controversies regarding the treatment of contemporary refugees worldwide, allowing the refugee subjects of history to share their experience and authority may guide our historical consciousness about our current immigration policies and practices.

Anh Nguyen was a Vietnamese child refugee raised in Carrollton, Texas. She graduated with a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity and Bachelors of Arts in English Literature from Bryn Mawr College. In 2002, she had a postgraduate fellowship from Harvard to conduct research interviews about the acculturation of Vietnamese in Australia. She then worked with Harvard School of Public Health on AIDS research and treatment in Nigeria, and became a bilingual legal aid advocate for Vietnamese immigrants at Greater Boston Legal Services. She worked in Melbourne on indigenous land rights with Native Title Services Victoria and is currently pursuing her PhD on the oral history of Vietnamese Australian child refugees in Australia at the University of Melbourne Australia.
This research project will develop a framework for understanding ‘inclusion’ factors for humanitarian migrants in local settings. Neoliberal immigration regimes are typically designed according to demographic and labour market needs, with entry granted on the basis of migrants’ productive and integrative potential. In policy contexts such as Australia, governments often treat refugees and people seeking asylum as surplus to these requirements, establishing institutional barriers to the realisation of full citizenship rights. Expectations for the ‘productivity’ and ‘participation’ of these groups are low, with an increasingly negative and exclusionary discourse surrounding their entry. However, at the local level, communities make choices and take actions which can lead to meaningful participation of humanitarian migrants in social and economic life, in spite of their tenuous immigration status. The concept of ‘inclusion’ thus encompasses a wider set of social relationships and opportunities, both formal and informal. Local stakeholders such as employers, councils, community organisations, volunteers and ‘street-level bureaucrats’ may not have the authority to implement formal, policy-driven ‘integration’ measures, but nevertheless play critical roles in migrant settlement. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, this project will examine the factors shaping local inclusion for refugees and people seeking asylum, the findings of which will provide insights for the design of refugee integration schemes.

John van Kooy is a PhD Candidate in the Population, Migration and Social Inclusion Focus Program at Monash University. He has spent the last 10 years working as a research and evaluation professional in the international community development sector in Australia, Asia and Africa.
SESSION 4
PROGRAMS AND SERVICES SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

FACILITATED RESILIENCE: SERVICES AND UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM SEEKING MINORS

EBONY KING

This exploratory study analysed the role of service providers in supporting the resilience of unaccompanied asylum seeking minors (UAMs) in Australia and Nauru. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 former UAMs (aged 19-34 years) and 21 service providers to explore what helps separated young people cope, adapt, positively develop and achieve good outcomes in contexts of adversity. Preliminary analysis of interviews suggests that service providers supported UAM’s resilience through mobilising resources and providing access to services and opportunities that the young people found meaningful and relevant to their needs and priorities. Of central importance to separated young people was the need for connection, particularly with kind and empathetic adults who took a genuine and active interest in them. A sense of agency, purpose and belonging to Australia and its communities were also supportive of resilience. The greatest challenges for both UAMs and service providers largely related to the restrictions of increasingly punitive federal government policies. The ability of UAMs and their social and physical ecologies to support resilience processes was significantly undermined by distal decisions in legislation and policy designed in the context of anti-asylum-seeker (and more specifically, ‘boat people’) political and public sentiment.

Ebony King is a PhD Candidate at Griffith University’s School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science. Ebony is passionate about an evidence-based approach to developing policy and practice that facilitates the social-ecological resilience of young people with asylum seeker, refugee, migrant and out-of-home care backgrounds.
ARRANGED FRIENDSHIPS AND THE POTENTIAL OF INTERCULTURAL CONTACT

PHILLIPA BELLEMORE

While Australia’s settlement services are regarded as first class, there is a gap in the bridges between refugees, asylum seekers and their local communities (Neumann, 2013; Fodzar & Hartley, 2013). Westoby (2009) suggests informal buddy programs are missing from the settlement experience and instead are replaced by connections to services. This gap is important because most settlement services are time-limited and encourage eventual independence from their services. Refugee mentoring programs, where a trained volunteer is linked to a refugee or asylum seeker encourages longer-term relationships with reciprocity, trust, cultural exchange and a caring relationship forming core elements of the bond (Askins, 2016, Behnia, 2008).

In this presentation, I will briefly discuss the methodology for my research and highlight ethical challenges in the fieldwork. Next, I will explore the potential for refugee mentoring programs to provide sustainable relational bonds in local communities. Exactly how “arranged friendships” between strangers are imagined and developed depend on a variety of factors, and the bonds can range from fragile to immersive. Risk management regimes adopted by community services can undermine relationship building and reinforce stereotypes of the Other. Care needs to be taken that the voice of refugees and asylum seekers is heard. Mentors and mentees both require support to navigate the relationship and to grow new limbs (Wise, 2010) and apply cultural curiosity (hooks, 2013).

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Phillipa Bellemore is a PhD student in Sociology at Macquarie University. She is investigating the relationship between refugees and the receiving community through studying three refugee mentoring programs. Prior to the PhD, Phillipa co-ordinated a Tibetan mentoring program in Sydney for nine years. She is a member of Macquarie University’s Academics for Refugees and Asylum Seekers.

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This presentation will give a brief outline of an emergent drama therapy intervention utilising Sanford Meisner’s repetition exercise focusing specifically in ‘colonized Other’ communities. The presentation will include an outline of an in progress systematic review of literature that attempts to demonstrate a gap in the knowledge/research of work within these communities, the significance of the technique in a dramatherapeutic context, how the technique will be implemented in an intervention with a specific community, future implications for other ‘colonized Other’ communities and a brief experiential demonstration of the technique (time permitting).

**Mikel Moss** is a current PhD student in Global Mental Health, a recent graduate of the Clinical Psychology program at Columbia University, and a former alternative training student in drama therapy. His focus is on the development of empirical, mixed method data-driven drama therapeutic techniques.
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL COST OF SEEKING ASYLUM IN AUSTRALIA

TRAM NGUYEN

The current global humanitarian crisis involves over 65 million forcefully displaced persons. The Australian government response has involved draconian policies of deterrence, indefinite detention and denial of human rights, in the name of border protection. Whilst the highly politicised maritime diaspora have become the prominent depiction of this debate, there are many more plane arrivals in Australia of people seeking protection. The literature is clear that asylum seekers have higher rates of mental illness than refugee migrants. Those on temporary visas have more negative mental health outcomes than those granted permanent protection. The length of time in immigration detention and similarly the duration of prolonged refugee status determination process are both correlated with worsening mental health status. The post-migration factors are equally as significant as pre-migration factors in contributing to the mental health status of those fleeing persecution and conflict. The post-migration treatment of asylum seekers often triggers and re-traumatises them. The Cabrini Asylum Seeker and Refugee Health Hub (Cabrini Hub) launched its Specialist Mental Health Service in 2017, acknowledging the specific and complex mental health needs of those seeking asylum in Australia. Beyond a history of possible torture, trauma and persecution, these people face many present-day challenges such as destitution, homelessness, family separation, every-changing legal requirements and psychological burden of uncertainty and insecurity. The Cabrini Hub aims fill an unmet need in mental health service provision for those who are the most vulnerable, with the least entitlements and who fall between the gaps of specialist trauma services and public area mental health services. The Cabrini Hub provides screening, comprehensive assessment, multidisciplinary management and care co-ordination for asylum seekers with mental health needs.

Tram Nguyen is the Medical Director and a pro bono psychiatrist of the Specialist Mental Health Service at the Cabrini Asylum Seeker and Refugee Health Hub. She is also a consultant psychiatrist at the Royal Women’s Hospital, Melbourne and holds an honorary clinical lectureship at the University of Melbourne, Department of Psychiatry.
MENTAL HEALTH SCREENING TOOL FOR
ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES:
THE STAR-MH

DEBBIE HOCKING
SURESH SUNDRAM
SERAFINO MANCUSO

There is no extant brief and sensitive mental health screening tool for asylum seekers and new refugees (ASR) designed to be administered by non-mental-health trained workers in receiving host nations.

The STAR-MH was iteratively developed and piloted with adult ASR without a known current psychiatric diagnosis. 192 participants from 37 countries were administered the STAR-MH by non-mental health workers, and subsequently underwent a validation interview (structured psychiatric assessment, MINI 6.0) to determine psychiatric morbidity. Statistical analyses were conducted using item response theory methods. Sensitivity/specificity analyses determined the most accurate cut-off score to detect PTSD &/or Major Depressive Disorder (MDD).

The majority was male, had arrived by boat, and required an English language interpreter. Median screening time was 6 minutes (IQR=5–7). 33% met criteria for ≥ 1 clinical diagnosis (MDD, 30%; PTSD, 20%) and 99% of other psychiatric disorders were co-morbid with MDD or PTSD. A cut-off score of ≥ 2 produced 0.93 (SN) and 0.74 (SP) for PTSD &/or MDD with a ROC of 0.91 p<.001. The STAR-MH is a sensitive and efficient screening tool to facilitate mental health assessment and referral for adult ASR at their agency of first presentation.

Dr Debbie Hocking is a clinical psychologist and mental health researcher. She has worked as a post doc fellow at Florey Institute of Neuroscience & Mental Health and Cabrini Institute, developing mental health screening tools for adult and adolescent forced migrants. She also works probono in a clinical capacity with asylum seekers at the Cabrini Asylum Seeker and Refugee Health Hub in Brunswick.