CHAPTER 10

Who's to Blame for Asylum 'Moral Panics'?

Asylum Seekers' Perspectives on UK Policymaking, News Reporting, and Preferences of Identity Construction

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Introduction

The debate about who is to blame for the labelling of asylum seekers as folk devils in the West continues to animate scholars in forced migration (for instance, Leudar et al. 2008; Sales 2007; Zetter 2007). This chapter is intended to engage in this debate. It does so by critically reviewing policies and news reporting in the UK that circulate and sustain the labelling of asylum seekers as folk devils, and the moral panics around asylum in the past quarter century. The chapter further draws from qualitative interviews to consider asylum seekers' views about who is to blame for the moral panics, and asylum seekers' preferred forms of representation. It considers that both news media and policymaking is to blame for the representation and explores how refugees' preferences of identity construction are at odds with the mediatized and politicized asylum seeker folk devil representation.

To date, very little exists in the literature about UK-based asylum seekers' perspectives on who is to blame for moral panics and how they would like to be represented, even though asylum seekers are the subject and victims of moral panics and the pejorative folk devil labelling. In addition, much needs to be explored about the way in which anti-asylum policies and news reporting are both complicit in this pejorative identity construction. As highlighted in the Introduction of this volume (see also Myers 2018), much of the analysis of moral panics and folk devils, including Cohen's (1987; 2002) seminal work, have mainly focused on the bedevillers' othering of groups in society while overlooking the views of the folk devils in this process. My analysis fills this gap by focusing on the views of folk devils to engage with the cultural and political processes of othering through (mis)representation of vulnerable groups in society. As others have argued, prioritizing the voices of the folk devils in the sociological theorizing of moral panics is crucial to correct the distortions that stigmatize, demean and scapegoat them (Myers 2018; see Harboe Knudsen, Chapter 11). The chapter, therefore, calls for asylum seekers' preferences of representation to be heeded in the modus operandi of the UK legislative and policymaking process and news reporting of the asylum issue, if the moral panics and folk devil constructions are to be alleviated or avoided.

The chapter starts by providing a brief conceptual reference point about the relationship between moral panics and the discursive construction of asylum seeker folk devils. This is followed by a review of UK government legislation and conjoining policies, and UK newspaper reporting of asylum seekers between the last and first decades of the 20th and 21st centuries (covering a 25-year period from 1990 to 2015). This section mainly explores the linkages and continuities in policies and news stories that render both politics and news media to become powerful sites of hostile asylum representations. I then go on to the empirical data and asylum seekers' views on who is to blame for the asylum moral panics and the demonized asylum seeker identity constructions in the UK. Following from this section is a discussion of the findings in relations to the debate about who, as powerful institutions in Western democracies (news media and policymaking), is to blame for sustaining both the 'moral panics' and the folk devil label around asylum. I also argue for policymakers and news media practitioners to accord prominence to asylum seekers' preferences of identity representations to help counter the banal asylum seeker folk devil image and moral panics.

Hegemonic Representation, 'Moral Panic' and 'Folk Devil' Labelling

By hegemonic representation, I, mean the power to control and shape the communication of a message or view that has, dominance over audiences, and which is informed by powerful institutions of society (Devereaux 1998; Haynes

et al. 2004; van Dijk 1997). Hegemonic representations are realized through various discursive processes including stereotyping, which is the repetitive production of social identities and characteristics that are imbued with subjective evaluations. The stereotypical representations are likely to influence the audiences' perception of those who are stereotyped, rendering stereotyping a key vehicle of 'othering' and identity ascription (Zargar 2004).

In the context of UK asylum-seeking migration, media and politicians that are hostile to asylum-seeking have stereotypically constructed asylum seekers as the cultural 'other' and a threat to an 'imagined' Britishness (Ibroscheva and Ramaprasad 2008; Shoemaker and Reese 1996). The stereotyping is sustained by transmission of new hostile asylum stories, and by constantly and reiteratively evoking previous negative labels and representations (Kirmayer 2003, 171). This capacity to circulate and sustain hostile discourses and images of asylum seekers in policy and media spaces is arguably the driver of hegemonic representation of the asylum seeker 'outsider'.

To say that hostile asylum policymaking and news reporting is hegemonic does not imply that there are no opposing views or counter-hegemonic representations within politics and news media spaces. By counter-hegemonic representation, I mean narratives and views that question, contest or resist the status quo or dominant constructions. However, the existence of rival discourses, which challenge and seek to undermine hegemonic practices and discourses, can be managed tactfully or coercively into a dominant or 'common-sense' discourse (Gramsci 1971; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). For example, both proponents and opponents of asylum-seeking migration in the UK may disagree on the reasons for asylum-seeking migration: that of safety and economic reasons, respectively. Yet, both implicitly have conveyed a message that the UK is being 'flooded' by asylum seekers (Clark and Campbell 2000; Kaye 2001; Khan 2012, 2018; Smart et al. 2007), while also representing asylum seekers as objects of pity, as sentimental human interest and as either victims of political persecution (in non-hostile news reporting and political spaces) or daredevil economic adventurers (in hostile ones). The 'common-sense' discourse, therefore, is that the culturally impoverished 'other' from the developing world is exploiting the magnanimous asylum system to migrate into the politically powerful and affluent developed world to benefit from its economic prosperity, security and social welfare.

As Cohen observed, this generates moral panics because 'a condition, episode, person or group of person emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values or interests' (Cohen 1987 [1972], 9). The agents of such moral panic are not only the news media but also other institutions in the state, such as rule enforcers, politicians, action groups and the public (Ejarvec 2003; Rothe and Muzzatti 2004). The moral panic culminates in creating folk devils, who are the individuals that are stereotyped as a threat and held responsible for the criminal behaviour and social deviance (Cohen 1987 [1972], 2002 [1972]; Hall 1997; Rothe and Muzzatti 2004, 329). In the context of asylum seekers as a minority

immigrant group, the moral panic and folk devils labelling is a single, virtually consistent message of hostility, which generate reactions that are more overtly political than any others. Additionally, the asylum moral panics compel urgent action and provide cover for political legitimation and agenda-setting towards formulating hostile policies to deter asylum-seeking migration, and to pacify an anxious public (Ferguson and Walters 2005; Statham and Geddes 2006).

The next two sections review this kind of policy and news hostility, which circulated between the end of the 20th and the early 21st century. This constitutes a 25-year period, from 1990 to 2015, that sustained the moral panic and folk devil labelling of asylum seekers in the UK.

Policymaking the Asylum Seeker Folk Devil

The Cantle Report on Community Cohesion (Cantle 2001), later followed by the UK Home Office consultation document *Strength in Diversity*, were the first major policy documents to link asylum-seeking migration with a crisis of good community relations in the UK (Fortier 2010; Nagel and Staeheli 2008). The report and consultation documents came after the racial riots in the north of England in 2001 and 'Islamic terrorism' in London, which have been partly blamed on the asylum 'influx'. Commentators considered the social cohesion enterprise to be aimed at strengthening the link between the integration of asylum seekers and other immigrants, and British national identity (Fortier 2010; Nagel and Staeheli 2008). The policies therefore framed an asylum 'influx', and the attendant ethnic and cultural diversity, as posing a threat to social cohesion (Phillips and Berman 2003).

Other policies followed, such as: *Fairer, Firmer and Faster*, *Secure Borders, Safe Haven*, and *Controlling Our Borders: Making Migration Work for Britain* (Home Office 2005a, 2005b). These policies represented government posturing to curb so-called 'illegal' asylum-seeking migration (Home Office 2005b). The *Secure Borders, Safe Haven* White Paper, which informed the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, contained proposals for limiting asylum seekers' access to citizenship rights (Home Office 2001a). For example, the Act removed asylum seekers' concession to a right to work after six months, subjected some to detention, and restricted welfare support to those who 'do not make a claim as soon as applicable', except for families with children (Sales 2007).

The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 also put in place the 'citizenship, classes, tests and oaths' policy. This policy required aspiring UK citizens to participate in citizenship and language classes; citizenship and language test; and the taking of a citizenship oath at a citizenship ceremony (Khan 2018). The policy is an example of government intervention to instil 'British patriotism' and promote identity-building of an 'imagined' Britishness among immigrant populations (Cheong et al. 2007, 30; Khan 2018). Other policies and Acts followed, namely the Asylum and Immigration Act 2004 and the

Controlling Our Borders: Making Migration Work for Britain White Paper and its adjoining Asylum and Immigration Act 2006 (Home Office 2005b). It is worth pointing out that there is no such thing as an 'illegal' asylum seeker under British and international humanitarian law (Khan 2018, 2012). Yet, these policies allowed, for the first time, criminal prosecutions of asylum seekers arriving without valid documents or good explanation and those failing to cooperate with redocumentation (Cheong et al. 2007); the tagging and detention of unsuccessful asylum claimants; and the exclusion from benefits to those refused asylum, except claimants with children. The Asylum and Immigration Act 2006 also limited access to legal aid and the High Court for appeals against deportation. It strengthened controls on immigrants via integrated pre-entry and in-country security – 'E-borders' and Border Management Programmes (Cheong et al. 2007). The Act set up the New Asylum Model (NAM), which paved the way for the UK Border Guards to arrest, detain and deport unsuccessful asylum claimants.

The 'good character' requirement was strengthened in the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009. The Act entrenched into law 'probationary citizenship', which would take into account would-be UK citizens' ability to integrate into Britishness; failing to do this could deny them UK citizenship (McGhee 2009, 45).

Some conclusions can be drawn from the above legislative context relating to constructions of refugees as 'folk devils'. The policies construct an asylum 'influx' and that it poses a threat to public safety and security, the UK's territorial borders, and an 'imagined' Britishness. By prescribing anti-terrorism security technology to police entry into the UK and to curtail free movement of asylum seekers, policies are a tool of securitization (Bloch and Schuster 2005; Statham and Geddes 2006). 'Dispersal', 'tagging', 'detention' and 'deportation' construct asylum-seeking as 'illegal' and a façade for terrorism, which reinforces asylum seekers as a threat to public safety.

Policies have also created categories of asylum-seeking migrants, namely refugees, asylum seekers, humanitarian protection, and exceptional leave to remain, which restricts some categories of asylum seekers from access to social welfare, legal aid and other citizenship rights. The categorization conveys a message that asylum-seeking is a façade for economic migration and that asylum seekers are here to scrounge from the welfare state (Heller 2008). Arguably, therefore, policies have been created and repeatedly amended to regulate 'otherness' and differentiate among categories of asylum seekers: the 'deserving', 'legal' and 'genuine' asylum seeker from the folk devil asylum seeker that is an 'undeserving', 'illegal' and 'economic' migrant. Hostile policies are also an attempt by politicians to convey a message that they are taking action to curb immigration, and to protect British cultural identity (Cheong et al. 2007; Clarke 2005; Dwyer 2008; Hall et al. 1978; Khan 2018).

This kind of policymaking, which sustained the demonization and the construction of the asylum seeker folk devil identity, was also evident in

newspapers' reporting of the asylum issue within the same period (1990–2015), as is now discussed.

Asylum Reporting from the 1990s to the 2000s

Ronald Kaye (1998, 2001) conducted one of the first systematic analyses of the UK press treatment of asylum in the 1990s. They include the right-wing press (normally hostile to refugees and allied to the Conservatives) of *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, and the liberal press (or what others referred to as the left, normally seen as less hostile to asylum seekers) of *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and the *Daily Mirror* (Kaye 1998, 2001). Kaye found that there was frequent use by these newspapers of the terms or labels 'bogus', 'phoney' and 'economic', in relation to asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, in the reporting of the asylum issue between 1990 and 1996. The *Daily Mail* was the worst culprit because these labels were not only used 90 per cent of the time but also occurred more often in its editorials than in any other newspaper. Kaye observed that *The Sun* deployed other 'stronger' and more 'insulting' language against asylum seekers (Kaye 2001, 59).

Another analysis by Kaye of the same newspapers' coverage of the so-called Roma 'invasion' in two weeks in October 1997 found that, except for *The Guardian*, all newspapers had similar themes: the economic and social welfare motivation for seeking asylum, 'illegitimate' asylum and the huge cost of welfare provision for refugees (Kaye 2001, 61). Other studies by Colin Clark (1998) and Clark and Elaine Campbell (2000) found that the coverage of the same event (the Roma 'invasion') over a two-week period in *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Observer*, *The Mail*, *The Sun*, *The Mirror* and *The Express* was 'vitriolic, distorted and exaggerated' (Clark and Campbell 2000, 30).

Kaye (2001), Clark (1998) and Clark and Campbell (2000) found certain discursive strategies to be commonplace in the asylum stories, affirming other studies of the decade (see Law 1997, cited in Clarke 2000; Coleman 1996 and Tomasi 1992, cited in Kaye 2001; McGloughlin 1999). These include labels such as 'invasion', 'deluge', 'hand-outs', 'bogus', 'economic migrant', 'exodus', 'flood', 'gold diggers', welfare 'fraud', 'scam' and 'spongers' (Clark and Campbell 2000, 30; Kaye 2001, 61). Kaye (2001, 64) and Clark and Campbell (2000, 41) concluded that the vitriolic language directed at asylum seekers displayed overt and covert racism and xenophobia by journalists, prompting concern to be raised by refugee-supporting agencies (also Coleman 1996, cited in Kaye 2001; Statham 1999). Unlike Kaye (1998, 2001), others (Clark and Campbell 2000; Koser and Lutz 1998; Philo and Beatie 1999; Statham 1999) recognized that such racism and xenophobia was realized through the discursive strategy of the 'us and them' binary. This binary was used to differentiate not only between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' among the Roma asylum seekers but also between the group of Roma as 'scroungers' and 'gold diggers' from the

magnanimous British citizens. The binary labelling was key to these newspapers' ascribing an inferior cultural identity to the Roma people, in contrast to the British 'other' with superior cultural values of magnanimity that were under threat by the 'invasion' (Clark and Campbell 2000, 33).

Just as in the 1990s, research conducted between 2000 and 2005 found similar themes as well as racist and xenophobic comments, and the inaccurate and provocative use of language (Buchanan et al. 2003, 19; Barclay et al. 2003; Statham 2002). For instance, three Home Office-commissioned research projects undertaken by ICAR in 2003/04 in two London boroughs found that refugees and local residents perceived the media coverage to be negative and inflammatory (ICAR 2004). The anti-poverty organization Oxfam UK's 2001/02 research also found that some 'Scottish' press reporting of the asylum issue was negative even though less hostile than the 'English' press (Mollard 2001; Wilson 2004).

A subsequent study by Kate Smart et al. (2007) in 2005/06 systematically monitored UK newspaper reporting of asylum seekers with reference to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) Guidance Notes on Reporting Refugees and Asylum Seekers. It found that some coverage contained hostile and inflammatory language, and asylum seekers were depicted as increasing or uncontrollable, illegitimate, criminals, motivated by economic benefits, a drain on taxpayers and scapegoats for the failings in housing and welfare provision (Smart et al. 2007).

Amadu Khan's (2012) work, which was a content and discourse analysis of 106 articles of UK newspapers, found that the depiction of asylum seekers through pejorative language to be consistent with previous studies of the 1990s and 2000s. However, in contrast to the 1990s, Khan (2012) supports other studies in the 2000s in which, for the first time, asylum is conflated with 'Islamic terrorism' (Buchanan et al. 2003; ICAR 2004; Smart et al. 2007). This might be attributable to the 11 September New York and 7 July London terrorist attacks of the 2000s, even though none of the terrorists were asylum seekers.

As others have observed in this volume (see Chapters 5 and 11), it could be concluded that much of the press mirrored the hostile policies and representations to generate moral panics: they abused the term 'asylum seeker', portrayed asylum-seeking migration as 'illegitimate' and motivated by welfare and economic considerations, and criticized government failure to control the asylum 'influx'. Furthermore, asylum seekers were depicted as a threat not only to the welfare system but also to national security and an 'imagined' Britishness or British cultural values (Clark and Campbell 2000, 42; Kaye 2001; Pickering 2001). As demonstrated in this volume, it is important to highlight that negative identity ascriptions to social groups such as young people, rockers and hipsters have been the mechanism and the source of the moral panic in the West. However, in the context of asylum seekers, the folk devilling and moral panics is not only focused on negative identity ascriptions but also on numerical quantification. In this sense, the anti-immigration rhetoric of an asylum 'influx', 'flooding' and 'invasion' rather than merely attributions of negative identities is both a concern and the mechanism for creating moral panic.

What are asylum seekers' perspectives on this debate about who is to blame for generating the folk devil depiction and moral panics around asylum in the UK? The next section draws from a qualitative study to explore this issue. The study explores the ways asylum seekers would like their identities to be constructed in public spaces, particularly in news stories and policies.

The Study: Refugees' Views on 'Folk Devil' Representation

The data for this analysis was generated from a study on asylum seekers' citizenship formations and the perceived role of the UK news media in this process. It conducted qualitative interviews with 23 asylum-seeking migrants residing in Scotland: 12 males and 11 females between the ages of 26 and 65. Participants were selected through non-random snowballing and convenience techniques, and the ability to speak English. By non-random, I mean opportunistic recruitment of participants through accidental or off-chance encounters. Snowballing implies asking those who participated in interviews to recommend others to participate in the study. Snowballing and non-random techniques enable the recruitment of participants to be ongoing throughout the research. Participants were given anonymity to encourage participation and protect their confidentiality and safety.

The interviews explored with participants their views about the hostile depictions of asylum seekers in the UK press, and preferred forms of representation. However, during the interviews, it became obvious that participants were keen to express a view on the role of policies and politicians in the UK Parliament in the hostile depictions of asylum seekers. Consistent with the study's inductive approach, the data was therefore analysed to include participants' opinions on the ways they are represented in policymaking, and how they preferred the UK news media and policymakers to construct asylum seekers. Each interview is, therefore, analysed to explore perceptions of the policies and news reporting, and who they blamed or commended for the depictions.

For this chapter, I focus on participants' perceptions of whom to blame for the hostile representations, how they preferred to be represented, and the reasoning and contexts for their views. This is with a view to centre the voices of folk devils in the sociological theorizing of moral panics, which others have noted have been absent, including in the seminal work of Cohen (Myers 2018; see Harboe Knudsen, Chapter 11).

Who Is to Blame: Media or Political Elites?

I cannot find the words to describe how I feel about media's coverage of us. Asylum seekers are bogus, where do they get these words? From the government. Yeah, who called us bogus asylum seekers? It's the Home Office! How can people or the media respect us? (Meri, in Glasgow)

The above comments by Meri, a female refugee from Algeria living in Glasgow, UK, is an example of how difficult it is to apportion blame for the labelling of asylum seekers in pejorative identity. While Meri expressed concern over the pejorative coverage of asylum seekers, she blamed policymakers like the Home Office for attributing the 'bogus' label to asylum seekers. Meri also suggested that the folk devil labelling by policymakers is the source of public and media hostility against asylum seekers.

Shek, an Iraqi male refugee, expressed a similar opinion of the role played by policymakers in the pejorative labelling of asylum seekers:

> So in addition to the political point of view of the (UK) Government, they put certain Legislation to restrict the number of people who come to this country. And so they started with the media to talk about asylum seekers, they invented this failed asylum seeker. …They are preparing the public to have a negative view of these people and the Government put on restriction to prepare the public. (Shek, in Glasgow)

In Shek's opinion, policymakers colluded with the news media and 'invented this failed asylum seeker' label as a façade to pursue restrictive immigration policies that are ideologically driven. He also thought that politicians deliberately construct the 'failed' asylum label to generate a 'negative view' of asylum seekers among the public in order to galvanize public support for hostile asylum policies. This can be unpacked to suggest agenda-setting by policymakers in two respects. First, the negative attributions to asylum seekers are aimed at constructing asylum seekers as folk devils and generating moral panics. Second, the moral panics generated are a strategy to pave the way for the political legitimization for the state's hostile immigration policies.

While Meri and Shek seemingly believed that it is policymakers who are the creators of the folk devil labelling, other research participants like Mick highlighted the influential role played by the press in its dissemination:

> What? The media has published these things: these people [asylum seekers] are bad. These people [asylum seekers] are vampires, these people [asylum seekers] are like evil people, and these people [asylum seekers] are like you know junkies. So if you hear what is going to happen is like what is called Chinese whispers – and make them [UK public] hate us [asylum seekers]. (Mick, in Edinburgh)

Mick, a Zimbabwean male refugee residing in Glasgow, UK, used the 'Chinese whispers' metaphor to suggest that the news stories are not only pejorative and inaccurate representations of asylum seekers but are widely circulated through news publications. In his view, the press repetitively producing asylum seekers in reprehensible identities in news stories generated public hostility against asylum seekers.

Participants' perceptions suggest agreement that news reporting and policymaking offer sites for moral panic and folk devil representations of asylum seekers. Participants also agreed that the reproduction of negative representations have a social consequence for asylum seekers: they generate public hostility or, in the words of Mick, 'hate' against asylum seekers. Additionally, participants believed that the moral panic compels urgent action and provides political legitimacy for formulating hostile policies to deter asylum-seeking. The moral panic also generates support for the policies and at the same time pacify public anxiety over a perceived asylum 'influx'. However, while participants' beliefs highlight media and political elites' complicity in sustaining the folk devil image and moral panics around asylum, they also suggest the difficulty in ascribing blame solely to any one of the two institutions.

An analytical observation is worth highlighting here: participants also claimed that there were non-hostile asylum stories and labels particularly in the press reporting (for instance, see Khan 2012). I have only focused on the negative asylum labelling in so far as to bring an asylum seeker perspective to the debate about who is to blame for the moral panic and folk devil identity constructions. Moreover, participants expressed that the hostile labels far exceed the non-hostile ones, and this is mainly responsible for fuelling the moral panic and public construction of asylum seekers as folk devils (Khan 2012). The next section explores with participants the kind of representation they would prefer in order to avoid or counter the demonized labelling of asylum seekers.

What Are Asylum Seekers' Preferences of Representation?

Three main areas of identity constructions featured prominently in the interviews that participants said they would like to inform policymaking and news reporting. Participants believed their preferred forms of representations would be crucial in countering the demonized asylum seeker representation.

A Nuanced 'Victimhood'

All participants would have liked to see the news media and policymaking represent asylum seekers as 'victims' of repression in the homelands from which they fled. Participants recounted many emotional stories of persecution, trauma and suffering they were subjected to. Participants would have liked these experiences to frame the debates, reporting and policies on asylum-seeking in the UK.

> I came after the bloody coup of 11 Sept 1973. I came from Lima, where the UN set up a programme for refugees, to bring out Chilean refugees to different areas of Europe. So the UK decided to take up 3,000 to here, about 500 of us ended up in Scotland. (Carl, in Edinburgh)

> I was farming with my mother in a village in Nigeria – my boyfriend and father wanted to use my child and myself as a sacrifice, and that's why I fled. … I fled when I was pregnant because they said they are going to open my stomach and take the baby out. … And the man took me from there to the UK. (Prom, in Glasgow)

These harrowing accounts suggest that asylum seekers' experiences of persecution are diverse, and that the causes of their victimhood are complex. For some, like Carl, a Chilean refugee, they sought asylum in the UK through the UN refugee programme. Prom, a Nigerian female asylum seeker, fled because she had no confidence in the state authorities in Nigeria to protect her from harm and potential death. Prom, and many other participants like Tah, a male Eritrean asylum seeker, had to be 'smuggled' (Tah, in Glasgow), without passports or proper identification documents.

Participants' comments can be unpacked to imply that financial considerations that portrayed asylum seekers as 'scroungers', 'gold diggers' and 'economic migrants' in much of the hostile policies and press are not a key determining factor in seeking asylum and choice of destination. Participants felt that the inability to produce identity documents, particularly passports, and using 'human traffickers' and 'smugglers' (Joy, female Malawian, in Edinburgh), to escape to the UK is further evidence that asylum seekers are desperate to escape political persecution (Khan 2018). In this sense, the failure to reflect these perilous contexts of flight to safety in policies and news stories may emasculates the public's construction of asylum seekers as victims of political repression.

While most participants blamed political persecution in their homelands for seeking asylum and 'the worse, which can kill you', they also claimed that UK hostile policies and press coverage are equally detrimental to their well-being. Participants described policies and news reporting on asylum as 'heartless', 'inhuman' and 'wicked', and treated them as 'second class or even third class citizens' (Mick, male Zimbabwean in Edinburgh). Dorcas, a female asylum seeker from the DRC, explained:

> Here [in the UK] you are safe, but you are not safe mentally, and they treat you so bad that, I think, why did I flee from those people [homeland], when the [UK] Government is making me worse mentally. (Dorcas, in Glasgow)

Stories of suffering, destitution, detentions, social exclusion and psycho-social trauma abounded during fieldwork. Participants said that these impacts of the policies on their everyday lives made them feel victimized again for fleeing repression, and that they would have liked these mistreatments to feature prominently in the news coverage. This suggests that participants preferred a nuanced representation of asylum seekers' victimhood that reflected the

adverse impact of hostile policies on their everyday lives and well-being in the UK as the host country.

One Label, Diverse 'Voices'

Participants also said that there is a tendency to frame individual indiscretions of asylum seekers in a collective way in news reporting and policies:

> You are just put in one blanket. It is prejudice because all what they say about asylum seekers is not correct. Every individual is a unique individual. We've all got the right minds, whether in our own conscience to do good from bad. But not everyone is bad or not all asylum seekers are scrounging. For instance I am not getting any benefit, I am not a burden to society. (Leon, in Edinburgh)

This person, like other participants, acknowledged that there were 'bad asylum seekers and refugees' and not 'everyone is good' (Leon, in Edinburgh). However, Leon, a male Rwandan asylum seeker, among other participants, like Ama, a female Somali asylum seeker, would have preferred the news reporting to stop 'lumping together' (Ama, in Edinburgh) or 'put[ting] in one blanket'(Leon, in Edinburgh) the indiscretions of a few and ascribing these to the wider asylum-seeking community. Participants said doing so would minimize demonizing asylum seekers as 'scroungers', 'spongers', 'junkies', 'evil' (Mick, in Edinburgh), 'bogus asylum seekers', 'economic migrants and here to take their [British citizens'] jobs' (Carl, in Edinburgh), and 'worthless or useless individuals' (Ama, in Edinburgh).

To counter the stereotyping, Ama proposed that journalists provide them with a platform to tell their stories: 'to provide them a voice', 'to stand up for people like them and take their plight seriously' (Ama, in Edinburgh). Another refugee participant from Malawi, Joy, called for journalists 'to look at all sides' before reporting (Joy, in Edinburgh), while Carl would have preferred that journalists 'speak their language' (Carl, in Edinburgh), meaning asylum news stories should reflect or are aligned to asylum seekers' aspirations, motivations and preferences. Others, like Ann, a female Angolan refugee, believed that doing so would help 'the media change their [inflammatory] language, make people feel safe to contribute' and 'avoid misrepresentation and stereotyping' (Ann, in Glasgow).

Participants' comments can be interpreted to imply that the failure to reflect the diversity of backgrounds, experiences and actions of asylum seekers in policymaking and news reporting contributes to the pejorative stereotypical representation and moral panics. Participants also implied that the lack of diverse 'voices' and experiences in news reporting deprived asylum seekers of the opportunity to contest hegemonic representations in demeaning social practices and identities.

The 'Agentive' Asylum Seeker

The majority of participants would have preferred policymakers and the UK news media to treat asylum seekers as capable of agency. Agency is used here to refer to the individual capacity to make and carry out decisions and actions (Gordon 2006). For example, many, like Siso, a female Zimbabwean asylum seeker, expressed the view that the press should report on the 'hard work', 'positive things' and 'contribution' to 'national development' and to their neighbourhoods (Siso, in Glasgow). Many spoke about various types of voluntary work they participated in their neighbourhoods, including serving as interpreters for local services and other asylum seekers, and providing care support to asylum seekers and their neighbours and friends (Khan 2018).

Participants would also have liked to be portrayed as doing a 'lot of work that citizens would not do' (Leonard, in Edinburgh). Leonard, a male Burundian asylum seeker, felt this would contrast with dominant depictions of asylum seekers as 'scroungers' and 'taking [British citizens'] jobs' (Leonard, in Edinburgh). Participants said they worked as home help, cleaners, nurses, doctors, teachers and engineers. They also would have preferred policymakers to formulate policies that tap into the resourcefulness, skills and knowledge that asylum seekers bring. As one participant, Halma, a female Somalian refugee, put it, 'We could have done so much if only the government accepted our qualifications from back home' (Halma, female Somalian in Edinburgh). This person is suggesting that refugees' so-called 'dependency' on social welfare is caused by hostile government policies that precluded some asylum seekers from paid employment. More importantly, participants would have preferred the news reporting to focus on reporting the government's failure to tap into refugees' agency, skills and resources.

Participants' views can be unpacked to imply that asylum seekers have been compelled to 'scrounge' on the welfare state by hostile government policies. In addition, representing asylum seekers' agency and resourcefulness will counter the dominant construction of asylum seekers as 'scroungers', 'welfare cheats' and a threat to public safety, security and the welfare system.

Discussion of Findings

The foregoing accounts (policy, news and participants) begs the question: who is to blame for the hostile labelling that ascribes pejorative identities to asylum seekers and the attendant moral panics around asylum in the past decades? The debate has always centred on which of the two powerful institutions of state, namely the news media or politics-cum-policymakers, is the culprit (see, for instance, Ibroscheva and Ramaprasad 2008; Leudar et al. 2008; Sales 2007; Zetter 2007). It is expedient to note that the heightened visibility in news

reporting and policymaking might have fuelled public anxiety that uncontrollable asylum-seeking migration is a threat to public safety, security, the welfare system and an 'imagined' Britishness. The public trepidation is widely believed to have generated political intervention through hostile policies that are intended to curb the asylum 'influx' and promote British cultural and national identity (Kaye 2001; Khan 2018). Politicians also aimed to win legitimacy and support for hostile political interventions among the public. However, by restricting access to social, welfare and citizenship rights to some asylum seekers, policies create the structural inequalities that stigmatize asylum seekers (Hall et al. 1978). Policies also construct a pejorative binary between the asylum seeker cultural 'other' who are 'illegal', 'undeserving' and 'criminal' migrants, and the 'deserving' and good UK citizen. The combination of structural inequalities and the negative identity ascriptions to asylum seekers in policymaking constitute a form of legal regulation of 'otherness'.

It could, therefore, be argued that policies to some extent provide the material for the media's negative discursive representations of asylum seekers (Leudar et al. 2008; Sales 2007). The media analyses also suggest a discursive convergence with policies on the social categorization of asylum seekers in demeaning identities and an uncontrollable asylum 'influx' or 'invasion'. The overarching relationship between policies and news stories in the repetitive production of these pejorative asylum seeker identities is constitutive of stereotyping and hegemonic representation of the asylum folk devil and moral panic. As I argue elsewhere, this discursive predominance of the folk devil identity ascriptions also subvert the refugee label under international humanitarian law (Khan 2012). The media and political (mis)representations also suggest that, in the case of asylum seekers and in contrast to other social groups that have been traditional victims of moral panics in the West, numerical (mis)representations along with ascriptions of demeaning qualities or identities are central to their folk devilling.

The interview data suggests a similar difficult in apportioning blame solely to either the policy process or news reporting. Yet, participants' observations provide a useful insight into understanding the role of powerful institutions in the social construction of 'disadvantaged' groups like asylum seekers in the UK. Participants' accounts suggest that folk devil representations and moral panics around asylum might their origins in public policy, even though parts of the UK news media are instrumental in its dissemination. Participants' beliefs are a reminder that moral panics are caused by not only the news media but also other institutions in the state (Cohen 2002 [1972]; Ejarvec 2003; Rothe and Muzzatti 2004). It is arguable that news reporting is driven by a desire to inform and disseminate news, and not a deliberate collusion by news media and politicians towards a social agenda, as some participants claim. This is not to say that accusations of agenda-setting by media and political elites should be dismissed. It shows that agenda-setting to create folk devils and moral panic might not be advertent but an exigency of political communication in news reporting (as argued in Khan 2012).

The interview data also demonstrates that asylum seekers have their own preferences for constructing their self-identities. Asylum seekers would prefer to be portrayed as victims of UK hostile asylum policies and news reporting, as well as agentive and bringing assets to the UK. They would also like to see their diverse and individual voices and actions to be reflected in the news coverage. These identity preferences are, therefore, at odds with the dominant folk devil representations in news reporting and policymaking. Asylum seekers' preferences of identity construction constitute a process of 'dis-identification', meaning the contesting of a prescribed form of identity that is often sustained by elites (Byrne 2007; Fortier 2010). They are also counter-hegemonic representation because they question, contest or resist the dominant pejorative constructions.

Conclusion

This analysis is not intended to claim that there were an absence of non-hostile asylum news stories and policies. It is intended to draw attention to how mediatized and politicized representations have created a discursive predominance of asylum seekers as folk devils and a problem to society. More importantly, it highlights that, in contrast to other social groups that have been traditional victims of moral panics emanating from demeaning character ascriptions, the repetitive (mis)representations of the numbers or massive inflow of asylum seeker folk devils into the West is central to the moral panic around asylum-seeking migration.

As the qualitative data demonstrates, asylum seekers' preferences of identity constructions are at odds with the mediatized and politicized asylum seeker folk devil representation. Policymakers and media elites should, therefore, heed asylum seekers' opinions because they are not only the subject but also the 'victims' of the hostile constructions. The preferred representations can be deployed to inform strategies on positive messages of the asylum issue. This is crucial to mitigate public conceptions of asylum seekers in negative identities, and to enable public knowledge of asylum as a humanitarian issue (see Khan 2018). Additionally, policymakers and media elites should incorporate these preferred forms of representations to counter or preclude the moral panics, and the demonization of asylum seekers, which research participants say adversely impacted on their well-being. Doing so would redress the historical structural processes and hostile discursive continuities that have generated and sustained the 'moral panic' around asylum for the past quarter century.

Asylum seekers' experiences and preferences of self-identity constructions demonstrate the agency of folk devils to fight back against pejorative mainstream cultural practices and discourses that negatively impact on them. There is, therefore, an urgent need for prioritizing the voices of folk devils in moral panics research beyond the mundane analytical obsession with cultural and political processes of othering through (mis)representation of vulnerable

groups in society. Adopting a victim-focused paradigm in moral panics socio-
logical research that prioritizes the views and experiences of folk devils will
enable a remediation of the distorted representations that stigmatize, demean
and scapegoat them in society (Myers 2018; see Harboe Knudsen, Chapter 11).

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