

# 'I'm not happy, but I'm OK': How asylum seekers manage talk about difficulties in their host country

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**Title: “I’m not happy, but I’m ok”: How asylum seekers manage talk about difficulties in their host country**

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## **“I’m not happy, but I’m ok”: How asylum seekers manage talk about difficulties in their host country**

This paper addresses the ways in which asylum seekers in the UK manage making complaints about their host country. It is shown that asylum seekers have fled dangerous situations in their countries of origin and then can face difficulties and hostility in the UK. A discursive psychological approach is used to assess the ways in which asylum seekers made complaints regarding their treatment.

Interviews were conducted in a refugee centre in the Midlands with nine asylum seekers and were transcribed for a discourse analysis to be conducted. Analysis of the data showed that participants criticised the asylum system for being unfair. They also made claims about not being happy in the UK, but did so in ways that downgraded the problem so as to manage the possible dilemma of appearing ungrateful and undermining their reasons for claiming asylum. The problems associated with these strategies are discussed.

Key words: asylum seekers; refugees; complaints; ideological dilemmas; discursive psychology; discourse analysis

### **Introduction**

There is a growing literature that has focussed on the negative experiences of asylum seekers and the way in which asylum seekers are presented both by politicians and in the media. More recently discursive psychologists have started to address the experiences of asylum seekers in the UK and the ways in which they present themselves. This paper begins with an overview of the literature about asylum seeking and then presents a review of the growing discursive work looking at how asylum seekers manage their talk, before presenting an analysis of how asylum seekers are critical of the way they are treated by the Home Office in the UK and how they manage being critical of their host country whilst also needing to appear grateful.

### ***Background: The Treatment of Asylum Seekers in the United Kingdom***

There is a wealth of literature that demonstrates that asylum seekers living in the United Kingdom have fled from extremely harsh situations such as violence and oppression (Neumayer, 2005), torture (Behnia, 2004) and persecution (Crawley, 2010) and from

countries that have ongoing violent conflicts including Pakistan, Iran, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2011). Once asylum seekers reach the UK they face further problems as the system is designed to reduce applications to the country (Schuster, 2004). The Home Office system has been criticised for operating a “culture of disbelief” (Souter, 2011, p. 48; Kirkwood 2012) when assessing the legitimacy of asylum seekers’ claims. Further, Hardy (2003) has shown that Home Office staff, who interview asylum seekers and make decisions about whether or not they can stay in the country, lack knowledge about the situation in the countries that the applicants are coming from, which means that applicants are subjectively and unfairly processed (something that asylum seekers express as a major source of stress, see Liebling, Burke, Goodman and Zsanda, under submission). Asylum seekers in the UK lack many standard rights such as being allowed to work (Sales, 2002) and are therefore marginalised (Hynes & Sales, 2009).

Politically, asylum seeking is perceived as problematic and needing control for a number of reasons, most commonly due to costs to British taxpayers (Sales, 2002) but also due to concerns regarding alleged associations with Islam (Pearce & Charman, 2011), terrorism (Rudiger, 2007) and wider issues of racial and cultural diversity (Lewis, 2005). This has resulted in many incidences of hostility towards asylum seekers (Hubbard, 2005; Kirkwood, McKinlay and McVittie, in press; Mulvey, 2012) and has been shown to cause further unhappiness for them (Khan, 2008). The impact of both traumatic reasons for having to leave their country of origin and the hostility faced by asylum seekers once in the UK has been shown to leave them with a number of serious psychological difficulties ranging from depression (Robjant, Hassan, and Katona, 2009) and feelings of isolation (Strijk, van Meijel, and Gamel, 2011) through to post-traumatic stress disorder (Lawrence, 2004) and attempted suicide (Bernardes *et al.*, 2010). Their mental health problems are exacerbated by the lack of support for them (McKeary & Newbold, 2010). A recent analysis of asylum seekers’ experiences (Liebling *et al.*, under submission) has demonstrated that asylum seekers are particularly fearful of being sent home, are critical of the way that they are treated by the home office and feel that they lack support in the UK.

### ***Discursive Psychology and Asylum Seeking***

There are two areas in which discursive psychology has approached asylum seeking. In the first, media and political representations of asylum seekers have been addressed and

criticised. In the second, strain analysts have started to address the talk of asylum seekers themselves. This section begins with a clarification of the specific discursive approach in use and then outlines each of these areas in turn.

Discursive psychology (DP, Edwards & Potter, 1992) is the approach that criticises the use of cognition in psychological research. Instead it claims that when people report on cognitions that they are engaged in some kind of social interaction (such as justifying or blaming, or building some other case for example either in support or opposition to asylum) which means that accessing what people are 'truly' thinking is deemed impossible and not useful. Instead, discursive psychologists directly research this interaction, or what is being accomplished by what is being said (or written) which they term the 'action orientation' of interaction (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 154).

Of the first area of discursive research, that which addresses representations of asylum seekers, a number of commonly used strategies have been identified that all function to present asylum seeking as problematic. Opposition to asylum tends to be presented as due to economic reasons rather than for any ulterior motive, such as racism (Capdevila & Callaghan, 2008; Every & Augoustinos, 2007; Goodman & Burke, 2011). This idea of economic benefit is tied into the notion of the 'bogus asylum seeker' (Lynn & Lea, 2003) and the conflation of the different terms 'asylum seeker' and 'immigrant' (Goodman & Speer, 2007) where asylum seekers are presented as (at least potentially) economic migrants rather than genuine refugees. Asylum seekers have also consistently been shown to be 'othered' through the use of 'us and them' distinctions (e.g. Goodman, 2007; Lynn & Lea, 2003; van der Valk, 2003; Verkuyten, 2005) which positions asylum seekers as 'different' from citizens of the host country and also less deserving of support.

The second strain of discursive research has developed more recently and has addressed the talk of asylum seekers themselves. The first to do so was Leudar, Hayes, Nekvapil, J and Turner Baker (2008) who demonstrated how asylum seekers managed and attempt to challenge anti-asylum arguments, such as those outlined above. This demonstrates the negative impact that these arguments have upon asylum seekers in the UK. Two more studies have started to develop this literature. Goodman et al. (under submission) have demonstrated how asylum seekers construct safety as their key reason for being in the UK,

and they refer to safety as justification for resisting calls that they be returned to their country of origin. Kirkwood's analysis (2012a), in which asylum seekers in Glasgow were interviewed, has focussed on the ways in which they argued for their presence there. Strategies included presented their home country as dangerous in contrast to the UK which was constructed as problem free; the right for asylum seekers to work was argued for by constructing it as being in the interests of the UK; and asylum seekers were seen as presenting themselves in humanistic terms (in direct opposition to some lay representations of asylum seekers, see Goodman, 2007). Kirkwood (2012b) builds on this to show how asylum seekers attempt to manage the dilemma of criticising the host nation while also having to appear grateful and ensuring that any hardships in the UK are presented as much less serious than those in their host nation, otherwise they risk undermining their case for being in the UK. Kirkwood et al. (in press) show how, asylum seekers tend to resist making accusations of racism, even in instances where attacks against them appear to be clearly racist.

### ***Aims***

The aim of this paper is to build on the developing research into the ways in which asylum seekers talk about their experiences and present a justification for staying in their host country. In particular, the current research builds upon Kirkwood's (2012b) investigation of the way in which asylum seekers manage the problematic task of making criticisms of the host nation while also not appearing to be ungrateful or not really in need of asylum. To do so, the analysis focuses on two areas that asylum seekers present as problematic; dealings with the Home Office and being unhappy in the UK. It further aims to address how asylum seekers make these complaints without bringing about potentially negative connotations.

### **Procedure**

This study is part of a wider project (Goodman et al., under submission; Liebling et al., under submission) in which data was collected by recruiting and interviewing nine volunteer asylum seeking participants (five female and four male) from a refugee centre in the West Midlands. The interviews were semi-structured and questions were devised by the authors and in collaboration with staff at the refugee centre. Participant information can be found in table one. The interviews were conducted by authors one, two and three, transcribed according to a simplified Jeffersonian level of detail (Clarke, Kitzinger and Potter, 2004) by

author two and analysed by authors one and two. In the transcript 'P' refers to the participant and 'A' refers to the author who conducted the interview.

[Table One about here]

Following the aims and philosophy of discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992), the analysis focuses on how the participants manage their accounts, rather than attempting to ascertain what they 'really think'. As the research question focuses on how participants criticise the host country while also having a requirement to appear grateful, the analysis focuses on how such complaints are brought about. The examples included below are examples that best illustrate the strategies that were identified through the analysis.

## **Analysis**

### ***1. How participants criticise the asylum system***

This section contains a variety of strategies that were used by participants as a way of presenting the asylum system, and the Home Office that runs it, as being unfair. In the first of these examples participant one presents the asylum system as being unfair.

*Extract 1: P1, The asylum system is presented as 'really bad'*

1. A1: So I think you said something about this what do you think about the asylum
2. system? What are your opinions of it?
3. P1: Really bad
4. A1: Really bad okay
5. P1: Because we came here ten years ago (A1: yeah) they don't sort out our
6. (papers) yeah (A1: yeah) and the people coming here in 2007, 2008 they all
7. got their stay why they don't
8. A1: Oh so people have come [more recently]
9. P1: [of course ]
10. A1: And they've-
11. P1: Yeah in 2007 (A1: okay) 2005 they give them all stay (A1: oh) but what about
12. us we came here ten years ago (so what-) and it's not fair system

This extract begins with a direct question about P1's opinion of the asylum system. This question is immediately met with a very negative appraisal (3). Following the interviewer's agreement (4) P1 goes on to provide a rationale for this negative appraisal which is based on two points, the first that the system is too slow, signalled by the used of 'ten years' (5-6) and the second is that it doesn't treat all applicants equally (6-7) a point which is made through the contrasting of those who have claimed asylum more recently who have been allowed to stay and those like him who have been longer and have still not been granted leave to remain. When this supposed unequal treatment is questioned by the interviewer P1 states that this is self evident (signalled through 'of course' 9). The use of the rhetorical question ('but what about us' 11-12) works to position him, and others in his situation, as the victims of an injustice. It is this situation, that P1 presents as self evidently unfair that is used to bring about his claim that the system is not fair (12). It is noteworthy that in this extract while P1 presents himself as an expert on the asylum system and presents his problems with it as self evident, he is making a distinction between two different types of asylum seekers; those like him who have been here for a long time and without leave to remain and those who have been here for a shorter time and have been allowed to stay. Whilst this may bolster his argument that the asylum system is unfair and the case for him being allowed to stay, it may also function to further distinguish different asylum seekers and in doing so draws upon the notion of deserving and undeserving asylum seekers that has been shown to be damaging to all asylum seekers (e.g. Goodman & Speer, 2007).

In this next extract, P7 can be seen to be criticising the asylum law on the grounds that it is unfair.

*Extract 2: P7, The law is presented as unfair*

1. A2:           What about like um the length that you've been waiting to hear back about
2.           your
3. P7:           The length of waiting is so so difficult (A2: yeah) because it's like err they
4.           know, them they are human beings (A2: yeah) but because of the law it's
5.           because of the law (A2: yeah) you understand what I am saying (A2: yeah)
6.           because at the moment they told me to I have to go (A2: mm okay) they
7.           told me that I have to go (A2: yeah) but I've told them that how can I go in
8.           this situation (A2: yeah absolutely) then them they answer back they saying I



9. can go to other part of the country (A2: yeah) in Lilongwe it's not them they
10. going to live in that side them they won't they haven't err live in Malawi
11. before (A2: yeah) they just search the information through the Internet

This extract begins with the interviewer asking specifically about the speed of the asylum decision, rather than the more general question about the asylum system seen in the first extract. It is noteworthy that the question about timing orients to participants' criticisms of the asylum system, such as those illustrated in the previous extract. P7 responds by claiming that the timing is a problem (signalled through the repetition of 'so', 3). (P7 had been in the UK for seven years and last applied two years before the interview.) This is hearable as a criticism of the asylum system and of those who work for it. Directly following this comment P7 works to rhetorically distance herself from making criticisms of the staff that work the system ('they are human beings', 4) and instead blames the system itself ('the law', 4 and 5) that these staff have to implement. After this attempt to place the blame on the system rather than on its staff, P7 goes on to make her criticism, which is that she was told to go back to her country of origin. As in the previous extract, this is presented as unreasonable through the use of a rhetorical question ('how can I go' 7). P7 then goes into detail about how she was told to go to a different part of the country she fled, which is presented as unhelpful and dangerous, showing no regard for asylum seekers' safety (Goodman et al., under submission). Finally, the Home Office staff are presented as lacking knowledge about the countries that they are potentially sending people back to, a point which is emphasised through the claim that they are relying on the internet (as opposed to the required specialist knowledge) to make their decisions. Note how P7 uses the word "just" to construct their actions as particularly unreasonable (see Goodman & Burke, 2010).

The next extract, with participant eight, also contains a guarded criticism of the asylum system, based on the lack of knowledge Home Office staff have about asylum seekers' countries of origin.

*Extract 3:P8, Home Office workers are presented as ignorant*

1. A2: What do you think of the asylum system like the Home Office and things?
2. P8: °I don't know°
3. A2: You don't know. <I mean> do you think they treat you fair?

4. P8: I don't know I give err too much evidence I make all my life how I escape my
5. country I tell I don't know (A2: mm) maybe I don't know understand I don't
6. know how (.) she say maybe you return your country how can? I say
7. A2: What they suggested you return?
8. P8: Yeah maybe (A2: Mm) you want your country you return how can? I say,
9. how? (A2: yeah) you don't know my life

This extract begins with a general question about the Home Office to which P8 initially resists answering through the use of a quietly spoken 'I don't know' (2, a comment that demonstrates the merits of focussing on 'action, not cognition' (Edwards & Potter, 1992, p. 154) because, as can be seen a little further into the extract she does have an opinion about them but seems to be resisting making a complaint). The interviewer pushes P8 for an answer by restating the question and adding to it by asking about fairness (3). Once again P8 states that she 'doesn't know' (4) but this time goes on to make a guarded criticism of a Home Office worker that she has interacted with. She states that while she has told the member of staff about her situation (4-5) that despite this she was still told to return to her country of origin (6). This is presented as unreasonable by P8 in two ways, first through the use of 'I don't understand' which suggests orients to this suggestion of returning home as baffling and second, as in the previous two extracts, through the use of a rhetorical question ('how can?', 6). The interviewer orients to this suggestion as equally unreasonable (7) after which P8 repeats her rhetorical question (8 and 9) which is followed by a claim to personal experience in which it is suggested that the Home Office interviewer isn't properly placed to make decision about her life.

In the final extract in this section, the Home Office system is criticised again, this time by participant 3, for being designed to ensure that refugees are sent back to their country of origin. This extract also contains a charge of racism, something that has been shown to be both rare and problematic in talk about asylum (Goodman & Burke, 2011; Kirkwood et al., in press).

*Extract 4:P3, The system is presented as designed to deport refugees*

1. A1: So did you appeal against your decision or did you
2. P3: I appeal against my decision 2004 (A1: okay) but they still refusing

3. me again because they have one system that moment what they was calling
4. fast track
5. A1: Okay so you were in the fast track
6. P3: They put me in the fast track
7. A1: Okay and was that a good or a bad thing?
8. P3: It was very very bad because err they don't they don't respect people
9. who aren't white in this country sometime (A1: okay) seriously
10. A1: So you think it was a a race thing?
11. P3: It wasn't race things but it's their job to deport somebody (A1: okay)
12. so even they know there some (law some way) (A1: okay) who can
13. normally cover you (A1: right) they will never use that law to cover
14. you (A1: right) they always trying to take you back to your country

This extract begins not with a general question about the asylum system but with a specific question about P3's appeal against the decision to reject his asylum claim. P3 responds by stating that he was part of the 'fast track' (4) system, which refers to the procedure where asylum seekers are detained while a decision is made on their claim within seven to ten day (ILPA, 2010). After some clarification of this (5-6) the interviewer asks whether or not being involved in the fast track system was good (7) to which P3 responds certainly that it was bad (8) which is emphasised through the repetition of 'very' (8, in a similar way to the repetition of 'so' in extract two). After this direct criticism P3 offers his explanation for this, which takes the form of a guarded accusation of racism. The guarded delivery can be seen through three features of P3's talk, first the hesitation signalled through the utterance 'err' (8) which suggests that what is about to be said is a dispreferred response (Pomerantz, 1984). Second, through the use of 'aren't white (9) rather than making any reference to any other racial group, which may work to suggest that there is an in-group favouritism, rather than hostility towards out-groups on the part of Home Office workers, and third through the hedging term 'sometime' (9). Despite this delicacy, the interviewer orients to this claim as a potential accusation of racism (10). P3 responds to the interviewer's question by denying that the decision was about racism (11) but instead by claiming that the Home Office functions to attempt to deport applicants. As with P7 in extract 2, it is the system that requires Home Office workers to attempt to deport asylum applicants that is criticised, but unlike P7, P3 here

is more critical of Home Office workers, claiming that they will avoid using laws that support asylum seekers even if they know that they may help them.

This section has therefore demonstrated that participants are critical of the asylum system on the grounds that it is slow, unfair and designed to prevent asylum seekers from gaining leave to remain in the UK. While some participants make their criticisms of the Home Office and their staff in delicate and guarded ways (e.g. participants seven and eight) others are more forthright and overtly critical of the (e.g. participants one and three). Rhetorical questions were used to present the actions of Home Office staff as unreasonable and the Home Office were constructed as ignorant to the conditions that asylum seekers fled from, which allowed participants to present it as incapable of making appropriate decisions about asylum seekers' cases. Such treatment by the Home Office has been identified as a cause of distress and unhappiness for asylum seekers (e.g. Liebling et al., under submission). In this next section the participants can be seen managing talk about being unhappy in the UK.

## ***2. How participants deal with the dilemma of being unhappy, but wanting to stay in the UK***

Extracts in this section demonstrate the existence of an ideological dilemma (Billig et al., 1988) of participants describing their negative experiences, whilst avoiding being seen to be complaining about the host country, which risks presenting them as ungrateful and/or risk undermining the grounds on which they are claiming asylum. In the first extract in this section, participant five can be seen talking about her hopes from the future, in which she admits that she is not currently happy.

*Extract 5:P8, I'm not happy, but I'm okay*

1. A2: What would you like for your future?
2. P8: I like I like maybe I save my (.) life I want work I want voluntary work I
3. (A2: you do?) yeah I think like this my dream is this (A2: yeah) really
4. A2: Okay that's what you'd really like=
5. P8: =Yeah yeah
6. A2: To work
7. P8: I have a house I have a some I want to cook my food (A2: mm) I want work
8. even I don't know twenty four hour twenty four hours I work I don't know

9. (A2: okay) I'm not happy (A2: yeah) you know (A2: yeah) but (.) °I'm okay°
- a. (A2: okay yeah) how can explain I don't know but (A2: no) you understand
- b. me yeah?

This extract begins with P8 being asked about her hopes for the future (1). P8 responds to this by saying that she would like to work, however the importance of this is emphasised in a number of ways during this term. First, working is presented as having the potential to save her life (2), second it is presented as a 'dream' (3) and thirdly the type of work that she states she wants highlighted as being voluntary work, which function to present her as very much wanting to work, and not simply for financial gain, but for other benefits to. After the interviewer reformulates this (4 and 6) P8 goes on to state her other hopes, this time in a three part list; she states she wants a house (7) the opportunity to cook (7) and to work (7). P8 again presents working as extremely important by suggesting that she would be willing to work excessively long hours (8). It is the presentation of her hopes, which functions to demonstrate that she is lacking basic and fundamental amenities (including somewhere to live – P8 appears to be destitute – and the ability to do her own cooking) that provides the groundwork for her to make the claim that she is not happy (9). Together, these complaints can be heard as very serious, so the claim about being unhappy comes only after extremely difficult events. However, even after this claim of being unhappy, P8 goes on to quietly claim that nevertheless she is 'okay' (9). Directly after this, despite the interviewer's agreement (10), P8 goes on to present this as a difficult think to express and something that may not be properly understood (10-11). This extract therefore demonstrates that whilst asylum seekers may claim that they are unhappy, that this is done in a guarded and careful way that suggests an orientation to such complaints as being problematic (see Kirkwood, 2012b).

In the next extract participant 9 also presents herself as being unhappy, but makes a show of contrasting her situation here with her situation in her country of origin, to avoid risking the potentially harmful implications of simply claiming to be unhappy in the UK.

*Extract 6: P9, I do not have a good life here, but I am safe*

1. A3: So you would never return to Kenya because you would be worried about
2. yourself? =
3. P9: =How can go I I face death how can I go I face death? How even if

4. yourself how you can go to a place where you face death (A3: no I
5. know) I can die there it is better I die here better than I go.
6. A3: No you're right it's better to be safe
7. P9: Because here I don't have anything good here I don't have any life here
8. you understand my life what I explained to you I do not have a good life
9. here but I am safe I stay here because ( ) for here I have never been
10. happy even one day here (A3: no) I have never been happy one day

This extract begins with the interviewer reformulating previous comments about safety (1-2) which is followed by P9 making a case that she cannot return to her country of origin because it is not safe (see Goodman et al., under submission) (3-5) which in turn is met by agreement from the interviewer (6). It is after making this extreme point that P9 moves onto her account of being unhappy in the UK, which begins with denials of having 'anything good' (7) and 'any life' (7) in the UK. As with the previous extract P9 seeks confirmation from the interviewer ('you understand' 8). The comment about not having a good life can be heard as a criticism of the host country, so it is at precisely the point that this comment is made that the justification for staying in the UK is made in the form of safety. Safety has been shown to be a dominant argument used by asylum seekers to argue against being deported, so the mention of safety here can be seen as an orientation to the problems associated with claiming to be unhappy in the UK and the potential retort to this that if you aren't happy in the host country then you can always return to your country of origin. Being safe is presented as the one reason key reason for staying in the UK, and safety is therefore constructed as being more important than happiness as the argument here is that P9 is willing to stay in the UK and be happy because in the UK she is safe. This helps to position P9 as a legitimate refugee as she is placing importance on safety over anything else. As with the previous extract, an explicit claim of unhappiness is made, but this is mitigated through the presentation of another factor (here safety, and in the previous extract being 'okay') that is associated with the identity of a refugee, is given more importance.

The final extract contains a different strategy for managing complaints. Here participant seven can be seen to be criticising an aspect of the asylum system while suggesting that she is hopeful that the system will change.

*Extract 7: P7, It's difficult, but maybe the system will change*

1. P7: I have to stay in Coventry (A2: yeah) I can't go like stay like
2. let's say I want to go to my friend in Nottingham (A2: yeah)
3. to stay there for two weeks (A2: yeah) I can't
4. A2: Because of reporting
5. P7: Yeah (A2: yeah) because of reporting
6. A2: Mm so it's quite frustrating
7. P7: Mm (A2: yeah) it is mm so that's the way things they are but
8. (A2: yeah) it's so difficult (A2: mm) I don't know maybe in the future
9. they might change their plan but (A2: yeah mm) I don't know

After previously claiming to be happy in the UK, P7 here is building up a complaint about the way she is treated by the system. As demonstrated in the previous section, the system is presented as being unfair; this complaint is supported by making a show of the lack of freedom of movement she has in the UK (1-3) that is worked up with support from the interviewer who suggests that it is the weekly reporting to the Home Office that prevents this freedom (4); a point that P7 aligns with (5). The interviewer then upgrades the account so that it is now presented as 'frustrating' (6).

After this P7 then agrees ('mm' 7) and goes on to give a fuller account of her situation, which is structured into four parts. First P7 begins with a fatalistic acceptance that this frustrating situation is part of the system and that nothing can be done about it ('that's the way things ... are' 7). The next part 'but it's so difficult' (7-8) contains the complaint by constructing the system as particularly problematic. This comment is met with a continuer by the interviewer (8) and after this P7 suggests that the system may change (8-9). This comment is made in a delicate way, beginning with 'I don't know' (8) which serves to distance P7 from the comment that follows, and the 'maybe' and 'might' also function to present this as only a possibility and not something that P7 expects to happen. The comment is then followed by further hedging ('but I don't know' 9) which further distances P7 from these comments. The delicacy surrounding this comment suggests a number of things. First the comment is oriented to as problematic; this could be because it is following a complaint, which runs the risk of positioning P7 as ungrateful or unwilling to play by the rules of the host country which can open her up to accusations of not being a 'good' refugee. The

delicacy may also work to distance P7 from appearing naive and having unrealistic expectations about the asylum system.

What this comment does do is function to downgrade the force of the complaint about the system being unfair and making her life difficult; so where in the previous extracts complaints about difficulties have been downgraded by drawing on being safe or 'ok', here the comment is downgraded by suggesting that the system may soon change, which demonstrates both hope for a better future and also a belief in the goodness of those who run the system ('they' 9). In sum, P7 deals with the dilemma of appearing to be complaining about the system by presenting the idea that in the future the Home Office might change their procedures for the better.

In this section it has been demonstrated that participants manage their complaints about the ill effects of the asylum system in a way that downgrades them and therefore displays an orientation to the potential problems of appearing ungrateful; this is done by drawing on the ideas of being safe (extract five) being okay (extract six) and suggesting that the system may soon improve (seven).

## **Discussion**

Analysis of interviews with asylum seekers has addressed the ways in which they manage talk containing complaints about their host country (the UK). In the first section of analysis it was shown how a range of different reasons are used to criticise the asylum system and the Home Office, the department that runs the system. In the first example the asylum system is presented as unfair, and in particular it is criticised for not dealing with all applicants in the same way. In the second example the law is presented as unfair, in the third Home Office workers are presented as lacking knowledge about the countries they are making decisions about and in the fourth example the asylum system is presented as designed to ensure that refugees are denied asylum in the UK. In the second section of analysis it was shown how participants manage the dilemma of bringing about criticisms of the host country whilst also having the interactional requirement to show gratitude to the host country. This is managed by downgrading the complaints against the host country so that in the first example the participant claims not to be happy in the UK, but mitigates this by claiming to be 'ok', in the second example the participant claims not to have a good life in the UK, but this is mitigated



by drawing on the notion of being safe and in the final example the participant claims that her life is made difficult, but mitigates this by displaying hope that the asylum system will improve in the future.

It is the first section of this analysis that contains the most direct criticism from participants and this criticism is directed towards the asylum system. It is of note that it is the system that participants criticise, rather than members of the public or even the government, as this strategy echoes that used by opponents of asylum who also blame the asylum system rather than asylum seekers themselves. Goodman and Speer (2007) showed how opponents of system made a show of their being opposed to the system rather than the people using the system (the asylum seekers themselves) in order to present themselves as reasonable and not having any dislike of the people using the system themselves. In the examples in this analysis the asylum seekers are using a similar strategy for similar ends; by criticising the system they are not directly criticising the people they have come into contact with, who are British citizens and any hostility is directed at an abstract system rather than real people. This suggests that even when refugees do make criticisms, they do so in a guarded way.

While the overt criticism found in the first section of analysis have been shown to be made in a guarded way, it is the extracts found in the second section of the analysis that contain the clearest evidence of dilemmas (Billig et al., 1988). It is these extracts that contain not criticisms of the asylum systems, but claims about being unhappy and not having a satisfactory life in the UK, that suggest the existence of an interactional necessity not to appear too unhappy. As Kirkwood (2012a; 2012b) has shown, refugees claiming not to be grateful in their host country run the risk in doing so of undermining the seriousness of the danger that they have fled to become refugees. This may explain the delicacy displayed in making these criticisms and the ways in which they are mitigated. The different ways that the claims are downgraded are of interest. In the first example the participant claims to be 'ok', so while she explicitly claims not to be happy, she also avoids any counter claims that she would be better off in her host country, as being 'ok' in the UK could be favourably contrasted with the situation she has fled (which could be presented as not ok). In the second example, the participant claims that despite not being happy, she is safe; the use of safety in managing a refugee identity has been discussed in more detail by Goodman et al. (under submission) who demonstrate that safety is used as a key rationale for being a refugee (see

Neumayer, 2005 more on the dangers that refugees flee). In the third and final example presented in this analysis a different strategy is used to downgrade the claims of having a difficult life, here in the form of displaying a hope that the system will improve; this strategy helps to position the participant as controlled by the system and willing to go along with it, despite its problems.

These findings suggest that refugees in the UK face difficulties once in the UK primarily as a result of the measures that are in place to prevent access to asylum (Souter, 2011) and to discourage refugees from coming to the UK (Schuster, 2004). While discourse analysis cannot ascertain whether or not these difficulties are truly experienced by the participants in this study, the difficulties they describe are in line with existing literature on asylum seeking (Mulvey, 2010). These findings also support the suggestion that refugees are unlikely to report any negative experiences they have, or will downplay them (Kirkwood et al. in press) and instead present themselves as resilient and strong (Clare, Goodman, Liebling and Laing, in preparation). Such strategies may have the disadvantage of functioning to further marginalise (Hynes & Sales, 2009) an already weak and vulnerable group of people (Baird & Boyle, 2012) and preventing them from accessing necessary support or for arguing for fairer treatment.

### ***Conclusion***

This research has focussed on the ways that asylum seekers manage making criticisms of their host country. Whilst examples of participants making explicit criticisms are found, they are directed towards the asylum 'system' rather than to any individuals. When participants claim not to be happy or satisfied in the host country, they can be seen to downgrade these complaints so that this isn't presented as too problematic, which has been shown to be evidence of an orientation to the problems associated with making complaints. These problems include appearing ungrateful and potentially downgrading the seriousness of the events that have caused them to seek refuge in the host country in the first place. It has been shown that whilst these complaints may help to manage this dilemma, the delicacy displayed in making them may prevent refugees from arguing successfully for better treatment in the host country.

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