

# 'I Can't Go Back Because If I Go Back I Would Die': How Asylum Seekers Manage Talk about Returning Home by Highlighting the Importance of Safety

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# **“I can’t go back because if I go back I would die”: How asylum seekers manage talk about returning home by highlighting the importance of safety**

## **Abstract**

Asylum seekers living in the United Kingdom have been shown to have fled danger in their countries of origin, only to face hardship and the threat of deportation once in the UK. This paper draws on the discursive psychological approach to address the way in which asylum seekers in the UK manage questions about returning to their country of origin. Interviews were conducted with nine asylum seekers in a refugee support centre in the Midlands. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using discourse analysis. The analysis showed that participants drew on the notion of safety and also having families to counter suggestions that they should return to their country of origin. The way in which this is achieved, and the implications this has on the participants’ identity are addressed. Finally implications for practice and for those advocating asylum seekers’ rights are discussed.

## **Key words**

Asylum seekers, refugees, safety, rights, discursive psychology, discourse analysis

## **Introduction**

Asylum seekers<sup>i</sup> are not initially granted refugee status, but are first obliged to become ‘asylum seekers’, while their claim for refugee is managed by the ministry responsible for people entering the country, the Home Office. The term asylum seeker, in the UK, as in other countries, has become a negative category and there is now a wealth of literature addressing the difficulties faced by asylum seekers and discursive literature that has analysed the arguments that are used to justify their harsh treatment and exclusion. However, to date there is a limited amount of discursive research that has focussed on asylum seekers’ accounts. Therefore this paper reports on the discursive analytic findings of interviews with asylum seekers about their experiences, and in particular how they counter suggestions about returning home by drawing on the notion of safety.

### *Asylum seekers' reasons for leaving their country of origin.*

The countries that have the highest number of asylum applications in the UK are currently Pakistan, Iran, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Libya (UNHCR, 2011), many of which have ongoing conflicts. Research has shown that asylum seekers have fled from conditions including oppression and violence (Neumayer, 2005) and religious and gender-based persecution (Crawley, 2010). Asylum seekers have experienced traumatic events such as rape, murder of family members (Author and Author 3, 2012) and torture (Behnia, 2004). When they flee they often have to leave without their families or become separated from them along their journey (Turner *et al.*, 2003) and then can also face ordeals such as having to live in refugee camps where the conditions are poor and overcrowded (Behnia, 2004).

### *The treatment of asylum seekers in the UK*

The first problem that asylum seekers face when claiming asylum in the UK is the range of measures that have been designed to reduce the number of applications (Hynes and Sales, 2009). To this end, Hardy (2003) argued that decisions made by the Home Office about asylum applications, rather than being fair and objective, are made by people that have little knowledge about the country of origin. Perhaps more worryingly, Souter (2011, p. 48) demonstrated that asylum decisions are based on a desire to refuse access to the country wherever possible, something he terms a “culture of disbelief” (see also Kirkwood, 2012a).

For those that do remain in the UK, research shows that asylum seekers continue to experience hardship. This can come in the form of exclusion and marginalization (Hynes and Sales, 2009), and a lack of rights (Sales, 2002). Asylum seekers who have had their claims refused can become destitute as they have no entitlement to housing or financial support (Green, 2006), and are not allowed to work (Sales, 2002). Finally, once a claim is denied, asylum seekers can be deported to the country they have fled (Gibney, 2008).

Asylum seeking in the UK has been presented as a threat to the country because of concerns that their presence can lead to an increase in racial diversity (Lewis, 2005), and because of (unwarranted) associations with Islam (Author 1 and Author 2, 2011; Pearce and Charman, 2011) and terrorism (Rudiger, 2007) and extra costs to the

British taxpayer (Hynes and Sales, 2009). Mulvey (2010) has shown that such representations have increased hostility towards asylum seekers. It is perhaps therefore unsurprising that in the UK asylum seekers receive day-to-day prejudice, sometimes in the form of violence, and can be subjected to local anti-asylum campaigns (Hubbard, 2005). Overall, the way in which asylum seekers are treated has led researchers to conclude that such treatment is prejudicial (Author 1 and Author, 2007; Every and Augoustinos, 2007).

#### *The effects of the harsh treatment on asylum seekers' mental health*

There is a growing body of work that demonstrates the negative impact this has on their psychological well-being, with cases including post-traumatic stress disorder (Lawrence, 2004), depression (Robjant, *et al.*, 2009), suicidal tendencies (Bernardes *et al.*, 2010), and increased feelings of isolation (Smyth and Kum, 2010; Strijk, *et al.*, 2011). For those relying on benefits, a decrease in self-esteem may occur (Fozdar 2009) and living in a different culture can also cause difficulties (Baird and Boyle, 2012). Uncertainty about their future (Spicer, 2008) and the threat of being deported, back to their country of origin has been shown to leave asylum seekers feeling anxious, insecure and unable to settle (Author and Author 3, 2012).

Despite often having complex healthcare needs, research has shown that there is inadequate support available for asylum seekers. For example, McKeary and Newbold (2010) showed that language barriers, poverty, and difficulty in accessing transport also prevent asylum seekers from gaining necessary access to effective support/services. Survivors of sexual abuse, (particularly common amongst women asylum seekers), also struggle to seek appropriate support from mental health services (Author and Author 3, 2012).

In addition to their problems caused by having to flee their home and experiencing deprivation and mental health problems, asylum seekers in the UK are also aware of and troubled by their negative portrayal in the media (Khan, 20008). To this end, Leudar *et al.*(2008) showed how asylum seekers responded to what they termed 'hostility themes', which are the range of anti-asylum arguments used by opponents of asylum including "they are an economic drain; they lack basic human qualities such as love for their own children and responsibility to the community; potentially,

they are criminals; they are carriers of dangerous diseases” (2008, p. 199). Despite asylum seekers building up clear rebuttals of these anti-asylum arguments, it was also shown that these ‘hostility themes’ nevertheless posed a threat to their well-being.

### *Discursive Psychological Research on Asylum Seeking*

The anti asylum arguments, or “hostility themes” (Leudar *et al*, 2008, p. 191), which lead to the exacerbation of the negative experiences of asylum seekers, need to be viewed as discursive accomplishments, that is that they are products of talk. This means that the discursive psychological approach (Edwards and Potter, 1992) is particularly relevant to understanding these arguments, and the very real impact that these have on the lives of refugees.

Discursive psychology (DP, Edwards and Potter, 1992) is part of what has been described as the “discursive turn” (Wetherell, 2003, p. 13) in which traditional psychological approaches that focus on attitudes and that treat what people say as an accurate representation of what they are ‘really’ thinking are criticised because it is claimed that such approaches fail to account for the complex interactional work that is going on when people are talking. By this it means that when people are talking they are managing their stake, interest and accountability (Edwards and Potter, 1992) in that interaction (so for example it follows that opponents of asylum seeking make very different claims about what asylum seekers are in the UK for, when compared to those who are supporting them, see for example Author 1, 2007 and Lynn and Lea, 2003). Instead, discursive psychologists focus on the ‘action orientation’ or talk (Edwards and Potter, 1992, see also Every and Augoustinos, 2007) so instead of viewing talk as an accurate reflection of what people have really seen or really think they are, talk is analysed to see what it may be doing in that interaction (such as blaming someone or justifying something).

There is therefore a growing discursive literature about asylum seeking. The most common finding is the use of an ‘us and them’ distinction (e.g. Author 1, 2007; Lynn and Lea, 2003; Verkuyten, 2005) which works to present asylum seekers as undeserving of support from, and a threat to, British people. Another common anti-asylum strategy is the use of the notion of the ‘bogus asylum seeker’ (e.g. Lynn and Lea, 2003; Author 1 and Author, 2007) which presents all asylum seekers as at least

potentially economic migrants, and again unworthy of sympathy. This also helps to shift the focus of talk away from how asylum seekers can be helped to concerns over welfare costs (Souter, 2011). A further way of delegitimizing asylum seekers is the conflation of the terms 'asylum seekers' and 'immigrants' which presents asylum seekers as immigrants rather than as people fleeing from persecution (e.g. Author 1 and Author, 2007). It has also been shown that opposition to asylum tends to be framed in terms of economic factors and asylum seekers' supposed lack of integration into Britain (Author 1 and Author 2, 2011; Capdevila and Callaghan, 2008), rather than as a result of prejudice or racism.

To date, the only studies to apply the discursive approach to the talk of asylum seekers themselves are those by Leudar *et al* (2008) and Kirkwood (2012a; b; Kirkwood *et al*, in press). Leudar *et al.*'s study, described above, showed how asylum seekers respond, and attempt to counter, the 'hostility themes' that are present in public discourse. Kirkwood's work has demonstrated that asylum seekers find it difficult to express hardships in the UK, as this risks both presenting themselves as 'ungrateful', and presenting the conditions that they are fleeing from as less serious than they are claiming if they are complaining about conditions in the UK. This may mean that although asylum seekers are having challenging experiences in the UK, there may be an interactional need to avoid expressing this.

### *Aims and objectives*

This report is part of a wider project focussing on the experiences of asylum seekers in the UK (see also author three, author two and author one, under submission; author one, author two, author three, author four , in preparation). The overall aims of the project are to explore how asylum seekers talk about their experiences in their country of origin, their reasons for choosing the UK and once in the UK. This part of the project focuses specifically on how participants manage talk about returning to their country of origin, this is necessary as being returned home is an issue at the very centre of the asylum debate; opponents of asylum argue for returning applicants as a key aim of policy (e.g. Phillimore and Goodson, 2006), whereas asylum advocates claim that, due to the reasons highlighted above this is unacceptable (e.g. Zetter and Pearl, 2000). This paper, therefore, reports on the first research project to address how asylum seekers themselves manage talk about returning to their country of origin.

## **Procedure**

Data used for analysis was gathered from nine interviews with asylum seekers (five female and four male), who were recruited through a refugee centre in the West Midlands. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed, with input from the refugee centre. Interviews lasted between 20-50 minutes. One interview was conducted with the assistance of an interpreter. Interviews were conducted individually, and authors one, two and three conducted interviews. Participant details can be seen in table one.

[*Table One about here*]

To conduct the analysis data was transcribed by author two according to simplified Jeffersonian conventions (Clarke *et al.*, 2004, p. 535), and then analysed by authors one, two and three. As this is discursive research, the analysts focused on how participants' constructed their experiences in the talk, rather than viewing their talk as an accurate representation of cognition (that is, the focus is on “action, not cognition” Edwards and Potter 1992, p. 154), particularly with regards to how participants constructed their relationships with others, how they presented themselves as legitimate, and importantly how they dealt with challenges to their status and how they dealt with suggestions that they should return to their country of origin. Researchers were also interested in how identity was constructed through talk, as according to discursive psychology, identities are socially constructed through talk (Barker, 2001; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003). Extracts were chosen as exemplars of the findings identified in the analysis.

### **Analysis: How Participants resist talk about returning back to their home country on the grounds of safety**

This analysis section reports on how participants deal with the idea of returning to their home country. First, a participant can be seen arguing that she would return to her home country if it were safe to do so, but that it is not, next another participant argues that is not safe to return, and then a third stating that she fears death if she were to return. In the final two examples the importance of family is presented as an additional reason, along with safety, for not being able to return to their countries of

origin. In this first extract the participant is clear that ideally she would return to her country of origin if only it were possible, but that this is not the case.

*Extract 1: P7, I would rather go back to my country*

1. P7: <It's not easy> if I didn't have a problem in my country I would
2. rather go back to my country=
3. A2: =You would?
4. P7: Yeah (A2: mm) but (.) th- the situation of mine (A2: yeah) if I go
5. there (A2: yeah) oh my God (A2: mm) you see? (A2: yeah)

P7 brings about her claim that she would return if she could by twice using an 'if x, then y' argument (Wooffitt, 1992). The first of these (1-2) is used to clearly state that she would rather go back come if she could. This functions to explicitly highlight the problems she has back home, so she is clearly positioning herself as a refugee, as opposed to an economic migrant, for example, or someone in the UK through choice. The interviewer responds with a continuer (3) which is then met with a reaffirmation of the problems that she is leaving. Here the second 'if x, then y' structure is used (4-5) to draw attention to the potential harm she claims she will come to if she returns. The 'then y' part of the structure isn't completed and instead P7 uses the phrase 'oh my God' (5). By not explaining the possible outcome and instead using an idiom that suggests something very serious, P7 constructs what will happen to her as particularly serious, adding further credibility to her case that it is fear of returning home, rather than any other reason (such as economic need) that is causing her to stay here. The next extract also contains a participant arguing that it is too dangerous to return home.

*Extract 2: P8, How can I return?*

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

In this extract, P8 is questioned about her opinion of the Home Office (1) and is initially resistant to answering (2) so is prompted for an answer by the interviewer (3). Her response (4-6) begins in a non-committal way ('I don't know' 4) that suggests an orientation to the difficulties associated with being critical of the Home Office. However, P8 does eventually make a guarded criticism of the Home Office by stating that she has given too much evidence (4). She then goes on to give her account of how she 'escaped my country' (4-5). This phrase does two things. First, by referring to her 'escape' she makes inferences about initially being in danger and needing to get away, so as in extract one, P8 is positioning herself as someone fleeing danger (and rejecting any categories such as economic migrant). Second, by referring to leaving 'my country', P8 is also positioning herself as an outsider; she had to leave one country, but her host country is not 'hers'. This adds credibility to her positioning herself as a refugee, rather than a standard migrant who may take on the new country as their own. Perhaps as an orientation to the problematic nature of criticising the home office, P8 appears to backtrack a little and then goes on to say 'I don't know' a further three times, which is a clear display of hedging.

After this P8 makes what can be seen as her main complaint (6), which is that someone in the Home Office suggested that she return home. This is followed directly by the rhetorical question 'how can?' which draws attention to what P8 is constructing as an impossibility and an unfair claim. The interviewer's response, a repetition of the Home Office worker's suggestion, preceded by 'what' (7) helps to co-construct such a claim as outlandish and unreasonable. After this P8 retells the exchange (8) and again uses the rhetorical question 'how can?', which is emphasised through the repetition of 'how?' (9). P8 then draws upon her personal experience and the lack of the Home Office worker's knowledge about her (9) to undermine and discredit the suggestion that she return home. In doing so, P8 stands firm in her suggestion that returning home would be an impossibility for her. Unlike in the previous extract, there is no claim about desiring to return to the country of origin, but in common with the previous extract is the suggestion that returning home simply isn't a possibility, on the grounds of (a lack of) safety. In the next extracts there is evidence of a more extreme version of the same argument around safety being used.

*Extract 3A:P9, If I go back I would die*

1. P9: It was very very cold I feel so many difficulties because of all those
2. experiences but I can't go back because I can go back and I would die. I
3. can't go back because if I go back I would die I do not have a good life
4. here ((crying)) as I struggle a lot

*Extract 3B: 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

In these two extracts, both from P9, she makes the argument that she cannot return home for fear of being killed. In extract 3A P9 begins by outlining a particularly difficult experience in the UK, however despite describing these 'so many difficulties' (1) this is contrasted favourably with returning. This is using the same structure identified in extract one (if x, then y), in this case it is 'if I go back I would die' (3). By suggesting that her return to her home country would inevitably result in her death, P9 is building up a particularly strong case for her staying; indeed sending her back is presented as no different than killing her. In addition to this appeal based on a threat to her life, P9 goes on to bolster this claim by adding that she is not happy in the UK (3-4) indeed she cries through this account. What this does is demonstrate that she has no particular interest in remaining in the UK for anything she is gaining from any benefit she may gain from being there (her statement about struggling pre-empts any potential criticism that she is being given an easy time at the expense of British taxpayers) other than the not being sent home, where she is in danger. The overall effect of this talk is to present herself as someone who wants to remain in the UK, not

because she wants to be there, but simply because she cannot go home for fear of death.

Extract 3B begins with the interviewer reformulating what P9 had said before, referring to her safety as being ‘worried about yourself’ (1-2). This allows P9 to continue with her account. P9 begins with the rhetorical question (‘how can I go?’ 3) which is used to present returning home as a particularly unreasonable thing to do. This is followed by the statement ‘I face death’ (3) which answers the rhetorical question and works to upgrade the interviewer’s statement to something far more serious than being ‘worried’. Next, P9 repeats these two points, which serves to emphasise their seriousness. P9 then directs a rhetorical question to the interviewer and directly asks her if she would go somewhere facing death. Clearly this type of formulation invites a no response (Clayman and Heritage 2003: 303) which is exactly what it is met with (4) and then after this P9 states that it would be better to die here (in the UK) than return. The function of this is unclear, but it is met with agreement from the interviewer who reformulates P9’s talk about being safe (6).

The remainder of this extract (7-10) works in the same way as P9’s previous extract; she restates that being in the UK in of itself is not a good thing, and makes further references to not being happy in the UK, but that highlights the issue of safety (9) as the rationale for being here. In these two extracts P9 presents herself as someone who has to stay in the UK for safety, even if it means constant unhappiness, as her home country is too unsafe to live in. In this next extract we see P1 stating that safety is his reason for being in the UK because his country is at war.

*Extract 4: P1, the country is still at war*

1. P1: No I did a fresh claim in 2005 (A1: yeah) and in 2009 they
2. said that been refused (A1: okay) and then
3. A1: So same reason again [it's safe go home ] okay
4. P1: [the same reason it's safe]
5. A1: (That's difficult)
6. P1: and I did a further submission (A1: yeah) in 2009 and since
7. that I'm waiting for that (A1: right) to see when they gonna
8. refuse that one ((laughter))

9. A1: So you expect that to be refused
10. P1: God knows I don't know (SG: okay) my hope
11. A1: [You're hoping that they accept it ]
12. P1: [ I been here ten years ] you know
13. A1: Yeah so you can say I've been here ten years
14. P1: I been here ten years no trouble no crime (A1: yeah okay)
15. the country is still war there (A1: yeah) you know

This extract begins with P1 talking about his claim for asylum and stating that his most recent attempt at gaining asylum was refused (2). The interviewer then responds in a way that orients to earlier in the conversation when P1 was complaining that his case was rejected because country of birth (Afghanistan) was deemed to be safe; this can also be seen in the overlapping agreement on lines three and four. After this P1 continues with his account, and this time makes an ironic statement, signalled with laughter (8) to suggest that he knows that his latest application will be rejected. The interviewer then seeks to clarify this point (9) and afterwards P1 takes a more serious tone (10). Next comes his list of reasons for why he should stay, which includes, but is not limited to safety. The first is the length of time he's been here (14) which could be seen as an appeal based on him being settled in the UK, then he appears to orient to two "hostility themes" (Leudar *et al.*, 2008, p.191) in the form of denying being the cause of trouble or crime. Finally comes the appeal to safety when he states that war is ongoing in his home country (15); the continuation or war certainly suggests that safety may be a concern. In this case, safety is one of a number of reasons for staying in the UK, but again the participant explicitly rejects the suggestion that his country is safe (this time referring to the ongoing war) when criticising the Home Office for rejecting his asylum claim on the grounds that his country is safe. If rejecting claims on the grounds of safety is a commonly used reason by the Home Office, then this may explain the interactional need to make a display of the lack of safety in participants' home countries.

The following extract consist of a participant who also claims that he cannot return home. Here the participant draws on an identity of responsible family member who needs to stay in the UK for his family, although the notion of safety is also oriented

to. P1, the same speaker as in the previous extracts, draws on family responsibility as the main reason to stay in the UK.

*Extract 4: P1, Being a responsible parent*

1. SG: No okay so and so when you made your application again did
2. you say I have a child now? =
3. P1: =Yes yes before the submission I said I have a child I have
4. been with my partner for five years (SG: yeah) and for these
5. reason I don't want to go back (SG: yeah) and the country's
6. not safe (SG: yeah yeah) that's my reasons

As demonstrated in the previous extract, P1 has previously stated that his reason for wanting to stay in the UK was safety and because his home country is too dangerous. Here we see an additional reason being introduced in the form of his family commitment (3-5). By referring to family commitment, P1 is orienting to the criticism of asylum policies than can separate children (Author 1, 2007). What is of particular interest here is that following this point about wanting to stay with his family (and the interviewer's agreement with this, 5) that P1 then goes on to add the safety of the country as a reason (5-6). What this shows is that there is an interactional need to refer to (lack of) safety as grounds for refugee status, even when other (arguably equally reasonable) justifications are offered for staying. Once more this points to the importance of an argument against being sent back to the country of origin on the grounds of safety.

## **Discussion**

This analysis has shown that the notion of safety is used as the main argument against suggestions that asylum seekers should return home. In all four extracts here the participants construct their home countries as unsafe, in sharp contrast with the UK which is presented as providing safety. In the first extract the participant argues that she would like to return, and that if her home country was safe enough she would. In the second extract there is no mention of wanting to return, instead the participant argues simply that returning is too dangerous. In the third, and perhaps the most harrowing extract, the participant argues that even though she is unhappy in the UK, she would still rather be here than returned home, as if she returns home she will be

killed. In the fourth extract the participant points to the lack of safety as a reason not to be sent home, but in addition to this he draws on his family in the UK as a further argument not to be sent back to his country of origin.

Arguments around safety are fundamental to the whole issue of asylum and refuge; indeed it is the basis on which refugee status is determined, so it is perhaps not surprising that this forms such a major part of the rationale for remaining in a country of refuge. It is certainly the case that participants are drawing on the notion of safety as a rhetorical device; that is it forms the basis of a strong argument to justify their staying in the UK. However, there is evidence to support the participants' claims about lack of safety in their home countries, with participants (at least claiming to be) coming from war-torn countries such as Afghanistan. This is line with the literature on asylum seeking that suggests that asylum seekers are indeed fleeing from dangerous situations such as conflict and violence (e.g. Author and Author 3, 2012; Neumayer, 2005). As such, it can be claimed that asylum seekers have a strong case to remain in safe countries such as the UK as it keeps them out of danger, and in this case protects lives (as is the case for participant nine) and prevents people from being forced to fight against British soldiers (as is the case for participant one).

The talk of the participants in these extracts can all be seen as responding to, and attempting to challenge and undermine, what has been termed 'hostility themes' (Leudar *et al.*, 2008) aimed at asylum seekers, and in particular the ideas that they are here for financial gain and that they lack responsibility for their children. In terms of the idea that they are here for financial gain, arguments based primarily around safety serve to show that this is not the case and those who claim that they aren't even happy here (participant nine) or that they'd return home if only they could (participant seven) serve to highlight that they aren't in the UK to get anything, other than being out of danger. Making arguments around safety, therefore, helps to position the participants as genuine (rather than say 'bogus', see Author 1 and Author, 2007) refugees and not economic migrants. The arguments made by parents (participants one in extract four) that they would not be willing to leave their families even if they were safe acts to directly counter the hostility theme that suggests that asylum seekers lack the normal morals to do so.

It is possible that participants may find the strategy of claiming that they are only in the UK for safety and that they would rather not be here to be a problematic one, because this creates a situation where they can be seen to be critical of, and ungrateful to, their hosts. None of the interviewers or the participants oriented to this potential problem, however there is a potential dilemma here for participants that could be investigated in more detail in future studies.

### *Implications*

There are two practical applications that are suggested based on the findings of this research. The first is that this research does suggest that there is a genuine need to find out about the context and potential risks to the safety of each asylum seeker; doing so will require detailed knowledge about asylum seekers' countries of origin. If Home Office workers are ill-informed about these countries (Hardy, 2003), or worse still, if there is a culture of disbelief (Souter, 2011) where workers are attempting to return as many asylum seekers as possible, then this must be stopped as a matter of urgency; the whole notion of asylum and refuge is based on providing safety to people who otherwise don't have it, so this must be maintained. It is simply not acceptable to send people back to the dangerous situations that they have fled.

A second practical application is that advocates and services supporting asylum seekers should focus on the lack of safety experienced by asylum seekers and on how they aren't simply in the UK for financial gain (as the 'hostility themes' would lead members of the public to think). Responses by service providers and advocates could draw attention to the distressing situations that asylum seekers are fleeing and use a moral argument based on supporting people in need. Professionals and advocates can also assist to show that rather than being a threat to the British way of life, asylum seekers are in fact very similar to British people and share the same values as wanting to be safe and have a normal family life.

### *Conclusion*

This research has demonstrated that asylum seekers draw on the notion of safety when faced with questions about returning to their countries of origin. By drawing on safety as the main reason for being in the UK, the participants are able to position themselves as genuine refugees and are also able to counter hostility themes that

suggest that asylum seekers are only in the UK for financial gain. Literature supports the claims that the asylum seekers' countries are unsafe (e.g. Author and Author 3, 2012; Neumayer, 2005), so the authors of this research recommend that asylum seekers' safety must be a key concern of asylum policy and that asylum seekers must not be sent to their country of origin if doing so puts them into danger.

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<sup>i</sup> A note on terminology. Throughout this paper reference will be made to ‘asylum seekers’. Although this term technically refers to people who are awaiting the legal status of a refugee it has been noted that this term has come to be used in a negative way (for example to suggest that they are not ‘genuine’ asylum seekers, e.g. Goodman and Speer 2007). The authors would like to note that when they use this term they are referring to asylum seekers’ legal status, rather than making any inferences as to the legitimacy of their claims.