

## Refugees and National Identity in Letters to the Editor

KATE DUNSMORE  
Fairleigh Dickinson University, USA

ANDREA HICKERSON  
University of South Carolina, USA

Construction of refugees in news has been extensively researched. Less researched is the link between refugees and the construction of the receiving country's national identity. This discourse analysis of letters to the editor in Australia, Canada, and the United States found wide variance in the way refugees and refugee policy were linked to the construction of national identity. Letters were selected if they referred to the respective national anniversary and fell within a few news cycles of the respective national holidays. These tight criteria yielded a sample manifesting multiple discourses including the nation as protector, the nation as normative leader, the nation among nations, and the nation as a site of individual identity construction.

*Keywords: refugee, immigration, framing, discourse, letters to the editor, Canada, Australia, United States*

The relationship between national identity and media has long been an area of study. It is a symbiotic and thorny relationship, whereby the power of media to unite people is balanced against their ability to reify difference, often at the expense of minorities. Recently, refugee policy has become a premier test of national leaders as emblematic of their country's identity and cultural survival (McCartney, 2019). At present, refugee movements are framed as a crisis throughout the world with a hardening of borders.

Large flows of immigrants, including those defined as refugees, have historically accounted for much of the resident populations of Australia, Canada, and the United States. Immigrants, including refugees, have been exploited, feared, and sometimes, under certain circumstances, even welcomed. The question of who deserves to live in Australia, Canada, or the United States has recurred throughout the histories of these countries and has had to be accounted for in the imagined community of each country (Cisneros, 2008; Lueck, Due, & Augoustinos, 2015).

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Kate Dunsmore: [dunsmore@fdu.edu](mailto:dunsmore@fdu.edu)

Andrea Hickerson: [hickera@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:hickera@mailbox.sc.edu)

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At present, the issue has become white hot. It is useful to examine the public view leading up to the current moment to see how national identity was tied to refugee issues at the point prior to the current inflamed environment. This study of letters to the editor generated before and after national holidays for Australia, Canada, and the United States, from 2011 to 2014, speaks to the role of refugee issues in the construction of national identity in our recent past. Letters to the editor often expose the range of debate around contentious issues (Squires, 2011). The present study focuses on the construction of a crucial aspect of policy debate: how the public discursively links refugee issues to the nature of national identity.

We draw our sample from letters published near each of these countries' national anniversaries, a day we would expect heightened national rhetoric around a conventional news hook (Ben-Aaron, 2005). Although many previous studies of refugees in the media have focused on traditional news content, letters to the editor, a vestige of print media that has survived the industry's digital transformation, are relatively understudied. Our results suggest that letters to the editor do present an array of viewpoints, including those in opposition to national leaders. Furthermore, the attitudes reflected in these viewpoints also indicate a range of values with regard to the connection between national identity and national refugee policy. In our sample, the construction of national identity was clearly tied to public deliberation on the role of the state as such and on a basis that extends beyond a single policy area. The constructions voiced in the letters subsumed refugee policy under a broader set of norms and criteria rather than holding national identity as derived from refugee policy. We conclude that attending to public conceptions of national identity offers a useful resource for policymaking as it shifts the focus from characterizing refugees to characterizing the nation-state.

## **Literature Review**

### ***National Identity and Refugee Issues***

Weeks (1990) argues that nationality provides an important element of "the stable core to your individuality," an element that has "become ever more complex and confusing" (p. 88). Quinsaat (2014) and Şahin (2011) found that coverage of immigration policy mobilizes powerful frames, extant in the population, related to national identity. McCartney (2019) argues that immigration policies may become "touchstones in the national memory and baked into the core of the nation's self-understanding in a way that can be difficult to replicate when the subject is purely domestic" (p. 708). The present study explores this connection between expression of personal identity and construction of national identity through letters to the editor on a point of strong tension: the introduction of outsiders.

### ***Construction of Refugees***

There is a considerable literature on the identities ascribed to refugees through press coverage. Our study moves in a different direction, but it is useful to review the place of refugees in the public imaginary because these frames would be part of the mental inventory letter writers would draw on as they speak to national identity constructs. Very often, *refugee* and *immigrant* are conflated in news coverage. For example, Randall (2003) found that British coverage of refugee issues was dominated by themes of

immigrants (and asylum seekers) as a source of crime and disease. Lawlor and Tolley (2017) note that constructions of refugees are based on more critical assessment of motivation, in which immigrant motivations are more readily accepted. Santa Ana's (1999) analysis of metaphors in news articles found that "immigrants correspond to citizens as animals correspond to humans" (p. 203) and concluded "that racism undergirds America's everyday discourse about immigrants" (p. 218).

Some studies have specifically dealt with refugees and asylum. Pope (2017) links a negative valence for refugee identity with discriminatory policy. O'Doherty and Lecouteur (2007) found "particular uses of categorisation that are indicative of potentially oppressive social relationships" (p. 9). Leudar, Hayes, Nekvapil, and Baker (2008) document the presence of negative construction of refugees and the consequent harmful self-conceptions of refugees.

Focusing on letters to the editor, Lynn and Lea (2003) found a dominant discourse of discrimination against asylum seekers amounting to "the creation of this 'new apartheid'" (p. 448). Mummery and Rodan (2007) argue that Australian letters to the editor have a divisive discourse about national identity marked by differing views of the nature of Australianness.

### ***Letters to the Editor as Public Sphere***

Whereas objectivity is the intended standard for news, letters to the editor are presumed to advocate for a viewpoint. Letter writers provide their names and place of residence, establishing legitimacy as members of the newspaper's community. Letters to the editor "can be understood as a mode of public communication and debate, given its democratic purpose" (da Silva, 2012, p. 250). Da Silva (2012) reviews the contrasting positions on the question of how well letters to the editor serve public sphere needs and ends by finding that editors seek to represent multiple sides (p. 259)

Although not a census of public views, letters clearly do add to public discourse. Squires (2011) argues that "the op-ed page functions as a site of framing struggles," offering a space for reflecting, reframing and revisiting issues, "inviting the audience to question the premises that may be normalized or taken for granted" (p. 34). This suggests that one selection value at work on opinion pages is to represent a broader range of voices than would normally be quoted in news articles.

Neilsen (2010) takes the view that

letters are published through an institution that systematically lends the publicity and symbolic status of newspapers to reader-driven controversy over issues on the news agenda. Thus, the letters institution exists somewhere between a private life devoid of politics, and a political life devoid of citizens. (p. 34)

The letters institution provides a public voice of private views. Neilsen found also that editors hold debate as a primary selection criterion when choosing letters to publish (pp. 29–30). He concludes, "Whereas the logics of the news institution tend towards convergence and consensus, the logics of the letters institution lead to divergence and disagreement. This, and the participatory potential of reader-generated content,

continues to differentiate them" (p. 3). Wahl-Jorgensen (2004) comes to a similar assessment. Even with self-selection of letter writers and overrepresentation of White, male, and well-off members of society (Perrin, 2016), the letters section is treated as an important site of liberal democracy (Perrin & Vaisey, 2008, pp. 786–787; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004, p. 93).

Whereas others have usefully found that letters to the editor indicate extant views on refugees themselves, the present study explores how letters to the editor become a site for construction of national identity, as Mummery and Rodan (2007) did. Furthermore, drawing on Tuchman's (1973) work on news norms, particularly how news organizations use traditional and routine holidays to anchor coverage about larger trends or features, we asked the following questions: What role did refugee issues play in the public's construction of national identity as suggested in letters to the editor on national anniversary days in the recent past? In other words, how did letter writers connect refugee issues to their understanding of national identity?

### **Context of Study**

Critical scholars have problematized the positive attributes nations claim for themselves. For our purposes in providing context, what is offered in this section is a description of qualities commonly attributed to Australia, Canada, and the United States as part of their national identity. Understanding these short histories and stereotypes helps identify outsiders.

Australia primarily claimed a British-based identity through the 19th century and into the 20th century. This came to be challenged in the mid-20th century, but McGregor (2006) argues that Britishness remained integral to Australian identity. Nevertheless, the efforts to establish uniquely Australian qualities, such as mateship, gained a hold in popular understanding (p. 495), even as fears of being engulfed by neighboring Asian countries intensified (p. 500).

Like Australia, a distinct Canadian national identity was slow to develop. In the late 20th century, Canada made strong public commitments to multiculturalism and a humanitarian role internationally. These steps included Secretary of State for External Affairs Lester Pearson's initiatives, which ultimately resulted in his receiving the Nobel Peace Prize; the Official Languages Act of 1969; Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's program to make multiculturalism central to Canadian national unity; and Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy's program in the 1990s, following the lead of Prime Minister Jean Chretien.

U.S. national identity is deeply rooted in its history as a country born of revolution, which sets it apart from Canadian and Australian conceptions of their respective nations. What is critically viewed as "American exceptionalism" has a role within U.S. culture as representing the nation as a unique place in history defending individual freedom (Engle, 2014, p. 326; Heidt, 2013, p. 234; Schudson, 1999, p. 23).

Australia, Canada, and the United States share an origin in British culture, a population dominated by immigration historically and an increasingly multicultural reality. These countries differ in the historical circumstances shaping their political and economic systems and in their self-conceptions.

## Method

### *Data Source*

The data set was constructed using keyword searches of all newspapers included in the LexisAdvance database for Australia, Canada, and the United States. (A full list of the 135 newspapers is available on request.) The keyword used was *refugee*. The search parameter was letters to the editor from five days before to 10 days after each country's national anniversary. This maximized the opportunity to harness the news hook of the national anniversary; the public would have been primed to think of national identity in this period by reporting on celebratory events (and also taking part in them, such as community parades). We wished to capture data from this acute period of national identity framing. The indicators an item was a letter to the editor were being labeled by the newspaper as a letter to the editor, explicitly addressing the editor, and closing with the writer's name and place of residence (as is common newspaper practice).

We chose to analyze the four years (2011–2014) as a time period that established a foundation for current, extremely polarized opinion. Removing duplicates and irrelevant material yielded the quantities of individual letters to the editor shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Letters to the Editor in the Data Set.**

Country	Individual letters ( <i>n</i> )	Country population ( <i>n</i> )	Newspapers in data set ( <i>n</i> )
Australia	150	25 million	20
Canada	35	37 million	20
United States	79	329 million	95

### *Analysis*

The analysis process began with uploading all the data into the computer-assisted qualitative analysis software program Atlas.ti. The autocoding function of Atlas.ti was used to tag occurrences of the following terms: *national*, *refugee*, *multicultural*, and *asylum seeker*.

Based on tagged references in individual letters, we read all letters to understand the context of these occurrences and the implications of those contextualized occurrences. The open coding of a grounded theory approach identified instances when refugees and refugee policy were linked to national identity discursively. For example, refugee policy may have been equated with a national norm such as the Australian norm of offering everyone "a fair go" or simply with the nationality (un-American). These associations may be accomplished through metaphor, metonymy, or establishing equivalence or antithesis. These discourse structures are commonly noted in discourse analysis (see, e.g., Fairclough, 2003; Tannen, 1993). The combination of corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis has been recommended by Baker et al. (2008).

Further rounds of reading for axial coding yielded the categories shown in Table 2. The categories are emergent (O'Doherty & Lecouteur, 2007, p. 5) and result from noting repeated discursive practices in the letters.

**Table 2. Categories and Exemplar Indicators.**

Category	Typificatory textual references
Nation as protector	Border policing, refuge, haven, preservation of existing (preferred) domestic conditions
Nation among nations	International law, negotiations with other nations
Nation as embodiment of national ideals	Constituting national documents, legal processes, national traits (e.g., "Australianness")
Nation as site of construction of self-identity and personal place in the world	Personal emotions, psychological states, personal political commitment or expectation (e.g., ashamed of policy)

### Findings

Squires (2011) argues that the editorial page is an important site of counterframing, and we found a wide range of policy positions within the discourses. In coding these letters, we took account of the well-documented tendency for public discourse to blur the formal distinction between refugees and all other immigrants.

#### ***Australian Letters to the Editor***

The discourse of the nation as protector has both economic and social aspects. An example of the protective role expressed through the legal system is seen in the following letter from the January 25, 2011, edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

We have a legal right to determine they are bona fide refugees fleeing persecution, have a legal right to determine they do not carry health risks, and in reality have the legal right to reject people who cannot reasonably provide proof of identification and suffering. (p. 12)

The primacy of nationality in this example constructs the nation as practical guardian of health as well as legitimacy. The determination of being "bona fide" rests with the national government as the agent of Australians, but also sets up an equivalence between the national government and citizens in saying, "We have a legal right." This is established as "we" is in contrast to "they" referring to individual asylum seekers.

Other letters refer to homeless Australians and those seeking work. This discourse employs "Australian" and "our" to sharply distinguish in-group status based on nationality. The nation as protector is implicit in the assumption that aid to these disparate groups of Australians would rightly come from the national government.

The following extract exemplifies the nation as protector discourse in regard to economics. In a letter from the January 27, 2012, edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the writer makes multiple references to Australian national iconography, including the national anthem ("plains to share") and the origin story of the country:

Australia does not have unlimited plains to share. . . . Lofty ideals of accommodating the world's displaced are honourable, but Australia is not the bush colony of history books any more, and our status as an "immigration nation" must eventually be upgraded to one of a mature, stable and compassionate nation. (p. 10)

Here, the identity of the country is related to the manner in which ideals are met in practice. Unlike the letters in which upholding a norm is the major point, in this example the norm (being honorable) is a minor point compared with the practical concern of economic security. The reassertion in the last sentence of compassion and the use of the term "upgraded" point to a conflicted sensibility about the form of immigration that shaped Australian society. An equivalence is established among maturity, stability, and compassion, signaled by their inclusion in a list of desirable qualities. An equivalence is also set up between "bush colony" and "immigration nation" that is set against a preferred status as "mature, stable and compassionate." This list is contrasted with immigration through the phrase "must eventually be upgraded," suggesting that the desirable qualities are put at risk through immigration. This writer associates refugee policy with the broad sweep and destiny of Australia as a nation able to protect a desirable way of life and identity as a nation.

Letters sympathetic to refugees also participate in the nation as protector discourse, but with a very different focus. These writers reference the role of nations as sites of refuge, as in this extract from the January 26, 2012, *Sydney Morning Herald*:

As we contemplate what it means to be an Australian, let us remember all the different ways we have come to be here. . . . These days, many of those who would be Australian cannot. They have arrived, but live in limbo. Where is their freedom, and how can any person (or nation) presume to deprive any other human being of his or her right to live freely? (p. 16)

Again, there is an equation of persons and nations, in this case as responsible for safeguarding rights. This writer also suggests that asylum seekers are in some measure part of the imagined national community.

Some writers reference the nation as protector, but in the context of international agreements. This introduces the construction of Australia as a nation among nations as in this example from the January 21, 2014, edition of *The Australian* bearing the headline "Boats Policy Risks More Than Friendship":

Our actions fly in the face of the key principle underlying the UN Refugee Convention that the international community will share the burden of hosting refugees.

Why should other countries do more when wealthy countries like Australia are doing less? (p. 11)

Here, Australia is positioned hierarchically as a wealthy member of a community of nations, but one shirking an attendant responsibility for protecting (“hosting”) refugees. The alternative identity of being an active agent in sustaining international cooperation (“encouraging”) is an additional aspect of acting protectively, in this instance, for some implicated international orderliness in apportioning burdens. The following example from the February 1, 2014, edition of the *Hobart Mercury* also discusses the refugee issue in terms of relations with Indonesia:

It’s pleasing to see a dent made in the lucrative people-smuggling business. There is no doubt this illegal activity got out of control under Labor and needed reining in. It’s not surprising Indonesia has done little to curb the problem as it has a vested interest in it continuing. (p. 27 )

In this example, the refugees themselves all but disappear as the focus is on policy gambits and Australia holding its own against Indonesia. Refugees as people are transmuted into the “people-smuggling business.” The explicit construction of Australia as having a policy role is the reference to needing to rein in the “illegal activity” in which Indonesia has a “vested interest.”

The international law that concerns these writers is related to the boundaries marking international from domestic waters rather than rights of refugees. Other writers, more sympathetic in tone toward refugees, highlight the expectations that other nations might hold of Australia rather than of Australia’s policy aims with regard to other nations.

The following example from the January 29, 2014, edition of *The Advertiser* is representative if more strongly worded than others:

Many countries wonder why we treated vulnerable groups worse than criminals, including incarcerating over 1000 children at a time.

Australians will wonder, as do the Germans of today in relation to Nazism, how we became such an uncaring society contradicting the words of our own national anthem. (p. 16)

The extract invokes international reputation, but also the common discourse of the nation as the embodiment of national ideals. This extract explicitly references national iconography (the national anthem) and national self-reflection on norms. The contrastive juxtaposition of an “uncaring society” and “our own national anthem” makes clear an extant framing of caring as integral to the Australian national character; that is, the writer (and the newspaper editor) expects this contrastive construction to make sense for some set of readers even as it takes up a counterframing relative to the official government policy.

The discourses of a nation among nations and nation as protector reference norms the nation should uphold or represent. The principal norms among writers expressing concerns about refugees relate to respect for law and order and responsibility to care for citizens. These norms offer a construction of national identity implicitly, within the explicit construction of national identity of Australia as a protector and as a nation among nations.

By contrast, among letters expressing a sympathetic viewpoint toward refugees, there is an explicit discourse focused on the nation as the site of reinforcing norms. In this discourse, refugee issues are a site for normative leadership as a part of the identity of the nation. A sweeping example of this is seen in the January 22, 2014, edition of *The Advertiser*:

A refugee is anyone fleeing persecution, and they have the right to seek asylum wherever they choose. Further, as many transit countries are not signatories to relevant conventions, they are not—unlike Australia—obliged to accept them.

Why should Australia shirk its responsibilities and allow places like Lebanon to feel the full force of Syria's civil war, for example? We are lucky to live in this relatively stable region, we are rich and we have, allegedly, boundless plains to share.

It is our duty and an honour to offer them to the needy. (p. 21)

Australia is constructed as part of an international community nations in two ways: officially, as a signatory to conventions and, circumstantially, owing to its relative wealth. Both confer a normative status: owing an obligation. Australia is constructed as a person, capable of moral action and having personal attributes such as honor. There is an equivalence set up as well between individual Australians ("We are lucky to live in. . . .") and the nation-state ("Why should Australia shirk. . . ?").

Several writers are explicit in calling out the role of the nation as a normative leader in the context of Australia Day. This letter titled "Repelling the Boats an Ugly Thought for Australia Day" from the January 25, 2012, edition of *The Australian* provides an extended elaboration of national iconography, the role of the nation, and the connection to individuals:

Tony Abbott's announcement of a refugee boat "push back" policy just before Australia Day is a fatal blow for our sense of ourselves as a community, and for what we should be celebrating. . . .

But as if denial of our legal obligations is not enough, Tony Abbott wants to deny our moral obligations. He should be calling us to be a moral people, not calling us to ignore our legal and moral responsibilities. . . . The damage inflicted on our morality well outweighs any arguable good.

All caring Australians with a moral compass should push back on Tony Abbott's opportunistic, illegal and above all immoral refugee push back policy. Otherwise, we are truly impoverished as a nation, and our celebrations on Australia Day a hollow celebration of exploitation of Australia for our own selfish ends. (p. 14)

This writer establishes a set of equivalencies. The first is between Australia Day and "our sense of ourselves as a community." This begins the link between self-construction ("our sense of ourselves") and national identity. The sense of self as part of a community is tied to national identity. The next equivalence is between

the nation and moral leadership. Finally, there is an equivalence between the nation and individual morality ("caring Australians with a moral compass"). The actions of individuals according to their "moral compass" are the basis of the nature of the nation ("Otherwise, we are truly impoverished as a nation"). The actions of individuals define the nature of the nation. The last sentence, however, reestablishes a sense of nationality that, although subject to individual actions, nevertheless has a standing above the individual or even political level. Thus, "Australia" is a site where normative leadership plays out to define the nation.

Finally, some writers make clear the role of the nation in their construction of their self-identity and place in the world. In a letter in the January 28, 2013, edition of *The Age*, the writer expresses his own emotional self as connected to the nation: "WHY should I feel 'proud' of a country whose treatment of refugees amounts to an abuse of human rights? I feel terribly sad" (p. 10). Whereas many writers identify the refugee issue with a political party or officeholder, for this writer the "treatment of refugees" metonymically stands for the nation as a moral actor. The characterization "country whose treatment" assigns agency to Australia as a nation. The writer's position is posed as a question: "Why should I feel 'proud'. . . ?" This implies an expectation that citizens would look to the nation as a moral actor. The betrayal of that expectation in this instance is constructed as undermining an expectation of oneself as well as an emotional state (terrible/sadness).

The large amount of coverage and the many explicit invocations of Australia Day itself indicate a strong association between refugee issues and national identity construction. This construction has multiple equivalencies between nation and citizens as well as a strong consciousness of Australia in international contexts.

### ***Canadian Letters to the Editor***

Although far fewer letters appeared in the Canadian content than in the Australian content, the discourses are expressed in equally forceful ways. The most prevalent of the discourses is Canada constructed as protector in relation to health care. Strongly represented is the view that extending health benefits to asylum seekers undermines the ability of the nation to effectively protect the health of those deemed legitimately resident. An example is from a letter titled "Maybe MDs Should Treat Refugees for Free" in the July 9, 2014, *Hamilton Spectator*:

I can't believe *The Spectator* is fighting for all refugees and immigrants for full health-care benefits including dental, eyeglasses and prescriptions. My mother and mother-in-law have worked and paid taxes their whole lives in Canada and are both low-income earners.

But they pay dental and eyeglasses costs out of pocket. So do my uncles, who both fought in wars for Canada.

This country cannot be everything to everyone without bankrupting ourselves. (p. A12)

The protection the country is expected to provide is economic security as compared with the implied others arguing that the nation should protect health care benefits. Although the policy disagreement indicates different attitudes on treatment of refugees, what is shared is the expectation of national protective

action; that is, the nation is constructed in the role of protector. The June 26, 2012, edition of the *Alberni Valley Times* explicitly draws on the national anniversary to argue that protecting health care is a foundational commitment:

As the country warmly embraces Canada Day July 1, the federal government will use the distraction to introduce one of the more mean-spirited measures we've seen in years.

They will remove full medicare coverage from refugees, and thus send them to join indentured guest workers as part of the first under-class of Canadians. (p. A9)

This writer explicitly references the national anniversary, as do nearly a quarter of all letters. For writers recognizing Canada as a nation among nations, often this involves a comparison with what other countries are doing to help refugees. In some cases, the comparison paints Canada as being taken advantage of; in others, Canada's identity among nations rests on treating refugees well. A letter from the July 9, 2014, online edition of the *Hamilton Spectator* lists "welcoming more refugees from troubled lands" as needed to maintain Canada's international standing, saying, "Canada has long been a safe haven for those seeking protection from violence and persecution in troubled parts of the world" (thespec.com, para. 2).

A less flattering comparison is made in a July 6, 2011, letter to the *Toronto Star* (p. A22) outlining how limits on accepting Afghan interpreters as refugees mirrors the policy of the United States and Great Britain, both of which "abandoned" wartime interpreters, leaving Denmark to "compassionately" accept the Iraqi interpreters Britain refused. Although these writers refer to Canada as a protector in the sense of being a haven, this is distinct from the more prominent construction of Canada as a protector in domestic issue areas. Canada as a normative leader (or failure in leading) is frequently invoked as the basis for Canada's international standing. These examples point to a construction of Canadian national identity in which refugee policy is central to Canada's place in the world. This construction differs from the Australian case, where the focus was more on strategic policy or meeting obligations of international agreements.

The construction of the nation as the normative leader appears as a distinct discourse, apart from fairness as a protector or compassion in the community of nations. This example from *Whitby This Week* June 26, 2013, headed "What Has Become of Us?" is sweeping:

Where once we were a compassionate, generous, civil nation, we increasingly find ourselves miserly, selfish, unforgiving and churlish. . . . No individual I know of in Whitby, of any political stripe, would deny charitable treatment to a sick person who showed up at their front door, whatever their circumstance, so why are we allowing our government to do this in our name? (p. 1)

The government here has a leading role, but is judged by the individual standard of moral behavior; that is, for this writer, the nation has failed to live up to its role as a normative leader. This is clear in the assertion that the government defines a moral standard, one that this writer feels is at odds with personally held standards. A letter to the *Edmonton Journal* from June 26, 2012, makes this construction of the nation as a normative leader even more explicit:

The refugees struggle with the English language and desperately want to find jobs and make their own lives in Canada, but many still live in poverty. Taking away their health care is, as Dr. Houston says, "mean, poorly thought out and un-Canadian." (p. A11)

Here, negative moral status is made equivalent with the undermining of national identity intrinsically; that is, being mean is not the national character, the character of Canada. Other letter writers cite the national stance as being against human rights (where they reference international conventions or the United Nations; of course, this also participates in the nation among nations discourse). Many writers, however, construct the nation as the exponent of the norm of fairness. An example dated July 2, 2012, also from the *Edmonton Journal* and also in response to statements from Stan Houston, asserts,

I am not against refugees coming to Canada; I am very much for it.

However, these are taxpayers' dollars we are talking about and the government must be fair to all Canadians, as well as to refugees. (p. A12)

The role of the nation as normative leader in some cases is shifted to express the nation as a source of self-identity. This example from the July 3, 2012, edition of *Whitby This Week* connects self-construction (as an agent) with international regard for Canada:

I feel like flying our proud flag upside down on Canada Day, the internationally recognized distress signal. The Canada the world used to love and admire, the country of which I am so proud, is slipping away from us. Trouble is, most of us don't know it or even seem to care. Pity. (p. 1)

The writer emphasizes his personal emotional world and that of other individual citizens, representing this world as strongly tied up with Canada as a nation, including as a nation among other nations. The action that begins this extract draws on an "internationally recognized" signal, but closes with an address solely to Canadians. This personal address deals with the emotional stake of Canadians, which the writer views as dangerously diminished. The final "Pity" is a judgment on the perceived failure of Canadians to tie their self-identity to the national identity in connection with issues such as refugee policy. This construction is much more prominent in the Australian data than in the Canadian data. The previously cited examples of policy that do not conform to a personal moral standard are not constructed in the way this example (and those indicated in the Australian letters) in which the personal position is made the most salient.

### ***U.S. Letters to the Editor***

From the U.S. data, we identified 79 letters addressing refugee issues. Of these, 10 discussed refugee issues as a matter confined to some country other than the United States. The discourses found in the Australian and Canadian letters were all prominent in the U.S. letters, but inflected and in varying degrees as compared with the other two countries. The construction of nation as protector was the least present of the four. It was limited to the definition of asylum as an offer of safety, especially for children. A few letters also referred to protecting domestic conditions. The construction of a nation among nations was

prominent in the letters, linking the international stature and role of the nation to the refugee issue, principally in relation to the U.S.–Mexico border. Writers espousing differing policy positions employed this international construction. Examples include these extracts:

Why hasn't our government and we the people demanded that those countries make a better effort to protect their children and other citizens from whatever dangers they are trying to escape? (*San Diego Union-Tribune*, July 10, 2014, p. B8)

Under normal circumstances, thousands of children don't just decide to run away to a foreign country. These children's lives have been shaped by NAFTA and CAFTA, by our punitive drug war policies and by our refusal to regulate guns. (*St. Paul Pioneer Press*, July 9, 2014, para. 8)

In the first instance, the writer constructs the U.S. role as exerting pressure on other countries to alter their domestic conditions. In the second, the U.S. role is constructed in relation to international treaties. In both instances, the construction is of an agent that would be expected to be active and powerful. In the first instance, the form of asking a question presupposes that U.S. action could cause other countries to alter their domestic conditions. In the second instance, U.S. treaty demands are constructed as having an impact on domestic conditions in other countries ("lives have been shaped by").

Several writers argue that U.S. international standing depends on its response to refugees, as in this example from the *Dallas Morning News* from July 12, 2014, titled "Our Values, Our Fears":

For the past three years, we've paid Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey nearly \$2 billion to accommodate 3 million refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war. It is our country's signature humanitarian reputation in the world. It is what we do, help refugees. (para. 1)

The final sentence makes an equivalence between the United States as a nation and its actions in regard to refugees. This equivalence is also present in letters referencing past responses to refugee flows, implicating a norm of consistency in national policy as well.

In the U.S. letters, the nation as normative leader and as the site for expressing individual identity are the most prominent. In both of these constructions, actual policy positions vary considerably, but the construction of refugee issues as an indicator of national identity is evident. An explicit reference to national iconography is seen in this letter from the Wilmington, North Carolina, *Star-News* from June 29, 2014:

No border—no country

When the law does not mean anything to our president, and the borders are wide open, we'd better burn the flag and erase the name of our country. And the Constitution? It's already been shredded. (p. 14A)

Here, the normative leadership of respecting the law is made entirely equivalent with founding documents and the foundational activity of defining geographic borders. This linkage of normative leadership to the national foundation is prominent, regardless of specific policy positions. Writers opposing restrictions also refer to America as being a nation of laws (*Dallas Morning News*, July 4, 2014) and rights, as in this example from *The Washington Post* from July 5, 2014:

Deportation and walls will never solve the problem; human rights begins [*sic*] at home, by knowing the true story of how this country came to be (p. A14).

Many letter writers see national identity as a site for expression of their own identity, often linking it to Christianity. This letter from the *Dallas Morning News* from July 4, 2014, titled "Heed a Child's Heart," expresses this construction dramatically:

I told my 8-year-old granddaughter about the influx of children coming into our state from Mexico and Central America and asked her what she thought about the situation. She said the adults in our country should help them.

Her child heart is very clear. We Texans must help these children instead of acting so brutish and uncaring. She sees it as evil to think that we need to deport them and be sure none of them get across the border. You see, she has been taught in Sunday school to love her neighbor as herself and to do unto others as she would have them do unto her.

I agree with her. Why do we call these children "illegal immigrants" instead of refugees? (para. 1)

The personal identity extends to familial ties, community identity ("we Texans") and religious practice ("Sunday school"). Members of the state community—including the writer—are being called to account for national policy, not as a policy but as a matter of personal identity.

As with the nation as normative leader, the powerful connection between personal identity and national identity is not tied to a single portion of the political spectrum. The following letter, from the *Daily Oklahoman* from July 6, 2014, constructs national identity ("the same government") as intimately concerned with personal religious expression:

It's interesting that the same government that refuses my child the right to pray in school sees no contradiction in telling me I should be more Christian about millions of illegal immigrants. (p. 17A)

Among the connections writers make between the nation and themselves are those expressed aspirationally as in this July 9, 2014, letter from the *Roanoke Times*:

I dream of taking most of our huge U.S. military budget and investing it in nonviolent methods of peacemaking and helping the millions of refugees and those dying of hunger.

The enhanced respect just might bring us more security than the wars we have been fighting.

Violence generates new enemies. The cycle of violence must be broken. Jesus had a formula for that. He said, "Love your enemies." (p. A12)

Here, a personal moral precept is linked to a construction of the nation in international context ("bring us more security than the wars we have been fighting"). Another writer makes the link through personal identity as a citizen (*San Diego Union-Tribune*, July 11, 2014): "Those of us fortunate enough to be American citizens are responsible for making that distinction when choosing our position about this recent wave of families and children attempting to enter our country" (p. B6).

### Discussion

The number of Australian letters to the editor dramatically outpaced the number in Canadian and U.S. newspapers. It is possible that this prominence is a general feature of Australian newspaper practice. That is, editors in Australia may choose to devote more space to letters to the editor, and Australian culture may place more emphasis on writing letters to the editor.

Whereas the Australian data showed rich, deep associations between refugee policy and the national anniversary, U.S. data showed essentially no such association. U.S. letters referenced the Statue of Liberty and the Constitution, but in fact, references to Christianity were more prominent. About a quarter of the Canadian letters referenced Canada Day as such, making it more salient than the U.S. case, but far less salient than the Australian case. The Australian emphasis may be due to the ongoing conflict over which day of the year should be named Australia Day. No parallel conflict exists in Canada or the United States.

The specific policy linkages that evoked the construction of national identity naturally differed across the countries, although concerns for safety, cost, fairness, and compassion were shared. In addition, the prominence of each discourse varied across the countries.

There are implications from these findings for the construction of the imagined community in each country. Leudar et al. (2008) found strong evidence of hostility themes in news coverage of refugee issues. In examining letters to the editor, however, we found a range of views, some highly sympathetic to refugees as an expression of national character and of the standing of the country internationally. The hostility expressed in letters was related primarily to the national government as the provider of things citizens needed—argued as citizens being deprived (consonant with the findings of Lueck and colleagues [2015] regarding the presence of neoliberal themes). Other letters concerned about refugees echoed the hostility themes related to character and norms. In Leudar et al., this arose as lacking normal commitment to parenting. In the present study, the problem was tied to concerns that refugees would change the extant character of the nation.

In the U.S. case, national iconography related to the long history of the migration of refugees to the United States, often through references to the Statue of Liberty. In both Canadian and Australian letters,

the national anniversary day was frequently invoked in stating a position on refugee policy. Other national iconography was also referenced, usually as the basis for the position.

For the most part, specific policy initiatives or political positions were the subject engaging the writer. For these publics, the promoting of a policy or position was the action that called for a response. As such, the writers were engaging with what Perrin and Vaisey (2008) characterize as the distant, nonlocal audience (pp. 804–805), in other words, an imagined national community. Governmental action rather than some abstract, free-floating notion of refugees or their situation motivated the writers. Although writers were supportive of refugee rights or programs, their arguments were underpinned by an ideal or a belief they saw their nation embodying as a norm. Writers were concerned about the presence of refugees, and the strongest basis of their arguments was pragmatic. Economic ruin, redirection of scarce resources, or the possibility of overwhelming communities with those ill-equipped to prosper were among the concerns expressed.

For the Canadian and Australian letter writers, the national anniversary iconography supported their sense of efficacy in addressing a nonlocal issue. In the case of Canada, in 2012, there was a pre-Canada Day announcement of eliminating health care benefits for unsuccessful applicants for refugee status that generated several letters to the editor referencing Canada Day itself and Canadian national character and norms. In other years, letters made generalized statements about Canadian national character, but without a specific policy hook. For the U.S. writers, the Constitution or the Statue of Liberty held this role.

The Australian letters largely related to the policy of actively turning back boats and housing refugees in detention centers outside Australia. This had been the policy for some time. Lueck and associates (2015) found that Australian news coverage relied on negative characterizations of asylum seekers, reflecting neoliberal economic concerns as well as nationalistic security concerns. The present study found evidence of the counterframing suggested by Squires (2011), including inflections of nationalistic and neoliberal concerns. The outpouring of letters seen in the Australian data appears to reflect a truly deep division in Australian society that speaks to multiple understandings of the national character of Australia. The explicit presence of national iconography in the letters signals the great salience this issue has for the public and its resonance with their conception of national identity.

The U.S.–Mexico border was the most prominent policy issue in the U.S. letters. Although there were references to treaties and the rule of law as normative, references to personal religious beliefs were more prominent. Writers expressing opposing policy positions nevertheless shared a religious foundation for their linkage of the normative and personal to national identity.

The different discourses point as well to a more fundamental difference in how letter writers construct national identity. For those concerned about the influx of refugees, national identity markers were roles the nation or, more particularly, the government of the nation would serve. For those voicing a more sympathetic position on accepting refugees, national identity markers were more often the intrinsic nature of the nation or the national level as a site for expression of personal morality.

### Conclusion

In all three countries, refugee policy and the place of refugees in society were controversial, giving rise to extensive news coverage. The letter writers did draw on well-established frames for refugees and refugee issues. The way in which this framing was linked to construction of national identity extends our understanding of conceptions of national identity when it is tied to refugee issues. The variance may also shed additional light on extant norms about refugee issues. The relation to national iconography showed wider variance of perspective than previous research has indicated, making the emergence of common discourse structures more noteworthy. For the nation as protector, the linkages were similar among the three countries: Protection of refugees, protection of the domestic way of life, and protection of rule of law were leading linkages in all three countries. In all three countries, the nation among nations and the nation as normative leader were recognized in relation to treaties, conventions, and reputation. The U.S. letters were more concerned with reputation than treaties or conventions. Canadian letters linked reputation and conventions, as did Australian letters to an even greater degree.

In the U.S. letters, the nation as normative leader referred to religious norms more than was the case in Australian or Canadian letters. This was also the case for the nation as site of personal identity expression.

The present data set included all newspapers indexed in LexisAdvance in each country. The present study is limited by its focus on coverage from three countries related to national anniversary days. A more extended longitudinal data set or one including additional countries would permit greater generalizability.

The construction of the nation as site of individual identity is consonant with the findings of McConville, McCreanor, Wetherell, and Barnes (2017) regarding media coverage of a national holiday as reinforcing an emotional and normative national identity. The writers in our data used letters to the editor to reference a shared emotional and normative national space facilitated by the press.

The findings are consistent as well with the argument that editorial norms for the letters section creates a real, if imperfect, deliberative space (da Silva, 2012; Nielsen, 2010; Sigelman & Walkosz, 1992; Squires, 2011; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2004), particularly if the issue is highly salient as in the Australian case here. This study longitudinally extends the work of Mummery and Rodan (2007).

With increasing numbers of people becoming refugees, nations are pressed to create policy that threads its way through highly polarized demands. Public opinion on refugee issues has been well studied as regards public views of refugees themselves. This study sheds light on how the public sees refugee issues as an expression of national identity. Although related to conceptions of refugees themselves, the conception of national identity is distinct. It provides the basis for legitimating policy at the highest level of authority. It also provides the basis for framing policy in relation to extant views of the basis of the national imagined community itself. As Hester and Housley (2017) argue, the symbolic power of the imagined community rests on the action of people identifying as members of the imagined community, and this action is evident in discourse. The present study of public discourse sheds light on the multiple understandings of how refugee issues relate to the formation of the national imagined community.

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