

Constructing Asylum Seeking Families

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Abstract

In this paper I show how families of asylum seekers are constructed by members of the public. A discourse analysis is conducted on a UK internet message board where members of the public were asked to comment on councils' decisions not to implement Section nine of the 2004 Asylum and Immigration Act. This is a ruling which allows children to be separated from their failed asylum seeker parents. The nature of these asylum-seeking families, which are potentially threatened by this law, comes to be constructed in two opposing ways, utilising two different repertoires: first, as a loving family and second, as a unit for breeding. The loving family repertoire normalises the asylum seekers in question, which reduces the 'us and them' dichotomy often found in talk about asylum seekers and appeals to humanitarian arguments in support of asylum seekers and against section nine. By contrast the breeding repertoire dehumanises these families and undermines their legitimacy. This rhetorically allows for the separating of these families and so justifies this harsh treatment of asylum seekers. I discuss the implications of these findings for the understanding of asylum seekers and in terms of possible resistance to anti-asylum talk.

Keywords: *Asylum seekers, Discourse Analysis, Prejudice, Family*

1. Introduction

As the debate about asylum seekers and their treatment remains a major and controversial one (IPPR 2003; Randall 2003; Schuster 2004; Verkuyten 2005), I aim to demonstrate how members of the public argue about one particularly notorious policy known as Section nine of the Asylum & Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc) Act 2004. Section nine legislates for the 'withholding and withdrawal of support' for failed asylum seekers 'with family' (Home Office 2004). If this lack of benefits leaves the family destitute (and with no support this is the likely outcome) then local authorities have the power to take the children into care (Refugee Council 2005). It is this element that has caused the most outrage (e.g. Guardian 2005; Kelley and Meldgaard 2005).

Discursive studies about asylum seeking have identified a number of strategies used by members to justify the increasing measures that have been brought in to prevent asylum seekers from arriving in the country (Bloch and Schuster 2005; Schuster 2005) and accessing benefits and support once here (Schuster 2004; Verkuyten 2005). Most noticeable is the distinction that is made by opponents of asylum and immigration between the British 'us' and the asylum seekers 'them' (Lynn and Lea 2003; 2005 Mehan 1997; van den Berg et al. 2003; Van der Valk 2003; van Dijk 1997; Verkuyten 2001, 2003, 2005), which serves to highlight the differences between these groups. This means that asylum seekers come to be seen as 'not us' and are therefore undeserving of 'our' sympathy and support.

Asylum seekers are constructed as problematic because they are presented as both entering a country only for financial reasons (Layton-Henry 1992; Steiner 2000) and as an invading force (Van Dijk 2000a, 2000b; Van der Valk 2003). A very common rhetorical strategy used to de-legitimise asylum seekers is to separate 'genuine' and 'bogus' asylum seekers (Goodman and Speer in press; Lynn and Lea 2003; Sales 2002) or even to conflate these two categories (Goodman and Speer in press) so as to present all asylum seekers as 'bogus'.

The distinctiveness of my approach in this paper is that where existing discursive studies – and indeed the entire literature on asylum seekers – focus on parliamentary discourse (e.g. van Dijk 2000a, 2000b), politicians' and media discourse (e.g. Goodman and Speer in press; van Dijk 2000c) or independent individual's comments (e.g. Lynn and Lea 2003), this paper focuses on a debate conducted by members of the public. I am therefore able to show the conflicting argumentative strands that are used by members of the public in their arguments both for, and - uniquely - against, the Section nine laws.

1.1 Materials and procedures

This research uses discursive psychology (e.g. Edwards and Potter 1992; Lynn and Lea 2003; Wetherell and Potter 1992) which rejects traditional social psychology's cognitivism in favour of a focus on the action orientation of talk (Billig and MacMillan 2005: 462; Leudar et al. 2004: 244). This means that I am concerned with what actions are performed by participants' comments. In addition, this analysis is influenced by 'Critical Discursive Psychology' (van den Berg et al. 2003: 7; see also Edley 2001; Reynolds and Wetherell 2003; Dixon and Wetherell 2004; Wetherell and Edley 1999) which emphasises the critical potential of discourse analysis, what Wetherell has described as 'the social and political consequences of discursive patterning' (Wetherell 1998: 405). In this case, the social and political consequences of discourse will have consequences for the construction of asylum seekers, and in particular, asylum seeking families.

An important concept utilised here is that of the 'Interpretative Repertoire'. These have been described as 'a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events' (Potter and Wetherell 1987: 128); that is, 'they are the 'building blocks of conversation', a range of linguistic resources that can be drawn upon and utilized in the course of everyday interaction' (Edley 2001: 198). In discourses about asylum, Lynn and Lea (2003) have described a number of these interpretative repertoires, including, for example, what they called 'differentiating the other' where asylum seekers are separated into different groups (or subject positions) of 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' asylum seekers. By identifying these 'building blocks' of talk we can see how contributors may be drawing upon similar rhetorical strategies to accomplish the same tasks.

The extracts used here come from a single case study from a large corpus collected between November 2002 and September 2006 as part of an ongoing research project about asylum seekers. This single internet discussion board presents the opportunity to analyse a specific debate¹ which consists of the contributions of interested members of the public. The case study in question is an internet discussion forum on the Manchester Evening News (MEN) website. This is a local paper for the issue in question as Section nine was trialled in the greater Manchester area. The discussion followed an online article on the MEN website entitled 'Do you own dirty work'²

which reports on the refusal of the relevant local councils to implement the Section nine rules, claiming that they are not prepared to separate children from their parents. At the end of the article there is a 'readers' poll' asking 'Are city councils right to object to the 'immoral' new asylum rules on benefits?' The poll (now closed) shows 'yes' 68% and 'no' 32%.

Readers are also invited to submit their comments. It is this message board that is analysed here³. Please note that the extracts are presented as they appear on the website so they include all original spelling and grammatical errors. The names given with each post are presented after the extract number along with the date and time of the post. Extracts included in my analysis have been chosen for inclusion because they are representative of the interpretative repertoires that were identified in my data trawl through the comments.

2. Analysis

As this internet discussion is about the Section nine rules, which allow the possibility of separating families, the asylum seeking 'family' was of relevance in this particular debate. It is unsurprising, then, that family was topicalised by contributors to this discussion board. Two distinct repertoires were uncovered in the course of this analysis: the 'loving family' and the 'breeding family'. Each of these will be addressed in turn.

2.1 The loving family

This first extract shows asylum-seeking families being written about as though they are 'normal' families through the use of 'informal' terms such as mums and kids, rather than more formal terms such as parents and children.

Extract One. James, Eccles 24/08/2005 at 12:21

1. Of course the councils are correct in refusing to act inhumanely. I don't want
2. to live in a country that separates kids from their mums, and chucks them out
3. of the country purely because we resent sharing our riches. Those who
4. would split this family should be ashamed. You'd rather hurt kids than admit
5. your politics can be flawed. Disgusting.

James refers to families as constituting 'kids' and 'mums' (both line 2) who must not be separated⁴. These informal terms for family members help normalise these asylum seeking families by suggesting a friendly and homely relationship. In addition, these are terms that may be used to refer to the family of someone familiar to the speaker. Asylum seeking families are therefore presented as like any other families which makes them seem like 'us' (in stark contrast to the commonly reported differentiating of asylum seeking 'them' and the British 'us' (e.g. Lynn and Lea 2003; Mehan 1997; Van der Valk 2003; van Dijk 1993b, 1997; Verkuyten 2001, 2005). Splitting families is explicitly presented as shameful and as 'hurt[ing] kids' (line 4). Here families are seen as natural, normal and important to the extent that separating them is wrong and 'disgusting' (line 5). This construction of the family is used to argue strongly against Section nine and to support the councils who are opposing it. The following extracts are used to portray families as bound by love which attributes to these families a high moral status.

Extract Two. F Franklin, Hulme, Manchester 24/08/2005 at 15:12

1. I'm glad that for once the council is standing up to National Government and
2. not allowing social workers to be used as tools of some very oppressive and
3. dubious legislation. Surely social workers are meant to take children into care
4. if they are in danger, not separate them from loving families in order to serve
5. someone else's racist and illogical immigration policy that thinks human rights
6. are a numbers game not obligation under international law?

Extract Three. Heather Bullen, Liverpool 26/08/2005 at 11:21

1. It is disgraceful and shameful how far basic human rights have been eroded by
2. the current government, to the extent that they are happy to suggest children
3. can be removed from the care of loving parents, when the state has made those
4. parents destitute...

Of particular interest here are the phrases 'loving families' (extract two, line 4) and 'loving parents' (extract three, line 3). Clarke (2001) identified a repertoire called 'love makes a family' in which participants attempting to present gay and lesbian parenting as acceptable claimed that love is more important in a family than the sexuality, or gender makeup, of the parents. Presenting asylum seeking families as based on love works to emphasise the similarities between asylum seeking families and 'our' families. Harsh criticisms of attempts to separate asylum-seeking families add to the construction of families as important institutions. For example, F Franklin describes separation of families as 'oppressive' and 'racist and illogical' (extract two, lines 2 and 5) and Heather Bullen describes this as 'disgraceful and shameful' (extract three, line 1). Families are constructed as more important than immigration policies by F Franklin when he explicitly criticises the 'numbers game' (extract two, line 6; an issue which has been addressed by van Dijk 2000b) as a way of reducing people to numbers.

In the following extracts, the notion of the loving family is built upon in terms of the children's dependency on their parents so that the family is also a way of nurturing children. In this way, families are not just normative and loving, but also contain a practical element in terms of helping and protecting children.

Extract Four. Judith Ann Read, Chorlton 24/08/2005 at 15:44

1. The government needs to rethink this policy which is being piloted in the
2. Greater Manchester area as soon as possible. It clearly has not been thought
3. through properly. Whilst arrangements are being made for families to return
4. abroad, something that cannot happen overnight in many cases, it is inhumane
5. to withdraw benefits from them thus making them destitute. It cannot be in the
6. best interests of children to separate them from their parents. I am appalled at
7. the prospect of very young children being dragged away from their parents
8. and put into care. To my certain knowledge at least one of the babies involved
9. is still being breastfed. Well done Manchester Authorities for taking the stance
10. they have.

Extract Five. Alison, Levenshulme 24/08/2005 at 16:37

1. ... Whatever is wrong with our system, it is NOT the fault of innocent young
2. children who would be forever damaged by being removed from loving

3. parents.

These extracts offer a lay persons' account of Bowlby's (1973) psychological 'attachment theory' which suggests that children can be psychologically harmed if separated from their parents. This can be seen in the claims that it 'cannot be in the best interests to separate' (extract four, lines 5-6) children from their parents and that the children would be 'forever damaged by being removed from loving parents' (extract five, lines 2-3). The inclusion of 'loving parents' at this point works to emphasise the 'loving bonds' aspect of the family while adding to it in a way which suggests that such bonds are fundamental for the wellbeing of the children in these families. The separation of families is presented as violent, with children 'dragged away' (extract four, lines 7) from the safety of their family. By emphasising that these are 'very young children' (extract four, line 7), 'innocent young children' (extract five, line 8) and 'babies' who are being 'breastfed' (extract four, line 9) these particular children are presented as dependant on their parents. Further, being 'dragged' from parents implies that there is a strong bond between children and parents that must not be broken and implies that the child will be distressed. This formulation is used to argue in support of the councils and against Section nine.

These two posts also include arguments based on humanity so that Section nine is referred to as 'inhumane' (extract 4, line 4) and asylum is a 'human right' (extract 2, line 5). Therefore, the helping of asylum seekers is contrasted favourably with 'tyranny' (extract 5, line 7). The loving family repertoire, therefore, can be seen to contain an element of humanity.

In this section I have demonstrated that there is an interpretative repertoire in use by many participants in this debate which can be described as the 'loving family'. This repertoire highlights the way in which families are positive and normal; these families are described as a way of nurturing children (e.g. extract three, line 3 and extract four, line 8) and young children in particular (e.g. extract four, line 7 and extract five, lines 1-2). Family bonds are portrayed as being important for children (e.g. extract three, line 3 and extract four, lines 6-8), so that if these bonds are broken, the children will suffer (e.g. extract one, line 4). For these reasons, any attempt to separate families is presented as wrong, not just practically, but also morally. The 'loving family' repertoire is used by the participants to object to Section nine, and to support the councils that have refused to implement it.

2.2 The breeding family

While the loving family is presented as normal and beneficial, there is an opposing construction of the families presented in this debate. This can be described as the 'breeding family' repertoire and contains a much less flattering portrayal of asylum seeking families who are presented here in animalistic terms of sexuality and breeding. This repertoire is designed to rhetorically undermine the positive portrayal of asylum families seen in the 'loving families' repertoire by making asylum-seeking parents morally accountable for their having children. This is true of Grimaldi in the following extract.

Extract Six. arturo grimaldi, rome 24/08/2005 at 11:06

1. We have similar problems here in italy. It seems in spite of all their economic
2. and medical woes they still know how to make babies.

Asylum seekers having children is presented here, explicitly, as a 'problem' (line 1). Not only are asylum seekers made accountable for having children, but this decision is deemed to be irresponsible and not something that Grimaldi would do. By stating that asylum seekers are 'still' (line 2) able to have children, they are presented as somehow cheating because they are doing this 'in spite' (line 1) of their other problems. This hints at the 'bogus' asylum seeker concept (Bloch 2001; Goodman and Speer in press; Sales 2002; Randall, 2003; Lynn and Lea 2003;), that is a non-refugee immigrant posing as an asylum seeker. This is implied through the implication that having children is inconsistent with the medical and economic problems associated with being an asylum seeker. These families, therefore, are not presented as loving units, but as something that should not have occurred in the first place.

The following extract shows how these families can be dehumanised through the description of asylum seeking children. Where extract six refers to asylum seeking 'babies' (line 2), the following extract uses the more negative term 'sproggs' to problematise these families.

Extract Seven. Henry, Moston 24/08/2005 at 15:58

1. If these councils defy the law of the land they should be taken to court & their
2. councils leaders jailed. This defiance by them sends out all the wrong
3. messages to these asylum seekers, fail your asylum claim & whilst then
4. waiting to appeal, knock out a couple of sproggs, which they have no trouble
5. doing & go for the sympathy vote. Get them on the planes now before they
6. knock out any more sproggs.

In this post there is no mention of family values and bonds. Instead, having children is presented as 'knock'ing out 'sproggs' (line 4). This presents the asylum seeking parents in a far more negative light. Their ability to reproduce which 'they have no trouble doing' (lines 4-5) is presented as a cynical attempt to gain sympathy. Indeed, this utterance is designed to remove any sympathy from these families; 'sproggs' are not as worthy of sympathy as 'kids', 'children', or 'babies'. Again, suggesting that these asylum seekers 'have no trouble' (line 4) having children, undermines their refugee status because the 'simplicity' of their childbirth does not sit comfortably with the profile of a refugee. In addition to this lack of sympathy, the asylum seeking parents are presented as possessing a rampant sexuality. This sexuality is used to justify their swift deportation, because if they are not deported then they may have further children. Such animalistic sexuality is elaborated on in this next extract.

Extract Eight. Henry Piggot-Smythe, Prestbury, Cheshire 25/08/2005 at 11:14

1. The government is not putting these children in care, its the selfish parents
2. who are threatening to put their own children in care by refusing to get on the
3. plane back to their homeland. How irresponsible of them to breed children
4. whilst living on state benefits & trying to claim asylum can you get. This
5. country cannot afford people with this mentality that the you can have as
6. many children as you like here & the state will pay for their upkeep. Is it any
7. wonder our pension funds are in such dire straights when this kind of
8. behaviour is going on all over the country with illegal immigrants who have
9. never paid a penny into the state coffers in national insurance or income tax,
10. siring as many children as they can before being granted residency here to
11. play on the heart strings of silly people. If there's anything these immigrants

12. are good at it's siring children, just look at the television news with
13. populations starving to death in their homelands because there's that many that
14. they cannot feed them & that situation could soon happen here with their kind
15. of breeding patterns if we do not act now.

In this extract asylum seeking parents are deemed to be 'breeding' (line 3) children. This term acts to construct these asylum seekers as uncivilised. It is an extreme version of the 'them and us' formulation (e.g. Lynn and Lea 2003; Mehan 1997; Van der Valk 2003; van Dijk 1993b, 1997; Verkuyten 2001, 2003, 2005) to the extent that it is dehumanising: the 'other' is depicted as somehow less than human' (Billig 2002: 185; see also Billig 2001; Schuster 2004; van der Valk 2001). In this case even having a family is presented in animalistic terms; the phrase 'sire', a term associated with horse breeding, is used twice (lines 10 and 12). These 'breeding patterns' (line 15) are blamed for poverty in 'their homelands' (line 13), suggesting that these people are so uncivilised that they are ruining their own society due to their uncontrollable breeding. Again, it should be noted that these asylum seekers are referred to as 'immigrants' (line 11) and 'illegal immigrants' (line 8), conflating general immigrants with asylum seekers, which can remove sympathy from this distinct group of immigrants (Goodman and Speer in press).

The following extract shows a direct contrast being made between civilised British and uncivilised asylum seeking families, who are presented in terms of their 'breeding' (extract eight, line 3).

Extract Nine. Rupert Thomkinson-Palmer, Nether Alderley, Cheshire 29/08/2005 at 14:29

1. I don't want the Sukula's or Khanali's to work, I just want them back in their
2. own country as soon as possible to enable my own 3 teenage children which
3. were planned with the help of contraceptives in the course of 27 years of
4. marriage as we worked & saved to give them decent lives which we could
5. afford without scrounging off the state, to have decent educational facilities &
6. career prospects other than in quango's set up to work with illegal immigrants,
7. which are a further drain on our state finances. We all know asylum seekers
8. are not allowed to work & therefore contribute nothing to our society but a
9. drain on our social services, education establishments & most of all our health
10. services with all the children they breed without any consideration of how they
11. are going to feed them back home when their asylum application fails. Well
12. the goose has stopped laying its golden eggs & its now time for these selfish
13. failed asylum seekers to pay the piper for their irresponsible selfish behaviour
14. of siring children they cannot afford to feed & would rather see be put into
15. care here for us to pick up the bill for their sexual behaviour than keep them in
16. the family to take back to their country to feed & raise. I find it repulsive that
17. anybody can just leave their children when they have a choice to keep them in
18. the family unit, have they no decency or love in their hearts for their own
19. children. Any pair of fools can create children but I for one do not want to pay
20. for their offspring of lust when trying to raise my own children responsibly in
21. a loving & caring environment. I would rather die fighting to keep my children
22. than put them into care voluntarily.

The contrasting of civilised and uncivilised families is done with the detailed description of how Thomkinson-Palmer's family was planned with contraception and marriage (line 3) over 27 years (line 3) specifically for the benefit of his children. By

contrast, asylum seekers are deemed to ‘breed without any consideration’ (line 10), which is described as ‘selfish behaviour’ (line 13). The ‘us and them’ polemic (e.g. Lynn and Lea 2003; Mehan 1997; Van der Valk 2003; van Dijk 1993b, 1997; Verkuyten 2001, 2003, 2005) is worked up so that ‘we’ carefully plan ‘our’ children whereas ‘they’ simply breed children. Thomkinson-Palmer deems this to be common knowledge (Edwards and Potter 1992) by speaking on behalf of the whole population, which is achieved in his footing (Goffman 1981) at the utterance ‘we all know’. Presenting a point as common knowledge functions to normalise it and makes it harder to refute. The sexual language is more extreme in this extract with reference to the asylum seekers’ ‘sexual behaviour’ (line 15), ‘siring children’ (line 14) and the claim that ‘any pair of fools can create children’ (line 19). The children are described as ‘offspring of lust’ (line 20) who require ‘feeding and raising’ (line 16) which helps to present them more as animals than as children, further dehumanising them. The ‘feeding and raising’ in the ‘breeding’ repertoire is very different to the protecting and caring seen in the ‘loving family’ repertoire.

Interestingly, in this extract the asylum seeking parents are deemed to be having children for the purpose of being allowed to stay in the country. This means that they are blamed for the potential separation of their families. However, the opposition to Section nine exists precisely because these families do *not* wish to be separated. This particular construction helps to further construct the asylum seeking parents as bad parents, subhuman, and immoral.

These ‘breeding’ extracts are similar in that they all dehumanise asylum seekers by referring to them in terms usually associated with animals. This helps to undercut the morality of the ‘family values’ repertoire seen above by replacing the rhetoric of the loving family with rhetoric of sex, where love is absent. This repertoire makes asylum seekers accountable for their own misfortunes including the potential separation of their families, which it is implied should not exist in the first place, so that the separation of these families becomes more justifiable and less morally problematic.

2.3 Dilemmatic extract

In this next extract we see a dilemma (Billig et al. 1988) for the speaker who draws upon both the loving and the breeding family repertoires. SB’s dilemma is about how, as a minority group member (line 20), s/he can both support asylum seeking families whilst also criticising asylum seekers’ behaviour. SB’s post contains the claim that families should ‘not be separated’ (lines 1-2) which draws upon the loving family repertoire, but also contains the claim that ‘it’s easy to bring a child into the world’ (line 12) which draws upon the breeding repertoire by criticising the parents for having their children.

Extract Ten. SB, Oldham 24/08/2005 at 13:28

1. I agree with what the council have decided. No doubt, children should not be
2. separated from their parents. A child needs its parents, it's natural thing.
3. However, I do think that rather than handing out benefits, the government
4. should look at getting asylum seekers into employment - legally. There are so
5. many jobs out there that can be done by anyone, cleaning to filing jobs. You
6. don't need to be fluent in English to do these jobs, but it keeps you busy. This
7. way they are earning their living, and not relying on state benefits. The whole
8. system is wrong. If they stopped giving benefits to asylum seekers and gave
9. them the option to work or leave, let me tell, we will have far far less asylum

10. seekers in Britain. Spongers/gold diggers won't see it as the land of free
11. money any more. If I was in these people's situation, the last thing on my mind
12. would be to have any more children. It's easy to bring a child into this world,
13. but how will they get the money to look after this baby, feeding, clothing,
14. welfare etc. Oh now the crunch comes. The state will provide for that child.
15. And that's were the system is wrong. The state shouldn't have to provide, if
16. these people are healthy enough to have a child, then they should be healthy
17. enough to get any sort of jobs. Don't get me wrong, my deepest sympathy goes
18. out to both of the family, and I feel so sorry for the kids - what future do they
19. have. The parents should have waited until their decision for leave had been
20. made, before having a child. I am a second generation british asian, and know
21. what it feels like to be discriminated, hated by racists etc. I work full time, just
22. about get enough money to feed my family (a wife and a child). We would
23. love to have another child, but we can't because money is tight. We can't
24. afford to have another child. And yet people on state benefits (UK permanent
25. residents and assylum seekers) don't think twice to have kids because it means
26. more money coming in for them. I have seen people on benefits who have
27. 6/7/8 kids with mothers on the way to having another one. Lets face it, the
28. sooner the government sort out elegibility of state benefits, and makes tougher
29. to get benefits the better. Yes there a few genuine cases, but majority are
30. frauds. If I was in a poor country and got to know that UK gives out state
31. handouts/benefits if you don't work then UK would be first port of call and
32. probably the last.

SB draws upon the family repertoire when it is claimed that families, including the sympathetic term 'kids' (line 18) – a term absent in the breeding repertoire – should not be 'separated' (line 1 and 2) and that children are dependent on their parents (line 2). These facts are presented as 'natural' (line 2), which has been described as a strategy to make even controversial descriptions appear to be indisputable (Edwards 2003: 36).

SB's use of the breeding repertoire can be seen on line 11 after displaying some interesting category work. On line 10 asylum seekers are described as 'Spongers/gold diggers', which draws upon the notion of the 'bogus' asylum seeker (e.g. Bloch 2001; Sales 2002; Randall 2003; Lynn and Lea 2003), as the asylum seekers are considered to only be here for financial benefits. This is the groundwork which allows SB to shift to the breeding repertoire, albeit a less strong version of that seen above, by claiming that 'it's easy to bring a child into the world' (line 12). This is used to criticise the asylum seekers for having children while applying for asylum. 'Don't get me wrong, my deepest sympathy goes out to both of the family, and I feel so sorry for the kids' (lines 17-18) acts as a disclaimer (Hewitt and Stokes 1975) so that SB rhetorically dissociates his/herself from an anti-family position. Such disclaimers are absent in other posts containing the breeding repertoire. This highlights the dilemmatic nature (Augoustinos et al. 2005; Billig et al. 1988) of this extract for SB because despite the criticism of the families' behaviour, the importance of the family is still acknowledged. However, the sympathy associated with families is not enough here to prevent a call for the ending of benefits for asylum seeking families.

2.4 The dialogical network

These competing repertoires of the family and breeding are not, however, often displayed together. The following extracts show participants responding directly to

the opposing construction of the family which suggests that the discussion board can be seen as a 'dialogical network', a system of interconnected statements and replies (Leudar and Nekvapil 2004). The next extracts show supporters of the 'family' repertoire attacking the 'breeding' argument. These are followed by a supporter of the 'breeding' argument responding to the 'family' repertoire (extract fourteen).

Extract Eleven. Wendy, Levenshulme 24/08/2005 at 15:38

1. I am absolutely horrified by some of the comments I have seen here.
2. suggesting that refugees are 'punished' before being sent back. Punished for
3. what? For seeking refuge in a country with a healthy economy which can
4. afford to provide support to them? An economy to which refugees contribute
5. 10% more than they actually use in benefits! And to state that they still seem
6. to be able to have babies (the implication being that this is morally wrong) is a
7. disgrace and harks back to Hitler's use of eugenics. Of course local authorities
8. should be refusing to implement this inhumane legislation. Social Services
9. department exist to serve the most vulnerable members of our communities,
10. and that includes children and refugees. I am proud that Greater Manchester
11. authorities have taken up this issue and I only hope this will put paid to this
12. racist legislation.

Extract Twelve. Laura, Manchester 25/08/2005 at 10:23

1. ... As for taking the children away from these families - I can think of nothing
2. crueller. No matter what the situation, these people have as much right to a
3. family as anyone else, and suggesting otherwise reeks of bigotry. Reading
4. some of the comments on here makes me very ashamed of my country. Why
5. are people so full of hatred and jealousy? How is it possible to be jealous of
6. asylum seekers on benefits? I am very happy with my job, house and family,
7. though i am by no means rich. How could I possibly deny these people the
8. right to a basic existence? Thank god there are still some people out there
9. with
10. a heart, and the brains to see that what the Manchester councils are doing is
11. commendable.

Both Wendy (extract eleven) and Laura (extract twelve) draw upon the loving family repertoire to criticise the use of the breeding repertoire. Laura (extract twelve) describes separating families as cruel (line 2) and Wendy (extract eleven) links 'children and refugees' together as vulnerable people (child vulnerability is an important part of the loving family repertoire). The breeding repertoire is criticised through Wendy's claims to be 'absolutely horrified by some of the comments' (extract eleven, line 1) made in the breeding repertoire. Wendy explicitly labels the argument that 'they still seem to be able to have babies' (lines 5-6) as a 'disgrace' (line 7). This critique is built up using an association with 'Hitler' and 'eugenics' (both line 7) which have extremely negative, and racist, connotations. Laura opposes the 'us and them' distinction by claiming that 'these people have as much right to a family as anyone else' (extract twelve, lines 2-3) so that any opposition to the 'right' to have a family is presented as immoral.

The opposition to the breeding repertoire shows that the loving family repertoire is bound up with a number of other strategies that are designed to support asylum seekers more generally. Wendy (extract eleven) makes a plea to humanity (lines 7-10) in an attempt to undermine the supposed (im)morality of section nine. In addition,

both of these extracts are used to criticise opposition to asylum as ‘racist’ (extract eleven, line 12) and as displaying ‘bigotry’ (extract twelve, line 3).

These extracts show that the participants in this internet debate are displaying an awareness of, and opposition to, competing repertoires, so much so that they are specifically building their arguments against them. In the following extract ‘Anon’ draws upon the now familiar family repertoire (lines 5-7) and claims that s/he would welcome these families into his/her home (lines 1-2). The reply by Richard Everard (extract fourteen) is a direct response to ‘Anon’'s post (extract thirteen) and the family repertoire in general.

Extract Thirteen. Anon, Manchester 25/08/2005 at 13:43

1. I am no saint, but would gladly open up my house to people such as the
2. Khanali and Sukula families. That is the extent to which I think it is wrong
3. that they have been forced into this situation. For the people here who have
4. commented that the humanists should not be generous with other people's
5. taxes, I would say that no-one deserves to be forced into poverty. There is
6. nothing wrong with having children, and taking a breast feeding child away
7. from it's loving parents is absolutely disgusting [extract continues]

Extract Fourteen. Richard Everard, Hale Barns, Cheshire 25/08/2005 at 20:58

1. Anon, Manchester. You have the facility on these pages to enter your name &
2. address for the Khanani & Sukula families to take up your kind offer. I
3. wonder why you didn't ? Could it be that you can't afford to feed, clothe &
4. house them all either or would they just keep you awake with all their breast
5. feeding babies crying throughout the night in between them creating more
6. babies by ‘accident’ as Laura, Manchester puts it, for your income tax to
7. support.

Here Everard directly criticises those who have used the family argument. In particular he singles out ‘Anon’ who claimed s/he would house the families in question, and Laura (*not* extract twelve) who claims that these babies may not have been planned. Instead Everard makes problematic the accidental nature of these pregnancies by placing the word ‘accident’ in quotation marks (line 6). This returns to the question of intention (seen in extracts six to ten) where asylum seekers are made morally accountable for having children. Those who support asylum-seeking families are constructed as un-genuine in their offers of help, as ‘Anon’ did not offer his/her details to the asylum seekers in question on the message board. This so-called hypocrisy is accounted for by once again presenting the asylum seekers in animalistic terms: they ‘feed their babies in between copulating throughout the night’ (line 4 to 6). This extract clearly shows a participant using strategies from the breeding repertoire to undermine the opposing loving family repertoire. I have demonstrated that both opponents and supporters of asylum seekers demonstrate an awareness of, and can be seen to be orienting to, these arguments.

3. Discussion

My analysis has shown how two differing repertoires are built and used to justify different positions in the debate over Section nine of the 2004 Asylum and Immigration Act. The ‘loving family’ repertoire is used by supporters of asylum seekers to present Section nine as damaging to the positive institution of the family.

By contrast, the ‘breeding’ repertoire is used by opponents of asylum to reduce the apparent difficulties associated with separating asylum seeking families by presenting asylum seekers as animalistic and overly sexual, which makes separating these families rhetorically less problematic.

The breeding repertoire contains an extreme version of the ‘us and them’ dichotomy (Lynn and Lea 2003; Mehan 1997; Van der Valk 2003; van Dijk 1993b, 1997; Verkuyten 2001, 2003, 2005). This can be most clearly seen in the dehumanising presentation of asylum seeking families as animal-like. This extremely aggressive language may be accounted for by this being an internet discussion board, and not more institutional formal debates (Goodman and Speer in press; Lynn and Lea 2003; van Dijk 1993b, 2000a, 2000b) where, arguably, more delicacy is required. This could be because participants may be less guarded about potential accusations of racism (see Goodman and Speer forthcoming) and do not have to manage their stake (Edwards and Potter 1992) in the way a public figure may have to. Alternatively, this more extreme anti-asylum position could be explained by the internet discussion consisting of people who have extreme enough views to be willing to contribute to it.

The ‘loving family’ repertoire, by contrast, has wide-ranging possibilities for supporting asylum seekers more generally. This is especially true of the way it challenges the prominent ‘us and them’ distinction. This is achieved by positioning asylum seekers as ‘us’, where ‘us’ refers not to nationality but to those who have a moral approach to families. This argument, therefore, focuses on what British people have in common with asylum seekers, rather than on differences. The ‘family values’ repertoire contains a humanitarian argument which focuses the asylum debate on a different area to those often focused on, such as their economic costs (Laytonn-Henry 1992; Lynn and Lea 2003) and the legitimacy of their claims (Goodman and Speer in press; Sales 2002). Instead, the humanitarian argument focuses the asylum debate on the plight of the asylum seekers in terms of the way in which they are treated and the possibilities for helping them.

This analysis shows how members of the public construct opposing versions of what an asylum seeking family is. I have shown how support and opposition to asylum seekers ‘gets done’ in a public debate and that this is done in a more extreme and less cautioned manner than participants in more formal media. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, I have shown a possible way in which anti-asylum talk is resisted with a more sympathetic construction of asylum seekers.

At the time of writing, the Section nine pilot scheme is continuing and it remains to be seen whether Section nine will be repealed or fully enforced.

¹ Albeit part of the wider ‘dialogical network’ (e.g. Leudar and Nekvapil 2004) about asylum seekers (see Goodman and Speer in press).

² http://www.manchesteronline.co.uk/men/news/s/171/171031_do_your_own_dirty_work.html

³ It can be viewed in full at:

http://www.manchesteronline.co.uk/men/news/comments/view.html?story_id=171031.

A number of commentators have written about analysing computer mediated data; see Yates (2001) for example.

⁴ The lack of ‘dads’ may be accounted for by the fact that the Sakula family, one of the two families featured in the news article, are separated from their father, who fled separately. The other family featured in the article are the Kunalis, who consist of the mother, father and two children.

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