

Pedersen, A., Briskman, L., Kenny, M.A., &
Hoffman, S. (2007).

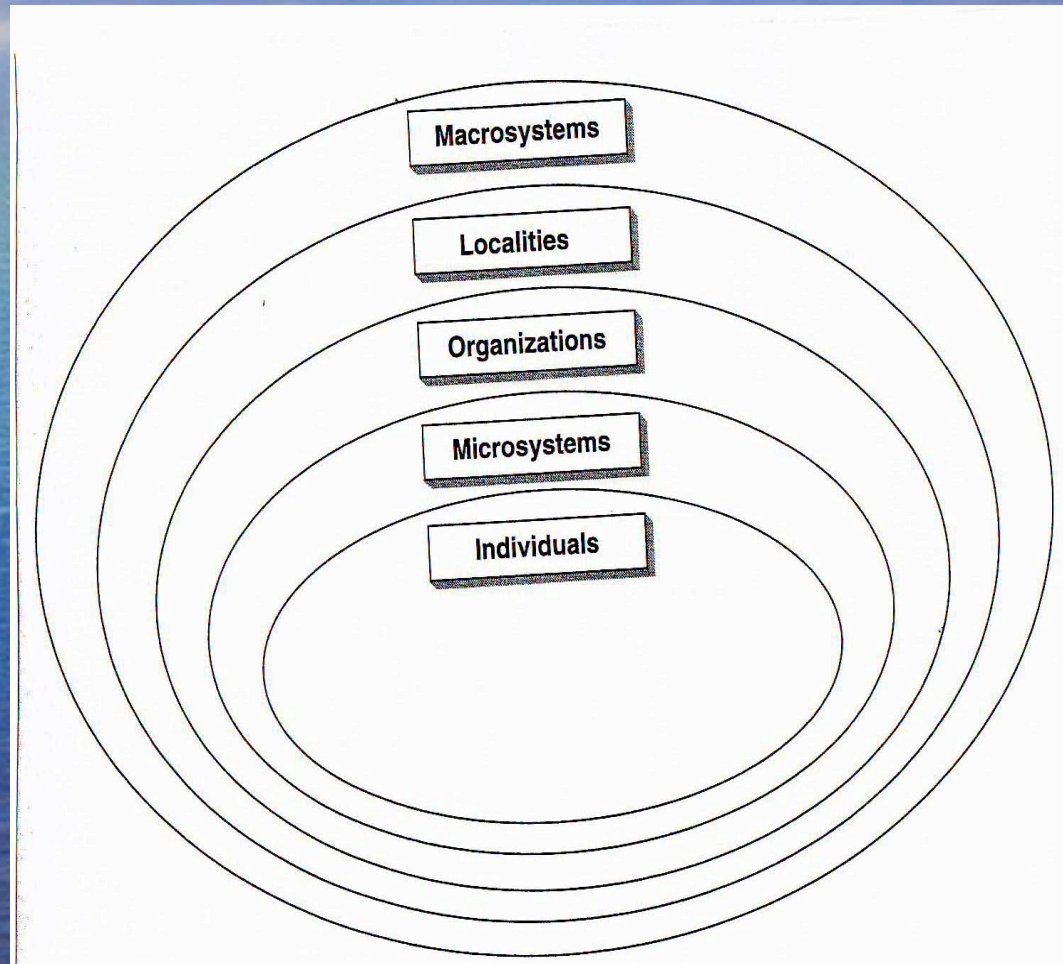
*Institutionalised racism and asylum seekers:
The Australian community fights back.*

Paper presented at the National Conference on
Racism in a Global Context. Perth, Western
Australia

Who are we?

- **Wasim:** Stateless asylum seeker:
5 years in detention:
>4 years in community without any means of support
- **Anne Pedersen:** Community psychologist
- **Linda Briskman:** Social worker
- **Mary Anne Kenny:** Lawyer
- **Sue Hoffman:** Human services/psychology/sociologist

Bronfenbrenner (1979)



Research Question 1: *“What is the role of the Australian community in allowing such treatment of asylum seekers like Wasim?”*

- Microsystems, Organisations and Localities less relevant
- Macrosystems (societal level) more relevant e.g.,

1. Government: punitive

- Detains asylum-seekers in indefinite detention: Wasim for 5 years
- Detention debt policy: Wasim owes \$456,000
- Many other policies such as TPVs, The “Pacific Solution”
- Overall, how does this government legislation affect asylum seekers? Badly. Suicidal behaviour in detention is calculated between 41 and 26 times that of the national average
- Wasim’s mental health fluctuates greatly
- Government policy driven by institutionalised racism

2. The internet: spreads venom like virus

3. The media

- They often characterise asylum seekers as having the potential to disrupt social harmony
- Eg, “illegals” although by Australian and international law seeking asylum without authorisation is not illegal.

4. Cultural belief systems

- Much negativity toward asylum seekers
- Correlation between false beliefs and prejudice very high (.77)
- The presence of such false beliefs present in Federal politicians' public statements
- Macrosystems linked with all other levels

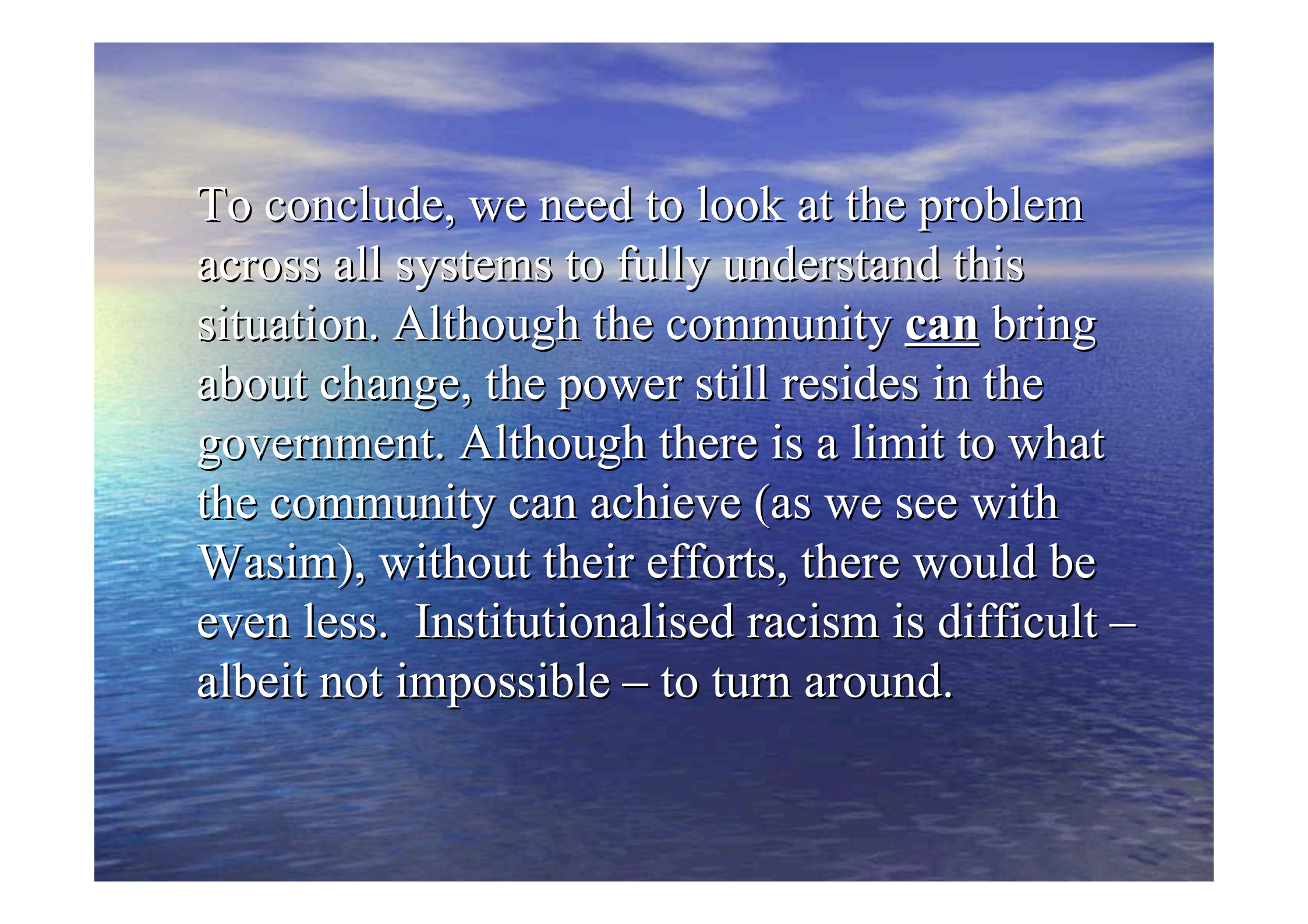
Research question 2: *“What is the role of the Australian community in making social change”?*

- Loads of individual action taken (e.g., Phillip Adams’ civil disobedience campaign)
 - a) Micro-systems. Friends and families were very much brought into the advocates’ fight for justice.
 - b) Organisations:
 - School students contributed their art to the SIEV X memorial project to commemorate the death of 353 asylum seekers at sea en-route to Australia
 - Work groups got involved such as Murdoch Uni
 - Coalition for Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Detainees: supported Wasim for last 3 years

c) Localities: Rural Australians for Refugees went from 0 to 30 regional groups within 3 months

d) Macro-systems

- Government: A minority of politicians from all sides worked to turn around the situation of asylum seekers
- Mass media: certain journalists have been highly critical of refugee policy and were instrumental in bringing the worst excesses to light
- Social movements have swept across the country
- The internet: a resource used extensively by refugee advocates



To conclude, we need to look at the problem across all systems to fully understand this situation. Although the community can bring about change, the power still resides in the government. Although there is a limit to what the community can achieve (as we see with Wasim), without their efforts, there would be even less. Institutionalised racism is difficult – albeit not impossible – to turn around.

Postscript

Since preparing this presentation, Wasim's situation changed. On 18th October, 2007, in the last few hours remaining of the Howard Government before it went into "caretaker" mode, Wasim was granted a removal pending bridging visa. This gave him the right to work and to receive medical and social security support, but it also means that he cannot travel, and can be deported at any time. He is now working six days a week as a manager of security doors firm. He plans to apply for a permanent visa at a later date.