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‘It’s time we invested in stronger borders’: Media representations of refugees crossing the English Channel by boat

Samuel Parker*, Sophie Bennett, Chyna Mae Cobden, Deborah Earnshaw

Birmingham City University

*Corresponding author: Samuel Parker

School of Social Sciences

Birmingham City University

Curzon Building

4 Cardigan Street

Birmingham

B4 7BD

Email: Samuel.Parker@bcu.ac.uk

Samuel Parker is a Lecturer in Psychology at Birmingham City University where he teaches Social Psychology and Qualitative Research Methods. His PhD was completed at Cardiff University which took a Discursive Psychological perspective to talk by refugees and asylum seekers in Wales about integration.

Sophie Bennett has recently graduated from Birmingham City University with a BSc (hons) degree in Psychology and Criminology.

Chyna Mae Cobden is a current final year undergraduate student at Birmingham City University where she studies Psychology and Criminology.

Deborah Earnshaw is a Lecturer in Psychology at Birmingham University. Deborah researches identity, representation and community, and specialises in the use of qualitative methodologies and analyses.

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Abstract

Refugees crossing the Mediterranean Sea in small boats has become a common sight in the media, particularly since the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015. The number of boats crossing the English Channel between the French and UK coasts has been increasing as other migration routes have been closed down. This article reports the findings of a discourse analysis of 96 UK newspaper articles published in December 2018 when the daily crossings were referred to as a “major crisis”. Adopting a broadly critical discursive psychology perspective, we identify the use of three main interpretative repertoires used within the media reporting. Firstly, a ‘secure the borders’ repertoire which positions the UK’s borders as porous and easily breached, secondly, a ‘smuggling is immoral’ repertoire which works to position smugglers as to blame for the current ‘crisis’ and removes responsibility for the crisis from the Government, and finally, a ‘desperate people’ repertoire which worked to position the refugees themselves as vulnerable and in need of protection, but also as people who will engage in risky behaviours. We suggest that the use of these repertoires ultimately functions to obscure the need for safe and legal migration routes to the UK.

Key words: Refugees, English Channel, migrants, Discursive Psychology, Discourse Analysis

Introduction

Concerns surrounding the UK's relationship to the EU are ongoing and plentiful (Nugent, 2019; The New York Times, 2020; Wilson, 2014), with the decision to leave the EU in June 2016 exacerbating an already fraught connection related to freedom of movement and border control (Sandford, 2020). Recent worries encompass the proposed migration pact (Rankin, 2020), with political commentators suggesting that the UK's plan is dubious as it requires negotiating with all countries within the EU separately (Gallardo, 2020). The want to control borders, and the subsequent rhetoric in the media surrounding migrants, is not new but the lead up to the UK's decision to withdraw from the EU could be considered a significant impetus. A particular moment that could be considered is what Crawley et al. (2018) explored as 'Europe's migration crisis'. Since then, the more recent 'English Channel migrant crisis' has reignited debates about border control, particularly in light of the UK's departure from the EU. This new 'crisis' is the focus of this article in which we analyse UK news media reporting in order to understand how those crossing the Channel are discursively constructed and who is positioned as to blame for the 'crisis'. To achieve this aim we begin by outlining the recent movement of refugees to Europe and highlight the lack of safe and legal routes that restrict the ability of those who wish to seek asylum in the UK. We then discuss previous discursive research that focusses on media reporting of refugees and argue that the change in relationship between the UK and EU makes the more recent 'crisis' a similarly important topic to analyse. After outlining our analytic approach we offer an analysis of UK newspaper media reporting of this new 'crisis' and argue that a range of interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) are a feature of this reporting and which construct refugees in a variety of ways.

The refugee crisis in Europe

Migration across the Mediterranean Sea attracted large amounts of media and political attention in 2015. At the time, the movement of people from the Middle East and Africa was described as unprecedented, ignoring earlier histories of refugee movements and describing sea crossings by boats as a new phenomenon. However, as Crawley et al. (2018) point out, boat migration from North Africa has been a seasonal feature in Malta and Italy since the early 1990s. From 2015 onwards, much of the talk of the ‘crisis’ focussed on the EU’s southern borders, particularly countries such as Italy, Greece and Malta. For many of those making the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean however, these border countries were not the end point and the focus of the ‘crisis’ increasingly also focussed on the movement of refugees across Europe. A key point during the ‘crisis’ was Angela Merkel’s decision in 2015 to open Germany’s borders to refugees, resulting in over 1 million arrivals making claims for asylum in Germany. Merkel’s decision highlighted the divisions within Europe of how to respond to the ‘crisis’. Whilst the EU itself proposed a redistribution scheme that sought to reduce the ‘burden’ on countries that were seeing high numbers of arrivals by boat, this was opposed by some member countries such as Poland and Hungary. Under the EU’s Dublin Regulation, refugees are required to claim asylum in the first EU country they enter, however, this approach overlooks factors such as the presence of existing family connections in other European countries which means that for many their final destination may be well beyond the borders of the Mediterranean Sea.

Sangatte, Calais and crossing the English Channel

Safe and legal migration routes for refugees to the UK remain limited. Whilst a small number of refugees arrive in the UK every year as part of government organised resettlement programmes or have the resources to fly to the UK, for many who have travelled across Europe, crossing the English Channel presents an additional challenge. Camps such as ‘the jungle’ in Calais have become one of the symbols of the ongoing ‘crisis’. However, refugee camps in

France were not a new phenomenon in 2015, nor was the political discussion between the UK and French governments relating to securing the UK's borders (Gatrell, 2019). In 2006 the 'Calais Jungle' came into being (Gatrell, 2019, p.374), and although it was destroyed by the French government in 2009, during the 'crisis' of 2015 it once again became a camp due to the increasing numbers of refugees arriving in Calais aiming to get to the UK. With increasing numbers of refugees in the 'Calais Jungle' at this time, the UK government's response was to increase security at the entrance to the Eurotunnel, spending large amounts of money on a wall along the road into Calais to deter refugees from attempting to board trucks crossing the English Channel. With increased security at the border and the demolition of the 'Calais Jungle' in October 2016 (Gatrell, 2019, p.443), which saw refugees being dispersed across France, the number of asylum applications in the UK decreased slowly between 2015 and 2018 (Home Office, 2020), suggesting that those who want to come to the UK continue to find a way to do so.

In November 2018, the British media reported on migrants attempting to cross the English Channel by boat as a 'new' perceived threat to the British border (Maggs, 2019). For many years, migrants and refugees have made the difficult journey in small overcrowded boats across the Mediterranean to enter Europe and across the Indian Ocean to enter Australia (Pickering, 2001), sometimes paying smugglers large amounts of money to escape war, persecution and poverty in their home countries (Crawley et al., 2018). However, November 2018 marked the first time that smugglers had sent migrants across the channel on boats in significant numbers, with almost 300 refugees arriving in November and December 2018, and an estimated 1,500 making the crossing in 2019 (Commons Library, 2019). This is not necessarily a 'new' phenomenon though, as Maggs (2019) highlights that the bodies of two Syrian men were found on beaches in Norway and the Netherlands after having set out from Calais in 2014.

The initial political reaction to what has become known as the ‘English Channel migrant crossings’ or the ‘new migrant crisis’ (Maggs, 2019) was that it may be related to the UK’s decision to leave the EU following a referendum in June 2016 and that smugglers may have been encouraging refugees to take the journey before the initial planned departure from the EU on 29th March 2019 (Wolff, 2020). The political focus once again became one of security and deterrence with politicians, such as Home Secretary Sajid Javid, blaming people smugglers and the French government for not doing enough to tackle the problem on their side of the Channel (Commons Library, 2019).

Discourses of migration in the media

In recent years there has been a large body of work exploring the ways in which the ‘refugee crisis’ was discursively constructed by the media across Europe (e.g. Fotopoulos & Kaimaktioti, 2016; Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018). Krzyżanowski (2020, p.4) draws attention to the ways in which such ‘crisis imaginaries’ can be seen as ideological constructs that are enacted in line with pre-defined political goals that carry visions of a particular social, political and economic order which reproduces and sustains particular forms of power relations. Referring to such imaginaries as ‘moral panics’, Krzyżanowski (2020, p.4) goes on to suggest that they may function as ‘visions of the future which, as such, may never come to fruition yet effectively yield a significant degree of legitimacy to current actions of (powerful) actors essentially geared towards controlling the present’. Goodman et al. (2017) analysed categorisations of ‘crisis’ in UK media reports in 2015 and 2016 and found initial reporting constructed events as a ‘Mediterranean migrant crisis’ presenting those involved as ‘migrants’ who needed to be prevented from reaching Europe. The next identified phase also drew on notions of security but, in becoming a ‘Calais Migrant crisis’, the ‘migrants’ were constructed specifically as a threat to UK security. This was then later constructed as a ‘European Migrant crisis’, indicating an ongoing threat to Europe, and then finally a fourth short-lived phase,

following the publication of photos of three-year old Alan Kurdi's drowned body on a Turkish beach, led to more humane and sympathetic constructions of a 'refugee crisis'. Goodman et al. (2017) point to the incidence of terrorist attacks in Europe as being a turning point back to the construction of a 'migrant crisis' in which the term 'migrant' is used as an immoral and problematic category and 'migrants' are therefore presented as a group that needed to be prevented from reaching Europe. As such, this study indicates that the news media constructed 'migrants' in varying and often conflicting ways during the 'crisis'. This work also raised questions about who this was a 'crisis' for and similarly Balabanova and Balch (2020) argue that the 'crisis' is better seen as a political one regarding both hospitality and European integration. Through a focus on international norms in relation to refugee protection (asylum and burden sharing; Betts, 2015) they highlight that the media in the UK and Hungary often ignored these norms or otherwise challenged them and that this raises issues when the media has the ability to shape public perceptions relating to these norms.

A number of other studies, many pre-dating the 'refugee crisis', have also used discourse analysis to study the ways in which refugees, migrants and asylum seekers are discursively constructed by the broadcast media more generally (e.g. Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; KhosraviNik, 2009). Such studies suggest that the problematizing of those fleeing their home countries and the construction of them as a 'deviant population (Pickering, 2001) that needs to be controlled, has been a feature of media reporting for much of the last 30 years. Hodge (2015, p.122) highlights that governments employ various 'apparatuses of security to govern the circulation of 'unruly' populations which he suggests has led to the 'criminalisation' of asylum seekers' bodies. Lea and Lynn (2003) found that readers' letters concerning the asylum debate in the UK, which had been chosen for publication by those newspapers in line with their values, constructed asylum seekers in a predominantly negative way. They suggest

that asylum seekers were positioned as being outside of society through a reconstruction and re-positioning of the social order within these discourses.

Whilst much of the previous literature suggests that refugees and migrants are constructed in a mostly negative way within the print and broadcast media, some studies have suggested that the media may also draw on alternative constructions of refugees as people in need of help (Parker, 2015). Cooper et al. (2017) discursively analysed media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers in four Australian regional newspapers. They found that despite the dominant negative framing of refugees at a national level, the regional level newspapers displayed a more positive, humanising approach to refugees and were more likely to focus on refugees' personal stories. Parker, Naper and Goodman (2018), in a comparative discourse analysis of media reporting of Alan Kurdi's death in the UK, Australian and Norwegian media, found that this tragedy had led to a sympathetic construction of refugees for a short period of time. Whilst this positive reporting of refugees was short-lived, the studies by Parker et al. (2018) and Cooper et al. (2017) do highlight the opportunities that the media has to also offer more positive and humanising discourses about refugees and migrants.

To date little research has been conducted on media reporting of the English Channel Migrant crossings, despite the events being a feature of UK media reporting for several years and perhaps even more so since 2020 as record numbers of crossings have occurred (Walsh, 2020). Perhaps most relevant to the present article, Jacobs (2020), undertook a discourse analysis of BBC and Home Office reports and statements about channel crossings between November and December 2018. Focussing on risk, Jacobs (2020, p.44) argues that 'within the UK's oceanic borderlands, risk discourse is used to criminalise migrants, justify the perpetuation of harsh border policies, and ultimately colonise possible futures'. This research both complements and extends Jacobs' analysis through focussing analysis on UK print media reporting of the channel crossings in December 2018. We take a broadly critical discursive

psychological (CDP) approach (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wiggins, 2017) to analyse the ways in which this ‘new migrant crisis’ is constructed by the British news media. Whilst much has now been written about the ‘migrant crisis’ in Europe, this article offers an original contribution by analysing the ways in which the UK news media discursively construct those who have arrived in the UK by boat since November 2018. The research question it seeks to answer is how do the UK news media discursively construct people attempting to cross the English Channel by boat and how do they construct blame for the cause of this ‘new crisis’? As such it builds on work in CDP, such as Goodman et al.’s (2017) work which tracked the ways in which the ‘crisis’ in Europe evolved in the British media.

Methods

Data collection

A search of newspaper articles from December 2018 was conducted using the Nexis database. December 2018 was chosen as the timeframe as this was when references to a ‘crisis’ in the English Channel were first reported, following the initial reports of crossings in November 2018. The search terms used were ‘English Channel’ along with ‘migrants’, ‘refugees’ or ‘asylum seekers’. A second search used the term ‘Calais’ along with the additional terms. This initial search yielded a dataset of 262 articles. The dataset was further refined through removing articles from regional newspapers and articles that were not specifically about people crossing the English Channel. Duplicate articles were also removed, for example, those that appeared in both the ‘English Channel’ and ‘Calais’ searches. This resulted in a final dataset of 96 articles which came from 11 different UK national newspapers (including their Sunday editions), a mixture of broadsheets and tabloids, as shown in table 1 below.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Data Analysis

Each of the articles was read several times and then initially grouped as being either broadly positively framed (i.e. if the article sought to explain the events based on humanitarian grounds), neutral, or negatively framed (i.e. if the article was critical of those crossing the channel or the responses to the 'crisis'). Our reason for doing this was that on initial reading of the articles it became clear that the articles were framed in contrasting ways that were not specifically related to the newspapers' broad political allegiances or stances on immigration. This initial grouping led to 19 articles being coded as positive, 6 as neutral and 71 as negative. We also noted at this stage that 21 articles (22%) included the voices of refugees and migrants as part of the text and that these were present in both the positive and the negatively framed articles. Following this, a more detailed analysis of the dataset was undertaken using the broad principles of CDP.

Critical Discursive Psychology can be distinguished from other forms of discourse analysis in several ways and is described as a synthetic approach by Wetherell (1998). In this approach, CDP combines the micro-level analysis of approaches such as Conversation Analysis and Discursive Psychology (DP) with the approach to analysing wider societal discourses and power relations seen in the more macro-level approaches to discourse analysis such as Foucauldian or Critical Discourse Analysis. Within the field of Discursive Psychology the use of 'natural' or 'contrived' data has been highly debated (Speer, 2002). Whilst most DP and CA research demonstrates a strong preference for 'naturally occurring data', we adopted a CDP approach in order to identify 'the social and political consequences of discursive patterning' (Wetherell, 1998, p. 405) within the news media's reporting of migrants crossing the English Channel.

Our analysis proceeded through coding the data in line with the approach to CDP advocated by Potter and Wetherell (1987), where we identified a number of ‘interpretative repertoires’ used in the reporting of the ‘crisis’. These were a ‘secure the borders’ repertoire, a ‘desperate people’ repertoire and a ‘smuggling is immoral’ repertoire. Wiggins (2017, p.244) defines interpretative repertoires as ‘a collection of words or ways of talking about objects or events in the world which provide a relatively coherent and culturally recognisable characterisation of that object or event’. Whilst Seymour-Smith et al. (2002, p.255) talk of repertoires as ‘a recognizable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations found in people’s talk often distinguished by familiar clichés, anecdotes and tropes ... ‘what everyone knows’’. Goodman (2017) draws attention to the ways that interpretative repertoires are drawn upon to accomplish actions, to strengthen arguments and make them more persuasive. In the context of the current paper, Parker’s (2015) analysis of news reporting of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK and Australia identifies the ‘unwanted invader’ as a principal repertoire, which draws on the idea of migrants being a burden and the notion that nation states have the moral right to exclude. Whilst the term ‘interpretative repertoires’ is closely linked to that of ‘discourses’, Edley (2001, p.202), suggests that the difference between the terms is predominantly an issue of disciplinary ‘ring-fencing’ but which also highlights CDP’s interest in analysing both the wider social and cultural context as well as the empirical focus of what is actually said (Wetherell, 1998), which may distinguish this approach from other forms of DP.

Our identification of the three interpretative repertoires began following the initial reading, re-reading and coding of the dataset. Following this the first and fourth author met to discuss the coding and the repertoires employed in the articles. This led to agreement that many of the articles were drawing on themes of protecting the integrity of the UK’s borders (the ‘secure the borders’ repertoire), on the challenges faced by refugees living in Calais (the ‘desperate people’ repertoire) and the role of smugglers in facilitating the Channel crossings

(the ‘smuggling is immoral’ repertoire). Whilst we initially discussed other repertoires such as a ‘facilitators’ repertoire, during our discussions we concluded that these facilitators were being used as part of the criticism of smugglers that formed the ‘smuggling is immoral repertoire’. In total we coded 171 sections of text relating to the ‘secure the borders’ repertoire, 127 for the ‘desperate people’ repertoire and 102 for the ‘smuggling is immoral’ repertoire, reflecting that a number of competing repertoires were used within the articles. Analysis then proceeded in accordance with the principles of CDP outlined by Goodman (2017) with a particular focus on identifying the action orientation of the text which we discuss in the section which follows.

Findings

Our analysis of the data identified three prominent interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) drawn on by the news media in their reporting of the English Channel crossings in December 2018. In this section we outline each of these repertoires and provide extracts from the articles analysed to demonstrate how each of the repertoires function in the media reporting of this story.

Although we identify three distinct repertoires used by the news media in this reporting, it is important to note that many of the articles drew on more than one of these repertoires concurrently. Throughout this section we highlight the ways in which these repertoires worked with, and at times in opposition to, each other.

Secure the borders repertoire

The first and most prominent repertoire identified within the news media reports of the English Channel crossings in December 2018 was a ‘secure the borders’ repertoire. This repertoire draws on the notion that nation states have the right to control their borders and that protection of these borders, and who enters the country, is of importance to the government and people of the UK. In Extract 1, below, the attempts to cross the border between France and the UK by

“migrants” in the English Channel is described as a “major incident” (line 3), which works to classify this as an important and urgent matter of border security. This therefore shares similarities with previous work on the representation of refugees in the UK press and political speeches (e.g. Parker, 2015; Charteris-Black, 2006) which has identified the ways in which metaphors (particularly of water) are used to create an image of the UK as a container that could burst if it continues to fill up.

Extract 1 (Daily Star, 29th December 2018)

1. *HOME Secretary Sajid Javid last night stepped in as two more boatloads of migrants*
2. *were plucked from the English Channel.*
3. *He declared the situation a "major incident" as officials warned it was "only a matter*
4. *of time" before lives were lost.*
5. *Border Force staff yesterday intercepted two boats carrying 12 people. They were*
6. *handed over to officials at Dover.*
7. *Almost 70 people have been intercepted in the past three days trying to cross one of the*
8. *world's busiest shipping lanes.*

Rather than metaphor, in Extract 1, statistics that function as quantification rhetoric (Potter et al., 1991) are used in lines 5 and 7 to add to the argumentative case supporting this as a “major incident”. As such it works to justify stronger border controls in the Channel by indicating how the border is breached by a number of “migrants” each day. “Two more boatloads” (line 1) creates an initial image of masses of people attempting to make the crossing and draws on the imageries of boats seen crossing the Mediterranean Sea during the 2015 “refugee crisis”. However, it is not until Line 5 that it is revealed that this only represents “12 people”. In lines 3-4 it is similarly suggested that “it was "only a matter of time" before lives were lost” which, by being presented as an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) works to increase the urgency of strengthening borders.

Throughout Extract 1 there are also terms used which imply a level of criminality; the migrants are “intercepted” (lines 5 and 7) and “handed over to officials” (line 6), which works

to present migrants as the cause of the “major incident” and the response to be stronger controls at the border. In Extract 2, below, in a quote from a local Conservative MP, the migrants are likened to “burglars” (line 6) thus implying criminal activity and the common sense notion that borders must be protected.

Extract 2 (Daily Mirror, 31st December 2018)

1. *Charlie Elphicke, Conservative MP for Dover and Deal, said: "This cannot be done*
2. *on the cheap with the half-hearted, Dad's Army-type set-up suggested by the Home*
3. *Office in the past."*
4. *He demanded all five Border Force Cutters be deployed in the Channel as a*
5. *deterrent. One is in the Channel and one each in the Mediterranean and Aegean.*
6. *Mr Elphicke added: "You don't deter burglars by leaving your front door open."*

Many of the articles, such as Extract 2 and 3 (below), appear to be critical of the government’s handling of the ‘crisis’ rather than specifically of those attempting the crossing. Indeed, in Extract 2, Mr Elphicke describes the response as a “Dad’s Army-type set-up” (line 2), a metaphor drawing on the BBC TV series of the 1960s and 1970s, which implies that the response to the crossings is disorganised and chaotic. Whilst in Extract 1 there appeared to be some acknowledgement of the danger faced by migrants, in this second extract the focus is entirely on ‘deterrence’ (lines 4 and 6) and a vision for more Border Force ships in the Channel. This construction may therefore support Krzyżanowski’s (2020) suggestion that ‘crisis imaginaries’ function to support a particular social, political and economic order. In this case, one in which such uninvited migrants do not get the opportunity to enter the United Kingdom. This is of note because at this time political debate was focussed on how the UK would leave the EU in March 2019 and what the future relationship between the two would be. A key element of the campaign in favour of the UK leaving the European Union was the repeated use of the nationalistic phrase “take back control of our borders” and thus the ‘secure the borders’ repertoire used here may align with this wider political discourse.

In Extract 3, below, the ‘crisis’ is described as “disturbing” (line 4), suggesting that it is an important issue that is “escalating” (line 6) and functions to support the critique of the government’s handling of this ‘crisis’. In Lines 1 and 2 the government are described as “dithering”, “enfeebled” and there being “a mood of timidity and impotence” which begins the argumentative case of a need for more secure borders. Again, Brexit (line 2) is cited here as an example of such “timidity”.

Extract 3 (Daily Express, 31st December 2018)

1. *DITHERING seems to be the default mode of our enfeebled Government. A mood of*
2. *timidity and impotence prevails about so many issues facing our country, from Brexit*
3. *to knife crime.*
4. *The same weakness can be seen in the disturbing crisis over migrant boats in the*
5. *English Channel. Due to prolonged inaction by British and French authorities, the*
6. *problem appears to be escalating. At least 220 people, almost all of them Iranian, have*
7. *tried to make the crossing to the English coast since November, though the Immigration*
8. *Services trade union puts the total far higher, at 450 to 500.*
9. *A muscular strategy is not cruel but humane. That is why the Government must be more*
10. *robust, although there is sadly little sign of that from the Home Office.*
11. *Yesterday, in another indicator of ministerial helplessness, Sajid Javid wailed that*
12. *"there is no easy answer to this complex problem". His colleague Caroline Nokes, the*
13. *immigration minister, was just as pathetic when she declared that more patrols in the*
14. *Channel "might act as a magnet, encouraging people to cross".*
15. *But that will only happen if the British agencies act as a quasi taxi service for migrants,*
16. *ferrying them to shore from halfway across the Channel.*

We initially coded the articles as being either broadly positive, neutral or negative in relation to their reporting of those people crossing the English Channel by boat. For those articles which were coded as being largely negative, a common device employed in the opening lines of the article was using statistics to begin the argumentative case for stronger borders. Indeed, by beginning the article with such quantification rhetoric (Potter et al., 1991) the authors begin to draw on the ‘secure the borders’ repertoire. In Extract 3, above, such quantification rhetoric can be seen in Line 6 where it is claimed that 220 people had “tried to make” the journey in the final two months of 2018. This is subsequently upgraded to “450 to 500” people in Line 8, further justifying a case for stronger borders and the need for a “muscular strategy” (line 9).

This strategy is one that is described as “not cruel but humane” (line 9) which suggests that stronger borders and deterrence are both a reasonable and humanitarian response to the situation. In contrast to such a perceived reasonable and humanitarian response, government ministers are described as “helpless” (line 11) and “pathetic” (line 13) for “ferrying them to shore” (line 16). Like other extracts that draw on the ‘secure the borders’ repertoire, this article uses the category ‘migrants’, which Goodman et al. (2017) suggest functions as an immoral category, emphasising the view that these people are ‘unwanted’ (Parker, 2015). However, in contrast to this repertoire many of the articles also drew on a repertoire, which we discuss next, that more fully acknowledged the humanitarian reasons why people may attempt to cross the English Channel by boat.

Desperate people repertoire

Analysis of the dataset revealed that a prominent repertoire used within the articles was that of refugees as ‘desperate people’. By this, we mean an explicit acknowledgement that refugees are people who have escaped difficulties in their home country or who are currently living in difficult conditions (e.g. on the streets or in camps in Northern France). Within this repertoire is also the implied notion that ‘desperate people’ will take risks (Jacobs, 2020), such as attempting to cross the English Channel in small boats.

Many of the articles that we initially coded as being broadly positive representations, which focussed on the situation faced by refugees in their home countries or in France, begin with a narrative structure that is akin to the opening of a fictitious novel.

Extract 4(i, 1st December 2018)

- 1. Guarding his wicket during a makeshift game of cricket on the potholed Calais street*
- 2. that currently serves as his home, Merza had no time for the notion of achieving his*
- 3. cherished goal - crossing the English Channel - in a small boat.*
- 4. The 20-year-old Afghan has seen enough of what happens to migrants who put to sea*
- 5. in crowded rubber dinghies when he crossed from Turkey to Greece on his three-year*

6. *journey from his homeland.*
7. *The cricket-loving mechanic, who has spent the last month in a squalid camp that has*
8. *sprung up on the edge of the French port, told iweekend: "I have seen what happens.*
9. *People pay money and they drown. I saw it in Greece. Bodies in the water. I have only*
10. *one life and I won't end it that way.*

In Extract 4, this form of storytelling can be seen in lines 1 to 3 where the scene is set in terms of location ('the potholed Calais street'), character (Merza) and goal ('crossing the English Channel'). In this opening paragraph the act of playing cricket on the street is presented as a normal activity and it is not until line 4 that Merza is described as a 'migrant' and line 7 when it becomes clear that he lives in a 'squalid camp' in Calais. Between lines 4 and 10 details of Merza's experiences are told in a series of footing shifts between the author and reported speech from Merza himself. These work to present Merza as a 'migrant' who has seen what happens to others who put themselves in a risky situation and who is desperate to travel to England to escape the situation in which he finds himself in Calais.

A similar narrative structure can be seen in Extract 5, below, which also draws on the desperate people repertoire to present the situation in Calais faced by migrants and their children as difficult.

Extract 5 (The Independent, 1st December 2018)

1. *A three- and four-year-old brother and sister scuttle around together on a patch of*
2. *grass. At first glance they are a pair of happy children playing. But on closer*
3. *observation, their skin is dry and their hair unwashed. Their clothes are dirty. The boy*
4. *has a large wound on his forehead reaching to the side of his left eye and the girl has a*
5. *swollen sore on her right cheek.*

This extract, which began a report in The Independent on 1st December 2018, uses a contrast structure in which initially (line 1) it appears to be a description of small children who could be playing together anywhere before switching to a description of the more desperate situation these children find themselves in (lines 3-5). That the article focuses on children, rather than

adults, also works to generate sympathy in a way that would perhaps be lesser if this story was about adults. As such, through eliciting sympathy, the children are constructed as being more ‘deserving’ of support through the use of this repertoire.

Other instances of where the desperate people repertoire was used did not involve the narrative structure seen in Extracts 4 and 5. Several of the articles relied on the reported speech of third sector organisation representatives, such as in Extract 6, below.

Extract 6 (MailOnline, 31st December 2018)

1. *British Red Cross chief executive Mike Adamson last night urged the Government to*
2. *provide migrants with safe alternatives to risking the Channel crossing.*
3. *He said: 'People only attempt perilous journeys like crossing the Channel because they*
4. *are desperate.*
5. *'It is deeply concerning that men, women and children feel they have no choice but to*
6. *put their lives at risk in their search for a safe place to live.*

This extract is taken from a MailOnline article published on 31st December 2018. The Daily Mail (and its online equivalent MailOnline) is generally regarded as a right-wing, Conservative and anti-immigration publication. Whilst we initially coded this article as being one that was negative towards and critical of the migrants crossing the Channel, and predominantly drew on the secure the borders repertoire, many such articles also drew on the desperate people repertoire. In this example it reports the speech of the Chief Executive of the British Red Cross, an organisation who have many years of experience of supporting vulnerable refugees. In this extract, the ‘migrants’ are described as “desperate” (line 4), “have no choice” (line 5) and “put their lives at risk” (line 6), thus it is the situation in which they find themselves that results in them engaging behaviour that could be described as ‘risky’. Something of a dilemma therefore exists when news reporting draws on both the ‘secure the borders’ and ‘desperate people’ repertoires. If these ‘desperate people’ need help, it would imply that the humanitarian response would be to step in and assist them, however use of the conflicting repertoire suggests that it is border security that takes precedence.

Smuggling is immoral repertoire

The final interpretative repertoire that we identified in the newspapers analysed relates to the idea that ‘smuggling is immoral’ and that smugglers are dangerous criminals who care little for those who they help to cross the English Channel by boat. In Extract 7, below, the smugglers are referred to as “traffickers” (line 1) and “gangsters” (line 3). Use of the term “traffickers” here rather than the term ‘smugglers’ functions to obscure the agency of those making the crossing who may choose to pay someone to assist them reaching safety. Their immorality is constructed through a contrast structure in which the “traffickers” are seen to be targeting parents by offering deals for “youngsters” (line 1) to travel half price. As with Extract 5, the focus on children, works to emphasise that the children are innocent victims and that parents will engage in such risky behaviour if they are desperate.

Extract 7 (The People, 30th December 2018)

1. *Traffickers are advertising deals where youngsters travel for half-price if they join their*
2. *perilous journeys.*
3. *Iraqi Kurdish gangsters control highly sophisticated networks behind the sick trade.*
4. *They charge adults £5,000 but try to tempt them by saying their children can go for half*
5. *the cost.*

In this extract, and in Extract 8 below, the prices charged by the smugglers are reported within the story. By using these figures, the smuggler is constructed as immoral for charging a high price for a “perilous journey” (line 2). However, at the same time it also constructs those wanting to cross the channel as ‘desperate’ if they are willing to pay this price. This therefore highlights some crossover with the desperate people repertoire described previously and creates something of an ‘ideological dilemma’ (Billig et al., 1988). Such an ideological dilemma therefore highlights the ways in which talking about migrants as ‘desperate people’ can be both positive, in directing the reader’s attention towards the humanitarian reasons that people flee their home countries, but can also be used negatively to construct a sense of distrust.

Extract 8 (Daily Mail, 31st December 2018)

1. *Smugglers have been charging migrants up to £13,000 each to help them cross the*
2. *world's busiest shipping lane, but they are often entirely unprepared.*
3. *Boats have regularly been fitted with fuel tanks that cannot hold enough petrol for the*
4. *21-mile journey and in recent days migrants have been rescued from rubber dinghies.*

In Extract 8, above, it is not just the price charged by smugglers that constructs their immorality. In line 2 the smugglers are described as leaving migrants “unprepared” for their journey and in lines 3 and 4 they are reported to be using “fuel tanks that cannot hold enough petrol for the 21-mile journey”. Such descriptions of the smugglers constructs them as doubly immoral, both for the money they make from these activities but also the risk that they create for those travelling in boats. Here again migrants are constructed as engaging in risky behaviour, and there is some overlap between the repertoire discussed previously which we suggested implied that ‘desperate people’ would engage in activities that carry a certain level of risk. Here, however, it could also be argued that in constructing smugglers as immoral, by implication there is a suggestion that the ‘migrants’ are also not ‘genuine’ for engaging in such risky behaviour. Such distinctions between ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus’ asylum seekers and refugees have been a feature of political rhetoric in the UK for many years (Yeo, 2020) and work to suggest that it is only certain people that we should have sympathy for and allow into the country.

Discussion

As we discussed in the introduction to this article, refugees travelling via boats to reach safe countries is not a new phenomenon. Since the 1990s many refugees have attempted to reach Australia by boat, leading the Australian Government to introduce ever more restrictive and controversial measures designed to ensure that they do not set foot on Australian soil (McAdam, 2013). Research has shown that such measures are justified in the Australian media by constructing the refugees as criminals or deviants (Pickering, 2001) and the policies as

necessary to ensure strong borders. Similar media discourses were evident during the so-called ‘refugee crisis in Europe’ in 2015 (Goodman et al., 2017). However, until recently, the arrival of refugees in the UK by boat was comparatively rare. This article makes an original contribution to the literature on media constructions of refugees with its focus on reporting of this ‘new’ route being taken by those who wish to claim asylum in the UK.

During the 2017 Brexit campaign, Nigel Farage, Leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), was criticised for using a poster depicting refugees fleeing to Europe as a warning to voters about migration being at ‘breaking point’. Although it is impossible to know what impact this had on the United Kingdom’s eventual decision to vote to leave the European Union, the incident did highlight the ways in which the ‘refugee crisis’ and Brexit became discursively entangled by some populist politicians (Durrheim et al., 2018). At the same time, Goodman et al.’s (2017) study showed how the UK media typically constructed the ‘refugee crisis’ as a crisis that was for Europe, even when the focus of the reporting focussed on refugees in Calais. Whilst refugees continue to make the journey across the Mediterranean Sea, during the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, Farage has this time been actively campaigning to stop boats carrying refugees from making the crossing between northern France and the south coast of England. Thus, whilst the analysis reported in this paper relates to December 2018, the crossings of the English Channel continue to be politically and socially relevant, particularly given that the UK has now left the European Union and has greater powers to devise legislation on immigration matters.

We identified the ‘secure the borders’ repertoire as the predominant way in which the UK news media constructed a ‘crisis’ of migrants attempting to cross the English Channel by boat. Use of this repertoire frequently worked to position politicians, and political decisions, to be both the cause of, and solution to, the perceived ‘crisis’. In reducing the ‘crisis’ to one of borders and political decisions it assumes that all ‘migrants’ (as they are typically referred to

within the articles analysed) are an homogenous group who need to be stopped from entering the UK. However, it also works to obscure wider governmental decisions that have removed safe migration routes for those fleeing persecution in their home countries. Whilst the UK government has offered sanctuary to some refugees through existing resettlement programmes, these have typically been in very small numbers and, as we discussed previously, the security and surveillance infrastructure put in place by governments over the past 20 years to secure the border around Calais (Gatrell, 2019) have also played a role in ‘migrants’ using ‘new’ routes to enter the UK.

The use of the ‘smuggling is immoral’ repertoire both supported the predominant border security repertoire, by implying the need for ever stronger borders, and also worked to move the blame for the ‘crisis’ away from the government. As Forkert et al. (2020) have argued, this shifting of blame also works to suppress wider colonial histories and the role that western societies, such as the UK, have played in creating the reasons why people may need to flee their countries. As our analysis pointed out this repertoire relies on the notion that the activities of smugglers are immoral. However, it again also obscures the fact that this has become one of the only ways in which those fleeing their home countries can now enter the UK, as other routes to claiming asylum have been shut down. At the same time, some of the articles were also constructed using a ‘desperate people’ repertoire which we suggested was employed in two contrasting ways. Firstly, it was used in humanitarian terms to construct those crossing the channel as fleeing from difficult situations, particularly through focusing on the poor conditions in Calais refugee camps. Secondly, and in contrast, the use of this repertoire was also used to imply that such ‘desperate people’ would be likely to engage in risky behaviour, implying that the ‘migrants’ are also themselves to blame for this ‘crisis’. Here our work offers some support for Jacobs’ (2020) analysis of risk in BBC reporting and Home office press statements about the ‘crisis’ and we suggest that it is through this use of multiple

conflicting repertoires that responsibility for the ‘crisis’ is diffused between multiple actors. It similarly offers support to Hodge’s (2015) work on the criminalization of migrants, and, as Hodge highlights, these constructions of criminalization can function to delimit public discourse on this topic.

In conclusion, our findings point to a range of competing discursive constructions being used in UK news media reporting of this new ‘crisis’. Although some of the articles drew on a repertoire which humanised those making the crossing the predominant repertoires used in the articles related to the need to secure the UK’s borders and the immorality of smuggling. We have argued that the use of multiple competing interpretative repertoires creates an ideological dilemma between protection (of refugees) and security (of borders) which works to obscure the lack of safe migration routes for those seeking sanctuary and spreads responsibility for the ‘crisis’ beyond the government. As the UK’s transitional withdrawal from the European Union has now come to an end, the issue of border security is likely to become ever more politicised, as will the crossings of the English Channel by boat discussed in this paper. We suggest that more humanised media reporting of this issue, which was evident in places in our analysis, should be used to draw attention to the risks that refugees face in being able to exercise their right to claim asylum in the UK when there is a lack of safe migration routes open to them.

Declaration of Interest Statement

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

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Tables

Table 1 - Source of newspaper articles

Newspaper	Number of articles	Newspaper	Number of articles
The Times	14	The Telegraph	13
The Daily Mail	25	The Daily Express	2
The Sun	6	Daily Mirror	5
The Guardian	8	The Independent	12

I	6	The People	1
Daily Star	4		