

# Immigrant Organisations

Marlou Schrover and Floris Vermeulen

*Migration scholars are increasingly realising the importance of immigrant organisations. Such organisations are not only important for the immigrants themselves, but also for their participation and integration into the host society. Immigrants set up organisations to create, express and maintain a collective identity. By studying organisations we gather valuable information about the settlement process of immigrants. We can thus see what differences were made important by whom, for whom, and for how long. The information gathered in this way can only be assessed if we know what factors influence the founding and continuation of organisations, and how this influence works. The articles in this issue focus on how and why immigrant organisations originate, and how they manage to survive and change over time. We argue that the characteristics of the immigrant community and the political opportunity structure are important in explaining immigrants' organisational activity, but that the nature of the relationships is bell-shaped rather than linear. Too much and too little competition (from governments and others) leads to reduced organisational activity. Too small and too large communities experience problems in maintaining organisations.*

*Keywords: Immigrant Organisations; Political Opportunity Structure; Crowding-Out Effect; Competing Institutions*

## Introduction

Migration scholars are increasingly addressing the topic of immigrant organisations. Such organisations are not only important for the immigrants themselves, but also for the study of their participation and integration into the host society. Studying immigrant organisations enables us to make better sense of the complex and dynamic developments that take place within immigrant communities. This special issue of

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*JEMS* is the result of the growing awareness of these possibilities. It brings together studies on associational behaviour of immigrants in Western Europe and North America in different time periods. As will become clear from the articles that follow, the size of immigrant communities, and government policies towards immigrants and their organisations, are key factors in explaining the nature and continuity of immigrant organisations. With such large differences between Europe and North America in terms of migration history and policy, and in the size of immigrant communities, the results of comparisons between the two cannot rise above the obvious. The articles in this issue also largely ignore the relationship between organisational behaviour and political participation. For this we refer to the special issue of *JEMS* edited and introduced by Dirk Jacobs and Jean Tillie (2004).

The articles in this issue focus on how and why organisations originate, and how they manage to survive and change over time. In 1991, Olzak and West wrote that: 'Despite the apparent consensus on the importance of ethnic organizations no theory has satisfactorily explained what conditions encourage their founding or what factors support or inhibit their continued existence' (1991: 459). Although research on this point has progressed, this observation is still valid. Jose Moya (in this issue) provides an extensive historiography on this topic. In this introduction we therefore limit ourselves to remarks about factors that can explain the founding of organisations and their continuity. We argue that the characteristics of the immigrant community and the political opportunity structure are important in explaining immigrants' organisational activity, but that—and this is our main argument—the nature of the relationships is bell-shaped rather than linear.

### **Immigrant Organisations**

Immigrant organisations can be large and well-established, but they can also be small, ephemeral and unstable. As the articles in this issue illustrate, organisations often did not outlive the first generation of migrants. They were plagued by internal friction, were sometimes ineffective towards host authorities and certainly did not represent entire immigrant communities. In this special issue we argue that, although organisations may not always be impressive, they are still important for understanding immigration and integration processes, because the extent to which immigrants cluster in organisations is a critical measure of collectively expressed and collectively ascribed identity. The character, number and size of organisations indicate the extent to which immigrants want to profile themselves as being different, or how they are seen to be different by others (Cohen 1985: 685, 693). It is also through organisations that others can address immigrants as a collective, and as such organisations say something about demarcations within and between immigrant groups, and between immigrants and the host society. By forming an organisation, immigrants fence off their ethnic or national identity from others (Marquez 2001). Immigrant organisations can be defensive—as a response to exclusion—or offensive—stemming from a choice of immigrants to set themselves apart from

others. Apart from this offensive–defensive dichotomy, a distinction can also be made between organisations that aim at enforcing or encouraging integration and those aiming to distinguish organisational members from the host society. Offensive organisations will generally aim to retain the members' ethnic identity. In the case of defensive organisations, strategy prevails over identity (Cohen 1985). The outcome of such a strategy can either be to stress or to ignore differences, depending on the position of the immigrant group in the host society.

One can question the extent to which an organisation can be labelled an immigrant organisation (cf. Fennema 2004: 431). Do we regard organisations as immigrant organisations because the majority of its members are foreign-born, or because most of its members are descendants from immigrants? Do we call an organisation an immigrant organisation because the inspiration for the organisation originally came from immigrants, and when does an organisation stop being an immigrant organisation? Moya (in this issue) deals with this point extensively. Organisations that started out as immigrant organisations may evolve and change over time. They can become more open and general organisations. Organisations can also change their target audience (see the papers by Bloemraad and Cordero-Guzmán in this issue). Not all organisations can or do go through these transformations. Why do some change and others not? The articles in this special issue deal with these subjects from various perspectives.

Informal organisations pose a problem to some extent. By their very nature they are difficult to track down and leave few traces in archives. As a result most studies focus on formal organisations. Formal and informal organisations are not the same. They do not have the same goals, the same continuity or the same leadership. However, formal and informal organisations are not always as different as they may seem at first sight. As Chung describes in her article in this issue, formal organisations may take on roles that are not the same as their officially stated purpose. Moreover, different governments take different positions toward informal leadership. Vermeulen describes how local governments in Amsterdam encouraged informal leadership within and outside formal organisation while Bloemraad describes a case in which informal leadership was discouraged and feared.

### **Influences on Immigrant Organisations**

In his well-known article Breton (1964: 204) suggests that three sets of factors stimulate the formation of ethnic organisations: cultural differences with the native population; the level of resources among the members of the immigrant group; and the pattern of migration. Breton, and many later authors, saw cultural difference between immigrants and the members of the host society as an important factor for encouraging the formation of immigrant organisations (Breton 1964). Moya (in this issue) questions the value of this observation. He shows that immigrants who are culturally different from the members of the host society have not set up more organisations than culturally similar immigrants have. Moya's critique does not imply

that cultural difference is of no importance. The critique points out the difficulty in measuring similarity or difference. The concept of cultural difference can be criticised, but there is a societal use of the concept. One way in which differences are shaped, stressed and maintained is by setting up organisations. Differences may not be very real, and may be difficult to measure, but it is important to see which differences are made important, and how demarcations are maintained and by whom.

Forty years after Breton published his article, and with more knowledge about immigrant organisations, migration scholars now believe that other factors need to be considered beside cultural differences, level of resources, and pattern of migration. The factors can be re-categorised into three sets: *the migration process* (similar to the migration pattern mentioned by Breton); *the opportunity structure* in the host society; and *the characteristics of the immigrant community* (of which level of resources is just one element). The articles in this issue deal mainly with the latter two, so we focus on these in the remainder of this introduction.

The two sets of factors are related to the founding of associations, but the nature of the relationship is not clear. To come to grips with this relationship we refer to Olzak and West (1991). They hypothesised that ethnic conflict encouraged group solidarity and cohesion. Solidarity in turn encouraged the founding and maintenance of ethnic organisations. Repression, however, also took its toll. When conflicts increased, the cost of collective action rose and the group's capacity for mobilisation was undermined. The way out of this paradox was that mild levels of repression enticed people into action, but intense repression caused collective action to diminish or disappear. Olzak and West (1991: 460) suggested a bell-shaped relationship between the level of conflict and the founding rates of ethnic organisations. Following this line of reasoning, we argue that a similar non-linear, bell-shaped relationship is found between government interference (as part of the political opportunity structure) and associational behaviour, and between the size of the immigrant population (as a characteristic of the immigrant population) and associational behaviour. We briefly look at these two variables in turn.

### **Opportunity Structure**

Governments of the host society can use immigrant organisations to mould immigrants into a coherent community. This makes it possible to address the community, and hold it responsible for its members. The principle underlying this function of organisations dates back to the European Early Modern Period (Penninx and Schrover 2001). In that period, foreigners could only gain access to a town if a religious community could be held responsible for them in case they fell into poverty. In the nineteenth century, when the public salience of religion was gradually replaced by nationality, local and national governments tried to enforce a coherent community that could be held responsible for the behaviour of its members and which could be addressed in times of crisis. A contemporary example of this principle is the

formation of umbrella organisations to represent Turkish and Moroccan groups in the Netherlands (Rath *et al.* 1996: 69) and in Belgium (Hooghe, this issue).

It is not only the government of the receiving society that enforces unity. Immigrants, or their descendants, also look for spokespersons to represent the community in times of crisis (Bloemraad, Chung: this issue). Furthermore, governments or other organisations within *sending* societies may foster the creation of one coherent immigrant community within the receiving society, in the hope of retaining their former subjects for their nation or national identity (Suurenbroek and Schrover, this issue).

It is important to note that women do not relate to the nation-state in the same way as men do. Men are more strongly associated with nationality than women are. This is even more so for women who have married outside the community to which they originally belonged. Through their marriage they are assumed to have transferred their loyalty. Although women are presumed to have a looser relationship with nationality than men, they are at the same time regarded as the transmitters and reproducers of ethnic and national ideologies, and they are seen as central in the transmission of cultural rules. According to Floya Anthias, women may be empowered by retaining home traditions, but they may also be quick to abandon them when they are no longer adequate strategies for survival (Anthias 1998). If women relate differently to nationality, this will have consequences for their participation in immigrant organisations. In contemporary society, men participate more in organisations that are active in politics and that direct their attention to the country of origin. Women participate more in organisations aiming at the receiving society and concerned with finding practical solutions for everyday problems (Jones-Correa 1998). Chung (in this issue) observes that women are conspicuously absent in the power structures of traditional immigrant organisations. We are confronted here with a contradiction: women are carriers of ethnic identity, but they are mostly absent in the power structure of immigrant organisations, which are also supposed to be carriers of ethnic identity. Gender relations in general, and attitudes towards female leadership, explain this contradiction. We can assume that women play a more important role in informal leadership or in informal organisations.

A complicated relationship exists between nation-states (of sending and receiving societies) and immigrant organisations. Today, immigrant organisations are tied to the state, but also transcend the nation-state. Before the emergence of modern nation-states, sending societies did little to keep in touch with their former residents. On the contrary, before 1871 German states, for example, were usually unwilling to take back people who had emigrated, even if the emigrants had planned to migrate temporarily. In contemporary society, migrants are seen, both by the sending and the receiving society, as still belonging to their country of origin, although this idea is stronger in Europe than in North America. This feeling is expressed by the use of the term 'migrant' even for the second or third generation (Anthias 1998). The hereditary immigrant status affects the way immigrants and their descendants organise, and it can give immigrant organisations greater longevity although the characteristics of the

organisations will have to change. In the past, immigrant organisations were mostly made up of the generation that had migrated. Now, immigrant organisations become ethnic organisations (Moya, this issue) or they transfer their activities to a different or broader group of immigrants than the one for which, or by which, they were originally established (Cordero-Guzmán, this issue). The 'need' for certain organisations can also disappear because of developments within the sending and receiving societies (Schrover 2006).

Change or continuity in both sending and receiving societies can play a role in organisational development. It can enforce homogeneity and coherence, and it can stimulate or constrain the number of organisations. Contrary to practice in the past, authorities in the sending society try to maintain their influence on their former subjects over a much longer period of time by supporting associations and controlling their activities. In a similar manner, receiving governments set the boundaries within which the immigrant organisations can function. Consequently political or institutional opportunities in the host and sending societies strongly influence immigrant organisations. The *political opportunity structure* is used as a concept by several authors in this issue. Political opportunities can be described as the extent to which powerful groups, including governments, are vulnerable or receptive to new claims made by groups that hold a marginal position in the political system. Marc Hooghe (in this issue) provides a more general approach on how to use the political opportunity structure model for the study of immigrant organisations. In the nineteenth century, when the state was less influential, the political opportunity structure was less relevant. The local institutional opportunity structure, however, was important, and did influence the collective representation of a group—as illustrated in the historical article in this issue (Suurenbroek and Schrover).

The opportunity model predicts that the level of organisation will strongly depend on the structure of political institutions and the configuration of political power in a given society. Changes in the external opportunities or constraints on mobilisation can spur or inhibit group action. Chung explains (in this issue) how the Los Angeles riots of 1992 changed the opportunity structure for Korean organisations, both on an institutional level and also at the level of the ethnic community itself. On the one hand, more funding became available for the organisations in an attempt to restore the damage caused by the riots. On the other hand, the riots disclosed the fact that the older Korean organisations were unable to represent their community effectively. New Korean organisations took advantage of this vacuum in political leadership and challenged the older generation. Strengthened by the strong sense of ethnic political solidarity among younger generations, which was a direct result of the riots, these organisations were able to prosper and obtain a powerful position in the community.

Governments' attitudes influence the opportunities immigrants have for setting up organisations. Governments of the receiving society may forbid, condone or stimulate immigrant organisations or part of their activities. The degree of support for immigrant organisations is strongly related to the legal position of the newcomers in the host society. On the one hand, there are countries in which immigrants are

seen as temporarily residing residents of foreign nations. Immigrants are regarded as foreigners and the state restricts its integrating role to legal procedures: registering admission, giving out permits, tracing illegal (non-registered) foreigners and expulsion. Organisational activities of immigrants are regarded as undesirable or even threatening, and will therefore be forbidden or strongly constrained. On the other hand, there are countries that consider themselves as immigrant societies. Immigrants are approached as new citizens and have easy access to nationality. Government initiatives are directed at making a quick use of the immigrants' potential and stimulating integration (Penninx and Schrover 2001). In these cases, organisational activities of immigrants will be regarded as helpful in the process of integration and are therefore supported financially. Many countries have moved from one end of the spectrum, where immigrants were seen as foreigners, to the other end, where immigrants were seen as new citizens. However, not all countries have done so at the same rate, and some have moved with great reluctance. The article by Vermeulen (in this issue) illustrates how the attitude of authorities can change over time and, most importantly, how it can vary for different immigrant groups within one city.

Governments can enforce mergers between organisations by giving or withholding subsidies. Several articles in this issue deal with the *crowding-out effect* of government (and other non-immigrant) initiatives (Bloemraad, Caponio, Hooghe). Government initiatives (and those of non-immigrant organisations such as unions or churches) and the resulting creation or maintenance of *competing institutions*, obliterate the need for immigrants' initiatives. It is important to note that governmental interference, be it from the host or the sending country, primarily influences the formal organising process of immigrants. Furthermore, immigrant initiatives in one town can also, by catering for a larger surrounding community, crowd out initiatives in other towns.

Various articles in this issue illustrate that the crowding-out effect does not work as simply as it may seem at first glance. Bloemraad shows that state funding does not necessarily lead to the crowding out of immigrant initiatives. Immigrant organisations in Canada have benefited from state funding, which allowed immigrant groups to found a larger number of organisations than similar non-funded groups in the United States. The effect of government interference depended on how state funding was structured. Caponio explains how in Italy Catholic non-immigrant organisations benefited from state money, thereby profiting from policy changes to a greater degree than immigrant organisations. What the articles in this issue make clear is that government policies *can* lead to crowding out, but that it can also have the opposite effect of stimulating immigrant organisations. The outcome depends on the nature of the government policy. This policy can differ per immigrant group within the same town or country and time frame (Bloemraad, Vermeulen: this issue).

A complicated relationship exists between government interference and the founding of immigrant organisations. Tolerating and funding immigrant organisations have a positive effect on the organisational infrastructure of the immigrant

community. Conditions attached to funding may, however, take the sting out of the organisations, as is shown by the American examples in this issue. This is the case if support is only given if organisations refrain from political activities. In that case organisational activity will pacify active political activity. Too much government interference, or additional interference from competing organisations such as unions and churches, will lead to the crowding out of immigrant initiatives and thus to a decrease in organisational activity (Caponio, this issue). Here we see the bell-shaped relationship whereby both too few and too many competing activities will crowd out immigrant initiatives.

### **Characteristics of the Immigrant Population**

According to Hechter (1978) the degree to which individuals identify with their ethnic group increases as the percentage of the population belonging to this ethnic group increases. This does not necessarily mean that there will be more organisations, because the number of organisations is not linearly related to the size of the immigrant community. Large immigrant populations do not necessarily have many organisations, as the articles in this issue show. The character of immigrant organisations is determined by many factors related to the demographic and socio-economic profile of the immigrant community: residential propinquity, regional background, age, sex ratio, religion, occupational structure, education and political orientation. The population turnover within the immigrant community is also important. If the turnover is high, there are few people who can have a stabilising effect on immigrant organisations. Finally, the labour market participation of immigrants influences the founding of organisations and their continued existence. Again, the relationship is complicated. Overlapping in the economic activities of two ethnic groups can lead to competition, which in turn triggers ethnic exclusion, supported by the founding of organisations. Systematic exclusions, rather than competition, can also lead to ethnic solidarity and the founding of organisations (Diez Medrano 1994: 875).

A critical number of people are needed to set up an organisation. The carrying capacity that is needed, however, differs by organisation. Different numbers—who provide the resources and the demand—are needed for a newspaper, a school or a theatre. The potential recruitment area of an immigrant organisation can change over time. It can increase with improvements in transportation and communication. At the same time, recent developments in communication and transport might make it so easy for individuals to keep in touch that such technologies obliterate the need for some kinds of organisation. The time factor is also relevant: newer organisations run a higher risk of disappearing than older organisations that have a clientele, reputation and organisational routine (Olzak and West 1991: 470).

Size of the immigrant community and its organisational behaviour are also related in another way. When immigrant organisations merge and grow, it becomes increasingly hard to find a common denominator (Vermeulen, this issue). The

common denominator that larger organisations manage to find is often so general that it has little binding power. Again we find the bell-shaped relationship. If immigrant groups are too small (or too heterogeneous) we find little formal organisational activity. When the communities grow and age organisational activity increases, partly as a result of competition between organisations. The increase continues until attempts are made to find common denominators that can tie together large groups. However, these denominators can become so vague that the binding power flags and initiatives water down.

## **Conclusions**

Immigrant organisations are an indication of how immigrants see differences between themselves and the rest of society, or how these differences are perceived by others; a translation of which is found in government policy. Government policies within the same time frame and country will work out differently for different groups. By studying organisations we gather valuable information about the settlement process of immigrants. We can thus see what differences were made important by whom, for whom, and for how long. The information gathered in this way can only be assessed if we know what factors influence the founding and continuation of organisations, and how this influence works. The articles in this issue show that the characteristics of the immigrant communities and the political opportunity structure exercise the most influence. The nature of the relationships is non-linear. Too much and too little competition (from governments and others) leads to reduced organisational activity. Too small and too large communities experience problems in maintaining organisations.

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