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Moving beyond 'refugeeness': problematising the 'refugee community organisation'

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Abstract

This paper explores processes of change and development within asylum seeker and refugee-led associations in Glasgow. I argue that adopting a life-cycle approach to association emergence and continuity (Werbner 1991a: 15) provides a more rounded and sophisticated understanding of not only the factors giving rise to such groups, but also of processes of change within groups. By problematising the 'refugee community organisation' label, I suggest that the focus on 'refugeeness' fails to attend to internal diversity, specifically relating to changing and differentiated immigration status within such associations. Exploring an externally constructed fictive unity using Werbner's framework provides one way to challenge these effects. Rather than see this framework as made up of linear stages, I argue that groups move through and between stages of associative empowerment, ideological convergence and mobilisation simultaneously and that features differentiating stages may be co-present. This paper is relevant for policy-makers, practitioners and third sector organisations and can aid thinking about how to move beyond labels in approaching broader questions, practices and experiences of 'settlement', integration, belonging and social cohesion.

Keywords

RCOs; refugeeness; community life-cycle; community groups; sustainability; settlement and integration.

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Contents

- Introduction..... 3**
- Conceptual framework..... 4**
- Methodology 7**
- Discussion 7**
- Studying group life over time: the problem with the ‘RCO’ category 7**
- Changing and differentiated immigration status and the emergence of the local
associative network 9**
- Changing and differentiated immigration status and effects on ideological convergence 13**
- Changing and differentiated immigration status and implications for mobilisation 16**
- Concluding comments..... 17**
- References 19**

Introduction

The implementation of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act marked a lasting change in the way asylum seekers were resettled and supported in the United Kingdom. The Act had two key outcomes. The first was to separate the social rights of asylum seekers from those of other UK citizens and non-citizen residents (primarily intended to deter economic migration). The second was the establishment, for the first time, of a nationally co-ordinated system for the resettlement and welfare support of asylum seekers, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) (Wren 2007). This resettlement was part of a UK-wide dispersal policy, involving a programme of relocation (on a no-choice basis) of asylum seekers requiring accommodation away from the South East of England, where many pre-existing networks of co-nationals, families and contacts were located, to dispersal sites across the UK. Glasgow was and remains the only sizeable dispersal area in Scotland, with more asylum seekers dispersed to Glasgow than any other regional site in the UK (ICAR 2007). From 2000 to 2010, more than 22,000 asylum seekers have been housed in Glasgow. In this ten-year period the city moved from having a handful of asylum seekers to having the highest number of NASS supported asylum seekers in the UK.¹

Despite concerns that dispersal would impact negatively on integration, friendships and social networks have developed in dispersal areas, from which a number of formalised associations have emerged. This emergence of associations has been well documented in a number of academic and policy related accounts of the collective practices of asylum seekers and refugees, where they are generally categorised as 'refugee community organisations' (hereafter RCOs) (*inter alia* Zetter and Pearl 2000; Home Office 2004, 2009; Griffiths, Sigona and Zetter 2004, 2005; Zetter et al. 2005; Amas and Price 2008; Lukes 2009; Jones 2010; Phillimore and Goodson 2010). Whilst offering important insights into different aspects of association experiences, these studies tend to focus on the emergence of such groups, generating 'empirical snapshots' of associations at the early stages of their development. As a result, they fail to capture the life-cycle of groups as they evolve over time and the different internal and external constraints and opportunities affecting their continuity and sustainability.

This dominant focus on the early stages of group emergence contributes to a number of important limiting effects. Firstly, RCOs tend to be treated in academic and policy research as fixed in time and space as they respond to the effects of dispersal policy. Secondly, they come to be framed as made up of individuals organising around homogenised understandings of objectives, problems and challenges relating almost uniquely to asylum and refugee matters. A third effect is that groups' collective identities come to be constructed around a further fixed notion of 'refugeeness'. Fourthly, the effects of changing and differentiated immigration status on group life - a central feature of groups who

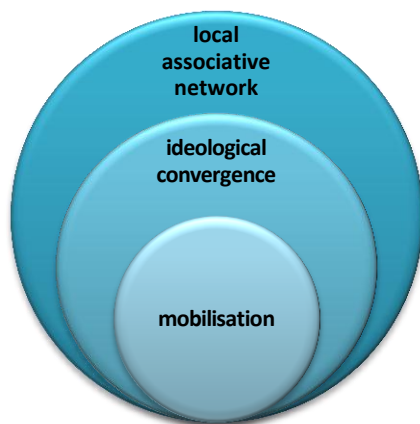
¹The Guardian, 24 November 2010 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/nov/24/asylum-seekers-glasgow-face-eviction>. 2010 figures reveal that 2,300 asylum seekers were housed in Glasgow. By way of a comparison, in 2009, the three local authorities in England with the highest populations of asylum seekers in dispersed accommodation were Liverpool (1,375), Birmingham (1,345) and Manchester (950) (ICAR).

are categorised according to temporary immigration status - are largely obscured by the focus on 'refugeeness'. The challenge for researchers, policy makers and practitioners is how to move beyond these limitations.

Conceptual framework

Drawing from Pnina Werbner's work on leadership within black and minority ethnic associations (1991a, 1991b), I consider ways in which external actors' administrative disposition to define groups in terms of their 'refugeeness' imposes a problematic fictive unity upon group social relations. This homogenises not only individuals within groups (contributing to their labelling in terms of 'refugeeness') but also masks the effects of internal diversity of group life. To critically engage with the idea of change and diversity within groups, I draw upon Werbner's conceptual schema of three stages that set urban protest movements in motion: localised associative empowerment, ideological convergence and finally mobilisation (Werbner 1991a: 15). This schema is used to frame group emergence and continuity, and to then explore how groups themselves self-identify and move beyond labels. This framework can be presented figuratively.

Figure 1: stages of association life-cycle (after Werbner 1991a)



The first stage is marked by the development of an *associative network* that focuses on distinct cultural or political issues. Associative empowerment, Werbner argues, usually takes the form of associational growth, where associations emerge typically to address a wide variety of objectives ranging from social and cultural activities to political goals and concerns with group welfare (Werbner 1991a: 15). This emergence has various dimensions, often resulting from some form of struggle or battle for autonomy, power and/or resources. Alongside unifying aspects, associations can also be characterised by ideological and personal divisions and conflict, as well as competition for resources. Despite this competition between associations, seen as a whole this associative network, Werbner suggests, is united in its drive to establish distinctive cultural or political institutions (1991a: 16). The

second stage of *ideological convergence* emerges in the formulation of common discourses and a set of objectives in relation to the state and the contemporary condition of the group within the wider society (1991a: 16). Through alignment with other minority groups, associations identify a set of universalistic values whilst working hard to maintain their particularistic goals. The third and final stage of *mobilisation* occurs when the movement emerges as a recognisable, public *protest* movement (1991a: 17, emphasis in original). Werbner argues this usually occurs when there is an issue or event threatening community autonomy or solidarity. Whilst tensions and divisions exist both within and between groups, these associations (and the wider associative network) generally pool resources and skills through collective action and practices of solidarity. Werbner argues that these three stages capture the formative stages of *potential* urban social movements, whilst also recognising that many such associative networks never become fully fledged movements.

Werbner's conceptual schema is particularly useful for considering change within migrant associations generally, and asylum seeker and refugee-led associations more specifically. Firstly it provides a framework to explore and understand transformative change within groups and how relationships develop across to other associations who share a common stand against structural inequalities. Secondly it provides a 'way in' to the internal dynamics of associational life, whilst recognising that the group exists within a wider context that presents both constraints and opportunities. Thirdly, through its three-stage framework, this schema facilitates a deeper analysis of internal politics as they might evolve and develop over time. Too often, these politics are glossed over, lending an air of romanticism to analyses of migrant associations and sanitising the complex and sometimes difficult internal relations that directly influence association sustainability (c.f. Rex and Tomlinson 1979; Sivanandan 1985; Rex et al. 1987; Joly 1996). Finally, this staged process provides an interesting way to consider how associations seek to confront being labelled as an 'RCO' and move beyond imposed constructs of 'refugeeness'. It is argued in this paper that a fine-grained account of association life which includes analyses of internal diversity alongside unity will generate a different, more holistic picture of the shape of an association over time. That is, the suggested framework provides insights into the life-cycle of groups, moving beyond the narrow and often fixed focus on immigration status to the complex and varying identities of refugees and their associational practices.

Despite offering a conceptual language for studying association emergence and continuity, and different internal and external factors affecting these processes, there are also problems with Werbner's framework. Firstly, whilst such a framework is effective in that it can reduce complexity to a manageable form, it is at risk of presenting an overly stagist notion of social change as linear: where associations move rather neatly from one stage to the next. This fails to account for the ways in which different factors and variables affect this trajectory. An important question addressed by this paper is to what extent the changing structural context as it relates to asylum and immigration legislation affects the trajectory of asylum seeker and refugee-led associations. Secondly, the differences in the stages presented by Werbner can also be understood as co-present in each stage. Not all immigrant and minority associations 'ideologically converge', nor necessarily do so at the same time. Equally,

different association types may also co-exist, for example they may concentrate on particularistic cultural or political goals, *and* converge around a broader set of structural inequalities. A focus on organisational trajectories over time may well reveal the co-presence of these differences, although this is not made clear in the way in which Werbner presents her argument. Moreover, state and local state policies may enable different interest groups to exist side by side.

Thirdly, whilst offering important advances for the study of immigrant associational practices, Werbner's approach takes for granted the very existence of stable 'co-ethnic' or 'co-national' foundations upon which to build new lives, and engage in relations with the state and civil society. The extent to which this represents the experience of all migrants is questionable. Equally, immigration status is presented as generally undifferentiated, arguably imposing homogeneity on a highly diverse population for whom the very notion of stability in relation to immigration status cannot be taken as a given. Importantly, in much the way that bureaucratic administrators impose a fictive unity on ethnicised groups (a criticism levied at 'race relations' thinking by Sivanandan (1985) and Werbner (1991a)), the failure to attend to the effects of differentiated immigration status and migrant incorporation regimes on the emergence and continuity of associations runs the very risk of constructing a fictive unity around the undifferentiated monolithic category of 'immigrants' (and one can also add 'Black Minority Ethnic' (BME) populations and RCOs). Finally although Werbner's framework provides an account of the process of change as it affects groups, and this provides a life-cycle perspective, the effects of change on internal relations, and how such relations impact upon association trajectories is less clear, that is how movement through the three presented stages is experienced from within.

Despite the shortcomings of this framework, it provides a structure within which a complex reality can be considered. Indeed, I argue that the way Werbner conceptualises the different stages of associational emergence and mobilisation as a heuristic device means that there is scope for a less linear and overly stagist notion of change. In this sense it can be modified to account for the co-existence of discrete groups often in competition with each other for power and resources, but which, as this paper will explore, also assert strong universalistic claims of ideological convergence, mobilisation and alignment with each other and other BME populations. Finally, Werbner's critique of externally imposed fictive unity presents a particularly useful and insightful framework for problematising labels and considering internal processes within associations and the effects of internal diversity on association life, particularly as these relate to differentiated and changing immigration status within associations on association life. This paper poses two key questions: How does changing and differentiated immigration status affect association emergence, ideological convergence and processes of mobilisation? And what are the implications of this for the RCO label?

Methodology

This paper draws from doctoral research completed in 2011, involving an ethnography of six mainly Francophone and Anglophone African asylum seeker and refugee led-associations in Glasgow (2007-2010). The data presented are illustrative of the cultural, linguistic and socio-economic diversity of asylum seeker, refugee and migrant populations, drawing from the experiences of asylum seekers, refugees and migrants from Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, People's Republic of the Congo, Uganda and Zimbabwe. The discussion is informed by extensive participant observation over a twenty-six month period, 46 in-depth individual interviews, group discussions, and analysis of online fora and printed materials (for example, written constitutions, internal rules, minutes, newsletters, articles). I also worked as a community interpreter prior to and during fieldwork.² During fieldwork each of the associations considered me as a member but in varying terms, with different levels of involvement.

Discussion

Studying group life over time: the problem with the 'RCO' category

As already stated at the beginning of this paper, a number of (mainly UK-based) studies have emerged since the late 1980s which offer important insights into how asylum seeker and refugee based associations and social networks function as a source of social capital, and as a critical mechanism for coping and survival in exile (*inter alia* Salinas et al. 1987; Gold 1992; Wahlbeck 1998; Zetter and Pearl 2000; Kelly 2003; Zetter et al. 2005; Griffiths et al. 2004, 2005; Phillimore and Goodson 2010).³ Most often, but not exclusively categorised as refugee community organisations, or RCOs (for example see Mayblin and Soteri-Proctor 2011), these studies very effectively recognise the specific social, political and structural circumstances relating to asylum seekers and refugees, the way in which 'community' is conceptualised as it relates to these populations, and the complex asymmetrical relations that exist between such groups and the state. They also reveal ways in which the collective forms and practices categorised as RCOs have originally been organised around immigration status. The relationship between immigration status and Werbner's (1991a) first stage of local associative empowerment is clear: association emergence is often described by members as a direct response to dispersal policy, and the struggle to build new forms of social relations in the face of increasingly punitive immigration asylum and immigration legislative regime, characterised by non-

² This role was highly beneficial, especially in establishing rapport and gaining access to associations. But it also raised different practical and ethical challenges, particularly in relation to managing my 'new' role as researcher, managing members' expectations and potential blurring of boundaries. An in-depth discussion of these challenges is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

³ A basic and important premise underpinning the arguments in this paper is that RCO constitutes a bureaucratic category, which in many respects fails to capture the internal diversity and dynamic nature of the associations studied in my own research. When I refer to RCOs I do so in relation to previous studies which use this as a category for analysis. I refer instead to asylum seeker and refugee-led associations or simply associations when discussing the groups involved in my research study. The term asylum seeker and refugee-led captures the migrant status of majority members at the point of association emergence.

integrative policy mechanisms. In this sense, immigration status comes to be understood in many studies as the defining organising principle of these populations.

However, immigration status is not a homogenous process, nor does it remain fixed in time. Despite many groups originally organising around shared concerns with welfare related to immigration status, the aims and foci of such groups nonetheless evolve over time, as they widen their focus on an increasingly diverse range of concerns relating to cultural identity, diasporic relations, but also settlement and family life. This is suggestive of a fluidity and malleability of collective identity, and a life-cycle of and within associations that often fails to surface in studies that centre upon RCO practices and experiences. There is added complexity in the very diverse nature both within and between groups, as it relates to multiple nationalities, languages, cultures, faith and religions, ages, gender, tribal or clan affiliations, and socioeconomic status. Such diverse identities are a feature of much work generalised as RCO research (for example, Gold 1992; Griffiths 1999; Wahlbeck 1997; Kelly 2003 and Hopkins 2005). However differentiated immigration status within groups tends to be largely overlooked. The dominance of the RCO label as the main category for analysis tends to obscure this aspect of internal diversity, although given the complex asylum and immigration regime in the UK, differentiated immigration status certainly merits more attention than it receives as an important feature of group life. Consequently a single way of approaching different groups - in terms of their 'refugeeness' - may not be appropriate for them all. Although visible and 'on the radar' of academics, policy-makers, and third sector practitioners as RCOs, the visibility of these groups beyond 'refugeeness' and as newly settling migrant populations who are effectively part of a wider 'settled' population is questionable.

The changing nature of members' immigration status reveals an important problem with the RCO category. The community life-cycle approach to the study of the integration and acculturation, or assimilation, of migrants generally is well represented in historical and contemporary accounts of immigrant associations (Thomas and Znaniecki 1958; Breton 1964; Rex 1973; Rex and Tomlinson 1979; Rex et al. 1987; Portes and Rumbaut 1990; Portes and Zhou 1993). However, the idea of change and transition into something 'other', be it that of a 'settled' population as opposed to the enduring unsettled nature of 'refugeeness' tends to be missing from contemporary accounts of RCOs. Subsequently, any sense of a community life-cycle is missing. This might be for a number of reasons, three of which are highlighted for this discussion. Firstly, with very few exceptions (for example Jones 2010), the majority of research carried out on associational practices has focused on the immediate and medium-term effects of dispersal, producing what could be described as 'empirical snapshots' of associational life at a specific, relatively early, point in time after dispersal. Consequently, the research into RCOs post-dispersal has concentrated on groups who were still in somewhat nascent stages of development. Secondly, dispersal of asylum seekers as an *integral* aspect of *non-quota* immigration management policy was at the time of much 'RCO research' a relatively new development in UK policy (implemented since 2000) (c.f. Robinson 1999, 2003 and Robinson and Coleman 2000). Thirdly, the lack of recognition of and attention to the notion that these groups are made up of individuals with diverse immigration status, and who experience change in said status is at best cursorily acknowledged (Salinas et al. 1987; Gold 1992), or at worst completely ignored. What this

does is create a collective identity built upon an externally constructed fictive unity based on 'refugeeness' that in many cases might not necessarily reflect the aims or aspirations of the groups being thus categorised.

Changing and differentiated immigration status and the emergence of the local associative network

Changing immigration status impacts groups in three ways that can challenge fictive unity and shift the focus away from refugeeness: in terms of claims to representativeness; effects of positive decisions on identity claims; and as a source of internal conflict and tension. In terms of representativeness, each of the associations studied in Glasgow, with one exception, was originally either exclusively or predominantly composed of asylum seekers. Over time asylum seeker members became refugees. However, some were refugees with indefinite leave to remain, whilst others had been granted 5 year temporary protection. Moreover, membership to each of the groups has never been restricted by specific immigration status, with groups counting students, professional and skilled migrants and dependents in their numbers. The point is that this complex internal heterogeneity relating to immigration status alone, (and putting aside other aspects of social difference for the moment), highlights an important limitation of the RCO label as representativeness of 'refugee communities'. This is especially the case where those very same people no longer or indeed have never defined their associations as such, seeing themselves instead as 'nationals' of a specific country or as 'Africans' (as was the case in Glasgow). Although the groups that took part in this research were typically defined as RCOs by third sector actors, local authorities, public sector and NGO support agencies, the members and groups themselves rarely made claim to this label, except as will be discussed later, groups did on occasion strategically adopt the label to access funds. However, they most often rejected it when it was applied to them, as the following excerpts reveal:

That's where this is a bit of a problem... From the beginning, when we set the group up, RCO was perhaps more a reality for the Scottish than for us. When the Cameroonians met up it wasn't as a refugee group... it was more the Cameroonian way. And there were students, workers, resident and asylum seekers and refugees... Over time these asylum seekers became refugees... so, to place CAMASS (a Cameroonian group) as an RCO that was never what it was about for us. More a reality existing in Scotland, a reality that says everything that is new, that is different... Because over the years there was a wave of foreigners who arrived. They said all of them who formed groups are refugee groups (Guy, Cameroonian man, migrant).

When they speak of RCO, maybe they see it as them that give, that's how I see it. Like they need us so they exist. They don't think we give as well. We're here to give and receive, because if we don't tell them our problems and if we don't give them solutions that seem right to us, then how will they know? [...] I think our organisation is a bit different. RCO is like a category that is imposed... it's fixed. We would define ourselves as a space where there is exchange and interaction that is about integration, where life is changing for all our members, asylum, refugee, students... all of us. (Heloise, Congolese woman, refugee).

These excerpts reveal some of the complexities in the often unproblematised relationship between immigration status and association emergence and development. Rejecting the label as non-representative can be seen as a strategy of identification and a claim to alternative identities. As an act of agency, it can be conceptualised as a way of taking back control of the definition of the group from external actors (e.g. statutory and non-statutory agencies). It can be argued that such actors have powers of categorisation and use this to advance their own position as experts vis-à-vis the groups' predicaments (Rainbird 2011) to provide a rationale for their own existence, and in imposing this definition, to use the RCO construct to its own ends. Groups understand this situation as the above interview excerpts suggest: certain actors 'need' RCOs to justify their own existence and position of expertise.

Group development and continuity is affected by varying participation rates which also question how groups might be able to claim representativeness of a wider 'community'. Analysis of the complex link between representation, participation and association emergence needs to be carefully balanced with a number of competing external and internal factors. These factors may relate to the detention and deportation of members, as well as the destitute circumstances some members find themselves in. The data showed that such factors inhibited members' ability to participate in meetings, as they needed to make important decisions about spending limited money on a bus fare or food. Thus different immigration status shapes ability to participate, rendering some members less visible and with a weaker voice in group life. During the research period, the introduction of a new immigration-related policy or a political event in the country was generally accompanied by increased participation in meetings and requests for information and advice. Such public expressions of belonging through attendance related to their experience of being a migrant in the most general terms, rather than simply relating to their particular immigration status.

The significance of one's immigration status in terms of expectations of the group was relative to the precariousness of one's asylum claim, and subsequent ability to participate. Many members were traumatised by the experience of flight and claiming asylum and then their exclusion in trying to 'settle' in Glasgow and felt unable to be active. In some groups, the RCO label kept some potential members away, if they felt the group could not represent (or in certain cases no longer was representative of) non-asylum seeker/refugee members. Whilst in other groups, general migrant members often demonstrated greater confidence, 'talking up' their ability to commit themselves to the future of the group. They pushed for different agendas relating to longer-term integration that were not always representative of other members' needs, unintentionally excluding others from the development of the association.

The second effect of changing and differentiated levels of immigration status on the emergence and development of associations relates to increasing positive decisions amongst members. Over the

course of the research period, a pattern of waning participation emerged that was directly linked to changing immigration status under UK Home Office Case Resolution policy.⁴ Most members of groups were granted a form of leave to remain and subsequently, member numbers dropped significantly. Positive decisions affected individual member needs of groups, their motivation to be involved as well as the foci of organisations. The correlation between waning participation and positive decisions reveals one of the ways in which broader asylum policies affect group formation processes and sustainability. The impact of dispersal and the experience of *non-settlement* (Piacentini 2008) it produces on associations' capacities to meet members' needs has been documented in the literature on asylum and dispersal (see for example Griffiths et al. 2005). My research findings build upon this by highlighting the impact of positive decisions on the collective identity of associations and the processes of group formation. In brief: rather than strengthening the position and resources of an organisation, increased positive decisions appeared to have a detrimental effect on group continuity. This particular trend is missing from RCO studies which focus largely on emergence and ignore the effects of differentiated and changing immigration status within groups.

Although associations may also come to an end because they have fulfilled their purpose, group categorisation as an RCO was never an accurate reflection of the longer-term aims of the different associations in this study. One of which was establishing as a settled minority population in Scotland and association continuity was seen as integral to achieving this goal.

If we just disappear because we are not asylum seekers anymore, then what does this say about us? No, the group is our way to say we are part of Glasgow, and it is a legacy for our children. It is a symbol of Congolese people making Glasgow their future home. We are here to stay. (Simon, Congolese man, refugee).

During fieldwork, committee members would often state that the new pressures they faced as refugees (getting a job, finding new housing, concentrating on family reunification) meant they had less time to give to the group. Such pressures relating to the 28 day 'moving-on' period have gained increasing attention in academic and policy research (Carter and El-Hassam 2003; Lindsay et al. 2010).⁵ A second indication of the importance of association continuity is the presence of a dual or parallel focus on both 'asylum issues' and wider 'settlement' issues, suggestive that groups had not fulfilled their purpose in addressing asylum-related problems for members, but aspired to longevity. This dual focus might be hindered by lack of resources and capital for associations to be effective

⁴ Also known as Legacy Review, this involved a review of outstanding claims predating the Asylum and Immigration Act of 2004, and ran from November 2007 until summer 2011. Case Resolution introduced a new form of subsidiary protection that effectively removed the right to indefinite leave and introduced a revised status: Refugee status with five years limited leave to remain, held under 'active review' in the UK (in line with Government's Five Year Strategy for Asylum and Immigration announced in February 2005).

⁵ This 'moving-on period' refers to the 28-day transition period imposed upon refugees to access mainstream services including securing appropriate housing, accessing mainstream benefits and other relevant services. This period is a particularly vulnerable time for new refugees as they have to make the transition from complete dependency upon UKBA, to being responsible for negotiating the complex housing, health and benefits system in the UK and paying for energy costs recent research suggests this particularly short timeframe has led to increase levels of destitution amongst newly granted refugees. Asylum seekers who are refused face a similar time-pressure of 21 days to vacate accommodation (British Red Cross and Refugee Survival Trust 2009, 2011).

actors in wider 'non-asylum specific' social fields. That associations are ill-equipped is directly related to the constraints they face when categorised as an RCO and the limited opportunities this presents. In parallel, a very distinct feature of all the associations can be identified in their claims for alternative identities and representations, not limited to being 'asylum seekers' or an RCO but as 'other' types of associations, reflecting a desire to be represented by different overlapping identities. The RCO label was not only considered a misrepresentation of who they were, but as a category it has little meaning for the very people being thus categorised.

A third effect of differentiated levels of immigration status is that it exposes internal tensions within groups. As stated earlier in this paper, positive decisions negatively affected participation levels of many members who had been granted a form of leave to remain. But there were also implications for those members still awaiting a status determination decision and how they experience the changing immigration status of others, as Estelle described during an interview when I asked why she no longer attended meetings:

We are like a scab... you pick at it and you are reminded of the pain. They (*other members*) don't want to be reminded of us. They don't want to be reminded of being asylum seekers. When everyone didn't have their papers we were all the same. Then some start to get their papers. They want to celebrate but they don't tell you. They don't want you to feel bad, so they go off into small groups. But then you find out they are meeting up and you are not invited. So it gets like a club [...] I am not jealous, but I am different now (Estelle, Ivorian woman, asylum seeker).

In two of the groups involved in the Glasgow research, members who remained asylum seekers described a developing a sense of outsider-ness. Members felt they were becoming a minority within a minority, no longer represented by the group. Of course a number of factors might affect decisions to participate, none the least personality clashes and personal dislikes between members. But such claims were suggestive of a more subtle, and rarely discussed, hierarchy of immigration status emerging within groups. Again, this appears to be an important feature of group life largely overlooked in studies. What was becoming increasingly apparent was that as more and more members received positive decisions, those who remained asylum seekers were rendered both more visible and invisible within the group. In some instances, members spoke about how as asylum seekers they lived with a social stigma as 'second class human beings', but that they had now started to feel this within their groups. Other 'general migrant' members looking on also sensed this:

It's about a status, you know ... about what status you have. So somebody who came here maybe with a 2 or 3 year visa to study and then you have somebody who has been going through the asylum system... and you don't feel like you are a brother or sister or friend to that person because they have a different status. You don't listen to them like you do to others. What you have done is you have basically created, you know, another social class for yourself and you think you are better than everybody else. (Gilles, Cameroonian man, migrant)

There was also a relationship between varied ability to be actively involved and differentiated immigration status. Some members spoke of how they found their asylum seeker status as restricting

group involvement, contributing directly to a subjective experience of internal marginalisation. For example, during an interview with Sabine, she told me:

There was definitely a change (when she got her papers). Because not having your papers, you feel frustrated you know. Even when you are amongst your brothers, people from your country, all that... I think it (immigration status) does influence you. You think 'I'm a bit weaker than them'. I definitely felt that. For example, sometimes decisions were being made which I didn't agree with, but I couldn't say so, I felt I couldn't speak up as an asylum seeker. [...] and you know with the business of having your papers, there is a part of you that says, why bother getting involved in all that (association business) because you don't know if you will still be there tomorrow. I think that really influences a lot of people's participation. (Sabine, Cameroonian woman)

Changing and differentiated immigration status and effects on ideological convergence

The second stage of Werbner's framework is ideological convergence. This stage too can be analysed through the lens of changing and differentiated immigration status within group life. It is also a useful way to understand certain features of the association life-cycle, that is, how a group's collective identity evolves over time, extends beyond the group boundary, and the effects this has on sustainability.

As illustrated in the earlier excerpts, in rejecting the RCO label, groups on the one hand assert convergences and alignments with other 'minorities' by making claims of self-representation beyond perceived 'refugeeness'. Through this alignment, associations identify a set of universalistic values whilst working hard to maintain their particularistic goals. On the other hand, these same groups did, on occasion, find themselves strategically engaging with labels to justify their distinctive social and political position within the broader discourses of 'minority' associations. So whilst on one level they see the RCO as stigmatising, they equally recognise that they have to, at times, adopt this label in order to stake a claim to a place in the society of reception, and to access specific funds.

As the president of a Cameroonian association stated during a members' online debate as to whether to accept or reject externally imposed funder deadlines for a Refugee Week project, which some members felt was irrelevant to their group:

The Refugee Council is very important strategic partner for us and we have had a long relation with them since the inception of our group. It is vital that we understand the importance of that relationship and how our work or what we do fit into their agenda. All the bigger institutions like parliament right down to small community groups all over Scotland and other parts of U.K. celebrate this very symbolic day [World Refugee Day, 20 June] even though very few of them have refugees in their organisations. (Association email exchange)

And as a member of another association stated during an interview:

We are no different from any other voluntary association... By this I mean we all have to chase the funds. So if this means it needs to be 'refugee money' then so be it, but we also want the chance to apply for 'non-refugee money'... you know, like money for what

you call black and ethnic minority, that's who we are too, not just asylum. (Gilles, Cameroonian Man, migrant)

Such strategising around labels is of course not necessarily unique or distinct to RCOs. It is also common in other populations categorised as 'vulnerable', who strategically engage with labels in order to ensure services, for example mental health or disability groups. Nonetheless there is an underlying tension between how groups self-identify and how groups are categorised, and the different agendas underpinning these processes. A focus on 'refugeeness' makes it difficult to recognise not only this tension but also articulations of ideological convergence across a variety of identities. During a consultation workshop on the strategic direction of a community development team working with asylum seekers and refugees, one participant told me she was happy to be consulted on asylum issues, but that this was also a source of continuing frustration:

We are really just organisations whose members come from different backgrounds, not just asylum [...] I am happy to help with this consultation but why not be invited to consult on other BME matters, with other non-asylum or refugee organisations. We are 'black' and a 'minority population' in Glasgow (Jeanne, Ivorian woman, refugee).

The members' experience of the consultation reveals an interesting paradox: far from being 'hard to reach' and 'hidden', certain segments of these populations see themselves as being 'over-consulted and 'over-researched' (Temple and Moran 2005). But more is happening here: these groups may well indeed be 'over-consulted' as asylum seekers or refugees, but are equally 'under-consulted' on wider BME matters. As a result, they are 'seldom heard' or 'seldom seen' as a BME population. It can be argued then that the focus on RCO labelling and lack of attention to differentiated immigration status within such groups contributes to this 'see-saw' effect of 'over/under consultation'. Ultimately, the consultation process itself remains mainly an extractive process with little impact on services, policy or public attitudes.

The views expressed above reveal that, in practice, such associations are being excluded from the wider BME sector by the labels assigned to them by various external actors. Such categorisation processes also serve to reinforce their representation as vulnerable groups (the main aim of the above-mentioned workshop was to provide a rationale to external funders for the community development team's 3-5 year development strategy). In order to meet funder requirements, it is necessary for support agencies to maintain their exclusive positions of knowledge bearers of 'refugee community' issues. Despite being consulted as experts, groups were defined in the terms of the third sector stakeholder, rather than their own. Group members felt constrained by the category, desired to align themselves to other 'settled' groups with an established foothold in different social fields, such as a wider 'BME community'.

The data from Glasgow suggest that, across the 6 groups studied, members wanted to challenge the boundaries imposed by the RCO label. One expression of this was the articulation of convergence across immigration status to other immigrant or minority populations.

During fieldwork and interviews, members regularly expressed their belief that as newly settling minorities, they were entitled to and should be able to apply for funds 'ring-fenced' for the general BME sector. One association had been successful in this endeavour, receiving Glasgow City Council

funds to assist with rental costs of office space. In their application, they positioned themselves as a women's BME group, stating clearly their aims of addressing inequalities and discrimination faced by BME women across the city (an expression of ideologically converging across a common set of objectives). This group then challenged externally constructed and imposed 'refugeeness' and asserted an alternative collective representation. They successfully formulated an identification strategy around common discourses that related to the contemporary condition of 'BME' women within the wider society and successfully aligned themselves to this:

We see ourselves as new minorities, but although we are new, we share lots of the same worries as our Asian sisters did before us and still do today. (Laurentine, Congolese woman, migrant)

Such expressions of alignment demonstrate how groups actively distance themselves from the refugee label and identify common discourses and struggles with other BME communities who have had to fight for resources, and who have mobilised around their 'ethnicised' identities. Each of the associations studied in Glasgow accentuated their particularistic cultural symbols as a way to define their group-specific boundaries. However, at the same time, they also emphasised what they perceived as universalistic values and symbols that they identified with other 'racialised minorities', interchangeably signified as 'Asian Muslims', 'Pakistanis' or 'Asians' rather than with the wider (and 'whiter') Scottish community. This most commonly occurred during Annual General Meetings and regular association meetings, where association presidents and guest speakers called members to be proactive and look to their "Asian predecessors", as the following excerpt from an AGM speech reflects:

Be proactive, take action. Do not wait for things to happen. Look at the Pakistanis, the Chinese... they have worked hard to build their community and their place in Glasgow, like us they had nothing when they arrived here. They are now political players, they are economically independent... they are our role model for our African shops and the new African economy in Scotland. (Heloise, Congolese woman, refugee).

Of course, an important issue here is that labels such as 'Asian' or 'Muslim community' are themselves oversimplifications of complex realities. An uncritical engagement with 'BMEness' will also fail to reflect the tensions within such populations, in very much the same way I argue occurs with the RCO label and its focus on 'refugeeness'. Werbner and Anwar (1991) and Sivanandan (1990) are highly critical of the way 'race relations' perspectives on immigration have imposed a fictive unity on ethnically and racially bounded 'communities', and 'BMEness' can be seen as a product of this. Such fictive unity presupposes homogenous communities and fails to address internal diversity, conflict and tensions that arise around not only ethnicised identities but also socioeconomic status, gender, age, culture and religion. Sivanandan (1985) argues that 'race relations' manifested itself in new funding structures based on ethnically constructed segmentary divisions, resulting in previously supportive groups now competing with each other for funds and influence. He critiques the inclusionary rhetoric of 'race relations' which perpetuate exclusionary practices. Werbner and Anwar (1991) also provide a detailed account of the problems within associations when the notion of fictive unity is viewed through a critical lens.

Although the notion of 'BMEness' must also be problematised, it is nonetheless important to recognise that when expressed by asylum seeker and refugee-led groups, it can be understood as ways of practising ideological convergence. This convergence reflects a move away from immigration status towards an alignment with other BME populations who have also had to struggle for resources, but who have mobilised around 'ethnicised' identities (as opposed to identities framed around immigration status). It is also important to note this is an alignment to populations who, when juxtaposed with the 'temporariness' of asylum seekers and refugees, can be understood as part of a wider, settled 'host' community', thus revealing shared issues that could provide important foundations for potential mobilisation. Such issues might relate to poor quality housing, poverty, limited employment opportunities, discrimination and racism. If the focus remains solely on 'refugeeness,' then it becomes difficult to discern these social processes and their long-term implications not only for settlement and integration but also for challenging social injustice and inequalities.

A final important point is that these practices or articulations of ideological convergence co-exist alongside what Werbner describes as the first stage: the development of a local associative network. This highlights that the stages do not necessarily occur in a linear fashion but can emerge or happen simultaneously. That is, the features that differentiate the processes of association emergence and of convergence with other groups or populations can be co-present at any point in the association life-cycle. Differentiated and changing immigration status forces a more sophisticated and critical engagement with an overly stagist approach to the community life-cycle, because, depending upon their immigration status, members will have differing needs and ideas about the group's direction at every point of the group's development. In practice this means groups can maintain a parallel focus on asylum issues and wider settlement issues simultaneously, the focus being influenced by shifting political and cultural contexts.

Changing and differentiated immigration status and implications for mobilisation

The last stage in Werbner's framework is mobilisation, where a movement emerges as a recognisable public *protest* movement (1991a: 117, emphasis in original). Of interest here is that when mobilisation occurred around an issue or event threatening community autonomy or solidarity, in most cases during the research this was largely framed around immigration matters. Importantly, mobilisation practices were not limited to a specific group but would also extend beyond association boundaries. For example, members across the groups engaged in public acts of protest within and across their associative networks (NGOs, support agencies, Trade Unions), using their online fora to lobby MPs and MSPs. They also provided template lobbying letters, circulated information on visiting times in detention centres and contact numbers for detainees. Using their online fora and text messaging, members and management committees actively encouraged each other to maintain general contact with detainees for morale and support. But also in private, members would make individual contributions to a collective fund to help with bail, to buy mobile phone credit or a cheap 'pay-as-you-go' mobile phone package to give to a detained person. In some associations, with the permission of the person detained, members gained access to their flat to remove and store belongings that would

otherwise be uplifted and in most cases dumped by the housing authority. Although the 'refugeeness' of the different associations did not always define them, it was never too far away from their day-to-day activities and discussion, and was played out within the associations and across members' wider associative networks. For example, at one Cameroonian association meeting, a Cameroonian woman who had been the subject of a relatively high profile anti-destitution and anti-deportation campaign in Glasgow came along to personally thank members for their moral and practical support. Although her campaign was never mentioned during the meetings I attended, and had been widely supported by a range of groups, I was able to follow members' efforts through their online messenger group email. Of note in this last example is that this was a group very much asserting a non-refugee identity, but which continued to mobilise around asylum issues.

This reveals an interesting phenomena that again speaks to the critique of an overly stagist framework that presumes a linear trajectory from emergence to mobilisation. Different association types and practices may be understood as co-present in each stage. The groups taking part in the Glasgow study clearly mobilised around particularistic goals whilst also converging around a broader set of structural inequalities. This was particularly evident in the women's group discussed earlier that had received funding on the basis of services to be provided that would address disadvantage and discrimination as faced by BME women in Glasgow. It also reveals that different group interests can co-exist side by side. In sum, groups can simultaneously focus on and mobilise around refugee matters which relate to 'refugeeness' *and* wider settlement matters that can be understood as relating to their 'BMEness'.

Concluding comments

By advocating a life-cycle approach to analysing association life, this paper has explored various internal and external factors and processes which affect group emergence and sustainability. In light of changing policies as they relate to asylum seekers, refugees, migrants, BME populations and integration and community cohesion, it is difficult to know what lies ahead for these groups. For example, how are they to position themselves in a new policy characterised by funding cuts? Will this shrinking funding environment push groups to retreat back to ring-fenced 'refugee money'? Can asylum seeker and refugee-led groups effectively compete in the wider BME sector? Will, or can, they have longevity in competing sectors? How might this move beyond 'refugeeness' contribute to broader debates of integration and 'settlement' and the role such groups may play in the Big Society agenda if recognised as belonging to the wider BME population?

These questions suggest areas for further research into association life and sustainability. However, some answers may lie, in some part, in the shift away from single group funding. The groups studied in Glasgow each negotiated the tension between particularistic identities and claims to universalistic goals. However they are also facing tough decisions about their respective futures. The associations informing this study are exemplary of the Big Society agenda of a stronger role for civil society rather than the state. However, despite these associations demonstrating Big Society in practice, the increasingly shrinking funding pot they can access is undermining their work, and possibilities to continue, should that be their goal. Being limited to 'asylum seeker funds' and refugee

networks and excluded from wider BME narratives appear to exacerbate this problem. As a result, longevity for some will mean evolving into a primarily social and cultural group. For others, it may mean developing as a proactive BME organisation providing services to a wider population. These are only two of many other possible outcomes, and for associations this will mean finding a place that not only permits them to position themselves on their own terms, but also recognises this as a valid and visible position and as valued members of wider society.

Lukes (2009) argues that to access so-called hidden or hard-to-reach populations, movement from where we are is essential. But these populations must also be allowed movement in how they self-identify and define their practices, experiences, values and collective identities. Only then can change within groups be firstly recognised and secondly understood in its complexity. Change reveals the life-cycle process within groups that tends to be missing from accounts focusing on 'refugeeness' and Werbner's framework provides one way forward. To be effective however, an overly stagist approach needs to be avoided and replaced with a more fluid understanding of groups simultaneously moving through and between stages. The benefit of a life-cycle approach is that it allows for an increasingly sophisticated understanding of change within groups as it occurs in response to internal and external factors to be developed. Such an approach demonstrates that to conceive of these groups as fixed in time and space paints only a partial and reductive picture of a complex reality. It contributes to the problematic impasse of 'refugeeness'. There is an added limitation to focusing on reductive categories: defining populations by immigration status fails to attend to important overlaps and interconnectedness between different segments within a broader population, creating further distinctions between populations. As a result, groups face further challenges in moving beyond labels.

Critically, groups labelled as RCOs need to be able to move within and across boundaries rather than be constrained by them. This requires not only movement from where these associations are, but also involvement in the relevant conversations to effectively move beyond 'refugeeness', to work towards equal access to opportunities and to help newly settling minority populations develop their place as part of wider civil society.

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Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.

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