The political significance of ethno-cultural organizations: The case of Ethiopian immigrants in the City of Edmonton, Canada

by

Berhanu Demeke

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Department of Educational Policy Studies
University of Alberta

Abstract

This qualitative case study research was conducted to contribute to a better understanding and enhancement of immigrant political integration. It focused on Ethiopian immigrant community in a city in Canada and explored an understudied area of how belonging to ethnocultural organizations impacts political integration in African immigrant communities. It sought to answer questions about the political significance of ethnocultural organizations by analyzing and interpreting data generated from interviews with 15 participants, relevant organizational documents and field notes. It used the discourse of communities of practice to understand how endogenous social learning groups affect the organizations' success and drew on Nancy Fraser's conception of justice to assess how visible minority immigrants are faring in economic, social and political lives as well as to posit a normative vision of a just society, a social ideal to strive to. Furthermore, it applied insights from critical pedagogy, importantly the idea that learning engagements have inherent political implications, in interpreting the activities that members initiated, organized and participated in under the auspices of ethnocultural community organizations. The broad conception of politics the study adopted, and the emphasis it placed on political agency facilitated discovering unexpected ways in which members of ethnocultural organizations admirably sought and asserted political agency and in so doing improved resources for political integration. The study culminated in proposing to increase ethnocultural organizations' capacity to support immigrant political integration, further animate political agency and improve social wellbeing. It did so by identifying, critiquing and seeking to redress a) broader discourses of contemporary political understandings of integration, immigrants and democracy as well as b) endogenous factors of division over homeland politics, deficiency in criticality in programming and shortage of administrative acumen.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Berhanu Abate Demeke. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "The political significance of ethno-cultural organizations: The case of Ethiopian immigrants in the city of Edmonton, Canada", No. 00059220, February 12, 2016.

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family; first and foremost, to my father Demeke Abate and my mother Zaid Mebrahtu Tesfaghabr, whose significance in my life is much more than what can be adequately expressed in words or in deeds. Your gifts of guidance, joy and love to me have exemplified God's work on earth. It is a privilege to carry parts of you until the end.

It gives me great joy to honor my lover, wife and counsellor, Senait Yoseph, who has stood behind me and egged me on when I faulted, walked beside me and offered wise counsel and listening ears and ran in front of me with inspiration and foresight. From you and through you, I have learned that fulfilling work can be done even in the face of adversity.

To my sister Almaz, my brothers Kirubel, Surafel and Fanuel and my sister Tsion, whose filial love and support has been steadfast and great source of confidence. Specially to my sister Cha, whose proximity, companionship, endless conversations, laughters and empathy throughout this study and beyond have represented to me purest sisterly love and friendship.

Last but not least, to my daughter Haewan Zoe Demeke, whose arrival in this world has brought the greatest blessings, deepest love and highest responsibility.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Biographical sources of the study

This study has three intertwined sources: 1) my lived experience as an immigrant, 2) my longstanding theoretical interest in understanding the political nature of human beings and its relationship to wellbeing and 3) lessons from my current work.

Personal Aspects of the Research

My lived experiences as an immigrant, having been raised in Ethiopia and emigrating to the West at a fairly young age, have provided me valuable perspectives. I entered Canada in 1992 under "refugee category" and my sense of gratefulness and civic responsibility stems from the reception I was extended and subsequently for life-enhancing opportunities I have been afforded. However, I have also encountered the dark side of living in Canada as an immigrant, through encounters with individuals and systems that while posturing to be genuinely multiculturalist are only so nominally. I strongly identify with my immigrant friends' description of their life in Canada as one of vacillation between warm sense of security and acceptance and experience-borne cautiousness, frustration and alienation. This ambivalence, though cumbersome, does also provide a privileged position from which to examine immigrants' social lives. And this experience of oddness is part of what inspired me to do this research, in an attempt to understand and to contribute to a world that is more just, while striving to be aware of, and possibly guard against, my own shortcomings and deceptive self-righteousness that afflicts all of us.

Theoretical Aspects of the Research

In my M.A. work in political theory (Demeke, 2008) I pursued my passionate interest in understanding human beings' political nature through a critique of a variant of political

individualism, its corrosive effect on collective political consciousness and how citizenship conceived as civic friendship can stem its disruptive implications. My doctoral study is in part a continuation of this interest in the sense that it explores collective action and its importance for wellbeing, albeit as it relates to a specific immigrant group and its political activities through its institutional affiliation to ethno-cultural organizations (ECOs). In this study I was especially focused on how belonging to ECOs facilitate accessing social goods, enhancing identity and striving for political representation. And I brought the illuminating forces of critical and learning perspectives to my exploration.

Professional Aspects of the Research

In my recent work experience in community and educational institutions, I supported new immigrants and witnessed firsthand the many ways they find life challenging. Lack of familiarity with institutions restricted access to social goods such as education, health, housing curtailing in the process their voice and their wellbeing. I also became more and more aware of the fact that sections of new immigrants are seriously underrepresented in formal political structures. As a result, a lot of immigrants show feelings of being bystanders subject to forces they are not able to inform, influence or change. They feel they have neither the conducive platforms to make political claims nor social and psychological resources to substantively contribute to democratic life in part because of the how they are misunderstood and the ways in which they are expected to *assimilate*. The alienation that I witnessed in them has powerfully highlighted for me the importance of political agency for social wellbeing and spurred my passion to study, and to help address, the key issue of political agency among immigrant communities in Canada. Hence, the research is rooted in a convergence of my lived experience, theoretical interest and lessons I learned as a community worker.

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Background of the problem

Even as multiculturalism, as an approach to governance in diverse societies, spreads across the globe (Kymlicka, 2007), voices in the West calling for its burial have gained momentum (Kymlicka, 2010, 2012). A great source of the backlash against multiculturalism is its alleged failure to integrate immigrants into so-called mainstream society (Banting, Kymlicka, Johnston & Soroka, S., 2006; Garcea, Kirova & Wong, 2008, pp. 1 – 2). Despite being the first country to adopt multiculturalism as state policy, the integration process is curtailed by the fact that immigrants, particularly visible minority immigrants, fare dismally in some fundamental aspects of life: in political representation, employment equity, and health access. This has dire consequences for immigrants insofar as it compromises their wellbeing and for Canadian political community by robbing it of the potential contributions immigrants can make. These effects undermine the Canadian nation as a just society tied by bonds of mutual understanding and a common project.

While considered a success in integration of immigrants compared to other nations – despite recent regress – Canada ranks poorly in the specific area of political integration of immigrants (MIPEX, 2015). In Canada, immigrants do not participate in democratic life before they become Canadian citizens, and they do not have opportunities to inform policy through consultative bodies (MIPEX, 2015). Visible minority political representation in federal elections has been low. In an article that studied visible minority immigrants' political representation in 2006, 2008 federal elections, in historical context, Black (2011) affirms that the low representation is virtually unchanged since 1993.

And although electoral successes by visible minorities candidates increased in 2011 and 2015 federal elections, to 28 and 45 MP's respectively (Black, 2017), they fall short of

proportional representation, which stands at 13.3 % in elected MP against a visible minority proportion of 22.3 % of Canada's general population. Although these numbers are very encouraging, only time will tell if the optimism the numbers inspire will continue into a sustainable trajectory. It is also important to be reminded of the symbolic and substantive significance of the electoral success of Hussen Ahmed, a Canadian of Somali origin, who now sits as Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. Although this is anomalous in the broad context of the presence of visible minority immigrants is such positions of formal political influence, its significance should not be overlooked, especially as it represents an example of the openness of the political system and its potential significance as a possible harbinger.

At the provincial level while visible minority population increased from 10% to 14% of total population (Albert Spotlight, 2006), there are only 7 out of 123 MLA's that represent the visible minority category hold office. There exists a deep chasm between mainstream Canada and immigrants in the political arena which are evident in political representation in major Canadian cities (Hum & Simpson, 2004; Armony, Barriga & Schugurensky, 2004), a chasm particularly pronounced in how African immigrants are faring. In the city of Edmonton, for example, while four percent of its population is African-Canadian (Statistics Canada, 2012), there are no, and never have been, elected African-Canadians members in Edmonton City Council. Hence, "we are far from electing a diverse Canada, [although] fulfilling democracy's promise of political participation, belonging, and inclusion requires that we do better" (Andrew, Biles, Siemiatycki & Tolley, 2008, p. 269). The reasons for this chasm have been not only immigrants' lack of familiarity with electoral system but also maintenance of status-quo and various kinds of discrimination (Abu-Laban & Stasilus, 1991; Black, 2017).

Immigrants are also lagging in employment equity, reflected in pay gap and underemployment. According to 2016 Statistics Canada numbers, Alberta has the highest immigrant wage gap, with immigrants from African and the Middle Eastern countries being at the lowest end of the gap (Statistics Canada, 2016). While discrepancy in pay gap between native-born Canadians and immigrants is due in part to lower human capital among immigrants, it is also because of "barriers [that] have to do with immigrants' foreign credentials not being fully recognized in Canada, as well as employment discrimination against those with identifiable linguistic characteristics and racial features" (Li, 2003, p. 118). The failure to utilize immigrant human capital and resources constitute, "an inefficient way to allocate scarce human resources and imposes an economic cost both on racialized groups and on the Canadian economy as a whole (Galabuzi, 2006, p. 61). Economic cost of unrecognized foreign credentials was estimated, in the year 2002 for example, at a cost of 4.1 billion to 5.9 billion dollars to the Canadian economy in forfeited income revenue related to about 340,000 new Canadians whose credentials were not assessed and employment commensurate to their education were not secured (Daenzer, 2014, p. 22). What is more difficult to calculate, however, is the human loss of self-esteem, hope and confidence (Galabuzi, 2006, pp. 36-7).

Unfortunately, "employment and wage inequities represent only one aspect of… inequities in Canada" (Nestel, 2012, p. 12). Despite the fact that most arrive in Canada healthier than their Canadian counterparts, so-called healthy immigrant effect, immigrants face substantial barriers to healthcare for reasons that have to do with culture, communication, socio-economic status, healthcare system structure, and immigrant knowledge (Turin, 2016, p. 1537, McDonalda, 2004; Nestel, 2012). While there is substantial gap in research that provide insights about visible minorities and immigrants and how they are utilizing healthcare system (Turin, 2016;

McDonalda, 2004), studies that focus on social exclusion and discrimination that is very often faced by immigrants are being confirmatory (Beiser, 2005, p. 36). It has been established that availability of translators at point of service, better training of doctors in intercultural awareness as well as structural changes and education of immigrants can go a long way in addressing the issue (Turin, 2016; McDonalda, 2004). Inequities in health among visible minorities in Canada have far-reaching implications for the health of individuals and communities and raises questions about "Canadians' self-perception as an equitable society" (Nestel, 2012, p.23). These social, economic and political gaps raise serious question of social justice and since one of the most prevalent ways that are addressed is through the concept and practice of integration, it is very important to consider what the research on integration. To this end, I will next consider the different approaches used to understanding integration and the assumptions that drive them.

Studies addressing the problem

Integration is a vast, complex and multidimensional discourse that is spread over multiple disciplines. However, the specific type of integration, i.e., political integration, that this research is engaged in exploring has not been sufficiently studied despite various implications worthy of serious consideration (Frideres, 2011; O'Neille, Gidengil & Young, 2012; Pikkov, 2006). Part of the reason why immigrant integration is approached this way is because there is a certain stock of theoretical filters that obscure vital aspects of the integration experience. Although not exhaustive, the three filters identified here are neoliberal constructions, quantitative methodologies, and formalistic understandings of political integration and will be explored in more detail in chapter two after briefly discussing them here. These filters tell us a lot about current attitudes towards immigrant integration and reveals a gap which shows that predominant perspectives through which immigrant integration is studied neglect, distort or over simplify the

complex integration experiences of immigrants. And while there is nascent literature that provides a more accurate analysis, it is does not focus on African immigrant communities.

The neoliberal filter

The first pervasive filter is the economic lens through which immigrant integration experiences are refracted. The economic approach goes hand in hand with neoliberal policies that governments in Canada have been pursuing since the 1980s (Kobayashi, 2014). One manifestation of this approach is seen in the prevalence of a tacit belief that immigrant integration is a function of how well immigrants are doing economically, especially defined as "employability" or "labour market attachment." The assumption that economic integration tells us enough about other aspects of integration is prevalent (Pikkova, 2006) but deeply misleading because successful economic integration does not necessarily lead to political integration (Pikkova, 2006). The case is very well articulated by Andrew et al. (2008):

> until recently, relatively little research in Canada has looked at the electoral – or even political – dimensions of the integration of immigrant, refugee, and minority populations in Canada. Rather, much of the integration literature focuses on economic, and to a lesser extent educational, social, and cultural dimensions.... This relative neglect is somewhat surprising, given that the political arena is often a space where social change can occur.... Why has research not focused on the political or electoral participation of immigrants and minorities in Canada? Is the political process not viewed as an important mechanism for minority communities? (p. 5)

The focus on economic integration is so pervasive that it virtually displaces serious considerations of political integration. In contrast to the focus on economic integration, this

research sought to highlight political integration, taking it as a means through which immigrants seek cultural recognition, economic welfare and representation. Since economic integration is not *sine quo non* of integration, it is highly questionable if the current discourse on immigrant integration and government policies and programs that share such an approach on the issue are nuanced enough to provide a basis for better understanding of immigrants' social wellbeing. This research took the opposite tack and showed how the politics is an important aspect of their lives.

The quantitative filter

Beyond the political questions, this research also critiqued the extent to which quantitative methodologies are utilized to understand and assess immigrant integration. Currently quantitative methodologies that center on surveys are ubiquitous in immigrant integration research. In this research environment numerical approach, or indexing, is prevalent. As Wilkinson (2013) documents,

> Recently, there have been several attempts in North America and in Europe to conceptualize and operationalize immigrant integration. Some examples include the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) created by the British Council and the Migration Policy Group (2011), the Cultural Rights Index and the Legal Obstacles to Integration Index (Waldruch & Hofinger, 1997). (p. 3)

This quantitative approach is largely based on survey research and, as such, gives a bird's eye view of immigrant integration experiences. The noticeable emphasis on quantitative approaches, which has the drawback of underemphasizing close-up narratives of immigrants' experiences risks producing an incomplete and, therefore, deceptive picture. Conclusions drawn from these quantitative research projects are debatable at best and misleading at worst.

The formal politics filter

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The third filter identified in the research on immigrant political integration has to do with the conception of politics that is implicit in studies on political lives of immigrants. Most of the time, a particularly formal understanding of politics is assumed; thus, indicators such as immigrant turnouts in political elections, naturalization rates and the number of immigrants holding political party membership are taken to be enough for assessing political integration. As Abu-Laban (2008) points out in her review of a book on immigrant incorporation,

> the focus on political incorporation concerns itself with the formal arena of politics (especially elections) and the engagement of citizens – naturalized and native-born. As such, a common model is presented that uses the native-born as the yardstick by which to measure outcomes for immigrants rather than, for example, immigrants' own understandings. Yet, as feminist scholars have pointed out ''the personal is political,'' and there may be activities that take place in the home, the workplace, or the street that newcomers view as expressing political agency. (p. 529)

While the three stock of filters outlined above detract adequate understanding of immigrant political integration; fortunately, "scholarly attention to the political participation of the diverse identities" is being done in recent years (Andrew et al., 2008, p. 5). Avoiding most of the aforementioned pitfalls, this *new* literature, explores various angles of visible minority political participation. One approach considers ethnocultural organizations as important means of immigrant integration in general and political integration in particular. This is a productive and highly valuable field of examination with substantial degree of contribution for understanding immigrant political integration and consequently for enhancing immigrants' political lives as well as their social wellbeing. However, it has very rarely been applied to studying African

immigrant communities; it is in fact, virtually silent in this area.

Problem statement

Research in the area of immigrant integration indicates that visible minority immigrants face barriers to integration and as result are constrained from fully participating in economic, social and political life. While a substantial amount of research focuses on economic integration, to the neglect of political integration, those that take politics seriously are either overwhelmingly centered on analyzing formal avenues and arenas of politics or take a quantitative approach which provide at best a partial picture of immigrant integration experiences. And whereas a nascent literature that avoids the blind spots that characterize these studies is growing, it has rarely considered African ECOs influence on political integration of immigrants.

As enunciated in the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988* and the *Immigration and Refugee Act (IRPA)* of 2001, integration is a social ideal that is enshrined in Canada's constitutional framework and is intended to inform pertinent social policies and practices. (Berry, 2011; Biles & Winnemore, 2006, p. 24). The *Multiculturalism Act*, for example, states the policy of Canadian government as one of "[promoting] the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in elimination of any barrier to that participation" (*Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988*). However, Canada is far from adequately addressing barriers to participation, which are pronounced among visible minority immigrants, as described above. These barriers are negatively consequential, as they violate fundamental principles of justice insofar as they deny parity of participation (Fraser, 2009), harm people's dignity (Freire, 1970) and curtail their agency by misrecognizing their particularity (Taylor, 1994) and undermine

social solidarity that is a necessary foundation for shared civic identity (Reitz & Banerjee, 2007; Kymlicka, 2015).

However, the concern of this research is much more than about immigrants' compromised ability to fully participate in social life and to access social goods, as serious as that in itself is; rather, it is also about Canada's status as a democracy. For, lack of immigrant participation is a social and political problem that undermines democracy (Bloemraad, 2006, p. 1). Whereas participation is a key element in democratic legitimacy (Nakhaie, 2008, p. 835; O'neill et al., 2012, p.185; Taylor, 2004), integration is particularly important for immigrants since integrating politically has a positive effect in overall integration. (O'neill et al., 2012, p. 185) and social wellbeing (Berry & Hou, 2016; Sam & Berry, 2006;). Therefore, that visible minority immigrants are socially constrained from full participation bodes ill to Canadian multicultural democracy. In this sense, studying political integration among immigrants serves as the prism through which to assess Canada's self-understanding as a just multicultural democracy, and as a way of interrogating the rhetoric of equal participation that undergirds it. Research shows that visible minority immigrants in Canada are faring dismally in political representation, employment equity, and health access. While their integration has been thwarted by barriers to participation; the role of ECO's – organizations that have a great potential for supporting acculturation – in political integration has not been studied nearly adequately; such studies are particularly scarce in African immigrant communities.

Purpose statement and research questions

The purpose of this case study was to explore how members of ECOs understand the political significance of belonging to these organizations and how they use their membership for political integration. The study was guided by the following questions:

1a. How do members of Ethiopian community in a city in Canada understand the political significance of belonging to ethnic organizations?

1b. How does their participation community organizations reflect a quest for, or assertion of, political agency?

2. What are the underlying factors that hamper the flourishment of ethnocultural organizations as a means of enhancing the political agency of immigrants?

3. What organizational and discursive shifts can positively impact the realization of immigrants' achievement of political agency when the work of ethnocultural organizations is considered?

Research design overview

This study is a qualitative instrumental case study that focuses on Ethiopian immigrant community in a city in Canada; although, it is also intended to shed light on African communities of comparable size and organization. In order to locate the study within scholarly works in the area of immigrant integration, I reviewed literature. I found that although the area has been well studied, a) there was generally inadequate attention given to political integration b) when political integration was taken up it was conceived too narrowly focused on formal politics, such as electoral politics and c) a quantitative approach that attempted to quantify and crudely aggregate the experiences of immigrant integration was preferred. However, d) there is a growing body of literature that took seriously informal ways immigrants sought to integrate politically, including studies that looked at the significance of ECOs for political integration. While encouraging, this area of research was exceedingly scant in African immigrant communities.

Determined to build on this literature and fill the gap that exists in the area, I focused on

an African ECO. I generated data through semi-structured interviews with 15 members of three

ECOs and from documents that pertain to the organizations. I analyzed the data through common

qualitative thematic coding and interpreted them through the lens of critical and learning

theories, paying particular attention to integrate the concept of political agency, which facilitated

giving interview participants' voices substantial centrality.

Three Ethiopian ethnocultural organizations form the main sites of the research. Two are

religious and one is secular, and all are located in Canada in a city where there is a sizable

population of Ethiopian immigrants.

	founded	type	Resource	
ECO I	1982	Secular	Fund raising; some government subsidy	
ECO II	1998	Religious (Christian)	Fund raising	
ECO III	2001	Religious (Moslem)	Self-generated mostly	

Ethnocultural organizations represent and advance the needs of an ethnocultural community. For

this study a community or group is defined by the shared characteristics unique to, and

recognized by, that group. This includes characteristics such as cultural traditions, ancestry,

language, national identity, country of origin and/or physical traits. To the extent that religion is

inextricably linked to the group's racial or cultural identity, it can also be recognized as a

defining characteristic (Canada Revenue Agency, 2005).

Previous research has established, although not sufficiently explored, (Bloemraad, 2005,

Bucklaschuk and Sormova, 2011) ECOs' importance for political integration of immigrants

for delivering members services and expressing immigrants' voices. I elicited participants'

perspectives on the purpose of ECOs, what they thought were ECOs' distinctive resources and

values; but, I also closely examined the activities that ECO members initiated, organized and participated in. I drew insights from participants' accounts of the activities facilitated by ECOs. The three major activities that I focused on, analyzed in the discussion chapters, expressed the social and personal priorities members have; thus, by applying social learning theory (Wenger, 1998) I sought to understand the objectives for which the activities were initiated, their efficacy and the benefits members drew from them.

Rationale and significance of the study

The rationale for the study was to redress the gap in research regarding the significance of ECOs on political integration of members of African immigrant communities. While integration is a key social ideal that multicultural societies aim at and by which their success as a just social political order is appraised (Berry, 2011; Berry & Hou, 2016; Bloemraad, 2006, 2008; Kymlicka, 2001, 2012; Sam & Berry, 2006), the paucity of research in this area of ECOs leaves an important avenue of investigation and valuable knowledge neglected. I sought to fill this gap by not only seriously examining the complex ways in which ECO's function but also by acknowledging and exemplifying the paramount importance of the voices of ECO members' and by conceiving politics broadly, as "any methods or tactics used, by individuals or groups, to make claims about the allocation of material or symbolic public goods" (Correa-Jones, 2013, p. 177).

The study provided theoretical contribution by engaging and critiquing dominant, liberal understandings of immigrant integration and reconceptualizing the concept within conceptual framework of agonistic democracy. As it avoided glossing over important differences among immigrant groups that sometimes characterize statistical approaches, the study provided insights about the distinct ways Ethiopian ECOs in the city of research function as a means of political

integration and constituted a resource for policy makers who can use it to develop nuanced integration policies. Furthermore, the study can serve as a mirror through which immigrant groups can reflexively examine the benefits of belonging to ECOs, including for political integration and social wellbeing.

The researcher's position

I am a member of the ethnocultural community I research. While in a sense my arrival in Canada in 1992 informally and automatically ensured my membership, I formally became a member when I began serving in one of the ECOs for two of years, as part of the executive committee from May 2005 to May 2007, responsible for culture and family affairs portfolio. This experience drew me deep into the workings of the community, enlivened me and gave me a perspective from which I learned. My active volunteering involvement in the community spans (all together) from 2002 to 2010. The details of my personal life, being newly married as of early 2010 and becoming a father for the first time with birth of my daughter in January 2014, have to some extent restricted me from active participation since 2011; although, I still am connected to the community in general and sporadically engage in activities of the community (as of 2018).

My connection to the Church organization I study has been intermittent. Despite my upbringing as Orthodox Christian, I have not been a practicing one and have not attended church service at the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church except for a few times. However, I am not distant from it at all. Almost since the church was established in 2001, I have had a connection to it through friends and family who participate in the organizations. As part of my formal role with the Ethiopian Community Association, I was an active participant in two endeavors on which the church and the community association collaborated. Personal acquaintances and social relationships I have had for many years with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church provided a

conducive set of circumstances for the research in terms of accessing information, resources and personnel. Conducting interviews and participating in and observing the community's life in action was smooth. I have socially known and interacted with members of the Moslem organization where I conducted research since my arrival in Edmonton; although, I have not been participant in the organization, apart from some formal interactions with members of its leadership regarding collaborative work on preparing for Heritage Days, 2005 and 2006 (as a member of E.C.A.E.).

Limitations

This research seeks to understand the relationship between belonging to ECOs and immigrant political integration. It takes the case of Ethiopian immigrants' experiences of integration by focusing on members of three Ethiopian ECO's in a city in Canada. The research therefore does not speak about, or for, Ethiopian immigrants in the city of the research in general. As an instrumental case study, the research is conducted in such a way as to shed light on immigrants' experiences in general, although generalization is resisted. Hence, insofar as ECOs play important role in the integration of immigrants, the findings were transferrable, rather than simply generalizable to other African immigrant groups.

Delimitation

This study was delimited in the following ways. First, it considered adult participants in three of the biggest and longest serving Ethiopian organizations even though there are several others in the city where the research was conducted. I delimited it in this way in order to generate rich data from organizations that have endured the test of time, have comparatively more visibility and have significant experience in devising programs and carrying out activities pertinent to their members. I also delimited the means of generating data to interviews, studying relevant

organizational documents and my field note; thus, I did not do a survey, for example. For, I determined that a survey would not provide me with reliable data on a topic of *political* integration, given the too often volatile connotations political questions have in general among a lot of Ethiopians, much less in a formal survey format.

Organization of the study

The study is presented in the following sequential manner. Chapter one begins with a brief overview of the study, which captures the essence of what is to come, and an account of autobiographical sources of the study, which constitute the personal motivation for the study. Then, the background of the problem the study addressed is laid out, culminating in the problem statement, purpose of the study and research questions. These are followed by research design overview and the study's rationale and significance. And then I address my position, as a researcher, before I spell out the limitation and delimitations, concluding with organization of the study. In chapter two, I provided literature reviews; first, describing three theoretical assumptions that drive a lot of studies of immigrant integration and then adding a fourth one that describes and assesses a nascent literature that I understand is markedly different from the first three in its more productive approach to understand immigrant integration from formal and informal politics point of view. This account revealed a gap in the literature which was part of the rationale for conducting the present study. In chapter three, I explicated the three theoretical conceptions I drew on as the lenses through which I understood the social world of the study and by which I sought to make sense of and interpret the data. Chapter four laid out the methodology of the study, the qualitative paradigm within which I conceived it, the ontological and epistemological stance I took, as well as the methods of collecting data. Chapter five presented the findings, which are presented in terms of five themes. Chapter six and chapter seven are the

discussion chapters, where I interpret and make sense of data through the theoretical lenses I used; these chapters are also where I answer the research questions more directly. Whereas the discussion in Chapter six focuses on making sense of three major activities ECOs made possible and the political implications they have, in doing so answering the first two research questions; Chapter seven works out implications of the discussion in chapter six, and is driven by the third research question, which is about why, given the many important ways ECO's support the integration of immigrants, they are under sourced and achieving below they potential. Chapter eight concluded the study with a summary, recommendations and laying out implications for further research.

Summary

I began this chapter by providing a brief overview and by outlining personal experiences that are at the root of my motivation to do the present research. These were followed by an account of the background of the problem and a survey of studies that address the problem. I presented the research questions immediately following the purpose statement. I then proceeded to discuss design elements, rationale and significance of the study as well as my positionality within the study. I closed with limitations and delimitations and an outline of the organization of the study. In the next chapter, two, I offer literature review. The details I presented in chapter two are driven by two overarching imperatives: to highlight the relative neglect of political integration from a ground-level approach that prioritizes immigrants' voices and to call attention to a gap in studies that address the relation between immigrant political integration and the role of ethno-cultural organizations in African immigrant communities.

Chapter Two: Literature review

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to explore how members of ECO's understand the political

significance of belonging to these organizations and how they use their membership for political

integration. Hence, I investigated the political lives of immigrants by exploring how belonging to

ethnocultural organizations facilitate, or hinder, their political agency. Here, in this chapter I

provide the discourse contexts within which salient aspects of the study, such political

integration, political participation and political agency, will be addressed. While the study was

primarily focused on political agency among Ethiopian immigrants in a Canadian city, the

literature reviewed here typically falls under concepts that seem to be used as alternatives such as

immigrant political participation, immigrant civic engagement, immigrant political incorporation

and immigrant political integration. I used political integration discourse as a point of entry since

this latter concept has become a rubric under which many questions of relevance to political

agency are constructed, discussed and disseminated. Following this introductory section, each of

the following three sections discussed one of a triad of features that are strikingly prominent in

immigrant integration literature. In so doing, a gap in the literature was revealed on which I

focused and directed my research.

In this chapter I first explain how the current discourse of immigrant integration and

immigration policy are substantially shaped by neoliberalism and identify how economic

considerations are of primary importance. This economic focus, I argue, overlooks the

importance of political integration. I claim that it is very important to develop, and extend the

nascent studies on political integration, since the political experiences of immigrants reveal the

quality of their lives, perhaps in ways economistic accounts cannot. Furthermore, without political agency, democratic legitimacy of the state is compromised, and this is particularly dangerous since democracy characteristically draw its mandate and political vitality from active citizenship and expressions of political agency. I used these grounds to make the case for taking immigrant political agency as an indispensable consideration.

In discussing the second prominent aspect of immigrant integration discourse, I claim that the common, quantitative approach to assessing immigrant integration, while valuable in its own right, fails to give a composite, nuanced picture of the political experiences of immigrants; and, that it is too general, providing only snapshot of the reality, and is, at worst, misleading. A qualitative approach is lacking and that is what this research provides by delving into the lived experiences of immigrants from a perspective of social learning theory and through intimate accounts of immigrants' political lives as seen through their organizational belongingness. In the third section, I maintain that formal political activities, such electoral politics, are assumed to be the adequate variable with which to assess immigrant political integration. Contrarily, I argue that a broader conception of politics which looks at informal politics is crucial in understanding immigrants' political lives. For activities in the formal political arena, like voting in elections and naturalization rates, while instructive, they are imperfect measures of political integration. As such, dependence on the insights they provide can distort our understanding of immigrant political integration.

Subsequently, I provide an account and appraisal of a fourth area of research on immigrant integration, an area I defended as more useful than the three. This literature avoids the shortcomings of the three and provides, when considered as a whole, a more close-range account that takes into account the non-formal ways immigrants seek and assert political agency, uses

qualitative approach and considers the significance of ECOs. While I am encouraged by this body of work for its more accurate, even holistic picture, of immigrant integration, such studies are virtually non-existent in African immigrant communities. My study is built on this area of research

Immigrant integration and neoliberalism

The main claim I advance in this section is that neoliberalism informs immigration policy and integration discourse in Canada in a way that undermines the importance of political integration of immigrants. As a starting point, as an ideological orientation, neoliberalism's most formal application pertains to government's management of the economy. Nevertheless, its essential character is rooted in a vision of social and political justice which connects human wellbeing with a particular understanding of economic freedom. As Harvey (2005) describes, "[n]eoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political and economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills" (p. 3). It privileges "private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 3) and relegates the state's role to one of "[creating and preserving] an institutional framework appropriate [for the market]" (Harvey, 2005, p. 3). Neoliberalism's economistic approach to integration implies *the relative nonimportance of political integration*, despite the latter's value as one of the viable means of assessing how well immigrants are doing and whether Canada's multicultural ideals, full participation in life including cultural and political integration, are being seriously considered.

Several scholars have pointed out that generally speaking discourse of integration underemphasizes political integration experiences of immigrants (Frideres, 2011; Kymlicka, 2010a; O'Neille, Gidengil & Young, 2012; Pikkova, 2006; Siemiatycki & Saloojee, 2003).

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Pikkova (2006) sums up the rationale of the approach in this way:

> Research on the integration of immigrants has focused primarily on economic aspects of social experience, on the assumption that economic success predicts and precedes integration of all kinds. Political integration of immigrants has received far less attention. (p. 1)

This bias in research is reflected in Canadian policy making discourse as well. As Kymlicka notes, "Most policy attention in recent years has focused on economic integration" (cited in Banting & Kymlicka, 2010a, p. 52.)

A clearer picture of the influence of an economistic approach to immigrant integration in the policy realm (Banting & Kymlicka, 2010a, p. 52) and in the academic discourse (Wilkinson, 2013) appears when one looks at the curious relationship between neoliberalism and multiculturalism in Canada. While the thrust of what follows has to do with the reduction of resources to immigrant integration services and programs and the failure to embrace multicultural citizenship, it begins with introductory account of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is architectonic, with far-reaching consequences for individuals and political communities, affecting a wide range of social and policy domains. One area in which it has had profound effect is immigration and integration. Root, Gates-Gasse, Shields & Bauder (2014) observe that immigration is an area in which neoliberalism has been "framed and applied" in various ways. Root, Gates-Gasse, Shields, & Bauder (2014) provide a synoptic discussion of the various ways neoliberalism has shaped immigration and integration of immigrants. They outline how Shapaizman's (2010) focus on neoliberalism's concepts of *self-sufficiency and personal responsibility* has had the greatest impact on immigration policy, and specifically on construction of the ideal immigrant as a market agent. Shields (2004), on the other hand, zeroes in on the

ways in which neoliberalism has brought about reduction of social programs. Despite these variety of foci, "[t]he common thread in the academic literature on immigration is neoliberalism's concentration on the more immediate economic benefits of immigration and the economic focus of immigration policy making" (Root, Gates-Gasse, Shields & Bauder 2014, p. 5).

The extent of neoliberalism's influence is reflected in how it diminishes the role of the state to a surrogacy role of aiding markets. As Harvey (2005) reveals neoliberalism's logic, "If markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution), then they must be created, by state action if necessary. But beyond these tasks, the state should not venture" (p. 3). However, neoliberalism is not only about the creation of markets in as many walks of life as is possible, but also about altering *the terms of governance*. Neoliberalism is, as the name suggests, a resurgence of many classical liberal ideals and practices; and yet, it "is distinct from classical liberalism and above all from the simple *laissez faire* vulgate which conceives self-regulating markets as a natural reality" (Amble, 2010, p. 7). Surely, neoliberalism shares with classical liberalism the central tenets of a commitment to 'free markets' and individual *freedom*; however, classical liberalism was a capitalist project from "outside" the state and neoliberalism is a capitalist project under the coordinated direction of the state.

As Steger & Roy (2010) put it

opposed to the mercantilism of monarchs who exercised almost total control over the economy in their efforts to amass large quantities of gold for largely bellicose purposes, 'classical liberals' like Adam Smith and David Ricardo preached the virtues of the 'free market' and '*laisse-faire*' economics. Smith is credited with creating the Scottish

Enlightenment image of *homo economicus* – the view that people are isolated individuals whose actions reflect mostly their material self-interest (pp. 2 – 3).

However, neoliberalism parts company with its ideological ancestry in several ways. Proponents of classical liberalism sought to persuade that economic problems were the result of government intervention in the economy and that economic strife can be effectively addressed by restricting such interventions (Steger & Roy, 2010, p. 3). So, while liberalism endorses restricting government intervention, neoliberalism, on the other hand, takes the opposite tack:

> [under neoliberalism] the state [is]… not a weak and inactive state, the 'night watchman' of classical liberalism. On the contrary, it is a state that establishes and preserves, through its constant action (…), a competitive market order which is an artificial human creation and not a product of nature" (Amble, 2010, pp. 10–11).

So, even when it seems to claim that social wellbeing requires a minimalist state that holds back from intervening in the economy, neoliberalism depends on the state to intervene and ensure an ideological structure in the economy. Furthermore, it specifies how interventions are to occur, so neoliberalism also impacts conceptions and practices of citizenship (and immigration) to ensure the prevalence of its core principles, including competition and individual self-reliance.

In Canada, the influence of narrowly defined economic orientation on immigration discourse and policy has been pronounced since the emergence of neoliberalism in the early 1990's. Canada's immigration policy has been profoundly shaped by what is deemed to be in the economic interest of the country (Abu Laban & Gabriel, 2009). And this has been intensified in the advent of neoliberalism when "the rationale for multiculturalism shifted from supporting equity to supporting Canada's global competitiveness and promoting business links abroad

(Abu-Laban, 2014). Root et al. (2014) emphasize that

> there has been a significant shift in immigration policy away from nation-building and
> longer-term integration goals… towards more "flexible" immigrants better equipped to
> quickly adapt to changed economic environment (with a much sharper focus on
> economic-class immigration and temporary foreign workers) (p. 4).

Neoliberalism's privileging of global competitiveness has meant a strong preference for attracting immigrants who can economically integrate and contribute to Canada's economy relatively easily (Root, Gates-Gasse, Shields & Bauder, 2014).

Neoliberalism accords a limited role for the state in most areas of governance except in supporting markets, which it takes to be the most efficient and judicious means of allocating resources. One consequence of neoliberalism on integration comes in the way resources for settlement and integration services have been significantly reduced. Neoliberalism has entailed "an emphasis on cutting back social spending [and] a greater stress on individual self-sufficiency" (Abu Laban, 2013, p. 7). And immigrants' settlement and integration resources have been directly affected by these "cuts to funding as well as new terms to funding" (Abu Laban, 2013, p. 7). It appears that attracting economic immigrants deemed to be more likely to integrate economically are preferred, and "the introduction of the new Express Entry platform for economic immigrants… typifies this shift" (Root, Gates-Gasse, Shields & Bauder, 2014, p. 5); resources for settlement and integration are, hence, being cut. This priority is consistent, needless to say, with the view according to which economic immigration and integration are more important than other types of immigration and integration.

The dominance of an economic approach to immigrant integration is adopted at the price of taking seriously the importance of political integration (Frideres, 2011; Wilkinson, 2013).

Alberta's immigration policy is a case that illustrates this point quite strongly. In his cogent, historically informed account of immigration and integration in Alberta, Frideres (2011) notes that Alberta's immigration policy has been motivated almost exclusively by the need to fill the serious labour gap that the province has had and to do so as quickly as possible.

> Alberta's provincial government has focused on increasing the number of immigrants strictly as an economic venture…it was felt that immigrants coming to Alberta would be highly educated and/or trained, with vocational skills, and would be within the labour force working age. As such, it was felt that they could easily integrate into the current labour market. (Frideres, 2011, pp. 128-129)

Beyond filling the labour gap, Alberta has refused to create an immigration policy, resulting in immigrant serving agencies difficulty "to make a case for funding new services that the communities and the immigrant serving agencies identified as being necessary" (Frideres, 2011, p. 131).

The focus on recruiting economic immigrants and the assumption that economic integration is the most important consideration crowd out other aspects of immigrant integration from integration discourse and practice. The focus on economic integration is also reflected in academic research. Wilkinson (2013) points out that:

> A review of the Canadian literature in 2003 revealed that nearly 60% of the research on immigrants focuses exclusively on income, economic and labour market conditions. This development is hardly surprising given that government and research funding tends to favour economic issues over non-economic ones. (p. 3)

This study cut against the grain, making a case for why political integration is important both for immigrants and the host country, Canada.

As the study investigated how Ethiopian immigrant community functions politically within this broader context of *neoliberal multiculturalism* it focused on the work of three community organizations. These settings are conducive for such explorations because they are institutions which play significant role in the lives of immigrants; they are cultural centers where immigrants seek refuge and religious and social guidance, places where social learning takes critical importance and therefore where political agency can be productively studied.

Quantitative research in immigrant integration discourse

The second feature of the discourse on immigrant integration addressed here is the dramatic prevalence of quantitative methodologies which are now being deployed as a preferred means of understanding immigrant integration. Survey research is quite prevalent and uses a number of immigrant integration indicators in numerical terms. Both academic researchers and government, including the government of Canada, are deeply involved in quantitative research which seek and provide information about various aspects of immigrants' integration status.

Quantitative research on immigrant integration is increasingly popular at the international level but nations are also adopting the practice to study immigrant integration through indexing researches. "Over the last decade, an important development in the integration and citizenship policy literature has taken place… various scholars and projects have started to compare a relatively large range of countries by building indices" (Helbling, 2013, p. 555). In fact, the proliferation of quantitative research has been so pervasive that there is a need for assessing their merits and determining which ones to consider. As Helbling (2013) notes, "the problem is, however, that there are almost as many indices as there are such studies, and one might wonder whether it matters which indices we use" (p. 555). At the international level measuring integration is a prominent exercise. The "Migration Integration Policy Index" (MIPEX), for

example puts out heavily statistics-driven research. Noting that "few countries base integration policy changes on hard facts" (MIPEX, 2014), it seeks to correct this state of affairs by providing numerical analysis by ranking countries' integration successes, by tracing changes and identifying trends. MIPEX "covers six areas of integration and citizenship policies. The project started with EU-15 in 2004 and expanded to the EU-25, Canada, Norway and Switzerland in 2007" (Helbling, 2013, p. 557).

Measuring immigrant integration is a long-standing practice in Canada as well; however, most of these measurements pertain to a specific aspect of integration: economic integration and overwhelmingly focus on "variables such as income, employment, and occupational attainment" (Wong & Tézli, 2013, p. 12). "In Canada, there is a long history of measuring economic integration where variables such as income, employment, and occupational attainment are the indicators" (Wong & Tézli, 2013, p. 12). This may be in good measure because research is driven by the belief that "economic success predicts and precedes integration of all kinds" (Pikkov, 2006, p. 1). Thus, in the period from 2003 to 2013, published studies on civic integration of immigrants are few and far in between (Wong & Tézli, p. 15).

Similarly, Multicultural Policy Index is one such project invested in indexing multicultural policies and integration of immigrants. It is founded by Will Kymlicka and Keith Banting and "tracks the evolution of MCPs across 21 OECD countries… [the] Index has been used to show the MCPs have not had a negative effect on social capital, social cohesion, educational attainment or civic participation" (Banting & Kymlicka, 2013, p. 3).

However, a number of serious questions may be raised in regard to these quantitative researches. For instance, it is legitimate to ask whether integration can be studied and understood well through quantitative studies given the complexity of the processes that enable a nonlinear

phenomenon. As Wilkinson (2013) aptly presents the complexity of understanding the integration process, which is inherently non-linear:

> As researchers of immigration already know, the integration process is not linear, since many newcomers report that for every step forward, they take two steps back. Nor is the process balanced. Newcomers may be fully integrated into their employment and occupation yet at the same time, they may feel ostracized by their community. Furthermore, there is no such thing as a fully integrated ethnic group. We cannot say one group is more or less integrated than another. Individuals from the same ethnic group, living in the same community and even living in the same family, report different integration experiences. Mothers may integrate faster than fathers or children, despite the fact that all arrived at the same time. (p. 1)

Hence, for example, accounts that claim Canada's highly favorable record in political integration of immigrants emanate in good part from indexing research that provide only a broad, average picture of immigrant integration. Quantitative researches that conclude immigrants have shown high levels of political participation do, therefore, too often, rely on average numbers which naturally ignore variations in participation from immigrant community to immigrant community. Since averages do not capture nuances, these accounts gloss over the question of which immigrant groups have fared well in political participation and why. Consequently, for example, national averages do not tell us enough about the situation of immigrant integration at the subnational levels, that is, at the level of provinces and cities. This neglect of the heterogeneity of immigrant groups is likely to fail to account for the experiences of integration of relatively smaller and newer immigrant communities like the one this study explores.

Whereas quantitative research continues to yield valuable insights, it can be woefully

deceptive if the picture it provides is not counter-balanced with qualitative research that tells the distinct stories of immigrant communities, that reveal the factors that govern their political integration experiences and the implications of integration experiences for political agency and social wellbeing. This study explored social learnings that are part and parcel of community and organizational life. It is the implicit assumptions and the meanings that undergird organizational belonging that hold one important key to understanding political integration and is the central premise for this study on political integration in a city in Canada where qualitative research on immigrants has been very limited.

Formal metrics in political integration discourse

In this section I discuss, and raise questions about, the last of the three discourses that reflect and shape understanding of immigrant integration. The case I make here is that while there are, needless to say, formal political processes and activities that are valuable to consider when studying immigrant political integration, politics has several means of expression that are informal and equally valuable, especially when we consider immigrants who may not be conversant with and, therefore, not adept at utilizing formal channels of political engagement. It behooves us, then, to seriously investigate non-formal political resources that are at their disposal.

Social and political changes are brought about through two kinds of citizen action: one, through formal electoral politics and the other through activities in non-electoral, non-formal actions and practices (Siemiatycki & Saloojee, 2003, p. 1). Therefore, the notion of assessing the health of democracies on the bases of what we find solely and even primarily on the formal plane of political activities and institutional practices is suspect at best and misleading at worst.

This research focuses on, and exemplifies, the value of exploring cultural spaces and the

informal cultural learning instantiations within them to enlighten understanding of immigrants' political agency and their political integration. For, in so far as, "culture is a way of seeing the world, and if seeing the world has any relevance to changing the world" (Abdi, 2004, p. 31), culture is inherently political. Hence, exploring cultural spaces is productive exercise when looking at political integration.

Several works by notable theorists. no less, presuppose formal political measures when studying immigrant political integration (Anderson & Black, 2008; Bloemraad, 2006; Kymlicka, 2012; Stasiulis, 1997). Although these authors are expressly aware of the various avenues of political participation including informal political activities in theory, some of the influential works they have done are predominantly focused on formal political measures. My modest proposition here is to be both cautious about drawing definitive conclusions about immigrant political integration from studies that assume formal political measure as a bases and to stress the need for research that considers the informal mechanism and practices of politics within a cultural context as central to understanding immigrant political integration.

Consider for example, Kymlicka's (2012) publication on the state of multiculturalism in Canada. In this work, Kymlicka sets up his thesis through a historical review of debates about the relationship between multiculturalism policies and their effect on immigrant integration. Kymlicka (2010) describes how Canada has stagnating in this debate and that there is now a way out of it.

> One reason for the continuous recycling of the debate is that, until recently, we have had
> little concrete evidence to test these dueling perspectives on the impact of
> multiculturalism. However, in the past few years, important new evidence has emerged.
> (p. 7)

The overall tenure of Kymlicka's work here is rather celebratory of multiculturalism, as he seeks to show that Canada is doing very well in the integration of immigrants, especially when compared with other countries. He addresses political integration in particular and again finds Canada doing very well, despite some reservations. Kymlicka (2010) notes,

> In terms of political integration… immigrants in Canada are (much) more likely to become citizens… [and] are more likely to actually participate in the political process as voters, party members or even candidates for political office. (p. 8)

The measures for political integration here are activities to electoral politics, that is, acquisition of citizenship status and political participations of specific kinds, like voting and membership in political parties. And Kymlicka seems to have drawn a celebratory conclusion from such considerations. And my contention is that these findings are insufficient foundation to conclude with any degree of confidence the political integration experiences of immigrants because these measures leave out informal ways in which immigrants express political voice and have political impact.

A similar approach is taken by Anderson and Black (2008) who set out to "identify some of the rights and responsibilities that define [the] two-way street approach to political integration… and to measure progress of [political integration]" (p. 46). They focus on three indicators of political integration: naturalization, political participation and representation. It is telling to consider how these measures are defines:

"Naturalization formally incorporates non-citizens into the national political community by recognizing in them certain political rights and responsibilities. The acquisition of legal citizenship status is therefore a fundamental feature of political integration" (Anderson & Black, 2008, p. 49). And although they point out that political participation encompasses many forms

and informal expressions, their working assumption seems too narrow: "Along its most formal dimensions, political participation incorporates basic modes of electoral participation, such as voting in electoral events, campaigning… and running for office" (Anderson & Black, 2008, p. 54). As for representation, Anderson and Black (2008) restrict themselves to studying, "[o]ffice seeking and office-holding [as] important considerations in the study of political integration because they are constitutionally protected rights that lie at the very center of the exercise of representational government" (p. 60).

Although Anderson and Black (2008) show awareness of the importance of informal politics, their work here is heavily dependent on formal markers of political participation. And what is being argued here is not that these studies are not valuable but that they need to be complimented by studies that take seriously informal practices and cultural activities to be essential considerations for assessing immigrants' quest and expression of political agency. Simply stated, quantitative research is necessary but not sufficient in the analysis of political integration. Furthermore, qualitative research on topics such as "self-understanding" or "the efficacy of engagement" may be sufficient in itself and quantitative research an unnecessary addition except for contextualization.

The study shares Abu-Laban's perspective, expressed in her review of Bloemraad's (2006) book entitled, *Becoming a citizen: Incorporating immigrants and refugees in the United States and Canada*:

the focus on political incorporation as presented in this work concerns itself with the formal arena of politics (especially elections) and the engagement of citizens – naturalized and native-born. As such, a common model is presented that uses the native-born as the yardstick by which to measure outcomes for immigrants rather than, for

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example, immigrants' own understandings. Yet, as many feminist scholars have pointed out ''the personal is political,'' and there may be activities that take place in the home, at the workplace, or on the street that newcomers view as expressing political agency. This idea can only be tested by offering newcomers themselves the opportunity to define what they see as political engagement, and this may move in directions that are not captured through the lens of formal citizenship and voting. (p. 529)

Although it does not ignore formal activities, this study takes cultural setting as a conceptual entry point to explore agency.

Here, I signal how the literature reviewed above is a powerful detracting influence on the development and enactment of political agency, which is the central conceptual construct in the conceptual framework. The three approaches to understanding political integration covered in the literature review above detract theorizing the political agency of immigrants, which the present does, by neglecting, distorting and oversimplifying immigrant integration experiences. The neoliberal approach to integration, in its emphasis on economistic understanding of wellbeing, neglects political agency and promotes instead a severely narrow, inauthentic kind of agency, that is, agency understood as the individual freedom of choosing among conceptions of the good life and one that focuses on choices made in market relations or in relationships that are made in the image of market interactions and values thereof. Statistical, aggregative studies, obscure the diversity within immigrant communities, blurring out in the process nuanced integration experiences of immigrants, whereby specially smaller immigrant groups and their agency are rendered almost invisible. The third approach to understanding immigrant integration, the formal political approach, oversimplifies immigrant integration in such a way that pays no attention to the informal, grassroots civic engagement avenues that immigrants are likely to be drawn to and

partake in, the very means through which immigrants express agency. Therefore, all three orientations that constitute the bulk of contemporary immigrant integration discourse, while useful in a narrow sense, are counterproductive for a wholesome understanding of political integration. The present study takes a different approach, an approach that avoids the detracting effects that are embedded in the three types of literature reviews discussed.

In agreement with Dahlgren (2006), "we need to take a 'cultural turn' in our understanding of… agency seeing citizenship not just in formal terms but also in regard to meaning, practices, communication and identities" (p. 267). In investigating political agency this study ascribed important role to informal social learning. As emphasized by Dahlgren (2006), communal practices act as reservoir for many informal yet deeply revealing insights: "the field of civic talk, its sites and contexts and how it mobilizes identities and links up with political issues would be a fertile one as well as a constructive antidote to the formalistic version of deliberative democracy" (Dahlgren, 2006, p. 280).

Although, the three filters discussed above exemplify impediments to understanding immigrant political integration, there is nascent literature that addresses the topic of immigrant political integration more productively. This study is intended to build on this body of research, with the hope that this trend will be continued into the future. In this section, I will provide a review of this area of literature, outlining some of its major themes, assessing its merits and ultimately identifying the gap this study intended to fill by specifying the possible contribution to the discourse. Beginning with selective historical examples of ethnocultural political mobilization and the place of ECOs in them, I will discuss some of the social implications scholars have attributed to existence ECOs, through discussion of scholarly works that have looked more specifically at the political implications of ECO's before I discuss how I conceived

the study in this regard.

Historical example of successful ethnocultural mobilization

Political mobilization of ethnocultural groups in Canada was very negligible prior to the 1960s (Kobayashi, 2014, Abdi, 2005). Although the discourse of human rights had begun to be part of Canada's national identity, "[t[he ability of ethnocultural and racialized minority groups to achieve full citizenship and to overcome human rights injustices [was] limited" (Kobayashi, 2014, pp. 124 -125). It is on the heels of the rights revolution of the 1960's that ethnocultural groups "became more vociferous in their demands for political and economic rights" (Abdi, 2005, p. 55).

The successes ethnocultural communities gained in winning social and political rights, as well as in helping usher in multiculturalism were in important ways due to the resources that were marshaled and used through ECO's. For example, "the Japanese-Canadian redress settlement… one of very few high points of successful ethnocultural anti-racist activism in Canadian history" was in good measure owed to [National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC)] (Kobayashi, 2014, p. 131); although, support from the wider community played an important role. Similarly, the contribution of Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC) in providing symbolic and substantive voice for ethnocultural groups and positively influencing the road to official multiculturalism as state policy is noteworthy.

> Encouraged by some preliminary successes, Ukrainians in Canada demanded more
> political representation for the "smaller ethno-cultural groups,"... In this context, they
> wanted the community's umbrella organizations-the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC)
> – to be acknowledged as the official voice of the Ukrainian-Canadian community. As

such, the UCC could advise the Canadian government and have more influence on day-to-day politics. As this proposal shows, the quest for more political influence was often connected to the achievement of greater recognition by the government. (Lalande, 2006, p. 53)

Similarly, the formation of The Canadian Ethnocultural Council (CEC) was in good part enabled by ethnocultural organizations who comprised it. As Kobayashi (2014) notes,

It was a very active organization with a significant educational role that not only empowered national ethnocultural groups to advance their human rights concerns but also reached out to "mainstream" society in an attempt to push that agenda. (p. 129)

These historical examples underscore the importance of ethnocultural organizing in the striving for, and achievement of, equality through political claims making. They exemplify ECO's importance to integrating immigrants in significant ways. In representing success of immigrant political mobilizing, they serve as an antidote to the worry about immigrants political disengagement that new immigrants are naturally susceptible to be in the absence of such organizations that have served as a means for inclusion and equal participation. Notwithstanding these macro-level activities and political gains, ECO's do also supply opportunities and resources for immigrants' striving for betterment in most aspects of life at the local level. In what follows, I will highlight some of the works in the scholarly terrain that are concerned with immigrants and politics before turning my attention to those that focus on the role of ECO's in politics in general.

Immigrant electoral participation

Research has looked at different aspects of ethnocultural immigrant groups and political

participation. One area that has received substantial attention is electoral politics. Literature in this area has been conducted with respect to specific groups, such as on the prospects of political engagement of immigrants from non-traditional source countries (Bilodeau & Kanji, 2006); the variables that determine positive political opportunity structure among South Asian immigrants in Toronto (Matheson, 2006); how the intersection of gender and visible minority status affect willingness and ability to participate in politics (O'Neill et al., 2012); examining whether foreign born and non-European voters face the same barriers in 2000 and 2004 elections (Tossutti, 2003), on print media coverage and the representation of Muslim immigrants in 2000, 2004, 2006 federal elections (Abu-Laban & Trimble, 2006); immigrant Muslim women's turnout in voting in federal election (Hamdani, 2005, pp. 1 - 9); on specific cities: the lack of proportionate representation of immigrant in the city of Ottawa and across Canada (Biles & Tolley, 2004); a book length study of immigrants and electoral politics, with a comparative intent is noteworthy for its very useful, 11 city-specific analyses, (Electing a diverse Canada, Andrew, C. et al, 2008, Eds.), on methodological issues, for example, on the need for a more rigorous methodology in assessing immigrant voter turnout (Jedwab, 2006); on the complexity of assessing immigrant voter turnout (White et al., 2006); on factors that constrain and determine electoral participation, such as, the underrepresentation of visible minority in electoral politics (Siemiatycki, 2011) and analysis of the factors that determine the nomination and election of visible minorities in three elections from 1993 to 2000 (Tossutti & Najem, 2003) and exploration of structural impediments to immigrant political participation (Bird, 2004).

Black (2000, 2006a, 2006b, 2008, 2011, 2017) has produced a substantial body of work on immigrant political participation: on the demographic changes in representation in Canadian parliament (2000); on the role of "voter bias" in assessing the representation of ethnic minorities

(2006a); comparing the number of visible minority candidates in 2004 federal elections with the previous three elections (2006b); analysis of the number of visible minority candidates in 2006 federal election (2008); providing the current state of knowledge on mass-level political participation of immigrants at the national level (2011) and on the representation of racial minorities in the 2015 federal elections (2017).

The studies on immigrants and electoral politics contribute to a proper understanding of the political lives of immigrants and their integration experiences. They enhance understanding of the rate at which immigrants are involved in elections, what the determinant factors of election rates are, how they should be measured and their overall impact on immigrant integration and Canadian democratic politics. Even though immigrant success at the ballot box is not a guarantee that issues immigrants are impacted by and want to highlight are going to be addressed necessarily, they are at least symbolically significant. This is not, of course, to minimize the importance political representation and the prospects of presence of political voices at policy tables; these are crucially a means of co-constructing specific policies salient in the immigrant community but also influencing the terms of governance. Some of the studies I outlined above, that focus on specific groups show the diversity of immigrant groups and the nuances within them. It is also beneficial to have studies devoted to methodological issues and those that examine the potential barriers to participation in order to help vitiate, or remedy obstacles. However, they are not designed to provide insight on non-electoral politics, a politics that may be more appealing to immigrants, whose political participation is limited by their relative unfamiliarity with the political system of host country and by the insufficiency of political opportunity structure, as compared to native born Canadians. What I have considered in this study is the various ways immigrants are politically active, not neglecting their electoral

engagement of course, but seriously examining non-electoral avenues of political engagement. I specifically wanted to look at the contributory or potentially detractive effects of belonging to ECO on political agency. And research in this area, that is, on the relations between ECO membership and political lives of immigrants is scarce.

As Wong (2006) put it:

Many political scientists consider electoral participation to be the cornerstone of political participation. Parties and elected officials also tend to focus on electoral participation because votes and electoral victories are the source of their power… [however,] participation in activities other than voting and campaigns, especially if that participation occurs through an array of different types of community organizations, may represent an easily overlooked element of immigrants' involvement in politics, as acknowledged by other who have studied nonelectoral participation. (p. 94)

This, surely, is not to say that there have not been such studies at all. I note, in what follows, scholarly works that focused on just this equation.

On various segments of ethnocultural organizations

I preface the section by reminding that the brief historical examples of ethnocultural political mobilization, outlined above, does in itself constitute a significant instantiation of the importance of ECO's. However, those examples primarily indicate the achievement of across ECO coalition building, as opposed to the efforts and successes of individual ECO's; although since the coalitions are made up of specific ECO's they implicitly give support to their importance. What I will provide here are empirical and theoretical studies on the social and political significance of ECOs generally speaking but also accounts of specific ECOs.

Breton (2005), Bloemraad and Ramakrishnan (2008), Bloemraad (2013) and Jones-Correa (2013) exemplify studies in the politics of ECO's. Breton (2005) has explained some of the salient factors that determine institutional completeness in immigrant social organizations (p. 170). Describing how ECO's efficacy is dependent on the extent to which their member need and depend on them, Breton outlines three possible factors that are implicated in immigrant political participation and organizational strength: knowledge of language of the host country; the resources that are available to the community and whether or not immigration continues from the countries that represent ECOs. These are factors to consider in understanding the resilience of ECOs.

Bloemraad and Ramakrishnan (2008) have also contributed to understanding of ECOs, outlining the factors that potentially create barriers to establishing ECO' and to making them effective means of participating in larger society. Noting the relative silence of academia on the importance of ECO's to political participation, Bloemraad and Ramakrishnan (2008) discuss the potential negative effects of the following factors: a) proficiency in host language, b) knowledge of democratic norms and c) the influence of transnational politics. Calling for research that studies immigrant integration at the individual and organizational levels, Bloemraad and Ramakrishnan (2008) affirm that these factors affect the visibility, potential influence of ECO's in larger society and therefore their political integration.

In her article Bloemraad (2013), stresses the importance of ECO's:

The second level of analysis, at the "meso-level," centers on organizations, understood as collections of individuals. Attention to organized collectives—between the macro-level and individual—is critical since, in a democracy, individuals can rarely wield power and political influence on their own. Rather, they gain power and voice by aggregating

resources, votes, or bodies in order to donate money, affect elections, or launch a demonstration. Organizations can also serve as civic or political schools, providing individuals with skill development, information, and motivation to engage in political or civic actions. (p. 199)

Bringing a broad lens to capture the many ways in which immigrant political incorporation transpires, Jones-Correa (2013) identifies E.C.O.'s as one of the most substantive ways immigrants engage in politics.

Beyond these studies that are inclined to provide more general insights about ECO's, there are others that focused on specific ethnocultural immigrant communities. Ginieniewicz (2010) has found that grassroots political involvement is preferred to electoral politics among Latin American immigrants in Toronto and that this is in part because organizations through which civic engagement happens are understood as "organizations capable of bridging the distance between the people and the state" (p. 508). People's sense that they are familiar with how things are done at the community organization level, have more of a say in community organizations and increased ability to predict and experience the consequences of their actions in them, has drawn members of the community to choose to participate at the grass roots level than at the formal political channels.

Couton (2014) has explored "organizational capacity" (p. 1) in a study that compared Korean-Canadian and Ukrainian-Canadian communities. His findings suggest that the "defensive" strategy adopted by the former, of creating and finding employment opportunities within the community, restricts bridging and social integration into mainstream society. On the other, the success of Ukrainian-Canada to integrate, "[experiencing] significant upward economic and social mobility… and strong cultural and political representation at all level" (p. 1)

demonstrates the importance of E.C.O.'s as drivers of social integration and substantive multilevel participation.

Similarly, Guo and Guo (2011) wrote about the nature and evolution of two Chinese community organizations in Edmonton and Calgary. Outlining their history, Guo and Guo (2011) showed how the organizations responded to the changing needs of organization members and how they help build bridged into mainstream social life of Canada. The authors argued that there is a strong case to make about the need to "treat ethno-specific organizations as an integral part of Canadian society" (p. 78) and support them in their efforts to help newcomer immigrants acculturate. The organizations are, Gou and Gou (2011) reason, better able to respond to the needs of those who belong to them since they are more attuned to member needs.

Despite increased scholarly attention to the topic of ECO's and immigrant political integration, there are gaps. Although the aforementioned studies contribute to understanding ECO's social and political significance, they are tepid in their attention to two features that the present study considers pivotal: the voice of immigrants themselves and African immigrant communities. While studies that center on immigrants' own account are in their infancy those that focus on African immigrant communities is virtually non-existent. The study I conducted brings immigrants' perspective right to the center of the investigation. This move is in part facilitated by the fact that the present study's focus on concept of political agency lent itself to making immigrants' voices the indispensable starting point of examination and insights. While smatterings of research exist on African communities and their ECO's, they are far behind what would be expected given the increasing number of African ECO's. The present study's contribution is in part in its focus on an African immigrant community. However, it also gave particular attention to ECOs, a site that is potential very significant politically but remains

underexplored in the literature.

Summary

This chapter offered literature review on immigrant integration, including immigrant political integration. I identified the following three prevalent trends that make up a majority of the discourse on immigrant integration: the economistic perspective that goes hand in hand with neoliberalism; the quantitative approach that evinces aggregation as the modus operandi and the trend that focuses on studying formal politics as the way to understand political integration of immigrants. My view is that although these three perspectives to studying immigrant integration are valuable in their own right, they implicitly leave out an approach to understanding of immigrant integration that gives centrality to immigrants informal organizing that have political implications, to immigrants' perspectives on integration, especially those that focus on one of the most fertile means through which immigrants politically integrate, through which they participate and exercise agency: ECOs. In this connection, I also reviewed a relatively new but productive literature which avoids the pitfalls that characterize the previous three integration discourses. Here, I advanced the view that although this new literature is a move in the right direction, it is very rarely done in African immigrant communities. This gap is part of what this study was intended to fill. To that end, focusing on one, Ethiopian, immigrant community in a city in Canada, the present study explored the political significance of ECOs and how members of three ECOs utilize their organizational belonging for political integration.

In order to do so, in the next chapter I laid out the theoretical framework, which comprised three theoretical perspectives. First, I drew on critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970) for exploring the political implications of the many learning instantiations that are integral part of associational life in ECOs and the meaning of political agency. Second, I used Nancy Fraser's

(1990, 2009) conception of justice as a normative framework by which to recognize and address violations of justice and her account of *subaltern counterpublics* for understanding the meaning and political importance of counter hegemonic democratic spaces, which I believe ECOs are examples of. And thirdly, I drew lessons about the role community voluntaries and social learning play in the success of organizations from communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). I discuss these concepts in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter Three: Theoretical framework

The purpose of this case study was to explore how members of ECOs understand the political significance of belonging to these organizations and how they use their membership for political integration. To that end, in this chapter, I lay out the study's theoretical framework, discuss the intellectual traditions I draw on, explicate the seminal concepts and working assumptions that underpin the research study, and explain how these traditions and concepts helped to make sense of the data. This chapter entails showing how the theoretical framework is commensurate with the purpose of the research; and how the theories and assumptions that make up the lens through which I see and understand the social world facilitate addressing the questions I have set out. And I explain why this way of conceiving and operationalizing the theoretical framework is most helpful for conducting the research, given social problem, the setting, conditions that the study is built around. I discuss the three major theoretical perspectives: critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), a conception of justice; (Nancy Fraser, 1990, 2000, 2003, 2009) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Furthermore, I provide a definition of political agency, as I use the concept in the study.

The first section begins with a genetic account of critical pedagogy, providing a discussion of its emergence and development. I explicate features of critical pedagogy, starting with what may be considered its central plank, that is, the interdependence of education and political life. I explain how I deployed this relationship within the study. Second, I discuss how the research reflects and employs insights explicated in critical pedagogy regarding the political importance of informal pedagogic contexts and the cultural realm as well as their implications for examining political agency among immigrants. Third, I indicate how the

trenchant critique of neoliberalism made by critical educationalists intersects with the study's

assessment of neoliberalism's influence on Canadian policy of immigration and integration

practices. Furthermore, I define political agency by drawing on insights provided by critical

pedagogy thinkers, supplementing the definition by referencing concepts from political theory.

Critical pedagogy

Defining what critical pedagogy is and what its purposes are can be complex and elusive

(Breuing, 2011). There is a tendency among self-identified critical educationalists to resist

defining critical pedagogy definitively (Breuing, 2011). The challenge of definition in this case

has to do in part with the fact that scholars have employed critical pedagogy to address a variety

of topics, emphasizing different aspects of the theory. Some are interested in conducting class

analysis, others explore social action, and yet others classroom teaching (Breuing, 2011). This

variety in application is compounded by a variety in the political orientations that accompany it.

As McLaren (2003) notes, "[t]here are many different strands of critical pedagogy: the

libertarian, the radical, the revolutionary, and the liberationist, all with points of difference and

fusion" (p. 129). Nevertheless, even though its various permutations evince a diversity of foci

and are articulated from different political positions, a common set of concerns animates the

tradition since its inception. As Abdi (2003) neatly puts it,

> Theories of critical pedagogy are united in focusing on a program that aims to empower
>
> those who have been and being subjected to the inequalities and inequities that, more
>
> often than not, permeate public spaces and programs of education. (p. 21)

A productive way to begin a wholesome account of critical pedagogy is by taking the work of

one of its pioneers as a reference point. In fact, any account of the history of critical pedagogy

cannot but stress the contributions of Paulo Freire, the Brazilian pedagogue, whose work

Pedagogy of the Oppressed articulated key concepts and the praxis-oriented spirit of critical pedagogy that are being continually addressed by scholars. Kincheloe (2007) outlines historical and intellectual sources of Freire's work and its extensive influence.

> Emerging from Paulo Freire's work in poverty-stricken northeastern Brazil in the 1960s, critical pedagogy amalgamated liberation theological ethics and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School in Germany with progressive impulses in education. Critical pedagogy gained an international audience with the 1967 publication of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* … By the mid-1970s several scholars in education and other disciplines adapted Freire's conception of critical pedagogy. (p. 12)

Freire has left an enduring legacy both in laying the intellectual fundamentals of critical pedagogy that have continued to be explored and extended and in exemplifying, through his practically transformative contributions in his work with farmers in Brazil, the hands-on work of emancipation that critical pedagogy ultimately aims at. While Freire's exemplary standing remains indubitable, Giroux (2011), who has had an exceptionally prominent role in the development of critical pedagogy, resists attributing the emergence of critical pedagogy to efforts of specific individuals. According to him critical pedagogy is an open-ended endeavor that has emerged from a broad struggle.

> Critical pedagogy is a movement and an ongoing struggle taking place in a number of different social formations and places. To argue that there is such a thing as "the father of critical pedagogy" devalues those struggles and the collective efforts that have been made to develop and build upon the diverse archives that make up critical pedagogy in all of its different formations (Giroux, 2013)

Understanding critical pedagogy as a social movement alerts us to appreciate critical pedagogy

as a multi-voiced discourse with several branches of expression, varied historical applications and many contexts of relevance.

Mutual influence of education and political life

One of the fundamental concepts that underpin critical pedagogy is the recognition of the symbiotic relationship between education and political life. The work of many critical pedagogy scholars is undergirded by such an understanding (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988, 2004, 2011; Kincheloe, 2004; MacLaren, 1995). Whereas Paolo Freire's oeuvre evinces this overarching theme at different times and in different ways, suffice it here to point to one specific articulation of it as an example. In telling the reader the purpose of his foundational book *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, Freire (2000) explicitly lays out both the goal of pedagogy of the oppressed and the means through which is politically transformative.

> This book will present some aspects of what the writer has termed the pedagogy of the oppressed, [a pedagogy] which makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. (p. 49)

As Kincheloe (2004) asserts the point more directly, "Critical pedagogy is constructed on the belief that education is inherently political" (p. 8). This understanding is a unifying beginning point from which works in critical pedagogy generally begin.

The virtue that makes such social empowerment possible is development and exercise of critical consciousness, or *conscientizaçao* in Portuguese, which is a means by "which the people, through a true praxis, leave behind the status of *objects* to assume the status of historical *Subjects*" (Freire, 2000, p. 160). And the way *conscientizaçao* is activated is through the enactment of critical literacy, the ability to *read the world*, a way of *reading* that uncovers "the

ideological dimensions of texts, institutions, social practices and cultural forms… in order to reveal their selective interests" (McLaren as quoted in Mayo, 1995, p. 363). Critical literacy denotes, and connotes, a natural and seamless fusion of education and politics; for, it speaks of the necessity of *reading* that leads to emancipation, the acquisition of literacy of a particularly political kind whose ultimate social goal is liberty. Freire (2000) expresses such empowerment in terms of something that transpires at the level of individual consciousness leading to social transformation:

> a deepened consciousness of their situation leads people to apprehend that situation as a historical reality susceptible of transformation. Resignation gives way to the drive for transformation and inquiry, over which men feel themselves to be in control (p. 85).

Being attentive to the complex and consequential dynamic between education and political life is much more than stating the obvious. It is a radical departure from views that take education as a neutral and innocent social practice. It is a rejection of the notion that education is a benign enterprise whose outcomes are immune from the influence of political interests or free of political implications. Being consciously aware of and explicit about the education-politics nexus and ultimately seeking to uncover the dangers, as well as to exploit the great opportunities, that lie behind this interactive dyad (of education and political life) can itself be the necessary first step for emancipatory action. Abdi and Richardson (2008) capture the peril that attends anything less than such critical awareness about the place of education in social and political life really well,

> Education, as other general categories of life, may sometimes have an air of innocence about it, and without some notions of criticism to enhance both its philosophical and structural categories, could become a petrified societal block that does not disturb the

clustered realities of inequity and marginalization that crisscross our existentialities. (p.

1)

Critical pedagogy lays bare how education can be a means through which dominant discourse can be sustained (Freire, 1970) but it also emphasizes the point that education ought to be harnessed for redemptive social goals, and for undoing the very injustices doctrinaire and oppressive pedagogies seek to entrench (Freire, 1998, pp. 90-91). Hence, critical pedagogy stresses the intimate connection between education and political life and emphasizes that all instantiations of learning and teaching are politically pregnant. This insight is one of the principal assumptions of this study, the logic that structures it as a whole. The study mines the pedagogic aspects of immigrants' life in order to examine political integration. It does so by exploring how informal learnings that transpire in organizational settings enable or hamper enactments of political agency.

As stated in the introduction, enactments of political agency are crucial to democracy, which as a system of governance puts great premium on political agency of members of the political community. As is clear from the foregoing, political agency is a central idea in this study; it is assumed, implied and stated at different stages. One way the centrality of political agency for the study can be seen is in the way I have structured my research questions:

1.   A.   How do members of Ethiopian community in a city in Canada understand the political significance of belonging to ethnic organizations?

      B.   How does their participation in community organizations and the learning it entails reflect a quest for, or assertion of, political agency?

Defining agency in relationship to learning communities and authenticity

Clearly, political agency is a key concept for this the study of dynamic education in

communities. I begin with a broad definition and narrow it down to specific aspects of political

agency I invoke in the study. Bandura (2001) gives a straightforward definition of agency when

he states, "to be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one's actions" (p. 2).

To sharpen this denotation of political agency as action it can also be linked to cultural

authenticity as an act of liberation. Although the word agency is not explicitly used in *Pedagogy

of the Oppressed*, Freire's (2000) account of *conscientizaçao* also conveys the importance of

agency, as social and psychological process by "which the people, through a true praxis, leave

behind the status of *objects* to assume the status of historical *Subjects*" (Freire, 2000, p.

160). Similarly, Kincheloe (2008) drives essentially the same point, defining agency as, "a

person's ability to shape and control his or her life by freeing the self from the oppression of

power" (p. 42).

Here agency is understood as importantly linked to action in the service of political

freedom. It is not just the condition of being free from domination or free from being object of

oppressive forces but what Freire (2000) calls *praxis*: "the *action* and reflection of men and

women upon their world in order to transform it" (emphasis my own, p. 79). People who have

agency show it through action, by partaking in certain activities. This view of agency is

commensurate with Arendt's (1958) definition: "Men *are* free – as distinguished from their

possessing the gift for freedom – as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to *be* free and to

act are the same." For Arendt (1958) action is, in this sense, epitomized in the engagement of

citizens in political governance, in having a say and using this capacity to effect political change.

As such, civic participation in democracy is the quintessential expression of agency for Arendt

(1958): "no one could be called free without his experience in public freedom, and that no one

could be called either happy or free without participating and having a share in public power" (p.

93).

Agency as authenticity

And now I want to indicate a serious consideration in what is at stake with political agency and in doing so I explicate another feature in the understanding of political agency that I adopt in the study; and this has to do with the way that agency is related to authenticity. In explaining this point, I draw on Charles Taylor (1994) whose discussion of authenticity in his *Politics of recognition* is part of his work on tracing the modern ideal of authenticity.

Taylor (1994) wrote about authenticity as a modern ideal that is intimately connected to agency, that is, as a state of being original in the sense of people having an inner voice that guides their actions and that is integral to our sense of fulfillment. In the following quote, Taylor (1994) expresses the profundity which this ideal represents, relating it to self-directedness and its ultimate goal of self-realization.

> Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, which is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This is the background understanding to the modern ideal of authenticity, and to the goals of self-fulfillment and self-realization in which the ideal is usually couched. (p. 31)

This ideal is very well connected with the idea of agency; for, it is connected to being free from external imposition or oppression, since without such freedom one can't be one's true self, and it has practical implications, since living authentically means, among other things, living out according to one's inner voice that directs us in self-determined directions. Taylor (1994) goes further and notes that our agency, understood in terms of self-directed life, is the fundamental

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ground for our dignity: "what command[s] respect in us… [is] …our status as rational *agents*, capable of directing our lives through principles" (emphasis my own, p. 41).

As such, political agency is constitutive of authentic life. And a social life in which one is not able to be oneself, that is, to be without effective agency, whether when this is a result of external pressure as when one is misperceived by others or brought about by one's own false sense of self is a deplorable state of being. Taylor (1994) puts it in these terms:

> a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being. Thus, some feminists have argued that women in patriarchal societies have been induced to adopt a depreciatory image of themselves. They have internalized a picture of their own inferiority, so that even when some of the objective obstacles to their advancement fall away, they may be incapable of taking advantage of the new opportunities. And beyond this, they are condemned to suffer the pain of low self-esteem. An analogous point has been made in relation to blacks: that white society has for generations projected a demeaning image of them, which some of them have been unable to resist adopting. Their own self-depreciation, on this view, becomes one of the most potent instruments of their own oppression. (pp. 25–26)

In integrating the idea of authenticity into the understanding of political agency, I wanted to stress the profound significance it has for meaningful human life of dignity. I wanted to claim that lack of political agency can depreciate humanity by undermining the capacity for self-directed, conscious life. The seriousness with which I imbue this point is commensurate with my

concern about immigrants' social and political standing in their political community. And yet, one of the most importance contexts of agency is culture, a construct I discuss next.

The significance of community culture in critical pedagogy

Furthermore, in taking community culture seriously, that is, in choosing to explore cultural institutions and cultural forms as reservoirs of experience with pedagogic significance and in examining them with the understanding that they are most revealing of political agency, I draw on and exemplify yet another tenet of critical pedagogy; namely, the thesis that cultural forms are requisite sites for inquiring about education and politics (Freire, 2003; Giroux, 2004, 2009; McLaren, 2003).

Given that culture is a controlling idea here it is beneficial to explain, again drawing on critical pedagogy, how culture is understood and taken up in the present study. The political import of culture takes center stage in critical pedagogy; culture is understood as site of political struggle and prospective redemption. Giroux (2004), for example, drew on cultural studies in defining culture in this way, "culture is recognized by many advocates of cultural studies as both a site of contestation and a site of utopian possibility, a space in which an emancipating politics can be fashioned" (p. 60). McLaren (2009) also captured one of the ways in which critical theory has defined culture against a depoliticized concept of culture: "Culture is analyzed not simply as a way of life, but as a form of production through which different groups in either their dominant or subordinate social relations define and realize their aspirations" (p. 65).

Critical pedagogues have explored cultural sites as particularly revealing of dynamics of politics and the workings of power. For example, Mayo (1995) has explained Freire's conception of "dialogical cultural action" and its political significance in this way,

Freire referred to the non-formal activity carried out within the wide spaces existing

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outside the system as 'cultural action'… [which] constitutes the means whereby the oppressed acquire consciousness of themselves as a political force. It is one of the areas, according to Freire, where a sense of agency can be developed. (p. 367)

McLaren (2009) reinforces this point when he affirms that culture is indispensable to critical pedagogy because it is deeply implicated in politics (p. 69). Affirming political significance of culture here implies a conception of politics as something that transcends activities that transpire within formal institutions of governance. In the Freirean sense, politics exists in "all relations of power and forms of organization in society, *whether or not they occur within the domain of official governmental affairs*" (emphasis my own, McCowan, 2006, p. 59).

In this study understanding the political experiences of immigrants is one of the primary objectives. Such understanding is sought by exploring sites where the specific immigrant group under study lives out the practices that give it its distinct cultural characteristics. The study's analytical context comprises three interrelated conceptual pillars: education, culture and political agency. When observing, or studying social phenomenon, most of us may naturally take into account the interrelationship of these three co-extensive elements. However, I adopt this approach not based on my experiential knowledge alone. Rather, I have greatly benefited from critical educationalists' (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2006; Kincheloe, 2008) accounts that similarly take cultural context and its corollaries as central to political analysis. "Critical pedagogy is cognizant of the importance of understanding the context in which educational activity takes place" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 31).

One such statement is provided by Abdi (2013). Explicating the importance of context in understanding of educational practices in general and those educational practices tied to goals of enhancing well-being in particular, Abdi (2013) notes that "decontextualized education is…

decultured education, and from there, becomes nonconductive to the desired social well-being plateaus that should be expected from viable learning and pedagogical situations" (p. 27). While the mutual influence of culture, education and well-being is implicitly alluded to here, Abdi (2013) is more direct when he identifies the triad of culture, education and development as having a more fundamental and consequential relevance for understanding social life:

> To be sure, the relationship between education, culture, and development is so important in my understanding of the world that I am willing to talk about what I am ready to call "the primary triangle of people's lives", where culture heavily constructs education… [and] becomes capable of achieving social development contexts for the concerned society (p. 23).

Abdi (2013) appreciated understanding the contextualizing influence of culture in creating and enacting learning programs and practices that can bring tangible social outcomes, including social enfranchisement and democratic citizenization. After all, cultural context plays a key role in "knowledge constructions, informs the processes of such construction, and greatly shapes the results we reap thereof" (Abdi, 2013, p. 17). These insights reveal the productive interplay between culture, education and wellbeing and it is precisely this triangle that is adopted as the central framing construct that guides the research.

The political nature of culture as a social learning system

Freire expresses the relationship of education to culture in a straightforward manner when he succinctly asserts, "education in itself is a dimension of culture" (Freire, 2003, p. 357). Education and culture are mutually-reflective and critical educationalists take this relationship as fundamental to inquiries about politics and power. Thus, in part because culture is "a field of

struggle in which the production, legitimation, and circulation of particular forms of knowledge and experience are central areas of conflict" (MacLaren, 2009, p. 69); "education has to take the culture that explains it as subject of curious comprehension" (Freire, 2003, p. 357). In this study, I explore political agency by focusing on the effect of belonging to ethnocultural organizations, institutions in which learning practices are weaved through cultural mores, which serve as meaning-making processes that shape identities, articulate and live out moral beliefs and exert force, ingredients with potent implications for political agency.

In settling on sites of informal learning as most conducive to explore the intersection of cultural pedagogies and political agency, I once again reflect the common tenet of critical pedagogy, namely that pedagogic questions and how they are related to power and politics must explore informal instantiations of learning which make up what Freire has termed "cultural action." As Giroux (2004) writes with resounding approval of this approach,

> cultural theorists acknowledge the primacy of culture's role as an educational site where identities are being continually transformed, power is enacted, and learning assumes a political dynamic as it becomes not only the condition for the acquisition of agency but also the sphere for imagining oppositional social change. (p. 60)

Cultural learning spaces are exemplified here as ethno-cultural organizations of the particular community group and are inherently political and, therefore, studying them as social learning systems reveal much about the group's quest or enactments of political agency and consequently political integration. The importance critical pedagogy attaches to a specific understanding of culture and mining cultural forms and institutions as particularly instructive is, hence, a second seminal theme in critical pedagogy discourse that I draw on in this study. For, succinctly put, "[p]edagogy, at its best, implies that learning takes place across a spectrum of social practices

and settings" (Giroux, 2004, p. 61).

These settings, that is ECOs, exemplify contexts for what Freire's (1970) has termed critical consciousness, a civic disposition that advances the development of political awareness that transforms people from being docile recipients of the status-quo to responsible political agents who are invested by ideas of social justice and the praxis that accompany them. Critical consciousness is integral to critical pedagogy's project of "[demystifying] the asymmetrical power relations and social arrangements that sustain the interest of the ruling class" (Darder et al., 2009, p. 13). As such, ECOs are most conducive for such demystification insofar as they serve as contexts in which immigrants reflect and understand their role as potential liberators of themselves, as opposed to remaining inadvertently complacent in sustaining oppressive systems, narratives and relationships.

There is also a third significant way I draw on critical pedagogy; this pertains to critiques critical educationalists have been making against neoliberalism. And to this I now turn, as I present the case against neoliberalism and describe elements of alternatives to it.

Critical pedagogy and neoliberalism

This study involved examining how belonging to ethno-cultural organizations influences immigrants' ability to pursue and exercise political agency and advance their political integration. However, what happens at the level of ethno-cultural organizations is affected by a paradigmatic ideology like neoliberalism. Hence, as stated above, the study was concerned with the effects neoliberal policies and neoliberal social ethic have on political agency of immigrants. I have expressed the concern regarding neoliberalism and reduction of resources for immigrant settlement and integration and the adverse effect neoliberalism has on public psyche concerning the (re)definition of who a *good citizen* is. As such, one of the focal points of the study is on

understanding how the immigrant group under study is seeking to pursue and fulfill its full civic life, including exercising agency, despite neoliberalism's reach into their existentialities. The lines of questioning I assume in this study about the worries I harbor regarding neoliberalism draws from and reflects, both in tenor and substance, the sustained critique of neoliberalism that critical educationalists have produced.

While it is beneficial to consider the "negative" critiques that explicate deleterious effects of neoliberalism on social and political life, it is as well valuable to come to grips with what vision of life animate neoliberalism, not merely its harmful effects but also what it considers to be important and seek to protect and advance. For, it is when we come to investigate neoliberalism's purpose, its social ideal that we can begin to find and appreciate alternatives to it. Thus, in what follows I will first discuss an important part of neoliberalism's principal vision by drawing on critical pedagogy.

Shultz's (2007, 2013) work engages neoliberalism in part by specifying its driving vision. Whereas Shultz (2013) concurs with Giroux's (2004) statement on the role of the state, as when she notes that, "has been eroded through neoliberalism… [leaving] citizens to fend for themselves" (p. 96) she also goes on to describe a central part of neoliberalism's *raison d'être* and a vision of the neoliberal citizen: "In a modern, neoliberal society, a citizen's role is primarily an economic one, that of consumer, influencing society through individual acts of consumption" (Shultz, 2007, p. 250). Furthermore, Shultz (2013) captures the individualist root that lies at the historical and theoretical source and practical consequences of neoliberalism:

> Neoliberalism rests on the ideas that it is only possible to act as an economized
>
> individual. Here, we recall Margaret Thatcher, the political herald for much of neoliberal
>
> ideology, whose claim "there is no such thing as society, there are only individuals" sums

up much of what is at the foundation of the diminished public sphere, repositioning

citizenship as individualized participation in the global economy as consumer or

entrepreneur, devoid of place, history, culture, or social obligation. Democracy and

citizenship are described in many ways but most often in terms of a relationship between

a person or persons and a state (p. 87).

Neoliberalism attaches disproportionate importance to market values and advances

narrowly conceived practice of economic competition to such an extent that it virtually banishes

politics from the public realm. In championing the economy, neoliberalism turns its back on

those aspects of citizenship that see democratic engagement as key to social wellbeing (Shultz,

2013). Neoliberalism is, therefore, deeply implicated in a practice of depoliticization by

misconstruing political issues into economic ones (Shultz, 2013). It valorizes negative rights in

contrast to positive ones, and creates "the economic citizen, obedient to the market and policies

that create market-friendly environments where there were once spheres of publicness in the full

sociocultural sense" (Shultz, 2013, p. 99). These are crucial considerations that connects the

concerns related the political agency of the immigrant community I study to broad political

realities that function as hegemonic ideologies. However, it is also important to supplement these

broad theoretical lenses with concrete normative benchmarks with which to recognize

instantiations of injustice and from which to argue for ameliorative social reality. Thus, I turn to

Nancy Fraser's (1990, 2000, 2003, 2009) theory of justice.

Nancy Fraser's conception of justice

This study began with profound concern about whether immigrants' political lives in their

adopted country are adequately considered, whether their political engagements are sufficiently

understood, and if their voices are judiciously represented in social and political arenas. The

source of the concern in part is my lived experience, both as an immigrant and the understanding I have gained in my roles as community volunteer and as a settlement worker for over a decade. These experiences were gained in tandem with my development as a student in political theory and later in education. One focus where these experiences converged was the question of whether immigrants' political presence and social contribution were matters of serious consideration. To this end, I was interested in exploring the political lives of immigrants in the context of sites where immigrants are likely to pursue, express and evolve their political identities and seek political agency: ECOs. Part of what I found out is that immigrants in general are faring badly in accessing social goods, developing optimal political consciousness and political representation. Their full participation is impeded by factors that are internal to ECOs, such as the community's size and the tepid activism of its animators – or its communities of practice as I call them following Wenger (1998) – but also by broader discourses and practices, like prevalent conceptions of integration and democracy as well as the social effects of neoliberalism. Since these concerns entail fundamental questions of social justice I needed a theoretical lens to address them from a comprehensive vantage point.

While I consistently refer to *political* lives of immigrants as the point of concern in the study, I have been keenly aware that my study informants' cultural *otherness* and their economic situations critically shape their experiences as political actors. Given these concerns then, I posited at the theoretical foundation of my study Nancy Fraser's (1990, 2000, 2009) conception of justice, as it takes seriously the political but also the economic and social aspects of social existence. I utilize it to name social injustice when I *see* it, to help me think through the various bases of redress and to posit a normative ideal to strive towards. Integrating questions of cultural recognition, economic distribution and political representation, Fraser's approach responds well

to virtually all aspects of social justice, and so also to the questions of political agency that drives this study. Therefore, in what follows I will lay out Fraser's account in a straightforward manner.

Fraser's (2009) conception of justice is founded on an egalitarian normative bedrock: "In my view, the most general meaning of justice is party of participation. According to this radical-democratic interpretation of the principle of equal moral worth, justice requires social arrangements that permit all to participation as peers in social life" (p. 16). This principle of justice, what Fraser calls parity of participation, can be violated along three dimensions: the cultural, the economic and the political. The cultural dimension of justice is contravened when individual members of a group are impeded from full social participation because of "institutionalized patterns of cultural value" (Fraser, 2000, p. 113) that disfavors them and reduces them to a subordinate status, rendering them "unworthy of respect and esteem" (Fraser, 2000, p. 114). Fraser (2000) calls the type of injustice that occurs along the cultural dimension *misrecognition*; although, she distinguishes her use of the concept to refer to violations that happen to individual members of a group, as opposed to a group per se. Fraser (2000) picks up on a second dimension along which parity of participation can be curtailed and therefore where it should be addressed: the economic. Along this, second dimension injustice occurs when "actors lack the necessary resources to interact with others as peers" (p. 116). The social culprit here is *maldistribution,* designates the condition whereby "economic structures, property regimes or labour markets deprive actors of the resources needed for full participation" (p. 117). Fraser cautions against two serious dangers in how we understand and operationalize these two dimensions of justice.

First, the two dimensions are mutually irreducible and conflating them poses grave peril to justice. Fraser (2000) discusses how there has been in recent years a dangerous trend whereby

questions of recognition "are serving… to marginalize, eclipse and displace" questions of *maldistribution*, inadvertently "promoting economic inequality" (Fraser, 2000, p. 108). Neither should one pursue distributive justice exclusively lest one "[condemns] millions of people to suffer grave injustices that can only be redressed through recognition of some kind" (p. 120). Therefore, "only by considering both dimensions together can one determine what is impeding participatory parity in any particular instance (p. 119). However, Fraser (2000) also urges that neither one of the two dimensions can be reduced into the other, it is equally true that they cannot be "neatly separated from each other in capitalist societies [since]… economic issues such as income distribution have recognition subtexts… conversely, recognition issues – judgements of aesthetic value, for instance – have distributive subtexts." (p. 118). To these two dimensions, Fraser (2009) has added a third one in her more recent work.

This is the *political* dimension of justice. Although the first two dimension "are themselves political in the sense of being contested and power-laden… [usually] requiring adjudication by the state" (Fraser, 2009, p. 17). Reflecting one aspect of parity of participation, "the political dimension of justice is concerned chiefly with representation" (Fraser, 2009, p. 17). It is concerned with questions about, first, who belongs to the political community and second, with whether political structures and practices enable or impede equality in representation in the political arena. This dimension of justice is sufficiently different from the previous two, since "there can be distinctly political obstacles to parity, not reducible to maldistribution or misrecognition, although (again) interwoven with them" (Fraser, 2009, p. 18). I used this broad framework gave me normative language by which I made sense of and interpreted interview data; it also provided me the rationale for how equality of social participation is an important social justice goal. However, I also found Fraser's (1990) account of subaltern counterpublics an

excellent means of conceptualizing ECOs as political spaces.

Subaltern counterpublics

In addition to using Fraser's conception of justice as a central normative foundation, I have availed myself of her account of *subaltern counterpublics*. More specifically, while I used the conception of justice described above to assess barriers to participation but also to think about and propose means of overcoming the barriers, I have drawn on Fraser's (1990) account *subaltern counterpublics* as a way of understanding ECOs as public spaces where immigrants, like other minorities, form political discourses to articulate and express their identities but also to seek and enact their agency.

Fraser (1990) defines *subaltern counterpublics* as "discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). They are a subset of the public sphere, which is that democratic space, distinct from the state and the economy, in which citizens participate in deliberating about common affairs, co-create discourses and hold the state accountable (Fraser, 1990, p. 57). Fraser (1990) provides her account in the context of on one side acknowledging the critical importance of the public sphere as "indispensable to critical social theory and to democratic political practice" (p. 57) and on the other hand critiquing a liberal conception of it which understands the public sphere as one, neutral, inclusive arena in which all citizens participate equally.

According to Fraser's (1990) central critique, this conception of the public sphere is neither historically true nor normatively desirable. For, history shows that what is being referred to as *the* public sphere has more often than not been attended by barriers to participation against marginalized groups, such as women and racialized minorities. *Á fortiori* the public sphere

couched as it is in biases that favor dominant group has been instrumental in perpetuating domination. What Fraser (1990) argues for, therefore, is acknowledging the importance of *subaltern counterpublics* as essential for subordinate groups as parallel sources of expressing social identities and pursuing political goals.

Based on Fraser's (1990) account, I want to stress that part of what makes *subaltern counterpublics* critical for immigrants is that they are venues where immigrants live out, construct and evolve their identities. It is in the light of Fraser's discussion of *subaltern counterpublics* that I conceive ECO as spaces of belonging and well-being but also opposition and political agency. However, I have remained cautiously aware that ECOs as *subaltern counterpublics* can also be counterproductive in the sense of being divisiveness. For, as Fraser (1990) notes *subaltern counterpublics* "function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment" (Fraser, 1990, p. 68). When ECO's function in this way, they give support to the critique that diversity breeds division and erosion of social solidarity. This raises the importance of understanding ECOs qua organizations, how they function, what makes them perform well as well as holds them back. To address this essential set of questions, I draw on communities of practice.

Communities of practice and social learning

Introduction

I used the discourse of communities of practice as the third pillar of theoretical framework because it offers insights on (a) how organizations work and (b) the nature of social learning and (c) the relationship between social learning and organizations. As Wenger (1998) put it, "organizations can do what they do, know what they, and learn what they learn" through the communities of practice that constitute them (p. 241). Communities of practice in turn are driven

by expertise or passion to learn about things that engage the common attention of the people who make up organizations (Wenger, 1998, p. 6). As such, the success of organizations depends in great measure on the extent to which the communities of practices that work under organization's rubric function effectively. Wenger (2000), who co-pioneered the theory of communities of practice is clear on this point: "the success of organizations depends on their ability to design themselves as social learning systems" (p. 225). These features of the discourse of communities of practice align well with my focus on ECOs. Put another way, in order to examine agency in connection to collective institutions I was led to focus on cultural organizations and then to explore organizations and to mine the pedagogic instantiations organizations can potentially facilitate I found the link between organizations and learning at the root of communities of practice most conducive.

The line of reasoning I followed in settling on communities of practice starts with my adoption of *cultural conception of agency*, according to which "agency always operates within and through social structure" (Ratner, 2000, p. 421). Cultural conception of agency rather sharply contrasts with individualist conceptions of agency in that it advances the importance of the social or cultural context as the necessary condition for the formation and realization of agency. Without taking culture seriously, agency remains only a potential, a mere capacity people have, lacking the specificity that imbues it with significant content (Ratner, 2014):

> Agency certainly makes culture, and it makes culture part of psychology – in a collective process. Individual agents also struggle to understand and select from social possibilities. The point is that all of this activity is part of a cultural collective process, full of influences and compromises. The outcome of this process is what defines and constitutes agency. (p. 403)

ECOs are cultural institutions that can profitably be studied as organizations in which learning take a central role. Communities of practice incorporates a theory of social learning with the nature and functioning of organizations and this made it a productive resource for the study. My employment of communities of practice focuses on Wenger's (1998) theorizations as presented in his foundational book Communities of practice, and selected references to Wenger (2000, 2010) as well as on one of Wenger's collaborative works Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015). I begin with an introductory definition of communities of practice and then go on to discuss how Wenger's (1998) theory of social learning provides a rationale for focusing on organizations in the study, explain the relationship between communities of practice and organizations before I provide an account of Wenger's (1998, 2000, 2010) concepts of participation and belonging, throughout explaining how the study draws on these.

Three defining features of communities of practice

The term communities of practice was coined by Lave and Wenger (Wenger, 1998) as a way of addressing issues related to situated learning, a concept that refers to the study of learning and its relationship to the situation in which learning occurs. In their co-authored book *Situated Learning* Lave and Wenger (1991), advance an innovative perspective, according to which learning is a situated process in which participation in social communities is both the necessary medium for, and an integral part of, what is learned. Far from being an individual, cognitive experience, Lave and Wenger (1991) theorized, learning is a gradual movement from being newcomers of social communities to being longstanding members. Whereas Lave and Wenger (1991) explored this perspective by examining the experiences of professional apprentices and how they are inducted into various professions, Wenger (1998) extended the account into detailed analysis of the ways in which social learning is facilitated by communities of practice.

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) provide a succinct definition of communities of practice: "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (p. 1). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) identify three characteristics that are necessary for a community to be a community of practice: the domain, the community and the practice. "A community of practice is not merely a club of friends or a network of connections between people. It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest." (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). What distinguishes a community of practice from a civic community, for example, is that the former has a more specific and a more narrowly defined shared area of interest or concern, a focus that constitutes a domain, the first element of a community of practice. The domain can be so specific as to render the community unique so that it would sometimes not be even identified by *outsiders*. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner's (2015) examples demonstrate how unique a community of practice can be:

> A youth gang may have developed all sorts of ways of dealing with their domain: surviving on the street and maintaining some kind of identity they can live with. They value their collective competence and learn from each other, even though few people outside the group may value or even recognize their expertise. (p. 2)

Hence, the domain is important in that it serves as the centrifugal force around which the community is formed.

The second element of a community of practice is community, which is conceptualized in a particular way. A community here is used to refer to a group of people, members, who are interacting with each other and in the process learn about something they are passionate about. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) provide examples that clarify this aspect of the

definition:

> A website in itself is not a community of practice. Having the same job or the same title
>
> does not make for a community of practice unless members interact and learn together.
>
> The claims processors in a large insurance company or students in American high schools
>
> may have much in common, yet unless they interact and learn together, they do not form
>
> a community of practice. (p. 2)

Now, the interaction can be frequent and face-to-face, or it can be once a month or even more infrequent than and that online.

The third feature is the practice. What distinguishes a community of practice is that members, interacting as they do around a specific concern or interest, produce some artifact like "stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2). Therefore, practice and its corollary, that is, collectively created resources or assets are things that distinguishes a community of practice from a group of people like, "a community of interest of people who like certain kinds of movies" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 2) that does not produce anything. Hence, as Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) note,

> nurses who meet regularly for lunch in a hospital cafeteria may not realize that their
>
> lunch discussions are one of their main sources of knowledge about how to care for
>
> patients. Still, in the course of all these conversations, they have developed a set of stories
>
> and cases that have become a shared repertoire for their practice. (p. 4)

The three elements discussed above define a community of practice and it is this definition of that I adopt in this study. A centerpiece of Wenger's (1998, 2000, 2010) accounts is his particular understanding of learning, which I present and show how I draw on in the following

section.

Wenger's theory of social learning and its place in the study

A key premise of Wenger's (1998) rethinking of learning is that human beings are fundamentally social by nature and that this fact "far from being trivially true… is a central aspect of learning" (p. 4). Learning is ubiquitous in the human world since social relationships are the necessary condition through which learning takes place. Human beings habitually participate in various communities in which learning is an integral part; "at home, at work, at school, in our hobbies – we belong to several communities of practice at any given time" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). Even when we engage in a solitary experience, like reading a book by oneself, we are implicitly interacting with a community; for, reading entails dialoguing, although only virtually, with the author of the text and with those who have influenced the reader about how reading is to be understood or how what is read is interpreted. The conception of learning that is presented in this account is not sufficiently recognized or theorized about as such (Wenger, 1998, p. 6). Wenger's (1998) rethinking of learning as a social practice that permeate our lived experience provides support for the study. First, it undergirds the choice to approach ethnocultural community organizations as places of learning. As Wenger (1998) has put it, "learning… is part of participation in our communities and organizations" (p. 7). In them, intragroup interactions, which are the means through which programs and activities are carried out, are frequent and concentrated. As such, the interactions implicitly or explicitly draw participants into learning engagements.

Second, Wenger's (1998) description of the conditions that make social learning especially important is very much similar to the social and psychological world that characterize immigrants' lives. As Wenger (1998) notes "there are times in our lives when learning is

intensified; when situations shake our sense of familiarity, when we are challenged beyond our ability to respond, when we wish to engage in new practices and seek to join new communities" (p. 8). Although members of the community I explore evince varying degrees of integration into their adopted country, they function with a level unfamiliarity with the "new" social conditions that surround them. Members may sometimes find themselves unsure of how to interact with and within, as well as how to respond to, the cultural, social and political milieu into which they have entered. These feelings are likely to coexist with intense interest in wanting to learn the new ways of being and doing as immigrants chart their way to life in the adopted environment. These conditions make learning all the more earnest for them, as learning is necessary to *survive* and master social resources for wellbeing.

Hence, the theoretical perspective Wenger (1998) develops provides a foundation for the study by stipulating learning as a social enterprise and by identifying the circumstances that amplify its importance to the process of acculturation. Such learning happens most importantly in ECOs, as their very purpose of practicing homeland culture and acculturation to Canada provide an environment in which learning is in great need and takes great significance. However, it is important to differentiate between organizations as the setting for many learning engagements and the actual drivers of education that are communities of practice. Conflation of community setting and community drivers can lead to misapprehending what each of them specifically does. Therefore, in the following section, I discuss how communities of practice and organizations are related but not reducible to each other.

Communities of practice and organizations

Communities of practice are not synonymous with organizations, but they are intimately related

to them. The former are part of the latter and exist "inside and across [them]" (Wenger, 1998, p. 227); one might say, they constitute them and play an indispensable part in their success. Wenger (1998) lays out the logic of how this is so: Organizations are social designs directed at practice. Indeed, it is through the practices they bring "together that organizations can do what they do, know what they know, and learn what they learn. Communities of practice are thus key to an organization's competence and to the evolution of that competence" (Wenger, 1998, p. 241). Communities of practice are, in fact, so integral to organizations that they are one of the two sources of organizational structure (Wenger, 1998). There is a structure that emanate from formal elements of institutions "such as policies, curriculums, standards, roles, jobs descriptions, laws, histories, affiliations, and the like" (Wenger, 1998, p. 243). By the same token, practice also embody a second source of structure, as "practice is where policies, procedures, authority relations, and other institutional structures become effective. Institutionalization in itself cannot make anything happen. "Communities of practice are the locus of 'real work'… where the official meets the everyday" (Wenger, 1998, p. 242). Organizations as a whole are "therefore the meeting of two sources of structure: the designed structure of the institution and the emergent structure of practice" (Wenger, 1998, p. 241).

Hence, in this study, part of what is drawn upon is an understanding of organizations as "the meeting of two sources of structure: the designed structure of institution and the emergent structure of practice" (Wenger, 1998, p. 243). Awareness of communities of practice, what precipitates their emergence, what specific goals they aim at, how they interact with formal organizational mandates, how they promote knowledge, and whether they promote or hinder political agency and social wellbeing are all questions I brought to the research field, all the while considering how the answers to these questions contribute to ECOs success.

Now, one way to explore the meaning of organizational belonging is to think of the nature of members' participation. And here again, I have profited from Wenger's (1998, 2000, 2010) analysis of this idea and practice. In what follows, therefore, I outlined Wenger's (1998) distinct understanding of participation and how I make sense of just what members do and what benefits membership holds for them.

Learning as social participation

Wenger (1998) states that "the primary focus of [his] theory is on learning as social participation" (p. 4). To understand the concept of learning as a social participation, it is helpful to consider Wenger's (1998) examination of the assumptions that underlie prevalent understandings of learning. Learning is generally understood as an individual, cognitive process which typically happens in designated location – schools – with beginning and end points in time (think of the statement, "I completed my education in 1990 at the University of Alberta"). Wenger (1998) questions these assumptions and seeks to supplant them with a social conception of learning:

> So, what if we adopted a different perspective, one that placed learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world? What if we assumed that learning is as much a part of our human nature as eating or sleeping, that it is both life-sustaining and inevitable, and that – given a chance – we are quite good at? (p. 3)

By broadening learning as an experience that transcends schooling and by refusing to restrict it to a cognitive process and ultimately by redefining it as essentially a social experience that permeate a multiplicity of spaces, Wenger (1998) rethinks learning as essentially and necessarily a social, participative process.

However, Wenger (1998) uses participation in a particular way:

I will use the term participation to describe the social experiences of living in the world in terms of membership in social communities and active involvement in social enterprises. Participation in this sense is both personal and social. It is a complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling and belonging. It involves our whole person, including our bodies, minds, emotions, and social relations. (p. 55)

Hence, participation here means more than what is conveyed by the word's common usage, such as when it refers to attending an event, as in *we participated in the New Year festivities.* In Wenger's (1998) usage participation does not preclude the existence of discord among co-participants. The concept is expansive enough to accommodate "all kinds of relations, conflictual as well as harmonious, intimate as well as political, competitive as well as cooperative" (p. 56). Also, participation involves mutual influence between participants and the organizations (or the social community) – the participant affects the community, by which she is in turn shaped. Wenger (1998) also notes that the idea of participation describes social relationships implied in activities that do not involve other people's physical presence. Wenger's (1998) examples clarify this aspect of the concept:

Our engagement with the world is social, even when it does not clearly involve interactions with others. Being in a hotel room by yourself preparing a set of slides for presentation the next morning may not seem like a particularly social even, yet its meaning is fundamentally social. Not only is the audience there with you as you attempt to make your points understandable to them, but your colleagues are there too, looking over your shoulder, as it were, representing for you your sense of accountability to the professional standards of your community… the concept of participation is meant to capture this profoundly social character of our experience of life. (p. 56)

These features of communities of practice were useful to understanding the community organizations I studied.

The significance of *participation* in the present study

Wenger's (1998) discussion of participation offered conceptual orientation useful to explore research site well. By explicating it as a complex experience, Wenger (1998) elevates the concept of participation into a theoretical vocabulary helpful in understanding the meaning and effects of members' engagements. As Wenger (2010) notes "communities of practice have always been there, of course. But having the concept makes the process discussable and then potentially more intentional" (p. 187). Exploring a community as a case study, especially one immigrant community, may conjure up an image of a monolithic grouping devoid of internal ruptures. However, understanding participation as something that in fact does not deny the existence of intragroup disagreements and even conflict made me attentive to the complexity of a community and it various organizations. This awareness then helped me identify instances of disharmony that may prove crucial in understanding the community, and in turn its influence, positive or negative, on enactments of political agency.

Indeed, I found members of one of the organizations hold contradictory views about whether the community organization should take formal stand on matters related to homeland politics. Three other interview participants worried that some activities that were carried out in their community organizations and in immigrant community organizations in general should necessarily involve mainstream society for fear that the organizations become, or appear to be, exclusive groups and help create division and disunity. Therefore, although the organizations are self-contained entities, they evinced dynamic tensions in them. Wenger's (1998) textured conception of participation enabled investigation of such complexity on social communities and

organizations.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that members' involvement in organizations has implications far beyond what members do at the community organizations. As Wenger (1998) put it, "their participation is not something they simply turn off… its effects on their experience are not restricted to the specific context of their engagement" (p. 56). This idea is very much in suit with the study's interest in how organizational membership and belonging supports or hinders members' political agency, which can shape how members function both inside their organizations but also outside of it. Thus, here again Wenger's (1998) re-contextualization of participation as an activity that transcends contexts of direct interpersonal engagement supplies a theoretical foundation that facilitates the study's aims of seeking to understand the effects of membership on how well immigrants from the community in the study function in domains of life outside their specific, ethnocultural environments.

In addition, it should be noted that in emphasizing the study's objective of understanding the effects of belonging to ethnocultural organizations, I did not assume that members are passive beneficiaries who do not influence the community. Rather, the study actively explored how members shaped the way the community functions, through their modes of engagement, what they understand ought to be the purpose of the ECOs they are members of and how they see the role ECOs play within the larger community of the city where the research was done and Canada. Wenger's (1998) discussion of participation as a concept and practice that allows accounting for the ways members are agentic who impact their community organization, in an interplay of mutual influence between individual members and community organization as a whole was an insightful reminder of the individual-community interaction.

The accounts of participation served as a valuable analytic lens for the study. In

discussing participation, Wenger (1998) cautions against slipping into the assumption that communities of practice are harmonious, that members are passive recipients of whatever value they get out of membership or that their identity as members does not get expressed in contexts outside face-to-face interaction in a specific community of practice they belong to. These insights have guided my understanding of ECO's and in what I looked for in the interviews.

In summary, the discourse of communities of practice offered a lens through which to make sense of major elements of the phenomena the study is concerned with, such as organizations, organizational membership, learning and participation. The detailed conceptual language Wenger (1998, 2000, 2010) has developed shaped assumptions I have made about the social world I explored. These are valuable for exploring the question of political agency. As Wenger (1998, pp. 6–7) summarizes the value of the discourse of communities of practice,

- For *individuals,* it means that learning is an issue of engaging in and contributing to the practices of their communities…

- For *organizations*, it means that learning is an issue of sustaining the interconnected communities of practice through which an organization knows what it knows and thus becomes effective and valuable as an organization. (pp. 6–7)

Summary

The three theoretical constructs that constitute the conceptual framework provided distinct contributions to achieving the purpose of the present study; although, they overlap in some respects. In highlighting the symbiotic relationship between politics and education, critical pedagogy calls attention to the fact that one of the most ubiquitous practices in human life, that is social learning has political assumptions, implications and that it is a stage on which vested interests are exercised and contested, implicitly or explicitly. And community culture is a terrain

on which this dynamic is manifest. Critical pedagogy also clarifies that awareness of this fact of life can be the beginning point of freedom, one that elevates human beings from a status of subservience to one of understanding and emancipatory action. These insights are very useful in the present study since they raised my awareness that instantiations of learning that happen because of ECOs are politically pregnant and worthy of close attention and understanding. Also, critical pedagogy's insight that *cultural action* that domain of activities outside the bounds of formal political channels is a fertile ground in which agency can be developed and supported. This last point is also shared by Nancy Fraser's account of *subaltern publics*, although there it is expressed in different *language.* Not only did I rely on Nancy Fraser's account of justice as a way of explicitly identifying what violations of social justice constitute in, I also drew on her understanding of *subaltern publics* as political spaces where marginalized groups express and seek ways of pursuing their interests. In this vein, I took ECOs as versions of *subaltern publics.* In addition, I needed a theory of organizations and found in communities of practice just such account but also one that integrates a theory of social learning into the genesis, functions and goals of organizations. The combination of these approaches equipped me with rich theoretically resources with which to examine the political lives of Ethiopian immigrants by way of their membership to ECOs and the social learning activities that imbue the organizations. In the next chapter, I discussed the methodological choices I made and the rationale for them, given the purpose of the present study, and the social problem it is sought to address.

Chapter Four: Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to explore how members of ECO's understand the political significance of belonging to these organizations and how they use their membership for political integration. To that end I devised a research design. This section discusses the research strategy and triangulates the underlying philosophical perspectives that make up the epistemological and ontological bases of critical realism; the methodological orientation and related literature regarding qualitative research for doing a case study; and the specific methods and techniques regarding the gathering interview data, document analysis, and the formulation of my findings.

Qualitative research strategy

This was a qualitative research study. As such, it incorporated most of the main principles on which qualitative research methodology is based. Although it is defined in various ways, qualitative research methodology has common features. Of these, I have adopted the following fundamental ones. I sought to understand the meanings people attribute to social phenomenon and made sense of their meanings by taking the social context from which they arise and in which they exist seriously (Creswell, 2009, Stake, 2014, p. 15). Also, I conducted the study in real-world setting whereby I was the main instrument of gathering and analyzing data (Merriam, 2014, p. 5). As is typical in qualitative inquiries, I approached the study from a particular theoretical perspective, that is critically and from a social learning theory angles, with which I made sense of social phenomena I focused on (Creswell, 2007, pp. 36–37). The study culminated in written presentation which reflected participants' experiences and perspectives, my own interpretations inductively constructed with a textured description of the problem as well as

practical proposals as to what actions should be pursued based on findings (Creswell, 2007, pp. 37–38). In this study I adhered to all of these theoretical orientations and procedural practices. As I discussed in Chapter 3, the study's overarching orientation is critical; hence, it takes politics seriously as a real entity and the study "[went] beyond uncovering the interpretation of people's understandings of their work… to critique and challenge, to transform and empower" (Merriam, 2014, p. 9).

Of the various qualitative research strategies (e.g. grounded theory, phenomenology, ethnography) that can be used to do qualitative research, here I used an interpretive case study method. In this section, I provide a description of the broader qualitative research methodology in which case study exists, specify the type of case study I use and explain how it is suitable for the study I am conducting given the fundamental features of the research, the subject matter, the objectives and questions.

Case study

How then is a case study defined? Some researchers, like Stake (2005), view it as a study focused on a single phenomenon; hence taking case study to refer to a unit of analysis; others (e.g. Yin, 2009) define it as a research methodology, "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, p. 18).

This study is consistent with both definitions. It is focused on one, bounded entity, a community of Ethiopian immigrants, but it also provides an in-depth analysis in which the context, ethnocultural community organizations, is deeply intertwined with the social phenomenon being studied, that is, political agency as a means of political integration. Beyond subscribing to this definition of case study, the study is further defined by two features: it is both

an embedded and an instrumental type of case study.

Embedded case studies are concerned with exploring subunits within the case, focusing "on salient aspects of the case" (Scholz & Tietje 2002, p. 10). This type of case study fits the present research study since I am more specifically exploring the topics of organizational belonging, social learning and political agency that are manifest in the community, rather than being interested in exploring the community as a whole, as in holistic case study. Embedded case study is sometimes defined in contradistinction with holistic case study which focuses on providing thorough descriptive exploration of a case (Scholz & Tietje, 2002, p. 11). In addition to being embedded, this is also an instrumental case study, as opposed to an intrinsic one. In instrumental case study, a particular case is explored as a way of understanding a topic pertinent to a broader context. Thus, I am interested in exploring one immigrant community to gain understanding about immigrant communities in Canada vis a vis organizational belonging, social learning and political agency. Gerring (2004) provides the best comprehensive definition of case study and the most conducive way to understand and deploy the case study strategy: "a case study is best defined as an in-depth study of *a single unit* (a relatively bounded phenomenon) where the scholar's aim is *to elucidate features of a larger class of similar phenomena*" (emphasis my own, p. 341).

Case study methodology has many virtues. As it focuses on a specific entity that is rooted in clearly defined context, it is conducive for providing detailed account of a phenomenon (Stake, 1981, p. 35); and it is also a design that enables a more concrete description as its point of reference is real life entity (Stake, 1981, pp. 36–37). These features of the case study methodology are commensurate with the present study whose aims are to get an understanding of a living community, its organizational life, and the subjective experiences and expressions of its

members. Also, in this study the boundary between the subject of investigation, political integration through pursuit of political agency, and it context, ethnocultural organization are blurred (Kim, 2003; Sharan, 2015).

However, like all methodologies it has its drawbacks. One of these has to do with the challenge of whether generalization from case studies are valid. Generalization is an issue that is particularly relevant to case studies (Merriam, 2014, p. 45). And it is even more pertinent to an *instrumental case study* which by definition entails generalization of some sort, since in it a case is explored to ultimately draw statements applicable to other, similar cases (Stake, 2005, p. 437). However, it remains valid that there is a lot that can be learned from single cases (Merriam, 2014, p. 51) and while strict generalization may be questioned many insights can be transferable to other situations and have utility for participants who might identify common patterns that can be appropriated for insight (Merriam, 2014, p. 51). Furthermore, application of the insights found in one research into other similar situations is in part drawn by the reader – in this way the reader's insights play in important part in the validity of transferable knowledge. For, "the reader will add and subtract, invent and shape – constructing the knowledge that leave it… more likely to be personally useful [to the reader]" (Stake as quoted in Merriam, 2014, p. 51). In addition, there are many similarities between immigrant communities in Canada, having to do with the fact that a vast majority of them form communities around pre-existing organizations (e.g. non-governmental as well as state funded or subsidized and otherwise), that integration is a common concern of very high importance and that some social learning is implicated in the pursuit and exercise of political integration through development of political agency. Beyond this, the present study is based on certain philosophical foundations, articulated in critical realism.

Critical realism

Critical realism is a contemporary philosophical tradition centrally concerned with questions about the nature of reality, ontology, and whether and how the human mind can come to know what is real, epistemology. Critical realism is a variant of philosophical realism and it originated in Britain in the 1960's. It is "a philosophical system developed by the Indo-British philosopher, Roy Bhaskar, in collaboration with a number of British social theorists, including Margaret Archer, Mervyn Hartwig, Tony Lawson, Alan Norrie, and Andrew Sayer" (Gorski, 2014, p. 658). Roy Bhaskar's *The possibility of naturalism* (1989) is one of the three seminal works that established a distinct type of critical realism. Although Bhaskar's works are particularly influential with respect to social science (Baert, 1998, p. 189), they are so broad that they address almost all scientific pursuits of knowledge. In *The possibility of naturalism* (1989), Bhaskar defends naturalism and advances "a unity of the sciences, or, more precisely, a unity of the *method* between the natural and the social sciences" and, in so doing, he clearly and explicitly critiques both positivism and "hermeneutic-inspired philosophies of the social sciences" (Baert, 1998, p. 191).

Philosophical realism has a long history (Potter & Lopez, 2001, p. 5) and encompasses a variety of positions which are at odds with one another so as to render realism heterogenous. As such, "[t]here are ongoing philosophical debates over realism that remain unresolved, and realist philosophers themselves disagree about many of these issues" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 3). Despite these differences, realism is unified around, as Phillips (1987) states, "the view that entities exist independently of being perceived, or independently of our theories about them" (cited in Maxwell, 2012, p. 3). Within this rubric, critical realism occupies one distinct instantiation. One helpful way of defining it is by looking at what the qualifier *critical* adds to the concept.

The *critical* in critical realism refers to (a) the critical engagement this tradition has had

with other schools of thought at the root of this tradition's emergence and development and (b) the emancipatory social project it espouses. As a discursive endeavor, critical realism is shaped by the dialogical engagement it has had with two prevailing discourses: positivism and constructionism. Critical realism took issue with the division between natural and social sciences and sought to bridge the gap between them by transcending the positivism-constructionism dichotomy. Critical realism emerged through a refutation of the value-neutrality advanced by positivism and acknowledged the perspectival nature of our understandings, shaped as they are by social, historical and cultural lenses which cannot be detached. But critical realism also advanced arguments against constructionist positions that assume knowledge and values are "so embedded in concrete social and cultural settings that there is no possibility of transcending them" (Hamlin, 2001, p. 2). Hence, critical realism charts a middle course between positivism and constructionism as such it "developed via a critical dialogue with alternative social ontologies" (Cruickshank, 2003, p. 3).

Critical realism is *critical* in another, second sense as well. It is critical because it has social emancipatory intent. Roy Bhaskar, in particular, has argued "that social science has an emancipatory potential (1986)" (cited in Sayer, 2000, p. 18). In *Scientific realism and human emancipation* (1981) for example, Bhaskar "argues, [that to be critical is] to identify understandings in society as false, and hence actions informed by them as falsely based, is to imply that (other things being equal) those beliefs and actions ought to be changed" (Sayer, 2000, p. 19). Spinkler (1987) notes the close connection between Bhaskar's work and his concern with social emancipation: "Human emancipation, Bhaskar's theme and his overriding concern, is the ultimate goal of scientific practice" (p. 9).

Critical realists argue that ontological realism and epistemological constructionism (the

two poles between which critical realism exists) are in fact mutually-reinforcing. Sayer's (2000) argument on this point is worth quoting at length:

> if the defining feature of realism is the belief that there is a world existing independently of our knowledge of it, then that independence of objects from knowledge immediately undermines any complacent assumptions about the relation between them and renders it problematic. What reason have we for accepting this basic realist proposition of the mind-independence of the world? I would argue that it is the evident *fallibility* of our knowledge – the experience of getting things wrong, of having our expectations confounded, and of crashing into things – that justifies us in believing that the world exists regardless of what we happen to think about it. If, by contrast, the world itself was a product or construction of our knowledge, then our knowledge would surely be infallible, for how could we ever be mistaken about anything? How could it be said that things were not as we supposed? Realism is therefore necessarily a fallibilist philosophy and one which must be wary of simple correspondence concepts of truth. It must acknowledge that the world can only be known under particular descriptions, in terms of available discourses, though it does not follow from this that no description or explanation is better than any other. (Sayer, 2000, p. 2)

One important point here has to do with whether critical realism claims for itself an exclusive hold on Truth or Reality. Whereas this is sometimes claimed to be a central thesis in critical realism, it is markedly inconsistent with critical realists' professed positions. For instance, consider Maxwell's (2012) statement,

> A distinctive feature of all… [critical] realism is [denial] that we can have any

"objective" or certain knowledge of the world, and accept the possibility of alternative

valid accounts of any phenomenon. [According to critical realism] all theories about the

world are seen as grounded in a particular perspective and worldview, and all knowledge

is partial, incomplete, and fallible. (p. 5)

In fact, the marriage of ontological realism with epistemological constructionism that underlies

critical realism is a perspective that is naturally assumed by people in general.

[for] on a daily basis, most of us probably behave as garden-variety empirical realists—

that is, we act as if the objects in the world (things, events, structures, people, meanings,

etc.) exist as independent in some way from our experience with them. We also regard

society, institutions, feelings, intelligence, poverty, disability, and so on as being just as

real as the toes on our feet and the sun in the sky. (Schwandt, 2007, p. 256, quoted in

Maxwell, 2012 p. 5)

At the same time, people accept

the idea that there are different valid *perspectives* on reality… Language doesn't simply

put labels on a cross-culturally uniform reality that we all share. The world as we

perceive it and, therefore, live in it is structured by our concepts, which are to a

substantial extent expressed in language [and therefore open to interpretations].

(Maxwell, 2012, p. 9)

Holding these positions is made possible by realists' rejection of the conflation of ontology and

epistemology, thus resisting the what is called *epistemic fallacy*.

And this is the basis on which I posit critical realism at the theoretical foundation of the

study. The combined effect may be described as giving the researcher the requisite self-

awareness in recognizing the possible limitations of our perspectives but also the hope and

possibility of transcending them.

Critical realism and social science research

Critical realism has important implications for qualitative research. As Maxwell (2012) states, "taking a realist ontology seriously, and systematically and critically applying this to a number of theoretical and methodological issues in qualitative research, can… provide a stronger justification for what qualitative researchers do" (p. viii). Here I will provide an account intended to capture the significance of critical realism to the research. I will describe it as a thread of thought with three interrelated nodes; namely, critical realist perspective on knowledge, a conception of what it means to be a knowing person that undergirds critical realist ontology, and the purpose of research that is entailed when critical realism is the meta-theoretical foundation of research.

A critical realist account of knowledge is where I begin. First, let us note that the critical realist position is defined around an ontological commitment that social phenomenon under study in social sciences are *real*, not mental and/or social constructions. Maxwell (2012) states the general point about the relationship between critical realism and social research clearly and succinctly,

> …one of the major implications of realism for qualitative research is that it relegitimates *ontological* questions about the phenomena we study, as distinct from epistemological ones. If our concepts refer to (not "reflect" or "correspond to") real phenomena, rather than to abstractions from sense data or to our own constructions, it makes sense to ask, to what phenomena or domains of phenomena do particular concepts refer, and what is the nature of these phenomena? (p. 22)

To ask about the *nature* of a phenomenon is to presume the possibility of knowledge as lying not in people's perceptions but outside and beyond them. This approach by no means should imply that people's perceptions are not important sources of knowledge and that research ought to subsume them. As Sharpe (2009) notes:

> [c]ritical realists… set out from the premise that subjects' own accounts are the starting point but not the end of the research process. Realist ontologies therefore seek to go beyond agents' conceptualizations of events and seek to look at social structures. (p. 5)

Let's remind ourselves that critical realism agrees with the critique that *scientific* knowledge is far from an outcome of a value neutral process of seeking "objective" truths by and unbiased agents. Critical realism "accepts the full significance of the manner in which theorizing is socially located… and the socially constructed nature of knowledge" (Sharpe, 2009, p. 9). However, it vigorously rejects the conclusion, which certain variants of the hermeneutic tradition and postmodernism are aligned with, that knowledge is impossible and that the best that can be pursued are people's subjective constructions and their expressions. "Social science is possible because there can be objective answers to the questions: what does this mean? Why is he or she doing that?" (Sharpe, 2009, p. 13).

Accordingly, as a researcher, I elicit participants' subjective accounts with which they make sense of their experiences as sources of knowledge. However, I also interpret these accounts, as I seek to answer *what does this mean?* This two-step process is reflected in the first two questions which I have posed at the outset of the research.

1. A.   How do members of Ethiopian community in a city in Canada understand the political significance of belonging to ethnic organizations?

B.   How does their participation community organizations reflect a quest for, or

assertion of, political agency?

The first part of the question is about participants' perceptions (for that too is a source of

knowledge, as mentioned) and the second part indicates the mandate to go beyond them. Hence,

the study intends to go beyond relying on and reporting the knowledge received from

participants.

The account of critical realism I provided has two interrelated ideas which further impact

this research. In understanding knowledge (and reality) as located outside the human mind while

acknowledging the latter's potential capacity, if fallible, to seek and gain knowledge, including

through experiences entails two things: a certain *conception of a knowing person* (an implicit

reason regarding what it means to be a knowing person or researcher) and the *purpose of

research* (what in the end a social scientific research should and does aim at).

We can begin to appreciate the effect on *purpose of research* when we follow the logical

outworking of the critical realist account regarding knowledge given above. If knowledge can be

gained both from people's experiences but also by going beyond them, then research should not

be about reporting participants' experiences but must reflect, through theoretical explanations,

something that can't be fully understood if we just succeed to *objectively* register these

experiences. Critical realists reject strongly the idea that "knowledge is a reflection of the

prevailing discourse or language game [and that] the task of the researcher is more about

constructing a narrative than discovering the truth" (Cruickshank, 2003, p. 1). Cruickshank

(2003) states this point strongly when he writes, "…critical realism is realist because it holds,

contra postmodernism and social constructionism, that research is about gaining knowledge of a

reality that exists independently of our representations of it" (p. 3). In accordance with this

critical realist position, I will for all intents and purposes take my undertaking as a researcher to be one guided by the aim of revealing things that are *real,* although of course always less than fully accessible without cultural mediation. In any case, I don't begin from the constructionist assumption that my task as a researcher is primarily registering participants' experiences; it is rather to use participants' expressions and experiences as springs boards that take me beyond them. Participants experiences cannot be ignored but they are the starting point, albeit an important one.

Since what it means to be a person (a knowing subject) is implied in all meta-theories, we find a conception of the person underlying critical realism as well. Once again in describing its conception of the person, critical realism makes its case through a contrast with constructionist-relativist mindset. Cruickshank (2003) expresses this conception of the person through a contrast with that presupposed in constructionism.

> Critical realism is realist because it challenges the current postmodernist and social constructionist vogue… [according to which] there is not rational self, and instead the self is decentered contingency which cannot transcend its socio-historical location… [f]or critical realists the self is neither an asocial entity divorced from its socio-historical location with a fixed identity, nor a contingent epiphenomenon that is reducible to the prevailing norms of a society or community. (p. 1)

Insofar as this point is tenable, it informs the researcher's self-understanding *qua* researcher. One straightforward implication is that the researcher understands himself both as a product of his socio-historical circumstances with interpretive lens that is far from neutral but also with an ability, if not to render these lenses null and void, but, to transcend them. As

Cruickshank (2003) affirms "… selfhood is… socially mediated but not socially determined" (p. 1).

Hence, critical realism shapes three interrelated major methodological issues in this study: *understanding of knowledge*, *the purpose of the research* and *researchers' self-understanding*. Knowledge is possible, and it resides both in people's experiences and expressions but also beyond them. Therefore, the purpose of research ought to be a pursuit of understanding and should not be restricted to registering merely participants' experiences. And critical realism in the way I have described it is conducive for grounding these views.

Methods

Interviews

I passed a rigorous ethics approval process in which various aspects of ensuring the confidentiality of informants were duly tested and my ability to secure them were thoroughly examined, trained and approved by Research Ethics Office (REO) at University of Alberta, No. 00059220. Part of the ethics process included accounting for how to preserve the privacy of personal information, the maintenance of collected information securely and ensuring the safety and wellbeing of participants are preserved during and after the interviews. Secure data collection, retention and disposal mechanisms and strategies were also covered in the ethics approval.

Interviews were conducted with three sets of participants, five members of each of the three ethnocultural organizations. I used a combination of semi-structured and open-ended questions to elicit clearer responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015), and I stayed attentive to what participants say, do and feel about their experiences of belonging to ECOs as well as their perceptions of how their membership impacts their political agency. I used open-ended questions

to allow participants to lead me into topics, understandings and experiences that are meaningful and valuable to them. This two-pronged interview approach is consistent with the nature of my research questions which are heavily exploratory but also in part seek and definitive responses.

In conducting these interviews, I remained consciously aware of the fact that language is socially constructed and is therefore never neutral or consistently self-transparent (Maxwell, 2005). I was cognizant yet vigilant that my interview questions were necessarily laden with my theoretical lens and the strong impetus that prompted me to do the research in the first place. However, I was also aware that respondents also had interests that shaped their responses. Thus, awareness of my role in the co-construction process meant that my goal was to avoid leading the interview participants toward my orientation in order to help them clarify as best as possible their own authentic responses; thus, charting this middle course between a futile attempt to be completely *objective* and to resist any ideologically-driven engagement. In terms of the manner in which I conducted the interviews, I followed Vandermause and Fleming's (2011) counsel to weave the importance of active listening with the co-creation of knowledge:

> The capacity to listen attentively while remaining appropriately silent is useful during the elicitation…. Understanding what is being said and what may be hidden, responding sensitively to the cadence of the interview, and actively acquiescing to the participants' direction is important to the process of moving the interview along with inquiring questions as the narrative text is co-created. (p. 371)

The orientation conveyed in these words was my guide in listening during interviews.

For the present study I recruited interview participants on the basis of purposeful sampling. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) has explained, "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore

must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 96). Under the rubric of purposeful sampling, I used two strategies. First, I relied on my own knowledge and familiarity of the community to select those participants who I believed are able to provide me with the richest possible data. While I used this strategy with regards to the secular organization, since my familiarity with it was quite extensive, I used snowball sampling with respect to the two religious organizations. In the latter cases I was first able to identify key informants; I could do this with relative ease since I knew some people who were active participants in the organization. And then I relied on these key informants to guide me in the right direction and find informants who were able to provide me with rich data. This combination of direct recruitment based on my personal familiarity and acquaintance and using snowball sampling in organizations I knew less of worked well since I ended up with what I considered to be an excellent set of participants, who constituted "information-rich cases… [that is] those from which one can learn a great deal about issue of importance to the purpose of inquiry" (Patton as cited in Merriam and Tisdell, p. 96).

I ensured that there were gender representative voices from each organization; although, the distribution was not perfectly even. For example, while I recruited more female participants in the secular organization, three of the five, in the other two organizations there were more males. Coincidentally, the female participants happened to be very active members of the community, whose experiences in the organizations included leadership positions and were therefore very knowledgeable, passionate and able to provide rich and textured data pertinent to the goals of the study.

Participants were all Ethiopian immigrants who were members of the community organizations. They were of varying socioeconomic status, with diverse educational

backgrounds, ranging from pre-high school educated to three with master's degrees and anywhere in between. They also spanned in age from early 30s to mid-60s. A mature group of participants was sought in order to generate data about a topic that required delving into life experiences, a certain disposition regarding the value of cultural orientation, a sense of civic responsibility for community and an experience of immigration and settling in a "new" political community (country).

The process of interview data analysis began with the data collection (Creswell, 2013, Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). When I began the process of interviewing, I had interview questions that naturally emerged from the what the research questions were intended to explore and answer (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, p.97). But those questions evolved and became more specific, more precise and more able to generate richer responses. For example, in the first two or three interviews I started by asking about the activities that informants participated in because social participation is a particularly valuable concept in the study; for, in the way I have adopted the concept in the study from Wenger (1998), participation is very much a learning experiences that shapes identity but it is also a concept that accommodates the idea of intragroup conflict, so that participating in ECO can reflecting a conflictual situation.

One of the important potential conflicts is the one between members and organizational mandates, a type of conflict that has significant impact on the development of agency. But to explore these potentially conflictual situation, I reasoned, would be more effective if I started with what participants thought were the purpose of ECOs in the first place. And following that with the question about their participation would not only make the two ideas sit close together and make participants provide answer that show the relationship between organizational mandates and the activities they participated So what was lacking, which was a broader

perspective that would offer overall organizational goals took more and more importance. This made, more specifically, for example, the organizations restricted some kinds of political activities, political agency and political integration.

So even if data analysis, in terms of coding, comparing reflective notes started with data collection, the analysis proper, if you will, intensified once all data are collected and organized (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). And although I had read all of the transcripts as I went along and had a first go at coding, I re-read the entire script going through it in a sense a second time refining the coding, guided by the purpose of the research and research questions as well as the reflective journal. In this later process, I started writing another document in which I recorded notes, which attempted to take all the data into account and that document became the basis for the structure for most of the second half of dissertation.

The locations where the interviews were conducted were varied. Some interviews were conducted in reserved library rooms, others in the residences of participants, a few in the physical locations that housed the organizations and a couple in outdoor public spaces. While the whole interview process took a space of 3 months, each took an average of one hour and half. The interviews were conducted in Amharic and later translated to English in the transcription process and checked for accuracy verbatim in two subsequent readings of transcripts. This process refined the quality of translation and permitted the best possible precision in capturing the spirit of everything participants shared in the interviews. Furthermore, I would like to note that Amharic is my mother tongue, I have studied in since grade school and have continued to use it in my daily interactions with Amharic speaking friends and family.

Documents

Documents are one of the several sources of data that can be used in qualitative inquiries (Creswell, 2009, Sharan and Tisdell, 2015, Stake, 1995, Yin, 2009). For the present study, I used mainly the following documents: Canadian Multiculturalism Act, Alberta Human Rights Act, City of Edmonton Multicultural Office website, Alberta Societies Act, bylaws of the ECOs I studied, ECO produced information materials. Since "documents can serve a variety of purposes as part of a research undertaking," (Bowden, 2009, p. 29) I found it useful to categorize these documents in three groups and use them for the following three specific purposes.

As Bowden (2009) noted, "documents can provide data on the context within which research participants operate" (p. 29). Accordingly, I used, the following documents, first, as a way of understanding the broader context, the policy arena and formal government views that influence ethnocultural communities in general and the integration of immigrants more specifically: Canadian Multiculturalism Act, Alberta Human Rights Act and City of Edmonton Multicultural Relations Office website. Having knowledge and understanding of these documents helped me extrapolate how government perspectives impinge on some important aspects of the study, such as on the meaning and goals of integration, the provision of integration and settlement services, and the values of equality and fairness vis-à-vis immigrants (Bowden, 2009, p. 30).

Second, consistent with Bowden's (2009) point that "documents can suggest some questions that need to be asked and situations that need to be observed as part of the research" (p. 30), I used The Alberta Societies Act as a context within which to generate the interview question about whether or not participants felt ECOs can play a political role given provisions

about the requirement of political neutrality expressed in the Act. I probed participants' views about whether ECOs are restricted from political activities given the Act's provisions, which not only define organizations like ECOs, but also lay the terms under which ECOs function and the conditions for their existence.

Third, I used bylaws of ECOs as "valuable additions to [my] knowledge base" (Bowden, 2009, p. 30). By reading with a view to understanding the purposes for which the organizations were created in the first place, how they are constituted and roles of its various parts, as well as what the parts actually do, I learned about the organizations' as a whole and their specific parts. Since understanding how ECOs work is an integral part of understanding their political significance, which is the purpose of the study, the bylaws "[provided] insights into the phenomenon under study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 174). Relatedly, "documents provide a means of tracing change and development [within organizations]" (Bowden, 2009, p. 30). One of ECOs had had three bylaws over its 35 years of history and reading the bylaws and figuring out

the motivations that prompted the changes was valuable in understanding the ECO's evolution. I also drew practical knowledge from promotional materials that I collected, which were intended to disseminate information to the wider Ethiopian immigrant community about ECO organized activities.

Artifacts

Having a physical space, like an office or a building, is very important for ECOs. Having such a space provides a place of gathering, where organizational work is done, events are held, programs run, and activities carried out. It also gives official address through which important communication with stakeholders can be established. It gives ECOs visibility and through it the

ability to organize more effectively than would be otherwise. Therefore, I was attentive to acquire knowledge about history of the physical spaces of the three ECOs. To some extent the status of these physical spaces, whether they were rented or bought, in good shape or not, spacious or restrictive and why revealed the organizations' durability. One focus that I found valuable in this respect is comparison of the three ECOs physical spaces and appraising whether the conditions of spaces corresponded to the effectiveness of the organizations. All in all, although physical spaces may not be considered artifacts in the ordinary sense, they were valuable sources of information and insights for this study as they helped me enter into the backgrounds stories of the ECOs and gauge their overall performance. In part taking inspiration from Maxwell's (2005) statement that,

> 'data' in qualitative study can include virtually anything that you see, hear, or that is otherwise communicated to you while conducting the study; there is no such thing as 'inadmissible evidence' in trying to understand the issues or situations you are studying. (p. 79)

I felt it would be apropos to classify the organizations' physical spaces as data sources.

Reflective journal

Throughout the present study I kept a reflective journal, and in doing so I adhered to Maxwell's (2005) two instructions: First, the researcher must, "engage in serious reflection, analysis, and self-critique, rather than just mechanically recording events and thoughts" and reflective journal should be organized "in a systematic, retrievable form, so that the observations and insights can easily be accessed for future examinations" (p. 13). I followed these instructions in every stage of the study and found them valuable as a way of being not only consciously aware of my own thoughts but also in testing them.

I organized the journal in one place so that retrieving my notes, comments and reflections was easy. I also wrote in the journal in three layers for each entry. I recorded, first, a descriptive account that strived to be objective, straightforward and as much as possible neutral with respect of the phenomenon under observation. And then, secondly, I registered my critique, with clear intention of critiquing, theorizing about and arguing in support of the opinion I was forming. This was, thirdly, followed by recording which either questioned aspects of my critique so that this last layer was explicitly and consciously represented a rebuttal or objection to my critique.

This way of recording was quite helpful. It allowed me to engage in continuous reflection on my perspectives in a way that revealed my normative positions. However, it also allowed me to seriously consider the side of the argument that opposes mine. Thus, the journal was a very good means of formulating my thoughts and clarifying my positions in ways that took account of alternatives and oppositions to them. Many times, I found myself seeing more clearly the assumptions I had been making and amending my critique by considering *new* ways of formulating and strengthening my arguments.

Reliability

Working towards ensuring reliability of analysis, findings and conclusions in qualitative studies is important (Patton, 1999, Merriam and Tisdell, 2015, Creswell, 2014). To this end I employed member checking, triangulation, research bias clarification and presentation of discrepant information (Creswell, 2014). In doing member checking, I presented most interview participants with written copy of the findings and received their perspectives on its accuracy (Creswell, 2014, pp. 201 – 202). I also sought reliability through triangulation by checking for convergence between the following data sources: interviews, documents and my reflective journal (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). Triangulation was particularly useful in this study on questions regarding the

purpose of ECOs and on whether communities of practice had requisite level of criticality in developing, organizing and executing community programs and activities. In addition to these, I outline my own location as an immigrant and a person who has been working in settlement and integration for over a decade and the bias I have in favor of the conditions of life for immigrants. Not only do I express this right at the beginning of the study but also later at the beginning of Chapter VI. As Creswell (2014) notes, "good qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretation of findings is shaped by their backgrounds" (p. 202). Furthermore, I continuously present and engage with discrepant information, that is, perspectives that contradict my own. In fact, most particularly in the discussion Chapters Six and Seven, I engage with prevalent discourses against which I argue in articulating my own critique.

Ethical considerations

This research was conducted in a way that maintains ethical standards established by the University of Alberta in relation to the collection of data, as well as their analysis and dissemination. First, it provided all information to participants about details of the research in all aspects that pertain to their wellbeing. I sought and gained informed consent before collection of data and I have been very clear with participants about the purpose of collecting data and about the fact that participants have guaranteed timely access to all data they have provided, should they want it. They also have had unqualified option of redacting, revising or withdrawing the information they provide.

The research was undertaken in such a way as to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants and the data they provide. This was achieved in part by ensuring that neither the name of the city nor the organizations under study will be disclosed from the onset to the culmination of the research. The entire process of data collection, analysis and

possible publication will adhere to a strict code of confidentiality and safeguard the identity of research participants and their locations; in so doing, the research will effectively help avoid potential harm to participants.

Also, given the sometimes violently contentious nature of politics in Ethiopian history and its effects of creating antipathy in some and extreme passion in others, I conducted interviews carefully so as to cushion these reactions and not overwhelm responses. The concept of politics I invoke in the research is broader than its narrow and combative version that has been most commonly experienced among Ethiopians. Therefore, I have used language that clearly taps into this broad conception of politics, striving to clearly convey that what animates the research is the more positive, enlivening and life-affirming aspect of social and political life. Communicating my intention of seeking to gain understanding for socially salutary purposes facilitated more productive interviews without sacrificing genuinely passionate expressions of feelings.

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the research design for the study. I explained what kind of qualitative case study the present inquiry is and explained that this approach is in sync with the study's purpose of exploring the perspectives of an immigrant community on the political significance of ECOs and how they use their membership to ECOs for political integration. The fact that the study is focused on a bounded entity, that is, Ethiopian immigrants in a city in Canada who are members of three ECOs, as well as the tight relationship between the phenomenon of inquiry, political integration, and the research context, ECOs, made case study a suitable methodology. I also posited critical realism as the metatheory for the present study because its combination of ontological realism and epistemological constructivism provided a stable philosophical

grounding to, on the one hand, understand the context-dependent nature of interview data and on the other hand, allow causal explanations. I also generated data from semi-structured interviews, documents and artifacts. Furthermore, I kept reflective journal, which was helpful in making me aware of how I was constructing my perspectives but also in assessing them through alternative perspectives. In this chapter, I also discussed what strategic tools I used to add reliability to the study and the ethical considerations that I brought in conducting interviews as well as in doing the study as a whole. In what follows, I will present the findings of the study along themes I developed by analyzing the data.

Chapter Five: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to explore how members of ECO's understand the political significance of belonging to these organizations and how they use their membership for political integration. This chapter presents findings from 15 interviews conducted with members of three Ethiopian community organizations. Five members from each of the organizations shared their perspectives on and experiences of belonging to ethno-cultural organizations. They spoke about the purposes of ethno-cultural community associations, the programs and activities that define them and the meanings and significance of membership. They discussed how the work of the organizations can be enhanced and shared views about the work of these organizations vis à vis integration into larger society and how the needs of the community and Canada's interest may be met through changes in what members can do, in how the wider public understands immigrants and in the ways governments can support ethno-immigrant organizations.

The chapter presents interview data organized around the following five formative themes:

(a) the purpose of (Ethiopian) ethno-immigrant organizations,

(b) the practices and activities that embody ethno-immigrant organizations,

(c) ethno-immigrant organizations' distinctiveness,

(d) the social and political significance of belonging to ethno-immigrant organizations for members, and

(e) barriers and potential areas of improvement to enhance the work of ethno-immigrant organizations, political agency and social wellbeing.

These themes are well-aligned with the study's research questions. Critical and learning theories frame the study as well as the overall objectives. Theme (a) provided data necessary to understand the nature of the organizations. Since purpose is determinative of how new organizations come into being in the first place, what goals animate them and where they see themselves heading to, this theme served as a rubric under which data that are requisite for understanding subsequent information on political integration and political agency can be contextualized and assessed.

Theme (b) supplied information more directly related to what actually happens in the three community organizations and in so doing revealed several instantiations that can interpreted in terms of social learning engagements, which in turn allowed me to connect the activities to pursuits and enactments of political agency. Hence, this theme promised answers, partial at the very least, to research question (1a) How do members of Ethiopian community in a city in Canada understand the political significance of belonging to ethnic organizations? and (1b) How does their participation in community organizations reflect a quest for, or assertion of, political agency?

Theme (c) related more directly to the question of the distinctiveness of ECOs and consequently the ways in which the organizations offer unique opportunities for political integration and political agency. This focus also led the research to situate the organizations in the context of the broader political community by comparing them to mainstream organizations that immigrants rely on for social integration services. Themes (d) and (e) present information relevant to assessing the success of the community organizations under study as well as explore ways in which the organizations are underperforming and in what changes may enhance them;

hence, they help with addressing research questions (2) about understanding the underlying factors that hamper ECOs' effectiveness and (3) What organizational and policy shifts and platforms are necessary to realization immigrants' achievement of political agency. Since the study's main purpose was to explore the political significance members attribute to membership in ECOs and how they use them for political integration, all of the five themes provided different facets to construct the study.

The purpose of Ethiopian ethno-immigrant organizations

Ethno-cultural community organizations play key role in immigrants' lives. However, whether this role is positive or not is a question of debate. One particular source of this debate has to do with the potential effect the organizations are supposed to have of creating immigrant ghettos and in doing so not only isolate and disenfranchise immigrants but undermine social solidarity. From this perspective as Couton (2014) put it,

> How… immigrants are organizing, the types of social and political structures they are building, and whether their organizational strategies enable them to achieve mainstream economic [or social and political] success or tend to push them into the margins — sometimes called an "enclave effect" — are important questions (p. 3)

Hence, an important aspect of what the interviews explored were the participants' understandings of the purposes of ethno-immigrant organizations to which they belong and the activities of the organizations through which the purposes are lived out. Participants' responses regarding the purposes of the organizations were very similar; however, their divergent accounts of organizational activities were more specific to their particular organizations.

This section will address participants' accounts of the purposes of ethno-cultural organizations. The organization-specific activities, the second theme, which shows the nuanced

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differences among the organizations' character, will be presented in the next section. The two overarching purposes of ethno-immigrant organizations that virtually all of the participants outlined are (a) to enable practicing aspects of members' culture and (b) to support in the development of resources integral to living well in the adopted country.

One participant articulated these two enabling and supporting purposes in her account of the founding of her church organization but not necessarily with the exact wording:

there was a lot of interest in exploring ways to sustain our culture and also to sustain the skills that we have brought to the new country… the founding of the church was for the purpose of creating the space for social development so that new people coming after us can use some of the things that we have learned in the settlement process. (participant 2)

Although not mentioned together, the participants of the three organizations invariably stated the twin purposes, although they used a variety of ways to express them. For example, participant 9 spoke about how the organization he belongs to, the Moslem organization, was founded for the purpose of cultivating the youth to be good citizens, to protect their wellbeing from nefarious influences and to do so through transmission of native language and religious teachings. He said,

the community was founded by adults, but the purpose was for the kids, for the good future of the kids… for the youth growing up with these lessons [that teach good behavior and civic responsibility], they will be contributing for the whole society.

The participant related such a life for the youth with the practice of fostering the right social environment where youth of the same ilk, specifically based on shared cultural and religious background, could form relationships and thrive. The necessity of sustaining the native culture was understood to be integral to the purpose of the community. He articulated this point in this

way:

the idea is to gather the kids and engage them in different activities, like soccer, so that

they can be close to each other so they can be friends to each other, because when they

are friends they follow the same path, *because their background is the same* and as

Muslims, they have strict ethos, the way the kids are raised, there is no pathway to

mischief, first of all alcohol is prohibited, drug is also very strictly prohibited (emphasis

my own).

As the participant highlighted here, what is important is not just being involved in activities but

to do so within the mores of the practice of Islam, which establishes the common ground.

Practicing the religion is understood to be instrumental in keeping the youth safe and setting

them on the right path. While such religious-cultural practices help the youth to be contributing

members of society, the lack of religious education can lead them towards nefarious social

problems, including crimes and "terrorism," as one participant pointed out. Here, there is a

coupling of the two purposes of ethno-immigrant organizations; namely, the need to practice

culture, culture understood here as including religion, and the kind of cultivation that is

consistent with being good responsible citizens. Notice, that there is a causal relationship implied

in the pursuit of the two purposes. That is, the purpose of practicing culture is to understand the

positive effect of cultivating citizenship.

A similar coupling of practicing culture and efforts to enhance life conditions in Canada

is outlined in the following quotation taken from interview with participant 10, a member of

Ethiopian Community Association in the city of the research.

Ethiopian immigrants pursue their religions, cultures... We are born and raised in

Ethiopia, and I can only be my authentic self when I avail myself of activities and

meaningful exercises of it, food, language, people make me healthy in a way, it affects

my well-being. There is a 'feeling' that comes with cultural affiliation, because it is who

we are. Even a simple incident of discovering a new Ethiopian restaurant gives us a very

good feeling, a sense of being accepted and legitimized

Yet again, a member of the church community organization articulated the enabling and

supporting purposes; that is, the member emphasized the profound importance of practicing

homeland culture and developing resources that support participation in larger society and

described the church organization as a resource for enhancing wellbeing and as a refuge from *the*

world out there. This participant (11) put it this way:

children and youth are able to sing church songs in their own language, so they study the

language always on Fridays and Saturdays there are training sessions so that children and

youth know how to sing in their own mother tongue. They are conversant in Amharic and

in geez, they can sing and then on Sundays present their songs during mass. For

somebody who is going to study the literature to study the songs and to be able to present

it… it's just like saying a foreigner sings in Amharic. [Proud laughter]. That's

because these children do look from Ethiopia but they were born in Canada they were

outside Ethiopia, the language and culture they know are non-Ethiopian in a sense. In this

way, their presentations on Sundays symbolizes their understanding of heritage, their

original culture, their language. When they go back to Ethiopia for visits with their

relatives with their families they can speak Amharic… with their uncles and grandparents

they won't be strangers, they won't be new to their own country, they know it, they have

studied it. There won't be nothing new for them in their travels.

Participant 11 returned to this theme three times in the interview. He spoke about the knowledge

and virtues the youth are supported to develop in the church organization as very important social achievement, both because the youth are educated to connect to their roots and as a way of developing self-awareness and virtues that serve them well in their lives in Canada. He says the youth are enabled to develop self-consciousness and mastery of cultural-religious rituals through participation. Hence, he is clear in giving this as an example of what the church organization exists to do, that is, the preservation of cultural and religious practices. This purpose is also listed as one of the main *raison d'être* of the organization, in the website of the church.

This participant also spoke about the purpose of enhancing members' wellbeing, similar to other interviewees. Here, he does so in the context of social challenges that attend immigrants.

People are lonely and isolated, people work hard, they get tired, they don't associate, so when they face challenges, they get extremely upset and disturbed and they are driven to suicide. But when people come to Church, we provide guidance/counsel; all challenges pass, that challenges are part of life. Meeting people, and belonging give you many opportunities of sharing and commiserating; people help each other in communities/ organizations but if people are isolated and lonely, there is no one to support you when you are ill, and this creates extreme stress.

This quotation shows the crucial role the church plays in the lives of members, underscoring how the organization's uniqueness in its ability to provide a shelter against over-working and social isolation, social issues that seem to affect many in the Ethiopian immigrant community. In another part of the interview the participant talked in some instances about the value of belonging to the church organization as a matter of life and death and provides a vivid example of how this is so. As the above three examples from the three organizations studied show, the two purposes of ethno-immigrant organizations were essentially the same. Despite this

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uniformity, though, a closer look at the programs and activities that make up the life blood of the organizations showed important differences even though there are many similar activities.

Programs and activities

Although participants' understanding of the purposes of the ethno-immigrant organizations they belonged to were found to be remarkably similar, the programs and activities which interview participants helped create and participated in were diverse across the organizations. Exploring activities or what members actually do through and for their organizations shows the life blood of ethno-cultural organizations.

One of the objectives of this research was to understand the significance of belonging to ethno-immigrant community organizations; thus, activities are the means through which the purposes of organizations are lived out, including the way members interact, learn from, and teach, each other, cooperate, as well as, share resources and act as a collective. For example, exploring the types of programs and activities that exist in each organization helped me get at a fine-grained understanding of priorities. They not only helped me see the distinctions among the organizations but also enabled me to grasp their relative efficacy. They revealed also whether and what activities need to be enhanced. What follows, therefore, is a comparative account of programs and activities with these thoughts in mind.

There are analogous programs and activities in each of the three organizations. However, there are also some programs and activities that are distinct to each organization. While the similarities of programs and activities reflect the shared purposes of the organizations, the contrasts show us how each is a distinct organization with its own characteristics, strengths and shortcomings. All three organizations have programs and engage in activities that involve (a) teaching and learning of native languages, (b) promote homeland culture and (c) engage in

programs that develop some aspect of members' lives in Canada.

However, the organizations differ in other respects. Two of the three organizations are ethno-religious and, therefore, programs and activities of religious nature are part of the core undertakings. In these organizations prayer service and other religious events like Easter Mass, fasting breaks are staples but there are also programs whose explicit objective is to educate in aspects of religion and language. And yet, there is a fundamental difference between the two organizations, for example, in terms of taking an explicit position on political matters. While the church organization officially takes political stand, the other two organizations claim that they are "politically neutral." The secular organization's main professed area of activity is practicing and introducing Ethiopian culture and promotion of integration in Canadian society and social wellbeing; whereas, the Muslim community association focuses on youth education through building communities.

One of the biggest events that the secular organization the Heritage Festival, the annual city showcase in which many cultures display artifacts, celebrate and introduce their cultural products, such as food and dance. Members of the secular organization who were interviewed talked about this event as important for introducing, promoting and celebrating Ethiopian culture.

> Heritage Festival is big in the city and a lot of people attend them. So, these create a more
> honest, a fairer image of who we are as Ethiopians. We, the community, use these events
> as a way of giving an accurate and holistic picture of who we are.

Another participant (4) talked about the experience of a person coming to the Ethiopian pavilion and the kinds of important things she would learn.

> Let's say you are a visitor at the Ethiopian pavilion and you see that there are about 80
> something ethnic groups in Ethiopia, and you have never heard of any ethnic conflict in

Ethiopia. So, that tells you how those people can live together with other people in spite

of … whatever differences they might have.

The Heritage Festival is run by volunteers, most of whom are members of the community, and

the experiences of participating in organizing it provides numerous opportunities for learning, re-

learning many cultural ideas and enacting cultural practices, from cooking the ethnic food, to

dancing to and singing cultural songs to recreating the atmosphere, welcoming pavilion visitors

and providing information and orientation about Ethiopian culture through display exhibition.

Whereas the learning and teaching with which these experiences are imbued are incidental

(without a pre-planned intention of learning), there are other learning activities that are more

intentional and create opportunities where the learner internalize values and practices, especially

the youth.

Of these, teaching of native language is the most prevalent; it is an activity that has been

undertaken, at one time or another, by the three organizations studied. Almost all interviewees

who participated in the research highlighted language as an important aspect of teaching culture,

especially as a way of connecting the youth to their history and identity. For example, participant

#7 of the church organization, proudly talked about his experience of training deacons and the

role of language in this process as an effective way of facilitating connection to roots.

so children and youth are able to sing church songs in their own language, so

they study the language always on Fridays and Saturdays there are training sessions so

that Children and Youth know how to sing in their own mother understanding the

language in Amharic and in geez they can sing and then on Sundays represent their songs

during mass for somebody who is going to study the literature to study the songs and to

be able to present it it's just like saying a foreigner sings in Amharic. [Proud

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laughter] that's because these children do look like but they were born in Canada they were outside Ethiopia, language and culture they know are non-Ethiopian in a sense. This way their presentations on Sundays symbolizes their understanding of their heritage, their language; when they go back home for visits with their relatives with their families to talk with their uncles and grandparents they won't be strangers, they won't be new to their own country, they know it, they have studied it. There won't be nothing new for them in their travels.

Participant 3 spoke eloquently about the Amharic language school at ECAE that educated many of the youth:

[the Amharic language school] was at some point very vibrant. Again, the program was something that really played a key part in helping the youth understand their roots, to speak the language and to understand it. Most immigrant children draw on their "Canadianness"; they have "Western" names so you see the youth forgetting their roots. The Amharic school shows the youth that they do in fact have rich roots that they should be proud of and they learn all these things in the Amharic school.

A very similar perspective was stated by a community leader and a member of the Moslem organization. He said one thing that all Muslim community organizations he has been a member of have continually done to this day is running classes that teach language and religion. Whereas the language instructions are the most common of many other activities (such celebrations of families, mothers, fathers, religious holidays and secular ones, as members partake in practices that are culturally distinct) that have to do with practicing the native culture, there are others more geared towards the development of awareness, knowledge and skills that more directly and practically enhance integration and social wellbeing in the adopted country.

For example, a member of the Moslem organization, talked about how he and other members initiated and received a workshop that educated community members on how to establish a board that can administer community organization effectively. And he expressed that there is a lot of interest in attracting "external" stakeholders for the specific purpose of developing the community through engagements that enhance members' social integration and social wellbeing. Similarly, the secular organization has had a number of such programs and a participant, who is a member of the organization, discussed them as follows.

I have participated in… professionals networking event like women life skills, youth leadership [and women's conversation café] events. The first one was about… was intended to be an occasion for Ethiopian members of the community who… to come and discuss their experiences. And the idea was those who have not had those professional experiences can learn from those who have had, and the idea was in part to help people get jobs better jobs, resume writing skills, interview skills. The women's conversation cafe, held in the ECA once a month, I have led/facilitated 4 of those events. I was with a non-profit organization focused on health. So, I facilitated and presented on health, healthcare during pregnancy, during menopause, how to protect oneself from STD's and so on. Informal discussion was the method... when we come to this country we get really busy, raising children, domestic affairs, and this creates a situation where mothers, and women in general forget/disregard their well-being, they don't focus on themselves. The third engagement is the youth group. There was a 6-week-long training… the purpose of the whole thing was developing life skills and it was divided into various topics, "relationship," "body image," 'sexual health" others. And then, those who attended college, we also talked about the importance of participation and leadership in

associations/organization that are found in colleges, GMCC and U of A etc. so is

leadership development program. These are the main ones, the ones I participated in.

Of the three organizations I studied, the one that did not have many of these "development"

programs was the church organization. The reason for this anomaly is not apparently clear;

however, four of the five participants from that community organization spoke about the earnest

need for such engagements. One participant made this point more directly.

> if there were initiatives where the government approaches ECO's to look closely at
>
> endemic social problems [that ethno-cultural communities face], it would be of great
>
> benefit, for parents. And in general, to know what our rights are and to know what our
>
> obligations are, if people know this by learning from mainstream... for example parents
>
> can reprimand their children to keep them safe and in the right path, but if they fear that
>
> any such disciplining would land them in jail… there are a lot of parents who are
>
> restricted from disciplining their children because they are not sure of the legal
>
> repercussions. If outside entities, agencies teach about some of these issues to parents, it
>
> would be of great service to the families.

Thus, the numerous activities and programs in ethno-immigrant community organizations under

study can generally be categorized into two types. First, there are activities that have to do with

the preservation, practicing and promotion of culture through, as exemplified above, cultural

showcasing such as during Heritage Festival and the ubiquitous practice of language instruction

that has been carried out in all of the organizations. Second, there are activities – or a serious

need of them – that are intended to enhance life in the adopted country, including the

aforementioned activities of raising awareness and providing information on issues like health,

youth leadership, professional development and women's issues and learning to run community

organizations, activities that enable immigrants to participate in and contribute to the larger society. These two ideas and practices related to language learning and healthy living are integral to understanding the significance of immigrant organizational belonging and whether and how the organizations facilitate agency and social wellbeing. This [what? lost the referent?] is so because the accounts of purposes and activities tell us (a) about social agency, which involves the exercise of *positive liberty*, that is, what people are actually intending and doing, how they are acting in the social world and (b) how their *social wellbeing* is enhanced because of such intentions and exercise of liberty. Also, the accounts of purposes and activities lay the necessary backdrop to investigating the kinds of engagements members have with the larger community. Two observations are worth calling attention to here, to more directly show link between these accounts and the research as a whole:

a) virtually all of these activities described by participants are educational in nature and, therefore, political in consequence. As such, they can be profitably analyzed through the lens of critical pedagogy, one of the pillars of my theoretical framework; and

b) the planning and organization of the activities, which is undertaken by volunteers who are interested in enhancing community through knowledge and social proficiency, and the social and informal context in which the activities happen make the second main theoretical paradigm that underpin the study, that is, communities of practice, a most fitting construct with which to theorize the activities. By examining the communities of practice who are inspired by ideas and driven by passion or interest to initiate and execute programs and activities I was able to understand how the community organizations function, the process of identity construction in them and how agency is enhanced.

The uniqueness of ethno-immigrant organizations

The next theme attempted to answer the issue concerning what makes ethno-cultural community organizations unique. This theme is pertinent to the research first insofar as it helps further illuminate what has been understood from the previous discussion on two themes about what ethno-cultural organizations are about, explored through what their purposes are and what they do. That is, in examining what makes them distinct, I attempted to uncover the things that ethno-cultural organizations provide that perhaps other organizations (e.g. mainstream) do or cannot do. This research and analysis have been instructive about whether the roles they play can ever be undertaken by mainstream institutions and the possible consequences of the answer to this question.

Furthermore, the theme of distinctness contributes to an important debate about whether ethno-cultural community organizations should be publicly supported with taxpayer money or not. In arguing in support, Guo (2011) reasons, "ethno-specific organizations can be an effective alternative [to mainstream ones] in providing accessible and equitable social services for immigrants because they are more closely connected with and responsive to ethnic community needs" (p. 77). Those who take an opposing position, like Bissoondath (1994), claim that such support contradicts the basic liberal democratic values of personal liberty and equality. Research participants articulated perspectives that are pertinent to this debate when they spoke about the distinct features of ethno-cultural organizations that facilitate addressing community needs more effectively. These responses shed light on the question of whether it is desirable and justifiable to publicly support ethno-cultural organizations and why.

Language and culture were at the center of the participants' discussions about uniqueness of ethnocultural organizations. The commonality of language and culture, it was reported, shared by members of community organization is what makes the organizations distinct from others that

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immigrants interact with, mainstream or otherwise. Participants described how these shared social attributes, practiced as they are within community organizations that provide common space for their exercise, facilitate the welcoming and settlement of newcomers, the creation of social capital and the construction of a sense of place and self. Most interview participants talked very positively about the social benefits that stem from these commonalities.

Participant 12, for example, started by discussing how it is natural for human beings to congregate around shared cultural affinities. She said that it is empirically verifiable that people of the same culture and language, or belief system or religion for that matter, come together into a *community* and that this happens not only in immigrant communities but in all human social formations. She said that this natural tendency for *birds of the same feather to flock together*, so to speak, explains in good measure the founding and thriving of Ethiopian communities in the city of the research. In identifying these shared features of life as the centrifugal force that pulls people together into communities, Participant 12 reflects a lot of the views expressed by community members who were interviewed, which is that this commonality of language and culture makes possible several social benefits.

Two of these will be presented here: language learning and social capital. First, shared language and culture are discussed as having been the naturally best means to help in receiving and settling recently arriving immigrants. For example, participant 1 made the case in this way:

> newcomers in any context can face culture shock when they but if they are exposed to, relate with and learn from people of their cultural origin, people who they share common things with, adaptation and integration, is softened, learning new culture compared with newcomers just being let free in an environment where they have no such luxury. Otherwise there is confusion and frustration. But having a familiar environment is very

beneficial.

Participant 2 echoed the same point:

> what's makes these ethno-cultural communities good is that the people who come to the
> community organizations is that… because of the commonality of language and the
> commonality of culture between the people who are in these communities giving service
> and those who come needing support is that these communities create comfort zone,
> especially for newcomers.

One participant (2) said that the whole idea of the founding of the church is for supporting

newcomers. She said, "the church was [founded] for the purpose of creating the space for social

development so that new people coming after us can use some of the things that we have

learned." However, the organizations' work continues well after the initial settlement period and

facilitates the creation of *social capital*, a subtheme that will be taken up now.

> The commonality of cultural mores also was effective in creating conducive environment
for building social capital. When asked about the benefits of membership to ethno-cultural

organizations, one participant (5) talked about his belonging to the church community

organization as a conduit for building important social networks that support different kinds of

social needs. He notes,

> one of the big things about the church is that it is a place where people meet come
> together and develop qualitative social relationship, it is not only a place of spiritual
> worship, you meet people from your country of origin, there are a lot of "educated"
> people. There are a lot of things you learn from you fellow immigrants. You meet people
> who are educated and they give you advice, when you have some life difficulties you
> consult the clergy.

Part of what makes these social benefits, of the reception and settlement of newcomers and building social capital, possible that shared language and culture create trust and also enable a way of engagement that is comparatively effortless. Two participants have articulated this point well. Participant 4 talked about this in interesting detail,

> the way we get ourselves informed is way different in Canada than how these things work back home. In Canada, we have flyers, websites to get info. For example, if you want info on taxation or how to start a business, you can log on to the city website and you get all the information you need. But the way information is transferred back home is a bit different – it is socially based – over coffee ceremonies. That's what we did for example, with women's conversation café – or Nu Buna TeTu [literally means "come, drink coffee"] – is they will be making coffee in Ethiopian traditional style and while drinking coffee they discuss women-related issues. That is how it is done back home. So, they exchange information and share while drinking coffee.

Participant 6 reinforced the point about the uniqueness of the supports available at ECOs by incorporating the value of trust but she also goes further, favorably comparing her community organization with other mainstream ones. She said,

> you get the support in the language of your mother tongue, the language you understand. There is also trust, and such information or service is provided from you family, or friend in these organizations, so it is different, it's not a relationship based on "customer service", it is not "work", what you get at the church or similar organization is more powerful, more effective.

Interview participants variously pointed out that because ethno-cultural organizations are able to provide comfort zone for new members and make the reception and settlement of newcomers

smoother than it would be otherwise and because these organizations take advantage of the commonality of language and culture to deliver programs and organize and conduct activities that enhance social wellbeing, they are able to create a sense of place and provide a level of psycho-social experience that make immigrant feel accepted in their adopted country. Furthermore, they claim that these unique aspects of the social structures of ethno-cultural organizations and the supports that are available because of them make the organizations more capable of providing social services than mainstream organizations, government or settlement organizations.

One participant (4) talked about the fact that there are services provided by ECOs, the secular organization in this case, that cannot be done by other, mainstream or settlement service, organizations.

> for the kids, we have a special program where we invite speakers of Ethiopian origin, professionals of Ethiopian origin to speak to them so that they can be inspired. I don't see such sorts of services provided by other agencies. Sometimes you want to see a person that looks like you, that you can identify with achieving something important in life… for you especially as a kid to say I can do this, I can reach to this level. So, such sorts of activities are not done by other social service providers in Canada.

Another participant (3) bemoaned the negative effects of racist attitudes precisely where tolerance and understanding of immigrants should be much expected, that is, at the points of services that immigrants need, the implicit point being that such discrimination would not happen in ethnocultural organizations,

> at the social level, you need social capital, you need to know people who are in the in; for newcomers it is not easy, we don't think we fit in, not knowing the system, not having

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people in the inside, there is also the big issue of racism. Being seen as different… and

there is a widespread perception that newcomer, because they are "different" they look

different from the mainstream, they are thought to be incompetent, these are huge

barriers. Especially the racially biased attitude of people who are there to provide social

and settlement services perpetuate the barriers for integration.

While the foregoing interview responses give strong suggestion that ECOs are uniquely

equipped to provide certain services for members, it should also be noted that they also

potentially can spawn enclave-mentality (Couton, 2014, p. 3), whereby immigrants withdraw

from civic participation and function with limited social and political interaction with non-

members and mainstream institutions (Sam and Berry, 2006; Couton, 2014). One way to

examine this issue is by looking closely at members' perceptions of social and political

significance of organizational activities. And this area constitutes the fourth theme that will be

discussed in the following section.

Social and political significance of belonging to ethno-immigrant organizations

A fundamental focus of this study concerned the political lives of immigrants. This topic is

explored through the lens of organizational belonging and its significance for political integration

and political agency. As *newcomers*, many immigrants, at least those in the community of

immigrants I studied, are comparatively less experienced in democratic politics and have

comparatively less social capital. Democratic experience and social capital are resources

requisite for political agency. One aspect of what makes the quality of the political lives of

immigrants important is the issue of social justice. That is, without political agency or without

political voice, they sit ambivalently on the edges of democratic society, constrained to pursue

social and economic goods, and with diminished sense of civic belonging and wellbeing.

This makes them susceptible to socially pernicious and nefarious influences, as participants asserted. And this bodes ill for democracy, a political system whose legitimacy rests on vibrant and engaged civic community with authentic political agency. When immigrants, like members of a community in general, are able to function well in his or her social and political life, when he or she is able to individually and collectively act in freedom and contribute to, shape and enhance the social and political forces that determine the conditions of its existence, democracy has delivered its goods. As Kymlicka (1994) puts it, "the health and stability of modern democracy depends, not only on the justice of its 'basic structure' but also on the qualities of its citizens: [when they are politically engaged]" (p. 353).

Research participants shared how these organizations can and do give expression to political voices, are used as sites for political campaigns (by community members running for office and mainstream candidates) and become conduits for bridging between the community and mainstream institutions as well as creating and using opportunities to participate in wider society. There are explicit and implicit ways in which political agency is sought and expressed, although the latter are sometimes not recognized as politically pertinent.

Many participants reported the organizations they belong to are *not political*; however, they also described activities organized by their organizations or ones they participated in, where politics is either front and center or just beneath the surface. For example, participant 14 pointed out that the church organization he is a member of does not get involved in politics, as the organization's main purpose is related to religion. However, he also talked about the fact that the synod, the church's administrative body, recently issued a press release condemning the recent killings of civilians demonstrating in opposition to what they perceive is a corrupt government in

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Ethiopia. And participant 8 more directly reported the church's political stand vis-à-vis the current government in Ethiopia in these blunt terms spoken with passion and conviction:

> we, this church, 100 % do not support the government in Ethiopia. We are opposition to the current government. And the reason is not about other aspect of administration and the like, it is rather because this government has deposed a legitimate patriarch of the Orthodox Church. The government did that and appointed a member of its own ethnic group. The patriarch was exiled, with other members of the clergy. He came to USA and another, a new synod was created. So, we renounced the synod in Ethiopia and founded one of our own. And that new church has spread very wide across North America. You may say that it is the dominant Orthodox Church in North America. Almost everything the current Ethiopia government does we denounce. The ethnic divisions, the fact that the government instigates ethnic clashes, divide people… we renounce it all. Twice a year we have a gathering and we state the grounds for our opposition and renunciation.

As such one may say that the church organization is expressly and officially opposed to the current political leadership in Ethiopia and engages in activities consistent with this stand. By the same token, the secular organization officially positions itself as a politically-neutral organization – "the ECCAE is non-political" (a view expressly reflected in official communication documents, such as formal letters of the organization), although it has carried out several public demonstrations, including opposing human rights violations in Ethiopia. Accordingly, as participant 3 articulates, the community organization has enabled political activism

> if there are things that happen in Ethiopian that we think are unjust politically or otherwise, we can voice our concerns and help address problems and that is made

possible by the "community," because we are community, because we stand together. These examples are only a few of the several others which demonstrate that politics is a prevalent area of concern and activity despite the oft-repeated responses by members about community organizations being non-political. And the examples given above are more focused on homeland politics, that is, about current political experiences in Ethiopia. However, there are also many examples of how community organizations facilitate involvement in local (Canadian) politics as well. ECAE, the more active of the three in political activities - non-partisan political activities – encourages voting in Canadian elections through several means of communication such as email and during community gatherings, as one of the interview participants (#4) shared; one of the community organizations has been important sites for political campaigns by for two members of the community, who happen to be women, who ran for federal politics just in the last election. Also, two of the three community organizations have consistently been approached by mainstream political candidates for opportunities to connect with community members during campaigns, approaches that have been received and utilized by the community organizations.

By in large interview participants reported that themselves as well as the vast majority of their fellow community members are more in tune, more engaged and more active in homeland politics compared to their involvement in local politics. And there were different explanations offered to account for this divergence and about whether homeland politics should or should not be a priority or the focus of political activity. Some said that there is more at stake in homeland politics than in local politics, others talked about the deep roots and connection with the homeland attracts member to be active in what is going in in the *old country*.

One member of the secular organization (participant 4) put it this way:

Participant 4 – Ethiopian immigrants are more concerned about what is happening in

Ethiopia than what's happening here. And I think there's a justification here.

Interviewer – What do you see is the justification?

Participant 4 – The basic democracy issue has not been addressed back home. And when it comes to the Canadian politics, basic democracy issue is not as such a concern. May be that's why you see most of the people of Ethiopian origin more interested in Ethiopian politics than Canadian politics. That's how I see it.

And in this he reflected a view that is shared by several other respondents. For example, participant 9 said:

Most people know about homeland politics than the politics here. We follow homeland politics. First, it is stable here. And people do not seem to care much about the future impact of the present … what will my children need? How will it affect the kids? etc. we [in Ethiopia] are not there yet… Most talk about back home and even go on Facebook for that [to follow political news, to be informed and to participate in some ways]. Some part of them is still there. Most people focus on homeland politics than this one.

The sense I got from this subset of respondents' answers is that it is *understandable* that most immigrants would be more active with respect to homeland politics than local politics. The message that comes through is that because immigrants are for obvious reasons of attachment to their homeland and also because they perceive that what is at stake in homeland politics is fundamental question of social and political justice, immigrants are more passionately drawn to, follow and participate in homeland politics.

Of the three institutions, the church organization and the secular one are two of the organizations where politics is more overtly present than in the Muslim community. Interview participants who belong to the latter community did not provide examples of how the community

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organization has served as a means for political activity in the local (Canadian) context. This is intriguing given that they have been more vocal about experiences of facing negative stereotypes and prejudice of late. For example, participant 8 talked about how because of the negatively through which Muslims are represented in the media in the aftermath of 9-11, people have lost confidence to speak up even in the face of unfair treatment that happens frequently, or to say what is right, what they believe because they fear being labeled and misconstrued as "bad."

Members of the Muslim community association did not report in the interviews that they are active in Ethiopian politics through their organization; although, as participant 10 who is a member of the Muslim community shared, one of the founding principles of the community organization has to do with helping alleviate the poor living conditions of Muslims in Ethiopia. Interviews have shown that individually members of the Muslim community, consistent with what was found in the other two organizations, are more engaged with homeland politics, keeping up with news, discussing and contesting political choices and contributing to it through writing, raising funds and so on. This is substantiated by responses from participants 8, 9, 10 of the Muslim community organization, although these political interests exist and are enacted at individual level and not facilitated by the organizations. Participant 8 of the Muslim community talked about how in the context of immigrant life in Canada political representation is important and how having someone from your culture as elected representative is important for immigrants to feel like they can be heard, how it allows immigrants to make social and political claims and to feel included in the system.

Despite the declared absence of interest and involvement in local (Canadian) politics from within the Muslim community organization, the activities facilitated by the Muslim organization, such as teaching the youth language, culture and religion are implicitly political,

insofar as they shape particular kinds of identities, inculcate moral orientation and reinforce self-confidence. Interview data has revealed several descriptions of how teaching the youth is in part a way of protecting them from mainstream influences that are very harmful. This is sometimes expressed in passionate terms. Participant 10 of the Muslim community put it in these terms,

the situation of kids these days are really scary, because what guides the kids' behavior are peers/friends, with who they spend time, so they can be badly influenced, so the community was founded by adults but the purpose was for the kids, for the good future of the kids.

Participant 10 continued to talk about the dangers that await immigrant Muslim youth and outlined how they are lured both by the drinking and drug culture that he sees as prevalent in Canada and from recruitments for terrorism, an influence to which Muslim youth are targeted and susceptible. In the following account one of the central points was about critical role the community organization plays:

if they don't have the knowledge, they get confused easily, so as Muslim, and the reason that we Muslims feel responsibility is if people have true knowledge they won't be confused, so yes, terrorist influence of Muslims is lack of knowledge, lack of organizations. If there are no organized communities, these kids will be easily negatively influenced. So, they will be more likely to believe what they find online, for example

Participant 10 asserted that ultimately it is about teaching the youth responsible citizenship.

Islam actually says that one person's wrongdoing on another is a crime on the whole world, regardless of whether the wrongdoing was on a Muslim or not. [*The Koran* teaches about] a prostitute who had witnessed a thirsty dog gave it water using her shoe, and for that gesture of goodwill and service she inherited heaven, this is what we teach

the kids. And for them growing up with these lessons, they will be contributing to society as a whole [without discriminating on the bases of religion].

As such, several of participants' statements referenced under the current theme being explored exemplify the many ways that social and political issues, interests and activities are ubiquitous in the Ethiopian immigrant community in the city of research. Some of these are expressed explicitly, sometimes in both arenas of homeland and local politics, although with varying degrees of intensity across the three organization. At other times activities, pregnant with political implications are implicit so that even if they are not recognized as political they do have far reaching and long term social and political consequences. And I also gathered that these political concerns and exercises are tied to social wellbeing in that members of the organizations see them either as a way of addressing dissatisfaction or oppression, a means of striving to achieve political voice or a resource for enhancing life through empowerment, or as a combination thereof. The whole gamut of activities that are enabled by these organization, the ones discussed in this section and the chapter as a whole, from the teaching of language and culture, to workshops on learning about health, education and professions, to those that help acquire skills necessary to navigate the system in the pursuit of social goods and explicitly the possibilities that are created have been reported to be very valuable. One may say that founding such organization and choosing to belong to it is in itself a political act of the highest degree. However, if, or since, these organizations have such variety of resources of political agency and social wellbeing, why are they not more prominent, more flourishing? This is the subject of the next, last, theme to be explored now.

Barriers and potential areas of improvement to enhance the work of ethno-immigrant organizations, political agency and social wellbeing

Interview participants shared their perspectives on and feelings about the reasons for why community organizations are not thriving, how despite the many ways they are instrumental in supporting and enhancing members' lives, they have remained on the margins of institutional recognition and support as well as why resources internal to the communities have been underutilized and appear to be underdeveloped. Interview data is presented here in a straightforward manner, summarizing the barriers discussed by participants into three simple sub-categories (a) *internal barriers* in each community, (b) *external barriers* in each community. A vast majority of respondents' accounts of barriers were articulated in such a way that they indicated clearly enough what they believe can and must be done to make community organizations thrive so that they can serve a multitude of benefits that community organizations are best positioned to provide. The discussion that follows intended to convey how community members identified, experienced and articulated impediments and improvements.

Participants discussed a number of factors that were holding back ethno-cultural organizations specific to their own community. The factors here are internal to the community and related to how the community is doing without taking into account influences from mainstream institutions and social practices, that is, aspects generally about how the community is being affected by interactions with the wider public. I have designated these *internal barriers* because of the cloistered nature of the factors, mainly as three types: (a) lack of administrative aptitude to run organizations, (b) political divisions within communities and (c) deficiency in criticality. Most participants who discussed these factors spoke with a mixture of deep disappointment but also earnest hope.

Participant 12, who is a life-long member of the secular organization, and participated in various ways over the years said that people who volunteer and assume positions in the executive committee and board act irresponsibly. And she attributed this in part to the unaccountability for consequences of actions taken in these positions which are run by volunteers and lack a formal mechanism for accountability. She passionately asserted that these are critical issues that have to be addressed if the organizations are going to work better. She contrasted the general attitude the members showed when they operated in mainstream institutions. She said members of the community act responsibly when they are at their formal employment. They also fulfill the demands for effectiveness that is expected of them when working outside the community organization where they seem to take their lives more seriously. In contrast to these points, she said, that when members participate in their own community organization, they are slack, expect much less from themselves and are altogether careless. While she was unwavering in praising the efforts that have established and contributed to the community organization, she was equally critical of the many instances of these malaises that, in her words, hinder its development. She said that such issues cannot and should not be masked, nor should they be excused by arguments about how this is our cultural way of doing things. She said it is possible to do things in ways that honor our culture without having to shirk good work ethic. She suggested that marrying our way of doing things with responsibility, efficiency and seriousness is perfectly feasible. In reporting this particular barrier, passionately and regretfully, participant 12 provided an account that summarized most of the comments made by other participants about internal factors that impede the work of ethnocultural organizations.

Participant 4 brought up the role of homeland politics in organizations and intragroup political division as the other most important internal barrier. Several participants reported that

homeland politics created division and had negative consequences. Participant 1, for example, pointed out that membership is lower than it could have been *because of politics*. He said that he also was turned off by it and that it was most important in his decision to pull back from his role as a leader in organizing Amharic language school, emphasizing the counter-productive influence of homeland politics in his community work. He said, "people [Ethiopian immigrants in the city of the study who would naturally be members of the community don't participate] because of politics, which is divisive and antagonizing to members". He pointed out that homeland politics is so contentious that ideological disagreements spill into personal conflicts and that this drives down membership and alienates potential members, who can contribute to the well-functioning and growth of community organizations.

Similarly, participant 1 bluntly stated that a good number of community members avoid actively participating in his home organization in order to avoid coming into contact with those who hold formal positions in the organization and are known to be sympathizers with certain views on homeland politics. Participant 1 felt that what would alleviate this critical problem is for his organization to adopt a *neutral* position and refrain from politics altogether. This is consistent with the view expresses by participant 2, who outlined why immigrants should be active with respect to their civic and political duties and limit activism to the environment they currently occupy in Canada. However, this view was contradicted by participant 4 who thinks that the organization he is active in, the secular organization he is a member of, is *not political enough* vis-à-vis homeland and should, if it were up to him, change to adopt a clear policy of political activism. Two other participants also expressed a third perspective and justified the view that while politics is in and of itself unavoidable - and therefore should not be banished – the members in the organization should be inclusive and non-partisan.

While these internal barriers were key issues, in regard to external barriers, the two principal ones were a) a broader discourse of assimilationist conception of integration and negative or suspicious social perception of ethnocultural organizations b) the general effect of neoliberalism on immigrants' agency. While I addressed the first one here, I will discuss the second on in more detail in chapter seven. Ten of the 15 interview participants pointed out that the capacity of the organizations they are members of would be enhanced with more support from government bodies. This support included financial but also closer collaboration with governments and the general public as well as the provision of community development education, especially as it relates to understanding and working in collaboration with stakeholders, development of administrative boards and the navigation of the related bureaucracies to enhance the work of community organizations in supporting settlement of new immigrants, creating social capital and practicing their culture.

Eleven of the 15 interview participants reported that ECOs are suffering from social stigma or suspicious social perception of their ethnocultural organizations. These accounts converge on the idea there is a streak in the attitudes of mainstream society which views immigrants as a threat. Participants said that this view was painful and had pernicious effects on immigrants at the personal level but also at the organizational level. Three participants stated that racism explicitly created a critical barrier and that it negatively affects immigrants' acculturation. They asserted that social bias is ultimately behind the deficiency of support for their ethnocultural organizations. The Muslim community was one which pointed out that prejudice was particularly virulent and had negative consequences. All of the participants from the Muslim community organizations talked about how prejudice has negatively affected their organization, especially in the aftermath 9/11, as having restricted them from raising their voices against

mistreatment, put roadblocks in the functioning of Muslim organizations and stigmatized them to the detriment of their social organization.

One interview participant from the Muslim community association shared that there have been attempts to shut down the organization he belongs to on what he considers to be very sketchy grounds. He recounts, "within the first week of us renting the space…, we had complaint from the neighborhood. [The complaints were] 'They [referring to members of the organization] hang out here a lot', 'They park lots of cars', 'how can this happen?' And we had a mosque shut down in this neighborhood some time ago." This participant said that this is nothing but a thinly disguised Islamophobia. And instantiations of such prejudice, in one form or another, were reported in a variety of walks of life: in workplaces, accessing social services or government program, and in public spaces in general. And although, these accounts came from many of the participants, there is no doubt that they are particularly persistent and clearly more frequent in the Muslim community then elsewhere in my study.

Summary

This chapter presented data generated from interviews with 15 members of three ECOs along five themes: a) the purposes of ECO's, b) practices and activities that embody ECOs, c) ECOs' distinctiveness, d) the political significance of belonging to ECOs and e) barriers and potential areas of improvement for ECOs. The first theme, on purposes of ECO's, was useful in contextualizing subsequent themes but also revealed participants' views about how they perceive their relationship with fellow members and the larger society. The second theme delved into ECO organized activities and showed, implicitly sometimes, initiatives that consciously or not are politically significant. Theme three, on ECOs' distinctiveness, shed light on the especial importance of ECOs to members of the immigrant community and their unique ability to address

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concerns and goals of members. And then the views participants shared when asked about the political significance of ECOs was thematized fourthly. Despite hesitation from participants about acknowledging the political significance of ECOs virtually all of the participants provided a variety of examples of how politics is very much a central concern. In the last theme, about barriers to further development and enhancement of ECOs, participants shared their perspectives about the factors that are holding ECOs back from flourishing and doing more, given the broad and deep importance they clearly have.

A major conclusion that I drew from the interviews is that ECOs are complex organizations that are great resources for members in various ways. ECOs present themselves as capable of providing the best possible select settlement and integration support to their members, they serve as important political spaces for articulating members' needs and ideals and in so doing can be understood as democratic spaces and they also function as social refuges, where members who are frustrated in larger society fall back on for comfort and guidance as well as to seek what they could not otherwise. This description of ECOs and their implications was the subject of detailed discussion in the following chapter. The findings show that interview data are rich and provide many insights that enable addressing the research questions. In the next chapter, I will discuss and interpret these data, by bringing the theoretical lens explicated in chapter three to bear on the themes identified and discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Six: Discussion of three major agentic activities and their political significance

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to explore how members of ECO's understand the political significance of belonging to these organizations and how they use their membership for political

integration. In this chapter I analyzed the findings presented in the previous chapter, by closely examining three categories of salient activities undertaken at, by and through ECOs I studied. Focusing on the political significance of the activities and on ECOs role in creating them enabled me to answer the main research questions. Discussion of each of the three categories will result in three different but overlapping conceptualization of ECOs: (a) as informal settlement service providers, (b) as discursive democratic spaces and (c) as social refuges. The emergence of this complex description of ECOs heavily invokes the theories I presented at the outset, in particular the ideas of learning as political act (Critical Pedagogy, Freire), equality of participation as a foundation of justice (Nancy Fraser) and communities of practice as the engine of community work (Etienne Wenger). At the end of the chapter, after having addressed the research questions, there remain some nagging concerns about the political status of immigrants which I feel compelled to entertain. These concerns will be addressed in the following chapter with a driving question: "What are the *underlying* factors that hamper the flourishment of ECO's?" My preoccupation with the factors in the potential success of ECOs have led me to advance three arguments pertinent to the following: (a) ECOs endogenous shortcomings that manifest in the counterproductive influences of homeland politics, the lack of critical consciousness and deficiencies in administrative acumen; (b) an assimilationist critique of multiculturalism and the conception of integration that underlies it; and (c) neoliberal ideology and its effect on immigration and adaptation. The activities I begin with are information workshops, cultural events and conversation cafes and electoral politics.

Filling empowering knowledge gaps

In explaining how several of programs and activities that are undertaken by ECOs advance political agency, I began by focusing on sessions outlined in Chapter Five that provide

information to members about how to navigate government run programs and services, specifically regarding the following social goods: health care, educational systems and affordable housing. The focus here is on information sessions that are initiated, organized and delivered by members of the community, who associate in communities of practice interested in community development and invested in building capacity of members in need. These communities of practice design and/or deliver programs well suited to facilitate better life in the adopted society using native language and in manners that are inscribed in the community's cultural mores. As such, the work of these communities of practice is a practical interpretation of what study participants expressed were the two main purposes of ECOs: cultural preservation and participation in larger society. Here, my analysis will focus particularly on development activities that have to do with the acquisition of information, knowledge and abilities that equip members to access the aforementioned social goods and enhance settlement and adaptation process. Later in the chapter I focus on …

To highlight the special importance access to social goods has for immigrants and refugees – especially goods such as health care, education and housing, three critical ingredients that are causally related to wellbeing – I provide a broader context, pointing out the challenges that impede accessing social goods by immigrants. As Setia et al. (2010) summarized what is known about the relations between immigrants and health, "Immigrants often have limited access to health care in new settings due to barriers such as: inadequate understanding of health care systems, linguistic barriers, cultural barriers, discrimination issues and economic barriers" (Setia et al., 2010, p. 70). According to The Canadian Council on Learning (2008), "Immigrants and refugees" is one of three groups that has the least health-literacy and are therefore most at risk when compared to other sections of Canadian population. According to Magro and

Ghorayshi (2011), similar barriers exist in education, where "there are a number of inter-related individual and structural barriers that impede learning [for immigrants and refugees]" (p. 20) The ubiquity of barriers continues regarding housing: lack of affordable and safe housing for marginalized and low-income families is widely acknowledged and documented (Carter, 2001; Davidson, 2009; Silver & MacKinnon, 2009; Turegun, 2008 as cited by Magro & Ghorayshi, 2011, p. 9).

As extant research has shown (Beiser, 2005; Margo & Ghobayashi, 2011; The Canadian Council for Learning, 2008), one indispensable means through which to address this set of problems effectively is provision of educational services for immigrants. While language-specific, culturally-nuanced education can go a long way, such opportunities are few and far-in-between in the city of the present study's settlement service industry. As "[n]ational discourse tends to focus on whether immigration fulfils the promise of net economic benefit and on the effects of immigration on social cohesion" (Beiser, 2005, p. 31), attention to creating avenues of wellbeing for immigrants is overlooked.

Although critically under-sourced to address soaring needs, ECOs have continued to address this gap. Information sessions that address the gap provide guidance about the mechanics of accessing services but they also raise awareness of the fact that these services are based on their citizenship rights. And this knowledge reorients the way immigrants understand their relationship with the state – as they begin to see themselves as citizens that *the system* is intended to serve, as opposed to docile recipients of whatever benefits the country is offering in its magnanimity. This knowledge has implications to political agency.

For, acquisition of practical knowledge of a variety of systems, especially in the three areas outlined above, what may be called systems-navigation-literacy facilitated by ECOs is

essential to enhancement of political agency. Such literacy provides foundational knowledge necessary to acquire social goods essential for wellbeing. These engagements may not necessarily develop critical agency in the full Freirean sense, as they do not aim at understanding ideology driven social practices and acting upon such understandings; however, they do develop what may be understood as procedural agency, the type of agency that is necessary for navigating formal social support systems.

The programs are crucial for political agency and exemplify the political-educational nexus described by Paolo Freire (2000) and other critical pedagogues (e.g., Giroux, 1988, 1993; Mayo, 1995). For, learning about how to access social goods is a political act insofar as it is indispensable to sustaining and enhancing wellbeing, a social attribute that is a prerequisite for the role citizens and citizens-to-be can use to become democratic political agents. In the words of Henry Giroux (2010), critical pedagogy is "education as a practice for freedom… [and expands] the capacities necessary for human agency" (p. 718).

The information workshops are political in another way as well because they are also responses to the absence of state-sanctioned programs that address the gap in accessing social goods. Perhaps, the view concerns the mere availability of healthcare, education and housing as sufficient conditions for equitable access addressing. Perception of the gap as *not systemic* may be the result of ideology, possibly liberal or neoliberal information that has been promoted and internalized in the recruitment process for migration as one or personal responsibility. However, as Fraser (2009) stresses justice crucially requires discarding *institutional* barriers that prove to be persistent even after formal equality is guaranteed. It is one thing to ensure the rights to health care, to education, and to housing are protected by law, and quite another question as to whether they are actually being accessed by all. As is well known, access alone has too often been too

constraining for too many immigrants, due to the multiple barriers to access referred to above. But what larger implication does the above discussion have? I claim that, given the potential ECOs have shown in providing workshops that address basic needs, as discussed above, they are great candidates for providing select settlement services on a formal bases. Why this idea is not popular and is not getting support from governments will be addressed in the next chapter; however, in what follows I will first lay the groundwork by considering arguments in support of ECOs as select settlement service providers.

Significance of filling empowering knowledge gaps

One important political consequence of the preceding discussion is that ECOs have a strong claim to make about their ability and effectiveness in providing select settlement services to members. The case is predicated upon two strands of thought developed from the interviews and supported in literature. First, several interviewees resounding support for the idea rests on the belief that such services would better address the community's needs. Second, some participants outlined how the services that are being provided by settlement agencies are either inadequate, alienating or even, in some respects, attended by *colonial assumptions and practices*, as one participant put it.

The rationale in favor of suggesting ethnocultural organizations for providing settlement services is consistent with findings of various studies. For example, in a synoptic report in which settlement and integration of immigrants was one of five themes, Shields et al. (2014) note that ethnocultural organizations have "the [distinct] ability to connect to particularly vulnerable immigrant populations who can be hard to reach and service through more standard service bodies" (p. 23). Similarly, in a study that looked at the evolution and ability of Chinese community organizations in addressing emerging immigrant issues, Guo and Guo (2011)

conclude that ethnocultural "organizations were more effective than mainstream organizations because they were more closely connected with and responsive to the ethnic community' needs" (pp. 68–69). Couton (2014) also supports this point when he notes how, despite being defunded, ethnocultural organizations have shown their contribution in the settlement of immigrants and for making connections between ethnocultural communities (p. 20). Zhao's (2009) findings add that the importance of ethnocultural community organizations as one of the most crucial players in the settlement of immigrants: "According to the participants, the major source of settlement support is community-based and culturally based. Help comes to them from friends, families, community members, ethno-cultural community organizations, churches and neighbors" (p. 6).

And at a time when "the focus for settlement has become economic integration and short-term measurable results, as opposed to the more holistic and long-term settlement process" (Shields et al., 2014, p. 20) ethnocultural organizations are much-needed alternative for filling the gap in addresses a wider set of needs. Nevertheless, as Couton (2014) asserts government is reluctant to support ethnocultural organizations and that this impulse is evidenced in "reduced federal government funding for the immigrant settlement services these organizations provide" (p. 1).

Here, in this section, I provide part of the answer to the main research questions. I have also learned that ECOs have the desire and unique ability to play a formal role in supporting the settlement of new immigrants. Put very simply, part of the answer to the question, (a) How do members of Ethiopian community in Edmonton understand the political significance of belonging to ethnic organizations? is that membership in ECOs creates opportunities for enhancing political agency by closing the knowledge gap that disadvantages immigrants and refugees from effectively accessing social goods. ECOs are the means through which, in the

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words of Mayo (1995) who reflects Freire's (1970) teaching, "pedagogic practice become a political act" (p. 363).

A critical insight that I have drawn from this and explored in the literature is ECOs ability to play a new formal role of helping settle new immigrants. This is a role that ECOs have not been entrusted to take thus far; therefore, its execution would require further study. Given some of the institutional infirmities that ECOs have evinced, a viable way forward would necessarily include addressing endogenous deficiencies that characterize ECOs, (a topic I leave to the next chapter). However, suffice it to say here, the institutional infirmities also require a change in perspective from government bodies, who are for the most part relying on third party settlement agencies for provision of settlement support. I suggest, therefore, that the attunement ECOs have to the needs of their members as well as their unique ability to deliver services in native language couples with the deficiencies in settlement support model that currently exists establish a compelling case in favor of ECOs viability, indeed indispensability, as alternatives providers of some types of settlement services.

Two major strands of research findings are critically important here. On the one hand, integration of immigrants has been identified as one of the principal goals of settlement services; and on the other, the importance of ECOs as potential source of settlement support has been argued for. Therefore, the failure to support settlement adequately, in part by not supporting ECOs to provide some settlement support, amounts to impeding integration. Suffice it to note here that when integration is defined as "the ability [of immigrants and refugees] to contribute, free of barriers, to every dimension of Canadian [/host society] life, that is economic, social, cultural and political" (Shields, Drolet & Valenzuela, 2016, p. 6), integration is a worthy goal to strive for. While reserving the topic of the meanings of integration and their implications

for the next chapter, I contend here, based on the discussion above, that the study has shown the strong case ECOs have to evolve as settlement service providers. Needless to say, this is not the only way ECOs enable political agency. As is discussed in the next section, they also do so by creating opportunities for members to reflect on their identities, celebrating their culture, through it affirming dignity and building confidence.

Self-reflection and political agency

If the series of activities discussed in the section above are the kind that serve as beginning points for political agency, those that are in focus in this section push participants more along the journey of cultivating and expressing political agency. Study participants used a variety of expressions to describe the importance of participating in events organized by the ECOs, such as conversations cafes, Heritage Days, gatherings on women's issues (*Nu buna tetu*), religious rituals and cultural events. Although these engagements are varied, they elicited a similar set of feelings and ideas: Participants reported these events made them feel at home and gave them opportunity to express who they really are and reflect on the meaning of their social lives as members of a *new* country. In describing how these types of engagements influence on political agency, I will focus on one of the engagements: conversation cafés.

The conversation cafés were conducted in particular interesting ways. First, they were meant to initiate dialogue, and therefore they would start with open-ended questions. Second, the conversations invited self-reflection, especially in terms of the social and psychological experiences of being a member diasporic community. Third, they encouraged sharing autographical narratives and raising and addressing personal struggles. They enabled participants to engage in reflecting on the meanings of their status as members of the Canadian polity. These features of the conversation cafés make them strikingly consonant with the spirit of Freire's

(2000) accounts of the value of self-understanding, problem-posing education and critical literacy, which, when taken together, constitute the core of Freire's teaching on emancipation.

For Freire (2000), critical literacy necessarily encompasses self-knowledge. As Giroux (1988) put it:

> literacy for Freire is part of the process of becoming self-critical about the historically constructed nature of one's experience. To be able to name one's experience is part of what it meant to 'read' the world and begin to understand the political nature of the limits *and* possibilities that make up the larger society. (p. 64)

Such an exploration of the self is what the conversation cafes facilitated: naming experiences and exploring their significance in the broad context of the social realities participants' lives interact with. This humanizing ability to reflect on one's social circumstance, and one's relation to the world, is one of human beings' distinct capacities, a capacity that marks an important beginning point for becoming critically conscious (Freire, 1970, 2000, p. 40). The conversation cafes provide just such conditions, taking distance from the routine of their day-to-day lives participants consider how their inner selves relate with social realities.

Also, the approach taken by the conversation cafés mirrors what Freire (2000) identified as problem-posing education. In problem-posing education, the traditional teacher-student dichotomy is cast aside and a collaborative ethic guides learning and teaching (Freire, 2000, p. 76). This allows the full participation of all and all are enabled to "develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality but as reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 2000, p. 12). Since problem-posing education involves people in problematizing their social existence, reflecting on their own self-construction and processes the effects of social and

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political forces that shape their lives, it creates ample prospect for finding and speaking in one's own voice. These are steps towards developing critical consciousness, the animating force behind Freire's emancipatory program.

Hence, since the activities exemplified by the conversation cafés have served this type of emancipatory occasion, they have been instrumental in the enactment of political agency. My understanding of the value of these engagements has opened up a new vantage point from which to extrapolate ECOs status as democratic institutions. In the next section, I draw on Fraser (1990, 2009) to explicate this political participation perspective.

The political significance of *"conversation cafés"*

Most interview participants shared that several of the activities they participated in, like the conversation *cafés* as well as organizing for Heritage Days, language classes and the like, involved them in affirming the value of their identity, elevating their sense of confidence and legitimizing their interests. And they expressed their satisfaction with and gratitude for the role ECOs play in making it possible for them and others to do so. Here, I elaborate the larger political significance of ECOs, describing them as *subaltern counterpublics* (Fraser, 1990) that are not only beneficial to the narrow interest of the communities I studied but also spaces that are indispensable to democracy.

Here, I draw on Fraser's (1990, 2003, 2008) discussion of *subaltern counterpublics* as it relates to her conception of justice as parity of participation. She focusses particularly on how *subaltern counterpublics* are a positive factor in democracy since they promote equitable social and political participation of marginalized groups in society. A central point I seek to advance is a conception of ECOs as embodiments of *expanded discursive spaces.* I pick up the point where Fraser (1990) critiques *the* public sphere. She argues that "a single, comprehensive public

sphere" (p. 66) is bound to unfairly privilege "dominant groups… and disadvantage subordinates" (p. 66) in part because social advantages enjoyed by the former will negatively influence – that is to the advantage of the dominant group – the operation of *the* public sphere. The existence of *subaltern counterpublics* counterbalances this dominance by giving subordinated groups a means to "invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 67).

Fraser's (1990) discussion of *subaltern counterpublics* provides a way that immigrant organizations like ECOs can be understood as seedbeds for, but also reflections of, political agency. One insight that I draw is that the very existence of ECOs itself is an expression of agency since it establishes the arena through which the immigrant community expresses its authentic voice. The space itself provides the conditions in which members can be themselves, that is, a state of being I connect to dignity as a facet of agency in the theoretical framework. Her account, therefore, helps answer the question of how membership to ECOs facilitate political agency. ECOs provide the unique space in which immigrants freely express and sustain their cultural identities through the language and culture classes, in addressing community needs, basic material needs as well as identity and psychological and political ones, through idioms of birthplace culture and native language.

Now, the existence of *subaltern counterpublics* is consistent with (indeed a requirement in) "multi-cultural society that is also a participatory democracy." In the absence of *subaltern counterpublics,* subordinated groups essentially lose their collective [?] agency, since "they would have no venues in which to undertake communicative processes that were not, as it were, under the supervision of dominant groups" (Fraser, 1990, p. 66). This amounts to muzzling some voices and thus contravening an important precept of democracy, which is that everybody's

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voice should count. For, even in the absence of formal barriers to participation can be curtailed by the biases that favor the expressive norms of the dominant culture. Therefore, ECOs as representations of democratic discursive spaces serve as countervailing forces against informal barriers to participation, which are, in Fraser's conceptualization, impediments to justice.

In so far ECOs represent *subaltern counterpublics,* whose sustenance not only supports immigrants' right to seek social goods and express interests but also contributes to inclusive democratic governance, they emerge as the *sine quo non* of political agency to immigrants. Such understanding of ECOs presents a picture that is markedly different from the understanding of ECOs as potential or actual enclaves that encourage divisiveness and erode civic solidarity, as some critics of multiculturalism worry. In the next chapter I follow up this insight by drawing on insights of Parekh (200 Aladin El-Mafaalani (2017) and Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2009). I will argue for a conception of democracy that conceives oppositional discourses, such as those that were facilitated in ECOs, as productive and desirable. Here, I reiterate in closing that ECOs as democratic spaces enhance the political voice of immigrants while at the same time enriching democratic plurality. In addition to the case I have laid out for ECOs as potentially excellent sources of select settlement service provision and ECOs as democratic spaces, ECOs have also played a part (to a much lesser degree) in facilitating activities in electoral politics - a topic I will now turn to.

Electoral politics and political agency

Many of the study participants showed astute understanding of the importance of electoral politics for their community. They claimed that electoral success, *even having one member of the community in office* – as two participants put it – would help project a more positive image of the community, that it could serve as a way of addressing pressing issues at the policy level and that

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it would greatly improve the community's self-confidence and sense of belonging.

Ethiopian ECOs have been instrumental in encouraging voting among its members. By way of emails, word of mouth and the Amharic radio station, E.C.A.E. informs its members about the importance of voting, mostly during elections. The other two ECOs are relatively silent in this area. And while ECO's have been a great support for the two female members who competed in the last federal elections, the fact that the community have not had members who ran for office in its whole history shows the vast chasm between the reality and the ideal of equal representation.

Nonetheless, not only are ECOs places where mainstream political candidates have come to attract votes, but they have also served as resources for the two immigrant political candidates, whose efforts relied in important ways on ECOs. ECOs provided the civic space where the candidates enjoyed social relationship from which they were able to develop the motivation, the causes and the goals that drove their campaigns. Community members, by volunteering to work in the campaigns, were involved in the democratic process, learning the ropes, and partaking in activities that made them feel like there is a real chance to affect the system, however unlikely it may be. These experiences could not have but enhanced political agency.

However, even though ECOs play a positive role in electoral politics, efforts in electoral politics has not yielded tangible fruits for the community. And this reflects the trend in immigrant representation in Canada's electoral politics in general. The broad context of it is not encouraging at all. The state of Ethiopian community's standing in electoral politics ought to be understood within the broader context, which I shall briefly outline. Surely, the ethnic identity of political leaders and representatives is "a critical indicator of Canada's progress towards inclusion as a diverse society" (Siemiatycki, 2011, p. i). The election of ethnic political

representatives not only gives significant symbolic message of inclusion but plays a substantive role by increasing the likelihood of advancing policies that address the concerns and interests of ethnic groups (Bloemraad, 2013). According to Freire (1970) practices that enable people to exercise agency, to speak with their own voice, are those that *originate* from within the ranks of those who are *trying to get in* (p. 136). However, the under-representation for immigrants in political office in Canada is palpable.

As Black and Hicks (2006) point out, "while it is true that more minorities than ever before have been winning their way into Parliament, they still make up a percentage of the legislature that is much smaller than their incidence among the Canadian population" (p. 17). Under-representation is even worse among visible minorities, whose occupancy is about half of their demographic proportion (Black & Hicks, 2006; Bloemraad, 2013). Siemiatycki (2011) assesses the prospects thusly,

> visible minorities continue to be under-represented in elected office and at this rate, it
> will take many more elections until visible minorities occupy seats in municipal councils,
> the provincial legislature and federal parliament equal to their share of population. (p. 1)

Although there is cause for optimism in the highest increase in minority political representation over the last two federal election when 28 and 45 minority candidates were elected respectively, the proportion of black representation at the federal level, as well as in Alberta's current and previous governments and in City of Edmonton's counsel is dismal. The electoral success of African-Canadian (Somalia) MP, Hussen Ahmed, who now presides as Minister of Immigration Refugee and Citizenship is an encouraging but rare occurrence. Such a picture seriously threatens democratic accountability, undermines the sense of community and helps construct immigrants as sojourners (Morales & Guigni, 2011, p.1). The implications of this dismal picture

are better understood when seen in the context of the reasons for lack of electoral success in the Ethiopian community.

Broader significance of electoral campaigns in Ethiopian community

Consistent with this bleak picture, the effects of activities related to electoral politics that transpire through ECOs I studied have been underwhelming. This is attributable to several factors that are both endogenous and exogenous. Of the many factors hampering immigrant electoral politics discussed in the literature (Ramakrishnan & Bloemraad, 2008, pp. 4–11), some are particularly salient here. The community's relatively small size, its comparative recency, lack of formal democratic experience in original country, and deficiency in social capital and resources, together with absence of a strong network of relationship with other institutions and government resources and the legal status of permanent resident must have adversely affected the community's efforts – which excludes many community members from voting in election and seeking office. These have contributed to the community's limited visibility and influence in the larger society and, as a consequence, mitigated success in electoral politics and political agency at the formal level. These are endogenous factors that may be shed through a combination of time, citizenship learning and active development of resources such as human capital formation through bridging social capital. However, there remain other, exogenous impediments to electoral participation by immigrants, which may be addressed by means that are outside this specific community. In the next chapter and based on my findings, I will identify and argue that there are three major factors that contribute to why Ethiopian ECOs are not doing more "why they are not getting more popular and government support. Here, I will draw on interview data to argue that there are barriers to electoral participation as exemplified by instructive stories given by the two members of the community who ran in the 2015 federal

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elections.

In several ways, the experiences of the two candidates highlight the challenges of the Ethiopian immigrant community as a whole; for, they give a useful point of entry into broader questions about the performance of ECOs as vehicles of political agency and immigrants' wellbeing, as well as prospects for democratic engagement in politics and immigrants' potential contributions to Canada's political life. The two candidates talked about the positive reactions they received in the face-to-face interactions they have had with the public during their campaigns; however, they also spoke very insightfully about the barriers that constrained their endeavors. One of the candidates (participant 12) talked passionately about how her campaign for the nomination of one of the major federal political parties was marred by a variety of barriers. She recounted how some Muslim immigrants were virtually restricted from voting because a church basement was designated as a location for voting. She also talked about how the decision to extend the deadline for nomination seemed to have favored a mainstream candidate who was known to party insiders. Furthermore, the on-line voting option was particularly advantageous to those who not only have literacy in, but also, easier access to a computer.

The three barriers are violations of what Fraser (2009) conceived as an injustice in the parity of participation along economic, cultural and political dimensions. In failing to be sufficiently sensitive about the effect of designating a church basement as voting booth, organizers (i.e. government officials) have inadvertently (or possibly not) curtailed the participation of voters on the basis of cultural misrecognition; in allowing e-voting government has implicitly made it comparatively more difficult or laborious for some to register their political choices on the basis of economic status; and by the same token (if this is actually what

happened), the political favoritism shown to a candidate surely has unjustly benefited one person over another, contravening equal representation. On all counts, it appears like the candidate has suffered her fate because of barriers that unjustly impeded her participation.

And this is only a more dramatic example of other forms of barriers that virtually all of the participants brought up and some discussed passionately: *prejudice*. To synthesize, participants, especially members of the Muslim organization, expressed that they have faced prejudice in how they are scrutinized and talked to in public spaces, how they are mistreated in their interactions at points of service in government institutions, how, at times, they felt misunderstood and mocked at their work. In general, the effects of these have been to give them the experience of feeling unaccepted by Canadians, a belief that they must prove their worth and work to demonstrate that they are deserving of the trust the country has shown in receiving them. They also talked about how these experiences forced them to live with restraint, deference or refraining from making claims, even for, things they are legally entitled to. It should be noted that the frequency and intensity of prejudice is much more pronounced among members of the Muslim ECO.

This can spawn or intensify one or both of the following two consequences:
(a) immigrants increasingly withdrawing into their ECO's, which can detract *integration* and diminish a sense of belonging to Canada or;
(b) growing involvement in homeland politics, with contrastingly decreased attention and interest to contribute to Canadian formal politics and common good.

This trend of retreating into ECOs in proportion to experiences of prejudice, and bias, has already been noticed among some member of the community. Some of the interview participants even alluded to them. In this sense, ECOs function as social refuges where disgruntled members

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come for respite and guidance. In this way, political participation AND culture refuge are linked in ECO life.

Conclusion

This chapter explored the various ways ECOs facilitate political agency of its members. While answering the research questions related these, it also culminated in a description of ECOs with three functions. First, the commonalities of language and culture that underlie ECOs unique virtue have enabled creating and delivering learning opportunities such as information workshops that address gaps in accessing core social needs, needs that literature shows are inadequately being accessed by immigrants with negative consequences for wellbeing. The knowledge gained in these workshops creates a certain kind of political literacy and agency insofar as it enables members to be aware of their availability and their right to demand for them. This capacity of ECOs is a basis on which they legitimately claim to be effective providers of select settlement services, thereby filling gap in the current settlement service landscape in city of the study.

Second, culture celebrating events offer members many opportunities to affirm with pride their cultural heritage and to reflect on their social identities. This activity promotes political consciousness, and agency, and a process that defines ECOs as democratic spaces where alternative discourses that reflect the unique and authentic interests of the community are affirmed and constructed. Within these spaces immigrants can, and do, find, live and share their normative preferences, the values and practices through which they make sense of the world and their place in it – and this has the effect of sustaining and enhancing dignity.

Third, ECOs have also served as the quintessential locations for the most salient activities in immigrant electoral politics, as grounds where votes are sought, issues raised and listened to;

however, they have also served as informal sites for launching campaigns by immigrant candidates, pursuits that can eventually give immigrant voices a seat at the policy tables. These are not only a means of seeking political agency but also affirming and enacting it.

Yet, I have to say that it is curious that given the many ways that ECOs support immigrant integration, participation in democracy and operate as pathways towards policy input through formal politics, and I have to ask, "Why are ECOs not supported more?" Expressed in the words of the second major research question, what are the underlying factors that have held ECOs back from developing more fully so that the good work they are doing with limited resources is enhanced?

Chapter Seven: Discussion of factors negatively affecting ECOs

Introduction

The discussions in chapter six constitute answers to the first two research questions:

1a. How do members of Ethiopian community in city in Canada understand the political significance of belonging to ethnic organizations?

1b. How does their participation community organizations reflect a quest for, or assertion of, political agency?

That is, first, the political significance of the ECOs has to do with how the organizations provide members opportunities to learn about how to access social goods and enhance their settlement and integration experiences. Second, ECOs enable occasions through which members reflect on their lives and in so doing raise their political consciousness. And thirdly, ECOs facilitate political office seeking and otherwise participation in electoral politics. Participating in activities, whether as organizers or recipients, by which these three goals are achieved reflect the pursuit or assertion of political agency. While this establishes the incredible value ECOs have for immigrant political integration and their wellbeing, benefiting both immigrants and larger society, ECOs are performing at a level much lower than what they could do if they had more resources and supports. In this chapter I discussed why this is the case, why ECOs are performing better, by considering factors that are holding ECOs back. I addressed two kinds of factors, endogenous and exogenous, and proceeded in the following manner. I first discussed three detracting endogenous factors: division over homeland politics, deficiency of criticality in community work and lack of administrative acumen, respectively. And then I explicated how broader discourses of anti-multiculturalism and neoliberalism negatively affect ECOs, in doing

so advancing arguments against them.

Endogenous barriers

Three salient factors, not exhaustive of the gamut of possibilities, account for the bulk of factors that explain why ECOs are performing under their capacities: (a) division over homeland politics, (b) insufficient critical orientation and (c) lack of administrative acumen. It is my considered and strong-held opinion that if these issues were adequately addressed, the ECOs I studied would be strengthened considerably and their ability to serve as a means for political integration and social wellbeing would be enhanced. All three are factors that immigrants themselves can address since they stem from shortcoming internal to the community. Not all of the organizations I studied exhibit all these shortcomings and when more than one of suffer from one or two of them, they do not do so with the same level of negative consequence of the work they do.

Homeland politics

Many participants spoke about how opposing views and divergent allegiances over politics in Ethiopia has curtailed the organizations' progress. Some said that they have severely restricted their participation because of the antagonistic atmosphere the divisions over homeland politics gives rise to. And this phenomenon is an issue in all three organizations. For example, conflict between communities of practice and the board has led to splintering of one of the ECOs (#A) into two, who now hold diametrically opposite views on the legitimacy of the current government in Ethiopia. Similar issue has arisen in ECO #B, where there has been disagreement about whether the organization should officially take political stands regarding homeland politics or should abide by neutrality mandated by the Alberta Society Act. Although, the organization formally positions itself as a non-political, non-religious, and complying with the guidelines of

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Alberta Societies Act, some members, including a few interview participants, believe it should be politically vocal and take clear political stands, if necessary changing the organization's bylaw and operating outside guidelines of Alberta Society Act.

The influence of homeland politics in the Muslim ECO (#C) is much less direct but still significant. The assignation of political representation along ethno-linguistic groups brought about by *ethnic federalism* in Ethiopia has had the effect of organizational – although not spiritually – balkanizing of the Ethiopian Muslim community into various smaller groups, as people seek to organize through their narrower linguistic, regional, and cultural circles. This balkanization has diminished the authority that a more united organization could have brought about. Consequently, the Ethiopian Muslim organization I studied has a comparatively diminished presence and weight; even as the community needs a united front to address serious challenges, including the significant issue of Islamophobia, of which the community is bearing the brunt of.

The appeal of homeland politics for immigrants is understandable. Indeed, it is inevitable, may even be desirable, that immigrants are interested and participate in homeland politics. In fact, most research participants affirmed that most members of the three ECOs are inclined to be more active in homeland politics. According to Armony et al. (2004), while some research shows attention to homeland politics is negatively correlated to political participation in host country, other research findings contradict this equation. In the context of this study, ECOs have undermined a conducive environment for communities of practice to thrive not because people understandably show interest and participate in homeland politics but more importantly because of the lack of craftsmanship needed to keep the influence of homeland politics at bay, ensuring the ECOs is not infected by it. Although separating these demands is sometimes difficult,

requiring to manage vocal and energetic political pursuits some members express, it remains a fact that inability to manage them has been exacerbating division and consequently undermining the work of ECOs. This issue will continue to plague the community unless it is confronted in an on-going bases, given the fact that divisions over homeland politics have spawned intrapersonal frictions and disincentives to membership and participation in ECO's as well as organizational splintering, sapping the energy that could be harnessed in the service of a more united front. While this is a problem that is transported from homeland, so to speak, there are others that pertain more directly to life in Canada.

Deficiency in critical consciousness

As ironic as it might sound, one factor that accounts for the underperformance of ECOs is the absence, or lack of, an important ingredient in the many communities of practice who otherwise do great community work in and through ECOs. That is lacking is a critical orientation among several of the communities of practice that constitute the lifeblood of ECOs. I want preface with the undeniable importance communities of practice have. A lion's share of the

work in ECOs I studied is done by communities of practice who profoundly, and positively, affect the community through their efforts to sustain and celebrate homeland heritage, support acculturation of newcomers and to give the community visibility and influence the larger society, including in the political arena. By co-creating programs, celebrating culture, initiating self-reflection and participating in electoral participation, they teach one another, learn together, enhancing the practice of community development, much in the way communities of practice discourse illuminates. Their collective efforts arise organically to tackle emerging needs in the community, such as those that provide information workshops about settlements resources and create opportunities for immigrants to reflect on social meaning of their lives. The quality of

these groups' organizational effectiveness is a crucial factor for the success of ECO's and much good that is done is owed to them.

However, their work suffers from tenacious challenges that undermine agency. Tepidity of a critical spirit in communities of practice diminishes the potentially more significant political role ECOs could be playing. For all the great work that is being done by communities of practice in promoting political agency, the work lacks a spirit of a more explicitly political orientations. The three types of activities for example do not approximate an attempt to understand, in the language of critical pedagogy, "the ideological dimensions of texts, institutions, social practices and cultural forms... in order to reveal their selective interests" (McLaren as quoted in Mayo, 1995, p. 363). Considering Freire's (1970) concept of *praxis* in this context helps draw out this point.

Praxis is a concept that is intimately tied to the ideal of emancipation that Freire 's oeuvre as a whole promotes. It is an engagement at once of doing and thinking, acting and theorizing (Freire, 1970, p. 79). As Mayo (1995) puts it: "any separation of the two (i.e. action and reflection) is mindless activism or empty theorizing" (p. 367). My point is not so much that the ECOs I studied and the communities of practice who continue to do significant contribution fall short of this prescription; it is rather that such *praxis* has not even been their objective in the first place. Despite facilitating many learning engagements at the ECOs they simply do not adequately exemplify the adage: "Pedagogical practice becomes a political act -- a very important maxim in Freire's work as writer, educational philosopher and pedagogue" (Mayo, 1995, p. 363).

Critically oriented communities of practice could address profoundly pernicious issues that afflict some segments of the community. For instance, many families have expressed serious

concerns about whether refugee students from the community are adequately understood by schools and remain highly dubious about whether refugee students' needs are judiciously attended to. There is wide spread perception that in many instances refugee students are being taken advantage of, used as a means of eliciting funds to schools without receiving commensurate educational services and social as well as psychological supports. There is also a common trend now whereby many members of the community perpetuate internalized discourses of integration that not only misrepresent immigrants' interests but also help reproduce harm to the community. I am referring to the fact that immigrant community members hold on to conceptions of integration that are effectively assimilationist, which induce them to claim that as *newcomers* they have to accept prima facie Canadian ethos and learn to live it without qualms. Some members of the community have, and more live with, the implicit understanding that it is too much to ask of Canada to accommodate immigrants' cultural values. I believe this perspective informs how some immigrants conduct themselves vis-à-vis larger society and shapes their ability to make political claims. Relatedly, there is a prevalent tendency in the community whereby some members see themselves more as beneficiaries of, as opposed to contributors to, the social, economic and political fabrics of larger society. Critically oriented communities of practice, who are able to first decode these phenomenon and understand its disempowering political implications can address it through a more critically oriented engagements. Beyond what critically oriented communities of practice can do to address these concerns within the community, they can also co-create links with mainstream institutions which can supplement their efforts. However, as its stands communities of practice are not animated by a more political understanding of the conditions of life and are not engaged in emancipatory projects so that these mostly self-inflicted harms might be reversed. In summary, the lack of

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criticality in the work of communities of practice is a factor that seriously hampers the otherwise many agency-enhancing engagements that are enabled by ECOs. Awareness of this problem can be a basis for addressing it. And yet, I have identified another factor that is worth exploring in order to further enhance the effectiveness with which ECOs can function as organizations. This has to do with administrative issues that have to be improved, subject of the next subtopic.

Lack of effective administration of ECO's

To make matters worse, in addition to the lack of critical consciousness, there is also a lack of administrative acumen which has negative effects. For example, one of the organizations (#B) was plagued by perceptions of lack of accountability by the leadership, financial mismanagement, and additional allegations that created a negative atmosphere and counterproductive dynamics among the membership that turned some members off and undermined their sense of camaraderie. Also, from an administrative and organizational management point of view, no significant gains have been made in two of the organizations in creating the kinds of links with mainstream organizations that would have provided the organizations with funding opportunities and channels for making claims. This area has to be developed through education and consistent application

Exogenous barriers

While the three endogenous factors, a) divisive homeland politics, b) lack of critical consciousness in communities of practice and c) deficiency in administrative practices, were the key endogenous ones, the second major factor is exogenous, and its subfactors concerned a) the arrested development of ECOs within a broader discourse of integration as assimilation and b) the key exogenous subfactor of neoliberalism, which will be addressed in the next subsection.

Discourse critical of multiculturalist integration as barriers to ECOs

Discourses critical of multiculturalism that center on concerns about integration have been expressed in different source: academic literature (Bissoondath, 1994; Brubaker, 2001) mass media (Gregg, *The Walrus;* Jimenez *Globe and Mail*) and in a combination of policy regimes, popular discourse and theoretical sources (Li, 2003). Here, I want to advance the thesis that this discourse critical of multiculturalist integration I call "assimilationist critique", generally stems from a concern with supposed, or potential, social fragmentary effects of multiculturalism. It focuses on the concern that multiculturalism erodes social solidarity and a sense of common citizenship, and entails othering of immigrants, who it demands to conform to a supposedly cohesive Canadian ethos as a political community. The assimilationist critique works against ECO insofar as it contributes to the idea that ECOs are a manifestation of socially fragmentary trends, that they reflect a deleterious and isolationist social formations sometimes described as "enclave effect" or "ghettoization" (Bissoondath, 1994; Couton, 2014; Guo, 2011).

I want to argue that this concern and the view of immigrant integration that undergirds it is of a piece with a negative image of ECOs since the latter are seen as an instantiation of social fragmentation. I present my arguments against the assimilationist critique in the following steps. I, first, seek to establish that the assimilationist critique of integration discourse is alive and well and that it is several sources. And then I will maintain that this critique is related to a negative understanding of "enclave effect", which in turn feeds a picture of ECOs as socially problematic. Lastly, I will offer a counter-critique by deconstructing what I consider to be key assumptions of the assimilationist discourse and resurrecting constitutive features a necessary shift towards a more productive understanding of immigrants by drawing on concepts from scholars like Honig (2001), Parekh (2008), El-Mafalaani (2017) and Chantal Mouffe (2000).

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The assimilationist critique has a variety of sources: academic writings, mass media views, and public perceptions. For the purposes of my argument, I differentiate between two versions of the assimilationist critique: one that is implicit and the other, more explicit. The first one is not readily perceptible and therefore detecting it requires going behind the multiculturalist façade it lurks, while in its second expression the assimilationist critique tends to be more explicitly critical of multiculturalism and the model of integration it endorses. The spirit of first variant of the assimilationist critique generates the theoretical perception that contributes to a view of ECOs as counterproductive, while the second one is more straightforward in its criticism of ECOs. Li (2003) and Hansen (2014) provide examples of the former, while Gregg (2006), Jimenez (2007), Bissoondath (1994) and Brubaker (2001) are examples of the latter. Li's (2003) analysis of theoretical debates regarding integration, policy discussion surrounding it, and both academic and immigration critics' discourses found in all of them an underlying assumption according to which successful integration is understood as the degree to which immigrants are becoming more like native born Canadians. Li (2003) puts it directly when he writes:

> The integration discourse clearly upholds conformity as the desirable outcome of successful integration of immigrants. Accordingly, immigrants who adhere to their linguistic, social and cultural patterns are considered segregated from mainstream society and such self-imposed segregation is depicted as detrimental to the interests of immigrants and the well-being of Canadian society. (pp. 9–10)

This point is echoed by Hansen (2014) who states,

> All the while claiming that they are supporting immigrants' culture, [Canadians] quietly do the opposite: they assimilate them, turning them rather quickly into the polite, kind, modest, and rather earnest people that make up the majority of this country's citizens. It

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is nothing short, to use another analogy, of a migratory coup. (p. 71)

While these accounts by Li (2003) and Hansen (2014) identify views that while purporting to endorse multicultural integration in principle nonetheless undermine its practice, there is a more overtly assimilationist perspective which argues that multicultural integration is counterproductive both in principle and in practice. This critique is usually intertwined with expressions of worry about, or questioning of, the effect of enclaves, which are assumed to cause or express social fragmentation deleterious to the polity. It is an expression of the criticism that "multiculturalism promotes ghettoization and balkanization, encouraging members of ethnic groups to look inward" (Kymlicka, 2010, p. 7). This critique is more assertive in its concern about the "enclave effect" and as such more critical of ECOs.

While this frontal critique of multiculturalism (in terms of ghettoization) is more prevalent in Europe with influential expressions of leaders of some European countries that constitute a broader *backlash* against multiculturalism (Kymlicka, 2012, Bloemraad, Korteweg and Yordakul, 2008), it has also been expressed in the Canadian context both in media and academic literature. For example, Allan Gregg (2006) claims, in an article that strikes a strongly cautionary tone on the divisive effects of multiculturalism, that "recent settlement trends suggest that so-called ethnic box settlements are becoming prevalent." Similarly, Marina Jimenez writes in *The Globe and Mail* (2007) that "The number of ethnic enclaves like this one has exploded in Canada." Although these claims about the supposed growth of enclaves have been repudiated as exaggerations (Kymlicka, 2010), they seem to reflect mainstream views. For instance, this view is consistent with predominant public perceptions when we look at the results of a recent Angus Reid poll (2016) conducted in partnership with the CBC that showed that 68% of respondent said *Minorities should do more to fit in with mainstream Canadian society*, with 32% saying *we*

should encourage cultural diversity with different groups keeping their own customs and languages. (CBC website).

And similar views are expressed in some academic writings as well. Whereas Brubaker (2001) argues for new type of assimilationism, Bissoondath (1994) relates his critiques of multiculturalism in overt rejection of support for ECOs. As Guo (2011) summarizes Bissondath's (1994) position:

> the very practice of supporting ethnic organizations is problematic. [Bissoondath] rejects using taxpayers' money to fund ethnic organizations. He argues that allocating special resources to support such organizations will undermine Canadian democratic principles and erode norms and practices of democratic citizenship (pp. 61–62).

These worries contradict the findings of this study; for, far from being causes of isolation or contributing to the erosion of democratic citizenship, ECOs are just about the most effective, if not the only *bona fide*, means through which opportunities to participate in larger society are created and utilized. However, in order to refute this assimilationist impulse, I consider it important to go deconstruct its internal logic.

I shall suggest, following El-Mafaalani (2017), that behind this assimilationist drive is the implicit belief that similarity of beliefs, values, and interests are the most, or only, basis of solidarity, social cohesion and that ultimately immigrant integration, worthy of its name, require such likeness. However, as El-Mafaalani (2017) reasons, "[t]his idea is either naïve and romantic, in the sense of multicultural optimism. Or it is hegemonic, in the sense of expecting minorities to assimilate. Reality, however, looks different." The assimilationist critique presumes that immigrants are "others" in ways that are so profound that the differences they bring lead to conflict and disharmony.

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I posit that this assumption is supported by the following three fundamental propositions, which I contend are questionable: a) that there is harmony (social, political, cultural) in Canada to begin with; b) that differences lead to disharmony; and c) that conflict is a social ill to be avoided at all costs. The assumption of a harmonious Canada towards which immigrants are an anomalous, disharmonious is more of a myth than reality. For Canada's history itself is one that is characterized by politicized cleavages (Abdi and Ghosh, 2004, Abu-Laban, 2014) between the British and the French, natives and settlers, men and women, the West and East so that the narrative of social harmony can only be supported with historical amnesia. It is indeed a challenge, and far from self-evidently viable, to characterize Canada as having a single, unifying story as a nation. In fact, multiculturalism is a response to relationships based on paternalism and coercion that sustained some of these cleavages (Kymlicka, 2010). The assumption of unfettered unity at the core of Canada as a nation, to which immigrants ought to conform implicitly but powerfully undermines the agency of immigrants and their stories and ultimately constitutes a "disservice to our understanding of Canada, our understanding of others, and even ultimately our shared political community." (Abu-Laban, 2014, p. 217).

Second, although its intuitive appeal is understandable, the notion that differences lead to social disharmony or that immigrants, as foreigners, pose a problem that host societies have to deal with is embedded in a lot of contemporary discourses in pluralistic nations; and yet, despite the prevalence of this assumption (Honig, 2001) its explanatory logic is questionable at best and untenable at worse (Parekh, 2008). The prevalence of the assumption is articulated well by Honig (2001)

> Political theorists deliberate about whether or to what extent social unity is necessary to
>
> sustain social democracy. Courts rule on the extent of government's obligations to its

noncitizen residents. Economists debate the costs and benefits of immigration.

Sociologists argue about the (in)effectiveness of multilingual education. But,

notwithstanding their differences, participants in contemporary debates about foreignness

all reinscribe foreignness as a "problem" that needs to be solved by way of new

knowledge, facts, or politics (p. 5).

While Honig (2001) has exemplified the value of exploring the political question of foreignness

from the unusual but productively novel perspective of considering the issue by asking "what

problems do foreigners help us solve?" in her book *Democracy and the stranger*, Parekh (2006)

is straightforward in articulating social value of the other as well as the epistemological rationale

for it:

[D]ifferent cultures represent different systems of meaning and visions of the good life.

Since each realizes a limited range of human capacities and emotions and grasps only a

par of the totality of human existence, it needs other to understand itself better, expand its

intellectual and moral horizon, stretch its imagination and guard it against the obvious

temptation to absolutize itself (p. 337).

For me, this perspective conceives immigrants as assets, agentic resources that benefit host

countries as opposed to causes of disharmony that have to be *figured out* and *neutralized*. This

views serves as an antidote for the way immigrants are objectified and assumed to have no

agency. As Leinonen (2015) pointed out "immigrants often appear in public discussions as

"objects" of integration policies as carried out by the state or municipalities" (p.6). Therefore, to

rightly acknowledge the contributions they make as well as to treat them with the dignity they

deserve, it is essential to shift the very assumptions that undergird our conceptions of

immigrants.

Similarly, the third assumption, that social disharmony is a social ill to be avoided is not only suspect but can also prove to be socially counterproductive. For, democracy as a system of governance as well as as civic disposition thrives on plurality of, and even passionate contestations, which in the end are neither possible nor desirable to *solve*. Even though the pursuit of tidy resolutions and consensus is a manifestation of a certain, prevalent variant of liberalism, it is inconsistent with the spirit of pluralistic democracy that not only manages differences but more importantly uses differences by harnessing the energies that constitute them (El-Mafaalani, 2017; Mouffe, 2000).

What is crucial here is the need to fundamentally shift our conception of integration from understanding it as an agent of harmony to one of a facilitator of fruitful conflict (El-Mafaalani, 2017) or useful agonistic contest (Mouffe, 2000).

> When integration, inclusion or equal opportunities are successfully implemented, they do not lead to a society which is more harmonious, or free from conflict. On the contrary. The central effect of successful integration is actually a higher potential for conflicts. In every case, more people will be sitting at the table and they all want a piece of the pie. Remember this image of the table: more people are sitting at the table and want a piece of the pie. (Mafaalani, 2017)

Acknowledging such a shift in thinking helps in coming to terms with reality of multicultural societies, what to expect from them in regard to immigrant integration and what kinds of theoretical perspectives help us conceive and manage the intractable conflicts that inhere in them. While the assimilationist critique is a formidable discourse that has a wide purchase, neoliberalism's effect is similarly influential.

Neoliberalism and citizenship

In this, second of two exogenous sub-factors that hamper the development of ECOs, I focus on the effects of neoliberalism. Here, I am particularly concerned with the new and deceptive guise neoliberalism has adopted in working its way into multiculturalist discourses, undermining the latter's emancipatory drive and co-opting its political agenda for economistic purposes. The gravity of the consequence of neoliberalism on integration can be seen in the way it has affected conceptions and practices of citizenship. As Abu Laban (2013) writes, "Since the 1990s, neo-liberal policy rationales have transformed the nature of Canadian social citizenship. As a consequence, the equity agenda was dealt a severe blow, and… minority groups (amongst others) has been weakened" (p. 7). It is helpful to take a few steps back and see the complex relationship between neoliberalism and multiculturalism to understand such claims better.

Neoliberalism's influence is not at all restricted to the economy. Although "[n]eoliberalism initially took form as a counter-movement to increasing sympathy for state regulation of economic life" (Evans & Sewell, 2013, p. 39), it manifests in various realms of life: as political ideology, policy paradigm and social ethos (Evans & Sewell, 2013, p. 39). As such, neoliberalism's effects are extensive and affect not only domains that are directly related with the economy but also spheres of social and personal lives. Kymlicka (2013) lucidly describes this long reach of neoliberalism's hand:

> The era of neoliberalism is often defined as a set of changes in economic policy and in economic relationships, many of which created new challenges and insecurities for individuals. But it also reshaped the structure of social relationships, including relationships in the family, workplace, neighborhood, and civil society. It may even have reshaped people's subjectivities – their sense of self, their sense of agency, and their identities and solidarities. (p. 99)

Framing his discussion within the evolution of neoliberalism's response to multiculturalism within the Canadian context, Kymlicka (2013) describes the ways in which neoliberalism has co-opted multiculturalism, making it a means of fostering its own ideological program. As Kymlicka (2013) recounts, neoliberalism's initial reaction to multiculturalism in the 1980s was hostile, criticizing state support for multiculturalism as a response to "special interests" and an "unjustified intervention in the market" (p. 107) and as nothing more than a reflection of welfare state liberalism. Neoliberals used institutions to attack multiculturalism by severing links between the state and progressive advocacy groups, slashing funding and political access for such groups. But they also "delegitimized multiculturalism by contrasting 'ordinary' hard-working tax-paying citizens against the 'special interests' represented by 'ethnic lobbies'" (Kymlicka, 2013, p. 107).

Despite these neoliberal attacks, multiculturalism has proved to be resilient, and in fact policies that support it have grown even since such attacks began (Kymlicka, 2013). In the wake of such resistance, "many neoliberal actors have not only tolerated multiculturalism but positively embraced it" (Kymlicka, 2013, p. 109). Neoliberals have done so by co-opting multiculturalism, harnessing the resources that are at its disposal to expand neoliberal programs of "creating effective market actors and competitive economies" (Kymlicka, 2013, p. 109). So, "ethnicity is a market asset in the very tangible form of cultural artifacts that can be marketed globally (music, art, fashion) … but [also] because it is a source of "social capital" that successful market actors require" (Kymlicka, 2013, p. 109). This is a foundation on which *the idea* of "neoliberal multiculturalism" rests. As Kymlicka (2013) puts it, "neoliberal multiculturalism is possible because ethnicity is a source of social capital; social capital enables effective market participation, and governments can promote this market-enhancing social

capital through MCPs (multicultural policies) that treat minorities as legitimate partners" (p. 110).

Associated with this co-optation of multiculturalism, neoliberalism has attempted, with significant success, in reformulating the discourse of citizenship from a multicultural form of citizenship, which is based on "social liberalism (committed to remedying disadvantages) and nationalism (building good citizens who can work across differences for the good of the nation)" (Kymlicka, 2013, p. 111) to citizenship that promotes a conception of the citizen as "a cosmopolitan market actor who can compete effectively across state boundaries" (Kymlicka, 2013, p. 111). This recasting of citizenship in turn has had the effects of drastically undermining the causes that brought multiculturalism into being in the first place. As Kymlicka (2013) sums up this point, "Neoliberal multiculturalism for immigrants affirms – even valorizes – ethnic immigrant entrepreneurship, strategic cosmopolitanism, and transnational commercial linkages and remittances but silences debates on economic redistribution, racial inequality, unemployment, economic restructuring, and labor rights" (p. 112).

Abu-Laban (2014) reinforces this point when she writes, "[i]n this neo-liberal context, the rationale for multiculturalism shifted from supporting equity to supporting Canada's global competitiveness and promoting business links abroad" (p. 154). However, for Abu-Laban, the effects of neoliberalism go farther than a benign desire to increase global competitiveness. It rather promotes *patriotic* citizenship, which aims at a radical transformation that negatively affects Canada's minorities. Abu-Laban (2013) summarizes:

> The turn towards neo-liberal patriotic citizenship provides reduced supports and
> discursive space for minorities to advance claims to deal with contemporary inequities. It
> is evident that Canadian social groups and movements face challenges in advancing a

social justice agenda in an era of patriotic neo-liberal citizenship. (p. 9)

Moreover, the neoliberal approach is reflected not only in the stance and policies of governments but also in academic research on immigrant integration. As Wilkinson (2013) notes "Research on integration much like government priorities, has tended to focus on economic aspects of integration to the near exclusion of other forms of integration" (p. 3). However, it is clear that doing well economically is not necessarily guaranteeing overall wellbeing (Wilkinson, 2013). Fitzgerald (2006) concurs on this point:

> [Ethnographers have shown] that the different domains of assimilation (e.g. cultural, marital, and economic) are not always mutually reinforcing, and in fact, can be at odds with each other. Specifically, economic assimilation, in the sense of upward mobility, can actually be increased through ethnic retention. (p. 14)

The overall effect of neoliberalism amounts to evisceration of the political experiences of immigrants from consideration and undermining of conceptions of citizenship as an intrinsically valuable practice in freedom. This research interrogated the economistic approach to immigrant integration and explored how a specific immigrant community is functioning in a milieu in which the importance of political agency is crowded out by neoliberalism's focus on the economization of life. The study sought to bring forth immigrants' political participation as both an instrumentally and intrinsically valuable human vocation that affirm human's distinct civic capacities for contributing to social justice.

The two exogenous factors discussed above contribute to misrecognition of immigrants and seek to sublimate the political interest they have into predominantly economic ones. In so doing, they unsettle the social foundations that makes equal participation in society possible and violate principles of social justice that were articulate by Nancy Fraser (2009). This also

undermines immigrants' political agency, objectifying as institutional projects to manage as opposed to subjects with political consciousness and resilience (Freire, 1970). This study has found that despite these impediments, immigrants have managed, in a limited but admirable manner, to seek and assert their political agency. The means they can best do that is through their belonging to ECOs.

The normative appeal of the multicultural conception of integration is that it positively responds to the demands of recognition by minorities as well as to their vested interest in participating in larger society without violently contravening fundamental precepts of the norms of democratic society. Berry's (1980, 2011, 2016) well-known delineation of four possible strategies of acculturation, assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization is the backdrop for his approval of integration the best acculturation model. Berry (2011) endorses integration for its acceptance of *cultural diversity*, promotion of *equitable participation* of all groups in society (p.18) and for its correlation with immigrants' positive acculturation and wellbeing (Berry & Hou, 2016). While I endorse the conception of integration articulated in multiculturalist scholarly literature in Canada by the likes of Taylor (1994), Berry (1980, 2016), Kymlicka (2001, 2008, 2013) and Bloemraad (2006, 2008, 2013), it is necessary to go beyond them to ensure immigrants' political agency is a principal consideration. One way this can be done is by focusing on the idea of political agency as opposed to on integration; for, when demands on the two ideas pull in opposite direction, I believe agency ought to be given precedence, as agency is more likely to enhance integration rather than the other way around.

Summary

This chapter considered factors that impede ECOs from doing more in enhancing political integration, social wellbeing and political agency. First, I considered endogenous factors of

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divisive homeland politics, lack of criticality in the programs and activities that ECOs create and deficiency in administrative abilities. Then, I discussed exogenous factors of assimilationist conceptions of immigrant integration and the detracting effects of neoliberalism. My account was intended to be both diagnostic and solution-oriented. In regard to the endogenous factors I called ECOs to be craftier in manage divisiveness of homeland politics, become more critically oriented and learn and grow in administrative capacity. Discussing the assimilationist critique, I not only critiqued it but also advanced arguments in favor of understanding Canadian history as constituted by pluralities and contestation, accurately recognizing immigrants and their social contributions, being true to pluralistic democracy and appreciating the value of social contest as inherent in political life and having the right kind of expectation from integration, not seeing it as a means of ensuring harmony but probably more contest. I also offered an account of neoliberalism and its attempts to displace politics with economic and stressed the latter's indispensable importance. In what follows, the last chapter, I summarized the study, provided recommendations and suggested further research.

Chapter Eight: Summary, recommendations and further research

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to explore how members of ECO's understand the political significance of belonging to these organizations and how they use their membership for political integration. In this chapter, I provide a summary of the study, discuss its genesis, return to the social problem it sought to address, and remind readers of the objectives of the study, as well as the theoretical framework and methodology. I will provide a final discussion of the findings in light of the previous two discussion chapters and describe the significance of the answers to the research questions. I conclude with suggestions about future research ideas to further understand immigrant politics and close with recommendations that follow from the study and my interpretations of them.

Summary

Genesis of the study and literature review

While my abiding interest in understanding the meaning and implications of human beings' political nature reside at the theoretical root of this study, my own lived experience as an immigrant on a quest for meaning and agency and the awareness about the plight of immigrants that I gained from working as a settlement worker are significant parts of the impetus for it. My literature review revealed prevalence of discourses on immigrant integration that, while valuable in their own right, fail to provide sufficiently rich account of immigrant integration.

My reading also made me aware of, and appreciate, the existence of nascent literature that examines the political lives of immigrants in a manner that takes immigrants' perspectives seriously, avoiding in the process the intellectual filters mentioned above and filling a gap in

research. Aligning myself with works that exemplify this burgeoning literature, I explored the topic of immigrant political life by focusing on the specific case of Ethiopian immigrants in a city in Canada.

Theoretical framework

As the study evolved into an examination of the politics of immigrants in the context of their ethnocultural organizational membership, I found central tenets of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008; Giroux, 2011) and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2009, 2010; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015) as requisite theoretical resources. I also linked the critical orientation that informs critical pedagogy to Nancy Fraser's (1990, 2009) broad, nuanced and very well-developed conception of justice.

Methodology and findings

My decision to settle on case study research methodology was well taken for two reasons. First, the study was focused on one community, an entity bounded by ethnicity, place of residence and time; namely, Ethiopian immigrants in the city of the research, at the present moment. Equally important for choosing case study strategy was the particular configuration of the research situation in which the phenomenon I am examining, political integration and agency, is bound up with the context of the study, ethnocultural organizations which have great potential for enabling political agency, a situation for which case study is most productive. Thus, it these senses, it has served me well. However, in retrospect the study may well be understood as a critical ethnography, for some of its distinct features. For, it is an examination of a cultural group through the lens of a critical orientation. Although I did not delve into detailing its ethnographical specificity, fundamental aspects of the Ethiopian culture, such as the particular variant of collectivism, the distinct ways in which people use language and communicate, as well

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as the extent of reverence given to community organizing and organizers had significant contribution to the ways that activities were conceived, executed and how efficacious the activities were.

In terms of the ontological and epistemological perspectives I brought to the study, it is fitting that I used critical realism. On the one hand, I found social constructivist orientation most fitting to my efforts to understand participants' own accounts as realities that are historically, socially and linguistically constructed. On the other hand, to discuss the causal factors that explain members' need for belonging to ECOs and their motivations in participating in social activities in and through ECOs, I sought theoretical support from the sure-footed orientation that critical realism provides. Hence, I adopted critical realism as a meta-narrative, because it combines social constructivist epistemology and realist ontology, allow understanding participants' views and experiences as well as proposing explanatory insights about them. Thus, equipped with these research perspectives and decisions, I generated data from interviews with 15 members of three ethnocultural organizations, 5 from each of the organizations. Using semi-structured questions, I elicited the feelings, thoughts and actions of community members vis-à-vis the research questions

Summary of the findings

Participants expressed that belonging to ECOs is a uniquely important resource for psychological, social and political wellbeing. They expressed, sometimes passionately, how belonging to ECOs and creating and participating relationship in them gave them a sense of being comforted and from there a drive to develop their community. They also discussed how because of their membership they were exposed to opportunities to enhance their health, their educational opportunities and that because of these they have become more at ease identifying

with Canada.

1. participants explained the benefits of membership in ECOs in terms of their impact on the development of knowledge, affirmation of identity and enabling broader participation in larger society. They expressed the extent to which they appreciate and benefit from the many knowledges they acquire about their broader society as a result of being members of ECOs. They stated their gratefulness for being able to affirm their identity through opportunities related to culture celebrating events and activities and that this, in part, equips them with what is needed to participate in larger society.

2. participants explained that political agency is sought and enacted through activities that a) provide critical information, b) engage and raise members' social and political consciousness and c) educate about and involve members in formal politics. They said they have gained immensely valuable information about how life works in Canada as a result of their membership to ECOs. They also affirmed that one of the main sources of knowledge about the broader social and political life of Canada comes through ECOs, including knowledges about participating in electoral politics.

3. participants outlined internal and external barriers to flourishing of ECOs and the success of their collective endeavors. They expressed their serious concerns about the deleterious effects of divisions over homeland political issues, about the lack of seriousness they witness in members' commitment to enhancing community activities and about the lack of government support.

4. This study also led to a conception of ECOs as complex organizations, as informal settlement service providers, as discursive democratic spaces and as social refuges, serving a multiplicity of important social tasks: provision of various types of services

that are geared to supporting the settlement and integration of new immigrants; they function as democratic spaces where ideas and concerns about life are expressed, developed and acted upon; and as places of refuge where people who feel they are not fully embraced by larger society come to seek comfort and vent.

5. Social learning that transpired in, and because of, ECOs impacted those who participated in associational activities and shaped their political agency. I drew from the data that one of the best things ECOs do is informally educate members about what is needed to effectively access healthcare, education and housing; about the means through which they are express their homeland culture and about understanding themselves as political actors and about the possibilities of fruitful engagement in formal politics.

6. The contributions of communities of practice were *sine quo non* of ECOs. It became more and more clear to me that the life blood of ECOs are the several communities of practice that constitute these institutions. That is to say, for example, virtually all of the major activities with political significance (like information sessions, culture celebrating and reflective gatherings and activities in electoral politics) are carried out by communities of practice.

To flesh these findings into a more defined structural and thematic presentation, I wrote two discussion chapters (6 and 7) by engaging them through the lens of the theoretical framework I put together and by bringing them into conversation with discourses and practices that impinge on them. I summarize these in the following.

Answering the research questions and their broader significance

Research questions

Whereas I have provided answers to the research questions and discussed their significance in the two discussion chapters; here, I commented on some of the lessons I drew, lessons that perhaps go beyond the specific purview the study was fenced around. I prefaced this part of my account with a quick reminder of the research questions and brief answers to them. This preface was intended to be a stage-setting and contextualizing move.

1a. How do members of Ethiopian community in a city in Canada understand the political significance of belonging to ethnic organizations?

By in large participants responded that belonging to ECOs enables them to sustain their cultural identity but also support their efforts to equitably avail themselves of the resources necessary for a life of wellbeing as well as provide them a distinct means of making claims through informal and electoral political channels.

1b. How does their participation community organizations reflect a quest for, or assertion of, political agency?

By inviting identity celebration, self-reflection, as well as enabling the pursuit of formal political office.

2. What are the underlying factors that hamper the flourishing of ethnocultural organizations as a means of enhancing the political agency of immigrants?

Endogenous: factors such as the divisive nature of homeland politics, lack of administrative acumen and tepid level of criticality in vision of communities of practice.

Exogenous: broader discourses of neoliberalism that tends to coopt multiculturalism into its economistic agenda and prevalent discourse of political liberalism that insists on consensus building and undermines the idea that contest can be harnessed in service of democratic vitality.

3. What organizational and discursive shifts are necessary to realization of immigrants' achievement of political agency when the work of ethnocultural organizations is considered?

ECOs can improve their efficacy a) with government material and administrative support; b) broad acceptance of the value of social contest by those who hold the reigns of formal political authority and create policies and the general public; and c) tempering the harshness and haste with which immigrant groups and ECO's tend to be judged socially counterproductive and politically fragmentary

This study provided to me more evidence that human beings are more inclined to seek associations and social relationships as critically important means of sense making and as a way of pursuing collective goals, more so than pursuing self-interested individual goals out of expediency. It was confirmation that human beings' innate drive and natural capacities almost compel them to transcend narrow self-interest. This is not to deny human beings do act out of self-interest or that they ought not to. It is rather that when they do, it is more often than not a result of the way people are socialized, not only about what to value in and about life but also how. In the context of this study, therefore, the very fact that immigrant groups are forming organizations and participating in them, I believe, reflect their need to live in a collective, forming a "we", not only as instrumentally valuable practice but also as an expression of their dignity. It is of course undeniable that ECOs are a means of ensuring survival, literally and metaphorically. One of the participant's accounts of incidents of suicide that happened in the community in recent years as having been the effect of social exclusion, which ECOs are consistently trying to work against, is a poignant reminder of the life-or-death role ECOs play in the immigrant community.

It was fascinating and inspiring for me to witness the resilience with which community members were responding to discourses that have proved to be constraining on them. These discourses became the medium through which members of the community interpret how the country they have deep appreciation and gratitude for fail too many times to treat them judiciously and that they have to first depend on their own efforts and wisdom to fight for, construct and achieve what they rightly deserve. For me, this has exemplified the fundamental political principle that political authority, the status-quo and the underlying principles that are the true governors of our lives are not self-justifying. And because of that, members of a political community must take seriously the need, the duty and civic effort necessary to hold them to account, and to contribute to changing them when necessary.

This study has been a continuation of my own psychological evolution, a personal journey, albeit a particularly intense, deeply engaged and ultimately most enlivening one, of a quest to understand, not only the immigrant community I examined and the significance of ECOs for political agency but also, myself. As I learn and evolve, I have become more aware of the rationale for why I pay attention to things I do and aware of the filters through which I see the world. Consequently, I am a little bit closer to humbly acknowledge the ideals that animate my thoughts and actions as well as the blind spots that should incentivize perpetual self-critical reflection.

Recommendations

The following recommendations constitute a call to action directed at various levels of government, ethnocultural organizations, other social agencies, immigrant settlement and other mainstream organization and the general public. They are meant in part to inform social and civic practices, animate praxis and bring about policy changes. They emanate from the tradition

of critical pedagogy, whose ultimate goals include nurturing the conditions for the cultivation and development of agency, the achievement of political freedom in the full sense and the assertion of human dignity.

1. Communities of practice within ECOs in general, especially those of visible minority immigrants groups, should engage in developing the means (including programs and activities) to bring more critical pedagogic engagements in order to create an environment that nurtures deep political awareness and inspire political action. Using existing cultural practices and institutions, exemplified by the conversation cafes, *Nu Buna Tetu* ceremonies and culture celebrating events discussed in the chapters six and chapter seven, politically important subjects like human rights, democratic claims making, and the rights and responsibilities of multicultural citizenship can be broached. This is of paramount importance for the overall development of immigrant communities, their political voice and their political contributions. This process must be conducted in tandem with government involvement through organizing events and information sessions where knowledges are shared about democratic governance and the role of citizens in democracy.

2. ECO's should seriously be considered as alternative sources for providing services and programs to settle and integrate immigrants. The unique resources they have, such as first language knowledge and understanding of homeland culture enable them to more easily understand immigrant issues and to respond to needs more effectively than the settlement service industry, as it is constituted now, can. More specifically, settlement funding and resources from the federal government of Canada should be directly provided to ECOs to provide select settlement and integration services. However, since ECOs are not in all

respects better equipped than what current settlement social agencies can, any federal government support should be clearly defined and focused on the distinct capacities specific ECOs evince. For example, ECOs would not be the best means of language instruction. However, they would be primary candidates to provide services social work practitioners do.

3. Relatedly, political opportunity structures must be established for the purpose of bridging the gap between immigrants and formal political structures in order to create the means through which immigrants' interests, concerns and aspirations can be heard at the level of formal politics and impact policies. Consultative bodies of the type that exist in some European jurisdictions, like in Finland, should be created, albeit, with due attention to the mechanics to ensure that these efforts are fitting for the context here and now. These consultative bodies can serve as a means to keep a close relationship between immigrant groups and formal government bodies through regular meetings and continuous bilateral flow of information. This can be establish with respect to all three levels of government.

4. The political participation of immigrants in politics must be encouraged both by government bodies but also by a more politically oriented ECOs. Governments ought to be more attentive to big and small ways in which barriers constrain, especially small, immigrant communities from participating fully in political governance. More concretely, language translation services should be provided at voting booths. While this does not mean translators can be in person available, given the complicated logistic demands this entails; however, the availability of translated text material can be disseminated before and during elections.

5. All stakeholders, ECOs, government bodies, settlement agencies, other social agencies

and the general public should engage in more honest and broad discourse on immigrant integration and a serious consideration of fundamental concepts, including true meaning of integration and realistic expectations about the extent to which immigrant can and should assimilate and how. More directly, in the city of the research, for example, the work of Multicultural Relations Office is better advised to integrate discussions of the meaning integration in a more fundamental manner. Furthermore, the work of the office should include in its mandate to raise awareness about the meaning of integration in the many opportunities that are already found in its mandate.

6. More focus should be given to understanding the distinct challenges Muslim immigrants face, considering the broad context of rising Islamophobia and the increasing tendency to see issues of immigration in terms of national security. Schools, and other learning institutions and public media ought to be mandated to provide education about the Muslim community in the city of the research, to counter the baseless assumption that Islam and violence are mutually supportive, beginning with countering the prevalent tendency to hold on to and perpetuate a homogenized view of Muslim communities.

Having made these recommendations, I would also like to propose pathways that I feel ought to be pursued in order to explore, deeply and broadly, that subjects that this study could not address adequately.

Further research

1. Extending this study by conducting parallel research in other immigrant communities within Edmonton vis a vis ECOs would be a productive way to get a composite picture that supplies the knowledge necessary to support across immigrant communities as well as to get a fine-grained delineation of various communities and their specific characteristics and needs.

2. A more rigorous development of the concept and practice of integration along the lines of what is drawn upon in this study's second discussion chapter, that is integration as consistent with democratic contestation, is promising in terms of injecting realism and honesty in the current discourse that implicitly takes liberal, consensus democracy as a given.

3. It is also a worthwhile endeavor to study the comparative merits of transnational politics, whether for example, involvement in homeland politics undermines participation in Canadian politics. The worry that immigrants lead segmented lives in which they see their existence in Canada as one motivated by economic advantages while reserving their true allegiance to homeland is worth exploring as a way of understanding the pattern of immigrants' political participation, or lack thereof, in Canada.

4. Also, studies that seek the perspectives of settlement agencies about the prospect of ECOs providing settlement and integration services can yield insights useful to reimagining the provision of services as collaborative endeavors. Such studies may also explore issues of government funding for settlement services and the role funding plays in how settlement is constituted currently

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study showed the many unexpected ways in which ECOs are politically significant for immigrants, that they are ultimately the most effective, perhaps sole, means for the development and exercise of political agency, at least as studied among Ethiopian immigrants in Edmonton. Although enhancing ECOs, by addressing the barriers they are up against, is immensely important to the social wellbeing of immigrants, it is also of great benefit to Canada in general, since a nation can only be a strong as its weakest links. What is hampered by the weaknesses that inhere in the Ethiopian ECOs as well as by dominant discourses, like

neoliberalism and ill-conceived conceptions of integration, is the full participation of immigrants in the social, cultural and political lives of the civic community of which they are a part. Since what is at stake in this study has been a question of justice, it behooves us to work towards understanding, towards a collective political ethic and emancipatory praxis, which are genuine bases for freedom.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. For what purpose does the ECO you belong to exist?

2. What are some of the distinctive activities that define your community association?

3. How are these activities opportunities for learning?

4. What do you feel are the individual and collective/social benefits of these learning activities?

5. What are the benefits of membership to your community association?

6. Does your community association have an influence on how members are perceived by, and relate to, the larger Edmonton and Canadian society and governments in terms of multiculturalism? What are they influences?

7. Do you think the activities in your community association shape how Ethiopian participate in Canadian social, political and cultural life?

8. What would you improve about Canada's social, political system and/or the theory and practice of multiculturalism in order to give immigrants substantive political agency?

9. How can immigrants influence society by articulating and enacting social policies and programs? What specific policies and program do you feel can enhance your belonging or citizenship in Canada?