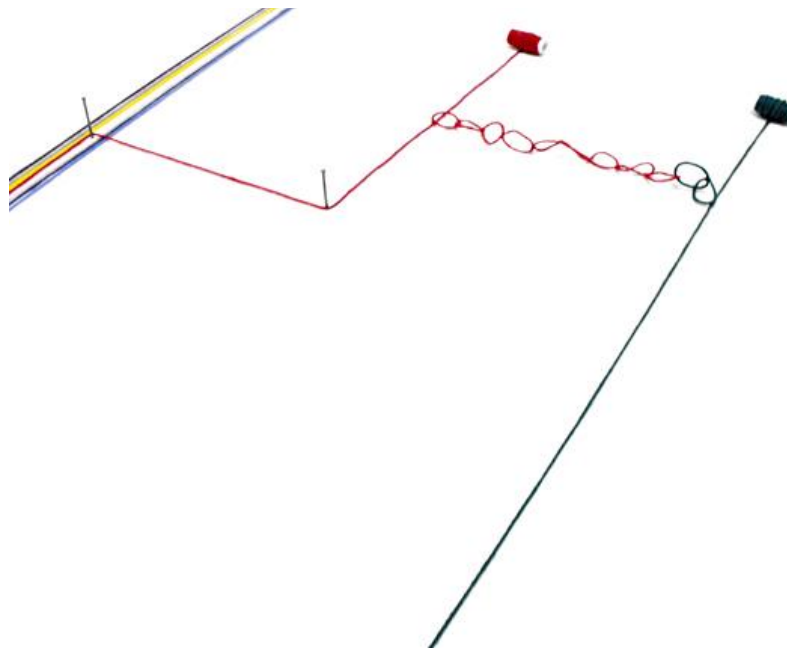Arts, Culture and Society

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Master Thesis

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Listening to stories from the borders

Uprooting, Disjuncture, and Metamorphosis through Contemporary Storytelling Events on Migration

© Guy Königstein, Family stories

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Listening to stories from the borders

Abstract and keywords

This study explores the context of storytelling events: oral performances in which migrants interpret their life experiences in front of an audience. The research focuses on how listening to life stories on migration affects the listeners, at an individual and a collective level. More specifically, it investigates the role of storytelling events as a mediator between the listeners' understanding of their narrative identity and the narratives on migration built by mass media and NGOs.

In order to explore the existential and social dimensions of storytelling, 10 semi-structured interviews have been conducted with usual participants of storytelling events on migration, organized in different parts of the world.

The conceptual core of this study is first informed by Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, and second by Van Gennep's conceptualization of the rites of passage, and in particular of the liminal stage. Through this interdisciplinary approach at the cross path of philosophy, sociology and anthropology, the analysis demonstrates the listeners' understanding of storytelling events as a collective rite of liminality: as a transitory, in-between state, from disruption to potential for social change. Participants, after an initial a form of rejection and tension towards the story, are able to negotiate what they heard and reincorporate those feelings in a critical reflection on their own society's stereotypes and limits. Therefore, the context of storytelling events creates a bridge between migrant and host society's members by inviting both groups to experience dialogic moments.

Finally, the potential of a theoretical approach to storytelling joins the vibrant conversation on the post-colonial approach by positing storytelling events on migration as a form of knowledge production disruptive of Eurocentric knowledge. By giving voice to migrant experiences and memories, storytelling events can become the environment in which deep-rooted prejudice can be transformed into new, culturally democratic, discursive forms.

Keywords: liminality, migratory experience, storytelling, narrative identity, hegemonic narratives.

Acknowledgments

This thesis is the result of months fluctuating in intellectual discomfort that questioned the relevance of the research process at its very core.

Those feelings, located in the zeitgeist of COVID-19, got truly empowered by the stories and the insights that the various participants were so open to sharing with me.

It is indeed to them that I dedicate my deepest gratitude, for the energies that I was able to collect and the sudden motivation that accompanied the last weeks of the research process. Thank you.

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To all of you, a good read.

Thoughts on COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic and the related measures had a strong impact on our lives.

One of its consequences is that the events that are narrated and analyzed in the present study, as forms of social gatherings, all belong to what is now impossible to do.

But most consistent, in these current times, are the ideas of uncertainty and unpredictability. I believe several people were, and maybe still are, trapped in a sort of limbo. It is for that reason that we can look at these times as a liminal period, or at least I perceived it so.

The concept of liminality is one of the cornerstones of this research: in this way, as the research process moved further, I apprehended this concept as perfectly compatible with some feelings that I was, myself, developing.

In fact, the entire process unfolded as I was stubbornly trying to go back to my home country. Can that form of liminality, being stuck between the Netherlands and Italy, be compared to the forms of liminality that I outline in the thesis? I realized that the similarities were strong, at least on a conceptual level: I was very insecure, and at the same time I was feeling guilty for complaining about my privileged form of liminality.

The similarities of liminality between the current Covid-19 crisis and the experience of listening to storytelling inspired me to continue the research with increasing optimism. When everything we hold for sure is thrown into question, liminal periods can become crises in the Greek sense of the word (krino): to be able to distinguish, and therefore, to be able to choose. Liminality allows us to choose what we want for our future.

TABLE OF CONTENT

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Presentation of the Research and Research Question

This master thesis analyzes the reception and integration of migrant life stories. It focuses on storytelling events: oral performances in which migrants interpret their life experiences in front of an audience (Boje, 1991). Those events are organized not only in the Netherlands, in platforms such as Mezrab or Belvédère, but increasingly worldwide, especially in countries that receive consistent migration flows.

In particular, the research will explore, first, how the audience gets affected by the experience of listening to migrants' first-hand accounts, and, next, how the audience reacts to that, at an individual and a collective level. For the understanding of the collective implications of storytelling, I distinguish what I call 'hegemonic narratives', the migration stories usually portrayed by mass media and humanitarian associations.

With all that in mind, the research question of this thesis is the following: How do storytelling events about migration influence the listeners' understanding of migration in general? And, more specifically, how does storytelling mediate between personal thoughts and hegemonic narratives on migration?

1.2 Academic and Societal Relevance

Recently, there has been a growth of academic interest in narrative practices. This dissertation will contribute to this field of research by investigating storytelling events as a complex narrative practice that addresses the understanding that we already have of our own identity, while it allows us to develop an interpretation of what the migrant's identity consists of.

The massive displacement of people and contemporary migration flows have resulted in an increased academic interest in the intangible cultural heritage of migrant communities. In particular, some research has focused on how migrants and refugees attempt to find a sense of continuity in their host country through various cultural expressions (Anthias, 2002; Jackson, 2002). Among these expressions, collective practices of storytelling are becoming more and more common.

Although some academic studies have examined how storytelling and life stories help to mediate the migrant's social categories ascribed by the host society (Ottonelli, 2017; Poletti, 2011; Sabaté Dalmau, 2015), there is a real lack of focus on how those life stories act upon those listeners who have not lived any experience of migration. By describing the effects of migratory life stories on the audience of storytelling events, this study explores how the reception of these stories gives insights on the difficulties of the migratory experience.

I am interested in understanding if and how storytelling practices become representative of more complex personal and social structures. In other words, what has storytelling on migration to offer on the topic of how the communities that face migration flows understand the society they live in.

The present study is, therefore, merging contemporary academic interest in narrative practices with the topical issue of forced migration. In this way, it is meant to shed more light on the process of cultural integration from the perspective of the host society's members, instead of the migrant perspective that is commonly researched.

Storytelling events cannot be considered independently from the context they take place in. They represent a social practice, and therefore a specific set of relationships may elapse between the different actors involved (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940).

Hereby, it is relevant to research how participants perceive those stories both in their private sphere, as individuals, and through the influence and pressures exerted by the society they belong to (Brown, 2006). To do this, this study is also embedded in the larger societal debate about the stereotypical representation of migrants as agency-less, stagnated individuals.

Here lies the societal relevance of the present research, as it aims to open the possibilities of a more dialogical relationship between migrant-storyteller and local-listeners. Indeed, as it can be learned by Bar-On & Kassem (2004), personal storytelling facilitates some degree of reconciliation between conflicted social groups, as it creates empathy and mutual trust. This makes it possible for more complex identity processes to surface and becomes an instrument to build critical collective memories (Harrison, 2013; Lowenthal, 1998).

As a form of collective integration, migrants who have been through traumatic experiences can learn to recognize and accept their past, while listeners can develop an ability to listen to the suffering of the 'Other'. The storytelling approach can create the conditions for a transformative process in host societies since stories can engage people at every level – not only intellectually, but in their emotions and values.

1.3 Thesis Outline

In the following theory section, I first explain Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity. This is the idea according to which our self-identity is associated with the story that we create for our life, and that organizes our past and present experiences.

Next, by looking from the perspective of the stories told by migrants and refugees, the study analyzes the hegemonic narratives that regulate the public representation of contemporary migration stories told by mass media and humanitarian organizations.

Ultimately, the research will go toe-to-toe with the increasing academic interest in applying anthropological theories to migration studies. Van Gennep's sociology of limit is used to enlighten the continuous process by which society's members think about their limits, problematizing each member's fundamental relations between "self and other, the familiar and the foreign, insiders and outsiders, objectivity and subjectivity" (Gazit, 2018, p. 271).

Chapter 2 will help to discuss the aforementioned concepts. It will not only examine the intricate narrative process of the participants but also look into the issue of how storytelling can offer and display a multi-layered interpretation of such process, finally considering it as a moment of collective reflection (Van Gennep, 1960; Vertovec, 2011).

The third part of the thesis will give more insights into the methodological framework that was used to find answers to the research question. Through a qualitative method based on semi-structured interviews, 10 participants of storytelling events were selected. Here, the consequences of the COVID-19 on the development of the research design will also be detailed.

In chapter 4, the data analysis identifies certain recurrent modes of reception and insightful patterns offered by the interviewees. The results of the research will be discussed and analyzed in detail and will be connected to the main aspects of the theoretical framework. This analysis aims to explore the extent to which storytelling events can unfold new stories of migration and create collective awareness.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework is divided into 3 chapters and it is informed by an exploration of migrant storytelling as a complex experience at the cross path of philosophy, sociology, and anthropological theories. Below, I summarize the scope of inquiry under each of these areas, as carried out in the context of this research project.

The following section will introduce several theories concerning the perspective and the values through which the experience of listening to migration stories is understood as an individual and collective practice. Within that, the concepts of 'narrative identity', 'hegemonic narratives', and 'liminality' will be addressed.

In the first chapter, I present a discussion on Ricoeur's theory on narrative identity according to which narratives are used to develop a conception of self-identity. Applied to the reception of migration stories, I later analyze the 'hegemonic narratives'. Those represent the extreme example of collective narrative identities, transformed through social relationships, and mediated by institutional structures such as mass media and NGOs. The final chapter presents a discussion on storytelling as a potential tool for social change.

2.1 Narrative Construction of Identity

2.1.1 Framing Storytelling: the Role of Stories in the Formation of Personal Identity

The central argument of this chapter is that life stories offer unique ways of establishing, disrupting, and re-establishing personal continuity (McLean et al., 2015). To analyze the construction and perception of migrant identities through the lens of narrative practices, I start by connecting the experience of listening to life stories to the concept of narrative identity. A narrative approach to identity construction reveals that the self is a narrative structure and that the activity of telling and hearing life stories is the most evident representation of meaningfully attempting to incorporate past and present experiences within one's personal life (Garro, 2001; Garro & Mattingly, 2001; Linde, 1993).

I first draw the attention to Ricoeur, whose fundamental theorization of the narrative identity (1991) has been the starting point for following theoretical approaches and empirical research in various fields, among which precisely include migration studies. In framing the experience of storytelling, I want to consider some arguments presented in Ricoeur's following books: 'The model of the text: Meaningful action considered as text' (1973) and 'Narrative Identity' (1991). By doing that, my task is not only to replicate Ricoeur's argument. Rather, my concern is to consider the implications and limitations of the concept of narrative identity, for the specific reception of migrant stories.

A narrative identity represents the symbolic integration of the lived experiences of a person into a coherent plot that he or she can identify with and is willing to share with others. It is the conceptual structure that regulates past and present by mediating "between the individual events or incidents and the story taken as a whole" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 65).

Ricoeur argues that human development occurs through the performance of narrative structures that act not only as a mental representation, but as an active and substantial mode of interpretation of reality. He suggests that storytelling can alter meanings and therefore actions (Ricoeur, 1991): this happens because biographical narratives are considered to be essential to the production of knowledge on a situation, phenomenon, or problem.

Stories are perceived as foundational for the understanding of the subjective reality of lived experience (Ezzy, 1998), but more than that, they are also considered to be shaped by historical action. This means that if storytelling is a personal practice, it is also a cultural and intersubjective experience through which, as Sigona argues, a person draws on the "cultural/personal heritage to make sense of, imagine, and negotiate with others the world around them" (2014, p. 370). Therefore, there is an explicit link between narrating and doing, meaning-making and action-making.

However, there are key criteria for the fulfillment of such a sensemaking process: self-continuity and coherence. On one side, self-continuity responds to the need of maintaining self-consistency within life changes; on the other, coherence represents the organization of events in time and space so that they form a unified whole, whereas changes and unclear choices are minimized. Without such criteria of self-continuity and coherence, the experience of narrative identity cannot be powerfully enabled. For that reason, the individual strives for social and psychological coherence and continuity in his or her narrative.

Considering these characteristics, what can we say regarding the narrative identity of listeners of migration stories? Since those stories represent disruptive experiences for the listeners' self-continuity and coherence, how does their narrative identity react to make sense of the lived experience?

To add insights to this question, I first need to acknowledge that research applying the philosophy of narrative identity to migration studies is mostly focusing on the perspective of migrants, and on the effects of personal storytelling within the process of migrant's identity development. Among those, several studies and empirical research showed the constructive impact of storytelling for the migrants that share their own story. For example, Burgess argues that "the story is a means of 'becoming real' to others, on the basis of shared experience and affective resonances" (2006, p. 211). By reorganizing the lived events into a shareable story, the migrant

would be able to pass the own, individual experience of suffering to a collective experience. Burguess argues that in this way, the audience could become aware of the existence of life courses of that kind (id., 2006).

However, a notable exception to this migrant-oriented perspective can be found in Lechner & Renault's study on the relationship between narrative coherence and the migratory encounter (2018). While investigating the implications of stories for the teller, they decide to focus on the side of the listener. By extending the work of Ricoeur to an investigation on the role of the life stories, they claim that migration stories function as a mechanism that disturbs the ordinary process of personal identities. Indeed, that process results in an unstable negotiation between self-identity, or the individual, and alterity, or the other (Lechner & Renault, 2018). In the words of Lechner & Renault:

> "The production of narratives about migration experiences is a concrete model of the dialectic between the permanent and impermanent aspects of identity" (Lechner & Renault, 2018, p. 5).

The binary between self-identity and alterity is reflected in the difference between the migrant's space-time narrative, and that of the listener. Here, I am referring to the features of self-continuity and coherence.

In the storytelling practice, the description of foreign spaces, cultures and life arcs reveals the differences in how the listeners perceive the reality of migration from the outside of their privileged narrative identity (Lechner & Renault, 2018). If the language barrier may sometimes add difficulties to the reception of the story (Ottonelli, 2017), it is on its content that mutual understanding seems to be difficult to achieve.

Another important academic contribution to the understanding of the phenomenon of storytelling is offered by Brown (2006). Although his approach generalizes the framework of analysis to collective identities, the conclusions of his study are extremely relevant for this thesis. He insists that in order to fully appreciate narrative identities, it is important to recognize them as "complexes of in-progress stories and story-fragments" (id., 2006, p. 732).

Rosaldo calls this operation the "myth of detachment" (1989, p. 168). With this concept, he argues that life stories cannot be objective and neutral collectors of facts, and that considering them as such is nothing but an illusion, a myth indeed. In his ethnographic research, he suggests that life-stories should be instead treated as problematic "sources" for the reconstruction of events and experiences. Their reception should be interpreted as an "interactive text" in which several layers of narratives are joined (Lechner & Renault, 2018).

In addition, Riessman sees clear analogies between the way people make sense of themselves and the social world that surrounds them. Events are "selected, organized, connected and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience" (Riessman, 1993, p. 1). Not only the notions of 'self', but also that of 'culture' and 'community' constitute the basis of narrative (Adelson & Olding, 2013). In other words, we more or less consciously choose what to integrate or not in our narrative identity, and in this selective procedure, the socio-cultural context influences our choices.

If these considerations, except for Lechner & Renault (2018), are applied to storytelling in general, they are probably even more relevant for the specific case of storytelling performed by migrants. This is because of two reasons: first, because of the heated and controversial debates around the topic, especially in host countries, and second, because migration stories challenge at their very core the criteria of self-continuity and coherence upon which narrative identity is based.

Then, in translating the theories from the aforementioned scholars to the topic of this study, it should be emphasized that listening to life stories on migration represents a disruption of the listeners' narrative identity.

2.2 The Politics of Storytelling: Hegemonic Narratives

Reproducing collective narrative identities

From the previous section on the mechanisms of narrative identity, we concluded that narrative identity, with all its layers, acts at a personal level, but with deep and often unconscious collective implications.

I will present, as another example of storytelling, how mass media and humanitarian organizations present stories on migration. In inesection 1.1, we saw narrative identity primarily as a tool for individual meaning-making. However, this consideration inevitably puts to the side sociological questions about power, inequality, and social change.

Nowadays, because of the constantly evolving interrelationships of the contemporary world, a new sociological approach has emerged and complemented the philosophical theories by Ricoeur and his followers. This approach studies the oral transmission of stories at the intersection of personal and institutional contexts (Polletta et al., 2011). Such an orientation suggests that storytelling, like other discursive forms, is embedded in hierarchies of cultural authority that judge the credibility of some stories to the detriment of others.

In this section, the disruption operated at a narrative level by storytelling on migration will be analyzed through two main macro-narratives: first, through the stories about migration told in

mass media, and second, through the stories about migration told my humanitarian organizations such as UNHCR[1], SolidarityNow[2], and other NGOs.

Although the 2019 Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD, 2019) stressed the urgency of promoting a balanced narrative on migration, the debates around migrants, and especially refugee voices, are by now integrated with the contemporary "anxious politics" (Modest & de Koning, 2016). That is, in a time when the concepts of culture and nationality are been fervently fetishized, this politics consists of reducing all migrants to the category of a racialized Other, perceived as a threat to the cultural and social homogeneity of a country.

The report of the GFMD annual roundtable session explicitly states the potential of storytelling as follows:

> Storytelling has the unique capacity to unite diverse groups of people through common values and life experiences. Tapping into these elements can help the public to better relate with the experiences of migrants. By showcasing migrants' success stories within their host communities, communications products can shed light on effective integration and tackle concerns linked to "cultural insecurity." Migrants themselves have a key role to play in this regard and should be engaged in the storytelling process from creation through to delivery." (GFMD, 2009, p. 6)

Consistent with this perspective, several studies have demonstrated that storytelling may serve as a powerful tool to unmask the structural inequalities in society, especially through first-hand stories by marginalized groups – in our case, told by migrants themselves (Alexandra, 2008; Phillip L. Hammack et al., 2011; Jackson, 2002; Sonn et al., 2014). In the case of migrant and refugee voices, my aim is here to examine the conditions under which storytelling becomes a complex tool for the understanding of the phenomenon of migration.

As Messer et al. (2012) have noted, narrative practices present a considerable variety of approaches that may also end up reproducing asymmetrical situations such as who has the right and the legitimacy to tell its own story. My focus is on oversimplification and entertainment: how knowledge claims are made against a whole range of stories that are not considered appealing enough (Hammack, 2008), as they do not meet the canons of marketable news. This selective process reflects the existence of a dominant mode of story-making and storytelling (Hammack, 2008), which for individuals whose personal stories do not conform to the national collective narrative constitute a counter-narrative to be silenced.

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[1] See https://www.unhcr.org/.
[2] See https://www.solidaritynow.org/.

In particular, the dominant narrative on migration tends towards a one-sided meaning and coherency (Hammack, 2008). In the case of migrants and refugees, their experience of narrative identity places them in a position of subordination towards the dominant, collective narrative that rather fosters two opposite images: the migrant as a source of threat, and the migrant as an agency-less victim (id., 2008; Sigona, 2014) Therefore, in hearing life stories within storytelling platforms, the narrative identities of the practitioners need to confront broader collective narratives.

In this approach, first I focus on mass media narratives on migration: those not only perpetuate a dominant mode of storytelling, but also present a strong aspect of entertainment.

For example, in populist language, the migrant is often represented as a pollutant (Cisneros, 2008). To come back to Ricoeur, the metaphor of pollution may be twofold: it refers to the collective narrative of cultural homogeneity, that we can associate to a national narrative, but it also refers to the space-time coherence belonging to one's narrative identity. Such coherence indeed cannot be easily achieved by a migrant and can, therefore, disrupt the development of a stable society. This double dimension of pollution is relevant to understand how migration and refugee stories are perceived in the public discourse of a nation.

In line with Ricoeur's considerations, Hage illustrates the following dichotomy: "the national narrative operates with both 'we' and 'I' forms" (Hage, 1996, p. 478). He continues by acknowledging that if this national narrative operates between collective and individual narratives, it is in the 'we' that it seeks to perpetuate a dominant mode of storytelling.

Finally, we can associate that national narrative to a form of "cultural hegemony"- what Marxist philosopher Gramsci (2010[1971]) demystifies as the cultural foundations through which the elites perpetuate their power. He argues that it is thanks to a complex system of relations that stories are incorporated by mass media. To apply his theories to the scope of this research, mass media become not the expression of a social or individual narrative, but truly part of the process led by the dominant class to ensure cultural stability.

2.2.1. *Mass Media: Representation and Fragmentation of Migratory Encounter*

For a long time, migration stories in mass media had been reproducing the solid paradigm of symbolic annihilation. This concept is defined as the status quo of social groups systematically marginalized in media (Caswell, 2014), and surely this strategy also applies to stories on migrants. However, the representation of migrants has now become perfectly integrated within the mechanisms of mass media storytelling (Sabaté Dalmau, 2015). As a matter of fact, life stories of migration increasingly permeate media, and especially television reporting (id., 2015).

The most identified narrative in mass media is the portrayal of the migrant as a form of threat for the host society. In her critical analysis of some standard tropes of migration stories, Anderson names the concept of "migration fairy story" (2013). Her idea is that of a binary division between 'us' and 'them', which results in an idealization of the standards of living and the values of the host country. This form of idealization is what justifies the systematic association of the migrant to a form of threat.

On an empirical basis, research conducted by Arcimaviciene & Baglama on a selected range of U.S. and EU media outlets showed "the importance of conventionalized metaphor usage in recreating ideological positioning based on the dichotomy of 'us' and 'them'"(2018, p. 11). They classify the metaphors into two categories: dehumanization on the one hand, and moral authority on the other.

Similar conclusions are also drawn by Ottonelli, whose analysis of storytelling for democratic deliberation highlights the limits of storytelling practices, and even some dangers. By focusing on the differences between mainstream culture and members of minorities, the author argues that personal stories may be unable to bridge the gap between the two groups, and instead may fall into the pitfalls of exoticization, eccentricity, and orientalization (Ottonelli, 2017). In other words, Ottonelli's analysis suggests that life stories of marginalized groups are concerned by consistent limitations, as the audience is attracted to the unfamiliar, exotic and eccentric context that those stories portray, more than to their actual content (id., 2017).

Such conclusions can be applied to the framework of mass media because, as the most followed form of news reporting, mass media tend to reinforce polarized views on migration (Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018).

2.2.2   *Experts of Migration Stories: Humanitarian Approaches to Storytelling*

The hegemonic function of mass media is widely acknowledged. However, a new area of controversy in the literature about migration revolves around the narratives constructed by humanitarian organizations.

In those organizations, storytelling is used in several ways. First, regarding the preparation of so-called visa stories- the life stories that, narrated to the authorities, give migrants the right of asylum in a certain country (Odofin, 2013). There, migrants need to prove their reliability through an objective, detailed account of the degree of suffering they went through, which will eventually allow them to remain in a safer country.

Second, storytelling is also used in specific platforms that claim an activist stance, for example Humanity House in The Hague. In such places, as in other platforms, migrants share their personal stories with an audience.

One of the theoretical foundations of the humanitarian approach to migrant stories is articulated by what Chouliaraki calls the 'humanitarian imagination' (2013). This concept represents how the public reacts to the suffering of others, and therefore it lies at the core of humanitarian action.

However, not only media but also NGOs finally misuse humanitarian imagination (Andersen, 2017). Sigona (2014) suggests that despite the different strategies and aims that distinguish the two fields of action, the polarized narratives that media use for migrant life stories are equally present in humanitarian intervention. In fact, the pathologization of refugees makes Western 'experts' and organizations the only legitimate voice to speak for refugees on their experience of forced displacement. These dynamics turn refugee lives into "a site where Western ways of knowing are reproduced" (Rajaram 2002, p. 247), as they reinforce the idea that Western NGOs have the authority to represent and speak on behalf of migrants that otherwise would have no channel through which to express their existence.

Therefore, heavily relying on infantilized images of 'pure' victimhood and vulnerability (Sigona, 2014), humanitarian approaches to storytelling often fail to represent a broader scope that transcends the simple realm of basic emotions. Refugees are indeed contemplated as "speechless" (Rajaram, 2002, p. 248) and in need of help and empathy, whereas the agendas of humanitarian agencies are often prioritized.

To summarize the previous sections, I first analyzed narrative identity as a way of organizing one's life story (Brown, 2006). Then, I applied narrative studies, and in particular the philosophy of narrative identity, as a core concept to understand how listeners of storytelling may perceive migrant life stories on a personal level.

Next, by focusing on mass media and NGOs' communication strategies, I analyzed migrant life stories as a flexible content that, depending on how it is used, can also potentially perpetuate monolithic conceptions of society and the Other. These are maintained through national narratives that see migrants either as a threat or as a victim. Indeed, as I argued earlier, the multilayered nature of storytelling creates the conditions of producing alternative stories as well as hegemonic narratives (Ewick & Silbey, 1995).

For the last section of the theoretical framework, the tension between the strive for a coherent narrative and the dominant representations of migrant stories will find a synthesis in the anthropological concept of liminality.

2.3 "Liminality": an Anthropological Approach to the Reception of Life Stories

This section deals with the concept of liminality, defined as the ensemble of the "moments or periods of transition during which the normal limits of thought, self-understanding and behavior are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction" (Thomassen, 2016, p. 1). From the Latin word līmen, meaning 'threshold', liminality represents an in-between stage that, on one side, gives uncertainty and disorientation, but on the other side it is also constructive, as it can bring new impulses to question a certain status quo.

In the application of this concept to the specific practices of storytelling, this last theoretical section will be structured as follows: first, I will analyze the concept of 'ontological security' as a condition of the host society to the arrival of migrants, and similarly as the initial condition of the audience of storytelling events during the listening of migrant life stories. Secondly, I will briefly explain anthropological theories on liminality, mainly through the contribution of Van Gennep and his *Rites of Passages* (Van Gennep, 1960). Lastly, the distinct concept of 'ontological security' and 'liminality' will be compared with the intention of elucidating the complex collective patterns of life stories reception.

2.3.1 Ontological Security: First-hand Narratives of Migration

As argued by Gazit (2019), thinking storytelling through liminality helps to clarify the relationship between the listeners' narrative identity, and the hegemonic narratives of mass media and humanitarian organizations that the listeners, are members of the host society, are deeply used to hear. Indeed, by understanding storytelling on migration as a complex moment for both the teller and the listener, I will present the difficulties and challenges related to the reception of migrant stories.

The question that guides me is the following: how do life stories on migration mediate between individual narrative identity and hegemonic representation? Gazit suggests that the ephemeral character of the stories, linked to the unsettling nature of the migratory experience (Baron et al., 2017; Waldinger, 2008), is experienced not only by the migrant, but also, and surprisingly, by the members of the host society (Gazit, 2019). She explains this phenomenon by evoking the concept of ontological security.

Ontological security theory was developed most extensively by Anthony Giddens (1984) and revolves around the assumption that we constantly research a consistent self in space and in time, looking for our way of being in the world (Innes and Steele, 2010). Therefore, it is strongly related to the criteria of coherence of self-continuity described in 1.1 and represents the psychological condition under which those criteria are fulfilled.

McSweeney's analysis demonstrated that the feeling of security is necessarily expressed through a body of "typified actions" (McSweeney, 1999, p. 166), such as aggressiveness or rejection. As cultural representations of the community that the individual belongs to, those actions find an explanation in Gramsci's idea of hegemony (2010[1971]).

Ontological security is therefore connected to a national narrative, and often finds in the hegemonic narratives a strategy to keep its stability. In other words, ontological security is indicated as the strategy that, through boundaries, creates positive security where personal and collective narratives can remain narrow enough to be coherent and stable (McSweeney, 1999).

In this way, when this security is disrupted, the individuals are left in a state of 'ontological insecurity'. This means that the routines in which their own narrative identity used to find expression and coherence are now fractured. At that point, the community attempts to provide security for its members, since it feels threatened by the presence of others (Innes & Steele, 2013).

At both individual and societal levels, storytelling on migration cannot be understood without acknowledging its connection to ontological insecurity. In fact, the encounter with the alterity represented by the migrant destabilizes monolithic conceptions of identity.

2.3.2 *Anthropological Theories on Liminality*

At this point, I suggest an application of the anthropological theories by Van Gennep to the field of migration studies to explain how storytelling is framed by those who listen to it (1960).

Because they combine theoretical analysis with empirical research, anthropologists are in a good position to unravel the tangled dynamics between collective, personal identity, and migration (Vertovec, 2011).

Liminality – often also referred to as 'in-between' - is a core concept taken from Van Gennep's classification of societal rites. He distinguishes three passages: first, the pre-liminal, second, the liminal or the transition, and finally the post-liminal or the incorporation. The liminal represents the stage in which the individual, while being no longer in the first stage, has not yet begun the transition that will bring to a new identity. While Van Gennep applies this tripartition to the anthropological analysis of rites of passage, I employ his theories to the realm of storytelling events.

In *Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha also refers to liminality as a transitory state or space which is characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion and change. The disorientation of the liminal stage has the characteristics of being simultaneously a disruptive and a constructive force, since from this last aspect new challenging stories can indeed be created. Therefore, there is a clear connection between ontological security and the concept of liminality.

Indeed, we can say that the insecurity is connected to the doubts and uncertainties of the liminal stage.

But why do the members of the receiving society lose their ontological security in face of the migrant "newcomer" and his/her personal story?

For Van Gennep, the answer lies in the socio-symbolic meaning of a society's threshold. His important contribution lies firstly in the sacred quality of the threshold and of the stranger that crosses it, and secondly, in the elastic nature of that threshold, namely subject to social changes. For the sake of the present study, I will consider the threshold as the national border, and the stranger as the migrants that traverse it, in opposition to what Van Gennep calls "locals".

Developing a previous argument (Anderson, 2013), the mobility of the migrants acts as a physical and symbolic threat for the society's sense of "perceived sacredness" (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 10), causing ontological insecurity within the members of the host society. That is because not only they are shaking the individual and collective narrative identity (linking to Ricoeur's narrative unit and homogeneity), but they are also considered as violating a sacred rule.

Despite being considered as dangerous and isolated, the stranger has nonetheless the strength derived from the crossing of the sacred realm represented by the threshold. Consequently, migrants will be initially seen as sacred, but because of the elasticity of the threshold, they will lose this quality as and when they proceed within the host society. From such processual nature results that the socio-symbolic status of the migrant-stranger is, in either a positive or a negative sense, transitory. This impermanence is explained through Van Gennep's model of rites, according to which migrants are considered as embodying physical and social liminality.

It is now relevant to specify how the experience of the liminal stage also involves the locals, here understood as the audience of storytelling events. In fact, both sides of the migratory encounter experience the loss and the later reconstitution of the ontological security, trying to make sense of their new status quo through the execution of certain rites. Among those, I argue, storytelling events take shape as a rite of regeneration through the liminal stage experienced by the listeners.

Through this pivoting process, separation, transition, and incorporation continuously occur, enabling a dialectic overcoming of ontological security and sense of narrative disruption.

My assumption here, nourished by Turner's research (1967), is that storytelling events act as a representation of the movement of the local towards the stranger, holding, enclosed by the blurred boundaries of the liminal stage, the potential for critical emancipation (Chakraborty, 2017; Poletti, 2011), creativity (Innes, 2016), and societal change (Black, 2008).

To summarize, Van Gennep and Turner's main contribution is that of perceiving the host society's ontological security not as a static category, but rather as an ongoing process in which

both locals and strangers are equally involved. The overcoming of their ontological insecurity is materialized through the performance of rites that enable the shift from strangers' socio-symbolic liminality to locals' understanding of existential liminality.

2.3.3 *Liminality and Ontological Security in Migrant Life Stories*

By applying the theory of liminality to migration studies (Gazit, 2019), we looked at storytelling on migration as one of the mechanisms that facilitate the understanding of liminality. Consequently, we can see storytelling events as channels allowing for the conceptualization of the migratory encounter, beyond the limitations of narrative identity (see 1.1) and beyond the discriminatory patterns of hegemonic narratives (see 1.2).

In this last section, I intend to examine migrant stories as an expression that "brings the lacunae of hegemonic narratives into focus" (Berghahn, 2016, p. 87).

In the previous section, I identified storytelling events as one of those collective rites of passage that cause transformative and emancipatory effects in the host society. As a result, life stories of migration become incubators through which members of the host society can reconstitute their lost sense of ontological security and reintegrate the migrant.

First, storytelling events and the life stories told in such platforms crystallize the symbolic stage in which the listeners' conceptualization of belonging and otherness, articulated by mass media and humanitarian agents, become a mere dialectic step towards a more complex understanding of ontological security. This is described as moving from a preliminary phase of separation rites into a more ephemeral, intermediary liminal phase (Gazit, 2019).

Life stories of migrants are of course extremely varied. Although storytelling has the inherent risk of reproducing the same generalizations of hegemonic narratives (see 1.2), it nevertheless can diversify the voices in the public sphere, hopefully impacting future tendencies of media and humanitarian intervention (Poletti, 2011). For example, scholars Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra (2009) argue that liminality can also include political and cultural change.

Several studies testify of the growing interest in the specific role of the audience in producing, embodying and responding to a story. Among those studies, Black (2011) has investigated storytelling as a tool for democratic deliberation. She argues that through the encounter of narrator and listener, the tensions between the 'Self' and the 'Other' can be negotiated, and dialogic moments can surge.

Sium & Ritskes further develop her argument by suggesting that indigenous storytelling can, through the listeners' engagement, foster the urgency of the decolonization of society (2013). While recognizing the limitations of such storytelling practices, mainly related to who tells the story and

how, they conclude that the audience may be encouraged in pursuing decolonizing social practices (id., 2013). Stories need to explicitly state the causal link between contemporary migration and the historical exploitation of colonial resources and systematic oppression driven by Western powers. Base on such studies, stories of migration can help solve "the disarticulation between individual narratives and social or political narratives" that are often hidden (Poletti, 2011, 74).

Since every storytelling event is a social practice, teller and listeners similarly go beyond the expectations of their personal and social identity (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940). In particular, stories elucidate the host community's understanding of itself (Georges, 1969; Gazit, 2019), and of the migratory experience as the result of critical interpretation. That is what Brah argues by asking that 'the question is not simply about who [migrant] travels, but when, how, and under what circumstances?' (Brah, 1996, p. 182): to complexify, indeed, and to add extra layers of meanings behind migrants' life arcs.

In approaching ontological security in migration through the lens of Van Gennep, the following insights emerge: first, that ontological security is the result of a process taking place among different actors. Second, the transitory state of liminality is symmetric, in other words, it exists in both the local and the migrant.

Finally, the telling of stories is perceived to be bound up with the forming of new communities. The experience of migration is an opportunity (both for migrants and hosts) for self-redefinition and alterity, to be understood as a possibility to show what can be negotiated and appropriated from the overcoming of ontological security (Poletti, 2011).

3. METHODOLOGY

In the following section, I will analyze the methodology chosen for this study. First, the research question will be reminded, alongside the research aim and the expectations that developed throughout the whole process. Second, I will briefly describe the impact on COVID-19 by comparing the original methodological choices of the thesis proposal submitted on February 4th to the final adoption of semi-structured interviews. In this regard, the following sub-section presents, first, a justification for choosing qualitative methods in general, and, second, it is followed by a detailed overview of why and how semi-structured interviews have been conducted. Data collection and sampling are also described. At this point, the operationalization will give an additional understanding of the connections between theoretical concepts and the implementation of the interview guide. Next, the data analysis carried out through Atlas.ti will be detailed. Finally, this section will end by disclosing the validity, reliability, and limitations of the chosen approach.

3.1 Research Question, Aim and Expectations

This master thesis revolves around the exploration of the effects of life stories on migration on the listeners of storytelling events. Based on the explained theories, namely 'narrative identity', 'hegemonic narratives' and 'liminality', in this section I will present the research question and some expectations for the study.

First, before further exploring the personal experiences of participants, the research question that this master thesis poses, reads as follows: how do storytelling events about migration influence the listeners' understanding of migration in general? And, more specifically, how does storytelling mediate between personal thoughts and hegemonic narratives on migration?

Here, I intend to illustrate a theoretical and methodological approach that, through the exploration of the data, will explain how storytelling provides tools for a better understanding of migratory encounters.

In fact, through such a complex approach I aim to analyze the patterns of relationship between the migrant-storyteller and the audience as representative of the host society. In order to unravel storytelling as a complex act for audiences of storytelling platforms, I also aim to explore the experience of listening to stories and identify some of its features.

The next sections will detail the methods selected as relevant to answer the research question, by an overall comparison of the original choices with the changes that the outbreak of COVID-19 required. Then, I will explain data collection, operationalization and coding procedure, and finally, tackle the limitations of the research.

3.2 The Impact of Covid-19

The spread of COVID-19 and the uncertainties that it carried worldwide had undoubtedly caused great repercussions on the development of this thesis, especially on the methodology. Indeed, I initially intended to conduct this research on two storytelling platforms in the Netherlands that are specialized in storytelling on migration: Mezrab and Belvédère, located in Amsterdam and Rotterdam respectively. As argued by Bryman (2012, p. 66), case studies, when selected upon criteria of relevance and representativeness, can give interesting insights on settings, individuals, and processes. In the present case, this selection answered to geographical as well as thematic reasons, since the content of the stories performed in both spaces is coherent with the research design, and at the same time both spaces are located in proximity to the researcher.

Iranian storyteller Sahand Sahebdivani, the founder of Mezrab, describes the venue as a space open to everyone who has a story to tell[3]. Located in the Eastern Docks in Amsterdam, stories are performed every night, in English. In particular, with the title of "My True Story", stories revolving around first-hand accounts of migrants are monthly told on the stage and are quite successful.

Bélvèdere is a less international, more neighborhood-based platform in Katendrecht, Rotterdam. In an area of the city with a rich past and present of migration flows, the Verhalenhuis (House of Stories, in Dutch) acts as a mediator of the memory of immigrants, telling generational, family, or personal stories, narrated in Dutch and often accompanied by a dish cooked by the storyteller or by a member of the storyteller's family. Migration stories are Belvédère's exclusive and rich framework of analysis to understand how Katendrecht has evolved and how people want the neighborhood to keep being.

Upon the suggestion of one of the Belvédère members during one of the pre-interviews, my intention was also to write parts of the dissertation in loco, to be filled with the place's identity and sensation (Schofield, 2015). Ethnographic methods were meant to be employed alongside interviews, but the irruption of COVID-19 practically made that mixed-method impossible to be realized. In particular, because of the implementation of social distancing measures, cultural venues closed in the Netherlands in March 12th, and consequently, the events organized in both Mezrab and Belvédère were canceled and postponed indefinitely.

Therefore, the ethnographic research had to be abandoned, and the scope of the research became geographically open, with participants also living outside of the Netherlands. Because of

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[3] See https://mezrab.nl/about-us/history/.

the reformulation of a research question that could more effectively respond to the current circumstances, the research design was reduced to interviews.

3.3 New Methodology: Interviews

In alignment with the nature of the new research question, my methodology follows the interpretative tradition as it emphasizes the value of participants' interpretation and seeks to understand their subjective experiences in listening to migration stories (Bryman, 2012).

Initially, as reported in the thesis proposal, I had opted for a qualitative multi-method approach, combining participant observation with semi-structured interviews. In fact, such a qualitative framework represents a half point between creative interpretation and analytical rigor, allowing for an explorative understanding of the phenomenon at stake.

In addition to those interviews, participant observation was considered to meaningfully capture the social reality of the storytelling events and, through an attitude of observer-as-participant (Ambrosino, 2011), I would have captured non-verbal and interactional relations among the audience, while being part of that audience. Indeed, as argued by Markee, my field notes could have complemented the interviews in making emic interpretation possible, in other words in facilitating the understanding of the internal reality of the participants (2012).

However, for the circumstances that I explained, I decided to keep the qualitative method, but I was compelled to rely only on semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for the following reasons. First, thanks to the flexibility of this approach, the questions could be tailored to each interviewee and be adapted to the nature of the interactions between the respondent and me (Delahunt & Maguire, 2017). Secondly, those open conversations are considered to evoke more easily surprising insights. Thirdly, as advocated by Byrne, using semi-structured interviews allows greater exploration of the "views, interpretations of events, understandings, experiences and opinions" of the interviewee (Byrne, 2004, p.182).

My original intent was to set up the interviews after or before the storytelling event because in such a way the interviews would have captured the participants' insights in the "place of birth" of the story. However, for the impact of the pandemic, all interviews finally had to be conducted through Skype. Each of them lasted approximately 1 hour.

3.3.1 Sampling

The research question demanded an approach that was suitable to examine the topic of storytelling reception from different perspectives. To reflect this multidimensional approach, but also as another adjustment to the present situation (at a considerably late stage of the research process), the sampling procedures evolved differently.

With the awareness that any generalized reference to the listeners of storytelling on migration does not acknowledge the social complexity of the storytelling phenomenon, the main criteria the respondents needed to satisfy was the regular frequentation of the storytelling events and the ability to speak English. Indeed, through such a criterion sampling, I was willing to interview people that had listened to stories on migration multiple times, because I was interested in capturing the process of reception of those stories over the time. Moreover, I considered that they would have a deeper knowledge of what usually happens during storytelling events on migration.

I had contacted Mezrab and Bélvèdere to get some respondents by relaying information via the newsletter, and for that purpose, I prepared a short introduction of myself and the research project. However, since I received few responses from that channel, I expanded the sampling procedures in the following way: from exclusively relying on participants of those two platforms, I rather decided to expand the framework to people that listened to migration stories in general.

Therefore, I chose to interview a group of participants of "performative storytelling" platforms (5 respondents) and another group of participants of more "humanitarian-oriented" storytelling platforms (5 respondents). The first group includes participants of storytelling platforms in which migrant storytellers creatively reuse their own life story through forms like poetry or performance; whether the second group is represented by participants of storytelling platforms with a more evident mission of social justice. In those two cases, life stories revolving around migration are performed.

The background of the respondents is diverse: as I mentioned earlier, having no geographical framework allowed me to find respondents in different areas. Indeed, although the majority still lives and listens to storytelling on migration in the Netherlands (6 respondents), the rest of the interviewees lives and operates in different contexts such as Australia, Greece, and Germany. The age range lies between 20 and 50 years old approximately. An overview of the respondents is provided in Appendix B.

3.3.2   Data Collection

The interviews were held between March 27th and April 10th, 2020. After initial contact through email, a small group of interviews agreements was reached. In this first phase, as explained in the previous section, I was helped by Mezrab and Belvédère in getting voluntary response sampling: 4 respondents contacted me directly after they saw the description of the research in the newsletters of the two venues. Despite allowing me to reach respondents with a strong interest in the research, this type of sampling presented some difficulties in obtaining a sufficient number of respondents.

To overcome the lack of participants, the second phase consisted of snowball sampling through which the first interviewees helped find other respondents (Bryman, 2012). That aspect can be seen at the end of several interview transcripts (see Annex A) when interviewees often remembered of some friend or acquaintance potentially interesting for the sake of the research.

Finally, thanks to the collaboration of this initial group, a diverse selection of ten people could be interviewed. The interviews followed this structure: first, the research project and process were explained, during which the interviewees were asked to sign an informed consent form for permission to audiotape the interview, and to discuss with them whether and how they will be identified in the study; then the interview started. Therefore, to ensure the privacy of the interviewees when some of them stated it in the consent form, fictitious names are used throughout the thesis. When clarification was needed, suitable follow-up questions were posed. Afterward, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim.

3.4 Operationalization

Since the research question is focusing on how participants of storytelling events react to life stories on migration, the semi-structured interview guide consisted of several questions that provided clear and interesting information about the effects of listening to that type of storytelling.

The interview guide was also affected by changes during the research process. The overall structure, made up of three different sections, is taken from "The Sociology of storytelling" (Polletta et al., 2011) and reflects the tripartition of the theoretical framework between 'narrative construction of identity', 'hegemonic narratives', and 'liminality'.

This structure has been organized as follows: at the beginning, a series of questions on the perceived effects of storytelling for the respondent itself and the collectivity, under the scope of narrative identity theory outlined in chapter 2.1. Second, I focused on what I call the "corrective element"- namely on how participants evaluate the authoritative use of stories on migrants in mass media and NGOs' communication strategies. This group of questions refers to the concept of hegemonic narratives as explained in chapter 2.2. Finally, the third section on the "productive element" presents questions that are related to storytelling as a critical and liberating form, as it was discussed in chapter 2.3., and specifically in 2.3.3. In this last part of the interview guide, I asked the participants about the potential of storytelling as a tool for counternarratives, such as previously described by Berghahn (2016) and Sium and Ritskes (2013) among others. This aspect will be investigated in the dimensions of collectiveness and potential social action.

The operationalization guided the data collection by translating the study's theoretical core concepts into the interview guide (Appendix A) and informed the thematic analysis of the data (see coding manual in Appendix C).

3.5 Data Analysis

Since many themes of the analysis had already emerged during the study of the existing literature, thematic analysis was adopted. On one side, this type of analysis assisted me not only in categorizing themes and in selecting the most relevant core, but also in revealing implicit, latent themes within the respondents' answers (Bryman, 2012). I observed not only words, actions, and settings, but by employing Mason's methodology (Mason, 2017), I also tried to comprise an interpretation of the implicit values and ideas that participants attribute great meaning to. In other words, while reflecting the reality of the participants, the thematic analysis also allowed me to unravel that reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). On the other side, I tried to avoid the disadvantages of this type of analysis by strictly examining the data in a flexible, yet coherent body. To facilitate that, and to identify the relevant codes, I used the software Atlas.ti.

The analysis of the datasets was mainly based on two coding processes. First, the transcriptions from the interviews were revised through "open coding" (Benaquisto, 2008, p.86) in order to get familiarized with the texts. While reading the raw data set several times, important passages were marked and termed with a specific code (Bryman, 2016). Although this process was relatively open, the concept of narrative identity and the liminality theory from chapter 2 already informed relevant codes such as 'trauma stories', 'implications on the self', and 'identity-seeking', contributing to contextualize them directly in relation to the literature. In a subsequent 'axial coding' phase, codes that fit together semantically were connected. From those groups, to avoid redundancy and facilitate a systematic analysis, common themes were drawn. Finally, I identified interconnections of the codes with the research question and literature (id., 2016). From that, I created different overarching themes, which form the main pillars for the presentation of the results and can be seen in Appendix C.

3.6 Reliability and Validity

In order to increase the reliability and validity of this thesis, the selected codes were constantly re-evaluated to make sure they reflected the opinions of the interviewees through the "validity-as-reflexive-accounting" (Altheide & Johnson, 2011). Every code was accompanied by a quote that supported the reason why the code was selected as representative of a recurrent pattern.

As codes were extracted, I systematically verified their accuracy with constant comparison. Much as Braun and Clarke (2006), I constantly moved back and forth within the collected data

through an ongoing critical reflection of methods aiming to ensure strong findings. In that regard, the writing process started simultaneously to the analysis, identifying, and jotting down possible patterns.

The data analysis and subsequent interpretations were carefully though to demonstrate clarity in terms of how the process was tackled. For example, the transcriptions of the interviews are strictly following the original conversation, and include linguistic features such as hesitations and rectifications, as well as the connection failures. Such a rigor aimed to ensure that the analysis is accurate and valid, and the findings are supported thoughtfully.

Having generated the codes and having organized them in themes, I started re-reading the entire data set to make sure that the thematic maps were accurately representing the data, in a coherent and organic body, to minimize distortions that might creep into it.

3.7 Limitations

Concerning the limitations of the methodological approach, it needs to be acknowledged that the methodology has been deeply affected by the conditions of the pandemic.

In fact, the main limitation of the research design is related to the frequent changes it had to overcome, which were independent of the researcher as well as from the participants.

Skype interviews, additionally, do not allow for effective communication, especially when they represent the first contact with a respondent. Therefore, to be set at ease and to obtain genuine answers, it was important to dedicate some time to a short presentation with each respondent and a conversation in friendly tones. Another issue concerned the impossibility of notetaking and repeated connection failures.

Therefore, since the integrity of the research process took place under these exceptional circumstances, the outcomes of this research are to a certain extent influenced by them. For example, this small-scale qualitative research has no selected geographical framework, which would have given more consistent results. Not having looked for a specific kind of listeners, it would be interesting to further research on how some specific factors such as age or education influence the reception of migration life stories.

Moreover, although the snowball sampling helped in achieving the required number of participants, I am aware of its bias, as people tend to refer to those whom they know and have similar features (Cohen & Arieli, 2011). The network of the respondents gathered through snowball sampling may indeed have similar views and experiences in relation to storytelling events on migration.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Discussing storytelling in practice

This chapter presents the findings of the empirical research on the meanings, implications, and effects of listening to life stories on migration.

The aim of the semi-structured, in-depth interviews with participants of storytelling platforms was to analyze the implications of migration stories in the mediation between personal and hegemonic narratives. In other words, the objective was to find out more about the reception of migrant life stories in light of the listeners' process of narrative identity construction, both as individuals and as members of the society that receives the migration flows.

The interviews have been interpreted in reference to the theoretical framework presented in chapter 2, in order to answer the following research question: how do storytelling events about migration influence the listeners' understanding of migration in general? In particular, how does storytelling mediate between personal thoughts and hegemonic narratives on migration? Therefore, the analysis aims to illuminate the multilayered character of storytelling and the gradual process of reception by the listeners.

The organization of the thematic analysis echoes the stages of Van Gennep's theory on the rites of passage: a pre-liminal stage, before the listening of the story (see section 4.1), a liminal stage, during the life story performance (see 4.2 and 4.3), and finally, a post-liminal stage, happening after the storytelling event has come to an end (see 4.4). A visual representation if this structure is provided below (see fig. 1).
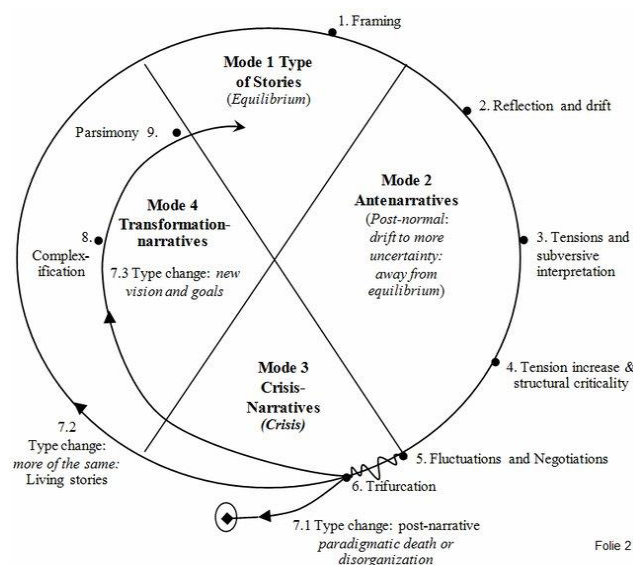
Figure 1: the thematic structure of the data analysis. Inspired by "Narratives, paradigms and change–the issue of relevance" (Fink & Yolles, 2012).

From that, the data analysis evolved into four sections: first, the domain of the coherence of the stories is investigated. Applying Ricoeur's theory presented in 2.1.1, I looked at how participants conceive and construct a sense of continuity in their lives in the pre-liminal stage, before taking part in storytelling events. Within that scope, respondents were asked which position do life stories on migration occupy in that research of self-continuity. Unanimously, stories were associated with the feeling of encountering a painful, or even traumatic space-time.

Secondly, the analytical focus shifts to a collective level, by examining how participants perceive the representation of migration stories in mass medias and NGOs. This section still belongs to the pre-liminal stage, as it represents the cultural stereotypes that are inherently present before the listeners are even engaged in the storytelling event.

In this regard, a common answer was the idea of 'being migrant' as a set of static, absolute characteristics that range from representing a 'threat' to becoming a 'pure victim' of unfortunate circumstances. This subsection distinguishes three dimensions: oversimplification, estrangement, and entertainment: three features that the respondents described as recurrent patterns of how institutions portray migration stories.

Thirdly, the section titled 'Crisis of narrative' addresses how life stories affect the participants' personal and collective sense of stability and investigates through which means participants try to rehabilitate it. This section delves into storytelling events as embedded in the liminal stage of disorientation and insecurities.

The final section of this chapter covers the evolution of the listeners' reaction in the post-liminal scenario, by discussing the potentials and limitations of life stories in questioning narrative instability and ontological insecurity. Here, results provide interesting insights on the participants' process of meaning-making. Those insights include the perceived role of storytelling in society and the means through which it can challenge the dynamics of hegemonic narratives.

4.1 The Reception of Migration Stories as Narrative Practice

4.1.1. Chasing a Coherent Direction

This section of the analysis aims to give some insights on how storytelling is perceived by the participants. First, the analysis suggests that they consider migration life stories as a narrative practice. Such association makes that the stories are seen as comparable or relatable to their own narrative identity.

The interviewees tended to think of their life as a coherent ensemble and pointed out that they naturally try to forget or remove those elements that do not "make sense" in it, as Anja said.

In this regard, the same respondent emphasized her vision as follows: "But everybody actually has his or her story and tries to make sense out of it through the others". By expressing the importance of a network of interactions, the respondent highlighted the interactional and intersubjective nature of narrative identity.

Participants also explicitly recognized the power of oral transmission of stories: when the person physically stands in front of the listeners, the probability that the story will affect them is perceived as much higher. "We all appreciate hearing other people's stories", E. D. said when asked

about the reasons behind her decision of attending storytelling events: because ultimately, using her words, "these stories, these personal stories, they make people remind of their own stories".

Without exception, storytelling is perceived as the "most basic form of understanding" (E. D.) and indeed a very powerful form of communication, associated with coziness and intimacy. In this scenario, Norihito justifies the recent popularity of events on oral storytelling.

Surprisingly, 5 out of 10 respondents linked storytelling to an ancient, non-Western way of transmitting knowledge and emotions, characterized by a horizontal relationship between the storyteller and audience. Respondents defined that transmission of knowledge as an inclusive and powerful tool for communities.

This aspect is conveyed, for example, by the words E.D, when she argues that

> Oral storytelling is the most ancient in its existence, used by indigenous people to protect heritage from colonization...and for that reason, ultimately nothing can be as impactful as hearing the story from someone that has lived certain experiences and have a certain perspective (E.D.).

Participants looked at storytelling as a direct medium involving identity-seeking and an intricate set of implications on the self, such as empathy, identification or reject. They consider stories as raw material with which to reflect on their own identity. As a demonstration of that, the metaphorical association of the life course to an unfolding story was recurrent. Norihito gives such an image to this process: "As if I am doing my personal storytelling for my life, as reorganizing the fragments".

These words respond to how Ricoeur (1991) and Ezzy (1998) see narrative identity. They do so by confirming the subjective sense of self-continuity that symbolically integrates the events of lived experience in the plot of the life story. Indeed, the interviewees imagine or identify a specific life course, and as they hear other people's stories, they try to select the accounts that are the most compatible with their own.

4.1.2 *Avoiding Pain and Discontinuity*

Participants, as mentioned before, admitted that all the stories they hear have the potential to be integrated into their own narrative identity. Nonetheless, they also specified that they tend to avoid stories that are not easily understandable because of their unusual content. This is because, to paraphrase Norihito's words, for a natural mechanism we all want to avoid pain.

There is a paradox here that it is interesting to untangle: it concerns the relation between narrative identity and migratory stories as sources of narrative disruption for the listeners.

Firsthand migration stories belong to the category of traumatic accounts that participants consider as very hard to listen to, which often forces them to build a wall of emotional distance. For example, Paula referred to an episode in which her boyfriend and her were listening to the same migration story. At that time, she realized that, although she is quite easily able to forget the heaviness of the migrant life story, her boyfriend was deeply affected by it. What resulted from that experience was a sense of insecurity that he expressed through feeling of guilt, hopelessness, and emotional burden, but those feelings can be rather generalized to the rest of the respondents. In fact, common adjectives used were "heavy", "emotional", and "overwhelming". "Because you do not want people to feel so guilty, so...you know what I mean. So miserable, so sad", says Mustafa.

Although the capacity of not being affected by the stories is somehow felt as subjective, the participants mostly agreed that the mechanism of avoiding pain is inherent to them: Sarah said that "when you hear them talking about it, it's very heavy- you're like: you cannot know what it means, really. And you don't know where to put the distance". Sahdi highlighted that the painful effects of migration stories not only break his internal security, but also add a sense of guilt which further reinforces the urge to reject, even if temporarily, those stories. With the same sentiment of guilt, Paula, in recalling her decision to live in Greece, said that she adores the place, "while for them [the migrants] is a nightmare".

The sentiment of guilt presents two aspects: first, it derives from the impossibility to fully understand the narrated trauma of migration, as every story depends on conditions that are unique, and that therefore cannot be easily imagined with an external look.

Second, respondents connected this form of guilt to the unwillingness to actively integrate the migration story into their own story. In some respondents, this unwillingness is consciously activated, while others admit it may remain unconscious. Mustafa described the trauma as a limit, saying that if the storyteller has not overcome the trauma, the audience cannot understand the message of the story, and additionally it is refrained from delving into such a fragile condition.

To summarize, we can argue that narrative identity and the sense of one's own story is threatened by stories of pain and trauma. Joe said he sometimes deliberately forget the stories to preserve himself, while Paula started to write them down in order to create some distance to them, in a sort of mediated memory.

These findings ultimately reinforce the concept of 'narrative identity' formulated in the theoretical framework (see 2.1), and, confirm that, as the most evident representation of narrative identity, storytelling does hardly accept disruptions, especially if coming from people that we have difficulties in relating to. The theory of narrative identity is therefore appropriate to understand how

the listeners of storytelling events on migration examine the alterity, namely in the dimensions of trauma and incoherency, represented by migrants' life stories.

More precisely, storytelling affects the participants through two, apparently contrasting, processes: first, in their pre-liminal stage, in their process of narrative identity. Second, in the liminal stage, when, by listening to migration stories, the narrative coherence gets challenged. These dimensions reinforce the complexity of life stories: they seem to become sources of stability and catalysts for instability, at the same time.

In the next section, the participants' perceptions of how a mass media and humanitarian agencies narrate migration stories will be analyzed.

4.2 Hearing Counter-narratives

The structures and public usage of life stories on migration

In the following section, I will create an overview of the most critical issues concerning the public representation of migration stories from the answers provided by my respondents. From the theory presented in 2.2, we argued that humanitarian and mass media stories fail in giving a fair and adequate representation of the migratory phenomena. Now, I will analyze how this representation is perceived, and judged, by the interviewees.

In the examined interviews, the totality of the respondents agrees that migrants are typically described either as criminals or as victims. Three discursive strategies are distinguished by the respondents: oversimplification, seeking for entertainment and estrangement, that I will here call the concept of alterity or the 'Other'. Participants recognized that mass media and NGOs apply those strategies to reinforce the idea of migrant stories as unfamiliar and strange accounts, that are and should be kept as external to the reality of Western societies.

4.2.1 Countering Oversimplification

Oversimplification refers to the tendency of reducing migrant stories told in media to a set of stereotypical characteristics providing generalizing views.

A significant number of respondents expressed their concern with how the media in their country refer to migrant communities. As Sohbi explained, humanitarian associations seem to say that "those are good people, so let's give them a chance", while mass media bring the oversimplification in the opposite sense, through a generalized feeling of rejection of the migrant. According to the last approach, and contextualizing it to the cultural context of the Netherlands, Hevien argues that "they always tell one side of the story and this one side of the story that helps the idea of Dutch people being the victims".

Based on the two opposite narratives that such quotes give voice to, I will deconstruct the theme of oversimplification within two parallel sub-sections: first, the association of the migrant as a form of threat for the receiving country, and second, the humanitarian stereotypes, that is how migration stories are been appropriated by NGOs. I will do so by proceeding back and forth between empirical results and the theoretical concepts that have been previously outlined.

The first form of oversimplification revolves around the question of geography. 8 respondents criticized how narratives about migration are often Syrian-centric. Provocatively, Sohbi claims that one example of the consequences of such simplification is that: "We, Syrians, are like you. Look at us! We sing and we dance!" He thinks that the simplification at the core of this assumption is that Syrians cannot be simply assimilated to the host country because of basic common needs, but that multiple layers of cultural and societal nuances should be added to that.

Respondents found a clear division between 'us' and 'them' in media narratives, an oversimplification they criticized with statements like: "migration has to do with us", "I feel anger", "that's only one side of the story". Interestingly, two respondents connected this binary opposition to the historical development of the capitalistic system, placing the use of such stories as a category that follows Western structures of oppression such as colonization and its strong legacy in contemporary society. According to Sohbi and Paula, the rejection of the racialized Other, despite being inherent to human nature, has undoubtedly been systematized and reinforced by the capitalist system.

Not only is this division applied in broadcasting news stories, but it finds additional applications in the strategy of communication of several humanitarian agencies. Referring to social media publication in NGOs pages, Paula acknowledges that

> I, I put up some kind of resistance against these posts, because they are very like they are suffering, and it's our fault. Not directly, but kind of. I don't need those things because they make me feel so bad, you know (Paula).

According to her, NGO publications make increasingly use of dramatic life stories to provoke in the audience a form of indirect suffering that does not help the understanding of the migration phenomenon.

Respondents generally identified pathos, sadness, and sense of guilt as recurrent features in media and humanitarian narratives. This strongly resonates with the "humanitarian imagination" explained in 2.2.2. Chouliaraki (2013) uses this concept to illustrate the communication strategy employed by NGOs and other humanitarian organizations. Here, from the participants' insights, we can claim that the sentiment of guilt inhabits the core of the humanitarian imagination. Not only

humanitarian imagination oversimplifies the migratory phenomenon, but it may also perpetuate a discriminatory categorization of migrants and refugees, that indeed become agency-less victims seeking for Western experts' help.

The limits of humanitarian imagination are exemplified by interviewee Norihito's comment: "I got it! You are living such a life, and therefore we should do that, that and that": although he recognizes being empathetic in respect at those stories, he simultaneously develops a strong sentiment of separation, almost of denial, for the victimized paradigm that the stories seem to be reproducing. In this way, the analysis of the results confirms the tensions within the dominant representation of the refugee as an object of humanitarian intervention, as they foster counterproductive feelings of guilt and helplessness (Ottonelli, 2017; Sigona, 2014).

4.2.2   Countering Entertainment

When led to reflect upon other strategies of media narratives, participants evoked the dimension of entertainment, represented by what Anja describes as "the strategies of selling better". Hevien is reticent on such usage because "they're making their...stories, painful sometimes, to entertain others": for this reason, an entertaining approach can create criticisms first within the community of migrants.

Whereas one respondent explained that "Obviously you want to hear something different, something new", another argued that some stories are "too appealing to the Europeans, like dismissing their own identity, basically.". The above quotes, although apparently contradictory, evoke the idea that migration stories must fulfill some criteria to become a 'good story'.

To clarify how a migration story can be categorizes as 'good', participants discussed the recurrent technique of portraying and promoting 'stars' of migration. Both in mass media and NGOs, migration stories occupy a position of subordination towards a dominant discourse that often privileges a one-dimensional representation, that of the 'success story'. For instance, Joe emphasizes how public migration stories focus on deficit as opposed to highlighting the humanities, skills, and contributions that migrant communities bring to the receiving countries. He describes this status quo as the deficit mentality versus the potential asset mentality. Opposite to that, "every now and then there's maybe one big news stories about the One": a migrant that reached success or that did an extraordinary action that deserved some form of public recognition.

The report of the GFMD roundtable, quoted in 1.2, states that "showcasing migrants' success stories within their host communities" (GFMD, 2009, p. 6) can shed better light on effective social integration. To nuance those assumptions, Norihito connected the building-up of migrant heroes as "a marketing thing" that is meant to reinforce the values of the host society. Success

stories are presented as a model that migrants should follow to accelerate their well-being in the host country. To that approach, Sarah opposed real forms of activism arisen from an alternative way of portraying migration stories, because she believes that success stories should not be the only spectrum through which to push for social integration.

In investigating how mass media use or misuse human emotions, I direct myself back to Anderson (see 1.2.1), whose conceptualization of the "migration fairy story" (2013) supports the data analysis on a binary level. First, respondents associated the 'success stories' to a tool that idealizes and protects the host country. This is because success stories represent the power of the host country in neutralizing the risk represented by the migrant. Sohbi says that by promoting the paradigm of a westernized successful life, mass media try to neutralize the differences that migrants have vis-à-vis the host society, and that are indeed the source of the feeling of threat. Here, Anderson becomes relevant to explain the reasons behind the recurrent choice of broadcasting migration stories that do conform to a 'fairytale' crowned by success.

Some respondents, however, highlighted that some form of entertainment, when used correctly, is necessary for a story to reach a wide audience. The dimension of entertainment for migration stories, if beyond the scope of a stereotypical 'good story', may indeed serve the purpose of blocking the story from becoming a rigid indoctrination of ideologies. Participants still identify as important that migration stories reach different social groups, and they believe entertainment can greatly contribute to that. What remains decisive is that different types of migration stories are portrayed, as this would highlight how differently the reality of migrants can be experienced in the host society.

4.2.3 Countering and Reproducing the 'Other'

The third recurrent pattern identified by the respondents is what I call the 'Other': a form of estrangement, or alterity. Respondents perceive it as a feeling that accentuates the differences between migrant's and host society's cultures. More importantly, not only this pattern is used by mass media and humanitarian narratives, but participants recognize it in some migration stories they listened to during storytelling events. This double perspective explains the title of the present section- *Countering and Reproducing the 'Other'*- as storytelling events on migration may sometimes unconsciously reproduce the binary opposition 'us' against 'them'.

Respondents argue that through the representation of the 'Other', migration is often labeled as the exact opposite of what is considered normality. For example, in the case of migration stories, 5 interviewees recalled how storytellers, if unable to express their story in a language that the audience clearly understands, contradictorily end up reinforcing an impression of alterity. On one

level, language was evoked as an additional barrier to the reception and understanding of the story; on another level, language difficulties reinforce the idea of the migrant as an 'Other' that refuses to be integrated in the host society.

Confirming Ottonelli's argument (see 1.2.1) that audiences are attracted to the exotism of migrants' accounts, more than to their content (2017), the collected data prove that interviewees frequently came in contact with stories that were portraying the home countries of the migrants in a very orientalist manner, despite the life in those places being not particularly different from what is common in the West. This is something that Sohbi recalls as comparable to "dismissing their own identity". Interestingly, he raises the point concerning the responsibility of the storyteller in perpetuating those stereotypes.

Therefore, the respondents perceive storytelling as a contradictory medium that has different messages adapted to the type of audience. For example, some respondents believe that only privileged social groups would have the tools to appreciate storytelling events that have the idea of the migrant 'Other' as their core. "I think the risk with big institutions [using storytelling on migration], is that they reach just specific ranges of the population", says Hevien about how art can use narratives on migration.

In relation to the importance of the concept of 'Other', participants highlighted the difference between their own life experiences and the stories they heard. Because of such a difference, some respondents tended towards an emotional reaction that recognizes their privileged conditions. For instance, Paula compared her choice of living in Greece as an expat, opposite to that of living in Greece as a migrant: "I love living here, while for them it's a nightmare".

The results presented throughout this section confirm the theoretical premise that storytelling is simultaneously a personal and a collective practice: memories are created, transformed, and institutionalized through the narrativization of stories. Those stories can be interpreted as perpetuating hegemonic narratives, in media and humanitarian channels. They both reinforce patterns of representation based on a system of exclusivity and on a strict canonization: a migration story needs to be profitable and entertaining for the audience, to the detriment of the content they address.

Since they are able to identify such structural patterns, it is logical to say that respondents share a critical sense on the public representation of migration stories. At the same time, respondents recognized that they, as a collective, have a lot in common, as is exemplified by the words of Sohbi saying that "the audience, ideologically speaking, is not diverse. The audience is basically the social group that already believes in everything": despite being ethnically diverse, they are politically akin.

Finally, participants all agree that storytelling can be controversial, as is it difficult to distinguish what is true and what belongs to the realm of entertainment. In this context, they see the migration stories heard in storytelling events as a balanced compromise between truthfulness and entertainment.

Combining the previous insights, the following question arises: how does the respondents, as an ideologically coherent group, cope with the incoherency caused by hearing migration stories? How does their reception relate to the hegemonic narratives that I just analyzed?

4.3 Crises of Narratives

In this section, I will discuss the effects of migration stories told during storytelling events on the respondents. In opposition to their thoughts on hegemonic narratives, respondents reflected upon the experience of listening to storytelling events. This specific data analysis aims to find an answer to the first research question, namely: how do storytelling events about migration influence the listeners' understanding of migration in general?

When explaining their experience of listening to storytelling events, interviewees talked of a narrative crisis, acting on two levels: first, on the personal level of their own narrative identity (see 4.1), and second, on the collective level of hegemonic narratives (4.2). They therefore consider storytelling as a tool to give complexity to the understanding of the phenomenon of migration, by disrupting the assumptions that, as individual and as members of a society, they have been constructing.

4.3.1   The "Familiar" in Crisis

At this point, I will retrieve from the data why and how such a process of disruption takes place. From the interviews, it seems clear that life stories had a strong impact on the respondents' own lives. The shock perceived at multiple levels (depending on the participant and on the story) is seen as related to the direct nature of the medium. Two representative fragments from the interviews demonstrate this:

> For them, it's often something they just read in the newspaper, or they see in...in a journal, but now it becomes real for them cause they see someone who experienced all this kind of stuff by themselves so...it's for them also overwhelming (Hevien).

To those words, Sahdi adds that whereas "in the media, you watch an icon and that's it- there is no interaction", in storytelling events the audience has the possibility to directly exchange with the storyteller, to ask further questions, to debate on a one-by-one dialogue.

Thanks to such interaction, storytelling events are foremost experienced as a form of reflexivity. The respondents all emphasized how the experience of listening to firsthand stories enables a more complex view on the relation between 'us' and 'them'.

Remarkably, 8 out of the 10 respondents relied on the same word to describe their feelings: "familiar". Whereas, as demonstrated in 4.2.3, irreconcilable differences prevent them from fully understanding the story, they recognize themselves within some details that relate to basic situations we can all refer to, such as the loss, the difficulties of living far from the family, the nostalgia for home. This is referred to by Anja when she says that "I think you always need to become personal to touch people, it has to get back to themselves, to their inside".

4.3.2   Between the "Other" and the "Familiar"

Now, we can distinguish two impressions the respondents agreed upon to situate the experience of listening to storytelling events on migration. The first is the connotation of "Other" (see 4.2.3), which emphasizes the differences between audience and teller. On the opposite side, there is the "Familiar" (see 4.3.1), indicating that the respondents recognize similarities between themselves and some details of the migrant's life arc.

The tension between 'Other' and 'Familiar' creates what the respondents described as disorientation and uncertainties on how to tackle the reception of migration stories. That feeling corresponds to what Giddens calls ontological insecurity (1984) and that has been discussed in in 2.3.1. In that theory section, I defined it as the difficulties of accepting and integrating the stranger, since the latter was seen as potentially destabilizing the internal equilibrium of single individuals, and their society at large.

However, the results nuance this assumption. Indeed, since we demonstrated that the respondents are ideologically open to accepting migrants, their drift to uncertainty cannot not related to the reject of the migrant. Rather, in this case the ontological insecurity seems to be connected to the impossibility of completely situating the story either in the realm of the 'Familiar'/us nor in that of the 'Other'/them. More precisely, the interviewees say they are perturbed by recognizing some similarities with a story that they initially perceived as very different from what they are used to live, in their daily life and their past experiences.

We can, therefore, state that the respondents share a strong feeling of in-betweenness. Such an in-betweenness locates storytelling events in the realm of the liminal stage of Van Gennep (1960), namely on the transitory moment that a group experiences when it abandons the pre-liminal condition. In our case, the listeners are brought to critically reconsider their previous assumptions on migration.

With regard to this liminal stage, I will finally explore the extent to which empirical results confirm the idea of storytelling events as collective performances of liminality. As Gazit (2019) demonstrated, the liminality of migratory experiences is also very much entwined with the disposition of the host community. We will now analyze how that is performed in storytelling events, and if listeners actively make use of the stories heard to defend or promote certain values (Gazit, 2019; Innes, 2016; Van Gennep, 1960).

4.4. New Stories

Potentials and limits of the after-story

I define the 'after-story' as the post-liminal phase in the experience of listening to storytelling on migration. The 'after-story' dimension comprises the ensemble of actions and effects enabled by the storytelling event after the story has ended. It is, to employ respondent Joe's words, the dimension of "where do I sit between all those stories, with the ultimate goal that as a society we have to come up with a shared story". To come back to the structure of this analysis chapter, here the focus is on the last stage of listeners' reaction the stories.

This section will help find an answer to the second research question of how storytelling finally mediates between personal thoughts and hegemonic narratives on migration.

When asked about the potential of the 'after-story', respondents gave different answers. One group of respondents believes in its potential, others have rather doubts about how storytelling can promote a real change in how migration is usually portrayed. However, they all agree that storytelling brings complexity and critical thoughts to simplistic or polarized views. For example, interviewee Paula emphasized that "I asked myself several times: what is the reason behind this [decision of migrating]?". By questioning the reason why migrants decide to leave behind their country and their past, her words give focus on two key effects coming from the stories she heard. First, the potential of storytelling for self-reflection, and second, how those thoughts affected her far beyond the performance of the story, resisting over time. Therefore, we can argue that the 'after-story' is perceived as a long-term space for reflexivity.

Trying to capture what happens in this post-liminal phase, in this last analytical section I will open up the idea of storytelling events as platforms in which teller and listener can overcome their respective insecurities, solving the crisis of being between the 'Other' and the 'Familiar'.

4.4.1 Liminality and Post-liminality

It is relevant to specify how all the interviewees agreed on the complexity of tackling life stories on migration. This uncertainty is linked to "people realizing that there's something more than these news-worthy stories, but also some...complexity, confusion in that world" (Anja).

Liminality affects all the actors involved in the life story, both the migrant and the listeners. For example, Sohbi argues that "it is also for the storytellers to start questioning things" by realizing that not only they are performing for the audience, but they are also, at the same time, being reflexive and questioning some aspects of their own stories.

Respondents experienced the complexity of storytelling on migration as allowing for a progressive contact between the storyteller's and the listener's sensibilities, once both groups realize to be living a comparable condition of uncertainty.

The oscillation between the 'Other' and the 'Familiar', previously explained, is what for Norihito represents the "beauty of storytelling". As discussed in 2.3.3, it is the result of making listeners use their own liminality to overcome the ontological insecurity activated by migration stories. Migration is seen as an experience that challenges social boundaries and binary categories, blurring the conventional distinctions between the 'Other' and the 'Familiar'.

Although they recognize how difficult this process of overcoming is, respondents acknowledged the possibility of creating awareness and new forms of discussion. By presenting the potential of storytelling for critical emancipation, the data analysis confirms Bhabha's argument (1994) of a constructive form of liminality that can foster social subversion and change (see 2.3.2).

Illustrating Turner's concept of liminality as an emancipatory tool (1967), Hevien argues that storytelling "draws people together on a micro level, and on a macro level". By that, she refers to the multiple layers of interpretation through which listeners can understand and negotiate the experience of listening to storytelling events. Indeed, the understanding of a common liminality may later result in a collective endeavor in which both sides of the migration story collaborate in overcoming their crises.

With these results, we can position storytelling events in a more open narrative discourse where the condition of liminality is constructively overcome.

4.4.2   *Storytelling as a Complex Collective Rite*

In the process of listening to stories, the respondents considered important to outline the collective nature of the storytelling events they take part in. The organization of storytelling platforms is perceived as an essential component to enable the powerful feelings that stories evoke. In what one respondent describes as the "live setting of participatory action", the perceived sense of collectiveness was very high (9 out of 10 respondents).

When asked to provide details on how this sense of collectiveness materializes during the events, participants strongly expressed that as a consequence of the power of bonding that is inherent to any form of storytelling. In the case of migration stories, the dimensions of pain and

trauma seem to reinforce the feeling of group belonging. We can see that participants recall a very strong and positive memories related to storytelling events. In particular, Sohbi remembers that, at the time when he was thinking about leaving the Netherlands, the relationships that he had built during those events were "definitely one of the reasons why I stayed".

In describing the storytelling events, respondents used terms that indicate that those places are open-minded, safe, and peaceful. Anja describes her feelings as following: "Here's the power, that this is a unique moment that we are all sharing: we are all paying attention to a personal story of somebody who takes the time and courage to tell it". For her, the feeling of group belonging got even more powerful now that the participation in such events has been prevented for the spreading of COVID-19. Furthermore, participants are commonly willing to branch those events into bigger projects that aim to change the way migration flows are socially stigmatized.

Indeed, they argued that the conversations and the stories that arise in the 'after story' as equally important as the migration story. Generally, several questions and debates emerge from the insights and issues that the life story inspired in the participants. The latter either approach the storyteller by saying that telling their own story, either with they approach other members of the audience. Those conversation lead to surprising directions that Mustafa describes as sometimes even more impressive and engaging than the life story itself.

We can therefore associate storytelling events as a collective rite of liminality, drawing back to Van Gennep's theory on the different stages that characterizes social rites (1960): participants evoke that, after listening to the story, they often do not feel the same, as if storytelling was indeed a moment of passage for their own narrative identity.

Those 'new stories' confirm storytelling as an experience in which all actors involved are first confronted to the same experience of liminality, but later collaborate in sharing and challenging their respective views on the topic of migration. As also argued by Black (2011) in 4.4.2, through those forms of dialogue participants reach the post-liminal stage where they can overcome disorientation and doubts by reincorporating the migration story within their narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1991).

However, although storytelling on migration is considered a powerful tool, respondents acknowledged that it presents some contradictions related to the type of people it attracts. Indeed, some participants believe that those storytelling events are often exclusive experiences and are addressed to an audience that is already ideologically accepting the topic of migration. In this way, the social effects of storytelling would be limited to the fact that migration stories will not get out of the usual circles and would not reach a wider part of the host society.

Sohbi goes further by arguing that those places aren't truly inclusive: "If you come, with your- let's say with your perspective that refugees should be allowed here and I do not question that...maybe you can question that, as well.". He remembers the episode in which a person asked a provocative question about a migrant story and was attacked by the audience without any form of constructive dialogue. The respondent describes this situation as symptomatic of the dangers of "fake inclusivity" in storytelling events.

Therefore, those platforms must not maintain the same polarized separations promoted by mass media and humanitarian migration stories. This risk exists because, as I said in 2.3.3, dynamics of power affect storytelling events not less than any other forms of social gathering (Radcliffe-Brown, 1940). Indeed, those dynamics can make storytelling events on migration as an experience restrained to a specific niche of the population.

To summarize, although the potential of storytelling events on migration was diminished because of the ideological homogeneity of the audience, participants agree that storytelling can become an important tool to bring complexity to the understanding of migration and foster a more critical thinking. Norihito uses the image of storytelling as incubator of "seeds of thought for the listeners to deeply think […] so it's an open structure with which they can discover what is it like really, rather than giving a straight understanding.".

Furthermore, a recurrent reflection linked storytelling to the possibility of rethinking European power structures in a post-colonial framework. Consequently, some participants questioned the hidden historical and political conditions that explain contemporary migration and refugee waves. By representing the "whole structure that we have co-created in the past centuries-decades even" (Paula), migration stories may offer the conditions to rethink migration as a consequence of western exploitation of resources throughout history. This aspect will be further developed in the discussion section.

This analysis finally adds a new dimension to the concept of liminality as defined in 2.3. Indeed, the data analysis contradicted the idea that the feeling of liminality experienced by the listeners represents a gradual process of incorporation and acceptance of the migrant's story. In fact, the audience is already sensitive and empathetic about the migratory experience.

Rather, liminality concerns the oscillation between the 'Familiar' and the 'Other. In other words, while listening to life stories on migration, some elements that are similar to the listeners' own narrative identity coexist with other elements that are radically different from it. Therefore, participants concluded that migration stories reflect a reality that is impossible to fully engage with, but that can still be used as a tool for critical thinking and new meaning-making.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Now that I have finished my analysis, I am able to look back on the past few months of research and reflect upon the conclusions I reached, alongside the decisions, changes and insights encountered along this path.

The purpose of this study was to understand the identity and social process associated to the experience of listening to life stories of migration, from the perspective of the participants in storytelling events. The research has been done based on the following question:

How do storytelling events about migration influence the listeners' understanding of migration in general? And, more specifically, how does storytelling mediate between personal thoughts and hegemonic narratives on migration?

In this final chapter, I will discuss how the different themes of the analysis have been used to answer the research question. Altogether, the results led me to identify the complex effects of storytelling events on migration upon the listeners, which will be addressed in the discussion (5.1). Next, the conclusion (5.2) will present an answer to the research question, reflecting on the limitations of this study, and identifying possible areas for future research.

5.1 Discussion

This master thesis revolved around the experience of listening to storytelling events around migration life stories. Whereas there is a clear identification of what the 'migrant experience' consists in, which originates in the host society a reaction of either rejection or welcoming, it is difficult to capture the phenomenon of migration in its existential and social dimensions. The various migration stories we are confronted to, constructed by mass media and NGOs, do seem to offer suitable knowledge and tools to decrypt the complexity of the current migration flows.

Instead, storytelling events on migration can seize those dimensions. Through the focus on the under researched perspective of the listeners, and not on the storyteller, I examined the different steps through which, during those events, participants develop an understanding on migration. The process consists in overcoming the initial difficulties and enabling them to react to painful and unusual accounts, constructively and critically.

Because of the chosen perspective, the present dissertation is without doubts an original approach to migration studies, as it emphasizes the power of life stories in adding some "seeds of thought" (Norihiro) on the complex societal patterns existing between host society and migrants.

The main contribution of this research is that it problematizes the feelings and challenges of of the two sides of the migratory encounter, listeners and migrant storytellers, through an approach that mixes sociology, philosophy of narrative identity, and anthropology.

The theoretical foundations for the research have been the following concepts: narrative identity (see 2.1), hegemonic narratives (see 2.2), and lastly the theory on liminality (see 2.3). By considering migration stories at the intersection of these three areas of studies, I was guided by the hypothesis that migration stories are perceived as disruptive on both an individual and social levels.

First, narrative identity theory by Ricoeur displayed human perception of identity as a narrative practice that, throughout our life course, we tend to protect from external sources of disruption (Ricoeur, 1984). In *Framing Storytelling: the Role of Stories in the Formation of Personal Identity*, I discussed how that theory inspired further research on the specificities of narrative identity in the scope painful stories.

The concept of narrative identity was proved as suitable since respondents perceive life stories of migration as an experience that they initially have some resistance against, as it communicates a form of trauma that collide with their experiences and understanding of a coherent life course (Lechner & Renault, 2018).

Secondly, from studies conducted on migrant stories within institutional settings such as mass media and NGOs, summarized in *The Politics of Storytelling: Hegemonic Narratives*, stories are understood as powerful tools to ensure the stability of a society or a country (Gramsci,, 2010[1971]). The research identified some 'hegemonic narratives' that, by oversimplifying, generalizing, and entertaining their public, produce a systematic distinction between 'us' and 'them' (Arcimaviciene & Baglama, 2018). Informed by a western centric worldview, they generate a process of separation under which the migrant is seen as either a victim to be taken in charge by humanitarian experts, either a threat to the status quo of the host society. The overall picture exotifies and trivializes the migratory experience.

Finally, the concept of liminality was used to offer an original conceptualization of migration stories. It compares the experience of listening to stories to a moment of passage that, from initially causing ontological insecurity, allows for new stories and new encounters to emerge. It represents a form of disorientation: participants have already lost their ontological security but have not yet begun incorporating the stories into their own narrative identity. As it will be explained in the next section, this intuition has later resulted as appropriate through the analysis of the results.

The results answering the research question were presented after a thorough qualitative method research consisting of semi-structured interviews. By adopting interviews as an open and flexible methodology, and by interviewing 10 frequent listeners of storytelling event, I managed to get insightful data that confirmed the richness of the topic. The data was rich, and perhaps needed a longer period to be analyzed in further detail.

As explained in the methods section (see 3.2), the analysis has been strongly affected by the instability of COVID-19. Nonetheless, even in such difficult conditions, conducting semi-structured interviews was an appropriate choice, as it allowed me to combine adaptability to the respondent with analytical rigor.

5.2 Conclusion

In this section, I will first answer the research questions, and finally, identify limitations and areas for further research.

From the results of the empirical research, and the comparison of those with the theoretical concepts previously described, I argue that storytelling events on migrant life stories complexify the listeners' understanding of migration, by questioning the assumptions they have been developing at an individual and societal levels. In this sense, results showed clear complexity in how participants referred to those stories, and also explored the sense of belonging that that form of storytelling arises.

It is through the shared reception of life stories, that listeners achieve what I call collective thoughts: they are able to mediate between their individual narrative identity and the 'hegemonic narratives' by recognizing that they are living, all together, an experience of liminality. In this way, the liminality of the migrant-storyteller gets in touch with the liminality of the listeners. The existential migration experience, through a collective narrative lens, is an experience that allows to rehabilitate one's narrative identity after having been through a disorientating stage.

Therefore, this main result underlines the importance of the anthropological concept of Van Gennep presented in *Liminality and Ontological Security in Migrant Life Stories* (2.3.3). In a multilayered narrative identity, a dialogical relationship between listeners and storyteller enables to transform the internal barriers experienced by the listeners into the need to address the commonalities of human experiences. However, the results nuanced the concept of liminality as applied to the context of storytelling events, as participants emphasized that those events interest people are already in favor of migrants in society. Therefore, storytelling can materialize in social changes only when and if those events will be open to a broader audience that represents the variety of views on the topic of migration.

By studying how the participants experience that those stories deviate from the normal, coherent narrative and cause ontological insecurity, I sought to understand how individual and hegemonic narratives are negotiated in the context of storytelling events on migration. In this respect, I believe that interesting results could have emerged from the comparative analysis of the interviews with an ethnographic approach to the same topic, as the original methodology claimed.

Additionally, the sampling and analysis procedures did not consider factors like age or education that could have an influence on the reaction to storytelling events. Those represent some limitations to the research.

On the basis of the findings related to this study, it can be concluded that storytelling is a crucial tool at a dynamic interplay between personal experience, collective narratives and liminality. Storytelling events, by creating the conditions for a shared experience of liminality, finally solve the mismatch of society and migrant's self.

Flowing from this gap, this existential experience of migration, mediated by a narrative practice, is intriguing and in need of a more in-depth examination in future research.

By reflecting a dynamic process of knowledge production, narratives can also open theoretically interesting possibilities. Among those possibilities, there is that of adopting storytelling as an intersubjective method that can reconsider and reinvent a country's heritage.

As suggested by some respondents, through a narrative approach to identity, migration stories can contribute to a more balanced understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of migration. This can be reached by connecting personal stories of migrants to the bigger picture of western exploitation of the areas from which current migration flows are exponentially increasing.

As part of the democratization of migrant memories within the context of host society's historical heritage, stories can unveil migration as a consequence of colonialism. Consequently, storytelling events can be embedded in a post-colonial approach by becoming a channel for critical thinking on how colonialism can help explaining contemporary migrations. This approach would train to a critical perspective that understands the migrant experience as a self-transformative experience for the host society's understanding of its own past.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE[4]

Below one can find the default interview guide used for the respondents. Before each interview, I tailored the guide to be adapted to the specific interviewee. This was especially necessary because interviewees have listened to migration stories in different contexts and locations. The interviews were always structured in a way that it went from the micro to the macro, namely from the individual to a social and collective perspective. Also, before I ended the interview, I always granted interviewees the opportunity to add something if they liked and to ask me questions.

Practitioner of storytelling: stories as central to the self and the collectivity

1. How did you feel when you first listened to storytelling on migration? What kind of people attend those storytelling events (and where)?

2. Do those stories relate to your personal experience and how?

3. What are the patterns of life stories on migrants that you mostly heard and remembered?

4. Why do you think people like listening to life stories on migration?

5. Do you think that migration trauma affects people's listening?

*back-up questions:

6. Is your identity formed through the interaction of people attending storytelling events?

7. What is the value of the oral part of storytelling according to you?

The corrective element: understanding the official discourse on storytelling of migration 1. Tell me what you think of the representation of migration in media and popular culture. Do you think diasporic communities are excluded from national heritage?

2. What is the place of humanitarian associations, of NGOs?

3. What do you think is the role of storytelling in this context where narratives around migration are getting a different public treatment?

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[4] For the structure of the interview guide see:
Polletta, F., Chen, P. C. B., Gardner, B. G., & Motes, A. (2011). The sociology of storytelling. Annual Review of Sociology, 37, 109-130.

The productive element: storytelling as a critical form that challenges the authorized discourse on migration

1. Do you perceive storytelling as an activist tool that can challenge how people see migrants? Why?

2. What are the effects that you experienced in listening to storytelling on migration?

3. Is it somehow a participatory practice? In other words, do you feel storytelling events create or reinforce the community around them, and that you actively participate in them?

4. How storytelling can give an understanding of the experience of migration and diaspora?

5. My last question was about: the point of entertainment. Cause the story of migration has a content and a form. What role do you give to the entertaining part of life stories on migration?

6. While storytelling perpetuates cultural heritage and helps individuals make sense of the world, it also fulfills a basic need for entertainment and escape. Do you think that the experience of listening to those stories will have the same meaning if they were part of an exhibition in a museum? Or educational tools?

7. What are your thoughts on creatively reusing life stories of migration? Do you agree or not, and why?

during the interview certain sub-questions (which depended on the answers of the interviewee) were posed whenever possible. All interviews took place through Skype between 27/03 and 10/04, and each lasted approximately one hour.

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT OVERVIEW

*Table 1. Participants' name, nationality, date of interview and experience as participants of storytelling platforms. * (n = 10).*

Name	Nationality	Date of interview	Experience as participants of storytelling platforms
Paula R.	Swiss-Austrian	06/04	Thessaloniki, Greece
Anja R.	Dutch	10/04	Verhalenhuis Belvédère, Rotterdam
E. D.	Australian	09/04	Sydney, Australia
Sohbi K.	Italian-Palestinian	08/04	Mezrab, Amsterdam
Hevien D.	Dutch	06/04	Verhalenhuis Belvédère, Rotterdam
Mustafa D.	Egyptian	01/04	Mezrab, Amsterdam
Sarah A.	German	09/04	Berlin, Germany
Norihito T.	Japanese	23/03	Mezrab, Amsterdam
Joe W.	US	10/04	The Hague
Ehsan F.	Dutch	09/04	Mezrab, Amsterdam

* Alternative names were used to protect the privacy of the respondents, in accordance to the information provided in the consent form.

APPENDIX C: CODING MANUAL

CODES	GROUP CODES	THEMES
Different applications of storytelling Entertaining aspect of storytelling General trend of storytelling Images created by the stories Imagination Looking for a "good story" Similarities with the stories heard Storyteller's hability Storytelling effects The habilities of the storyteller The heritage of migrant and diasporic communities The limits of storytelling The popularity of migration stories True stories	*Entertaining life stories on migration*	**Representation of migration life stories in mass media and humanitarian sector**
Coronavirus and its effects General trend of storytelling Giving complexity to the phenomenon of migration Looking for a "good story" Migrant as agency-less victim Polarization of narratives on migration The threats in how mass media and ONGs tell migrant life stories	*Humanitarian representation of migrant stories*	
Rejection of migrant stories Looking for a "good story" Mass media narrative on migration Migrant as agency-less victim Oversimplification of migratory experience Polarization of narratives on migration Policy usage / humanitarian Portraying and promoting "stars" of migration Prasing host country Simplicistic and one-sided narrative Storytelling as a powerful tool The limits of storytelling The threats in how mass media and ONGs tell migrant life stories	*Oversimplification by mass media*	

Horizontal relationship between teller and audience members Direct statement by interviewee Geographical limitations Images created by the stories Imagination Recurrent themes Sharing life stories Stories that convey emotions of reject Storytelling as a direct medium The limits of storytelling Understanding the familiar	*Characteristics of storytelling events on migration*	**Listening to stories as a narrative practice**
Audience avoiding pain and identification with trauma Direct statement by interviewee General trend of storytelling Level of being familiar with migration stories Mass media narrative on migration Participant background Personal interpretations of the interviewee Storytelling in a historical perspective	*Type of audience*	

Appreciating storytelling Conscious and unconscious levels of storytelling Contextual differences between host society and migrant background Geographical limitations Giving complexity to the phenomenon of migration Level of being familiar with migration stories Macro understanding of the migratory reality Multi-layeredness of implications around migration stories Sense of life as a story Operation of identity-seeking	*Multi-layeredness of storytelling* *Social and existential uncertainties*	**Crises of narratives**

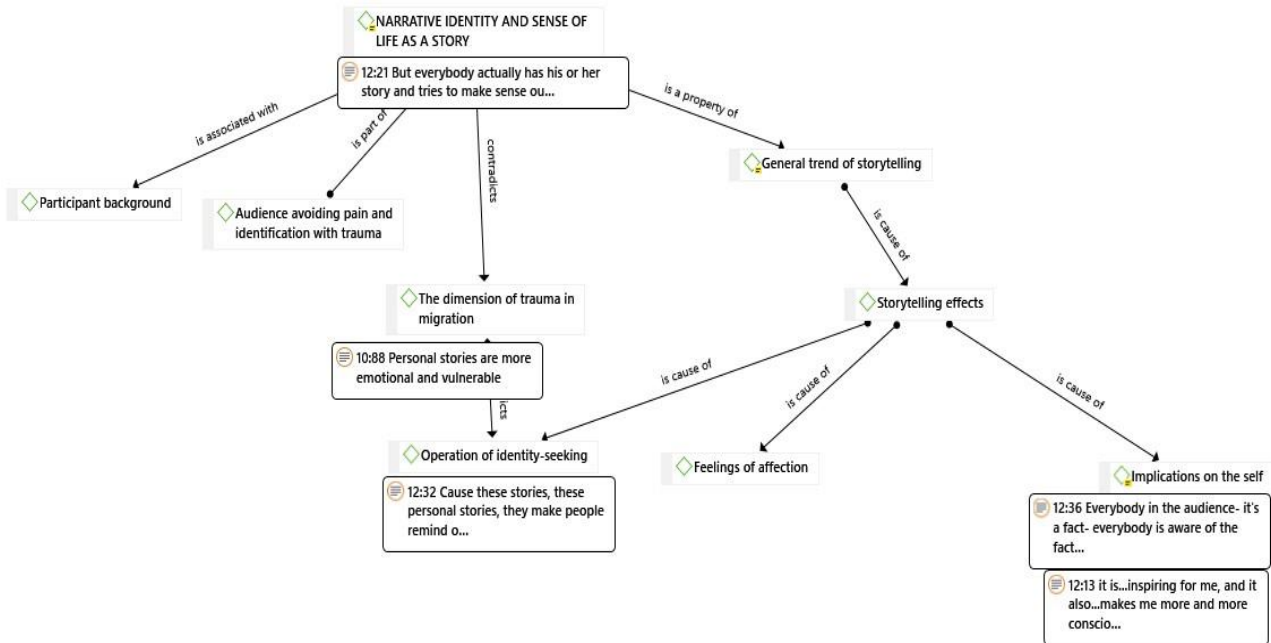|		
Similarities with the stories heard Storytelling as a performance Superposition performance/institution The feeling of the "Other" The heritage of migrant and diasporic communities		

Feeling of in-betweenness Geographical limitations Horizontal relationship between teller and audience members New sense of community New stories originated Questioning assumptions Sharing life stories The audience of storytelling events The heritage of migrant and diasporic communities Similarities with the stories heard Societal changes Specific stories remembered The popularity of migration stories True stories Type audience	*Questioning accomodating migration stories* *Group experience*	**New stories: potentials and limits of the 'after-story'**
Collective feelings arose Activist endeavor of storytelling made by migrants Empathy Feelings of affection Macro understanding of the migratory reality New sense of community Operation of identity-seeking Societal changes Stories as a form of dialogue with host society Stories that convey emotions of reject Storytelling as a powerful tool Storytelling effects The audience of storytelling events The heritage of migrant and diasporic communities What happens in the 'after-story'	*Overcoming the limitations of migration stories* *Storytelling potentials*	

|		
Empathy Overcoming pain and identification with trauma Contextual differences between host society and migrant background Imagination Beyond polarization of narratives on migration Similarities with the stories heard Storytelling in a historical perspective The dimension of trauma in migration	*Challenging accomodating migration stories* *Understanding the 'familiar'*	**Hearing counter-narratives on migration**

CONCEPT MAPPING

1ST THEME
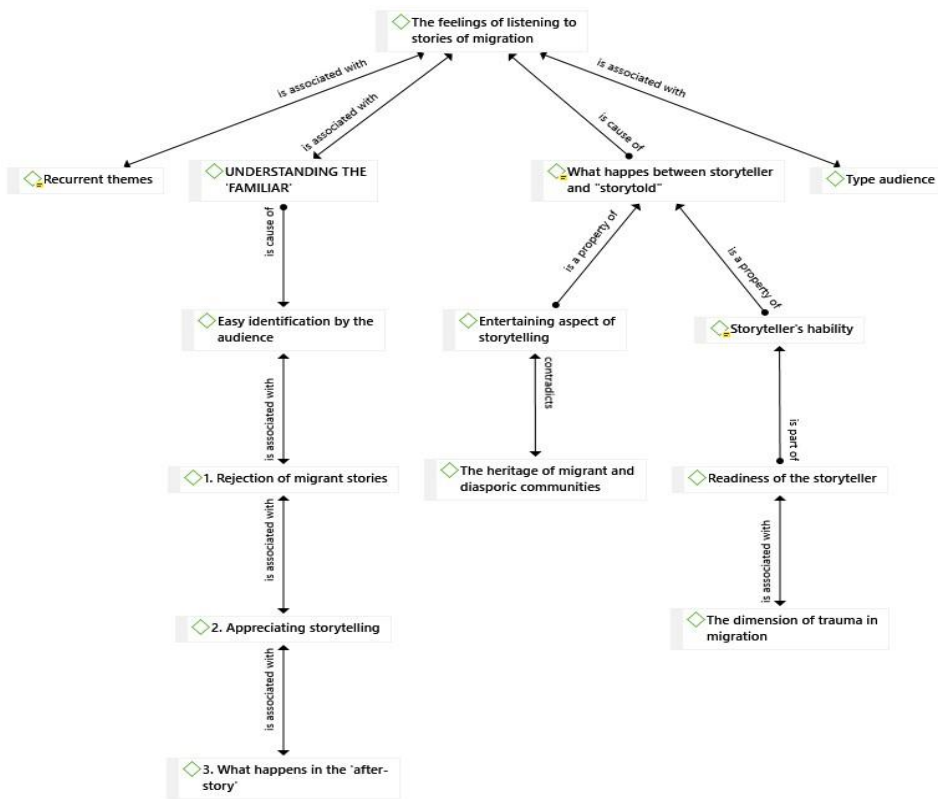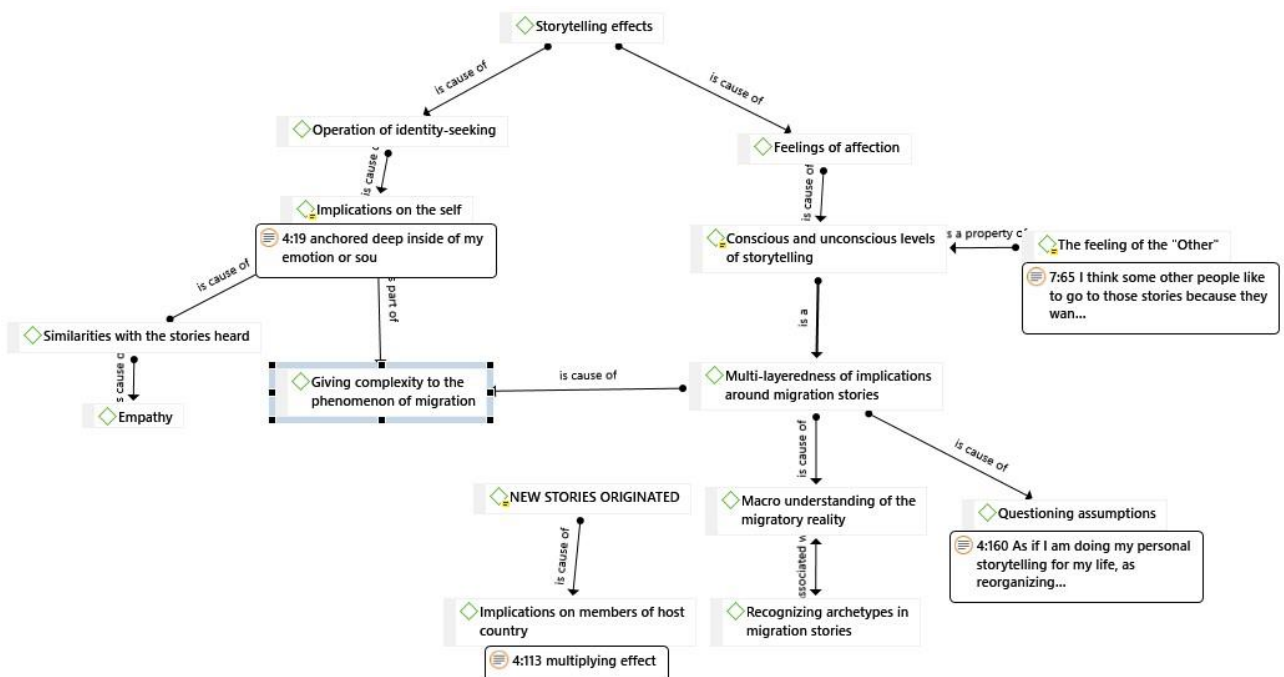**Listening to stories as a narrative practice**

2nd THEME
Representation of migration life stories in mass media and humanitarian sector
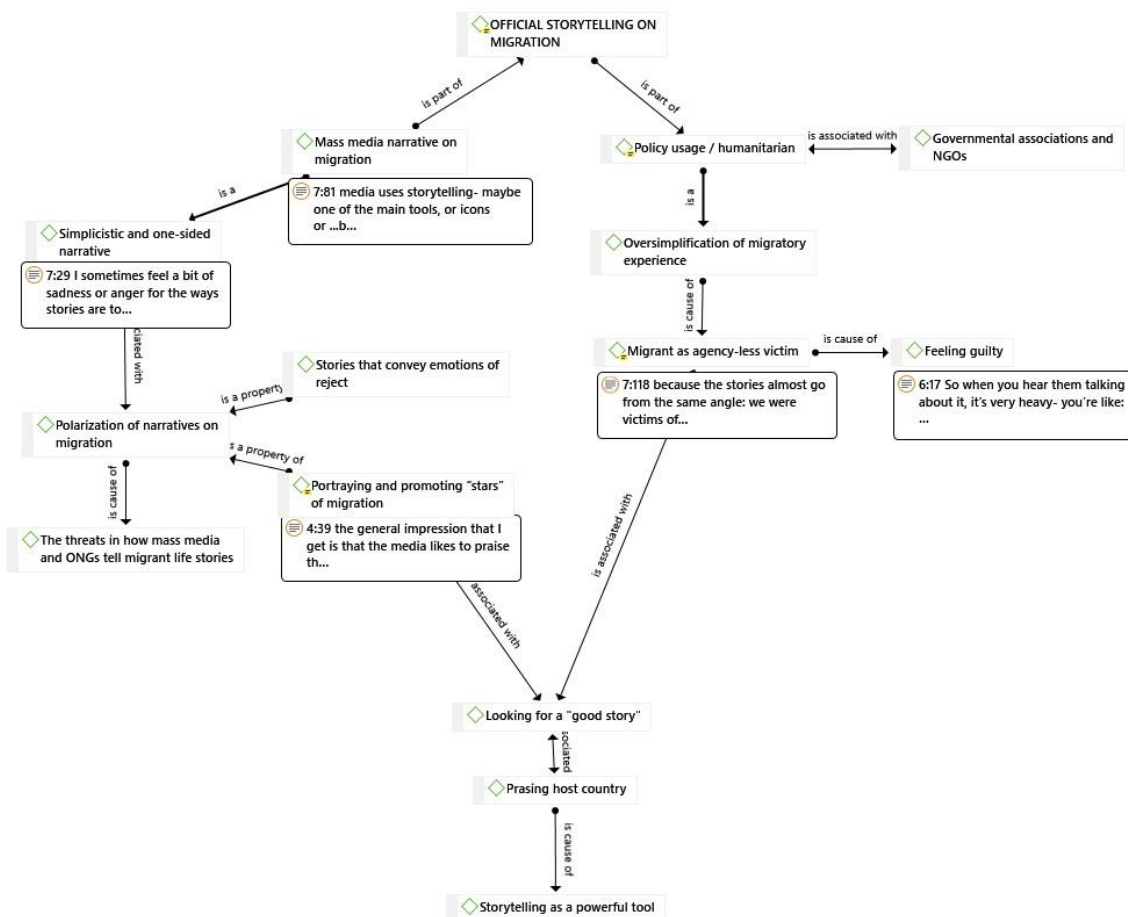
3rd THEME
Hearing counter-narratives on migration

4th THEME
Crisis of narratives

5th THEME
New stories: potentials and limits of the 'after-story'