



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

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Article first published online

July 2019

HOW TO CITE

Di Fraia, G., Risi, E., Pronzato, R. (2019). Socio-Narrative Representations of Immigrants by Italian Young People. *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 11(2), 126-146. doi: 10.14658/pupj-ijse-2019-2-7

Socio-Narrative Representations of Immigrants by Italian Young People

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Abstract. This paper aims to explore how young Italians represent the phenomenon of migration by using a socio-narrative approach and taking into account the role of media in shaping the collective imaginary. To this end, socio-narrative representations are deemed a valuable tool both at the conceptual and analytical level. Accordingly, this empirical study relies on the three main dimensions of socio-narrative representations (objectification, anchoring and narration) and on two mass communication theories (agenda-setting and cultivation theory) to analyse qualitative data. In-depth semi-structured interviews revealed that the iconic dimension has a predominant role in the mythopoietic mechanisms of construction of socio-narrative presentations. In fact, it emerges that also the anchoring and narrative processes frequently originate from certain stereotypical pictures and stories continuously broadcasted by mass media, which select and portray only a partial and inaccurate depiction of migration, based on the narrative distinction between “us” and “them”. In fact, this complex phenomenon is often reduced to the images of the victims of humanitarian crises, thereby favouring processes of distant suffering and compassion fatigue. Implications of these findings are discussed, as well as suggestions for future research.

Keywords: immigration/immigrants, narrative approach, media storytelling, social representation, compassion fatigue

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Introduction

Migration can be considered one of the issues of greatest social and political concern in the last decades. In fact, it has surely been one of the leading topics of the last electoral campaigns in many Western countries, as well as one of the most debated themes both on mass and new media worldwide (e.g. Castles et al., 2015; Geddes & Scholten, 2016).

Media have a striking importance in constructing social representations of migration (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010), given their agenda-setting role in filtering interpretations of public issues (Shaw, 1979; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; 1993; McCombs, 2002) and cultivating certain interpretations of social phenomena (Gerbner, 1989; Signorielli & Morgan, 1990; Gerbner et al., 2002). However, empirical evidence extensively supports the accuse of misrepresenting certain social groups, such as immigrants and ethnic minorities (Coleman & Ross, 2010). Specifically, media frequently frame the phenomenon of migration by highlighting a narrative distinction between “us” and “them” (Wodak, 2008; Anderson, 2013), thereby offering a stereotypical depiction of the phenomenon that do not favour the development of a public debate regarding integration policies (Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2014). In fact, immigrants are often represented within the association criminality/migration (Binotto, Bruno & Lai, 2016), which contribute to the construction and articulation of “a security frame in which ‘undesirable’ migrants are either politicised as ‘threatening’ subjects” (Huysmans & Squire, 2009, p. 7).

Extant research carried out content analyses of media products to better understand how broadcasters represent migration (e.g. Bleich, Bloemraad & De Graauw, 2015; Ahmed & Matthes, 2017), as well as both quantitative and qualitative studies to analyse attitudes towards immigrants (Medrano, 2010; Rustenbach, 2010), but there is no prior research regarding the construction of the figure of the immigrant by adopting a narrative approach. In fact, while several studies support this approach as highly valuable in order to study migrants’ personal stories and experiences (e.g. Eastmond, 2007; Taloyan et al., 2011), research investigating how locals represent immigrants and their stories by adopting a socio-narrative approach and which is the role of media images in this process is still lacking. Accordingly, this paper pursues to fill this gap by using socio-narrative representations as analytical tool.

To pursue this goal, this empirical study takes into account the Italian socio-cultural and media context, and it focuses on a specific sector of the Italian population: young people. Thus, since it explores how young Italians represent immigrants and interpret migration processes by using a socio-narrative approach, and given the three dimensions of socio-narrative representations (objectification, anchoring and narration), the following re-

search questions were addressed to thoroughly examine the phenomenon under study:

R1: *How do young Italians depict and personify the figure of immigrants through an objectification process? (iconic dimension)*

R2: *How do young Italians describe the figure of immigrant through an anchoring process? (conceptual dimension)*

R3: *Which skeleton stories emerge from the stories elaborated by young Italians regarding migration? (narrative dimension)*

Given the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative and exploratory approach was adopted (Creswell, 2013). To this end, 75 young individuals were interviewed to explore the meaning-making processes that underlie the social construction of the phenomenon of migration. Specifically, 54 participants were aged 18-24 and 21 were 25-29 years old, and they were all based in the north-west of Italy, especially around the city of Milan.

Findings support the predominance of the iconic dimension in the mythopoietic mechanisms of construction of socio-narrative presentations and a strong correspondence between how individuals represent migration and the media images and stories commonly and widely available in that socio-cultural context. In fact, the highly simplified constructions of meaning by mass media emerge as the core representations through which the migration phenomenon is conceived in the collective imaginary. Both the conceptual and narrative elaboration of the phenomenon are centred around frequently broadcasted stereotypical pictures and stories of victims involved in humanitarian crises, symbolic resources which favour distant suffering (Chouliaraki, 2004; 2008) and compassion fatigue mechanisms (Moeller, 1999), while many other possible stories are ignored.

The article is organised as follows: the next section presents the concept of socio-narrative representations as an instrument of analysis and discusses prior literature regarding this analytical tool. Then, the data collection process and methodology applied to carry out the empirical analysis will be thoroughly described. Next, this paper will show findings of the qualitative research, discuss the results and present some concluding remarks and implications of the study.

Theoretical framework: socio-narrative representations

This empirical research aims to investigate how young Italians represent migration and to get a better understanding of those processes of meaning production and interpretation by which they comprehend and interpret this complex social phenomenon.

To pursue this goal, a socio-narrative approach is deemed appropriate. Since individuals “are predisposed to think in narratives” (Humphreys &

Brown, 2008, p. 45) and that the production of intersubjective accounts is accomplished mainly through narrative thinking (Leiter, 1980; Fisher, 1984; Weick, 1995), this paper supports as a valuable instrument of empirical research the analysis of the discursive resources available to individuals in a certain socio-cultural context and how they are used.

The epistemological framework of this work is social constructionism, according to which individuals interpret the world “by categorizing beings, objects and experiences” (Pregernig, 2002, p. 26) through forms, concepts and configurations which are historically and culturally shaped (Di Fraia, 2004). These processes have been summarised by Moscovici with the conceptual term “social representations”.

A “social representation is essentially a construction of reality” (Breakwell, 1986, p. 55), employed by individuals in order to interpret and comprehend the social world in which they live. Although they result from an individual cognitive processing that includes some specific forms of memory and categorization processes, social representations tend to be similar among different individuals as they extensively originate from the available media contents regarding a specific social phenomenon, thereby emerging as collective forms of knowledge.

At the conceptual level, Moscovici (1984; 1988) claims that there are two main processes through which social representations enable individuals to make sense of social phenomena: *objectification* and *anchoring*. On the one hand, objectification occurs when an abstract phenomenon is materialised, in other words, something abstract is rendered concrete through an iconic representation. On the other hand, anchoring is the process by which new ideas and unfamiliar events are integrated into already existing concepts and reduced to ordinary categories. Thus, social representations can be defined with two main dimensions: iconic (objectification) and conceptual (anchoring), which have been proved to be particularly valuable in the analysis social phenomena. According to Di Fraia (2004), there is a further aspect of social representation that scholars ought to take into account at the analytical level: the narrative dimension.

Although narrative and sociology have always been strictly linked given the narrative nature of some of the main themes of this discipline (Maines, 1993), the “narrative turn” has gained impetus in social sciences only in the last few decades, as social researchers have acknowledged the potential value of stories from an ontological, epistemological and methodological point of view (Berger & Quinney, 2004; Herman, Jahn & Ryan, 2005; Goodson & Gill, 2011). For instance, one of the most common application of this approach can be considered the use of biographical interviews (Plummer, 2001). However, the analysis of stories to get a better understanding of the narrative dimension of social representations has not been taken into account yet,

thus, this research taps into this need. Regarding the analytical tool that can be employed to pursue this goal, this study shows that a valuable instrument to grasp this aspect of social representations can be the identification and interpretation of story skeletons (Schank, 1995).

Most stories are remembered through the lesson embedded into them (Schank & Abelson, 1997). Schank (1995) supports that when the same lesson frequently emerges from different stories, it “becomes a skeleton story and can be referenced as a separate entity from the story that created it” (Bos-ticco & Thompson, 2005, p. 10). In other words, if many stories, shared in a specific socio-cultural context, entail the same normative, moral and ethical lesson, that lesson becomes an independent interpretive structure, even though those stories have different themes and contents. In fact, the same lesson can be embedded into different forms of expression, such as linguistic idioms (e.g. “better late than never”), as well as in traditional anecdotes and proverbs, which can be considered symbolic resources that function as cognitive and communicative shortcuts, through which people interpret reality (Di Fraia, 2004).

Thus, skeleton stories entail narrative programmes which are commonly and intuitively used for attribution and sensemaking processes. For instance, if the teller says that someone is a “traitor”, listeners already know the narrative programmes that are entailed in that type of story and will tend to interpret the following events according to certain expectations linked with it and to which is possible to relate (Schank, 1995). This mechanism stems from the repetition of stories that include, for example, specific characters with specific goals, in other words, a story skeleton, which represent the sedimentation of specific shared cultural patterns.

Although these mechanisms are part of the human cognitive system, which need to simplify reality in order to better deal with its multifaceted nature, the use of skeleton stories to interpret reality may involve oversimplification risks and stereotypical prejudice. In particular, their functioning can be highly relevant when it comes to media representation. For instance, this can be seen in the application of certain story skeletons to describe the phenomenon of migration. On the one hand, if a columnist uses the skeleton story embedded in the term “humanitarian crisis” to define a certain situation in which asylum-seekers are fleeing from their country, he is proposing and employing a specific narrative programme. On the other hand, if the same events are described by another journalist with the skeleton story “invasion”, the narrative programme supports a different position on a narrative, but also on political and ideological level. Therefore, it should be noted that “the possibility to product, diffuse and “impose” specific story skeletons instead of others represents (...) one of the most important and effective forms of the exercise of power” (Di Fraia, 2004, p. 57).

This mechanism can be easily noticed in media products, which contribute to the diffusion of symbolic resources that people use as a starting point to construct stories and interpret reality. In fact, storytelling is not an aseptic activity. According to Sedney et al. (1994), stories are composed in order to fit the necessities of the contexts in which they are narrated, thus, the storytelling can be defined as a “story fitting” process (Di Fraia, 2004). People comprehend and elaborate new information by relating it to stories they already know (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005), therefore storytelling implies to deliberately choose well-recognised story skeletons available in a specific socio-cultural context and to construct stories with a predictable result that can be simply understood (Schank, 1995).

Thus, media are commonly considered as having a fundamental role as producers of social representations and the pervasiveness of their representations has a striking impact on how individuals understand the social reality and perceive social phenomena, “and how they subsequently become social and then personal representations” (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, p. 292). This entails that the role of media and of the skeleton stories produced and employed in media representations has always to be taken into account during the study.

Regarding the identification and analysis of skeleton stories, in order to understand, analyse and compare stories, it is necessary to decompose them in elementary and structural units. To pursue this goal, Burke’s dramatic pentad (Burke, 1978) was deemed a highly valuable technique. This tool, which originally aims to comprehend “what is involved when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it” (1945, p. XV) is composed of five elements:

- a. *Agent* (the performer of the action);
- b. *Act* (it refers to human action: what is happening?);
- c. *Agency* (means employed to perform the action);
- d. *Scene* (the context, both abstract or physical, and the background situation);
- e. *Purpose* (the reasons of the actions)

Since this study pursues to investigate the socio-narrative representations of migration by young Italians and the underlying sensemaking processes which emerge through narrative thinking, this technique is applied to fictional stories that interviewees elaborated regarding migration. Those stories are used as an epistemological tool to better understand how individuals interpret that specific social phenomenon and which socio-narrative representations are associated with it. Furthermore, the aforementioned iconic and conceptual dimensions of social representations are investigated to better comprehend the construction process underlying this story and the

phenomenon under study, as well as to favour and stimulate the emergence of valuable stories.

Method

Interviews were conducted by the researchers with a sample of 75 young people. Given the exploratory nature of the study, researchers relied on a purposeful and convenience sample (Patton, 2002; Palinkas et al., 2015): informants were selected by willingness to participate to the research and by capacity to express well-articulated opinions and elaborate on stories and experiences (Bernard, 2002; Higginbottom, 2004).

Participants were both students and workers and differ in various aspects, such as age, academic level, job position and experiences and relationships with migrants.

In particular, the study included 54 individuals between 18 and 24 years old, and 21 aged 25-29, thereby covering at least two age sub-groups (18-24 and 25-29) which may account for variation in the phenomena under study.

Then, the sample is gender-balanced as 37 of the interviewees were males and 38 were females, all based in the north-west of Italy, especially around the city of Milan. Further differences regarding the educational level, job position and previous experiences with migrants, which may interfere in the narrative process, are shown in the table 1.

Table 1 - Sample characteristics

Age group	Gender	Educational level	Job position	Previous experiences with migrants
<p>18-24 y.o.: 54 individuals</p> <p>25-29 y.o.: 21 individuals</p>	<p>38 females</p> <p>37 males</p>	<p>Lower Secondary school diploma: 3 individuals</p> <p>High school diploma: 60 individuals</p> <p>Tertiary education: 12 individuals</p>	<p>High school students: 3 individuals</p> <p>University students: 48 individuals</p> <p>Low-skilled jobs: 10 individuals</p> <p>High-skilled jobs: 14 individuals</p>	<p>No direct experience: 18 individuals</p> <p>Strict relations with asylum seekers: 12 individuals</p> <p>Relations with second-generation migrants: 39 individuals</p> <p>Direct experience but no relations: 6 individuals</p>

Interviews took place at a location and time of each participant's convenience between March and May 2018. Prior to beginning the interview, the interviewers informed the participants of the nature and purpose of the research and assured informers' confidentiality and privacy.

Then, to address the aforementioned research questions, interviews were conducted according to a semi-structured guide that covered different key areas and was divided in different sections as follows:

1. Introduction to the topic of the research, gathering of biographical data and information about media consumption;
2. Construction of images of migrations and description of the figure of an immigrant (*objectification process – iconic dimension*);
3. Conceptualisation of the phenomenon of migration (*anchoring process – conceptual dimension*);
4. Elaboration of a fictional story with an immigrant as main character and Burke's dramatisic pentad (*narrative dimension*);
5. Personal experiences and media representations regarding migration.

Interviewers had to audio-record the interviews and then to anonymise and transcribe them. Next, data were analysed by a researcher with the computer program ATLAS.ti: transcriptions of the interviews were codified line by line with descriptive and interpretative codes elaborated *de novo*, in order to embody key attributes of information and to better understand the phenomenon. Accordingly, the following higher codes were created.

Table 2 - Higher codes elaborated on ATLAS.ti.

Higher Codes
Anchoring – Conceptualisation
Objectification – Iconic description
Narrative dimension
Burke's dramatisic pentad
Media's role

Findings

“A boat full of Africans”: a typical iconic representation

“When I think about migration, I imagine boats.” (P20, F, 18yo)

On an iconic level, a boat full of people in the middle of the sea is one of the first images that emerge. This boat is often described as full of individuals, packed and without sufficient personal space, abandoned in precarious, unstable and extreme conditions.

“...visually, the first image I focus on is a boat, a dinghy, packed with people, in the middle of a stormy sea...” (P23, F, 24yo)

“The really first thing that comes up into my mind when you said immigration is (...) a dinghy full of black people...” (P33, M, 28yo)

Africa or Maghreb are usually considered the provenience of immigrants, which are often pictured with a specific somatic trait: the dark skin. In fact, this characteristic is highly recurring and seems to be one of the leading visual elements with which young Italians depict immigrants. Furthermore, when interviewees describe their image of an immigrant, they also portray their sexual and cultural characteristics.

“I imagine a really thin guy, with a hollowed face and a very dark skin, wearing oversized coat and trousers, worn out shoes, and of Muslim religion.” (P46, M, 26yo)

Thus, when it comes to the physical characteristics, interviewees indicate black young males as the standard image with which they would depict immigrants, which are also imagined as poorly dressed, with ruined clothes or even without some items, such as the shoes. Furthermore, informants imagine immigrants as practicing Islam.

It should be noted that these somatic and religious descriptions are extremely different from the traits that would be usually possible to identify in the majority of foreigners residing Italy, in which four out of five of the major national groups are Romanians, Albanians, Chinese and Ukrainians (Istat, 2018).

“I see the same old light-blue boat (...), fully packed with people that are at risk of falling...” (P52, M, 19yo)

Nonetheless, the informants focus on a boat, full of almost indistinguishable individuals. This objectification of migration highlights a massification process, whereby people are depersonalised: a collective image becomes the iconic materialisation of a certain phenomenon. Massification

can be opposed to personalisation, a process whereby a single victim personifies a crisis thereby favouring a process of identification.

“...it comes to my mind a very well-known image that, in my opinion, represents well the phenomenon of migration: Alan, the Syrian kid found dead that on the beach...” (P24, F, 21yo)

Even though a massification process is present in almost all the interviews, it yields to personification when participants picture migration with the image of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian child photographed dead on a Turkish beach after the boat he was with his family sank in 2015. Hence, it can be noticed an iconization of a certain image that is an exception compared to the typical image that the interviewees describe when they picture the phenomenon of migration.

Alan Kurdi’s picture is a highly famous media image, as well as the one depicting a boat packed with people in the Mediterranean Sea.

“...the canonical image of the boat, an image that is continuously broadcasted on television, people that are rescued from boats, on which they are in clear supernumerary.” (P55, F, 23yo)

“...because today the first image that is disseminated by newspapers, and so on, is this one...” (P43, M, 23yo)

Some informants make explicit references to media images, they claim to think about a certain picture as they frequently see it on mass media, such as newspapers and television. Thus, there are some media images that are used as a basis for objectifying the social phenomenon of migration. Interestingly, no differences were found also in the images used by people that have had previous direct experiences with migrants from various ethnic groups. In fact, even individuals that recall first-hand contacts usually focus on experiences with asylum-seekers from Africa, thereby ignoring other possible daily representations of the migration phenomenon.

Ancestors and Italian migrants: a different objectification of the phenomenon

“...Italians that used to migrate on ships toward America. (...) poor people with a sad expression looking for fortune somewhere else, wearing discoloured brown 1930s style clothes, large and worn out.” (P16, M 24yo)

“...it’s not necessarily the African guy that flee away and come in Italy to work, but also the Italian guy that go in England or in the USA to work or to study.” (P31, M, 20yo)

Another iconic representation of migration that emerge from the interviews regards Italians themselves. In particular, the informants recall two different historical moment: the mass migration to the United States that occur between the 19th and 20th century and the recent external migration of young people that has increased in the last decade.

“I could tell you that the first image (...) is the transoceanic boats that brought our Italian ancestors to the Eastern coasts of the United States.” (P14, M, 26yo)

There are similarities between the aforementioned stereotypical images of potentially African immigrants and the ones of the Italians that migrate to the USA more than a century ago: both are imagined travelling, poorly dressed and on a boat packed with people across the sea. However, there are two different mechanisms that emerge from these narrative lines. While the image of African immigrants triggers a process of massification and emotional detachment, when it comes to Italian immigrants it is possible to notice an identification process towards the idea of migration as those individuals are primarily framed as “ancestors” with shared roots.

“...my brother, he migrated to London as well 4 years ago, because his company went bankrupt.” (P9, M, 22)

“...my family, as (...) I’m part of a family that has been migrating all over the world for generations. For example, my grandparents migrated to the USA more than 60 years ago...” (P34, F, 20yo)

In fact, there are even personal stories of migration, therefore the interviewees identify themselves or their family with the figure of the immigrant. Personal experiences prevail over media experiences and become preponderant: in these cases, the images that objectify the concept of migration are primarily their own, of their family or of their own people, in other words, there is a common shared experience that is recognised and shape the iconic representation of that phenomenon.

Moving, escaping, hoping: a common conceptualisation

“Migration is a moving phenomenon of a certain number of human beings (...) from a place to another for certain reasons that (...) can be the goal to find a better condition at the political and ideological level.” (P10, M, 20yo)

“Migration is a flow of people moving from a state to reach another one, they mainly move for war, economic reasons, diseases...” (P5, F, 21yo)

Movement is the really first concept through which the interviewees commonly anchor migration. From this simple idea, the reflection moves to the reasons that ought to lead individuals to change the place in which they live. There are two main motives that are highlighted by the informants: war and poverty. Although other more general themes emerge, such as “necessity”, “difficulties” or “troubles”, war and really poor economic conditions are usually taken into consideration as the most plausible reasons to migrate.

“Immigration is a journey of hope, people travel for a dream (...). There are those that run away from war, (...) seek refuge from something.” (P4, M, 22yo)

Then, hope is one of the core concepts that surfaced in the anchoring process. Migration is delineated as an act that imply confidence in the future and optimism regarding what will come in life. There are not projects or plans but only a generic feeling that it will be possible to start anew and move towards a better, even if unknown, situation.

“...with migration I connect: escape, refuge, hope. Escape because immigrants are running away from a negative reality. Refuge cause is the goal of their journey. Hope because they hope to get better, hope is what encourage them to use that boat...” (P25, M, 21yo)

“...the word “escape” because, in my opinion, this word is really close to migration as you always escape from something bad (...) to find something good.” (P26, M, 20yo)

“Hope” is strictly linked with “escape” and “refuge”: two additional main concepts that the interviewees use to reduce, simplify and conceive the migration phenomenon and the figure of the immigrant. These terms are also conceptually used with other words such as “journey”, “family”, “courage” and “research”, as informants support that individuals move to “get a better life” or to “start anew”.

“I’d say refugee because is one of the main causes of migration so (...) it’s a synonym of the word migrant.” (P9, M, 22)

“Refugee and fugitive (...) are really close to the concept of migrant because they all have the same underlying basic concept: to escape and go away.” (P39, F, 20)

Accordingly, even though most of the immigrants living in Italy are neither political refugees nor asylum-seekers, this is the main form with which the interviewees conceptualise the figure of the immigrant, notwithstanding personal characteristics such as age, job position or level of

education, and their previous experiences or personal contacts with migrants.

Moreover, it should be noted that there is already a stereotypical story in this conceptualisation, as well as in the aforementioned iconic representations. However, the emergence of these story skeletons becomes more explicit in the next section.

The narrative dimension: two skeleton stories

After having investigated both the objectification and anchoring processes with which the informants represent the phenomenon of migration, the interviewers asked to elaborate a fictional story, such as a movie or a novel, starring an immigrant.

There is one core skeleton that emerged from the data. The *actor* of these stories is generally an African or Arabian man, which is a young guy escaping a difficult situation or an ordinary man that want to help his family that remained in his country of origin. This character migrates to Italy: the story describes a road trip across the African continents and the Mediterranean Sea and, sometimes, how he hardly sets in Italy (*act*). His *purpose* is generally a better life. However, to pursue this goal, he needs to find a modest job and earn some money that allow him to help his family that is in his country. Besides Africa and the sea during the boat trip, the *scene* of this skeleton story is a reception centre or a precarious workplace in Italy. In fact, to survive and integrate in this new society he needs a job, that is often unskilled (*agency*).

Furthermore, in this skeleton story the actor has also enemies and helpers. In fact, he often faces discrimination and prejudices and has to avoid criminals, while he is rescued by the coastguard and helped by volunteers at his arrival. Finally, there is almost always a happy ending: the character succeeds in helping his family with his hard work and eventually makes his relatives move to Italy.

However, there is also another story skeleton that some interviewees adopted, which regards an Italian migrant. Although it can be observed only in a few fictional stories compared the aforementioned one, it is possible to draw a comparison between the two skeletons stories to gather meaningful insights regarding the socio-narrative representations of migration that emerge from the interviews (Table 2).

The *actor* of this second skeleton story is an Italian man, usually in his twenties, that migrate to Anglophone countries, such as, Australia, USA or UK (*act*) with a comfortable journey (using a train or a plane) (*agency*). His *purpose* is a better life as well, however, whereas the African/Arabian actor finds modest jobs to help his family in Africa, the Italian character tries to become a successful businessman, therefore he pursues an individualistic

goal. To integrate in the new country (*scene*) he works too but his job is not modest, and he ends up having a top job position.

Thus, although these two skeleton stories are both about migration tales, their features deeply differ when it comes to the outcomes and actions of the two characters, who do not share the same cultural roots.

Table 3 - Main skeleton stories

Burke's dramatic pentad	Skeleton story 1 (highly common)	Skeleton story 2 (really rare)
Actor	An African or Arabian man. It can be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A young guy escaping a difficult situation; • An ordinary man that want to help his family back home. 	An Italian man (usually young).
Act	He migrates to Italy. Usually, the stories describe: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a sort of road trip across Africa and the Mediterranean Sea; • the integration and difficulties in Italy of the just-arrived migrant. 	It migrates to countries such as Australia, USA, UK.
Purpose	A better life. Usually the African/Arabian migrant finds a modest job to earn some money and help his family to migrate as well.	A better life. Usually it becomes a sort of successful businessman: it is an individualistic goal and satisfaction.
Scene	Road trip across Africa to arrive in Europe, disembarkation in Italy and life in reception centres or in precarious workplaces.	A comfortable journey and integration in the new country.
Agency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Means of transport: dinghies or other means of luck; • Means of integration: a job, although it is often modest and precarious. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Means of transport: trains or planes; • Means of integration: a job, which is the starting point of a successful career.

Discussion. What is left unsaid in the socio-narrative representations of migration

Socio-narrative representations can be an extremely valuable instrument of analysis to get a better understanding of how people interpret social phenomena. Accordingly, a socio-narrative approach was adopted, both in terms of research topic (socio-narrative representations) and analytical tool (story skeletons), in order to investigate how young Italians represent immigrants and their stories.

Furthermore, this empirical study also relied on two communication studies theories: agenda setting (Shaw, 1979; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; 1993; McCombs, 2002) and cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1989; Signorielli & Morgan, 1990; Gerbner et al., 2002)¹, in order to thoroughly explore the role of media in shaping and filtering social reality.

Findings support that iconic media contents are predominant and powerful elements into the mythopoietic mechanisms of socio-narrative representations, which have been taken into account as a fundamental constituent of narrative thinking (Bruner, 1990; 1992) in this paper.

Notwithstanding a continuous and immense availability of information, news and stories offered by mass and new media (*media storytelling*), in fact, the informants portray a complex phenomenon, such as migration, with highly stereotypical images and ideas, which result from cognitive simplification processes and collective elaborations of social knowledge that can be easily framed within the conceptual tool of socio-narrative representations.

This study has shown that socio-narrative representations of migration are shaped, through processes of iconic objectification and conceptual and narrative anchoring, around some media images, primarily broadcasted by television channels and newspapers (and ceaselessly reshared on social networks) and characterized by a strong emotional and mythopoietic value (a dinghy full of people, a figure of the migrant that is necessarily a young black male, etc.). Thus, it can be seen that these simplified, representative, visual and conceptual constructions, originally and largely disseminated by mass media, become stereotypical pictures through which the migration phenomenon is conceived in the collective imaginary. Indeed, at the cognitive level, individuals form social representations of a certain issue based on their own direct personal experience; on the other hand, if that is not possible, those representations are gleaned from other discursive resources regarding that topic available around them. Hence, individuals interpret and internalise

¹ In brief, agenda-setting theory supports that mass media have the capacity to influence which issues become salient for the public, through processes of reality filtering. The most relevant aspect of cultivation for the purpose of this study is the ability of mass media to generate shared representations and common perceptions of social reality.

the stories they collect from other people (Jedlowski, 2000) or from media contents, which can be considered the most powerful producers of stories (Bruner, 2002). It is interesting to note that this finding accords with the apparent lack of variation between different age subgroups and geographical life-contexts for what it concerns the use of stereotypical images and stories of migrants. In fact, none of these elements seem to have a striking role in the narrative process. Personal direct experiences with migrants do not seem to change this kind of representation either, thereby supporting the role of iconic media contents in the mythopoietic development of socio-narrative representations.

In recent years, stereotypical representations of individuals involved in humanitarian crises has emerged in many different frames to represent the migration phenomenon (Musarò & Parmiggiani, 2014). For instance, it is common that non-profit organisations use images of “victims” for their fundraising campaigns, thereby emphasising differences and distances (“us” and “them”) rather than focusing on integration policies. These types of pictures surfaced from the interviews as fundamental elements of the objectification process, as individuals associate specific conceptualisations (anchoring), stories and feelings around them.

Thus, findings suggest a socio-narrative representation in which the iconic dimension emerges as the prevailing element (“a boat full of Africans”). The predominance of these images entails “a mound of indistinguishable corpses” (Kurasawa, 2015, p. 9), symbolizing migration as a constant humanitarian crisis. However, these representations do not imply to share the sufferance of the victim but just to observe it, thereby favouring mechanisms of *distant suffering* (Chouliaraki, 2004; Manzato, 2012), that free the observant from the moral obligation of engagement with the sufferer (Chouliaraki, 2008), and of *compassion fatigue* (Moeller, 1999).

Accordingly, the conceptual dimension is anchored around concepts like moving and escaping. In fact, interviewees always focus on migrants rather than immigrants: the stories elaborated portray road trip of individuals arriving in Italy, as the narrative dimensions and the main story skeleton confirm. Thus, it should be noted that the socio-narrative representations of a complex phenomenon, such as migration, that can be experienced mainly through media contents, precisely correspond to the representations retrievable from media products available in that socio-cultural context, notwithstanding first-hand contacts and personal experiences. This reflection and specularity seem to support the agenda setting and cultivation theory and highlight the powerful influence of media in shaping how social phenomena are represented.

In fact, media images around *migrants* are more salient compared to the stories of *immigrants* that individuals presumably meet in their everyday

life. Data shows that most of the foreigners living in Italy are from countries such as Romania, Albania, China and Ukraine (Istat, 2018), which present traits that can be hardly associated with the figures depicted in the interviews. Immigrants from these places are not frequently represented on media, hence, they are also not present in individuals' narrative thinking strategies and stereotypical stories, which take into consideration immigration as the humanitarian crisis that has been ongoing in the Mediterranean Sea over the last decade.

This capacity of media contents to affect socio-narrative representations is also shown in the fictional stories elaborated by the informants, as they often focus on the road trip that a migrant has to accomplish to arrive in Italy or on the moments after the disembarkation. In fact, the story continues only if interviewees are asked to expand on it, and, then, it usually finishes with a modest happy ending, that envisage the character succeeding in helping his family back home with some money earned through precarious jobs.

Negative and uncertain outcomes are removed from the stories elaborated by the informants, as well as from many media contents which are based on stereotypical story skeletons. This trend can be interpreted as a typical feature of the risk society (Beck, 2002), in which individuals and media seek to hide those wasted lives deprived of the means of survival, such as, refugees, displaced persons and asylum-seekers (Bauman, 2004) in a perpetual mechanism of self-consolation.

Thus, the present study provides additional evidence with respect to those removal mechanisms that both individuals and mass media seem to carry out. Stories of migration that are not on the media, do not exist and hardly contribute to shaping the collective imaginary. They appear forgotten as though there was a media spiral of silence (Noelle-Neuman, 1974; Kim et al., 2004; Tsfati, Stroud & Chotiner, 2014), that make different representations of the migration phenomenon disappear. Moreover, it should be noted that these findings seem to be further supported by the lack of substantial and considerable differences between individuals from different geographical life-contexts, age subgroups and levels of education in the development of stereotypical socio-narrative representations. In fact, images are mainly retrieved from media contents which overemphasize a certain idea of the migration phenomenon, which focus on migrants rather than immigrants and cut out other potential depictions and possible narratives.

Conclusions and future research

This paper has shown the usefulness of socio-narrative representations both as instrument of analysis and conceptual tool to investigate the processes underlying the interpretation of social phenomena. Accordingly, it

explored how young Italians represent the migration issue and how their representations are shaped by media contents by adopting a socio-narrative approach. In fact, the analysis relied on the three core dimensions of socio-narrative representations (objectification, anchoring and narration) and on two communication studies theories (agenda setting and cultivation theory), through which 75 qualitative interviews were analysed.

The contributions of this study are manifold. First of all, it thoroughly explored what individuals think, imagine and tell, in other words, “the pictures created in people’s heads” (McCombs, 2002, p. 17) regarding the migration phenomenon. The results of this investigation, in fact, highlight the presence of a main skeleton story based on the recurring theme of travel: this elementary structure emerges from a specific objectifying image (a boat packed with African people) and few key anchoring concepts (moving, escaping, hoping) that the informants mainly derived from media contents. In fact, the main image and story converge on the figure of the migrant rather than the one of the immigrant, thereby considering an individual that is travelling rather than living in a foreign country.

Then, these findings support the striking role of media stories in *cultivating* the social imaginary regarding the migration phenomenon: an issue that is mainly experienced through media contents as personal and direct knowledge is often scarce. Hence, social representations are highly shaped by media, which daily provide to individuals a wide range of symbolic and discursive resources regarding topics that are considered more salient (*agenda-setting*).

Furthermore, this paper has adopted a narrative approach both at the conceptual and analytical level. In fact, narrations are the topic of this research (the stories elaborated by interviewees and media channels), as well as the instrument of analysis (skeleton stories). Thus, it has shown that socio-narrative representation can be a highly valuable instrument of analysis to grasp how individuals interpret social reality.

Finally, although this empirical study makes several contributions, it entails also some limitations. In fact, given that it relies on qualitative methods and on a purposeful sample of young individuals based in different parts of the North-West of Italy, it is not possible to generalise the results to the entire population of young Italians. Nonetheless, the sample was certainly adequate for the goals of this study that sought extrapolations and transferability rather than generalisability of results (Patton, 2002). Moreover, researchers were able to draw meaningful conclusions by relying on the gathered data. Further research may replicate this study in different parts of Italy, in order to compare findings and achieve results which are more generalisable. In addition, future studies may even gather and analyse data from different countries to explore how socio-narrative representations of

migration varies across different socio-cultural and geographical contexts and the role of media in this process.

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