The Emergence, Uses and Impacts of Narratives on Migration

State of the Art

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Assessing the production and impact of migration narratives

Contents

Abstract

This *Working Paper* provides an overview of social science literature on narratives, with a particular focus on narratives on migration (MiNa). The paper starts by tracing the emergence of the concept of narratives in a range of social sciences (sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology and media studies), and then outlines a working definition of the concept for use in the BRIDGES project. We then map key literature about the emergence and sources of narratives; their psychological, social and political functions; and the factors influencing their spread and prevalence. We go on to explore how the concept has been applied to understand the dynamics of mobility, displacement, integration, public attitudes and political mobilisation in migration studies. We examine some of the key themes of the literature in relation to gender, a key dimension of the BRIDGES project, and then set out a number of trends that might be expected to shape the content and diffusion of narratives.

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1. Introduction

The BRIDGES project explores the generation and impact of narratives on migration. Our core assumption is that narratives play a key role in shaping beliefs, behaviour and policy-making in the area of migration. The project explores how narratives are produced, why and how some become dominant, how narratives shape migrant decision-making, and how they impact individuals' opinions as well as political debate and policy-making. The project adopts an interdisciplinary perspective to these questions, mobilising insights and methods from social psychology, media studies, sociology, political science and history.

In this *Working Paper*, we locate the project's approach within key literature on narratives, and more specifically on migration narratives (MiNa). The paper starts by reviewing the emergence of the concept of 'narratives' in social science research (Section 1). It then draws on different approaches to develop a definition that can be used across disciplines (Section 2). This section also explores what analytical or theoretical purchase does the concept give us – compared to, for example, discourse, frames, or myths. In Section 3, we consider what literature tells us about the emotional, cognitive, social, strategic and political functions of narratives. Section 4 explores how narratives are developed and diffused, considering some of the conditions under which they gain traction and become diffused and sustained over time. Section 5 turns to consider literature applying narrative concepts and theories to migrants and to debate and policies on migration. In Section 6 we consider the role and treatment of gender in narrative construction, reflecting a key concern of the BRIDGES project. Finally, in Section 7 we consider some of the recent trends in narratives: how the content, diffusion and functions of narratives are changing, especially the light of changes in media and political dynamics.

While our review focuses on the definitions, functions, diffusion and impact of narratives more generally, we are especially interested in contributions that apply narrative theories and concepts to migration. Throughout the analysis, we provide examples of such applications in the literature. However, the review cannot hope to cover every single application of the concept of narratives to migration; instead, we select those examples we believe are most influential in the field, and/or most useful in shaping research in the BRIDGES project.

2. Narratives in Social Sciences

The concept of 'narratives' has its genesis in the humanities, and more particularly in literary studies. Czarniawska traces the development of narrative analysis through the work of Russian formalists and postformalists who analysed the underlying structures of folktales going back to the 1920s (Czarniawska 2004). Polkinghorne (1988) traces several movements that further developed this focus on texts, including the New Criticism (Northrop Frye and Robert Scholes), French narratology (Tzvetan Todorov and Roland Barthes), and German hermeneutics (including Hans-Georg Gadamer and Wolfgang Iser). French narratologists in particular were influenced by the work of Claude Levi-Strauss and linguist Noam Chomsky, who explored the evolution of the narrative in history (Czarniawska 2004). Another key figure was Paul Ricoeur, whose work examined the relation between narrative and temporality. As Czarniawska notes, these approaches shared an 'interest in texts as such, not in the authors' intentions or the circumstances of the texts' production' (14). In the 1970s, these approaches began to influence a wider range of humanities and social sciences, including historiography, sociolinguistics and sociology. Czarniawska notes that by the end of the 1970s, narrative was being picked up across political science, notably in the work of Walter R Fisher (1984); in psychology, through the work of Jerome Bruner (1987) and Donald E Polkinghorne (1988), in Sociology in the work of Laurel Richardson (1990), and in economics through Deirdre McCloskey (1990).

Within most branches of social sciences, the 'narrative turn' coincided with a turn away from positivist paradigms towards a more social constructivist approach, which favoured qualitative methods and a focus on discourse. Anthropologists were among the pioneers of this approach, arguing that cultures could not be understood without considering the mental structures underpinning them. In the early 1950s, the French anthropologist Lévi-Strauss claimed that narratives (understood as every story ever told) consist of basic elementary structures that are the same across all times and cultures and are combined following different patterns or grammatical systems. Without these structuring mechanisms, Lévi-Strauss argued, it was impossible to make sense of the world and of life itself (1958). In the 1960s and 1970s, this approach also shaped epistemological discussions on how to study culture. For instance, Clifford Geertz (1973) argued that cultural analysis is never complete as it is limited to an 'interpretation of interpretations' where anthropologists can only give meaning to the web of meanings that constitutes culture.

Sociologists also began to explore the role of narratives in understanding communication in sociological research. This strand of research is captured in the work of Richardson (1990), who argued that narrative construction was central to the way sociologists drew on data to make sense of their objects of enquiry. As she writes, 'all social scientific writing depends upon narrative structure and narrative devices… The issue is not whether sociology should use the narrative, but which narratives will be provided to the reader' (1990, 117). Other work in sociology emphasised the central role of narratives in shaping individual identities and behaviour (Somers and Gibson 1994). As Somers and Gibson put it, 'social life is itself storied', implying that 'narrative is an *ontological condition of social* life' (1994, 2). Drawing on the work of psychologist Polkinghorne, narrative was identified as the primary way through which people organise their experiences into meaningful episodes (Polkinghorne 1988, 1).

In political sociology and political science, the turn to narratives can be located in a broader interest that emerged in the 1970s in the social construction of policy problems. This literature eschewed the notion that policy problems were objective features of the world, instead emphasising how different actors selected features of social issues to emphasise, through 'framing', 'issue selection', 'problem construction' or agenda-setting. In these contexts, narratives were not simply a device for communicating complex material; they also had a generative effect, shaping social action. As Jones and McBeth identify (2010), key contributions in this field were offered by Thomas J. Kaplan (1986), Maarten A. Hajer (1993), Frank Fischer (Fischer and Forrester 1993; Fischer 2003), Emery Roe (1994) and Deborah Stone (1997, 2002). These approaches can also be related to the increased interest in the role of ideas in shaping political behaviour, as captured in historical, sociological, and discursive institutionalism.

Within psychology, narratives have been adopted as a tool for understanding people's attitudes, beliefs, intentions, and behaviours (Braddock and Dillard 2016). As in other social sciences, the interest in studying narratives in psychology reflected a shift from purely positivist approaches towards a more social constructivist view of the mind. This view recognized the study of individuals' subjectivities (e.g., their personal accounts of the world) as critical in understanding and better predicting key outcomes such as psychological adjustment, social and personal identities, and socio-political attitudes (McAdams 2006). Narratives in psychology are understood as storied accounts of connected events that people construct in order to deal – both emotionally and cognitively – with meaningful experiences. Such narratives permeate our everyday psychological experience. As Sarbin writes (1986, 8), 'human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures.' The concept of narratives has also been widely embraced within media studies, especially from the so-called 'cultural turn', with its focus on representations. Much of the theoretical elaboration of the approach was produced at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, under the direction of Stuart Hall. This work influenced the field of media studies, resulting in a greater focus on discourses and on narratives.

3. Definitions

While the concept of narratives has been deployed across multiple disciplines, we can nonetheless identify a number of common features in the way the term is understood. In its most basic sense, the concept of narrative refers to a sequence of chronologically and logically related events from which humans can learn (Toolan 2001). Narratives are characterised by displacement – the events told in stories are spatially and/or temporally remote (Todorov 1977), taking the form of historical interpretations (Hammack and Pilecki 2012). They are also characterised by transformation, as they generally present a progression from a crisis to a resolution (Todorov 1977). As Ryan writes, 'the sequence of events must form a unified causal chain and lead to closure' (Ryan 2007, 29). Narratives involve a prescriptive and diagnostic dimension, identifying the issue at stake and how to resolve it (Rein and Schon 1991, 1996), and they also contain information about the setting, characters and their motivation (Braddock and Dillard 2016, 446).

A useful conceptualisation that captures these elements is provided by Jones and McBeth (2010, 329). Reviewing the literature on narratives, they complain that 'narrative remains a mysterious and elusive concept in public theory, too associated with literature theory, too superfluous to underpin theory building, and too nebulous to facilitate the empirical investigation of policy processes and outcomes' (2010, 330-331). They therefore propose a more rigorous definition which can be empirically falsified – 'clear enough to be wrong.' They set out the following definition, which integrates the features we identified above:

> 'A narrative is a story with a temporal sequence of events unfolding in a plot that is populated by dramatic moments, symbols, and archetypal characters that culminates in a moral to the story.' (Jones and McBeth 2010, 329)

Jones and McBeth specify that narratives must possess the following qualities:

1. a setting or context;
2. a plot with temporal dimension (beginning, middle, end) that sets out relationships between characters, settings and identified causal mechanisms;
3. heroes, villains and victims;
4. a moral of the story, and implied solutions.

It is worth noting that this list of properties produces a narrower definition of narratives than is often deployed in psychology, where these features may be implicitly detectable, but not clearly present in all instances of what may be termed 'narrative.'

Narratives are reproduced through the discourse and cultural products of societies, including education, myth, and commemorative practices (Hammack and Pilecki 2012, 76). This makes them amenable to analysis by a range of social science disciplines. Narratives can be found in the media, in political communication, and in the way individuals and groups describe their beliefs, attitudes, identities and histories. By definition, narratives are characterised by a certain degree of stability and consistency over time and/or across space (Jacobs 2015). As noted above, they include assumptions about causality, good and bad, responsibility and consequences. Though narratives must broadly align with the knowledge available in a particular setting (thus meeting basic conditions of consistency and plausibility – Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011), they can be representationally inaccurate (and recognizably so) and include a contradictory set of beliefs. In fact, their semantic and/or moral ambiguity may provide appeal to various actors (Hajer 1995).

These features of narratives – their stability and capacity to sequence complex, emotive and morally charged ideas in a compelling and accessible format – distinguish them from other concepts such as

'frames' or 'discourse.' Framing is a process that refers to the selection and presentation of particular dimensions of an issue. Framing makes these selected aspects more salient, 'in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (Entman 1993). In media studies, a frame is a 'central organising idea' (Gamson and Modigliani 1989, 143), an angle through which a story can be told and becomes meaningful. Frames may be linked with broader phenomena or issues (Fishman 1978). Such frames can be used to compare different ways to select and highlight. While such selection is also a feature of narrative, framing does not involve a sequential dimension; nor does it necessarily involve a plot and characters and a denouement in the sense identified above.

In linguistics and discourse analysis, discourse is defined as a fully developed communicative situation (Dijk 1997). Following the work of Foucault, we can understand such discourse as capturing a much broader system of knowledge, thought and communication (Foucault 2002). For Foucault, discourse constructs our experience of the world and is formed by a circuit of power/knowledge, where power is constituted through accepted forms of knowledge, scientific understanding and 'truth', and knowledge arises from practices of power. When it comes to media and migration, therefore, the use of the concept of discourse often implies a reflection on the ideological uses of discourse on migration, asylum, and integration: how they are utilised to conceal, justify, or make sense of social practices of power and relations of domination.

Another related concept is that of myths. Myths are enduring cultural stories about some aspect of society, which tend to be formulaic and metaphoric, often repeating the interpretation that culture makes of itself, with familiar characters and predictable outcomes (Lule 1995). In turn, myths apply their symbolic power to social narratives over time (Slotkin 1992), informing how media stories are told.

4. The Functions of Narratives

Narratives have multiple functions for social actors, and these have been well covered in social science literature. Narratives help people deal with meaningful experiences, both cognitively and emotionally. From a cognitive perspective, they allow individuals and collectives to organise, group and understand complex material, making it coherent and accessible (Sahin-Mencutek 2020). They allow individuals and collectives to organise, process and convey information (Jones and McBeth 2010). Narratives are particularly important in situations where the social reality is complex and difficult to make sense of (Murray 2003); that is, when it is difficult to agree on the nature and meaning of a particular phenomenon, a narrative will provide structure and meaning and facilitate information processing and learning.

On an emotional level, narratives fulfil a need for collective solidarity through creating shared meaning. Hammack and Pilecki (2012, 77) refer to this as a form of 'narrative engagement, through which members of a society engage with collective stories of what it means to inhabit a particular political entity, be it a nation-state, a resistance movement, or a political party.' Narratives also help link individual emotions and cognition to wider social discourse. As Hammack and Pilecki argue, narratives serve 'to create a sense of personal coherence and collective solidarity and to legitimize collective beliefs, emotions and actions.' As Casebeer and Russell argue, 'stories influence our ability to recall events, motivate people to act, modulate our emotional reactions to events, cue certain heuristics and biases, structure or problem-solving capabilities, and ultimately perhaps even constitute our very identity' (2005, 9).

Narratives also play an important role in communication and persuasion. They allow agents to convey complex ideas in an accessible and compelling way. They also allow audiences to identify with characters

(Igartua 2010), becoming emotionally drawn into otherwise distant or abstract situations and contexts. Psychology has shown that the narratives individuals are exposed to (i.e., individuals as receivers of narratives) can affect their opinions and views through narrative-persuasion processes (Braddock and Dillard 2016); in turn, individuals then rely on this knowledge to construct their own narratives. (i.e., individuals as makers of narratives).The psychological processes involved in the processing of narratives on the one hand, and the production/ reproduction of narratives on the other, are thus intrinsically linked (Kashima 2000).

Flowing from this communicative function, narratives also have a more productive or generative role, enabling powerful forms of influence or manipulation. Social actors can strategically manipulate social meanings, for example through portraying certain groups as undeserving or deviant (Jones and Radaelli 2015). This communicative function has been extensively discussed and applied in literature on the media, and on politics. In media studies, media narratives make reality intelligible to the public helping 'naturalise and portray as commonsensical the ideology that informs' the selection of just this story, handled in just this way (White 1997, 111, cited in Toolan 2001). In political science, scholars have shown how narratives can influence policy change (Crow and Jones 2018), strategically deploying such narratives to mobilise support and shore up power in policy processes. Policy actors use narratives to 'strategically craft policy narratives to resonate with the public, relevant stakeholders, and governmental decision makers' (Shanahan, Jones, and McBeth 2011, 536). They do so through deploying tactics such as the use of policy symbols, which are emotionally charged rhetoric characterising opponents in a negative light; or policy surrogates, which involves using simple policy problems as surrogate for more contentious issues (Shanahan, Jones and McBeth 2011). Such narratives influence elites, 'which in turn most certainly drive both policy change and policy outcomes.' More specifically, narratives can be strategically deployed 1) to expand issues and increase coalitions; 2) to maintain coalition status quo; and 3) to 'strategically shifting value dimensions of a debate to beneficially restructure political coalitions' (Jones and McBeth 2010, 346). Indeed, Shanahan, Jones and McBeth argue that policies are themselves 'translations of beliefs that are communicated through policy narratives' (2011, 540).

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Such narratives are also important in constructing shared historical memory. Narratives of history can be a persuasive tool for framing collective memory (Hammack and Pilecki 2012). They can convey, among other things, continuity or change, and responsibility (Kirkwood 2018), thereby affecting communal identities (self/us versus other/they) (Sahin-Mencutek 2020, 2). They are prevalent in discourse on nation-building and nationalism, shaping conceptions of collective history and identity, including in relation to migrants (Triandafyllidou 1999; Somers and Gibson 1994).

In conveying social classifications and collective representations, narratives also function as boundary markers: conceptual distinctions that have the effect of categorising objects, people, practices and even time and space (Wimmer 2008). In this sense, narratives may serve to create, maintain, contest or even dissolve institutionalised social differences. Narratives thus play a fundamental role in uniting and separating people, but also in generating feelings of affinity, solidarity and group membership. These distinctions may result not only in symbolic notions of 'Us' and 'Them' but also in influencing and legitimising social boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, thus determining differential access to civil, social and political rights.

5. Diffusion and Impact

We now turn to explore social science insights regarding how narratives are diffused, and the impacts they have on behaviour and beliefs.

We start by considering how narratives exert influence at the individual level. In the field of social psychology, research has examined how narratives affect people's attitudes, beliefs, intentions, and behaviours through narrative-persuasion processes (Braddock and Dillard 2016). A narrative may persuade by reducing reactance, counter arguing, or selective avoidance, and by increasing/decreasing perceptions of self or group control (Moyer-Gusé 2008). Exposure to a persuasive narrative thus produces story-consistent cognitive, affective, and behavioural changes. Not surprisingly, narratives have been linked to support for controversial political policies (Igartua 2010), improved health (Hinyard and Kreuter 2007), and recruitment into terrorist groups (Casebeer and Russell 2005). The psychological process involved in the processing of narratives (i.e., individuals as receivers of narratives) on the one hand, and the production/ reproduction of narratives (i.e., individuals as makers of narratives) on the other, are intrinsically linked (Kashima 2000). Narratives are a form of normative influence that shapes the opinions and views of individuals, who themselves then rely on this knowledge to construct narratives. In other words, one can say that individuals are narratively-shaped shapers of narratives.

Research in communication science has explored the effects of basic narrative features such as degree of fictionality and medium of presentation on people´s opinions. Braddock and Dillard found that fictionality does not cancel out the effects of narrative, as people are naturally inclined to belief and may not actively engage in undoing the creation of the story world; however, the findings are somewhat ambiguous (2016, 461). Similar findings emerge from media studies, where analysis of news about migration and minorities has shown that the constructed-ness of the story goes unnoticed, and lay people reproduce in everyday talk stereotypes conveyed by the information (Dijk 1987). There is no evidence to suggest that the medium of presentation affects the persuasiveness of narratives (Braddock and Dillard 2016). By contrast, the effect of informational framing (stressing certain aspects of reality and pushing others into the background) on individuals' opinions is much more robust (Scheufele 2004). There is also evidence that framing effects are surprisingly persistent in the socio-political domain (Lecheler and De Vreese 2011). Moderately knowledgeable individuals display the most persistent framing effects, while framing effects for individuals with high or low levels of political knowledge dissipated much quicker. Through framing, certain schemas (such as perceptions of threat versus opportunity) become more cognitively accessible (i.e., primed), and guide the interpretation of subsequent related information.

Surprisingly, psychology research on the impact of framing on opinion has almost exclusively focused on the role of 'valence' (describing an event or object in positive versus negative terms) and failed to examine other framing factors. However, the field of narrative psychology, with its focus on the study of individual narrative construction, and how personal narratives are a window into individual's personalities, identities, and socio-political attitudes (see, for example, McAdams and McLean 2013; Hammack and Pilecki 2012, points to several other key narrative features that might function as frames and influence individual cognition. One example of such a feature is 'complexity.' Complex narratives have more characters and interwoven plots involving a greater degree of ideational elaboration and suggest multiple meanings and ambiguous resolutions. Other features that may influence cognition include 'affective tone' (use of positive versus negative emotion terms), and 'social boundary' (use of particular pronouns denoting in-group and out-group distinctions). There is thus a need for research that examines the (separate and joint) influence of these different framing factors on individuals' opinions and subsequent narratives.

Scholarship on policy narratives has also analysed which features of narratives are likely to be most persuasive. Jones and McBeth (2010) argue that narratives that breach canonicity (understood as normalcy or banality),

thus changing the way we view the world, are more likely to be persuasive. However, they also suggest that narratives are more persuasive if they are largely congruent with existing belief systems, which may appear to contradict the claim about breaching canonicity. A further importance aspect is trust in the narrator, or source of the narrative, which will increase the credibility and thus persuasiveness of the narrative (Jones and McBeth 2010, 343-344).

Turning to the dimension of public opinion, there has been extensive research in political science and media studies on how narratives come to influence public attitudes and political behaviour. Research in media studies has explored the conditions under which narratives emerge from two main perspectives. The first is through ethnographic studies of journalism (Gans 1979; Tuchman and Tuchman 1978; Fishman 1990). An important aspect of this is the way in which certain actors are able to produce dominant narratives – in the case of migration, institutions involved in managing migration (Maneri 2011), which become a regular source of information for journalist, thereby translating public officials accounts into a 'public idiom' (Hall et al. 1978; Fowler 1991). In the same vein, news values – i.e., the necessary qualities of 'good news', such as consonance, dramatisation, negativity, unexpectedness, unambiguity (Galtung and Ruge 1965; Chibnall 1977; Gans 1979) – explain in part the sensationalistic, simplistic and stigmatising narratives on migrants.

A key event, or a series of similar events, triggers disproportionate attention – as compared to routine coverage – both as a consequence of its initial characteristics but also, more interestingly, because media practitioners tend to emulate each other's news themes and define newsworthiness in relation to other news-outlets coverage.

One interesting exception to this deductive approach is the visual ethnography of the coverage of the death of Alan Kurdi, the toddler who drowned in the Mediterranean whose picture became viral. This wide circulation transformed the debate and narratives on the 'migrant crisis', at least in the short-term, which began to be called 'refugee crisis' (Parker, Naper and Goodman 2018). In this case, the facilitating conditions for the circulation of the picture were the availability of a polished image (with no signs of the damage done to the body after drowning), the fair-skinned complexion of the child, which facilitated the public's identification with his parents, and especially the circulation of the picture on Twitter, generated by journalists' and activists' connections between their personal accounts (Vis and Goriunova 2015). In other words, the image spread not because of traditional and online media coverage, but first and foremost through Twitter.

A second approach to studying the conditions for the emergence of narratives analyses patterns of attention, notably how certain narratives elicit sudden bursts of attention and drama over particular episodes. The model of 'media hypes' (Wien and Elmelund-Præstekær 2009; P. L. M. Vasterman 2005) is centred on the mechanisms of media activation (see also Kepplinger and Habermeier 1995). A key event, or a series of similar events, triggers disproportionate attention – as compared to routine coverage – both as a consequence of its initial characteristics but also, more interestingly, because media practitioners tend to emulate each other's news themes and define newsworthiness in relation to other news-outlets coverage. Once perceived as newsworthy, the theme is further covered and amplified actively looking for similar incidents, public officials and politicians' actions and reactions. This process happened frequently regarding MiNa, especially in relation to news coverage of crimes committed by foreigners (Vasterman 2005; Maneri 2018).

A different model, that of moral panic (Cohen 2011), is more interested in the role of 'moral entrepreneurs' in the collective labelling of deviance. In a moral panic, 'a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their

diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible' (Cohen 2011, 1). As Márton Ger ans Endré Sik show in their work on Hungarian politics, such moral entrepreneurs can also be part of government (Gerő and Sik 2020). In this criminological model, the spread of narratives that provoke moral outrage is linked to a generalised societal reaction to an episode seen as a surface manifestation of a more profound crisis. In this reaction, moral entrepreneurs, electing themselves as guardians of the moral community menaced from the outside, take the lead in constructing stereotyped and dramatized narratives. In studies that applied the moral panic model to racial minorities (Hall et al. 1978) or migrants (Maneri 2001), narratives about minorities' wrongdoing find exceptionally favourable conditions in a kind of mediatised ritual (Cottle 2006) where roles are scripted from the start. The media play a part that is more important than initially considered (Critcher 2003; Maneri 2013).

The interplay between the process of news-making and the role of political parties and leaders, social movements and civic society organisations (including their use of social media) is usefully developed in the agenda-building approach. However, this research agenda is very complex, and it has been seldom applied empirically. Pogliano and Ponzo (2020) have analysed the agenda-building processes of two relevant Italian local events involving refugees: the attempts of migrants to reach other European countries through Central Station of Milan, from 2013 onwards; and the utilisation of abandoned buildings in Turin by refugees who had been granted humanitarian status but remained trapped in Italy and unable to access housing or work. The research concluded that the cohesion of local policy networks, understood as shared frameworks and operational cooperation, strengthened their 'narrative autonomy', namely their ability to produce public narratives and impact those of the media. Alongside the cohesion of the local policy networks, the presence of a cohesive local media community, i.e., a group of journalists sharing the same definition of the situation and exchanging information and contacts, was key in developing positive and coherent media narratives.

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Research on policy narratives has traced how and why actors diffuse particular narratives. Shanahan, Jones and McBeth (2011) argue that stakeholders form coalitions based on congruent policy beliefs and desired policy outcomes, and these coalitions then generate policy narratives. Such narratives portray the coalition as winning (implying a preference to contain the issue, restrict participation and maintain the status quo); or as losing (implying a preference for issue expansion and disrupts the status quo by engendering policy change). 'Losing stories' are likely to deploy policy narratives tactics, including policy symbols and policy surrogates, through which relatively straightforward problems are used as a proxy for debating larger and more controversial topics (Nie 2003, 314). Shanahan, McBeth and Hathaway (2011) show that the media can adopt policy narratives that are strategically constructed to influence public opinion towards preferred policy outcomes (see also Shanahan et al. 2008). Their findings suggest that media narratives impact the public both by consolidating the position of audiences with congruent opinions, and by 'converting' audiences with divergent opinions. However, studies have also been at pains to show the distinct role of the media in shaping narratives. Rather than representing mere conduits for narratives developed by such coalitions, the media actively promotes particular problem definitions and wordings that lead their audiences to particular interpretations and forms of reasoning (Thorbjørnsrud 2015).

Media studies has also explored the contexts under which certain types of myths emerge and gain traction. Key concepts here are the notions of 'subversion myths' and 'atrocity tales.' While the narratives produced by authorities are generally reassuring, subversion myths (a concept initially developed in folklore studies) and atrocity tales serve different functions. A subversion myth explains why things are

going wrong, why established customs and traditions are threatened, and who is responsible. Myths of subversion demonise individuals or groups by holding them responsible for evils. They are usually accompanied by 'atrocity tales' (Bromley, Shupe and Ventimiglia 1979) or 'horror stories': actual or imagined events, typically disseminated by social movements to mobilise support for their cause. Such atrocity tales depict all that is wrong with their enemies, with the aim of evoking a sense of outrage and reaction against these supposed villains.

Media studies have also explored the concept of substantiation: the extent to which narratives are backed by reliable factual documentation. Concepts such as 'rumour' or 'urban legend' are hearsay that lack substantiation, and are 'told, believed, and passed on not because of the weight of the evidence but because of the expectations by tellers that they are true in the first place' (Rosnow and Fine 1976). Rumours tend to surface in times of uncertainty and anxiety, to make sense of events of topical importance. Rumours are a substitute for news, replacing news when institutionalised actors are silent or perceived as unreliable; they are an effort at collective problem-solving (Shibutani 1966). With its unofficial, subterranean, deflected information, we can also conceive fake news in similar terms. What qualifies such news is not so much the falsity of narratives being invoked: official news can be false, and fake news can be true but partial, out of context, or distorted. Similarly to rumours and urban legends, fake news is characterised by its being misleading and viral (Venturini 2019). On the surface, these kinds of narratives appear to be about specific people and events; yet they actually have a general, mythical nature.

6. Migration Narratives

Narratives have been extensively applied to the analysis of migration. In the BRIDGES project, we understand such narratives to cover both narratives about migration processes including the causes and dynamics of international movement; and narratives about the life courses, experiences, behaviour and effects of migrants settled in host countries. Within each of these categories, De Fina and Tseng identify two broad groups of research on migration narratives (MiNa): those focusing on the 'types of representations that migrants construct about their identities, experiences, values, and relations with out- groups, through storytelling', or what we could term narratives *of* or *by* migrants; and those that explore 'storytelling as a practice within migrant communities and institutions that deal with migrants' or narratives *about* migrants (De Fina and Tseng 2017, 382). As both of these dimensions are examined in the BRIDGES project, we will briefly consider key literature from each in turn.

In literature on narratives of migrants, personal narratives of the migrant experience in the form of life story narratives or biographical interviews can help understand and communicate the complex factors shaping migration decisions and lived experience (Sahin-Mencutek 2020, 16), providing them with insight into the 'hidden, subtle meanings people assign to their life experiences' (Czarniawska 2004, 24). De Fina and Tseng suggest that research on the lived experiences of migrants (protagonists of stories) offers a counterbalance to 'the often-negative views about marginalized social groups circulated through political discourse and the mainstream media' (2017, 382). As Sahin-Mencutek notes in her overview of this literature, research on migrants' narratives has often focused on charting migration journeys, including through ethnographic approaches. Such studies are valuable in exposing the suffering and abuse that many migrants experience travelling to countries of destination, and can also debunk hegemonic narratives about migratory processes, or assumptions about the motivations of migrants and refugees.

Scholars have observed the very limited voice that migrants and refugees possess in media narratives about them. Since the Kerner Commission (1968), this question has been analysed several times in many Western States and media outlets (for a comparative EU analysis, see Bennett, Kendall, and

McDougall 2011). Squire et al. (2021) recently drew on a large-scale project to narrate the testimonies of migrants, whose 'unheard voices' are crowded out by hegemonic discourses on the 'migrant crisis.'

Studies have also explored the inter-relationship between narratives *by* and *on* migration narratives. For example, studies have examined the impact of official campaigns developed by those seeking to regulate flows on migrants' narratives on migration. Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud (2018) explored how information campaigns by European governments and institutions affected potential migrants in two African countries. They showed how European Governments and institutions had adopted the techniques and plots of the personalized, dramatic and emotional mass media narrative, by using a simple and affective language, employing both the plots of a threat and a hero narratives, and by addressing potential migrants through either the direct 'you' – 'you can risk your life', or by conveying the personal stories of sympathetic and morally worthy migrants who have decided to stay – in their home country (Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2018).

However, a far larger body of literature has focused on the second variety of MiNa: narratives on or about migrants. Research has analysed both constructions of immigrants, as well as narratives around multi-culturalism, race and citizenship. This latter theme has been prevalent in media studies research. For example, research has identified the Islamisation of migration narratives, especially in Germany and in the Netherlands (Yildiz 2009; Roggeband and Vliegenthart 2007; D'Haenens and Bink 2006; Morgan and Poynting 2016), but also in Norway, after the white supremacist terrorist attack in Utoya in July 2011 (Wiggen 2012). Studies have observed a 'boundary shifting' from ethnic or national boundaries and categorisation to those related to religion and religious belonging (Lamont and Molnàr 2002; Wimmer 2013). Clemons et al. (2020) applied a narrative framework to analyse Islamophobia, analysing the power of facts versus the power of narrative in shaping individual opinion towards Muslims.

Much of the literature has focused on the (increasingly) stringent and securitised nature of narratives on migration in the media. Media studies have identified the frequent adoption of humanitarian and the securitarian (public order) frames to produce MiNa.

Much of the literature has focused on the (increasingly) stringent and securitised nature of narratives on migration in the media. Media studies have identified the frequent adoption of humanitarian and the securitarian (public order) frames to produce MiNa. In particular, the ambiguous construction of refugees in the media as threats or victims highlighted this aspect of framing (Gorp 2005; Chouliaraki 2012). Thus, for example, D'Amato and Lucarelli (2019) chart national newspaper coverage of key political events related to European politics and migration between 2014 and 2018. They identify an increasing normalisation of extreme and anti-immigrant claims in all cases. They also argue that the counter-narrative of 'humanitarian' predominantly depicts migrants as victims, hence denying their subjectivity, agency and actorness.

Benson (2013), in his review of the media and migration academic literature, offered a synthesis of MiNa in the media as a field dominated by three immigration frames: threat frames (which focus on jobs, public order, fiscal and national cohesion), victim frames (focused on global economy, humanitarianism and racism/xenophobia) and hero frames (invoking themes of the good worker, cultural diversity, and integration). These frames replicate the characters through which most narratives develop: the villain, the victim and the hero. In media MiNa, the role of the villain is primarily ascribed to racialised and criminalised migrants (especially Muslim) and by refugees portrayed as fiscal or public order threat. Within the humanitarian frame, the role of the victim is mainly ascribed to refugees, but also to migrants under the topic of the violence of state regulation or racist and xenophobic acts. Migrants often interpret the role of hero as 'good workers' and those who enthusiastically adopt mainstream cultural mores or civic obligations. Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017) analyse news articles on the 2015 refugee 'crisis'

across eight European countries. They identify three different linguistic practices through which refugee voices are managed in the news, which they refer to as forms of 'bordering': bordering by silencing, which involves the marginalisation of voices of refugees; bordering by collectivization, whereby groups remain unknowable and nameless; and by de-contextualization, which abstracts the plight of refugees from its more nuanced and historical context. They conclude that the distribution of voice in European news follows a strict hierarchy that relies on specifically journalistic strategies of selection and bordering. Laine (2020) seeks to counter securitised narratives on migration to Europe, in particular questioning the narrative of 'crisis' propagated by political leaders in the EU and European countries.

Similar frames have been shown to operate in photojournalism, with images that support the media MiNa functioning through the frames of threat, victim, or hero (Gariglio Pogliano, and Zanini 2010). For instance, in Italy, the redefinition of migrants as desperate (Pogliano and Solaroli 2012), deploying humanitarian images of the arrivals of migrants by sea, plays a crucial role in offering the possibility of framing migrants as threats or victims. By presenting migrants as passive and providing the image of passive desperation as the key image to interpret migration, it becomes easy to link those images with certain forms of criminality or the stereotyped humanitarian victim image (see also Chouliaraki 2012).

Despite the widespread perception that some MiNa and their political exploitation may have had a significant effect on electoral results, there are no rigorous studies of MiNa's impact, as they are complicated to design. The empirical evidence available is often qualitative and small-scale, and limited to specific case studies.

Studies focusing on policy narratives have analysed the strategic use of narratives on migration by political leaders. Jones and McBeth (2020) deploy their concept of 'winning' and 'losing' narratives to analyse Trump's strategic use of narratives on illegal migration. They argue that Trump is 'spinning a loser's tale' by blaming 'undocumented migrants and refugees for increased costs', crime, and for taking the jobs of Americans (100-101). Kirkwood (2017) shows how discourse on refugees can be 'humanised', charting the functions and effects of the use of 'human beings' as a category in debates on the European refugee 'crisis' in UK parliamentary debates. Such conceptualisations reinforce processes of othering and the understanding of migration as a binary phenomenon where some are supposed to win ('Us') and others to lose ('Them').

However, less research has been carried out on the impacts of these narratives on public attitudes. Instead, the role of MiNa is typically conceived as a struggle over public meaning, captured by Gramscian ideas of hegemony and counter-hegemony, or by theories of agenda-setting. Indeed, despite the widespread perception that some MiNa and their political exploitation may have had a significant effect on electoral results, there are no rigorous studies of MiNa's impact, as they are complicated to design. The empirical evidence available is often qualitative and small-scale, and limited to specific case studies. In Italy, Maneri (2019) has described three 'cycles of vindication and criminalisation' that occurred in 1997-2001, 2007-2009, and 2015-2018, each targeting a different group: Albanians, Romanians and asylum seekers. These cycles were characterised by a common pattern. First, xenophobic leaders advanced claims about government 'laxity' over threats created by migration ('vindication'). Government forces then tried to appear tough on immigration, so as not to expose themselves to criticism and loss of electoral support ('catch-up'). An episode or series of episodes in the news embodying the phenomenon that triggers so much bipartisan concern then received exceptional media coverage, accompanied by pressing narratives of threat, and these narratives then became the fetish used by the opposition to attack the government weakness on immigration ('crisis'). The main issue then became the determination to confront the 'emergency', which became a key tactic for whipping up support in elections and contributed to the victory of the opposition ('conquest'). Once in government, the political entrepreneurs of fear kept the tension high for a year or so, with executive and legislative

measures showing their determination ('solution'). The new order promoted other cascading provisions that targeted migrants more generally with harsh measures ('criminalisation'); and the final outcome was that the government, satisfied with its display of force, stopped playing up the threat and returned to business as usual ('quiescence').

7. The Role of Gender

Compared to the relation between Media MiNa and race and class, gender has been less investigated in these studies. This has partly to do with the invisibility of refugees and migrants as a gendered phenomenon, despite the increasing feminisation of migration flows. As stated in the *Gender guidelines on how to include the gender perspective in the analysis of migration narratives* (Güell and Parella 2021), there are studies confirming the absence or low presence of women in the news on migrants and refugees (Lind and Meltzer 2020; CCME/WACC Europe 2017; Masanet Ripoll and Ripoll Arcacia 2008).

However, some studies examine gender constructions in media MiNa, such as those on the so-called honour crimes (Reimers 2007 for Sweden, Giomi and Tonello 2013 for Italy). This scholarship shows how these stories produce narratives of migrants' culture interpreted (and generalised) as violent and patriarchal. By contrast, Western culture is not seen as influenced by patriarchy and by violence against women, despite the high rates of domestic violence that still characterise Western countries. In Germany and the Netherlands, Scholten et al. (2012) have stressed how episodes of domestic violence in immigrants' families have produced news waves about honour crimes that influenced public opinion, generating a consensus for civic integration policies, especially in relation to civic tests in cases of family reunification. In Italy, news waves of this kind have led to a neat separation between episodes of domestic violence, which include only natives and are described through the axis of gender, and episodes of domestic violence which include only migrants and are explained recurring to religious or ethnic culture. This selective separation reproduces the 'Us versus Them' mantra, perpetuating ideas of civilisation versus barbarity (Pogliano 2015), deploying homogenous social constructs. Work by Belloni, Pastore and Timmerman (2018) found that women in the 'refugee crisis' of 2015-16 were systematically obscured both in statistical terms (with very few statistics by gender produced) and qualitative (through the routine reduction of female migrants to the role of 'vulnerable victims.' In this sense, the representations of migrant women express 'otherness,' charged with 'culturalisation' in essentialist and homogeneous terms. In this way, culture is used to explain women's behaviours and they are mainly described as incapacitated by their cultures, with a lack of autonomy (Giorgi 2012, 87). Moreover, such interpretations ignore the interrelation of different axes of inequalities (i.e., an intersectional perspective) and their contextualisation within structural and complex relationships of power in reception societies.

Images of women have also been used to reproduce the victim (humanitarian) frame in producing media and political MiNa on asylum seekers (Lenette 2017), while the threat frame is rendered through images of men (Maneri 2021). In her analysis of media coverage of the 'Cologne' episode, Boulila and Carri (2017) shows how misogyny is projected onto racialised others, with media narratives emphasising the need to 'educate' Muslim men on 'European values' of gender and sexual equality. Gray and Franck (2019) identify how tropes of racialised, masculinised threat and racialised, feminised vulnerability has characterised narratives of the European refugee 'crisis.' In this context, institutions and NGOs may also reproduce the 'rescue' frame, where they appear as the 'saviours' or 'heroes' of defenceless migrant women. Such an approach fails to distinguish between real victims (for example of sex trafficking) and women who deliberately go into prostitution being aware of the consequences (Oloruntoba et al. 2018). This study also highlights how narratives may be built and propagated at the macro or meso level by institutions or civil society organisations, respectively.

Images of white (Eastern European) women employed as caregivers and domestic workers have been used in MiNa in certain countries to build the frame of the good migrant (Gariglio Pogliano, and Zanini 2010). In Italy, this narrative led to a regularisation decree that was explicitly addressed to domestic workers and caregivers, and which was strongly influenced by gender-oriented representations. When not presented as heroes within the frame of cultural integration (Muslim women who want to live a 'Western life', a desire symbolised in our media by the symbolic act of removing the veil), or within the frame of good workers, women are often treated as victims (asylum seekers, prostitutes, or victims of patriarchy) (Korteweg 2017). Moreover, migrant women's representation in the media has also been studied as a process of over-sexualisation (Pogliano and Gariglio 2013). Other studies undertaken in Italy have identified five main framings to represent migrant women: a) the maid, a reassuring image of migrant women working in Italian homes; b) the prostitute, dependent and subordinate; c) Muslim women, also dependent and subordinate, and embedded in their culture (forced marriages, female circumcision, and veiling are all included in this frame of cultural – coercive – choices); d) emancipated (and westernised) migrant women, with autonomy, independence and good values; and c) migrant mothers, represented as mainly ignorant and poor, subordinated either to their life circumstances, their family, or their culture (Giorgi 2012; Campani 2001).

Another example of a MiNa with a policy impact (in this case, a circular migration policy) is represented by the feminisation of agricultural work in the red berries sector of the enclave of Huelva (south of Spain). At the end of 1990s, the selection criteria changed from recruiting mainly migrant men to migrant women, alleging the need to hire workers with stereotyped feminine skills (delicateness, tidiness) and character (obedient and responsible) (Gualda 2012; Gadea et al. 2015). This narrative was spread by employment agencies, institutions and farmers and has been especially present in the *modus operandi* of the Spanish recruitment in origin programme (*Gestión Colectiva de Contrataciones en Origen*), which for the last ten years has only hired Moroccan women from poor and rural areas, with family responsibilities and little education. This programme brings in the 'travelling' of gender ideologies and roles around honour and confinement from Morocco to Spain (Hellio and Moreno 2017).

The last aspect of interest is that when analysing MiNa, gender needs to be linked with other structural social divisions in order to fully comprehend the reproduction of inequalities, hierarchies and power affecting men and women from a holistic point of view. In this sense, intersectional perspectives sometimes link nation, race and gender (and sometimes also class) to analyse the reproduction of community as white, male and middle-class oriented (Giuliani 2019; Ličen and Billings 2013). However, this scholarship is more centred on cultural than on media studies and only seldom analyses news media related to MiNa.

8. Trends in Narratives

We now turn to explore some of the trends identified in narratives on migration and tease out some expectations or hypotheses about how narratives and their use might be evolving in the media, political debate and policy-making.

First, we can identify changes in the use of narratives in the media. Journalism studies distinguishes between news stories written in narrative or non-narrative form (Schudson 1982). Typical hard news, or straight news, have a more organised structure, also known as the 'inverted pyramid style.' The text is organised, with an 'instalment method' (Dijk 1988), in 'satellites' each related to the lead—i.e., the opening sentence of a news story; the order of events and the order of the story are totally disconnected (Bell 1991); the content of the text does not present a plot but, instead, decontextualised, 'important facts', quotes from proper sources, and verbal reactions. By contrast,

more 'classical' storytelling emphasises characters and their human experience, including more detailed descriptions of the setting and a cinematic picture of (some) events in their unfolding, with rising and falling tension. This 'storytelling mode' is used mainly, but not limited to, in feature stories and soft news. Journalism studies has observed that the use of narrative forms of news reporting is increasing, linked to a more general narrative turn.

This has implications for the nature of news, rendering it more persuasive, and also enhancing the scope for subjective interpretation. In the news as storytelling, the interpretation is more 'closed.' The organisation of the news story, like any narrative, conveys ideas about causes and effects, justifications, contextualisation, implications, appraisal and attribution of agency and responsibility to the different characters. The explanation is 'woven into the narrative tissue' (Ricoeur 2016, 278). The focus on characters, our identification with their experience, and their connections with events help establish who is affected and responsible for the crisis in that particular representation, resulting in more explicit moral evaluations (Jones and McBeth 2010). The writing of news-as-stories is more subjective. While journalists say that news based on the inverted pyramid style is a story that writes itself, which is no guarantee of objectivity (Tuchman 1972), storytelling involves decisions that determine the specific characters, plot and causal implications.

There is also extensive discussion about the changing *content* of narratives. In the area of migration studies, many contributions, as we have seen, have identified the increasingly negative and 'securitised' nature of depictions of migration. For example, Leurs et al. (2020) and D'Haenens and Joris (2020), suggest that there has been an increased securitisation in the portrayal of migrants in the media. This is often linked to analysis of the growing influence of right-wing populist narratives on migration. Hogan and Haltinner (2015) argue that such narratives are part of a 'populist playbook' shared by transnational right-wing anti-immigrant parties. In his analysis of social media coverage of immigration, Datts (2020), however, found that populist narratives did not dominate Twitter activity on migration – contrary to initial expectations.

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A further key debate regards the *factual content* of narratives.
Political science literature on narratives has linked the growing use of narratives in the media to the polarisation of public discourse. New media channels such as blogs, YouTube and various social media platforms create venues for the dissemination of narratives on policy (Shanahan, Jones and McBeth 2011). Within this new media landscape, there has been a rise in right-wing media outlets and user-shared digital news, both of which have enhanced the political traction of more populist narratives (Polletta and Callahan 2019). These platforms have few traditional gatekeepers, in contrast to traditional sources, including traditional news reporting and 'experts.' As a result, the content of narratives, and the reporting or communications within which they are embedded, have become less grounded in fact. This decline in reliability or validity has given rise to the phenomenon of 'fake news.' Yet as Polletta and Callahan show (2019), narratives can be crafted in such a way as to appear to reflect people's experiences, helping account for the traction of such narratives, even where their plausibility is questionable (2019).

However, there is some discussion about the status of the popular concept of fake news (Albright 2017). The somewhat simplistic distinction between true and false is difficult to sustain, and 'fake news' is often identified more in terms of the political context and the subjects who spread it than based on its intrinsic qualities. A key distinction thus relates to the virality of news stories, rather than their factual validity (Venturini 2019; Gray, Bounegru and Venturini 2020; Habgood-Coote 2019).

However we define it, the concept of 'fake news' raises intriguing issues about how such narratives are handled in different political venues. As Boswell has observed (2011), different political venues will apply different criteria for what constitutes a plausible and wieldy narrative. While simplistic and emotive narratives may be perfectly legitimate and appropriate in certain media settings and for more populist styles of political communication, more technocratic venues may be more exacting in their requirements. Thus, for example, policy-making in public administration, or specialised fora for scrutiny such as parliamentary committees, will be concerned to verify the factual content of narratives, and may want to avoid stories with more dramatized and emotive content. This raises questions about how such venues process and respond to such simplistic and emotive narratives, including those characterised by more 'populist' styles of communication. We can define such styles or claims in terms of their simplicity and urgency (Freeden 2017), their eschewal of expertise and evidence, their assumption that social problems can be addressed through straightforward and immediate interventions, and their direct appeal to the interests of 'the people' in contrast to elites and experts (Canovan 1999; Mudde 2004).

While literature has expressed concern about the rise in narratives, their persuasiveness and their factual content, some scholars have suggested that we still know relatively little about their effects on beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours (Braddock and Dillard 2016). This omission is crucial not just for understanding how narratives shape social actors; but also for commentators who are keen to counter more negative narratives on migration. Casebeer and Russell (2005) argue that we need to understand narratives and their impact in order to generate counter-narrative strategies.

9. Conclusion

From its initial emergence in social science and humanities literature in the 1960s and 1970s, literature on narratives has now burgeoned, becoming one of the most influential approaches to studying communication and behaviour in contemporary societies. The definition of the term has been sharpened, and studies have yielded a range of interesting hypotheses and findings on key dimensions of narratives: their human, social and political functions; the conditions and features that make them persuasive and pervasive; and some of the social and political conditions which are changing the form, content and diffusion of narratives. Literature dealing more specifically with narratives on migration (MiNa) has both applied and further developed these concepts, theories and empirical findings – in many cases operating at the frontiers of theory-building. Indeed, migration has become a key site for the study for narratives, given its salience in media and political debate, and the social tendencies and political incentives to construct migration in particular ways.

This *Working Paper* has set out a proposed definition of narratives that will be deployed in the BRIDGES project, identified some key approaches and claims, and set out a number of issues that need to be further explored and elaborated. We will make use of these concepts and tools across our research on the deployment of narratives in the media, within political debate and policy-making at national and European level, and on the narratives that shape migrants' decision-making.

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