

Mediterranean migrations as experienced by migrants: Memories as a “lifeline”*

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Abstract. Research on migration mostly focuses on its quantitative aspect, often neglecting the foreigner’s point of view. This shift is, however, necessary, as reception and integration stem from two-way processes pivoting around the immigrants’ social representations of the host society and their intangible resources (cognitive and relational). This contribution analyses how the autobiographical material (“memories”) included in the application for refugee status can become a “lifeline”. The idea underpinning this exploratory study is that the experience of “suspended life” linked to such application has become an element of contemporary collective memory, due to its specifically performative and experiential character. This type of narrative constructs in-group belonging based on the shared memory of a founding past linked to trauma and violence. We focus on three key concepts: identity, social representation, and public memory. We analyse 53 statements of asylum-seekers transited in Italy through SPRARs and other reception projects between 2011 and 2014, collected in the Province of Bologna. Our aim is to bring out the narrative of the “trauma” linked to the experience of the asylum application as a symbol of a contemporary social drama. Our findings show that the migrants’ narratives followed a precise script sequence and become common heritage, enhancing solidarity and constructing collective memory.

Keywords: Migration, Asylum-seekers, Public memory, Narratives, Identity, Social representation.

1. The Mediterranean and the encounter with the foreigner

The great challenge faced by societies is whether they should be configured as closed (unwelcoming) or open (welcoming) systems towards “other cultures” – what Baumann (1999) called “the multicultural enigma”. Culture, like identity, is not absolute. Both are in continuous movement: the benefits of culture depend on its rebuilding processes, and the dominant discourse of culture as an immutable legacy is only a sub-component (often a conservative one) of a process. It follows that multiculturalism is a new way of conceiving cultural dynamics. The concept of multiculturalism does not stand for that of culture multiplied by the number of “other cultures” in a given territory, being a new way of dealing with the simultaneous presence of cultural diversity in daily activities (Hannerz, 1996) resulting from these subjects/actors coming from other countries. On this issue, Donati states the need for “new” multiculturalism for modern citizenship based on “relational culture”. In his words, «[w]e need a new vision of human existence to manage the cultural borders in such a way as to preserve the differences while taking care of what links them and can be shared by them. This amounts to find out a new “relational culture”, *i.e.* a culture of social relations that can be able to see and deal with the “enigma” of the borders themselves» (Donati, 2016: 25) that can connect different individuals, lifestyles, affiliations and nationalities, without reproducing their separation or pitting them against each other.

Every form of relationship oscillates between exchange of information and symbolic action on the Other, thus embodying some ambiguity. The relationships implemented and experienced by individuals are a problematic action that rarely allows for reciprocity between the subjects. That is

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why cultures and identities are transformed by entering a relationship with the *Other*. The subject constructing his life project recognizes not only himself but also the other as different from himself. When this process does not attain mutual recognition, it can lead to conflict. The attitudes and actions of individuals are influenced by many multidimensional factors including the culture and the indissoluble bond with the individual's biography. We thus switch from a research approach for social phenomena oriented towards the search for the cause (causality) to one focusing on the overall interactions between individual, social and environmental variables (relationality).

In the relational perspective (Donati, 2011a; Donati & Archer, 2015), social relationships are seen not as constraints for individuals, but as the elements promoting their self-determination based on reflexivity (Donati, 2011b) that becomes the sphere defining both their distance and their integration. On this reality (the social relationships) depends if and in what form, measure, and quality the individual can choose to be detached or engaged towards other subjects, the institutions, and more generally the dynamics of social life. In other words, individuals, through relational reflexivity, must orient themselves to the reality that emerges from interactions and reflects on the subjects themselves because it goes beyond the powers of individuals and aggregates.

The idea of "otherness" is almost always linked to that of "extraneity" and therefore to the foreigner. However, each society has its own "foreigners". In Simmel's work (1908) the category of foreigner is characterized by dichotomies: close/distant, similar/different, inside/outside the community. Today, they no longer apply only to a subject coming from distant places and with a specific symbolic dimension but also to those (others) among us who create ambiguity or undermine our degree of certainty as they cannot be easily ascribed to a specific category. The *Ego/Alter* relationship is no longer based on aspects of inequality (how) but of differentiation (for whom). Researchers should focus on the attitudes of *Ego*, who perceives himself as similar to/different from *Alter* in a given symbolic sphere, as well as to *Alter's* responses within a relational framework built on expectations that determinate closeness/distance and openness/closure. The construction of identity occurs over time through differentiation and integration and changes according to the relational situations experienced by individuals in their daily life.

The individual constructing his identity – since it is a matter of social construction – recognizes himself, the other as different from himself, and himself as the other. The emerging differences should not limit or hinder action but prompt the integration, pooling and sharing of skills and daily experiences. The individual, as a subject, exists in the social system and is in turn socially identified through the process of categorization. This applies also to groups: each has an identity that corresponds to its definition and that allows it to be placed in society. Identity is both inclusion and exclusion: it identifies the group and distinguishes it from other groups (Cuche, 1996) and it thus seems a way of categorizing the distinction between Us and Them based on cultural difference.

Attitudes and actions towards others depend on our idea of them, our interpretations of their past and present actions, and our predictions about what they will do in the future (Berger & Luckmann, 1969). Attitudes (understood as positive or negative orientation) towards others are thus oriented by our perception of them through the attribution of a judgement (Hewstone, 1983). The social reality of individuals springs from both the social meaning and the products of their subjective world. Individuals build their schemes of action based on of the meaning they attribute to their everyday life; they find a world of meanings and events that become real for them only because they are perceiving and conscious social beings. These are social representations (Farr & Moscovici 1984), which can be considered a set of cognitive matrices with the task of coordinating words, ideas, images and perceptions that are shared by a wide category of people who identify with each other. Social representations are understood as actual systems of interpretation for the social environment. In short, social representations constitute social reality because they determine the meaning of actions and events. They also define the experience of reality by identifying the limits, meanings, and types of interactions, thus reducing the ambiguity of information (they make the non-family familiar), and they make the meanings of actions unequivocal.

Social representations, therefore, act as a descriptive tool to understand the process and the mechanisms of construction and functioning of the category "other". When an individual or a group

judges (in positive or negative) another person or group, they build shared social representations. In the case of negative orientation, they lead to the attribution of responsibilities that may go as far as establishing prejudices and excluding these individuals, considered “enemies” (Mangone & Marsico 2011). In recent years, this often happened with migrants landed on European coasts from the Mediterranean Sea (Mangone & Pece 2017a). If we analyse this process considering representations as a cognitive-descriptive process that leads to the creation of the construct of the “foreigner”, it emerges that individuals do not attribute the “otherness” only to immigrants. Their construction of “otherness”, and consequently its recognition, refers to a broader and more complex process of categorization that leads to the visibility of the Us-Them nexus (the basis of social identification) and simultaneously makes the close-distant dimension visible. As this process is strengthened, we risk reproducing cultural prejudices – which can be exacerbated into racial prejudices – that are in fact “defence of one’s own world” and “competitive orientation” towards the “Other”. Prejudice is nothing more than a form of categorisation with social implications for the victim (Allport, 1954), but it is a completely normal cognitive process for its producers: it is not negative *per se* but only in its effects. In daily life, prejudice is a preconceived opinion, socially learned, shared by the group of belonging, which has a negative value towards the category that is the object of prejudice (the “Other”) by orienting attitudes (Taguieff, 1999). Prejudice defines a certain type of orientation towards categories rather than single individuals. Based on this definition, we can state that individuals produce prejudice towards the “Others” not because of their difference but because they are classified into the broader “migrant” category.

2. Mediterranean migration and European policies

The “formal” dismantling of the geographical borders in global society – *e.g.* the Schengen Agreements in Europe, at least until the latest wave of terror (Mangone & Pece, 2017b) – should allow for people’s voluntary and peaceful movement. And yet today this does not happen (see the construction of the Hungarian-Serbian border in 2015, or the increased surveillance on the border between Italy and Austria, or Italy and France). This gives rise to dynamics in which different cultures find themselves “forcibly” having to meet and co-exist, permeating the social and cultural processes of both the home and the host society.

Migration is a sector of operational commitment that calls for a clear reference framework appropriately calibrating interventions and trying to interpret future trends. On the latter, which is an extremely delicate action because it affects immigration policies, we should start from a non-ethnocentric reading of migrations with reference to different territorial areas and individual regions. For example, we could consider historical events such as the “Arab Springs” that have modified the flows, the channels, and the countries of emigration. Or we could focus on a little-studied aspect of migrations which nevertheless allows for an “objective reading” of the other point of view: the social representation that the immigrant builds of the host society and its citizens. The foreigner is an actor who, within the resources and constraints provided by his contexts, faces the need, on the one hand, to maintain a link with the culture of his home society, and, on the other, to be open to the values of the host society. While most research focus on the quantitative aspect of migrations, few adopt this outlook (La Barbera, 2015). The observation of the foreigner’s point of view stems from the need to follow a paradigm shift on how to conceive the processes of reception, inclusion, and integration. These are no longer seen unilaterally but by enhancing the perspective of those who are often vulnerable and, on the ground of their cultural references, wish to join in their host society. The *Action Plan on the integration of third-country nationals* (European Commission, 2016) confirms that integration “is an evolutionary process” and the development of related policies must be linked to local realities, to support access to services, education, language learning and the fight against discrimination.

The dynamics of migration – particularly forced migration – challenge the institutional capacity of welfare systems to promote effective processes of reception, inclusion, and integration. This may lead to the assumption that forced mobility causes disturbances in the subjects’ daily lives. Forced migration differs from voluntary migration, which usually entails the search for a better life, although it is not always possible to distinguish between economic migrants and refugees or between voluntary and forced migration. The latter includes refugees and asylum seekers, who in any case are a small part of the migrants living in European countries.

At the end of 2019 (UNHCR, 2020a), migration reached its highest levels ever: an unprecedented 79.5 million people fled their country, over half of which are minors. Of these, some 26 million are refugees. Over two thirds (68%) came from just five countries: Syrian Arab Republic, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Myanmar. Most of them seek shelter close to their home country: the main host countries are Turkey (keeping in mind the agreement signed on 18th March 2016 with the EU on the management of migration flows), Colombia, Germany, Pakistan, and Uganda.

If this is the general picture, the state of affairs in the Mediterranean, and particularly in Italy, is hardly rosier: the UNHCR figures until December 2019 (UNHCR, 2020b) show that more than 123,000 people have landed on the coasts of Italy, Spain and Greece and in a smaller part in Cyprus and Malta, while over 1.319 died or were lost at sea. According to the same source, in the first six months of 2020 about 30,000 people landed on the northern coasts of the Mediterranean (just under 10,000 in Italy and Spain, a little more than 10,000 in Greece and about 2,000 in Cyprus) and an estimated 370 are dead or missing.

Figures from the Italian Ministry of Domestic Affairs (2020a) account for 6,812 landings in the first semester of 2020 (updated 30th June), mainly from Tunisia (19%), Bangladesh (18%), and Ivory Coast (11%). According to the same source (2020b), as of 31 December 2019, asylum applications amounted to 43,783. In 2019, 76,798 applications out of 95,060 were rejected (81% of the total). The numbers are much higher than in the previous year (91.576 applications examined, of which 60.147 rejected, 66% of the total).

The data show that asylum-seekers reaching Europe via the Mediterranean largely come from The Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa. For the former, migration is mainly due to political instability, religious persecution, and civil wars; while African asylum-seekers reach Europe for a variety of reasons (persecutions and civil wars – particularly in the countries of the Horn of Africa, such as Somalia and Eritrea – or poverty and unsustainable economic conditions – particularly in West African countries such as Nigeria, Senegal, Guinea, etc.). In short, these countries are theatres not only of war but also of extreme poverty and the reasons why the migrants leave are often manifold.

Recent humanitarian crises, particularly in Syria, have led to a significant increase in the number of applications for international protection in the EU. Since asylum legislation differs between countries, the EU issued directives on reception, qualifications, and procedures for applying for asylum. At present, there are three types of European protection: a) *refugee status*, granted for persecution (or a well-founded fear of) in the country of origin for the reasons listed in the Geneva Convention (5 years); b) *subsidiary protection*, granted to those who risk “serious harm” in the country of origin (3 years); and, finally, c) *humanitarian protection*, granted for humanitarian crises that do not involve personal persecution suffered by the applicant (from 6 months to 2 years). A special fund for the management of asylum applications has been established since 2008, replaced in 2014 by the *Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund* (AMIF) to standardise asylum procedures in Member States and deal with crises. The EU’s objective to establish a *Common European Asylum System* (CEAS), instead, seems far into the future due to the differences between the Member States.

The EU also introduced the *European Dactyloscopy* (EURODAC) System, a fingerprint database for asylum-seekers. When someone applies for asylum anywhere in the EU, their fingerprints are transmitted to the EURODAC Central System. Since its inception in 2003, it has

proven paramount for providing comparative fingerprint evidence to help determine the Member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in the EU. Its main objective is to support the implementation of the Dublin Regulation, which was last revised on 26 June 2013 (EU Regulation 604/2013). These two instruments together constitute what is commonly referred to as the “Dublin system”.

Lastly, the European Agency for the Management of International Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the EU, better known as Frontex (acronym of “*Frontières extérieures*”) was established in 2005 to coordinate the patrolling of the external air, sea and land borders of the EU Member States.

The EU’s commitments go beyond these interventions. In 2013, it finances the humanitarian operation known as “Mare nostrum”, managed by the Italian Navy, that patrolled the Mediterranean Sea up to its international waters. This operation mission was twofold: “to guarantee the protection of life at sea” and “to bring to justice all those who profit from the illegal smuggling of migrants”. In 2014, it was substituted by operation Triton (originally called Frontex plus), entrusted to the Frontex agency but coordinated by Italy. It aims to patrol Europe’s maritime borders, controlling the international waters up to 30 miles from the Italian coast. Triton is a joint border police operation that reaches the maritime borders of the Schengen area, but it does not replace the responsibility of EU Member States to control their borders. Finally, operation Sophia – officially called the European Union Naval Force Mediterranean, also known by the acronym EUNAVFOR Med – is a military operation launched by the EU following the shipwrecks in April 2015 of several vessels carrying migrants from Libyan ports. It aimed to neutralise the established trafficking routes of migrants in the Mediterranean.

In recent years, especially after the North African emergency in 2011 and the Syrian crisis in 2015, migrants and refugees have become a major issue on the political agenda of European countries, and the EU’s commitment is judged to be lacking by many. Since the spring of 2018, the Italian government has been pushing for redefining the Union’s migration policies, without real results. Currently, partly because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the amendment to the Dublin Rules of Procedure is still unresolved and Operation Sophia itself is being questioned.

The most evident consequence has been the growth of xenophobic parties and movements (besides boosting the groups already strong in countries like Hungary and Poland), such as the *Front National* in France, the *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany and the *Lega* in Italy (formerly *Lega Nord*). Many countries have implemented hostile policies towards refugees, not least those of the Italian government when Matteo Salvini was Minister of Domestic Affairs, with the so-called security decrees to crack down on the arrival of migrants. The continuous influx of migrants has cast doubts about the very resilience of the European Union and one of the reasons that contributed to Brexit was probably Great Britain’s fear of these strong migratory flows.

In this scenario, the reception and integration of immigrants derive from two-way processes in which their social representations of the host society (before and after their arrival) and their intangible resources (cognitive and relational) are paramount. Integration processes are not mechanically determined by the structure of the reception system or local policies, but result, at least in part, from strategic paths chosen by the migrants themselves, acting in a context of options whereby choices are made in the light of specific social frameworks of knowledge.

3. Memory as a “lifeline”

The migratory phenomenon is a structural fact whose importance goes beyond its quantitative significance. It fascinates sociologists for its effects on the construction of the processes of collective and individual identity. In particular, in the face of the many victims of immigration, it seems useful to try to understand the paths through which migrants have the right to a “new life”, while the community must remember (Tota *et al.*, 2018). The role of public memory (Jedlowski,

2007, 2016), as memory studies - which developed in the social sciences (Grande & Affuso, 2012) - have long held, is also to highlight those processes, allowing for a traumatic past to be collectively re-elaborated.

Within this framework, our contribution aims to analyse how the autobiographical material (“memories”) included in the legal-administrative process of application for refugee status can become a “lifeline”. The specificity of such documentation is expressed in a narrative¹ with a specific symbolic dimension as an expression of those fleeing human persecution or destiny (Ahmed, 1999; Colombo, 2018). The passage from the status of “migrant” to that of “refugee” allows for another outlook for observation and knowledge, less tied to stereotypes and more open to acceptance and acknowledgement.

This type of narrative is performative, useful for the construction of a collective and social memory linked to the dimension of trauma and violence. We refer, of course, to Halbwachs (1950) and Assmann (2006) who consider collective memory as a social construct emerging from a group with a limited function in time and space that cannot be autonomous from individual memories and their limits. In this sense, it is a concrete memory with respect to identity, *i.e.* it constructs in-group belonging based on the common memory of a founding past (Bartoletti, 2007). The concepts of place, travel, body, trauma, etc. take on new meanings and force a change of direction: between memory and oblivion, between emergency and need for protection, a new social space opens up in which memory (individual and collective) is the protagonist, constructing and de-constructing the representation (not only medial) of new subjectivities today traversing Europe.

Migrating and waiting for refugee status lead to a “suspended” life: the migrant almost always ends up between a not-anymore and a not-yet (Dal Lago, 2004). This makes this path (from the reception to the recognition of refugee status) a privileged field of analysis for both the observation and the construction of subjective memories and the attribution of meaning in the reconstruction of a new contemporary world (Tota, 2001), creating significant links between memory and conscious citizenship.

Migration de-structures the identity of the individual, but also that of the community that is left behind. In some cases, and for certain countries, this form of “disorientation” still seems to permeate the lives of citizens years after migration. This “fracture” often remains unhealed and is accentuated between generations (*e.g.*, the second- and third-generation migrants born in Italy). Often, everything that existed before leaving is sent into “oblivion” as if to accelerate a “new birth” from the day after arrival in the landing country, thus marking a discontinuity (Jedlowski, 2002) with what was before. The date of departure from the country of origin leaves deep wounds, linked to those for a “loss” (mourning), since migrating means almost always to leave family members in the home country, but the trauma is also attributable to identity loss. For example, many first-generation Italian migrants at the beginning of the last century never renounced Italian citizenship – and in many cases have never asked for citizenship in the landing country. It is almost as if they wanted to keep alive the (very remote) hope of returning to Italy, or claim “foreigner” status. Conversely, their children and grandchildren (second and third generations) prefer dual citizenship. If there is no collective memory of the “place” of origin, there has been no *re-composition* of the past. *Re-composing* is not only preserving the memory, but it entails its *re-construction* according to the present. This process implies the relationship with the other (both as an individual and as the subject’s group) within a context – a framework, to use Halbwachs’ terminology – which contains objective and objectivable references. In other words, the migrant’s past life has fallen into “forgetfulness” by implementing the opposite process to “fixation”. Both processes, however, are configured as a construction of reality – Berger and Luckmann’s phenomenology (1966) or Assmann and Czaplick’s socio-constructivist conception (1995) – which seeks for a meaning (or meanings) for the present.

¹ Narration takes two forms (Czarniawska, 2004): a) as a mode of knowledge; b) as a mode of communication. Since knowledge enables the development of systems of ideas and communication and their diffusion, it is easy to understand how narration is paramount for social change.

The relationship between memory, identity, and sense of belonging is, therefore, very close because the latter is an active element of affirmation and recognition of identity (Crespi, 2004). Such identifications are needed both by single individuals and by the whole of the collectivity (in this case the collectivity of migrants) – the latter in order to carry on “existing”. Due to the problematic nature of this relationship, the complexity of its ambivalent concepts, and the identity changes happening in modern society, we here wonder how and by which means is it possible to substantiate memory as a strong element that generates the sense of belonging to a foreign territory, and what is its function in the territory development process.

3.1. Theoretical and methodological framework of the "exploratory" study

Reflecting on the suspension that asylum seekers experience in the host territories requires a “certain outlook” (Dal Lago, De Biase, 2002), whose knowledge is not necessarily codified in a manual but able to observe and grasp marginal, unusual, or little-known aspects of the surrounding reality. This means adopting the gaze of a «subject (the researcher) who is himself part of society and who therefore runs the risk of adopting presumptions and prejudices, but the main defence for this danger is precisely the critical interpretation of socio-cultural phenomena» (Mangone, 2019: 7, personal translation) which can take place between participation and scientific detachment, between interpretation and disorientation, aware of adopting inevitably partial viewpoints.

The analysis of the memories of asylum seekers, presented below, starts from these premises. It aims at bringing out their experience by placing the reader “on the side of the subject”, by pointing out the experience of “transit or suspension” in the host territories as categories of meaning and novel representations of this path with an uncertain outcome (Eastmond, 2007).

This “exploratory” study is not without a critical vision of the genesis of the texts considered, since the intention of the writers (the migrants) is to provide the Territorial Commission with the tools to judge their right to receive international protection. These texts, therefore, need a contextualization about the administrative procedure framing their writing and that characterizing the reception path.

The underpinning idea is that the experience of “suspended life” linked to the request for international protection has now become an element of contemporary collective memory, due to the specifically performative and experiential character that it conveys. The *supplementary statements* are attached to the so-called C3 model filed with the Central Police Station by those who intend to apply for asylum (“Minutes of the declarations of foreigners applying in Italy for the recognition of refugee status” according to the Geneva Convention 28/07/1951, Law 189 of 30/07/2002) and which contains information on the subject and his family, the reasons for leaving his country, the journey, etc., and which grants a three-month permit pending recognition. To the C3 model, the applicant can attach the *supplementary statement*, the story of his personal experience in his original language, in which he can explain all the reasons that led him to expatriation and the asylum request. This act of writing begins the work that asylum-seekers must carry out on their personal history to obtain international protection. The fragments of remembrance and experiences lived are almost always assembled with the operators (often psychologists and cultural mediators) and the lawyers who support the applicant within the reception facilities.

We analysed 53 statements of asylum-seekers transited in Italy between 2011 and 2014 (Federici & Degli Esposti Merli, 2014), collected in the Province of Bologna and belonging to subjects accepted in the SPRARs and other reception projects (ENA, Mare Nostrum and Step Italy). This number should not be considered as statistically representative of the phenomenon. Since ours is a qualitative methodology, it does not base its legitimacy on the high number of cases observed but favours the semantic and thematic analysis of the issues. The material considered here should be interpreted with the aim of “covering” the variety of the interlocutors, capturing the issues of most relevant interest (Corbetta, 2003). Our aim was to bring out the narrative of the “trauma” linked to the experience of the asylum application as a symbol of a contemporary social drama. As Alexander

claims (2012; Alexander *et al.*, 2004) traumas are not merely psychological experiences, but also collective ones (culture shock), and they play a key role in the definition and resolution of critical situations experienced by the subjects.

The experience of “suspended life” as an expression of contemporary culture is revealed in its public, communicative, and dramaturgical dimension. It is performance, representation, a social drama that involves actors and spectators and presupposes the mediation of media (Russo, 2011) as made explicit by the pragmatic and performative turning point of cultural sociology (Alexander, 2005). According to Turner (1982; 1993), the performance qualifies a series of events that are mainly expressed as forms of live communication starting from social drama, *i.e.* a critical situation of sudden change involving a group, a community or even an entire country. The drama is for the author the most present performative way in the complex society: it becomes a performance that involves the actors as much as the audience in the reciprocal implementation and enjoyment of cognitive and emotional experiences that can be questioned on stage. The performance constantly provides material for social life, especially insofar as it is capable of representing the self (Goffman, 1959) in an authentic circle in which the individual, by representing his own (social or cultural) dramas on the stage of life, reveals himself. In the face of traumatic events that leave an indelible mark on the collective consciousness, and hence on the group’s memory and identity formation, the performance can produce new meanings and offering symbolic answers “embodied in an object” (Griswold, 1994).

The integrative memories analysed here take the form of a performative cultural object, able to explain the “dramatic” occasions that call into question the physical and cognitive involvement of the “writers” – the migrants who are both producers and spectators at the same time (Melucci, 2002). The performance becomes a creative and essential element of the migrant’s experience to the extent that it produces meaning. The experience takes on the tones of “living through” and the experimentation of the facts of life is also a way to reflect on both past and future.

Our hypothesis is that the experience of the asylum-seeker is a cultural performance that draws from the social drama, capable of building a collective representation whose details feed the contemporary social imaginary of migrations. This strengthens the relationship between memory, identity, and belonging since the latter is an active element of affirmation and recognition of an identity. Because of the problematic nature of this relationship and the complexity of its ambivalent concepts, as well as the ongoing changes in identity and belonging in contemporary society, the question is: how or through what forms or ways can memory be substantiated as an element that generates belonging and solidarity? Memory is not only the narration of the lived experience but represents the very “life” of the individual because it is «the continuity of the past in the lasting present. It is precisely in this continuity that the images of the past are constantly rethought, reshaped and selected on the basis, not of philological perfection, but adaptation to the needs of everyday life» (Ferrarotti, 1997, p. 14, personal translation). Memory becomes a priority also for the need to begin anew, to reconnect the thread of life of individuals and the community, to seek a plan that can bring the community out of a crisis (imbalance).

4. The narrative of asylum seekers

Narration is highly rhetoric. The issue, then, is to go from rhetoric to action, *i.e.*, how narration becomes the “recovery of memory” by placing individuals at its centre. Narration resulted in the implementation of a real biographical method as the stories of asylum seekers all lie between biography and autobiography (Rampazi, 1991).

This kind of method, which is also an analysis of narration (production, diffusion, appropriation), cannot omit the dimensions of space and time (Ricœur, 1969, 1983-1985; Schütz (1932): the world of narration is always a temporal and situated world. As Mencacci (2012) observes, the supplementary statements are a fundamental tool for gaining international protection. Their

narrative is not free because, beyond the reconstruction of the subjective experience of these individuals, they must be aimed at drawing the profile of someone who falls into the “refugee” category. The plot must be precise and highlight certain aspects (traumatic events or episodes of persecution) rather than others; this implies not only a narrative capacity but also an introspective capacity for deep self-work.

With this in mind, we broke down the texts (units of analysis) into recurring items which led to the construction of the scripts² (Goffman, 1959). All the units of analysis were characterized by a narrative following this script sequence: a) beginning (information about one’s geographical, ethnic, or family origin) that introduces the existence of a problem at the basis of the traumatic life change; b) focus on a crucial episode that is the reason for the escape (a traumatic, violent or very risky event); c) consequences of such episodes on the body (scars, mutilations, etc.); d) the journey; e) the stopover in Libya which has a double representation: those who have spent a more or less long working stay there and those who remember it as a moment of suffering, torture and new persecution; finally, f) the crossing of the Mediterranean, an experience linked to hope, nightmares, fear and the saving image of the “Great Ship” (referring to the rescue ships that were part of the Mare Nostrum programme).

Although the lexicon is often poor and repetitive, we can see precision in dates, places, and distances, fundamental to the positive definition of the procedure. The anonymous excerpts of the supplementary statements proposed below (only the country of origin is revealed) exemplify the script sequences.

At the beginning of the narrative, the migrants highlight their origin and the problems leading to their escape. In this part of the script, the emerging categories represent various situations: the militancy in opposition parties, the oppressive presence of the family of origin and the customs handed down in determining the life choices of young people; the impossibility of freely living one’s religious beliefs or homosexuality (almost always hidden at the level of the collective imagination in the country of origin); the presence of rebels or forced enlistments; the extreme poverty of living conditions.

I have been fighting against compulsory military service in Turkey since 1998. I was captured in I. and I was imprisoned for 65 days in the military prison where I tried to commit suicide twice. I think that’s the most disgusting place in the world [Turkey]

I have no memories of Afghanistan; I was less than a year old when my family fled that country and took me with them. They saved me, but in a country where we had no rights. That’s why I couldn’t go to school [Afghanistan].

I’m from Pakistan, 39 years old, a wife and three children. I’m a Christian and I’m a street sweeper. On my street Christians and Muslims live together... every Sunday I went to church. One day a Muslim boy got angry, he slapped me because after prayer I said that God is one... [Pakistan]

Subsequently, the attention focuses on the main event, the decisive reason for the escape. These are, in most cases, traumatic, violent, high-risk events, repeated during the journey from Africa or Asia to Italy. They are almost always associated with the memory of the physical violence suffered (the consequences), whose scars find their main stage in the body:

The main reason why I left Iran is my choice to change religion. I converted from Islam to Christianity, following the arrest I suffered in 2009 for taking part in the protest demonstrations that broke out after the results of the presidential elections in June. I took part with other fellow citizens in the demonstrations organized by the Green Party... they surrounded us and started beating us. Then they took us to jail and left us blindfolded for 3 days. I refused to sign their statements and then they

² Scripts are complex structures of knowledge about an ordered succession of actions, which define various situations known from experience. The use of this form of knowledge does not require specification or explanation of what one does.

beat me with a rifle, tortured me, urinated on me, insulted me, broke my right ankle, and threatened me with death [Iran].

I was born in Nigeria in 1985. My family and I lived in the state of B for missionary reasons... in April 2013 I went to visit my family to participate in three days of prayer in my father's church. On the third day, some people I had never seen before arrived to stop. They broke into the church and my family was killed. The attackers tied me up and blindfolded me and took me away. It was a terrible day. Many people were killed, I saw many human skulls and body parts. They also sexually abused some of us... every time they came to get me to rape me, they were masked [Nigeria].

They came every day and beat me; I still have the mark on the face of one of their fists. They threatened me that if I didn't pay them, they'd kill me; I didn't eat for 7 days. Then one day an old man came and helped me escape [Gambia]

I come from Bangladesh from a very religious Muslim family... I found out I was gay when I was 12 years old, I had my first experience with a much older relative. When I rejected him, he raped me and threatened to expose everything... I was terrified [Bangladesh].

A transversal element is the theme of the journey. Its description includes details of the intermediate countries crossed to reach Italy. The narrative often mentions the pain of the death of the companions, the hunger and thirst in the desert, the fear of the sea and the shipwreck, the abuse of power. A common point is the permanence in Libya, a place at high risk of potential new persecutions. The departure from Libya is also characterized by recurring elements: the difficulty of paying for the crossing, the total unawareness of the conditions of the trip. The subjects who narrate the rescue through the Navy mainly recall the image of the Big Ship:

I was born in D., Syria, and I am of Palestinian nationality. I am the son of Palestinian refugees in Syria since 1948...I was forced to stay at home and I went out only out of necessity. My family's diaspora had begun: my father had had to flee Palestine 65 years before to build a new life in Y. And now a second escape began...we went to Egypt, but even there finding a job was impossible. I stayed for about 22 days. It is well known among Palestinians and Syrian refugees that it is possible to reach Europe by sea. I paid \$2,000 to a smuggler who told me to be ready at any time. At the meeting, there were about 100 people and minibuses were loading 14 people at a time and taking them to the embarkation point. We boarded a boat that could hold 50 people but there were more than 200 on board. The voyage of death lasted 8 days: we were out of fuel and stationary for 2 days, we had no food and at the end not even a drink...we saw a ship and asked for help waving our vests. Also, 2 boats of the Italian coast guard arrived, and they transferred us in 2 big ships [Palestine].

From Iran, I decided to continue my escape to Turkey and then to Greece. On the way from Turkey to Greece, we pierced the dinghy and had to swim for 10 minutes to the beach, so I lost all my documents. From Greece, I managed to get to Italy [Afghanistan].

I decided to leave for Libya. I travelled in a truck hidden with other people from the Horn of Africa. Once we reached Benghazi the driver asked us 800 dollars for the transport and threatened to report us to the Libyan police for irregular immigration. I was seven months pregnant, I only had \$300 on me. The driver took me to Tripoli in front of the Somali consulate... when the war broke out, I paid \$500 to embark with my daughter and 300 other people. We were at sea for 4 days until an Italian fishing boat found us and called for help [Somalia].

I entered Libya loaded into the back of a pick-up truck and arrived in Tripoli. I paid 10,000 dinars (about 300 euros) to get to Tripoli. There I looked for work in the square when the cops stopped us and put me in jail where I was 3 months. We were many, we ate very little, they beat us. One day the cops took us to the sea and forced us to get on a boat. I didn't know where we were going, I was so scared. Only when the big ship saved us did I know that we were going to Italy [Senegal].

Conclusions

The analysis of the supplementary statements confirms what has been repeatedly claimed by memory studies: that memory is an elaboration and, as such, represents a form of construction of the actualized reality. It cannot ignore the interaction between the various actors involved in the *re-composition* process, which in this case requires a dialogue between subjects belonging to different territorial and cultural contexts that can be metaphorically identified in a “sacred system” (operators and mediators) and a “profane system” (migrants). Memory is linked to the narrative-biographic method indispensable for such an analysis. However, this method does not guarantee the real correspondence between what is narrated and what happened – intrinsic truth (Bertaux, 1981). The range of meanings emerging from the analysis of supplementary statements confirms that biographical writing is an active tool in the construction and affirmation of the representation of the trauma experienced by asylum seekers, essentially linked to drama and performance. If the “suspension” emerges as a container able to describe the condition experienced by these subjects for a large part of their path, such narratives need recipients to exist. From this point of view, the individual narratives produced for the asylum application become common heritage and produce new solidarity, while contributing to the construction of a fundamental aspect of collective memory.

Analysing the supplementary statements of asylum seekers, going beyond the judicial procedure linked to them, allows to widen the gaze to the possibility of self-narrative of the migrant subject, through which he can self-represent, recognized as a subject bearer of rights and duties, deconstructing commonplaces. The narration of these memories feeds the construction of a social discourse that aims to move from the individual to the collective dimension, with the force that transforms a “simple” declaration of one’s experience into an object that is part of the present culture. Within an ever-changing present, and in a social context that seems more and more devoted to forgetfulness than to memory (Doni, 2010), the experience of the trauma of migrants has a social implication: the awareness of the representation of an increasingly unbearable “South of the world” that requires collective, universalist recognition, beyond the European vision and its increasingly blurred borders.

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