

Examining Discourse of Undocumented Migration and Religious Faith: An Intersectional Approach

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ABSTRACT: The present study delves into the self-narratives voluntarily shared by Algerian undocumented migrants on publicly accessible social media platforms. It aims to unveil the multifaceted experiences of these migrants, exploring the pivotal role of faith within their narratives. Employing overarching intersectionality theories and critical discourse analysis approaches, these narratives highlight the importance of religious faith in justifying migrants' irregular journeys and shaping their aspirations for a better future, indicating a need to reevaluate its significance in their identity construction. Additionally, the analysis uncovers a prevalent narrative of mistreatment and a deep sense of non-belonging among undocumented migrants, revealing how discourse constructs perceptions of being the Other and perpetuates their marginalization by reducing them to objects of surveillance in host countries.

KEYWORDS: Discourse, narratives, migration, identity, faith, the Other

1. Introduction

“... I did not know where to go, no language, no family, no friends, no papers... I kept walking with tears. I slept that night sitting on a garden chair shivering with cold and fear. Then I felt the bitter taste of alienation, which I never thought bitter. In that moment of deep vulnerability, I found solace in my faith. Veiled, I whispered prayers, finding peace in the belief that I was not alone amidst the challenges I faced...” (Anonymous female migrant)

The poignant narrative of this anonymous female migrant offers a window into the disorientation and isolation experienced upon arrival in a new land. Her words evoke a profound sense of alienation that she had not anticipated, prompting questions about the extent to which migrants identify with their homeland and host society (Sam and Berry 2006; Jaspal 2015). Within this narrative, the migrant's reference to being veiled while offering prayers illuminates the intimate connection between her religious identity and her sense of belonging. It emphasizes the significance of religion and faith as a coping mechanism amidst profound challenges

(Garha and Domingo 2019), highlighting the profound impact of the migration process on individuals' inner worlds and identity formation (Jaspal and Breakwell 2014). In other words, the migrant's ability to articulate her emotions and thoughts amidst adversity reflects the complex interplay between external challenges and internal processes, underscoring the dynamic nature of self-perception in the context of migration. This resonates with Erikson's (1968) concept of the complexity of identity construction amidst migration-related experiences. Rumbaut (1994) further explores this by emphasizing the integration of 'here' and 'there' into a meaningful sense of self. Massey and Sanchez (2010) offer insights into how immigrants negotiate boundaries with the host community, illustrating the ongoing process of identity negotiation and boundary-brokering to preserve a distinct identity while striving for peaceful coexistence.

Through this narrative, the complexity of the migrant experience unfolds as a dynamic interplay between external challenges and internal processes, constituting a highly emotive event in a migrant's life (Brooks and Simpson 2013). This highlights a notable gap within the Algerian context research about undocumented migration discourse, where such complexities are not often addressed. By drawing upon the analytical frameworks of critical discourse analysis, which emphasizes the constitutive nature of discourse (Fairclough and Wodak 1997), and intersectionality theories (Kelly et al. 2021), this study aims to explore a central inquiry: How do linguistic resources contribute to the representation of various aspects of undocumented migration, particularly regarding religious faith? Against this backdrop, the present research endeavors to analyze similar narratives and draw insightful conclusions. To achieve these objectives, it is crucial to address the following three key research questions:

1. How is the concept of 'undocumented migration' understood and portrayed within narrative discourse?
2. In what ways are the identities of undocumented migrants, including their faith, reflected in discourses surrounding migration?
3. How can we comprehend the (self-)surveillance practices of undocumented migrants within the ostensibly all-encompassing countries of destination?

2. Intersectionality: A tool for migration research

Of paramount importance are inquiries into the conceptual framework of 'intersectionality' and its pertinence within the domain of migration. Intersectionality, as conceptualized by Crenshaw (1991), encapsulates an intricate matrix of concurrent systems of oppression. This definition underscores the necessity for scholars to concurrently consider gender and race, recognizing their interplay in shaping the multifaceted dimensions of experiences and elucidating resultant power dynamics. Thus, these facets do not operate in isolation but rather

intersect, culminating in a system of oppression reflective of the convergence of multiple forms of discrimination (Bernard 2022).

Within the scope of this investigation, the adoption of intersectional analysis commences with the acknowledgment that migrants possess layered identities influenced by social dynamics, historical contexts, and power dynamics. It is imperative to recognize that migrants often inhabit multiple communities concurrently, navigating both oppression and privilege simultaneously. What is particularly notable about this assertion is its illumination of how distinct experiences specific to certain migrant cohorts may remain obscured and marginalized (Larkin and Ross 2024). As such, the incorporation of intersectionality into our research demands a fresh perspective on concepts such as integration, inclusion, equality, and power dynamics. This paradigm shift is fundamentally rooted in the notion that attention should be directed toward the intersections among these factors rather than treating them as discrete entities.

3. Intersections of migration discourse, social media, and religion

Morgan (2010) brings attention to the inherent diversity in definitions of discourse and discourse analysis, indicating their variability based on the epistemological stance of the theorist. Despite this diversity, there are common characteristics of discourse that emerge. Wodak and Meyer (2001) assert that discourse, as a social practice, both shapes and is shaped by the social world, suggesting its dual role as both representative and constitutive. Bucholtz (1994) supports this perspective, emphasizing how speakers' identities emerge from discourse.

Examining discourse surrounding migration has been a focal point in various contexts, including media coverage and political communication (Galasińska 2010; Bréant 2013). Chauzy and Appave (2014, 62-72), along with van Dijk (2018), highlight the role of discourse in shaping perceptions of migration, including its impact, the identity of migrants, reasons for migration, and policy responses. Eberl et al. (2018) demonstrate how migrants are frequently depicted negatively in European media, impacting their integration into destination communities. Similarly, Ross (2019) highlights how mass media perpetuates ethnic and racial stereotypes, marginalizing minority groups and distorting public perceptions. Conversely, positive discourse empowers migrants to cushion their anxieties and foster inclusivity (Ihejirika et al. 2021).

The terms 'religion, spirituality, and faith' are subject to debate and carry various meanings, often used interchangeably despite their distinct nuances. Defining them universally proves challenging due to their diverse interpretations across cultures, traditions, and individual beliefs, ranging from closed to open worldviews (Rachel and Ross 2024). Recent studies have begun to elucidate the intricate nature of religious engagement among young migrants, both during and after their migration experiences (Martin 2014; Garha and Domingo 2019).

Raghallaigh and Gilligan (2010) observed that religious faith emerged as a coping mechanism among all unaccompanied young migrants in their study conducted in Ireland, while separated girls in Brook and Ottemöller's (2020) research in Norway utilized religious practices to preserve their cultural identities and establish new communities. Furthermore, the enactment of religious beliefs has been recognized as a protective factor for the mental well-being of young individuals within post-migration Somali communities (Im and Swan 2022). Mosques and churches have been identified as significant spaces of belonging for young migrants (Drammeh 2019), with examples such as the makeshift church constructed in the Calais "Jungle" camp, as highlighted by Chase and Allsopp (2021). However, the concept of belonging varies among individual young migrants (Drammeh 2019). These studies collectively emphasize the importance of analyzing and understanding migration discourse across diverse societal contexts.

4. Method

4.1. Collection of narratives

At the core of this study lie the narratives of various undocumented migrants, sharing their personal experiences voluntarily on publicly accessible social media platforms. Following a meticulous review of the amassed stories related to undocumented migration, three excerpts were chosen based on predefined criteria, as outlined by Labov and Waletzky (1967). These criteria encompass:

- a. *Abstract*: A succinct overview of the primary propositions that the story intends to convey.
- b. *Orientation*: Crucial contextual information such as time, place, and individuals involved.
- c. *Complicating Action*: Key events pivotal to the narrative's progression.
- d. *Evaluation*: Emphasizing the narrative's central point.
- e. *Resolution*: Detailing the resolution of the crisis or conflict.
- f. *Coda*: Concluding remarks.

It is pertinent to acknowledge that not all narratives encapsulate every element delineated above, yet the inclusion of complicated actions and resolutions remains crucial (Thornborrow and Coates 2005). The three selected excerpts, rendered in English, collectively offer a nuanced depiction of undocumented migration intertwined with religious faith. They explore diverse facets including the connection to the country of origin, motives driving migration, individual perspectives, lived experiences, and the level of integration within the ostensibly all-encompassing destination nations. Additionally, these narratives provide insights into the intricate process of identity construction.

4.2. *Analysis of narratives from undocumented migrants*

Riessman (2003) elucidates that the myriad definitions of narrative inevitably yield a spectrum of analytical approaches. Furthermore, as underscored by Roggers (2004), it is imperative not to confine scholars to singular methodologies, especially in the realm of (critical) discourse analysis; rather, there is a compelling case for embracing diversity in theoretical underpinnings and methodological approaches. Aligned with the tenets of intersectionality, this study employs critical discourse analysis, with particular focus on Van Leeuwen's Analytical Framework (1996). Central to Van Leeuwen's framework is the pivotal concept of 'representation,' which pertains to how a social actor is depicted within discourse. This framework encompasses several key terms, including but not limited to exclusion, suppression, inclusion, passivization, and determination.

Of paramount importance is the notion of 'inclusion,' which involves positioning social actors prominently within an event and articulating them clearly within the textual context through strategic discourse techniques. Conversely, 'exclusion' entails the potential omission of a social actor from the text, necessitating their suppression or relegation to the background within the textual narrative. A social actor is considered 'suppressed' when no explicit references to them are discernible in the text. In the case of 'backgrounding,' there are subtle indications of social actor(s) in the text, albeit with these references being somewhat deferred or less conspicuous.

5. Data analysis

In this section, we explore the prominent themes identified within the narratives of undocumented migrants. Each narrative is presented individually, facilitating a deep exploration of the portrayed realities within the realm of undocumented migration and religious faith.

Excerpt 1: *Algerian male migrant was an employee, 34 years old, 1 year in France.*

"... Like anyone whose salary was not sufficient for his personal and family needs, I was eager for 'harga' (irregular migration), dreaming of living in paradise in European countries, not caring about religious restrictions (this is haram) and the dangers that may confront me in my journey. We were a group of 20 people, including a woman. We bought a wooden boat (6 meters) for amounts to 60,000 Algerian dinars. We were provided with petrol cans, a compass, and life jackets. After inquiring about the weather with a GPS device, the call was made with the mediator (the smuggler) to determine the date of the trip. After preparing the equipment for eating and sleeping and the sums of money in hard currency, we moved to the starting point (isolated area) at night. It was programmed and organized towards the Spanish coast (Almeria) and then to France. The tour

operator said: "The boat has a powerful engine, it will take us to the other bank in the shortest possible time", but the tragedy was that the money we paid was stolen. We faced significant obstacles, including the engine's failure, in addition to that, the tour operator did not know the destination as well as he had claimed, and the result was to stay at sea for long hours, and as a result, one of the garages (irregular migrant) suffocated due to his asthma disease. This led to a quarrel and disagreement between us because, I think, some were drug users. We were shocked, we spent 5 days at sea, and all our supplies ran out. We saw horrific scenes; some immigrants were eaten by a shark in front of our eyes, unfortunately.....".

1.1. The decision-making process in irregular migration

Excerpt 1 delves into a well-known form of migration, shedding light on the intricate stages that an irregular migrant undergoes before committing to the journey. This migrant embarks on the path by diligently saving a sum of money to cover the expenses associated with the trip. Subsequently, they navigate the intricate process of contacting and coordinating illegal immigration through intermediaries connected to smuggling networks. The narrative unfolds as they undertake a perilous boat voyage across the Mediterranean, ultimately culminating in their arrival at the distant shore on the opposite bank, signifying the culmination of their arduous journey away from their homeland.

1.2. Rationalizing irregular migration beyond religious norms

Within Excerpt 1, we encounter a narrative that provides a simplified yet poignant glimpse into what is deemed the norm within the context of undocumented migration. This undocumented migrant rationalizes their decision to engage in irregular migration by emphasizing their inability to meet their basic needs in their place of origin. The narrative commences with the statement, "Like anyone...," effectively encapsulating the rationale. It is worth noting the proactive effort to present a persuasive argument, even while recognizing that this choice exists outside the boundaries of the law and transcends the norms of religion.

1.3. Assigning blame to smugglers

In this narrative, we observe an alternative perspective. The central figure in the irregular migrant's journey is the facilitator responsible for crossing borders, commonly known as the smuggler. This individual assumes a dominant role in the migrant's experience. The narrative emphasizes the smuggler's responsibility for providing the necessary equipment and materials for the voyage. As explicitly stated, the smuggler capitalizes on the willingness of a significant number of migrants to take risks in their pursuit of migration.

Excerpt 2: *Algerian female migrant was a student, 26 years old, 5 months in France.*

"... I was constantly in touch with my friends in France. They painted a beautiful picture of life there for me, promising that if I came, I wouldn't lack anything. They assured me I could stay with them, and they'd take care of everything. Given the corruption, bribery, and nepotism back home, where the poor are mistreated, I saved up and traveled to France illegally, driven by the hope that my religious beliefs would guide me toward a better life. I sneaked onto a ship headed for Italy, not telling my family because I knew they'd stop me. I dreamed of a luxurious life on the Champs-Élysées, sending money home to support my family and make them proud. When I arrived, I was shocked that my friends had turned off their phones. I tried and tried but to no avail. I was not psychologically prepared for that. I regretted coming because I didn't have any papers and I didn't know where to go. I spent the night under an arch, and even veiled I was sexually harassed. The whole night I was on the run. It's been five months, and I'm still living on the streets, selling things to get by. I'm all alone, with no stable job or place to stay. It's hard fitting into this new way of life... "I'm tired of holding everything in. I want to find myself in these new gendered and racialized spaces, guided by my religion. I'm lost, and it feels like no one can help."

2.1. *Silent suffering and self-blame*

The female migrant in this narrative offers a poignant glimpse into the motivations driving her migration. Her story revolves around an unsettling truth, one often concealed by silence and self-blame. Her silence is so entrenched that it might easily go unnoticed by those around her. She departed her homeland in pursuit of a brighter future, a vision enthusiastically painted by her friends. However, this aspiration comes at a profound personal cost. Her tale reveals a dual threat she faces as a female and an irregular migrant. This narrative sheds light on the prevalent phenomenon of silent suffering experienced by many female irregular migrants. It serves as a stark reminder of the multifaceted challenges they confront, not only in their journey but also in the social and emotional burdens they carry. The silence and self-blame that shroud their experiences often serve as barriers to seeking help or sharing their plight with others.

2.2. *Gender, family, and psychological distress*

Within this narrative, the female migrant's identity is deeply intertwined with her family. Her aspiration to send remittances back to her family serves as a driving force behind her decision to migrate. Notably, she chose to keep her irregular migration a secret from her family, fully aware that they would oppose it. Despite her belief in achieving a better life, her journey is marked by loneliness, job dissatisfaction, and the lack of permanent residency, resulting in considerable psychological distress.

Additionally, the challenge of adapting to a new culture further exacerbates her emotional turmoil. The loss of familiar cultural norms contributes to profound shifts in her identity and self-concept. This narrative reveals the intricate relationship between family, identity, and the psychological well-being of female migrants. It emphasizes the significant sacrifices they make to improve the living conditions of their families, often at the cost of their own mental and emotional health. Moreover, it highlights the profound impact of cultural dislocation on their sense of self and mental stability.

2.3. Seeking communication and guidance to adapt while maintaining religious norms

The concluding phrase, "I seek information, what shall I do...", implies the migrant's search for guidance and resources. It indicates a necessity for access to consular services, social media platforms, or other sources of assistance in the host country. This statement reflects the migrant's recognition of the importance of communication and information access in navigating the challenges of irregular migration. It highlights the crucial role that support networks, whether formal or informal, play in aiding migrants during their challenging journey. Feeling overwhelmed, she seeks solace and direction in their religion amidst the complexities of new gendered and racialized spaces, expressing a profound sense of loss and helplessness.

Excerpt 3: *An Algerian male migrant, was working in the care sector, 34 years old, 3 years in France*

"...I came to France with a temporary visa, but I stayed longer than the period permitted. I went to the Barbès area because I have been told that there is an Algerian community with which I can adapt. But unfortunately, no one helped me there. The moment I arrived, they told me: 'Help yourself.' An Association guaranteed a stay of 15 days in a hotel for me, after which it gives me staying during this period an amount of 100 euros for my expenses... I will not lie, I stole to eat. For four months I did not shower. I couldn't find a place to charge my phone and clean my clothes. To obtain residency and nationality, I tried to marry an older woman, but I failed. I have a college degree, but I faced discrimination for finding a good job because they see us as unskilled and mainly a burden. So, I am working on selling cigarettes, but due to the pandemic, my business has worsened, and I can hardly provide for my needs. Sometimes my family calls me to ask for money because they think that I live in luxury... I blame my country because no procedures are available. Here the situation is inhumane... Despite all this, my faith in Allah keeps me going, urging me to seek a better future despite the hardships."

3.1. Pervasive apathy and the absence of a unified voice

This excerpt provides insight into a different facet of irregular migration, one where the central issue appears to be the widespread apathy within the migrant community itself. The migrant candidly highlights what, in their view, is amiss within their community. They assert that migrants with permanent residency status do not extend assistance to new undocumented migrants. While they acknowledge receiving financial support in the form of food and shelter, notably absent is any mention of psychological support. This narrative serves as a stark reminder of the challenges of cohesion within migrant communities. It underscores the need for a unified voice and greater empathy among migrants themselves, particularly between those with different migration statuses. The absence of psychological support raises concerns about the emotional well-being of migrants and the need for comprehensive assistance beyond basic sustenance.

3.2. Stereotypes and perceptions about migrants

Within the same narrative, the migrant harbors a pronounced negative attitude, perceiving that the host country stereotypically views him as an unskilled individual. He grapples with the perception of being an outsider perceived as a threat rather than an opportunity for the host community. This narrative highlights the pervasive issue of stereotypes and the impact they can have on migrants' self-perception and integration experiences. It underscores the importance of challenging such stereotypes to foster a more inclusive and understanding society.

3.3. Evolution of migration policy, integration, and religious resilience

The migrant's narrative emphasizes marriage as a potential pathway for integration, representing a departure from solely economic motivations towards broader social integration goals. This perspective underscores the multifaceted nature of migration, encompassing not only financial objectives but also aspirations for establishing a life in the host country. Furthermore, the migrant attributes the adverse effects of the pandemic on his business and acknowledges his homeland's role in his integration process. This acknowledgment reflects a nuanced comprehension of migration dynamics, acknowledging the influence of external factors such as economic conditions and pandemics on the integration trajectory.

Overall, the narrative demonstrates an intricate understanding of migration dynamics, recognizing the interplay between individual aspirations and external circumstances. Moreover, the migrant's reliance on faith as a source of resilience underscores the importance of religious belief in coping with adversity amidst the migration journey.

6. Discussion and interpretation

Consistent with the research conducted by Larkin and Ross (2024), the discussion of findings emphasizes the significant role of religious faith in justifying migrants' journeys and shaping their future aspirations. This prompts a reevaluation of its importance in their identity construction within host countries' contexts. The guiding questions of the study at hand span a broad spectrum of open-ended interpretations, delving into the complexities of undocumented migration and prompting reflections on societal perceptions and attitudes toward both male and female migrants. These inquiries challenge prevailing narratives that often categorize migrants as either criminals or victims, urging a more nuanced understanding of their experiences.

Furthermore, the narratives reveal the emotional intricacies of the migrant experience, which are shaped by external pressures and internal processes, significantly influencing their identities and interactions in new social landscapes. This is aligned with research conducted by Georgalou (2021) in the context of Greece, which shows that the lives of migrants are characterized by a mix of conflicting emotions. These include a sense of loss of belonging, irritation at Greek policies and mentalities, and concern for their families who remain in their homeland facing the crisis, juxtaposed with hopes for new beginnings and potential opportunities to fulfill their goals in the host country.

Despite the lack of clear definitions surrounding undocumented migration, expressions associated with it often perpetuate reductionist perspectives, emphasizing criminality or victimization. However, the narratives also highlight the construction of migrant identity as "being for the other and not-being for the self," imposed by societal expectations and necessitating compliance. Paradoxically, the effort to conform to these expectations may result in the internalization of prevailing ideologies, eroding migrants' agency and autonomy in these panoptic societies.

7. Conclusion

This study examines the self-narratives of undocumented migrants, seeking to comprehensively explore the multifaceted phenomenon of undocumented migration while recognizing religious faith as a strategy to address its complexities. Furthermore, it acknowledges the contested definition of religious faith, emphasizing the need for further research in the context of undocumented migration. Through meticulous analysis of unique experiences, the study endeavors to amplify the voices of undocumented migrants, allowing them to articulate their experiences, aspirations, and struggles. Additionally, by pinpointing areas requiring further attention, it aims to inform compassionate approaches to addressing the needs and rights of undocumented migrants. In essence, this study represents a dedicated effort to bring about meaningful change in the lives of undocumented migrants.

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