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Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Language & Communication

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

What is your dream? Fashioning the migrant self

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Dreamers
Media
Identity
Narrative
Migration
Digital storytelling

ABSTRACT

In this paper I analyze a corpus of 15 video narratives of migration experiences posted on the United We Dream Movement website. The narratives are part of the group's campaign to convince the public and then President Obama to promote legislation to reform the migration system and help undocumented families stay together and not be deported. Based on a "narrative as practices" approach (De Fina and Georgakopoulou, 2008, 2012), I focus on the participation frameworks established through storytelling and on the linguistic and semiotic strategies used by narrators to present themselves as acceptable citizens. I illustrate how Dreamers negotiate both innovative identities as social activists and more "traditional" identities based on values largely shared in the host society.

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1. Introduction

The nexus between narrative and politics has received renewed attention in recent times due to the increased use and visibility of personal biographies as weapons for political advancement. In his introduction to a special issue devoted to the topic, Smith argued for example that personal biographies were used extensively in the 2008 presidential elections, so much so that

in the first decade of the Twenty-First Century, voters, journalists, pundits, campaign operatives, and candidates engaged directly and indirectly in an extended national debate in the United States about the uses, abuses, and meanings of memoir, about issues of truth-telling and authenticity" (2010, p. viii).

The study of ways in which autobiographical narratives contribute to politics and constitute political discourses is not new, particularly if we regard political activism as "involving overlapping forms of consciousness and realization—often in contradiction—some with a definable goal, organization and clear commitment, others much less so" (Roberts, 2004). Researchers for instance have been long interested in the 'testimonio' as a form of political struggle (see Beverly, 2004; Gugelberger and Kearny, 1991; Tierney, 2000). But more recently, studies have started to widen the scope by looking at identity construction among different kinds of minority groups such as members of the LGBTQ communities (see Gray, 2009; Jones, 2015) or participants in minority political movements (see García Agustín and Aguirre Díaz, 2014; Merino et al., 2016) and extending the investigation to online contexts as well.

This line of research is significant for the empirical investigation of mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion and the conflicts and ambiguities that they generate among individuals and groups as it opens a window into how those who are excluded by society from equal opportunities and basic social services and also ideologically marginalized and isolated, fight

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back and create their own channels of expression. In this article, I will explore the case of the Dreamers movement, formed by young migrants to the United States, who have created an impressive organization to counteract exclusion and discrimination.

The paper will develop as follows: first I provide some background on the Dreamers movement; second, I discuss the theoretical and methodological references that sustain the work presented here, particularly in relation to identity and narrative; and, finally, I present my data and analysis.

Before I turn to the Dreamers, let me briefly mention that undocumented migration to the United States constitutes a significant portion of all migration. Although figures are always tentative, according to data published by the Pew Center (Krogstad et al., 2015), in 2014 the number of undocumented migrants in the US was 11.3 million, 52% of which constituted by Mexicans. Young people form a significant part of this category, since it is calculated in the same report that about 6% of K to 12 students have at least one undocumented parent.

2. The Dreamers movement

The United We Dream, or Dreamers, movement in the US represents the aspirations and the struggles of those migrants who came to the United States as children with their undocumented parents, stayed in the US, and therefore became undocumented as well. These youngsters have been facing all kinds of difficulties, both material and psychological as a consequence of finding or having found themselves in a limbo. They often cannot continue studying after they graduate from high school and thus cannot attend college, they cannot get a social security number, nor a driving license. They live in fear of being deported or seeing their parents deported and of being found out by classmates and friends and therefore they often keep a semi-secret existence. The Dreamers movement started, according to Nicholls (2013, 1) on May 17, 2010. On that day, four undocumented students occupied the office of Senator McCain in Arizona to put pressure on the Senate to approve the so called DREAM Act, a law that would provide undocumented students with the right to remain in the United States. Such occupation was followed by a host of political actions including protests, sit-ins, encounters with undocumented parents on border sites and by the creation of a national network that has put this youth organization firmly on the map of American politics. The Dreamers movement today has 55 affiliate organizations in 26 states with about 100,000 members and fights for the reform of the migration system and for a stop to deportations, particularly to avoid the separation of family members. As they declare on their website:

In addition to timely political campaigns, like our current We Can't Wait Campaign, [which seeks to address the most pressing and most painful issues facing the undocumented community: deportations and family separation], United We Dream also runs programs to advocate for access to higher education; stop the deportations of undocumented youth and their parents; and strengthen alliances and support for dreamers at the intersection of queer and immigrant rights.¹

One of the most important victories of the movement was the approval by the Obama government on June 15, 2012 of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Act (DACA) that allows young people to avoid deportation and remain in the country for two years, with a possibility of renewal of their visa.

As of 2016, the US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS, 2017) has granted DACA status to about 800,000 individuals and denied it to about 50,000.

In November 2014, then President Barack Obama announced changes to DACA which would expand it to include undocumented immigrants who entered the country before 2010, eliminate the requirement that applicants be younger than 31 years old, and lengthen the renewable deferral period to two years. The Pew Research Center estimated that this would have increased the number of eligible people by about 330,000 (Krogstad et al., 2015). The presidential decree that would have allowed for the extension of DACA was blocked by a judge of the District Court in Texas under a legal pretext and that decision was subsequently upheld by the Supreme Court on June 23rd 2016. It is extremely likely that the newly elected President Trump will kill the initiative.

3. Theoretical and methodological framework

As mentioned in the introduction, the topic of the Dreamers is particularly in line with some of the topics discussed in this Special Issue, such as migrants' inclusion or exclusion, for various reasons. One is that these youngsters mostly live a situation that very clearly represents the ambiguity of inclusion and exclusion circumstances. They are part of the society they live in, but also not part of it. They regard themselves as Americans but also as individuals who have a heritage outside America (see Tetreault, 2015 for a similar case with migrant origin teens in France). They have to navigate their identities within the constraints of a movement that needs to devise strategic self-presentations in order to win political battles. Such presentations may vary according to the communicative and political occasion for which they are created. Thus, the analysis of identity claims made by the Dreamers has to focus on communicative practices and participation frameworks and cannot essentialize those claims without betraying the emic perspective of these young people.

¹ <http://unitedwedream.org/about/our-missions-goals/>.

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