

24th IMISCOE Annual Conference, 6–9 July 2027, Brussels and online

Call for Paper Abstracts

For this panel, I invite researchers to submit paper proposals on themes mentioned in the panel's abstract.

Applicants should submit a 250-word paper abstract with a title (as Word document, including your full name and institute affiliation), to Nilay Kılınç, [nilay.kilinc\[at\]helsinki\[dot\]fi](mailto:nilay.kilinc[at]helsinki[dot]fi)

Deadline for submissions: 20 September 2026

Please visit the conference website to be informed about IMISCOE and check the Guidelines for Abstract Writing: <https://www.imiscoe.org/events/imiscoe-events/2688-24th-imiscoe-annual-conference>

Storytelling on 'Migrants', Storytelling in Migration Research

Migration is not only experienced, governed, represented and researched; it is also told. Stories about migration circulate through novels, memoirs, poetry, journalism, documentary and fiction film, television, photography, stand up comedy, social media, podcasts, digital platforms and political discourses. At the same time, stories are central to the production of migration knowledge itself: migrants narrate their lives to researchers, researchers select and interpret these accounts, and ethnographers transform encounters, voices and experiences into academic narratives.

This panel brings these two dimensions of storytelling into conversation. How are 'migrants' and migration made into stories, and how does storytelling shape the ways in which migration is researched and understood?

The panel starts from the premise that stories are never neutral accounts of reality. Narratives select, organise and connect events; they foreground some voices and background others. As Dennison (2021) argues, migration narratives are constructed and selective representations of reality whose effects depend not only on their content but also on their plausibility, emotional appeal, circulation and the contexts in which they are encountered. Recent work has further encouraged scholars to move beyond treating migration narratives as fixed discursive products and instead examine how they are produced, circulated, contested and transformed across different communicative spaces (Garcés-Mascareñas & Pastore, 2025). This invites us to ask not only *what* stories about migration say, but also *who* tells them, for *whom*, through *which* forms, under *what* conditions, and with *what* consequences.

Research on media representations has demonstrated the persistence of recurring figures of the migrant: the victim, the threat, the burden, the hero, the economic contributor or the grateful newcomer. Such representations can reduce complex lives to recognisable narrative templates, while apparently sympathetic representations may also reproduce paternalistic or humanitarian hierarchies. The distinction between representing migrants and enabling migrants to represent themselves therefore matters. Leurs et al. (2020) call attention to the relationship between the politics and poetics of migrant narratives, emphasising the multiple actors involved

in narrating migration, including migrants, journalists, governments, humanitarian organisations, artists and activists.

Nevertheless, the question of representation is not simply one of negative versus positive storytelling. Even stories intended to ‘give migrants a voice’ may reproduce particular expectations about what a ‘migrant story’ should sound/look like (Montero-Sieburth, 2020). Stories of suffering may make migrants more visible, but can simultaneously produce the migrant primarily as a victim. Stories of extraordinary resilience may offer agency while placing pressure on migrants to perform resilience, success or gratitude. Conversely, stories of ordinary life, humour, intimacy, desire, boredom, creativity, contradiction or ambivalence may disrupt the expectation that migrant lives must always be narrated through displacement and hardship.

This panel therefore invites critical attention to the storytelling forms, styles and methods through which migration as a phenomenon and ‘migrant lives’ become understandable. I welcome papers examining literature, fiction, poetry, stand up comedy, memoir, autobiography, theatre, photography, documentary, fiction film, television, journalism, podcasts, social media, digital storytelling and other cultural forms. Contributions may consider stories produced by migrants and post-migrants themselves, as well as stories produced by journalists, filmmakers, writers, researchers, artists, institutions, governments or other non-migrant actors.

The panel is particularly interested in questions such as:

- Who is authorised to tell stories about migrants and migration?
- What happens when migrants tell their own stories, and what forms of agency can such storytelling create?
- When does ‘giving voice’ become another form of speaking for?
- How do literary and audiovisual forms challenge, reproduce or complicate dominant migration narratives?
- What narrative conventions produce migrants as victims, threats, heroes, outsiders or citizens?
- Can stories of everyday migrant life move beyond the dominant narratives of crisis, suffering and integration?
- How do gender, race, class, nationality, religion and legal status shape whose migration stories become visible and credible?
- How do stories circulate between literature, journalism, social media, politics and academic research?
- What happens when migrants appropriate, parody, refuse or transform dominant narratives about themselves?

The second strand of the panel turns the question towards storytelling in migration research itself. Migration researchers routinely work with stories: life histories, oral histories, interviews, testimonies, ethnographic encounters, fieldnotes and collaborative forms of knowledge production. However, academic writing often transforms these stories considerably.

Researchers decide which fragments to quote, which voices to foreground, how participants are introduced, where stories begin and end, and how individual accounts are connected to theoretical arguments. In this sense, migration researchers are not simply collecting stories; they are also producing narratives about migration.

This raises important methodological and ethical questions. What does it mean to transform a interlocutor/participant's life story into an academic text? What is lost, gained or altered through transcription, translation, anonymisation, editing and interpretation? How can researchers acknowledge their own narrative authority and positionality? How might we write ethnographic and migration research without turning participants into illustrative 'cases' for arguments developed elsewhere?

Therefore, the panel particularly welcome methodological contributions engaging with participatory, collaborative, community-based, activist, visual, creative and arts-based research. Digital storytelling, participatory filmmaking, photovoice, collaborative writing, oral history, theatre, mapping, creative ethnography and other experimental approaches can potentially redistribute narrative authority and open spaces for participants to shape how their experiences are represented. Recent research on digital storytelling with young adults with migration backgrounds, for instance, suggests that participant-led storytelling can create opportunities for engagement and empowerment, while also requiring critical attention to the complexities and limits of such claims (Bissinger et al., 2025).

At the same time, the panel does not assume that participatory storytelling is inherently emancipatory. Who controls the final story? Who owns the images and recordings? Who decides what can be published? What happens when participants disagree with the researcher's interpretation? Can collaborative methods reproduce inequalities between researchers, institutions and communities? The panel thus invites contributions that critically examine both the possibilities and contradictions of participatory storytelling.

References

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- Garcés-Mascareñas, B., & Pastore, F. (2025). The making of migration narratives: understanding processes and gauging impacts. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 51(16), 4119-4137.
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