

Coping with Personhood Limbo: Personhood Anchoring Work among Undocumented Workers in Italy

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Abstract

Prevailing socio-legal structures create a state of personhood limbo for undocumented workers, where broader society undermines various aspects of their personhood in a way that prevents them from fully representing and embracing all dimensions of their selves in and around workplace. But how do undocumented workers cope with personhood limbo? Drawing on interviews with undocumented workers and civil society workers in Italy, we identify specific forms of what we call ‘personhood anchoring work’ that undocumented workers engage in to claim aspects of personhood that are meaningful to them. Our theorization suggests that workers’ experiences of personhood are influenced not only by socio-legal structures, but also by their own agentic acts in response to external conditions, as well as their aspirations, past experiences, and future plans. A key finding of our study is that these practices do not aim to create or disrupt social orders, even in subtle or hidden forms of resistance. Instead, they enable undocumented workers to temporarily position themselves within the social order. In doing so, we also introduce a new way of conceptualizing the integration of undocumented workers that can account for the possibilities and limits of retaining rather than redefining personhood in the face of prevailing constraints.

Keywords: Undocumented workers, personhood, socio-legal structures

Introduction

It is estimated that some 10-15% of all migrants are undocumented, suggesting that there are currently up to 25 million undocumented workers in the global economy (International Organization for Migration, 2022; International Labour Organization, 2021), typically in the agriculture, construction, manufacturing, hospitality, and domestic service industries. Given extensive and conflated terminologies for such workers (Nelson & Davis-Wiley, 2018; Paspalanova, 2008), we define “undocumented workers” as working individuals, regardless of their legal status, who left their home country in search of work or security and who either entered a host country without authorization or lack full or proper documentation for residence, work, and/or other basic entitlements in the host country. This includes, but is not limited to, refugees and asylum seekers (who at some point may achieve official status as such)¹ as well as migrants who entered a country without seeking such status, and excludes those who entered through formal immigration channels that confer on them full rights to work and residence.

Undocumented workers typically exist in a kind of “personhood limbo” that makes them particularly vulnerable to exploitation by employers (see e.g. Clibborn, 2015; Magalhaes et al., 2009). By personhood limbo, we mean a state where prevailing socio-legal structures constrain the possibilities for undocumented workers to experience full personhood, such as the ability to decide where, when, and how they will live and work. As a result of their uncertain legal status and entrenched social structures that deny them full recognition and acceptance in their host country, undocumented workers perpetually remain neither fully included nor excluded in their host countries, communities, and workplaces, rendering their employment, housing, health, and relationships continually precarious (Menjívar, 2006; Nyakabawu, 2021; O’Reilly, 2018; Ozturk & Berber, 2022).

Given the obvious challenges undocumented workers face in such a personhood limbo, existing research on the personhood of undocumented workers has thus far focused on what happens to workers experiencing personhood limbo and how such limbos are created and sustained (Kubal, 2013). In contrast, limited attention has been paid to how undocumented workers cope with such limbos and what strategies may enable them to cope with their predicament and exercise some degree of agency in manifesting or holding onto aspects of their personhood. Against this background, one intriguing angle of research would be theorizing the ways in which such workers actively participate in constructing and maintaining certain aspects of their personhood, despite the constraints imposed by the limbo they are subjected to. Thus, we ask the question: *How do undocumented workers cope with personhood limbo?*

In this paper, we focus specifically on the lived experience of undocumented workers and identify for the first time specific forms of what we call “personhood anchoring work”. As we conceptualize, workers experience personhood limbo in terms of invalidation, discrimination, and exclusion and therefore engage in personhood anchoring work to cope with these experiences and claim at least some aspects of their personhood that are meaningful to them. Our analysis reveals that undocumented workers practice four types of personhood anchoring work, namely relational, spatial, temporal, and moral anchoring work. The elaboration of these practices and how they help undocumented workers cope with personhood limbo forms the core of our paper and is used as a platform for developing novel insights into the experience of personhood among undocumented workers in and around the workplace.

As such we make three main contributions to the literature. First, we advance our understanding of personhood limbo by explicating exactly how undocumented workers deal with such a predicament through our identification of specific practices that help realize at least some

fragments of their constrained personhood. Second, we contribute new understanding of the role of individual workers' agency in structuring their own personhood which has tended to be overlooked in existing accounts that focus predominantly on the social and legal structures that inhibit personhood. Third, we introduce to the migration and work literature a new way of conceptualizing the integration of undocumented workers into host environments that accounts for the possibilities and limits of retaining rather than redefining personhood in the face of prevailing constraints during the process of transition.

Personhood in migration studies

Due to being studied across multiple fields, personhood has evolved as a complex and multifaceted concept. Some key points of contention include the lack of a universally accepted definition of what constitutes personhood and the criteria that should be used to determine whether an entity is a person (Brozek, 2017; Hitlin & Andersson, 2023). These contestations of personhood are so highly debated that it has given rise to many types of personhood including but not limited to natural personhood (human beings as persons), legal personhood (as an entity entitled to rights), moral personhood (moral worth of humans), and environment personhood (status of personhood extended to non-human entities), to name a few.

What is, however, similar in these types of personhood is that, regardless of their definition, they represent a critical threshold that demands equal respect for the inherent value of an individual (Osborne & Rose, 2023). History has shown that the concept of personhood has been used to unjustly exclude certain groups, such as women, enslaved people, racial minorities, the disabled, and others deemed unworthy or denied rights (Kittay, 2005). This exclusionary approach persists in contemporary society, as evidenced in the immigration literature that highlights how

undocumented workers often have their personhood undermined by social and legal structures in their host country (Kubal, 2013).

For the purpose of our research, we draw from the work of Michael Jackson (e.g. Jackson & Karp, 1990) and Paul Riesman (1992) who have explored the concept of personhood in the context of migration and displacement. Jackson's approach highlights that personhood is not solely an individual characteristic but is deeply relational. That is, personhood necessarily involves connectedness to other individuals, with whom meaning is communicated and shared. Adding to the relational dimensions of personhood is Riesman's (1992, p.10) process dimension where "being a person and understanding what a person is are the same sort of process; that being a person is essentially a process of making meaning". Building on these relational and processual understandings of personhood, we consider personhood as a social concept that reflects individual agentic efforts, as well as shared expectations about who a person is.

Drawing on these understandings we define personhood as *a state or experience of being recognized as a person within one's social and legal context and the pursuit of such recognition by individuals*. This encompasses relational and agentic dimensions. This active pursuit unfolds against a global backdrop characterized by structural inequalities and intensified border controls, where individuals navigate the complexities of social and legal dynamics to establish themselves as recognized members of society. Our definition integrates legal and social perspectives, unraveling the intricate threads that compose the narrative of individuals actively "seeking" personhood. From a social perspective, we delve into how migrants interact with peers, employers, and others in their quest for belonging and identity, while legally, it involves navigating the state apparatus to secure rights against discrimination and exploitation, ultimately striving for acknowledgment of one's full citizenship.

In the international migration system, the right to equal personhood is often unreliable and contingent on vague administrative categories. Extant literature expressly characterizes legal personhood as “gradable” aside from it also being “discrete, discontinuous, multifaceted, and fluid” (Wojtczak, 2022, p.205). This is because legal personhood can contain a variable number of elements such as responsibilities, rights, and competencies that can be assigned or taken away from individuals by the lawmaker (Kurki & Pietrzykowski, 2017). Consequently, states can undermine the personhood of migrants by denying them voting rights or enacting hostile immigration laws that result in detention and deportation (Charanpal, 2015). This highlights how the “myth of a liberal all-inclusive polity” (Pateman & Mills, 2007, p.176) obscures the lived reality that legal status and citizenship are contingent upon social standing, and that “behind the capacities ascribed to all human beings, there exists a set of social credentials that constitute the real bases of political inclusion” (Mehta, 1990, p.429).

The undermining of personhood is particularly acute among undocumented workers, but is not solely perpetrated by legal structures. Rather, it is also brought about by political leaders and the media, who often depict migrants, and undocumented workers in particular, as a significant challenge to the way of life, especially in Western nations (Kerr, Robinson & Śliwa, 2022). Moreover, recent public opinion polls in many Western countries have revealed negative attitudes and perceptions towards undocumented workers. For instance, an IPSOS poll on migration and refugees conducted in 2021 across 27 countries suggested widespread public skepticism about the motivations of undocumented workers entering their countries. In every country polled, at least half or more of the respondents agreed that foreigners entering their country as asylum seekers were not “genuine” refugees, and that their country should entirely close its borders to

undocumented workers (IPSOS, 2021). These negative perceptions reflect constraining social structures that further complicate the lives and work of undocumented workers in host countries.

Personhood limbo

The uncertain legal status of undocumented workers, coupled with entrenched social structures that dictate “who stands inside, who remains outside, and who is stuck-in-between” (Kabul, 2013, p.563), has profound and critical impacts on their economic and social realities. Empirical studies have shown that stringent legal structures have the ability of perpetuating “tiered personhood based on race or ethnicity, forming different groups and classes of persons” (McKanders, 2010, p.172). In addition, legal structures create uncertainty that increases precarity for undocumented workers and impedes their social and economic integration (Cheng, Smyth & Guo, 2015). Undocumented workers are systematically pushed into conditions that severely constrain their social mobility and their ability to integrate into society, as these socio-legal structures limit their future aspirations and confine them to low-skilled jobs (Lee et al., 2020).

As such, these socio-legal structures create a state of personhood limbo for undocumented workers, where broader society undermines various aspects of their personhood, preventing them from fully representing and embracing all dimensions of their selves. The uncertainty created by these socio-legal structures becomes a form of social control and precarity, impacting workers’ ability to access work, secure housing, healthcare, and educational opportunities. This personhood limbo is not “conducive to flourishing” (Rabin, 2021, p.607), as it makes individuals “physically present but legally absent, existing in a space outside of society, a space of ‘nonexistence,’ a space that is not actually ‘elsewhere’ or beyond borders but that is rather a hidden dimension of social reality” (Coutin, 2003, p.173).

This puts them in a personhood limbo in both a relational and processual sense. In other words, undocumented migrants are allowed to work in the labor market and exist in broader society, but their socio-legal status prevents them from fully realizing their desires of where, when, and how they wish to exist. This creates a “pervasive absence-presence” (Broom et al., 2021, p.1068) characterized by “constitutive ambiguities and tensions” (Wylie, 2009 p.279), where they are in a state of in-between statuses, torn between the preoccupations of the present and retrospective hopes of the past (Schuck, 1998).

Researchers have explored the experience of being stuck in personhood limbo in various contexts. For instance, Salvadorans in Temporary Protected Status in the US have been described as caught in a sort of a confusion that is characteristic of most borderline cases (Menjívar, 2006). Similarly, migrants from El Salvador and Guatemala with legal status in the USA are often situated in a “grey area between [documented and undocumented] legal categories” (Menjívar, 2006, p.1000), representing the complexities, ambiguities, and gradated nature of their legal status, where individuals’ legal personhood transits from one legal category to the next. Likewise, Zimbabwean migrants in South Africa exist “in and out of statuses, between tentative lawfulness and complete marginalization” (Nyakabawu, 2021, p.4). Similarly, the asylum process in Ireland leaves migrants in a state of “limbo, an in-between space, inside Ireland but outside of Irish society, included and yet excluded” (O’Reilly, 2018, p.834).

The existing research on migrants and the undermining of their personhood has primarily focused on explaining what happens ‘to’ workers experiencing personhood limbo and how the limbo is created through social and legal factors (Kubal, 2013). However, there is limited research on how workers cope with being stuck in personhood limbo. This limited research is divided into

two strands – extreme acts of resistance when faced with threats of deportation or detention and more passive actions undertaken while waiting for immigration decisions.

The first strand of research shows the ways in which different forms of active resistance by undocumented workers have emerged and sought to change the social, and mainly legal, structures affecting them. Thus, research has explored actions such as the 2020 hunger strikes in detention centers in the US (Gibney, 2004), and the undocumented youth movement in the US known as DREAMERS (Sirriyeh, 2020), among others.

The second strand of research focuses on undocumented workers' lived experiences of time, and how some forms of waiting may be seen as acts of agency or defiance if not explicit resistance to prevailing socio-legal structures (Jacobson et al., 2021). Time spent awaiting immigration decisions can be used by undocumented workers to acquire administrative or social capital or develop new political strategies (Jacobsen et al., 2021), or they might “strategically incorporate waiting into subjective understandings of themselves and within life projects” (Conlon, 2011, p.358).

Therefore, through research, we know that although undocumented workers are essentially excluded from their host political and social systems, they maintain social relations and engage in some form of survival strategies (Alkhaled & Sasaki, 2022; Daniel, 2022; Kodeih, Schildt & Lawrence, 2023). Nevertheless, the extant literature lacks a clear understanding of how these various activities respond to and impact upon personhood specifically. That is, there is a dearth of insight on how the everyday practices of undocumented workers contribute to the preservation or construction of their personhood, albeit the limited fragments or vestiges of personhood that are possible within the limbo such workers find themselves in. Thus, our overarching research question is: *How do undocumented workers cope with personhood limbo?*

Methodology

The study followed an abductive approach of going back and forth between data and theory to develop plausible reasoning (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). We initially began our study to understand the lived experiences of undocumented workers, especially in the context of challenging social and legal situations. However, as we moved forward in the study, through an iterative abductive process, we deepened our focus on understanding the survival of undocumented workers in personhood limbo, understood as the uncertain legal and social recognition in society.

Research context

We have chosen to focus our study on undocumented workers in Italy, which, due to its geographical location and connections with countries along the main migration routes to Europe, receives a significant portion of migrants who arrive in Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea. In 2021 alone, approximately 60,000 migrants arrived by sea in Italy (Statista, 2022). The selection of Italy as our study context is primarily based on evidence pointing to the exploitative and precarious conditions faced by undocumented migrants in this country (Busetta et al., 2021), as well as the barriers and challenges they encounter in being fully accepted by broader society (Campomori & Ambrosini, 2020). Furthermore, with increased media exposure of the mistreatment of migrants and the heightened concern of international organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the overall condition of migrants in Italy has become a significant issue of concern. Italian labor immigration policy has in the past two decades more stringent and selective, increasingly converging with those of Northern European states (Devitt, 2023). The legal entrance to Italy through sponsorship of family, friends, and employers is severely restricted, and after entering Italy without a valid document, asylum seekers need to go through arduous administrative processes defined by the configurations of the national law. On the

one hand, national law compels them to go through protracted and complicated bureaucratic processes for obtaining their residence permit. On the other hand, in most cases, the same law makes the approval of their residency entirely dependent on a working contract. Overall, obtaining a legal document in Italy is very ambivalent and uncertain, and in most cases takes several years. The combination of these factors, makes Italy a suitable context for studying the experiences of undocumented migrants living in precarious and exploitative conditions, and shares similar characteristics with other countries of the global north.

Data collection

Given the complexity of the phenomenon and the existing in-depth studies on individuals navigating work and life in precarious conditions (e.g., Alkhaled & Sasaki, 2022; Kodeih, Schildt & Lawrence, 2022), ethnography would have been an ideal method to capture the lived experience of undocumented workers. However, due to Covid-19 restrictions and time limitations, we relied on in-depth interviews to capture their subjective experiences. We conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews, often multiple rounds when necessary, to develop a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of undocumented workers in the context of uncertain legal and social recognition.

We conducted interviews with two key groups of participants: undocumented workers and civil society workers. The interviews with civil society workers aimed to understand the processes undertaken to support undocumented workers in Italy, gain contextual knowledge, and facilitate triangulation. These civil society workers were affiliated with various state-funded organizations that provide support to undocumented workers, including assistance with initial care, training, and education. Additionally, we interviewed three cultural mediators who were undocumented

migrants known to be more integrated into Italian society and fluent in Italian. Their role was to assist in the integration of other undocumented migrants.

We conducted pilot interviews with three undocumented workers and one civil society worker to test the interview guides. In our pilot study (March 2021), we conducted interviews with three undocumented workers and one civil society worker, focusing initially on a broad exploration of the social and legal experiences of undocumented workers and the impacts of these experiences on their lives.

In the main data collection phase, which took place from March to July 2021, we employed a purposive sampling approach (Campbell et al., 2020) and conducted a total of 29 in-depth interviews (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003), including undocumented workers, cultural mediators, and civil society workers (refer to Table 1). To capture diverse experiences, we interviewed undocumented workers from different countries of origin and migration statuses. We intentionally selected workers who had entered Italy without valid documentation (and thus classified as ‘undocumented’), but who may have had different levels of documentation at the time of the interview, such as a temporary or long-term residence permit, or even Italian citizenship. This approach allowed us to investigate the experiences of undocumented workers across varying levels of documentation, and to examine whether and how their arrival as undocumented workers continued to affect their experiences even once they were technically no longer completely undocumented, but rather partially documented, or in a few cases, fully documented. Indeed, even those who had gained some degree of documentation clearly identified as being unable to access full personhood in terms of social recognition in their host country. In this sense, the experience of being an “undocumented worker” is only partially determined by one’s current level of

documentation but rather is sedimented from arrival and during one's experience of the immigration system.

Informants for our study were identified through personal networks, snowball sampling method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and visits to refugee camps in North Italy. Interestingly, when given the option, none of our informants chose to participate in the interviews in Italian. Instead, most undocumented workers were comfortable in English, as they had a good level of English proficiency either due to their educational background or because English was widely spoken in their country of origin. For Afghan and Iranian informants, Persian was chosen as the language of the interview, as it was the native language of the interviewer. Conducting interviews without a translator or interpreter allowed the interviewer to establish a trusting relationship with the informants (Squires, 2009), increased their level of cooperation, and facilitated capturing the emotional aspects of their lived experiences in Italy. The average length of the interviews was 55 minutes, ranging from 25 to 90 minutes.

Initially, we created two interview guides using an iterative process. These guides followed a semi-structured approach, covering focal topics or issues, but with flexibility in the order, number, and structure of the questions. Reflecting on the interviews and data collection process, we refined both interview guides. Broadly, undocumented workers were asked questions about their background, working and living conditions, challenges and navigation strategies, and future plans. Civil society workers were questioned about the structure of their organization, their collaborations with other actors, their perspective on employers and immigrants, and the context of Italy and its influence on immigrants' conditions.

Table 1. Interviewees

Name	No. of Interviews	Nationality	Role	Age	Gender	Duration
Mohammad	2	Egyptian	UW*	29	M	120'
Vahid	1	Iranian	UW	40	M	85'
Naser	1	Afghan	UW	38	M	65'
Luis	1	Venezuelan	UW	26	M	60'
Alfredo	2	Italian	CSW**	33	M	85'
Fathi	1	Libyan	UW	27	M	65'
Imran	1	Pakistani	UW	32	M	75'
Modou	1	Gambian	UW	21	M	60'
Ishani	1	Indian	UW	29	M	50'
Alessandra	1	Italian	CSW	34	F	60'
Kofi	1	Ghanaian	UW	23	M	55'
Farhad	1	Afghan	UW	35	M	65'
Eniola	1	Nigerian	UW	21	F	55'
Chiara	2	Italian	CSW	36	F	70'
Naghme	1	Iranian	UW	41	F	95'
Shiva	1	Iranian	UW	30	F	55'
Chiara	1	Italian	CSW	45	F	60'
Tawab	1	Afghan	UW	32	M	30'
Janice	1	Cameroonian	CM***/UW	38	F	65'
Bakary	1	Gambian	UW	33	M	35'
Gonza	1	Ugandan	UW	20	M	45'
Majid	1	Ghanaian	UW	29	M	50'
Saikou	1	Gambian	CM/UW	23	M	60'
Seedy	1	Gambian	UW	34	M	25'
Momolu	1	Liberian	UW	24	M	30'
Diric	1	Somali	UW	28	M	25'
Negasi	1	Ethiopian	UW	24	M	25'
Ekow	2	Ghanaian	UW	30	M	40'
Adama	1	Mali	CM/UW	25	M	60'

Note: Names have been changed to protect the identity of the respondents

* Undocumented Worker

** Civil Society Worker

*** Cultural Mediator

In light of the vulnerable condition of undocumented workers, we took additional measures to ensure their trust and safety (Rogers, Toubiana, & DeCelles, 2016). The interviewer engaged in casual conversations with the informants before the formal interview, during which the purpose of the research, the process of data gathering and analysis, and the final distribution of the results were explained and clarified. All informants were assured about the protection of their anonymity and welfare. The interviews were conducted in locations when and where the informants felt comfortable. All interviews were recorded digitally and accompanied by interview notes. Interviews conducted in English were transcribed using a transcription service provider. Interviews conducted in Persian were translated into English by the interviewer, and data distortion was minimized through several comparisons with the informants' original responses.

In addition to the interviews, a comprehensive collection of relevant documents was obtained. Furthermore, data were gathered through informal conversations with workers at Milan central station, a common gathering place during weekends. Additionally, social media posts of civil society workers were observed to gather further insights and data pertaining to the research topic. The list of these documents is provided in Supplementary Table 1.

Data Analysis

The interviews with undocumented workers and civil society workers were combined in a database and subjected to several rounds of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to analyze the data, aiming to identify “patterns of shared meaning” that were anchored by a “central organizing concept” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.39). The reflexive approach involved the iterative and interpretive process of the researchers, allowing themes to emerge from the codes through in-depth analysis and abductive reasoning where we moved back and forth between analysis and engagement in theory. In contrast, other approaches, such as coding reliability and codebook

approaches, focus on predetermined themes and evidence. It is important to note that reflexive thematic analysis differs from grounded theory and pattern-based discourse analysis in various ways while also sharing some similarities (Braun & Clarke, 2021), aligning with our overall abductive approach (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). A detailed discussion of these approaches can be found in Braun and Clarke (2021).

The reflexive thematic analysis involved six iterative steps: familiarisation; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing and developing themes; refining, defining, and naming themes; and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Accordingly, first, the complete dataset was read several times to develop familiarity and a deeper understanding of the experiences of undocumented workers. The informants' experiences presented a unique opportunity for expanding the theorization of personhood (e.g., Chandrachud, 2022; Kittay, 2005), especially with respect to relational and agentic dimensions in the pursuit of recognition within social and legal spheres. Two key insights emerged from these readings of the data. Firstly, the uncertain legal status of undocumented workers appeared to make them feel confused about who they were in society, confirming our initial hunch regarding the suitability of the concept of 'personhood limbo.' We observed that undocumented workers experienced a state of being stuck in personhood limbo, where various aspects of their personhood were undermined or not allowed to be expressed. Secondly, rather than succumbing to this uncertainty or resorting to extraordinary measures to navigate their confused status, they employed simple, everyday practices aimed at conceiving and expressing some fragments of who they were socially, if not legally (i.e., their personhood) to cope with and endure the personhood limbo on which they had little control. So, we decided to focus more on these practices and labeled them *personhood anchoring work*. Given that personhood

anchoring work is a novel concept, we focused our abductive data analysis on theorizing this in more depth.

In the second stage of analysis, we focused on gaining a deep understanding of the specific experience of being caught in the limbo status of personhood and explored the concept of personhood anchoring work as employed by undocumented workers. We initially generated two sets of codes related to these two aspects. For personhood limbo, we specifically looked for experiences of uncertain social and legal recognition, and for personhood anchoring work, we specifically looked for practices through which undocumented workers conceived and/or expressed fragments of who they were as social and legal members of society. This stage resulted in numerous first-order codes, which consisted of terms and language that resonated with the meaning expressed by the informants. Examples of these codes include ‘precarious condition in refugee camp’, ‘receiving differential treatment compared to co-workers’, and ‘undermining of experience and skills’, which were related to the experience of being stuck in limbo status. Additionally, we identified codes such as ‘engagement in story-telling’, ‘use of virtual accounts for creating art and content’, and ‘praying and meditating’, which were related to the personhood anchoring work undertaken by the undocumented workers.

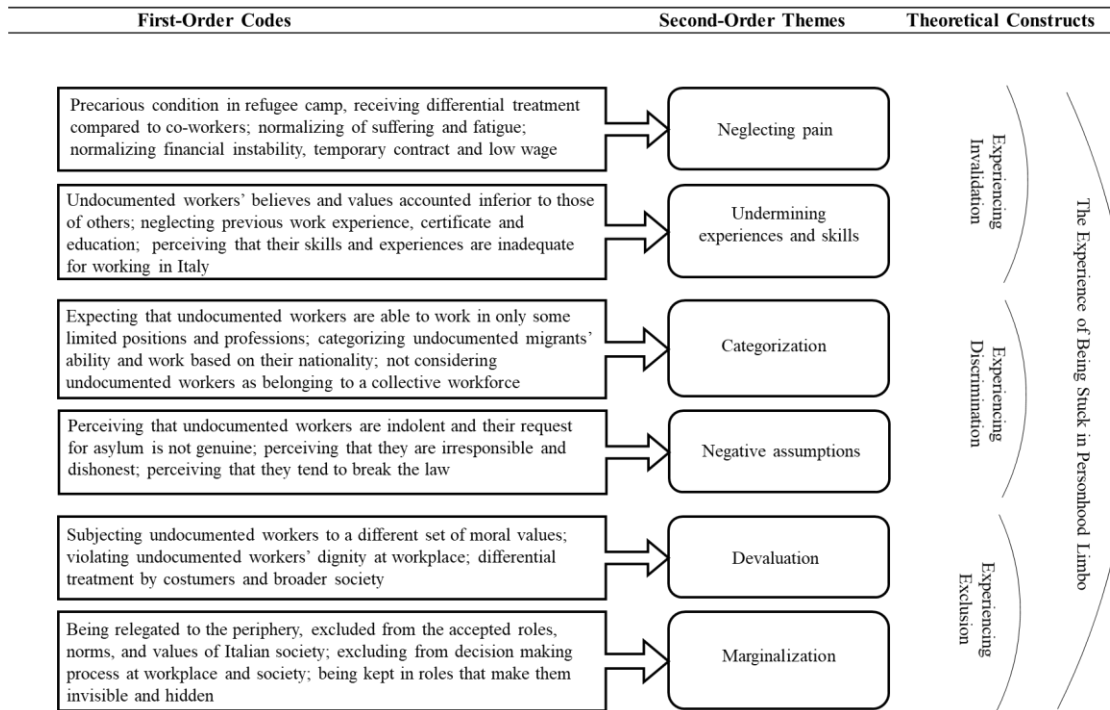


Figure 1. Invalidation, discrimination and exclusion, the manifestations of the experience of being stuck in personhood limbo

In the third stage, we conducted an iterative and interpretive analysis of the preliminary set of codes to generate subthemes and themes that we abductively compared with and refined in relation to, existing theory. During this stage, we actively searched for relationships between the generated codes and combined them to develop subthemes. For instance, we found that codes such as ‘precarious condition in refugee camp’ and ‘receiving worse treatment compared to co-workers’ were linked to the experience of undermining an important aspect of personhood related to feelings, senses, and emotions, which we identified as a second-order theme labeled ‘neglecting pain’. Similarly, we observed that codes such as ‘engagement in story-telling’ and ‘use of virtual accounts for creating art and content’ were linked to the narrative construction of personhood through art and performance, which we labeled as ‘artistic space’ in our second-order categories. These subthemes became major themes upon iterative analysis and consultation. For example,

subthemes ‘safe spaces’ and ‘artistic spaces’ focused on anchoring work with regards to spatial dimension, and so we initially called them ‘anchoring work with respect to space’

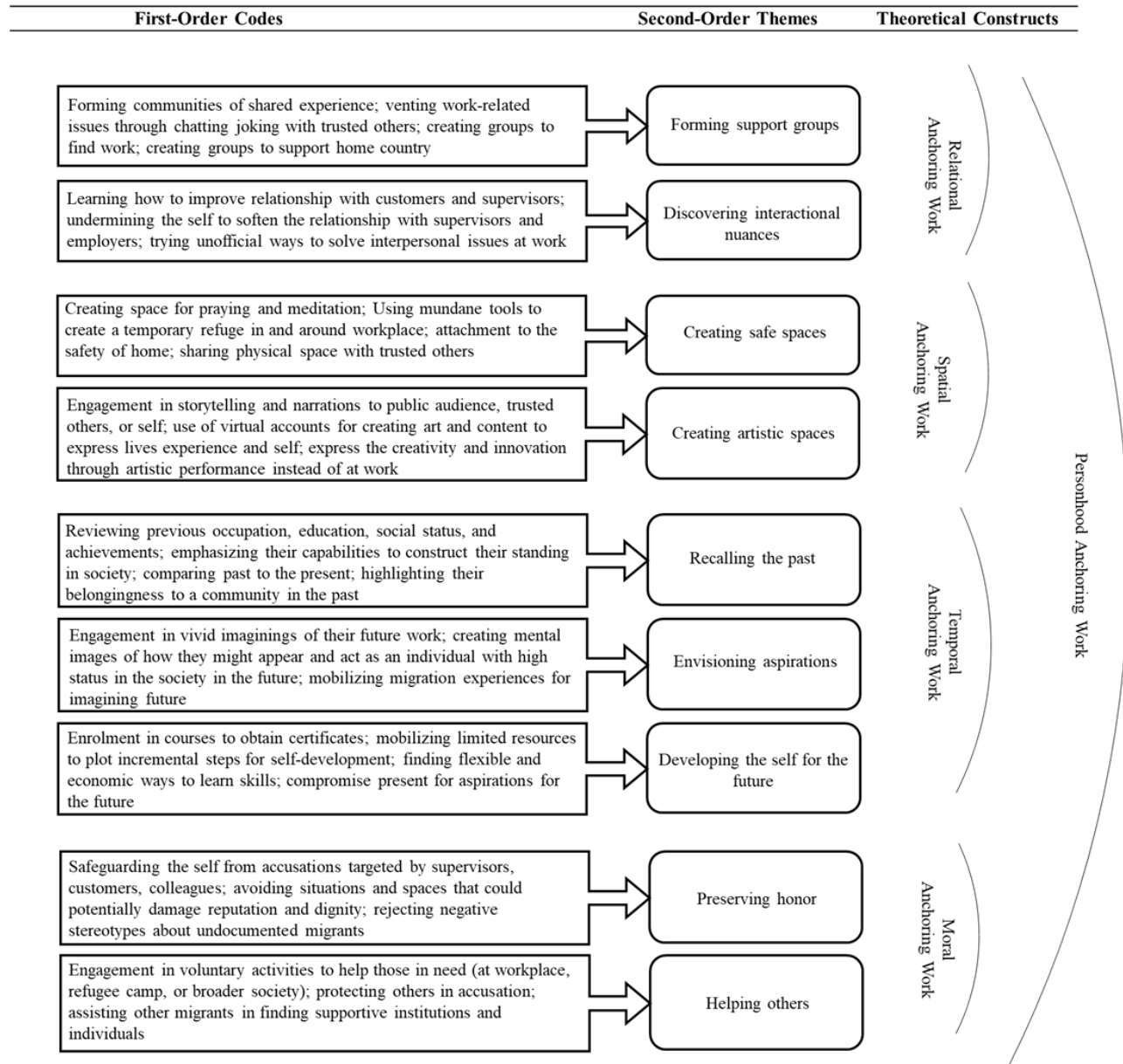


Figure 2. Relational, spatial, temporal and moral personhood anchoring work

In the fourth stage, we conducted a comprehensive review of the identified themes based on Patton’s (2002) criteria for evaluating themes, which include internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. To ensure internal homogeneity, we thoroughly examined the themes, subthemes,

and associated codes through multiple readings to ensure coherence in the extracted data. Any unique codes that did not fit were removed or added to appropriate themes. For external heterogeneity, we carefully reviewed all the themes to ensure their distinctiveness through multiple readings. Additionally, we thoroughly reviewed the entire data set again to identify any additional codes that could be added to the existing themes. This rigorous process resulted in the development of a thematic map (refer to Figure 1 and Figure 2) to visually represent the identified themes and their relationships.

In the fifth stage, we engaged in an iterative process of consultation to assign appropriate names to the identified themes and subthemes, while ensuring they were unique, concise, sensitive, and aligned with the empirical and theoretical narrative reflected in the data and the extant literature. For the experiences related to being stuck in personhood limbo, we named them as ‘experiencing invalidation’, ‘experiencing discrimination’, and ‘experiencing exclusion’. We labeled the personhood anchoring work practiced by undocumented workers as ‘relational anchoring work’, ‘spatial anchoring work’, ‘temporal anchoring work’, and ‘moral anchoring work’, to reflect the different dimensions of their efforts to establish a sense of personhood.

In the sixth stage, we documented the findings using relevant supporting codes. To minimize any potential issues related to retrospective accounts, we took great care to only make statements of findings that were corroborated by multiple informants. Therefore, the representative quotes included in the findings section only reflect corroborated findings. In addition, we have provided Supplementary Table 2 and 3 that include additional codes for reference.

To enhance the ‘trustworthiness’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of our findings, we employed several rigorous measures. These included collaborative theme development involving three authors who were actively engaged in the coding process, triangulation of findings by drawing

from multiple data sources and incorporating diverse voices, contextualization of findings through thick descriptions (using our secondary data presented in Supplementary Table 1) to provide a rich understanding of the research context, transparent presentation of our data collection and analysis process, and inclusion of numerous examples and additional data to support our findings.

Findings

We present our findings in two distinct subsections. The first subsection delves into the ways that undocumented workers experience being stuck in personhood limbo in terms of its effects on their experience of personhood. This sets the stage for the second subsection which sheds light on the efforts undertaken by undocumented workers to cope with these aspects of personhood limbo, through four distinct types of personhood anchoring work.

The experience of being stuck in personhood limbo

Our analysis uncovered a wide range of unpleasant and dehumanizing experiences associated with being stuck in personhood limbo, most of which persisted even after having gained some degree of documentation since the experience of personhood limbo largely remained intact regardless. We focus here specifically on undocumented workers' experiences of personhood in this situation, which we characterize as the invalidation, discrimination, and exclusion of their personhood.

Experiencing invalidation

Our analysis revealed a recurring experience shared by many of our informants, wherein their thoughts, emotions, feelings, capabilities, and aspirations were systematically invalidated by employers, supervisors, and other individuals encountered in both the workplace and broader society. Most of our informants reported that their work experiences and certificates earned outside of Italy were not considered valid in their desired field in the host country. For example, Mohammed, a food delivery rider, lamented that his accounting degree was regarded as '*just a*

piece of paper' in Italy. Similarly, Luis, who had previously worked as a project manager in Venezuela, struggled to secure similar employment in Italy due to employers' reluctance to recognize his ability to perform such work. Civil society workers corroborated these observations, stating that undocumented migrants often faced difficulties in finding work in their areas of expertise, as employers frequently doubted the compatibility of their skills and experience with Italian work practices.

Furthermore, our informants shared that employers and supervisors often invalidated their feelings by making assumptions that undocumented workers were capable of enduring laborious work, handling more physically demanding tasks, or should be assigned more difficult roles at the workplace. As Majid explained:

"When you are working in a warehouse, it is so tiring. You are standing on your feet for 16 hours... There are three of us in the warehouse: two Italian boys and me. Whenever the supervisor wants to give an order to one of us, she chooses me. Even when I am in the middle of another task and the two other boys are free, she asks me to do the work. She thinks I get less tired." (Majid)

The invalidation of pain and suffering was pervasive, extending to almost all the spaces where undocumented workers were present, including refugee camps and courts that were supposed to protect them. For instance, Adama recounted how the camp director invalidated his friend's pain due to a potentially fatal disease:

"My friend was feeling very, very bad, then every time he went to the camp director, he said 'I am sick, can you bring me to hospital, please?' He always responded, 'no, no, you don't have anything'...My friend was even about to die, and then a civil society assistant said, 'I will bring him to my family doctor'. They did a blood analysis and figured out my

friend has Hepatitis B. He could die, and it was also dangerous for all people in the camp.”

(Adama)

Experiencing discrimination

Being categorized according to negative attributes, characteristics, and images and discriminated against accordingly was another aspect of the experience of being stuck in personhood limbo. In the community and the workplace, undocumented workers were often unjustly assumed to be unreliable, disloyal, and dishonest. We recognized that this assumption was fueled by their tenuous legal status as undocumented workers and reinforced by social stereotypes and stigmatization:

“Undocumented workers are perceived as irresponsible workers who can leave their job one day without notice or are not really honest at work.” (Alessandra)

Undocumented workers faced discrimination not only through generalized categorizations but also through specific characteristics assigned to them based on their nationality. For example, Africans were often expected to work on farms, while Romanians were typically relegated to menial jobs. In daily communications, workers of color were frequently referred to using terms such as ‘nero’, ‘di colore’ (colored), ‘straniero’ (foreigner), or ‘immigrato’ (immigrant), which many of our informants found offensive and inappropriate. These terms served as indicators of a specific class to which they were perceived to belong, associated with negative characteristics and behaviors:

“I was passing with my bicycle on a bike path, and there was an old man I passed by him, and then he started to shout “Ma tu sei nero!” ([You do this because] you are black!). He insulted me because I was too close to him with the bike, because the bike path is not that wide for bikes and pedestrians both. But for him, it was because I am ‘nero’” (Mohammad)

Experiencing exclusion

Being trapped in personhood limbo also severely impacted social relations for undocumented workers. Many of them had irregular or no relationship with their employers. In most cases, they only had contact with supervisors or instructors. Additionally, the entrenched social structure of Italy, including its culture and language, coupled with ineffective state programs for cultural assimilation and intermediation that “encourages the public to see immigrants as equals but as foreigners” (MIPEX, 2020), as well as the challenging work-life conditions faced by undocumented workers, hindered their integration into mainstream society. Consequently, our informants frequently expressed a sense of being relegated to the periphery, excluded from the accepted roles, norms, and values of Italian society.

“I have few acquaintances in this village. I sometimes meet them on street and we say hi. But you know what? For them I am a strange person. What I eat, how I talk, what I do as a job, my home, my thoughts, these are all strange for them. They cannot understand me truly as I am. So we can never become closer than acquaintances.” (Janice)

Upon their arrival in Italy, many undocumented workers were settled in refugee camps, as mandated by the state as part of the process for obtaining legal documentation. However, this marked the beginning of their exclusion from mainstream society. In the camps, while some civil society organizations made occasional visits to support their integration, undocumented workers were isolated and lacked communication with the outside world. Even after obtaining legal status and being allowed to leave the refugee camps, formerly undocumented workers still faced significant barriers to social interaction due to cultural norms, racism, and stigmatization. Our informants often shared experiences of being avoided and rejected by Italian society, with any attempts at initiating interactions being met with resistance.

In summary, the state of personhood limbo in which undocumented workers were trapped greatly impacted their everyday lives at work and in broader society, leading to feelings of invalidation, discrimination, and exclusion that undermined their sense of personhood. To maintain a sense of self-worth and existence as individuals in such dire circumstances, they engaged in what we refer to as ‘personhood anchoring work’, a concept that we introduce to the literature for the first time, and which we will illustrate in the upcoming section.

Personhood anchoring work

Our analysis revealed that undocumented workers trapped in personhood limbo employed certain practices in order to conceive and express at least some fragments of their personhood. We label these practices as *personhood anchoring work*. Our analysis further identified four types of personhood anchoring work that workers engaged in: relational, spatial, temporal, and moral. In addition, our observations suggest that personhood anchoring work practices did not necessarily extricate undocumented workers from their state of personhood limbo, but rather allowed them to endure within its confines. We provide further elaboration on these findings below, along with additional quotes in Supplementary Table 2 & 3.

Relational anchoring work

Relational anchoring work encompassed practices employed by undocumented workers to conceive and express various aspects of their personhood through social relationships. These practices involved forming support groups and discovering nuances in their interactions with others.

Forming support groups

As noted earlier, most undocumented workers had limited social connections, and their relationships with employers, supervisors, and colleagues were superficial. However, some

workers formed groups with supportive colleagues who were in similar conditions, allowing them to share their experiences, vent work-related frustrations, chat, laugh, and joke. These groups were cautiously formed by individuals who trusted and felt safe with each other, and had distinct boundaries from the broader society and employers, as well as untrusted individuals. In the face of invalidation, discrimination, and exclusion by the broader society and employers, these groups provided a (temporary) sense of belongingness and facilitated the navigation of life as an undocumented worker. This was evident in the experience of Mohammad, a food delivery rider, who described spending his time waiting for a delivery order while sitting in squares with other undocumented riders:

“We are many different nationalities that sit together. But not [riders from a certain nationality]. We don’t mingle with them, because we think they manipulate the [order distribution] system, and so they receive many orders while we wait for hours for one order... sometimes we complain about [X-delivery platform they work for], sometimes we envy and say ‘I wish I worked for [Y-delivery platform]’, or sometimes we laugh about other companies, like [Z- delivery platform]. Because [Z] pays almost nothing.”
(Mohammad)

These communities were often formed by individuals who shared similar ethnicity, nationality, or religion, and who also had common interests and values. These communities provided undocumented workers with a space to not only share their lived experiences but also discuss the conditions in their home country. For instance, Luis, a political refugee from Venezuela, shared that he found his job through a group called ‘Venezuelan Body,’ which consisted of individuals with similar political positions:

“Economics and political condition are so bad in Venezuela. So once a month we [Venezuelans] gather to discuss and exchange ideas about this condition. We often donate some money to an organization in Venezuela that financially supports people there... When I needed a job I told people there and they found me this work as a mail delivery guy.”

Discovering interactional nuances

Despite the limited and problematic nature of their relationships in the workplace, our findings revealed that undocumented workers were also able to discover nuances in these interactions that allowed them to protect and portray specific aspects of their personhood. These nuances often served as drivers for further developing their expertise and skills.

However, discovering these nuances sometimes created tensions for undocumented workers as they had to navigate between articulating and conceiving certain aspects of their personhood at the cost of undermining others. Our informants shared that building good relationships with their supervisors was crucial, as these individuals were gatekeepers for stability and promotion at work. In some cases, undocumented workers were able to change their supervisors' opinions about them and improve their relationships, but at a cost. For example, Kofi, a construction worker, revealed that he was constantly looking for an '*opportunity*' to showcase his masonry skills at work in order to secure a promotion. He learned that in order to be given such an opportunity by his supervisor, he had to '*pretend to be stupid*'.

Despite some of our informants managing to provide improvements and opportunities through discovering nuances and adjusting their behavior and approach, it was not a panacea. Most continued to struggle with improving their social relationships even after making such adjustments. For example, Ekow, who worked in the warehouse of an international trading company, experienced discrimination against Africans in the workplace. He had issues with his supervisor,

who frequently undermined his work and fabricated false reports about him. Despite his attempts to resolve the issue without antagonizing the supervisor, it remained unresolved and ultimately led to his contract not being renewed:

“I was trying to avoid referring to HR for this issue. Because you know, sometimes when you try to report these issues to HR, the problems would escalate instead. So, my supervisor might think I didn’t like her. I just preferred to talk to her directly, so that maybe it would allow us to solve it and make peace.” (Ekow)

The formation of support groups and the discovery of interactional nuances for amending their behavior were thus two practices of relational anchoring work that helped undocumented workers to express some limited aspects of their personhood. However, our analysis uncovered that within these practices, there is a simultaneous enactment of portraying some aspects of personhood while suppressing others.

Spatial anchoring work

Undocumented workers faced limited mobility, as their movements were tightly controlled by employers, supervisors, and sometimes even colleagues. Despite these restrictions, they engaged in spatial anchoring work, a set of practices that enabled them to find or create spaces within, around, or outside their workplaces where they could behave and express themselves more freely. This work involved creating safe spaces and artistic spaces, allowing them to anchor themselves in their surroundings and assert at least some degree of agency.

Creating safe spaces

The majority of our informants did not feel safe or accepted in their workplaces. They were constantly under the watchful eye of supervisors and faced frequent criticism and censure. As a result, any space that was outside the controlled confines of their workplace and free from conflict,

criticism, or threats became a safe haven where they could assert some aspects of their personhood and release the strain of work and life. For instance, Vahid and Ekow chose to bike to work through the outskirts of Milan to avoid public transportation, which they did not feel safe in due to the potential for conflicts with drivers or other passengers. It also served as a way for them to ‘enjoy’ some moments of respite before arriving at their stressful workplaces.

In situations where safe spaces were hard to come by, some individuals resorted to creating their own mundane safe spaces. Take the example of Majid, who had to work a grueling 16-hour shift packing fruit and vegetables in a warehouse. His supervisor had strict control over the workspace, and he had to seek permission to drink water or use the restroom. However, after his shift, while waiting for his bus home, he found a way to calm his mind. *“At the bus stop, I put on my headphones and listen to some Arabic prayers from my phone,”* he said. *“They help to ease my heavy head.”* Despite the lack of a physical safe space, Majid found solace in his own way, using his phone and headphones to create a personal refuge.

Outside of work, some individuals found solace in the safe spaces of their own homes, or even just their personal rooms in shared living situations. For example, Fathi shared pictures of his home on his Instagram account, featuring lit candles and the flag of Libya hanging on the wall, which made him feel a sense of belonging. However, there was also an underlying anxiety, as Fathi’s current living arrangement was temporary and provided as part of a state project to support refugees. He knew that he could be asked to leave once the project terminated in a few months, adding an element of uncertainty to his safe space: *“I won’t be lucky to find a peaceful place like this again because no one rents his apartment to a refugee. Or it will be so expensive.”*

Creating artistic spaces

The tasks assigned to undocumented workers in the workplace were often mundane and lacked creativity or innovation, with some of our informants describing them as *'nothing special'* (Gonza, Negasi) or *'boring'* (Bakary, Diric). As a result, many sought outlets for artistic and creative expression beyond the workplace, allowing them to connect with different facets of their personhood. Some of our informants engaged in forms of art, such as participating in theatre, narrating stories, creating comedy videos for YouTube, or recording song tracks. These virtual or physical spaces provided opportunities for them to utilize their creativity and innovation to express aspects of their identity that were not easily conveyed in the workplace or broader society. For example, Modou, a janitor in a hotel in southern Italy, shared how he participated in drama to reflect on and portray a unique aspect of his personhood:

"I play drama. It is like a story about me, an African guy, who decides to leave his country, travels with all dangers and difficulties by boat, and starts a new life here in Italy. So, it is the story of my own life that I play in the amphitheater." (Modou)

The enactment of artistic spaces provided undocumented workers with the means to establish a distinct position for themselves that was difficult or impossible in the workplace:

"On YouTube I have many subscribers. Since my videos are in English, the subscribers are from many different countries. They like my videos and sometimes leave a comment 'Oh man! Your work is amazing.'" (Kofi)

However, artistic spaces were not always shared spaces; some were also more personal and private in nature. For instance, Gonza, who had traveled from Africa to Italy alone at the age of 13, wrote stories about his journey and kept them in his own home. During the interview, he granted the interviewer a glimpse into his private artistic space:

A: *I like to write the story of my life from Africa to here.*

Q: Where do you write them, do you want to publish these stories?

A: No, no I won't publish them, I write only to keep them in my house.

Q: Why do you write these stories then?

A: Because I like to write to my future children, and to their children, so that they know how their father and grandfather arrived to Italy. From Africa to Italy, [so that] they know about my sacrifice of life. I did this sacrifice also for them.

In sum, the boundaries of safe and artistic spaces for undocumented workers varied, ranging from spaces that were limited to the self to those that were shared with others. The impact of spatial anchoring work on individuals' personhood could be enduring, such as when relationships were forged in a theater, or fleeting, as when a safe space disappears the moment the bus arrives at the stop.

Temporal anchoring work

Temporal anchoring work involved activities aimed at shaping and expressing one's personhood through the lens of time. Undocumented workers engaged in temporal anchoring work by *recalling the past, envisioning aspirations, and developing the self for the future.*

Recalling the past

Undocumented workers engaged in temporal anchoring work by reflecting on their past experiences and assessing their different facets of personhood, particularly in their country of origin, with respect to their employment, education, and relationships. They were acutely aware of their place in the societal hierarchy in their host country and recognized that their skills, work experience, and educational qualifications earned in their country of origin were insufficient to secure comparable positions in the host country. Nevertheless, during the interviews, they often

referred to their previous accomplishments, suggesting that it was not their shortcomings but the socio-legal structure of the society that hindered the full expression of their personhood:

“I never had a good job in Italy. In Iran, I used to have meetings with 20 or 30 engineers, and I would speak for them, they respected me a lot...But here, I’m a simple worker, and I don’t have any interactions. One day at work, I don’t even meet any colleagues or even my boss.” (Vahid)

Moreover, they frequently emphasized their sense of belonging to a collective community or group in their country of origin, particularly when describing their limited relationships in Italy in the present:

“In Africa, I was with my community. When you are in a community, there are many people who care about you. They are fair with you. They support you if you need food or if you are sick. But here, no, you do it all alone. Nobody helps you. Understand?” (Negasi)

By recalling their past experiences, the undocumented workers we interviewed were able to cling on to some aspects of their personhood. They were able to provide evidence of their accomplishments and achievements, which highlighted their ability to take purposeful actions and achieve goals in the past, before the constraints of the current socio-legal system locked them into personhood limbo. In doing so, they were able to assert their ability to construct their standing in society based on their own actions and abilities.

Envisioning aspirations

Undocumented workers engaged in vivid imaginings of their future, creating mental images of how they might appear and act. These imaginings were crucial in providing a means of conceiving and articulating aspects of their personhood that were not readily visible or achievable in their current circumstances. While the practice of recalling the past allowed undocumented workers to

provide evidence of the agentic dimension of their personhood, envisioning aspirations enabled them to extend the application of their agentic personhood to the future. However, it is worth noting that while they envisioned these aspirations, they often didn't make concrete plans to achieve them. Due to their resignation to being in personhood limbo, many of our informants imagined fulfilling their aspirations in countries other than Italy, including their country of origin:

“So maybe, apart from the country [Italy] preventing me, this [opportunity] is yet to come. Maybe one day, I’ll find a group who is doing movies and they give me a chance to do an audition. I love acting, if it is true that acting is my talent, maybe one day my star will shine. But it will be in another country. In a big city in another country.” (Kofi)

In addition to imagining future occupations, our informants also envisioned aspirations related to their potential impact on broader society. For instance, Fathi expressed a vision of “opening an orphanage home” in the future, which allowed him to conceive of a role in positively influencing the lives of others and making a meaningful contribution to society.

Our informants also drew on various dimensions of their lived experiences as undocumented workers in Italy, such as starting life from scratch, navigating life in an unfamiliar country, and decoding Italian legal systems and bureaucracy, to shape their aspirations for the future. Some informants expressed a desire to use these experiences to support others in similar conditions or to forge a new career path, illustrating how their present challenges could inform their future goals and aspirations:

“During these years, I had this YouTube Channel through which I helped lots of Arab and African guys to go through their paperwork here. I consulted with them about what to do at the court or how to behave, and where to go. Since my [asylum application] case was very complicated, I learned a lot about all details of Italian law for refugees. It doesn't

matter where I will live next year. Even if I go to Scotland, I can continue doing this. But I will try to find a way to make some money out of it.” (Mohammad)

Developing the self for the future

Envisioning aspirations, as a form of temporal anchoring work, was often practiced without tangible plans for their achievement. However, some of our informants mobilized their limited resources to plot incremental steps for their self-development. Despite facing financial and legal instability, responsibilities of supporting family members in Italy or their country of origin, as well as lack of time and inaccessible information about higher education, undocumented workers made efforts to pursue alternative paths of self-development to support the fulfillment of their aims. For example, Kofi highlighted that free training available on the internet was one such path that he pursued:

“What I decided to do was to educate myself from YouTube. To become a comedian, at least you have to know how to edit a video, how to set camera. These things....So I saved some money and bought a laptop, because you cannot do it with a phone. And then I started studying it from YouTube.”(Kofi)

For some, self-development involved replacing formal education with learning from supervisors or instructors at their workplace. Eniola, for example, aspired to become a chef in a restaurant, but acknowledged that attending culinary school was not feasible for her. As a result, she proactively changed her job from being a dishwasher in one restaurant to another where she was allowed to assist the chef, in order to learn cooking skills:

“In the first restaurant I worked, the chef never allowed me to cook, to do anything with the fire. But in this restaurant, I am always beside the chef and learn from him but also do some cooking for him as he observes and guides me.”

Interestingly, we observed that in some cases, activities aimed at self-development for the future came at the expense of compromising development and promotion in their present work. Naser, for example, worked as a part-time employee in a chain bookstore in Milan. He explained that in order to be eligible for promotion, he needed to change his contract to a full-time one. However, for the past 16 years, he had declined this option because he preferred to allocate some of his time and energy towards pursuing his aspiration of becoming a screenwriter.

In sum, undocumented workers engaged in temporal anchoring work by making sense of their present limbo by holding onto fractions of their personhood from throughout their lifetimes. They recognized that who they were in the past could be reclaimed in the future, and acknowledged that their present development of personhood may be furthered or compromised for the sake of the future. This dynamic interplay between past, present, and future was evident in how they navigated their sense of self and aspirations in the face of personhood limbo.

Moral anchoring work

Moral anchoring work involved the practices of conceiving and articulating personhood through personal values and beliefs. Undocumented workers engaged in moral anchoring work by preserving their honor and extending help to others. They drew upon their own moral compass, individual values, and beliefs to shape their sense of self and identity, and to navigate their interactions with others and the challenges they faced as undocumented workers.

Preserving honor

Undocumented workers, both at their workplace and in broader society, made efforts to protect their dignity and defend their personal values and beliefs. One way they did this was by safeguarding their sense of personal honor from accusations that were targeted at them by their supervisors, customers, or colleagues. For instance, Negasi, who worked as a food delivery rider,

recounted a situation when he was accused of stealing food by a customer, and how he defended his personal integrity in response to the accusation:

“A customer called me after I delivered her food ‘the potato is missing, bring it back’. I told her that I take the closed package from the restaurant and deliver it to them. If the potato is not there, is it the restaurant’s mistake. She shouted at me, ‘no! I know you took it, bring it back’. I told her, ‘Mam! If I wanted to steal potato, if I wanted to be a thief, I was not working as a rider under rain and sun for 2 Euros per delivery.’” (Negasi)

Undocumented workers also sought to protect their honor by avoiding situations and spaces that could potentially damage their reputation. For instance, during our interview with Diric, we met him outside Milan Central Station, where many migrants perceived to be drug dealers would gather on weekends. He explained that he was only there to catch his train back to his town and that he typically avoided being there unless it was necessary. This was one way in which he tried to preserve his honor, and avoid being associated with any negative stereotypes or assumptions about undocumented migrants:

“Many people think that the refugees gathering in the central station are drug dealers. Maybe they are, or maybe they are not. That I cannot say. But what I can say is that I am not like this. So, I never come to this place because this is not who I am and what I do.”

(Diric)

Helping others

Despite facing challenges such as limited resources and disadvantages, undocumented workers often demonstrated remarkable resilience by utilizing their knowledge and experience to support those in need. Many engaged in systematic efforts to help others through NGOs and voluntary activities. For example, Janice, who used to work as a cultural mediator in her village in southern

Italy, continued to provide assistance to undocumented workers even after her contract was terminated. Janice expressed her commitment to helping others, stating:

“I like it [helping undocumented workers] very much. Because by helping others, you also know the person, and you learn from them. You learn about the culture of the other person. You learn about how other people in this world think and live. These are like assets you take with you in your own life.”(Janice)

Additionally, undocumented migrants demonstrated acts of kindness and bravery by offering support and protection to those in peril. Shiva shared an incident where she intervened to protect children who were being harassed on a bus. She recounted the experience, saying:

“One day, I was in bus, and a woman was shouting at some [allegedly] migrant kids saying that they were not welcome to be on the bus. At that moment, I interrupted her, and told her, ‘you are not allowed to talk like this to these kids.’ Then I went to the kids and tried to move them to the other side of the bus, away from the woman.” (Shiva)

In sum, undocumented workers exhibited moral anchoring work where they portrayed themselves as individuals with a distinct and enduring set of values and beliefs despite their current predicament. Depending on the circumstances, these practices involved creating a divide between themselves and those who did not share the same values, whether other migrants, co-workers, or society at large. They also asserted some degree of personhood by seeking affiliation with others who were considered valuable and deserving of fair treatment, respect, and dignity.

Discussion

Our study delves into the challenges faced by undocumented workers as they cope with personhood limbo. Our analysis reveals that this limbo is manifested through invalidation, discrimination, and exclusion and that undocumented workers employ specific practices, which

we identify and label personhood anchoring work, to hold onto and express different aspects of their personhood beyond the boundaries set by socio-legal definitions imposed by society at large.

The first form of personhood anchoring work – relational – involves efforts to articulate one’s status as a person within the social order. The personhood literature has emphasized the relational aspect of personhood, which has mainly been discussed in the context of stable social orders such as families (McCarthy, 2012), tribes (Lepani, 2015), organizations, and workplaces (Zeyen & Branzei, 2023). However, our empirical investigation complements these findings by suggesting that when individuals find themselves in personhood limbo, their purposive actions in conceiving different fractions of their personhood become more prominent. We argue that when the aspired personhood cannot be granted, or is even undermined, by prevailing socio-legal structures, individuals strive to temporarily and progressively construct their personhood status within their immediate social groups. This is done both at the collective level, where one’s social group may provide sufficient familiarity and safety for individuals to present aspects of their personhood that may not be recognized in broader society, and at the individual level, where intentional presentation or omission of facets of one’s personhood in relation to others can allow individuals a degree of agency in self-constructing at least some aspects of their personhood.

The second form of anchoring work involves how individuals create spaces where they can articulate fractions of their personhood. Prior studies have emphasized that one premise underlying the personhood perspective is that to be recognized as a person, an individual needs some control over resources in the external environment, with place or property being considered particularly important (Chowdhury, 2021). This notion is especially relevant in the context of migration, where studies have shed light on various place-making practices pursued by individuals who have left their familiar spaces and cultural resources that are essential to their personhood (Kodeih, Schildt

& Lawrence, 2023). These constructed places become claimed property of individuals, resembling “bubbles of freedom” (Rodner et al., 2020, p.1054), where individuals are shielded from disruptive pressures and hostile environments outside, and can engage in dialogic practices to compose and realize their personhood (Busse & Sharp, 2019). Through interactional processes (Ashforth, Caza & Meister, 2022), emotional bonds are formed between individuals and these physical spaces, which become “key places in which one’s life has taken place” (Gray, 1989, p.53). Our conceptualization of spatial anchoring work adds another dimension to these place-making practices: when socio-legal structures prevent individuals from forging constant familiarity and intimacy with a physical space, the substance of ideas and imaginings essential for the realization of personhood cannot be retrieved from the surrounding spaces. In such conditions, personhood itself renders meaning to spaces, and any virtual or practical space in which fractions of personhood can be presented is considered a safety bubble where ideas and imaginings are conceived.

The third form of anchoring work involves the conceptualization and articulation of personhood through the attributes of time. Recent theoretical frameworks describe the present as a period rather than a moment, extending from the immediate future and beyond (Kim, Bansal & Haugh, 2019; Kodeih, Schildt & Lawrence, 2023). This line of research suggests that individuals imbue meaningfulness into their present time by conceptualizing a *long present*, which allows them to avoid trade-offs in resource consumption for future goals. Furthermore, research indicates that individuals in transitional phases may intentionally disregard aspects of their past to reinvent themselves in the present and for the future (e.g., Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Jones Christensen & Newman, 2023). In other words, these studies highlight a forward direction, where resources from the past are used in the present, just as resources from the present are mobilized to achieve future

aspirations. Our study adds to these studies by focusing on individuals whose sense of personhood is heavily undermined in the present, and it suggests that for those caught in a state of personhood limbo, the present loses much of its meaning and significance. Instead, individuals tend to draw on their relatively positive past selves and aspirations for “an alternative yet unknown future” (Alkhaled & Sasaki, 2022, p.1596) to conceive their personhood in the present.

The final form of anchoring work in shaping personhood involves practices aimed at conceiving and articulating personhood through personal values and beliefs. Personhood is associated with a particular status, where individuals who surpass the personhood threshold are recognized as persons and are entitled to moral rights (Chandrachud, 2022). So, being a person not only entails the entitlement to moral rights, but also the responsibility to comply with the normative considerations of the broader society. In other words, individuals must demonstrate that they possess the values and beliefs that align with the moral framework of the broader society to be considered as persons (Kittay, 2005). However, the moral anchoring work in our study is not always enacted by adhering to values and beliefs that may align with the normative considerations of the broader society, but also by defying the normative considerations of the broader society. This entails workers distancing themselves from certain communities when their values contradict (e.g., from other migrants accused of being drug dealers) as well as preserving their honor and protecting and helping others who face discrimination from the broader society. By doing so, individuals demonstrate that their beliefs and values, whether in compliance or defiance with normative considerations of broader society, constitute their personhood and qualify them as persons worthy of moral respect.

Personhood anchoring work among undocumented workers involves purposeful actions taken to make sense of and articulate different aspects of their personhood, however small and

fragmented (e.g., listening to prayers after a heavy day at work), in the face of socio-legal structures that resist their existence. These practices do not aim to create or disrupt social orders (Martí & Fernández, 2013), even in subtle and hidden forms of resistance. Instead, these practices serve as scaffolding that enables undocumented workers to temporarily position themselves within the social order (e.g., being praised on social media). Through personhood anchoring work, individuals are able to conceive themselves a little closer to how they desire to be recognized, albeit within the limits imposed by the personhood limbo they find themselves in, and even though this (re)conceiving may not necessarily be acknowledged or recognized by the broader society (e.g., writing a personal diary). As a result, personhood anchoring work practices do not necessarily extricate individuals from personhood limbo, but instead often become ongoing struggles to persist and endure within the limbo.

Personhood anchoring work is inherently aspirational, meaning that individuals engage in this work with the aim of achieving a more desired social status throughout their lives. However, aspirations are not static and are constantly evolving in response to an individual's position, work, and surrounding structures (Bennett & Hennekam, 2018). Engaging in anchoring work can lead individuals to intermediate or ultimate stages in their journey towards realizing their personhood. For some, personhood anchoring work marks the end of their attempt to exit the personhood limbo (e.g., being given an opportunity at work to show your skills), while for others, it is an intermediate stage marked by constant struggles to escape this limbo (e.g., assisting the chef in the kitchen, rather than being the head chef). Therefore, our findings suggest that individuals respond to the realization of their personhood in various mundane and non-mundane anchoring work practices in, around, and outside of their workplace, depending on their aspirations. These practices range

from acknowledging the existence of some fractions of personhood that cannot be currently conceived or portrayed, to planning for their achievement, to temporarily conceiving them.

While our findings may have generalizability to comparable populations of undocumented workers within migration systems of the global north, especially given the growing convergence of migration policy and practice in Italy to those of other European countries (Devitt, 2023), it is essential to acknowledge that migration systems and socio-economic conditions can vary significantly among different countries. As such, the need for future research becomes evident. Our study paves the way for numerous opportunities for future research, inviting exploration into the concept of personhood anchoring work across diverse categories of workers and varying legal statuses. These investigations can provide valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of personhood within distinct socio-legal contexts.

Contributions to the literature

Our empirical investigation makes significant contributions to the existing literature on personhood and migration studies. While previous personhood scholarship has extensively debated various attributes of being stuck in personhood limbo (Broom et al., 2021; Rabin, 2021), it often falls short in elucidating how individuals cope with such limbo. In this regard, a key finding of our study is that individuals stuck in personhood limbo engage in articulating fractions of their undermined personhood without disrupting existing structures. Despite the perpetual struggles they face in anchoring their personhood in the limbo state, these individuals simultaneously progress and face setbacks in the articulation of their personhood.

The novel concept of "personhood anchoring work" introduced in this research represents an important contribution to the literature on work and organization. Its novelty lies in its explication of how exactly individuals, particularly in the workplace, engage in practices to secure

and express their personhood despite being caught within limbo. This innovative perspective brings to light the multifaceted dimensions of human personhood within the workplace and offers a more holistic and humane framework for understanding the experiences, motivations, and well-being of undocumented workers. Future research can expand this concept by exploring other contexts, identifying how anchoring work transforms if or when workers emerge from personhood limbo, and comparing the relative effectiveness of anchoring practices in promoting well-being.

Moreover, while previous research has identified the gradated nature of legal personhood (where individuals move from one category of legal document to another one, depicting a linear construction and reconstruction of personhood (Joseph, 2018)), our study, in contrast, encompasses both legal and social dimensions of personhood. It suggests that for individuals trapped in personhood limbo, personhood anchoring work is fragmented, and only fragments of personhood can be conceived through it. Consequently, irrespective of the gradation of legal personhood that may be achieved by undocumented workers, their personhood remains fluid and heterogeneous, undergoing continuous developments and setbacks in various aspects. This sheds new light on the dynamic and multifaceted nature of personhood in the limbo state, highlighting the need for further exploration and understanding of how individuals negotiate and cope with their personhood in such challenging circumstances.

Second, the existing literature has predominantly focused on legal and social considerations as the main constraints or enablers of individual personhood. This narrow focus undermines the agency of individuals in conceiving their own personhood. Our research corroborates that socio-legal structures of the broader society can significantly curtail individuals' freedom in defining their personhood (Kittay, 2005). However, our findings also highlight that even in the most constraining socio-legal structures, individuals engage in personhood anchoring

work to mobilize their resources and imagination in order to articulate and conceive certain aspects of their personhood. The perpetual struggle involved in this process suggests that personhood is not a definitive state solely based on one's social or legal status, especially in the case of undocumented workers. Rather, personhood is fluid and continuously shaped by socio-legal structures, but also by one's purposive actions.

Our third contribution pertains to migration studies within the field of work and organization literature. The existing migration literature often interprets the process of work integration for migrants as transition “passages between sequentially held organizational, occupational, or professional roles” (Ibarra & Barbulesco, 2010, p.136). During this period of transition, undocumented workers are tasked with making sense of their identity, reconciling “who they were and who they are becoming” in the new society they find themselves in, either by force or by choice (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014, p.67). Prior research suggests that this process involves reconstructing their life narratives (Macías Gómez-Estern, 2013) and personhood (Zeyen & Branzei, 2023), as well as developing a repertoire of behaviors that are perceived as appropriate within their professional community (Nardon et al., 2021). Our empirical analysis demonstrates that instead of solely reconstructing their life narratives and redefining their aspirations, undocumented workers engage in practices that allow them to retain prominent aspects of their personhood. As such, we propose that migrant integration should be reconceptualized as a period during which migrants purposefully create and seek ways to conceive and articulate their personhood in the face of socio-legal structures.

From a practical perspective we suggest that gaining insight into how individuals participate in various anchoring work practices could offer a blueprint for policymakers and practitioners to craft and execute migrant integration programs that are more effective and

meaningful. From this perspective, the efforts to support undocumented workers in conceiving and articulating their personhood should focus not only on reducing the influence of socio-legal resisting forces, but also on providing resources and support to foster their agency in shaping their own identity. Recent examples of migrants forging relationships, creating their own communities, and engaging in meaning-making about their new lives in the host country highlight the potential capacity of these individuals to conceive their own personhood as integrated members of the broader society (e.g., Daniel, 2022; Kangas-Müller, Eräranta & Moisander, 2023). This underscores the need for state institutions, NGOs, and other associations to recognize and tap into the agency and resilience of undocumented migrants in navigating their integration process and foster supportive initiatives accordingly.

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¹ A refugee is defined as “a person who is outside his or her country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail him- or herself of the protection of that country, or to return there, for fear of persecution” (UNHCR, 2011, p. 5). Until they are recognized as convention refugees by the UNHCR or by host countries, individuals seeking refuge are asylum seekers. Nevertheless, the request of some asylum seekers can be entirely rejected in the host country and so these individuals usually strive to find other ways, such as finding work, to remain in the host country. The distinction between refugees and asylum seekers is quite blurred (Esses, Ertorer & Fellin, 2017), since not only scholars but also different countries adopt different definitions. Therefore, for the sake of simplicity in this article individuals who enter a country without a valid document, and need to pursue irregular processes for their legal settlement in the host country are defined as ‘undocumented workers’.