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Urban Storytelling as Human Capital: Narratives of Migration, Labour, and Survival in the Philippines

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Abstract

Background: Internal migration is a primary driver of urbanisation in the Philippines, yet the lived realities of rural-to-urban migrants—particularly those in the informal economy—are often marginalised in dominant urban discourses. While the pursuit of economic opportunity drives migration, it simultaneously creates a complex urban landscape where migrants must navigate exclusion and precarity.

Objective: This study investigates how internal migrants utilise narrative practices as a strategic resource to navigate economic instability, cultivate social networks, and assert a sense of belonging within the urban environment.

Methodology: Adopting a qualitative narrative inquiry framework, the study purposively sampled ten internal migrants engaged in informal-sector labour. Data were collected between January and March 2025 through semi-structured interviews and collaborative story-sharing circles. A thematic narrative analysis was employed to decode recurring story arcs, metaphorical devices, and symbolic expressions.

Results: Findings indicate that storytelling serves as a critical communicative strategy for building trust, mobilising communal resources, and navigating public institutions. Participants utilised narratives to reframe vulnerability as resilience and to negotiate the city's symbolic and material boundaries. Furthermore, storytelling acts as a tool for "placemaking," allowing migrants to construct distinct urban identities and claim spaces of belonging.

Conclusion: The study concludes that for internal migrants, storytelling functions as both symbolic capital and symbolic labour. In the absence of formal credentials, narratives provide the legitimacy required for survival and belonging. However, these practices also reveal "unsettling social fields" where migrant resilience is under constant scrutiny and systemic struggle.

Unique Contribution: This research advances urban and communication studies by recasting storytelling as a functional form of human capital. By centring narrative agency, the study offers a new framework for understanding how marginalised populations actively shape urban futures rather than existing as passive subjects of development.

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Key Recommendation: Policy-makers and urban planners should move toward participatory models that recognize migrants as co-creators of the city. Future research should explore how integrating migrant narratives into community-based programs can foster more equitable and inclusive urban governance.
Keywords: human capital; internal migration; narrative inquiry; storytelling; urban poverty

Introduction

As Philippine urbanisation continues to transform the cultural and economic landscape, cities such as Metro Manila and Baguio have long been receiving destinations for rural migrants seeking better access to economic opportunity and services (Porio, 2012; Shatkin, 2008; Ballesteros, 2010). Migration from provinces to urban centres is deeply rooted in not only economic necessity but also cultural imaginaries of transformation and progress. However, for many migrants, upon arrival in the city, a new set of hardships often begins: unstable housing; informal employment; limited access to public services; and an ongoing, pervasive sense of social marginality. In the midst of these struggles, a source of resilience that is underappreciated lies in storytelling. The stories migrants tell about their lives, work, and survival are not only memories or expressions of identity but rather survival strategies that shape how they live, act, and get by in urban spaces.

Urban storytelling—defined here as the everyday narratives migrants use to make sense of their place in the city—has not been widely utilised as a form of human capital. Human capital has traditionally been conceptualised in human capital theory (Becker, 1993) as formal education, technical skills, and labour-market productivity. Even in the context of informality and urban precarity, we find no student outcomes, vocational education, or skills that would open access to acquiring intangible elements. In theorising the urban poor, the economy is based on symbolic capital, which leads everyone to treat tangible things (e.g., language) as social currency with value that fosters dependence on reputation and narrative competence. As the urban poor do not necessarily have standardized forms of capital in the way that the already privileged do, tangible and symbolic capital becomes even more important as they navigate ways to signal trustworthiness, need, and potential in order to access opportunities through social relations, employers, or institutional actors (Bourdieu, 1986; Portes, 1998).

Drawing from narrative theory (Riessman, 2008), it is important to note that stories are not reflections of experience, but an active social approach to meaning-making. In this way, for internal migrants, telling a story is a form of agency, an assertion amidst turbulence. It can provide them with a foothold of coherence and continuity between their rural existence and the urban present. Urban communication scholars (Matsaganis et al., 2011) further contend that communication infrastructures (digital, institutional, or interpersonal) shape how residents engage with their cities. For members of urban poor communities, interpersonal storytelling often becomes the infrastructure for accessing information, resources, and belonging.

The role of narrative in shaping urban resilience is also supported by Sandercock (2003), who asserts that stories help marginalised groups articulate alternative urban futures. Likewise, Appadurai (2001) argues that the capacity to narrate is essential to the "right to research"—a claim to visibility and knowledge production by the poor. These perspectives converge in recent urban studies (Cruz & Formoso, 2020; Silver, 2015), which emphasize the lived experience of informality as a site of agency, not merely deprivation. In the Philippine context,

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scholars such as Ortega (2016) and Tadiar (2009) have shown how urban narratives reflect both structural exclusion and creative survival, pointing to storytelling as a form of everyday resistance and city-making.

This study builds upon these intellectual foundations and attempts to understand the functions of storytelling as a manifestation of human capital among internal migrants in low-income urban communities. It analyses how migrants in Cubao, Quezon City (Metro Manila), and Baguio City used storytelling to address labour precarity, construct identities, develop social networks, claim their positions within the urban order, and more. Rather than viewing these narratives as singular or anecdotal, this research treats them as collective practices of knowledge generation and survival. This study serves three goals: (1) to document and analyze the personal stories of internal migrants who live in urban poor communities of cities in the Philippines; (2) to examine the social role of storytelling as a form of human capital in urban situations characterized by labor precarity and survival in cities; and (3) investigate the potential implications of narrative agency for inclusive urban governance and planning.

Through this process, the study contributes to a broader conception of human capital that centres communicative competence, cultural memory, and symbolic labour as essential elements of the lived experiences of the urban poor. The study was done in Cubao, Quezon City and Baguio City. Although distinct in geographic location and sociocultural context, both study sites represent an urban landscape characterised by highly mobile migrant groups, informal economies, and cultures of storytelling. The study aims to centre the voices of people seldom heard in policy and planning discussions—people who, through storytelling, occupy space, demand recognition, and envision the city in their own way.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative narrative inquiry design, which is well-suited to exploring how individuals construct meaning from experience, in part through storytelling. Narrative inquiry enables in-depth engagement with migrants' lived realities and the communicative practices they use to understand and navigate everyday urban life. This study is not concerned with the ability to generalise; instead, it focuses on the depth and richness of the context, the authentic exploration of lived experience, and the exquisitely nuanced subjective "threads" of experience. The study is based on the central idea that storytelling is agentive, not merely expressive—as evidenced by how individual internal migrants use narrative to affirm their "being here" in an urban space fraught with precarity.

Research Sites

The research was situated in two urban locales with high concentrations of internal migrants: Cubao, Quezon City, a district in Metro Manila which is a mix of commercial and residential space with informal housing, transient workers, and a lack of appropriate space for everyone; and Baguio City, a highland urban centre with a history of in-migration from lowland provinces related to seasonal employment opportunities, notably in construction, tourism, domestic work, and informal vending.

E-ISSN: 2735-9891 DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18062106

These sites were specifically selected to examine different urban dynamics, but similar conditions of precarity and adaptation. These sites also represent areas characterised by internal relocation, informal local economies, and complex cultural narratives.

Participants

The study sample comprised 10 internal migrants: 5 from Cubao and five from Baguio City. Each participant was born and raised in a rural or semi-rural area before moving to their present urban neighbourhood. They were selected for the study based on their current residence status and low income (or informal urban housing). They also all participate in informal and/or unstable work (sidewalk vending, construction, domestic service, food selling, or delivery). The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 55 years.

The study noted participants' ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, in addition to age and occupation, given their significance in the Philippine context of migration and identity. Most participants from Cubao reported being from Ilocos or the Central Luzon provinces and primarily identified as Ilokano or Kapampangan speakers. Baguio City participants were mainly from surrounding Cordilleran provinces, and were either Ilokano- or Kankanaey-speaking. These identities influenced how participants told their experiences; Ilokano expressions of persistence (*agsagrap*, enduring hardship, perhaps) sometimes framed stories based in labour. Cordilleran participants drew on notions of collective resilience and kinship in describing how they thrived. The use of Filipino and Ilokano, as well as hybrid codes at times, allowed participants to express themselves in a manner that was more comfortable for them—accountable and culturally situated.

The selection process employed purposive and snowball sampling, with a focus on individuals with in-depth migration and work histories. Each participant consented to participate in an extended storytelling interview, during which they could share their own stories about the city. Pseudonyms were used to disguise identities and protect confidentiality.

Recognising the context of poverty and informal work, the researcher explicitly reflected on and carefully managed power dynamics with participants to maintain ethical and methodological rigour. The researcher entered participants' everyday spaces as a university-based academic and was aware that their presence could position them either as an authority figure striving to maintain neutrality or as someone affiliated with empirically verified institutional power. While it cannot be assumed how this dynamic shaped how participants narrated their lives, it is possible that they felt compelled to emphasise certain hardships, hopes, or moral positions. To address the researcher's authority, interviews were conducted in community spaces suggested by participants, with a clear reminder that they—not the researcher—were the experts on their own stories. The researcher also shared linguistic and cultural frames to reduce distance and build trust.

Data Collection

Data were collected from April to May 2025 using multiple qualitative methods. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were the primary method, each lasting 60–90 minutes. The interviews were designed to give participants space to express their migration journeys, labour histories and everyday lives in their own rhythms and words without constraints.

E-ISSN: 2735-9891 DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18062106

Language was a significant dimension of data collection. Participants were allowed to narrate their stories in Filipino, Ilokano, or a hybrid language, depending on which language they were most comfortable using. For Ilokano- and Kankanaey-speaking participants, the simple ability to switch into their local language provided them a sense of cultural intimacy and authenticity, especially when narrating sensitive lived experiences of struggle, sacrifice, or discrimination. Similarly, Tagalog- and Kapampangan-speaking participants engaged in lengthy narratives that relied on idioms and metaphors rooted in their rural upbringing, indicating that linguistic resources and decisions were intrinsic to constructing and framing their migration stories.

In addition to the individual interviews, informal small-group conversations were held in community spaces. These small-group conversations became dialogic, collective exchanges in which participants reflected on shared conditions and co-constructed meanings. Field observations and researcher memos were also maintained, documenting nonverbal and nonlinguistic cues from participants, the surrounding environmental context, and reflexive insights into how the research process unfolded in relation to the study's guiding questions. Reflexivity was deliberately embedded into the data collection process. The researcher consistently reflected on how their identity as an academic, their relative socioeconomic privilege, and their outsider status in participants' daily labour spaces might have shaped the narratives shared. At times, participants appeared to tailor their accounts to what they perceived the researcher wanted to hear, or to underscore their resilience in the face of hardship. Instead of disregarding these moments, they were treated as data that clarified the situated and negotiated character of storytelling under conditions of inequality. This reflexive position strengthened the ethical and methodological rigour of the study, emphasising that the narratives gathered were not fixed "facts", but lived accounts co-shaped by the interview context, the researcher's presence, and participants' agency.

Each interview was recorded with informed consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis, with careful attention to preserving local idioms and cultural expressions.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic narrative analysis, following Riessman's (2008) approach. This consisted of looking at what was said (content) as well as how it was said (structure and sequencing). To identify recurring themes, motifs, metaphors, and story arcs related to migration, work, adaptation, and identity, the transcripts were read and reread. The use of thematic coding enabled the researcher to organise the narratives into larger analytical categories that captured not only individual agency but also collective struggle. Once themes were developed, they were refined through cross-participant comparisons and validated through reflections and revisiting/rechecking the data to ensure consistency and credibility of interpretation.

Results

The stories that internal migrants from Cubao and Baguio City tell illustrate how storytelling serves not only as a form of recollection but also as a means of survival, resistance, and identity. Throughout the stories told, there was an intricate tapestry of loss, hope, work, and adaptation. Through narrative, participants made sense of their identities, connected with their communities, and developed strategies to navigate the precarities of urban life. In the analysis

E-ISSN: 2735-9891 DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18062106

process, four main themes within the data set were identified: (1) migration as a leap of faith, (2) storytelling as a work or labour and trust-building, (3) narrative as informal resource mobilisation, and (4) storytelling as place-making and belonging.

Migration as a Leap of Faith

Migration was often portrayed as something people do when they feel uncertain, like a step forced by economic desperation, natural disasters, or family need. Participants did not view their move as a rational economic decision, but as a series wherein emotion and symbol coalesced around notions of hope, sacrifice, and *pagbabakasakali* (taking a chance).

> *"Wala namang plano. Basta may kaunting ipon, sumubok na kami sa Maynila. Akala mo lang, basta makarating ka, may trabaho ka agad. Pero hindi pala ganoon kadali." (There was no real plan. We just had a bit of savings and decided to try our luck in Manila. You'd think that once you get there, work would be easy to find. But it turns out, it's not that simple.)* — Rosa, 38, laundry worker in Cubao

This leap-of-faith framing aligns with narrative theory's emphasis on storytelling as a way of imposing meaning on unpredictable life events (Riessman, 2008). With no institutional guide, or structural safety nets available, stories provided participants with a framework to interpret and justify their actions. Migration is itself a ritual of transition—a rite of passage in the life course of many rural-born Filipinos. The stories framed their movement as resilience and risk-taking, not as failure or fleeing.

Storytelling as Labour and Trust-Building

Participants emphasized that in informal labor settings, technical skills mattered less than character, relatability, and the ability to be trusted. Stories—of struggle, of origin, of commitment—served as tools to build trust with customers, co-workers, or employers.

> *"Yung suki ko, gusto nila may kwento habang bumibili. Naghahanap sila ng karanasan, hindi lang produkto."*
> (My regular customers want stories while buying. They're looking for experiences, not just products.) — Leo, 46, street vendor in Baguio City

> *"Hindi ka kukunin ng amo kung di ka marunong makipagkwentuhan. Dapat alam mong magpaliwanag kung bakit ka kailangan nila."*
> *(An employer won't hire you if you don't know how to converse. You need to be able to explain why they need you.)* — Glenda, 32, domestic helper in Quezon City

These insights stress Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic capital, in which communicative ability and social charisma can be converted into economic advantage. For migrants in the informal economy, their stories are part of the labor they perform. Narratives serve as social bridges, facilitating transactions, building loyalty, and smoothing over power asymmetries. This challenges conventional human capital theory, which often privileges formal competencies, by showing how communicative labor sustains livelihoods in precarious urban settings.

E-ISSN: 2735-9891 DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18062106

Narrative as Informal Resource Mobilisation

Several participants talked about how telling their story to a neighbor, barangay official, or social worker led to them getting access to food packs, temporary employment opportunities, or referrals for assistance. Their stories were not only expressive; they were calculative.

> *"Nung lockdown, ang dami naming problema. Pero sinabi ko sa barangay yung sitwasyon namin—yung asawa ko walang trabaho, may anak akong may sakit. Ayun, nakakuha kami ng ayuda."*
> (During the lockdown, we had so many problems. But I told the barangay about our situation—my husband had no work, and my child was sick. That's how we got aid.)
> — Noel, 41, tricycle driver in Cubao

In these situations, narrative becomes a form of social capital—mobilized to elicit sympathy, establish legitimacy, or make claims to state resources. Storytelling, in this sense, acts as a performative currency (Couldry, 2010), where individuals must frame their need within narratives that align with institutional expectations. This underscores the communicative burden often placed on the poor: to be heard, they must narrate themselves in ways that are intelligible—and acceptable—to power holders.

Storytelling as Place-Making and Belonging

Storytelling served several of the most impactful purposes for participants, one of which was to construct an urban sense of belonging. There were numerous participants who described a journey to feel "at home" in the city. It was important to assert that none of the participants had become "at home" in the city through material success, but rather by creating stories that portrayed the completion of a unit of urban life.

> *"Dati, laging sinasabi sa akin, 'Hindi ka taga-rito.' Pero ngayon, kahit mahirap, may kwento na ako dito. Alam ko na kung saan ako hihingi ng tulong. Kilala ko na mga kapitbahay ko. Parang sa akin na rin ang lugar na ito."*
> *(Before, people would always say, 'You don't belong here.' But now, even though it's hard, I already have stories here. I know where to ask for help. I know my neighbors. It feels like this place is mine too.)* — Jessa, 29, food seller in Baguio

In this way, urban storytelling becomes a form of place-making, in which migrants engage in remaking new or even hostile spaces into lived and meaningful ones. Their stories, in fact, root them in this place—anchoring their being in the city's spatial and social fabric. This finding echoes the urban communication ecology model (Matsaganis et al., 2011), which highlights how communication networks—formal or informal—mediate participation and inclusion in urban systems.

For those migrants, their stories act as the access points to the city's moral and symbolic geography. It becomes increasingly clear that narrative works not just as an expression of self, but as a fluid and flexible form of human capital: grounded in context, contextually civic, and socially negotiated and communicated. For internal migrants in precarious urban spaces, storytelling allows them to make sense of their experiences of surviving harsh conditions, negotiate intelligible identities in contestable locations, and identify belongingness in cities that reflect their relatively excluded presence. Their stories, therefore, are not merely recountings

E-ISSN: 2735-9891 DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18062106

of suffering or hope; they enact practical and symbolic capital - tools to communicate trust, credibility, and legitimacy in places where formal credentials are often out of reach.

Drawing from Riessman's (2008) narrative theory, it is clear that participants used storytelling to impose coherence on their often fragmented and uncertain migratory journeys. The narratives they shared—in terms of leaving home, obtaining employment, raising children, and developing informal networks—were embedded not just to remember but also to contextualise hardship and to convert vulnerability into action.

In this way, narrative acts as a survival tool: allowing the migrant to understand suffering as sacrifice, risk as resilience, and labour as dignity. The act of storytelling facilitated the connection of past to present, rural to urban, hardship to hope–creating an individual and collective identity within the emerging socio-cultural context of the city.

These narratives also demonstrate the operation of symbolic capital in everyday transactions. As Bourdieu (1991) emphasised, language and symbolic practices are deeply entwined with social power. Without official work records, educational credentials, or a permanent address, an individual migrant uses her narrative capacity to present herself as trustworthy, hard-working, or worthy before employers, local authorities, or aid providers. The ability to share a meaningful narrative—rooted in shared values such as determination, accountability, or collective/community support—can be as helpful as any formal credential in the informal economy. That is, communication may also be understood as a resource, not merely as a soft skill, capable of yielding social and material returns when used as labour.

Discussion

Storytelling serves a critical function within the urban communication ecology, as conceptualised by Matsaganis et al. (2011). In both Cubao and Baguio, participants relied not on mainstream media or digital technologies, but rather on interpersonal storytelling networks to gain access to housing information, job opportunities, health care assistance, and safety in their neighbourhoods. These narrative exchanges occur within localised "communication infrastructures" that are not accessible to formal urban management, but are crucial in how the poor navigate the city. Stories are both containers for collective knowledge and spaces of action, allowing the poor to access and circulate information to meet their immediate survival needs.

From this evidence emerges a layered conception of human capital that extends beyond economic productivity or formally recognized skills. This study supports the view that emotional labour, cultural memory, and narrative agility—the capacity to articulate and circulate one's own life story—are central to how internal migrants come to understand themselves and remain socially legible within their communities. These intangible forms of capital enable migrants to forge connections, cultivate trust, gain visibility, and participate in the city's moral economy, particularly in contexts where formal credentials and institutional recognition are limited (Bourdieu, 1986). In this way, storytelling operates as a socially embedded resource through which migrants mobilize relationships, signal trustworthiness, and access opportunities, reflecting the relational and network-based dimensions of social capital articulated by Portes (1998).

E-ISSN: 2735-9891 DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18062106

The implications of these findings are significant. The urban poor should not be understood as passive recipients of development interventions or welfare programs; rather, they are active narrators and informal knowledge producers who craft accounts that illuminate everyday urban realities often rendered invisible within technocratic policy frameworks and aggregate statistical data (Porio, 2012). By examining storytelling as both process and resource, this study contributes to an expanded model of human capital—one that is deeply communicative, relational, and experiential, and that emerges in response to structural exclusions embedded in contemporary urban governance and market-driven planning regimes (Shatkin, 2008). This reconceptualization invites urban planners, public health practitioners, and local governance actors to engage with stories not as peripheral anecdotes but as central texts that surface the lived contradictions, insights, and grassroots innovations of marginalized communities.

The findings also create an opportunity to revisit Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic capital, clarifying its role across different social fields. For internal migrants, storytelling is an act that transcends experience and utilises symbolic capital whose value is contingent. Within the neighbourhood, stories of hardship and resilience offer a means of fostering stronger bonds and solidarity, thereby strengthening one's capital within the local community. Among encounters with barangay officials, the story is equally important. However, it is valued not for its truth but for its evidence of necessity, responsibility, or respectability, in line with institutional expectations. The job market operates similarly: narratives of diligence or trustworthiness are often prerequisites for informal jobs where credentials are unavailable. These examples illustrate that symbolic capital is unequally valued, negotiated according to field-specific dynamics, and highlight the precarity of migrants' social location across overlapping fields of power.

These dynamics show an undeveloped yet essential idea in the study: narrative as work. Narrative requires communicative, emotional, and moral work, in which migrants repeatedly narrate themselves as worthy, resilient, or trustworthy. This work is invisible to many, yet it is work nonetheless: essential to survival in informal economies. Couldry's (2010) argument that voice is a claim to recognition fits well here, yet the data suggest that voice requires work: migrants schematize their struggles in ways the audience will accept as morally acceptable, choosing their words according to the audience's expectations, and ensuring they maintain trust over time. Thus, the narrative becomes a type of symbolic labour that generates and consumes, for example, energy, trust, and emotional resources. It is work that migrants must perform, but it is rarely viewed as work in dominant human capital models.

Framing storytelling as symbolic labour helps situate the Filipino case within broader discussions of the hidden economies of the poor. As Tadiar (2009) argues, the urban poor in the Philippines generate not just material labour, but also affective and cultural labour, which help sustain their survival. Narratives can also be regarded as a form of labour: migrants tell stories to secure *ayuda*, gain informal employment, negotiate belonging in contested spaces, and stitch together coherence in their fragmented lives. However, like all vulnerable forms of labour, the returns on this form of labour are uncertain, conditional, and easily disenfranchised. Understanding narrative as symbolic capital and a form of work underscores its power and limits, while making visible some of the ways in which migrants strategise their survival in an asymmetric social field.

E-ISSN: 2735-9891 DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18062106

Beyond the Philippine context, the findings of this study align well with urban experiences in the Global South that grapple with the intertwined phenomena of migration, precarity, and informality. For instance, across the ocean in Accra, Ghana, Silver (2015) illustrated how urban poor households are making sense of broken infrastructures by generating informal communication networks to access basic supplies such as electricity, ultimately. This is not far off in how Filipino migrants precisely utilize interpersonal storytelling as a communication infrastructure for accessing things like jobs, aid, and housing. Similar practices among urban street vendors in Latin America —for example, in Mexico City or Lima —also tell stories that frame issues of dignity, sacrifice, and moral worthiness—stories that become instrumental in negotiating legitimacy with both the public and the state (Sandercock, 2003). These examples indicate that narrative practices are important symbolic resources across sites with very few material and institutional supports, and that storytelling is one form of "soft infrastructure" across cities in the Global South.

Academics researching migration in Dhaka and Mumbai in South Asia have similarly pointed out how rural migrants, using narratives both to transform vulnerability into moral and social capital and to assert themselves as resilient risk-takers, became visible/mattered in unstable labour markets. This is reminiscent of how Filipino migrants framed migration as pagbabakasakali (taking a chance) and of how migrants reframe their ambivalence as perseverance. The narratorial labour of migrants negotiating with local authorities, claiming rights to urban spaces, or gaining trust at different scales with the community in question, suggests a common strategy of communication for belonging and survival across precarity in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. this study not only highlights the specificity of local storytelling practices but also underscores their transferability. The importance of storytelling as a form of human capital across the Global South suggests that narrative agency is a significant yet underappreciated resource for inclusive urban futures.

Though the results emphasise storytelling as a communicative tool in the form of human capital, storytelling has limitations. Stories do not fundamentally challenge the structural inequalities that produce and maintain the precarity of internal migrants. Bourdieu (1991) points out that symbolic capital is always situated within a broader set of power relations, and its power depends on how institutions recognise (or reject) it. For many study participants, storytelling led to temporary benefits—food packs or referrals—but these transactions rarely created long-standing change. In this sense, narrative acts as the end of the line when formal credentials, secure employment, or access to institutions were absent. Essentially, this demonstrated agency and also represented the deep structural exclusions that Ortega (2016) engaged with across the various dimensions of the Philippine urban context.

At the same time, the performative power of storytelling may make uncertainty more legible—and palatable—to those in authority. Migrants would often tell their stories in ways that emphasised sacrifice, resilience, or perseverance, in ways that aligned with the moral expectations of barangay officials or aid providers. Couldry (2010) argues that voice is important precisely because it is a claim to recognition, yet recognition may be conditional and equally discretionary. For instance, after a migrant narrated their hardship to officials and received *ayuda* (relief goods), they remained contingent on the occasional generosity of local governance rather than on any systemic entitlement. Thus, storytelling may obscure the visibility of inequality without necessarily addressing its structural causes—a challenge that

E-ISSN: 2735-9891 DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18062106

Sandercock (2003) likewise discusses, noting that "exclusionary systems can still shape the stories we tell that create images of inclusive futures.

These tensions prompt difficult questions. Does storytelling function as an actual substitute for the institutional legitimacy provided by formal credentials or fill the role when credentialed recognition is denied? Does it challenge entrenched asymmetries of urban power on its own, or does it work within those asymmetries and reinforce migrants' reliance on how their stories are received? As Silver (2015) shows in his research on Accra, informal practice can reveal both agency and constraint, helping the poor manage while simultaneously exposing the fragility of their position. In the Philippines, too, the stories presented here reveal resilience and the limits of storytelling as an urban survival strategy in a profoundly unequal urban environment.

Postcolonial forms of survivalism should not be oversimplified; thus, storytelling could contribute to a constellation of mechanisms of survival and self-representation, rather than serving as a panacea for urban precarity. Storytelling can reveal how migrants articulate a new form of belonging and assert agency amid exclusion and constraint. This point recalls Tadiar (2009), who argued that urban life in the Philippine context is not merely about structural dispossession, but about finding creative ways to survive. If storytelling has merit as an expression, it is not as a substitute for more comprehensive structural reform, particularly in relation to labour protection, housing, and welfare. Listening to people who share their stories of precarity in this new context should aim to extend their formal rights and entitlements as what matters for well-being, rather than as a substitute for activism. Understanding the value, alongside its limitations of storytelling, poses a balance and potential of narrative as an experience of human capital, in positioning it in the field of urban inequality, not as a pragmatic solution.

Conclusion

This paper has examined storytelling as a form of human capital among internal migrants living in low-income communities in Cubao, Quezon City and in Baguio City, Philippines. Using narrative inquiry, this research has demonstrated how stories - personal stories, community stories, or strategic narratives - working together, help poor urban migrants survive, acclimatise, and participate in urban life. When limitations arise in formal credentials, economic capital, and institutional connections, the opportunity to tell a story emerges as one form of symbolic labour. Internal migrants do not merely tell stories to remember; they tell stories to endure human life, to belong, to seek resources and legitimacy, and to claim their place within the social structures of the city.

Using the frameworks of narrative theory, symbolic capital, and urban communication ecology, it has been demonstrated that storytelling is central to urban resilience rather than peripheral. Yet, recalling Bourdieu (1991), the value of storytelling as symbolic capital depends on its value across various social fields and can be interpreted differently: a story that strengthens solidarity among neighbours is not necessarily valued in the same way by barangay officials or potential employers. This draws attention to how storytelling demands constant communicative and emotional work—work that remains invisible labour, through which migrants can claim themselves as resilient, trustworthy, or deserving. As Tadiar (2009) argues,

E-ISSN: 2735-9891 DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18062106

the urban poor not only produce material labour but also affective and cultural labour, and in this study, narrative can be understood as one form of symbolic labour.

Reconsidering narrative in terms of both symbolic capital and symbolic labour, this paper helps to enhance (and to develop) the burgeoning interdisciplinary literature demonstrating explicitly inclusive, culturally-informed, and communicatively competent urban management. Storytelling transforms vulnerability into value—struggle into strength—and repositions the migrant not merely as a subject of poverty, but as an active agent with means of communication, negotiation, and meaning-making. At the same time, the findings remind us that storytelling is contingent and precarious, more often a cry for help than a deliberate attempt to exert influence when formal entitlements are absent. The value of storytelling service organisations (as opposed to support organisations), thus, lies not in replacing or functionalising structural reform, but in capturing and portraying the lived experiences, understandings, and agency of migrants exposed to a strategy of managing inequality.

As Philippine cities grow rapidly and internal migration is reshaping both peripheries and centres, it is necessary to consider the urban poor not only as recipients of policy but also as co-designers of urban futures. Their stories—raw, complicated, and hopeful- are lessons in resilience, adaptability, and human agency. In their stories, a deeper, more human understanding of the city emerges, while also revealing the unequal social fields in which their resilience is tested.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest regarding the publication of this work. In addition, the ethical issues including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and, or falsification, double publication and, or submission, and redundancy have been completely witnessed by the authors.

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