# ESREA – LHBN 2017

## ’Discourses we live by’

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# ABSTRACT

# Discourses, cultural narratives, and genre in biographical narratives

The analysis of life story narratives reveals the interpretations of self and existence expressed by the narrators in the act of narrating (Horsdal 2012). They may, however be expressed in various ways. The use of language is a social phenomenon as Bakhtin claimed several decades ago (1981), we express ourselves through existing words, sentences and discourses that are culturally available to us, while we narrate our personal and individual stories according to our memory, present situation, and context.. Life story narratives express world views and ‘possible worlds’ (Bruner 1986) and often negotiate meaning between various cultural narratives and existing discourses. Furthermore, not only what is told in an autobiographical narrative but also *how it is told* display a variety of discourses though the act of emplotment (Riceour 1984) and the chosen genre of the narration. Life can be told as a fairy tale, a tragedy, a developmental story of ‘Bildung´, etc. Most life story narratives in Western culture are linear, but linearity is not a necessary condition for narrating a life story.

In the paper the theoretical implications of the use of the terms discourses, cultural narratives, and genre in biographical narratives will be discussed from my theoretical and epistemological stand. As stated in so many publications, I see life story narratives as much more than just an outcome of discursive acts, but also including significant phenomenological and embodied aspects, they are, nevertheless, always symbolic representations and thus embedded in local cultural discourses. The theoretical discussion of discourses, cultural narratives, and genre will be illustrated with examples from a few stories among a repertoire of hundreds of life story narratives, collected in the course of more than 25 years of research. The stories collected in a small European country include stories with people from different generations throughout the 20st century and beyond, thus demonstrating the historical development of discourses and cultural plotmodels which appear in the narratives. Also, the act of learning to narrate and express oneself in a culturally accepted way will be briefly touched upon.

References:

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Bruner, J. (1986). Actual minds. Possible worlds. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Horsdal, M. (2012). Telling Lives. Exploring dimensions of narratives. London and New York: Routledge

Ricoeur, P. (1984). Time and narrative. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.