**ESREA – European Society for Research on the Education of Adults**

**LHBN - Life History and Biography Network**

**‘Discourses we live by’. (How) Do they benefit the world we live in?**

**Copenhagen, University of Aarhus, Copenhagen Campus, Thursday 2nd to Sunday 5th March 2017**

Individual paper

**Title: “It is impossible to say just what I mean”. Telling what we live by in discursive-biographical narratives.**

The aim of this conference is to examine the conceptual frameworks that bound people’s thoughts and actions and consider how these matter to a global society. We wish to ask if the real life narratives that researchers collect transform understandings and shape acceptance of commonly held discourses.

This paper, taking up the suggestions of the conference organisers, will take a ‘grounded’ approach, moving from the horizontal to the vertical, e.g. analysing unstructured interview narratives to find and examine the discourses evident - not within any “texts” - but within the narratives, as closely heard as possible; to compare contrasting discourses emerging in narratives; to consider, too, specific, dominant discourses, their origins, their efficacy, and their application to lives and our research. To this end, discursive-narrative biographical interviews with young adults who are currently in university education, international students from Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Belarus and Brazil will be examined. Closely-heard talk in interaction will be examined to question (a) what evidence of discoursal work is encountered in the interview interaction; (b) how the emergence/unfolding/communication/sharing of discourse in interview talk may be identified and described; (c) the relationship between discourse and biographical self or ‘biographicity’ (Alheit).

Since the much-cited “linguistic turn”, discourse has passed through many forms in qualitative research focused on language or language-near interaction. As with so many other concepts, discourse is often used in a very loose fashion and can describe anything from a limited exchange of utterance between speakers (as in classroom discourse), service exchanges (customer-salesperson talk, flight operators/pilot communication), specific professional/academic/discipline “codes” (medical, legal discourse, etc.) or the overarching chains or sequences of language (semiotic sequences, language in all conceivable forms, codes, linguistic, visual, symbols, practices) that in relation to one another (interdiscursivity) offer or impose what the Call sees as conceptual frameworks, the “big packages” (Sachs) of cultural and political narratives. This last is the understanding of discourse adopted by this author. The theoretical perspective of this paper fully embraces the Foucaultian notion of discoursal power and recognizes the tension between structure and agency that necessarily resides in the culturally constituted social practices that massively determine individual and collective interaction.

It will therefore be of assistance to take to heart in our analysis open-ended notions of life history narrative that emphasise the relational character of discourse (Mishler, Mason). The agency of the individual, in this approach, always has more or less access to accumulated layers of experience that represent more resources of experience than can be ‘used’ at any one time, yet they go to create a kind of intuitive sense of an own biography, that is self-referential and remains ‘porous’, transforming and being transformed in ongoing interactions, given that it arises from interdiscursive interaction. The individual’s potential to respond to, and to shape, discourse can be seen as drawing on biographical resources (Alheit).

The narratives of the young adults presented in this paper live, too, from this porosity between ubiquitous discourses of discipline, of love, of family, of learning, ambition, obedience, resignation and so on. This paper will attempt to show what we may discover about the discourses as well as about our attempts as researchers to identify, describe and communicate what we believe to have understood.