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# Discourses, cultural narratives, and genre in biographical narratives

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When someone is asked to tell about her life – in an interview, in an interpersonal exchange of human curiosity, in a professional setting – the context of the telling is obviously of great significance.

We do not tell the same story in different settings, and we do not tell the same story throughout changing times. The context of the narrative has a decisive impact on the discourses we may find in the story.

This, however, does not imply a complete relativism, the context is very important but not the only significant element of the story told. A life story narrative contains cultural, as well as cognitive and corporeal elements, however inseparable. The life story informs the listener about interpretations of self and existence as memories from the past, expectations of the future and the experience of the present are conceived, combined, and expressed in the moment and context of telling.

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The argument that we are confined to or limited by the cultural symbolic signs available to us is often put forward, and for good reasons mainly due to the influence of impoverished cultural environments. However, it is a remarkable fact that the human imagination enables unlimited creative and innovative use of culturally and socially inherited symbolic forms. The ongoing production of fiction is a proof of the human ability for new creations, just as the fantastic possibility of new musical compositions in spite of the fact that they all use the same 12 tones. Limitation of the cultural tools for symbolic expression is a social and cultural issue, not an immanent feature of symbolic representation.

Biographical narratives also contain a mixture of something unique as well as socially and culturally well known symbolic material. There are remarkably common features. We are a paradoxical mixture of cultural imprints such as social discourses and features of learned social interactions and, at the same time, we are individually unique human beings due to our corporeal existence in space and time in a cultural environment. Only Siamese twins shared the identical path and trajectory throughout life. The rest of us move physically along individual trajectories in space and time although constantly involved in interpersonal relationships of various kinds which partly determine our interpretations and embodied experiences of our life journey as well as our intentions and actions. Large samples of biographical narratives make the paradox evident. Each story and each human being is unique, and yet stories display so many common traits, similarities between many individual stories. We are narrated from a third person perspective before we ourselves are able to narrate (Kerby 1991). The world is pointed out to us adorned or burdened with values and significance from the very beginning. During our upbringing we acquire the available cultural tools in richer or poorer degrees, including the words and discourses at our disposal.

Even the cognitive parts, our mastery of language and episodic memory depends heavily on interpersonal interactions.

Whether or not we regard ourselves or other as individual beings is a different matter. Individualism is a mayor discourse or grand narrative in our Western culture today, which heavily affects our interpretations of self. Whether we regard the other as an individual human being or as a generalized member of a group is another question (Horsdal, 2012, 2017)

## Discourse

Discourse analysis can be a useful tool in the analysis of biographical narratives. Back in 1998 Ochs wrote a fine chapter on narrative in Van Dijks book, ‘Discourse as structure and process’. A central part of discourse analysis has been the identification of “floating signifiers” and the different combats between various discourses in order to determine the assignment of meaning to concepts such as ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’, ‘equality’, or ‘nation’ . Discourse analysis thus provided an important tool in critical analysis not least of social media.

As the variety of presentations during this conference most probably showed, discourse may be applied in a way somewhat similar to the term ‘genre’, as when you talk of a ‘narrative discourse’ in comparison with a different discursive genre, or as a concept somewhat similar to ‘grand narratives’ or ‘cultural narratives’. But the ambiguity of the concepts may be confusing. You can speak of a narrative genre in comparison with e.g. lyrics. And you may speak of the genre of a particular narrative, which may be told as a fairy tale, a Buildungs novel, or a tragedy. The terms ‘discourse’ as well as ‘genre’ may signify larger or smaller linguistic units.

As for third term ‘grand narrative’, Lyotard (1979) proved to be so wrong about his claim of the extinction of ‘grand narratives’. Although the interpretations of the significance of class and other collective frameworks changed, grand narratives are most certainly alive. The grand narratives of ‘individualism’ not to speak of ‘growth’ are very influential.

Personally, I have primarily used the term ‘cultural narratives’ in my own research, signifying both grand narratives and discourses of various kinds, such as the two grand narratives mentioned above, as well as religious narratives, social political narratives etc. which are part of people’s biographical stories.

The invitation to this conference claimed:

“To participate in the 2017 conference, you are asked to interrogate the **discourses we live by** and consider how they are present in cultural narratives and how they are relevant to the real life contexts of adult education and of people’s life histories. Question to what extent are people's accounts shaped by the understandings already held.”

During a quarter of a century of research on biographical narratives a significant part of the analysis of the biographical narratives has been the analysis of the cultural narratives expressed in the life stories right from the beginning. I rarely used the term discourse in my books and articles on biographical narrative research. This does not mean that I object to the statements in the invitation. I only preferred the term cultural narratives in order to distance myself from the theories on narrative which in the postmodern line of thought only wanted to speak of discourse, viewing also biographical narratives as a purely linguistic phenomena and thus abstaining from any cognitive or embodied or phenomenological approach to the life story narratives.

My immediate answer to the question posed in the invitation is clear: People’s accounts of their lives is to a very great extend shaped by understandings which may be termed and analyzed as discourses or cultural narratives, that is as understandings already held in the communities and societies in which the narrators interact. What is interesting, however, is the way the cultural narratives or discourses appear in the stories.

## The individual and the communities

Some of the hundreds of stories I have collected or analyzed show a tendency to negotiation of meaning between competing discourses.

*“Can you force someone to do something-because what will be the result? In a way I feel that when I have finished this education and I am able to do various things and also want to do various things, well, when there are lots of schools missing teachers the problem is that most of the students at the college of education say they may well study there, but they do not want to become teachers. The college works as a jumping-off point for something else. You don’t really know what you want – you have tried the university – may be two or three times. This is typical of many of the students at college. What, really do I think myself? What do I want? We…maybe you have an obligation towards society. My father always maintained that.”* (Woman aged 23).

“*On the other hand, I have no doubts as for when we feel fine. Most people feel bad about being alone, and they feel better being part of communities, and when they feel loved and appreciated by other people. That you now and again may want to act selfish, it may be suffocating, and then you want to break out. But I believe we generally feel better in communities. The thing is that what is frightening in our time is also the gift. That we are released from a lot of family tires, religious ties, national ties, ideological ties…the question is to accept that we haven’t got those ties you had in different times. Yet while we are so differentiated it is important to have the basic belief that at some point we just want the same things.” (Man age 27)*

The two young people negotiate an interpretation of self and existence with themselves among several common discourses. The discourse of individuality and variety of choices and ‘death of the grand narratives’ on the one hand, and a need for relationships and communitarianism on the other.

The open approach to the narrative interview in which the story told is the response to one single question: “Please, tell me about your life from the beginning until we are here today”, where interruptions and redirections by further questions from the interviewer are completely avoided, more often display a negotiation of meaning between a variety of different cultural narratives or discourses (Horsdal 2016b).

In some research project this open narrative interview was followed by a more traditional semi-structured interview, in which I posed several questions according to the interests of the research. Here, I noticed, that the responses to the questions in the semi-structured interview proved to be much more unambiguous and unequivocal compared to the open biographical narrative. In other words, the narrators negotiated meaning in the open biographical narrative, but chose one discourse (that perhaps might express the ‘good interviewee’) in the semi-structured interview.

Also a very specific context for the interview might limit the application of various discourses to what was thought most appropriate, thus equivalent to Bruner’s argument of rhetorical justifications (Bruner 1991).

An analytic implication of this is an increasing impact of the relationship between interviewer and interviewee – which, however, always is very important - in a semi-structured interview, coloring the chosen discourses and/or cultural narratives. The more the methodology of the interview procedure supports time for thought, for reflections, for considerations about what to say and how to put it in a relaxed atmosphere, the more negotiations of meaning between different ‘voices’ and given cultural narratives are expressed in the biographical narrative.

Some commonly held beliefs and widespread discourses or grand narratives are present in most biographical interviews. The context of the biographical interview in itself points to an individualistic interpretation of existence and to an emphasized linearity in modern Wester life stories. I have in a few cases met other forms, cyclic stories based on the seasons as well as collective conceptions of the person in her relationships of kin or class. Interestingly, the main discourse changed from the generations born in the beginning of the 20th century to their grandchildren from a view of life as a common destiny to a matter of personal choice.

The biographical reflexivity I am referring to above is in itself a quite dominant cultural narrative in our cultural environment. We ask the questions: ‘who am I?’ ‘Who do I want to become’? ‘Am I doing the right thing?’ ‘Making the right choices?’ Questions which are part of a grand narrative or discourse of: “life as a project and a matter of personal choice.” Naturally, biographical research on lifelong learning underscored this tendency.

This Individual biographical reflexivity so well discussed by Taylor (1989) and Giddens (1990), meaning that individual biographies replaced the cultural narratives of a collective fate (“Such were the conditions for women/small farmers/workers”) is nevertheless hardly visible in some biographical narratives.

This biographical reflexivity is mostly found in stories of well educated, prosperous young people. The two quotations above come from a project researching biographical learning of active citizens.

Stories collected in more impoverished areas beyond the range of possibilities belonging to the middle class rather show an interpretation of existence as a troublesome journey in a rough terrain with few options and a careless resignation to circumstances combined sometimes with some anger and frustration (Evans 2016) Horsdal 2016, 2017). The antagonism between this interpretation of experience and the main stream dominant discourse of life as a personal project and responsibility for success or failure may furnish the frustration.

“*We don’t’ always, get it, as we want“. “Life is no dance on roses”. “This was hard, it was a failure”. “What doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger”,* are part of the expressions in a typical life story from a less privileged environment.

Narrators belonging to the very old generation often tell about the hard circumstances they endured with a certain pride as they managed to have a reasonable life after all. The individual –often quite moderate – success is vied upon a frame of a collective fate of poverty, hard work, gender, social class, illness etc.

Today foreground and background are almost reversed for the less privileged narrators. The discourse of life as an individual project to be succeeded is hinted at as a background upon which the actual life conditions seem almost given or fatal. And yet, the personal responsibility for success or failure lurks in the background.

During many years I have asked my students in education at the university to make a narrative interview with someone they knew, in order to feel more familiar with the methods of biographical research before entering the field. Together we have read and analyzed most of those stories in class. The random collection of life stories from my students show a significant amount of biographical narratives told by people who had to struggle with very serious problems during the childhood. Serious neglect, violence, mental illness, abuse of drugs or alcohol make children’s and young people’s life a struggle just to survive without deterioration, and without repeating destructive patterns in their own relationships.

Other narrators tell about caring families, secure childhoods and lots of happy memories.

However, the most significant issue in the storied I have read, across different backgrounds, is the question of relationships.

Many biographical narratives show relationships as the overall theme of the stories: The relationships within the family between the different members, the relationships in kindergarten, in schools, in neighborhoods, in sports or other leisure activities, other educational settings and workplaces. Shift of places or communities of practice such as when the family moves, the parents get divorced, the arrival to a new school etc. entails new challenges in the theme of relationships. Did the narrator manage to get new friends in the new place, did he feel accepted, legitimate in his participation etc. This is significant.

Relationships are the big, big issue, and the feeling of being bullied or excluded seems devastating. Our participation in the different communities is valued in the stories according to the kind of relationships they offer or oppose. Even in stories in which working life and career plays a significant role in the biography, the relationships in the different workplaces have a heavy impact.

The dependency on good relationships exposes a certain vulnerability which can be interpreted as connected to the overall discourse on individualism and the ‘liberation from’, or ‘dissolution of’ earlier more persistent communities based on necessity.

The old collective communities did not question the legitimacy to the same extend as the wish to be accepted – and appreciated – as the very person you are can do. You are free to go, but also to be excluded.

I also noticed a tendency to a quite narrow range of social relationships in the stories of less privileged people. Does the outer world seem frightening or hostile? Or, challenging, and fascinating? Active citizens have the resilience and extra energy to engage in a larger world, the less privileged tend to care only for the closest relationships. One of the active citizens I interviewed said:

“*I think it is one of the curses of our time, exactly because we have got so many options, and we’ll always feel there is something we haven’t time to do. The danger, of course, is that you go to the other extreme and search yourself more than necessary, and then that you turn around and say that you’ll only concern yourself with the Danish, or you’ll only concern yourself with your family, or you’ll only concern yourself with your job and that’s it. This is a danger these years, and some people are caught.”*(Man 29 years).

This is obviously a statement from a person who has the freedom of choice and resources to reach out to a larger range of communities. A young woman alone with four kids, third generation in violent family relationships limits her ambitions to the hope, that her children do not like herself become mothers at an early age. Typically, the only person mentioned in her story outside her own closest family is a doctor who treated her when she was sick as a child.

How narrow or how spacious is the human lifeworld in which we engage? And how are the reserves of strength for this engagement?

To take up the question of hope from the latest conference in Canterbury, the sharing of life story narratives may, in itself, enhance a view of the other as someone with whom you may identify as well as recognize and accept as a different, unique, and equal person. The paradox between the individual trajectory and the persistent interdependency cannot and should not be resolved. But narrative competences to allow for negotiation of prevailing discourses are indispensable today in a world full of dangerous manipulations.

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