



GREY MATTERS

A Guide to Collaborative Research with Seniors

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Appendix 9

Narrative Interview Guide

This protocol provides a step-by-step guide to conducting research based on the collection of stories by seniors with seniors. Details about why you might want to use stories in research, the theory behind this research, examples of stories collected by seniors, and how to analyze and use stories in reports are included in Chapter 8 of the seniors' manual.

Narrative interviewing needs to be paced and structured to promote a safe space for peer-to-peer interaction. This protocol includes background information, a structured workbook, and conversational prompts.

It is intended that you tape your interview, and this workbook can be copied or scanned. You can use the same form to take notes while interviewing and to record the data later as you listen to the tapes.

Narrative research captures people's experiences and thoughts through their stories. The skill of the researcher lies in soliciting

stories and writing about the topic through the stories so that others can understand what you have learned. Through careful documentation and thinking, you come to understand the meaning of events.

Meaning is created in conversation as stories are told and explored. There is no hidden truth that you are trying to find. There is no theory or definition to prove. Knowledge and meaning evolve and change through the process of talking, documenting, and analyzing the stories you create together.

Meaning is contained in stories – stories about events, relationships, emotions, and thoughts. You need to use great care and skill in locating and documenting stories, just as you look for behaviours while observing, answers to questions when using questionnaires and ideas about issues and topics in focus groups.

A. Stories in Research

While you can do narrative research to find interesting stories about a person's life experiences, this particular method has been developed to collect stories to add to our knowledge about the topic you are researching. In order to achieve this goal, you need to set an expectation that thaws out stories about your topic.

A story is seldom told from beginning to end. Most stories have a tendency to be messy and rich in detail that may seem irrelevant at the time. These diversions are often important when looking back at your data to understand the meaning or lessons of the story.

We will be using a narrative framework that has come from the study of literature and has been adapted to serve research purposes. We will be asking you to pay particular attention to the following parts of each of the stories.

The title of the story. The title captures the essence of the story and creates a shorthand reference to the story. You may have time to do this with the person during the interview, but it is more likely that

you will think of a title as you listen to the tape. If you have made arrangements to follow up with the person after you have recorded the stories, you might ask for input about what titles work best. For example: *Playing the piano while the kitchen burned*.

The context of the story – setting the stage or the backdrop to the story. The context creates a frame of reference for the story: where the story takes place, what is happening at that time in the community and the world, who is involved. A context sounds like the beginning of a fairy tale. *Once upon a time*. The context provides very important information about what precipitated the story.

The plot of the story as you piece it together – from the beginning to the end. It may be effective to lead the conversation by asking the question, "... and then what happened?" To ensure that you have a chronologically sound story – in order over time.

The lessons of the story, why the person told the story and what lessons they felt were there to be discovered. For example, "Looking back on his experience, Tom comes to see that being injured on the farm kept him from going to war and made it possible for him to go to university so he could support the family."

The person's reaction to the process of telling the story. For example, "Jill seemed very sad at the beginning of the story as she spoke of the hardships when she was young, but became very proud of what she and her brother had accomplished. She felt strong in her achievements."

Your reactions to the story and the meaning you found for the topic. For example, "I really learned that loneliness can lead people to do things that are harmful to themselves; they turn inside and that makes it more difficult to meet people and they become afraid of new people."

B. Conducting the Interview

A good researcher in narrative research is an avid listener, or fan, of the person's story, following up on ideas, exploring the detail and sharing short reflections from their own experience.

You are considered a peer because both of you have come to learn and to listen, to contribute, and to create.

Before you sit down with the person, make sure that your tape recorder is working by taping the date and the topic with your name and the other person's name, rewinding, and listening for volume. For example, "This is my first narrative interview. My name is Angel Star and it is November 8, 2009. We are in the volunteer office of the Kerby Centre, and Jam interviewing Betsy Bim."

As you begin the interview be sure to offer a cup of tea or coffee, and ask if there is anything that you should know before you start, such as which side to talk on, is the person likely to tire quickly, or would they like to stand and stretch or even walk as you talk?

Reinforce your status, you are helping to collect data for a seniors' group, for a doctor's study, or that you are learning how to be an interviewer (there may also be a helper with you taking notes for you as you go, so introduce that person). Be sure that the following are done before you start:

The consent form and identifying information.

Go over the workbook ahead of time (or give them a copy), and show them what you are following so they know what is going to take place. Explain any questions but do not go into great detail.

Reinforce that, at any time, if the person is feeling uneasy or confused about what is happening, they should let you know. They are free to stop the interview at any time.

Your role in the interview is to be the guide, following the workbook process but not enforcing it. You do not have to follow a specific order in the interview because you will be able to collect the bits and

pieces of the story on tape and enter the whole story together in the workbook later on. Keep an open mind when listening for links to your topic and to follow-up ideas. You do not have to ask direct questions but allow for a conversation to emerge. Be careful not to judge what is being said but be an active listener.

The following sequence has arisen from listening to the natural way that seniors tell stories. You do not have to follow this particular order and may find that you need several pages for one or more sections. These are merely suggested frameworks for a storied research process.

Brief story of the person's life: People will feel more comfortable, and also be validated, if the researcher takes the time to listen to the person's life story. If you do not honour their personal story, the more targeted stories may be told in a manner that includes their life story.

Tell the person being interviewed that you would like to begin with a brief story about the person's life so that the rest of the stories can be understood better. Begin by asking the person to tell you a little about where they were raised and their family, their schooling, marriage and family, work life, creative gifts, and retirement. This is not the focus of the interview but a way to establish the context for the stories to come. You may find that the person becomes very detailed about aspects of their story. If that happens, suggest that you may want to return to that time in more detail later on. You may want to share some examples of people's stories to help them get started. Examples are included in Chapter 8 of the manual.

A family topic story. Begin this section by referring to the short story of the person's life and ask:

In looking back at your family, do you think you learned about "your research topic" from them? Is there one particular person that seemed to stand out as representing the topic? Could you tell me about a time that you remember as being a good

example of “your topic”? Would you tell me a story that you would feel comfortable sharing about that person and what they taught you about “your topic”?

If the person can’t think of a family example or if it is inappropriate to ask, suggest:

Is there someone in your life that taught you about the topic and could you select a story that you would feel comfortable sharing about that person and how they taught you about the topic? Be sure to include the relationship to the person and the context of this story.

A personal story about the topic. You may find that you can bridge from family to personal stories as follows:

Could you select a story that you would feel comfortable sharing about a time when you were most aware of the topic being discussed? Encourage the person to tell one story in detail.

Topic-related stories. At this point we are shifting the focus of the interview from general stories to stories that come from your previous work or directly from the topic at hand. You may wish to take a small break here and note that you are now going to carry on with stories directly related to the topic. After a brief chat about the topic, negotiate the questions that you would like to follow up on. For example: “Having had some time to think about the role of culture in understanding resilience, do you have some examples about being a woman in your culture and how this affects your resilience? Would you select a story you would feel comfortable relating about a time when this became clear to you?”

Completion and other stories that the person may wish to share. Thank the person for their stories and contribution to the

research. Ask, “Are there other stories about loneliness and aging that you would like to share?”

As you complete the interview, offer to give them a copy of the stories you create from the interview, and you may wish to ask if they would be interested in seeing the stories when they are written to make sure that they are clear and correct. You may also invite them to contribute to the analysis that you have been able to complete. Set a rough time for this and exchange contact information.

Ask if they would like to learn more about research or to help with the next project.

C. Listening to the Stories from the Interview and Recording Stories

Once you have completed the interview, you will have the tape of the interview and any notes you have been able to make. In listening to the tape, you are asked not to transcribe the conversation word for word, but to listen and take notes about events and thoughts until you can piece together a representation of each of the stories.

This listening and note-taking is the first stage of data analysis because you are extracting the essential elements of the tape to create the stories in the form of a story about your topic. Record each story in the boxes of the workbook. Be sure to record the title and context separately.

The second stage of analysis and interpretation occurs as you explore what the story meant to the person interviewed and to you. This may be a simple emotional reaction: “She seemed pleased to have recalled this story after all these years and she felt warm about her memories of her mother despite the hardships they all endured.” You will likely find that the moral of the story was included in the telling of the story, but that it was possible to separate this.

Please return to your work after you have recorded your first impressions and re-read the stories and the reactions to see if you think of other ideas and themes. You may also feel that you want to link the stories together and note what was the overall impression of what you learned and how the stories were connected.

Once you have recorded your stories and impressions you will likely want to get together with the other members of your team to share ideas about what you have discovered as a group.

D. Storied Research Workbook

Based on information from senior researchers from the Kerby Centre of Excellence

Topic of the research being conducted and stage of research:

Name of interviewer:

Date and place:

Identifying code for tape _____

Name of person being interviewed and relationship to topic

Consent to be interviewed as part of the study

I have read the summary of the research project and understand that the information gathered will be shared with me prior to any use of my stories or any publication.

Name:

Date:

Place:

Comments or qualifications:

Short overview of the person's life:

Family story: Title _____

*If we waited for other people to do research
on things we really cared about, we might be
waiting forever... and we have the ability.*

(PA 2010)