

Narrative Interviewing

General Format and Examples

Suzanne M. Grieb, PhD, MSPH

1. Introduction and explanations about the research

Introduce the interview as general as possible. An important question in interviewee's mind will be: "What do they want from me?" The more explicit the interviewer is about specifying that, the narrower the interviewee's responses will be, and important insights on topics may be lost.

Also explain the interview process (e.g., that the interview will be audio or video recorded, that the researcher would like to hear their story in their own words) and obtain consent.

2. Initiating discussion

Do not begin straight away with the interview. Engage in conversation about everyday things. Switch the recorder on during the preliminary conversation. In this way you will avoid introducing a formal "switch" to the narrative, which can be distracting or intimidating for some, and may create an unnatural formality that can influence the storytelling.

During this phase, the interviewer may also share a short narrative about themselves to help the interviewee feel more comfortable about sharing their narrative (for example, the interviewee may share how they came to be interested or involved in the current work). Note: the interviewer's narrative may also occur prior to this time, depending on the amount of communication that occurs leading up to the narrative interview.

3. The narrative

The interviewee begins telling their story about the topic of interest. This often begins with a prompt (examples below) but may also organically begin since the interviewee is already aware of the topic of interest.

The topic/prompt should be focused on an experiential part of the interviewee and should not reference explicit names, dates, or places, as these should be brought up only by the interviewee.

Examples of prompts:

- Can you tell me about your experience in the program?
- Can you tell me about your experience developing the program?
- Tell me what is like to live in your community as someone who...
- Please tell me about your journey with...
- Tell me your story of...

Prompts should be broad. Generally, interviewers allow the interviewee to begin and end their story wherever they want, as often our retelling of stories may not be organized in a chronological fashion. If an interviewee asks about this, the interviewer can respond by saying “Start wherever you would like.”

As the interviewee shares their narrative, the interviewer only listens. They should use non-verbal cues to encourage the interviewee to talk freely. These can include, for example, saying *hmm* or *yes?*. The interviewer should not interrupt or ask any probing questions. This can be difficult for less experienced interviewers, especially if there are long pauses. The interviewer does not interject with additional questions until there is clear end, that is, the interviewee signals the end of their story (for example, the interviewee says something like, “Well, that’s about it” or “And that brings us where we are today”).

Note: a narrative interview usually includes only 1 or 2 narrative prompts.

4. Questioning phase (in a combined narrative/semi structured interview)

Themes, topics, and events brought by the informant are probed using the language of the interviewee.

Do not ask “Why” questions, or directly ask about opinions, attitudes, or causes as this invites justifications and rationalizations. Narratives will include these, but it is important that they occur organically and not through probing.

Example questions for the questioning phase:

- What happened then/before/after...?
- Can you say a bit more about...?
- You mentioned [your initial encounter with a staff member, the first session of the program, your first meeting about this with the Tribal Council, your first run-in with a client’s family member...]. Can you remember a few details about this?
- How did that happen?

5. Concluding talk

After the questioning phase is complete, the interviewer then explains the next steps (e.g. transcribing of interview, whether the participant will have access to the transcripts and/or narrative that is developed by the research team, opportunities for any further input, whether or not the interviewer will meet with the interviewee again).

Finally, the recorder is switched off, and the interviewer and interviewee can engage in small talk about the topic/narrative. The more relaxed mood can shed light on more formal accounts shared in the narrative, and this can be very important for the interpretation of the data.

At this point, it is ok to ask “Why” questions.

To capture the important information shared during the unrecorded small talk, the interviewer should have a notebook for summarizing the contents of the small talk immediately after the interview.