

The Power of Stories Brief

Enriching Program Research and Reporting

Historically, tribal communities have used storytelling to share language and customs from one generation to another. Tribal social service programs and others can build on this rich tradition by using stories within a **qualitative research** framework.

Programs often use quantitative research to monitor implementation and track outcomes. Qualitative research is of equal value. It can provide insight into whether, how, and why a program works. Common qualitative data collection methods include interviews, focus groups, and observations. With these methods, programs can draw stories from program stakeholders, such as participants, staff, elders, and community members.

*Sometimes there is a need
for something more
to make people sit up
and listen.*

—Jane Field

Why Stories Resonate So Strongly



We can all relate to stories. They strike our emotions as well as our intellect, help us to better understand our own and others' experiences, and describe the world around us.

Research suggests the human brain is hardwired for stories (Bentley, n.d.). When presented with a story, both sides of the brain work to process the words, interpret the story, and store its meaning in memory. Facts activate only the language processing areas of the brain, while stories activate the motor and sensory areas as well. Essentially, stories

make the brain behave as if we are experiencing the events firsthand. For example, a frightening story might trigger the heart to beat faster. The combination of these brain responses makes us empathize and connect with stories (Berns et al., 2013; Weldon, 2014; Zak, 2013).

Using Stories in Program Research

Stories can help us understand the experiences of people involved in programs. Stories provide rich information and valuable context that cannot be directly observed or quantified. They allow us to **explore, describe, or explain** program activities and outcomes.

Collecting and using stories takes time. Before you begin, carefully organize and plan your approach. Be systematic, develop protocols, and describe your methods in your report. You can increase support for your research by engaging program stakeholders. They may have ideas about what methods are most important and feasible, and they may be willing to be trained to collect stories.

Program research is not just a requirement of funders and others. You can use the findings to improve your program and outcomes. Stories can support quality improvement, recruitment of participants and partners, sustainability efforts, and the design of new programs.

Consider the kinds of questions stories can and cannot address, and determine your purpose and research questions.

Stories can...	Stories cannot...
✓ Answer research questions that ask how or why about an experience, event, or outcome	✗ Answer research questions that ask how much, how many, or how often about an experience, event, or outcome
✓ Provide indepth information and understanding of individuals' thoughts, behaviors, and experiences	✗ Provide information that is generalizable to other people or settings
✓ Provide data that are sometimes more compelling than quantitative data	✗ Make quantitative assessments or predictions about outcomes
✓ Describe patterns, themes, and rare occurrences	✗ Assess measurable impact or change in outcomes

Collecting Stories

The methods you choose for collecting stories will depend on your purpose and audience. They include interviews and visual and performance-based methods like those shown below.

Individual and Group Interview Methods	Visual and Performance-Based Methods
Participant interviews	Photovoice
Institutional memory/staff interviews	Digital storytelling
Oral history and community interviews	Scrapbooking and story quilting
Story circles	Theatre

Analyzing Stories

Stories can be analyzed using qualitative methods. These often involve transcribing, reviewing, and organizing the data and coding it for themes. Analyzing story data helps you choose which stories to share and transform them into effective formats for reporting.

Sharing Stories

Share selected stories in a format that is appropriate for your audience. Possible formats include brief summaries or compilations of stories (vignettes), case studies, and Web-based multimedia. The format and content should be clear and meaningful to program staff and stakeholders so they may use the information to inform practice and system improvements.

Honoring the Storyteller

Collecting and using stories requires mutual trust and respect. Trust is established when research is conducted in an open, honest, and transparent manner from start to finish. Begin by clearly explaining the research goals to storytellers and describing how their stories will be used. Consider and discuss issues of safety, confidentiality, consent, and data ownership. Before sharing stories, confirm with storytellers that the final form reflects their experiences.

Not all stories are appropriate for sharing. Some may include sensitive information or identify other individuals who did not consent. Storytellers might not fully understand the need for confidentiality until after they have shared their story. Even when a consent form has been signed, seek ongoing approval.

To learn more, please see the full report, *The Power of Stories: Enriching Program Research and Reporting*, available at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/index.html>.

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