

**SOCIAL
CHANGE**



A guide

**THE POWER OF
NARRATIVE AND
STORIES IN RESEARCH.**



Introduction.



We have been creating and sharing stories since the foundation of human society.

Historically, stories were used to establish social cohesion and shared values, while communicating the overall structure and each person's place within that society. As such, stories are intertwined with our concept of society.

The stories we tell ourselves can reveal how we think about the world and our place within it, and are a powerful tool for gaining insight into our social values, social norms and understanding of social issues.



What are narrative and stories in research?

Narrative is the **process of defining events and the sequencing of those events**. Narratives tend to be based on past events and experience, rather than imagination or creation.

In contrast, stories provide the features, such as setting, character and plot, of a narrative to make it more emotionally compelling and to **capture the attention and imagination of the audience**.



Why should we use narrative and storytelling in the research process?

In research, narrative can be a useful way to structure the process and sequence of events to provide general understanding around a social issue. Storytelling, however, can be a powerful tool in research to understand:

- The meaning and connections people have to an issue
- How people perceive their place in the wider framework of social structures, and
- How people perceive and establish their identity within wider social structures.

How and why should we use storytelling?

To demonstrate the potential power of storytelling, let's imagine how it could be used by an organisation whose services cover a local area. The organisation want to refresh and improve their current website to showcase their services and increase awareness and access to those services. Storytelling can be a useful tool at various stages of the research process.

1

Scoping stage: useful for problem formation.

At the initial stage, often called the 'scoping' stage, you may need to gain an understanding of the topic to be researched to help define exactly what key issues or problems you are seeking to address. This can help you to define the key research questions and aims you wish to tackle. Storytelling can be a valuable tool to help you do this.

Using our example, if the outline brief is to 'improve the design of our website,' storytelling can be used as a method to gather primary evidence by asking key stakeholders to 'describe your experiences of using the website – from when you first started using it to now.' This provides a good basis to gather together stories relating to all of the possible issues involved, as it may differ by audience group and each group may be experiencing multiple issues at a time. It will help to define the issues and topic areas to be further researched from a range of different stakeholders with different views.

2

Participatory research: co-creation solution generation.

Along with helping you to understand the issues you need to address, storytelling can be a powerful way to generate insights that are actionable and able to address those issues. This is because storytelling can be an effective tool to facilitate truly collaborative and participatory research.

In our example, if a big issue with the website has been shown to be the customer journey, such as providing reassurance about any worries or information and signposting to other places for support, storytelling can be used as a method to help collectively envision the 'ideal customer journey.' In a focus group or workshop session, you could ask participants about their customer journey through the start of a story, such as: 'imagine that Bill has sat down to access our new and improved website. He has just been diagnosed as a type 2 diabetic and is looking for information and support. Can you talk me through the story of what you think the best experience for Bill is on our website?' This would then allow participants to continue the story and work together to finish it.

Suggestions that are put forward can be pieced together and build on each other as part of the overall story. Using storytelling can ensure that everyone is able to contribute ideas towards resolving and addressing the issues identified through the problem formation stage.

3

Research output stage: knowledge transfer

Storytelling can also be used to help design any outputs from the research process. It can help to establish trust and belief in the product or the results of the research, helping to create a credible and established brand. This could be a new brand story to communicate a shared and unified message. This is often key to generate understanding of the product and to influence and obtain buy-in from key audience groups for the organisation's product.

In our example, once any changes to update and refresh the website have been actioned based on the research, storytelling is a useful method to communicate with key audience groups to let them know about the updated website. A strong story, detailing how local people have found using the website with key messages, can be shared via case studies or testimonials across various communication channels, such as social media and local media (newspapers and magazines). This will help to raise awareness of the website and to initiate or re-establish trust in the website. People are drawn to and remember personal stories, which will help to encourage increased access and use of the website by the local population, in turn leading to greater impact and better outcomes from the research.

Conclusion.



This behaviour change resource has sought to explain the power of storytelling by showing how and why it can be used at various stages of the research process. Get in touch with **the research team at Social Change** to explore how storytelling can be used to help you achieve improved impact when tackling your social issues or projects!

**WE ONLY WORK WITH
ORGANISATIONS THAT
WANT TO BRING ABOUT
POSITIVE SOCIAL CHANGE,
AND PEOPLE WHO WANT
TO DO GOOD. IS THIS YOU?
LET'S WORK TOGETHER.**

**SOCIAL
CHANGE**

FOLLOW US



London.

The Gridiron Building,
1 Pancras Square,
London,
N1C 4AG

Phone: 020 7186 1980

Lincoln.

First Floor,
29-31 Mint Street,
Lincoln,
LN1 1UB

Phone: 01522 77 50 60

www.social-change.co.uk