

RESEARCHING HUMAN INTEREST STORIES

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Human interest stories or case studies aim to highlight a specific development issue from one person's (or group of people's) perspective. They are useful as qualitative background to monitoring and evaluation, for organisational learning and programme learning, for campaigns and media communications, and for funding and marketing departments looking for story leads.

Their power lies in their ability to bring issues to life, showing the link between 'macro' policy questions and the 'micro' impacts these have on people's lives. Their personal quality helps the reader or viewer to connect with, and de-mystify, complicated issues, such as global trade or HIV/AIDS. They create a bond of empathy and understanding based on a shared humanity.

As a result, they have the potential to reveal a complex picture of a certain socio-economic or political reality by depicting one experience of it. An example of this would be to provide insight into the complexities of HIV/AIDS in southern Africa through a 'day in the life' account of a home-based care facilitator in Zimbabwe.

SUGGESTED STEPS

Human interest stories rely on interviews as their central element, but they must place the individual's opinions and experiences in context through quality desk research. Hence a good human interest story draws on three sources of information:

- Field staff and other stakeholders' input, as part of the story design, then as follow-up;
- Desk research before the interviews as preparation and afterwards as consolidation, in order to contextualize the interviews;
- The person's story, as told through interview(s).

1. Learning from staff, partners and other stakeholders

Before meeting with the interviewees, speak with local colleagues and partners who know the community concerned. You wouldn't write a news story about an important politician without learning something about them first and the same applies to potential interviewees: knowing something about their lives before meeting them really helps with the development of a good interview and good outputs.

Make sure you have access to and agreement on contacting colleagues and partner organisations that can answer questions or provide clarifications during the writing up phase. It is helpful to stay in contact with them and anyone else who will be able to provide advice and feedback.

2. Desk research

Desk research, conducted before and after the field research, underlines the importance of understanding the broader context of the story, so that when you talk to the person involved, you can better see how their situation is affected by a particular issue, be it government policy, trade rule, HIV crisis, or budget cut.

For a start, colleagues working closely with the community concerned can provide you with any background documents on their work and the context it takes place in. Otherwise, you should try an internet search.

Remember, this is not about writing a thesis; the purpose is to situate your interviews and observations correctly, and make the links between everyday life and the political, social and economic conditions that impact upon it.

Use reliable sources for desk research and reference them throughout.

3. Interviews: Understanding the personal story

Try and ensure that the interviewees meet your remit, i.e. that their experiences and perceptions illustrate the situation you aim to depict. Make sure that their experiences are typical rather than 'extraordinary'. Ask yourself: if another researcher came to this community, would they easily find someone else with a similar story to this?

In order to gather good interview material for a human interest story, think carefully about three interrelated elements:

- **Time.** While the reality is that there sometimes isn't a lot of time available for interviews, there should be the impression of time through an unrushed, attentive approach. Write up possible questions beforehand to avoid getting flustered while interviewing. At the same time, remember these are only a guide and be ready to move away from them according to the conversation's flow (see guidelines on 'Conducting Semi-structured Interviews'). Even if you worry you won't have enough time, you should take time to introduce yourself and the purpose of the interview properly, and gain their consent for taking part (see *Undertaking Research with Ethics*).
- **Space.** Work on making the participant feel as comfortable as possible. Feeling comfortable and secure allows people to speak honestly. Try and figure out an arrangement that is best for both you and the interviewee before starting, e.g. will it be one-on-one, or with family and friends, or other NGO colleagues nearby?
- **Authenticity.** It is important to allow the interviewee to speak honestly, even if the answers are not what you expected to hear. The only way to encourage honesty is to be yourself. Don't worry if you make a mistake, as it is the overall impression that counts; be natural and, within reason, let the conversation be two-way rather than a one-sided Q + A. Do your best to concentrate on the person in front of you and what is important to them in the context of the issues you discuss (for more tips see 'Conducting Semi-structured Interviews').

Writing up

In pitching the tone of your narrative, think clearly about who your primary audience is. Is it other staff in the region? Is it the media department? Is it a global campaign communicating to supporters? Don't let this stifle you though, as many readers will find an informative, personal description of a big issue interesting.

As a reader or viewer wanting to learn more about a certain issue, what is of most importance to you and what would make it memorable? The most important ingredient for a good story is common sense, which we all have. Ask yourself, how would you like to be interviewed about your life or work? How would you like aspects of your life recorded and used?

Taking photos or video interviews

Think about the best ways to communicate your interviewee's experience. It adds enormously to their story if they are happy to be photographed so that the reader can put a face to their name. Even better, can you interview the person on film? Having a visual record of the interview will massively increase its potential reach. With modern technology this is much easier than it used to be. Even just filming a minute or two of the interview on your mobile phone could be enough. But again – check that your interviewee understands how the film will be used and is happy to be filmed or photographed.

Simplicity vs reality?

Reality can be complex and hard to communicate, but beware of over-simplifying a story! A human interest story is not there to simplify the issue, but rather to give a human angle. Human lives are as, or even more, complicated than socio-economic and political issues.

Going back

Too many times our human interest stories are 'one-offs'. Think if it would be possible to go back – in maybe six months or a year's time – to find out what has changed in the interviewee's life and, perhaps, what impact your work has made in that time. Going back can provide extremely valuable information for fund raisers and communicators to demonstrate that donations or grants have been well spent. It can also provide fascinating and deeper insights into people's lives and pathways in and out of poverty.

Getting feedback

Is it possible to show a draft of the story to the person it is about? This would be ideal, but is often not possible. As such, it is advisable to raise any queries with them at the time, e.g. to check you have clearly understood something they said or that are they happy for you to use a particular quote. You can additionally:

- Imagine what they would think of it. Once you have your draft story, all the desk research has been included and any conclusions have been drawn, read through it as if you were the interviewee. If you feel confident that they would be saying to themselves, '*Yes, that's just about how it is for me*', then it is a job well done.
- Get feedback from colleagues and partners who were working with you during the research. Do they agree with the way you have shown the links between the macro picture and the micro story?
- Get feedback from other colleagues who work on the issues you have written about or who are experienced in research and writing.
- Make sure you send your drafts to the group you are writing for, i.e. the marketing department or advocacy team, so you can incorporate their feedback as you go.

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG...

The interview doesn't fit with what you were looking for

While it is up to the interviewer to ensure the interview sticks to the point, it is better to acknowledge afterwards that the participant was not entirely appropriate to the remit than to ask leading questions during the interview. It's all helpful for learning and it could form a lead for a future story. Sometimes of course you may realise that the interview really is not leading anywhere. In that case, be patient – don't be rude and try to end it abruptly (see 'Conducting Semi-structured Interviews').

The story doesn't fit with what it was intended for

It can happen that after putting something together, it appears that it is not what the advocacy team / marketing department / etc were after. This means there may have been unclear communication earlier on or that things changed in the interim. It helps to take stock – work together to figure out what you would like to have come out of the material you have got. Alternatively, find other avenues for it: there are many channels for story dissemination.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Kate Bird's [Life Histories Resource Pack](#), by Kate Bird, provides a wealth of further suggestions and guidance. This is part of the [CPRC Methods Toolbox](#), produced by the [Chronic Poverty Research Centre](#).

If you're a researcher, you might also want to check out other [Oxfam research guidelines](#), including [Undertaking Research with Ethics](#), [Integrating Gender in Research Planning](#), [Conducting Semi-structured Interviews](#), and [Conducting Focus Groups](#).

LINKS

All links last accessed March 2019.

Life Histories Resource Pack (Kate Bird):

http://www.chronicpoverty.org/uploads/publication_files/toolbox-4.3.pdf

CPRC Methods Toolbox (Chronic Poverty Research Centre):

<http://www.chronicpoverty.org/page/toolbox>

Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC): <http://www.chronicpoverty.org/>

Oxfam research guidelines: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-approach/research/research-guidelines>

Undertaking Research with Ethics: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/undertaking-research-with-ethics-253032>

Integrating Gender in Research Planning: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/integrating-gender-in-research-planning-620621>

Conducting Semi-structured Interviews: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/conducting-semi-structured-interviews-252993>

Conducting Focus Groups: <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/conducting-focus-groups-578994>

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