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# The Power of Narrative: A Practical Guide to Creating Decolonial, Community-Based Projects

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## Abstract

Focusing on the potential for narrative-driven, community-based projects to foster intergenerational connections and mobilize communities on behalf of social justice, this chapter aims to serve as a guide for practitioners. The guidance offered here was developed over two decades of work on oral history and narrative-based projects in a range of national and community contexts that include South Africa and the Americas. Beginning with a short overview of core concepts in narrative and decolonial theory and method, readers are taken through a series of seven questions designed to help them establish a practical, ethical framework for designing, launching, and maintaining narrative based projects of their own. The chapter concludes with a reflection on self-care for practitioners, a too often neglected component of academic or professional fieldwork.

**Keywords:** oral history, decolonial methods, preservation, ethics, seven questions

## 1. Introduction

“Tell me again about when I was born,” my daughter entreats as she climbs into my lap. And so, I begin the story of her birth, mindful that how I construct this narrative has the power to shape not only how she thinks of herself but how she understands our relationship to each other, to friends and family who play roles within the story, and perhaps even to how she will ultimately think about childbirth, mothering, and stories she chooses to tell children of her own. This is, in microcosm, the power of narrative. It is a tool that is not only central to shaping personal and communal identities but one that can also be harnessed for social change and social justice as a proliferating number of recent initiatives have shown [1–3]. Narrative is fundamentally relational. Yet for all of the current interest in narrative theory and narrative power analysis as mechanism for feminist and decolonizing research, strengthening intergenerational ties, and mobilizing communities in the name of social justice, few resources exist to guide practitioners in how these principles may be applied to launching, realizing, and maintaining community-based, narrative projects.

This chapter aims to address that need. It begins with a short overview of recent scholarship on narrative, story, and decolonial theory that is designed to foreground

considerations practitioners should take into account before launching initiatives of their own. Next, the reader is asked to consider seven basic questions by way of establishing an ethical framework for carrying out their work and identifying resources necessary to realize their project. Links to additional resources to support project development and connect with fellow practitioners are included as well. The chapter concludes with a reflection on self-care for practitioners, a too often neglected component of academic or professional fieldwork.

The guidance offered here was developed over two decades of work on oral history and narrative-based projects in a range of national and community contexts. Those sites include Cape Town and Durban in South Africa as well as numerous sites in the Caribbean and mainland United States: Puerto Rico, Florida, Illinois, Maryland, and Michigan. While some of these efforts began primarily as research endeavors, all were ultimately community-based; the strongest of these efforts began at the community level and were fundamentally decolonial by intent, focus, and method. Carried out over a long span of time, these projects also spanned a period of rapid technological transformation. In the mid-1990s, it was still almost unimaginable that recorded stories could be so easily obtained and shared around the globe, reaching individuals everywhere from high tech urban centers to rural villages without electricity or running water. Today, mobile smart phones are found just about everywhere. Where the possibility of sharing voices across generations and geographies once seemed profoundly democratic and hopeful, critical consumption and use of these technologies in an age of online trolling, cyberbullying, and persistent electronic surveillance makes careful ethical consideration of the potential impact of any narrative based work all the more important.

## **2. Narrative, story, and decolonial theory**

No researcher or practitioner truly works alone. In this way, narrative-based projects are not only helpful for connecting generations in the present, but they also connect the practitioner to those who have used and developed these methods before them. As the practitioner, then, one inherits a wealth of knowledge. This knowledge is important for informing the careful planning that should be foregrounded as part of any initiative which involves human subjects. But it also brings with it an obligation to humbly consider the mis-steps, insights, and impacts of those who have carried out this work before us. Before any particular method can be employed responsibly, then, it is helpful to understand the larger context in which the approach evolved.

Scholarly interest in the stories that people share proliferated through the mid-twentieth century, producing a significant shift in how narrative was studied, theorized, and understood within academic, educational, and clinical circles. In many ways, these developments owe their roots to what is often referred to as the “linguistic turn.” Through the work of scholars like John Pocock, Patrick Joyce, and Quentin Skinner, historians began to question the assumption that historical interpretation was objective [4]. Emphasizing the links between philosophy and language, these scholars argued that the work of historians could not be separated from their own ideological and cultural influences. Rather than describing the past as it really happened, then, increasingly historians came to see that the past could not be separated from their textual representations.

This movement unfolded in kindred ways across other fields like psychology, linguistics, literature, and anthropology—each of which seek, through different lenses and methods—to examine how human beings make meaning from language and discourse [5]. Building upon the work of Theodore Sardin, in the 1970s,

psychologists began using narrative as a clinical tool designed to more fully examine personality, self, and culture [6, 7]. Around the same time, communications scholar Walter Fisher conceptualized what he called the “narrative paradigm.” Framed as a response to classical (Aristotelian and Platonian) understandings of humans as rational beings who understand their worlds through logical relationships, uncovered through reasoning, Fisher’s view emphasized the importance of storytelling as fundamental to human beings understanding of common sense as a basis for decision-making [8]. Within anthropology, Clifford Geertz’s work on the discursive connection between symbol and culture, the latter defined as a means of “imposing meaning on the world to make it understandable,” had broader impact across a variety of fields, too [9].

Some date the interest in narrative as an extension of research methodology even earlier. Sharpless has argued that the formal practice of oral history dates back well into the nineteenth century when California historians like Hubert Howe Bancroft began hiring assistants to “interview and create autobiographies of diverse groups of people living in the western U.S.” in order to supplement what could be gleaned from maps, manuscripts, and journals alone [10]. Federally sponsored efforts like the Works Progress Administrations extensive interviews with African-American slaves, Native Americans, and immigrants through the 1930s and 1940s provide additional examples of large-scale, systematized efforts to create national or regional histories made up of a patchwork of individual memories. Such efforts grew up alongside folklore studies and kindred efforts by anthropologists like Geertz who were working in global locations that bore the brunt of imperialism and conquest.

Work by postmodern theorist Michele Foucault infused studies of narrative with power analyses. Rather than focusing on how individuals or discreet structures wield power as instruments of coercion through specific acts or episodes, Foucault argued that power was disperse and pervasive. Using a nexus of power/knowledge he argued that accepted forms of scientific understanding, truth, and culture all exemplified a kind of “microphysics” that is primarily discursive, embodied not in individuals but within societies [11]. These understandings continue to influence scholarship today, including a burgeoning interest in narrative studies among political scientists and social movement theorists. Viewed through a theoretical lens, most traditional narrative theorists take pains to separate story from narrative. “Story” is understood as the building blocks—event(s), people, place(s). “Narrative” is how the teller assembles these pieces, putting the blocks together, giving them meaning and crafting a larger structure. Together, this distinction creates a framework that can be applied to interpret various texts—written or spoken.

These theoretical contributions proliferated through the mid-to-late twentieth century era of global freedom struggles. From the anti-colonial, sovereignty, and civil rights struggles that spanned every region of the world, many scholars and practitioners sought to change how academics understood, documented, and interpreted human experience. For historians, this included a move away from relying primarily written texts to understanding all human communication as “text.” It also resulted in an increasing push to recover “hidden” or missing voices within existing historical records.

However much these efforts were motivated by new awareness about power and privilege, most were still guided by a prevailing desire to make new discoveries, leverage new interpretations, and ultimately promote knowledge produced by the researcher or practitioner themselves. Those individuals were drawn largely from the privileged classes. Yet as feminist, anti-colonial, indigenous, queer, and kindred perspectives took greater hold across academe, by the early twenty-first century, more individuals and communities began calling for a more self-critical and disruptive approach to narrative studies.



Within the Americas, one of the most influential of these approaches has become the field of decolonial studies. Born out of indigenous, feminist, and Latin American-based movements to understand modernity in the context of critical theory and modernity studies, decolonial scholars reject the idea of “empire” as fundamentally Eurocentric in favor of focusing on colonialism as tied inextricably to postmodernity. Noting that their work links “thinking and doing,” decolonial scholars distance themselves from postcolonial work because the latter is predominantly about scholarly transformation [12–17]. By contrast, decoloniality sees itself as both a political and epistemic project, rooted in the search for “social liberation from all power organized as inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and domination” [18].

This has a profound impact in that it up-ends the hierarchical relationship between narrator and researcher or practitioner. It also complicates these binary relationships while drawing attention to ways that many discursive narratives themselves have moved the colonial project forward, erasing or rendering invisible the knowledge, experiences, and traditions of indigenous peoples, women, and communities of color. From this gaze, then, decolonial scholars like Malea Powell further reject the core tenants of narrative theory, seeking not to “apply a framework to a set of practices but to immerse oneself within a set of practices in order to make something out of them” [19]. Others, like Emma Perez, have emphasized the importance of a “decolonial imaginary” as a way of unraveling normative understandings of language, race, gender, culture, class, and sexuality [20, 21]. These decolonial approaches are being applied by a wide variety of new practitioners with the intention of linking oral history and storytelling with larger social justice-oriented projects [22].

### **3. The seven questions**

Realizing a narrative-based project that applies feminist and decolonial practices requires beginning with careful reflection on the part of the researcher/practitioner, conducted in dialog with community partners and collaborators. I call these “The Seven Questions.” The seven questions model proposed here is a play on “the six questions” first developed by Doug Boyd, director of the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky, to help oral historians and archivists assess the publication risks of an interview [23]. Grounded in western understandings of ownership and U.S. legal practice, Boyd’s list is widely used as a quick reference for practitioners to begin thinking about the larger legal and ethical implications for sharing out recorded stories, interviews, and oral histories. These seven questions, however, aim to do more. This model is rooted in a decolonial perspective—one that understands ethics as rooted in intercultural dialog among multiple people rather than framed by existing political, legal, and/or cultural boundaries and informed by current best practice guidelines for fostering collaboration between tribal and non-tribal organizations [24, 25]. As such, the questions are not limited to ownership. Instead, they focus on relationships: relationships among interviewer, narrator, and their larger communities, past and present, as well as people and the stories themselves [26]. They address a whole process, not just obligations that may or may not exist after a recording has taken place. This approach highlights the process and purpose of the narrative-based project, encourages careful reflection on the intention, positionality, and role of all participants, as well as implications of larger relationships and obligations the participants may have to each other in the present and future [27].

### 3.1 Question 1: where did the idea for this initiative come from?

Many traditional, western approaches to project development are rooted in ownership, or intellectual property. Roles are delineated not just to accomplish tasks but also to mitigate or assign legal and other responsibilities. Asking *where* an idea came from however, compels a fundamentally different approach. Rooted in the indigenous epistemology of a land/body/history triad, this question is intended to call out the whole network of ideas, rooted in history and communities, that contributed to the vision of the current project [28]. Equally important, this question is rooted in place. It is also rooted in bodies, a recognition that knowledge may be carried in blood memory and experience, as well as acquired through formal training mechanisms or schooling. In other words, this question is designed to highlight what indigenous researchers Cueponcaxochitl Sandoval and their co-authors have called “Ancestral Knowledge Systems” or AKS [29].

The AKS concept relies the consistent practice of critical reflexivity, including awareness of the researcher or practitioner’s own positionality. While there are a variety of dimensions to positionality, including gender and sexual identities, class, race/ethnicity, and nativity, among those that we as researchers should consider are also those of “conferred dominance,” to use Peggy McIntosh’s phrase, which includes entitlements like academic affiliations and imperial privilege, which many researchers take for granted [30]. The latter includes thinking intentionally about one’s citizenship in relation to those with whom they are working, or whose stories they may be hearing or preserving. For example, a researcher who is a U.S. citizen who may be recording stories about immigration experiences should take seriously the various protections they may have in relation to others who do not hold the benefits of citizenship. I highlight these forms of privilege here as most researchers are trained from their time in graduate school to think critically about intersectionalities like race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. Yet until recently, little recognition has been given within scholarly literature to associated privileges such as citizenship or academic affiliation [27].

A great deal has been written over the past decade about the strengths and dangers of incorporating reflexivity as key central component in community-based research and teaching. For example, as Erica Burman has argued, if carried to extremes “reflexivity threaten(s) to individualize privilege and pathologize the already oppressed for a supposed skills deficit...inciting researchers to work on ourselves and only ourselves” [31]. Nor is this reflection on privilege intended to imply that a practitioner can somehow divest themselves of bias or privilege through personal disclosure. Rather, by posing the question in a way that is both self-reflexive and designed to elicit critical examination of a nexus of relationships and positionalities, the goal is to produce awareness of structures that undergird and support the larger endeavor itself. Only by creating structures that recognize and challenge these positionalities can a project truly be leveraged toward social justice. This gaze also intended to recognize the variety of knowledge (ideas) that informed the project’s vision and goals, including past or shared experiences. Rooted in the relational, the question is designed to produce intentional, critical thinking about the variety of expertise that is represented as part of the project team, the aim and purpose of the larger initiative, as well as empowering the director to put practices in place to mitigate potential risks to various team members while maximizing benefits for the individuals and/or communities the project is intended to serve.

Here is but one example of how the AKS concept might be applied as a tool to foster stronger and more equitable project development. While teaching at a private university in Baltimore, Maryland, I worked with several community members and

colleagues to launch a community-based oral history project designed to collect memories from African American families living in one of the city's most impoverished, inner-city neighborhoods—one that was actively being razed as part of urban renewal efforts. The community activists saw engaging an inter-racial team of university researchers as a way to highlight their work to preserve their neighborhood by showing the positive aspects of community organization, institutions, and family life that were eclipsed by images of drugs and violence displayed in the media. Most residents who remained in the neighborhood were of advanced age and could not afford to move. As researchers, we saw this effort as having both historical value and social justice benefits for the neighborhood. We also saw the pedagogical benefit for undergraduate students who would be the primary interviewers. Thus, one could say that the initiative began at the suggestion of neighborhood activists who appreciated the value of sharing and collecting stories—and that together we appreciated the opportunity to create mutually beneficial intergenerational connections between our students and the older community members. In a much deeper way, the effort drew upon traditional storytelling methods passed down through African American families that also included music and singing. At the same time, technological and methodological expertise and resources brought by university researchers lent legitimacy to the effort as well as enabling archival preservation quality recordings and access to publication venues not available to community members working alone.

While this effort took seriously the project of self-reflexivity and acknowledgement of privilege, several conferred privileges were taken for granted by researchers. One was having a driver's license. Community partners, and interviewees, supported the idea of having their stories preserved in the university's archives. The university also saw the donation of the staff time and archival space necessary to preserve, maintain, and make these materials accessible into perpetuity as being donated in service to the community who wanted the materials preserved but not made available online. But what researchers and archivists took for granted was that access to the university library was limited to those who could provide a driver's license or other state-issued photo identification. As we soon learned, this not something many of those interviewed either had or were willing to temporarily at the library's security desk, as required by institutional policy. Once this barrier was discovered, however, it was difficult to correct. Had the AKS concept been applied as we first addressed whose idea the project was from the outset, we may have avoided these limitations or at least have been able to exercise transparency with participants about these limitations from the outset.

### **3.2 Question 2: who is the primary audience?**

In order to understand who a project is intended to serve, it is important to think intentionally about audience. Who will be served by this endeavor? And who does this project intend to reach? Recognizing from the outset not only who is speaking but who they are speaking to is fundamental to creating a project that will successfully reach its intended audience(s). These questions may also determine the form the project will ultimately take.

Here, too, a consideration of decolonial principles is helpful. Sociologist Aníbal Quijano describes coloniality as a “matrix of power that produces racial and gender hierarchies on the global and local level, functioning alongside capital to maintain a modern regime of exploitation and domination” [18]. Decolonial narratives are not offered in opposition to colonial grand narratives. Rather, the intent is to elevate narratives that originate in knowledge forms from what might be called the Global South, philosophical, intellectual, and artistic approaches are that often suppressed,



erased, or dismissed by imperial structures. Endeavors designed to foster inter-generational connections through narrative should consider carefully just who the intended audience of the particular effort may be, both in an immediate sense (such as the point of recording) as well as once materials have been disseminated and/or preserved—if indeed they will be published or archived.

Identifying early on who the primary audience for the initiative may also address issues of language. Decolonial perspectives highlight the extent to which English as a dominant form of communication is a form of cultural imperialism. Meaning is also best communicated through one's mother tongue, with the dual benefit that stories recorded this way preserve all manner of sounds, rhythms, and cadence that are too often lost in translation. At the same time, however valuable the recording of multilingual materials may be, they also may be of limited utility to the primary audience envisioned for a work is not able to understand the language spoken.

Translation in the form of transcripts may provide one way to mitigate these challenges. While imperfect, translation may open up pathways to new audiences, too.

Digital access is another potential consideration and is also rife with challenges. As historian Mary Dillard asks, "What are the potential challenges, for example, of an oral history project where communities document their experiences of displacement, but the government that moved them is still in power? In addition, to what extent does speaking to a researcher make her or him immediately vulnerable to retaliation—either from community members or government officials? How does the type of recording device being used (audio, video) and the possibility of widespread dissemination of a person's history change what an individual shares or how they share that information?" [32]. All of these are the type of considerations a practitioner should take into account before launching a narrative-based project.

### **3.3 Question 3: what is the primary purpose of this initiative?**

Examining the primary purpose of any project is related to audience. Together with Question 2, examining the core reason for taking on this is critical to framing how the project will be carried out and what its ultimate goals may be. It may also help to mitigate risks, more wisely allocate resources, and be realistic about outcomes.

For example, between 2013 and 2016, I directed a series of narrative-based, community projects intended to strengthen ethnic relations in a small, midwestern city. Initiated at the suggestion of city's community relations office and supported by a public library system, the project invited members of the city's Latinx and Asian communities to record short interviews or memories as well as having professional portraits taken of themselves alone or with friends and family. Recording and photography sessions were held in a variety of settings, including local churches, schools, employers, and the public library. The recordings were then archived through the local public library. Excerpts from the interviews were translated into English and posted bilingually on poster-sized boards along with the portraits of the narrators. At the end of each year of the project, participants and community stakeholders were invited to attend an exhibition reception where all of the posters were displayed under variations of the title, "My Community." Copies of the printed posters as well as digital copies of the professional photographs were also given as a thank you gift to each participant. In this way the project met its core purpose: bringing together diverse community members to connect with each other around shared interests and a shared community home. A secondary benefit of the effort was also that it conveyed a message of support for immigrant communities of color by key public institutions, including city hall and the public library system.

Because the interviews were short, they were of lesser value from a research standpoint than longer interviews. But the interviews also were much lower stakes



for participants, a significant number of whom were either not U.S. citizens or were otherwise vulnerable because of immigration or citizenship status. The short length of interviews also took less time and was less intimidating to narrators than full-length, more formal sessions. This encouraged participation and, in some cases, opened the door to more opportunities for collaboration, sharing, and the building of deeper relationships through use of public resources or individual collaborations.

Clearly identifying the primary purpose of an initiative early on may also affect the pace at which a project proceeds. This is often critical piece where grant funding or institutional expectations are involved as those efforts are most likely to have specific quantifiable targets (i.e. x hours of interviews by a specific date) embedded within them. In these cases, institutional priorities or needs may not be compatible with community needs or the primary goal of an initiative. Being clear at the outset helps to foster transparency among project partners and shared decision-making when tensions arise.

One of the best illustrations of this may be an urban Native American oral history project we launched in Michigan as a collaboration among university researchers, several local tribes, and community-based organizations. The advanced age or fragile health of many individuals who were identified as potential narrators was a compelling reason why both community partners and university researchers initially wanted to conduct as many interviews as possible in the first year of the project. Partners agreed at that outset, however, that the primary goal of the effort was to build trust among Native and non-Native participants through these shared stories. As a result, when methodological concerns arose, partners agreed to slow the pace of the project and opted to spend much of the first year focusing on not interviewing but on creating a shared set of bylaws and processes to ensure Native control over primary decisions within the project [33]. This shift in focus was essential to supporting the project's primary goal while also keeping the partnership together and moving the project forward. But it would not have been possible to make this shift if there had not been transparency among the partners and clear goal-setting at the outset. By prioritizing in this way, it also meant that partners turned down funding or promotional opportunities that would have wedded them to collecting a set number of interviews over a set period of time in favor of supporting the ongoing development of mutually beneficial relationships among partners. Again, because of the clear goal-setting, partners were able to support each other through this sometimes difficult decision-making.

### **3.4 Question 4: what is my goal as a researcher or practitioner?**

More than an additional nod toward self-reflexivity, explicitly naming one's goal as a researcher is essential to navigating what are often different—and at times incompatible—needs of the researcher and narrator. In a traditional research model, investigators are trained to value their own needs as part of the production and preservation of knowledge over that of the communities upon which their research is based. One way that practitioners can navigate their own imperial privilege, then, is to be explicit about their needs and goals as investigators in communication with their community partners and/or narrators. This transparency is a first step toward true reciprocity, identifying mutually agreed upon terms for the project as a whole that will balance the needs or desires of the investigator(s) with those of the larger community. Making this recognition an intentional part of the project's methodology empowers the practitioner and their community partners to identify strategies to ensure that power differences are not further exacerbated in the course of carrying out the work [27].

This work of goal setting is also essential to honest evaluation of a project's successes and short comings. At the same time, when working within an AKS

framework, many practitioners may find that their very definitions of success and/or goal-setting themselves become a form of “epistemic disobedience” [34]. For example, the fundamental benefits of a project for the researcher may rest in the intercultural exchange of experiences and meanings. Or it may be the opportunities for dialog or intergenerational exchange. Such benefits do not easily fit easily into the professional check boxes or quantifiable outcomes favored in the majority of western, professional contexts. Yet they are every bit as important to make note of when assessing the overall value of an educational, decolonial effort. At the same time, if such efforts fail to achieve these goals, the practitioner may rightly find that the effort has fallen short even if it produces a wealth of outcomes that satisfy professional or institutional needs.

### **3.5 Question 5: who will benefit from this project?**

Every project worth undertaking should have a clear benefit. These benefits may come in the form of material resources. Or they may be intangible benefits such as moving forward a particular social or political agenda, strengthening community ties, or fostering connections of other kinds. Researchers are encouraged to think carefully and intentionally about who will benefit in addition to whatever risks a project may entail. The reflective process should compel practitioners to consider honestly the ways their own interests or interventions may be at odds with those of their community partners. This is a critical part of any decolonial research process and one more way that practitioners can demonstrate a “willingness to decenter oneself and to learn and act from a place of responsibility rather than guilt” [35].

Part of this process also involves recognizing the ways that undertaking a project may privilege or benefit the researcher that may be evident to community members but taken for granted by those of us within the academy. Examples could be conferring status through promotion, professional recognition, or publicity given to the researchers as an extension of their work. Thinking critically about benefit also compels researchers to avoid positioning community-based or social justice work as a corrective the fully escapes concerns about research practices or colonial institutional practices [36, 37]. As with all of these questions, the fundamental goal is transparency in order to better frame truly reciprocal relationships with community partners.

That said, narrative-based projects can be an extremely effective and powerful way to foster inter-generational connections and intergenerational learning, reaping important benefits for all involved. This can take a variety of forms. For example, in 2013 I was approached by a local arts-based, non-profit organization that runs after school programs for teens and pre-teens in a heavily immigrant, working-class, inner-city neighborhood. The goal of the collaboration was to help support the teen’s academic and creative learning in order to support future college attendance. Very few of the teens came from families where parents or loved ones had ever attended college themselves. Most of their households were non-English speaking. Over the first year, faculty and college students from Grand Valley State University worked with the students two afternoons a week. Rather than focusing on teaching writing or reading skills, the GVSU team began by asking the teens what they most wanted to know or understand about themselves, their families, and their neighborhood. Those questions formed the basis for a series of recorded interviews and neighborhood mapping exercises the teens ultimately carried out with family members, community leaders, business owners, and others. Called “Portrait of My Community,” the collected photographs, video and audio recordings, and kindred materials were ultimately put together in an interactive, bilingual (Spanish and English language) exhibit that opened with a big community dinner and party where everyone who had contributed to the effort gathered along with

the major of Grand Rapids and other local dignitaries. Materials collected through this effort were then archived in the Grand Rapids Public Library—the city’s first historical archive to be focused specifically on the lives and work of Latino immigrants.

In addition to creating materials of historical value and helping to generate additional funding for the local non-profit organization, the greatest benefit of this effort was the inter-generational connections it fostered. Parents and community elders told us how being interviewed by the teens helped them to feel connected to the community in new ways. The teens began to describe themselves in new ways, growing in confidence and pride in their neighborhood. As one student told me, while she used to think of her neighborhood as “la basura”—the trashcan—because of what she saw as dirty streets and run-down homes, she came to see as a place “of hope” where people “built things together.” Now 7 years later, nearly all of those teens have become the first in their families to attend college. A number of parents have also begun taking classes through local community colleges, too. For university students, their role as mentors as well as the applied experience supported their learning and professional goals. Two of our undergraduate interns are now employed in these same community-based organizations. All said the experience helped them feel more comfortable in the urban space and enhanced their own inter-cultural understanding and communication skills. In these ways, the project reaped not only inter-generational benefits but also fostered cross-cultural understanding.

### **3.6 Question 6: who may be harmed from this project?**

All work involving human beings includes some risk. In the United States, current recommendations by scholarly organizations like the American Historical Association and Oral History Association guide institutional review boards to treat oral histories as falling outside the scope of their charge because they “preserve the unique perspective of the individual and do not lead to systemic, ‘generalizable knowledge’” [38]. Federal guidelines were updated in 2018 to reflect these recommendations. These most recent guidelines, which are currently scheduled to take effect in January 2019, specify that “oral history, journalism, biography, literary criticism, legal and historical scholarship are not considered research” for purposes of institutional review [39, 40].

Even though oral histories and kindred narrative-driven work may not be subject to institutional review, this does not mean that they are without risk to participants. Everyone working with narratives, stories, or oral histories is encouraged to think carefully about potential risks to participants. To borrow from an earlier example, what about the project that seeks to document narratives of displacement but the government who moved these individuals is still in power? The community seeking to record these narratives may choose to go forward with the effort despite these risks. But a realistic conversation about the risks and benefits of the endeavor, as well as how to fully inform community members about these potential risks, is important.

It is also essential for practitioners to recognize that risks may be evolving. This is but one reason why a process of interactive consent is important. Different contexts may require slightly different approaches, but in general I make consent part of an ongoing dialog with community participants pursued over the course of a project with the understanding that consent may be withdrawn at any time. Generally, at the outset of a project or interview, I discuss the purpose of the project with a narrator and invite them to share any concerns or questions. Written consent is usually obtained at that time. If this narrative is to be recorded and preserved as part of an archival collection or larger project, that consent may include a deed of



gift. A variety of online models and templates are available online, including those noted in the resources section of this chapter. If the interviews will be transcribed, I typically offer participants a chance to review and edit those transcripts prior to giving those to an archive. This is another opportunity where participants may choose to withdraw consent if they have concerns.

In many ways the idea of an interactive, multi-stage process of informed consent departs from what are often institutional priorities. This can particularly be the case if you are working with an archival repository or have plans to preserve recorded narratives for long-term access. In these cases, a discussion of interactive consent that includes potential take-down criteria or restrictions placed on physical and/or digital materials is essential to have early on in the project. This is particularly important with digital materials. Professionally, most librarians advocate for open access to information and understand this to be a central aspect of their professional obligations. This commitment can be at odds, however, with the needs of vulnerable communities and highlights tensions over sovereignty issues. One of the best documented examples of these tensions is the debates surrounding the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials that were crafted in 2006–2007 and published in 2008 [40, 41]. The Protocols argue that non-Native institutions should relinquish some of the control they hold over Native archival materials in recognition of Native sovereignty. This principle was recently upheld in a much publicized 2017 Supreme Court of Canada decision to allow survivors of abuse in the Indian Boarding Schools to destroy their own records. It was a decision opposed by the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, however, who argued that the records were critical to national historical memory [42]. Several other international examples demonstrate additional ways that archival repositories are navigating issues of take-down and interactive consent with community partners, including the New Zealand Electronic Text Centre and the British National Library [43, 44].

Practitioners should also be mindful that narrative projects may open up wounds or to cause unintended harm to narrators for whom sharing historical memories or stories may recall traumas or wounding. One of the best ways to offset this potential for harm while providing support for narrators and community collaborators is to avoid working isolation. Community members will often be the best judges of what could potentially be harmful or re-traumatizing for narrators. Working in close collaboration with community members to help identify resources to support narrators and to provide appropriate follow-up and check-in steps after interviews have taken place are a few of the steps that all practitioners should consider when setting up a new project. To return again to the example of our urban Native American oral history project, although this initiative was not intended to focus on boarding school experiences, many of the individuals with whom we spoke either attended the Indian Boarding Schools themselves or had parents or grandparents who had attended those schools. For others, the oral history process was the first time some individuals shared difficult experiences with anyone outside of their immediate family circles. Thanks to the guidance of our community partners and elders, several of whom were also trained social workers, we were able to put a plan in place to ensure that any participants in the study would not only be able to locate supportive, therapeutic and culturally appropriate resources if needed. We also were able to frame a set of follow-up protocols to ensure that participants were well-supported beyond the interviewing stage itself. This process also helped to foster lasting connections across generations, as younger interviewers continued to correspond with community elders who had been interviewed for months and years after the interview itself had been recorded. Had we not been open to discussing all potential risks and working to mitigate those risks in culturally appropriate and collective ways, we would not have been able to meet the primary goals of our project.



### **3.7 Question 7: how will decisions about this project be made now as well as into the future?**

Irrespective of where the idea(s) for a project may have originated, most initiatives move forward under the leadership of one or two key individuals. While there is nothing inherently wrong with this model, particularly if framed within the considerations articulated within an AKS framework, it is valuable for practitioners to think long-term as well as short-term when developing a workplan. What happens if one or more principles should move away or change position within their organization(s)? Or if some other unforeseen change such as illness, personal disagreement, or the like result in significant changes to project personnel or kindred structures? While it would be impossible to account for all unforeseen possibilities, there are some practical steps that can be taken to better ensure that projects will be able to meet their set aims or, alternatively, be responsibly dismantled, in the event of significant disruptions over the life of a project.

One way to approach this forward planning may be to formally establish a committee and process for making key decisions about the project. This was an approach we followed as part of our urban Native American oral history initiative [25, 33]. Building upon the principles outlined in the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials, that project established a set of bylaws and Council made up of representatives from major stakeholders within the university and urban Native American organizations. The Council was given authority to make major decisions for the project, including establishing processes for vetting and overseeing transcription of interviews, any changes to interview protocols, and reviewing take-down requests. Bylaws were also written by the project team to specifically articulate processes for decision-making, roles of the partners/councilors, as well as mechanisms for disbanding the project.

Not all projects may require or benefit from such a formal structure. In most cases, a clear conversation about transitional planning, responsibility, and ownership negotiated as part of answering Questions 1–6 may be enough. Still, here as elsewhere, the joined principles of transparency and collaboration are key. Project directors and practitioners should resist working alone. As Sylvia Falcón notes, “Fostering a research community means understanding the relationships formed in the research field as ongoing partnerships...[and] transparency...Scholars embedded in community can then strive toward a collective knowledge model built from the dynamism of a research community” [27].

This is important but can also be challenging. For example, in 2012, I began a research collaboration with an internationally recognized community organizer who had been a significant figure in the Latino Civil Rights Movement and Puerto Rican Independence struggle. We met through a shared connection at the university, where he was a non-traditional student completing an undergraduate degree while in his 60s. It was his goal to collect oral histories with members of his political organization and their children with the goal of keeping the political movement alive and building future leadership, focusing on a single Chicago neighborhood where the movement was born. From the organizer’s standpoint, the university provided a platform, expertise, and legitimacy to build the project and move forward these larger organizing goals. He was clear, however, that this work needed to be carefully controlled and thus could not be run by a committee or larger team; it needed to remain a partnership primarily between himself and the supervising faculty member. For the university and the faculty member, the organizer’s international profile and opportunity to grow archival collections that would be of historical benefit to researchers from across the country as well as creating primary research materials for students was also seen as a benefit. And so, the project moved

forward as a faculty-supported, student-led project even though in this case the student was also a community elder and national figure. Within just a few months, the project had amassed hundreds of hours of video recording and kindred materials drawn from interviews with more than 50 individuals.

Even though the project had clear consent and deed of gift procedures, arguments over control and resources quickly brought the effort to a grinding halt. For the community organizer this effort was not primarily an academic exercise but was deeply political, personal, and familial. Once he had graduated from the university, however, he had no livelihood. Student research grants which had supported his travel and equipment needs as well as providing a small stipend were no longer an option once the organizer was no longer a student. American universities rarely pay independent researchers, particularly on projects lacking grant funding or other external financial support. While my intentions as the supervising faculty member had been good and the project had initially seemed to be mutually beneficial and reciprocal, the situation highlighted how much those of us working in academic settings can easily assume that university structures are understood by community members, in reality, they are not. In this way, I think it is safe to say that whatever intergenerational learning may have been fostered through the interviews themselves, the most important intergenerational lessons that I learned as a faculty member working with an older student were unfortunately gleaned from hindsight as our collaboration broke down and came apart.

The pace at which the university library was able to digitize and make the interviews publicly available also slowed as key administrative positions transitioned within the university and funding dwindled. What seemed like logical project management decisions to library staff, looked like obfuscation to the community organizer. For him, these decisions also carried high stakes, compromising interpersonal relationships and relationships with family, friends, and allies when interviews were not made available on the schedule he had promised or in well-edited form, creating embarrassment and eroding trust. In less than 2 years from the time it was launched, the project broke down ending painfully and with raw feelings on all sides.

I offer this as a cautionary example that I have continue to learn from as a researcher and practitioner. Intergenerational, community-based projects should never be carried out alone or in pairs. Intentional work to establish a shared network and/or team is critical to ensuring longevity as well as maintaining reciprocity and mutual benefit. Creating a clear timeline and workplan is key. So is identifying which team members have power over what decisions. A contingency plan that addresses needed resources as well as alternative management approaches in the case of job change, illness, or the unforeseen is also important if projects carry high stakes for one or more partners, particularly if this is a long-term effort whose leadership is intergenerational by design. All projects also benefit from starting by establishing a clear end date. This may take the form of phases (e.g. Phase 1, Phase 2, etc.) or it may require establishing a complete date for wrap-up/conclusion. No matter what form it takes, establishing a timeline with space for breaks, re-evaluation of goals, reconfiguration of partners and roles, is a healthy, respectful, and proactive step that fosters healthy collaborations. Practitioners who follow these recommendations can also rest easier knowing their work stands a greater likelihood of doing more good than harm, contributing to lasting relationships and partners that are of truly mutual benefit.

#### **4. Technical considerations and resources**

The conceptual issues highlighted here will ultimately shape the form any narrative based project will take and requires both time and commitment on

the part of all involved to fully address the seven questions. Once those steps have been completed, however, practitioners can make use of a range of publicly available resources to aid in identifying equipment, recording standards, and other technological decisions particularly with regard to recording. Two published guides that are considered “classics” among oral history practitioners include Ritchie’s [45] and Trimble et al. [46]. Although both are written with a focus on practitioners working within the United States, they provide practical guidelines that are useful in a global context. Another high quality guide that is currently available as a free, downloadable PDF is the 2016 edition of *The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide* (<https://folklife.si.edu/the-smithsonian-folklife-and-oral-history-interviewing-guide/smithsonian>).

Technology changes quickly. Practitioners are encouraged to consult guides that are available electronically as they are more likely to keep up with current recommended best practices. Within the United States, one of the most comprehensive site for updated information on recording, accessing, and preserving spoken word resources is the “Oral History in the Digital Age” website (<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu>), which was launched with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and digitally housed at Michigan State University. The site includes guidance on video and audio recording equipment as well as additional guidance on curating and disseminating recorded materials, a “very selected” oral history bibliography, and a link to additional web-based oral history guides.

Practitioners working in all geographies would benefit from consulting a range of international guides as well, particularly as a mechanism for more thoroughly integrating decolonial perspectives and aims into their work. In South Africa, for example, oral history and other narrative-based work is broadly categorized as being a part of “living traditions,” a cultural heritage that is protected by UNESCO Conventions, among others. Examples of regional guides to all steps in oral history collection—including ethical responsibilities that extend well beyond the recording process itself, are available online: [https://www.westerncape.gov.za/assets/departments/cultural-affairs-sport/oral\\_history\\_doc\\_0.pdf](https://www.westerncape.gov.za/assets/departments/cultural-affairs-sport/oral_history_doc_0.pdf). These publications also place important emphasis on language and interactive consent.

## **5. Self-care for practitioners**

Just as decisions about purpose, intent, and technology should not be made in isolation, so too should researchers remember that the relational aspect of narrative projects can be a source of strength to themselves as they carry forward this work. Incorporating a plan for self-care as a practitioner is important. Yet Self-care is not typically a part of academic conversations when we discuss our research or methodology. Like other aspects of academic work, the prevailing dictum is typically to ignore or erase this need. In this way, the emphasis on power and control that governs much of academic structures and processes simply ignores this need on the part of researchers. The emotional labor tied to investing in community processes, hearing community narratives, and building lasting relationships with community partners is often masked. As a result, many practitioners run the risk of not being able to engage in this important work for very long. Or, if they do, they often do so at tremendous cost to themselves, their professional lives, and those closest to them.

Lorde once famously said, “Caring for myself is no self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” [47]. There is perhaps no fuller expression of why self-care is not just important for the research practitioner, but it is fundamentally a community responsibility. Without it, many researchers would



be unable to continue to do the hard labor of forging meaningful, long-term relationships with community partners and narrators [48]. Just as decolonial practice compels us as researchers to critically self-examine our own positionality, seeking more collective, relational models for working, it is impossible to fulfill this charge without recognizing the need for self-care. Rather than thinking of self-care as an isolated or privileged pursuit, researchers should consider this work an extension of the type of dialogic, mutually mediated, shared authority that many oral history interviewers cultivate with their narrators.

The very first and most important step to exercising self-care, then, is to recognize the need as both valid and integral to our research practices. For those new to the idea of thinking about how to exercise self-care as an extension of a lifelong commitment to community-based practice and activism, there are a variety of recently published guides that address this topic from a feminist perspective. I have included links to several of these in the references section of this chapter [49–51]. These resources guide practitioners to consider what for them may be areas of greatest need as well as linking the principle of self-care to larger community responsibilities. That includes fulfilling responsibilities to those who are most dependent upon us for their daily needs. This is why I strive to make time when my daughter asks me to tell her the story of how she was born once again. Narrative is fundamentally about relationships. By taking the time to build more equitable, mutually agreed upon and reciprocal relationships of all kinds, we have the power to strengthen those around us as well as ourselves.

## 6. Conclusion

This chapter intends to serve as a guide for practitioners and researchers who may be interested in launching narrative-based projects as a way to foster stronger intergenerational connections and intergenerational learning. Emphasizing the value of a feminist, decolonial approach, the seven question model proposed here is designed to get practitioners started. They are rooted in concepts of reflexivity, social justice, and relationality. Coupled with a discussion of technical resources and self-care for practitioners, it is the goal of this chapter to provide a much-needed template practitioners can follow—one that departs in key ways from more traditional, academic approaches to community-based research and educational work.

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## Dedication

This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Rudolph Paul “Buzz” Kutsche, Jr. (1927–2017), ethnographer, oral historian, mentor, and friend.



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