Working with Stories
Sourcebook

Questions and Cases for

Participatory Narrative Inquiry

Pre-publication Draft

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I dedicate
this book
to your respectful curiosity.

Contents

Introduction

This is a book of questions and cases. You can use it to help you plan your Participatory Narrative Inquiry (PNI) projects.

> This book manuscript is in process. So far it it contains 36 story forms. When it is published, I hope it will contain at least 50 story forms. (If you think of a project goal you would like me to write a story form to address, let me know.)
>
> There are as yet no case studies in the manuscript. I have enough notes (in various locations and formats) to write at least 50 case studies. However, it will take me some time to organize them.

A quick definition of PNI

Participatory Narrative Inquiry is an approach in which groups of people participate in gathering and working with raw stories of personal experience in order to make sense of complex situations for better decision making. PNI focuses on the profound consideration of values, beliefs, feelings, and perspectives through the recounting and interpretation of lived experience.

A PNI project can range from three people talking in a room for an hour to thousands of people talking for a decade. All across this range, PNI is powered by people who gather together through and around their stories.

There are three **essential phases** in a PNI project.

1. In the **collection** phase, stories are gathered together.
2. In the **sensemaking** phase, people work with the stories, comparing them, combining them, talking about them.
3. In the **return** phase, the stories go back—and the story of the project goes back—into the group, family, community, or organization.

PNI also has three **optional phases**, which happen in some but not all projects.

1. In the **planning** phase, people work out what they will do in the rest of the project.
2. In the **catalysis** phase, people look for patterns in the stories and other data collected, and they prepare catalytic material to help make sensemaking work

even better. I call this phase catalysis because its goal is to pose questions, while the goal of analysis is to present conclusions.

3. In the **intervention** phase, people work to change the stories they tell.

For more information on PNI and how it works, see the other books in this series.

- *Working with Stories in Your Community or Organization: Participatory Narrative Inquiry* is the original PNI textbook, whose first edition I published in 2008.
- *Working with Stories Simplified: Participatory Narrative Inquiry in Brief* is a shorter, simpler, picture-book version of the original textbook.
- *Working with Stories in Depth: Advanced Topics in Participatory Narrative Inquiry* contains everything I think people will only want to read later, when they have done some PNI work and want to get into the deeper details of the method.

Why I wrote this book

The kinds of questions that work best in PNI projects—questions that combine respect (for safety) with freedom (for exploration)—are easy to recognize, but hard to write. Thus one of the tasks that often frustrates newcomers to PNI is coming up with questions that will help project participants share and reflect on their experiences.

However, this task is essential. If the questions you ask are not respectful, inviting, and relevant, you won't be able to gather the stories and interpretations you need to help your participants make sense of your topic.

In my coaching practice, I have found that the best way to help people write their first PNI questions is to write them some *examples of possibly useful questions* based on what I know about their projects. When I do this, people tend to use my questions as launching points to write better questions of their own.

That's what the first part of this book is for. I wrote it to give you examples of possibly useful questions for your PNI projects. Some of these questions will work for you exactly as I wrote them. Others will give you ideas for better questions you will write.

Another task that often frustrates new PNI practitioners is not knowing what to expect as their project unfolds. When I'm coaching people who are getting started with PNI, I tell a lot of stories about projects I have worked on in the past. Hearing what other people have done always seems to help people figure out what they want to do.

So the second part of this book describes, in brief, fifty real (heavily anonymized) PNI projects that I have worked on in some way (as a researcher, consultant, or coach) since 1999. Reading over these stories should help you see what PNI can do for you. You may also find some ideas you can use and some problems you can avoid.

Part I

Story Forms

There are many ways to gather stories in a PNI project. You can interview your participants. You can listen to them in unstructured group conversations. You can facilitate group story-sharing exercises. You can ask people to fill out online or paper surveys. The best choice of methods for any project depends on you, your project, and your participants.

But no matter how you gather your stories, you will need a story form, a set of questions you will use to ask people to share stories and reflect on them. A story form has three types of questions in it, usually in this order:

1. First there are one or more **story-eliciting questions**. People respond to them by telling stories about their experiences related to the topic.
2. After each story is told, each participant is asked a few to several **questions about the story** they just told. They respond by reflecting on and interpreting the story. These first two question types usually repeat until each participant has told and interpreted as many stories as they would like to tell.
3. Finally, each participant is asked a few to several **questions about themselves**. Participants are typically asked about their roles, traits, and views as well as basic demographic information.

How to use these story forms

All of the story forms in this book are *starting points*, not complete solutions. Start with the form that best fits your project goals, then look through the rest of the forms to find questions you like. You can copy questions from one form to another, and you can adapt any question to your project's context and needs.

You can find more questions in the collection-related chapters of the other books in the *Working with Stories* series.

Why ask questions about stories?

For two reasons. First, when you ask someone to share a story with you, then ask them some carefully chosen follow-up questions, you send them three important messages:

- I am listening to you with respectful curiosity
- I value your unique perspective on the topic we are exploring together
- I consider you capable of reflecting on your experiences—and qualified to do so

This approach helps your participants feel heard, invited, and included. Stories told by people who feel heard, invited, and included penetrate more deeply into the heart of any topic than stories told by people who feel interrogated, used, or excluded.

The second reason to ask questions about stories is that nobody knows a story like the person who just told it. Questions about stories gather valuable insights your participants can use to make sense of your topic. This is true both for the participants who tell the stories and for the participants who work with the stories in the sensemaking phase of PNI.

Why ask questions about people?

When you ask people to reflect on their experiences, you are asking them to speak to you in an indirect, oblique way. It might seem as if ending such a conversation by asking people *direct* questions about facts and opinions would subvert the value of this practice. But in fact, carefully combining these two very different types of question in one conversation can reveal useful insights.

For example, often what people say about a topic in the abstract ("Do you support this policy?") does not match what they say about it when they reflect on their lived experiences ("When was the last time you...?"). The border lands between story-based and fact-based reasoning can be excellent places to find useful patterns for sensemaking.

A note on the what-happened question

I want to say a special word about the what-happened question. This question makes it clear to participants that *you are asking them to tell you a story*. The what-happened question can be of great help when you need to strengthen a story-eliciting question that is relevant to your topic but that people might answer *without* telling a story.

For example, if you ask:

> Do you remember your first day at work?

People are likely to say:

> Yes.

But if you ask:

> Could you tell me what happened on your first day at work?

People are far more likely to tell you a story in response.

In this book I have included many what-happened questions. I did this to give you many ways to ask the question. However, it is not a good idea to ask the what-happened question too many times, because it can start to seem interrogatory.

So don't keep all of the what-happened questions from this book in your story form. Just include some of them. For example, you might want to include a what-happened question as part of the first question in your menu of questions.

A note on question menus

I recommend using a menu of diverse story-eliciting questions—that is, 3-5 questions that are all related to your topic, but in different ways, and that range from surface-level and safe to revealing and risky. Simply ask people which question they would like to answer, then invite them to answer it. You can't always use a menu of questions (it is difficult in phone interviews, for example), but when you can, it's a good idea.

Why use a menu of questions? For two reasons. First, it meets each of your participants where they are. It gives everyone a question they can answer, even if they vary widely in their experiences, perspectives, and levels of interest in your topic. Second, it helps you collect more and better stories, because it draws from a wider range of experience.

A note on testing

No matter what story form you choose or how you adapt it, you must test it before you can use it to gather stories in earnest.

1. Test your story form on yourself. *Try to answer each of your story-eliciting questions without telling a story.* If you *can* answer the question without telling a story, improve the question. Then tell a story—yes, to yourself. Then answer your questions about it. If a question feels strange, out of order, rude, or confusing, fix it.
2. Test your story form with a trusted friend, family member, or colleague. Don't tell them what the questions are for (other than a vague "I'm working on this thing, can you look at this"). In written or spoken form, put the questions in front of them. Then watch them like a hawk. Look for signs of confusion, irritation, offense, contempt, boredom, interest, curiosity, and gratitude.
3. Test your story form with a few of your participants. Watch them even more closely than you watched your first test subject.

Chapter 2

Common questions

The questions described in this chapter are useful on many story forms. Start the questions-about-your-story portion of the story form with one or two of these questions.

The value question

Always use this question. It distinguishes positive from negative stories. Choose the version that fits your participants best.

If you will be talking to professionals who don't want to talk about emotions at work, use this version.

> How would you rate the emotional tone of this story? (Mark a spot on the line)
>
>   Very negative ◁——-▷ Very positive

If your participants are apathetic or busy, use this version.

> How well do you think this story turned out? (Mark a spot on the line)
>
>   Horribly ◁——▷ Perfectly

If you think your participants will be willing and able to talk about their emotions in detail, this version can be useful.

> How do you feel about this story? (Choose up to three)
>
>   ☐ happy ☐ sad ☐ angry ☐ pleased
>
>   ☐ energized ☐ indifferent ☐ hopeful ☐ hopeless
>
>   ☐ other _____

Adapt the named emotions to suit your project's goals and participants. I find that putting emotions in pairs helps people read them more quickly. But be careful not to list more than eight emotions in total. If you do, your answers will be artificially skewed toward the beginning and end of the list.

I will not continue to write "mark a spot on the line" or "choose up to three" on the rest of the questions in this book. But you should include those instructions in your story form—the first at least once, and the second on every question to which it applies.

The importance question

Use this question if you want to distinguish essential from trivial stories. However, do not use it when people are recounting trauma. In that case it's insulting.

> How long do you think you will remember this story?
>
> For a few minutes ◁——-▷ For the rest of my life

You can also ask the importance question directly. However, be sure to communicate that you want to know how important the story is to them, not in general, so they do not feel that you are judging the story (or them).

> How important is this story to [you, your life, your work, etc]?
>
> It's trivial ◁——-▷ It could not be more important

Another way to ask the importance question is to use a "looking back" scenario. Note again the importance of the words "to you."

> Looking back over your [experiences with, time with, life with] [the topic, your life, work, the community, etc], to what extent would you say that this particular story stands out to you as something that matters to you?
>
> It's trivial ◁——-▷ It could not matter more

The commonality question

Use this question if you want to distinguish common from rare stories. It is most useful when you are exploring community-wide issues.

> Based on your experience, would you say that [the events, the situation, the outcome, the emotions, etc] in this story [is/are] common or rare in [this group, family, organization, community]?
>
> This happens every day ◁——-▷ This is a rare exception

The change question

Use this question if you want to consider change over time. If people will not be talking about change (say over the past few months or years), it is not very useful.

> How long ago did the events of this story take place?
>
> [some number of weeks, months, or years] ago ◁——-▷ Today

Note that you should not ask "How long ago did this story take place"—because people will say "I just told it to you." (Never mind how I know that.)

The anything-else question

Use this question if you think people will be hesitant to speak up and will need an extra nudge to become convinced that they really can say whatever they want to say. If you use this question, place it last among your auestions about the story.

> Is there anything else you [would like, feel a need, have] to [say, tell us, explain] about that story?
>
> [free text]

The source question

Use this question if you collect stories in more than one way (e.g., interview, group session, survey). Don't show it to your participants, but do answer it yourself.

> How was this story collected?
>
> ☐ individual interview
>
> ☐ group interview
>
> ☐ story-sharing session
>
> ☐ online survey

Community and Organizational Health

These story forms might be useful for projects focused on how well a community, group, or organization is working for its citizens, members, or employees.

To explore unmet needs

Story-eliciting questions

- Can you remember a moment [in or during a time period] when you felt that your **needs** [for something, or in general] were either met or unmet? What happened at that moment?
- Did you ever think to yourself [about the topic], "If this had not happened, things would be a lot **worse**"? Or did you ever think, "If only this had not happened! Things might be **better**"? What was it that happened?
- Looking back over [a time period; your time, work, or life with or in this group, community, or organization], can you recall a moment when a **wish** came true—or a **dream** was dashed to pieces?
- Is there any other experience related to [the topic] that you would you like to tell us about? What happened that was **important** to you?

Questions about the story

The following five-question set is unique in that all five questions are required; they work together.

> Choose a person who **needed something** in that story. Who did you choose?
>
> ◇ [list of roles and relationships, e.g., "a student," "an employee"]
>
> ◇ other _____

What did that person **need** in the story?

☐ help ☐ support ☐ information

☐ to understand ☐ to be understood

☐ freedom ☐ respect ☐ trust

☐ other _____

To what extent **did they get it**?

They got everything they needed ◁——-▷ They got nothing

Who or what **helped** them get what they needed?

☐ their own [trait]

☐ their [role, group, group member]

☐   [list of resources]

☐   [list of rules or policies]

☐ other _____

Who or what **hindered** them?

☐ their own [issue]

☐ their [role, group, group member]

☐   [list of resources]

☐   [list of rules or policies]

☐ other _____

Questions about the participant

Ask these questions after participants have told all the stories they want to tell.

In general, in [your work, life, family, community, etc], what would you say is **needed** most?

☐ help ☐ support ☐ information

☐ to understand ☐ to be understood

☐ freedom ☐ respect ☐ trust

☐ other _____

To what extent would you say that these needs are **met**, in general?

Completely ◁——-▷ Not at all

Who or what **helps** most in meeting these needs?

☐ my own [issue]

☐ my [role, group, group member]

☐ a [resource]

☐ a [rule or policy]

☐ other _____

Who or what **prevents** these needs from being met?

☐ my own [issue]

☐ my [role, group, group member]

☐ a [resource]

☐ a [rule or policy]

☐ other _____

To draw out energy for positive change

Story-eliciting questions

- If you look back over [a time period], can you think of a time when something happened that you wish would happen more—or less—often in the future?
- Did you ever wake up and think, "I can't wait—or I don't want—to get started [doing something] today." What happened that made you feel that way?
- Looking forward [a number of] years into the future, what would you like [the topic] to be like? Is there a time in the past that was like that? What happened in that moment?

Questions about the story

Where do you see **energy** in this story, positive and/or negative? Could you describe it?

[free text]

How much energy do you see in the story, in total, positive and/or negative?

Barely any ◁——-▷ An overwhelming amount

Where did the energy **come from**, and where did it **go**?

[free text]

If the story ended well, which of these things do you think would make it happen **more often**? If it ended badly, which things do you think would make it happen **less often**?

[list of supportive things, like money, help, reform, etc]

Questions about the participant

Which of these things do you think has the greatest potential to **turn things around** with respect to [the topic]?

[list of supportive things, like money, help, reform, etc—same list as before]

What do you think **stands in the way** of things being turned around?

[free text, or list of opposing things]

What would you yourself be **willing to do** to make those things happen?

[list of things a person could do—donate, advocate, collaborate, etc]

Note: I always recommend bolding the most important words in each question you ask. It aids with skimming, and people who can skim questions usually answer more of them. However, I have not yet bolded words in the rest of the questions in this book. I will do that before the book is published.

To make sense of an ongoing conflict

Story-eliciting questions

- What happened the last time a crisis—or the resolution of a crisis—related to [the topic] came up?
- Was there ever a time when you felt like your experience with [the topic] was getting better or worse? What happened that made you feel that way?
- Can you recall a time when you came to see [the topic] differently than you had before? What happened that changed your point of view?

Questions about the story

Who do you think most needs to hear this story?

[free text, or a list of groups or roles]

How do you think the people who most need to hear the story would feel about it? [Then repeat the same value question as you asked of the participant themselves, either with emotional tone, story ending, or named emotions.]

[same answers as for the previous value question]

Why do you think they would answer the question that way?

[free text, or list of reasons]

What would you like to say to them about the story?

[free text]

Questions about the participant

What is your position on [the topic]?

I totally support it ◁——-▷ I oppose it completely

Is there anything you would like to add about your position on [the topic]?

[free text]

Why do you think people disagree about [the topic]?

[free text, or list of reasons]

What do you think would help to resolve the conflict?

[free text, or list of things]

To surface concerns, anxieties, and fears

Story-eliciting questions

- With respect to [the topic], when was the last time something happened that made you think, "Oh no, here it comes again." (Or, "Yes, good, it's back!") What was "it," and what happened that made you think that?
- When was the last time you felt either hope or despair about the future with respect to [the topic]? What happened that made you feel that way?
- When you think about [the topic], is there a particular moment you keep going back to, something you worry will happen again—or will never happen again? What happened in that moment?

Questions about the story

For a wide-ranging goal such as this one, I would use only free-text questions about the story, to help people feel free to express every emotion they feel. You can cluster the answers into categories after the stories have been collected.

Why do you think you chose this particular story to tell? What does it mean to you?

[free text]

If this story ended well, what do you think would have made it turn out even better? If it ended badly, what do you think would have made it turn out even worse?

[free text]

What does this story say to you about the future of [the topic]?

[free text]

If every person mentioned in this story told it from their own perspective, as they saw it happen, how do you think they would tell it?

[free text]

Questions about the participant

Are you a worrier, in general?

Do people say that about you?

Yes, I worry a lot ◁——-▷ No, I never worry

When you think about the future of [the topic], which of these things do you think is most likely to happen?

[list of potential outcomes]

Why do you think those things are the most likely things to happen?

[free text]

To bring out rumors and things "they say"

Story-eliciting questions

- Can you recall an experience you've had with [the topic]—or an experience you've heard about from someone else—that most people would be surprised to find out about?
- Did anyone ever tell you about something that happened to them, and you thought, "Oh, so that's what [the topic] is really like"? What happened to that person, and how did you react when you heard about it?
- Can you recall an experience you heard about—one that didn't happen to you personally—that had a big impact on your feelings about [the topic]? What happened, and how did hearing about it affect you?

Questions about the story

Where did this story come from?

☐ it happened to me

☐ it happened to someone I know

☐ I heard it around

☐ everybody knows it

☐ I don't know

☐ I'd rather not say

What does this story say to you about [the topic]?

[free text, or list of common beliefs]

Who needs to hear this story?

[free text, or list of people, roles, groups]

What do you think would happen if this story was widely known?

[free text, or list of outcomes—one being "it is already widely known"]

Questions about the participant

What is your role in [the community, organization, etc]?

[list of roles]

How long have you been [in, associated with, etc] [the community, organization, etc]?

[list of time periods]

How much of a say do you have in [the community, organization, etc]?

None at all ◁——-▷ As much as I want to have

To give voice to the voiceless

Story-eliciting questions

- If [a group, person, or role] could step into your shoes and see what your experiences have been like, what day would you choose to show them? What happened on that day?
- Think about [a group, person, or role]. Think about what they know and don't know about you. Now think of an experience that they would never ask you about but that you would like them to know about. What happened to you during that experience?

- What is something people think they know about you—or people like you, in some way—that is wrong? Can you remember an experience that proves how wrong people are to think that? What happened in that experience?

Questions about the story

Who needs to hear this story?

    [list of roles, groups, people]

What do you think [a role, group, person] would say about the story?

    [free text]

If everyone knew about stories like this one, what would change?

    [list of possibilities, or free text]

Questions about the participant

To what extent do you feel heard in your life?

    Not at all ◁——-▷ As much as I want to be

Who or what helps you feel heard?

    [list of roles, groups, relationships, qualities]

What do you think would help you to be heard more clearly than you are now?

    [free text]

To bring a community together

Story-eliciting questions

- Did anything ever happen to you that made you think, "We are truly all in this together"? Or instead, did anything ever happen that made you feel completely alone? Either way, what happened?
- Did you ever find out that you had something in common—or not in common—with someone else in [a community]—something unexpected? What was it? How did you find out about it? And what happened as a result?
- When you look back over your time [in, at] [a community or organization], can you remember a time when you felt at home—or not at home? What happened that made you feel that way?

Questions about the story

Does this story tell you more about our community's past or future?

☐ It tells me about the past I miss

☐ It tells me about the past I'm glad is gone

☐ It tells me about the future I hope to see

☐ It tells me about the future I dread will come

☐ It's not about the past or the future, it's just the way things are right now

☐ I don't know

What do you wish had happened in this story?

[free text]

List as many community assets as you can think of—present or lacking—that were important to the story.

[free text, or a list of likely assets plus "other"]

If this story was told to the children of our community, would you tell it more as a good example of how to live together, or as a cautionary tale? Or maybe as a mixture of both?

Cautionary tale ◁——-▷ Good example

Questions about the participant

What is your role in this community?

[list of roles]

Which of these groups do you belong to within the community?

[list of groups]

How long have you been a part of this community?

My whole life ◁——-▷ Just a few days

How involved would you say you are in this community?

Barely ◁——-▷ Completely

To respect all voices

Story-eliciting questions

- Have you ever had a "you don't know me" experience, one that contradicts the assumptions people usually make about people who are like you (in some way)? What happened in that experience?
- Did anything ever happen to you that would surprise people who don't know you? What was it that happened, and why would it surprise people?
- Did anyone ever underestimate you in any way—or overestimate you? What happened?

Questions about the story

> If the roles in that story had been reversed, what do you think would have happened?
>
> [free text]

> Does that sort of thing happen more today than it used to, or less? If it's about the same, mark the middle of the range.   Was rare, is common ◁——-▷ Was common, is rare

The next two questions go together as a pair.

> What would have to happen for a story like this one to never happen again?
>
> [free text]

> If that did happen, would it be good or bad?
>
> Or a mix?
>
> Awful ◁——-▷ Wonderful

Questions about the participant

> Which of these groups do you belong to within the community?
>
> [list of groups]

The next three questions go together as a group.

> How respected do you feel in this community?
>
> Perfectly ◁——-▷ Not at all

> Is there anyone you know (who isn't you) who seems to feel perfectly respected here?
>
> [free text, or a list of likely roles/people]

> Why do you think they feel respected?
>
> [free text, or a list of likely reasons]

To help people see through the eyes of others

Story-eliciting questions

- When was the last time you felt truly seen—or completely invisible—with respect to [the topic]? What happened that made you feel that way?
- Think of an experience you've had related to [the topic] that is both important (to you) and unknown (to your group, family, community, etc). What happened in that experience, and why do you think people don't know about it?
- What one moment from the past is so important to understanding [the topic] in [your life, our group, community, etc] that anyone who can truly say they understand [the topic] in [your life, our group, community, etc] already knows about it? What happened in that moment?

You can also use these two questions together, in sequence.

1. If there was a documentary that showed *what truly matters* about [the topic] in [your life, our group, community, etc], what day would that documentary be about? What happened on that day?
2. If there was a documentary that showed *what people usually think matters* about [the topic] in [your life, our group, community, etc], what day would that documentary be about? What happened on that day?

Questions about the story

Why do you think you chose this particular story to tell?

☐ I remember it well

☐ it resonated with me

☐ it's a good memory

☐ I learned a lot from it

☐ it seemed like the right answer to your question

☐ I thought you would like it

☐ it's a funny story

☐ other _____

What do you think the story says about [the topic] in [your life, our group, community, etc]?

[free text, or list of likely things]

The next two questions go together as a pair.

If everyone in [our group, community, etc] heard that story, would that make things better or worse for you?

Infinitely better ◁——-▷ Infinitely worse

Why would it make things better or worse?

[free text]

The next three questions go together as a group.

Who do you wish could hear that story?

[free text, or list of people or groups]

Why haven't they heard it?

[free text]

What do you think would happen if they did hear it?

[free text]

Questions about the participant

The next two questions go together as a pair.

To what extent do you feel understood in this [group, community, etc]?

Completely ◁——-▷ Not at all

Would you like to be more or less understood than you are now?

Much less ◁——-▷ Much more

The next two questions go together as a pair.

To what extent do you feel like you understand everyone in this [group, community, etc]?

Completely ◁——-▷ Not at all

> Would you like to understand more or less about everyone in this [group, community, etc]?
>
> Much less ◁——-▷ Much more

To get along better in general

Story-eliciting questions

- Did you ever change your mind about [the topic] because somebody helped you see it from a new perspective? Or did anyone else change their mind about [the topic] because of something you said or did? What happened?
- What was the last eye-opening experience you had, or saw somebody else have, in relation to [the topic]?
- When you think of conflict and cooperation in [our community, etc] around [the topic], what recent experience stands out to you?

Questions about the story

The next three questions go together as a group.

> Who would be surprised to hear this story?
>
> [list of groups]

> Who wouldn't be surprised to hear it?
>
> [list of groups]

> Is there anything you would like to say about your answers to the two previous questions?
>
> [free text]

The next two questions go together as a pair.

> If stories like this one happened every day, what would be the result?
>
> Disaster ◁——-▷ Dramatic improvement

> Why do you think this is true?
>
> [free text, or list of reasons]

Questions about the participant

What do you think our [group, community, organization, etc] needs to do to get along better?

[free text, or list of possible actions]

What do you think our [group, community, organization, etc] needs to have more of to get along better?

[free text, or list of possible assets]

What do you think our [group, community, organization, etc] needs to have less of to get along better?

[free text, or list of possible problems]

Which of these ideas for getting along better do you think has the most promise?

[list of ideas]

The next two questions go together as a pair.

What do you like best about our [group, community, organization, etc]?

[free text, or list of possible good things]

What do you wish would change?

[free text, or list of possible bad things]

To become a more effective team

Story-eliciting questions

- Looking back over the past [month, year, etc] in [the team], can you remember a moment when the team worked together especially well—or especially poorly? What happened in that moment?
- When you think about productive versus unproductive conflict in [the team], does any particular incident come to mind?
- Synergy is a powerful concept, but it's hard to put into practice. Can you recall a time when synergy in [the team] was exceptionally high or low?
- Did you ever see something happen in [your team] and think to yourself, "That's why this team works so well"? Or, did you see something happen and think, "That's why this team doesn't work as well as it could"? What happened? [Because this question is complicated, only use it with involved participants.]

Questions about the story

The next two questions go together as a pair.

How does this story compare to experiences you have had in other teams?

Infinitely better ◁——-▷ Infinitely worse

Why?

[free text]

The next two questions go together as a pair.

If someone new joined [the team], would you tell them about this story?

They need to hear it ◁——-▷ I would not

If you would tell them the story, what else would you tell them about it?

[free text, or list of options]

The next two questions go together as a pair.

Did what happened in this story help or hurt the team in the short run?

It hurt ◁——-▷ It helped

What about in the long run?

It hurt ◁——-▷ It helped

Questions about the participant

If you could say anything to every member of [the team] and be guaranteed that they would listen—but they would have no idea that what you said came from you—what would you say?

[free text]

How does [the team] compare to other teams you have been involved with?

Infinitely better ◁——-▷ Infinitely worse

If you could change one thing about [the team], what would it be?

[free text, or list of things]

To build stronger community connections

Story-eliciting questions

- Think back to the last time you felt truly connected to this community—or completely disconnected from it, whichever matters more to you. Can you tell [me/us] what happened during that time?
- Think about the people in this community. Choose a person to whom you feel especially connected to—or disconnected from, your choice. Now, can you recall the first time (or the first few times) you met that person? What happened during that interaction?
- Who do you rely on in this community? Who do you avoid? Could you tell [me/us] about a memorable experience—memorable to you, not to anyone else—that you had with any of those people? What happened that you remember?
- Say you meet someone who thinks they might like to [move to, join] this community. Knowing that you are part of it, they ask you for advice. You look back through your experiences and decide to tell them about one particular experience that will show them what being part of this community has been like for you. What experience do you choose to tell them about? And can you tell [me/us] about it? [Because this question is complicated, only use it with involved participants.]

Questions about the story

What do you think the people in this community can learn from that story?
[free text, or list of things]

Who do you think would be surprised to hear that story?
[free text, or list of groups, roles, people]

Who would benefit from hearing that story?
[free text, or list of groups, roles, people]

If any of these [people, groups, roles] heard that story, would it benefit the community?
Not at all ◁——▷ Very much

If any of these [people, groups, roles] heard that story, would it benefit them?
Not at all ◁——▷ Very much

If any of these [people, groups, roles] heard that story, would it benefit you?
Not at all ◁——▷ Very much

Questions about the participant

What is your [role, position, place, etc] in this community?

   [free text, or list of groups, roles]

How long have you been a part of this community?

   [free text, or list of time periods]

To what extent do you feel that you are a part of this community?

   Not at all ◁——▷ Completely

To what extent do you feel that you are responsible for this community?

   Not at all ◁——▷ Completely

To what extent do you feel that you have gotten what you need from this community?

   Not at all ◁——▷ Completely

To what extent do you feel that you have contributed to this community?

   Not at all ◁——▷ Completely

Problem or crisis mitigation

To address a longstanding issue or problem

These story forms might be useful for projects focused on intractable problems or longstanding issues.

Story-eliciting questions

- Looking back over your experience with [the issue], can you remember a moment that explains what [the issue] is like? What happened in that moment?
- Did something ever happen that made you think to yourself, "That's what's really going on with [the issue]." What was it that happened?
- Think of a day when you felt either hope or despair about [the issue]. What happened on that day?

Questions about the story

What do you think would have made this story turn out better?

[free text, or list of solutions]

What do you think would have made this story turn out worse?

[free text, or list of obstacles]

Was there ever a time when the opposite of this story happened?

[free text—this is a story-eliciting question, but it need not have follow-up questions]

Questions about the participant

How long has [the issue] been important to you?

Forever ◁——-▷ Very recently

To what extent does [the issue] matter to you, in general?

Very little ◁——-▷ Very much

If you were to describe [the issue] as a [metaphorical thing—cloud, animal, building], what kind of [metaphorical thing] would it be?

[free text, or list of descriptions of the metaphorical thing]

To help people gain a new perspective on a problem

Story-eliciting questions

• Did you ever see someone say or do something and realize that they thought about [the topic] in a way that was completely unfamiliar to you? What did they say or do that stood out?
• What has been your single biggest surprise when it comes to [the topic]? What happened that surprised you?
• Did anything ever happen to you that caused you to question your assumptions about [the topic]? What happened, and how did you react?

Questions about the story

What did you learn from this story? What lessons did you draw from it?

[free text]

How surprising is this story, to you, in the light of your experiences with [the topic]?

Not at all ◁——▷ Completely

If [a person, role, group, etc] heard this story, how surprising do you think they would say it is?

Not at all ◁——-▷ Completely

Why do you think they would say that?

[free text, or list of reasons]

Questions about the participant

What do you think is the cause of [the problem]?

[free text, or list of causes]

What do you think should be done about it?

[free text, or list of solutions]

Is that being done? If so, how is it being done? If not, why isn't it being done?

[free text, or list of ways and reasons]

To adapt to a changing world

Story-eliciting questions

- Can you recall an experience you had [a long time ago, or X years ago] that wouldn't happen the same way today, for better or worse?
- Do you remember the very first time you [had something happen to you related to the topic]? What happened?
- Did you ever think to yourself, "Well, I guess this is the way [something] is going to be from now on"? What happened that made you think that?

Questions about the story

If that story had happened [a number of] of years in the past, how would it have turned out? What would have happened back then?

[free text, or scale from worse to better, or list of outcomes]

Now imagine the same story playing out [a number of] years in the future. What do you think will happen then?

[free text, or scale from worse to better, or list of outcomes]

How would you say the people in the story responded to changes in [the topic]?

☐ they adapted

☐ they resisted

☐ they gave in

[and more responses]

Did what they did work for them?

Did it help them get what they needed?

Not at all ◁——▷ Very much

Questions about the participant

With respect to [the topic], if things were exactly the way you wish they would be, what would [the world, your life, the community, etc] be like?

[free text, or list of descriptions]

How much hope do you have for the future of [the topic]?

    None at all ◁——-▷ Infinite hope

What's one good thing and one bad thing about the changes in [the topic] over the past [number of] years?

    [free text, or list of positive and negative things]

To bring out good news for optimism

Story-eliciting questions

- The best way to gather either only positive or only negative stories is to leave the door open to both. When you only allow people to tell the stories you want to hear, you lose the opportunity to hear the stories people want to tell.
- When you look back over your memories about [the topic], is there a particular memory that brings you energy—or drains your energy? What happened in that memory?
- Was there ever a time when you felt hopeless about [the topic], and then found a reason to hope? Or the reverse? What happened?
- What's a good or bad thing that happened (to you or to someone else) related to [the topic] that not many people know about? Can you tell us what happened?
- Can you recall a time in which things went better or worse than expected for you with respect to [the topic]? What happened during that time?
- When you think about [the topic], what's the best or worst thing you've heard happened lately?
- If someone you cared about felt hopeless about [the topic] and you wanted to cheer them up by telling them about a hopeful experience you had (or heard about) related to [the topic], what happened that you would tell them about? Or the reverse—if you felt they had false hope and you wanted to help them avoid disappointment, what experience would you tell them about? [This is a fictional-scenario question. It is useful if people are ready to explore, but likely to fail if they are not.]

Questions about the story

The next two questions work as a pair.

What do you like best about that story?

    [free text, or list of likely relevant things]

What do you like least?

    [free text, or list of likely relevant things]

The next three questions go together as a group.

> Who needs to hear that story?
>
> > [list of roles or groups]

> If they did hear it, what do you think would happen?
>
> > [free text]

> If this story isn't heard often enough, why do you think that is so?
>
> > [free text, or list of likely reasons]

Questions about the participant

> In general, would you say that you are an optimist or a pessimist? Or some of both?
>
> > Pessimist ◁——-▷ Optimist

> Would you say that you have the responsibility to bring hope to people? Is that part of what you do?
>
> > It is exactly what I do ◁——-▷ No, not at all

> When it comes to [the topic], where do you look to find hope?
>
> > [free text, or list of likely sources]

The next two questions work as a pair.

> If you were to design a perfect future related to [the topic], what would it look like?
>
> > [free text, or list of likely scenarios]

> What about the worst possible future? What would that look like?
>
> > [free text, or list of likely scenarios]

To listen to criticism without censorship

Story-eliciting questions

- The best way to gather either only positive or only negative stories is to leave the door open to both. When you only allow people to tell the stories you want to hear, you lose the opportunity to hear the stories people want to tell.
- The last time you [encountered, spent time with, dealt with, etc] [the topic], what was the highest or lowest point (you choose) of the experience? What happened in that moment?

- Did you ever have an experience related to [the topic] that says something to you about the strengths or weaknesses of [something related to the topic]? What happened?
- Did you ever have an experience related to [the topic] that made you think, "This part of [something related to the topic] is worth keeping"—or "has to go"? What happened that made you think that?

Questions about the story

How do you wish that story had ended?

[free text, or list of outcomes]

How does the story affect your opinion of [something related to the topic]? If it has no effect on your opinion, place your mark in the middle of the line.

Makes it much worse ◁——-▷ Improves it a lot

Why do you think you chose this particular story to tell?

☐ I remember it well

☐ it resonated with me

☐ it's a good memory

☐ I learned a lot from it

☐ it seemed like the right answer to your question

☐ I thought you would like it

☐ it's a funny story

☐ other _____

Who do you think needs to hear that story?

[free text, or list of groups]

What do you think [a specific group] would say about the story?

[free text, or list of reactions]

Questions about the participant

In general, what is your opinion of [something related to the topic]?

Worst possible ◁——-▷ Best possible

The next two questions work as a pair.

[List, choose] three things that make you feel [good, grateful, happy] about [something related to the topic].   [free text, or list of likely things]

> Now list three things that make you feel [unhappy, sad, angry] about [something related to the topic].   [free text, or list of likely things]

The next two questions work as a pair.

> What do you think needs to change about [something related to the topic]?
>
> [free text, or list of things]

> What do you think should stay the same?
>
> [free text, or list of things]

To make sense of a disaster

Story-eliciting questions

- What happened to you during [the disaster]?
- When [the disaster] was going on, at what moment did you feel the most hopeful or hopeless? What happened in that moment?
- When [the disaster] was going on, at what moment did you feel the most connected to other people—or the most isolated? What happened in that moment?
- Was there a moment during [the disaster] when your sense of what was happening shifted, either because you finally understood something or because you were suddenly bewildered?

Questions about the story

> What moment within that story do you think you will remember the longest?
>
> [free text]

> What did you learn from the events of this story?
>
> [free text]

The next two questions work as a pair.

> How does the experience you described compare to everything else that has happened in your life so far?
>
> Not that much worse ◁——-▷ Indescribably worse

> Is there anything you would like to say about your answer to the previous question?
>
> [free text]

Questions about the participant

In general, how much experience have you had with disasters?

None before this ◁——-▷ This is normal for me

Do you consider yourself a resourceful person?

Absolutely ◁——▷ Not at all

How strong is your personal support network?

We can weather anything ◁——-▷ What support network?

To nip an emerging problem in the bud

Story-eliciting questions

- When was the last time you felt a sense of increasing or decreasing anxiety about [the topic]? What happened that made you feel that way?
- Did you ever feel like the situation you faced with respect to [the topic] was beginning to shift or change in any way? What happened that made you feel that way?
- When you think about the saying "Change is the only constant," what recent experience comes to mind? What happened in that experience?
- Did you ever see something happen and think to yourself, "I hope that doesn't happen again." Or did you think, "I hope that happens more often." What was it that you thought about? [Don't put this question first or use it with reluctant participants. It's a little complicated.]

Questions about the story

To what extent would you say that this story offers a cautionary tale?

Not at all ◁——▷ Completely

To what extent would you say that it offers a glimpse of a better future?

Not at all ◁——▷ Completely

What was the dominant problem or solution in the story?

[free text, or list of likely problems and solutions]

In the story, who was responsible for solving the problem or providing the solution?

[free text, or list of roles and groups]

Who took responsibility for solving the problem or providing the solution?

[free text, or list of roles and groups (same as previous list)]

Questions about the participant

What is your role with respect to [the topic]?

[free text, or list of roles]

How long have you been [involved in, connected to, concerned about] [the topic]?

[free text, or list of time lengths]

In your own words, describe any general problems and/or solutions you see in [the topic]. How do you see it?

[free text]

How strongly do you support [the official policy, a law, a particular opinion, etc] about [the topic]?

Not at all ◁——▷ Completely

Please choose two problems you think are most pressing with respect to [the topic].

[list of problems]

Please choose two solutions you think are most promising with respect to [the topic].

[list of solutions]

Chapter 5

Planning and Policy

These story forms might be useful for projects focused on planning and policy making—finding out what people want, choosing among available options, dealing with problems, envisioning the future.

To gather feedback on a plan, message, statement, or policy

Story-eliciting questions

- When you think about the word "[some important word from the plan, message, statement, or policy]," does it remind you of anything that has happened to you with respect to [the topic]? What happened that you remember?
- When you look back on your experiences with [the topic] in [the community or organization], what one experience stands out to you as most relevant—to you, not to anyone else—with respect to [a particular law, policy, plan, statement, etc]? What happened in that experience?
- Say you have been placed in charge of [the topic] in [the community or organization]. Say you have written a policy that will guide how [the topic] is dealt with from now on. Say you have been asked to make a speech about your new policy. In that speech, you have decided to tell your audience about something that happened to you that influenced your decision. What experience do you choose to tell people about? And can you tell [me/us] about that experience? [Because this question is complicated, only use it with involved participants.]
- Look at this [policy, law, statement, message, etc]. [Show it.] Does any part of it remind you of anything that has happened to you—good or bad—or anything that you heard about happening from someone else? Could you tell [me/us] about it? [Only use this question if your participants can read, you're not talking to them on the telephone, and the topic is not extra sensitive.]

Questions about the story

The next three questions work as a group.

Who do you think needs to hear that story?

[free text, or list of roles and groups]

Who do you think would want to hear it?

[free text, or list of roles and groups]

Who would not want to hear it?

[free text, or list of roles and groups]

The next five questions work as a group.

If [the policy, law, plan, message, etc] was changed to take account of that story, what would it say?

[free text]

If there was a vote on changing [the policy, law, plan, message, etc] in the way you described, who would vote for it?

[free text, or list of roles and groups]

Who would vote against it?

[free text, or list of roles and groups]

Who would the change help?

[free text, or list of roles and groups]

Who would the change harm?

[free text, or list of roles and groups]

Questions about the participant

How do you feel about [the topic]?

[free text]

How strongly do you support [the official policy, a law, a particular opinion, etc] about [the topic]?

Not at all ◁——-▷ Completely

Would you say that [our community, organization, country, etc] is going in the right or wrong direction with respect to [the topic]?

Wrong ◁——-▷ Right

Is there anything else you would like to say about [the topic] that you haven't had the opportunity to say so far?

[free text]

To find out why people stay and leave

Story-eliciting questions

- What was the best or worst moment of your last [month, six months, year, etc] [at, in] [this group, our community, this organization, etc]? What happened in that moment?
- Can you recall an experience that made you feel like an essential [part, element, component, member] of [this team, group, family, community, organization, etc]? Or can you recall an experience that left you feeling like you were on the outside looking in? What happened that made you feel that way? [If you want to, you can use this question with a sub-menu of relevant sayings, to give people multiple ways to be reminded of a story.]
- When you think about the saying ["A chain is only as strong as its weakest link," "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence," "It takes a village to raise a child," etc], what experience from the past [time period] comes to mind? Could you tell [me/us] about that experience?
- Did anything happen to you in the past [few months, year, etc] that made you think to yourself, "The next time this happens will be the last straw"? Or did anything happen that made you think, "If this keeps up I might just start liking it here"? What was it that happened? [Don't put this question first or use it with reluctant participants; it's a little complicated.]

Questions about the story

Why do you think you chose this particular story to tell?

☐ I remember it well

☐ it resonated with me

☐ it's a good memory

☐ I learned a lot from it

☐ it seemed like the right answer to your question

☐ I thought you would like it

☐ it's a funny story

☐ other _____

If a prospective [employee, team member, resident] heard that story, do you think it would make them want to join [the group, our community, etc]?

☐ Of course it would

☐ No, it would warn them away

☐ It would depend on the person and the situation

☐ I have no idea

☐ other _____

If the story involves a problem, what do you think would fix it?

[free text, or list of solutions]

If the story involves a solution, how do you think we should use it?

[free text, or list of uses of solutions]

Questions about the participant

The next three questions work as a group.

What do you think will come next for your [job, home, group membership, etc]?

☐ I plan to stay forever

☐ I would like to stay forever, but we'll see

☐ I am not sure how long I want to stay

☐ I am considering a move

☐ I am actively seeking a new [job, home, group, etc]

☐ I don't know

☐ other _____

Which of these reasons explains your answer to the previous question?

[list of likely reasons]

Based on your experiences, how many people in [this group, our community, this organization] feel the way you do about staying or leaving?

Everybody ◁——▷ Just me

To find new and innovative ideas

Story-eliciting questions

- What happened the last time you had a new [idea, hunch, brainstorm, brainwave, stroke of insight, epiphany, etc]?
- What was the best or worst new idea you've had or seen [in the team, our community, etc] in the past [month, year, etc]? Where did the idea come from, and how did it play out?
- If I say "out of the box thinking," what experience from the past [time period] comes to mind for you? What happened that connects to that phrase?
- Can you recall a time in the past [few weeks, six months, etc] when something happened and you thought, "Now that's an idea worth keeping"? Or it could have been an idea that ended up not being worth keeping. But in either case, what happened that led you to think that? [Don't put this question first or use it with reluctant participants; it's a little complicated.]

Questions about the story

The following six-question set is unique in that all six questions are required; they work together.

> Choose a person who had a new idea in the story. Who did you choose?
>
> ◇ [list of roles and relationships, e.g., "a student," "an employee"]
>
> ◇ other _____
>
> ◇ I would rather not say

> What was the person's idea?
>
> [free text, or list of likely ideas]

> Who or what helped them to come up with the idea?
>
> ◇ their own [quality]
>
> ◇ their [role, group member, or group]
>
> ◇ nothing and nobody
>
> ◇ I don't know
>
> ◇ other _____

Who or what hindered them in coming up with the idea?

◇ their own [issue]

◇ their [role, group member, or group]

◇ nothing and nobody

◇ I don't know

◇ other _____

To what extent did the idea make a difference in how the story played out? (If the idea had no effect, place the marker in the center of the range.)

It ruined everything ◁——-▷ It fixed everything

What happened to the idea after the story was over?

[free text, or list of likely outcomes]

Questions about the participant

The next three questions work as a group.

In your mind, is [our group, team, family, community, organization, etc] an idea-generating [place, group, community, etc]?

Not at all ◁——-▷ Completely

Would you say that [our group, team, family, community, organization, etc] is an idea-welcoming [place, group, community, etc]?

Not at all ◁——-▷ Completely

How do you feel about your answers to the previous two questions?

This is perfect ◁——-▷ This needs to change

In general, how would you say new ideas are received in [our group, team, family, community, organization, etc]?

◇ they are supported

◇ they are celebrated

◇ they are put into practice

◇ they are considered

◇ they are evaluated

◇ they are dismissed

◇ they are ignored

◇ it depends on who has them

◇ it depends on who they are told to

◇ I don't know

◇ other _____

In general, how do you think we ought to receive new ideas in [our group, team, family, community, organization, etc]?

☐ We should be more welcoming to them

☐ We should take them more seriously

☐ We should be more careful about them

☐ We should be more equitable about them

☐ I don't know

☐ Other

To decide where to allocate funds

Story-eliciting questions

- Can you remember a time when you felt that [our group, team, community, organization, etc] had turned in the right or wrong direction going forward? What happened that made you feel that way?
- When was the last time you felt like [our group, team, community, organization, etc] was in good working order—or wasn't? What happened?
- Looking back over your experiences in [our group, team, community, organization, etc], what one moment stands out to you as an example of something worth investing in? What happened in that moment?
- Can you remember a time when you saw something happen in [our group, team, community, organization, etc] and thought, "This is what needs to happen"? Or can you remember a time when you thought, "This is what needs to stop"? What hap-

pened that needs to happen or stop? [Don't put this question first or use it with reluctant participants; it's a little complicated.]

- Say you are talking with someone who wants to help [our group, team, community, organization, etc] by making some kind of contribution. Say you decide to tell them about an experience that will show them how you feel about the past or the future of [our group, team, community, organization, etc]. What experience do you choose to tell them about? And can you tell [me/us] about it? [Because this question is complicated, only use it with involved participants.]

Questions about the story

The next two questions work as a pair.

> What does that story make you want to do or say, and to what or whom?
>
> [free text]

> What do you think would happen if you did do or say those things?
>
> [free text]

The next two questions work as a pair.

> What could have made that story turn out better than it did?
>
> [free text, or list of factors]

> What could have made it turn out worse?
>
> [free text, or list of factors]

The next three questions work as a group.

> What does the story say to you about what [our group, team, community, organization, etc] needs most in the future?
>
> [free text, or list of needs]

> What does it say to you about what we already have?
>
> [free text, or list of needs]

> Does the story have anything to say to you about anything we have lost?
>
> [free text, or list of needs]

Questions about the participant

Would you say that people are equal in this [group, team, community, organization, etc]?

    Absolutely not ◁——-▷ We are all exactly equal

Are you happy with the way we make plans in this [group, team, community, organization, etc]?

    I am content ◁——-▷ I am very unhappy

The next two questions work as a pair.

How much say do you have in this [group, team, community, organization, etc]?

    None whatsoever ◁——-▷ I'm in charge

How much say would you like to have?

    I'm good ◁——-▷ So much more

The next two questions work as a pair.

If you were in charge of investing in [our group, team, community, organization, etc], which three of these allocations would you prioritize most?

    [list of things funds could be allocated to]

Which would you prioritize least?

[same list, which should have >6 items]

To ground a decision in the community or organization

Story-eliciting questions

- When you think about [the topic of the decision], what one experience, good or bad, comes to mind for you? What happened that [the topic] reminds you of?
- Can you recall a decision made by [our CEO, our mayor, our town council, etc] in the past [month, six months, year, etc] that had an impact—positive or negative—on your [work, job, home, family, life, etc]? What happened to you when that decision was made?
- Look at this [draft decision, or drafts of different decisions]. [Show it or them.] Does any part of this remind you of anything that has happened to you—good or bad—or anything that you heard about happening from someone else? Could you tell [me/us] about it? [Only use this question if your participants can read, you're not talking to them on the telephone, and the topic is not extra sensitive.]
- Say you are talking with someone who is making a decision about [the topic of the decision]. Say you want to influence their decision in some way. You decide to

tell them about an experience you've had that will show them how you feel about [the topic]. What experience do you choose to tell them about? And can you tell [me/us] about it? [Because this question is complicated, only use it with involved participants.]

Questions about the story

The next two questions work as a pair.

> Which one of these [draft decisions] do you think this story supports best?
>
> [free text, or list of options]

> How strongly would you say the story supports the options you chose in the previous question?
>
> Barely ◁——▷ It could not be stronger

The next two questions work as a pair.

> Which one of these [draft decisions] could the story be used as argument against?
>
> [free text, or same list]

> How strongly would you say the story argues against the options you chose in the previous question?
>
> Barely ◁——▷ It could not be stronger

The next four questions work as a group.

> What does this story say to you about [the topic of the decision]?
>
> [free text, or list of likely things]

> How strongly does the story speak to you about the things you mentioned?
>
> Barely ◁——▷ It could not be stronger

> Who in [our team, community, etc] do you think would agree with your interpretation of what the story has to say?
>
> [free text, or list of roles and groups]

> Who would disagree, and what would they say about the story?
>
> [free text]

Questions about the participant

How strongly do you feel about [the topic]?

    I don't care ◁——▷ I care deeply about it

How involved are you with making decisions about [the topic]?

    Not at all ◁——▷ It is my responsibility

What decision do you favor with respect to [the topic]?

    [free text, or list of options]

The next two questions work as a pair.

If the decision about [the topic] was entirely yours to make, what would you do?

    [free text, or list of options]

How would you explain your decision to [the group, community, etc]?

    [free text]

To plan for the future

Story-eliciting questions

- All of the questions for this purpose are complicated, because using stories from the past to talk about the future is by its nature complicated. [If you are collecting stories for this purpose, you might want to start people off with a few simple "best or worst moment" or "moment that stands out as important to you" questions to warm them up to storytelling before you challenge them with any of these necessarily complicated questions.]
- Did you ever see something happen related to [the topic] and think to yourself, "I hope that happens again!" Or did you ever think, "I hope that never happens again!" In either case, what happened that made you think that? Could you tell [me/us] about it?
- Imagine a situation [in the future, or in a specific future time frame, like "in 20 years"] that is either perfect or horrible with respect to [the topic]. Now look back on your past experiences related to [the topic]. Can you recall an experience you have had that connects to the future situation you chose? What happened in that experience?
- Shakespeare said "the past is prologue," meaning that what has happened in the past sets the stage for what will happen in the future. When you reflect on that phrase with respect to [the topic], what one experience from the past comes to mind for you? What happened in that experience?

Questions about the story

The next two questions work as a pair.

> Which of these issues seem most connected to the story?
>
>   [list of issues about the future]

> How important do you think the issues you chose, taken together, are to the future of [the topic]?
>
>   They are trivial ◁——-▷ Nothing is more important

How do you think this story would [turn, have turned] out in [a time in the past or future]? [Use as many of these different-outcome question sets as fit your project's goals. For example, you might choose 100 years ago, 10 years ago, 10 years in the future, and 100 years in the future.]

  [free text, or list of outcomes]

Is there anything you would like to add to your answer?

  [free text]

Questions about the participant

When you think about the future of [the topic] in [our group, community, etc], how do you feel?

  Devoid of hope ◁——-▷ Full of hope

How involved are you in making decisions about the future of [the topic] in [our group, community, etc]?

  Not at all ◁——-▷ It is my responsibility

How involved would you like to be in making decisions about the future of [the topic] in [our group, community, etc]?

  Much less involved ◁——-▷ I wish I was in charge of it

In your opinion, what are the [2, 3, 4] most important issues [our group, community, etc] faces in the future?

  [free text, or list of issues]

What do you think [our group, community, etc] should do about [the topic, or the issues you chose]?

  [free text, or list of options]

Knowledge management and education

These story forms might be useful for projects focused on individual or collective learning in a group, family, community, or organization.

To support development and growth

Story-eliciting questions

- When you think about how [you, our team, our community, etc] [does something, deals with something], can you remember a turning point when [you, we] got better—or worse—at [doing something, dealing with something]? What happened at that turning point?
- Did you ever encounter a discovery—or a mystery—that changed the way [you, we] [did something, dealt with something]? How did it come about, and how did it play out?
- Looking back over your experiences with [the topic], was there ever a moment when you realized that the ground had been shifting under you—in a good or bad way—for some time? What had been changing, and what caused you to realize it?

Questions about the story

> Does this story show things getting better with respect to [the topic], or getting worse? (If it doesn't show either thing, mark a spot in the middle.)
>
> Getting worse ◁——-▷ Getting better

> Why do you think this story shows that things were getting better or worse?
>
> [free text, or list of reasons]

> What lesson do you think [you, we, our community, etc] can draw from this story?
>
> [free text, or list of lessons]

If [you, we, our community, etc] did learn that lesson, and applied it, how would things change in the future?

[free text, or list of outcomes]

Questions about the participant

How do you feel about change with respect to [the topic]?

Love it ◁——▷ Hate it

With respect to [the topic], what's something you hope to see more of in the future?

[free text, or list of things]

With respect to [the topic], what's something from the past that you wish we could get rid of?

[free text, or list of things]

With respect to [the topic], what's something from the past that you wish we could get back?

[free text, or list of things]

To map knowledge assets

Story-eliciting questions

- When you think back on all the things you learned about [the topic] in the past [month, six months, year, decade, etc], in what one moment would you say that you learned the most about [the topic]? What happened in that moment?
- Can you recall a surprise that taught you something about [the topic], something that you can now see was important to your learning? What happened that surprised you?
- Did you ever learn something useful about [the topic] because of something someone did or said? What was it they did or said, and what happened as a result?
- If you think about what you know about [the topic] today, and you look back into your past experiences with [the topic], what one experience do you think explains best what you know (or don't know) about [the topic] today? What happened in that experience?

Questions about the story

The following five-question set is unique in that all five questions are required; they work together.

Choose a person who faced a challenge in the story. Who did you choose?

◇ [list of roles and relationships, e.g., "a student," "an employee"]

◇ other _____

What challenge did that person face in the story?

[free text, or list of likely challenges]

To what extent did they succeed in facing that challenge?

Perfectly ◁——-▷ Not at all

In their effort to meet the challenge they faced, which of these things did they draw on?

☐ their own [asset]

☐ the [asset] of [the group, community, organization]

☐ other _____

Which things would have helped them succeed better than they did, if they had had more of them?

[same assets list]

The following five-question set is unique in that all five questions are required; they work together.

Choose a person who learned something in the story. Who did you choose?

◇ [list of roles and relationships, e.g., "a student," "an employee"]

◇ other _____

What did that person learn in the story?

[free text, or list of likely things]

How much of an impact did their learning have on how the story turned out?

It changed everything ◁——-▷ It had no impact

Which of these things helped them learn?

☐ their own [asset]

☐ the [asset] of [the group, community, organization]

☐ other _____

What do you think would have helped them learn more, if they had had more of them?

[same assets list]

Questions about the participant

To what extent would you say that our [group, team, community, organization, etc] has the knowledge assets it needs to meet its challenges effectively?

It has nothing ◁——-▷ It has all the assets it needs

Which of these knowledge assets do you think are the most useful to our [group, team, community, organization, etc]?

[list of known assets]

What sorts of knowledge assets do you think our [group, team, community, organization, etc] needs more of?

[free text, or list of possible assets]

What do you think would happen if our [group, team, community, organization, etc] got all of the knowledge assets it needs?

[free text, or list of outcomes]

Which of these knowledge assets do you personally use on a day-to-day basis?

[list of known assets]

To what extent would you say that you have the knowledge assets you need to meet your challenges effectively?

I have nothing ◁——-▷ I have all the assets I need

What sorts of knowledge assets do you personally need more of in your [work, job, life, etc]?

[free text, or list of possible assets]

What do you think would happen if you got all of the knowledge assets you need?

[free text, or list of outcomes]

To pass on knowledge

Story-eliciting questions

- If you look back over the past [six months, year, few years, decade, etc] of your [work, involvement, learning] with [the topic], what was the most [useful, important, intense, memorable] aha moment you experienced? What happened in that moment?
- Describe a mystery or dilemma you faced in your experience with [the topic] over the past [six months, year, few years, decade, etc]. What was the mystery or dilemma, how did you deal with it, and how did things turn out?
- Looking back over your experiences with [the topic], can you choose one day in which your [understanding of, knowledge about, ability to deal with, etc] [the topic] changed more than on any other day? What happened on that day?
- Say you are talking with someone who is just getting started [with, in] [the topic]. Say you want to pass on some of your knowledge about [the topic] . You decide to tell them about an experience you've had that you think will help them learn. What experience do you choose to tell them about?
  And can you tell [me/us] about it? [Because this question is complicated, only use it with involved participants.]

Questions about the story

The following five-question set is unique in that all five questions are required; they work together.

> Choose a person who learned something in the story. Who did you choose?
>
>> [list of roles and relationships, e.g., "a student," "an employee"]

> What did that person learn in the story?
>
>> [free text, or list of likely things]

> How much of an impact did their learning have on how the story turned out?
>
>> It changed everything ◁——-▷ It had no impact

> If a person who knew nothing about [the topic] heard that story, what would you think they would learn from it?
>
>> [free text, or list of likely things]

> How useful would the story be to a person who knew nothing about [the topic]?
>
>> Entirely useless ◁——-▷ The most useful thing possible

Questions about the participant

How long have you been learning about [the topic]?

    [free text, or time frames]

How much do you know about [the topic]?

    [free text, or amounts]

What sorts of formal learning have you completed with respect to [the topic]?

    [free text, or named programs, degrees, etc]

What sorts of informal learning have you experienced with respect to [the topic]?

    [free text, or categories]

To what extent are you officially responsible for helping other people learn about [the topic]?

    It's what I'm supposed to do ◁——-▷ Not at all

To what extent are you unofficially responsible for helping other people learn about [the topic]?

    It's what I always end up doing ◁——-▷ Not at all

To help people learn a complex process

Story-eliciting questions

- If you look back over your history of learning about [the topic], can you think of a time when you crossed a threshold of learning, when your understanding of [the topic] changed in a way that mattered to you? What happened during that time?
- Can you recall a time in your learning about [the topic] when you (or someone else) got past an obstacle? What were you (or they) stuck on, and what happened to get you (or them) unstuck?
- In the course of your learning about [the topic], did anyone ever help you make progress that you could not have made on your own? Or did you ever help someone else make progress they could not have made on their own? What happened?
- What was the hardest part of learning about [the topic] for you (or someone else)? What happened that helped you (or them) get past the hardest part?

Questions about the story

The next four questions work as a group.

Which of these things did the people in this story learn?

[free text, or list of likely things]

How hard were those things to learn?

Easy peasy ◁——-▷ Impossibly hard

How much effort did the people in the story put into learning the things?

None at all ◁——-▷ Massive effort

How much help did they get?

None at all ◁——-▷ All the help they needed

If someone was putting together a learning resource about [the topic], how useful do you think it would be for this story (or one like it) to be included in it?

It would be of no help ◁——-▷ It would be required

If you think about people who are learning about [the topic], who do you think this story would help most?

[free text, or list of groups—learning styles, stages, roles, etc]

What do you think this story has to say about [the topic]?

[free text, or list of likely things]

Which of these [facts, concepts, techniques, etc] about [the topic] do you think this story could help people learn about best?

[list of facts, concepts, techniques, etc]

Questions about the participant

How long have you been learning about [the topic]?

[free text, or list of time periods]

How much do you know about [the topic]?

[free text, or list of proficiency stages, or slider with "nothing" to "expert"]

To what extent have you found learning about [the topic] to be difficult?

Easiest thing I have done ◁——-▷ Hardest thing I have done

> To what extent do you help other people learn about [the topic]?
>
> I help people learn about this all the time ◁——-▷ I never do that

To improve a process or procedure

Story-eliciting questions

- What was the best or worst time you ever [did the process]? What happened during [the process]?
- When you have been [doing the process], did you ever have a feeling that it could, or should, work better than it does? Or that it does work better than it used to? What happened in that moment?
- What's your favorite part of [the process]? Or your least favorite? Can you tell [me/us] about an experience with that part of [the process] that stands out to you?
- Were you ever [doing the process] and saw something happen that made you think, "That should happen more often"? Or did you ever think, "I hope that never happens again"? What was it that happened?

Questions about the story

> What went well in that story?
>
> [free text, or list of things]

> What could have gone better in that story?
>
> [free text, or list of things]

> If you could change one thing about the events of that story, what would it be?
>
> [free text, or list of things]

> What does that story say to you about how [the process] can or should be improved?
>
> [free text, or list of things]

> To what extent do you think that story shows that [the process] needs to be improved?
>
> Not at all ◁——-▷ It shows a total need for improvement

Questions about the participant

> To what extent do you think [the process] needs to be improved?
>
> Not at all ◁——-▷ Absolutely

If you were in charge of improving [the process], what would you do first?

[free text, or list of things]

To what extent are you involved with [the process]?

Not at all ◁——▷ It is what I do

How long have you been involved with [the process]?

[free text, or list of time periods]

How much do you know about [the process]?

[free text, or list of proficiency stages, or slider with "nothing" to "expert"]

Chapter 7

Evaluation and research

These story forms might be useful for academic research projects in social science settings.

To evaluate the impact of a project

Story-eliciting questions

- When you look back over [the project], what do you think was its best or worst moment? What happened in that moment?
- Can you think of anything that happened during [the project] that would have happened differently—or not at all—if [the project had not happened, however you want to word that]? What did happen?
- What moment during [the project] was the most surprising to you? What happened in that moment?

Questions about the story

How do you wish that story had turned out? What would have made it perfect?

[free text, or list of positive outcomes]

If the story had turned out much worse, what would have happened then?

[free text, or list of negative outcomes]

How did [the project] change what happened in the story, compared to what would have happened without it? What was different?

[free text, or list of possible changes]

Why do you think [the project] changed the story in the way it did?

[free text, or list of reasons]

Questions about the participant

To what extent has [the project] affected you and [your life, work, family, whatever the project was supposed to affect]?   It changed nothing ◁——-▷ It changed everything

Has the change been positive or negative?   Completely negative ◁——-▷ Completely positive

Why do you think the project, in general has had the effect it had on you and [your whatever]?   [free text, or list of reasons]

To evaluate the effectiveness of a process or project

Story-eliciting questions

- Looking back over [the project], can you recall a moment when you thought to your-self, "Yes! This is working"? Or did you ever think, "No. This is all wrong." What happened in that moment?
- Was there ever a time when [the project or the process] felt exceptionally smooth or rough to you? What happened that made it feel that way?
- Can you recall a time when you felt proud—or not—to be part of [the project or process]? What happened that made you feel that way? [you could also use excited, thrilled, privileged, etc in place of proud]

Questions about the story

Within the context of this story, how well [or how effectively] did [the project or process] do what it was meant [or designed, built, created] to do?   Horribly ◁——-▷ Perfectly

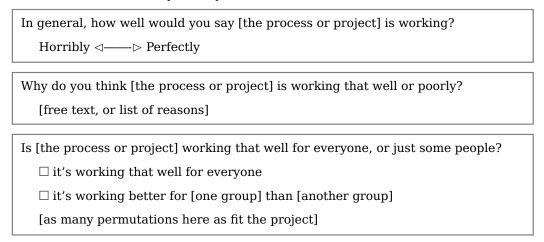| |
|---|
| Why do you think the story turned out the way it did?

    [free text, or list of explanations] |

What would have made this story turn out better?   [free text, or list of positive things]

What would have made the story turn out worse?   [free text, or list of negative things]

Questions about the participant

In general, how well would you say [the process or project] is working?

Horribly ◁——-▷ Perfectly

Why do you think [the process or project] is working that well or poorly?

[free text, or list of reasons]

Is [the process or project] working that well for everyone, or just some people?

☐ it's working that well for everyone

☐ it's working better for [one group] than [another group]

[as many permutations here as fit the project]

To answer a research question on a topic

Story-eliciting questions

• Think back to your most recent experience with [the topic]. What happened to you?
• What was the highest or lowest point of your experience with [the topic]? Can you tell [me/us] what happened?
• When you hear the question, "[the research question]," does a particular experience come to mind for you? Something that happened related to that question? Could you tell [me/us] what happened in that experience?
• Say you are talking to someone, and they ask you, "[the research question]." Say that you look back over your experience with [the topic] and decide to tell them about one particular experience that will show them what [the topic] has been like for you. What experience do you choose to tell them about? And can you tell [me/us] about it? [Because this question is complicated, only use it with involved participants.]

Questions about the story

What does that story say to you about [the topic, or the research question]?

[free text, or list of things]

Do you think other people [in your community, group, family etc] would interpret that story in the same way you did? If not, how would they interpret it?

[free text]

How relevant do you think that story is to the discussion of [the topic or the question]?

It's essential ◁——-▷ It's completely irrelevant

The next two questions work as a pair.

> How could that story have turned out better?
>
> [free text, or list of ways]

> How could it have turned out worse?
>
> [free text, or list of ways]

Questions about the participant

> What is your opinion about [the topic or the question]?
>
> [free text, or list of likely opinions]

> What would you like to see happen with respect to [the topic or the question]?
>
> [free text, or list of things]

> How important is [the topic or the question] to you?
>
> It does not matter ◁——-▷ It could not be more important

> How much does [the topic or the question] affect you personally?
>
> Not at all ◁——-▷ Completely

> To what extent is [the topic or the question] your responsibility?
>
> Not at all ◁——-▷ It is what I do

To gather a wide range of experiences on a topic

Story-eliciting questions

- Did you ever have an experience related to [the topic] that would surprise most people? What was it? Can you tell [me/us] about it?
- Did you ever have an experience related to [the topic] that you find yourself telling people about often? Can you tell [me/us] about it?
- Did anything ever happen to you related to [the topic] that you wish you could tell [someone, everyone in our community, the people in charge, etc] about—but you don't feel like you can? Or maybe you just haven't had the opportunity? If you would like to tell [me/us] about that experience, go ahead and do that.
- When you think about [the topic], what one experience stands out most in your mind? What happened that you remember well?

Questions about the story

Is the sort of thing that happened in this story a common or rare occurrence for you? [Note how this question does not ask "does this happen to you a lot"—because it might seem judgmental or blaming. We want to keep the participant's mind on the *story*, not on themselves.]

This happens every day ◁——-▷ This rarely happens

Why do you think you chose that particular experience to tell [me/us] about?

◇ It says a lot to me about [the topic]

◇ I remember it well

◇ it resonated with me

◇ it's a good memory

◇ I learned a lot from it

◇ it seemed like the right answer to your question

◇ I thought you would like it

◇ it's a funny story

◇ I don't know

◇ other _____

What you think other people [in your community, group, family etc] would say about that story?

[free text, or list of things]

Questions about the participant

In general, how do you feel about [the topic]?

[free text, or list of feelings]

In general, how would you describe your experiences related to [the topic]?

Completely negative ◁——-▷ Entirely positive

How much does [the topic] affect you?

Not at all ◁——-▷ Completely

To what extent is [the topic] your responsibility?

Not at all ◁——-▷ It is what I do

To explore a hypothesis

Story-eliciting questions

- When you hear the statement, "[the hypothesis]," does a particular experience come to mind for you? Something that happened related to that statement? Could you tell [me/us] what happened in that experience?
- Did you ever have an experience related to [the topic] that convinced you that [the hypothesis]—or the opposite, [the alternative hypothesis]? What happened in that experience?
- Did anyone ever try to convince you that [the hypothesis]—or [the alternative hypothesis] by telling you about an experience they had? If it's something you can share, could you tell [me/us] about the experience they had?
- Whether you believe that [the hypothesis] or that [the alternative hypothesis], was there a particular experience that brought you to that belief? Could you tell [me/us] what happened in that experience?
- Can you recall a time then you thought [the alternative hypothesis], but then realized that [the hypothesis]? Or vice versa? Was there a particular experience that changed your mind? What happened in that experience?
- Say you are talking to someone, and they say, "[the hypothesis]." Say that you either agree or disagree with them. And say that you look back over your experience with [the topic] and decide to tell them about one particular experience that will show them what [the topic] has been like for you. What experience do you choose to tell them about? And can you tell [me/us] about it? [Because this question is complicated, only use it with involved participants.]

Questions about the story

The next four questions work as a group.

> What does that story say to you about [the hypothesis]?
>
> > [free text, or list of things]

> Who do you think would agree with your interpretation of the story?
>
> > [free text, or list of groups, roles, etc]

> Who would disagree with your interpretation?
>
> > [free text, or list of groups, roles, etc]

> What would you say to people who disagree with your interpretation of the story?
>
> > [free text]

Who do you think needs to hear that story?

   [free text, or list of groups, roles, etc]

Why do you think you chose that particular experience to tell [me/us] about?

   ◇ It says a lot to me about [the topic]

   ◇ I remember it well

   ◇ it resonated with me

   ◇ it's a good memory

   ◇ I learned a lot from it

   ◇ it seemed like the right answer to your question

   ◇ I thought you would like it

   ◇ it's a funny story

   ◇ I don't know

   ◇ other _____

Questions about the participant

The next six questions work as a group.

What is your opinion about the statement that [the hypothesis]?

   [free text]

When you hear someone say [the hypothesis], how does it make you feel?

   [free text]

When you hear someone say [the hypothesis], what do you wish you could say to them?

   [free text]

What is your opinion about the statement that [the alternative hypothesis]?

   [free text]

When you hear someone say [the alternative hypothesis], how does it make you feel?

   [free text]

When you hear someone say [the alternative hypothesis], what do you wish you could say to them?

    [free text]

In general, how would you describe your experiences related to [the topic]?

    Completely negative ◁——-▷ Entirely positive

How much does [the topic] affect you?

    Not at all ◁——-▷ Completely

To what extent is [the topic] your responsibility?

    Not at all ◁——-▷ It is what I do

Part II

Projects

This part of the book will include (at least) fifty one-or-two-paragraph descriptions of real PNI projects, those I have worked on myself, those I have helped other people carry out, and those other people have given me permission to talk about.