

TIPSHEET

Ethical Storytelling

When telling someone else's story in the presence of unequal power dynamics between the storyteller and the source, **good intentions are not enough.**

On an individual level, storytelling can feel invasive, tokenizing, retraumatizing and extractive.

On a community level, storytelling can perpetuate harmful stereotypes about a group of people, giving credence to your opposition's narratives and reducing people to little more than their pain and trauma.

To avoid these outcomes, employ practices of ethical storytelling.

What is Ethical Storytelling?

Ethical storytelling:

- Is an **ongoing collaborative process**
- **Values** relationship-building and moves at the speed of trust and consent
- **Defers** to the knowledge of the storyteller, incorporating their expertise at the very beginning
- **Sees** people as multifaceted, whole human beings
- **Asks:** what stories are you telling and what power are you using to tell them? How do people want their **own** stories to be told?

Guidelines for Ethical Storytelling

Relationship-building first and always

This could look like:

- **Reevaluating your expertise:** Do you/your organization have the knowledge, skill set, lived experience, credibility, to tell this story? How might you be getting in the way of this person feeling safe?
- **Budgeting** project time for relationship building
- **Connecting** on a personal level first without cameras, microphones, notepads, etc
- **Understanding** and **listening** to what current narratives exist that are damaging to this person's community

Informed and ongoing consent

This could look like:

- **Ensuring** the interviewee understands each step and component of the process
- **Providing** full transparency:
 - What is the purpose?
 - Who is the audience?
 - How will the story be used (on what media platforms)?
 - Possible repercussions for having their name and story out in public
- **Acknowledging** power dynamics and impact of re-traumatization

Options, options, options

This could look like:

- **Providing** a model consent form with options for how, when and why their story is used
- **Considering:** Stories that are ready to be shared vs. ready to be told
- **Recognizing** our multitudes of stories
- **Giving** freedom to say no while interviewing, take a break, to stop. Establishing process for on/off the record

Each individual is an expert of their own story

This could look like:

- **Bringing** the subject into the story creation process at the very beginning
- **Coming** with questions and a story in mind (structure is good!), but treating it as a collaborative process. Be flexible. Follow where the story goes.
- **Deferring** to the story sharer's knowledge and consider allowing line-item veto power. Making sure they are happy with how they are represented!

Consider asset-framing vs. deficit-framing

- **Deficit-framing:** defining people by their problems
- **Asset-framing:** defining people by their aspirations and contributions

Questions to consider:

- Are there scenarios where asset-framing is NOT useful?
- Who is doing the talking and in service of what?
- Who is the audience? How do these communities WANT to be portrayed?
- Focusing on deficits v. putting on a pedestal: two sides of the same coin?