
Personal Interwoven Narratives (PIN): An Oral Storytelling Method for Evaluators

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Background: Personal interwoven narratives (PIN) is an oral storytelling data-collection method designed to meet the specific needs of evaluators while preserving the rich data that storytelling interviews can provide.

Purpose: I introduce the method, how it's been adapted for evaluators, the types of evaluations it benefits most, and considerations for evaluators before incorporating it into an evaluation plan.

Setting: Not applicable.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: Not applicable.

Data Collection and Analysis: Not applicable.

Findings: Not applicable.

Keywords: *oral storytelling; qualitative methods; participant-focused; evaluation.*

Conventional (e.g., structured or semi-structured) interviews and focus groups are often the qualitative methods of choice for evaluators (Office of Data, Analysis, Research & Evaluation Administration on Children, Youth & Families, 2016), successfully clarifying program goals, needs, outcomes, strengths, and areas for improvement in an organized and easy-to-analyze way. On the other hand, the methodical nature of conventional interviews (Patton, 2015) and the communal nature of focus groups (Hollander, 2004) may fall short in some cases, such as when seeking personal stories about sensitive topics or experiences, when working with marginalized individuals whose voices are often not sought out or heard, and when seeking to uncover nuanced connections between shared experiences while also honoring each individual's story. "By encouraging participants to share stories, researchers can attempt to gain insight into the lives of vulnerable populations" (Palacios et al., 2014, p. 348).

Though oral storytelling methods are not typically used in program evaluation (Sharp et al., 2024), my team and I found that using such a method allowed for a deeper dive into program participants' experiences through its person-centered focus, attentive interviewer–"narrator" relationship,¹ and especially its storytelling format. However, my team and I also began to recognize that several adaptations to established oral storytelling techniques (such as oral history) would be required to meet the evaluation's needs. Personal interwoven narratives (PIN; Sharp, 2024)—named as such because the findings they stimulate are both personal (individual stories) and interwoven (shared experiences)—considers these evaluation-specific needs while preserving the rich data that storytelling interviews can provide.

Necessary Adaptations

Fundamentally, the adaptations my team and I made centered around defining the shared experience, protocol development, interview administration, and analysis.

Shared Experiences

The shared experiences oral histories address typically involve historical events ("Oral History," 2026, February 16), such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Holocaust, or 9/11. Evaluators, on the other hand, would likely define the shared

experience they are focusing on as participation in the program, or a program component, being evaluated. That said, while not as globally impactful as a major historical event, participants' program-related experiences, the factors that led them to participate, and potential outcomes, are of great importance for many evaluations.

Protocol Development

Because a primary goal of many evaluations is to answer specific evaluation questions (Yarmey, 2026), an oral historian my team consulted with (J. Wilkerson, personal communication, February 4, 2020) suggested that the protocol for using oral storytelling in evaluation could resemble an oral history interview, with very open-ended prompts that are both *narrative* ("Tell me a story about a time when...") and *reflective* ("How did it feel when...?") to encourage storytelling, while also including targeted follow-up questions to gather the information needed to answer evaluation questions if narrators did not provide it organically. For example, to answer the evaluation question, "What personal barriers do program participants face that could hinder successful graduation?," we might start with an open-ended question like, "Tell me a story about a time you needed personal support this year." If the narrator's response does not provide the specific information needed, a more targeted question such as, "What barriers, if any, have impacted or may impact your academic progress?" could follow. The primary difference, compared to conventional interviews, is that the open-ended questions elicit storytelling, which often provides more information and detail than would be obtained from asking only the more targeted question (Palacios et al., 2014; see Rich Data section for examples). Additionally, I also found that the privacy ensured in a PIN interview, compared to a focus group, helps put narrators at ease and makes them feel heard, which further encourages deeper, more meaningful responses (see Narrator and Interviewer Impact section). Even skilled interviewers would not typically elicit such personal stories using a semi-structured protocol because the questions are not worded in such a way to do so.

Interview Administration

Oral history techniques include embracing silence and tangents, as well as letting the narrator take the

¹ Oral history often uses "narrator" to mean "interviewee" (Oral History Association, n.d.-b).

lead in their own way and on their own time (Oral History Association, n.d.-a). As such, a standard oral history often requires lengthy (and often multiple) interview sessions. With the need to consider timeline, budget, and evaluation questions, evaluators might need to divert from a true oral history process by limiting interview duration and/or frequency and gently steering narrators' stories back to the prompt if silences or tangents become too long.

Interview Analysis

The goal of oral history is to document stories, consider their content in relation to historical events, and make them publicly available for others to learn from (J. Wilkerson, personal communication, October 21, 2024). Though oral historians may attempt to interpret the stories they collect to understand a historical event, there is no formal analytic process for oral history, because

analysis is not the goal. Additionally, there is an inherent incompleteness to the oral history process (Portelli, 2015) that makes analysis essentially impossible.

On the other hand, analysis is a very important step in helping evaluators determine the effectiveness of, inform decisions about, and/or improve a program (Patton, 1987), so evaluators require analysis techniques that can help in drawing evaluative conclusions. Because oral history does not offer an analysis method to draw upon, this is an adaptation my team has struggled with and continue to improve upon.

Adaptations and Benefits of PIN

The adaptations described in the previous section and summarized in Table 1 are the crux of what I have come to call personal interwoven narratives (PIN; Sharp, 2024).

Table 1. Oral Histories vs. PIN

Component	Oral histories	PIN
Shared experience	Historical event	Program or program component
Prompts	Guide/outline of themes with open-ended narrative and reflexive prompts	Protocol of open-ended narrative and reflexive prompts <i>with</i> follow-up questions, when needed
Length/frequency	As long as it takes narrator to share experiences	Considers evaluation questions, budget, and time
Analysis	Considers interview content in relation to historical event	Considers interview content in relation to evaluation questions

Rich Data

"While in-depth interviews tend to be topic- or issue-focused, oral history interviews often cover an extensive part of a participant's life, seeking to uncover processes and link individual experiences with the larger context in which those experiences occur" (Leavy, 2011, p. 10). Using oral storytelling in an evaluation helps create a safe space that encourages a deeper, more personal level of sharing from program participants (Palacios et al., 2014) than conventional interviews typically provide. The following are some examples of experiences that narrators shared in the course of a set of interviews my team and I conducted—experiences that conventional interviews likely would not have elicited. These stories helped me to better understand the barriers participants experienced as they tried to develop a sense of belonging at their

university and complete their undergraduate degree.

I work full time. I was a full-time foster mom.... Full-time student. And then handling every day other business because I have 12 siblings, so they need help.... The biggest challenge, I would have to say, was my mom went to prison, so I had to come home and take care of my little siblings, get custody of them.... I initially took a semester off but now I'm back, trying to finish.

I think I've always had body image issues. I mean, I'm six foot four and I weigh 300 pounds. Always just been this big guy.... It's always just like, well, let me squeeze into the largest size, then I'll just go online and order a larger size anyway.... I have been super thin, too.... Even then, I still felt large. I still feel body dysphoria.

I definitely had a lot to overcome because I had moved because of the pandemic. So, I don't have a stable living situation. I don't have one address that I'm living in. So, going back into person [sic] classes was really difficult because it was a matter of like, "Am I going to stay with my friend? How many times a week do I need to be there? Gas is now going up. Oh, my car broke down."

Narrator and Interviewer Impact

An unanticipated outcome of PIN interviews is the positive impact of participation on the narrators. As they reflected upon their experiences participating in these interviews over the years, they shared, "It was challenging to share these vulnerable moments—a lot of these things that happened are not things that I've shared with many people because of [sic] I was, am scared." (Anonymous, personal communication, October 5, 2024); and "As a researcher, it taught me how to navigate interviews in my own research and create a safe space for participants to share their stories" (Anonymous, personal communication, October 4, 2024).

I remember at the beginning I was super, super scared and even a little bit hesitant to do [the interviews] because I'm like, my personal information, or just talking to someone always scares me, too. But as the years go on, it just gets easier because I would say how safe you make it.... I think I just feel heard." (Anonymous, personal communication, June 7, 2023)

Similarly, conducting the interviews positively impacted the interviewers through a growing sense of connection:

I am used to a conventional interviewer/researcher and interviewee dynamic.... I'm not sure if it was the frequency of the interviews or the intimacy of the topics discussed, but at a certain point the dynamic felt different, and I felt pretty invested in their success and wellbeing. (H. Codd, personal communication, October 7, 2024)

Considerations and Best Practices for Incorporating PIN into an Evaluation

Evaluation Types

Patton (2008) enumerates 79 distinct evaluation approaches. It is evaluators' job to determine which approach (or approaches) are best suited to project and client needs. The choice is often based on several considerations, such as program goals, evaluation questions, participant demographics, and timeline, among others. While some evaluation methods, such as surveys, are useful for most evaluation approaches (Morgan & Harmon, 2001), this is not the case for PIN interviews, because they would add unnecessary time and cost while providing unneeded excess for evaluations that seek concise, straightforward participant response. For such evaluations, surveys or conventional interviews would be more appropriate. On the other hand, because PIN interviews provide a safe space for marginalized or otherwise underheard individuals to share their stories and provide data containing a descriptive recounting of participant experiences, the evaluation approaches most suited this method include those focusing on personal experiences related to culture, identity, inclusivity or social justice (e.g., culturally responsive, diversity focused, inclusive, personalizing, social justice focus; Sharp et al., 2024)

The evaluation I originally used oral storytelling for—and which sparked the idea of PIN—is a perfect example of where this method would be especially appropriate and useful. My team and I approached that evaluation using a mix of several of the approaches listed above, because the program was based in critical race theory (CRT) and the majority of the program's participants came from one or more marginalized groups whose voices are commonly overlooked, especially in STEM environments—female, Latinx, and first-generation college students. Finding a method that would help raise and honor these voices, while also focusing on identity and cultural assets as this CRT-based program promoted, inspired the evaluation team to select oral storytelling as one of our data-collection methods, and it did not disappoint. We found this method to superior to a structured or semi-structured interview or focus group because the open-ended questions in a private, safe setting drew out stories rich in personalization and detail.

Mixed-Methods Evaluation Design

After identifying that PIN would benefit a particular evaluation, the first step in using it, even before protocol development commences, is to design an evaluation plan that incorporates a mixed-methods design. While this is typically good practice to increase rigor and validity (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017) of any evaluation, it is especially important when incorporating PIN, because validity across respondents can be limited when using personal stories to draw conclusions (Lummis, 1988). The personal context that makes PIN so compelling also limits the conclusions that can be drawn from them. By incorporating a quantitative method to complement PIN findings, evaluators can enhance the validity of their findings by controlling for storytelling's inherent limitations. For example, incorporating surveys into the evaluation plan allows for triangulation of findings from both qualitative and quantitative measures, helping to verify some of the trends and inferences observed in narrators' stories while also painting a fuller picture of their experiences than could be obtained from surveys alone.

Methods-Based Training and Consultation

Despite the previous experience in protocol development and conventional interview technique an evaluator might have, my team found that additional training and guidance are required when incorporating oral storytelling. Part of what makes PIN interviews so powerful is their ability to elicit rich, personal storytelling from individuals whose voices are often silenced; however, that can only be accomplished with open-mindedness, empathy, and intersubjectivity. An understanding of how these constructs relate to each step in the process can be attained through training and/or consultation with an oral historian or evaluator proficient in the use of PIN.

Reflexivity

Individual assumptions and biases can impact an evaluator's practice on multiple levels, from how they develop their evaluation plans to how they share their findings, and every step in between. While this is true for any evaluation and is addressed in the American Evaluation Association's Guiding Principle E5 (American Evaluation Association, n.d.), it should be especially emphasized when working with marginalized individuals and/or very personal stories (Henwood, 2008), as will often be the case when using PIN.

Therefore, evaluators incorporating PIN should be reflexive at every step to ensure their assumptions and biases do not influence their design, interactions, analyses or interpretations.

To be reflexive is to be able to examine and react to one's own emotions, motives, and situation (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In social research, this requires the ability to critically recognize one's influencers and one's influence on others. Holland (1999, p. 464) expounds that reflexivity is the ability to take account of oneself and the effects of the personality or presence of the researcher on the investigation. This means being sensitive to "how relations of power operate in the research process" (Kirby et al., 2017, p. 50) and affect your relationship with, and perspective of, the subject. (Robinson & Wilson, 2022, p. 6)

Evaluators can start their reflexive journey during their training (recommended in the previous section) and then continue to keep assumptions and biases in check throughout the process by requesting further consultation for protocol review, completing post-interview field notes, strategizing with other team members, and journaling during the analysis phase.

Time and Cost

Though PIN interviews are often shorter than oral history interviews to respect the narrator's time and adhere to the evaluation budget, ample time is still necessary to give narrators the freedom to tell their stories and interviewers the option to follow up for evaluation-specific clarification. It is up to the evaluator to determine the length and frequency of the interviews, but I urge evaluators to recognize that while more interview time leads to more data to work with, the more interview data there is, the more costs will accrue in terms of interviewer time, transcription, and analysis. Analysis itself is an integral factor in terms of time and cost. Due to their personal and interwoven nature, participants' stories produce more themes and require increased effort to make meaning of potential connections. As such, this process is more nuanced and takes much more time than analyzing conventional interviews. It is possible that if artificial intelligence (AI) becomes more accurate, especially in terms of recognizing emotional nuance, it could provide a significant time- and cost-saving alternative to solely human analysis. Using AI for this purpose, however, would come with ethical considerations, such as participant privacy protections and consent, societal biases inherent in AI modeling, and environmental impact.

Conclusion

Personal interwoven narratives (PIN) is an oral storytelling method specifically designed for evaluators by taking into consideration the types of experiences program participants share, the need for follow-up questioning to ensure evaluation questions can be answered, and the need for analysis that weaves together personal stories to help draw data-based, evaluation-focused conclusions.

While not appropriate for all evaluations, given suitable focus, budget, timeline, and evaluator training, PIN can enhance the evaluation of a culture-rich program by eliciting deep, personal stories from program participants, while also providing answers to essential evaluation questions.

In the future, I hope to advance PIN into a mainstream evaluation method by reducing barriers to evaluators. This includes providing evaluator-specific training materials and workshops as well as a more efficient—but not less effective—analysis process. In this vein, as PIN become more mainstream, other evaluators may develop analysis processes they can improve upon and share.

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