

Michigan Sea Grant Community-Engaged Research Institute 2017

Technique Example: **Heritage narratives** Presented by: **Christine Carmichael, PhD**

Purpose/Goal

- **Heritage narratives** are “broad renditions of a community’s history...the character of its people (both past and present), and its trials and triumphs over time” (Bridger, 1996, p. 355). These stories emerge when people in a community are trying to develop a response to a new challenge. There are often multiple heritage narratives told by different groups in a community, which can constrain land planning practices when proposed actions are in conflict with a community’s dominant heritage narrative.
- By learning of these diverse stories of a community, it is possible to better understand the reasons for current approaches used in environmentally-related initiatives and any conflicts that exist between groups involved in these initiatives.
 - For example, in Detroit, Michigan, residents who declined to have a street tree planted in front of their house by a non-profit organization indicated they had challenges with property upkeep due to the city’s declining population and economy, and little help from the city to care for street trees. Therefore, they wanted more decision-making power about the types of trees planted, and assistance with (or information about) tree maintenance before accepting a tree.

Why are heritage narratives important? “Community members have a sense of place, *shaped by a shared history* and a shared culture derived from continuity of generations” (Salamon, 2007).

Advantages/Strengths

Understanding heritage narratives is helpful when:

- An organization or agency is working with a community or group with whom they have previously had conflicts regarding land use or environmental decision-making.
- Cooperation between groups with diverse histories in an area is needed, and the relationship is new or not yet well-established.

Limitations

- In cases of existing conflict between groups, it may be helpful or necessary to use a trained facilitator to elicit heritage narratives from all involved and guide dialogue about how to build bridges between groups based on this knowledge.
- Where a new relationship is being developed between groups, one group may need to identify “key informants” in the other group or community to serve as a trusted liaison.

Number of people

- It is usually best to identify heritage narratives in one-on-one conversation or in small group dialogue (e.g. 5-10 people). However, you can continue this process with as many people in a community as necessary to understand the full range of relevant narratives. You’ll know you can stop when you are not hearing any new narratives in dialogue.

Amount of Preparation

- It may take time initially to identify who you want to gather heritage narratives from—in essence, who is part of the groups or communities you need to work with? Be sure to hear narratives from at least a few people in each group (e.g. renters and owners, volunteers and board members).
- Once you identify participants, schedule a time to talk with them and be prepared to take detailed notes (or have someone with you who can), or audio-record the interaction to listen to the narratives again later (ideal).
- Alternatively, you can schedule a time to go door-to-door with a leader in a neighborhood, if you want to talk with a variety of residents in an area.

Technique Length

- Usually between 15-20 minutes, can be shorter or longer depending on the situation.

Resources Required

- Notepad to take notes and ideally an audio-recording device (if the participant consents to be audio-recorded).
- An open mind and ability to listen intently to the participant's story. People may shut down and stop talking honestly with you if they get the impression you are not truly interested in understanding their perspective.

Steps in Process

1. Identify participants, or leaders who can introduce you to participants (e.g. at group meetings)
2. Ask a few key questions and take detailed notes or audio-record the interaction. Questions to ask include:
 1. What is special about this community (be as specific as possible in your language—e.g. this neighborhood, this organization)?
 2. What are some of the major challenges you are facing in this community?

Follow-up

- Highlight key themes, phrases, or ideas in your notes taken during the interaction
- If you audio-recorded the interaction, listen to it afterwards and write down key themes, phrases, or ideas (e.g. noteworthy positive or negative experiences with the environment, other groups, or government agencies)

References/Published Materials

Alkon, A. H. (2004). Place, Stories, and Consequences Heritage Narratives and the Control of Erosion on Lake County, California, Vineyards. *Organization and Environment*, 17(2), 145–169.

Bridger, J. C. (1996). Community Imagery and the Built Environment. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 37(3), 353–374.

Salamon, S. (2007). *Newcomers to Old Towns: Suburbanization of the Heartland*. University of Chicago Press.

Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge.