

The Storytelling Café as a Citizen Science Method: generating knowledge, communication and education

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Storytelling Cafés are well established in different fields of action and research: oral history, education, community work, care for elderly people. Within the project “Storytelling about caring cultures at the end of life. Students and Citizen Scientists are doing research in intergenerational and intercultural exchange (SoKuL)” the method will be established as collaborative social science research method within a Citizen Scientists framework. In formulating theses on the contribution of Storytelling Cafés to principles of Citizen Science we argue how this narrative group method can be integrated into the methodological repertoire. Citizen Science takes place in a kind of in-between space where appropriate methods are needed to enable good understanding between citizens and scientists and also to be able to work well together. The Storytelling Café is a particularly suitable method for Citizen Science projects in this respect.

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1. Introduction

In October 2022, the project "Storytelling about caring cultures at the end of life. Students and citizen scientists are doing research in intergenerational and intercultural exchange (SoKuL)" (<https://pfliegewissenschaft.univie.ac.at/erzaehlen-ueber-sorgekulturen/>) started. There, the Storytelling Café is used both as a research method (generation of knowledge) and as an instrument of communicative exchange and reflection (education) in collaboration with Citizen Scientists. Together with students for elderly care of the "Caritas Ausbildungszentrum für Sozialberufe" in Vienna and with students of the bachelor program in applied Nursing Science at the "FH Campus Donaustadt" we are exploring the different cultures of care at the end of life in 12-15 intergenerational and intercultural Storytelling Cafés. The aim of this paper is to introduce the Storytelling Café and to reflect on it against the background of the experiences in the SoKuL project as a Citizen Science method.

2. The Storytelling Café

2.1 From oral history, education and community work to social science research

Biographical storytelling in groups has a tradition in various fields of social practice and also in participatory history research. In Storytelling Cafés, people come together, tell each other stories, and listen to each other on a particular topic. Storytelling Cafés are organized in – for example – adult, aging and political education or community and social work [1]. According to Hartmut Rosa [2], it is a social resonance space that promotes democratic belonging.

In qualitative social science research, group methods are well established, but compared to the narrative interview [3], there is no group method with an explicit claim to make people shift into a narrative mode. Group discussions and focus groups tend to aim to elicit opinions on a particular topic. An exception is the collection of small stories in organizational research [4] and our own research experience in participatory action research in palliative and dementia care [5]. In previous studies, we have incorporated narrative elements into focus groups. In the Sparkling Science project, it is the first time we have used the Storytelling Café as a narrative group research method with the aim of establishing it as a research method.

2.2 A Citizen Science Method

With this article we would like to show why the Storytelling Café is particularly well suited as a method for Citizen Science projects. After the first Storytelling Cafés, which were very well received by the Citizen Scientists, we reflected in the scientific team on what exactly about the method of the Storytelling Café proves to be favourable for Citizen Science research settings. We formulated the result of the method reflection as theses:

- The Storytelling Café creates a framework that makes it possible to **communicate at eye level**. People tell stories and listen, but do not judge or discuss. Through the mode of storytelling, hierarchies can possibly be reduced.
- **Different and shared experiences and perspectives** on a topic become visible and acceptable. Participants can get to know each other. An acceptance of and for difference can emerge, and at the same time commonalities (within the differences)

can become clear. There is no need to agree on a common truth. Experiences of socially marginalized groups can be given a place to be heard and seen.

- **Everyone can tell stories and listen;** this is an everyday practice accessible to Citizen Scientists. However, telling and listening are also part of the scientific repertoire of methods.
- **Facilitating Storytelling Cafés can be learned by Citizen Scientists.** It is important to learn a certain conversational attitude, which is also expressed in the Storytelling Café rules: storytelling is voluntary; all who want to have their say can tell their story; appreciating and not judging; listening and not discussing; no side conversations; what is said remains in the room. It is also important that the questions have an open character. A guideline should be prepared and tried out together with the Citizen Scientists.
- **Facilitating scientists are also welcome to tell stories.** The rule of abstinence applies less than in other empirical methods of social science research. This allows for a different, less hierarchical approach to Citizen Science, and can encourage more in-depth narratives. Keeping a research diary can be helpful, and reflection of the own facilitation is important, because every self-narrative of the facilitator is a special intervention.
- **Storytelling Cafés have an intervention character,** encourage individual reflection and dialogue, and are community-building. Citizen Science projects, in addition to the goal of generating knowledge, are often interested in changing practice. The fact that people come together, exchange ideas in the setting of the Storytelling Café, and get to know each other is already an event that creates change. The intervention can take place at individual or group level.
- The format **Storytelling Café can be implemented in many places** - indoor and outdoor – preferably at consumption free places and can be integrated in different contexts. In the SoKuL project, for example, it takes place in a museum, a library, a nursing home, a school, etc.
- In the Storytelling Café, **people can tell and listen to stories about different topics,** especially about anthropological topics: Virtually all people have experiences at all times and in all places - but in different ways. In the SoKuL project, citizen are invited to tell "Stories about end of life". But the topic can also be "Celebrate festivities", "Neighborhood Stories", "Care Stories", "Childhood Stories", "Birth Stories", etc.

3. Conclusion

Locating our research in the Citizen Science discourse, it can be said that our type of Citizen Science is rooted in the tradition of participatory action and transdisciplinary research, which organizes the research process as a collaborative process of research, education and action [6] [7] [8] between – in our case – citizens, students, professionals and social scientists. The participatory research process involves intervening in social systems as well as producing knowledge and ultimately empowering the co-researchers involved [9]. Sharing personal stories and experiencing resonance in the course of Storytelling Cafés can be fundamental prerequisites for empowerment. Unlike in educational practice, Storytelling Cafés, when used as a social science method, require

the informed consent of the participants. Initial experience shows that this does not diminish the confidence and the willingness to tell stories.

Storytelling Cafés are often used in settings that are "in-between": inter-disciplinary, inter-professional, inter-cultural, inter-generational [1]. Citizen Science also takes place in an in-between space – in between scientists and citizens or students. Appropriate formats are needed to create an understanding between scientists and citizens, and in our view the Storytelling Café is a suitable method.

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