Chapter 25

Qualitative Story Completion: A method with exciting promise

Virginia Braun, Victoria Clark, Nikki Hayfield, Naomi Moller and Irmgard Tischner

Virginia Braun

School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, New Zealand

Email: V.Braun@auckland.ac.nz

Victoria Clarke

Department of Health and Social Sciences, Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY, UK

Email: Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk

Nikki Hayfield

Department of Health and Social Sciences, Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY, UK

Email: Nicki.Hayfield@uwe.ac.uk

Naomi Moller

Department of Psychology, Faculty of Social Sciences, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK.

Email: Naomi.Moller@open.ac.uk

Irmgard Tischner

Department of Health and Social Sciences, Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1QY, UK

Email: Irmgard.Tischner@uwe.ac.uk

Abstract

This chapter introduces the story completion (SC) method of collecting qualitative data, a novel technique that offers exciting potential to the qualitative researcher. SC involves a researcher writing a story 'stem' or 'cue' – or more simply put, the start of a story, usually an opening sentence or two – and asking the participants to complete or continue the story. Originally developed as a form of projective test, the use of SC in qualitative research is relatively new. The authors comprise the *Story Completion Research Group*, a group of researchers that have come together to share their experience of using and further developing the method. This chapter explains what SC offers the qualitative researcher – including choices about the 'best' epistemiological lens and analytic approach for their research question, the potential to collect data about sensitive or taboo topics and to access socially undesirable responses, as well as the possibility of research designs that allow comparisons (for example between male and female respondents). This chapter provides key guidance, such as what constitutes an appropriate research questions, and sampling and design considerations. As a recently-developed method, SC has fewer published research studies than some of the other research methods covered in this volume. For this reason, the chapter aims not only to provide a description of the method and recommendations for how best to use it, but also to explore some of the unresolved theoretical and practical questions about SC as well as to suggest future directions for SC.

Key words: Story-completion; qualitative methods, data collection, innovative

1. Introduction

Story completion (SC) involves a researcher writing a story 'stem' or 'cue' – or more simply put, the start of a story, usually an opening sentence or two – and asking the participants to complete or continue the story. Most forms of qualitative data collection involve the gathering of direct self-reports, so SC offers the qualitative research a radically different approach to data collection, and one that we think holds much potential.

SC originally developed as a form of projective test, for use by psychiatrists and clinical psychologists, to assess the personality and psychopathology of clients (see Rabin, 1981). Projective tests involve asking people to respond to ambiguous stimuli, such as inkblots, as in the famous Rorschach inkblot test (Rorschach et al., 1921/1998). The assumption is that because the respondent cannot know unequivocally what the stimulus 'is', they have to draw on their own understandings to make sense of it, and 'fill in the blanks'. In doing so, as the theory of projective tests goes, the participant reveals things about themselves that they may not be conscious of, or would feel uncomfortable revealing if asked directly about. Projective tests are rooted in psychoanalytic theory (Rabin, 2001), which assumes that large portions of the self are blocked off to consciousness, and thus unavailable to both clients and clinicians through conventional means, such as self-reported accounts. Projective tests are thought to tap into this 'blocked off' information, providing what Murray (1943/1971, p. 1) described as "an x-ray picture of [the] inner self".

Projectives have also been used as a research method, for example, in consumer and business research (e.g., Donoghue, 2000; Soley & Smith, 2008) and developmental psychology (e.g., Bretherton, Oppenheim, Emde and the MacArthur Narrative Working Group, 2003; George & West, 2012). Projectives as a research technique (such as SC) have typically been used in *quantitative* designs, with complex coding systems developed to allow researchers to iron out the variability in individual responses to the projective stimuli, and turn the rich narrative detail into numbers and categories suitable for quantitative analysis.

Because it is assumed that projectives reveal 'hidden truths', those who use projective methods in this way rely on a (post)positivist epistemology, taking an essentialist stance on the person and on the data. Such an approach does not sit well with many qualitative researchers, and in the rest of this chapter an alternative approach to using SC is elaborated, one which is grounded more firmly within a qualitative paradigm.

SC was first used in qualitative research in a 1995 study by feminist psychologists Celia Kitzinger and Debra Powell. They used SC to examine how 116 male and female

undergraduate students made sense of infidelity in the context of a heterosexual relationship. They suggested that it was not necessary to read the stories as (only) revealing the psychological 'truth' of the respondents: "researchers can instead interpret these stories as reflecting contemporary discourses upon which subjects [sic] draw in making sense of experience" (1995, pp. 349-350). This approach to SC is a social constructionist one, rejecting the idea that it is possible to access 'real' or 'true' feelings or thoughts, and assuming instead that realities are discursively constructed (Burr, 2003). Kitzinger and Powell (1995) illustrated the differences between essentialist and constructionist readings of SC data by contrasting two different readings of their data. An essentialist reading would see the data as revealing any gender differences in 'attitudes' to infidelity; a social constructionist reading would make sense of the data as replicating various (gendered) discourses about the meanings of infidelity for men and women.

2. Theoretical Lens

We contend that qualitative SC can be used in both essentialist and constructionist qualitative research, and this theoretical and conceptual flexibility makes the SC method eminently adaptable to a range of research questions and approaches to qualitative research! The aim in this chapter is thus to hand researchers the tools from which to choose which theoretical 'lens' to apply to their data.

How might different theoretical lenses impact on SC research? Epistemology has implications at both design/data collection phases, but most vitally at the analytic/interpretative phase. In essentialist qualitative SC research, the data are assumed to represent participants' real perceptions of a phenomenon. US psychologists Jennifer Livingston and Maria Testa (2000), for example, used qualitative SC within an *experimental* design in which the female participants were given alcohol, a placebo drink or no drink, to explore women's perceptions of their vulnerability to male aggression in a heterosexual dating scenario. The researchers asked women to imagine *themselves* as the female character in their story, and to write in the *first person*; they treated the women's responses as representing their true beliefs about this topic. An example of constructionist SC research can be found in feminist psychologist Hannah Frith's (2013) research on orgasmic 'absence', where she treated SC data as capturing the cultural discourses available to participants. Frith's analysis explored how the stories drew on and reinforced various gendered discourses, including women's responsibility to be sexually attractive to maintain men's sexual interest

and the notion that men's sexual desire is unbridled and easy to satisfy. Contextualist research, which sits somewhere between essentialism and constructionism, and where multiple truths or situated realities are understood to exist within particular contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2013), is also possible using SC. However, at the time of writing, there are no published studies exemplifying this approach.

3. Benefits of SC as a Data Collection Method

Theoretical flexibility is only one benefit that SC offers the qualitative researcher – there are many others:

1) ***SC gives access to a wide range of responses, including socially undesirable ones***: SC offers an alternative to approaches that ask people directly about their views and understandings of a particularly topic, instead asking them to write about the *hypothetical* behavior of *others* (Will et al., 1996) or how they would feel in a *hypothetical* situation. When participants are prompted to write hypothetically, they do not have to take ownership of, or justify, their stories in the way they would if they were being asked directly about the topic. Therefore, they are more likely to 'relax their guard' and engage with the research topic with less reserve. This gives SC the unusual advantage of breaking down the 'social desirability "barrier" of self-report research' (Moore et al., 1997, p. 372).
2) ***SC ideally suits sensitive topics***: SC also offers a particularly accessible way for participants to take part in research, because it does not necessarily require personal experience of the topic. The use of hypothetical scenario story telling also means participants are slightly 'removed' from the topic. This makes SC *especially* useful for exploring sensitive topics - if questioned directly about their *own* experiences, some participants feel uncomfortable, or even unwilling, to discuss such topics. Sensitive topics that have been explored utilising qualitative SC include orgasmic 'absence' (Frith, 2013) and sex offending (Gavin, 2005).
3) ***SC offers robust and easy-to-implement comparative design options***: This feature of SC can be useful to explore differences between different groups of participants or between different versions of the same story and how they are made sense of. Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) ground-breaking study used a comparative design with unfaithful male and female partners in the story stem, and male and female respondents. Critical psychologists Ginny Braun and Victoria Clarke (2013) similarly used two versions of a story to explore people's perceptions of trans-parenting. The story stem described a parent

telling their children that they are uncomfortable living within their assigned gender and want to start the process of 'changing sex'. Roughly half of the participants completed a male parent (Brian) version and half an otherwise identical female parent (Mary) version. Having two versions enabled the researchers to compare the responses both according to the gender of the parent character and the gender of the participant. This was important because mothers and fathers tend to be perceived very differently in the wider culture, and women tend to be more tolerant of gender diversity and nonconformity than men (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

4) ***SC offers scope for methodological innovation***: Qualitative researchers have only recently begun to fully explore the possibilities that SC offers. For example, critical psychologists Nikki Hayfield and Matthew Wood (2014) recently piloted a SC using visual methodologies (Frith et al., 2005) in their research on perceptions of appearance and sexuality. The stem described a dating scenario; once they had completed their stories, participants were directed to the website *Bitstrips* to create a cartoon image of the main character. A preliminary analysis of the images indicated that participants recognized the existence of lesbian and gay appearance norms, in a way which was not necessarily *as* apparent in their written responses. Hence, visual data may provide an anchor for, or 'bring to life', textual responses, and can also be analyzed in their own right. This allows the potential for different understandings of, insights into, and interpretations of the findings (Frith et al., 2005).
5) ***SC is useful for researching social categories****:* The listed advantages of SC as a method – including the ease of implementing comparative designs – means that it fits well with research focused on understanding the operation of social categories such as gender, race/ethnicity or sexuality. It enables researchers to explore any divergences in how different social groups make sense of a scenario, *and* whether participants respond differently to variations in, for example, the story character's gender or sexuality.
6) ***SC methods have the advantage of being economical in terms of time and resources****:* In a context of reduced support for social sciences research it can be an advantage that SC is a thrifty method! Being economical to use also makes SC eminently suited for student research projects. Hard copy stories, for instance, can be handed out to a large group of people and the completed stories returned in 30 minutes or so; online stories can be distributed (and then downloaded) with a few mouse clicks.

4. Suitable Research Topics and Questions in SC Research

The flexibility of SC is one of its key advantages and, accordingly, it can be used to research a broad range of topics. SC is particularly suited to research exploring people's perceptions and understandings and broader social constructions around a topic. However, questions that focus on people's *lived experiences* are not well suited to SC research, because this method does not gather stories about participants' *own* experiences. When developing a research question(s), as in any qualitative project, it is important to ensure it is both focused on a specific topic, but also broad and open-ended – for instance, the research is guided by exploratory 'what' or 'how' type questions. For example, Kitzinger and Powell (1995, p. 345) aimed to "explore young men's and women's representations of "unfaithful" heterosexual relationships", and Frith (2013, p. 312) examined "how people account for and explain orgasmic absence during heterosex". These questions are specific enough to guide the research and design, but open enough so that there is plenty of scope for fully exploring participants' responses. It is also important to ensure that the type of question created 'fits' with the chosen epistemological approach; 'perception' questions tend to be used in essentialist research, whereas 'construction' and 'representation' questions are most often used in constructionist and critical research. Table 1 provides examples of existing SC studies that demonstrate this.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

5. Stem and Study Design in Story Completion Research

The most important design consideration in SC research is the design of the story stem: the 'start' of a story that participants are asked to complete. A careful balance needs to be struck between providing the participant with a *meaningful* story stem, and leaving enough ambiguity for tapping into their assumptions. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest six considerations in story stem design:

1) ***Length of the story stem***: How much of the beginning of the story will be written? There are no hard and fast rules here; it depends on the topic and participant group. If the story concerns something likely to be familiar to participants, less detail is necessary for the scenario to be meaningful to them. For a less familiar or more complex topic, such as one focused on the character's psychology, participants may need more detail to understand the scenario that is the focus of the stem. For instance, critical psychologist Irmgard Tischner's (2014) research on constructions of weight-loss used a slightly longer stem:

'Thomas has decided that he needs to lose weight. Full of enthusiasm, and in order to prevent him from changing his mind, he is telling his friends in the pub about his plans.' Although weight-loss is a familiar topic to most people, the main focus of the research was on social perceptions and interactions around weight-loss *intentions*; this necessitated the story stem including the protagonist's interaction with other people, i.e., him telling his friends about his plans.

2) ***Authentic and engaging scenarios and characters***: Unless the story, its protagonists, and the context resonate with the study participants, it is unlikely they will write a useful story. The stem should engage participants and be easy for them to relate to. Using names and scenarios that sound authentic and believable will help participants imagine or 'see' the characters and the scenario, and thus to write a rich and complex story. These details can also cue (potentially not deliberately) certain cultural norms; for example names may provide cues about ethnicity, class or religion, which may then shape the stories told.
3) ***Amount of detail***: The most difficult design decisions revolve around the issue of detail in the story stem. Too much detail and direction will potentially limit the variation and richness of the data; not enough could mean the participants will not know 'where to take' the story, resulting in data that do not address the research question. Researchers need to design a story stem that stimulates a range of complex and rich stories – otherwise the analysis will not have much to say! To achieve this, give the participants adequate directions by giving them a context or background to the story, and some detail about the characters, and what the topic of the story should be about. At the same time, it is important to avoid overly constraining their responses, by describing the background and characters in too much detail. Participants need to know what their story should be about, but do not give them a suggested plot or ending. Thus, for a study exploring understandings of *motivations* for exercise, for instance, a very open story stem like 'Toby decides to become more physically active… What happens next?' may take the stories in too many, and possibly undesired, directions, and not focus on Toby's motivations. On the other hand, giving participants a particular motivation in the story stem (e.g., 'Toby wants to develop a six-pack to attract a boyfriend…') is likely to result in a lack of diversity in the data. A better stem for this topic could be 'As Toby wipes the sweat off his face and tries to catch his breath, he wonders why he ever thought starting to exercise was a good idea'.

4) ***Use of deliberate ambiguity****:* SC is particularly useful for the exploration of underlying, taken-for-granted assumptions around a topic – for example, the heteronormative assumption that a couple consists of a man and a woman. This can often be achieved by leaving certain elements of the story ambiguous, such as some demographic characteristics of the protagonists (e.g., class, sex, race, sexuality, age). However, if the research question necessitates focusing participants' attention on a particular detail of the story, this should not be left ambiguous.
5) ***First or third person****:* One design consideration concerns the standpoint the researchers want participants to take. Is it important participants step into the shoes of, and empathize with, one particular protagonist? Or is it better if they assume the position of an omniscient narrator? Although to date qualitative SC has involved mostly third person story stems, first person stems are possible (e.g., Livingston & Testa, 2000). These can be useful if it is important for the participants to write from the perspective of a specific character. From a classical projective standpoint, first person SC is assumed to prompt more socially *desirable* responses (Rabin, 1981). Therefore, if the researchers want to gain a *broader* range of stories, including socially undesirable responses, it is recommended to use a third person stem. However, as this approach is still new, the impact of participant perspective is also something that can be explored within research design!
6) ***A comparative design****:* A final design consideration is whether or not to use a comparative design. A comparative design allows exploration and comparison of assumptions made, or perceptions held, about certain social groups or scenarios. If this is a research aim, it is necessary to design versions of the story which reflect the specific differences of interest, and to allocate roughly equal numbers of participants to each of these. It is better not to have too many versions of a story in one study, and to avoid using overly complex designs, because qualitative research is primarily about understanding (potentially complex and dynamic) meaning, rather than compartmentalization – the latter is a specialty of quantitative research designs. Two to six covers the manageable spectrum for comparison for small and medium-sized projects, in terms of both participant recruitment and analysis.

The other main way comparison can be designed for involves different participant groups, and exploring the differences between the stories written by people who are, for

instance, from different genders, sexualities, generations, or cultural or educational backgrounds. This requires the recruitment of sufficient numbers of participants from each demographic category concerned. For example, counseling psychologist Naomi Moller's (2014) research on perceptions of fat therapists included responses from 18-21 year-old undergraduate psychology university students and 16-18 year-old sixth formers. This design made it possible to consider the salience of counselor body weight for the whole group of young people, but also showed how small differences in age and educational experience impacted on the expression of fat stigma. Whereas the stories of both groups clearly reiterated anti-fat cultural narratives, the younger cohort were much more direct in their expression.

6. Completion Instructions for SC

After designing the story stem(s), the researchers need to write completion instructions for participants. In the *participant information sheet*, provide participants with some information about the nature of the task, and what they are expected to do, emphasizing the necessity of writing *a story*. Here is an example from Victoria Clarke's (2014) research on body hair:

> You are invited to complete a story – this means that you read the opening sentences of a story and then write what happens next. There is no right or wrong way to complete the story, and you can be as creative as you like in completing the story! I am interested in the range of different stories that people tell. Don't spend too long thinking about what might happen next – just write about whatever first comes to mind. Because collecting detailed stories is important for my research, you are asked to WRITE A STORY THAT IS AT LEAST 10 LINES/200 WORDS LONG. Some details of the opening sentence of the story are deliberately vague; it's up to you to be creative and 'fill in the blanks'!

Then, ideally just before or after participants are presented with the story stem, provide specific instructions on how they should complete the story. Completion instructions can vary from the broad and open to the more prescriptive and directive. For example, Clarke (2014) instructed participants to simply 'read and complete the following story'. Another common instruction is to ask participants to write 'what happens next'. Nikki Hayfield and Matthew Wood's (2014) research on sexuality and appearance provides an example of a more

prescriptive approach. Because they wanted participants to focus on the events before, during and after the female character's date, they instructed participants to write their story in three sections. Their story varied by character sexuality (bisexual, lesbian and heterosexual) – these are the instructions for the lesbian version:

> Jess is a 21 year old lesbian woman. She has recently met someone, and they have arranged to go on a date.
>
> - Please write about the run-up to the date and how she prepared for it…
> - Please write about the date and how it went…
> - Please write about what happened next…
>
> (Please feel free to write as much as you like about the characters and as far into the future as you like)

Researchers may also want to provide participants with clear instructions on the length of story they wish them to write, or a time-expectation, to help ensure the stories generate rich, useful data. For example, instruct participants to spend a certain amount of time writing their story (e.g., 'please spend at least 10 minutes'), or to write stories of a particular length (e.g., see Clarke's, 2014, example above). Such instructions are particularly important for participant groups who are not necessarily highly motivated, such as individuals who take part in order to access particular benefits associated with participation (e.g., research participation for course credit within universities).

7. Asking Additional Questions in SC Research

Although one of the key features of SC is that it provides an indirect approach, some researchers have combined the use of a story stem with a small number of direct questions (in a way that combines some aspects of vignettes, a related data collection approach; see Gray, Royall and Malson, in press). For example, Naomi Moller's (2014) research on perceptions of fat therapists involved asking participants a direct question about the counsellor featured in the story stem: 'What weight did you think the counsellor was?' The answers to this question allowed Moller to understand how the participants' defined 'fat' – a variable construct – and provided a conceptual anchor for interpreting their stories.

Researchers should also consider whether it is important to ask participants demographic questions beyond the 'standard' questions about age, sex/gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality,

disability and social class (see Braun & Clarke, 2013). Such questions can provide a useful 'baseline' for interpreting and contextualizing stories. For example, in her research on body hair, Victoria Clarke (2014) asked a series of questions about whether participants had currently or previously removed or trimmed body hair in particular areas and their reasons for doing so. Given that for women, but increasingly for men too, body hair removal is a dominant social norm (Braun, Tricklebank & Clarke, 2013; Terry & Braun, 2013), an overview of the participants' own body hair practices provides important information for contextualising the data.

8. Sampling in Story Completion Research

How many participants or stories is the 'right' number? In existing SC research, there is a large variation in sample sizes – from 20 (Walsh & Malson, 2010) to 234 (Whitty, 2005) participants. Sample size depends on a number of factors, including: a) the complexity of the design – more stories generally require more participants to be able to say something meaningful about each version, especially if researchers intend to make comparisons; b) the richness of individual stories – richer stories mean fewer participants (note, however, that it may not be possible to predict in advance how rich the stories will be); and c) the purposes of the research. For a small student project, with a single stem design, and no comparison between different participant groups, a sample size of around 20 – 40 participants is likely to provide data that are rich and detailed enough for a meaningful analysis. The more comparisons made, the bigger the overall sample will need to be. Braun and Clarke (2013) advise recruiting *at least* 10 participants per story stem variation, but to publish the study, journal editors and reviewers may require higher participant numbers than that.

Of course, as with any research, recruiting enough participants can be a challenge, which is why many studies are carried out with a student population. Students, however, are a very specific population, and often not very diverse in terms of demographics. At the same time, students *are* used to discussing and describing ideas in writing, tend to be fairly literate, and thus will not struggle with the task of writing a story (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995); the same cannot be assumed for all other participant groups. Think carefully about the needs and expectations of the study participants – busy professionals, for example, may require very clear but short instructions.

Another sampling consideration is determining how many stories each participant will be asked to complete. When using a comparative design with multiple versions of the story

stem, one option is to ask participants to complete one version, which is what Clarke (2014) did in her body hair research. Another approach is to get participants to complete more, or all, the versions. In psychologist Helen Gavin's (2005) research on the social construction of sex offenders, for instance, each participant was asked to complete *six* different versions of a story stem. She did so to explore how individual participants' narratives surrounding sex offenders varied when presented with different situations. Asking participants to complete more than one stem may reflect a more pragmatic concern to maximize the number of stories in the data-set. For example, Shah-Beckley and Clarke (2015) were able to halve the number of required participants by asking them to complete two versions of a story stem related to therapists and non-therapists' constructions of heterosex.

One concern when asking participants to respond to multiple story stems is that there may be order effects, which could have different impacts. Participants may write their longest story first, and the richness and quality of data may drop off. However, in Shah-Beckley and Clarke's study (2015), the opposite was true, with participants writing longer stories in response to the second stem. Randomizing order can reduce the risk of systematic impact across different stems. A second concern is whether, through more than one stem, the participant gets 'cued in' to what the researcher is interested in, and starts to tell the 'right' story. Whether or not this is a concern still needs to be determined, and whether/how it potentially impacts the research likely depends primarily on the specifics of each study.

9. Data Collection and Ethical Considerations in Story Completion Research

When it comes to actually collecting SC data, the key consideration is whether to conduct the study using 'paper and pen' completion, or electronically either online using (free or subscription) survey software such as *Qualtrics* (www.qualtrics.com) or *SurveyMonkey* (www.surveymonkey.com), or by emailing the SC to participants as an attachment or in the body of an email (**see Chapters 16, 18 & 19 in this volume**). An advantage of hard copy completion is that researchers can hand the SC directly to participants (for example, if researchers recruit on university campuses or at specific events), and, providing they have ethical approval, offer participants a small 'reward' (e.g., a chocolate bar) for returning their story. A downside of hardcopy is that researchers then need to manually type up participants' stories ready for analysis.

The key advantage of *electronic* data collection is that responses require little preparation for analysis – emailed stories will need to be cut and pasted and collated in a

document; online responses can be downloaded into a document almost instantly (**see Chapter 19 in this volume**). Furthermore, participants can complete the study at a time and place that suits them. However, online SC research that requires participants to have Internet access can limit who can take part; it is the least privileged members of society that tend to have limited or no Internet access (Hargittai, 2010), and some groups (such as older participants) *may* be uncomfortable with, or find difficult to use, certain types of technology (Kurniawan, 2008). Finally, another important consideration is achieving a good fit between the mode of data collection and the participant group. Researchers do not have to restrict themselves to one mode – it may be most appropriate to ask some participants to complete the study online and others on hard copy.

9.1 Piloting in SC Research

Given the open-ended and exploratory nature of SC research, piloting the stem and instructions to ensure they elicit relevant and useful data is vital (Braun & Clarke, 2013). We have often made minor (but transformative) amendments to story stems or instructions following piloting. The nature of SC means that piloting is not generally an onerous task. It is recommended that researchers pilot the stem on the equivalent of 10-20% of the intended final sample; the precise number should be determined in relation to the diversity within the participant group: greater diversity = larger pilot sample. Piloting can be approached in one of two ways: 1) by treating early data collection as a pilot, and using participant responses to judge if the stem and instructions have been interpreted in the way(s) researchers intended; 2) by asking participants to both complete the study *and* comment on the clarity of the instructions and the study design, after completion. If researchers make no (or minimal) changes to the stem following piloting, the pilot data can be incorporated into final sample.

9.2 Ethics in SC Research

As a general rule, SC research raises fewer ethical concerns than research that involves direct interaction with participants and asking them about their personal lives; this is particularly the case for online SC studies that make it even easier for participants to be anonymous and reduce risk for both participants and researchers. However, participant comfort with the topic is still an important ethical consideration, particularly for sensitive topics, and standard accepted ethical practice still needs to be adhered to (e.g. American Psychological

Association, 2010; British Psychological Society, 2009). Researchers should also follow the relevant ethical guidance of their institution and/or professional body.

10. Analyzing Story Completion Data

To date, two methods have been used to analyze SC data – thematic analysis (TA) (e.g., Livingston & Testa, 2000; Frith, 2013; Clarke et al., 2014) and discourse analysis (DA) (e.g. Walsh & Malson, 2002). Following Kitzinger and Powell, TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012) is often slightly adapted from its usual use with self-report data. That is, rather than simply identifying patterns across the stories as a whole, researchers have identified patterns in specific elements of the story (both of these can be thought of as a variant of *horizontal* patterning, in the sense that the patterns intersect the stories). For example, SC research on perceptions of relational infidelity has identified patterns in how both the relationship between primary partners, and between the unfaithful partner and the 'other' man/woman, is presented, how infidelity is accounted for, and how the responses to, and consequences of, infidelity are depicted (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Whitty, 2005). This means that SC researchers have identified particular questions they want to ask of the data – either in advance of the analysis, or after data familiarization – and used the techniques of TA to identify patterns in relation to these questions.

As noted above, Kitzinger and Powell (1995) demonstrated that both essentialist and constructionist readings of SC data are possible, and TA has been used to analyse SC data in both essentialist and constructionist ways. Pattern-based DA is also an ideal analytic approach for constructionist approaches to SC (Braun & Clarke, 2013). For example, critical psychologists Eleanor Walsh and Helen Malson (2010) used poststructuralist DA (e.g., Wetherell et al., 2001) to interrogate some of the ways in which their participants made sense of anorexia and bulimia, and constituted the causes of, and recovery from, eating disorders. They explored how the participants constructed 'dieting' as normal and healthy, for instance, and the ways in which recovery from eating disorder was framed in terms of a return to 'normal' dieting rather than (say) a return to unrestricted eating or a lack of concern with body weight.

10.1 Story maps

In addition to identifying *horizontal* patterning in the data, SC researchers have also examined *vertical* patterning – patterns in how stories unfold. One approach very useful for

this type of 'narrative' analysis is Braun and Clarke's (2013) story mapping technique that involves distinguishing patterns in the key elements of a story's progression (**see also Chapter 4 in this volume**). Braun and Clarke provide the example of a study exploring perceptions of a young woman 'coming out' to her parents as non-heterosexual. The story map for this study identified patterns in: (1) the parent's initial reactions to the coming out; (2) the development of the stories; and (3) the ending or resolution of the stories. After an initial expression of shock, the parents' responses to their daughter coming out were categorized as either (broadly) positive or negative; the negative reaction stories either ended positively, negatively or ambiguously, and the positive reaction stories always ended positively (see Figure 1). Depending on the research question and approach, this story mapping technique can be a useful complement to a standard pattern-based analysis (e.g., TA), which helps the analysis to retain a sense of the storied nature of the data. This technique also lightly captures (Western) cultural conventions around story-telling (beginning, middle, end) and the dominance of particular genres (e.g., 'happily ever after', 'triumph over adversity'), and forces the researcher to think about the ways these are part of data production using SC.

One analytic approach that has yet to be used to analyse SC data, but nonetheless seems particularly apt, is narrative analysis (e.g., Riessman, 2007). Narrative techniques could be productively used to identify narratives types and genres, and the structures and styles of particular narrative types, thus extending and developing Braun and Clarke's (2013) story mapping technique.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

10.2 Frequency counts

Researchers who do qualitative research within a qualitative paradigm do not generally recommend the use of frequency counts in the analysis of self-report data, because of the organic and participant-responsive nature of self-report data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, frequency counts *are* often used in the analysis of SC data. For example, in their research on perceptions of infidelity, Kitzinger and Powell (1995) asked how many participants interpreted the female protagonist Claire 'seeing someone else' as Claire being unfaithful – a full 10% rejected the implications of infidelity. When asking such concrete questions of the data (and when participants have been set an identical task), reporting

numbers or percentages rather than using looser words such as 'most' or 'some' to capture patterning in the data is both appropriate and potentially analytically informative.

10.3 Analysis approaches to avoid

Certain analytic approaches are *not* suited to the analysis of SC data, including approaches such as interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009) and forms of narrative analysis focused on understanding participants' lived experiences (Reissman, 2007). Because participants are not asked for their views directly, and are often asked to write stories about things they may have little or no personal experience of, it is unclear whether SC data tell us anything meaningful about participants' lived experience. Without some big interpretative leaps, SC data would need to be combined with another data source to be suitable for use in research focused on lived experience. Grounded theory has similarly not been used to analyze SC data, and the focus on theory generation and the examination of the social processes and factors that shape particular phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006) suggest that it is unlikely to be an appropriate method for analyzing SC data. Finally, approaches centred on the analysis of language practice – such as conversation analysis (e.g., Schegloff, 2007) and discursive psychology (e.g., Wiggins & Potter, 2010) – are not well suited to SC data. These approaches typically focus on 'talk-in-interaction'; the 'what' and 'how' of 'real' talk – both everyday 'real' talk and that produced in institutional contexts such as courtrooms or consulting rooms – which is rather different from written, storied data.

11. Conclusion and Future Directions

It is hoped that this chapter conveys the enthusiasm of a group of committed SC researchers. In our view, SC is a method for producing data that provide an exciting, viable, and very accessible, alternative to self-report methods of data collection. SC allows participants control and creativity, and the resulting data can be fun, rich and complex. SC also offers researchers new ways to generate data that provide compelling insights into their chosen topics. This said, the method is still relatively unknown, with as yet a small but growing body of literature evidencing its use and potential. This leaves some questions still to be explored in future research, such as:

1) ***What is distinct about SC?*** As noted, there are overlaps between SC and vignette research; there are also overlaps between SC and diary research (**see Chapter 23)** –

another often written solicited account. Points of overlap and of difference between these forms of data collection could further be delineated.

2) ***What sample size is best?*** To date, studies have used quite varied sample sizes. Ideal sample sizes, and whether or not a higher N offers more convincing and useful data/results, remain important questions to keep exploring.
3) ***Does SC work well with a wide range of sample populations?*** So far, SC has predominantly been used with UG students, who are educated, literate, and used to putting thought into textual form. How well SC works with different populations thus remains an important question. For instance, does it work well for less educated populations? How might it work in populations with different story-telling traditions? Could it also work effectively as an oral method, such as in clinical contexts, or with children?
4) ***What are the factors that explain why SC does not always work?*** Sometimes, SC data can, for instance, be flat, restricted in scope, or very brief. Some of the potential causes have been discussed, such as over-specifying the stem; another possibility to consider is whether even a hypothetical scenario may prove threatening to participants in some way, thereby restricting the data. For instance, in Shah-Beckley and Clarke's (2015) study, potential concerns about their own professional competence may have been evoked in the respondents, leading to 'flat' data. Are there other consistent aspects to consider in designing effective stems?
5) ***What can and should be done with story 'refusal'?*** Story refusal is when the participant either effectively ignores the stem topic, or offers up a humorous and/or fantastical story – such as accounts of a (hairy) yeti in our hair removal research, or of a monster/therapist eating the storyteller/client in our research on perceptions of fat therapists. These stories exemplify the creative potential that participants have with SC research – and can provide great pleasure to read as a researcher – and in some cases, the discursive or thematic aspects may resonate with the more conventional stories provided (e.g. that it is monstrous to be hairy/fat). But the theory of what such data mean still requires some thought.
6) *Finally,* ***what is the potential of other analytic approaches to SC data?*** What is the cost and the benefit of not focusing on the *storied* aspect of this approach? What potential is there in using narrative analysis to provide quite different insights to those offered by TA and DA?

These questions are important ones for the development of SC, but already, the evidence indicates that SC offers a valuable alternative to existing methods of qualitative data collection. The existence of questions offers researchers the opportunity to explore and innovate. Have fun with it!

Note:

The chapter is a revised version of: Clarke, V., Hayfield, N., Moller, N., & Tischner, I. (2016). Story completion tasks. In V. Clarke & V. Braun (Eds.), 'Resource-lite' qualitative research: Harnessing the potential of textual and virtual methods. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission of the publishers.

References

American Psychological Association (2010). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. Available: http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners. London: Sage.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological (pp. 57-71). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3, 77-101.

Braun, V., Tricklebank, G., & Clarke, V. (2013). 'It shouldn't stick out from your bikini at the beach': Meaning, gender, and the hairy/hairless body. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 37(4), 478-493.

Bretherton, I., Oppenheim, D., Emde, R. N., & the MacArthur Narrative Working Group (2003). The MacArthur Story Stem Battery. In R. N. Emde, D. P. Wolfe, and D. Oppenheim (Eds.), Revealing the inner worlds of young children: The MacArthur Story Stem Battery and parent-child narratives (pp. 381-396). New York: Oxford University Press.

British Psychological Society (2009). Code of ethics and conduct. Leicester: British Psychological Society.

Burr, V. (2003). Social constructionism, 2nd edn. London: Psychology Press.

Charmaz, K. (2006). Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Clarke, V. (2014). Telling tales of the unexpected: Using story completion to explore constructions of non-normative body hair practices. Paper presented at Appearance Matters 6, 1-2 July 2014, Bristol, UK.

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2008). Gender. In D. Fox, I. Prilleltensky & S. Austin (Eds.), Critical psychology: An introduction, 2nd edn (pp. 232-249). London: Sage.

Clarke, V., Braun, V., & Wooles, K. (2015). Thou shalt not covet another man? Exploring constructions of same-sex and different-sex infidelity using story completion. Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 25(2), 153-166.

Donoghue, S. (2000). Projective techniques in consumer research. Journal of Family Ecology and Consumer Sciences, 28, 47-53.

Frith, H. (2013). Accounting for orgasmic absence: Exploring heterosex using the story completion method. Psychology and Sexuality, 4(3), 310-322.

Frith, H., Riley, S., Archer, L., & Gleeson, K. (2005). Editorial. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 2(3), 187-198.

Gavin, H. (2005). The social construction of the child sex offender explored by narrative. The Qualitative Report, 10(3), 395-415.

George, C., & West, M. L. (2012). The Adult Attachment Projective system, attachment theory and assessment in adults. New York: The Guildford Press.

Gray, D., Royall, B., & Malson, H. (in press). Hypothetically Speaking: Using Vignettes as a Stand-Alone Qualitative Method. In V. Braun, V. Clarke & D. Gray (Eds.), Collecting qualitative data: A practical guide to textual, media and virtual techniques. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hargittai, E. (2010). Digital na(t)ives? Variation in Internet skills and uses among members of the 'net generation'. Sociological Inquiry, 80(1), 92-113.

Hayfield, N., & Wood, M. (2014). Exploring sexuality and appearance using story completion and visual methods. Paper presented at Appearance Matters 6, 1-2 July 2014, Bristol, UK.

Holaday, M., Smith, D. A., & Sherry, A. (2000). Sentence completion tests: A review of the literature and results of a survey of members of the Society for Personality Assessment. Journal of Personality Assessment, 74(3), 371-383.

Kidder, L. H., & Fine, M. (1987). Qualitative and quantitative methods: When stories converge. In M. M. Mark & L. Shotland (Eds.), New directions in program evaluation (pp. 57-75). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Kitzinger, C., & Powell, D. (1995). Engendering infidelity: Essentialist and social constructionist readings of a story completion task. Feminism and Psychology, 5(3), 345-372.

Kurniawan, S. (2008). Older people and mobile phones: A multi-method investigation. International Journal of Human-Computer Studies, 66(12), 889-901.

Livingston, J. A., & Testa, M. (2000). Qualitative analysis of women's perceived vulnerability to sexual aggression in a hypothetical dating context. Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 17(ni), 729-741.

Moller, N. (2014). Assumptions about fat counsellors: Findings from a story-completion task. Paper presented at Appearance Matters 6, 1-2 July 2014, Bristol, UK.

Moore, S. M. (1995). Girls' understanding and social constructions of menarche. Journal of Adolescence, 18, 87-104.

Moore, S. M., Gullone, E., & Kostanski, M. (1997). An examination of adolescent risk-taking using a story completion task. Journal of Adolescence, 20, 369-379.

Murray, H. A. (1971). Thematic apperception test manual. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1943).

Nadal, K. L., Skolnik, A., & Wong, Y. (2012.) Interpersonal and systemic microaggressions toward transgender people: Implications for counseling. Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, 6(1), 55-82.

Rabin, A. I. (Ed.) (1981). Assessment with projective techniques. New York: Springer Publishing Company.

Rabin, A. I. (2001). Projective techniques at midcentury: A retrospective review of an introduction to projective techniques by Harold H. Anderson and Gladys L. Anderson. Journal of Personality Assessment, 76(2), 353-367.

Riessman, C. K. (2007). Narrative methods for the human sciences. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rorschach, H., Lemkau, P., & Kronenberg, B. (1921/1998). Psychodiagnostics: A diagnostic test based on perception,10th rev. edn. Verlag, Switzerland: Huber.

Schegloff, E. A. (2007). Sequence organisation in interaction: A primer in conversation analysis. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Shah-Beckley, I., & Clarke, V. (2015). Exploring constructions of sexual refusal in heterosexual relationships: A qualitative story completion study. Manuscript under submission.

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research. London: Sage.

Terry, G., & Braun, V. (2013). To let hair be, or to not let hair be? Gender and body hair removal practices in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Body Image, 10(4), 599-606.

Tischner, I. (2014). Gendered constructions of weight-loss perceptions and motivations. Paper presented at Appearance Matters 6, 1-2 July 2014, Bristol, UK.

Walsh, E., & Malson, H. (2010). Discursive constructions of eating disorders: A story completion task. Feminism and Psychology, 20(4), 529-537.

Wetherell, M., Taylor, S., & Yates, S. (2001). Discourse theory and practice: A reader. London: Sage.

Whitty, M. T. (2005). The realness of cybercheating: Men's and women's representations of unfaithful internet relationships. Social Science Computer Review, 23(1), 57-67.

Wiggins, S., & Potter, J. (2010). Discursive psychology. In C. Willig and W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.), The Sage handbook of qualitative research in psychology (pp. 73-90). London: Sage.

Wilkinson, S. (1999). Focus groups: A feminist method. Psychology of Women Quarterly, 23, 221-244.

Will, V., Eadie, D., & MacAskill, S. (1996). Projective and enabling techniques explored. Marketing Intelligence and Planning, 14, 38-43.

Table 1: Examples of Existing Story Completion Research

Topic area	**Research question / focus**	**Theoretical framework**
Internet infidelity	What are the perceived impacts of cyber-cheating on offline relationships? (Whitty, 2005)	Essentialist (perceptions)
Sexual aggression	How do women perceive their vulnerability to sexual aggression in (heterosexual) dating contexts? (Livingston & Testa, 2000)	
Infidelity	How do women and men represent unfaithful heterosexual relationships? (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995)	Essentialist and constructionist
Sex offending	What cultural narratives do people draw on in stories about child sex offenders? (Gavin, 2005)	Constructionist (discursive constructions)
Eating Disorders	How are 'anorexic' and 'bulimic' young women discursively constructed in stories written by young people who do not self-identify as 'eating disordered'?	

Figure 1: An Example of a Story Map (Braun & Clarke, 2013)