

**Editorial Introduction to the Special Issue: *Using Story Completion Methods in Qualitative Research***

**Story completion: The best\* new method for qualitative data collection you've never even heard of**

Victoria Clarke, Virginia Braun, Hannah Frith and Naomi Moller

**Victoria Clarke**, Department of Health and Social Sciences at the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK.

**Virginia Braun**, School of Psychology, the University of Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand.

**Hannah Frith**, School of Applied Social Sciences, University of Brighton, UK.

**Naomi Moller**, School of Psychology, the Open University, UK.

**Corresponding author:**

Dr Victoria Clarke

Associate Professor in Qualitative and Critical Psychology

Department of Health and Social Sciences

Faculty of Health and Applied Sciences

University of the West of England, Bristol

Frenchay Campus

Coldharbour Lane

Bristol BS16 1QY

UK

Email: [Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk)

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### **About the Authors**

*Victoria Clarke* is an Associate Professor in Qualitative and Critical Psychology in the Department of Health and Social Sciences at the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK. She is co-author (with Virginia Braun) of *Successful qualitative research* (2013, Sage), co-editor (with Virginia Braun and Debra Gray) of *Collecting qualitative data* (2017, Cambridge) and is currently writing a book on thematic analysis with Virginia Braun for Sage. She regularly tweets about thematic analysis and qualitative research: @drvicclarke

*Virginia Braun* is a Professor in the School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Aotearoa/New Zealand. She works around gendered bodies, sex/uality, and health, as well as writing about qualitative research. She is co-author (with Victoria Clarke) of *Successful qualitative research* (2013, Sage), co-editor (with Victoria Clarke and Debra Gray) of *Collecting qualitative data* (2017, Cambridge) and is currently writing a book on thematic analysis with Victoria Clarke for Sage. She tweets qualitative research and other things @ginnybraun

*Hannah Frith* is a Principal Lecturer in the School of Applied Social Sciences, University of Brighton, UK.

*Naomi Moller* is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology at the Open University as well as Research Consultant for the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapist.

During her training as a Counselling Psychologist in the US Naomi was taught how to use projective tests (TAT, Rorschach) with clients and has been interested in the potential of 'imaginative' methods for research and therapy ever since.

**Story completion: The best\* new method for qualitative data collection you've never even heard of**

**Abstract:** What *is* story completion? How come I've never heard of it? Can it be useful for me as a qualitative researcher? A relatively unknown method for qualitative data collection, story completion has a long history of use in psychotherapy *practice* and (quantitative) developmental psychology research. We believe it has untapped, exciting potential as a qualitative technique in and beyond psychology, offering something *quite different* to many of the more popular methods used (e.g. interviews, focus groups). In this paper – an introduction to an exciting *Special Issue* that discusses and demonstrates the potential of story completion – we provide a brief history of the development of story completion as a qualitative technique, and an overview of design, sampling, and data analysis in story completion research. We finish by highlighting potential pitfalls of story completion, alongside discussion of the possibilities it offers, and briefly introduce the empirical papers in the *Special Issue*.

**Key words:** Applied research; comparative design; construction; discourse; projective techniques; story maps; story stem; thematic analysis

Contrary to the title of this paper, we do not actually believe in the idea of a 'best' method, removed from context, design and other considerations. However, in this paper we hope to convince you that qualitative story completion offers an exciting and compelling way of collecting qualitative data.

Like all good stories, ours begins with meeting our story characters:

Davey and Emily have to make a decision about their three 'left over' embryos following successful IVF treatment. One option is to donate them to someone else trying to have a child...

Tom and Lisa have been seeing one another for a while. After having sex one night, Tom realises that Lisa has not had an orgasm...

David has decided to start removing his body hair...

Imagine being presented with sentences like these, and instructions to tell what happens next. How would you write the stories? What would you draw on to perform the task?

Writing a story, following a brief story 'stem' or 'cue' and a set of completion instructions, is the task of story completion, a novel approach within qualitative research. The stems listed are from Naomi Moller and Victoria Clarke's research on embryo donation for family building (Clarke & Moller, 2017), Hannah Frith's research on orgasmic absence in heterosexual (Frith, 2013) and Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's research on 'non-normative' body hair practices (see Jennings, Braun & Clarke, 2018; Clarke & Braun, 2018).

Story completion offers a very *different* approach to data collection than traditional self-report techniques, such as interviews, focus groups, and diaries. Self-report approaches give access to first person accounts of personal experience or perspectives. Story completion involves participants writing stories about *hypothetical* scenarios created by the researcher, through responding to a "stimulus consisting of at least one complete sentence which represents the beginning of a story plot" (Rabin & Zlotogorski, 1981: p.140). Such story data cannot be understood within the familiar framework of self-report, as representing *personal* views or experiences. In this paper, we outline what these story completion data allow us

access to, and why we believe story completion offers something useful for social researchers.

This paper offers an introduction to story completion and a contextualisation for the papers in this *Special Issue* – which is the culmination of around a decade of passionate enthusiasm for story completion as a qualitative technique. We provide a brief history of the development of story completion as a qualitative technique, an overview of key design and sampling issues, and discuss approaches to data analysis in story completion research. Currently, there are only a small number of published qualitative story completion studies, but we draw on these, and our own/our students' ongoing projects, to highlight possibilities and potential pitfalls of story completion. We hope this paper – and the others in the *Special Issue* – will inspire you to use story completion in your own research, to include it in your research methods teaching, and to encourage and support its use in student research.

### **Using and teaching story completion: Locating ourselves**

We have *taught* story completion as a qualitative data collection technique to undergraduate and postgraduate students for several years, including using story completion in undergraduate research methods practicals and laboratories. We have supervised numerous student projects using story completion – it is a popular method for students conducting their own research, particularly undergraduate students (Clarke, Braun & Wooles [2015] and Walsh & Malson [2010] both report on undergraduate student research projects). This popularity led Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke to include story completion in their qualitative textbook (Braun & Clarke, 2013), even though it's a novel technique and textbooks are usually the domain of well-established or 'core' techniques.

More recently, a group of us interested in further exploring story completion – Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke, Nikki Hayfield, Naomi Moller and Irmgard Tischner, as well as various research students including Iduna Shah-Beckley and Matthew Wood – came together as the Story Completion Research Group (SCRG) to develop our understanding of story completion (see Braun et al., 2018; Clarke et al., 2017). Three of the SCRG members (Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke and Naomi Moller) have edited this Special Issue, along with Hannah Frith (a sister story completion enthusiast; see Frith, 2013, 2018). The work of the SCRG can be seen in the five empirical papers themed around appearance and embodiment in this *Special Issue*: on appearance and sexuality (Hayfield & Wood, 2018), body hair practices (Clarke and Braun, 2018; Jennings, Braun & Clarke, 2018); fat therapists (Moller & Tischner, 2018) and weight loss (Tischner, 2018). We chose these papers because of their common focus, but also because they demonstrate a range of issues in story completion design and analysis (see below).

We are not the only ones who have explored story completion, and the *Special Issue* highlights and celebrates the contributions of pioneering qualitative researchers who have previously published papers using story completion. We include an interview with Celia Kitzinger, who first developed story completion as a ‘fully’ qualitative technique (see Kitzinger & Powell, 1995), conducted by Matthew Wood (see Hayfield & Wood, 2018; Wood, Wood & Balaam, 2017). We also include a ‘Spoken Word’ paper, capturing a group dialogue focused on ‘thorny’ issues in story completion research. This features several other researchers who have previously published story completion papers, including Helen Malson (Walsh & Malson, 2010), and Iduna Shah-Beckley, who used story completion in her recently completed doctoral research (Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2017a, 2017b). Finally we are

delighted that the Special Issue includes two brief commentaries from titans of qualitative research – Wendy Stainton-Rogers and Brett Smith.

Do we have all the answers yet? No! We are still ‘playing’ with story completion – and as we explore, our enthusiasm only increases. There is still much to learn about story completion, and we hope we will persuade some of you to join us on the adventure.

### **History and background of story completion**

Projective techniques, by providing ambiguous stimulus material, are supposed to create conditions under which the needs of the perceiver influence what is perceived, and people ascribe their own motivations, feelings and behaviours to other persons in the stimulus material, externalizing their own anxieties, concerns and actions through fantasy responses (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995: p.348).

Story completion was originally developed within the psychoanalytic tradition as a projective technique. Projective techniques were principally clinical assessment tools, the most famous example of which is probably the Rorschach ink blot test (e.g. Rorschach, Lemkau & Kronenberg, 1921/1998). However, projection techniques also include the thematic apperception test (TAT), a story telling task where the stimulus consists of the TAT ‘cards’, a set of rather eerie black-and-white images (Murray, 1943/1971). The thinking behind such tests is that by providing the subject with an ambiguous stimulus, people would project their ‘hidden’ feelings and motivations onto the test, thus revealing something of the contents of their unconscious. The tests provide a way of circumventing two barriers to clinical assessment: 1) barriers of awareness – where the ‘subject’ lacks awareness of



certain feelings and motivations; and 2) barriers of admissibility – where the subject does not feel able to admit to certain feelings when asked directly about them.

In clinical contexts, the focus has been on using narrative detail in response to projectives to ‘get at’ psychological meanings presumed to lie *behind* the content, as a way to explore or diagnose psychological problems or pathologies. Infamously, at a time of pathologisation and criminalisation of homosexuality (Hooker, 1957), the Rorschach was used to ‘diagnose’ homosexuality and lesbianism in patients (e.g. Wheeler, 1949). More recently practitioners typically use a coding and interpretation manual (e.g. Exner, 1974), to investigate whether patient responses about what they see in the inkblots suggests depression or psychosis. Empirical evidence for this approach is strong, though the instrument remains contested (Mihura et al., 2013).

As a *research* tool, story completion has primarily been used in developmental research, specifically in research focused on assessing attachment, a concept originally developed by the psychoanalyst John Bowlby (1969/1982). There is also a small psychoanalytically-informed story completion literature in consumer research (e.g. see Donoghue, 2000; Putthiwani, 2012). In developmental research, story completion has often been used in the form of the doll play story completion test: the researcher tells and acts out the *start* of a story using dolls and asks the child-participant to complete the story, using the dolls (e.g. Bretherton et al., 2003; Smeekens et al., 2010; Steele et al., 2003). Typically, in this approach, researchers develop elaborate coding systems to transform the narrative detail of the stories into numerical data for statistical analysis. In such research, the analytic interest is again on psychological meanings presumed to lie *behind* the stories, not the content of the stories themselves.

One of the first examples of story completion being used as a (to some extent) qualitative research tool was US feminist psychologist Matina Horner's (1972) work on women's 'fear of success,' conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Horner used story completion to explore 'fear of success' in female and male undergraduates. One of the story stems she presented to female participants read: "After first term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her medical school class" (1972, p. 161). The parallel stem for male participants was identical, except it featured a male character: "After first term finals, John finds himself at the top of his medical school class" (p. 161). She coded for the presence and absence of 'fear of success' imagery in the stories. Whereas the overwhelming majority of men showed "strong positive feelings" (p. 162) about the successful male cue, a smaller but still clear majority of women (65%) were "disconcerted, troubled, or confused" (p. 162) by the female success cue. Horner, who was influenced by psychoanalytic thinking and quoted Freud approvingly in her 1972 paper, explained such sex differences in achievement motivation by claiming women and girls are motivated to avoid success, because success is inconsistent, or in conflict, with femininity. Unsurprisingly, Horner's findings and interpretation of her data were controversial – they seemed to blame women, rather than society, for inequality. As we have only been able to identify one subsequent (somewhat) qualitative story completion study published in the next two decades (Lewin, 1985)<sup>1</sup>, we believe this controversial use had a negative impact on perceptions of qualitative story completion (and may continue to do so for some<sup>2</sup>).

US feminist psychologist Miriam Lewin (1985) used story completion, in combination with a questionnaire, to examine 76 undergraduate women's perceptions of what was described as 'unwanted intercourse'. Lewin's novel use of story completion involved a videotaped stimulus cue – it began with a narrator describing the viewing woman "receiving an

unmistakable invitation that you do not feel ready to accept” (p. 186) and continued with what Lewin described as a “rather handsome young man who speaks directly into the camera” pressurising a seemingly reluctant woman into engaging in sexual activity: “if you want to sit over there, I’m coming over there too, and we’re going to carry on. That’s all there is to it” (p. 186). The participants were instructed to write two stories – one in which the woman refused sexual activity and one in which she agreed to such activity. They were instructed to write stories that addressed both the woman and the man’s feelings and what happened right away and in the long run. Using a positivist content/thematic analysis, the stories were coded for positive and negative feelings and the endings were categorised as positive or negative. The stories were broadly interpreted as reflecting the participants’ feelings about ‘unwanted intercourse’, including the different feelings of participants with and without a personal history of being pressurised into having sex.

A decade later, story completion reappeared in feminist research. Australian feminist psychologist Susan Moore (1995) published a study using story completion to explore girls’ understandings of menstruation (she also published a story completion study of adolescent risk taking two years later; Moore, Gullone & Kostanski, 1997). Moore used five different stems as part of a larger mixed-methods questionnaire and interview study. Using a positivist version of thematic analysis, common themes across the stories were identified – deception, embarrassment, anxiety, illness, support from others, and problem solving – and interpreted as revealing something about the girls’ personal attitudes and feelings toward menstruation. Moore’s qualitative treatment of story completion data was consistent with previous story completion, in that she interpreted the data as revealing psychological truths about the story *writers*.

In contrast, British feminist psychologists Celia Kitzinger and Deborah Powell (1995) sought to re-awaken feminist researchers' interest in story completion as a qualitative technique, by offering a *reconceptualisation* of it as a method that can be used to access not just *psychological* meanings, but also *social* discourses. They argued that story completion data could be read through what they identified as an essentialist lens – as revealing psychological *truths* about the story writer – but they could also be read through a social constructionist lens – “researchers can... interpret these stories as reflecting contemporary discourses upon which subjects draw in making sense of experience” (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995: pp.349-350). Within this latter take, stories written by participants can be theorised as the product of particular sociocultural discourses or constructions of the object being researched. In a social constructionist framework, story completion is transformed, becoming a method for examining how particular objects are socially constructed, and the sociocultural discourses available to participants to make sense of a particular scenario. This opens the door to a much wider range of qualitative research using story completion. And yet, story completion remains profoundly under-utilised as a qualitative method.

### **Qualitative story completion research**

Qualitative story completion research still consists of only a handful of studies, mostly conducted by feminist researchers on topics related to gender, sexuality and relationships such as: infidelity (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Schnarre & Adam, 2018; Whitty, 2005); dating a person with physical disabilities (Hunt et al., 2018); sexual refusal (Beres et al., 2018; Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2017a); sexual experimentation (Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2017b) and orgasmic absence (Frith, 2013) in heterosexual relationships; infidelity in same-sex relationships (Clarke, Braun & Wooles, 2015); eating disorders (Walsh & Malson, 2010);

sexual aggression (Livingston & Testa, 2000); child sex offenders (Gavin, 2005); and virtual reality pornography (Wood, Wood & Balaam, 2017). Some researchers have used story completion in what Kitzinger and Powell (1995) would categorise as an essentialist way, to access psychological meanings or truths. Livingstone and Testa's (2000) exploration of women's perceptions of their vulnerability to sexual aggression is an example of this – they used a story completion design where women were asked to imagine *they were* the character in the story stem. Most recent qualitative story completion research, however, has used the method to access sociocultural meanings relating to the topic of interest, often through a constructionist lens. We discuss Kitzinger and Powell's study in more detail, because it has been so influential in subsequent research, including in our use of story completion.

Kitzinger and Powell (1995) used two versions of a *third-person* story stem – where you write a story about someone other than you – to explore representations of infidelity in heterosexual relationships (see Frith, 2018, for a discussion of third-person story stems). They were influenced by the use of story completion as a projective technique and designed an *ambiguous* story stem:

Version A: 'John and Claire have been going out for over a year. Then John realises that Claire is seeing someone else...'

Version B: 'Claire and John have been going out for over a year. Then Claire realises that John is seeing someone else...'

Ambiguity was created through the phrases 'going out' (to describe the cue relationship) and 'seeing someone else' (to *imply* infidelity, but not name it as such), to explore participants' assumptions about these aspects of the stem. The phrase 'going out for over a

year' was understood by all of the participants to imply a sexual relationship between Claire and John; 90 per cent interpreted 'seeing someone else' as infidelity. Most subsequent qualitative story completion studies have adopted the practice of designing a deliberately ambiguous story stem.

Comparison was also designed for, in the stem and the sample. Using two versions of a stem which was identical apart from swapping the names and pronouns of the male and female characters enabled Kitzinger and Powell (1995) to compare participants' descriptions of male and female characters in the same roles – the 'unfaithful' or the 'betrayed' partner. With both women and men in the sample, they could compare how each participant group described the same stimuli (e.g., Claire as the 'unfaithful' partner). Looking at John and Claire's relationship, men tended to depict it as *sexually* focused; women depicted them as loving, trusting and committed *couple*: "only 8 percent of males, compared with 70 percent of females, make any reference to love, trust or honesty in their stories" (p. 354).

This comparative design, and a focus on *gender* comparison, is echoed in much subsequent research, and is perhaps another reason why story completion has been rarely taken up. For some, comparative designs may bear too many echoes of experimental research and are seen as antithetical to qualitative inquiry – we've encountered responses which suggest this in manuscript reviews. However, comparison in qualitative inquiry aims for something very different than comparison in quantitative research – a process of exploring and understanding (potential) difference, rather than measuring (or explaining) it (Ritchie et al., 2013). Moreover, many qualitative researchers would locate (any) found differences in the social – through socialisation or socially accessible meanings – rather than an essentialised- (gender)-difference framework. That is certainly the way we understand and use

comparison in our own story completion work. Further, we would argue that the value of a comparative design is that allows for a more *nuanced* understanding of how a particular phenomenon is socially constructed.

The other aspect of some qualitative story completion research that some qualitative researchers may find challenging is the use of frequency counts (or percentages) when reporting some findings, as noted in Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) quotation above. We do not dismiss these concerns. The *values* that underpin, and the *practices* that define, qualitative research are important considerations. The sorts of claims we make about our data – whether frequency reporting or using some fuzzier category (such as “many” or “most”) – can always be understood as rhetorical acts, as representational claims. We encourage discussion and thought around why such practices as frequency counts or comparison may seem desirable *or undesirable* and bring any decision back to the question of what you want to know, and to be able to say, and why (and to whom). However, instant-dismissal of story completion for such reasons may unnecessarily limit the use of story completion research.

Story completion is a useful tool for accessing meaning-making around a particular topic of interest. This scope does *not* rely on a constructionist lens – this research can coherently be framed as exploring either perceptions and understandings *or* social/discursive constructions of a topic (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Story completion is *particularly* useful for exploring (dominant) assumptions about a topic. Because the topic is addressed indirectly, and because stories stems are deliberately ambiguous and require participants to ‘fill in’ the detail, participants have to draw on personally and socially available sense-making resources to tell a story that ‘makes sense’. They also provide an ideal tool for researching

topics where social norms strongly demarcate socially desirable viewpoints. Because story stems provide participants with few overt cues about socially desirable responses (although they *may* provide some assumed cues; see Braun et al. 2018), and because participants are not asked directly for *their* views, story completion seems to permit access to a range of meanings surrounding a topic, not just socially desirable ones. Participants may feel less *accountable* for how they respond compared to presenting *their own* views (Potter, 1996), and/or interacting face-to-face with the researcher – plausible deniability means any challenge could always be rebutted with ‘it’s just a story’.

The indirectness of non-personal storytelling (compared to telling ‘your’ perspective; see Livingston and Testa, 2000) also makes story completion useful for *sensitive* topics (such as sex offenders [Gavin, 2005] and orgasmic absence [Frith, 2013]). Topics like these, but also less sensitive ones, can be distressing for participants. An ethical researcher needs skill in collecting such data face-to-face, to ensure participant wellbeing. Because story completion sidesteps this, it creates space for students with limited (qualitative) research experience to explore more sensitive topics than they otherwise might. Usefully, story completion generally works well for students, and others inexperienced at face-to-face data collection, where data quality can be significantly impacted by researcher ‘skill’ (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Finally, in fitting with story completion’s emergence from the projectives used in applied (clinical) settings, there appears to be potential value in using story completion for applied research on topics where it would be ethically dubious (due to confidentiality or client vulnerability concerns) or socially difficult to ask clients or practitioners directly for their perceptions or understandings. For example, Moller and Tischner (2018) examined the ways in which body size might impact professional role credibility for therapists. Story completion



allowed the researchers to usefully side-step politeness norms around negative comment on personal appearance to explore the significant social meaning of body weight in counselling, which led to findings which have implications for therapy practitioners of any size. Shah-Beckley and Clarke (2017a, 2017b) similarly used the method to examine therapists' constructions of heterosex and sexual refusal, in research that has implications for both practice and training. The studies suggest the value of the data collection method for other applied psychologists, including health, sport and exercise, occupational and forensic psychology.

### **What are the main design and sampling issues in story completion research?**

The main design issues to be aware of relate to the detail of the stem, the instructions provided on completion (see Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke et al., 2017, for further discussion of these), whether the potential for comparison is *inbuilt*, and sample size and characteristics.

*Basic stem design.* The story stems we presented at the start are deceptively simple. Considerable work goes into the stem, with every word carefully examined for what meanings it may evoke. The names of any characters are part of this. Our stems, in western contexts, used common English-language names, not marked by class or (particularly) by race. Stems tend to be fairly brief. The stem needs to contain enough detail to orient the participant to the focus of the research/story, and ideally engage them, but be open enough that the scope of the story is not obvious, nor foreclosed. Designing in some ambiguity facilitates access to meaning-making, as participants have to interpret the scenario presented (see Braun and Clarke, 2013; Clarke et al., 2017; Frith, 2018).

*To compare or not to compare?* Story completion is one of the few qualitative data collection methods *suited* to comparative research designs, because participants are given an identical stimulus (perhaps with some element changed), and the focus of comparison is on the detail of stories all produced in response to one or more stimuli. Comparison can be *designed for* – for instance with stems that switch one key feature, or sampling different participant groups – but that does not determine a subsequent comparative analysis. For example, in Braun, Clarke and Jennings’s body hair study (see Clarke & Braun, 2018; Jennings et al., 2018), they wanted to explore differences and similarities in the responses of male and female participants to the stories. As it turned out (unpredictability is another exciting feature of story completion) differences between male and female participant responses were not particularly marked or notable. So, there is a certain amount of ‘wait and see’ required for story completion research. However, designing comparison in makes it *potentially* possible to compare the responses of different groups to the same story and/or to explore whether varying a key feature of the story (e.g. character gender or sexuality) produces systematically and substantially different responses. There is much to explore related to the value and use of comparison.

*How many participants, how many completions?* Sample size can be a thorny issue for qualitative research, and there’s little guidance for story completion. The published research reports a wide variation in participant number, from just 20 participants (Gavin, 2005) to over 200 (Beres et al., 2017; Whitty, 2005), and even as many as 1000 responses coded from a dataset of 1723 (Hunt et al., 2018). Studies reporting undergraduate student projects (e.g. Clarke et al., 2015; Walsh & Malson, 2010) typically have fewer completions and still work well. Sample size is to some extent linked to whether the design is comparative and/or involves multiple stems. Braun, Clarke and Jennings used larger samples in their body hair

project (see Clarke & Braun, 2018; Jennings et al., 2018): 205 stories from the UK (each participant completing one stem, with 103 responding to the Jane and 102 to the David stem), and 174 stories from New Zealand (90 responding to the Jane and 84 to the David stem). This size captured diversity and variation in stories, but did not produce an overwhelming dataset. By contrast, Moller and Tischner (2018) had 203 participants who responded to just one stem, which created a rich and varied dataset.

The sample size issue is complicated by the question of whether you count the number of *people* writing stories, number of *completions per stem*, or *total* number of completions. There is currently no consensus regarding the answer to this question. The most common design is for participants to generate just one story: in Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) two-stem project, they had 57 and 59 completions of each stem (116 in total); Whitty's large sample and two-stem design resulted in 127 and 107 completions (234 stories overall); Wood et al.'s (2007) one-stem design had 45 participants/stories. In some designs, participants complete more than one stem: Walsh and Malson (2010) had all 22 participants complete *two* stems (44 stories); Gavin (2005) used a six-stem design, with all participants responding to *all* six stems (producing 120 stories). Overall, the number of completions *per stem* in published studies varies from 13 (Clarke et al., 2015) to 570 (Moore et al., 1997).

*Ensuring you get what you want.* We briefly mention three other important design factors. First, instructions: make sure completion instructions to participants are clear, not overly restrictive, and contain reference to anything you want participants to do or focus on – such as a time or length indication for the task, or the timeframe of the story (e.g. what happens in the next 24 hours). Second, piloting is *vital*. Because story completion is a fixed task, once you start data collection, you can't clarify or change things. So give the task to a small

sample of people to check the stem generates the sort of stories you want to get, and the instructions are clear. Piloting works best if you do it with people like your sample – if there are no problems, you can incorporate the data in your final sample. This brings us to the third issue: your participants. Although we have used students (e.g. Clarke et al., 2015; Frith, 2013), as have many others (Beres et al., 2017; Gavin, 2005; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Lewin, 1985; Schnarre & Adam, 2018; Walsh & Malson, 2010; Whitty, 2005), they are not necessarily the ideal sample. There is an intersection between topic and population of interest (and purpose of research). For instance, getting therapists to write stories in research that wants to *speak to* therapy practice (e.g. Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2017a, 2017b). Writing fluency is another factor to consider. Wood et al. (2017), for instance, targeted “fluent” writers, accessed through online writing forums, for their study of virtual pornography (for further design guidelines, see Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke et al., 2017).

### **How can I analyse story completion data?**

In analysing story completion data qualitatively, researchers tend to do one (or more) of three things: (1) explore horizontal patterning in a broad way – that is, looking *across* the dataset; (2) explore horizontal patterning in a more structured or compartmentalised way (e.g. patterns across particular facets of the stories or in response to particular analytic research questions); and (3) explore *vertical* patterning in how the story unfolds – an approach Braun and Clarke (2013) called ‘story mapping’. Most published studies have used some version of thematic analysis (TA; such as Braun & Clarke [2006] or Boyatzis [1998]) to identify patterned meaning (e.g. Beres et al., 2017; Clarke et al., 2015; Gavin, 2005; Hunt et al., 2018; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Livingston & Testa, 2000; Schnarre & Adam, 2018; Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2017a, 2017b; Whitty, 2005; Wood et al., 2017). Walsh and Malson’s

(2010) discursive methodology offers an exception, although a constructionist version of TA we and others (e.g., Clarke et al., 2015; Frith, 2013; Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2017a, 2017b; Wood et al., 2017) have used is very similar. Frith's (2013; see also Frith, 2018) examination around orgasmic absence in heterosexual illustrates the broadest approach to horizontal patterning. Within a constructionist framework that treated the stories as capturing cultural discourses available to participants, Frith identified three themes: (1) *reciprocity, blame and the orgasmic imperative* captured the construction of orgasm as an *essential* event in heterosexual; (2) *sex work, technique and pursuing the absent orgasm* focused on the 'technical' solutions that were offered – the absence of orgasm was conceptualised a problem to solve through various means; and (3) *honesty and dishonesty in sexual communication* focused on another solution – 'clear communication'. Across these themes, Frith identified that 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.

Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) paper utilised a more structured approach to horizontal pattern identification, reporting patterns in relation to three aspects of the data: depictions of the cue relationship, reasons for infidelity, and responses to infidelity. Clarke and Braun (2018)<sup>3</sup> followed a similar approach in another paper from the (UK) body hair study. After initial engagement with the *Jane* data, which appeared very diverse, we decided to identify themes in relation to three questions, which captured the divergence and patterning with the dataset well, and spoke to key issues in body hair scholarship: 'Why does Jane stop removing her body hair?' 'What kind of woman stops removing her body hair?' and 'What are the *meanings of body hair* for women?' (see Clarke, Hayfield & Moller, 2016).

Examining *vertical* patterning – patterns in *how stories unfold* (see Braun & Clarke, 2013) – remains a novel approach. Braun and Clarke (2013) discussed a story *mapping* technique, which involved distinguishing patterns in the key elements of a story. Figure 1 provides an example of a story map from a student project exploring sense-making around a young woman ‘coming out’ to her parents as non-heterosexual. The story map identified patterns in: (1) the parents’ 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 categorised as either (broadly) positive or negative; the negative reaction stories either ended positively, negatively or ambiguously, and the positive reaction stories always ended positively. Coming out is a *particularly* storied event (Plummer, 1994), so we might expect to see such patterns, but we have also found interesting patterns in how stories unfold for other less culturally-storied objects of study, such as men and body hair removal (see Clarke & Braun, 2018).

*[Insert Figure 1 about here]*

Story mapping retains a sense of the storied nature of the data within the analysis, and so provides a complement to horizontal pattern-based analysis, or a stand-alone framework. The technique also *lightly* captures (western) cultural conventions around story-telling (beginning, middle, end) and the dominance of particular genres (for example, ‘happily ever after’, ‘triumph over adversity’). However, there may be little or no patterning in how a particular set of stories unfold. In Braun, Clarke and Jennings’ body hair study, for instance, the clear vertical patterning around the UK David stories (see Clarke & Braun, 2018), were not evident in the UK Jane stories. As we said before around gendered comparison, sometimes you just have to ‘wait and see’ what the data offer.

One analytic approach that has yet to be used to analyse story completion data, but nonetheless seems particularly apt, is narrative analysis (e.g. Riessman, 1993; 2007; Smith, 2016). We welcome further exploration of narrative approaches for analysing story completion data, as the value of narrative techniques for identifying narrative types, genres and metaphors around our lives is well established (e.g., see Frank, 2004; Plummer, 1994; Smith & Sparkes 2004). A narrative analytic orientation, focusing on structures, styles and/or narrative types could expand well beyond Braun and Clarke's (2013) initial story mapping technique with exciting outcomes.

### **Why use story completion, and some potential pitfalls to watch out for**

Hopefully we've piqued your interest in story completion! We conclude by highlighting some contexts and advantages story completion can offer. We also note potential *pitfalls* to aim to avoid. We believe story completion offers:

- A creative, fun and engaging method, for participants and researcher alike.
- A way to access perceptions or constructions around your object of interest (it's less suited for accessing 'experience').
- A way of accessing participants' *assumptions*, and an indirect way of accessing people's *perspectives*, potentially avoiding the social demands associated with self-report collection.
- A way to circumvent some barriers to self-report, such as a lack of direct experience or knowledge of the topic. This expands the range of possibilities for student (and other) research with student participants (e.g. research using participant pools for participant recruitment).

- A non-intrusive way of researching sensitive and ethically and morally complex topics. It also avoids some of the ethical issues associated with *novice* researchers using face-to-face and self-report methods of data collection to investigate such topics (Braun & Clarke, 2013), and hence suits student projects.
- A useful way to collect data in time and resource limited research (e.g. unfunded or student projects). Data can be collected online using survey software (e.g. *SurveyMonkey*, *BOS* or *Qualtrics*), and (even large) samples can be generated quickly, efficiently and cheaply.
- For students, who typically have been thoroughly inculcated into the assumptions of (post)positivism and quantitative research designs, a bridge between those logics and norms, and the “airy- fairy” (Clarke & Braun, 2013: 121) and seemingly impenetrable, as they often see it, terrain of qualitative research. The possibility of comparative designs, for instance, can feel safe and familiar to those new to qualitative research.

But story completion is not without challenges. The most common ones we’ve identified are:

- The data are less predictable than other conventional (self-report) methods. This makes it trickier to plan in advance how to analyse the data, and some research questions (e.g. based in participant gender comparisons) may need to be revised or discarded and replaced with others more appropriate to the data collected. That said, unpredictable data can be good (and even exciting): unexpected data can reveal new things!
- There can be wide variation in the richness of the stories. Some are long, complicated and highly creative, even involving dialogue between characters; some are short and very ‘thin’; some participants may ‘refuse’ the task by, for example, writing a fantasy



story that has little that is obviously to do with the topic<sup>4</sup>, or by not writing in the form of a story. Occasionally authors report the word count range (and sometimes mean) of the stories they collected – ranges vary from a minimal 3 (Wood et al., 2017) to a far more extensive 1252 words (Wood et al., 2017), with means between 72 (Frith, 2013) and 358 (Clarke et al., 2015) words.

- Data generated can be less ‘transparent’ and accessible, and therefore harder to analyse, including identifying patterns or themes, than self-report data. Consequently, we have found using a more structured approach can be useful for student researchers.

In outlining potential pitfalls, we want to be clear that we do not see the storied nature of story completion data as a problem. However, one criticism we have often heard is that story completion data are not ‘reality’, they are stories, and therefore artificial. What is ‘real’ and what is ‘artificial’ is an ontological question, and where you sit determines how valid this critique is. Essentialist/realist/(post)positivist researchers may be concerned that data may not reflect or predict ‘real-life’ behaviour. By contrast, for social constructionist or critical realist researchers, interested in the sociocultural meanings or discourses people draw on when writing their stories, this critique holds no water. Story completion cannot capture the complexity of the social world – no method can completely – but we believe it provides access to aspects of it, and aspects some other common methods might miss. The most vital aspect for doing good (qualitative) research (which applies *beyond* story completion) is that you have a coherent theory and explanation for what your data represent, what you think the data give you access to.

We end by briefly introducing the empirical papers in the *Special Issue*. The five empirical papers all cover topics related to appearance and embodiment: body hair norms (two

papers from a wider study – Clarke & Braun, 2018; Jennings et al., 2018), dating and appearance (Hayfield and Wood), encountering a fat therapist (Moller & Tischner, 2018), and weight loss motivations (Tischner, 2018). Overall, they showcase much of the range of approaches to story completion research that we have discussed in this paper. This includes different:

- Length and level of detail of story stem – from a very short stem in the Braun, Clarke and Jennings’ body hair study to a slightly longer stem in Tischner’s weight loss motivations study.
- Built-in comparative design elements – from a single stem design in Moller and Tischner to a three-stem design in Hayfield and Wood.
- Modes of data collection – from purely textual in Clarke and Braun, Jennings et al., Moller and Tischner, and Tischner to multimodal, textual *and* visual in Hayfield and Wood.
- Approaches to analysis – from a ‘horizontal’ thematic analysis in Hayfield and Wood, Jennings et al., Moller and Tischner, and Tischner to a ‘vertical’ thematic analysis or story mapping approach in Clarke and Braun.
- Theoretical lenses applied to the data – from a critical realist reading of the data in Moller and Tischner and a constructionist one in Clarke and Braun, Hayfield and Wood, Jennings et al., and Tischner.

So, having briefly introduced you to the best\* new method for qualitative data collection you’ve *now* heard of, we hope to have inspired you to ‘boldly go’ and explore story completion in your own research. Have fun!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although we have searched extensively, we are not claiming our efforts are exhaustive, and there may well be other story completion studies published in the 1970s and 1980s that we have not identified (please contact us if you identify other studies). One of the challenges to identifying such studies is the variety of terms used to identify the method in earlier research. For example, Lewin (1985) did not use the term story completion but instead referred to 'vignette' and 'projective' methods.

<sup>2</sup> One reviewer commented that she was 'still haunted by the memory of Horner's over interpretation of her data'.

<sup>3</sup> Manuscript currently in preparation.

<sup>4</sup> Fantasy stories are not necessarily 'wasted' data and can be pertinent to the topic (see Clarke & Braun, 2018, for an example).

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**Figure 1: An example of a story map – Sarah comes out to her parents as non-heterosexual**

(from Braun & Clarke, 2013)

