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**Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal**

**“Difficulty mentioning the M word”: Perceptions of a woman disclosing negative menopause symptoms in the workplace**

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**Note 1: Context and background on the vignette and story completion methods**

The vignette method is an established technique in organisational and management research, principally used in quantitative studies, in areas such as age and ageism (e.g., Burmeister *et al*., 2018), gender (e.g., Dray *et al.,* 2020), bullying (e.g., Dal Cason *et al.,* 2020), and leadership (e.g., Steinmann *et al.,* 2020), but there are also some examples of its use in qualitative research (e.g., De Alwis *et al.*, 2022). SC is a relatively novel method, originating – as a qualitative method – in psychology, and used principally in feminist research on gender and sexuality until relatively recently, when its use has been promoted by the Story Completion Research Group (see Clarke *et al.*, 2017, 2019; [www.storycompletion.net](http://www.storycompletion.net)) among others.

As Moller *et al.* (2021) outline, SC has a longer history as a projective technique, developed in the 1930s and 1940s for clinical research and assessment with children (Lanksy, 1968). Projective techniques – the most famous of which is the Rorschach inkblot test (Rorschach and Morgenthaler, 1921/1942) – emerged from the psychoanalytic tradition and were based on the assumption that people project their internal motivations and beliefs externally, shaping their perceptions of other people and the world around them (Rabin, 2001). Through providing an ambiguous stimulus – the opening sentence or sentences of a story, with some details deliberately not specified, or an inkblot – projectives are assumed to provide a way of overcoming barriers of awareness (accessing unconscious motivations that the test taker is not consciously aware of) and barriers of admissibility (accessing feelings that the test taker is not able to admit to when asked about directly). The ambiguous nature of the stimulus means that the test taker has to draw on and reveal something of their internal world in order to make sense of it.

As a research tool, SC has principally been used in quantitative child development research, often in the form of doll play SC (the researcher acts out and narrates the start of a story using dolls, and the child completes it) (e.g., Smeekens *et al.*, 2010). The story told by the child is then transformed into numerical data using a manualised coding scheme for the purposes of statistical analysis. Therefore, in quantitative child development SC research the interest is in the psychological meanings presume to lie behind the stories, rather than the narrative detail of the stories themselves.

The first study to open the door – somewhat - to a qualitative SC method was a controversial study by the feminist psychologist Matina Horner (1972) on women’s “fear of (academic) success”. Horner gave university students (binary) gender-matched stems about a female/male student finding themselves at the top of their class and coded the resulting stories for “fear of success imagery”. According to Horner, whereas most male students showed positive feelings about the success stem, around two-thirds of the female students were “disconcerted, troubled, or confused” (p. 162) by the stem. Horner’s use of SC was located within the psychoanalytic tradition and supposedly revealed something of the internal worlds of female students – women are motivated to avoid success because it is in conflict with femininity. Horner’s findings were unsurprisingly challenged, with many studies failing to replicate them (e.g., Levine and Crumrine, 1975), and seemed to have a negative impact on perceptions of the SC as a research tool (Clarke *et al.*, 2019). It was used in only a handful of studies until the mid-1990s when feminist psychologists Celia Kitzinger and Debra Powell (1995) sought to reawaken interest in SC as a qualitative technique and wrench it free of its essentialist, revealing-inner-psychology moorings.

Kitzinger and Powell (1995), in research on representations of infidelity in a heterosexual relationship, argued that narrative SC data was not confined to essentialist inner-psychology interpretations. They could also be interpreted through a social constructionist lens “as reflecting contemporary discourses upon which subjects draw in making sense of experience” (Kitzinger and Powell, 1995, pp.349–350). Within this latter approach, stories written by participants can be theorised as the product of particular sociocultural discourses or constructions of the object of research. This retheorisation opened the door to a much wider range of SC research. Clarke *et al.* (2017) and Moller *et al.* (2021) extended Kitzinger and Powell’s theorisation of interpretative possibilities for SC by adding a third – contextually situated social perceptions – option. As discussed in the main paper, this is the theorisation that informs our use of the SC method.

In a “essential psychological truths” reading of SC data - sometimes used in first person story completions, where the participants are invited to imagine themselves in the role of the protagonist in the story stem/vignette (e.g., Livingston and Testa, 2000) – the assumption is that it is possible to read participant’s individual thoughts, feelings and motivations off their response to the story stem/vignette, and perhaps even to make the interpretive leap that how participants respond to a hypothetical scenario reflects something of how they would respond to a similar real-world situation. In Livingston and Testa’s (2000) research examining women’s perceived vulnerability to sexual aggression in a hypothetical dating scenario, participants were invited to imagine themselves in the role of the female character in a story stem who is attracted to and has previously dated the male character. In the story stem, the male character comes to the female character’s home carrying beer and a pizza having called her from a bar earlier in the evening, when obviously drunk, and invited her out – she declined. Livingston and Testa (2000) reported that although many of the women participants recognised the risk of sexual aggression in this scenario, a majority nonetheless wrote stories in which they invited male character into their home, believing they could employ various strategies to manage the risk of sexual aggression. Thus, in Livingston and Testa’s reading of their SC data, they are assumed to give access to pre-existing psychological phenomena.

In a “social perceptions” reading of story completion data, researchers are exploring how participants make sense of a particular phenomenon within their particular social context. There is an interest in how individual participants perceive and make sense of the world, but these perceptions are assumed to be shaped by participants’ social context and location, so participants’ responses reveal something of the readily available and dominant sense making frameworks within their particular context. For example, in examining young people’s perceptions of “fat counsellors”[[1]](#footnote-1), Moller and Tischner (2019) argued that qualitative SC “offer[ed] the opportunity to tap into dominant social understandings available to, and used by, young people” (p.37). Taking a critical realist approach, they “treat[ed] the stories as arising from shared social meanings, which can influence individual behaviours in the real world” (p.37). They theorised their qualitative SC data as reflecting participants’ assumptions and social understanding of fatness and counselling, but argued that the content of stories cannot give *direct* “access to the actual thoughts, values, or beliefs of the individuals themselves” (p.37). Similarly, this approach did *not* offer a way to make claims about how story writers behave or respond in a real-life counselling session with a fat counsellor.

Finally, a social constructionist reading of SC data, assumes stories reveal social rather than psychological or individual but socially situated meanings. In their study of ‘healthy eating’, for example, McDonald and Braun (2022) did not theorise their data as accessing the experiences, opinions, or inner worlds of the story writers. Rather, their purpose was to examine “how healthy eating was positioned and represented”, and to interrogate “discourses and sense-making around it” (p.3). The *content* of the stories was treated as meaningful in *itself*, rather than as a means to get to ‘truth’ or participant perceptions:

Our analysis does not make material claims about actual people or practice, speculate as to the writers themselves, or align writer demographics to the stories. Rather we focus on the representations in the data, the intersection of different meanings, and consider what these representations might mean in terms of people's sense-making around healthy eating in the wider society (McDonald and Braun, 2022, p.3).

Within this theorisation of SC data, stories access how social phenomena are constructed and made meaningful, rather than the (beliefs, values, etc., of) individual participants themselves.

Although the use of SC has expanded beyond feminist psychology to fields such as health research (e.g., Diniz *et al.*, 2020), education research (e.g., Gravett and Winstone, 2021) and human-computer interaction research (e.g., Troiano *et al.*, 2021), we are not aware of any examples of the use of SC in organisational and management research, and related fields.

One of the unique, and somewhat controversial (Braun *et al.*, 2019), possibilities of SC research is the use of comparative designs – where concrete aspects of the stem (most commonly protagonist gender) are varied to explore how participants’ sense-making around the scenario, shifts, if at all, with such changes. The assumption being that any differences in sense-making are associated with the variation in the stems rather than chance. This was something Horner (1972) introduced through her use of otherwise identical stems about a male/female student finding themselves at the top of their class. Kitzinger and Powell (1995) mirrored Horner’s use of a comparative design in their ground-breaking SC study – using stems in which the gender of the presumed to be “cheating” partner was varied, with a female partner presumed to be cheating and a male partner presumed to be cheating stem, but the stems otherwise identical. Kitzinger and Powell also recruited male and female participants and compared and reported on any differences in their responses to the stems. Thus, their study involved two levels of gender-based comparison – comparing responses to a male and a female presumed to be cheating partner, and comparing the responses of male and female participants. Many subsequent SC studies have involved comparison – either comparing responses to different variations of the stems, and/or comparing the responses of different participant groups. Although gender comparisons are common, more recent research has involved other types of comparisons including comparing responses to working-class and middle-class protagonists (e.g., Diniz *et al.*, 2020) and comparing the responses of therapists and those without therapeutic training (e.g., Shah-Beckley *et al.*, 2020).

**Note 2: Vignette-story completion and completion instructions**

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| --- |
| Below is a short story involving one main character. Please read this story and then answer the questions that follow. The questions focus on how you think the character is feeling, how you think others may perceive the character, how you think the character should deal with the situation and how the situation should develop. There is no right or wrong way to answer the questions! Don’t spend too long thinking about your answers – just write about whatever first comes to mind. The story provides you with some level of detail but I'm expecting you to ‘fill in the blanks’ and answer each question as best you can based on the information provided and your own thoughts and feelings about the main character, how they should behave and how the situation should develop.  *Julie is fifty-two years old and has been working in her current job for twelve years. For the last few months Julie has been feeling overwhelmed, most nights she struggles to sleep and at work she struggles to concentrate – her brain feels like it’s in a permanent fog. Julie feels anxious most of the time and no longer feels like herself. Julie didn’t used to be someone that struggled to get her work done but recently she has been working extra hours to try and keep up. Yesterday Julie had an appointment with her doctor who confirmed that these are all common symptoms of menopause but couldn’t say how long they might last. After the appointment Julie couldn’t help but wonder what the future of her work might look like.*  Please answer the following questions, providing as much detail as possible:  1. Please describe how you imagine Julie.  2. How do you think Julie is feeling about managing work and her menopause symptoms?  3. How do you think Julie’s work colleagues might perceive her behaviour at work?  4. How do you think Julie’s manager might perceive her behaviour at work?  5. Should Julie tell her manager about her menopause symptoms and how they are impacting her at work? Please explain your answer.  6. What do you imagine will happen to Julie in the next two months?  7. What do you imagine will have happened to Julie in a year from now?  8. Is there anything else you would like to add?  Now I would like you to write a story about the main character from the first part of this study. You will be presented with a story opening to read and you then must decide what happens next. Feel free to be creative – there is no right or wrong way to do this and I am interested in all the stories that are written. Please don’t spend too much time preparing and thinking about details, your story can be rough and ready, and I am not interested in perfect spelling or grammar! It is important however that I get some detail in your stories, so I ask you to please write at least 300 words (to provide context, the instructions in this paragraph are roughly 150 words). Of course, if you want to write more, please do so – be as expansive as you like and as creative as you choose!  [Participants were presented with one of the followingstory stems at random]  *Julie decides that she needs to tell her manager that she is menopausal and explain the impact it is having on her work. Mark, her manager, is in the office today so she meets with him to discuss….*  *Julie decides that she needs to tell her manager that she is menopausal and explain the impact it is having on her work. Ruth, her manager, is in the office today so she meets with her to discuss….* |

**Note 3: Researcher reflexivity**

We are a group of white, middle-class, cisgender women, three of whom identify as heterosexual and currently nondisabled and one of whom identifies as queer and disabled. We are each in slightly different places in respect of menopause.

Two of us have not yet experienced it but have close friends and family who are experiencing perimenopause and menopause symptoms and recognise that, at some point in the future, we will experience this too. We also recognise that there are genetic associations with the age of menopause (Louwers and Vissa, 2021; Bae *et al.*, 2019) which, for one of us, means that we are only a few years away from the age at which our mum started experiencing severe perimenopause symptoms.

One of us is currently experiencing menopause symptoms but, having spent 7 years or so researching menopause at work, including numerous one-to-one conversations and interviews with menopausal women, recognises these symptoms as very minor compared to other women.

Finally, one of us is postmenopausal and taking a relatively high dose of HRT to reduce the health risks associated with having premature ovarian insufficiency and Multiple Sclerosis (MS) – as people with MS tend to have lower levels of hormones. This specialist menopause care and use of HRT means that symptoms associated with menopause have not been experienced.

Collectively, our backgrounds can be summarised as follows;

* a social scientist and, to some extent, activist in the field, who is keen to promote recognition and change for women at work,
* a work psychologist interested in wellbeing issues and acutely aware from practice and research of the avoidance of menopause in workplaces and the invisible nature of women and ‘their issues’,
* a feminist psychologist with a long-standing interest in gender and women’s lived experiences, and
* a recent occupational psychology graduate with an interest in gender in the workplace and qualitative research methods.

We recognise that our positionings shape our worldview, how we view others and how we engage with the research. The range of our positionings and menopause experiences coupled with the fact that menopause experience was not a requirement to participate in this research, means it is reasonable to assume that some participants may occupy similar social and situational positions to one or some of us, whilst others will not. Therefore, in respect of both menopause and our participants, we recognise ourselves as a group of Insider-Outsider researchers, individually situated somewhere across the spectrum of both our participants and menopause experience (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

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1. Moller and Tischner (2019) take a fat studies perspective in their paper and use the term fat as a neutral descriptor of body shape. Fat studies explicitly rejects mainstream understandings of fat as a stigmatising term and also morally loaded terminology (e.g., “overweight”) and euphemistic terminology around body shape, both of which they argue ultimately stigmatises fat bodies. In describing their work, we follow their usage of the term fat as a neutral descriptor. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)