Chapter 3

Tell Me a Story…: Story Completion Methods

Victoria Clarke, Nikki Hayfield, Naomi Moller, Irmgard Tischner and the Story Completion Research Group

Overview

This chapter introduces the story completion (SC) method of collecting qualitative data, a novel technique that offers intriguing potential to the qualitative researcher. Since the method is new to qualitative research, it has fewer published research studies than some of the other methods covered in this book. 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. These questions have been identified by the chapter authors, who comprise the Story Completion Research Group. We are a group of researchers who have come together to share our experience of using and further developing the method (see Box 3.1). Our view is that SC has the potential to 'reach the parts that other methods cannot reach' (Pope & Mays, 1995); it therefore has advantages over and above being enticingly resource-lite in terms of data collection, although that in itself is a sizeable benefit.

[Insert Box 3.1 about here]

Introduction to the Story Completion Technique

SC originally developed as a form of projective test, for use by psychiatrists and clinical psychologists (and other therapeutic practitioners), 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, Lemkau and Kronenberg, 1921/1998). The assumption is that because the respondent cannot know unequivocally what the stimulus 'is', they have to draw on their own understandings (personality, needs, life experiences) 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-report. The psychodynamically-informed promise of projective tests taps into this 'blocked off' information, providing what Murray (1943/1971: 1) compares to 'an x-ray picture of [the] inner self'.

The key projective method of interest for the current chapter is the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), the most famous – but not the first (Morgan, 2002) – projective test based on SC (Murray, 1943/1971). The TAT involves showing a client a series of evocative but ambiguous images and asking them to 'to make up a story' for each picture presented. Although there are scoring methods available, the typical approach to the TAT in therapeutic settings is for the administrator to use their clinical judgement to interpret what the stories reveal about their clients.

Projective tests are used predominantly in clinical settings to provide insight into individual clients, rather than as an empirical method for research data collection. In other settings, however, projectives have also been used as a research method – for example, in consumer and business research (e.g., Donoghue, 2000; Soley and Smith,

2008) and developmental psychology (e.g., Bretherton, Oppenheim, Emde and the MacArthur Narrative Working Group, 2003; Bretherton, Ridgewa and Cassidy, 1990; George and West, 2012). Projectives are typically used in *quantitative* designs – complex coding systems have been developed that 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 (e.g., Exner, 2002, for the Rorschach Inkblot Test). It is difficult not to regret the loss of valuable, in-depth information that taking a quantitative approach necessitates.

As highlighted, projective tests make the assumption that hidden truths are revealed about the test takers: 'indeed it is often because projective methods are supposed to be *better* at getting at what people "really" think, that they are recommended' (Kitzinger and Powell, 1995: 349). For some, this is what underpins SC as a method, as it is assumed that there is *a* truth that can be *discovered* through the research process. Therefore, those who use projective methods such as SC in this way rely on a (post-)positivist epistemology, taking an essentialist stance on the person and on the data. Such an approach doesn't sit well with many qualitative researchers, and we elaborate on an alternative approach to using SC in the rest of the chapter. First suggested in a 1995 study by two feminist psychologists (Kitzinger and Powell, 1995), this approach situates SC within a *qualitative* framework (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Celia Kitzinger and Debra Powell (1995) used SC to examine how 116 undergraduate students made sense of infidelity in the context of a heterosexual relationship. In SC research, the (ambiguous) stimulus the participant has to respond to is the opening lines to a story (the 'story stem'), which they are instructed to complete. Kitzinger and Powell used a comparative design to explore differences in responses when the unfaithful

person was a man versus a woman. The ‘unfaithful male partner’ version of the story stem read: ‘John and Claire have been going out for over a year. Then Claire realises that John is seeing someone else’ (p. 352). In the ‘unfaithful female partner’ version, the names in the second sentence were swapped.

Equal numbers of participants responded to each version of story stem. The researchers also made sure that roughly equal numbers of male and female participants completed each version, to allow them to explore differences in how the male and female participants made sense of the scenarios. In contrast to existing frameworks, the authors 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 draw in making sense of experience’ (Kitzinger and Powell, 1995: 349-350). This approach to SC is a social constructionist one that rejects the idea that it is possible to access ‘real’ or ‘true’ feelings or thoughts, and assumes instead that realities are discursively constructed (Burr, 2003).

Kitzinger and Powell (1995) illustrated the differences between the two approaches by contrasting an essentialist reading of their data, as revealing gender differences in ‘attitudes’ to infidelity, with a social constructionist one, in which the data were read as replicating various discourses about the meanings of infidelity for men and women. In this context, male participants’ propensity to write more about sexual than emotional infidelity did not reveal ‘young men’s preoccupation with sex’ (p. 350) but rather said something about their greater likelihood of being exposed to pornographic narratives of heterosexual sex than romantic fiction. One of the aims in the current chapter is similarly to hand researchers the choice of which ‘lens’ to apply to their data, something that

makes the SC method eminently adaptable to a range of research questions and approaches to qualitative research.

What Does Story Completion Offer the Qualitative Researcher?

In common with all of the techniques and approaches discussed in this book, SC methods have the advantage of being less demanding of time and resources than established face-to-face interactive methods, such as interviews and focus groups. 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.

The advantages of SC are not limited to being resource-lite, however. We now outline some of the unique features that SC has to offer.

1) *SC gives access to a wide range of responses, including socially undesirable ones*: Much qualitative research is based on self-report data – often generated by interviews and focus groups – in which small numbers of participants are asked to provide their experiences or understandings of the topic of concern (Braun and Clarke, 2013). SC offers an alternative approach to exploring participants' perceptions or understandings by asking about the *hypothetical* behaviour of *others* (Will, Eadie and MacAskill, 1996; also see Chapter 4, on vignette research). When participants are prompted to write hypothetically, and in the third person, 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, Gullone and Kostanski, 1997: 372). Traditionally, this has posed a problem for essentialist research, which has sought to tap into participants' 'real' views or perceptions: participants not responding truthfully creates a validity concern for such research. (It's important to note that not *all* SC researchers ask participants to write in the third person; an example of a first person SC is discussed below.)

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 (also see Chapter 4, on vignette research). 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 SC include orgasmic 'absence' (Frith, 2013) and sex offending (Gavin, 2005).

3) *SC gives participants control and allows for creativity*: Many qualitative researchers value methods – like focus groups – that are more participant-led and 'hand back' some of the control of the research to the participants (Wilkinson, 1999). SC is arguably a method that affords participants more control *and* creativity than other methods. The ambiguity of some story stems, for instance (see design section), means that participants have lots of scope to choose the direction and style of their story. They are the sole authority of what and how they write.

4) *SC research is theoretically flexible*: As noted above, qualitative SC can be used in both essentialist and constructionist qualitative research. In essentialist 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 to explore women's perceptions of their vulnerability to male aggression in a heterosexual dating scenario. The participants completed the story stem under different experimental conditions (one group was given alcohol to drink before completing the story, another a placebo, and the third, was not given a drink). The participants were presented with a first story stem with a male character, Mark. They were told that 'you think he's really good looking' (p. 741); Mark later phones sounding drunk and then 'shows up at your door' (p. 741). Thus 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 beliefs about this topic.

Third person SC has also been interpreted through an essentialist lens. Psychologist Susan Moore (1995), for instance, explored girls' beliefs about menarche by asking Year Six (eleven year old) Australian girls to each complete five different menstruation story stems.

The second way in which SC data have been interpreted is through the identification of discourses, tropes, discursive repertoires, or constructions, consistent with a social constructionist epistemology (Burr, 2003), as used by Kitzinger & Powell (1995), described above. Another example is feminist psychologist Hannah Frith's 2013) constructionist research on orgasmic 'absence', which treated SC data as capturing the cultural discourses available to participants. She used two versions of a story stem, featuring a heterosexual couple – Lisa and Tom. In one version, Tom realises Lisa has not had an orgasm; in the other version, it is Lisa who realises Tom has not had an orgasm. Frith identified three themes in the data these stems

generated. The 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 and Clarke, 2013), is also possible using SC. However, to date there are no published studies exemplifying this approach.

5) *SC offers robust and easy-to-implement comparative design options*: This feature (which also applies to vignettes, see Chapter 4) of SC can be useful to explore differences between groups of participants or between versions of the same story and how they are made sense of. As outlined above, Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) ground breaking study used a comparative design, as has most subsequent qualitative SC research. For example, critical psychologists Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2013) 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 and Clarke, 2013).

6) *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, Riley, Archer and Gleeson, 2005) in their research on perceptions of appearance and sexuality (see 'steps to using SC' below). 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 recognised the existence of lesbian and gay appearance norms, 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 analysed in their own right. This allows the potential for different understandings of, insights into, and interpretations of the findings (Frith et al., 2005).
7) *SC is useful for researching social categories:* These 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. We document examples of our and others' gender and sexuality research throughout the chapter to illustrate this point.

What Research Questions Suit Story Completion?

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, understandings and social constructions. However, questions that focus on people's *lived experiences* are not well suited to SC research, because you're not gathering stories of *their* experiences (see 'methods of analysis' below). When developing your research question(s), as in any qualitative project, you will need to ensure it is both focused on a specific topic, but also broad and open-ended (typically asking exploratory 'what' or 'how' questions). For example, Kitzinger and Powell (1995) aimed to 'explore young men's and women's representations of "unfaithful" heterosexual relationships' (p. 345), and Frith (2013: 312) examined 'how people account for and explain orgasmic absence during heterosex'. These question 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 you create 'fits' with your 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 3.1 provides examples of existing SC studies that demonstrate this.

[Insert Table 3.1 about here]

Design, Sampling and Ethical Issues

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 (or 'perceptions' or 'psychological projections,' in essentialist research). Braun and Clarke (2013) discussed five considerations in story stem design:

1) *Length of the story stem*: How much of the beginning of the story will you write? There are no hard and fast rules here; it depends on your topic and participant group. If the story concerns something likely to be familiar to your participants, less detail is necessary for the scenario to be meaningful to them. For example, in Victoria Clarke's (2014) research on young people's constructions of non-normative body hair practices, it was safe to assume the participants had knowledge of the topic, so a very short stem was used (this is the female version): 'Jane has decided to stop removing her body hair…' For a less familiar or more complex topic, such as one focused on the character's psychology, your 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 your participants, it is unlikely they will write a useful story. Your stem should engage your participants and be easy for them to relate to. Using names and scenarios that sound authentic and believable will help your participants imagine or 'see' the characters and the scenario, and thus to write a rich and complex story.

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 your research question. You need to design a story stem that stimulates a range of complex and rich stories. To achieve this, give the participants adequate directions by giving them a context or background to your story, and some detail about the characters, what the topic of the story should be about (and what you are actually asking participants to do, which is discussed below). At the same time you also want 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 you don't want to give them the plot or ending. So if you want them to write about *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…') could result in a lack of diversity in your data, as participants follow your lead and don't describe the range of understood motivations to take up exercise (a further example is given under the heading 'what can go wrong', below).

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 your story ambiguous, such as some

demographic characteristics of your protagonists (e.g., class, sex, race, sexuality, age). However, if your research question necessitates focusing participants' attention on a particular detail of the story, this shouldn't be left ambiguous. For example, Victoria Clarke, Virginia Braun and Kate Wooles' (2014) study comparing constructions of same-sex and different-sex infidelity in the context of a heterosexual relationship had to specify the gender of the characters in the story stem.

5) *First or third person:* The final design consideration concerns the standpoint you want your participants to take. Do you want them to step into the shoes of, and empathise with, one particular protagonist, or 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 and 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 you want to gain a *broader* range of stories, including socially undesirable responses, we recommend using a third person stem.

6) *Completion instructions:* Think carefully about the completion instructions provided to participants (see 'steps to using story completion' also). Is it necessary that they write about a particular aspect of the scenario? Do you want to know about how the story develops (in the future)? Or the 'back story' to the scenario? For instance, if it's particularly important that your participants provide a description of the characters, you need to include this in your completion instructions. For example, the stem on weight-loss intentions discussed above (Tischner, 2014) was followed by the

instructions: ‘Please complete and expand on this story by describing Thomas to us, and telling us how the story unfolds: what is Thomas saying to his friends about his reasons and motivations, and how do they react?’

So how many participants or stories should you aim for? In existing SC research, there is a large variation in sample sizes – from 20 (Walsh and Malson, 2010) to 234 (Whitty, 2005) participants. Sample size depends on a number of factors, including: a) the complexity of your design – more stories generally require more participants to be able to say something meaningful about each version, especially if you intend to make comparisons; b) the richness of individual stories – richer stories mean fewer participants (note however than you may not be able to predict in advance how rich the stories will be); and c) the purposes of your research. For a small student project, with a one stem design, and no comparison between different participant groups, around 20 – 40 participants is likely to provide you with data that are rich and detailed enough for a meaningful analysis. The more comparisons you make, the bigger your overall sample will need to be. Braun and Clarke (2013) advise recruiting *at least* 10 participants per story stem variation, but should you aim to publish your report, you may find that journal editors and reviewers 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 and Powell, 1995); the same cannot be assumed for all other participant groups. Think carefully about the needs and expectations of your participants. For example, busy

professionals may require very clear but short instructions (see 'what can go wrong' below).

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. British Psychological Society, 2009). Follow the relevant ethical guidance of your institution and/or professional body.

Steps to Using Story Completion

Step One: Decide if you want to use a comparative design: With a comparative design you can explore and compare the assumptions made, or perceptions held, about certain social groups or scenarios. If this is your aim, you need to design versions of your story which reflect the specific differences you are concerned with, and allocate roughly equal numbers of participants to each of these. For example, Tischner (2014) used a comparative design to explore the gendered constructions of body weight concerns and weight-loss motivations. This necessitated two story stems, with a male and female protagonist respectively. Clarke et al.'s (2014) research on infidelity employed a more complex comparative design. Their aim was to explore how same- *and* different-sex emotional *and* sexual infidelity were conceptualised in the context of heterosexual marriage. This required four story stems. We do caution against having too many versions of a story in one study, and the use of overly complex designs, because

qualitative research is primarily about understanding (potentially complex and dynamic) meaning, rather than compartmentalisation. Two to six is the manageable maximum number for small and medium-sized projects in terms of both participant recruitment and analysis.

Another level of comparison 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, practitioner psychologist Naomi Moller's (2014) research on perceptions of fat therapists (which will be described more in Step Four) 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 both the salience of counsellor body weight for the whole group of young people, but also 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.

Step Two: Determine how many stories each participant will be asked to complete: When using a comparative design with multiple versions of the story stem, you have the option of asking participants to complete one, or more than one, story. In psychologist Helen Gavin's (2005) research on the social construction of sex offenders, 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. Similarly, in a study on adolescent risk-taking the

researchers asked all of the participants to respond to four short SC scenarios so that data could be collected on a variety of different aspects of the topic (Moore et al., 1997).

Asking participants to complete more than one stem may reflect a more pragmatic concern to maximise the number of stories in the data-set. For example, Iduna Shah-Beckley's (see Box 3.2 below) doctoral research on therapists and non-therapists' constructions of heterosex asked participants to complete two versions of a story stem. This halved the number of participants she needed to recruit. One concern when asking participants to respond to multiple story stems is that there may be order effects, with participants writing their longest story for the first story stem. However, In Iduna's research, the opposite was true, with participants writing longer stories in response to the second stem.

Step Three: Write your instructions: After you have designed your story stem(s), you need to write completion instructions for participants. In the participant information sheet, you should provide participants with some information about the nature of the task, and what they are expected to do, emphasising 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 you present participants with the story stem, you need to provide specific instructions on how they should complete the story (unless you do not want to constrain their responses in any way). Completion instructions can vary from the broad and open to the more prescriptive and directive. For example, Victoria (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); this is 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)

You may also want to provide participants with clear instructions on the length of story you wish them to write, or a time-expectation, to help ensure you get the quality of data

you need. For example, we have instructed 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 Victoria's [Clarke, 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.

It is especially important to *pilot* SC stems, and participant information and instructions, to assess whether participants interpret the stem and instructions in the way you intended (see Step Five below). In Victoria's (Clarke, 2014) study, for instance, the instructions 'you are asked to WRITE A STORY THAT IS AT LEAST 10 LINES/200 WORDS LONG' were added after piloting, because the pilot stories were often very brief or did not seriously engage with the task.

Potential Step: Write additional questions: Although one of the key features of SC is that it is 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 vignette research, see Chapter 4). For example, Naomi Moller's (2014) research on perceptions of fat therapists used the following story stem and completion instructions:

> Please read and complete the following story: Kate has been feeling finding it really difficult to cope with life so she has decided to go for counselling. As she walks into the counselling room for the first time, her first thought is: 'Oh, my counsellor is fat!' What happens next? (Please spend at least 10 minutes writing your story)

After completing the story, participants were asked 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 Naomi to understand how the participants' defined 'fat' – a variable construct – and provided a conceptual anchor for interpreting their stories.

You 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 and Clarke, 2013). Such questions can provide a useful 'baseline' for interpreting and contextualising your 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 (Terry and Braun, 2013; Braun, Tricklebank and Clarke, 2013), an overview of the participants' own body hair practices provides important information for contextualising the data.

Step Four: Determine mode of data collection: Another consideration is whether to conduct your 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. An advantage of hard copy completion is that you can hand the SC directly to participants (for example, if you are recruiting on university campuses or at specific events), and, providing you have ethical approval, offer participants a small 'reward' (such as chocolate) for returning their story. However, you 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. 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). The fact that participants can now complete online studies on smart phones and tablets (there is a *Qualtrics* 'app' that users can download for free) *may* also impact on data quality. Mobile devices often utilise 'soft' keyboards that do not necessarily facilitate accuracy of typing, or indeed typing full stop. Features such as auto-correct may mean that unless participants look closely at their responses as they are typing, inaccurate 'corrections' can be made. Therefore, detailed (and coherent) responses may be restricted by the need to constantly check the screen, as well as by the impracticality of smaller keyboards and screens common to such devices. However, some research has indicated that as long as participants do not need to enter numerical as well as alphabetic data (thereby requiring switching between soft-keyboards) completion on mobile devices will not necessarily take participants much longer, nor impact on errors (Sears and Zha, 2003), and this may also apply to tablets which are generally larger and more 'typing-friendly' than mobile phones. Finally, another important consideration is achieving a good fit between your mode of data collection and your participant group. You don't have to restrict yourself to one mode – it may be most

appropriate to ask some participants to complete the study online and others on hard copy.

Step Five: Pilot your SC: Given the open-ended and exploratory nature of SC research, piloting your stem and instructions to ensure they elicit relevant and useful data is vital (Braun and Clarke, 2013). We have often made minor (but transformative) amendments to stems or instructions following piloting. The resource-lite nature of SC means that piloting is not generally an onerous task. We recommend piloting your stem on the equivalent of 10-20% of the intended final sample; the precise number should be determined in relation to the diversity within your participant group: greater diversity = larger pilot sample. You can pilot in one of two ways: 1) by treating early data collection as a pilot and using their responses to judge if the stem and your instructions have been interpreted in the way(s) you intended, or 2) by asking participants to both complete the study *and* comment on the clarity of the instructions and the study design. If you make no (or minimal) changes to the stem following piloting, the pilot data can be incorporated into your sample. Once all these steps are completed, you are ready to keep calm and collect your data!

What Can Go Wrong With Story Completion?

The generation of poor quality data is a concern across most qualitative data collection methods; SC can also 'go wrong' in this way, and it can result from a number of different factors. Participants can sometimes 'refuse' the task by not completing the story as requested – for example by not writing their response *as a story*. This *may* result from a simple failure to understand the task. For instance, in Iduna Shah-Beckley and Victoria Clarke's (2014) research comparing psychology students and therapists' perceptions of

sexual refusal in heterosexual relationships, a number of the therapist-participants wrote about what Ben and Kate might be feeling, and what might happen to their relationship, but not in the format of a story (see Story 1 in Box 3.2). Therapists are busy professionals, and it seems likely that they did not spend much time reading the detailed participant information, and thus did not understand what was being asked of them. This shows the importance of providing clear but not overly long instructions, and repeating and highlighting key instructions. Participants may also generate short or shallow stories (see Story 2 in Box 3.2). This is often the result of low participant motivation – as noted above, we have found that individuals participating for reasons other than wanting to contribute to the study (e.g. benefits associated with participation such as students gaining course credit) often write very short stories unless given explicit (and repeated) instructions to produce stories of a certain length. But such instructions can iron out variability in story length – eliminating both very short and longer, richer and more complex, and thus highly desirable, stories. One way to manage this is to over recruit, so you can eliminate stories under a certain length from the final data-set.

[Insert Box 3.2 about here]

Short or shallow responses can also result from the design of the story stem. Story stems that constrain participant's creativity in how they continue and complete the story, or suggest a very likely single outcome, often produce rather thin and narrow data. For example, a student project using a story stem about a student feeling anxious about giving an assessed presentation produced shallow stories, which mostly ended with the student successfully giving the presentation (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The data did not provide the basis for a rich and complex analysis. In sum, the lessons we have learned are that: 1) it is important to write story stems that allow for a range of possible

outcomes, hence maximising the potential for participant creativity; and 2) piloting of the stem is crucial (see above).

Another potential problem is that participants can sometimes write stories that contain elements of humour and fantasy. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2013) found this in their research on perceptions of a parent coming out to their children as transgendered, with one story containing the memorable line 'Brian rubs his nipple and then David Beckham appears'. You don't need to know much about the study to appreciate the participant's failure to take the task seriously! Such stories may *potentially* reflect participant discomfort with the topic. In the instance of this study, the prevalence of 'transphobia' in the wider society (Nadal, Skolnik and Wong, 2012), and the content of some of these stories ('Brian's… over the moon that the tax payer is picking up the bill for a completely unnecessary procedure') suggests this as a potential explanation. However, 'fantasy' stories are only a *potential* problem; for some research questions and approaches, they may actually provide useful data. For example, in Victoria Clarke's (2014) social constructionist research on non-normative body hair practices, fantasy stories about Jane stopping removing her body hair and running away to live as a yeti in the wild were highly pertinent, providing useful information on the socio-cultural connotations of hairy women.

Such humorous or fantasy stories highlight another challenge with the SC method – the data are potentially more difficult to interpret than self-report data. We've noticed that some student-researchers get confused about what SC data represent, treating the fictional characters as real people and equating the stories with self-report data. This meant that, for example, creative responses to hypothetical scenarios about a parent coming out to their children as transgender were treated by some students (analysing

the data for an assignment) as providing information about the *real world* impact of a parent undergoing a gender transition on child development. It's important to remember that SC produces just that – *stories* – which *may* (depending on your epistemological standpoint) reveal something about what participants think and feel about a particular topic. Because of the nature of SC data – in our qualitative context, creative stories about hypothetical scenarios rather than direct self-reports of personal experience – standard analytic approaches may need to be adapted somewhat to capture the full potential of SC data.

What Methods of Analysis Are Suitable for Use With Story Completion Data?

To date, two methods have been used to analyse SC data – thematic analysis (TA) (e.g., Clarke et al., 2014; Frith, 2013; Livingston and Testa, 2000) and discourse analysis (DA) (Walsh and Malson, 2002). Following Kitzinger and Powell, TA (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012) is often used slightly differently from how it is used to analyse self-report data. 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 themes in how the relationship (both that between the primary partners, and that 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 and Powell, 1995; Whitty, 2005). This means that SC researchers have identified particular questions they want to ask of the data (in advance of the analysis, or after data familiarisation) and used the techniques of TA to identify patterns in relation to these questions.

As noted above, Kitzinger and Powell (1995) demonstrated that both essential 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 and Clarke, 2013). For example, critical psychologists Eleanor Walsh and Helen Malson (2010) used post-structuralist DA (e.g., Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 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.

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. 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 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 (see Figure 3.1). Depending on your 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').

One analytic approach that has yet to be used to analyse SC data, but nonetheless seems particularly apt, is narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993; 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 3.1 about here]

Researchers who do qualitative research within a qualitative paradigm don't 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 and 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 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 entirely appropriate.

Certain analytic approaches are not suited to the analysis of SC data, including approaches such as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009) and forms of narrative analysis focused on understanding participants'

lived experiences (Reissman, 2008). 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's 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 analyse SC data, and the focus on theory generation and the examination of the social processes and factors that shape particular phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006) suggest to us that it is unlikely to be an appropriate method for analysing 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 and 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.

Conclusion

In sum, SC produces data that provide a major, and 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 and exciting ways to generate data that provides compelling insights into the topic at hand.

Have a Go…

1) Develop a research question suitable for use with SC and determine your participant group. Design a story stem that could be used to address this research question with this participant group. Think carefully about what details should be included (will

your participants know anything about the topic?), and whether any aspects of the stem should be ambiguous.

2) The following story is from Victoria Clarke's (2014) research on perceptions of non-normative body hair practices. Code the data in relation to the research question 'how do young people make sense of a woman stopping removing her body hair?' What are your main analytic observations about this story? Next, consider whether Braun and Clarke's (2013) story mapping technique could usefully be applied to this story? How would you code the opening, development and resolution of the story?

Jane has decided to stop removing her body hair… After years and years of shaving, waxing and bleaching. Jane has had enough of spending time removing her body hair. Jane has come to a point in her life where she is comfortable with her body and the way she looks. Jane does not feel the need to remove it as is now 65, happily married with old children. Jane does keep herself fit and healthy and wears make-up and feels her husband loves her enough to not be worried about her body hair. Jane only removes her body hair on her legs and armpits in hot weather due to hygiene and how it looks in summer clothes. Jane also encourages older women to feel happy and comfortable in themselves and not worry and their body hair. Jane also like to encourage men to embrace their inner self and encourages them to embrace partners hair/non-haired bodies.	

Further Resources: Online

The companion website for Braun and Clarke's (2013) book *Successful qualitative research* provides examples of SC research materials and a 'perceptions of parent coming out as transgendered' SC data-set to practice coding and analysis with: www.uk.sagepub.com/braunandclarke

Further Resources: Reading

The paper that introduced SC as a qualitative method: Kitzinger, C. and Powell, D. (1995). Engendering infidelity: Essentialist and social constructionist readings of a story completion task. *Feminism and Psychology*, *5*(3), 345-372.

Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke further developed the SC method for qualitative research (see Chapters 6 and 10): Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London: Sage.

Read about one of the examples discussed in more detail: Clarke, V., Braun, V. and 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.

An example of a thematic analysis of SC data: Frith, H. (2013). Accounting for orgasmic absence: Exploring heterosex using the story completion method. *Psychology and Sexuality*, *4*(3), 310-322.

An example of a discursive analysis of SC data: Walsh, E. and Malson, H. (2010). Discursive constructions of eating disorders: A story completion task. *Feminism and Psychology, 20*(4), 529-537.

Reference list

Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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

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

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, and 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. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*, 77-101.

Braun, V., Tricklebank, G. and 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., Ridgeway, D. and Cassidy, J. (1990). Assessing internal working models of the attachment relationship: An attachment story completion task for 3-year-olds. In M.

T. Greenberg, D. Cicchetti and E. M. Cummings, (Eds.), *Attachment in the preschool years: Theory, research and intervention* (pp273-308). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Bretherton, I., Oppenheim, D., Emde, R. N. and 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 ed.). 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. and 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.

Exner, J. E. (2002). *The Rorschach, Basic Foundations and Principles of Interpretation Volume 1, 4th Edition.* Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley.

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. and 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. and West, M. L. (2012). *The Adult Attachment Projective System, Attachment Theory and Assessment in Adults.* New York, London: The Guildford Press.

Guest, G., MacQueen, K. M. and Namey, E. E. (2012). *Applied thematic analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Hammer, E. F. (1958). *The clinical application of projective drawings.* Oxford: Charles C. Thomas.

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. and 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. and 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. and 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. and 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*(6), 729-741.

Mays, N. and Pope, C. (1995). Reaching the parts other methods cannot reach: An introduction to qualitative methods in health and health services research. *British Medical Journal, 311*(6996), 42-45.

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. and Kostanski, M. (1997). An examination of adolescent risk-taking using a story completion task. *Journal of Adolescence*, *20*, 369-379.

Morgan, W. G. (2002). Origin and history of the earliest Thematic Apperception Test pictures. *Journal of Personality Assessment, 79*(3), 422-445.

Murray, H. A. (1971). *Thematic Apperception Test, Manual*. Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1943).

Nadal, K. L., Skolnik, A. and 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. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

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

Rorschach, H., Lemkau, P. and Kronenberg, B. (1921/1998). *Psychodiagnostics: A Diagnostic Test based on Perception, 10th Revised Edition*. Verlag, Switzerland: Huber.

Rotter, J. B., Lah, M. I. and Rafferty, J. E. (1992). Rotter Incomplete Sentences Blank. San Antonio, Texas, Harcourt Brace.

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

Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice*. London: Sage.

Sears, A. and Zha, Y. (2003). Data entry for mobile devices using soft keyboards: Understanding the effects of keyboard size and user tasks. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, *16*(2), 163-184.

Shah-Beckley, I. and Clarke, V. (2015). *Exploring male and female therapists and psychology students' constructions of sexual refusal in heterosexual relationships: A qualitative story completion study*. Manuscript under submission.

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

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

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

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. and 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. and MacAskill, S. (1996). Projective and enabling techniques explored. *Marketing Intelligence and Planning, 14*, 38-43.

Box 3.1: Introducing the Example Studies

We have been 'experimenting', in the broadest sense, with SC for the last decade or so, and in this chapter we share what we have learnt about, and our enthusiasm for, the method, drawing on a wide range of different SC studies from our, and our students', research. The example studies reflect our interests in gender, sexuality, appearance and counselling and include research on perceptions of transgender parenting, sexual refusal in heterosexual relationships, the disclosure of non-heterosexuality to parents, non-normative body hair practices, same-sex infidelity, fat-therapists, weight-management, sexuality and appearance… Again, reflecting our shared interests in gender, most of these studies use a comparative design to explore gender variation – both with regard to the responses *of* male and female (or other gendered) participants, and responses *to* male and female (or other gendered) characters.

Box 3.2: Examples of Story Completion Data (from Shah-Beckley and Clarke, 2015)

The story stem: "Ben and Kate have been together for a few years. For quite some time they have not been having sex because Ben does not want to. Kate has tried talking to Ben but he has been reluctant to talk. Tonight Kate is making sexual advances but Ben says he is tired and turns over… What happens next?" (In a second version of the story Kate refuses sex.) We have corrected all the spelling errors and typos in the data.

1) *Story 'refusal':* "If that will happen from now on, she will challenge him to talk about it and if he refuses she will divorce him."

2) *Example of a short and thin story:* "Kate is then upset as she feels unattractive. Ben doesn't want to discuss it further so becomes defensive and dismissive. They have an argument and Kate makes Ben sleep downstairs."

3) *An excerpt from a longer and richer story:* "Kate then decides that enough is enough - what's wrong with him? Am I unattractive? Is there someone else? Is he worried about something he hasn't told me? Kate challenges Ben, 'I can't keep doing this - you need to tell me what's going on. Is there something you're worried about? Something you feel you can't tell me? Please try - I just want to understand'. Ben sighs and turns back over to face Kate. He places his hand on her face and looks at her – 'It's not you' he says, 'I just feel like I've lost the urge to have sex…" (The story continues for another 216 words.)

Box 3.3: Personal Reflections on *Using* Story Completion From Iduna Shah-Beckley

I am completing a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology. I have used SC for both a small project in my second year of study (focused on constructions of sexual refusal in heterosexual relationships; Shah-Beckley and Clarke, 2014) and now for my doctoral research, which explores how therapists and non-therapists' make sense of heterosex. I have just finished collecting my data (200 stories) and begun the process of analysis informed by constructionist, post-structuralist, feminist and critical sexuality research. Before using SC, I only had experience of quantitative research, which often left me feeling very dissatisfied because the kind of data quantitative methods produced was simply not useful for addressing the kinds of research questions I was interested in. Broadly speaking, I am interested in how social norms around sexuality are produced and perpetuated, and the ways in which men's and women's sexuality are differentially shaped and constrained by social norms. SC is very useful for addressing these kinds of questions. For me, it's the best of both the quantitative and qualitative worlds, as it retains an 'experimental' element through the use of comparative designs, and it can generate a large amount of data, while also allowing for in-depth analysis. For both of my studies, I have collected data online using the *Qualtrics* survey software, which has the huge practical advantage (compared to using face-to-face interviews or focus groups) of cutting out hours of transcribing time. The online environment grants participants maximum anonymity and allows people across the world to be reached. For me the main challenge of using such a novel method as qualitative SC has been having to explain to other people why SC produces meaningful data. I have encountered questions and confusion from both quantitative and qualitative researchers, as well as lay people. So if you choose to use

SC methods, you may encounter scepticism from other researchers. But this has really helped me to develop clear arguments about why I think SC really is a very exciting and useful method for qualitative (sexuality) research.

Table 3.1: 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 and Testa 2000)	
Infidelity	How do women and men represent unfaithful heterosexual relationships? (Kitzinger and 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'?	
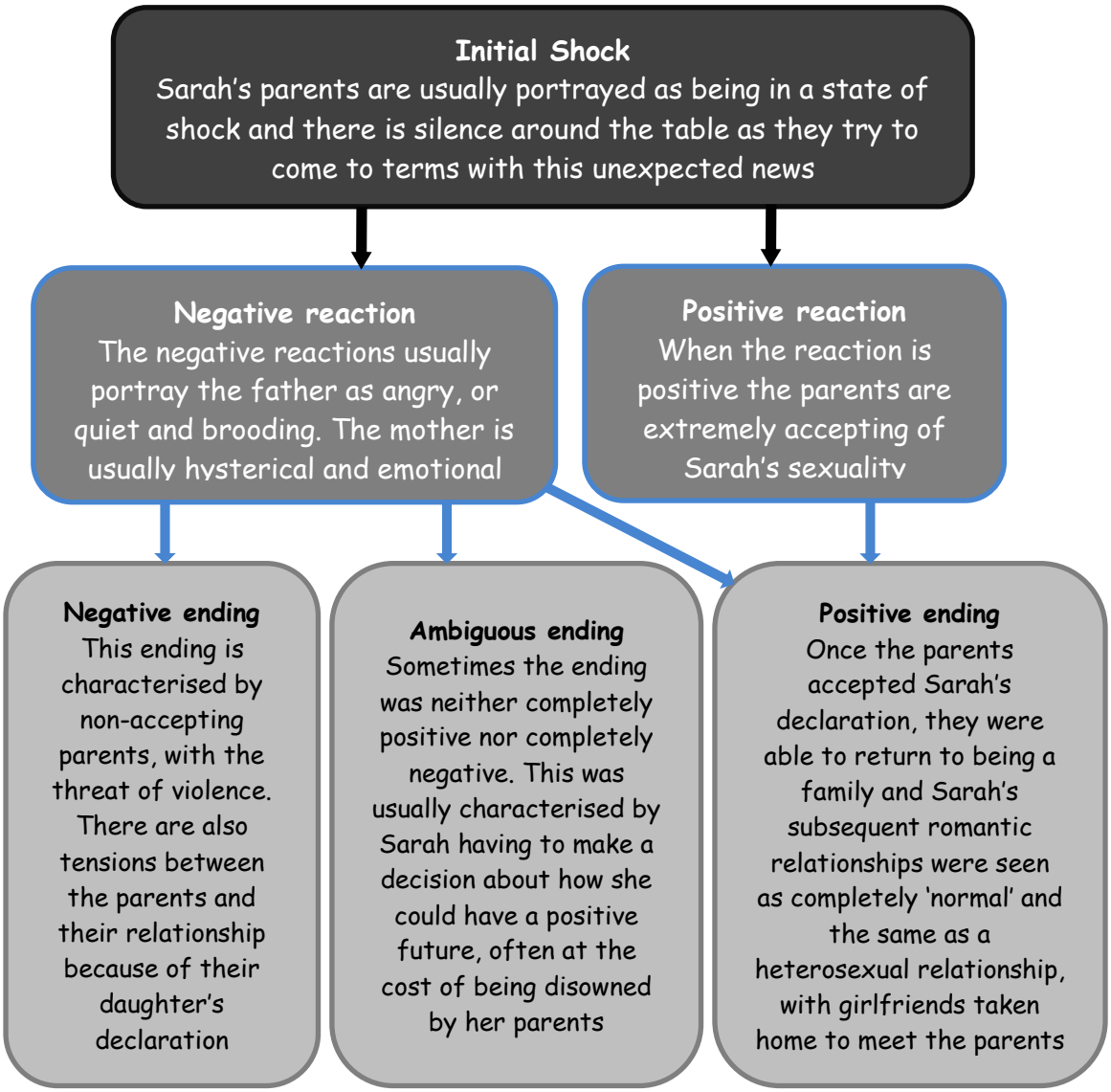
Figure 1: An Example of a Story Map (from Braun and Clarke, 2013)