

**Thou shalt not covet another man? Exploring constructions of same-sex and different-sex
infidelity using story completion**

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Abstract

This study explores conceptualisations of same- versus different-sex infidelity in the context of a heterosexual marriage using story completion. A convenience sample of 57 female and male participants completed one of four versions of a story stem featuring a husband who is either emotionally or sexually unfaithful with a woman or a man. A social constructionist thematic analysis found that same-sex infidelity was conceptualised as the ‘worst case scenario’ and was underpinned by a heteronormative framing of repressed homosexuality. By contrast, heterosexual infidelity was understood in terms of relational deficits and the wife assuming responsibility for these. Overall, the analysis shows that in making sense of same-sex and heterosexual infidelity, the participants drew on familiar discourses of sexuality and gender, suggesting that despite social psychological theorising related to sexual fluidity, essentialist ideas remain firmly in place. Methodologically, the study demonstrates the usefulness of a rarely-used tool – the story completion task – for accessing socio-cultural discourses and dominant meanings surrounding a particular topic.

Key words: Emotional infidelity, heteronormativity, heterosexual relationships, qualitative research, same-sex relationships, sexual infidelity, thematic analysis

Introduction

Within western countries, the prioritising of monogamous relationships (Barker, 2005), and Judeo-Christian framing of infidelity as a sin, work to situate infidelity rather negatively, as deeply distressing experience with profoundly negative implications for psychological, relational and social well-being. Blow and Hartnett’s (2005a: 183) descriptions of the

consequences of infidelity as 'undeniably harmful' and 'often devastating' are typical. At the same time, infidelity is a relatively common experience within expectedly monogamous relationships (Moller & Vossler, 2014). Although precise statistics are almost impossible to generate, estimates that around a quarter of people in a (heterosexual) marriage or long-term relationship will be unfaithful at some point are widely cited (see Blow & Hartnett, 2005b), with men thought to be more likely than women to engage in infidelity (Barta & Kiene, 2005). Moreover, within the wider culture, a male sex drive discourse (Hollway, 1989) situates (heterosexual) men as almost naturally inclined to 'cheat' and seek sex outside of a monogamous relationship (Farvid & Braun, 2006).

One of the challenges faced by relationship researchers is determining what behaviours constitute infidelity, and the levels of threat different types of infidelity pose to the primary relationship. The lack of a consistent and inclusive definition of infidelity, and the consequent proliferation of definitions underpinned by individual researcher's (often impoverished) assumptions about what constitutes infidelity, is widely regarded as one of the most significant methodological challenges in the field of infidelity research (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a). Existing research is overwhelmingly focused on heterosexual relationships (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a, 2005b) and definitions of infidelity often centre on 'heterosexual, extramarital intercourse' (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a). Same-sex infidelity, particularly in the context of a primary heterosexual relationship, is rarely the focus of research, so little is known about the perceived threat that this type of infidelity poses to a primary heterosexual relationship.

A few quantitative studies have compared heterosexual men and women's perceptions of an imagined homosexual or heterosexual affair, but have produced mixed results. Sagarin,

Becker, Guadagno, Nicastle and Millevoi (2003) found that same-sex infidelity induced less jealousy than heterosexual infidelity. By contrast, Wiederman and Lemar (1998) found that female-female sexual infidelity evoked the least amount of jealousy and upset (among men *and* women), whereas male-male infidelity was the most upsetting type of infidelity (among women) (see also Confer & Cloud, 2011).

Responding to calls for more qualitative research on understandings of infidelity (Blow & Hartnett, 2005a), in this paper we explore conceptions of same- versus different-sex infidelity in the context of a heterosexual marriage using the innovative qualitative method of story completion (SC). Thus, this paper has two aims that expand the existing literature: to explore views of same-sex infidelity; and to highlight the use of SC for research focused on participants' conceptualisations of particular social and psychological phenomena.

Exploring conceptualisations of infidelity using story completion

SC provides an open-ended way of accessing participants' meaning making around infidelity. Rather than being asked to report directly on their understandings, in SC research, participants are provided with the opening sentences of a story about a hypothetical scenario (the story 'stem' or 'cue') and asked to complete it. Kitzinger and Powell (1995) used SC to explore women and men's perceptions of infidelity in the context of a heterosexual relationship. Their story stem described two main characters (John and Clare) as 'going out for over a year', and one character as realising the other is 'seeing someone else'. As "'seeing' leaves the precise nature of the relationship ambiguous and 'someone else' leaves the sex of the other person unspecified" (p. 352), they were able to explore participants' assumptions about what 'seeing someone else' meant, as well as about the gender of that 'someone else'. Most participants 'accepted' the inference in the story stem of a sexual relationship, and wrote stories about an

(sexually) unfaithful partner. In the vast majority of stories, the infidelity was with someone of the 'opposite' sex. In one story (written by a man) John turned out to be gay; in a few stories, Clare's new partner was a woman – which was portrayed as 'even worse' than infidelity with another man (c.f. Wiederman & Lemar, 1998). There were strong participant-gender differences in the stories. Men tended to represent John and Clare's relationship as sexually focused and minimised the emotional impact of the infidelity (especially for John); women tended to represent John and Clare's relationship as emotionally committed, and emphasised the emotionally devastating impact of the infidelity for both of them.

Whitty (2005) used a slightly modified version of Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) story stems to explore women and men's representations of heterosexual emotional and sexual infidelity (a common distinction in infidelity research, Blow & Hartnett, 2005b) committed via the *internet*. Most participants characterised online 'relationships' as 'cheating', but very few portrayed online 'infidelity' as involving a same-sex partner. Women emphasised the *emotional* elements of the betrayal more than men. Overall, equal weighting was given to impact of sexual and emotional infidelity.

Method

SC is thought to be particularly useful for accessing participants' assumptions about a topic and socially undesirable, and, thus, a wider range of, responses (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Braun & Clarke, 2013) – these are both important considerations when researching the discursive construction of same-sex relationships. SC is also useful for comparing the responses of different participant groups and the responses to variations in key elements of the story. Research to date has focused on gender comparisons – comparing male and female

participants' responses to female and male characters', among other things, infidelity (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Whitty, 2005) and 'missing' orgasm (Frith, 2013).

SC was introduced to qualitative research by Kitzinger and Powell in 1995 – prior to that, it had primarily been used in (psychoanalytic) clinical contexts (see Rabin, 1981), and quantitative developmental research (e.g., Bretherton, Prentiss & Ridgeway, 1990). In a clinical context, SC is a form of projective technique, an ambiguous stimuli designed to overcome barriers to direct self-report – particularly barriers of awareness (the subject's lack of awareness of their own emotions) and barriers of admissibility (the subject's difficulty in admitting certain emotions). Third person, rather than first person, SC is thought to be particularly useful for accessing socially undesirable meanings because participants do not have to justify their own motivations (Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995). The focus of interest is not the story per se, rather it is viewed as a route to the unconscious.

In quantitative developmental research, story completions are subject to standardised coding and statistical analysis (Steele, Hodges, Kaniuk, Hillman & Henderson, 2003). Here, again the focus is on the psychological meanings revealed by the story rather than the story per se. One concern with the use of SC, and similar methods such as vignettes, in clinical and quantitative research is the gap between the hypothetical scenario and 'real life'. For example, Blow and Hartnett (2005a: 191) in their methodological review of infidelity research express concern about the fact that "many of the studies that claim to focus on infidelity do not in fact research infidelity directly". They argue that – citing research that shows differences in responses to hypothetical and actual infidelity – the reliance on hypothesised or fantasised infidelity limits the potential to draw conclusions about real-life infidelity. Furthermore, it is

impossible to know “what is in the minds of the participants” (2005a: 191) when they respond to a hypothetical scenario (rather than a direct question about real life infidelity).

In the *qualitative* approach to SC, the focus *is* on the story. Although, as a general rule, all forms of qualitative data are open to different kinds of interpretation (for example, interviews can be viewed both as a tool for the researcher to discover participants’ thoughts and feelings and as a social interaction in which meaning is co-constructed by the researcher and the participant, Braun & Clarke, 2013), SC perhaps makes the different interpretative possibilities more visible than do other methods. As with clinical and quantitative SC, qualitative SC can be interpreted through an essentialist lens so that the analysis is focused on the participants’ psychology. For example, Kitzinger and Powell (1995) argued that the differences in the stories told by their female and male participants could be interpreted as providing evidence of (essential) psychological differences between women and men. In an essentialist framework the gap between the story and ‘reality’ is still of concern (the researcher does not know definitively that the stories reflect participants’ ‘true’ thoughts and feelings about a particular topic).

Alternatively, SC can be interpreted through a social constructionist lens so that the focus is on the discourses that participants draw on in constructing their story (Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Walsh & Malson, 2010). In a constructionist framework, the gap between the story and reality ceases to be of concern precisely because the focus is on socio-cultural discourses rather than individual thoughts and feelings. This is the approach we take in this study.

Participants were given one of four versions of a story stem to complete. Because the aim was to compare responses to same- and different-sex infidelity, the story stems had to refer to the

sex of the 'someone else' the main character was 'seeing'. In addition, we were interested in exploring whether different types of same-sex infidelity (emotional versus sexual; Whitty, 2005) were constructed as more threatening to the primary relationship and accounted for in different ways. Therefore we could not rework Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) original story stems as other researchers have done (Frith, 2013; Whitty, 2005). Instead, we designed story stems specifically for this study that implied a husband who was being unfaithful in his heterosexual marriage. The stories varied in two ways – by sex of partner, and by form of infidelity. Two versions implied an affair with another woman (A2/B2); two with another man (A1/B1). Following Whitty (2005), two versions implied *sexual* infidelity (A1/A2); two implied *emotional* infidelity (B1/B2). For example, the version A1 and B1 stems were as follows:

Sarah wakes up early on Tuesday morning and follows her usual routine of getting ready for work while John, her husband of four years, remains sleeping. Later that day Sarah returns home early from work, as she enters the house she notices John's coat and work shoes in the hall way. Thinking he must have come home from work sick she walks upstairs to their bedroom, when she opens the door she is confronted with John in bed with another man ... (A1)

Sarah wakes up early on Tuesday morning and follows the usual routine of getting out of bed while John, her husband of four years, remains sleeping. On her lunch break Sarah decided to try out a new café that a work colleague has recommended. As she walks towards the café, much to her surprise she notices John sitting at one of the tables outside with a man she has never seen before. As she gets closer she notices that John is holding hands with the man and he is smiling and gazing into the man's eyes... (B1)

In the version A2 and B2 stems, the word 'man' is replaced with 'woman'.

Participants and Recruitment

A convenience sample of 57 participants was recruited primarily through the UWE psychology participant pool (and awarded with a small amount of course credit). Because of a preponderance of female psychology students, participants were also recruited through the third author's personal network to ensure roughly equal numbers of female and male participants. The characteristics of the sample are summarised in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Data Collection and Analysis

The study was approved by the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences Ethics Committee at UWE. Data were gathered electronically using the *Qualtrics* online survey software. Participants were sent a URL for one of the four versions of the SC (13 participants completed version A1, 14 B1, 15 A2, and 15 B2). After reading an information page, participants were required to consent to take part in the study. Participants were then asked to "read and complete the following story" and presented with the story stem. The story stem was followed by the question "what happens next?" and the instruction "please spend at least 10 minutes writing your story". Once the story was completed, participants were asked to provide demographic data.

The data were downloaded into a *Microsoft Word* document for the purposes of analysis, and were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012, 2013) approach to thematic analysis (TA), which is comprised of 6 phases of coding and theme development. Because TA is not constrained by inbuilt theoretical assumptions and can be flexibly applied to produce either data-driven or theory-driven analyses, Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend that researchers

clearly specify their theoretical assumptions and approach to TA. The analysis was underpinned by a social constructionist framework (Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995), and primarily focused on the semantic meaning in the data. KW and VC read and re-read the data making a note of any initial analytic observations (TA phase 1). KW then engaged in a process of systematic data coding, identifying key features of the data (phase 2), which she then examined for broader patterns of meaning or 'candidate themes' (phase 3). After a process of review and refinement (phases 4 and 5), which all authors contributed to, 5 themes were generated. Writing this paper constituted the final phase (6) of analysis and involved selecting illustrative data extracts and the weaving together of theme definitions (5) and other analytic notes into a coherent analytic narrative. Data extracts are tagged with a code that identifies the version of the SC, participant number (numbered from 1 for each version) and the sex of the participant (F, M or O for other). Spelling errors and typos in the data have been corrected to aid readability and comprehension.

Results and Discussion

There was a large variation in the length of the SCs (range 71-647 words), with an average of 258 words. Only two participants 'refused' the implication of infidelity (both in response to version B1; emotional infidelity between men): one wrote that John had found his "little brother after all these years" and the other portrayed Sarah as mistakenly identifying a stranger as John (see also Kitzinger & Powell, 1995). Furthermore, a mononormative assumption (Barker, 2005) pervaded the data, such that John's behaviour in almost every story was interpreted as taking place within a monogamous marriage, and thus as infidelity. Only two stories (both in response to version A2), with a rather comic tone, mentioned the possibility of an open relationship:

The general atmosphere in the bedroom has changed. It seems clear to each of them what will happen next and they all feel good about it... They are all highly stimulated. John loosens his wife from Mariah by kissing her and carrying her to the bed. There they have a good time in a threesome. (A2:9F)

'Hey' she shouts at her husband who leaps from his illicit lover and cowers with her against the bed head, the quilt pulled up over their naked sweaty bodies, 'if you had wanted sex with another you should have just asked' Sarah says 'but but' her husband replies in a quivering voice, before he has time to answer a naked 19 year old emerges from behind his wife and stands confidently next his wife 'this is Tammy from the office' she says 'I guess great minds think alike.' (A2:14M)

In the rather fantastical story written by participant 9F the characters are 'punished' for their sexual immorality by the house collapsing on top of them as they lie on the bed "still playing a bit with each other" – "None of them survived". Overall, John's behaviour was understood as infidelity, and it was framed *differently* if it was with a man or a woman.

The 'Worst Possible Case Scenario': The Gay Husband and the 'Cover Story' Wife

In both versions of the story involving another man, John's infidelity was explained in terms of his closeted or unrealised homosexuality:

While at work she continues to mull over the idea that her husband is gay. (B1:4M)

On the kitchen table was a note from her husband saying that he was unhappy with the marriage, not because of her but because he felt uncomfortable around women.

(B1:1M)

In line with societal invisibility of bisexuality (Gurevich et al., 2007), none of the stories explicitly mentioned bisexuality. In some of the sexual infidelity stories, John was presented as sexually attracted to another man (or men in general) or confused about his sexuality, rather than explicitly as gay. However, most of the stories were underpinned by a homosexual/heterosexual binary (Hegarty, 1997) – in one of the stories John had to decide if he was gay or straight:

Sarah thought John had to make a clear choice about his sexuality and left him to him to decide between her or Patrick. She felt prepared to go with his decision. (A1:7M)

Moreover, in most stories, John was depicted as *essentially* gay; marriage was described as providing him with a 'cover story' wife (B1:13M). The stories depicted John as experiencing sexual feelings for men *before* his marriage to Sarah, and using the marriage to try to hide, deny, or 'cure', these feelings:

How did he tell his wife of four years that from the day he married her he realised that a heterosexual marriage wasn't for him. (A1:8F)

John was aware of his feelings but had always suppressed them. When he met Sarah and fell in love and they got married John thought these feelings would go away. (B1:2F)

Explanations for John's suppression of these ('true') sexual feelings often centred on the social stigma attached to homosexuality:

John said it was hard to explain but he had been suppressing his true feeling for many years and that by marrying her he was trying to portray and fit into what he felt was expected of him. He was frightened that both his family and friends wouldn't understand if he had told them the truth about his feelings towards other men. (A1:1F)

On the kitchen table was a note from her husband saying that he was unhappy with the marriage, not because of her but because he felt uncomfortable around women. A feeling he has had since puberty. His note explained how he had got married to present a stable family life image, enabling his career to develop. (B1:1M)

These explanations evoke a heteronormative social reality in which it is not 'okay to be gay' (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003). The social stigma perceived to be associated with homosexuality also extended to Sarah, who was portrayed as worrying about what others will think of her and as internalising the social stigma of homosexuality:

She doesn't like to talk about it to anyone, because she is ashamed of what her husband has become. (B1:9F)

John's infidelity with another man was often portrayed as 'even worse' than an affair with another woman (see also Kitzinger & Powell, 1995):

To Sarah's horror the worst possible case scenario had been confirmed. Not only has her husband been having an affair but even worse, he is having an affair with a man. (B1:12F)

The sense of betrayal that Sarah felt was immense, not only had her husband of four years cheated on her, but he had done so with another man. (A1:8F)

Situating John's infidelity with a man as *worse* than infidelity with a woman relies on it being a double dishonesty, and thus a double betrayal. Dishonesty was frequently mentioned as a key source of distress and of feelings of betrayal:

Disorientated she can't even look at this man who has not only lied to himself but her so convincingly for so long she leaves the house. (A1:4M)

Sarah although heartbroken, was extremely angry with John, it was not necessarily the fact he was having an affair with a man, but the fact John was so dishonest about it.

(B1:12F)

Furthermore, sex between men was associated with an increased risk of sexually transmitted infection:

‘The least you could do John is hide that thing from me, put some clothes on will you, I don't want to look at that infected thing that you have had near me since having sex with another man, I could have caught something, didn't you ever think of me?!’

(A1:2F)

Thus the participants drew on a heteronormative framing of sex between men (particularly anal sex), and the homosexual body, as ‘dirty’, ‘dangerous’ (Ellis & Kitzinger, 2002), deviant and pathological (Scarce, 1997). In a few stories, same-sex infidelity was presented as less upsetting than different-sex infidelity because it was understood as an expression of John’s true self and not something Sarah could ‘compete’ with.

Deficient Heterosexual Relationships and Blameworthy Wives

In contrast to same-sex infidelity, heterosexual infidelity was commonly explained in terms of a relational deficit (see also Kitzinger & Powell, 1995):

He explains that he has fallen out of love with Sarah. They have been fighting lots and when he met Kate she made him happy again... She had a feeling that things weren’t right between her and John. (B2:13M)

As John started explaining that the only reason he did it was because he was so lonely with Sarah working all the time. (A2:1F)

In this second extract, Sarah is implicitly to blame for the failure of the relationship – her working has left John lonely. Frequently, Sarah was also portrayed as blaming *herself* for John's infidelity. This was evident for all types of infidelity:

Sarah immediately starts to think that she has done something wrong which has made him want to cheat on her. (B2:1F)

If she'd been a better wife surely he wouldn't have wanted someone else? (A2:3M)

She wonders if it was her fault that John turned to men, if she was so repulsive that she put him off women. (B1:9F)

'What do you get from him that you don't get from me? Is it just Gary or is it men in general?' she couldn't stop asking the questions and each time she asked one she was blaming herself. (A1:4M)

Although John's presumed inherent gayness was typically drawn on to locate the 'fault' for the infidelity with him, it also partly situated him as not *really* to blame, because he was simply expressing his 'true' feelings. The contrast between John's lack of accountability and Sarah's frequent self-blame evokes a very traditional gendering of emotion, with women responsible for the emotional (and sexual) labour that ensures the longevity of a heterosexual relationship, and fidelity within it (Hochschild, 1983; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995).

Meaningless Sex or Emotional Relationships

In addition to providing different *reasons* for same-sex and heterosexual infidelity, the stories depicted the infidelity, and particularly the seriousness of the infidelity, rather differently. In the same-sex scenarios, the relationship between John and the other man was commonly portrayed as a 'serious', committed, long-term relationship, involving feelings of love:

He then met this man 6 months ago and fell in love... (B1: 5F)

He said it had started six months ago when he joined a local gym, he said he felt relieved that she now knew as he didn't know if he would have ever been able to tell her. He told Sarah that he also loved her but that when he was with Colin he felt as though it were a missing piece of the jigsaw he had been missing in his life for a long time. (A1: 1F)

These stories contradict the negative stereotype of gay men as 'promiscuous' (Peplau, Fingerhut & Beals, 2004), and present a very conventional account of a relationship. Similarly, in the heterosexual *emotional* scenarios, the relationship between John and the other women was often depicted as serious:

John gives in and admits that he has been having an affair for over a year. (B2:1F)

John explains that he has been seeing this woman for months and he has feelings for her. (B2:5M)

By contrast, the infidelity in the heterosexual *sexual* scenarios was depicted as 'meaningless' one-night stands:

'Who is she?', 'Oh just a girl from work, we had a few drinks and things got a bit out of hand but it meant nothing'. (A2:3M)

In the heterosexual scenarios then, emotional infidelity was associated with committed relationships and sexual infidelity with casual sex. By contrast, in the same-sex scenarios John was depicted as uncovering the truth of his identity and as seeking to replace his wife with a committed male partner. Thus, John was framed as a gay man, rather than (say) a man who has sex with men, and his behaviour was conceptualised in terms of dominant

heteronormative expectations about long-term, monogamous, loving relationships. His behaviour fits with what has been referred to as the image of the 'good gay' (as opposed to the 'bad gay'; Cooper & Herman, 1995); an acceptable gay sexuality that operates within the bounds of heteronormativity.

Beware, a Woman Scorned...

Overall, Sarah's response to John's infidelity was typically portrayed as centred on feelings of hurt and upset:

Sarah cries, unable to hold the tears back. (A1:10F)

With a look of complete heartbreak on her face, Sarah bursts into tears and runs out of the house leaving John and Anna alone again. (A2:5M)

These interpretations fit with traditional gender stereotypes of women as emotional (Hochschild, 1983; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995). But Sarah was also described as being aggressive and violent, often towards John:

She ran to the top of the stairs and punched John in the ribs, 'I hate you, I hate you for doing this to me'!! (A1:2F)

Standing toe to toe with John she punched him as hard as she could muster. (A2:8F)

Sarah's violence towards John was more common in response to the sexual infidelity story stems. Her aggressive response sometimes went beyond John. In the same-sex scenarios, only one story depicted any aggression towards the other man:

'Sarah I'm sor-' Phillip tries to explain but is cut off by Sarah 'get the f*** out of my house I need to talk to my husband' she spits at him. (A1:9F)

By contrast, there were a number of accounts of hostility and aggression towards the other woman in the heterosexual scenarios:

Sarah goes into the cafe and kicks the chair from under the women. (B2:40)

Sarah wouldn't let the women out of the room blocking the way out of door, Sarah confronted the women face to face before landing a thumping slap on her cheek.

(A2:10M)

In Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) study, the woman scorned (Claire) was depicted as responding to her male partner's infidelity with both upset and anger; male participants were far more likely, than female participants, to portray Claire as engaging in violent revenge. In our data, violence was depicted by both female and male participants.

Infidelity: Death to the Relationship

The most common resolution to all versions of the stories (either explicitly or implicitly) was John and Sarah ending their relationship (see also Whitty, 2005). The separation was most often depicted as less than amicable:

She had no contact with John as she wished to put it all behind her and concentrate on her new family. (A1:1F)

'Oh and you, you cheating bastard, I want a divorce'. (A2:8F)

Dishonesty and feelings of betrayal were often presented as key factors in the separation (see also Whitty, 2005):

How could he be so dishonest with her? (B1:14M)

Forgiveness wasn't an issue, it was more a matter of losing trust and respect... It would never be the same again... not with John, or any other man. (A2:2F)

Amicable separations were only depicted in a few of the same-sex stories, which seemed to again invoke the idea that John had a true nature, which Sarah recognised, so separation becomes an ethical choice:

Sarah is upset, but realises that she cannot force John to spend the rest of his life with her if he is gay, she realises they had been falling apart, and agrees that even though her and John cannot remain in a romantic relationship, they can still share a special friendship. (B1:5F)

This demonstrates the way John's 'essential' gay identity was invoked to account for both the cause, and the consequences, of his infidelity, and in a way that rendered them less morally suspect than different-sex infidelity, and even understandable or morally right.

Conclusions

Our data did not evidence the differences between the stories written by female and male respondents found in other studies (e.g., Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Whitty, 2005); however, our sample was significantly smaller than both Kitzinger and Powell's (N=116) and Whitty's (N=234). It is possible that a larger sample may have generated a wider range of responses and thus more evidence of gender differences. There were some differences between the responses to the emotional and sexual scenarios. Violence and aggression were more commonly portrayed in the sexual scenarios; and in the heterosexual sexual scenarios, the other relationship was often portrayed as 'meaningless'. But the greatest differences were between the responses to the heterosexual and same-sex scenarios. Same-sex infidelity was frequently portrayed as 'worse' than heterosexual infidelity (see also Confer & Cloud, 2011; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Wiederman & LaMar, 1998). Sex between men was portrayed as 'dirtier' and 'riskier' than sex between men and women, invoking feelings of shame (for both

John and Sarah) and the associated social stigma, and reinforcing a heterosexual=safe/homosexual=risky binary construction of sex (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe & Thomson, 1998). However, this was counterbalanced by a narrative of John's realisation and enactment of his 'true' (gay) self, and therefore his *legitimate* search for love with a man. Thus, in the same-sex scenarios, John's sexuality was framed in terms of an essential gay discourse (Kitzinger, 1995).

Only a few of the stories entertained the possibility of flux and fluidity in sexuality; however, this was limited to John experiencing 'confusion' about his sexuality. Such portrayals were underpinned by an assumption that John would eventually *realise* he was gay (or straight). Overwhelmingly, sexuality was "assumed to be an inner state or 'essence', which the individual 'represses' or 'discovers', 'denies' or 'acknowledges'" (Kitzinger, Wilkinson, Coyle & Milton, 1998: 531). Overall, the portrayal of sexuality was underpinned by dominant (heteronormative) understandings: a homosexual/heterosexual binary (Hegarty, 1997), the cultural silencing of bisexuality (Gurevich et al., 2007), and an assumption of mononormativity (Barker, 2005).

It is important to note the limitations of the sample – this was a convenience sample comprised largely of psychology students and relatively privileged (mostly, white, middle class and heterosexual) individuals and the results should be interpreted with this in mind. Because the sample consisted mostly of young adults and of a greater proportion of women than men, the stories may reflect a more 'liberal' understanding of homosexuality. There is evidence to suggest that more liberal or 'tolerant' heterosexuals are more likely to subscribe to a belief in the immutability of homosexuality, and that less tolerant heterosexuals are more likely to believe in the possibility of changing sexuality (Hegarty, 2002). It is conceivable that a less

tolerant sample – homophobia research consistently finds that older, politically and religiously conservative individuals and men are more likely to be homophobic (Clarke et al., 2010) – would be less likely to construct John as essentially gay. Furthermore, a less tolerant sample may be more inclined to portray John’s same-sex attractions as potentially changeable and thus as less of a threat to the primary relationship. Although some of the stories portrayed disgust at homosexuality and homosexual sex, again it is possible that stories written by a more conservative sample would express more aversion to homosexuality.

This study contributes to a small body of qualitative literature using SC (Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Walsh & Malson, 2010; Whitty, 2005; see also Gavin, 2005; Livingston & Testa, 2000). We concur with these authors that SC provides a useful tool for exploring participants’ conceptualisations and, particularly, the assumptions that underpin their sense-making. SC is also a particularly useful way of accessing the socio-cultural discourses, and dominant meanings, that surround a particular topic (Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Walsh & Malson, 2010). It has been argued that writing stories in the third person, rather than writing first person stories or providing personal responses to direct questions, generates fewer concerns about social desirability because participants do not need to account for their motivations (Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995). However, it would be useful to compare third person and first person SC data, and SC data with data generated from self-report methods such as focus groups, to provide some empirical support for this argument.

There was a large variation in the length of the SCs (range 71-647 words), with an average of 258 words. This is a wider range and higher average than that reported in existing research. But only Frith (2013) and Walsh and Malson (2010) have provided information about story length. Neither of these authors presented details of any completion instructions given to

participants. In this study, participants were asked to spend at least 10 minutes writing their story (this instruction was repeated on the participant information sheet; see Braun & Clarke, 2013); it is possible that this instruction prompted participants to write longer stories. Future research should explore the impact of completion instructions on the data produced. We also encourage researchers using SC to provide details of any completion instructions given to participants and to provide details of story length and range (as a basic indication of data quality).

To date, most authors have used thematic analysis to analyse SC data (Walsh & Malson's, 2010, discursive analysis is an exception). Braun and Clarke (2013) have also proposed a story mapping technique to capture patterning in the structure of the stories. Narrative analysis is perhaps an obvious choice of method for analysing SC data (Reissman, 2007). Future research should explore and develop new approaches and techniques for analysing SC data.

Up to now, SC data has primarily been collected from student samples (Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Walsh & Malson, 2010; Whitty, 2005). Indeed, Kitzinger and Powell (1995) argued that students are ideal participants for SC research because they are reasonably fluent writers and accustomed to expressing themselves in writing. In this study, student participants recruited through the participant pool were required to accrue a certain amount of participation credit as part of their research methods training. This means that they may not have been particularly highly motivated participants. Given that participant motivation is an important factor in data quality (Braun & Clarke, 2013), a volunteer sample (receiving no incentives) may be more motivated to participate and may write longer and richer stories, which draw on a wider range of discourses (although this was not the case in Frith's, 2013,

study). In order to expand our understanding of qualitative SC, future research should use this method with a wider range of participant groups.

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Table 1: Characteristics of the sample

Age	Range 18-63 (most 18-22); mean 25 (13 supplied no data)
Sex	Female 30; male 24; other 1; no data 2
Occupation	Students 45; other 12
Sexuality	Heterosexual 53; non-heterosexual 2; no data 2
Race/ethnicity	White 53; mixed-race 1; Chinese 1; no data 2
Social Class	Middle class 33; working class 14; no class 6; no data 4
Relationship status	Single 23; partnered 24; married/in a civil partnership 7; separated 1; no data 2
Personal experiences of infidelity	Ever unfaithful to a partner 17; a partner ever unfaithful to you 16; someone close to you experienced different-sex infidelity 29; same-sex infidelity 6