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Iduna Shah-Beckley in conversation

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Qualitative story completion: Possibilities and potential pitfalls

Virginia Braun, Victoria Clarke, Hannah Frith, Nikki Hayfield, Helen Malson, Naomi Moller and Iduna Shah-Beckley came together at the University of the West of England (UWE) in July 2017 to discuss, and share their enthusiasm for, the story completion method. Virginia nominally 'led' the discussion, to keep us on track. This is a transcript of the discussion, edited by the Special Issue editors, principally Hannah Frith, which we have all read and commented on. The discussion begins with the contributors introducing themselves, and their experience of the story completion method. It then identifies a series of 'knotty issues' about story completion which we explored: 1) What can stories tell us?; 2) Research practicalities, comparative design and sample size; 3) What happens when story completion doesn't go to plan?; and 4) Getting published. The conversation ends by considering 'Future possibilities for story completion research'. Our aim was not to reach consensus of definitive 'answers' but to debate and gain perspective on an open issue. Hence, we reach no 'conclusion' for any of these issues.

Virginia Braun: I am Ginny from the University of Auckland, and I have written about story completion in a qualitative textbook co-authored with Victoria (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I have also used it myself in my own research examining counter-normative body hair practices (Clarke & Braun, 2018; Jennings, Braun & Clarke, 2018) and infidelity (Clarke, Braun & Wooles, 2015), supervised students, and talked about it at conferences where it gets lots of interest and excitement. I've also used it in the classroom as a data collection exercise, and students really seem to love it.

Naomi Moller: I am Naomi from The Open University and I have used story completion in a couple of projects - on fat therapists (see Moller & Tischner, 2018) and embryo donation (Clarke & Moller, 2017) – and also talked about it at conferences and written about it with some of the people

sitting around this table (Braun et al., 2018; Clarke et al., 2017). One of the conferences I have talked about it at was a counselling conference and people were really interested in it.

Iduna Shah-Beckley: I am Iduna and I completed my doctoral research here at UWE which was supervised by Victoria (Shah-Beckley, 2017). I used story completion in my research to explore the social construction of sexual experimentation (Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2018a) and masturbation in heterosexual relationships. I also used story completion in an earlier 'pilot' study for my thesis research focused on sexual refusal in heterosexual relationships (Shah-Beckley & Clarke, 2018b). In both studies I was keen to see if the method was sensitive enough to pick up differences in the way therapists described these practices compared to people who have not been therapeutically trained. I have also discussed the method at various conferences and people seem to be really interested in the comparative elements it offers. I really enjoyed using it, and I would use it again. I'm a practising psychologist in the National Health Service.

Hannah Frith: I am Hannah from the University of Brighton and have used story completion in my own research on orgasmic absence (Frith, 2013). I've also supervised students using story completion, and have just written about story completion as a method as well (Frith, 2018).

Victoria Clarke: I am Victoria from UWE. I learnt about the method from my PhD supervisor Celia Kitzinger, and first started using story completion by supervising undergraduate students using the method. I teach it to postgraduate students and have taught it to undergraduate students. More recently, I have used it in my own research on body hair (Clarke & Braun, 2018; Jennings et al, 2018 and same-sex infidelity (Clarke et al., 2015) and given lots of presentations on it. I have also co-authored a couple of chapters on story completion (Braun et al., 2018; Clarke et al., 2017), which have already been mentioned, and included it in a textbook, co-authored with Ginny, which also has already been mentioned (Braun & Clarke, 2013)!

Nikki Hayfield: I am Nikki, at UWE as well, and I mainly teach story completion to undergraduates and supervise final year undergraduate projects using story completion. I have used it myself when I was part of the Story Completion Research Group at UWE with Victoria and Naomi. As a member of the Story Completion Research Group, I worked with Matthew Wood on a project where we combined *Bitstrips* with story completion to explore people's understandings of bisexual, lesbian, and heterosexual women's appearance (see Hayfield & Wood, 2018), as well as co-authoring the two methodological chapters that developed from that collaboration (Braun et al., 2018; Clarke et al., 2017).

Helen Malson: I am Helen, also at UWE, I often suggest story completion to students as a method, including one student – Eleanor Walsh – about seven years ago, who did an excellent story completion study, which we published (Walsh & Malson, 2010). I've also used it recently, in my own research with Emma Halliwell, where we developed and piloted an intervention for secondary school students, challenging restrictive gender norms. We asked the participants to complete a story stem at the start and end of the programme as a way of exploring its impact.

What can stories tell us?

Hannah: One of the great things about this method, which is sometimes one of the things that it's criticised for, is that it is quite playful. Because it's a story, it's not real, and that gives people the opportunity to play. So, you often get quite varied responses, not just in terms of the content themes, but how the stories are completed - the way in which the narrative is delivered, the use of reported speech, little pictures and drawings. All of those kinds of responses are enabled by the story method.

Naomi: It allows people to say things that they wouldn't say face-to-face, and they wouldn't say about themselves, so it is useful particularly with topics like sexuality, race or appearance, which might be hard to talk about or which are taboo.

Helen: I found that with an undergraduate student's study on eating disorders (Walsh & Malson, 2010), people said things that were pejorative in a way that they would not, I don't think, have said in an interview, or even perhaps in a questionnaire. But precisely because it was a fictional character they could be quite snide.

Naomi: And that might be part of someone's genuine response, but you don't see it in research because people are being 'proper'.

Helen: It's kind of about people's attitudes, but it very clearly isn't about their real-life attitudes towards real life people too.

Victoria: With the study that Ginny and I conducted for our qualitative textbook where we had a parent telling their children that they're trans (Braun & Clarke, 2013), the participants ran with it in the story, they were playful, and we got strongly aversive responses to the topic. So, we had people telling stories about the tax payer paying for the surgery, which was 'a complete waste of money', and real hostility in the story. I think because you've got that excuse of 'it's just a story', you're taking away personal accountability for what you write, and that seems to free people up. You also get ridiculous fantasy scenarios, and there's always at least one character who gets murdered or dies in every dataset.

Helen: Something that undergraduate students sometimes struggle with, is what kind of status to give to the story in relation to psychological concepts.

Virginia: What do we think the data give us access to? What do they represent?

Naomi: In terms of therapy, I think stories tell us not necessarily what that person would do in that context, but something about the repertoire of potential understandings that a client might draw on in a therapeutic context, and that can be useful clinically.

Iduna: The stories give access to socio-cultural representations, in the case of my research, around heterosexual sexual practices. This can be very relevant in clinical practice, as it enables therapists to understand the socio-cultural meanings that are attached to certain sexual practices, and how they might impact on, or are negotiated by, the individual. Clients negotiate their own experience within wider socio-cultural experience, and this is what the stories show.

Naomi: For me it's about the universe of social understandings that people might draw on.

Iduna: Yes, there's a whole body of literature that tells us how to treat, for example, certain sexual difficulties. As therapists we make choices about what kind of services we offer to people. It's important to understand and contextualise clients' difficulties and problems within their sociocultural environment. Story completion data can highlight some of the challenges within people's experience. Having a more nuanced understanding can help therapists make more informed choices about interventions.

Victoria: It might be helpful if you explain a little bit about what your research is about.

Iduna: Yes, I was interested in heteronormativity and how that gets negotiated, so I chose two scenarios on sexual behaviour – one on masturbation and one on sexual experimentation – to elicit heteronorms, and how people make sense of them. I wanted to disrupt the norms by having two versions of each stem – for example, one where the female partner was found masturbating and one where the male partner was found masturbating. The stories participants told about the male and female stems were very different and that's significant in terms of making sense of heteronormativity and how that may play out in individual experience. I wasn't particularly interested in masturbation or sexual experimentation per-se, it was an opportunity to interrogate sexual behaviour, and relationships, and how people negotiate these.

Hannah: I think that's one of the really interesting things about story completion, the story endings that people write are sometimes so different. The difficulty for students is then separating out the stories from the people that have written them and thinking about the connection between what's on the page and the person who's writing. This isn't just students, we all slip around these things. So, that's a nice example of stories as cultural products, rather than individual psychology.

Iduna: When men and women respond to a story stem and their responses are compared, there is an assumption that something about the person writing the story is reflected in the story, but this isn't about the individual as much as a cultural group of people. In my story completion, I compared therapists with people who hadn't been therapeutically trained because I wanted to understand whether that particular experience (therapeutic training) gives you access to a different kind of discourse. I think that's important because what we want as feminists is to find ways to change cultural patterns, so we can say "There is a group of people who have developed a different understanding, well let's see how they might write stories or what cultural stories they can tell", and then we can compare them to people who might not have had access to those kinds of discourses. So, we may not be making interpretations of the individuals answering the stories, but of social groups of people and then compare the discourses the different groups have access to.

Virginia: I think most of us around this table have adopted critical constructionist frameworks in our story completion research, but given the rise of psycho-social approaches, and interest in interiority, do you think they can be a useful tool at getting at what might be considered more traditionally psychological?

Naomi: I like projective methods –in my US Counselling Psychology training I was taught how to use them in clinical settings. Using them clinically means understanding the projections as potentially saying something about somebody's interior world. When I've worked clinically with

children they've sometimes been obsessed with particular films. One little kid I was working with, he was really obsessed by Peter Pan, I thought that was really interesting, what has that taught me about him? He wanted perhaps to be a little lost boy and not have to deal with his reality? In the same way, I think if you've got a group of young people responding to a particular story stem, you can potentially learn about their meaning-making frameworks.

Nikki: It's interesting isn't it. Although I've taken a constructionist approach with data, if I completed a story I imagine that what I wrote would probably reflect some of my criticality, that would come through. But I could equally decide that I was going to write a really abhorrent story, that was as far removed from my personal views as possible, just to have fun.

Naomi: But even if you wrote a story that was abhorrent, it would still tell us about what is abhorrent for you. So, I think that the stories we tell might say something about what's in our head. It doesn't mean that it's you or how you behave, but it says something potentially about the wealth of your fantasy, the scope of your imagination.

This said, I also think about the unexpected ways you can end up providing a cue in this method. Qualitative methods talk a lot about the importance of understanding that the narrative that you get from somebody is contextual – that it's a response to the person who is asking the questions and the time and the place, and where they're at and everything. Victoria and I collected data with sixteen and seventeen years old where we've handed out the story completion in person, and sometimes the data talks about protagonists who look a little bit like us! Which was a bit unexpected! You can think about the value that you add (as the researcher) in terms of creating the data.

Nikki: There is the idea that by doing story completion we can potentially reduce social desirability impacts, because as Victoria said earlier, it takes away that personal accountability. That's one of my big interests in story completion tasks because my research is around perceptions of sexuality.

I've noticed in the data I've collected with students asking about sexuality and appearance – where they had a lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual character – that it was hard to find any clear differences between how the character was portrayed in each of those datasets. I was collecting the data and I'm open about my bisexuality to the students. I wondered whether that came into play with why the responses were so uniform across those different groups, and whether if someone else had done the research, we would have had more varied responses across the characters with different sexualities because they might have felt less guarded about acknowledging difference if they weren't completing it for a researcher they know is bisexual.

Victoria: They are writing their stories for you, or their imagined version of you. In the stories we collected face to face from sixth formers, the character sometimes had red hair, and it's hard not to read that as related to the fact that I'm standing there with red hair!

Research practicalities, comparative designs and sample sizes

Virginia: One of the things we wanted to talk about was the use of comparative design in story completion, and whether this is consistent with qualitative research, especially constructionist qualitative research. This seems to be potentially controversial for some people – including journal reviewers. Do you think we can justify comparison?

Hannah: If the story endings that are written are different, then something is going on. When you use gender as your point of comparison, this can mean male writers and female writers, or a male protagonist in the story or a female protagonist in the story. People get in all kinds of twists and contortions about which of these they are talking about when making comparisons. So, it feels easier as a constructionist when you're talking about gender in the story, than when you're talking about the gender of the writers.

Naomi: To me it seems obvious, that men and women in our cultural context grow up with different understandings. Because gender is complex and is understood in very deep and complicated ways, because of different exposure and assumptions, people grow up with a different kind of repertoire or understanding about gender, and that's what stories show. It doesn't mean that we can conclude anything necessarily about the men and women.

Hannah: Yes, but when the stories that are written by people who identify as male and people who identify as female are different, if you're not careful about how you explain that, then it becomes read as if those are inherent sex differences. Like the interpretation of Horner's work about fear of success (1972)[1], and assuming that women as a category have a fear of success, and that that's somehow inherent or an essential part of being female.

Naomi: We've been talking about gender comparisons, and Iduna was talking about her work comparing stories told by therapists and non-therapists. I am interested in understandings of fat and I have been thinking it would be interesting to do a comparative study including people who self-identified as recovering from Anorexia, because I know from other work (Rance, Clarke & Moller, 2014) that there's a particular kind of understanding and attention to body shape in that population. One could imagine that if you could compare the stories told by people who might have different body weights, you could explore whether body size potentially influences how people make sense of and respond to story stems.

Helen: I would feel really cautious about how the findings of that kind of comparative study would be taken up and that, however carefully you explain it in the paper, people will still say 'This is what girls and women who are diagnosed as anorexic are like, that's what's wrong with them'.

Naomi: Yes, it's important to be aware of the idea that the results of story stem comparisons might be interpreted in ways that are stigmatising to particular groups. One of the reasons I like story completion is because it allows you to look at topics, but also groups, that are stigmatised. Fat is

certainly a taboo topic! Also, recently I have been thinking about doing story stem research around ethnicity in the context of therapy – comparing responses of people who identify as white or non-white to counsellors of different ethnicities. There is a little bit of research from non-white therapists who talk about their experience of working with white clients, but it's really hard to get that from the client's perspective. However, it could be really useful to support practitioners who want to work with a client group that might have racist responses to them.

Virginia: To me, an interesting question is how you set up comparisons – when you have one story stem and switch a detail for a second stem, and whether you alter the story telling task for the different versions.

Helen: Eleanor and I had an anorexia version of the story stem and a bulimia version in our study, but otherwise the stories were the same. Half of the participants did the anorexia version first, and half the bulimia version first. We were expecting much more difference between the two versions than we found. There was a little bit along those lines of privileging anorexia over bulimia, but mostly they were pretty similar, and there wasn't that much difference in things like length, or what sorts of things they were writing, one way round or the other.

Naomi: It's interesting that you counterbalanced the presentation, because that's another good example of the way that this is a qualitative method that nonetheless borrows techniques from positivist quantitative methodologies.

Virginia: To me it intuitively feels like a good thing to do, because otherwise the context for making sense of one set of stories is somehow different to another set of stories, even within the same participant group. Has anyone else asked participants to complete more than one story? I haven't tried it.

Victoria: For an embryo donation study Naomi and I have in progress, we had one story about a donor family and one story about a recipient family, and all of our approximately two hundred participants completed both stories – so we've got about four hundred stories. In another study that Nikki, Ginny and Naomi and I are currently collecting data for on voluntarily childless couples (they have decided not to have kids) and we've used story stems with a straight couple, a gay male couple, and a lesbian couple. The basic stem is 'partner 1 and partner 2 have been together for several years and have decided not to have children…'. We've played around with it so that we've got participants to write two stories, and more recently we've got them to write all three. And there's some participants that say, 'For the same reasons as the previous couple'. But what I've noticed is that they write more for the second story, and they write even more for the third story, so rather than there being a tail off and they write less, they actually seem to get into it and write more, the more tasks you ask them to do.

Naomi: And did you counterbalance the story order?

Victoria: I didn't do anything that systematic. I just chopped and changed it because I wanted to play around and see what happened… some got the straight couple first, some got the gay male or lesbian couple first, some got one stem to complete, some got two and some got three.

Iduna: In my study, in a very quantitative way, I made sure each version was equally likely to come up, and I counterbalanced all the different versions. The number of words for the masturbation stories pretty much corresponded with the number of the words for the sexual experimentation stories. Counterbalancing was good to show this.

Virginia: So, it could have been that the first story got less?

Iduna: Yes, it could have been, and you can check that.

Victoria: So, if people were starting out with this method, what would we say makes a good sample size?

Virginia: What would we advise a student if we were advising them for a small project?

Helen: I usually say thirty to fifty.

Nikki: I think Matt Wood and I had about thirty participants, and we considered it a pilot study, but actually there's enough data in that sample. In terms of undergraduate student projects, that number seems to work fine and usually seems to be enough to be able to identify some patterns. But it varies depending on what you're trying to get out of it, how many comparisons you've got, and what you're trying to do.

Naomi: One thing I like about the method is that it allows you, in a way that other qualitative methods don't, to have a larger sample. So, I quite like a sample size of two hundred. Although I have mixed views about the construct of theoretical saturation, there is something about having a bigger sample size that means you can just see the themes really clearly.

Virginia: For students, it's that fine balance between giving them something that's going to have patterning that is evident, or that gives them a way into the data, versus feeling overwhelmed by the data. In the counter-normative body hair project, I had a student who analysed a subset of the data for the project. We were collecting more, but there enough patterning for us to not feel like the remaining sixty were going to be radically different and might completely change what might be done analytically.

Victoria: In the same way that I would always say to my students "Well let's see how it goes with the interviews", I'd say the same with story completion. "Let's see how it goes, stop when you've got fifty, stop when you've got one hundred", then, see what they look like. If you feel like there's enough, you start to see patterning, and you've got a rich dataset, stop. If you want more, carry on.

Virginia: And partly that depends on the length; if you're getting fairly short, fairly thin stories versus rich nuanced three pages.

Naomi: Yes, it's about the quality of that data not the quantity.

Hannah: It also depends on what you're going to do with the data. If you're going to quantify the data, then you need more because otherwise the numbers aren't meaningful – it depends who you're writing for, and what they're going to expect of a qualitative analysis.

Naomi: I also think it depends on the purpose. If you're trying to influence practice, there's no question in my mind that bigger samples are more convincing. If you're trying to say "This might be something you need to think about in therapy" having a sample of two hundred is probably going to be more convincing to that traditional audience than a sample of thirty. It depends on the journal and who you're writing to.

Iduna: The number of comparisons is really key in identifying the number of stories you need. I had a large sample (two hundred and fifty completions overall), but when you break it down to look at the interactions between the gender of the story protagonists, the gender of the person answering the story, and the profession of the person answering the story, it ends up being quite small numbers. On that level I wouldn't have confidently made any comparisons. Where you just compare men or women, male or female protagonists, or therapists and non-therapists, I probably had fifty in each of those categories and that felt more comfortable. When you broke it down more (examining the stories female therapists wrote about a male character or a female character) then the data wasn't there to justify the comparison. So, I stopped the comparisons when I felt like there wasn't enough data to make those comparisons. When you make comparisons between the people writing the stories, it gets a lot trickier and you need more stories to see the trends. I would probably suggest for undergraduates to not make any interpretations about the people writing the story, because that becomes conceptually really complicated as well in terms of what the data

mean. Whereas comparing responses to different protagonists is relatively straight forward, and differences jump out at you more readily.

Nikki: I guess the other thing is in terms of participants, it has mostly been undergraduate students as participants in the story completion work that's been published so far.

Virginia: And students as we know are, to evoke that paper that some of you might have seen, 'The weirdest people in the world' (Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010).

Nikki: In the appearance and sexuality stories, we had some non-student participants and the data are different – it is quite striking. Those who were not students were more engaged, and the data felt more engaged – and therefore interesting – compared to data from students, although sometimes at more of a tangent. One of the non-student participants told a story that was very artistic and conjured up amazing imagery which went beyond simply completing the task and had all this detail that was evocative and emotive.

Iduna: Using an adult sample where my average age was thirty-five, the data were much more consistent. I used a student sample in an earlier piece of story completion research focused on sexual refusal in heterosexual relationships, and the variance in story length was between eight words and five hundred. When I used the professional sample it was pretty much in accordance to the guidance I had given, which was a hundred and fifty words. On average they wrote around two hundred words, and I could use all of the stories, none were too short to be meaningful. So, I think there's a real value in accessing non-student samples.

Naomi: One of the things I like about story completion is that it's inexpensive. It also allows you to collect data you couldn't otherwise collect – this was the case with the embryo donation study, because embryo donation is rather uncommon. Later we went on to do research with people who had engaged in embryo donation but in this early stage of our work we looked instead at

understandings of embryo donation. The method allowed us to collect data from students, because we could just ask them to tell a story. You could ask, why would we bother to do this study? But there's this generation of people who've come from donor conception, including embryo donation, so when you hit seventeen and you tell your best friend where you come from, how does your best friend understand that? What we get in the data are this sort of layering of understandings of things like adoption, and then this lack of understanding about embryo donation. In a way, it allowed us to do this brilliant thing of collecting data at a point where we didn't actually have any data from the population we wanted to study. And, to explore the current cultural context of lack of knowledge about assisted conception in general and embryo donation in particular.

Victoria: What's fascinating about those stories, is that we organised a seminar day themed around embryo donation research for a British Psychological Society seminar series (see Moller & Clarke, 2016) where two people talked about two separate studies they'd done interviewing people who had conceived with embryo donation or had donated embryos to others. The narratives they were telling about embryo donation mapped exactly onto our story completions; the themes, the issues that came up were identical. It does make me think that story completion taps into something meaningful - the narratives we use to make sense of particular experiences or phenomena in the wider social contexts.

Naomi: Yes, social understandings around family in this context.

Virginia: That's a nice example because it offers (don't hate me when I use this term) 'triangulation', or kind of validation of this as a technique for getting at something that is meaningful around the meaning-making resources that people have around topics. So, it's a really nice example for validity of the method.

What happens when story completion does not go to plan?

Naomi: What happens when story completions don't work, and why they don't work? For some people that blank piece of paper, and their anxiety about how it might be read, and what we might do with it, is difficult. For some people you do get these short or very flat stories.

Helen: I have just tried using story completion with secondary school students, and it didn't work very well. Partly because it was part of a before-and-after evaluation of an intervention in the school around gender norms. They had quite a lot to do – a raft of standard questionnaires to complete about body image, restrained eating, and conformity to gender stereotypes – and inserting a story completion task at a point where they were probably a bit bored may be partly the reason why it didn't work so well. But I'm not sure how we could have done it differently. They had a story about a teenage girl or boy, and they were asked to write about what sort of person the character is, and how does their life proceed immediately after, and what kind of adult they become.

Hannah: I'm interested in understanding a bit more about why you think it didn't work, what didn't work?

Helen: The stories were really short. One of the things I put in the story opening to cue age, and to get them more engaged in the exercise, was about choosing educational options. So, 'Jay is a fourteen-year-old and she has just been discussing GCSE [General Certificate in Secondary Education[2]] options with her friends at lunch time. They go on to talk about what their plans are for the weekend.' We got three lines maximum – 'she chose biology, and got married, the end'. 'She chose biology, and went on to cure cancer, the end'. That sort of thing.

Iduna: I wonder whether the stem has to be quite emotive, so it elicits an emotional response for people to be triggered into writing. Sometimes when there are other characters in the story stem, or when participants write additional people into it, the different characters end up representing

the different types of emotions people might experience in relation to what's happened in the story.

Naomi: I also think you can give people a cliff hanger. It's that kind of 'A deep and dark…' story.

Iduna: So, somebody comes into the room and finds something unexpected, like their partner masturbating. People will often put themselves into the shoes of the 'injured' party. It is easier for people to write what happens next if they have had an emotional response to the cue.

Victoria: Yes, in Ginny and my trans parent study the parent has got something important to tell their children, and then they disclose that they're trans.

Naomi: Yes, it creates a space that you can write into, in all sorts of different ways. One of the things that projective methods are famous for, is having ambiguity in the stem. So, you can explore what people mean by the core thing under investigation – what do they mean by masturbation, what do they mean by experimental sex, what does being girly mean if you're fourteen?

Hannah: Short stories are not necessarily bad stories. Some of the ones that stick in my mind are short. In Kitzinger and Powell's (1995) study about infidelity, one story ended 'And he shot her'. From my study (Frith, 2013) about the absence of (female) orgasm, one ended with 'And he rolled over'. A very short ending, but very packed with meaning.

Virginia: I'm thinking of the ways in which in certain kinds of contexts, like schools, there are these narratives about what happens – you choose your GCSE topics – and you're already cued into a particular kind of trajectory.

Victoria: Yes, a student of a colleague used a scenario in which a student ('Jane') was very anxious about giving a presentation, and the colleague contacted me saying that the student was having a panic because 'the data are really kind of bland and uninteresting and we don't know what to do'.

Everyone had written stories about Jane feeling really nervous, but then overcoming her nerves, giving her presentation and getting an A. So, there was no richness and texture.

Naomi: That's not a contested story – the idea that you're anxious about a presentation is not a contested idea.

Victoria: No, and I think that really taught me that the scenario you set up has got to be able to travel in many different directions.

Nikki: Some of the topics I've researched *aren't* necessarily hugely contested, but if you give clear instructions you can still get good stories. In my research around appearance, appearance isn't that contested, but we asked participants to tell a story about a date – about what happens over the following days, weeks, months or years. So, then you do get some longer stories.

Hannah: Perhaps sometimes stories are striking because of their lack of variability – why can there be no other story about anxious students doing presentations, except they do it, and they do it well? What does this mean in the context in which they're writing?

Naomi: Yes, if you didn't ask students you'd probably get something really different, because students need to succeed in this context. We've talked about story 'refusal' too. I was really struck in the fat therapist data, about the extent to which sometimes people think they know what researchers are after, and so they avoid it. Some of the stories in this dataset did not make any mention of weight at all. In one the character says, "Oh my god, she's fat!", and then the participant tells a story about something completely different – a lovely therapeutic experience with this delicious person. And that's really interesting.

Victoria: Yes, and in the body hair data there are stories where David is about to start removing his body hair, and he doesn't, or he shaves his beard off. So, it's a partial 'resistance' to what's being asked of them.

Naomi: Sometimes I've had story refusals that have been rude. 'This is boring'; 'what the fuck are you asking me'; 'I don't want to play this game'.

Virginia: One thing we've noticed is getting zingers and witty comments where people are trying to write the clever story or the witty answer.

Hannah: I think there's something about people reading the situation and what they think they're being asked to do. I've sometimes got those little zingers, with lots of exclamations at the end, and other times I've had 'a serious telling'. With the orgasmic absence data, participants would tell me 'it's all about communication' – in capital letters – like, 'I know this is the answer you're looking for, so here it is'. People are trying to make sense of what it is you're asking, and that might be about what they project onto you as the researcher, but also about what the task is.

Getting published

Naomi: I think getting published is an issue, because people don't understand the method yet.

Victoria: Yes, some reviewers have been very negative and dismissive – 'No, this is wrong, you're doing qualitative research all wrong, you're over-interpreting your data'. The comparative design is really troubling, but also the fact that you're collecting stories, and there's some real uncertainty among reviewers about what conclusions we were drawing about the status of the stories.

Naomi: Yes, I got that in some reviews. 'What do the data tell you, what's the status of the data'?

Hannah: Because it's a story, and made up?

Naomi: Yes.

Victoria: But that rests on the idea that interviews give you the unvarnished truth of people's experiences, rather than being a story located in a particular social context that does particular

kind of work. For me all methods can be interpreted in different ways and can occupy a different epistemological space, but interviews tend to get treated as the truth.

Hannah: Story completion is often considered resource light – they're quick to do and can be a way of doing research in areas that might otherwise be very tricky. Perhaps this means that they get treated as poor quality, qualitative research – a bit lightweight as a method.

Victoria: It does make sense of the reaction – you're sort of 'getting away with' something. Yes.

Naomi: I think there needs to be a distinction between the quickness or the resource-lightness of the data *collection*, and the seriousness or weight of the *analysis*.

Virginia: I think story completion is challenging in a different way, because it's unfamiliar. It comes back to what we were talking about earlier, about the anxieties around bringing in some of that quantitative experimentalism. Some aspects of story completion appear to be contestation of the essence of qualitative research.

Naomi: We've talked about comparative designs, but it's possible to count data in this method. You can talk about percentages of participants who assumed that the lead character was female versus male, for example. For me it makes perfect sense that you would do that, but it makes some people uncomfortable.

Hannah: You have to work quite hard in publications to shift people into a different understanding of what you're trying to do and why.

Naomi: Most of us are talking about using story completion in a broadly critical psychology context. When I tried to publish in US therapy journals, they really struggled with that perspective, which is foreign to them.

Virginia: But I don't think it's limited to story completion. I think it can apply to a whole lot of different methods you might use, because the reviewers and the editor, and their knowledge and their location and understandings, are all part of that equation.

Hannah: It feels like story completion may be more open to criticism because of its status as a story.

Naomi: And because it's a qualitative method that uses aspects that are associated with quantitative research, qualitatively.

Virginia: So what advice might we have for people wanting to use this method and publish, or for any editors who might be reading this and evaluating the method?

Victoria: I think it's like any new method, there's always a struggle. The more that gets published, the more that it becomes a method on people's radar, hopefully the easier it gets. But also, qualitative researchers are really territorial. We know this because we can be territorial. They have a clear vision of what they want qualitative research to be, and anything that falls outside of that provokes a strong reaction.

Naomi: And I think you have to make a case. With the embryo donation research, it doesn't make sense to use a participant group that doesn't have experience of it, *except* for imagining what it's like to be an embryo donation kid. You have to make an argument for the choices you're making, you have to talk about why you're doing it, and about how you read the data.

Virginia: And also, be clear about what you're interested in getting at, and why this is a method that allows you to get at that. That relationship is absent in many published articles.

Future Possibilities for Story Completion

Nikki: We used imagery in our story completion tasks on appearance and sexuality. We asked participants to make avatars using *Bitstrips*; lots of people were using *Bitstrips* on *Facebook* at the

time, so we felt it would be accessible. I think using images has some potential, but it was actually quite challenging and tricky. Using visual imagery fitted well because it was a project about appearance, and it gave a way of seeing how the characters participants created fitted with, or disrupted, the stories they were telling in their written text. But it was quite limited with how much participants could edit their character with *Bitstrips* – you can only change so much about them. You couldn't, for example, add tattoos or make their clothes hang off them in a particular way. I'm always aware of wanting participation to stay fun, and not become too arduous, and the limitations of the *Bitstrips* software constrained how participants could engage with the study, as well as introducing complications of using different types of technology into participation.

Virginia: So, the avatar was for the character in the story?

Nikki: Yes, so they told their story and then we said, 'Now please draw your character.' Some of them did fun things, like they drew the character, and also drew the character's date. They obviously enjoyed it because they engaged with it beyond what we had asked.

Victoria: Lewin (1985) used a video stem for research about unwanted intercourse. There was a narrator who sets up the scenario, and then there was a man talking directly to the camera. Lewin asked women to tell two stories; one in which she agrees to have sex with him, one in which she refuses.

Hannah: Other ways of playing with story-telling could involve presenting two people in the video, and asking participants to tell the story from the two different perspectives, or having participants write a story from a perspective that they might not otherwise choose.

Naomi: I've noticed in my (collaborative) research on infidelity using qualitative surveys that when we ask people about infidelity, it's much easier to get accounts from people whose *partners* have cheated, than from people who themselves have done so. The accounts from those who engaged

in infidelity that we have are all slightly 'mea culpa', and I have always assumed that people engage with infidelity because it's fun. We didn't get that at all from the data. So, I have been thinking it would be fun to do a story completion where you put participants in the position of the person who's having the affair, and then see what kind of sociocultural understandings are drawn on. Another way you can be creative with the method is asking questions at the end. One of the follow-on questions I asked in the fat therapist study was "How heavy do you think the therapist is?" You can have a description ('incredibly fat', 'not fat at all', 'she just thinks she's fat'), but actually to have a concrete body weight was really interesting – 'a hundred million tons' was one answer, while some weights were really low.

Hannah: Thinking about different story-telling traditions, story completions are often written individually. Are there story stems that might invite a collective story, or could participants write collective stories?

Virginia: From the New Zealand context, Pacific cultures have very strong story-telling traditions, and it's more culturally embedded in identity, than in Western cultures. Has anyone done anything with any groups where story-telling may be more part of their histories? Not that I'm aware of, and if not, it strikes me as a really interesting thing to think about for future use.

Notes

[1] In her story completion study on women's 'fear of success', Horner interpreted the fact that her male and female participants wrote different stories about male and female success as meaning that women have a fear of success. As discussed by Celia Kitzinger (see Wood & Kitzinger, 2018; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995), Horner used a psychanalytic lens to propose an interpretation focussed on individual women rather than a cultural lens that might explain the stories as the result of a particular (1970s) milieu where to be both feminine and successful was difficult.

² GCSEs are qualifications in Britain that are awarded to 16-year-olds.

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