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**Qualitative Story Completion for Counseling Psychology Research: A creative method to  
interrogate dominant discourses**

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### Abstract

Qualitative story completion (SC) research involves the novel qualitative application of a technique previously used in quantitative research and clinical assessment, in which participants write stories in response to a story “stem” designed by the researcher. The resulting stories are analysed to identify patterns of meaning using conventional qualitative analytic approaches such as thematic analysis. In place of the more typical self-report methods used in qualitative research, such as interviews or focus groups, the method provides a categorically different way to explore a topic, one which can offer new understandings to counseling psychology researchers. In particular, SC’s capacity to illuminate social discourses makes it particularly useful for understanding the potential ways in which socially marginalized populations are understood in therapeutic spaces as well as for understanding how clients of all kinds may make sense of therapeutic interactions. This paper provides an introduction to qualitative SC, explaining the method and its origins, and offering practical guidance about how to use it. The method is illustrated with examples from the existing SC literature and a hypothetical study focussed on understandings of mental health difficulties in the workplace.

*Keywords:* Creative methods, intersectionality, projective techniques, social justice, thematic analysis

**Public significance statement:** This paper introduces a method of data collection, qualitative story completion. The paper argues that by providing a different type of data (stories), new possibilities are opened up to counseling psychology researchers.

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### Introduction

In this paper, we introduce a qualitative method that centres on a novel application of a technique principally used in clinical assessment and quantitative research (mostly relating to attachment and child development). This technique is story completion (SC) – where the researcher crafts a story “stem”, the opening sentence(s) of a story centred on a hypothetical scenario, and participants are invited to complete it. SC was first used as a qualitative method in the field of feminist psychology in the early 1970s but there has been little uptake of the method until relatively recently when several European and New Zealand social and counseling psychologists starting working together to develop and promote SC as a qualitative research tool in psychology (see, Braun & Clarke, 2013; Braun et al., 2019a; Braun et al., 2019b; Clarke et al., 2017; Clarke et al., 2019).

There is now a small but growing body of empirical literature in psychology – most notably in the intersecting fields of feminist, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT), social, health and counseling psychology – using SC to explore and interrogate participants’ social perceptions, or the dominant social meanings, surrounding phenomena. Such phenomena include (different-sex) relational difficulties including infidelity (e.g., Clarke et al., 2015; Kitinger & Powell, 1995; Schnarre & Adam, 2018; Whitty, 2005) and a partner refusing sex (e.g., Beres et al., 2014; Beres et al., 2019) or not orgasming during sex (Frith, 2013), eating disorders (Walsh & Malson, 2010), and dating a physically disabled person (Hunt et al., 2018). SC research within counseling psychology has also explored both perceptions of socially stigmatized therapists (Moller & Tischner, 2019) and therapists’ perceptions of phenomena relevant to clinical practice such as heterosexual sex (heterosex) (Shah-Beckley et al., 2018). Thus, qualitative SC research has mostly formed part of a strand of qualitative enquiry centred

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on the social context of human subjectivity and experience, rather than human experience per se.

In this paper, we extend existing literature on qualitative SC by providing the first methodological discussion of the application of SC within the context of counseling psychology, identifying both the general strengths of the method and those with particular relevance for counseling psychology, such as the potential SC offers researchers concerned with intersectionality and social justice. In writing this paper we hope to encourage counseling psychologists to add SC to their toolkit of methods and, in doing so, to respond to calls for counseling psychologists to embrace a diversity of methods in their research (Morrow, 2007; Suzuki et al., 2007).

### **The History of Story Completion as a Projective Technique and Quantitative Research Method**

The SC task was developed as a projective test in the 1930s and 1940s for clinical work with children (Lansky, 1968). SC was one of the earliest projective tests; predated only by the Rorschach ink blot test (Rorschach & Morgenthaler, 1921/1942), SC came before the Rotter Incomplete Sentence Blank test (Rotter & Rafferty, 1950), drawing tests such as Koch's Tree-Drawing test (Koch, 1952) and the Draw-a-Person test (Goodenough, 1926; Harris, 1963), and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT, Murray, 1943/1971), which is a type of SC task that involves describing an ambiguous scene. Developed principally for use in clinical assessment, the assumptions of projective tests lie in psychoanalytic theory and the idea that a core psychological mechanism of humans involves the projection of internal aspects of a person externally, with a consequent (biasing) impact on perception and understanding of the external world (Rabin, 2001). Since, within psychoanalytic theory, a person may not be able to access material (memories or understandings) that is unconscious, projective tests provide an

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opportunity to access that which is otherwise inaccessible, generating what Murray (1943/1971, p. 1) described as “an x-ray picture of [the] inner self.”

Projective tests centre on the use of an ambiguous stimulus – such as an inkblot, a request to draw a man or the opening sentences of a story (the story “stem” or “cue”) based on a hypothetical scenario in which some of the details are deliberately ambiguous. The assumption is that because the test taker cannot know definitively what the stimulus or task “is”, they have to draw on their own psychological resources to make sense of it and “fill in the blanks”- projecting aspects of their unconscious self onto their test responses. In addition to providing access to unconscious material, projective methods are valued for sidestepping the problem of patients who deliberately withhold information or lack sufficient insight into themselves to provide relevant information (Huprich, 2006). In short, projectives are theorised to provide access to the, otherwise inaccessible, essential and accurate “truth” of a person.

Similar assumptions underlie the use of (quantified or quantitative) SC tasks in developmental psychology research. For example, the Adult Attachment Projective, a TAT-like story telling task that aims to assess the attachment status of adults, is named as a “projective” assessment. The MacArthur Story Stem Battery (Bretheron & Oppenheim, 2003), which is designed to assess attachment in children, is framed as “revealing the inner worlds of young children” in the title of a book on the battery (Emde et al., 2003).

SC methods that align with the label “projective” embrace an “essentialist” stance (Kitzinger & Powell, 1995), the conceptual assumption that people have an inner “essence” or relatively fixed psychological “nature”, even if it is not easy to access or reveal. Quantitative research using such methods typically also assumes a positivist empirical stance (Ponterotto, 2005), and is concerned with accurately and objectively revealing the “truth” of a phenomena,

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with measures in place to control for researcher bias. Consequently, such methods often utilise complex coding systems (e.g., George & West, 2012) which aim to maximise reliability of measurement and produce data that can be analysed statistically. This has led qualitative SC researchers Clarke et al. (2017, p. 46-47) to bemoan the loss of “valuable, in-depth information”, the ironing out of “the variability in individual responses to the projective stimuli” and the turning of “rich narrative detail into numbers and categories suitable for quantitative analysis”. By contrast, it is this “rich narrative detail” that *is* the focus of qualitative SC research.

### **The Early Development of Qualitative Story Completion**

The first study to use SC in a broadly qualitative design was conducted by the US feminist psychologist Horner in the early 1970s and focused on women’s alleged fear of success (Horner, 1972). Horner retained the psychoanalytic underpinnings of SC as a projective test and asked male and female undergraduates to write stories in response to stems she crafted. Participants were given stems with a protagonist of the same sex; one of the female stems read: “After first term finals, Anne finds herself at the top of her medical school class” (1972, p. 161). Horner coded for the presence and absence of fear of success imagery in the stories and concluded that whereas most male participants showed “strong positive feelings” (p. 162) about the successful male stem, a majority of the female participants were “disconcerted, troubled, or confused” (p. 162) about the successful female stem. Horner interpreted this as meaning that women and girls are motivated to avoid success because it is in conflict with femininity. Horner’s interpretation of her data was controversial – triggering numerous failed attempts to replicate her findings (see Levine & Crumrine, 1975) – because she appeared to blame women for inequality rather than a patriarchal society. The controversy surrounding Horner’s interpretation of her findings may explain the lack of uptake of SC as a qualitative technique

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until relatively recently (Clarke et al., 2019; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995). Apart from a study by another US feminist psychologist Lewin (1985) on college women's perceptions of unwanted (penis-in-vagina) intercourse, qualitative SC research did not re-emerge until the 1990s. In 1995, Australian feminist psychologist Moore used SC in research exploring girls' understandings of menstruation. Although Moore did not use a psychoanalytic lens to interpret her data, like Horner and Lewin she treated her data as revealing psychological truths about the storytellers. She assumed the stories the girls wrote – with themes like embarrassment, anxiety and deception – reflected their true feelings about menstruation.

The first qualitative study to offer a radically different approach to qualitative SC was also published in 1995 by British feminist psychologists Kitzinger and Powell. This study explored responses to infidelity in a heterosexual relationship. The researchers argued that although it is possible to interpret stories as revealing essential psychological truths about the storytellers, it is *also* possible to interpret them through a social constructionist (see, Gergen, 2015) conceptual lens as revealing social rather than psychological meanings, and the dominant ways of making sense of a phenomenon in the wider social context. In this social constructionist framework, in which meaning and knowledge are viewed as socially created, stories are theorised to be the product of particular sociocultural discourses or constructions of the object being researched. Kitzinger and Powell's argument that SC is an epistemologically flexible method opened the door to a much wider range of qualitative SC research.

The rest of this paper will expound the possibilities of SC research, providing an introduction to qualitative SC, with a particular focus on what it offers counseling psychology researchers, and guidance on implementing the method. The discussion will be illustrated with examples from the small body of existing SC studies and by discussing the design possibilities in

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a hypothetical study focussed on sense-making around mental health difficulties in the workplace.

### **Defining Qualitative Story Completion**

As a method that gathers “speculative” stories, SC offers something entirely novel within qualitative data collection. To unpack this claim, we have to distinguish qualitative SC from what it is *not*.

### ***Types of Qualitative Data***

Qualitative studies based on textual data collected directly from participants can be generally categorised into two broad types. The first type consists of *self-reports* of personal experience, perceptions and opinions, most often collected through interviews and focus groups set up by the researchers to gather data on the topic they are studying. Other researcher-directed methods for collecting such data include qualitative surveys (see, Terry & Braun, 2017), diaries (see, Clarke & Braun, 2013), vignettes (see, Gray et al., 2017) and memory work (e.g., Willig, 2000). Some of these methods involve participants writing or telling stories about their experiences (e.g., memory work) or answering questions about their perceptions of a hypothetical scenario in story form (e.g. vignettes).

The second main data source consists of what can be referred to as *naturally occurring* language (talk and text that are not instigated by a researcher). This is the focus for researchers who seek to access language in its ‘natural’ social context (Potter, 2011), and are interested in prevailing social narratives or discourses, such as those surrounding mental health difficulties and psychiatric diagnoses (e.g., Harper, 1995). This type of data might consist of text drawn from sources such as websites, newspaper stories or blog posts, however it could also comprise

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speech interactions that take place in psychotherapy (e.g., Antaki, Barnes & Leudar, 2005; Madill, 2015; Perakyla, Antaki, Vehvilainen & Leudar., 2008).

Although both broad types of textual data sources offer rich resources for qualitative psychotherapy research, qualitative SC offers counseling psychology researchers an alternative type of data. Stories written in response to a “stem” provided by the researcher can be categorised as neither self-report nor naturally-occurring language. Like focus groups and interviews, qualitative SC data are “created” by a researcher, who provides participants with a story stem to respond to. Unlike most focus groups and interviews conducted in counseling psychology research, however, SC research does not seek to access direct accounts of participants’ personal experiences or beliefs. Instead, SC accesses something else; what that something else is, can be theorised and understood in different ways, depending on where the researcher sits in terms of their research values or paradigm.

### *Qualitative paradigms in SC research*

Morrow (2005) recommends that qualitative researchers make explicit the philosophical assumptions or paradigms that underly their research. This is particularly important for SC research as SC data can be interpreted from within different qualitative paradigms. As discussed, Kitzinger & Powell (1995) proposed – in addition to an essentialist (or “realist”) paradigm – that it was possible to adopt a social constructionist position and this approach has been used in much contemporary SC research (e.g., Clarke & Braun, 2019; Clarke et al., 2015; Hayfield & Wood, 2019; Jennings, Braun & Clarke, 2019; Tischner, 2019; Wood, Wood & Baalam, 2017). However, Clarke et al. (2017) outlined a third possibility for the conceptual foundations of SC research - one they argued sits somewhere between essential truths and social constructions – an approach concerned with social perceptions or understandings. This framework, which they

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dubbed contextualist, is broadly consistent with an interpretivist-qualitative paradigm (see, Morrow, 2007) and also somewhat akin to critical realism (Willig, 2019). Contextualist paradigms are concerned with participants' perspectives (similar to the essential truths framework) but view these as partial and shaped by, and embedded within, the participants' social context (similar to the social constructionist framework) and reflecting their particular social location.

In order to understand more about the different ways in which SC data can be treated, Table 1 outlines how, depending on the adopted paradigm, SC data can be understood as accessing: 1) essential psychological truths about the storytellers (essentialist paradigm); 2) socially situated perceptions about a phenomenon (contextualist paradigm); or 3) socially prevalent discourses surrounding a phenomenon (social constructionist paradigm). Each position reflects a different core research paradigm – or set of epistemological and ontological assumptions.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

In choosing the “right” paradigm for a given qualitative SC study, the researcher needs to consider both the aims of the study and their research values - the position they take on the conceptual foundations of qualitative research (see, Morrow, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005). Consider a researcher who wants to explore understandings of mental health difficulties in the workplace. Adopting an essentialist paradigm would allow the researcher to uncover what research participants *themselves* think and feel about this topic. Since self-report methods (e.g. interview or questionnaires) directly access personal perceptions of/opinions about a phenomenon, there would need to be a clear rationale for using SC as an indirect (projective) method. For example,

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the researcher might be concerned that the sensitive nature of the topic might discourage participants from giving honest responses.

Alternatively, a contextualist paradigm could be apposite if the researcher wants study findings to inform practice (e.g., how employee assistance mental health services are advertised to employees) but is uncomfortable with the assumptions inherent in projective SC. This is because although contextualist approaches reject the notion of a single knowable truth, they are still interested in uncovering (albeit provisional, local, and context-specific) ‘truths’ (Madill et al., 2000). SC that adopts a contextualist approach would allow a researcher to extrapolate from their findings about the social understandings of mental health difficulties in their study context, to propose that similar (e.g., demographically or contextually) groups of employees might draw on similar social understandings. Thus, if one study finding is that mental health difficulties in the workplace are understood as stigmatising, it would be reasonable to assume that this negative understanding might be available to other employees in a similar context.

It is not appropriate to straightforwardly extrapolate to practice from research conducted from within a social constructionist paradigm because of the social constructionist stance on knowledge and reality (e.g., a rejection of the notion of objective knowledge that reflects a singular reality and an understanding of knowledge as a social artefact). What this approach offers the SC researcher is, however, a framework for examining the discourses – the culturally available, shared ways of talking/writing – about mental health difficulties in the workplace and how these discursive practices (ways of talking, writing) create both the very topic and the experience of ‘mental health difficulties in the workplace’ (Georgaca, 2014).

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### **What Qualitative Story Completion Offers Counseling Psychology Researchers**

Qualitative SC has exciting potential as a method for qualitative researchers in general (see, Clarke et al., 2017), but also *specific* advantages for counseling psychology researchers. The most important general advantage is that SC offers a genuine alternative to other qualitative approaches to data collection and consequently potentially access to new understanding (examples of potential new understandings are discussed below). An additional key general advantage is flexibility, both in terms of conceptual foundations (qualitative paradigms) and in many aspects of study design and analytic approach (see sections on design and analysis below). When conducted online SC offers practical advantages as a relatively quick and inexpensive method for qualitative data collection (more on mode of delivery below). The method also offers potential enjoyment to researchers, because the stories are often interesting and, sometimes, very funny (Clarke et al., 2017), and the potential therapeutic benefits of expressive writing to participants (Sexton & Pennebaker, 2009).

#### ***Taboo, stigmatised and ethically sensitive topics***

But what of the specific advantages for counseling psychology researchers? In addition to general benefits, qualitative SC offers counseling psychology a method to research taboo or stigmatised topics and populations. Counseling psychology is centrally concerned with a stigmatised topic/population, namely mental health/people with mental health difficulties (Corrigan, 2016); in fact, mental health stigma and discrimination has been described as having worse consequences than mental health conditions themselves (Thornicroft et al., 2016). Although stigma may impact recruitment and engagement in research, qualitative SC at least partly side-steps these problems because participants are not asked about their own experience or their own opinions but instead to tell a story.

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The fact that SC data is literally made up potentially also reduces ethical concerns around confidentiality in SC research and risk of harm as a result of research participation may also be lower. In contrast to an interview study, an SC study on workplace bullying (for example) would not (intentionally) recruit people with personal experience of phenomenon being studied and would not ask about any personal experience of bullying. (Note though that ethical conduct of SC research requires that any study focussed on a sensitive topic must always include extensive signposting to relevant mental health support for all participants as well as resources – just in case - for any participants who do have personal experience of the phenomenon being studied; see ethical codes, e.g. American Psychological Association, 2019). Because ethical risks are potentially lower SC may also allow study of subjects that might otherwise prompt concern by institutional ethical review boards, for example, child sex offenders (Gavin, 2005), failure to orgasm in heterosexual sex (Frith, 2013), or experiences of parenting in a pandemic (Auðardóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2020). The method additionally allows mental health/therapy topics to be studied by researchers-in-training (e.g. psychology students) who do not (yet) have the appropriate professional or clinical expertise to ethically engage directly with people with mental health concerns.

### *Qualitative research with quantitative elements*

As the current Special Issue suggests, qualitative methods are less familiar for many counseling psychologists than quantitative ones. For some counseling psychologists, a potential advantage of qualitative SC may be that it permits research designs that include elements common in and seen as benefits of quantitative study designs, namely larger samples (for example 100-200+ participants), frequency counts (where relevant) and comparative designs (more on these aspects of study design below). Mixed methods study designs are also possible

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(Hanson et al., 2005). Livingston and Testa (2000), for example, used SC in an experimental design, and Diniz, Castro, Bousfield and Bernardes (2020) in a sequential mixed methods design. It is important however to note that while these elements of qualitative SC may be familiar from quantitative research, they do not result from positivist assumptions. For example, larger samples are not preferred because they are more statistically generalisable (see below); in qualitative research different criteria for quality and trustworthiness apply, such as transferability, rich rigour and credibility (Levitt et al., 2017, 2018; Morrow, 2005). In qualitative research, larger samples, frequency counts and comparative designs are appropriate only if they enhance the quality of the study, facilitating more nuanced understandings of complex phenomena.

### *Intersectionality and social justice*

As a discipline, counseling psychology in the US has values which include social justice and multiculturalism, and (from 2020) working towards liberation for all people who experience oppression (American Psychological Association, 2020). The UK discipline has a stated commitment to “fairness, equality and social justice” (British Psychological Society, 2020), although not the strong focus on multiculturalism found in the US profession. These counseling psychology values reflect a body of theory and research within the counseling psychology and psychotherapy literature more broadly that is concerned with both intersectionality and social justice. It is the argument of this paper that SC is a method that offers specific value to counseling psychology in part because it is well suited to examining such concerns.

**Intersectionality:** Intersectionality is “the study and critique of how multiple social systems intersect to produce and sustain complex inequalities” (Grzanka, Santos and Moradi, 2017, p. 453). This entails a focus on understanding the way that constructs such as ethnicity and gender function as social categories and processes (versus characteristics of individuals), which position

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“individuals and groups in asymmetrical relation to one another” (Cole, 2009, p. 173) and consequently shape (create) their experiences and understandings of themselves and others. Embedded in intersectionality research is a commitment to not only understanding but also resisting oppressive social systems, and a corresponding valuing of research that goes beyond study of multiple/intersecting identities to focus structurally and contextually on *how* identities are produced (Grzanka & Miles, 2016).

Given the project of intersectionality, SC offers promise because, used from within a contextualist and social constructionist paradigm, the method can illuminate the social understandings and discourses that produce identities in particular social contexts. SC makes it possible to examine how a researcher-chosen identity category (ethnicity, gender, person with mental health difficulties) is constructed in stories told by particular groups of participants. The analysis not only reveals the range of social understandings available to participants as they make sense of the identity category (or intersected categories, e.g. Black lesbian, Bowleg, 2008), but also the implications of these understandings. For example, SC can reveal assumptions about what mental health difficulties are and who is or is not likely to be understood as experiencing them, as well as the emotions someone identified as having mental health difficulties is assumed to feel, or to evoke. The stories can also show how mental health difficulties are socially understood to impact on the self, on relationships, and on life experiences, creating trajectories – for example, in terms of negative outcomes for a person with mental health difficulties. Analysis of how participants respond to the deliberate ambiguities or lack of detail in a SC stem can also shed light on what social understandings of topics may be contiguous (intersectional) to the researcher-chosen identity category. For example, the gendered nature of mental health as a construct is revealed if the majority of participants assume a “mad” story protagonist with a

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gender neutral name is female. Alternatively, racialised social understandings of mental health may be revealed by the ways participants describe the ethnicity of story protagonists (both mental health providers and ‘patients’). In this way, SC can provide a way to examine how structural inequalities rooted in intersecting identities are mutually constituted and, depending on the configuration, socially understood to confer structural advantage and/or disadvantage.

SC facilitates analysis of intersecting systems of domination and privilege above and beyond identities. This is because the method allows exploration of the ways that participants perceive broader aspects of the social world, such as social settings (e.g. a therapy room) or social interactions and relationships (e.g. of the kind that occur in counseling), as simultaneously gendered, raced, classed etc. Analysis of stories might reveal, for example, that participants implicitly or explicitly construct the spaces that counseling occurs in as both white and middle-class. Moreover, because the method encourages participants to “fill in the blanks” and take a stem where they want to, there is the potential for unanticipated intersectional phenomena (e.g. forms of gendered racism or class-based sexism) to emerge in the participants’ stories, unfettered by researchers’ potentially limited conceptions of an issue. SC as a method thus may provide a research method that allows researchers to move past a rhetoric of intersectionality towards a strong or transformative (Shin et al., 2017) research practice that offers not only understanding of but also clues about means to resist oppressive social systems.

**Social justice:** A commitment to social justice within counseling psychology entails a commitment, “to decrease human suffering and to promote human values of equality and justice.” (Vasquez, 2012, p337). As with intersectionality there is an emphasis on both identifying and challenging oppression, and on the role of research in this endeavour (DeBlaere et al., 2019). SC is a method that fits with a social justice agenda because it allows examination

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of the social discourses through which systems of oppression operate, allowing a focus at the systemic or structural level on their interdependencies, and how they create, for example, (mental) health inequalities. In addition to the examples described above, one way that SC does this is by potentially making it easier for participants to express socially unacceptable (e.g., stigmatizing) understandings - because participants are being asked to tell a story (fiction) rather than being asked for their perception or opinion of a topic. An example of SC research that evidences this is Moller and Tischner's (2019) study of fat counsellors; in this study the depictions of the counselor's fat body were uniformly negative and a number of them were borderline vicious. Analysis of this kind of data is uncomfortable but potentially important: an Australian study on the impact of hate speech found that even the *circulation* of racist hate speech (e.g., through word of mouth or social media) caused longstanding harm for the implicated communities (Gelber & McNamara, 2016). This suggests the value of analysis of the whole spectrum of socially available understandings if the aim is to map the operation of systems of oppression, and consequently the value of a method that makes it easier for participants to draw on versus self-censor the socially unpalatable social understandings which are available to them. Next, we turn from epistemic foundations to the specific procedures involved in conducting SC research.

### **Story Completion Design**

SC is a deceptively simple method – participants are just asked to write a story – but detailed design thinking, and piloting, is necessary before data collection commences, to facilitate the likely success of any SC project. Not all story stems generate good quality *qualitative* data, and not all those that do allow researchers to address their research questions.

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Correspondingly, this section will cover key design aspects illustrated with examples from the published SC literature and the exemplar mental health at work study.

### **Identifying a Research Question**

Following – or concurrent with – the articulation of the purpose or aims of a study and a decision on the appropriate conceptual stance to take in view of such, is the need to establish the research question(s), which should be *answerable* with SC data. As previously noted, our view is that although qualitative SC (used as a projective) can be, and has been, used to access individual psychological beliefs, it particularly suits questions related to social understandings of, or social discourses around (depending on the conceptual position), researcher identified topics or populations. For a (hypothetical) study focussed on examining social understandings of mental health in a particular work context, a broad research question could be: “What social understandings are drawn on by employees in this work context to make sense of mental health difficulties in the workplace?” Depending on the interests of the researcher(s) it would also be possible to add sub-questions focussed on particular types of mental health difficulties or the differences between different types of work context or between responses by different types of employees. These sub-questions would then dictate the SC study design, such as decisions about the focus and number of story stems, recruitment strategy or approach to data analysis.

### **Developing a Story Stem**

Deciding on the wording for the story stem(s) is a critical stage in SC research. When writing a stem, the overall aim is to develop one that is broad enough that it elicits a range of stories, but not so broad that participants’ end up telling stories that are not about the topic of the research study. To give an example, in the hypothetical mental health at work study a stem could be:

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*Michaela has been signed off sick from work with mental health issues but while she has been off, word has got out. Today is her first day back. Please continue Michaela's story...*

In this stem there is a clear beginning for a story and the research focus of mental health difficulties in the workplace is evident. Yet, lots of other stems could be written. In settling on the wording, Braun and Clarke (2013) provided a useful list of story stem elements researchers need to consider, and we particularly highlight:

### ***Length of Story Stem and Amount of Detail***

The stem needs to provide participants with enough information about the topic of the research that they can write rich and compelling stories. If they are likely less familiar with the topic the stem may need to be longer to provide relevant information. Alternatively, stems may be written to include specific details that cue participants to aspects of a topic a researcher is particularly interested in. For example, a researcher interested in social understandings of different mental health difficulties could substitute “signed off sick with mental health issues” with “signed off sick due to depression” or “signed off sick due to schizophrenia.”

### ***Including Ambiguity***

Leaving aspects of the story ambiguous and open to a range of interpretations is a key tool to potentiate a diversity of stories. What is usefully left unclear includes personal characteristics of the story protagonists, which can be left out of the stem to allow space for a range of ideas about *who* a character is to be evidenced (e.g., a gender-neutral name can be chosen for the main protagonist, and no pronouns used, to explore how assumptions around any potentially gendered practices may play out). In the mental health at work story stem, the example stem does not specify the protagonist's mental health difficulties, allowing examination

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of how ‘mental health difficulties’ are constituted in stories - for example as pathological/medicalised or a normal response to difficult circumstances.

### *Writing a Stem that Encourages Rich Stories*

In order to maximise the chances that participants fully engage with the SC task, and that they provide longer and more detailed responses, the story stem needs to be interesting enough that participants’ imaginations and enthusiasm are engaged. Good stems evoke a mental picture of the story protagonist in a significant moment, providing a narrative ‘cliff hanger’ or narrative tension with some suspense to foster participants’ creativity in writing stories. For example, in the mental health at work study, an effective stem might conjure the anxiety someone who has been signed off work for mental health concerns experiences as they return to their job.

Depending on the study aims, stems can be accompanied with different types of directions: an instruction to simply continue the story (“What happens next?” Or, as in the example stem, “Please continue Michaela’s story...”). Alternatively, instructions can specify a timeframe (“What happens in the following weeks, months and years?”) or particular focus relevant to the research; for example, “Please continue Michaela’s story as she goes back to her work as a mental health nurse/police officer/shop assistant.”

### *Multiple Stems for Comparative Designs*

One key way qualitative SC differs from other kinds of qualitative methods is that it allows for comparative designs within a quite structured context, reducing some of the contextual variances that invalidate *simple* comparison in most qualitative research. Comparison between groups is not a key driver for many qualitative researchers, and its historical dominance in (difference-seeking) quantitative psychology can lead some to regard it with suspicion (Braun et al., 2019b), but where researchers have an interest in exploring difference (for example, around

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the meanings of social categories such as gender), SC provides a useful tool. Comparison can be invited through design – for instance, studies can be set up with different story stems, in which specific details are varied in different stems. Most comparative designs to date have centred on gender (e.g., Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; Shah-Beckley et al., 2018) and it would be possible to have male and female stems in the hypothetical mental health at work study. Yet, as suggested, it would be equally possible to write versions of story stems where what is different is the severity of the mental health condition (depression versus schizophrenia) or the workplace setting (psychiatric hospital, police station, retail outlet). In published SC research to date, in addition to gender, comparative designs have been used to compare participants' responses to scenarios centred on anorexia versus bulimia (Walsh & Malson, 2010), different types of infidelity including same-sex versus different-sex (Clarke et al., 2015; see also Schnarre & Adam, 2018), lower socio-economic status women versus middle socio-economic status women (Diniz et al., 2020), and heterosexual versus lesbian versus bisexual women (Hayfield & Wood, 2019).

In addition to varying the stems, comparative designs can involve comparing responses from different groups of participants (something that is possible with other qualitative methods – e.g., the same interview can be conducted with different groups of participants, although contextual variance can impede straightforward comparison). In the mental health at work study, the study could be set up to compare responses by employees in different work contexts, or to compare responses from women and men (to investigate gendered understandings of mental health, Bergin, Wells and Owen, 2008). Again, to date, most SC comparative designs have compared responses from female and male participants (e.g., Beres et al., 2014, 2017; Frith, 2013; Kitzinger & Powell, 1995). Shah-Beckley et al. (2018) in their study of sense making

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around sexual experimentation in heterosexual relationships uniquely compared the responses of therapists with those of people without therapeutic training in order to investigate whether the populations drew on similar or different discourses of heterosex.

### *Story Completion Instructions*

Alongside story stem development, clear instructions need to be written for participants. To some extent the particulars of this depends on mode of delivery, but in general, instructions should aim to provide encouragement about openness, to generate a wide range of stories and reduce second-guessing of researcher motivation or “desired responses”, and to assuage potential participant anxiety about whether their story is “good enough”. We have also found that having a suggested minimum word length discourages minimal or thin responses, which is a risk when participants are not strongly self-motivated to participate (e.g., students completing stories for class credit). Much recent published SC research has used variants of the following (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2013):

Remember, there is **no right or wrong way to complete the story**, and you can be as realistic or creative as you like in completing it! We are 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. You can write as much as you like but it would be great if your story was at least 200 words long.

### *Piloting the Stem and Completion Instructions*

Piloting is critical even in small scale qualitative SC in order to understand whether the carefully crafted stem and task instructions are understood as anticipated and generate appropriate data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Clarke et al., 2017). Piloting involves inviting a small number of the participant population (around 20% of the anticipated sample in smaller studies

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and 5% in larger studies) to undertake the study and reviewing the stories written. Participants can also be asked to offer feedback on the instructions and the stem. Piloting may result in no revisions, but it is more likely to suggest changes are needed. For example, in Moller and Tischner's (2019) study focussed on social understandings of fat therapists, piloting indicated that there was too much detail in the original stem about why the client (story protagonist) was coming to counselling. This detail distracted from the narrative 'hook' of a first-time therapy client noticing that their therapist is fat, and resulted in too many stories that deviated from the study focus. Other common problems can include perfunctory, thin and short stories, which may suggest the story stem lacks drama, and responses not in a story form (e.g., participants treat the story stem like a survey question and answer accordingly), which may suggest that the stem and instructions do not clearly invite a story response. If stories lack variation and rich detail (e.g., all of the stories end in exactly the same way), the stem may be over-determined - written in such a way that suggests only limited range of possibilities.

### **Mode of Delivery**

Decisions on the best mode of delivery for a SC study should be dictated by the study population, setting and topic. To date, qualitative SC has principally been administered online but hard copy paper-and-pencil administration is also possible; it would also be possible to offer verbal responding. Different administration modes offer different advantages and disadvantages. For example, the online disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) suggests that online qualitative SC might elicit more dramatic, or more discriminatory stories. Using online methods also brings practical cost and time savings for researchers (Wright, 2005). At the same time, virtual research methods have also been critiqued for being less accessible to some populations (Robinson et al., 2009), although the 'digital divide' is now deemed as more of a matter of bandwidth than of

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access to computers and mobile devices (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019). Participant comfort with online technologies is also a consideration, with some populations likely less comfortable with communicating online than others (Thayer & Ray, 2006). However, in settings where all or the bulk of potential research participants have computer and internet access, and a private space to complete the study, online SC is likely most convenient for participants. If the topic of the study is sensitive – as in a study focussed on mental health difficulties in the workplace - administration through an independent online survey platform may also provide a higher sense of anonymity for participants than face-to-face methods.

Paper-and-pen and verbal completion lack the ease of data collection and compilation of online response modes (e.g., both require data transcription) but have their own advantages. Paper-and-pen completion for example is useful when collecting data from groups at an event where not everyone has immediate access to a computer – such as when collecting data from employees attending a mental health at work briefing. However, whether administered online or via paper-and-pen, written SC requires a significant degree of literacy. This is unproblematic if the study population is familiar and comfortable with expressing themselves in writing (e.g., university students, Kitzinger & Powell, 1995; participants in online writing communities, Wood et al., 2017) but limiting for some research. Although video stems have been used in existing research (e.g., Lewin, 1985), no published SC study has yet used verbal (video or audio recorded) responding. A verbal response design would allow SC to be accessible to participants with limited or no literacy skills, just as doll-play SC is used in child development research with young children (e.g., Smeekens et al., 2010). However it is also the case that it may not be possible to adapt SC design for all participants, for example those with certain cognitive or physical impairments.

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### **Sample Size**

Sample size is an issue that qualitative research troubles and is troubled by, and researchers often want clear and concrete guidelines on “how many is enough”. Unfortunately, it is rarely that simple. Qualitative research typically emphasises smaller and contextually situated samples on the basis that a large amount of rich and detailed data is collected from each participant (e.g., an interview that lasts for over an hour and results in 30 pages of transcribed data). However, in qualitative SC research, what is collected from each participant is a story (or multiple stories) of a few hundred words in length. This means that to generate a rich and detailed dataset, often larger numbers of participants are required than is usual for qualitative research. However, to add complexity, in SC research sample size should be considered both in terms of numbers of participants and in terms of numbers of story completions. Participant numbers in published qualitative SC research range from 20 (Gavin, 2005) to 1,865 (Hunt et al., 2018) and story completions from 44 (Walsh & Malson, 2010) to 1000 (coded) (Hunt et al., 2018). However, most studies are based on around 100 to 200 total completions, with Braun and Clarke (2013) describing 40-100 completions as a ‘medium’ size study and 200 plus completions as a ‘large’ study.

Still, the answer to “how many” for any actual SC study depends on the study design. More than one stem, and any planned comparisons between stems and/or sample sub-groups, requires higher numbers of participants as it is necessary to have “enough” stories from each group to generate a rich and varied dataset for each version of the stem and to conclude anything meaningful about any differences or similarities. If each participant however is asked to complete multiple stems a lower number of participants is required. Another consideration is the richness, complexity and length of the individual stories; if the data set contains a lot of

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superficial or short stories more stories may need to be collected to compensate (or the story stem might need revising).

Beyond this, the “usual” qualitative debates apply about what counts as the “right” amount of data (e.g. Morse, 2000). Morrow (2005) for example suggested that the quality of qualitative data is always more important than the quantity. Morrow also proposed the concept of “information redundancy” as a guide to the adequacy of a sample and one very large SC study – 1,865 participants (Hunt et al., 2018) – drew on this concept to determine when to stop coding data (after coding 1,000 responses). Yet information redundancy (sometimes also referred to as data saturation) can be a contentious concept in the qualitative methodology literature (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2019a), with “information power” (Malterud et al., 2016) being proposed as one alternative. In making a decision about sample size, the SC researcher should consider that as well as the problem of not enough stories, there is also a real risk of *too many* stories, with the resulting analysis unable to capture all the complexities of the data.

### **Story Completion Data and Analysis**

#### **Choice of Analytic Method**

SC data are analysed to identify patterns of meaning using conventional qualitative analytic approaches. Existing SC research has evidenced the viability of some analysis methods, but methods not yet used may also offer potential. The choice about the “right” method will depend on the study aims, however, it is also critical that the analytic method is compatible with the selected qualitative paradigm.

To date, almost all qualitative SC research has used some form of thematic analysis (TA), or its close cousin qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), for data analysis – most

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commonly Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive TA approach (e.g., Auðardóttir & Rúðólfssdóttir, 2020; Beres et al., 2014; Clarke & Braun, 2019; Clarke et al., 2015; Diniz et al., 2020; Hayfield & Wood, 2019; Hunt et al., 2018; Jennings et al., 2019; Moller & Tischner, 2019; Shah-Beckley et al., 2018; Tischner, 2019). The dominance of Braun and Clarke's reflexive TA in SC research is likely explained by the fact that these authors have been central to the development of SC as a qualitative technique (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2013). Kitzinger and Powell (1995) also used TA in their ground-breaking study. TA forms part of a cluster of qualitative methods concerned with identifying and reporting recurrent patterns (variously conceptualised as "themes" or "categories") across cases (Yeh & Inman, 2007). Other approaches in this cluster include grounded theory (Fassinger, 2005), and approaches developed from grounded theory techniques like thematic coding (Flick, 2014) and constant comparative analysis (Rennie, 2006), consensual qualitative research (CQR, Hill et al., 1997), and some phenomenological approaches such as interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009; see also Yeh & Inman, 2007).

Braun and Clarke's (2019b) reflexive TA is theoretically flexible and compatible with several different qualitative paradigms. It emphasises researcher subjectivity as a resource for analysis and an open, organic and recursive approach to coding and theme development, which acknowledges the inevitable subjectivity of coding. This means there is no use of a coding frame or codebook and no concern with consensus coding or measurement of coding agreement (Yeh & Inman, 2007). The approach is widely used (e.g., in Europe, Asia, the Middle East) but less common in North America, likely reflecting different qualitative traditions (however see publications in this journal e.g.: Okun, Chang, Kanhai, Dunn & Easley, 2017; Tebbe, Moradi, Connelly, Lenzen & Flores, 2018).

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Walsh and Malson (2010) demonstrated the viability of discourse analysis (Madill & Barkham, 1997) for the analysis of SC data when they used a discourse analytic methodology to conduct a feminist, poststructuralist analysis of the discursive construction of eating disorders. Discourse analysis is compatible with social constructionist paradigms and, broadly defined, is concerned with the meanings and (ideological or interactional) function of written and spoken language in relation to its social context. The other exception to the use of TA in existing research is Lupton's (2020) post-qualitative methodology (see Gibson & Cartright, 2013; St. Pierre, 2014); the method overlaps with the discourse analysis tradition in many ways, with a shared emphasis on analysis as a theoretically embedded craft that relies heavily on interpretation.

As SC data consist of stories rather than participants' direct accounts, approaches focused on the analysis of first-person personal experience – such as phenomenological (Smith et al., 2009) and some narrative approaches (Reissman, 2000) – are not suited to the analysis of these data. Across-case approaches such as grounded theory and related methods such as CQR, although often centred on the analysis of human experience, are potentially flexible enough in application to be used to analyse SC data, as could narrative approaches that centre on the analysis of narrative structures and other features such as plot and temporality; the “hows” of the *telling* rather than the teller's experience (Reissman, 2007).

### **Analytic strategy, frequency counts, unexpected stories and quality**

In addition to choice of analytic method, it is important to consider the analytic strategy. Clarke et al. (2019) identified three possibilities: (1) identifying patterns across the whole dataset; (2) identifying patterns in relation to specific facets of the stories – for example, in their research on infidelity, Kitzinger and Powell (1995) reported patterns in how the infidelity was

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explained and how the consequences of infidelity were depicted; and (3) identifying patterns in how the stories unfold, what Braun and Clarke (2013) termed ‘story mapping’ (for an example, see, Clarke & Braun, 2019). Another decision is whether to report frequency counts or percentages. Counts of how often a particular story feature appears can concretely evidence aspects of how a topic is understood but they may be seen as controversial (e.g., antithetical to qualitative values), depending on the researcher and their qualitative paradigm (Clarke et al., 2019). For example, in their infidelity study Kitzinger and Powell (1995) were interested in gendered understandings of infidelity and correspondingly reported what percentage of their female versus male participants referred to love, trust or honesty in their stories. Moller and Tischner (2019) were also interested in gender in their study focused on social understandings of fat therapists and consequently reported how often the story therapist (who was not gendered in the story stem) was assumed to be female. In the mental health at work study, if the researcher were interested in identifying patterns in how the stories unfold, it might be useful to count how many stories end with positive versus negative outcomes for the employee with mental health concerns.

### *Analysis of Unexpected Stories – Complexities and Challenges*

Some of the data that arise from qualitative SC can offer potentially unfamiliar analytic challenges to qualitative researchers and these challenges are worth discussing. Examples of ‘difficult’ stories include:

**Stories that Ignore the Stem.** Sometimes even if a stem seems to be working well (generating lots of on-topic stories) a few participants will tell stories that carefully avoid the topic prompted by the story stem. Analysing an absence is challenging but this type of story may

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point to the ways aspects of the research topic are construed as ‘taboo’. An example of this in the mental health at work study would be a story that failed to mention mental health difficulties.

**Moralising Stories that Opine About the Topic.** Sometimes participants elect not to tell a story but to write a thesis on the ‘proper’ response in the story situation; other times there is a story but there is also a lot of angry ‘should’ content. To exemplify, in the mental health at work study there might be stories about how HR/management ‘should’ respond to employees with mental health difficulties. Such stories can be difficult to make sense of, but they are potentially useful because they evidence social understandings that have moral and emotional valence (not just an understanding) and help to unpack the social impacts of such understandings.

**Fantastical Monster Stories.** One feature of qualitative SC is that sometimes a few participants will take stories into fantastical places, introducing vampires or aliens, or channelling horror movie conventions to end stories in a blood bath. It is easy to read such stories as ‘noise’ in the data, but they sometimes suggest something less obvious about the social understandings of the research topic (Clarke et al., 2017). As an example, in Moller and Tischner’s (2019) story about fat therapists, one story told how the fat therapist ate the client; this response captured something about how a fat therapist was seen as being both monstrous and the opposite of therapeutic, something which was depicted in many other of the stories, albeit in more subtle ways.

### *A word about quality*

Just as SC data are analysed to identify patterns of meaning using conventional qualitative analytic approaches, so assessments of the quality of SC research utilises conventional approaches to evidencing quality. Quality comes in through good design and piloting, and through the quality practices associated with the analytic method, and with the particular

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paradigm the research is situated within, as discussed by Morrow (2005) and Braun and Clarke (2020; see also Levitt et al., 2018).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has provided an introduction to qualitative SC that aims to equip counseling psychology researchers to use the method, beginning with an explanation of what distinguishes SC data from other types of qualitative textual data, and providing a guide to the decisions that need to be made when designing a SC study and analysing SC data. In doing so, it is hoped that this paper has convincingly demonstrated the novelty of qualitative SC data and the paradigm, design and analytic flexibility of SC as a qualitative method. However, additionally it has been argued that qualitative SC has specific relevance for counseling psychology, and in particular to current concerns in the discipline related to intersectionality and social justice research. SC encourages intersectionality researchers to move beyond description of multiple/intersecting identities (Grzanka & Miles, 2016) because the focus in SC research is on social understandings and their operation at the systemic and structural level. This potentially allows SC research to examine how (intersectional) identities are socially produced in particular social contexts, creating experiences of stigma and oppression. The potentials of SC also align with calls in the discipline for social justice research which better delivers “justice”, not only identifying but also challenging oppression (DeBlaere et al., 2019). SC allows the network of social understandings around a topic in a particular social context to be mapped, and the interdependencies and contingencies identified. This in turn potentiates examination of the ways in which systems of oppression operate to create inequality, including health inequalities. Identifying such systems then makes it easier to challenge them. In summary, SC is a method that has the potential to

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advance the discipline, and therefore it is a method that deserves attention in counseling psychology.

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**Table 1:***Three Different Approaches to Qualitative Story Completion*

What Story Completion Can Access	Type of Research Question	Examples from the Literature
<p><i>Essential psychological truths of the storytellers:</i> Stories access participants' deeply held personal beliefs and experiences around the topic of interest. The stories may be understood as revealing perceptions that may be not in participants' awareness or beliefs that a person would not choose to divulge. Because stories reveal what participants really think and feel, they potentially predict what they might say or do in a similar real-life scenario.</p>	<p>What do the participants think/feel about X?</p>	<p>Moore (1995) – girls' beliefs and feelings about menarche. Livingston and Testa (2000) - women's perceptions of their vulnerability to sexual aggression in a dating context.</p>
<p><i>Contextually situated and partial perceptions shaped by the participant's particular social context and location:</i> Each person's stories provide data on the range of social understandings around the topic of interest that are available to them. For some participants it is possible that stories reflect aspects of their opinions or their personal experiences but their actual reaction to a real-life scenario cannot be predicted from their responses, as any actual reaction would depend on the specific context.</p>	<p>How do participants make sense of X in their particular social context?</p>	<p>Moller and Tischner (2019) – participants' assumptions about and understandings of fatness and counseling/counselors. Hunt et al. (2018) – participants' social attitudes towards dating a person with physical disabilities.</p>
<p><i>Socially prevalent discourses:</i> Stories provide data on the range of social discourses around the topic of interest available to the group of participants. From this perspective, the idea that stories can provide any information about the opinions or experiences of individual participants is rejected; instead, there is a focus on what possibilities are available to individuals in the respective socio-cultural and political context they find themselves in, for understanding a particular topic.</p>	<p>How is X socially constructed?</p>	<p>Shah-Beckley et al. (2018) - the discourses around heterosex drawn on by therapists and non-therapists. Frith (2013) – gendered discourses of sexuality related to orgasm.</p>