**INTRODUCTION TO STORY COMPLETION METHODS**

**by Simon Moss**

|  |
| --- |
| **Introduction** |

**Purpose of this method**

 Often, researchers want to ascertain the motivations, perceptions, explanations, and attitudes of people about sensitive topics. For example, they might want to explore

* how people feel about individuals who are often stigmatized, such as anyone who is overweight, unattractive, alcoholic, or unfaithful?
* how people feel about unethical or irresponsible behaviors?
* how people explain these behaviors?
* how victims of these behaviors, such as domestic violence, perceive their circumstances?

Conventional methods, such as interviews, may not be sufficient to extract this information. People may be reluctant to disclose motivations, perceptions, explanations, and attitudes that are not regarded as suitable or appropriate. They might be ashamed to converse about sensitive topics. Or they may not be attuned to their own motivations, perceptions, or attitudes. The story completion method is designed to address these impediments. That is, the story completion method can be utilised to ascertain the motivations, perceptions, attributions, and attitudes of people, especially about sensitive topics

**Outline of the method**

In essence, to conduct this method

* participants receive a few sentences about some topic—such as a person who discloses their sexuality to their parents
* the participants are then invited to complete this story
* these stories are then subjected to various analyses, such as thematic analysis, to extract themes or other insights.

These stems tend to introduce the topic but also offer participants many opportunities to decide how the story will unfold. Typical stems include

* Mary has been struggling to cope with life. She decided to visit a psychologist. As she meets the psychologist, her first thought is “Oh, she is so fat”
* During dinner, immediately after a short pause in the conversation, Frank, a young gay man of 17 years of age, coughed nervously. His father said, “Are you OK?” “I have something to tell you”, Frank said. “Sounds serious”, his mother replied.

|  |
| --- |
| **How to clarify your research questions** |

 To apply story completion, you need to devise research questions that are amenable to this approach. Which research questions can story completions answer? How do you devise your research questions? To resolve these queries, first consider some of the key benefits of story completion, as outlined in the following table.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Benefit | Clarification |
| Prompts undesirable responses  | * During interviews and similar formats, participants often communicate thoughts and attitudes that are usually perceived as appropriate
* For example, if asked why they donate to charity, they may not admit they initiate this act merely to impress friends
* But, when constructing stories, they might allude to thoughts or attitudes that are not perceived as appropriate
* They might write about a person, for instance, who donates to charity only to impress friends
 |
| Enables discussion of sensitive topics | * Participants are sometimes unwilling to discuss sensitive topics, such as sexuality, but may be more willing to write about these topics—especially from the perspective of a fictional character
 |
| Improves engagement | * During interviews and similar formats, the researchers dictate the conversation
* When writing stories, participants are granted more discretion and autonomy
* This sense of autonomy tends to foster persistence and creativity
 |
| Suitable to essentialist and constructivist perspectives | * Some researchers want to explore the actual perceptions or motivations of participants, called an essentialist perspective.
* Other researchers want to explore how people generate and shape meaning about their world—such as the patterns of conversation they use to convince someone else, called a constructivist perspective
* Story completion can be applied to achieve either or both goals
 |

 As this table implies, story completion is especially helpful in specific circumstances. Specifically, story completion is suited to instances in which researchers want to explore the motivations, attitudes, or perceptions of participants towards some topic—especially if individuals may be reluctant or unable to disclose their own motivations, attitudes, or perceptions.

|  |
| --- |
| **How to develop the stems** |

 After clarifying the research questions you want to explore, the next key activity is to construct the stems. The following table outlines some principles you should consider while you attempt this task.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Consideration | Details and examples |
| Consider the length of these stems  | * Often, stems comprise 3 to 4 sentences
* If you want to generate stories around matters that are very familiar to participants, shorter stems might be warranted
* If you want to generate stories around matters that are unfamiliar to participants—or more nuanced—longer stems might be needed to clarify the issue
 |
| Consider how to engage the participant  | To construct engaging stems* the stems should include some details about the main character or characters; these protagonists need to seem vivid and authentic
* the characters should experience a conflict, challenge, or experience with which participants can empathize
* the setting should be described vividly enough to imagine
* the stems should include details, such as the name of characters or locations

If you apply these features, the stem will seem more vivid and relatable to participants, engaging their attention and effort |
| Balance the level of specificity | * Describe the motivations or goals of characters sufficiently to engage the reader but also to guide the story
* But these motivations should be broad enough to enable flexibility
* For example, you might write “Sam wants to exercise to look better” rather than “Sam wants to exercise to develop biceps and attract a partner”

Sometimes, key features, such as the gender of participants, are deliberately ambiguous. That is, the researcher may want to ascertain which gender or feature participants naturally choose |
| Choose between third person and first person | * Most researchers utilize third person, such as “John tries to…”
* Some researchers utilize first person, such as “I try to…”
* When people write in third person, they may be more inclined to write honestly rather than attempt to comply with social norms
 |

|  |
| --- |
| **How to collect stories** |

 Every researcher applies a unique sequence of activities to utilise collate the stories. Nevertheless, the following table outlines a sequence of activities that Clarke, Hayﬁeld, Moller, and Tischner (2017) recommend.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Activity | Details and examples |
| Choose the number of participants | * At least 10, and usually more than 20 to 40, individuals should write stories about each stem
 |
| Determine whether you want to compare groups or not | **Manipulation of stems*** Sometimes, participants are assigned to one of two or more conditions
* The stems might differ across the conditions
* For example, in one condition, the stem might refer to a male protagonist; in the other condition, the stem might refer to a female protagonist

**Comparison of participants*** Alternatively, the researchers might want to compare the responses of distinct subsets of participants—such as age groups, cultural backgrounds, and so forth
 |
| Determine the number of stories each participant will be invited to write | * For example, participants might be presented with one stem but receive the instruction to write two—or more—distinct stories
* Alternatively, participants might receive two or more stems and receive the instruction to write one story that corresponds to each stem
* One benefit is that researchers can generate more stories with fewer participants
* One complication is the order in which participants write the stories could affect the content.
 |
| Design your instructions | The instructions often include the following features* You will be invited to write a story that is at least 10 lines long
* You will first receive the opening sentences, and you can then write how you feel the story might unfold
* You can be as creative as you like—no answer is right or wrong
* My interest is in the range of stories that people like to write
* You can write whatever first appears in your mind; you do not need to deliberate too long
* The opening sentences might seem vague; you can interpret these sentences however you like

The instructions tend to vary across studies. For example* typically, the instructions are not designed to constrain the stories. But, in some instances, you might deliberately want to participants to write about specific facets—facets that interest you
* you might limit the number of words, the number of lines, or the duration; if motivation is likely to be limited, a minimum number of words could be helpful
 |
| Complement the stems with other questions | * After participants write the story, they might be asked questions about the stem
* To illustrate, if the stem revolves around how people respond to overweight counsellors, participants might be asked to indicate “What did you assume was the weight of this counsellor?”
* Other questions might revolve around the previous experiences of participants that are relevant to this story, such as “Have you ever visited a counsellor before”
 |
| Determine how you will collect the data | * Participants might complete the stories on paper
* Or you could utilise Qualtrics, Survey Monkey, or other software to administer the stories online
* Of course, online stories demand internet access, restricting the scope of participants. Furthermore, online stories might include automatic corrections
 |
| Pilot the stems and instructions with a few participants | * Sometimes, the stories you read during the pilot will signify problems that indicate you might need to change the stem or the instructions
* During the pilot, you could also ask participants to comment on their experience, such as whether the instructions were unambiguous
* If you do not need to change the methods after the pilot, you could include the stories you received during the pilot in your final report
 |

|  |
| --- |
| **How to analyse stories** |

 After you collate the stories, you need to analyse their content. You can apply a range of methods to analyse the data. The two most common methods are thematic analysis and discourse analysis—although these techniques need to be adjusted slightly to accommodate the unique features of story completion. The following table briefly outlines these established methods.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Method | Details and examples |
| Thematic analysis | Overview* Read all the stories
* Convert phrases or sentences to codes—a label that summarises the content
* Identify clusters of codes to uncover themes—underlying patterns or concepts

How to learn about thematic analysis* Read Braun and Clarke (2006)
* Read the example in Frith (2013)

How to adapt thematic analysis to story completion* Perhaps read Kitzinger and Powell (1995)
* You might attempt to divide the data into key elements—such as all the responses that relate to a specific topic, such as beliefs about infidelity.
* Then, extract distinct themes from each of these elements separately.
 |
| Discourse analysis | Discourse analysis entails a closer examination of the words, phrase, and strategies individuals use in their writing. Many variants can be distinguished. One variant is critical discourse analysis* The researchers examine the text closely, striving to identify subtle features of the words, phrases, or strategies that foster, maintain, or challenge inequalities in power
* For example, they might show how people use phrases like “The victim admitted that…” to imply the victim was at fault

How to learn about discourse analysis* For an example, read Walsh and Malson (2010)
* Read the document on the CDU webpage called “choosing your research methodology and methods” on critical discourse analysis
 |

 When applying thematic analysis to story completion, Braun and Clarke’s (2013) complemented thematic analysis with a story mapping technique. In particular, they divided each story into three key segments—the problem, attempts to resolve the problem, and the resolution—because most stories comprise these three segments. They applied thematic analysis to each segment in sequence. In their examples, in which the stories revolved around how parents respond to children who confess their sexuality

* the initial responses were divided into two clusters: negative and positive
* the resolutions were divided into three clusters: negative, positive, and ambiguous
* the authors also displayed the relationship between the initial response and resolution—noting, for example, that position responses initially always culminated in positive endings.

Arguably, more sophisticated narrative analysis (e.g., Riessman, 1993, 2007) might complement and enhance this story mapping technique. However, some other techniques, often used to analyse qualitative data, should not be applied to story completion such as

* interpretative phenomenological analysis: participants are not writing stories about themselves and, therefore, researchers cannot uncover the lived experience of participants themselves
* grounded theory: researchers cannot readily derive theories about some phenomenon from stories and cannot iteratively assess and refine these theories
* conversation analysis and discursive psychology: stories differ from real conversations

|  |
| --- |
| **How to interpret the findings** |

 Thematic analysis will uncover themes—often underlying concepts that characterise the motivations, perceptions, attributions, and attitudes of individuals. For example, a theme might revolve around “surprise then relief” or “a feeling of superiority”. But, how should researchers derive meaning from these themes? What do these results indicate? That is, how can you interpret the findings? To help you interpret the findings

* google and skim articles about thematic apperception tests—or other projection tests—in which psychologists derive insights from the stories that individuals construct
* this information will expose you to some of the taxonomies, principles, and theories you can apply to interpret the findings;
* for example, according to some taxonomies, motives can be divided into three clusters: the motivation to seek power, to achieve goals, and to establish relationships
* these taxonomies could help you interpret your findings; you might, for example, discover that younger individuals are more compelled than older individuals to seek power when stressed

|  |
| --- |
| **References** |

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative research in psychology, 3(2), 77-101.

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

beginners. London: Sage.

Clarke, V., Braun, V., & Wooles, K. (2015). Thou shalt not covet another man? Exploring

constructions of same-sex and different-sex infidelity using story completion. Journal of

Community & Applied Social Psychology, 25 (2), 153-166.

Clarke, V., Hayﬁeld, N., Moller, N., & Tischner, I. (2017). Once upon a time…Story completion methods. In V. Braun, V. Clarke & D Gray (Eds). Collecting qualitative data: a practical guide to textual, media and virtual techniques (pp. 45–70). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Frith, H. (2013). Accounting for orgasmic absence: Exploring heterosex using the story

completion method. Psychology and Sexuality, 4 (3), 310-322.

Gavin, H. (2005). The social construction of the child sex offender explored by narrative. The

Qualitative Report , 10 (3), 395-415.

Gravett, K. (2019). Story completion: storying as a method of meaning-making and discursive discovery. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 18.

Kitzinger, C., & Powell, D. (1995). Engendering infidelity: Essentialist and social

constructionist readings of a story completion task. Feminism and Psychology, 5 (3), 345

372.

Moore, S. M., Gullone, E., & Kostanski, M. (1997). An examination of adolescent risk

taking using a story completion task. Journal of Adolescence, 20, 369-379.

Riessman, C. K. (1993). Narrative analysis. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

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

Sage.

Walsh, E., & Malson, H. (2010). Discursive constructions of eating disorders: A story

completion task. Feminism and Psychology, 20 (4), 529-537.