How can Story Completion be Used in Culturally Safe Ways?

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Abstract

Story completion is a narrative inquiry method where participants complete a story from an opening hypothetical scenario or 'stem' that researchers create. While interest in this method is growing across disciplines due to its emancipatory potential, the literature fails to address how story completion can be used in culturally safe ways. Cultural safety in research means that it is the participants who determine whether the process values and privileges their unique standpoints and perspectives. Culturally safe research approaches and methods are crucial to decolonisation efforts in the academy. To illustrate this topic, we draw from our experience using a digital version of story completion in May 2020 to prompt thoughts on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We received 52 responses from Australian residents using a stem relating to a pandemic-related scenario. When we noted the lack of diversity in ethnic backgrounds in participant demographic information, we wondered whether story completion was reinforcing rather than disrupting norms about narrative inquiry and what constitutes a story, and we questioned our recruitment strategy. In this paper, we highlight the importance of decolonising research methodologies rather than merely adapting or validating methods by using them across different cultural contexts. We explain how our story completion project led to reflections on western constructions of storytelling, how to create the stem, and how to improve our recruitment approach. In response, we propose a rhizomatic perspective, which values multiple entry and exit points in research, to frame practical strategies that can improve the potential of using story completion in culturally safe ways. These include: embracing messy stories; exploring diverse notions of storytelling; favouring story fragments (rather than stems) and story assemblage (rather than completion); co-designing story fragments with target groups; and collaborating with local communities to co-design culturally appropriate and sensitive recruitment strategies and projects.

Keywords

ethical inquiry, decolonial research, rhizomes, meaning-making, narrative data collection

Introduction

All research projects stem from implicit and explicit philosophical underpinnings, and the choice of research methodology determines processes, activities and outcomes. For decades, white privilege has shaped how research methodologies were conceptualised and used in the field (Held, 2019). Western or Eurocentric frameworks have consistently ignored or deliberately undermined Eastern, African, Latin American, Pacific/Pasifika and Indigenous research paradigms and ways of knowing, and the rich sociocultural, traditional and spiritual knowledges that sit outside normativity (Lenette, 2022). Normativity refers to (un)conscious ideas, norms and practices that make one aspect appear right or better (e.g. being white, male, masculine, heterosexual, nondisabled, upper-middle class, English-speaking, young and educated).

Transformative research approaches (e.g., feminist, critical, and antiracist) tend to be more inclusive and focus on challenging power differentials. While such frameworks have been touted as paradigm 'shifts', they often still rely on western[1] lenses and are not necessarily underpinned by

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decolonial values. Decolonial, Indigenous and intersectional research theorists offer methodological and epistemological strategies that address systemic power inequities and work to privilege knowledge systems excluded or rendered invisible by western and Eurocentric research processes. Theorists include Tuhiwai Smith (2012), Moreton-Robinson (2009; 2013), Crenshaw (1989), Baskin (2005), Battiste (2008) and Lester-Irabinna Rigney (1999).

Story Completion

Story completion is a form of narrative inquiry where participants complete a story from an opening, cue or 'stem' set up as a hypothetical scenario that researchers create. Participants respond to a 'stimulus consisting of at least one complete sentence which represents the beginning of a story plot' (Rabin & Zlotogorski, 1981, p. 140), usually written in the third person. This means that participants do not have to disclose personal details about their circumstances (Clarke & Braun, 2019). The method has the potential to be emancipatory for storytellers in the sense that it offers a different way to explore a topic rather than using established methods such as interviews or focus groups (Moller et al., 2020). Participants do not need to provide 'answers' to questions but can be creative in how they wish to interpret and respond to the cue or stem.

Story completion is increasingly used across diverse research areas such as health (Tischner, 2019); sexuality and sexual health (Beres et al., 2019; Frith, 2018; Lewin, 1985); relationships (Livingston & Testa, 2000); adolescent risk-taking (Moore et al., 1997); and disability (Hunt et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2019). Story completion can be combined with other methods, for example, with semi-structured interviews to understand higher education experiences (Gravett, 2019), with visual methods when researching sexuality and appearance (Hayfield & Wood, 2019), or with poetic inquiry to explore health literacy (Lupton, 2021). It can be used electronically or face-to-face and has the potential to reach large numbers of respondents.

While interest in the method is growing (e.g. Braun et al., 2019; Moller et al., 2020; Vaughan et al., 2022), the uptake of story completion as a qualitative method has been minimal until recently. This narrative inquiry technique was first used in developmental psychology and psychotherapy as a projective tool for clinical practice and assessment, and in quantitative research (see Moller et al., 2020). Story completion largely reflects western cultural conventions around storytelling with a beginning, middle and end, and the dominance of specific narrative arcs (e.g. 'happily ever after', 'triumph over adversity') (Clarke et al., 2017). When used in qualitative, narrative research, the method is useful to access meaning-making around a particular topic of interest and to understand what discourses inform participants' understandings. As such, this innovative narrative-based approach has vast potential for applicability across several disciplines.

In May 2020, we used a digital version of story completion to prompt Australian residents to describe their thoughts and experiences on physical distancing measures and restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our aim was to capture how participants made sense of new circumstances and coped with daily life. We selected story completion because we were interested in using a narrative data collection tool (as opposed to a question-asking approach) that could be used online while opportunities for face-to-face fieldwork were constrained. Story completion offered a relatively straightforward pathway to engage with participants online and document their perspectives at a specific point in time. We advertised the research via social media (Twitter and Facebook) and received 52 responses in one month. We also collected demographic data for context to enrich our analysis. We have reported on the findings elsewhere (Vaughan et al., 2022).

We noted clear trends in the participant group composition such as homogeneity in ethnicity, educational backgrounds and geographic location. The lack of diversity in ethnic backgrounds led us to write this paper and reflect on the potential for story completion to be used as a culturally safe research method. As researchers who have engaged in decolonial participatory research (e.g. Lenette, 2019; Wells et al., 2021), we wondered from the outset whether using a tool developed from a western perspective for application in clinical settings would preclude diversity among participants and pre-empt how respondents might engage with this method. Based on our application of story completion in a social health context, our findings suggest that the method captured some intersectional markers of identity such as gender and age in the narratives, but the lack of diversity in participants' ethnic backgrounds and how stories were constructed pointed to limitations.

In this paper, we share reflections on the process we used including key ethical and practical considerations, and on what constitutes culturally safe research. We aim to contribute to the literature on decolonial research, which involves more than merely accommodating cultural diversity in the process. Rather, decolonisation is about *disrupting* established ways of conceptualising and implementing projects to privilege and re-centre methods and worldviews that have been diminished or ignored (Lenette, 2019, 2022; Phipps, 2019). Using culturally safe research approaches is crucial to decolonising methodologies and the academy.

We aim to prompt conversations on culturally safe methods using examples and reflections on what we could have done differently. Since white, non-Indigenous researchers still lead the bulk of research initiatives in western and majority-world settings, the key strategies outlined here are primarily for researchers whose cultural backgrounds differ from that of participants, that is, for those considered as 'outsiders', although some considerations apply to researchers who are 'insiders' given the multi-layered and intersectional nature of participants' experiences.

Cultural Safety in Research

The concept of cultural safety originated from work practices in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1980s, based on Māori nursing students' experiences of racism in transcultural nursing contexts that disregarded their strong cultural ties and beliefs. Since Māori patients and nurses were treated appallingly, Irihapeti Ramsden led a group of nurses to challenge Pākehā-(white)centric approaches in favour of 'an environment in which there is mutual respect, openness and willingness to listen, and there is shared understanding and acknowledgment of identity of others' (Skellett, 2012, p. 382). The aim was to reframe how health professionals were trained, with more emphasis on recognising and challenging the impact of coloniality (Browne et al., 2009). Cultural safety means that 'there is *no assault on a person's identity*' (Williams, 1999, p. 213, original emphasis). It posits that the people best equipped to create a culturally safe environment are usually from the same cultural background. However, all practitioners, irrespective of backgrounds, and all organisations must pay attention to addressing racist attitudes or run the risk of perpetuating discriminatory practices (Williams, 1999).

When considered in a research context, the notion of cultural safety challenges researchers to consider the impact of research activities *from participants' perspectives* rather than adopt a 'checklist' approach to assess researchers' cultural 'competence'. It seeks to understand how participants experience their engagement in research processes and the content explored (Lenette, 2019). Cultural safety aligns with research seeking to redress power imbalances and achieve social justice outcomes (Browne et al., 2009). Importantly, it is participants who determine whether the process values and privileges their unique standpoints and perspectives about project design, implementation, evaluation, dissemination and research teams. Participants contribute without fear of being misunderstood or belittled. They are confident that their views will be respected and amplified rather than decontextualised to fit agendas that serve the needs of researchers, academic institutions, funders and governments. Culturally safe research challenges detrimental 'top-down' research paradigms that can diminish rich narratives and worldviews, as a strategy to decolonise methodologies (Lenette, 2019).

Decolonial Research or 'Lite' Adaptation?

Discussions on decoloniality must consider contextual specificities. For instance, in settler-colonial states such as Aotearoa New Zealand and Canada, there are similarities and points of divergence in decolonial research based on sociocultural and geopolitical contexts and histories (see Browne et al., 2009). The points we raise here emerge from our experiences living and working in a settler-colonial state, Australia, characterised by ongoing harm to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through research (see Held, 2019)

and home to a rich diaspora of migrant-settlers (we state our positionalities below). Decolonial research in majority-world countries (sometimes termed 'global south') and non-settler-colonial contexts is likely to require vastly different approaches to be culturally safe, although there may be some overlaps.

Research tools should be sensitive and responsive to participants' backgrounds. This means that, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach for all participants from backgrounds different to academic researchers', the latter need to carefully consider the appropriateness of methods according to group composition, that is, whether they are Indigenous participants or migrant-settlers, or whether the research focusses solely on centring Indigenous perspectives. Participant-led co-design and other collaborative approaches to design, analysis, and dissemination are more likely to yield appropriate, fit-for-purpose research processes and outcomes (see, for instance, Roper et al., 2018).

Attempts to adapt western-based research methods for use with participant groups that sit outside cultural normativity can produce mixed results. Some established research tools have been 'validated' for application in cross-cultural work, such as Mollica et al.'s (1992) and Shoeb et al.'s (2007) work on the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire. However, the principles underpinning tools such as the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire are still grounded in western, biomedical traditions. Validating this questionnaire by using it in research with different groups (in this case, Indochinese and Iraqi refugees) can fall short of addressing the privilege and standpoint bias that determines how studies are designed and questions worded and framed. A broader problem is that participants' views on what constitutes culturally safe research are largely absent from published accounts.

Other methods, while lauded as participatory and emancipatory, have been criticised for continuing to impose western notions. For example, digital storytelling can support participants to exercise agency in the story-creation process, but has been criticised for imposing western-based underpinnings of storytelling and narrative structures that may continue to disregard diverse cultural frames of reference (e.g. Polk, 2010). This approach potentially makes the use of digital storytelling culturally risky or unsafe (see Browne et al., 2009). Such perspectives are critical when discussing how to challenge colonialist applications and appropriation of research methodologies across settings (Lenette, 2019, 2022). A safe/unsafe binary would not be helpful to reflect the nuances of methods and contextual specificities, and it is more likely that research practices sit along a continuum of risks with the aim of privileging culturally safe approaches.

In our own research using body mapping, where participants trace life-size outlines or maps of their bodies and use creative media and words on the map to describe embodied experiences (see Boydell et al., 2020), we did not anticipate any issue with using this participatory method with refugee-background women. However, an advisory committee

member who works in the refugee sector pointed out that some participants might feel uncomfortable with the method's focus on bodies and the familiarity of someone tracing around their bodies due to contextual sociocultural norms. They also noted that the term *body mapping* might imply a bio-medical classificatory process that would be daunting or triggering for participants and encouraged us to emphasise the art-based elements of the method in recruitment material to counter this. We had not considered this issue in depth in previous body mapping projects. Our discussion not only prompted us to review our workshop outline[2] to ensure participants would feel comfortable engaging with the method, but also re-emphasised the importance of reflexivity in ensuring cultural safety in participatory research.

Decolonial research is the reverse of indiscriminately applying new and established methodologies to diverse settings without acknowledging contextual and intersectional factors such as racial, ethnic, religious or linguistic diversity and the rich sociocultural knowledge of participants. Decolonial research begins with understanding white and settler privilege (Held, 2019), answering the call to explore the emancipatory and transgressive possibilities of (new) research approaches, even though – or precisely because – that might imply violating western academic norms about what are considered 'good' or 'acceptable' ways of producing knowledge (Brown & Strega, 2005).

Recent research illustrates how to decolonise research methods. For instance, Mark and Boulton (2017) outlined three cultural adaptations to create a Māori framework to photo-voice in research on primary health care experiences, using *Whakatauki* (proverb), *Mahi Whakaahua* (storytelling through photos) and *Pūrākau* (meaning making of the photos). The aim was to create a Māori-voice research method that aligned with Māori values and cultural protocols. *Te ao Māori* (the Māori worldview) was the point of departure rather than an add-on. In another example, decolonial feminist Rita Segato drew from experiences collaborating with Indigenous women in South America to actively challenge dominant western and colonial standpoints on gender issues (Icaza & Vásquez, 2016). Decolonial discourses reinforce intersectional understandings of oppression and marginalisation.

Shifts in quantitative methodologies, although rarer, also draw on Indigenous knowledge and frameworks. For example, in response to the cultural insensitivity of survey models, Walter and Andersen's (2013) methodology aimed to challenge established, deficit-based practices of Indigenous statistics in favour of a new paradigm for quantitative research such as *nayri kati* (good numbers). Being informed by Indigenous standpoints in quantitative research leads to asking different questions and analysing data differently.

These examples illustrate culturally safe research models that challenge dominant forms of inquiry and privilege Indigenous knowledge and experiences. Importantly, they demonstrate that merely acknowledging diversity in projects is far from sufficient to make them culturally safe. Even when researchers acknowledge cross-cultural differences and their

own privileges and identities as 'outsiders', principles underpinning research methods and activities remain largely western-informed and Eurocentric. This situation can result in implementing culturally insensitive research models across disciplines rather than challenging colonialist approaches, which is *every* researcher's responsibility irrespective of cultural background. A lack of researcher reflexivity means that the decolonisation agenda has progressed slowly because of our collective failure to challenge these norms.

Story Completion: What are We Missing?

Existing studies using story completion do not explicitly address how this method originating in western psychoanalysis is applicable to contexts where diversity in racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds is a key consideration. Most story completion studies are implemented in white-majority settings such as the UK, and this may be why opportunities to explore whether the method can be used in culturally safe ways have been limited. Moller et al. (2020, p. 289) highlight that story completion can help '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'. Similarly, Gravett (2019, p. 5) characterises story completion as 'a means to illuminate (…) sociocultural discourses'. But there is no explicit or nuanced analysis in the current literature on whether this is an appropriate method for cross-cultural research or when working with participants from diverse racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, given its western underpinnings.

This paucity of cross-cultural reflexivity is frustrating, as story completion has the potential to support decolonial research methodologies that foreground storytelling and narrative-based sharing. Indeed, storytelling, yarning and storywork are central to various decolonial and Indigenous research approaches and methodologies (e.g. Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Baskin, 2005; Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Geia et al., 2013; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) and methods (e.g. Lenette, 2022; Mark & Boulton, 2017; Segalo et al., 2015). For example, Storytelling is one of the 25 Indigenous projects outlined in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's foundational Decolonising Methodologies (2012). However, just because story completion is narrative focussed does not make it innately decolonial or culturally safe.

As discussed below, storytelling traditions and practices vary across cultures (McCabe, 1997) and this shapes how, why, and in what contexts stories can be shared or elicited. In some instances, the sacred nature of stories means that they cannot be shared publicly, while in other contexts, interpreting stories shared in research contexts using an outsider lens may not be welcomed. Further, facilitating or gathering stories is not enough (Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019; Baskin, 2005). Decolonial storytelling requires particular ways of listening too – listening with intent (see Lenette,

2019). To be story-ready, 'the researcher must listen to Indigenous Peoples' stories with respect, develop story relationships in a responsible manner, treat story knowledge with reverence, and strengthen storied impact through reciprocity' (Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem et al., 2019, p. 2). While a lack of attention to cultural safety is not unique to story completion, this method's innovative potential across disciplines (e.g. Braun et al., 2019; Gravett, 2019) requires that we pay careful attention to the possibility of reinforcing dominant colonial notions rather than disrupting those through culturally safe research.

Deconstructing Story Completion: Our Project

After attending a workshop on story completion in 2018, we were excited at the prospect of using this method in social health research. The changes we experienced in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that we had to think creatively about how we could proceed with research projects and, like much of the world, 'pivot' to an online format. Story completion lent itself to online research. The stem we used was

> An 11 p.m. phone call is received from Ali's elderly parent who is distressed due to COVID-19. What happens next?

Here, we provide an account of the key ethical and practical considerations we documented to deconstruct how the method is understood and to identify its limitations.

We applied for ethics clearance at the level of negligible risk. Usually, our work in mental health and refugee studies requires us to submit more than low risk applications, which are quite extensive. This experience was quite different. The shorter nature of the application meant that we only provided essential information to the ethics committee. The first response from the ethics office was that this was perhaps more suited for the 'low risk' committee to review. Part of the initial response was due to a lack of understanding of the approach: it looked *deceptively simple*, and the ethics officer thought there were details missing in our application. The mention of 'coping with COVID-19' in our description may have raised concerns that participants might experience sadness or distress, but we maintained our position that we were only asking people to respond to one stem (i.e., a one-question survey) and to write about it in any way that suited them. As we suspected, a week later, the ethics committee asked us to clarify 'whether completing the story stem may have the potential to induce experiences of discomfort or distress in participants'. We could not identify a reasonable cause for concern in that respect and responded accordingly. We received ethics approval for this project within two weeks, which was completely novel to us (some of our applications have taken up to six months to get ethical clearance). We share this to signal that ethics committee might either consider the method as less rigorous (see Gravett, 2019) because of its perceived simplicity, or might be suspicious of the stem wording.

When used face-to-face, story completion can involve placing the stem at the top of an A4 size page with space to write the story. Even if the back of the page is used for writing, the hard copy version of a story completion task might act as parameter for how to respond. The online submission process we used versus an A4 size page with limited space offered participants a different experience with the method. The length of submissions varied from one sentence identifying the next step or action the protagonist would take, to a lengthy paragraph that was either reflective or followed a narrative arc, for example, orientation, complication and resolution.

Reflexivity and Author Positionalities

We see reflexivity as an ongoing process where researchers consciously reflect on how their assumptions shape research relationships, processes, and outcomes (Lenette et al., 2022; Fletcher-Brown, 2020). It is an intentional strategy of ongoing critical self-reflection to avoid causing (unintentional) harm (Kumsa et al., 2015). A crucial element of reflexivity is for us as white (Priya and Katherine) and non-Indigenous (all authors) researchers to position ourselves in relation to this topic and identify how our privileges and identities affect our approach to decolonial research. This process aligns with the paper's intent of challenging primarily 'outsider' researchers to think more deeply about cultural safety in research.

Caroline: I am an uninvited first-generation migrant-settler living and working on unceded Aboriginal land since 2005, with English as a second language. I am a woman with brown skin, making me a 'visible minority' in a white-majority country. I have privileges as an academic in a full-time, ongoing role, living in an affluent suburb and country. My lived experiences differ greatly from that of the people I usually collaborate with in refugee research projects. I value participatory methodologies because of my commitment to social and gender justice, and because my aim is to change how we think about and conduct research to make it more respectful, ethical, and culturally safe. In the last two years, I have become more aware of my responsibility as a migrant-settler woman scholar to decolonise research.

Priya: I am a white woman working and learning on Gadigal and Bidjigal Country. I have privileges resulting from being part of the white majority in Australia, as well as from my employment in a white-collar profession. As a junior researcher, I feel fortunate to work as part of a research team that values collaborative, participatory research methodologies. I am learning a lot, and still have much to learn, about decolonising my research practice.

Katherine: I am a Canadian scholar who relocated to Australia in 2015 to pursue my work that aims to reduce the knowledge to practice gap, the well-known fact that our research results often fail to reach individuals who need to know – the service providers, policy makers, health care consumers and their families and the public. This research began many decades ago when I was working in large public psychiatric

hospital, which resulted in collaborating with adults with schizophrenia, hiring, training and remunerating them as key members of research teams, participating in analysis, publication and advocacy. This deep involvement of people with lived experience in the entire research enterprise enables a much richer understanding of what features were important to people with serious and persistent mental illness.

Issues

We outline three considerations when using story completion: western constructions of storytelling; creating the stem; and recruitment strategy. The section that follows discusses what we could do differently to ensure we use story completion in culturally safe ways.

Issue 1 – Western Constructions of Storytelling. As we began designing the project, we struggled with the assumption that the stem or story cue should be the beginning of the story. This presumes that every story has a beginning, middle and end, and follows a particular narrative arc with a story (moral) resolution or coda. The name of the method itself implies that participants should 'complete' it, and that we provide the 'beginning' (the stem from which the story 'grows'). Our inclusion of the phrase *'What happens next?'* at the end of the stem might have suggested that respondents should write about thoughts and actions that followed receiving the phone call, not necessarily to 'solve' the issue but to take the story forward, which is what most respondents did. Traditional notions (e.g., Bruner, 2002; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) consider a story as 'a linear and complete whole which is characterised by a plot, a unity which is – just like an embroidered quilt – spatially and temporally structured' (Sermijin et al., 2008, p. 634). We acknowledged that this approach (i.e., the stem setting the beginning of a story) broadly reflects westerns conventions and understandings of storytelling, unlike, for example, oral storytelling traditions such as yarning – a protocol primarily used in Indigenous research, which prioritise time and space for stories to unfold in different ways. Yarning is seen as relatively informal and flexible. The approach privileges listening with intent (e.g. Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010; Dean, 2010) and values reciprocal engagement allowing listeners to contribute, ask questions, and seek clarifications (Baskins, 2005). We felt conflicted, as we were keen to ensure that the stem would not discourage participation from diverse respondents, especially those who conceptualised storytelling differently or embraced culturally prescribed protocols to storytelling that diverged from the norm in Australia. When we scanned the literature on story completion, we did not come across any examples where stems were used differently, that is, other than as the 'beginning' of a linear story. We decided to proceed with this caveat in mind because (i) this was a time-sensitive research initiative and (ii) it was our first time using story completion

and we did not yet have direct experience of how it could work to deconstruct and modify the method.

Issue 2 – Creating the Stem. We designed a stem that was gender neutral and avoided pre-determining how participants should respond to the scenario. We tested the stem with a few colleagues from different professional backgrounds to determine whether it was suitable and broad enough. We asked local and international colleagues who would respond promptly and were familiar with our research. We received insightful responses and could already see that each story explored multiple issues. We anticipated that the method would be appropriate to capture sociocultural aspects in their narratives, but our knowledge of the group of test-respondents suggested that we did not trial the stem with a diverse enough group.

Issue 3 – Recruitment Strategy. In conjunction with the method used, a project's recruitment strategy is a distinct but related issue in determining who gets to participate. We have provided a detailed summary of the demographic data elsewhere (Vaughan et al., 2022). We reproduced standard questions we came across in previous surveys but favoured an open-ended format over predetermined categories for questions on gender, and race and ethnic identity. As such, participants used self-identifying terms in their responses. The table below summarises responses to the question *Which race/ethnicity best describes you*? (two participants did not respond):

Caucasian[3] (including white, white Australian)	17
Anglo (including Anglo-Australian, Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-Celtic, Anglo white)	11
Australian	9
European	1
Irish Catholic Australian	1
Non-Indigenous Australia	1
Aboriginal	1
Anglo/Sri Lankan	1
Asian	1
Asian Australian	1
Chinese	1
Jewish Anglo	1
Mixed	1
None – my family comes from many continents	1
South Asian	1
The Human Race	1
Total	*50*

Even though we do not know the ethnicity of those who identified as 'Australian' or 'Non-Indigenous Australia', it is clear that a large proportion of 52 participants (i.e., at least 28 in the first two categories) identified as white, Anglo-Saxon. Our first reading of the demographic data was that there was little diversity among participants in terms of which race or ethnicity they identified with.

One reason for this lack of diversity might be due to our strategy for advertising the research and recruiting participants as approved by the University of New South Wales' ethics committee. As we wanted a snapshot of immediate responses to circumstances prevailing in May 2020, we shared the Qualtrics link via our Twitter accounts, which we use for professional networking. We live and work in Australia, so it is unsurprising that most of our combined 3000 followers are academics and professionals from western countries. The second step was to post it on the *Black Dog Institute*'s Facebook site, which has over 200,000 followers (we noted a net increase in responses at that point). It is difficult to gauge the composition of followers, who are mainly people with experiences of mental distress, their families, friends, and carers, and mental health academics and practitioners. The survey containing the stem remained open for one month only because our aim was to capture people's experiences at a specific point in time. This was especially relevant in the context of rapidly changing circumstances that characterised much of 2020.

What could we do differently?

To suggest how we could use story completion in culturally safe ways, we draw on a *rhizomatic* perspective. Katherine had previously found it valuable to apply this concept to reflect on community-based research. The rhizome concept, which refers to knowledge, practices, and growth that do not have a single origin, highlights the importance of multiplicities, singularities and fluid connections (Gravett, 2019). A rhizomic perspective challenges concepts of linearity and regularity. We find this framework useful to discuss culturally safe research methods precisely because of its emphasis on disrupting established notions of how we conceptualise knowledge and meaning making. We posit that a rhizomatic perspective is useful to both 'outsider' and 'insider' researchers.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, volume II of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) use the term 'rhizomatic' to describe research that allows for multiple, non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data representation and interpretation. The principles of rhizomatic analysis, embracing ideas such as rupture, ambiguity, angst, and uncertainty, provide a valuable metaphoric framework. Gravett (2019) drew on a rhizomatic perspective to analyse story completion data and deviated from traditional approaches via identification of patterns, themes, meanings or codes. Instead of prioritising regularities in the data, her goal was to engage in a messy analysis to show nuances and irregularities by 'identifying data "hot spots" that "glimmer" and "glow", "gathering our attention"' (Maclure, 2010; in Gravett, 2019, p.5). Here, we extend Gravett's approach and propose thinking rhizomatically about not only data analysis, but also the construction and facilitation of story completion. This approach resonates with us as it

highlights the uniqueness of intersectional experiences as reflected in the narratives.

Strategies

To address issue 1 – western constructions of storytelling:

- Embrace messy texts (Sermijin et al., 2008), which are similar to rhizomes as they are open ended and resist simple dichotomisation that attempt to deviate from representational methods and approaches of traditional, realist writing strategies (Denzin, 1997). Typical story characteristics are not inherent in stories, nor in individuals, but instead must be seen as sociocultural constructs (Butler, 1990). Researchers can identify characteristics that may not be immediately apparent and are grounded in distinct cultural standpoints by privileging a messy rather than prescribed step-by-step analysis (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016; in Gravett, 2019) when 'reading' texts for patterns, meanings or themes.

Messy analyses are commonplace (especially in qualitative research) and far from being sloppy (Mellor, 2001). Despite the negative connotation that might be attached to the word 'messy', this approach is a highly skilled and reflexive process that many researchers who analyse complex and rich data engage in (see Cook, 1998, 2019; Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Mellor (2001) posits that a messy analysis does not follow established rules but creates new ones through the analysis by 'working without rules'. As such, researchers' analytical frameworks will vary across diverse datasets. Importantly, 'working without rules' can lead to challenging predetermined western lenses due to the open ended nature of messy analyses. Clearly, a messy analysis of narratives in a story completion project can yield very different interpretations when compared to more established, systematic approaches – and can indeed complement and inform the latter.

- Explore diverse notions of storytelling, for example, from Indigenous, African, Latin American, Middle Eastern, Pacific/Pasifika, or Asian literature and norms to inform the stem design and adapt instructions so that the story completion task is relevant to distinct sociocultural contexts. This involves seeking advice and support from collaborators from the same background as participants (e.g., Pasifika researchers or community leaders) on the appropriate protocol to avoid decontextualising or misappropriating storytelling norms. This is especially important when researchers are white or non-Indigenous and from western institutions. For instance, the work of Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem and colleagues (2019) is an excellent starting point to engage with Indigenous storywork as an ethical and decolonial methodology. This edited collection draws on examples from Canada, Aotearoa New Zealand, and

Australia. Such a shift in approach might involve storytellers using different media, rather than (just) words to respond to stems, such as drawings, storyboards, pictograms, photographs, captions or collages. To complement story completion data, semi-structured interviews (as in Gravett, 2019) or focus group discussions can be used to further contextualise responses and understand the full sociocultural significance of narratives.

- Offer the option of integrating simple story *fragments* (a term we propose to replace story stem with its linear narrative implications) at any point of the story, that is, not necessarily at the beginning, so that storytellers may choose to build the narrative sequence in ways that make sense to them and reflect culturally prescribed storytelling protocols. To this end, we favour the term story *assemblage* over completion so that storytellers do not feel constrained to complete the narrative. Our use of the word 'assemblage' is deliberate. We offer a contemporary take on assemblage and reclaim this academic concept for decolonial research due to its usefulness in a creative sense. This term acknowledges that while story assemblage involves creative imagining, it depends on the storyteller's standpoint. A story assembled from a fragment draws on individual, cultural, and lived experiences and knowledges. More accessible terms such as story creation can be used during data collection to avoid confusing participants with sociological terms, as is usually the case in co-research.

To address issue 2 – creating the stem:

- Co-create story fragments with the target group(s). To our knowledge, this has not been done previously. As per the standard definition of story completion, researchers design stems prior to recruiting participants. Collaboratively co-creating fragments can better reflect narrative norms that are relevant to target groups and support the development of new research paradigms. The co-creation process can be negotiated with representatives who would guide the development of an appropriate fragment. This approach is commonly used in participatory research. For example, Fine and Torre (2019) describe a successful partnership with LGBTIQA+ and gender expansive young people in the United States to develop a survey on intersectional narratives of living at the margins and resilience. Because they spent time consulting widely and integrating the wishes of LGBTIQA+ and gender expansive young people into the design, the survey received a high response rate (6000 young people across the US) with diverse representation across ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and disability. Some respondents felt that the process of taking the survey was affirming because it was sensitive to their issues and built on the wisdom, experiences and knowledge of the young people consulted in the design.

To address issues 3 – recruitment strategy:

- Deliberately target specific ethnic, religious or linguistic groups via the best and context-relevant strategies to promote and recruit for the study. Efforts to ensure that methods are used in culturally safe ways can fall short of yielding diverse, culturally grounded perspectives if we overlook the recruitment strategy, as both aspects are equally important. A co-research model to engage with community leaders and representatives or peak, non-government organisations working with and for multicultural communities can yield a more targeted recruitment process to increase diversity among respondents. They can also play a key role in co-designing story fragments to ensure sociocultural and linguistic relevance and sensitivity. Fragments could be translated so that respondents can share narratives in their first language. Even though engaging in a storytelling research initiative might not be seen as a priority especially in times of crisis, community partners might find the approach insightful to illuminate concerns and hardships at the source of respondents' anxieties. This process can inform relevant community-based support and intervention strategies, rather than add to the body of research that has little impact on people's everyday lives.

We acknowledge that, even with careful attention to these shifts in process to elicit stories, there are still risks of perpetuating racist and discriminatory attitudes in data collection and analysis. No method is culturally safe in and of itself and we all have the potential to use methods in ways that create risky and unsafe contexts. As such, the importance of reflexivity cannot be overstated. The process of ongoing, intentional critical self-reflection to avoid causing harm through research practices (Kumsa et al., 2015), reflexive conversations about how research activities contribute to the decolonisation agenda, and listening to feedback from participants, co-researchers, and community partners can help researchers identify what aspects of projects go against the tenets of cultural safety and require adjusting or reframing.

Conclusion

As part of our reflexive research process, we set out to interrogate the underpinnings of story completion. Our observation is that there have been limited efforts thus far to use the method in culturally safe ways, including in our own project on the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. It is not enough to rely on possibly capturing racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity among respondents as a 'happy coincidence', nor is it always possible for researchers to identify or interpret key sociocultural characteristics in the narratives alone. We argue for more explicit commitments to using new and established research methods in culturally safe ways. Although we missed an opportunity to discuss how we could challenge the western, clinical origins of story completion *prior* to using the method, we

hope that the strategies we outlined in this paper reflect what we have learnt. We are keen to expand the application of story fragments (instead of stems) and assemblage (instead of completion) as a strategy to redress the imbalance of decontextualised research approaches that can lead to culturally unsafe practices.

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Notes

1. We use lower case 'w' in 'western' intentionally to decenter colonialist linguistic dominance and white discourses (Bhattacharya, 2022).
2. We added the italicised text to our instructions: 'To make a body map, you trace around your body and use symbols, images and colours to depict your experiences. *If you prefer, you can use a pre-made outline, or you can create a drawing of your outline and it will be reproduced in large scale for you*'.
3. We note that this term is racist (see Mukhopadhyay, 2017).

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