

# A method worth telling: Using story completion to understand social work responses to discriminatory abuse

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## Abstract

Story completion methods have not yet been used in social work research, but the method has significant potential in this area. This paper reports on findings of a qualitative story completion study, which set out to understand professional responses to discriminatory abuse in English safeguarding adults practice. Fifty-six social worker and social care worker participants responded to a ‘story stem’, which refers to the opening lines of a story, continuing a story they choose to tell in response. In this instance, the story stem introduces a fictional scenario involving a social worker who is visiting an adult who has experienced discriminatory abuse. Story completion was chosen because it does not require self-report and this was useful given the under-reporting of discriminatory abuse. Story completion is appropriate for studying taboo or sensitive topics because it is less exposing, producing stories rather than accounts of one’s practice. Story completion also allowed contrast and comparison across different characteristics that might be targeted in discriminatory abuse, spotlighting divergent responses to discrimination based on transgender identity, race and mental ill-health. Dramaturgical narrative analysis was used to make sense of the resulting stories and three narratives were identified: anxious allies, affirmative advocates and administrative assessors. There were a small number of outliers who did not complete stories based on the guidelines provided. The results suggest workforce development needs in relation to discriminatory abuse. The article concludes with a reflection on the ways in which social work research can draw on story completion methods in the future.

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Discriminatory abuse, discrimination, hate crime, safeguarding adults, story completion methods, narrative analysis, dramaturgical analysis

## Once upon a time...

Stories and storytelling are integral aspects of social work and social care (Riessman and Quinney, 2005) and this article reports on an innovative study that used stories to better understand safeguarding adults practice with people who experience discriminatory abuse. Safeguarding adults comprises promoting and protecting an adult's "right to live in safety, free from abuse and neglect" (Department of Health and Social Care, 2024: s14.7). Although now seen as a core part of adult social care in England, Dixon (2023) reminds us that safeguarding adults is a relatively new and developing area of policy and practice. It is also relatively under-researched (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2016). Graham et al. (2016) have noted local variance in models for how safeguarding is delivered, degrees of specialism and enquiry practices, but point to key safeguarding activities comprising thresholds and decisions, multi-agency working and clear outcomes for people who have been affected. However, the person-centred and strengths-based 'Making Safeguarding Personal' agenda has been increasingly influential. It marks a cultural shift in the way that safeguarding adults is practiced, advocating a more participatory approach (Cooper et al., 2018). In effect, this means listening and engaging with people's stories about their experiences of risk and harm, whilst also encouraging 'strengths-based' stories, centring people's voices and perspectives on what they would prefer to happen as a result of the abuse experienced (Department of Health and Social Care, 2019). Engaging with stories is crucial for understanding people's experiences of harm and how they have coped. After all, "to harvest strengths, the practitioner must be authentically interested in, and respectful of, clients' stories" (Saleebey, 2008: 133).

This study focuses on discriminatory abuse, which is one of 10 categories of abuse in safeguarding adults policy in England. It refers to "forms of harassment, slurs or similar treatment, because of race, gender and gender identity, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion" (DHSC 2024: s.14.17). Discriminatory abuse occurs in community settings but is more likely to be reported in people's own homes or care home settings (Mason, 2023; NHS Digital, 2023) so cannot be reduced to incidents of name-calling by strangers and is likely to be more nuanced. The definition above lists characteristics but clearly, people often have multiple, intersecting characteristics and may be targeted in relation to different characteristics at different times or multiple characteristics simultaneously. As such, an intersectional lens is important but there is also limited research on whether professionals respond in different ways to different characteristics.

This study engages with stories to understand practice responses to discriminatory abuse. The term 'story' describes the interactional nature of relating one's experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988) and stories are socially constructed so that the same events might be seen differently by different storytellers (Baldwin, 1993). Similarly, the same events might be shared in different ways by the same storyteller, depending on the context

([Riessman, 1993](#)). For example, the story one might tell a friend, might be different to one shared with a manager or a researcher. This does not mean that stories are fabrications but is an acknowledgement that stories should not be interpreted as transcriptions of some fixed reality. Stories may be told to different audiences in different ways and may need ‘smoothing’ over to engage audiences and speak to their interests. Social workers, for instance, may convert raw stories onto eligibility frameworks to be more persuasive to audiences such as resource panels ([Baldwin, 1993](#); [Smith, 2016](#)). Alternatively, storytellers may edit or only partially share certain stories if they feel ashamed or judged, which may happen when talking to professionals about discriminatory experiences. Drawing on these connections between practice and storytelling, this article outlines a ‘story completion’ project which considers how social workers and social care workers might approach working with discriminatory abuse in their practice.

Storytelling has been foregrounded here as an essential component of safeguarding practice but in the case of discriminatory abuse, stories are conspicuous by their absence ([Mason et al., 2022](#)). Less than 1% of safeguarding activity in England relates to discriminatory abuse ([NHS Digital, 2023](#)), representing an under-estimate given the simultaneous increases in hate crime reporting (disability hate crime is up 71% over 5 years in England and Wales; many of these cases could meet the definition for discriminatory abuse) ([Home Office, 2023](#)). Similarly, few Safeguarding Adult Reviews have been commissioned to examine practice that relates to discriminatory abuse ([Preston-Shoot et al., 2020](#)). Various narrative barriers may explain this silence. People may not realise that their everyday experiences of discrimination constitute a safeguarding issue and societal taboos may make it difficult for people to discuss their protected characteristics. Professionals may not identify discriminatory abuse because they miss these dynamics behind a more obvious form of abuse, such as physical abuse, or they may fear intrusive conversations relating to protected characteristics ([Mason, 2023](#); [Mason et al., 2022](#)). This limits the narrative resources of people who have been harmed and such professional responses may effectively silence these stories. This provides an agenda for further research but also produces methodological challenges. Directly asking practitioners about practice through self-report methods is unlikely to yield answers given concerns about professional engagement in this area, so careful methodological choices are needed.

## Method

Story completion has been described as an innovative and flexible method that is relatively under-utilised ([Clarke et al., 2019](#); [Gravett, 2019](#)). The premise of this method is providing participants with the opening lines of a story, known as a story stem, and asking them to continue the story (this study’s stem is re-produced in the next section). Story stems are usually written in the third person so participants adopt the role of a fictional character or narrator of events they are not involved in, thereby providing a work-around to the limitations of direct self-report methods. [Clarke et al. \(2015\)](#) have outlined the history of story completion methods and their transition from a psychoanalytic assessment technique to a quantitative research method that enabled numeric analysis and counting specific mentions or positivist studies focusing on developing fixed meanings from

stories. This emphasis changed following a study by [Kitzinger and Powell \(1995\)](#) who underpinned their story completion project on infidelity with a constructivist philosophy, engaging with discourses that participants drew on, rather than revealing hidden meanings. Their study also spotlighted the potential for comparative data, through minor alterations to a story stem to allow analysis of how changes such as the gender of the main character affected the response ([Kitzinger and Powell, 1995](#)). As a result, this method offers a window into how specific protected characteristics might be responded to in different ways.

### *The study: Implementing story completion methods*

Research in Practice (a charity that supports the use of research and evidence in social care) commissioned the author to run three online knowledge exchange workshops on discriminatory abuse. Ethical approval was provided by Royal Holloway, University of London for a story completion research exercise as part of this knowledge exchange activity. Research in Practice advertised the online workshops to local authorities across England inviting practitioners to sign up for one of three full-day online workshops. Participants were drawn from a variety of local authorities across all regions of England and were required to have experience in working with safeguarding adults enquiries. Although participants comprised both social workers and social care workers (the latter do not hold professional registration in England), there were no significant differences in the responses across these groups. The workshops were fully booked by 150 practitioners and 95 of these attended on the day. From this, 56 practitioners consented to take part in the research element of the workshops and arrangements were made to delineate participants who consented from those who preferred not to take part.

Given the concern that participants may not be familiar with discriminatory abuse, workshops began with initial knowledge exchange, sharing definitions and an overview of research findings on the topic, which is a recommended step in story completion as it prompts more relevant stories ([Gravett, 2019](#)). Next, the story completion activity was introduced and guidance about what makes a good story was shared (using ‘third person’ voice, license to use creativity and imagination, no stories are wrong stories). Pre-writing questions were invited, and participants were encouraged to return to the virtual ‘room’ if they needed clarification or support whilst writing. Participants were given 45 min to complete their stories, exploring an encounter between ‘Pat’ (a social worker), and ‘Nicky’ (who is meeting Pat for an assessment). Three versions of the story stem were evenly allocated around the group, so that ‘Nicky’ had one of three named protected characteristics (transgender identity, race, or mental ill-health) depending on which stem the participant was allocated. The story stem comprised the following text:

Pat is undertaking a social work assessment with Nicky who <insert protected characteristic (i.e. identifies as trans *or* is Black British *or* experiences mental ill-health)> and has care and support needs. Nicky tells Pat they have experienced name-calling and rough treatment in the community but moves on to talk about their care needs. It is not clear if this relates to

Nicky's <insert protected characteristic (i.e. transgender identity *or* race *or* mental ill-health)  
>. Pat thinks it is important to return to this comment....

The characteristics attributed to Nicky were selected in conversation with Research in Practice, based on practitioner familiarity (mental ill-health) and unfamiliarity (transgender identity), or where less research has been done in safeguarding adults (race). Interestingly, several participants told us that their employer's initiatives around LGBTQ+ Pride or Black Lives Matter had prepared them for the workshop. Meanwhile, participants were advised that they could interpret Pat's characteristics as they wished, so that they would be comfortable writing from this character's perspective.

The 56 stories were evenly split across the stories about transgender identity ( $n = 18$ ), race ( $n = 19$ ) and mental ill-health ( $n = 19$ ). Voice recording and transcription was offered to provide reasonable adjustments and taken up by two participants with no significant qualitative differences. The average word length for stories was 655 words (range 1353 - 204 words). Although the segregation of transgender identity, race and mental ill-health entails limitations in terms of intersectional identities, this allowed disaggregation of how different characteristics may result in different reactions from storytellers.

## Data analysis

The collected stories were rich and stimulating, offering many perspectives on how the social work character, Pat, would proceed with Nicky, who had disclosed experiences that appear to be discriminatory. Whilst my initial plan was to thematically analyse these stories, I was struck by the richness of the stories (atmosphere, tone, character arcs, story progression) and was keen to preserve this storied context.

Narrative analysis refers to methods for interpreting storied data (Mihás, 2023) involving several analytic practices. Typically, it involves considering storytelling devices such as plot, characterisation, rhetoric or genre (Baldwin, 1993), though there are a range of alternative methods under the narrative umbrella (Riessman and Quinney, 2005; Smith, 2016). Mihás (2023) has suggested that Saldaña's (2013) dramaturgical analysis, based on sociologist Goffman's (1959) metaphor of 'life as theatre', can be adopted narratively.

Saldaña's (2013) dramaturgical analysis emphasises character development and interaction, noting six relevant storytelling devices: (i) objectives (character motivations), (ii) conflicts (barriers arising in character action or interaction), (iii) tactics (strategies for overcoming barriers), (iv) attitudes (character thoughts towards others), (v) emotions (and their relation to others), and (vi) subtext (unsurfaced messages that become clear as the story is told). When applied narratively, these dramaturgical categories should not be over-coded (or coded as they might be in thematic analysis) as this can fracture the narratives. Instead, after a period of familiarisation (known as 'indwelling' in narrative analysis) with the stories, these aspects of characterisation are considered lightly across whole stories to understand how they drove the story forward (Smith, 2016: 216).

Goffman's (1959) concepts of frontstage and backstage are particularly interesting for dramaturgical narrative analysis with story completion. At the frontstage, we use scripts to present ourselves in idealised ways to others and manage the impressions other people

(our audience) have of us. For example, storytellers in this project may write stories that demonstrate professionalism or anti-oppressive values. Whilst story completion offers clear frontstage access (what we want others to hear), the method also provides some degree of backstage access. At the backstage, access is provided to our true nature, possibly when we feel comfortable with the person. In story completion, a narrator may share thoughts about other characters with their readers, without the knowledge of these characters. For example, a narrator may suggest that the lead character had some strong emotional reactions to events, which they did not share with other characters. In this way, story completion allows a degree of backstage access to be shared with the reader.

To coherently present the findings, I have used ‘narrative smoothing’ and ‘composite narrative’ strategies. Narrative smoothing is a core element of using narrative data and involves “brushing off the rough edges of disconnected raw data” (Kim, 2016: 192). Whilst there are risks involving discarding data that does not fit, smoothing is a commonly applied strategy to enhance coherence and produce engaging stories. Meanwhile, composite narratives share data from stories that contain similar narratives and have been used to protect storyteller confidentiality or to manage large datasets and present data in an engaging way, including to mixed academic/practitioner audiences (Willis, 2019).

## Findings

The project set out to understand how practitioners thought a social worker might engage with discriminatory abuse. Data analysis produced three distinct narratives: the anxious ally, the affirmative advocate, and the administrative assessor. Each narrative was found in different concentrations across the three story stems and composite narratives are used to present these.

### *Narrative 1: The ‘anxious ally’*

Pat feels out of his depth. He has never dealt with anything like this before and is anxious he could upset Nicky through his lack of experience. Pat notices he has appraised what Nicky says about their life and how different it is to Pat’s own and worries he may act out biases he is barely aware of. Pat thinks that he is mostly uncomfortable about relating what Nicky has said to their protected characteristics in case this is intrusive or offensive. Pat is nervous about asking questions but imagines how it feels for Nicky. Nicky looks away avoiding eye contact and Pat realises that re-telling what happened might be traumatic for them. After Pat explains he is there to listen and get to know Nicky, the atmosphere eases and they start to form the first steps of a professional relationship. Pat is relieved that Nicky is opening up. After a long discussion, where Pat tries to get Nicky’s perspective on what has happened, Nicky acknowledges feeling upset, but they are glad they told someone. Once they have finished the visit, Pat thinks to himself that he has not yet gathered much information about the risks but realises this will take trust and time.

‘Anxious allies’ were particularly concentrated in the transgender identity stories (9 of 18 stories), while only a small number of stories about mental ill-health (2 of 19 stories) or race (3 of 19 stories) adopted this narrative. Thinking dramaturgically, these stories tended to be introspectively ‘scripted’, outlining the social worker’s thoughts and feelings. The ‘set’ for the story was minimally described but involved a home visit and occasionally a return to the office whilst reflecting on the encounter and soliciting reflective supervision. These stories set Pat’s motivations (or ‘objectives’) as support-oriented, though this was often obscured by a range of anticipatory ‘emotions’. A wide array of stories across the three story stems discussed empathy and inferred the importance of emotional attunement, given the sensitivity of the topic and the likelihood that Nicky would be upset. Storytellers frequently discussed the importance of trauma as a consequence of transphobic and racist abuse (this was not apparent in the mental health stories). Whilst trauma may cause a barrier (or ‘conflict’) for Nicky to relay their experience, storytellers took this into account through approaches (or ‘tactics’) such as trauma-informed practice or building rapport over several visits.

The concentration of anxious ally narratives about working with transgender identity conveyed a strong concern not to cause offence to Nicky, suggesting significant taboos that stifled conversations between Pat and Nicky. There was a clear sense of amplified difference in these stories and a concern to use ‘correct language’ to avoid offence. In a different way, stories adopting this narrative that related to mental ill-health also included concern not to ‘unsettle’ Nicky or cause them distress due to their diagnosis, but these also ran the risk of shutting down conversation.

In the face of ‘conflicts’ about not knowing what to say to Nicky, storytellers identified that Pat drew on a range of transferrable skills (or ‘tactics’), asking broad questions to get to know Nicky, unpacking unclear statements and identifying what the risks were or what they wanted to do about their concerns. The storytellers who told ‘anxious ally’ stories acknowledged their limitations in terms of knowledge and experience, but this was underpinned by ‘attitudes’ that Nicky needed support, acknowledging that providing this support was an unfamiliar, but important, aspect of Pat’s role. A large proportion of ‘anxious ally’ stories contained ‘subtext’ that suggested professional biases and values were engaged in this work. As an example, the story above discusses Pat’s noticing that he has appraised Nicky’s appearance, hinting towards a recognition of professional bias. The story moves on without fully unpacking this comment, so any revelations about values remain submerged and latent.

## *Narrative 2: The ‘affirmative advocate’*

Pat is not surprised – discrimination is an everyday occurrence for people like Nicky. Pat sets out to work in an anti-oppressive way to help Nicky feel empowered. Her characteristics are protected under the Equality Act. Pat tells Nicky he wants to support her and invites Nicky to say more about what happened. Pat notices family photos and a full bookshelf, including books related to race and racism. As a white, British social worker, Pat recognises the structural power in their relationship. Although he cannot change this, Pat acknowledges it,

trying to be an ally. Pat reassures Nicky that what happened is wrong, affirming it is abusive. Pat asks Nicky what they want to happen. Nicky sighs, gets up and turns the kettle on and says, "I was bullied every day in school, and this has continued, bullies come in different shapes and sizes, but they are everywhere". Recently, young people have been throwing litter through her letter box and even surrounded her in a local shop, pushing her around. "I don't want to go through all that again, reporting it to the police. Nothing happens, it just gets worse".

'Affirmative Advocate' narratives were evident in over half of the stories about race (12 of 19 stories) and slightly fewer stories about transgender identity (7 of 18 stories) and mental ill-health (6 of 19 stories). In terms of dramaturgy, 'affirmative advocates' were the most likely to adopt dialogue between Pat and Nicky, breathing dynamism into the accounts and underlining a sense of Nicky's agency and voice. The stories also provided context about Nicky's life beyond their abusive experiences, drawing on observations of their home and community. In these stories, we learned most about the storyteller's perspectives about Nicky's wishes, motivations, and concerns.

Multiple accounts were provided about the story 'set', which envisioned action beyond the Pat and Nicky dyad through non-linear, flashbacks to what happened. 'Props' such as kettles, bookcases and family photographs conjure up aspects of homeliness that supplied comfort during a difficult interaction. In the above story, switching on a kettle provides a pivotal moment in the narrative where Nicky begins to open up to Pat. Some stories described densely built-up neighbourhoods where those causing harm could be encountered at any point, suggesting some practitioner bias around what sorts of communities this abuse might occur in. Front doors were inspected for damage and letter boxes deposited litter or dog excrement. The community contained shops, parks, pharmacies, and schools but these spaces also facilitated unavoidable confrontations when Nicky accessed necessary facilities. CCTV might provide protective or evidential resource, whilst presenting an atmosphere of ubiquitous threat, while use of the internet might unlock online support or facilitate new forms of online abuse. All of these factors amounted to significant menace and social isolation rather than neighbourliness and community integration.

Professional 'objectives' in these stories involved Pat thinking together with Nicky about what support might help to stop or challenge the abuse. Ineffective professional interactions in the past or contextual issues such as the pervasiveness of discrimination within the community could act as barriers or 'conflicts'. Another 'conflict', specific to the race story stem, was low levels of trust extended to working with the police – this was not fully elaborated upon in terms of specific issues regarding race and policing, but this was implied as 'subtext'. Stories frequently discussed whiteness as another 'conflict' to full understanding of issues regarding racism, potentially leaving Nicky feeling concerned about full disclosure when working with a white professional. In contrast, stories that identified Pat as a Black professional explicitly mentioned drawing on their own experiences of racism as a resource. Other stories mentioned identifying culturally specific services for Nicky or using supervision or specific training opportunities to attend to 'cultural awareness'.



‘Affirmative advocates’ (specifically those related to race) were most likely to mention theoretical frameworks such as anti-oppressive practice and affirming or validating skills, adopting an ‘attitude’ that something must be done to prevent any interference with Nicky’s rights. These stories were less likely to talk about Pat’s ‘emotions’ but relayed a visceral sense of injustice that drove the plot forward. Although structural issues were often named within the narrative, this sometimes remained at ‘subtext’ level and some storytellers conveyed that tackling society-wide discrimination was a high-level ambition and attempted to address these issues at an individual level instead.

### *Narrative 3: The ‘administrative assessor’*

Nicky was distressed and agitated, rubbing her hands together. Pat observes Nicky’s body language to establish any visible injuries. Nicky’s mental health issues may influence her perception – is the disclosure related to her mental illness, a hallucination? Either way, discrimination is experienced by many people, not necessarily something for progressing through safeguarding services. Pat does not want Nicky’s care and support needs to go by the wayside so went back to the beginning and completes a full Care Act assessment. This way, he can be sure Nicky’s needs are being met, asking what Nicky wants, who can help her, what support she currently has, does she have capacity, does he have consent to share information? Pat wonders if Nicky is being too sensitive, is off-loading or this may simply be a flippant comment dropped into conversation? Does this involve any children or a vulnerable adult as this would need escalation regardless of Nicky’s consent. Once Nicky has shared more, Pat can better understand if this can be married to the needs assessment. Different people might need to be involved and Pat would be looking to work closely with the police and braces for this challenging referral – guessing their response will be to bounce it back to him. Pat could understand this though, as Nicky is reluctant to open up. Pat will book supervision and research any relevant training, although it can be a struggle to fit this in.

‘Administrative assessors’ were found across the three stems, but were particularly concentrated within the mental health stories, with over half (10 of 19 stories) adopting this narrative, compared to far fewer stories about race (3 of 19 stories) or transgender identity (1 of 19 stories). These stories adopted monologue and long lists of assessment questions and, as such, they were less creative and imaginative. Few observations were made about the ‘set’ for the visit and there was limited engagement with Nicky’s world. On one hand, there was a clear ‘objective’ – the completion of an assessment, reinforced though ‘scripting’ with the socio-legal language of the Care Act, 2014. Descriptions of professional tasks appear ‘frontstage’, recounting casework problems related to multi-disciplinary engagement, time constraints or limited organisational support, contrasting with challenges about working with unfamiliar identities from other narratives.

Meanwhile, ‘backstage’ there was some uncertainty about Pat’s role and stories evoked a sense of scepticism. For example, some stories asked why protected characteristics were significant here and why assessments should involve an understanding of identity. In these stories, the discussion of discrimination was sometimes presented as a distraction from the

determination of Nicky's eligibility for care services. This was sometimes based on resources – 'there's not much we can do'. Discussions of inter-agency work often entailed bottom-line 'tactics' of involving the police. If Nicky did not want to proceed with a police report, this signalled a 'conflict' that marked the end of social work intervention. Several stories commented that discrimination is widespread and might not trigger a safeguarding enquiry. Given the frontloaded knowledge exchange workshop, which shared research findings and illustrated the policy basis for this work, and the premise of the interaction being an assessment of need, this interpretation was unexpected.

Notably, a large portion of mental health stories expressed concern that Nicky's presentation may be linked to their medical situation or diagnosis and Pat regularly wondered about Nicky's insight, capacity, or ability to engage or communicate. Vocabulary such as 'agitation', 'fabrication', 'PTSD' and 'hallucination' led to the identification of medical intervention or review or risks around acute mental health or self-harm. Similarly, in the smaller number of stories about race and transgender identity adopting this narrative, Nicky's disclosure was attributed to misinterpreting apparently innocuous events as racism or to insecurities about their gender identity. Through portrayals of administrative social care practice, these narratives narrowly interpret the role for safeguarding and at the level of 'subtext', de-legitimise professional responses to discriminatory abuse.

### *Story refusal and outliers*

Story refusal refers to contributions that do not address the story guidance. Their content can be revealing and given the use of narrative smoothing practices, reviewing these outlier stories enables data that did not fit the identified narratives to still be considered. Several stories, evenly spread across the stems (one story from each stem), did not engage the topic of discriminatory abuse, which was striking, given the frontloaded training. It is unclear if the storytellers remained unconvinced about the legitimacy of the work or if they intended to touch on discrimination but were carried away with familiar features of assessment. One outlier story took issue with the creative process and wrote about the lack of evidence in the story stem to support any knowledge of what might have been happening for Pat or Nicky, treating the stem like a case study. This meets the criteria for story refusal given the instructions provided, but the story ends with a coda as follows:

"With politics, headlines and the "woke society" now being trendy there is, sadly, a walking on eggshells procedure within working practice whereby professionals need to be very careful with what is said or the phrasing that is used. It can now cost jobs. Within my practice, I've witnessed that everyone now has to have "a label" to "tick a box"."

We cannot know if this is a provocation presented by a storyteller who wanted to produce an extreme case and/or if it reflects the views of the storyteller. It suggests that adult social care needs to engage with practitioners who retain suspicions about working with discriminatory abuse. Storytelling has value in identifying such narratives, offering

possibilities for considering the ways that identities interact with and inform one's care and support needs.

## Discussion

The study set out to understand social work and social care practitioner responses to discriminatory abuse and adopted story completion rather than self-report interviewing or survey methods to account for the under-reported and potentially sensitive nature of this topic. Readers may well wonder what we can tell from a set of stories that may not reflect how participants would respond in a real-life situation. Narrative inquiry and story completion methods frequently face such critiques. [Riessman \(1993\)](#) comments that narrativisation involves a constructivist understanding that stories are not a reflection of a world 'out there' and story plots are not innocuous. Inevitably, stories include 'hidden agendas' and 'inconsistencies' based on the context in which the story is told. [Josselson \(2004\)](#) points to 'hermeneutics of demystification' in narrative analysis which contains any suspicions that stories are 'invented'. Stories may diverge from what the practitioner might do in real life, but the context in which storytelling takes place can help uncover some reasons for this. For example, writing a story for a social work academic might entail presenting idealised practice but this still runs close to the aspirations of the storyteller. Another way to think about this is the 'hermeneutics of restoration' ([Josselson, 2004](#)) which is to trust that stories are a reasonably faithful account of what might happen. [Riessman \(1993\)](#) notes that whilst storytelling involves some invention, this is rarely "out of the blue" (p. 65) because stories are situated within available social discourses. It is reasonable to suspect that participants were motivated by self-development, given their registration for a knowledge exchange and research activity. Furthermore, the alignment and concentration of story stems and specific narratives supports this more optimistic reading. Story completion should not be dismissed on this basis, particularly given the vulnerability of other qualitative methods to similar 'creative license' – interviews, for instance, may also contain polished versions of what a participant wishes to reveal, perhaps owing to social desirability.

The three narratives demonstrate that there is no single way that practitioners discussed engaging with discriminatory abuse. As the work involves engagement with values, this is perhaps unsurprising, given the variety of starting points that professionals may have in relation to transphobia, racism, and mental health discrimination. The stories diverged in key places relating to the unique challenges of working with people who had different protected characteristics. Certain characteristics were more likely to draw on particular narratives.

Stories about transgender identity were the most likely to adopt the 'anxious ally' narrative. The dramaturgical narrative analysis approach supported this through its attention to emotions, attitudes, and subtext, acknowledging professional biases. A significant finding for these stories was Pat's fear of offending Nicky. This reflects existing research on social work with trans people that acknowledges knowledge gaps and a lack of preparedness, even when compared to working with people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual ([Inch, 2017](#)). Whilst fear of offending may be driven by gender binary biases in

social work discourses (Taylor, 2013), the amplification of difference as a barrier for engagement has consequences that leave Nicky exposed to being silenced if Pat does not push themselves to engage with this aspect of their identity. Although a small number of stories about transgender identity adopted an 'affirmative advocate' narrative, the majority were more practitioner-centred stories. These gaps have significant consequences for advocacy, challenging systems, and rights-based practice (Rogers, 2016). More optimistically, the 'anxious ally' stories within the transgender identity stem acknowledged wanting to do better as an ally and most applied transferrable skills such as person-centred approaches, for example considering how Nicky preferred to be addressed (Siverskog, 2014). Taken together, transgender identity stories provided strong justification for workforce development strategies to better familiarise social workers and the broader social care workforce with the topic of trans people's experiences, with an emphasis on reducing anxiety and helping practitioners to move further towards a trans-affirmative stance that will support advocacy and general practice competency.

Stories about race were concentrated around the 'affirmative advocate' narrative. This may reflect the increased visibility and discussion of anti-racist practice following the 'Black Lives Matter' social movement (Cane and Tedam, 2022) or the heritage of anti-racist social work (Keating, 2000). As such, it was interesting to find the discussion of theoretical frameworks restricted to stories about race in the 'affirmative advocate' narrative (anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice both mentioned in race stories but not in other stories). Although there were a larger proportion of these stories in the 'affirmative advocate' narrative, the engagement with how racist discriminatory abuse might impact on Nicky was relatively shallow or centred on micro level practices. Stories acknowledged the abuse was wrong and observed the abuse as racist in nature, yet there were limited reflections about the impact of this and responses tended to suggest universal service follow up, particularly in stories aligning with the 'administrative assessor'. Where stories about race adopted an 'anxious ally' narrative, they tended to reflect Singh's (2018) observations on white anxiety about being labelled as racist and reflections that this might pose a barrier for building rapport. In common with the transgender identity stories, this anxiety or fear of offending seemed to be well-intentioned, but these stories provide further substance that such anxiety centres (white/cisgender) Pat whilst silencing Nicky and pushing her experiences to the periphery of the stories. Where Pat was written as a Black professional, shared experiences of race and racism were named as a resource for effective practice. The stories support a call for social workers and social care workers to better understand that race and racism load up people's experiences of abuse and that this means there are particular requirements for a safeguarding response beyond micro-level or universal service referrals.

Meanwhile, the stories about mental ill-health were predominantly aligned with the 'administrative assessor' narrative, reflecting bureaucratic concerns about eligibility and the mechanics of completing an assessment. These narratives provided few reflections on Pat's emotions, attitudes, or considerations about Nicky's life beyond the assessment. This appears to reflect the familiarity of mental health social work as compared to the amplified difference in the transgender identity and race story stems. Mental distress was so normalised as falling within a social work purview that the possibility that Nicky was

targeted based on this was portrayed as ‘wallpaper’ against which an assessment was taking place. Whilst the other stories engaged anxiety or affirmation, most of the stories in this stem did not significantly address the abuse at all, instead engaging basic casework issues such as inter-disciplinary barriers, inadequate supervision, or training. Indeed, several stories brush Nicky’s statements about discrimination aside as distractions from the assessment, re-affirming [Ferguson’s \(2008\)](#) concerns about the diminishing meaning of the ‘social’ in ‘social work’. [Carr et al. \(2019\)](#) have commented that those experiencing stigma in relation to their mental distress may be treated as unreliable witnesses and several stories confirm this, deploying medical jargon to question if Nicky may be fabricating or has an incorrect interpretation due to their mental state. In an extreme example, Pat wondered if Nicky may be hallucinating. This also occurred in a minority of race and transgender identity stories, where Nicky was considered to have misinterpreted supposedly benign behaviours as racist or to be over-sensitive having not yet ‘come to terms’ with their transgender identity. [Gormley and Quinn \(2009\)](#) have called on social workers to honestly self-evaluate and acknowledge unconscious or unintended stigma we may hold regarding mental distress. This could be applied across each story stem.

Before concluding and in this spirit of honest self-evaluation, I recognise my own experiences and identities, particularly in relation to sexuality, that drew me to researching discriminatory abuse. Whilst not sharing Nicky’s characteristics, the professional responses they experienced in the stories I collected resonated with my own, such as anxiety and apologies for assuming heterosexuality, affirmations of specific needs or tick-box responses. Recognising that even people with ostensibly similar characteristics will have different experiences, story completion allowed space for participants to share their own perspectives, which sometimes challenged my own ideas. In a larger study, a wider range of characteristics could be included and co-production with a diverse authorship team would add value.

## **And they all lived happily ever after?**

This study is the first story completion project in social work research and the method offers novel and flexible applications in this field. As such, it is worth reflecting on whether social work research can ‘live happily ever after’ with this method and where any tensions or mismatches might exist when using story completion in social work research.

[Braun et al. \(2019\)](#) have outlined the main advantages and disadvantages in adopting story completion. They summarise that it provides methodological and analytic flexibility and when used online can provide access to much larger responses than qualitative studies would usually engage with. For this project, the benefits of this method lay in overcoming methodological shortcomings of self-report strategies in an area that is significantly under-reported.

Story completion provided a potentially ‘safe’ space to explore sensitive or taboo topics, though this might raise dilemmas for research if participants experience distress during the storytelling process, given that debriefing opportunities may be more remote. This study worked around this by providing a debriefing discussion, a feedback survey, and a follow up email to provide further support and signposting. In the debriefing

discussion for this study, participants voiced that the creativity of the method was liberating, but others found it challenging. Indeed, this came through the ‘anxious ally’ stories in particular. Many participants commented that they did not have space to consider developing their practice in supervision sessions and that the activity had been enriching and informative. These discussions were helpful in both ensuring ethical commitments to debriefing were met and in providing a sense of context about organisational contexts for practice, which would not have been possible without this in-built debrief. Future studies engaging practitioners in sensitive discussions should endeavour to integrate similar debriefing opportunities.

In terms of disadvantages, story completion has in-built Eurocentricity given its emphasis on stories with fixed beginnings, middles and ends (Lenette et al., 2022). In this project we encouraged practitioners to write in whatever way they felt comfortable, that back-stories or flashbacks or indeed flash-forwards can be incorporated, which led to some stories with nested accounts of earlier events. We also reassured storytellers that they did not need to finish the story or write in a linear way, but to simply continue the stem. Alternatively, researchers could adopt story fragments rather than stems, emphasising the fragment does not have to be the beginning of the story.

An area for further consideration is the use of writing methodologies with social work and social care participants. I was initially surprised by the high number of ‘administrative assessor’ narratives or outlying stories that did not engage the topic of discriminatory abuse. This may reflect that practitioners are socialised into writing in highly stylised ways in bureaucratised settings (Rai, 2014). This organisational context socialises practitioners and some may adopt these writing practices because they see this as a prerequisite for identifying and legitimising themselves as social workers. Whilst story completion may offer a flexible and creative method for social work concerns, researchers should consider how to prepare their participants for more creative and imaginative writing. Participants in this study were encouraged in this way and provided with illustrations, examples and tips but given the context for practice, that may not have been adequate. An alternative, emerging story completion technique that could offer a solution involves the use of cartoon strips (Hayfield and Wood, 2019) and social work researchers could usefully develop similar innovations to engage the needs of professional storytellers.

This small-scale project did not include people who might contact services for support. This would require a different set of ethical questions and support arrangements given the potential for triggering if leaving people alone with sensitive topics that this study’s funding could not address. However, in theory and with the right support in place, the method could be used to incorporate stories told by those with experience of using care and support services. Indeed, this would provide further insight into various unanswered questions such as the barriers that Nicky would have faced when talking to a professional or the ways in which the dynamics of discrimination impacted on the abuse experienced. People with lived experience could also participate in co-creating story stems or fragments for more inclusive research design. This application of story completion might well offer further guidance to those offering professional safeguarding support about the perspectives of people who experience abuse.

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