

Verbatim quotations in reports from applied social research

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Including verbatim quotations from research participants has become effectively standard practice in much reporting of qualitative applied social research. Until recently, it has been hard to find in methods texts clear arguments for the theoretical underpinning of this approach. Quotations appear to be used in different ways, for various purposes. Little is known about their impact on readers; the views of those who spoke the words are seldom sought.

With funding from the ESRC, Anne Corden and Roy Sainsbury have conducted a three year study of the theory, practice and impact of use of verbatim quotations in reports of applied social research. The study has included a literature review of the theoretical and conceptual basis for using quotations; a desk-based analysis of the use of quotations in 60 selected publications which report recent work in major areas of applied social research (social policy, social work, education, health, nursing, criminal justice, housing); two series of depth interviews with researchers and research users across these fields; and empirical work to test the impact of quotations used in a research report both on people who spoke the words and on readers who were interested in the findings.

In her presentation, Anne describes the main findings from this study. Issues which arise for discussion include how to reduce some of the distance there may be between a researcher's purpose in presenting spoken words and the effects on those who read the report in terms of managing the reading task and understanding the material. Anne's findings also raise questions about responsibilities to research participants, for example in relation to editing spoken words and the way they are attributed, and in relation to the concept of 'informed consent'.