Exploring ‘quality’: research participants’ perspectives on verbatim quotations

Anne Corden and Roy Sainsbury

‘This is an electronic version of an article published in the International Journal of Social Research Methodology, vol. 9, no. 2, pp.97-110. The International Journal of Social Research Methodology is available online at:
http://www.informaworld.com with the open URL address:

Address for correspondence:
Anne Corden
Social Policy Research Unit
University of York
Heslington
York
YO10 5DD
Tel. 01904 321950
Fax. 01904 321953
E-mail. pac2@york.ac.uk
Abstract

Support for inclusion of verbatim quotations from research participants in reporting qualitative applied social research is strengthened by evaluative tools which point to presentation of extracts of original data as indication of clarity of links between data, interpretation and conclusion. This article contributes to discussion about ‘quality’ criteria and the role of verbatim quotations from the perspectives of those who speak the words. The authors describe an exploratory empirical study to test the impact on research participants of seeing their words in a report. This small study is part of a wider, ESRC funded study of the theory, practice and impact of using verbatim quotations in reporting applied social research.

Findings from the exploratory study raise important issues. Research participants preferred the version of the report which included spoken words, and saw ways in which spoken words contributed positively to interpretation and reporting. However, the ‘quality indicators’ perceived in relation to the verbatim quotations sometimes did not reflect the authors’ intentions in selecting and using the words. Participants had strong views on ethical issues associated with use of their spoken words. Maintaining anonymity was important, as was the way they perceived themselves represented as a result of the authors’ editing decisions and the form of the attributions at the end of the quotations. The study raises questions about how far and in what way perspectives of research participants should be taken into account in judging ‘quality’ of qualitative research.
Introduction

Including verbatim quotations from research participants has become effectively standard practice in much qualitative applied social research reporting, and some research funders now specify final reports with direct quotations. Support for this approach is being strengthened in the development of formal methods for critical appraisal and evaluation of policy-related qualitative studies, with the aim of grounding policy and practice in best evidence. Evaluative tools and frameworks which have emerged in the last decade for use in quality assessment of reports of qualitative research have been reviewed by Spencer et al. (2003). They find, among both empirically and philosophically based frameworks emerging from within a range of disciplines, broad consensus that one important quality criterion is clarity about how evidence and conclusions are derived. Verbatim quotations are identified as having a key role here. Authors of some of the frameworks developed within the health and social welfare sector spell out how inclusion of excerpts from transcripts help to clarify links between data, interpretation and conclusions, discussed variously within concepts such as validity, reliability, credibility and auditability (see for example, Beck 1993, Greenhalgh and Taylor 1997, Spencer et al. 2003, Long and Godfrey 2004).

For academics and researchers, relevance attached to presentation of quotations in their research outputs depends on personal philosophical beliefs, and the research tradition in which they work and their core
methodologies. There is a growing, influential literature on methodological issues and debates relevant to arguments about quality criteria and the role of verbatim quotations. (For further reading, see Denzin and Lincoln 2000, Hughes and Sharrock 1997, Mason 1996, Seale 1999.) In this article the authors contribute to the discussion from the perspective of research participants by describing findings from a small, empirical study designed to test the impact of verbatim quotations on those who spoke the words.

The authors’ interest in pursuing this ‘bottom-up’ approach arose some years ago in discussion with a man who had taken part in a qualitative study of experiences of supported employment. He said, effectively, that he might be embarrassed if his spoken words were used in a report, because he was not as clever as some other people and it was harder for him to explain what he meant. This experience led the authors to reflect on their own practice in selecting and presenting spoken words in research reports, on the match between their intentions and the impact on readers, and on the ethical issues involved. There appeared to be little published research on the views and preferences of research participants about ways in which their spoken words were made public.

The opportunity arose for exploration of these issues within an ESRC Research Methods Programme, in a study of the theory, practice and
impact of using verbatim quotations in reporting applied social research, conducted by the authors during 2003-05.¹

The main components of the overall study were:

- a review of theoretical and methodological texts across different fields of applied social science, seeking theoretical bases for presentation of verbatim quotations and suggestions for good practice
- a desk-based analysis of recent social research outputs, purposively selected from different fields of applied social science, conducted by a range of authors for different funders and readerships. The aim here was to review the spectrum of styles of reporting and approaches to using quotations
- a series of interviews with selected researchers, to discuss in detail their approach and practice in using verbatim quotations
- a series of interviews with selected research users, to explore preferences and assumptions about verbatim quotations in research outputs
- an empirical study to test the impact of the presentation of verbatim quotations on those who spoke the words and users of the research report.

Each component of the overall study will be reported separately. This

¹ This study is funded by ESRC grant no. H333 250 002. At the time of writing, the study was still in progress. An overview of the research and methods used can be found on the ESRC Research Methods programme website www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods.
article draws on the last mentioned empirical study. The next part of the paper discusses the design of the study and the methods of enquiry. These are presented in some detail as readers may be interested in the novel and exploratory approach, and the methodological and ethical issues that arose. The article goes on to present the main findings, and concludes with reflections on the findings in the general context of research ‘quality’.

Design
The authors wanted to take back to people who had taken part in qualitative semi-structured interviews the research report written for the sponsor, in which were included verbatim quotations from transcripts of the interviews. The aim was for participants to see what such a report looked like and how their own words were included or not, and to give their views about this. There were a number of options in the design of such a study.

One approach was to look in the archives of the authors’ university research unit for names of people who had taken part in social research previously conducted and reported. Attempts might be made to re-contact people and show them the written outputs. An alternative approach was to invite people to take part in a completely new study, of which an integral part would be discussing the draft report. The essential difference between these approaches is that in the former, people would not be expecting to be re-contacted for the purpose of this methodological study while, in the
latter, people would be recruited on the basis that the interviewers would return for their views on how their words were included.

The authors had a number of methodological and ethical concerns about the former approach. Given normal research timescales there were likely to be problems in re-contacting people. It might be hard to explain the purpose of seeking views on a report which had already been published and could not be changed. So we had some doubts about levels of understanding that we might enable people to achieve, raising issues of informed consent (see Wiles et al. 2004). There might be problems of recall of initial interviews. In addition, some people might have had new experiences or changed their views since previous participation, which might influence how they thought now about what they previously said. The authors had concerns about returning unexpectedly to people who believed involvement was over. Some might welcome more discussion, but there might be negative outcomes for others in remembering circumstances discussed, even if they declined to take part again. Other possible negative outcomes, of course, were people not liking what they read in the report and the way their words had been used. There are some examples in the wider literature of negative reactions from research participants to the way in which they or their words were represented (Kvale 1996, Beresford et al. 1999). It would not be possible to make any changes to address such dissatisfactions.
Such concerns led the authors towards the alternative approach: inviting people to take part in a new, empirical policy-related study on the basis that they would be shown how their words were included in a draft report, and their views would be taken into account for the final version. One advantage perceived was that this way of working was not hard to explain and was likely to seem logical. The authors felt more confident about the validity of people’s agreement to take part on the basis of understanding, although this would require careful management. Returning with a draft report within two or three months after the initial interview might reduce the likelihood of problems of recall and big changes in views initially expressed. People taking part would be able to influence how their words were included, so the authors might be more confident that participants would be satisfied, and happy for the report to be circulated and used in further outputs such as this article.

There were some risks in this approach. Attrition might be a problem if the original participants were hard to re-contact, or decided after all they did not want to see a draft report. Agreeing the final report might be hard if there were highly variable suggestions for changes to the draft, so the research sponsor might get selected findings only, or a skewed perspective. On balance however, the authors decided on this approach as methodologically more robust, more ethical and more empowering for participants.
Having decided on a completely new study, the next decision was a topic for enquiry in the initial stage. The authors wished to replicate, as far as possible, the usual conditions in which social research to inform the policy process is currently commissioned from and undertaken by their research unit. Again, there were methodological and ethical issues to consider. One option was to pursue a personal research interest, but the authors foresaw problems in achieving a robust sample within resources available, without an interested sponsor. They wanted to avoid problems reported by other researchers whose primary interest had been methodological. Backett-Milburn et al (1999) arrived at a substantive topic for a methodological study somewhat pragmatically, and found it hard to retain sharp intellectual focus on the topic or consistency of approach among interviewers. There were ethical concerns about recruiting people to a study whose ultimate aim was methodological unless there was also a more direct policy-related aim, and participants could be guaranteed at least some interest in findings from policy makers.

So preference was for a sponsor who wanted a small, qualitative study based on depth interviews to provide information useful for their own purposes. The authors subsequently negotiated with Nottingham Council for Voluntary Service to conduct a small project looking at one of their services, Volunteering for Employment Skills (V4ES), which offers advice and support to people interested in using volunteering as a way of moving towards paid work. The project manager was currently developing this service to make it more useful for clients, but lacked information about the
experiences of people who had been in touch with the project. This topic fell centrally within the authors' areas of interest and expertise, and provided an opportunity for empirical policy-related evaluative research for a research customer, as the first stage in methodological enquiry about verbatim quotations.

The initial study

The initial evaluative study was developed and conducted according to usual ways and standards of working in the Social Policy Research Unit. This is fully described in the published report from the service evaluation (Corden and Sainsbury 2005a). Essentially, the authors recruited 13 people recently in touch with V4ES, who were willing to talk about their circumstances; their experiences of the project, volunteering and paid work, and who agreed to look at a draft report so that they might see how what they said was included, and make any suggestions for change. The authors conducted semi-structured, tape-recorded interviews about involvement with V4ES and volunteering. At this stage, some participants said that reading a written report would be hard for them. We had anticipated that possibility, and agreed to send a tape-recorded version of the draft report to the people concerned.

The tape recordings of the interviews were transcribed professionally, using basic conventions (see Corden and Sainsbury 2005b). A technical failure meant that one interview was not recorded, discovered shortly after leaving the person’s home. The researcher followed usual practice,
dictating into a tape recorder within half an hour an account of everything that was remembered, including one or two of the participant’s phrases as spoken.

The data were analysed using a version of the thematic matrix data extraction and display technique originally developed by the National Centre for Social Research (Ritchie and Spencer 1994) and fully described more recently (Ritchie et al. 2003). This tool facilitates synthesis, but allows emergent ideas, concepts and patterns to remain rooted in the data, and enables return to transcripts for extraction of text, for example verbatim quotations. It enables transparency of analytic building blocks to other people.

In forthcoming publications from the overall ESRC-funded study, the authors will discuss the many different ways in which researchers use quotations. Approaches depend on philosophical beliefs and chosen methodologies. Further influences on choices and decisions about selection and presentation of quotations may include length of output and the expected readership. In the report on V4ES the authors selected and used quotations in two main ways. Some of the quotations show the kinds of terms and concepts which people used when they talked and how these linked together. Some of the quotations show strength of feeling (satisfaction, enjoyment, disappointment or hurt), confusions or hesitations.
The authors considered this approach to be appropriate to the policy context of the study; the aims, design and conduct of the study and the nature of the evidence collected; the analytical techniques; and the form of output likely to be useful to the sponsor, and a wider readership in the field of employment programmes. Our approach to using primary data in this way is generally supported by authors such as Bogdan and Taylor (1975), Patton (2002) and White et al. (2003).

The draft report followed a format commonly adopted by the authors, with an introductory chapter and two chapters of analysis and interpretation. The report included indented, italicised verbatim quotations from participants interwoven with the authors' narrative. The verbatim quotations were attributed by gender and age group, shown in brackets at the end of the quotations. An example, taken from the project report (Corden and Sainsbury 2005a: 9) is presented in box 1 below.

[Insert box 1 here]

Spoken words from everybody who took part were included at least once, and most people's twice or three times, so that everybody might be shown how their words were used. Some of the quotations included the authors' questions. A tape-recorded version of the draft report was made using the voices of three members of the staff of SPRU.
The effect of these choices and the reactions of the research participants were the subject of the follow-up interviews later in 2004.

**The follow-up study**

Three months after initial interviews the authors were successful in re-contacting all except two of the original thirteen participants. The authors mailed each person a copy of the draft report or the tape-recorded version, and then went back to talk in depth about the report and how their words were used, pursuing some issues that might prove sensitive such as presentation of impaired speech. People were also shown two new versions of the findings chapters which the authors had prepared. One version had no verbatim quotations but consisted only of the authors' text. The second version aggregated all quotations within each sub-section to a ‘box’ with light blue background shading (see box 2 below). Again, these second interviews were tape-recorded and the data extracted from transcripts and analysed thematically, as previously.

[Insert box 2 here]

The authors undertook to consider all views and suggestions from participants for changes to the final report.

The following section presents some of the main findings from the analysis. Readers will notice that the account does not include any indented, attributed verbatim quotations. Having emphasised to
participants their commitment to showing them a draft report that included
their words, the authors have set a precedent for people in this study
group. They have decided not to use any other of their attributed spoken
words without first seeking their views. However, they also feel they have
reached the limits of the iterative process in this particular study, in terms
of taking up people’s time; in terms of understanding and participation
among some people who found reading and some of the concepts
introduced both hard, and in terms of research resources. The authors do
occasionally use within the following text italicised single words or short
phrases taken directly from transcripts. This happens when a participant’s
own phrase or word is more direct or explanatory than would be the
authors’ construction.

Findings
Most people interviewed a second time had read the report, or at least
parts of it, or listened to the tape-recording. The authors had explained to
each person on at least four separate occasions during fieldwork that a
report would be written. However, when people saw or heard the eventual
draft report its length, detail, mix of narrative text and spoken words meant
that it was a surprise to some. Several had had images in mind of a few
sheets of typing stapled in the corner or small folded leaflets; some
thought the report would be longer or harder to read. Not everybody had
recognised that the indented, italicised type was different from the rest of
the text.
This raises issues about people's levels of understanding of the research process when they agree to take part, and whether researchers should show participants in advance the kind of report they expect to write. One possibility might be showing people a report or article previously published to demonstrate format and the inclusion of spoken words. However, when this was suggested to participants, some said they might have been put off taking part at all by seeing such an unfamiliar document. One person said seeing in advance how the report would include their words would have led to being more careful in what they said.

The attributions at the end of the quotations had worked both to signal spoken words and to show the kind of person speaking. Attributing quotations to people by describing gender and age group was acceptable. Participants thought that people's age group and gender showed the kind of person whose views these were, within the group interviewed. Both of these characteristics were thought important. For example, some participants felt that people of different ages would certainly have different views about getting paid work and volunteering so it was important to know the age group of the person whose words were used. Describing people in age groups rather than by specific age helped to maintain anonymity. Anonymity was important to most participants, and some said they would not want any other personal details attached to their spoken words, in case other people knew who they were.
The authors gave examples of other kinds of attributions commonly used in similar reports, and which might have been used in the V4ES evaluation. These included policy-related categories such as ‘lone parent’, ‘incapacity benefit recipient’, or ‘resident in a hostel’. People had strong feelings here. In general, people did not want to be described in a way that marked them as different from other people who took part in the research, or in a way they thought might lead to other people judging them. Some said they would not want their words attributed to a ‘disabled person’ or an ‘income support recipient’ because these terms did not reflect well on people.

This dislike of some kinds of categorisation extended into what the authors had written in the narrative text. So while it was important to participants that readers of the report understood how long-term mental illness affected people’s lives and working capacity, they did not want to recognise views or experiences they had personally described as those of ‘people with mental health problems’.

The authors explained that some researchers might have used a ‘pretend name’ (pseudonym) against participants’ spoken words. Nobody liked this idea. Some said that using made-up names in this report would simply be false. Some said that whatever pretend names were chosen were likely to be real names of other people who might or might not have used the volunteering service, and could lead to wrong identifications or assumptions among readers. Some also said they would be confused if
they read the report and found words they remembered saying attributed to somebody else.

There were sharp differences of opinion on the amount of editing and tidying up of their spoken words that should be done by the researcher, and people who did not read also had views here. The original draft included excerpts from transcripts that included verbal hesitations, repetitions and some of the transcriber’s phonetic representations such as ‘cos’ (because). For some participants it was important that spoken words were not changed in any way. If the researchers changed words, such as removing hesitations, representations of dialect or swearing then the words were not real and the report would be ‘untrue’. It was also more interesting for people who read or listened to the report when it included different ways of talking.

On the other hand, some people perceived possible risks and disadvantages in using spoken words without making some changes. They thought that some regional forms of speech could be hard to read and understand, and that some regional expressions were unattractive and might lead to negative judgements about the speaker. To make speakers appear reasonable and intelligent they thought it would often be necessary to tidy up quotations or extract the relevant points being made from the general flow of spoken words. Some did not like the image of themselves they saw or heard in their unedited spoken words. One person argued strongly that without re-punctuating the spoken words and
removing phrases such as ‘like I said’ and ‘you know’ the report looked ungrammatical and unprofessional and thus would not be taken seriously by V4ES managers.

There were no swear words in the report because people in the study group did not use swear words in the interviews. When this issue was raised there were wide differences in opinion. People keen that no editing was done thought this should extend to swearing. Others felt strongly that they would not want to read swear words. Speech containing swear words produced a negative image of the person concerned as ‘an ignorant person’ or somebody ‘not very nice’, and some would not want to be presented alongside such people as if they formed a group of people with some common or shared characteristics. One person argued that swearing was often a feature of speech of people who were not very articulate and could not express themselves. That being so, it was argued, it would not be a good example for the researchers to choose to illustrate views. The same reasoning was used by another person who pointed out that many people had learned generally not to take much notice of people who swore. There would thus be no point including their words in the report because they would be generally ignored.

The authors asked people how they should deal with patterns of speech which might suggest that people came from a minority ethnic background. Those in the study group who identified themselves as having a minority ethnic background thought (and the authors agreed) that their own speech
patterns did not identify their ethnicity, and they said they did not mind anyway. However, they agreed that the spoken English of some people from an Asian or Afro-Caribbean background identified them as such, and thought this was ‘tricky’ for researchers to deal with. One opinion was that such words should not be changed and it would be generally positive for the report to show that views were included from people from different cultures. On the other hand, some spoken English just ‘didn’t look right’ when it was written down and this could be a disadvantage.

Views on what to do about impaired speech were also polarised. Some people with relatives who stammered thought that attention should not be drawn to this by showing the repetitions. However, they were keen that people with impaired speech would have the same opportunity as others for inclusion of their own words, and this seemed another hard issue. People who thought impaired speech should not be edited said that the person concerned would know that the researcher had changed their words and might not like this.

People in this study group generally liked the idea that their actual words were presented in the report. Having spoken words in the report made it more convincing, because people who read the report would know that the researchers had not just made it up. The quotations made the report easier to read or listen to because they broke up otherwise long passages of text. Some liked the diversity in ‘the voices’, and the different ways people talked made the report more interesting. Some said seeing or
hearing their own words made them feel that their ideas were important and being taken seriously. People who often found it hard to talk to strangers or had few opportunities to talk seriously about things were sometimes surprised that their own words appeared, but were pleased and said they felt ‘wanted’. Some felt it had been a good chance to have their say.

Another reason for liking the overall report was finding it ‘fair’ or ‘balanced’. Mentioned here was approval of there being a good mix of people who took part. More frequently mentioned in terms of fairness was that there was a general balance between positive and negative views. It was important to people that V4ES was told about both good and bad things. In particular, it was important for some people whose own words had been used to explain a negative experience that elsewhere in the report they found their own words had also been used to illustrate positive views. It seemed that people wanted to maintain their own identity as ‘fair’ although other readers would not know who had spoken the words. There was general agreement that the report should include at least some words of everybody who took part. One person would have liked to see more of their words. This was the person whose interview was not recorded, due to technical failure.

The authors specifically asked people whose own words describing strong feelings of disappointment or regret had been included how they now felt about this. Some spent some time thinking about whether they now
wanted changes made. They decided that it was all right to use these quotations, as this was how they had felt, but anonymity was important. They also did not want the surrounding text to present them in negative ways.

When those with reading skills looked at the alternative version of the draft without any spoken words, some said the long, unbroken text would make reading the report hard for them. Another comment was that without real words from the participants there was no way of knowing the researchers had not just made it all up. The alternative version (see box 2 earlier) with ‘boxed’ quotations drew some interest, but this was mainly related to the coloured shading which people tended to like. Some people said it was better to have quotations interspersed with what the researcher wrote, rather than all brought together, because it was easier to see how they related to the researchers’ ideas.

Seeing what other people said about the volunteering service had led some people to realise that they had more to say on particular topics than they thought of saying at the time, but would now like included. One had written down points for incorporation into the final report, in a format influenced by seeing the draft.

**Discussion**

Findings from this study have led the researchers involved to reflect carefully on their usual practice and the choices they made in the study
about the way quotations were presented in the main research report.

There are two methodological provisos to this discussion.

First, this was a small, exploratory study with a selected group of people in one Midlands town. Our findings cannot be generalised empirically (see Hammersley 1992) to people who use the V4ES service, or to other settings or contexts. However, the characteristics and circumstances of those who took part were such that they were all in groups receiving attention within key government policy initiatives (labour market programmes; incapacity benefit reform; support for families with children; support for people with an unsettled way of life). There are many recently commissioned qualitative research reports which draw on information provided by people like those who took part in the V4ES evaluation, and many such reports include verbatim quotations. We believe that the issues raised by these participants are general to much applied social research, and deserve more attention and debate.

Second, we have to consider some features of the draft report used as a basis for the enquiry. In comparison with other similar reports routinely written by the researchers there were some deliberate differences in writing and presentation. The draft report was relatively short because we wanted the research participants to be encouraged to read at least the chapters presenting findings if not the whole report. To accommodate a wide range of reading skills there were probably more sub-headings than the authors would usually include. The authors purposefully did not use
some descriptive categories which we know from previous research are disliked, for example ‘disabled people’. There were probably more verbatim quotations than the authors would normally include, so that they could explore everybody’s reactions to their own words.

Such factors may be associated with the generally positive reactions to the draft report. It might be argued that more insight would have been gained by taking less care to produce a ‘user-friendly’ report. However, there would have been little point trying to discuss with people a report which was hard to understand. The authors wanted to maximise discussion about quotations and were not researching more generally how people read reports. The authors also believed that people who were not too dissatisfied were in a relaxed and secure position from which to offer criticism, and to give their views about some of the more complex constructs and ideas being explored.

With these provisos, we draw out the following issues to contribute to the debate on ‘quality’ of qualitative research from the perspective of research participants.

As we would expect, the research participants did not talk explicitly about the ‘quality’ of the research. However, interpreting their responses to the draft report we would argue that, using the language of our academic discourse, participants felt that the way their spoken words were used did enhance ‘quality’ at various stages in the research process. At the
reporting stage, verbatim quotations enhanced readability and provided evidence for the researchers’ analysis and interpretation. In the authors’ analysis participants thought that differences between people’s perspectives had been drawn out well, and in a balanced way, and that the quotations helped them understand how this had been done. Some talked positively about themselves and other users of V4ES ‘having their say’ in a way that reflects the importance of enabling ‘voice’ advocated by some researchers (for example, Beresford et al. 1999).

As we explained earlier our intentions in selecting quotations was twofold: to demonstrate the range of terms and concepts used by people when they talked and linkages between them, and to show strength of feeling, confusions or hesitations. What is interesting therefore is that participants attached ‘quality’ indicators to quotations which did not reflect the way in which the authors actually used or drew on the spoken words. Some qualitative researchers do emphasise the evidentiary power of quotations, and their use in establishing credibility (see Beck 1993) or validity of findings (see Sandelowski 2003). Some argue that quotations increase textual diversity to make things more interesting (see Alasuutari 1995, Holloway and Wheeler 1996) and researchers who work within a participatory or emancipatory paradigm emphasise the importance of enabling people to speak for themselves (see Beresford et al. 1999). However, the authors did not set out to use quotations in such ways, and are uncertain at the moment of the implications of such divergence between this aspect of our use of quotations and their impact.
In thinking about indicators of ‘quality’ and ethical issues, a number of important matters can be associated with the use of verbatim quotations, including informed consent, anonymity, and recognition and avoidance of potential harm to participants. Findings show how some people agree to take part in research on the basis of relatively low levels of understanding of how their words may be used. The methodological and practical issues involved in addressing this should not be under-estimated. It might be fairly quick and easy to show examples of research output to people with developed reading skills and have some confidence that they would understand how researchers might use their spoken words. It is likely to be much harder to enable understanding of people with less experience and confidence and those who do not read at all. Showing a report to some people at the beginning of an interview might be little more than a token gesture. More widely, our findings show how researchers’ reliance on written text for recruitment, information sharing or returning drafts may exclude or disadvantage some people. It was not until after the initial interview that some people explained they had limited reading skills. We recognise now that explanations and information about the research sent with invitations to take part had assumed a reading capacity that was unrealistic.

Anonymity was important to this group of people, and the way their spoken words were attributed, and edited (or not) raised complex issues. There were strongly polarised views on presentation of impaired speech and patterns of speech which may be associated with minority ethnic
background. The strength of feelings here and the importance attached to
the way participants perceived themselves being represented through their
spoken words suggests to the authors that this topic merits more
discussion generally. Other academics have suggested to the authors that
if participants’ anonymity is maintained and (as is common) they do not
get to see research output containing their spoken words, then there are
no real negative impacts for them in the inclusion of excerpts from
interview transcripts. The authors are not convinced by this position in
their own field of social research, and would welcome more discussion
and debate.

Finally, the authors were impressed by the strength of dislike among some
people of being represented in groups or categories perceived as
emphasising difference or attracting negative judgements. This presents
challenges for those who undertake policy research. By its nature, policy
research and evaluation focuses on particular groups or people with
particular characteristics and needs. A ‘quality’ analysis, representing the
diversity in the data, establishing typologies and unpacking underlying
influences may depend on categorisations which research participants
themselves believe compromise their anonymity or cast them in a negative
role.

This small study of verbatim quotations leaves the authors wondering how
far and in what way the perspectives of research participants should be
taken into account in judging ‘quality’ of qualitative research.
References


Box 1 Illustrative example of presentation of verbatim quotation in original research report

He was hoping for a volunteering opportunity that would demonstrate to future possible employers that he had experience of responsibility and dealing with people, and said:

_I wanted something involved. If I was going to use it towards getting work I wanted to be able to say ‘well, I’ve done this volunteering, and this is what I’ve done, and it involved this, that and the other’. Not ‘I’ve done this volunteering and handed out cups of tea’._

(man, in 30s)
What was helpful in the service offered?

*They’re very helpful, cos at one time I wouldn’t have come out, I wouldn’t mix with people, so during that [guidance worker] gave me the support to actually go and volunteer, and from there, that’s how I got a start with [an organisation], even though they’re two different things.*

(woman, in 20s)

*It’s just like building my confidence up and that’s what I need* (and, later in interview) *I didn’t know anything like that happened. I couldn’t wait to get there. There seemed to be a lot of opportunities.* (woman, in 30s)

*She said to me, ‘Well, we’ve got lots of jobs in voluntary shops.’ And I thought that would be brilliant to get into social contact with people, relating to people, relating to what I’m doing, so that’s what I did.* (man, in 30s)

(narrative text then continues, explaining how some participants spoke positively about parts of the service they had experienced).