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# Verbatim Quotations in Qualitative Research Reports

## On the Use and Abuse of Verbatim Quotations in Qualitative Research Reports

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Verbatim excerpts of interview data text are a time-honored component of a typical qualitative research report.<sup>1</sup> They can bring human actors into the narrative of a complex theoretical claim, offer the reader the opportunity to shift perspective between clinical terminology and the human phenomena it implies, and allow for the subjectivity of health and illness expression to shine through within an otherwise technical rendering. They also reinforce for the reader what qualitative research seeks to do when it claims to derive research findings inductively from data grounded in first person accounts of lived experience. However, as journal editors who see many manuscript submissions are well aware, many qualitative

nurse researchers seem to miss the point as to the role verbatim quotes can and should play in supporting a high quality qualitative research write-up.

## FINDINGS AS NARRATIVE

When you write up qualitative research findings, you are offering your reader a narrative rendering of where you arrived after a complex analytic process fueled by intensive immersion and reflection upon a particular body of data. When the data are individual or group interviews, you will have been guided by your research question into an interactive human engagement in which your study participants used language to the best of their ability to convey what may have been a complex, multi-faceted, ambiguous, or confusing human experience. For most of us, language has real limits in terms of how effectively it can convey that which is deeply felt, and the stories we tell to try to explain ourselves to others are generally constructed within the context of our cultural, social, circumstantial understandings of ourselves and our messages. So interview data are not “truth” *per se*, but rather someone’s attempt to convey to us the information they believe we want to hear.<sup>4</sup> It is shaped by the questions we have posed and the manner in which we have positioned ourselves as researchers, our explanations as to why we have recruited or chosen them as expert witnesses to the phenomenon in question, and all of the elements of our relational engagement with them at the moment in time that the interview occurred.<sup>5</sup>



Intellectually, in arriving at the thematic structure with which you will display the ideas you have positioned as “findings,” you have undergone an extensive process of seeing patterns within the data set, moving beyond the self-evident to engage the mechanisms of interpretation into a coherent structure through which

you can guide your reader to reach the conclusions you understand as reasonable and credible.<sup>9</sup> The report of your findings leads the reader through the parts or the steps you have come to see as a whole phenomenon, or a comprehensive representation of an answer to your research question. It is within this narrative structure of reporting on the ultimate outcome of your inductively derived findings that verbatim quotations become your illustrative material—“showing” your reader some exemplars of the kind of data you had access to along the path of coming to your coherent account of what you have learned.

## **THE ART OF WEAVING QUOTES INTO THE NARRATIVE**

Using quoted material effectively requires that you appreciate the intended purpose of verbatim text excerpts in a narrative research report. This kind of material is meant to be illustrative, offering examples that bring your theoretical claims to life, and helping your reader access the “look and feel” of the data set from which you generated your findings. The inclusion of quotes is not meant to be a proof that your ultimate findings or conclusions are true, valid or credible; no matter how many you include, or how beautiful they are, they actually cannot logically perform that function.<sup>3,4</sup> The author who forgets that will be one who justifiably loses credibility in the eyes of the reader.

### *Avoiding the Data Dump*

The worst kind of qualitative research report is that which seems to have lined up a collection of interesting text excerpts then used narrative to glue them together. The examples should never be misinterpreted as themselves findings; rather they are the decorative material that draws attention to what you the researcher are trying to convey with respect to your inductively derived account.<sup>9</sup>

No matter how many verbatim text excerpts you include in your written report, the reader cannot have had the experience you have had in data immersion, reflection, and discovery. Far too often, a qualitative research write-up includes a “data dump,” in which there is minimal narrative explanation accompanied by a string of verbatim quotation excerpts. This style of reporting implies a misunderstanding of what qualitative approaches are designed to accomplish. Overdoing the quotes deprives your reader of the ability to scrutinize your logic in deciding that they were meaningful as well as the precise meaning you intend them to have for the reader in relation to answering the research question. The idea that “the data speak for themselves” is a complete misunderstanding of the point of qualitative research;<sup>3,8</sup> rather it is your job as the scholar to lead the reader toward the logic you arrived at, providing illustrative material along the way.

### *Making Strategic Choices in Quotation Selection*

A quote that simply repeats the narrative (or vice versa) is pointless and redundant. When you provide a verbatim quote, it should extend upon and bring to life the point you are making at that juncture in the narrative, such that the intended meaning is augmented not simply restated. This means that you must make strategic choices in which text excerpts you include and which have to be left on the cutting room floor.

A researcher who has fallen in love with his or her data set will often find it hard not to share all of the gorgeous “bits” of verbatim material that contributed to the layers of insight through which the analysis evolved. However, the test of whether a verbatim quotation has earned its place in your final report is not your own attachment to it but the extent to which it effectively conveys the illustrative message that is right for this particular moment in the narrative report. A study participant may have explained something to you in a manner that made lightbulbs go off in terms of your own understanding of a phenomenon. That does not mean

that segments of the actual words used in that interview segment would do the same for a reading audience.

There are also times when, having interviewed many people, you have come to “know” something about the phenomenon that does not actually appear in any single text excerpt. Qualitative research is not about collecting quotes that will line up into a logical account, but rather drawing on your intellectual and interpretive capacities through an inductive reasoning process that allows you to surface possibilities, test them among and between instances and develop a patterned understanding of the things you set out to study. There may be times, then, when reporting on your sense of the study participants, your observations of their emotional tone, the content of their accounts or the underlying messages in the information they chose to share with you will be more important and accurate than any excerpt from their actual verbal accounts.<sup>4</sup> The main message here is that you only include quoted material when it can play the intended role in highlighting, illustrating or bringing to life the points you are trying to convey to your reading audience.

### *Displaying Verbatim Text so the Reader Can “Hear” the Message*

The idea of “verbatim” (or word for word) transcription came into the research reporting lexicon from work in social science disciplines (including anthropology and linguistic studies). It implies a pledge with respect to “the faithful reenactment of the form and meaning of a given stretch of discourse as it was (as if) without any tampering...in a subsequent spatiotemporal repetition separate from the original.”<sup>2</sup>, p. 218 Verbatim becomes useful in contexts in which the finely tuned detail of timing, volume, and tone of all audible utterances is an important element of the answer to the research question. In nursing research, however, that is rarely the case. While you may well want to capture non-verbal cues, expressive gestures, meaningful pauses and other features of the interview within the record

of what was said, for the most part, it is the verbal material that you are sharing when you include a quotation.

Beyond the context of formal speechmaking, human beings rarely speak in complete sentences and paragraphs. Verbal material often has stops and starts, grammatical errors, partial words, and/or repetitions as a person gathers their thoughts and tries to find the best way of communicating it to an interviewer. If you report on the material “verbatim,” including all of the *ums*, and *ahs*, and problematic speech parts, your reader is likely to get lost in the vernacular and miss the underlying meaning that led you to select that particular quotation in the first place. Because your main priority in providing the quoted material is to augment the argument you are making with respect to the narrative report of what you came to conclude were your findings, it is important that the reader of the written word can “hear” the intended meaning in the speech. It is therefore quite acceptable in any study in which meaning, rather than speech pattern, is your goal, to adapt the verbatim transcript material into a readable communication.<sup>3,6</sup> While reworking the verbatim material to change the meaning would be inappropriate, editing to make it understandable is often well advised. You might, for example, use ellipses to edit out unnecessary or redundant words or sentences, or use your discretion to edit a quote to make it grammatically correct. If there are features of the speech pattern in the people you have interviewed that are worth retaining for the purposes of engaging the reader in their lifeworlds or making the verbal material authentic that is just fine, as long as the reader can easily grasp what it is that the speaker was intending to communicate. And you may want to use your discretion with this—reporting an authentic utterance can make the speaker sound ignorant or come across as disrespectful. The choices you make in what to include, how to include it, and how to contextualize it within the narrative report can make the difference between a formulaic display of data segments and a powerful account of the phenomenon you are studying.

## QUOTING WISELY

The verbatim quote is to your qualitative research write-up the element that brings black and white text into full color visual images. Effectively selected and displayed, it helps your reader not only understand the intellectual basis of the argument you are making in your narrative report, but also get a feel for the experience it entails and the reason that it matters.<sup>7</sup> Choosing a verbatim quotation to illustrate the analytic claims as they unfold in the parts of your findings report is not simply a matter of extracting a specimen to pin on the board to prove that you have found one, but rather a way of capturing a window into the human story that led you, as the researcher, to come to “know” something in a new way. Using quotations wisely brings the complex theoretical or clinical material you are working with into everyday relief, helping the reader move back and forth between generalized observations and distinctly particular experiences of them in order to gain the kind of robust insight that will ultimately help us translate grounded findings into practice enhancements.

Used badly, verbatim quotations can discredit the qualitative research genre as if all it can do is offer anecdote as an attempted truth. Used well, however, they can make a qualitative manuscript come alive. They can be artful, evocative, and powerful—inviting the reader into the privilege of embracing both heart and mind with respect to the phenomenon in question—ultimately enlightening and enriching the knowledge that informs the work we do in the practice of this marvelously human profession of ours.

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