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# Direct quotations in social work writing: multi-functionality and double voicing

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## Abstract

Writing comprises a core area of social work as a substantial amount of time is spent on producing case notes, assessment reports, and other required documentation in order to progress cases; however, little research has been carried out on social workers' writing and, in particular, the specific discursive and rhetorical devices employed to create effective texts. One rhetorical device often employed in order to include the voices of service users and their families is the use of quotations. This article explores the extent to which quotations are used across social work domains and text types, the different voices represented through quotations, and the perceived functions of the quotations. The study draws on three different data types: (1) a 1-million-word corpus of social workers' writing; (2) social worker interviews ( $n = 81$ ); (3) two case studies comprising texts, interviews with the social worker writer, and researcher observations. All data were collected within the WiSP project and were interrogated through a mix of computational and qualitative analysis to develop a taxonomy of functions of quotations. In addition to furthering our understanding of how quotations are employed in professional writing, the study has implications for social worker training and practice.

**Keywords:** corpus; ethnography; interviews; quotations; social work education; writing.

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## Introduction

Within the profession of social work, the production and use of written texts is a high-stakes activity as it comprises the major means through which observations and decisions are logged, and through which services for vulnerable people are requested and justified (Lillis et al., 2017). Despite this, little research has been conducted on social workers' everyday professional writing, and any public or media focus in this area tends to have a deficit framing (see discussions in Lillis et al., 2020a; Leedham, 2022, 2024). The goal of the WiSP project is to offer an evidence-based characterization of the written texts and writing practices involved in professional social work (Leedham et al., 2020). In this article, we focus on the specific rhetorical practice of the use of quotations, which are often employed in order to include the voices of service users (SUs) and those directly implicated in their daily care, such as family members and other professionals. In social work, there seems to be general agreement on the ethical and evidential value of including words spoken by SUs, but to date, no analysis has been carried out on the specific ways in which these are used in written texts.

For the purposes of this article, quotations (here used interchangeably with 'quotes') are defined as words directly attributed to people other than the writer of the text (though, occasionally, writers include self-quotations). Only quotations given within speech mark punctuation are analysed (whether single or double quote marks); that is, direct speech such as: *he said "I have not got a clue"*. Such direct quotes are typically construed as 'verbatim' representations (Deahl, n.d.; Peart, 2023); however, quotes are an example of Bakhtin's 'double voicing' (1984) as they represent both the voice of the person being quoted, and, indirectly, the voice of the social worker who selected these particular words and situated them within their own text. In this article, we aim to make visible this double voicing by documenting the extent of quotation usage and the range of functions this performs. The framing context of reporting verbs to introduce a quotation (*she stated, he shouted*) adds a further evaluative stance and is explored within case studies. We use the phrase 'near-verbatim' to refer to quotes in order to acknowledge that these are often heard, written down from memory, and later recorded in an information and communication technology (ICT) system. While social workers may aim for a faithful recording of an utterance, there may be some accuracy loss in the gaps between hearing and handwriting and the final computer recording.

Words attributed to others are sometimes indicated through the use of indirect speech (e.g. *[SU] told me that his phone is not working*), or through other orthographic means such as dashes or indentation), or are implied but not indicated through punctuation (e.g. *she snapped back at me I don't know*). The focus here is on explicitly marked direct quotations.

**Table 1.** Research questions and datasets

| Research questions  | Datasets   |
|---|--|
| 1) To what extent are quotations used in social workers' texts?             | WiSP corpus  |
| 2) How does quotation usage vary across social work domains and text types? | WiSP corpus  |
| 3) Who is quoted?   | WiSP corpus<br>Two case studies (drawn from texts, interviews, researcher observations)          |
| 4) What are the functions of the quotations?                                | WiSP corpus<br>81 social worker interviews<br>Two case studies (texts, interviews, observations) |

Methodologically, we draw on three layers of datasets (Table 1): the first layer involved quantitative linguistic analysis of a large, electronically stored collection of social worker texts (a 'corpus') known as the WiSP corpus to uncover broad differences in quotation usage across domains and text types, to find out who is quoted, and to identify the possible functions of quotations. In the second layer, we drew on a WiSP dataset of eighty-one social worker interviews in order to support and nuance our text analysis and present writers' perspectives. For the third and final layer, we carried out an in-depth qualitative analysis of two case studies, each comprising texts, interviews, researcher observations, and researcher field notes to contextually explore the functions of quotations within a particular child's or adult's care. The use of mixed methods (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007) in this article thus builds 'rich descriptions' (Ellingson, 2009) of the practice of quotations.

The next section provides a theoretical framework on voice for exploring quotations and looks at the literature on quotations in professional writing. Following this, the datasets and methodologies employed in the study are unpacked. The three layers of analysis and discussion are then provided in separate sections: corpus analysis, social worker interviews, and case studies. The final section contains a concluding summary, limitations, and recommendations.

## The nature and function of quotations in professional texts

This section first offers Bakhtin's framing of double voicing for conceptualizing usage of quotations, then looks at the ways in which functions of quotations have been categorized in existing literature on professional writing.

## Quotations as *double voicing*

The use of quotations in social work records is often referred to as giving ‘verbatim accounts’, an attempt to factually record people’s specific words and meanings, illustrated in the comment ‘what I try to do—is use the exact things that they’ve said. So that it’s as accurate a reflection of their voice as possible’ (SW26). There is a strong commitment to factually representing people’s perspectives, accounts, and feelings (e.g. [City of Wolverhampton Council, 2019](#)). However, the use of quotations in texts written by social workers (or indeed any professional group, see e.g. [Baxter, 2014](#)) is never simply a record of facts, or in Bakhtin’s terms ‘single voiced’, but is always necessarily ‘double voiced’, that is, representing both an intended factual record of the voice of the person being quoted and, indirectly, the evaluative voice of the social worker. The decision to include quotations necessarily involves ‘a relationship to someone else’s utterance’ ([Bakhtin, 1984:186](#)) with the social worker making decisions (implicitly or explicitly) about which specific words it is important to attribute to the other person. Therefore the use of quotations always involves some sort of evaluative stance towards what is being quoted, linked to the overall purpose of the text that is being written, and the particular addressees the writer has explicitly or implicitly in mind: in the case of social work, there are multiple purposes and addressees ([Lillis et al., 2017](#)). Our aim is to offer a characterization of the ways in which quotations are used in written texts based on quantitative text analysis and qualitative analysis of interviews and two case studies. We attempt to make visible the range of functions of quotation usage and to underscore the double voicing that quotation usage necessarily involves.

## Quotations in professional writing

The literature on the use of quotations in professional writing has been dominated by studies of academic writing, whether student or professional academic writers (e.g. [Tachino, 2021](#)). Across all types of academic and professional text, quotations are used for a wide array of textual functions from different writer perspectives and practices, and within varied professional settings and text types (e.g. [Rantsudu, 2022](#) in the field of journalism reports; [Jayasinghe et al., 2021](#) on medical healthcare records; and [Byrman and Byrman, 2018](#) on police interview reports; see also [Finnegan, 2011](#) for an overview of quotations).

Two studies are particularly pertinent to the current exploration of the functions of quotations: a classic study by [Clark and Gerrig \(1990\)](#) and a more recent one by [Byrman and Byrman \(2018\)](#). In a theorization

drawing on a broad range of quotations and focusing mainly on spoken communication, Clark and Gerrig (1990) describe quotations as ‘demonstrations’, meaning that, in recounting someone’s words, the quoter is illustrating by example. They outline six functions of quotes: (1) ‘Verbatim Reproduction’, meaning to provide the words of others and thus directly convey their meaning; (2) ‘Dissociation of Responsibility’, allowing the writer to renounce authorship of ‘impolite or inappropriate’ utterances (p. 792); (3) ‘Solidarity’ wherein quoting contains the tacit assumption that the reader can infer the whole context, thus building rapport between writer and reader; (4) ‘Ineffability’, referring to the ease of providing a direct quote rather than paraphrasing; (5) ‘Engrossment’, whereby quotes help the reader vividly experience a particular moment; and (6) ‘Impossible Demonstrations’ where it might be difficult to convey meaning through rewording, for example, false starts or self-talk.

The second study contains some overlapping functions with Clark and Gerrig. Byrman and Byrman (2018) explore quotation marks within Swedish police reports and, while they do not appear to map quotations in their study against functional categories, they provide some overarching functions. They comment that quotations were used to mark verbatim utterances (Clark and Gerrig’s [C&G] category 1); as a stylistic tool ‘dramatising the interview ... giving the reader a flavour of the interviewee’s personal way of speaking’ (p. 177, similar to C&G’s category 5); for speed over paraphrasing (C&G’s category 4); and finally, as slang expressions enabling the police to ‘retain their authoritative voice’ (C&G’s category 2).

The current study of quotations in social work writing draws on the textual functional categories in the above work, but the specific functional categories given are derived from analysis of the WiSP corpus.

## Datasets and methodologies

This section describes the datasets drawn on in the paper, and the ways in which these are analysed in order to respond to the research questions (Table 1). Each dataset is discussed in turn: the WiSP corpus, social worker interviews, and case study data (comprising texts, observations, and interviews around a ‘case’).

### The WiSP corpus

The WiSP corpus is a 1-million-word collection of over 4,600 texts produced by thirty-eight social workers within three UK Local Authorities (LAs comprising the social services units within local governing bodies

such as county councils, district councils, or metropolitan districts) from 2015 to 2017 (Leedham et al., 2021). The corpus contains texts within the domain of children's care (77 percent of words in the corpus) and adults' care (23 percent). The imbalance across domains is largely due to the complexity of securing access to sensitive texts (Leedham et al., 2021). An alternative division of the corpus is by text categories: assessment reports (44 percent of the corpus), case notes (41 percent), and emails (9 percent) (using social work labelling), with the remaining 6 percent classified as 'other' (e.g. letters). Ethics and governance procedures were followed in compliance with the formal requirements of the university and all agencies involved. All original textfiles were anonymized within the LA, and all personal names were replaced (e.g. [SUMUM] for service user's mother, [CHILD] for child SU; see Leedham et al., 2021; Lillis et al., 2023).

The WiSP corpus was explored using WordSmith Tools v.8 corpus software (Scott, 2022) to extract all quotations indicated through single or double quotation marks and checked to exclude quotations within form language (as this is not produced by individual social workers). Following established corpus linguistics procedures, 200 randomly-selected lines from each of children's care and adults' care were manually categorized according to who is quoted (each quotation is situated within approximately 35 surrounding words). For example, quotations in children's care were categorized as 'child', 'adult-family-mum', 'professional-health', and so on. One difficulty encountered is that speaker roles are not always clearly stated in the anonymized texts with many simply given as '[PERSON]'. In particular, the presence of 'floating quotes' (Asr et al., 2021), wherein an utterance is given without a quotative verb or speaker, means the reader has to infer the speaker. Here, greater context (provided by reading the full text) was needed to ensure we had understood who was being quoted. A similar process was carried out to assign functions to 200 lines from case notes and assessment reports. Each set of 200 quotes was exported to Excel, and then assigned categories by one researcher through iterative rereading to ensure quotes with the same function were grouped together, and that all quotes could be accounted for. In determining category labels, we drew on classifications of quotes from the literature (e.g. 'dramatic recreation'), adding further categories where needed (e.g. 'signalling risk'). The second researcher then considered the selected categories and, through discussion, we gradually refined the groupings to establish eight functions. (See corpus studies in Taylor and Marchi, 2018).

Corpus analysis provided a quantitative overview of quotation usage, range across domains, text types, and people quoted, enabling us to identify a list of functions.

## WiSP interview data

A total of eighty-one transcribed interviews with seventy-one social workers were drawn on in the second layer of analysis. The social workers were practitioners at different levels from newly qualified to highly experienced, senior practitioners, and were located within five LAs across England. Interviews followed both LA and The Open University ethical procedures with interviewees providing informed consent. While the WiSP interview protocol did not include a specific question on the use of quotes, this rhetorical feature frequently arose within discussion around writing. Initial analysis of interview data was conducted by iteratively searching for words around quotation usage such as: *quot\** (to uncover *quote(s)*, *quoting*, *quotation[s]*), *evidence*, *verbatim* until it was felt that all relevant comments had been found. Subsequent analysis involved aligning comments with functions; for example, a social worker stating ‘it saves me having to interpret something’ was aligned with a functional category on saving time. This layer provided support for our text-based categorization of functions, as well as enabling further nuancing, for example, increasing our awareness of the value of quotations in recording child risk (Interview extract h).

## Case studies

In order to explore quotation usage within the context of recording practice, two case studies were compiled. Each case study is constituted by one social worker and one of the ‘cases’, that is, a specific person/family group with whom they were working during the research period. In addition to the relevant set of texts, we draw on interviews with the social worker responsible for the case, and researcher observations and field-notes (for further details, see Lillis et al., 2017; and documentation in [Lillis et al., 2020b](#)).

This analysis serves to contextualize the use of quotes and to illustrate the multiple functions of quotations.

## Corpus findings

This section draws on the WiSP corpus to answer RQ1: To what extent are quotations used in social worker texts?, RQ2: How does quotation usage vary across social work domains and text types? and to provide one layer of findings for RQ3: Who is quoted? and RQ4: What are the functions of the quotations? This section provides overall findings, followed by findings across domains and text types, and an initial presentation of functions.



## Overall corpus findings

In response to RQ1, analysis of the overall WiSP corpus revealed that it contains almost 1,500 quotations across 466 texts or approximately 10 percent of the corpus files (note this figure includes quotations deemed to be scare quotes, e.g. citing a document title; all scare quotes are excluded from qualitative analysis in the article). All but one of the thirty-eight social work writers make use of direct quotations and these are almost always from spoken dialogue (occasionally a written document is cited). Quotations occur across both children and adult domains and in all text types, indicating they are considered a legitimate rhetorical resource within professional social work writing. However, the fact that quotations occur in just one in ten texts means they can be viewed as a relatively ‘marked’ rhetorical practice, used sparingly by social workers and therefore presumably employed for particular functions.

## Domains

This section first responds to RQ2 in terms of variation across domains. Our analysis reveals that quotations are used 50 percent more frequently in children’s care (Table 2). Quotations in both children’s and adults’ care are, however, sparsely employed.

Categorization of 200 randomized quotations from each domain was then conducted to gain insight into *who* is quoted (RQ3).

In children’s care, coding for the 200-line sample reveals that adults (parents, family members, foster/prospective carers, professionals) were quoted more than twice as often as children. A total of 70 percent [140 instances] of quotes were from adults (comprising 51.5 percent carers [parents, family members, foster/prospective carers], 14 percent professionals, 5.5 percent other adults), and 29 percent [58 instances] from child SUs (Table 3).

In adults’ care, coding indicates that adult SU quotations account for 55 percent [110 instances] of the sample, family members 25 percent [49 instances], and professionals 13 percent [25 instances] (Table 4).

The relatively low number of quotations attributed to children (29 percent) relative to adult SUs (55 percent) may in part be due to children’s lack of agency and voice and a prioritization of adult carers’ and

**Table 2.** Number of quotations by domain.

| Domain          | No. of words | No. of quotations |                  |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------------|------------------|
|                 |              | Raw               | Per 10,000 words |
| Children’s care | 767,927      | 1,200             | 15.63            |
| Adults’ care    | 235,169      | 255               | 10.84            |

**Table 3.** Who is quoted in sample of 200 instances in children's care?

| Role                      | No. quotations (raw) | Notes  | Example  |
|---------------------------|----------------------|--|--|
| mum                       | 58                   | Includes three text messages                           | [MUM] said that she would want all the children living with her [...] "I am their mother". [CN_WiSP0683] |
| Child                     | 58                   |  | He was very clear that his dad had 'not been doing anything bad to him' [AR_WiSP2529]                    |
| Other-professional        | 26                   | For example, health, school, police (seven in writing) | [CHILD] is described as a child who will always 'have a go' at anything. (Nursery teacher) [AR_WiSP2628] |
| Dad                       | 13                   |  | He is now working 'the doors' at two clubs in [CITY] [CN_WiSP3420]                                       |
| Prospective carer(s)      | 12                   |  | They talked about how they think that a 'messy baby is a happy baby' [AR_WiSP0534]                       |
| Other adults              | 11                   | Unclear speaker  | [PERSON5] stated that when they returned, the boys had presented as more 'clingy'. [AR_WiSP1971]         |
| Parent(s)                 | 11                   | Includes two text messages                             | [MUM] and [DAD] hugged [CHILD1] and [CHILD2] several times, and said 'see you soon'. [AR_WiSP0809]       |
| Other adult family member | 5                    |  | [PERSON1] said the club is a 'pick up joint' [CN_WiSP4604]   |
| Foster carer              | 4                    |  | she said that he has gone 'into himself' [CN_WiSP2629]   |
| Self                      | 2                    | SW citing own utterance. One text message              | Text sent "Hi [PERSON] I wanted to talk to you [CN_WiSP2848]   |

Examples include a WiSP corpus text ID indicating either case notes (CN) or assessment reports (ARs).

professionals' words. In contrast, the higher proportion of quotations from adult SUs accords them a greater presence in texts written about them.

### Text types

Analysing the corpus according to text type gives further insights into how quotations vary (RQ2, Table 5).

To investigate the functions performed by quotes (RQ4), 200 randomized instances from across case notes and assessment reports were iteratively classified according to their perceived primary functions (The WiSP corpus section). This analysis produced nine categories (Table 6).

**Table 4.** Who is quoted in sample of 200 instances in adults' care?

| Role                    | No. of quotations (raw) | Notes  | Example   |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|--|---|
| Adult SU                | 110                     | Two from the form written by SW on behalf of SU  | [SU] initially stated '4-5 years' but then changed this to '4-5 days'. [AR_WiSP1392]        |
| Professional            | 25                      | For example, health, carers                      | Reports are that the two are 'getting along' with one another [email_WiSP2472]              |
| SU's family             | 18                      | Other family member                              | However, her family report that [SU] seems to have 'gone off most foods'. [ARWiSP4049]      |
| Self                    | 16                      | Three citing own text message                    | I suggested to [SU] that she would need to save the messages as 'evidence'. [CN_WiSP0349]   |
| SU's wife               | 16                      | No quotations explicitly attributed to a husband | [WIFE] [...] stated 'I don't need anything' at the moment. [CN_WiSP2250]                    |
| SU's adult son/daughter | 15                      | Eleven from son                                  | [DAUGHTER] stated that they did admit that things had 'got a little whatever' [CN_WiSP2917] |

**Table 5.** Quotations by text type.

| Text type          | No. of words | No. of quotations |                  |
|--------------------|--------------|-------------------|------------------|
|                    |              | Raw               | Per 10,000 words |
| Case notes         | 407,851      | 651               | 15.96            |
| Assessment reports | 436,908      | 631               | 14.44            |
| Emails             | 92,991       | 59                | 6.34             |

Note that raw numbers do not match the domain figure total as the 'other' textual category (see The WiSP corpus section) is not considered here.

Functional categories one to eight are given in decreasing frequency order, but all categories were prevalent within our data, appearing in both case notes and assessment reports as information is frequently repurposed by social work writers from case notes to provide evidence within assessment reports. Function 3 (dramatic recreation) occurs more frequently within case notes, probably as these documents often give a step-by-step account of a visit and can be more expansive in terms of recreating a specific dialogue. Functions 4 (evidence) and 5 (signalling risk) appear more prevalent in assessment reports, probably as these documents need to document the presence (5) or absence (4) of risk. Note that [Table 6](#) categories are based on analysis at sentence level; our

**Table 6.** Functions of quotations.

| No. | Function   | Corpus example   |
|-----|--|--|
| 1   | To <b>foreground</b> an adult, child or carer's perspective  | [ADULT_CARER] stated [CHILD] is "mouthing off" [CN_WiSP3393]   |
| 2   | To <b>save time</b> when writing as quicker than paraphrasing and detail may be added at a later point   | [DAD] informed me that his son had been as he described 'up and down' [AR_WiSP2282]  |
| 3   | To <b>dramatically recreate</b> a situation/incident/experience  | When I asked [SU], 'where do you live?', [SU]'s initial response was 'a street', [...] I asked [SU] again later in the conversation 'where do you live?' and he stated '[ADDRESS] Road'. [AR_WiSP1392] |
| 4   | To serve as evidence for specific social worker <b>evaluation</b>  | [DAD] stated 'nobody has ever hit each other' [CN_WiSP2287]  |
| 5   | To <b>signal risk</b> to someone's wellbeing   | [CHILD] said it 'causes more shit' when he speaks to us. [CN_WiSP1855]   |
| 6   | To reflect the <b>complexity</b> of a particular perspective or situation  | [BIRTH_MOTHER] informed, 'The family felt this is not a good time for all this' [AR_WiSP1761]  |
| 7   | To <b>distance</b> the social worker's voice from the voice of another (e.g. swearing, colloquial language)  | [DAD] stated alcohol does not make him aggressive however makes him 'horny'. [CN_WiSP3346]   |
| 8   | To <b>document</b> a specific spoken or written interaction (e.g. previous written text around arrangements)                                       | I sent [MUM] the following text message: 'Hi [MUM]', [CN_WiSP3238]   |
| 9.  | To indicate words commonly used by others but not specifically attributed, either in vernacular or professional discourse ( <b>scare quotes</b> ). | [MUM] was observed to use 'Triple P' strategies [CN_WiSP2258]  |

broader reading suggested a further functional category of 'narrative', which is more visible across whole texts within a case. Due to space limitations, however, the narrative function is not considered further in this article.

What is clear from the text analysis is the multifunctional nature of quotation usage in social work written discourse: they serve different, sometimes overlapping functions (illustrated through the case studies). The next section considers social workers' views on use of quotations, further illustrating this multi-functionality but also underlining double-voicing, in terms of intended factual reporting and evaluative stance.

## Findings from social worker interviews

This section draws on the WiSP interview dataset to support and further nuance the functions given in [Table 6](#).

Several social workers provided overarching comments on the use of quotations in which they emphasized their evidential value:

- (a) ‘Everything is about evidence-based, evidence-based practice.’ [SW69\_Int1].
- (b) If I, if I put verbatim what it was that he’s: oh, you fucking bastard. [...] I don’t have to describe, or voice any opinion about his personality. I’ve got the words coming out of his mouth which he cannot contest.’ [...] ‘So it’s ferocious, effective evidence. [SW21\_Int1]
- (c) I will write odd words that will, erm, you know jog my memory. I might expand on them when I’ve actually left the visit but, you know, triggers really to get, erm important points across. [SW63\_Int1]

The remainder of this section considers social work interviewee comments relating to specific functions (boldening is used to indicate keywords mapping onto functions).

Quotations provide a means of including multiple voices in a text and foregrounding an adult, child, or carer’s perspective, rendering them more ‘present’ in texts (Function 1):

- (d) obviously a quote are [*sic*] quite important **you can get a feel of the person from a quote**, if it’s a direct proper quote [SW51\_Int1]

Quoting may be quicker than paraphrasing, and easier to include where it is difficult to convey the precise meaning intended by the speaker (Function 2). As SW21 states:

- (e) **it saves me having to interpret something** [...] If I can get all the words down, even if it’s twice as many words, I don’t then have to describe or analyse. I can just, **that’s data, raw data**, which people can reinterpret or just borrow. [SW21\_Int1]

What we have termed ‘dramatic recreation’ is sometimes deemed necessary by an external professional (Function 3) (italics indicate voicing within the quotation):

- (f) the solicitor advised that I needed to write **a verbatim note** on the system with exactly what happened. And it took me about three hours to, you know, *and then she said, and then I said, and then he said, and then the doorbell went and.* [SW11\_Int1]

SW62 comments on the distinction between evidence provided through quotes (Function 4) and their professional analysis.

- (g) I would try and quote them [the child] as much as possible because I think instead of me trying to interpret what they say, I like to just **write down what they say** and then, I can try and interpret it in my analysis. [SW62\_Int1]

In Extract h), the interviewee explicitly acknowledges that where an utterance suggests a level of risk (Function 5), it is important to record the exact words uttered:

(h) if they're [child] making a disclosure about abuse maybe that they've suffered, that is, it's going to be so important not only for, the child, the court proceedings, but for any police investigation.[...] It's going to be so important that you've got **word for word** what they've said [SW60\_Int1]

The use of quotations can also reflect complexity through the multiple people, relationships, or prior texts in a case (Function 6, Extract f).

SW50 comments on how a quotation enables the SU or family member's voice to be preserved (Function 1), while clearly distinguishing this from their own professional voice (Function 7):

(i) if I record anything that somebody's said that I personally wouldn't have said myself I always make sure I put it in quotes **so that it's clear that that is what the person has said** [SW50\_Int1]

Finally, quotations can document a specific spoken or written interaction that the social worker feels is important to include (Function 8):

(j) if I'm writing a case note and I thought it was important to put what the person's said, I put it in quotation marks, **implicit in that is a professional judgement. I think that should go in.** [SW45\_Int1]

Social workers' comments on the use of quotations to a large extent align with the functional categories identified through text analysis, while also illustrating the multi-functionality of quotation usage across social work writing. However, social workers' comments also indicate that quotations are not single-voiced—that is straightforward, factual, and verbatim representations of others' voices—but rather double-voiced, that is embedded with an (implicit or explicit) evaluative stance towards that quotation. For example, comment (j) indicates an awareness that quotations are never only verbatim representations of events and perspectives, but are always embedded within an evaluative stance—'implicit in that is a professional judgement'.

## The case studies

This section comprises two case studies drawn from the WiSP dataset, in order to provide rich contextual insight into the practices and functions of quotations within social workers' writing and respond more fully to RQ3: who is quoted? and RQ4: what are the functions of quotations?

### Case study 1 children's: Child and spouse abuse

The case social worker, Carla (pseudonyms are used for all participants), is in her early sixties; she has been a practising social worker in children's care for seven years and previously worked in social services

administration. This specific case concerns the care of four children living with their parents. Social services became involved after the mother reportedly slapped the father and oldest child, leading to the father calling the police. One researcher observed Carla during a week in which she made a home visit, talking to the father and two younger children, and also produced documents relating to this visit.

Given that many of the texts relate to situations affecting all the children (e.g. case notes describing the home situation), we are treating the family and related texts as a single case study. **Box 1** gives information on the texts produced by the social worker available to us. Notably, while this case concerns potential abuse of four children and their father, fewer than half of all quotations are attributed to a child (**Table 7**).

Sixty quotations are from a single supervised contact. This visit is documented by Carla within four individual case note documents (due to system-imposed word restrictions). Taken together, the texts provide a lengthy account of exchanges between the mother and one child together with Carla’s commentary and timecodes (between 4.20 p.m. and 6.07 p.m.). Each quotation illustrates several functions from **Table 6** (In Corpus findings section), indicating the multi-functionality of quotations: extract 1 dramatically recreates a situation (Function 3), providing evidence for evaluation (4) and foregrounding the voices of others (1). A large part of the dialogue concerns whether the child is allowed to have chocolate:

(1) Stella (child) asked for pudding. Mum replied ‘no! not until after we eat dinner!’ Stella said ‘but I want chocolate’. Mum replied more firmly ‘no you’re not having any!’ [CN\_WiSP1658]

The account then details the mother’s responses to Stella’s repeated request, for example:

(2) Mum went to the bottom step and said to Stella ‘so do you want to apologise for your behaviour?’ Stella shouted ‘No!’ Mum then said

**Box 1.** Texts analysed for case study 1  
*Texts available* = 63 case notes  
*Texts containing quotations* = 11  
*Number of quotations* = 72

**Table 7.** Who quotations are attributed to?

| Total number of quotations in texts | Child | Mother | Father | Contact supervisor | Automated phone message |
|-------------------------------------|-------|--------|--------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| 72                                  | 26    | 37     | 7      | 1                  | 1                       |

‘Do you want to watch a film on mummy’s phone?’ Stella screamed ‘No’ to her Mum said abruptly ‘Do you want a kiss and a cuddle?’ Stella said ‘No!’ I want chocolate! Mum said ‘the answer is no you’re not having any!’ [CN\_WiSP1658]

The social worker’s extensive recreation of one incident serves to exemplify the range of parenting techniques employed by a parent whose parenting skills have come into question (e.g. explanation, threat of punishment, distraction, assertion of authority), while also providing an evaluative stance of Stella’s behaviour through the reporting verbs used. Thus, the child *shouted* and *screamed*, whereas the mother more calmly *said*, *asked*, *replied*, or sometimes *shouted*. Tension in the exchange is illustrated through the twenty-four instances of *scream/screamed/screaming* and *shouted/shouting*.

The case note record of the observation represents unfolding events through dialogue. Such dramatization serves to shift time towards the present, rhetorically bringing events alive (cf ‘the dramatic present’ used in literary texts). Adding to the recreation is the distinctive use made of exclamation marks which emphasize the child’s curt or loud responses. While such extensive turn-by-turn recording of a conversation is often impractical, Carla’s shorthand notes and fast typing enable her to capture the immediate detail [researcher fieldnotes].

Dramatic recreation of a situation does not always occur over extended turns. In a case note relating to a different visit, a single sentence helps to recreate a particular situation:

(3) Mum saying she wishes to see the children more and said “I have got to make more of an effort but I have work commitments. Summer months in work are busy.” [CN\_WiSP2646]

Including this quotation also serves Functions 4 (evidence) and 2 (saving time). Carla’s notes could have stopped at ‘she wishes to see the children more’ but adding in the mother’s mitigating circumstances through quotation foregrounds the adult’s perspective. In dramatizing through use of the first person, Carla emphasizes the existence of the mother in her own right and at the same time allows her to offer an evaluative stance, highlighting the mother’s effort and commitment to her children and thus the complexity of the situation (Function 6).

## Case study 2 adult care: Falls and family

Alice, the case social worker, is in her early thirties and has worked in adult care for five years. In interview, she commented that she makes short, handwritten notes during a visit, stating ‘as long as I’ve got those key bullet points so that I can remember the information accurately,



I don't feel it necessary to write full, you know word for word everything that's discussed' [SW46\_Int1].

This specific case centres around Robert, a man in his nineties and now deceased, who lived in a supported living apartment with his wife and main carer, Mary. He received social care support due to significant mobility issues and deteriorating dementia. For many years, he also had a difficult relationship with his grown-up children from a previous marriage. Social care involvement was needed to reduce the risk of falls, provide mobility resources, and facilitate acceptable contact (or no contact) with his children. During our observation days, and following a period of no contact, Robert's children tried to visit him at his apartment and gained access through the passcode doors to knock directly on his front door. This caused Robert and Mary much distress, and they contacted Alice to raise their concerns.

Box 2 shows the available texts. In this case study, most quotations are attributed to Mary, who often speaks on Robert's behalf and is Alice's main point of contact due to Robert's deteriorating dementia (Table 8).

Quotations from Mary appear to be used to provide a narrator or eye-witness account evidencing Robert's condition (Function 4). Example 4 illustrates the use of quoting to detail Robert's daily needs:

(4) Robert will state when he requires the toilet and will differentiate between requiring the toilet to empty his bladder and requiring the toilet for "a sit down". [AR\_WiSP0773]

The choice of a colloquial expression ('a sit down') for toileting habits represents the event from the partner's viewpoint as opposed to more clinical language; this effectively provides three layers of voicing (Robert's voice, conveyed by Mary, and contextualized through Alice's wording) and thus reflects the complexity of the situation (Function 6). This short quotation provides an evaluation of Robert's needs and illustrates Mary's importance as his carer (Function 4), distances the social worker's voice (7), saves writing time (2), and foregrounds both Robert's and Mary's perspectives (1).

In a rare case note citing Robert, three quotes in close succession illustrate his strength of feeling when discussing an attempted visit by his adult children:

**Box 2. Texts analysed for case study 2**

Texts available = 90

- 89 Case notes
- 1 Support plan

Texts containing quotations = 13

Number of quotations = 19 (all but one from case notes)

**Table 8.** Who quotations are attributed to?

| Total number of quotations in texts | Adult SU | Wife | SU's daughter-in-law quoting someone else | Other professionals |
|-------------------------------------|----------|------|---|---------------------|
| 19                                  | 4        | 11   | 2   | 2                   |

(5) I advised Robert that Mary has informed me that there was an issue involving his family at the weekend. [...] I asked Robert what had happened and he stated “nothing good”.... Robert stated that he would not “spit on them if they were on fire”. He also stated “I hate their guts”. [CN\_WiSP1133]

Quotes appear to be employed here to evidence good social work process and practice (Function 4), as—due to Robert’s dementia—Alice is shown asking similar questions several times to ensure Robert’s wishes were stable, understood, and followed. The quotations serve a number of additional functions including distancing the social worker from the sentiment expressed (Function 7), dramatically recreating the conversation (Function 3), foreground Robert’s perspective (Function 1), and are probably also used to save time when writing (Function 2).

In an interview discussion on different text types, Alice comments, ‘We always complete any assessment or the support plan with the person anyway. So basically what you’re recording is their, is the discussion that you’ve had with them.’ [SW46\_int1]. Thus any quotations used by Alice are intended to be factual representations but are filtered through evaluation: in this instance as the result of ‘discussion’ implying that such evaluation is arrived at collaboratively between the social worker and SU.

## Conclusions and recommendations

This section first pulls together the findings from textual analysis, discussing these in the context of social workers’ writing more broadly, before providing limitations of the study and suggestions for future research and finally giving some recommendations for social work practitioners and educators.

### Summary and discussion

Attributed near-verbatim quotations are part of the rhetorical resource employed by social workers and, while used sparingly (within one in ten texts), occur across both children’s and adults’ domains and within the three main text types in the WiSP dataset. All but one of the social worker makes some use of direct quotes, though the low occurrence

suggests that usage is linguistically ‘marked’ or unusual (RQ1). Corpus analysis reveals that quotes are used most extensively within children’s care (RQ2) and that adult carers are quoted twice as often as children (RQ3). Quotations occur at almost the same level within case notes and assessment reports and infrequently within emails (RQ2). While the first two text types serve to document and evidence, emails in social work are generally informal exchanges between colleagues, with quotations largely limited to scare quotes.

The three layers of analysis—the 1-million-word WiSP corpus, the set of social worker interviews, and the two case studies—complement each other in an iterative research cycle, enabling us to propose and exemplify a comprehensive set of functions for social worker quotations (RQ4). We purport that quotations perform a wide variety of—often overlapping—functions within social workers’ writing, ranging from dramatizing an incident to signalling risk. Taken together they provide insight into the ways in which this rhetorical device is used in social work text production.

In previous work, we have attested to the writing-intensive nature of the profession of social work and to the fragmentation of text production (Leedham et al., 2020; Lillis et al., 2017, 2020a, 2024). Texts are the medium through which events are recorded and actions requested, and stylistic choices are important in conveying the professional discourse of social workers. As text creators, social workers can decide what information is recorded, whose voice is heard, and how voices are conveyed. While often referred to in guides and training as ‘verbatim’ records and straightforward representations of people’s perspectives (e.g. *City of Wolverhampton Council*, 2019; Peart, 2023), the use of quotations involves (implicit and explicit) decision-making on the part of the social worker writers: in choosing which words to note down during a visit or meeting, in later decisions when reconstructing and transferring hand-written quotes to the computer-recorded case notes, and in re-selecting quotes to include in an assessment report, court case, or other official documents.

Decisions are clearly made about which discourse to mark as attributed words spoken, meaning that they can never be viewed as simply factual representations but always involve an (albeit often implicit) evaluative stance. The quoted language is therefore never only ‘single voiced’ but rather ‘double voiced’ in Bakhtinian terms, expressing a participant’s perspective but also the social worker’s evaluation of that experience, through the choice of quoting this particular language, weaving the quote into an ongoing account in a particular way, and on occasion through the reporting verb used. It is hoped that the study reported on in this article serves to highlight the different ways in which social workers use quotes, the multifunctional nature of these quotes, and the double voicing that quoting necessarily involves or implies. The data,

categorizations, and discussions within this article can be used as resources for social workers, serving to raise awareness of the functions of quotes in social work writing. Findings around quotations from the WiSP study have been used in professional development resources, allowing practitioners to consider both range of functions and their intended evaluative stance. For example, the WiSPeR resources made available on the WiSP website (<https://wisper.writinginsocialwork.com/>) and in a programme developed by IRISS (Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services, see <https://content.iriss.org.uk/writing-analysis-social-care/evaluation/>) use examples from the WiSP project to critically explore the impact of quotations in representations of people, their needs and perspectives.

### Limitations and future research

The WiSP dataset is constituted by datasets generated from one national context (England), and the corpus (entailing case study texts) is necessarily partial due to difficulties in securing access to sensitive texts. Social workers' texts are written at speed, and sometimes layout or punctuation appear to be used to indicate quoted speech in place of quotation marks. The automated corpus searching focused only on text signalled as quotations through the use of quotation marks, omitting indirect quotations as these are harder to extract and assign to individual speakers. Each instance of opening quotation marks is counted as one quote: an alternative would be to count the total words within quotation marks. In addition to filtering from the verbal output for recording, the transcription of talk necessarily omits gestures, eye gaze, and other multimodal features. Future research could take a different approach to quotations, aiming to recover a broader range of language (see Papay and Padó, 2019; Asr et al., 2021, on automatic quotation extraction).

In considering the difference in quotations ascribed to children or adults within the domain of children's care, it should be noted that some texts are written about an unborn or pre-verbal child, result from a meeting with carers without a child's presence, or are extracted from an adult's text message.

Finally, the social worker interviews focused on *practices* around writing and did not include a specific question about the use of quotations, though many interviewees commented on including the voice of SUs and their families. A future study could include interviews with social workers about their intentions when quoting and the extent to which these align with reader understandings.

## Recommendations

In adopting an innovative multimethod approach, we suggest that this data and analysis sheds light on the functions of quotations in social work writing and may be useful in considering professional writing more widely in healthcare, educational, and social care contexts. The functions given in Table 6 could be used within reflexive discussion around why quotations are used in social workers' texts, and to challenge the idea that quotations are actually 'verbatim'. We suggest that 'near-verbatim' is a more useful term where a precise recording of the exact words cannot be guaranteed, as it reminds the reader that notes were written at speed and reinforces the double voicing inherent within quotations. It is particularly important for social work writers to be aware of how readers may pick up on highlighted or emotive language within quotations and to ensure such language is recorded as accurately as possible: the ferocity and effectiveness of this rhetorical device should not be underestimated.

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