

Defining 'Quality' in Social Policy Research

Views, perceptions and a framework for discussion

Saul Becker, Alan Bryman and Joe Sempik

This report presents the findings from an innovative mixed methods study of over 250 social policy researchers and users of research and how they conceptualise 'quality' in social policy research and how they judge the quality of published research texts.

It draws on three sources of original data: an Internet survey of 251 respondents, six discussion groups with 26 participants and in-depth telephone interviews with a further 28 interviewees. The study is the first to capture the range of views and criteria concerning 'quality' that are held by members of the 'social policy community'. The report provides a synthesis of the key findings from all sources of data. It examines indicators of quality in quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, cross-national and theoretical social policy research; it explores whether there is a perceived 'hierarchy' of methods in social policy research whereby the method and research design themselves are associated with higher quality; it reviews what the social policy community think of user involvement in research and how this involvement might affect quality; it discusses how 'originality', 'significance' and 'rigour' can be conceived of as criteria of quality; and it shows that within the social policy community it is possible to construct a ranking of quality criteria with some indicators receiving significantly more support than others.

The report will be supplemented by a number of specialist articles that will report in more depth particular aspects of the research. An email alert service is available for those who would like access to these other publications (see inside front cover for details).

This report is timely given the growing concern in higher education for assessing quality in research, particularly the quality of published research, through the mechanism of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The data contained in the report, and the findings, will be of interest to those who conduct, manage, fund, publish, review or use social policy research and particularly to those who need to make judgements about the quality of published studies. It is hoped that the publication of this report will generate dialogue and debate within and outside the social policy community about what counts as 'quality'.

ISBN 0 907274 50 1

www.social-policy.com



Defining 'Quality' in Social Policy Research

Views, perceptions and a framework for discussion

Saul Becker, Alan Bryman and Joe Sempik



First published in Great Britain in July 2006 by the Social Policy Association in conjunction with the Joint University Council Social Policy Committee

Social Policy Association
c/o The Lavenham Group
47 Water Street, Lavenham
Suffolk CO10 9RN
www.social-policy.com

© Saul Becker, Alan Bryman and Joe Sempik

A catalogue record for this report is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0 907274 50 1

Saul Becker is Professor of Social Care and Health, University of Birmingham, and from September 2006, Professor of Social Policy and Social Care, University of Nottingham. **Alan Bryman** is Professor of Organisational and Social Research, University of Leicester. **Joe Sempik** is Research Fellow, Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University.

The right of **Saul Becker, Alan Bryman** and **Joe Sempik** to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the 1988 Copyright, Designs and Patents Act.

All rights reserved: no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission of the authors.

The statements and opinions contained within this publication are solely those of the authors and not of the Social Policy Association or Joint University Council Social Policy Committee.

Acknowledgements: The authors acknowledge with gratitude the help of the social policy academics, researchers and users of research who took part in the e-survey, discussion groups and individual interviews. We are also grateful to Dr Elizabeth Matka who conducted the telephone interviews; Helen Harris who organised the discussion groups and interim seminar and administered the grant; Dr Hanne Beirens, Dr Nathan Hughes and Paul Mason who assisted with the discussion groups.

Contributors: SB had the original idea for this research, secured funding for the study and managed the work. All three authors conceived the idea for the analysis, interpreted the data and conducted the analysis. SB took the lead for drafting the final report and all three authors revised the report and approved the final version. SB is the guarantor.

Funding: The study was funded by the Social Policy Association and the Joint University Council Social Policy Committee. The authors of this report have worked independently of the funders. The funders have not sought to have influence on the design, outcome or outputs of the research.

Competing interests: SB is Chair of the Social Policy Association. No financial or competing interests have been declared by the authors.

Ethical approval: Not needed.

Citation: This report should be cited as:

Becker, S., Bryman, A. and Sempik, J. (2006) *Defining 'Quality' in Social Policy Research: Views, Perceptions and a Framework for Discussion*, Lavenham: Social Policy Association.

Other articles will be published in due course which discuss in more depth particular aspects of this research. If you would like to be informed when these articles are being published please send an email to j.sempik@lboro.ac.uk asking to receive an email alert. Alerts will also be posted on the Social Policy Association website at www.social-policy.com. A pdf of this report is available from the SPA website.

Defining 'Quality' in Social Policy Research

Views, perceptions and a framework for discussion

Saul Becker, Alan Bryman and Joe Sempik

Contents

Section 1: Study design, methods and samples		Section 6: 'Originality', 'Significance' and 'Rigour' as criteria of quality	
Methods	2	Understanding perceptions of 'originality'	12
Scoping exercise	2	Is originality important in social policy research?	13
The E-Survey	2	Originality and significance	13
Discussion groups	2	Defining 'significance'	13
Telephone interviews	3	Rigour	14
The E-Survey sample	3	Limitations and importance of rigour	15
Using a mixed methods approach	3		
Section 2: Indicators and rankings of quality in published social policy research		Section 7: User involvement in social policy research	
A ranking of quality criteria	4	The diversity of 'users' of social policy research	15
Accessibility and type of publication	4	The advocates of user involvement	16
Ethical and procedural standards	6	The committed – but with strings attached	16
Transparency and objectivity	6	What user involvement brings to the research process	17
Potential value to service users and practitioners	6	The hostile, ambivalent and agnostic	17
Service user involvement	6		
Contribution to theory and knowledge	6	Section 8: Moving Forward: A framework for discussion	
Section 3: Quality criteria in quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods research		Orientations to quality	18
Quantitative research criteria	7	What approach to assessing quality?	18
Qualitative research criteria	7	New challenges and opportunities	19
Mixed methods research criteria	8	References	20
Relevance to research questions	8	List of Tables	
Transparency	9	Table 2.1: Rank order of quality criteria	5
Need for integration of mixed methods findings	9	Table 2.2: The role of social policy research	7
A rationale for mixed methods	9	Table 5.1: Research methods and research designs associated with high quality findings	11
Section 4: Quality criteria in cross-national and theoretical social policy research		List of Boxes	
Cross-national research criteria	10	Box 2.1: Peer review in the publication and funding of research as an indicator of quality	4
Theoretical (scholarly) social policy research	10	Box 2.2: For whose benefit?	6
Section 5: Research methods and designs as indicators of quality		Box 3.1: Definitions of 'traditional' criteria	7
A hierarchy of research methods?	11	Box 3.2: Definitions of 'alternative' criteria	8
		Box 5.1: Randomised controlled trials	12

Section 1: Study design, methods and samples

This report presents the findings from an innovative mixed methods study of over 250 social policy researchers and users of research which explores how they conceptualise 'quality' in published social policy research.

In trying to understand and conceptualise what counts as 'quality' in social policy research the study draws on the experience and expertise of those directly engaged in conducting social policy research (academics and researchers), those who commission social policy research, and those who use the findings for academic, policy or practice purposes (e.g. researchers, academics, policy makers/managers, practitioners) – collectively 'the social policy community'.

The report draws on three sources of original data: an Internet survey of 251 respondents (the 'e-survey'), six discussion groups with 26 participants and in-depth telephone interviews with a further 28 interviewees. The study is the first to capture the range of views and criteria concerning 'quality' that are held by members of the social policy community.

A difficulty experienced in the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), and commented on publicly by some of the international representatives of the social policy sub-panel, was that there were no clear, explicit and transparent criteria/benchmarks for determining the quality of social policy/social work research (Gambrell, 2002, 2003; MacGregor, 2003). The current study is the first to address some of these challenges. While this will be helpful to the RAE 2008 sub-panel members, the exercise has broader significance and relevance. It is important that the Social Policy Association (SPA) and Joint University Council Social Policy Committee, and their membership, have clarity about what constitutes 'quality'. It is hoped that this report will make a contribution to the discussions and debates about what counts as 'quality'.

The focus of this study is on the quality of social policy research and not social work research. A study of the 'kinds and quality of social work research' is currently being conducted by Professor Ian Shaw at the University of York, funded by the ESRC, SCIE, SIESWE and the JUC Social Work Education Committee.

This report provides a synthesis of the key findings from all the sources of data and outlines some of the implications for determining and judging what counts as 'quality' in published social policy research. The report will be supplemented by a number of specialist articles that will report in more depth particular aspects of the research.

Methods

Scoping exercise: Scoping discussions were held with key social policy/social sciences 'research methods' academics to generate baseline information/criteria of what constitutes high quality research in social policy, drawing on established criteria from subject areas aligned to social policy. Additionally, other documents that discussed the

concept of quality in research were examined (for example, Furlong and Oancea, 2005; Spencer et al., 2003). These discussions and documents provided the foundation for the present study and specifically for the development of the 'e-survey' (a web-based questionnaire).

The E-Survey: A web-based survey was developed, piloted, revised, piloted again and then published online using a commercial provider of Internet surveys (Survey Galaxy). This was active for 80 days (May-July 2005) during which time the URL and details of the background to the survey were circulated by email to 803 members of the Social Policy Discussion List of the Social Policy Association (SPA) and to 467 members of SPA. In view of the overlap of membership of these two groups it is estimated that details of the survey reached 800-900 individuals.

A total of 347 people logged onto the web site hosting the survey form and 251 completed the questionnaire in full. Respondents completed the form anonymously, although those willing to take part in a subsequent interview (see section on telephone interviews) went on to provide their contact details (n=90).

Discussion groups: A seminar was held in November 2005 for 26 invited individuals who were known to be experienced researchers and users of research in the field of social policy. The aim of the seminar was to present preliminary data from the analysis of the e-survey and to explore themes that arose from the survey. After a brief introduction to the study by the researchers, the participants were assigned to three discussion groups (each of around 8 - 10 participants) that were facilitated by a researcher and an assistant.

The first round of discussion groups addressed the following issues:

- the criteria used by the participants to judge the perceived quality of a published piece of social policy research.
- the criteria they used for evaluating work that used different methodological approaches i.e. quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods.

The discussions lasted approximately 45 - 60 minutes and were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. A second round of discussion groups was held later in the day which focussed on:

- the participants' perceptions of the nature of originality, significance and rigour in social policy research and their relative importance and relationship.
- their views of the preliminary findings of the e-survey.
- participants' views regarding the 'hierarchy of criteria' relating to published work suggested by the e-survey (see Section 2 of this report).
- the implications of the findings of this research for the forthcoming RAE.

The content of the discussion groups was also used to inform the interview guide for the telephone interviews described in the next section.

Telephone interviews: Telephone interviews were carried out with 28 interviewees who had indicated in the e-survey that they were willing to be interviewed. Ninety respondents had agreed to be interviewed and a purposive sampling method was used to select interviewees so that as many of the different 'orientations' in attitudes to research and quality (see Section 8) were represented in the sample. One researcher carried out all of the interviews, which were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. Those who had participated in the discussion groups were not selected for interview. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

The questions in the telephone interviews related to the following:

- interviewees' perceptions of originality, significance and rigour in published social policy research and their relative importance or ranking.
- interviewees' views on the involvement of 'users' in research, and their impact on the quality of research findings, for example, "what do users bring to the research process?"
- the individual preference of interviewees for any particular research methods or approaches, for example, quantitative, qualitative or mixed and their perceptions of the specific value or usefulness of such methods.

Both the discussion groups and the telephone interviews explored common issues of quality in published social policy research and the difficulties faced by the RAE in assessing and evaluating quality.

The E-Survey sample

The e-survey sample represents predominantly those who are actively involved in social policy research. Over 80% of respondents (83.1%) had been involved in this field of work for five years or longer and most were engaged in university-based research (79.6%). A smaller percentage (8.4%) were employed as researchers outside of the university environment. Only 1.2% and 1.6%, respectively, described themselves as 'policy makers' or 'practitioners'.

Around half of the respondents (46.2%) also managed the research of other staff and almost half of the sample (48.4%) had received between one and four research grants in the past five years; 67.3% were members of the Social Policy Association and 13.5% were members of the Social Research Association.

The gender distribution of respondents was approximately equal with 47% male and 53% female respondents. Most (83%) were in the 30 - 60 age groups (25% of the total were aged 30-39; 26% aged 40-49; 32% aged 50-59), with only a small proportion (8%) of younger (under 30) or older (9%) (over 60) participants.

The overall profile of the sample of respondents suggests a group of individuals with substantial experience in social policy research.

It is difficult to be precise about who constitutes the social policy research community and how our sample

compares with this group of researchers or for that matter the membership of the Social Policy Association as a whole. At the time that the e-survey was conducted (May-July 2005) there were 524 members of the Social Policy Association, although it is not possible to compare in detail the characteristics of our sample with this membership because data were not available in a comparable form. However, the 169 people in our e-sample who were members of the SPA constitute 32% of the membership at that time. Our sample extends beyond the SPA membership.

The ESRC *Demographic Review of the UK Social Sciences* (Mills et al., 2006) presents conflicting sources of data about the profile of Social Policy academics. Using the Higher Education Statistical Authority staff records it indicates that there may be up to a maximum of 1,773 staff in Social Policy and Administration (p.20). Seven hundred of these are on temporary contracts, many on fixed-term research contracts, often within dedicated research centres or units. Social Policy has a slightly older age profile than the average for the social sciences, with 42% of staff aged 50 or over, and 20% of staff aged 56 or over (Mills et al., 2006, p. 50). Our e-survey sample has a younger profile than for the discipline as a whole. The gender split for the discipline and for our sample is almost the same, with just a slightly higher proportion of females in our e-sample.

However, while the ESRC figure is a total population, it does not allow us to identify the numbers who are active researchers. In the 2001 Research Assessment Exercise, 926 research active staff (FTEs) were submitted under Social Policy and Administration (with another 354 submitted under Social Work). Mills et al suggest that the number of research active staff in Social Policy and Administration, weighted by the 2001 RAE submission, would lead to a figure of 1,213 research active staff in the discipline.

Using a mixed methods approach

This research represents a mixed methods investigation. In particular, there are both quantitative and qualitative research elements in this study. There are quantitative data deriving from the e-survey and there are qualitative data deriving from three main sources: the answers to open questions in the e-survey; the discussion groups; and the semi-structured interviews with social policy researchers. The chief rationale for using this combination of sources of data is that it was felt that a complete picture could not be generated by any one method alone. Each source of data represents an important piece in a jigsaw. The goal of the quantitative data was to provide a sense of the degree to which particular views regarding quality were held. The answers to e-survey open questions provided interviewees with the opportunity to express views in areas that did not lend themselves to closed questions or to amplify their comments. The discussion groups provided an opportunity for researchers to discuss some of the findings deriving from the survey. They allowed a variety of views concerning quality to be teased out following a presentation of the e-survey findings. The semi-structured interviews were designed to allow a

variety of issues to be explored in greater depth than was possible in the e-survey. In areas of methodology that have no or few agreed upon quality criteria, the ability to ask questions in an open manner is extremely valuable, as the questions are unlikely to lend themselves to the creation of fixed-choice options.

Section 2: Indicators and rankings of quality in published social policy research

E-survey respondents were asked to rate the importance of a number of potential criteria of quality, as observed in the *published output* of a piece of social policy research. This section of the report shows the extent to which certain quality criteria have support amongst our e-survey sample.

A ranking of quality criteria

Thirty-five criteria of quality were ranked in order of respondents classifying them as 'very important' to provide a hierarchy of perceived quality criteria. These 35 items were generated from our scoping discussions and from our examination of the literature (see for example, Furlong and Oancea, 2005; Spencer et al., 2003). These criteria are shown in Table 2.1. The percentage of respondents classifying each criterion as 'very important' is shown to one decimal place and in some cases the difference between them is very small. Ranked in this way, the ten criteria viewed as most important were those concerned with the accessibility of the published output (ranked number one) and issues related to the research process itself, including the collection, analysis and storage of data, provision of an explicit account of the process and observing appropriate ethical and legal standards and also protecting the safety of researchers.

In the sections below we give a brief description of some of the key groupings of quality criteria as they relate to, for example, ethical procedures, service user involvement, potential value for policy and practice and so on.

Accessibility and type of publication: Issues related to the publication of the research in refereed journals or as book chapters appear towards the bottom of the rank order, as does citation in academic journals. This is in sharp contrast to the accessibility of published work that is ranked at the top of the list. The accessibility of published work to appropriate audiences was seen as important by almost all e-survey respondents. Most respondents do not view publication of work in prestigious, refereed academic journals as necessarily indicative of high quality, but instead value published work that is accessible to the appropriate audiences. Around half of the respondents considered that publication in a prestigious refereed journal, or citation in one, were 'important', and only a small proportion (12% – 13%) thought that such criteria were 'very important'. This response appears low when considered in relation to the emphasis that academic institutions

and processes (such as the RAE) have placed on publication of research findings in refereed journals. Indeed, almost half of the respondents (47.6%) considered that it was 'fairly unimportant' or 'not at all important' for research to be published in refereed journals, and over half of the respondents (50.6%) considered that citation in a prestigious peer reviewed academic journal was 'not important' (see also Box 2.1).

There was an approximately equal division of views regarding the publication of results in professional journals or magazines, with 53% of respondents regarding such publication as 'important' and 47% as unimportant. Publication of research findings as a chapter in a book appeared to be the least valued form of dissemination among the respondents and was seen as unimportant by 62.9% of them.

Box 2.1: Peer review in the publication and funding of research as an indicator of quality

Two possible indicators of high quality social policy research are whether findings are published in a peer reviewed (refereed) journal and whether the research was funded through a peer reviewed process, for example, by a Research Council (Taylor-Gooby, 2005). When asked whether publication in a refereed journal can be regarded as indicative of high quality research, e-survey respondents were fairly split. While 47% agreed (though only 9% agreed strongly), one-fifth were unsure and nearly one-third disagreed. The variation could be regarded as surprising in view of the significance of the refereed article for RAE panels and also because it has long been regarded as the highest status form of academic publication, a view which has arisen in response to its significance in the sciences.

Similarly, while research council funding (e.g. ESRC) is often regarded as particularly prestigious, only just over a third of the e-survey sample felt that it was indicative of high quality. A further third of the sample were unsure and the other third disagreed. There is therefore considerable variation in whether this source of funding is believed to be a criterion of high quality research. One possible reason for this is that respondents may feel that simply because a Council has agreed to fund research does not guarantee its quality. This is of course true but possibly neglects the fact that all ESRC funded research projects are evaluated so that grant holders have a vested interest in ensuring their research is of high quality if they want to have the opportunity to receive further funding from this source. However, there was a greater tendency to view social policy research that has been peer reviewed at the application stage to be regarded as indicative of high quality, with one half of the sample agreeing that this is the case. It is strange, therefore, that investigations funded by research councils are not somewhat more likely to be regarded as indicative of high quality, since all applications for funding to such councils are peer reviewed.

Table 2.1: Rank order of quality criteria

Rank Order		Respondents classifying criterion as 'Very Important'	
		Number	%
	(n = 251, except where otherwise stated)		
1.	The research is written in ways that are accessible to the appropriate audiences	208	82.9
2.	The research design adopted clearly addresses the research question(s)	207	82.5
3.	The ways in which data were collected and analysed are transparent (n=250)	197	78.8
4.	An explicit account of the research process (design and method(s)) and analysis of data is provided	192	76.5
5.	The research makes a contribution to knowledge	173	68.9
6.	Informed consent was given	167	66.5
7.	The safety of participants has been assured (n=250)	166	66.1
8.	The research conforms to appropriate ethical codes and protocols (eg SRA/BSA/Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care)	145	57.8
9.	The safety of researchers has been assured	126	50.2
10.	Data are stored and protected according to established protocols and legislation	116	46.2
11.	The researcher has sought to be as objective as possible (n=247)	108	43.7
12.	An explicit account of the ethics and governance of the research is provided	106	42.2
13.	The research should help achieve better outcomes for 'service users' of social policy (n=246)	101	41.1
14.	The research has the potential to develop the capacity of policy makers and/or practitioners to make informed and ethical decisions (n=249)	99	39.8
15.	The research has potential value for policy makers (n=250)	96	38.4
16.	The researcher provides a clear statement of his/her value position (n=249)	95	38.2
17.	The research has the potential to develop the capacity of policy makers and/or practitioners to take appropriate actions (n=249)	91	36.5
18.	The research has potential value for 'service users' (individuals or groups at the receiving end of social policy interventions) (n=250)	91	36.4
19.	Research participants have been given the findings of the research study (n=250)	90	36.0
20.	Details are provided about the funding body which commissioned the research	90	35.9
21.	Service users have been consulted about the research aims and objectives (n=249)	89	35.7
22.	The research has produced recommendations for policy and/or practice (n=247)	87	35.2
23.	The research achieves an effective synthesis between theory and knowledge (n=248)	81	32.7
24.	The research is informed by a theoretical position (n=249)	79	31.7
25.	The research has potential value for practitioners (n=249)	77	30.9
26.	The research should help to bring about change (n=247)	69	27.9
27.	Service users have been involved appropriately in all stages of the research (n=249)	62	24.9
28.	The research has the potential to empower 'service users' (n=248)	53	21.4
29.	The research makes a contribution to theory (n=250)	39	15.6
30.	The research is published in a prestigious refereed academic journal (n=250)	33	13.2
31.	The research provides good value for money (n=250)	32	12.8
32.	A randomised controlled design was used (n=243)	31	12.8
33.	A publication deriving from the research is cited in prestigious refereed academic journals (n=249)	29	11.6
34.	The research is published in a professional journal/magazine (n=249)	19	7.6
35.	The research is published as a chapter in a book (n=248)	6	2.4

Ethical and procedural standards: A high proportion (over 80%) of respondents considered that it was 'very important' or 'important' to know from the published output that informed consent was granted, the safety of participants and researchers alike was assured and that the research conformed to appropriate ethical standards. These quality criteria appear at the top of the ranking (Table 2.1). Whilst such results are not unexpected – they may be interpreted to reflect a desire for perceived high professional and ethical standards to be demonstrated in the published literature – it is surprising that a small number of respondents reported that they considered such information to be 'fairly unimportant' or 'not at all important'. It may be that for those respondents such assurances are unnecessary because characteristics such as informed consent and safety are taken for granted (and do not need to be reiterated). It is essential to stress, however, that such answers indicated that those respondents considered factors such as mention of informed consent to be unimportant in the *published output* and not unimportant *per se*. It appears therefore that the presentation in published material of some assurance that appropriate standards and procedures have been followed is perceived to be an indicator of quality by a large majority of our respondents.

Transparency and objectivity: Almost all respondents (over 96%) considered that an explicit account of the research design and methodology was 'very important' or 'important'. This included a research design that clearly addressed the research question and transparency in the manner of data collection and analysis. A smaller, but substantial majority of respondents (over 75%) perceived that a statement of the value position and apparent objectivity of the researcher, together with details of the funding body, to be 'important'. 'Being as objective as possible' was seen as 'very important' or 'fairly important' by eight out of ten respondents (80.1%) although this was recognised by some in their comments as a problematic concept. Both a detailed account of the research methods themselves (including details of data collection and analysis) and knowledge of the integrity of the researchers appear to be involved in the perceived quality of published research. A concern for transparency is a theme that recurs in other sections of this report.

Potential value to service users and practitioners: Most respondents (75% - 90%) viewed the demonstration of the potential value of research outputs to service users, policy makers and practitioners as 'important', and around 30% - 40% saw this as 'very important'. Similarly, around 90% of respondents considered it 'important' for research to develop the capacity of policy makers and practitioners to make informed and ethical decisions and to take appropriate actions. The practical consequences of research, therefore, appear to be seen as important, as research in social policy is closely associated with its practice.

Around a quarter of respondents viewed the premise that research should 'bring about change' (26.3%) or be empowering for service users (31.9%) as unimportant. These figures may reflect the perception by a sizeable minority of respondents of the actual practical difficulties of effecting change in policy or empowering

users through published research outputs or a lack of engagement in these areas.

Service user involvement: Criteria linked to the involvement of service users, and effects on policy and practice are found towards the middle of the ranking order, for example, the statement 'Research participants have been given the findings of the research study' appears at number 19 in the list. The involvement of service users in research may not be considered as important as the assurance that ethical and procedural standards have been followed. For example, 66.5% of respondents considered it 'very important' that an assurance had been provided in the published work that informed consent had been obtained, whilst just under 36% thought it to be 'very important' for such an assurance to have been provided that service users were consulted about the aims and objectives of the research and 24.9% thought it 'very important' that service users had been involved appropriately in all stages of the research. Section 7 of this report provides further discussion of user involvement in social policy research drawing on data from the discussion groups and telephone interviews.

Contribution to theory and knowledge: The contribution of published research to both theory and knowledge was perceived as important. However, more respondents (96.4%) considered it to be 'important' to make a contribution to knowledge than a contribution to theory (72.8%) and almost 70% viewed a contribution to knowledge as 'very important', but only 15.6% had the same perception of the contribution to theory. These results could be interpreted as showing an emphasis on the practice dimension of social policy research (i.e. evidence and knowledge-based) rather than on theoretical development. However, the interaction between theory and knowledge i.e. whether the research achieved an effective synthesis of theory and knowledge, or was informed by theory, was viewed as 'important' by almost 80% of respondents. Knowledge gathering and creation, therefore, appears to be perceived as of primary importance and its integration with the theoretical process may be secondary. The contribution of research to the generation of theory appears to be less strongly valued (see also Box 2.2).

Box 2.2: For whose benefit?

Social policy researchers can be viewed as having to straddle two kinds of criteria: traditional academic criteria of quality and whether the research has potential value. E-survey respondents were also asked about the balance of importance for social policy research of having potential value for policy and practice on the one hand and leading to the accumulation of knowledge on the other. The majority of respondents (53%) believe that social policy research should contribute towards both elements (Table 2.2). There is a balance of replies towards favouring potential value for policy and practice but the fact that over half of respondents favour making a contribution to both policy and practice *and* knowledge is striking. Only 13% of respondents favour doing research that leads to accumulation of knowledge alone or for the most part.

Table 2.2: The role of social policy research

(n=248)	Number	Percent
Much more important for social policy research to have potential value for policy and practice	31	12.5
Somewhat more important for social policy research to have potential value for policy and practice	53	21.4
Equally important for social policy research to have potential value for policy and practice AND to lead to an accumulation of knowledge	131	52.8
Somewhat more important for social policy research to lead to an accumulation of knowledge	20	8.1
Much more important for social policy research to lead to an accumulation of knowledge	13	5.2

Section 3: Quality criteria in quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods research

Quantitative research criteria

E-survey respondents were asked which criteria they felt should be applied to *quantitative* social policy research. They were provided with four traditional criteria in this connection: validity, reliability, replicability and generalisability (the definitions that were provided are shown in Box 3.1).

Box 3.1: Definitions of 'traditional' criteria

The following definitions were provided on the e-survey questionnaire.

Validity: the extent to which there is a correspondence between data and conceptualisation.

Reliability: the extent to which observations are consistent when instruments are administered on more than one occasion.

Replicability: the extent to which it is possible to reproduce an investigation.

Generalisability: the extent to which it is possible to generalise findings to similar cases which have not been studied.

Most of the sample (90% and 86%, respectively) feel that validity and reliability criteria should be applied to quantitative research but there was slightly greater uncertainty regarding the other two criteria – replicability (60%) and generalisability (71%). This means that over a quarter of the sample do not feel that it is crucial for the researcher to be able to generalise findings to a population and nearly 40% feel that the ability to reproduce findings is not a crucial issue.

Many respondents took up the opportunity to mention other quality criteria in the free text spaces of the online questionnaire. While a diverse range of issues were mentioned, a recurring theme in many replies was a concern for explicitness and transparency in procedures. Examples of such views include:

Robustness – the extent to which we can say that the weaknesses of the quantitative approach employed (and there always are some) have been dealt with as appropriately as possible given the data.

Transparency of methodology, so that users can assess the value of the research for their purposes on the basis of information that is publicly available.

A further recurring theme, though not as prevalent as the previous one, was that the research methods should be appropriate to the research question:

Congruence – that there is a congruence between the research methods used and that which is being studied.

Research questions clearly specified.

Hypotheses tested in an appropriate manner.

Qualitative research criteria

E-survey respondents were also asked whether traditional *quantitative* research criteria (validity, reliability, replicability and generalisability) should be applied to *qualitative* research. While validity is regarded as a criterion for qualitative research by three-quarters of the sample, the three other traditional criteria are not viewed as important in this connection. While quite a large percentage see reliability as a criterion (57%), replicability (32%) and generalisability (31%) are much less likely to be viewed as criteria of qualitative research.

These findings beg the question of which criteria respondents feel should be applied to qualitative research. To shed light on this issue, the possible relevance of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) quality criteria were the focus of a question. Definitions of the four criteria devised by Lincoln and Guba (see Box 3.2) were provided as the meanings of the terms have not passed into common usage to the degree that the traditional criteria have. Credibility and confirmability – which are concerned respectively with how believable findings are and whether personal biases have been kept in check – are endorsed by large percentages of social policy researchers (79% and 65% respectively). However, whether findings are relevant to other settings and whether they are likely to occur at other times – are far less likely to be endorsed. The finding for transferability (44%) parallels the rather low endorsement of generalisability as a criterion for both quantitative and qualitative research.

Box 3.2: Definitions of 'alternative' criteria

Credibility: the extent to which a set of findings are believable.

Transferability: the extent to which a set of findings are relevant to settings other than the one or ones from which they are derived.

Dependability: the extent to which a set of findings are likely to be relevant to a different time than the one in which it was conducted.

Confirmability: the extent to which the researcher has not allowed personal values to intrude to an excessive degree.

As with the question on quantitative research, answers to open questions concerning other possible criteria sometimes made reference to issues of *explicitness* and *transparency* in relation to qualitative research. The *relevance to* and *involvement of users* was also a particular issue for some respondents who took the opportunity to reply to the question of other criteria. Several respondents also made reference to the importance of being *reflexive* in qualitative research:

Reflexivity: extent to which the investigators have critically and explicitly reflected upon the methodological limitations of the research and the competing interpretations that may attach to the data.

Critical Reflexivity, especially in relation to research process & researcher contribution to the production of knowledge.

Mixed methods research criteria

Here we are concerned with quality criteria in relation to research that combines quantitative and qualitative elements, commonly referred to nowadays as mixed methods research.

Most (82%) e-survey respondents feel that a combination of traditional and alternative criteria should be employed in relation to mixed methods research. Three quarters of social policy researchers favour employing different criteria for the quantitative and the qualitative components of mixed methods research. In other words, most do not favour using the same criteria for both quantitative and qualitative elements in mixed methods research.

E-survey respondents were less forthcoming in answering an open question on other quality criteria for mixed methods research than they were in the corresponding questions for quantitative and qualitative research. There was certainly recognition of a need for the consideration of mixed methods research criteria, as when the following two respondents wrote:

you would apply different criteria to each component, but there should be a set of criteria relating to the use of mixed methods, not just to the separate methodological aspects.

a combination of traditional quant criteria and alternative qual criteria AND some kind of assessment

of the quality of the synthesis of the qual and quant data, that the two have been used together coherently and any apparent tensions between the two types/sets of data are explored/explained.

Because the Internet survey respondents were somewhat less forthcoming about mixed methods research criteria than they were in connection with quantitative research and qualitative research criteria, it was decided to include a question specifically on this issue in the semi-structured telephone interviews that were carried out. In addition, the issue was raised in the context of the six discussion groups. The interviews brought out a number of themes concerning the criteria that should be applied to mixed methods studies. The four criteria most often referred to in telephone interviews and discussion groups are: relevance to research questions; transparency; the need for integration of mixed methods findings; and a rationale for using mixed methods.

Relevance to research questions: It is quite common for social researchers to argue that mixed methods studies should be tailored to research questions and that it should not be assumed that such studies are inherently superior (Bryman, 2006a). Social policy researchers appear to share this concern. Ensuring that mixed methods investigations are conducted with reference to research questions implies that it is seen as a further criterion against which social policy research should be judged:

if I'm looking for the quality of a published piece of work that combines methods I want to know that the methods have been selected appropriately, that they've not just been selected because of the particular foibles and preferences of the researcher who has a particular expertise in a particular kind of method. (Interviewee 35)

I would want to look at what is, what is this person, what is this researcher trying to do, what was the question that he or she originally asked, why and have they found ways in answering that question... (Interviewee 43)

I think I'd be looking to make sure that there was a point to using different kinds of methods, that it wasn't just trying to be a catch all kind of piece of research. So I would be hoping that the choices of methods would fit the research... that there was definitely a purpose to using those different sorts of methods. (Interviewee 26)

Sometimes, interviewees would turn the discussion around slightly to argue that mixed methods research was no different from any other approach to research, in that for all research it is important for the methods used to dovetail with the questions asked. For example,

So I'm not actually looking for a particular sort of method to say yes this is good, that's bad, I'm looking for something that fit the question and produces something I can trust in the way of data. (Interviewee 31)

With this comment, the interviewee is essentially trying to say that mixed methods research is implicated in a general principle that methods should be tailored to

research questions. The interviewee also refers to 'trust' in the data, which is a reference to another key theme in his/her reply, namely the importance of *transparency* as a criterion of quality in mixed methods (and indeed any other) research.

Bryman (2006b) has noted that mixed methods researchers display two kinds of discourse when referring to this approach to research. One is the discourse just described, which Bryman calls a *particularistic* discourse, that entails viewing mixed methods research as only appropriate when relevant to the research questions being asked. The other is a *universalistic* discourse, which tends to view mixed methods research as providing better outcomes more or less regardless of the aims of the research. As Bryman notes, sometimes both discourses are employed within an interview. The significance of the relevance to research questions for the interviewees quoted in this section implies the widespread use of a particularistic discourse among social policy researchers. Indeed, a particularistic discourse was far more prominent than the universalistic discourse among the 28 interviewees.

There appears to be some tension for social policy researchers between a desire to express a commitment to the textbook account of the research process in terms of choosing methods appropriate to research questions and a 'gut feeling' that one method or combination of methods represents an approach to data collection and analysis that is likely to have a more general applicability or appropriateness.

Transparency: Several interviewees expressed the view that it was important for mixed methods researchers to be transparent about the nature and content of the procedures they employ. This view was typically not expressed because of a belief that mixed methods researchers are sometimes opaque about their procedures. Instead, transparency typically arose in the context of interviewees indicating that it is an important quality criterion for all research and that mixed methods research was no exception. In other words, they were applying a generally valued quality criterion to the specific context of mixed methods research:

A big question is always having sufficient information to judge the methods in the published piece as you put it but I would say that you would need to have them in order to test them. (Interviewee 21)

Need for integration of mixed methods findings: The two previous criteria are ones that are arguably not specific to mixed methods research, in that they are potentially applicable to a broad swathe of research methods and approaches. Indeed, our interviewees typically conceived of relevance to research questions and transparency in that way.

Half of the telephone interviewees (14) specified a criterion that is far more specific to mixed methods research, namely, the need for the findings to be *integrated*. In other words, they often specified as a quality criterion that they would look for evidence that mixed methods findings were indeed mixed:

Trying to link them together rather than just doing them separately. So that the qualitative material could

throw light on the results of the quantitative work and the quantitative work could, you know, vice versa throw light on the qualitative work. (Interviewee 39)

Well how far it actually does mix them rather than juxtaposing them. I think a lot of mixed methods research is juxtaposed. (Interviewee 6)

... the capacity of one methodological approach to inform the other, and therefore research findings, and insights, that delivered more than would have been delivered by using only one method. (Interviewee 10)

We see in these comments a common refrain: mixed methods research should be judged by the degree or way in which the different components are *integrated*. There is also in some of these comments a concern that mixed methods researchers sometimes do not go far enough in this regard, that in other words, they sometimes treat the components as too separate. There is also a hint in some of these comments that integrating quantitative and qualitative components can be difficult for several reasons, such as the different pictures that are sometimes gleaned from them and the skill difference between research team members who may take responsibility for different parts of the analysis and writing up.

A rationale for mixed methods: Although the above three criteria were by far the most commonly expressed criteria for mixed methods research, several others occurred in the course of interviews. One of these is the presence of a *rationale* for selecting such an approach. This is important in view of the fact that a significant proportion of mixed methods articles in refereed journals do *not* provide a rationale for its use (Bryman, 2006c). A small number of the telephone interviewees argued that mixed methods research needs a clear justification for its use. For example, the following interviewee links the need for integration of mixed methods findings to the need for a rationale for its use:

I'd want to see some rationale as to why the mixed method was used. Some integration between the methods and some justification of why it was appropriate to that particular study. I'm a great believer in mixed methods but just think generally people just see them as add ons, they do run them separately rather than taking advantage of the fact they work very well together. (Interviewee 16)

Mixed methods research is an area that has gained in popularity in recent years both in terms of the number of articles using the approach and the amount of methodological attention it receives. However, the issue of which quality criteria should be applied to it is an area that has not received a great deal of attention (Bryman, 2006a). The research reported here suggests strongly that any criteria that are developed should include features of both quantitative and qualitative research criteria and should include the integration of the quantitative and the qualitative data as one of the criteria. Interestingly, this second element would not have been apparent if we had relied on the e-survey alone, as it mainly manifested itself in the semi-structured interviews. That in itself provides a justification for mixed methods research.

Section 4: Quality criteria in cross-national and theoretical social policy research

Cross-national research criteria

No closed questions were asked in the e-survey in relation to comparative, cross-national research but a single open question was asked about quality criteria. A large number of respondents took the opportunity to answer this question. The answers bunched around several key themes.

Several respondents felt that the *same criteria* should be employed as for research that is not cross-national:

No difference from uni-national.

In many respects the same as for quantitative as the research tends to fall into this criteria.

The international standards of validity, reliability, replicability and generalisability should be used with the addition of user/public empowerment.

A recurring theme was that of ensuring that the data that are produced and examined cross-nationally are in fact *comparable*:

Careful attention to comparability of measures between nations. Otherwise the same as all others.

Equivalence of approach and measures.

Key is the way in which the same set of concerns, research questions and methods have been applied in the different settings, and thus how far the cross-national lessons or messages apply. i.e. if a study has done very different things in very different places, but is claiming to be exploring one thing, I would have questions about the quality of the research.

A further theme was the importance of taking into account the policy and/or cultural context of the nations involved:

Awareness of context

*Awareness of potential differences in data
Comparative, and not just descriptive, analysis of findings.*

Clear knowledge of social, economic and political structures in different countries; effort to single out unique features within different states; effort only to generalise where patterns of provision (or whatever the dependent variable is) are entirely clear (which is not often).

Some respondents reflected all three of these themes (traditional criteria, comparability, context) in their replies:

whether policy, legal and other differences (ie context) allow a fair comparison to be made; whether the same methodologies and types of sample were used; whether the research took into account cultural and social differences.

A further issue that was mentioned by a small number of respondents relates to the issue of cultural context but with a concern about whether the research instruments reflect an *ethnocentric bias*:

Awareness of ethnocentricity of researcher. Clear indication of limitations of research/data/data collection etc. and indication how language barriers have been approached.

Clear indication of what is compared – nations, culture, the social, the local etc.

The chief messages to emerge from the responses concerning cross-national research are to do with the need for methods and data to be genuinely comparable, for there to be a sensitivity to the cultural and policy contexts, and ensuring that there is no ethnocentric bias in the research instruments.

Theoretical (scholarly) social policy research

The e-survey questionnaire was perceived by some respondents as emphasising empirical research. Indeed, one e-survey respondent commented in relation to the opportunity to specify other research approaches that may lead to high quality social policy research:

The questionnaire is based in the assumption that research is empirical. The term research is also used for scholarship.

However, contrary to this remark, there was a question on theoretical research or scholarship. The following open question was asked:

Regarding theoretical social policy research/scholarship, what criteria would you use to judge its quality?

The answers frequently emphasised the importance of sound rigorous thinking but this was often coupled with an implicit concern that the theoretical reasoning was not too abstract, which meant that the theoretical work should make, or be capable of making, a *contribution to policy*:

Accumulation of knowledge

Accessibility of analysis

Relationship to other research/scholarship

Relevance for policy and practice, even if indirect.

how it engages with existing body of literature; links that are made; structure and accessibility of writing; extent to which any claims or recommendations that are made are grounded in what has been written earlier in the piece; author's established reputation and expertise?; extent to which it is founded on any empirical evidence.

Some e-survey respondents suggested that it was important for theoretical social policy research to *add to understanding*, implying that sometimes such work reproduced existing ideas with no added value:

That it adds to my understanding. That it challenges my views or confirms them.

in the simplest terms – do I need to take into account ideas expressed in the article when I next address a related topic?

Development or elaboration of concepts or refinement of theory which improves understanding. Work which “reframes” an issue in order to allow subsequent new research to take place.

Thus, theoretical social policy research is viewed as an approach that must straddle rigorous thinking and the development of new insights with the need for relevance.

Finally, as we show in Section 6, the concepts of significance, originality and rigour also apply to the consideration of quality in theoretical research. So, for example, scholarly social policy research that lays a claim to be rigorous would also need to be located within appropriate theoretical and empirical frameworks and would require a transparent procedure for systematically searching and interpreting the existing literature and knowledge base. Moreover, as we show in Section 7, the issue of user involvement is also one that applies to theoretical social policy research, in addition to applied studies where it is generally seen to have more practical relevance. Theoretical research need not, by definition, be isolated from the involvement of users, particularly where those users are policy makers, practitioners, researchers and other groups of stakeholders.

Section 5: Research methods and designs as indicators of quality

A hierarchy of research methods?

One possible criterion by which a study's quality might be evaluated is in terms of the research design or research method that is employed. It has sometimes been suggested that there is a hierarchy of research designs and research methods with the randomised controlled design at the top (Becker and Bryman, 2004, p. 57). This would mean that simply knowing the type of research on which a set of findings derives would itself *ceteris paribus* provide a signal of quality. Around a quarter of e-survey respondents (26%) subscribed to the view that there is such a hierarchy, but over half (57%) did not. Moreover, nearly three-quarters of respondents (73%) thought that there should *not* be such a hierarchy. Thus, the notion that there is and should be a hierarchy of research designs and research methods is something of a minority view among our respondents. One respondent was particularly scathing about the notion of a hierarchy in his/her reply to an open question:

There is a tendency to identify research hierarchies, with RCTs and systematic reviews at the top and expert opinion (including the views of users and carers) at the bottom. I fundamentally disagree with this approach – a method is only “good” if it helps to answer the question, and user knowledge can be just as valid a form of knowledge.

However, when asked about research designs and research methods that are particularly likely to produce findings of high quality, quite a high degree of variation was found between the different designs and methods asked about. What is especially striking about the percentages in Table 5.1 is that they depart quite substantially from the traditional hierarchy that is sometimes envisioned (Becker and Bryman, 2004, p. 57). Several features of this Table are noteworthy.

Table 5.1: Research methods and research designs associated with high quality findings

(n=251)	Number	Percent
In-depth interviews	172	68.5
Longitudinal study	169	67.3
Case study	148	59.0
Survey	132	52.6
Cross-national comparative research	125	49.8
Statistical analysis	124	49.4
Systematic review/Meta-analysis	121	48.2
Grounded theory	108	43.0
Focus groups	105	41.8
Experimental design (eg randomised controlled trial)	81	32.3
Quasi-experiment	60	23.9
Other	30	12.0

First, the traditionally high status approaches – experimental and quasi-experimental designs – are not viewed (when compared to other research designs and research methods) as particularly likely to produce findings of high quality (see also Box 5.1). This finding stands in stark contrast to the view within medical sciences (see Jadad, 1998). One e-survey respondent felt it was crucial that the research approach “appropriately addresses issues of complex causation. N.B. randomized controlled trials don't!!”.

Second, systematic review, which at the time of writing is the focus of a great deal of attention, is only viewed as providing high quality findings by one half of the sample.

Third, in-depth interviews and case studies, which typically come out low on lists of approaches likely to generate high quality findings (Becker and Bryman, 2004, p. 57), are especially highly regarded by respondents.

Fourth, longitudinal research is highly regarded by this sample, while surveys and statistical analysis are viewed as providing high quality findings by around half of respondents.

These findings suggest that a hierarchy does exist but it is one that in many respects inverts the hierarchy that is commonly supposed to operate – namely, with the experiment at the top and the qualitative case study at the bottom.

Respondents were also given the opportunity to signal whether there were any research designs or research methods that they regard as particularly likely to produce high quality research that were not in the list. The answers were very varied, but one recurring theme for several respondents was the importance of taking the research question into account rather than suggesting that some ways of collecting or analysing data are likely to lead to high quality research:

These techniques cannot in themselves produce quality research; they are a means to an end and can only be evaluated with regard to the end. What matters is how well the research design is fit for the purpose/objectives.

All of these CAN of course produce high quality work: it depends on the research questions.

Several respondents also took the opportunity to suggest through this question that mixed methods research was particularly likely to generate high quality research:

Mixed methods are the most likely to produce high quality findings. A mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Mixed methods – triangulation of findings from one method.

A variety of other research methods and approaches were mentioned. Among the most commonly mentioned were: life history/biographical approach; ethnography/participant observation; and action research. The accent placed on mixed methods research in the replies to the open component of the question is striking and suggests that for some respondents it is almost becoming an indicator of quality in itself.

Box 5.1: Randomised controlled trials

In the rank order of 35 quality criteria (see Table 2.1) our e-respondents placed 'a randomised controlled design' in 32nd place. The use of a randomised controlled trial (RCT) design was considered important (either 'very' or 'fairly') by only 27.6% (only 12.8% considered it 'very important'). This is interesting since the RCT is regarded as a 'gold standard' in many areas of research, particularly medical research (for a critique of RCTs in clinical research see Kaptchuk, 2001; Simon, 2001). These e-survey results appear to question the perceived value of an RCT design in social policy research although *The York Trials Methods Group* and *ESRC Trials in Public Policy Initiative* are currently promoting and developing knowledge of the RCT in the Social Sciences. The response may reflect the low level of use of such designs in social policy research and the lack of practical experience of such methods among researchers in addition to an uncertainty about their applicability in this context.

Section 6: 'Originality', 'Significance' and 'Rigour' as criteria of quality

Issues of originality, significance and rigour, which play such an important part in the assessment of the quality of published work for the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE, 2006), were explored through the discussion groups and telephone interviews. This section presents the main findings from this part of the study.

Understanding perceptions of 'originality'

Participants' perceptions of originality revolved around viewing existing issues, ideas or data in a new or different way, more so than generating new data or novel methods. Originality involved, also, the development of new theoretical and practical insights and concepts, for example:

Primarily I would argue that originality is defined theoretically, that essentially discovering new facts is not particularly difficult when there is a mode of research which involves nothing more than descriptive recording of what is taking place. But this is not what we would ordinarily think of as being original research because it is not in any sense developing new insights, it is in fact simply changing the data. And if we're going to say that new facts create data then every time we collect a new bunch of indicators from the World Bank we could say that's original. That's not what we mean by originality, it's the character of the insight in research which defines its originality and the character of insight depends on the theoretical overview that's taken so that primarily what we're getting, if we're doing SP research, social policy research is not that it is in itself in a new area but rather that it has something which is distinctive, different to say and so that in terms of the best originality or that the originality of the highest interest and highest standard it would be that which generates new theoretical insights. (Interviewee 4)

Originality was perceived to occur within the context of existing knowledge or theory and to build on that in a unique way, possibly by making connections and creating understandings that were new. Such a concept of originality, therefore, relies on scholarship and an extensive knowledge of the discipline. Originality does not arise simply from asking a new question or using a new method; it arises from the outcomes of the research set in the context of existing knowledge and although it draws from a pool of empirical work such scholarship can exist without it.

The researcher also has a responsibility to explain why any body of work is original, and this can be through positioning it within the context of existing knowledge or theory, again emphasising the reliance of originality on scholarship:

... one of the things that the researcher ought to do is explain how it is original. In other words situating what you have done in the context of existing

knowledge and/or research is critically important in its originality. And that's to some extent what makes it original and that may help to explain why or the extent to which it's original. But actually ironically, to say what everybody else has done is critically important to it being original. (Discussion group participant)

Although viewing originality in terms of scholarship and theoretical insight, the participants also acknowledged that many of the underlying issues and concepts in social policy have been subject to extensive study and debate and this limited the capacity for the expression of 'true' originality i.e. the development of major novel concepts or theories:

I think it's actually quite hard to find originality in social policy research but I think mainly it's more about approaching questions in different ways to the ways that they've been approached in the past. So I think that that's what the originality means for me, rather than coming up with new and un-asked questions. (Interviewee 26)

And also in social policy while I recognise that there are new social problems that emerge actually the most, perhaps some of the most substantive ones are old problems, i.e. poverty remains you know the key problem that social policy I think in some shape or form, and social injustice are the two key issues that remain at the core for me of social policy. And while you may be able to sort of get a new angle on those two sort of social situations you're unlikely to be able to actually develop something that is truly original. (Interviewee 3)

The pressures placed on researchers, through links with commissioning bodies or requirements to produce work in relation to specific policy agendas, could also influence their scope and abilities to be original.

Is originality important in social policy research?

Although scholarship and the theoretical context of research were seen as particularly important by some participants and this formed part of the overall concept of originality, the idea of originality through 'novelty' of approaches or concepts appeared to be less important to others, perhaps because of the difficulties associated with producing work that contained such elements.

When asked to rank 'originality', 'significance' and 'rigour', 12 of the telephone interviewees placed significance ahead of originality, but only five placed originality before significance. Only two interviewees ranked originality as the most important factor overall. Originality *per se* appeared not to be particularly important for some of the participants of this study who questioned whether much of their research was indeed truly 'original':

I think significance, rigour and originality. I'm not really sure at the end of the day whether much of what we do is ever that original you know but if that's the case significance and rigour to me are far

more important. (Interviewee 16)

So actually at the end of the day probably rigour would be the founding bedrock and then I think then I would go, so it would be 1. rigour, 2. significance and 3. originality because actually you know I, there may be bloody obvious questions that haven't been research[ed], now one could argue that's original but a lot of people wouldn't say it's original but there's still plenty of scope for highly significant research and rigorous research that is answering questions that are bloody obvious but in order to take the policy forward one needs that research. (Interviewee 3)

Originality and significance

Some of the interviewees found it difficult to rank the relative importance of 'originality', 'significance' and 'rigour', either because they considered them of equal importance or because they perceived that these dimensions were interrelated or dependent on one another. One member of a discussion group suggested that the term 'new' could be used in place of both 'originality' and 'significance':

But one could substitute the word 'new' for both originality and significant in certain sorts of contexts. It's original because nobody has ever looked at this issue before, it's significant because nobody has ever looked at this issue before. (Discussion group participant)

For a piece of research to be capable of having a 'significant' effect on policy or practice it needs to be new or untried (i.e. 'original') otherwise it will already have been used or considered. One interviewee suggested that significance and originality were linked through theoretical knowledge:

I struggled with this [originality] a bit, but I think, because to be perfectly honest I couldn't separate it from significance I think, I think for me it's about not being just empirical research and I think there's too much simply empirical research done so it's got to be working with theoretical knowledge as well and I think that's where originality comes from. (Interviewee 12)

Defining 'significance'

Nine of the interviewees ranked 'significance' as the most important indicator of quality from the three criteria (nine ranked 'rigour' as the most important and two 'originality'). The general perception of significance in relation to social policy research had two main dimensions – the ability of research to influence the debate or argument and so to cause a shift in the understanding of both researchers and policy makers and to influence policy itself and therefore the life of the real person in the real world. These two dimensions could be linked i.e. a shift in thinking could lead directly to a change in policy, although this need not necessarily be the case for work to be 'significant'.

For research to have 'significance' it needed to address social policy issues that were 'important', although the

concept of 'importance' within the social policy arena was also a contested one, one that research had the power to clarify:

it must be addressing issues that are important in terms of the real world of social policy making, social policy implementation, and the experience of those who are the subjects of social policy. So it must be addressing important issues. Now then, how importance is defined in that way is also at issue, and importance is not necessarily what government departments and other policy makers say are important issues. And indeed, I would think that one criterion should be that social policy research is actually capable of challenging the received wisdom about what are important issues. (Interviewee 10)

As an applied discipline, the significance of social policy research rests to some degree on its ability to change the way that policy is formed or delivered and its potential for influencing the actions or perceptions of policy makers. For some, 'significance' was the ability of research to move policy debate forwards, creating a change in understanding that connected with the 'real' world. Although significant research was deemed to advance understanding and knowledge of policy makers and also of the academic community, a number of interviewees suggested that the effect on the academic side was secondary to that on policy itself, for example:

Well I suppose there are two things, there's one thing which is about taking the debate further on and looking at things from a different perspective, the other would be, for me, it's about influencing the policy process and policy formation. In other words I'm somewhat less concerned about the academic community per se, the social policy academic community as I am about the policy community, ie those actors involved in actual policy implementation and formation. (Interviewee 3)

Additionally, issues concerning the influence of time on the significance of a piece of research caused concern for two interviewees who suggested that significant research does not necessarily have an immediate effect (on policy or understanding). Hence, there are intrinsic difficulties in judging the significance of a piece of research too soon after its publication when it will not have had time to exert any demonstrable impact:

So again I can think of examples about things that are very challenging to theoretical assumptions, it could be significant because of its policy impact or potential impact. But that could also be short or long term. Certainly I've worked actually in practice in the policy field and you know it can take ten years you know for an idea actually to have a result in policy. (Interviewee 21)

I mean that's incidentally one of the problems we have in assessing the RAE, we'll come onto that later, it's the test of time and it's the nature of the RAE that it doesn't let the test of time apply. (Interviewee 4)

Rigour

Nine of those interviewed by telephone ranked 'rigour' as the most important of the three criteria of quality. However, comments made during the interviews suggest a diversity of views regarding rigour in research. For some it was the absolute foundation to the research itself, a pre-requisite before other dimensions, such as originality or significance could even be considered:

In other words if something is not rigorous there's no point really in considering its originality or significance. So unless it passes some sort of threshold of rigour which I think I mean the easiest way to interpret that I would think is some idea of looking at the rules, you know there are some sort of informal, or formal rules about scientific enquiry and any piece of research that doesn't pass those rules, doesn't pass those tests in terms of you know however we want to interpret these terms, you know validity and reliability is probably not rigorous is probably the place to say it. (Interviewee 7)

Rigour was seen by some other participants primarily in terms of methodology – using appropriate methods and techniques to the standards recognised by the research community and conforming to the norms and guidelines set by that community and known to researchers:

Rigour in social policy research is an approach to the process of research, including data collection that adheres to a recognised methodological approach using any particular guidelines set by the Social Policy Association or ESRC. And so it's following on in a traditional best practice really. So that would be in terms of doing a kind of research report. But I think also rigour in terms of presenting those findings is about, and in writing reports, is about transparency. So rigour also has to be the rigour or the method that's been used and the approach that's been taken has to be made completely transparent. (Interviewee 5)

Transparency was a component of rigour for some interviewees, since it allowed the users of the research and the research community as a whole to judge the quality of the work and the appropriateness of the methods and also to replicate it should they wish:

Well I think this is, you know for me it's about the way research is conducted and I think most of the rigour comes from methodology. So I think for things to be rigorous you have to be pretty transparent how it's been conducted. That has got to involve some sense of being able to replicate it. Even if it's not, even if you can't actually personally replicate it at least have the information available that enables you to be able to. (Interviewee 2)

Rigour also entailed locating the research within the wider social and political context and within the existing literature base; not just as obeying the methodological rules and conventions, but having a critical insight and being aware of the implications of the work to policy and knowledge in the area:

I think, I mean I think it's exceptionally important to actually have defined methodologies, methodologies

that are both transparent but methodologies that are also reflective and by reflective I'm not really concerned about individual reflection but actually a sense that the research or the researcher is well aware their research is taking place within a certain political, a certain social, a certain economic context and exists within time. So to me that is rigour, it's trying to do good research that can be justified and follows very clear methodology but also is aware of the wider context in which it is reported, a sort of critical insight. (Interviewee 16)

Ethical standards also formed a part of the concept of rigour for some participants:

there is scientific rigour which has to do with the methodological techniques that are used and applied and there is also ethical rigour in terms of the values that guide your research. (Interviewee 35)

Within the context of theoretical/scholarly social policy research, indicators of rigour would need to move beyond the tendency to associate it with following methodological precepts with regards to the collection and analysis of data and following recognised ethical codes. So, for example, rigour in this context would include locating the study within the existing theoretical, empirical and knowledge frameworks, and ensuring that there are transparent and systematic procedures for locating and interpreting the relevant literature.

Limitations and importance of rigour

Not all of the participants viewed rigour as the necessary prerequisite for high quality social policy research. Indeed, for some rigour was not important if the work was influential on policy or sufficiently original:

And rigour is the least important for the reasons that [Name] said which is that we're actually, you know we're doing things for a particular reason and although rigour is desirable it is not always what's essential and it's a point that's being frequently made about social policy that scandal has far more impact than research. But if we're actually concerned here about what is going to move the field forward it's not necessarily the rigour of the piece that's going to do it. (Interviewee 4)

Rigour by itself did not necessarily lead to work that was good, either original or significant:

I think sometimes you can do that in a very uninspired way and kind of do it in a sort of almost painting by numbers approach. If you can do something that is rigorous, that it ticks all the appropriate boxes but I do think originality is important as well. (Interviewee 39)

Also, some work that was clearly not rigorous could be useful and influential or provide important insights into situations that are unreachable by rigorous methodology, for example:

And it was a wonderful study but some people would say it wasn't rigorous but for me it was very insightful. And I mean I think that sometimes you have to do the best you can. I mean if you're doing a study of,

suppose you're doing a study of, you know, teenage mothers or, you know, children who are looked after by Social Services you may not get many people at all but, you know, those are difficult fields to do research in, if you just have twenty or thirty interviews it's quite an achievement. (Interviewee 31)

Indeed, one interviewee admitted being 'lax on rigour' and his view suggests that transparency could be seen as an alternative to rigour by some researchers:

Well I suppose I'm quite lax on rigour [laughs]. I think, I think as long as it's people are honest about what they've done and that you know it's clear that the research is informed by what is known about how to do research and that you know the limitations are recognised I think that's fine. (Interviewee 26)

Perceptions of rigour showed the greatest diversity of opinions among those interviewed. This is in contrast to the views of originality and significance where there appeared to be a general consensus, although each interviewee picked out dimensions and facets which were of particular importance to them. Rigour was treated in different ways by different researchers, from being regarded as a fundamental and obligatory component of research by some to being dismissed as of secondary importance by others.

Section 7: User involvement in social policy research

The six discussion groups and individual interviews provided in-depth material on participants' perceptions and understanding of the issue of 'user involvement' in social policy research. There was considerable variation in responses about the meaning, nature and value of user involvement, who 'users' are, what users bring to the research process, whether their involvement improves the quality of social policy research, and what stages of the research process should users be involved in.

The diversity of 'users' of social policy research

Many of our participants recognised that there were many real and potential 'users' of social policy research and that the word 'user' would have different meanings to different people. There is a broad recognition that there are diverse 'user constituencies', including 'policy users of research' (for instance, policy makers, government agencies, practitioners) who make use of the findings of research for informing or developing policy or practice; 'academic users' who make use of research methods and findings for knowledge transfer; 'research funders' (including ESRC, government, JRF who are commissioning research); and 'service users' who are on the receiving end of social policies and interventions. Other constituencies would include public users of research (who may be interested in particular areas of

research) and the media (who may want to use research to illustrate or illuminate their own story or news item). Sometimes, of course, individuals or organisations will fall into a number of these user constituencies at any one time. Moreover, as many of our participants acknowledged, all these different user constituencies will have their own values, agendas and purposes when being involved in research. Some participants talked explicitly about 'service user' involvement:

it could include people who are actual or potential users of services provided through institutions of the welfare state. It could also include community members who are affected by social policy, who may not accurately be described as service users. (Interviewee 10)

There was concern expressed by a few participants about the involvement of 'policy users', particularly government funders of research who may come to the research process with specific agendas:

I think we have a problem here, or we potentially have a problem here to do with the power of government funding... I also think it's important for the rigour and independence of university based and academic research that the government bodies should not to be too involved in the research process itself. (Interviewee 29)

A few participants suggested that the word 'stakeholder' might be a more appropriate term to use than 'user' while drawing attention to the fact that there are many stakeholders/users of social policy research that may need to be involved in the research process.

The advocates of user involvement

The most committed advocates for the principle or ideology of user involvement in social policy research appear to be those who are supporters of the involvement of *service users* in research. The service user movement has had a strong influence on the development of social policy (and social work) and practice in the UK (Glasby and Beresford, 2006), and this is now informing developments in social policy research, methodology, design, process, analysis, control and dissemination:

I think the whole user movement has transformed a lot of social policy research and transformed it almost wholly for the good. So I view that very positively. (Interviewee 29)

I think it's the single most important thing that's happened in research in my lifetime quite honestly. I think the power balance has begun to shift, but nowhere near enough yet. (Discussion group participant)

One interviewee commented that the involvement of service users is needed in research because social policy researchers themselves have become too distant from the real world and user involvement enables researchers to reconnect:

I think a lot of social policy research becomes too disconnected from users so I think it isn't necessarily a

positive sign that more users are being involved, I think it's just an acknowledgement that your average social policy academic has just become so far removed from being the users of welfare services that they now need this kind of direct contact and they should have been having it before. But I think for me it's a signal that they've just become so far more removed from the experience they need to kind of find ways to reconnect with it. (Interviewee 2)

The committed – but with strings attached

Other participants supported user involvement but also argued that the level and nature of involvement would vary in practice according to the type of research (for example, whether it was applied or theoretical), or the kind of 'topic' or research questions that are being asked, or who the research was being conducted for. Thus, there was a view that user involvement may be more appropriate and necessary where the research was policy and practice oriented or where it is being conducted for policy purposes, and less relevant where the research is theoretical (or 'scholarly' as it is sometimes referred to):

if what I'm doing is theoretical scholarship then there are arguments to say well that could be less important or less relevant [to have user involvement] within the particular context than it would be if what I'm trying to do is to do some practically oriented work, take it to the other extreme, an evaluation of an agency where without user involvement the exercise becomes worthless. (Interviewee 4)

While there is widespread acknowledgement that policy-oriented or applied research will be appropriate for service user involvement, the belief that other types of research, particularly theoretical or scholarly work, are less relevant for user involvement does raise an important issue. All social policy research has 'users' or stakeholders who will have an interest in the research, the methodology, process, findings or knowledge transfer. With theoretical or conceptual research there will be users of this work (other academics, researchers, funding bodies), even when the relevance to the day to day experiences of service users may be more distant. Consequently, the issue of 'user involvement' is one that applies to theoretical and scholarly research much as it does to applied and policy studies, although who the users are may vary between different types of enquiry.

What user involvement brings to the research process

Participants' comments suggest that there are eight perceived advantages for social policy research when users are involved. Again, of course, different types of user (policy user, service user etc) will bring different experiences and value to the research process and some of the items below are influenced more by particular types of user. Items at the top of the list were mentioned more often by our telephone interviewees than those at the bottom. User involvement helps:

- social policy research to be grounded in the everyday experiences of service users
- to ensure social policy research is relevant
- in the formulation and design of the research
- to provide scrutiny of ethics and process
- the researcher to access subjects/participants
- the dissemination and implementation of findings
- to make the research accessible and understandable
- to improve the quality of social policy research

Some participants thought that users should be involved in all stages of the research process, from conceiving the research ideas through to the dissemination of findings. Some of these participants also emphasised again that this involvement needed to be genuine and meaningful. Other interviewees thought that users could play a more useful and important role in the earlier stages of research, particularly when the research is being conceived and designed:

I think probably early on when you're, you know, to get some input into your research design because they may well, they could improve the quality of the work in the sense that they may well highlight issues that you just hadn't thought of addressing.
(Interviewee 39)

A few participants thought that users should be involved early on in the research process, but that users were not researchers nor should we expect them to be.

The hostile, ambivalent and agnostic

Some participants were more critical about the value of user involvement in principle and in practice. Some expressed strong (sometimes hostile) views, seeing user involvement as 'trendy' or as a 'bandwagon' with no proven worth, while others were less sure of the advantages that it brought or its value and consequently expressed ambivalent or unconvinced views. Hostile or ambivalent views towards user involvement can be categorised under seven main concerns:

- User involvement is a fad, driven by ideology rather than proven in value
- User involvement can be tokenistic in practice, rather than a genuine exercise in involving other stakeholders
- Users do not have the skills or knowledge to

be involved

- Users bring to the research their own agendas
- User involvement requires a 'representative' sample of users
- User involvement is costly and time consuming
- The value of user involvement is not proven – it will not necessarily improve the quality of social policy research

The majority of these participants thought that user involvement would not necessarily improve the quality of research (and thus, that user involvement should not be seen as a proxy indicator of quality). The belief here was that quality is determined by a number of criteria other than the extent or nature of user involvement *per se*.

The following quotations illustrate some of the difficulties that participants observed with regards to undertaking research that involved users. Again, these demonstrate the different types of user that can be involved in social policy research:

there's drawbacks... I think in terms of having users involved at the beginning of a project and having been at advisory group meetings in which users are there perhaps they're given a bit too much credence in setting the methods and the approach to some extent because they're kind of used as a representative of the population when they're not, they're really individuals if you see what I mean.
(Interviewee 5)

I don't think it always improves the quality of the work because sometimes users may have strong views about, and this is especially the case where one is tendering to do pieces of work for government departments or other sorts of organisations who may have very strong agendas of their own and therefore the piece of work that you end up doing may be not the best thing that you could have done in that area but what they wanted you to do.
(Interviewee 36)

There are many examples of exploitation of the people themselves in order to meet the brownie points. You reel in your person with learning disability and put them in a setting which is completely inappropriate and all feel very virtuous, but actually I think it's a misuse of people.
(Discussion group participant)

Section 8: Moving forward: A framework for discussion

The data from the e-survey, discussion groups and telephone interviews with over 250 participants suggests that while there are significant differences in attitudes and judgements about what constitutes 'quality' in social policy research, there is also considerable agreement about the importance of certain items, criteria and methods, as Tables 2.1 and 5.1 show. There are also clear views about the indicators of quality as they relate to quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, cross-national and theoretical social policy research. Our participants were also able to articulate how originality, significance and rigour could be construed as quality criteria, but differed in how they construed the relative importance of these three criteria with respect to quality. Many participants also talked about how user involvement could improve quality although others were less convinced of the potential benefits.

Orientations to quality

Factor analysis of the e-survey data suggests that it is possible to identify a number of distinct orientations or attitudes to quality issues held by social policy researchers. The analysis, conducted on the 35 questions that were concerned with quality criteria in social policy research (see Table 2.1), identified five separate orientations within the sample. These are listed in terms of our initial estimates of their relative prevalence, and are as follows:

Research process orientation: Refers to the view that quality in social policy research reflects the degree to which the researcher has followed proper procedures with respect to dealing with research participants.

Policy orientation: Refers to the view that quality in social policy research reflects the degree to which research informs and is useful for those involved in policy and the implementation and impacts of policy.

Theoretical orientation: Refers to the view that quality in social policy research reflects the degree to which research reflects theoretical commitments and makes a contribution to theory.

Service user involvement orientation: Refers to the view that quality in social policy research reflects the degree to which service users are involved in the research process.

Academic prestige orientation: Refers to the view that quality in social policy research reflects the degree to which the research is published in significant outlets.

With a small number of exceptions, correlations between these five clusterings were low, suggesting that there is good discriminant validity between them and that the clusterings are relatively independent of one another. These findings suggest that the respondents in our e-survey may each have a dominant orientation towards issues of quality (one of the five above). However, whilst these orientations appear to be

relatively discrete, there is likely to be some overlap between them. For example, the correlations are low between policy orientation and theory orientation and between policy orientation and academic prestige orientation. This suggests that researchers with an emphasis on policy tend to have a low emphasis on theoretical issues and publishing as signals of research quality.

In contrast, service user involvement orientation has a high correlation with research process orientation and policy orientation, suggesting low discriminant validity between it and these two other clusterings, though it does suggest some interesting continuities between them. These findings require further investigation, but they do suggest that how a person defines 'quality' in social policy research is not just a product or consequence of the research itself, but is to a large extent in the eye of the beholder.

What approach to assessing quality?

One inference that might be reached from reading the data presented in this report is that it should be possible to create and employ a structured approach to assessing the quality of any piece of published social policy research. Another interpretation of the findings could be to use them to sensitise the reader to aspects of quality that could be identified as important in the published work. The first we shall call the 'structured' approach, the second the 'sensitised' approach.

Although in some dimensions quality does appear to reside in the eye of the beholder, there is a general consensus of opinion regarding many aspects of quality. Within a structured approach, these aspects could be used together as criteria to score the overall 'quality' of published work. For example, a 'score' might be given for *evidence* and *transparency* in the published text that ethical protocols had been followed or that the research design was appropriate to the question(s) being investigated. The more criteria that receive a score, potentially the higher the quality of the published work. It should be possible to develop this system to give quality scores to every piece of research that is scrutinised. Safeguards could be built into the system. For example, a number of readers could score the same output and discuss any differences before reaching an accommodation on the quality of the published work using such a structured approach.

A structured approach to assessing quality in research outputs could be used by academics, researchers, students, policy makers and so on to help identify and select the highest quality studies that, for example, could be utilised in literature reviews (including systematic reviews) or for informing policy or practice.

However, there is some diversity of opinion on the substance and importance of some of the major aspects of quality, for example, on involving users in research, the importance and nature of 'true originality' and so on. The comments regarding these particular criteria submitted by participants to our study reflect strongly-held beliefs and views and there would need to be some debate (and eventual consensus) about which items

should be included in any structured approach.

The introduction of a structured approach to quality could also lead to a more mechanistic reading of social policy research, where quality would be inferred by the extent to which indicators of quality had been transparent or 'evidenced' in the written text. Moreover, over time, research and writing behaviour would be likely to change, with published research increasingly conforming to a set of mechanistic formats whereby authors spell out how their research meets expected criteria.

There are obvious strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages, to any structured approach to assessing quality. These advantages and disadvantages can also be found in any possible move to a metrics-based system for defining or rewarding quality (see McKay, 2003, 2006; HM Treasury, 2006; Sastry and Bekhradnia, 2006). This is not the place to rehearse these arguments, and while it is clear that metrics may be useful as one mechanism for recognising existing achievement and for allocating future research income, they are not a method or process for judging the quality of published research texts. That task will still need to be done by people involved in the old art of reading. Students need to make judgements about the quality of the material they read rather than accepting it all as of equal quality. Academics, researchers and other 'users' of research (broadly defined) need to make judgments about quality based on indicators or criteria that have some currency and acceptance within the community of scholars and researchers who have written those publications and who make use of them, for whatever purpose (thus, does the art of reading need to include a science of reading?). The data presented in this report provide evidence of the indicators or criteria of quality that have widespread acceptance within the social policy community. Whether the reading of these texts draws on a structured approach is a matter for the reader. However, where there are literally hundreds (or thousands) of texts to be read (as in the RAE) then there may be some additional advantages in a process that includes a defined structure, especially to enable transparency in what is being regarded or defined as *quality*.

An alternative method for reading publications and assessing their quality – the sensitised approach – is to draw on the kinds of criteria identified in this report, particularly those where there is a degree of consensus, as a 'sensitising mechanism' to *inform* judgements of quality. Our notion of a sensitised approach draws on Blumer's 'sensitizing concepts' which provide "a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances" (Blumer, 1954, p. 7). Thus, a sensitised approach provides a personal framework for what to look for when assessing quality in published research. It is a process of informed intuition for inferring quality.

This is a much less transparent approach and probably more challengeable than a structured one. There is a likelihood of greater variability in judgements of quality between different reviewers and assessors. However,

given the contested nature of some of the criteria explored in this report, it is likely that a sensitised approach will be seen as more acceptable and appropriate than a structured one to many researchers.

New challenges and opportunities

There is some virtue, we believe, in social policy journals pre-empting these potential transformations in how we read research and how we determine quality by adopting some of the publishing conventions of medical journals (for example, the *British Medical Journal* and the *American Journal of Public Health*), where research-based articles also contain some standardised information. This includes, for example, information on the role of the authors/contributors (which are different things), who is the guarantor for the research, a statement on any competing interests, funding sources, details of ethics approval (where required), how the research develops on what is already known and how it contributes to new knowledge. Thus, these matters can be dealt with routinely (rather than dominating the published work) whilst providing the reader with some key information from which to make judgements about quality, rigour, significance, and so on.

As the learned body representing the discipline of Social Policy [and Administration], the Social Policy Association has an important role to play in these debates and future developments. Its two peer reviewed journals (*Journal of Social Policy*, *Social Policy and Society*, both with Cambridge University Press) could take a lead in thinking through the value or otherwise of adopting and requiring standardised information to be printed alongside research-based articles. The SPA also needs to develop and publicise its own ethical codes and procedures, drawing no doubt on the ESRC's Ethical Framework and those of the Social Research Association. This process has now begun, and the SPA established in May 2006 a working group to move forward the development of ethical codes and principles. There will be other areas too in which the SPA can take a lead in developing recognition of what counts as quality in social policy research and in celebrating and disseminating the excellent research that exists within the discipline.

As this report has shown, while quality is literally in the eye of the beholder (in that there are particular and sometimes dominant orientations towards quality issues held by our participants), quality can be defined by reference to a range of criteria and indicators, many of which have widespread currency amongst the social policy community. While there is debate about certain indicators, there is much common ground and there is at least recognition of the difficult and disputed territory – a critical factor required for resolution or progress. We hope that the research presented in this report will help to fuel discussion and debate about what counts as quality in social policy research, and help the social policy community to better recognise quality when it sees it.

References

- Becker, S. and Bryman, A. (eds) (2004) *Understanding Research for Social Policy and Practice: Themes, Methods and Approaches*, Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Blumer, H. (1954) 'What is wrong with social theory?', *American Sociological Review*, 19, 1, pp. 3-10.
- Bryman, A. (2006a) 'Paradigm peace and the implications for quality', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 9, 2, pp. 111-126.
- Bryman, A. (2006b), 'The research question in social research: what is its role?', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 9 (in press).
- Bryman, A. (2006c), 'Integrating quantitative and qualitative research: how is it done?', *Qualitative Research*, 6, 1, pp. 97-113.
- Furlong, J. and Oancea, A. (2005) *Assessing Quality in Applied and Practice-based Educational Research: A Framework for Discussion*, Oxford: Oxford University Department of Educational Studies.
- Gambrill, E. (2002) "'I am not a rubber stamp": my experiences as a non-UK RAE advisor', *Journal of Social Work*, 2, 2, pp.169-185.
- Gambrill, E. (2003) 'Reply to Susanne MacGregor's response, "We did not simply mimic received opinion"', *Journal of Social Work*, 3, 2, pp. 253-256.
- Glasby, J. and Beresford, P. (2006) 'Who knows best? Evidence-based practice and the service user contribution', *Critical Social Policy*, 26, 1, pp. 268-284.
- HM Treasury (2006) *Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004-2014: Next Steps*, London: HM Treasury, DTI, DfES, DoH.
- Jadad, A.R. (1998) *Randomised Controlled Trials*, London: BMJ Books.
- Kaptchuk, T.J. (2001) 'The double-blind, randomised, placebo-controlled trial: Gold standard or golden calf?', *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*, 54, pp. 541-549.
- Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Beverley Hills, CA.: Sage.
- MacGregor, S. (2003) "'We did not simply mimic received opinion": response from the chair of the social policy and administration and social work RAE panel to Eileen Gambrill's "I am not a rubber stamp"', *Journal of Social Work*, 3, 1, pp.119-124.
- McKay, S. (2003) 'Quantifying quality: can quantitative data ("metrics") explain the 2001 RAE ratings for social policy and administration?', *Social Policy and Administration*, 37, 5, pp. 444-467.
- McKay, S. (2006) 'The consistency of RAE outcomes in the social sciences: a quantitative comparison of social policy and cognate subjects in the RAE 2001', *Social Policy and Society*, 5,1, pp. 1-13.
- Mills, D., Jepson, A. and Coxon, T. (2006) *Demographic Review of the UK Social Sciences*, Swindon: Economic and Social Research Council.
- RAE (2006) *Panel Criteria and Working Methods: Panel J*, Bristol: HEFCE, SFC, HEFCW, DEL.
- Sastry, T. and Bekhradnia, B. (2006) *Using Metrics to Allocate Research Funds*, Bristol: Higher Education Policy Institute.
- Simon, S.D. (2001) 'Is the randomised clinical trial the gold standard of research?', *Journal of Andrology*, 22, 6, pp. 938-943.
- Spencer, L., Ritchie, J., Lewis, J. and Dillon, L. (2003) *Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: A Framework for Assessing Research Evidence*, London: Government Chief Social Researcher's Office.
- Taylor-Gooby, P. (2005) 'How good is social policy research?', *Policy World*, Summer 2005, p. 24.

