

A Good Name: Pseudonyms in Research

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Abstract

People's names and the places, animals, and items named by people are deeply personal and reflective of their culture and identity, yet in qualitative research, the standard is to use pseudonyms. This practice is thought to protect research participants, but when are “real” names most respectful and appropriate? How might researchers include research participants in these considerations? The purpose of this methodological article is to increase transparency and collaboration around the participant naming process, bringing much-needed attention to issues of power in the naming process in research. The authors review the literature and detail their reflexive engagement with pseudonyms; they advance issues for consideration and provide recommendations in the areas of power in participant naming, culturally responsive research, and pseudonym use with trans people and incarcerated people. Throughout the article, the authors interrupt the text with reflexive narrative interludes to share personal experiences with naming.

Keywords

names, power, prisoners, pseudonyms, transgender

A good name is rather to be chosen than riches.

—King Solomon

Tattoos, graffiti tags, monograms, welcome-to-our-home signs, vanity license plates, naming a car or bike or skateboard, pets that share family names with their owners, and phrases such as “Everyone will see my name in lights” all proclaim the importance of names. A pseudonym, fake name, moniker, AKA, handle, anonym, assumed name, nickname, nom de guerre, non de plume, pen name, and stage name are all used for specific reasons and situations. In literature, authors may adopt a nom de plume or a pen name. Famous examples include women authors (e.g., Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters) who used pen names at a time when publishing as a woman was unacceptable and Pablo Neruda, whose father disapproved of writing (Bayless, 2016). Actors and pop music singers commonly change their names to ones that are perceived as more appealing to wide audiences: P!NK's given name is Alecia; Bruno Mars's given name is Peter, but his father called him Bruno and “Mars” captures his intent to go far; Alicia Keys's surname was changed from Cook after a dream her manager had that the name Keys would reflect a love of music (Morley, 2021). Pseudonyms may be used so famous people may move around more easily, to interact on the internet with anonymity, so repercussions of actions do not occur at work or hide illegal activity. In this article, however, we specifically consider researchers' use of pseudonyms in the social sciences.

Theoretical Framework

Storytelling, an integral part of critical research (Ilmonen, 2020), also allows researchers to consider and tell their stories of identity reflexively. Therefore, we have placed some of our stories about names, naming, and pseudonyms throughout this article as narrative interludes (Lather, 2007) for readers to encounter. It is our hope that readers will then consider their stories around names and the naming process.

Maria—As a white, het, cisgender woman from a minoritized religious group, Mennonites, I hold critical white feminist beliefs (McFadden, 2011) that underlie my attempt always to be becoming as a culturally responsive and peace-building researcher. Toward this end, I work to increase transparency in research methods (e.g., Lahman, 2018).

Rowen—My connection to names and autonomy are salient to how I show up as a researcher, particularly in connection to pseudonyms for research participants. Chosen names, chosen family, distanced biological family, and others sometimes traumatizing, always transformative experiences. Naming is an act that can

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be imposed upon others but can also be used by someone to claim, reclaim, and empower themselves (Kolankiewicz, 2022). Naming can be both an act of validation and an act of disrespect. Naming can be violence, or it can be a tool for safety (Strunk et al., 2016, p. 8) and liberation (Lahman et al., 2020, pp. 9–10). These are the framing contexts for my approach to pseudonyms for research participants. I am a South Asian (Indian) American (person of color) who is also transgender, nonbinary, and a person with visible and invisible mental and physical disabilities. I hold privileges as a citizen, an English-speaker, someone with advanced education, and someone with a home. In all my work, I build upon the brilliance of scholars who have revolutionized research through intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Nichols & Stahl, 2019), critical-cultural lenses through a range of identity frameworks (Delgado & Stefancic, 1998; Iqtadar et al., 2020; Lawrence & Hylton, 2022; Loutzenheiser, 2020; Mills & Unsworth, 2018; Pasque et al., 2022; Watharow & Wayland, 2022), and lenses of healing justice (Hale et al., 2018).

Eric—As a cisgender, white, queer male, I at once hold many privileges and minoritizations. I see the world through lenses that have been clouded by deep wounds (e.g., bullying, religious trauma, and suicidal ideation; e.g., Teman, 2016). My queer self is always front and center: An invisible identity, some say; nonsense, I retort. People have always seen me as queer, and that is how I see myself. Thusly, queer theory not only drives how I view the world and my place in it but also profoundly informs my research approach (e.g., Bravmann, 1996; Namaste, 1996). Alas, it has proven impossible—fruitless even—to engage in research but through a queer lens (e.g., Teman & Saldaña, 2019). Perhaps this is a gift, but it has simultaneously been a curse: To see the world only through a queer lens has been tiring, trying, and heartbreaking—but also overwhelmingly rewarding. To sit down with participants and hear their experiences as LGBTQQAI+ folx has been nothing less than life-changing and has spurred my advocacy interest in ways I had never imagined (e.g., leaving the faculty to pursue a degree in clinical mental health counseling to further advocate for the LGBTQQAI+ population). And it is soul-crushing work.

Background of Pseudonyms in Research

Breare (2018) says,

Using pseudonyms is the accepted and expected ethical practice for maintaining participants' privacy in qualitative research. However, it may not always be ethical, for example in

participatory action research (PAR), where academics aim to recognise co-researcher participants' contributions. (p. 722)

In Breare's research on the health care of children who have AIDS in a rural Swazi community, participants initiated a conversation about the possibility of using their own names in the research. Since Breare sought to conduct participatory research, she was more than willing to have this conversation and indeed had seven opportunities for participants to discuss the naming process over the course of the research. This account is deeply reflexive and well worth reading in full.

We concur with researchers who advocate for increased reflection on and written accounts of the participant-naming process in research. Allen and Wiles (2016) write,

We argue that renaming participants—the common practice of allocating pseudonyms to confer anonymity—is not merely a technical procedure but has psychological meaning to both the participants and the content and process of the research. We consider the question, “How do we name people respectfully?” (p. 149)

There are times when a pseudonym is important to protect social-emotional health, physical safety, or employment security, but researchers have found that when asked, many research participants prefer to use their own names. In a study with the parents of a young adult child with cancer, Grinyer (2002) noted, “To our surprise, only seven of the respondents said that they would like pseudonyms to be allocated. Thus, about three quarters of the respondents specified that they would like their own names used” (p. 2).

In 2015, I, Maria, wrote with coauthors, in a literature review of 60 articles with the word “pseudonym” anywhere in the article, “Unfortunately, there is little to report in the way of literature regarding the topic of research participant pseudonyms (see Guenther, 2009; Nespore, 2000, for notable exceptions)” (Lahman et al., 2015, p. 447). We are pleased to update this statement: Through the process of an updated review of more than 75 articles since 2015, we found that there seems to be increased methodological conversation and understanding about this important topic. Heaton (2022) notes that qualitative researchers use epithets,¹

... descriptive terms used to describe the character of a person or place (“epithet” is derived from the Greek term meaning “added”). They are used in research to replace the real names of people mentioned by participants with one or more terms that convey their role and/or relationship to the speaker. (p. 124)

We recommended in most cases using a personalized name, but there will be times when an epithet makes sense. In Maria's research poetry (Lahman, 2009), she referred to her physician simply as “Doctor” to heighten

their confidentiality since what she was saying was negative. While she also asks moms in her current research to choose a pseudonym for themselves or use their own name, when referring to the moms as a group, she uses a label. This natural movement between a personal name and an epithet seems to work well in that moms often go by a parenting label yet readers are allowed personal, intimate moments through the use of each one's name.

Some examples of ways researchers are addressing pseudonyms in their research accounts follow.

- *In a footnote*—"All names included here are pseudonyms, per Institutional Review Board requirements. All pseudonyms were chosen by the participant. Some participants also chose to remain anonymous. When this was the case it was noted as such. Not all 'Anonymous' refer to the same participant. Because all survey responses were anonymous no attribution is made" (Call-Cummings & Martinez, 2016, p. 801).
- "Participants in this study were afforded the opportunity to either create a pseudonym or choose a favorite color by which they would be referred" (Mountz et al., 2018, p. 108).

Use of Pseudonyms With Capable and Competent yet Vulnerable People

Proper names are poetry in the role. Like all poetry they are untranslatable.

—W. H. Auden

In this section, we highlight exemplars of pseudonym use in research with transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC) people, in cross-cultural research, and in research with people who are or have been incarcerated.

Rowen: Pendulum

Names are a nuanced, deep, healing, and traumatic topic for me as a person of color, a trans person, a queer person, and a disabled person. Names can be official and unofficial. Names can be chosen, given, forced, stolen, borrowed, annihilated, and much more. Names are a point of joy and a point of fury for me. Names evoke the full spectrum of emotions from people in all permutations of their lives and relationships.

I grew up fighting with people about my name and my family's names—as a brown femme presenting youth, I was constantly derided for hiding my "real" name. My white peers were often adamant that my family had changed their names when immigrating to the states to be

more anglicized. They refused to believe my correction as I identified India's vast cultural, regional, and religious diversity and the roots of my family names. I was so often spoken to with such patronizing disbelief as if others knew more about me and my names than I did. I grew to embrace my given name, and as my connection with my own gender evolved, I built a new meaningful association with my new name, my chosen name. As a trans person, gender and name exploration often go hand in hand. Although I didn't try out any other names before I picked mine, I thought about what I wanted my new name to be for a very long time. I thought about my intentions, my wants, my needs, the meaning my name could bring to me, and my contribution to the world.

Like all of life, names contain phantasmagoric multitudes.

The (No) Name Game

A four-letter word

A four-letter word, more powerful than one may realize

A four-letter word that can change relationships, burn bridges, destroy realities, and create lives

A four-letter word, taken for granted

A four-letter word

Name

Transgender and gender-nonconforming people

To name oneself is the first act of both the poet and the revolutionary.

—Erica Jong

Names may have particular importance for someone who is TGNC, also termed gender queer, gender fluid, and gender expansive. TGNC people's understanding and expression of their gender do not conform with the sex they were assigned at birth. The names their families have registered as legal names and nicknames used typically denote a particular binary gender. TGNC individuals often spend time reflecting on their names and experimenting with new names. This important process should be easily relatable to cisgender people given the amount of time spent choosing names for babies and rejecting the use of full names or nicknames that they dislike. (See an example of this in the section on incarcerated people). However, family and those around them (e.g., coworkers, neighbors) may continue to use their assigned-at-birth names, or "dead names." Institutions, such as companies or the government, may enforce the use of deadnames through regressive policies or government-issued IDs. A legal name change may be the only way to rectify the situation, which may not be possible because of financial or social inaccessibility, or for a minor with unsupportive parents.

There are some people who remain ignorant to the importance of names for TGNC people. Research shows that for transgender youth, “chosen name use in more contexts was associated with lower depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior. Depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior were lowest when chosen names could be used in all four contexts” (i.e., work, school, home, friend groups; Russell et al., 2018, p. 503).

We strongly recommend closely involving TGNC research participants in the research naming process. It may be that using their chosen name is important or using a pseudonym of their own choice is a welcome opportunity. Stephanie Shelton and Tamara Brooks (2021), who included participants in the naming process, reported that for “a participant who identified as genderqueer, [and] it was important to the participant that their pseudonym ‘sound masculine, even though people usually think I’m a woman’” (p. 825).

A cisgender researcher Galupo (2017), who is committed to responsive research with trans people, writes that researchers should include personal gender identity and reflexivity statements in our research accounts and ask “trans individuals to provide input regarding their experience when participating in our studies”; addressing the constraints of a cisgender researcher when we consider the research experience and “critiquing other researchers’ work with these same standards in mind” (p. 242) are important steps toward responsive research. In addition, Vincent (2018), a transgender researcher, gives detailed information for researchers to consider around naming transgender participants. Vincent, recommending dialogue with participants and case-by-case decisions, points out that while a researcher might assume

that the potential vulnerability of the trans population would create a strong ethical imperative to guarantee anonymity for all participants, this can deny agency to participants who may wish to be recognisable. Further, due to the majority of trans people using and identifying with a name different to that which they were given at birth (whether changed by deed poll or not), a trans person’s name (defined as that which they choose) may not make them identifiable to those people from whom anonymity may be preferred—such as an employer, or family. This can create a circumstance where a trans person’s name can function to make them anonymised and identifiable simultaneously, to different audiences. (p. 108)

Eric: Queer Folk

What’s in a name?

—Shakespeare

“What’s in a name?” you ask. Somewhat paradoxically, perhaps nothing, and maybe everything. You see, our voices

are already silenced—have been for the better part of history—our stories deeply buried within ourselves. You see your job as coming alongside us to hear our tales deeply and profoundly, to listen, to even understand (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We co-construct knowledge with you, we develop our stories, we learn things about ourselves that we had not before known until you probed a little too deeply—an experience that is at once cathartic and terrifying. We re-story ourselves (Clandinin, 2013).

We learn to trust you, to open the door to our souls over time as rapport solidifies. Then suddenly you leave us, erase our names as if we don’t exist as individuals, as if we never had so existed. You abandon us, affix your name to our stories, and substitute in a pseudonym where our real name ought to be. Our stories abruptly become your stories; they soon are reduced to mere lines on your vita. We as individuals are soon forgotten, yet our hijacked stories live on separate from us, almost like a vital organ has been extracted.

Occasionally, we stumble on to the published article, seeing ourselves reduced to a small representation on paper but without any mention of our name. Jack, you have renamed me. A single tear drops onto the paper as I try and make sense of what it is you have taken from me: It is not immediately identifiable; nor am I.

I am there, yet I am not. What’s in a name? I am. My story is attached to my name; a name alone may be nothing . . . nothing really at all, just letters mixed in such a way as to be utterable. And, true, a story with a name holds the same properties as the story sans name; but I am not there. The one who gifted you the story is not there. I have been exiled from my story. I have been made invisible.

Again.

Incarcerated people. The use of names and titles in prisons, jails, and places of incarceration, in general, becomes a microcosm of the power behind a name and who determines how naming occurs. Prison guards may require that they be addressed as Mr., Sir, Ma’am, or a hierarchical term such as “Boss.” Yet prisoners’ names may be turned into a joke or a demeaning address used instead of actual names (Scott, 2011). Researchers in much of the literature reviewed about people who are or have been incarcerated, in keeping with research in general, assure the reader in a short statement that pseudonyms have been used throughout the study. Examples of this include “Kima—a pseudonym of an actual incarcerated mother” (Hayes et al., 2020, p. 21), “one mother” or “a mother” (Wiseman et al., 2019, p. 39). We do wish to note that the full studies we are giving examples from here are making important contributions and our wish to extend the discussion of pseudonyms should not be seen as undermining the research in general.

When given the option though to use a legal name or nickname, researchers report enthusiastic responses. Schwartz (2017) recounted,

When asked if he preferred that I use his real name instead of a pseudonym [Mason] to identify him in the article, he emphatically declared, “And hell, yea, I wanna use my full name . . . I don’t know who this Mason guy is lol.” (p. 54)

Prins et al. (2020) have an exemplary yet concise explanation for pseudonym use in an article that, as most do, needs plenty of room to highlight research findings. Their research account was about qualitative research with fathers incarcerated in prisons in rural Pennsylvania, USA, who had taken part in their children’s literacy education prior to incarceration. The fathers were now in a program that allowed them to continue to support their children through video-recorded book reading, children’s books, and the creation of “personalized scrapbooks that cultivated their children’s literate abilities and cognitive, academic, and socio-emotional development” (p. 168). Of pseudonyms, the researchers wrote,

We sought to affirm participants’ dignity and self-determination by honoring their decision to use a self-chosen pseudonym or their real name or nickname. . . . We have chosen children’s pseudonyms that reflect their family’s culture (e.g., most of the children of African American fathers had names that are common among African Americans). (pp. 172–173)

One step further would have been to invite the fathers to choose pseudonyms for their children. However, this research took place in intensely concentrated, highly prescribed circumstances, so this advice may be more suited for researchers in less prescriptive settings.

Research participants who are or have been incarcerated may desire a pseudonym to protect their identity from a larger audience. Jarldorn and her coauthor, using the pseudonym “Deer,” wrote a powerful reflection on why a formerly incarcerated person might want to use a pseudonym:

Deer decided that despite the length of time since her release, it could be a risk to her career aspirations to use her real name as co-author of this paper. This is such a telling indictment of the latent power of incarceration that criminalised women experience. Thus, rather than feeling confident in publicly stating her successes and achievements, Deer will be known by the pseudonym she chose, silenced because of her punishment and in fear of the consequences of being “outed” as a former prisoner. (Jarldorn & “Deer,” 2020, p. 324)

Maria: Professor

I have been mulling over names, nicknames, and pseudonyms as related to people who are incarcerated. The root of everything we discuss in this article leads me to one theme, power—the power to name someone, demean someone’s name, or undermine others’ power through naming, uplifting, and honor names, and the power to name yourself. When my brother was incarcerated for drug addiction-related

behavior, a whole world I was grossly ignorant about opened up to me. My brother shared that he was one of the oldest people in the section of the jail he lived in. He wore glasses, so combining that with his age, standard English, high vocabulary, and penchant for reading books gained him the nickname name “Professor.” Another aspect of his name is that his first name is one that would be associated by many people as being from a Muslim culture. He is from a Christian family that is set in a highly Christian local culture. While he is called by his middle name by everyone who knows him, in jail, he was officially addressed by his first name or family name. My brother endorsed my sharing this reflection indicating he hopes his story is helpful to others.

Culturally responsive research. When a researcher is working to be culturally responsive, an understanding of the history of and contemporary naming practices in the area you are working in is important. Some cultures choose names in the hope of good fortune. This process may be religious or spiritual; there may be an expert consulted or names from the family drawn on.

Brear (2018) compellingly wrote,

In cross-cultural research selecting pseudonyms may be particularly complex, because naming participants is a (potentially harmful) form of racial labelling (Foster, 2006). . . . In post-colonial contexts individuals have often historically been forced to adopt colonial-language names. Not using Indigenous-language names might represent, or be interpreted as, a subtle form of racism and White supremacy (Foster, 2006). In addition, the assumption that pseudonyms should be used to protect privacy may be considered paternalistic, because colonized people marginalized due to race, have historically been exploited by White researchers. For example, during the colonial period research was used to steal Indigenous knowledge, justify dispossession and misrepresent cultural identities (Svalastog and Eriksson, 2010). (p. 723)

Hurst (2008) also discussed this issue, writing, “Anglicizing a person’s ethnically identifiable name, say renaming a German named Jurgen ‘John,’ can become a serious misrepresentation. Even more so if a German named John is renamed by the researcher as ‘Jurgen’” (p. 346).

In studies with participants from other cultures, if you did not ask the participants to choose pseudonyms and are not able to backtrack and do so, using a baby name list from that culture is a good starting place. Then make a shortlist of the names to show people from the culture and ask them for appropriate suggestions. However, if research participants choose their own pseudonyms, you will need to be open to them Anglicizing their names or choosing a name that may not reflect theirs in any way, such as someone who chooses Pepsi for their pseudonym. If you prefer to keep a sense of the name, you could encourage participants to choose a name they think has the spirit of their name, but you will want to avoid belaboring this process.

Methodological Recommendations

In this section, we review methodological considerations in the following areas: (a) researcher reflexivity: question research traditions, (b) long-term impact, and (c) discuss and document.

Researcher Reflexivity: Question Research Traditions

Actively identify your own biases, paradigms, and frameworks that inform your stance regarding the use of pseudonyms in research (generally and with reference to a particular study), and be prepared for the potentiality that the views of the research participants may be different.

Related to the previous point, Rosalinda Edwards (2020) wrote,

I also started to realise that I did not do any of this pseudonymic practice—choose first names, give the choice to participants—in a vacuum. My understanding of my research practices and issues I was pursuing and how to understand them was shaped within the particular sub-discipline that I was working in: family sociology, and the particular period of time in which I carried them out. (p. 383)

Edwards's point underscores the need to become more aware of your discipline's history with the general use of pseudonyms in research. The history of dehumanizing practices in research and the use of pseudonyms is more recent than most researchers realize. Different disciplines have reinforced and/or attempted to critique the status quo of research regarding pseudonyms in various ways; considering an interdisciplinary approach will be helpful.

Constantly question the common research narrative that pseudonyms in research automatically add a layer of protection, ethical action, or intentionality in research. Ethical research requires active engagement; with the question of pseudonyms, researchers must ask themselves and their participants if they are appropriate for the specific research context.

Become more aware of your discipline's history with research regarding the populations in your study, especially if they are marginalized identities in your region.

Long-Term Impact

Think about the long-term impacts, also called developmental (Lahman et al., 2015), of the use of pseudonyms and how they are used in the research you conduct. This consideration is not only for your research and field but also for the research participants and for future participants from these communities.

Discuss and Document

Discuss with the research participants how they wish to be named. Document this process for research ethics boards, and include it within research accounts to help future researchers consider this area thoughtfully. Research accounts about the naming process, such as Grinyer's (2002) in the area of cancer and death, Edwards's (2020) historical family sociology work, and Allen and Wiles's (2016) "childless" older people, are invaluable. Check back periodically during studies of a longer length to see if participants are comfortable with the naming process.

The Gist

Encouragingly, methodological conversation in this area has continued (e.g., Anthias, 2018; Shelton & Brooks, 2021), adding to earlier contributions (e.g., Boschma et al., 2003; Guenther, 2009; Lahman et al., 2015; Nespor, 2000; van den Hoonaard, 2003; Zarsky, 2004). However, discussion of the naming process within research articles continues to be insufficient. Editors and journal reviewers should request that these discussions be added to manuscripts under review. These could be brief statements to be included in articles regarding the naming process, or in a longer reflective article, a page or so would greatly benefit readers.

Ethics is of the utmost importance in qualitative research, and paying attention to methodological choices can increase researchers' ability to be culturally responsive (Lahman, 2018). Methodological transparency and increased discussions strengthen researchers' ethical intent and actions, for a good name is better than riches.

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Note

1. This use of the word "epithet" here does not have the negative connotation that, for example, "He hurled a racial epithet" would have.

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