

To name or not to name? Reconciling participants' anonymity, authenticity, and power in qualitative research

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Abstract

Our name is an essential part of our identity, and despite our ethical pledge to authenticity, we often start our qualitative inquiry by pseudonymising our participants' names without their input, undermining their authenticity and power. This methodological paper investigates qualitative research's understudied participant naming process, highlighting authenticity and anonymity concerns. We draw on research practice-based experiences to narrow the gap between theory and research practice by asking: *"How do qualitative researchers ensure participants' anonymity and authenticity? What names do participants prefer if offered the choice?"* We draw on the social exchange theory and critical reflection to explore research experiences shared by 14 participants from a study on acculturation triangulated with the research practices shared by seven qualitative researchers. This methodological article is one of few that contributes to the ethical debate between participants' anonymity, authenticity and power and thus addresses the gap between the theory and practice of qualitative research.

Keywords: pseudonymising, qualitative research, power, authenticity, anonymity, migrant entrepreneurship

Track: Research Methodology

What's in our name? our bridge to the deep
A marker of life, not a secret to keep.
Our nameless stories could be lost in your mist
Our journeys detached that ceased to exist.

As we build our trust through the stories we share,
Do not make us nameless, as though we aren't there.
The research justice, our voices unsealed
Yet, the root of our names is forever concealed.

Whilst our stories keep living, as our names fade away
Why are we forced into silence and our rights kept at bay?
Let us share both our story and our name as a whole
As our name is a bridge and the key to our soul.

(Researcher's own)

Introduction

Qualitative researchers must preserve anonymity and authenticity by using "ethics on the go" and treating participants as co-creators of knowledge. Many official ethics guidelines recommend disguising the personal identities of research participants as a default position' (Saunders et al., 2015, p. 617). The GDPR principle of "do no harm" and the right "to be forgotten" (2020) guide qualitative researchers to 'only use real names when respondents are public officials' (Guenther, 2009, p. 411) and conceal their participants' identities in most cases. As qualitative researchers, we should reflect and ask many what-if questions to make ethical, evidence-based decisions for ourselves and our participants, even though ethics are always at the forefront of our research practice. As such, researchers should examine an imbalance of power between them and participants when seeking anonymity, which may impact data quality and depth (Råheim et al., 2016). What if, prioritising "do not harm", we end up excluding individuals from the process of naming and thus "silencing" their authentic selves and miss out on the pursued and needed social justice impact for the disadvantaged communities we research *with*? Our research practice of pseudonymising, whilst grounded in a solid rationale of "do no harm", might translate into an

exercise of “writing about people as if they do not exist” (Mukungu, 2017, p. 86), masking their identity under letters and numbers (Glinka et al., 2023), which leaves us the sole beneficiaries of the research.

Power, anonymity, and authenticity intertwine in this methodologically significant but frequently overlooked debate, especially in migration research, where migrants are stigmatised or privileged on identity grounds (Chitac, 2023). Despite the potential for socioeconomic redemption their naming choice could bring, this remains a largely overlooked ethical issue for the qualitative research community (Wang et al., 2024), often limited to the outcome of a neutral stroke of the pen as respondents' names are carefully concealed in published work to protect their anonymity, with no saying from participants (Isik & Walsh, 2023). However, recently, supporting the shift towards more collaborative research practice and the prioritisation of researching with, instead of about (Vershina et al., 2021), few scholars reported this research practice (Lahman, Thomas and Teman 2023; Sivaraman & Barnes-Holmes, 2023; Wang et al., 2024).

Our methodological study is significant and timely, addressing the complexity of this process that lies at the intersection of ethical research conduct, researcher-researched power and participants' authenticity, a methodological call which gains momentum among qualitative researchers (Lahman, Thomas and Teman, 2023; Sivaraman & Barnes-Holmes, 2023; Wang et al., 2024). As such, on the one hand, this debate is the risk of participants' vulnerabilities being exploited if their anonymity is not protected, resulting in increased social stigma and self-exclusion from mainstream society (Tuppat & Gerhards, 2021). On the other hand, this debate also sheds light on empowering participants as knowledge co-creators. As such, voicing their naming preferences might be an important step in creating impactful research, as many of the vulnerable communities, by contributing to research, might pursue social justice as a form of fair, reciprocal exchange (Wang et al., 2024).

To add to this methodological debate, we draw on Social Exchange Theory, which reinforces human need for “exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two persons or more” (Homans, 1958, p. 327). In addition, we examine social exchange between participants and researchers through the lenses of *reciprocity*, which promotes mutual benefits, and *consistency of identity*, which motivates people to share their personal stories as a reflection of social positionality (Ahmad et al., 2023). To ensure depth and rigour to our

methodological inquiry, we triangulate the naming preferences of 14 migrant entrepreneurs who participated in a phenomenological study on acculturation with the research experiences of seven qualitative researchers using a methodological phenomenological approach and critical reflection on their "lived-in experiences" and embedded meanings (Alase, 2017).

Acknowledging the complexity of this debate and its significant role in the quality and ethical standards for qualitative studies, our methodological inquiry into the authenticity, anonymity and empowerment of our research participants through the process of naming them is timely and important, particularly for narrowing the existent gap between research theory and practice. Therefore, we launch this critical reflective inquiry by asking qualitative researchers and participants, *"How do qualitative researchers ensure participants' anonymity and authenticity? What names do participants prefer if offered the choice?"*

The rest of our methodological article follows this structure. In the ethical and theoretical part, the ethical argument over pseudonymising vs. anonymising in qualitative research and naming and renaming in migrant entrepreneurial scholarship is critically reviewed. Second, the critical reflective methodological approach is presented, encouraging researchers to deeply explore and share their "lived" fieldwork naming practices. The research findings and discussion section reveal and position the broader methodological research and naming practices from their descriptive perspectives, including researchers as decision-makers, researchers as participants and migrant entrepreneurs' naming preferences as participants. From these findings naturally emerge evidence-based lessons learned. The following section outlines our significant methodological contributions, given its limits and future research directions.

Ethical and theoretical framework

The ethical debate

Researchers must anonymise participants by "removing or obscuring the names of participants or research sites and not including information that might lead participants or research sites to be identified" (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011, p. 198). Anonymisation and pseudonymisation are frequently used interchangeably to safeguard study participants' identities, confusing the ethical argument.

Anonymous information is "the information which does not relate to an identified or identifiable natural person or to personal data rendered anonymous in such a manner that the data subject is not or no longer identifiable." Thus, participants' "right to be forgotten" is protected (GDPR, 2020, Art. 17). This involves removing all direct (names, addresses, pictures) and indirect (workplace, job title, salary, organisation) identifiable information. Researchers use GDPR-compliant masking, generalisation, and randomisation to anonymise data. The researcher uses randomisation to sever the relationship between the individual and the data while keeping its value through noise addition, permutation, and differential privacy (European Commission, 2014). Generalisation reduces data granularity, reducing participant identification. This is done by grouping individuals by age (e.g., 35-45) or meaning clusters that lack direct single connections (e.g., refugee means "worthless," "dependent," and "uneducated" for most respondents). Names, addresses, and images are masked along with other anonymisation procedures. After anonymisation, the data is no longer subject to the GDPR and can be used more freely.

In contrast to anonymisation, pseudonymisation will not free researchers from GDPR. They help researchers comply with data protection laws, particularly "data minimisation" and "storage limitation" (Articles 5(1c) and 5(1e) and "appropriate safeguards." Pseudonymisation is defined as "the processing of personal data in a manner that makes it impossible to attribute the data to a specific data subject without the use of additional information, provided that the additional information is maintained separately and subject to technical and organisational measures to prevent attribution to an identified or identifiable individual" (GDPR 2020, Article 4(3b)). Complying with these regulations, research participants are pseudonymised to protect them from social shame and penalties for voicing their opinions (Moore et al., 2020). Due to the reversibility of pseudonymisation, "personal data which have undergone pseudonymisation, which could be attributed to a natural person by the use of additional information should be considered information on an identifiable natural person" (GDPR, 2020, Recital 26). Although pseudonymisation reduces the identifiability of personal data, it does not exempt such data from GDPR. Recital 26 (GDPR, 2020) states that pseudonymised data that could be re-attributed using additional information must still be considered personal data and handled accordingly under GDPR.

Two views on pseudonymising participants' names emerged throughout time. Some researchers stress the psychological importance of giving participants pseudonyms that reflect their cultural

and historical collective identity (Allen & Wiles, 2016), while others advocate for participant choice (Lahman et al., 2015). Psychological approaches emphasise individuals' right to own their narratives, enhancing the public link between their authentic experiences and distinct identities (Scarth, 2015). These conditions may make pseudonymisation a "marginalised eraser" (Brear, 2018), stigmatising marginalised groups before protecting their privacy (Tuppat & Gerhards, 2021).

The empirical debate

Qualitative research examines individual experiences, perceptions, views, and behaviours (Saunderson, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2019). Given the human-centric approach of qualitative inquiry, a person's name is crucial in defining their personal and social identity throughout their life (Allport, 1961), combining personal traits with cultural and ethnic origins (Aksholakova, 2013).

Particularly in migration studies, names and identities are linked (Itzik & Walsh, 2023). Migrants' and refugees' paths towards belonging depend on intersectional "politics" also embedded in their names, which can help or hinder their integration into the host country. Therefore, *renaming* involves recreating and creating a new identity (Suarez, 1997). In migration contexts, this process of renaming increases the risk of devaluing, as humans are reduced to arbitrary acronyms or host culture names because both strategies challenge migrants' cultural hegemony (Fermaglich, 2018) and can be seen as forceful assimilation (Walsh & Yakhnich, 2020) or omnipotent researcher authority over participant image (Itzik & Walsh, 2023).

Within the same context, pseudonymisation becomes a transformative tool that can exacerbate socio-cultural power asymmetries. Therefore, researchers must carefully name their individuals (Gordon, 2019). Therefore, randomly assigning pseudonyms to migration study participants may reinforce prejudices and stigmas, marginalising them. It may also and because their name choice is denied or use their actual names for dissemination (Wang et al., 2024). intensify discomfort or disagreement led participants to defer their involvement in the study

Researchers commonly become guardians of participants' narratives and exclusive knowledge makers by overlooking participants' expectations of reciprocal and equitable social exchange. The researcher's position as the sole decision maker not only disempowers their participants but also challenges these entrepreneurs' identities, rendering them invisible due to anonymisation. This

strategy could impact their social position, but more critically, it could diminish their opportunity to overcome social stigma as visible contributors to impactful research that will inform evidence-based policy and help them integrate into the host nation (Chitac, 2023).

Many qualitative researchers see pseudonymisation and anonymisation as ethical requirements to protect participants' "right to be forgotten" (GDPR 2020, Art. 17), overlooking the complexity of this problem in light of reciprocal and equitable social exchange. Whilst there is a consensus between ethics boards and academic communities across the world that quality requires authenticity (Smith et al., 2011), the debate around which these practices could compromise it is underexplored, yet significant (Lahman, Thomas, and Teman, 2023; Sivaraman, Barnes and Holmes 2023), especially when considered in isolation from participants' agency and empowerment as knowledge co-creators (Kapasi & Rosli, 2020).

Qualitative researchers who believe that our qualitative inquiry is deeply rooted in researching "with" participants rather than "about" them (Vershina et al., 2021) are concerned about the underreporting and lack of published discussion of this methodological and ethical topic (Itzik & Walsh, 2023). A succinct description of qualitative migrant entrepreneurship research shows how researchers use naming procedures to protect participant anonymity and self-authenticity. Unfortunately, their methodological argument remains overlooked or underdeveloped (Lahman, Thomas, and Teman, 2023).

The table below captures examples of naming techniques identified in qualitative migrant entrepreneurship research.

Table 1. Naming techniques used in qualitative migrant entrepreneurship research

Naming technique	Name examples	Methodological	Reference
<i>Ethnolinguistic names</i>	Angela, Natalia	None	Polish women entrepreneurs in Glasgow, Scotland (Lasalle and
<i>English names</i>	Peter, Taylor	None	Peter is born in the Netherlands and from Surinamese descent. Taylor is a Zambian-born Black start-up founder in Netherland. (van Merriënboer, Verver, and Radu-Lefebvre 2023)
<i>Letter + number</i>	V5-I1	None	Vietnamese and Indian entrepreneurs in Poland (Glinka et al. 2023)
<i>Title + letter</i>	Mr P, Mr Q and Mr O	"Three emblematic and successful Chinese entrepreneurs, renamed as Mr P, Mr Q and Mr O"	Chinese entrepreneurs within the leather industrial district of Florence, Italy.
<i>Actual first names or variations of first</i>	Maria , Ana	None	Romanian women migrant entrepreneurs (Chitac 2023)
<i>Combination of strategies</i>	RE01-RE20	None	Nepalese women entrepreneurs in the UK (Maharjan, Nazir and Roomi 2024)

Source: Researchers' own

Evidence suggests that some researchers "name" their participants with symbolic initials, reinforcing their work, migrant, and gender identities (e.g., WER1 for Romanian women entrepreneurs 1 (Chitac, 2023). However, most researchers choose to assign pseudonyms to participants based on their ethnicity, gender, location, or English names (i.e., ValRo, (Chitac et al., 2025); and Paul (van Merriënboer et al., 2025), whilst others may combine different naming strategies, such as participants' designation number and entrepreneurial identity (RE01-RE20) (Maharjan, Nazir, and Roomi 2024). However, while numbering or alphabetising participants can provide ethical anonymity, it does so by dehumanising them and by hiding their direct contributions, which could result in a lost opportunity for social justice and impactful research (Wang et al., 2024).

Most entrepreneurship researchers use culturally relevant pseudonyms, thus trying to prioritise participants' intersectional or cultural identities while providing little or no reflection on their methodological and ethical choices. Therefore, it is difficult for readers to establish individuals' specific backgrounds from pseudonyms, even if they have ethnolinguistic backgrounds distinct from English, to fully grasp the contextual understanding of the research findings disseminated (Wang et al., 2024). Despite its insignificance, sustaining participants' authenticity and social justice is crucial in qualitative research on migrant entrepreneurship. Thus, without understanding participants' ethnolinguistic origins, readers may fail to understand their narratives from a cultural perspective. Furthermore, participants may feel that researchers do not value their authentic selves. Therefore, researchers should be aware of name convention issues in studies of diverse populations, especially when studying identities, and reflect on how they can best preserve their participants' authenticity while complying with ethics (Chitac, 2023).

Social exchange theory

In order to contribute to this methodological debate, we draw on Social Exchange Theory, which is defined as "the exchange of activity, tangible or intangible, and more or less rewarding or costly, between at least two persons or more" (Homans, 1958, p. 327). In addition, we examine the understanding of social exchange between participants and researchers through *the reciprocity principle*, which promotes mutual benefits for all parties, and *the identity consistency principle*, which reinforces the benefits of maintaining their authentic identities by their social status (Ahmad et al., 2023).

Blau (1964) further developed Homans' theory (1958, 1961) by emphasising non-coercive, reciprocal, and egalitarian social exchanges to address researcher-researched power asymmetries. He called these exchanges "*voluntary actions of individuals that are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring and typically do bring from others (p. 91)*," generating interdependent and reciprocal relationships as parties achieve their goals. This approach enables the researcher and participant to negotiate to achieve their goals in a fair, reciprocal, and ethical manner, thus protecting participants' anonymity. Furthermore, due to the underreporting of this methodological and ethical decision, the reciprocal and equitable exchange between researcher and participants and the recognition of their identities encourage the question of whether all research participants

consent to anonymity or if our assumption as omnipotent researchers that participants have no choice but to consent is indeed an ethical conduct. Whilst this research practice remains overlooked due to conflicting macro-ethical standards of anonymity, this practice also demotivates researchers from extending the courtesy of asking their participants about their preference for adopting a research name or disclosing their real names. This practice could raise questions about ethical research conduct grounded in half-truths.

This study examines the gap between qualitative research practices and theory by investigating *"how qualitative researchers ensure that participants' pseudonyms preserve their authentic identity and ensure their anonymity. How do participants prefer to be named in entrepreneurship studies?"*

Methodological choices

This methodological article triangulates 14 migrant entrepreneurs' requests to use their real names in research during the data collection stage in 2017-2021 and seven qualitative researchers' fieldwork experiences shared in 2024-2025 to understand how anonymity, authenticity, and power are experienced and embedded in qualitative fieldwork.

This methodological qualitative research employs critical reflection and phenomenological ontology. This perspective acknowledges socially created realities and collaborative knowledge creation. Naming research participants and its effects on anonymity, authenticity, and power were crucial to interviewees' meaning-making. This reinforces that research is a practical, dynamic process rather than just an experiment (Beres and Fook, 2020). Critical reflection was conducted by the lead researcher in the migrant entrepreneurship study based on 14 participants' requests to use their real names or variations of those, and the seven qualitative researchers were invited to reflect and share their experiences of anonymising and preserving the authenticity of their research participants.

The following table details researchers' academic profiles, their chosen research names as participants in this methodological inquiry, and the pseudonymising method they use for their research participants' anonymisation:

Table 2. Qualitative researchers' academic profiles

Participant code	Researchers' preferred research names	Research focus	H-index (Google Scholar)	Pseudonymising technique
Ibajnup	Specific, culturally relevant pseudonym	Migrant entrepreneurship	12	Culturally relevant pseudonyms and real names, if requested
Nem	Random pseudonym	Migrant entrepreneurship	5	Random pseudonym
Jul	Real name	Migrant entrepreneurship	4	Culturally relevant pseudonyms and real names, if requested
Elle	Specific, intersectional pseudonym	Entrepreneurship	14	Intersectional relevant pseudonym
Anca	Real name	Entrepreneurship	4	Culturally relevant pseudonym
Lia	Specific, culturally relevant pseudonym	Entrepreneurship	5	Intersectional relevant pseudonym
Carol	Real name	Refugee entrepreneurship	5	Random pseudonym

Researchers' own

With an average H-index of 7, the qualitative researchers in this methodological article specialise in various areas of entrepreneurship research, such as migrant and refugee entrepreneurship. The pseudonymising practices shared by the majority of the qualitative researchers interviewed revealed that, despite prioritising the ethical principle of anonymity, they achieve this by preserving the cultural background of their participants or by incorporating relevant intersectional elements, such as nationality and gender, into their anonymised names. Their pseudonymisation practice is also evident in selecting their preferred pseudonym, demonstrating their commitment to an equitable exchange and empowering their participants by addressing potential power imbalances.

It is intriguing to observe that the majority of six out of seven researchers expressed their desire to maintain their authentic selves by using their real names or a pseudonym that is "culturally or intersectionally relevant." On the other hand, only one researcher, Nem, expressed no preference for a specific pseudonym, either as a personal choice or when naming their participants. It is

intriguing that Carol, the sole participant in this methodological study, opts to use a random pseudonym for her participants despite her preference to be identified by her actual name.

To understand better the motivation and meaning of their practices in maintaining the authenticity and anonymity of participants, we need to explore their narratives.

Research findings and discussion

This section provides insights into *how qualitative researchers ensure that participants' pseudonyms preserve their authentic identity and ensure their anonymity?* by revealing how and why the seven qualitative researchers balance their participants' anonymity and authenticity from their position of research decision-makers when they name their participants and when they report this research method and as research participants in this study. Additionally, by investigating *how participants prefer to be named in entrepreneurship studies?* This study reveals insights into participants' preferences as research names and the reason for their preferences, all of which are captured in the table below:

Table 3. Data structure

Illustrative examples	1st order themes	2nd order codes	Aggregated dimensions
" Sometimes, people use names, which is also fine, but I usually use codes. Although I had people saying, "I do not mind you using my name", I chose not to protect them, particularly when they are minorities. " (Carol) "It is better to fully anonymise participants' identities, an ethical requirement that should be implemented as it is. There is little gain in using their real names, but a high risk of making them socially vulnerable." (Nem)	Random pseudonyms	Anonymity	Researchers as research decision-makers
"I either used first names of the participant or gave them a pseudonym which represented their cultural and religious identity. For Example, Punjabi names are different from Gujarati names." (Ibajnup) "For the next major qualitative study, I independently named my participants using abbreviations of their real names, a naming strategy which I believed, at that time, to be a	Culturally relevant pseudonyms	Authentic anonymity	

middle ground for ensuring their authenticity and anonymity. As such, if their real names had been Bogdan, for example, I would have called them "Dan" in the published article." (Jul)			
"Firstly, during my PhD study, I concentrated on amplifying my participants' voices and conveying their tales truthfully while adhering to the anonymity criteria outlined in my institutional ethics proposal, using intersectional abbreviations, such as WME1." (Jul)	Intersectional pseudonyms		
"However, for my last two cross-cultural studies on refugees, the tension of focusing on refugees' identities revived my phenomenological commitment to go above and beyond to safeguard my highly vulnerable participants and to conduct research "with" instead of "about" them as part of my "authenticity" pledge. I co-shared with my participants the responsibility of naming and asking them about their research name preferences, only to discover that I had severely underestimated the importance of utilising their names to choose research names with a specific cultural or family meaning to them." (Jul)	Real names	<i>Authenticity</i>	
I tried to use a name from the same community and religion but a 'common' one, so they could not be identified. (Ibajnup) "Until now, one of the three strategies I discussed, encouraging them to choose their research name, can be the research strategy that empowers them while maintaining the level of privacy and authenticity with which they are most comfortable. This approach is ideally suited for knowledge co-creation, which fosters the trust required for participants to reveal their personal, in-depth experiences that make phenomenological research uniquely insightful." (Jul)	Culturally relevant names		<i>Empowering</i>
" I never discuss it with them. I just inform them that I will be protecting their identity by using codes. Anonymity is one of their rights and our responsibility as ethical researchers." (Elle) "We have the ethical responsibility to ensure participants' anonymity, and maybe we just need to do just that, as it is already challenging to publish in good journals!" (Nem)	Researchers as research decision-makers		

"Whilst I am aware that this might be an unorthodox practice in research, I believe that it is our duty as qualitative researchers to research "with" our participants instead of "about" and to empower our participants as knowledge co-creators by making research decision together, particularly since they are co-authors." (Jul)	Researcher - researched co-creation		
"I did not specifically state this in the written research but did do so when I was presenting the work at conferences." (Ibajnun) "If it is not required, I avoid overloading the article with unnecessary details, which would create more opportunities for further questioning" (Elle) Indeed, although the naming technique is a valuable statement of participants' authenticity and a fundamental requirement of ethical research conduct, I never included it in my previously published articles. This is because there are no ethical requirements for journals in this regard. (Acna)	Underreporting	Methodological transparency	
"The name I would choose is from the same community and religion I belong to." (Ibajnun) "I would like to be named a random pseudonym like Sylvia or Anne. However, my pseudonym must include gender, nationality, and age, and I want to be named like. FUKBL60 to confuse things whilst keeping it very relevant for me." (Elle)	Culturally relevant pseudonym	Authentic anonymity	Researchers as participants
"Jul " would be my preferred research name in this case because it preserves my hybrid cultural identity and represents the identity I built as a professional while preserving the meaning of the name my mom gave me. When we become participants, we care about the research name given to us. (Jul) "I prefer to use my name if I have something to say!" (Carol)	Real name	Authenticity	
"Use Ria, short for Maria. It is what my parents used to call me." (RWE9) "Can I use my English name, Dany? People know me here by this name." (RME28) "I want you to use Vero, so when I read your paper, I could find myself. I never participated in research until now. "(RWE7) "John from Ioan is good enough."(RME2)	Variations of real names	Authentic anonymity	Participants as research decision-makers

"Use my British name, Lory, so people relate to me here too." (RWE15)			
" I am proud of who I am, and I want people to know my name and thus Romanians are not gypsies; we are hard-working people." (RWE4) "Well, there is nothing to hide. Maybe it is time for all to find out that a Romanian created London's financial hub."(RME32) "If they see my name, maybe other Romanian women will want to follow in my footsteps and look at me as a role model." (RWE15) "If this gets published and my business partners see my name is good for business" (RME12) "Maybe it is time for the British to learn our names so that we become human instead of just a bunch of thieves and uneducated who took their jobs" (RME1)	Real names	<i>Authenticity</i>	

Source: Researchers' own

Researchers as research decision-makers vs researchers as participants

Our findings demonstrate that the diverse methodological approaches and motivations of researchers are influenced by the dichotomy between preserving the authenticity of participants and guaranteeing their anonymity, as revealed by their narrative accounts. This dichotomy is further exacerbated by the dual positionality they adopt in the context of this methodological study, acting both as participants and research decision-makers. Using illustrative examples of their fieldwork practices, this analysis contrasts these roles, emphasising the impact of each approach on the implementation and prioritisation of principles of authenticity, anonymity, and the development of a hybrid principle, authentic anonymity, that combines the two, which reflects their fieldwork reality, which may act as a bridge between theory and practice.

Anonymity vs. authenticity: hybrid or dual naming strategy

Researchers as a research decision maker

The majority of researchers interviewed, specifically five out of seven, indicated that while they do not enquire about participants' preferences for research names, they implement a hybrid naming strategy for their participants. Consequently, participants' identities are anonymised by creating culturally or intersectionally relevant pseudonyms. Specifically, Ibajnup seeks to balance ethical

anonymity with a respectful recognition of her participants' cultural and religious identities by applying their first names or pseudonyms that reflect these identities. Similarly, Jul seeks to establish a balance that preserves both authenticity and anonymity, describing, *"If their real names had been Bogdan, I would have referred to them as 'Dan' in the published article."* In addition to protecting their participants from vulnerable immigrant and refugee communities from additional social stigma and "anti-immigrant" socioeconomic retaliation (Morosanu, 2018), many researchers believe that combining the two principles preserves a nuanced, culturally authentic context that adds to the findings' richness, whilst ethically protecting them from social stigma (Allen & Wiles, 2016).

Furthermore, researchers' narrative accounts indicate a dual approach to naming their participants. Carol and Nem emphasised the importance of maintaining anonymity and upholding participants' "right to be forgotten" as outlined in GDPR (2020). They noted, *"Sometimes, people use names, which is fine as well, but I usually use codes... I chose not to protect them."* (Carol). Nem advocates for a similar viewpoint, emphasising the importance of anonymity over authenticity by highlighting the dangers linked to revealing participants' true identities, asserting that: *"It is better to anonymise participants' identities fully..."* Using their real names offers minimal benefit while significantly increasing their social vulnerability.

The prioritisation of participants' anonymity is a mandatory requirement of GDPR (GDPR, 2020, Art. 17), which is also a well-supported methodological research practice, underscoring the necessity to 'not harm' (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011). However, careful consideration needs to be given also to the fact that erasing a key cultural identifier, such as participants' identity, through over-anonymisation can diminish the contextual value and sensitivity of data, which are essential components of quality in qualitative research (Smith et al., 2011).

By the standard practices of research dissemination demonstrated by a handful of methodological scholars, where this research practice is underreported (Lahman, Thomas, and Teman 2023; Sivaraman & Barnes Holmes 2023), all of our researchers also stated that they *"never included it in my previously published articles."* (Acna), mainly *"to prevent the article from becoming overloaded with unnecessary details, which would generate unwelcome opportunities for additional inquiry."* (Elle).

The underreporting is motivated by a variety of factors, such as the complexity of ethical considerations that are required to be reported and the publishing constraints regarding word count, which may need to be prioritised to prevent text overload and unnecessary complexity, potentially complicating the peer review and publication process, as Elle and others have mentioned.

Researchers as participants

When acting as research participants, the researchers exhibit a preference for the same hybrid authentic anonymity or exclusively authentic naming techniques that they implement for their participants. Their preferences for preserving cultural and intersectional identities as research participants correspond with the principles of Social Exchange Theory (Homans, 1958), emphasising their dedication to reciprocal exchanges while carefully considering the potential risk for power asymmetries in the research context.

Furthermore, acting as research participants, Jul and Carol extend the limits of duality in hybrid research practices by challenging the principle of anonymity and expressing their preference to be identified by their real names in this methodological article. Jul expresses that this decision is fundamentally grounded in her experience as a phenomenological researcher and the commitment to amplify participants' voices inherent in her research pledge, sharing how *"In her last two cross-cultural studies on refugees, the tension of focusing on refugees' identities revived my phenomenological commitment to prioritise the protection of her highly vulnerable participants and to engage in research "with" rather than "about" them as part of her pledge to authenticity. This meant that I co-shared with my participants the responsibility of naming and asking them about their research name preferences, only to discover that I had severely underestimated the importance of utilising their names to choose research names with a specific cultural or family meaning to them"*(Jul) and *"just like my participants, I want to own my stories directly. For that, I chose to be known by my voice and name."*(Jul). From Jul's account, we learn her participant-centric approach, making the naming process a collaborative decision that enhances data authenticity while respecting participants' privacy preferences. Her naming strategy, which encourages participants to select their research name, serves as a research approach that empowers individuals while upholding their privacy and authenticity. This method respects participants' agency and cultivates trust, transforming research into a collaborative process where researchers and participants share the responsibility and benefits of maintaining their authentic identities per the identity consistency principle (Ahmad et al., 2023).

In contrast, despite her preference for her real name, Carol employs a paternalistic approach and prioritises the anonymity of participants over authenticity. She perceives this as a *"responsibility to protect them, particularly when they are minorities,"* and as a result, in her paternalistic approach, she assigns them random pseudonyms, such as *"A1" or "A2."* Nevertheless, her excessively protective demeanour may be attributable to the fact that she is conducting research with refugees, who are burdened by the effects of war trauma (Addeko & Treanor, 2020) and for whom she feels overprotective given the oversensitive circumstances of their forced displacement.

Overall, the tension between authenticity and anonymity is notably evident in examining participant naming strategies in qualitative research, particularly on migrant entrepreneurship. This tension is underscored by researchers' dual roles as research decision-makers who establish naming protocols and as participants who undergo these protocols. The analysis of this dynamic offers a fertile environment for comparing these roles and comprehending the ethical and methodological implications from the perspective of both empirical evidence and theoretical frameworks.

Participants as decision-makers

It is not surprising to find that the status of research participants, whether former researchers or participants, reveals similarities rooted in the participants' agency. If given the opportunity, they share their preference to be known in research by their real names or closely linked variations of their real names. In particular, numerous participants expressed their preference for genuine anonymity by using their actual names, which would preserve their connection to their cultural identities and ensure that their interest in "being known" and the ethical research requirements of anonymity were balanced. For example, like many participants, RWE9 requested to forgo the anonymisation process and asked the researcher to *"Use Ria, short for Maria. It is what my parents used to call me (RWE9)."* RWE9's preference for an abbreviation of her real name that is profoundly connected to her personal history demonstrates a desire to be recognised in a manner that is both genuine and somewhat protected within the academic discourse. RME28 uses an Anglicised version of his name, which may be perceived as less recognisable to a broader audience but remains authentic to those who know him personally. This demonstrates a nuanced layer of authentic anonymity (*"Can I use my English name, Dany?"*). *People know me here by this name."* (RME28)).

In contrast, many participants requested to use their actual names, underscoring their dedication to maintaining their genuine selves. This method frequently originates from a wish to challenge stereotypes or make visible contributions under one's identity, potentially enhancing the impact and reach of the research. This is particularly relevant for vulnerable communities, such as migrants. RWE4 not only asserts her identity with pride but also endeavours to address discriminatory stereotypes by utilising her name and social status as an entrepreneur as a tool for personal empowerment and social justice. This ethos is shared by other participants, such as RWE15, who view this study as an opportunity to become a community role model. She says, *"I am proud of who I am, and I want people to know my name, and thus Romanians are not gypsies; we are hard-working people." "If they see my name, maybe other Romanian women will want to follow in my footsteps and look at me as a role model"* (RWE15). Sharing a similar perspective, RME32 employs his actual name as a badge of honour, thereby reiterating that *"there is nothing to hide,"* thereby asserting his contributions and accomplishments, which he believes should be publicly recognised without anonymity, as he further explains *"Maybe it is time for all to find out that a Romanian created London's financial hub"* (RME32).

The use of real names is consistent with the identity principle in Social Exchange Theory, which suggests that these interactions can notably improve participants' self-concepts (Homans, 1958). This method enables participants to contribute to their communities' narrative formation openly. Kapasi and Rosli (2020) suggest that participatory methods involving actual names can lead to more ethical and impactful research outcomes by fostering transparency and empowerment.

This dynamic illustrates the significant impact of participants on the research process, highlighting that the naming conventions employed are not simply methodological details but critical ethical considerations that affect the authenticity, integrity, and impact of research findings.

Lessons learned

I critically reflected on these methodological findings and realised that several lessons deserve consideration.

Research is an iterative process and contextual critical reflection.

Researchers must comply with the institutional ethics protocol; however, it is equally crucial to meticulously evaluate the contextual specifics of the research practice (Wang et al., 2024). This transformation has the potential to facilitate the co-creation of knowledge, resulting in research that is both high-quality and impactful (Kapasi & Rosli, 2020). Recently, researchers have advocated for the development of a contextualised code of ethical practices that recognises the importance of ethical principles while accounting for the unique characteristics of different research contexts and methodologies (Izic & Walsh, 2023; Lahman, Thomas, and Teman, 2023; Sivaraman & Barnes Holmes 2023). This requires that researchers actively confront everyday ethical concerns during the research process and consistently assess specific ethical standards, such as the anonymisation and pseudonymisation of participants (Wang et al., 2024), whilst also equal attention is given to participants' preferences as knowledge co-creators.

Anonymity and authenticity can and should coexist in ethical conduct

In addition to ensuring participants' anonymity, research must comply with the GDPR (2020) or the institutional ethical framework underpinning the study (Lahman, Thomas, and Teman, 2023). Furthermore, the implementation of these practices of anonymity is equally critical.

However, anonymisation ensures that the information "does not relate to an identified or identifiable natural person or to personal data rendered anonymous in such a manner that the data subject is not or no longer identifiable." The "right to be forgotten" of participants is therefore safeguarded (GDPR, 2020, Art. 17). However, this does not imply that we should go to extremes and strip our participants of any semblance of humanity, reducing them to arbitrary numbers or letters and naming them after flowers. It would be beneficial to employ an empathic approach, critically contemplate our roles as potential research participants, and consider what constitutes a fair and reciprocal exchange. Is there a "right to be known" that we should consider? As we observed, the authentic anonymity approach provides a balanced approach by combining the anonymity of participants with their authenticity. Qualitative research could benefit from more comprehensive data as researchers adopt research as a collaborative process of knowledge creation with participants as equals.

Furthermore, when conducting research with vulnerable communities, such as migrants or refugees, it may be necessary to exercise caution regarding their anonymity. However, employing

pseudonyms should not be so prevalent that it is rarely documented. Instead, relational researchers should be able to allow participants to select their research names and determine whether they wish to have their identities disclosed in the studies (Lahman et al., 2015).

In order to guarantee ethical behaviour, it is imperative that the researcher not reduce the process of accommodating participants' requests to use their real names to a one-time exchange. Instead, the process should be iterative and documented, requiring the participants' iterative consent. This means the researcher would consult with the participants to see if their naming preferences had changed. Accordingly, the researcher should be dedicated to reflective methodology (Lahman, Thomas, and Teman, 2023) and thus actively participate in process responsiveness (Lahman et al., 2011).

Making the rationale for naming practices explicit and transparent

Our researchers also shared the widespread limited reporting of how and why participants' names are decided. They shared that they rarely, if ever, report on their naming practices, even though all but two of the participants expressed preferences for culturally or intersectionally relevant pseudonyms or even using their real names. Consequently, the absence of an explanation for the naming practices in research outputs may give participants the impression that their contributions have not been adequately acknowledged, which is particularly problematic when participants' cultural or intersectional identities are crucial to comprehending their phenomenological lived experiences (Chitac, Michielsens, and Radu-Lefebvre 2025, ahead of print).

Consequently, we urge future qualitative research to critically and transparently engage with detailed accounts of the selection of pseudonyms and their salient intersectional and cultural representations, in addition to improving the transparency of their methodological reporting. Even though researchers argue for the addition of unnecessary complexity as a result of the strict word limits imposed by publishers, which motivate this underreporting of standard practice, we recommend that researchers develop their critical awareness of such micro-ethical issues as a guide in their research practices (Wang et al., 2024), which would further encourage and recognise the value of fair reciprocal exchange and knowledge co-creation, which should be at the heart of the qualitative inquiry.

Moreover, while this paper highlights the persistent underreporting of naming practices in published qualitative research, it is also important to acknowledge the structural constraints that may contribute to this omission. Word limits imposed by academic journals can create pressure to prioritise data presentation and theoretical discussion over methodological transparency. To address this, researchers might adopt several strategies: first, by incorporating concise reflective statements within methods sections that explicitly address participant naming preferences; second, by using online supplementary materials to provide extended explanations of naming decisions; and third, by advocating for journal policies that recognise the ethical significance of naming practices. As Tracy (2010) argues, transparency and ethical reflexivity are central markers of qualitative rigour, and including naming rationales—even briefly—strengthens the integrity and authenticity of published work.

Contribution, limitations and future research directions

Researchers recently called for a contextualised code of ethical practices that recognises ethical principles but addresses research contexts and practices (Izick & Walsh, 2023; Lahman, Thomas, and Teman, 2023; Sivaraman and Barnes; Holmes, 2023). The present article contributes to this methodological debate, arguing that participants' names matter as much as the ethics, particularly in qualitative research where scientific quality rests on pillars of authenticity, sensibility to context and reporting transparency (Smith et al., 2011).

While our methodological article is timely and significant in bridging the distance between theory and practice in qualitative research, it must be considered in the context of a few limitations. Specifically, the sample size, which is also methodologically consistent with qualitative research, could enhance the discourse and facilitate a deeper understanding of the research practice of naming participants whilst considering their anonymity and authenticity. Furthermore, this methodological article examined the viewpoints of the participants who requested to use their actual names as research names. Whilst this is a timely and significant contribution to this newly emergent debate, this methodological debate could be further enriched and fortified by examining the experiences of participants who prefer to remain anonymous and comprehending their motivations. This could provide a more in-depth understanding of researchers' paternalistic approach to safeguard their participants.

These limitations present significant potential for future research, which could help develop contextual research ethics that reflect and support the fieldwork research process.

Specifically, in qualitative research protocols, discussions with participants refer to how personal data will be treated. These could have consequences for research results, especially when comparing two distinct situations: the naming occurs before or after the interviews. Besides honesty, fears, etc., naming can unconsciously alter respondents' behaviour due to the need for uniqueness versus belonging psychological traits (Ryan & Deci, 2004; Pardede & Kovac, 2023).

A high need for uniqueness leads to higher expectations of distinctiveness and enhancement of one's personal and social identity. A high need for belongingness leads to expectations of group recognition and positive social bonds. Crises can exacerbate both. Cultural differences are significant, as well. Anonymisation "destroys" the personal, individual layer and its contribution to the closely intertwined fabric of cultural layers - national, regional, organisational, professional, generational, and individual (personality) ones.

Conclusion

The present article does not claim that it provides definitive answers to the questions of authenticity and anonymity in qualitative research that were previously addressed. Further, it does not advocate for or against the principles of anonymisation. However, it has contributed to addressing the gap between ethical and methodological theory and practice by addressing the challenges of authenticity and anonymity that qualitative researchers might face when conducting research with entrepreneurs, particularly vulnerable communities of migrants and refugees. We hope that by our timely and important contribution to qualitative research practice, our findings will assist researchers facing similar ethical and methodological conundrums and engage critically and iteratively in the process of research, thus giving the required attention to what many researchers consider to be a "micro-ethical" issue, and which the fieldwork reality emphasised by our participants considers to be an important manifestation of reciprocal exchange.

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