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### "\*Pseudonyms are used throughout"

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## "\*Pseudonyms are used throughout": A footnote, unpacked

Janet Heaton

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# Qualitative Inquiry

**"\*Pseudonyms are used throughout": a footnote, unpacked**

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Abstract:	Pseudonyms are often used to de-identify participants and other people, organizations and places mentioned in interviews and other textual data collected for research purposes. While this is commonplace, the rationale for, and limits of, using pseudonyms or other methods to disguise identifying information are seldom explained in empirical works. Following an illustrated outline of pseudonyms, epithets, codenames and other obscurant techniques used in the social sciences and humanities, this paper considers how they variously frame the identities of, and position the relations between, participants and researchers. It suggests ways in which researchers might improve on current practice.

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43 **Biographical statement**  
44

45 Janet Heaton is a sociologist and qualitative researcher, with a special interest in the  
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47 secondary analysis of qualitative data. She has worked on a wide range of health and social  
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49 care projects in the NHS and UK universities and is currently researching health and  
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51 wellbeing in remote and rural communities using a range of methods.  
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## "\*Pseudonyms are used throughout": a footnote, unpacked

### Abstract

Pseudonyms are often used to de-identify participants and other people, organizations and places mentioned in interviews and other textual data collected for research purposes. While this is commonplace, the rationale for, and limits of, using pseudonyms or other methods to disguise identifying information are seldom explained in empirical works. Following an illustrated outline of pseudonyms, epithets, codenames and other obscurant techniques used in the social sciences and humanities, this paper considers how they variously frame the identities of, and position the relations between, participants and researchers. It suggests ways in which researchers might improve on current practice.

### Keywords

anonymity; confidentiality; naming practices; pseudonymous data; research ethics

### Introduction

When working with qualitative data, researchers generally disguise or remove information that might directly or indirectly lead to the identification of the participants and any other people, organizations and places described. The resulting data are commonly referred to as 'pseudonymized' or 'pseudonymous' data.<sup>1</sup> Researchers often have no choice but to de-identify data in order to meet ethical and legal requirements, especially when conducting

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<sup>1</sup> In the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), 'pseudonymous' data refers to information that has been de-identified but where a separate key has been kept, allowing re-identification if required. This is distinct from 'anonymous' data, which are not relatable to individuals by any means and hence are not subject to the Regulation (European Parliament and Council of European Union, 2016).

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3 studies on sensitive topics or with small populations. They do, however, have some latitude  
4 over how to do this as the exact methods for disguising data are not usually prescribed  
5 (Allen & Wiles, 2016).  
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9 As others have noted, the thinking behind and mechanics of choosing pseudonyms  
10 tend to be thinly reported in empirical works, if at all (Guenther, 2009). Reference to their  
11 use in these reports is usually relegated to a footnote that simply states 'pseudonyms are  
12 used throughout' or similar. More information is found in methodological works on the  
13 topic, particularly those in which researchers reflect on the issues they encountered when  
14 disguising data in particular studies (see, for example, Allen & Wiles, 2016; Brear, 2018;  
15 Lahman et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2015). Studies of related practices, such as the naming  
16 conventions used in some fields of research (Edwards, 2019; Thomas, 2010), the use of  
17 verbatim quotations in research reports (Corden & Sainsbury, 2005, 2006), and the  
18 management of confidentiality (Wiles et al., 2008), have also provided some valuable  
19 insights into researchers' and/or participants' preferences for how identities are disguised in  
20 qualitative research.  
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31 Building on this literature, I aim to do two things in this paper. First, I describe  
32 different approaches to disguising names and other information that have been used in the  
33 social sciences and humanities. Second, I examine how the selection and use of different  
34 types of aliases not only de-identifies data but also frames the identities of the people and  
35 places concerned and positions the relations between the interactants in ways I elucidate. In  
36 these ways, I hope to encourage researchers to reflect more on their naming practices and to  
37 better account for these in empirical works.  
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## 48 **Techniques**

49 To disguise identifying information in transcripts of interviews and discussion groups, and  
50 records of observations, fieldwork, and other textual data, qualitative researchers use  
51 various techniques at different stages of the research process. Transcripts and records may  
52 be disguised before analysis commences, as part of the initial process of checking the  
53 accuracy of transcripts of audio recording and correcting the texts. Alternatively, data may  
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3 be corrected at the start, with identifiers left intact for the duration of the primary analysis  
4 and only anonymized at the end of a project, when preparing datasets for archiving.  
5 Research participants may or may not be given the opportunity to check and correct  
6 transcripts, and to select or approve their designated pseudonyms, if used. As well as  
7 disguising the data, researchers and transcribers may also apply some form of disguise to  
8 data filenames, document headers, study meta-data and data analysis charts when  
9 processing data, in order to keep the information secure and private during transmission,  
10 storage and use by primary researchers and secondary analysts.  
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18 In some time-pressured projects, researchers may only check for identifiers in  
19 excerpts used to illustrate findings in presentations and reports, and then anonymize them  
20 for publication. Published quotations are also generally annotated. Participants and  
21 interviewers are given tags to show speakers' turns. Descriptive information may also be  
22 given in brackets at the end of excerpts, identifying speakers by pseudonyms or by  
23 characteristics such as their age and gender and/or role. A table listing all the participants  
24 individually by their unique study identifier and/or their demographic characteristics may  
25 also be included in some publications.  
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33 To disguise the real names of people, organizations, places and other identifying  
34 information at source and/or in reports, three types of aliases tend to be used, either singly  
35 or in combination, along with punctuation and other editorial conventions. These are  
36 described below along with examples from various fields of research.  
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### 41 *Pseudonyms*

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43 A 'pseudonym' is a false name that differs from the real name of a person (orthonym) or  
44 place (toponym). In qualitative research, individual participants tend to be assigned  
45 pseudonyms by researchers, although sometimes they may be asked to choose their own.  
46 So, a participant called, say, 'Pamela Jedstone', might be given the fake name of 'Samantha  
47 Smith'. If she was mentioned by name by another participant, such as her husband, whose  
48 surname she shares, then he might be assigned a matching alias, such as 'Alan Smith'. Some  
49 examples of pseudonyms that have been used in published works are shown in Table 1.  
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3 [Insert Table 1]  
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6 As the table illustrates, different sources and types of pseudonyms have been used  
7 for people's names in research. They include some chosen by researchers and some self-  
8 selected or approved by participants; common cultural names and rarer forms; and names  
9 based on plants and animal species.<sup>2</sup> Other researchers have reported pseudonyms being  
10 based on a car marque, a Shakespearian character, and a pet's name (Allen & Wiles, 2016).  
11 The name forms also range from the use of surnames with honorific titles, to the less formal  
12 use of given names only. In some cases, pseudonyms have been truncated to very short  
13 forms, such as 'K' as in Smith's titular 'K is mentally ill' (Smith, 1978), and 'Mrs B' in  
14 Sweeney and Heath's (2008) account of a consultation between a patient and a general  
15 practitioner – a convention that has a precedent in early conversation analysis (Billig,  
16 1999). Following these examples, the real name 'Pamela Jedstone' might be replaced with  
17 the fictional 'Samantha Smith' and variations thereof ('Samantha', 'Sam', 'Mrs Smith', 'Mrs  
18 S' or simply 'S'); the nearest equivalent form might be substituted in each case (that is,  
19 'Samantha' for 'Pamela' and 'Sam' for 'Pam', 'Mrs Smith' for 'Mrs Jedstone') or just one  
20 variant used throughout.  
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32 Likewise, references to the names of places or regions where the research was  
33 conducted that might enable the identities of themselves or the study population to be  
34 inferred, particularly if working in a small rural community, may also be disguised using  
35 pseudonyms. Thus, a real village called 'Fairstow' might be given the alias 'Daleside'. Some  
36 examples of pseudonyms that have been used for places, as well as for organizations and  
37 services, are shown in Table 2.  
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44 [Insert Table 2]  
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47 In some papers, whole sections may be devoted to detailed case studies of  
48 individual participants or particular places or settings, with their pseudonyms used in  
49 section headers (Downe, 2001; Dyck et al., 2005; France et al., 2011; Graham 2015).  
50 Occasionally, pseudonyms may even be included in titles of papers (Hollett & Ehret, 2015);  
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56 <sup>2</sup> The pseudonyms 'Rat Man' and 'Wolf-Man' were in turn based on the person's fears or dreams.  
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3 Lynd & Lynd, 1929, 1937; Smith, 1978; West, 1945), in notes or acknowledgements  
4 (Hamilton, 1996; Sheridan et al., 2011), and in Christmas cards and other study  
5 correspondence sent to participants (Allen & Wiles, 2016).  
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### 8 9 *Epithets*

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11 Epithets are descriptive terms used to describe the character of a person or place ('epithet' is  
12 derived from the Greek term meaning 'added'). They are used in research to replace the real  
13 names of people mentioned by participants with one or more terms that conveys their role  
14 and/or relationship to the speaker. So, if 'Pamela Jedstone' was a general practitioner (GP),  
15 references to her in an interview with one of her patients might be replaced by '[GP]' in  
16 brackets; references to her by another health care professional (HCP) at the same practice  
17 might be replaced by '[GP colleague]'; and references to her work by her husband might be  
18 replaced by '[GP]' rather than by '[wife or spouse]'. The exact choice of terms depends  
19 partly on context and partly on the specificity of role – so '[HCP]' might be used instead of  
20 '[GP]' if Pamela was the only GP in a sample of health care professionals, to minimize the  
21 possibility of her identity being inferred. Epithets can also be used for places, where real  
22 names are replaced with descriptions, such as '[town]', '[coastal village]', '[northern city]' or  
23 similar. Epithets may also be used to label quotations in reports, with or without the  
24 addition of pseudonyms. Some examples are shown in Table 3.  
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40 Epithets are mainly adopted by researchers without the involvement of participants.  
41 However, as Table 3 shows, when participants have been invited to choose their own  
42 pseudonyms, some individuals have chosen what might be considered to be epithets (or  
43 similar nicknames) as their aliases, such as 'Pretty' (Brear, 2018), 'Happy' (Rodham et al.,  
44 2012), 'Super Woman' and 'Tricksey' (Salmon, 2007).<sup>3</sup>  
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55 <sup>3</sup> Of course, in some cultures, names such as 'Pretty' may be conventional, which highlights the  
56 importance of understanding onomastics (naming practices) when using pseudonyms.  
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### ***Codenames***

Codenames are index terms assigned to participants and other people, places and organizations by researchers. They can take a relatively simple alphanumeric form, such as 'ID12' for 'Pamela Jedstone', and may be used with or without epithets, such as 'village 2' or 'site 2' for 'Fairstow' respectively. More complex forms can be used to convey further information about the characteristics of the participants. For example, the codes 'ID12/f/40s/GP/S3' might be used as a file header and/or speaker tag to denote a participant's unique study reference number, gender, age band, role, and study setting in a way that can be observed at a glance. Some examples are shown in Table 4.

[Table 4]

In reports, participants' unique study reference numbers are sometimes used as tags for speakers in published quotations, instead of a pseudonym or a standard abbreviation like 'R:' for respondent. They can also be incorporated into labels in brackets following quotations, along with other codes or, more usually, epithets like 'ID2, female, carer'.

### ***Punctuation and other editorial techniques***

Both epithets and codenames tend to be used in conjunction with punctuation marks to indicate which segments of text in transcripts have been disguised or annotated. These conventions vary a great deal. Marks such as [ ], { }, < >, @@ or ## are variously used at the beginning and end of segments to indicate where text has been edited and the contents redacted or replaced. In published excerpts, other marks or text might be inserted to indicate that text has been deleted or modified, as in [...], {anon}, or <text deleted>. In contrast, pseudonyms tend to be used without any embellishment,<sup>4</sup> after a brief explanatory note – typically in a footnote on the first occasion a name is used.

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<sup>4</sup> For an exception, see Scarth (2016) who, writing about why bereaved participants wanted their real names to be used in reports, represented 'nom de plumes' in italics and real names in normal font.

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3 In general, participants, organizations and places tend to be assigned aliases that are  
4 unique to them and these are applied consistently in dataset(s) and excerpts in reports. This  
5 allows for quotes by particular individuals to be cross-referenced within publications and to  
6 be tracked over time in qualitative longitudinal research. However, where this approach  
7 might enable identities to be inferred, additional measures can be taken to obscure the  
8 identity of individuals and/or the relations between them. For example, when reporting the  
9 results of a study involving small rural communities, Nimegeer and Farmer (2016) chose to  
10 provide only minimal description of participants and to avoid using gendered pronouns as  
11 well as pseudonyms. In her study of social scientists, Platt changed the names and  
12 sometimes even the sexes of participants; she also used the same pseudonym for more than  
13 one person (Platt, 1976). And in their study of family members of people with severe brain  
14 injuries, Saunders et al. (2015) used multiple techniques: they purposely assigned different  
15 pseudonyms to extracts from the same people as a 'smoke screen' (p. 621); they employed a  
16 different set of pseudonyms in one publication to those used in other reports; they  
17 decoupled participants' associations with hospitals and locations; and, in some cases, they  
18 disguised the familial relationship of the participants as another way of minimizing the  
19 chances of a 'jigsaw identification' being made (p. 627).  
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33 Another editorial technique involves creating composite figures by melding together  
34 elements from multiple participants' accounts (Markham, 2012). 'Fictional vignettes' have  
35 also been suggested as a means of communicating research findings (Rabbiosi & Vanolo,  
36 2017). Writing in a different context, Gibson (2020) has argued that fictionalized accounts  
37 can be used to represent data in ways that are empathetic and verisimilar to the social world  
38 being studied – which potentially provides another way of disguising data.  
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45 It should also be noted that, in the past, researchers have published their work using  
46 pseudonyms for themselves, in order to prevent the identities of the communities they  
47 studied being identified. Examples include Carl Withers' study of Plainville in the United  
48 States, which was published under his pen name of 'James West' (West, 1945); and the  
49 anthropologist Sjaak van der Geest reported his work in Ghana as 'Wolf Bleek' (van der  
50 Geest, 2003).  
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### **Aliases and identities**

The techniques described above should, if carefully applied, help to conceal identifying information in qualitative datasets and research reports. However, they are not without issues. Problems with the politics, power and paternalism of using pseudonyms in social research have been previously described (Guethner, 2009; Lahman et al., 2015; Svalastog & Erickson, 2010). So too have the difficulties of de-identifying data without distorting it or cleaning it to the point that it loses its integrity and becomes devoid of vital context and meaning (Clark, 2006; Edwards 2019). Other issues that have received less attention to date, are how the different techniques frame the identities of participants, populations and places, and position the relations between the interactants, which I examine below.

### ***Framing identities***

As we have seen, pseudonyms are commonly used in qualitative research. This technique has the advantage of allowing data to be de-identified without being de-personalized as well. This is important in qualitative studies designed to capture the richness of, and thickly describe, participants' lived experiences and social worlds. Unsurprisingly, in work involving people living with dementia, brain injuries, and those who have been bereaved, using pseudonyms is the preferred technique precisely because it avoids de-personalizing those who have already experienced a loss of, or change in, their identity or that of a loved one (Saunders et al., 2015; Scarth, 2016).

Using pseudonyms does, however, involve substituting names with others that, by definition, are false and changes how people and places are identified. This is problematic because orthonyms have personal, social and symbolic meanings: they are markers of, and convey ideas about, ethnicity, age, gender, religion and other identity characteristics. Likewise, toponymies have historical, topographical and cultural associations. By replacing the real name of a person or place with a pseudonym, researchers are essentially removing one identity and replacing it with another. The chosen pseudonyms may or may not be congruent with the participants' self-identities and/or approved by them; and they may or may not have particular meaning and connotations for the people and places associated

with the research, as well as for the analysts, and other users of the datasets and readers of the published results of the work.

This raises the question: how do researchers pick and assign the pseudonyms for participants and places? Unfortunately, this information is only occasionally reported in empirical works. Examination of such reports, as well as methodological and reflective works on anonymizing data and related topics, suggests that pseudonyms are selected using different systems. One approach involves choosing pseudonyms that purport to represent the characteristics of the sample, such as the age, gender, ethnicity and location of the participants. Thus, Saunders et al., (2015, p. 621) avoided selecting pseudonyms that revealed too much about the ethnic or cultural backgrounds of participants but chose ones that 'resonated' with them in some way. Fazio et al., (2011: 637) also 'made an effort to choose ones [pseudonyms] that reflected the culture and ethnonational background of the participants' names'. Other researchers used random name generators (Pelletier et al., 2020) or chose names alphabetically (Hedman et al., 2013; Jones & Coffey 2011; Mullan, 2013). Yet others selected names that had some special meaning or associations. For instance, in a study of people living with dementia, pseudonyms were chosen for the participants because of their special meaning, such as 'Audrey' for 'noble spirit' and 'Fran' for 'free' (de Witt et al., 2009, 2010; see Table 1).<sup>5</sup> In another study, of people's experiences of using complementary and alternative therapies for Ménière's disease in the UK and Australia, the authors' ascribed pseudonyms based on the names of British wild flowers and Australian indigenous plant species (Long & Bennett, 2009; see Table 1). In other cases, researchers chose pseudonyms that were inspired by their own relatives' names (James, 2013) or based on famous contemporary sociologists' names (see Edwards, 2019), or that were symbolic for the researcher themselves (see Thomas, 2010).

While it is usually researchers who assign pseudonyms to participants, in some studies participants have been invited to choose their own. In a detailed account of this process in the context of a participatory action research project conducted in rural

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<sup>5</sup> The works by de Witt et al., (2009) and Downe (2001) are the only papers I am aware of that mention the researchers and/or participants using a source book of names to select pseudonyms.

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3 Swaziland, Brear (2018) explains that this was not straightforward. She found that, once  
4 given the choice, some of the co-researcher participants initially wanted to use their real  
5 names.<sup>6</sup> They subsequently changed their minds over whether they wanted to be assigned a  
6 pseudonym or use their real name, and then over which false name they preferred,  
7 suggesting that the process was dynamic (Brear, 2018; see also Allen & Wiles, 2016;  
8 Downe, 2001; Scarth, 2016). When selecting pseudonyms, the participants chose mainly  
9 English-language and not indigenous siSwati-language names, for various reasons. One  
10 person chose a name that Brear asked them to change, concerned about how it (Bin Laden)  
11 might be interpreted. In another detailed examination of the self-selection of pseudonyms in  
12 two anthropological studies set in Barbados and Canada, Downe (2001) reveals the ways in  
13 which the choices of two girls were associated with notions of gender, and with positive  
14 and negative cultural identities.

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25 Epithets also have limitations. By using descriptive terms, researchers may  
26 inadvertently define participants in terms of roles, relationships or traits that the latter may  
27 or may not relate to and regard as meaningful or significant. For instance, in their study of  
28 the use of verbatim quotations in social research, Corden and Sainsbury (2006, p. 105)  
29 found that some participants did not like their quotes being attributed to someone who was  
30 described as a 'disabled person' or an 'income support recipient', but they were more  
31 accepting of the use of demographic epithets such as '[male, 30s]'.<sup>7</sup> This was because they  
32 felt that the former terms might mark them as different or that they might be judged by  
33 them. Epithets are also used more generally in research reports, in the form of categories  
34 and language that participants may not necessarily self-identify with. Examples include  
35 parents of disabled children being described as 'carers' even though they regard themselves  
36 as 'parents', and people living with dementia being referred to as 'PWD'.<sup>8</sup> Participants may  
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49 <sup>6</sup> See also Saunders et al., (2015) and Grinyer (2004). Research teams may not be able to oblige  
50 because of ethical constraints or because revealing their identities would then compromise the  
51 privacy of those in the study who did not want to be identified.

52 <sup>7</sup> Corden and Sainsbury (2006) also found sharp differences in participants views on the tidying of  
53 quotes and rendering of ethnic speech and speech impaired patterns.

54 <sup>8</sup> Some journal guidelines state that such abbreviations should not be used, preferring more  
55 humanizing language (for example, *Dementia: The International Journal of Social Research and*  
56 *Practice*).  
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3 also prefer to be described in more than one way and not only defined in terms of, say, their  
4 medical condition. In addition, some epithets chosen by participants as their alias may be  
5 ambiguous; for example, 'Super Woman' could reflect a positive self-image, or it could be  
6 an ironic self-reference to an over-loaded carer.  
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11 A potential advantage of using codenames instead of pseudonyms is that they meet  
12 ethical and other requirements to de-identify data without imposing new names and  
13 associated identities on people and places. However, by using codenames for participants,  
14 researchers risk representing and conveying information about them in ways that might be  
15 perceived to de-personalize them, reducing them to a set of impersonal index figures and a  
16 configuration of codes. In studies involving families or complex networks, the use of codes  
17 may also become convoluted and result in text that is difficult to read. These changes may,  
18 in turn, influence the ways in which analysts and readers (including participants  
19 themselves) relate to the people so represented in transcripts, records and reports. It was for  
20 similar reasons that Allen and Wiles (2016, p. 154) decided not to use this technique  
21 because they felt it would be 'unnecessarily distancing, especially as participants were  
22 receiving the transcripts of their interviews, where their very personal accounts would be  
23 linked to somebody called merely "P3".  
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### 34 ***Positioning names***

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37 Further examination of the ways in which different types of aliases and associated editorial  
38 techniques have been used in published works also reveals other issues with how they  
39 represent the relations between participants and researchers. As Table 1 shows, culturally  
40 common names are often used as pseudonyms. Where first names and hypocoristic name  
41 forms are used (for example, 'Sam' not 'Samantha') this adds to the sense of informality and  
42 suggests a friendly relationship between the researchers and the participants. Conversely, in  
43 some studies, more formal pseudonyms with honorific titles and surnames were used  
44 because the researchers felt that those name forms reflected the nature of their relationship  
45 with the participants (Day & Hitchings, 2011) or that it was how the participants would  
46 want to be addressed (Hildon et al., 2008). While the former approach is warm and  
47 humanizes the sample, and the latter is more formal and respectful, at the same time there is  
48 a risk that the pseudonyms and/or form of names chosen for individuals do not reflect the  
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3 (in)formality of relations achieved between the researchers and the individual participants  
4 (this is likely to vary in any given sample), and/or may draw on stereotypical ideas about  
5 the sample populations (Edwards, 2019).  
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9 In addition, a possible cumulative effect of the repeated use of common names as  
10 pseudonyms across studies and over time is that participants, when so labelled, become  
11 archetypal, everyman/everywoman-type figures – a Joe Bloggs, Jane Doe or John Smith –  
12 and paradoxically lose their individuality. In this way, some of the uniqueness and  
13 heterogeneity of diverse samples in qualitative work might inadvertently be lost by the  
14 nature and form of pseudonyms adopted. Similarly, some of the pseudonyms used for  
15 places in Table 2 are evocative: 'Plainville' and 'Middletown' are suggestive of types of  
16 geographical area or average towns; others have place-based connotations and age-related  
17 associations in UK culture (Deer View Nursing Home; Lavender Wing). The pseudonym  
18 'Ashworthy' also implies the study relates to one place when in fact it was based on two  
19 villages (W.M. Williams interviewed by Paul Thompson, 2008).  
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29 The use of different re-naming techniques within the same study can also contribute  
30 to the positioning of participants as central or marginal figures. For instance, in Smith's  
31 (1978) detailed analysis of a single interview transcript, she states that: 'Here is the  
32 interview as I received it, plus minor alterations to further conceal identities. The  
33 punctuation is the interviewer's. The form and paragraphing are as the interviewer wrote it  
34 up' (Smith, 1978, p. 28). In the 138 lines of transcript that follow, 'K' is the only person who  
35 is given this form of pseudonym; the other figures are referred to by first names ('Angela';  
36 'Trudi'; 'Betty') or by epithets (Angela's 'mother', 'father', 'parents'; Betty's 'boyfriend'; 'a  
37 boy'). This differential practice effectively directs attention to the work done by the  
38 multiple protagonists to construct the central figure of the paper as mentally ill. Conversely,  
39 in another report of a study using the correspondence method, participants' references to  
40 their relationship with the lead author are edited using an initial 'D' for the latter's name  
41 ('Debbie'), thereby minimizing her presence as a figure in the correspondence with the  
42 women participants, who are mostly unnamed (Kralik et al., 2000).  
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54 Similarly, interviewers are almost always represented in quotations as simply 'I:' or  
55 'INT:', even when multiple interviewers are involved in a given study team. In these ways,  
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3 they are positioned as relatively monomorphic and marginal figures compared to the  
4 participants. Yet, as one participant in Corden and Sainsbury's (2005) study on the use of  
5 verbatim quotations observed, the interviewer's gender, age bracket, ethnicity and other  
6 characteristics might well have influenced how the participants spoke to her or him. Thus,  
7 while this convention focuses attention on the people who the research is about, at the same  
8 time, it may downplay the relationship between the participants and the researchers that  
9 was formative of the data.  
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16 There are other ways in which the use of aliases to disguise data may potentially  
17 shape the relations between researchers and participants at different points in the research  
18 process. During data collection, interviewers and discussion group moderators may try to  
19 avoid referring to people, places and organizations by their given names in order to  
20 minimize the amount of de-identification to be done afterwards. This may, in turn, affect  
21 the rapport achieved with the participants, the type of information disclosed by participants,  
22 and the quality and clarity of the data, making it harder to identify precisely who or what  
23 was being talked about at a later stage. When pseudonyms are used to disguise data pre-  
24 analysis, this may also affect the ways in which the analyst(s) relate to the data, depending  
25 on whether or not they collected the data personally and remember the interviewees by their  
26 real names. And researchers (or participants) may selectively include material in reports  
27 based on their judgement of how sensitive it might be to those concerned.  
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38 Finally, secondary analysts also face some unique challenges when working with  
39 de-identified data. For example, I carried out a secondary study of a qualitative dataset in  
40 which all identifiers had been removed by the primary researchers and no key retained, so  
41 the data were completely anonymous. I assigned codenames to the participants that were  
42 unique to the secondary study. When seeking to publish the results, I was initially asked by  
43 the reviewers and editor to use pseudonyms instead. Because the data were truly  
44 anonymous, I had no way of knowing if I might inadvertently choose a pseudonym for a  
45 participant that was in fact their actual name. This was further complicated by the study  
46 being set in north Wales, where there are some very common forenames and surnames, and  
47 the participants were an older generation, some of whom may have had traditional Welsh  
48 names.  
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## Conclusion

The 'de-identification' of textual data using pseudonyms or other techniques is rather a misnomer. By removing real names and replacing them with pseudonyms, epithets and/or codenames, researchers (and sometimes participants) are in effect replacing each identifier with other personal or impersonal ones, as well as subtly positioning the relations between themselves in particular ways. Given the personal, social, and symbolic meanings that names have in different cultures – as well as the acts of using associated honorifics and preferred pronouns (or not) – it is important that researchers attend more to these naming practices and their identity-framing and positioning effects. This is necessary for two main reasons: firstly, to ensure that data are disguised in ways that are acceptable to the participants and populations involved, while still retaining their integrity and being accessible and fit for use; and, secondly, to acknowledge the strengths and limitations of the adopted obscurant technique(s).

There are a number of ways in which researchers could improve on current practice. They could engage more with research participants, discussing their preferences and concerns about different systems for disguising data (and whether it even needs to be). This might include discussion of the use of gender-free pronouns and attitudes to the use of non-human name forms (based on flowers, animals, colors or other preferred schemas). They might also carry out further research on the ways in which research data and findings are rendered and communicated, investigating questions such as: Are participants' concerns about the use of aliases and other editorial techniques related to popular ideas about empiricism, truth, veracity and verisimilitude in science and scientific works? How do participants feel about their accounts being dramatized and reported via non-traditional means? How might this be done faithfully in their eyes? Which methods best engage end-users of social research and facilitate impact? Researchers could also draw on work in other disciplines to learn more about the ways in which naming practices in general have developed over time and operate in different historical and cultural contexts. In these ways, the use of pseudonyms and other techniques to disguise data in qualitative research may become less of a footnote and more considered in practice.

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Table 1: Illustrative examples of pseudonym aliases used for people's names

Examples	Reference
K	Smith (1978)
Mrs B	Sweeney & Heath (2008)
Mrs H-P, Mrs H-B, Ms. R, Mrs T, Mrs J-R, Mr Q, Ms J, Mrs Z, Mrs S, Mrs R-A, Mrs H, Mrs I, Mr C	Hillcoat-Nallétamby (2017)
*Mr A, Ms B, Ms C, Ms D, Ms E, Mr F, Ms G, Mr H, Mr I, Mr J, Mr K, Mr L	Hedman et al., (2013)
Parker (also Bean), Steve, Sarah	Hollett & Ehret (2015)
Florence, Mildred, Anna, Gladys, Edna, James, Mary, Helen, William, John, Joseph, Ruth	Duane et al., (2011)
Angelo, Christopher, Christian, Allen, Paul, Rajeev, Johnny, William, PJ, Ernie, Surat, Arjun, Hien, Miki, Ryan	Fazio et al., (2011)
Khulekani, Railinah, Essie, Elphas, Siphon, Ernest, Esther, Nomsa, Lungile, Glory, Losta, Clifford, Nancy, Freddy, Gale, Dorcus, Ruth, Precious, Nonhlanhla, Sbusiso	Goudge et al., (2009)
Ted, Roger, Bob, Don, Peter, Tom, Bill, Gordon, Keith, Al, Malcolm, Mick, Eric, Selwyn, Joe, Sam, Roy, Raymond, John, Vince, Cliff, Reg, Adam, Ken, Jim, Bruce, David, Harry, Phil, Doug, Eddie, Henry, Mike, Bob, Greg, George, Andy, Chris, Davy, Mark, Paul, Ben, James, Barry, Ken, Jerry, Bill, Colin, Graham, Rob, Ian, Roderick, Richard, Larry, Steve, Fred, Nick	Milligan et al., (2015)
Daniela, Lola, Carmen, Sofia, Lorena, Lourdes, Yvonne	Gulbas & Zayas (2015)
Alice, Becky, Ismene, Charlotte, Fiona	Sheridan et al., (2011)
Steph and Sam; Lyn and Phillip; Susan and Jim	Downey et al., (2017)
*Anne, Ben, Chris, Dave, Edward, Frank, Grant, Heidi, Iris, Jane, Kay, Len, Mark, Nia, Olivia, Paula, Quentin, Ruth, Susan, Tom	Jones & Coffey (2011)
*Alan, Bill, Clara, Dick, Eamon, Fred, Gayle, Harriet, Ian, Jack, Ken, Lee, Martin, Niamh, Owen, Peter	Mullan (2013)
Betty MacRobert, Rebecca Jackson, Jimmy McLean, Isobel MacDonald, Alice Taylor, Jane Gilbert, Myra Bains	McColgan (2005)
Mrs Jansen	Janssen et al., (2014)
Mr Hamilton, 76; Mr Crompton, 76; Mr Mitchell, 72; Mr Smith, 70; Mrs Bosworth, 79; Mrs Henson, 73	Hildon et al., (2008)
Nadine (hope); Keisha (gentle); Audrey (noble strength); Fran (free); Leona (courageous spirit); Kay (joyful); Kera (protected); Faith (firm believer)	de Witt et al., (2009; 2010)
Amaranth, Hollyhock, Chamomile, Foxglove, Daffodil, Eyebright, Grevillea	Long & Bennett (2009)
Rat Man; Wolf-Man	Freud (1909; 1918)
**Karen, David, Janice, Jane, Steve, Brenda, Judy, Melissa, Frank, Theresa	Pelletier et al., (2020)
***Kizzy, Ashley-Mika	Downe (2001)
***Robert, Melissa, Mark, Al, Chan, Gregory, Mary, Ric, Liz	Duff (2012)
***Jim Heather, Joe Brown, Angela Huggins, Bosse Knudsen, Gus Holden, Nancy Matheson, Esther Hernandez, Julianna Molnar	Hulko (2009)
***Mary, Simon, Samuel, Adrianna, Sophie, Petunia, Lucy, Jackie, Colin Trevor Dutoit	Breare (2018)
***Angelina, Bill, Dorothy, Nelly, Roz, Sam, Crystal, Hope, Sarah, Thomas	Rodham et al., (2012)
***Mary, Jo-Anne, Shannon	Salmon (2007)

\*alphabetical; \*\*randomly generated; \*\*\*self-selected or approved by participants

Table 2: Illustrative examples of aliases for places, organisations and services

<b>Examples</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Middletown (for a town, US)	Lynd & Lynd (1929, 1937)
Plainville (for a town, US)	West (1945)
Ashworthy (for a village in the West Country, UK)	Williams (1963)
Colton (for an Appalachian community, US)	Rowles (1988)
Ayere (for a town in Ghana)	van der Geest (2003)
Adair, Beagan, Moreton, Gairden, Caltowie, Doonburr, Elandra, Pintan (for remote communities in Scotland and Australia)	Prior et al., (2010)
Evesham Public Library (EPL), Buckingham Public Library (BPL), Glendale Public Library (GPL), Dalton Public Library (DPL), Stoneham Public Library (SPL) (for Public Libraries in Ontario, Canada)	Griffis & Johnson (2014)
Rathbeg Services (for an intellectual disability service, Republic of Ireland)	Feely (2019)
Deer View Grange Nursing Home and Lavender Wing (for a private nursing home, Scotland)	McColgan (2005)

Or Peer Review

Table 3: Illustrative examples of epithet aliases (with and without pseudonyms)

Examples	Reference
James (carer interview), Mary (carer interview), Daphne (service user interview), Bill (carer interview), Winifred (carer interview), Harry (service user interview), Nancy (carer interview), Effie (carer focus group); Diana, Dawn, Joyce, Dierdre, Ross, Katie (all from focus groups)	Blackstock et al., (2006)
Haji, Abdul, Brendan, Juliette (16-18 focus group); Zeb (14-16 Focus group), Eric (15, interviewee), Methanwe (14-16 focus group), Mangit (14-16 focus group), Fahad (15, interviewee), Jocasta (14, interview), Selina (14-16 focus group), Harid (17, interview), Becky (14, interview)	Harries et al., (2019)
Mrs. Wright, 73, lower income; David and Carol, 70s, higher income; Mr. Spicer, 78, lower income; Mr. and Mrs. Corbert, 80s, higher income; Norma, 74, higher income; Mrs. Lovett, 75, lower income; Mr. and Mrs. Spicer, 70s, lower income; Mrs. Spence, 70s, lower income; Julia, 70, higher income; Mr. Page, 76, lower income	Day & Hitchings (2011)
Dan, white British, no family experience of HE, Brasenose School (independent school, Greater Manchester); Leo, white British, NS-SEC 1, St. Alexanders Boys' School (independent school, London); Sian, white British, NS-SEC 2, parental experience of HE, Ysgol Abereynon (Welsh-medium school, post-industrial coastal town, South Wales)	Donnelly et al., (2020)
*Pretty	Brear (2018)
*Cloggy, Happy, Snoopy	Rodham et al., (2012)
*Super Woman, Tricksey	Salmon (2007)
Person living with dementia, female, dyad 51; person living with dementia, male, dyad 75; daughter, dyad 3; niece, dyad 8; brother, dyad 1)	ANONYMISED

\*self-selected or approved by participants

Table 4: Illustrative examples of codename aliases (with and without epithets)

Examples	Reference
Community A: Participant A1 (retired individual, self-selected), Participant A2 (local business owner, community member, self-referred), Participant A3 (locally active parent, community member referral); Community B: Participant B1 (retired individual, self-selected), Participant B2 (healthcare practitioner, community member referral), Participant B3 (single, employed individual, self-selected); Community C: Participant C1 (local business owner, community member referral)	Nimegeer & Farmer (2016)
Dyad 1, R1, F1; Dyad 2, R2, F2; Dyad 3, R3, F3; Dyad 4, R4, F4; Dyad 5, R5, F5(a), F5(b); S1 Lifestyle Manager; S2 Personal Care Worker; S3 Care Manager; S4 Personal Care Worker; S5 Enrolled Nurse; S6 Diversional Therapist; S7 Endorsed Enrolled Nurse	Moyle et al., (2014)
Interview, service user, primary document PD25; Interview, NHS manager PD9; Interview, NHS manager PD12; Interview, CMHT social work manager PD8; Interview, community nursing manager PD1; Interview, CMHT nurse PD2; Interview, hospital nursing manager PD5; Interview, CMHT nurse PD16; Interview, CMHT social work manager PD8; Interview, CRHT team psychiatrist PD18; Interview, CMHT nurse manager PD11	Hannigan (2013)
*D33/409, age 18; C1/540, female, age 22, scoliosis; D7/727, female, age 20; E9/522, female, age 23	ANONYMISED
**PS11MPP0SRD; mumPS11MPP0SRD	James (2012)

\*D: diabetes; E: epilepsy; C: chronic illness and the participant's unique study reference number/paragraph number.

\*\*PS: rural school; 11: age of the interviewee; M: male; PP: two parents; OS: no siblings; RD: restricted diet.