



Safeguarding Participants: Using Pseudonyms for Ensuring Confidentiality and Anonymity in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Using pseudonyms for research participants is not new. However, there is little discussion in the Nepali context concerning the practical strategies for assigning pseudonyms. This study unfolds the multiple aspects of using pseudonyms in qualitative research and provides practical guidelines for novice researchers. Using narrative interviews and document analysis methods, this study integrates these approaches with critical reflections on PhD fieldwork. I argue that using pseudonyms for research participants is not straightforward and linear; instead, it is situational and depends on the research context, data sensitivity and participants' desires. Hence, a researcher needs to be allowed to decide whether to use pseudonyms and which pseudonyms best safeguard their participants. The study's findings show that ensuring absolute confidentiality and anonymity is challenging. However, a researcher's careful and responsive approach helps protect participants' privacy. While it is the autonomy of the researcher to use a proper strategy in assigning pseudonyms, negotiating with participants based on discussion with them could be a flexible alternative. Nepali researchers use an alphabet, alphabet and number together, alphabet and word together, and word phrase in disguising participants based on age, gender, ethnicity, culture and contemporary society. This study suggests including the process of assigning participants' pseudonyms in research reports and publications.

Keywords: Pseudonyms, qualitative research, research ethics, research participants, anonymizing

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Introduction

Protecting participants from possible harm using pseudonyms is a key ethical issue and the heart of qualitative research. Using pseudonyms is a conventional practice and a strategy to disguise the identification of participants, institutions and geographical places to ensure their privacy (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Lahman, 2024; Macleod & Mnyaka, 2018, Morse & Coulehan, 2015; Vorhölter, 2021). While assigning pseudonyms is a strategy for ensuring anonymity and confidentiality in qualitative research, some of the studies also consider it as challenging to ensure (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Morse & Coulehan, 2015; Reyes, 2018; Vorhölter, 2021) and influenced by the power relation between researcher and participants (Ellersgaard et al., 2021; Itzik & Walsh, 2023). Assigning pseudonyms for participants in qualitative research has been much discussed in the Western world that several studies (Ellersgaard et al., 2021; Engward et al., 2022; Gibson et al., 2012; Heaton, 2022; Lahman et al., 2023) are available. However, the global literature does not discuss the practical concerns of assigning pseudonyms. Moreover, it is little discussed whether assigning pseudonyms ensures anonymity and confidentiality.

The trend of doing qualitative research and using pseudonyms is rapidly growing in Nepal. Several studies (Basnet, 2022; Ghimire, 2021; Rana et al., 2019; Subedi, 2024a; Subedi & Gaulee, 2023) discuss the multiple aspects of doing qualitative fieldwork, but little discusses using pseudonyms in separate publications. Renaming participants is not merely a technicality of doing research; instead, it is a psychological process that concerns assigning pseudonyms respectfully (Allen & Wiles, 2016) and considering cultural sensitivity (Heaton, 2022; Wang et al., 2024). Despite researchers using pseudonyms in their research reports and publications, there is a paucity of broader discussions on the pros and cons of pseudonyms and strategies for naming participants. There is a lack of consensus among researchers concerning renaming participants to preserve their anonymity in qualitative research. Similarly, there is a paucity of knowledge to deal with the specific and contextual challenges of assigning pseudonyms to participants. In addressing this gap, this study seeks to contribute to the available literature by drawing on relevant, context-specific practical strategies derived from the author's doctoral research experience.

This study has two major purposes. First, it aims to continue the discussions in participants' naming practices to ensure their safeguards in the various stages of qualitative research. Second, it aims to contribute knowledge in the Nepali context so that it is easier for future researchers to choose pseudonyms and maintain robust research integrity, particularly when conducting in-depth interviews. More specifically, this study is based on my critical reflections on my PhD fieldwork

and dissertation writing experiences that unfold the dynamics of maintaining confidentiality and anonymity in qualitative research by using pseudonyms by answering the following research questions:

1. Does using pseudonyms ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of participants in qualitative research?
2. How are participants' identities masked in existing qualitative research practices?
3. How do qualitative researchers choose pseudonyms to safeguard the participants and mask other local identifications?

Literature Review

Understanding Pseudonyms from Navigating Literature

A qualitative researcher's first and foremost task is to 'disguise the identity of research participants' (Morse & Coulehan, 2015; Vorhölter, 2021). It is a commonly practised ethical task of qualitative researchers to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. It is considered 'naming' participants who take part in research by the researcher. Generally, in in-depth interviews, including other qualitative methods, the real name of participants is replaced by a false name called 'pseudonym' (Heaton, 2022). The intent of assigning pseudonyms is to preserve privacy (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Vorhölter, 2021; Wang et al., 2024) and protect participants from possible harm due to their identifications (Morse & Coulehan, 2015; Reyes, 2018). Pseudonyms are indispensable for qualitative research on sensitive topics. Securing privacy is not only limited to the participants. In addition to the participants, researchers also assign pseudonyms for the geographical places and institutions to preserve them from possible harm when disclosing their identification. While assigning the pseudonyms, it is expected that the participants themselves should be able to recognize themselves, but readers should not be able to determine the participants' identity. Using pseudonyms began in anthropological and sociological qualitative research and later became popular in educational research. Disguising identity begins with qualitative fieldwork, particularly from in-depth interviews, to report writing and dissemination that requires the researcher's careful attention to protect participants' privacy (Morse & Coulehan, 2015). Further, they suggest not preparing a table containing "participants' demographic information—age, gender, occupation, employment, disease, and so forth— line by line" (Morse & Coulehan, 2015, p.151). As participants' demographic information could fail to ensure anonymity, it is better to remove such information. The discussion above suggests that a researcher needs to be careful of any possible participants' identifiers in the entire manuscript that can be changed without destroying the research's integrity.

Using pseudonyms in qualitative research aims to ensure confidentiality and anonymity to avoid harm to the participants. These are distinct concepts as

confidentiality and anonymity come together (Wiles et al., 2006). They further suggest that confidentiality refers to protecting the information collected from the participants, while anonymity is related to protecting the identity of the participants. Saunders et al. (2014) define “‘confidentiality’ as a generic term that refers to all information hidden from everyone except the primary research team. Anonymity is one form of confidentiality – that of keeping participants’ identities secret” (p.2). As protecting participants is an important ethical concern, preserving their interests and well-being in research is equally important. For instance, Macleod and Mnyaka (2018) state that “anonymity is closely related to confidentiality in that anonymizing data assists in confidentiality” (p.239). Therefore, confidentiality focuses on data, but anonymity ensures that participants’ identities are unidentifiable, so they are not recognized.

Nevertheless, confidentiality and anonymity are treated together in qualitative research. However, it is equally important to be careful that in the name of protecting confidentiality and anonymity, the originality and integrity of the research should not be destroyed by overemphasizing pseudonyms (Heaton, 2022). Anonymity focuses on hiding or disguising participants to preserve their privacy from possible harm to them in the future. Similarly, confidentiality is related to the sharing of any identifiable information of participants to others, which is a key concern of qualitative research (Wang et al., 2024). Particularly, the researcher’s serious care requires maintaining confidentiality and anonymity while conducting research or in-depth interviews with the participants. Besides, it is equally necessary to be careful in making the data confidential and anonymous by keeping the geographical places and the research context unidentifiable while collecting data from focus group discussions and participant observation. However, several studies (Ellersgaard et al., 2021; Macleod & Mnyaka, 2018; Reyes, 2018; Saunders et al., 2014; Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011; Vorhölter, 2021) raised the question of ensuring confidentiality and anonymity that is not possible to keep confidential in this digital and the Internet age fully. Because the researcher and the research team were involved in conducting interviews or focus group or participant observation could allow people guess the data even when it was presented in pseudonyms. Moreover, using the Internet and social media (Vorhölter, 2021; Wiles et al., 2006) and a ‘particular methodological challenge’ (Macleod & Mnyaka, 2018, p. 235) has been challenging in ensuring anonymity and confidentiality in many stances.

Concerning the vulnerability of social media and using the Internet to ensure anonymity, Vorhölter (2021) argues that “anonymization, although nowadays taken for granted, poses an underestimated challenge for ethnographic writing, especially in the context of global mobility, the Internet, and social media” and “sometimes,

the research context and the small number of possibly identifiable population could be a challenge in ensuring confidentiality” (p.16). So, the researcher cannot guarantee anonymity (Reyes, 2018). For example, despite the researcher’s serious efforts, Saunders et al. (2014) faced a similar challenge in carrying out a study with the participants having a ‘prolonged disorder of consciousness’ in the UK due to identifiable research context and a small population. Concerning the challenges to ensure full confidentiality and anonymity, Macleod and Mnyaka (2018) argue that “guaranteeing complete anonymity to participants can be an unachievable goal, particularly in qualitative and ethnographic research” (pp. 229-230). They further argue that the research team, especially those responsible for conducting interviews or engaging with participants, will typically be aware of the participants’ identities. Similarly, in some research like (auto)biographical research, life story, oral history, and narrative work, participants want to take ownership for recognizing them in future; hence ensuring confidentiality and confidentiality is impractical (Lahman, 2024). However, Saunders et al. (2014) suggest that if researchers are serious, confidentiality and anonymity could be maintained by anonymizing these six areas: people’s names, places, religious and cultural background, occupation, family relationships, and other potentially identifying issues (i.e., case details). This discussion suggests that ensuring anonymizing and confidentiality is not straightforward and “‘one size fits all’ or ‘find and replace’ approach” (Saunders et al., 2014, p. 12); instead, it is a context-specific task which requires the researcher’s carefulness and seriousness.

As the above discussion indicates, naming or assigning pseudonyms is a common way to ensure ethics in qualitative research, but it has been a challenging task for the researchers (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Lahman et al., 2015; Lahman et al., 2023; Reyes, 2018; Vorhölter, 2021). Despite a huge literature existing on the multiple aspects of assigning pseudonyms for participants (Ellersgaard et al., 2021; Engward et al., 2022; Gibson et al., 2012; Heaton, 2022; Itzik & Walsh, 2023; Lahman et al., 2015; Morse & Coulehan, 2015; Saunders et al., 2014; Vorhölter, 2021; Wang et al., 2024), there is little discussion concerning the naming practices how the Nepali researchers have been assigning pseudonyms in their qualitative studies. Finding even a single publication fully devoted to naming participants is difficult. So, how the Nepali scholars assigned pseudonyms is scattered in their reports and publications. However, the Western world has rich literature in this regard. Viewing pseudonyms from Western perspectives means that multiple perspectives and focuses exist. A recent study (Wang et al., 2024) concluded that researchers assign pseudonyms based on ethnolinguistic backgrounds, particularly assigning “Letter + Number” or “Title + Number” is also a popular pseudonyms practice. They also highlighted that naming participants is related to one’s identity,

and it needs to pay attention to the power differentials between the researcher and participants.

Similarly, several researchers (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Lahman et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024) focus on the cultural background of the participants as a basis for using pseudonyms since they consider that culture reflects in their identity. For instance, Heaton (2022) identified varied naming practices such as changing forename and surname, using either forename or surname, using code (i.e., “ID12” for “Pamela Jadestone,”; “village 2” or “site 2” etc.). However, some scholars suggest a more flexible approach of assigning pseudonyms by providing authority to the researcher. The researcher negotiates with participants to assign a pseudonym, and they collaboratively choose it (Lahman, 2024). She further suggests the practical tips for assigning pseudonyms as “avoid changing ethnic and cultural background, use names but do not use numbers or letters for names, honour participants’ requests to use their real name, but review with them the pros and cons of real-name use” (Lahman, 2024, p. 231).

Like, Itzik and Walsh (2023) offer a different perspective that transfers the choice of pseudonyms to participants. This approach highlights that participants’ names are closely related to and illuminates their identities. Sometimes, it is difficult to make one’s identity since they are at the very apex of society. For instance, in their interview with professional elites, Ellersgaard et al. (2021) faced a similar challenge to disguising identity in that elites do not mask their identity and want to appear with their names. In their study, Allen and Wiles (2016) found that gender, culture, and age are the basis for assigning pseudonyms to the participants. The following section discusses the strategies for assigning pseudonyms.

Strategies for Assigning Pseudonyms to Participants

This section discusses the following strategies for assigning research participants pseudonyms rather than the types of names to assign.

Assigning Names by a Researcher

Naming by a researcher is the most popular and practised strategy of assigning pseudonyms to the participants. Several literature (Delamont, 2016; Kara, 2018; Lahman, 2024; Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011; Wang et al., 2024) discusses this strategy. It provides the sole authority to the researchers in deciding their participants’ names based on their criteria and analysis of the research context. As there is no rule of thumb for assigning names to the participants, the researcher could consider gender, age, cultural background, occupation and other basis similar to the research context (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Ellersgaard et al., 2021; Gibson et al., 2012; Heaton, 2022; Itzik & Walsh, 2023).

Assigning Names with Negotiating Participants

Allowing participants to choose their pseudonyms or deciding upon the discussion between the researcher and participants is the recent approach proposed by several researchers (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Ellersgaard et al., 2021; Gibson et al., 2012; Heaton, 2022; Itzik & Walsh, 2023; Lahman, 2024; Vorhölter, 2021; Wang et al., 2024) where negotiation remains in the centre. As qualitative researchers remain close to their research participants for a long period, particularly in in-depth interviews, pseudonyms can be decided after interacting with them. As such, the prolonged engagement with the participants helps them understand their participants well, particularly when assigning pseudonyms. So, if the participants desire unchanging their names or choose a particular name of their interest while publishing and disseminating the research, it requires negotiating with the participants, and the researchers choose the names what their participants wish. However, as the studies suggest (Vorhölter, 2021; Wang et al., 2024), it is a pre-condition that the researcher needs to be respectful and responsive to their participants while assigning pseudonyms.

Assigning the Real Names

Assigning the real names of research participants without assigning them pseudonyms is a more flexible and democratic strategy in qualitative research. Several studies (Ellersgaard et al., 2021; Macleod & Mnyaka, 2018; Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011; Reyes, 2018; Vorhölter, 2021) suggest this approach for naming participants. This strategy transfers authority to the participants whether they intend to appear in the research, reports and publication for their real names. For instance, Reyes (2018) makes it clear that in some cases, particularly in ethnographic research, it requires putting the real names of the participants (i.e., interviewees) to ensure credibility. In addition, it is equally important to make decisions about geographical places, cases or populations, and research context. The rationale behind this logic is that participants “see their names as inseparable; it did not make sense to use her stories of experience without their names” (Clandinin et al., 2016, p. 30). For instance, Vorhölter (2021) argues that “there are no straightforward solutions to deal with these. If and how research data can and should be anonymized is highly context-dependent and cannot be governed by an a priori one-size-fits-all recommendation” (p.30). It is equally important for the researcher to consider the consequences of putting the participants’ real names in qualitative research despite not wanting to be anonymous.

Assigning No Names

Assigning no names to participants is considered a safe strategy for ensuring confidentiality and anonymity in qualitative research. Some researchers (Lahman, 2024; Morse & Coulehan, 2015; Wiles et al., 2006) suggest no names to make participants anonymous. They suggest using word phrases such as “one participant”, “one male”, and “one teacher”. However, this strategy could sometimes destroy the research context as it is not congruent with the research context and local characteristics. Therefore, a researcher needs to be careful while choosing this strategy.

Methods and Procedures

This article follows the methodological approach used in this study.

Research Design

This article adopts the blended methodology of narrative inquiry and document analysis, integrating with the researcher’s reflexivity and lived experience during his PhD fieldwork. As the literature (Clandinin, 2016; Ghanbar et al., 2024) suggests using participants’ stories as data, I have carefully captured their lived experiences concerning naming participants to protect participants from harm. In addition, narrative inquiry methodology allows me to account for my reflexivity from my PhD research (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Jonsen et al., 2018)) alongside the participants’ experiences. In particular, I am adopting the methodological reflexivity suggested by Whitaker and Atkinson (2021), which will help me to critically assess the methodological procedures I employed during my PhD and their appropriateness.

Participants and Data Collection

I have purposively selected two participants for this study. As narrative inquiry concerns the depth of explorations of participants’ stories, it is rational to use a small number of participants (Barkhuizen, 2014; Subedi, 2021). A male participant (JyoH) recently defended his doctoral research and obtained a PhD. Similarly, another female participant (Bidushi) is close to preparing for the final PhD defence; however, I am masking their other details to ensure anonymity. As I offered to choose their pseudonyms, the male participant chose JyoH, but the female did not interested to select any pseudonym for her. Hence, I assigned her name as ‘Bidushi.’ I am aware that using pseudonyms and maintaining anonymity and confidentiality is not limited to data collection; instead, it requires careful attention during data analysis, interpretation, writing, reporting, and finally, disseminating the research findings (Delamont, 2016; Kara, 2018; Subedi, 2024a). As the narrative inquiry intends to explore participants’ stories and experiences in depth concerning

the all-methodological procedures, I chose the experienced ones to demystify the phenomenon. To capture their stories, I conducted a narrative interview with each of them as literature (Engward et al., 2022; Ham et al., 2022; Keen et al., 2022; Lobe et al., 2020; Rice, 2023), allowing data collection from a distance virtually. While the telephonic interview was performed with the female participant, another interview with the male participant was done via Facebook Messenger. The interview in Nepali lasted 30 to 45 minutes, followed by informal conversations. The interview was recorded using an audio recorder service. Before the interview, informed consent was obtained (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012), and voluntary participation was ensured after describing my study in detail. I collected participants' rich experiences using pseudonyms from the informal conversation and interviews with the participants online as the narrative inquiry allows (Rice, 2023). In addition, I have blended my fieldwork experience (Subedi, 2024a) and writing the PhD dissertation. Finally, as a document analysis, I chose three recent qualitative PhD dissertations (Ghimire, 2024; Sharma, 2023; Subedi, 2024b) from the Graduate School of Education, Faculty of Education (FOE), Tribhuvan University (TU). In addition, to analyze how confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, I selected three qualitative doctoral dissertations (Khanal, 2012; Phyak, 2016; Rana, 2018) by Nepali scholars from foreign universities who have completed rigorous qualitative research with substantial publications in high-ranked journals. The dissertations I reviewed represent a variety of qualitative research designs.

Data Analysis

I employed the reflexive thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022), which considers qualitative data analysis a flexible and recursive process. In addition, I blend thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) with reflexive thematic analysis. First, I listened to an audio recording of the interview many times and transcribed it. I read the transcriptions many times and highlighted the important portions of transcriptions. I translated the Nepali transcriptions into English. Then, I developed the initial themes based on the highlighted codes. With this process in mind, I started to write a report. In the next step, I refined the initial themes and turned them into final ones. I also blend my experience there with themes. Finally, the assigning pseudonyms in PhD dissertation was done to understand the use of pseudonyms by Nepali scholars.

Research Ethics and Trustworthiness

I am aware of maintaining methodological and ethical integrity. So, I considered the suggestion of Finaly (2024) that the data gathering and analyzing process needs to cohere and clear, contextual and evidence-based findings drawn.

Similarly, I am equally careful that “the value of narrative research is the stories told” (Finally, 2024, p. 13). As both of my participants are well-known colleagues from the same graduate school, and I am familiar with the research context, it was not difficult for me to skim their experiences. I also know about online interviews and care about my participants’ well-being (Rice, 2023). After several informal conversations about my project, we agreed to the virtual interview. As Engward et al. (2022) suggest, the researcher needs high sensitivity before, during, and after the interview. They further argue that “online environment researchers require a heightened sensitivity and awareness of their attitudes, knowledge, and skills before, during and after the interview to ensure that the process is safe, rigorous and meaningful for collecting comprehensive qualitative data”(Engward et al., 2022, p. 1). This suggestion also became helpful for short informal conversations with the participants.

Results and Discussion

The data analysis generates the following four themes.

Ensuring Confidentiality and Anonymity

Ensuring confidentiality and anonymity using pseudonyms is the most straightforward and practised strategy for safeguarding participants in qualitative research. Assigning pseudonyms begins from the fieldwork resumed and continues to future publications requiring protecting participants (Clandinin, 2016; Kara, 2018; Lahman, 2024; Lahman et al., 2023). For instance, from the beginning of my PhD fieldwork, I began data collection by assigning pseudonyms to participants, hoping to protect themselves from possible harm while disclosing their identity (Subedi, 2024b). Similarly, Bidushi has her perspectives on ensuring anonymity. She shared:

I think using pseudonyms is a Western colonial repetition since we have our cultural traditions of ensuring anonymity. So, decolonial practice is needed, and we must rely on our traditions. Though using pseudonyms helps to maintain anonymity, it does not fully ensure. For example, researchers do not ask for participants’ names at the beginning of the interview in the Western context; however, we cannot imagine beginning a conversation without asking for names. So, using pseudonyms is contextual and situational.

While engaging in the PhD fieldwork, I realised that only assigning pseudonyms cannot ensure anonymity and confidentiality. For example, the locals and colleagues who were informed about the data collection process may estimate who could have shared something related to a particular thing, event, person, or context. Several studies (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Morse & Coulehan, 2015; Vorhölter, 2021; Wiles et al., 2006) are also consistent with this notion. Concerning the use of pseudonyms in research, JyoH said:

I always care about research ethics. I consider assigning pseudonyms the best way to maintain anonymity and confidentiality in which the researcher's assigned name replaces the real name. Hiding the participants' identity is essential. However, I do not think absolute anonymity is possible since the locality and research context provide clues to familiar ones. Similarly, hiding the total identity could give a sense of fake data.

The above quotes suggest that despite assigning pseudonyms widely used in qualitative research as a basis for research ethics, it is not possible to fully ensure the pseudonyms. For instance, Reyes (2018) stress that “assigning pseudonyms does not always equate to our participants’ anonymity or include the protections that we intend, particularly when people in the community from where the study was located can identify individuals because of the details included in published work” (p. 210). The research context could provide clues for guessing and recognizing the participant’s response. During my PhD fieldwork, I experienced participants becoming suspicious towards the confidentiality and use of data they provided (Subedi, 2024a). However, during my PhD, I conducted in-depth interviews smoothly after building a warm relationship and rapport with the participants. Such a warm relationship depends upon mutual trust building between the researcher and participant (Heaton, 2022) and ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of the information collected. Similarly, the above remarks also indicate thinking from the decolonial perspective so that we can explore and use our cultural traditions to safeguard participants from possible harm. Bidushi stresses that researchers must be careful of future consequences and decide whether to use pseudonyms. In addition, it depends on the participant’s desire to see if they could appear in the reports and publications with real names. The rapid growth of information technology using excessive Internet and social media has been challenging in ensuring confidence (Macleod & Mnyaka, 2018; Vorhölter, 2021; Wiles et al., 2006). It requires researcher sensitivity and care of how the participants’ information will appear in the reports, publication, and dissemination. In some cases, such as in life history and other research, participants may want to appear with real names (Clandinin et al., 2016). Despite researcher care and sensitivity, people can guess the real identity of participants. Therefore, it is always challenging for qualitative researchers to “contextualize the places they study while also maintaining interviewees’ anonymity” (Reyes, 2018, p. 206). It requires the researcher to make responsible decisions after assessing the research context and the future consequences of the research result. More importantly, the researcher needs multiple strategies in assigning pseudonyms, such as omitting names, using real names, self-assigned names, and identifying appropriate names to negotiate with participants.

Masking Participants' Identity

Disguising the real names of interviewees, places, and local context to protect the research participants is a way to mask their real identity by assigning pseudonyms. Qualitative research is carried out in a particular or a narrower geographical location to explore in-depth information from a small number of participants. So, masking participants' real identities is essential to de-identifying by replacing their real names since the information they provide could harm their recognition. Several studies (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Engward et al., 2022; Itzik & Walsh, 2023; Reyes, 2018); Wang et al., 2024) suggest the various ways of masking participants' identity (i.e., including place and local context) lacking uniformity and specific rule to assigning pseudonyms (Kara, 2018; Lahman et al., 2023; Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011). Participants of this study have different perspectives on disguising identity. Alike, in my PhD research, I considered gender, cultural context, and geographical location in masking teachers' identity and school's name (Subedi, 2024b), which corroborates with several studies (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Heaton, 2022; Itzik & Walsh, 2023; Kara, 2018; Lahman, 2024). Concerning the naming participants, JyoH explained:

I was careful in safeguarding my participants by masking their real identities. So, I decided to replace their real names. For instance, I used alphanumeric symbols to represent teachers as T1, T2, T3... with number of teaching years, and S1, S2, S3.....for schools. Further, I also used the pronouns 'he' or 'she' to distinguish the gender of my participants. In addition, regarding location, I just said urban school teachers. It must have ensured anonymity and confidentiality in my PhD research.

Bidushi responded differently to disguise participants. She said:

Participants' identity is conditional in my PhD research. Participants sometimes wish to appear in their real names, so I never mask their identity. However, when the participants were sharing sensitive data and if they wished to hide their identities, I used pseudonyms. So, I use pseudonyms like 'Kishor1, 2, 3.....' for boys and 'Kishori 1, 2, 3....' for girls. Sometimes, I also use age with them, e.g., 'Kishor 12yr, 13yr etc.

Furthermore, Bidushi thinks using pseudonyms should not be considered a hard and fast rule; rather, it must be conditional and contextual. So, she considers pseudonyms to be a grey area that requires the researcher's sensitivity and estimation of future consequences.

The above verbatims suggest that a single and 'one size fits all' criteria are

not applicable in assigning pseudonyms in qualitative research as the studies (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Ellersgaard et al., 2021; Gibson et al., 2012; Heaton, 2022; Itzik & Walsh, 2023; Saunders et al., 2014) suggests. As it lacks the consensus among scholars concerning criteria for assigning pseudonyms (Ellersgaard et al., 2021; Itzik & Walsh, 2023; Lahman, 2024; Wang et al., 2024), it is the researcher's right to devise their criteria for one. It is equally important that masking participants' identities are situational and contextual, where researchers can change their earlier strategies. Despite the individual differences in assigning pseudonyms to researcher participants, it needs to be careful not to destroy the particularities and characteristics that remain with participants, such as place and context.

Choosing the Pseudonyms

Researchers generally choose pseudonyms on their own. However, there are several strategies for replacing the real name. For instance, during my PhD research, I assigned participants' pseudonyms and let them know during the time of 'member checking', a widely used strategy as literature suggests (Delamont, 2016; Kara, 2018; Lahman, 2024; Reyes, 2018; Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011; Wang et al., 2024). Similarly, participants in this study shared that they followed the same strategy. When I asked both participants if the researcher could request their informants choose pseudonyms, I found that JyoH did not agree with me and favoured choosing by a researcher. He thinks giving participants a choice may cause problems, such as variations in names. In addition, it lacks uniformity and coherence when reading the publications, and the reader could be distracted. As a result, a report or an article could lose readers' interest. However, Bidushi seems flexible and consider letting the participants choose their pseudonyms could be a good initiative. Moreover, she questions the rituals of using pseudonyms to research participants. If we are generating knowledge from participants and becoming heroes, why not write their real names and brief descriptions of the naming process in the methodology section? Inspired by Bidushi and also from the several literature (Allen & Wiles, 2016; Ellersgaard et al., 2021; Gibson et al., 2012; Heaton, 2022; Itzik & Walsh, 2023; Lahman, 2024; Vorhölter, 2021; Wang et al., 2024), I let the participants choose their pseudonyms as my first novel practice, which I never thought during my PhD research. Allowing participants to select pseudonyms is a negotiating and flexible approach that gives them a sense of belongingness toward research.

Pseudonyms Used by Nepali Scholars

I reviewed six qualitative PhD dissertations to analyze how confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, particularly using pseudonyms. Table 1 presents the details of the analysis.

Table 1*Pseudonyms of Research Participants and Study Sites*

Researcher	PhD Award Date	PhD Dissertation Title	Pseudonyms		
			School	Teachers	Locals/ Others
Nani Babu Ghimire	2024	Unravelling the Dynamics of English Medium Instruction (EMI) Policy in Community Schools: A Critical Ethnographic Exploration of Teacher Ideology, Identity and Agency <i>[Critical Ethnography]</i>	Srikantha Mahabharat Dharmachakra	Ramkrishna Ranju Amar Sujita Nabaraj Jamuna	
Khim Raj Subedi	2024	Professional Identity of Primary Teachers in Community Schools: A Narrative Inquiry <i>[Narrative Inquiry]</i>	Annapurna Machhapuchhre Nilgiri Kanchanjangha Dhaulagiri	Sumit Madan Kanchan Prakash Pramod Ananda	
Umanath Sharma	2023	Home Language Use in Nepalese EFL Classes: Lived Experiences of Teachers and Students <i>[Phenomenology]</i>	Sc1, Sc2, Sc3	T1, T2, T3	Grade 9 Students Grade 10 Students
Karna Bahadur Maski Rana	2018	ICT in Rural Primary Schools in Nepal: Context and Teachers' Experiences <i>[Case Study]</i>	Annapurna Buddha Chadani Ekata	Anju Ananda Anita Asha Binod Bijen Bhupal Bikash Chandra Chiran Chitra Deepa Dinesh Ekendra Elis	Anju Ananda Anita

Prem Bahadur Phyak	2016	'For Our Cho: Tlung': Decolonizing Language Ideologies And (Re) Imagining Multilingual Education Policies and Practices in Nepal <i>[Engaged Ethnography]</i>	Sewaro Laaje	Kumar Aita	Villagers: Angla Saila Mukul Nabina Amar Muskan
Peshal Khanal	2012	Policy as a Practice of Power: An analysis of the Policy to Decentralize School Education in Nepal <i>[Qualitative Research]</i>	School A School B School C	Permanent (A, G, C) Temporary (A, G, C) Rahat (A, G, C) PCF (A, G, C) Local (A, G, C) Head Teacher, School A, B, C (A, G, C)	MOE Official (A, G, C) DEO, A, B, C (A, G, C) Teacher Union (A, G, C)

Note: A = Age, G = Gender, C = Caste, T1 = Teacher, Sc1 = School, MOE = Ministry of Education, DEO = District Education Officer

Table 1 shows that researchers use multiple perspectives and criteria in assigning pseudonyms. However, there are also similarities in naming participants and institutions. For example, none of the researchers use both forename and surname. The reason behind using only a forename (i.e., an individual's name) could be prevented from possible matching with somebody. Using both the forename and surname (i.e., family name) is to secure participants from their possible matching with someone. I did the same when naming participants for my PhD research. Similarly, the above table denotes that the researchers also use cultural heritage (e.g., Mahabharat school) (Ghimire, 2024), ethnicity (e.g., limbu) (Phyak, 2016), name of the lord (i.e., Buddha) (Rana, 2018), geography (e.g., popular mountains) (Subedi, 2024b), alphabets (e.g., A, B, C and School A...) (Khanal, 2012), alphanumeric (e.g., Sc1, Sc2, T1, T2) (Sharma, 2023). However, Khanal (2012) used pseudonyms differently; he added age, gender, and caste to every mention of the participants. As I went through all the dissertations mentioned in Table 1, I found that none of the researchers allowed participants to choose their names and mentioned assigning pseudonyms and mentioned the process of assigning pseudonyms.

Conclusion

Assigning pseudonyms to the research participants in qualitative research is considered a popular ethical approach to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. As replacing real names with pseudonyms is widely discussed in Western literature, there is little discussion in Nepal's context. So, there is a lack of consensus among the researchers on using pseudonyms. In addition, it is not easy to find a comprehensive resource that guides novice researchers in adopting the appropriate practical strategies for using pseudonyms for participants. First, I discussed the multiple aspects associated with safeguarding participants using pseudonyms. Next, I explored how the naming took place in the empirical studies.

Based on the data analysis, it is concluded that using pseudonyms to protect participants is a mandatory task for a qualitative researcher. I argue that the ritual practice of using pseudonyms for research participants is not straightforward; instead, it is situational and depends on the research context, data sensitivity, and participants' desires. So, a researcher needs to be allowed to decide whether and how to assign pseudonyms to safeguard their participants. More specifically, this study has three major findings. First, while using pseudonyms in qualitative research is a popular trend, it is debatable whether it fully ensures confidentiality and anonymity. This study concludes that assigning pseudonyms to participants may not always guarantee confidentiality and anonymity since the research context could provide clues to guess participants' identity (Reyes, 2018). As the challenges of disclosing participants' identities exist, the researcher's care and sensitivity in assigning pseudonyms are required. The rapid growth of information technology and massive use of the Internet and social media add more challenges, so safeguarding participants is vulnerable. Second, there are variations in assigning pseudonyms to the participants, so the scholars lack consensus. However, age, gender, cultural and social background, and occupation are some bases that mostly exist in the literature for choosing pseudonyms. Usually, assigning pseudonyms by a researcher is the most dominant practice. However, some alternative strategies are assigning real names (case-specific), omitting names, and using collective names. More importantly, being more respectful and responsive to the research participants requires interacting and discussing with them to choose pseudonyms or keeping their real names, which could be an appropriate negotiated strategy. Naming participants depends on the context in which researchers can make a proper decision. However, they must always be sensitive to the future consequences and the relationships with the participants from assigning pseudonyms. Finally, there is a lack of uniformity and unanimous rules in assigning pseudonyms to the research participants. In a similar vein, Nepali researchers use the pseudonyms differently. For instance, they use an alphabet,

alphabet and number together, alphabet and word together, and word phrase to name participants based on age, gender, ethnicity, culture, and contemporary society. So, Nepali scholars seem careful not to destroy the research context. However, none describe the procedure and criteria for choosing pseudonyms for their study.

This study is implacable to novice researchers who choose alternatives of assigning pseudonyms for their research participants to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Specifically, this study suggests flexibility in using pseudonyms and the researcher could choose the appropriate strategy based on analysis of the research context, sensitivity of the information collection, and desire of the participants. This study suggests briefly mentioning assigning participants' pseudonyms in research reports and publications. Finally, this study suggests conducting further studies with a large sample to obtain multiple perspectives.

Acknowledgement

I thank my colleague Lekh Nath Baral, a PhD scholar at Oslo University, Norway, for providing me with several inaccessible resources for this study.

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