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Beyond research ethics: anonymity as 'ontology', 'analysis' and 'independence'

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Abstract

Anonymity – its desirability and perceived difficulty divides the domain of qualitative research. This article shows that such divisions are associated with discrepancies in assumptions about what the power relations between the researcher and the researched, as well as the desired goals of the research, should be. This article questions the assumption that anonymity is necessary only for ethical reasons and identifies three additional functions of it in qualitative research: anonymity as 'ontology', anonymity as 'analysis' and anonymity as 'independence'. First, ontologically, anonymity is a way of turning into 'data' what someone has said or written. Second, anonymization as 'analysis' turns the participants into examples of specific theoretical categories, and as such is a part of the data analysis. Third, anonymity as 'independence' enables the researcher to interpret the data irrespective of the participants' wishes. As a conclusion, this article argues that anonymizing research participants has an influence on the overall quality of research and therefore is also useful when no ethical risks are perceived, when participants wish not to remain anonymous or when their anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

Keywords

anonymity, independence, ontology, qualitative research, research ethics, social psychology

This article discusses the functions of research participants' anonymity in qualitative social research, from the perspective of social psychology. Anonymity becomes particularly important when publishing results: this article focuses on the phases of qualitative data analysis and the writing up of a research report. Anonymity is one of the core principles of research ethics and is usually regarded as the mechanism through which privacy and confidentiality are maintained. Even if no general consensus exists concerning what constitutes research ethics (Ryen, 2007), it is widely agreed that other core elements of ethical practice include informed consent and the avoidance of deception, harm

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and exploitation, regardless of the ethical approach taken (Wiles et al., 2006). Of these elements, anonymity is unique because it involves modifying of the empirical data, so that the research participants cannot be identified. This article goes beyond ethical motives to explore what anonymization does for knowledge production and use, data interpretation and power relations between researchers and researched in a qualitative inquiry.

Despite anonymity being one of the core concepts of research ethics, it is a contested and criticized concept, and a small yet growing number of researchers question the prevailing orthodoxy surrounding it (Grace, 2002; Nespor, 2000; Peshkin, 2001; Scheper-Hughes, 2000; Walford, 2005; Wolfe, 2003). There even seems to be two lines of thought: one that considers anonymity as possible, desirable and not difficult to achieve, and the other that considers it a virtually unachievable goal (Van Den Hoonaard, 2003), an 'illusion' (Stein, 2010: 567) or even unethical (e.g. Scheper-Hughes, 2000; Walford, 2005). Anonymity's critics seem to be confined to participatory and emancipatory research and ethnography (see Kelly, 2009; Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011).

Critics justify non-anonymity for multiple reasons. First, in social research, it is sometimes difficult to define what can be considered as the harm caused by revealing participants' identities (e.g. Nespor, 2000). In addition, there is increasing awareness that research participants in some circumstances may be happy or even prefer to be mentioned by name (Grinyer, 2002; Wiles et al., 2006, 2008). Some authors and ethical advisory boards consider that in such cases, the wishes of the participants should be respected (Bok, 1983; Giordano et al., 2007; National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2009). Other researchers prefer non-anonymity because they consider their participants or the studied organization to be so unique and well known that anonymity is, in their opinion, impossible to maintain. Other researchers believe that non-anonymity empowers the participants (Baez, 2002) and even advocate the idea that the research participants should be full research partners (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). Some researchers, moreover, feel that politicians and experts should be identified in research reports because of their public position, which also renders public their words (Tiittula and Ruusuvuori, 2005). In addition, many academic research projects require a wide dissemination of results, including to stakeholders and funders who may wish to have some of the identifying information kept in the research reports (e.g. Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011).

This article argues that apart from ethical justification, anonymity is in any case useful for conducting qualitative research of a high standard. From the perspective of qualitative social psychology, this article discusses the following questions: What ontological issues do anonymity versus non-anonymity raise about the roles of research participants and what they say, and what are the consequences of the potential merging of the role of researcher and research participant? What is the ultimate purpose of academic research – is it right that scientific inquiry also promotes political activism among participants or advertises products or improves the image of stigmatized groups in society? How does the chosen anonymization strategy affect a researcher's way of interpreting what the participants have said?

In order to answer these questions, three functions of anonymity in qualitative research are discussed: anonymity as 'ontology', anonymity as 'analysis' and anonymity as

'independence'. First, here ontology means that by treating research participants anonymously we actually make an ontological modification: this way a researcher turns into 'data' something that someone has said or written. Second anonymity as 'analysis' means that anonymization is a strategy for applying a specific theory to something that someone has said or written. The research participants are thus abstracted and become examples of a theory. Third, anonymity as 'independence' means that anonymity increases researchers' autonomy, so that a researcher can also publish results that may not please the research participants.

The practice of anonymity in qualitative research

Anonymity has traditionally been considered as one of the elements of research ethics, the purpose of which is to protect participants from harm. In this article, anonymity is defined as the process of not disclosing the identity of research participants (American Psychological Association, 2002; British Sociological Association, 2004; National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2009; Wiles et al., 2008). Anonymity is one way to apply confidentiality. According to Wiles et al. (2008), confidentiality means not discussing information provided by research participants with others and presenting findings in a way that research participants cannot be identified (through anonymization).

As compared to quantitative research, qualitative research is often open-ended, and its methods are rather flexible. For this reason, some researchers consider the application of anonymity to be a rather challenging process (e.g. Shaw, 2003). Small numbers of participants, personal contacts between researchers and participants where both parties are no longer mutually anonymous, means of recruitment (e.g. the snowball method) and case studies carried out in small towns or organizations where 'everyone' knows who has participated (e.g. in ethnography) are just a few examples of why (e.g. Li, 2008; Nespor, 2000; Sieber and Stanley, 1988). In addition, the use of Internet material where information is accessible to everyone, including the identifying information of the participants, has become more popular (Rodham and Gavin, 2006).

Anonymity in practice means that information on the identity of research participants (names, nationality, ethnic origin, age, occupation, place of residence, etc.) should be removed from the final research reports. First, researchers must decide what information, or who, to anonymize. It is a common practice that all people referred to in interview transcripts and other forms of data are anonymized in the earliest phases of research. Usually, people's names are replaced by pseudonyms. However, some researchers consider that individuals speaking from a professional position should not be anonymized. Some research participants might also prefer not to remain anonymous (e.g. Allmark et al., 2009; Grinyer, 2002; Richards and Schwartz, 2002). Some authors argue that in these cases, research participants need not be kept anonymous and that they actually should be identified (e.g. Tiittula and Ruusuvuori, 2005). However, Clark (2006) argues that this implies that some individuals' rights to privacy are less important than others'. Researchers who view anonymization as a core ethical principle tend not to agree with the participants' wishes to have their real names used (Wiles et al., 2008).

In addition to persons, qualitative research can also examine organizations, communities and places. Multiple practices exist regarding their anonymization. The identity of organizations or places is usually considered to be less ethically sensitive and less in need of protection than that of individuals (Nespor, 2000). However, the anonymization of an organization may protect the anonymity of its members.

Anonymity as 'ontology'

Anonymity is associated with research ontology in a number of ways (see also Nespor, 2000). It underlines the following questions: How are the roles of the researcher and research participants conceived, and how is power between them understood? What are the desired goals of research? What are 'data'?

First, the roles of the researcher and the research participant can be understood either as separate or, alternatively, as merged. Anonymity is one way to mark such a separation. For example, Duckett and Fryer (1998) reported an overlap between the roles of research participants and co-researchers in their study on the development of empowering research practices in connection with people who have learning disabilities. As a solution, four co-researchers who were also research participants did not appear as co-authors in the article. Staller (2007) describes a study that attempted to avoid a representation of participants as forced objects in the study by fusing researchers' words with those of the research participants themselves.

Anonymity is frequently associated with the power relation between the researcher and the researched (Guenther, 2009). Some critics of anonymity have argued that anonymity maintains the same unequal power relations in research that prevail in society in general. Non-anonymity would give 'voice' and empower the participants, allowing their words could be heard, whereas anonymity obscures this possibility. However, naming the participants does not eliminate power differences between a research participant and a researcher: the ultimate decision about what should be included in a publication and how the empirical material should be treated is always made by the researcher. In addition, attaching a name to the data excerpts does not necessarily make the message more 'heard'; stigmatized groups are devalued in the society also because other members of society interpret negatively the messages of those who have been labelled as members of stigmatized groups and can even use them as a means for social control (see, for example, Bryson and Winter, 1999; Crow and Wiles, 2008). For example, Corden and Sainsbury (2006a) were impressed by the degree of dislike among some people about being represented in groups perceived as casting them in a negative role.

The critics of anonymity assume that any power differences are inherently bad and that they can and should be avoided. However, anonymity does not necessarily negate the power of research participants: quite the contrary, because of anonymity, research participants have a greater freedom to express opinions that might be unfavourable to readers. As Kelly (2009) puts it: 'It seems more intuitive to claim that not offering anonymity is more likely to guarantee that truth is *concealed*' (p. 439). In other words, anonymity can ideally be an empowering tool. When compared to the anonymous referee practice in scientific journals, anonymity should help all parties to focus on what has been said instead of who has said it.

In addition, anonymity is a way of making a distinction between 'reference' and 'data'. It is a way of turning text into 'data' (Nespor, 2000). 'The data remaining after anonymization tells us a story without telling whose story it is' (Thomson et al., 2005: 166). In contrast, when the text or interview are presented as 'reference', the name of the person is mentioned, as well as detailed information about how to access the original source. A good example of using the interview excerpts of academic scholars as empirical data (and not as 'expert interviews', for example) is a study by Haverkamp (2005) examining ethical problems faced by researchers. The researchers assumed the role of research participants and for this reason were anonymized in the research report.

In my work, I faced these issues in a project that I was supervising, referred to here as Case 1. Researcher A had conducted a case study of an organizational empowerment technique developed by Researcher B, concentrating on a qualitative study of speech strategies used by Researcher B in his organizational empowerment sessions. The theoretical model of Researcher B was used as the theoretical model for the study (in addition to discursive psychological theories). Researcher A wrote a report in which Researcher B was originally represented by name because he wanted it so (however, not as a co-author). Researcher B also ran a consulting service for work organizations. He could potentially use the overtly positive results in his consulting firm. Researcher A attempted to replace the name of Researcher B with a pseudonym in the almost final version of the research report, which, however, required changing the overall logic of the manuscript. For example, the use of the empowerment theory developed by Researcher B for interpreting the data was problematic, leading to circular interpretations about his empowering speech techniques.

Anonymity is also associated with the desired goals of research, which can vary from theory-building to politics as well as to serving the interests of the participants. Apart from ethical reasons, anonymity as a research practice has evolved in academic research in part to facilitate the goal of developing theoretical understandings of social phenomena. As a contrast, within journalistic, marketing and business research, interviews are usually published with names. Some qualitative researchers want to distinguish themselves from non-academic research, whereas others do not. The anonymity of research participants is one of the ways to make such a distinction (French, 1993; Nespor, 2000; Silverman, 2009). For example, many ethnographers, who frequently are critical of anonymity, do not make such a distinction. According to Stein (2010), good ethnographic work,

> like a good novel or an astute piece of journalism, tells the story of lives lived in specific social and historical contexts and draws readers in, helping them to understand their own hopes and fears and personal and political investments. (p. 567)

However, in many other fields of social research, such as qualitative social psychology, the research goal is to assess the findings in relation to the theoretical perspective from which the research derives and to which it may contribute (e.g. Mason, 2002; Silverman, 2009). There may even be a connection between research goals and the perception of anonymity as problematic: in a study of researchers' ethical practices, issues of anonymity were less problematic in research focusing on general (e.g. theoretical) social phenomena

in which the identification of the specific context from which participants are drawn was unnecessary (Wiles et al., 2008).

Anonymity as 'analysis'

Anonymization can also be considered as a way of making a generalization. As such, it is already a part of the empirical analysis. Anonymization turns people into usable examples or illustrations of generalizing theoretical categories, such as social classes, ethnic groups, genders, institutions or other theoretical constructs (Nespor, 2000; Smith, 1987). The perception of anonymity as 'analysis' is closely related to anonymity as 'ontology': both involve decisions regarding the treatment of people's words as 'data'. However, anonymity as 'analysis' can be regarded as a step forward in terms of decisions concerning which particular theoretical categories the data excerpts represent.

Those who criticize anonymity also question the desirability of making theoretical generalizations. At least within social psychology, qualitative social scientific research is usually assumed to produce results that can be generalizable beyond the specific empirical context and individual cases (Mason, 2002). Anonymity facilitates theoretical generalization. However, Walford (2005), for example, criticizes anonymity because it 'implicitly gives the writer and reader the chance to broaden the findings of each study beyond the situations investigated' (p. 90).

The issue of anonymity as 'analysis' became evident in a research project that I was supervising, referred to here as Case 2. In this project, a social psychologist had undertaken a research project where a locally well-known travel agency wanted to know why their clients did not use their Internet pages where one could register and share personal travel experiences with other registered members. The researcher had difficulties finding a research question that would be relevant from a social psychological perspective. By anonymizing the travel agency, the researcher was able to focus on the acts of self-disclosure.

How do researchers' preconceptions affect the choices of the anonymization strategy? Social psychological research on social identity, stereotypes and anonymity reveals that information about people's identity shapes our interpretations of their motivations for what they say and do (e.g. Fiske, 2009). Accordingly, we must assume that researchers, too, are affected by information about their research participants' gender, ethnic background, educational level and so on. For example, Corden (2007) reports that the way in which verbatim words were attributed, and the way descriptors and names were attached to quotations raised the potential for readers to imagine the class, age and cultural identities of the research participants, beyond the intention of the author. There is also evidence that readers and research participants themselves use the information on participants' gender, age and so on as a 'claim of causality' (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006c: 22). Another example of researchers' preconceptions is the perception of studied organizations as unique, which may lead to anonymization being seen as difficult to achieve. Organizational research has shown a tendency among organizations to emphasize characteristics that differentiate them from other organizations (Pedersen and Dobbin, 2006; Whetten and Mackey, 2002), known as the 'uniqueness paradox' (Martin et al., 1983).

How does the chosen anonymization strategy affect a researcher's way of interpreting what the participants have said? Novice researchers are frequently overwhelmed by how to use their data in a theoretical manner (Silverman, 2009). In addition, many researchers choose a topic that is important to them; they may have personal experience of it and thus feel emotionally connected to the study and to the participants, whom they may even know personally. In such situations, anonymization can help to shift the focus from the particularities of the case to a more abstract level. Varying the degree of anonymization can therefore also be a tool for analysis: at a certain stage of the analysis process, some of the identifying information can be removed, in order to determine whether the information on participants' gender or age, for example, is inadvertently affecting the analysis process (if age and gender are not the real foci of the analysis), and later replaced, if considered necessary.

Anonymity as 'independence'

The question to what extent research should be based on the participants' interpretations and wishes divides researchers. This issue is closely associated with different practices of anonymity in social research.

According to one viewpoint, anonymity can be preferred in qualitative research because it increases the impartiality of the research. In addition, the supporters of researchers' independence claim that researchers should have the power to impose their own interpretation of why people say what they say, which may be a different interpretation from the participants' (Kidder and Fine, 1997). Qualitative research frequently arises from prior contacts in 'the field' with the participants. Therefore, a novice researcher can feel strongly compelled to fulfil the expectations of participants who may express their own suggestions for research problems or hypotheses. Anonymity gives the researcher more freedom to report findings that may appear both as favourable and unfavourable to the participants or funders. Through increasing a researcher's independence, anonymization in many cases can contribute to the overall quality of the research by allowing for an independent analysis. It also provides space in which the researcher may set hypotheses that are free of the participants' wishes and interests and which may even be contrary to these. If anonymity is important only when the results are negative, how do we know what the influence of the participants' wishes has been if the results are positive, such as in Case 1 presented earlier? In this case, anonymity made Researcher A wonder if the analysis had been partially in favour of the method developed by Researcher B and if some important parts of the data had been excluded from it. Anonymity revealed that Researcher A had only focused on the empowering aspects of speech by Researcher B.

Moreover, it is not easy to predict what the participants may regard as offensive information. For example, Blee (1999) describes racist activists who wanted their real names used in order to gain attention and attract recruits: he 'imposed' anonymity to 'support the academic and political goals of the researcher, against the expressed interest and desires of the informants' (p. 995). There are numerous examples of studies in which researchers have identified the findings that the research funder or participating organization were unhappy with (see Herdman, 2000; Lawton, 2001; Punch, 1998; Wiles et al.,

2006). Wiles et al. (2006) argue that researchers' freedom to interpret their data is important because it gives rein to the critical aspect of research.

According to the opposite viewpoint, research should not be impartial or independent of the participants' wishes. As discussed above, those who question the ethical principles of research claim that they maintain unequal power relations between a researcher and the research participants (Brinkmann, 2007; Wiles et al., 2008). For example, within a participatory approach, it is common to assume that researchers should not decide alone which characteristics (e.g. gender or age) should be attached to people's words but rather that such issues should depend on the decisions taken by the participants (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006b).

Critics have also expressed a concern that anonymity makes the data analysis harsher on the research participants (Walford, 2005). For example, Scheper-Hughes (2000) has described an ethnographic study where pseudonyms did not protect the participants' anonymity, which resulted in considerable psychological harm and distress among the research participants; the author concluded that representing the participants with names would have made the analysis softer and more focused on the well-being of the participants. However, research ethics require that research publications should strive to treat the individuals involved in a respectful manner even if they are anonymous (National Advisory Board on Research Ethics, 2009). In this case, a technical solution allowing researchers to mitigate the potential damaging effect of anonymity would be to add the names of the participants during the writing process (and remove them later). The view that anonymity can actually be harmful (when the participants will sooner or later be identified by the public) seems to be particularly strong within ethnography. However, many other qualitative research traditions do not share the view that anonymity is impossible or even difficult to maintain and have also developed strategies to improve it (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c; Wiles et al., 2008).

It is usually assumed that the researcher is in a more powerful position than the research participants. However, researchers can also be vulnerable. Fieldwork with deviant groups in dangerous contexts where both parties can be known to each other, as well as the participants' possible disclosure of secrets, can also place the researchers in dangerous situations (Kidder and Fine, 1997; Li, 2008). In addition, the studied organizations can have a strong influence on the nature of the research undertaken, including the results, such as in Case 2, described earlier (see also Irvine and Gaffikin, 2006). These issues cannot be entirely eliminated by anonymity in research publications, but the critics of anonymity should recognize that it is not automatically the researcher who holds the more powerful position.

Anonymity in different phases of qualitative research

The researcher should consider the functions of anonymity in terms of 'ontology', 'analysis' and 'independence' and choose the anonymization strategy accordingly. How is the power relation between the researcher and research participants conceived? Are the goals theoretical, political or something else? How are the participants who want their names published dealt with?

Researchers should be explicit to themselves and to others about what the ultimate goal of the research is. This way a researcher can eliminate the risk of readers, research participants and other stakeholders misinterpreting a study. In general, anonymity may be easier to achieve when research is theoretically driven (Wiles et al., 2008). If the goal is theoretically driven, the participants should be anonymized and the main theoretical concepts should determine the anonymization strategy. Information that is not important from a theoretical perspective should be anonymized. According to Corden and Sainsbury (2006c), audiences expect that personal characteristics given in attributing quotations should always be directly relevant to the issues being studied and that the authors should explain the relevance of individual descriptors and how readers should use them. It is relatively unusual to find such explanations in research reports. In addition, readers have no way of assessing how much weight to accord the specific characteristics. In other words, identifying information that is not relevant from the perspective of theory and research questions should be excluded when describing the participants.

When writing publicly about the results, qualitative researchers can use different strategies to improve anonymity. For example, people can be described in age groups rather than by specific age; distinctive speech patterns can be edited (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006a); quotations can be attributed using selective analytical categories relevant to the topic, such as 'parent', 'carer', or 'customer'; people can be represented as numbers (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006b) and details about personal characteristics and circumstances can be changed (Corden, 2007; Wiles et al., 2008). However, the identity characteristics of participants should be changed only if it does not affect the integrity of the data. In addition, a researcher should mention if changes have been made and what these changes encompass, in order to help the reader to interpret the results. There is considerable debate about the extent to which it is appropriate to modify data for the purposes of anonymity. The removal of identifying information from data can be a challenge to a 'thick description' (Ponterotto, 2006; Thomson et al., 2005; Wiles et al., 2006). However, as discussed above, an anonymization strategy should be applied as a first step of an analysis because the chosen theoretical categories can affect the analysis and the interpretive explanations made by a researcher.

In order to improve anonymity, researchers should take into account a number of issues in addition to attributions attached by a researcher. In addition, a particular way of speaking (such as a regional accent) can establish a 'difference' that is not relevant to communicating the results, may give people a level of anonymity different from that of other respondents or may cast them in a possibly negative light: it might direct attention more to the way something was said than to the meaning (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006b). In addition, distinctive stories told by research participants may also make individuals identifiable (Wiles et al., 2008).

Moreover, the use of pseudonyms is a common anonymization strategy but one which should be employed carefully. According to Corden and Sainsbury (2006c), pseudonyms can present powerful messages about age, race, ethnicity, faith, class and location. Different readers may make different assumptions, which might be even opposite to the author's intentions. In addition, if the pseudonyms are to be chosen by the participants, people frequently choose those that both express and mask their identities (Kraut et al.,

2004). Instead of pseudonyms, people can also be referred to by numbers; in this way, sensitive material may be also presented without revealing identities.

Publishing widely can be challenging when maintaining anonymity (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011). Researchers conducting projects for both their university and private company may experience tension between the academic needs of the university and the applied needs of the company. One way of handling anonymity in such cases is to write up different versions of the results for the different audiences: an anonymous version for the academic community and a non-anonymous one for stakeholders and funders. In addition, the choices made regarding anonymity, such as why a certain strategy was selected, should be described in the research reports.

Towards anonymity as part of qualitative research design: a conclusion

This article has demonstrated that anonymity is a contested issue within qualitative social research. The debate underlines and intersects a number of mutually controversial understandings of what the power relations, roles, independence and goals of qualitative research *should be*. This article demonstrated that researchers' explicit consideration and treatment of issues associated with anonymity from multiple viewpoints, in addition to the ethical one, has a bearing on the overall quality of research. Most importantly, it contributes to diminishing the risk of reader misinterpretation, shifting the focus of readers from research participants as 'individuals' or 'persons' to the 'text' itself, and to helping researchers to generalize the results beyond a particular empirical case. In addition, this article has shown that the perception of anonymity as difficult to maintain largely pertains to ethnography and participant research, which in general are critical of anonymity. As a contrast, in much qualitative research, the participants are not known to each other, research goals are theoretically driven and multiple techniques can be used to maintain anonymity. In other words, a full consideration of anonymity from the perspectives of ontology, analysis and independence makes anonymity easier to achieve and maintain.

This article has demonstrated that the anonymization of participants, organizations or cases analysed in qualitative studies serves many functions. In addition to its ethical importance, it also has an effect upon the ontology, analysis and independence of the research and the researchers. First, the ontological function of anonymity was discussed. Information about someone who has said or written something was shown to be related to the roles of researchers and research participants and consequently to the ultimate goal of the research. Second, anonymity as an analytical tool was discussed. Choices regarding which analytical categories to use in order to represent participants were shown to have an impact on how the audience and even the researchers themselves may interpret the results. Third, anonymity as independence was considered, and it was argued that anonymity grants a researcher a space in which to conduct an independent analysis and to draw conclusions about data that may also be unfavourable to the participants and stakeholders.

The motivation to write this article arose from my personal conversations with novice and established researchers who were conducting qualitative research. Many

researchers who questioned anonymity described the choices they made in revealing the identity of the organization, the case or the research participants. The criticism of anonymity, currently limited mainly to ethnography and the participative approach, may actually represent a new turn in social scientific research, and such a development should be further discussed within the scientific community. Wiles et al. (2008) argue that 'in a culture of increasing individualization where people want to have their story told, it may be that the notion of anonymity is one that is appropriate, or desired, only in particular types of social research' (p. 426). I agree with this perception. This tendency may be partly due to the practice of non-anonymity in journalistic and commercial business research (Nespor, 2000) and the growing trend to disseminate results widely (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011). When faced with such issues, many researchers are already asking important questions, but such questions should be made an integral part of any qualitative research design – ontological questions about the roles of research participants and what they are saying as well as the consequences of the potential merging of the role of researcher and research participant and the ultimate purpose of academic research. By doing so, the researcher could avoid undesirable and unexpected effects of research, such as promoting political activism among participants, advertising commercial products or shifting attention from the theoretical contribution to a description of research participants.

Qualitative researchers should incorporate the explicit consideration of anonymity as a part of their research designs. This article supports the idea of Shaw (2003) that ethical research practice should to be related and tailored to the specifics of the research process. Instead of treating research ethics as if it has no effect on the main research questions, subsequent data analysis and interpretations, a reflexive consideration of the core elements of research ethics should be part of any qualitative research design. This article has argued that of the core components of research ethics, anonymity stands out because it involves a conscious modification of the empirical data. For this reason, the way in which anonymity is treated and applied has important consequences and modifies the role of the researcher and research participants, the logic of the analysis and the perceived impartiality of the results. It even affects how readers of research publications interpret the results. Most qualitative studies apply the principle of anonymity without describing how and why the anonymization was applied in a particular way (Guenther, 2009). Instead, such a description should be seen as an important part of writing qualitative research reports. When we look beyond the ethical motive, we can redefine anonymization as the interplay between concealing identities and revealing them. As such, anonymization intersects researchers' normative perceptions of the nature of scientific knowledge, analysis and independence in qualitative inquiry.

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