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research article

Naming practices in domestic homicide reviews in England and Wales

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In England and Wales, domestic homicide reviews (DHRs) seek to build a picture of the circumstances preceding a domestic abuse-related death, identify any learning and make recommendations for change. Drawing on data from document analysis of 60 DHR reports, this article explores how a victim's real name is routinely taken out of use when a DHR report is published and, to disguise their identity, is usually replaced with a pseudonym or some other nomenclature like initials/letters. I report on the name forms used in place of a victim's real name and the limited explication of both how (pseudo)names were chosen and the role of the family. By exploring how names are used, I argue for a recognition of the assumptions and complexity at the heart of DHRs concerning the place of the victim, family and state, and identify implications for practice, policy and research.

Key words domestic homicide review • domestic violence fatality review • family • naming practices • pseudonyms, use

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Introduction

Domestic abuse (DA)-related deaths are an enduring social problem, and one response has been the development of domestic violence fatality review (DVFR) systems to learn from these deaths to prevent future tragedies (Walklate et al, 2020). In England and Wales,¹ DVFR is known as domestic homicide review (DHR). After a DA-related death, a DHR is commissioned and its findings are usually published in an anonymised overview report and/or executive summary ('the DHR report') (Home Office, 2016b). There is an increasing interest in DHRs (Chantler et al, 2020; Chopra et al, 2022) and DVFRs (Websdale, 2020; Jones et al, 2022). However, gaps exist in our understanding of these systems (Dawson, 2017), not least because of a limited engagement with DVFR/DHR practices (Rowlands, 2020a). Nonetheless, the complexity of DVFR/

DHR systems has been recognised (Websdale, 2012; Haines-Delmont et al, 2022), and this article adds to this by exploring the use of names within DHRs.

Naming is relevant to DHRs because it is ever-present but unaddressed. Specifically, the real name of a victim (and other subjects)² is usually not used in a published DHR. In place of a victim's real name, a pseudonym or some other nomenclature like initials/ letters is used and, in theory, the family can play a role in replacement name selection. However, these name changes and the role of the family in them have not been examined.

In the following sections, I introduce naming practices and then the DHR system, including the role of family and the use of names. Thereafter, I set out my conceptual framework, as well as my method and research design, before presenting and discussing the findings. By exploring naming practices in DHRs through the prism of use, I show how it is possible to unpack the DHR system and shed light on the place of the dead subject, their family and the role of the state. Throughout, I identify practice and policy implications and, in closing, the limitations and areas for further research.

Background

To date, naming in DHRs has not been addressed. Thus, naming is not considered in the aforementioned research into DHRs nor elsewhere, including in analyses released by the Home Office (the sponsoring UK government department) (Home Office, 2016a; Potter, 2022). Naming is also unexplored in DVFR systems internationally³ and other English and Welsh statutory review systems (for example, into the serious injuries/deaths of children or vulnerable adults).⁴ Given this limited attention, I draw on qualitative research methods for insights into the use of names, including issues like name selection and considerations like anonymity.

Lessons from research

Naming has both personal and political dimensions (Alia, 2007) because names locate an individual and are associated with recognition and difference (Hagström, 2012). Conceptually, 'naming practices' captures how names are chosen, any conventions in doing so and how names frame the identity of and/or position the referent (Heaton, 2021).

One consideration concerning naming practice has been how, to achieve anonymisation in research, the use of pseudonyms has been routinised. Scholars have argued that the assumptions underlying pseudonymisation should be interrogated, not least because of effects like the decontextualisation of data (Nespor, 2000). There has also been a concern about the researcher-participant relationship in (pseudo)name selection (Allen and Wiles, 2016), including the complexity of decision making (Brear, 2018) and/or because sometimes participants want to use their real names (Jerolmack and Murphy, 2019). Others have argued anonymisation is often unachievable because of the possibility of identifying participants (Walford, 2005). The names used have also been considered. Thus, for example, Edwards (2020) examined family sociologist naming practices from the 1950s to the 2010s and argued that a move towards more personal names reflects an increasing, albeit little reflected on, desire to convey a closeness to research participants. Finally, naming practices have been explored to address specific sociological phenomena. For example, noting that names are 'the

most ordinary of everyday constructs', Pilcher et al (2020: 573) examined naming practices in adoption. Pilcher et al demonstrated both the significance and complexity of naming in adoption and the wider policy and social context within which this occurs. In this article, I draw on these insights about the use of names to consider naming practices in DHRs.

DHR system

Conducted routinely in England and Wales since 2011, DHRs examine killings by a (former) intimate partner, family or household member, and deaths by suicide, the process of which is governed by statutory guidance (Home Office, 2016b). Some 800 DHRs have been completed (Monckton-Smith, 2021).

It is beyond the scope of this article to address the DHR system itself (for a discussion, see Rowlands 2020a; Haines-Delmont et al, 2022). In summary, when a DA-related death occurs, a DHR is commissioned by the responsible local Community Safety Partnership (CSP).⁵ A DHR is led by an independent chair who works with stakeholders including a multi-agency review panel and potential testimonial networks (primarily family, but also others) (Mullane, 2017; Rowlands and Cook, 2022). Through deliberative dialogue, a picture of the case circumstances is built and, in response to any learning, recommendation(s) for practice, policy or system change(s) are made. These findings are captured in a DHR report, which is signed off by the CSP and must then be approved by the Home Office-convened quality assurance panel ('the QA panel').

Thereafter, a DHR report is usually published,⁶ albeit in 'exceptional circumstances', like protecting the welfare of surviving children(s), this may not happen (Home Office, 2016b: 28, 24).⁷ Publication is assumed to ensure lessons are learnt by facilitating 'transparency' and be a means to 'restore' public confidence (Home Office, 2016b: 24).

Family involvement in DHRs

In a DHR, nominally at least, a victim's family can play a central role, reflecting the statutory guidance's requirement that 'families should be given the opportunity to be integral to reviews and should be treated as a key stakeholder' (Home Office, 2016b: 17). Family involvement is understood as useful because they may be able to share information unknown to agencies (for example, about a victim, including their experiences of DA or agency interventions). Furthermore, involvement is also understood as being potentially useful to families (for example, for catharsis and/or the ability to contribute to change) (Mullane, 2017). Yet, family involvement presents numerous challenges, with key questions including who constitutes family; when and how to engage with family; a family's role and power during this process; and what 'good' looks like in terms of the outcomes achieved (Rowlands and Cook, 2022). Concerning naming practices, the statutory guidance emphasises 'enabling families to choose, if they wish, a suitable pseudonym for the victim' (Home Office, 2016b: 18). However, no further guidance is provided – including how this choice might be introduced, be made and by whom, as well as what might be considered 'suitable' – beyond directing that, should a family decline this opportunity, this should be noted. There is also no guidance about name selection if a family do decline to make a choice.

Use of names in DHRs

The presumption of publication means that the story of a victim's life and death is usually publicly shared. In turn, publication means a decision is necessary about how to refer to the victim in the DHR report. Reflecting this, DHR reports must be 'suitably anonymised', thereby 'protect[ing] the identity of the victim' (Home Office, 2016b: 24). Anonymisation is primarily achieved through pseudonyms, although other 'masking practices' – including disguising/removing identifying information (Jerolmack and Murphy, 2019) – are also used.

By using a (pseudo)name, a victim's real name is taken out of use and replaced. In this act of replacement, there is a preference for personalised names (that is, pseudonyms) rather than nomenclature (for example, initials or letters). This is because using a pseudonym 'humanises the review and allows the reader to more easily follow the narrative' (Home Office, 2016b: 18). Beyond this preference for pseudonyms, name selection is only addressed with reference to family members as noted above, with this requirement added to the statutory guidance in 2016.

Yet, pseudonymisation (and other masking practices) offers only a partial veil because the inclusion of case detail neutralises attempts at masking (Walford, 2005). Illustratively, on publication and when cross-referenced with media reports, a DHR's subject may be identifiable (Websdale, 2020; Jones et al, 2022).

Taken together, the removal of a victim's name and its replacement, the rationale for this (despite its limits) and the sparse guidance on selection and who should be involved (including the role of the family), raise questions about DHR naming practices.

Conceptual framework

As Cook has noted, speaking to C. Wright Mills' ([1959] 2000: 8) distinction between 'personal troubles of milieu' and 'the public issues of social structure', fatal violence is 'an intensely personal encounter' for the family whose loved one has died but also a public concern (Cook, 2020: 1). Consequently, examining responses to and by family can reveal both understandings of family and the effect of such tragedies. Such examination can also explicate the complexity of attempts to make sense of fatal violence, including as part of state-sponsored accountability mechanisms that seek to involve family and thus connect the personal and the public.

As introduced above, DHRs are one example of such a mechanism. First, DHRs are – like most other DVFR systems – enacted by the state (Websdale, 2012; 2020). Second, a DHR brings together different stakeholders, potentially including family, in a deliberative process. Third, yet in doing so, there is the potential for tension (Haines-Delmont et al, 2022), not least because there may be conflicting, explicatory discourses from which those involved may draw (Rowlands, 2020b). Concerning family specifically, as discussed above, these tensions relate to if and how the family are seen as useful to a DHR and, in turn, whether the family find it useful.

To explore naming practices and family involvement, I draw on Ahmed's conception of use (2019). Ahmed explores what things are understood as being useful and how they are used. Illustratively, Ahmed deploys the metaphor of a path and asks by whom and how a path can be used, as well as what happens through repeated use. This metaphor also captures how choices are made about when and how a path originally

became available for use. Approached in this way, use can be conceptualised as both structured and structuring and can be analysed to trace power and identify resistance through (mis)use.

Following Ahmed in ‘think[ing] from use’ (2019: 65), I ask how, when and where things – here, names in DHRs – are used. In DHRs, power is exercised both in terms of how they came into use (that is, through state enactment, including the requirements affecting naming practices like a presumption of publication) and their operationalisation (that is, understandings of what and how things can be used and by whom, including the routinised use of pseudonyms, and when and how this is resisted). Thus, this article is concerned with the use of names in DHRs *and* what naming practices tell us about the DHR system.

Method and research design

In addition to being a researcher, I am a practising independent chair. This dual status means that, as an insider, I am familiar with the field. Additionally, my interest in naming arose because of encounters in practice and being an insider aided access. Where appropriate I draw on my practice to illustrate key issues and/or be explicit about its influence on my research.

Data collection

This article is derived from a doctoral study which included an analysis of published DHR reports, a web-based survey and interviews with DHR stakeholders. The data here are drawn from the analysis of published DHR reports. There is currently no national repository for DHRs. Consequently, researchers have used different data collection strategies, including Freedom of Information requests (Benbow et al, 2019) or searching CSP websites (Chantler et al, 2020; Chopra et al, 2022). A limitation of these strategies is that they only provide data on published DHRs. An alternative (see Home Office, 2016a; Potter, 2022) is to construct a sample from DHR reports submitted to the QA panel.

Enabled by my insider status, the Home Office provided basic information on 102 DHR reports submitted to the QA panel in 2018 (for example, dates of death and commissioning CSPs). Using this information, I conducted a targeted online search at the end of 2019 and then again in 2020, allowing up to two years between submission and publication.

Of 102 prospective DHR reports, 73 (71.6 per cent) were located. (Given concerns about publications, this finding is significant; see endnote 6). Three DHR reports were excluded because, as a practitioner, I had either commissioned or chaired them, leaving 70. Of these, in 10, only an executive summary was available: given their brevity and variability, these too were excluded. This left a sample of 60 DHR reports.

Data analysis

Document analysis was undertaken (Bowen, 2009). I developed a coding schedule and manual (Bryman, 2016), with one category being ‘family, informal network and perpetrator involvement’. Within this category, the following data were sought:

- The (pseudo)name used: coding decisions were based on Edward's (2020) naming conventions typology: categories of individuals; an honorific plus some other naming feature; family collective names, personal and family names, or personal names only. From my practice experience, I made two additions capturing the use of 'initial(s) or code only' or a 'real name' (Table 1).
- The nature of family engagement: this included whether or not a family had been approached; any outcome; and, within this, if/how the family had been involved in name selection. Pre-defined codes captured different outcomes based on my practice experience (Figures 1–3).
- Accounts explaining name selection: these accounts were identified, extracted and read, then coded using a three-part framework encompassing generic references to the requirements to confidentiality/anonymity in the statutory guidance ('technical'); those that specifically addressed decision making ('explanation'); or where no account was offered ('not stated') (Table 2).

Coding was usually explicit although sometimes interpretation was necessary (Rowlands and Bracewell, 2022). The analysis was conducted in Excel with descriptive statistics produced in SPSS. As a doctoral study, no other researchers were involved, although DHR reports were read multiple times.

Sussex University provided ethical approval. With respect to DHR reports, although challenges are often noted, researchers frequently indicate that ethical approval was not required (for example, Benbow et al, 2019; Chantler et al, 2020) or ethical issues have been unaddressed (for example, Chopra et al, 2022). This may reflect an assumption that DHR reports are, as documents, inert (Bowen, 2009). However, I take a 'widened ethical lens' (Clark and Walker, 2011) by engaging specifically with the ethics of research into DHR reports. This means considering, despite being in the public sphere, how the findings might be received (for example, the risk of sensationalisation) and to whom an ethical duty is owed (for example, the victim, despite their death, as well as their family and others who knew them). This means also engaging with DHRs as a process and a product, with a particular focus on victim subjectivity. A focus on the use of names in DHRs, which has been otherwise unconsidered, serves as an exemplar of this widened ethical lens.

Findings

Name forms

Concerning *name forms*, in all but one DHR report, the victim's real name had been removed. In 41 DHR reports (68.3 per cent), the replacement name form used was a personal name. No other replacement name form accounted for more than 10 per cent of the DHR reports: six (10.0 per cent) used categories of individual/s; five (8.3 per cent) used an honorific plus an initial or family name; five (8.3 per cent) used a personal and family name; and two (3.3 per cent) used initial(s) or a code. No DHR report used a family collective name. In one DHR report (1.7 per cent) real names were used. This DHR considered the murders of Claire and Charlotte Hart in 2016 by their husband/father and real names were used at the family's request (Wate, 2018). No names were duplicated (Table 1).

These findings suggest that the statutory guidance call to use pseudonyms is largely being followed. Moreover, the predominance of personal (and sometimes family)

Table 1: Name forms

	Examples	Frequency	Per cent
Categories of individual/s	Child D, Victim M, Adult A	6	10.0
Honorific plus initial of family name, family name, or personal and family name	Mrs J, Mrs Lowe, Mr AB	5	8.3
Family collective name	N/A	0	0.0
Personal and family name	Maggie Johnson	5	8.3
Personal name only	Rabia	41	68.3
Initial(s) / code only	V	2	3.3
Real name	Claire and Charlotte Hart	1	1.7

Note: Adapted from Edwards (2020).

names mirrors the trajectory in research towards more personal naming styles (Edwards, 2020). However, a minority of DHR reports used more impersonal name forms like a category of individual/s or an honorific or initial(s) or code. I consider the DHRs where real names were used below.

Name selection

Concerning *name selection*, the process of choosing replacement names was little explained. In 34 DHR reports (56.7 per cent) there was no specific account of name selection. Of these, in 8 DHR reports (13.3 per cent) no account was offered and in 26 (43.3 per cent) there was a technical account. In the remaining 26 DHR reports (43.3 per cent), accounts specifically addressed decision making, with references to decisions made by the independent chair, review panel and/or family. Where there was an account, this was usually a statement about family involvement and their agreement to a name chosen for them. In these cases, how a specific name was

Figure 1: Family involvement

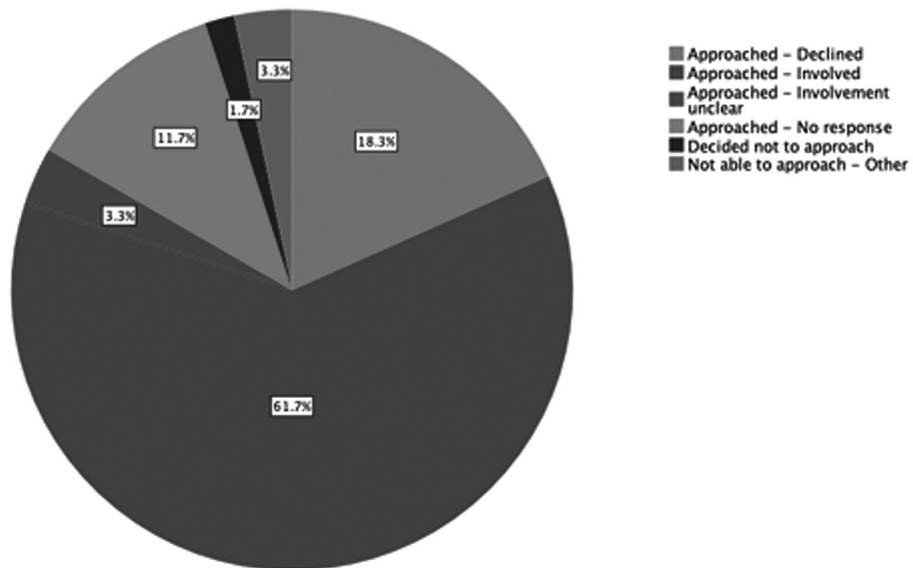
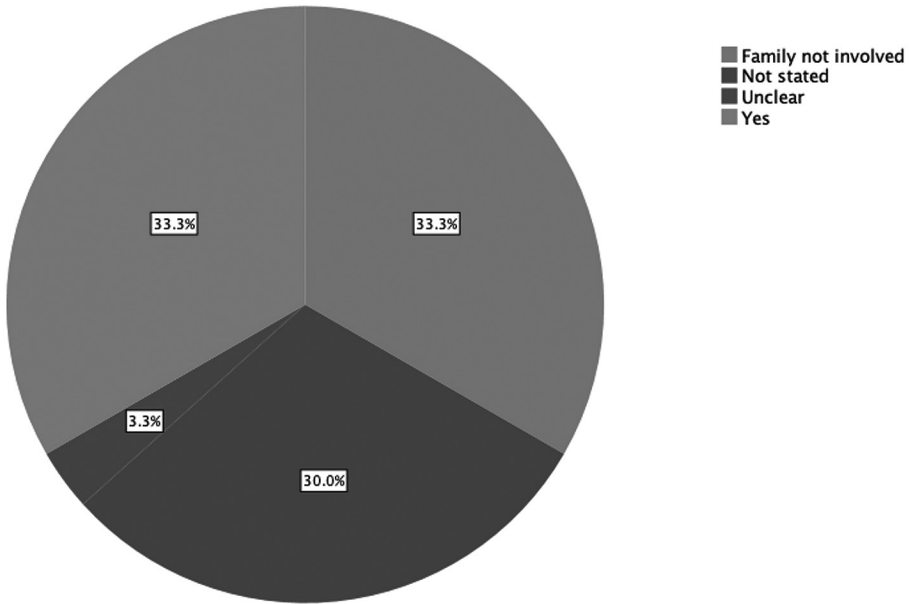


Figure 2: Involvement in name selection



chosen was usually absent, with name selection only explained in one DHR report specifically (1.7 per cent) (discussed below). However, if a family had been engaged, there was sometimes a more substantive account explaining their involvement in name selection (also discussed below); see [Table 2](#).

I intended to consider naming practices with references to ethnicity. However, victim ethnicity data were only reported in 35 DHR reports (58.3 per cent).

Figure 3: Nature of name selection

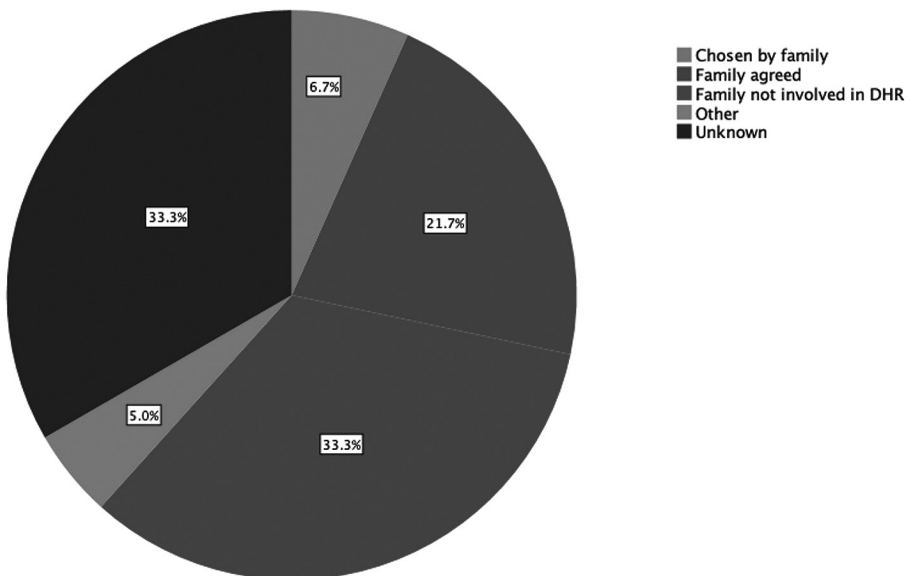


Table 2: Accounts of name selection

	Frequency	Percent
Technical	26	43.3
Explanation	26	43.3
Not stated	8	13.3
Total	60	100.0

Nonetheless, in some DHR reports there was evidence of attempts to select names with reference to a victim’s ethnicity and/or cultural heritage where the victim was not White British. In one DHR report, the name ‘Rabia’ was used for a victim originally from Pakistan. However, no explanation was given as to the selection and the victim’s family had not been involved (Spanswick, 2019). In another DHR report, the victim, originally from Lithuania, was named ‘Irena’. Although the family had not been involved, name selection was described as based on ‘names from their community’ (Chapman, n.d.: 4).

Like Benbow et al (2019), the level of missing data about ethnicity meant further analysis was not possible. Given this, and the limited explanation of name selection, it is not possible to report substantive findings regarding naming practices and ethnicity. This finding reinforces concerns about missing data in DHR reports (Benbow et al, 2019; Chantler et al, 2020; Chopra et al, 2022). Nonetheless, the evidence of attempts in some cases to select names with care is notable, even though this could only be identified regarding ethnic/cultural background. Such targeted selection is significant given the risks that naming practices could, for example, erase ethnic/cultural differences through anglicisation (Brear, 2018). However, at the same time, these findings support Chantler et al’s suggestion that ethnicity is most reported for ‘visibly different’ victims (2020: 487). It is important to attend to the silences in the data producing this exceptionalism. Specifically, gaps in ethnicity reporting may reflect normative assumptions about White Britishness (and conversely the Othering of victims from different communities and backgrounds), compounded by the limited explanation of name selection.

Taken together, these findings about replacement name forms and selection suggest that naming is seen, as in research practice (Edwards, 2020), as a technical matter in DHRs. While the limited accounts in most of the DHR reports preclude further exploration, these findings also suggest variability in naming practices among DHRs, perhaps reflecting differences between independent chairs (Haines-Delmont et al, 2022).

Yet, treating naming as a technical matter ignores its personal and political dimensions (Alia, 2007). Arguably, greater reflection on, and transparency about, name selection in DHRs is required. In reflecting on my practice as an independent chair, I have recognised that while I address family involvement in DHR reports, I have not consistently explained name selection where a family is not involved. This is even though, when selecting names, I consider the etymology of a victim’s real name and other factors like nationality and/or faith.⁸ However, although one should be cautious about naming because of the aforementioned potential to occlude ethnicity and culture, participant subjectivity may mean that people choose to use names in ways that run counter to un-interrogated assumptions

(see [Brear, 2018](#)). Taken together, these findings suggest the need for clarity in the statutory guidance about expectations, promoting greater reflection on, and attention to, naming practices, and increased transparency as to what should be reported and how.

This also points to the need for greater attention to the consistency of DHR reports and a dialogue about what should be included and why, including ethnicity data, and how these data should be reported ([Rowlands and Bracewell, 2022](#)). It also underlines the need for diverse review panels ([Jones et al, 2022](#)).

Family involvement in DHRs (including name selection)

In most DHR reports, an approach had been made to the family, and they often engaged. Thus, in 50 DHR reports (83.3 per cent) contact had been established with the victim's family. In 37 of these (61.7 per cent), the family were involved in some way, with two (3.3 per cent) where the nature of involvement was unclear. In 11 DHR reports (18.3 per cent), having been approached, the family declined involvement, although one family (1.7 per cent) requested a specific pseudonym be used. In 10 DHR reports (16.7 per cent) families were not involved in any way. Non-involvement included cases where the family had been approached and no response was received (11.7 per cent, $n=7$), it had been decided not to approach (1.7 per cent, $n=1$) or an approach was not possible (3.3 per cent, $n=2$) ([Figure 1](#)).

These findings sit between the levels of engagement reported elsewhere (see [Montique, 2019](#); [Potter, 2022](#)). However, limited information was available about the nature of family engagement in DHR reports. This is further evidence of the variability in DHR reports generally ([Benbow et al, 2019](#); [Chantler et al, 2020](#); [Chopra et al, 2022](#)), and family engagement specifically ([Potter, 2022](#)). This wider engagement is not explored further here.

If a family were engaged, their involvement often included name selection in some way. Thus, reflecting the above, in 20 DHR reports (33.3 per cent) the family were not involved. However, in up to 40 (66.7%) DHR reports the family were involved in some way. In 20 (33.3 per cent) DHR reports, it was not possible to determine the nature of family involvement as this was not stated in 18 (30.0 per cent) and unclear in two (3.3 per cent). In the remaining 20 DHR reports (33.3 per cent) it was possible to identify how family had been involved ([Figure 2](#)).

Of the 20 DHR reports (33.3 per cent) where families were involved in name selection, in 13 DHR reports (21.7 per cent) a name was chosen and subsequently agreed on by the family. In these circumstances, the independent chair/and or review panel most likely selected the name. However, as already noted, as little detail was included about naming practices, how any offer was made is unclear. In four DHR reports (6.7 per cent) the name used was selected by the family. Three DHR reports (5.0 per cent) were coded as 'Other' ([Figure 3](#)).

While it may be viewed as positive that families are often involved in name selection, how an offer is made might affect a family's expectations *and* decisions. For example, there is no requirement that families are shown examples of previous DHR reports to help them understand what a published report might look like and thus the context in which their choice of a pseudonym will operate. Moreover, families might be offered an informed choice with a range of possible options, before deciding to agree to a name selected by others. Alternatively, families

might be told that a pseudonym will be selected and that they can comment on this. These offers are different and may lead to different outcomes. Thus, the findings begin to explicate family involvement in name selection, but its nature remains unclear.

In the small number of DHR reports where the family had chosen a name, this was not explained but this decision may have reflected the risk that an explanation could compromise anonymity (for example, if the selected name was a nickname or perhaps another family name).

Overall, limited reporting is perhaps not surprising given, as noted earlier, the scarce consideration of naming practices in the statutory guidance. Indeed, this scarcity is itself a policy illustration of how naming practices are treated as a mere technical activity. The absence of guidance and/or expectations suggests a lack of concern with, or attention to, the interactions between decision maker(s) and participant(s) in naming practices, including with respect to power in individual cases. This is significant given naming selection may range from paternalistic allocation to engaged co-production (Allen and Wiles, 2016). This is further evidence for what has already been suggested: the need for greater reflection and transparency in DHR name selection and direction in the statutory guidance.

The data also illustrate the operation of power within the DHR system. Of the DHR reports coded as 'Other', as noted above, one was the DHR into the killing of Claire and Charlotte Hart. In this case, the QA panel, while noting the potential implications, accepted the family's request (supported by the CSP) to use real names. Of the other two reports, one was a joint DHR and serious case review into the killing of a 17-year-old boy ('Child D') by his half-brother in 2016: the victim's mother 'decided she did not want to use alternative names' and a category of individual form was used (Griffiths and Jeremiah, 2017: 3–4). The other related to a 79-year-old man ('Mr AB') killed by his son in 2015: the honorific form was requested because the family felt the impact on younger family members would be mitigated (Griffiths, 2018: 4, 41).

Each of these requests, contrary to the statutory guidance, was honoured by the commissioning CSPs. Subsequently, in the case of the Harts, the QA panel noted the implications of using real names but accepted the family's request. However, in the cases of Child D and Mr AB, while acknowledging family preferences, the QA panel decided that pseudonyms should be used to 'allow a reader to more easily follow the narrative' (Griffiths and Jeremiah, 2017: 47; Griffiths, 2018: 38); that is, the QA panel recommended a personal name should be used. However, it appears the commissioning CSPs nonetheless honoured the families' wishes.

These three cases are indicative of two tensions about power within the DHR system. The first relates to power between state bodies, that is authority. The DHR system is unusual because it is national in scope (Dawson, 2017), with oversight via the Home Office and the QA panel. However, in practice, delivery is localised, with individual CSPs being responsible for each DHR. This division creates tension (Rowlands, 2020a; Haines-Delmont et al, 2022), including where centralised oversight can come into conflict with localised delivery. Illustratively, for Child D and Mr AB, the QA panel's recommendations that pseudonyms should be used appears to have been disregarded by the respective CSPs.

Second, there is the issue of power exercised by or over a family – that is, status. In these cases, families made choices contrary to the statutory guidance. The choice

of the Hart family was recognised as legitimate by the QA panel, but the choices of the other families were not. This suggests that some choices are seen as more suitable than others, raising questions about the status of families in DHRs (Mullane, 2017; Rowlands and Cook, 2022).

Discussion

In the discussion, I bring together the findings to address how the use of names can help unpack DHRs in practice and as a system. Specifically, it is possible to attend to power by examining assumptions about, and the practical and conceptual challenges that arise in relation to, names. Here, I follow Nespor (2000) who argues that the uncritical use of anonymisation in research, including the use of pseudonyms, conceals assumptions about these practices and their effectiveness and removes people and places from being situated in their everyday world through abstraction. In particular, Nespor highlights that anonymisation obfuscates the analysis of power because – discussing specifically the anonymisation of settings and places – it means events ‘are simply taken as givens instead of scrutinized as contingent and unfinished outcomes of power and struggles’ (2000: 554). I argue this same concealment can be found in DHRs because the taken-for-granted use of pseudonyms conceals the contingency of this process. Thus, to explicate power, returning to Ahmed (2019: 7) I ‘complicate’ the use of names in DHRs by asking how a victim’s real name comes to be placed out of use; why pseudonyms are used; and finally, what is considered proper use.

Out of use

As the findings show, a victim’s real name is usually taken out of use in a DHR and replaced. This change, required by the statutory guidance, is rationalised as protective and humanising. What does this tell us about the DHR system?

First, that a victim’s real name can be erased is an expression of power because DHRs are a manifestation of the ‘legal regime’ enacted by the state after a death (Conway, 2016: 34). Thus, a concern with naming is only necessary because DHRs have been established and usually place a victim’s story in the public arena. There are good reasons to tell these stories, not least to attend to, account for and develop preventative responses to DA-related deaths (Walklate et al, 2020). I attend to replacement names below, but here a concern with the erasure of a victim’s name is not semantic, as it leads us to consider what the conduct of DHRs means in the first place.

Thus, second, in operation, DHRs exercise power by severing the connection between a victim and their name, thus disrupting the link between identity, bodies and names (Pilcher, 2017). What is the consequence of removing a victim’s name? *Within a DHR*, might this affect the extent to which a victim’s subjectivity and agency are recognised? In the absence of their real name, might a victim become an object to be scrutinised? These questions are significant because in state-sponsored mechanisms a victim is often not central. Thus, the criminal justice system has been criticised for reifying perpetrator perspectives (Monckton Smith et al, 2014). This could also happen in DHRs, particularly as some reports contain limited victim information (Bracewell et al, 2022).

Moreover, as Benbow et al (2019) highlight, taking a victim's real name out of use may enable agencies to avoid or mitigate scrutiny by obscuring the connection between an individual and their story. If so, claiming that pseudonymisation humanises a victim may be symbolic, particularly given that evidencing change is an ongoing challenge in DHR/DVFRs (Jones et al, 2022).

Outside a DHR, there is no research into how DHR reports are read and received. In lieu, we might consider what is lost by removing a victim's name. Illustratively, in other contexts, using a victim's real name has significance: the Femicide Census – which documents the killing of women by men in the UK (including domestic homicides) – uses names in 'commemoration and recognition' (Long et al, 2020: 114). In this way, naming can help enable memory justice (Walklate et al, 2020). Current DHR naming practices usually preclude this.

The findings here underline the importance of considering the place of the dead subject and encourage us to examine the assumption that victims are central to DHRs (Rowlands, 2020b). In response, we might also ask what practices could promote or maintain a victim's centrality so DHRs might, as far as possible, 'articulate the life through the eyes of the victim' (Home Office, 2016b: 7).

In use

In the statutory guidance, the use of pseudonyms is partly justified as being protective. Yet, the confidentiality offered by DHRs is partial at best, given anonymity is easily overcome (cf. other DVFR systems; see endnote 3). To draw on a parallel in research practice, effectively DHRs operate at one extreme by 'telling about it [the death] extensively while using pseudonyms for everything' (Nespor, 2000: 559).

Given this, what is the consequence of nonetheless placing a victim's name out of use? First, as Benbow et al have noted, perhaps it is 'not logical' to maintain the pretence of confidentiality (2019: 1111). This may be particularly true if families wish to see their loved ones named, to which I return below.

Second, publishing DHR reports means the use of pseudonyms (and the promise of confidentiality) is a procedural fiction (Walford, 2005). This raises several issues. Might assumptions about the protective power of pseudonyms lead to less caution about confidentiality more generally (Contreras, 2019)? DHR reports often include extensive detail about a victim's life and death. Such detail is, in part, the value of DHRs as engaging with the 'structure, culture, time, and space' of a victim's death can enable learning to prevent future tragedies (Walklate et al, 2020: 100). Yet, as noted above, DHR report quality varies, suggesting this ambition is not always achieved. Moreover, as an independent chair, I struggle with how much detail DHR reports place in the public arena and whether this is excessive. This also raises legal questions, particularly considering the General Data Protection Regulation, introduced after the latest version of the statutory guidance was released.

Linked to and extending this, what are the ethical implications? For example, regarding family participation as part of a victim's testimonial network, how are the limits of confidentiality explained and understood? These limits include both the risk of general identifiability and being identifiable to others with case knowledge (what Tolich (2004) describes as external and internal confidentiality).

Proper use

We might also consider the implications of the state coming to own, or at least having a controlling influence over loss in the telling of the story of DA-related deaths through DHRs. In this way, the state has exercised its power to determine that pseudonyms should be used in DHRs.

Yet, some families resist this prescription and, instead, prefer real names, as was the case for the family of Claire and Charlotte Hart. Such a preference has been reported elsewhere. For example, in Scarth's (2016) research with bereaved families, some – challenging the routine use of pseudonyms – wanted their loved ones' real names used. Reasons for preferring real names included memorialising a loved one, enabling a continued presence and/or challenging the silence around or possible objectification of the dead. Although no data is available on this trend in DHRs, the Harts' case is not unique: the DHR report into the killing of Ellie Gould by her ex-boyfriend in 2019 used Ellie's real name at her family's request (Harding, 2021). Such requests challenge the existing requirements for naming practices.

Moreover, sometimes family wishes may be contrary to normative assumptions about 'appropriate' replacement name forms. Thus, as described above, in the cases of Child D and Mr AB, family preferences were weighed by the QA panel as less important than accessibility for the abstract general reader. Putting aside the extent to which impersonal name forms are a barrier to intelligibility, it is notable that the commitment to treating families as 'key stakeholders' (Home Office, 2016b: 17) appears dependent on them making 'suitable' choices (Home Office, 2016b: 18). This, then, is an example of both the state's capacity to claim power over loss and its potential ability to cause harm to a family in the aftermath of a death (Armour, 2002).

Unaddressed in this data is a further complexity, which is who constitutes 'family' and thus can make this decision? The evidence relating to family engagement is limited, yet here too power may be exercised by the state based on assumptions about family structure. That includes decisions over whom to approach in a family and, for example, how to manage conflict among family members (Rowlands and Cook, 2022).

Implications for practice and policy

This article has interrogated what naming in DHRs means for practice and the DHR system. As Jerolmack and Murphy (2019: 819) observe, 'all kinds of combinations of disclosure and masking' can be used to balance an ethical responsibility to subjects and the benefits of transparency. Yet, it seems the combination currently used in DHRs – a pretence to anonymity, largely through the use of pseudonyms, in the knowledge that a published DHR report is identifiable because it usually ceases to be confidential – is flawed. More problematically, current guidance and practice concerning name use raise questions about power in practice and for DHRs as a system, including the place of the victim and their family, and the state's role.

What, then, for practice and policy? Perhaps the call for 'thoughtful naming' (Allen and Wiles, 2016: 162) is a starting point. Such thoughtfulness would mean recognising that naming is not a routine administrative task but is instead vested with power. The statutory guidance should be revised to clarify expectations about naming practices, including processes for name selection and what should be included in DHR reports. Moreover, to fulfil the ambition of treating families as equal stakeholders, they should

be offered a range of options regarding name choice. Associated with this, a family's choice of name form should be honoured wherever possible.

Additionally, the recognition that naming practices arise because of a pursuit of a partial and easily drawn-aside veil of anonymity after publication must prompt a more explicit engagement with informed consent. There is an ethical responsibility to acknowledge the 'ever-present threat of disclosure' (Jerolmack and Murphy, 2019: 807). Given the limits described here, this should mean an open and realistic discussion with the family (and other testimonial network stakeholders) about the extent, nature and risk of their contribution(s). As a minimum, a range of options could be offered, addressing anonymity and – given its limits – agreement about what information can be used and how (Kaiser, 2009).

Finally, there is also a need to consider the procedural fiction of anonymity which is largely sustained by using pseudonyms. Such consideration should be part of a wider process of examining the DHR system, including its strengths, weaknesses and contradictions as a state-sponsored mechanism.

These findings also have research implications. As discussed in the methodology, DHR reports are ethically complex, with naming practices being an example of this. Thus, researchers should explicitly consider the ethical issues that arise in using DHR reports as a source of data.

Limitations and future research

This is the first study of DHR naming practices and the sample is not generalisable. Future research, particularly using a larger sample, could examine changes in naming conventions over time and/or victim characteristics (such as ethnicity/culture, age or class). The findings also offer only a partial picture of family engagement; further research is needed, including examining societal and administrative understandings of 'family'. Furthermore, the experience of professional stakeholders could also be addressed, including intersections with family wishes. Finally, I am a practising independent chair and an insider. I have acknowledged this (creative) tension and present my methods and findings, so readers may make a judgement as to the trustworthiness of my research.

Conclusion

In examining the use of names in DHRs, this article addresses the underexamined issue of naming practices. Based on data from DHR reports, and drawing on qualitative research literature, I have shown how name selection is often treated as a technical exercise and how testimonial networks, specifically family, are involved. I have argued that naming is important for how we approach DHRs and should be more fully considered, not least through greater attention to and explication of name selection and family engagement. This article illuminates assumptions about the use of names and in doing so has explored the role of the state vis-à-vis both victims and their families. Together, this returns us to Alia's (2007) observation that naming is both personal and political, which we must not forget when seeking to honour our dead.

Notes

¹ DHRs began in Northern Ireland in 2020 but are not yet undertaken in Scotland.

- ² Such as the (alleged) perpetrator, family members, friends, community members and professionals.
- ³ This is because other DVFR systems publish aggregated accounts (Dawson, 2017), reflecting confidentiality requirements (Websdale, 2020). However, there are exceptions. One Australian team uses pseudonyms ‘to protect the identities of people involved and respect the privacy of surviving family and friends’ (NSW Domestic Violence Death Review Team, 2020: 20), although no specific process exists for name selection (E. Buxton-Namisnyk, personal communication, 15 October 2022). Meanwhile, a team in the US publishes (real) names (Office of Consumer Protection and Victim Services, 2019).
- ⁴ If published, different (pseudo)names are used (Brandon et al, 2020: 269–73; Preston-Shoot, 2021: 209–10). However, real names are sometimes used (Brandon et al, 2020: 258); see also NHS England (2015).
- ⁵ Community Safety Partnerships – or Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships – convene local agencies and are responsible for reducing local crime and disorder, substance misuse and reoffending.
- ⁶ There are challenges concerning the availability of DHR reports (Chantler et al, 2020; Chopra et al, 2022). Illustratively, a third of the DHRs cited in this article are no longer accessible online.
- ⁷ Sometimes an executive summary and/or a learning briefing is published.
- ⁸ Davina James-Hanman introduced me to this method.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Note: * indicates the source is no longer accessible. See note 6.

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