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In defence of anonymity: rejoining the criticism

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This article is a response to the growing criticisms of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) ethical guidelines on anonymity and pseudonymity as default positions for participants in qualitative educational research. It discusses and responds to those criticisms under four headings—illusion, impossibility and undesirability, access and quality—and extends the explication of difficulties to quantitative approaches using an example from value-added effectiveness research. The article discusses potential flaws in the arguments made against anonymous and pseudonymous research, and presents some issues for the research community to take forward. Finally, some suggestions are offered for a modified code of practice regarding anonymity and pseudonymity, which attempts a more subtle capture of difficulties in the field and qualifies the existing rationale to take account of previously unconsidered technical concerns.

Introduction

Many and great are the vicissitudes of anonymity as an ethic in educational research. Over the last few years, protocols have been issued by research and funding agencies like the American Sociological Association (ASA, 1997), the American Psychological Association (Sales & Folkman, 2000), the American Educational Research Association (Strike *et al.*, 2002), the British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002), the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2004) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2005). As they have become more embedded in practice, they have given rise to doubts, particularly in ethnographic research, about the efficacy of offering anonymity to participating sites and individuals as a default position. The right to dissent from the prevailing wisdom of the day is of course legitimate and to be encouraged: speaking frankly to the hegemony of supervisory organisations and individuals is a necessary feature of any healthy research community. What has been lacking is a rejoin to these criticisms and in that spirit this article attempts such a purchase.

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The challenge to 'default anonymity' (which subsumes pseudonymity) is perhaps best put in the round by Geoffrey Walford (2005), who has been consistent in his critique over several years and who musters best the forces on that side: Jan Nespor (2000) on the fact that anonymisation offers protection only insofar as what is discovered is insignificant; Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2000, p. 128) on how self-preserving and spurious such 'cute and conventional' protection can be; Alan Peshkin (2001) and Gerald Grace (2002) as examples of how easily contextual information can be used to uncover true identity; Alan Wolfe (2003) on the fact that trust between researcher and researched is better achieved when there is *no* promise of anonymity. In some respects, these challenges to anonymity do not go far enough, being as they are confined within the slightly solipsistic world of ethnography; in other respects, the arguments appear prosopographical and circumstantial, and occasionally quite flawed.

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Anonymity in ethnographic research: a discussion

The chief concerns of those who object to the rubric of anonymity—defined as not true-naming participants or sites and not providing information that enables them to be identified—as the default position in qualitative research can be grouped under four generic headings: illusion; impossibility and undesirability; access; quality.

The illusion of anonymity as a protection for participants

Trivially, there is no problem in the case where participants or sites *wish* to be identified and *are* identified. At first sight, it might seem that the converse is also trivial—that there is no problem in the case where participants wish to remain anonymous and do (for a time)—but this is not so, say critics, because anonymity is a temporary and misleading illusion: a determined sleuth can always uncover the true identity of participants, who have been lulled into a false security by manipulative researchers, and this is particularly true where research findings are significant enough to arouse media interest.

In the situation where participants wish to be acknowledged but are not, they are being denied credit. In the case where they wish to remain anonymous but are identified, it is simple betrayal. Critics therefore conclude that anonymity as a default position among researchers is at best unimportant and at worst miasmic.

The impossibility and undesirability of offering anonymity in certain circumstances

It seems reasonable to claim that the more people that know of research and the more newsworthy its findings, the more vulnerable is anonymity to being broken, but it does not follow from this that anonymity is therefore impossible or pointless, or that media interest is a proper measure of anything other than prurience. When the substantive findings from a project merit wide public interest and are presented properly, it should still be possible for communities of interest to discuss the emerging issues without knowing the specificities in such a way as to be able to

discover the characters, unless that is necessary for a proper understanding. And if in extreme cases sites and participants *are* uncovered by a resourceful sleuth driven by the desire to expose criminality, professional misconduct or moral hypocrisy, it is *still* not an argument against anonymity as a default position *in the first instance*. If a research site has doings so distasteful that public disquiet incentivises the press to try to uncover its identity, is it reasonable to suggest that the participants there situated, knowing of the transgressions from the start but yet consenting, have the right reasonably to assume *perfect protection in every eventuality*? Can this be considered a betrayal? I would suggest not. Critics have only demonstrated that anonymity *in bad research* is seldom preserved against keen sleuthing, and that is probably as it should be. It is not clear that significance is the determinant. If a site and its individuals have been anonymised properly, their identities cannot be uncovered, even though the findings be significant. Even at the point of criminality, it is usually the researcher or a participant (and not the outside sleuth) who breaks cover. The identity of 'Deep Throat' in the Watergate scandal, for example, remained a secret for 30 years until the source revealed itself, despite the best efforts of hundreds of well-equipped and highly motivated professionals. With this in mind, the ESRC (2005) ethical framework obliges researches to consider: 'the form and context of the publication of research results … to ensure that media coverage does not compromise research participants, co-researchers or funding bodies or breach confidentiality' (ESRC, 2005, p. 26)

As critics rightly point out, promising anonymity *where it cannot be maintained*—as with gatekeepers (Levinson & Sparkes, 2005) and focus groups, where it is impossible to ensure that participants *themselves* adhere to the rules (Parker & Tritter, 2006, p. 33)—is unethical. Again, this is not a reason to abandon anonymity altogether: it has not been proven that good research properly conducted ever has to get into that situation. Additionally, among non-vulnerable consenting and professional participants like teachers, there is usually (at least) an implicit understanding that anonymity offered initially is subject to later limitations placed on it by the law and professional operating procedures. For example, in the UK, research has limitations imposed upon it by the Data Protection Act (1998), the Freedom of Information Act (2000) and the fact that school inspection reports are published on government websites. In the USA, there are limitations to anonymity as a result of the Freedom of Information Act (1966). The BERA (2004) guidelines are explicit in this respect:

> Researchers who judge that the effect of the agreements they have made, on confidentiality and anonymity, will allow the continuation of illegal behaviour, which has come to light in the course of the research, must carefully consider making disclosure to the appropriate authorities. If the behaviour is likely to be harmful to the participants or to others, the researchers must also consider disclosure. Insofar as it does not undermine or obviate the disclosure, researchers must apprise the participants … of their intentions and reasons for disclosure. (BERA, 2004, Section 27, p. 9)

The point here is one of expectation. Professionals should be made aware, if they do not already know, that there is some information (already or likely to be) in the

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public domain which if coupled with data from the research, might cause the level of protection offered *ab initio* to be lowered. If critics of anonymity have a case, it is this: that too seldom is this fact of limitation explained to participants; that the unspoken presumption by some that anonymity is perfect and inviolable is left unchallenged.

Expectation and duty of care are linked, of course. They both depend at least in part on the level of sentience of participants, and the coda here is that the researcher (at a minimum) must act with integrity while doing everything reasonable to ensure that anonymity is preserved. If in some circumstances anonymity is broken, advertently or inadvertently, the fault lies not in the aspiration to preserve it.

Issues of access

It has been argued that sites for research, like schools, are too often chosen for reasons of professional or geographical convenience, which then enables the cover of anonymity to be more easily blown. Critics use this (mal)practice as an argument against offering anonymity in the first place, though it seems more an argument against *bad* research:

> There are obvious temptations to accept sites that appear to be readily available rather than work harder to try to achieve access to the most appropriate sites for the research. … Choosing a site on the basis of geographical convenience challenges the promises of anonymity that are so often given. (Walford, 2005, p. 87)

It is a feature of criticisms like this that anonymity is frequently conflated with substandard fieldwork or poor interpretation. It is not obvious how poor research could be made better by *not* offering anonymity, even if it is a veneer easily cracked. It may be that anonymity is an issue more in ethnographic research because ethnographers themselves perceive there to be more bad research in the area; not because the method itself is flawed, but because it so readily embraces the risk of intimacy (Proweller, 1998) within which it is easier to ignore cautionary precepts and still produce 'findings'.

One issue that critics of anonymity do not mention, but which would add to their case, is the possibility that the default of anonymity has become more popular not as a means of securing access, but as a way of avoiding certain legal impositions, such as those arising from the provisions of the UK Data Protection Act (1998), Section 33 of which offers certain exemptions:

> The provisions of the DPA do not apply if complete anonymisation of data is undertaken. However, organizations and individual researchers should be aware that data 'stripping' to remove personal identifiers, and the concept of anonymisation itself, are often problematic. Careful consideration is advised before using this as a basis for exemption. (ESRC, 2005, Section 1.16.3.3, p. 18)

Issues of quality

The issue of access and whether the sites selected for research are appropriate or too easily compromised leads to issues of quality. Walford (2005, p. 87) cites research by

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'one of America's most well-known educational ethnographers', the late Alan Peshkin (2001), as an example of how pseudonymous reportage can fail:

> Peshkin gave some 'basic facts' about the elite school in which he conducted the research. Geographically, it is in New Mexico, has a 312 acre main campus and another 270 nearby mountain acres. Quoting from the prospectus, it is stated that the school has 25% pupils of colour and 30% receive more than $1,200,000 in financial aid based entirely on demonstrated financial need. It can do this because it has an endowment of approximately $200 million.

Peshkin's pseudonym—perhaps not surprisingly—failed in its mission to protect the school from identification. In using it as an example, there is an implication that such exposure is inevitable with pseudonymous research. Surely it is instead a case of 'noble Homer nodding', which is to say, an instance of a good researcher getting it wrong or being badly served by presentation. It is bizarre to go to such trouble to hide a site's identity and then go to even greater trouble to reveal it! Can there be any justification for telling the reader the home state, the acreage of the campus, the fact of the school's mountain estate and the extent of its endowment, while purporting to offer the school anonymity? Perhaps Peshkin assumed—wrongly as it turned out, but perhaps not unreasonably—that knowing the substantive purpose and findings of the study would be enough to sustain the school's anonymity in that readers would be induced to see its real identity as being of little importance. It serves as a lesson that adding trivia to a story does nothing for its telling, but little else. Anonymity may harm output quality in the later stages if, as critics claim, it encourages spurious generalisation (though that is unproven), but it could just as easily be said to *encourage* quality at the earlier data-gathering stage. The issue with 'the Peshkin failing'—giving superfluous information that enables pseudonymity to be broken—is instead one of reportage.

Anonymity in quantitative research: a case against

Critics of anonymity have centred their concerns tribally on ethnographic and small-scale qualitative research (Shulman, 1990; Brettell, 1993). In that respect, they do not go far enough. Anonymity is also a problem in nomothetic and large-scale quantitative work, even if the default position is even more unchallenged. Consider the following scenario in which the link between value-added measures and raw pupil attainment (at age 16) is measured. Figure 1 shows a (fictional) correlation between the value added (VA) by schools between the ages of 11 and 16, and some broadly-defined[1] measure of attainment for a cohort of secondary schools. Figure 2 shows the correlation (again fictional) between the value added by the same schools when the measures are contextualised (CVA) by ethnicity, social deprivation, gender and so on. In effect, these graphs tell how good a predictor is VA or CVA of 'attainment'. None of the schools has been identified or is identifiable.

The two scatter plots and their correlations—at a guess, about +0.8—are very similar, which would lead one to the conclusion that contextualised value-added measures (CVA) do not predict 'attainment' any better than non-contextualised

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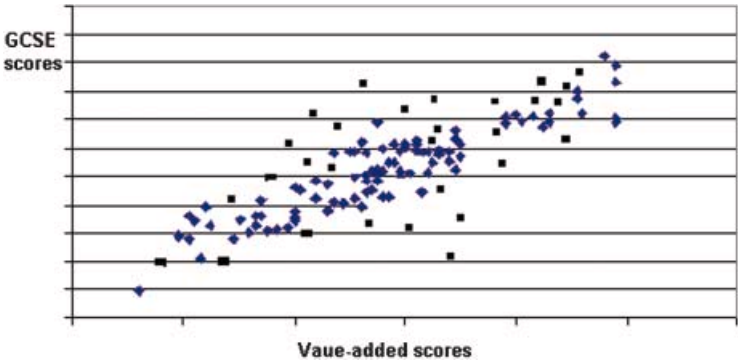

Figure 1. A fictional link between VA (KS2 to KS4) and GCSE attainment for a cohort of secondary schools

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value-added measures (VA); or to borrow Stephen Gorard's (2006) phrase, that contextualised value added 'is of little value'.

Data like this are never school-specific and in very large-scale research it is difficult to see how it could otherwise be presented sensibly, beyond doing more statistical tests within the data set. However, something is lost in this 'anonymity of aggregation'. Consider Figure 3 and Figure 4, in which eight schools within the cohort have been identified, not in the sense of being named, but in the sense of being distinguishable. It can now be seen clearly that contextualising value added makes a very significant difference to some schools and if, for example, local authority funding were predicated on such measures, this understanding would have a practical and important bearing on how schools 'triaged' their pupils. In circumstances of choice and consumerism such as prevail today, the extent to which a school is perceived to be successful affects enrolment, which in turn is the major driver of government funding.

Figures 3 and 4 tell us something that Figures 1 and 2 do not: that for some schools, the contexts of ethnicity, social deprivation and gender are important, and

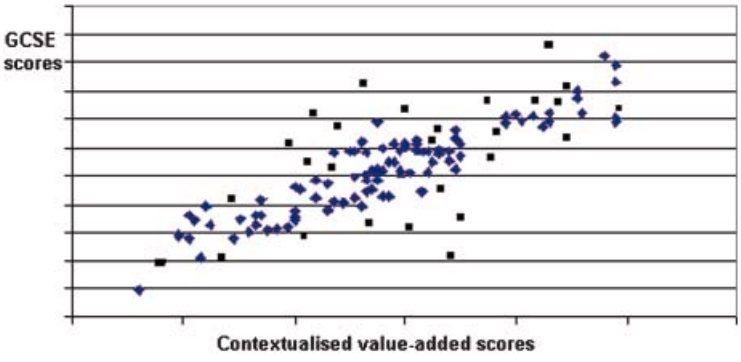

Figure 2. A fictional link between CVA (KS2 to KS4) and GCSE attainment for the same cohort of secondary schools

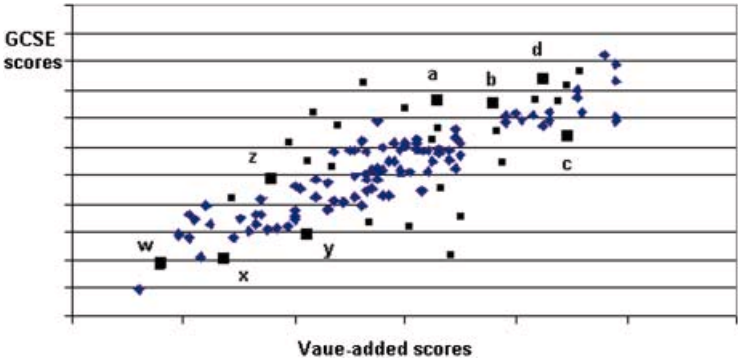

Figure 3. A fictional link between VA (KS2 to KS4) and GCSE attainment for a cohort of secondary schools, showing eight identified schools

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for others they are not. Clearly, the policy issues emerging from the research have changed *radically* with the different presentations.

The same concerns over the detection of actual identity that were discussed already in relation to *qualitative* research arise here too. In the quantitative example given above, if the cohort of schools were (say) from a single local authority, it would be possible for a determined sleuth to uncover the identity of the eight schools distinguished on Figures 3 and 4. This fact suggests that it may be that anonymity is more affected by research *topic* than by research *approach*. Not for the first time, the great contraries of qualitative and quantitative may offer only a false dichotomy.

Finally, there is an ethical side-issue in relation to school effectiveness research like this, which relates to how it is presented: that the anonymised statistical findings can have the unfortunate and self-fulfilling effect of lowering expectations. For this reason, some value-added (estimated) measures, like the Fischer Family Trust SE model for example, do not use contexts like ethnicity as factors in their measures of value-addedness, even though research suggests it has an impact on attainment.[2] If a school with a large population of white working-class boys, for example, achieves a

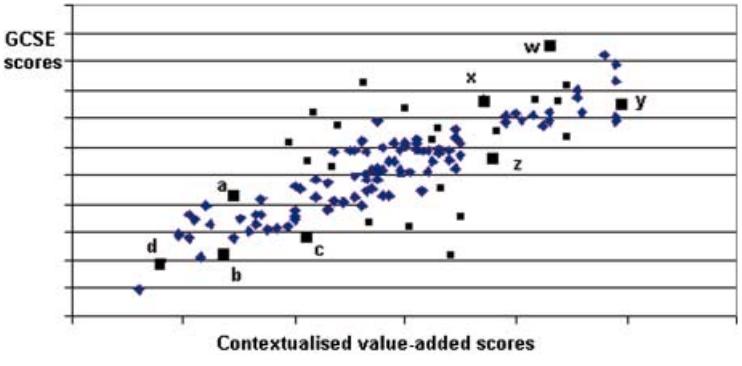

Figure 4. A fictional link between CVA (KS2 to KS4) and GCSE attainment for the same cohort of secondary schools, showing eight identified schools

level of attainment well below the national average (Abrams & Stewart, 2007), but when this is contextualised by race and gender the attainment is deemed to be 'good', it may send out a message that has the effect of lowering the expectations of white working-class boys and their teachers. The fact of aggregated anonymisation is unhelpful. It would be better to identify all the schools, without of course identifying individual pupils. The ethical tension for quantitative researchers is to try to do the science without doing the harm.

Some flaws in recent criticisms of anonymity

Spurious generalisations from rational fools

It is always the case that spurious claims to external validity are *ipso facto* wrong, but why critics of anonymity should claim that it results more frequently from projects where anonymity is offered is unclear. With or without anonymity, small-scale qualitative research has always been criticised—unfairly, if it is done right—as being prone to false generalisation, but this has nothing to do with anonymity as an ethical principle. Bad research will always be bad research, irrespective of the presence or absence of anonymity, and bad researchers will tend to error at every stage of proceedings: the method will be inappropriate; the collection will be incomplete; the data will be misinterpreted.

The breaking of anonymity from media prurience is presented in the literature as being particularly unpleasant. Assuming that proper protocols were in place and that exposure therefore resulted from self-identification or misconduct, the fact of having hordes of consenting professionals thrust blinking into the public glare as a result seems a slightly contrived concern. There seems to be a presumption on the part of critics of anonymity that professionals within schools are rational fools, unable to distinguish between different conditions and expectations. Why this assumption should be made on that side of the debate is as unclear as the assumption that researchers are acting out of laziness or incompetence in using pseudonyms in the first place. Their arguments seem to be contradictory: firstly, to dislike anonymity while denying its existence; secondly, to suggest on the one hand that anonymity is a useless veneer trivially broken, and on the other that anonymity provides a cover so opaque as to deny participants and others the opportunity to challenge findings.

The false supposition that events which occur at the same time must be causally connected

Critics make the same mistake of spurious generalisation that they claim anonymity itself encourages: taking instances of failure and implying something generic about the occurrence, as if the failed case was just one of many that could have been cited. It is not that opponents of default anonymity always or necessarily fall prey to the assumption that one can ignore a criticism because of the person of the critic, but neither should they casually impute good quality research *because* it is anonymised. The conflation (of 'anonymous' with 'bad') is most easily hidden under the supposition that because the two things occasionally occur together they must be causally linked, and that won't do.

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Anonymity is generally portrayed by critics as a sacrosanct binary provision; it either obtains or it does not obtain. However, anonymity is *not* a sacrosanct provision. It is conditional on various imperatives of morality, professionalism and common law. It is not the case that an initial guarantee of anonymity is preserved throughout a research project, irrespective of findings and duties of care. The BERA guideline takes account of this, though that is seldom acknowledged by its critics:

> At all times the decision to override agreements on confidentiality and anonymity must be taken after careful and thorough deliberation. In such circumstances it is in the researchers' interests to make contemporaneous notes on decisions and the reasoning behind them, in case a misconduct complaint or other serious consequence arises. (BERA, 2004, Section 28, p. 9)

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The fallacy of proving what is anyway assumed

When critics of anonymity present exemplars of bad experience, no one can doubt the conclusion that the outcome was undesirable, so readers are lulled into accepting the premise, which presupposed the conclusion, that the fault was anonymity. It is a subtle material fallacy wherein what the critics wish to prove is implicitly assumed: the conclusion that the research is poor follows from the premise that the research is flawed. Following from this is the tendency for critics of anonymity to visit the sins of one researcher on the entire research community, though experience in other fields suggests that it is frequently impossible to uncover unholy truths *without* offering anonymity (Szklut & Reed, 1991). Instead, it seems more intuitive to claim that *not* offering anonymity is more likely to guarantee that truth is *concealed*. So the fundamental question for the research community is whether it should abandon what prior experience suggests is the most likely pathway to truth, on foot of uncovering some badly executed examples. Overall, the circumstance of anonymity is a benefit in the search for truth—not the only one, but an important one—and it would be a mistake not to use it if it increases the likelihood of adding to our understanding.

The dispute between opponents and advocates of anonymity as a default position in research seems to arise in part from a confusion between blanket and unnecessary anonymity on the one hand, and a more selective sort of anonymity on the other. Default anonymity can only be a starting premise. A researcher behaving ethically will explain to participants that there are circumstances where imperatives of law and morality will demand (or lead others to demand) that anonymity be broken, or will incentivise those who keep a public watch on such things to investigate the circumstances in such a way as to make it impossible for the researcher to continue to *guarantee* it. Participants that do not understand this, or to whom this fact of life is left unexplained, are probably incapable of giving informed consent in any true sense.

Anonymity encourages access and quality

The argument is made against anonymity that it discourages from participation those who might wish to be acknowledged, which seems to ignore the more obvious

fact that anonymity can just as easily encourage participants who might *not* wish to be identified. Geoffrey Walford (2005, p. 88) posits that anonymity is usually offered by researchers as 'part of an access strategy' and that offering it can 'take some pressure off' teachers and heads, but like other critics, makes a claim too far when he extends this to suggest that if research findings present a school or its 'characters' in a good light, they will themselves break cover. Again, it is unclear why such a material transgression, in what should be a negotiated situation (Hilton, 2006, p. 301), should be assumed of participants or why it is a consequence of the BERA (2004) guidelines on anonymity. The right to anonymity for participants does not confer a right for researchers to impose it. Should participants agree among themselves to withdraw or identify themselves, that is their prerogative, subject to a sensible concordat. The more delicate problem is to find a balance between encouraging those who wish to be acknowledged by *not* offering anonymity, and encouraging those who wish to remain unidentified by offering it. Unfortunately, it is a zero-sum situation—what one side gets by way of accommodation, the other must lose—because *part*-anonymity cannot guarantee *any* anonymity for those who need it. This is why the situation cannot be resolved by compromise and *why the BERA default is justified*. If a school and half its characters are identified, it is impossible for a researcher to guarantee any anonymity to the remainder, so the default position is the one of best outcome and least harm: the most valuable participants are encouraged and the most vulnerable are protected. And bearing in mind that participants with sensitive information are usually the ones with the greatest need for anonymity, it is a default position that usually imputes quality.

Some issues to take forward

Context

There is an issue of context in the debate about default anonymity. To tell an ethnographic story anonymously or pseudonymously about a school is necessarily to decontextualise or 'falsify' it (Coffey *et al.*, 1996), except insofar as the researcher-writer can provide those contextualising factors which are necessary for a full understanding of what it is that makes the school worth studying in the first place. As has been said already, it does not follow from this that the reader is consequently entitled to infer a spurious generalisability upon the narrative. There is no inherent freedom to assume that a school is representative of any and every school just because it has been given a pseudonym, though critics suggest that in actuality this is what readers are inclined to do. Certainly, anonymised research imposes a burden of care on the researcher-writer to maintain a balance between anonymity and illumination; to give only enough circumstantial specifics as are required to decipher the meaning (but not the identity) of the site and its characters. But there are *caveant lectores* too: not to infer from the anonymity anything beyond the researcher's duty to obtain the most privileged information and *post facto* to do no harm. Many of the criticisms of anonymity have more to do with the writer providing too much or too little context, and in the case of pseudonymity the *reader* falsely imputing external

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validity to the work. If there *is* a flaw in the practice of anonymity in educational research it is that too seldom is it made *explicit* that context and changing circumstance can alter the initial undertaking of anonymity. It is accepted practice in other fields, like medical research for example, though fairly rare. For example, in March 2006, six paid volunteers were admitted to hospital in London suffering from multiple organ failure after participating in 'phase one' trials of a new drug. The trial involved eight people in total. The six who received the drug and whose identity was subsequently revealed in the press fell ill while the two who received a placebo did not (*New Scientist*, 2006). These six participants had engaged voluntarily to undertake the drug trial and were promised anonymity, but as the drug trial became subject to intervention and a matter of legitimate public interest, it became impossible (and probably unethical) to preserve anonymity. In many fields, the limitations to anonymity are widely accepted, easily explained and well understood (World Medical Association, 1964; ASA, 1997; Botkin, 2001). There is no reason why it cannot be thus in education.

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Public domain-ness

Related to the issue of context is that of 'public domain-ness'. It might be possible to uncover the true identity of a research site and its characters, but that is not always the point of contention and is in any case always affected by 'public purpose' and circumstance. Consider the following example. An ambassador is stopped by police while driving under the influence of alcohol. He invokes diplomatic immunity so as to avoid prosecution. Nothing is proven against the diplomat and he is only ever anonymously referred to in press reports. This is accepted as proper reportage as long as its purpose is to question the traditional practice of granting diplomatic immunity in such cases. The particular incident serves only to illustrate what is wrong with the status quo; it is not necessary to know who the diplomat was in order to appreciate the point of the narrative. However, if the purpose is to argue that hostile countries use diplomatic immunity while friendly ones do not, then the embassy must be named—and in naming the embassy, the likelihood is increased that the diplomat's identity will be uncovered—because it is not possible properly to make the case otherwise. The issue is one of purpose, appropriateness and context, and of putting 'proper' information in the public domain in order to have an informed debate on a matter of importance (Demerath, 2006).

Expected standards of privacy and access

Expected standards of privacy and access in society and among professionals do not remain constant over time. In a society increasingly sustained by communications and media technology, established notions of anonymity are being challenged by advances in Internet and multimedia approaches to gathering and storing data (Vulliamy, 2004, p. 277; Coffey *et al.*, 2006, p. 26), amid general agreement that access is greater and expectations of privacy lower now than was the case when the guidelines on anonymity were developed.

> [It] is worth remembering that many schools have now allowed television cameras into their classrooms and corridors where they usually have little control over the finished product which can be seen by millions. … If schools are prepared to allow such detailed and open disclosure by television reporters, documentary filmmakers and journalists, why not by researchers? (Walford, 2005, p. 88)

However, neither increased access nor the lowering of expectations is a good argument for abandoning default anonymity. The quotation above describes a school *controlling its own* anonymity (or lack of it), which is the point and the purpose of BERA (2004) and ESRC (2005) guidelines anyway. Research anonymity is not a question of just *being or not being* anonymous, but of accepting or rejecting the offer of it as of right.

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A modified code of behaviour for anonymity in educational research

There are precedents for having default positions, like that of anonymity, in practical situations. The law, for example, maintains a number of them (like the presumption of innocence) and accepts different standards of proof and expectations of attention for different situations, and juggles them all to great effect. The practical situation regarding anonymity in the field of education is perhaps more subtle, but not beyond the wit of academics to codify. It may mean qualifying existing ethical frameworks to make explicit certain 'technical' concerns and reflect the fact that the imperative 'protection from harm' has different meanings for different characters:

- Anonymity should be negotiated, not imposed. It should be the default position initially for all participants and sites, but the aim should be to identify and acknowledge participation whenever possible, subject to an overriding concern for protecting the vulnerable.
- There are limits to any guarantee of anonymity, which itself should be kept under review. Under normal circumstances, these should be explained to participants as part of the researcher's obligation to obtain informed consent. It should be pointed out that the discovery of criminality, professional misconduct or moral hypocrisy jeopardises anonymity, and subsequent media intrusion can lessen the researcher's control over what was initially an undertaking made in good faith.
- The default of anonymity is predicated on an absence of malice and a regard for the truth. Anonymity should therefore be deemed to have been broken by a researcher if when reporting, even truthfully, there is the intention to cause harm or to mislead.
- Researchers should be particularly careful not to expose unnecessarily any participants to embarrassment in a fixed medium, like a research paper, taking care also to avoid damage by implication.
- It should be an ethical failure on the part of a researcher to report in such a way that although technically true, the reportage is still damaging because other truths were concealed that caused a misrepresentation and which would have led a reasonable reader to a different conclusion.
- Promising anonymity where foreseeably it cannot be maintained is in all cases unethical.

- A proper selection of research site should obviate the need to provide contextual descriptions of such detail that anonymity is jeopardised.
- The burden of proof for ethical failure is with the participant if the discovery is not caused by the researcher's negligence or incompetence, and with the researcher otherwise.
- A distinction should be made between the *casual* discovery of identity and discovery as a result of the researcher's negligence or incompetence. There is also a distinction between harm caused by the discovery of a *truth* and that caused by a *misrepresentation*.
- A researcher's degree of care varies with the nature of the participant and the site, and the size of the research population. The care should be greater for research that extends beyond professional participants or extends outside a single community of practice.

Certain defences to the accusation of ethical failure (as a result of failed anonymity) should be codified for researchers: the discovery of identity was not the researcher's fault; participants were made aware of the limitations to anonymity but consented nevertheless to a dissemination which then caused their identity to be revealed; there was justification for disclosure as a result of (certain stipulated) misdeeds; fair academic comment and discussion led to an unforeseeable breach; the researcher was obliged by law or professional duty to break cover; the researcher was deliberately misled by participants and as a result identity was uncovered; the site and its characters were so badly in need of remediation that the researcher encouraged participants to waive their right to anonymity in order to access support.

Conclusion

The critics present a reasonable case that the current guidelines on anonymity are to a degree inadequate. Until they are amended, it is important that researchers make clear that anonymity, though granted, is never guaranteed in cases of criminality or professional misconduct; that anonymity is primarily designed to protect the innocent and the vulnerable; that anonymity is always guaranteed against gratuitous and casual identification; that findings will be presented in such a way as to avoid giving superfluous information that could be used to identify participants but which would not add to public understanding; that informed consent to participate includes a demonstrable or reasonably assumed understanding of the limits to which anonymity can be guaranteed.

At a minimum, for anonymity, there are different levels of care and changing contexts in any research situation, so there are several different constituencies that have legitimate but differing claims to protection; for example, the safety of the single researcher going into the field to investigate sensitive issues is often overlooked in the rush to protect the 'researched'. The default of anonymity exists to protect the innocent and the vulnerable against harm, but it is more than that. It is an aspiration that must be realised to different degrees depending on circumstance and which must remain under constant review. It is unfortunate that it is presented in the

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literature as a monolithic obligation; it might serve its purpose better were it viewed as the first step in a negotiated settlement.

'We are slaves to the law so that we can be free', said Cicero. The default of anonymity in educational research, if properly codified, sets researchers free in more ways than it restricts them. This is the scales to be used for judging whether or not the balance is right: that research is tilted in favour of seeking understanding rather than obfuscating it. The morphology for anonymity simply needs to reflect better the complex actuality of research in the field.

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Notes

1. Using straightforward measures of attainment like the percentage of pupils obtaining five or more General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) grades A*–C (say) would be misleading here because real-life measures of value-addedness *include* measures of GCSE attainment, and Figures 3 and 4 would be most unlikely to occur.
2. The FFT SE model uses factors like prior attainment, month of birth, gender and free school meal entitlement. FFT took a conscious decision not to include ethnicity in their 'estimates' models, but *have* included ethnicity in the 'retrospective' SX model.

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