

# Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

## Anonymity

Contributors: Desirée Ciambrone

Editors: Michael S. Lewis-Beck & Alan Bryman & Tim Futing Liao

Book Title: Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods

Chapter Title: "Anonymity"

Pub. Date: 2004

Access Date: April 06, 2015

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9780761923633

Online ISBN: 9781412950589

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589.n17>

Print pages: 19-20

©2004 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589.n17>

Anonymity refers to the assurance that participants are not individually identified by disguising or withholding their personal characteristics. In conducting social science research, the protection of “human subjects” is a serious concern for institutional review boards and researchers alike. Guaranteeing and preserving individuals' anonymity is a key component of protecting their rights as research participants.

As researchers, we take several steps to ensure the anonymity of our participants. For example, we assign case numbers to each person instead of using respondents' real names to identify their data. When presenting our findings, we disguise any facts that would allow participants to be identified. For example, we use pseudonyms instead of individuals' real names. Researchers involved in the construction of data sets must remove all personal identifiers (such as name, address, and Social Security number) before permitting public use of the data.

We withhold direct identifiers as a matter of course, but indirect identifiers, such as state of residence, organizational membership, and occupation, might also be used to recognize an individual or group (Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2002). Quantitative researchers routinely recode the variables into broader categories as the broader categories adequately capture the shared characteristics they believe may affect the outcome variable of interest. Data from a sample of physicians, for example, may include the *type* of medical school from which they received their medical degrees (e.g., private or public institutions) rather than the *name* of that institution. In qualitative research, indirect identifiers may pose a greater problem, in part because data are not aggregated. Qualitative social scientists strive to provide rich narrative accounts of the group they are studying. Part of the richness of the narrative is the extent to which the author can link the participants' social milieus to their experiences and perceptions. Thus, often we want the reader to know the occupation of a particular participant and how that may have affected other aspects of his or her life (or another variable of interest).

Protecting participants' anonymity may be especially important when dealing with groups who are distrustful of research and science and/or those involved in illegal or stigmatized activities, such as illicit drug use. Groups who have been victimized or exploited by past research projects are likely to be distrustful. The Tuskegee Syphilis

Study, in which African American men were left untreated so that the natural course of syphilis could be studied, is an egregious example.

In my research of women with HIV/AIDS, I discovered many reasons women worried about preserving their anonymity, including illicit drug use, criminal behavior of their children, and nondisclosure of their HIV/AIDS diagnosis to family and friends. Interestingly, on the other hand, some participants may not want to remain anonymous as they are proud—proud of what they have overcome, proud of what they have learned in the process, and proud of who they are or have become—and they want to share their stories. In fact, Grinyer (2002) has reported that a cancer patient who participated in her study expressed that she wanted her real name used rather than a pseudonym. The desire of some participants notwithstanding, researchers are obliged to take every possible measure to ensure the confidentiality of data and provide anonymity to research participants.

Desirée Ciambrone

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412950589.n17>

#### References

Grinyer, A. The anonymity of research participants: Assumptions, ethics, and practicalities . Social Research Update 36 1–4 (2002).

Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research . (2002). Guide to social science data preparation and archiving [online]. Supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation . Available: <http://www.ICPSR.umich.edu>