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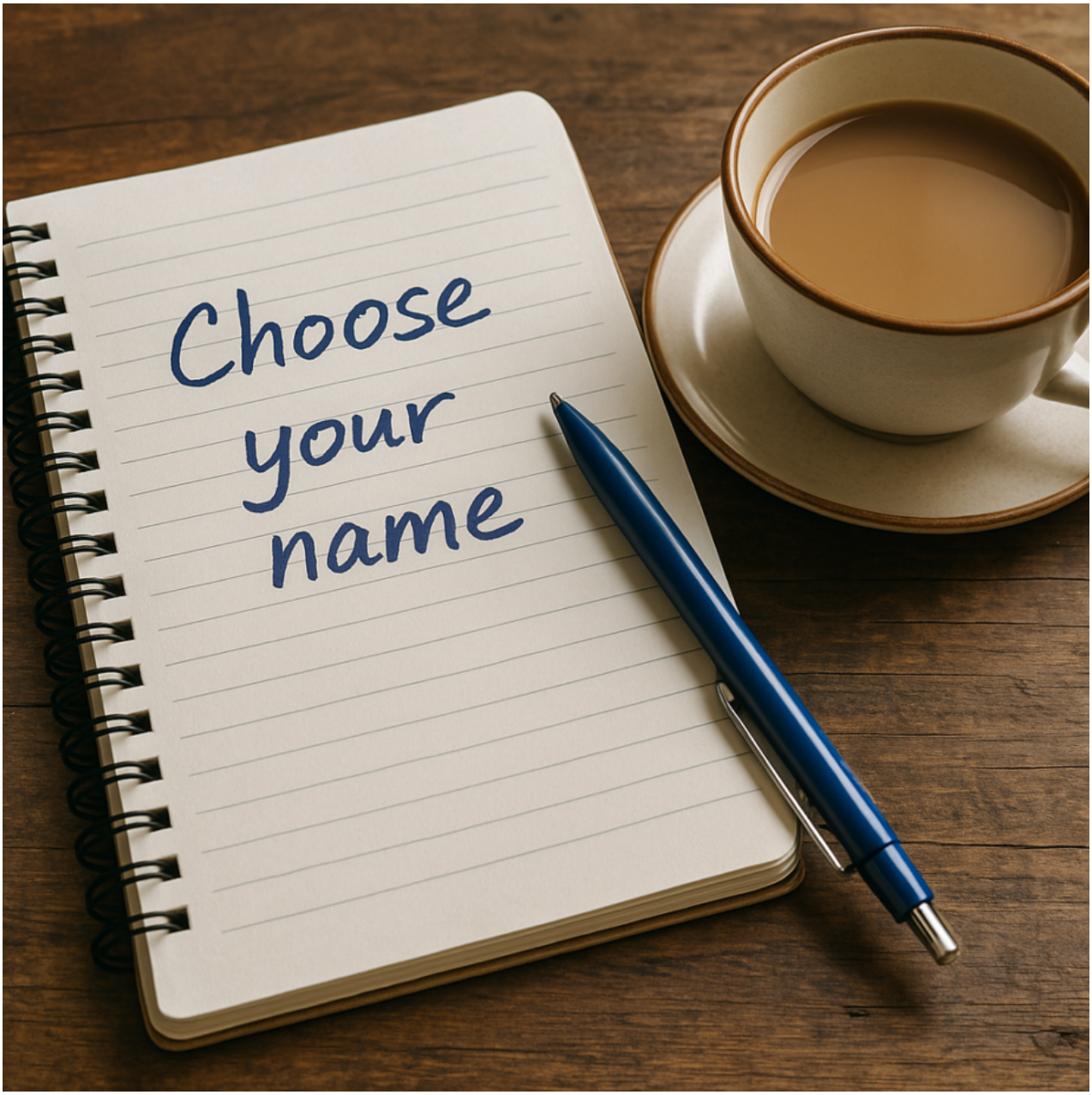
“Choose Your Name”

Naming, Consent, and the Ethics of Storytelling



Symbolic image provided by the author.

Fieldnotes from the Kitchen

It was late afternoon in one of the *Ijaza* houses, a shared accommodation space for migrant women in Sharjah, UAE. The air was thick with the smell of frying onions and cardamom tea. We were sitting around a low plastic table—three women, a child playing nearby, and me with my open notebook, trying to look less formal than I probably did. In these shared domestic spaces, conversations often flowed outside the boundaries of structured interviews. Stories surfaced not on schedule, but between bites of bread, laughter, and quiet glances. The familiarity of the setting, the sounds and smells of everyday life, softened the edges of my researcher role and allowed something more relational to unfold. I was about to begin with my usual set of questions when I paused and asked something different: "You may choose a name for yourself. One you'd like me to use in my writing." They looked up, surprised. Then one smiled: "Really? I get to choose?" "Yes," I said, "I want it to be your decision." That simple moment would stay with me. It was the first time I offered a participant the chance to name herself—not with her legal name, and not with a name I chose from a list, but one she could claim in the story I was entrusted to tell. What began in that kitchen would grow into a practice of inviting participants to choose how they wanted to be named and it changed the way I approached research ethics, storytelling, and knowledge production. This entanglement between the intimate and the analytical echoes what McGranahan (2021) calls "the truths of anonymity," where pseudonyms are not just about protection, but about how ethnographic truth itself is constructed through trust and relationship.

In much of social research, names are changed to protect people's privacy. Researchers often pick pseudonyms from name lists or assign codes like P1 or P2. But something always felt off to me about deciding how someone should be renamed without involving them, especially when working with women whose stories were filled with pain, resilience, and deeply personal memory. The names or codes I might

have chosen could never carry that weight, so I asked not for their real names but for those they wanted to carry their stories. Some picked names they'd always liked. Others chose names tied to family members, religious meanings, or turning points in their journeys. A few said they didn't care. And others, like one woman who told me, "Actually, I don't want a fake name. Use mine," resisted pseudonyms altogether. This tension between concealment and recognition speaks to what Peacock (2024) describes as the representational challenge of "opacity and legibility" in anthropological writing—the idea that the ethics of naming go beyond binary choices of anonymity or exposure.

This wasn't part of my original research design. It emerged from discomfort, from listening, and from the relationships that formed during long conversations in cramped rooms over tea and shared food. It also emerged from the gendered intimacy of domestic work and the shared language we had as Ethiopians. I can't generalize whether the desire to name oneself was shaped more by gender, culture, or circumstance, but it was always personal. What began as a question about ethics slowly became a practice of respect and, in retrospect, a modest step toward co-producing meaning in a space where extractive methods often go unquestioned.

What a Name Can Carry

One of the interviewed migrant workers chose the name **Rabia**. She explained that her late father, who had died six months earlier, used to call her with that name and always wanted it to be her formal name. But she never got to say goodbye: Her undocumented status in the UAE meant she couldn't travel to Ethiopia to attend his funeral. When she chose Rabia as the name for her story, she wasn't just picking something anonymous. She was reclaiming a connection, invoking her father's memory, and honoring a name that had always belonged to her in spirit.

Another participant asked to be referred to as **Jagnit**, which means “the brave one” in Amharic. “Escaping from the house and surviving on your own is not something just anyone can do,” she told me. Her choice wasn’t just about being safe—it was a deliberate framing of her story as one of strength. The name *Jagnit* offered her a way to mark her resistance and courage in the face of exploitation.

Then there was **Ekram,** a name chosen not to conceal but to remember. Ekram had originally been given a Christian name, which her family and friends still use. But when she first travelled to Saudi Arabia for work, she changed her name to Ekram to make it sound more Islamic—a strategic act of adaptation in a context where her faith and identity could put her at risk. Years later, now living in the UAE and known by her original name again, she chose Ekram for this story. “That name is part of me,” she said. “It’s the name I used when I first learned what it means to be a migrant worker.” In Dubai, few know her by that name, but for her, Ekram carries the memories, struggles, and transformations of a life lived across borders.

These moments taught me that a pseudonym doesn’t have to be a placeholder. It can be a vessel for grief, for pride, for defiance, and for complex memories of selfhood. By letting participants choose those names themselves, I began to see anonymization not just as protection, but as a way to co-create meaning.

Not Everyone Wanted a Pseudonym

Some participants felt that hiding their names meant hiding their truth. One woman, **Eyersuse**, was clear about it:

I appreciate your effort and the care you have for our privacy and safety in your research process, but we want our story to be told under our own name. We have seen worse, and what we are telling you is not much of a rare story or something unknown to many or unique to me—so let it be told with my name.

For her, the effort to anonymize was well-intended but misplaced. She didn't feel exposed by her story; she felt erased by the idea that it needed to be hidden.

Another woman, **Selam**, expressed something similar but from a slightly different angle. After hearing that her name might be changed in the write-up, she paused and said, "Why do you want to protect me from my own life?" She explained that while she understood the risks, she had already shared these experiences openly within her community and felt proud of surviving them. For her, having her real name attached to the story wasn't just about being known—it was about owning her history.

These conversations didn't feel like pushback; they felt like ethical moments I hadn't prepared for. They exposed a gap between the assumptions I brought with me as a researcher and the values held by the people I was working with. For some, anonymity felt like care. For others, it felt like silencing.

Negotiating Ethics in Real Time

These weren't hypothetical dilemmas—they happened in the middle of real conversations, in crowded kitchens, under fluorescent lights, between laughter and silence. I didn't always have answers ready. What I had instead were questions: What does it mean to protect someone who doesn't feel the need to be protected? Who decides what ethical care looks like? And can pseudonymization, usually treated as a default good, ever become a form of harm? I began to see that it is never neutral. It's shaped by assumptions about risk, visibility, voice, and vulnerability—all filtered through the researcher's lens. But those assumptions don't always hold. What seemed like ethical responsibility from my side could feel like erasure or detachment from the other side.

What Did This Teach Me?

Inviting participants to choose their names didn't resolve all the ethical tensions, but it shifted something important. It was no longer just about replacing a name; it was about inviting participants to take part, even in a small way, in how their stories would be told and remembered. Choosing a name became part of a broader process of shared representation, one that questioned who gets to decide how lives are narrated in research. And it reminded me that ethics in fieldwork isn't a checklist; it's a set of ongoing, situated negotiations, shaped by relationships, emotions, and mutual recognition. As Vorhölter (2021) also argues, contemporary ethnography demands a reconsideration of pseudonymity as a fixed ethical norm; the author instead invites us to develop practices of dialogue-based decision-making with participants. These negotiations were messy, but they were also meaningful. They forced me to slow down, to ask instead of assume, and to stay accountable not just to abstract ethical protocols but to the people sitting across from me.

Participant-led naming began as a small gesture—an alternative to assigning random names. But it became something much more: a way of opening space for dialogue, for trust, for collaboration and for shared authorship in a process that is often one-sided. Letting participants choose how they wanted to be named did not eliminate all ethical tensions. It didn't resolve the risks of exposure or the responsibilities I carried as a researcher. But it did allow something important to happen: It gave participants a say in how their stories were told and how they would be remembered in the research. In that sense, it became a modest but meaningful form of co-producing knowledge. It invited participants not just to speak, but to shape how their identities, experiences, and emotional realities entered the ethnographic record. It also reminded me that ethical fieldwork is not about getting everything right. It's about staying open to correction, being willing to change course, and recognizing when your methods are getting in the way of the relationships you're trying to build.

What I learned from these women—Rabia, Jagnit, Ekram, Eyersuse, Selam, and others—is that even the smallest decisions in research carry weight. Names are not neutral;they are stories. And when we give people the right to choose their names, we are not just protecting them—we are honoring their voice. In doing so, we begin to co-produce not just data but meaning itself through small, situated acts that challenge extractive research norms and make space for shared authorship in how knowledge is created and carried.

And After Fieldwork?

Leaving the field is always harder than arriving. I left with notebooks full of stories, names (chosen and real), and voices that echoed long after the interviews ended. But the ethical work didn't stop there. Every time I wrote—whether a report, a chapter, or this reflection—I returned to those moments of naming. In one case, I reached out again, months after an interview, to ask a participant if she still wanted to be referred to by the name she had chosen. She answered, "Yes. That name is still mine, even if it's not my real one." In another case, I hesitated. A woman who had insisted on using her real name might now face new risks in a changed political climate. I had to make a judgment and decided to anonymize her even though she had asked not to be. This dilemma—whether the final ethical responsibility lies with the interlocutor or the researcher—is well discussed by Weiss and McGranahan (2021), who remind us that anonymity does not always equal safety nor does naming always equal truth.

These were not easy decisions. They challenged the ethical principle of "do no harm," especially when what counts as harm can shift over time and across contexts. Who carries responsibility when a well-informed participant chooses to be named? And what if that choice later turns out to endanger them? Should researchers always honor agency or intervene when they perceive risk, even if it means going against the participant's wishes? In my case, I chose caution, but I continue to question

whether this was a protective act or a paternalistic one. Could I have preserved her voice by modifying the spelling of her name or by using a version recognizable to her but untraceable to others? These questions remain open, and I don't believe there are easy or universal answers.

Such questions also connect to a broader debate: Why do we anonymise vulnerable interlocutors while often naming "experts," officials, and academics? This double standard—naming those in power and anonymising those with less—might reproduce inequalities rather than offering protection. In giving my participants the right to choose their name, I wanted to shift this logic. But I also learned that protecting someone can mean making a decision they might not agree with. These are not contradictions to be solved but ethical tensions to be acknowledged, lived with, and approached with humility, transparency, and care.

What I take with me is not a perfect method but a shift in attitude. Participatory pseudonymization isn't just about ethics or protection—it's about trust, ownership, and how we write with, rather than about, others. It calls for humility in how we carry someone else's voice and openness to the fact that ethical choices are rarely final. As I continue to work with these stories, I keep asking myself: What does shared authorship really mean? What stories are still mine to tell? And how can I honor the names that were entrusted to me and chosen not only for safety but also for meaning?

AI use disclosure

I used ChatGPT for limited editorial support, specifically to help shorten my original draft by suggesting alternative sentence structures and wording.

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