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The Impact of an Unusual Name on Individual and Cultural Identity

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Thesis of Taisha A. DeAza

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Nova Southeastern University
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THE IMPACT OF UNUSUAL NAME ON INDIVIDUAL AND CULTURAL
IDENTITY

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Composition, Rhetoric, and Digital Media

Taisha DeAza

Halmos College of Arts and Sciences

Department of Communication, Media, and the Arts

Nova Southeastern University

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is devoted to personal names and depicts how names both establish and destabilize identity. The collection of research gathered in this thesis demonstrates that names play an intriguing role in the construction of our lives, selves, and placement in society. It also considers names in childhood, and how names are one of the earliest signifiers of self-recognition and gender identification. Further, this thesis shows the impact social constructs have on names and the power of names to persuade people into making certain choices. This thesis concludes by demonstrating how unusual names can exclude, stereotype, or disadvantage people.

Keywords: Names, Identity

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Prologue

“What’s your name?” is not a question we usually put much thought into. We respond the way we have time and time before, almost involuntarily. But that one-word response can carry a lot of weight. Names can affect how we see ourselves and how we are understood by others. Since names are tied up in expectations, the relationship between names and identity is complex. How exactly do our names resonate with who we are as people? In what respects do our names guide the course of our lives?

For me, and perhaps other people with uncommon first names like myself, I often find myself being asked questions I don’t always have the answers to. In a generation full of Jennifers and Jessicas, I was given the name Taisha, a relatively unusual and difficult-to-pronounce first name. It has been socially labelled as an “ethnic” name, with a sound (“isha”) predominantly associated in the US with African American females. As a female who is not African American, I have had multiple experiences with my name that have resulted from my name not “matching up” with how I look. The most significant occurred during a job interview. I was immediately offered the job, and the employer said they were delighted to have gone through and called me, as they almost didn’t call based on my “black-sounding name.” This example—and the many others I have experienced in my lifetime—illustrates the assumptions that are made based on names alone. Names that break with typical expectations, in particular, show how engrained social constructs related to names and identity really are.

This project will first show how impactful names are in establishing identity. Then, it will identify some of the social constructs related to personal names. If names reflect expectations and norms, unusual names can explore how names can destabilize personal identity when naming practices and their outcomes serve socially unequal results. To guide this project, I will

draw upon scholarship in onomastics, the study of the historical contexts and origins of proper names. The term originates from the Greek “onomastikos” which means “of or belonging to naming.” There are two types of onomastic categories: anthroponyms (personal names), and toponyms (place names). This thesis will focus on anthroponyms.

Names Establish Identity

As proper nouns, names are used to identify individuals in everyday life. Given names are used to differentiate a person from other members of a family and serve as introductions and greetings when meeting new people. In “The Unconscious Meaning of Personal Names,” Mary Seeman tells us that beyond just identifying a person, personal names serve even more purposes, both for the namer and for the person being named (Seeman, 1983). Names are often strongly encoded with identity, traditions and expectations. “Bestowing or adopting a name is often dictated by a number of wishes and associations which may not all be conscious” (Seeman, 237). Understanding the depth behind your name, she claims, is one of the first steps in recognizing its power. However, most people do not explore the significance of names. Personal names are worth looking into more because humans naturally make quick judgements and assumptions based on them. Names are initially chosen by someone else, yet they shape the ways in which we identify with our gender, self-worth, and identity as a whole. Names are worthy of further investigation because they are labels we carry with us through life.

In the study of linguistics, the history of onomastics is traced back to 19th century studies in which toponyms and anthroponyms became the dominant subjects of research (Rentenaar, 1996). While last names have been of interest to linguists because they tell the story of a person’s familial lineage, first names, otherwise known as forenames, hold clues about a person’s gender, age, cultural ethnicity and social class as well (Alia, 1989, p. 33). Like all words, personal names are arbitrary. This means that its sounds and meaning have no intrinsic link. However, an important distinction between the everyday words we use and personal names is that personal names are intentionally given and strongly represent the experiences and values of the people who give them.

Naming is influenced by many different factors, including geography, religion, culture, and language. The following sections of this thesis will take these factors into account to demonstrate the power of a name to construct and deconstruct self-identity. Self-identity is composed of personal attributes and awareness of one's skills and abilities. While names shape how we see ourselves, these assessments do not occur in a vacuum. They are informed by larger socially constructed aspects of identity, including race, sexuality, gender, and class. Names shape individual identity in both positive and negative ways, depending on the established cultural conventions for first names and how a given name fits in with those norms.

Names in Childhood

Names are one of the first elements that bring identity to an unborn child. As one of the first words children learn, names are also one of the earliest signifiers of self-recognition. Many people associate their name with their own reputation and identity. In "Names, Identity and Self," Kenneth L. Dion proposes that there is a definitive relationship between a person's name and their sense of identity. Dion found that personal identity, self-acceptance, and attention and memory of one's name all have a strong correlation. A personal name is also the first social identification or label given to a person to establish their place within society. Starting as a child, names play an important role in shaping social and cultural identity. A person's name usually functions as a unique social symbol representing the individual's identity (Dion, 1983). Names help children understand they are their own beings and individuals. A study that Play et al. conducted to show how children learn their names demonstrated that most children love their names. It's been observed that one of the first things many children do in their downtime at school is doodle their own names (Play et al., 2018). Children's notebooks are often filled with their names in cursive, block letters, or even graffiti style. Children are taught the importance of

their own name at a young age, and many education centers put an emphasis on name recognition and appreciation. Preschool teachers display children's names in a variety of places not only to identify the children's property, but also to help with name identification as well. Thus, from the beginning of our formal education, we are taught to link our names to our identities. Our names are *who we are*.

Names and Gender Identification

First names are one of the more apparent and outward indications of gender. Many naming traditions are created to be able to distinguish between names that are appropriate for girls and names that are appropriate for boys. Traditionally, given names are very gendered, with the name parents give their child working as a tool that categorizes sex at birth. But this aspect of baby naming has changed in the US within the last 30 years; today's parents are more likely than ever to reject the idea of stereotypical gender-specific names. As our society becomes more comfortable with non-binary gender identities and gender fluidity, some parents do not want to impose a gender identity on their child. An example of this is the gender-neutral name, Blake. Though in the 1980s it was strictly seen as a male name, within the last thirty years the name has become unisex. In 2018, the name Blake's popularity raised 38% for girls at number 279 in the US. The trend toward gender-neutral names may also be linked to social class as well. When considering the social class of the parents, studies found that lower-class families tended to hold more traditional gender associations with names whereas middle and upper-class "professionals" appeared to more receptive and open to gender-neutral names (Sonnad, 2018).

The relationship between names and gender identity is, of course, also apparent in the transgender community, within self-naming. For transgender people, choosing a new name can be seen as the first outward claim on their new identity. "It helps [other] people to start seeing

and thinking about you differently — even if your body hasn't changed, or if body changes aren't part of your transition plan, they still have to call you something different," said Colt Keo-Meier, a clinical psychologist in Houston who works with the transgender community. In this situation, a new name serves as an empowering affirmation to their gender identity and can signal that to others.

Social Constructs

Name Selection and Parental Beliefs

The names people choose for their children carry a lot of weight and significance and oftentimes reflect the parents' notions of gender, culture, religion, language, and family history. The practice of naming is significant enough that it has created a distinction between social and biological births. A social birth is when a pregnancy is announced and a name is identified for the unborn child. A biological birth is when the child is born, thus bridging the gap between the social and biological births.

Names are given intentionally and, most often, parents tend to bestow names based on how they sound or on what they assume the names represent. Traditionally, strict family rules governed the naming of children. But in modern times, names tend to reflect the parents' personal style. Thus, naming has become much more of an aesthetic choice with endless available options. Contemporary parents in the US take their inspiration from nature, favorite places, and even pop culture. In this way, baby names are often statements about the parents' tastes. Of course those tastes are often shared with people of similar socioeconomic statuses and life experiences. Vanguri found that “[b]irth names especially can indicate social position and factor into social differentiation because they signal class, gender, race...” (Vanguri, 2016, p. 4). This is important in establishing that naming is complex even when it seems to be purely ornamental. From birth, children are affected by their parents' beliefs and communicate them with others through their names.

Naming children may serve as a powerful and highly visible marker of a parent's ideologies. Vanguri contends, “[b]ecause those who name are generally in positions of power, names reflect the ideologies of the dominant group” (Vanguri, 2016, p. 4). Parents potentially

impose their beliefs onto their child's beliefs with the practice of naming. In "Nominal Partisanship: Names as Political Identity Signals," Robert Urbatsch looks into the possibility of partisan signals sent by parents of newborns, particularly with girls named "Reagan," in the US from 1976 to 2011. President Reagan's era garnered strong support from Americans for being featured as arguably one of the first conservative U.S. presidents in over 50 years. "Results of the study indicate that the benefits of expressing political identity increase...higher proportions of Democrats in a state increase the relationship between Republican populations and the tendency to name daughters Reagan (Urbatsch, 2009)." That is, when Republicans lived in predominantly Democratic states, they were more likely to use their newborn daughters to project their political beliefs. The research shows Reagan's supporters were so loyal to his beliefs they went as far as naming their children after him in hopes of continuing his "Reaganomics" morale. This is a strong, and literal, example of parents imposing their political ideologies and beliefs through naming.

What all of this suggests is that the name parents choose for a baby says more about the parents than it does about the child. According to Laura Wattenberg, founder of the name research website *Namerology*, author of *The Baby Name Wizard*, and a pioneer in baby name research, "The name doesn't belong to you—you're making the decision because your child can't do it for himself—but what you choose does say a lot about your personality" (Wattenberg). Research has shown that certain patterns and trends have been discovered in baby names that correlate to the personality of a parent. Wattenberg says, "There is a revolution going on when it comes to baby names, and for some parents, the more unusual, the better." Many parents with ordinary names were found to give their children names that helped them stand out.

Maryanna Korwitts, the founder of TheBabyNamingExperience.com, says that many parents choose an unusual name in an effort for attention. Korwitts states, “when you tell people your child’s name, it will lead to a lot of questions—they’ll want to know the back story, so it does put the parents in the spotlight.” Another naming trend that reflects parents’ personality is using family names in unusual ways. Many parents now are using family names as middle names, or adding something creative to a family name. “You can easily put a twist on a traditional name and give it a more modern flair, like naming your son Donovan after your grandfather, Donald,” says Wattenberg.

There are profound shifts in our culture that have changed the way parents name their children. A study conducted in 2010 by Jean Wenge, a psychology professor at San Diego University, examined the names of 325 million American babies born between the period of 1880 and 2007. The study revealed that common names have dramatically decreased in popularity since the 1980’s. An example derived from the study shows that while more than 30% of boys were given names from the top-10 used names in 1950, less than 10% of boys were given a top-10 name in 2007. This shift in the way parents name their children is caused by the growing cultural shift toward individualism and a need to stand out from the crowd.

However, in this era of foregoing tradition in favor of unusual names, there can be negative consequences. In the article “Good or Bad, Baby Names Have Long-lasting Effects,” David Figlio, a research psychologist at Northwestern University in Illinois, examined the similarities between the phonemic breakdown of a name and the contradictory behavioral patterns of boys with traditionally feminine names. Figlio states,

When in elementary school...boys with names traditionally given to girls are more likely to misbehave than their counterparts with masculine names, research suggests... When in

elementary school, boys named Ashley and Shannon, for instance, behave just like their more masculine-named classmates named Brian and other boyish names. Once these kids hit sixth grade, all of a sudden, the rates of disciplinary problems skyrocket [for those boys with girlish names], and it was much more the case if there happened to be a girl in the grade with that same name (Figlio, 2010).

This research is significant in demonstrating that even when parents attempt to “break the rules” when choosing a name, there are larger societal constructions at play. To refer to a previous example, the once-male name Blake has become appropriate for females; yet as Figlio demonstrates, males with traditionally-female names (on the whole) are not as well received. The gender biases and stereotypes of a culture will still restrict what parents name their children, even in an era when parents have more choices than ever when naming their babies.

Names and Culture

Names are arbitrary, but they carry significant social and cultural signals. Since the practice of naming varies throughout different parts of the world, this poses problems for the translation of names. Generally, translating personal names poses a tremendous challenge to stay true to the given definition of a name. Some names are deeply rooted in culture.

Translators also have a challenge in the ordering of first names and surnames, which is not the same in all languages. For example, in Korean, Japanese and Hungarian cultures, surnames come before the first name. In the English, French and Western hemisphere, first names come before the surname. Researcher Albert Peter Vermes asserts that:

The translation of proper names has often been considered as a simple automatic process of transference from one language into another, due to the view that proper names are mere labels used to identify a person or a thing. Contrary to popular views, the translation

of proper names is a non-trivial issue, closely related to the problem of the meaning of the proper name. (Vermes, 2003, p.88-90)

For many cultures, names strengthen familial ties and reinforce the historical continuity of the culture. Some countries, including Sweden and Denmark, have official lists of names that citizens have an obligation to conform to. In Germany, the gender of a child must be apparent with the first name. In Norway, you're not permitted to use a first name that has been historically used as a last or middle name. In the United States, parents have the liberty to name a child anything they choose because it is considered a form of personal expression and protected by the Constitution. In most Western societies, the proper name is composed of the given name, the middle name, and the surname, with optional titles such as Junior or Senior. The Chinese name their children by combining two or three characters that are symbolic to the powerful characteristics they hope their child will possess. Regardless of cultural context and the naming expectations within different cultures, naming is always part of a social process. Lieberson and Bell write,

The naming activity is ultimately a social process, and the resulting pattern of name usage reflects the combined influence of the imagery associated with each name, the notions parents have about the future characteristics of their children, estimates of the response of others to the name, the awareness and knowledge of names through the mass media and other sources, parents' beliefs about what are appropriate children's names for persons of their status, and institutionalized norms and pressures. (514)

As Lieberson and Bell defend, parents do not choose names in isolation. They consider social factors in the process of naming, even if they are not aware of it.

Names have a strong correlation to cultural identity. Cultural identity is defined as a person's self-conception and self-perception, as related to nationality, ethnicity and religion. Names create an inclusive and supportive space to identify with others. Further, names allow you share a similarity with others within the culture you identify with. The strongest takeaway is that people with culturally distinctive names are more likely to stick together due to a sense of belongingness.

The practice and value of naming varies throughout different parts of the world. In Europe, if you were born before the 1600's, it is likely that you would have been named after your grandparents and with careful consideration to help you rise in socioeconomic stature. Descriptive names were used repeatedly until they formed a "name pool" for that culture. (Dietz, 2014, pp. 569-575). Parents would choose names from the pool of existing names rather than invent new ones for their children. As time went on the language changed and in many cases the words that formed the original name passed out of use, leaving the fossilized form in the name. Therefore, we do not recognize the meanings of many names today. Their origins are in ancient languages from words that have passed out of use.

Nominative Determinism and Names as Self-Fulfilling Prophecies

It has been established that names are critical factors in shaping and developing a sense of self. A concept that highlights this idea is nominative determinism, which claims that people's names can have an impact on the profession they pursue. The term "nominative determinism" was first used by the magazine *New Scientist* in 1994, after readers of the magazine noted that many of the researchers who conducted the studies had very fitting surnames. Of these researchers was Daniel Snowman, who conducted research and wrote a book on polar explorations. These examples led readers to believe that one's name plays a psychological effect

on their work. In a case of nominative determinism in 2015, researchers Limb, Limb, Limb and Limb published a paper demonstrating support that people are more likely to pursue careers that are connected to their names, and in their case, their surnames. Further, their research revealed that they found a higher frequency of names relevant to medicine and to its subspecialists. In 2010, researcher Abel came to a similar conclusion, finding that the first three-letter combination of a surname was strongly indicative of nominative determinism; for example, Raymonds (“Ray”) were more likely to be radiologists than lawyers (Abel 65-74.). These studies suggest the effects nominative determinism could play on names to subtly persuade people into making certain choices.

Nominative determinism also posits that having a connection to your name can have the power to influence a positive body image, high sense of self-worth and a positive self-esteem. Having a good feeling toward the name you were given is actually a driving force to your confidence. The opposite appears to be true, as well. In the scientific article titled “Emotional Disturbance in Children with Peculiar Given Names” taken from the *Journal of Genetic Psychology, Research and Theory of Human Development*, the short article written by Albert Ellis and Robert Beechley found that children with unusual names are negatively affected. The research found that “14 of 77 college women who disliked their names felt that these names had made them sensitive, shy and easily embarrassed whenever they were mentioned as they were being introduced to strangers” (Ellis and Beechly, 1954). The results of the study concluded in the finding that disliking your name can affect your self-esteem, confidence and overall self-worth. This is impactful in showing that people’s connections to their names, whether positive or negative, will influence how they see themselves.

Nominative determinism confirms that names are symbols used by society to assign statuses and roles to individuals and groups. Famous entertainers often change their full names often to something much less common in order to become memorable or recognizable. Do name changes alter the course of nominative determinism? A research study conducted to assess the distinctness of forenames and the role of subjective experiences and recognition memory found that distinctive forenames were more memorable than typical names and that the uniqueness of a name helped people to remember them (Brandt, Gardiner, and Macrae). Examples of famous people who have renewed their identities with a personal name change include Vin Diesel (born Mark Sinclair), Miley Cyrus (born Destiny Hope Cyrus), and Lady Gaga (born Stefani Germanotta). These celebrities are few of many who changed their names on a potential impact of nominative determinism, that is, the belief that names are self-fulfilling prophecies. Unlike the general public who may suffer from unusual given names, celebrities usually yearn and thrive with unique names. When performers, entertainers, actors, singers or comedians change their names, it is often seen as a stage name, a pseudonym used for the public eye.

Perhaps the best-known example of a name change based on the notion of self-fulfilling prophecy is boxing legend Cassius Clay changing his name in 1964 to the name he would forever be known as: Muhammad Ali. Muhammad Ali's name change is a fascinating example of how strongly identity is affected by one's name. Ali was named Cassius Marcellus Clay Jr. after his father, but upon affiliating himself with the Nation of Islam, he denounced his birth name as his slave name and changed it. In an interview, Ali says "I am Muhammad Ali, [...] it means beloved of God..." (Sims, 2016). At the time, people perceived Ali's choice as radical. If a name were just a name, then the fact that Muhammad Ali felt as though he was born with a slave name would have been irrelevant. Muhammad Ali sought to change his name because his

founding principles and identity were intertwined with his name, and in order to be free, he had to be liberated of his “slave name.” Studying the name choices of Muhammed Ali demonstrates the notion of the detachability of names and the capacity to shift your biological identity and power attached to your name.

“The Dorian Gray Effect” and Name Associations

Related to nominative determinism is a phenomenon dubbed “The Dorian Gray Effect,” named after Oscar Wilde’s eponymous hero. The Dorian Gray Effect was first coined by a therapist named Burkhad Brosig, when he noticed that people feared the aging process because they believed they’d cease to look like themselves, or their names. We have been told to not judge a book by its cover, but according to this theory, we all already do. The Dorian Gray Effect posits that one’s first name may have the potential to change the way they look. The article “We Look Like Our Names: The Manifestation of Name Stereotypes in Facial Appearance” confirms the “Dorian Gray” effect with their findings that “each name has associated characteristics, behaviors, and a look, and as such, it has a meaning and a shared schema within a society (528).” The study’s researchers, from Hebrew University in Jerusalem, tested whether the name a person is given at birth impacts later physicality. The researchers concluded that names could impact your physical exterior and the children may likely develop into adults who look and act the part associated with their names. In the same article, a French and Israeli team performed experiments to determine whether a stranger could tell a name from a face. The results showed that the caveat to the Dorian Gray Effect is that it is likely cultural. The Dorian Gray Effect phenomena may also be related to the grammatical ‘bouba-kiki effect’—which describes that across all languages, more bulbous smoother objects are labelled with rounded ‘bouba’ sounds, while thinner spikier objects have ‘kiki’ like sounds. What exactly does the bouba-kiki effect

mean? It is a way of showing a human predisposition to associating certain sounds with shapes and concepts, which demonstrates the linkage between names and physical appearance in the Dorian Gray Effect—and names and self-identity with nominative determinism.

Names Destabilize Identity

That names can have particular “looks” gives them the power to exclude, stereotype, or disadvantage people (Peterson). The article, “We look Like Our Names: The Manifestation of Name Stereotypes in Physical Appearance,” confirmed several assumptions about common names. In the first experiment in a series of eight experiments, researchers asked people to look at photograph of strangers with their assumed names under them, and rank the people in terms of popularity (Zwebner, Sellier, Rosenfeld, Goldenberg, and Mayo, 2016). The outcome of this experiment found that participants were more likely to rank the strangers with common names as “popular.” In another experiment conducted by the same researchers, participants looked at photographs of strangers and were asked to guess their names from a list of five possible choices. They found that participants frequently selected the correct names for strangers. The findings of this experiment showed that people were able to guess the right names with such frequency because appearances are shaped by the cultural expectations and stereotypes associated with a given name (Zwebner, Sellier, Rosenfeld, Goldenberg, and Mayo, 2016). Unusual names alter these stereotypes because they surprise people. Unusual names disturb people’s social expectations and the stereotypes associated with a name. This creates a dissonance that causes others to reject the person with the unusual name. In this section, I present findings that demonstrate how names cause exclusion and negatively impact areas of employment, education and housing.

Unusual Names and Stereotyping

Studies show that having an unusual name will likely serve more exclusivity than inclusivity. When a name is unfamiliar, it has a correlation to peculiar traits that are often misunderstood. Essentially, people have no basis on which to judge the name, so the person with

an uncommon name is more likely to be perceived negatively (as people often reject what they do not understand). This has been shown to negatively influence the self-esteem and self-identity of those with unusual or difficult-to-pronounce names. Names also can be a strong identification of racial minority status and can be used as a basis for discrimination (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004). In an article titled “Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? A Field Experiment on Labor Market and Discrimination,” economist Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan looked into how race, ethnicity and racism affected hiring decisions. In the experiment conducted, the researchers sent out resumes in response to help-wanted ads in Chicago and Boston newspaper to measure the amount of callbacks each resume received. The researchers carefully crafted the name of resume to randomly assign very White sounding names (such as Emily Walsh or Greg Baker) to half of the resumes while the other half of resumes presented very African American sounding names (such as Lakisha Washington or Jamal Jones.) The research concluded that unusual names increased the racial gap and negatively impacted identity.

The discrimination of people with unusual first names disproportionately affects minorities, whose names might not rank among the most popular for various reasons. According to an oft-cited chapter in *Freakonomics* titled, “A Roshanda by any other name,” unusual naming conventions have roots in the Black Power movement of the 1960’s. The California data established that by the 1980’s, a typical baby girl born in a black neighborhood would likely receive a name that was 20 times more common among blacks than white. Giving a child a name that was associated with the black community would appear to be a black parent’s signal of solidarity to her community. On the other hand, more than 40 percent of white babies are given names that are four times more common among the white community.

As a way of preserving their identities while at the same time assimilating with the American naming customs, many Latina/o parents blend Latin and American sounding names to avoid exclusion based on their children's names. Yet many children of Latino parents with names that represent their culture report having a special connection to their names and explain that their names "serve as an overt marker to ethnic identity (Peterson, Gunn, Brice, & Alley, 2015)." In the book *Voces: Latino Students on Life in the United States*, Latino children show how their names help or reduce the attachment they feel to their ethnicity. White Latinos, whom based on their physical appearance and complexion would normally not be seen as Hispanic, report having the strongest connections to their Hispanic names. For example, take two males, both Hispanic, both named Jose, the only difference is that one is of browner complexion than the other. Based on the findings of this book, the male with lighter skin feels a stronger sense to his name, due the likelihood of that being one of the strongest connections to his ethnic identity.

Names in the Educational System

Personal names have the power to positively affirm identity and signal belonging within the classroom and school community. Names may also negatively affect student's academic achievement. In a research study conducted by the University of Amsterdam, researchers set out to examine whether teachers graded students differently for the same work based on their names (Tierweb). The ultimate finding of the experiment was that teachers' grading was not directly affected by ethnic-sounding names. However, what was found was that teachers had different expectations of the ethnic-minority-sounding name, which changed the attitude teachers had towards these ethnic students. And this did *indirectly* affect ethnic minority students' grades.

This suggests that names are due further consideration in the classroom. When a teacher mispronounces a student's name, it can have a long-lasting negative impact on the student.

Research in “Teachers, Please Learn Our Names: Racial Microaggressions and the K–12 Classroom,” showed that many students with ethnic names suffered from having their names mispronounced by teachers on a constant basis (Kohli, Rita, and Solórzano, 2012, p. 441-462). “Students often felt shame, embarrassment and that their name was a burden,” Kohli says. “They often began to shy away from their language, culture and families.” Students often found that teachers would laugh off their inability to pronounce students’ names and they would often ask the student if they had an easier to pronounce nickname. This study was impactful in demonstrating that mispronouncing students’ names affected their social and emotional state.

Proactive steps are being taken to address naming issues that result in discrimination and inequality. In the Santa Clara County Office of Education, members of the education community have taken a stance to pronounce students’ names correctly to foster a sense of belonging and build positive relationships in the classroom. The campaign, called “My Name, My Identity: A Declaration of Self,” demonstrates that teachers cause students “anxiety and resentment” when they mispronounce students’ names. The campaign shows that mispronouncing students’ names amounts to a form of bigotry. Rita Kohli contends, “when the child enters school and teachers—consciously or not—mispronounce, disregard or change the name, they are in a sense disregarding the family and culture of the students as well” (Kohli, Rita, and Solórzano, 2012, p. 441-462). Name mispronunciations fall into the larger category of micro-aggressions. Researchers at Columbia University’s Teachers college define micro-aggressions as “bride and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults towards people of color” (Zue). Created as a plan of action to stop these micro-aggressive behaviors with name mispronunciations, the “My Name, My Identity: A Declaration of Self,” campaign calls for

teachers to take a pledge and promise to show respect to others' names and identities in schools by working to pronounce students' names correctly. Their hope with this campaign is that they can help improve a healthy social, psychological and educational outcome for students. This campaign recognizes that a person's name is integral to their cultural identity.

While unintentionally mispronouncing someone's name can function as micro-aggression that has effects on students, name discrimination can also take more overt and hostile forms. In February of 2017, Chinese students at Columbia University Chinese students were targeted by their ethnic names. Students of Chinese descent had their tags ripped off their dorm doors (Sixth Tone). Many of the Chinese students who were victimized said they understood why people from China give themselves "Americanized" nicknames to fit in. The racism against their names impacted how the Chinese students identified with their names and as a result all of the students victimized considered changing their names to better assimilate to American society. They all considered changing their names to something more universally acceptable in America, but after much thought, they created a video instead. The video, "Say My Name: What my name really means to me," went viral. In the video, the Chinese students demonstrated how their names impact their individual lives. The students wrote about what their names mean in Chinese and how important it was to them. They fought against the racism against their names and showed how many go by nicknames for the convenience of others, nevertheless, their names mean a lot to them. The video was strong in demonstrating how names could be impacted by both culture and the education setting.

Names in the Workplace

Discriminatory practices not only impact educational environments in the forms of bullying and grade discrimination, but furthermore, research has shown that name discrimination

is prevalent in the job sector as well. In “Whitened Resumes: Race and Self-Presentation in the Labor Market,” professor of organizational behavior and human resource management Sonia K. Kang presents the research founded in a two-year study that looked into how names were represented on resumes (Kang, 2016). She found that many employees of minority ethnic groups changed or shortened their names with the sole purpose of bringing less attention to it. Employees referred to it as “toning down” one’s minority status in an effort to make it less obvious to employers. Many employees who were involved in changing the presentation of their names found that these techniques played an important role in hiring decisions at many occupations. Employees found that it increased the number of interviews they scored and callbacks they received from employers (Kang, 2016).

Just as applicants report “toning down” their minority identity to employers, there’s evidence to suggest that inclusion of a middle initial on a job application can make an applicant *more* hireable. In a study originally published in the *European Journal of Social Psychology*, “The impact of middle names: Middle name initials enhance evaluations of intellectual performance,” a series of tests were conducted on 85 participants whom were asked to read a passage about Einstein’s theory of relativity (Tilburg & Igou, 2014). The study concluded with participants rating the passages that included the middle initial as higher quality writing than the passage without. The impact of this study shows that middle initials enhance perceptions of intellectual performance, likely because they are tied most often to white males of upper socioeconomic status.

In another field study created to analyze the job market, researchers at Northwestern University, Harvard, and the Institute of Social Research in Norway (Quillian, Pager, Hexel & Midtbøen) joined together and gathered every field experiment conducted on hiring

discrimination that occurred between 1989 through 2015. The purpose of this experiment was to assess trends in hiring discrimination by analyzing callback rates. They conducted two experiments, one focused on resumes and the other on in-person audits. The resume experiment was conducted by sending out resumes with nearly identical levels of education, experience and skillsets; with names being the one difference. In the second, in-person audit experiment, applicants applied in person for the job of their choice. Similarly, to the first experiment, they all shared the same qualifications, experience and skillset, but some were white while others were black or brown applicants. In the results of both experiments, it was determined that on average, applicants who were stereotypically perceived as being white by their first names received 36% more callbacks than the equally qualified African Americans. The evidence derived from these experiments demonstrates that little progress has been made with regard to discrimination in hiring processes. Anti-black racism in hiring remains relatively the same since 1989, and racial discrimination persists in the US labor markets.

A BBC NEWS report titled, “How Hidden Bias Can Stop You Getting a Job,” stated that companies were beginning to remove names from applications in an effort to recruit in a more just manner. The report admitted that recruiters hold an “unconscious bias” against the recruitment of ethnic minority groups. In a research study conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research (Francis, 2018), researchers selected applicants with similar qualifications and sent resumes on their behalf, which they differentiated with “white-sounding” names and “black-sounding” names. White sounding applicants received one callback for every 10 resumes; whereas black or ethnic sounding names received one callback for every 15 resumes sent. Another interesting finding of this study was that name discrimination does not only occur based on racial backgrounds, but also toward gender. The study revealed the true inequalities between

male and female applicants; where male applicants were usually seen as “significantly more competent and hireable.”

A study conducted by the Harvard Business Review found a similar gender-related bias. The study was based on studying the patterns elite law firms conduct when hiring law school graduates (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2017). The applicants contained similarities all around with the only difference being their gender-apparent first names (James vs. Julia) on the resume. On the resumes, affluence was demonstrated by adding subtle signals of a social class background; this ranged from selection of formal schooling to stereotypical sporting and extracurricular involvement that would typically be associated someone with a higher-class origin. The results of the study showed that men of affluent families were more likely to be offered an interview at a top law firm than all other applicants. The study found that law firm employers were looking for women applicants, specifically not to hire them, because they felt they were seen as less committed to a demanding job.

In another study conducted at Syracuse University in New York, 500 college students rated 400 popular male and female names from the past seven decades (Klein 9). When it came to warmth and competence, there was a clear gender stereotype that occurred. Names linked with low competence and high warmth tended to be female, like Hannah and Melody. Conversely, those associated with high competence and low warmth tended to be male. The results of this study demonstrate strong gender stereotypes and relate to the findings in the Harvard Business Review that female names are tied to the perception of a less committed, less competent employee.

LinkedIn has been often viewed as the social networking site for working professionals. Some people even treat it like an online resume and utilize it as tool to hire and get hired. On

your LinkedIn profile, your name and picture are the highlight of your profile, followed by your work history, experience, and other talents. In 2011, LinkedIn gathered data to conduct research on the correlation between names and success. Onomastics specialist and Editor of *Names: A Journal of Onomastics*, Dr. Frank Neussel stated in the LinkedIn research finding that shortened versions of given names are utilized to demonstrate a sense of invitingness and friend-like behavior. Further, the demographics of female CEOs suggested that women were more inclined to utilize their full names to convey a more professional demeanor.

Names and Living Conditions

First name discrimination in the educational and workplace environments happens everywhere, and it is significant because it affects people's long-term livelihoods as well as their perceptions of self in the moment. The effects of name stereotypes also extend into domestic life, affecting people's ability to obtain homes. In a housing market experiment conducted in Finland, 1459 inquiries were sent regarding 800 apartments. Evidence of naming discrimination was found against Arabic sounding male names. "Arabic-sounding male names had the lowest probability of receiving a response, receiving a response to about 16% of the inquiries made, while Finnish-sounding female names received a response to 42% of the inquires." The gripping results of this experiment identify that housing discrimination exists in names. Further, it demonstrates how people could make negative judgements on your name and it could impact the status of your housing.

In a study published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, it was found that out of 1,100 email inquiries to landlords in the Los Angeles-area, landlords replied positively to 89% of white sounding names, while unusual names brought in 66% replies and African-American

names elicited merely 56% replies. The study also showed that landlords were more likely to reply to names that they resonated with. For example, if the landlord was of Arabic descent, the landlord was more likely to reply to a name sounding Arabic over any other name that inquired.

Conclusion

It is an undeniable truth that names are related to personal identity. Names are powerful because they mark our entry into life. The act of naming is the solidification a person's being. This thesis worked to demonstrate how personal names are a prescribed form of identity, and something that a person bears through their life forever, even if their name changes. While the importance of names may appear trivial, the purpose of this project was to demonstrate that names indeed hold a substantial amount of weight; names should be a respected and sacred language.

The impact of the collection of research gathered in this thesis has shown that names serve a dual purpose, first in denoting the individuality of the person and second in marking social connections. All throughout the world, people use different naming systems, but always the names demonstrate more about the personality of the giver of the name than the named. Yet, as people grow with their given names, names impact their lives and define personal identity. Names can have significant influence in shaping a person's life and can serve as self-fulfilling prophecy. The manner in which people feel about their own names can affect the relationship a person has with oneself, just as names can have an impact on other people's perceptions. Names influence the assumptions we make about others' character traits and personality. First names actively shape the ways people perceive our age, likeability, and even job competence. Evidence shows that names can strongly influence everything from academic grades to career choice.

Names matter to a remarkable degree and are also always impacted by social constructs. Names signal the values of the givers and are embedded with a profound amount of meaning. The name given to a child influences the development of the child's character. Names are ideological statements we make to others and they tell us who we are in the world. Unusual

names, because they break with typical expectations, remind us how engrained social constructs related to identity (and therefore names) are. When stereotypical judgements are made about unfamiliar names, they reflect our own discomfort with difference and can have socially unequitable consequences. Names play an intriguing role in the construction of our lives, self and placement in society. With the simple choice of being given our name, names demonstrate that we are subject to social structuring, much beyond our control, at the time of birth.

It's been well-established that unusual names have a strong impact on the individual and cultural identity of a person. To alleviate the possibility of subtle prejudice made against unusual names, it's important to keep a few aspects of names in mind. First, a name that sounds unusual where you live may be quite common in other parts of the world. Second, names are valuable because they're a reflection of the giver of the name's values. These values could entail family roots, beliefs and heritage. Third, names are significant because they can impact other people's self-confidence and foster a strong sense of identity. Ultimately, this research has been gathered as a reminder to not judge anyone by a given name, regardless of how unique it is.

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