

Theresa Tran

Bergvall

HU3401

3148

The Transcendental Importance of Name and Identity

The power of language is overwhelmingly strong. This is particularly relevant when considering the implication of a name. Names are crucial in helping us define our identities. Naming differs through, but is not limited to, marriage, varying cultures, and body references and it has the potential to affect and shape behavior and personality. The significance of having a name gives meaning to our existence, our purpose in life, our identity.

What makes a name so important? “A name grants a person identity... Names are not superficial phenomena, but are an expression of cultural identity deeply imbedded in sociocultural contexts. Naming is therefore regarded as the social birth of a human being... Names reflect important aspects of everyday life, of worldviews, and of people's social relationships within the family, extended family, and beyond” (Steinhauer 6). Simply put, everyone has a name. Deluzain (3) explains that “This year, more than 120 million babies will be born on earth. Those who survive will sooner or later undergo the initiation process of receiving a name... The truth is that names are a part of every culture and that they are of enormous importance both to the people who receive names and to the societies that give them. ” But in order to answer this question, it is necessary to understand what the meaning of “name” is. According to *Merriam-Webster*, the definition of name is “a word or phrase that refers to or that can refer to a specific person” thus implying that a name gives an identity to a person. So, what is “identity?” Also from *Merriam-Webster*, identity is “the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others.” It can be concluded, then, that a name provides a person with a specific, assigned reference that others know

them by.

The meanings of “name” and “identity” are very similar but there is one significant difference. Both name and identity have the potential to give reference to a person while only an identity can differentiate people. An identity provides people with the same name a reason for their dissimilarity and an escape for acceptance of true self. This means that a person is able to alter how they portray their identity depending on who is around them.

How, then, are identities formed? Woodward (1) explains that “identities are formed through interaction between people. When people take up different identities there are different processes taking place as people position themselves, and are positioned, in the social world... Our identities are shaped by social structures but we also participate in forming our own identities... We suggest that gender, class and cultures are particularly important.” An identity has the potential to be shaped by the people that we surround ourselves with. Identities can change as we experience different stages in our lives such as marriage, parenthood, or a loved one passing away. Woodward (1) continues to explain this idea by stating that “the changes which are identified are largely structural: in the economy, in new technologies, through migration and ethnic diversity, in the organization of domestic and family life, and in gender roles... Identity necessarily involves an interrelationship between the personal and social...” This passage provides an explanation to reflect upon. Woodward argues that identity is directly correlated with a person’s personal and social life. Not only do we, as individuals, have an idea of what our identities consist of, the people in our lives also play a huge part in defining our identities.

How we portray ourselves to others is very important and is the difference between whether or not a genuine, long-lasting relationship can be formed. Woodward (2) boldly argues that “we live in a world where identity matters, it matters... as a concept...” Many times, people will change their identities to represent the person that they believe they are supposed to. It all depends on who is

around. What aspects of ourselves that we decide to present to others, in any circumstance, depends on whether or not we are around friends, family, colleagues, and so on. Do “we choose to state a nickname or a pet name instead of the name our parents have decided for us?...This may seem like a casual choice, or maybe just a matter of habit, but the fact is that the way we use our name constitutes an important part of the impression we want other people to form of ourselves...Our personal perception of identity does not represent a stable unity. It changes as we gain experience, along with our personal growth” (Windt-Val 3). This concept leads me to believe that the self-fulfilling prophecy is the reason why we will transform our identities depending on who is around us in various situations.

Deluzain (3) describes the self-fulfilling prophecy as:

The process that gives names their influence is the so-called self-fulfilling prophecy...[Imagine a situation in which] a man introduces himself to us as Percy.

Immediately, our unconscious mind goes to work dredging up all the images and associations we have with that name. Without realizing it, we develop a mental picture--a set of expectations--of what a Percy is like. This mental picture causes changes in our own behavior that are so subtle that we are not aware of them.

However, Percy picks up on the messages we are sending by our actions, and he makes unconscious changes in his own way of acting to satisfy what he thinks we expect of him. In other words, we set up a situation which forces Percy to behave the way we think Percys are supposed to behave... This process does not necessarily occur in every chance encounter or casual meeting, although it very well can happen under these circumstances. However, it does occur sometimes in long-term relationships, especially those involving people on different status levels, such as a foreman-worker or teacher-student relationship... To put this idea another way, the

way we *see* ourselves behaving is more or less the way we *do* behave in any given situation.

Taking the self-fulfilling prophecy into account, how do we maintain our identities at a time of change, dishonesty, and disruption in society? I have reason to believe that we do not. Image is extremely important to us as humans. Therefore, we are continuously changing ourselves to fit what we believe we should act or be like. Change is simply more noticeable at a younger age because the pressure is more prevalent in that time of our lives when we are most susceptible to modifying ourselves. People change without realizing it. In an ever-changing world, we must adapt to change in order to survive and be successful. Because of the constant change in society, people are bound to meet similarities in other people's identities and that of their own due to the vast number of diverse people in the world.

Different characteristics that make up an individual's personality constitute the difference in identity among people. Woodward (6) cleverly contends that "if identity provides us with the means of answering the question 'who am I?' it might appear to be about personality; the sort of person I am... We may share personality traits with other people, but sharing an identity suggests some active engagement on our part... Personality describes qualities individuals may have, such as being outgoing or shy, internal characteristics, but identity requires some element of choice." It is true that many people have very similar personalities but they are never exactly the same.

On the contrary, can it be argued that, in specific circumstances, we are expected to act alike? Take the image of the professional world for example. There is a silent need to portray a certain image, an indistinguishable image. This image consists of wearing business attire to a professional job but also acting a specific way-- well-mannered, polite, attentive-- even if it is not how we truly act. This supports the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy when we alter our true identities to portray the person we think others want us to be. What about cultural naming traditions

that Americans have continued to practice?

One important topic that I want to touch base on is why it is has become traditionally widespread, specifically across the United States, for women, in heterosexual marriages, to adopt the man's last name to start anew instead of the other way around. Most women follow tradition and take the last names of their husbands as their own perhaps to avoid an argument or to submit to the concept of "man of the household." What happens when the woman wants her husband to take her name? It can be considered an act of weakness on the man's behalf for not taking claim of the lineage. In the past, women were seen as part of a man's possessions. This tradition has continued to be practiced in today's society in a less notable way. Society has not failed to make women feel that they are less than that of their male counterparts. More importantly, when a man wants to take his wife's name, he is thought of as attempting to commit fraud since it is very rare for men to change their names in marriage.

In many cases, changing a name is considered fraud especially since not very men change their name to that of their wife's name. In the U.S., people who wish to change their name, except for women in marriage, must petition with a court in order to prove that they are not trying to commit fraud. They have to provide a reason for the name change and go through a substantial amount of paperwork as well as receive frequent questioning about fraud if the name change is even allowed.

There is a large difference in the societal influences that are put on men and women during marriage. Women SHOULD take the man's name and men are ALLOWED to take the woman's name. Notice the word "should" which implies that women have the choice to decide but it would be frowned upon if chosen differently from what is expected. Notice the word "allowed" which gives men the choice to decide as they please with no allotted repercussion for either choice.

Many women will argue that they adopt their husband's name to represent the idea of a new

family being formed. On the other hand, by a woman changing her name to that of her husbands, how does that signify that a “new” family has been created? When a woman takes her husband’s name, she is realistically joining an already existing family. What is a plausible explanation to this issue? Perhaps it is the notion of a new identity. Although a man may still have the same name after marriage, it is the idea that a new identity has been created in that specific moment in time. The name may still be the same but it most likely has a new meaning for that person; the name has adopted a new identity of “family”-- wife, kids, commitment, patience, etc.

So will it ever be the norm for men to change their name in marriage? It is hard to say so because people are so unpredictable. There have not been any large conflicts of men attempting to change their names and it becoming a largely, public news header. Personally, I cannot imagine it becoming a norm, specifically not in American culture, but it has the potential to slowly become less rare to find. It is also quite the process for someone to go through a name change. It would be different if states and the law made it easier for men to change their names.

What are some reasons why a person would want to change their name? Aside from matrimony, there are many other reasons why a person would want to change their name. Truth is, we cannot truly know why a person wants to change their name because “the stories behind the changes, which are alluded [only] to... a few short phrases on the application, are tales of family dramas, broken marriages and years of mispronunciations” (Steinhauer 3). Names have meaning on many levels and they hold an important part of a person’s identity but sometimes changing your name is necessary in order to start a new. Steinhauer (5) intricately provides a list of circumstances where a name change seems essential: “Most people who apply for a name change want to re-identify themselves religiously, culturally and occasionally biologically...Many have converted and want their names to reflect new religious ties. A few are men who have become women, and even less frequently, women who have become men. Others want to reclaim the ethnic names that their

ancestors shortened. There are divorced women who want to resume using their maiden names, children who never knew their fathers who want to rid themselves of his surname, or even his memory. ” A name change can represent a fragment or a new chapter in life.

What actually happens when you change your name? Well it depends. Some people change their name to take on a new identity but, in marriage, it doesn't necessarily change who you are. It just reflects a change in your life which represents that particular marriage or beginning a family. There are those who grow a strong attachment to their name. Others rename themselves in order to create a new identity or perhaps to fit certain characteristics that are physically shown. One such way to go about this is by adopting a nickname.

Nicknames are important in understanding how others view us as well as whether or not we have created a bond with our given names. Windt-Val (9) explains that “pet names, nicknames and bynames can reveal a considerable amount about a person's position among equals and in his or her surroundings in general, and it is just as revealing when a person does not “feel at home” in their own name, but chooses instead to “hide” behind a pet name or use a name that actually does not belong to them... Pet names and nicknames are often used as a means to control, manipulate or degrade other people.” Nicknames are names that are given in place of a person's real name whether the nickname feels more familiar or not. Waugaman (12) explains that “nicknames provide insight not only into the individual but also into how other people think of her—they are a double prism rather than a one-way mirror. Nicknames also serve as time markers.”

On a less serious and less knowledgeable topic about naming, do people ever consider the fact that other people will name various parts of their bodies? Deborah Cameron conducted an experiment asking American college student both men and women to list as many “penis” terms as they could. The results showed that males were able to produce almost three times as many terms as women were able to. Cameron (367) explains the reasoning behind the difference: “Feminist

commentators on language have noted in many contexts that the world has been ‘named’ from a male and male-dominant perspective and that lexicogrammatical features in languages often reveal important underlying cultural (male) assumptions...[It can be] examined from a historical perspective the elaboration of the English lexicon in the area of terms denoting women as prostitutes. They argue that the cultural salience of the equation ‘woman=prostitute,’ while the insulting or dysphemistic character of many items bears to witness to (and reinforces) the culture’s negative attitudes to women and to sex.” Common forms of naming that men use to name their penises relate to either intimate (Rob, Dick), animalistic (Beast, Hulk), or authoritative (Excellency, Majesty) terms. Perhaps men name their penises as a way to argue that the penis has a mind of its own.

Along with the different names that people give to their body parts, naming also differs across cultures. “Despite their universality, there is a great deal of difference from one culture to another in how names are given” (Deluzain 3). Distinctly, in my research, I have noticed a large difference between naming in a collectivistic culture such as that of Native Americans compared to that of an individualistic culture such as the American culture. There is a significant difference between the two cultures. Waugaman (2) gives an argument about how Native Americans do not necessarily consider names to be connected with personal identity but rather one with collectivistic traits: “Native American tribal names link an individual to a group of families. Native Americans inspire us to think about our names as allegory-with multiple dimensions. To remember that we are on a linear voyage in life, that we should be constantly changing and growing, that our identity consists in how we are seen and judged by others-by what we give, not by what we take. To remember that our names should remind us first of ‘us’, not ‘me.’ To remember that making the world a better place means not only helping others but also caring for nature so that our descendants will enjoy the same bounty we have. To remember that every human being has a sacred

spiritual core.” The segment that stood out most to me was “that our identity consists in how we are seen and judged by others- by what we give, not by what we take.” The reason for this is that it argues that identities are determined by what others see of us and interpret us as. Therefore, it would be beneficial to adopt the concept of identity as “us” and not “me” because our identities are determined by the notion of “us” and what is best for the whole. Taking into consideration what is best for everyone is something that is lost in today’s society.

This passage from Waugaman struck me personally. I strongly agree with the idea that in order to make the world a better place, we must care for each other but also respect the earth which provides nourishment to us.

How is it that names define us? Or do they? Each of us have a name that contributes to how we identify ourselves and how others identify us. This can be determined by the way that we talk or how we act around certain people. “Through the words we choose when talking, we create the picture of ourselves that we want others to see” (Wind-Val 5). Windt-Val (6) reminds us that names and identity are closely connected: “Even if you have been so fortunate as to have been given a name that does not make heavy demands on you, but instead a name that indicates positive qualities ,a name that helps to create an encouraging picture of yourself, it is still possible for other people to manipulate your feeling of identity and self-view through their way of addressing you.” Name and identity give us social distinction among each other.

Works Cited

Cameron, Deborah. "Naming of parts: Gender, culture, and terms for the penis among American college students." *American Speech*. 1992: 367-382. Print.

Men and women use different ways to name and identify parts. English lexicon indicates that terms denoted towards women are more likely to be negative compared to terms aimed towards men. Many cultures have a negative attitude towards women and sex.

Deluzain, H. Edward. "Names and Behavior." *Behind the Name*. 1996. Web. 10 Nov. 2013.

---. "Names and Personal Identity." *Behind the Name*. 1996. Web. 10 Nov. 2013.

---. "Names and Personality." *Behind the Name*. 1996. Web. 10 Nov. 2013.

Deluzain's research has been very helpful in my understanding of names and how they affect various aspects of a person's existence. He explores topics of behavior, identity, and personality to give meaning to a person's development and character. This source has provided information about how names can affect a baby's future such as whether or not they will be popular, well-liked, or outgoing.

Steinhauer, Jennifer. "A Matter of Identity; What's in a Name Change? Everything You Can Imagine." *The New York Times*. 19 Aug. 1994. Web. 19 Nov. 2013.

When a person changes their name, a question of whether or not that person loses their identity is asked. A name change does not necessarily mean that sense of self changes or is lost—it is a matter of if that person knows who they truly are or not. However, it is understandable that people find cultural identity in their names and this is most common in marriage.

Waugaman, Elisabeth. "What's in a Name?" *Psychology Today*. 8 Jul. 2011. Web. 19 Nov. 2013.

After taking a look at the meaning in a name, I have a better understanding of how

names can affect the way that people identify themselves among a group of people. Rather than thinking about a name as “me,” it can be more beneficial to think of a name as “us.” This holds true for some Native Americans.

Windt-Val, Benedicta. “Personal Names and Identity in Literary Contexts.” *Names and Identities*. 2012: 273-284. Print.

There is a close connection between how a person feels about their name and how they identify themselves. It has a lot to do with their sense of self. Sometimes how we choose to identify and present ourselves depends on who we are surrounded by.

Woodward, Kath, ed. *Questioning identity: gender, class, nation*. Routledge, 2004.

This source explores reasons of why identities are formed, how individuals make sense of their own identities in society and how we shape our own identities. These points help me to expand on my own understandings of identity and that of my own.