Naming a New Self: Identity Elasticity and Self-Definition in Voluntary Name Changes

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This article considers how personal name changes are situated within their sociological context in the United States. Reviewing both popular and scholarly texts on names and name changes, I draw on recent work on identity and narrative by Oriana Bernasconi (2011) to argue that voluntary personal name changes are made in relation to a sense of *narrative elasticity* or *identity elasticity*, and act symbolically to make a shifting identity or self-narrative manifest in the social context. Drawing out these themes through an exploration of name changes for ethnic self-definition or religious purposes, I conclude with a reflection on the unstable social balance between an individual's interest in self-expression and society's priority on the stable identification of persons within a given social sphere.

KEYWORDS name changes, narrative elasticity, identity work, African-American names, religious name changes, self-representation

In 1975, a high school teacher from North Dakota named Michael Herbert Dengler "petitioned the state district court for permission to change his name to 1069" (Kaplan and Bernays, 1997: 191), as he believed that each digit of his proposed name symbolized, respectively "his relationship to nature, time, the universe, and essence'" (Nuessel, 1992: 17). A series of five courts located in both North Dakota and Minnesota refused Dengler's request. When they finally permitted him to adopt the name — if spelled out in letters — he questioned this victory: after all, he said, his friends had called him "1-0" for years (*US News*, 1980: 8). Stories of this nature, which crop up frequently in anecdotes and news briefs, raise questions for us about the meanings that Americans assign to names, the relationship of names to identities, and in the ways which society structures and limits the choice of name.

In discussing these issues, this article draws broadly on the sociological framework of symbolic interactionism, developed by George Herbert Mead and systematized by Herbert Blumer. As Blumer notes, in this framework human action is based on

meaning, represented in symbols. This meaning originates from "the social interaction that one has with one's fellows," and is modified through social interpretation (1969: 2). Additionally, I use Oriana Bernasconi's discussion of life-history narratives among elderly Chilean women (2011), in which she refers to the *narrative work* involved in telling one's story and the *identity work* involved in constructing personal identity through talk. Examining both of these types of meaning-work, Bernasconi (2011: 23) posits that a kind of *narrative elasticity* is used by respondents as they struggle to integrate narratives of their past selves with changes in "personal experience [...] in relation to new cultural references."

In this article, then, I use the framework of symbolic interactionism and Bernasconi's concepts of identity to situate American name changes within a wider context. After an overview of the role of names and name changes in American society, I outline how a person's choice to change his or her name, and social acceptance of that change, could reflect Bernasconi's *narrative elasticity*. Specifically, I consider the African-American name change as an example of narrative elasticity, in how new names are reinterpreted as having "always been a part" of the person's life. Name changes, however, can also represent *identity elasticity* by making clear the breaks in identity that transform a person's life and social relations: this is seen in name changes made upon conversion or taking religious vows. In both examples, personal name changes act symbolically to mark a shifting identity or manifest a complex self-narrative in the social context.

The essence of an anthroponym

Across societies, personal names provide us with a great deal of information, from markers of individuals and groups to signifiers of the relationships between individuals and groups. Leonard Ashley (1996: 31) suggests that personal names can express a wide range of social values, serving for individuals as:

> scripts for their lives, expressions of the beliefs and expectations of their parents, clues to where they fit into society and what their duties are. Names are human artifacts that can tell us much about the namers' beliefs about religion and magic, social order, what parents want from children, how they seem often to value males over females, and how the members of the society regard the world in which they live. In short, names are full of historical, cultural, and sociological information.

In a fourth century BC discussion of names found in Plato's *Cratylus*, Socrates, Cratylus, and Hermogenes consider whether names are "natural" or "conventional." In developing this dialogue, Plato situates names and naming conventions within the philosophical concern with objects and their labels. The character of Hermogenes pushes for a conventional view, as "no name belongs to any particular thing by nature, but only by the habit and custom of those who employ it and who established the usage" (Plato, 1977: 11). In contrast, Plato's character Cratylus asserts that names are natural: "a name is not whatever people call a thing by agreement [...] but that there is a kind of inherent correctness in names" (1977: 7). Already, we see the division between names given and accepted for their conventional/social use, and names whose meanings seem to naturally represent a person's essence. After a lengthy deliberation, Socrates combines the two view above, suggesting that, as Kaplan and

Bernays paraphrase it, "names, being the product of a rational process — language — are based on nature but also modified by convention and usage" (1997: 211–212) — something with which we all surely would agree.

Names work first as identifiers, confirming the identity of the people they represent. In agreement with Hermogenes' conventional stance, John Stuart Mill argues that, when a dog is named Caesar or a child is called Goliath, "these names are simply marks used to enable those individuals to be made subjects of discourse" (cited in Kaplan and Bernays, 1997: 214). Mill reminds us that a child is not always "Goliath" because he is big, but that perhaps the name was chosen for other reasons and simply acts to identify little Golly as distinct from his peers. Such an identifying function for names is twofold. Rodriguez (1997: 455) notes that names identify a person inwardly and outwardly, by acting as both labels for social and for self-identification. Rodriguez examines names in relation to slavery, as slaves' names are changed by a new master. Such a forceful renaming not only asserts the master's ownership to the wider world, but also gives the slaves a new self-definition in relation to their latest master.

This identifying function is most often highlighted when discussions of personal names arise. Dumas (1999: 144) reports a speech in which cartoonist Bil Keane introduced himself as "Bil Cartoonist Keane," saying, "That's a little idea I picked up from Francis Cardinal Spellman." Reminiscent of the occupational names held by many Europeans in the Middle Ages, Dumas in fact makes the connection directly, proposing we return to such descriptive names as *Richard the Lion-Hearted* and *Æthelred the Unrede*.

And names not only identify, but are "semantically meaningful," symbolizing relations between people. Kaplan and Bernays suggest that names embed information on ethnicity, religion, gender, era of birth, or social status (1997: 215). Ashley's description above, in which names as "artifacts" reveal the beliefs of the namer, is especially apt (1996: 31): names not only identify the person as belonging to a given family or culture, but also represent attitudes towards those social groups. In this, Ruane and Cerulo (2000: 70) argue that names are symbols, "arbitrary signs that come to be endowed with special meaning and, ultimately, gain the ability to influence behaviors, attitudes, and emotions."

When asking whether names are markers for individual humans, a symbol of social relations, or a representation of something meaningful about the person, the obvious answer is, *yes*. Names serve in all of these functions, and a change in name can mark a change in all of these relations. Bering himself suggests that we should "view the phenomenon of the name from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, namely as a *symbol of identity*" (1992: 189; emphasis mine). In this way, names have an identifying function but operate through the use of symbols, and thus become a key site for meaning and identity on both a personal and social level. A change in individual identity or social meaning could each precipitate a name change — a subject to which we now turn.

A change of name

While name changes may be momentous in the American social context, this is not true across all social situations. Jennings (1967: 144) notes that in medieval Britain a

man might have had the experience of being "named Heaven-blest at birth, apprenticed as Freckles, serving in the army as Bowman, signing the marriage register as Handsome, being entered on land rolls as Underwood, paying his taxes as Weaver, and being buried at last as Oldfellow." Most moderns, however, are far from this now, and locked into one public identifier recognized by the state. The closest we come is in nicknames — but these have limited legal standing, and can fall out of favor just as quickly as they are applied.

In search of a lasting change of name, then, most Americans apply to a court of law. Several hundred people each year apply to legally change their names in New York City (Kaplan and Bernays, 1997: 190), although this number pales beside the 8 million residents of the city. In medieval Britain, name changes may have served as markers of transition throughout a life, but modern changes — if only because of their rarity and legal significance — often are significant life events in themselves.

Indeed, in our society, the public status of our primary names, even for the most non-public of individuals, serves to make name changes both notable and unusual. Most Americans regard officially registered names at birth as a person's "real" name (contrast this to tribal societies in which a secret name may be the more real). Furthermore, name changes are not "real" or binding upon others, unless obtained through a court of law. Such a legal change is known as the best way to both "assert continuity of identity and property rights [and] make the change a matter of public record" (Kaplan and Bernays, 1997: 189) — the public record itself providing the validity for the name.

Yet, outside of nicknames and legal names, there remains a legal gray area for common-law names. Although not well known, any American may take on a new "common-law" name simply through constant use, to the point where it is publically accepted as the representation of him or herself. Other limitations for the legal recognition of a common-law name (ironically) are that it not be offensive or inciting hatred, and that the name not be chosen for purposes of crime, fraud, or debt avoidance. So long as it is not also a number, a hieroglyph, or a visual symbol, the new name becomes as legal as if it had been given at birth (Kaplan and Bernays, 1997: 189) — even though such a name was never given legally in any sense.

Common law or legal, name changes are most notable when they act as symbols of internal change or reflect wider changes in society. Indeed, a change is sometimes assumed to *mean* something in itself, regardless of which name is assumed. Immigrants who adopt an "American" name in order to blend in culturally may not only enact a changing identity, then, but the change itself can suggest a distancing from their home culture. In this way, individuals may enact Bernasconi's *identity elasticity* through a change of name, using the symbolism of their names to stretch the definition of self as they move through life.

Such symbolic messages, of course, need not even be recognized by the person changing their name. Many name-changers act deliberately to enact their desire or possession of an attribute, such as the ethnic self with the change to a "more ethnic" name, or a break in self with the assumption of a religious name. But this symbolic function can be just as strong when a person changes their name for personal reasons, disregarding the message it may convey. And in such cases, the interpretation of the meaning of a name change can vary widely from what the individual intended. For

instance, when Queen Elizabeth II of England added her husband's surname to her own, some subjects were alarmed at a perceived "encroachment" of the Mountbatten family on the Windsor-held throne; others argued that the Queen was simply acquiescing to marital convention, and that neither name had value in and of itself (*Economist*, 1960: 602–603). With echoes of Plato's natural/conventional debate, the furor over Queen Elizabeth's married name reflects both the private, conventional symbol of marriage, and the wider political effect that prominent marriages may have — and that the Queen herself could enact in putting her husband's name above her own.

Name changes can similarly become a point of contestation between parents and children, especially when parents have taken great care in choosing the "right" name for their child's person, social situation, or future. Some parents become upset if a child informs them of a desire to change their name — even if the proposed new name commemorates the family. Recalling when she first attempted to replace her father's surname with her mother's maiden name, Defrancisco comments:

> Naively, I thought my parents would view the change as a tribute to my mother's family, particularly since there were no boy children left to carry on the name. No such luck. My father was furious and visibly upset for days after. My mother asked why I would want to hurt him so. (Kissling and Defrancisco, 1993)

Such discord may spring from the sense of social upheaval suggested by a shift in patriarchal values, but may also come from the intimate social disruption involved in assuming a new identity. Defrancisco's father, although clearly upset at her rejection of the patriarchal family structure, may have also been responding from distress at his daughter giving up a name that signified her former self — a self that he had come to know and love.

African-American name changes: narrative elasticity in reaffirming the past

Another clear example of the narrative work involved in name changing comes within the African-American community. Since the emancipation of slaves in the 1860s, many African-Americans have taken the opportunity to change their names, representing a new direction in self-narrative and identity. Freed slaves may have chosen names based on linguistic familiarity, relationships or other factors not associated with their old master (Jennings, 1967: 153); they may have also brought into public names formerly used in secret between those in bondage (Gutman, 1977). Such names, when taken openly, could serve to maintain existing social connections and identities between former slaves, but to disrupt relations to former slave-owners. In either case, slaves who did not have a surname took one soon after emancipation.

In the twentieth century, African-Americans have once again examined the symbol-ism of names taken during or soon after slavery — and, in some cases, have chosen new ones. Ali-Bey (1991) calls for African-Americans to "define your own reality" rather than accepting whites' definitions of society, and believes the way to do this is to "collectively detach ourselves from the plantation slavemaster's last names."

Others have symbolized this renewed sense of self-direction and ethnic-identified pride through a change of personal names.

Of course, a person's identity may change at many points in their life, as when adopting a new business, personal, or life-stage role, or discovering something new about their past or their community. These changes all call for identity work, as the person adjusts their experience of self to a new role. But the change of name undertaken during an intensification of ethnic identity may also call for *narrative elasticity*, in which the person adapts their newly awakened realization of self to match and incorporate their past self, stretching their self-narrative to encompass new understandings of a life already lived.

This is especially clear in the case of ethnic name changes, which challenge dominant understandings of culture and community in America. The dissonance between a changing person and a more slowly changing community is something that a number of African-Americans have sought to highlight with their name changes. As James Chikaodili Anyike reflects:

> My former last name was "Brame," a German name that in no way reflects my true heritage. This name was forced on my ancestors during the period of chattel slavery in America, separating me from thousands of years of my ancestral heritage and culture. [. . .] In changing my name, I have begun the process of reclaiming my heritage. (1990: 12)

Boldly comparing those who refuse to accept this change to those who refused to emancipate black slaves, Anyike explains that his newly chosen name means "James belongs to God for whom nothing is impossible" (1990: 12). In publicly marking this change in identity, Anyike demonstrates an intensely meaningful shift in self-narrative: he no longer belongs to the slave system of society, but to a God who makes all things possible for him as an *African-American* man. But this narrative remains elastic, as he continues to incorporate his prior self and his heritage into a new understanding of himself.

As with Anyike's turn to African Christianity, others within the African-American community have turned to Islam for a sense of identity that offers an alternative to dominant American narratives about African-Americans. Most notably, Malcolm Little chose the name Malcolm X when joining the Nation of Islam; such a change served to remove layers of social meaning and foreground the man himself: "You are obliterating family, friends, culture, lineage, even ethnicity. To be X is to be Muslim and nothing more--nothing more need be understood" (Kaplan and Bernays, 1997: 87–88). As with most religious conversions, these changes in identity and narrative were ongoing: When Malcolm X made the pilgrimage to Mecca in the mid-1960s, he made a final transformation, this time to the name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Kaplan and Bernays, 1997).

Cassius Clay represents another example of a name-change intended to mark the social divide between whites and blacks in America in a concrete way. After joining the Nation of Islam in 1964, Cassius became Muhammad Ali. His original name, however, was not a slave name, but rather "one given him in honor of a white Kentucky hero, the antislavery politician Cassius Marcellus Clay" (Kaplan and Bernays, 1997: 85). Even a name recalling an abolitionist, however, limited the identity of this boxer. But, by joining the Nation of Islam, Ali found the opportunity

to construct a self independent of whites — and even from the long fight and victory over slavery. In naming himself in line with the traditions of his new religion, Ali also directed the focus away from his other identities and onto the religion itself.

Religious name changes: identity elasticity in a break with the past

While in the section above we discuss name changes as a representation of *narrative elasticity*, in which a person's sense of self and heritage expands and contracts to reflect changes in their current identity, it is also evident that a name change can be not only the modification of a narrative, but a break between old and new self, when the very nature of identity gets called into question. This is especially clear in the last two stories above, in which the new converts to the Nation of Islam sought a radical break with the black-white identity politics that had characterized their prior names.

When a person experiences a deeply significant spiritual event, such as conversion, revelation, or a deepened commitment to a faith community, they may precede or follow that internal change with a name change. This name change itself becomes a meaningful symbol of what has occurred within the individual. In this way, the name changes assumed by the Islamic converts above symbolized to both convert and community the marked shift in identity and responsibilities that the new believer is expected to embrace. Even when done as part of ritual, the ritual itself may heighten the person's internal resolve of change, while the new name may stand as a constant marker of the change, as well as present an ongoing signal to the person's family and friends of the profound shift in meaning and orientation within their compatriot.

A key timeframe for religious name changes is during the period when people first make a pilgrimage. After completing a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, medieval Christians added a variant of the name "Palmer" to their name, the journey itself giving them the right to "'wear the palm,' that is, the palm-leaf badge signifying that [they] had made the arduous pilgrimage to the Holy Land" (Jennings, 1967: 151). In a practice that continues today, Muslims who have made the costly pilgrimage to Mecca may add the name *Hajji* (or *Hajja* for a woman) as an honorary at the end of their name (Davidson and Gitlitz, 2002: 426). Reflecting van Gennep's notion of a rite of passage (1960: 184), a pilgrim moves out of the sphere of everyday life and into a transformative experience shared with others; the new name at the conclusion of the pilgrimage stands as a reminder of the individual's changed self and status within their community.

A third key instance of spiritual name change comes when joining a religious order. Stahl notes the common practice of changing one's name when entering Romanian monastic life (1998: 129), and Rodriguez describes how freed slaves assume new names under Buddhism, "since Buddha specifically ruled against using the old name" (1977); it was also at the point of taking a new name that the freed slave could join a Buddhist religious order. In recent years, Wiccans or other neo-pagans who are initiated into neo-pagan community have often taken a new name as well (Lewis, 1999). Lewis notes that, while in the 1960s such names were private tools "for building a new magical personality," in recent times many witches and pagans have announced their names publically, either in asserting their right to public space, or in

shielding their legal self from public scrutiny (1999: 68). In musing on the meaning of such religious name changes, Paul Tournier notes that within the Christian faith:

> to change one's name is to break one's continuity as a person, to cut oneself off from the whole of one's past, which has defined one's person up to that point. Proof of this is the fact that a change of name may be desired by an individual and accepted by society when the change has a religious significance. The new name asserts that a new life is beginning, like a new birth, by divine election. (1975: 19)

As proof, Tournier offers the example of Catholic monks and nuns, who, prior to the Second Vatican Council of 1963–1965, were required to choose a new name when they took their vows. Such a case marks a clear break in identity: "for a new person, a new name" (20).

This sort of break, though, brings up an obvious question: how to talk about narrative and identity continuity, or elasticity, when name changes can concurrently signify a break in identity. As above, a self's identity can stretch as far back as a person's heritage, and as wide as their moral universe. But there are also limits. Name changes may serve not just to revitalize identities (as in the case of African-American name changes), but also to deliberately cut off the past self. This is most clear in the case of religious name changes, in which the "old becomes new," and the individual is, in some sense, understood as irrevocably changed through an abrupt shift in their self-narrative (cf. Robbins, 2007). I would suggest, however, that these irrevocable changes are themselves often incorporated into a person's lifelong narrative and identity. A person choosing to change their name may similarly incorporate both a break in self, and a self that remains to tell both side of the story. In this way, even narrative gaps are incorporated into the named self.

Conclusion: names and self in community

Herbert Plutschow (1995) describes an ancient Japanese custom known as "closing a name," in which powerful temples had the authority to strip tax-evading peasants or rule-breaking monks of their names — the reason for so doing being that "by breaking the law, the person inflicts damage on the temple or on his community as well as on his own name" (61). This custom demonstrates how closely the individual's identity is to the community as the break in relationship is symbolized in the rejection of a person's name. For a person living in community to lose his or her name is a serious matter, as names are a core part of how we know ourselves and operate in the social world.

In asking how names can represent individuals when "actual names are not in the least merely individual but taken from a *store* of names," Bering suggests that names are well-placed to represent the divide between self and society in Western culture, as they both act as "individual symbols" and mark a person's relationship to community through being drawn from "the language's *store* of names" (1992: 190). Plutschow also describes this dual nature of names operating in early Japan, where it was customary to have both public and private names. Names could thus be secretive and subject to taboo, as well as attached to states, circumscribed by politics, and generally belonging "to the official rather than to the private world" (1995: 200).

This tension between public and private, however, stands in sharp relief when put in relation to American name changes — in a place where all identifying markers are supposed to be public, and private identities in some sense cease to exist. Some feminists caution women against changing their public names given the social costs involved; Brown argues that "for women with vast professional contacts to abruptly take a new name is like becoming invisible or going underground" (1983: 6). And communities also have a vested interest in name continuity, in order to make it as difficult as possible for debtors and other public miscreants "to slip away" (Ashley, 1971: 183). Jennings contrasts the medieval and modern experiences, noting that people who might in medieval times have pursued "a chameleon career" of name changes must now relegate a fluid identity expression to their private life, as they maintain "an unchanging 'public' name for clerical purposes" (1967: 144).

What do we do, then? Given the costs of changing names, and the community resistance from officials and loved ones, it may not be practical for most Americans to embrace name changes to represent changes in identity and self-narrative as they move through life. But, given the dual nature of names as marking both identity and social relationships, one option is for Americans to more fully embrace private name changes as avenues of self-expression, consciously choosing to change our names to reflect the significant events of our lives. While most of us maintain one public name for life, increased opportunities for deliberate change in the names or nicknames by which friends and family know each other could provide a sense of passage through time. Just as a baby receives a name at birth, a woman a name at marriage, and others a new name at conversion or immigration, perhaps we can develop the cultural space for renaming to occur within the American context, marking the spaces when significant events alter our self-identities and social statuses. Assuming a new informal name could acknowledge *identity elasticity* by providing an opportunity to explore a changing identity, while embracing the passage of time through a *narrative elasticity* that acknowledges an enduring self even as we leave one part of our lives and enter another, or as we reformulate our pasts and futures in new and changing ways.

Acknowledgements

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