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What's in Our Name? Exploring Meaning and Narrative Identity in Parents' Naming of Firstborn

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the name of the firstborn as a linguistic self-representation that expresses the parent's evolving narrative identity. Twelve first-time parents of one-year-olds underwent personal and joint-couple interviews to explore the act of bestowing a name and the experience of bearing one. We found that parents chose names that echoed self-related wishes and conflicts corresponding to themes of belonging and individuality, ideal self, choice and control. While the child's name evoked positive connotations, their relationship with their own name was more complex and ambivalent. We propose that the act of naming is an act of self-authorship, in which parents choose names that both establish a similarity between themselves and their child, and embody their unfulfilled wishes.

Keywords: name giving, denominatum, psychology, family studies, identity, anthroponymy

Introduction

Personal names are a human linguistic universal (Brown 1991). People bear names and bestow names in all known societies (Alford 1988). Once given, our names become intrinsic to our identity: they have the function of identifying and singling us out, and the social expectations and stereotypes that they trigger can influence the way we are perceived and, accordingly, our self-perception and developmental traits (Newman et al. 2018; Zwebner et al. 2017; Aldrin 2016; Mehrabian 2001).

The correlation between personal names and identity has been widely studied and established (Aldrin, 2016). Empirical studies indicate that first names may be correlated with a range of psychological, behavioral, and developmental characteristics such as self-esteem (Joubert 1993; Strümpfer 1978), gender identification and socialization (Alexander at al. 2021), scholastic performance (Figlio 2005), major life decisions (Pelham et al. 2002), employment opportunities (Cotton et al. 2008; Bertrand & Mullainathan 2004), strategic distinctiveness (Kang et al. 2021) and even ADHD diagnosis (Shoval et al. 2012) and facial appearance (Zwebner et al. 2017). Alongside this growing body of research, there is a need for further theoretical conceptualization and critical methodological analysis (Aldrin 2016).

Studies in the US and in Europe have shown that, in industrialized societies, naming practices have become increasingly individualized and are based on emotional considerations, personal taste and disposition towards popularity rather than traditional conventions and kinship obligations (Leibring 2016; Twenge et al. 2010; Lieberson 2000). By naming their firstborn, parents seek to determine who their child will be and, at the same time, also define their own identity as parents (Finch, 2008). The existing empirical qualitative studies on parents' naming are embedded in a sociocultural and sociolinguistic orientation and highlight the function of naming as an act of social positioning and a marker of social, cultural and religious identity (e.g. Mensah 2024; Aldrin 2014, 2011; Bramwell 2012).

In the current literature on names and naming, there appears to be a gap between writings on the psychological importance attributed to a given name, as it relates to one's identity, and empirical studies that integrate theoretical psychological perspectives vis a vis the act of naming and how parents' narrative identity and relationship with their own name play into their choice. There has been some psychoanalytic writing regarding the conscious and unconscious motivations of parents' choice of names. According to Nadav et al. (2008), for example, within the context of naming, it is possible to observe processes of intergenerational transmission. This view coincides with Seeman's (1983, 1980) claim that the act of naming is motivated by wishes and associations related to the parents' tradition, identity, and hopes for their child, as well as with Atlas's (2022) assertion that names hold significant emotional meaning pertaining to the past of the parents and how they envision the future. The role of narcissistic deprivation in parents' choice of names has also been discussed (Nadav et al. 2011). All these works, however, are clinically based rather than empirical. Our study attempts to address this gap by empirically investigating the way in which the naming of the firstborn corresponds to the parents' experience of self in relation to the other, while identifying themes that are consciously and unconsciously manifest in the personal and joint narratives of the parents and their relationship with their own names. The conceptual framework that guides our investigation is interdisciplinary and integrates narrative psychology, existentialism and psychoanalysis.

Narrative Identity and Authorship

The concept of narrative identity, pioneered by Jerome Bruner and Ted Sarbin in the 1980s, recognized the constitutive role of personal and cultural narratives in constructing our sense of self (Lieblich & Josselson 2013). The present study reflects this view both theoretically and methodologically. Embracing the idea that "self-making is a narrative art" (Bruner 2002, 65), it employs narrative tools to explore the parents' sense of self, and it examines the act of naming, a narrative act, as it reflects and "makes" one's sense of identity. In this context, it is interesting to note Aldrin's (2014) analysis of personal naming as an evolving process that generally includes several phases: inspiration, comparison, testing, decision-making, formalization, and, finally, narrative. The latter occurs "after the name is actually chosen, during which parents are given the opportunity to describe the name choice [. . .], and in so doing also have the opportunity to recreate the meaning of the name choice" (2014, 394). Our study is situated within this phase and thus, in a way, could be seen as affording the parents an opportunity to revisit and rewrite this aspect of their narrative identity. In light of the constitutive significance of the name in the development of the parent's identity and perception of self, the parent's relations with his or her name are intrinsic to this study, since this relationship is in itself a part of his or her personal narrative identity. Thus, we examine the child's name also in relation to the parents' relationship with their own name and explore the connection between the act of bestowing a name and the experience of bearing one.

A person's construction of his or her narrative identity is a developmental milestone (McAdams & Olson 2010). In their lifespan developmental approach to identity, McAdams and Olson (2010) present personality as an integrative framework consisting of three developmental perspectives of psychological individuality: the dispositional perspective conceptualized as "the person as actor"*;* the motivational perspective conceptualized as "the person as agent"; and the self-narrative perspective conceptualized as "the person as author". According to this framework, whole persons are more than merely actors with dispositional traits; they are "agentic, self-determining beings" who make choices that reflect characteristic adaptations (motives, goals, values, virtues, etc.), and by doing so, they "will their very identity into being" (524). More so, in modern societies, from adolescence and increasingly up through midlife, persons already have the cognitive skills to become the authors of "an internalized and evolving narrative of the self" (527), that is, their narrative identity. To do so, argue McAdams and Olson, "one must be able to envision his or her entire life—the past reconstructed and the future imagined—as a story that portrays a meaningful sequence of life events to explain how the person has developed into who he or she is now and may develop into who he or she may be in the future" (2010, 528). The notion of authorship is also a central element of existential psychotherapy. Drawing upon Sartre's claim that "to be responsible is to be the 'uncontested author of an event or a thing'" (Yalom 1980, 218), existential authorship is tied to freedom and will and entails responsibility. Though cast into the world with no choice or control over our birth and given circumstances (Beauvoir 1976), we are deemed free and responsible for our choices as authors. Thus, the existential model of personality also highlights the interplay between objective givens and subjective agency and self-reflection (Yalom & Josselson 2019).

Aims and Research Questions

The goal of this study is to empirically investigate how the naming of the firstborn corresponds to themes in the parents' experience of self and narrative identity as these are, consciously and unconsciously, manifest in the personal and joint narratives of the parents and their relationship with their names. For this purpose, the study addresses the following research questions:

(1) How was the child's name chosen?

(2) What is the chosen name's meaning (denotative and connotative)?

(3) What is the parent's relationship with his or her own name?

(4) How can one understand the child's name considering the parent's relationship with his or her name?

(5) How does the process of choosing the child's name and the meaning of the name correspond to themes in the parents' narratives?

Method

This qualitative study draws upon the phenomenological and narrative methodology (Creswell, et al. 2007; Lieblich et al. 1998). Interviewing parents afforded insight into several phenomena: being a parent who has named his or her child, being a person who has been named by his or her parents, and the interplay between both experiences. The narrative methodology investigates the individual and identifies collective phenomena by investigating discourse and verbal reports (Josselson & Lieblich 1995). This form of collecting data, based on in-depth interviews, is especially relevant to our investigation of the parents' experience of self, due to the effectiveness of first-person narratives as a means for learning how the self evolves and "capturing the elusive concept of identity" (Lieblich and Josselson 2013, 206).

Participants

Interviews were conducted with 12 Jewish Israelis (6 couples), first-time parents of an approximately one-year-old infant (3 boys and 3 girls). The choice to focus on parents of one-year-old infants was based on the assumption that, at this particular point in time, the experience of choosing the name would still be a "fresh" memory, while the passage of time and the couple's adaptation to the experience of parenthood would enable a more retrospective reflection about the process of naming, as well as a consideration of whether or not the chosen name suits their child.

The age of the parents ranged between 29 and 38 years old. Some parents were officially married, while others lived together without any state-recognized marital legal binding. The participants were secular, though some, to a degree, occasionally observed the Jewish tradition. The participants were recruited through snowball sampling. The interviewees were of varying geographic and socio-economic backgrounds, yet they could be seen as belonging to the same socio-cultural sub-group of Jewish, secular, heterosexual Israelis.

Acknowledging that naming practices vary across cultures and ethnicities (Bramwell 2016; Lawson 2016) and that changes in naming practices are subject to social influences and historical developments (Leibring 2016; Lieberson 2000), we recognize that our study, which took place in Israel, was undertaken within a specific Jewish, secular and heterosexual socio-cultural setting, and does not aspire to offer a cross-cultural analysis. With that being said, considering the above-noted shift in industrial societies towards individualism, this study's findings and discussion may be relevant to other industrialized societies as well. In addition, we believe that the relative socio-cultural homogeneity of the group enabled an in-depth analysis within a comparatively even grounded playing field.

Procedure and Interviews

The study is based on two types of in-depth semi-structured interviews: a personal interview with each parent and a joint interview with the couple. The interviews were conducted according to Josselson's (2013) relational approach to qualitative inquiry. The first author conducted all the interviews in the interviewees' homes. The interviewer was a female creative arts therapist specializing in storytelling, reading and writing processes (bibliotherapy). The study was approved by the IRB of the Faculty of Education, University of Haifa (22/455). All interviewees signed a consent form permitting the audio recording of the interviews and were informed of their right to leave the study at any stage. To ensure the participants' privacy, their specific names do not appear.

Most of the questions were inspired by interviews by Bagarozzi and Anderson (1989). The personal interview included questions about (1) the familial history of each parent aimed at identifying the core themes and embedded conflicts in the parent's development of self in relation to their family of origin; (2) the name of the parent and the name of the child aimed at understanding the relationship of the parent with his own name and how the name of the child reflects this relationship. The joint-couple interview included questions about (1) the experience of pregnancy and birth and the parents' perception and expectations of their child aimed at identifying themes related to the parents' ideals, wishes, and experiences of becoming a parent; (2) the process of choosing their child's name: the parents were requested to describe the process together to collect relevant data from a joint perspective. Specific questions included: Who chose the child's name, and why was it chosen? Were there any disagreements regarding the name? How were they solved?

Data Analysis

The analysis of the transcribed interviews combined the holistic and categorical approach (Lieblich & Josselson 2013; Lieblich et al. 1998), while focusing on the overt and covert content of the narratives rather than their formalistic and structural proprieties. The analysis was multilateral and included several stages. After transcribing the individual and joint interviews of a couple, we conducted a thematic analysis of the process of naming and the relationship of the parents with their own names. Subsequently, we attempted to ascertain how the process of naming corresponded to themes of identity and relationship that emerged from the personal and joint narratives. Following the individual analysis of each couple, the final stage consisted of identifying broad themes and trends common across the six couples.

Results

The narrative analysis showed that the naming of the firstborn was indeed rooted in the parents' experience of themselves, their familial history, and their own name, and that the child's name encapsulated the parents' ideals, needs and wishes. While each name was akin to a complex code that corresponded with conscious and unconscious themes specific to the parents' past and their perception of themselves and their own names, a cross-analysis of the personal and joint-couple interviews led to the identification of four common characteristics:

(1) The child's name echoed conscious or unconscious wishes and conflicts related to themes of belonging and individuality, ideal perceptions of self, and choice and control.

(2) The child's name evoked a positive connotation. All the parents expressed a liking for their child's name, and most stated it suited them.

(3) The parents' relationship with their own name proved to be more complex, ambivalent and, at times, accompanied by a sense of estrangement.

(4) The child's name reflected aspects of the parent's relationship with their own name, suggesting varying links between the parents' experiences of their own name and their chosen name for their child. While a few parents (3 out of the 12) gave their children names that had the potential to recreate similar experiences to those they had, most parents gave their child a name that would enable a different experience for their child.

To elucidate these findings and demonstrate the idiosyncratic manner by which the parents' wishes, ideals, and relationship with their own name play out in the choice of their firstborn's name and the meaning they attribute to this choice, we present the analysis of two couples (using initials to maintain anonymity).

Belonging and Individuality

D. chooses a name for his son that is rooted in his own experience as a son of immigrants. D's parents, originally from Colombia, did not speak Hebrew and could not assimilate into the collective community of the Israeli Kibbutz where their son was born and raised. Bilingual considerations were the main reason for choosing his son's name: "I wanted his name to be a name that can be pronounced in Spanish as well. [. . .] a name my mother could say normally without breaking her teeth". This is opposed to D.'s experience of his own name, a name that he does not like, primarily because his parents, who had wanted to find an Israeli name, couldn't pronounce it: "Calling me a name which they couldn't use seems to me idiotic. [. . .] There's no such name in Spanish. They could have found a name that is both Spanish and Israeli, but they tried to be something they weren't".

   D. understands Spanish but does not speak the language. As a child, his parents would speak to him in Spanish, even though, as he emphasizes, speaking a language other than Hebrew was against the communal rules of the Kibbutz. Thus, his son's name, in effect, succeeds precisely where his own name failed; it is a name that need not be translated or adapted but equally belongs—as is—to both the Spanish and Hebrew languages. In this sense, the child's name echoes the wish to belong. It expresses and fulfills his father's wish to integrate the two languages and cultures that constitute his identity. As such, D.'s choice could be seen as an attempt—in his dual role as father and son—to restore his parents' self-expression and cultural autonomy by granting his son a name that also belongs to their native tongue.

For *L.* (*D*'s wife), their son's name echoes a longing for familial belonging. When asked about her son's name, *L.*, who was the one who suggested it, emphasizes her in-laws' Colombian roots: "I liked that they spoke Spanish and that they had all their special customs. So, we wanted him to have a name that is also Colombian and also Israeli". Further in the interview, she speaks about her relationship with *D.'s* family and her own: "When we first met, I had just had a fallout with my family and had grown very distant from them [. . .] and *D.*'s family was great. They really welcomed me". *L.*'s strong connection to her husband's family happened in parallel to her experience of estrangement from her own. She recounts that she suggested her son's name after she and her husband had attended a joint therapy session with her psychologist. In this context, one could understand the son's chosen name as *L.*'s attempt to compensate, through *D.*'s idealized family, for the complicated and painful relations with her own. Interestingly, *L.*'s own name commemorates her grandfather's name, which consists of the same letters. In this sense, it appears that *L.* is affording her son the same experience of familial connectedness.

Choice, Control, and Ideal Self

E. and *G.* choose a name with biblical reference for their daughter. *E.*, whose name is also of biblical origin, was the one to suggest the name and was, as his wife attests, "astoundingly persistent" in rooting for it. The name, he explains, communicates to him "love and gentle nobility". Gentleness and loving innocence also come up in the worldview that he wishes for his daughter: "I'd like her to be a loving person who [. . .] gives love and feels that the world is a safe place in which you can love and receive love". *E.* recognizes that the world does not necessarily match this view, but he still perceives this noble gentleness as something to strive for. Thus, his daughter's name—with the love, nobleness and gentleness that it conveys—embodies and echoes this ideal.

Contrary to this ideal, however, *E.*'s narrative reveals a dominant experience of guilt—both in the context of his relationship with his mother: "a relationship in which you can always end up feeling a little guilty", and in the way he feels the need to justify himself and his intentions in the process of choosing his daughter's name: "I'm guilty of the name. [. . .] *G.* said I did it with intentional malice—that I rejected all the other names and always stayed with this name—but it's just a name that I really, really, liked".

E.'s experience of being made to feel guilty, as opposed to his wish to be perceived as having a noble ideal soul, also manifests in his relationship with his own name. He does not like his name and says it has always sounded "awfully strong", like "someone telling you off". As a child, he wished to be called *Richard,* a name he liked "because of the story of Robin Hood. He was the good king". Thus, *E.* gives his daughter a name that echoes his ideal of a noble gentle soul and his wish to be perceived as such—not guilty.

While *E.*'s choice seems prefixed, from *G.*'s perspective, choosing her daughter's name was more of a process. *E.* suggested the name even before *G.*'s actual pregnancy. *G.* initially loved the name and even forbade her girlfriends from choosing it in the future, claiming it as her own. Once pregnant, however, *G.* reopened the subject: "I think I needed to choose the name over again". She refers to the process of choosing the name as "the saga of the pregnancy—the thing that all the fears, all the fantasies, channeled into". Obsessed, in her words, about what name to choose, *G.* sought out women with a similar name on Facebook to inquire as to how they fared with the name. This "name obsession" could be understood as closely related to *G.*'s dislike of her own name and her claim that it does not suit her at all: "I would have chosen for myself a different name". Though she never changed it, *G.* recalls spending her childhood years picking potential alternative names for herself. In fact, what finally convinced her to agree to her husband's choice was that she herself felt complimented by it when a relative commented that it was a name that suited *G.* herself.

G.'s conduct in the process of choosing her daughter's name echoes her need to feel that she is choosing, a need that appears in various contexts of her life narrative: "I definitely have an issue about needing to feel that I have chosen", she recognizes, and compares it to the fact that it took her a long time to choose her husband. She also points to the similarity between her obsessiveness in choosing a name and her obsessiveness in choosing a wedding song: "A friend of mine told me that in both these experiences, they're the only two things you can actually control". Here, *G.* directly connects her preoccupation with choosing and an attempt to control an event that is out of her control.

Finally, in addition to the shared biblical origin of both father's and daughter's names, and despite both parents' dislike of their own name, the parents make a conscious choice to link their daughter's name with their own and choose a name that emphasizes a phonetic continuity with their own names. As *G.* explains: "We wanted the name to have something of our own names and the sounds we liked in them". This, too, could be understood as an agentic attempt to make amends with their own names, of which they had no control.

Discussion

The analysis of the naming process, vis à vis the parents' experience of self, revealed rich findings about how the firstborn's name corresponds to the conscious and unconscious themes in the naming parents' narrative identity. Though we tend to associate one's name with the person bearing it, the meaning of the name is rooted in the narrative identity of the persons who choose the name: the naming parents. Atlas (2022) states that "we carry emotional material that belongs to our parents and grandparents, retaining losses of theirs that they never fully articulated" (17). The findings of our study indicate that our name is akin to a symbolic code that carries psychological material that belongs to our parents and grandparents (who named our parents), retaining conflicts and wishes related to themes of belonging and individuality, control and choice and ideal perceptions of self. The finding that the wishes and needs of the parents echoed themes of belonging and individuality, as well as themes of choice and control, is particularly interesting when considering the centrality of the communion (relationship) versus agency (autonomy) modality in narrative identity (McAdams 1990; Bakan 1966). This also resonates with Finch's (2008) assertion that naming a newborn offers an opportunity to mark both individuality and familial relationships.

Our analysis of the twelve parents reveals that parents choose for their children names that, on the one hand, establish the similarity and bond between the parents and their child and, on the other hand, echo and embody their unfulfilled wishes, with the conscious or unconscious desire to grant the child a different experience and, perhaps through this, grant their injured self a corrective one. The results support the view that the act of naming involves intergenerational transmission and is a process "that connects between the past of the parent and the future the parent wills for his or her child" (Nadav et al. 2008, 46). The chosen name reflected and expressed the parent's emotions, hopes and wishes and, in line with Seeman's claim, were often selected to induce in the child "desired qualities associated consciously or unconsciously with the sound and meaning of the name" (1983, 239).

The links we found between the child's name and the parents' experience of their own name is further illuminated by McAdams and Olson's (2010) life-span developmental approach to identity as a dynamic and evolving work in progress. Indeed, the findings of this study indicate that the occasion of choosing a name for one's child is an instance in which the parent is afforded an opportunity to actualize his or her being as a whole person: actor, agent, and, most significantly, author. The parents participating in this study chose, as motivational agents, names that echoed ideal perceptions of self, based on what they considered valuable and desired. This also coincided with the social-cultural dimension by which choosing a name "implies choosing which social attributes, values, groups and positions one wishes to be associated with and which ones one wishes to be dissociated from" (Aldrin 2014, 395). Furthermore, the fact that the names of the children reflected a conscious, or unconscious, effort to recreate or reform their experience of their own name—one of the defining factors in how they became who they are—is indicative of the way in which the name of the child can be viewed as an act of self-authorship—that is, an act in which the parents reconstruct their past and imagine their future, sequentially and coherently as befits a narrative. From an existential point of view, the parents in this study, though cast into the world with a name that they did not choose, rose to the challenge of assuming their responsibility as authors and, in the terms of existentialist Rollo May (1981), responded to their destiny, and gave their child a name that would enable a similar or more positive experience vis a vis that which they themselves were granted.

Several limitations of the present study should be noted. First, we focused primarily on analyzing each of the parent's individual quests, and we recommend that more emphasis be given to couple dynamics in future research. In addition, this study did not specifically address the role of gender; a gender-based comparative analysis of names and naming promises to be an interesting avenue of investigation in the future. Also, as noted above, the study was based on a small sample of an Israeli Jewish, secular and heterosexual socio-cultural subgroup. Future research would benefit from studying a larger sample of cross-national/cultural populations. Another point that ought to be considered relates to the point in time at which the interviews were conducted. Research has shown that the "child is an active contributor to the development of the parent" (Fiese et al. 1995). Thus, it is necessary to recognize that since becoming a parent may help integrate and make sense of one's own experiences as a child, the naming process could be viewed not only as merely reflecting the parent's experience but also as constituting it. It is possible that if we were to interview these individuals before becoming parents and choosing names, their experiences of their own names, and self in general, would have been different. Future research could benefit from a longitudinal study comparing the parents' experience of self and their names at different points in time.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates the extent to which the process of choosing the child's name, and the parent's relationship with his or her own name, can serve as a key to understanding the parent's wishes, needs, and experience of self and others, all of which are likely to impact the parent's relationship with the child and the other parent. As such, the findings have implications that may contribute to individual therapy, couples and family therapy, child and adolescent therapy, dyadic therapy and parental guidance. Clinicians conducting psychological intakes could benefit from inquiring into the clients' name and, in the case of parents, the names they chose for their child. Furthermore, raising awareness about the psychological significance of names and the naming process in antenatal programs could have interventive and therapeutic value.

If our given names are a form of inheritance, the act of naming our firstborn has the potential to be an opportunity to author one's own will. In this sense, it is an act of meaning-making and identity and, in effect, an act of power. As the parents in this study exhibited, when choosing names that they imagined would grant their children a positive experience, naming can also be an act of empathy and love.

Disclosure Statement

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

AI Disclosure Statement

No AI Tools or Technology were used to conduct the research or write this article

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