

# Some Hypotheses About the Psychodynamic Significance of Infant Name Selection

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THE IMPORTANCE that the human mind attaches to the name is amply attested to by the antiquity of documented interest in names and the naming process. According to Garnot's<sup>1</sup> examination of the ancient *Texts of the Pyramids*, even before 2000 B.C. belief in the power of the proper name to determine the behavior and the destiny of its possessor was commonly held. Smith<sup>2</sup> cites a quotation from Antisthenes, c. 400 B.C., which states, "The beginning of all instruction is the study of names." Even the more recent pioneering essays in English onomastics — Patton's *The Calendar of Scripture*, Warren's *The Nurserie of Names*, and Camden's monumental *Remaines*<sup>3</sup> — which also illustrate a serious interest in the subject, belong to past centuries.

Apart from the testimony of history, the universal importance of the name in human society is also reflected by the fact that anthropologists have been able to discover only a few primitive groups, notably certain aboriginal Australian tribes, that fail to endow their members with personal names. The Astantes in Africa were reported by Herodotus and Pliny to have exhibited this curious characteristic.<sup>4</sup>

An examination of the literature on the topic suggests that the formal study of names usually is approached from one of three directions: the etymological, the socio-anthropological, or the psychological.

The etymological orientation, exemplified by the bulk of the contributions appearing in the pages of *Names*, seems to be the one most commonly adopted.

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<sup>1</sup> Garnot, Jean Sainte Fare, "Les fonctions, les pouvoirs, et la nature du nom propre dans l'ancienne Egypte d'après les Textes des Pyramides." *Journal de Psychologie Normale et Pathologique*, 1948, 41, pp. 463—472 (abstract in English appearing in *Psychological Abstracts*, 1949, 23, p. 599, abstract no. 4750).

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Elsdon C., *The Story of Our Names*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1950, p. 277.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 277—278.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

The socio-anthropological approach, as represented in part by the work of Miller<sup>5</sup> and, more recently, that of Loseff,<sup>6</sup> concerns itself primarily with the social, or group, determinants of naming practice as manifested principally in primitive, preliterate, or alien cultures. "The folkways built about the name . . . the customs of naming and the form of the name" as they reflect "the evolution of social institutions and the nature of social forces" are investigated intensively in the belief that they can serve to "give significant insight into the organization, history, and ways of thought of these peoples."<sup>7</sup> Social custom, tradition and heritage, and their rational and irrational underpinnings occupy the central focus in this point of view, and, presumably, are regarded as the salient, if not indeed the exclusive, causal agents responsible for determining the choice of names in common currency within a particular society.

The psychological approach, in contrast, typically limits itself to matters pertaining to the individual rather than to group phenomena. Furthermore, the preponderance of the material published to date in the general area of the psychology of names has tended to deal mainly with reactions of the individual to his own name or to the names of others in terms of aesthetic preference, and with those factors that may be related to this individual preference. This restriction in research interest characterizes both the methodologically naive early studies issuing from the renowned psychological laboratories of Titchener at Cornell<sup>8,9</sup> and more sophisticated later studies.<sup>10</sup> Even in those instances where the attack employed has

<sup>5</sup> Miller, Nathan, "Some Aspects of the Name in Culture History." *American Journal of Sociology*, 1927, 32, pp. 585-600.

<sup>6</sup> Loseff, E. D., "Comparative Study of Names and Naming Patterns in Selected Cultures." Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Southern California, 1951.

<sup>7</sup> Miller, *op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> English, G., "On Psychological Responses to Unknown Proper Names." *American Journal of Psychology*, 1916, 27, pp. 430-434.

<sup>9</sup> Alspach, E. M., "On Psychological Responses to Unknown Proper Names." *American Journal of Psychology*, 1917, 28, pp. 436-443.

<sup>10</sup> Walton, W. E., "Affective Value of First Names." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 1937, 21, pp. 396-409.

Allen, L., Brown, V., Dickinson, L., and Pratt, K. C., "The Relation of First Name Preferences to Their Frequency in the Culture." *Journal of Social Psychology*, 1941, 14, pp. 279-293.

Finch, M., Kilgren, H., and Pratt, K. C., "The Relation of First Name Preferences to Age of Judges or to Different Although Overlapping Generations." *Journal of Social Psychology*, 1944, 20, pp. 249-264.

been dynamic and speculative<sup>11</sup> rather than purely descriptive and empirical, the focus has been upon reactions to the name rather than upon the naming process or the process of name selection and bestowal *per se*. The present paper is intended to bridge the gap between the socio-anthropological and the psychological approaches to the study of names by applying a speculative, psychodynamic mode of conceptualization — borrowed from motivational psychology — to the analysis of the naming process. The position taken here is that such an attempt is both feasible and worthwhile because in a small, simple and relatively homogeneous cultural group, as is typified by most primitive, preliterate societies, social custom and tradition is the most potent, and perhaps the only, determinant of naming practice; whereas in a complex, heterogeneous culture, such as ours, idiosyncratic factors are at least of equal and quite often of greater importance in determining the choice of name. In keeping with this view, an effort will be made here to elucidate the psychological significance of the personal determinants that operate in the naming process as it occurs in American society. In the interests of scientific rigor, however, it should be noted that the subsequent discussion is intended to be suggestive and heuristic rather than definitive and conclusive. All propositions and statements are to be regarded as hypotheses subject to future verification by controlled empirical research.

The present writer's system for classifying the principal determinants of name selection coincidentally parallels and duplicates in

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Eagleson, Oran W., "Students' Reactions to Their Given-Names." *Journal of Social Psychology*, 1946, 23, pp. 187—195.

Arthaud, R. L., Hohneck, A. N., Ramsey, C. H., and Pratt, K. C., "The Relation of Family Name Preferences to Their Frequency in the Culture." *Journal of Social Psychology*, 1948, 28, pp. 19—37.

Savage, B. M., and Wells, F. L., "A Note on Singularity in Given Names." *Journal of Social Psychology*, 1948, 27, pp. 271—272.

Houston, T. J., and Summer, F. C., "Measurement of Neurotic Latency in Women with Uncommon Given Names." *Journal of General Psychology*, 1948, 39, pp. 289—292.

Dexter, Emily S., "Three Items Related to Personality: Popularity, Nicknames, and Homesickness." *Journal of Social Psychology*, 1949, 30, pp. 155—158.

<sup>11</sup> Plottke, Paul, "On the Psychology of Proper Names." *Individual Psychology Bulletin*, 1946, 5, pp. 106—111.

Murphy, W. F., "A Note on the Significance of Names." *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 1957, 26, pp. 91—106.

Drake, David, "On Pet Names." *American Imago*, 1957, 14, pp. 41—43.

many respects the classificatory method devised by Smith.<sup>12</sup> While the author arrived at his system independently and previous to his reading of Smith's work, the priority and exhaustiveness of Smith's contribution is appreciatively acknowledged.

For the purposes of this study, it is postulated that various psychological or, more broadly, psycho-social motives, needs, or values underlie the choice of a name for an infant in our culture. An *a priori* analysis of the infant-name-selection process suggests that any of the following factors may serve to influence the final choice.

*Family Tradition:* In family-oriented parental units where familial tradition carries inordinate weight, the choice of a name for an offspring may be decided by family custom. Thus, it may be the usual family practice to restrict the selection of an infant name to a relatively narrow predetermined range of choices traditionally in use in the family. The order of birth of the newborn child within its immediate family unit, as well as its sex, may determine the choice of name that is finally made from the traditional set of family names. The conscious or unconscious parental attitude underlying conformity to this practice at least implies a need on the part of the parents to defer to family expectation in this matter; possibly it is also a reflection of a more general attitude of compliance with regard to family claims, demands, and expectations. The basis for such acquiescence to familial wish may be a sense of psychological, or emotional, dependence experienced by one or both parents of the infant, or it may be a maneuver prompted by an anticipation or a hope of material (perhaps monetary) gain. Where the motivation is solely or principally that of emotional need, the emotion involved may be that of guilt or an unsatisfied wish to gain approval or love or to avoid disapproval, rejection, or figurative punishment. Again, it should be stressed that any one or any combination of these emotional needs may characterize one or both parents where the choice of name is made solely in accordance with family tradition. Likewise, the hope or expectation of material gain for self and for the child can co-exist with a sense of emotional dependency and can act as an equipotent determinant of name-choice. An illustration of this mixture of motives might be the case in which an infant is named Stacey, Beaumont, Dalton, or O'Neill both because it is traditional in his

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *op. cit.*

family for the first-born male child to be given this particular name and because wealthy great-aunt Stacey, Beaumont, Dalton or O'Neill might be more favorably disposed in her will toward a youngster bearing the appropriate name.

*Religious or Ethnic Custom:* (E.g., the custom among Jewish people of bestowing upon the new-born a Hebrew name in addition to the Christian name, where a Christian name is also given, and of choosing the Hebrew name in commemoration of a deceased relative. Thus, an infant whose name is Malcolm, Mark, Maurice, or Morris, as entered on his birth certificate, may, at the traditional Hebrew circumcision ritual, also be given the Hebrew name of Moshe in commemoration of a deceased grandfather Moshe.) This practice carries with it the implied attitude of willingness to conform to religious or ethnic requirements as well as to family expectations. The latent psychodynamics probably are essentially the same as those described under the preceding rubric.

*Current Fashion or Fad:* Here the infant's name is chosen in accordance with the dictates of current fashion in name selection. This phenomenon points to a tendency on the part of the parents to defer to the subtle pressures of prevailing social taste and preference, a wish or a need to move with the crowd, at least in this matter. To the extent that this piece of behavior mirrors a general attitude of social compliance, an issue which must, of course, be decided through empirical investigation, one or both parents may be plagued by a lack of confidence in the soundness of their own judgment, by a lack of experience in exercising independent judgment or in expressing personal taste or preference, by a fear of being socially conspicuous by virtue of being different, or by an inability to think with originality in some or in most matters. Some names that are currently modish and may, therefore, be chosen for the above reasons are Deborah, Susan, Lisa, Steven, and Jeffrey.

*Desire to Display Uniqueness, Distinctiveness, or Novelty:* Here the motivation is the obverse of the foregoing in that the primary consideration in the selection of a name is the uniqueness of the choice. This determinant reflects a need in one or both parents to assert their own individuality or originality by maintaining an attitude of non-conformity to the dictates of current fashion. Coupled with or substituting for this attitude may be a wish to confer an air of distinctiveness or individuality upon the offspring bearing the atypical

name. Examples of names chosen for this characteristic might be Thane, Kyle, Candida, Richardette, and Gæia. An exception to this principle, however, would be the case in which current fashion prescribes the use of novel names for infants (e.g., Morley, Myron, Vilma, Lilith). In this latter instance, then, the inference would be that selection of an unusual infant name is simply an expression of the parents' need to conform socially.

*Aesthetic Considerations:* The infant's name may be chosen because it is euphonious in itself or when taken in combination with the surname, or because it evokes happy mental associations with a pleasant concept, event, or object. A choice of name made on this basis suggests the possession, in some measure, of aesthetic sensitivity by one or both parents and is indicative perhaps of the position occupied by the aesthetic experience in the hierarchy of the parental value system. On the other hand, selection of a name mainly on aesthetic grounds may simply reflect a strain of parental pretentiousness betraying itself in the desire to be regarded socially as "aesthetes." (Names like Dew, Mist, Dawn, Campanella, Sonella, Coral, Rhondine, Alouette, Cybelline might serve as illustrations of this category.)

*Psychological Connotations:* Falling into this category are names chosen because their sound connotes to the parent certain desirable traits or characteristics, or because the parent believes that the name will evoke in others an image or an impression of the desirable characteristic. (E.g., certain names, such as Frank, Grace, Hope, Charity, August, Prudence, and Victor, may be regarded as connoting virility, femininity, morality, strength, etc. Related to this phenomenon is the general issue of the stereotypical associations elicited in others by the sound or the visual configuration of names.) Arriving at a name on this basis points to the presence of a degree of psychological concern, awareness, sensitivity, or preoccupation in one or in both parents. It may also reflect the latent presence within the parent of a measure of "magical thinking" — i.e., the un verbalized and irrational hope or belief that the infant will in some way acquire the trait connoted by its name. Moreover, such a ground for choice suggests the existence in the parent of an attitude which can be best described as "child-oriented" rather than "parent-oriented." It is perhaps not unreasonable to entertain the possibility that a distinct neurotic component resides within the personality structures

of those parents whose choice is guided solely by psychological considerations.

*Naming for Real or Fictitious Eminent Persons:* The name chosen here is commonly associated with a real or fictitious person of some renown. Parents who make their choice on this basis may be somewhat naive, perhaps unimaginative, possibly prone to engage in magical thinking, and perhaps unduly given to hero-worship; or conceivably they may be the precise converse — sophisticated, well-educated, and possibly somewhat pretentious. In the latter instance where most likely the name selected is that of a fictitious person, probably esoteric in its reference, there may co-exist an unconscious desire to achieve an aura of uniqueness or novelty in the name by this tactic. Moreover, an impression of learning, of literary taste and astuteness, can be conveyed to others by this kind of practice. Lincoln (or Abraham Lincoln), Washington (or George Washington), and Jefferson (or Thomas Jefferson) would probably be chosen by the less imaginative, more naive parent, whereas Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Trilby, Medea, Zen, Zeno and Zarathustra might be preferred by the knowledgeable and pretentious one.

*Idiosyncratic Names With Cognitive Connotations:* The motive underlying the choice of this kind of name is usually highly personal and frequently readily apparent. Names such as "Last Chance," "No More," "Number One," etc., though certainly not common, do occur, displaying concrete and obvious meaning. Where such name choices are made, the parents may be found to be unimaginative, undereducated, perhaps unintelligent individuals; or, conversely, whimsical, highly individualistic, and clearly exhibitionistic people. In the latter instance, they are undoubtedly strongly driven to achieve uniqueness and social distinction, perhaps occasionally even at the price of appearing to be bizarre or ludicrous to others. Relatively little concern for or sensitivity to the future social and emotional needs of the infant so named is evinced by such parents.

*Arbitrary, Expedient, and Concrete Names Without Personal or Psychological Connotation:* Names in this category are chosen through indifference, lack of imagination, lack of intelligence, or purely in the interests of expedience. Occasionally, as in the preceding category, an element of whimsy may be contained in the choice. In any event, here, too, the future effect of the name upon the infant recipient is not taken into account, the fundamental attitude being

“parent-oriented” rather than “child-oriented.” Entries in this category are probably rare but would include names such as “Boy, Girl, Laddie, Sonny, Sister, Daughter,” and to a lesser extent the names of months, i. e., “April, May, June, etc.” Names falling under this rubric, with the possible exception of the month names, probably are found most commonly among educationally and culturally deprived groups such as the Southern white and negro share-croppers and the so-called “hill-billies” where the reproductive rate is high and the offspring lose their individual identity and high emotional significance to the parent through the stultifying weight of numbers. The parental attitude is one of indifference, if not outright hostility, because the child is regarded as an unwanted social burden and responsibility, the unfortunate and unwelcome by-product of a highly-valued biological act.

*Multiple-Determined Choices:* While perhaps not logically a distinct and separate category in the same sense as the foregoing ones, this category is identified and included here both in the interests of comprehensiveness and by way of explicit acknowledgement of the fact that — as is true in all other aspects of human behavior — name selection need not necessarily nor invariably reflect the influence of but a *single* underlying motive or attitude. Thus it is probably more often than not the case that the choice of a particular name is the result of a delicate compromise among conflicting or complementary psychological needs characteristic of both parents. Nevertheless, a reasonably discerning motivational and attitudinal analysis should provide insight into the nature, intensity, and hierarchical position of these needs within the family unit as they are reflected in the final name choice.

### *Summary*

It is hypothesized that parents whose choice of an infant name is determined solely by considerations of family tradition, religious or ethnic custom, or current fad or fashion will, in general, by empirical test, show themselves to be essentially middle-class in their values, standards, and aspirations; socially conforming and accepting of the social status quo; and psychologically dependent upon others for emotional support, approval, and for guidance. Intellectually they will be found to range from below average to slightly above average in capacity, but it is unlikely that they will include among their numbers individuals of outstanding endowment. By and large, as a



group, they will probably show themselves to be better adjusted personally and socially than the members of the other groups to be discussed below.

Those parents whose choice of an infant name is based on a desire for uniqueness or novelty, or on aesthetic considerations, or on the psychological connotations of the name, or on a regard for the real or fictitious eminent person with which the name originally was identified will generally reveal themselves to be highly individualistic, socially nonconforming, rebellious, or even defiant, and essentially self-involved, or self-conscious in their outlook. A measure of genuine or feigned idiosyncrasy will characterize them; and a degree of intellectual, and, perhaps social and artistic pretentiousness will mark them. As a group they will be found to be more intelligent, better-educated, more sensitive and appreciative aesthetically, and more inclined to personal and social maladjustment than are other people considered in this discussion.

Parents who choose idiosyncratic names with cognitive connotations, or arbitrary, expedient, and concrete names without personal or psychological connotations — with the exceptions noted — will be found to be of low intelligence, of relatively poor educational attainment, unimaginative, and indifferent to the presence or the needs of the offspring. In many instances, psychological rejection and outright hostility are evident here; and the child may be viewed as a social and financial burden.

Multiple-determined name choices require and lend themselves readily to individual analysis.

In conclusion, it should be noted that this postulation leans heavily on the assumption that the same motives or attitudes, or configurations of motives and attitudes, will persist in time and will be found to underlie the choice of the names of all children in a given family unit. Where the motives or attitudes behind the selection of a name are found to vary from time to time and, hence, from child to child in a particular family, it is hypothesized that this will be a manifestation of the occurrence of some personality change in one or both parents, or an expression of a significant change in the relations between the parents. Intensive analysis of such instances might lead to the uncovering of additional psychological material of considerable interest.

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