

Names of Twins*

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THE PHENOMENON OF TWINS long stimulated popular imagination and intrigued the scientists. Modern science, however, has not concerned itself equally with different aspects: there has been much research on biological questions on which the study of twins can shed light, and more especially on genetics; but relatively little work has been done on the psychological and social problems of twinship.

While involved through a personal connection with studies on the previously neglected problems of mothers of twins,¹ my attention was drawn to an observation which, of course, many people have made before: namely, that the pattern of twins' given names differs rather conspicuously from the general pattern. Particularly because so many twins have similar names, it seemed worthwhile to investigate the matter.

It is a commonplace that the actions of the parents which affect the baby have a powerful influence on the child's future destiny. Most of these actions are unintentional: the parents act often without conscious awareness of what they are doing and what the effect of their action will be in future years. One action, however, which is purposeful, and at the same time one of the earliest steps the parents take in regard to their child, is name-giving.

The underlying principle has been stated by Gaffney, who says that it is "probable that names influence character, personality, and occupation, and that the parent can determine, or at any rate help to determine, the child's career by the kind of Christian name he bestows."²

* Paper read at the 1961 Annual Meeting of the American Name Society.

¹ Cf. Plank, Emma N. "The Reactions of Mothers of Twins to a Child Study Group," *Amer. J. of Orthopsychiatry* 28, 1 (1958).

² W. G. Gaffney, "Some Theoretical Considerations on the Influence of Given Names on Character and Occupation; or 'What Shall We Name the Baby?'" — paper presented at the 1959 Annual Meeting of the American Name Society.

What is the special significance that the given name has for a twin? In which way does the influence that the given name exerts on a child's future personality differ in the case of twins from that of the great majority of the single-born?

Obviously, this difference is related to the special problem that twins face; namely, in contrast to the single-born, a twin usually grows up in the constant company of another human being who is extremely similar to him. It is more difficult for him than for other children to develop his own distinct personality, to acquire a clear and sure sense of the boundary between himself and the outside world.

Biologically speaking, there are three categories of twins. Evidently the problem is most marked for the monozygotic (popularly called identical) twins, somewhat less marked for the dizygotic (popularly called fraternal) twins of the same sex, and considerably less so for the dizygotic twins of different sex. But it is present in all three groups. Clearly the twins' problem is aggravated if they, who can so easily be confused with each other and sometimes even confuse themselves with each other, have also been given names which are easily confused.

The literature on the bringing up of twins naturally gives proper attention to the overriding problem of the development of identity. Parents of twins generally proclaim their firm resolve to do everything in their power to ease the twins' special difficulty. The question is whether they actually act on this resolve or whether theirs is merely lip service.

Various commonly observed facts, particularly the propensity of parents to dress their twins alike, make us doubtful. The study of the given names of twins affords an opportunity to observe these patterns systematically.

I began my study by tabulating the names of 187 pairs of twins whose mothers had filled out questionnaires for a social organization of mothers of twins. I divided the names in three groups:

First, those beginning with the same initial: e.g., twins named Richard and Robert, or Judith and Joseph. The identical initial may not be the most striking similarity, but is the one that can be determined most objectively. Furthermore, the similarity of many of these pairs of names goes far beyond the initial; e.g., John and Joan, or Paula and Paul.

Second, those pairs of names that, although starting with different initials, show unmistakable similarity in sound, rhyme, or rhythm; e.g., Gail Marie and Dale Lee, or Penny Sue and Billy Joe. Such pairs are also found in literature; e.g., in a novel by the recent Nobel laureate Andrić, the twin children Stoja and Ostoja.³

Third, all other names; i.e., those showing no such similarity. The findings were as follows:

- 62 % names with the same initial.
- 17 % names with some other strong similarity.
- 21 % dissimilar names.

It is of course true that similar names are also found among single-born siblings. Names with the same initial may be found in families that maintain an aristocratic tradition or want to preserve a famous monogram. The three daughters of Lampedusa's hero, for instance, are named Concetta, Caterina, and Carolina.⁴ I happen to be acquainted with a descendant of Josiah Wedgwood; he has three sons; their names all begin with J. However, in any randomly selected family group, these instances are rare. They never come even close to the situation we find with our twins where almost two-thirds have the same initial and almost four-fifths show a distinct similarity in given names.

In breaking down my twin group by sex and biological status, I found some slight but significant differences. Among the boys, 23 % have dissimilar names; among the girls, only 19 %. As expected, identical twins deviate more strongly from the single-born pattern than do fraternal twins:

	identical twins	fraternal twins
same initial	67 %	58 %
other similarity	21 %	15 %
dissimilar names	12 %	27 %

In order to test the reliability of my findings in general and to find out in particular whether there has been any change in these patterns over the years, I also tabulated the names of 576 pairs of twins who are registered with the Behavioral Genetics Laboratory

³ Ivo Andrić, *The Bridge on the Drina*. New York: MacMillan, 1959.

⁴ Giuseppe di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*. New York: Pantheon, 1960.

at Western Reserve University. The twins in both groups come from the same geographic area, northeastern Ohio; but while the first group comprises only young children, the Western Reserve group includes persons of all ages.

The names of the twins in the Western Reserve group do not deviate from normal patterns quite as much as the first group: 49 instead of 62% have names with the same initial, 10 instead of 17% show other marked similarity, and 41 instead of 21% are dissimilar. However, even these figures are still quite different from those we would find among the single-born.

Furthermore, a breakdown by age shows that the older group has a more commonplace name pattern:

	born before 1950	born in 1950 and since
same initial	45 %	52 %
other similarity	11 %	10 %
dissimilar names	44 %	38 %

The obvious conclusion is that the pattern of giving twins similar names is one that has gained ground over the years and has by now reached prevalence — in spite of protestations of intent to facilitate the formation of separate personal identities in twin children.

I should add here that the pattern found in the first group — a somewhat greater tendency toward similar names for girls than for boys, and for identical twins than for fraternal twins — also holds good in the Western Reserve group.

This study has also yielded an intriguing by-product: In tabulating the twins' names, we find that a remarkably large number of them begin with the letter J. It is true that the initial J is relatively frequent in the general population — in such popular names as John, Jane, Joseph, Judith, Joan, etc. In random groups in the Cleveland area, the number of names beginning with J runs as high as 10%. However, among the twins tabulated in this study, it is as high as 17%.

No explanation for this phenomenon is immediately apparent. There must be a psychological reason which motivates parents to give preference to the initial J for their twin children, but we can only speculate as to what reason might be. Speculation of this sort has a venerable history. In *Cratylus*, Plato considers the origin of

names (and more generally, of words), postulating that certain initial sounds — and the letters corresponding to them — are expressive of certain emotional values, and venturing to state what these may be: e.g., rho, expressing motion; and lambda, smoothness.

With regard to iota, he remarks: "... just as by the letter iota he [the imposer of names] expresses the subtle elements which pass through all things."⁵

We do not really know to what degree the Greek iota corresponds to our J, or how much validity to attribute to Plato's obviously naive speculation. Still, the idea that parents feel a need to express in the sound of a name their special feeling about their twins — perhaps indeed the feeling that a subtle element is involved here which will pass through all things — this is an idea that has appeal and calls for further research.

In fact, all these results are preliminary, and we cannot yet expect more. It is questionable to what extent our samples are representative and what implications these problems may have for the wider field of the psychology of the ego and of identity; the exploration of this area is still in its beginnings. The broad fields of interaction between human beings, and of symbolic behavior — of which the giving of names is an important part — are growing a rich harvest of riddles, some of which we may hope eventually to solve.

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⁵ B. Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 4th ed., p. 372 (*Cratylus*, Sec. 427).