

## VANITY PLATE CHILDREN: THE AMERICAN PROPENSITY TOWARDS NAMING

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In American culture, we like namesaking. We like to call our children after ourselves, our relatives, or after other people who are important to us. Sometimes this practice is taken to extremes. People are familiar with boxer George Foreman, his five sons all named George and his daughters Freeda George and Georgetta (Foreman 2005). Most families do not go this far, but Alice Rossi has found that a high percentage of families include at least one child named for someone else. Namesaking does, however, take more than this one form and is even more widespread than is readily obvious. While very few people actually know a family containing six people named George and two with derivatives of that name, most people know at least one family that practices namesaking by way of semihomonymous naming, in which the children are given names that *resemble* those of others without being identical to them. This frequently, but not always, takes the form of a recurring initial letter. It is not at all uncommon to come across a family in which the parents are named Jack and June and their bright-eyed children are John, Julie, Jeff, and Jamie.

In this paper, the factors that have been found to be most important to the naming choices that American parents make will be explored, followed by an examination of the studies that suggest that these factors frequently lead specifically to children being named after someone else. Both direct namesaking and semihomonymous naming will be taken into account and answers as to why people would make these kinds of choices will be sought in the traditions of the people who tend to do this more frequently as well as in the realm of cognitive psychology and the unconscious thought processes that inform our preferences. Finally, a look at a certain aspect of American worldview will enlighten us as to why this practice of namesaking has been described as a particularly American phenomenon.

Americans use a rather small pool of forenames. *The Dictionary of American Family Names* (DAFN), which gives information on the provenance and meaning of some 70,000 surnames, and these are only the surnames that occur 100 times or more in the phonebook, states that in contrast to this huge pool of surnames, where forenames are concerned, 95% of the population possesses 1% of the forenames that are currently in use. This means that 5% of the population uses very uncommon or entirely unique forenames, but the vast majority tends to reuse the same names over and over. We shall begin our exploration of why that might be with a look at the things that go into a parent's child naming decision-making process.

Five of the six factors that Richard Alford describes in his discussion of American naming practices have to do with ensuring that the child being named conforms to familial expectations by connecting them to the person for whom they are named (130-31). These factors are (1) a desire to honor a namesake, thereby giving the child certain responsibilities towards the reputation or memory of that namesake; (2) a desire to emphasize family continuity, which may be particularly important in modern American society because such continuity is not currently very strongly supported by things that used to be nearly ubiquitous like common geography or common trade; (3) a desire to encourage qualities characteristic of the namesake, which puts a stronger burden of responsibility on the child than even the obligation to honor the namesake; (4) a desire to encourage identification with or attachment to a family, differing from family continuity above in that this point suggests a less diachronic view of the fracturing stresses put upon the family by society; and (5) a desire to emphasize membership in a subgroup, such as an ethnic or religious group. The only decision-influencing factor Alford offers that does not have to do with molding the child in the likeness of someone who has come before is simple aesthetic preference, which, as we will see later, may not be so far removed from these family-oriented factors after all. Alford later collapses the factors discussed above into names from relatives and names from non-relatives.

Myron Brender, in his *Some Hypotheses about the Psychodynamic Significance of Infant Name Selection*, offers ten possible motivations for the selection of any given name for a child. He makes further subdivision of the factors that Alford lumps under "aesthetics," but half of his "motivations" still act as threads tying the child to its family and the tradition that it comes from. In particular, the ideas of the importance of (1) family tradition, (2) ethnic custom, (3) direct namesaking (often with undertones of contagious magic causing the child to be like the one it is named for), and (4) the psychological connotations of names, offer interesting material to aid our examination of the reasons parents would give children names identical with or very close to their own (4-8). Now, by "psychological connotations of names" Brender means to indicate attribute names, such as those that evoke a quality that the parents desire their child to have, and names that evoke stereotypical qualities or behaviors in the minds of the parents. He offers that giving children names that evoke certain qualities, along with direct namesaking, shows signs of magical thinking on the part of the parents. Giving these types of names indicates the parent's belief that a certain name will have a formative and positive effect on the personality of the child, which raises the question of whether or not names do, in fact, construct identity, which shall be addressed in just a moment.

A 1961 study of name choices made in American middle-class families in Chicago found that five out of six of the families involved in the study had at least one child who had been expressly named after a relative (Rossi 503). Fully 16% of these children had been named for more than one relative, having a middle name in honor of a relative as well as the first name. This is a rather large segment of the population that systemically reuses the same forenames over and over, particularly taking into consideration the ever-expanding wealth of baby name books and the steadily increasing acceptability of entirely unique names invented by the parents.

American culture has never had an institutionally prescribed system for choosing a child's name, as many other cultures do, nor has it ever had some manner of list from which names must be chosen, as some others have done. Catholics and Jews are theoretically supposed to follow certain guidelines when choosing names, but in practice in this country, few of them do (Alford 130). Why, then, do we voluntarily confine ourselves to such a small pool of names? And why are so many of them chosen specifically and consciously to imitate the name of someone else, and why are so many others chosen, probably much less consciously, to evoke the name of someone else? Rossi says that this practice is simply a meaningless retention of traditional pattern (501). I would agree with the second part of that statement, that namesaking is a retention of traditional pattern, but I would argue strongly against the idea that this retention is meaningless. Unconscious, perhaps, but the folk almost never retain practices that are truly meaningless to them. Rossi herself presents material that is in opposition to her above claim, namely the fact that she found that people with high levels of kin involvement, who interact with their kin on a regular and intimate basis, are more likely to name their children after a relative than those who have lower levels of kin involvement. Furthermore, these children, named after relatives, are more likely to develop high levels of kin involvement themselves, extending beyond the relationship with the person for whom they were named (Rossi 501). This suggests that this traditional pattern is one that acts as a means of increasing cohesion within the kin group, which makes it far from meaningless.

In his 1948 article, Louis Feipel discusses what he calls the folklore trait of semihomonymous child-naming. By giving a child a name that *resembles* one's own without being identical to it, one can fulfill the desire to make the child an extension of the self without appearing quite as ambitious or conceited as our friend George up above. A quick perusal through the obituary section of any newspaper will turn up evidence to support the idea that this is, in fact, a current naming practice and that it is very extensively used (Hans is survived by son Henry, Mike is survived by son Mike and daughters Michele and Mary Anne, Max is survived by sister Madelein, wife Marta, son Michael and grandson Martin, etc.

(*Minneapolis Star Tribune* 3/7/2005, *San Francisco Chronicle* 3/7/2005)). In this article, Feipel presents examples of this semihomonymous naming from 266 different families. Kin involvement has been shown to be very important to the practice of direct namesaking, but data on the kin involvement levels of the people mentioned in this particular article is unavailable. One must work with the information that is available. Examining the list of names for probable cultural backgrounds may lead to the revelation of patterns that might allow us to better understand why these people, rather than others, should be the ones to engage in this sort of naming.

Certain personal names correlate strongly enough with certain ethnic categories of family names that the DAFN, which took its data from phonebook listings, could use the personal names attached to the family names in which it was interested in order to determine the ethnic origin of that family name when the etymology of a particular name was less than straightforward. The choice of personal names that parents make are often done along traditional lines reflecting the language and culture of the parents and their heritage even when, and very likely because, the family name has been too Americanized to be recognizable. The DAFN gives a useful illustrative example of how this was done:

The English forename *Stanley* is favored by Polish Americans, presumably because it is reminiscent of the common Polish forename *Stanislaw*. In our terminology, *Stanley* is associated with the Polish CELG (cultural, ethnic, or linguistic group) and is therefore weakly diagnostic. (xxvi)

The fact that forenames can be diagnostic for the cultural origins of surnames shows that specific ethnic groups do indeed tend to confine themselves to a small set of forenames and to pass them down as a matter of tradition, names acting as the link to the cultural past. "Americans tend to favor forenames that were borne by their ancestors, long after they have ceased to use the language of their ancestors" (Hanks and Tucker 67). Choice of forename is strongly influenced by the type of kin structure that the namer is embedded in and the extent to which that structure has been reinforced in the mind of the namer.

By making use of the DAFN, the ethnic origins of the families cited in Feipel's study can be traced and the functions of these surnames can be identified. By function I mean whether the surname is indicative of the original bearer's occupation, of the location that that person came from, or of the kin group that the original bearer was part of. Of the 107 family names for which information about function was available in the DAFN, 41 were specifically noted as being patronymic in origin, a reduced form of a

patronymic, or a variant of a patronymic. A further 23 are derived from personal names, and yet another 13 are derived from nicknames or bynames. This is in contrast to the 17 listed as names indicating a location and the five that are occupational names. Thus, nearly 72% of these names have their origins in the personal identifier of an ancestor and suggest that the family might be one in which a high level of kin involvement would be encouraged.

The ethnic origins of the names suggest the same trend. Of the 226 names for which an ethnic group of origin could be identified, using the DAFN, 83 come from cultures in which patronymic identifiers were historically commonly used. These being family names of Irish, Scottish, Welsh, Swedish, Danish, Dutch and Jewish origin (Ingraham *passim*). Another 108 are of English origin, a culture that has historically used patronymics, but not to the same institutionalized extent as those listed above. 35 of these English surnames fall into the earlier category of surnames derived from personal identifiers.

Given the strong connection between the surnames which appear in Feipel's article, belonging to people who practice semihomonymous naming, and cultures that historically used patronymics, and the even stronger correlation between these names and *specific families* that historically used patronymics or surnames otherwise derived from the names of ancestors, it is tempting to draw the conclusion that having origins in a culture or family that uses these ancestor-invoking surnames might make one more likely to name one's child after a relative. If sharing a name with a kin member will dispose one towards a greater level of kin involvement, and having a greater level of kin involvement will dispose one towards naming their child after a specific kin member, further perpetuating the cycle of kin involvement and namesaking, might not surnames derived from the personal identifiers of ancestors, or coming from cultures in which such surnames were very common, indicate families in which high levels of kin involvement have historically been perpetuated? This is a somewhat circular argument, but it might explain why such a large proportion of the people mentioned in Feipel's article have surnames that invoke ancestors, or come from cultures in which ancestors are routinely invoked in surnames.

But, Feipel's study is specifically about *Semi-homonymous naming*? Why do people choose names that *evoke* other names rather than simply choosing a namesake for their child outright? Is it even done that often? In my own case, I know that my father, Michael Harriman Foote, made the final decision about my name, Monica Harriman Foote, just as his mother, Martha Harriman Foote, did for him. Semihomonymous naming is done much less consciously than direct namesaking. When asked for the reasons that led to the eventual choice of my name, my father said that he liked the etymology of it and that he and my mother wanted to avoid very common

names like John, Mary, or Michael. Notice that two of the rejected names, which must have come into brief consideration for him to have bothered mentioning them, begin with M, as fits the pattern for firstborns in my family, and one of them is even his own name! He certainly would not say that his or his mother's names were important considerations in choosing mine, but there may be reason to believe that they were important nevertheless.

When asked why they have chosen such and such a name for their child, many parents would respond that the name simply "sounded right." The idea that they may have chosen the name because of its similarity to their own might well never consciously occur to them. The "name letter effect" (Nuttin, "Narcissism" 353-361) might go a long way to explaining why certain names "sound right" when being combined with one's own family name or when being applied to one's own children. This effect describes the findings that letters occurring in one's own name are found to be more attractive than letters that are not. One explanation offered for why this should be is that ownership of an object is sufficient to enhance its attractiveness to the owner in relation to other similar objects. This effect has been demonstrated in communities using twelve different European languages, suggesting that it is not restricted to one linguistic or ethnographic group, but rather it might be tied more closely to cognition (Valentine 9).

The idea that this name letter phenomenon might be explained by the fact that, growing up, one encounters the letters contained in one's own name more often than other letters and that it is the frequency of encounters that forms preference, is strongly argued against by the data which was collected largely from professional academics, who do a great deal of reading and thus encounter letters, including those in their own name, in other myriad combinations with great frequency, and which found that the letters composing the subject's own names were still greatly preferred (Nuttin, "Narcissism" 353). The theory was bourn out to a statistically significant extent in all but three of the populations involved in the study. Further examination of the data showed a statistically significant preference for the initial letter of one's forename in all of the studied populations (Nuttin, "Affective Consequences" 391). This may help explain why Miguel is survived by wife Maria and sons Michael and Mario, Joe is survived by daughter Jennifer Jean, and Lloyd is survived by daughter Louisiana (*New York Times* 5/15/2005).

The name letter effect would seem to suggest that parents might give their children names similar to their own because, by virtue of the letters that compose the name, and particularly by virtue of the initial letter of the name, the chosen name represents a thing of value to the parent because it is something of their own (Nuttin, "Affective Consequences" 381). The

child as well, belonging to the parent, is of great value to the parent and thus the parent would desire to confer an item of value upon this new being of value. Cognitive psychologists have also found that name attractiveness has a positive effect on social judgments (Valentine 10). If one is more disposed to think well of people whose names they like, and more disposed to like names that are similar to their own, it is reasonable that they would give their children names similar to their own, which, to their minds, are aesthetically pleasing and will encourage people to like them. None of this is conscious, of course, but the way that we think about things like aesthetics and social interactions will inform our choices regarding these matters regardless of our conscious awareness, or lack thereof, of these thought processes.

Harking back to the question of whether name constructs identity, Samuel Obeng suggests that "name constructs a person because the name one bears may create an attitude in those who hear it even before they meet the name bearer" (164). He says that in this way it can be argued that one is not simply *called* X, one *is* X. Zaitzow, Skipper, and Bryant say that names are more than arbitrary symbols. They exert a powerful influence on behavior and thus guide our activity while at the same time transmitting cultural knowledge about the person being named (83). Cognitive psychologists have found that, despite not being cognitively processed for meaning, names are far from being meaningless nonsense words (Brennen 139). While proper names might not be integrated with the rest of a person's semantic system, they usually denote gender, nationality, language, class, and age. How far having a label permanently attached to oneself actually goes to constructing one's identity depends on the person. A name might be integral to one person's sense of self, but a mere label to another.

Parents frequently choose their children's names in order to construct a certain identity for the child. Brender calls this a child-oriented method of naming, since it indicates a preoccupation with the child's future and development (6). This is in opposition to the parent-oriented methods of naming such as arbitrary choices (novel strings of syllables), idiosyncratic choices (names with semantic meaning – very unusual in the United States), or choices designed to emphasize the parents' uniqueness and opposition to expectations (recognized but very singular names). These parent-oriented choices reflect the personality of the parents rather than attempting to define the personality of the child. A glance through any phonebook will show that child-oriented naming choices are much more common in this country than parent-oriented naming choices. (There are many more Emilies and Sarahs and Jasons and Christophers than Brizjais and Moon Units and Aloysiuses.) This phenomenon coincides with the future-oriented basis that has been found in the study of American

worldview (Dundes 69–84). Americans are conditioned from earliest childhood in a variety of ways to be preoccupied with the concerns of the future, therefore it is entirely reasonable that Americans as parents should tend towards trying to build what they consider the “proper” future for their children, that bit of themselves that will continue further into the future than their own reach will, from the very first moments of those children’s lives, from the moment that they are officially brought into the society by the bestowing of a name. Parents want their children to be judged kindly in social situations and to remain involved in the family, that is, with them. Parents frequently try to achieve these future oriented goals by giving the child a link to the past, situating the child within a kinship system that will act as a support network in order to shape the child into the sort of person that the parent feels the child would do best to be.

Namesaking is very widely practiced in the United States and many of the identified factors that influence why parents choose any certain name for their child suggest that this should not be in any way surprising. American naming choices tend to be made in a traditional manner despite the fact that American culture has never had an institutionalized system for guiding parents in their choices. The more involved with one’s family one is, the more likely one is to engage in namesaking, either of the direct or semihomonymous varieties. Some of this can be traced to the practices of the cultures from which the families that do this are from, and some of it can be attributed to an unconscious aesthetic preference for names that resemble one’s own. Parents who engage in namesaking do so with their children’s futures in mind, whether they simply hope that the child will be liked, which will help it succeed, or whether they want to ensure that the child will be involved with the family and will thus reinforce the strength of the family as an entity into the future. That this concern with the child’s future should be major motivating factors in American child naming becomes clear in the light of the knowledge that American culture is very deeply future-oriented. Children are the future and it is by means of the names that we give those children that we attempt to ensure that that future will be bright.

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