



Naming Names: Kinship, Individuality and Personal Names

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ABSTRACT

The article presents an exploratory analysis of the significance of personal names in contemporary Western societies, the UK in particular. Names are seen as having the dual character of denoting the individuality of the person, and also marking social connections. The focus is particularly on kinship, and the ways in which names can be, and are, used to map family connections as well as to identify unique individuals. The author argues that both surnames and forenames can serve to ground the individual within family relationships, though the extent to which this is used actively can vary. In turn the way in which names and naming are used within the family context sheds light upon contemporary kinship, with its enduring and variable dimensions. Additional empirical exploration of names and naming could further illuminate its characteristics.

KEY WORDS

display / family / individuality / kinship / names

Introduction

Personal names are a core marker of the individual, with legal force and with social purchase on an everyday basis. I must provide my name – Janet Finch – in order to be able to transact even the most mundane of everyday tasks. My name has two dimensions. It marks me as a unique individual, and it also gives some indication of my location in the various social worlds which I inhabit – it encapsulates my legal persona as a British citizen, it reveals my gender and probably my ethnicity, it documents something of my family connections and, in my case, if I add my title ‘professor’ it states my occupation.

Sociological research on names and their use is surprisingly sparse given their social significance. The purpose of this exploratory article is to open up some sociological questions about names and their uses in contemporary Western societies, the UK in particular. A full sociology of personal names and naming potentially has a very wide compass and is not attempted here. It would range from understanding how names serve to make intimate connections between individuals (Edwards et al., 1993), to questions about the political power which is entailed in the process of naming places and peoples in a colonial context (Harvey, 1996). It would include analyses of how personal names can act positively as cultural capital in widely differing contexts (Lord, 2002; Silva, 2005) and negatively to reinforce the status of the oppressed and the dispossessed (Benson, 2006).

It is not my intention here to map out the whole territory of a sociology of naming. Rather, I focus on one specific dimension, which is the significance of names in the context of families:

How far, in the context of contemporary UK society, are names used publicly to map family connections?
 How far do people use the process of naming in constituting their family relationships?
 What do naming practices tell us about the contemporary significance of families and kinship?

In this discussion, I focus principally on Anglo-Saxon naming practices, which are dominant legally as well as culturally in contemporary Britain, but where available I use evidence which also reflects cultural diversity.

In the UK, there is an absolute legal requirement to have a name and to confirm it publicly through registration, which must take place within 42 days of the child's birth. This is the process through which the state defines the basis of both individual citizenship and of family connection, since the process of registration also requires information about the parents (either both parents, or the mother only if the father's identity is not being acknowledged) (Finch, 2004). Names are central to registration, which requires 'the forename(s) and surname in which it is intended the child will be brought up' (General Register Office, n.d.).

The formula of the 'forename(s) and surname', the latter being seen as a family name, reflects Anglo-Saxon naming customs but not necessarily the naming customs of other cultural groups now settled in the UK. For example, in southern India many people (women and men) traditionally will have three names – the name of their village, their father's name and their personal name, in that order (Hanks and Hodges, 2003: 390). This does not fit neatly with the required formula for registering a name in the UK, though Registrars are encouraged to be flexible in the way in which they handle requests to register names in other configurations.

Personal Names, Individuality and Kinship: Exploring Connections

In societies which prize individuality, a name quite literally ‘personifies’ the individual by encapsulating the essence of that person for those who know them or know about them. Speaking or writing a name conjures up an image, a history, a sense of personal taste and style, whether that be a public figure whose name many people would recognize – Bob Geldof, Jemima Khan, Gordon Brown – or whether it is the name of my next door neighbour whose resonance would be recognized by a much more limited circle. At the same time the construction of a name, and its uses through a lifetime, also can embody a sense of connectedness with family – with the parents who gave the name, and with others in a domestic arrangement or a kin network with whom all or part of the name is shared.

Individuality and connectedness, the two dimensions of a name, have been recognized as significant by social anthropologists in the context of their reviving interest in kinship (Bodenhorn and Vom Bruck, 2006; Carsten, 2004; Edwards et al., 1993; Franklin and McKinnon, 2001; Strathern, 1992). The significance of names in current social anthropological thinking is that:

Naming [is] a quintessentially social act ... naming acts as a critical element in processes of social incorporation and the constitution of personhood. (Benson, 2006: 180)

Similarly, there is valuable work by social historians, who have used personal names as an empirical resource in a variety of ways, including the exploration of family connections (e.g. Main, 1996; Postles, 2002; Schurer, 2004; Scott et al., 2002; Scott Smith, 1984, 1985; Tebbenhoff, 1985). I draw on both the relevant historical and anthropological work in this article.

Although sociological literature on the topic of names is very sparse, Norbert Elias did briefly open this up in an essay first published in 1987. Elias considers the construction of names in his discussion of the balance between the ‘I-Identity’ and the ‘We-Identity’ in human societies (that is, whether the dominant identification is as an individual or as part of a group). He argues that the double construction of the name – the forename plus surname formula – combines the ‘I’ and the ‘We’ identities of the individual. For Elias a name is both ‘a symbol of uniqueness’ of the individual and a ‘visiting card which indicates who one is in the eyes of others’ (Elias, 1991: 184). This approach echoes the work of social anthropologists and historians, discussed above, but has not really been developed in subsequent sociological analysis.

The constitution of personhood through naming, viewed in sociological perspective, also needs to be related to particular social, economic and political contexts. The very requirement to have a fixed name can be traced to the rise of the modern state, linked initially to certifying property rights then subsequently to the need for the state to keep accurate information on individual citizens (Alford, 1988; Hey, 2000; Scott et al., 2002).

Within the 'forename(s) plus surname' formula, conventionally there is much more choice about the former than the latter. Whilst not obligatory, the Anglo-Saxon convention is for a surname which is patronymic, that is, children take the surname of their father, who had the name from his father and so on. This means that the process of naming a child embodies male generational continuities. The strength of the patriarchal preference is also reflected in the conventional custom for a woman to change her surname to her husband's on marriage – thus also expressing her links to a new kin network. These conventions were established as the norm for most of the British population by the late 19th century (Schurer, 2004: 53).

In summary, the Anglo-Saxon tradition of naming follows a predictable pattern which makes kin relationships visible to others, unless individuals choose otherwise. However, whereas surnames root the individual in a kin network, the choice of first names provides the opportunity to introduce the dimension of individuality. Both elements capture social meaning within a particular society. From a sociological perspective, the interesting questions concern how opportunities are taken, in the contemporary family environment, to fashion both individuality and connection, the dual dimensions of personhood.

Sociological Perspectives on Naming and Families

The concept of social identity is an obvious starting point for the sociological exploration of the relationship between naming and families. If social identity is 'our understanding of who we are and of who other people are' (Jenkins, 1996: 5), then it follows that a name is both a legal *identifier* of the individual but also potentially part of social *identity*.

The role of names in the construction of social identities has been very little explored, but one could argue that the possession of the same name throughout life provides a continuity in one's public persona which contributes to a stable sense of the self, that coherence of personal narrative which Giddens regards as 'at the core of self-identity in modern social life' (1991: 76). Conversely, a change of name denotes a 'passage' in the life course which is part of the creative construction of a personal narrative (1991: 79).

That idea, that a changed name can be a symbol in a narrative of personal change, can be interpreted in a number of ways, not all of them positive. The practice of a woman taking her husband's name on marriage was seized on at an early stage of second wave feminism as a clear symbol of women's oppression. Friedan (1963, 1983) argued that 'the personhood of women' was compromised by marriage, which subsumed a woman's identity in her husband's. Bernard (1973) saw marriage as an 'authority structure' in which a man was dominant by right. In this analysis the change of a woman's name to her husband's on marriage is a symbol of a married woman's structurally inferior position.

By contrast, there are other circumstances where a change of name can be part of a positive narrative of personal change, which rejects the perceived oppression associated with the former name. When Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali soon after he had won the world heavyweight boxing championship, he did so in order to distance himself from the history of slavery which his birth name denoted, and to embrace the identity of the Muslim faith in a particular form, the Nation of Islam. All adherents to the Nation of Islam ceased using their former surnames, sometimes declining to adopt any alternative, as was the case with the then leader of the movement, Malcolm X.

So the power of a name to symbolize social connection, including ethnic and religious identity, is clear. It is also clear that family and kinship provide the framework within which these symbols operate. Muhammad Ali rejected the name Cassius Clay because it was his *father's* name, and therefore provided him with the genealogical connection to the slavery which past generations of his family endured. Anthropological literature on slavery notes the symbolic power of the control of the powerful over naming the powerless (Benson, 2006: 179–80).

The power of names to stereotype and disadvantage the individual also has contemporary resonance. For example, in France in 2006 where there were examples of serious social disorder in the impoverished suburbs of many cities, the young rioters were predominantly of North African and black African origin, but now second or third generation settled in France. A member of the French security services was quoted as saying that these young people 'feel penalized by their poverty, the colour of their skin *and their names*' (Jessell, 2006, my italics).

As well as their power to symbolise social connection, names provide a potential set of tools with which family relationships can be constituted and managed. Thus, names and naming can provide a lens through which family relationships can be viewed and their characteristics more fully understood. This exploration needs to take cognisance of evidence about the changing character of contemporary family life in the UK. In the literature on families over the last decade and more, the same themes recur: families are increasingly diverse in their form and character; increasing rates of divorce and re-partnering create a complexity in family relationships which is increasingly the normal experience; the character of an individual's meaningful family relationships will change over her life course; family does not equate to sharing a household because meaningful family relationships stretch over households, and sometimes across the world; and the boundaries between family relationships and friendships are themselves quite fluid (see for example: Finch and Mason, 1993, 2000; Morgan, 1996; Ribbens-McCarthy et al., 2003; Smart and Neale, 1999; Weeks et al., 2001; Williams, 2004).

In this fluid and diverse family environment, at first sight the link between names and family relationships is tenuous at best. To use my own case, my surname is Finch, which was my father's name and which I have retained throughout my life. My partner has a different surname, as do his children. Since my father died three decades ago, none of my close kin has been called Finch: my

mother remarried and took the name of her second husband; I do not have any children myself; my sister married and took the name of her husband and this has been passed to her children, though her first child bears a different name since he is the child of an earlier marriage; my step-brother (the son of my mother's second husband) has a different name again as do his partner and children. There is, in short, now nothing in my surname which connects me publicly with any of the people whom I regard as my close kin. This pattern is repeated in many families where there has been a history of complex and changing relationships over time.

Names therefore do not act as unambiguous statements about family membership – increasingly they may not denote either household relationships or relationships formed by marriage. Indeed the variety of surnames within a household is itself an indicator that the key intimate relationships of individuals have changed over time (Johnson and Scheuble, 2002: 428; Silva, 2005: 97). However, on deeper inspection, in most cases a person's name does provide a strong link to her family, especially cross-generationally. My surname – Finch – was bestowed on me at birth as my father's name. My two forenames – Janet Valerie – were chosen by my parents and I have never sought to change them. The link with my family of origin therefore remains very strong and is encapsulated in the very label with which I am known as an individual in the social world.

In exploring sociologically the ways in which names can be used in the construction of family relationships, I draw upon the influential set of concepts within contemporary sociology of families, which derive from Morgan's (1996) discussion of family practices. In the contemporary social environment, he argues, families are defined more by their practices ('doing family things') than by simple membership of a kin network or household. Social actors creatively constitute their own social worlds, through day-to-day practices which are understood by the participants to be 'family' practices:

... little fragments of daily life which are part of the normal taken-for-granted existence of the practitioners. (Morgan, 1996:190)

Building on this I have argued that, for these practices to be effective, family relationships have to be 'displayed' as well as done. They need to be seen, experienced and understood by relevant others as 'family-like' relationships. Display is the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute 'doing family things' and thereby confirm that these relationships are 'family' relationships (Finch, 2007).

Utilizing this framework, I now explore questions about how far names – the naming of children, the retention of a given name, the change to a partner's surname – represent one set of tools which is available to assist the process of displaying families, whilst at the same time marking out individuality in a complex social world.

Surnames: Mapping Family Connections?

The most obvious way in which family connections are made visible is in a surname, passed from one generation to the next. Historically in England, hereditary surnames first came into being amongst landed families after the Norman Conquest and were part of the identification of the new Norman landowners and their families with the new estates; it was only in the 13th and 14th centuries that the use of hereditary surnames began to spread much more widely in the population (Hey, 2000: 51–4).

Whilst the requirement to have and to use a name is absolute, legal restriction on the choice and use of names is minimal. Although patronymic naming is a well-established custom, it is not a legal requirement. The use of a mother's surname is perfectly in order, though there is no systematic evidence about how many people choose this, or in what circumstances. The most obvious circumstance would be single mothers; in the past this would have defined the child as 'illegitimate' and thus would be stigmatizing (Hey, 2000: 88; Shackleton, 1990; Wolfram, 1987: 67). Historically, in some wealthy families the mother's surname would be also be used where inherited wealth was passed through the mother's line for lack of a male heir (Lord, 2002: 187–8). However, there is no systematic evidence to suggest that patronymic naming is generally losing its hold. Indeed recent evidence from the United States has found that, even where the parents themselves used different surnames, the use of the father's surname for the child was almost universal (Johnson and Scheuble, 2002).

Given the importance of a name in identifying the unique individual, it is perhaps surprising that there is no legal requirement to retain the same name throughout life. There are also very few restrictions on a subsequent change of name. At any stage in life it is legally possible simply to begin using a different name:

A person in England and Wales may be known by any name they wish and they will acquire the right to use that name by usage and reputation ...there is no reason why a name acquired in this way should not be used for all purposes (except fraudulent ones). (General Register Office, n.d.)

Although not a requirement, many people who want a securely documented change of name use the Deed Poll Service, which entails a process for changing a name that is legally recognized and has been in place since the middle of the 19th century. Legally, a Deed Poll is a form of contract, signed by the individual and committing her or him to use a new name rather than the previous one, and to notify relevant agencies that this change has been made (Deed Poll Service). As to the actual selection of names – whether at initial registration or on a change of name – there are practically no restrictions. The Deed Poll Service will not accept names which are impossible to pronounce, which contain symbols rather than words, or which are 'vulgar or offensive'. They will, however, accept names which others might think of as ludicrous, including what they call 'fun' names (giving the examples of Father Christmas, Huggy

Bear and various football teams) though they reserve the right to refuse such names for people under the age of 18 (Deed Poll Service, n.d.).

Although changing a surname is generally unusual, there are two circumstances in which it is regarded as so much the norm that special registration provisions apply. Both of these relate to changes in family circumstances. The first is adoption, where a separate registration takes place and where an Adoption Certificate replaces the original Birth Certificate; the adoptive parents are required to supply 'the full name of the person after adoption' for entry in the Register (General Register Office, n.d.).

The second circumstance in which changing one's name is treated bureaucratically as routine is when a woman marries. Notwithstanding the feminist critique of this practice, marriage is still a circumstance which confers on women a special right – but not a requirement – to change a surname. Legally this change is effected by the marriage itself and the Marriage Certificate is an adequate document for all purposes, including acquiring a new passport. However, if the husband wishes to adopt his wife's surname, or if they both wish to use another name, this requires a Deed Poll. Since 2005 the same rights as those accorded to married women have recently been extended to those who have contracted a civil partnership, with a Civil Partnership Certificate being accepted by the Passport Office as adequate legal proof that one of the parties has changed a surname (General Register Office, n.d.).

The UK legal framework thus affords a wide range of options for the selection of names, but there is no systematic empirical data about how those options are used. I am therefore using more limited data from two specific circumstances to explore contemporary naming practices in the context of the diversity and fluidity which characterize contemporary families.

My first example concerns the surnames used by children after their parents have divorced and one or both may have remarried. If, following the end of a marriage, the mother wishes to change the child's surname to her own, or to that of a new partner, there are legal restrictions on this freedom. In such circumstances all individuals who have parental responsibility for the child must give their consent. Where parents cannot reach agreement, the Courts have to determine whether the child's surname can be changed – typically at the request of the mother but with opposition from the father.

A landmark case which considered these issues is *Dawson v Wearmouth* which went all the way to the House of Lords (Times Law Report, 1999a). Dawson, the father, appealed against the mother's wish to use the surname Wearmouth for his child. He had cohabited with, but had never been married to, Wearmouth (the mother) and they had separated shortly after the child was born. She had been married previously to a man named Wearmouth, whom she had divorced before she met Dawson, and with whom she had two other children. She wished her youngest child to have the same surname as the rest of her family. Throughout their deliberations on this case, the Courts had adopted the principle – as they must in law – that the child's best interests should be the prime consideration. However, would it be in the child's best interests to have

the same name as the rest of the family with whom it lived? Or was it important to maintain the connection with the father by retaining his name? A particular feature of this case was that the name Wearmouth came originally from a man with whom the child had neither biological nor social connection. As Lord Jauncey expressed it in his judgement:

The surname was a biological label telling the world at large that the blood of the name flowed through its veins. (The child) had not a drop of Wearmouth blood in its veins. (Times Law Report, 1999a)

This particular case was eventually decided in favour of the mother, a decision which overturns the patriarchal connections. However, its real significance for my argument is the fact that it was brought at all as a test case, around the connection between a surname and the biological fathering of a child. In other cases the Courts have been reluctant to sanction breaking that link, except where the father's name would carry negative connotations for the children, for example where he has a criminal record which might damage the reputation of the children if they were associated with it (Bond, 1998; Times Law Report, 1999b).

The focus on the 'blood tie' – whatever the outcome of an individual case – is resonant with debates in social anthropology about the concepts of nature and culture in the construction of kinship, in particular the relationship between genetic links and parenthood (Carsten, 2004; Edwards et al., 1993; Franklin and McKinnon, 2001). This is also relevant to my second example, the naming of the children of gay or lesbian parents. The construction of family and kinship on a 'chosen' basis fundamentally rejects heterosexual conventions, and with them of course the custom of selecting a patronymic surname (Weston, 1991: 27; see also Weeks et al., 2001). Lesbian and gay couples who do decide to have children therefore have also to decide whether they wish to name them in a way which publicly maps their family connections and, if so, how this is to be accomplished.

Recent work by Almack (2005), based on an in-depth study of 20 families, explores the decisions of lesbian parents about naming their first child, confining her cases to those parents who had had their first child together using donated sperm. She reports that the majority (14 out of 20) used the surname of the birth mother for the child, either on its own (10 cases) or double-barrelled with the social mother's (4 cases).

The predominance of the use of the birth mother's name is explored in some depth by Almack, who concludes that the biological link (in this case, to the mother) still confers a special status even in these circumstances where two women have explicitly chosen to have a child together.

Almack's interviewees are often quite explicit about the ways in which their choice of surname has been influenced by the public perception of who constitutes the child's family, for example in the choice of whether or not to use a double-barrelled name. Though different couples made different choices about this, the issue with which they wrestled was the same: how best to craft the child's surname to 'create visible family connections', which would also be positive for the child (Almack, 2005: 245).

Thus, within an essentially permissive legal framework, the choice and use of a surname does perform a 'mapping' function that links individuals to families. The two examples above demonstrate that this can operate in complex circumstances in ways which are powerful in defining directly the nature of family relationships.

The visibility of family connections through a shared surname, normally patronymic though not inevitably so, carries a wide range of consequences for individual identity and the constitution of personhood. The effect can be very different consequences depending on social, economic and political circumstances.

Forenames: Marking Individuality?

The surname is the most obvious element of a name which maps family connections within Anglo-Saxon naming traditions. But what of forenames? What is the balance of individuality and family connection in parents' choice of their children's forenames? In selecting a name (especially for a first-born child) parents are not only determining the personhood of their child but are also taking a key step in defining their own new identity as parents. They are identifying 'what sort of child they want to be the parent of' (Zittoun, 2004: 143).

Influences operating on parents, in making this choice, are widely varied and can include political and religious dimensions of the society as a whole. For example, New England naming customs changed between the 17th and the 19th centuries when there was a shift away from Biblical names, clearly reflecting the change to a more industrial economy and a less religiously based society (Scott Smith, 1985). To cite a contemporary example from a different linguistic tradition, in the Arab-speaking world, where Islam has always provided the source of the majority of names, there is a growing trend to select names which follow European/American customs notwithstanding the current importance of religion in these societies (Hanks and Hodges, 2003: 351–5).

Change in the concept of childhood is another important dimension in the selection of names. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition one can trace over time how the allocation of first names increasingly became part of the developing perception of children as individuals. An indication of this can be found in the greatly expanded range of names in common usage over time. In England in the first half of 18th century, three boys' names (John, William and Thomas) and three girls' names (Mary, Ann and Elisabeth) comprised a majority; by the later part of the 20th century, it required some 50 boys' names and 30 girls' names to make up a majority of names used in the population (Scott Smith, 1984: 17).

The influence of fashion on the selection of names is another cultural dimension of clear significance. There is a lively American literature on this topic (Besnard, 1995; Lieberman, 1995; Lieberman and Bell, 1992). In the UK the importance of fashion is clearly visible from the annual publication by the office of the Registrar General for England and Wales of the 'top fifty' names from birth registrations in a given year. These show a mixture of continuity and

change over time, in which fashion plays an important part. For its millennium edition *Social Trends* (2000: 23) provided a brief overview of trends in first names over the 20th century, using data for selected years. John and Margaret were the most popular male and female names for the first half of the 20th century but neither was even in the top 50 by the end of the century. Their counterparts at the end of the century were Jack and Chloe, though neither had made the top 50 just 15 years earlier. In interpreting these trends, which appear to show a significant degree of volatility in the selection of names, it is important to note that only the 'first' forename is used in the analysis.

Changes in the popularity of different names over time have been capitalized in the development of a social research tool which can predict the statistical probability that someone with a specific name falls into a particular age group. This can then be used, for example, with the electoral register to sample names of people over a certain age. As a social gerontologist who has used it in a recent study has written:

In simple terms a sampling frame was generated that included all the Ethels and Stanleys that lived in the chosen study areas, whilst ignoring the modish Kylies and Jasons and the more timeless Elizabeths and Johns. (Scharf, 2005: 32)

Amongst the variety of influences which bear upon parents' choice of forenames for their children – religious, cultural, fashion – there is also the option of selecting a name with a family connection, perhaps specifically naming a child 'for' or 'after' a specific relative. There is some evidence that the 'middle' forename may be the one used for this purpose, which would make the selection of 'middle' forenames less subject to changes in fashion.

Whilst there are no systematic contemporary data from the UK on the choice of names with family connections there are two important American studies which, though now somewhat out of date, do relate to Anglo-Saxon naming traditions (Alford, 1988; Rossi, 1965). Rossi's (1965) classic study analysed American middle-class naming practices in the Chicago area, for birth cohorts between the 1920s and the 1950s. She found a very high prevalence of forenames (either first or middle name) linked to kin: 62 per cent of all children had a personal name linked to a family member, and 84 per cent of all families had at least one child with a kin-related name. A very similar pattern, especially amongst middle-class families, was found by Alford (1988) who replicated Rossi's study in Oklahoma in the 1980s. Rossi argues that the opportunity to make these connections forms part of the repertoire of symbols and meanings available to parents when they select a child's name (1965: 503).

If a kin name is to be used for a child, whose names are most likely to be selected? The most common choices would appear to be a parent or grandparent's forename, with uncle's or an aunt's name being used less frequently. Another relatively common practice is the use of the mother's surname as a 'middle' forename for the child. Johnson and Scheuble (2002) found that women in the US who have kept their own surname after marriage are very much more likely than others to use it as their first-born child's middle name.

Rossi found that 85 per cent of kin-related names came from the child's parental or grandparental generation (not earlier), a pattern which has a long history (Main, 1996; Scott Smith, 1985; Tebbenhoff, 1985). A striking feature of Rossi's data is that, almost without exception, the individual selected was known personally to both parents, suggesting that parents choose specific individuals whom they wish to acknowledge in some way (Rossi, 1965: 508–12). This aligns closely with contemporary evidence about kinship in the UK in which personal connection, and the development of relationships between individuals over time, are of much more fundamental importance than the simple genealogical connection (Finch and Mason, 1993: 2000).

The selection of children's names is therefore one way in which parents can choose to confirm and reinforce the particularity of those kin relationships which are important to them. In doing so, the theme of continuity over time is a strong feature – names from people in previous generations are used for children expected to live for many decades. This is not so much about 'preserving' a family name as acknowledging a specific relationship which is important to the parents and giving it a longer life span through their child.

The importance of temporal continuities is further reinforced by evidence that first-born children are the most likely to be given kin-related names. This is true for the US data presented by Rossi (1965) and Alford (1988) and also appears in historical evidence (Main, 1996; Scott Smith, 1985). Various explanations have been offered, including the idea that first-born children, especially sons, have a special role in the continuity of families (Rossi, 1965: 503). If first-born children are seen as the ones who create a new generation, then there is a special significance in naming them in a way which makes connections with previous generations. This is true even if the name selected is from someone who has died, indeed it may be even more powerful since, like symbolic household objects passed on after a death, it serves to preserve the memory of a loved person (Finch and Mason, 2000: 145–61).

In considering how people manage the process of naming in a way which connects with family relationships, I have concentrated on the naming of new-born children. It becomes clear that kinship features prominently in the suite of cultural meanings associated naming, even though a forename also marks the child's individuality. Parents who choose a name with links to another family member are making a positive choice to shape the child's connection with their developing kin network, and are doing so in a way which focuses on *particular* relationships. There is an open choice of whether or not to name a child after a relative, and this very facet means that selecting a family name is significant. It is not about naming the child after a person who occupies the *role* of grandfather, or aunt. It is about recognizing the value of a particular *relationship* and honouring this in a special way, which at the same time fashions a continuity of relationships into the future.

Thus, whilst the marking of a child's individuality remains central to the selection of children's forenames, there is also an opportunity to show publicly that specific family connections are special. Even when this is not done, the very

selection of forenames makes a family connection in that the selection is a distinctive task of parents. Given that most people retain the same forename/s throughout their lives, the process of naming a child therefore roots the very statement of a person's individuality within family relationships.

Displaying Family Connections through Names

In this final section I focus, not so much on the significance of names per se, as on what the above analysis can tell us about the nature of contemporary family relationships. Here I return to the concepts of 'doing' and 'displaying' family relationships.

The examples given above indicate that the selection and use of names constitute family practices in Morgan's (1996) sense, in that they are fragments of everyday life which are taken for granted. Bestowing the father's surname to a child, retaining the name which one had at birth throughout one's life, and the expectation that choosing a name for a first-born child will be an integral part of becoming a parent – these are all taken-for-granted aspects of everyday life which, whilst not legal requirements, are practices followed by the great majority of the population and are built into the social fabric.

The idea that these are 'fragments' of everyday life captures perfectly the significance of names. This significance is conferred by the routine use of names as a marker of the individual, in a very wide range of circumstances. Names thus become part of the fabric of daily life which both shapes and reflects family relationships.

This leads to the question of how far people make active use of the very flexible naming practices present in the UK, to 'display' family relationships, either to other family members or more publicly. Some examples of this have been used in this article, whether it be through the continued use of a father's surname after the parents' divorce or the use of a valued grandparent's forename for a child. The recognition in the power of the name to display family connections is clear, for example, in the reluctance of the Courts to sanction the change of a child's name against opposition, and in the dilemmas about surnames experienced by lesbian parents.

More subtly, and on a much wider scale, names can act as a connector which locks an individual into a cross-generational history which stretches into both the past and the future. A surname tracks an individual's history by indicating a child's parentage. Forenames and surnames both are bestowed by parents upon their children. They represent a permanent, cross-generational link. Thus the social act of naming, the very act of constituting personhood, is fundamentally rooted in kinship.

Equally the sharing of surnames serves to map links formed through marriage or other partnering. However, these maps of names within a kin network, or even within individual households, can become very complex in circumstances where individuals have moved through a series of relationships (with or

sometimes without changing surnames), and may have produced children with different partners who have been given different surnames. Thus a complex pattern of shared and different surnames makes visible something of the history of the relationships. In itself this denotes the character of contemporary kinship – complex, diverse, fluid over time.

Therefore names provide one tool through which the ‘family-like’ character of relationships can be displayed (Finch, 2007). That happens both through the taken-for-granted elements, like the sharing of surnames between parents and children, and also through those elements which are more proactive – social actors choosing and using particular names to convey social meaning in particular circumstances. The latter would include the apparently much more individual, conscious choices such as naming a child after a specially valued relative, for example, or a woman deciding to retain her previous surname as she moves into a new partnership.

At the most general level therefore, a study of names and their use confirms that contemporary kinship ‘works’ with a mixture of social processes which combine the taken for granted and the actively shaped.

Names: Future Research Agendas

In conclusion, I would point to the rich potential for understanding more about names and how they work both as markers of individuality and as a means of displaying family connectedness, in studies which capture both the taken-for-granted and the socially constructed elements.

Further research might profitably generate more systematic data on how children’s forenames are selected, especially how far the option of selecting kin names is balanced with other considerations such as fashion and taste, or the management of multiple identities for minority ethnic groups. Evidence about how this opportunity is used, and how that varies within different ethnic and social groupings, would illuminate the circumstances under which parents do – or do not – actively utilize the opportunities for displaying family connections which the naming of a child affords.

Another valuable focus for empirical study would be decisions about whether to change a surname when entering a new partnership, both the first legally recognized partnership (marriage or civil partnership) and subsequent ones. Ideally, this would build in comparison between different ethnic and religious groups, and between generational cohorts to document change over time. This would assist greatly in understanding the changing nature of partnering and its relationship to parenting and would illuminate more generally how, in situations of diversity and complexity, people seek to balance individuality with defining and displaying their meaningful family relationships.

These, and other, empirical studies of names and naming could capitalize on one readily accessible aspect of family connections to explore the balance between individuality and social connection, between the enduring and the variable dimensions of contemporary kinship.

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