

On The Psychology of Proper Names

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Certain people have the magic belief that one's name determines his or her character; one has only to know about this relation between name and person, or to consult a book containing such information to know not only the character but the future of an individual as well. The very opposite of this primitive belief seems to be expressed by Goethe when his Faust says to Gretchen: "**Name ist Schall und Rauch.**"¹

For an Individual Psychologist it will be clear from the outset that names are factors in our lives which are independent from us and to which we have to adapt ourselves. There are surnames as well as Christian names which are just as suitable to distinguish one person from another as an overall is suitable for wear in a workshop. On the other hand, there are striking names which arouse particular opinions in both the bearer and those with whom he comes in contact. Let us consider the name "Longfellow." For many people this surname will have so definite a connection with a great poet that they may hardly ever realize its original meaning. Others may find a funny contradiction when a short woman has this name. A friend of mine whose name is "Hollander" was a schoolboy in Germany during World War 1, and was one day horribly beaten by his "patriotic" mates when the rumor went around that Holland would declare war on Germany. There are in Central Europe thousands of citizens who have ridiculous or disgusting names, like Katzenellenbogen² or Dienstfrei³. "Aryan" officials had given these names to their forefathers when they had left the ghettos. There are people who are in utter disagreement with their Christian names because they do not admire the saint, the monarch, or the relative for whom they were named. The last example of this kind I met was an Italian called "Vittorio." There are grandiloquent names given by Negro parents to their sons, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones, or George Washington Carver. Also, one may, as an ordinary individual, have to put up with the name of a father or relative famous either for positive achievements or for crime.

If someone chooses a name for his public activity, he will naturally select one in accordance with his life-style. We easily understand names like Stalin (steel) or George Sand. I came across the name "La-guerre" on an invitation to a pacifist meeting, the name "Brailleur" held by the conductor of a choir. I

1 Name is sound and smoke.

2 Cat's elbow.

3 Day off.

found the name "Milk" borne by a pessimistic, unaccomplished fellow who said: "What could you possibly achieve with a name like that?" Consequently, I have given some attention to the role which the name plays in the development of human personality. Here are a few examples:

A lady once made me smile when she asserted that the name of a person is important in the construction of his or her character. But she insisted that there was a connection between name and personality, and gave herself as an example. She was called "Lucy" which, she said, comes from the Latin word "lux", meaning light. All her talking was meant to impress upon me her brilliance: her extraordinary brightness as a child; the splendor of her brothers, of her relatives, of her home as a spiritual center. Certain persons of her acquaintance were content to declare her "crazy" (behind her back), but with a little insight into some conditions in her life one could fathom much of the meaning of her particular superiority complex and discover her life-style. A physical fact particularly struck me at once: her eyes were slightly asymmetric. She believed herself, however, to have been freed entirely from an inborn strabismus through the treatment of a famous oculist when she was still a very young child. Her dresses always showed an extraordinary variety and rather striking colors. She used to paint the nails of her fingers and toes. She said she had a pure Egyptian profile, a statement which was not quite wrong, but which made people smile. Her great interest in everything bright is comprehensible to us as a means of compensating for the inferiority of the eyes mentioned above.

Let us now look for some facts in her social relations.

Lucy was eight years old when the first of her two brothers was born. According to her, she was virtually the mother of the two. She had discovered their talents, she had pushed them in their studies, she had prepared them for the sparkling situations in life which they now occupy. So now she basks in the reflected double light: that of having "made" her brilliant brothers, and that of their splendid activities.

What have we to think of this outshining of her mother? Does it not appear abnormal? Did she train herself for her future role as mother - as girls do in playing with dolls - or was her main idea actually to obtain the "halo" of a particular superiority over her mother? One may find the answer in the fact that at the age of forty she had never had any children. She suggested that this was the fault of her husband; however, she had never given up a marriage which she declared had been unhappy from the outset. But the martyr role of a misunderstood wife may appear as a "halo" in the eyes of a neurotic person.

The life-style, the behavior pattern of the person in question, formed in reaction to organic dispositions and social positions,

was probably fixed before she learned the meaning of the Latin word "lux" from which her name was derived. Obviously it was not her name that made her in a magic way such a brilliant person. It was rather her goal, her wish to shine, her guiding fiction of superiority, her personality-ideal of brilliance, that made her perceive the importance of her name "Lucy" in a pre-scientific manner.

As Individual Psychologists, therefore, we may sometimes find it useful to study the opinion which a person has of his name in order to obtain a quicker understanding of his life-style.

An old companion of mine had the surname "Weisheit" (wisdom). Although no college graduate he was a great reader of serious books and a keen debater. As a political fighter he had often risked his freedom and his life. Some of our common friends found his mind confused. I had the impression that he had an exaggerated desire to see clearly, both as regards present details and future developments.

One day I brought him to talk about his peculiar name.

"When I was speaking in political mass meetings," he said, "opponents often tried to ridicule me through my name, suggesting that contrary to my name, I was very stupid. But that only made me persevere to become a better speaker and debater."

I need hardly insist that his striving for deeper understanding of the economic and political movements was **not** determined by his name "Wisdom." My friend declared that his brother who had the same name was a very dull fellow. What had been a more important determining factor in the creation of this man's life-style seems to be this:

He wore rather strong glasses, and when I asked him at which moment of his life he had first noticed his eye weakness he said: "I remember that in school I could not see what the teacher was writing on the blackboard, and he made me sit on the bench nearest him so that I could see better what was on the board." This childhood recollection contains the seed from which grew his adult behavior. This striving to see clearly, taking the form of studying political and historical developments, was reinforced in his mind by his conception of his name, while the same name may have been a burden for his brother who developed a different behavior pattern.

While conducting a study circle for Individual Psychology, the writer invited his students to write a paper on the subject "I and My Name." Of approximately thirty students, seven handed in papers. The following three are the most interesting and need hardly to be commented upon.

1. "Although my parents may have failed in more important respects in their family life, they did at any rate succeed in giving me a name which has met with my satisfaction. They named me P., after my mother's birthplace

and M., presumably after my father's mother. Neither of these names is very common in England. Quite apart from the fact that personal vanity is assauged by having an unusual name, I was proud of my mixed parentage and felt content that my characteristics were not entirely at variance with my name. I would have considered it extremely irritating to have been named "Rose," "Violet," "Lily," for instance, not believing myself to have any flower-like qualities!

"I will endeavor to explain why I had these feelings about my name. I was an awkward and wayward child, cantankerous and moody possessing neither a pleasing personality nor an attractive appearance. My name made up for the sense of loss I felt in other respects in the following ways: The percentage of people of foreign extraction in England during my childhood and school days was not large, and my foreign surname nearly always aroused interest and provoked comment on my entry into a new group or community. This focussed attention on me at a time when I presumably felt it was lacking in my life otherwise. It was a means of drawing the interest of people in my direction.

"It was nearly always necessary to spell my surname to strangers, and to tell people how to pronounce my name. I think these facts fixed my personality in their minds to some extent and led them to put me in a niche of my own, when perhaps my character, appearance, or personality did not strike them particularly.

"However unsatisfactory I thought my life to be otherwise, I used to feel proud of my foreign extraction. It appealed to my sense of the romance and adventure of life in a way that would have been impossible if my name had been Joan Smith or Mary Brown.

"In view of my particular mental make-up, I consider my name has played a helpful part in my life at a time when I most needed help, and that if I had had any reason to dislike my name, my dissatisfaction would have been intensified. Although I have now no wish to change my name, I feel strong enough in myself to be known as 'X' if necessary; in other words I think I can now do without that particular prop!"

2. "I and My Name." The name is "Jacob" - held by a Christian family and yet a name immediately linked with Jewry, a fact which has caused no small amount of trouble in my life. Two typical examples I can clearly remember in my youth: namely,

- (a) "When I submitted my name for my civilian job and found myself initially rejected, as the partners of the firm

were noted for their anti-Semitic tendencies.

(b) "When I, with a youth's enthusiasm, received my first setback in the "courting" stage of my life by the refusal of my girl friend's mother to allow her to associate with me, since on hearing my name she suspected me of being a Jew.

"In both of these instances I was able to explain that I was not a Jew, but through the years similar incidents followed.

"My reactions to these frequent accusations were somewhat strange. I immediately developed great interest in the Jewish problem and studied various books and articles on Semitism. This was followed by a feeling of deep rage and personal insult when I read of details of the maltreatment of Jews in Europe. My sympathies towards the Jews increased, and through my support of them I was forced into many arguments during a period when anti-Semitism was prevalent in some sections of the English community—and yet I am not a Jew! It is possible that these protecting instincts were partly hereditary, as one line of my ancestors **were** originally of Jewish stock, but I am convinced that my feelings would not have developed automatically had not my name been the subject of these incorrect accusations.

"The incorrect spelling of my name as 'Jacobs' has irritated me enormously from time to time."

(3) " **'My Name'** by F. J. Pepper. I became aware at an early age that the surname with which my fond parents had endowed me was pregnant with disagreeable properties. I can recollect quite vividly a feeling of angry resentment that it should enable my playmates to call me 'Mustard' or 'Pepper-box.' I was sensitive to ridicule in those early days. I felt impotent to retaliate. Such occasions as joining a new class at school could be really distressing. As the moment approached for me to announce my name I uneasily anticipated the inevitable sniggers which it would provoke. Sad to relate, the unseemly mirth was all too often aggravated by some rejoinder from a teacher, who might have been expected to know better.

"With the passing years my attitude has mellowed. Very gradually, I think, for it is not easy to trace the stages. My name seems quaint rather than ridiculous. It is sufficiently unusual for people who hear it over the telephone to ask me to spell it. They make the request with an inflection of the voice which suggests that my pronunciation is clear, but that possibly their ears have deceived them.

"Acquaintances to whom I am introduced invariably pass the merry observation, 'Oh! Hot stuff eh?' I acknowledge with an indulgent smile in appreciation of their wit. I pride myself that I can hide the fact that this estimable piece of sophisticated repartee has fallen upon my indulgent ears since the days of my earliest recollection. I no longer begrudge them the apparent delight which is the reward for all authors of this subtle rejoinder.

"It was perhaps inevitable that my surname should give birth to my nickname 'Pep.' This has been so universally adopted that outside of my home I no longer respond instinctively to my Christian name. My Christian names incidentally are 'Frederick John' but I have always been called 'Jack' by my parents and sister.

"Before we were married my fiancée, who quite understandably disliked calling me 'Pep' and who for some obscure reason preferred 'John' to 'Jack', started a determined campaign to have me called 'John.' It was, of course, doomed from the start. There may be some not readily apparent psychological reason for this. 'John', I believe, means 'godly.' I entertain strong doubts that this had anything to do with it! Like all fiancées, she invariably called me 'Darling' if she were about to suggest that we go to a dance or theater!

"Pepper! I ask myself now whether I still dislike it; whether I have grown merely indifferent to its irrefutable disadvantages; or whether I have grown to like it. I should not like to change it for 'Smith' or 'Jones' or 'Robinson'; I would not even change it for such an admirable and dignified name as 'Plotke.'"

I think one can sum up the conclusions as follows:

1. The still widespread belief that the name of a person directly determines his character is prescientific and bordering on magic.
2. As the elaboration of the life-style takes place largely before the child can have an opinion about his name, the latter becomes one of those numerous and varied factors in an individual's existence which will be perceived and used according to the guiding fiction which makes for the life-style.
3. Whereas in most cases the name will be of negligible importance, it may become either a factor that facilitates the bearer's movement towards his personality-ideal or one that represents a discouraging handicap.
4. The opinion a person has of his name can therefore reveal the life-style, as can the analysis of dreams, childhood recollections, or faulty acts.