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IDENTITY AND NAME CHANGES*

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The act of naming is as old as civilization. According to Hebrew legend, God named the first person he created Adam because he was made of *adamah* (earth), and Adam subsequently set up naming all the animals (Genesis 2:20). Academic psychology has dealt with the problem of names and naming primarily on an empirical basis,^{1-5,7-8,10-13,16,19,21-23,25-27,31-33,37} while psychoanalytic studies have been few and far between.^{6,9,18,28-30} Lynd²⁴ explains that the act of naming gives security and protection against feelings of being lost, confused and unconnected: thus the wood in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* in which no creature bears a name is a place of terror. We feel shame at not knowing or at forgetting a name.¹⁷ In the Old Testament literature, names bore great significance and were given various interpretations. The naming of Jacob's twelve children, for example, is given detailed clarification. The first, Reuben, was named by his mother, Leah, who had been jealous of Jacob's love for her rival Rachel and succeeded in giving Jacob a son before Rachel did, hoping to win her husband's love in this manner: *Reuben* means "behold—a son!" (Genesis 29:32). Remaining the hated wife, she named her next son Simon (Shim'on) and her third Levi from roots referring to "hear" and "join," signifying her undying hope of getting Jacob to hear her and join her in love. Thus names of children were directly related to strong emotions prevailing between parents. In answering Shakespeare's famous question "What's in a name?" (*Romeo and Juliet*, II, ii), one might say that there may be much more in a name

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than meets the eye. The point is partly made by Shakespeare himself in that same scene:

Juliet. O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet. . . .
'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;—
Thou art thyself though, not a Montague.
What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot,
Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title:—Romeo, doff thy name,
And for that name, which is no part of thee,
Take all myself.

Romeo. I take thee at thy word:
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized;
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

. . . .
I know not how to tell thee who I am:
My name, dear saint, is hateful to myself
Because it is an enemy to thee;
Had I it written, I would tear the word.

. . . .
Juliet. Art thou not Romeo, and a Montague?
Romeo. Neither, fair maid, if either thee dislike.

Romeo is willing to part with his very name for the sake of his loved one. He makes it appear as though swapping names is as easy as swapping hats. Yet his name—and the identity it implies—remain with him and literally prove to be his undoing because of the war between the Capulets and the Montagues.

Soddy⁸⁵ surveyed names and name changes from a cross-cultural point of view. He argued that a person's name represented his relationship to his family and to his society in an abbreviated fashion. Thus a change of name, along with change of social class, marriage out of the social class and change of nationality, was an expression of a change in *identity*. Immigrants change their names to conform

with the language and cultural norms of their new country. Such name changes, said Soddy, "probably always imply some change in the individual's identity." Some less culturally advanced groups in the Philippines believe that changing a sickly child's Christian (first) name will improve his health. So do Orthodox Jews. Authors may write under pseudonyms which permit them to assume several different identities; this may be a socially sanctioned display of identity struggle not permitted other members of society, who emerge as impostors using "aliases." Soddy points out the strong group pressures towards name changes in societies where women assume their husbands' family (last) names upon marriage. In Chinese culture a man will almost never change his surname and widows are extremely reluctant to remarry partly because they refuse to give up their surname and take on a different one. Adoptive sons are selected from nephews of the same surname, so that there will not be any name change involved. Chinese women who marry assume their husbands' surname but sign their maiden name and use it on their cards. The maiden name is retained for premarriage friends to use in conversation or in letters. Thus the Chinese married woman retains elements of her unmarried and married identity at the same time.

Soddy also points out that some families have a limited number of names for children to select from. Other families name the oldest son by a certain fixed name, or after the father, using Sr., Jr., II, and III to distinguish between the generations; this may create a problem in identity formation when the son finds it difficult to separate himself from the father (or grandfather) in his own mind. Naming a child after a deceased relative (a practice common among Jews) may lead the child to identify with that person's image. Some parents may give their child a new, original, unique or esoteric name.⁸⁶ This may lead the child to feel "different" or to try to be the meaning of the name. In 1973 in France the Supreme Court had to rule on an appeal by a couple named *Trognon* (meaning "butt end") who had adopted a child and then were forbidden by a lower court from giving their name to it. That issue rocked public opinion. Far from being a matter of indifference, names often are associated with strong feelings. The emotional value of names is an indication of the deeper psychic implications of names and name changes.*

* Cf. "The Name Game," *Time*, May 13, 1974, and readers' responses in the June 3, 1974, issue.

The use of first names in many cultures is a sign of familiarity: "We're on a first-name basis." Yet a nursery child who was asked his friend Billy's last name said: "I don't know him well enough to know his last name." In many cultures the use of first names is represented as an invasion of privacy, an offense and an insult, and the use of title and last name are the expected mode of address. The Chinese traditionally has several names: a "pet name" as a child,⁹ a "school name" at school, and a regular name consisting of two characters, one common to all the brothers and sisters (a "family name"), the other personal and unique to the individual. Some large families had the same "common name" for all male members of the same generation in the clan—designating the "family rank." Any member of the extended family who belonged to the father's generation (had the father's common name) had to be addressed and referred to as "uncle." A similar practice prevailed in Israel a generation ago, having been imported from Central Europe. It becomes clear from Soddy's account that a person's name in Chinese culture had a great deal to do with his identity as son or daughter, husband or wife, member of clan, class and generation, etc.

Social and cultural norms and pressures determine naming practices; so also do they help to determine the formation of a sense of identity. However, the primary and primal group in which both names are given and identity is achieved is the family. The relationships within the family which determine a child's name may be crucial. Thus Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, named by his mother Leah as part of her attempt to win over his father Jacob through the giving of a son, was also the son who committed "incest" with his father's concubine Bilhah (Genesis 35:22) and was cursed by Jacob on his deathbed (49:4). He literally came between his father and his father's wife—perhaps as a revenge on his father for not loving his mother, as a way of saying to Jacob, "If you don't want her, I do"—but displacing his incestuous wishes to another wife of his father. (Of course it was not the name alone but the feelings and the conflict that came with it which affected Reuben. We may regard the story as a paradigm of the firstborn son's dilemma.)

Similarly the famous "Joseph complex" of Jacob's son Joseph may have to do with Joseph's mother's motives in naming him. Rachel had been childless for many years and though loved by Jacob had yearned very deeply for a son to please him with. When Joseph

was born she named him for her wish for yet another son: *Yossef adonai li ben aher* (May God give me another son). Joseph was destined for jealousy and sibling rivalry. (Genesis 30:24).

We can see that in the intricate relationship between identity and names cultural and individual-family forces play important roles, although the relative weight of each factor may differ from one individual to another. Identity (or the sense of identity) is itself a complex concept consisting of social, cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic and other elements; yet it is also, and often strongly, determined by individual identifications, resolution of early crises of psychosocial development,¹⁶ early parent-child relationships, and the entire family and life history of the individual. Names, which form so important a part of identity from the very beginning of life, when the mothering person addresses the baby by his name, or "name of affection" (diminutive) as pet names are called in Hebrew, come to symbolize the identity of the person. They become associated with a heavy affective content, or as Freud might say, "libidized." When a person changes his or her name of his or her own "free will," then that change reflects a change of identity, an inner change which may have strong emotional motivation. Zelig³⁸ made a very interesting analysis of the motives for name changes and aliases in Whittaker Chambers, the "accuser" in the famous Alger Hiss case. In what follows I shall try to illustrate cases of name changes in patients with identity diffusion, a problem it seems clear Chambers suffered from as well.

SOME BRIEF CLINICAL CASE HISTORIES

Case 1

A twenty-four-year-old Israeli man showed up at the clinic complaining of impotence ever since his father died a short time before. The young man looked big, strong and manly, but his manner was indecisive, effeminate and insecure. Above all, it turned out, he was suffering from a lack of a clear sense of identity: he did not know what he was or what he wanted to be, and was not able to take any steps to define his identity by learning a profession, taking a job, studying or doing anything else. The identity problem by far outweighed the sexual one of which he was complaining and with which he was exceedingly preoccupied. In exploring his history it became clear that he had been unable to accept (introject) his father's figure from

early on in his life, and had had to struggle continually to develop an identity of his own, because he had not been able simply to identify with his mother or with any other important figure in his life. His father had been a strong, aggressive and obstinate man, overpowering him, frequently fighting with the mother, and arousing deep feelings of fear, rage and envy, which the patient could not reconcile. The mother was unstable and erratic, probably of an hysterical character, who both "seduced" and "castrated" her son through her behavior. It was clear that the son had wished his father dead and that the death of his father aroused deep-seated feelings of guilt which he had to atone for by "castrating" himself through impotence. It was most interesting to discover that the patient had in a sense "killed" his father before (symbolically) by divesting himself of his father's name. At the age of sixteen, at which Israelis are issued their identity cards, the patient changed his last name (a common one) to an unusual and distinctive name denoting strength and power. He had thus declared: "I'm no longer the son of my father, with whom I cannot compete, against whom I am weak and powerless. I am now a new man—strong, brave, manly—my own man, not my strong father's weak son." It was noteworthy that the patient's brother, who had been suffering from the same sexual problem and was being seen at the same clinic, had not changed his last name. Indeed the brother had been better able to identify with the father. The patient, however, suffered from such diffuse "ego identity" that he was not able to function properly, and he grew worse, showing suicidal ideation and signs of depersonalization. He required a brief hospitalization in a psychiatric ward of a general hospital before his state improved. In this young patient the relation of the name change to his identity problem was clear and was symbolized by the identity card.

Case 2

A young Moroccan-Jewish Israeli girl changed her name from one that reflected her ethnic origins to a Sabra (native Israeli) name. When she came to the clinic for help, it transpired that she had been one of many children in a rocky marriage in Morocco, whose parents had separated and divorced early in her life. Both were Jews. The mother, however, remarried, this time an Israeli Arab. The patient herself was apparently rejected by both of her parents. She was placed in Jewish Youth *Aliyah* institutions as a

child immigrant, where she spent most of her young life. She was seen by a female psychologist while there for several years, but the therapeutic relationship was difficult. She would run away from deep emotional commitment for fear of rejection and fear of the conflictual material evoked. Her inability to identify with the therapist was due to a very early disturbance in her emotional ability to receive and accept (introject). She too was desperately searching for an identity (ethnic, vocational, personal), but her rejection of herself was such that she had to change not only her last name (implying rejection of her father in herself) but also her first, given name (given by the parents), implying that she was really "reborn," a totally new person. The name change, however, did not resolve her identity problem. She continued striving for an identity. She left Israel for Germany, where her sister was living at the time, in a desperate attempt to identify with the sister. This, however, failed, partly because the patient herself was unconsciously provoking rejection by insisting on unconditional acceptance. She required psychiatric help in Germany, then left and returned to the psychologist in Israel. However, the disturbance in her ability to identify through an emotional relationship was so great that every attempt she made failed and she fled the relationship.

NONCLINICAL OBSERVATIONS

Turning from the disturbed to the "normal," one can point to national Israeli leaders who changed their names many years ago: ex-Premier David Ben Gurion, whose original name was Green, or Chief Rabbi Shlomoh Goren, who was originally named Goronsky. They are typical of a long line of Zionists who Hebraized their names. The Zionists, however, were rebelling against their own parents' Jewish identity (with a weak, religious, superstitious, fatalistic, exiled minority group) for deeply personal reasons. (For every Zionist, there were five who preferred America to Palestine.) The Zionists expressed their rebellion and their new identity through their new Hebrew names: strong, Biblical, heroic, royal, independent. The more extremist identified with Israel's ancient heroes by actually assuming their names (Gideon, Samson, etc.) in lieu of both first and last names together. This practice was common among the terrorist dissidents such as the Stern Gang (*Lohamei Herut Yisrael*) and *Irgun*

Tzvai Leumi. There is little doubt that for each of them the name change reflected a deeply personal declaration of identity.

The practice of Hebraizing names is still widespread in Israel and has its roots in the formation of the new Israeli identity as distinct from the old diaspora Jewish identity (see Herman²⁰ and Ash⁴).^{*} The usual rationale given is that the old Jewish name is not really Jewish, since it is not Hebrew and is derived from some other culture or language. Therefore, many Israelis of the present generation and previous ones who had come to the land of Israel changed their family names (as well as their first names when necessary) to make them sound Hebrew, Israeli or biblical, thus establishing an old-new identity. However, many Israelis have retained their "foreign" names, thus retaining the traditional family identity and history. Some have selected entirely different new names which have little or nothing to do with their father's last name. Thus when Ben Gurion chose his name, he retained some of the sound of his original family name. When a Goldberg becomes *Harpaz* (Mount of Gold), he retains the meaning of his father's name. Even so, the name changes beg the question of whether they were really necessary because of external social circumstances, or an expression of deeper changes of identity due to intensely individual reasons such as rebellion against the father. When the new name has no relation whatever to the original one, the clinician senses that the patient rejects his family identity.

Not surprisingly the "father of identity theory" himself, Erik Erikson, underwent both identity crises and name changes. There is little doubt that the name change from Erik Homburger to Erik H. Erikson is intimately related to his identity struggles. In his very moving autobiographical essay¹⁴ he describes how he grew up a tall, blond, blue-eyed Danish "goy" in an intensely Jewish family and had fantasies of being other parents' son—which in fact he "half" was, for his natural father was a Dane who had abandoned Erik's Jewish mother and whom Erik had not known or forgotten. He speaks of his "ambivalent identification" with his adoptive German-Jewish stepfather, Dr. Homburger. Small wonder, then, that he retained the middle initial H. in his three-part American name—symbolizing his identity as Dr. Homburger's son and at the same time saying

^{*} One might mention the highly emotional legal and political battles over identity card listings in Israel as an example.

it is the least important of the several components of his identity (Dane, German, Jew, "goy," American—Marshall Berman^{*} claims Erikson denied his Jewish identity). With the several fathers and mothers in his life (mentioned in his essay) Erikson had a very difficult time forging an identity for himself, and he confesses he retained the "professional identity of a stepson." He thus crystallized his final identity in the choice of his name, too. In fact, he declared in choosing his name: "I, not my natural or my adoptive father, am my own father."

SUMMARY

The theoretical literature as well as case material presented point to the intimate relationship of name changes to identity struggles. Names have strong affective value and symbolize an important part of a person's identity. The cultural and social value of a name may be secondary to the personal meaning of that name to the individual who in changing it will reveal an inner change in his sense of identity or an inability to integrate a diffuse sense of identity. The answer to "What's in a name?" may be "Identity's in a name."

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^{*} Book Review, *The New York Times Book Review*, March 30, 1975.

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