This essay explores the power of names, highlighting the central role of symbols and labels in the construction of identity.

Shakespeare’s verse argues for substance over labels. It is a sentiment common to much of the conventional wisdom on names. Adages such as “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me” or “The names may change, but the story remains the same” and quips like “Call me anything, but don’t call me late for dinner,” all such truisms consistently downplay the importance of names. Are the labels we give to people and things as inconsequential as conventional wisdom suggests? Do names really lack the power to influence or the force to injure? Would a rose really command such deep respect and awe if it were known as a petunia or a pansy?

A large body of social science literature suggests that conventional wisdom has vastly underestimated the significance of names. Indeed, names in our society function as powerful symbols. Symbols are arbitrary signs that come to be endowed with special meaning and, ultimately, gain the ability to influence behaviors, attitudes, and emotions.

The symbolic nature of names makes them much more than a string of alphabetics. Rather, names function as calling cards or personal logos. They signify important aspects of
one’s history and heritage; they pinpoint an individual’s social location and group affiliations. Based on our names, others make important decisions regarding our nature and temperament. In this way, names serve as important symbols of identity. **Identity** refers to those essential characteristics that both link us and distinguish us from other social players and thus establish who we are.

The link between names and identity helps to explain why forgetting someone’s name often is viewed as a social *faux pas*. Similarly, we view situations that preclude the linking of name to identity with great pathos. Consider the sadness that surrounds every tomb of an unknown or unnamed soldier. In settings where one’s name remains unknown, it is not unusual for an individual to feel alienated or disconnected. Think of those large lecture courses in which neither the professor nor other students know your name.

Names contribute to the construction of identity in a variety of ways. A family surname, for example, provides instant knowledge of an individual’s history. Surnames serve as road maps to the past; they guide us through an individual’s lineage and archive one’s traditional group affiliations and cultural ties. Thus, historically, children who were denied their father’s surnames were denied legitimate social locations. Without this signifier to chronicle their paternal pasts, such children were considered faceless and anonymous, with no rightful place in their social environments (Brunet and Bideau 2000; Isaacs 1975; Nagata 1999; Sanabria 2001; Sapkidis 1998). Surnames also tend to be indicators of one’s ethnic background. Thus, in the modern world, many states manipulate surnames in ways that forward their current national agendas. A governing body may, for example, create official policy that uses surnames to include or exclude particular communities in the national identity. Consider the case of Japan. After annexing Korea in the 1900s, the Japanese government forced the first wave of Korean immigrants to adopt Japanese surnames. In this way, the government subsumed Koreans under both physical and symbolic control. In the White (British) controlled Jamaica of the 18th century, immigrants were an issue as well. But here, the immigrants were African slaves. Rather than assimilating the group, the government wished to mark that population’s separation from Whites. Hence, upon their arrival in Jamaica, slaves were stripped of ancestral forenames and surnames. Furthermore, they were renamed using common English forenames. These truncated labels marked slaves as a distinctive group. Their “missing” surnames also made it clear that slaves lacked the lineage of Whites (Burnard 2001; Fukuoka 1998; Prabhakaran 1999; Scassa 1996; Wang 2002).

A name’s ability to pinpoint personal histories leads some individuals to abandon their family surnames and adopt new ones. A well-chosen replacement name can bring one closer to groups or social histories that seem more in vogue, more powerful, or more in-tune with one’s future aspirations and endeavors. The entertainment industry is rife with examples of the practice. Many performers readily acknowledge the necessity of name changes in building a successful career. Consequently, Marshall Bruce Mathers’s fans now know him as rapper “Eminem.” Brian Werner decided “Marilyn Manson” was better suited to a life of shock rock. And credit singer “Queen Latifah” for understanding that names such as Dana
Owens are not the stuff of which pop idols are made. In particular, personalities with ethnic surnames often feel the need for more mainstream, English-sounding names. Thus, fans know Winona Horowitz as “Winona Ryder,” Jennifer Anistopoulou as “Jennifer Aniston,” and Carlos Irwin Estevez as “Charlie Sheen” (World Almanac and Book of Facts, 1998:352–53; www.famousnamechanges.com). Of course, name changing is not restricted to the famous. Often, newly naturalized citizens choose to change their names, selecting something familiar within their adopted nation. And name changing can be political in nature. For example, after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, some Muslims began legally changing their names to avoid bias and discrimination (Donohue 2002).

In each of these cases, a name change became a tool for impression management. Impression management is a process by which individuals manipulate or maneuver their public images so as to elicit certain desired reactions. In the process of impression management, new surnames become the foundation upon which broadly targeted identities are constructed.

First or common names function as powerful symbols as well. Consider the care and consideration frequently given by parents as they set about naming a newborn. Many parents start the process months before the child is born. Such care may represent a worthy investment, for research suggests that the selection of a personal name can have long-term consequences for a child. Several studies show that individuals assess others’ potential for success, morality, good health, and warmth on the basis of names. Thus, when asked to rate other people on the basis of first names alone, subjects perceived “James” as highly moral, healthy, warm, and likely to succeed. In contrast, “Melvin” was viewed as a potential failure, lacking good character, good health, or human caring. Similarly, individuals with names that correspond to contemporary norms of popularity—currently these include Jacob, Michael, and Joshua for boys and Emily, Madison, and Hannah for girls—are judged to be more intelligent and better liked than individuals with old-fashioned names such as Arnold, Earl, Fred, Betty, Judy, and Phyllis (Christopher 1998; Etaugh et al. 1999; Joubert 1999; Karylowski et al. 2001; Liddell and Lycett 1998; Mehrabian 2001; Mirsky 2000; Twenge and Manis 1998).

Personal names can influence more than just the perception of performance and ability. Some studies show a significant association between uncommon, peculiar, undesirable, or unique names and actual outcomes such as low academic performance, low professional achievement, and psychological maladjustment (Bruning et al. 2000; De Schipper, Hirschberg, and Sinha 2002; Insaf 2002; Luscri and Mohr 1998; Marlar and Joubert 2002; Twenge and Manis 1998; Willis, Willis, and Grier 1982). Indeed, so strong is the influence of personal names that some nations actually regulate the process of naming. French law, for example, allows officials to reject any name deemed at odds with a child’s well-being (Besnard and Desplanques 1993). The Canadian government has set similar standards, refusing to register unusual names for babies. After trying to register the name “Ivory” for their daughter, two Quebec parents were told, “No! Ivory is only a brand of soap.” (McLean 1998). While we don’t fully regulate naming in the United States, there are limits, especially...
in the world of business. Nearly 100 years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that newcomers to the market could not use their personal names if those titles duplicated active names with high market recognition (Quigley 2003). So, if your name is Martha Stewart, Tommy Hilfiger, or Sarah Lee—sorry, you'll have to make a change before you enter the marketplace! Aside from laws, there are strong social norms that govern the practice of naming. **Norms** are social rules or guidelines that direct behavior; they are the “shoulds” and “should nots” of social action, feelings, and thought. In the United States, norms tell us that naming is a very personal affair. That may explain why Jason Black and Frances Schroeder drew the wrath of the public when they tried to “cash in” on the naming of their son. In 2001, the couple announced they were willing to sell a corporate buyer the right to name their child. People were aghast when they posted the “naming rights” on E-Bay and started the bidding at $500,000 (Goldiner 2001)!

In charting the role of personal names, it is interesting to note that child name selection follows some predictable patterns. For example, naming patterns initiate and reinforce certain gender scripts. Parents quite frequently select trendy or decorative names for their daughters, for example, Chloe, Destiny, Lily, or Jade. In contrast, parents prefer traditional or biblical names for their sons—such as David, Ethan, Jacob, or Michael. (Think about it. Have you ever met a man named after a flower, a season, or a concept?) Furthermore, although little boys frequently are given the names of their fathers or grandfathers, little girls rarely share a name with any family member (Lieberson 2000; Satran and Rosenkrantz 2003).

In addition to establishing identity, names often demarcate shifts in identity or changes in social status. In this way, names facilitate a process sociologists refer to as boundary construction. **Boundary construction** is the social partitioning of life experience or centers of interaction. When we cross the boundary from childhood to adulthood, for example, we often drop childlike nicknames—Mikey, Junior, or Princess—in favor of our full birth names. Similarly, when acquaintances become close friends, the shift is often signaled by a name change. Mr. or Ms. becomes “Bob” or “Susan”; William becomes “Bill,” or Alison becomes “Ali.”

A shift from singlehood to marriage, an occupation change, and a religious conversion are marked by name changes. Thus, in the occupational arena, “Ike,” “The Gipper,” and “W” all became “Mr. President” when they moved into their new status. In the religious realm, Siddhartha’s conversion was signaled by his new name, “Buddha.” With a similar experience, Saul became “Paul.” In the modern day, a change in religion transformed Cassius Clay into “Mohammed Ali.”

Name changes accompany the shifting identities of places as well. With the reemergence of Russia’s nationhood, for example, Leningrad reverted to “St. Petersburg.” Similarly, with political reorganization, the plot of land once known as Czechoslovakia was renamed as the “Czech Republic” and “Slovenia.” And the place once known as Yugoslavia is now called “Bosnia,” “Croatia,” and “Serbia.” Although the physical terrain of these areas remains the same, new names serve to reconfigure each location’s political identity.
Changing place names often does more than mark an identity shift. Such changes can also function as tools of social control. Gonzalez Faraco and Murphy (1997) illustrate this condition as they trace the rise and fall of three socially transformative regimes in 20th-century Spain. The authors note that extensive changes to the street names of a town called “Almonte” served as a strategy by which each ruling body announced its relationship to the ruled. Indeed, the street names chosen by each regime proclaimed each government’s intentions, methods, philosophy, and ethos. Thus, the Second Republic (1931–1936) chose street names that promoted the regime’s educational agenda. In contrast, Franco’s oppressive dictatorship (1936–1975) employed intimidating street names. And the Socialist Democracy that followed the Franco regime adopted a clever set of symbolic compromises designed to heal the rifts between the nation’s opposing “camps.” Azaryahu and Kook (2002) tell a similar story in their study of street names in pre-1948 Haifa and post-1948 Umm el Fahm. The researchers show that the naming of streets in these locations represent variations on the theme of Arab-Palestinian identity. For example, street names in pre-1948 Haifa define Arab identity in the broadest meaning of the term, celebrating culture and politics, Catholics and Muslims, heroes and occasions that traverse locality and time. In contrast, street names in Umm el Fahm project a much narrower version of Arab-Palestinian identity. The overwhelming majority of these names highlight persons and events critical to early Islamic history. The differences one finds in Haifa and Umm el Fahm street names are important, for they reveal the interests and attitudes of local political elites. In studying them, one can concretize a political shift and track a period of changing ideologies. Finally, consider this example from the American South. In 1993, the New Orleans school board launched an effort to lead the population toward greater racial tolerance. The school board mandated that slave owners’ names be removed from all city schools. Schools that bore the names of slave owners were renamed after racially tolerant individuals. The seriousness of the school board’s intentions was dramatically illustrated in 1997 when President George Washington’s (a slave owner) name was removed from one of New Orleans’ schools. School board officials renamed the institution after Charles Drew, a pioneering black doctor. Spain, Palestine, the United States: These examples illustrate one common point. By reading the symbolic tapestry created by place names, we learn something about official identity formation in a region. We learn something as well about the ideological premises upon which such identities are built.

Beyond person and place, names can illustrate changing collective identities. In this regard, consider the experience of African Americans in the United States. Note that when the name “Negro” appeared in the United States, it was synonymous with the status of slave. To distance themselves from slavery, free African Americans of that period elected to call themselves “African” rather than “Negro.” However, when a movement developed in the 1830s encouraging slaves and their descendants to return to Africa, free African Americans renamed themselves “Colored” or “People of Color.” The color term was adopted to underscore disapproval of the “return to Africa” movement. Interestingly, “Black” was repeatedly rejected as a name for this collective and appeared on the scene only with the social and legal
changes of the 1960s and 1970s (Isaacs 1975). Currently, the name “African American” is favored, with many arguing that this change will emphasize African Americans’ cultural heritage and help to address problems such as racial disparity and poverty (Philogene 1999; Sangmpam 1999).

Postmodern theorists suggest that collective identities generated by shared group names can sometimes prove more harmful than helpful. Postmodern theory represents an approach that destabilizes or deconstructs fixed social assumptions and meanings. Collective names imply a unity of identity—a sameness—among all members of a group. In this way, collective names can mask the diversity that exists within groups. Collective names can lead us to conclude that all “Hispanics,” “women,” or “senior citizens” think or act in identical ways by virtue of their shared classifications. Postmodernists also warn that collective names can give a false sense of distinctiveness to groups. Labeling collectives suggests that “Whites” are profoundly different from “Blacks,” “men” irreconcilably different from “women,” and “nations” unique unto themselves (Collins 1990; Foucault 1971; Hacking 1995, 1999; Riley 1988; Smith 1991; Wong 2002).

Just as name changes symbolize shifts and movement, they can also function to immortalize certain identities. The name often becomes the tool of choice in poignant and permanent commemorations of extraordinary human efforts. Consider The American Immigrant Wall of Honor located at Ellis Island or the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Special individuals often are honored by attaching their names to buildings or streets. War memorials elicit heightened emotions by listing the names of those they honor. Witness the deeply moving response elicited by the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., or the ceremonies for the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks that have involved reading the victims’ names.

Extraordinary athletes have their “numerical names,” or numbers, retired, indicating that there will never be another Yankee “Number 7” (Mickey Mantle) or another Jets “Number 12” (Joe Namath). The retirement and return of the Chicago Bull’s Michael Jordan is an interesting example. Recall that upon Jordan’s 1993 exodus from basketball, “Number 23” was ceremoniously retired by his team. When he returned to the Bulls in 1994, his new beginning was signaled by the assignment of a new “name”: “Number 45.” These numerical names served to distinguish the old, proven Jordan from the new, mysterious Jordan. Indeed, the National Basketball Association viewed the boundary protected by these symbols to be so sacred that they fined Jordan heavily the first few times he tried to wear his old number during one of his “second-life” games.

Names can be used to indicate possession or ownership. It is not unusual for valuable belongings such as homesteads, boats, aircraft, cars, or pets to be named by their owners. In the same way, conquerors reserved the right to name the continents they discovered or acquired, as well as the indigenous people living there. Columbus, for example, named the indigenous people he met “Indians,” a term that came to be used generically for all native peoples. Similarly, colonial populations were frequently renamed by those controlling them so as to reflect the cultural standards of the ruling power. In one case, a mid-19th-century
Spanish governor replaced the Philippine surnames of his charges with Spanish surnames taken from a Madrid directory, as a method of simplifying the job of Spanish tax collectors (Isaacs 1975). Scientists, too, use names to mark their discoveries. Most of us are familiar with “Lucy,” the name given to some of the oldest human remains known to contemporary scientists. Indeed, the naming of scientific discoveries is so important that scientists fight hard for the right to name. Witness the multiyear controversy that surrounded heavy elements 104 (discovered in the 1960s), 105 (discovered in the 1970s), and 107 through 109 (discovered in the early 1980s). These elements went nameless, in some cases for decades, because researchers in the field disagreed as to the parties responsible for their discovery. Similar controversies now surround the human genome project as companies and universities fight for the right to patent and trademark thousands of genes and gene fragments. (Browne 1997; Information Please Almanac 1997:545; Pollack 2000).

Family names function as a sign of ownership as well. In bestowing their surnames on children, parents identify the children as “theirs.” And historically, wives were expected to take the names of their husbands to indicate to whom the women “belonged” (Arichi 1999; Johnson and Scheuble 2002; Suarez 1997). These examples highlight a normative expectation: That which we name belongs to us. This expectation may help to explain why adopted children are more likely to be named after a parent or relative than are biological children. In the absence of shared genes, names become a mode of establishing familial connection. And, indeed, research shows that namesaking generally strengthens the bond between father and child. This link between males, surnames, and possession has been a difficult one to challenge. Interestingly, in places and times in which women have won the right to keep their surnames upon marriage, the large majority choose to name their children in accord with the surnames of their husbands (Auerbach 2003; Furstenburg and Talvitie 1980; Johnson, McAndrew, and Harris 1991; Stodder 1998).

Perhaps the importance of the power of naming is best revealed in research on labeling. Labeling theory is built around a basic premise known to sociologists as Thomas's theorem: If we define situations as real, they are real in their consequences. In other words, the names or labels we apply to people, places, or circumstances influence and direct our interactions and thus the emerging reality of the situation.

Thomas’s theorem was well documented in a now-famous study of labeling practices in the classroom. After administering intelligence tests to students at the beginning of the academic year, researchers identified to teachers a group of academic “spurters”—that is, children who would show great progress over the course of the approaching school year. In fact, no such group really existed. Rather, researchers randomly assigned students to the spurter category. Yet curiously enough, when intelligence tests were readministered at the end of the academic year, the spurters showed increases in their IQ scores over and above the “nonspurters.” Furthermore, the subjective assessments of the teachers indicated that the spurters surpassed nonspurters on a number of socioeducational fronts. The researchers credited these changes to the power of labels: When teachers came to define students as
“sputters,” they began to interact with them in ways that guaranteed their success (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968; Schulman 2004).

A famous study in the area of mental health also demonstrates the enormous power of labels. David Rosenhan engaged colleagues to admit themselves to several psychiatric hospitals and to report symptoms of schizophrenia to the admitting psychologists. (Specifically, Rosenhan’s colleagues were told to report “hearing voices.”) Once admitted to the hospital, however, these pseudopatients displayed no signs of mental disorder. Rather, they engaged in completely normal behavioral routines. Despite the fact that the pseudopatients’ psychosis was contrived, Rosenhan notes, the label “schizophrenia” proved more influential in the construction of reality than did the pseudopatients’ actual behaviors. Hospital personnel “saw” symptomatic behaviors in their falsely labeled charges. The power of the label schizophrenia caused some normal individuals to remain hospitalized for as long as 52 days (Rosenhan 1973; Schulman 2004).

The labeling phenomenon is not confined to what others “see” in us. Labels also hold the power to influence what we see in ourselves. Recent emphasis on politically correct (PC) speech is founded on this premise. The PC movement suggests that by selecting our labels wisely, we may lead people to more positive self-perceptions. There is, after all, a difference between calling someone “handicapped” and calling that person “physically challenged.” The former term implies a fundamental flaw, whereas the latter suggests a surmountable condition. Many believe that applying such simple considerations to the use of positive, versus negative, labels can indeed make a critical difference in self-esteem levels.

Similar logic can be found within the literature on social deviants. Some contend that repeated application of a deviant label—class clown, druggie, slut, troublemaker, and so on—may lead to a self-transformation of the label’s “target.” Sociologists refer to this phenomenon as secondary deviance. Secondary deviance occurs when labeled individuals comes to view themselves according to what they are called. In other words, the labeled individual incorporates the impressions of others into his or her self-identity. Thus, just as positive labels such as “spunter” can benefit an individual, negative or deviant labels can help to ensure that an individual “lives down” to others’ expectations (Lemert 1951; Schulman 2004).

The power of names and labels may be best demonstrated by considering the distrust and terror typically associated with “the unnamed.” Namelessness is often synonymous with invisibility and exclusion. One can note several examples of this phenomenon. Historically, the Christian child was considered a nonperson until “it” received a name. Indeed, Christian children were not granted full rights to heaven until they were baptized and “marked” by a Christian name. The soul of a child who died before such membership cues could be bestowed was believed to be barred from heaven and condemned to perpetuity “in limbo.” Indeed, the body of such a child could not be buried in sacred ground (Aries 1962).

Things that are unnamed can strike terror in social members because, in a very real sense, such things remain beyond our control. The most feared diseases, for example, are
those that are so new and different they have not yet been named. The lack of a name implies unknown origins, and thus little hope for a cure. In contrast, the mere presence of a diagnosis, even one that connotes a serious condition, often is viewed as a blessing by patients. Think of the number of times you’ve heard a relieved patient or family member say, “At least now I know what the problem is.”

Alzheimer’s disease also illustrates the terror that accompanies namelessness. For many people, the most frightening aspect of Alzheimer’s disease is its ability to steal from us the names of formerly familiar people and objects. Generally, our life experiences are rendered understandable via insightful naming and labeling.

In another realm, note that anonymous callers and figures can strike dread in their targets. The namelessness of these intruders renders them beyond our control. Wanted “John Does” are frequently perceived as greater threats than known criminals because of their no-name status. Recall the intensive search efforts for the suspect “John Doe II” following the Oklahoma City bombing. Similarly, note the frantic aura that surrounded the hunt for the unknown “Unabomber.” And no time was wasted in putting names to faces after the September 11, 2001, attacks. Fears of namelessness plague us in cyberspace as well. Anonymous communication forums or situations in which people use “fake” names and identities make Internet users uncomfortable and unsure of “who they’re dealing with.” In these settings, namelessness can threaten the development of trust (Marx 1999).

When we experience disruptive behaviors that appear new or unusual, our first step toward control involves naming. We coined the label “rumble,” for example, to characterize the violent and frightening gang fights that began to erupt on urban streets in the 1950s. We applied the label “wilding” to the new and shocking acts of violence by packs of juveniles that emerged as a phenomenon of the 1980s. And we use the term “hacking” to describe those who harm Web sites and machinery by releasing unwanted computer viruses and worms. In essence, naming such phenomena provide us with a sense of control. In addition to control, naming people, places, objects, and events seems to make them more appealing. Thus, marketers work long and hard to get the right “brand name,” one that will “hook” potential consumers. Nothing can hurt the image of a product more than locating it in the generic or no-name arena (Grassl 1999).

What’s in a name? Obviously more than conventional wisdom implies. Names and labels can effectively reshape an individual’s past, present circumstance, or future path. Indeed, research seems to leave little doubt: A rose by any other name . . . would somehow be different.

Learning More About It

Want to trace the popularity of a name or discover the most popular names of the day? Visit the Social Security Web site on names at <http://www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames/index.html>.


The following organizations and Web sites will help you learn more about names:

*American Name Society* (Sponsors research on names)
c/o Professor Wayne H. Finke, Dept. of Modern Languages
Baruch College 17 Lexington Ave.
New York, NY 10010–5526
Web site: <http://www.wtns.binghamton.edu/ANS/>

*Ancestry.com* (Web site facilitating genealogical research)
Web site: <http://www.ancestry.com>

*Behind the Name* (Web site devoted to information on the history of names)
Web site: <http://www.behindthename.com>

**Exercises**

1. Choose one or two good friends and intentionally call them by the wrong name several times over the course of a day. Record your friends’ reactions. What do these data tell you about the power of personal symbols?

2. Research the names of various buildings on your campus, especially those named for an individual. Taken as a whole, what identity do these names confer on your institution? What lessons of naming can you deduce from the list? Are the norms of naming time-bound? Class-bound? Gender-bound?