The Child and His Name

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M.S., one of fifty young girls, twelve to fourteen years of age, who wrote a composition on the subject "Myself and My Name" said, "I read in a periodical once that all Monicas are gay, that they like books and writing, but are not very good in literature, though they are good in mathematics. They like history, and are very fond of music. That is exactly my personality!"

These lines are an excellent illustration of the popular belief in a "magic" relation between the name of a person and his character. The bookstores specializing in the occult sciences offer innumerable works conceived in this metaphysical spirit.

By contrast, L.T. came closer to a positive psychology. "There are no silly names," she wrote, "there are just silly people." This variation on the old proverb corresponds to the concept of Alfred Adler, who said (2) so emphatically that it is not important what we *find* in our heredity and in our environment, but rather what we *make* of it. Adler has given us a valuable insight into the importance that a name acquires for the child who bears it.

Comparative Individual Psychology is the most concrete of all systems of psychology which deal with the "drama" (6) of the personality. Adler begins with a minute analysis of the actual life-situation of the individual, especially of any physical or social inferiorities. These actual inferiorities arouse *feelings of inferiority* in the mind of an individual who is intelligent enough to compare himself and his achievements with the achievements of others, the impression they give, and his own future tasks. (The actual inferiorities may be compared to the *thesis* as understood in dialectical reasoning, while the inferiority feelings correspond to the *antithesis*.) Since inferiority feelings cannot remain absolute and static, they become strivings for compensation, a qualitative change thus taking place when they reach a sufficient intensity. As the result, a person, if courageous, will seek compensation in superiority by trying to overcome his difficulties through an effective social contribution. (Such behavior could be called a *synthesis* arising out of the

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antagonism between actual inferiority and inferiority feelings). Künkel has named such phenomena *catatheses*. (4) An individual's characteristic attack on difficulties or avoidance of them is determined very early in his life, and manifests itself in the consistent and personally unique psychological tendency which Adler called the life-pattern (or life-style). In some cases a child may consider his name as an inferiority, and the attitude which he adopts toward his name is thus significant to the teacher who is trained in psychological observation, as it reveals, in part, his life-pattern.

The writer once made a study (5) of ten adults of different nationalities, from the point of view of their attitudes toward their names, and arrived at the following conclusions:

(a) Since a child forms his life pattern *before* arriving at an opinion of his name, the latter becomes for him one of the factors which he perceives and employs according to the compensatory goal toward which his life pattern is oriented. Certain names can act either as encouragement or as a handicap to the person, depending on whether he is oriented toward real or fictitious superiority, toward the useful or the useless side of life.

(b) The opinion which a person forms about his name therefore reveals in some measure his life-pattern, just as his dreams do, or his first memories of childhood, or his unconsciously motivated slips of tongue or pen, or failures of recollection in daily life, named "faulty acts" by Freud. (1)

In an effort to test the validity of the conclusions cited above, the writer collected some new material. Through the cooperation of a friend who teaches in a senior school near Paris, he obtained the fifty compositions on "Myself and My Name" mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Her pupils had written these essays very willingly, and of the fifty exercises the longest did not exceed twenty-two lines, the smallest had three lines, and the average length was eight lines.

The writer noted that three attitudes had been taken by these children toward their names: the positive attitude ("I like my name"); the negative ("I don't like my name"), and an attitude of indifference. The following conclusions can be drawn from these expressed attitudes:

	Positive	Negative	Indifferent
Attitude toward given name	64%	16%	20%
Attitude toward family name	32%	42%	26%

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Whereas 64% were satisfied with the given names chosen for them by their parents, only 32% liked the family names which had been handed down from their ancestors. To have an agreeable name is certainly encouraging, but 16% considered their given names inferior, and nearly half of the subjects considered their family names burdensome. This would certainly seem to present a psychological problem to the teacher.

The opposing positive and negative attitudes are motivated by various personal considerations, but they are also rooted in the "pattern of culture" (3) in Western civilization, in which most of the individual's effort is oriented toward superiority, power, and individual renown. The welfare of the individual seems to depend upon his individual strivings, involving a spirit of competition and a ruthless struggle between individuals and groups, rather than upon cooperative efforts in society as a whole.

The reasons given for the attitudes expressed and their frequency are categorized as follows:

Positive Attitude	Toward Given Name	Toward Family Name
Esteem for a person, country, or religion connected with a name	24%	18%
Rarity of the name . .	24%	4%
Commonness of the name .	6%	0%
Aesthetic appeal . .	14%	4%
Displeasure provoked in others . .	0%	2%
Superstitious reasons	2%	0%
No reason given	2%	4%

Negative Attitude	Toward Given Name	Toward Family Name
Susceptibility of name to distortion or ridicule	8%	26%
Too common	4%	2%
Not well enough known	2%	2%
Aesthetic objection	2%	4%
Being last in alphabetical order	0%	2%
No reason given	2%	6%

From the reasons given, it is strikingly apparent that the directing goal of individual superiority which determines the psychic life of most people in our civilization brings about the opinions that individuals have of their names. To participate in the superior status of a person, a country, or a religion by means of identity of name (which obviously is a rather ficticious type of participation) is the most frequently given reason for liking a name. The next most frequent reason is the feeling of superiority enjoyed because the name is rare. And naturally the reasons given most frequently by those who dislike their names are that the name is subject to distortion or ridicule, or that the name is too common. Both of these facts may cause the person to feel inferior, although the commonness of the name is also interpreted as a social asset. The more objective reasons, such as the aesthetic, are rarely mentioned.

The experiment could be repeated using a greater number of subjects, or groups of boys instead of girls, or persons of different ages, or groups from different cultures. However, we already have valuable evidence concerning the drama of the individual as revealed by his attitude towards his name. As educators, we have to try to find out how to prevent that drama from becoming a tragedy!

First, we would expect that children with a pronounced dislike for their names might have other emotional problems as well. It should also be recognized that in some cases indifference toward a peculiar name might indicate an inferior intelligence. This is illustrated by the English joke which tells of a man named George Stinker who went to the registrar asking for a change in his name, saying: "I want to be called Jack Stinker!" There is also evidence of a positive correlation between intelligence and inferiority feelings. (6)

In our inquiry, the given names to which their bearers feel indifferent are those which are somewhat colorless, such as Ginette, Frances, Jacqueline, Jeannine, Josette, and Monica. In fact, several girls were indifferent towards their family names even while reporting that the names inspired disagreeable jokes, thereby indicating courage and intelligence rather than dullness. Little Mlle. Bureau ("office") says, "Everybody makes puns on my name. It seems amusing to them." Mlle. Couture ("seamstress") states that she herself finds her name amusing. It may be conjectured that the life-pattern of these two girls is oriented towards an objectivity which is not found often enough.

As for the two opposed groups, the writer found among those who

liked their names many girls characterized by a desire for easy glory, and, on the other hand, many (among those who did not like their names) who aspired to the fictitious superiority of being martyrs. In either case there is likely to be the same element of social maladjustment.

Here are some examples in which a "superior" name is seen as conveying advantage to its bearer:

> *Case number 1:* Y.C.: "I like my given name very much, because it is my mother's name and was given to me by my father. I find also that it is not a common name and I like it for all that as well. It is a Breton name and I always feel pleased when somebody asks me whether I am from Brittany, because that makes me remember my native province which I have not seen for a long time." We see here a girl who is much attached to her mother, who likes to receive things from her father, and who enjoys the attention given to her because of the rarity of her name and its association with Brittany. She is doubtless a spoiled young lady who takes more than she gives in her social milieu.

> *Case number 2:* A.G.: "My name is Alice. I like it because it makes me think of marvellous adventures like those of *Alice in Wonderland.* Alice is an English name and I am very proud to have a foreign name. I like it also because it is a rare name and makes me feel that I am not like others." This girl's desire to be unique is striking, having been expressed in three ways. She is so much preoccupied with the fictitious superiority conferred on her by her given name that she even forgets to speak of her family name!

The purpose of the teacher in dealing with children like these should be to show them that a name can confer no magical superiority upon its owner; that in fact, if there is any relationship at all, it is just the opposite. The owner sheds luster upon the name, if he is the kind of person who makes a real contribution to his fellows. But in a case like that of Alice, a simple statement of this truth would hardly be sufficient. The "private intelligence" (2) of vain people, as well as of pessimistic people, does not yield to intellectual reasoning. Only individual therapy which will touch the basic emotions, that is, the total personality in all its dynamism, can change an infantile, rigid life-pattern.

In considering the ridicule which is heaped upon peculiar names and their bearers, we recall Adler's concept, the "tendency to depreciate." This tendency is strong in persons who have lost courage; they feel that in deflating others they somehow gain importance for them-

selves. Teachers, alas, often indulge in this depreciating tendency, and themselves add to the discomfort of students who bear odd names. They would do better to try to understand such tendencies in themselves. Then, on the one hand, they could help their pupils to understand the discouragement and hostility which underlie this depreciating tendency, and on the other hand, they could help the unfortunate owners of peculiar names to become reconciled with or even to smile at their former discomfort. Such enlightened teachers can point out the many instances in which people of every country have accomplished great things in spite of having odd names.

The following cases show clearly the psychopathological aspect of what is so often considered an everyday matter and of small importance.

Case number 3: J.M., thirteen years old: "My name is quite common in the north of France. The first day I went to school in Paris, someone called me 'M———' (a slight distortion, of no significance, in a rather ordinary name) . . . that unnerved me so much I could not answer anyone. As for my given name, Jacqueline, I find it attractive. Several of my friends are called Jacqueline. Sometimes I am called 'Jacky' and I find that pleasant." The conflict over the family name contrasts with the rest of the composition which indicates a rather well-balanced personality.

Case number 4: G.S., twelve years old: "What do I think of my name? It doesn't please me! It seems to suggest something silly to other people and that makes me angry, because my schoolmates make fun of me." She has not yet learned to endure jokes made at her expense. She might be one of those oversensitive people who cannot stand even a suggestion of criticism, however well meant, but who are habitually and sharply critical of others. (This conjecture is based upon the fact that she is the same girl who, in another experiment using students' compositions, declared that she shudders when she sees an old person and cannot bear to think of her own old age.)

Case number 5: E.H., twelve and a half years old: "I have a horror of my family name because it is ordinarily the given name of a boy. When someone asks me what my name is, I dare not tell it. When my school teachers call me, I blush! As for my given name, I find it too old fashioned and I would prefer to be called Lillian. I would like to have a more modern or prettier name. So I do not like either my given name or my family name." A wise teacher, one not herself discouraged by the heavy burden which a teaching position often is in France, would try to effect a reorientation and development of courage in this young girl.

Case number 6: One can certainly sympathize with J.C. who writes: "My family name is C———, and it gives me many bad moments, because people change it to 'cochon' (pig), and that makes me angry." She seems too straightforward to transfo m her displeasure into a neurotic symptom as has happened in the following case.

Case number 7: N.T. failed to present her given name, but her comment on her family name shows us that she is one of those intelligent neurotics characterized by the "yes, but . . ." attitude described by Alfred Adler. (2) She wrote: "Several years ago, people used to distort my name. Because I am nervous, a trifle will make me angry. As soon as one of my schoolmates would see me, I would hear, 'Hello, *Tournecroche*' (pliers), or *Tournevis* (vise) or *Tournemoulin à café* (coffee mill) or *Tournebroche* (broiling spit). I remember it all as if it were yesterday, but to tell the truth, it was not a very bad thing for my schoolmates to do and I should have laughed at it. Sometimes I ask myself just what did my ancestors turn?" Further evidence of emotional disturbance in this girl is to be found in the fact that she has the idea that she will die young, at about thirty or forty years.

The citation of specific cases concludes with two specific cases in which the writers show contrasting attitudes of a more sophisticated nature towards the thought that their names will be changed some day by marriage.

Case number 8: M.B.: "My given name, M———, pleases me very much, though it is a little too common. I like it because my parents chose it because they liked it and not because it ran in the family. I have an aunt named T——— who insisted that I be named T——— also, but my parents called me M——— instead and I am pleased with their choice. As for my family name, it lends itself to several remarks which are not unpleasant really, but which I cannot help disliking; for example, people have made puns on my name, such as *'Vous êtes Bienvenue'* (You're welcome!) I am satisfied with my name, however, because I have been told it is an entirely French name, one that does not conceal its origin. I am rather pleased with both my names, but all the same I like the thought that when I am married my family name will be different, though it is possible that then it may be an uglier one."

Case number 9: J.C.: "My given name has become rather common during the recent past. At first I liked it a great deal, but since I have realized that many girls are called by this name it does not please me any more. However, I am proud to have the name of a great saint who did so much for our country. My family name, C———, (a name having a religious connotation), pleases me very much, because I am a Catholic. I love to bear this name which for me is the emblem of my religion. Very often people joke about it, calling me 'Protestant' instead, but I

laugh at it and am not at all offended, because after all I have the great joy of bearing so symbolic a name. It makes me remember all my ancestors who were devoted Catholics. I consider the name a great honor. The thing that most annoys me is that when I marry I shall have to give up this fine name which recalls to me so many beautiful things."

Adler has told us that two people can be striving for the same goal while doing different things or thinking in different ways; that, conversely, the same thought or action in two people may have different meanings. Thus, the first candidate for marriage, case 8 (p. ???), indicates a dynamic pattern of life. She is an individual who adapts well to changes and has the normal amount of self-esteem. The life-pattern of case 9, however, is static and conservative, therefore scarcely adequate for life in a society geared to radical and rapid changes.

The writer has endeavored by means of this study to emphasize an important aim in Adler's Individual Psychology, which is to study, not elements or isolated and static facts of the mind, but the concrete, real individual—"one and indivisible"—in movement from inferiority towards superiority, according to the life-pattern formed during the first years of life, and in relation with the pattern of culture which surrounds him. Information concerning the life-pattern is to be found in the individual's attitude towards his name as well as in other details of his thinking and behavior. Thus a psychologically observant teacher has an opportunity to use sound principles of mental hygiene which may contribute to the social reorientation of children whose attitudes toward their names reveals fictitious ideas of inferiority-superiority.

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