Individual Names and Personality: A Consideration of some Beliefs

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Abstract

When we talk about someone's personality, we usually mean what makes that person different from another, perhaps even unique. This aspect of personality is known as individual difference. All of us grow up in a culture that existed before our birth. This influences us so subtly and so thoroughly that we grow up thinking "this is the way things are", rather than "this is the way things are in this particular society". Erich Fromm (1995) calls this the social unconscious, and it is very powerful. Some researchers have found an unusual association between the name of a person and his/her personality. They even go so far as to say that people with the same names seem to have similar personalities. Turner (2009) observes that Levitt (2005) theorizes that one's name can affect one's ability to succeed. However, Turner (2009) believes that your name does not make you. Names do not prevent you from getting a college education. She adds that names do not determine what you can achieve, nor do they stop you from reaching your dreams. She concludes by saying that parents ironically name children to be winners or losers. Losers go on to achieve success in life, while winners end up convicted felons. This paper advocates that, logically, a person's name is his/her parents' choice and thus reflects their taste, not his/hers. One does not choose one's own name. How, then, can a name reflect a personality? Moreover, the meaning of one's name is relative. Names differ across cultures and communities. We often come across people with identical names but different personalities. How successful one is in life involves much more than just one's name. People are unique individuals with their own strengths and weaknesses. This article is about uniqueness. The focus in this paper is on the fact that we may share a name with another but our environment will influence us as individuals. To illustrate this the researcher approaches the Zulu personal names. In Zulu culture, individuals receive names as they mature. In many African cultures, given names are reused, especially to commemorate ancestors or those who are particularly admired, resulting in a limited collection of names that sometimes vary by orthography. Different cultures thus follow different agreements when bestowing personal names.

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Introduction

The term "personal name" is referred to as anthroponomy. The study of personal names is a multidisciplinary field that has attracted the attention of philosophers of language, anthropologists, linguists and ordinary people. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, defines a proper name in the following way:

> "Proper" name is a word that answers the purpose of showing what thing it is that we are talking about, but not telling anything about it.

An individual's name is defined as a personal name identifying that individual person, and today it usually comprises a given name bestowed at birth or at a young age. It is nearly universal for a human to have a name, because names identify an individual. Occasionally, a person is referred to by a single name. In an African belief a person may have different names at different life stages. Names are usually bestowed when a child is born, and when a child is baptized. In Zulu culture individuals receive names as they develop. In many African cultures, given names are reused, especially to commemorate ancestors or those who are particularly admired, resulting in a limited repertoire of names that sometimes vary by orthography. Different cultures thus have different conventions for personal naming.

The term "personality" can be defined as the characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviors that make a person unique. In addition to this, personality arises from within the individual and usually remains fairly consistent throughout life.

Warren and Carmichael (1930: 33) claim that:

> Personality is the entire mental organization of a human being at any stage of his development. It embraces every phase of human character: intellect, temperament, skill, morality, and every attitude that has been built up in the course of one's life.

Mayer (2005: 6) sees personality as:

> An individual's pattern of psychological processes arising from motives, feelings, thoughts, and other major areas of psychological function. Personality is expressed through its influences on the body, in conscious mental life, and through the individual's social behavior.

We describe and assess the personalities of the people around us all the time. Whether we realize it or not, this daily deliberation on how and why people behave as they do is similar to what personality psychologists do. While our informal assessment of personality tends to focus more on individuals, personality psychologists use conceptions of personality that apply to everyone. Personality research has led to the development of a number of theories that help to explain how and why certain personality traits develop.

The term "belief" is defined as an assumed truth. Belief is inextricably linked to language. This is one reason why people from different countries have difficulty understanding one another, as the beliefs they hold are *built into* the language and their culture. Belief is not a product of meditation and has very deep roots.

The word "culture" has many different meanings. For some it refers to an appreciation of good literature, music, art, and food. However, for anthropologists and other behavioral scientists, culture is the full range of learned human behavior patterns. The term was first used in this way by the pioneering English anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1871) who defined culture as: "…that knowledge, belief, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". He added that "…culture is a powerful human tool for survival, but it is a fragile phenomenon. It is constantly changing and easily lost because it exists only in our minds."

Lederach (1995: 9) defines culture as follows:

> Culture is the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them.

In most cases, those who share your culture do so because they acquired it as they were raised by parents and other family members who had it. There is no way to exclude culture from belief although some psychologists argue that personal names reflect the personality of individuals.

This paper argues that personal names bestowed on individuals will always differ across cultures and community beliefs. Thus, personalities are unlikely to be the same even if the personal name has the same meaning. This paper discusses personal names, given to individuals within traditional African societies that have an ontological influence on the lives of these individuals. An attempt will be made to confirm the foregoing position by addressing what is in a name. In other words, an effort will be made to ascertain the philosophy that informs African names. According to Achebe Chinwe, "a world view is the totality of each person's assumptions which reveal his beliefs, attitudes, values and concepts

and serve to impose an order on his experiences and to provide an explanation for everything that happens" (1986: 9). This is the direction given to a man to enable him to analyze and control events concerning him in the society efficiently for a better life. The paper attempts to make individuals aware that personality is the result of many external and inborn factors, not simply the effect of the meaning of a personal name.

The aim of this paper is to counter the belief that personal names necessarily reflect the personality of the individual. Beliefs and cultural activities have a great influence on an individual's personal name. The emphasis is instead on the external factors that may have an influence on the personality of an individual. The psychological make-up of two individuals is likely to differ if they are fraternal twins who were raised apart. This statement leaves us with no option but to accept that environment has more influence than a personal name in predicting the personality of an individual.

Theoretical framework

This paper deals with an aspect of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics. It addresses the uniqueness of personal names given to individuals. It argues that personal names cannot predict the personality of the individual; rather, the personality is defined by social and cultural forces. People may share personal names but the environment will influence their personality. Based on a review of the literature on personality, Mischel (1968) pointed to the lack of evidence that the behavior of individuals is consistent across situations (Mischel & Peake 1982). Kenrick and Funder (1988) carefully analyzed the various arguments that have been leveled against personality and summarized the theoretical and empirical work refuting these arguments. Their paper (Kenrick & Funder 1988) delineates three major criteria that must be met in order to establish the existence of personality traits: (1) assessments by independent observers must be in agreement; (2) these assessments must predict behaviors and real-world outcomes; and (3) observer ratings must be shown to reflect genuine attributes of the individuals rated, not merely the observer's implicit theories about what personality traits convey.

If individual differences in personality exist and can be detected, then independent observers should agree about the relative standing of individuals on personality traits. Ultimately, for personality traits to have value, they must predict behaviors and real-world outcomes. There is the potential for problems to arise when the assumptions are applied in a cross-cultural context and when personal names come from different cultural backgrounds. For example, a person's culture might have different norms for appearance, behavior and the display of emotions. Culturally normative spiritual and religious beliefs need to be distinguished from misconceptions which regard these as similar though they have different roots. Assessments must also take the individual's language and educational background into account before assuming that names have any influence on personality. One of the most significant personal values is to regard each individual as a special, unique human being, despite sharing the same name with another. This form of deep respect for individuals has the power of generating good will, great happiness, and great achievement

According to the literature on anthroponomy, African and Zulu personal names are quite different from Western society's personal names, where people take their father's last names. While Western personal names are predictable, African names are generally not, for until the child is born and depending on the circumstances under which it is born, personal names cannot be predicted with accuracy.

The most important aspect of personality affected by personal names is self-concept. Self-concept develops as children mature, and it is "learned" from the verbal and non-verbal messages given by significant people in their lives. Parents are the most important message-senders, but, as children mature and become more independent, the messages of teachers, classmates and others all contribute to their developing concept of self. In a sense, self-concept works as a kind of script for the way people act. If a boy has an image of himself as bad or as incapable of doing well at school, his behavior will probably reflect this image. He will tend to behave the way he thinks a "bad boy" would behave, or he will fail to learn as he should even though he might be quite intelligent.

In every culture, names have cultural and social contexts that identify the bearer. This is to say that every person in this world has a name that solely identifies and marks him/her from all other peoples in the world.

Algeo (1992: 728) aptly points out that:
    People are almost invariably named; indeed, a human being without a name would be socially and psychologically less than fully a man.

Frege (1949) and other scholars also consider that names have attributes and consider them as attached to referents. This is exactly what pertains in African culture, where the social and cultural context of personal names reveals the power of names to emphasize social relationships. These contexts include sex, hierarchy of birth, circumstances surrounding the birth, the person's physical structure, power and status.

Among the Zulus, people who bear the same family name are by default believed to be related genetically and so to behave alike. This would thus dispute the unpredictability of names.

According to Mey (1993: 132):
    Through the use of words I make the world fit my language and change the world in accordance with my directions as given through the use of language.

People's language is therefore the exit valve through which their beliefs and thoughts, cognition and experiences are articulated. The limit of one's language is thus the limit of one's world, and man is at the mercy of his language (Farb 1993: 168). Language is a manifestation and description of the complexity of people's way of life and practices. This is apparent in their naming systems and practices, family, and religious beliefs. This language also depicts the social and cultural stratification of the particular society.

The events involved in the naming ceremony and the choice of names given to children have traceable links to the referent. Lyons (1977: 222) claims that proper names are both "synchronically and diachronically motivated". Rymes (1996: 231) confirms this in saying that "the name an individual is given has one synchronic meaning in the baptismal ceremony but as the individual uses that name, it acquires new and varied meanings diachronically". We see that with time people may add to their original names or drop some of them; this is a system of elimination by substitution. In African culture, people with circumstantial names often change them when they grow up; however, some maintain theirs to make the names unique. This adds to my belief that proper names do not necessarily depict one's personality.

The circumstances and social context of the birth of a child may at the appointed time compel the parents to give a name X but not Y. The circumstantial context will be first and foremost gender, then the social and economic situation of the parents, the time of the birth and their social links with other people, among other factors. These are all aspects of synchronymy. The individual carries this name and since names have social meanings, people expect the bearer to live by it or make positive amends to that name. The varied meanings will represent the diachronic aspects of the name. In this respect, it is contradictory that the meaning of one's proper name evolves through a life history instilled with many transformations and that it may be intimately linked with the "identity concerns" of an individual or society (Goodenough 1965: 265; Rymes 1996: 238).

These various meanings mean that people with the same personal name do not necessarily have similar personalities. That is why a personal name like *Sipho,* "the *gift",* is often shared by individuals with very different personalities. You may find one *"Sipho"* doing well in life, while another is a criminal. This is an indication that individuals who share a name will not necessarily share a personality.

However, it is a common belief among Africans that "names are part and parcel of those elements of African culture that make African personhood unique" (Umorem 1973: 15). Based on this uniqueness, Africans believe that names are meant to distinguish one individual from another through the uniqueness of his or her character. According to Ubahakwe (1982: 27), African names are aspects of African cultural heritage and make a significant impact on an individual's personality. This is because "each person's name moulds him into and cuts for him his separate identity" (Nze 1989).

Methodology

The approach that was used to collect data in this study was qualitative. Both primary and secondary data were collected. The questionnaires were administered via electronic mail, or faxed or posted to respondents. A total of 500 questionnaires were sent out, and all were returned. The researcher also collected names from school registers and from a list of graduate and undergraduate students at the University of South Africa. As a speaker of isiZulu, the researcher was able to identify the Zulu personal names from both the school registers and the list of university students. A total of 500 personal names were collected from these sources.

Books by Agyekum (2006), Asante (1995), Crane (1982), Chuks-Orji (1972), Obeng (2001) and Zawawi (1993) were consulted. The *Journal of the Names Society of Southern Africa* Volume 22 (1&2) 2008 and Volume 23 (No. 2) were also studied. In this way, the researcher compared Zulu personal names with those of other African communities. It was established that African naming traditions were very much the same as those of the Zulu culture.

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The analysis of collected names

Most compound names such as *Ntombikayise, Ntombizinhle and Muzikayifani* are descriptive names. They describe the individuals at the time of their birth. Such names are unlikely to mold or influence the personality of the name bearer. Moyo (1996: 10) points out the following about name-giving:

> In Bantu culture name-giving can be influenced by a range of social, religious, economic and cultural circumstances.

Such factors empower Zulu parents or Zulu name-givers in their decision on a suitable name to be bestowed on the child, a name which suggests the state of affairs on the day of the child's birth. The researcher argues that if the personal name *"Sipho"* is given to children in different societies of the Zulu nation, they will have different personalities. The reason for this is that they are given these names in different contexts and by different parents, surrounded by different circumstances. Skhosana (2005) believes that a name is traditionally linked to the family's belief in the ancestor spirits. He adds that, on the other hand, the birth name is usually coined such that it cleverly or explicitly communicates and expresses the deep inner feelings of the parents about their social or family life experiences before the child's birth. When collecting the data on personal names in the Zulu nation, some common names were noted in one particular village. The most common personal name for girls was *"Busisiwe",* while for boys it was *"Vusumuzi"*. The personalities of these individuals were, however, extremely different, since beliefs and cultural aspects were very different.

Physical appearance is also taken into consideration in personal name-giving. When a female baby is large, the name *"Sdudla"* is often given to describe the physical appearance. Boys are often nicknamed *"Fats"*. This also suggests that personal names of Zulu children may not predict their personalities, because the above names are nicknames about the physical structure of an individual.

When collecting data from local schools, the researcher found that most children in schools run by the Catholic Church were given names such as Joseph, if they were boys, and Maria, if they were girls. Most of the respondents with these Christian personal names stated that they had been given them by their grandmothers or other close paternal female relatives, and indicated that they did not really approve of these names. The name continuity tradition was given as the reason that they had no option but to accept these names. The judgmental attitude towards African names, consistent with the Western values imposed on blacks by both church and schools, eventually led to a practice of giving children two names because Western names had no value to the children or their society. Unfortunately, African personal names were regarded as "igama lasekhaya", the name that can be used at home, and the Western names were used at schools and on certificates. Although a Christian personal name was introduced to Africans as a way of showing acceptance of Christianity and Western civilisation, it further acted as an easy identification tag for an African person by any European person.

The findings

African personal names will not always represent aspects of synchronymy, but may have varied meanings and will represent the diachronic aspects of the name. In effect, what happens is that people expect the inherent power of words in names to reflect the lives of people either positively or negatively. Therefore the individual's name is of concern to the society as a whole. A child named after a dignitary or a chief is thus expected to behave accordingly so that nobody can make derogatory remarks about the name in an attempt to

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belittle it. It is for this same reason that children named after grandparents, parents and chiefs are addressed accordingly. Such children are also advised to behave well so as to avoid tarnishing their names. These names are intended to shape the children's upbringing, behavior and socialization. The world and its cultural practices are dynamic, and the naming system of African people is affected by this dynamism.

Naming can be considered a universal cultural practice. Every society in the world gives names as tags to its people, but how the names are given, the practices and rituals involved and the interpretations attached to these names differs from society to society and from one culture to another. When one faithfully follows the guidance of one's name, an inexplicable self-fulfillment is acquired. This is possible only when one keeps away from all that is not in agreement with the predictions made by this name. This nullifies the question of whether names as teleological guides can be explained as a coincidence of fortune and family desire.

The change of names among Africans deserves attention at this point. Africans believe that proper reflection is made by the parents of the bearer; they take into consideration their family history, their aspirations for the child and the values they esteem before giving the child a name. Parents do this because for traditional Africans, names teach, instruct, motivate and inspire generation after generation in the religious and philosophical truths that lead to proper self-fulfillment.

Conclusion

This paper provides a counter argument to the notion that a name predicts the personality of an individual and those individuals with the same personal name with the same meaning share the same personality. It also provides an interface between a people's language and its cultural practices. It mirrors (a) how language is used as a cultural resource and practice, and (b) how language is viewed as a powerful tool to view and understand the worldview and philosophy of a particular society.

The African personal name system and its practices is a marker of people's beliefs, ideology, religion, culture, philosophy and thought. These names are best understood and analyzed if one has insight into the language and culture of Africans.

Africans believe that there is some inherent power and linkage in names, and expect the behavior of those who bear them to reflect these personal names, either positively or negatively. The individual's name is of concern to the society as a whole, for the individual performs and participates in society.

It is also possible for a person to accumulate other names, baptismal names, as she/he grows up in the society. I have argued that if multiple names are taken through honorable means then it is appropriate to the status and the social standing of the person within that society. This paper covers an important area of African culture, the acquisition of personal names, and one that should not be ignored in any sociolinguistic or anthropological study.

From this exposition of the philosophy behind personal names, it is clear that the various ways through which a name manifests itself are interconnected. This is in contrast to Western tradition where names appear to be merely labels or tags for identification.

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