

The American Naming Revolution

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It is not known when humans began using names, though the practice certainly extends far back into prehistory. Our most ancient texts contain examples of names.

All cultures use names, though naming customs vary greatly from people to people. In some cases, names are very simple, perhaps even unwed to a surname. Other cultures assign very complex names to the newly born, names that merge pedigree and history, even location or trade. Names can even identify the generation of the bearer, or the order in which siblings were born.

A name is a powerful component of who we are. It is personal, it identifies us. It is the sound to which we respond. It carries information about our past and can influence our future. It is not all of who we are, and yet we are someone quite different when it changes.

The names chosen for children often reflect parents' values and tastes, as well as dreams and ambitions for the child. Most always, it's a very heartfelt and noncommercial choice. And yet a wealth of social information is communicated by the choice of a name.

For example, according to economists Steven Levitt of the University of Chicago (author of *Freakonomics*) and Roland Fryer of Harvard University, American blacks and whites chose similar names for their babies until the 1970s, when hospitals began noticing a rise in unique and so-called "black" names such as Ebony, and Darnell.

The racial divide is now so wide, observed Levitt and Fryer in a study published in 2004, that 40 percent of all African-American babies born in California are given a name that doesn't appear on even a single white baby's birth certificate. According to the authors, the patterns in the data appear most consistent with a model in which the rise of the Black Power movement altered how blacks perceived their identities.

Likewise, movies, celebrities, and other cultural trends have an impact on the popularity of certain names. Cullen, a surname from the wildly popular Twilight book and movie vampire series, has soared in popularity in recent years. The leading choice of baby names the past two years, according to the Social Security Administration, were Isabella and Jacob, both names that just happen to belong to main characters in the same series.

Are people really naming their children after vampires? Or might this just be a case of wagging the dog? Isabella had been trending steadily upward since the 1990s, and Jacob has held the top spot for more than a decade, thus predating 2005's Twilight. Might author Stephenie Meyer just have chosen names that were already soaring in the popular conscience?

Just as fashion and music trends come and fade, so do baby names. Girls born in the 1980s were given bouncy, bubbly monikers that ended in y or ie: Brittany, Tiffany, Katie, Ashley. Today, nearly half of the 20 most popular girl names end in the soft, more feminine a ending: Isabella, Emma, Olivia, Sophia.

Similarly, boy names have trended in recent years toward two-syllable names that end in the en sound: Ethan, Jayden, Aiden, Logan, Nathan, Dylan, Evan, and Brayden.

And then there is the widely noticed trend towards originality in naming. Names never previously heard of, spellings never previously seen, the unusual has become usual, and not just among babies of celebrities. We're clearly in the middle of a societal naming revolution. But is this a good thing, and what might it mean?

Psychologist Jean Twenge of San Diego State University studies baby naming. In her analysis of the first names of 325 million American babies born 1880 to 2007, she found parents, beginning when baby boomers came on the scene, increasingly giving their children less common names, suggesting a growing interest in uniqueness and individualism.

Reviewing Social Security Administration records, Twenge discovered that common names became steadily less popular from 1950 to 2007, with an unremitting decrease after 1983 and the greatest rate of change during the 1990s.

Here's a striking play with numbers: in the 1950s, the top 25 most common boys' names and the top 50 girls' names accounted for half of babies born. These days, those top names are given to far fewer babies. You'd have to include the 134 most popular boys' names and the top 320 girls' names to cover half of all babies born each year.

Parents today are putting a much higher premium on distinctiveness. The uptick in unusual baby names and diversity over the past 50 years, especially over the past 20, seems to indicate a cultural change in which Americans now place a greater emphasis on individuality and standing out, and a lesser on collectivity and fitting in.

One could make a compelling argument that a similar shift has occurred in our politics, and our media.

There are positive sides to individualism, seen also in our politics and media in recent decades, such as less prejudice and more tolerance for minority groups. When individualism is carried too far, however, the result is narcissism. And when it's carried too far on a societal level, the result is a dulled sense of collective responsibility.

"It remains to be seen whether having a unique name necessarily leads to narcissism later in life," Twenge observes. "If that unique name is part of a parent's overall philosophy that their child is special and needs to stand out and that fitting in is a bad thing, then that could lead to those personality traits."

There are other factors likely playing a role in the American naming revolution. The ubiquity of media in our lives – we're vastly more tethered and immersed than ever before – exposes us to a wider variety of name options. The electronic ocean in which we all swim – or simply tread water – perhaps also makes us search for ways to stand out, and for our children to stand out, in order that we not feel so small and insignificant.

Additionally, the advent of name statistics has undoubtedly swayed naming trends. Only recently has the Social Security Administration made naming data available, and accessible online. This has had an enormous effect. Today there's a sort of reverse competitiveness that nobody wants their child to be number one. Hence baby names have become more diverse and numerous.

Naming a child used to be an easier decision. The only tough part was to avoid saddling a kid with a name or initials that provoked derision.

Now parents must set out from the pink starting line with a compass to name their child something south of popular, and north of weird. It's a difficult nine-month journey, fraught with obstacles social and sentimental.

The idea of your name as a unique signifier that severs you from the crowd – that's a new idea in American, and perhaps human, history. Time will tell whether our massed strive for individual distinctiveness reflected the best in us, or the worst.