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**Names in Psychological Science: Investigating the Processes of Thought Development  
and the Construction of Personal Identities**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the name as an issue of interest in the psychology field. In thinking about the role played by names for some of the most important approaches on the psychology panorama, it has been found that the analysis of names can be used as an instrument for the investigation of thought formation processes, or as an element in the process of constructing personal identity. In the first case, the focus is on the so-called “common” names, which designate objects; in the second case, instead, it is on people’s given names and on the way they are perceived by their bearers and those who surround them. We have examined both domains, since it is essential to understand how the psychological concepts related to names develop in children’s minds, if we aim to grasp their importance as designators of people’s internal and external realities. Lastly, we have proposed our own view of the person's name, linked to the relational systems perspective which essentially sees the name as a signifier or "representative" of the child-parent relationship , while the “relationship” is the signified.

**Keywords:** names, nominal realism, given name, identity

The aim of this study is to analyze the role played by names for some of the most important approaches on the psychology panorama, before providing our own concept of the personal name linked to the relational systems perspective. Foregoing results show that the name can be analyzed as an instrument for the investigation of thought formation processes, or as an element in the process of constructing personal identity. In the first case, the focus is on the so-called “common” name, which designates objects; in the second, instead, it is on the person’s proper name and on the way it is perceived by the person bearing it and by the people with whom he/she comes into contact. Both domains have been examined, since it is essential to understand how the psychological concept related to the name develops in the child’s mind if we are to grasp the importance it assumes as designator of the reality both external and internal to the subject.

The first part of our contribution concerns the use of names as instruments for investigating the processes of thought formation, by analyzing the theorizations given by two historical representatives of Developmental Psychology: Piaget and Vygotskij. Both scholars define “nominal realism” but while Piaget ascribes said phenomenon to the cognitive structures that characterize children’s thought at 5-6 years of age, Vygotskij considers realism by referring to children’s historical and cultural world. A further reference to the realism of words can be found in the organismic theory of symbolization, which will be discussed in depth in the paragraph dedicated to Werner and Kaplan. These authors believe that said realism is determined by the dynamic and syncretic characterization of infants’ self-perception, which would not allow them to distinguish between emotional and sensory facts.

The first part concludes itself with the references to the authors who based themselves on the theory of metalinguistic competence. They explain nominal realism by observing that the discovery of an object’s name occurs jointly with the discovery of its characteristics,

which, in turn, pervade the children's attention and bring them around to thinking that the object's name is determined by its own qualities.

Conversely, in the second part of our paper, we will concentrate on given names, which differentiate themselves from common names because their referents are subjects and not objects. We propose a short review of perspectives and authors who state that names given at birth have a profound impact on a person's psychology, conditioning his or her behavior and choices.

Each of the articles commented on seems to lead the reader to see the personal name as a magic element capable of determining the life choices of the person who bears it. Every scholar proposes his/her own specific definition of this phenomenon, and its different declinations: Stekel (1911) spoke of "the obligation of names", Berne (1972) insisted on the importance of names in the "script of life", while Andolfi (1966), Bowen (1978), and Dogana (1993) state that name act as a sort of "psychic genogram". Approaching the issue within the confines of the relational systems perspective, we can see that in actual fact the name possesses no magic but can affect the individual as if it were magic. The name contains the blessing or the curse of the parents, auguring well or badly for the way their child will grow up and face his life. The name is therefore a signifier or "representative" of the child-parent relationship, while the "relationship" is the signified.

Before proposing our own personal concept of names, we have briefly examined some theories that have been proposed by other schools of thought, both inside and outside the field of psychology. These reflections are necessary because the topic of names has been discussed by various disciplines, and it acquires different meanings and values that depend on the perspective that one chooses to adopt.

**The name as an instrument for the investigation of thought formation processes**

**The cognitive approach to the study of names: J. Piaget.**

Jean Piaget (1926) was one of the first scholars to delve into childhood conceptions on the origin and nature of names. Through the study of names, he tried to identify the cognitive processes guiding the activity of thinking and its development.

In investigating the origin of names, he asked children the following questions: “Are names in the subject or the object? Are they signs or things?” (1929, p. 61). Using the clinical method, he reached some interesting conclusions. The child’s thinking has “every appearance of being exclusively realistic” (1929, p. 33). The expression ‘nominal realism’ refers to the child’s tendency, especially the pre-school-aged child, to identify the name of the object with the thing itself. For the child, name and object cannot be distinguished; the name therefore conceals the very essence of the object. As far as the origin of names is concerned, they are therefore emanations of the things themselves. After the age of six, names are no longer in the objects, but were invented by God or the earliest people, that is, by those who created these objects. Finally, after the age of nine to ten, the child believes that names may have been given to things by anyone at all. In short, in the first stage, up to the age of six, the name is in the thing. In the second stage, the name is given by the creator of the things. In the third stage, the name becomes a pure sign.

Piaget highlights the child’s inability to dissociate the name from its object; things exist because they have a name, and to illustrate this he cites an episode reported by a colleague: “A little girl of 9 asked: “Daddy, is there really God?” The father answered that it wasn’t very certain, to which the child retorted: “There must be really because he has a name!”” (1929, p. 67).

Furthermore, investigating the places of names, and asking children where names are, Piaget receives answers which yet again reflect the characteristics of nominal realism. In the first stage (5-6 years), names are in the things themselves; in the second stage (7-8 years), the

name can be anywhere, or nowhere; in the third stage (9-10 years), the name is ideally situated in thought. In sum, names come directly from objects, from their meaning, having characteristics and properties of objects. Later, they are detached from objects, and can float in the air or be present only when uttered. Finally, names come to reside in people's minds, and blend with thought itself. The name therefore migrates from the world of things to the world of ideas.

Lastly, to demonstrate the value of names in the small child, Piaget asks whether the names of objects could be changed. Here is an example of the response of a seven-year-old: "Fert (7): "Are you called Albert? – Yes. – Could you have been called Henry? Would it have been just the same? – No. – Could the Salève have been called "Jura" and the Jura "Salève"? – No. – Why not? – Because they are not the same thing. – And could the moon have been called "sun" and the sun "moon"? – No. – Why not? – Because the sun makes it warm and the moon gives light." (1929, p. 81).

It is not before the age of ten that names cease to be somehow linked to their objects; however, it is not until the age of twelve that they can completely lose the value of some sort of connection with ideas referring to things, and acquire that of a pure sign.

Although the main interest of Piaget's work is not the study of names as such, but the identification of the cognitive mechanisms underlying thought, it remains an essential reference point for those desiring to study the psychological meanings of which names are the custodians. The Swiss scholar did not divide names into "common names" and "person's proper names"; he never felt such a distinction was important for assessing the overcoming of nominal realism. To understand possible differences between the names of things and those of people, specific studies are needed, with the aim not of studying thought processes, but the processes that constitute the individual's identity.



**The cultural-historical perspective applied to the study of names: L. S. Vygotskij.**

Vygotskij, too, studies the relation existing between word and thought, elements that he considers independent. For him, verbal thought is the product of their union. Like Piaget, he assesses the relation between the name and the object it denotes, in the light of nominal realism. As regards words, Vygotskij, however, distinguishes two lines of development: the semantic and the phonetic. He explains that in the early stages of language acquisition the child does not distinguish the semantic aspect from the phonetic one but during its development becomes aware of the specific nature of each of them, essential for the process of semantization of thought in language to come about (1962).

This means that until 5-6 years of age, there is no awareness of the arbitrariness of the relation between name and object, so the child does not distinguish verbal forms from meanings. Furthermore, not only the name or the word, but also the phonetic structure itself would be seen by the child as a part and a property of the thing itself. In short, for the child, verbal meaning and object on the one hand, meaning and the word's sound on the other, cannot be distinguished.

However, Vygotskij's vision presents some reflections that make it different from Piaget's. Development for Piaget is conceived as a succession of mental structures, tending towards an increasing equilibrium between organism and environment; therefore it is the cognitive structures, which are predominant in a certain phase of development, that determine nominal realism. By contrast, for Vygotskij, nature and culture are interwoven; realism is seen in reference to the child's historical-cultural world and to the instruments and resources the child has available.

Social interaction, in particular child-adult interaction, would be what underlies mental functioning, following a movement from the outside inwards. Thought and language, for the Russian scholar, are two processes that do not coincide, and both have social origins.

Up to the age of three, the child uses a socialized language with an elementary, though still indistinct, verbal function, both of language “for oneself” (internal or egocentric), and of language “for others” (external). At this age, the child is not able to think words, nor to operate with the images evoked by words, but needs to utter them and to do things with words. It is only the child’s interaction and dialogue with the adult that gives language a verbal meaning, a sound and an object reference, all elements conceived at the outset as an undifferentiated whole. Therefore for Vygotskij, too, the name is experienced by the child as part and property of the thing signified.

Internal and external are not separated, in Vygotskij’s mind, by barriers (Rogoff, 1990), but are two realities that naturally blend in social exchanges and in the sharing of experiences. Egocentric language can therefore be considered an original form of both external and internal language, and this internal language is supposedly a shortened personal version of the external one. In the development of external language, thought is transformed into words, becoming concrete and objective; internal language on the other hand, represents the passage from a form of social activity to a form of completely individual activity.

Towards the age of seven, egocentric language dwindles and there is the progressive development of a language that in its functional and structural features is completely shared. This phenomenon also marks the end of the earliest phase of nominal realism.

### **The Organismic approach: H. Werner and B. Kaplan.**

Reference to the surrounding context does not appear only in Vygotskij’s historical-cultural approach. Werner & Kaplan (1963), in fact, deal with the issue of the formation of symbols in a holistic-organismic theoretical framework, where the surrounding context and the organism’s purposes intermingle and determine the properties and functional meaning of each activity. For these two authors, as previously for Piaget and for Vygotskij, the need for

knowledge is man's typical and exclusive characteristic and to know his world, or rather to fulfil his capacity for knowledge, man needs the tool of symbols. Now the necessary condition for mental representations to emerge is the development of the semiotic function, which manifests the ability to use a signifier to evoke a signified. This function supposedly appears in the second year of life, marking the transition from the sensorimotor phase to the preoperative stage.

Werner and Kaplan, however make a distinction between symbols and signs: on the functional plane, signs stimulate or inhibit an action, and symbols represent the events; at the level of genesis, unlike signs and signals which have highly practical functions for small children, symbols emerge "from cognitively oriented rather than pragmatically oriented operations" (1963, 14). The authors' argument is that, when a symbol is used to "represent" an object there is an analogy or some kind of correspondence between symbol and referent, and that therefore the structure of the symbolic vehicle represents, or almost reveals, the connotative structure of the referent itself. Such correspondence would not be objectively perceptible but would be established through a conscious act.

"The members of a speech community articulate a linguistic form so that it bears a structural correspondence to its significate" (1963, p. 15).

For Werner and Kaplan, linguistic forms are not arbitrary and the relation between signifier and signified is therefore not an outcome of conventional connections; on the contrary, the shapes of words are constructed on systematic principles.

Going beyond language's function of merely indicating the authors take into consideration some factors that normally seem to be ignored or neglected, such as the expressiveness of objects, in the sense of the dynamic characterization of primitive perception in which physiognomic qualities belong to objects just as geometric qualities do; the exaggeration of expressive qualities, meaning the possibility of perceiving, in dissimilar

objects, the same dynamic-expressive qualities; the intentional act of denotational reference, which establishes a symbolic relation between two elements; the creation of a semantic correspondence, which establishes the correspondence between the meanings expressed by the symbolic vehicle and the connotative structure of the referent. The mere sound has no symbolic value; the term needs to evoke in the individual a “postural-affective” state, schematically organized so as to be transformed from a simple sign into a symbolic vehicle.

Following the organismic theory of symbolization, Werner and Kaplan reconsider the problem of symbolic realism and, more specifically, of the “realism of words”. Using words as if they were concrete objects of action is a common phenomenon both in primitive cultures and in the small child, as soon as it starts to use language. As Piaget showed, words do not distinguish themselves from the referents, but in fact contain the qualities of the referent and convey its substance. Piaget explained this phenomenon as the outcome of a primitive confusion between the inner, or psychic, world and the external, or physical, world. It is only later, within the single undifferentiated reality, that through action, the child establishes the limits between his “I” and the outer world. For their part, Werner & Kaplan explain the magic use of words, in which the word takes on the nature of the designated object, as a result of the structural and dynamic characteristics informing both the symbolic vehicle and the referent. For the two authors, the participation of the vehicle in the object’s attributes can only come about if “the material comprising the vehicle is structured to possess or embody those features which are apprehended in the object” (1963, p. 36).

In brief, the presence of certain characteristics pervades both the symbolic form and the object represented and leads to the symbol being treated not as the representative of the object, as happens at a mature level of development, but as identical or belonging to the same class of object. The whole activity of symbolization therefore involves organismic activity and originates in the syncretic character of primitive organization and above all in the

dynamic characterization of the small child's perception, so sensorial and emotive events are inseparably fused. The child does not know the world simply by acting on it, but through the intimate relation existing between a child's mode of physiognomically perceiving the shapes of the world and therefore words too, and specific postural, corporeal and affective states of organization. Consequently, symbols are not arbitrary signs, "but dynamic representational forms" (1963, 36).

Werner and Kaplan's organismic theory offers one of the most exhaustive and innovative explanations of the creation of a symbol, with reference both to the appearance of the symbolic vehicle and to the nature of the relation between the symbol and what is designated. However, what remains unclear is the transition from the child's pre-symbolic world, essentially made up of "action-objects", to a world of "objects", in which organismic states (sensory, motor, affective) become the tools used by the child to take possession of the characteristics of objects. The shift from reacting-to-objects to reflecting-on-objects is attributed by the authors to the postulated appearance of the need for knowledge.

Now, wanting to explain a developmental transformation always marks the limitation of all psychological theories; thus in ontogenesis there reappear the dilemmas present in phylogenesis, namely how to explain the great changes that have come about in the species, by going beyond a mere narrative description. It has been suggested that in man there exists an epistemophilic instinct (Hutten, 1962), but postulating and making hypotheses is not explaining. A gap remains in this "genetic transformation of purposes", nevertheless, organismic theory proves to be the one that best deals with and responds to the factor related to the expressiveness of objects, and more generally, to the problems posed by phonetic symbolism; conceptualizations put forward by Sapir (1929), who indicated a special relation between signifier and signified, based on the expressive qualities possessed by certain phonemes to express some of the properties of the designated objects.

**Name and metalinguistic competence.**

A long journey has therefore been undertaken in order to conceive of language and, first of all, of the connection between symbol and referent, between names and things. Today, we have come a long way from the position of Watson, who saw language and thought as identical, and reduced mental processes to motor habits of the larynx (1913). The terrain to be explored for the most recent research is meta-semantic competence (Olson, 1983), defined as the capacity to detach words from their referent, a condition that involves the acquisition of awareness on the part of the individual of the arbitrariness of the linguistic code, and that therefore enables the individual to develop the ability to manipulate words (Gombert, 1990).

The manipulation of words, however, is preceded by a long, complex inter-mental activity between mother and child, who achieves language use through the repetition of moments of attention shared with the mother towards objects. Along with the object, in fact, whether the mother points to it or hands it to the child, she is not only offering a toy, but also a name. Language itself begins with the discovery that each thing has a name: this discovery seems to give the child intense pleasure. From research conducted on the development of language, it emerges that the motivation to learn the names of objects and people comes from the interest that the world of things arouses in the child. Language is therefore directed to objects rather than to the expression of subjective states. According to Nelson (1973, 1974) the child first learns the names of objects it can grasp, eat or wear; it is therefore the function of the objects that prompts the naming. According to Clark (1973), on the other hand, learning the first words is determined by the objects' perceptual attributes. At any rate, the two positions are not necessarily in contrast since the child points to and names the object which it practices on. The child is not initially attracted to the objects for their function but above all due to their shape, but it does not separate perceptive from functional information: a

spoon serves as much for “beating” as for “making a noise”. The acquisition of language therefore goes from the manipulation of objects to the manipulation of words. To be able to name, the child must first of all discover that things have names; later, that only some objects have the same name; lastly that names serve to communicate (Bates, Benign, Bretherton, Camaioni & Volterra, 1979).

The discovery of the name of an object occurs together with the discovery of the attributes of the object; for the child the reason for the name therefore cannot be conventional, but must necessarily lie in the qualities of the object. It cannot be ignored that the name is thought of initially through the object’s perceived attributes, but names are studied and assessed exclusively in view of the meaning and therefore of communication.

Werner and Kaplan’s teaching has therefore prompted questions and new avenues of investigation. Instead of the symbol based on a semantic correspondence between the vehicular form and the referential object, what was preferred was a symbol reduced to arbitrary sign, devoid of any intrinsic value. Today, the neo-Piagetian constructivist paradigm is one of the most important reference frameworks for research into the development of metalinguistic awareness. Research continues, in line with Piaget’s thinking, to focus both on the different levels of achieving awareness of locutionary activity, correlated to the respective levels of language knowledge (Bonnet & Tamine-Gardes, 1984), and on aspects of pragmatic and interpersonal awareness (Berthoud-Papandropolou, Kilcher, & Veneziano, 1989).

The literature in a cognitivist key is also important. Karmiloff-Smith (1992) elaborated a model called “Representational Redescription” (RR), a process enabling the information contained in the mind to acquire clarity for the mind.

A different model of metalinguistic development is proposed by Bialystok (1991), who identifies two fundamental components in governing the various uses of language: the first is the representation of linguistic knowledge, the second is the control of language

processing. Every component can find actualization at different levels of awareness, so the first level may be organized in a limited way, and the second may present an unconscious control over language use.

Another object of investigation are the grammatical, semantic and phonological aspects of metalinguistic development (Gombert, 1990); the exact age when children grasp the arbitrariness of referential relations is also studied (Markman, 1976); at what age the distinction between name and word occurs (Ferreiro & Vernon, 1992), between common name and proper name (Grazzani Gavazzi, Brockmeier, Groppo, Carruba, Gonfalonieri, & Ornaghi, 1997); the origin of names of objects of different classes (Homer, Brockmeier, Kamawar & Olson, 1998), the evolution of writing proper names (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982), the cultural differences in the development of linguistic awareness (Romney & d'Andrade, 1964).

The study of given names has also merged into the broader research field related to children's metacognitive and metalinguistic competence, where it has been discovered that given names have their own specificity and cannot be reduced to common names.

The proper name as referent does not have an object but a subject. Now, names generally do not possess the object's physical qualities (Piaget, 1926), but they have a social value and assign social properties to objects (Vygotskij, 1934): finally, in virtue of their expressive characteristics (Werner, 1940), they give the object meanings marked by a dynamic conception of reality. In the case of people's names, of primary importance is the role and the function that they can fulfil in constructing the individual's identity. When the child learns its own name it names the substantial entity that identifies it to itself as "I". It is by acquiring a name, therefore, that the "I" acquires a "face" and a social dimension. The name is the objectivization of the I, while remaining part of the Self, as the immutable part which represents an individual, identifies it before others and distinguishes it from others.



The choice of name may therefore reflect family dynamics, social values, cultural influences, family expectations, which often raise problems that go beyond metalinguistic competences. Last but not least, the name is a concentration of different elements that highlight relational aspects that can affect the quality of relations between parents and child, between individual and individual.

### **Names as important elements in the process of constructing personal identities**

#### **The psychodynamic approach to the study of names: W. Stekel and E. Berne.**

The first psychodynamically-oriented author to deal with names was Wilhelm Stekel. He revealed, in a classical psychoanalytic perspective, the existence of significant relations between names (or surnames) and some aspects of the individual's personality, going so far as to postulate the binding power of names in determining individuals' professional choices and character traits (1911).

Eric Berne, the founder of Transactional Psychology, also considers names as important elements in the construction of personal identities, arriving to the conclusion that they contribute to the creation of a people's *life scripts* (1972). Every individual organizes and plans his existence; the script is exactly what one has been determined to do in life since childhood. It is therefore a life plan that somehow affects one's choices and one's destiny. Among the various elements that make up the creation of the life script (genetic heritage, experiences, external circumstances), there are the influences that the child undergoes; now, the name, being an "indicator" of existential models, can be a decisive factor in planning what the individual thinks will happen to him during his existence.

A name can determine a script in four different ways, which parents can foresee and control, namely: deliberately, if the name is chosen with reference to a particular figure or ideology; accidentally, when the name loses its cultural references due to the emigration of the family group; carelessly, if the name is reduced to a shortened form and inevitably, when it is a surname.

Besides affecting occupational choices, names can become something the bearer boasts about, or, in cases where they have an undesirable sound, they can offer an unpleasant image of the self, and again, they can offer the opportunity to be ridiculed by others. For the first time, Berne introduces the analysis of the patients' name and surname as a phase in therapy, casting light on life scripts, including those of the parents and on the story that inevitably led to the birth of the individual.

### **The systemic-relational approach: M. Andolfi and M. Bowen.**

For Andolfi, the name affects the person like a kind of psychic genogram, conveying orders that in certain conditions may come into effect and determine the individual's experiences. The author argues that the name cannot be regarded as a distinctive neutral label since it influences the behavior, choices and experiences of the individual who bears it, proving to act profoundly in the person's psychology (1996).

The name brings with it messages both for the person and for others and its choice reveals ideological motives, myths, rules and family dynamics. Andolfi sees the choice of name as a genuine test to gather a range of information "on the quality of the couple's relationship". The parents' agreement or disagreement on the child's name becomes an important clue to identify family processes and strategies in coping with critical moments.

Bowen, too, refers to the conceptual schema of the genogram, in which he claims one can identify the passing on of family traits from one generation to another, to be regarded as

generalizable basic models (Bowen, 1978). Naming, in fact, supposedly follows precise rules, guaranteeing continuity, both in a temporal and a social sense, of the descendants and ideally links ancestors and descendants.

For this reason, Frith (2008) states that family ties are customarily explicated through surnames. The author reports that surname changes do not occur often in Western society, although there are some cases in which they can be expected. It is good to cite two of these instances because they allow us to consider all the possible aspects that names can embody as elements of family continuity.

Both cases are linked to changes in family arrangements. In the first case, surnames are changed as the result of an adoption process. The non-biological son or daughter becomes part of the family and acquires the surname of one of the adoptive parents (usually the father's because, even if this is not requested by law, the practice of assigning the paternal surname remains the most common in our society). In the second case, children's surnames may change as a consequence of the divorce, and subsequent remarriage, of the father, mother, or both.

### **Names and Communication theory: F. Dogana.**

Fernando Dogana judges the name from the standpoint of communication theory and interprets it as a message. For Dogana, too, once the name is given it acts as a sort of psychic genogram, a sign containing information for the subject and for others (1993). The choice of name therefore becomes important, always motivated by a reference to the conditions at birth, a significant social event, a cultural element or to a wish for the newborn baby's future.

According to Dogana, such beliefs and motivations governing the choice of name have not completely disappeared from our society but survive, though in a veiled form. Accordingly, the tendency to perpetuate certain names in the family is considered an attempt

to consolidate the continuity and identity of the family group. The giving of a saint's name, on the other hand, contains the implicit request for heavenly protection. Finally, names of historical or show-business figures imply a wish for success in the child's life.

There are also punitive names, which clearly reveal the parents' message of rejection, discontent or disinterest towards the child. Dogana clarifies the concept by telling of the case of a young girl referred to specialists by the school in a state of serious psychological prostration. Her surname was Troia (Italian for "slut"), but to make matters worse, the parents had given her the first name of "Vera" ("true" in Italian). The problem arose from the fact that after giving her that name, the parents opposed the girl's request to change it and she suffered immensely, since as a minor she needed her parents' permission to change her name (1993).

When faced with the message conveyed by their name, according to Dogana, individuals can adopt three different attitudes: fulfil it, oppose it, or succumb to it.

The message can be fulfilled with the mechanism of identification. Thanks to this mechanism, in fact, the individual can develop temperament traits or interests that conform to the meaning expressed by their name. Referring to the literature produced, Dogana gives the example of three researchers in animal behavior whose names were Swan, Finch and Heron (Davis, 1974). In such cases, the choice of profession seems to have been motivated by a perception of congruence with their own names.

The second modality of reacting to the content of one's name is to oppose it. The subject judges the message negatively and opposes it, triggering a mechanism of "reactive formation". In other words, when faced with a name whose meaning is regarded as inappropriate, the individual tends to react, developing a personality with diametrically opposed characteristics (Murphy, 1957).

Names can also affect individuals from the outside, through stereotypes and preconceptions triggered in others, which are inevitably reflected on the subject. In other

words, they can trigger favorable or unfavorable reactions on the part of the environment towards the person.

A great deal of research uses the parameter of how widespread a personal name is to assess its influence on social variables, such as the perceived social class (Joubert, 1994; 1996), as well as personal variables like perceived gender adequacy (Joubert, 1995; 1996), the personality characteristics of the person bearing the name (Schonberg & Murphy, 1973) and their social adjustment (Hartman, Nicolay, & Hurley, 1968). Other studies focus instead on the name typology, distinguishing between names more used in the past and more current names (Christopher, 2006; Young, Kennedy, Newhouse, Browne, & Thiessen, 1993), but they all show that people infer a great deal of information starting from the name of the unknown individual, also resorting to stereotypes and prejudices.

A name considered beautiful leads to a better assessment of its owner's looks (Garwood, Cox, Kaplan, Wasserman, & Sulzer, 1980), a higher attribution of positive impressions (Busse & Love, 1973), a higher opinion of personality characteristics (Garwood, Sulzer, Levine, Cox, & Kaplan, 1983); it also favors popularity amongst peers (Busse & Seraydarian, 1979; McDavid & Harari, 1966); makes teachers better disposed towards pupils, with reflections on school success (Dogana, 1977; Harari & McDavid, 1973; Skinner, 1984).

Further proof of how names can trigger favorable or unfavorable reactions towards the person on the part of the environment comes from research designed to analyze the consequences of having an uncommon personal name. It suggests that personal names are liked in direct proportion to their familiarity: in general, more familiar names seem to be liked more than less common names which arouse greater antipathy (Colman, Hargreaves, & Sluckin, 1980; West & Shults, 1976).

### Discussion

The reflection on the value of names has distant origins. Classical philosophers had proposed various theories on this phenomenon, well before it became a topic of interest for psychologists. There is an actual Platonic conception of names that can be derived from the contents of *Cratylus*, portions of the *Sophist*, the excursus on knowledge in the *Seventh Letter* (342a8-344d2), and from a passage of the *Laws* (895d 1-9). However, there are various interpretations of this conception. The excerpt from *Cratylus* that states that, for the purpose of knowing things, it is better to consider the things themselves and not their names (here intended as images of things), seems to be taken literally by the majority of the interpreters. In doing so, they would believe that, by being imitations of essences, names represent an estrangement from Ideas, which are the true essences of things (Licata, 2002). In contrast with these interpreters, Florenskij elaborated his theory on names by considering the Platonic origins of the realistic conception of language (Lingua, 2002).

Florenskij's analysis of *Cratylus* made him conceive an opposite interpretation of the ideas expressed in said dialogue. Florenskij claimed that, in the dialogue, Plato states that the knowledge of names also entails the knowledge of things, since names express the nature of things and not just their conditioned signs. In these terms, Florenskij's reading of *Cratylus* would appear to draw the Platonic conception of names closer to that of children during the "nominal realism" phase. As it has been pointed out in cognitive psychology, in fact, nominal realism would appear to define the preschool-aged children's tendency to identify the objects' names with the objects themselves. Similarly, Vygotskij's Cultural-historical perspective assumes that before age 5-6, children are unaware of the randomness of the relationship between name and object, that is, they do not discern between verbal forms and meanings.

Florenskij's contribution on the value of names is not limited to their sole Platonic conception. To the contrary, the Russian scholar's theorization of names is quite vast, and it includes theological argumentations in addition to philosophical ones. We do not mean to examine said conception in this paper, but it is important to focus on what the author has expressed on the elaboration of consciousness (2003), which he believes to take place in the union between the person who acquires knowledge and that which must be known. Florenskij believes that, in the act of knowledge, the subject cannot be separated from the object, but that, instead, it is through that unity that the object is not destroyed by the subject, and the subject is not dissolved in the object of his or her knowledge. This argumentation appears to recall and point out the primitive confusion between the internal, psychic, world, and the external, physical, world described by Piaget, and called upon to explain the symbolic realism theorized by Werner and Kaplan.

However, one should not look to philosophy, but to social and cultural psychology if he or she seeks to integrate the description of given names that we have presented in the second part of our paper. In said part, we reported that Berne, Andolfi and Dogana give importance to the parents' choice of names. About which, Zittoun (2004) highlights that said choice has different outcomes depending on the meaning that the parents assign to a name.

There are four symbolic functions that can be associated to names:

First, names can be seen as signs of group or identity belonging. Second, they designate imaginary spaces, such as the fantasy, hopes, imagination, associated with a name, both in collective representation and in personal imaginaries. Third, names are symbolic objects with a sound, a rhythm, and a shape that can have bodily and affective prolongations. Fourth, they also might be associated with projects, or future representations of the child. (Zittoun, 2004, p. 10)

It is meaningful that the first functions listed by the author refer to the social context. Lieberman and Bell (1992) have also pointed out that process of name-giving has a social nature, but they added that:

The resulting pattern of name usage reflects the combined influence of the imagery associated with each name, the notions parents have about the future characteristics of their children, estimates of the response of others to the name, the awareness and knowledge of names through the mass media and other sources, parents' beliefs about what are appropriate children's names for persons of their status, and institutionalized norms and pressures. (p.514).

It clearly stands out that the social context, alongside the beliefs and expectations of the parents, plays an important role in influencing the choice of a name.

The relevance of name-giving and name-possession inside social contexts has emerged in various studies, which have observed that names and name-giving are strictly linked to cultural values (Alford, 1988; Goodenough, 1965; Lieberman & Bell, 1992; Rymes, 1996; Stahl, 1992; Su & Telles, 2007). This concept has been repeated recently by Kim and Lee, who have stated that “naming practices are part of cultural practices reflecting beliefs and values in a community” (2011, p.212). When discussing the relationship between humans and their social context by focusing on what can be revealed through names and name-giving processes, it is appropriate to remember Turner’s (1991) statement that individuals, in order to be a part of human society, must have names and that, since acquiring a given name is a fundamental prerequisite for becoming a member of society, names can be considered as acts of creation or external assignments of cultural identities.

However, the function of names cannot be confined to a cultural setting alone, for obvious reasons. As we have stated in the second part of our contribution, given names are a fundamental element in the process of constructing personal identities.



A name arouses in its owner a lived experience that can have various affective nuances. We believe that seeing a simple message in the name may or may not trigger certain psychic mechanisms. A name can be liked or disliked, and this does not depend so much on its meaning or its pleasant sound, but on the de-coding and interpretation of its properties.

In other words, it is not enough to reveal the existence of a link between a name and a choice of profession (Stekel, 1911; Abraham, 1911), or between a name and a specific scientific interest, as is pointed out by Davis (1974, 1978), because the name can be decisive, either as an element in the individual's identity, or as a motive underlying specific choices. The name can become a determining factor when an indicative relation is established between the name and its owner. In the terms of classical psychoanalysis, it could be said that if there is no investment of libido in the name, it remains a dead letter and does not become a living word.

We would like to pursue the discourse of the parents' choice of name and extend it in the light of the relational systems perspective. We specifically want to stress that what filters down into the name is the positive or negative fallout of the child-parent relationship. The name "communicates" the qualities of this relationship, and becomes its signifier.

The way the child deciphers and interprets his/her own name needs to be assessed. The deciphering is prompted by the attitudes the parents adopt and especially the opinions they express about the child's name; the interpretation on the other hand is inspired by the explanations given by the parents about the reasons for the choice, the beauty of the name, as well as the way the name is uttered and pronounced.

Adding the simple suffix <<Jr.>> to the son's name, in order to distinguish him from his father, according to Zweigenhaft and collaborators (1980), could indicate that the son's name is somehow lacking in comparison to the father's, conveying diminutive concepts (like

'little', 'minor'), and above all inculcating feelings of inadequacy. This is how Zweigenhaft *et al* explain the low scores obtained on a personality test by those called Junior.

There are therefore different ways of experiencing one's name: it can be felt to be *one's own*, that is, suited to one's personality; *not one's own*, that is, not felt to correspond to one's self-image and therefore to be the wrong name; lastly, one's name can be experienced as a *stigma*, which affects us as a person.

A name experienced as *appropriate* or *suitable* is felt by its owner to be representative of him/herself, and it is used in this way. Its value as a symbol is linked to the significance of the symbolic vehicle, as conceived by Werner & Kaplan, (1963), used to “represent” a referent. However, the correspondence between the <<vehicular structure >> and the <<connotational structure of the referent >> is not based on an objective analogy, and nor is it established intentionally, but is fantasmatizzata, as in the example of Carlo, reported by Dogana & Trisi (1977), who recognizes an analogy between his name and some features of his character, both hard, decided, and not accepting backchat.

The subject does not understand, but <<imagines>>a correspondence at the tactile level between the hardness of his name and the hardness of his personality. Therefore the name, seen as a symbolic vehicle, depicts and reveals the individual's personality. It is true that children soon learn the arbitrary nature of their names, which were chosen by their parents; however, names quickly acquire a “transactional” value between the pure world of the imagination, which animates children, and the objective world of the physical-geometrical reality (Winnicott, 1971), in which children move. To say, with Werner (1940), that our perception has dynamic characteristics which in adults are still found to a significant degree only in the artist, equates to describing the situation of intermediate experience that Winnicott tried to convey in his work. A personal name will never be perceived as equivalent to a common noun, which progressively loses its character of dynamicity, but will always be

seen in terms of physiognomy, because, first of all, it is a person's name and secondly because people are extremely expressive.

The *suitability* of the name is therefore not to be sought in a correspondence between the name's semantic content and the possible choices in the professional or amorous field. The name can only play a more or less important role but never one that is decisive or binding in the script of the individual's life. Instead, *suitability* has to be sought in a feeling of harmony between what the subject feels he/she is and what the subject feels the name itself communicates, in its cognitive and dynamic aspects.

A name that is *not one's own*, on the other hand, is experienced as a name that does not belong to us, that was given to us by mistake, or out of carelessness, or to “remember” the person to whom the name really belonged, as in the case of a dead brother. The name that is *not one's own* always reveals the existence of great conflicts in the family nucleus. It is often a family name not shared by both parents, or a name chosen or imposed by chance. The new-born baby may thus receive the name of the saint for the day he/she was born, of a show business star, or of a historical event. In such cases, the child senses a sort of lack of interest in his individuality; the name received is actually in honor of another person, or serves to express an ideology or a creed, which one day may lose its meaning or not be accepted.

Lastly, a name can become an authentic stigma, a sign that identifies us, revealing aspects of ourselves that we would rather keep hidden. We are not referring to punitive names; due to a good relationship after birth, the subject can be on good terms with his/her name, which in some cases may become something to be proud of. Instead, we are talking about names that show that the owner belongs to a certain social class, or to a geographical region, or comes from a foreign country. Behind the rejection of a name there is always the attempt to disown an emotional and cognitive self-image, which is not felt to be appropriate

to one's <ideal I>. In such cases, in the name there is a genuine clash between what we are in virtue of that name and what we could be with another name.

In short, if we feel our name is appropriate to the image of our person, it arouses feelings of pride in us, while names seen as *not our own* tend to inspire feelings of anger and aggressiveness or of closure and inhibition in social relations. Lastly, names that stigmatize create feelings of embarrassment and shame in the individual. A name possesses no magic, but it can affect the individual as if it were magic. In actual fact it contains the blessing or the curse of the parents, auguring well or badly for the way their child will grow up and face his life. The name is therefore a signifier, "standing for" the child-parent relationship, while the "relationship" is the signified. What distinguishes the advantage or disadvantage of the name thus becomes the experience triggered in its owner.

Moreover, our name is the first information others receive about us and from which they can infer presumed characteristics that are not observable. The name therefore has a priority effect, in the sense that one immediately tends to attribute greater importance to the impression one forms of others during the first meeting than to impressions received during subsequent encounters.

The name reveals the person's characteristics and triggers prejudices towards him/her, arousing other people's judgements and predisposing them favorably or unfavorably. Many preconceptions revolve around names, since in our name there is often imprinted a code that identifies us as belonging to a sex, a social class, a political or religious creed, a geographical place, or a race; and if the name does not contain clear information, appearing ambiguous, bizarre and unusual, it is even more disturbing. The research carried out shows undeniably the role the name plays in triggering important psychic processes in personality formation. It is also a determining factor in favoring or inhibiting the individual's socialization.

### **Conclusions**

The present contribution has the merit of analyzing the value of names in Psychology from two different profiles: as instruments for investigating thought formation processes, and as elements in the process of constructing personal identities. This choice, however, has determined that the description of the various schools of thought inside both profiles had to be limited, due to lack of space. We were forced to sacrifice a more in-depth analysis of the different perspectives that we have reported, since our aim was to give the readers a summary of the different values of names, by discussing both common and given names. We also wanted to put forward a personal conception of the person's name. In our view the name plays a role of signifier or “representative” of the child-parent relationship, while the “relationship” is the signified. When dealing with the relational systems perspective, we introduced the importance of the process of choosing a name and its implications. The picture however needed to be completed, by illustrating the importance of the de-coding carried out by the child in view of the opinions of his/her name expressed by the parents and his/her interpretation of the parents' explanations about the reasons the name was chosen, the goodness of the name, as well as the way it is uttered and pronounced.

It must be noted that, since ancient times, the topic of names has been analyzed according to different theoretical approaches, ranging from Philosophy, to Anthropology, to Psychology, and other disciplines as well. The present contribution does not have the pretense of being exhaustive since, as we have pointed out, it refers only to psychological studies. Furthermore, its objective was to analyze but a few of the argumentations that have been proposed in said field. The focus was set on specific perspectives that had been chosen because they provided contrasting point of view and would consequently allow the reader to grasp the vastness of the arguments concerning the value of names from a psychological standpoint. We have cited a number of theories that belong to different research areas, for the

purpose of integrating and discussing the perspectives that we had decided to present, but plenty of others have not been discussed. We have left out a number of psychological theories concerning the link between given names and self-images both inside and outside individuals, as well.

We hope that a meta-analysis of the scientific literature concerning names might be published in the future, so as to supply us with a complete and exhaustive picture of the empirical and theoretical contributions that have already been presented. Clearly, this topic has assumed a great cognitive value and, given its vastness, it lends itself to multiple reflections. Names as instruments that must be acquired for the purpose of designating and recognizing the external reality, might inspire theorizations of a cognitive nature, while the research topic of given names can be investigated by various perspectives: psychodynamic, relational-systemic, social, cultural, etc.

We feel further studies should examine in greater depth the conception of names that we have proposed. The ancient Romans said *in nomine omen*, meaning that a presage is written in the name, thus indicating a different destiny for each name. However, from the research carried out, it seems that in the name there is much more than a mere augury. Paraphrasing the Latin expression, we could say *In nomine numen*, meaning that the name holds a divine will, and for the child the parents' will is divine. We believe that more than the name itself, the influential factor is the reason behind the choice of the name, for the name holds not a message, but an image. The name remains, at any rate, the only "part" of man that is immutable over time, and identifies the person more than his/her bodily image. We change only the voice in which we say our name, but never the feeling with which we declare it.

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