
Sociobiology and the Naming of Adopted and Natural Children

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A study of ninety-six adoptive families and one hundred and four nonadoptive families revealed that adopted children were significantly more likely to be named after a parent or relative than natural children were. When natural children were namesakes of relatives, they were more likely to be named after a patrilineal than a matrilineal relative, and boys were more likely to be namesaked than girls; neither was true of adopted children. The results are discussed in light of evolutionary theory, with naming seen as a form of parental input inversely related to the certainty of kinship between parent and child.

KEY WORDS: Naming; Adoption; Parental Investment; Evolutionary Theory.

SOCIOBIOLOGY AND THE NAMING OF ADOPTED AND NATURAL CHILDREN

Assigning a name to a child is loaded with fundamental social meaning" (Smith 1977, p. 3). Given the importance placed on the naming of children and the careful thought given to it by most parents, it is surprising that so little research has examined the factors that influence this early form of parenting behavior. In this paper, we will examine the naming strategies used by the parents of adopted and natural children in light of predictions derived from an evolutionary perspective in which naming is considered to be a form of parental investment.

Smith (1977) has traced three stages of "rules" that have developed about naming children in England and the United States from medieval times to the present. In the first of these stages, which Smith refers to as the *Medieval* period, living siblings could bear identical names and be distinguished by birth order modifiers of some sort. The second stage is the *Early*

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Modern period. In early modern families, living siblings could no longer share the same first names. However, if a child died his or her name would frequently be given to the next child born of the same sex. This was especially likely to occur when the dead child shared the same first name as a parent. In the *Modern* period, no two siblings are ever given the same first name, even if one of them has died. Smith believes that these changes in naming patterns reflect larger societal changes in which families moved from being totally nonchild centered to focusing greater attention on their children and prizing them more for their individuality.

In an extensive historical study of the naming patterns used in the town of Hingham, Massachusetts from the year 1640 until 1880, Smith (1977) concluded that the transition from the early modern to the modern period occurred during this time. He believes that in all periods the parent-child relationship was the key factor in determining the name of a child and that much can be learned about the history of this relationship by studying naming. According to Smith, naming a child for one's self expresses the significance of reproduction as a way of extending one's self and lineage into the future. Although such namesaking has a cost in the individuality of the child, it also favors the child with the parent's name in other ways. That naming practices reflect the relative importance of individuality within a group is reflected in Smith's data. In the 1600s, five out of eight of first sons and three out of four of first daughters shared first names with their parents, but by the late 1800s these proportions had dropped to two out of five and one out of six respectively. There was an especially sharp decline after 1840, a period of time that also coincided with the widespread introduction of middle names and a dramatic increase in the number of people legally changing their first names. Smith's evidence suggests that the use of middle names developed as a compromise response to the tension between traditional homage to lineage and the new quest for individuality.

While there was undoubtedly a decrease in namesaking (at least in Hingham) during the nineteenth century, the practice has always been common and remains so today. In Hingham, 49.5% of first sons born between 1861 and 1880 were named for a father or grandfather. More recent studies of naming have confirmed a continuing strong tendency toward naming children, especially male children, after close relatives (Furstenberg and Talvitie 1980; Rossi 1965). Taylor (cited by Smith 1977) found that 39.4% of white, first-born males born in Richmond, Virginia in 1913 were named for their fathers. In Richmond, this figure actually increased to 49% in 1930 before dropping to 37.6% in 1950 and 32.2% in 1968. Similarly, Rossi (1965) reports that 61% of children born to a sample of white middle-class women in Chicago were named for kin. A more in-depth study of naming was conducted by Furstenberg and Talvitie (1980). The Furstenberg and Talvitie study was a longitudinal study of 323 unmarried teenage mothers studied from the time of their pregnancy until their first child reached the age of five. When the children in this study were named after a relative, it was almost always the

father; almost half of these children also assume the father's last name, even when the parents were never married. Boys were especially likely to be named after fathers.

Smith's (1977) classic study in Hingham also demonstrated that naming patterns can provide a wealth of insights into other aspects of a society. For example, it was clear that names were selected for intra-family purposes and not for the convenience of the community at large since it was common for a child to receive the same first and last name as a pre-existing, unrelated other person living in the community. On the other hand, this was almost never done if a *related* person who was not a parent or grandparent already had that name. The lone exception to this rule was that daughters of different brothers were allowed to share first names. According to Smith, this was true because children in Hingham were viewed as "ultimate adults" and women were expected to change their surnames when they married. The incorporation of females into male lineages by marriage is evident in the Patriliney that dominated in Hingham. Between 1760 and 1780, first children were twice as likely to be named after paternal grandparents than they were to be named after maternal grandparents. This bias eroded somewhat in the nineteenth century and seemed to correspond to the importance attached to passing property on to the next generation. Naming followed the channels by which wealth was transmitted, and this usually occurred from the father's side. Wealthy parents were more likely to name children after themselves, were less likely to supply a middle name for a son named after a father, and showed a particularly strong patrilineal bias in naming. Poor families did *not* exhibit such a strong patrilineal bias in naming.

Furstenberg and Talvitie (1980) suggested that naming might indeed be a deliberate strategy used to strengthen the bond between the father and the child. They found that for children born out of wedlock, naming the child after the father proved to be a remarkably strong predictor of the quality of the long-term relationship between father and child as reflected by the amount of contact between them and the degree of financial assistance provided by the father. They also found that sons with the same names as their fathers were reported to have fewer behavioral problems such as bedwetting, temper tantrums, and general disobedience and they also scored higher on a standardized test of cognitive skills. Gutman (1977), in a study of naming patterns in Black American families between 1750 and 1925, also concluded that naming is an important means of fitting the child into the kinship network. Gutman also believes that naming reflects the exchange relationships among kin and may be used as a way of settling old debts or positioning for future favors.

Evolutionary theory provides a framework that suggests some predictions about the naming of children. At its core, evolutionary theory proposes that behavior has evolved to maximize each organism's inclusive fitness and to insure the propagation of its genes in subsequent generations (Wilson 1975; Rushton 1984). In many animals, parents expend considerable energy

and resources in an effort to increase their offspring's chances of surviving and reproducing. Trivers (1972) has referred to this as *parental investment*. Since the naming of a child does not incur obvious costs to the parent, the term *parental input* (Evans 1990) may be a more appropriate one for our purposes because this term refers to the care or resources provided to offspring without regard to the costs incurred by the parent.

Considered within an evolutionary framework, the naming of a child after a parent or relative can become a form of parental input which enhances the sense of relatedness experienced by the parents and other relatives. It may be that namesaking a child publicly advertizes the strength of the kinship between the child and its relatives, making the child instantly more similar, familiar, and hence, more likeable to potential caregivers.

A comparison of the names given to adopted and natural children is a logical step in exploring the relationship among attachment, relatedness, and the naming of children. At first glance, adoption would seem to be completely inconsistent with a conception of parental input as a way of insuring one's own genetic survival, but several authors (Barash 1977; Silk 1990; Thierry and Anderson 1986; West Eberhard 1975) have reviewed the research on human and nonhuman primates and proposed ways in which adopting children might enhance inclusive fitness. Adoption was more clearly advantageous in early human history than it is today. In early human groups, it was highly likely that adopted children would also be kin. In the few cases where they were not, the benefits of a child's labor to the parents, the opportunity to keep wealth within the kinship group, and the status and "genetic satisfaction" that may accompany the opportunity to engage in parenting behavior could still combine to make adoption an evolutionarily feasible strategy. Nevertheless, Barash (1977) has pointed out that among humans adoption is usually a second choice, and that in most cases humans prefer to bear and raise their own children.

The empirical work on human adoption was summarized by Kirk (1984), and much of what follows is derived from his review. While his conclusions are suggestive, it must be kept in mind that his data are limited in that they describe adoption only as it occurs in modern western nations. In this context, he notes that men feel less disappointed and deprived by childlessness than women, and that men are relatively hesitant in approaching adoption. These feelings appear to be driven by kinship sentiments. Typically, parents of adopters are even more hesitant about adoption, although they become more enthusiastic about the idea after the child actually arrives. Fathers of adoptive fathers (Kirk, p. 20, calls them "Guardians of the Bloodline") are especially resistant to the idea of adoption. Adoptive parents try as much as possible to simulate a natural-parent experience and there is a strong bias in the social work environment toward "hiding" the adoption by matching on as many phenotypic characteristics as possible. Accordingly, adoptive parents frequently report distress at being asked about a child's background or even at being asked by others if the child is adopted.

The adopted newborn is more of a stranger to the parents since the biological stages of development and the rituals surrounding the impending arrival of a biological child are often lacking. Kirk (1984) reports that mothers of adopted infants confide that they do not at first share the same feelings of warmth and maternal closeness reported by biological mothers. No studies have yet examined whether adoptive parents are more likely to engage in behaviors (such as namesaking a child) to compensate for the lack of genetic relatedness and guard against what Smith (1988) refers to as "differential parenting" and the tendency to dislike stepchildren and adopted children more than one's own natural children. As would be expected, there is ample evidence that parents invest more in biological children than in genetically unrelated children with whom they might be living, and children suffer more at the hands of adults who are not genetically related to them. In keeping with the notion of the "evil stepmother" who is a fixture in many fairy tales, research has demonstrated that the incidence of child abuse, incest, sexual abuse, and infanticide is indeed significantly higher for stepparents and other nonrelated adults than it is for biological parents, a finding that is consistent with a sociobiological perspective and in line with the data from other species of animals (Daly and Wilson 1984, 1987; Hausfater and Blaffer Hrdy 1984; Lenington 1981; Lightcap, Kurland, and Burgess 1982; Russell 1984; Smith 1988). It should be noted that none of this research has been done with adoptive parents.

If naming a child after a parent or relative is an attempt to increase perceptions of the child's genetic relatedness to the parents, it would be expected to occur most frequently in those situations where this need is strongest. In many respects, such a tactic would resemble the social deception and self-deception given such importance by sociobiologists such as Trivers (1985) and Krebs, Denton, and Higgins (1988). The naming of non-biological children after a parent or other relative can be understood as a means of protecting one's reproductive self-esteem and inducing others to treat the child as if it were in fact one's genetic kin; this, in turn, would reinforce and facilitate the parents' own parenting behaviors. The biological child is recognized at birth as a family member without qualification (Kirk 1984). Since the crucial goal of integrating the child into the kin group is especially difficult for adoptive parents, the naming of the child might take on special importance in reassuring both the child and its new relatives that there are no important differences between the child and its "kin." On the other hand, when genetic kinship is assured, the importance of the name given to the child decreases. Thus, it would be predicted that adopted children would be more likely than natural children to be named after a parent or relative. Given this orientation, predictions could also be made about the naming of natural children. While mothers are generally confident of who their offspring are and maternal kinship is assured, many writers have pointed out that males of necessity have less confidence of paternal kinship (Barash 1977; Daly and Wilson 1982; Trivers 1972). This reality has been

proposed as a possible explanation for differences between males and females, especially grandparents, in the amount of time and energy invested in children (Smith 1988). Fathers are delighted by clear signs of paternity, since their confidence of paternity rests solely on their confidence in the mother's fidelity and on their assessment of the child's phenotypic similarity to themselves (Daly and Wilson 1982; Daly, Wilson and Weghorst 1982). Irons (1988) stresses the importance among middle-class American women that husbands recognize children as their own. Similarly, Leifer (1977) reports that pregnant women frequently fantasize that their newborns will look like their husbands. It is clearly in the mother's and child's interest to promote confidence in paternity (Kurland 1979). The aforementioned study by Furstenberg and Talvitie (1980) documents the benefits associated with a stronger bond between father and child, and Daly and Wilson (1981) report that when a child is singled out for abuse in a family, it will most likely be the child that least resembles the father.

A study by Daly and Wilson (1982) illustrates how perceptions of newborns can be shaped by the anxiety of assuring paternity. In videotaped recordings of 111 American births, paternal resemblance of the neonate was spontaneously remarked on by the mother significantly more often than maternal resemblance. Paternal resemblance was perceived especially strongly in first-borns, and the bias toward seeing paternal resemblance in babies was even stronger in a separate questionnaire survey of a larger number of parents who had recently given birth (Daly and Wilson 1982). Daly and Wilson also found that when a child was named prenatally after the father, mothers were even *more* likely to note a paternal resemblance. Interestingly enough, this same research revealed that *maternal* relatives were the strongest advocates of *paternal* namesaking!

In light of the above evidence, it is predicted that when natural children *are* namesaked, it is more likely to be after a patrilineal than a matrilineal relative; for adopted children, where lack of kinship is equally assured for both parents, no such tendency should be found. These predictions were tested in a study comparing the naming of the oldest child in 96 adoptive families and 104 nonadoptive families.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 96 adoptive parents and 104 natural parents. All subjects were volunteers.

Procedure

The adoptive parents were contacted via a questionnaire sent out with a newsletter published by an adoption agency. Subjects returned the ques-

tionnaires to the agency which then forwarded them to us. Two hundred questionnaires were mailed, and one hundred and four were returned. For a questionnaire to be included in the final sample, the following criteria had to be met: 1) the adopted child must have been less than one year of age at the time of adoption; 2) there must not be any older, natural children in the family; 3) the adopted child must be of the same race as both of the adopted parents; and 4) the child could not be a biological relative of either parent. Out of the one hundred and four questionnaires that were received, six were discarded for failure to meet one or more of the criteria.

Due to severe time restrictions during the collection of data, we could not wait until questionnaires were returned from the adoptive families to recruit a matched sample of biological parents, and a more convenient pool of subjects had to be utilized. While this undoubtedly poses some problems of comparison, the information available to us indicates that the two groups were highly similar in most respects. Both groups were overwhelmingly white, middle-class people drawn from the same small cities and towns in central Illinois. The only demographic characteristic on which there appears to be any noticeable difference is religion. There was a somewhat greater proportion of Roman Catholic families in the sample of adopted parents than there was in the sample of biological parents. There is *no* evidence to suggest that this religious variable is important in naming, especially when virtually all other demographic and geographic factors were the same. Extensive (albeit informal) questioning of people from these backgrounds failed to uncover any strong influence on the naming of children that could be specifically traced to religious affiliation. In spite of these reassurances, however, this qualifying factor must be kept in mind when considering the results of this study. The parents in the "biological" group were selected as follows: fifty-nine were solicited at the shopping center, thirty-nine filled out the questionnaire in the reception area of a hair salon, and six were teachers at a local elementary school.

On the questionnaire, each subject provided information about the oldest child in the family, including his or her name, sex, and age at adoption (where applicable). Subjects were also asked if the child was named after a relative, and if so, they described the nature of the relation (e.g., father, mother, spouse's mother, subject's brother, etc.), the sex of the relative, which part of the relative's name was used, and whether it was given to the child as a first or middle name. To be considered a namesake, the child had to be named after a biological relative no more distant than a grandparent or a sibling of the parents.

RESULTS

The data were organized by grouping the responses into the following categories: Namesake/Not a namesake, Male child/Female child, Natural

Table 1. Raw Frequencies of Namesaking by Category

	Patrilineal Namesake	Matrilineal Namesake	Not Named After Kin
Adopted (N = 96)	31	42	23
Male (N = 57)	25	21	11
Female (N = 39)	6	21	12
Biological (N = 104)	36	14	54
Male (N = 57)	30	4	23
Female (N = 47)	6	10	31

child/Adopted child, and if the child was a namesake, Patrilineal namesake/Matrilineal namesake. These data are presented in Table 1. The raw data were subjected to chi-square analyses. As predicted, adopted children were more likely to be namesakes (76% vs 48%), ($\chi^2(1) = 16.49, p < 0.01$). The second prediction, that natural children who were namesakes would be more likely to be named after a patrilineal than a matrilineal relative, was also supported, $\chi^2(1) = 9.68, p < 0.01$ (72% vs 28%). For adopted children, this tendency was actually reversed (42% vs 58%), although not to a significant degree ($\chi^2(1) = 1.66, n.s.$).

It was also found that although adopted male and female children were equally likely to be namesaked (81% vs 69%), $\chi^2(1) = 1.67, n.s.$, natural male children were significantly more likely to be named after a relative than natural female children were (60% vs 34%), $\chi^2(1) = 6.77, p < 0.05$.

For the children who were namesaked, the frequency of namesaking via first name, middle name, or *both* first and middle names was recorded. These data are presented in Table 2, and they indicate that namesaking with a middle name alone was far more frequent than namesaking with a first name alone. This was true for adopted children ($\chi^2(1) = 24.02, p < 0.001$) as well as biological children ($\chi^2(1) = 7.42, p < 0.01$). As can be seen in Table 2, it was also more common for parents of adopted children to name-sake with *both* a first and middle name than to name-sake with a first name alone ($\chi^2(1) = 6.54, p < 0.05$); this was not true for the biological parents ($\chi^2(1) = 0, n.s.$).

An examination of the relatives each child was named after revealed that 65% (20 out of 31) of adopted children who were patrilineal namesakes

Table 2. Frequency of First and Middle Names as Namesakes

	First Name Only	Middle Name Only	Both First and Middle Names
Adopted (N = 73)	8	43	22
Male (N = 46)	3	30	13
Female (N = 27)	5	13	9
Biological (N = 50)	11	28	11
Male (N = 34)	9	17	8
Female (N = 16)	2	11	3

were named after the father. The same pattern held true for patrilineally namesaked biological children, with 75% (27 out of 36) named after the father. Matrilineally namesaked children were less likely to be named after parents. Only 24% (10 out of 42) matrilineally namesaked adopted children were named after the mother and 43% (6 out of 14) matrilineally namesaked biological children were named after the mother. Matrilineally namesaked children were more likely to be named after grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

DISCUSSION

The prediction that the naming of a child after a relative would be a function of the certainty of genetic kinship was strongly supported. The more that parenthood was assured, the less likely the child was to be namesaked. Consequently, adopted children who almost certainly were not genetic relatives were most likely to be named after a relative, were equally likely to be named after patrilineal or matrilineal relatives, and they were more likely to be given *both* a first name and a middle name in honor of a relative. Biological children were more likely to be named after a patrilineal relative, possibly reflecting a difference in the confidence of kinship experienced by the father and the mother. The finding that natural male children (but not adopted males) were more likely to be namesaked than female children is interesting, although it was not specifically predicted. In hindsight, however, it too is consistent with evolutionary theory and with other research (e.g., Rossi 1965). Sex-biased parental investment is expected to occur whenever expected reproductive success is greater for members of one sex than for members of the other (Trivers and Willard 1973), and humans have evolved in societies where polygyny was an option for the most successful males. Therefore, it would be more adaptive to make a greater investment of resources in sons than in daughters, which has in fact been shown to be the case in humans and animals alike (Clark, Bone, and Galef 1990; Clark and Galef 1989; Hrdy 1987; Moore and Morelli 1979; Smith 1988). If the naming hypothesis is correct, the bestowing of a name upon a child is an investment or input no different than any other form of parental investment.

Margo Wilson (personal communication) has pointed out that these results suggest at least two hypotheses for future research. First of all, it should be more likely that parents will name a child after a relative if there are no other children in the family, meaning that first-borns will be more likely to be namesakes than later-borns. Secondly, when a child is indisputably adopted (e.g., of a different race from the parents), then the child probably won't be named after relatives since any attempt at deception would be fruitless.

The tendency to use namesaking as a strategy to enhance perceptions of kinship with unrelated offspring may be dependent upon a social context

in which people are trying to create a "natural" family and it may not necessarily occur in all adoptive situations. Also, neither the sample of adopted parents nor the sample of natural parents in this study was completely random, and they are not necessarily representative of the at-large population of adoptive and natural parents. In spite of these limitations, the results are provocative and suggest that the naming of offspring may be influenced in a heretofore unrecognized fashion by the assurance the parents have (or do not have) that the child shares their genes. Future research on this topic must not only rely on larger samples, but, since patterns of naming vary among societies, it must also make use of cross-cultural comparisons to adequately explore the possible sociobiological foundation of the naming of offspring.

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