Javeria K. Shah

MY NAME IS

Is Your Name a Gift or a Burden?

Cultural Anthropology

Collection Editors
NILA GINGER HOFMAN
&
JANISE HURTIG

My Name Is

Javeria K. Shah

MY NAME IS

Is Your Name a Gift or a Burden?

The Cultural Anthropology Collection

Collection Editors

Nila Ginger Hofman & Janise Hurtig

LPp

Acknowledgements

I want to express my sincere gratitude to everyone who shared their stories for this book. I apologise that not all accounts were included, but please be assured that your stories are still a great source of inspiration for this project. I hope to utilise your powerful experiences in future projects.

I want to thank everyone who has taken extra care to learn and correctly pronounce a name. You make more of a positive impact than you may realise. For all of you who have reached out to us to let us know how this project has positively impacted you or led you to deep reflection, we have been so moved by your feedback and appreciate your support of the project. Please keep spreading the word because names matter!

Abstract

This book explores the difficulties faced by individuals with non-Western names living in the West. It originated from a research project that began as a university lecture I was leading. It elaborates on how a teaching moment led to a collaboration with one of my students, Tony Giroux, to create an accompanying multi-award-winning short documentary series called *My Name Is*.

The book delves deeper into the issues discussed in the documentary and provides additional accounts of individuals who have faced challenges related to their name identity in various situations. I also introduce my original Whiteness ecology theory to explain how colonialism and systemic barriers have impacted people's sense of social belonging.

My objective is to start an honest and open conversation about name identity and to promote inclusivity through this book.

Keywords

Identity and belonging
Pressure to assimilate
Whiteness ecology
Ecological Whiteness
Racism

Contents

Introduction

My Name Is is a project inspired by a screen studies class I facilitated at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London. While facilitating icebreakers with the cohort of primarily international students, I took extra care in correctly pronouncing individual names. Filmmaker and actor Tony Giroux, a student in the class, asked why I was taking such care in getting people's names right. He was curious why this mattered so much to me. The question was simple, but in answering it, I began a long journey of introspection that would surpass the classroom and seep into all aspects of my life. In my response to Tony, I risked trust and vulnerability before the class, disclosing that I wasn't born as "Jo" (an anglicised name I had used for over 20+ years) and that my given name was Javeria. I had changed it to assimilate, to avoid attention being drawn to me, to make others struggling with its pronunciation feel more comfortable, and above all, to avoid name bias associated with navigating a non-western name in Western contexts.

Tony continued pondering my disclosure and this classroom interaction for some time, and months later, he approached me again. He asked me more questions and expressed an interest in articulating a film that would capture my story and those of

others around names. Until this point, I had never realised the significance of my experience in its resonance with others. I suggested a social awareness-raising research project that a film could be one articulation of, and we successfully applied for funding, which formed the first stage of the My Name Is research project.

Tony and I began this project with a teacher student relationship background that evolved into a collaborative dynamic as a result of this project. Our research dynamic was unique relative to traditional research approaches. As we found out, it was also the strength of our project. By consciously aiming to dismantle power dynamics, we could work together to create spaces for stories and personal truths. Our participants risked trust and vulnerability to authentically share their experiences because of the relationships forged with the project team over time. Accounts shared in the film included references to name bias and, subsequently, pressure to anglicise names to overcome systemic barriers to success, as well as recollections of navigating hostile spaces and associated negative experiences relating to non-Western names in Western contexts. Film participant accounts are shared in this book's early chapters for a more in-depth insight into the authentic and vulnerable narratives shared.

Before embarking on this project, I was "Jo", but in 2020, a year after the film's release, I chose to revert to my given name, Javeria. This project changed my life. It brought me back to my given name and helped me reclaim my lost identity. After sharing my story

for the film, I began reflecting deeply on why I had changed my name and considering what a return to my given name might look like in practical terms. It was a decision I agonised over for more than a year until I finally gathered the courage to reclaim my original name. In 2020, I announced the change on Twitter (now X) and began communicating it across all my professional and social networks. The support I received in reclaiming my name was incredible from colleagues and friends, and my networks, in general, motivated me to continue with confidence.

Since its release, this project and associated film have reached thousands of people with a message of hope, listening to understand, respect, and empathy surrounding names and a sense of social belonging. Every film screening we have hosted has led to profoundly poignant and powerful disclosures from our audiences. Many of our film audience members have approached us with their own stories and, through doing so, signify the importance of names. We have heard from the Jewish diaspora disclosing the changing of surnames in their recent ancestry for safety, trans communities discussing the significance of the names that are chosen to represent identity, and the Irish diaspora have shared the significance of religious identity through names and historically what this has meant in connection to safety. The themes of this project have resonated with so many, and feedback from our audiences has been a crucial motivator for us to continue spreading messages of inclusion and respect.

I was particularly moved by the support we received from the Swansea-based organisation Ways of Working, who disseminated

our call-out for more participants for the book phase with the *Street Matters* community. Community stories reflected the over-arching themes to have emerged in the film and now in this book in the shape of:

- Encountering racism because of name bias;
- Bullying at school due to having an unusual name;
- Shortening or changing names for the comfort and ease of others;
- Name mispronunciation;
- Name bias.

Building on the focus of the *My Name Is* film, this book recognises the significance of lived experiences to understand the impact of name navigations on personal identity formation. Grounded in new accounts while acknowledging the stories shared in the associated film, this book extends focus into the counter-narratives relating to navigating name identities in the authentic voices of participants – and continues the conversation around names and their importance to our identity formation and sense of individual social belonging.

I begin by sharing an original theoretical framework that I developed in 2021. This framework, called "Whiteness ecology", offers readers tools to understand marginalised groups' experiences from a broader contextual perspective. I introduce this theory and summarise how it can be applied to five stories featured in the associated *My Name Is* film. These stories comprise the book's first five chapters, and serve as an example of the theory's application in name-navigation contexts. Readers are then invited to explore the other stories in this book by applying the Whiteness

ecology theory, should they wish to delve deeper into the stories. In the process, some readers develop an empathetic and holistic understanding of the challenges marginalised communities face in navigating their identities. These new stories are also laid out differently from the first five chapters, as the new participants share their contexts in their own words.

1
Understanding name identity using Whiteness ecology theory

- The reader will become familiarised with the author's Whiteness ecology theory and be able to apply this to the name stories shared in this book.

- The reader will be able to develop an understanding of the deeper issues relating to navigating names in Western contexts through applying this theory.

- The reader will be able to use this theory in other contexts where applicable.

Classifications

Throughout this chapter and book, I will be referencing non-white racialisations as melanin-rich or global majority to counteract terms such as BAME (Black, Asian, Minority, Ethnic). This is in line with my anti-racist activism and its emphasis on the significance of language as a tool to classify individuals racialised as "Non-White". Existing terms such as "Black" or "Brown" will only be

used in their original citation contexts or connection to specific discourse or data references.

What is Whiteness ecology?

Whiteness ecology (Shah, 2021) combines two distinct theoretical positions. The first is inspired by Bronfenbrenner's (1975) bio-ecological theory, which presents society using an ecology metaphor. The second derives from the work of critical Whiteness theorist Nayak (2007), who contends that:

1. Whiteness is a modern invention; it has changed over time and place;
2. Whiteness is a social norm and has become chained to an index of unspoken privileges;
3. The bonds of Whiteness can yet be broken/deconstructed for the betterment of humanity.

(2007, p. 738)

Whiteness ecology aligns with the "third wave" (Garner, 2017, p. 1583) of critical Whiteness, which aims to extend the focus on Whiteness in the context of power dynamics (Shah, 2021, p. 280). This chapter will explain Whiteness ecology theory and its filtering down of Whiteness across social systems.

This chapter now shifts to a more detailed consideration of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory in connection to Whiteness so that the accounts shared in the associated *My Name Is* film can be more carefully considered.

Ecological Whiteness

Whiteness ecology is premised on the theorisation that Whiteness is ideological and upheld through white supremacy and its associated social classifications represent ideological (Western) colonial legacies that othered indigenous groups and cultures, and organised human worth based on race, with Whiteness being at the top of the so-called hierarchy. Whiteness ecology considers how stratifying ideological legacies filter down across social structures, systems, and interactions within the Global North and post-/still colonial spaces (Shah, 2021). The overarching premise of the bio-ecological theory is "… modelled using interconnecting layers constituting of a chronosystem, macrosystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and microsystem" (2021, p. 281).

Figure 1 illustrates the interconnected and cyclical nature of various systems. The diagram includes both inner and outer layers, which are linked to each other. At the centre of the diagram, we have the individual and their social characteristics such as age, gender, and race. This is where we can begin to understand whether the individual has any traits that could differentiate them from their broader environment. We can then analyse the macro and micro impacts of these traits on the individual which can be understood using the analogy of a ripple effect (Hong and Garbarino, 2012, p. 276). When considering Whiteness and British Muslim individuals, understanding each layer helps to visualise the broader context.
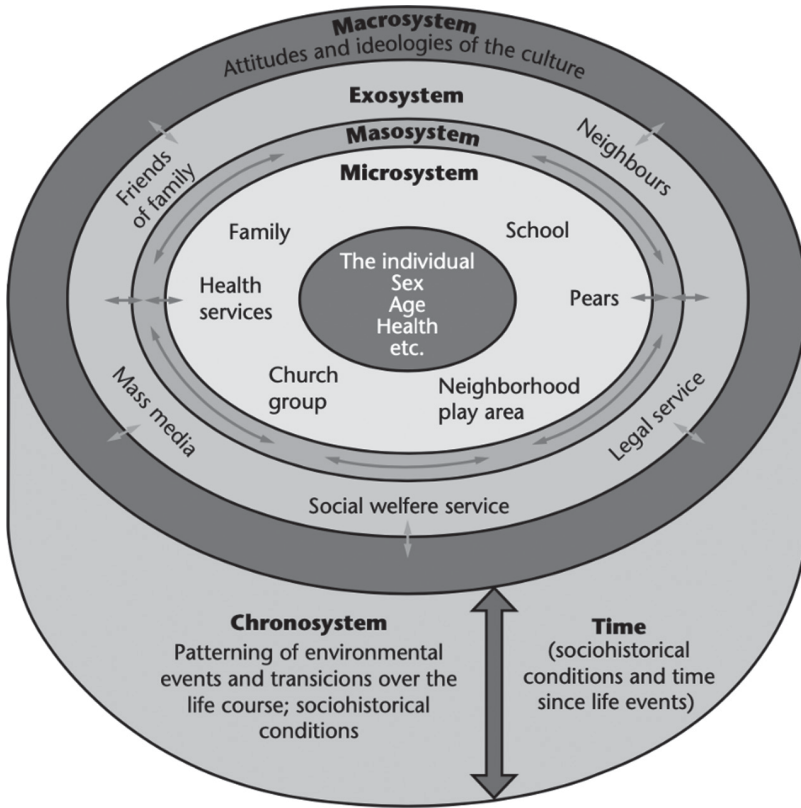
Figure 1 Bio-Ecological Theory. Source: Santrock (2007). *Child Development, 11th ed.* NY: McGraw-Hill Companies Inc.

Chronosystem

The ecology is surrounded by the chronosystem, which represents the social and historical contexts over time for the individual. This backdrop may include post-9/11 policy impacts that affect Muslim communities disproportionately, such as the Prevent Duty in the UK that has had a negative impact on Muslim communities. As a result, under the Prevent Duty, Muslims are statistically more likely to be subjected to negative

classifications that will negatively impact their life trajectories in shape of educational and professional opportunities.

Macrosystem and exosystem

The system that perpetuates Whiteness often leads to the formation of dominant social beliefs that stereotype marginalised racial communities negatively, both on a larger social level and in external systems. This is further reinforced by the depictions and coverage of mainstream media, which exists outside of the immediate system. The external system also represents the spread of dominant beliefs, attitudes, and cultures to the individual through social constructs such as family, friends, and legal and welfare systems.

A visibly Muslim individual who is positioned at the centre of this exosystem is likely to experience racial microaggressions based on negative ideological assumptions that categorise Muslims as a social threat or violent terrorists. This broader system dynamic can affect their experiences in various ways. For instance, news coverage in the UK and US often equates terrorism with Muslims and shows racial bias in the reporting of terror attacks.

In practical terms, being visibly Muslim can lead to varying degrees of insecurity across all levels of society. For example, after a terrorist attack for which a Muslim person may be held responsible, Muslims may become extremely cautious about how they are perceived by their neighbours and friends. They may also worry about the impact of this on the larger community through moral panics, which can lead to increased referrals under the Prevent Duty. This, in turn, can affect the quality of their interactions with social welfare and legal systems.

Mesosystem and microsystem

The mesosystem refers to the interaction between larger social structures (exosystem) and the immediate environment (microsystem). This provides access to social systems on a small scale. To illustrate, let's consider the scenario of a Muslim individual and the Prevent Duty. In this context, we can observe the mesosystem in the school environment. For instance, if a teacher makes a Prevent referral, it can potentially have negative consequences for the life and prospects of a young Muslim who is subjectively perceived as a potential threat.

These layers form part of a holistic ecosystem that enables better insights into an individual's social navigation and associated experiences. Subsequently, this leads to multiple social interaction possibilities while acknowledging that the experiences of melanin-rich or global majority individuals, or those from historically or presently colonised diasporas, are more likely to be marginalised in Whiteness ecology that positions Whiteness as a normative (Shah, 2021).

In practical terms, this theory can be applied to various Western social contexts. For instance, several research studies have confirmed that Black boys are marginalised within the UK education system through disproportionately punitive measures such as school detentions, suspension, or expulsion. Furthermore, several studies have also revealed a pattern in such measures negatively impacting Black boys' future journeys, resulting in academic failure, incarceration, or severe mental health classifications. These research findings are represented in disproportionate Black male representation within the UK criminal and mental health systems.

Importantly, research also reveals that young white males in the UK from similar social backgrounds in terms of class and academic ability have comparatively positive educational and social experiences. Understanding this phenomenon through the lens of Whiteness ecology, we can see the following factors come into play:

- Based on Western colonial constructions of a hierarchy of race and those racialised as non-white are at the bottom. Black boys are negatively classified in line with colonial ideological legacies.
- Negative classifications include their adultification (treating children as adults and holding them accountable in such ways), criminalising them, and labelling them as "stupid" or aggressive and mentally ill.
- Such classifications create a social barrier for Black boys and men.
- These barriers can be understood by observing social structures, systems, and interactions. For example, in addition to the example cited above, Black boys and men in the UK are most likely to be stopped and searched by the police.
- This example represents the filtering down of racialised colonial ideologies that cause harm to Black boys and men in the UK in all areas of their social lives.

It is, however, worth noting that in developing a Whiteness ecology, I do recognise the nuances within Whiteness itself and the complexities of navigating this identity in the context of marginalised ethnicities such as Jewish, Irish, or Gypsy Roma/Irish Traveller communities. Furthermore, I also acknowledge that a low socio-economic background or other marginalisations

would also impact full access to white privilege, as this is heavily tied into hetero normative, elite, heterosexual male privilege (Etchells *et al.*, 2017). However, despite access to full privilege, the experiences of someone racialised as white in comparison to someone who is black or brown who isn't located within the Whiteness ecology will be vastly different because of the colonial racial binaries of white in opposition to black and brown.

Looking more carefully at Bronfenbrenner's (1975) ecology layers in Figure 1 below, we can see the interconnectivity between each layer across contexts and time and its extension from ideological to social interaction.

To frame Bronfenbrenner's (1975) model as a Whiteness ecology, I treat each component through the lens of Euro-colonialism, associated white supremacy, and the subsequent experiences of global majorities navigating this ecology. The following section expands on this using the UK context and then shifts to applying this theory to identity contexts and name navigation to frame the subsequent chapters.

I start with the outward chronosystem layer, representing time and socio-historical conditions. In a Whiteness ecology, this would be represented in the accumulation of negative experiences over time for the melanated/global majority individual. These experiences would take shape in racial microaggressions and/or systemic or structural racism, represented by a lack of access to education or opportunities. This could also be linked to global majority community contexts. For example, in the UK context, the Black British[1] experience could be connected to a range of socio-historic contexts such as British colonialism of the West

Indies, Windrush migration, contemporary histories of strained relations between Black communities and the police (Shah, 2021), and racism such as in a British education system that negatively classified young Black learners as *subnormal* throughout the 1960s and 1970s (*Subnormal*, 2021).

Shifting from these examples into the macrosystem layer, which represents cultural ideologies and attitudes, in a Whiteness ecology, dominant social and political ideologies uphold white supremacy. Dominant colonial ideologies are represented in the exosystem layer in our interactions and engagements with our wider social circles, neighbours, state services, or the mainstream media we consume, which generates and reinforces negative racial stereotypes such as Muslims as terrorists, Black women as angry, or Black men as criminal, and perpetuates social intolerance for groups. An example of such programming includes BBC sitcoms such as *Dad's Army* or British films such as *Carry On Up the Khyber*, which use brown faces and exaggerated Indian accents to represent South Asian communities. Legacy colonial ideologies that continue to hegemonically re-enforce racial, linguistic, cultural, and ethnic othering are representative of socially constructed racial hierarchies that position Whiteness as the default and the normative as invisible, free of critique or scrutiny.

We can see this play out in the quality of representations in the mainstream media (Hall, 1997), the state's micromanaged curriculum through educational policy churn (Steer *et al.*, 2007) and associated omissions of our colonial past from the curriculum, and in the introduction of policymaking, such as the Prevent

Duty, or through policy levered legal systems that disproportion-ately target racially marginalised groups such as the stop and search laws in the UK (Shah, 2021). The Prevent Duty is a post-9/11 policy lever which awards all UK public sector organisations such as schools, social services, and the national health services the capacity to classify individuals as at risk of radicalisation based on their racial embodiments and Muslimness. The policy has disproportionately and unfairly caused negative and unfair repercussions for many Muslims in the UK. A recent High Court ruling concluded that parts of the policy wording were racist and should be redrafted. This hegemonic dynamic can also be seen to play out in the mesosystem of a Whiteness ecology.

The final parts of this ecology metaphor constitute the individual at the very centre and their microsystem layer. In a Whiteness ecology, the individual's racial, ethnic, or cultural background will determine the quality of their social experiences and access to opportunities.

Here's a clearer and error-free version of it:

When a person with a non-western name interacts in a predom-inantly white environment, they may face difficulties navigat-ing their name. This issue is closely linked to the manifestation of unconscious colonial biases. In the "My Name Is" film, several individuals with non-western names faced this challenge. As someone who has experienced this in the past, I can relate to feeling like an outsider due to the mispronunciation of my name by teachers. This experience negatively impacted my sense of belonging.

By applying the concept of Whiteness ecology to name navigation, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the social contexts and impacts involved. I am suggesting that it is not merely a matter of mispronouncing someone's name and causing them discomfort, but rather that there are broader implications to name navigation that pertain to issues such as colonisation, racial politics, and hegemony.