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Publication Date

2013

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"What's In a Name?" American Parents' Search
for the Perfect Baby Name

By

Hannah Beth Emery

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Ann Swidler, Co-Chair
Professor Stephen Vaisey, Co-Chair
Professor Claude S. Fischer
Professor Claire J. Kramsch

Spring 2013

Abstract

"What's in a Name?" American Parents' Search for the Perfect Baby Name

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Professor Ann Swidler and Professor Stephen Vaisey, Co-Chairs

In the last half-century, the most popular names given to American children have become less common than ever before. Between 1960 and 2010, the percentage of children receiving the top ten most popular names dropped from roughly 22% to 8%. In 2010, almost 10% of American children received names given to fewer than five children born in the country that year. Increasingly, when naming their children, parents from all demographic backgrounds are choosing something "distinctive" or even truly unique. I argue that this shift in practices reflects an increasing cultural emphasis on individuation, as parents struggle to ensure that their children will "stand out" without being branded as strange.

My dissertation explores the phenomenon of the "widening name pool" using data drawn from a sample of longitudinal birth records and from more than 80 in-depth interviews with contemporary parents and those who named their children in the last few decades. My findings suggest that, rather than a simple side effect of increasing demographic diversity, the shift toward increasing use of distinctive names reflects an active effort on the part of parents to find something "different." Parents explain this choice in terms of a desire to help their child forge a more unique identity, which will also – implicitly – be a stronger one. Contemporary parents feel a sense of pressure to choose a distinctive name, claiming that to do otherwise might lead children to feel somehow less than "special"; however, parents also shy away from selecting a name that could cause children to stand out in the wrong way. My research suggests that, for most parents, the perfectly distinctive name is one with personal meaning for the family, something easily comprehensible by strangers, and in which parents can feel that they've made an "authentic" choice, a concept most often expressed by parents' avoidance of names strongly connected to racial or ethnic groups with whom they have no affiliation.

Although contemporary parents choose distinctive names at significantly higher rates than their counterparts from a few decades past, both groups present remarkably similar rationales for their desire for a distinctive name. I thus suggest that the increasing diversity in contemporary names reflects not only the cultural shift toward individuation but also a reaction to the increasing presence of and emphasis on popularity data in the resources available to parents seeking "expert advice" on naming a child. Thus, my conclusion submits that the widening pool of American baby names, motivated by larger cultural forces, is also self-perpetuating as contemporary

parents and experts alike become increasingly conscious of the "need" to avoid the most popular names.

Dedicated to my parents, who never questioned my crazy decision
to continue going to school forever;

to my friends, who listened to me blather on about names whenever
we got together, and who put up with my overexcitedness
whenever any of them announced a child on the way between
2009-2013 and accepted my naming "help" with good humor;

and to Alec. Who lived under the same roof as me
through the last leg of this grad school journey,
who put up with the mood swings, tears and rants
that are an inevitable part of this process,
and whose support never flagged even for an instant.
You're the reason I finished this thing.

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Acknowledgements

As is always the case, many hands contributed to the work of this project.

First and foremost, I want to thank my committee members, each of whom played an essential role. Ann Swidler's enthusiasm for the project was boundless; whenever I sat down in her office, she was always interested to hear an account of my latest interviews and to discuss interesting names she'd run across, as well as to share her encyclopedic knowledge of the sociology of culture literature and suggest new ways I might fasten my work into the existing theoretical canon. Steve Vaisey bailed me out of many a Stata-induced crisis, taught me a new way to think in order to analyze 2.2 million birth certificates, and provided the invaluable suggestion that I ask parents to rate a pregenerated sample of names to gain some insight into their views of different name types; he was also the first to suggest that my "little side project" on names and naming might be big enough to constitute a dissertation. Claude Fischer pointed out that any mixed-methods project purporting to look at change over time ought to include qualitative data supporting that finding, and set me to interviewing grandparents; as my primary editor for accessibility and clarity, he patiently waded through early chapter drafts that shouldn't have seen the light of day, and never hesitated to tell me when I had used ten words where three would do. Claire Kramsch dove boldly into this sociological endeavor, providing both a sociolinguistic and an international perspective that greatly enriched my thinking about the project, and in our early discussions, she set me on the track of the literature on "branding" that proved essential to my framing of why contemporary parents seek out distinctive names.

Of course, my committee were not the only individuals who offered me feedback. I presented parts of this research at numerous conferences, including the 2011 and 2012 meetings of the American Sociological Association, the 2010 meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association, and two small UC Berkeley conferences in spring 2012, as well as to fellow grad students in a departmental writing seminar; I am grateful to the participants in these forums for their thoughts and suggestions. I also thank my undergraduate students at UC Berkeley and Mills College between 2011 and 2013 for enduring my focus on this work as a source of course readings and in-class examples, and for their questions and suggestions. Finally, I owe particular thanks to my fellow graduate student Rafael Colonna, who graciously offered me the benefit of his experience with interviewing couples, and who served as my most regular sociological sounding board in contexts both formal and informal.

My study would not have been possible without the California Department of Public Health, which provided me with access to state birth certificate records. I am also grateful to the Social Security Administration for collecting such comprehensive popularity data on their website (updated every Mother's Day week at www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/).

Although the quantitative data provides an essential backdrop to the project, the core of my research remains my interviews. Thus, I thank the many gatekeepers, at parent education organizations, birth classes, public assistance programs and other sources who made it possible for me to make contact with parents.

Finally, I am especially grateful to those families who took time out of their busy lives to meet with me; in their homes, at coffeeshops and restaurants and, on one memorable occasion, a Laundromat; during naptime, on Sunday afternoons or at the end of a long day's work. As I said to respondents at the conclusion of many interviews, this kind of research can't happen without their participation. I hope they found it an enjoyable process, and that some of them may someday read my work to learn how their experience compares with those of other families.

Chapter 1
Not Just "A Matter of Taste": Names as Identity Markers

Amanda and Manoj[1] are an upper-middle-class married couple living in the San Francisco Bay Area with one young daughter. Amanda is white, born in the United States; Manoj is an immigrant from Pakistan. When they decided to start a family, they knew their daughter would be negotiating a bicultural identity: with this in mind, when it came to selecting her name, one of their top priorities was to find choices that "worked" in both English and Urdu. The name they chose is of South Asian origin, but phonetically similar to popular English names, which makes it familiar enough to work for a child growing up in the United States and also reinforces their daughter's ties to her family in Pakistan. For Amanda, limiting the options to Pakistani names had a special extra benefit: because the Pakistani and Pakistani-American population in the United States is still relatively small, the names are not "too popular." As she put it, "I grew up next to a Jennifer, and there were a thousand Jennifers in the seventies and eighties, and I didn't want that. I definitely wanted her to have her own identity." Although their daughter's name appears on the Social Security Administration's list of the Top 1000 most popular American names in the year she was born, it ranks well below 500.

Nakia is a working-class black woman living in the Bay Area with her two young children, a boy and a girl. The children's names start with the same letter, which is also the first letter in their father's name, and both children have middle names that honor members of the extended family. Nakia created her children's names herself, and they are extremely distinctive; according to Social Security Administration data, her son's and daughter's names were given to fewer than five children in the years they were born. Although Nakia didn't know this, she did research the names' popularity as she developed them, primarily by looking them up on Google to see if they were attached to other people. In explaining why she'd avoided using reference materials (books or websites) to help in her naming process, Nakia explained that it was very important to her that her children's names be distinctive, because it would help them better "be themselves." She also touted the fact that the names "[come] purely from me, not from a book or anybody else's idea."

Ashley and William are a young white evangelical Christian couple, living in student family housing at a Bay Area college with their infant daughter. When Ashley was a teenager, she fell in love with the name Lily and resolved to use the name for a future daughter; she liked it for a multitude of reasons, including its linguistic meaning and the presence of a positive role model from one of her favorite books. However, by the time she was actually choosing names, Lily had risen dramatically in popularity, and other similar names were also rising on the girls' popularity list. This made Ashley second-guess her choice, because "I hated having to share my name with everybody… [so] when I saw that Lily and Lillian were so popular, I was really upset, 'cause Lily's been my favorite name forever. But I still named her that." She went on to explain that if her daughter ends up with friends named Lillian, "and they're called Lily, she can call them Lillian. [She can say] *my* name's Lily, your name's Lillian."

For all these parents, the relationship between names and identities was important, and seemed to follow a set of implicit rules. The parents considered questions of race and ethnicity, potential friends and family who they wanted to honor, and the personal ideals they wanted to

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[1] All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of my respondents. Particularly with children's names, I made an effort to select pseudonyms that shared the most salient features of the names parents chose, while not being similar enough to allow the children's names to be guessed.

pass on to their children. Alongside these elements, however, all three families deemed popularity to be a key factor in determining which names were best. Even those who gave their child a popular name, as Ashley did, somehow justified their choices as "different."

This emphasis on choosing distinctive names for children – names that will prevent a child from being forever known as "Jennifer M," and will enable children to better "be themselves" – has increased across American society throughout the last century. In 1940, the two most popular names, James and Mary, were given to roughly 5% of boys and girls born that year; twenty years later, in 1960, 4% of boys and 2.5% of girls received the most popular names for that year, David and Mary. The percentage of parents choosing the most popular names for their children continued to decline through the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and by 2010, the most popular names, Jacob and Isabella, were given to only about 1% of boys and girls across the country. This trend is not restricted only to the most popular names: between 1940 and 2010, the percentage of children receiving one of the top 1000 most popular names fell from 94% for boys and 96% for girls to 78% for boys and 66% for girls. Modern American parents increasingly avoid the most popular names, and range further and further afield in their search for something distinctive.

In this dissertation, I present the results of 71 interviews with contemporary American parents about how they chose their children's names. Their accounts suggest that the modern change in naming practices is more than just a quirk of demographics, an echo of America's growing diversity, or a reflection of growing multicultural familiarity with different names. Modern parents actively seek to avoid "the popular," for a combination of reasons that I argue tie into both a broader cultural pressure for individuation – the capacity to distinguish oneself from the crowd without being isolated – and the more specific pressure on parents to empower their children to successfully pursue any and all available opportunities. Compared with their counterparts from twenty years ago, contemporary "experts" in the field of baby names – the name dictionary authors and website developers – place substantial emphasis on the importance of popularity, which I suggest contributes to contemporary parents' obsession with this factor.

Nonetheless, even as parents seek out ever-more distinctive names, cultural boundaries persist. Parents in my study avoided names that seemed "inappropriately ethnic"; they believed that gender-neutral names were more suitable for daughters than for sons; and, in the Bay Area, many spoke about "the Berkeley effect," having to consider just how much they wanted their child's name to embody the family's political or social aspirations or values without being "over-the-top." Nearly all parents wanted something distinctive, but this distinction had certain limits.

Names and Identity

In perhaps the most widely read sociological treatment of names and naming, *A Matter of Taste* (2000)*,* Stanley Lieberson uses names to illustrate how cultural products rise and fall in popularity. His book presents compelling arguments for using names to study cultural change, pointing out that the United States has no restrictions on what names may be chosen for children, and that unlike most cultural products, names have no expense associated with their adoption and no institutions dedicated to promoting one model over another (no marketing department seeks to convince parents to name their sons Jayden instead of James). However, Lieberson's text includes only minimal recognition of the ways in which naming children might differ from making other fashion decisions, like choosing which car to purchase. He seems well aware of these differences, as evident from the quote below:

> The pattern of name usage reflects a combination of influences: the imagery associated with each name, the notions parents have about the children's future, estimates of others' responses to a name, the awareness and knowledge of names through the media and other sources, parents' beliefs about what names are appropriate for people of their status, and institutionalized norms and pressures (2000:24).

Nonetheless, although Lieberson uses this discussion as part of the lead-in to his analysis, he does not further elaborate on the proposition that parents commonly view the choice of a name as significantly shaping their child's future.

My research suggests that for most parents, the idea of choosing a child's name based simply on fashion is unsettling at best. As one father put it:

> *I didn't want to pick a name like someone picks a tattoo, of something they really like at that moment… I didn't want to pick a name just because I'm like, oh, that's a really cool name.*

Most of the parents in my study did not see fashionability or "coolness" as a deciding factor. Their concerns centered on a name's racial and ethnic overtones, its cultural associations, its accessibility for children's peers, and a host of other factors touching on issues more substantial than how well it reflected current fashions.

Lieberson does undertake some analysis of the connection between names and identity, both when he explores the naming practices of parents from different ethnic and racial groups and in previous scholarship demonstrating the persistence of gendered naming conventions in invented names (Lieberson and Mikelson 1995). Nonetheless, his work focuses primarily on names as a window into fashion trends rather than an end in themselves, and the fact that his book is rooted in large-scale quantitative analysis means that the few statements he makes about parental motivation are based wholly on existing research and inference.

The few more accounts-based scholarly examinations of names and naming do seem to suggest that parents consider issues of identity when selecting their children's names. To date, however, this research has focused primarily on the practices of groups who might be seen as having particular reason to foreground their own identity concerns. Scholars have looked at the practices of immigrants (Gerhards and Hans 2009; Sue and Telles 2007) and multiracial families (Edwards and Caballero 2008), but up to this point, there has been no comprehensive, large-scale study of naming practices across a wide range of respondents.

In one of the earliest sociological works discussing the utility of names and naming for social science research, the French scholar Pierre Besnard (1979) suggested that the best way to approach this kind of data would begin with large-scale statistical analysis, to gain a broad sense of the trends and changes in naming practices, and then move to interviews "designed to identify the reasons given by parents for their choice of first name" (1979:349, author's translation). This dissertation reports exactly this kind of project, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis to first examine the history of the widening pool of names for American children and, second, to discover the causes for it by turning to parents themselves.

More Than Just Fashion: On Individuation and Intensive Parenting

To date, the only sociological work specifically considering parents' decreased use of the most popular names, by Lieberson and Lynn (2003; 2006), attribute the phenomenon to a larger shift in the public's "taste for popularity." This argument extends Lieberson's (2000) "ratchet effect" model of how fashions change; collective taste shifts in one direction (for example, toward shorter skirts, or more distinctive names) until continuing the shift becomes impractical (a skirt too short for modesty, a name composed of non-alphabetic characters), and then tastes shift back in the other direction. As an explanation for parents' increasing focus on distinctive names, this model is problematic. It presumes not only that the general population feels an increasing pressure toward avoiding "the popular" in all areas of consumption behavior, but also that at some future point, naming preferences will shift back toward popular names. This reversal has yet to appear: instead, the United States has seen a widespread and increasing avoidance of popular names consistently for more than seventy years. This suggests that other, deeper cultural factors might be at play in motivating the change in behavior.

Over the course of the twentieth century, attitudes in industrialized societies on a range of topics shifted toward an emphasis on the value of individuals' personal qualities rather than their social relationships or positions (Alwin 1989; Buchmann and Eisner 1997; Frank and Meyer 2002). By the 1990s, a significant portion of upper-middle-class individuals reported one of their most important values to be "self-actualization," the desire to maximize their own – and their children's – potential and to be the best they could be at whatever specialization they pursued (Lamont 1992). This suggests a broader increasing cultural emphasis on *individuation*. This term designates a different phenomenon than that typically labeled as *individualism.* When authors describe an increase in American individualism, they most often point to a modern focus on individual ends to the exclusion of the collective, and frame this change in negative terms (Bellah 2002; Putnam 2000); by contrast, individuation is most often described as the tension – ubiquitous in American culture – between individuals and their community, as individuals try to distinguish themselves from others without removing themselves from the group (Swidler 1992). While increased *individualism*, for example, might prompt parents to seek out unambiguously distinctive names with no concern for how a name might be viewed by a child's peers, we would expect increased pressure for *individuation* to prompt parents to try to help their children stand out without being cast out. This was precisely the rhetoric presented by the parents in my study as they justified their choice of distinctive names: that they wanted their child to "be an individual," but still be able to "fit in."

The other explanation I heard frequently from parents as justification for their search for distinctive names was a concern about doing right by their child, wanting to prove their own commitment to parenthood by putting in the effort right from the start. Just like attitudes around the relative value of social approval and personal expression, parenting attitudes have changed over the last fifty years. By the late twentieth century, as Hays (1996) describes, "good parents" (particularly good mothers) were those who approached parenting in "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive" ways. In the last few decades, good parenting has become an industry, with countless dollars devoted to making sure that clients' children have not only the best of everything, but the "right" forms of everything. Baby names have not escaped the more extreme expressions of this phenomenon – for particularly concerned parents, professional "baby name consultants" will provide a list of choices, or feedback on parents' selections (2012). An Internet search conducted in the course of

writing this chapter revealed half a dozen name consultants offering their services – face-to-face or online – for between $25 and $150.

In much of the existing literature, this model of "intensive parenting," the notion of a good parent as one who consults experts and does research on the best methods of child-rearing, is firmly associated with middle-class parents. In contrast to their working-class peers, the argument goes, middle-class parents have the luxuries of extra time and resources to devote to actively "cultivating" their children as opposed to contenting themselves with simply "adequate" care (Lareau 2003). However, as Lieberson (2000) points out, names have no financial constraints. Any parent can name their child Tiffany or Mercedes, Princeton or Harvard, regardless of how much the goods and services associated with these brands might cost, and for parents seeking suggestions of what might constitute a "good" name, all that's required is an Internet connection or a trip to the local bookstore.

Contemporary parents with access to these resources will find no shortage of suggestions as to what constitutes a "good" name. When I typed the word "baby" into Google's search function, the auto-complete suggested "baby names" as the most likely phrase I am actually seeking. A trip to my local Barnes and Noble in fall 2012 found fifteen different baby name dictionaries in the parenting section, and for parents who don't feel the need for a physical book, there are countless numbers of baby name websites. These resources provide everything from names' linguistic origins and meanings to historical and celebrity namesakes, popular associations with a particular name, and even baby-name-consultant-style fashion assessments (as in this analysis of Sophia, the name ranked number one for American baby girls in 2011):

> SOPHIA, Greek, "wisdom." Ancient name with a sensuous sound and high-minded meaning, chosen by several celeb parents, and heading toward the top of the charts without losing any – okay, much – of its sophisticated beauty. A real winner. [goes on to list 4 nicknames and 37 variants sourced as drawing on 19 different languages, including Turkish, Finnish and Serbian] (Satran and Rosenkrantz 2007:263).

These dictionary-style books have, of course, been available for some time. Although the 1941 text *What Shall We Name the Baby* does not include assessments of its names' "winner" status, the fundamental elements of the entry are the same:

> Sophia, Sofia. "Wisdom" (Greek). Sophia was a favorite royal name with many German and Danish princesses. It came into popularity after the Roman Emperor Justinian built a church in Constantinople intended to outshine Solomon's temple and called it Sta. Sophia or "divine wisdom." [goes on to list 2 nicknames] (Ames 1941:110).

Where contemporary baby name sources differ most from their predecessors is in their emphasis on popularity. Of the fifteen books I found in my local Barnes and Noble, eleven included popularity listings; three of these listed not only the national data (top 25, top 100, or top 1000 most popular names) but the top five most popular names by state for the most recent year. Fourteen of the top 25 baby naming websites[2] also included popularity data. For contemporary

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[2] As they appeared in a Google search for "baby names" 16 February 2012

parents, a name's popularity is just as salient – if not more so – than any of the other data they might seek out from an "expert."

The most authoritative source of data on American names is the Social Security Administration (SSA). Since 1998, the SSA has published data on the most popular names for all individuals born in a given year who hold a Social Security number: this means a nearly-complete dataset for children born in the United States in the last fifty years, as well as substantial data for most American births after about 1940 (a few years after the Social Security Act was made law). The SSA also presents partial data on the top 1000 names stretching back to 1880, lists of the Top 100 names for each American state and territory since 1960, and lists of the most popular names for twins in the most recent year. Finally, for those willing to forego attractive formatting, the site offers complete national data (from 1880 to the most recent previous year) and state-level data (from 1910 to the most recent previous year) on the number of children who received any name given to five or more children in the year in question.

There are, of course, some problems with these data. Data from before 1940 are likely not representative of the whole US population, since not all sections of the population received Social Security numbers at the same rate. Also, the datasets list each unique spelling as a unique name, so that "Katherine" and "Catherine," "Brian" and "Bryan," or "Jayden," "Jaden" and "Jaedon" are all ranked separately, a choice which masks the popularity of some phonetic combinations (as in 2011, when the boys' name Caden/Caiden/Cayden/Kaden/Kaeden/Kaiden/Kayden ranked as the tenth most popular overall, while the single most popular variant, Kayden, ranked #105). However, this remains a staggering amount of data available to any parent who can gain access to the Internet.

I argue that having more data on names' popularity, combined with growing cultural pressure for intensive parenting, increasing presses American parents to avoid the most popular names in their search for a "good" name. In fact, this was the case for many parents. Even for those who liked the most popular names – and even those who decided to "bite the bullet" and choose them nonetheless – the cultural pressure to find something more distinctive for one's own child was undeniably present. As I will discuss in Chapter 7, parents who named their children in earlier decades, before this glut of popularity data, also tried to avoid the most popular names, but felt less guilt if they failed.

Research Methods: Birth Records and Interviews

Following Besnard's (1979) advice, my project encompassed analysis of both large-scale administrative data and interviews.

I used two main administrative data sources: the SSA's publicly available data on popularity[3] and a subset of birth record data obtained from the California Department of Vital Statistics[4]. While the SSA dataset includes only the number of children receiving a particular name in a given year, the California data, drawn from all birth certificates filed in the state in that year, notes the parents' races, their ages when the child was born, and in some cases their levels of education, as well as the mother's place of birth. By combining these two datasets, I was able

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[3] At time of writing, the top 1000 most popular names for years between 1880-2011 were posted at http://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/. Additional data, including all names given to 5 or more children (who received Social Security numbers) in those years, was available at http://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/limits.html.

[4] My analysis drew on the California Birth Statistical Master files from the years 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2008. More information on these files is available at http://www.cdph.ca.gov/data/dataresources/requests/Pages/BirthandFetalDeathFiles.aspx.

to examine both a comprehensive picture of how national popularity has changed over time and a more nuanced case study of how changes have occurred within specific subpopulations.

The heart of my project, though, was my interviews. Between summer 2010 and spring 2012, I conducted 71 interviews with new and expectant parents about how they chose their children's names. My study population comprised expectant parents and parents with at least one child under two years old, living in the greater San Francisco Bay Area (I conducted interviews in Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin and San Francisco counties)[5]. I gathered participants primarily through postings in online discussion groups, gatekeeper-facilitated recruitment (presentations at hospital and birthing center parenting classes, Head Start and WIC centers, and other parental education organizations) and snowball sampling. Whenever possible, when interviewing two-parent families, I tried to speak with both parents (successfully in 43 of 65 cases), bringing my total number of interviewees to 113 out of 135 parents.

I conducted semi-structured interviews, encouraging respondents to walk me through their naming process. Whenever possible, I asked open-ended questions about parents' experiences ("How did you start the process of choosing a name? What factors were most important to you in finding a good name? What resources did you use to help you come up with names?"), employing respondents' own recollections to re-tell their naming decision. Interviews generally lasted about an hour, and most often took place in families' homes. At the conclusion of the interview, parents also completed a short survey asking them to rank a list of boys' and girls' names based on how likely they would be to use the names for their own children: this list included names that had been extremely popular in 2008 with one of the four major California ethnic groups (white, black, Hispanic and Asian) as well as names from various places on the popularity spectrum.

The mean age of my contemporary parents was 35, although parents ranged in age from 18 to 54. Approximately 61% of parents self-identified as white, 11% as black, 7% as Hispanic and 4% as Asian; 14% identified as multiracial. Fully 71% of parents reported possessing at least a bachelor's degree, and 56% reported household incomes of $90,000 or above. Although my sample over-represents privileged families (white, highly educated and high-income), I contend that I nonetheless interviewed a sufficiently cross-sectional sample to speak to the naming motivations of parents from a range of groups. I provide a table of population demographics in the appendix.

After completing my contemporary parent interviews, in the spring and summer of 2012, I conducted an additional 15 interviews with a subset of the parents of my original respondents to get some historical perspective on the naming process. These interviews allowed me to gain some insight into how parents named their children in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and thus speak with more authority about the ways in which this process has changed in the last fifty years. I give more details about my grandparent interviews when I present that data in Chapter 7.

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[5] Although the unique political and social character of the Bay Area undoubtedly influenced the attitudes of some parents in my sample – a few who chose distinctive word names reminiscent of the "hippie" names of the 1970s even acknowledged that their child would be "a San Francisco child" – I argue that the specific geographic location of my sample doesn't invalidate its representativeness as a model for the larger national phenomenon. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, the increasing use of distinctive names has taken place at a national level across the United States. Thus, I suggest that any geographic area would serve equally well as a site for an exploratory study of this nature. Of course, further research should include data collection in other regions of the country to gain insight into potential regional differences.

Organization of the Dissertation

In the next chapter, I present a more in-depth account of the change in American naming practices over the 20th and early 21st centuries, looking at how the pool of names parents use has widened over time for all sorts of Americans, across race, socio-economic status and mother's place of birth. I suggest here that although some groups – like black and immigrant parents – seek out distinctive names at a higher rate than others, both these groups and those with more conservative name choices are choosing more distinctive names in the early 21st century at a higher rate century than did their peers in earlier cohorts.

Chapters 3 through 6 focus on the results of my interviews with contemporary Bay Area parents. In Chapter 3, I discuss parents' accounts of how they chose their children's names, finding that more than 75% of parents actively considered popularity when they screened names. I suggest that these concerns about popularity stem from a combination of their belief that standing out as an individual is intrinsically important for their children and their accommodation to societal pressure to "be good parents." I also look at how accurately contemporary parents perceived name popularity, both of the names they chose and those they rejected or offered up as examples of something "over-saturated." Chapter 4 moves to examining the ways in which parents constructed the desirability of different groups of distinctive names, and how parents from all groups were seeking a "Goldilocks name," simultaneously not too popular and not too strange. In Chapter 5, I examine some of the implicit "rules" for choosing distinctive names, focusing on how parents navigated names' ethnic connections. I look at how my respondents framed the issue of whether or not to use a name from their own ethnic background, as well as the appropriateness of using a name to which their family had no ethnic ties. Chapter 6 turns to a discussion of the name surveys I conducted with parents. I found that they tended to reject names either too trendy (like Ava or Jack, which ranked as 5 and 45 respectively in 2011, the year I did the largest proportion of my interviews) or too old-fashioned (like Dorothy or Walter, which ranked 4 and 12 in 1911 but had fallen to 934 and 375 in 2011). My survey data also reinforce the finding that parents were extremely conscious of possible racial associations with names, and inclined to avoid names tied tightly to another racial or ethnic group.

Chapter 7 shifts our focus from my contemporary parent interviews to the accounts of my contemporary respondents' parents. I explain how these "grandparent interviews" paint a picture of a different naming environment, where parents were much less concerned about collecting mountains of data on their name choices and more likely to approach the process casually, "going through the book" to make a list of names they liked without much concern about popularity or other empirical factors. Although grandparents were almost as likely as contemporary parents to report wanting to avoid the most popular names, the lack of authoritative data available before the compilation and distribution of SSA records made this task much more difficult. In practice, grandparents were inclined to report success in finding a distinctive name if their child didn't grow up surrounded by same-named peers, even if the name was empirically very popular in the population at large. This further reinforces my argument that the easier availability of data facilitates the modern obsession with popularity.

Finally, in the conclusion, Chapter 8, I return to the broad discussion of how parents are naming their babies today, drawing together my evidence to suggest that parents from all demographic groups are seeking out more distinctive names than ever, in large part because of a greater cultural desire for increased individuation, but also because they feel increasing cultural

pressure to be "good parents," and because the desire to turn to the advice of experts has increasingly meant consulting popularity data.

My study combines a broad illustration of naming practices over the last fifty years with a detailed snapshot of a group of families in one metropolitan area naming children between 2008 and 2012. I hope that this research will provide a stepping stone for others interested in examining the cultural changes discussed here – the increasing shift toward individuation and toward intensive parenting at all class levels – and also simply be of interest to those, like me, fascinated by the naming process and the social construction of identity in one of the few moments in life where it is consciously considered.

Chapter 2
The Widening Pool of American Baby Names

  In the twenty-first century, the most popular American baby names are less popular than ever before. In 2010, the top 1000 boys' and girls' names were given to 2,897,658 out of the 4,007,000 children born that year[6]; put differently, more than one quarter of all children born in the United States that year (approximately 28%) did not receive a name from the top 1000. The percentage of American children receiving these "unpopular" names has increased steadily since the early twentieth century. In this chapter, I first present evidence for this trend at the national level, then discuss some of the potential causal factors ruled out by previous research, and finally showcase the increasing avoidance of the most popular names by parents from a range of social groups, including some groups not typically seen as seeking out "unique" names.

  On the national level, the percentage of babies receiving the single most popular boys' and girls' names has declined roughly fivefold since the 1940s. In 1940, slightly more than five percent of all children received the most popular name for their gender; this percentage stayed nearly constant through the 1940s and then began to fall, dropping fairly consistently through to the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Figure 1: Most Popular (#1) Names Nationally as % of Total Births, 1940-2010
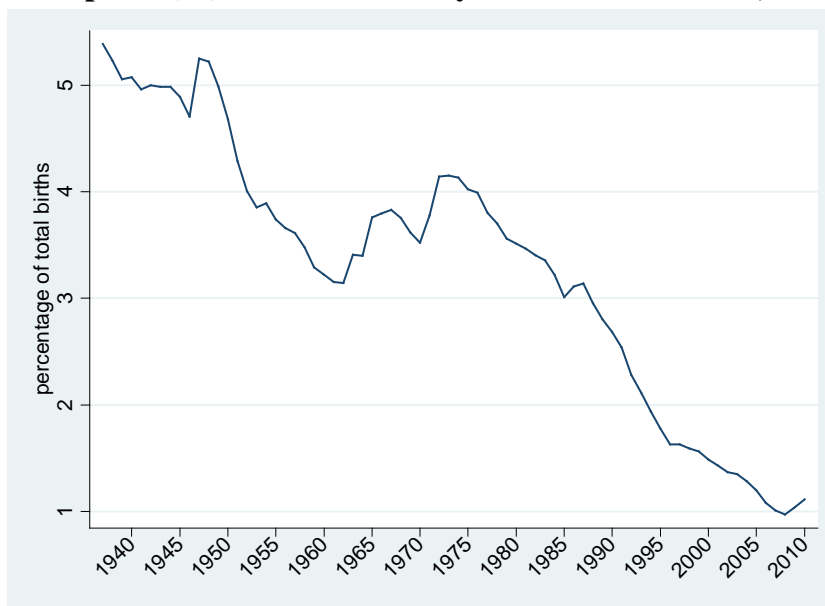
This pattern appears even more consistently once we move away from the most popular choices. While the market share of "number one" names fluctuated through the middle of the twentieth century, the larger clusters of "popular names" show a consistent decline in popularity, with one notable drop in the early 1950s and a second appearing between the late 1980s and early 1990s.

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[6] Data on number of children given popular names derived from SSA data. Data on total number of births derived from Centers for Disease Control data; 2010 data available at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestat/births_fertility_2010/births_fertility_2010.htm. Accessed 2 October 2012.

**Figure 2: Top 10, Top 100 and Top 1000 Most Popular Names Nationally
as % of Total Births, 1940-2010**
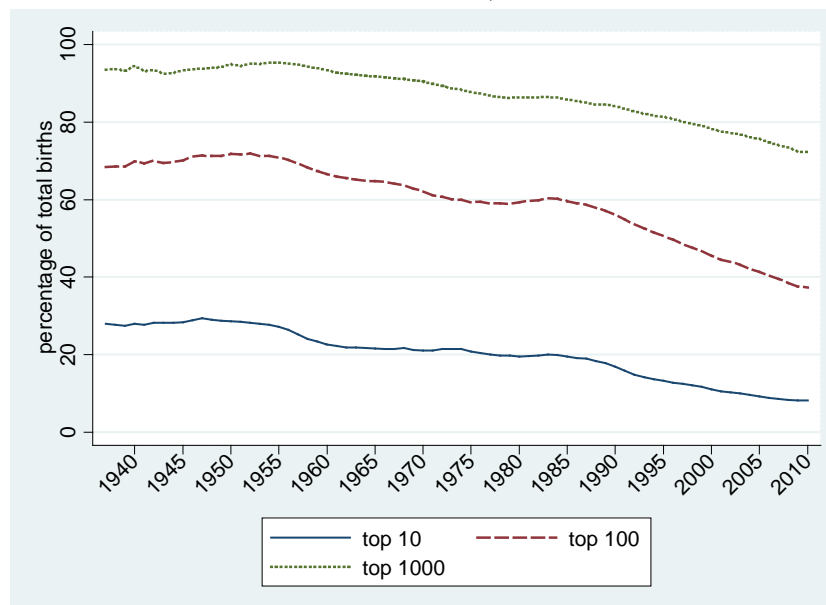
Possible Explanations for the Widening Pool

Even scholars whose work demonstrates the value of names and naming practices as a window into larger cultural trends have given little attention to this phenomenon. However, Lieberson and Lynn (2003) do rule out several possible explanations for parents' increasing avoidance of the most popular names. These include urbanization (using California birth certificate data, they found that the names chosen in rural areas were historically less concentrated than those chosen in urban ones), diversity (they point out that the decline in use of the most popular names occurs at approximately the same time for black and white parents), and the availability of "official" popularity data as a resource for interested parents.

This last point seems worthy of more examination. In their analysis, Lieberson and Lynn focus on the fact that parents' rejection of common names began well before the point at which the SSA released its first popularity list, in 1998[7]. My own data reinforce this view. In 1997, the top 100 names were given to 49% of children; in 1998, the number was 48%, virtually unchanged. The other potential influence worth considering in terms of data availability is Americans' increasing access to the Internet; as previous research has pointed out, increasing access to new technology can change cultural practices in unexpected ways (Beniger 1983). Nielsen media research documented rapidly increasing access to the Internet in the early 21st century, with the percentage of Americans having regular access growing from 66% to 75% between 2003 and 2004 (Kim 2004). However, even a close look at the declining use of popular names between 1990 and 2010 reveals no "bump" or "drop" that might reflect increasing data

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[7] The original actuarial note, from data assembled by SSA actuary Michael Shackleford, lists the top three most popular names for boys and girls for every year of birth between 1910 and 1997, as well as the top 40 names given to boys and girls in 1996. The note also states that the website for the Office of the Chief Actuary listed the top ten names for all years between 1880-1997, and included "large lists" of names for girls and boys born in 1996 and 1997. The note is available at http://www.ssa.gov/oact/NOTES/note139/original_note139.html.

availability: instead, the popularity of the top 100 names declines at a fairly steady rate over this 20-year period.

Figure 3: Top 100 Most Popular Names Nationally as % of Total Births, 1990-2010
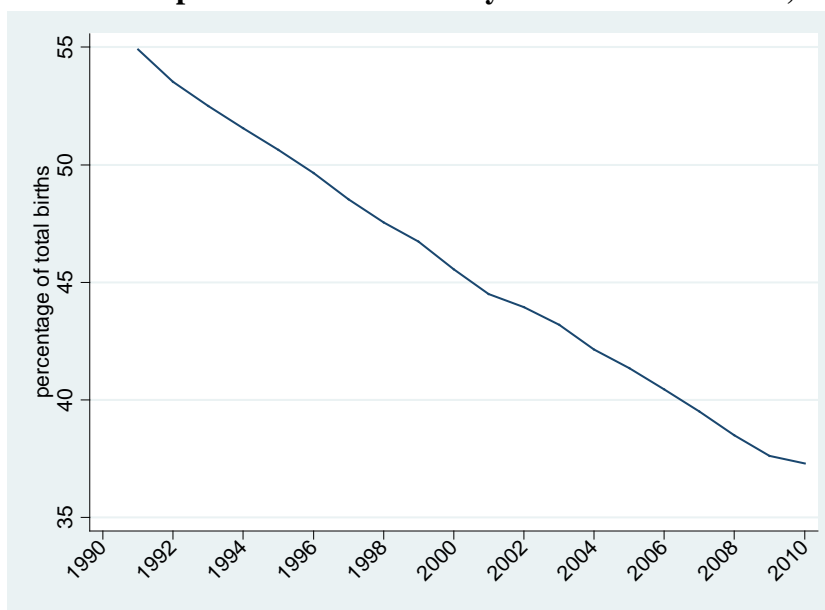
In their discussion of possible cultural explanations for the increasing diversity in parental name choice, Lieberson and Lynn consider the effects of increased cultural pressure toward individuation only in passing. This relationship has not received much examination from other scholars, either. Recent work by social psychologists connects the use of increasingly distinctive baby names with a larger interest in "individualism" or even narcissism (Twenge, Abebe, and Campbell 2010); another study attributes German parents' increasing choices of distinctive names to the nation's growing emphasis on the individual since the nineteenth century (Gerhards and Hackenbroch 2000). However, both these studies are small-scale, with the American study focused only on particular states and the German study on only a single village, and like Lieberson's and his collaborators' work, both extrapolate their conclusions from quantitative data. By combining national and state-level datasets with parents' accounts of their own naming processes, my study provides more comprehensive insight into causes of the trend.

Characteristics of the Widening Pool

My analysis of national and state-level data suggests – as do the parental accounts I discuss in subsequent chapters – that concerns about gender and race continue to be central factors in parents' name choice process. Parents are significantly more likely to choose a distinctive name for a daughter than for a son, and black parents are more likely than those from other racial groups to choose a distinctive name for a child of either sex. However, the large-scale data also demonstrate that the pool of potential name choices is expanding across all demographic groups, with effects on names chosen for boys and girls, on the choices of white, black, Hispanic and Asian families, of American-born and immigrant parents, and of mothers from all education levels. Although some groups choose distinctive names at higher rates, all groups are seeking them out more frequently than did their peers even a few decades ago.

Gender

Of the list of ascribed characteristics that might be expected to influence parents' name choices, gender is perhaps the most obvious. Even a quick look at the data reveals that boys' and girls' names follow different use patterns. In 1940, approximately[8] 32% of boys and 24% of girls received one of the top ten most popular names for their gender; by 1975, when overall name density had dropped dramatically, the percentage of children receiving a top ten name had fallen to 25% of boys and 17% of girls. Although the prevalence of the most common names dropped for both sexes, throughout this 35-year period – and the rest of the twentieth century – boys' names at all popularity levels were reliably more concentrated than girls' names. However, as we can see in the figures below, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the gap between the density of the most popular boys' and girls' names has begun to close.

This convergence is particularly striking when examining data for the most popular names. In 1964, the top ten most popular names were given to 28% of boys and 15% of girls; although the percentage of children receiving these names was smaller in 1964 than in 1940, the difference in percentage between boys and girls (13 points) is larger here than in earlier decades; in fact, it represents the largest difference in name density by sex throughout the dataset. This gap narrows slowly through the next few decades and then begins to drop significantly in the 1990s, a trend that continues through the first decade of the twenty-first century to its lowest recorded point in 2010, when 8.3% of boys and 8% of girls received a top ten name.

**Figure 4: Top 10 Most Popular Boys' and Girls' Names
Nationally as % of Overall Births, 1940-2010**
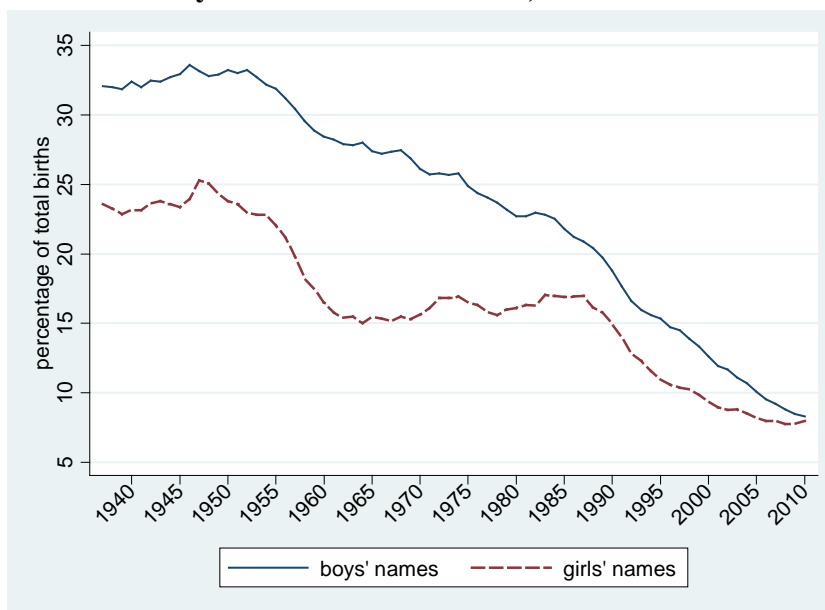
This pattern seems to be unique to the most popular names: turning to the top 100 names, we see a gap between the density of names chosen for the two sexes that widens from the 1940s through the early 1960s, and has since remained fairly consistent at between twelve and sixteen percentage points' difference. Thus, these data show us two things: that the names given to boys

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[8] CDC population summaries do not include children's sex: accordingly, I have estimated the total boys and girls born in particular years using the CIA World Factbook birth rate of 1.05 males born for every 1 female.

have historically been more concentrated than those given to girls at all popularity levels, and that the most popular boys' names are becoming less common in the twenty-first century.

Figure 5: Top 100 Most Popular Boys' and Girls' Names Nationally as % of Overall Births, 1940-2010
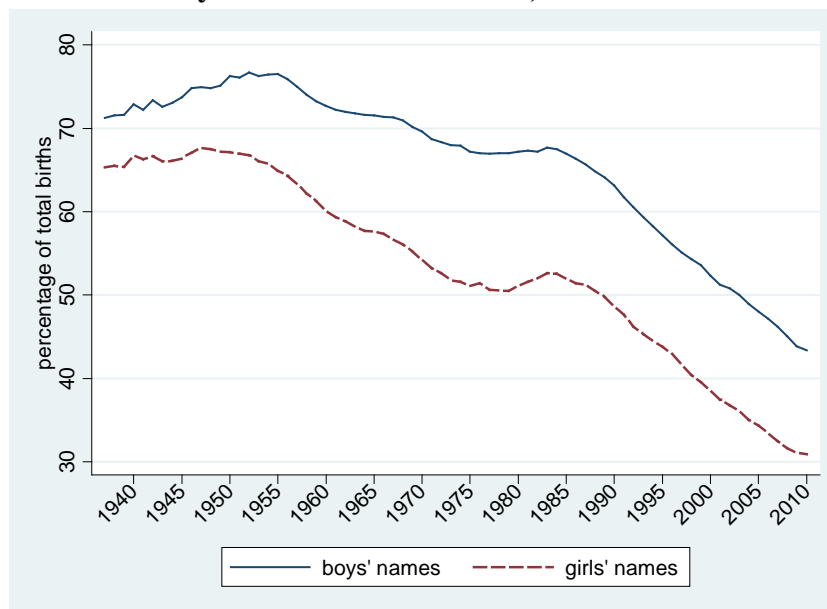
Explanations for the higher density of boys' names are not difficult to come by. Previous studies have demonstrated parents' greater propensity to use family names for boys than for girls (Rossi 1965), and the greater tendency for boys to receive "traditional" names (Sue and Telles 2007). Even the popularity data itself registers this difference. Boys' names have historically shifted in and out of fashion more slowly than girls' names. Between 1880 and 2011, the national top ten lists encompassed 83 girls' names and only 44 boys' names. In 1960, the top ten most popular boys' names had appeared on the top ten list for an average of 44.8 continuous years, as compared to 19.3 years for the top ten girls' names: by 1985, this average had fallen to 7.4 continuous years for the top ten girls' names, while remaining almost unchanged at 45.6 for boys. In 2011, however, the average was 13 continuous years on the list for boys and 9.6 for girls: six of the top ten boys' names and five of the top ten girls' names in that year had appeared on the list for fewer than ten continuous years overall. This shift in the staying power of the most popular boys' names is not only extremely recent, but dramatic.

What, then, has prompted the change in the most popular boys' names in the last few years? Part of the explanation might be the declining use of family names as first names (Gerhards and Hackenbroch 2000): in my sample of 103 children, only three received direct "legacy" names (boys named after their fathers or otherwise in keeping with family tradition), and only 12 received any name directly borrowed from a known relative as a first name (middle names are a different matter, as I discuss in Chapter 3). Another factor could be that young parents, born and brought up after the women's movement, are more inclined to view their sons in the same way as their daughters, and are less concerned about choosing a "manly" name. The most common explanation volunteered by the parents in my study, though, was that traditional boys' names are "boring." To borrow Lieberson's (2000) metaphor, girls' names have been a "taste" for a long time; for the first time, boys' names seem to be moving down the same path.

However, as I discuss in more detail in later chapters, gender remains a powerful motivator for contemporary parents in choosing names for both their sons and their daughters: even Bay Area parents generally don't want their sons to have "girls' names," and everyone I spoke to had an opinion, favorable or unfavorable, on the use of boys' names for girls.

Race and Nationality

Alongside gender, the ascribed characteristics most sociologists would deem most important for parents considering the effects of name on their child's identity are race and nationality. When the widening pool of names came up in my conversations with parents, they often speculated that the phenomenon was related to increased immigration, or noted that "parents from some cultures" (a phrase typically implying African-Americans) seek out extremely distinctive names for their children. I discuss these boundaries of race and ethnicity, and their ramifications for parents' own attitudes toward what "counts" as a viable name, in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6. Here, I present the evidence that parents from all demographic groups are seeking more distinctive names than did their counterparts in earlier decades.

This analysis draws on California birth certificate data from 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2008. Although limiting my analysis to state-level data slightly reduces the generalizability of my results, focusing my efforts on a large, diverse state allows me to extract data on sub-populations that reflect different parts of the national picture. Additionally, a comparison of California data with the national dataset reveals similar patterns in overall popularity trends. Although the most popular names have long been slightly less common in California than in the United States overall, likely because of the highly diverse demographics of the state, the density of popular names in California declines roughly alongside the national average. A comparative table of California and national popularity rates is available in the appendix.

To consider the effects of race on parents' preference for a popular or less popular name, I examined the practices of families from the four major racial groups in California: white, black, Hispanic and Asian[9]. For this analysis, rather than looking at the distribution of nationally popular names (as I will do in the following discussions of nationality and mother's education), I instead focused on the most popular names *within* each racial group. As Lieberson (2000) and others have argued, race tends to trump all other demographic characteristics for parents considering a name: parents' choices more often correlate by race than by education.

As I noted above, some groups are more inclined than others to choose distinctive names. In 1970, 72% of white boys and 54% of white girls received one of the top 100 most popular names for white children in California, compared to 54% of black boys and 37% of black girls. In that same year, 63% of Asian boys and 55% of Asian girls received one of the top 100 names for Asian children. The comparatively lower concentration of boys' names for Asian children compared to white children suggests that Asian immigrant families, like the Chicano families studied by Sue and Telles (2007), may be more inclined to give traditional names to their sons and "American" names to their daughters. When Hispanic families begin to be distinguished in the California data, in 1990, we see that their popularity preferences roughly mirror whites'.

Examining the figures below, we can note that this pattern persists more or less throughout the available years of data: white and Hispanic parents are most likely to give their children popular names, while black parents are least likely to do so, and Asian parents stand somewhere in between. The different behavior patterns of the two immigrant communities may

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[9] I determined families' race/ethnicity by looking at the race of both parents, limiting my sample to those cases where both parents' races were listed as the same (or where only one parent's race was listed).

stem from the fact that the vast majority of Hispanic Californians come not only from the same language background but the same cultural background, Mexican or Mexican-American, while Asian parents come from a wide range of linguistic and cultural traditions. The figure also illustrates that regardless of race, the general trend is toward decreasing use of the top 100 most popular names.

**Figure 6: Top 100 Boys' Names by Race in California
as % of Overall Births in that Racial Group, Selected Years Between 1970-2008**
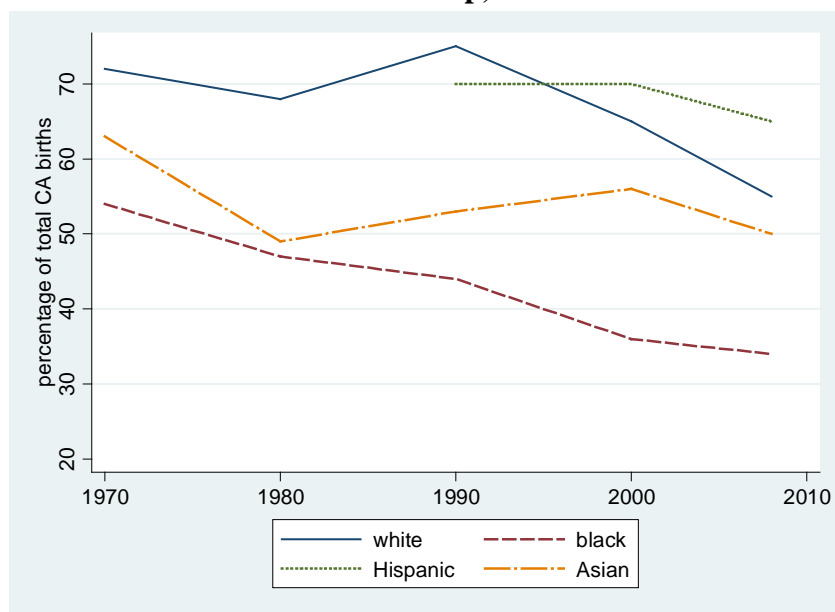
**Figure 7: Top 100 Girls' Names by Race in California
as % of Overall Births in that Racial Group, Selected Years Between 1970-2008**
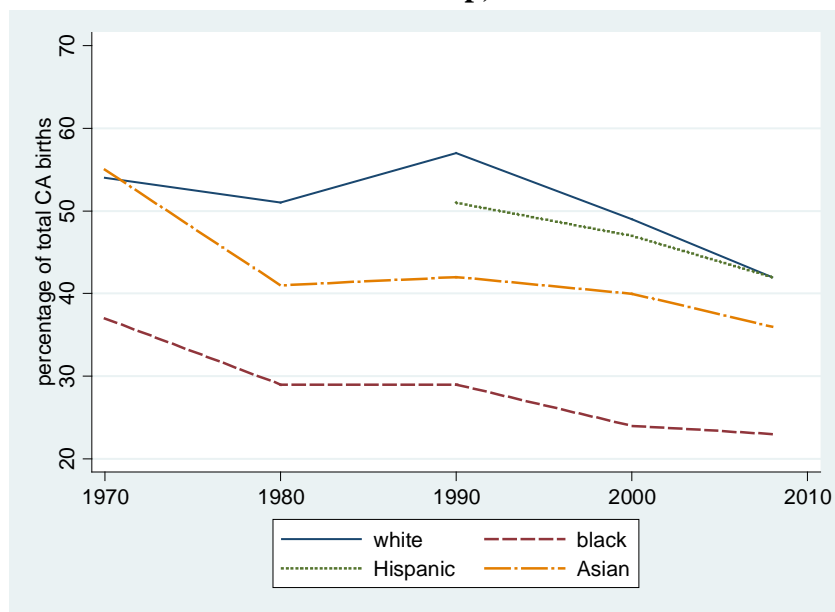
When I spoke to my respondents about the widening pool of names used for American babies, in addition to suggesting that the increasing diversity had to do with "certain groups" being more likely to choose distinctive names, some respondents suggested that the pattern had to do with increasing numbers of immigrant parents. However, a comparison of the percentage of popular names chosen by American-born and immigrant mothers over the years encompassed by my sample demonstrates that, in fact, the percentage of immigrant mothers choosing popular names has remained relatively constant, while the percentage of American-born mothers has declined. In 1970, the national top 100 names for boys were chosen by 42% of immigrant mothers and 68% of American-born mothers giving birth in California; 31% of immigrant mothers and 47% of American-born mothers chose a top 100 name for their daughters that year. Comparing the data from 2008, we see that the percentage of immigrant mothers selecting top 100 names declined only slightly for girls' names, and not at all for boys' names; however, the percentage of American-born mothers choosing top 100 names dropped dramatically for both, to 49% for boys and 33% for girls. This is more than a 25% reduction in the percentage of American-born mothers choosing top 100 names for their sons, and a 30% reduction in the percentage choosing top 100 names for their daughters.

Figure 8: National Top 100 Boys' Names as Used in California, by Mother's Place of Birth, Selected Years Between 1970-2008
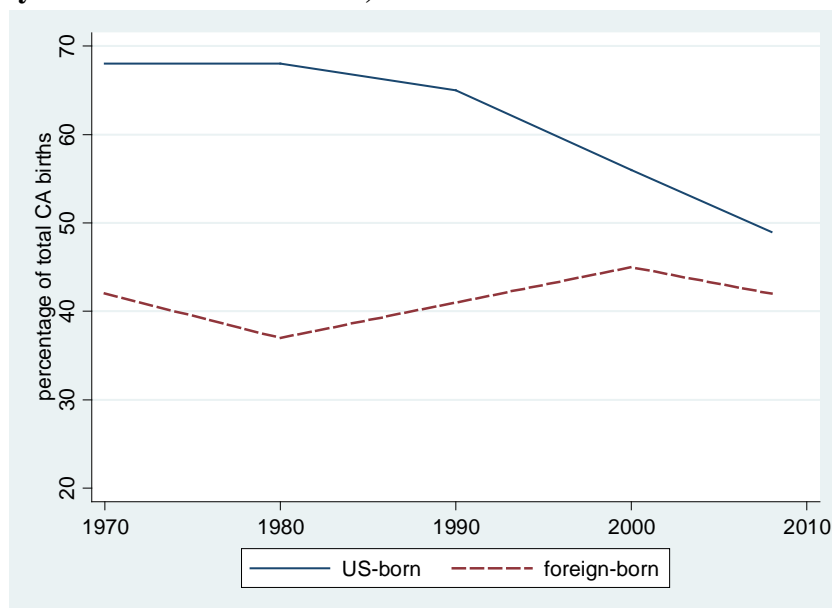
**Figure 9: National Top 100 Girls' Names as Used in California,
by Mother's Place of Birth, Selected Years Between 1970-2008**
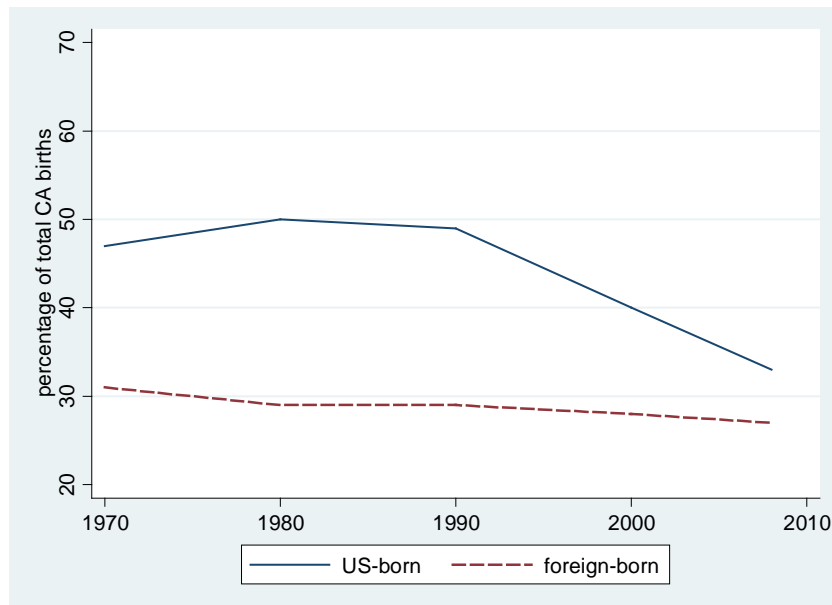
For both groups, we might suspect that the increasing shift away from "most popular" names for American-born women and white families could reflect a cultural shift in the composition of the most popular names, i.e., that white and American-born mothers increasingly avoid the national top 100 because of perceived contamination by "immigrant names" or "ethnic names". Examining the racial distribution of the national top 100 names in 2008, we see that children from a single racial group made up more than 50% of the population receiving a name for 57 boys' names and 50 girls' names in California that year. However, while this list includes 29 boys' names and 30 girls' names given to a Hispanic majority of children, it also includes 28 boys' names and 20 girls' names given to a white majority, and the "majority Hispanic" names include names with a long history of Anglo usage like Christopher, Daniel, Alexander, Brianna, Emily, and Jennifer. Although some of the names in the 2008 national top 100 (like Juan and Luis) could clearly be marked as "ethnic," it seems unlikely that parents are avoiding the list solely out of concern for names' ethnic associations.

Maternal Education

Compared to their eagerness to ascribe causality to race and nationality, my respondents had relatively little to say about the possible effects of class and education on the declining use of popular names. However, an examination of the popularity preferences of mothers with different education levels suggests a correlation between education and parents' preference for popular or distinctive names. Although the California birth certificate data did not record parental education until 1990, even three data points provides us with enough information to see the beginnings of a fairly striking trend. In 1990, mothers with no high school diploma gave top 100 names to 43% of their sons and 30% of their daughters; mothers with a high school diploma chose top 100 names for 60% of their sons and 44% of their daughters; and those with a bachelor's degree chose top 100 names for 66% of their sons and 51% of their daughters. In other words, mothers with limited education were substantially more likely than those from other

groups to choose distinctive names for their children, and a preference for popular names seems to correlate with increasing levels of education.

We see the same declining use of popular names here as in other demographic comparisons, but the drop is substantially smaller for mothers with no high school diploma than for the other groups. It seems that although mothers with limited education have consistently been more likely than those with more education to select distinctive names for their children, their preference for distinctive names has not increased at the same rate as the other groups'.

Figure 10: National Top 100 Boys' Names as Used in California, by Mother's Education, Selected Years Between 1990-2008
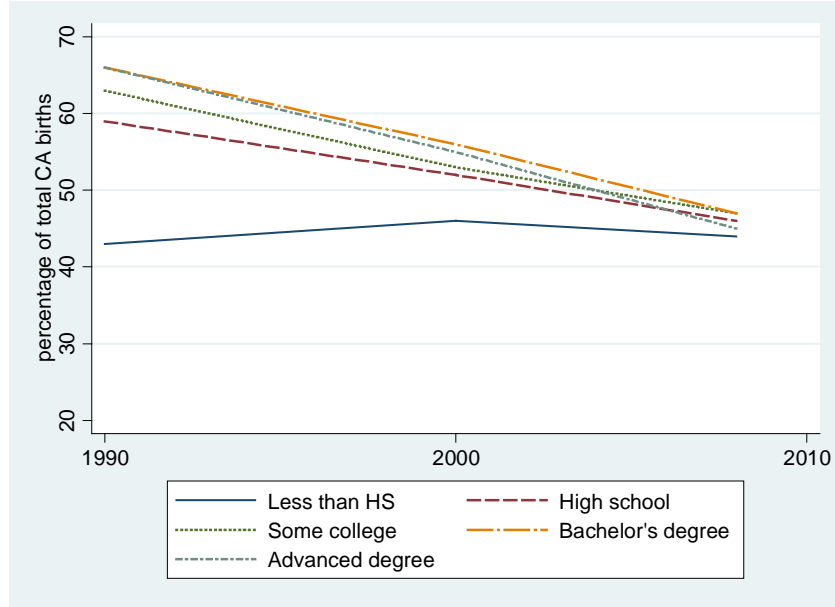
Figure 11: National Top 100 Girls' Names as Used in California, by Mother's Education, Selected Years Between 1990-2008
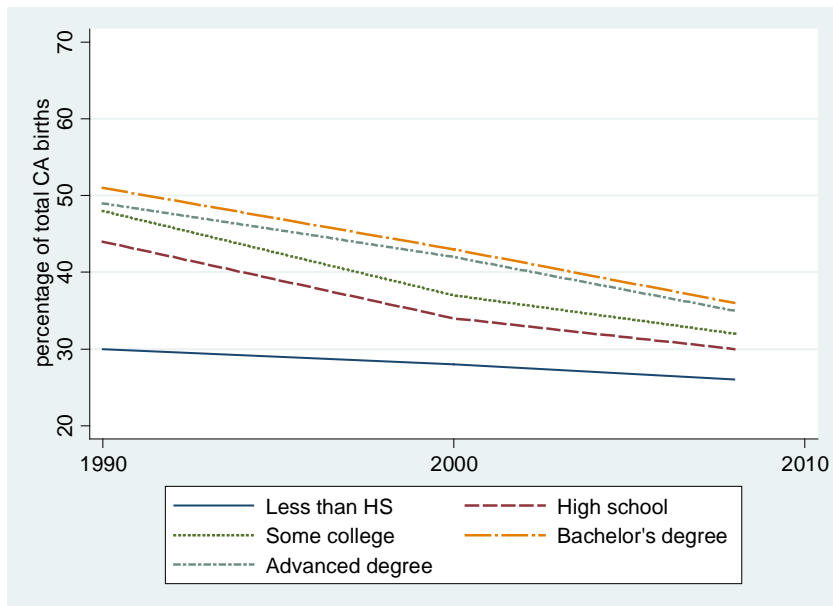
One possible confounding variable here is a potential correlation between education and race; in 2008, 86% of mothers in this dataset reporting less than a high school education were Hispanic, compared with 51% of mothers overall. However, even when isolating the sample to white mothers, I found similar patterns. In 1990, white mothers without a high school diploma gave top 100 names to 65% of their sons and 48% of their daughters, while white mothers with a bachelor's degree gave top 100 names to 74% of sons and 58% of daughters. By 2000, these percentages had dropped to 47% of sons and 31% of daughters for white mothers with no high school diploma, while the percentage for white mothers with a bachelor's degree had fallen to 52% of sons and 39% of daughters. The gap between education levels narrowed over the decades, but mothers without a high school diploma remained somewhat more distinctive in their choices from the rest, as can be seen in the figures below.

Figure 12: National Top 100 Boys' Names as Used in California, by Mother's Education (White Mothers Only), Selected Years Between 1990-2008
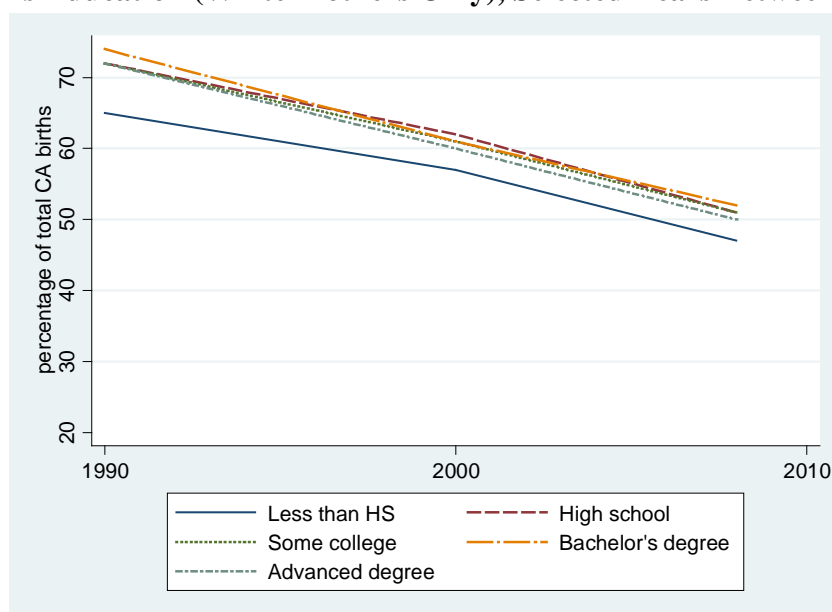
**Figure 13: National Top 100 Girls' Names as Used in California,
by Mother's Education (White Mothers Only), Selected Years Between 1990-2008**
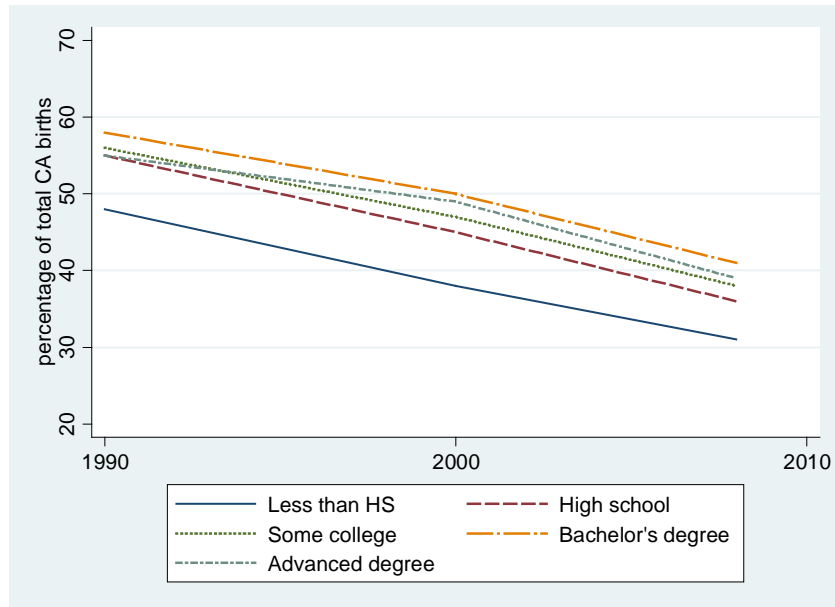
Taken together, these data demonstrate that the pool of potential names American parents choose for their children is increasing across all groups. What these data do not show, however, are parents' motivations for avoiding the most popular names. To gain insight into these rationales, we must turn to my more in-depth data set: the accounts of parents themselves.

Chapter 3
"He Won't Be an Ordinary Kid": Contemporary Parents' Search for Distinctive Names

When I asked parents which factors they placed greatest emphasis on when considering names, their answers spanned a wide range. Parents might have selected a name because they wanted to honor a family member, or because they wanted their child to feel connected to a specific ethnic or religious community, or for a name's appealing sound or linguistic meaning. I heard each of these rationales many times, offered up by parents from a variety of backgrounds. As we saw in Chapter 1, each family's priorities were distinctive, but regardless of the specifics of their choice, the overwhelming majority of families in my study shared one important qualifying factor: they wanted a name that was "a little bit different."

Before starting data collection, I expected that some parents would report considering popularity in their evaluations of prospective names. What I did not expect, however, was that the overwhelming majority of parents were preoccupied with popularity. When I asked parents what they considered to be the necessary elements of a "good name," 62% (from 44 of 71 families) spoke without prompting about wanting something "unique." Including those parents who acknowledged the importance of distinctiveness after some prompting from me brings that number to 63 of 71 families. Thus, in total, 89% of my respondents reported considering the distinctiveness of potential name choices before making a final choice.

For the most part, parents' efforts to find a distinctive name were successful: as we see below, the children in my interview sample had significantly more distinctive names than both the national population born in 2009 (the mean birth year for my sample) and the California population born in 2008.

Table 1: Popularity of Children's Names

Name Rating	National data, 2009	California data (using names' national rankings), 2008	Children in my sample (based on names' national rankings in child's birth year)
Extremely popular (1-10)	337,095 (8%)	46,103 (8%)	6 (6%)
Popular (11-50)	726,208 (18%)	97,914 (18%)	6 (6%)
Common (51-100)	492,264 (12%)	68,731 (12%)	8 (8%)
Familiar (101-250)	648,680 (16%)	97,022 (17%)	15 (15%)
Less familiar (251-500)	430,878 (10%)	61,539 (11%)	13 (13%)
Unusual (501-1000)	359,926 (9%)	47,581 (9%)	17 (17%)
Unique (1001-end of rankings)	778,675 (19%)	93,288 (17%)	24 (24%)
Exclusive (not ranked; given to <5 children nationally)	362,274 (9%)	39,011 (7%)	12 (12%)
Total	4,136,000	551,189	101

While the California birth data roughly echoes the national distribution, with 38% of children receiving a top 100 name, only 20% of the children in my sample received such a name. In California overall, 75% of parents naming children in 2008 chose a top 1000 name, compared to only 65% of the children in my sample, and 12% of my sample received names given to less than 5 children nationally, compared to only 7% of all children born in the state that year.

In this chapter, I discuss parents' explanations for wanting distinctive names for their children, as well as the process they went through to find something appropriately unique. My data suggest that although most families' motivations for choosing distinctive names stem from a desire to make their child "stand out," something they see as beneficial both in social interactions and on a personal level, parents also feel pressure from an intensive parenting culture that demands a substantial investment of time and energy in every part of childrearing. Rather than choosing distinctive names unwittingly, most parents feel a strong "need" to seek out a distinctive name, and are fairly conscious of which are the popular names to avoid; however, mistakes do happen, and I also spoke to a few parents who expressed their dismay at having chosen a popular name inadvertently.

"Not Getting Lost in the Crowd": Parents' Explanations for Seeking Distinctive Names

For many parents, the most straightforward reason to avoid the most popular names was to avoid their child's suffering the burden of sharing a name. Parents from 21 families (one-third of those who considered popularity) gave this as their first rationale, most in almost identical language:

> *I didn't want four [kids with my child's name] in the class* [final choices ranked between 51-100 and between 101-250].

> *I wanted a name that was unique enough that there weren't four of them in her kindergarten class* [final choices ranked between 101-250, between 501-1000, and unranked in the year of the child's birth].

> *There's just some aversion to having another John or Bob or Heather in a class where four [other] people have her name* [final choice ranked between 251-500].

In most cases, parents didn't offer any unprompted elaboration on why sharing a name is a burden: for them, the undesirability of being one of many Jennifers (or Isabellas) required no further explanation.

Those who did elaborate without prompting from me most often referenced their own childhood experiences as bearers of common or distinctive names. Parents who grew up with very popular names spoke about hating the fact that others shared their name, or about the frustration of always being identified by first name and last initial, while those with more unusual names spoke about their positive experiences being recognized as "one-of-a-kind."

> *It's good to have [your name] be distinctive... you stick out. I remember in high school, there'd be like four Matts, three Chrises and six Mikes in my class. And me. And [the repeated names] always seemed a little bit pointless. You know, it's cool to have a name that's distinct, so you're the only one. Not just in the room,*

but in the entire school [parent's name not ranked in birth year, child's name ranked between 101-250].

I was born in the early eighties, and anybody born in the late seventies, early eighties [had my name]. So in elementary school, there were typically three of us in the class, and we all had to go by our last initial... I did not like that, 'cause we were the only name that had to do that. Everybody else had their own individual identity [parent's name ranked between 1-10 in birth year, child's name ranked between 1-10].

As the relative rankings of these parents' names compared to their children's might suggest, I found no significant distinctiveness correlation between parents' and children's names; having either a popular or a distinctive name did not increase the likelihood of parents' choosing a distinctive name for their own child. However, parents' own experiences did help establish their models for what constituted a "good name."

When I pressed parents to further unpack their rationales for avoiding popular names, most framed their decision in terms of a desire to help their child become an individual, to be unique and special. In a pattern which evokes the scholarship on the rising importance of individuation over the course of the twentieth century (see Alwin 1989; Buchmann and Eisner 1997; Swidler 1992; and others), the creation of a unique identity was seen as intrinsically beneficial to children, as something that would allow them to stand out from the crowd in a positive way, and thereby to better "be themselves."

I think that on some level, [having an unusual name] helps to confirm that you are different from other people. It sets you apart [final choice ranked between 251-500].

Parents' specific explanations of the value of a unique name fell into two main categories: a distinctive name's social benefits, and its benefits for a child's self-esteem and psyche.

The Social Benefits of a Distinctive Name

In the small field of onomastics (research on names), a name's possible social effects are one of the most popular subjects. Many of my respondents reported a passing familiarity with this literature, most commonly citing Levitt and Dubner's pop social science text *Freakonomics* (2005) and its discussion of the research literature on the negative effects of African-American names on individuals' job prospects (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004). Respondents seemed less likely to remember Levitt and Dubner's main takeaway point, supported in other research, which is that after controlling for factors like socioeconomic status, the choice of any particular name "isn't likely to make a shard of difference" in a child's prospects (Levitt and Dubner 2005: 207; see also Figlio 2005; Fryer and Levitt 2004). Many of the participants in my study, even those who had read *Freakonomics,* felt that names would have a definite influence on their child's well-being and prospects. The threat of possible negative effects made a clear impression on them: as we will see in Chapter 4, many parents spoke at length about wanting to choose the "right" kind of distinctive name to avoid handicapping their children. For most of the parents in my sample, however, an appropriately distinctive name was seen as an asset, something that would bring their child attention in a positive way.

Although ten families in my sample spoke specifically about the social benefits of distinctive names, only one framed these benefits in terms of the topic most central to the argument in *Freakonomics,* a name's potential economic effects. The father in this family, talking about how he hoped his son would use his full "multicultural" name (an "ethnic" first name and Anglo middle name) rather than reducing his middle name to an initial, put it this way:

> *I want him to flaunt his multicultural [heritage], and use it. And I'd say, if he's looking for a job or whatever, and there's five hundred resumes, [an employer might say] oh, that's an interesting name. You know? You sort of pop out among all the other non-descript names* [final choices ranked between 500-1000].

For most parents who drew on this language, the perceived social benefits of a distinctive name were much more immediate, focused on helping their children to stand out in a positive way within their peer group. Parents choosing names from all popularity levels spoke explicitly about this goal in describing their motivations, and rarely elaborated, suggesting that being distinctive was an end in itself.

> *I think a unique name is important, because they will definitely stand out.* [final choices ranked between 51-100 and between 251-500]

> *[I wanted a unique name] so they'll stand out* [final choices ranked below 1000]

> *I think I would want [a name that's] less common. For him to stand out more* [final choice not ranked in the year of the child's birth].

Parents who did expand on the social benefits of a distinctive name most often spoke about the value of preventing their child from being confused with others. Here, too, parents brought up their own social experiences with popular or unpopular names.

> *I've always liked having a name where people will recognize it immediately [as mine]* [parent's name ranked between 251-500, child's name not ranked].

> *As a kid, I always thought it was kind of a drag when you'd say, you know, Jennifer, and I'd say, well, which one?... not that there couldn't be another [child with my child's name], but [I wanted a name] that wasn't so commonplace that you'd have to constantly explain which one you were [talking about]* [final choices ranked between 101-250, between 501-1000, and unranked].

> *It's inconvenient to have an unusual name in that you have to spell it for people all the time, but I think it's [also sometimes] convenient to have the unique name, because you don't get confused with other people* [final choice ranked below 1000].

Even though unusual names might require a bit more explanation in new social settings, these parents felt the benefits of being instantly recognized and remembered outweighed any initial

nuisance coming from having to explain an unusual name. Being memorable and unique within one's social circle was an unquestioned benefit.

The Personal Benefits of a Distinctive Name

Alongside the parents who extolled the importance of standing out from the crowd, another group focused their explanations on the intrinsic personal value of a unique identity. For these families, a distinctive name had undeniable positive effects on a child's self-image, self-esteem and personal development. As I noted in Chapter 1, previous research has noted increasing emphasis throughout the 20th century on developing the individual, and on "self-actualization" as goals both for oneself and one's children, particularly for the upper-middle-classes, who "encourage their children to define early on their own individuality and tastes" (Lamont 1992: 117). I was thereby unsurprised to find that fifteen of the 63 families in my study who considered popularity (24% of that subgroup) spoke about distinctive names in the context of personal fulfillment and helping children finding a way to "be themselves."

For these parents, establishing a personal identity was a complex and difficult task, and something children might not be able to accomplish on their own: thus, part of a parent's job was providing tools to help children in their quest to be individuals, to "have a more defined identity" and to learn to see their own uniqueness as "something to embrace, instead of being ashamed of not being like everyone else." In a few cases, parents argued that the specific act of choosing a distinctive name was part of their parental obligation, suggesting that the choice of a popular name could somehow be damaging to the child:

> *I see the goal of a name as being about establishing individuality. So to me, giving a child a popular name is like telling them they're not unique, and they're not special* [final choice ranked between 251-500].

This notion of a distinctive name as inherently reflecting the "special-ness" of an individual child was echoed by parents choosing names at a range of popularity levels:

> *When you have this all-important job of naming a child, you feel like a part of their identity is gonna be wrapped up in their name, and you want – as Americans, and with our culture, you want your child to be unique* [final choices ranked between 1-10 and between 101-250].

> *We wanted to have unique names. Just so that they wouldn't get confused, and they would have their own personalities. I guess when I was younger, there were a lot of [kids with my name], so it wasn't that special. I just wanted something different* [final choices ranked between 101-250 and between 251-500].

> *Why would I want to give them a name that everybody has? Like, I knew ten Mikes growing up. Why would I do that? … Nothing wrong with it, I guess, but it just seemed like it's such a big deal to pick a name for somebody. It's something that he's gonna have forever, [something] I hope that he likes. Why not give him something that's for him? You know. Special* [final choice ranked below 1000].

The secondary point made by this last mother, of her son's name as a "special" gift that is "for him" – a handmade product, as opposed to a mass-produced one picked off the rack – was echoed by other parents as well. As another mother put it:

> *I really wanted to give my child something that was theirs. You know? And that began first with his life, second with his name* [final choice ranked below 1000].

In fact, in a move that might dismay the producers of personalized paraphernalia, several parents spoke explicitly about how an "appropriately" distinctive name was one that couldn't be found "on a key ring, or whatever."[10] One mother explained this decision in terms of her own experience with personalized goods as a child:

> *We wanted [a name] that you can't find on a pencil, at the store, just to be unique and different. Because I had a traditional name, and I always found my name on pencils and things... and it's just so ordinary* [parent's name ranked between 11-50, child's name ranked below 1000].

Just as those parents justifying their choice of a distinctive name in terms of its social benefits spoke about the intrinsic goodness of standing out, the parents talking about the personal value of a distinctive name viewed "ordinariness" as obviously something to be avoided. For these parents, the best path for their child was to stand apart, confident in their own uniqueness from the beginning, and to find their own special place in the world:

> *I don't want her to be one of many of a particular name. I wanted her to have her own identity, hopefully be able to forge her own way... maybe having a unique name, or a less popular name, will make it easier for her to become who she wants to be, or who she is, earlier... I just want her to be an individual, as soon as possible, and to be as immune as possible from all outside influences* [final choice ranked between 11-50].

As Lamont's research suggested, these parents wanted their children to feel not only unique and special, but to forge their own path. As this mother put it:

> *I think everybody wants to have their child have their own – not reality show, but kind of that experience. Like, you are your own universe, and you're gonna be the trendsetter. You're gonna be the one who paves the way, versus sitting and conforming* [final choices ranked between 501-1000].

This idea of the value of "paving the way," of controlling the course of one's life rather than sitting back and letting it be determined by others, is certainly not a new one in American

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[10] Of course, in the 21st century, parents hoping to buy personalized items for their children do not have to limit their name choices to those available on keychains and pens at the corner store: a Google search for "personalized children's items" revealed thousands of companies selling personalized versions of almost anything a parent might think of. A few companies even produce CDs full of songs that prominently feature a child's name; although most of these require parents to choose from a pre-set list of names, a few proudly state that "our CD can be made with ANY NAME."

ideology. However, my research suggests that contemporary parents are feeling increasing pressure to help their child in the process of becoming an individual.

Distinctive Names and Intensive Parenting: The Responsibility of Finding a Good Name

The existing literature leaves little doubt that the contemporary model of "good parenting" puts ever-increasing pressure on parents. In her analysis of "intensive mothering," Hays (1996) points to the ways in which mothers are pressured to

> [not only] respect [their] children as human beings… [but] as individuals. This means that a good mother will take the time to get to know the particular interests and desires of her own unique child… Listening to children in order to understand just who they are what they want and need is regarded as crucial by most mothers" (1996:113).

Lareau's (2003) work reveals a similar burden placed on those parents who practice "concerted cultivation," seeking to actively develop their children into smart, capable adults. Whether parents spend their time discussing the events of the day with their child, shepherding him to one of a half dozen extracurricular activities, or intervening with teachers to make sure that she receives the extra help needed to support her learning disability, modern parental responsibilities include making sure children are able to take advantage of every available opportunity.

A number of parents in my study framed their search for a distinctive name in language reminiscent of the concerted cultivation/intensive parenting model, explaining that since this was one of their first parenting decisions, they wanted to make sure they did it "right." One mother spoke at some length about how, because she and her husband would be the last in their extended family to have children, she wanted to make sure her children's names displayed a level of effort equal to that put in by other family members:

> *We were the last of our siblings to have kids, and [when we were choosing names] I considered what [our siblings] all named their kids, too. And in my husband's family in particular, I think there's less common names with his nieces and nephews. And I just wanted to present that we had [given] some thought to it. Not that we just kind of were lazy about it* [final choices ranked between 101-250 and below 1000].

Parents not only viewed the choice of a distinctive name as reflecting their own commitment to their children, but extended this analogy to criticism of those in their extended social circles who "settled" for popular names. We see this in this mother's account of her reaction to a friend's choice of the wildly popular boys' name Aiden:

> *I can understand naming your kid something that everybody else in your kindergarten class is gonna be named, insofar as they're probably not gonna get picked on if there are six other kids with the same name. But I just don't understand the impulse. (Half-mockingly:) Your child is a unique flower. (laughs) And I don't understand why people would name their kid something that everybody else is named. I mean, you'd think your child is unique, and so you might as well name them something unique* [final choice ranked below 1000].

Even as they expressed their commitment to choosing just the right name for their child, however, parents' accounts also reflected another element common to discussions of the intensive parenting process: the stress of labor-intensive childrearing. Many families spoke unenthusiastically about the time and effort it had taken to find the right name, poring over books and drafting list after list. Eleven families in my study (15% of the total) directly acknowledged the stress of the naming process, with comments like these:

> *I couldn't believe the responsibility of naming another human being... I felt tremendous pressure. I mean, I just think that it's an incredible responsibility, because it's not your name. It's somebody else's. Somebody else has to live with it* [final choice ranked between 11-50].
>
> *[I'm] carrying around this burden of having to work so hard to come up with a name... it's hard work. It's exhausting* [final choice ranked between 51-100].
>
> *I found it really stressful, actually, thinking about names, because though I've always enjoyed it, thinking about coming up with a name for my child when time was running out was actually kind of stressful* [final choice ranked between 501-1000].

Parents from all backgrounds spoke about the immense responsibility associated with selecting a child's name, noting that names are part of the first impression an individual makes and something that "could have a big impact on the child's life." In many cases misremembering the findings they cited from *Freakonomics,* parents went to great lengths explaining how "the wrong name" could have a strong negative influence on a child:

> *I feel like you are opening and closing doors with a name. Some names just won't be good politicians* [final choice ranked between 501-1000].
>
> *I didn't want [his name] to be something that's gonna determine his future. You know? ... Naming somebody Jett, you're kind of giving him a chip on his shoulder to start with. You know? I wanted to [make his name] something that was open enough that he could be whoever he wanted to with it* [final choice ranked between 501-1000].
>
> *It's something that we stressed over a lot... that at the beginning of your child's life, to pick a name that they're gonna like, something that can be respectable and liked, and present a good first impression. For the rest of their life. And you don't know what this child's personality is gonna be like, and you have all this responsibility of trying to pick a name for them* [final choice ranked between 251-500].

Although the literature on intensive parenting most often frames it as a middle-class phenomenon – limited to those parents with time and resources to indulge in "cultivation" – my study suggests that working-class and poor parents feel as much pressure to choose the "right"

name as do their wealthier counterparts. In one working-class family, the father spent hours putting together name spreadsheets "with all the boys' names in blue, all the girls' names in pink," which he then presented to his wife for approval; when I asked him why, he explained:

> *It's not easy for me to find something I like… I have specific criteria when it comes to naming children. It has to be something that can be taken seriously when they're older, and not too common… I want a name that sounds very good for an adult, and has a certain amount of heft. Somebody who would be in charge* [final choices ranked between 501-1000, below 1000, and not ranked].

Working-class parents were also just as likely as their wealthier counterparts to say that they wanted to choose a name that would have the right kind of effect on their child's future. Whether families found their child's name in a book or website, named their child after a family member or role model, or invented a unique name (a practice far more common for black and working-class families, as I discuss further in Chapter 4), working-class families, too, spent significant time and effort to make sure their child's name was something the child could carry proudly forward into the future.

> *[Naming my daughter] was fun, but then I was like, I don't want to make a mistake, 'cause her name's gonna [be with her] for the rest of her life* [final choice ranked between 251-500].

Although my research certainly cannot stand on its own to change the prevailing wisdom on intensive parenting, it does suggest that that in circumstances where financial and time limitations can be set aside, working-class and poor parents may be as inclined as wealthier families to employ the high-maintenance practices associated with concerted cultivation.

"Popular Names Are Boring": Distinctive Names and Fashion

In their analysis of the widening pool phenomenon, Lieberson and Lynn (2003; 2006) suggest that parents' increasing avoidance of popular names is rooted in a broader shift in taste away from "the popular," that, as they put it, "it is not that everyone now wants a unique name and nobody wants a popular name, but rather that the proportion favorably or negatively disposed towards various points on the [popularity] continuum may change over time" (2003:260), with the result that fewer people would be interested in choosing "popular" things. If this model were correct, we would expect to see people describing their avoidance of popular names in terms suggesting a connection with "taste." In fact, several of my respondents (seven families in total) did use this language, either by expressing a simple aesthetic dislike of popular names or by explaining their choice of distinctive names as consistent with their being the sort of people who avoided "popular" things.

Parents from two families used the aesthetic explanation, speaking about their own rejection of popular names as "boring" or "bland":

> *It'd be nicer if people strayed a little bit more outside of the norm… there's not only fifty names to name your kids, and I think it just gets boring to hear, as a person of society. It's boring to constantly hear the same names over and over*

and over and over again [final choices ranked between 501-1000, below 1000, and not ranked].

For the remaining families, however, the choice to avoid a distinctive name was identity-based, a decision to set themselves and their children "apart from the pack":

> *I'm one of those people [where if] everybody has an iPhone, I want nothing to do with an iPhone. Everybody gets married in the summer, I totally don't want to get married in the summer. I'm not such a rebel, but little things like that, I don't like to jump on the bandwagon. So like, Emma* [ranked #3 in 2010], *Aiden* [ranked #9]*, Liam* [ranked #30]*, Ella* [ranked #13]*, they're all beautiful names, but I don't want my kid to be that kid* [final choices ranked between 101-250 and between 501-1000].

> *We didn't want something that was terribly common, and like all of a sudden a really super popular name. I didn't want to feel like we were jumping on the bandwagon with anything, and just trying to be like everyone else* [final choices ranked between 101-250 and below 1000].

> *I didn't want anything common because I don't like to be common. I sort of like to march to my own drum* [final choice ranked below 1000].

One mother explained the rationale for choosing an unusual name in language reminiscent of explanations for shopping at thrift stores, pointing out the difficulty of someone's "copying" her daughter's unusual name without being "found out":

> *I think a name feels very personal, and unique. I mean, I know plenty of kids that have the same name… I don't know why it would really matter. I guess it doesn't really matter. But I think we felt like, when you pick a name that is obviously unique, no one can get away with copying it, without it being quite obvious that they are copying the name* [final choice ranked below 1000].

In short, it seems that some parents do view names, at least in part, as aesthetic objects, cultural artifacts that can reinforce their own credentials as "trendsetters" rather than "followers." However, the fact that the majority of parents seeking out distinctive names invoked some deeper explanation, social or personal, reinforces the argument that for most parents, a name is more than simply a cultural product. Choosing the right name was a task worthy of significant time and effort, in drawing up lists, tossing possible names back and forth, and – as we will see below – in many cases, educating oneself on the current trends in the universe of baby names.

Running the Numbers: Parents' Knowledge of Popular Names

In her analysis of the cultural "requirements" of intensive mothering, Hays (1996) points out that the vast majority of mothers in her sample reported having at least one "child-rearing manual… and many owned three or more" (1996:73). The weight of perceived expert opinions in child-rearing has increased over the last few decades, with Lareau (2003) similarly reporting that the concerted cultivation strategies practiced by her middle-class families reflected the

current prevailing wisdom about the best way to raise children. When in doubt, it seems, parents still turn to the experts. This was the case for a significant proportion of my respondents as well: 42 of 71 families (59%) reported that they had consulted some "authoritative" resource for data on popularity, with 19 of those (27% of the total population, 45% of those who used references) going directly to the SSA's website. Only 2 families reported receiving the popularity data from someone else (as in the case of the mother who reminded her husband that "[your] mom sent me an article"); the rest sought it out themselves.

The simple existence of an authoritative popularity list clearly had an influence on parents' attitudes: in fact, fifteen families actually framed their attitude toward popularity in terms of specific numeric thresholds.

> *I probably would've steered away from something that was ultra-ultra-ultra-popular, like the top ten list of names* [final choice ranked below 1000].

> *We weren't looking for the top fifty standard names* [final choice ranked between 251-500].

> *I knew I wasn't going to name my child something that was in the top one hundred. That wasn't going to happen* [final choice ranked between 501-1000].

Parents from five families spoke specifically about watching with trepidation as a favorite name rose up the charts, or about excluding a favorite name from the list of possibilities because it had simply grown too popular.

> *There were a bunch of names that I'd liked, um, you know, for a long time, and I decided, and I'd say, well, whenever I have a daughter, if I ever do, I'm gonna name her this. I'm gonna name her Emma* [#3 in 2010]*, I'm gonna name her Claire* [#53 in 2010]*, I'm gonna name her Charlotte* [#45 in 2010]*, and then suddenly Emma, Claire, are these incredibly popular names* [final choices ranked below 1000 and not ranked].

Within the 21 families who expressed a desire to avoid popular names but did not report seeking out empirical data, parents most often explained their decision by saying they "already knew" the common names in their children's generation. Some parents' careers brought them into significant contact with children, as was the case for this mother, a teacher:

> *There's hardly anybody [with our children's names] out there… In ten years, of all my students, I've probably seen maybe two Cesars. And I've seen maybe two Rosas* [final choices ranked between 101-250 and 251-500].

Others drew on the naming experiences of friends or siblings.

> *As my friends and colleagues started having children, I knew that there were some very popular names that I wanted to stay away from. I can't even tell you how many Zoes* [#31 in 2010] *my friends have had, or Isabella* [#1 in 2010]*, or*

Olivia [#4 in 2010]*, or Emma* [#3 in 2010]*, or Ella* [#13 in 2010] [final choice ranked between 11-50].

For the most part, parents were successful in achieving their personal goals, with the names they chose generally meeting their professed limits for being suitably distinctive. However, parents' broader perceptions of what constituted "popular" and "unpopular" names were less likely to be accurate. Although parents from 35 families made accurate statements about which names were popular and unpopular (including 13 families who did not report doing research), parents from 34 families made statements about particular names being popular or unpopular that were inaccurate according to my data, and this number included 15 families discussing their own popularity research:

> *Mother: [Our daughter's name] is increasing fast in popularity, but it's still out*
> *of the top thousand.*
> *HBE: What website did you look at?*
> *Mother: I don't remember. It had a chart, for the last hundred years. And it lists*
> *like the names in the top million births* [final choice ranked between 101-250].
>
> *HBE: So you did look at popularity, you said.*
> *Mother: I did. I did. Yeah. I mean, I think if something more common had struck*
> *me, I wouldn't have fought it, but I didn't want [the name] to be super*
> *common.*
> *HBE: 'Cause Ethan* [#2 in 2010; their "backup" name] *is pretty popular right*
> *now.*
> *Mother: Is it?*
> *HBE: Yeah.*
> *Mother: Oh, I did not know that* [final choice ranked between 51-100].

In fact, parents from 16 families made both accurate and inaccurate estimations of popularity at different points in their interview, suggesting their knowledge of popularity was spotty at best.

Perhaps the most notable illustration of this is the fact that only one parent, of the 112 who sat down to participate in my interviews, demonstrated any knowledge of the widening pool phenomenon. This father, who identified himself as "a math major… fixated on the numbers," knew that the most popular names were less common than they had been in earlier periods, but no other parent raised the point during an interview. If I brought it up at the conclusion of the interview (most often when parents asked about what prompted me to choose this subject to research), in every other case I was greeted with surprise.

The quotes from earlier in the chapter, noting parents' desire not to have a child be "one of four in [their] class" with the same name, also demonstrate this lack of demographic knowledge. In 1975, the mean birth year for parents in my sample, the nationally most popular name for boys, Michael, was given to 4.2% of boys; the nationally most popular name for girls, Jennifer, was given to 3.8% of girls. From these data, we can predict that in a class of 25 children, we might have found one boy and one girl with those names. By 2010, the most recently available year of data on this measure, the most popular boys' and girls' names were given to about one percent of children: for a student to be one of four in their class with the same name, class sizes would have to balloon to 400. Even if we assume some clustering of names

according to a family's race or education level, and look at a specific subgroup, the pattern persists. The most popular names given to white children with US-born mothers holding bachelor's degrees in California in 2008 (the group most heavily represented in my sample) were Jack and Emma: within that same population, each name was given to about 2% of children. A bit higher than the overall average, but certainly not high enough to indicate that four or five children in the same class might receive the name.

Although parents may be fairly ill-informed about the actual density of popular names, their gauge of whether or not they were "successful" in choosing a distinctive name tends to reflect social density more than numbers. Parents spoke with pride about not knowing anyone else who shared their child's name, and with dismay at realizations that there were others with the same name out in the world.

> *I think we were pretty satisfied… [when] our nurse asked what the baby's name was, and when we said Miranda, she said, oh, we haven't had a Miranda around here in a long time! And so I think we felt pretty satisfied with that reaction. Because it's obviously not uncommon, people will know it, [but it's not too common]* [final choice ranked between 101-250].

> *[Before my daughter was born], I had known one other Nadia. And since we've named her Nadia, we've gone around the world meeting Nadias. And she even made a little friend in her baby group whose name was Nadia… all of a sudden, it kind of exploded* [final choices ranked between 251-500].

> *We have come across quite a few Olivias, but the thing is, they're older than her. We haven't really found any Olivias her age… she's the only Olivia in her class, in the class of thirty-something kids* [final choices ranked between 1-10 and between 251-500].

Regardless of the numerical popularity of their child's name, people were apt to consider their process a success if the child, in practice, had the name to himself: if the name was able to help a child pursue the creation of an individual identity in her own social circle, at the least. As I discuss in greater depth when presenting my grandparent interviews in Chapter 7, this reliance on a name's density in the family's social circle was the principal marker for "popularity" before the wide-ranging prevalence of authoritative name data. Without easily available "expert" guidance, earlier generations used social confirmation as their main popularity measure.

Non-Conforming Conformists: Parents Choosing Popular Names

Of course, not all the contemporary families in my study chose unusual or unique names. As we saw in Table 1 at the beginning of the chapter, twelve of the 101 children included in my contemporary parent sample received a name ranking within the top fifty in their birth year, and six children received a top ten name. These children came from twelve different families: of the 22 families with more than one child, none chose top fifty names for multiple children. The group of children who received top fifty names included five girls and seven boys, while three girls and three boys received top ten names.

Considering birth order within this popular name sample, we find nine firstborns, one twin (from a first pregnancy) and two secondborns. Firstborns comprise 75% of the total children

in this subset, as opposed to 67% of the overall sample. There are a few reasons we might expect firstborn children to receive more common names than their later-born siblings: new parents might be less cognizant of current popular names, and first-born children, particularly boys, could also be more likely than their younger siblings to receive a legacy name. Parents cited both of these elements in describing their choice of a popular name: in fact, two of the six children who received a top ten name received their name without parents realizing that it was wildly popular in their child's birth year.

> *We wanted something that was not gonna be extremely common, although we failed miserably in that effort* [final choices ranked between 1-10 and 101-250].

These parents, naming a first child, consulted a book "three or four years out of date," and were thus unaware of the rapid rise of their chosen name until after the child was born. Another family made the same mistake with their second child:

> *I never [looked at popularity data]. I didn't learn about it until about a month after [the child] was born, when somebody said something about, oh, you picked the popular name this year. And I was like, what? And they were like, yeah, it's the [most] popular name. And I was like, what!? … I was disappointed* [final choices ranked between 1-10 and between 251-500].

In both of these cases, the parents presented their accidental choice of a popular name as something to be slightly ashamed of, saying that if they were somehow given the opportunity, they "definitely would redo" the choice. However, for the other four families who chose top ten names – and for most choosing top fifty names, too – the choice was somewhat more purposeful.

When parents consciously selected popular names, they tended to explain their choice in terms of the name having other qualities that outweighed the negative pull of popularity.

> *The interesting thing about our son's name, it breaks my [popularity] rule. It's in the top 100. It's like… in the top 50? …[But] I think I just liked it enough that the rules didn't matter* [final choice ranked between 11-50].

One family chose a top ten name for their second child because it was the only one that both met parents' aesthetic criteria and matched well with the older sibling's name; another gave a top ten name to one of their twin girls in spite of its popularity, primarily because they liked its meaning. Popularity even came up in discussions of carrying on family traditions with "classic" legacy names. One family researched their legacy name to make sure it was not in the top ten, which they explained would have been a "red flag" that would have made them reconsider using the name. The mother in another family justified her willingness to go along with her husband's family tradition this way:

> *I thought, well, maybe no one [else] will name their kid James this time around, 'cause it's going down [in popularity]* [final choices ranked between 11-50 and between 51-100].

For many parents, naming children after family members seemed the most legitimate "excuse" for choosing a popular name. As this father put it:

> *[We chose] a common name, so in terms of having a separate identity from everybody else, we did a rotten job. But in terms of the reason why we picked it, and sort of as a tribute, it's a perfect name* [final choice ranked between 1-10].

The choice of a family name was used by parents to legitimate a range of otherwise "unacceptable" naming behaviors. I discuss this phenomenon more in Chapter 4.

The Unmindful: Parents Disregarding Popularity

Alongside the broad swath of parents who invested significant time and effort to avoid the most popular names, and the smaller subset who elected to choose a name "even though" it was above their preferred popularity threshold, there were eight families in my sample who reported that they had not considered names' popularity as part of their naming process. For these families, other factors were more important than whether or not a name was popular.

Three of these families cited cultural concerns as their primary motivator; these were immigrant or first-generation parents seeking names that were accessible to their non-English-speaking families, sounded harmonious in both English and their second language, and would not be too challenging for the child's American teachers, classmates, and employers.

> *I did a quick [pronunciation] test at work, just my close coworkers. I just wrote [some names] up on the white board and said, how would you say this, how would you say that?* [final choices ranked below 1000]

In the five families without significant linguistic or cultural considerations, parents most often fixated on a name early on in the pregnancy, naming children after a real-life role model, a favorite historical figure, or – in a few cases – their own positive associations with the name. One mother reported that her child's name had come to her in a dream. Another explained her decision-making process this way:

> *My daughter's name came to me in the shower, about 25 years ago... it wasn't like I was thinking about it, or I was getting married twenty-five years ago, I just [thought of it, and decided]. … so when I met my husband, and we started talking about getting married, I said, we can get married, but I have to tell you, I know our daughter's name* [final choices ranked between 501-1000 and not ranked].

Although these families did not focus on popularity, however, the names they chose still reflected many of the same justifications offered by the parents who spent hours preoccupied with popularity lists: a good meaning, positive associations, and some sense that the name was chosen especially for the child. As is evident from the quote below, even those parents who spoke out most strongly against the impulse to choose distinctive names were aware of the cultural pressure to help their child stand out from the crowd:

> *To me, being unique because your name is unique, and then every time you [meet someone you] have to tell [them] the spelling – why [would parents do that]? The person is gonna be unique no matter what the name is. I just feel like I want an easy name, something that sounds nice. It has to sound nice* [final choice ranked between 11-50].

For this mother, the accessibility of her child's name – a name that was simple and "nice" – was more important than using the most distinctive name she could think of. Regardless of the

distinctiveness of the names they chose, many parents had this same attitude, seeking a name that would benefit their children rather than burden them. This phenomenon – finding a name that is "just right" – is the subject of my next chapter.

Chapter 4
"Original, But Not Stupid": The Goldilocks Name

As I discussed in the last chapter, the vast majority of parents in my study prioritized distinctiveness in seeking a name for their child; for these families, a distinctive name was a path to Bourdieusian *distinction*, setting children up to feel more confident in their own identity because of never being confused with their peers. However, even those parents most committed to finding something different did not choose "just any" distinctive name. Although the specific qualities of a good name varied from family to family, parents who chose names from across the popularity spectrum had one goal in common: wanting their child's name to be uncommon, but not too uncommon.

> *A little less common, while still not being insane* [final choices ranked between 51-100 and between 101-250].

> *We didn't want it to be too common, or just too completely off-the-wall* [final choice ranked between 251-500].

> *I didn't want a super-popular name. [But] I didn't want something that was so out there* [final choice ranked between 501-1000].

> *Unusual, but not too weird* [final choices ranked below 1000 and not ranked].

Parents from 30 of 71 families explicitly used some version of this binary language in discussing their ideal name; they wanted something that would help their child stand out, but not something so bizarre as to be unfamiliar, unpronounceable, or otherwise burdensome. The perfect name, in other words, would be "perfectly" distinctive; not common, not weird. In the last chapter, I explored parents' restrictions on how common a name could be; this chapter examines the other half of the equation, the determination that a name is "not weird."

Before relating my respondents' accounts, I first present a typology of unique (singular) names given in California in 2008, demonstrating that different groups of parents favor different kinds of distinctive names. For example, white parents are more likely than any other racial group to revive obscure "classic" names (like Homer or Lavinia), to use boys' names for girls, or to appropriate surnames as first names; black parents are the group most likely to give their children original invented names; and mothers without a college degree are more likely than their college-educated counterparts to adopt alternate spellings for popular names.

Turning to my interview data, I show not only that my respondents' unique name choices reflected larger state-wide demographic patterns, but that each family justified both their particular choice and the type of name they chose as fundamentally *better* than other kinds of names. While parents who chose an obscure traditional name spoke about the importance of giving their child a "real name," those who chose less traditional names discussed the value of their child's having a name with deep personal meaning for the family.

Unique Names: Variations, Discoveries, Reappropriations and Inventions

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the percentage of children receiving popular names declined over the twentieth century at all popularity levels. Even the most diffuse set of SSA data, all

names given to 5 or more children, illustrates this pattern. In 1940, approximately 97% of boys and nearly all girls born in the United States received a name given to five or more children; by 2010, this percentage had declined to 92% of boys and 90% of girls.

Figure 1: Children Receiving a Name Given to 5 or More Children Nationally as % of Overall Births, 1940-2010
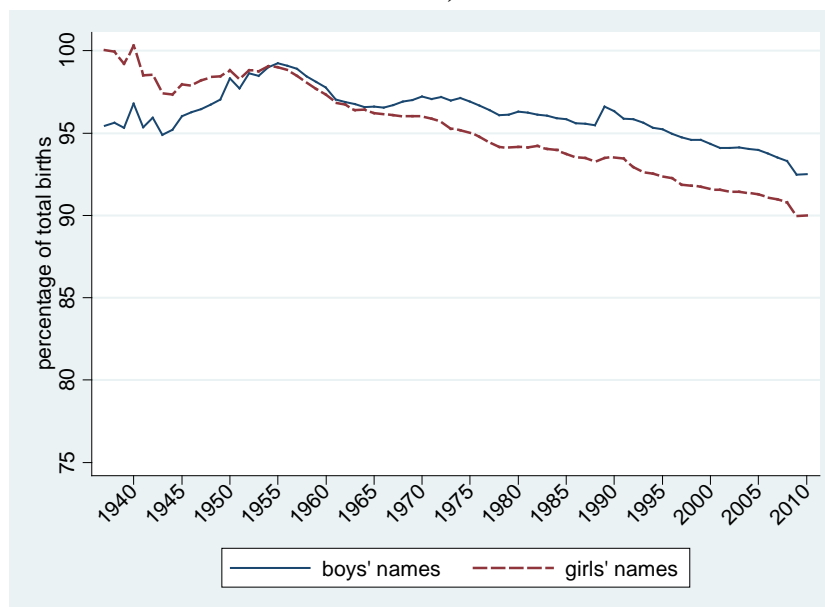
These data suggest that not only are fewer parents choosing the most popular names, but increasing numbers of parents are selecting extremely obscure names.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the trend toward more distinctive names encompasses parents from all demographic groups. However, given the existing research on the different kinds of names favored by different groups of parents (Figlio 2005; Fryer and Levitt 2004; Lieberson 2000), I suspected that these different groups might choose different kinds of unique names. To answer this question, I conducted an in-depth analysis of a sample of unique names – given to only one child in the state – chosen by American-born mothers in California in 2008. My sample included 1,940 boys and 1,991 girls' names[11], drawn in equal numbers from the four largest California racial groups (white, black, Hispanic, and Asian) and whose mothers were spread across five educational categories (no high school diploma, high school diploma, some college, bachelor's degree and advanced degree).

A Typology of Unusual Names

To analyze my sample, I created four large typological categories: variations (names with clear roots in the 2008 top 1000), discoveries (names with traceable roots that did not appear in the top 1000), reappropriations (names re-purposed from some other source), and inventions.

Variations: Names with clear roots in the 2008 top 1000.

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[11] My original goal was to draw 500 children of each sex from the four largest racial groups, but some groups did not have 500 children receiving unique names. In those cases, I included all children from the group.

1. *Variant.* A variant of a top 1000 name that involves some change other than a spelling modification (like the addition or removal of a terminal A, or the addition of a prefix like La- or Sha-). Also included international/foreign variations of top 1000 names that did not themselves appear in the 2008 top 1000. Examples[12]: Corvin (a variation of Corbin), Everlyn (Evelyn), Jabryan (Bryan).
2. *Alternate spelling (top 1000).* An alternate spelling of a top 1000 name, which did not itself appear in the top 1000 in 2008. Examples: Aadan (an alternate spelling of Aiden), Jazmyne (Jasmine), Ryyan (Ryan).

Discoveries: Names with traceable roots that did not appear in the 2008 top 1000.
1. *Classic.* A name which appeared in a 1941 name dictionary (Ames' *What Shall We Name the Baby*), but not in the 2008 top 1000. Examples: Guinevere, Homer, Phyllis.
2. *Nickname.* A name which could be identified as a general diminutive or a diminutive of a specific existing name. Examples: Bo, KJ, Mikey.
3. *Cultural.* A name with "deep" cultural roots (including names with religious significance, names of historical figures, and place names). Examples: Calais (French city), Dubois (W.E.B. Du Bois, 20th-century author and civil rights activist), Monet (Claude Monet, 19th-century French impressionist).
4. *Pop cultural.* A name with "shallow" cultural roots (including brands and names of contemporary fictional characters or athletes/film stars). Examples: Anakin (Anakin Skywalker, character from *Star Wars*), Dwyane (Dwyane Wade, professional basketball player), Maybelline (brand name; a line of cosmetics).
5. *Foreign.* A name listed in multiple name dictionaries as an international name, which did not have a variant appearing in the 2008 top 1000. Examples: Faruq (Arabic), Lijuan (Chinese), Sigrid (Scandinavian).
6. *Alternate spelling (discoveries).* A name that fell into one of the above categories (and was double-coded as such), but had an alternative spelling as opposed to the most traditional one. Examples: Anikin (Anakin), Homar (Homer), Farouk (Faruq).

Reappropriations: Names whose roots could be traced, but which did not have a clear history as a given name in the context in which they were used.
1. *Gender.* A name more commonly used for the other gender, either appearing on that gender's top 1000 list or in multiple contemporary name dictionaries as belonging to that gender. Examples: Julienne or Shelley for boys, Carter or Tucker for girls.
2. *Word:* A word appearing in an English or other language's dictionary, that did not appear in any other category (double-coded as "foreign" if applicable). Examples: Beautiful, Henna, Knight, Truth.
3. *Surname.* A name appearing on the list of surnames available on the US Census website which did not appear in any other category. Examples: Decatur, Garcia, Lieberman.
4. *Alternate spelling (reappropriations).* A name that fell into one of the above categories (double-coded as such), but had an alternative spelling as opposed to the most traditional one. Examples: Beautifull, McAllister.

Invented: Names that did not appear to be either variants of existing names, discoveries or reappropriations. Examples: Kemilly, Lashelle, Quantavius.

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[12] To preserve participants' confidentiality, I use invented examples rather than drawing them from the sample.

Coding errors: This category included two groups of names which appeared as unique because of probable typographic errors in the original registry.

1. *Two first names.* This group included children who had two distinct names listed as first names. If the first of these two was also unique among names given in California in 2008, the name was double-coded in another category; otherwise, this was the only code given to it. Examples: JacobEthan, NevaehElizabeth, TylerJames.
2. *Suffixes attached to first name.* This group included children who had "Jr." attached to the end of their first name in their official birth record.

Typology Results

The results of my typology analysis reveal significant differences in the types of names chosen by parents from different backgrounds. As evidence from both my previous chapters other research would suggest, boys received "traditional" names (discovery names) more often than girls, and white parents and mothers with more education were more inclined than those from other groups to choose "traditional" names over reappropriated or invented names. On the other hand, black parents were more likely than those from any other group to invent original names for their children.

Looking at the overall typology categories divided by sex, we see differences appearing immediately. Boys received "discovery" and "reappropriation" names much more often than girls (particularly names of foreign origin and surname names), while girls were slightly more likely to receive "variation" names and significantly more likely to receive invented names.

Table 1: Typology Categories by Sex

	Boys	**Girls**
Variations	**469 (24%)**	**559 (28%)**
Variant	107 (6%)	126 (6%)
Alternate spelling (top 1000)	362 (19%)	433 (22%)
Discoveries	**475 (24%)***	**319 (16%)***
Classic	26 (1%)	16 (1%)
Nickname	40 (2%)	32 (2%)
Cultural	59 (3%)	43 (2%)
Pop cultural	62 (3%)	28 (1%)
Foreign	314 (16%)	213 (11%)
Alternate spelling (discoveries)	62 (3%)	41 (2%)
Reappropriations	**333 (17%)***	**207 (10%)***
Gender	26 (1%)	38 (2%)
Word	139 (7%)	99 (5%)
Surname	175 (9%)	72 (4%)
Alternate spelling (reappropriations)	56 (3%)	75 (4%)
Other/invented	**333 (17%)**	**542 (27%)**
Coding errors	**420 (21%)**	**401 (20%)**
Two names	414 (21%)	401 (20%)

Suffixes	6 (.3%)	0 (0%)
Totals in Overall Sample	1,940	1,991

* sub-categories may not sum to total due to double-coding

These findings are not terribly surprising. Previous research suggests boys are more likely than girls to receive family names as given names (Rossi 1965), a possible explanation for the higher use of surname names for boys, while girls' names have a longer history of existing as objects of fashion (Lieberson 2000), which could explain their significantly higher representation in the invented names category.

Examining the typology breakdown by family's race and mother's education, I found a slightly different distribution. Looking first at race, we see that three of the four racial groups have distinctive "favorite" name categories. White parents are significantly more likely than other groups to use reappropriated names for both boys and girls (30% of boys and 19% of girls), and discovered names for boys (32%). More specifically, white parents favor classic names and nicknames, word names and surnames slightly more often than any other group. On the other hand, black parents are significantly more likely than any other group to use invented names, with 32% of black boys and 42% of black girls in my sample receiving one of these. Asian parents are more likely than any other group to give their children two first names, with 57% of Asian boys and 46% of Asian girls falling into this category; further analysis of this category reveals a particularly high practice of "double-naming" among Filipino-American mothers, whose children made up 394 of the 480 Asian children receiving two names[13]. Finally, although Hispanic parents are slightly more likely to use variations of existing names, especially for boys, they have no other significantly distinctive naming pattern (including with regards to foreign names; as Sue and Telles (2007) suggest, American-born Hispanics are less likely than their immigrant counterparts to give their children clearly Spanish-language names).

Table 2: Typology Categories by Child's Race, Results For Boys

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
Variations	**132 (26%)**	**132 (26%)**	**160 (32%)**	**45 (10%)**
Variant	24 (5%)	41 (8%)	34 (7%)	8 (2%)
Alternate spelling (top 1000)	108 (21%)	91 (18%)	126 (25%)	37 (8%)
Discoveries	**160 (32%)***	**118 (24%)***	**130 (26%)***	**85 (19%)***
Classic	17 (3%)	4 (1%)	5 (1%)	0 (0%)
Nickname	19 (4%)	2 (.4%)	13 (3%)	6 (1%)
Cultural	25 (5%)	15 (3%)	15 (3%)	4 (1%)
Pop Cultural	23 (5%)	17 (3%)	17 (3%)	5 (1%)
Foreign	81 (16%)	82 (16%)	82 (16%)	69 (16%)
Alternate spelling (discoveries)	24 (5%)	10 (2%)	25 (5%)	3 (1%)
Reappropriations	**150 (30%)***	**67 (13%)***	**79 (16%)***	**37 (8%)***
Gender	6 (1%)	4 (1%)	12 (2%)	4 (1%)

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[13] In 78% of cases, Filipino-American children in my sample received their mother's maiden name as a middle name. Anecdotal research (through online name discussion boards) suggests that this practice is a legacy of Spanish cultural influence, where children typically use both parents' surnames as part of their legal name, and that most often only the first given name is treated as the child's "first" name, but I was unable to find any academic research addressing the subject.

Word	56 (11%)	30 (6%)	35 (7%)	18 (4%)
Surname	93 (19%)	34 (7%)	33 (7%)	15 (3%)
Alternate spelling (reappropriations)	22 (4%)	12 (2%)	13 (3%)	9 (2%)
Other/invented	**59 (12%)**	**162 (32%)**	**68 (14%)**	**44 (10%)**
Coding errors	**32 (6%)**	**43 (9%)**	**90 (18%)**	**255 (58%)**
Two names	31 (6%)	43 (9%)	88 (18%)	252 (57%)
Suffixes	1 (.2%)	0 (0%)	2 (.4%)	3 (1%)
Totals in Overall Sample	500	500	500	440

* sub-categories may not sum to total due to double-coding

Table 3: Typology Categories by Child's Race, Results for Girls

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
Variations	**173 (35%)**	**132 (26%)**	**159 (32%)**	**95 (19%)**
Variant	37 (7%)	27 (5%)	35 (7%)	27 (6%)
Alternate spelling (top 1000)	136 (27%)	105 (21%)	124 (25%)	68 (14%)
Discoveries	**91 (18%)***	**85 (17%)***	**81 (16%)***	**65 (13%)***
Classic	8 (2%)	1 (.2%)	3 (.6%)	4 (1%)
Nickname	15 (3%)	5 (1%)	7 (1%)	5 (1%)
Cultural	15 (3%)	14 (3%)	9 (2%)	5 (1%)
Pop Cultural	9 (2%)	8 (2%)	9 (2%)	2 (4.%)
Foreign	50 (10%)	58 (12%)	56 (11%)	49 (10%)
Alternate spelling (discoveries)	10 (2%)	17 (3%)	7 (1%)	7 (1%)
Reappropriations	**94 (19%)***	**45 (9%)***	**50 (10%)***	**19 (4%)***
Gender	19 (4%)	8 (2%)	6 (1%)	5 (1%)
Word	37 (7%)	27 (5%)	27 (5%)	8 (1%)
Surname	39 (8%)	11 (2%)	16 (3%)	6 (1%)
Alternate spelling (reappropriations)	31 (6%)	25 (5%)	14 (3%)	5 (1%)
Other/invented	**92 (18%)**	**210 (42%)**	**136 (27%)**	**104 (21%)**
Coding errors	**60 (12%)**	**41 (8%)**	**72 (14%)**	**228 (46%)**
Two names	60 (12%)	41 (8%)	72 (14%)	228 (46%)
Suffixes	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0
Totals in Overall Sample	500	500	500	440

* sub-categories may not sum to total due to double-coding

These cross-racial differences in naming patterns demonstrate the continuing boundaries between racial groups in which names they deem suitable for their children. I discuss these boundaries in more depth in Chapter 6.

Turning to the effects of mother's education, we see that mothers with less education are more likely to favor variations and invented names, while those with more education, and particularly with the highest levels, are more likely to choose discovery and reappropriation names. Mothers with advanced degrees are especially likely to choose foreign and surname names, and to reject invented and alternate spelling names, while those with a high school education or less are most inclined to seek out alternate spelling names and invented names.

Table 4: Typology Categories by Mother's Education, Results for Boys

	LT High School	High School	Some College	Bachelors	Advanced
Variations	**131 (32%)**	**138 (28%)**	**106 (22%)**	**59 (16%)**	**36 (19%)**
Variant	34 (8%)	27 (6%)	22 (5%)	11 (3%)	13 (7%)
Alternate spelling (top 1000)	97 (24%)	111 (23%)	84 (17%)	48 (13%)	22 (11%)
Discoveries	**96 (24%)***	**119 (24%)***	**110 (23%)***	**94 (26%)***	**74 (38%)***
Classic	5 (1%)	4 (1%)	7 (1%)	4 (1%)	6 (3%)
Nickname	12 (3%)	13 (3%)	3 (1%)	9 (2%)	3 (2%)
Cultural	14 (3%)	7 (1%)	14 (3%)	12 (3%)	12 (6%)
Pop Cultural	12 (3%)	16 (3%)	7 (1%)	13 (4%)	14 (7%)
Foreign	57 (14%)	79 (16%)	74 (15%)	60 (16%)	44 (23%)
Alternate spelling (discoveries)	18 (4%)	14 (3%)	13 (3%)	10 (3%)	7 (4%)
Reappropriations	**65 (16%)***	**74 (15%)***	**79 (16%)***	**67 (18%)***	**48 (25%)***
Gender	6 (1%)	6 (1%)	9 (2%)	4 (1%)	1 (1%)
Word	34 (8%)	30 (6%)	36 (7%)	26 (7%)	13 (7%)
Surname	25 (6%)	39 (8%)	37 (8%)	39 (11%)	35 (18%)
Alternate spelling (reappropriations)	13 (3%)	15 (3%)	11 (2%)	11 (3%)	6 (3%)
Other/invented	**86 (21%)**	**102 (21%)**	**80 (16%)**	**44 (12%)**	**21 (11%)**
Coding errors	**48 (12%)**	**86 (18%)**	**134 (28%)**	**119 (33%)**	**33 (17%)**
Two names	45 (11%)	83 (17%)	134 (18%)	119 (33%)	33 (17%)
Suffixes	3 (1%)	3 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Totals in Overall Sample	406	489	487	365	193

* sub-categories may not sum to total due to double-coding

Table 5: Typology Categories by Mother's Education, Results for Girls

	LT High School	High School	Some College	Bachelors	Advanced
Variations	**133 (33%)**	**155 (34%)**	**136 (26%)**	**90 (22%)**	**45 (22%)**
Variant	25 (6%)	30 (7%)	34 (7%)	27 (7%)	10 (5%)
Alternate spelling (top 1000)	108 (27%)	125 (28%)	102 (20%)	63 (15%)	35 (17%)
Discoveries	**64 (16%)***	**60 (13%)***	**69 (13%)***	**78 (19%)***	**51 (25%)***
Classic	3 (1%)	4 (1%)	1 (.2%)	2 (.5%)	6 (3%)
Nickname	7 (2%)	5 (1%)	9 (2%)	5 (1%)	6 (3%)
Cultural	6 (1%)	7 (2%)	12 (2%)	12 (3%)	6 (3%)
Pop Cultural	6 (1%)	6 (1%)	6 (1%)	5 (1%)	5 (2%)
Foreign	42 (10%)	40 (9%)	44 (9%)	55 (13%)	32 (16%)
Alternate spelling (discoveries)	5 (1%)	11 (2%)	14 (3%)	7 (2%)	4 (2%)
Reappropriations	**31 (8%)***	**41 (9%)***	**47 (9%)***	**52 (13%)***	**37 (18%)***
Gender	4 (1%)	10 (2%)	8 (2%)	10 (2%)	6 (3%)
Word	23 (6%)	22 (5%)	22 (4%)	19 (5%)	13 (6%)
Surname	4 (1%)	9 (2%)	16 (3%)	25 (6%)	18 (9%)
Alternate spelling (reappropriations)	16 (4%)	17 (4%)	23 (4%)	15 (4%)	4 (2%)
Other/invented	**127 (32%)**	**141 (31%)**	**149 (29%)**	**87 (21%)**	**38 (19%)**
Coding errors	**51 (13%)**	**64 (14%)**	**144 (28%)**	**106 (26%)**	**36 (18%)**

Two names	51 (13%)	64 (14%)	144 (28%)	106 (26%)	36 (18%)
Suffixes	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Totals in Overall Sample	405	453	520	408	205

* sub-categories may not sum to total due to double-coding

Since the patterns of names favored and avoided by mothers with the highest levels of education roughly corresponded to the patterns favored and avoided by white mothers, I also examined the distribution of favored names by mother's education for white mothers only. This group demonstrated a similar trend, with those women with less education more likely to favor alternate spellings than those with more education, and less inclined to favor discovery and reappropriation names, especially foreign names and surname names. The one change I did notice in looking at the practices of white mothers only was that educated white mothers were just as likely as those with less education to choose invented names for their children.

Table 6: Typology Categories by Mother's Education (White Families Only), Results for Boys

	LT High School	High School	Some College	Bachelors	Advanced
Variations	**35 (35%)**	**33 (33%)**	**26 (26%)**	**21 (21%)**	**17 (17%)**
Variant	9 (9%)	2 (2%)	4 (4%)	3 (3%)	6 (6%)
Alternate spelling (top 1000)	26 (26%)	31 (31%)	22 (22%)	18 (18%)	11 (11%)
Discoveries	**26 (26%)***	**26 (26%)***	**31 (31%)***	**33 (33%)***	**44 (44%)***
Classic	3 (3%)	0 (0%)	6 (6%)	2 (2%)	6 (6%)
Nickname	6 (6%)	6 (6%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	3 (3%)
Cultural	4 (4%)	1 (1%)	6 (6%)	6 (6%)	8 (8%)
Pop Cultural	3 (3%)	4 (4%)	1 (1%)	6 (6%)	9 (9%)
Foreign	12 (12%)	15 (15%)	15 (15%)	17 (17%)	22 (22%)
Alternate spelling (discoveries)	6 (6%)	3 (3%)	6 (6%)	5 (5)%	4 (4%)
Reappropriations	**23 (23%)**	**22 (22%)**	**28 (28%)**	**40 (40%)**	**37 (37%)**
Gender	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	1 (1%)
Word	15 (15%)	2 (2%)	14 (14%)	14 (14%)	11 (11%)
Surname	7 (7%)	21 (21%)	13 (13%)	26 (26%)	26 (26%)
Alternate spelling (reappropriations)	5 (5%)	3 (3%)	5 (5%)	4 (4%)	5 (5%)
Other/invented	**11 (11%)**	**15 (15%)**	**15 (15%)**	**6 (6%)**	**12 (12%)**
Coding errors	**9 (9%)**	**7 (7%)**	**8 (8%)**	**5 (5%)**	**3 (3%)**
Two names	9 (9%)	6 (6%)	8 (8%)	5 (5%)	3 (3%)
Suffixes	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Totals in Overall Sample	100	100	100	100	100

* sub-categories may not sum to total due to double-coding

Table 7: Typology Categories by Mother's Education (White Families Only), Results for Girls

	LT High School	High School	Some College	Bachelors	Advanced

Variations	41 (41%)	51 (51%)	36 (36%)	25 (25%)	20 (20%)
Variant	4 (4%)	10 (10%)	11 (11%)	9 (9%)	3 (3%)
Alternate spelling (top 1000)	37 (37%0	41 (41%)	25 (25%)	16 (16%)	17 (17%)
Discoveries	**15 (15%)***	**11 (11%)***	**15 (15%)***	**20 (20%)***	**30 (30%)***
Classic	2 (2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	5 (5%)
Nickname	4 (4%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	5 (5%)
Cultural	3 (3%)	2 (2%)	3 (3%)	3 (3%)	4 (4%)
Pop Cultural	3 (3%)	0 (0%)	3 (3%)	1 (1%)	2 (2%)
Foreign	3 (3%)	7 (0%)	8 (8%)	14 (14%)	18 (18%)
Alternate spelling (discoveries)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	5 (5%)	1 (1%)	2 (2%)
Reappropriations	**10 (10%)***	**11 (11%)***	**19 (19%)***	**27 (27%)***	**27 (27%)***
Gender	2 (2%)	2 (2%)	3 (3%)	7 (7%)	5 (5%)
Word	7 (7%)	7 (7%)	8 (8%)	8 (8%)	7 (7%)
Surname	1 (1%)	2 (2%)	8 (8%)	13 (13%)	15 (15%)
Alternate spelling (reappropriations)	5 (5%)	6 (6%)	10 (10%)	7 (7%)	3 (3%)
Other/invented	**17 (17%)**	**18 (18%)**	**22 (22%)**	**20 (20%)**	**15 (15%)**
Coding errors	**17 (17%)**	**10 (10%)**	**14 (14%)**	**9 (9%)**	**10 (10%)**
Two names	17 (17%)	10 (10%)	14 (14%)	9 (9%)	10 (10%)
Suffixes	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Totals in Overall Sample	100	100	100	100	100

* sub-categories may not sum to total due to double-coding

Of course, as I discussed earlier, large-scale quantitative data presents an inherently limited picture when attempting to infer parents' attitudes. To gain further insight into why parents felt that one type of name was appropriately distinctive while another was "too weird," I turn back to my discussions with parent respondents.

"Just Something That Was 'Not Trendy' ": Parents' Perfectly Distinctive Name Choices

As I explained in the last chapter, although almost all the parents in my sample discussed wanting their child's name to be "not too popular," parents' boundaries for which names fit that description varied. Of the 101 children in my sample, 38 had names not appearing in the top 1000 in the year of their birth; this included 10 of 38 boys and 28 of 63 girls. As we might expect, the parents in my sample were more likely to go outside the top 1000 for girls' names than for boys' names.

Table 8: Distribution of Top 1000 and Less Popular Names in Interview Sample

	Boys	**Girls**
Top 1000	28 (74%)	35 (56%)
Below top 1000	10 (26%)	28 (44%)
Total	38	63

Of the 25 families with more than one child, the majority chose names with roughly comparable rankings. On my eight-category ranking scale (ranging from "extremely popular," names ranked between 1-10, to "exclusive," names not given to 5 or more children in the child's birth year), six families gave all their children names from the same category, and twelve more chose names

within two categories of one another. Only seven families chose names that differed significantly in popularity. This provides some evidence for Lieberson and Lynn's point that individual parents have a personal "popularity threshold" that guides their decision-making process.

The table below compares the statewide sample with names from my interview sapmle not appearing in the top 1000. We immediately see a distribution slightly different from that in the statewide sample. My respondents were significantly less likely than the general population of unique namers to choose variants of top 1000 names or to give a child two first names[14], and slightly less likely to use invented names. They were also significantly more likely than the statewide population to use discovered or reappropriated names, particularly foreign names and word names.

Table 9: Comparison of Statewide and Interview Sample's "Distinctive" Names

California 2008 Sample, Unique Names				Interview Sample, Names Outside Top 1000		
	Boys	**Girls**			**Boys**	**Girls**
Variations	**469 (24%)**	**559 (28%)**		**Variations**	**1 (10%)**	**0 (0%)**
Variant	107 (6%)	126 (6%)		Variant (top 1000)	1 (10%)	0 (0%)
Alternate spelling (top 1000)	362 (19%)	433 (22%)		Alternate spelling (top 1000)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Discoveries	**493 (25%)***	**322 (16%)***		**Discoveries**	**5 (50%)**	**19 (68%)**
Classic	26 (1%)	16 (1%)		Classic	1 (10%)	5 (18%)
Nickname	40 (2%)	32 (2%)		Nickname	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Cultural	59 (3%)	43 (2%)		Cultural	1 (10%)	1 (4%)
Pop Cultural	62 (3%)	28 (1%)		Pop Cultural	1 (10%)	2 (7%)
Foreign	314 (16%)	213 (11%)		Foreign	3 (30%)	11 (39%)
Alternate spelling (discoveries)	62 (3%)	41 (2%)		Alternate spelling (discoveries)	3 (30%)	0 (0%)
Reappropriations	**333 (17%)***	**208 (10%)***		**Reappropriations**	**3 (30%)**	**8 (29%)**
Gender	26 (1%)	38 (2%)		Gender	0 (0%)	1 (4%)
Word	139 (7%)	99 (5%)		Word	2 (20%)	7 (25%)
Surname	175 (9%)	72 (4%)		Surname	1 (10%)	0 (0%)
Alternate spelling (reappropriations)	56 (3%)	75 (4%)		Alternate spelling (reappropriations)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other/invented	**333 (17%)**	**542 (27%)**		**Other/invented**	**2 (20%)**	**6 (21%)**
Two names	414 (21%)	401 (20%)		**Two names**	**1 (10%)**	**1 (4%)**
Totals in Overall Sample	1,934**	1,991			10	28

* sub-categories may not sum to total due to double-coding
** subtracted 6 "suffix" names with no counterpart in interview sample

This difference likely reflects the different demographics of the two samples; as I discussed in Chapter 1, my interview sample skews toward white and educated parents, the ones most likely in the statewide sample to favor discovery and reappropriation names over invented

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[14] Of course, this could be an artifact of the difference between quantitative and qualitative analysis: while it's impossible for me to ascertain whether a child in the statewide dataset with the legal first name "Aiden Michael" was called by one or two names, I know for a fact that the two children marked as having two names in my interview sample were routinely called by both. As one mother put it: "Some people do call her Alice; she corrects them. 'It's Alice Ann, thank you.'"

and variation names. In fact, examining the distinctive names in my interview sample by parental demographics, I found black families significantly more likely than any other group to favor invented names, and that the majority of white families who chose names from outside the top 1000 chose names from the "discovery" category (most commonly foreign names), just as in the statewide sample. In another echo of the statewide sample data, parents without a college degree were more likely than their more educated counterparts to choose invented names, although this distinction was less marked.

Table 10: Interview Sample's Distinctive Names, By Family Racial Composition

	Boys					Girls					
	White	Black	Mixed	*Total*		White	Black	Hispanic	South Asian	Mixed	*Total*
Variation	1	0	0	1		0	0	0	0	0	0
Discovery	0	1	4	5		11	2	1	2	3	19
Reappropriation	0	0	3	3		3	2	0	0	3	8
Invented	0	2	0	2		3	3	0	0	0	6
Total population*	1	3	6	10		14	6	1	2	5	28

* sub-categories may not sum to total due to double-coding

Table 11: Interview Sample's Distinctive Names, By Mother's Education

	Boys				Girls		
	No degree	Bachelor's or higher	*Total*		No degree	Bachelor's or higher	*Total*
Variation	0	1	1		0	0	0
Discovery	1	4	5		3	16	19
Reappropriation	0	3	3		4	4	8
Invented	2	0	2		3	3	6
Total population*	3	6	9		9	19	28

* sub-categories may not sum to total due to double-coding

As I've discussed elsewhere, parents' rationales for their final name choice varied widely. Whatever their reasons, though, almost all the parents I spoke to talked about wanting their child's name to have "meaning." What this represented varied depending on which type of name parents had chosen, but almost without exception, parents felt that names like theirs – a "real" (discovery) name, or a name with deep personal significance (most of the reappropriation names), or a name created especially for the child – were the best possible option, and often spoke a bit disparagingly about those parents who had "settled" for another category instead.

"A Name That Means Something": Discoveries and Reappropriations
Although the specifics of their choices were different, parents choosing discovery and reappropriation names tended to share one precondition: they wanted their child's name to have a "past", whether this be a clear linguistic meaning or a history of long-time usage. Both groups saw "new" invented names as lacking this quality, and often spoke about those names as being insubstantial, flimsy, or "silly."

I'm more of a sentimental person when it comes to names, you know. Whether it's an animal, or an inanimate object... the name's gotta kinda mean something. It can't just sound cool, or be spelled cool. It doesn't have to be a family name, [but] it does have to have meaning [chose a discovery name: classic name, an old family name ranked between 501-1000].

One option for us would have been a nonsensical name, or a quirky name that's just a bunch of syllables slapped together that didn't necessarily mean anything. But I decided I wanted the name to have some sort of a meaning. [chose a reappropriation name: word name from outside the top 1000].

Nearly all parents who chose discovery and reappropriation names were united in their desire to have a name with some meaning beyond aesthetics. However, beyond this point, they were looking for very different things in a "good" name.

Most of the choices made by parents using discovery names fell into two broad categories: "familiar" classic names and foreign names. In both cases, parents spoke most often about wanting a name that felt "authentic"; while "other" Bay Area parents might name their children after trees, rock stars or letters of the alphabet, these parents wanted "real names." They typically defined a real name as something that could be found in a name dictionary, something that had been used as a name for generations and would be identifiable as such:

I guess I'd describe [the names I like] as names that are obviously names, but which were never on a Top 100 list. Or a Top 25 list... I wasn't thinking like, Apple[15], or anything crazy. I don't think I've ever realistically suggested something where someone would say, is that a name? They just might not know anybody with that name [chose a discovery name: foreign name from parent's ethnic background, ranked between 251-500].

I wanted a name that was a real name... you know, there's a lot of made-up names right now. So I wanted it to be a real name. And I think ideally I wanted it to be kind of an old name... older names felt sort of substantial. Enduring. Just something that was not trendy [chose a discovery name: classic name, ranked between 251-500].

In some interviews, parents even became a bit defensive when explaining how their children's unusual names were "real names," pointing out cultural connotations or the fact that they had met at least one other person with the name.

They're not that *unique. I mean, I have heard the names before...* [chose discovery names: classic names, ranked between 51-100 and between 251-500].

There's other people [with our son's name] out there... there's lots of them in the world [chose a discovery name: classic name, ranked between 501-1000].

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[15] This name, chosen by actress Gwyneth Paltrow and her husband Chris Martin for their first child (a girl, born in 2004), was cited by nine families as an example of a comically reappropriated word-name.

In their quest for an underused, "authentic" name, many parents spoke about looking through SSA lists from the early twentieth or even the nineteenth century, to find "real names" not common for contemporary children.

> *I like the idea that a name has a definition already, or that it has a sense of history. Making something up, I don't know if I would be happy with it. I think I would probably judge a name like that more than if the name had already kind of been through the ages* [chose discovery names: classic names, one old family name, both ranked between 501-1000].

The strategy used by these parents – of reappropriating an old family name – was a fairly common one among the parents selecting classic names, and my sample's single most common source of family names used for first names. Of the 20 children (20% of my total sample) who received first names honoring specific family members, only four were named directly for a parent (two legacy names and two others derived from a parent's name), and only five more families reported entering a pregnancy with the hope of naming the child after a particular relative (most often someone recently deceased). For the other eleven children given family names, parents reported that the tie to family had weighed in a name's favor, but most often framed it as the final qualifier for an already appealing name rather than a necessary factor.

> *I sort of liked the idea, for boys, of surnames as first names… and Finnegan came into my mind, and it so happened that my grandmother – Finn's great-grandmother, who he got to meet, we have a picture with her – that was her maiden name. So then it was like, okay, there's some connection* [chose discovery names: classic names, one old family name, ranked between 101-250 and between 501-1000].
>
> *We started talking about family names, and then the interesting thing we discovered was that we had a Lillian on three out of four sides [of the family]. And then we were like, wait, that's a great name! And we immediately both really liked it. And so the moment that name came up, we were like, yes. And we were just done. We were totally done* [chose a discovery name: classic name, old family name, ranked between 11-50].

With very few exceptions, parents would only choose a family first name if it was also "a great name," a name they found attractive on its own merits. If a family name was aesthetically unappealing, it far more often found a home as a middle name, the position viewed by almost every parent I spoke to as the place for "service to family" (60 of 101 children received middle names directly tied to family members).

Another discovery-name strategy used by parents who wanted a "legitimate" unusual name was to turn to the family's ethnic heritage. This strategy was used by many bicultural families in my sample as a way of finding an authentic name that would be distinctive in the United States, and in fact, two American parents with immigrant spouses cited their partner's "foreignness" as a way to resolve what would otherwise be a difficult dilemma:

[Our son's name will already be] different for me, just by giving him a Spanish name. Even if it's traditional, it's already going to be different. I'd never met someone with my wife's name before, even though it's a very common name in Spain, so [any name we choose] will already be unique. To me [chose a discovery name: classic name, ranked between 11-50].

I think we sort of assumed that because he would have an Arab-American name, it wouldn't be super super common anywhere in the US [chose discovery names: foreign names, ranked between 501-1000].

Even when both parents were American-born, perceived ties to a non-Anglo culture were a frequent source of distinctive names. Two black families chose African names for their children, while three Jewish families selected unusual Hebrew names, and in multiracial families with one white parent, children would often receive a given name with ties to the heritage of the parent of color. I discuss this phenomenon – how parents used ties to their own ethnic heritage to find a "legitimate" distinctive name – in much more detail in Chapter 5.

If the ideal choice for parents choosing discovery names was a name with "history," those families who chose reappropriation names sought a different kind of meaning. This group was more likely than any other in my sample to be white and highly educated, and their choices also fell into two main categories: "repurposed" existing names (surnames, or names primarily used for children of the other gender) and word names.

Two families used family surnames as first names for their sons; while the one quoted above who spoke about the "strength" inherent in surname names chose a family name almost accidentally, the other did so quite intentionally, taking a grandmother's maiden name and Anglicizing the spelling to produce a distinctive name with deep family roots. A few other parents spoke about liking the sound of surname names, for both boys and girls. However, the majority of the unsolicited comments I got from parents about surname names were negative, with these names framed as being "snooty" or "preppy":

[In the neighborhood where my parents live], it's kind of very obvious wealth. And the kids' names are all of a type, where they're using last names for first names, and you know exactly what kind of social strata they're from [chose a discovery name, foreign name, ranked below 1000].

In what might be an effect of my study's roots in the Bay Area, where cultural pressures tend to push people away from ostentatious displays of wealth, names with this kind of upper-class association were almost universally rejected.

Another trend often associated with the upper-middle-class, that of using historically boys' names for girls, was enthusiastically endorsed by a number of my respondents:

[My husband] wouldn't go for it, but I really wanted to name a girl, like, Michael... call a girl Alex, Sam... [because] it's strong. It's unique. And names that I wouldn't usually like [for boys], I like it for a girl [chose two discovery names, foreign names, ranked between 251-500].

> *[I liked] Sasha because it's either male or female, in Russian... I think partly just because in our generation, there's still quite a lot of discrimination based on gender* [chose a discovery name: foreign name, ranked below 1000].

As this mother's quote suggests, some parents seek out androgynous names for girls from a belief that this may help their daughters in college or when applying for jobs. However, the one mother in my sample who did give her daughter a popular boys' name gave a different explanation for her decision:

> *To me, there's something very feminine about a man's name [on a girl]... I think it just exaggerates her femininity. Because there's no way a girl is gonna look like a guy in a guy's shirt. She's still [going to] look like a girl.* [chose a reappropriation name: gendered name, ranked between 501-1000].

The biggest category of reappropriated names in my sample, word names, were given to twelve of 101 children (including nine girls and three boys). This includes five children who received top 1000 names, two of which appear as given names in the 1941 Ames dictionary. Ten of the twelve were English words; the remaining two came from family heritage languages.

Parents who chose discovery names often cited word names as a quintessential example of a "weird" choice. Besides the aforementioned Apple, parents used examples like these:

> *[I didn't want] a totally crazy-sounding name, like Princess Butterfly or something...* [chose a discovery name: foreign name, ranked between 251-500].

> *[As a teacher] I had students with funny names, like Majesty... some of them, it's like, how hard are [the parents] trying? ... for people who come from our background, there's a sweet spot of not too common, but not totally weird* [chose discovery names: classic names, ranked between 1-10 and between 101-250].

The five families who chose word names from outside the top 1000 recognized that their children's names were distinctive: they reported frequent conversations about them, and told tales of pediatricians or childcare workers not expecting or understanding the name when first meeting the child. However, they also spoke about the deeply personal meaning of their children's names. Just like the parents who chose discovery names, parents selecting word names were very interested in their children's names having meaning, but where discovery name parents most often defined this meaning in the context of pedigree and history, word name parents reported choosing their child's name because of its particular meaning to the family.

One mother explained that she and her husband chose their son's Spanish word name because a family vacation to Mexico was the first time she felt her baby move; another couple chose a name for their son based on its connection to both parents' favorite hobbies. Parents choosing word names were the group most likely to talk about how well the name "fit" the child, connecting the name's linguistic meaning to qualities of the child's personality. One mother explained that she had some reservations about the adjective name she'd chosen before her daughter was born, but after meeting the child, she realized no other name fit quite so well. Another told me that she decided to give her son a tree name not only because of her family's love of nature but because of the strength she felt from the child in the womb.

This highly personal approach to choosing a name bridged the more traditional practices of parents who chose discovery names – searching through books and websites, evaluating lists of preexisting names – with those of parents who chose invented names. Parents choosing word names wanted their children's names to have a meaning recognizable to those outside the family; as this father put it:

> *Something physical you could point to… you've heard of it, but you can also relate to it… and also easy to take to a different culture. You could point to the sky and be like, yeah, that's me, I'm the sky. How do you say sky in your language?* [chose reappropriation name: word name, ranked below 1000].

However, these parents were also concerned with choosing something special for their child, something connected not just with a dictionary meaning but to a story with ties to the child's own life. In this respect, they were very similar to the group whose name choices got the most disdain from more traditionally-minded parents, those parents who changed the spelling of traditional names or invented their own.

"This Name Comes Purely From Me": Variations and Invented Names

Although all the name categories received some ill will from parents who had made another choice, variations, variant spellings and invented names received more than their share. While those respondents disparaging word names most often presented them as the work of "crazy," "hippie" parents, criticism of parents who chose to change the spelling of a mainstream name or invent one of their own framed them as everything from uneducated to cruel. Given my study's demographic slant toward white and educated parents – those more likely to favor discovery and reappropriation names – this bias is unsurprising. However, the accounts of those parents who chose variation and invented names bore a remarkably similarity to those of the other groups who sought something beyond a "traditional" discovery name; they wanted something with more meaning than a name simply plucked from a book.

The group of names most often disparaged by parents in my study was traditional names with non-traditional spellings. More often than any other topic, this one provoked "rants" from otherwise well-mannered respondents, speculating on why other parents would "inflict" a non-traditional spelling on their child:

> *A really popular trend right now is to take a name and change a letter, like Jackson, instead of J-A-C-K-S-O-N, it would be J-A-X-S-O-N. And that really irritates me. It just seems lame. It seems kind of fake, I guess.* [chose discovery name: classic name, ranked between 11-50].

> *I have a friend, her kids are all grown, and they all have relatively plain names, but all have ridiculous spellings… I feel like it's just a way to drive your children crazy, by having their name spelled wrong all the time* [chose discovery names: classic names, ranked between 51-100 and between 101-250].

> *We didn't want to achieve individuality through novelty. Through stupid spellings* [chose discovery names: classic names, ranked between 11-50 and between 101-250].

These respondents assumed that other parents' choice of non-traditional spellings was based solely on aesthetics, or a misplaced desire to stand out. For the parents in my study who chose non-traditionally-spelled names, however, aesthetics was never the only reason for "tweaking" their chosen name. Just like their counterparts choosing word names, in almost all cases parents changed the spelling of a child's name to add an additional layer of meaning.

Given the demographics of my sample, I did not expect many parents to use alternate spellings of popular names, and in fact, only five children had names that parents acknowledged as using something other than the "usual" spelling. Two of these cases touched on concerns about racial/ethnic associations, where couples chose to change a name's spelling to make the ethnic connection more or less apparent. The other three families framed the spelling change as a way to add an additional layer of meaning to the name, either by making it look more like another relative's (changing a first letter from C to K to match a father's name, for example) or by tying it in to other family connections, as for a family who chose a less popular spelling of their son's name to evoke a character from one of the parents' favorite book series.

The other category commonly disparaged by parents who had chosen discovery or reappropriated names was invented names: names that "had no history," that "didn't mean anything." Parents spoke about current popular names with no strong historical legacy, like Caden[16] and Nevaeh[17], as "silly," or as "fake names":

> Mother: A lot of top ten names were like [to her husband] What's that awful name, that we hated? Made up. Like Jayden, Hayden[18]. It had to be a real name. James [their son's name] is a real name.
> HBE: But somebody made it up at some point.
> Mother: I guess that's true, yeah, but it's been around a long time.
> Father: The difference being, of course, that the people who made it up did so several millennia ago [chose discovery names, classic names, ranked between 11-50 and between 51-100].

Eight children in my sample were given names that their parents identified as invented or "made up," and five of these children were from black families. Invented names have a long association with the black community (Fryer and Levitt 2004; Lieberson and Mikelson 1995; Lieberson 2000), and my own analysis of California birth certificate data demonstrates that this population was more likely than any other to use names with no clear preexisting history. However, the other three children with invented names came from upper-class white families, and the rationales given by these parents were very similar to those presented by the black parents about why they had chosen a particular name.

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[16] This name first appeared in the Top 1000 in 1993, and stood in the top 100 from 2005-2008. I could not find it in a baby name book printed before 2000, and none of the major websites give it a consistent linguistic meaning.

[17] This name, most often pronounced neh-VAY-ah or neh-VAY (the word "heaven" spelled backwards), sprang to prominence in 2001 after the lead singer of the hard rock band POD used it for his daughter. It entered the top 1000 at #266, reached the top 100 by 2005 and the top 50 by 2006. In 2011, it stood at #35.

[18] Both of these appear as "real" names in most baby name dictionaries (with Jayden an alternative form of the Hebrew name Jadon, which appears in the Book of Nehemiah, and Hayden appearing in the 1941 Ames dictionary). However, the recent popularity of the "-ayden" cluster of names (with Aiden, Jayden, Brayden and spelling variants all appearing in the national top 100 in 2011, along with Caden, Zayden and Raiden and variants in the top 1000) would seem to have diminished the perceived authenticity of anything with this ending.

In both black and white families, the main reason given for wanting to invent a new name was to help their child be as distinctive as possible. Most of these parents were uninterested in looking through books of names; a few reported that they had considered names from books but found them generally uninspiring.

> *I looked at books, but I never was really interested in book names. [I] just wanted to be creative, on my own... I just wanted to think of my own names that are not in the book. Just to be more interesting, and find an uncommon name. Names in the book are more common names... I like being creative with my kids' names* [chose invented names, one ranked below 1000, two not ranked].

The idea of the child's name as a unique gift came up for parents here, too, as they explained the value of a name that they designed without any outside input. This quote from Nakia, one of the mothers profiled at the beginning of Chapter 1, encompasses this sentiment perfectly:

> *[The name] comes purely from me. It's not from a book, or anybody else's idea* [chose invented names, not ranked].

Although outsiders tend to assume that invented names are chosen solely on the basis of aesthetics, most of the unique names given to children in my sample were constructed very intentionally. Black parents tended to emphasize a name's connections to family: one mother gave two of her three children names with connections to other family members, while another carefully selected her children's initials to match with hers and her partner's. White parents, on the other hand, tended to focus most on the sound of their invented name, a process which sometimes had unintended consequences. Although one white mother carefully researched her daughter's invented name to make sure it didn't have negative associations in other languages, another family discovered only after their daughter's birth that they had inadvertently named her after the capital of a foreign nation.

These parents acknowledged that unique names had their own pitfalls. One mother spoke very candidly about the possible downsides of distinctively African-American names when it came to applying for a job "and things like that,"[19] but said optimistically that she believed "our world is changing so much [that] I don't think there's going to be that much of a difference [in the prospects] of a Mary and a Jaiyanna" by the time her daughter was applying for jobs. For these parents, the value of a unique name was worth that risk.

Another pitfall commonly spoken about by parents who had chosen this strategy as a means to distinction was difficulty with others spelling and pronouncing their child's name. With this in mind, parents who chose invented names often spent significant time and effort to make sure their children's names would be understandable by the general public. In this respect, the practices of parents choosing these most-distinctive names were no different from those choosing other kinds of unusual names: however parents found their way to a distinctive name, they wanted to make sure the name would be accessible to those the child interacted with, an asset instead of a liability.

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[19] Although some research suggests that the perceived negative effects of distinctively black names have more to do with socio-economic class than with race (Figlio 2005; Fryer and Levitt 2004), the "black name" penalty has been fairly conclusively demonstrated (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004).

"People Know How to Spell This Name": A Note on Accessibility

No matter how strongly parents wanted a distinctive name for their child, they almost always went to significant effort to make sure the name they'd chosen "wouldn't be a burden." In explaining what they meant by "burdensome" names, parents once again drew on anecdotal personal experience, either their own or the experiences of friends and family:

> *My sister, growing up, she hated her name. No one can spell it. No one can pronounce it. [Everyone always asked], where is this from? And that was hard for her. I didn't want to put that on my kids.*

> *When I was growing up, I always had times where I wished I just had a slightly more normal name, where people don't ask me how to spell it and people don't want to have conversations about it.*

> *Being a teacher, I would not have picked a name that is difficult to spell or pronounce, or that is a common name that's spelled strangely... I think it makes it really difficult, and I think there is also something there about growing up feeling kind of outside the mainstream, of not wanting that for my child. [The discomfort] of having a substitute [teacher] being like, how do you pronounce this name?*

In other words, in addition to distinctiveness, parents' criteria for "good" names included intuitive spellings and pronunciations. A good name was one that would not be constantly misspelled, or provoke undue conversation every time a child introduced herself. Parents from nineteen families spoke directly about wanting a name that was easy to spell, while ten families spoke about wanting names that were intuitive to pronounce. Thus, in total, 29 families (41% of my total sample) spoke about the value of names' being "accessible" to the public.

For multicultural families, of which my sample had a significant number (including 27 multiracial families and 17 with at least one parent born outside the United States), the issue of accessibility became more complicated. Ten families spoke explicitly about making sure their child's name was intuitive and accessible across multiple languages, whether this was making sure that the name "worked" in two languages spoken at home, that a Cantonese- or Spanish-speaking grandparent could pronounce a child's name, or that a name drawn from another language would "sound good" in the English-speaking world. As one mother put it, in discussing the criteria she and her partner used when evaluating potential Hebrew names for their daughter:

> *We did talk a little bit about [pronunciation], about [avoiding] something with the* heth*, you know, the mucus-producing letter, or something really difficult. It definitely came up.*

Even the quest for meaning, the common thread for nearly all my respondents, took a back seat to accessibility. One mother, who came from a family with a strong connection to their Irish heritage, considered using an alternate spelling of her daughter's popular name because she'd read that it was "[the] Celtic spelling." She noted that her husband would have been amenable to the idea, and that they had considered it for a while during the pregnancy, but that in the end she decided to choose the more traditional spelling because:

I was like, that would be so silly to have her named Bridget and have her not be this spelling. It felt too forced to try to be sort of different, when Bridget is a recognizable name, and people do assume a certain spelling… when we say Bridget, no one asks us how to spell it. And that would've just been a chore to put on her, to have to assert this sort of unique spelling. Even though I thought it was kind of cool-looking.

For all this discussion about accessibility, however, it's worth noting that even the best efforts sometimes failed. Seventeen families (24%) mentioned off-handedly that their children's names were regularly mispronounced and misspelled. Parents who chose the most common spelling of a traditional Anglo name are still asked how to spell it; those who chose a reappropriated or invented name are asked to repeat it over and over again, because people "don't hear it," or the name is mispronounced by those reading it, much to the dismay of parents like this father:

It is surprising to me that [since our child's name is] a word that's in the dictionary, that there's any ambiguity in people as to how you pronounce this dictionary word.

It seems that for all the effort parents go to in trying to make their names accessible, no name will be perfectly understandable by all who encounter it, perhaps especially in the multicultural Bay Area.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I demonstrated that despite modern parents' increasing commitment to distinctive names, most parents do not consider names from the whole spectrum of possible choices. No one wants a "weird" name for their child, but parents' definitions of "weird" vary as widely as their definitions of "popular." Most parents enter the naming process committed to a particular kind of name, whether that be something with a long history of use as an Anglo name, a foreign name tied to the family's ethnic heritage, a word with special meaning for one parent or the other or a wholly invented name – and whatever strategy a particular parent adheres to, they are likely to see that strategy as "the best one." Nonetheless, regardless of the specifics of their preferred name categories, nearly all parents have two central goals for their "perfectly distinctive name": they want something that will not be burdensome to their child (something easy to spell and pronounce), and something that has meaning for their family, whether this meaning is a connection with extended family members, a personal story for the child's parents, or just the fact that the name was designed especially for the child who bears it.

In addition to wanting to avoid names that were "too weird," nearly all the parents in my study had one other exclusionary qualification in mind: wanting to respect ethnic boundaries, by choosing names with no ethnic affiliation, or which were affiliated with a group to which the family had some traceable personal tie. This boundary is the subject of my next chapter.

Chapter 5
"Not Irish Enough For That": Race, Ethnicity, and Naming Practices

In the last two chapters, I examined the ways contemporary parents evaluate "good" and "bad" names for their children, and established that most parents want a name to be distinctive on some level, but shy away from names they perceive as "too strange." Although personal limits for "strange" names vary from one family to the next, I argue in this chapter that one category of names provokes particularly strong reactions from parents: names strongly affiliated with a particular racial or ethnic group. While many parents see a name with connections to their own racial or ethnic background as a way to legitimate an unusual choice, names with strong ethnic affiliations can also be contentious. In my interviews, many parents spoke about resisting the impulse to choose a name that might be seen as "too ethnic," even if it was connected to the family's ethnicity, because of concerns about discrimination or perceptions inauthenticity. Most parents also spoke about the inappropriateness of choosing a name from an ethnic community of which they were not a part. Despite the rising pressure on parents to find the right kind of distinctive name, ethnic and racial – boundaries around "correct" names remain persistent.

Existing research demonstrates the weight of racial identity in naming decisions. I've already noted Lieberson's (2000) finding that race predicts patterns of naming behavior more strongly than other demographic elements, that black college-educated mothers more often chose names similar to those chosen by black mothers with less education than to the choices of white college-educated mothers. Other research on multiracial and multiethnic families suggests that when an American child's heritage combines "majority" and "minority" identities (as when one parent is white, American, or Christian, and the other is a person of color, an immigrant or a member of another religious group), the child more often receives a name reflecting the minority identity, particularly if this identity cannot be easily deduced from their surname (Edwards and Caballero 2008; Gerhards and Hans 2009). This suggests that race and ethnicity remain some of the most important elements for parents considering how best to present a child's identity.

In this chapter, I look at discourses of race and ethnicity as they emerged in my interviews, first discussing how parents spoke about choosing an "appropriately ethnic" name for their children, then the reasons a family might choose to avoid such a name, and finally turning to parents' attitudes around transgressing racial and ethnic boundaries by choosing a name affiliated with a group other than their own. I found that although many children (32 of my sample of 101) received first or middle names that parents claimed had an intentional heritage connection, a significant minority of parents (18 of 71 families) also spoke about wanting to avoid names with a strong connection to their ethnic background, primarily because they felt that their family's heritage ties were "not strong enough" to entitle them to using an ethnic name. Parents often used this same rationale to explain why they would not select a name from another culture, saying that "random" ethnic names had no "resonance" for them. Of course, any discussion of why parents reject a name they view as "ethnic" must consider the possibility that the true reasons had to do with prejudice rather than resonance, and that political correctness shaped parents' accounts. I return to this issue in the next chapter, where I discuss the results of the survey that asked parents to evaluate names from a range of different ethnic groups.

"It Gives Her an Identity": "Legitimate" Ethnic Names
Most often, my respondents spoke about considering names' race and ethnicity in the context of names that had some tie to the family's own racial and ethnic background(s). Of the

101 children in my sample, 32 (from 27 of 71 families) received names chosen at least in part for connections to ethnic heritage. Five more families reported considering first names with ethnic connections before deciding on a different name. Although both white parents and parents of color chose ethnic names, in both multiracial and single-race families, the discourses around how and why parents decided to use an ethnic name varied depending on a family's racial composition. While parents of color in single-race families often reported considering practical factors in their choice of an ethnic name, like wanting the name to be pronounceable by non-native-English-speaking grandparents, interracial families were more likely to specifically cite issues of identity, of wanting a child's name to encompass "all that she is." By contrast, white families often (though not always) framed their choice of an ethnic name as almost whimsical, an extra mark of legitimacy like that which might come from giving a child a distant ancestor's name.

"Knowing Where They Come From": Parents of Color and Preserving Racial Heritage
        Of the 49 children of color in my sample, 21 (43%) received a name that parents reported as being directly connected with their heritage. The rationale for these names varied somewhat depending on whether the child was in a single-raced family or a multiracial family.
        Only 10 of the children of color in my sample were in single-raced families, and five of these (from four families) received first names that parents framed as having direct racial/ethnic ties. Two Hispanic families chose Spanish-language names for largely practical reasons, to ensure that Spanish-speaking grandparents could pronounce the name correctly and that it would sound good in both Spanish and English. As this mother put it:

> *I have a cousin whose name is Joshua, but in Spanish it's HOSS-way. And that just sounds so ugly to me! … Like, London was a really nice name, but in Spanish it's Londres. And that just sounds weird to me. I couldn't imagine my parents saying the name.*

The other families in this group, one South Asian and one black, chose "ethnic" names for more symbolic reasons. The South Asian parents, both immigrants, framed the decision in terms of wanting their American-born children to have some tangible connection to their home culture:

> *I figured because they're gonna grow up here, living here, they'll have sort of an American experience. And [with these names], they can have something sort of [from] where their parents are from.*

The black parents chose an African name for similar reasons, explaining that they wanted their daughter to have "at least one positive symbolic tie to her ancestry." Nonetheless, practical concerns factored in for these parents, too; the South Asian mother, quoted in an earlier chapter, tested the accessibility of her children's names by presenting them to coworkers for a pronunciation test, while the black mother spoke matter-of-factly about rejecting some of her husband's suggestions as too strange:

> *[He would suggest something, and] I was like, that's so wonderful that that person did really great things, but I'm not sending my child to school with that*

> *name… I would like them not to have to fight every day after school because people are making fun of their name.*

Thus, single-raced families who chose overtly ethnic names for their children were roughly evenly divided in the practical and symbolic reasons for their choice.

Multiracial households presented a slightly different picture. These children made up a much larger proportion of my overall sample, 39 in total, and 16 of them (41%) received first or middle names explained by parents as having direct ethnic connections. Seven of these children received ethnic first names, four more received ethnic middle names, and five received both first and middle names with strong ethnic ties. Of the 12 children who had one white parent and one parent of color, nine received an ethnic name with ties to a heritage culture connected to the parent of color; two of the remaining three, both of mixed black and Jewish heritage, received Hebrew first names, while the last, of Puerto Rican and white Italian heritage, received an Italian first name. The distribution of ethnic first names versus middle names split based on parental ethnicity, most notably when it came to the practices of Hispanic versus East Asian parents. While all five of the children with one Hispanic parent[20] who received ethnic names were given Spanish-language first names, only one of the five families with East Asian heritage who chose to use an East Asian name for a child put it in the position of a first name.

Only one multiracial family presented practical reasons for their choice, choosing an ethnic name to make sure grandparents could pronounce it correctly. By contrast, fully ten of the twelve multiracial families who chose ethnic names explained their decision explicitly in terms of identity. For these families, one of the most important aspects of a name was its capacity to help children connect with their heritage. When I asked parents why they felt it important to choose ethnic names, they tended to respond with sentiments like these:

> *We wanted the two-heritage kind of thing.*

> *We talked early on about the fact that we did want a name that worked in both English and Hindi… I thought it was great that I was marrying a foreign-born person, who speaks another language… I want that for our kids. I want the multicultural experience.*

> *[We wanted a Chinese name] because he is half me. Half-Chinese.*

Most parents framed their decision to choose an ethnic name as based in a straightforward desire to reinforce the child's ethnic identity, but a few used more actively political language:

> *It just seemed like it would be a defeat to name him Sam [or another Anglo name]… you're really, really hiding, at that point. Hiding your cultural background. You're saying, I'm the same as everyone else… having a unique name can ground you in your background, and also move forward an agenda [of] not always being easy for someone else to understand. [Of how] the world is bigger than [white Anglo culture].*

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[20] This number excludes multiracial parents with Hispanic heritage; in cases where a parent identified as Hispanic and something else, the parent typically expressed that they did not have a strong enough connection to their Spanish heritage to use a Spanish name.

Although nearly all the multiracial families in my sample included at least one parent with some European heritage, only two reported considering names with European roots (other than Spanish-language roots). In general, when I asked parents if they had considered honoring their child's white ethnic background(s), their responses echoed the one given by the South Asian mother quoted above, that children would have no shortage of exposure to mainstream American (white) culture, but that they might find it more difficult to connect with the family's other culture or cultures. As this multiracial white/East Asian mother put it, explaining how she and her Hispanic husband designed their children's names:

> *We figured the kids would be half Latino and a quarter Chinese, so we'd give 'em a Spanish first name and a Chinese second name… [since] they were mixed, it was gonna be hard to raise them to be in touch with everything, and we felt that the American culture is the one they'll be exposed to more easily. It'd be harder to identify with Chinese or Honduran culture, [because] those aren't as prevalent. The name will kind of help them do that.*

Conversely, if a child was connected with multiple "minority" cultural heritages, multiracial parents would sometimes consciously choose a name from a heritage which would otherwise be not immediately evident, as for instance in the case of parents who chose Hebrew names for multiracial children who might not "look" Jewish to a casual observer.

While some parents of color explained their choice of an ethnic first name as an opportunity for the child to display otherwise invisible heritage connections, others expressed a desire to have the child's first name "match" with the rest of their ethnic presentation. I saw this especially in multiracial Hispanic families; in three of the four cases where parents reported choosing a Spanish name for a multiracial child with Hispanic heritage, the child also carried their Hispanic father's Spanish-language surname. One mother, the white parent in a white/Hispanic multiracial family, stated explicitly that her decision to focus the name search on Spanish names came from the fact that the child would bear a Spanish surname:

> *I wanted [our kid's] first and last name to match [ethnically]. So I wouldn't want [their name] to be, like, Bob Garcia. And I know it happens all the time, and no one even cares, but I still wanted to match.*

If multiracial Hispanic families tended to put their child's Spanish identity front and center in their name, multiracial East Asian families were almost universally the opposite. Although three families in my sample chose to include Chinese or Japanese names as part of their children's legal names, none gave them as a first name. For these parents, the desire to honor their ethnic heritage was balanced by concerns about accessibility; they wanted their children to have names reflecting their heritage, but not names that would be difficult for English-speaking teachers or classmates to spell or pronounce. Although Asian parents engaged in this practice most consistently, it was also an issue for other parents of color looking to balance different aspects of their child's heritage, as I discuss in more detail below.

Regardless of the specifics of their choice, for parents of color, the choice of an ethnic name related almost universally to symbolic concerns about forging and preserving children's connection to their racial and ethnic identity. For white parents, on the other hand, choosing a

name with connections to the family's ethnic heritage was framed as much less consequential, more likely to be seen as "something nice," a way to honor family or to narrow down the list of possible names to a more manageable size. As previous research has suggested, ethnicity for the white parents in my study was far more optional.

"A Way To Connect to Our Family": White Parents Seeking Ethnic Names

In her discussion of white ethnicity, Waters (1990) points out that for the majority of white Americans, ethnicity is largely symbolic. While people of color are almost inevitably viewed as "hyphenated" Americans, whites have the choice of whether to express their ethnic identity, of how strongly to associate with this identity, and in which contexts they want to be "Italian-American" or "Norwegian-American," rather than simply "American." However, Waters also notes that increasing numbers of contemporary whites seek to reclaim their "lost" ethnic heritage. Her language evokes my earlier discussion of American individuation, with its emphasis on optional ethnic heritage as allowing whites simultaneously to stand out and connect:

> Being ethnic makes [people] feel unique and special and not just 'vanilla'… They are not like everyone else. At the same time, being ethnic gives them a sense of belonging to a collectivity. It is the best of all worlds: they can claim to be unique and special while simultaneously finding the community and conformity with others that they crave (1990:151).

This rhetoric appeared frequently in discussions of ethnicity with my white respondents.

Of the 52 white children in my sample, 11 (21%) received a name identified as having ties to the family's ethnic heritage. Six of these families had immediate ties to the chosen ethnicities, an immigrant parent or grandparent or a heritage language spoken in the home. In these cases, white parents' rationales for choosing an ethnic name were very similar to those offered by parents of color: wanting the child to feel connected to their heritage culture. In two cases, parents framed this decision as a compromise, where one parent's surname (with its visible tie to a particular ethnic heritage) was chosen for the child and the first name came from the other parent's ethnic background. One mother believed that this compromise was the only reason her husband's family had accepted the couple's unorthodox decision to give the child their mother's rather than their father's surname.

> *I think the fact that [the arrangement] was so even, with the Irish first name, [helped]. …I think the fact that it was a strong Irish name, with a Greek last name, made them happier than if it was a Greek [first and last] name.*

Another parent, a father who described himself as "[not having] a culture," talked at some length about wanting to allow his child participation in his wife's Eastern European Jewish culture:

> *I don't have cultural rituals, or tapestries, or crap that goes back fifteen generations… and it never really occurred to me to want it. [But our daughter] will have that culture, at least on her mom's side. All four of [my wife's] grandparents are Jewish, and so it is entirely possible that her bloodline is relatively clean, at least that half… so long story short, we're planning on*

> *teaching the child Hebrew, and if we're gonna give our child access to this culture, there's nothing wrong with a Hebrew name.*

Just as was the case for parents of color, these white parents saw a name with strong ethnic ties simultaneously as a recognition of the connection with a particular culture and a means to further strengthen that connection. However, this group constituted a distinct minority among the white parents in my sample.

In most cases, white families' ties to the ethnicity their child's name evoked were less direct, with the choice based on a serendipitous combination of aesthetics and vague ethnic connection. These parents often reported that a name's perceived ethnic associations were the final deciding factor in a process that was already well on its way to completion:

> *Logan just clicked. And I just think it's such a pretty name, so I kind of had to backtrack the meaning into it. Which works. So her [first and last] name is Logan Daniels. So Logan is an Irish name, and my mother's lineage is Irish, and I thought that was perfect, because then Daniels, of course, is from my father, so it kind of blends both of [my] heritages into her name.*

Three families, taking this phenomenon to its extreme, spoke matter-of-factly about going through a range of different ethnic name "sets" to find an aesthetically appealing name with some measure of authenticity.

> *I looked at Russian, Polish, everything that we are.*

> *We did like the idea of doing a sort of ethnic name, [so] we looked at Scottish names and Gaelic names, and Scandinavian names...*

> *[We thought] it would be really nice to have a name that comes from one of our ethnic heritages... so we did look at the Polish names, the German, the Ukrainian-slash-Russian names, we definitely did that.*

For these parents, ethnicity served as a convenient boundary, a way to avoid feeling the paralysis of choice that might otherwise emerge from facing a massive dictionary or website full of thousands of equally suitable potential names.

Of course, as I discussed in the previous chapter, no parent or family actually deemed all potential names equally suitable. For some, the limiting factor might be popularity; others reported being alienated by a name's strangeness, or conventionality, or lack of established pedigree. For a significant number of parents in my study, particularly white parents, any whiff of non-Anglo ethnic connection was enough to remove a name from consideration. Although I discuss this phenomenon in two sections – speaking first about those parents who rejected names from their own ethnic background, and then those who avoided names with strong connections to ethnic groups not "their own" – as we will see, parents from both groups provided remarkably similar justifications for their avoidance. Both groups saw authenticity as extremely important: with rare exceptions, parents would use an ethnic name only if they felt that, through one means or another, they could claim to be "connected" with that name and its associated culture.

Reasons Not to Use an "Appropriately" Ethnic Marked Name

If a bit more than one-third of the families in my study (27 of 71) reported choosing a first or middle name specifically for its ethnic affiliations, another quarter (18 of 71) explicitly rejected the idea of choosing a name that reflected their child's ethnic background. This group included 7 white families and 11 families with at least one parent of color. Although parents' specific rationales for this decision varied, the most common explanations stood in counterpoint to those offered by parents who chose to give their child an ethnic name. Just as those who chose ethnic names often sought a closer connection with their heritage, parents who avoided ethnic names were most likely to do so from a concern that the child might face negative responses because of the name, or because they felt that having an ethnically marked name would somehow put an unfair or unrealistic burden on the child.

Several parents spoke quite candidly about the potential social and even professional risks of "ethnic" names. Four women whose children had black ethnic backgrounds discussed their own familiarity with the research on the possible negative effects of distinctly "African-American" names, and explained that they had chosen more neutral names to avoid burdening their child with this particular kind of discrimination:

> *I don't know if I would want my child to have a very distinctly African or black name. So that people don't see that resume [and start] making decisions.*

> *I didn't want her to have a name she could be judged on. And Linda could be – I know an Asian lady named Linda, and I know an African-American lady named Linda, and I know a Caucasian lady named Linda. So I was like, that's a universal name. It's not one ethnicity. So I was like, okay. I like Linda.*

One Chinese-American mother and one white Jewish mother also expressed concerns about the possible social ramifications of a name that was "too ethnic," voicing fears about potential prejudice against immigrants and about anti-Semitism.

The other common explanation offered by these parents, which I heard from six families, was that a name with strong ethnic affiliations would connect their child more tightly to a particular ethnic group than they felt was justified. This surfaced most often for families with Hispanic heritage, where non-Spanish-speaking parents feared not only discrimination from the English-speaking population, but also a negative reaction from California's Chicano community:

> *Mother: If I spoke Spanish, I might think about [a Spanish name], but they're [only] a quarter Puerto Rican, and I didn't grow up with any Puerto Rican family.*
> *Father: In California, you can't get away with [using a Spanish name].*
> *Mother: People would just assume – [there'd be]the expectation that they should know Spanish.*
> *Father: I think it would be too much of a stigmatism (sic)... I don't think they would be accepted in the minority community of Spanish speakers, [as] a white person – or [someone] perceived [as white] – with a Spanish name.*

White families explained their avoidance of ethnic names in similar language, as in the case of one Irish-American father who explained that if he had given his son a traditionally Irish name,

with its associated Gaelic spelling, "he'd have to spend summers in Ireland to make that worthwhile. We'd have to be pretty hardcore." These families, then, present the other side of Waters' point about optional ethnicity: if a family has elected not to develop a strong ethnic identity, they may perceive it as inauthentic to spontaneously attempt to strengthen that bond by choosing an ethnic name for their child.

In contrast to these weighty identity-based rationales, a few families provided more casual reasons for avoiding ethnic names. Six families focused on aesthetics, explaining that they had been uninterested in ethnic names because, for example, Scandinavian names were "ugly" or "there were very few Romanian names that I liked." One Chinese-American mother used the aesthetic explanation to justify not including a Chinese name on her daughter's birth certificate:

> *I wasn't into that. I had a transliterated Chinese middle name on my birth certificate, and growing up, it just didn't mean anything to me. ...when you look at a name [written] in Chinese [characters], it has such beauty, the characters are interesting [but when you transliterate it] it just kind of loses any significance. So she has a separate Chinese name that's not related to her English name.*

Three families also addressed issues of accessibility, as when one Greek-American mother explained that she and her husband chose to avoid Greek names because they couldn't find one whose pronunciation and spelling were both appealing and intuitive in English.

Thus far, my analysis has focused on parents' use of or opposition to names from their own ethnic backgrounds. However, some of the most contentious conversations that take place in the "baby naming community" have to do with using names from outside one's own cultural background, and it is here that I conclude my analysis of the current norms around the appropriate use of ethnically marked names.

"You're Misrepresenting Yourself": Transgressing Ethnic Boundaries

As parents face increasing cultural pressure to choose distinctive names, we might expect that they would turn almost inevitably to considering names from other cultures. Incorporating "foreign" names into the American mainstream is hardly a new phenomenon; a name's linguistic roots have long been part of the standard entry in dictionary-style name books, and Kristen (Scandinavian; peaked at #33 in 1982), Megan (Welsh; last peaked at #10 in 1994), Danielle (French; peaked at #14 in 1987) and Aiden/Aidan (Irish; as Aiden, last peaked at #9 in 2011) are just a few of the names that reached the top of the American popularity charts while retaining a bit of international flavor. However, more recently, the pool of "ethnic" names has widened in its own right. Popular contemporary baby name books often include lists of Slavic, Spanish, Japanese and Arabic names, as well as "African," "Indian," and "Native American" names (with the fact that these communities encompass a number of languages and naming traditions sometimes acknowledged, sometimes not). For many families, this has raised the question of when (if ever) it is appropriate for parents to choose a name to which they have no heritage ties.

On the popular baby name website Nameberry, one blog post asking readers "Would you use a name from another culture?" generated 35 responses, of which 18 (51%) were enthusiastic endorsements (twelve respondents said that they wouldn't use a name from another culture, while five expressed uncertainty). Parents who supported the idea of using a name from a "foreign" culture most often framed their belief in the context of parents' implicit right to choose whatever name they liked best: as one commenter wrote, "What is important is that the names

flow well and are special to you." Many commenters also noted that nearly all popular American names have ties to a non-English language; a few went on to justify their own right to choose any name they liked specifically because they had no ties to any particular non-American culture, as was the case for this commenter:

> I think, as an American that can't claim to be as much as an 1/8 anything *(sic)*, that choosing a name from my "culture" seems kind of like a moot point. What is my culture? Isn't it made up of everyone who came to the US from everywhere else? (RocLibrarian 2010)

Among those site visitors who expressed hesitation about appropriating another culture's name, some did so for aesthetic reasons that echoed my respondents' style rationales (that certain name combinations don't "flow," for example), but the majority framed their belief in terms of a desire not to offend. For these commenters, as for the parents in my study who rejected names from their own heritage because of insufficient "connection," the use of a name implied some nuanced understanding of the associated culture. A few commenters also suggested that some cross-cultural usage (particularly, they implied, the use by white parents of names traditionally associated with communities of color) was co-optation and thus inappropriate:

> Without meaning to sound racist, I think it depends on the ethnicities involved and the direction of the transfer. Some names connote higher status than others, and this is in part because of their origins… Whenever you use a name that doesn't come from your culture, you risk using it inappropriately. But transgressions are more likely to be over-looked if members of the other culture can feel secure that their culture has high status and is valued by others… Personally, I find the names of my Mexican-American students beautiful and compelling, but I would be hesitant to use those names myself. I wouldn't want to portray myself as someone who understands a culture that is so frequently misunderstood by other people who look and talk like me (Memomo 2010).

One example of this perceived co-optation which generates periodic heated forum discussion is the use of the Jewish surname Cohen as a first name for non-Jewish children. The name first appeared in the SSA's top 1000 list in 2004, at #651, and in 2011 was ranked at #336. As popular name book author Pamela Redmond Satran summarizes in her essay on the subject, the name's recent association with several popular characters and pop culture figures has led to many parents adopting it as just one more "surname name," without taking into account its unique cultural associations:

> …the problem is it's not just any Jewish surname. Call your sons Greenblatt or Rosenberg, the objectors say. But the name Cohen is reserved for the priestly caste descended directly from the biblical Aaron… On being assured on one name board that using the name Cohen would not necessarily offend Jews, one mom-to-be wrote, "That's great to hear!! We live in a small town in the Midwest and I've never met a Jewish person IRL *[in real life]*" (Satran 2009).

For some families, then, a name is a name, and the only factor parents need consider is personal aesthetic appeal. However, within my interview sample, nearly all of those parents who spoke about the idea of taking a name from another culture were flatly against it. Of the 24 families who discussed the issue, only seven said that they had personally considered using a name from a culture they had no strong connection to, and only three had actually done so.

Among the 17 families who spoke disapprovingly about the practice of giving a child a name from another culture, nine justified their belief with the same language of authenticity and connection used by those who rejected names from their own ethnic backgrounds.

> *Father: If we had gone with Ali, or whatever – that's a Muslim name, and that's not our ethnic background, or our religion.*
> *Mother: [I have] nothing against Muslim names, but I wouldn't want people thinking I was anything [that] I wasn't. [It'd be] like calling them Jesus. We're not Hispanic, and we're not Christian.*

> *There are some really beautiful Welsh names, but it's a strongly ethnic name, of an ethnicity that I'm not part of.*

> *I got an iPhone app that had international names, and that was kind of interesting and fun to read through, but I also didn't want to choose, like, a Japanese name. As pretty as some of them were, I didn't feel connected to them.*

Echoing the comments about authenticity from the previous chapter, these parents felt that a good name was more than simply attractive; they wanted the name to somehow resonate with their family's identity. The other reasons offered up by families who spoke against using a name from some ethnicity other than their own were more in line with those suggested in the website discussion: that a strongly ethnic name wouldn't "match" or "flow" with the child's surname, or that parents might be accused of misappropriating another culture's names or using a name without full awareness of its cultural connotations. Even those parents who had considered a name strongly associated with another ethnic group often matter-of-factly laid out their "qualifications" for using such a name. For example, one white couple explained that they had thought about a Hindu name for their daughter because "we've traveled to India together twice, and I think we resonate with Indian culture."

Only one family spoke without prompting about the possibility of negative associations with a name tied to another culture, in this case a name strongly associated with black children:

> *I read Freakonomics, and the study, how they sent out all the [resumes with African-American names which received negative responses from prospective employers]. [And] I can't deny this overwhelming data that's right there in front of my face, just 'cause I don't think about it.*

The fact that this rationale did not appear more often in respondents' accounts may have reflected concerns about the perceived social desirability of their answers, a limitation perhaps unavoidable in an interview setting. However, the fact remains that very few families chose a name for their child that they identified as having strong connections with an ethnic or racial group other than their own.

Of the three families who did make this decision, two purposely chose a "non-affiliated" name, while a third did so unintentionally. In the first case, an eastern European mother gave her son a name whose roots are Italian, a language that she speaks but has no heritage tie to. She explained her decision this way:

> *I ran across the name in a story… [where] one of the hero's companions is named Luca. It's an old name. [And] obviously, there are people with the name Luke, or Lucas, but those just sounded very prosaic, and I wanted something a little bit different. A little bit more romantic, I guess. And I speak Italian fluently, and I like the way Luca sounds.*

Another family, of white eastern European heritage, chose a Spanish-language name for their son because they wanted to use a particular nickname, wanted a longer formal name to accompany it, and didn't care for any of their "mainstream" options:

> *When we were picking out ethnic names, we always kind of ruled out Spanish-sounding ones, because we're not Spanish, at all. But once we decided he was gonna be Freddie, we're like, who cares? Alfredo is a really cool name.*

In the third family, the parents chose a name for their daughter mainly for aesthetic reasons, and did not discover until after she was born that the name had strong Jewish cultural associations. Because of these associations, this mother, almost uniquely among the parents I spoke to, expressed some regrets about her choice of a name:

> *Even though I named her Selah, and I like the name, people always think I'm Jewish, when I introduce my daughter. I'm not Jewish – and I don't care about it being Jewish, but I wish it were a little bit less strongly centered in a culture that I'm not part of… I didn't really associate it as a particularly religious name, [and] I don't want that association.*

For this mother, the fact that her daughter carries a name to which her family has no heritage tie is a source of unease. Thus, we see the continued persistence of the belief that in order to use a name with strong "ethnic" connections, parents should at least have some association with and appreciation for the culture from which the name is drawn.

In this chapter, then, we have seen that racial boundaries in naming continue to persist, and that considerations about a name's perceived ethnicity continue to influence parents' views of what might constitute "acceptable" and "appropriate" names. For the majority of parents, a name with visible ethnic associations is a visible tie to the culture from which that name is drawn, which could serve to motivate or dissuade use of the name depending on how close parents feel – or want their child to feel – to the culture in question.

Combining this chapter with the prior two, on striking a balance between familiarity and uniqueness, we can claim the beginnings of some insight into what factors are most important to contemporary parents in choosing a suitable name. However, any discussion of a process after-the-fact will inevitably be flawed, with parents' recall of their motivations and decisions biased by the outcome and the name they eventually chose. To broaden our understanding, then, of the factors most important to contemporary American parents in choosing a "good name," I turn in

the next chapter to the results of my name survey, where I asked parents to evaluate and rate a set list of names in terms of their perceived suitability for future children. This exercise moves our conversation out of the abstract, and allows me to discuss the pros and cons of specific names.

Chapter 6
The Name Survey: Parents' Rankings of Popular, Trendy, and "Ethnic" Names

Parents' accounts of their name choice process, as presented in the last three chapters, provide some insight into the ways contemporary parents define a "good" name versus a "bad" one. Although parents from different demographic groups disagreed somewhat in their accounts of what made a bad name, their views of a good name were very similar overall: something neither too popular nor too obscure, and which ideally had some tangible connection to or "meaning" for their family. Taken together, these findings support my argument that the increasing diversity in contemporary American baby names reflects a deeper cultural focus on individuation; however, as in any interview study, the accounts I collected from parents have their own limitations. As others have noted, post hoc accounts of decision-making are subject to recall biases, with respondents inclined to see the final outcome of a decision as more inevitable than it may have seemed at the time (Connolly and Bukszar 1990) and others). For this reason, I included an element in my interviews designed to illuminate parents' attitudes toward different name types separate from the cases of their own children, by asking them to evaluate a set list of names. Thus, the name survey.

At the end of each interview, I asked parents to evaluate and rate a set of sixteen names, evenly divided between boys' and girls' names. Although each family received a slightly different list, I always drew the names from eight categories designed to measure parents' attitudes toward popularity and ethnic associations in names. From 71 interviews, I obtained 1,808 rankings, with 112 parents evaluating a total of 85 different names. The results of this survey further reinforced my findings about parents' likes and dislikes: although parents gave favorable ratings to names they saw as "fresh" or "different," they almost uniformly rejected those they found difficult to spell or pronounce, as well as those strongly associated with an ethnic group not their own. Parents also rejected names they perceived as dated, a trend predicted by Lieberson in his discussion of popularity cycles. Perhaps my most notable finding, however, is that overall, parents rated the names in my survey relatively poorly. Since, as I discuss below, I chose nearly every name on the list because it met some definition of "popular," this suggests that relative popularity remains one of the strongest predictors of a name's unacceptability to parents.

Before turning to the survey data, I begin this chapter by discussing how I chose to focus on race and popularity as the two principal axes for developing my name categories, as well as what previous research can show us with regards to parents' practices around the preservation of racial/ethnic boundaries and the effects of names' recent popularity. Next, I move to the methodology of my survey and how I chose the names that appeared. Finally, I turn to the survey data itself, presenting results first by group and then in a brief discussion of individual names.

An Illustration of Racial Boundaries: California's Most Popular Names By Race
Even a quick examination of recent popular names from California's four major racial groups demonstrates that parents of different races vary dramatically in terms of the names they like best. In 2008, the most popular name for white boys born in California, Jacob, ranked number 20 for black boys, number 23 for Hispanic boys, and number 18 for Asian boys. The most popular name for white girls, Emma, ranked number 401 for black girls, number 47 for Hispanic girls, and number 10 for Asian girls. If we compare the relative ranks of the most popular name for each racial group, boys' names seem less racially segregated overall than girls'

names, with three of the four races' number 1 boys' names appearing in the top 100 for every group compared to only one of the four number 1 girls' names. The most distinctive groups overall are popular Hispanic boys' names and popular black girls' names; the number 1 name on each of these lists does not appear in any other group's top 100.

Table 1: Relative Ratings of #1 Names in California by Race, 2008

	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
Jacob	1	20	23	18
Jayden	59	1	38	4
Angel	1269	578	1	568
Ethan	7	54	43	1
Emma	1	401	47	10
Nevaeh	129	1	101	366
Ashley	57	61	1	6
Chloe	8	37	174	1

An examination of the full top 100 lists from each racial group serves to further illustrate these patterns. Thirty percent of the names in the boys' top 100 lists by race appeared on all four lists, meaning that parents from all four racial groups used them frequently; by contrast, only 11% of the names in the girls' top 100 lists appeared on all four. Turning to individual lists, we see that the popular names for Hispanic boys and black girls remain more distinctive than those from any other set. Only 34% of the top 100 Hispanic boys' names also appeared on the top 100 list for white boys, compared to 47% of the top 100 for black boys and 67% of the top 100 for Asian boys overlapping with the white top 100. Popular black girls' names are even more distinctive, with only 32% of the top 100 overlapping with popular white names and even smaller percentages overlapping with popular Hispanic and Asian names.

Table 2: Percentage[21] Overlap of Top 100 Names in California by Race, 2008

Boys	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
White	n/a	47%	34%	67%
Black	47%	n/a	41%	53%
Hispanic	34%	41%	n/a	46%
Asian	67%	53%	46%	n/a
Total overlap (appears in all 4 groups): 30%				
Girls	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
White	n/a	32%	31%	57%
Black	32%	n/a	20%	24%
Hispanic	31%	20%	n/a	38%
Asian	57%	24%	38%	n/a
Total overlap (appears in all 4 groups): 11%				

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[21] Due to small population sizes, some groups' lists included multiple names receiving the same rank, resulting in slightly more than 100 names in their top 100. Thus, I present percentages rather than raw numbers.

Previous research (Lieberson 2000) suggests that this racial disparity in popular names, and particularly the distinctiveness of names chosen for black children, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Looking at earlier birth certificate data reinforces this finding, as we see that the distinction between popular names used by different races has widened appreciably in just a few decades. In 1970, 47% of popular boys' names and 34% of popular girls' names appeared on the top 100 lists for all four racial groups, compared to 30% of boys' names and 11% of girls' names in 2008. Research on black and Hispanic naming practices provides partial explanations for these divergences. On the subject of Hispanic names, Sue and Telles (2007) suggest that Mexican immigrants are more likely to give distinctively Spanish names to their sons than their daughters, and that sons' odds of receiving a Spanish-language name are inversely correlated with maternal education. This population, encompassing a significant proportion of all California births (foreign-born Hispanic women accounted for 30% of all mothers giving birth in the state in 2008) draws from a pool of names closely tied to their heritage language and culture, increasing the likely association of these Spanish-language names with the immigrant community. By contrast, popular Spanish-language girls' names overlap with the national mainstream, where Latinate names for girls are becoming increasingly dominant (in 2008, for example, Sophia and Isabella appeared in the top ten for both white and Hispanic girls in California).

The rise of distinctively black names, already present in the 1980s (Lieberson 2000), is far more prevalent for girls than for boys. As Lieberson puts it:

> …there is more "play" in names given to daughters [of any race]. Girls' names are less traditional and more fashionable (that is, they change more frequently), and they are often not drawn from the existing inventory. Changes in boys' names are less severe, reflecting the role of sons as bearers of tradition. Among black [families], the more conservative naming trends for boys hold for newly invented names as well; blacks are more inclined to be inventive in choosing names for their daughters than for their sons (2000:205).

Fryer and Levitt (2004) point out that more than 40% of black girls born in California in the late 20th and early 21st centuries received names shared by no white children, as compared to 25% of the overall black population. Just as my typology analysis from Chapter 4 demonstrated black parents' increased tendency to invent unique names for their children, the evidence from other researchers combined with my birth certificate data suggests that black families are particularly inclined to create these names for daughters rather than sons.

Given the persistent dissimilarity of the most popular names for different racial groups, I expected that parents might be disinclined to choose a name they strongly associated with another racial/ethnic group, and that they might carry the strongest associations with popular black girls' names and Hispanic boys' names. However, the existing research also points to another category of names apt to be avoided by contemporary parents: those seen not as "popular" (meaning with a high distribution in the current population of children) but as "dated."

"They Sound Like Old Men's Names": Expectations About Popularity
In his text, Lieberson (2000) presents a theory of name popularity as a cycle, arguing that once a top twenty name falls out of fashion, it tends to disappear for at least seventy-five years,

not only because its phonetic and etymological features might no longer be fashionable but because of its associations with elderly people:

> In the case of names, an association with older people and out-of-date fashions undercuts [a name's] appeal – at least under the current conditions where [these people and fashions] appear as both unfashionable and therefore unattractive. As it happens, then, a name long out of use can reappear when nobody can think that the parent is simply out of fashion. The earlier wave of people who carried the name has died out, and so the association with *old* changes from real live persons – aunts and uncles, grandfathers and grandmothers – to historical names that no longer have that negative association with the elderly (2000: 162-165).

Some of the parents in my study echoed this pattern in discussing their own name choices, particularly in the context of whether to use the name of a beloved family member. As I noted in Chapter 4, in the few cases where children in my study received a family member's name as a first name, it was most often the name of a relatively distant ancestor, a great-grandparent or someone even further back in the lineage. Closer relatives, like grandparents, were much more likely to see their name placed in the middle name spot, which one father noted as "the province of homage to family." As one mother put it when explaining why she had chosen to honor her sons' grandfathers through middle names:

> *Warren and George, I wouldn't like either of those names for a first name. I mean, they're too – it makes sense that they're grandfather names, 'cause they [sound like] two old men's names.*

This couple chose "classic" names for their sons; one stood in the top ten through the first half of the 20th century, the other hovered at the edge of the top 100 through the early 20th century before definitively entering it in the last few years. Another mother used similar language to explain why the name she chose for her daughter was "old-fashioned," while the grandmother's name she rejected was "just old."

> *Vivian's* [ranked #158 in 2010] *sort of an old-fashioned name, [but] I love the way Vivian sounds, where Virginia* [ranked #608 in 2010]*, it's a little more old-fashioned.*

Examining the SSA's top 100 list demonstrates the same ebb and flow pattern. Comparing the top 100 lists from 2011 and 1880, we find 20 boys' names and 18 girls' names appearing in both lists; after 1880, we do not see this many names overlapping with the 2011 list again until the mid-1960s for boys and the mid-1980s for girls. Comparing the lists from 1960 and 2011, we see that only four girls' names appeared on both lists (the number of recurrent boys' names remains relatively constant through the mid-twentieth century at between 15 and 20); this suggests that contemporary parents see the most popular names from fifty years ago as inappropriate for a modern child.

Lieberson (2000) suggests a nuance to this avoidance of "dated" names in his analysis of the naming practices of immigrants. As he points out, many immigrant parents incline toward slightly "unfashionable" names:

> [Immigrants] are not fully connected with contemporary developments in the
> larger white culture and inadvertently use dated names (obtained perhaps from
> older movies, popular music, white coworkers, older people with prestige, and the
> like). Even the stereotypes held by [immigrants] of popular American names may
> be dated (2000:199).

Although Lieberson refers here specifically to the practices of Asian parents, we see evidence of the phenomenon he discusses in the popular names for both Asian and Hispanic children born in California in 2008. For the top 100 white names in California that year, the average peak popularity year (the year the name reached its highest level of national popularity) is 2001 for boys and 2004 for girls. By contrast, the average peak popularity year for Hispanic names stands at 1995 for boys and 1997 for girls, and for the top Asian names the average peak is 1993 for boys and 1994 for girls. Given the predominantly American-born nature of my sample, I anticipated that the parents I spoke with would prefer to avoid these "dated" names, and would focus instead on names that fell outside Lieberson's 75-year window of "unfashionability."

With this pair of broad trends – the widening differences in ethnic preferences, and the disinclination for parents to choose something either too of-the-moment or too dated – in hand, I now turn to the presentation of my survey results.

Design and Delivery of the Name Survey

In developing the name survey, I created two broad groups of categories: one for "ethnic" names and one for "popular" names. To minimize possible idiosyncratic effects, I designed each category to include five possible names, for a total of 40 boys' names and 40 girls' names; however, as I explain below, I added names to a few categories over the course of data collection.

The Ethnic Names

I created my first group of categories to explore parents' attitudes about names with strong ethnic associations. Rather than focusing on potentially obscure names used exclusively by one racial group, as previous studies had done, I instead chose relatively popular names that showed some amount of distinctiveness by race. By taking this approach, I hoped to better examine how parents ascertained what "counted" as a racially marked name. Using 2008 California birth certificate data, I drew up a list of names that appeared in the top fifty for one of the four major racial groups (white, black, Hispanic and Asian) and did not appear in any of the other three groups' top fifty. In my earliest interviews, my set of "racially distinct" names came from a popularity list drawn up based on the mother's race; however, after an early discussion with a colleague I revised this measure to reflect the child's race instead. At this point, I removed and replaced five names (one each from the popular white boys', white girls' and Asian boys' lists, and two from the Asian girls' list). Thus, in total, parents ranked 45 "ethnic names" over the course of my study, 22 boys' names and 23 girls' names.

Table 3: Popular Names From Major California Racial Groups, 2008
(including in-group ranking by child's race)

Boys	**White**	**Black**	**Hispanic**	**Asian**
	Jack (#2)	Jeremiah (#5)	Angel (#1)	Kyle (#14)

Logan* (#4)	Josiah (#8)	Jose (#3)	Brian (#24)
Luke (#14)	Jaylen (#10)	Diego (#5)	Alex (#28)
Jackson (#15)	Xavier (#12)	Adrian (#7)	Ian (#30)
Gavin (#16)	Malachi (#16)	Luis (#9)	Vincent* (#36)
Mason** (#26)			Sean** (#38)

Girls	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian
	Lily* (#11)	Nevaeh (#1)	Valeria (#4)	Rachel (#17)
	Addison (#17)	Aaliyah (#2)	Kimberly (#6)	Tiffany (#22)
	Brooke (#22)	Jayla (#3)[a]	Camila (#8)	Angela (#25)
	Charlotte (#23)	London (#3)[a]	Andrea (#11)	Amy* (#27)
	Riley (#24)	Aniyah (#5)	Jocelyn (#12)	Katie* (#30)
	Avery** (#32)			Nicole** (#32)
				Megan** (#35)

* name added after rank recalculation w/child's race
** name dropped after rank recalculation w/child's race
[a] equal numbers of children received name

The lists demonstrate the relative exclusivity of some name categories compared to others. To find five popular black girls' names and Hispanic boys' names not appearing on another group's top fifty list, I did not have to leave the top ten. Finding names distinctly popular for black boys and Hispanic girls required looking slightly further down those lists, but still kept me within the top twenty. By contrast, distinctly popular names for white and especially Asian children stand significantly further down, with both sets of popular Asian names including some from the 30s. This is unsurprising, since as I discussed above, popular white and Asian names have significantly more overlap than those from the other groups.

Nearly all these names are significantly overrepresented in a particular racial group, which I define as having double the percentage of children from a particular racial group bearing the name as would follow that group's representation in the overall state population. Looking specifically at the two groups whose names show the clearest signs of exclusivity, I found that black children made up more than 50% (roughly 10 times their representation in the overall population) of the recipients for two names, Jaylen for boys and Aniyah for girls; thus, I suspected that parents from other racial groups might more readily recognize these names as "racialized" than the rest. For Hispanic children, three of the five boys' names (Diego, Jose and Luis) and two of the five girls' names (Camila and Valeria) would rate a 2 on Sue and Telles' (2007) 5-point "Spanish name scale," as Spanish names with clear English equivalents. Although other names on the lists (Adrian and Angel for boys, Andrea for girls) would rate a 3, as names used natively in both languages, we might expect parents from other racial groups to be less positive in their ratings of the clearly Spanish-language names than the more neutral ones.

We also see names in the popular Hispanic and Asian lists that reflect Lieberson's (2000) observation about immigrants' tendency to use names slightly "past their peak" with the larger American public (as measured by their rank on the national popularity lists). Four of the six Asian boys' names (Kyle, Brian, Alex, and Sean) peaked between 1972 and 1995, while Vincent peaked all the way back in 1882. Only Ian remains a relatively popular "current" name (peaking

nationally at #65 in 2003, and standing at #70 in 2009). Similarly, all seven popular Asian girls' names, as well as Kimberly and Andrea off the popular Hispanic girls' list, peaked nationally between 1967 and 1996, with the mean peak year being 1984.

Since most of the parents in my sample were born in the United States, these names would likely have been common among their own peer groups; we might therefore suspect, building on Lieberson's theory, that parents would be disinclined to use them out of a desire not to appear "dated." This presumed impulse – to find names at the perfect popularity level for a contemporary child – also guided the development of my second set of categories.

The Popular (and Unpopular) Names
The groups of names chosen for their popularity status included four categories:

1. *Common names:* Current popular names that had also been steadily popular through the late 20th century.
2. *Old-fashioned names:* Early 20th-century popular names that were no longer popular.
3. *Trendy names:* Current popular names that recently rose to prominence.
4. *Emerging names:* Uncommon names that were rising in popularity at the time of the study.

I chose the "common names" using the SSA's 2009 popularity list[22]. Starting at the top of the list, I chose the five names in the 2009 top 25 that had held that rank (25 or better) for the largest number of years[23] since 1960. Since more than five boys' names met these criteria, I chose those with the best 2009 ratings.

Table 4: Common Names (Top 25 in 2009, Long-Standing Top 25 Presence)

Boys' names	2009 rank	# of years in top 25 since 1960	year first appeared in top 25		Girls' names	2009 rank	# of years in top 25 between 1960-2009	year first appeared in top 25
Michael	3	50	1938		Emily	6	28	1982
William	5	50	1880		Elizabeth	11	50	1880
Daniel	7	50	1943		Samantha	15	24	1986
Anthony	10	50	1960		Ashley	20	28	1982
David	14	50	1920		Sarah	21	36	1974

In selecting old-fashioned names, I restricted myself to those that ranked in the top 25 in 1909 but did not appear in the top 100 in 2009. After developing a list of all names meeting those criteria, I chose those with the best 2009 rankings.

Table 5: Old-Fashioned Names (Top 25 in 1909, Rank Below 100 in 2009)

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[22] The most recently available year when I started my interviews.
[23] Not necessarily consecutive years.

Boys' names	1909 rank	2009 rank	year disappeared from top 100		Girls' names	1909 rank	2009 rank	year disappeared from top 100
George	4	163	1993		Mary	1	102	2009
Frank	8	289	1989		Helen	2	389	1959
Edward	9	137	1997		Margaret	3	187	1976
Walter	12	386	1973		Ruth	4	357	1962
Willie	13	625	1969		Dorothy	5	1127	1962

Looking at these lists, we again see evidence of the relative timelessness of boys' names compared to girls' names. While none of the common boys' names entered the top 25 after 1960, three of the girls' names appeared in the thirty years prior to 2009, including two, Ashley and Samantha, with no long-standing history as girls' names (neither appears in the 1941 Ames book). On the other end of the spectrum, three of the "old-fashioned" boys' names that stood in the top ten in 1909 and had disappeared 100 years later remained in the top 100 in the late 1980s, and two of them remained in the top 250 even in 2009. By contrast, three of the top five girls' names in 1909 were gone from the top 100 in a little more than 50 years. For parents concerned with avoiding "dated" names, we might expect better ratings for the more long-standing "classic" names (Elizabeth and Sarah as opposed to Ashley and Samantha), and for those names that left the top 100 more recently (Edward or Mary, rather than Dorothy or Walter).

Regardless of their current popularity, I expected the names in both the common and old-fashioned categories to be familiar to most of my respondents; all twenty have long histories of use in the United States, and associations with numerous real-world and fictional figures. By contrast, I thought that the names in my last two categories, trendy and rising names, might be less well-known. Although some of these names, too, carry historical or cultural associations, in contemporary life they are more likely to be associated with a single pop cultural figure.

To assemble the list of trendy names, I focused on those names that appeared in the 2009 top 50 but did not appear in the top 100 ten years earlier. I chose the most popular names from this list that were not already represented in a different category[24].

Table 6: Trendy Names (Top 50 in 2009, Ranked Below 100 in 1999)

Boys' names	2009 rank	1999 rank	Classic name?		Girls' names	2009 rank	1999 rank	Classic name?
Jayden	8	254	no		Ava	5	259	no
Aiden	12	474	alt. spelling (Aidan)		Mia	10	120	no
Landon	36	196	yes		Ella	14	374	yes
Brayden	47	222	no		*Lily**	18	152	yes
Liam	49	141	no		Lillian	27	147	yes
					Leah*	28	103	yes

* name added to the category after early interviews
** name dropped from this category to be used as a "popular white name"

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[24] For example, the boys' name Gavin and girls' name Addison would have met these criteria, but were already present in the survey pool as "popular white names." I also shifted one name, Lily, off the trendy girls' list and onto the list of popular white names after I recalculated the popular ethnic names based on child's race.

The final category, "emerging names," included those ranking between 101-500 in 2009 which did not appear in the top 1000 five years before. After eliminating alternate spellings of more popular names (such as Aaden and Caylee), I chose the names that ranked best in 2009.

Table 7: Emerging Names (Ranked 101-500 in 2009, Below 1000 in 2004)

Boys' names	2009 rank	First year appearing in top 1000 & rank	Classic name?		Girls' names	2009 rank	First year appearing in top 1000 & rank	Classic name?
Kingston	225	2006/944	yes		Miley	189	2007/278	no
Leland	349	2005/608	yes		Analia	329	2009/329	no
Colt	370	2005/945	no		Emery	336	2005/812	boys'
Zayden	398	2006/877	no		Isla	346	2008/622	no
Beckett	413	2006/751	no		Audrina	355f	2007/707	no

Although we see a number of "classics" (appearing in the 1941 Ames book) among the trendy girls' names, only one trendy boys' name and two emerging boys' names carry that qualification, along with one alternate spelling of a classic name and one classic boys' name reappropriated for girls. In many cases, trendy and emerging names for both boys and girls would qualify as invented names, often also with ties to a particular celebrity (as in the case of Miley, which leapt onto the top 1000 list in 2007 as a reflection of the popularity of singer and actress Miley Cyrus). For parents seeking to avoid association with "a passing fad," then, we might expect nearly all of these names to be off-limits, with the possible exception of those with more classic roots.

Administering the Name Survey

At the end of each interview, I handed parents a paper survey that listed sixteen names (separated into boys' and girls' lists) and five possible responses: "I'd definitely use this name," "I might use this name," "This name's OK," "I probably wouldn't use this name," and "I'd never use this name." No two families received identical survey lists, but when two parents participated in an interview, both rated the same list of names. In addition to randomly selecting which names from each category appeared on the lists, I also randomized the order in which names appeared. Although I did not offer unprompted suggestions on how parents should approach the survey, if they asked, I typically responded with something like "Think about how likely you'd be to use these names for hypothetical future kids." Once parents had rated all the names, I encouraged them to expand on the rationales for their choices. I was more inclined to prompt parents for responses here than at any other point in the interview, particularly if they had rated a name as something other than "OK."

Given the social desirability biases implicit in this kind of research, we might expect parents' explanations to be mitigated by concerns about political correctness and reluctance to label names in a way that might reflect poorly on the labeler. In fact, I did hear this rhetoric from a number of parents, who began their explanation of their ratings with hedges like "I feel bad saying this, because [Dorothy] is somebody's name… but it's an ugly name!" or "[Jayla] sounds like an African-American name – which is fine – but just wouldn't make sense for my daughter." However, as I discuss below, the numerical ratings showed no signs of hedging. Although parents gave relatively low ratings to all the names on the list, they reserved their lowest ratings

for names from the old-fashioned category, and for the two most distinctive groups of "ethnic" names, popular Hispanic boys' names and black girls' names.

"I Basically Hated Them All": Parents' Name Ratings

Once parents had completed the name surveys, I recoded their original Likert-style ratings into a numerical scale, with 1 corresponding to the best possible rating and 5 to the worst. This allowed me to compare parents' ratings and take averages across demographic groups, for different name categories and for individual names. In practice, I operationalized a rating of 3 ("This name's OK") as "neutral," with 1 and 2 as positive and 4 and 5 as negative ratings. In this section, I first discuss parents' overall ratings of the name categories according to parental demographics, then turn first to an analysis of how parents responded to different name categories and finally to a brief look at particular names that received surprising ratings.

Overall, parents rated the names relatively poorly. Taking all categories together, boys' names received an average rating of 3.75 and girls' names an average of 3.63, both trending toward the "negative" end of the scale. Parents' qualitative ratings reflected this same tendency, with many reporting that the names overall were too common or "uninteresting."

> *Most of the stuff you have [here] is pretty basic* [average rating 4.13].

> *They're just too common… I just don't like them* [average rating 4.56].

Despite this trend, two aspects of the numerical ratings suggest additional potential motivations beyond a simple rejection of popular names. First, we see that the categories with the best ratings overall were common and trendy girls' names: all of the names on these lists appeared in the national top 50 in 2009. Secondly, the standard deviation of categories' average ratings is relatively high, particularly for girls; this indicates that some individual names received substantially better ratings than others.

Table 8: Overall Ratings of Survey Categories, All Respondents

	Boys		Girls	
	mean rating (N)	std. dev	mean rating (N)	std. dev
White	3.54* (113)	1.24	3.50 (115)[a]	1.22
Black	3.55 (113)	1.34	3.88[+] (113)	1.24
Hispanic	3.97[+] (113)	1.28	3.70 (113)	1.26
Asian	3.61 (113)	1.28	3.81 (113)	1.21
Common	3.73 (113)	1.20	3.45 (113)	1.41
Old-fashioned	3.95 (113)	1.21	3.84 (113)	1.34
Trendy	3.88 (113)	1.26	3.12* (111)[a]	1.35
Emerging	3.81 (113)	1.22	3.73 (113)	1.27
Overall mean rating	3.75 (904)	1.26	3.63 (904)	1.30

* category received best overall rating
[+] category received worst overall rating
[a] reflects shift in categories after 8 interviews

As I predicted, popular Hispanic boys' names and popular black girls' names received the lowest ratings overall. This finding reflects the overrepresentation of white families in my sample: when I separated the data out by parental race, I found that black and Hispanic parents rated their groups' respective "unpopular" popular names substantially better than did parents from any other group.

Table 9: Ratings of Survey Categories By Parents' Race

Boys' names	All families (N)	White parents (N)	Black parents (N)	Hispanic parents (N)	Asian parents (N)	Other parents, inc. mixed-race (N)
White	3.54* (113)	3.43* (71)	3.80 (10)	3.88 (8)	3.80 (5)	3.63 (19)
Black	3.55 (113)	3.63 (71)	3.30 (10)	4.00 (8)	3.00* (5)	3.31* (19)
Hispanic	3.97+ (113)	4.20+ (71)	4.40+ (10)	2.25* (8)	4.80+ (5)	3.42 (19)
Asian	3.61 (113)	3.54 (71)	4.00 (10)	2.88 (8)	3.60 (5)	4.00 (19)
Common	3.73 (113)	3.63 (71)	3.90 (10)	3.63 (8)	4.00 (5)	4.00 (19)
Old-fashioned	3.95 (113)	3.81 (71)	4.40+ (10)	4.13 (8)	3.80 (5)	4.16+ (19)
Trendy	3.88 (113)	3.90 (71)	3.20* (10)	4.13 (8)	4.00 (5)	4.00 (19)
Emerging	3.81 (113)	3.75 (71)	3.50 (10)	4.50+ (8)	3.60 (5)	3.95 (19)
Overall mean rating	3.75 (904)	3.74 (568)	3.81 (80)	3.67 (64)	3.83 (40)	3.81 (152)
Girls' names	All families (N)	White parents (N)	Black parents (N)	Hispanic parents (N)	Asian parents (N)	Other parents, inc. mixed-race (N)
White	3.50 (115) [a]	3.36 (73)[a]	3.70 (10)	4.00+ (8)	3.80 (5)	3.68 (19)
Black	3.88+ (113)	4.14+ (71)	2.7* (10)	3.25 (8)	4.20 (5)	3.68 (19)
Hispanic	3.70 (113)	3.61 (71)	3.60 (10)	3.88 (8)	4.00 (5)	3.95 (19)
Asian	3.81 (113)	3.69 (71)	4.10 (10)	2.88* (8)	4.40+ (5)	4.37+ (19)
Common	3.45 (113)	3.11 (71)	4.20 (10)	3.50 (8)	4.00 (5)	4.16 (19)
Old-fashioned	3.84 (113)	3.58 (71)	4.40+ (10)	3.75 (8)	4.40+ (5)	4.37+ (19)
Trendy	3.12* (111)[a]	2.99* (69) [a]	3.50 (10)	3.88 (8)	3.80 (5)	2.89* (19)
Emerging	3.73 (113)	3.77 (71)	3.10 (10)	4.00+ (8)	3.60* (5)	3.84 (19)
Overall mean rating	3.63 (904)	3.53 (568)	3.66 (80)	3.64 (64)	4.03 (40)	3.87 (152)

category received best overall rating
[+] category received worst overall rating
[a] reflects shift in categories after 8 interviews

In addition to parental race, the other significant predictor of how well parents would rate particular categories was parental gender. Mothers rated trendy and emerging boys' names, as well as popular black names for boys and girls, significantly better than fathers; by contrast, fathers gave significantly better ratings to common and old-fashioned names for both sexes, and

to trendy names for girls. This suggests that fathers tend toward more conservative choices than mothers overall, particularly for sons, and that mothers may be more sensitive to naming "fads."

Table 10: Ratings of Survey Categories By Parents' Gender

Boys' names	All families (N)	Mothers (N)	Fathers (N)
White	3.54* (113)	3.60 (69)	3.42 (44)
Black	3.55 (113)	3.30* (69)	3.95 (44)
Hispanic	3.97[+] (113)	4.00 (69)	3.98 (44)
Asian	3.61 (113)	3.86 (69)	3.19* (44)
Common	3.73 (113)	3.81 (69)	3.58 (44)
Old-fashioned	3.95 (113)	4.20[+] (69)	3.51 (44)
Trendy	3.88 (113)	3.71 (69)	4.16[+] (44)
Emerging	3.81 (113)	3.72 (69)	3.98 (44)
Overall mean rating	3.75 (904)	3.77 (552)	3.72 (352)
Girls' names	**All families (N)**	**Mothers (N)**	**Fathers (N)**
White	3.50 (115) [a]	3.50 (71)	3.47 (44)[a]
Black	3.88[+] (113)	3.77 (70)	4.10[+] (43)
Hispanic	3.70 (113)	3.89 (70)	3.36 (43)
Asian	3.81 (113)	4.04[+] (70)	3.40 (43)
Common	3.45 (113)	3.74 (70)	2.93* (43)
Old-fashioned	3.84 (113)	4.02 (70)	3.50 (43)
Trendy	3.12* (111)[a]	3.22* (69)	2.98 (42)[a]
Emerging	3.73 (113)	3.69 (70)	3.79 (43)
Overall mean rating	3.63 (904)	3.73 (560)	3.44 (344)

* category received best overall rating
[+] category received worst overall rating
[a] reflects shift in categories after 8 interviews

My interviews themselves also supported these findings. When couples discussed having to negotiate differences in what they considered an "appropriately" distinctive name, in eight of eleven cases it was mothers who wanted something more distinctive, while fathers wanted something more traditional:

> *[My husband] didn't want the name to be the reason that she stood out, because he was afraid that could make her stand out in a bad way. He wanted [the name] to be a clean slate, whereas I wanted to start with a painted slate.*

> *I'm very old-fashioned, and I like standard names, and [my wife] was the opposite. And so it was basically a process of finding something in between. Something that felt unusual enough, but usual enough. For both of us.*

Several mothers also spoke about their partners' not having a sense of which names were appropriate for contemporary children.

> *[My husband] was throwing out names that I was just like, what are you thinking? Not names that I disliked, but just names I did not want to name my child. [There were] just too many people that I knew, our age, with those names. Like, Kelly* [peaked at #10 in 1977] *was one, I remember, and I was like, Kelly? That's the best you can do? This is our child!*

After looking at the quantitative ratings parents gave the names, I asked them to explain their rationales for the ratings. My respondents said much more about their negative ratings than they did about their positive ones; from my transcripts, I coded 1,171 parental comments about ratings, of which 296 (25%) were positive, 192 (16%) were neutral and 683 (58%) were negative. Respondents also had a significantly easier time giving a concrete reason for a negative rating than a positive one; among positive comments, 34% of those for boys' names and 31% of those for girls' names consisted of vague statements like "I don't know, I just liked it." Only 6% of negative comments followed that model: parents were able to speak definitively about what they didn't like. However, the rationales parents gave for why they didn't like a particular name varied fairly dramatically from one category to the next.

Looking at responses to the "ethnic" names, I found parents of all backgrounds were most likely to cite concerns about a name's being "not them" when discussing popular black and Hispanic names (with black parents expressing hesitation about Hispanic names and Hispanic parents about black names). This was particularly evident for the most tightly concentrated categories, popular black girls' names and Hispanic boys' names. Among the negative comments for popular black girls' names, 16% had to do with uneasiness about the name's perceived ethnicity; for popular Hispanic boys' names, fully 39% of negative comments had to do with perceived ethnicity. By comparison, only 9% of negative comments for popular black boys' names related to concerns about a name's perceived ethnicity, and no other category (including Hispanic girls' names) had 5% or more of its negative comments related to this issue.

Although popular black girls' names and popular Hispanic boys' names received similarly low ratings from most of the parents in my sample, and both sets were often rejected for reasons having to do with race and ethnicity, parents gave very different justifications for negative views of the two categories. When rejecting Hispanic boys' names, parents most often talked in terms of wanting to avoid a burden of potential confusion for their child, or of not wanting to use a name to which they had no legitimate ethnic claim.

> *[If our son's name were Luis], people would expect a Hispanic kid, and then they'd meet him, and [be]like, what? Who's this kid? He'd have trouble with teachers* [white mother/rated 5, "I'd never use this name"].

> *I don't want to mislead anyone… I have a whole list of [Spanish-language] names that I would love to use, that would be artificial for us to use* [white mother/rated 4, "I probably wouldn't use this name"].

The popular Hispanic names' clear linguistic and cultural connections gave parents a politically correct way to distance themselves from the name, by explaining that they did not want to be

seen as "pretentious" or as "appropriating someone else's name." By contrast, when parents spoke about ethnic concerns with popular black girls' names, they tended to tread very lightly.

> *Aniyah is too ethnic. It sounds like an African-American name – too much like an African-American name, for me to use it. I think it's a pretty name; in fact, my daughter has a friend by that name. Great kid. I love the name. But...* [white mother/rated 4, "I'd probably never use this name"].

This may be part of the reason that the most common rationale offered for avoiding popular black girls' names – 20% of negative comments – touched not on the names' perceived ethnic connotations but on their inaccessibility due to complicated spelling or pronunciation. If parents had to ask how a name was pronounced, it virtually guaranteed a negative rating.

> *ah-LYE-uh? Is that how you pronounce that name? Aaliyah? I couldn't pronounce that* [white mother/rated 5, "I'd never use this name].

> *[Nevaeh] has the huh factor. I can't pronounce it, or spell it. I don't even know if I'm saying it right* [white mother/rated 5, "I'd never use this name"].

The same phenomenon took place with popular black boys' names, with most parents rejecting names like Malachi because of pronunciation difficulties. Only one white parent spoke openly about wanting to avoid perceived "black" names out of a fear that they would cause unwarranted discrimination against the child, and she did so with considerably hedging:

> *I'm feeling really bad about this, right this minute. I would never have thought of myself as this, and I'm a little disturbed by it... Malachi, I wouldn't use because it's too ethnic in a way that [our son's name] is not. And of an ethnicity that [our son] is not... I wouldn't want to give him a more stereotypically African-American name, to compound that possibility. Do you know what I mean? Does that make sense? I'm gonna have to sit and think about that, it's not very progressive of me* [white mother/rated 4, "I probably wouldn't use this name"].

This comment notwithstanding, parents generally made far fewer ethnic associations with popular black boys' names and popular Hispanic girls' names than with their counterparts. For popular Hispanic girls' names, even the names with the strongest Spanish-language associations, Valeria and Camila, were rarely recognized as having connections to the Hispanic community; instead, parents most often rejected Camila for its perceived association with the Duchess of Cambridge, Camilla Parker-Bowles, while labeling Valeria as an invented name:

> *Valeria, to me, sounds like [someone thought] I'm just gonna add an extra syllable to a name that is perfectly acceptable, and now it's a new name!* [multiracial (white/Asian) mother/rated 5, "I'd never use this name"]

I saw the same disdain for presumed invented names in parents' response to the popular black boys' name Jaylen and girls' name Jayla, which truly are recent inventions.

> *Jayla is like a nightmare name for me. It just seems like something that was invented in like 1995* [white mother/rated 5, "I'd never use this name"].

> *Jaylen sounds like a made-up Berkeley name* [white mother/rated 5, "I'd never use this name"].

Most often, however, parents' negative responses to popular black boys' names touched on the names' overly religious nature (three of the five, Jeremiah, Josiah and Malachi, are the names of biblical prophets) or the perception that the name sounded "too old." Although these names are all at or near the highest popularity level they've ever reached – ranked 65, 87 and 161 respectively in 2009 – they do not see much use outside the black community; in the 2008 California data, Jeremiah, Josiah and Malachi were ranked 174, 149 and 275 for white boys, and 121, 134 and 439 for Hispanic boys. My findings suggest that non-black parents' associations with these names are more tightly tied to their "old-fashioned" nature than to race.

In contrast to the popular black and Hispanic names, the other two categories of "ethnic names" were only rarely labeled as such by parents. Although a few parents of color acknowledged that some names would "not be ethnically correct" for their children, when they spoke about a name's perceived ethnicity it tended to be more obliquely:

> *I have an image of a Jack in my mind, and I think it would be great for another kid, but not for my kid* [black mother/rated 5, "I'd never use this name"].

More often, when parents rejected names from the popular white or Asian category, it was because of their popularity with the general population. Most parents from all backgrounds saw the popular white names as extremely widespread, saying they wouldn't use them because they knew a child with the name or because "I know it's very common right now." By contrast, popular Asian names – most of which peaked in the 1970s and 1980s – were most often labeled as "dated."

> *Brian I just can't stand this name. I really hate this name… it's just not an appealing name. It's very eighties. Too common, and not very interesting* [white mother/rated 5, "I'd never use this name"].

Even the small number of Asian parents in my sample rated their own race's "popular" names negatively, the only group to do so; this might reflect the American-born status of my sample compared to the statewide population from which I drew the survey names (statewide in 2008, 85% of Asian mothers reported a birthplace outside the United States). To the parents in my sample, regardless of race, names that fell into the gap between "old-fashioned" and "up-and-coming" – peaking between 1935 and 2000 – would not suit a 21st-century child.

I saw the same rejection of "old" names in parents' reactions to the popular and unpopular names; parents from almost every demographic category gave poor ratings to the old-fashioned names, while giving better ratings to the classic and trendy names and to some of the emerging names. When explaining their reactions to old-fashioned names, parents spoke almost as if they had read Lieberson's (2000) analysis of the negative effects of having living elderly people who bear a particular name:

> *Walter [was] big in the World War Two era, which is sort of charming, but it hasn't [moved away] from that connotation for me yet* [white mother/rated 5, "I'd never use this name"].

> *I hate Dorothy, 'cause it sounds like a fat old lady. It's just, like, ugh.* [multiracial (white/Hispanic) mother/rated 5, "I'd never use this name"].

If old-fashioned names were rejected for their associations with the elderly, common names – those like Michael and Elizabeth that had maintained popularity for a long time – most often received negative ratings because of perceived oversaturation; overall, 52% of the comments for common boys' names and 43% of the comments for common girls' names reflected parents' perceptions of their overpopularity.

> *Sarah I like, but it's everywhere* [white mother/rated 5, "I'd never use this name"].

> *William's a nice name, but it's too common. I think it'd be a very nice name, for someone* [white mother/rated 4, "I probably wouldn't use this name"].

Trendy names received significantly better ratings overall. Although parents were nearly as likely to know someone (most often a child) with a trendy name as a common name, and often acknowledged the names' popularity, they frequently said almost in the same breath how much they liked the names and rated them positively.

> *Aiden was one of my favorites, I guess because it's different. But Aiden's also a name that is becoming a little bit more common* [white mother/rated 3, "This name's OK"].

> *I really like Ella. I might use it, if it drops off the top twenty* [white father/rated 2, "I might use this name"].

This pair of quotes also demonstrates that not all parents were equally well-informed about current popularity rankings. At the time of these interviews, the most recently available SSA data ranked Aiden and Ella at #12 and #13 (in 2009 and 2010 respectively); while the father in the second quote recognizes the popularity of the name he's discussing, the mother in the first one seems unaware of the name's pervasiveness. As I've discussed in earlier chapters, when parents were unaware of which names stood at the top of the popularity list, they tended to speak quite favorably about popular names, a pattern which suggests that access to reliable popularity data may have a larger role in shaping parental attitudes than might be apparent from my interview data alone.

The exceptions to the general pattern of positive ratings for trendy names were Brayden and Jayden, the invented names from the trendy boys' category. In seven cases, including four where Jayden appeared on the list, parents had expressed their disdain for this sort of name – "the Hayden/Aiden/Jayden/Kaden thing" – before they even saw the survey.

> *Brayden… nah. It just seems like one of these new names that parents are coming up with, an existing name that they've tried to tweak in some way that they thought was cute, and it irks me* [white father/rated 4, "I'd probably never use this name"].

This dislike for invented names appeared in parents' evaluations of emerging names as well, when they rejected Audrina for girls and Zayden for boys. More so than any other category, however, parents' responses to emerging names depended on which name appeared on their particular list. With Kingston and Beckett for boys and Emery for girls, parents who disliked the names spoke disdainfully about the practice of adopting "WASPy surnames" as first names; with Miley, the disdain was for the celebrity associated with the name. Isla prompted pronunciation concerns, while Analia (which most parents pronounced ah-NAHL-yah rather than in the Spanish style, ah-na-LEE-ah) evoked fears of teasing about its visual similarity to "anal." Although the rationales for particular names varied, parents' overall view of the qualities of a "good" name remained the same; something without connotations that stood counter to their family philosophy (for example, Colt, a name most parents associated with guns, was soundly rejected by my largely upper-middle-class liberal Bay Area sample), something easy to spell and pronounce and that wouldn't provoke teasing for the child.

  As I noted at the beginning of this section, parents rated the names on my survey relatively poorly overall. Only one boys' name and four girls' names had average ratings better than 3, while fifteen boys' names and eight girls' names had average ratings of 4 or worse. In my discussion above, I predicted that the worst ratings among the popular black and Hispanic names would go to the names with the highest percentage of their overall population coming from those racial groups: Jaylen and Aniyah for black children and Diego, Jose, Luis, Camila and Valeria for Hispanic children. Jaylen does indeed rate among the worst on the boys' list, as do two of the three Hispanic boys' names, Jose and Luis; however, Diego and all three girls' names rank somewhere closer to the middle, with Aniyah standing as the best-rated of the five black girls' names by a margin of .33. As I noted above, many parents did not recognize the ethnic connection of these three girls' names, instead seeing them as variants of other popular names (including Aniyah as a variant spelling of Anya); while Diego was always seen as a Spanish name, more than one white parent considered it as something that "maybe could have been."

  Otherwise, the results generally confirm my hypotheses from above. At the poorly-rated end of the list for boys' names, we see a significant percentage of the old-fashioned and popular Hispanic names, as well as the most "dated" of the Asian boys' names, Brian and Kyle, and the two invented names from the trendy set, Brayden and Jayden. The worst-rated girls' names include the two popular black names least intuitive to an unfamiliar eye, Nevaeh and Aaliyah, as well as an old-fashioned name, Helen, which peaked in 1919 and dropped out of the top 100 in 1957 (Dorothy and Ruth, which peaked in 1927 and 1893 respectively and both left the top 100 in 1961, stand only a little better on the overall list); the only category where more than two names received a rating of 4 or worse was Asian names, with the three "80's names," Nicole, Tiffany and Megan, standing at the bottom of the list. Mary, Margaret and Edward, the old-fashioned names which disappeared most recently from the top 100, rate significantly better than their "older" counterparts, while three of the four girls' names that received overall positive ratings, Ella, Lily and Elizabeth, are all long-standing classics as well as being popular with contemporary parents.

Table 11: Overall Ratings of Individual Boys' Names, All Respondents

Name	Group	mean rating	std. dev	count		Name	group	mean rating	std. dev	count
Xavier	Black	2.73	1.41	30		Leland	emerging	3.78	0.85	27
Sean	Asian	3.00	1.41	9		Liam	trendy	3.81	1.28	16
Beckett	Emerging	3.04	1.48	24		Vincent	Asian	3.86	1.06	21
Ian	Asian	3.05	1.29	22		Anthony	common	3.91	1.34	23
Aiden	Trendy	3.32	1.46	22		William	common	3.93	0.96	15
Alex	Asian	3.32	1.42	19		Michael	common	3.96	1.22	26
Jeremiah	Black	3.33	1.31	24		Kyle	Asian	4.00	1.10	26
Gavin	White	3.34	1.06	22		Frank	old-fashioned	4.04	1.14	23
Jack	White	3.38	1.35	24		Walter	old-fashioned	4.04	1.16	27
David	common	3.40	1.25	25		Luis	Hispanic	4.05	1.02	21
Zayden	emerging	3.41	1.18	17		Malachi	black	4.05	1.22	19
Adrian	Hispanic	3.50	1.58	10		Willie	old-fashioned	4.05	1.31	19
Landon	trendy	3.52	1.29	31		George	old-fashioned	4.11	1.15	19
Daniel	common	3.54	1.10	24		Brian	Asian	4.13	1.20	16
Diego	Hispanic	3.55	1.55	31		Angel	Hispanic	4.19	1.23	26
Edward	old-fashioned	3.56	1.29	25		Kingston	emerging	4.30	0.97	23
Logan	white	3.56	1.30	18		Brayden	trendy	4.38	0.77	24
Mason	white	3.67	1.15	3		Jose	Hispanic	4.40	0.87	25
Luke	white	3.68	1.35	25		Jaylen	black	4.42	0.90	19
Josiah	black	3.71	1.06	21		Colt	emerging	4.45	1.01	22
Jackson	white	3.76	1.22	21		Jayden	trendy	4.50	1.05	20

Table 12: Overall Ratings of Individual Girls' Names, All Respondents

Name	Group	mean rating	std. dev	count		Name	Group	mean rating	std. dev	count
Ella	trendy	2.48	1.17	21		Katie	Asian	3.70	1.21	20
Lily	white	2.80	1.00	25		Riley	white	3.76	1.16	25
Elizabeth	common	2.81	1.44	27		Ashley	common	3.79	1.27	19
Mia	trendy	2.90	1.49	20		Andrea	Hispanic	3.80	1.28	20
Isla	emerging	3.07	1.43	15		Mary	old-fashioned	3.80	1.53	23
Ava	trendy	3.09	1.35	23		London	black	3.81	1.36	21
Charlotte	white	3.25	1.48	28		Jocelyn	Hispanic	3.83	1.19	23
Rachel	Asian	3.35	1.40	23		Jayla	black	3.85	1.23	27
Lillian	trendy	3.44	1.26	34		Ruth	old-fashioned	3.86	1.32	22
Samantha	common	3.45	1.27	29		Addison	white	3.90	0.91	20
Avery	white	3.50	0.58	4		Dorothy	old-fashioned	3.90	1.29	29
Emery	emerging	3.50	1.44	22		Emily	common	3.90	1.33	21
Aniyah	black	3.52	1.36	21		Angela	Asian	3.96	1.06	23

Sarah	common	3.53	1.59	17		Helen	old-fashioned	4.00	1.20	19
Analia	emerging	3.56	1.16	25		Nevaeh	black	4.08	1.08	25
Valeria	Hispanic	3.56	1.19	25		Aaliyah	black	4.11	1.20	19
Amy	Asian	3.58	1.26	19		Nicole	Asian	4.17	0.41	6
Margaret	old-fashioned	3.60	1.43	20		Brooke	white	4.31	0.95	13
Camila	Hispanic	3.63	1.30	19		Tiffany	Asian	4.33	1.14	18
Audrina	emerging	3.67	1.28	18		Miley	emerging	4.36	0.93	33
Kimberly	Hispanic	3.69	1.41	26		Megan	Asian	4.50	0.58	4
Leah	trendy	3.69	1.32	13						

Perhaps the biggest surprise from a preliminary analysis of the list is the appearance of Xavier, a popular black boys' name, as the only boys' name to receive a positive overall rating. Parents from a range of backgrounds spoke positively about the name, saying that it was "funky"; one mother elaborated on this point by adding that Xavier is "uncommon, but not unheard of. So I think people would know how to spell it, how to say it." For these parents, Xavier might be seen as hitting a "sweet spot." It has the sought-after pedigree, appearing in the 1941 Ames book and continuously in the national top 1000 since 1947. It has risen slowly through the ranks, entering the top 100 in 2001 and standing at #68 in 2009 when I drew up my name categories; in California in 2008, it ranked #289 for white boys and #75 for Hispanic boys. Its first letter is also a trendy one; in 2009, 31 boys' names in the top 1000 included an X, including Alexander in the top ten, as compared with only thirteen in 1989 and nine in 1969. Notably, no one, not even black parents, identified the name as associated with the black community. If parents assigned Xavier any ethnicity, they were most likely to read it as Javier and label it as a Hispanic name. Relatedly, Hispanic parents were the only group to give the name a relatively low overall rating, with explanations like "there are too many Javiers in my family." For those group who saw the name as popular or well-used, its appeal decreased, but for many of the rest, it seemed the perfect choice; distinctive but not "strange," familiar without being common, and with no clear associations with any racial/ethnic group.

If Xavier benefited from parents' ignorance of its racial association, three of the well-received names from the girls' list – Ella, Lily, and Mia – often gained parental esteem from a similar lack of information, that being their extreme popularity. Parents aware of the names' extreme popularity (all four ranked in the top twenty in 2009) often said that they liked them but wouldn't use them; however, a significant number of parents spent the interview explaining their wish to avoid popular names, encountered one of these on their survey and praised it as something "pretty" and "different."

> *I've always loved Lily. I've always liked that name* [black mother/rated 2, "I might use this name"].

> *I really like Mia. I think Mia's kind of a cute name* [white father/rated 2, "I might use this name"].

When parents recognized a name's popularity or pervasiveness, they most often shunted it to the low ratings, but if they didn't recognize a name as popular they were prone to view it extremely

positively (as with the mother quoted above who spoke about liking Aiden apparently without realizing that it was a soon-to-be top ten name).

Conclusions

Taken together, these findings suggest that parents' framework for what constitutes a "good name" is fairly tightly tied to the design laid out in their accounts of their own naming process. A good name is ethnically neutral or "ethnically correct," accessible and easy to spell and pronounce, and, perhaps most importantly, not too popular; I suspect this last point is the cause of the overall low ratings on the name survey, as most of the names I selected were in one way or another at the top of the popularity charts. However, when parents didn't recognize a name's inclusion in one of these problematic categories, and instead judged it on aesthetics alone, they tended to inadvertently give positive ratings to popular and rising names. This suggests that despite the existing studies showing a lack of correlation between the ready availability of popularity data and the widening pool of names for children, the increasing ease with which contemporary parents can draw authoritative conclusions about name popularity compared to their predecessors may well have had an effect on parents' behaviors. This theme will be explored further in my next chapter, as I discuss my interviews with grandparents about how they named their children in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.

Chapter 7
"Just Going Through the Book": Naming Children Before the Information Age

In my interviews with contemporary parents, I learned a great deal about the practices and attitudes that shape their naming process. As my last four chapters demonstrate, contemporary parents invest significant time and effort in finding the right name, and most also put a heavy emphasis on finding a name with personal meaning for their family in addition to straightforward aesthetic appeal. However, the most universal goal for contemporary parents remains the avoidance of popular names, the effort to find names that reflect their commitment to individuation for their child. With few exceptions, contemporary parents want their children to have a name that lets them "stand out" from the crowd.

My examination of the large-scale national and California birth data demonstrated that parents have been choosing ever-more distinctive names for children since the early twentieth century. As I discussed in Chapter 2, in 1940, about 32% of boys and 23% of girls received one of the top ten most popular names; by 2010, those percentages had dropped to about 8% for both sexes. If, as I originally proposed, this shift has to do with a shift in cultural orientation toward increased individuation – the belief that one of the greatest advantages an individual can possess is to be distinguished from their peers without being so different as to be "strange" – we would expect to see the cultural orientation growing over the course of the twentieth century separate from the decline in the use of popular names. The existing literature provides some evidence for this, by demonstrating how attitudes toward child-rearing and presentation of self to potential romantic partners have changed over the twentieth century (Alwin 1989; Buchmann and Eisner 1997 and others). To tie these changes over time directly to the naming process, I turn the discussion from my interviews with contemporary parents to those I conducted with their parents, what I from this point forward call "the grandparent interviews."

This dataset is substantially smaller than my contemporary parent data, based on fifteen interviews. To gain any comprehensive insight into cultural changes in naming practices over the twentieth century would of course require a larger sample; however, my grandparent interviews provide sufficient data to allow for a preliminary comparison across time, and even these early results are illuminating. The grandparents I spoke with recalled their naming experience as different from their children's in many ways: they were more casual in their approach, they made much more use of family names, and they chose popular names significantly more often than their children had. However, in one respect, the two groups showed remarkable similarity: the grandparents I spoke with were nearly as likely as their children to report *wanting to avoid* the most popular names. The different outcomes came from how the two groups constructed mental models of what "counted" as a popular name: while contemporary parents typically consulted authoritative resources on popularity, grandparents had little to rely on but their own social networks, which proved a less reliable indicator of general popularity. This suggests that the reasons for the steady decline in popular name use may be more complex than I originally surmised, with the ready availability of large-scale data accelerating the effects of a cultural shift toward emphasized individuation.

In this chapter, I first provide some information on the methodology of my grandparent interviews, and then discuss grandparents' accounts of their naming process, including their common reliance on family names and their often-unsuccessful desire to avoid the most popular names. Finally, I bring contemporary parents' accounts back into the conversation for an analysis

of how the increased availability of popularity data might amplify parents' desires for a distinctive name.

The Process of Interviewing Grandparents

I chose to pursue interviews with my original respondents' parents, rather than seeking a whole new interview pool, to enable me to assess potential changes in naming practices across generations. By controlling for family background, I hoped to gain some insight into whether changes in the average popularity level preferred by parents at different points in time reflected larger cultural shifts rather than simply different personal preferences about "ideal popularity." With this goal in mind, between April and June of 2012, I conducted fifteen interviews with grandparents drawn from eleven of my contemporary families (including four cases where I interviewed two grandparent sets from the same family). In all cases, my initial contact with grandparents came through my original respondents, whom I invited to share the information about this new phase of my study with their extended families. I conducted four grandparent interviews in person, while the remaining eleven took place over the phone; three of the four in-person interviews included two grandparents.

My fifteen interviews yielded demographic information on 28 grandparents, including ten co-parents who did not participate in interviews. Of these 28 grandparents, 25 were white, and 24 had obtained at least a bachelor's degree. Thus, my grandparent sample overrepresents white and highly-educated respondents to an even greater degree than the contemporary parent sample; however, I believe the two samples, when taken together, provide enough information to offer some perspective on changing practices and attitudes over the last few decades. Nineteen of the 28 grandparents whose data I collected were born in the United States, with the remainder including parents born in Central America, Europe, Asia and Oceania. Three of the fifteen families raised their children outside the United States.

Just as in my contemporary parent interviews, I focused my questions for grandparents around their process and goals in choosing their children's names. I asked them to recount the naming process they went through for all their children, and also asked a few questions about their grandchildren's names (including the children of my original respondents), such as what they knew about how the names were chosen and how they thought their children's naming process might have differed from their own. Finally, I asked grandparents to share their views on the contemporary naming process overall.

In total, the grandparents in my sample had 38 children, born between 1967 and 1993 with a mean birth year of 1977. Of the 30 American-born children in the sample, 30% received a name from the top ten in their birth year, and fully 60% received a top 100 name. As we see in the table below, this population has significantly more popular names than those of the contemporary children; however, we can also see here that grandparents' grandchildren (the subset of contemporary interviews from which my grandparent interviews emerged) also had more popular names than the overall contemporary sample. Although grandparents' grandchildren make up a relatively small percentage of the overall contemporary sample, they received fully one-quarter of the top fifty names and nearly one-quarter of the top 250 names given to all the children in my sample, and were substantially underrepresented at lower popularity levels (including only 2 of the 24 children who received a name ranked below the top 1000, and none of the 12 children receiving a name not ranked in their birth year). This suggests that contemporary participants who referred me to their parents for an interview were slightly more conservative in their tastes than the overall contemporary sample. Nonetheless, the

increased 21st-century avoidance of popular names is visible even here, where 30% of grandparents' children received a top ten name, compared with none of their grandchildren.

Table 1: Contrasting Popularity of Names Chosen By Grandparents and Contemporary Sample

Name Rating	Grandparents' children	Grandparents' grandchildren (subset from contemporary sample)	All children in contemporary sample
Extremely popular (1-10)	9 (30%)	0 (0%)	6 (6%)
Popular (11-50)	6 (20%)	3 (21%)	6 (6%)
Common (51-100)	3 (10%)	0 (0%)	8 (8%)
Familiar (101-250)	5 (17%)	5 (36%)	15 (15%)
Less familiar (251-500)	3 (10%)	2 (14%)	13 (13%)
Unusual (501-1000)	0 (0%)	2 (14%)	17 (17%)
Unique (1001-end of rankings)	4 (13%)	2 (14%)	24 (24%)
Exclusive (not ranked; given to <5 children nationally)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	12 (12%)
Total	30	14	101

Comparing the popularity of grandparents' children's names with the national popularity distribution in 1977 (the average birth year for grandparents' children), we see that grandparents' use of the top ten names was again higher than average; they also show a slightly higher-than-average use of names that ranked below 1000. However, given the small size of the grandparent sample, we might assume these differences to be due to sampling effects.

Table 2: Contrasting Popularity of Names Chosen By Grandparents and National Popularity List

Name Rating	National data, 1977	Grandparents' children
Extremely popular (1-10)	666,232 (20%)	9 (30%)
Popular (11-50)	901,847 (27%)	6 (20%)
Common (51-100)	393,923 (12%)	3 (10%)
Familiar (101-250)	473,266 (14%)	5 (17%)
Less familiar (251-500)	271,308 (8%)	3 (10%)
Unusual (501-1000)	181,604 (5%)	0 (0%)
Unique (1001-end of rankings)	286,574 (9%)	4 (13%)
Exclusive (not ranked; given to <5 children nationally)	151,878 (5%)	0 (0%)
Total	3,326,632	30

American Naming Practices in Recent History

As we saw in the graphs presented in Chapter 2, popular names in the mid-20th century stood at significantly higher levels of concentration in the population than had become the case by 2010. However, comparing contemporary trends in American naming with those that

dominated in the 1960s and 1970s shows us several other factors that might affect grandparents' views of present-day names and practices.

Perhaps the most notable practice we might expect to see reflected in grandparents' accounts is a larger focus on family names than was the case for contemporary parents. In her analysis of mid-century naming practices, Rossi (1965) found that 62% of the children in her sample – most born between the 1920s and the 1950s – were named after relatives. More recently, Gerhards and Hackenbroch (2000) found a significant decline in the relative frequency with which German children were named after their parents over the course of the twentieth century. Although both these studies fail to distinguish between first and middle names, making them slightly problematic, they provide baseline findings reinforced by my interviews. Contemporary parents reported choosing first or middle names with "family connections" for 73 of the 101 children in my contemporary sample, but only twenty of these directly honored specific family members with first names (family middle names were given to 51 children). The overwhelming majority of family names used for contemporary children in either the first or middle place came from distant relatives whom a child would never meet. Many parents resisted using first names to honor even relatives that they themselves had known:

> *My grandmothers' names were Joanna and Alice. And my grandmother Joanna was someone I knew in my life, so obviously, we couldn't name [our daughter that], but that could be her middle name. Alice I never met; she passed away when my dad was a kid* [named her daughter Alice Joanna].

Contemporary parents most often intended family names to honor the memory of an ancestor, rather than forging a direct connection between child and older relative. By contrast, the parents in Rossi's survey most frequently named their children after their own parents and siblings. As Rossi puts it in her analysis:

> …naming children for parents or grandparents demonstrates a continuity with and a concern for the past different from… that demonstrated by naming a child for an unknown relative (1965: 509).

Another change we might expect to find in the last few decades, an increasing reliance on "non-traditional" names, appears to be largely absent from at least the top of the popularity list. Between 1965 and 1985, the national top ten list included 18 boys' names and 30 girls' names; all of these except for seven girls' names appear in the 1941 Ames book *What Shall We Name the Baby*, demonstrating their "classic" pedigree. Additionally, ten of the boys' names and five of the girls' names appeared in the top 100 every year between 1940 and 1985. By contrast, between 1990 and 2010, 23 boys' names and 25 girls' names appeared in the top ten; all but one of the boys' names and nine of the girls' names appeared in the 1941 text, while eleven boys' names and two girls' names appeared in the top 100 for every year between 1965 and 2010. This suggests that despite the decreased concentration of popular names, the overall character of names reaching the top of the list has not changed very much. Nearly all popular boys' names, and the majority of the popular girls' names, from the last two and a half decades share their predecessors' claim to Anglo-Saxon "pedigree," appearing as potential candidates for parents seeking names for their children in the early 1940s. Despite this finding, however, I suspected

that the contemporary emphasis on unusual names would lead most grandparents to believe that "everyone" was choosing a strange name for their child.

"I Don't Think We Got Into Meanings Then": A More Casual Approach to Naming

As with contemporary parents, I generally began grandparent interviews by asking about the mechanics of their naming process. In contrast to contemporary parents, who spoke about the process as stressful, grandparents tended to report being fairly laidback about naming. Nine of fifteen grandparent families reported consulting a baby name book just as their children had, but where contemporary parents framed this experience as one of "poring over" resources and making endless lists, grandparents were more apt to describe their process as "just sort of going through the book" and discussing names they liked and disliked. Three families did not use a book at all; in fact, one grandmother gave that as her first answer to the question of how she thought the naming process had changed over time, saying "My guess is that there are a lot more people picking [names] out of books than used to." Two other families brought this up when I asked specifically how they thought their process might have been different from their children's. As one mother put it:

> *[My daughter-in-law] was probably a lot more methodical [than I was] about choosing names.*

As I discussed in earlier chapters, the dictionary-style name books available before the mid-1990s typically did not include popularity information, focusing instead on names' etymological roots and meaning. Of the nine families that reported using a book in their naming process, six remembered considering the meaning of the names they chose. Although some of these families had long since forgotten the meaning, remembering only that it hadn't been "horrible," four grandparents still correctly remembered the meanings of their children's names.

As I anticipated, family names were a fairly common choice in this sample, with children from four of fifteen families receiving a parent's or grandparent's name as a first name and those in one more receiving ethnic variations of names closely connected to their immediate family. In my contemporary interviews, parents who chose first names with direct ties to living family members nearly always presented justifications for their choice, as was the case for this mother who agreed to give her son a legacy name:

> *It's a good enough name. And I really like family traditions, so I wasn't gonna go against it… and maybe no one else will use it [for a while].*

For most contemporary parents who chose to honor living relatives with a name, the common practice was to keep the spirit of the name rather than the letter (by, for instance, choosing a name from a grandparent's ethnic background). Some contemporary parents spoke about legacy naming as arrogant or self-indulgent, saying that it was egotistical to name a child after oneself. By contrast, just as Rossi's research suggested, grandparents who had duplicated a relative's name for their child spoke about the decision as rooted in a desire both to honor the relative in question and to strengthen the bonds between the child and the family.

We kind of liked the idea of the name being attached to family. I really, really love my mother-in-law, she's just a wonderful woman, and I just thought it would be a nice name to give my daughter.

I decided that when Jimmy was born, it would be nice to have him named after his father so that [my husband] would have something that would go forward into the future, that would be part of him. And my husband thought [that] was pretty neat.

Another place where grandparents' accounts diverged from those of contemporary parents came when I asked which factors they had prioritized when considering potential names. For contemporary parents, this question nearly always provoked a list of qualities: a name that carried – or lacked – strong ethnic associations, a name that would be distinctive without provoking teasing, a name whose meaning carried resonance for the family. A few grandparents spoke about one or two qualities they desired in their children's names, such as a connection to family legacies or ethnic heritage, or as a pathway to a particular nickname, but most struggled with the question, saying simply that they had wanted a "nice" or a "good" name. Those who expressed their preferences more concretely most often spoke about what contemporary parents might call the "superficial" qualities of a good name, such as its sound:

We liked the way that the name floated trippingly on the lips and the tongue.

I thought it just had a good kind of sound, very pleasant, and it sounded like the person would have a good personality and be very happy.

The factor most commonly cited by grandparents for rejecting particular names was a desire to avoid causing problems for their child; where contemporary parents overwhelmingly wanted something distinctive, grandparents spoke about wanting something "simple."

We wanted simple, easy names.

We tried to come up with something that would not be a burden, something that people would be able to spell… [they were] pretty practical considerations.

Simple. Plain and simple.

Although some of the practical differences which make grandparents seem more "casual" than parents about the naming process are no doubt due to the longer time gap between the naming experience and the interview, I suspect that reports from contemporary parents of feeling pressure to choose the right name also reflect larger-scale changes in parenting practices, and the increased emphasis on the labor-intensive nature of the parenting process. Grandparents' emphasis on "simple" and "straightforward" names, rather than distinctive ones, also reinforces my theory about the cultural shift toward individuation as part of the reason for modern parents' use of increasingly distinctive names. However, as we see below, even in earlier decades, few parents chose the most popular names for their children intentionally. Although grandparents didn't want to choose "burdensome" names, they still hoped to avoid the most popular choices.

"Weird Names Came In a Little Bit Later": The Search for Distinction in the 1970s

   As I pointed out above, compared with my contemporary parent sample, grandparents chose popular names for their children substantially more often, with eighteen of thirty American-born children in my sample (including eight of ten sons) receiving names that ranked in the top 100 in their birth year. Nonetheless, like their contemporary-parent counterparts, the majority of the grandparents I spoke with recalled wanting to avoid the most popular names; in fact, grandparents from five families told me without prompting that one of their goals had been to find something a bit distinctive.

> *I didn't want to pick something too common, like John – everybody's John – or David. It's just too common a name.*

If grandparents did not mention popularity, I prompted them on the subject, asking whether or not they had considered it in their decision-making; in this context, four more families acknowledged trying to avoid the most popular names. Even for those grandparents who wanted something more distinctive, however, the salience of popularity seemed much lower than it had been for contemporary parents, as in this conversation:

> *HBE: I think [your daughter was named] a little ahead of when Amanda became a really popular name, right?*
> *Mother: I have no idea.* [Later, when we're discussing factors she considered in naming] *I guess I didn't want the most popular name. I didn't want [her] to be in a classroom where – like, when I was growing up, there were always three Lindas and four Marys and whatnot.*

In total, eleven of fifteen families (a bit less than 75%) claimed to have put some consideration into avoiding the most popular names. Although this percentage is lower than the 89% of contemporary parents who reported a disinclination for using popular names, it remains significantly higher than what we might expect based on the fact that 60% of grandparents' children received a top 100 name. Only two families reported having given no consideration to popularity in their naming process, with one grandfather matter-of-factly answering my question of whether he knew that his daughter's name was popular with "I think it was the most popular name for a girl at that time, [and] I think we knew that, yeah." Two other families considered popularity only as it applied to choosing a name that wasn't "too weird," a point which, as I discuss below, was a priority for nearly all grandparent families.

   As was the case for contemporary parents, when I asked grandparents why they wanted to avoid the most popular names, the most common answer was a desire to avoid the child's being one of many in their social group with the same name.

> *We specifically did not want something [so popular] that when you go to first grade, there are gonna be twelve of you in the class.*

> *[We didn't want a popular name] just because I taught school for thirty years... [where] you say Tammy, and six kids look at you.*

When grandparents elaborated on their rationales for avoiding the most popular names, the language they used was very similar to the two main explanations given by contemporary parents, that a name's being too popular could have a negative effect on a child's social life or on their sense of personal identity.

> *I didn't want the kid to have so many friends with the same name that it was confusing… and also, you like [them to have] a name that people are going to remember.*

> *A name is part of your identity, part of what people see [in] you, and I'd like it to be a bit more unique than the name of the year.*

However, while many contemporary parents viewed the decision to seek out a less popular name as part of their parental obligation (as for the mother who matter-of-factly explained to me how "giving a child a popular name is like telling them… they're not special"), grandparents often remembered feeling anxiety about their decision to avoid the popular names. As this grandmother put it:

> *I wanted a different name. I didn't want to have a little Joey or Jason… [and] I liked the name we chose… but I wasn't sure if it was gonna be really, really different. But after [we] named him, I started seeing stores with the name, and [other] kids and people… and he was never made fun of or anything like that.*

The name this family chose for their son had deep family roots, appears in the 1941 Ames name dictionary, and ranked just above the national top 100 in the year of their son's birth; but despite all this, the fact that the grandmother did not know anyone who carried the name as a first name was enough to make her hesitate before using it.

This grandmother's attitude reflects one of the larger differences I noticed between the two samples. Although many grandparents expressed some desire to avoid the most popular names, just like contemporary parents, the grandparent population was much more concerned than their counterparts with avoiding "strange" names. Seven of my fifteen grandparent families specifically noted that they wanted something that was "not too strange." Percentage-wise, this essentially mirrors the pattern for contemporary parents, where 42% (30 of 71 families) explained that they wanted a name that was "distinctive but not weird," but grandparents placed significantly more weight on the "not weird" side of the calculation than did contemporary parents. As I noted above, two of the fifteen families considered popularity only with regards to wanting to avoid something that would be too "odd."

> *We weren't into the fancy names. We did not want their names to be [something where] you'd say, oh, unusual name.*

Not only did respondents from nearly half of my grandparent families specifically mention a name's being "not too strange" as one of their prime criteria, but in twelve of fifteen interviews, respondents expressed their dismay for what they felt was an overextension of creativity by contemporary parents in their search for distinctive names. Many of the grandparents I spoke with suggested that the push toward ever-more distinctive names was a

specifically modern phenomenon. When I asked one grandfather whether he had considered the popularity of his own children's names, he said that he was "maybe a little too old for that; that's more done by younger people." Most grandparents spoke generally about what they saw as the shift toward "weird" names as a cause for concern. Where contemporary parents tended to talk about truly unusual names as being "distinctive," grandparents were more likely to view them as "odd" and as apt to provoke teasing. Grandparents who disparaged contemporary choices of extremely distinctive names also tended to see the act as whimsical. As this grandmother put it:

> *[Many people take the attitude that] let's find something that nobody has ever called someone. [Like] Palm Tree! Why not? No one else is named Palm Tree! Some names are just to be odd...*

That said, grandparents' attitudes about the value of distinctive names shifted somewhat when they spoke about their own children's choices. Although the grandchildren subset of names in my contemporary parents sample hews closer to tradition than does the sample overall, grandparents' children still routinely presented them with unusual names; names that did not rank in the top 1000 in the year of the child's birth, came from an ethnic or linguistic tradition unfamiliar to the grandparents, or were otherwise "non-traditional." When I asked grandparents to list off the names of their grandchildren, however, including those whose parents I had not had an opportunity to interview, they invariably offered explanations for why a particular name had been chosen, particularly if the name was unusual.

> *[Our son's] oldest child is Kemal, and that's a big name in the Turkish community, and his wife wanted to give their eldest son a Turkish name.*
>
> *Our granddaughter is Tatiana, and our daughter knew someone with that name, and she liked the name and she liked the meaning… you don't hear it that often, [but] the name fits the child.*

It's perhaps unsurprising that grandparents would not criticize their children's name choices to a stranger, particularly since they knew that I had met and spoken with the children about their process. However, the fact remains that when grandparents knew something of the history of an unusual name, they seemed less inclined to view it as "odd." Although it's difficult to draw definitive conclusions from this small sample, I suspect that grandparents, like the contemporary parents in Chapter 4 who felt the perfect distinctive name was one tied to a larger sense of authenticity, might view other distinctive names more positively if they learned the rationales behind them.

Although grandparents expressed far more wariness around distinctive names than contemporary parents overall, they remained nearly united in their desire to avoid the most popular names, even if only to prevent the scenario pointed to by both populations as self-evidently horrible, sharing one's name with a classmate. However, as we saw in the table at the beginning of the chapter, a significant proportion of grandparents' children received popular names nonetheless. This suggests that unlike contemporary parents, a significant percentage of grandparents chose popular names without realizing they'd done so.

"And Then There Were Three Melissas in Her Class": Accidentally Choosing Popular Names

The stark disconnect between grandparents' desires and their choices is visible with a glance at the numbers. Although eleven of fifteen families claimed to want to avoid the most popular names, nine of the grandparents' 30 American-born children received a top ten name, and fifteen received a top fifty name; eight families chose top fifty names. The even more striking discrepancy, however, comes from a deeper analysis of parents' accounts of their experience. Only four American families *reported* having chosen a popular name by accident (along with one European family who named a daughter the most popular name for girls in that country that year). Of the other four families who chose top fifty names for their children, one did so without much concern for popularity; for the remaining three, their child's name did not register as having been wildly popular even in retrospect. In this era before widely available empirical popularity data, the most reliable source for parents seeking to gauge the popularity of a child's name – and whether they had succeeded or failed in their effort to choose something "a little different" – was its popularity for other children in their social world. If a name didn't surface among a child's classmates, parents tended to assume that it wasn't very popular.

For the four families who inadvertently chose an extremely popular name, in each case the "mistake" was made with daughters, which reflects the tendency for girls' names to move up the popularity charts faster than boys' names. Of the top ten girls' names in 1977, for example, three (Amanda, Heather and Jessica) did not appear in the top fifty ten years before, compared to only one of the top ten boys' names. Without access to year-by-year popularity data, we might surmise that parents would not expect the rapid changes in popularity characteristic of names like these. However, parents' accounts of how they rejected some names as "too popular" suggest that they were well aware of what might happen if a name experienced a rapid rise in visibility; they simply could not track the "spikes." As this grandmother explains:

> *I liked the name Amy, but President Carter was in office then, and Amy was in the White House, and I was afraid that because it was such a visible name at that time, that everybody'd be named Amy… I thought Kelly would be a lot less common name. And [as it turned out], Amy was less common [for girls our daughter's age], and there were so, so many Kellys!*

In fact, in 1976, the year this grandmother's daughter was born (and President Carter elected), Amy was the second most popular name for baby girls, while the name this family chose in its place appeared in the top 25 but not the top ten. The other grandparents who fell into this category of inadvertent popular name choice told similar stories. One grandmother explained that when they named their daughter Melissa:

> *…we thought we were being very original. Not! Fifty million Melissas later. It didn't show up until she went to nursery school, and then it was a little suspicious…*

If they found a child's name duplicated in their peer group, grandparents who had sought to find something a little more distinctive felt as though they had somehow failed. Conversely, for the second group of grandparents – those whose children had no peers that shared their names – a lack of overlap constituted victory. Grandparents from this group, including four families

where at least one child carried a top ten name, stated matter-of-factly that their children's names "weren't that common."

> *[Our son's name] was common, but it really wasn't common in his generation. He was the only one in his class.*
>
> *I think we avoided the [really popular names]. I don't remember there being any other kids with our daughter's name, when she was going through school.*

With no empirical popularity data to draw on, grandparents gauged their success or failure on a name's prevalence among the other children they knew.

It's perhaps unsurprising that this strategy (of relying on a name's "ambient" popularity) was not entirely reliable in allowing grandparents to recognize a name's rising popularity. As we have already seen, the most popular names can vary dramatically across different racial-ethnic groups and different parental education levels. A quick look at state-level popularity data demonstrates significant diversity here, too; in 1977, only three boys' names and one girls' name appeared in the top ten in all fifty US states and the District of Columbia. Additionally, even in this era of relatively high popular name concentration, the percentage of children receiving individual names remained relatively small. The top names in 1977, Michael and Jennifer, were given to approximately 4% of boys and girls; the second most popular names, Jason and Melissa, were given to about 3% of boys and 2% of girls respectively. Even these extremely popular names could easily have appeared only once in a classroom of 25 students, and thus perhaps not have been seen as a truly "popular" name by the standards of the time.

Of course, I saw this same sentiment expressed by contemporary parents in their evaluations of a name's popularity, when parents spoke about their pleasure at being told that a delivery nurse hadn't seen a child with their name "in a long time" or their dismay at meeting another child with the same name. As I discussed in Chapter 3, even contemporary parents tend to use social density as their final gauge of success in choosing a distinctive name. However, contemporary parents have significantly more empirical resources at their disposal to avoid inadvertently selecting something "too popular." The similarity in rationales presented by grandparents and contemporary parents for wanting to avoid the most popular names – that a distinctive name might help a child to stand out and to feel more unique – reinforce my argument that the increasing diversity in names over the twentieth century reflects a greater cultural emphasis on individuation. Nonetheless, the other factors which we must consider in trying to untangle the change in parental behavior are the ready availability of "expert" data that stresses the relevance of popularity as a factor for consideration, and the rising importance of consulting childrearing "experts" to gain insight on the best way to parent.

The Ubiquity of Modern Popularity Rankings and the False Pervasiveness of Popular Names

As I noted in Chapter 3, existing research amply demonstrates the rising expectations for what constitutes "good" middle-class childrearing. Both Lareau (2003) and Hays (1996) point to the ways in which contemporary parents are expected to invest time, effort and money into every aspect of their children's development, and this investment increasingly begins before the child's birth. Majorities in both my contemporary parent sample (42 of 71 families, 59%) and grandparent sample (9 of 15 families, 60%) reported using some "expert" resource to gather

information about which names might be best for their children. However, the nature of these resources has changed dramatically in the last fifteen to twenty years.

As I noted in Chapter 3, many contemporary parents framed their desire to avoid the most popular names using clear-cut numerical boundaries, ruling out names appearing in the top ten, top 100, or top 1000. For the most part, parents naming children before the appearance of the official SSA list in 1998 (Shackleford 2009) did not have access to this level of empirical data. The name books available in the 1970s and 1980s most often contained no popularity information at all, and when authors made an effort to address popularity, the lack of an authoritative data source on the distribution of names at the national level made for sometimes dubious results. Bruce Lansky's *10,000 Names For Your Baby,* published in 1985, includes a (presumably predictive) list of the "most popular names" in 1988 which the author compiled from a survey of 10,000 mothers. However, his results differ significantly from the SSA's top 100 for that year, with only four of the top ten boys' names and three of the top ten girls' names appearing in both lists.

While parents choosing names for their children in earlier decades would likely have had a difficult time finding any reliable popularity information, contemporary parents who consult any outside resources in making their choice will have to make a concerted effort *not* to see popularity rankings. As I noted in Chapter 1, of fifteen baby name books available at a local bookstore, eleven included some listings of popularity, as did fourteen of the top 25 baby naming websites. For contemporary parents already feeling the pressure to make the right choices for their child, the attention paid to popularity by "experts" may well suggest this aspect of a name deserves as much consideration, if not more, than other elements which parents have long prioritized, such as concerns about a name's ethnicity, meaning and sound.

The other noteworthy aspect in evaluating the contemporary "expert" literature on name popularity is that not a single one of these resources explains that, in fact, fewer children are receiving the most popular names than was the case even ten years ago. As I discussed in Chapter 3, only one contemporary parent of the 112 I spoke with seemed aware of the widening pool of popular names: the rest labored through the arduous task of finding an appropriately distinctive name with visions of dozens of Jennifers and Michaels dancing in their heads, avoiding any names that stood above their minimum popularity threshold on the all-powerful SSA list. This suggests that the modern drive to avoid the most popular names may be due, at least in part, to the ubiquity of modern popularity statistics' leading parents to the belief that popular names are more pervasive than they are in reality. While contemporary parents are encouraged by the "experts" to step outside the norm in selecting a name for their child, none of the books or websites bothers to explain that in fact all the other parents are doing the same. If grandparent interviews are any indication, if contemporary parents were informed of the relative market share of the "most popular" names with the frequency that they encounter the top ten list, the pool of names might not continue to widen at such a high rate.

Conclusion

Although the small size of my grandparent interview set limits its generalizability, it does provide us a glimpse into the changing nature of American naming practices over the last thirty to forty years. Grandparents reported wanting to avoid the most popular names nearly as often as contemporary parents did, but were more likely than contemporary parents to emphasize searching for a name that would be "not too weird," and frequently spoke with some discomfort about what they perceived as the contemporary trend toward names that were strange for their

own sake. Additionally, a substantial percentage of grandparent families chose popular names without recognizing they had done so. Although some of these families realized their mistake when children began to make their own social contacts and discovered peers who shared their name, those whose children did not encounter others with their name were inclined to still believe that the name was "not too common" even decades later. Taken together, these findings suggest that the impulse to avoid the most popular names out of a desire to ensure a child's individuation is not a uniquely contemporary phenomenon, but that the cultural pressure in this direction may have increased in recent decades. Additionally, grandparents' more relaxed attitude about the importance of name popularity may stem from the lack of "authoritative" popularity data available at the time, in contrast with the stream of contemporary data which seemed to have swept up nearly all the contemporary parents I spoke with.

Chapter 8
Conclusions

In my introduction, I presented three vignettes from families with very different goals for their children's names. One mother wanted the names to reflect her daughter's multilingual, multicultural identity, evoking both halves of her diverse ethnic background and being pronounceable and comprehensible to both sets of grandparents. Another chose her children's names to strengthen ties with extended family members. A third gave her daughter a "favorite name" that she'd held onto for ten years before having a child, and which had great personal significance for her both in its linguistic meaning and its cultural associations. Each of these families had distinctive reasons for the names they chose; in truth, each of the 71 contemporary families and 15 grandparent families I interviewed for this study told a slightly different tale of why they had chosen the names they did. However, as I noted at the beginning of the dissertation, the vast majority of the families I spoke with were united by the desire to avoid the most popular names. My interview data reinforced the demographic trend that set me on this project, the steadily declining use of the most popular boys' and girls' names over the course of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Through an examination of my interviews and California birth certificate data, I demonstrated the complexity of parents' shift away from popular names. Although the search for more distinctive names is occurring across all demographic groups, and parents from many backgrounds present similar explanations of why they seek out distinctive names – to help children stand out from their peers, and so that they will feel unique and special – demographics still dictate some aspects of parents' choices. Boundaries around what constitutes the "right" kind of distinctive name persist. White parents are most inclined to seek out a "classic" name that has fallen out of use, while black parents, particularly working-class black parents, are more likely to create an original name. Upper-class parents often reappropriate surnames or other familiar words as given names; working-class parents are more likely to seek distinctiveness by tweaking the spelling of an existing name. Most notably, parents from all racial groups typically avoid names that they recognize as strongly associated with another racial group, making race still the strongest boundary marking "appropriate" distinctiveness.

The results of my name survey, combined with the grandparent interviews, complicate my emerging model of parental name choice even further, suggesting that contemporary parents' rejections of the most popular names might relate to more than just broad cultural shifts toward individuation. When parents completed my survey, names they deemed "popular" or "common" almost always received negative ratings, but if parents didn't recognize a name's popularity, they tended to rate it quite positively. Similarly, my grandparent respondents almost always spoke with regret about discovering that they'd accidentally chosen a popular name for their children, but the number of grandparents who realized their mistake was considerably smaller than the number who had made it, and that realization largely depended on whether or not their children had encountered others in their peer group with the same name. This suggests that although cultural pressure to avoid the most popular names has almost certainly increased over the last few decades, the modern ubiquity of popularity data, and the emphasis placed on it by contemporary name "experts," likely serves as another incentive for contemporary parents to place more weight on the importance of popularity.

"There's Only One You": The Rising Importance of the Individual

As I've noted in earlier chapters, existing research already provides powerful evidence for a rising emphasis on individuation over the course of the twentieth century. In the language used in personal ads, in surveys of qualities parents want to see in their children, and in many other arenas, scholars have seen an increased emphasis on the importance of the individual over the group (Alwin 1989; Buchmann and Eisner 1997). My own research demonstrated this shift in just a few decades. While a significant number of grandparents spoke about wanting to avoid the most popular names, almost as many talked matter-of-factly about staying away from names that "[were given] just to be odd," and about wanting to make sure that children shared their names with at least a few people – as was the case for the mother, quoted in the last chapter, who felt better about her son's "different" name after meeting other kids with the name. By contrast, even those contemporary parents who drew the line at invented names, who wanted their child to have a name that "people might have heard before," frequently expressed dismay at encountering even one other child who shared the name.

> *One of my goals was to have her be the only child in her school with the name…
> [but] it's not going to happen, because we now know [another family] who had
> an Eleanor, a month later!*
>
> *There's one other Finn in town. I saw him at Trader Joe's on Saturday.*

For grandparents, knowing someone else with their child's name was a source of comfort, an acknowledgment that they hadn't strayed beyond the pale in their search for distinctiveness, but for contemporary parents, it was a source of grave distress. If my respondents' little Eleanor shared her name with another child in her school, it somehow made her parents' choice less special.

This idea of making oneself as distinctive as possible, without being "odd," appears elsewhere in contemporary American culture as well. In her analysis of the role of the market in intimate life, Hochschild (2012) discusses the pressure put on a would-be online dater by her "love coach" to market herself as a brand – to choose the best picture, the right keywords, the catchiest user name – without being "too real" and alienating potential dates. The right "brand" for a potential online dater, according to this expert, is memorable without being weird. Although relatively few of the parents I spoke to discussed their naming choice in such market-based terms, their choices nonetheless reflected the model. Only one mother mentioned purchasing the Web domain for her daughter's invented name, but a number of parents remembered Googling their child's name before finalizing their choice. One father spent significant time considering how different sets of initials would work for his daughter, because "if she's an academic, [her author credit] will be Sofia J. Burner. Or S.J. Burner. It's gotta look good on the page."

In addition to a name serving as the child's "brand" and helping children to assert their very special kind of uniqueness, many contemporary parents also asserted their own individuality – and autonomy – when it came to their right to choose a good name. As I discussed in Chapter 3, several parents spoke about rejecting popular names because they didn't want to be seen as following a trend, or "jumping on a bandwagon"; they wanted the name to come from their own creative process, not from someone else. On that same note, in contrast to

the practice of grandparents, most contemporary parents kept their child's name a secret until the birth, often matter-of-factly explaining that they didn't care about others' opinions.

> *We didn't talk about [our daughter's name] with our families. We didn't really want their input… but it did come up. Once, we were at [my inlaws'] house, and there was a bunch of people there and trying to talk about it, and I got really upset, and I said, we are not gonna decide her name by committee. And I left.*

The practice of keeping a name choice secret is common enough among contemporary parents to warrant discussion on baby name message boards and to be brought up by the "experts" in baby name books. However, grandparents frequently saw their children's not sharing the name with the family ahead of time as outrageous and almost offensive. In fact, one grandmother used her interview with me as an opportunity to try to find out information that her daughter and son-in-law hadn't shared:

> *Elaine and Paul were very secretive. We still haven't learned what their boy's name was – [they say] they might use it again [so they don't want to tell us]. Did they tell you?*

In general, grandparents seemed mystified by their children's silence. They explained that they themselves had "told everybody," getting feedback from friends and family as a matter of course. This change in practices might reflect a larger shift in cultural attitudes toward the centrality of the family, pointed to by Gerhards and Hackenbroch (2000) in their analysis of cultural modernization that suggests the decreased use of family names for children reflects a decreased emphasis on connection with the extended family in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. However, even if contemporary parents don't look for the advice of friends and relatives, the vast majority of them still seek guidance on which names are "good." In the modern world, the authoritative voice on a "good" name is not a parent's parent, or their best friend, but an expert. Like the increased emphases on individuation and "self-branding," this, too, reflects larger shifts in Western culture.

"Leave It To the Experts": Concerted Cultivation, Outsourcing, and 21st-Century Parenting

In previous chapters, I've discussed Lareau's (2003) analysis of the pressure on contemporary parents to "develop" their children, a pressure that often manifests in a throng of extracurricular activities, as well as in parents' efforts to teach their children to advocate for themselves and to view adults as equals. Although Lareau doesn't use the language of branding, she does suggest one of the principal reasons for this shift toward labor-intensive parenting is a sense of unease about children's future class security and a feeling that children must be taught to be their own advocates, stand up for themselves and take advantage of every opportunity. This rhetoric was echoed over and over by parents in my study as they explained how having a distinctive name would help their child to stand out, to avoid disappearing into the crowd, to be memorable. With this pressure increasingly weighing on their shoulders – 15% of the families in my study spoke about finding a name as an intensely stressful process – it's perhaps unsurprising that more parents should turn to the advice of experts in their search for the "right" name.

As Hochschild (2012) points out, increasing numbers of contemporary families are turning to the experts for management of intimate life tasks not only because of a lack of time

but because of a perception that a task *this important* – like a child's birthday party, or care for an elderly parent, or a wedding – should be handled by those who can do it best. Although not all parents can pay for a consultation with a "name specialist," like the one Hochschild interviewed for her book, my research suggests that very few go through the process of choosing a name without turning to the services of a virtual expert, either online or in the pages of a name dictionary. Although books of baby names have existed since at least the early twentieth century, as I've noted in earlier chapters, the rhetoric in the books has changed.

The authors of the current crop of popular baby name books include a software designer who crafted a program for "name analysis," and fashion writers whose resumes include stints at *Glamour.* As I've noted previously, more than two-thirds of the baby name books available at my local chain bookstore included information on popularity, as did more than half of the most popular baby name websites found in a Google search – but the authors' advice doesn't end there. Instead, in many cases, they go on to make style analyses of each name included in their name dictionary, as in the following examples:

> **Walter.** Walter was seen as a noble name in the Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Walter Scott era, but has long been in baby name limbo. Now a few independent-minded parents are looking at it as a renewable, slightly quirky, classic, stronger and more distinctive than James or John (Rosenkrantz and Satran 2013).

> **Walter.** On one hand, Walter is clearly out of style. You expect a Walter to be enjoying his well-earned retirement. On the other hand, if you met a boy named Walt you would think that was pretty darned cool (Wattenberg 2005).

Through language like this – very similar to the language used by wedding planners, "love coaches" and the other market specialists that Hochschild spoke to – parents are encouraged to think about a name as a product that puts forward an image, and to consider which image aligns most closely with what they want for their child and their family. Just like the love coach encouraging Hochschild's research participant to brand herself in the appropriate way, these texts encourage parents to think about which names would be "coolest" for their children. As we've seen in earlier chapters, parents need to like a name aesthetically for it to pass the final test and be given to a child – but in the modern age, that's no longer enough. With the increasing pressure on families to "do whatever it takes" to help their children succeed, a name has increasingly become just one more tool to help children become the most distinctive, most authentic, most perfectly unique people they can be.

Going Forward: Avenues for Further Research

Of course, my study alone hardly provides conclusive proof of either increased cultural emphasis on individuation or shifting attitudes toward the importance of experts in childrearing decisions. Choosing a name is only one decision in a countless array facing parents, and even as an analysis of naming practices, my study is necessarily limited, most notably by its geographic scope. More analysis both of names and naming and of other aspects of the cultural field are necessary to support these findings.

Perhaps the most essential expansion of my study would be to conduct interviews in another geographic area. The Bay Area remains an unusual sampling ground both in terms of its demographics and its attitudes; as I noted in the introduction, many parents spoke about "the

Berkeley effect" as influencing their naming process, and about the truly distinctive names of their friends' children or of children they encountered on the playground or at their child's school. A similar study conducted in another region of the country, or in multiple regions, would allow for more comprehensive insight into the motivations driving contemporary parents to seek out more distinctive names for their children. Nonetheless, the statewide data analyzed here demonstrates that the trend toward more distinctive names across demographic groups persists not only in the Bay Area, but also in southern California, the Central Valley, and other regions of the state that are culturally very "un-Berkeley."

      Similarly, future researchers should delve deeper into the change in naming practices over time. One approach to this might be to conduct a more comprehensive version of my comparative parent and grandparent study; another would be to compare contemporary parents' accounts with those of parents naming children in the mid- to late 1990s, when the second uptick in name diversity appeared and when widespread popularity data first became available from the SSA. This would allow researchers to more closely examine the effects of widely available data on parents' naming practices and attitudes.

      Finally, for a better understanding of the broader cultural factors expressed in parents' desire to seek out increasingly distinctive names, the research must turn to other avenues of cultural expression. For instance, if parents are indeed increasing their reliance on experts' advice in childrearing decisions, this would likely manifest in the way parents make purchasing decisions or choose a school for their child. Hochschild's book already provides fascinating insight into the different aspects of intimate life that have been largely taken over by "professionals," and the complex relationships this produces.

      I began this project expecting that parents' accounts of their naming practices would reflect a straightforward increase in the cultural emphasis on individuation; however, my research suggests a more complex relationship, with the increased availability of data and parents' desire for something "different" leading authors to incorporate popularity data into their texts, and parents then to see it as increasingly important because of its prominence in the work of "experts." Thus, I now argue that the increased cultural pressures toward individuation are reinforced by increasing reliance on experts in an effort to "do the right thing" as parents and to choose the best possible name: in the modern world, that means one that helps the child to stand out, that resonates with the image the parents want to send the world of their child, and that allows the child to walk the balance between fitting in and standing out.

      All the parents I spoke to, regardless of whether they named their children in 1970, 1990 or 2010, wanted to choose a name that would make their child happy. However, the essential qualities a name must possess to achieve that goal have changed significantly in the last forty years. Perhaps, as Lieberson suggests, future generations will swing back the other way in the popularity game, returning to an era where the most popular name is given to four or five percent of children, but this seems unlikely: if anything, I predict that names will continue to become more distinctive, as contemporary culture becomes increasingly focused on promoting the distinctiveness of the individual.

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Appendix

Table 1.1 (Chapter 1): Demographics of Contemporary Parent Sample

Parents' race (n = 135 parents)*			Household composition (n = 71 interviews)	
White	83 (61%)		Two parents	65 (92%)
Black	15 (11%)		One parent	6 (8%)
Hispanic/Latino	10 (7%)			
East Asian	5 (4%)		**Parents' relationship (n = 65 couples)**	
South Asian	3 (2%)		Married heterosexual couple**	51 (78%)
Multiracial	19 (14%)		Unmarried heterosexual couple	14 (22%)
Parents' education (n = 135 parents)*			**Number of children in household (n = 71 interviews)**	
Less than high school	5 (4%)		0.5 (expecting first child)	6 (8%)
High school only	9 (7%)		1	39 (55%)
Some college	22 (16%)		1.5 (expecting second child)	4 (6%)
Bachelor's degree	44 (33%)		2	18 (25%)
Advanced degree	52 (39%)		2.5 (expecting third child)	2 (3%)
not given	3 (2%)		3.5 (expecting fourth child)	1 (1%)
			4	1 (1%)
Parents' nationality (n = 135 parents)*			**Annual household income (n = 71 interviews)**	
US-born	115 (85%)		Less than $30,000	12 (17%)
Foreign-born	20 (15%)		$30,001-$60,000	8 (11%)
			$60,001-$90,000	5 (7%)
Mean age at time of interview*:	35		$90,001-$120,000	12 (17%)
Maximum age*:	54		$120,001-$150,000	12 (17%)
Minimum age*:	18		More than $150,000	16 (23%)
			not given	6 (8%)

* Parent demographic statistics include parents involved in child-rearing who were not present for the interview.
** Includes 1 couple not legally married who consider themselves married and asked to be identified as such.

Table 2.1 (Chapter 2): Nationally Popular Names as % of Population, US and California

Boys	US				California			
	#1 name	Top 10	Top 100	Top 1000	#1 name	Top 10	Top 100	Top 1000
1970	4.46%	26.11%	69.64%	93.74%	4.53%	22.31%	63.63%	88.07%
1980	3.71%	22.72%	67.18%	90.95%	3.33%	19.18%	59.25%	88.94%
1990	3.06%	18.77%	63.14%	89.29%	2.58%	15.49%	55.44%	86.44%
2000	1.66%	12.62%	52.28%	83.71%	1.28%	11.65%	51.04%	84.97%
2008	1.03%	8.81%	45.07%	79.30%	1.06%	9.74%	45.84%	58.95%
Girls	US				California			
	#1 name	Top 10	Top 100	Top 1000	#1 name	Top 10	Top 100	Top 1000

1970	2.54%	15.62%	54.23%	87.12%	2.64%	12.52%	44.24%	78.91%
1980	3.31%	16.11%	51.12%	81.63%	2.86%	13.01%	44.15%	78.46%
1990	2.29%	14.93%	48.61%	78.63%	2.19%	12.03%	40.80%	75.35%
2000	1.31%	9.36%	38.51%	72.50%	1.14%	7.96%	34.39%	72.82%
2008	0.90%	7.74%	31.61%	67.31%	0.64%	6.85%	30.67%	82.00%