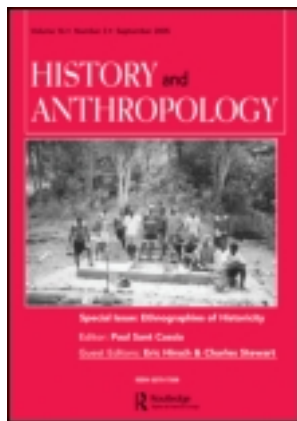


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The Functional Fallacy: On the Supposed Dangers of Name Repetition

João de Pina-Cabral

Whenever the theme of personal naming comes up, both in academic debate and in public opinion, we encounter a tendency to take for granted that there is some sort of collective interest in the clear and unambiguous individuation of persons through their names. “Society” or “culture”, it is presumed, would not function as well if that failed, so homonymy is automatically taken to be dysfunctional. This kind of explanation carries a deep sense of validity in common sense attitudes and it clearly imposes itself upon all who have discussed this issue over the past few decades, both in history and anthropology. In this essay, I argue that, on the one hand, there are fallacious implications to this explanatory proclivity, to which I call the functional fallacy, and, on the other hand, that it finds its power of evidence in the implicit expectations that characterize late modern thinking concerning what is a person and how persons are constituted. I identify three dispositions that need to be overcome: sociocentrism, individualism and the paradigm of the soul.

Keywords: Personal names; Person; Brazil; Portugal; Nicknames

Whenever the theme of personal naming comes up, both in academic debate and in public opinion, we encounter a tendency to take for granted that there is some sort of collective interest in the clear and unambiguous individuation of persons through their names. “Society” or “culture”, it is assumed, would not function as well if that failed, so homonymy is automatically taken to be dysfunctional. This kind of explanation carries a deep sense of validity in common sense attitudes and it clearly imposes itself upon all who have discussed this issue over the past few

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decades, both in history and anthropology. In this essay, I argue that, on the one hand, there are fallacious implications to this explanatory proclivity, to which I call the *functional fallacy*, and, on the other hand, that it finds its power of evidence in the implicit expectations that characterize late modern thinking concerning what is a person and how persons are constituted.

For historians who use official documents to reconstruct sociocultural contexts of the past where homonymy was prevalent (what they often call “name concentration”), it constitutes a major methodological problem, as it seriously hinders their attempts to engage in family, household or institutional reconstitution (cf. Porqueres I Gené 1995 or Dupâquier *et al.* 1984). The matter, however, is hardly limited to questions of methodology. In fact, both the authors whose studies of personal naming have more closely inspired our analyses of personal naming practices in the Portuguese-speaking world¹ and our daily interlocutors in Europe or in North and South America automatically assume that there is a contradiction between the fact that many people have similar names (homonymy, in general) and the main purpose for which names are supposed to exist: to individuate persons. The notion that names might also serve to de-individuate persons is not even contemplated. The present essay aims to demonstrate that the dominant assumption is based on a conception of personal identity that no longer satisfies us in terms of our contemporary interdisciplinary debates.

Few Names, Many Nicknames

In Europeanist history and anthropology, the functional fallacy is most often encountered whenever the matter of nicknames is discussed.² As a matter of fact, the occurrence of nicknames and their prevalence in community life are normally attributed to the relative incapacity of official names to differentiate among individuals; the functional fallacy is evoked automatically, with no felt need to specify the causal links implied.

For example, the linguistic anthropologist Nancy Dorian starts her well-known essay on naming systems in a community of Gaelic speakers in East Sutherland (Scotland) by explaining the “practical problems arising from the prevalence of by-names” that she had to face when she arrived at the village, since “it was quickly borne in on me that official names were virtually non-functional in the communities, for the simple reason that too many people had the same name” (1970: 305). Whenever she tried to identify someone using their official name, people asked her to tell them the person’s *by-name*. She stresses with surprise, however, “it should be clear the by-names are *not* problematic for bona fide members of the Gaelic-speaking sub-communities” (the emphasis is the author’s own, 1970: 306). As it turns out, the problem was not limited to her not knowing people’s by-names in the beginning of the research; she also came to discover that not everyone could use the same by-names for each person and that their use was also largely dependent on circumstance.

If one were to adopt Dorian’s implicit assumption that all persons have to have a name that individuates them and that that name must be public and unambiguous, then the pathologies of homonymy that she evokes are beyond doubt. Otherwise, we might be led to ask the following two questions: first, why did she assume, when she

arrived in East Sutherland, that the correct way to identify people in everyday circumstances would be to refer to them by their official names? And, second, why did she assume that personal names would be public and equally available for use by anyone?

If these assumptions were to be questioned, however, we would not be able to accept any longer her implicit causal conclusion that “By-name practices in the area owe their existence to a Celtic society in which the bulk of the population shared a very few clan names” (1970: 317). The functional fallacy is embedded in this sentence giving rise to an “explanation” that we are expected to accept but that, as a matter of fact, is totally dependent on denying the validity of two observations that, for one, I see no good reason to cast aside: namely, (a) there can only be homonymy in official naming because it is not prevented and, to the contrary, it is actively desired by the naming agents and (b) local naming practices are not guided by the pervasive interests of individuation and control that characterize bureaucratic practices in administration and policing.

Yet another example that is often evoked when such themes are debated in the anthropological literature is Manning’s paper on nicknames in the Caribbean Islands of Bermuda and Barbados, where he manifests great surprise at the prevalence of nicknames (1974: 123–132). The example is specially interesting because Manning discovered that, in those days, in which there were few cars and they mostly belonged to men, the number plates were used to identify the owners, not as a form of appellation but of reference. Thus, for instance, obituary notices in the radio normally had the following format: “We regret to announce the death of . . . ; also known as . . . ; driver of car . . .” (1974: 127). Or still, speaking to Manning, a certain lady asked him if he knew her son in the following manner: “You know my son—S170—my son, Stuart” (1974: 132).

Whilst Manning claims that West Indians were daily obliged to resolve a problem of “mistaken identity”, the fact remains that there is no evidence whatsoever that they thought that mistaken identity was actually occurring and there are also no signs that they worked at preventing it, for example, by the utterly simple means of enlarging the list of Christian names available for use. The author phrases the issue in the following terms:

Caribbean societies, especially those with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants, are essentially a collection of large, extended families that have become closely interrelated during centuries of marriage, concubinage, and casual mating. Consequently, two or three dozen surnames are usually shared by the majority of an insular population. Within local areas the concentration of a few surnames is even more apparent. Neighbourhoods, villages, and sometimes whole parishes may be populated almost entirely by a few large families. // Since the repertory of common proper names is also limited, there is a high incidence of nicknames. Formal names are non-functional from the standpoint of individuating persons; alternate designations are needed. Nicknames and number plates fill the need by serving as identity symbols that individuate persons from their kinsmen and namesakes. (Manning 1974: 128)

As is apparent in this passage, the supposed non-functionality of official names hardly exhausts the matter of the functional fallacy. We can see here the emergence of another aspect to the fallacy that links it to a whole series of implicit assumptions concerning the psychological needs of the people whose “identities” are supposed to be menaced.

Menaced Identities

In her famous essay on “The hidden name”, written about rural Brittany, Segalen gives a new turn to this debate by distinguishing clearly between “official identity” and “official identity” (1980).

Much like a party dress, official identity is what one wears in exceptional occasions, in order to go to a wedding or to visit the notary public. It is the time of exuberance, of parading. To the contrary, officious identity is that of everyday occasions. It is attributed, modified, manipulated by the local community. It reveals the multiple aspects of a personality. In this region, where homonymy is strongly prevalent, it designates each one as a unique being. (1980: 76)

Thus, the difference between the official name and nickname is not uniquely one of style or of the public it addresses, but rather one of truth of identity:

Patronyms [...] are not the marks of a social category. They seem to be both insufficient and superfluous when it comes to designate: insufficient due to the confusion engendered by homonymy; superfluous because other markers of residence or profession substitute them. Moreover, the greater the homonymy the less functional they are, one even comes to forget them. (1980: 64–65)

Therefore, as it would seem, the matter is not so much one of two systems of naming, but rather one of two systems of identification with diverging truth values:

The separation between the official identity—such as it appears in the documents of civil registry, of birth, death and marriage and in the lists of military service—and the identity of individuals is immediately apparent to any external observer who arrives at this commune. (1980: 63)

Zonabend also, in a short essay she wrote on name and identity for a volume which brings together the work of a series of French historians working on Christian names (*prénoms*), assumes a similar kind of identification between name and individual identity: “the name (*prénom*) may serve to differentiate among individuals, it is identity proper” (1984: 23). Thus, the matter would be not so much one of naming but more one of identity—yet what “identity”?

Zonabend answers that: “The *prénom* is quite the symbol of a psychological identity and, in spite of being common to many, there is no doubt that it contributes towards making one be oneself and not another” (1984: 26–27). Identity, therefore, is seen here as an individual psychological fact which is sustained by naming. Since individuals depend on their identity for their individuation, it seems important to correct the damage caused by the concentration of names.

Arguments such as these are tied to complex sensitivities concerning the Gaelic and English system of naming, in Dorian and Manning’s case, and the Breton and French, in Segalen and Zonabend’s case, which are very specific to the history of the linguistic universes that shape them. What this means is that one should be careful to distinguish the role played by *prénoms* in Francophone contexts from *Christian names* in Anglophone contexts. We must not be surprised, therefore, to discover that the Iberian systems (Hispanophone and Lusophone) that I have been studying of late should

diverge so considerably from dominant practices in France, Italy or Great Britain (cf. Pina-Cabral 2008b). Unfortunately, Europeanist anthropologists and historians (and Mediterraneanists before them) have hardly given any attention to the comparative study of these differences. Even noted historians of European naming practices, such as Wilson (1998), tend to downplay the importance of these historically rooted differences. Very few authors have noted that the formation of nicknames, house names and such like in Western Europe are very diverse regionally and their variation is correlated with divergence in household and family reproduction systems (cf. Pina-Cabral 1984, 1992).

It should be noted, however, that the supposed dangers of homonymy do not seem to be specific to the European context, which means that we must find their roots in theoretical proclivities that are far more deep-seated. As a matter of fact, this association between homonymy and a reduction of the functionality of naming is generalized throughout the ethnographic register.

For instance, in his valuable essay concerning names and personhood in China, Elvin replicates the assumption: “Chinese personal names have been almost unique to the individual [since the third century BC], a stock of perhaps several million appellations” (1985: 157). To which he immediately adds the following footnote: “One reason for this is presumably the need to compensate for the severely restricted number of Chinese *surnames*” (author’s own emphasis, 1985: 187). There we find, once again, an attribution of causality to homonymy that presumes implicitly that it redounds in a confusion for which “society” or “culture” needs to find some sort of compensation: the functional fallacy.

Similarly, in her monograph on the Sanumá, an Amerindian group of the Yanomami family, Alcida Ramos writes a chapter to address the ways in which “the Sanumá avoid the problem of name redundancy so as to identify specific individuals” (1995: 197). In this case, it has to be said, the analysis already addresses some of the preoccupations that occupy us here.

Before we move on, it is necessary to stress that it is not the functionality of naming (as well as of any other form of reflexive behaviour) that is denied here. It is, rather, the way in which individuation is given causal precedence over other aspects in causal attributions. It cannot be denied that personal names (and not only official ones) can be used and are used in order to discriminate among persons for administrative and policing purposes—as in passports, for example. Whenever names fail in this function, however, it is not to other names that modern bureaucracies take recourse, since they know that they would only be increasing the margin of confusion in this way. They take recourse to numbering and to discriminating features of the body (such as fingerprinting).

Lusophone Homonymies

In the Iberian Peninsula, few books or essays that deal with the issue of personal names avoid the proclivity that we have been identifying. I will use here passages from the essay that the Hispanicist historian Hiroka Shiba has written on the history of personal

names in Spain³ since it is one of the best treatments of the topic that has come to my attention. Upon finding forty-four double proper names in the documents concerning *autos-da-fé* celebrated in Cordoba between the end of the fifteenth and the end of the eighteenth centuries, the author explains, “The emergence of these double names is bound to be due to the scarce number of individual names” (1996: 211). How might one ground that causal attribution? Later on she furthers her argument:

Of the 100 male names and 61 female names collected in the above mentioned documents of *autos-da-fé*, the ones that are more frequently used number 10 for both sexes, which redounded in an excessive frequency of a few determined names. The combination of individual names [into double proper names] might seem, thus, to recuperate the individualizing function of the name, which had been reduced. (1996: 212)

The author reckons that “The greater concentration in name usage in Spain by comparison to any other Christian country might be due to the Spanish custom of using the baptismal name in memory of saints as individual name” (1996: 212). In fact, contrary to what she claims, this explanation might serve for most other Christian countries, since the injunction to name children after saints is already encountered in the Catechism of the Council of Trent in the mid-sixteenth century. Her phrasing is interesting, however, because it points decidedly to the reason for why her previous thesis is unsustainable: bureaucratic listing is *not* the determining factor in the choice of the specific individual name of each person who later finds him or herself in the list.

As a matter of fact, I have repeatedly observed that, in Portugal, where name concentration is at least as intense as in Spain throughout the whole of the Modern Era—as, indeed, Rowland has recently reminded us (2008)—people spontaneously take recourse to the same functional model in their conversations concerning personal naming. In spite of that, however, the very same people continue to name their children in highly concentrated fashion. Thus, the same members of the Portuguese middle class that explain to me the functional thesis with such deep-seated conviction, subject themselves to “taste” in matters of name giving, thus unwittingly creating whole generations of “Nunos”, “Gonçalos”, “Patrícias” and “Catarinas” (in much the same way as previous generations named their children João Paulo, José Maria, José Manuel, Pedro, Ana Maria, Maria de Fátima, etc.). The trend for name concentration—to which Brazil escaped for a few decades during the second half of the twentieth century—continues very alive in Portugal and has begun to emerge again noticeably among the Brazilian middle classes over the past decade.

Naming is sure enough a social practice engaged in reflexively. So, there can be no doubt concerning the fact that there is “purpose” in naming—that is, that when someone gives a name to a child, he or she has in mind the use that the name will have. There can be no doubt either that such a purpose is linked to the constitution of forms of *distinction* à la Bourdieu—that is, games of identification and differentiation that carry within themselves strong implications concerning the attribution of symbolic power. Where we might find a lot to comment, however, is in the way in which this *distinction* is put to use and the levels of identity at which it functions.

In short, the notion that I have heard time and again from my interviewees in Portugal and Brazil that “if everyone had the same name, one wouldn’t know who was whom” is fallacious and transports with itself a set of individualist assumptions—that is, the notion that the essential level of distinction to which the name applies is the individual person and that the name serves fundamentally to individuate publicly that person. Two questions emerge, therefore: first, what is being distinguished in naming? And, second, to what purpose?

As it happens, individual identity is only one of the levels of identity where the distinction between persons and other social entities functions. Identification and differentiation always operate in conjunction. To each instance of differentiation, there is a series of corresponding identifications and vice versa. Here, we might take recourse to a notion such as that of *Wortfeld*, which Gunther Schlee developed to refer to “the semantic space of identity and difference” in situations of armed conflict (2010: 10).

Thus, in Portugal, if there are many Antónios in a particular family it is because, rather than marking their respective differences, the family members preferred to identify with grandfather António—who might have been important, or rich, or whose memory is especially cherished. Furthermore, in choosing to give that name to their children, parents were abdicating from naming them after “the other family”; that is, they were making choices concerning which of their different families of origin, viri- or uxorilateral, they favoured. Two generations down, when no one any longer remembers grandfather António, the repetition of his name may well correspond to the desire to keep together the descendents or, to the contrary, to claim for their children special rights within the common familial project.

The rationalizing notion (characteristic of administration and policing) that each person must be “identifiable” by his or her name does not apply to the complexity of everyday life, but it also assumes wrongly that the person is naturally given and indivisible. Moreover, it discards considerations both of “taste” and “power” in the way in which naming occurs within households and families.

One must ask oneself, therefore: do personal names serve primarily to distinguish an individual from another? No doubt, personal names are one of the principal means by which people refer to each other in order to differentiate among themselves—this is the case both in modern societies and in most other societies that anthropologists or historians have studied. But that does not mean that this “function” be the determining one over a myriad of other reflexive considerations; nor that it might be possible to achieve it apart from a large panoply of other functions. In fact, the individualizing reference that a name provides is always combined with other functions of names. One has to assume a holist perspective in this matter—the diverse functions and implications that are written into a name choice constitute a complex process that is very close to that of “taste”.

For example, if a politician wishes to be “elegant”, he will choose a particular type of tie that will distinguish him. That, however, does not mean that he wishes to be confused with all other politicians who might go on TV using the same type of tie. The difference that the tie/politician identification establishes is one of “taste” that works on the basis of a series of factors that are, ultimately, undecipherable. It can

only be understood in this way. Furthermore, that distinction can only be interpreted as a process within a specific history of ties. Thus, if that type of tie comes to be used by too many politicians, our original member of Parliament will start thinking of choosing a different style next time he goes on TV, so as not to lose his distinction.

Much like ties or lipstick colours, in modern societies, names are phenomena of taste, subject to fashions. In other social contexts known to historians and anthropologists, things happened otherwise; the very opposition between proper name and family name already moulds decisively the whole process and it can hardly be said to have been universal to all known human cultures. But even in modern European contexts, we are not entitled to think that such processes are always alike. There are many different ways of identifying whilst differentiating by means of the use of names, both between persons and groups of persons and between factors of identification/differentiation. The process of attribution of value that sustains differentiation may be varied. The question of “name repetition” can formulate itself in many diverse ways and must be approached in its intrinsic plurality.

For instance, in the case of Iberia during the Ancien Régime, people chose their proper names from a list of saints, as Hiroko Shiba stresses. However, considering that there were thousands of saints, why did the number of most commonly used proper names seldom exceed six or ten during all those centuries (see also Rowland 2008)? There was, we must assume, an unformulated cultural process that redounded in a form of intense proper name conformism. But one thing is certain: there never was any rule, norm, explicit opinion or formed theory concerning the matter.

Now, in Portugal today, proper name concentration is still prevalent, even though religious considerations no longer contribute to parental choice. I have found out that, contrary to what some anthropologists seem to believe, people do not know which saint corresponds to their name, they do not necessarily consider their name-saint to be their patron-saint (when they have one) and they are seldom even cognizant of the fact that it is a saint’s name and not one of some classical hero.

Why, then, is it that there is in Portugal a legally enforced list of permitted proper names and a parallel list of forbidden proper names?⁴ Why is it that only foreign residents⁵ complain about this undemocratic limitation of one’s civil freedom when other such freedoms, equally immaterial, are so highly prized? Clearly, the reasons for name concentration cannot be reduced to religiosity.

Conformism and Difference

In general terms, it might be argued that naming people is necessarily a conformist activity. In Lusophone contexts, even where inventiveness of proper name seems at first sight to have imposed itself, it is never total and it always has a deceiving aspect to it. For instance, in the urban areas of Bahia (Brazil) where I have been carrying out fieldwork since 2004, the total number of personal names is very large, corresponding to an ideology of “self-affirmation” and modernity (cf. Duarte & Gomes 2008; Pina-Cabral 2010c). Nevertheless, even there, one is very far from the maximum possible onomastic inventiveness. Two factors contribute to this.

First, once one starts to enquire, one comes to discover that, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the name had already been “heard” by the parents beforehand. I once interviewed a young mother who reported having spent the best part of a week systematically going through a phone book until she found a name that served her purposes. She had not known of it before, but it was “a name that exists”, as she put it. This concept, which is frequently encountered in all Lusophone contexts, bears within it the implication that there are limitations to proper name creativity.

Second, and alternatively, names which are created anew most often result either from adaptations of foreign sounding names (for example, Uóxiton for Washington, Maicon for Michael, Mademuazélia for *mademoiselle*) or are circumstantial combinations of name particles that are recognized as “existing” previously. Thus, for example, names such as “Clemerson” can be created that “do not exist” but that are composed of parts that everyone recognizes as existing: *Cle-* (as in Clementina) and *-erson* (as in Emerson). In fact, the particles that are used as word-enders suggest the sex of the child. Thus, *-dir*, *-lia* or *-neida* are female and *-valdo*, *-ildo* or *-merson* are male.

Even in these situations of name combination, however, I formed an opinion based on numberless interviews and informal conversations that only very rarely do Bahians actually give their children composite names that they had not already “heard” before. For example, Euzedir is a name that results from the combination of the initial particle *Eu-*, referring to the father’s name *Eugénio*, and which had been part of the name of her earlier siblings, and the final particle *-dir*, which simply states that she is of the female sex. The name, however, was not simply invented, for it had been “heard” before and it was thought to be “beautiful”. Faced with the need to find yet another name starting by *Eu-*, the parents activated the distant romantic memory of someone they had known in their youth who had been called Euzedir.

Even in these Bahian urban situations, where people strongly favour an ideology of “name difference” (that is, onomastic distinctiveness), limits are felt to exist to combinational freedom and people mark those ambiguous borders to creativity with a feeling of distaste. I will cite as exemplars extracts from two interviews made in Valença (Baixo Sul, Bahia, Brazil) in 2006:⁶

Interview A

Question: So, I was just about to ask you: tell me a funny name.

Answer: That I find funny? . . . I find, rather, the name of my cousin: Clemerson.

Q.: Clemerson?

A.: Yap! (smiling) I reckon . . . I can’t take [eu não assimilo muito] that name of his, no.

Q.: Because you think it does not go with him?

A.: Well, yes, and I also think that it has no reason to exist [*não tem nada a ver*]. I never saw that name: Clemerson!

Interview B

Q.: And, apart from your school—anywhere, really—have you met anyone who does not like his or her own name?

A.: There is a colleague of mine . . . her name is Zulena Madalena.

Q.: Zulena Madalena?

A.: Yap! She says she doesn't like Zulena.

Q.: That she prefers Madalena?

A.: Well. . .

Q.: And why did they give her [*botaram*] the name Zulena?

A.: Don't know.

Q.: Does she know?

A.: She also doesn't.

Q.: And, when people meet her, does she ask to be called Madalena? How does it go?

A.: I call her Zu, in any case. She claims not to like it, but when she introduces herself she has no option, right? No purpose trying to hide.

Q.: Ah . . . so, in spite of all that, she still tells people her name. What do you think of the name?

A.: Zulena? I don't find it beautiful, no. That name has no reason to exist [*não tem nada a ver*]. Never seen it! As it happens, Madalena is already a little . . . but Zulena, no!⁷

In these Bahian examples, people are using aesthetic considerations that remit to a positive valuation of modernity, usually epitomized by the USA. They value distinctiveness as portrayed in the highly valued category of *nome diferente* (different name) because it fosters “self-affirmation”—a central value in Brazilian notions of modernity. Still, even though Clemerson and Zulena were distinctly “different names”, they carried the trend to an absurd extreme. We must, therefore, conclude that even in such contexts, where creativity is highly valued, it is balanced by the dominant long-term proneness towards concentration of proper names, as characteristic in most other Lusophone contexts throughout history.

To sum up, the assumption that name repetition leads to harmful confusion among people that needs to be avoided is only superficially true and is bound to lead one astray. It both naturalizes an individualist and bureaucratic order and hides the complexity of the processes that make someone want to give a particular name to a child with whom, in future, they will be closely connected: that is, the conformism of parents and godparents in name choosing.

Fashion and Confusion

Let us now consider the issue of the supposed dangers of “confusion” between individuals in appellation. It seems to me that the causal attribution in this assumption is placed the wrong way around. Thus, the argument that we need to have different names in order not to be confused applies to functions that concern someone who is using the name of a third person (who might be “confused” by a second person . . . who, in any case, would have to be rather distracted or ignorant of the immediate local context to make the confusion!). In short, the situation is not unlike that of a kin term that can be applied to a number of people, such as in a sentence of the kind “my uncle told me this-and-that”.⁸

The context of appellation, however, has little bearing on the context of name attribution. The proper names we bear were given to us by our parents or godparents after a more or less protracted process of decision-making. The fact of the matter is that for the namers, the dangers of confusion in appellation were not paramount at the time of

naming. Emotional and familial considerations were certainly predominant over pre-occupations concerning possible future confusions either in appellation or in bureaucratic identification.

Moreover, conformism in naming can only be detected *ex post facto*, a fact that has not been taken sufficiently into consideration. The person who chooses the proper name for a child or a godchild has no way of knowing whether a large number of people are making the same decision at the same time. In Lusophone contexts, I name a child because I “like” that name. I am concerned to give the child a “good name” that will serve it well in future. I am convinced that the choice was free; the considerations that led me to choose it were of a personal nature and, as Lévi-Strauss (1966 [1962]: 181) argues, they qualify me more than the named child.

For the people I interviewed in Portugal and Brazil, “to give a (proper) name” is to give something very real and emotionally very significant. For instance, the nurses in the public maternity of Valença told us that they were often confronted with having to name children whose adolescent mothers “could not decide for themselves” how to name them. As they explained to us, young girls who came to this maternity, many of them underage, were often too confused, frightened and anxious to take on the task of naming their children. They frequently asked for the nurses’ support, since many felt utterly abandoned at this momentous occasion—their parents too angry to help and the biological fathers invariably absent. They were usually considering giving their children to be raised by someone else.

So the nurses, out of compassion, helped them name their children “correctly”. Later on in life, however, the nurses expected the children and the mothers to remember them for that gift and correspondingly to demonstrate gratefulness. Many male children in the Municipality of Valença, for example, are named after a locally prestigious gynaecologist that the nurses respected very much. They reported that, many years after the event, it was common for mothers and their already grown children to approach them, so as to thank them. Apparently, these reunions were emotionally intense occasions for all.

At the same time as I am considering what to name my child or godchild, many other people are also trying to decide. They come to choose the same name as I did, moved by the same kind of conformism that moves me. None of us will ever be willing to admit that conformism was part of our personal decision. To admit to that would be to challenge our deep-seated beliefs concerning modernity and individuation, our cultivation of “self-affirmation” as a central personal value.

What the people we interviewed about it told us was that they normally took a long time over the decision. They invariably presented the eventual choice as an act of personal inventiveness.⁹ If, sometime after, an anthropologist were to come around clumsily implying that my choice might have been conformist, I am bound to be a bit peaked. But if, through an act of utter bad taste, the interviewer attempts to elicit some of the references that were at stake in my conformist propensity, I get downright irritated. No one is supposed to give words to that which we all know concerns others: namely, that certain names bear class implications, that others are appropriate to a certain educational group, that others carried political considerations now forgotten,

that others still point to specific consumerist desires, to the wish to find better luck abroad, etc.

A similar process occurs with homonymy in terms of surname. People treat surname attribution as if it were an automatic process; as if it resulted simply from the application of the rules of Civil Registry. Yet, our research has repeatedly suggested that this is not how things happen: people favour the reproduction of certain family names over others (for the situation in northern Portugal, see Pina-Cabral 1991). Since there is in Western Europe (as well as in upper class Brazil) a tendency to treat proper names as family marks (giving rise to families where most males are called João or Luís), the result is that there is a tendency for intrafamilial name concentration.¹⁰ The marked preference for homogamy that is so characteristic of Portuguese family practices only comes to further intensify this process of concentration. In families where there is an important capital base to inherit (be it economic or symbolic, as in the case of aristocratic or “intellectual” families), the tendency is especially noticeable, as de Lima (2000) described in her study of the families of Lisbon’s financial elite.

One might still counter-argue that “no one wants their child to be confused to anyone else’s child”, as one often hears stated and that, therefore, the functionalist argument might still be valid. Yes, people do not want their children to be confused, but they have little way of knowing what other children will be named by their parents and, in any case, matters of bureaucratic confusion are hardly of paramount consideration for them. On the contrary, factors of identification/differentiation that silently lead to “repetition” impose themselves silently. Unbeknownst to each of us, we are all contributing towards producing whole cohorts of similarly named persons.

Now, functionalist arguments tend to focus on contexts of appellation and on administrative individuation. But the panoply of factors that redounds in the occurrence of name concentration is not easy to specify fully. For example, in the late 1970s, the urban dwellers of Alto Minho were keen to explain to me that it was due to the fact that all peasants “had the same name” that nicknames were so important among them. Indeed, on the one hand, the list of the more commonly used proper names in Alto Minho was characteristically minuscule and, on the other hand, the high level of local endogamy in the peasant villages gave rise to high surname repetition (Pina-Cabral 1986).

Nevertheless, the form of formulating the matter the urban bourgeoisie adopted inverted the factors. If surnames were not used locally, it was not because they were few but because they referred to styles of sociality that, in peasant life, were largely irrelevant. The very same urban dwellers who haughtily smiled at name concentration and nickname usage among peasants were equally prone to name concentration; only they used their surnames instead of nicknames for purposes of appellation because that was the bourgeois thing to do. This only further proves how wrong they were in their functional assumption.

Similarly, in 2005–2006, among the 900 students of the Municipal School of Valença, around 60% used one or either surname *Santos* and *Jesus*. Considering the strong value attributed to name differentiation in this context (as opposed to the

Portuguese context just cited), this cannot be explained through any notion that people wanted to have the same surname as all others. These families who had recently come out of a despised rural life (the *roça*), found that they were bearing surnames that had been imposed on them through bureaucratic decision and that they thought demeaned them. They were mostly descendents of converts (African and Amerindian slaves—Schwartz 1985) and the process of surname differentiation associated with literacy is still very recent in this region. “Ser Santos é atestado de pobreza”—“To be surnamed Santos is a declaration of poverty”—as an adolescent student once told me. She opted for dropping her father’s surname and for being known by her mother’s, which she felt to be less of a mark of un-distinction. What she did not know is whether she was, in that way, starting a new, albeit different, process of surname concentration.

Once again, my aim is not to deny the multifunctionality implicit in all forms of reflexive decision-making, particularly in those that bear profound repercussions concerning forms of social identification, as is the case with personal naming. Rather, I mean to argue that the functional fallacy concerning personal naming, which is such a prevalent part of Western European (and Brazilian) common sense, has written into it a history of domination. It favours an androcentric, individualist and bureaucratizing worldview.

Name and Self

In the chapter which he dedicates to naming, in his 1994 book about self-consciousness, Anthony Cohen insists that

In making the kinds of assumptions which we have witnessed about the social and personal significance of names and their meanings, we neglect people’s self consciousness or dismiss it as irrelevant. The ways in which we have rendered naming rituals attributes to the societies we describe the denial of selfhood to their novice members. (1994: 78–79)

This sociocentric tendency to treat people as passive elements in social dynamics explains partially the assumption that there is a functional contradiction between homonymy and identification. Yet, in the mid-sixteenth century, Michel de Montaigne had already shown that this was a mirage. People are perfectly capable of dealing with the possible continuities, mixtures, confusions, redundancies, ambiguities and ambivalences summoned by homonymy with no jeopardy either to their social position or to their inner sense of psychological integrity. As with so many other aspects that now interest social scientists, Montaigne was one of the first to address this debate. The general opinion is that his genius is based on a systematic exercise of scepticism; personally, I think that the penetrating nature of his opinions is less to do with doubt and more to do with freedom.

His point of departure in his essay “On glory” is to stress the difference between signifier and signified:

There is the name and the thing: the name is a voice which denotes and signifies the thing; the name is no part of the thing, nor of the substance; ’tis a foreign piece joined to the thing, and outside it. (1877: 8569–8574)

Departing from here, Montaigne questions himself about the evanescent nature of our reputations and the way in which we are identified by our names:

I shall have no more handle whereby to take hold of reputation, neither shall I have any whereby to take hold of or to cleave to me; for to expect that my name should be advanced by it, in the first place, I have no name that is enough my own; of two that I have, one [Montaigne] is common to all my race [family], and indeed to others also; there are two families at Paris and Montpellier whose surname is Montaigne, another in Brittany, and one in Xaintonge, De La Montaigne. The transposition of one syllable only would suffice so to unravel our affairs, that I shall share in their glory, and they peradventure will partake of my discredit; and, moreover, my ancestors have formerly been surnamed Eyquem¹¹—a name wherein a family well known in England is at this day concerned. As to my other name [Michel], everyone may take it that will, and so, perhaps, I may honour a porter in my own stead. And besides, though I had a particular distinction by myself, what can it distinguish, when I am no more? Can it point out and favour inanity?¹² (1877: 8735–8740)

Thus, in what we might call a pristine fashion, Montaigne points to the three major problems we have so far identified: the functional complexity of homonymy; the complex and differed nature of the relation between name and person; the evanescence of personhood. Names dividuate as much as they individuate.

Conclusion

I hope I have managed to demonstrate that a set of unstated assumptions written into the conceptual universe with which late modernity addresses the matter of personal naming, are principally responsible for attributing verisimilitude to the functional fallacy, making it appear obvious. When analysed in the light of comparative research, we can identify three main aspects to this proclivity.

In order to simplify the argument, I will name the first aspect *sociocentrism*. That is, the matter of personal naming is not seen as constitutive of the person but as secondary and as teleologically produced as a response to the need that “society” or “culture” has to manage persons in an orderly fashion. It is assumed that the attribution of names to persons by the State (in particular surnames) is automatic, permanent and non-negotiable. Homonymy, thus, is dangerous since it challenges the clear identification of individuals before the State; it is never anything that people may desire or produce voluntarily; it is always the passive result of some sort of demographic and legal automatism that means that, without people’s contribution, there are fewer names than would be needed in order to differentiate them correctly.

Even in China, where the importance of agnatic descent associated with name exogamy necessarily produced surname concentration, the notion that homonymy is not desired and is the aggregate result of automatic processes is also taken for granted. And even when one goes to Amerindians, where the previous relative absence of a State might free anthropologists to see the interests of homonymy, that also does not occur. Even there, it is assumed that name concentration leads to name redundancy, requiring some sort of correction.

Note that there is in all this an unstated agency that is attributed to “society”/“culture”, systematically represented in two conflicting guises: the nation-state and the local community. These seem to be the two levels of collective engagement upon which sociocentric imagination repeatedly focuses.

In order to simplify the argument, I will call the second aspect *individualism*. That is, an implicit formulation of the relation between name and identity in which priority is attributed to the logics of identity seen as an essentially psychological process rather than to the logics of relatedness. Thus, personal name presents itself as a manifestation of personal identity, which is seen as a “natural” pre-given thing. Identity is taken to be the stuff of names, as these are supposed to be a functional manifestation of the truth of identity. Thus, identity is seen as being at root individual and marked by an interest in individuation.

There is, therefore, no place for the idea that the person as an entity may not be a given; that it may require a process of constitution. In short, the *hipostatization* of the person—that is, the always unfinished process of intersubjective attribution of entity status to the person—is simply denied, since the person as an individual is seen as physically given from the start. Thus, there is no recognition of the role played by intersubjectivity in the constitution of the person’s *self* or, better still, the person’s “arena of presence and action” (cf. Johnston 2010: 139–141)—that process upon which human ontogeny is based, and which has increasingly interested anthropologists (for example, Toren 1999), psychologists (for example, Braten 1998), primatologists (for example, Tomasello 2008) and philosophers (for example, Clark 1997) over the past decade.

As a result, the interest in homonymy for the purpose of constituting and reproducing *continued identities* (cf. Pina-Cabral 1997) is always denied or, at least, it is assumed to be temporary or secondary. The very idea that confusion/aggregation/undifferentiation among persons might turn out to be one of the reflexive interests (“functions”) of naming—and not an evil to be corrected at all costs—fails to emerge from the bulk of the historical and anthropological literature on personal naming. Rather, functionality always seems to go in the opposite direction.

Further still, there is a naturalization of the assumption that personal names are or should be public, since they address individual identities—this is an unstated assumption of modern individualism. The idea that individuation might be an always unfinished process; the notion that it might correspond to a historically situated ideological project, is simply cast aside. This means that historians and anthropologists that meet homonymy in their studies are at pains to explain why personal names may not be public, may not be universally available for use, and may even work in a des-individuating fashion. If the identity of individuals is given from the start, the less public, less universal and less explicit forms of characterizing persons that one often encounters in the historical and ethnographic register come to appear as pathologies of naming.

In his famous passages on personal naming in *The Savage Mind*, Lévi-Strauss (1966 [1962]) starts from the observation that

One [...] never names: one classes someone else if the name is given to him in virtue of his characteristics and one classes oneself if, in the belief that one need not follow a rule, one names someone else 'freely', that is, in virtue of characteristics of one's own. (1966 [1962]: 181)

As we have seen in the above examples, Lévi-Strauss' insights concerning the way in which naming someone else qualifies the namer as well as the named are highly valuable today (cf. Pina-Cabral 2010c).

From this strong initial statement concerning classification, the discussion evolves in such a way as to get to a point where proper names are seen as the limit beyond which all classification ends:

To say that a name is perceived as a proper name is to say that it is assigned to a level beyond which no classification is requisite, [...] proper names represent the *quanta of signification* below which one no longer does anything but point. (author's emphasis, 1966 [1962]: 215)

What bridges these two statements is Lévi-Strauss' attempt to relate the naming of species with the naming of persons. He finds a surprising similarity in the two processes: "proper names and species names form part of the same group so that there is no fundamental difference between the two types of name" (1966 [1962]: 213).

The notion of personhood that he develops from these considerations seems particularly relevant to us today, much as we might no longer be able to follow the argument in its entirety. Whilst, biologically speaking, he tells us, persons are like individual flowers, specimens of a variety; in fact, the way societies deal with persons are more akin to the way they deal with species than with individual specimens. "[...] social life," he goes on, "effects a strange transformation in this system, for it encourages each biological individual to develop a personality; and this is a notion no longer recalling specimens within a variety but rather types of varieties or of species" (1966 [1962]: 214)

I submit that what Lévi-Strauss was observing in the two chapters of *The Savage Mind* that he dedicates to personal naming is not unlike what we have been trying to capture using rather different epistemological presuppositions: it is the way in which social practices relating to the naming of persons (and domesticated animals) are ambivalently placed before singleness and plurality.

Proper naming works actively at constructing dividuality, affirming the intrinsic plurality of what is identified as single. Naming practices are on the margins of ostension (of pointing, as Lévi-Strauss put it) but they point in a complex fashion, for they point to a single entity by means of pointing to a myriad others. The person thus emerges processually as a crossroads, an intersection of multiple continuities (cf. Pina-Cabral 2010c). In the complexity of dividuality, individuation is as much a part of proper naming as des-individuality. For this reason, as Lévi-Strauss observes, persons are named more like species than like individual flowers, for they are inescapably multiple. There is a kind of prophetic overreach in Lévi-Strauss' enigmatic comment that these observations counter Durkheim's "thesis of the social origin of logical thought" (1966 [1962]: 214).

Finally, I will call the third aspect that I believe we must abandon *the paradigm of the soul*. The arena of presence and action that characterizes personal conscience (Johnston 2010), allowing for a reflexive differentiation from other persons—that which has been called *self*—is seen by those who adopt the functional fallacy as a series of representations that are to be situated in the mind. The reflexive process that allows us to know that we are present before ourselves is not seen, therefore, as a process in constant constitution, resulting from intersubjective engagement. On the contrary, the arena of presence and action is conceived as the base upon which are inscribed both the subjective knowledge of the world and, in time, intersubjective engagement.

Although the belief in the existence of spirit seems to have dropped out of acceptable scientific opinion since the 1930s (Vasconcelos 2008), the constitutive assumptions concerning human nature that continue to dominate scientific discourse fail to distance themselves from the modes of thinking of mind/*esprit* that we inherited from the Christian tradition. In an often-unconscious manner, mind is inscribed into the mould that was left behind by the Christian notion of *soul*. In spite of the fact that arguments against the body/mind distinction have become commonplace, the notion that mind is essentially a matter of ideas continues to this day.¹³ Identity, therefore, is seen as a psychological event, a mental representation, an idea. It is seen as a conscious mental principle that is fixed from birth. Identity is conceived wrongly as the idea that moves human action, instead of being seen as a process of objectivation of identifications and differentiations that occur largely beside one's conscious cognitive processes.

To conclude, it is worthwhile stressing that, in the same way as there are aspects of the process of personal naming that become aporias as the result of the functional fallacy, so also there are aspects of the naming processes that are so naturalized that they simply become invisible. One of these is that, in contexts centrally marked by the Christian heritage, contrary to so many other well-researched sociocultural contexts in history, mortuary names do not exist and could not exist. People do not change their name when they die because, ever since the days of St Augustine, the dominant theological opinion has been that the soul, once created at physical conception, never ceases to exist (Givens 2010). This Christian tradition explains a form of homonymy that moderns do not recognize and that, in consequence, the historians and anthropologists who inspired us throughout this paper have totally failed to identify: the homonymy between the living and the dead. That too, is a trap into which Montaigne did not fall.

Notes

- [1] See Pina-Cabral (1984, 1986, 1994, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c) and de Pina-Cabral and Matos Viegas (2007).
- [2] I use the word “nickname” to describe the broad category of informal, community-based personal names because it is the most commonly encountered in the historical and anthropological literature on Europe. The way these are formed varies considerably (cf. Pina-Cabral 1984), corresponding to the whole to the variation in systems of family reproduction (cf. Pina-Cabral 1991). In English they may also be called *by-names*, in French they

- are either called *surnoms* or *sobriquets*, with different implications, in Portuguese *alcunhas* (but in Brazilian Portuguese *apelidos*), in Italian *sopranommi*, in German *spitznamen*, etc.
- [3] Thanking Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro for having shown it to me.
- [4] Today these lists are no longer of saints but Civil Registry name lists kept by a professor of linguistics at the payment of the authorities (cf. Pina-Cabral 2008a).
- [5] Interestingly, I am told, mostly Hindus and Brazilians.
- [6] Interviews carried out in Valença (Baixo Sul, Bahia) in 2006 by Ulla Macedo, whom I thank for it. The Project *Nomes e Cores* was subsidized by the Foundation for Science and Technology, Portugal, and the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon.
- [7] It is probably worthwhile to note for the interested reader that (a) “traditional names” (saints’ names) are considered very uncool (my own name *João* was often said to be the epitome of bad taste by my interviewees in Valença) and (b) the interviewee does not seem to query the fact that Zulena Madalena is a rhyming name, a feature that elsewhere would probably be picked out as in very “bad taste”.
- [8] One of the referees to this paper kindly suggested that this discussion might be extended so as to develop a new angle on the old anthropological distinction between “classificatory” and “descriptive” kin terms. A further debate of this interesting suggestion, however, will have to await for another occasion.
- [9] I will leave aside here the issue of how, and under what conditions, the choice is seen as collectively made by both parents. To our surprise, in a large majority of cases the mother alone is attributed with the choice. This matter will have to be discussed further elsewhere.
- [10] I leave aside here the discussion of the integral kind of homonymy between child and father, uncle or grandfather that I discussed in Pina-Cabral and Matos Viegas (2007).
- [11] In the 1930s, Montaigne was accused of being a Jew due to that name! As a matter of fact, the name’s etymology is likely derived from the proper name Joachim, so the accusation, aside from being racist, was also spurious (Ciroc 1938: 468).
- [12] I imagine the word is being used here in its literal sense of “quality of that which is empty”.
- [13] For convincing counter-arguments see either Clark’s (1997) *Being There: Putting Brain, Body, and World Together* or Chemero’s (2009) *Radical Embodied Cognitive Science*.

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