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FRAMING MY NAME
EXTENDING EDUCATIONAL BOUNDARIES

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Chapter 7

'My name is Karen...'

Karen Stagnitti

Introduction

My name is *Karen*. In this chapter, I take a narrative approach and highlight 'critical incidents' that have caused me to reflect on my 'being' and recall events from childhood and adulthood. 'Being' or 'to be' is what Wilcock (1999) described as 'being true to ourselves, to our nature, to our essence and to what is distinctive about us' (p. 5). The state of 'being' requires time to think, reflect and to discover who we are (Wilcock 1999). My name is part of this. The constructivist view of learning posits that the learner comes with a representational model of personal constructs (in this instance, one's name being a personal construct) and within these personal constructs, the learner makes sense of their learning situation (Stacey 1998). From the constructivist view, the teacher negotiates meaning with the learner through reflection, dialogue, guidance and feedback because the learner interprets ideas and constructs meaning based on pre-existing understandings (Candy 1991; Stacey 1998). Reflecting on my 'being' gives insight into the representational model of my personal constructs, of which my name is one. As a learner, this insight helps me interpret new information within a meaningful context. As a teacher, this insight informs me on how to engage with the students I teach.

Background

My name is *Karen*. This is a Danish name. My great grandfather was Danish. In appearance, I have blondish hair, blue eyes, and fair skin. When I travel overseas to Europe, total strangers have looked at me and asked if I am Danish. At first, I found this quite a shock as no-one had ever asked me this in Australia. Australia is geographically removed from Scandinavia and Europe and with our English heritage, white skin, blue eyes and fair skin are interpreted as 'English' by most Australians. Karen also means 'pure'. I had looked up the meaning of my name when I was in primary school and remember thinking that 'pure' was a very agreeable meaning for my name as my perception of myself was a good student and of someone who did the 'right' thing. As I have grown older, this self-view has modified and a black and white view of life has become somewhat 'grey'. My ancestry is European. This struck me when I visited a museum in Otago, New Zealand where I was studying South Sea Islanders and I realised there was no common reference point between my understanding of society and how society was perceived by the South Sea Islander.

My maiden name was *Peachey,* which reflects my European heritage. In 1,000AD people by the name of *Peche* (peach in French) travelled from France to England with William the Conqueror. When these people settled in England, they changed their name from *Peche* to *Peachey*. They anglicised their French surname to English. During my undergraduate experience, there were numerous occasions when I was asked my name and then told 'Come on. What's your real name?' So I'd say, 'Cherry' or 'Apricot'. The non believer would give up and accept *Peachey*. Our name is part of our identity. Our surname groups us. By this I mean it identifies 'our tribe'. My 'tribe' is English with Danish and French origins so I perceive myself as European.

Karen is not a common name among preschoolers in 2009. It is more common to meet a *Karen* who is older. So, my name would identify me as someone who is not very young. When I was 13 years old, I was streamed into an academic class at my local high school for the following year. There were three streams: academic (science), commercial, technical. Each stream was divided again into classes which were based on ability. For example, you could be in the technical stream but in A, B or C class. Over the Christmas break, my father was very concerned about the stream I had been put into and suggested that I would need 'some practical skills when I left school at 15'. He suggested I change to commercial so I could get a job as a secretary. I changed to commercial. If I had been a boy, I don't think the suggestion would have been made. My gender influenced what my father thought I should learn. I didn't leave school at 15. I am grateful that I can type but high school chemistry would have been useful when I was learning physiology in my second year at university.

I have a middle name. At primary school, knowing someone's middle name was like knowing an intimate piece of knowledge about them because the middle name was a 'secret' name. My husband doesn't have a middle name. He is descended from a farming Sicilian family. In this culture, only

the rich had middle names, so his opinion of middle names was that they are foreign and only relevant to a certain class in society. Our name is a vital part of our identity, including class.

When I married, I took my husband's name. I wanted a change from my English heritage to something more 'exotic'. My husband's surname is Italian – Sicilian to be precise. Now, people who have never met me are surprised to find that I am not dark haired or dark skinned (as people tend to be from the south of Italy) but rather I am blond and white. They comment that '*Stagnitti* is obviously your married name.' *Stagnitti*, then, brings with it a perception of my origins which, when one sees me, is found not to be true.

Marked and unmarked identity

Names are linked to our identity and in our identity we can be 'marked' or 'unmarked' (Aveling, 2001). Aveling uses the term 'marked' to represent times when our identity is in contrast to those around us and we stand out from the crowd. She uses the term 'unmarked' to indicate times when our identity is similar to those around us and we blend into the crowd. Having been in situations where I was 'marked', I feel obvious, exposed, not 'one of them', an outsider, strange and alienated. Sometimes I want to hide and other times I think 'they have no idea'. In doing the latter, I silently unmark myself and I mark 'them'. The latter is also me taking a power position – rightly or wrongly.

This became particularly clear to me when, in 1991, my family and I lived in Ithaca, New York State in the United States of America. We arrived in winter, in snow and sleet. As the roads were icy and Ithaca has a good bus system, I took the bus instead of driving. Taking the bus in Ithaca was my first conscious experience of being 'marked' and white.

I had been travelling in and about Ithaca for a couple of months and was beginning to wonder where the other mothers with small children were. Maybe the lack of mothers and children on buses was a reflection of Ithaca's demographics? One morning, as I climbed up the bus stairs to put my money in the slot, my youngest daughter's hand in mine, I looked around for a seat. All I saw were black male faces (and some spares seats). I suddenly realised, white women didn't catch the bus, that's why I hadn't seen any! Aveling (2001) discusses her first encounter of being white when she contrasted a comment she overheard from her mother about 'a little black girl' (p. 37) with herself.

Standing momentarily at the front of the bus that day – the day I realised I was not behaving like a white woman – was my first conscious realisation I was 'white'. As Aveling (2001) noted 'my position of 'white' had been largely invisible to me' (p. 44). A week or so after this, I found the library. I had been looking for the Ithaca library because I enjoyed reading books to my girls and I also wanted something to read for myself. I walked in and looked around. There were white faces everywhere! White women drove their cars to the library and they took their children with them! I was 'unmarked' in

this place because I too was white, a mother, had small children and was interested in developing an identity for my children that included them being literate. That is, this identity included them being knowledgeable about print, story, books, and the understanding of how to use a community facility such as a library.

Travelling in North America, I had more experiences of having my identity revealed to me. Even amongst white women in the USA I was 'marked'. Standing in a line of families to see a show, the lady in front of me turned around and commented positively on my daughter's glasses. I thanked her and told her we liked them too. She looked at me in surprise then whispered to her friend, and never spoke to me again. I couldn't see the problem. She was white, I was white, we both had kids. I thought I was 'unmarked', what was going on? I had found myself in a similar situation to Aveling (2001) when she discussed her accent and people's reaction to it. To the white women in the queue, I was 'other', I was 'marked'. I was not American. On the same trip, at a function with white women who were married to academics, I commented on 'our nice place that had a brook running through the backyard'. The blank stares said it all – I was definitely 'other'. Along with my first sense of 'other' came the uniqueness of my married name. While many Americans saw me as 'other', my name also classed me as 'other' because it was not a surname associated with North America.

My eldest daughter went to school in Ithaca. Her classroom was a mini United Nations, with children from all over world. She was an international student in a foreign country. She was also 'marked' in the school she attended because of the different educational system she had come from. She was placed in the second year of school because she could read (she had finished her first year of school in Australia). She started in January but the class had been together since September the year before and had covered maths to 100. My daughter had covered maths to 10. She survived but it took years for her to recover her confidence in her own learning.

Culture and naming

Marrying into an Italian family brought with it expectations regarding the naming of our children. If we had followed tradition, as had been the case with my husband's name, we would have named our children after previous family members. This would have meant that one daughter would have been called *Giuseppina,* which is a female version of my father-in-law's name. Our other daughter would have been called *Rosaria*, after previous generations. Using this traditional system, you could predict the names of previous generations. We have broken tradition in naming our children and have used neither Italian nor Danish names. We chose names that we liked. So with the naming of our children, they are the first generation to have names that do not relate to family history.

THE LEARNER

Framing my name: extending educational boundaries addresses issues of name and the naming process and its impact on higher education pedagogy. In bringing together the perspectives of the authors, the book shows how students' names are an agency of their learning. The manner in which names are articulated impacts on how students relate to learning. The process of naming involves an ontology that is related to students' histories, their culture, their place and position within a social matrix of group and community. For educators, this means undergoing a scaffolding process of learning the background to names and naming processes and then applying this knowledge to an understanding of students.

'This book explores a wide and rich array of cultural stories and meanings, of hybrid forms and possibilities, or tradition and encounter in names and naming. It has great practical value and is a pedagogical investment of its own, but a possibly greater virtue is its ability to look at boundaries and ask about their role, to push beyond them but acknowledge their function and enduring presence, to offer ideas about how identity and place, names and roles are constructed and how these function.

In several chapters, we encounter students and teachers negotiating their local modus operandi based on cultural sensitivity and draw the conclusion of the key importance of an advance awareness of the need to think more seriously and systematically about personal names. In Margaret Kumar's discussion of names, we see how names and their multiple meanings is an instalment in the very process of global education itself, in which the expectations of teachers, lecturers and administrators about who they will be teaching and 'servicing', have been scrambled. The norm is less and less a norm. The editors, bring the perspectives of educators, concerned with effectiveness in education ('good' teaching) but also good effects from education ('just' teaching) and this double element pervades the ethical stance that the volume exhibits. This is one of its most ennobling characteristics.'

(Professor Joseph Lo Bianco, Foreword to *Framing my name: extending educational boundaries*.)

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