

Lisa Welleschik

**The inability to address others by name
or:
the name - syndrome**

Abstract

This psycho-onomastic article deals with the inhibition of addressing a person with their name – a topic which has not been discussed before. It is based on a psychotherapeutical study, where internet forums dealing with issues such as “shyness“ or “social anxiety” are studied. The phenomenon will be referred to as “name-syndrome”. It is the aim of this article to document and explain the aforementioned inhibition for the very first time. The topic is reflected on and linked with relevant aspects of psychotherapy and philosophy on the basis of a case study, internet posts and the author’s personal experience with people affected.

1. Lena, 37 - a case story¹

Lena, 37, is unable to address her partner by his name. She tried again and ageain: "Today I can do it, today I will address him with his name." When that failed, she thought to herself, "Maybe it's because I do not like his name. I choose another name, a nickname! "The attempt failed. Lena found no way to address her partner by name. Lena is ashamed of her inability and suffers from this inhibition. She describes the way she communicates with her partner as follows: "I approach him and start the sentence with "heeyy ...?" Mostly I just start to speak and wait for him to react." For Lena it was not possible to talk about this problem within their relationship.

By exploring the topic, Lena notes that her inhibition is most noticeable and disturbing in the partnership relationship but is not limited to it. She realizes that she addresses almost nobody by name, including her own mother. However, Lena recalls having addressed people by their names in her childhood. She especially remembers having called her mother “mom” on a regular basis. The ability to address persons by name was therefore there earlier and was lost later - through the development of an inhibition. As part of a therapy, she finds that her relationship with her parents, especially her mother, plays a major role. She realizes that she is angry with her mother. Anger provokes feelings of guilt in her which is why she does not dare to express this anger towards her mother. Lena is sure that the two phenomena are related. Sensitized to her now become aware of her anger on her mother, Lena explored the origin of this intense feeling. Important insights came to her watching her mother's dealings with Lena's own daughter. One scene Lena describes as revealing to her: "I visited my mother with my daughter Louisa, who was about one and a half years old. Louisa was sitting in the stroller. My mother came very close to Louisa and talked to her. Louisa grimaced. My mother poked Louisa on the nose. Louisa turned her face away and said "No!" The grandmother replied: "Why" no "? I just did like this!", and she repeated the unwanted touch of the face.”

Lena experiences anger and helplessness thinking of this scene, even a slight nausea. In the face of this event and her own emotional response, she realizes that she too was not respected by her mother when she said no as a child. She has also experienced that her signals were not understood, her reactions have had no effect, and her feelings have been deemed inappropriate when she expressed her need for boundaries.

To understand the development of Lena's inhibition, the role of the environment must also be considered. The father, an intellectual, rational man, had little understanding for feelings and emotions. Strongly expressed emotions seemed to make him feel uncomfortable. Lena's mother responded to Lena’s attempts

¹ Testimonial documented

to build boundaries by feeling hurt and withdrawing herself. Her father reprimanded her. The message that Lena understood was: "You must not offend your mother! This is selfish of you!" Lena's older sister Nora had a different temperament than Lena, more vivacious and less restrained. Lena recalls how the father reacted, when Nora expressed her feelings (of whatever quality): "Well, well, well! Now calm down!" When Lena witnessed conflicts between Nora and her parents it made her feel uncomfortable and intimidated. She thought to herself, "Stop, Nora, be reasonable!" She learned that this behavior was not wanted but considered as immature.

Lena longed for the approval of her parents. She was good at school and chose an education that her parents appreciated. She did not rebel, and was always "the reasonable one". Being "better" than her sister was like a guideline for Lena. Resistance against the parents was not part of Lena's way of dealing with them and therefore she never learned how to express resistance. For her, resistance was literally only possible in a dream: A recurring dream motive was to yell at her mother with the words "No!" or "Go away!".

2. Experience reports and first explanatory approaches

Lena is not alone in her experience. Internet forums contain numerous articles regarding the topic, some of which are cited below. The authors of the articles are looking for explanations and also for understanding - the relief, not to be the only one affected by the inhibition is expressed in such forums again and again. An Internet user turns to the Internet community as follows²:

Does anyone know what psychological background it can have if you never call your partner by name? I never did it in relationships. My current partner accuses me of that. I always used to avoid it and hoped the other one would not notice, or, at one point I thought that was normal. [...] I'm scared that it sounds weird when I say the name. [...] or my partner realizes that it does not sound good for him when I say his name.
(Pregunta)

"Pregunta" avoids saying the name because it could cause a threat to their relationship. She also finds a connection to expressing feelings between herself and her boyfriend:

On the other hand, my partner never spontaneously told me that he loves me. He says, he knows it's true, but it sounds funny to him when he says it. I think there may be a similar cause.

Like when saying the name, expressing the feelings involves the risk that the sound of the words says something different or more than one would like to say. "Pregunta" adds:

Then I had another thought that his name makes him human. He shares the name with many other people [...], but for me he is extraordinary and therefore he cannot get a "human" name.

If in love, one tends to idealize your beloved. It was described by Ernst Leisi that this raise of the other affects the way of addressing. On the one hand some couples tend to be shy to use the original name of the partner, but on the other hand something like a veneration of names could be established (Leisi 1980 p. 492 f). Worship and avoidance both indicate that the name under which one has met the loved one is kind of taboo [...] (ibid., p. 493)³

² <https://www.psychotherapiepraxis.at/archiv/viewtopic.php?t=30139>, 27.3.2018

³ Another reason may be found in the fact that the beginning of a couple relationship is one of the important passages in human life, that are often accompanied by the awarding of a new name (child baptism, monks, nuns, popes get a new name at the entrance to the Order or change of function, etc.). The renaming can create the dissolution of the old structure and previous relationships; the nominating partner "acquires" the nominated partner by the new name (ibid., p. 494). Whereas, the magical idea of having power over the person by giving or knowing the name plays a role - in Leisi's words: "By possessing the name (evidenced by the utterance) one gains power over a being [...]" (ibid., p. 495). It is no coincidence that one encounters the phenomenon of multiple naming on the one hand in the religious sphere and on the other hand in the couples` relationship.

„Pregunta“ remembers:

[...] When I was a child, there were a few teachers who had a way of saying my name that made me feel sick.
[...]

At this point a physical reaction is brought up. As described by Nübling (2017), there is a great deal of evidence that names are perceived like body parts and that changes of the name come close to manipulating the body.

An internet user with the pseudonym "kHaosprinzin" answers "Pregunta":

[...] I have the same problem. I cannot call anyone by their name! And I hate it when someone calls me by my first name or "miss..." !! This is so terrible for me, I get really scared, I sweat, I get cold hands ... I do not understand.

For "kHaosprinzin" being addressed by her name feels threatening. The addressee comes scarily close, crosses a border, takes possession and endangers her own integrity.⁴

Even only in imagination, Lena feels ashamed when she would call her partner by his name:

[...] I would become too visible and reveal everything about myself ... how I see him, how I feel for him. how good I think I know him ... it would feel like suddenly being naked in front of him.

The dialogue in the internet forum leads "Pregunta" to the following consideration:

[...] I used to be shy in puberty, I was quiet and observing. Maybe for me it means calling him by name, suddenly being part of the action, getting in touch with what's happening? To call the other one by name means to make contact. [...]

She repeats her well-known behavior of not letting herself in: by not saying her friend's name, "Pregunta" does avoid some intensity of contact and involvement with her partner.

The various feelings and fears that are mentioned in the quotes are of course individually motivated and developed. It seems obvious however, is that the selection (first name, surname, nickname, other names such as mom or grandpa ...) and the saying of the name reveal much about one's own share of the relationship and the relationship to the addressed person. In the following chapter there will be taken a closer look to coherences.

1. Name, identity and person

The own name is a significant part of one's identity. In order to be able to develop an sense of identity, physical existence is necessary, so that one is able to say, think and feel: "I am" (see Calvello 1983, pp. 60f.). However, a living body alone is not enough: it is only through naming that man is made known, distinguishable, identifiable and existent as a single entity with its own identity (see Debus 2003, p.77).

Being names is also a precondition for building a relationship with yourself and with others, and for maturing into a person. A person becomes a person through his encounter with the other; the naming of the other is an evocation of the person. At the same time, the calling of the other also evokes one's own person and is therefore both social and personal (Calvello 1983, 119f.). Paul Tournier expresses this tension when he says, "What separates and distinguishes me from other people is the fact that I am called by my name; but what unites me with them is the very fact that they call me" (Tournier, 1975, p. 5). Equally to the point Georges Gusdorf says: "Personal name has an element of both identity and difference. Personal name separates me from others yet puts me in relationship with others. I am named because I

⁴ It can be assumed that a person who finds it unpleasant to be addressed by his/her name will be at least very cautious about even addressing someone by name. The development of the name – syndrome in some cases may be connected to this phenomenon.

am not alone" (Gusdorf, quoted from Calvello 1983, p.120). In these quotes one can already feel the tension that has its source in being named.

2. Sense of identity and (suppressed) aggression

The term aggression is usually negatively connoted and often associated with destructive behavior, violence, destructiveness, etc., and seen as something to be rejected. This understanding is misleading (see Schmid, 1996, p. 473). Aggression is a fundamental part of human life force. It is necessary for the development, preservation and promotion of identity (ibid. p. 474 f.). This concept of aggression can be even better understood when one looks at the origin of the word: it includes the Latin word "gradus" which means "a step". Ad + gradus - figuratively "a step toward something, an approach", *aggredi* means "to approach something", "to attack something". The power of aggression can be understood in two directions: as a force for separation, avoidance and differentiation, as well as a force for confrontation, affection and encounter. This power is often misunderstood and suppressed whereas virtues such as modesty, generosity, tolerance, courtesy and consideration are highly acclaimed and appreciated. It happens that one's own aggression can no longer be recognized as such but expresses itself as compassion, guilt and depression, and is turned against oneself (see ibid., p. 480).

One's own identity is found as an affirmation of one's own in the negation of the other - just as in adolescence the young man distances himself from his parents in order to find his own self (see Schmid, 1996, p. 476). Only when a person can distinguish him- or herself as an individual from others, he/she will also be able to approach another person, to confront and to meet him/her. For a dialogue is only possible between two separate persons, encounter can only happen with the help of aggression (compare ibid., p. 475 f.) Who cannot say "no" cannot say "I" (ibid., p.475). Who cannot say "I" cannot address the other by name. The statement: "You are A!" - implies two more statements, namely; "I am not A!" and; "I am B!". At the same time, therefore, the person presents him- or herself to the other person as an approachable, touchable and visible person who responds, is responsible and enters into relationship. Responsibility presupposes a unity of the "I" (the sense of identity), since it is an answer to all that one does and has done before, beyond the present (see Derrida, cited after Kaplow 2002). The denial of addressing a person by their name avoids this separation on the one hand. On the other hand, the gratuity which is provided when addressing someone by their name is *not* granted.⁵

The connection between suppressed aggression and the uncertainty regarding one's identity is understandable: the development of one's own identity means finding answers to questions such as: "Who am I? Where do I begin? Where do I end? Where can I set my boundaries?". Finding those answers is very difficult without access to one's own aggression. Such an impaired, "unhealthy" (see Calvello, 1983) sense of identity can subsequently be expressed in merging (loss of one's own autonomy) or detachment and disconnectedness (Calvello, 1983, p. 187ff). Lena's narratives in the following quotations exemplify how the difficulty of regulating closeness and distance can manifest:

My mother played with Louisa and crawled therefor on the floor. Nora was there too. She sat next to them on a big gym ball. Mother then approached Nora, playfully pretending to push her off the ball. Nora stayed seated and said to our mother, "Are you crazy?" I could hardly bear to witness when our mother came so close to her. I wanted to scream that Nora should go away! But she stayed seated and could keep our mother at distance if she wanted to. I, on the other hand, needed the physical distance between my mother and myself.

⁵ In this context, the phenomenon of forgetting names, which is often mentioned in interviews on this topic, should also be mentioned. The sudden not-knowing of the name can in some cases also have its origin in an unconscious avoidance of saying the name. In this case, the person would perceive the inner conflict less strongly, since the problem is apparently located in the "forgetting".

Lena recognizes her limitation in her ability to gain a proper amount of space between her and her mother. Her only option is to “escape” and withdraw herself and create a physical distance between her and her mother. Her distress becomes visible in the following scenes:

I asked my sister, "What should I do if mom wants to have Louisa for herself?" There was no real reason for that, it was a fearful fantasy. Nora told me that as a mother I have the custody and if our mother wants Louisa for herself, she could forget it. I knew that theoretically, but I could not believe that I had the right to say no to my mom.

Now a mother herself, Lena's conflict gets acute again and again: Eventually she would have to say "no" to her own mother in order to be able to say "yes" to her own daughter - an almost insurmountable difficulty for her:

I talked to my husband about my feelings towards my mother ... I asked him how he feels regarding his mother ... I remember very well that I asked him: "So you are not your mother anymore?!" He answered quite persuasively: "I was never my mother!" I do still remember how surprised I was when I heard this answer.

3. avoidance behavior in intimate relationships

It is noticeable that the name syndrome frequently occurs in intimate relationships. The naturally close proximity increases the difficulty of exploring one's own border. The risks and consequences of both demarcation and showing affection are even greater through emotional attachment. (partly unconscious) strategies, the aim is to reduce the risk of being hurt in one's own feelings. "Pregunta" writes:

Maybe he's a human and I'm not? Maybe I am not equal to him? Or maybe I do not deserve a friend, no relationship? [...] It can also be that one is sure of one's feelings, but one does not feel "worthy". That, I think, is true in my case. [...]

"Pregunta's feeling of being" unworthy", as well as the above-mentioned idolization of her boyfriend, creates distance between him and her, with which she averts her aggression. By exaggerating her partner, she removes him from herself. This phenomenon is also known from numerous film scenes: phrases like: "It's not because of you, it's because of me!" and: "You deserve someone better than me!" are used in a stereotypical way when it comes to break off. The exaltation of the other and the devaluation of oneself still has the same effect like: "Go away!", or "I want to get away from you!". In this way, direct aggression is avoided. The message is communicated in a disguise and/or through passive aggressive behavior.⁶

4. Does the name-syndrome have any impact to the vis-à-vis?

The hope, expressed at some point by those affected, that their avoidance behavior would not be noticed by their vis-à-vis, is not met. "Rauchschwalbe" shares her experience:

[...] my husband never called me by my name. Always only: you, you, hello, hello, etc. I found it terrible. Often, I felt that so bad that I almost cried [...]⁷

„Anne043327“ also clearly notices not to be addressed by her husband. The feelings triggered by that behavior she describes as follows:

[...] I think it's so terribly frustrating. [...] I told him how this hurt me and that I wish that he would say my name [...]. What's wrong with me and my name? [...] I'm so ashamed to write about it.⁸

⁶ There is no desire for separation in the beforementioned relationships. The aggression is needed here for the preservation of one's own identity and the possibility to contribute to the regulation of closeness and distance in this relationship.

⁷ <http://www.med1.de/Forum/Psychologie/74780/?p=2>, 29.4.2018

⁸ <https://www.urbia.de/archiv/forum/th-584386/mein-mann-sagt-nie-meinem-namen.html>, 1.4.2018

"wintersonnenschein" feels devalued by not being called by her name:

[...] [he] has never called me by my name. When he sends messages or emails, he always starts with "hello you," "hey you," "how are you", "you, what are you doing today" That bothers me a lot, my name is not "you", I have a name! He also does not say to his dog, "you, with me!" (wintersonnenschein)⁹

„Sufragette“ is hardly ever addressed by her name by her psychotherapist. She longs for it though:¹⁰

[...] I would wish that she would address me with my name. [...] I really like that [...] When she did it only once during the lesson, my heart has risen. [...] Maybe because it sounded like she was explaining something only to me and not something she might explain to each client [...]

„Siri81“ understands this desire because her therapist addresses her by her name and she remembers the feeling of hearing her own name from him:¹¹

[...] Being called by my name had something so caring, paternal. As if someone would take care of me.

It becomes clear that the naming or not naming of the name can have a significant impact in a positive and negative way at relationship level to the relationship. Not being able to address the other by their name signifies a limitation and a burden for the person affected by the inhibition as well as for their environment, in particular partners (so to speak persons who are secondarily affected).

5. Is change possible?

Lena's high motivation to understand her inhibition resulted from her hope of overcoming this inhibition:

I do not want to hide anymore and make myself small. I want to be able to show myself with my rough edges. And I want to be able to express when someone is important to me by saying the name.

She suffers from experiencing herself as without contours and as too adjusted:

Once a colleague of mine said about me: "How can someone not like you, I cannot imagine!" When I think about it, that statement shakes me. I believe that statement meant, "You are so lacking of contours, how can anyone be against you?"

Lena's psychological strain enables her to develop a willingness to develop contours (boundaries), to show them and to bear the risks:

I participated in a self-experience encounter group, although I usually avoided group situations [...]. In "one-to-one setting" I have a good feeling for how I have to be so that my vis-a-vis likes me. That did not work in the group. Over time, I've come to appreciate that. If I cannot please everyone, then I do not have to. Then I can be what I want, because there can always be someone who does not like it anyway. I think that's when I first learned to listen to what I actually feel ... and not focus my attention first to what the other person wants me to do.

Being member of a group and show herself allowed Lena to further develop and define her own person and identity. This change of behaviour did cause some fears as well:

For quite some time I expected to be reprimanded by the leader after the group session for speaking out. I almost waited for it to happen. As my father did when I had a fight with my mother.

⁹<http://bfriends.brigitte.de/foren/uber-das-kennenlernen/375886-er-spricht-meinen-vornamen-nicht-aus.html>, 1.4.2018

¹⁰ <https://www.psychotherapiepraxis.at/pt-forum/viewtopic.php?f=20&t=26673&hilit=namen>

¹¹ <https://www.psychotherapiepraxis.at/pt-forum/viewtopic.php?f=20&t=26673&hilit=namen>

It was important for Lena to have the repeated experience of expressing her feelings without being reprimanded or rejected. On the difference between group situation and non-group situation, she continues:

In the group situation it is easier for me to be myself, because I do not feel that I owe anything to anyone. In the group I am already able to address the others by their names. During the breaks, it is much harder for me. For example, if someone wants to be friends with me. Then I have the feeling that I am not allowed to say no but believe I am obliged somehow.

Lena perceives the fact that others experience what she is doing as protective. So no one in retrospect (as her father used to do) can claim the power to judge alone.

When I say something in the group, I'm glad that the others witness. Afterwards no one can judge alone that I was somehow wrong or hurtful. I get feedback from several different people. That makes me feel safe.

Lena also experiences that her friendships develop:

When I have experienced and then overcome a dispute or a conflict in friendships, I feel more secure afterwards. I can address those of my friends by their names who I am able to have conflict with.

Lena learns to perceive her own feelings, to trust that her feelings can "be right" can be expected to others. The way of change, is to further develop and shape one's identity in contact with other. One's identity then can become more differentiated and contoured and the scope of action in relationships broadened.

6. Conclusions

The inhibition to address other people by their name has a significant impact on a relationship level and results from impaired identity development. This arises from the insufficient ability to distinguish oneself from other persons, for example, when one's own aggression cannot be sufficiently perceived and lived but must be suppressed. For the formation of one's own identity, aggression has proved indispensable in order to distinguish oneself from the other and differentiate oneself. Furthermore, aggression is needed to be able to turn to the other and to be able to encounter one another. The moment a person calls their vis-a-vis by name, these two movements are implied. This inhibition can be overcome or reduced by making new experiences in relationships by subsequently acquiring or strengthening the ability to express boundaries.

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