Child-Naming Patterns: a Tool to Assist with Family Reconstitution
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A major focus of work for the genealogist is the study of names, including their meaning and relationships to others. The task of assigning a given or Christian name to a child is simple, but originates from cultural, historical, and familial customs. The choice of a name usually came from the parents. In different cultures, societies, religions, and time-periods, the assigning of a name was not random, but came from a deep historical and/or cultural background.

Names identify individuals. The name also "defines an individual's position in his family and in society at large; it defines his social personality." In other words, it classifies a person.[1] Assigning a name to a child classifies the child in various categories. It defines him as Christian (or other group), classifies him as to gender, suggests a social status, and even implies a time period when he was born.[2]

Most genealogists have encountered, and possibly gained assistance from, the inheritance of given names. Historically, some groups had stringent customs for the assigning of a name to a child. Knowing these customs can assist in determining the correct parentage of the child. Hence, knowing the naming patterns used in a given time and culture can be very important to the family historian as he or she reconstitutes families. This essay addresses how names were assigned to children. Its focus deals with North American and Western European naming customs that have been the subject of scholarly studies.[3]

As parents named their children, the first option they had was tradition. The commentator William Jenkyn stated, "A good name is a thread tyed about the finger, to make us mindful of the errand we came into the world to do for our Master."[4] Names really are cultural documents that tell us much about our ancestors' mentality.

Naming customs have been used for centuries. Of John the Baptist, Luke tells us, "...they called him Zacharias, *after the name of his father*. And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John [Jehovah has been gracious]. And they said unto her, *There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name.*"[5] It is obvious from this dialogue that naming customs were in effect among the Jews at the time of Christ.

In Saxon England, the child was never named after his father, and was rarely named even for a remote ancestor. The latter was increasingly done, however, from the eighth century onwards.[6] Don Steel states:

> Christian names may therefore be of considerable value to the genealogist, but it must always be borne in mind that descent is but one, although the most important, of the ways in which the unusual Christian name may be obtained. The English genealogist is fortunate in that no limitation has ever prevailed on the names which may be given to a

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[1] Stephen Wilson, *The Means of Naming: A Social and Cultural History of Personal Naming in Western Europe* (Bristol, Penn.: UCL Press Limited, 1998), xii.

[2] Scott Smith-Bannister, *Names and Naming Patterns in England 1538-1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 19.

[3] D. J. Steel, MA, FSG, "The Descent of Christian Names," *Genealogists Magazine* 14 (June 1962): 34.

[4] John J. Waters, "Naming and Kinship in New England: Guilford patterns and usage, 1693-1759," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 138 (July 1984): 161-162.

[5] Luke 1:59-61 (KJV), italics added.

[6] Steel, "The Descent of Christian Names," 35.

child. In France an official list is still issued containing a selection of forenames, and no name of a child will be registered unless it occurs on this list. A similar limitation prevails in several Roman Catholic countries where the choice is limited to names of saints. A whole avenue of research is thus barred to many a continental genealogist.[7]

Two of the questions that arise in the study of naming are:

1. How prevalent was name sharing among the children of our families, and particularly between the children of one generation and the preceding generations?
2. Did children tend to bear unique forenames, implying that the culture saw them as unique individuals, or did they share names with parents and grandparents, uncles and aunts, implying they were construed more as elements of an ongoing family or lineage and less as individuals?[8]

As stated by Daniel Scott Smith, "Assigning a name to a child is loaded with fundamental social meaning." Bestowing a given name makes the admission of a child into the family group and locates it in familial space with respect to past and future generations. The very act of choosing a name suggests much about the values, traditions, and preoccupations of those involved in making the selection. [9]

Effect of Godparents on Child-Naming

Although kinship is the most common way in which given names are passed on, it is most dangerous to assume it is the only way. The most common of the secondary causes concerns godparents or sponsors at baptism. Even here, there are useful clues for the genealogist. Frequently the godparent is a relative.[10]

Godparenthood was an important influence in determining the name given to a child at baptism in many west European countries. Dutch godparents were used to assist in and affirm the baptismal ceremony and to stand for the baptized infant as his or her spiritual parents. As with names, the choice of godparents could be an instrumental or an expressive act.[11]

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Scotland, children were normally named for either relations or godparents. Mr. E. Chitty suggests, "In certain periods naming after godparents was the orthodox practice and only the fact that godparents were most often chosen from within the family produces the appearance that 'family names' were deliberately perpetuated."[12]

In the Anglican and Roman Catholic baptismal tradition, parents honored godparents by naming children for them, as recompense for undertaking their spiritual education. Whom did

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[7] Ibid, 43.
[8] Darrett B. Rutman and Anita H. Rutman, *A Place in Time: Explicatus* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 85.
[9] Daniel Scott Smith, "Child-Naming Practices as Cultural and Familial Indicators," *Local Population Studies* 32 (Spring 1974): 17-27.
[10] Steel, "The Descent of Christian Names," 39.
[11] Edward H. Tebbenhoff, "Tacit Rules and Hidden Family Structures: Naming Practices and Godparentage in Schenectady, New York: 1680-1800," *Journal of Social History* 18, no. 4 (Summer 1985): 575.
[12] D. J. Steel, MA, FSG and Mrs. A.E.F. Steel, *National Index of Parish Registers: Sources of Births, Marriages and Deaths Before 1837* I (London: Society of Genealogists, 1967), 112.

parents usually select as godparents? Parents usually asked grandparents first, and then siblings to act in this capacity for each child in turn.[13]

A study of the parish records of Banbury, Oxford, England from 1558 to 1559 revealed that 86 percent of the children were named for their godparents. Thus, it can be concluded that sixteenth-century English children were named for godparents rather than for the hope of carrying on a family name.[14]

One of the most complete studies of godparentage is that of Jacques Dupaquier, who analyzed families in the Vexin area of France from 1540 to 1900. He concludes that the spiritual parents were essentially chosen from among the kin. Specifically, "For the first child, [the godparents were] the paternal grandfather and the maternal grandmother; for the second, the father's eldest brother and mother's eldest sister, then for the rest one went further afield."[15]

Table 1
Naming Patterns in Vexin, France

Child	For Whom Named
1st son	Father's father
2nd son	Father's eldest brother
1st daughter	Mother's mother
2nd daughter	Mother's eldest sister
3rd child	Distant relatives rather than aunts, uncles, or parents

Scott Smith-Bannister studied child-naming in England from 1538 to 1700, using parish registers that named godparents. In the sixteenth-century registers, he found that 80 to 90 percent of children were named for their godparents. However, by 1700, naming for godparents had dropped to 40 percent. In all decades after 1620, there was a steady decline in naming for godparents. This was perhaps influenced by the Puritan beliefs encroaching on the English society. The Puritans in New England did not use godparents and their naming switched almost exclusively to naming older children for their parents.[16]

Child-Naming in England

The English did not have strong naming customs. The practice of giving a child three godparents in England was made an ecclesiastical rule in 1661. Of these godparents, two were of the child's own sex and was one of the opposite gender. A beneficed clergyman of the Church of England was obliged to perform the ceremony of baptism when required by a parishioner, and he was expected to give the child whatever name the godparents selected. In *The Dictionary of Genealogy,* FitzHugh indicates that godparents were almost certainly the second most powerful influence in the choice of a child's name. He purports that this may be the reason why in the

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[13] Gloria L. Main, "Naming Children in Early New England," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* XXVII, no. I (Summer 1996): 9.

[14] Erik Chitty, "Naming After Godparents," *The Genealogists' Magazine* 16, no. 2 (June 1969): 47-49.

[15] Girard de Villethierry, "La vie des Gens Maries" (Paris, 1696) in Jacques Dupaquier, "Naming Practices, Godparenthood, and Kinship in the Vexin, 1540-1900," *Journal of Family History* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1980): 154-155.

[16] Smith-Bannister, 29-48.

sixteenth century, more than one child of a family often received the same given name, although both children were living.[17]

This author studied English child-naming patterns from 1558 to 1740, and drew these conclusions. From 1621 to 1680, 42.4 percent of oldest sons were named for the father's father and 18.4 percent of first daughters were named for the father's mother. In the later cohort of 1681 to 1740, 36.8 percent of first sons were named for the father's father and 36.8 percent of first daughters were named for the mother's mother. This suggests that seventeenth-century English society was patriarchal, especially for firstborn children. In both time periods, about 24 percent of the eldest three children of both genders were named for their parents. The significant find is that first sons were usually named for the paternal grandfather.[18]

Smith-Bannister states, "The most important determinant of the names given to children was the proportion of children named after a godparent.... the proportion of children named after godparents was greater than that named after a parent."[19] The naming for parents increased over time. In 1545 15% of boys and five percent of girls were named for parents. This compares to 31% of boys and 16% of girls by 1700. With boys there was a clear increase in father-son name sharing in England. There was a deliberate movement toward naming for parents. This change shows a lessening of the use of godparents and the strengthening of the nuclear family over time. This was partly because the responsibility of raising the child spiritually and educationally shifted from godparents to parents by 1700.

Child-Naming in Middlesex County, Virginia

Darrett and Anita Rutman studied the naming of children in Middlesex County, Virginia from 1650 to 1750. The results are shown below. The table shows the percent of children sharing forenames with parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and deceased siblings:

Table 2
Naming Patterns in Middlesex County, Virginia[20]

Birth Order	Parent or Grandparent	Aunt or Uncle	Deceased Sibling
1st son	71.1	17.8	0
2nd son	63.8	26.3	1.3
3rd son	33.7	30.6	8.2
1st daughter	65.5	15.8	0
2nd daughter	58.5	18.6	1.7
3rd daughter	29.9	32.5	5.2

Instances of shared names are highly suggestive of a familial rather than an individual view of children. They are not definitive, however. It is clear that the naming of at least the first

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[17] Terrick V.H. FitzHugh, *The Dictionary of Genealogy* (Sherborne, Dorset: Alphabooks, 1985), 127; E.G. Withycombe, *Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959), xxx.
[18] Richard Woodruff Price, "Child-Naming Patterns in Three English Villages, 1558-1740: Whickham, Durham; Bottesford, Leicester; and Hartland, Devon," unpublished master's thesis, (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, December 1987), 72, 73, 88, 91.
[19] Smith-Bannister, 53, 63, 184-185.
[20] Rutman, 88.

two children of each gender was usually for parents and grandparents. Subsequent children were frequently named for aunts and uncles, as well as deceased siblings.[21]

Child-Naming in New England Families

More studies have been done on child-naming in New England than in any other area. Daniel Scott Smith has done major research on child-naming patterns of New England, initially focusing on Hingham, Massachusetts. His results showed that 74 percent of firstborn daughters before 1735 were named for their mothers, and 67 percent of firstborn sons were named for their fathers. David Hackett Fischer proposed that naming children for their parents was a supremely New England folk phenomenon – that the custom originated as a product of covenant theology among Puritan emigrants. This theology eliminated the use of godparents, giving parents the major responsibility to be spiritual guides for their children instead of passing it to someone else.[22]

The settlers of Hingham came from a culture where first children were usually named for grandparents, so why the abrupt change on their arrival in the New World? Three English villages were studied and compared. All three favored naming children for grandparents over parents, especially girls. This same preference for grandparents over parents emerges clearly in Virginia. Fischer identifies "covenant theology" as the source of New England's naming customs, because it enhances the spiritual role of the parents within the family.[23]

Dutch Child-Naming Patterns

One of the cultures with strong traditions for ancestral naming is that of the Dutch. New Netherland (New York) and South Africa both were of Dutch background, and their naming customs mirrored the Dutch in the Netherlands.[24]

In Dutch cultures, in most cases (79 percent of the time) the first son was named for the father's father and the second son was named for the mother's father. The first daughter was usually named for the father's mother (64 percent of the time), and the second daughter was named for the mother's mother. There was also frequent use of the necronym – when a child died, the next child of that gender was usually given the name of the deceased sibling. Also, if a father died while the mother was pregnant, the child would be named for the father. If a mother died in childbirth or shortly thereafter, the child would be named for her. Dutch families alternated between naming for the father's family and the mother's family. The first child was named for the father's family; the second child was named for the mother's family; and names of subsequent children continued to alternate between paternal and maternal relatives.[25]

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[21] Ibid, 89.

[22] Main, 2-3.

[23] Ibid, 4-9.

[24] Marian S. Henry, "Dutch Naming Practices in Colonial New York," *New England Ancestors* 8, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 31; R. A. P. Hare, "Naming Customs," *The Genealogists' Magazine* 14, no. 4 (December 1962): 121-122.

[25] Frans Van Poppel, Gerrit Bloothoft, Doreen Gerritzen and Jan Verduin, "Naming for Kin and the Development of Modern Family Structures: An Analysis of a Rural Region in the Netherlands in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *History of the Family* 4, no. 3 (1999): 261-295.

Table 3
Dutch Naming Patterns

Child	For Whom Named
1st son	Father's father
2nd son	Mother's father
Subsequent sons	Uncles or father
1st daughter	Father's mother
2nd daughter	Mother's mother
Subsequent daughters	Aunts or mother

The Dutch in New York and New Jersey almost invariably named children for relatives. There was (1) a strong tendency to name the first child for a paternal grandparent; (2) some tendency to name the first child, if a boy, for the wife's first husband; (3) a tendency to alternate, taking one child's name from the father's side, the next child's name from the mother's side, the following child's name from the father's side, et cetera; and (4) the tendency to repeat, giving the name of a child that died to the next child.[26]

Scandinavian Child-Naming Patterns

Scandinavian children were usually named after grandparents. As a general rule, the following table outlines the pattern Scandinavians used in assigning names:

Table 4
Scandinavian Naming Patterns

Child	For Whom Named
1st son	Father's father
2nd son	Mother's father
Subsequent sons	Great-grandfathers
1st daughter	Father's mother
2nd daughter	Mother's mother
Subsequent daughters	Great-grandparents

However, there were exceptions. Sometimes children were named after a father's deceased wife. If a first wife died and the husband remarried, the first daughter was often given the name of the first wife. Also, children named for grandparents might be "out of order" if one of the grandparents had recently died. Likewise, children might also be named out of the usual pattern if an important relative, such as an uncle or aunt, had recently died. If one of the parents died prior to the child being baptized, the child would be named after him or her. If necessary,

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[26] Rosalie Fellows Bailey, FASG, "Dutch Systems in Family Naming: New York – New Jersey," *Genealogical Publications of the National Genealogical Society* 12 (May 1954): 14.

the name was feminized, such as Oline for Ole. This was especially important for carrying on names of deceased relatives.[27]

Scottish Child-Naming Patterns

Scotland, being a country appreciative of its traditions, had a highly developed system of naming children. The general custom, to which there were some variations, was to name children as follows:

Table 5
Scottish Naming Patterns

Child	For Whom Named
1st son	Father's father
2nd son	Mother's father
3rd son	Father
1st daughter	Mother's mother
2nd daughter	Father's mother
3rd daughter	Mother

A variation exists. The eldest son might be named after the mother's father and the eldest daughter named for the father's mother. Occasionally the second son and daughter would be named for the parents instead of grandparents. Another variation was to call the third daughter after one of the great-grandmothers instead of the mother. In such a case, the fourth daughter would usually be named after the mother.[28]

Naming Patterns of Other Cultures

Other cultures carried child-naming customs. The Jews, Quakers, Germans, and Irish tended to follow certain patterns.

Assigning given names to Jewish children had some strict customs. The Ashkenazi Jews used the following practices. Children were named after their ancestors, but a Jewish child was never given the same name as that of a living forebear. If the grandparents were dead, the first son was named for his paternal grandfather and the second son for the maternal grandfather. If the grandfathers were alive, the names of the great-grandfathers were used. Only a posthumous child was given the same name as his father. Daughters were not always named after their grandmothers, although such was very common. The ban on naming for a living progenitor was just as strict with the women as with the men.[29]

Sephardic Jews had a much simpler custom, which was of far greater help to the genealogist. The eldest son was named for his father's father; the second son was named for his mother's father; the third son was named for his paternal great-grandfather; and thereafter the parents had a free choice. Daughters were similarly named after their female ancestors. There

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[27] Richard L. Hooverson, "Understanding Naming Patterns: Will the Real Ole Olson Please Stand Up," *Heritage Quest Magazine* 20, no. 3 (June 2004): 71-72.
[28] Gerald Hamilton-Edwards, *In Search of Scottish Ancestry* (London: Phillimore & Co. Ltd, 1983), 71-72.
[29] Edgar R. Samuel, "Jewish Naming Customs," *The Genealogists' Magazine* 14, no. 2 (June 1962): 44-45.

was no hesitation about using the names of living relatives or parents in Sephardic families. The same name was, however, never given to two surviving siblings.[30]

German children were usually given two names. The first was a spiritual biblical name such as Johann or Maria. The second was a secular name and the one they usually went by. It is this second name that was often taken from family traditions. These patterns were not always adhered to, and as German emigrants began new lives in America, many anglicized their names and began to adopt American naming customs.[31]

Table 6
German Naming Patterns

Child	For Whom Named
1st son	Father's father
2nd son	Mother's father
3rd son	Father
1st daughter	Mother's mother
2nd daughter	Father's mother
3rd daughter	Mother

David Hackett Fischer in *Albion's Seed* discusses four migrating groups, or folkways, who came into North America from the British Isles. They were (1) the Puritans who came from East Anglia to Massachusetts between 1629 and 1641; (2) the cavaliers and their indentured servants who came from the south of England into the Chesapeake Bay between 1642 and 1675; (3) the Quakers who came from the English north midlands to Delaware and Pennsylvania from 1675 to 1725; and (4) the Scots, Irish, and Anglos from the English borderlands who settled in Appalachia between 1717 and 1775. Of these four folkways, the Quakers showed the most distinctive naming pattern. They tended toward a much different pattern from the English, New England, or German customs. They were the only group to show a more equitable honoring of both the father's line and the mother's line when it came to naming children. Though these were not iron-clad, the pattern is clearly discernable:[32]

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[30] Ibid, 45-46.
[31] Anne S. Riepe, "German Naming Customs," *Riepe Roots: Surname Genealogy*, http://www.rieperotts.com/pages/Names/customs.htm.
[32] "Quaker Naming Patterns for Children," *The OTHER Chester County Site!*, http://chester-county-genealogy.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?it and David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 502-507.

Table 7
Quaker Naming Patterns

Child	For Whom Named
1st son	Mother's father
2nd son	Father's father
3rd son	Father
1st daughter	Father's mother
2nd daughter	Mother's mother
3rd daughter	Mother

According to a study of nineteenth-century child-naming patterns of western Ireland, it was traditional to name the elder children for grandparents, frequently of the paternal side. If the maternal relatives were more influential, then the children might be named more often for the mother's relatives. The first two children of each gender were named for their grandparents. The third children were usually named for other relatives, especially for deceased siblings. If relatives were prominent, such as an uncle who was a Catholic priest, then there was a tendency to name children for them. Children were also often named for unmarried relatives, deceased relatives, and godparents.[33]

Table 8
Irish Naming Patterns

Child	For Whom Named
1st son	Father's father
2nd son	Mother's father
3rd son	Other relatives
1st daughter	Father's mother
2nd daughter	Mother's mother
3rd daughter	Other relatives

Conclusion

A problem often facing the genealogist is which of three John Smiths living in the same village contemporaneously was the ancestor who married Jane Doe. By understanding naming patterns, it may be possible to draw conclusions based on important naming customs.[34] Although naming-patterns can provide powerful clues to identifying family relationships, they can also be frustratingly misleading. When researching any family, it is necessary to analyze all data, and with the preponderance of evidence, use the naming patterns to assist in drawing a final conclusion. Child-naming can be a useful tool when combined with other evidence. But keep in mind that our ancestors didn't necessarily follow a script when they named their children.

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[33] Richard Breen, "Naming Practices in Western Ireland," *Man* 17, no. 4 (December 1982): 703-705.
[34] Penny Bonnar, "Unpuzzling the Past Via Naming Patterns," *GenToday-L Archive* (October 1999), http://www.genealogytoday.com/news/archive/1099news.htm.

Clearly, assigning a name to a child had many different variables. However, understanding the typical patterns used by different cultures and nationalities can be of great help to a family historian. Sometimes the details we discover about an ancestor can be sketchy. At some point, the puzzle we are putting together seems like a brick wall, which needs to come down. Understanding child-naming patterns may be the solution for breaking down some of these walls.

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