Forms and Norms: Theorizing Immigration-Influenced Name Changes in Canada

Diane Dechief Canada

Abstract

Canadian immigration and settlement practices have been altering individuals' names since the mid-1800s. From the common explanations of immigration officials engaging in novel orthography as they completed forms, to families altering their names to make them easier for their neighbours to pronounce, a range of dominant cultural influences were at work. Today, these forces continue; they are evident in such technobureaucratic minutiae as maximum character lengths for permanent residents' names, and in the decadelong policy encouraging people with the religiously-significant Sikh names 'Kaur' and 'Singh' to remove these names before applying to immigrate (CBC, July 2007). They are also heard in day-to-day introductions as some newcomers choose to use common English or French names to present themselves, and to potentially make themselves more employable (Ng et al., 2007).

With these and other scenarios in mind I ask, in what ways and through what means do minority culture members and migrants to Canada change their names? What roles do legislation, policy and state regulated data collection procedures have in these shifts? How are names altered through less official interactions? What implications do these name changes have for Canada as a nation-state? What are the outcomes in terms of nationalism or cultural pluralism?

Introduction

Through Canadian immigration and settlement practices, individual's names have been undergoing alterations since the mid-1800s, Personal names serve to identify individuals and to create links to cultures and nations, yet name alterations that result in distancing migrants' names from their ethnic origins frequently occur. From the common explanations of immigration officials engaging in novel orthography as they completed forms, to families altering their names to make them easier for their neighbours to pronounce, a range of dominant cultural influences have been at work, and they continue.

Although names play a significant role in our day-to-day existences, within Canada they are not widely taken up as a subject of academic research. This project focuses on personal name shifts experienced as part of immigration to and settlement in Canada, characterized by newcomers' integration into dominant cultures. It seeks to explore and make visible both the official and the unofficial means through which individuals' names are changed. Personal names are situated as identifiers that sometimes create tension or demonstrate transition between countries of origin and dominant Canadian cultures. There are many potential reasons for changes to names: choices made by migrants, the need to use names in a milieu of either English or French, the reluctance of members of Canada's dominant cultures to pronounce and use less familiar names, and structures of institutional information processing.

Federal legislation supports individual's rights to exercise our varied cultures and identify ourselves with names from languages other than English and French. Canada's Multiculturalism Act states "persons belonging to ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities shall not be denied the

right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion or to use their own language" yet for many migrants to Canada, this statement of rights does not translate into maintaining the use of their origin names even though personal names are key derivations of many cultures. The numbers of people who have experienced name shifts within Canada has not been tabulated, but based on the shifts in legal names apparent from provincial gazettes, it is not a small number.

We can better understand the numbers of people who may contemplate name shifts by examining census data. The 2006 census tells us that one in five residents of Canada has migrated to live here (CIC 2007). Further, one in six residents of Canada identifies as being a 'visible minority' meaning that in terms of colour of skin, language, and possibly name, these individuals are differentiated from members of dominant cultures in Canada. Between 1997 and 2006, well over one million people migrated to Canada from countries where neither English nor French is an official language, and are of ethnic origins that suggest they are likely to be considered as visible minorities within Canada (CIC 2007), During the processes of settling in Canada, a number of people from these visible minority groups will have found it necessary to change their names for a variety of impetuses.

Recent immigration studies demonstrate that residents of Canada who are considered visible minorities face discrimination in terms of employment (Ornstein 2006, Schellenberg & Hou 2005, Hiebert 2003) and housing opportunities (Teixeira 2006). There is clearly a need for more egalitarianism, a sharing of power between earlier settlers and more recent immigrants. While there is no immediate solution to the current economic challenges and instances of social exclusion faced by visible minority migrants to Canada, examining the common and sometimes corresponding activity of name shifts demonstrates some of the integrative pressures and bureaucratic circumstances at work.

Research Context

In this paper, I work from examples of immigration-influenced name changes and theorize the significance of these name shifts. Working with our conference theme, "Names in Contact: Names in a Multi-Lingual, Multi-Cultural, Multi-Ethnic World" which raises questions about power, I ask what can names tell us about the ways that power is demonstrated, shared, circumvented, and inscribed? The power inherent in naming is perhaps best illustrated by toponyms. Shifts in the names of streets, cities, and nations, are dependent on the interests of the majority, or the most powerful voices. With toponyms, we see deliberate work to inscribe a shared territory with names significant to and representative of at least the dominant cultures that currently reside there, or have resided there historically. Indeed, Morissoneau describes toponymy as a mirror of territorial dreams (1995: 75).

A landscape is named as a means of claiming it and shaping it to belong to the people who control it politically. In a democracy, establishing or changing a toponym is generally dependent on engaging in some clear process including agreement or at least acknowledgement of a new official name, but with personal names, there are fewer actors who exercise their agency. Nevertheless there are actors; parents or an extended family give a newly born individual a name, and when the individual reaches adulthood, he can choose to alter his name officially, or at any point he can ask to be called by another name. Besides the individual and his family having these types of agency to select or alter a name, the bureaucratic system of the nation in which the individual resides also has agency. Some nations limit the types of names that can be selected (e.g., Sweden, France, and Bulgaria) while others shape names by determining their format, including length or number of names; the latter is the case in Canada. Social norms also dictate the selection of an individual's name; considerations may include gender, associations with class or popular culture, or the popularity of a name (Gerhands 2005).

While toponyms shape a territory by naming it, the names given to an individual also shape that individual, his family, and the communities and societies he is part of. A variety of actors including parents, relatives, and even the infrastructures managing registration information in the place he is born, form and contribute cultural values to the name that is carried forward by that individual. Besides birth, immigration is another period of life when both bureaucratic and social influences can put focus on an individual's name. Dependent on the cultural differences between one's country of origin and one's country of choice for immigration, names can be a site of conflict during immigration and settlement.

In Canada, besides the need to translate one's name into the Latin alphabet, it must also be used in either official language: English or French. It is not an insignificant matter that an individual has already lived whatever his length of life with a name that is key to his identity and significant to his original culture. The change of cultural context that is a requisite part of immigrating to Canada can diminish or shift the cultural relevance of a name. It can also make some names more difficult to maintain, while others are no longer used at all. It is these shifts and challenges that interest me: what types of agency are at work and with what outcomes to individuals who immigrate as well as to other members of our multicultural Canadian society?

I proceed by describing one feminism-rooted theory, that of inscription. Here I ask, in what ways is inscription at work in terms of names of people who have more recently become residents of Canada? How are personal name choices inscribing names and shifting identities both for individuals and for Canada's national identity? Following this, I provide three examples of name changes in Canada, with further theory employed to make sense of these name alterations.

Individuals' names as inscribed

In terms of inscription, Marcelle Dubé (2003), a feminist scholar in Quebec, suggests that for the advancement of women, it is important to leave a mark, to write a history, and to contribute to the long march toward a society that is more just and equal (119). Dubé defines one type of inscription as literally writing on the territory, as with toponymy (2003: 123). She suggests that leaving marks on the territory to make women more visible (i.e., naming streets and buildings after women, feminizing the French names of organizations women contribute to) should take place at every level: community, neighbourhood, city and region (Dubé 2003: 123).

Judith Butler's (1990) use of inscription, particularizes it to individuals; it is a way that we perform our identities. Butler states, "the constitution of the body rests in its inscription; the body becomes the text which is written upon it and from which it is indistinguishable" (Butler 1990:23). Naming is one of the ways we are made, but there are others. Considering cosmetic surgery as one form of inscription, Balsamo (1992) sees people "using their bodies as a vehicle for staging cultural identities" (226). In much the same way, name selection inscribes an individual with culturally appropriate names in terms of these and other signifiers: class, gender, ethnicity, religion. And an individual's efforts to inscribe themselves do not always result in a desired reading. Although someone who has recently migrated to Canada may shift his name to a commonly used Anglo-Celtic name, what might be noted is not his new name's sound or meaning, but that his name seems altered, that he is attempting to blend. This illustrates that we do have power to inscribe ourselves, but not to control how others read those inscriptions (Brush 1998: 36).

As with other forms of cultural inscriptions, in name-selection norms play a key role. Foucault examines the "power of the Norm" as a primary tool of discipline and control which, like surveillance, has become "one of the great instruments of power" (1979: 184). The norm effectively ranks individuals "while demanding a homogeneous norm to which all these disciplined individuals are trained to conform" (Brush 1998: 34). A discussion of plastic surgery as a form of inscription describes 'the norm' as a "western aesthetic" that is "white, Western, Anglo-Saxon...in a racist anti-Semitic context" (Morgan 1991: 36). This example bears similarity to the choices made during legal name changes. Selections are made that have the outcome of making names in Canada more alike, and easier to pronounce for members of dominant cultures.

A nation's names as inscribed

Because family names are inherited one-by-one, dependent on unions and births, the distinguishing characteristics of a population's family names seem less deliberately nationalistic than toponyms selected by committees. However, if we extend the metaphor of inscription from toponomy to family names, we can imagine individuals' names not only as a part of their individual identities, but as family names together inscribing the population with a recognizable identity or nationhood, at least in culturally homogeneous nations. The family name is a "national affinity" that is "infrequently attended to by scholarly literatures on the nation, but widely relied on for idiomatic taxonomies of the nation" (Stevens 1999: 150). Stevens describes a name as "a semiotic cornerstone in the foundational effects of a nation" (1999: 150). As an example she states, "France is a nation of the French, so known and constituted, in part, by their French names" (Stevens: 150). In this way, people who comprise the French nation have been inscribed with a particular set of names. But France has a considerable population of immigrants without French-origin names, and what of Canada, a nation of immigrants?

How we describe names that are 'typically Canadian' depends on where we look. A 2006 study found that the name 'Li' was the most common family name in Canada (CBC 2007) while in 2007, in British Columbia's Lower Mainland region, 'Lee' was the most common family name (Skelton 2007).² These most common last names are generally of Asian origin, and are one indicator of the large population of people who are Asian, or are of Asian heritage, and live in Canada.³ Even with their clear popularity, is either Lee or Li considered by members of dominant cultures, a 'Canadian' name?

Besides studies of frequency of use, other possibilities emerge. Are the names of famous Canadians what we think of as 'Canadian' names? Are the names David Suzuki, Michaëlle Jean, Wayne Gretzky, or Peter Gzowski 'Canadian names' or are they simply names of Canadians who became famous despite not having Anglo-Celtic or French-Canadian roots? Sites where contributions to Canadian society, through recognition or election, are noted such as lists of Members of Parliament or recipients of the Order of Canada indicate that having either an Anglo-Celtic or a French-Canadian name would make you part of the majority of these Canadian representatives. Certainly it is not necessary to have a name from one of these origins in order to be successful in Canada, but depending on the region, these names might be what dominant culture members consider to be a representative name, a name that requires no explanation of ethnicity. To people who change their names to more 'Canadian' ones, it might seem easier and more efficient to not have the origins of your name used as a means of determining an identity for you.

Even though many residents of Canada bear names that have been altered, we often look at family names to offer us links to individuals' ethnicities. But because our family names' links to original ethnicities have become more layered with name changes as forms of inscriptions, last names have become less classifiable and more obscured. Besides this, with the last decade's influx of migrants from a diversity of nations to Canada, there are many more languages and cultures one must be able to recognize and identify if trying to sort and determine the ethnicities of each person she meets.4 This informal and imperfect classification system persists, aiding dominant cultures' establishment as being without an ethnicity other than 'Canadian' while simultaneously impeding minority cultures from an equal status in this regard, and potentially others.

Examples of Name Changes

With this context in place, I present three cases of name shifts that are discussed as individual examples as well as in comparison with one another. The first is a questionable policy encouraging people with the religiously-significant Sikh names 'Kaur' and 'Singh' to change these names before applying to immigrate (CBC 2007), the second is the maximum character lengths and number of names for permanent residents to Canada and the third illustrates the 'helping role' of the some teachers and settlement counselors who have recommended the use of common English names to ease integration, and to potentially make immigrants more employable (Ng et al., 2007).

Example 1: Jaspal Singh

On May 17, 2007, Jaspal Singh received a letter from Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) stating the religiously-significant Sikh names 'Kaur' and 'Singh' "do not qualify for the purpose of immigration to Canada" (CBC 2007). While the letter provided no explanation, it declared that if Jaspal did not send an endorsed passport with the 'Singh' name component removed to CIC within 60 days, Jaspal's application for immigration could be refused. This letter was made public by Jaspal's wife who was pregnant and residing in Calgary as she waited for Singh to join her (CBC 2007). The CBC later reported that it was the popularity of the component 'Singh' that disqualified Jaspal from immigrating to Canada. In order to immigrate, he had six months to submit his passport indicating that his name had been changed.

Example 2: Limitations of the IMM 5444 form

The booklet that accompanies the application form (IMM 5444) for the Permanent Resident Card⁵ notes that if there are any discrepancies between names on the record of landing document, or the confirmation of permanent residence document, another form must be completed to get this sorted out, all before this form can be completed. This note suggests that discrepancies are not uncommon. The information booklet also states that, "family names over 20 characters and given names over 15 characters will be automatically shortened due to space restraints" (Browne 2005: 427). At this early stage of settlement the applicant must choose the way her name will be officially represented in Canada, how it will be inscribed. By choosing name components and their order as well as truncating any that are too long, the applicant submits to identification practices, which will provide her with a series of name components for her official identification.

Example 3: Morris George Yaworsky

Morris George Yaworsky was born in Alberta in 1918 with the name Dymyter Yaworsky (Kuttner 2003). One of his elementary school teachers took liberties with Yaworsky's name—as the teacher had with all students who had 'foreign-sounding' names—and called him by a name that better fit the then-current dominant cultural norms. The surname 'Yaworsky' was considered more official and remained unchanged. Living in Ontario in 1964, at the age of 54, Morris George had become so used to being called by this name that he made a legal name change from Dymyter Yaworsky to Morris George Yaworsky (Kuttner 2003: 11).

Analyses of Name Change Examples

These cases demonstrate an interesting interplay of norms at different stages of settlement. Morris George Yaworsky was born in Canada, yet his name was altered by social circumstances to become more common. A person completing a Permanent Resident Card application is likely to be at a very early stage of settlement. And in the case of Jaspal Singh, he was still in India when he was told that his name would need to be changed. It seems that name alterations can be relevant at stages from pre-immigration on to second-generation Canadians.

There are many ways to theorize immigration influenced name changes in Canada. Foucault's work on governmentality and discipline are of benefit for seeing commonalities and differences between these three name changes. Potentially all of the ways that names are altered are connected to the social norms. Officially, social norms developed within dominant society are the bases for legislation, and policy. Social norms also underlie the design of data collection tools such as databases and forms, as well as less official interactions such as commonly being called a different name by an authority figure. Additionally, wanting to have a name that is easier for a boss or co-workers to say or being tired of having your name mispronounced has to do with the norms of dominant languages and dialects. As long as exclusive, dominant cultures continue within Canada, new residents and members of minority cultures may continue to choose integrative name changes.

Foucault's theory of discipline acknowledges that social norms underlie the ways that names are shifted. He divides their outcomes into two categories: 1) 'state practices' include federal and provincial institutions' identification practices and related policies, and 2) 'self-constituting practices' are exemplified by the re-fashioning of oneself to become part of dominant culture.

In the case of Jaspal Singh, disciplining comes in the form of state practices; Jaspal did not even have the opportunity to modify his own name after becoming familiar with Canada's dominant culture norms. This example indicates that in terms of the Canadian landscape being populated with people bearing a diversity of names, many people bearing the same name did not work for immigration officials. Following this report, an official for Citizenship and Immigration Canada said that there is no such policy against other common last names.

The component length and number limits for the Permanent Resident Card demonstrate a way that inscription is controlled at the level of the nation. While an individual makes choices about her names and their order, the shape of these names is proscribed by Citizenship and Immigration Canada. As Simone Browne states, "...the application is one technology that allows permanent residents to produce themselves as 'responsible immigrants'" (2005: 427). Applicants are invited to shape their own names for use in Canada, but within the format shaped at the federal level: only an irresponsible immigrant would submit too long a name and have it automatically truncated where a break would make little sense. From Browne's perspective, it seems that both state and self-constituting practices function in what is happening when a form is completed.

Mina Kuttner has found that the particular length limits determined through forms make it necessary for some minority groups and immigrants to modify their names to adhere to provincial naming laws (2003: 515). This requisite name alteration could be considered a violation of the collective rights of minorities found in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1988) (Kuttner 2003: 515).

The final example also demonstrates a combination of state and self-constituting practices at work. For Morris George, early interactions with the majority culture-dominated state education system shifted his name during a teacher-student power dynamic that would have been difficult to challenge. Years later, well-inscribed with this more common name, Yaworsky made a decision to alter his name officially to the one his teacher had given him.

According to Sarup, "We do define ourselves to some extent, and yet, at the same time, we believe there are determining forces outside the individual" (1996:14). And Foucault "conceives of the self as constituted through certain 'practices' or techniques which are determined by the social context but are mediated through an active process of self-fashioning by the individual" (Rabinow 1984: 88). Through techniques of discipline that "prescribe the body's movements, impose norms on its activity, watch out for any deviation, and exclude the non-conforming... the body is connected with processes of meaning: it is tied to an identity" (Sarup 1996: 73). Discourses discipline us in many ways; a product of discourse can be a particular nation-state policy and the practices that enact it. These same discourses, in practice, create

"characterizations, assessments and hierarchies [that] decide who people are"; it simultaneously "makes' individuals and 'normalises' them" (Sarup 1996: 73). As disciplinary technologies, these practices work in tandem with 'technologies of the self,' which indicate an individual's selfconstituting practices through "controlling habits and value-sustaining self images" (Prado 2000: 261). This means that all of our interactions are discourses, and not only are institutional practices at work to normalize and regulate our activities, we discipline ourselves and other people we interact with. Through the lens of discipline, it seems that the agency that we experience is not as free as we might suppose. Our choices are forms of self-constituting practices; we choose from options shaped by state-level practices.

As one further means of theorizing the ubiquitous activity of settlement that is completing forms, we can consider a perspective form Dorothy Smith's Institutional Ethnography. Smith describes the relevance of texts and documentary procedures. Once an individual's information is submitted to an organization via a form, she is only known to the institution in this way. This generic means of processing local experiences into formats that are useful to an institution demonstrates a disturbing distancing and transforming of everyday, lived experiences (Smith 2005). Worse still, individuals, in many cases newcomers to Canada, are relied upon to convert their individual lived experiences into formats that will benefit the institutions that rule their dayto-day interactions. Bannerji confirms "the pervasive presence of the state over the lives of nonwhite and Third World legal and illegal immigrants and new Canadians" (Bannerji 2000: 15). She describes the state as a system that "steadily rules our lives with 'regulations'" (Bannerji 2000: 89).

Conclusion

With continued work on this topic, I hope to bring attention to and critically analyze aspects of immigration-influenced name changes in Canada. While working to contextualize and describe the situations faced by migrants to Canada who have experienced name shifts, I will continue to pose the following questions: With a degree of identity shifting already inherent to migration, is name alteration, a form of inscription, a reasonable expectation for a host country to have of its newcomers? Is it possible that naming practice norms in Canada could shift from stressing similarity to stressing difference (Langton and Hoppe 2002: 231)? Could a broader diversity of names be recognized and used meaningfully, with identification practices that aid rather than hinder this goal? Further, what could this mean in terms of shared power, equality and cultural pluralism?

Notes

- 1. Dominant culture in Canada is defined here as predominantly white, of European origin, practicing Christian religions and, in provinces other than Quebec, speaking English. The dominant culture in Quebec is French-speaking and traditionally Roman Catholic. Until the point-system of immigration was introduced in 1967, new residents to Canada generally emigrated from countries with similar dominant culture attributes (i.e., the United Kingdom, the United States).
- 2. These are studies by major newspapers; in Canada, census data is not analyzed to detail the commonness of family names.
- 3. These findings should be contextualized by describing how common certain surnames are in Asia, and how uncommon many 'Canadian' surnames are. One-fifth of China's billion plus population "share one of just two surnames: Lee or Wang" and in Canada there are 225,000 surnames with only one phone listing existing across the country (Skelton 2007). Given the difference in amounts of family names between China and Canada, perhaps commonness is not the best indicator of a family name that is representative of the Canadian nation.

- 4. Yet interestingly the 'Environics Analytics' corporation's database software called 'OriginsCanada,' is sold as a "breakthrough ethnic name coding system" that, as a marketing tool, "allows clients to assign a heritage to a customer database based on the first and last name of each consumer" (Environics Analytics 2008).
- 5. The card that migrants to Canada use for at least the first three years they live here, before being eligible for citizenship.

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Diane Dechief 5810, rue Clark Montréal, OC M2T 2V7 **CANADA** ddechief@gmail.com