



LUND UNIVERSITY

# “But It’s an Easy Process”

**Power, Identity, and the Hidden Costs of Preferred Name  
Use in Sweden**

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**TKAM02 - Spring 2024**

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## Abstract

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Sweden's population is becoming increasingly multicultural as evident from the foreign population reaching over 20% as of 2024, according to the National Statistics Agency *Statistikmyndigheten*. Yet even as the influx of migrants continues, changes in policies and norms do not necessarily change at the same pace. In particular, there is a difference between how migrants might prefer to use their names and how name use typically works in Sweden. In state-owned institutions such as universities, hospitals, and the postal service, the standard for staff and audiences alike is to display their full legal names on public domains such as digital platforms and email addresses. In this thesis, I use the political theorist Steven Lukes' theory of three-dimensional power in combination with sociologist Jane Pilcher's theory of embodied named identity to show the forces at play that shape migrant name use in Sweden. The aim is to reveal these underlying power dynamics and the personal cost on the migrants themselves of negotiating their name use. Data was collected from 16 one-on-one interviews with East Asian, Middle Eastern, and Eastern European migrants in Sweden who: go by multiple names, both legal and preferred, in everyday use; legally changed their first or last names to sound less ethnic; or have given Swedish or International names to their children. The ethnographic data is supplemented with data from current and previous Swedish naming laws, national name statistics in Sweden, and comparative studies from Scandinavian neighbors. The results show that migrants are constantly weighing the pros and cons of name use, deciding between fear of exposure and familial ties, against the economic and social advantages that a more local-sounding name can confer. Finally, the thesis offers ways that companies and state institutions can apply the findings to create more inclusive work policies. In addition, this thesis adds to the body of literature about preferred names, names in Scandinavia, and migrant names in particular.

**Keywords:** *immigration; personal names; preferred names; Swedish bureaucracy; three-dimensional power; embodied named identity*

## Abstract (Svenska/Swedish)

"Men det är en enkel process": makt, identitet och de dolda kostnaderna för önskad namnanvändning i Sverige

Författare: Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang)

Sveriges befolkning blir allt mer mångkulturell, vilket framgår av att den utlandsfödda befolkningen utgjorde mer än 20% av Sveriges befolkning år 2024, enligt Statistikmyndigheten. Men samtidigt som tillströmningen av migranter fortsätter, förändras inte nödvändigtvis politik och normer i samma takt. I synnerhet finns det en skillnad mellan hur migranter kanske föredrar att använda sina namn och hur namnanvändning vanligtvis fungerar i Sverige. I statligt ägda institutioner som universitet, sjukhus, och postväsendet, är det standard för både personal och besökare att använda sina fullständiga juridiska namn i offentliga domäner som digitala plattformar och e-postadresser. I det här examensarbetet använder jag Steven Lukes teori om tredimensionell makt i kombination med Jane Pilchers teori om förkroppsligad namn identitet för att visa vilka krafter som formar migranternas namnanvändning i Sverige. Syftet är att synliggöra underliggande maktdynamiker och den personliga kostnaden för migranterna själva av att förhandla om sin namnanvändning. Data samlades in från 16 en-till-en-intervjuer med migranter från östasien, mellanöstern och östeuropa i Sverige som: går under flera namn, både juridiska och föredragna, i dagligt bruk; juridiskt ändrat sin för- eller efternamn för att låta mindre etniska; eller har gett sina barn svenska eller internationella namn. Uppsatsens etnografiska data kompletteras med data från gällande och tidigare svenska namnlagar, nationell svensk namnstatistik, och jämförande studier från skandinaviska grannländer. Resultatet visar att migranter ständigt väger för- och nackdelar med namnanvändning, väljer mellan rädsla för exponering och familjeband, och avväger de ekonomiska och sociala fördelar som ett mer lokalt klingande namn kan ge. Avslutningsvis föreslår avhandlingen sätt som företag och statliga institutioner kan tillämpa resultaten för att skapa mer inkluderande arbetspolicyer. Uppsatsen bidrar också till litteraturen om föredragna namn, namn i Skandinavien och i synnerhet migrantnamn.

**Nyckelord:** *immigration; personnamn; föredragna namn; svensk byråkrati; tredimensionell kraft; förkroppsligad namngiven identitet*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to first thank my fellow classmates in MACA for making the process of writing a thesis a little less lonely and a lot more enjoyable. I appreciate every person who reassured me that this topic was interesting and important, and for all the mutual support we've given each other along the way to a finished thesis.

In that vein, I must thank my informants, who so kindly took the time to speak with me about their personal names, even when it brought up uncomfortable memories. I appreciate your honesty, your bravery, and your willingness to share your stories.

I am grateful to my supervisor Charlotte (Lotta) Hagström, whose sound advice, reassuring guidance, and consistent encouragement kept me grounded throughout this process. I promise to improve my Swedish, if only to be able to properly read your wonderful book about names.

Credit must be given to my husband Linus for listening to my wild ideas, vented frustrations, and late night writing frenzies while also building a home together (literally). I could not have gotten this far in my research without your support as a partner and a parent.

And last but not least, my son Sören, for whom I hope this research goes some small way towards helping shape a more inclusive future for you to grow up in.

Malmö, 2024-05-22

Melissa Boman

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## 1. Introduction

Imagine a typical day in Sweden. After easing out of bed, you linger over a morning cup of coffee or tea by reading the mail. Perhaps it's physical mail, addressed to you. For the eco-minded, you might opt instead for the secure digital mailbox Kivra, which you log into with your BankID. If there is no physical or digital mail, like so many in the modern age, you decide to check your work emails instead. Or if one is a student, you might open up the digital learning platform Canvas. As you leave your home, you notice your door sign and mailbox label which together confirm your residence. At the central train station, you open up the Skånetrafiken app to purchase a travel ticket and pay it with the mobile payment method Swish. During the day you rush out to a pharmacy to pick up a prescription and you open your wallet to hand over your ID card. And so that day and the days to come continue on like this, full of the mundane, the ordinary, the everyday moments of life.

But yet. There's something not quite right about that hypothetical day. The fact of the matter is that the name that appears so visibly in all those places – it isn't you. At least not the name that most people in your life know you as, or that you feel most accurately identifies you. Yet it is the name that follows you in Sweden in specific and public ways, used for, asked for, and shown with or without your consent. It's not that the name is *not* you, or some part of you, but that you did not choose this name to represent you in these settings. The circumstances around you have dictated the use of your name, and not your own will. There is a quiet invisible power at work, one that suppresses discontent.

Our names are a unique intangible part of us that reveals a lot about who we are in very few words: our ethnic background, possibly age or gender, and much more. Names are significant in that they often precede our in-person meetings, so that someone's first impressions of us are already shaped before they see other markers of who we are. Some people, especially those with names that are easily recognized and accepted by other locals who come from the same cultural context, find their daily lived experience quite smooth and frictionless. Their legal name and their preferred name could be one and the same. For others whose names are more challenging for a myriad of reasons, life is not so simple. There could be a big gap between the legal name and the preferred name, and the individual must negotiate between when to use each and who can be trusted to know these personal details. Yet that becomes more complicated when individuals who are used to using their names a certain way migrate and must reconcile their name use with a new country's system. This negotiation

between individual choice and the difference between how migrants and local populations in Sweden experience name use is at the heart of what I wish to explore in this thesis.

## 1.1 Not So Simple – A Background Story

The impetus to investigate migrant names started from a relatively small incident, what I considered a non-event, until it became increasingly clear that it actually wasn't as easy and clear-cut as I had thought. I simply wished to use my preferred name, Melissa, instead of my legal name, Meng, for my university email address and in digital course management systems such as Canvas. I am aware from past experience at other Swedish universities that it is, from a purely technological standpoint, quite easy to change someone's preferred name on Canvas. But time and time again, from the IT department to the student union to department staff, I was told that "it is impossible" to change to my preferred name, and that I should legally change my name on Skatteverket, the Swedish Tax Agency. "But it's an easy process," a well-meaning Swedish staff member told me, thinking that I was upset or afraid because of the logistical process. From my anecdotal experience interacting with Swedes, I feel confident in saying they generally do not wish to offend anyone and would not say something that they suspect could be taken the wrong way and risk causing a conflict. Therefore, by deductive reasoning, the people telling me to change my legal name must not consider it a controversial issue. Yet this seemingly innocent statement said by three unrelated departments, from people who do not know each other but seem to be in on some unspoken Swedish rule towards name use, confounded me. I found the insinuation that I should change a core part of myself deeply offensive. So where is the disconnect?

There is a constant urge to use the word "simply" because the matter seems like it should be simple: let people use the name they prefer. However, the bureaucratic response is that they also consider it simple, but from a different stance: people should change their legal names to reflect the name they prefer. We are in agreement that the issue of preferred names is simple, the difference lies in who the responsibility should be with. Is it on the university and other bureaucratic systems to be adaptable and open to allowing people to use unofficial preferred names? Or is the onus on the individual to conform to local naming practices and legally change their name if they want to go by something other than what's on paper? These are part of the questions I seek to explore in this thesis.



## 1.2 Aim and Research Questions

My interest lies in the gap between how names are usually used in various private and public settings in Sweden and how migrants would prefer to use their names. Through that, I'll be looking at what is given up, what is gained, and how the migrants feel about making these personal decisions. Therefore, the aim is to investigate migrant name choices to reveal the underlying power dynamics in - and human cost of - the constant negotiations around their preferred name use in Sweden. In order to look at this, I will consider the following research questions:

- How can decisions around migrant name use be understood in relation to their family heritage, individual preferences, and Swedish bureaucratic systems?
- How do migrants balance the pragmatism of everyday interactions versus their personal values, and how is that expressed through their name use?

By considering power as expressed through personal names, I want to show why migrant name use is not straightforward, and that it is not, as the title quote references, “an easy process” for many individuals. While the technology behind a name change on Skatteverket might be relatively painless, reaching the decision to change one's name can be challenging on an emotional and deeply personal level. It is a complex and constant negotiation between the wishes of name bearers and pressures of family history and cultural heritage, of strategically balancing the advantages and disadvantages of using different names, and between what the migrant wants and what the systemic barriers of Swedish bureaucracy will allow. I will look at the internal and external factors that influence how someone feels about their name(s) as well as the subsequent strategic actions that migrants take through name use, whether it's purposely keeping a name, adapting a name, or inventing a new name. Through this thesis, I hope to show that name use in a new country is not a simple or easy matter for many migrants.

## 1.3 Positionality

For a topic as deeply personal as personal names, my own positionality must be addressed. My legal name is Chinese, as I myself am Chinese, born in mainland China to Chinese parents, until we immigrated to the United States when I was only a few years old. From the moment I arrived, I was informally given the American name Melissa by my uncle. Although my legal name did not change, I began to use this new American name in school, extracurricular activities, and in all situations outside of the Chinese community. Whereas my Chinese name is unisex and timeless, Melissa is identifiable as a female name that peaked in

popularity in the US in the '80s and '90s. Both are equally my names, but I have strict divisions between when and with whom I use each name. There has been research into the motivations and methods of Chinese people adopting Western names, but that is not the particular focus of this study (Diao, 2014; Eickmann, 2020; Gilks, 2014). Even though this is a well-established practice in the Chinese community, the actual prevalence is not well documented in terms of concrete numbers since these Western names are informal and not noted on any legal documents. The closest one can get is through individual case studies. A thesis written about the practice of mainland Chinese students adopting Western names similarly found that this area was under-researched, though on average the studies found between 75% to 97% of the surveyed Chinese people used a Western first name (Schmitt, 2019, p. 32).

My intersectionality as a Chinese American is what allows me to hold both names as being true to who I am, albeit for different audiences. My membership in the Chinese community and ability to speak conversational Mandarin Chinese allowed me more entry into the Chinese community in Sweden and therefore Chinese migrants proportionally make up more of my informant pool. Conversely, my lack of ability to speak Swedish has made it more challenging to dive deep into some of the academic literature around Swedish norms and culture. Yet from the limited vantage point there can still be insights that can be extrapolated towards an understanding of the wider landscape.

In that vein, I'd like to offer the reader a lens through which to view this thesis. It is clear that there are multiple ways to look at the discourse surrounding migration and name use and that it is inevitable that we tend to bring our own perspective into these topics. Throughout this thesis, I will be using my preferred terminology as a Chinese American. This include terms such as "white-passing" which acknowledges that while race is a construct, it nonetheless is real in how it affects how people are treated based on their physical appearance and perceived group affiliation. It is relevant to my lived experience and to this thesis, as many of my informants are visibly different from the majority Swedish population and have different experiences with their names, as the thesis will show.

A study about how Polish people relate to their ability to pass as white and Swedish positions whiteness in Sweden as less about phenotypes and performances, and more as "products of ascriptions and practiced social relations" where people are ascribed Swedishness based on whether the person is interpreted as white or non-white (Runfors, 2022, p. 2). Passing refers to the ability to blend in with other Swedes and not stand out, thereby "going unnoticed in relation to the norms of Swedish whiteness" (Runfors, 2022, p. 2). My informants also refer

to their own abilities to pass as white or Swedish and this impacts their relationship to their names and decisions around name use in Sweden.

I am also choosing to use the term “migrant,” which refers to people who reside in a new country for more than a year irrespective of the causes or means used to migrate, over “immigrant”, or non-residents arriving in a new country with the intention to stay (*Migrant - European Commission*, n.d.). Since this topic is less about the arrival of the migrants and more about their long-term connection with Sweden, migrant feels like the more inclusive term. It is my unique perspective as a Chinese American who now lives abroad in Sweden that gives me the vantage point to look at nonstandard name use across multiple cultural contexts.

## 1.4 Disposition

In this thesis I will look at migrant names primarily through Steven Lukes (2021)' theory of three-dimensional power, which looks at the way power secures compliance by shaping desires and beliefs. I will also support the idea of power dynamics through name use by also using embodied named identity (Pilcher, 2016) and labor through complaint (Ahmed, 2021). Diving into the empirical material, which consists primarily of interviews with 16 informants, I will examine how power dynamics affect name use and decision making for migrants in Sweden. I will also give some context around name use in Sweden and offer some informant definitions around preferred name terminology.

The first analytical chapter will look at how migrants use names to stay connected to their cultural heritage, for themselves or future generations. The next chapter takes a closer look at the strategic actions of using names in everyday life, when it feels safe to reveal a name or advantageous to use or even create another name. The third chapter is grounded in everyday life in Sweden and how name use is navigated in bureaucratic networks such as universities, governmental agencies, and the postal system. The final chapter looks at what can be done about preferred name use, and what gets people to act and help others use their preferred names. Lastly, the applicability chapter takes this anecdotal evidence and relates it to current Diversity/Equity/Inclusion work happening across sectors and advocates for ways to implement more inclusive policies in the workplace. Through showcasing these relatable migrant voices and their lived experiences, my goal is to show that the matter of personal names is not so simple it seems at first.

## 2. Context on Name Use

### 2.1 Definitions Around Names

Before diving deeper into names, it is important to first of all define what it is that is meant by the parts to a person's name. There are multiple terms that could be used to refer to the same thing: personal names, given names, first names, birth name, legal name, and proper name. Similarly, people interchangeably use surname, family name, and last name. In order to keep the details as clear and straightforward for this thesis, I will refer to people by the terminology we used in the interviews, which are "first name" and "last name." Middle names were not discussed for the most part unless they had a significance in relation to the first or last names.

### 2.2 Categories of Names

Something that emerged throughout the ethnographic data collection process was a need to establish a common terminology for the classification of first names. While I personally have the habit of using the term "Western name" to refer to most names from European or North American origins (and will use this term throughout the thesis unless otherwise specified by informants), my informants were using terms such as "English name" or "International name" or "Biblical name." Therefore, it felt prudent to let them explain what these terms mean to them, so that I could use the terms as accurately to their understanding as possible. I asked informants to define, in their own words, the difference between the following terms: English Name; Western Name; International Name; Biblical Name.

The informants were asked to come up with their own definition of the terms and to map out how the terms related to one another. For example, is an English name under the category of Western name? Or is a Biblical name the same as Western name? There are, of course, dictionary definitions of these terms, but I wish to use the terms as the informants understand the relationships and associations each term carries. These definitions are the aggregate definitions across interviews where they were asked to define and categorize names (six out of sixteen total interviews; the others ran out of time).

English Name	Names that people in the U.S. and U.K. can pronounce naturally. Considered in terms of the language, English, rather than geographic origin.
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Western Name	Western European names, of which English names and Swedish names are a subset (e.g. Magnus is a Swedish and thus a Western European name). Some informants included American/North American names under this category as well.
International Name	Often compared to being on the same level as an English Name or Biblical Name due to widespread international recognizability.
National Name*	Unique to different nationalities, (e.g. Sakura that exists solely as a Japanese name)
Biblical Name	Names from The Bible, which can be harder to pinpoint the exact origin of the name bearer since it crosses boundaries (e.g. John, Mary/Maria).

\* While I didn't explicitly ask for this term, the way informants talked about country-specific names sounded like national names.

### 2.3 Context of Name Use in Sweden

In Sweden, it is quite common to have multiple given names, of which one acts as an individual's *tilltalsnamn*, or the primary name they use on a daily basis. However, there is not an exact figure on how many names on average people have. The national statistics bureau only get as specific as saying that more than 80% of all people have more than one given name (*Frequently Asked Questions about Name Statistics*, n.d.). There is a degree of flexibility built into the naming conventions in Sweden, as adding or changing a first name requires a short form and a processing fee of 250 SEK, and changing a *tilltalsnamn* is free of charge as long as it is one of the official first names.

Easy as it might be to apply for most name changes, there are conditions that the tax agency Skatteverket sets out for name changes that limit what is possible, or at least what will get approved. That a *tilltalsnamn* must be already one of a person's existing names is one such condition, so that "legal name" and "preferred name" exist within the same official status, wherein a person selects a single one of their legal names to be preferred. So, if a person has four first names, one is given higher importance, but all have the same status of being valid legal names. This is unlike systems such as the United States, where it is a cumbersome and expensive process to change legal names. The process could cost between \$100 to \$500 (*How Much Money Does It Cost to Change a Name?* | *LegalZoom*, n.d.), not to mention appearing in front of a judge and manually updating up to ten different government agencies to notify them of the name change (*How to Change Your Name and What Government Agencies to Notify* |

*USAGov*, n.d.). So, it is more often the case that migrants to the U.S. have their legal name on official documents, and in other parts of their daily life use another name that might be unofficial on paper but valid in terms of their identities. That is, unlike in Sweden, “legal name” and “preferred name” do not exist in the same official status but could be considered of equal importance. One is not more “real” than the other.

Sweden also sets out rules for what first names can be granted, as all name applications must be approved by the government and are not entirely up to the individual's choice. Per Skatteverket's website, the section for first name changes state:

A first name must not be able to lead to discomfort for the person who is to have it or cause offense to anyone else. The name must not be perceived as a surname. It must also not be unsuitable as a first name for any other reason.

Here there is a consideration not just for the individual's own name but towards “anyone else” for whom a name might cause offense. Naming standards reflect national values, and Skatteverket's wording here alludes to a consideration of not just the individual but towards others in the society. Contrast that with the American emphasis on individual freedoms, to where there are no boundaries in place for what a child can be named. A famous example is Elon Musk's child, X Æ A-Xii (“X Æ A-12,” 2020), which would likely not be approved by Skatteverket on the basis of its unsuitability as a pronounceable first name. There has always been controversy about naming laws that require governmental approval, as opponents think that “the state shouldn't be in the business of saying what you can or can't name your own children (“X Æ A-12,” 2020). Sweden is far from the only country that has an approval process for names, as it is also the practice in over a dozen countries including Germany, Denmark, China, and New Zealand (Dewey, 2013). What makes Sweden unique is how it defines the boundaries of acceptability in names and what degree of flexibility should be allowed for individuals. Take for instance, the section on Skatteverket about how “gender-contrary first names are names that are considered typical of a different legal gender than one's own. You may choose a first name regardless of your legal gender.” This open-minded stance is reflective of Sweden's progressive view towards gender equality.

While there are many rules and checks in place around what names people can choose, Sweden has actually gotten more lenient about names in recent years. Prior to 2017, migrants were limited in terms of surname options, as the pre-existing 1982 law required that a person must have a family connection by lineage or marriage to use that surname (*Namnförordning (1982:1136)* | *Sveriges Riksdag*, n.d.). As of a new naming law in 2017, anyone can change to a common Swedish surname if more than 2,000 people carry it, regardless of if it was originally

an individual's family name (*Lag (2016:1013) Om Personnamn* | *Sveriges Riksdag*, n.d.). That means that migrants could become Andersson or Olsson if they so wished, without having to marry into the family. While there are not yet measurable statistics about how many people of non-Swedish background end up adopting these common Swedish names, even having the opportunity to do so is already an indicator of Sweden adapting to how name use has changed over the years, or at least since the last version of the naming law from 1982.

Sweden offers another official government source for finding out information about names. The national statistics bureau *Statistikmyndigheten* (SCB.se) openly publishes statistics about how many people in Sweden have a particular name, including gender of the name bearers and the average age of someone with that name. It is a useful tool to look at name popularity over the years, but not all statistics are captured. It is not possible to find, for example, how many people change their names, and for what reason. Sweden also does not gather any data about a person's race or ethnic background, so there is no evidence to indicate whether any particular groups are more prone to name changes. However, that is not to say there aren't ways to study if particular groups are feeling pressured to consider name changes.

### 3. Previous Research: Migrant Names in Sweden

While there has been a sizable amount of research done on migrants in Sweden, the vast majority pertains to their tangible achievements, such as academic progress or job attainment. Understandably, these areas are of top priority for most migrants, and the numbers provide a clear quantitative result that is hard to argue with. However, my interest lies not in these observable actions and results, but the often missed, intangible choices migrants must consider in order to set themselves up for success in work or studies.

First, some context for migration in Sweden. Research has mapped how Sweden has gone from a small to large flow of immigrants quite rapidly. In 1940, only 1 percent of Sweden's population was foreign-born, but in 2014 it was 14 percent (Bursell, 2012, p. 473) and now the figure is over 20 percent (*Population in Sweden by Country/Region of Birth, Citizenship and Swedish/Foreign Background, 31 December 2022*, n.d.). Tobias Hübinette, a well-known expert on racism in Sweden, cites statistics about how towards the end of the 1990s refugee immigration, especially from non-Western migrants, took over from the labor immigration of the 1950s-1980s (Hübinette & Lundström, 2014, p. 430). This has continued into recent years, with refugees from Syria and Ukraine making up more of the foreign-born population (*Population in Sweden by Country/Region of Birth, Citizenship and Swedish/Foreign Background, 31 December 2022*, n.d.). Yet there is not necessarily a deeper understanding of what foreign-born people, or migrants, might want in terms of their relationship with their new country of residence, and what impact migrants may have on Swedish society. A government study (*Regeringskansliet 2013*) revealed that "80 percent of all Swedes rarely or never socialize with people of a non-European origin outside of working life" (Hübinette & Lundström, 2014, p. 424). That lack of interaction can also hinder cross-cultural understanding and growth, as well as instill unintended and hidden prejudices that can have a negative impact on the migrants who are starting new lives.

Difference in annual income is one of these negative outcomes. Arai and Skogman-Thoursie (2009) compared the difference in annual income between migrants who changed their personal names to a more Swedish or neutral sounding surname and those who did not. They found that those with Asian, African, or Slavic last names who changed to a Swedish or neutral name had a significantly greater increase in earnings than those who did not change their ethnic surname or changed it to one in the same category of ethnic-sounding names (p. 143). Khosravi (2012) builds on that work by looking at not just what groups in Sweden changed their names and the subsequent effect on their earnings, but the motivations behind



name-changing among immigrants with Muslim names. In speaking with migrants who applied for name changes, Khosravi found that discrimination accounted for 20 percent of stated reasons for taking this action (2012, p. 70). He is upfront about the finding that changing one's name doesn't magically eliminate structural discrimination or racism, but it mitigates the risk factors of being discriminated against in the initial phases of job or housing applications (Khosravi, 2012, p. 78). It's a personal price to pay for a foot in the door.

Following the thread of name changers and discrimination, Bursell (2007) focuses on how migrant names are received in the workforce. Through a field experiment using correspondence testing of applying to jobs using two CVs with similar qualifications, one with a Swedish name and one with a foreign (Arabic or African) name, the researcher was able to test for discrimination at the interview stage. Bursell found that there was clear evidence of applications with Swedish sounding names being preferred over Arabic or African sounding names across all 15 of Sweden's occupations, which points to ethnic discrimination in the workplace, at least in the hiring stage (2007, p. 23). Migrant name change can be seen as a *destigmatization* strategy, a case of pragmatic assimilation where the migrant can keep the benefits of their original ethnic identity in private life but have smoother interactions in public settings (Bursell, 2012, p. 472). On the surface, this makes sense. But for some migrants, name use is not that straightforward - to change or not to change – but there are factors to consider when pitting economic gains against ideological costs. Pragmatism, as I will argue in this thesis, is not the only deciding factor.

This phenomenon of ethnic discrimination is not only in workplaces, nor is it only in Sweden. A study into the cost of having a foreign-sounding name in the Swedish private housing market found that Eastern European- and East Asian- sounding names, and especially the Arab/Muslim-sounding name, yielded significantly lower callback rates to housing opportunities than Swedish sounding names (Molla et al., 2022, p. 4). Another study in Norway references a story of an immigrant “Hamsa Mohamed from Somalia who [has] changed his name to Kevin Sander, believing the name change will make it easier for him to get a job,” so the ethnic discrimination effect is not limited to only Sweden (Reisæter, 2012, p. 33). A recent notable study in the U.S. revealed discriminatory hiring practices among 100 top businesses where white-sounding applicants were favored over applicants with black-sounding names (Kline et al., 2024). However, as prudent as it is to be aware that ethnic discrimination is a widespread issue, my informants and I are based in Sweden, surrounded by Swedish bureaucratic systems and social structures, and thus the findings will be centered on Sweden.

A lot of work has been done so far in showing there is ethnic discrimination in Sweden, and that the goal of equality doesn't always match the reality of people's actions. But what's missing from the conversation is the migrants' reactions to knowing that intentional or unintentional discrimination is happening – that is, so now what? How can migrants react to being at a disadvantage? For some, it's adopting a Western name. For another, it's leaning in and resisting. For others, it's passing on a strategic name to the next generation. By researching the internal decision-making process of migrants against the powers of the state in Sweden, my hope is to add another dimension to the conversation around how migrants are negotiating the pressures of assimilation to a new country.

## 4. Theoretical Framework

### 4.1 Three-Dimensional Power

As this thesis is centered on the lived experiences of migrants, the theory follows what emerged from the empirical data. Upon analysis, the interviews all pointed to an underlying sense of a power difference between the migrants and the native Swedish society, an invisible but ever present push-and-pull to determine who makes accommodations for whom. Thus, it made sense to look at their experiences through a theoretical lens of power. There are countless well-known scholars who offer up ways to view power, but within the field of study for this thesis the goal was to find a theory that spoke to this more subtle idea of underlying invisible power. For when it comes to names, most of the interactions and effects are not outwardly observable, and thus power does most of its work beneath the surface and might not even be recognized to the individual as an act of power.

In order to study this type of unseen power, Steven Lukes, a theorist and professor of politics and sociology, posits a three-dimensional view of power in his book *Power: A Radical View* (1974, 2005, 2021). Power is defined as a potential, the capacity to secure willing compliance, which does not need to be actively exercised in order to be present (Lukes 2021). Lukes also offers a way to look at one-dimensional and two-dimensional power as the building blocks from which the third dimension seeks to explain the gaps. While his work focuses primarily on American politics, the theory behind power can be extrapolated far beyond the realm of politics.

The one-dimensional (1D) view of power has a “focus on behavior in the making of decisions over key or important issues as involving actual, observable conflict” wherein power is exercised by party A on party B, leading to a successful or unsuccessful outcome (Lukes, 2021, p. 23). The stress is on tangible, observable actions, expressed as conflict over certain topics on which party A and B do not agree. The two-dimensional (2D) view of power builds on the first but goes further in showing ways that power can be used in a more covert instead of overt way, such as in coercion, influence, authority, force, and manipulation (Lukes, 2021, p. 26). This 2D view “allows for consideration of the ways in which decisions are prevented from being taken on potential issues over which there is an observable conflict of (subjective) interests” (Lukes, 2021, p. 29). The idea of power as being less tangible when seen as potential is introduced, but the focus is still on observable conflict.

The three-dimensional (3D) view of power is Lukes' way of going beyond the observable conflict and behavioral focus of 1D and 2D power to identify a type of power that can be active or inactive, that works by securing consent through shaping and influencing the other party's desires and beliefs (2021, p. 3). He points out that previous literature focuses on conflict as the inciting moment that power is revealed, but in actuality "the most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent such conflict from arising in the first place" (Lukes, 2021, p. 32). That is, power can be expressed through the prevention of grievances, the ability to shape perceptions and influence people towards compliance and acceptance of the status quo through social forces or institutional practices. Power stops grievances from materializing, by misleading them and distorting their judgment, to where they think the state of things is natural (Lukes, 2021, pp. 17–18). Therefore, his three-dimensional view of power focuses on the ways potential issues are averted, sometimes without the other party even being aware of their own interests being influenced, to a point where they might even act against their own interests. Lukes draws attention to the idea of a "latent conflict, which consists in a contradiction between the interests of those exercising power and the real interests of those they exclude" so that the potential conflict between parties may never be actualized or even conscious to the ones on which power is being exerted on (2021, p. 33). This makes it hard to identify the actual interests of party B when the focus is on something that has not happened.

This way of party A covertly exerting influence and preventing concerns from progressing into real issues that can cause conflict – at times without party B even being aware – is what is of most interest for the topic of migrant name use. The three-dimensional view of power provides a way to look at the ideological influences that shape not only what we accept as natural and normal in our everyday lives, but also who is given the opportunity to push back on a latent conflict. The trick is being able to identify power in the first place when it is unobservable and active without visible conflict. One must keep in mind that "it does not follow that, just because it is difficult or even impossible to show that power has been exercised in a given situation, we can conclude that it has not" (Lukes, 2021, p. 46).

## 4.2 Embodied Named Identity

When researching immigration, especially with a focus on non-Western migrants, it is worth calling out the fact that bodies, names, and identities cannot be considered separately from one another. The sociologist Jane Pilcher's theory of *embodied named identity*, which she also calls the 'names-bodies-identity nexus', shows how "embodiment and identity are

inextricably intertwined with naming: above all else, forenames and surnames effectively 'label' or identify an individual's body" (2016, p. 767). To only speak of two of these categories is to miss the richness that comes from understanding all three in relation to each other: to only speak of embodied names will miss the effect on identities; to look just at names and identity excludes the perspectives experienced by non-White passing bodies, and to study embodied identities without addressing the names that label us is deliberately leaving out something we all have and use every day. It is worth remembering the context in which embodied named identities are shaped by and operate within:

Our names are both constituted by and help to constitute our sexed and gendered selves, our racialized and ethnic identities and other identifications that make us both a unique individual and a culturally embedded and socially administered citizen. (Pilcher, 2016, p. 776)

Embodied named identities work along all the axes to make us who we are, and in turn locate us as individuals in a certain cultural context. In general, migrants have different experiences with their name use than the majority Swedish population, but the non-White passing informants in this study have an added dimension of challenges with whether or not their bodies are seen to "match" their name, which can have a knock-on effect on their sense of identity.

## 5. Empirical material

### 5.1 Ethnographic Methods

As this research is centered around the lived experiences of migrants in Sweden, I felt the best way to gather these rich stories was through deep one-on-one interviews. Each informant's relationship to their names and experience living in Sweden was so unique that it felt more appropriate to speak with them individually, rather than in a group setting. Although I had a list of prepared questions, most of the interviews ended up being semi-structured, so that the responses became more natural and open-ended rather than kept to a certain order (Davies, 2008a, pp. 105–106). The informants discussed their name origins, other names within the family, heritage, their feelings about their own names, and any challenges they've had or still have with name use in Sweden.

The sixteen interviews ranged from half an hour to over two hours, with most informants speaking for one-and-a-half to two hours. Out of all the interviews, I recorded fifteen and one was not recorded due to unexpected technical issues. I also took detailed handwritten notes for each interview and reviewed them the same day in order to summarize the key points as well as pull out key quotes.

The interviews were conducted in either English or Mandarin Chinese, which were then translated and transcribed with the help of artificial intelligence speech-to-text tools before being manually cleaned up and analyzed. As previously mentioned, my language proficiency as well as my informants' comfort levels with English limited who I could comfortably speak to for this study. At times, I could feel that my informants could not express the nuances of what they wished to convey in English. In other cases, the situation was reversed, and I found it difficult to understand advanced vocabulary in Mandarin, as I hardly ever use it outside of communicating casually with family.

This mismatch of language abilities between my informants and myself stayed on my mind a lot as I wondered how much of the whole story I might be missing due to one party's inability to fully express or understand themselves. Another factor is that while I am ethnically Chinese, I was raised in a Western context and my viewpoint is a mix of Chinese and American cultural values. I am reminded that when doing ethnography, "no matter how competent ethnographers are in another language, they must remain aware that translation in any case is far from a theoretically neutral activity, and that their own perspective, both professional and personal, will influence their translations" (Davies, 2008a, p. 113). I tried to be as aware of my

own perspective and bias when listening to my informants and represent what they've said in the most faithful way I could.

It was tempting to consider other methods such as activities, or observations, but they were ultimately not appropriate. Observations are near impossible to do with an intangible phenomenon such as power dynamics of name use without shadowing someone in all aspects of their life. Normally I consider activities and other quantitative methods useful tools that can complement qualitative data. However, after a few attempts to incorporate mapping exercises and carefully considering the pros and cons of creating hypothetical scenarios, I have concluded that the time and effort put into performing the activities would not yield any more useful or meaningful data that wouldn't have come out through interviews. It is a conscious decision to hold back from going broad on methods and focus on diving deep into the qualitative data from the one-on-one semi structured interviews.

I also looked at Swedish policies and national governmental agencies such as *Skatteverket*, Sweden's tax agency, and *Statistikmyndigheten* (SCB) which publishes official statistics on many factors, including name popularity. The majority of these pages are either not available in English or the information is very pared down, and thus I am choosing instead to use Google Translate on the original Swedish pages whenever possible to see the full picture. Although Google Translate is not one hundred percent accurate, it is the most readily available option for those in my position who do not speak fluent Swedish or have access to a native Swedish speaker to help translate.

Along the way, I realized I was also conducting autoethnography. I could better understand what my informants were saying because of my own experiences, and their stories helped me think differently about the nuances of migrant name use. This way of demonstrating the effects of fieldwork on the ethnographer by "using others to learn more about and reflect upon oneself" is one form of autoethnography, or autobiography (Davies, 2008, p. 218). I also recount specific interactions I've had with preferred name use in Sweden, comparing and contrasting my experiences alongside my informants so that "the ethnographer is his her own key informant" (Davies, 2008, p. 222). I'd like to think of myself as part of my own informant pool as a group of migrants all navigating our naming decisions in Sweden together. Sometimes our experiences are similar and sometimes they are not, but it is in comparing experiences that the most interesting findings emerge.

## 5.2 Informant Criteria

For the purposes of this study, was to find people who were representative of the multifaceted issues that migrants encounter when having a non-straightforward name use. The question became, who are the ones most likely to be affected in Sweden by challenges related to their names, and by extension, what their names say about them? Thus, the field was narrowed down to first-generation migrants who:

- Go by multiple names, including ethnic/legal and western/preferred
- Legally changed their first or last name
- Named children with more local-leaning than ethnic-sounding names

Preference was given to those who were long-term settled in Sweden or didn't have a temporary connection to Sweden, as the research is grounded in how migrant names are negotiated in a Swedish context. The informants who had more of an understanding of Swedish culture and possibly language could speak to how their names affected their process of integration over the years. Another factor was that migrants on short term visas might temporarily adopt a Western name for the duration of their work or studies but might not necessarily identify with that name. For the purposes of this study, the names being spoken about are names that carry deeper significance and meaning to the informants.

Another key criterion was to try and consciously recruit people who have names that are originally not from languages that use a standard Latin alphabet, as they would have experienced the most significant changes adapting their names for use in Sweden. As Sweden's population is 26.9% foreign (defined as being foreign-born or having at least one parent who is foreign-born) as of December 2022, foreign names are becoming ever more present in Sweden (*Population in Sweden by Country/Region of Birth, Citizenship and Swedish/Foreign Background, 31 December 2022*, n.d.). Out of that 26.9% foreign population, African (2.4%) and Asian (8.0%) make up the largest proportion compared to other ethnic groups, which hover around 1% or under (*Population in Sweden, 31 December 2022*, n.d.). Not only are these groups visibly unable to blend in, but their names are also another source of difference. It is necessary to focus on those who have the most at stake when discussing matters related to identifying personal details such as names, which often are those who are the source of the most discrimination. Although many majority Swedes also use nicknames as a type of preferred name, such as "Sebbe" for Sebastian or "Lotta" for Charlotte, there is not the same risk level as migrants who must weigh multiple factors when deciding what name to use.



Although I was open to all ages, genders, and locations as long as someone had a connection to lived experience in Sweden, it was still challenging to find informants. As my informant criteria was so specific, I had the most success with personal contacts who then referred me to second degree connections. This snowball sampling method of recruiting new informants through personal referrals from existing ones can take researchers far, but it can also hit a dead end after a certain point, especially if the topic could be considered a sensitive matter (Hirvi, 2012, p. 93). This method helped when recruiting within the Chinese community in particular but stopped after a point at which no more informants felt comfortable in English, and I could go no further with my Chinese abilities. As a member of the Chinese community, I naturally had greater access to informants from this background.

In the end I decided to also speak to two administrators within different university systems to better understand the perspective of those who must work within the constraints of the system. Regardless of their personal feelings regarding name use by students or colleagues, they can speak as insiders who feel the limitations of the rules in a different way that is invisible to an outside researcher.

### 5.3 Informant Overview

Given the above criteria, the informants for my research can be summarized in the Informant Overview in the appendix. Some names have been changed upon request, while others use their original names intentionally. Permission was verbally asked and later reconfirmed in written correspondence before the thesis defense. The identifiers they are listed under are, whenever possible, their own stated preferred terms, such as “Middle Eastern” or “Eastern European” rather than a legal or dictionary definition. Some identifiers have been broadened to encompass more informants for the sake of anonymity.

Certain individuals fell into more than one informant criteria category and could speak to a variety of experiences. The “Naming Children” category addresses the naming decisions of the parents for children who were not yet able to speak about their own experience, due to age. The “Child Who was Named” are those born and raised in Sweden, whose parents purposely gave them more local-sounding names, and they spoke more about the firsthand experience of having to bear that name in Swedish society. There are two instances of migrants who reverted to, or purposely chose to use their ethnic name rather than a Western name, and one person who never used a Western name at all. While this fourth category breaks the three criteria I had set out for my informant pool, I felt it was more important to include someone of

Middle Eastern background since this group faces some of the worst discrimination in Sweden (Bursell, 2007, 2012; Khosravi, 2012). That perspective was too crucial to miss out on.

While not all informants ended up being quoted within the thesis, their stories and perspectives have informed the study and were of great value to my understanding of the topic. It is my hope to represent as many diverse viewpoints as possible here, and the informant stories will perhaps serve as jumping off points for future work.

#### 5.4 Ethical Consideration

Discussing personal names raises an unusual dilemma in the standard operating practice of striving for confidentiality when doing ethnographic research. Halfway through the interviews, it dawned on me how challenging it would be to aim for confidentiality when talking in depth about the unique meaning and history of a person's given name. Should confidentiality be assumed by default to be what both the researcher and the informant want? There are inherent power dynamics in assigning names to informants, and while the upsides of confidentiality are known in that it allows informants to speak openly, on the other hand "by guaranteeing their confidentiality, [the researcher] was in effect denying my respondents the right to be heard; in renaming them through the use of pseudonyms, I was denying them the basic right to be who they are" (Guenther, 2009, p. 414). This delicate balance is difficult to navigate, but I opted to follow the informants' lead and let them be the ones to decide what they wish to go by.

Permission to speak on the record was asked of informants before and repeated after the voice recording began. Informant wishes were revisited at the end of the interviews to give them a chance to state which details they wanted to be anonymized or left out, and which can remain as they are. Confirmation of their preferences and visibility into how their information was used in the thesis was shared with individuals before publishing. For those who wanted aliases, I asked them to choose their own alias, for two reasons. One was that it felt wrong in a study about the power dynamics around personal names that I as the researcher would be the one to give them a fake name. The second reason is that I simply do not have expertise in names from various cultures to select a name that would be in a similar position to what their real names represent. Thus, I felt strongly that the best positioned to pick aliases would be the informants themselves. Other details, when they do not have a direct effect on the name use such as job titles, relationship status, or birthplace, have been changed upon request.

## 6. Staying Connected: Names as Identity, Wishes, and Cultural Heritage

Personal names have always been imbued with power relations from the very moment a namer names another. The most common example that comes to mind is when parents name a child, which is a loaded decision. Parents-to-be must consider multiple factors such as linguistic parameters in spelling, cultural heritage, gender expression, and these decisions become even more complicated when the families are from different cultures, and the parents need to negotiate names that work across multiple contexts (Aldrin, 2009). Many migrants, especially those in blended families, face the daunting decision of how to name their children in a way that will not cause them to be teased or otherwise disadvantaged in the new country while still honoring their cultural heritage(s) (Aldrin, 2009; Bredefeldt, 2000; Reisæter, 2012).

Names then become one way to see Lukes' (2021) framework of power through how intangible and even inactive factors affect people's ability to think, feel, and act. The sense of guilt, towards disappointing one's parents or shedding cultural heritage, could be seen as a form of limiting personal agency without the name bearer even being aware. This speaks to the idea of *internal constraints*, or "the ways in which domination can work against people's interests by stunting, diminishing and undermining their powers of judgment and by falsifying, distorting and reducing their self-perceptions and self-understanding" (Lukes, 2021, pp. 128–129). While names could be a gift from parent to child, they can also be viewed as a symbolic shackle that binds a name bearer to a familial and cultural history. In this chapter, I will look at how family connections and cultural heritage attached to names can affect the migrant's decisions around name use in a new cultural context.

### 6.1 Bestowing Hopes and Values

When the character Butch in the cult classic movie *Pulp Fiction* is asked about the meaning of their name, the snappy reply is "I'm American, honey. Our names don't mean shit" (Tarantino, 1994). Although crass, the quote does speak to an inherent, relatable trait of American, and by extension, many Western naming practices. It's less about the meaning than about how it sounds or where it comes from. But this is not the case for many other cultures, where names are almost all about the meaning.

In many Asian cultures, it is not uncommon for people to react to a name with the question "what does it mean?" which can be confusing to many Westerners. Unlike Western names which may be sourced from past family members or popular media (Aldrin, 2009), Chinese names tend to be centered more on their meanings than their sounds or associations

(Gilks, 2014, pp. 99–100). Western names come from a finite list, whereas Chinese names do not come from a standard list and can be newly created as a composition of any existing characters in the language (Gilks, 2014, p. 98). This view of names as almost boundless creates opportunities for parents to consider what qualities they want for their child. But a name is finite after all, so parents are forced by the limitations of one or two Chinese characters to create a name that encapsulates their greatest desires. Some informants mentioned that their parents wanted to grant fortunes, such as “lucky” or “rich,” while others went with descriptive qualities that might include “handsome” “smiling,” or values signaling “studious” or “sensitive”. Others are more poetic, along the lines of “maple” or my own name, Meng (萌), which means “budding” or “sprouting” as a hope for lifelong growth.

Part of why I bristle when I hear someone tell me to change my name as if it were no big deal is because on some level it feels disrespectful to my parents. I would be choosing my own convenience over their wishes for me. Informant Ali agrees that family has a lot to do with why he didn't change his name even if it would have some potential advantages in Sweden, saying that “it is my connection to my parents [who are still in the home country]”. He cannot see them in person right now and has already lost so much in terms of tangible objects and intangible relationships in the process of emigrating away from his home country that it feels like he cannot have “one more thing taken away and denied.” The name our parents give to us is something that remains even when we live oceans apart.

Because names carry wishes, the decision is not taken lightly and can often involve other parties in the naming process, be it grandparents or outside sources. Attention is paid when naming a child as to bestow not only positive and auspicious characteristics but also match with the contextual factors such as birth date and feng shui, or the balance of internal elements (Gilks, 2014, p. 95). Much reverence is given to external expertise, so that naming a child then is no longer a private decision within the family. For example, the majority of my Chinese informants mentioned consulting a mingli shi (命理师) or fortune teller, who takes note of a child's birth date and consults an astrology chart and can make recommendations on what a lucky number of strokes in a name might be, or what element (fire, wood, water, metal, and earth) should be added to a name in order to “balance out” the child (Lee, 2020). The naming power is not only in the parents' hands, but in that of respected consultants within the culture whose services can cost a fair amount and whose expertise must not be taken lightly.

After all the considerations that go into picking a Chinese name, it can be a big shock when the names are Romanized and suddenly lose that carefully selected meaning. Power is

already being exercised when Chinese names are translated into the Latin alphabet through the standard pinyin romanization system. Research shows that as Chinese names get Romanized, “the meanings that the characters represented become lost. Chinese is a homophone-rich language, with on average about 11 characters sharing one spelling” (Diao, 2014, p. 209). As the original Chinese characters are replaced with Latin alphabet letters, there is a flattening of the name where it feels removed from its original rich meaning. There lies the power of systems to not only strip meaning from names, but in doing so, to erase the wishes that the parents had carefully selected.

Far be it for me to say that this is only a phenomenon in Chinese names, but I raise the examples here since a third of my informants are of Chinese descent and it illustrates the cultural phenomenon well. However, similar naming patterns also exist in other cultures, as my Japanese and Middle Eastern informants confirmed. An informant talked about his decision to legally change from his Swedish first name to his Persian middle name Omid, which means ‘peace.’ He made a point that “as a word in the Persian language, I’ve used it more in everyday speech than [my Swedish name], so it feels very natural to use it now.” When a name is not only a sound but consists of words that already exist in a language, the act of selecting it for oneself or another is an act of power in that it transfers concrete wishes, values, and desires. It is not only if a person “fits” their name, but if they can be an embodiment of what the words in this name represent. When these deeply ingrained meanings are at risk, there is intangible loss to the person’s identity. Not only are the individual names meaningful, but also the connection it offers to the family network, as will be discussed in the following section.

## 6.2 Continuing Heritage

The ties that bind people to their families through names exist not only between the parents and child, but with the rest of their extended family through various means. Research about family names and kinship shows that “names can act as a connector which locks an individual into a cross-generational history which stretches into both the past and the future [...] They represent a permanent, cross-generational link” (Finch, 2008, p. 722). This kinship is a positive way of bringing people together, but it can also act as a kind of subtle pressure against deviant name uses.

While there has been research into the naming decisions for individual first names, less attention is paid to that of *shared* names in a family. Again, looking at Chinese names as an example, it is quite common to give children born to a certain generation one character in common as a way to unite them. Four out of five Chinese informants brought up the fact that

they have a shared character in their name with their cousins of the same gender. These characters are usually chosen by a grandparent, which deepens the significance of a name choice. My Japanese informant Masahiro shared that it wasn't even that one character was shared across all his cousins, but that the first-born son in each generation receives the character "Masa," thus creating more of a vertical lineage than a horizontal one in the family tree. Looking multi directionally across families to find these shared characters is one way to trace familial ties through name use.

Last names are another way to continue passing down heritage. One Chinese informant had a deeper meaning to his name, as his name creatively represented both parents' last names while still being a unique new name:

My Chinese name is 毛門吉 (Mao Men Ji). Mao is my dad's surname, but 周 (Zhou) is my mom's family name. If you look closely at Men Ji it is actually my mother's maiden name, Zhou, split apart: 門 吉. [...] Later on, a fortune teller [*mingli shi*] noticed my name is missing water, so the character 吉 (Ji) was changed it to “洁” (Jie) which has the water radical to balance out the fire element.

In this special manner, Menjie's name carries the heritage from both family lines, while still being able to be his own person. Another way last names can represent unique heritage is when it is a rare name that signals membership in a special group, such as Steven who is of the Uyghur ethnic minority group in China. The name allows him to pass within the majority Han population as it does not stand out as an unusual Chinese surname, even if it is uncommon. His outward appearance and local-sounding accent also allow him to blend in, so that when asked about what aspects of his Uyghur background he or his cousins may pass onto future generations, he admits that the last name will be the only official proof that will remain of their Uyghur heritage. In Sweden, his last name might be coded as one of many "Chinese" names, but Steven himself knows the significance of what this name represents.

Possessing the ability to pass down a last name is in and of itself an act of empowerment. Esther, who is ethnically Chinese, was born and raised in Indonesia during what she recounts as a turbulent period of ethnic cleansing where members of the Chinese population were stripped of their names. Not only were her parents forced to rename her to a "random Indonesian name, some famous person from the newspaper," it never even occurred to her that she would have the chance to pass on her long-lost Chinese surname at all. After settling down in Sweden, it was her wife who brought up the convincing argument that it is actually powerful

that Esther, as a queer woman, would be the only person in the family to have the opportunity to pass down the Chinese name. Esther only seriously considered applying for a surname change after her wife said “if we change to [our blended surname], it will mean that not even your brothers or nephews – the male descendants -- have the Chinese family name on their legal documents. But you, the *woman* amongst your siblings, will have this, and we will even pass it down to our future kids.” In this way, the informant was not only able to reclaim the lost Chinese surname, but also empowered herself by reframing patrilineal naming practices in a gender equal society such as Sweden.

The patriarchal way of passing on last names as an assumed default can be a way that three-dimensional power shows itself. It is through one's *positioning* of the self, such as the common experience of women who are expected to choose to keep a maiden name or change their names after marriage, whereas men are not usually positioned to consider making that same choice (Grønstad, 2024). Ideological power can “block or impair its subjects' capacity to reason well, not least by instilling and sustaining misleading or illusory ideas of what is ‘natural’ and what sort of life their distinctive ‘nature’ dictates” (Lukes, 2021, p. 120). From a functional, logistics point of view, women are just as capable of passing down a surname as men, but it takes time to push past the way things have always worked, the resistance to cultural change, or *cultural inertia* (Lukes, 2021, p. 127). This assumption of oneself to be a person who can or cannot pass down a surname, through different identity markers such as gender, is part of what gives power its shape and durability. Moving abroad and living now in a country that allows for the capacity to change one's own name without the “consent of a male, which is needed in Indonesia” as Esther attests, allows for possibilities that were previously unimaginable. It is, I argue, the mix of repositioning oneself from a woman who doesn't traditionally pass down surnames, and the newfound ability, as granted by a different citizenship, that changes the individual's capacity for power. The forces to contend with are both ideological and structural.

### 6.3 (In) Security in Ethnic Identity

For some migrants, a name can feel like one of the last real connections to an ethnicity, depending on how secure the person feels in their ownership of that identity. When it comes to ethnic names, original names, legal names, however one chooses to call it, often it is assumed that what is on legal documents is a person's so-called “true” name. In a study of Portuguese speakers in Macao who have multiple name uses in daily life, the researcher found that people

nevertheless agreed there was only one “true name” which must meet the following three conditions: be in the population registry, be indicative of that person as an individual, and be “in the language that best characterizes the person’s dominant national or ethnic identity” (de Pina-Cabral, 2010, p. 302). This doesn’t mean the other names are false, but that there is one singular name that is “more true” or “more real” than the others they go by (de Pina-Cabral, 2010, pp. 302, 307).

However, I would argue that for migrants who grew up equally between cultures without one dominant national or ethnic identity, their legal name alone doesn’t feel inclusive enough of their lived experience and cannot be treated as a true name. It is not that one name is more or less true than the others, but that in having other names for everyday use, why is it that names must be on legal papers in order to be considered true? A study about how elderly migrants in Swedish nursing homes are addressed by staff only by their legal names instead of their preferred names finds that “the loss of certainty about one’s identity begins when the identity bestowed by others is inconsistent with one’s own view of her/his identity” (Yazdanpanah, 2022, p. 7). The legal name is assumed to be the “real” name, yet that is not consistent with what the name holders actually want to be called.

In my view, how migrants feel towards their legal names can represent the individual’s security, or lack of, in their ethnic identity. Omid, who was given the Swedish name Emil at birth, was repeatedly told throughout his childhood by other Persians that “you are Persian, your name *should* be Persian too.” The lack of having a name from that culture symbolized a lack of complete membership in that community. Another informant Andreas lamented the fact that his parents had decided against giving him a Hungarian name anywhere in his legal first, middle, or last names. “Changing the family name reduced our connection to our roots, symbolically. If we would’ve been kept called [original ethnic surname] we would’ve gotten a bigger reaction from Sweden. But at the same time, we would’ve had a stronger identity with our family in Hungary. The connection would’ve been stronger in our minds if nothing else. That’s a bit of a shame.” Although both informants speak their family’s native languages, the discomfort they feel from others in the community regarding their name reduces their own security in their ethnic identity.

Contrast that with Menjie who is very secure in his Chinese identity despite spending half his life in Sweden, who without hesitation says that he would change his legal name if he felt it would give him an advantage in the job market or other pragmatic purposes. He states that “I would keep my real name as long as possible, but if it’s affecting my everyday life, then I will change it. The meaning doesn’t change, I keep it inside for me. The Western name just



makes it slightly easier for day to day.” Menjie doesn’t need the legal name to prove his Chineseness, he is already secure in that identity no matter what it says on paper. Contrary to what I initially thought, that those who are *more* secure in their ethnic identity would take on an ethnic name to show their pride, it is actually the informants who are more secure in their ethnic identity that seem to *care less* if their legal name is changed, for it doesn’t shake their confidence in their sense of identity and cultural ownership.

This is also part of why a name change can be so uncomfortable or even alarming, because for some it is a loss of proof in their ethnic identity, when they are already approaching it from a place of insecurity. A name change can feel like a tangible change of affiliation, of acknowledging how far one has moved from the origin culture. It can be helpful to remember that ethnic groups are shaped by, and create in turn, boundaries, to define who is in and out. Names are one way to remain within those boundaries and can help demarcate populations and ethnicities (Palsson, 2014, p. 628). The power of the group to decide if someone is in or out of the community partly by virtue of their name is one way names are used in positioning ourselves and maintaining a cohesive sense of self.

#### 6.4 Bridging Cultures

One caveat to this sense of insecurity of ethnic identity is that some lucky migrants are able to have names that bridge both cultures. It is a great tool to allow the name bearer to stake a claim to both cultures without having to force a choice. A study of baby name choices by mixed-culture families in Sweden found that many parents-to-be chose names that come across as Swedish but also exist in other cultures (Aldrin, 2009, pp. 88–89). In some cases, careful planning and research can evade the issue of choosing which culture to showcase more, and instead find one name that satisfies both ethnic identities.

Yet that is not a guarantee that the pronunciation or the spelling will be consistent across the cultures where the name is used. This ability to give names that bridge cultures is also more common for countries that are geographically and culturally closer, such as names within continental Europe. These can be quite international names such as Sofia, Jacob, Lucas, Olivia, Isabella, where it’s hard to identify the origin of such a name bearer, at least within most Western countries. This becomes a lot trickier once the range expands beyond the boundaries of Western cultures, where African names, Latino names, and East Asian names have very few crossovers.

That is not to say it is impossible to find a name that exists across Western and Asian cultures, but the results are not promising. A naming website allows parents-to-be from two varying cultures to compare baby name lists and find names that exist in both languages (retrieved 4 May, 2023 from *Bilingual Baby Name Finder*, n.d.). While there are over 160 results for English-Spanish names for girls and even 66 results for English-Arabic names for girls, English-Korean names for girls numbers only three, and Swedish-Chinese names for either gender clocks in at only one name: Bo. To be able to even have a list of cross-culture names is a kind of privilege, for the range of choices and availability is not the same for everyone who finds themselves in a similar situation.

In my research, very rarely did migrants have names that truly could belong to both cultures if they were non-European or North American. Only one informant who was born to Turkish parents and raised in Sweden could fully claim his name in both cultures. Håkan embraces the fact that his name “in some way has been a mediator across these cultures since it belongs to both. My name doesn’t force a choice.” Yet it is not necessarily that nice and easy. When a name exists in two cultures, who gets to decide the “right” way of saying it? These rare cases are a kind of *boundary blurring*, which “implies that there are some names that are common in both the majority and minority groups, so that a clear distinction can no longer be made” (Gerhards & Hans, 2009, p. 1106). The existence of the name in both cultures is helpful, but that alone doesn’t mean the name bearer is free from challenges. The following account is a clear example of a person with authority exercising their power over another individual, even when it comes to how to pronounce their own name.

There was a teacher who got mad at me when I tried to tell her my name is pronounced “Hakan” the Turkish way. She was a Swedish teacher, a native Swedish woman who taught Swedish language, and here I was correcting her on a Swedish name. So she said ‘No, you are in Sweden now, we say it the Swedish way.’ The classmates were laughing at me too, at how I dared to correct a Swedish teacher about my name.

When a migrant who was born and raised in Sweden can’t even have the ability to assert their preferred pronunciation of their own name, that points to an imbalance in the power hierarchy. When one’s own name is weaponized against them to put them in a lower position of power, that has damaging effects on the individual, and ripple effects that are not limited to one single interaction. Names, especially on embodied identities, have the effect of influencing the way others, especially those in positions of power, treat them in general.

My informants who were born in Sweden to migrant families often had Swedish or international first names and ethnic middle names, a method that I also used when naming my

own son. But a few informants who grew up in Sweden spoke about older siblings who were born in their home countries and thus had much more ethnic first names. “I imagine it was much harder for [my older brother] in Sweden. But we don't really talk about it, so I don't know,” one informant recounted. The different lived experiences between two members within the same family based on their names might be felt, but not directly discussed.

Names conjure up connotations, or the mental images or feelings associated with a certain name. This is to say, names are not neutral blank slates, and people have a certain ingrained idea of what someone with a certain name might look or act like. For migrants who were given very Swedish sounding names but do not have a physical appearance that matches the category, their embodied identities become rather at odds with the given name. Others might have embraced their name in their home country, but suddenly find that the environment they have moved to is less tolerant of that name. It is one thing to have a surprising name that might not perfectly suit a given person, but with embodied named identities there is a deeper “dissonance [that] might be experienced if names are ‘seen’ not to match ethnic or racialized bodily appearance and/or nationality” (Pilcher, 2016, p. 772). That disconnect between the name and the name bearer takes on a different meaning on racialized migrant bodies, especially when the names in question are Swedish names.

If indeed “names signify geographical diversity; they are both displaced and emplaced” where a migrant name is known as coming from somewhere else, somewhere that is not here, then names become a kind of boundary making, separating out the insiders and outsiders (Lulle, 2022, p. 1298). Names mark bodies as not being from around here, as obvious of a marker of difference as the racialized bodies that bear these names.

## Summary

In this chapter, I have revealed some of the unseen powers that make it hard for people to change their names, or why it could be offensive to be told to “change your name then” by others in a new country. It is not an easy decision as it involves many other parties – cousins, parents, relatives, minority ethnic groups, fortune tellers, all of whom had a hand in deciding another person's name. A name which isn't just a sound, but a meaning that carries a wish, reflects a value, or carries on a lineage. These meaningful acts are indeed gifts, but they can also be burdens. They represent a version of invisible but present power that binds a person emotionally to their names, even as they must navigate the use of the name in a brand new context when they migrate. The next chapter will look at how names are used strategically to

stand out or blend in, as power moves from the individual to an interactive exchange between the person and the outside world.

## 7. Blending In & Standing Out: Strategic Name Use

Taking on a different name, whether through a legal name change or informal name use, can feel like an act of splitting one's identity. The person with multiple names exists in multiple worlds as they activate a name in various different contexts. Migrants decide for themselves how they will use names as an adaptive tool, be it adopting a more local-sounding name, tweaking their existing name to be less conspicuous, creating a brand new name for themselves, or selectively sharing their ethnic name for reasons of safety.

Three-dimensional power offers a way to look at strategic name use as a negotiation between two parties, the migrant and the societal context, in ways that are seen and unseen. Lukes offers a way to think of power in both active and inactive forms, wherein to exercise power can mean to perform straightforward actions, but inactive power can also exist through less observable means, such as reputation or influence (2021, p. 82). What are the inactive powers that are shaping the conditions in which migrants must decide how to present themselves? These external factors that shape individuals' desires and beliefs, also known as *adaptive preferences*, can be thought of as "the trimming of desires to circumstances" (Lukes, 2021, p. 129). What the individual truly wants in terms of name recognition or reflecting self-identity is carefully calculated and balanced out with the conditions of their environment. The following sections will look at the ways that migrants use their names in a relational way to others and pay special attention to the hidden costs of this negotiation.

### 7.1 (Dis) Advantages to Non-Ethnic Name Use

One of the major reasons stated for migrants that take on a local-sounding Swedish name is to fit in better when undergoing screening tests for jobs or housing applications (Bursell, 2007; Molla et al., 2022). In studying Muslim name changers, researchers found that "receiving 'better treatment' from Swedes after changing their names was a recurring point made during interviews, thereby revealing that participants' former Muslim names were considered the main reason for being badly treated (Khosravi, 2012, p. 70). Two of my informants, one Persian and one Hungarian, were born and raised in Sweden to foreign parents who chose their children's names hoping that they could "fit in with the Swedes" and not face too much discrimination. Essentially, they wished for their children to pass. Racial *passing* is

“the practice of a person of one race identifying and presenting him- or herself as being of a different race, usually the race of the majority population in the social context (Dawkins, 2012; Goffman, 1990 in Osanami Törngren, 2022, p. 54). But the hypothetical goals of the parents and the reality of living with these Swedish names are quite different, as the informants themselves attested to.

The white-passing Hungarian informant Andreas spoke fluent and unaccented Swedish and had no physical markers of being unlike other Swedes. However, while his behavior and outward appearance allowed him to pass on the surface, the passing did not seep into his inner sense of self. He recounts how even though his name and language abilities technically did not expose him as being different from majority Swedes in his high school, he never felt comfortable with that group, preferring instead to make friends with other migrants. Andreas takes a pause and reflects on that, saying “I think that's probably what drew me to them, that they also did not know how to behave, or how to be Swedish.” Even though his parents had deliberately given him a Swedish first name and even changed their family surname to sound more Swedish, it was not enough to integrate with Swedish circles. While a migrant can pass by the virtue of their name, it is only passing, not actual belonging. The advantages of using a Swedish name cannot surpass the invisible, almost unidentifiable barriers of the in-group. Put another way, the adaptive power of assimilating using a local name was not enough to break the inactive but deeply felt power of group norms and values.

However, while the Hungarian informant is white-passing, the Persian informant Omid originally had a Swedish name but could not pass because of his embodied identity that visibly reveals his ethnic heritage right away. Embodied named identities “arise out of the complex meshing of the connections between names, bodies and identity” and make the important point that names and identities cannot be seen as independent of the body on which they are worn (Pilcher, 2016, p. 767). The non-white passing informants know this all too well. No matter how Swedish a migrant's name might be, it doesn't do anything to help with the stigma of having brown skin. This is the *distance-difference* (Rose, 1995 in Antonsich, 2022, p. 1082) that is shown by migrant bodies, where the visible differences reveal that somewhere along their lineage, be in a parent, grandparent, or previous generations, their roots are not fully from here. His looks give away his geographical distance, somewhere along his lineage, which stays as part of embodied identity.

For Omid, passing is not possible, so the name was more of a method of *covering*, which is “the practice of ‘toning down their stigmatized identities to get along in life’” (Yoshino, 2007 in Osanami Törngren, 2022, p. 54). The Swedish name was given to him by

his parents as a way to counteract the stigmatized body, but the discrepancy between the two caused more conflict and confusion on a day to day basis. After many decades of living with his Swedish name Emil, Omid eventually changed his *tilltalsnamn*, the preferred default first name, to his Persian name Omid. He is not alone in changing his name due to repeated interactions with Swedish and other Scandinavian people being continuously surprised that his name didn't match his face. This illustrates that while adopting a majority name is often seen as an obvious method of obtaining advantages, the effect it has on individuals when the action backfires is less talked about. Sometimes the migrant has to do what is most comfortable for their own well-being. The pragmatic has to take precedence less for reasons of wanting to assimilate, but for long-term mental health and self-preservation. In studying Middle Eastern name changers in Sweden, Bursell found that "ethnic identity is not all that a person is. Recognition as a human being has value for the interviewees even at the price of undercommunicating their ethnic heritage" (2012, p. 480). The tradeoff of giving up a local-sounding name in order to limit constant negative interactions is worth it if it causes less cognitive dissonance in the name bearer.

Another advantage of having different name uses can be to signal group affiliation at strategic times. Masahiro started using his Christian name "Thomas" when he moved to New Zealand during the rise of the COVID outbreak, when "it was quite difficult to live there as an Asian. [Using the name] Thomas made it easier to blend in." He continued to use Thomas after moving to Sweden in hopes that "people will not put a Japanese stereotype on me" and as a nod to his mixed heritage as Japanese-British. Using his Christian name in a new country is a way to emphasize a different side to his identity. "I'm not very close to my Japanese side, so I don't feel very Japanese. The language and my legal name are probably the most Japanese things about me. Growing up, we didn't even eat much Japanese food at home, we ate British food [since] my grandmother is British." He does use Masahiro when he's in Japan, or as the case in a Swedish company, when there was already another Thomas working there.

One advantage to using a name that locals are familiar with is the simple fact that people can say it. Menjie used the Western name "Mike" for a period of time after immigrating to Sweden in his teens, a suggestion that came from his mom. It was only after a friend pointed out that his Chinese name was not that hard to pronounce that he reverted back to using Menjie. He also points out that the way Swedes say "Menjie" is not too far off from the correct pronunciation, but of course this can differ for Chinese names with characters that include tricky letters such as "Q" "X" "J" or "Z." His sister, who has one of these characters in her Chinese name, has taken a different approach to Menjie. He describes her interactions with

other Swedish people: "It was like, okay we cannot pronounce that, please change it. Now her name is [a Western name]. So, it's much easier." Another Chinese informant Eva recalls an incident that became the turning point in her name use. She notes how in Sweden, the letter "J" is pronounced more like "Y," so she did not realize someone was trying to call on her using her Chinese name.

One time I had a meeting within the workplace. And then my boss was calling [for] "Johan." My colleague was sitting next to me and then -- because we have no Johan in the team -- so then we were looking, and they said, "Oh. Maybe he is calling you." And I said, "Never use my Chinese [name]. I prefer people to call my English name. I don't want people to call me Johan anymore."

The surprise, embarrassment, and awkwardness of hearing one's name be changed to the point of unrecognizability and the labor of having to correct each and every new person takes a toll on the migrant. Adopting a Western name makes everyday interactions slightly easier, or at least less laborious, for the migrant and the locals they interact with. But at what cost to the individual?

The issue is not only about pronunciation, which can be challenging for speakers of languages that aren't used to particular sounds or tones, such as in Chinese spoken dialects like Mandarin or Cantonese. My point here is that the name holders themselves may start to mentally distance themselves from their original ethnic names due to the discomfort they feel from others regarding the difficulty of their names. For example, "in everyday life, instead of effortlessly introducing a name, migrants often immediately 'jump' into spelling by letters. [...] Such a depleting mode of stabilizing identity under the hegemony of the English language has become a widespread trend" (Lulle, 2022, p. 1304). I myself cannot remember the last time I spoke my legal name out loud for someone who wasn't Chinese, and instead instantly start spelling M-E-N-G to where my name is no longer a word but instead a series of letters. Thus, a name goes from a rich Chinese character to a Romanized English sound to then being further reduced to single letters. The distancing effect it has on individuals can be part of the reason why people are so hesitant to use their legal names with members outside of native speakers of that language. The advantage of adopting a Western name is to avoid further splitting of the self, but the disadvantage is that hiding the ethnic name achieves a similar result to spelling it by letters instead of saying it. Both scratch away at the individual's sense of identity and pride.

Another pragmatic reason for using a name that exists in the majority language is for economic benefits. Bursell (2007) has covered the hiring discrimination towards Muslim names, especially men, in Sweden who then consider taking on Swedish names. Another study

proved that migrants of Asian, Slavic, or African background who changed their names to Swedish-sounding or neutral ones saw a substantial observable increase in labor earnings before and after the name change (Arai & Skogman Thoursie, 2009, pp. 143–144). For entrepreneurs, it can be a business decision. Esther's family members never reverted back to their original Chinese names after experiencing ethnic cleansing in Indonesia. She explained that it was a matter of safety.

My parents, they *finally* became doctors, the first in the family. And they have this sign outside of their [private clinic] buildings, then of course the entire neighborhood will know, okay, let's just go to this doctor with this Indonesian name [...] if you suddenly change that [to Chinese names], then people might think that you are either betraying the Indonesian identity, or that you want to promote Chinese culture in a negative way. So then it's just better to just keep [the Indonesian names on the clinic signs] because there is too much of a hassle. And if you weigh the pros and the cons, it's too much of the cons.

The informant brings up pros and cons of a name change. Is symbolically reclaiming an ethnic heritage by way of a surname “worth it” if the family business and main income stream is hurt by this act? Even though Esther herself now resides in Sweden and isn't beholden to the same cultural pressures, she is conscious of these signifiers. A study of Muslim name changers in Sweden found that for entrepreneurs and other professionals such as doctors and lawyers who needed their names in the public, they “saw their Muslim names as seriously damaging their careers, since their clients did not ‘remember their names’” (Khosravi, 2012, p. 73). Power, in the three-dimensional view, is the capacity to secure compliance and can be at its most effective when it doesn't need to be actively exercised (Lukes, 2021, p. 3). If people already buy into the idea that using their original ethnic names will damage their careers, the fear of potential repercussions is enough to convince migrants to take the path with less conflict. The power need never be exercised to cause such an effect.

Sometimes fear around name use does not even need to be grounded in past or present events, but rather with an eye towards the future. Ali uses his legal name partly because it feels empowering to say that his achievements were accomplished by “someone with this name.” Another reason is for undeniable consistency in his legal records if he were ever to return to his home country. It is a decision that arises out of caution in case his hard-won achievements would be questioned if they were gained under a different name in Sweden. There is still the shadow of power from the home country, the conditioning towards avoiding a potential



conflict, that remains in the mind of this migrant and others as they consider whether or not to adapt their name use in Sweden.

In considering names as a tool of desired advantages, the question arises of why names, and why not balance it out with other elements of assimilation? For some migrants, this is possible. They can pay money to hire private tutors and learn the language, have the money to live in a nice neighborhood in the city, or have the time to pursue a prestigious university education. For others, it can be useful to see that names are a free method to acculturate and gain *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1987 in Gerhards & Hans, 2009, p. 1105), or knowledge, skills, and other competencies that afford societal advantages. This point that selecting a first name is a low-cost situation and can be considered more of a pure expression of individuality rather than material constraints is relevant for studying migrant names as an act of power, as economic resources are ways to expand or limit power (Gerhards & Hans, 2009, p. 1105).

## 7.2 Expanding the Category

Sometimes, a way migrants can try to reclaim power is to play with the idea of categories. At times there is a mismatch between a person's name and their gender expression as well as other aspects of their embodied identities. When a person's embodied identity is complicated by multiple factors such as age, gender, and race, these become added dimensions of dissonance with their given name. Håkan, who is non-White passing and also has visible signifiers of their queer identity, recounts a time they checked in for a doctor's appointment at a Swedish health center, or *vårdcentral*. Note that Håkan uses any pronouns: they/them, he/him, she/her.

So the doctor calls out for "Håkan" and I go up, and when he turned around the doctor was totally shocked. I was clearly not fitting with the image of 'Håkan' in his mind. Also, it likely had to do with my presentation. I was wearing very colorful clothes, I had color in my hair, a colorful dress... it did not fit his imagined category of Håkan. But in his mind, I probably helped nudge the category of Håkan a little bit bigger. It won't change him entirely, it's not possible. But every time someone sees me and it surprises them, it's a small step towards checking their own bias and expectations. This informant is slightly amused at the story, and their self-confidence in their own identity expression is clear. But they are also more than aware of how they come across visibly to others and that their name is surprising to hear. The burden is still on the migrants to bear the effects of the responses to their names. It is the individuals who must do the work of expanding the

categories in others' minds simply by existing with this name, while also having the grace and patience to bear the reactions.

This informant doesn't always use Håkan because it has such loaded connotations, but this in and of itself is a way to play with categories. Sometimes they use their middle name Mert, which is Turkish. As a queer person, they like that Mert is relatively unknown in Sweden as well as not being gender-coded as feminine or masculine, which fits their own fluid embodied identity. They explain their feelings towards their two names in further detail as follows:

*I = informant, R = researcher*

R: How do you think your experience growing up in Sweden would've been different if you'd gone by your middle name, a more outwardly Turkish name?

I: It would've been much harder. I very was lucky to have a name that works in both [Swedish and Turkish].

R: But you also said earlier that if you were to change your name, you'd probably go by your Turkish middle name, yet you acknowledge here that it would make your life more difficult.

I: Hm yes but the name is more neutral...[Mert] in Turkish is a very masculine name, but in Sweden it's more confusing. It sounds maybe like a female name but it's also a bit dark, a bit masculine. So, they cancel each other out. It's a category that doesn't exist. I can make it what it is. There's no association with it, whereas there is with Håkan, like oh a 56-year old man who lives in some small town.

The informant later reiterates that they like Mert because "It's an empty category, I can create it myself, unlike Håkan which has associations. I can play with it, make signifiers." The idea of what an empty signifier is to the informant is interesting because other research positions the Swedish or other White-passing names as the empty signifiers:

To have a Swedish or European name means that one is assumed to be "neutral" and without a racial or ethnic tag. White identity is often rendered as the norm, as neutral. In contrast to Muslim identity, whiteness is regarded as an empty signifier. (Khosravi, 2012, p. 76).

It all comes down to context when it comes to which names are the empty signifiers. What is evident is that the informant is well aware of the associations that each of their names has and plays with that idea in peoples' heads. In some instances, such as with the vårdcentral doctor, the name Håkan is used to shock and surprise in contrast with the physical appearance. In other cases, Håkan uses the name Mert to have a less gender-coded interaction, as the name doesn't

read as exceedingly masculine or feminine to other Swedes. The migrant is using their own names as a form of exercising power over the categories in other peoples' heads, teasing, confusing, and educating all at the same time.

When it comes to gendered name categories, some migrants use their names to shift the category of whether a name is masculine or feminine by their own lived experiences. The informant Peter explains that in her hometown of Hong Kong, there isn't such a strong sense from the previous generation of what English names are male or female. It's a bit more normalized to have a non-gender matching name, even if it is still uncommon. "Growing up in Hong Kong, people always thought my name was cool" she said, "Even now my female friends think it's weird to see guys with that name since I'm their closest association." However, Peter had such a negative experience with people being shocked by the masculine sounding name in Sweden that she changed her name around a year after she arrived. "I've never had such a difficult time. Sweden is a very progressive country, but in the meantime, being progressive is different from removing all those stereotypes completely." As open-minded and tolerant as Swedish society likes to see itself as, Peter's experience is a reminder that the categories still exist in peoples' heads and are not easy to shift.

If one cannot shift the category in peoples' minds like Peter or Håkan, another method is to try and claim multiple categories of belonging. Eva is a mother to three ethnically Chinese children born and raised in Sweden and was very conscious about their name choices. She and her husband, who is third generation Chinese, named their children what appear to be old-fashioned Swedish names: Svea, Knut, and Finn. The first names are all references to significant people, places, or symbols of the children's birthplace, the city of Lund, and the second names are their Chinese names. Eva explains that "they have an Asian face, so then we give [sic] them a typical Swedish name as a connection to their birthplace. They have a story to their name." Since non-White passing migrants cannot change their physical appearances significantly enough to blend in, another way they can stake ownership of their belonging in a culture is through their name stories. The connection to a birthplace in Sweden is a kind of claim to Swedishness and lends a legitimacy to giving a migrant body a very typical Swedish name. When asked if the now school-aged children have ever encountered any particular reactions to their Swedish names, Eva says they have not, but this is still coming through her as an intermediary.

Lastly, at times it's less about redefining the categories of a particular name and more about strategically using names to ascribe qualities to different groups to redefine stereotypes. When an informant legally changed his name from his birth name Emil to Omid, it was because

he was so tired of the reactions from other people when they found out he had such a Swedish name. He noticed that other people would perceive him as somewhat better and more assimilated when they found out his Swedish name, which made him uncomfortable with what they were assuming about him.

When I met someone skeptical towards me [based on appearance], then they found out I had a Swedish name they were less skeptical towards me. When I worked in [another Nordic country], they learned I can speak Swedish, then after learning my name they would go “Ohhh! So you’re *Swedish* Swedish.”

That’s what made me change my name - I don’t want you to look at me as a better person when you find out I have a Swedish name.

Omid could perceive that people were not expecting to hear the name Emil when they met him, and they would perhaps make all kinds of assumptions such as that he was adopted, or that he’s changed his name from some foreign name to a Swedish name in order to get a job or blend in. He also constantly gets comments about how nice and calm he is, and for some people it did not match their image of what Middle Eastern men are like. Therefore, once they found out his name is Emil, they would react as if that explained it, that he is calm and peaceful because he is *Swedish*.

As Omid puts it well, “the name [change] is a way to avoid an interaction.” He knows he doesn’t fit the category of Emil in peoples’ minds, so he changed to Omid in order to stop seeing the surprise in peoples’ eyes as they reconcile how he looks with the name they just heard. There are no longer any reactions of “Oh, you’re *Swedish* Swedish!” with that element of surprise. Now his innate traits of niceness and calmness are transferred to the category of Middle Eastern people, by association with his name. Now he hears more “You Persians are so nice. It’s like night and day.” Omid knew he didn’t match his name category and after a few decades expanding the category in peoples’ minds, he had had enough. Now through changing his name category to a Middle Eastern one, he is actually able to use his own personality and name to change the perception of the community and redefine what stereotypes people have about Middle Easterners. By trying to escape or avoid the discomfort of not matching a category, Omid has actually done an empowering thing by transferring positive qualities to the category that his new name does match.

Ultimately, it becomes a delicate balancing act. The burden of proof that an individual has a right to their name if it doesn’t match their face falls onto the shoulders of the name bearers. Whether or not a migrant wants to do that labor of expanding the categories is up to the individual and their parents who bestow the names. When asked if they would want to give

their children a notably ethnic sounding name, another Middle Eastern informant replied, “I don’t need my child to pay the price for my ideas,” implying that while he himself chose to use his ethnic name in Sweden, he understands the advantages and ease of having a less ethnic sounding name. The mission of proudly bearing a non-matching name seems empowering on paper, but it is another story when that labor of pushing the limits of these categories on a day-to-day basis is put onto the bodies of a real person who has to live with these consequences.

### 7.3 Is it Safe: Fear and Risk in Revealing Names

Advantages and disadvantages to using a Western name are one thing, but for some migrants, the question is not about calculated preferences but rather one of fear for their personal safety. The decision to use one’s ethnic name might not be about likes or dislikes or merits towards hiring decisions, but rather a deep-rooted fear of discrimination and consequences after people find out their ethnic identity. This is not a recent phenomenon in Sweden, or elsewhere in the world. In the Swedish context, a study about Jewish migrants in the early 20th century found that fear of antisemitism definitely affected name choice and accelerated assimilation of Jewish populations who did not want to stand out from the majority Swedish population (Bredefeldt, 2000, p. 112).

Similarly for Muslim migrants in Sweden, changing their original ethnic names to Swedish or neutral, international-sounding names is “a strategy to undermine ethnic/religious expectations. They protect themselves from discrimination and hostility by deflecting society’s attention away from their stigmatized identity” (Khosravi, 2012, p. 75). The people in these communities are aware of how their migrant names are perceived, but the options forward are rather limited. Even for those who do choose to go by a nickname or take on an alternate name that doesn’t reveal their ethnic identity as clearly, there is still a constant fear that they will be found out. And what then? For many migrants, my informants included, the fear about their names being exposed lies less in *what* the reaction is, but the *when* and *where*. Who can they trust with this information? In what situations are they safe? It is not that they cannot handle discrimination, as they have for most of their lives, but about the uncertainty of when and where it might happen.

Names as embodied identities also affect what kind of fear different people face. For the White-passing Albanian informant Klevisa who grew up in Greece, blending in with the majority Greeks was an adaptive strategy. She grew up speaking perfect, unaccented Greek, has a Greek passport, and even started going by a nickname that exists in Greek as well as

Albanian. It was only when professors did roll call or in other situations when her full name would be said out loud that people would ever find out she was not actually ethnically Greek. "In Greece, calling someone an Albanian is a slur," according to Klevisa. "Nobody ever suspected I wasn't Greek until they saw or heard my full name [or] my parents show up and they have an accent, and then people might know." For those who are able to pass with the majority population most of the time, their names can be one of the last stark tangible reminders that they are not of the majority. But this can change in a different context. Klevisa goes on to say that she feels quite safe in Sweden, where there is less discrimination towards Central and Eastern Europeans. She originally invented a new name that doesn't hold any personal meaning but is a lot more international, because as she puts it, "I was just questioning myself, would people be willing enough to spend time to learn my real name or not? I didn't know, so I went with [the new name] because that's what felt safer to me." Now she is more optimistic after a few positive interactions using her ethnic name in Sweden and hopes that it can be a part of her new identity formation in a new country.

For non-White passing migrants, fear takes on a different shape. For an informant who has had since birth both a Chinese name and a male-sounding English name (Peter), going by either of her legal names was tricky. When the informant tried to go on dating apps, she quickly realized that using her English name brought forth rude messages, creating discomfort and negative associations for a name that she previously had very few bad experiences with. "Online dating was awful. I would get messages like "Är du transgender?" she said, clearly frustrated even when recounting the experience years later. "My name keeps dominating every conversation - the why, why Peter, it's getting annoying. Honestly, I have nothing to prove, and I always feel like I have to prove myself in that way." Yet she made the decision to keep using the male-sounding name because the alternate option was even less desirable. Even though she liked and identified more with her Chinese name, she still didn't want to use it because as she points out, "anyone can find you on Hitta.se and I knew I'd be the only [one with this name] in Sweden." In Sweden, a lot of personal information such as one's relationship status, home address, income level, birthday, family members, among others, is publicly available on directories such as Hitta.se. That the Swedish norm seems to be to accept that people are easily searchable is part of what makes this informant feel deeply uncomfortable about her name, and this particular level of openness towards public records is rather unique to Sweden.

Thus, the annoying and rude messages to Peter were still preferable to someone possibly finding out where she lived and other personal details. At least even with a male name,

there are more name bearers in the country and thus she could blend in more. As she puts it well, “when you have such a unique, foreign sounding name, you want to be as anonymous as you can, right?” While neither option is great for her, she is forced to choose the lesser of two evils, so to speak. Power as domination is “the ability to constrain the choices of others, coercing them or securing their compliance, by impeding them from living as their own nature and judgment dictate.” so that the migrant does not get to live as they would like, with the name they would necessarily like, because of these external factors that nudge them towards reluctant compliance (Lukes, 2021, p. 90).

The informant Ali spoke about his journey as a refugee from the Middle East, during which he couldn't reveal which part of the country he was from out of fear that the person he was telling might not respond well to this information due to political affiliations. Ali would prefer the pronunciation from his hometown, but that place was associated with political groups which the listener may be pro or against, so it was safer to adopt a neutral accent or the accent of the largest city in the country as to not arouse suspicion. Later, when traveling through parts of Turkey and Greece, he and his group would purposely not call each other by name - using “you” or not starting sentences with names, to avoid triggering the notice of the border control guards. This is, when they were speaking English, they had the chance to pass as tourists. The guards might be attuned to hearing Arabic names and pay more attention to them. Ali compares the effects of name pronunciation back home and in Sweden:

Let's put it this way: In my homeland, I might be faced with death if I pronounced my name right, but now in Sweden, maybe someone can't say my name how I would prefer or they think I'm not as educated. These [effects] are not on the same level.

When put in this context, the pragmatism of personal safety is far more important than a personal preference. The pronunciation of a name, the uttering of a name, can jeopardize one's own safety. Names are no light matter. Yet for some, fully giving up their name is not an option either, so they look at compromises.

#### 7.4 Finding a Compromise: Inventing or Adapting a Name

Sometimes, a compromise is needed. Between the two extremes of keeping an original ethnic name and changing to use a local name, an individual can exert their own power to choose a third path, that of slightly adapting their existing name or inventing a whole new name entirely. This name change can mark a turning point in their lives. If using the same name one's whole life provides a stable sense of self, that coherence is shattered with a name change (Finch,

2008, p. 713). So for these migrants, are the name changes worth the shift in one's personal narrative?

A name change can arise from one's disassociation with both their ethnic and Western names, especially if the names were not by their choice. Esther, who had her original Chinese name stripped by ethnic cleansing and was given a "random Indonesian name," found a balance after she became a Swedish citizen and was able to both reclaim the Chinese name legally and choose a new name that felt like a better fit. The connective thread in these informants' stories is about reclaiming the power to name themselves, in a rejection of the powers that named them and the pressures to conform to the majority population's naming practices.

Others might choose instead to slightly adapt an existing name to fit in, if fully changing their name is not an ideal option. Andreas' parents noticed that Swedish people had difficulty pronouncing their Hungarian last name, so they chose to modify it to "make it easier, to make it sound more Swedish [...] to blend in more." They tweaked their name by changing one letter – from *Jantyik*, a common Hungarian surname, to *Jantvik*, which suddenly leans more Swedish. "*Jant* kind of reminds people of Jantelagen [Law of Jante, a well-known story in Nordic circles] and *vik* means bay, so nobody ever suspected it wasn't Swedish," according to the informant. Although it is now a brand new name, it is able to hint at the original Hungarian roots without raising any suspicions that it's not a Swedish last name.

Other strategic name changes can be even more subtle than creating a new name altogether. An informant recalled how their childhood friends adapted their Arabic names to sound more Swedish, for example, "Sami" became "Sam" and "Sadam" became "Sadde" to avoid being associated with Hussein. The latter example uses a nickname method that is quite Swedish. It is a common method in Sweden to double the consonant and the ending -E for male names or -I/-A for female names, so for example "Sebbe" for Sebastian or "Lasse" for Lars are accepted canonical nicknames. Not only has the informant's friend with an Arabic name covered his racialized identity with this nickname, by using the standard nickname method in Sweden, he is showing that he knows how to act in accordance with mainstream Swedish naming conventions. They have demonstrated their in-group knowledge and thus have turned it into a way to have both their original ethnic names and a name that doesn't arouse suspicions.

This compromise is understandable, as both Middle Eastern informants mentioned that name changes, while they do happen, are not very typical in the communities they are part of. Research also shows that the majority of people with Muslim names do not change their names (Khosravi, 2012, p. 78). Yet there is also strong evidence of psychological implications of bearing a stigmatized name, especially among Muslim communities who are aware that their



names cause “discomfort and offense (*väckte obehag och anstöt*),” to the extent that this reason is the leading motivation for Muslim name changers in Sweden (Khosravi, 2012, p. 73). This sense of peoples’ own names causing physical discomfort to others relates back to names as embodied identities. When thinking of harassment, especially with nicknames or other names that were not adopted organically, how others react can trigger the embodied sense of shame (Palsson, 2014, p. 625). Sometimes the middle ground between the original ethnic name and a whole new local-sounding name is the best option available. In terms of power, the migrant is exercising choice under conditions of relative autonomy, whereby their freedom to choose is really constrained to a few imperfect options (Lukes, 2021, p. 152). They make the best out of a tough situation.

Expanding upon the usual types of name changes, some adaptations that help migrants blend in are name additions rather than replacements. The American informant Mandy is strategically planning to hyphenate her last name when she and her partner get married, so that future employers won’t be able to tell if she is the Swede or Non-Swede in the relationship. Esther plans to do the same by hyphenating her Chinese last name with her wife’s Swedish last name, albeit for family, rather than professional, motivations. This is also a type of covering, in that the original name is still in plain view, but with other signifiers added in (Yoshino, 2007 in Osanami Törngren, 2022, p. 54). In a way, adding more names onto existing ones is a way of mitigating risk, and a way to play with the impressions that people in power of hiring have of certain names in order to resist being easily stereotyped and categorized.

## Summary

In this chapter I have looked at how migrants strategically use names, being aware of the discrimination against their ethnic names yet not giving in and changing their names entirely. There is a lot of thought, emotion, and careful consideration is given to the use of a name, whether it is hiding under a nickname, inventing a new name for oneself, or changing how they say the name. This negotiation between the name bearer and the receiving party is a show of the interrelational exchange of power. Names can be double-edged swords, where the pros are only possible when the pains of the cons are acknowledged. The hidden costs, known only to the name bearers, stay invisible because oftentimes there isn’t observable conflict, and the struggle remains internalized. The individual takes these adaptive measures in order to not cause conflict, even if that means more personal cost to themselves. With this multiplicity of names, the idea of a preferred name emerges as an alternative to the legal name. The next

chapter will take a look at obstacles in everyday life against preferred name use, and how people respond to bureaucratic powers.

## 8. Systems, Rules & Norms: Obstacles to Preferred Name Use

Up until this point, the focus has been on how names affect the individual, of being named, of carrying on heritage and intangible pressures, as well as how the individual interacts with others around them by way of their name use. Now I turn my attention to Swedish societal and bureaucratic systems that shape the world my informants live in. In this chapter, I will look at power in how it forces behavior in dictating when and where legal name use comes up, as well as how it is perpetuated through an ideology of being “right” (i.e. it is the individual that must adapt, and not the structures). When speaking about force, one must also consider the idea of consent. Lukes’ idea of power over others as domination takes a view that “compliance is secured in conditions that put in question the freely given consent of the person or persons subject to it” (2021, p. 163). Compliance, therefore, is not an automatically assumed quality of having power, but something that needs to be secured through various means. If consent and compliance are able to be contested, so then, can one question the effect of those who have power through domination. Between the complex structural processes and large state-run institutions that exist in Sweden, it is an uphill battle to not comply with the way “things are done here.” But if an individual wants to use their preferred name, be that a nickname, a name change, an invented name, or an informal alternate name, they have to be prepared to face some tangible and intangible obstacles in their everyday lives.

### 8.1 Navigating Bureaucracy: Forced Name Use

Most people are familiar with how exhausting dealing with bureaucracy might be, but there is an added layer of labor when it concerns a person’s name. The rules that lock people into using their legal name by default in most situations creates awkward or uncomfortable situations for migrants. This is not so much the case with majority Swedes, who have grown up within the system and are used to a certain trust in higher authorities. Labor is often invisible, but it is a measure by which it is clear to see the difference of lived experiences between majority and minority groups. In her book *Complaint!* about institutional complaints, the feminist scholar Sara Ahmed defines privilege as “an energy-saving device” where to be spared the need to complain is to conserve energy, and to complain is to expend time and energy on

something that not everyone has to (2021, p. 234). Privilege is not having to expend mental energy and free time on pursuing issues that already work the way that best suits you.

Previously I have shown how migrants have hidden fears around people knowing their legal names and through that, their ethnic backgrounds. To place it in a wider context, I want to look at when these cases of exposure are happening and why it is happening in Sweden – is it a conscious choice to insist that people use their legal names, or is it by default? One big caveat is that none of the informants objected to the idea that legal names must be used in circumstances that involve legal documents, such as passports, employment contracts, residence permits, housing leases, and so on. The gray area concerns email addresses, usernames on school or employer digital platforms, door signs, picking up mail, and other situations where there is not as strong of a case for using legal names, and yet it persists.

Barriers to preferred name use can happen in big and small ways, but the effect on the individual is the same. The primary difference is the *degree* of discomfort felt, not that there is or is not discomfort, as an embodied reaction to hearing their legal names used without their consent. The question becomes about the necessity of this act, of defaulting to the legal name without considering an alternative. It happens in the grandest of life milestones, as with Esther who recalls the physical recoil she felt on her wedding day as the officiant called out her Indonesian name, which she has no connection to but is forced to use on legal documents.

We got married in Sweden. When I had to answer, “I do” to the wedding officiant, he had to say my Indonesian name because it’s an official thing. So that was extremely uncomfortable, and everyone in my wife's family, they were like, “who is that?” They were informed before, so they knew it was my name, but it was still annoying. They had to ask for my ID card before I got married. Then, of course, they had to use whatever name appears on the ID card and I had to confirm that it was my name. So, I cannot just say, okay, I want [my preferred name]. Okay, but what is your proof?

The informant brings up the idea of proof – but what is your *proof* that this name is your name, when the ID card says something different? The burden is put on the migrant to prove that they are not lying, that they are who they are supposed to be, which is the name that matches the ID. The power of the state is exerted on even the most private and meaningful situations such as a marriage, to the point where even the extended family are confused about who is getting married. If the marriage is a promise for the future, the legal ethnic name surfacing is a constant reminder of the past. The embarrassment, awkwardness, and even the sense of fear the informant mentioned, are all put back on the migrant body as their split identity is revealed on one of the most special days of their lives. Research shows that traces of old names that appear

in the most unexpected and sometimes unpleasant circumstances can bring up complicated emotions in the name bearer and can even bring up past trauma (Sinclair-Palm & Chokly, 2023, p. 372). Like a ghost haunting, the migrant's hidden name never seems to quite fully disappear.

Unwilling name use can also happen during the mundane, everyday parts of migrants' lives. The same informant Esther expressed her frustration at registering for a shop's membership card or trying to buy alcohol:

I'm talking even when registering for like Hemmakväll, it's a candy store. It's such a simple thing, but then I have to show them this name, and then they have to register this name in my membership.

You know, even for small things like that, or even when I had to show my ID card with that name to Systembolaget [the state-owned alcohol shop] because they never believe my age.

The frustration of having to encounter their legal name on a day-to-day basis comes through clearly in the informant's retelling of these small but persistent interactions. There is a certain stickiness to how the small scratches on a person's identity can build up over time. It is not one individual moment or place, but the collective memory of the moments one is denied their preferred name or forced by those in positions of power to use the name that matches the ID card. The power of the state is everywhere in Sweden, even in a candy shop.

Encountering challenges with the postal service in Sweden (PostNord) was a common thread throughout the informant interviews. Picking up packages in one's own name proved to be a more difficult affair than many had anticipated if the addressee's name didn't match the recipient's legal ID. Granted, this frustration is not limited to just migrant names, as I have heard from many other Swedes who go by a nickname or a variation of their legal names that have encountered similar issues. But it is the extent to which the migrant has to go out of their way to reveal their legal name to their global networks that feels more like forced exposure. Continuing with Esther's experience getting married in Sweden, she recounts how tricky it was to receive wedding presents from abroad.

[PostNord] said if it is not your name in the legal document, then they cannot release this to you, even though the address is correct, even though it is your personnummer.

So I had to say to all my friends [in non-EU countries] who wanted to send wedding gifts to us "By the way, this is my legal name, you have to write this when you send us a gift." Because otherwise I cannot pick it up apparently. It was very uncomfortable.

Again, the informant has to reveal her legal name to her friends who want to send her a wedding gift. She is between two undesirable choices: either she doesn't accept the kind gesture from

her friends, or she reveals a personal detail that feels uncomfortable to her. It's the illusion of choice that actually is an exercise of power. The individual is put in an awkward position where they can exercise choice under *relative autonomy*, between a set of less than ideal options (Lukes, 2021, p. 152).

The rules governing the mail make it so that either the migrant reveals their name layer by layer to the people around them that might not know this protected detail, or else the migrant hides. It is reminiscent of the discussions around trans/queer folks' stories of "coming out"; Sometimes the individual is able to control the narrative and timing and do it on their own terms, but sometimes "you are outed by others and you have to deal with the consequences" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 119). What is shared between forced migrant name use and queer folks' coming out is the lack of agency and uncertainty of who controls the experience of releasing the information.

Sometimes the issue is not even about the legal name and preferred name, but how a name should appear. Andreas started using his middle name Michael as his last name in the U.K., to make it easier in everyday life. He describes how his logic in a way mirrored his parents' changing of their family name after moving to Sweden:

I think I mimicked my parents' logic with their name change. I was like, "[Jantvik] is too complicated for people, let's just do this, it's easier." So that's funny...I kind of replicated what they did with their name, moving to Sweden. And I guess this attachment to my last names were less, precisely because one of them was changed, so, and the other one [his mom later created another original last name] was invented. So, there was a lack of connection to a history, so I guess I felt like it didn't matter.

Since Andreas feels less of a connection to these modified and invented last names, he is empowered when he chooses his middle name Michael to act as his own individual last name. While in the U.K. it was not a problem, in Sweden it poses difficulties since although Michael is technically part of his full legal name, it is not classified as a last name. He describes an encounter with PostNord regarding this issue:

In the U.K., I could go and pick up a post addressed to Andreas Michael, I would show my ID card, they just give me the package. There're no questions asked. Like, the names are on the card, so here you go. Here in Sweden, they're like, "Oh, but it's not the *last* name." You know, you don't have your last name on there. And I was like, "Dude, the two names are on the card. They're right there." "Yeah, but the last names are not, [so] you know, I don't know if I can give you this package."

This informant doesn't even have the issue of a preferred name being different from what appears on his legal IDs, yet he still encounters issues with how he wants to use his name and how the bureaucratic systems deem it to be proper use. This is a way that national power is exerted on migrant bodies, through one type of standardized use within governmental bodies such as schools and the postal service. Migrants understand that when they have their names written and recorded on legal documents, there is an implicit understanding that "their linguistic identity marker is not 'owned' by themselves only, but also by different state powers" (Lulle, 2022, p. 1306). The migrant is not fully in control over their own names, how they're written, pronounced, or even exposed without consent. It is a constant negotiation with bottom-up power, such as social norms in the everyday, and top-down power, in forced use of legal names through the state.

## 8.2 Unintended Exclusion

In addition to the private internal discomfort people may feel when their legal names are exposed without their consent, there might also be tangible downsides to the preferred/legal name use in their everyday lives. One of these downsides would be the previously mentioned issues around picking up mail addressed to the preferred name, or put in another way, of names being used the wrong way.

Other informants mentioned the paranoia of possibly missing out on opportunities because their colleagues didn't know how to reach them. A Japanese informant who goes by "Thomas" instead of his legal name "Masahiro" immediately recalled how he missed out on an invitation to an office table tennis tournament because the colleague couldn't find his email (which uses the legal name) in the company system.

Everybody thinks I'm Thomas. But my university email address uses my legal name, so they couldn't find me by just typing Thomas, it didn't show up. The [table tennis] opponent needed to message me, and nobody emailed me because they couldn't find me. So I have to email them, always.

This informant brings up the issue of labor, of having to be the one to email the other party because it can't be trusted that others will know how to find them. The inconvenience of having a legal and preferred name is that the work of educating, reminding others, ensuring they are not unintentionally overlooked, then gets put on the body of the name bearer. This pressure becomes a kind of *communicative labor*, where the individual has to keep repeating the same points and telling the same story over and over, to bosses, peers, students, customers, as they come and go in a never ending flow (Ahmed, 2021, p. 119). Thus "the usual is the structural in

temporal form” as Ahmed puts it, where to become used to something as the norm as it keeps happening can make it recede into the background, otherwise one would be complaining nonstop (2021, p. 117). This norming, or *naturalization*, of making something seem like an organic and natural effect, is a way of enacting power as domination (Lukes, 2021, p. 146). By not recognizing that power is at play in an invisible, even inactive way, migrants accept their roles and extra labor as a fact of life.

He is not alone in having to take on this burden. Another Chinese informant, Alice, who works as a teacher brought up the same issue. In her public school, which has hundreds of staff members, many don't know how to contact her because her preferred name is not her email address. She takes special care and attention to her introductions with new staff members, saying her preferred name Alice but also then emphasizing her legal name and how to email her. Not only that, but the name discrepancy continues even off the screen and into tangible forms.

*I = informant, R = Researcher*

I: [Municipal] schools like ours, there's a rule that you have to use your name on your ID. So you can't just say, oh, my name is Alice, you can't just change your email. And on the sign at the door of my office, it will say which teachers are in this classroom. [My legal] name is also on that paper.

R: But your students, don't they call you Alice?

I: They are confused. Where is Alice? So when I receive a new class, I have to tell them my identity. I say, my name is Alice, but if you send me an email, you have to write to [her Chinese name]. It's a bit of a hassle.

Not only is it difficult for other teachers to contact this informant, but her own students are also confused upon first meeting her. Then she must repeat the information again for parents of students at the parent-teacher meetings. For one or two people this is no problem, but in a school of hundreds of staff and teachers, with people coming and going over the years, it can become exhausting.

Alice might have missed out on communications that were not addressed correctly, or perhaps people wanted to reach her but didn't know how. The thing about exclusion is that it's hard to know it's even occurred. Alice's and Thomas' burden is borne only by themselves. If they happen to miss out on opportunities due to their preferred names not being used, that is internalized as something they must personally perform better on, to make sure they reach out first over email or keep reminding colleagues of how to contact them. Power is the capacity to

put the onus back on the wronged party and make them do more work to remedy the situation, “capable of being effective even without active intervention” (Lukes, 2021, p. 91).

As for why Alice's legal name appears on a handwritten sign over her classroom door, and not the name her students know her by, she admits this is not something she had considered before. This is an example of a *latent conflict*, a contradiction between the interests of those in power and the real interest of those they exclude, where sometimes the interests of the latter might be unknown even to themselves (Lukes, 2021, p. 33). Lukes adds that “to put this another way, it is here assumed that, if people feel no grievances, then they have no interests that are harmed by the use of power” (Lukes, 2021, p. 33). But of course, that is not the case. It is not that power is exercised only when there is a known complaint, but that power inequities have already been taking effect unconsciously on the individual before feelings of being wronged can arise. If Alice accepts that this is the natural state of things, then she has no need to question if she agrees with the way things are. There is trust in the employer to be making the right decisions. The core issue then becomes whether the legal name is being used by necessity, with careful consideration and intent, or by default, without intent or forethought. These actions might seem ordinary on the surface, but it can veer into unintended discrimination if it is not done with consideration for the lived experiences of the people who must personally deal with the aftermath. Alice also adds that she is the only Asian teacher in the big school, and even though she has specialized qualifications that her colleagues don't have, she's younger than them so she feels she can't speak out.

Perhaps not everyone would see these events as such a big deal – a handwritten door sign, a table tennis tournament, a wedding gift, and so on, are not major offenses. But for the person missing out on it because of these strict, and I argue, *unnecessary* rules, it is indeed a big deal. They have to be the ones to do the labor of explaining their two names to colleagues who want to email them, to friends who want to mail them a package, to family who might not even recognize this name on their wedding day. Migrants take on this labor because the alternative of being excluded is even less desirable than the discomfort of exposure. These missed opportunities and awkward moments of name exposure are a result of *strategic inefficiencies*, that the slowness and resistance to change is intentional and purposeful, whereby “exhaustion becomes a management technique” so that people are too tired to address what it is that causes them to be so tired (Ahmed, 2021, p. 93). Rather than considering that there might be structural injustices, the informants first put the responsibility on themselves: that if others make a mistake, it is probably because the migrants did not perform their duty to educate and inform them well enough. This ability to shape people's perceptions of what is normal and



natural is power in action; it is three dimensional power that “works against people’s interests by misleading them, thereby distorting their judgment” (Lukes, 2021, pp. 146, 17–18). When the blame is put back on the migrants who don’t fit into the standard system, rather than the system being unfair, is that not power at work?

After all this, my biggest question regarding this individual labor boils down to: are migrants’ legal names even *necessary* in a country where in almost every setting where a legal name appears, so does a person’s identification number in Sweden, the *personnummer*? Previous research about the significance of names posited that renaming slaves was an act of control from those in power over the powerless (Finch, 2008, p. 712). To expand further on this example of how bodies become nameless through the expression of power, this is still happening in prisons and concentration camps, where taking away a name and replacing it with a number, not even renaming, is an act of dehumanization (Pilcher, 2016, p. 773). I agree with these examples of how names can be an act of power. To bring it back to the Swedish context, I think it is worth considering that it could be the reverse in Sweden, where people are assigned such a powerful *personnummer* that always identifies them in a central national database, the population registry. Thus, whether someone’s preferred name in day-to-day use does or does not match their legal name is not as crucial of an identification tactic in Sweden. Shouldn’t the systems in Sweden then be more lenient on letting people use their preferred names? The teacher Alice thinks the same, as she recounts how her first paycheck was made out to her preferred name instead of her legal Chinese name. “But it wasn’t a big problem, since my *personnummer* was on there. So it still got to the right person.” If the unique *personnummer* is a surefire way to know that the right person has been reached, is that not more of a case for letting people use preferred names in more situations?

### 8.3 Competing Priorities

An obstacle to preferred name use could be a lack of resources, of having to choose among different internal and external priorities. Even when someone does want to assist migrants in using their preferred names, there might be limited time and energy for one individual to do something long-term. A professor at a different university who helped me change my display name on Canvas admitted that he understood my desire to advocate for preferred names as not a one-off occasion but a larger discussion point, but he hasn’t done much to date. He was put on another course immediately after the one I participated in ended, and it became a structural issue about time management due to all the demands on teachers.

Things fall through the cracks, and the practical and tangible (classes, grades, research, writing) takes priority over the ideological and intangible (social justice, improving feedback and communications). There are clear downsides to not doing the practical job roles, but there is no repercussion for not acting on matters of theoretical inclusivity. It's a charitable act of generosity, not a job responsibility; a nice to do, not a must do.

This is also why following up on a request can be awkward for the name bearer; it feels indulgent, almost shameful, for to push on a complaint is "to be heard as being tiresome, as distracting somebody from doing *important* work elsewhere" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 2). The awkwardness and shame become part of the embodied named identity, a kind of silent self-policing that keeps migrants from advocating for what they want, as to not be a bother for those who are already so busy. Again, this is three-dimensional power at work: to believe in a system that is not working to one's benefit, without those in power needing to exert force at all.

Another way of prioritizing the wishes of those in power over that of the individual can be found in the field of gender studies, in particular that of deadnaming in the trans community. Deadnaming is when other people refer to the trans person by their former "dead" name before they transitioned from Male to Female or Female to Male. On the surface, the issue seems to be in respecting the trans person by referring to them by their new name, and not misnaming them. But research into deadnaming shows that the issue is more complicated than that: sometimes the trans person does not actually want to fully reject their former name and identity for the comfort of others (Gill-Peterson, 2020 in Sinclair-Palm & Chokly, 2023, p. 373). The matter of their former name is not so black-and-white for the trans person themselves, but they feel there is a societal demand to conform to a clear-cut named identity. They are pushed into choosing a consistent name and committing to that name for the sake of fitting into a system of gender legibility. There is still an under-the-surface push for people to be categorized neatly, even if they've switched categories. Research shows the complicated feelings trans people have with the pressure to "kill" their old names in order to create a coherent narrative:

Denying the existence of a name given at birth can become a part of young trans people's legitimization strategy as it erases the past and encourages a narrative of having always been the person one is in the present. This encourages trans people to narrow their subjectivity into an easily digestible, coherent narrative (Sinclair-Palm & Chokly, 2023, p. 384)

This experience is quite similar to the pressures migrants feel to choose one primary, public name, to present a clear and consistent image that doesn't cause other people confusion or discomfort. The desire to place people in orderly boxes, whether it's gender or names, is a

consistent phenomenon. There is also a false sense that “dead” things stay dead. But as the trans people’s experiences have shown, not everyone wants their names to be dead, and those assumed dead might resurface. Even those who legally change their names still are asked in official or administrative contexts if they’ve ever gone by another name. Therefore, “other (discarded, birth) names will always be ‘there’ in relation to our embodied selves and so remain the initial, and always present, reference point for identificatory practices” (Pilcher, 2016, pp. 775–776). There are always traces of a previous life, another identity, exposed for others’ knowledge even if it causes personal discomfort.

The labor of the migrant to assert their desire to use their preferred name is repeated time over time in an attempt to make a small effect through large personal effort. The imbalance of effort to effect shows how much of an uphill battle it is to make any change as an individual. In dealing with institutions, “making a complaint is never completed by a single action: it often requires you to do more and more work. It is exhausting, especially given that what you complain about is already exhausting” (Ahmed, 2021, p. 5).

A professor at another Swedish university who is ethnically Finnish put his personal view as such: “why would I make this [preferred name use] into an issue? It’s important to you, so I will accept it. If it makes you feel more included, that’s easy. Perhaps that’s the Finnish mentality: why make it into an issue if it doesn’t need to be?” I agree with his statement, but perhaps not with the word “easy” which mirrors the earlier use of “simple” – yet as I’ve shown through migrant stories and previous research, for some embodied identities, deciding name use is anything but simple or easy. If it were, I wouldn’t be writing this thesis.

## Summary

The bureaucratic systems in Sweden have made it so that everything follows a certain order and logic, and it works very well for those who do not deviate from this standard. But migrants do not come into names with the same cultural context that native majority Swedes do. Navigating the bureaucratic systems can be a frustrating and uncomfortable experience, where a migrant’s legal name can be exposed without their consent. This kind of indirect forced use of one’s legal name leads to situations of exclusion as well, as migrants can miss out on opportunities from people who only know them by the preferred name but have to address gifts, emails, and other contact to the legal name. All of this begs the question of are legal names such a necessary act, or a rule made by default. This is especially relevant in a country such as Sweden that has widespread use of a person’s identification number, or *personnummer*, which

is already a useful legal way to identify someone. The next chapter will look at other ways that preferred name use can be achieved in Sweden by reframing the problem and looking at what can be done rather than what cannot.

## 9. Making It Simple(r) – Finding the Helpers

It is not lost on me that in a research project that is challenging the idea of what is “easy” when it comes to name use by looking at the effect that these decisions have on migrants, that it can easily veer towards negative experiences. In examining the tensions between the preferences of name bearers and that of cultural heritage and family ties, fear of exposure of ethnic background, and rules within the Swedish bureaucracy, it is easy to get overwhelmed by all the powerful forces that *could* stand in the way of preferred name use. But I want to end on a hopeful note, on the forces that *can and are* creating change within their own scope of control, and what that could mean for future work.

It is at this point that I deviate from Steven Lukes' idea of three-dimensional power. He sees strategic manipulation, coercion, and force as *power* in that they can be ways to achieve desired results during conflicts of interest, and acts of persuasion or encouragement as *influence* in that there is no conflict of interest (Lukes, 2021, p. 41). But what about when there is a conflict of interest that *can* be worked through using supportive methods, such as inspiration or activism? Lukes' theory on three-dimensional power is relevant to show how power exists in our everyday lives in unseen ways, but it paints a rather bleak picture of the world where people primarily only pursue their own interests. While Lukes (2021) does not directly address the topic of how power can be used to help others, I would argue that it is inherently possible through his three-dimensional framework. If we consider all the dimensions of power, the two-dimensional view of power provides a way to see that those without power can influence those in power as well. The examples in this final chapter show how those who care, who listen, who remember, and who act on important issues for others can make a difference. Even if it is not power in the three-dimensional sense, I argue that it is empowerment for those who extend a helping hand, and those who receive it.

### 9.1 Avoiding Assumptions

Sometimes the path to preferred name use is as simple as having a real dialogue, of stating one's desires out loud clearly and directly. A lot can be lost to assumptions between two parties that may have good intentions. A Chinese informant Mia talked to me at length

about her journey to finding a Western name that she liked and felt suited her well. She has had multiple different names since arriving in Sweden years ago, from her original choice of "Season," a poetic reference to the four seasons in a year before she realized "It's not *even a name!*" to teaching her husband and in-laws to say her Chinese name, to trying out different Western names that friends and family suggested. None felt right until she got to "Mia," a few years ago, and now she lights up when she hears this name. Yet deep into our conversation, I asked what her husband introduces her to other people as, and the answer surprised us both.

*I = informant, R = Researcher*

I: Just every time when somebody calls me "Mia," it's just...it's me! [Delighted] If you call me [Chinese name], I will feel *really* strange.

R: What does your husband call you? He's known you through three names now.

I: For him, [when he introduces me] to others, for families, he will say [Chinese name]. He never, ever introduced me as Mia. [Laughs] This is so weird.

R: But is that what you would *prefer* to be introduced as?

I: Thank you for this, thank you for these questions. I'm going to ask him tonight.

I: I haven't, yeah, I haven't told him that I feel nice about Mia. I just think it's practical. So maybe, well, in his eyes, or maybe what he understand [sic], Mia, for me is practical, not like meaningful.

It is understandable to assume that someone as intimately familiar with us as a spouse has guessed our preferences. But when preferences go unspoken, it can lead to unintended results.

In a work context, Mandy, a North American university administrator in Sweden who works with international students, admits her own assumptions around name use have stopped her from asking questions that could be misinterpreted. The fear of embarrassment from those in a position of power can be a barrier against more inclusive actions.

There's, to some extent, this aspect of, for me, a discomfort of asking. Because if I ask then maybe I'm offending them by asking, because maybe people will assume you must have a Western name. Maybe that will be an offense taken, of "I don't need to have a preferred name. I could use my legal name. Why are you insisting that I have one?"

The administrator is nervous about asking for preferred names because the other party might be offended by the insinuation that they must have one. So then perhaps they think they need one and make up a more Western sounding name for the sake of the person in power who has asked this question. But since Mandy has never had this kind of conversation with students, it becomes a knotted web of assumptions. This vicious cycle of trying to avoid possible offenses leads to a situation where an outward conflict might be avoided, but neither party is entirely

satisfied. Seeing this scenario through three-dimensional power frames it “not in terms of wills or intentions but of interests” where it is the capacity to act in one’s best interest that is the issue (Lukes, 2021, p. 160). Can people set aside good or bad intentions, and consider if each party’s interests are being attended to? Mandy acknowledges her role in this dynamic, and the conversation we have seems to spark some new ideas for her work moving forward.

## 9.2 Making it Real: Creating a Connection

The motivation to help people with preferred name use can come from knowing that another person’s feelings are involved. In other words, care and concern towards a specific source spurs action. When another party knows the migrant well and understands how they want to use their names, many will do what is in their power to help. But when the issues are vague and not tied to a real person, there is less impetus to take it as seriously. I followed up with a professor at a Swedish university who helped me change my name on Canvas during a course he ran. Mikael explains how he reacted to my request for “Melissa” to appear in my display name to participate in online discussions comfortably.

To be frank, this was a new issue for me, so I had to pause and think about what I felt about [it]. I realized that this was more important than I would have realized by just, like, thinking about it.

If a student would have said “Hey, why can't we change our names in Canvas?” perhaps I wouldn’t have thought about it any further than [...] oh, that's an interesting topic. But I would not have had your experience where it was clear that this was certainly an important issue for you and your ability to feel included in the teaching. Your feelings were clear and it was easy for me to get straight away. Because of your story, it became relevant to make this into an issue.

He raises the example of if preferred names were simply a hypothetical topic of discussion, it might be interesting but not urgent or necessary to act. Mikael immediately acted, taking my request up the administrative levels until it was granted within a couple of days.

## 9.3 Self-Awareness of Personal Power & Agency

Change is never easy, but very possible with small steps. Acknowledging there are people with opposing views to the way things have always been is the first step. Recognizing that responsibility is an aspect of how power is located and expressed is important in determining accountability for the effect of one’s actions or inactions. After all, “we can

properly hold responsible, or accountable, those who have the power to advance or harm others' interests but fail to realize or attend to this" (Lukes, 2021, p. 81).

And while larger political and governmental bodies might be slow to change, even small change on the individual level is still a significant move. Mandy, the university administrator, realized in the span of our interview that she could very easily add a line for preferred names in the registration forms for a student program that she oversees. We had been talking for almost two hours about rules and legislations in Sweden, about migration barriers and international politics affecting students, about the complex workings of governmental agencies and university systems, and it took nearly that whole time to reach that "aha!" moment of remembering what is still achievable by one person if they have the will. There are many reasons why someone can't – lack of time, lack of influence, lack of understanding – but this informant's ability to recognize what she *could* do within her scope of authority, is a sign to look at what is possible rather than what is not.

#### 9.4 Follow-up to Background Story

After my initial disappointment at the lack of help in addressing my preferred name use from multiple IT departments, student union, and department staff members, I stopped pushing the issue. I kept in mind that "correction is often heard as complaint: as being negative, assertive, demanding" and I worried about the impression I was giving off (Ahmed, 2021, p. 119). I felt like I was being perceived as asking to be given special treatment, whereas I saw it more as advocating for increased flexibility in general to account for a diverse international student body. I refocused my attention on speaking to other migrants for this thesis to get a wider range of stories. That is, until I received the following email from an administrator of a student peer mentorship program I'm a part of, asking what name I wanted to be called when I receive my end-of-service certificate on stage.

From the training I remember you saying that you prefer to not be called by your legal first name and wanted to check the following with you:

- Do you want your legal name to be on the diploma?
- If yes, would you prefer if we call you up to collect your diploma by your preferred name (Melissa)?

I was surprised by this e-mail. There are hundreds of student mentors and this person and I had had limited interactions in the year since the training. Yet she remembered this detail about me and took the extra steps to make sure I felt comfortable with my form of address. I felt seen.

Respected. Hopeful. I could choose to see this as a case of an outstanding individual, and I don't doubt this is true as well, but I also believe that in the grander scheme it's about not just caring, but showing care for others that can lead to a perspective shift. It is easy to get caught up in the overwhelming power and opaqueness of institutional systems and to be disheartened by the blasé suggestions to "just go change your name on Skatteverket," but it is also important to remember the people who represent the other side. As shown in the thesis, the way migrants prefer to use names is not always so simple or straightforward, but the people who either help or hinder their efforts are not a monolith either.



## 10. Applicability

These informants' stories have laid the groundwork for showing that there is disagreement about how names operate in Sweden, and that migrants are looking for more understanding and flexibility in name use. Their voices must be heard by those in power. Lukes sees the highest form of exercising power as stopping grievances before they can materialize, of influencing people to essentially "accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable" (Lukes, 2021, p. 33). It is far easier to give up than to keep fighting, but the record of this fight is important. The next step is to look at what can be done to change the real world now that these informants' stories have been shared. The findings in this thesis are broadly applicable and can already serve as an addition to the conversation around names and migrant lives in academic literature. But in terms of business applications, I would like to propose three parties that might be able to put these findings into direct, actionable initiatives.

One party that can make a big difference in migrants' lives and their experiences in the workplace is that of hiring managers, or Human Resources (HR) departments. Not only should they be aware to check their hiring biases in the recruitment process (Bursell, 2007, 2012), they can continue to take that inclusive approach even after the person is hired on. Set flexible and inclusive policies around the legal name that HR knows, and the public-facing name that staff should use to communicate with the new hire. Give the new hire a chance to be in control of how they want to present themselves, with their own preferred names. In private companies, allow the use of preferred names in staff directories, email addresses, office signs, and wherever else names appear by default. It might be technology on the surface, but the decisions are made by humans. And if it costs the company very little in terms of giving up power to allow a change that means quite a lot to the individual, it would go a long way in creating a more equitable and welcoming work environment. Companies could gain a reputation for being a considerate place to work, one that listens to its employees, which would attract even more talent.

A larger, and possibly more complicated party in control of name use is that of state-owned institutions like hospitals, schools, banks, postal services, and so on. These very public-facing entities have many employees, and even more customers as they service all of Sweden. With such a high volume of interaction, employee name use comes even more into the spotlight. In my research, I have not come across a company that states an explicit name policy, yet there is a standard default use of peoples' legal names in all directories, emails, and other forms of communication. Perhaps it takes moving the issue up to political parties, though it

might also be possible to make small changes even within University departments. To be able to formalize an official name policy would be a big sweeping reform across so many state-owned industries. Take, for example, the growing trend of American universities, some even state-owned, that are publicly stating their name policies for students and implementing measures for sweeping preferred name use across nearly all instances where names appear, such as the class roster and online platforms (Johnson, 2019). A lead advocate for these name policy initiatives says, "I view this initiative as an issue of inclusivity and respect, as well as a contribution to the learning environment for our students," and another advocate agrees that university is where "people learn empathy" (Johnson, 2019). The seeds of change and inclusive thinking can and should begin in the learning environment of a university. It is a small investment in the beginning of getting a policy in place, but the long-lasting effects on staff and the audience are immeasurable.

Another notable group that could utilize the findings in this thesis are those that are already in the field of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) work. This type of work is more commonplace in the United States, where issues of race discrimination are more publicized and noticed. It's not that discrimination doesn't happen in Sweden, nor that race isn't an issue in Sweden, as research has shown (Hübinette & Lundström, 2014; Pred, 2000). But the field is still small because Sweden's population has changed so much in recent years and the migrants are coming from different places and cultural backgrounds. As DEI consultants and HR managers work together to analyze what the new workforce looks like and what they can do to respond to peoples' needs, it is important not to overlook the seemingly small and mundane things, even down to the very basic "What is your name" question. DEI work does not exist to point fingers at what people are doing wrong, so much as it exists to point out what people can take for granted as a default setting, assuming that what works will continue to work, and will work for others. By providing equitable choices to people, the end result is a more equal workplace and a more fair society in Sweden.

By joining forces in applying a new lens of scrutiny to these default positions, my hope is that those in positions of power to hire, to consult, to enact policies, can provide positive change for many of the migrants in their purview. A matter that is seemingly minor can grow and become something much bigger, but it starts with listening to the small voices as they start to speak up.

## 11. Conclusion

It would be nice if there were a clear and easy solution to tie the thesis up in a pretty bow, but rarely are contested issues of identity and power so neat and tidy. This thesis, while more of an inquisitive view into a less studied world of migrant preferred name use than a straightforward complaint, is still a kind of *nonreproductive labor*, or the work involved in trying to stop or hinder the reproduction of a problem (Ahmed, 2021, p. 163). If a complaint can be thought of as “a way of *not doing nothing*” it stands to reason that writing a thesis is a way of documenting what has happened, and the embodied named people it has happened to, with the goal that this situation doesn't keep happening to others (Ahmed, 2021, p. 164). It is a way of revealing what is hidden to the majority, with the hopes that it can be eye-opening for readers who had not considered name use in this way. And perhaps another reason is that it allows my conscience to rest easier because I have at least attempted to show why preferred name use matters, but why it is so hard to get this recognized in Sweden. Ahmed reminds all of us who fight for social justice that a complaint – or in my case, a thesis – can be a record, a reminder of the effort that went into the good fight, regardless of the outcome (2021, p. 288).

In this thesis, I have shown how migrant names and name use is negotiated between the name bearer, their family connections, the Swedish bureaucratic systems, and societal norms. Names are a symbol of heritage, hopes, wishes, and (in)security about ethnic identity, and can hinder migrants from cutting those ties by adopting another name. Names are strategic tools to navigate different situations, allowing migrants to blend in or stand out, as a cover in times of fear and uncertainty. Names are a negotiation between migrants and bureaucratic systems that force exposure and a certain usage of names. And names fit into a larger ideological framework about boundaries, ownership, and rights and responsibilities. Whether it is between the namer and the name bearer, or the name bearer and the structural systems they work, study, or live in, or national norms around name use versus the individual's lived experience, power is the constant in all situations that name usage occurs. Lukes sums it up best in saying that “it would be simplistic to suppose that ‘willing’ and ‘unwilling’ compliance to domination are mutually exclusive: one can consent to power and resent the mode of its exercise” (2021, p. 155). Those of us who live in Sweden give our consent in a lot of situations where power is being exercised, yet we do not have to like every aspect of how that power reveals itself in our day-to-day interactions.

The added dimension of embodied named identity makes the power difference even starker. What is an appropriate name, a mismatched name, a surprising name, depends on who

bears that name. Non-white passing migrants will have a different experience than white-passing migrants, because of the perceived distance between how they look and what their name is. The idea of named identities as being embodied cannot be removed from the conversation, for this dissonance is what creates some of the most common negative responses for migrants.

It is not my intent to be pessimistic. If anything, Sweden has shown that it has rather accommodating and flexible naming laws compared to its Scandinavian neighbors, such as the gendered first names in Norway (Grønstad, 2024) or the process of picking from an approved list of female, male, or unisex names in Denmark (*Personregistrering.dk - EN*, n.d.). The naming law of 2017 has already shown many improvements and opening of boundaries compared to its 1982 predecessor. But as with any country that strives to live up to the ideals it set for itself, Sweden can always improve. Part of that change process is understanding that the lived experiences of marginalized communities is not like one's own. Do not look away from these moments of tension. Sweden wants to see itself as a tolerant, welcoming society, but that requires continuous effort. It is not a process that ever stops, just as migration patterns don't stop. The change doesn't need to be instant, but to take a curious approach towards understanding others is the first step towards a system that works better for all.

It is helpful to remember that everything is relative: the degree to which migrants assimilate into Sweden, and the degree that Sweden tries to accommodate the wishes of many disparate migrant groups. "Assimilation and acculturation are typically viewed in absolute terms, and immigrants' varying cultural backgrounds have received too little attention in the assimilation debate thus far. A seemingly small degree of assimilation among immigrants from culturally or linguistically distant countries may still represent a high degree of *relative* assimilation" (Gerhards & Hans, 2009, p. 1125). Perhaps the path forward is not in absolute terms, of migrant name or local name, or legal name or preferred names, but in a gradual way that can accommodate more flexible name use. The way that emerges might be in leaving space for both legal and preferred names on forms, or letting professors take attendance in a way that doesn't involve speaking legal names out loud. These are not laborious or dramatic steps, but they can go a long way in making migrants feel more comfortable.

The heart of the matter, as I see it, is that equality, in the sense of treating everyone equally, should not be the goal in Sweden. Equity, that is, giving different groups varied support and meeting people where they're at with their needs, is what will create a more equal feeling society. Making every single person use the same method because that is considered fair in actuality then creates inequality, as it is not a one-size-fits-all model. Giving people, majority

Swedes and migrants alike, the *choice* of deciding how they want to be addressed is truly meeting the Swedish model of open-mindedness and equality.

It is not impossible to overcome the “yawning gap between what Swedish society encourages any individual to desire and what is objectively realizable” (Pred, 2000, p. 229). This gap between what migrants wish (to use preferred names), what values Swedish society promotes (equality, fairness), and what is actually realistic (the ability to change the structural and ideological systems) will take time to address. But if Sweden can achieve such impressive results and gain a worldwide reputation for gender equality and parental rights, then it is reasonable to think that a more welcoming approach to people's preferred name use is not such a stretch. It is my hope that this thesis has added fuel to that fire and opened doors for further conversation and action towards a more inclusive Sweden.

## 12. Limitations & Further Research

If this research was to be continued, and it is my hope that it does, then having a Swedish-speaking lead researcher would be beneficial to understand more of the local laws and news around naming, as well as Swedish societal norms. Much of the literature out there about Swedish culture is, not surprisingly, only available in Swedish. It would also be powerful to have a team of culturally and linguistically diverse researchers that could reach different ethnic communities, especially more Middle Eastern or African informants. Further comparisons could be made to Scandinavian neighbors, such as the experiences of migrants and the more restrictive naming laws in Norway and Denmark.

Another limitation of the study is that the national statistics website SBC.se stopped collecting and publishing name statistics as of 2024. While preliminary research was able to be carried out prior to 2024, detailed name statistics were no longer made publicly available in detail as of April 2024. For example, while previously one could search for a name and see the average age of a name bearer, the gender, and if it was used as a first or last name, the information available now does not display as many factors. Time will tell what effect this has on the field of onomastics, or name studies.

In a broader context than just name use in Sweden, there is the opportunity to study how names travel and are repositioned in new contexts. In particular, there is also space to study the act of cultural appropriation with ethnic names, especially in relation to power. As people and names move around the world, names are no longer bound to the country of origin. Yet some names are able to cross cultural boundaries and become trendy even, while others can be considered rude or even cultural appropriation. It is an angle I am aware of but did not have the opportunity to study in this thesis, though that would be an important perspective for future research.

### 13. Appendix

#	Name Use	Informant Name	Identifiers
1	Multiple Names	Klevisa	Albanian-Greek
2	Multiple Names	Masahiro/Thomas	Japanese-British
3	Multiple Names	Mia	Chinese
4	Multiple Names	Alice	Chinese
5	Multiple Names	Steven	Chinese - Uyghur
6	Multiple Names Reverted to Original Name	Menjie	Chinese
7	Legal Name Change Naming Children	Eva	Chinese
8	Multiple Names Legal Name Change	Esther	Chinese - Indonesian
9	Multiple Names Child Who was Named	Håkan	Turkish
10	Naming Children	Maja	Central & Eastern European
11	Legal Name Change Child Who was Named	Andreas	Central & Eastern European - Hungarian
12	Legal Name Change Child Who was Named	Emil / Omid	Middle Eastern
13	Multiple Names	Peter	Chinese - Hong Kong
14	Kept Original Name	Ali	Middle Eastern
15	University Professor	Mikael	Finnish
16	University Administrator	Mandy	North American

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## **Interviews**

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Alice (2023-11-23), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Menjie (2023-11-24), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Mikael (2023-11-28), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Steven (2023-12-04), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Klevisa (2024-01-10), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Eva (2024-01-18), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Esther (2024-01-19), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Håkan (2024-01-19), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Thomas (2024-01-13), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Andreas (2024-01-27), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Mandy (2024-01-31), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Maja (2024-02-01), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Omid (2024-02-09), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Peter (2024-02-15), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).

Ali (2024-02-21), Personal Communication. Interviewer Melissa Boman (Meng Zhang).