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Francesco Cerchiaro

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In the name of the children: mixed couples’ parenting analysed through their naming practices

Francesco Cerchiaro

Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology (FISPPA), University of Padova, Padova, Italy

ABSTRACT

This work draws on the life stories of 18 couples, of which the men, married to Italian women, come from majority-Muslim countries. These couples incorporate more layers of differences: religious, as the two partners are socialised into both Islam and Catholicism, and racial-ethnic, as a white Italian partner is married to a non-white immigrant partner. Partners’ narratives are analysed according to the naming practices they adopt. Although mixed marriages are interpreted as a gradual loosening of traditional ties, naming practices show how their choices are connected with couples’ racial, ethnic and faith backgrounds, the expectations of the family of origin and the social context. Three naming processes are identified: double names to signal a ‘pact of equity’ between parents’ cultural heritages, alternation of names to reflect the couple’s ‘mutual migration’ over time and names which transmit minority ethnic and religious identities. The conclusions note how naming choices highlight different parenting strategies in dealing with pluralism in everyday family life.

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Introduction

Our name, or names, become a symbol of something which transcends us before birth, something we are provided with but did not choose. It is an inextricable part of our identity. It talks about us before we do, saying a great deal about where we come from. From the moment our parents record our birth officially, our name introduces us symbolically to society as holders of an identity which is both individual and collective, the first step in our biography as citizens. Together with our surname, our forename, or forenames, incorporates our social and legal identity (Finch 2008) and conveys information not only about gender, ethnicity and original family (Pilcher 2015) but also about the trends of a given historical period. Despite the great social significance of our names in many aspects of everyday life, social sciences have dealt only
marginally with this topic, and it is still absent from the Italian sociological debate. The works by Edwards and Caballero (2008) Finch (2008), Davies (2011), Thwaites (2013), Pilcher (2015), Wykes (2015) and Madziva (2017) to mention only recent British discussions have contributed to the growth and problems of the sociology of naming, an even wider and partially unexplored field of study. With this work, we wish to contribute to part of this debate, which focuses on qualitative study of the processes which underlie name choices and their meanings. The data presented draw upon qualitative research focused on the life stories of 18 couples composed of migrant men, originally from majority-Muslim countries, married to Italian women. These couples incorporate more layers of difference; religious, since partners are socialised to Islam and Catholicism, and racial-ethnic, because a white Italian partner is married to a non-white migrant partner. Thus, our article represents a unique case study to analyse the negotiation of names in order to understand how, in a family context characterised by cultural and religious mixedness, the choice of a name

- is affected by a stigmatising social context around Islam and immigration within couples with a Muslim partner.
- is used to trace kinship continuity (especially as regards patrilineal traditions).
- implies differing negotiations with the minority identity of the Muslim partner.

Especially in the Veneto region where data were gathered, these couples represent an emblematic case study within the phenomenon of mixed marriages because, in the social space of the family, they incorporate racial, ethnic and religious differences represented as ‘strong’ and ‘conflicting’ in the public hegemonic discourse (Allievi 2006; Saraceno 2007). The position of Catholic and Islamic religious authorities, openly suspicious about this type of relationship, and the weight of the rhetoric of the secessionist right-wing party Lega Nord (‘Northern League’, firmly established in Northern Italy) are important in understanding the context of external pressure and hostility which characterise the everyday lives of these couples. During these last years, the Lega Nord has explicitly built its political actions round the public visibility of Islam. Examples are the daily disinformation campaigns appearing in the party’s newspaper La Padania, anti-Muslim demonstrations ridiculing the prophet Mohammed and protests against the building of mosques (on this point, see Allievi 2012).

According to the last two Italian population censuses (ISTAT 2001, 2011), mixed marriages – statistically defined in terms of the partners’ nationalities – are increasing in numbers, totalling 198,347 in 2001 and 320,234 in 2011. The latest ISTAT data (2015), referring to 2014, show that Italian women in mixed marriages marry most frequently marry men coming from majority-Muslim countries such as Morocco (13.5%), Albania (8.2%) and Tunisia (6.3%). As
demonstrated by recent research (Tognetti Bordogna 2015), mainly in North-East Italy, mixed marriages between white Italian women and immigrant men from North Africa are increasingly perceived as taboo. The stigma which associates male migration with the ‘theft of our women’ is directly related to Islamophobia. The fear of uncontrolled immigration together with that of the loss of a presumed ‘national identity’ are the key arguments which, in the public space, guide a monolithic ‘Muslim identity’ as the emblem of ‘otherness’, reinforcing the model of the ‘clash of civilisations’ suggested by Huntington (1996).

The following section first briefly frames our contribution at the intersection of the literature on mixed parenting and naming practices. We then clarify the research methodologies and participants. Analysis identifies three naming practices found in our couples’ narratives. The interaction of separate but closely interrelated analytical levels is emphasised: the social context, family connections and individual choices. The conclusions will discuss how naming choices are connected with cultural and religious pluralism in everyday family life.

**Behind a name: social context, kinship and individualism**

Mixed families reflect the multicultural and multifaith character of society and are thus spaces where individuals develop and negotiate multiple identities in relation to faith, ethnicity, gender and education (Arweck and Nesbitt 2010). Over the past decade, international interest in mixed marriages has been stimulated by research focusing on parenting as a privileged space in which to observe partners’ negotiations (Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2005; Murad 2005; Edwards, Caballero, and Puthussery 2009; Anweck and Nesbitt 2010; Song and Gutierrez 2015). Parenting practices open up one of the most important scenarios which defines conjugal mixedness in everyday family life. As Collet (2012) points out, ‘conjugal mixedness is not only a question of different cultures but one of conformity or deviance with regard to social norms’ (ibidem 71). In accordance with other authors (Tognetti Bordogna 1994; Edwards and Caballero 2008; Varro 2003; Collet 2012; Collet 2015), we refer to the term ‘mixed’ to encompass the multiple differences (regarding race, ethnicity and faith) which characterise the participants of our study.¹ The choice to avoid the use of an excessively precise adjective, such as ‘interethnic’, ‘intercultural’ and ‘interreligious’, is due to the fact that ‘most of the situations do not even permit isolating a single criterion: couples are often interreligious and interethnic’ (Collet 2015: 131). Decisions regarding children’s education reveal the connections (from family networks to the varying contexts of children’s socialisation), which show how couple’s choices may differ greatly from those of a homogamic couple. ‘When children come, it’s no longer just a matter between the two of us’ is a recurring sentence in many life stories, and it introduces the space of parenting as a turning point at which negotiations are represented as a
moment involving the transmission of the self and shedding light on the couple’s social connections. Children renew a couple’s mediation with not only the Italian context in which they will become socialised, but also, in a new light, the expectations and pressures of their respective family groups. In order to be understood, therefore, the choice of names should be set within the broader relational context around the couple. Early research on this topic in France (Besnard 1979) and the United States (Lieberson and Bell 1992) focused on the birth name registration data set and indicated that, during the twentieth century, there was a sudden move towards individual taste as a result of individualisation and the related decline in traditional naming patterns. Despite this, according to Lieberson and Bell (1992), naming practices are deeply imbedded in core cultural values and social class. For example, African Americans now often choose ‘African’ or ‘African-sounding’ names as a reflection of group pride and solidarity (ibidem). Thus, study of mixed couples’ naming practices is an interesting field in which to test how the choice of a name may symbolise going beyond partners’ ‘belonging’ or, conversely, their incorporation and reproduction.

Naming processes have only recently become the object of empirical analysis aiming at understanding connections with parental negotiation linked to the transmission of race, ethnicity and religion. We recall the recent debate in response to the proposal of Finch (2008: 722) to focus on ‘both the taken-for-granted and the socially constructed elements’ which reveal how names work as markers of both individuality and family connections. As in two exploratory studies focusing on naming practices in mixed couples (Streiff-Fenart 1990; Edwards and Caballero 2008), here we study how parental name choices reveal an explicit attempt to transmit collective identities regarding race, ethnicity and religion, more than a mere matter of individual taste. However, the above authors did not examine in depth the influence of social conflicts on immigration and Islam in couples’ choices. This aspect in particular is taken into account in our analysis, which also empirically examines the importance of the ‘embodied-named identity’ conceptualised by Pilcher (2015), who pointed out that importance was not previously assigned to ‘the relationship between names, bodies and identities’ (ibidem: 3).

Since Italy has a recent history of immigration (which has mostly began in the nineties), names like Mohammed or Omar are perceived as foreign-Arabic-sounding names with a specific religious connotation. This is an empirical evidence exemplified by the overlapping of national and religious identity, reinforced also by media and newspapers where ‘a Moroccan man named Mohammed’ is usually interchangeable with ‘a Muslim man named Mohammed’. Racialisation processes are indeed part of the parents’ narratives when they choose their children’s names. It was with this in mind that, as advised by Wykes (2015), we recorded individual interviews with both
members of the couple so that our study crosses various partner narrations on the same topic and shows the power relations between them.

During life story analyses, three naming processes were identified: double names to signal a ‘pact of equity’ between the partners’ cultural heritages, an alternation of names to reflect the couple’s ‘mutual migration’ over time and names to transmit minority ethnic and religious identity. The results open up new perspectives, allowing us to analyse one of the first instances of parenting which, using names ‘to create boundaries between belonging and not belonging’ (Davidoff et al. 1999: 92), defines the family identity in which the children live. Individuality, kinship and social context are thus differently negotiated within these processes.

**Research methodology and participants**

This paper uses data on name choices from a qualitative research project conducted between 2010 and 2014, focusing on conjugal mixedness in the life stories of 18 mixed couples. We carried out 36 individual interviews with partners in their own homes, following the approach of Daniel Bertaux (1998) who defines the life stories of the interviewees as *recits de vie*. These are generally biographical in-depth interviews in which, through the use of open questions, the aim is to shed light on ‘the interviewees world’ (ibidem) within their universe of meaning. These interviews were always conducted individually, in the absence of the other partner, and followed a chronological order (3–4 h average per interview). The interviews were originally fully transcribed in Italian. In many cases, the immigrant men’s spoken Italian was poor, and the English translation reflects some of the imperfections of their speech while making some corrections in the interests of comprehensibility. In view of the particularities of the Muslim presence in Italy, characterised as it is by fragmented ethnic groups, the choice of the sample was not limited to the husbands of one ethnic national group: migrant husbands came from Morocco (9), Palestine (2), Senegal (2), Egypt (1), Lebanon (1), Kashmir (1), Syria (1) and Turkey (1). A second criterion for internal differentiation of the couples was their sociopolitical level of involvement in Italy. The first six couples were members of an association of mixed couples. In order to avoid contacting geographically limited groups of couples linked by interpersonal relationships, the remaining 12 were reached by contacting acquaintances, school heads and city authorities in the Veneto Region. The sample was composed so as to reflect the homogeneity criterion with regard to two elements: the couples had been married for a minimum of 7 years and the social and political details of the place of residence were noted.

The choice to interview only mixed couples, in which the man is the exogenous component, was based on two main considerations: (1) the Koranic norm, which affects the orthopraxis which prohibits a Muslim
woman from marrying a non-Muslim man; and (2) the marriage market and the characteristics of migration flows.

The methodological choice was then narrowed to types of homogeneous couples from a gender perspective, the minimum duration of the relationship and the sociopolitical characteristics of the territory of residence, in order to support an analysis evaluating the concept of difference in cultural, ethnic and racial, socio-economic and religious terms. Another clarification concerned surname transmission in Italy. Since in the couples interviewed here, the father was always the minority partner the children always had only his surname, according to Italian law.

The gender inequality inherent in Italian legislation has long been evaded by politicians. Italian law DDL/1226 (2014) recently modified the Civil Code regarding the attribution of surnames to children. The possibility was accepted, and approved, that mothers can also pass on their surnames to their children or add them to those of their husbands.

All names used in the article are pseudonyms. In view of the importance of children's names, in accordance with other authors (Edwards and Caballero 2008; Wykes 2015), we selected pseudonyms that are ‘as close as possible in intention and effect to their actual names’ (Edwards and Caballero 2008: 46) both to maintain participants’ privacy and not to lose the importance of meanings in naming practices. When it was not possible to reach this intent, we used an asterisk (‘*’) so as not to mangle the meaning attributed to that choice.

**Double names to signal a ‘pact of equity’ between partners’ cultural heritages**

Among our participants’ naming practices, seven couples chose double names, the result of a special negotiation symbolising a ‘pact of equity’ between the partners’ cultural heritages. Mohammad’s remarks on the symbolic importance of double names given to both his children (Samir-Giovanni and Omar-Paolo) highlight some important aspects of this ‘pact’:

> About our children’s names, I told Giovanna: ‘I want my children to have a name from my culture … Arabic.’ But I’m not going to make a fuss if they have an Italian name too. So we had the idea of giving them our fundamental principles in their names. Giving them the principles which enrich us from both sides without ‘confession’ … not just putting them on one side … We did the same with our religions. So tomorrow they can say, ‘Well, my father is a Muslim. I know what Islam is, prayer five times a day, I see my dad who respects Ramadan and I know why. If I go back to Morocco to see uncles and aunts who pray, or here at Christmas and going to church, I know why’. They are curious, they ask questions, they help us with interpreting […] Double names are very important for us. For us, it’s a way of saying ‘We’re in this together’. The thing is that, in the future, our children can decide how they want to identify themselves.
Mohammad’s sentence ‘For us, it’s a way of saying “We’re in this together”’ clearly summarises the choice of the double name as part of a broader strategy mediating equally between the cultural backgrounds. The aim is to give children double references, leaving them to choose which to use. Differences are represented as an enriching heritage about which children should be informed. Names thus gather together traces of a broader educational plan involving cultural and religious questions ‘without denomination’, i.e. without any formal affiliation to the culture or religion of one member of the couple. Mohammad’s wife Giovanna focuses here on other important aspects which choosing double names imply.

We decided to give them two names, one Italian and one Arabic. The first one is Arabic, Samir-Giovanni. Samir is the name of a wind which blows in the desert, a breeze, but it also somehow means ‘one who watches the night.’ [...] When we had decided on it, we then thought about its sound. That was easy … that is, you can write it as you read it … it was not like the ones with lots of ‘H’s’ to be put in somewhere. Then we didn’t want several names like Ali, Ali Baba, Abdoullah … they might cause him problems, like teasing or racism, we didn’t want that. So we decided on a short Italian name which would sound right together with the other one […]. I mean, the idea is that if the children don’t feel comfortable with their foreign names, they can use their Italian ones. They have both their names, like Samir-Giovanni and Omar-Paolo […] Actually, at home, we always called them Omar and Samir, which was fine. Then after a while we found that when he met certain people, Samir called himself Giovanni, but Samir to others. First he studies the person in front of him for a bit. If it’s a person he thinks is smart enough to work it out, he uses Samir, if not, he uses Giovanni to avoid problems.

Giovanna highlights two recurring, significant aspects of what the choice of names involves. Especially for Arabic names, emphasis is placed on their meaning and phonetics; the first aspect emphasises the possibility of recalling the traditional meaning of a name which is auspicious for the baby; the second concerns the problem of mediation with the Italian social context. The fear of discrimination for their children is therefore negotiated according to decisions about transmission and education. Recurrent narratives stress the choice of Arabic names among those which are ‘easy to pronounce and write’ and which do not go back to the stigmatising imaginary of Islam and immigration (‘the various, Ali Baba, Abdoullah …’) which Giovanna evokes. Awareness emerges of the parents’ social difficulties, which may also have repercussions on their children’s lives, incorporating ‘otherness’ in name and sometimes in skin colour. Mohammed and Giovanna recalled the hostility of Giovanna’s parents against their union, motivated by the fact that ‘he was a Moroccan … the vu’ cumpra⁶’ stressing on ethnic and class differences depicted as external obstacles between them. The fear that their children may undergo early episodes of discrimination pushes parents to search for a balance with the Italian social context in which their children will be
socialised. The choice of double names is thus also explained as a resource parents give their children, so that they can face possible external stigma better. As Giovanna points out, ‘The idea is that, if the children don’t feel comfortable with their foreign names, they’ll use their Italian ones’. The fact that Samir-Giovanni decides to use one of his two names, depending on his impression of his interlocutor, shows how children themselves may experience, from the very moment of meeting someone, their connection with their parents and with stigma. Introducing themselves using one of the two names becomes a kind of gateway to their own family history – a history which they can decide to declare, or otherwise, according to circumstances.

Partners’ life stories, together with observation of participants during the days spent with some of these families, provided us with other elements with which to examine another key issue. Only during the interview do Mohammed and Giovanna reveal that their children’s Italian names are not used in an everyday context: ‘They come second’.

Different, but mirroring the case of Samir-Giovanni and Omar-Paolo, is the case of Lucia-Fatma and Nadia-Meyrem, which shows that the order of hierarchy of names applies only to daily use of the first name. Double names are thus revealed as an ambivalent choice: on one hand, they are ways in which to transmit both identities; on the other, the order of the names reveals the parents’ balance. The use of one name rather than another reflects the wider context which a name embraces. Moana, the mother of Lucia-Fatma and Nadia-Meyrem, refers to the choice of names in order to talk about family connections and traditions. Mediation with the Turkish family of her husband Bashir reflects the couple’s mediation with the family tradition of naming grandchildren:

First we decided on Lucia because we liked it […] but in Turkey they’re used to giving children their grandparents’ names … And then – you know how it is – then my mother-in-law started to say, ‘Hey, why don’t you call her by her grandma’s name?’ I remember, shortly before she was born, my husband told me: ‘You know, my mum’d like the child to have her name too – Fatma’. So I said OK, and we gave her the double name ‘Lucia-Fatma’. And she has to sign her name like that, because they put Lucia-Fatma on all her documents. But we call her Lucia. Here, everyone calls her Lucia. But in Turkey everyone calls her Fatma. […] And then another daughter came along … but just before she was born, my grandma died, my husband was very fond of my grandma … and he asked me why we didn’t call the baby Nadia after her grandma. So I said OK again. Her name is Nadia-Meyrem, because we’d chosen a Turkish name before too. Nobody calls her Meyrem here, but they do in Turkey. And you know how important it is. My husband’s parents are pleased about this – they’re proud of it, it’s as if they felt they were real grandchildren.

The narration of choosing the children’s names reveals not only how the hierarchy between the names works but also how it represents a definite
response to demands made by the parents’ families of origin. Double names incorporate their mixedness and also represent a way of dealing with it. In this sense, the fact that, during their travels and stays in Turkey, the grandparents call their grandchildren only by their Turkish names is meaningful both for the identification and sense of belonging of the family’s father and for the children to identify with their father’s heritage.

**Alternation of names to reflect couple’s ‘mutual migration’ over time**

If names referring to the majority or minority partners’ culture are used alternately, the couples’ life stories indicate their symbolic migration over the years. Among our participants, seven couples chose these naming practices. The two cases analysed below clearly exemplify the meanings which alternating names involve.

Hamid and Francesca use naming practices to tell their story. Hamid describes one of the recurring problems fathers have with their sons’ names. Patrilineality in the socialisation of children is culturally informed. Hamid’s claim that he must decide what to call his son stresses the gender aspects related to patriarchal cultures and the close relation between fathers and sons.

Look at me … if you want to understand us as a couple, you must look at our children’s names. I said to Francesca, if we had a boy, I wanted him to have the name of my uncle, my mother’s brother, who was very close to me, he’s called Omar. If we had a girl, I would leave the choice to her. But then we had two more girls (smiling) … Our first daughter’s name is Lara. Francesca decided on Lara and also the names for our other daughters, Amira and Halima, they’re Arabic names. She chooses all the names, but people think she chose Lara’s name and I chose the other two. But it wasn’t like that, Francesca chose them all […] because we’d decided that was what we were going to do. (Hamid)

Hamid’s words indicate that his claim to control his children’s names is gender regulated, names with which he could forge a link with his original family. Instead, the choice of their daughters’ names (the first Italian and the other two Arab) was delegated to his wife Francesca; so, we can reflect on her specific choices. The intersection between the narrations of both partners is again crucial in understanding what underlies a name choice. Francesca explains that choosing the two Arabic names was a milestone marking her personal change towards the ‘cultural world’ of her husband who, initially, she said, was ‘crushed’ by her decisions. Naming practices emerge as part of a wider discourse which informs the couple’s parenting over the years and deconstructs the rigid idea of conjugal mixedness given as unchanging.

At first I wanted him to have our daughter baptised. I was serious about that, I really meant it. […] But then we didn’t take the other sacraments, and they don’t have religion classes at school, so I realised the school must be lay. […] I
mean, I made a kind of personal journey, you can see it in our choice of names. The first one is Italian and the other two are Arabic. That’s because I had gradually come to understand mixed marriages. And my husband always said that if it was a girl, I would get to choose her name. After Lara, I chose Amira and Halima, just to balance things … to get closer to him. Because at first I was too much for him, I crushed him. Then we became ‘a couple’ in a more balanced way.

Here, telling the story of choosing names is connected with religious education. The Arabic names chosen by Francesca for her second and third daughters take on the symbolic meaning of a new balance in the couple. Although initially Francesca said that she wanted to impose her own choice about a Catholic religious education, the Arabic names of her last two daughters represent her attempt to compensate in some way her husband’s decision to move towards a more ‘lay’ education.

Nadir and Giulia gave their first son an Arabic name and their daughter an Italian name. Alternating Italian and Arabic names, as above, involves the gender dimension linked to the claim of fathers’ control in attributing names to sons. Instead, the mother’s decision to give her daughter an Italian name aimed at facilitating socialisation at school.

My son’s name is Amir, which means ‘prince’. I chose Amir because I wanted to give him the name of my nephew who I grew up with when I was down in Palestine. I was very close to him. When I came here and he stayed there, we missed each other a lot. He was a child and I was a youngster at that time … I wanted to keep the sound of his name in my house too. Get me? So I called him Amir, to show the love I had left there in his name. And the sound of that name reminds me of my homeland. […] But then, Silvia came along. So I only chose Amir’s name. He’s growing now, he’s ten. So we let him choose the new baby’s name, and Amir chose his sister’s name, it’s Silvia. (Nadir)

The continuity among name, language (the sound of the name) and homeland (the country of origin) is significant here. For Nadir, his son’s name conveys the memory of his origins, which are kept alive even now, when the family lives in Italy. In this sense, the symbolic power of a name to recall familiar memories enhances the importance of collective identity transmission in migrant men. Whilst Nadir avoids referring to the Italian context, his wife Giulia thinks that it highlights the influence of a stigmatising social context in giving her daughter an Italian name (Amir had problems about accepting his own name).

The name ‘Amir’ was given by my husband. He [Amir] didn’t like it when he was small, in kindergarten and elementary school, his classmates made fun of him. Because your name is very important at that age. It has an important social function. But kids need to be part of a group, so it took him a little while to sort things out. […] In elementary school, he used to say ‘No, I don’t want to be called Amir, I want to be called Riccardo’. He didn’t want to accept his Arabic name. […] Because society judges foreigners and Muslims negatively. […] Even the
speeches of the Northern League ... we can feel them in our family life. [...] So later, when my daughter was born, I insisted on an Italian name.

On one hand, Nadir’s wife Francesca speaks about her gradually increased proximity to her husband, symbolically reflected in the choice of Arabic names for her daughters. On the other, Giulia is concerned to protect her children from a possibly stigmatising social context. The otherness, ‘audible’ and incorporated in the name, is thus avoided, to facilitate the children’s identification with their peer group of Italian classmates.

**Names transmitting minority ethnic and religious identity**

The choice of a name is sometimes the expression of a definite wish to convey the religious identity of the Muslim father. This aspect, associated with narratives which tell us about the family’s religious practices, shows how religious differences may be overcome through the conversion of a partner or through gradual secularisation of the partner’s former religious identity (Cerchiaro, Aupers, and Houtman 2015). Four couples chose these naming practices. For example, the stories of Elena and Giorgia, who both converted to Islam while they were engaged to their future husbands, confirm how decisions concerning name choices are an important first step in a broader strategy related to religious education. Through an Islamic name, converted partners wish to signal the symbolic inscription of their child within the Muslim community. It is thus the converted wife who dwells on the importance of names as a vehicle of religious identity. In this regard, Giorgia highlights how name practices, for her, represent a cultural practice, confirming the fact that they seek to reflect a form of collective affiliation which connects family origins, ethnic-racial identity and religious faith, as also noted by Edwards and Caballero (2008) and Finch (2008). The choice of an Arabic name is therefore used to link a broader narrative involving conversion to Islam with distancing from the Catholic religion and Italian culture:

In the first few years I was adverse to the Catholic religion, in all its aspects. Now a little less. There’s been a bit of waning in me about this. Because of the relatives and family adversity here. Get it? I rejected the Catholic religion and everything to do with it. I was even more convinced that I had to choose only Muslim names … and my husband was pleased. So our son was called Omar … because that’s his father’s name. It’s a tradition in their family. Now he is even prouder, because his sons have the names of their distant relatives. So Omar was a choice which combined both his religion and his respect for the family tradition of giving the father’s name to the children. The second boy, Ibrahim, I wanted an important name for him, because I was always projected towards Islam. Because I am a Muslim, I had to choose a religious name, a Koranic name. [...] But for Samir, who is our last child, I chose his name because it has a good meaning. All Islamic names have meanings. (Giorgia)
Sure, I agree with Islamic names, but it was more my wife’s wish and she mainly chooses the names. Of course, it’s important for me to give them names which symbolise my belonging. (Rashid)

Giorgia’s family was opposed to her marrying a Muslim, and the narration of this opposition emphasises her break with her Italian culture and former Catholic religion. The narration of her conversion and assignment of Islamic names thus marks the boundaries of this process of cultural detachment. She endorses the cultural and family traditions of her husband, giving her first son the name of his paternal grandfather and thus reaffirming her departure from her culture of origin, which is also a symbol of her affiliation with her husband’s culture and religion. Both culture and religion are invoked by Giorgia and Rashid through the power of names, in incorporating and ‘fixing’ them in time.

The strong link between names and religious affiliation recurs with particular clarity in the life story of Elena, who also converted to Islam. Her four daughters’ names have strong religious connotations (three of them are also the names of Mohammed’s brides), through which she and her husband reinforce the narration of their strong Muslim family identity.

For all the names, we first examined the meaning and then looked at the name. But we chose names which aren’t too hard to pronounce or write. That was my main worry. “…we chose partly because that’s the name of my husband’s grandmother. So it’s tradition … this link in the name of the first child. […] It’s just because I liked the name *, which means life, prosperity. Then *, and * which means purity, essence, since that is the essence of everything … and then *, which means tenderness. But, according to Islamic tradition, * is also a plant, a palm, which is in heaven. […] Anyway … *, * and * … they were also the names of three of the wives of the Prophet. Did you know that the Prophet Mohammed had many wives […]. (Elena)

The emphasis on the significance of these names reflects the importance of religious contents within these choices and the adoption of a broader process in which conversion to Islam eliminates the religious mixedness perceived as an irreconcilable difference by her Muslim husband. Names are thus the first semantic contents of the couple’s religious identity as a whole. Although Elena always emphasises her concern about the difficulty in writing and pronouncing the names, the choice of Islamic names traces a symbolic border between the new family and the hegemonic-Italian-Catholic context, highlighting the will to link the children’s names with the traditional patrilineality of Islam. In these two couples, the intention to pass on religion through names appears at the forefront of negotiations regarding names. Hamidou and Marina, instead, stress racial-ethnic characteristics, together with religion, as central issues in their naming practices. Hamidou, a native of Senegal, wanted his children to have names which embodied race, ethnicity and religion, all together.
Choosing the children’s names was very important to me. They are also clearly half-black. It’s in their skin. I am Muslim and come from Senegal; I wanted them to have names which reflect that […] I know those names sound strange here … but I wanted them to pass down my roots. […] My son is called Demba, my daughter Rokhaya. And they must write their names like that. I knew they might have problems here … but I also wanted them to be proud of their black heritage. (Hamidou)

He wanted them to have typical Senegal names. I agreed with that. […] They were born in Italy, but you can see that there is something else. That was OK by me … but I’d have preferred names easier to write and pronounce. (Marina)

In the above narrations, Hamidou’s reflexivity about the racialisation of names (Wykes 2015) is clearly a way of ‘passing on roots’, in both religious and racial-ethnic senses. The interplay of names, bodies, religion and nationality ‘in labelling individuals as belonging to a particular ethnic group’ (Madziva 2017: 17) appears to be a significant aspect (Finch 2008; Wykes 2015) which directly influences the way children will be perceived in the Italian society. The connection between names and skin colours emerges especially among Italo-Senegalese couples who reported being more frequently victims of racist episodes.

**Conclusions**

Our study aimed at a good understanding of what naming practices reveal about parent couples from differing racial, ethnic and faith backgrounds. The naming practices identified in these couples can help us focus on the close relation–reaction dynamics between the social context and conjugal mixedness practices. These couples show that naming their children becomes the first important vehicle representing their identity as a couple in broader society. Some important results are highlighted: for all the couples interviewed, name choices never emerged as merely relegated to personal taste influenced by social trends. On the contrary, they are cross-identified as not only an essential moment of confrontation between partners and their different kinships but also as the first time in which husband and wife face the consequences of their decisions on their children’s lives.

Our analysis is therefore stimulating for the broader field of scholarship. It goes further also in highlighting the problem of the link between intermarriage and integration, seen as the unidirectional consequence of the weakening of fixed ethnic identities (Kalmijn 1998). As suggested in other recent studies (Roer-Strier and Ben Ezra 2006; Rodríguez-García et al. 2015; Song 2016), these marriages do not necessarily imply the identification of the minority partner with the society of destination. Our contribution suggests that, especially in a context hostile to a specific culture/religion, parenting strategies can cope in various ways with the minority partner’s culture, by hiding it, strongly reaffirming it or trying to ‘balance’ the partners’ cultural
heritages. In this way, both religious and gender dimensions emerge as essential aspects.

The emphasis on the significance of the processes behind name choices sheds light on how one of the first tests of family pluralism is managed and ‘solved’ by the couple’s decisions and reveals the relationship between their power dynamics, the implications of family networks and the influence of the social environment. Three naming processes emphasise different meanings given to choosing names, and different ways of dealing with pluralism in everyday family life. Double names emerge as representing a ‘pact of equity’ between the partners at the moment of choosing their children’s names – a way in which they can affirm that, in the naming of their children, ‘We’re in this together’. Their narratives explain how giving double names is also a practice which allows a range of possibilities to be opened up for the future: the first one, within the couple, is to use only one of the two names, revealing a hierarchy between them; the second, for the children, is to remember their ‘mixed’ background and to face possible external stigma choosing between the two names according to the circumstances and the third to facilitate the identification and sense of belonging of both families. The alternation of names chosen by some parents over the years also sheds light on the mobility of mixedness processes, on the definite side of that ‘mutual migration’ (Gozzoli and Regalia 2005) between the couple. To choose an Arabic-sounding name thus takes on the meaning of moving closer to the minority culture of the partner as confirmed by Collet (2015), whereas the Italian name often reveals the attempt to protect children from any Islamophobic and racist context of socialisation, as found by Edwards and Caballero (2008), Wykes (2015) and Madziva (2017). Emphasis on the significance of names and their links with tradition emerges particularly when the parents decide, through their children, to assert a Muslim identity extended to the entire family. The link among Islam, ethnicity and patrilineality in naming practices becomes a clear example of ‘reactive identities’, reaffirming a collective belonging, precisely when it is a minority in the hegemonic Catholic context. Reaffirming, in the names of the children, the father’s minority identity emerges as a way of ‘keeping the story alive’ and contrasts the sense of ‘inevitable ethnic and racial dilution’ (Song and Gutierrez 2015: 680) linked to migration and intermarriage. In this sense, our results confirm other studies (Edwards and Caballero 2008) which show that ‘naming practices that link children to their fathers promote and strengthen bonds between them, [...] perpetuating bonds, authority relations and resource obligations down the generations’ (Edwards and Caballero 2008: 41–42).

Most of the quantitative analysis associates interfaith marriages with the progressive decline of religion, according to the theory of secularisation as desacralisation (Voas 2003). The more a society is multireligious and the more the number of mixed marriages increases, the
more it becomes secularised. Mixed marriages are thus interpreted as a gradual loosening of traditional ties, with fewer and fewer differences between social groups. Instead, the naming practices of the couples described above are similar to the findings of Edwards and Caballero (2008), in that there is no attempt to ‘transcend children’s specific mixed background’ (55) but, rather, to ‘keep alive’ (Song and Gutierrez 2015) one or both cultural heritages, mediating with the social context in which the children will socialise. Through name choices, husbands and wives start out on a symbolic path in which mixed parenting is displayed for the first time. In this mediation, the role of the Italian mother crosses the three processes examined. It is the mother who is primarily concerned with the sound of the name, and with how easy it is (or is not) to write and pronounce, with the aim of facilitating her child’s successful integration within the social context in which they will grow up.

In any case, our analysis is limited to how couples discuss names and give meanings to their choices. It does not investigate the broader issues of how children use their names and how the wider family deploys them in different contexts: this opens up new perspectives, still little explored, on the identity processes of these new generations of children. Much more remains to be done in understanding what kind of ‘cultural repertoire’ (Arweck and Nesbitt 2010) children of mixed couple are developing and how they will relate to their multiracial, multiethnic and multifaith background as parents.

Notes

1. On the reflexivity of partners on ‘mixed’ definition, see Cerchiaro (2016).
2. Although Goffman (1968), Althusser (1971) and Elias (1991) stressed the importance of the link between name, identity (individual and collective) and social change, empirical research on names has remained almost unexplored.
3. This was done in order to collect life stories which contained narratives of various phases in the relationship. With the exception of one case, all participating couples had at least one child. All couples were formed between the early nineties and the first 10 years of this decade.
4. The Koran only allows Muslim men to marry women from ‘the people of the Book’ (kitabiyya), i.e. Jewish or Christian women (Koran 5,5). This is because, according to the Koran, only the father’s religion can be passed down.
5. The proposed law on children’s surnames was linked to the urgency of responding to the judgement of the European Court of Human Rights which, on 7 January 2014, condemned Italy for violating the principle of equality between husband and wife.
6. It is a neologism with specific racist connotation broadly used in mid-1980s to indicate hawkers from North African countries.
Disclosure statement

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