

Names That Are Unfamiliar to You Aren't "Hard," They're "Unpracticed"

"It's time to change the conversation around 'difficult' names."

BY

[N'JAMEH CAMARA](#)

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AMELIA GILLER

In this op-ed, N'Jameh Camara explains why it's not her name that's difficult, it's the attitudes of those unwilling to learn it that are.

Growing up in the United States, I often hear that my name is “hard” to pronounce: N’Jameh (IPA: 'ndʒeɪ me or 'njeɪ meɪ). It is a Gambian name conferred by my father, whose lyrical, West African accent rounds the vowels and punctuates the consonants into inertia. And yet, the syllables that tether my heritage to The Gambia seem strangely unable to make the voyage to my American life. The name I carry with me looks for harbor in the mouths of colleagues — even friendly acquaintances — and sometimes gets lost. My parents did not name me with evil grins and hands wringing: “We are

going to make her name hard for everyone to utter!” They named me out of boundless love. In that love is a pride of culture and heritage. And yet, my name is treated like a white elephant in society — an exotic interruption to the conversation among Kristins and Emilies, whose names may be forgettable, but most assuredly don’t make a stir.

I feel the weight of others passing their inability to learn my name onto me like a heavy stone. On it is an inscription that says, “Your problem, not mine,” and I have grown exhausted from the message. It’s time to change the conversation around “difficult” names, and to explore our accountability for learning the names of those around us.

I am sometimes in situations where my name is simply not spoken after weeks of interaction with an individual. As an actor, this happens in the rehearsal room and outside of it. I do not mean that people mispronounce my name. I’m talking about fellow actors, leaders of the creative team and crew members calling me “Hey” or not saying my name at all, after several weeks. It all begins simply enough. When asked, “How do you say your name?” at the audition, I pronounce it, and those in the room say it back, in a little call-and-response repartee. Their attempts are usually correct, but, by the first rehearsal, amnesia sets in.

Too often, I’ve felt the awkward “Good to see you again” when a director didn’t commit my name to memory at the callback. Because of experiences like this, I have learned to reintroduce myself repeatedly on day one of rehearsal. The ability to be genuine and relational precedes all other obligations of an actor — of a person, really. To know and say each other’s name is an absolute requirement for crossing the limen of connection, and to a performance that channels life.

Maybe it’s excusable to forget any name at first, but after a week, a few weeks, even a month, that excuse runs out. There is a moment in time when it is no longer the responsibility of a person to teach their name. The choice made by many not to learn my name renders me invisible. It seeds disappointment and erodes my normally jovial spirit. In these moments, my mind races with questions. Should I have gone by a nickname? Should I confront them? Will I be labeled as too “difficult” if I do?

Like so much in American life, the experience of being named and known is also bound up with issues of race, class and gender. It exists in the systems of how we socialize and interact with each other. For a white person to suggest that a colleague of color adapt their name to make it easier for others in the work environment (“Oh, your name is Masahiko? Mind if we just call you Hiko?”), is an aggression that infers it is socially acceptable for one individual to put a nickname upon another for their convenience. This kind of aggression can largely fly under the radar because our country was built on the backs of people whose names were shortened or erased. The suggestion to shorten Masahiko’s name does not come from the intention of love or respect. It comes from the notion that it’s two syllables too long, an inconvenience for the mouth. If Masahiko changed their name to “Sandra,” this upholds a kind of white supremacy, displayed in ethnocentrism, that can largely go unquestioned. If anything, it can be encouraged. This is more insidious and socially acceptable than white hoods and neo-Nazi graffiti, but communicates clearly that “white names” are easier and more desirable than names which stretch our understanding of who we — as a cast, an office, a neighborhood, a nation — are.

As well, a person of color suggesting that another person of color change their name to make it socially acceptable for others is also a socialization into white supremacy. It should not be written off. Intersections of people can make this mistake. Early in my acting career, I had a white, British casting director suggest that I change my name to something “easier.” I flatly told her no, that my name makes me stand out in this country, and that if I were to change my name, who would I be making it easier for? Imagine how much poorer we would be if actors Chiwetel Ejiofor became Chad or Ming-Na Wen was Minnie? To reduce the brilliant Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to “Mandy” would be akin to forsaking a Nigerian national treasure.

So where to go from here? Let us stop using the words, “difficult” or “hard” when describing a name. These are adjectives that assign bias by identifying particular names as unlikeable or just not worth knowing. “Difficult” conjures up images of strenuous, back-breaking work. It conveys something inconvenient or burdensome. Who wants to

hear their name described like that? When someone says a name is “hard,” they are subconsciously associating it not with the name itself, but rather with how they *learn* a name. The sheer newness may cause them to feel as though they will never learn it, and thus embarrassment shackles their lips.

Beyond that, describing a name as “hard” is a general conclusion that dismisses responsibility for learning it at all. Saying “I’m not good with hard names” is wholly different than saying “This name is hard for me.” If a name is hard for one person, that doesn’t mean it’s hard for everyone. Each person’s phonological fluency is uniquely dependent on their life experience and what sounds are in their phonological inventory. Therefore, instead of “hard” or “difficult,” I would like to offer the term “unpracticed.” Rather than connoting hardship, “unpracticed” reflects something new or untested. And, in fact, this exposes the root of the issue. Like learning the piano or playing sports, the level of practice will be different for each individual. Some people may not need practice. And some names have been practiced over centuries or decades in our country. To “practice” places the responsibility on the learner to adapt their ear.

The times when someone has practiced my name reaffirm the immense power for good that holds.

Learning each other’s name is a matter of spiritual will and value. Do we see someone as valuable enough to connect with on a level that involves something more than what they are producing for us? Do we see our collaborators as people? If we are one human family in a nexus of relationships, then the bare minimum of human decency is knowing each other’s name. When we don’t try because we don’t want to “butcher” the name, offend the other person, look bad, be uncomfortable, or are too busy, we are not protecting them. We are doing it at the *cost of* the other person. Anonymizing each other comes with a terrible price.

Lastly, if you cannot pronounce someone’s name after sharing dedicated time and space with them, don’t think they don’t know. Hearing our names, or not hearing them, up-

close or in a crowded room cues our brains to pay attention in a particular way. And when our name is replaced by dead air or generic substitutes, we notice. If you have yet to say your colleague's name, their lack of comment is likely due to the fact that you are being given time to come around.

I know my name isn't fully practiced in the U.S, so I have no problem teaching it. I, too, have struggled to learn names that are unpracticed to me. But as a person who was taught to respect and say Tchaikovsky, Brecht, Chekhov, Stanislavski and Hammerstein, I know my name can be learned too. What matters most is that we see ourselves as people whose vulnerability and mistake-making hold the potential to bring us closer.

Each of us is responsible for speaking our name, and for hearing and saying the names that shape those around us. Our risk-taking is not a weakness, it is a sign of care that enlarges our hearts and elevates the lives of others: Giannis Antetokounmpo, Uzo Aduba, Kumail Nanjiani, Ming-Na Wen, Djimon Hounsou, Hasan Minhaj, Mahershala Ali, Ntozake Shange, Saoirse Ronan, and Zach Galifianakis. I'm N'Jameh Camara. I pretty much fit right in.

N'Jameh Camara is an artist currently living in New York. She has performed around the country and her voice can be heard with Penguin Random House Publishing on Audible. This essay is an adaptation from her book, "The Name of US" to be released in the 2019-2020 year. Follow her at @lady_njay.

