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Personal Names in Swedish Academia

Ambiguities of Difference from the Perspective of Postmigration

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Abstract: Engaging with foreign-sounding personal names is an everyday reality in collegial interactions within contemporary Swedish academia. While encounters with difference are ever-present, dynamics of address often resist straightforward alignment within conventional hierarchies. The interview-based empirical material challenges overly simplistic analytical assumptions that rely on binaries such as native versus non-native or domestic versus international academics. Within this context, the analytical perspective of postmigration enables a closer examination of how the deeply personal character of names affects negotiations of difference, positionings and heritage. Moreover, postmigration highlights the emergence of subtle emotional labour within academic workplaces – grounded in practices that outmanoeuvre binary frameworks of thinking about difference and embrace humility and humour.

Keywords: academia, emotional labour, negotiation of difference, personal names, postmigration, Sweden

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At a departmental meeting where both English and Swedish are commonly used, a researcher from southern Europe who is not fluent in Swedish introduced her Swedish-born colleague. Although they had worked together for years, she stumbled over the colleague's Swedish surname, mispronouncing it twice. She laughed softly in embarrassment and offered a brief apology. At the same moment, the colleague reassured her with a smile, saying, "It doesn't matter", and then pronounced her Swedish surname.

This anecdote highlights a noteworthy strategy for addressing the less conspicuous yet persistent aspects of difference in internationally diverse workplaces, manifesting through linguistic and cultural heritage in the form of "hard-to-pronounce" names. It stems from the project "Academia and Cultural Production as 'Postmigrant' Fields in Sweden" (see Acknowledgement), in which we explored career paths of successful migrant professionals and inter-

viewed 36 university teachers and researchers (see Method section). Here, we explore how academic colleagues make sense of and respond to foreign-sounding names in professional interactions. "Hard-to-pronounce" names may be those of colleagues one interacts with daily. Is this perceived as a problem, and if so, what are the strategies for circumventing or neutralising it? What reactions are triggered by "strange" pronunciations and orthographies? How is difference negotiated when unfamiliar heritage infuses the deeply personal character of the name of a professional who is otherwise seen as fully accepted and included?

In what follows, we focus on the subjectively experienced ambivalences surrounding personal names (first names and family names/surnames). Though often subtle and fleeting, these ambivalences warrant close attention due to their potential impact on collegial relationships and sociability in the workplace. Hence, this article examines the range of responses to (mis)pronunciations or (mis)spelling of personal names, as well as the strategies used to navigate everyday markers of difference linked to such names. Because they are "taken-for-granted, and essential to every person everywhere, personal names have often eluded the theoretical and analytical scrutiny they deserve" (Pálsson 2014: 618). We explore how the peripeties of foreign-sounding names can be analysed from the perspective of postmigration, where "the emphasis is shifted from the concept of *integration* to that of *participation*" (Petersen 2024: 48; emphasis in original).

The case in point is contemporary Swedish academia, where around 41 per cent of teachers and researchers are born abroad or born in the country to two parents born abroad (Statistics Sweden 2025: 35). Regardless of the place of their previous education, the nature of their contract, their country of birth and the uneven presence of migrants in different departments, academic colleagues in Sweden are exposed to a great variety of personal names stemming from different languages and heritages. The currently intensified internationalisation further expands this variety.

In the aforementioned situation of difficulty with pronouncing a Swedish name, the exchange lasted only a few seconds, yet it exemplifies a moment of mutual recognition and the dignification of difference stemming from a subtle emotional labour (Bloch 2016; Ehn and Löfgren 2004, 2007; Suopajärvi 2023). In contrast, we also examine cases characterised by anger and blame, such as an incident during an official meeting (described in more detail below) in which an academic's name was altered to resemble what Amin Heidari (2024: 37) describes as "a terrorist-sounding name". Other cases present non-cathartic states of feeling, such as irritation, associated with situations in which (re)action is blocked or suspended (Ngai 2007). While deeper engagement with Sara Ahmed's work is beyond the scope of this article, we draw on her argument about "emotional labour as the work that is done to narrow the gap between how one does feel and how one should feel" (Ahmed 2004: 220). Daily encoun-

ters with difference pertaining to personal names both reinforce and challenge the key values underpinning the modern university: heritage, equality and merit (Kerr 1994). We contend that these emotionally charged interactions encourage colleagues to cultivate a more reflective approach to migrant heritage within contemporary Swedish academia. This echoes Luke Holmes's (2024: 75) discussion of "ethical events" in the internationalising university – "interactions involving that which is not known, normative or ordinarily visible, but for which all involved are called upon to take responsibility". The following sections address relevant previous research, the theoretical framework and the methodology. The next four empirical sections present and analyse the interview material, while the concluding section synthesises the findings by framing postmigration as a lens for understanding multidirectional emotional adaptation to difference.

Previous Research on Personal Names

As a major theoretician of academia's operation in society, Pierre Bourdieu addressed institutionally supported systems of classifications as a laboratory of power relations. He maintained that "naming is about symbolic power" (Bourdieu 1993: 7) and that "the power to impose recognition depends on the capacity to mobilize around a name" (Bourdieu 1984: 481). Likewise, studies on personal names suggest that they work as a symbolic asset and power resource. Gísli Pálsson (2014) explains how names situate people in genealogies, social networks and states and how they personify key elements of identification and personhood. Jane Pilcher's (2016) concept of "embodied named identity" highlights the relationship between names, identification and racialised and ethnified bodies; our individual and social identities are "embodied named" ones. Other authors have explored how names elicit preconceived notions (Huo 2020) and affect self-attitudes, interpersonal interactions and achievements (Horne 1986; Willis et al. 1982). "Unattractive" first names may yield "name-based life histories of neglect, discrimination, prejudice, or even ostracism" (J. E. Gebauer et al. 2011: 590).

Names perceived as "migrant names" produce everyday social distinctions (Lulle 2022). Migration research has produced studies on name-related labour market discrimination (Oreopoulos 2011), on stereotypes inferred by employers from ethnically distinct names (Midtbøen 2013) and on foreign-sounding immigrant and ethnic minority names as an initial factor of discrimination across Europe (Gómez-González et al. 2021; Molla et al. 2022). As Stuart Hall (1990: 12) pointed out, "exotic" names can be seen as part of a complex web of signifiers that underpins inferential racism. Names may provide "strategic gates to a person's identity through which a subtle, yet powerful method of domination could advance" (Heidari 2024: 27) and racialised individuals may

come to view their names as an insignificant residue deserving erasure and replacement (ibid.: 36).

Research on name change as a response to discrimination in Sweden highlights the problems of exclusion and racist differentiation (Arai et al. 2018). Shahram Khosravi (2011) demonstrates that alongside the veil, names are the most conspicuous signifiers of Muslim immigrants' stigmatised identity and "some believe that covering their Muslim identity with Swedish-sounding or 'neutral' European names will facilitate their individual integration into society" (ibid.: 65; see also Bursell 2011). Mahmood Arai and Peter Skogman Thoursie (2009) showed that name change to Swedish-sounding or neutral surnames brought about a substantial increase in annual earnings for immigrants from Asian, African and Slavic countries. A strand of research that is beyond the scope of this article refers to migrant parents' practices of first-name assignment (Aldrin 2009; Antonsich 2021; Drewski and Tuppat 2021; Girma 2020; Softic 2018). An extensive overview of research on personal names and migration is provided in Waldispühl 2024.

When it comes to encountering names that appear foreign, researchers have shown that first names are more difficult to learn and remember than other categories of words (Abrams and Davis 2017; Havlík 2016). Psychologists have demonstrated that individuals with easily pronounced names tend to be evaluated more positively in the workplace and that a name's ease of pronunciation can influence perceptions of trustworthiness (Newman et al. 2014).

Research concerning academia includes studies on personal name change as a strategy of students whose names are deemed "foreign, difficult and inferior" as their ethnicities are minoritised (Payne et al. 2016). Focusing on (mis)pronunciation of students' names, Jane Pilcher et al. (2024: 535) found that it is seen as an important part of the identities and professional practices of student-facing staff in UK higher education. Being "interwoven with myriad paradigms of privilege and power" (ibid.), (mis)pronunciation of names at the same time co-constructs the students' embodied named identities.

To the best of our knowledge, experiences with personal names have so far emerged as a focal point neither in research focusing on academics in Sweden nor in research that employs the framework of postmigration. In the subsequent sections, we explore how this framework can be applied to analyse emotional labour surrounding names, while offering fine-grained empirical insights into differently situated positionalities.

Postmigration as a Theoretical Perspective

The prefix "post-" in "postmigration" does not signify an end to migration, nor to any possible problems related to migration. However, it discontinues the

discursive repetition of "migration as an exceptional matter of otherness and minority politics" and "dissolves binary distinctions between the migratory and the non-migratory, and between immigrants and non-immigrants" (Moslund 2019: 351–352). It implies a perspective on migration as constitutive of societal change. The growing literature employing the perspective of postmigration (Gaonkar et al. 2021; Petersen 2024) rejects the narrow focus on migrants and the binary of native majority versus migrant or non-native minority while unveiling how the impact of migration on society has been shaped by its institutions and inequalities. We thus do not employ postmigration as a "positively utopian" (Tröger 2021: 147) concept that envisions harmony and consensus in multiracial, multi-ethnic contexts.

The lens of postmigration is directed towards public negotiations and conflicts concerning recognition, participation and representation of people with different heritages (Foroutan 2019; Petersen 2024) and the struggle for recognition based on self-identification rather than on ascribed identities (M. Gebauer et al. 2019: 137). However, it also foregrounds a gamut of subversive and playful strategies for dealing with one's ascribed position in society (Çağlar 2016: 954), something that has the potential to rekindle critical analysis into "a new topography of the possible" (Yıldız and Berner 2021) and a "positive epistemology" (Petersen 2024: 52) for engagements with difference, positionings and heritage.

Although postmigration distances itself from the concept of ethnicity as an explanative frame, it does not deny the significance of cultural or ethnic distinctions (Çağlar 2016: 960) that our interest in personal names relates to. As a frame of analysis, postmigration helps us to grasp the multiplicity of "subject positions and social interrelations in which the significance of a biographical migrant experience or immigrant background (near or distant) may appear and disappear in different contexts" (Moslund 2019: 353). Sharpening the focus on contestations concerning migration and its impacts, it allows us to remain sensitive to the ongoing relevance of migration-related heritages and genealogies and recognise the power and status inequalities they may entail (Povrzanović Frykman and Öhlander 2018; Schramm et al. 2019) without making far-reaching assumptions about their causal relations and without proposing speculative conclusions about their imminent hierarchies. Like other scholars adopting a postmigration perspective, we use it to closely examine the creative ways people address migration-related challenges, especially the development of "an innovative social praxis" (Hill and Yıldız 2021: 117), scaffolded by daily emotional labour in academia as a field of our interest. The issues around language (Povrzanović Frykman et al. 2023) and personal names are aspects of empirical realities that the perspective of postmigration helps us interpret in terms of how migration and internationalisation impact the changes in Swedish academia, involving migrants, migrant descendants and non-migrants alike.

Method and Material

Our material is based on 36 open-ended interviews with university teachers and researchers conducted between 2021 and 2023. We interviewed men and women of different generations who were employed at eight Swedish universities and worked with the same colleagues for several years. Most of them were professors; a few occupied top administrative roles. Instead of recruiting participants based on ethnic or national identity, we scrutinised their career stage, gender and representation across disciplines. Still, our interviewees represent diverse backgrounds, spanning more than twenty countries and three continents. Their names in the quotations below are changed for the sake of anonymity.

Our initial interviewees included migrants and children of migrants. Several were self-selected, as they responded to our public calls for participants, while others were snowballed. They were asked to identify individuals who were key sources of advice and support in their professional path into Swedish academia. We then interviewed these supportive individuals as equally significant participants in our study. Notably, only a few of them had personal experiences related to migration; in most cases, their interviews represent the perspectives of ethnic Swedes within Swedish academia.

Among other things, we asked the interviewees how their colleagues pronounced their names, whether they ever had trouble pronouncing a colleague's name, whether their names were written correctly by their employer and whether they had anything else to say about names at their workplace. Although direct questions about personal names may seem marginal in the broader context of our project, such queries nevertheless prompted thought-provoking accounts we had not anticipated.

We used thematic narrative analysis to tease out the meanings of the interviewees' experiences. The transcripts were coded manually to identify the specificities of individual narratives and topics. As evident from the empirical sections below, four main themes emerged regarding experiences with personal names: mispronunciations and misspellings, name distortions, efforts (or lack thereof) to pronounce names correctly and the emotional labour of (not) taking offence. These themes reflect both the experience of being affected by the micro-actions of colleagues and that of being the person who inadvertently prompts an emotional response, as well as the reactions to both.

Mispronunciations and Misspellings

Our material reveals that a common strategy for handling names perceived as difficult to pronounce is to avoid saying them. One migrant professor shared

that she felt deeply embarrassed after mispronouncing a close colleague's Swedish name at a conference. She also described difficulties in pronouncing certain non-Swedish surnames, highlighting how pronunciation challenges can also affect individuals across different linguistic backgrounds:

> I have two colleagues from [a South-Eastern European country]. That [the difficulties they had with names] is terrible! One officially changed her name in Sweden. So that people can call them, can get her on the phone – because now no one can pronounce her name! With them, that [language] is also the largest problem for me. I am embarrassed when we have an online conference and I have to ask them to present themselves. How shall I read that? [Also] Chinese names, and so … My French is also not good. I always apologise. (Professor in her forties, born in South-Eastern Europe)

Another migrant interviewee explained how he deals with the potential embarrassment of mispronunciation:

> I go with the perspective that, you know, ignorance is not wrong, particularly if you know it. So, I would be in a situation like, I'm sorry, I'm probably going to get your name wrong, or can you pronounce your name for me? That doesn't … embarrass me. Because it's, it's just inevitable. (Associate professor in his forties, born in an Anglo-Saxon country)

An interviewee born in a Nordic country gave a humorous account of the issues not only with the correct pronunciation of her name in Swedish academia but also with its spelling in other contexts:

> Uh, it's, it's very rare, uh, it's rare that people get it right. Because in Swedish, the pronunciation is different. I have lived it all my years. Uh, I mean, ever since seeing the, since primary school. Sometimes it's misspelt too. Like if I get a letter, even from the authorities … . So, I've kind of gotten really attached to my name because it has never been so straightforward – it's always had issues! The name has encountered issues in Swedish, in the Swedish context. (Professor in her fifties, born in a Nordic country, grew up in Sweden)

When asked about the misspellings of her name, a professor with a family name from another country neighbouring Sweden replied,

> Oh, many times! … I can't find myself anywhere [in popular science archives]; I contact them, and they say I don't exist! They spelt my name wrong! What is it, perhaps an assimilationist position, that you change my name? It happens often, I have to say. But I am trying to put myself in their position – they are trying to make their life simpler. (Professor in her seventies, born in Eastern Europe, with a surname from a Nordic country)

From the perspective of postmigration, challenges in pronunciation and orthography indicate both tensions and emerging opportunities for converting the "stigma" of a "migrant name" (Lulle 2022) into a distinction. The following quotation is taken (with permission) from correspondence received from one of our interviewees:

> I went into the department to do some paperwork yesterday and couldn't help but laugh and reflect upon our interview. … My name isn't correct on the door to my office! :) Once upon a time, I would get mad at people who spelt my name wrong, and I would correct them. At some point in time, I just said to myself, "It's not worth the frustration." So, as I told you, when I start Zoom meetings, I correct my name manually. I started doing this at every meeting when Zoom intensified. Yesterday, I took a marker and corrected the spelling of my name on my door. And as a result of our conversation/interview, I think I will once again start to press people at [the university] to spell my name correctly. (Professor in his fifties, born in an English-speaking country)

One may wonder whether the emotional response of "pressing people" for correct name pronunciation is primarily directed at university administrators and IT staff rather than close academic colleagues. If this is the case, then this example reveals yet another nuance of power negotiations that refers not to cultural backgrounds but rather organisational hierarchies of the university. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the concrete addressee, seen through the lens of postmigration, the emotional reaction itself can be interpreted as part of the symbolic power struggle, of being "recognised by the ways you identify yourself rather than by the identities ascribed to you" (M. Gebauer et al. 2019: 137). Insisting on the correct spelling or pronunciation of one's name may be dismissed as grumpiness or self-centeredness, triggering negative feelings in the workplace. However, such small acts of asserting the right to cultural integrity and the dignity of difference not only encourage colleagues to be more attuned to the institutionally embedded value of equality but also highlight the importance of the daily acknowledgement of the wealth of heritages at the workplace. Here, the perspective of postmigration highlights that, by raising awareness and demanding that things are done right, our interviewees counter both cultural or racial insensitivity (Matthew 2024: 975) and culturally sanctioned ignorance (Petersen 2024: 51). As a result, they contribute to engagement with difference that may bring about a broader institutional change.

Name Twists

An interviewee from South-Eastern Europe noted that her Swedish colleagues often add an "i" to her first name, such as Lilija instead of Lilja. She therefore shortened it in her daily workplace communication (albeit not on official pages and in published work) to make it easier to pronounce for colleagues in Sweden and internationally. For this interviewee, seeing this as a self-denial would be wrong because she likes her newly adopted short name – it reminds her of a childhood friend who once invented it. We also interviewed an Eastern European professor who Swedified his name, which stemmed from a Christian heritage background, "to make it possible for the Swedes to pronounce".

While the examples above show the will to make one's name easier for the majority language speakers to pronounce, a native English speaker shared that he takes offence when colleagues use the short version of his name. He finds this practice of crossing a boundary of intimacy annoying:

> I remember it was really annoying that I got into the system at [the university where he did his PhD studies] as Max, not Maximilian. … I don't like random strangers calling me Max. That is impertinent. So, I ended up in the system, and it was really annoying, 'cause also then my email address was Max, so every time ever since … so people would be calling me Max. … What was odd was that Swedes, my colleagues, just didn't seem to get it, that Max is a nickname. It's short for Maximilian, but if it's for anything formal, please call me Maximilian. It's how it works, so that is the lesson I took from that – now I'm always very precise about calling myself Maximilian, to make it clear. (Associate professor in his forties, born in an Anglo-Saxon country)

The same interviewee told us that his family name often gets misspelt:

> And then, Pringle [family name]! Well, to the Swedish ear, Pringle is spelt with *gel*, not *gle*. It's the sort of thing that periodically happens. They just don't … [get it], you know.

This case aligns with viewing academia through a postmigrant lens, as it underscores the unpredictability of how differences associated with specific cultural backgrounds are recognised or overlooked, and for whom these differences may lead to discomfort. Even though this interviewee's colleagues are fluent in English, they misspell his English surname. Or is it precisely because they are fluent in English that they do not bother to double-check? Appreciating difference requires an active effort to accommodate it. However, some foreign languages and cultural heritages are perceived as more familiar than others; that may lead to a certain complacency, whereby standards of attentiveness are suddenly relaxed.

A researcher born in Sweden to migrant parents from a Spanish-speaking country helps her colleagues see the issue by correcting them:

> Of course, pronunciation is a thing, when people don't always get it right. Sometimes they switch my names, so they say [the surnames in the wrong order] or you can feel them stumble a bit when they need to say it, sometimes it goes wrong. When they present me or write an email presenting me to somebody else, you know, I often have to correct it. (Researcher in her forties, born in Sweden to migrants from an overseas country)

The material does not allow us to follow up on such corrections, but it would be interesting to explore under which circumstances they are seen as helpful and when they are regarded as annoying or preposterous. Whose "right" to demand such corrections is considered legitimate, and which intersections of origin, academic status, gender and age does it involve?

(Lack of) Effort

An interviewee with rich experience of staying as a visiting professor in foreign countries said that his name "is constantly mispronounced and misspelt" abroad. Answering the question about difficulties with other people's names in academia in Sweden, he replied,

> I always had problems, yeah. I don't worry too much because if I'm mispronounced, [so] what the hell, they can be mispronounced too. Or, I try to do my best. (Professor in his seventies, born in Sweden to Swedish parents)

An interviewee who migrated to Sweden paid attention to a certain power hierarchy that could be detected in the perceived non-obligation to make an effort concerning foreign-sounding names:

> I feel like I should, I should make the effort. Like it's, I feel like it's a shortcoming on my behalf if I don't say it correctly. Whereas … in Sweden, it's like it's okay. Like people don't feel it's their obligation to get, to pronounce my name correctly – it doesn't matter. And you know, it always felt like this, this Swedish sense of superiority vis-à-vis people from other [countries], visibly migrants, basically with other names. (Professor in his fifties, born in an overseas country)

However, another Swedish-born professor we interviewed conveyed the impression that such perception of "the Swedish sense of superiority" might, after all, be overstated:

> My friend [Turkish name] – his name many of my colleagues had trouble pronouncing. I tried to be correct, and of course, I became used to the fact that,

> especially in the States, my name is pronounced differently. I think, with regard to my foreign PhD students in the past, I tried to get it right so that they could accept it. (Professor in his eighties, born in Sweden to Swedish parents)

An English-speaking professor expressed a humble stance as well:

> Oh sure, you always feel embarrassed, we meet people with very different kinds of names than we grew up with perhaps. It's an international environment. It's always … we're always struggling with it. I say, "I'm sorry, I don't mean to be offensive or to be rude or anything, I'm doing my best", but this is … yeah. (Professor in his fifties, born in an overseas country)

An interviewee with a Slavic surname, like several others whose names include diacritics, lost the "ć" in the official spelling of his surname, but his close colleagues pronounce it anyway: "Those who don't are not *really* my colleagues." From the perspective of postmigration, this is a good example of unpredictability in dealing with this kind of difference. Here, rather than the native versus non-native distinction, a different binary comes into play: that of close colleagues versus more distant coworkers. This professor's "real" colleagues make an effort to correctly spell his surname and thereby recognise and appreciate his heritage. He can therefore remain emotionally detached from the spelling per se in public contexts. He is not putting effort into trying to include "ć" in his name on his university's website. He said, "I don't insist", even when it comes to publications – "They sometimes add it themselves." Different search engines find his publications in any case, with or without the diacritics. When it comes to pronouncing others' names, he admitted,

> I am very bad at that, at remembering names and pronouncing them. But I behave humbly. I say, I am stupid, help me! X [his senior colleague] is an anthropologist, and he could say the name of a PhD student from Africa well. They have a "click" sound, Zulu pronunciation. Sometimes you are not capable [of doing it] … sometimes, you simply pronounce a name incorrectly, and then you apologise. I try to lay myself bare; that is a way to compensate. (Professor in his sixties, born in South-Eastern Europe)

Expressed self-critique, humbleness and the perceived need for "compensation" by the means of an apology indicate high awareness of the sensitivity of personal names. Seen from the perspective of postmigration, such awareness constitutes the ground for the possible development of "an innovative social praxis" (Hill and Yıldız 2021: 117), whereby difference does not risk becoming otherness, but is instead embraced as part of the present-day academic field.

Taking Offence (or Not)

Some of our interviewees see migrants as more sensitive to issues with names given their own experiences with misspellings:

> I think it helps if you do have that background and you do realise it … . Different ways of pronouncing names and different names are put together in different parts of the world. (Professor in his fifties, born in an overseas country)

However, while expressing an understanding of difficulties with pronunciation, the professor quoted above does not ignore the instances of depreciation of difference:

> I can also hear jokes at times – "Whatever his name is, you know who I'm talking about" – now, it's a way of dismissing it. I don't think people necessarily mean to be rude, but you don't even have to be exposed to it in that way, you know.

This brings us back to the matter of awareness exemplified above. The lens of postmigration highlights that ignoring the need to engage with "hard to pronounce/hard to remember" names is not just "rude" – it exposes the deep-seated sedimentations of racist attitudes (Matthew 2024).

An academic who came to Sweden as a young child relayed a moment of outspoken defiance that arose when his name was systematically mispronounced. He placed a demand on the majority-language-speaking person not only to take the presence of a person with a name from the country of his migrant parents on equal terms, but to invest an effort into understanding this person's position in cultural coordinates:

> I hate it when they deform my name, but one does not always dare to confront it. But on one occasion, I exploded, really! It was a meeting on Zoom, and one of the high bosses called me "Boran" several times in a row. She could read my name on the screen the entire time, but she simply didn't care! At the end, I said in front of everyone, "You know, my name is Bogdan! So, call me by my real name, for God's sake!" You can imagine the reaction. First, it was totally silent for several seconds. But then, it was like, "Woooow!" (Associate professor in his fifties, born in South-Eastern Europe, grew up in Sweden)

This was a moment of confrontation that is of central interest to the theorising of postmigration as permeated by negotiations, contestations and conflicts (Foroutan 2019; Petersen 2024). The interviewee found the courage to demand that his specific background, which is reflected in his first name, was recognised not as a negligible exoticism but as a distinction. An additionally important aspect of the situation was that his name was turned into a Muslim name, which caused triple alienation: not being called by his proper name, being lumped

together with a heritage he has nothing in common with and being associated with a group that research overall points at as highly stigmatised in Sweden (Arai et al. 2018; Bursell 2011; Khosravi 2011).

A female interviewee born in Sweden to migrant parents made a more general statement:

> Actually, my name is pronounced not with "d" but with "th", but it is difficult, so it is, like, "address your audience". My Indian colleague is called Akshpreet but he introduces himself as Ax, and we call him that. But he is Sikh, and I don't know if it's right to do so, culturally. But it is for him to protest, to talk about it. However, one is not always confident enough to do it. (Researcher in her fifties, born in Sweden to migrant parents from a South European country)

In line with the conflictual character of postmigration, the quotations above suggest that the migrants demanding recognition need courage to do so. The other side of our rhetorical question above, about whose "right" to demand corrections is considered legitimate, is the fact that one's visibility and reputation might be at stake. When asked whether he had ever experienced people addressing him incorrectly, an interviewee born in Sweden to parents from the Middle East confirmed with a smile that "it's always been like that with people who don't know me". When asked if he usually corrects them, he first answered, "Yes, even though it may irritate them", but then added,

> No, no. When people quote me, it can be "H…" sometimes, and that bothers me a little because half of my name is missing. But it's not their fault, it's the Tax Agency's fault, and they refuse to fix it! [Laughs] They [the Tax Agency] have refused. It's like, your whole family is written this way, so why should you in particular [have your name written properly]? (Researcher in his thirties, born in Sweden to migrant parents from a Middle Eastern country)

When asked if he objects to his name being systematically distorted by the same colleagues, he answered, "Yes, but then you also have to consider that people can have dyslexia, something that is not immediately visible on them. That can also affect."

This example is particularly revealing, as it showcases the emotional labour of handling one's bad feelings through rationalising others' mistakes (Ngai 2007), even going so far as to attribute name misspellings to dyslexia. This interviewee's responses reveal a nuanced emotional spectrum, with reactions ranging from annoyance and lenience to pity for those struggling with his name, humility regarding his own efforts to correct misunderstandings and suppressed indignation towards a "faceless" authority that mishandles not only his name but also those of other Muslims. Notably, the bursts of laughter in this segment of the interview highlight the ambiguity of the situation, potentially

signalling both rapport and the underlying tension between the interviewee and the interviewer, herself a migrant from another part of the world, as they navigate the sensitive topic (Osvaldsson 2004).

A professor who responded to our public call for participants has both a first name and a surname very common in Sweden, but it turned out that he was born to migrant parents who came from an overseas country. His family background is visible in his middle name that comes from a language other than Swedish. He explained,

> For the Swedish speakers, it's easy to pronounce and spell my name … . With foreign people [colleagues at his university], sometimes it is slightly more difficult. … But that has not been an issue so much with me. It's my middle name [that is an issue]. It comes from [the language of the country his parents come from], so that's a part of this heritage. Sometimes, I mean, people who know what I'm called as a second [middle] name, they'll sometimes use it jokingly, which I don't quite find really fair because there's, there's no joke to it. It's my grandfather's first name. And I was given it, and it's an honour to wear it. So in that sense, yes, I do have this experience of my name being used and misused. On the other hand, I did want to put [the first letter of the middle name] in there [in his signature and publications], both as an honour to my grandfather and also to differentiate myself from every other [person with the same first and family name common in Sweden], certainly. (Professor in his fifties, born in Sweden to migrant parents from an overseas country)

Close colleagues of this interviewee know his non-Swedish middle name and use it when they are in the mood to tease him. It annoys him, given that he cherishes his migrant legacy and uses it as a matter of distinction. As much as being exposed to daring humour may signal safe inclusion (similarly to the nicknames discussed in Pilcher 2016), this interviewee cannot tolerate the difference of his origins being recognised as laughable. The ambiguity remains unresolved: the mocking reveals the tension underpinning the complex entanglements of "embodied named identity" (ibid.).

Conclusion: Postmigration as the Prospect of Multidirectional Emotional Adaptation to Difference

While the multiplicity of ethnic origins structures daily realities not just in academia but in many other societal contexts and workplaces in Sweden, academia is characterised by the ethos of collegial equality counterbalanced with competition for status, intellectual prowess, normative emphasis on self-reflectivity, and international exchange as a standard working practice. Academia is a field where individuals interact as peers, and values of collegiality and equality are explicitly upheld. Yet seemingly mundane occurrences, such as the intentional or

unintentional alteration of one's own or others' foreign-sounding names, reveal practices and contexts in which embodied named identities are co-constructed (Pilcher et al. 2024) and difference risks becoming otherness. This article has showed that difference requires ongoing engagement, as the boundaries between "outsider" and "insider" are fluid and ever-shifting, shaped by the dynamics of daily interactions between colleagues with diverse identity trajectories. The discomfort of mispronouncing or misspelling a name is not exclusively a concern for migrants, nor are apologies limited to Swedes; rather, these moments of self-awareness and correction transcend origins and native language proficiency.

The ways of dealing with personal names such as those in our material can be summarised as follows. All interviewees from time to time encountered difficulties with the names that felt foreign to them and with their own names turned foreign in certain contexts, but not all of them perceived this as important, particularly not the participants with Swedish personal names. In general, academics are used to – and tolerant of – their names being mispronounced; they are appreciative of their colleagues' efforts to utter their names correctly. However, even though they may became accustomed to the new ways in which their names are pronounced, the interviewees whose names were regularly misspelt in formal contexts expressed irritation. Those with Swedish names shared such irritation but placed it in the context of their visits abroad, as their names are rarely misspelt in Sweden. None of them complained about the "strange" pronunciation of their names, but several migrants among our interviewees expressed embarrassment over not being able to pronounce some Swedish names (fully) correctly.

We observed that culturally sanctioned ignorance or negligence regarding the spelling of some non-Swedish names is rarely left without a response. It may provoke resentment, confusion, irritation, annoyance or anger, particularly when official decision-makers are involved, for example, university administrators responsible for door plaques, ID cards, logins and webpages, as well as state-level agencies overseeing taxation and academic infrastructure. The perceived lack of effort to "get it right" among colleagues can be understood against the background of more or less conscious discriminatory standpoints. Referring to another colleague as "whatever his name is" suggests a lack of respect that may be perceived as a token of a low-level discriminatory attitude and possibly deep-seated racial hierarchies (Heidari 2024). This underscores the need for further research into "name-blindness" as analogous to "colour-blindness", which obscures the presence of racism in everyday life (Osanami Törngren 2019; Petersen 2024: 51; Schütze and Osanami Törngren 2022) – something that our material does not yet allow us to explore in depth.

Although research employing the framework of postmigration engages with institutional and individual racism (Ohnmacht and Yıldız 2021), it seeks

to enhance interest in exploring diverse, often quirky and ambiguous ways in which people navigate and live with difference, thereby moving beyond simplified categorisations of empowerment or oppression. Our material also reveals a landscape of tolerance, humility, adaptability and a general willingness to navigate the challenges posed by unfamiliar names without perceiving them as obstacles to the core values and practices of academia. A touch of self-deprecating humour in several responses suggests that the diversity of names is accepted as an inherent aspect of the working environment and that people usually make an effort to become fluent in first names and surnames that are perceived not as "other" but simply as different. In some cases, one can even sense a transformation of the emotional labour invested in name-related interactions into what Tiina Suopajärvi (2023) terms "new emotional practices" and Luke Holmes (2024) describes as "ethical events".

Micro-practices such as those exemplified in the opening anecdote may be interpreted as a token of the ongoing fostering of non-confrontational habits grounded in solidarity and broader inclusivity within academia. Increasingly, these practices foreground values such as humility and a sense of humour, which are highly esteemed not only in academia but also in other international work environments (Nielsen and Marrone 2018). They subtly shift the focus from competitiveness to equality, sociability and the recognition of the value of offering and accepting apologies.

The article has shown that daily awareness of difference, as it emerges through engagement with personal names, is ambiguous and fluid, depending on the particular constellations of people involved. Research employing the framework of postmigration contends, and our analysis confirms, that these constellations cannot be captured by the binary of natives versus non-natives (Moslund 2019). However, this does not mean disregarding the existence, negotiation or recognition of diverse heritages and linguistic affiliations within Swedish academia (Povrzanović Frykman et al. 2023), whose genealogy is inseparable from "migration as historical normality" (Ohnmacht and Yıldız 2021: 149).

In Swedish academia today, where internationalisation is reshaping institutional environments, everyone – regardless of ethnicity, nationality or academic rank – must adapt to names that feel "foreign" yet are part of daily interactions. Our interviewees develop strategies to avoid embarrassment and self-blame for not trying hard enough when efforts fail. They recognise that navigating internationalisation requires conscious effort. Despite their seeming banality and small scale – or, rather, due to them – the transient situations highlighted in this article require the emotional labour of mitigating ambiguity, reaffirming one's name-related cultural embeddedness and confronting occurrences of "name-blindness". With cultural sensitivity as a starting point, academics

can help negotiate how everyday life in a competitive, status-driven workplace should function, so that the harms of exclusion are avoided and the dignity of difference is upheld.

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