



Institutional Transformation and the Significance of Renaming Buildings in a South African University: The Narratives of Support and Academic Staff

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Abstract: This study draws on qualitative research to examine the perspectives of academic and support staff concerning the processes of renaming buildings in one of the historically white South African higher education institutions. The names changed are expected to enhance the institutional culture, diversity, inclusivity, and social justice in the university. The discourses presented by most of our respondents suggest different reasons to justify the change of name. The responses of some support staff who are Africans suggest that they do not identify themselves with the university especially when they encounter names that do not belong to their own people. Some African male support staff argued that some of the names do not promote inclusivity and diversity because of the names of the spaces which rather represent Afrikaner power. Similarly other African participants asserted that while they struggle to pronounce some of the names, at times, they do not understand the meaning or the history attached to the names of the spaces and buildings. To these participants, although they were born and grew up in the region, they cannot call the place home. The contestation of names is not only for the Afrikaans' names, but it is also for names taken outside of the geographical region where the university operates. Most participants who could identify as Sotho people felt offended by the Zulu names that most buildings bear on the campus though the campus is located in their geographical region. Most support and academic staff maintained that for a socially welcoming environment to be effective there is a need to create a space where everybody is accommodated. They also suggested the renaming of buildings to reflect the names of individuals who contributed to knowledge production in the university and community.

Keywords: Renaming, colonial, diversity, sense of belonging, institutional transformation

Introduction

The renaming of places and other facilities, in South Africa, has been on the agenda since the first democratic era. Renaming universities and other facilities can help to enhance inclusivity and social cohesion (Duminy, 2017; Ndletyana, 2012). In the last two decades, place names have become an important object of interest for cultural anthropologists and human geographers. This is because of the growing awareness of place names' fundamental association with identity and power. A number of recent studies have shown the role of place names in place-making, the construction and promotion of national and other group identities, and the legitimization of competing for political regimes (Azaryahu, 1996; Alderman, 2000; Alderman,



Inwood, 2013; Light, 2004; Gill, 2005; Palonen, 2008). The significance of place names becomes particularly visible during periods of major political and ethnic change when new regimes and newly dominant ethnicities attempt to reinscribe the toponymic landscape in order to secure their legitimacy as well as their material and intellectual control (Mácha, Lassak, Krtička, 2018).

Colonial or Apartheid building names can obstruct social inclusion in a diverse higher education institution. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in investigating the Rhodes Must Fall campaign and the role of decolonizing place names in South African contemporary public spaces (Ndletyana, 2012; Uluocha, 2015). Yet there is little attention given to what it means for the indigenous black South Africans to encounter the buildings named after the former apartheid-dominated fellow whites or, more importantly, what role the building named after a colonial or apartheid figure serves in propping up the painful past which is deemed offensive toward the past marginalized groups. It is important to understand how memory is rooted in the landscape and how toponyms as a kind of landscape imbued with particular power are linked to wider geographies of belonging and exclusion (Barker 2018). This study seeks to examine academic and support staff perspectives on the processes of renaming buildings in one of the historically white South African higher education institutions. The study aims to provide the University of the Free State (UFS), the evidence and recommendations for knowledge-based decision-making support for its institutional culture research. This study uses the terms “African” and “black” interchangeably to refer to the community of black people.

Method

The Geographic Context and Sampling

The fieldwork was carried out on three campuses of the UFS, which are located in Bloemfontein and QwaQwa. Bloemfontein is the capital city of the province of the Free State. As of 2017, the population of Bloemfontein was about 520,000. The city of Bloemfontein is the home of the Supreme Court of Appeal of South Africa. It also hosts quite a few museums, including the National Women’s Monument, the Anglo-Boer War Museum, and Oliewenhuis Art Museum. QwaQwa is a rural area located some 700 km to the east of Bloemfontein. QwaQwa Campus assists a fast-increasing number of rural students from the proximate location and neighboring provinces. The South Campus is located in the southern part of Bloemfontein, the capital of the Free State, and currently provides alternative access to higher education for promising students who did not obtain the required marks in their final school examinations, although its purpose is under constant revision.

In terms of sampling, the study used several sampling techniques for participants’ recruitment, namely purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling techniques. For the snowball sampling, when contacting the potential participants, researchers asked if they know others who meet the qualifications. In fact, participants were invited to participate in the study on the ground of being staff members. They were selected because of their ability to provide insights into matters related to institutional culture. The researchers requested for lists of staff from faculties and departments to recruit participants. They consulted the head of schools to help in the recruitment process. Invitations requesting participants to attend interviews were personalized.

**Data Collection**

A qualitative research method was employed to examine academic and support staff perspectives on the processes of renaming buildings in one of the historically white South African higher education institutions. Qualitative research is an examination process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of investigation that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of participants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (Creswell 1998). Seven-trained team researchers conducted the individual interviews. These were researchers with experience in conducting individual interviews, especially conducted yearly university institutional culture research. A total of 79 respondents (male and female academic and support staff from all race groups) participated in the study. This comprised 28 academic staff and 51 support staff.

We interviewed African males, African females, white males, white females, colored males, and colored females. Seventy-nine individual interviews were conducted with the support and academic staff. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted using English as all participants could speak it.

Data Analysis

The data were thematically analyzed. The thematic analysis involves searching for recurring patterns of meaning and common themes across a broad data set. To analyze the data, we first read transcripts in their entirety in search of meanings and patterns and wrote down ideas and codes during the analysis process. We developed a guide for coding the interviews, and reread them to identify themes as they emerged. During the coding process, we retained the individual and dominant stories (Braun and Clarke 2006). We generally structured the content of the thematic analysis in such a way that we characterized the similarities among the majority of groups regarding the individual logical criteria; then, where this is important, we studied the groups where there was a differing manifestation or trend. Occasionally, we discussed the results of the individual groups separately under different analytical criteria. In other cases, we performed the analysis by grouping together the analysis of groups of similar composition. Vicsek (2007) suggests citing not only common manifestations but also isolated ones, including fragments of discussions containing several contributions often in thematic analysis. Under each citation, we always noticed whether it comes from a male or female participant including the race and campus attended by the participant. We also paid considerable attention to the relationship between codes or themes. We reviewed, defined, and named themes before producing our last analytical report (Braun and Clarke 2006). The themes we identified arose largely from the questions asked during the individual interviews, which, in turn, arose from our research objectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was granted by General/Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC). Permission was also obtained from the Deans of the faculties where the participants were from. The nature of the research was explained to the participants, and it was made clear that their participation was entirely voluntary. Informed written consent was obtained from all individual participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly respected in both our research approach and the execution of the study; all of the responses reported are identified



using coding. The individual interviews were tape-recorded to ensure accurate reporting of participants' information. The recorded data was verbatim transcribed by a professional transcript company. This study reports the respondents' comments in their own words and the quotations presented are unless otherwise noted, representative of the beliefs articulated by the majority of participants. Data and research instruments are stored in a secure space in accordance with university laws and ethics. To encourage participation, refreshments were provided in each interview session.

Results

Buildings should be renamed after people who have contributed to the community. The contribution to the community was often mentioned, and it explains the motivation for renaming some buildings after certain personalities. Some African support staff provide their suggestions on this matter as follows:

I'm not sure what kind of processes have been followed because there was that open dialogue between staff, students, management, and staff. Unfortunately, I couldn't be part of that because of workload but according to my own perspective, I think the naming of the buildings comes with a greater responsibility if they have done a certain contribution towards that community itself. Then, it can be used as part of the recognition to say this person has contributed to this largely so we recognize you based on your name to be there as something that will stay forever as a legacy. (African Female Support Staff A9 Interview 11)

Renaming buildings after people who have contributed to the community was also recurrent in academic staff perceptions. Personal contributions based on excellence, productivity, and academic integrity are perceived as the criteria on which should be based the renaming processes. Some white male academic staff illustrates it as follows:

Well personally, I think history will always be important. On the other hand, I'm quite comfortable with name changes. I think a place like a university needs to acknowledge history, especially regarding names, take into account, and acknowledge important personal contributions but after all, it's about knowledge, knowledge production, productivity, and academic excellence that is fostered at the university and quite frankly I don't think names would foster that quality. So, I am quite comfortable with name changes as long as it goes with excellence, productivity, and academic integrity. (White Male Academic Staff C1 Interview 1)

For some academic staff, when renaming the buildings, the Naming Committee should also take into account the individuals who contributed to knowledge production in the university and community.

Some African male support staff recommend the Naming Committee in the future take into account the role played by TK Mopeli in the building of school infrastructure in the region. The participants believe Mopeli should be acknowledged, and his memory should be engraved in the QwaQwa Campus memorial:

He is a chief. Well-known chief of back in the days who built all the schools you can see in QwaQwa. 283 in total under his governance. He was a governor of course. And not only him who has contributed towards all the development that you see in this



homeland. There are a few to be named as well. I would like to see in the future then their names coming on there. (African Male Support Staff A6 Interview 16)

Some participants belonging to Sotho cultures claim that their leaders were ignored in the buildings' renaming process, and believe that the acknowledgment of their leaders should be engraved in the campus memorial.

Although most participants appreciate the recent university democratic building naming process, some participants still believe it did not take into account the historical identity of Eastern Free State in its naming processes:

What I know there was an email that was sent to all the staff members to bring the names forward and the motive behind the names. And from there, there was a follow-up meeting in the senate hall. Whereby I think they selected based on the categories to say okay, these are names that dominated. And from there, people who attended the senate were the ones to have a discussion and agreed on a name to be used for the specific building. Truly speaking, it's never been my interest. So, whatever the name that they give, let it be. But what I've seen mostly happening... I know mostly they use icons from far away from Eastern Free State. If they can use the names that we can relate to Eastern Free State. Because this university is based in Eastern Free State. The only one name that stood out is this library building, the TK Mopeli building. (African Male Support Staff A6 Interview 16).

The contestation of names is not only for the Afrikaan names, but it is also for names taken outside of the geographical region where the university operates. Most participants who could identify as Sotho people felt offended by the names of the Zulu cultural community that most buildings bear on the campus though the campus is located in their geographical region.

One of the African academic staff disagrees with the recent naming change that happened on Bloemfontein Campus. He illustrates his disagreement as follows:

I don't think it is particularly necessary to have them [name] changed. I just think we need to revise the history around again. Because you have places like for instance Acacia. What is Acacia? Is it a plant; is it a person? What does it mean? We have Welwitschia, but you also have Emily Hobhouse. So, I think it's just a matter of going back to look at everything; compiling a document to try and say okay: "This is what Emily Hobhouse is. She was a person; she did the following things." So, that again if it's a negative thing we can decide then we are removing the name or replacing it or we're going to name the building with a countering name (African Male Academic Staff B2 Interview 4).

The participant also explained that:

So, for me removing without actually an understanding is basically equal to destruction. Because it means that we'll just look at something and decide that we don't like Block D. What is Block D, we want Block D removed but you don't actually know why there's a Block D, to begin with. There was a C. R. Swart Building and now it's called Equitas. The students are still complaining about what is Equitas because the meaning behind no one has ever actually sat down to say this is what Equitas means. It's Latin to mean



equality in English. Equality because we're talking about the law. It's the law building. So, it's just a matter of getting the context around that. So, changing everything is not going to resolve any problems that we have. Because our problems are many and many of them are not visible to the naked eye. They just require us to sit down and have a conversation. So, even with those, we just need to sit down and talk about who's Emily Hobhouse; who is Acacia if Acacia is a person. What is that and what does it mean? Just to get the context around it. Changing it can only come once we have the context. But whilst there is no context around it... (African Male Academic Staff B2 Interview 4)

An African male academic staff believes that in the recent name changes, buildings have been named with insignificant meanings. He strongly disagrees with the process that led to these changes. Rather compile a document that presents the narrative of the contribution to the community of the person whose buildings have to be named after him/her. He believes that removing the name of the building without understanding the contribution the person brought to the community is equal to destruction. He also indicates if it is found that the contribution was negative, then the name can be changed. However, for him, changing the names of buildings on campus is not going to solve any problem that people have. To conclude his statement, he illustrates it by this assertion: "Because our problems are many and many of them are not visible to the naked eye. They just require us to sit down and have a conversation."

However, some academics may disagree with the above assumption as they affirm to have noticed some signs of changes in name change processes at Bloemfontein Campus:

I'm happy we're making progress. Because I think everything in my time was purely Afrikaans. Now at least you've got the SR Lekota, the people will come, you know. Equitas, I don't know what Equitas means but it's no longer SRSAR now HMS, I don't know if HMS has changed but we've got Mabaleng Auditorium. So, I'm not saying that everything must change but at least it should be balanced. I need to lead from Mabaleng to... (African Male Academic B1 Interview 1)

Some academic staff believes that there are tangible changes in terms of name changes. However, they expect to see additional balanced names from Black people that may reflect the inclusivity.

Some academic staff clearly understands the change of names, and link the university buildings' name changes to other similar changes happening in the country. Some white academic staff finds no problem with the change of certain buildings' names:

I don't have a problem with that. It is a name. Many names have changed in this country, which we've all adjusted to. It is a name ... I would prefer that names are changed where it offends somebody. You just don't go and randomly change things. But if a specific name offends a certain group of students, I don't have a problem with that. (White Female Academic Staff B2 Interview 2)

Some white academic staff believes that these are merely names; therefore, they should be changed if they offend other people. However, they emphasize that this should not be an opportunity to randomly change names even if there is no apparent reason for doing it. They also prefer buildings to be named after politicians, but they emphasize that names should be linked to people who have played a role in the institution.



“Changing Buildings’ Names Makes Everyone Feel More Welcome”

It is clear from African female support staff responses that the sense of belonging in the university space represented in additional names of other parties may enhance a socially welcoming environment. One of the African female support staff advises the university to keep some of the names and add others that people may vote for to ensure a socially welcoming environment.

I can say if maybe some of the names can still be there, they can mix them with the current names. The democratic one together with the old one. So that we can know each one another by them. (African Female Support Staff A9 Interview 9)

The need for inclusivity through names changes was persistent in discourses reported by most African support staff:

They can’t mean anything to me because these are names of mostly white people who either were prime ministers, or important people during the colonial era and apartheid times, right? And some of them were integral in the dismantling of apartheid, but mostly the names remain in reference to, the names reference old constructs. If you go downtown, Charlotte Maxeke is a name we recognize as an anti-apartheid activist from Bloemfontein (African Female Support Staff C8: Interview 18).

The participant further argued that, “or do we even have a building named Charlotte Maxeke? So, the names for me represent a time and a concession because then we still need to live together with the people who enforced apartheid and the culture must be shared. Also, most of the names belong to the apartheid, pre-apartheid and post-apartheid times” (African Female Support Staff C8: Interview 18). Some African support staff feel like, when they enter the Bloemfontein Campus, they do not identify themselves with the place. Particularly, when they encounter names that do not belong to their people. They believe some current buildings’ are named after people who served during apartheid era or those who dismantled this system. However, they believe the names should be accepted despite the context in which they were naming as culture should continuously be shared.

As most names of buildings on the Bloemfontein Campus are in Afrikaans, some African participants indicate that they often get to the location and do not understand the meaning or the history attached to the name of the building:

...I don’t know where the names come from. Like we just get used to them okay, this is MGG, van der Walt. But why is it named like that, and the names are still more Afrikaans? It’s just the name of the building that I need to know when I go somewhere but it doesn’t really mean anything to me as an individual. (African Female Support Staff C11: Interview 21)

White Afrikaners are seen as a minority in South Africa, the university participants are referring to is one of the historically white South African higher education institutions. Thus, most names and streets in this institution bear Afrikaan names.



A name bears a meaning and represents the certain value that the giver wants it to convey. One of the African support staff believes some current names of buildings on the Bloemfontein Campus are representing Afrikaner power. Thus, they do not represent inclusivity and diversity, "...Some of these [names] represent the institutional memory of this place. ...Some of the buildings are named after former rectors, I found that out. So, it's maybe how the institution remembers them. Some of them are named after political leaders. But in my experience, they also represent I think, certain groups of people and interests that they have. Especially within spaces like residences, the name speaks about belonging, especially the male one. (African Male Support Staff C2 Interview 7). The participant also noted that:

So, there is a certain power that's linked to the names of certain spaces and group's identity with the naming of those spaces....especially in the residences. Honestly, other names mean nothing to me. Recently, I was educated on who exactly is Emily Hobhouse. I found out that she wrote stories about people who were in Afrikaner camps during the Anglo-Boer War. I think that the names represent powers in certain groups and institutional memory, I think. (African Male Support Staff C2 Interview 7)

For most participants, some names of buildings do not only represent the institutional memory, they also represent powers of the Afrikaner people, their interests, and identity that are articulated in the names of buildings and streets of the university.

Colonial or Apartheid names continue to offend some African people, they feel that these names do not resonate well. We asked participants whether some names personally represent anything to them, and they respond to this question as follows:

Personally? Nothing because I don't relate to them, right. ...I think they're just very colonial names from the past. They don't resonate you know. For example, if we had a name such as Pius Langa, that would mean a lot to me because Pius Langa was a constitutional court judge. ...Whether it's named like Lukong Vakasi, it doesn't resonate. They're just names that identify the space, that's all. (African Female Support Staff C6 Interview 16).

This quote implies that it may seem difficult to please everybody in the naming process, as individuals may want to have buildings named after people from their culture or race. For some support staff, new names of some buildings should be approved and may make much difference if they are from people who have shown great contributions to the community.

The reason for wanting the names of some buildings to change is not only linked to the name's geographical and linguistic support but also to the historical background of the person whose building has been named after it. This is indicated by the responses below:

We still have a residence named Abraham Fisher. I think a name like that is still good in as much as it's a white name but we know what he represents. So, I don't think the fight is being White or Afrikaans's names. Rather, the contention is about people who were involved in the destruction of another group of society. (African Female Support Staff C4 Interview 14)

For most participants, one of the reasons for contesting some Afrikaans names of the buildings at the university space is that those names evoke the painful past that black people experienced



during the Apartheid era as the name bearers might have been involved in the exclusive policies and politics against African communities.

Most African support staff reported that they do not identify themselves with some names of buildings. For instance, a participant noted that:

So, I struggle to pronounce some of the names of our buildings. I think if they [the university] change the names to those that we all relate to.....not Afrikaans then that will be okay. Imagine if you call these buildings or names in Sotho. Obviously, white people are not going to relate to that but if it is from the common language we use, English then I will feel at home. This is home, but for now, I don't think we have reached that are. We are maybe in the process but I don't think we've reached there. (African Female Support Staff C11 Interview 21)

This suggests that most support staff find it difficult to connect to the current names of buildings as most names are in Afrikaans. Thus, they do not feel at home particularly when they are on campus. Although they were born and grew up in the region, they cannot call the place home. They sometimes struggle to pronounce the names of buildings. They prefer most names of buildings to be neutral or English names, not in Afrikaans or Sotho. They also believe such transformation may enhance a socially inclusive and welcoming environment where everyone will feel at home.

We asked participants how the university should handle the demands to change building names to ensure a socially welcoming environment, an academic staff provided the following suggestions:

I am White so my opinion wouldn't be a problem. I don't have a problem with what's in the name. I think that one of the groups that matter here are the students and their representatives so, I would suggest that we understand how the students feel about the issues and how they feel about it. One might be surprised to find out exactly what a specific group thinks about the changes to building names. However, you cannot just go and take off names of buildings and take away statues that do not mean something to some students. So, I would definitely get advice from the student representatives. (White Female Academic Staff B2 Interview 2)

Consulting student representatives in the process of changing certain names is seen as an effective way to minimize the contestation which can happen in the future. In this regard, participants believe that the consultations and debates with all groups of students may help reduce tensions and emotions. Although some white academics agree with the change of certain buildings' names, they believe caution should be taken in this process as the random change of buildings' names can affect particularly some white Afrikaner students who identify themselves in these names.

Discussion

This study draws on qualitative research to examine academic and support staff perspectives on the processes of renaming buildings in one of the historically white South African higher education institutions. Results from individual interviews with a sample of support and



academic staff suggested that the change of buildings' names is expected to play an important role in marking institutional culture, and enhancing diversity, inclusivity, and social justice at a Higher Education Institution. A study conducted in Zimbabwe found that the renaming of postcolonial spaces provides another 'soft layer' of the urban landscape, which is about heritage and less about history (Matamanda, Chirisa, and Mhlanga, 2021). The data reported in the current study appear to support such an assumption. Such an expectation was persistent in discourses presented by most of our participants. They provided different reasons to justify the change. For most participants, one of the reasons for contesting some Afrikaans names at the university space is that these names evoke the painful past that black people experienced during the Apartheid era as the individuals, whose names have been given to buildings, might have been involved in the separated policies and politics against African communities. Colonial names continue to offend some African people, they feel that these names do not resonate well. The lopsided nature of renaming is indicative of the similarly uneven manner in which South Africa's black population recalls indigenous memory. These results are in agreement with Ndletyana's (2012) findings which showed that some South African black people relate to colonial memory and are offended by it. For African support staff, when entering the campus, they do not identify themselves with the place. Particularly, when they encounter names that do not belong to their people. The contestation of names is not only for the Afrikaans names, but it is also for names taken outside of the geographical region where the university operates. The controversies of names are not only for names originated from apartheid personalities, but also for Zulu buildings' names found on campus which is located in the Sotho geographical area. Most participants belonging to Sotho cultures claimed that their leaders were ignored in the buildings' renaming process, and believed that the acknowledgment of their leaders should be engraved in the campus memorial. They felt that the names of their people are not more represented on the buildings. Some African male support staff considered some names of buildings on the campus as representing Afrikaner power. They felt that the names of their people are not more represented on the buildings. Thus, they do not represent inclusivity and diversity. As most names of buildings on the campus are in Afrikaans, some African respondents asserted that they often get to the location and do not understand the meaning or the history attached to the names. This finding is consistent with that of Wanjiru and Matsubara (2016) who found that during the period of British rule in Kenya, the geographical name was used as an exercise of power and ideological dominance over space with the purpose of reflecting British control (Wanjiru and Matsubara, 2016).

Most African support staff reported that they do not identify themselves with some names of buildings. They sometimes struggle to pronounce these names. Thus, they do not particularly feel at home when they are on campus. What is surprising is that though they were born and grew up in the region, they cannot call the place home. A possible explanation for this might be that most African participants consider themselves as the first indigenous people and the location where the university is located as their ancestral land. However, the Apartheid policies removed them from the land and then belonged to the white cultural minorities. It is worth noting that the university did not enroll Blacks during the time of Apartheid, but this situation changed with the end of the Apartheid and the beginning of the democratic regime in 1994. Though the university welcomed black people, its buildings and streets still bear the names of some people who might have been involved in the policies and politics that segregated black people. However, the controversies of names are not only for names originated from apartheid



personalities, but also for Zulu buildings' names found on campus which is located in Sotho geographical area. Some Sotho participants felt that the names of their people are not more represented on the buildings. Most support and academic staff believed a successful renaming process should consider renaming buildings after people who have contributed to the university and community.

The most interesting finding was that most African respondents reported a lack of sense of belonging in the university's space. An implication of this study is the possibility that for a socially welcoming environment to be effective there is a need to create a space where everybody is accommodated. The narrative contributes to the literature on building names as 'spaces of contestation,' as building names are used to embody a particular narrative related to Apartheid experiences.

Most support and academic staff also believed that more balanced buildings' names from black people should be added to reflect inclusivity. Thus, personal contributions based on excellence, productivity, and academic integrity are perceived as the criteria on which should be based the renaming processes. They also expect to see during these processes take into account names of individuals who contributed to knowledge production in the university and community. Considerably more work will need to be done to determine the role that the change of buildings' names can play in marking institutional culture, and enhancing diversity, inclusivity, and social justice at a Higher Education Institution in a historically white South African higher education institution.

Given that this study took place among 79 support and academic staff in one of the historically white South African higher education institutions, it would be inappropriate to generalize its findings. It can be hoped that those concerned to enhance diversity, inclusivity, and social justice at a Higher Education Institution in South Africa and elsewhere will find the research insightful to their efforts.

This study has shown that buildings' names of a Higher Education Institution in a historically white South African higher education institution can affect people from different cultural and racial communities. In fact, most participants believed that some buildings' names at their university are not inclusive and diverse. As most names of buildings are in Afrikaans; thus, they described the naming change as a way to redress previous injustices caused by the apartheid. Most participants across races and genders preferred buildings to be renamed after people who have contributed to the community. They also indicated that inclusive and mixed names may accommodate everyone.

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