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The Sociology of Baby Names

Anne Helen Petersen: This is the Culture Study podcast, and I'm Anne Helen Petersen.

Hannah Emery: And I'm Hannah Emery. I'm a baby name expert. I have a PhD in sociology and I run a name consulting business called Janus Name Journeys.

Anne Helen Petersen: Thank you so much for coming on the show, I'm so excited. We've had so many people ask for it, a show in this realm.

It's an area of sociology where people find themselves… they're like, there's something going on here, and I don't really have the tools to talk about it, but like, I know that there's something going on here. What is going on here? So, we're very excited to have someone who specializes in this!

Sort of like me, you have a dissertation that people are like, oh, I didn't know you could write a dissertation on that. And you're like, yeah, yeah. You can write a dissertation on basically anything. As long as it's interesting. So how did you first get interested in names?

Hannah Emery: Well, so I've been interested in names since I was a kid.

I was definitely like the 8-year-old child standing in the parenting section of B-Dalton in 1991. And you know, I had a large collection of secondhand cabbage patch dolls that I very carefully picked first and middle names for them. Because, that's how Cabbage Patch dolls work.

Anne Helen Petersen: But they came with a birth certificate. I have a…

Hannah Emery: Not if you bought them at a flea market, they didn't.

Anne Helen Petersen: Very true.

Hannah Emery: But yes, I was born in 1983, so my grandmother was brawling people in the Toys R Us, to get me the authentic… Diana Adria was her name. But, I'm also a fiction writer. So I think I had thought of it more as sort of an addendum to that.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: So when I started graduate school, I went in thinking, okay, I'm gonna do something with multilingualism, or I'm gonna do something with folklore or something that feels more academic. And then as I was sort of trying to talk about dissertation topics with my advisor, I was just in his office.

He had young kids and he went on a mini rant about how a name that he had chosen for one of his kids was way more popular than he had expected.

Anne Helen Petersen: Ahhh.

Hannah Emery: And I said, so, you know, there's actually a weird phenomenon that's been happening for the last 30 or 40 years where the names at the top of the list are not actually as popular as they look anymore.

And I just sort of info-dumped that in for about 5, 10 minutes and he looked at me and said, have you picked your dissertation topic yet? Because it sounds like a dissertation topic to me.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right. And your dissertation was more focused on how parents specifically choose names, correct.

Hannah Emery: Yes.

Anne Helen Petersen: And that has, as we'll get into in this episode, that has so much to do with how you were trying to bestow class signifiers and so much else with your child, right? I think sometimes people scoff at like, oh, well, why would you need a consultant? Or why would you need someone to help you with this? And it makes me think of interior design.

When you know what you like and what you don't like, but you don't know necessarily how you want things to come together. And you don't necessarily,, this is not your skillset, this is not the place. Like you just don't have a lot of confidence

in it, and you just need someone with more of a skillset to kind of guide you in your taste.

Hannah Emery: Well, yeah, and I think, because for my dissertation, I did interviews with contemporary parents who - my dissertation is 15 years old, so at this point it was, it was mostly kids born in the aughts.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: But yeah, for those parents, it really felt a very loaded, sort of, I am giving my child this cultural product and I need to make sure it's the right kind of cultural product.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah, exactly.

Hannah Emery: But then I also did some interviews with some of my respondent's parents, just to sort of get a baseline of like, okay, if you were naming kids in the seventies or eighties, what was that like?

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: And I had a lot of people who said, yeah, I wanted something that was a little bit different, but not weird like they're doing now. And there was a lot less pressure. It was just like, yeah, I wanted to pick something I liked.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: I can tell you in, in my baby book, because my name is a little unusual for someone born in the early eighties, my mom says, yeah, you know, we wanted a name that was a little bit different.

Anne Helen Petersen: Mm-hmm.

Hannah Emery: But my mom didn't have the internet, so, she had to sort of take her name dictionary and be like, okay. Of the 1200 names in this book. This is one that I like the sound of, but that I haven't heard before.

Anne Helen Petersen: Shout out to the baby name dictionary. Someone that I babysat for had one and I… hours. Just hours. Just looking at it, you know, it's so fascinating. But I think you have to be someone kind of both you and I that are like, what are all the names that exist and what do they mean? What are they?

Hannah Emery: Well, and I can tell you the business of baby naming has changed in really interesting way.

Where the most popular naming website now is Nameberry. Yeah. Which is Pamela Redmond Satran and Linda Rosenkrantz. And they both came outta Glamor Magazine. So it is more like interior design. It's, here are some names, and then here's our professional opinion on how, on the style associated with those names.

Anne Helen Petersen: Totally. Okay. Before we go further, let's start with our questions, because we have so many, they're so good. When I selected these ones, I sent them to Melody and I was like, this is way, way, way, way too many, like we will have to do another episode, but I can't winnow them down. So we're just gonna see how far we get.

Okay, this first question comes from Becca and Melody's gonna read it.

Melody Rowell: Why do some names have staying power? Why are Helen and Alexander names that have lasted literally thousands of years and haven't dropped under 500 top names in the US since we've started keeping track, but names like Wilbur tank and never make a comeback?

Hannah Emery: What I'm doing in the background here is I'm looking at Helen's popularity track.

Anne Helen Petersen: Helen is not that popular. I know this because it's my middle name.

Hannah Emery: Not that popular, yeah. Yeah, your listener's right, that Helen was number 424 last year.

Anne Helen Petersen: [Laughter] So just barely in the top 500.

Hannah Emery: Yeah. But in 1919, Helen was number two.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah. Approximately when my grandmother, for whom I'm named, was born. Like not much later than that.

Hannah Emery: Yeah. I mean my husband and father-in-law are both named Alexander and my husband was born in 1982. My father-in-law was born in 1955.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: And I can tell you there are a lot more Alexanders in school in the eighties than there were in the fifties.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yes. To me, the thinking is always that great-grandmothers names seem old and distinguished.

Hannah Emery: Yep.

Anne Helen Petersen: Your mother's generation of names feel outmoded. Grandma, there's still some currency in passing it down, but I just love seeing when great-grandmas reache that point. So I will be fascinated when our parents - like we're speaking as millennials - when our parents, their names become fashionable again.

Hannah Emery: Yeah.

Anne Helen Petersen: So like Linda, Jennifer, Patty, Laura, even.

Hannah Emery: So the interesting thing. You are naming only women's names.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right?

Hannah Emery: Men's names have not been a fashion item for nearly as long.

Anne Helen Petersen: True.

Hannah Emery: Michael was the number one name for like 40 something years.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right?

Hannah Emery: Yeah. And you know, Michael is my dad's name, and when it dropped out of the top 20, which it did a few years ago, I had to text him, be like, dad, you're not in the top 20 anymore. Because, you know, my dad is Mike, my mechanic is Mike, my electrician is Mike. My husband's best friend is Mike. Like, there are a lot of Mikes in our generation. I can think of one or two little child Michaels that I know, but it's not this pervasive thing anymore.

Anne Helen Petersen: It's definitely cycling out, but, okay. So what is it that, like, makes a name feel consistent? Or stay like a Michael, right? Like stay in that way and not seem worn out.

Hannah Emery: Yeah. Well, I think it's not entirely whimsical, but there's definitely an element of whimsy in it. Like Wilbur, which is your listener's other example, like was never a wildly popular name, but then Edie White gave it to a pig and then it sort of… well, that's a pig's name.

Anne Helen Petersen: [Laughter] Yeah.

Hannah Emery: I think the only girl's name that is basically unmarked by time is Elizabeth.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: And I think that's because if you're Elizabeth, you can be Liz, or you can be Betty, or you can be Beth, or you can be Ellie, or, there's so many nickname options. That it doesn't feel dated.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yes.

Hannah Emery: My mother-in-law's name is Barbara, which is like a lovely fifties name, but there's not a lot of like, you can't be like, oh, well, we'll name her Barbara, and then we'll call her some contemporary short name. It's just not a lot.

Anne Helen Petersen: Babs? Yeah, no, no, that's so interesting, right? So like, if it is a more quote unquote classic name, if there's a way to iterate on it, and you see that a lot. I think with like, Charles, which is my brother's name. And also my partner's name, they're both Charles, but my partner goes by Charlie.

Actually now I'm seeing a lot of people not give their kids the classic name, like the nickname is what they want and they don't want any of that. Like, confusion between the full formal name and the nickname. So my best friend's kid is just Charlie. And my other best friend's kid is just Leo, not Leonardo, right? It's just Leo. And so just like foreclosing that possibility of iteration and being very, very specific about what your kid will be called, that seems really interesting to me too.

Hannah Emery: Well, and, and, and talking about cycles, like using nicknames as legal names is not a new phenomenon either.

Anne Helen Petersen: No, not at all.

Hannah Emery: And I don't have the data in front of me, but I wonder if that's like a class thing. Where, you know, if you're trying to name your kids so that they'll sound like the Supreme Court Justice, which is the go-to thing from a lot of the people I talk to, of, I don't want Justice Millie. I want Justice Millicent, who is called Millie.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah. They want the cute name for their kid when they're young, but the opportunity to formalize.

Hannah Emery: Yeah.

Anne Helen Petersen: I find it difficult because the name that I went by all during childhood from infancy was Annie. And I still understand myself as an Annie.

And chose a formal name. And this is something that you'll recognize. I chose a formal name when I was in grad school so that I could differentiate from another Anne Petersen, right. And I also chose to use Anne instead of Annie when I first started teaching to almost like create a, 'cause I was a graduate student, I was 25 years old. My students were only like five years younger than me. I was trying to create a formal persona that I could occupy.

But now I run into all of these problems with different iterations of my name existing out in the world and people not knowing what to call me. And sometimes I'm just like, I wish I had one name that was easy and that no one would ever have to ask me how to refer to me.

Okay, so let's keep on staying power and hear this question from Emily.

EMILY: Why am I so obsessed with having my kids' names be tied to some kind of lineage or meaning? I find myself kind of judging people unintentionally, who just pull names they like and give it to their kids. Um, my daughter is a year old.

Her name is Lorraine. She's named after my husband's great-grandmother. Of course, I love the name, but I find myself explaining the meaning to people as if that matters. My husband and I are thinking about having another child, and I already find myself stressing about what that child's name could possibly be that would also be as meaningful.

Anne Helen Petersen: So I wanna zero in on this idea of meaning. So what are the different ways that parents think of meaning when they're choosing a name?

Hannah Emery: So, first of all, Emily, I was you when my second child was born because my daughter has a legacy name from my husband's family.

And so my, I'm like, oh God, the second one needs to have an equally weighty name. Very few people now approach the process as eh, I'll just pick something, it's fine. Like my sister's name, my parents picked it in the car on the way to the hospital. I don't think many people do that anymore.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah. Yeah.

Hannah Emery: I actually wrote a post about this on my substack, talking about my son's name, that I think people feel like the name needs to have a really good story. And you know, whether that's it needs to be a family name. Or whether it needs to have a really, really important linguistic meaning, or it needs to be tied to our heritage or… it's different for different families.

And I go back again to kind of the culture around naming that, I think, if you go and buy a book or look at a website, that there's all this rhetoric about this is the most important gift you can give your child. This is so, so, so, so important that people are like, oh, well I can't just say, oh, well we liked it and you know, we thought it sounded pretty right.

But what I said in my post about it was, that's a name story too.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right.

Hannah Emery: Saying this was my favorite name and I gave it to you. Like, that is also special.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah. A friend of mine was named for a character on a soap opera.

Hannah Emery: Mm-hmm.

Anne Helen Petersen: Erica, and that's a great story.

Hannah Emery: Yeah.

Anne Helen Petersen: You know what I mean? Like every story is a story. And just because it comes from your family doesn't make it any more or less important. But I do think that's funny how, like what I see from Emily, they see family lineage as important. And some people, for whatever reason, do not think of heritage, that way, right?

Hannah Emery: Yeah. When I was doing my dissertation, I was at UC Berkeley, so the people who were most readily accessible to me to interview were middle and upper middle class white liberals.

Anne Helen Petersen: Mm-hmm.

Hannah Emery: I talked to a lot of those people, and then because I was trying to be a good social scientist, I really tried to get some people from other demographics to also talk to, so my white liberal base was very dismissive of quote unquote made up names. Which, you know, all names are made up. We can go on a tangent about that another time. But, everyone wanted a name that was different but people from the college educated white demographic really wanted a name that had been used by other white people at some time throughout history, but not too much, and not too recently.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right.

Hannah Emery: And then I interviewed a working class African American mom whose kids had very distinctive names, and she said, yeah, I invented my kids' names myself. They didn't come from a book, they didn't come from anyone else's

idea. They are a gift from me. And I thought, if I went back to those other people and put that framing on it, I bet they would think differently.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: Right. 'cause there's a lot of different ways to find meaning in the gift of a name.

Anne Helen Petersen: Okay. Since we're talking about goals, I want to do this question, this next question from Rachel.

Rachel: It feels like uniqueness is a quality. People have started looking for more and more in names, sometimes unique spelling, but maybe also just not in the top 100, 500, 1000 baby names.

I'm a millennial in my late thirties, and I've known many Rachels, Jennifers, Jessicas, Sarahs, both with and without an H, in my age bracket. But people my age often want less popular names for their own kids is the search for a more unique baby name. A millennial intensive parenting thing. An individualism thing, is it simply because we have access to the data in a way that prior generations did not?

What's your take? Thanks so much for this show topic. Baby names are my Roman Empire.

Anne Helen Petersen: So yeah, what is your take here?

Hannah Emery: Well, well that means, so this is what I wrote my dissertation on, essentially. Yeah. S it is definitely true. Everyone wants a name that is unique but not weird. I had a chapter title, the Goldilocks name, because everyone from every background wants that unique but not too strange.

And I can tell you it is not a millennial thing because the sort of broader decline in popular names has been happening since the late sixties.

Anne Helen Petersen: Oh, interesting.

Hannah Emery: The easiest thing to pull on the Social Security website, I was pulling some numbers this morning for you. So this year in 2024, the top 20 boys names were 12% of all births in the US and top 20 girls were 10%.

Anne Helen Petersen: Wow.

Hannah Emery: When I was born in 1983, 36% of boys, 25% of girls got top 20 names.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right.

Hannah Emery: When my dad was born in 1956, 44% of boys and 32% of girls got top 20 names.

Anne Helen Petersen: How much of this can be connected to just like a general decline in religiosity in the United States?

Hannah Emery: So, there's a really excellent book by a guy named, another sociologist named Stan Lieberson. The book's A Matter of Taste and he basically uses names as his unit of analysis to talk about fashion trends.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: And so he lays out sort of, okay, there's this decline happening and it's not urbanization and it's not increased cultural diversity, and it's not the availability of the official data because that didn't happen until 1998.

And it is happening somewhat in the UK and in Canada and other English speaking places, but it is more pronounced in the US and it seems like it's really just sort of correlated with the broader desire to stand out.

Anne Helen Petersen: Mm. So it is individualism then.

Hannah Emery: Yeah, but it's not any one obvious ‘oh, well, you know, there's more immigrants now, so that's why.’ Well, no. If you look at the charts, American born moms are substantially more likely to pick uncommon names than immigrant moms for the most part.

Anne Helen Petersen: That's so interesting. Well, and also, I think about when I was teaching oftentimes international students who came to the US would pick an Americanized name, especially once from, especially Asian students.

Hannah Emery: Asian students.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yes. Asian students and China in particular. And they would often pick an Americanized name that sounded the most similar to their Chinese name.

Hannah Emery: Mm-hmm.

Anne Helen Petersen: So I had two 10th grade students whose names were Shirley and Peggy.

Hannah Emery: Mm-hmm. Oh yeah. Again, teaching at Cal, I had a lot of Asian and Asian American students as well.

Latino students, you see some of this as well too, where parents who have come to the US but did not grow up in American culture, say, I'm gonna pick an American name.

But I don't really have my finger on what a modern American name is, so I might name my kid Donald or Ruth or Walter, which is not a name that most Gen Zers would have. But I know it's an American name, so I'm gonna use that.

Anne Helen Petersen: And also, and this goes back to this understanding of like, I picked it because I liked it, right? When we talk about liking a name, you like it because of what you see it as providing, like the entryway it seems to provide, but also you like something about the way that it sounds.

So, they still like the name Wilbur, right? Or they like the name Steve. I'm also thinking of names. My dogs are all named basically like Gen X and Boomer names, but that's because they're named for people who were alive during those times. Like I have a dog named Beverly and she's named for my partner's grandmother.

And that to me, like, you're not gonna see a Bev. Like there's something so lovely about meeting a dog with the name of a grandma, right?

Hannah Emery: Yeah. My son, who I named after my grandfather, his name is Robert. It's still in the top 100. But it is not a name people would expect on an upper middle class little white boy.

He's called Rob by all and sundry. He knows about six dads named Rob, but he doesn't know any other…

Anne Helen Petersen: Melody's partner is Bobby, so…

Hannah Emery: Yeah. Well, he doesn't know any other kids' named Rob.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah, yeah. That's the thing. It's like, it's still a very much familiar name. I'm like, oh there's Rob Kardashian. Or like, there's Boston Rob, like all of these are like millennial/Gen X. And also, don't know any Berts.

Hannah Emery: Well, yeah. Because like I said, so my daughter is Alexandra and is called Sandra, which blows people's minds. A little girl, well, she's nine, she's not that little, but yeah, a child named Sandra. They were like, what?

Anne Helen Petersen: I could see Bert coming back soon because that's like a granddad name now. So…

Hannah Emery: It's also a *Sesame Street* name though.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah…

Hannah Emery: It goes with Elmo and Kermit, where it's like …

Anne Helen Petersen: Well, Elmo and - well, Kermit actually was a name, but Elmo not, not as much. Let's talk about how popular names become popular. This question comes from Shami.

Shami: What is the deal with the generational name hive mind. I have two kids and for both of them I had what I thought was a unique boy and girl name only to look at data and find that both my picks were in the top five in the country. It's not like I was talking to friends about what they were naming their kids or doing all kinds of what to name your baby research to come up with them.

Wyatt, for example, was my number one boy's name because I was a *Charmed* fan back in the nineties. Now every third kid I meet, I feel like is a Wyatt. What gives.

Anne Helen Petersen: So Shami, do you know there are other people who like Charmed in the nineties?

Hannah Emery: That's what I was gonna say. So, Stan Lieberson talked about this in his book, that basically in the same way that like, hemlines will get longer and longer and longer until they get sold. Until they get too long, and then they'll go shorter, shorter, shorter again.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah. Yeah.

Hannah Emery: He said, yeah, the thing that is going to take off is the thing that is different, but not too different.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right.

Hannah Emery: So I went and said, okay, so, so why did Wyatt take off? Because I can tell you it started climbing the charts before *Charmed*. *Charmed* started in 1998.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: But there was a Wyatt Earp movie in 1994.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yes!

Hannah Emery: So then I'm like, okay, so what names were big in 1994? Oh, look, Tyler, Ryan, Kyle, and Brian are all in the top one hundred.

And Scott, and Robert. So, it's like, if you take Tyler and Scott and you sort of smoosh 'em together.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yes.

Hannah Emery: So like my 9-year-old is obsessed with K-Pop Demon Hunters, and so people have asked me, so is Rumi gonna take off as a name? I'm like, well, Ruby is number 63 and Remy is number 145 for girls, so maybe.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah, no, I think so!

Hannah Emery: But yeah.

Anne Helen Petersen: Well, and also I love what you're pointing out here. What I see now with what some people, they're like, what are these weird names that people are coming up with? It's, they're doing the same sort of smushing, but without an antecedent. So Wyatt is a safer choice because Wyatt was a preexisting name.

Hannah Emery: Right.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right, yeah. And so the thing that differentiates, and that people get judgy about is like, well, this, like this is a name that didn't exist before, but every name didn't exist before. It's just all, it's like new money, old money shit.

This just reminds me of another one of my friends who worked so hard to come up with really perfect names. She feels very strongly about her name. She loves her name. She wanted her kids to feel like they could love their names too, and worked so hard at it and then does and wouldn't tell anyone what she was thinking about, right? She just wanted to be unadulterated in her choice, and then named her her little girl Kylie. And we're like.

Hannah Emery: Oh, honey….

Anne Helen Petersen: And we're like, the Kardashian! And she had no idea. Like she just wasn't plugged into that world, you know? But still, now her Kylie is the Kylie that I think of. So, next question. Really interesting, and you have some experience with this, so I really wanted to include this as well. So this question comes from Oliver, who uses they, them pronouns.

Oliver: How do names become trendy and why do these trends feel so ubiquitous even in disparate social circles? As a trans person and an elementary school teacher, I noticed that the names trans people get excited about for themselves, and

the names new parents get excited about for their babies are often following the exact same trends.

See the often hordes of trans-masculine, Aiden, Caden, and Jaydens who came out and chose their names in the mid 2010s, and the 10-year-old kids I teach now who all of those names as well. See, also the Elis, Lucas, Leos, and then the Isabels and Mias and Avas and so on, who could either be my most recent crop of kindergartners or your average all trans group of D and D players as a trans-masculine Oliver, who has now taught many, much younger Olivers.

I have always found this incredibly funny and also just a little embarrassing for us trendy baby named adults. Was there always this much overlap if we look back through trans histories and baby named trends of past decades? And what broader social and cultural factors are people responding to when we all gravitate towards the same names, whether choosing them for ourselves or for our children.

Hannah Emery: That's a complicated one, right? Like I worked this spring with a non-binary client who was looking for a new chosen name, and they were actually pretty aware of, 'I like this name, this name, and this name that I heard on a kid that I taught in swim class.' And I don't know that there's enough solid data on the trans community through time to really look at how that trend has been there.

But I think my first thought on an answer is, sounds like Oliver at least is of the same generation as people who are having kids right now.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: So I think if you hear a name and you go, oh, that's a little bit different and funky, I like that. I think whether you're looking for a name for yourself or your child, there's a tendency to sort of fall into that trap.

Anne Helen Petersen: Totally. And like if all of us were choosing our names right now, right? If like all of our names were wiped and we all gotta choose names now, we would not go back and choose what are often understood as the tired names that the people that we grew up with, right? Like those are not names that are novel or interesting or electric, right?

Hannah Emery: Yeah. I mean, I can tell you that, you know, this is not the trans community, but it's, it's people naming people who are not babies. You look at TV character names…

Anne Helen Petersen: Right?

Hannah Emery: Which, which I did a post about and I'm going, no one was named Lucas in 1972 or however old the *Stranger Things* kids are supposed to be like, come on.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right!

Hannah Emery: Mike and Will and Nancy, those are good names for kids born in the seventies. Lucas is not a good kid-born-in-the-seventies name.

Anne Helen Petersen: Really? For some reason, I feel like that's an old, like somewhat… maybe Luke. Just Luke, right?

Hannah Emery: Well, yeah. It's an old name, but Lucas is a very, very popular contemporary name.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right.

Hannah Emery: My partner and I sat down to watch *Freaks and Geeks*. Like in the first 10 minutes you meet the main character. I think her name is Ashley, and I'm like, you were born in like 1965. This is like 1981. Your name wouldn't be Ashley. Come on. That's a name for someone who's *born* in 1981.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right, right, right, right, right.

Hannah Emery: Yeah. I think people when they're creating a show are trying to make their characters relatable. And so they say, oh, I'll pick this cool name.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah. But it's familiar and cool and notable, right? Instead of necessarily absolutely historically accurate.

Hannah Emery: Yeah.

Anne Helen Petersen: I could see that happening a ton with like, something that's set in like the 19th century, you're like, this sounds like a 19th century name, right? And when it was maybe not a name that like… especially for like, I don't know, something like the Gilded Age or something.

Hannah Emery: Oh, oh, I wrote a thing about because I was a nineties child, so American girls were my jam.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: Samantha is not a name you would've given your child in 1894. That's just wouldn't have happened.

Anne Helen Petersen: But it sounds so Victorian if you're a kid!

Hannah Emery: Yes, yes. To a kid in the nineties, Samantha's a very fancy name.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yes.

Hannah Emery: But like I'm sitting here going, okay, what were Theodore Roosevelt's daughters named. Okay. Like one was Alice and I think one was Edith. And if Pleasant Company had asked me, then I would've been like, here are some upper class names that would be appropriate for this character.

But you gotta kind of strike a balance between, I want this to read correctly to the audience.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right. Well, even before the existence of Samantha, the doll, like to me, Samantha was a fancy girl name when I was growing up. And it's like they collided with that understanding, and expanded it into, now I think most millennials who had any access to American girl dolls would be like, yes, Samantha is a name for a fancy girl.

Hannah Emery: Yeah.

Anne Helen Petersen: And a cool girl goes by Sam.

Hannah Emery: Yeah. Well, and I will say, stepping back to Oliver's original question, like I haven't worked with a lot of adults, but just like parents, people who are renaming themselves, like I know one trans woman who, when she picked her new name, she took her, whatever her birth name was, went to the data for her birth year and picked the girl name that was at the same rank.

Anne Helen Petersen: Oh!

Hannah Emery: And said, this is my new name.

Anne Helen Petersen: And that's a much more methodical way. Right. Instead of like a vibes-based way.

Hannah Emery: Someone else who I've worked with a little bit is like, I want a name that's not gonna stand out. And he kind of spoke about some of the same stuff that Oliver was pointing out that like a lot of people who pick chosen names pick something that is really distinctive for their age group.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right.

Hannah Emery: And this person was like, I don't want that. I don't want it. I don't want someone to hear my name, like at a party and be like, oh, that's a trans person.

Anne Helen Petersen: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. So they wanted to keep their name undistinctive in some way, right.

Hannah Emery: Yeah.

Anne Helen Petersen: And I know a lot of trans people who also pick the name that sounds the most like the gender that they are, that like their deadname was maybe similar. So like Olive to Oliver, right. So sometimes you get that and then sometimes people are like, I don't want anything to do with my dead name. So it's kind of like parents naming, right?

Like sometimes you want that distance and sometimes you want that proximity.

Hannah Emery: Well. I don't have an academic appointment right now, so I'm not sort of in that head space to like, I'm gonna go do a research study on this. But

living in the Bay, I know a lot of trans and genderfluid kids and it seems like the way kids choose their names is very different.

Like, adults will sit down, it'll be a long process, it might take months, it might take years. Kids will be like, I like that person, I'm gonna pick their name. Like every, every trans and genderfluid kid, I know their name is… well, I guess that's not true. Most, their name is from a namesake, either someone they know in real life. Or someone that, someone from, like a character.

Anne Helen Petersen: Which again, not that different from how people name their kids. It's just that we have culturally, I think, gravitated towards this like, a name has to be overdetermined in this way for you to be doing it, quote unquote right. Whereas sometimes it is, and it was historically as simple as like, here's someone I know and like, I'm gonna name it for that person.

Okay. Our next question gets to something that we've been teasing this entire episode, which is about ideological splits and the specific way that class I think comes into this. So this question comes from Valerie.

Valerie: My question is about why there seems to be almost an ideological split to name decisions here in the US.

I am currently pregnant. I have a name list myself. I live in a very blue city and would personally identify as pretty left, if anything. My name list is mostly great-grandparent kind of names, old literature kind of names. A lot of people I know who espouse more traditional values seem to have a preference for much less traditional names, which isn't necessarily a bad thing to do.

I'm just curious about why.

Anne Helen Petersen: Okay, so first I think we need to do a little bit of decoding here. Because there's also a question that we got, which is about adding an extra GH to a name. And how this person perceives that extra GH to oftentimes that's someone who is a conservative white person.

I think what she's trying to gesture to is this idea that people who are more bourgeois are currently gravitating towards names that are either gesturing towards the past or have a little bit of ancestor signification and then also then gesturing towards people who are more traditional.

I think that means conservative here tend to be into newly made up names.

Hannah Emery: Somebody did a study on this a few years ago, and I don't have it at my fingertips, but it came out around the time of the 2008 election, and they compared the names of Barack Obama's kids and then Sarah Palin's kids.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: And they're saying, you know, look, you have one where it's like, there's the, everything is very soft and flowing and one where the names are full of stops.

I think the Romney kids are similar in the names are just very consonant heavy.

Anne Helen Petersen: I feel like the Romney kids are all named like, Tuck.

Hannah Emery: Yeah.

Anne Helen Petersen: Or something like that.

Hannah Emery: That I would say like, there are definitely regional differences.

Anne Helen Petersen: Mm-hmm.

Hannah Emery: In style, like, I've got a post that basically, I say here's the top 10 from the US last year, and then here's the top 10 in Vermont and North Dakota and California and Florida.

And you know, California and Florida are both large diverse states with different politics. And Vermont and North Dakota are both small, white states with different politics. And you can see like, okay, yeah, there is definitely some variation because your political orientation is still a peer group.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: Right? So I think whether you like it or not, no matter how much of an aggressive individual one tries to be, you are still influenced by what you

watch, what you read, the names that you hear on the playground, that's still gonna shape your mental space of what your options are.

Anne Helen Petersen: What about - I've seen various studies about this, but how, like a name enters into like the bourgeois naming sphere, and then there's like a trickle down effect, how names that were understood as connotations of class. And oftentimes - so something like Arthur I think would be up there, like that was one of the names.

Then over time they… over like a decade, two decades, they become much more popular within working-class populations, in part because they are understood as upper class names. So you give your kid an upper class name, but then maybe you add that GH on the end to also add in a splash of that individualism that feels important.

Hannah Emery: It's one of those things that's really hard to track.

Anne Helen Petersen: Mm-hmm.

Hannah Emery: Because you say, well, okay, how do you get upper class names, just from a data perspective. It's, well, okay, am I looking at certain zip codes or congressional districts, But I do think there is definitely, again, it's a cultural product, so it sort of follows the rules of other cultural products where if this is what the people you want to be do, then you are gonna try to do that.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right. It's an aspirational name.

Hannah Emery: Yeah. Well, and, and this is a bit of a cliche, but also a thing that happens that, you know, working class people will say, oh, well, I'm gonna name my kid after this luxury brand.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right.

Hannah Emery: Where a more bourgeois person would never name their kid after a brand. That that would not feel like the right kind of name to them.

Anne Helen Petersen: But why is that? Can you spell that out?

Hannah Emery: In a way, it's a version of what we were talking about before with immigrant parents. Where your context is different.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: If you're someone who has never driven a Lexus and will never drive a Lexus or, or a Mercedes, then you say - well, Mercedes was named after a person, by the way. Like Mercédès.

Anne Helen Petersen: Mercédès, right? Yeah.

Hannah Emery: Yeah. Well, yeah, like I think the car was named after the inventor's daughter. So, but if you're an an American working class person who will never drive a Mercedes, then you say, oh, I'm gonna name my kid Mercedes, because that sounds classy. Because it is aspirational. Where if you're someone who has a Mercedes, you'd say, I'm not gonna name my kid after the car. That's not the right kind of inspiration.

Anne Helen Petersen: Or this is also just like how we think about how you should express wealth or desire for wealth, right?

So like, a bourgeois upper class or upper - just like a super rich person is like, oh, the way that I show that my family is wealthy is by passing down the same name, right. And not being aspirational in my naming, like, giving someone a name and then a, like giving them a WASPy nickname, like Mitt, right?

Like that is how you show wealth.

Hannah Emery: I think that's his middle name.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right? But yeah.

Hannah Emery: Yeah, I'm pretty sure his name is Willard Mitt Romney.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right. Classic rich person name.

Hannah Emery: Well, again, I wouldn't be surprised if Mitt is a family surname somewhere.

Anne Helen Petersen: And you're trying to invisibilize the ways in which you are broadcasting your class status and then you're able to look down upon people who are not as interested in invisiblizing their aspirational class status. Does that make sense?

So this is another area of your specialty, and it's about how your name can affect hireability. This question comes from Jordan.

Jordan: I know there's research about how your name impacts your hireability, but I think it's pretty old and predates the rise of gender neutral names.

Is there any new evidence for how being a Charlie or a Billy or a Frankie impacts your professional prospects?

Hannah Emery: So that was one of the things I did this morning was I was digging around seeing if someone had done that study.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: On specifically gender neutral names without it also being a study about gender identity. I found a few studies saying if someone included non-binary pronouns on their resume, it sadly and unsurprisingly had a negative effect on callback rates. But I didn't see anything about if there's no gender markers at all. But I would guess, just based on pre-existing research, that all of those people who name their daughters androgynous names saying, well, it'll help them get a job, are probably, if you're looking for a white collar, traditionally masculine coded job are probably sadly correct.

Anne Helen Petersen: Mm-hmm. But also the diminutive here is also something that's interesting, and I say this as someone who's partnered with a Charlie and Melody is partnered with a Bobby and like I have a friend who is a Billy and then goes by Bill professionally.

Like there is this understanding that somehow the nickname is not serious. How does that work? Because I feel like that's falling away. I don't think that's a big deal anymore.

Hannah Emery: Yeah. Well, it makes me think about everyone was mortified that we had a president named Jimmy or Bill.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right.

Hannah Emery: Where it's like you can't… like your wife can call you Jimmy, but when you're running for president, you gotta say James.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right? Well, and like Richard Nixon… Dick Nixon. But like, he had to be Richard Nixon publicly, right.

Hannah Emery: Yeah.

Anne Helen Petersen: But I think our awareness of race is increasing… well, maybe not increasing, but remains stable, right? Like the way that people make judgements based on what they perceive from a person's name in terms of their race.

Hannah Emery: Oh, sure, yeah. That, I mean that was the first of those resume audit studies. I think it's been redone several times, and it's most especially with African American coded names.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right.

Hannah Emery: But if you submit the exact same resume and it says Emily, or it says Lakeisha. Then Lakeisha's gonna get fewer callbacks.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: Which was something I heard from parents when I was doing my research saying, okay, I want a name that's gonna honor our heritage but isn't going to kneecap my kid.

Anne Helen Petersen: It just makes me think of the fact that like we, the people who are allowed to create unique names are, are white people, right?

Or that are allowed to like, still have those names be seamlessly incorporated into American society remain, the standard still remains aspirationally white in some way.

So to end, let's do a little bit on middle names, 'cause I think middle names are fascinating.

I especially think the idea that everyone should have a middle name is also not standardized. So I would love to talk more about that. But this question comes from Alta and then we can kind of take it from there.

Alta: Why do we all have the same middle names? For generations. The women in my mother's white Protestant family have all either had Anne, Marie, Elizabeth, Beth, or May.

These are kind of listed in order of popularity. What inspired this and why is it still pretty standard?

Hannah Emery: Well, so the first thing I noticed there is again, she only listed women's names.

Anne Helen Petersen: See, that's funny because I see it more commonly with men's names, the persistence.

Hannah Emery: My first inclination, again, I couldn't find any numbers on this. But if I had to make an educated guess, I would say that the reason that there was this inclination toward kind of the filler names for girls is, well, you gotta put something there.

Anne Helen Petersen: But you don't, you don't have to put something in there!

Hannah Emery: No, no, no. My father-in-law does not have a middle name. My brother-in-law does not have a middle name. Yeah, it's not a requirement.

Anne Helen Petersen: This does come - middle names come primarily from Catholicism. Correct? Because you're taking the same name?

Hannah Emery: I mean that's one route. I mean, basically middle names became a thing when people started to live in communities wide enough that everyone had the problem that you had.

Anne Helen Petersen: Right. They wanted to differentiate their Marie from a different Marie.

Hannah Emery: Yeah. Historically, in Catholicism, everyone had Maria or had Marie or Joseph, or the local equivalent as part of their name for a long time.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: Yeah. Also, it's a way, like there's a tradition of putting the mother's maiden name as a middle name in a lot of parts of the country.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: And I think my experience of the families that I've worked with and kids that I know, kids' middle names are not filler anymore. It seems like a lot, a lot of people are putting a family name in there.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah. I think there's a lot more meaning and thought attached. And oftentimes now I'm seeing, kind of like the name that you almost wish, like the aspirational name, like the even weirder name sometimes. Or like a name that sounds really cool with the first name.

Hannah Emery: Yeah, well that goes back to the naming culture thing. Like, like I can tell you the Nameberry ladies basically push that. They say, yeah, the middle name slot is a great place to put the name that is a little too crazy to use as a first name.

Anne Helen Petersen: Whereas before it was like, oh, well here's how you honor the relative that you're not naming your child. Well, and also, we got another question about, Jewish names and someone was commenting, we had a Culture Study thread a couple weeks ago that somehow went into names and someone was talking about how they always are astounded when they see someone name their child for a living relative because it's considered an ill omen to do that.

Hannah Emery: Yeah.

Anne Helen Petersen: And within Jewish families, like you will never name someone who is still alive…

Hannah Emery: In Ashkenazi tradition specifically, I think.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah. But you can name and honor someone who's already dead, so that would be a way to really pass down those names. That, I think we see it a little bit still, especially when people are exhausted by coming up with the first name and they're like, oh, we're just gonna put in a different name.

I do think that it also is a way to show continuity. So on my dad's side of the family, the middle name is Arthur, like all the way up to great-grandfather. It's like Arthur, Arthur middle names just going down. Which is kind of like weird and cool, right? You're like, why do I have this name? Because everyone had this name.

Hannah Emery: Right. My kids are weird because we ended up doing only family names, which was not what I would've anticipated before I was partnered and having children.

Which is the other thing I tell people is like, it has to be something that works for everybody.

Anne Helen Petersen: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Hannah Emery: Yeah, we had this legacy name that my partner really wanted to use, and so I was like, okay, I guess we're working in the family name sphere then. And, so what we ended up doing was basically our kids' first and middle names come from the four branches of our families.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah. And I'm Anne Helen, is grandma, grandma. I will say the last thing, we got a question from a mom, I think she's pregnant and she wants to name her child, wants to give them, a grandma's name, Ruth as their middle name, no matter what. No matter what. And other people have been like, oh, how could you, like, what if it's a boy? You can't curse this child with the middle name Ruth. I think it's cool and I think she should do it.

Hannah Emery: I mean, it's also a word, like it means kindness.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: Yeah. What I tell clients is no matter how hard you try, no matter how much sleep you lose, there will be something about your kid's name that they don't like.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah.

Hannah Emery: There will be something about your kid's name that you did not anticipate before they were born.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yep.

Hannah Emery: And probably they will be fine. Whether they hate their name or love their name or hate it sometimes and love it sometimes. If they really hate it, then they'll change it because you're giving them this thing.

Anne Helen Petersen: We are legally allowed to change our names. Right.

Hannah Emery: You're giving them a gift and if the gift doesn't fit, then they'll change it.

Anne Helen Petersen: Yeah. Exactly. Where can people find you if they wanna read more of your work or if they wanna hire you to help them with the name?

Hannah Emery: My home base right now is janusnamejourneys.com. J-A-N-U-S. I've also got a Substack that I'm trying to revive in between children and life. It's sort of in hibernation right now, but hopefully after the holidays that I can wake it back up.

Anne Helen Petersen: I get it. Thank you so much for joining me. This has been a pleasure.

Hannah Emery: Thank you for having me. This has been fun.