WHAT IS IN A NAME?: SUBTLE JEOPARDIES TURKISH IMMIGRANTS EXPERIENCE
by: Dr. Aysan Sev’er, Professor of Sociology, University of Toronto

The literature on race and ethnic relationships is voluminous, especially in the U.S. where such relationships have been studied as potential problems to the melting pot ideology the U.S. holds dear. In Canada, whether we ascribe to the ideology of multiculturalism, or rally under the more recent emphasis on diversities, cultural variations appear to be a celebrated aspect of the Canadian mosaic. Indeed, well-meaning studies, task-forces, reports and policies on immigration and racial and ethnic minorities abound. Unlike the political niceties, the sociological literature on these domains sufficiently highlight the conflictual dimensions in these relationships. Social ills in terms of attitudes (prejudice, ethnocentrism, racism and antisemitism are examples) or behaviour (such as discrimination, racially motivated riots, and at the extreme, lynchings, ethnic cleansing and holocaust) fill many scholarly as well as mass-consumption books and journals.

The students of racial and ethnic relations are also familiar with the more hidden, but just as insidious forms of ethnic or racial-based discrimination, the over-policing of the racial minority enclaves, the negative biases in all aspects of the criminal justice system ranging from higher rates of criminal charges, to the higher rates of incarceration. Often, there are articles in the daily news about the negative experiences of people with substantially different skin colour than what can pass as white, whether the deviation is yellowish, reddish, brown or black. Despite the Canadian ideology and expressed political resolve to honour the existing diversity in our midst, despite the well-meaning rhetoric on equality and equity in everyday life and under the law, the fact remains that the visible characteristics such as facial features, and especially skin colour often accompany increased hardships for the members of countless visible minorities. The hardships can include overt or more often covert refusals in job, housing or other service applications, or being overlooked in job related opportunities or promotions.

What is less well-known and much less studied is the penetration of some of these negative attitudes and some discriminatory behaviours to the experiences of non-visible minority group members, such as Turks, regardless of their immigration or citizenship status. These more subtle but nevertheless quite insidious transgressions also restrict the boundaries of a multitude of new Canadians, although the subtleness of the transgressions make their injurious effects less talked about, more hidden and extremely difficult to prove. What I propose here is the notion of concentric circles of tolerance, where the inner-most circles are formed by white Canadians from British or French origins, closely followed by other light coloured immigrants from nordic, western and central European states. The outer-most concentric circles on the (lack of) tolerance are the distinctly visible minorities who are the most frequent targets of prejudice, ethnocentrism and even racist attitudes and behaviours. Here, I touch upon the experiences of the groups that fall in the middle: not necessarily the targets of overt negative attitudes or behaviour, but at the same time, not ever allowed to forget their distinctions, differences and weaknesses due to their affiliation of their countries of origin. What I would like to highlight at this point are two processes against the immigrants or the new Canadians who are not visibly differentiated from the dominant group, but nevertheless who do not come from the easily welcomed and warmly accepted countries within the core of the concentric circles of tolerance.

First, the activation of prejudicial attitudes and/or discriminatory behaviour: Albeit some of the differential treatment non-visible minority Canadians receive is very subtle, it is often
prejudicial and emotionally hurtful. Moreover, at the absence of the usual skin-colour or other overt physical feature differentiations, the activation of differential treatment is triggered by more subtle cues (such as a non-English/non-French name, or a hard to recognize accent).

Second, people who act on the cues and who may contribute to a chilly experience for the non-visible minority Canadians are not necessarily bigots, red-necks or racists, but mostly well-meaning, sometimes even extremely well educated, respectable people who would sincerely defend egalitarian ideas and ideals if they were called upon. This is particularly a difficult complexity for the non-visible minorities since the attitudes and the behaviours they must challenge belong to those who are well-meaning and respectable in most other ways.

WHAT IS IN A NAME?

What is in a name? The chances are that I would have never asked such a question if my name were Mary or Sue or Nancy. But, my name is Aysan (pronounced eye-sun), a combination of five individual letters which gives no clue to who I am to a North American audience. For a person whose mother tongue is English, my name is a word of randomly selected letters, which is hard to read and without help, even harder to pronounce and almost always impossible to remember. Unlike Mary or Sue, my name requires the interest and the concentration of its audience which is often less than eager to extend such an interest. If any interest is shown, it is for the irrelevant, intrusive or totally wrong reasons.

My last name is even more difficult. “Se’ver” is not like Smith, or White or Brown, it is not something which allows recognition or cognitive closure. My last name is an anomaly in this country of my choice, a country which has legally accepted me as a citizen. Nevertheless, Canada has not made it easy for me to live with my name. I live, work and make my home in Canada for the last 28 years, I have been paying substantial amounts of taxes, but my name still makes me a target of unwanted interest or deems me invisible to most other Canadians.

This article is not about not liking one’s name, which may be the case for many people. Indeed I have met Sue’s who did not want to be yet another Sue, and I have met Mary’s who had wished they were called something else. The point here is about differentiations: undeserved, unwanted, unfair singling out of a person in a dynamic sea of other individuals. To underscore a sociological term, my point is about assignment of status on an everyday status marker, all because of a name.

When I first immigrated to Canada, probably like most other new immigrants, my utmost desire was to blend in, to learn the ways of my new country, to become similar to my hosts, to seek comfort in some kind of sameness, since so little was the same. Only immigrants would know the real meaning of being literally and figuratively “uprooted.” Even the fancy sociological concept of “culture-shock” fails to capture the reversal of everyday taken-for-grantedness of the immigrant’s life. The climate, housing, job patterns, schooling, transportation all become alien all at once. Even buying a loaf of bread or finding appropriate diapers for one’s child requires a totally new learning experience. Language patterns, even when one speaks the language of the host country (more so for those who lack such complex skills) become a symbolic oppressor. For immigrant men, jobs they may have known well become new obstacles to be conquered. For immigrant women who are likely to be entrusted and burdened by the day-by-day living needs of their families, supermarket shelves pose threats: buying the wrong stuff for the wrong reason, for the wrong price when time and money are at short supply.

In this chaos, the immigrant needs every little scrap of familiarity, the immigrant must hang on to whatever is still recognizable. And what is more familiar than one’s name? Of
course, something so comforting, so familiar also has its own pitfalls for the immigrant. For example, I immediately realized that my name was a barrier for my smooth integration. At the immigration bureau, the bank, my little daughter’s school, at the dentist, and the doctor, my introducing myself as Aysan Sev’er produced a single response: “Who?” A person with a “culturally correct” name can hardly ever know the pressure caused by a culturally unrecognized name. A Mary or Joe White, regardless of her/his circumstances, will never be greeted by “Who?” when introduced. Although the audience may have known other Mary or Joe Whites in the past, this particular Mary or Joe’s individual entitlement to their names is considered a given, they never have to hear the inquiry “Who?”.

The second relentless question a simple uttering of my name engenders is “Where are you from?” I have been asked this question on the phone and in person, by hotel clerks, by telephone operators, by bank tellers, by physicians who were in the process of examining parts of my body and a slew of others who were not necessarily in need of or entitled to this “additional” information, given the routine and mundane nature of their tasks. Of course, the question “where are you from?” can indicate a genuine interest, a willingness to know and to share another’s roots and culture under very uniquely defined situations. However, if the question is asked in situations where the transaction simply requires one’s name, and if this question is asked each time one’s name is mentioned over the duration of one’s immigrant life, it certainly becomes a demeaning intrusion. In my own case, it has been almost three decades of “Who? And the infamous “Where are you from?” at the sight or sound of my name... Even the U.S. and Canada customs employees who hold my Canadian passport in their hands have asked me “Where are you from?” Sometimes politely, sometimes with some agitation, I remind them that I am a Canadian, while some still insist “where are you really from?” to uncover the secrecy behind and the legitimacy of my claim to being a Canadian. This is an insidious marginalization of a citizen of a country. It is even more invasive if the country one has chosen prides itself on its vast cultural and ethnic variation and diversity. When I was a student travelling under my name and with a Turkish passport, my luggage was searched more than once, my used as well as clean underwear rudely scattered for all to see. Now, I am a professor carrying a Canadian passport, they just interrogate... “but, really, where are you from?” always insinuating that I do not really belong, that my 28 years of Canadian survival and accomplishments are just a disguise.

Where am I from? Well, I am from Turkey. My ascribed Turkish status and the recollections of my country of origin give me enormous pride and joy on countless dimensions. The sight of the Turkish flag (which incidentally matches the colours of the Canadian flag that I also love) still brings me close to tears. I ache for the carefree days of my childhood and youth within the warm caress of the Black sea and the Mediterranean. I love the hospitality that is a trademark for most Turkish people. Simultaneously, I have unresolved feelings toward some of the aggressive political history of my country of origin and my peace loving self continuously struggles with some of its shortcomings on human rights issues. The latter also partially explains why I eagerly chose Canada, and why I am happy to be a hyphenated Canadian. However, I do not see these dilemmas and split loyalties unique to me or to my Turkish heritage, but as an integral part of most human experience in the imperfect world we live in. If I were Chinese, wouldn’t I have loved my country despite the Tiananmen Square massacre; if I were Japanese, would I have not adored my heritage despite the rape of Nan Phan; If I were an American, wouldn’t I have been devastated by the civilian casualties in the Vietnam of the past and the Iraq of the more recent times while at the same time loving the magnificent vastness of my land? If I
were British, would it not have bothered me to have such a relentless imperialistic history while at the same time being full of pride of the innovations that my country has cradled? If I were German, would I not have been crushed by the dark era of eugenics while being grateful to a land of mechanical skill and perfection as well as natural beauty? The point is, no human history is perfectly clean, yet none of us can be held personally responsible for the historical wrongs or more recent imperfections. Yet, all of us are responsible for our “now” and are responsible for working toward a better future, all of us are responsible to avoid creating new dislikes, new hatreds, new suspicions or fears that are based on the ignorance and stereotypes of the past.

I am Turkish, and the relentless questions about “where are you from?” eventually bring my inquirers to deal with this new information. Amazingly, rather than finding closure, rather than quenching one’s irrelevant inquisitive thirst, my audience subjects me to additional questions: The first and the most common is “did you see the Midnight Express” and “do you know the man who tried to kill the Pope?” Whether I am at a social occasion, a professional conference, at a lawyer’s, banker’s, doctor’s office or amongst total strangers killing time while they wait, the social divide between “us” and “them” is drawn as soon as I mention my name. I am clearly reduced to the “other,” I am an alien and possibly a hostile one at that... In the minds of my audience, I may be related to the one who tried to kill the Pope. The same people who pursue these absurd connections would never have made connections between me and Paul Bernardo although both of us happen to be Canadian if my name was Sue or Mary. But, I am Aysan... therefore relentlessly subjected to Who? Where are you from? Do you know....

COPING STRATEGIES: Soon after I immigrated to Canada, I experimented with the notion of changing my name just to give myself a break, to blend-in, to protect myself from relentless inquiries and negative insinuations. To relieve the social pressure, I called myself “Ann” for a few months. The experiment served its purpose, indeed, no one asked me to repeat my name, no one asked me where I came from, despite the audible cues that remained (slight accent I still have). However, the experiment also taught me that I like my real name, and calling myself something else is too much of a sacrifice to my personal integrity. I did not choose Canada to hide. I have nothing to hide. I understand the dilemmas of those who change their names to fit in. But, I reverted back to Aysan ... No, I really do not know the person who tried to kill the Pope, the population of Turkey is close to 70 million, we are not a small tribe. No, we do not ride camels, no I am not married to a man with four wives, bigamy is illegal in Turkey since early 1920s. No, I do not know how to belly dance, no, I do not like to be called a “Turkish Delight” I am not food! Yes, I am here to present a paper at a professional conference.

Having decided to keep my name, I tried nemonic strategies to help people out. Rather than just saying it, I would make a point of providing pronunciation tips as well as spelling it out: Aysan, pronounced as “eye-sun” spelled as A-Y-S-A-N. My last name is S -E-V’ E-R. No, my last name is not pronounced as severe (like harsh or despotic), no, it is not sever (like amputate), no it is not an accent, it is an apostrophe, no it is not French, it is Turkish. Oh, no I don’t know the person who tried to kill the Pope. I have colleagues that I have known for more than two decades, who still do not know or bother to learn the correct spelling of my name. Some write it as it is pronounced (eye-sun; I-sun) and most use the apostrophe where ever they see fit (Se’ver; S’ever) some add extra accents just for a good measure (Se’ve’r) some add extra letters (Sev’err; See’ver). Some business contacts altogether drop part of my last name and reduce me to “Mrs. A. Er’ although I am not married and I resent the possessive implications of being a Mrs. Most others write letters to me as Mr; the cloak of the generic “he” that subsumes
the remaining 51% of us. My culturally ambiguous name robs me of my gender.

While I am caught in the dilemmas of my name, my colleagues are into constructive topics such as who should organize the next conference, who should contribute to the new book, whose paper or research can add to the critical analyses of the social problem that seems so pervasive. In contrast, I find myself spending precious minutes spelling my name, explaining, answering, clarifying, correcting... feeling increasingly frustrated, angry, isolated, different. Next time a new idea or project emerges, it will be unlikely that I will be called, after all, who can remember such an odd name, who will dare to spell it? Besides, I spent so much time about where I come from, we hardly had a chance to discuss my strengths, my contributions as a full-fledged Canadian scholar, my research, my grants, my ideas, my social activism. If at all remembered, I may be remembered as the woman who seemed “a little defensive,” what is there to be defensive about?! There are easier colleagues, friends who are more similar. I am an unknown, I am either invisible or a suspect. I once had a professor whose first name was “Adolf” and I cringe to think what he must have gone through. But even my professor “Adolf” had a last name that he did not have to explain, that made him blend in smoothly as long as he used his initial. I have to defend my “otherness” at all times, an “otherness” which has many hidden costs, an otherness which immediately surrounds me as soon as I mention my name.

I am not alone in my otherness. Other Turkish Canadians have expressed many of the thoughts and feelings I mentioned or felt over the years. I have met those who constantly yearn to go back, to return to the land they “belong to.” This longing is not only because of the good things they remember “back home” but is fuelled by the unshakable otherness they are made to feel in this new land. I have met those who associate only with their kind: other Turks, creating a closed ethnic enclave. Despite the immediate advantages of this strategy, there is also the hidden costs of missing an opportunity to learn new ways from our host country, to teach our ways, who we really are to others who know so very little. I have met some who already left Canada, hoping for a better future and a smoother life among others like them. However, I also met a few who reject everything Turkish about them, change their names, change their religion, even state a different birthplace when they are asked. The invisible minorities in Canada carry a heavy burden of subtle differentiation and insinuation despite the fact that Canada is trying very hard to make its own citizens welcome. Mostly, the subtle problems of the invisible minorities remain well hidden from the public eye or the academic quest.