

## What's in a Name?: Parental Name-Calling among French Adolescents of Algerian Descent

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*This paper looks at kinship as a central, organizing motif for ritualized teasing among French adolescents of Algerian descent. Specifically, I analyze adolescent uses of parental insults to collaboratively establish and subvert 'respectful' behavior in an Algerian immigrant community outside Paris. In performances of parental name-calling that negotiate the boundaries between play and insult, adolescents both structure and symbolize social relationships with their peers and their parents. In addition to expressing shifting affiliations with peers and kin, these performances represent both cultural change and continuity in a diasporic context. Through them, adolescents articulate conflicting beliefs about public space, gender, and generation. With respect to adolescent social networks and group identity, these verbal performances are central in three ways. First, they are often embedded in interaction and so are difficult for adults or outsiders to understand. Second, they symbolically pose parents and adolescents in oppositional and yet dependent terms. Third, parental name-calling functions as a personalized form of deixis to 'point' toward a specific peer, thereby creating a social context for that individual.*

### 1. Introduction

This paper analyzes kinship as an organizing motif for ritualized teasing among French adolescents of Algerian descent. Specifically, adolescent uses of parental name-calling collaboratively establish and subvert 'respectful' behavior in an Algerian immigrant community in Nanterre, located in the suburbs of Paris. Drawing from 16 months of fieldwork in Chemin de l'Ile, I will explore the ongoing elaboration of *le respect* or 'respect' as central to adolescent Algerian-French subculture there. By using a peer's parent's first name in public, and in an irreverent manner, adolescents play with a cultural taboo. In this way, rules for *le respect* are both foregrounded and subverted in performances of parental name-calling.

In addition to exploring the ways that these collaborative performances constitute adolescent ideals of respect for elders and their transgression, I hope to demonstrate how parental name-calling contributes to adolescent social networks themselves. These performances express adolescents' shifting affiliations with peers and kin and play a role

in expressing closeness and aggression between peers. Finally, these performances represent both cultural change and continuity in a diasporic context. Through them, adolescents articulate contradictory beliefs about space, gender, and generation as they negotiate Arabic-inspired ideals of respect and forge their own transgressive subculture as adolescents born and raised in France.

## 2. Parental Name-Calling

Negotiating the boundaries between play and insult, parental name-calling occurs when a speaker divulges a peer's parent's given name before an audience. Merely the act of publicly divulging the name of a peer's parent is a cause for concern and a source for play among these adolescents for two interrelated reasons. First, referring to non-kin adults by their given name is considered taboo for adolescents in this French community and in North Africa generally. Second, personal information about a parent, such as her or his first name, address, and workplace, is considered socially dangerous among adolescents. Possession of this information may be used to contact (or threaten to contact) a parent with information about their child's dating practices or other culturally taboo practices such as smoking cigarettes (both of which are considered more inappropriate for girls than for boys). In this way, controlling or attempting to control seemingly innocuous information about one's parents, such as their first names, fits into a larger system of information control and exchange among adolescents, as I will address in more detail later.

Among grade school children, parental name-calling may be as simple as yelling each other's mother's or father's first name back and forth. Among adolescents who are friends or intimate, a simple form of name-calling occurs when speakers address each other directly by their parent's first name, thus ironically laminating the parent's identity onto the identity of the peer. Frequently, however, adolescents embed their peers' parents' names into an ongoing interaction, as was the case one afternoon when I was teaching a voluntary English class at a neighborhood association.

The usual participants in my class were a group of middle-school girls who were friends and lived in a cluster of nearby buildings. On this particular day, however, a boy named Khaled<sup>1</sup> came to class, much to the dismay and resistance of the girls present, who exclaimed "Oh no, not him," and "That guy's crazy." As a slightly younger boy than the girls present (13 versus 14 or 15), Khaled was subject to the kind of adversarial teasing that generally characterized relations between boys and girls in the neighborhood. This adversarial tone seemed to set the stage for the parental name-calling that was to follow.

That particular day, I was attempting to have the group engage in role play, using one of their favorite T.V. shows, "Beverly Hills 90210," as a model. I began to list the names of the show's characters, eliciting help from the others, "Brandon, Kelly, Dylan and..." to which Khaled decisively replied "Ahmed" with a grin. I laughed, thinking that Khaled was making a clever statement about the lack of Arabic names on the list. Khaled looked startled and then asked me, "Tu piges?" (*Do you understand?*). I initially said yes, but when I explained my interpretation of his joke, Khaled shook his head and explained to me, "No, Ahmed is the name of someone's father." I only later understood that the teasing was directed at Mina who was present and whose father's name was Ahmed.

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<sup>1</sup> This name is a pseudonym, as are the others used in this paper.

The example illustrates how parental name-calling can function as covert communication in “mixed” (adult/adolescent and cultural insider/outsider) settings. In this type of embedded name-calling, covert challenges are destined for a particular person in the ongoing context, and only those individuals with personal knowledge about the addressee will understand the reference.<sup>2</sup> Using a highly abbreviated, embedded form of parental name-calling, Khaled had inscribed intimate meaning onto the ongoing linguistic context of an English lesson dealing with Anglo characters from “Beverly Hills 90210.”

### 3. Parental Name-Calling as Speech Event

I will now turn to more elaborate parental name calling routines and explore their relevance for structuring verbal interactions and social relationships among adolescent peers. True to Hymes’ (1964) vision of speech events generally, participation in parental name-calling holds dual consequences for adolescents. On the one hand, competence in these exchanges is a way to show that one belongs to a peer group through the demonstration of communicative competence and insider knowledge. On the other, practicing and performing name-calling is a way, in itself, to create social and linguistic contexts for peer relationships.<sup>3</sup>

In the following example of collaborative name-calling, also recorded at the neighborhood association mentioned above, three adolescents improvise using lyrics lifted from a Daniel Balavoine song *Je m'appelle Henri* (“My name is Henri”). Daniel Balavoine was a popular French singer in the late 70s and early 80s, whose career was cut short by a fatal plane crash. His music is part of classic French rock that is still played on mainstream radio stations across the country. Creatively subverting the song’s original meaning, three adolescents, Hayat, a 14-year-old girl, Salima, a 15-year-old girl, and Khaled, the same 13-year-old boy, take turns inserting each others’ mothers’ names in the “Henri” slot of the lyrics. In so doing, they transform the song lyrics into a performative vehicle for parental name-calling.

#### (1) Kinship Chart, Age, and Sex for Participants<sup>4</sup>

<i>Participant</i>	<b>Khaled</b>	<b>Salima</b>	<b>Hayat</b>
<i>P's Mother</i>	Aïcha	Djamila	N/A
<i>P's Father</i>	Ahmed	N/A	N/A
<i>P's Age, Sex</i>	13, male	15, female	14, female

<sup>2</sup> In this way, they are similar to the Apache place name stories that Basso (1996) documents.

<sup>3</sup> I also draw upon Marjorie Goodwin’s work describing the role of interactional structures for organizing African-American children’s social networks (Goodwin, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Transcription Conventions

[[	overlap
[ ]	non-verbal cues
.	pause
[X]	obscured talk
–	self interruption
?	intonation rise
!	exclamation
<b>Bold</b>	Parent’s name

- 1 Salima je me présente  
*I introduce myself*
- 2 Hayat shoush  
*shhhh*
- 3 Khaled je m'ap – pelle  
*my name is*
- 4 Hayat **Aïcha**  
*Aïcha*
- 5 Salima je m'appelle [[**Aïcha**  
*my name is* [[**Aïcha**  
Hayat [[je voudrais-  
[[*I'd like-*
- 6 Hayat je voudrais bien avoir un petit **chat**  
*I would like to have a little cat*
- 7 Salima [laughs]
- 8 Hayat bonjour **Djamila**  
*hello Djamila*

In this example, the overall playful tone and collaborative pattern indicate that competition is less central to the interaction than mutually constructing meanings and veiled references. Speakers use the words “I introduce myself” (the first line in the lyrics of the song “Je m'appelle Henri”) to instigate a round of playful teasing in which one participant's initial utterance is completed by a second participant, resulting in collaboratively achieved couplets. In the first four turns of this exchange, Salima, Khaled, and Hayat collaborate to form the couplet “I introduce myself, my name is Aïcha.”

However, Hayat's choice to fill the “Henri” slot with Khaled's mother's name, “Aïcha,” [in line 4] changes the openly collaborative character of the exchange into an utterance directed at Khaled. Salima chooses to align herself with Hayat [in line 5] by repeating the full second line of the couplet “My name is Aïcha,” thus maintaining the cadence or rhythm of the teasing exchange. Hayat uses this opportunity to create a new rhymed couplet by rhyming, “*je voudrais bien avoir un petit chat*” or “I would like to have a little cat” [in line 6].

Here, Hayat's seemingly non-sensical use of the French word *chat* (“cat”) not only rhymes with Aïcha, but is also a veiled reference to Salima's mother, whose nickname among Salima's peers is *Djamila, le chat* or “Djamila the cat.” Salima responds to this clever turn of the teasing with laughter and Hayat follows up with a direct reference to Salima's mother with the words “Hello Djamila” [in line 8].

As in the “Beverly Hills 90210” example above, adolescents are constructing a complex code that solidifies in-group knowledge. The code here consists of the playful

juxtaposition of personal and cultural references through the insertion of their parents' Arabic names into a classic French rock song.

Despite the innocuous and playful quality of the last example, the next example demonstrates the complications that arise when the interactional expectations of adolescent peers clash with interactional expectations of flesh-and-blood parents. In this excerpt, two 14-year-old girls, Naima and Béatrice, call out to a boy of roughly the same age, Ali, as he passes by on a bicycle. Although Ali responds, his words are not intelligible to me or to my tape recorder. The girls are sitting chatting in the park with Leïla, a girl of 15. As Ali speeds by on his bike, Naima and Béatrice perform parental name-calling to him in view of Naima's mother at the other end of the park. In response to Naima's mother's glare, Leïla criticizes Naima for behaving this way in front of her mother.

(2) **Kinship Chart, Age, and Sex for Participants**

<i>Participant</i>	<b>Ali</b>	<b>Naima</b>	<b>Leïla</b>	<b>Béatrice</b>
<i>P's Mother</i>	Djamila Hachani	sitting in park	N/A	N/A
<i>P's Father</i>	Mabrouk Hachani	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>P's Age, Sex</i>	13, male	13, female	14, female	13, female

- 1 Naima j'm'appelle **Djamila Hachani** y'a un problème!? y'a un problème!?  
*My name is Djamila Hachani. You got a problem!? You got a problem!?*
- 2 Béatrice **Djamila Hachani** y'a un problème!?  
*Djamila Hachani. You got a problem!?*
- 3 Naima j'm'appelle **Mabrouk Hachani** y'a un problème?!  
*my name is Mabrouk Hachani. You got a problem?*
- 4 Ali [XXX]
- 5 Leïla shh! shh!  
*shh! shh!*
- 6 Leïla **ta daronne**<sup>5</sup> est en train d'te dire "mais qu'est qui te prends? normale toi?"  
*your mom is telling you "what is wrong with you? [Are] you normal?"*
- 7 Naima c'est vrai? [whispered talk]  
*is it true?*
- 8 Leïla bah elle t'regarde  
*well she's looking at you*

<sup>5</sup> *Daronne* is slang for 'mother', which is purportedly derived from Romany, the Indic language of the Gypsies. Likewise, *daron* is French slang for 'father' (Goudailler, 1997, p. 79).

- 9 Naima     ah ouais, je croyais que c'était ta daronne qui était en train de  
me regarder  
*oh yeah, I thought that it was your mom who was looking at  
me*
- 10 Naima    elle est en panique. ma mère elle me regarde quand je crie  
*she [Naima's mom] is freaking out. my mother looks at me  
when I yell*

In this performance of parental name-calling, Naima yells Ali's parents' full, given names and constructs aggressive hypothetical speech for them: "j'm'appelle Djamila Hachani y'a un problème!? y'a un problème!?" [line 1].<sup>6</sup> Béatrice joins Naima's teasing by recycling Naima's words, making the performance collaborative [line 2]. Naima then repeats the parental name-calling and verbal challenge, using the name of Ali's father [line 3]. In so doing, Naima and Béatrice use 'name-calling' as a way to index or symbolically 'point' at Ali as he speeds by the park on his bike.

In this and other instances of parental name-calling, the construction of absent mothers and fathers through reported speech creates a complicated web linking self and other. In the case represented above, Naima and Béatrice embody Ali's mother's and father's voices as a way to communicate to and about Ali himself. Through hypothetical reported speech, Naima and Béatrice momentarily take on identities of their peer's parent, if only to create a vivid contrast between themselves, as Ali's mock parents, and his actual mother and father (Tannen, 1989).

In addition, this example demonstrates conflicting interactional expectations of adolescents and their parents. In particular, the loud performance of parental name-calling draws the attention and critical gaze of a real parent watching the performance: Naima's mother. While her mother stares stony-faced from across the park, Leïla chooses to voice the projected wishes of Naima's mother, again through the use of hypothetical reported speech: "Your mother is saying to you 'but what is wrong with you? [Are] you normal?'" [line 6]. Here, Leïla embodies Naima's mother by constructing words for her.

As illustrated in this example, through parental name-calling, adolescents capitalize upon symbolic relationships with adults to construct their peer group. At the same time, actual adults are not usually considered appropriate audience members for these performances. In this way, adolescent practices of parental name-calling demonstrate a cultural value of 'respect' for kin that prescribes both the subversive use of parents' names and their containment within peer networks. In other words, parental name-calling is a way that adolescents may simultaneously subvert and maintain cultural values such as 'respect.' For example, the preference for excluding parents as audience members is evident in Leïla's response to Naima's performance. By attempting to curtail Naima's loud public performance through shaming her (e.g., "what is wrong with you? [Are] you normal?"), Leïla demonstrates that she is attentive to her peer's mother's 'face' (or need for 'respect') in this public setting. At the same time, the example makes clear that prescriptions for the compartmentalizing transgressive behavior are being negotiated and

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<sup>6</sup> While it is unclear whether the words "is there a problem?" refer to an actual event or to an aggressive caricature, the humorous rendering of Ali's parents is effective nonetheless.

challenged by these adolescents—here, girls seem to be interested in both transgressing and policing the symbolic boundaries between peer and parent audiences.

In negotiating these conflicting interactional expectations, Naima and Leïla are also negotiating what is considered ‘respectful’ behavior in an intergenerational setting. On the one hand, this example shows Naima and Béatrice using parental name-calling in terms that are consistent with the face-needs of their adolescent peer group. In this way, adolescents are developing an emergent code of behavior, in which parental name-calling and other aggressive verbal play figures centrally. On the other hand, adolescents in Chemin de l’Île are also concerned with demonstrating cultural knowledge of propriety based upon what they term *le respect* or ‘respect.’

The previous example demonstrated the social consequences of displaying behavior appropriate to one’s peer group in front of one’s own parent in public. The final example (#3) explores some of the reasons why divulging knowledge about a peer’s parent is considered a threat with social consequences that extend beyond the immediate interaction. The excerpt shows an exchange between Samia (a girl of 12) and Khaled, in which each threatens to share personal information about the other. The exchange begins with Naima addressing Khaled as “Tariq number two,” in reference to his older brother, Tariq [line 1]. When Khaled takes issue with being nicknamed in reference to his older brother, Samia points out that he really should be called “Ahmed number two” because that is his father’s name [lines 5-8].

### (3) Kinship Chart, Age, and Sex for Participants

<i>Participant</i>	<b>Khaled</b>	<b>Samia</b>	<b>Naima</b>
<i>P’s Mother</i>	Aïcha	Ms. Messehani	N/A
<i>P’s Father</i>	Ahmed	Mr. Messehani	N/A
<i>P’s Brother</i>	Tariq	N/A	N/A
<i>P’s Age, Sex</i>	13, male	12, female	13, female

[Addressing Khaled]

- 1 Naima     **Tariq** numéro deux  
*Tariq number two*
- 2 Samia     ouais, nan, par contre,  
*yeah, no, on the other hand,*
- 3             c’est la vérité que c’est **Ahmed** numéro deux  
*the truth is that it’s Ahmed number two*
- 4             parce que **Ahmed** numéro un  
*because Ahmed number one*
- 5             c’est **ton daron**  
*it’s your father*

[Khaled frowns while Samia laughs]

- 6 Samia je t'ai vexé! [gleefully]  
*I annoyed you!*
- 7 Khaled heeeh t'es contente hhhaaa  
*heeee you're happy haaaa*
- 8 ah mais toi t'es pas une **Messehani**  
*oh but you you're not a **Messehani***
- 9 Samia vas dire ça. vas dire ce que t'a dit là  
*go ahead and say that. go say what you said there*
- 10 Naima il va la raconter à tout le monde pendant une semaine là  
*he's going to tell that to everyone during a whole week*
- [...]
- 11 Samia ferme ta gueule aussi  
*shut your trap too*
- 12 hé sur le Koran, tu balance  
*hey, on the Koran, you tell*
- 13 sur le Koran je vais voir **ta daronne**  
*on the Koran I'm going to go see **your mother***
- 14 et ouallah je lui dit-  
*and by God tell her*
- 15 voir **ton père**  
*[I'll] go see **your father***
- 16 je je sais où il travail **ton père**  
*I know where he works, **your father***

This example demonstrates that controlling knowledge about parents fits into a broader system of information exchange among adolescents. In this particular case, Samia and Khaled both wield information about each other's relatives to prevent the other from spreading rumors about themselves. Adolescents thus clearly use information about their peers' parents not only for teasing, but also to contain information about themselves by threatening disclosure of their peer.

By announcing Khaled's father's name, Ahmed, Samia engages in a version of parental name-calling; her playful yet aggressive intent is evidenced by her gleeful exclamation, "I annoyed you!" [line 6]. Ahmed retaliates by mimicking her glee, "heeee, you're happy, haaaa!", and then indirectly divulges that Samia is adopted, "oh, but you-you're not a Messehani" (Samia's last name) [line 8]. While presumably most of the other adolescents present were aware of this fact, the immediate concern becomes whether Khaled will tell other people at school. For example, although initially Samia defies Ahmed to repeat this information to others—*Go ahead and say that. Go say what you said*



*there*—in line 9, she eventually threatens Khaled after Naima claims “he’s going to tell that to everyone during a whole week” [line 10].

The unspoken information that Samia will ‘tell’ Khaled’s mother is, in fact, that Khaled is dating someone that Samia knows. Samia need only obliquely mention that if Ahmed tells her secret, she will tell his mother—the reference of what she will tell is understood and need not be named: “on the Koran I’m going to go see your mother, and by God tell her” [lines 13-14]. Samia adds for good measure that she knows where Khaled’s father works and she will go see him too [lines 15-16].

Thus, knowledge of a peer’s parents comprises a kind of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) on several levels. In the immediate context, such information provides the means to provoke one’s peer. In the larger context of the peer group and the neighborhood generally, such information provides important collateral for controlling information about oneself. The interactional importance of parental name-calling is contextualized by the potential social consequences of sharing knowledge about a peer’s parents. Such intimate knowledge offers tangible recourse for adolescents who feel wronged by peers’ misuse of information about themselves. As is shown in this example, personal information regarding dating or anything else deemed ‘secret’ by the peer in question is available for use as symbolic collateral to tease or threaten a peer. Information about dating was particularly coveted by adolescents because girls were generally forbidden to date and public dating was considered inappropriate even for boys. However, as so many boys and girls are secretly dating, these adolescents are clearly successfully managing conflicting cultural sensibilities. In this way, performances of parental name-calling and their social consequences highlight the ways that adolescents creatively innovate linguistic practices to manage the very different social pressures of French and Algerian cultural ideals.

#### 4. Conclusion

These varied examples of parental name-calling demonstrate the centrality of constructions of kin to adolescents’ performances of personal and peer group identity. In particular, through parental name-calling, adolescents collaboratively perform their own and their peer’s social identity in relation to parental figures imagined in talk. Performances of parental name-calling indicate that adolescents are experiencing and expressing peer identity as relational to their parents’ generation. In these multi-layered performances, adolescents construct their identities as relational “daughters,” “sons,” “brothers,” and so on. Thus, parental name-calling performances point to the ways that adolescent identity is formulated not simply in relation to peers, but in relation to parental figures which are constructed as foils for the self, and, in turn, as foils for the peer group.

Moreover, in the context of adolescent identity in this Algerian immigrant community, the parental figure also represents an adolescent’s relationship to one’s cultural origins, and in particular, to the social code of *le respect* that they elaborate in daily interactions. Information about a peer’s parent gives adolescents the ability or potential to threaten to share personal information (such as dating practices), thus potentially breaking the code of *le respect*.

Throughout these examples, it would seem that rules for ‘respect’ are both subverted and foregrounded in performances of parental name-calling. Adolescent ideals about the secretive nature of these performances show their desire to uphold the very cultural values that these performances subvert, namely the compartmentalization of certain information

and behaviors with respect to peers and parents. Through the practice of parental name-calling, adolescents simultaneously elaborate and perform cultural tradition, innovation, and transgression in a diasporic context.

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