

Intangible capital in the name-giving and godparent networks

By Sofia Kotilainen

In the earlier centuries it was important for many parents to give a newborn child the same first name as his or her godparent had. On the other hand, children's forenames were traditionally chosen from the family nomenclature. Why was it then so significant to honour the godparent with a younger namesake?

In northern Europe godparental relations originated as an educational task assigned to the godparents by the Lutheran church. In the earlier centuries it was the godparents' duty to take care of the godchild's Christian education together with the child's parents. In the course of time, godparenthood formed a special relationship in which the godchild had to act respectfully to his godparent and, if necessary, the godparent had a right to guide the godchild also in questions of secular life. Being a godparent was an indication of the community's approval from the point of view of the person who had been asked to be the godparent. This is also shown by local oral memory for example in the Finnish rural communities.

THE CHOICE OF GODPARENTS

The old Finnish proverb says: 'A godparent is half the child'. It means that the choice of a godparent to a newborn was important. Being a godparent was a responsible position of trust, and the godparent was an exemplar to the child.

According to the Swedish (and Finnish) Church Law, godparents in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had to confess to the Lutheran faith, had to know the teachings of the catechism, must have received Holy Communion (in other words to have attended confirmation classes and be confirmed) and be pious, of irreproachable reputation and of age. In practice, there were also other factors than the provisions of the church regulations that affected the choice of godparents. They were preferably close relatives or acquaintances.

The members of the different estates chose the children's godparents according to their own traditions. There was an old custom according to which there was one representative of each sex among the godparents. The godparents were in a way "reserve parents" to the child, especially if he or she would have lost his or her own parents, which is why a married couple were often chosen as godparents.

Up to the end of the nineteenth century, the ability to read and write was a rare skill and a form of intangible capital, and a literate godparent was definitely a good choice because he or she, it was hoped, would teach the same skills to the godchild. In 1880 only 12.6 per cent of the population over ten years old in Finland could both read and write, although 85 per cent of them had at least a rudimentary reading ability. Later on, it was schools rather than the home and godparents that more and more took care of the teaching of literacy skills, and the choice of godparents came to be affected more by other factors.

THE STRATEGIES OF NAME-GIVING CREATED SYMBOLIC CAPITAL

Certain strategic choices in the practice of name-giving expressed the parents' trust in, and respect for, the godparents. It was usually people with whom the child's parents were involved in their everyday life who were invited to be godparents, such as the relatives as well as friends.

The child's parents could achieve some goals and benefits by utilizing the intangible capital that godparenthood provided in local social networks. The clergy, in particular, introduced new name material to the rural communities as the priests and their families often came originally from outside the parish. Furthermore, as they were people of a higher class, clergy were popular godparents. Farmer families may have tried to secure their own social position by showing politeness in their choice of names and godparents. A namesake was a symbolic way to wish the priest welcome to the parish when he had just been newly chosen for the office.

Inviting people of a higher social class to be godparents for a child clearly showed the politeness and respect that the parents felt for them, and one could expect that godparents like these, in particular, would be able, more than the other parishioners, to support the child in the future both economically and by using their good social status. The godparents, as well as the child's closest relatives, were also inquiry important models in choosing the child's first names.

See also [Kotilainen, Sofia 2012. Förtroende och andra former av symboliskt kapital i fadderskapsstrategier. *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland* 97 \(3\), 295–326.](#)