

The name game

We all have one, and it might determine our fate in a number of intriguing and bizarre ways. Nicholas Christenfeld and Britta Larsen investigate

Names have meanings – historical, geographical, occupational, and so on – that transcend the individual, and while people do occasionally change their names to match their characters, the most intriguing hypothesis is that they change their characters to match their names.

There is plenty for psychologists to get their teeth into. Why are names so powerful in drawing attention, but so vulnerable in memory terms? Could position in the alphabet determine the quality of health care we receive? Were the urologists J.W. Splatt and D. Weedon particularly drawn to publish papers together on incontinence? Can surnames spark unconscious racism? Could something as minor as our initials determine our fate?

questions

How can we determine whether our fates are influenced by our names, or simply by the people who named us?

Should parents consider influences on future success or failure of the names, or even initials, they give their children?

resources

www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames
Pelham, B.W., Mirenberg, M.C. & Jones, J.T. (2002). Why Susie sells seashells by the seashore: Implicit egotism and major life decision. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 82, 469–487.

Among the defining moments in a person's life – and on such a list most would include conception, coming-of-age ceremonies, near-death experiences, and perhaps a wedding or two – a moment that might be worth adding is the one when the person is named. Names seem far more than arbitrary labels useful for telling one's children apart, or alerting friends to falling safes and other imminent dangers. They seem instead to capture and shape the individual, making it reasonable to say, as is done in English, German, Mandarin, and other, though not all, languages, not just 'I am called Nicholas', but 'I am Nicholas'. This identity of name as self suggests that it is worth looking for correspondence between names and the characters of those who hold them. There is no shortage of research doing just this.

There is also no shortage of research disputing causal effects of names on characters. The problem, most simply, with exploring the impact of names is that they are not randomly assigned, and that the people who give the name to the child also give it genes and an upbringing. Thus, one might suspect that a child whose parents chose to call him 'Big Loser Smith' might do badly for reasons not entirely confined to the direct impact of his name.

Nonetheless, overall, the research suggests that names may well matter sufficiently to warrant careful attention from parents. And attention parents certainly give the task of naming their beautiful (or soon to be so) baby. If choosing a name seems daunting, it is often preceded by the task of choosing

a baby naming book: even the most cursory look reveals thousands of such volumes!

Of course, all the books in the world will be of no avail if the causal power rests with the last name or the patronymic. Surnames, not being essential when communities were small, and occupational and geographic mobility was limited, were instituted, in the West, by William the Conqueror to facilitate taxation of land-owners. They were not generally adopted for several centuries, and not mandated in Finland until the 1920s. While they often reflect the original occupation, location or father of the bearer, there have also been groups whose names were more arbitrarily determined, as for example when Jews in the Austrian empire adopted them by law in the 18th century, and residents of the Philippines were assigned them in the 19th.

Names seem to have a special status quite apart from any possible role in determining one's fate. With the cocktail party effect, for example, people who are not deliberately or consciously processing a stream of speech, perhaps because they are attending to a more fascinating partner or experimental instructions, will nonetheless notice when their own name is mentioned (Moray, 1959). However, it does not seem that an entire brain centre is devoted solely to detecting whether people are talking about us – this low-level processing, or filtering, will also detect other important words, such as those with a strong emotional charge (Compton, 2003).

The special status of names cuts both ways, with them also being vulnerable to loss. There are reported cases of people who, after they suffer strokes, suffer from an inability to recall names (Semenza, 1995). It is possible for such patients to do perfectly well at naming common items, with common nouns, but show essentially no ability to generate the names of old friends, relatives and celebrities.

Many can sympathise with the plight of such people, since names are notoriously hard to recall, and it is not uncommon to be unable to reproduce the

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name of the person to whom one was introduced just moments before. This is not simply a matter of failing to pay attention. Introduced to Mr Smith, the carpenter, and Mr Carpenter, the smith, one may well recall the occupations of both and the name of neither (McWeeny et al., 1987). One problem with names is that they, unlike professions, do not activate webs of associations, and so the memories are vulnerable. To counteract this problem, various mnemonic strategies have been tested which involve creating associations with names – for example, thinking of Ms Farmer as one, strong enough to pull a plough, and so on (Yesavage et al., 1983).

Forming associations between the person and name would be facilitated, of course, if people's names did shape their lives. There are various ways this could happen. The most straightforward is through the meaning of the names. That is, people called Miller may be drawn to jobs that involve grinding grain, and those called Melody to music making. This sort of influence can come from first names, last names, and also initials, should those happen to spell anything of meaning. (*New Scientist* popularised the term 'nominative determinism' for this phenomenon, and there are plenty of real-life examples in the Wikipedia entry). A second way is through other attributes of the name, such as where in the alphabet it falls, how unusual or attractive it is, what letter it begins with, and how it connotes age, class, gender or race.

Perhaps the easiest way that a name could influence its bearer is by allowing

that person to move to the front of the line. Such an advantage is often, in fact, conferred on those whose last names come first, or at least early, in the alphabet. The notion is that alphabetical position is often used as an arbitrary way of sequencing people, whether it be in lunch lines or telephone directories; and perhaps years of the slight, but consistent, advantage that Ms Aardvark has enjoyed over Mr Zooplankton have cumulated into some measurable outcome.

There are some domains where alphabetical position has been shown to matter. In economics, for example, the creators of multi-authored papers are sequenced not by the magnitude of their contribution, by their seniority, or by their selfishness, but instead, more simply, alphabetically by their surnames. One might imagine that, although readers of those articles are likely to know that principle, the name that comes first might still get more credit, as it could be the one which is recalled more readily, or referred to more frequently. One does not need to imagine such an outcome, as it exists and

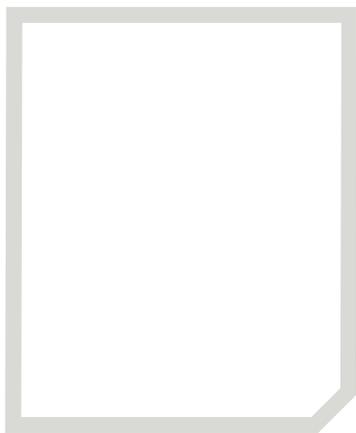
has been documented. Economists with early names are more likely to be tenured at top departments, to be fellows of the Econometric Society, and, perhaps even to win the Nobel Memorial Prize (Einav & Yariv, 2006). That this is a local result of the publication rules of the field, rather than a general benefit to the authors from a lifetime of getting to go first, is supported by the alphabetical advantage not existing in other fields, including psychology, which do not order their authors that way. Should they injure themselves

celebrating their successes, those early in the alphabet, when discussed by medical staff, also receive four minutes more attention than those whose names come late in the alphabet, and whose cases are thus taken up correspondingly late in the staff meeting (Singh et al., 2006). Whether that additional attention from teams of physicians would benefit or unfit them is not examined.

There is not much that can be done about where one's last name falls in the alphabet, short of unusual foresight in picking parents, or, sometimes, careful prioritisation in picking a husband. But control is exerted, at least by parents, over characteristics of first names, including how unusual that name is. Names can be rare because they have drifted out of fashion, such as Ethelred, whose popularity peaked perhaps a millennium ago, because they are spelled in uncommon ways, such as Catelin, a name spelled now so many ways it is hard to know even what is standard, or because they are simply made up, such as Gra2T, a name as yet of nobody.

As new parents struggle sleepless through the first weeks, after having stamped some such unusual name on the birth certificate, they might reasonably wonder whether they have blessed that child with specialness, or saddled it with a terrible, nominal burden. Early research suggested the latter. The idea of psychiatric disturbance resulting from odd names goes back at least to Kraepelin (1909), but has also been investigated with Harvard undergraduates, who are more likely to flunk out with rare names (Savage & Wells, 1948), and with psychiatric samples, where those with rare names show more severe emotional disturbance (Ellis & Beechley, 1954). Lacking experimental control over the names of their subjects, these studies do not demonstrate that names are causal, rather than just being markers of various parental characteristics.

There are studies that try to examine name rarity more directly, and they suggest that rare names, and rare spellings, get



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the generality of the name letter effect: Name initials and everyday attitudes. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31, 1099–1111.

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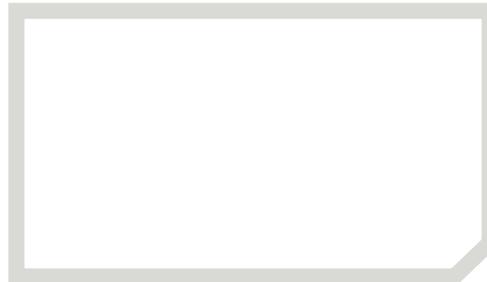
lower ratings from judges (Mehrabian & Piercy, 1993), and, when such names are randomly assigned to student essays, they get lower grades than more common names (Harari & McDavid, 1973). However, taking advantage of graduation programmes that list both the name of each student and the honours that student has earned, or at least received, one can readily examine whether those with common names are actually overrepresented in the ranks of the exalted. They are not (Skinner, 1984). Perhaps names, unusual at first, quickly come to seem ordinary, and, in the end, do not impair solving partial derivatives or translating Caesar.

This is not to say that wise parents do, or ought to, give no regard to the commonness of their offspring's names, especially those of their daughters. In general, girls' names are more varied, with the top 10 accounting for a smaller fraction of all girl babies than the top 10 do for boy babies (Liebersen & Bell, 1992). Furthermore, popular names for girls change more rapidly over time. Among the 20 most popular girls' names in the US in 1900 were, for example, Florence, Ethel, Edna, Bessie, Bertha and Mildred, which have not been used for anyone other than a great aunt for some time, and, none was even among the most popular thousand names a century later. By contrast, the male name to take the greatest tumble off the top-20 list was Clarence, which fell just to the 616th position. Similarly, half of the 20 most common girls names in 2000, such as Madison, Ashley, Kayla and Brianna (see www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames), would have been unknown to their great-great-grandmothers.

It may be that gender differences in naming reflect different goals, even now, that parents have for their sons and daughters (Rossi, 1975). By avoiding the most common and old-fashioned names, parents may enhance their daughters' claims to be young and exotic, and thereby

increase their mate value. In choosing more common and historically popular names for their boys, parents may signal that their sons are mature and established, and so help them to attract young, exotic mates.

Suggesting youth or status is not all that names can indicate. There are names that give strong hints about religion, such as, among the less subtle examples, Christian and Muhammad, and names that hint at national origins, such as Paul, Pablo and Paulo. However, what has been of most interest to researchers is that names can signal race. Kristen and Anne are white, while Latonya and Keisha are black; Brad and Jay white, Darnell and Jamal black (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Not all black people, of course, have names that indicate blackness, so it is



Bad luck or badly named? Baseball players whose names begin with K are more likely to strike out

reasonable to examine the effect on, for example, career prospects, of those who do.

When resumes were mailed out in response to job postings, with typical black and white names randomly assigned to resumes of various sorts, the black-named applicants got 33 per cent fewer responses, even from self-described equal opportunity employers (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). In order to achieve the same interest as would be generated simply by changing the name to a white one, a black-

named applicant needs an additional eight years of job experience. So far, then, it would seem that, whatever gains there may be in pride and group identity, there is a serious cost in employment prospects.

The second approach to determining the impact of black names is to examine large datasets that include names, and various important outcomes that could be influenced by those names. It is not enough, in such data sets, to show that people with certain names do less well, since names strongly signal how well the parents have done (Aura, 2004). The test is whether names continue to predict outcomes, such as future career success, even when critical background factors, like race and initial socioeconomic status, that may have caused them are also included in the model. Looking at California birth records, Fryer and Leavitt (2004) concluded that names, although they are highly predictive, do not play a significant causal role in outcomes. Others, also looking at large datasets (e.g. Aura, 2004), have suggested that 'black names' are damaging, but, such a conclusion requires that all relevant background factors be accurately measured and fully specified in the model, and so the data are far from establishing definitive causality.

While there is some suggestion that the sort of name one has may influence one's career prospects, perhaps the most intriguing notion is that it determines the specifics of one's occupation, as well, possibly, as one's location, tastes, and even cause of death. Some of these ideas have been investigated, and even supported, but some of the most basic questions are still lacking careful empirical evidence. There is no shortage of anecdotes, from the Fire Chief Dave Schmoke to surgeon Dr Scott Hacker, about name-occupation matches. But presumably there are rather more anecdotes that are rather less interesting about people whose names and jobs do not match. Likewise, one can find an occasional Bullitt who perishes from a gun shot wound, but there are even

more Blades who do not die by the sword.

However, there is some evidence that people's initials influence their choices, including how they die. People seem to favour products and careers that share initials with them, so that, perhaps, Peter prefers Pepsi (Hodson & Olson, 2005), and Harold tends to own a hardware store, while Roger is a roofer (Pelham et al., 2002). A recent study

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suggests that our preference for our own initials is strong enough to lead us to lesser rewards – or even punishments – when those outcomes share our initials (Nelson & Simmons, 2007). Those whose names start with C or D, for example, are more likely to receive those grades than are other students, albeit slightly, and baseball players whose names begin with K are more likely to strike out (a failure traditionally symbolised by a K).

“Those whose initials spell out nasty things, such as DIE, tend to do so prematurely”

Furthermore, those whose initials spell out nasty things, such as DIE, tend to do so prematurely, and more often by suicide, than those whose initials spell out nothing, and especially more than those fortunate enough, or with parents sufficiently farsighted, to have initials such as WIN (Christenfeld et al., 1999). This finding has been disputed, though not in a way that has convinced me (Christenfeld, in press), and it has been suggested that the finding is an artefact of a general shift in the popularity over time of positive and negative initials (Morrison & Smith, 2005).

Moving to whole names, it appears that Louis will tend to live in St. Louis, and Mary in Marysville, and that this effect, applying also to surnames, is not likely to be due entirely to parents naming children after their location, but to implicit preferences for one's own name, and variants of it (Pelham et al., 2003). Given how many surnames are derived from locations and professions, it is fitting that the names, some centuries later, get their causal turn.

Despite the challenging confounds in research on the impact of names, with name-givers generally being the source of both nature and nurture, it seems that the names do shape, in some ways, the fate of their bearers. Perhaps the thousands of

baby-naming books should add a new section reporting not only on the past of a name, but also on the future. The entry under 'Barbara' might include 'Greek name meaning "foreign"; could help your daughter move to the front of the class and signal that she is caucasian to potential employers, though it will suggest she is decades older to potential mates; could encourage her to move to Southern California; not well-combined with middle and last initials A.D.'

There is a trend in psychology, from behavioural genetics to Harris's 1998 book *The Nurture Assumption*, to suggest that parents' choices, other than of each other, play little role in their children's outcomes. Perhaps, though, they do get one last shot at shaping the next generation when they name it.



Nicholas Christenfeld is at the University of California, San Diego
nchristenfeld@usc.edu



Britta Larsen is at the University of California, San Diego