

## **The Attractiveness of Names**

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*After a brief account of the importance, and neglect, of the psychological study of names, the role of familiarity in liking for names is investigated. Some empirical research on first names and surnames is set in the context of two opposing theories in experimental aesthetics: the "mere exposure" and "inverted-U" hypotheses. A preference-feedback hypothesis that enables us to resolve some apparently contradictory results from the experiments, and to account for the existence of cyclical vogues in first names and other cultural items, is proposed.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

There can be no doubt that names are of considerable psychological importance. People's likes and dislikes for particular names are often strongly held, and the choice by parents of a first name for their newborn is one with many psychological implications. Knowledge of a first name can in many cases convey a good deal of information about the person possessing it. It usually tells us the sex of the person, though there are names such as Hilary, Leslie, and Vivian that can be used, sometimes with variations in spelling, for either sex. It often gives a fairly good idea of the person's age: women called Beatrice, Mabel, or Nellie, for example, are likely to have been born between 1900 and 1930, whereas Carol, Judith, and Sheila are more likely to have been born in the 1950s. It may also provide clues about social class: names like Jason, Lee, and Wayne are currently popular among working-class parents in England, whereas the middle-class readers of *The Times* prefer names such as Alexander, Edward, and William (Dunkling, 1977).

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Names can have powerful effects on behavior, and this is vividly illustrated among the Ashanti people of West Africa. Ashanti children are named according to the day of the week on which they are born, and there is a widespread consensus among the Ashanti that these names are strongly associated with personality. Thus Monday boys are supposed to be quiet and well-behaved, whereas Wednesday boys are seen as quick-tempered and aggressive. A study by Jahoda (1954) showed that the proportion of Monday boys who were delinquent was indeed significantly smaller than would be supposed by pure chance, and that Wednesday boys were more likely to commit offences against the person than were others. These findings provide some support for the notion that people “live up to their names.”

Another striking example of the psychological importance of names occurs among the Pondo tribesmen of southern Africa, whose kinship system gives rise to a set of taboos governing name avoidance by married women. A Pondo bride is forbidden to utter the name of her husband’s elder brothers, her father-in-law and his brothers, or her husband’s paternal grandfather, whether they are living or dead. She is not even permitted in everyday speech to use words whose principal syllable rhymes with any of these names. She is also forbidden to use the personal names of her husband’s mother, paternal aunts, and elder sisters, but she need not avoid words which rhyme with them (Hunter, 1961).

It is rather surprising, in view of anthropological evidence such as this, that psychologists have not devoted more attention to the study of names; the research literature is sparse and fragmented. Some recent work was carried out by Morgan, O’Neill, and Harré (1979) on the social functions of nicknames and their role in children’s culture, and a handful of studies (e.g., Lawson, 1973, 1974; Burning & Albott, 1974/1976) have investigated the personality stereotypes associated with different names. Arthaud, Hohneck, Ramsey, and Pratt (1948) questioned 201 American university students about their personal satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their own surnames. Subjects whose surnames were either extremely uncommon or extremely common in terms of the objective frequency in the population turned out to be least satisfied, while those with surnames of intermediate frequency were most satisfied. These results suggest that there may be a curvilinear relationship between familiarity and liking, with names of intermediate familiarity being liked most. Now this finding brings us to the central concern of this paper: the role of familiarity in the attractiveness of names.

### **FAMILIARITY AND LIKING: THE “MERE EXPOSURE” HYPOTHESIS**

A more parsimonious hypothesis than that above would be that people tend to like names in direct proportion to their familiarity with them – very

common, familiar names being liked most and unfamiliar ones being liked least. This suggestion leads to the prediction that if a sufficiently large group of individual preferences are averaged, a positive monotonic relationship will be found between familiarity and liking. The hypothesis that such a relationship holds for widely different classes of objects in our culture was first proposed by Zajonc (1968). Zajonc's "mere exposure" hypothesis, one of the landmarks of what has become known as the "new experimental aesthetics," states that repeated exposure to a stimulus increases our liking for it. Although popular wisdom might suggest that "familiarity breeds contempt," or that "absence makes the heart grow fonder," the "mere exposure" hypothesis has received empirical support from various investigators (see review by Harrison, 1977).

### FIRST NAMES

Our first two experiments on names (reported in full by Colman, Hargreaves, & Sluckin, 1981) were designed to investigate the relationship between familiarity and liking for first names in two different settings, namely England and Australia. Both use special experimental procedures that we have developed in order to maximize the range of the familiarity variable (see Sluckin, Hargreaves, & Colman, 1982, for further details). The essential features of the investigation were as follows. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (Withycombe, 1977) was divided into 100 sections of equal length, and in each section the first male or female name encountered was selected. The most common spelling of each name was chosen. The final list of 100 male names, from *Abraham* to *William*, included such uncommon names as *Balthasar* and *Fulbert*. The female names, from *Adeline* to *Zoe*, included rare names like *Etheldred* and *Griselda*. The 80 subjects in our English sample consisted of staff and students at the University of Leicester, as well as some students from local adult-education classes, while 80 students and staff at the University of Melbourne comprised the Australian sample. Each subject rated each of either the male or the female names on a 5-point scale, either from "very uncommon names in my experience" to "very common names in my experience," or from "names I dislike" to "names I like." These ratings were scored from 0 to 4, with "very uncommon" and "dislike" corresponding to a score of 0 and "very common" and "like" scoring 4.

Correlational analysis of the ratings revealed a very strong positive relationship between liking and familiarity for both boys' and girls' names in both samples. The three most liked boys' and girls' names in the English sample, for example—David, Peter, Richard, Clare, Elizabeth, and Sarah—all received high familiarity ratings. The converse was also true: the three least liked boys' and girls' names in the English sample—Oswald, Balthasar,

Clarence, Hilda, Ethel, and Gertrude—receiving very low familiarity ratings. This pattern is remarkably consistent; in the English study there were no examples of extremely well liked or extremely familiar names which received an average or lower than average mean rating on the other variable, and the converse was true for extremely unfamiliar and strongly disliked names. The same pattern emerged in the Australian results, but there were three exceptions among the girls' names that are of interest. Anastasia was the fourth most unfamiliar name to our Australian subjects, though it received a liking rating that was well above average. Similarly Melanie and Camilla, though ranked third and fourth in favorability by the Australians, received below-average ratings for familiarity. Generally speaking, however, the overwhelming conclusion to emerge from both experiments was that a strong positive correlation exists; the more familiar the name, the more it tends to be liked, and vice versa.

The familiarity ratings given to the names by the subjects in these experiments correspond roughly with what is known about the objective prevalence of first names among the subjects' contemporaries in English and Australian culture. The five male names rated as most familiar by the English subjects, for example, all appear in the *Index of Births and Deaths for England and Wales* among the 20 names most frequently given to newborn boys in 1950, and the five most unfamiliar male names were all chosen very infrequently between 1900 and the present. The five most familiar female names, with the exception of Caroline, were all in the top 30 names given to newborn girls in 1950, and the most unfamiliar female names were all chosen extremely rarely by parents after the turn of the century (Caroline was chosen rarely in 1950 but became somewhat more common in 1960).

A similar correspondence between familiarity ratings and the objective frequency of occurrence of first names was shown in the Australian results. For example, John, Peter, David, Stephen, and James were rated as the most familiar male names (in that order). A frequency count of birth announcements in the *Melbourne Sun* in 1950, which provides an estimate of the frequency with which various names were bestowed on newborn boys at that time, reveals that the six most frequently selected boys' names (in order) were John, Peter, Michael, David, Robert, and Stephen. Bearing in mind that Robert and Stephen were not included in the sample of names used in this experiment, it is clear that a high degree of correspondence exists between the subjective familiarity ratings of the subjects and the frequency with which names were chosen for newborn boys in Melbourne about a generation ago. The same correspondence exists for the girls' names used in our Australian experiment.

Our results also revealed a relationship between the liking ratings given by subjects for particular names and their objective prevalence. Generally speaking, the most well-liked names at any given time seem to be those that

have been increasing in objective prevalence over the previous 30 years or so, i.e., those that are being chosen increasingly frequently by parents. A comparison of the most frequently chosen names by Australian parents in 1950 with a similar count for 1975, for example, again using figures from the Melbourne *Sun*, reveals that the three most strongly liked male names in our experiment (David, Andrew, and Adrian) are all ranked higher in the 1975 list than in the 1950 list. This suggests that these names have become increasingly popular in recent years; this is particularly striking in the case of Adrian. Of the three most favorably rated female names, two (Sarah and Melanie) are ranked higher in the 1975 list than in the 1950 list. The third (Anne) was apparently chosen less frequently in 1975 than in 1950, but one may wonder whether the fall in popularity of this name may have been reversed since 1975 following the widely publicized marriage of Princess Anne to Captain Mark Phillips.

### THE "INVERTED-U" HYPOTHESIS

Our own research on likes and dislikes for various everyday objects, however (see Sluckin et al., 1982) suggests that the "mere exposure" hypothesis has important limitations; in some circumstances increased familiarity is associated with a *decline* in liking. A more general theory is required, and our experiments have shown that an *inverted-U* relationship between familiarity and liking holds for stimuli such as simple geometrical shapes and words. The inverted-U theory has its origins in the work of Wundt in the late 19th century, and has been expounded more recently by Berlyne (e.g., Berlyne, 1974). The "hedonic value," or pleasantness, of a stimulus is regarded in this theory as a function, rising to a peak and then falling, of the person's arousal; and arousal is considered to be directly related to the novelty of the stimulus.

Our work indicates that one of the key factors in deciding between these two alternatives may be the *range* of the novelty-familiarity continuum which is sampled: when a very wide range, from complete novelty to extremely high levels of familiarity is embraced, an inverted-U function seems to emerge. It may be that the Zajonc "mere exposure" effect is represented only by the rising part of the inverted-U curve, and that higher levels of exposure than those attained in Zajonc's studies would eventually produce a decline in liking. In the case of names, a properly chosen sample may span the novelty-familiarity continuum sufficiently widely to give rise to an inverted-U relationship. This would imply that when names are either very unfamiliar or very familiar they are not generally liked very much, but at some intermediate level of familiarity they achieve peak popularity.

A hypothesis such as this may enable us to account for the way in which many first names go through well-demarcated *cyclical vogues*. The girl's name Susan will serve as a typical example. This name occurred 63 times per 10,000 girls' names in the *Index of Births for England and Wales* in 1850. In 1875 it occurred 15 times per 10,000. In 1900 the frequency was 19; by 1925 it had dropped to 8. The name then gained rapidly in popularity, and by 1950 the frequency was 654, but a gradual decline set in once again; the frequencies for the years 1960, 1970, and 1975 were 446, 102, and 86, respectively. We can apply the inverted-U hypothesis to this phenomenon as follows. In choosing names for their children, parents would, on average, be expected to select names of intermediate familiarity, but these names would ipso facto become more common and therefore more familiar, thus causing parents to choose them less frequently; and the names would once more tend toward a state of intermediate frequency, and a new cycle of popularity would begin.

This process enables us to explain why, for example, Benjamin, Daniel, Matthew, Charlotte, Emma, and Rebecca were very popular choices for the names of infants born in England in the 1970s, whereas they were all unpopular 30 years earlier. Correspondingly, it can explain why Ethel, Gladys, Hilda, Albert, Ernest, and Walter were popular choices in England in 1900, while they are rarely chosen by modern parents. Some names, of course, come into vogue or fall more or less completely out of vogue for what may broadly be called cultural reasons unrelated to the processes described above. The name Glenn, for example, reached unprecedented heights of popularity in the United States following John Glenn's widely publicized space flight in 1962, and the name Adolf, once very popular in Germany, has virtually disappeared since World War II, while the variants of Mary are perennially fashionable in Christian (especially Catholic) countries, and so on.

## SURNAMES

The design and procedure of our experiment~~s~~ on surnames (Colman, Sluckin, and Hargreaves, 1981) were identical to those in the first names experiments, with 60 one-syllable and two-syllable surnames as stimuli, and 40 males and 40 females (mostly undergraduates at the University of Leicester) as subjects. The names were selected from the *Leicester Area Telephone Directory* according to the same procedure that was adopted for the first names; they ranged from Allen to Wright, and included very common surnames such as Smith and Brown as well as unusual ones such as Codling and Nall. Subjects' ratings of familiarity and liking were scored and analyzed as in the previous experiments. The analysis revealed, broadly speaking, that the most familiar names (e.g., Smith, Brown, and Davis), and the most un-

familiar names (e.g., Bamkin, Bodle, and Nall) tended to have low liking ratings, while the best-liked names (e.g., Shelley, Cassell, and Burton) tended to be of intermediate familiarity. This suggestion of an inverted-U relationship was tested by linear and curvilinear regression analyses, which showed that such a relationship was unequivocally present in the data. The 11 most unfamiliar surnames, and the two most familiar surnames, all received mean liking ratings which were well below average. Conversely, the 15 least-liked surnames all fell within the lower or upper thirds of the familiarity scale. And, of the 21 surnames which fell in the middle third of the familiarity scale, all but 6 received a liking rating that was higher than the average.

### THE “PREFERENCE-FEEDBACK” HYPOTHESIS

There is no indication in our results of any evidence for an inverted-U relationship between familiarity and liking for first names: the relationship is positive and monotonic. The fact that a Zajonc-type “mere exposure” effect seems to hold presents a problem for our earlier theorizing, since the extremely wide range of novelty-familiarity that was sampled would lead us to predict an inverted U. The apparent contradiction between this result and those of our earlier experiments on stimuli such as letters of the alphabet and words may arise for various reasons. It may be related to the range of the novelty-familiarity variable that was sampled in the different experiments; it may depend on the complexity of the stimuli under consideration; or, finally, it may be the result of inherent differences in the nature of the objects being studied.

The fact that an inverted-U familiarity-liking relationship does hold for surnames, as well as for the letters of the alphabet and words that were investigated in our earlier research, is all the more intriguing in the light of the finding that a Zajonc-type monotonic relationship holds for first names. We have attempted to explain this apparent contradiction by proposing the *preference-feedback hypothesis*. Let us start by assuming that all classes of stimuli are potentially subject to the inverted-U effect; that is to say, provided that people are exposed to the stimuli sufficiently often, their liking for them will follow a curve which rises at first, and then declines. This general rule may not apply in some exceptional cases, and only part of the inverted-U curve may be represented. In the case of complex stimuli which are not frequently exposed, for example, the peak of the curve may never be reached because sufficiently high levels of familiarity are not attained.

With this in mind, we can now distinguish between two types of stimuli: those whose exposure depends on voluntary choice, and those whose exposure is virtually beyond voluntary control. In the first category are cultural objects such as popular tunes and clothing fashions, whose popularity fluctu-

ates according to the preferences of different consumer groups. In the second category are stimuli such as geometrical shapes and letters of the alphabet, whose exposure is virtually unaffected by the preferences that people have for them. Stimuli in the second category may become so familiar that they pass well beyond the peak of the inverted U and decline in popularity; but those in the first category are prevented from attaining such high levels of familiarity because their exposure will tend to be reduced by voluntary choice as soon as their popularity starts to decline.

If we apply this distinction to names, we can see that first names fall very clearly into the first category: they are subject to voluntary choice, and the cultural feedback mechanism that we have proposed should come into operation. If a first name begins to decline in popularity through overexposure, parents will be more likely to avoid it when naming newborns, and its frequency of exposure and thus its familiarity in the culture will decrease. Other things being equal, the name's popularity may be expected to benefit from decreased familiarity, and it may later return to fashion. Thus, *at any given time*, our hypothesis predicts that familiarity and liking for first names should show a positive, monotonic relationship. *Over a period of time*, however, our hypothesis predicts that first names, as well as other cultural objects subject to voluntary choice, should display a cyclical waxing and waning of popularity. Our theory can thus account for the existence of cyclical vogues in first names, as well as the apparently contradictory Zajonc-type results found in our English and Australian experiments.

Most people exercise no control over their surnames, however; surnames fall into the second category of stimuli. Some surnames are so common that, like common words, they have been heard or read many thousands of times by most adults. According to our hypothesis, therefore, an inverted-U relationship between familiarity and liking for surnames should be expected; some surnames continue to be exposed even after they have passed the peak of the curve. The results of our last experiment confirm this expectation, and are in line with our previous studies of words and letters of the alphabet (both of which are also virtually independent of voluntary control).

Our theory may go some way towards explaining the well-known cyclical vogues in objects such as popular tunes and clothing fashions, as well as in first names. We are not suggesting, of course, that familiarity is the only factor that determines these patterns of liking; but that, nevertheless, it may be one of the most important. The popularity of certain figures in the mass media, such as television and film stars, as well as cultural variables such as social class and regional variation, undoubtedly exert a powerful influence on the attractiveness of particular names. It may be that the study of such influences in conjunction with our hypothesis will enable us to answer further questions that arise in the study of names and naming practices. What factors affect the periodicity of cycles of fashion in first names? Why do some names appear not to follow them, and is it possible to predict which particular

names will be rising or falling in popularity at any given time? Why is it easy to identify perennial favorites among boys' names, such as Andrew, David, James, and John, when it is surprisingly difficult to do the same for girls' names? The answers to these fairly specific questions may well turn out to have broad implications for the psychology of aesthetic preferences, as well as for the explanation of vogues and fashions.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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