

## Preferences for Christian names as a function of their experienced familiarity

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A sample of 80 English subjects and a comparable sample of 80 Australian subjects rated their familiarity with, or their liking for, either 100 randomly selected male Christian names or 100 randomly selected female Christian names. Positive linear relationships between familiarity and favourability, ranging from  $r = 0.568$  ( $P > 0.001$ ) for female names in the Australian sample to  $r = 0.824$  ( $P < 0.001$ ) for male names in the English sample, were found. The results are discussed in the light of monotonic (Zajonc-type) and non-monotonic (inverted U-type) functions relating to two variables which have been found in previous research with other classes of stimuli.

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Preferences for Christian names are influenced by unique aspects of personal experience, but there may also be more general principles at work in this attitudinal arena. One important factor, which may incidentally account for the apparently cyclic fashions in names (Seeman, 1972) is familiarity. Zajonc (1968) hypothesized that a positive monotonic function exists between familiarity and liking for all kinds of objects, and empirical evidence – reviewed by Harrison (1977) – has tended to confirm this for widely differing kinds of stimuli. Sluckin *et al.* (1980), however, found strong evidence for an inverted-U relationship in an investigation of familiarity and liking for one-syllable words. The evidence suggests that the key factor may be the *range* of novelty-familiarity sampled: an inverted-U relationship may emerge only when a very wide range is sampled. The two experiments reported below provide evidence on this question as it relates to Christian names in samples of English and Australian subjects.

### Experiment 1: English sample

#### Design

The design and methodology were based on the experiment on preferences for words by Sluckin *et al.* (1980). These experiments differ from most others in this area in using naturally occurring stimuli which for cultural reasons vary far more than can be achieved by laboratory exposure of initially unfamiliar stimuli, and in making use of between-subjects designs and subjective measures of both familiarity and liking.

#### Subjects and procedure

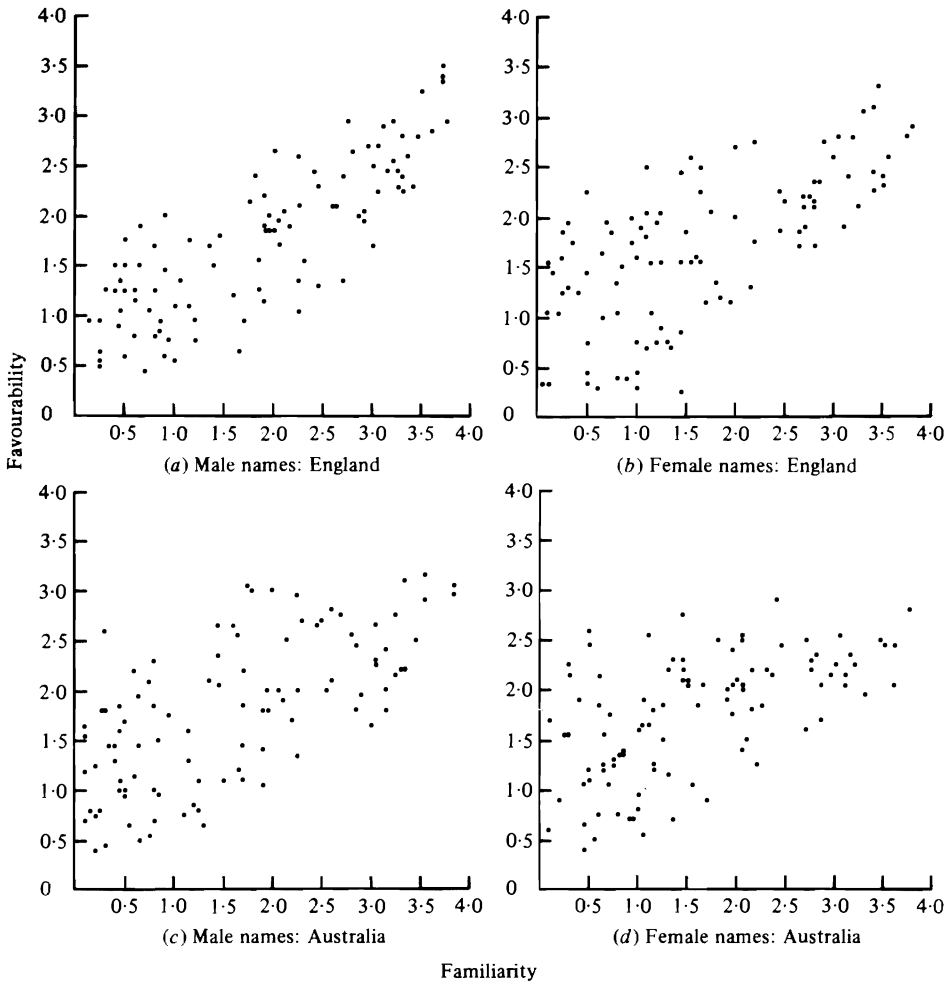
The subjects were 40 men and 40 women recruited from among the students and staff of the University of Leicester and from adult education classes in the area. Twenty subjects were randomly assigned to each of four treatment conditions involving the rating of familiarity or liking for male or female names respectively. Ages ranged from 15 to 68 with a median of 34.

The names were selected from the *Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* using a quasi-random procedure based on the method used by Sluckin *et al.* (1980), and the testing procedure was identical except that names rather than words were used. The 100 male names and 100 female names included very common names like *John* and *Anne* and very rare names like *Balthasar* and *Etheldred*.

#### Results

The ratings were scored from 0 ('very uncommon' or 'dislike') to 4 ('very common' or 'like'). For male names, the mean of the familiarity and favourability ratings were 1.86 (SD = 1.09) and 1.76 (SD = 0.76) respectively. For female names, the corresponding means were 1.66 (SD = 1.07) and 1.70 (SD = 0.74). For male names, the product moment correlation between familiarity and liking was  $r = 0.824$  ( $P < 0.001$ ), and for female names

it was  $r = 0.673$  ( $P < 0.001$ ). Scattergrams illustrating the familiarity–liking relationships for male and female names are shown in Figs 1(a) and (b) respectively.



**Figure 1.** Scattergrams showing the mean ratings of familiarity and favourability (liking) for male and female Christian names given by English subjects (Expt 1) and Australian subjects (Expt 2).

**Experiment 2: Australian sample**

The design and methodology were the same as in Expt 1, except that subjects were drawn from an Australian population and were tested individually. The 40 male and 40 female subjects were recruited from students and technical, clerical and academic staff at the University of Melbourne. Ages ranged from 18 to 50 with a median of 22.

*Results*

For male names, the mean familiarity and favourability ratings were 1.61 (SD = 1.09) and 1.80 (SD = 0.73) respectively. The corresponding means for female names were 1.60 (SD = 0.77) and 1.76 (SD = 0.61). The familiarity–favourability correlation for male names was  $r = 0.661$  ( $P < 0.001$ ), and for female names it was  $r = 0.568$  ( $P < 0.001$ ). The scattergrams illustrating these relationships are shown in Figs 1(c) and 1(d) respectively.

## Discussion

A highly significant degree of linear association between familiarity and liking for both male and female names emerged from both experiments. In Expt 1, four of the five most-liked male names (*David, Peter, Richard* and *John*) were also among the five most familiar, and two of the five least-liked male names (*Balthasar* and *Fulbert*) were also among the five least familiar. None of the most familiar or best-liked male or female names received an average or below average mean rating on the other variables, nor did any extremely unfamiliar or strongly disliked names receive an average or above average mean rating on the other variable. The results of Expt 2 reveal a similar pattern. All the evidence points to a predominantly rectilinear association in both experiments, and the scattergrams (Fig. 1) give no indication of any curvilinear trend.

The correlations were somewhat higher in the English than in the Australian sample. By means of Fisher's  $r$  to  $z$  transformations, the difference for male names was found to be marginally significant ( $z = 1.67$ ,  $0.05 < P < 0.10$ , two tailed), but the difference for female names failed to approach significance ( $z = 0.74$ ,  $0.05 < P < 0.46$ , two tailed). These differences may be related to the greater stereotyping of male than female names (Lawson, 1973, 1974; Bruning & Albott, 1974) and the more centralized character of the mass media in England than in Australia.

An explanation needs to be given for the monotonic Zajonc-type effects found in these experiments compared with the non-monotonic inverted-U effect found in our previous similar experiments on words (Sluckin *et al.*, 1980). Possibly the inverted-U has universal validity but only the rising part of the curve was sampled in the experiments on names; even the most familiar names are not nearly as common as some of the words used in the previous experiment. Another difference between the words and names used in these experiments merits comment. The popularity of names has a direct causal effect on their familiarity: the best-liked names are given most frequently to newborns, and they therefore tend to become more familiar. This tendency, which is probably either absent or much weaker in the case of words, tends to promote a monotonic familiarity-liking relationship. Common words may become so familiar that they pass the peak of the familiarity-liking curve, but Christian names are prevented from doing so by a self-regulating mechanism in naming practices. This speculation is consistent not only with the monotonic relationships found in these experiments, but also with the cyclical vogues referred to in the introductory section.

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