

First Names and First Impressions: A Fragile Relationship

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Given only first names, reliable differences are found in guesses about personal characteristics. It was hypothesized that this finding is strongly dependent on the lack of interference from competing information. Therefore such first-name effects should be fragile in that, if a subject is exposed to additional and relevant material, the differential effect of a first name would be mitigated. This interpretation was tested by exposing one group of subjects to a set of good and bad male first names, while a second group encountered the same names accompanied by photographs. The results showed that there was a replication of previously reported differences between these good and bad names if no photograph was present, but the addition of the photograph blocked the differential effect of first names. The results paralleled a similar finding with female first names. Overall, the results argue against too much emphasis on the possible deleterious effects of a particular first name.

Folk psychology assures us that many aspects of first impressions are vitally important. Clothes, hairstyle, manner of speech, and expressed views may contribute to an evaluative halo that frames the judgment of an individual's actions. A failure to present the best initial appearance may lead to devaluation of the person. We are further warned that the effects of a bad first impression persist in a subtle and pernicious manner.

One characteristic we present initially is our first name. First names differ in personal desirability as evidenced by the common use of alternative nicknames (Rickel & Anderson, 1981). First names also engender systematic

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differences in first-impression character judgments both within and across gender (Lawson, 1971, 1973, 1974, 1985). For example, Duffy and Ridinger (1981) report a higher rating of "potency," using a semantic differential analysis (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957), attributed to masculine, as opposed to feminine, first names. Finally, first names have been suggested to contribute strongly to the putative enduring qualities of a first impression effect (Marcus, 1976).

It would seem to be a giant step between finding differences in guesses about character from only a first name and the presence of differential treatment based on that first name. But this is what was reported by Garwood, Cox, Kaplan, Wasserman, and Sulzer (1980). They displayed six photographs of women of "equivalent" attractiveness in a booth in a college student union. Three photographs were paired with undesirable first names, three were paired with desirable first names. Students passing by were urged to vote for the "Beauty Queen" of an upcoming celebration. A significant difference in votes was found between those photographs paired with undesirable first names and those paired with desirable first names.

The results of Garwood et al. (1980) may represent a statistically significant but practically fragile effect. Hensley and Spencer (1985), in a replication of the Garwood et al. experiment, found a significant effect of first-name desirability also, but emphasized that the difference accounted for a miniscule amount of the variance. They concluded that the effect of an undesirable female first name was very weak.

There are other reasons to suggest that the effect of first-name desirability on first impressions may be present but should be fragile. We may have strongly feelings about the desirability of a particular name based on (e.g.) our experience with a highly liked or disliked uncle. However, it would seem that the information imparted by a first name is much less predictive of current behavior than (e.g.) aspects of appearance involving clothing, hairstyle, or jewelry. Commonly, the former is bequeathed by parents, the latter reflects recent history of the individual. And we would suggest that people are aware of this distinction to some degree.

This awareness of distinctions among characteristics of individuals suggests that such initial evaluations associated with first names should be fragile in their ultimate influence. To the extent that people are restricted to judgments based on only first names, a first-name effect should be present. But a first-name effect will be strongly reduced given the presence of some other, better, predictor. A recent photograph should be a better predictor of current behavior than the first name.

This fragility interpretation was tested in the following manner. We obtained a set of male first names that had been found to differ widely in judged desirability. Male first names were chosen as a logical extension to

the previous work with female first names. These "good" and "bad" first names came from Lawson's (1985) survey of over 450 male first names, which had been ranked using a semantic differential technique (Lawson, Metvier, & Metvier, 1984). One group of subjects was given a set of first names alone, and we determined whether we would replicate the differences between good first names and bad first names that were reported in Lawson (1985). A second group was also given a photograph to accompany each name. The photographs were graduation photographs taken from a recent college yearbook. Each showed a male of innocuous appearance in conventional pose. Our prediction was that the additional information provided by the innocuous appearance shown in the photograph would strongly reduce any differential effect of the names.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were 80 college students, 40 men and 40 women. They were selected from students in and around various campus buildings (library, music, science, cafeteria), and asked to participate immediately in a short study at the location. A subject could only participate once.

Materials

Eight male names were used. Four names (David, Jon, Joshua, and Gregory) were classified as good; four names were classified as bad (Oswald, Myron, Reginald, and Edmund). The classification of names as good or bad was determined from their position in either the extreme upper or lower end of Lawson's (1985) distribution of ratings of name desirability.

Two forms were used. Each form had two good names and two bad names. Each form began with the instructions, "We regularly make first impressions, we also gather first impressions about other people. Choose an adjective to describe your impression of . . ." This was followed by a list of the four names.

Underneath the instructions, the four names were centered in capital letters with five sets of bipolar adjectives under each name. The set of adjectives were good/bad, strong/weak, active/passive, sincere/insincere, and intelligent/dumb. These were adjectives used by Lawson (1985).

For one-half of the subjects, a photograph accompanied each name. Four different photographs were used. They were graduation photographs taken from a 1984 college annual, and each showed a male of typical facial

appearance for this college. Differences between photographs were minimal, as each comprised a conventional pose in suit-and-tie dress. Each photograph was fastened to a white index card and the name was presented underneath in capital letters. Each photograph was presented equally often with every name over the study.

An additional separate questionnaire asked the subject to rate the extent of reliance on name or photograph in the photograph condition. The scale comprised 1 (*name only*) to 5 (*photograph only*). In the case of the no-photograph condition, subjects were asked which they would rely on more if a photograph had been present.

Procedure

There were two general stimulus conditions: photograph and no photograph. In the photograph condition, subjects were asked to rate their first impression on the questionnaire after viewing each photograph. In the no-photograph condition, subjects were given the questionnaire alone. Otherwise, there was no difference in treatment of subjects.

A student was stopped by the experimenter and asked to participate in a study on first impressions. Upon agreement, the subject was handed the questionnaire, a photograph set (if in the photograph condition), and a pen. The subject read the instructions and the experimenter answered any questions about the procedure. Subjects were encouraged to respond with their initial judgment and were assured of anonymity. When the subject finished this task, the second questionnaire was presented. It asked the extent to which the rating was based on appearance. The no-photograph group differed in that no photographs were given, and the final question was phrased in terms of *if* a photograph had been available.

There were 40 subjects in each general condition. Sex of subject, names, and photographs were counterbalanced such that each name was paired equally often with each photograph and was viewed by equal numbers of each sex.

Scoring was based on which member of each pair of bipolar adjectives was selected. Selecting the positive member of the pair was counted as 1 point, the negative member counted as 0. A particular name's score could range from 0 to 5 based on the responses of a single subject. Scores were averaged across subjects.

The sex of each subject was recorded.

RESULTS

Ratings by subjects in the no-photograph condition replicated the differences between good and bad names reported in Lawson (1985). But when

Table I. Mean Name Ratings With and Without Photograph Present^a

Name	No photograph		Photograph	
	Mean	SE	Mean	SE
Good				
David	4.00	.32	3.60	.26
Jon	3.80	.28	3.65	.27
Joshua	3.70	.26	3.45	.21
Gregory	3.05	.29	2.80	.24
Bad				
Oswald	2.50	.24	3.75	.23
Myron	2.30	.33	3.60	.25
Reginald	2.55	.28	2.85	.22
Edmund	2.05	.31	3.15	.27

^aA higher score indicates a more positive rating. *N*: 20 per cell. *SE*: standard error.

photographs were added to the task, the difference between good and bad names disappeared.

Table I shows the mean positive scores for individual names for both the no-photograph and photograph condition. The individual names are grouped according to their classification of good or bad. For the no-photograph condition, there was no overlap of mean scores between the good-name and bad-name groups. Overall the difference between good names and bad names was significant ($F = 39.4$; $df = 1, 158$; $p < .001$). There was very little difference between the ratings assigned by males and females ($F = .004$; $df = 1, 158$; $p > .95$).

The results under the photograph condition present a very different pattern. The distribution of scores appears very similar for the good- and bad-name groups. The mean difference between the name groups was very small, and not close to conventional levels of statistical significance ($F = .05$; $df = 1, 158$; $p > .82$). The effect of sex of subject was stronger but, again, was not close to conventional levels of statistical significance ($F = 1.17$; $df = 1, 158$; $p = .28$).

The size of the name effect, or variance accounted for by the good name vs. bad-name grouping, can be determined using η^2 (eta squared; see Kiess, 1989, for a discussion of this statistic). For the no-photograph condition, $\eta^2 = .199$, or about 20% of variance is explained by name desirability. This value is considered to indicate a large effect. For the photograph condition, $\eta^2 = .0003$, or about 0% of variance is explained by the name-value grouping. This value of explained variance indicates the almost total elimination of effect of the name on judgment when photographs were available.

The group that was shown photographs indicated that they relied more on photographs in making judgments ($\bar{X} = 4.4$). Assuming that the expected value for no preference between reliance on name vs. photograph was

3.0 (the middle value of the scale), the obtained preferences were significantly biased towards use of photographs in making judgments ($t = 10.5$; $df = 39$; $p < .001$). The group that was *not* shown photographs indicated that they would have relied more on photographs *if* they had been used ($\bar{X} = 3.7$). Assuming indifference would be reflected in choice of the middle value, the preference toward photographs was statistically significant ($t = 5.19$; $df = 39$; $p < .001$).

t -Score values also may be converted to η^2 values for an indication of explained variance. For the photograph condition, $\eta^2 = .73$, or about 73% of variance, is accounted for by preference toward use of pictures. For the no-photograph condition, $\eta^2 = .41$, or about 41% of variance, is accounted for by a preference toward use of pictures. These values show that the preference toward reliance on pictures is a substantial effect.

DISCUSSION

The results were very clear. When no photographs were used, the difference between good and bad names reported by Lawson (1985) was replicated. The addition of photographs to the task eliminated the difference in ratings between the good-name group and the bad-name group.

The replication of the original effect in Lawson (1985) showed that there was agreement between his subjects and ours in the evaluations of these names in the absence of any other information. Innocuous photographs of male college students were introduced into the task in a manner such that each name was equally paired with each photograph. This change in the task eliminated the group difference in ratings between good and bad names for our subjects. It seems reasonable to suggest that a similar effect might have occurred with Lawson's subjects.

Our results were similar to those reported by Hensley and Spencer (1985). They concluded that the deleterious effects of an undesirable female first name were very weak when accompanied by pictures of women equated for high attractiveness. Our results strengthen their interpretation, and extend them to the effects of an undesirable male first name when accompanied by photographs that epitomized ordinariness.

The blunting of differences produced by the use of photographs is reasonably attributed to our choice of photographs showing men of innocuous appearance and the operation of presenting each photograph equally often with each name. The finding of a blunting effect makes two general points. First, it illustrates the difference between statistical significance and practical significance. Both Lawson (1985) and this study found a significant difference between the same groups of names in the absence of any other

information. Further, the η^2 value indicated that the effect size was large. But the introduction of competing information eliminated that difference in our study. This suggests a basic fragility of a first-name influence on first impressions.

Second, our fragility interpretation suggests that subjects in many single-variable experiments are often suffering from "deprivation" in that they are not permitted the use of information that is typically employed. For example here, those subjects who were not given photographs indicated that they would have relied more on that information if it had been present. This implies that a more fruitful approach to practical effects of stereotyping is to discover the set of factors, and their weightings, that are normally used in evaluation.

More generally, it seems important to recognize that first impressions are often simply that alone. They are an initial guess made in the absence of further information about the individual. With further experience the characteristics of the individual may assume more importance. Rather than emphasizing that tangential factors may have an initial effect in limited situations, it seems more important to examine the long-term effect of conduct by the individual.

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