Mr Lemaître is a good teacher: An experimental study of personological inference activated by names

Mr Lemaître est un bon enseignant : Étude expérimentale d’un effet d’inférence dispositionnelle activé par les patronymes

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Abstract

Research suggests that surnames are associated with connotations that affect judgment toward their owners. Some surnames are formed with qualifying adjectives and this characteristic has received little scientific interest particularly when a surname has the property to represent an attribute associated with an individual ability or a professional skill. An ad offering private lessons for pupils was published in various local French newspapers which come from a hypothetical teacher named Mr Lemaître (literally The Teacher), Mr Lebon (some- one with high abilities), Legrand (someone who is tall), Mr Leray, Mr Martin or Mr Le Gal (surnames that are build with no qualifying adjective). It was found that Mr Lemaître and Mr Lebon received significantly more calls than the ad with the four other surnames; and that these four latter surnames were not different among them. The capacity of some surnames to activate an attribute that in turn affects behavior toward their owners is discussed to explain these results.

Résumé

La recherche a montré que les patronymes sont associés à des connotations qui affectent le jugement de leurs porteurs. Certains noms de famille sont des adjectifs et cet aspect a été peu étudié par la recherche notamment lorsque l’on considère la capacité du nom de famille à représenter un trait en lien avec une aptitude personnelle ou une compétence professionnelle. Une annonce pour des cours de soutien scolaire a été diffusée et émanait d’un hypothétique enseignant nommé M. Lemaître, M. Lebon, M. Legrand, M. Leray, M. Martin ou M. Le Gal. Les résultats montrent que les annonces de M. Lemaître et M. Lebon ont reçu significativement plus de contacts que la même annonce utilisant les autres patronymes, ces derniers ne présentant pas de différence entre eux. La capacité de certains noms à activer un trait pilotant ensuite le jugement et le comportement des individus est discutée pour expliquer ces résultats.

Key-words

Names, attribute, attractiveness

Mots-clés

Nom de famille, attribut, préférence

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Allport (1937) suggested that one’s name is one of the most important components of an individual’s self-identity. However, names, and particularly surnames, can also represent social identity, status, ethnicity, origin and occupation (Amadieu, 2006; Garner, 2005). Some surnames are formed with qualifying adjectives; yet this aspect has received little interest in social psychology of names (Guéguen, Dufourcq-Brana, & Pascual, 2005). Historically, research into the psychology of names has focused on three main areas of investigation. A first line of inquiry deals with the relationship between the familiarity of a name and how attractive or appealing it is to others, with inconsistent results. Some studies in this area show a linear relation between attractiveness (I like/don’t like this name) and familiarity (I am familiar/not familiar with this name) where familiar names receive more positive evaluation than unfamiliar names (e.g. Colman, Hargreaves, & Sluckin, 1981a). Other research suggests more of a quadratic relationship (e.g., Colman, Sluckin, & Hargreaves, 1981b) with the most and the least familiar names receiving less positive evaluation than those with intermediate familiarity. A second axis of research emphasizes the ethnicity of a name and the effect this attribute can have on people’s judgment. Several studies have shown that names with a strong ethnic attribute often carry negative connotations (Amadieu, 2006; Mair, 1986; Radelet & Pierce, 1985). Names act as cues to different traits, such as ethnic background, which in turn prompt stereotypes that influence behavior (Luscri & Mohr, 1998). Finally, a third line of research, and our study falls into this category, concerns this ability of names to activate impressions that subsequently influence behavior towards their owners. As such it has been possible to show that pleasant-sounding names can have an effect on people’s judgment. Phonetic features of surnames influence perception and judgment of others towards the people the names identify. Smith (1998) examined 42 U. S. Presidential elections from 1824 through 1992 establishing, for each of the two candidates in contention, an esthetic score of the candidate’s surname based on phonetic features of the names (e.g., number of syllables, fricative consonants, stressed vowels, etc.). In over 80% of cases the surname with the most esthetic score received the greatest popular vote. Social psychologists have also studied the effect of names that reflect attributes associated with
personal, professional and social qualities or abilities. For example, names such as Lebon (good, skilled), Lemaître (teacher, master) or Ledoyen (dean, elder) convey traits of ability and experience. Using trial reports of robbery and murder, Luscri and Mohr (1998) have shown that a defendant named “Savage” is considered more likely to commit such crimes than someone called “Roach”. However, this effect was found only when participants were not informed of the details of the crimes committed. These authors emphasize that while it is a commonly-encountered name, the word savage is also an adjective which impelled participants to attribute a savage trait to the target personality. In Luscri and Mohr’s (1998) study, the name-trait becomes a personality attribute of its owner. To our knowledge, this is the only published study on this topic. The experiment presented hereafter builds on this research to establish the effect of name-traits that have a personologic attribute.

Firstly, the name-attribute studied by Luscri and Mohr (1998) was a negative one. So it becomes interesting to know if positive name-traits can increase positive judgments. Secondly, these authors focused on individuals’ ability to make judgments but did not study participants’ behavior. As such, the link between judgment and behavior has not been observed systematically (Joule & Beauvois, 1998). Indeed, while research has shown that either first names alone or first-names combined with surnames (Smith, 1998) can affect behavior of others towards the named person, the effect of the surname per se has never been studied.

Our goal was to study the impact of a name-trait related to aptitude or to personal quality on the attractiveness of its owner. We conceived of an advertisement offering private lessons for pupils where the name of the advertiser evoked a trait related to education or reflecting another pertinent ability. These name-traits were compared with others that conveyed a physical attribute or that carried no attribute at all. Several advertisements were published in various local newspapers offering private lessons for pupils. Each time an advertisement was published it carried a surname that literally evokes a trait related with education or with a more common ability. We hypothesized that an advertisement citing a name that conveys pedagogic or professional skill would
receive more response than those advertisements with names that reflecting only a physical attribute or no attribute.

Method

Participants

The participants included 403 people who responded to an advertisement proposing private lessons in mathematics and who telephoned to obtain further information.

Materials

A newspaper advertisement without any information other than text was designed for our experiment. This advertisement offered private lessons for pupils who have difficulties at school. Precaution was taken to write the advertisement in the same vein as those advertisements for school support found in the newspapers where our advertisement was to be printed. To ensure the similarity of our advertisement with those commonly published, we analyzed advertisements that appeared in local newspapers during a 3-month period prior to our experiment. The text of our advertisement was as follows: “Mr (surname) a High-School Mathematics Teacher with 27 years of teaching experience offers his help for students from the 6th to the 12th grade. Increase in school results and progress are guaranteed. I work from home. Please call 06 74 91 20 53 for further information.” This text was used throughout the experiment with only the surname cited in the text varying according to the experimental condition.

Procedure

Our advertisement was printed monthly for a period of two years in the classified section of four different weekly newspapers delivered free of charge in four different locations in Brittany, France. To obtain test names associated with personological or physical attributes and control names that carry no attribute we asked undergraduates business students (n=103) to suggest names that were also qualifying adjectives describing people with 1) good teaching ability, 2) strong professional skills or 3) positive physical attributes. The names we retained were those most
often cited by the students: 1) Lemaitre (teacher, master), 2) Lebon (good, skilled) and 3) Legrand (tall). We selected three other names according to their familiarity and frequency in the French population, as reported by Mergnac (2005), and avoiding names previously cited by the students. The first two of these control names (Leray and Le Gal) were chosen because their consonance is similar to the three test names and they carry no personal attribute. The third control name (Martin) was selected as a commonly-encountered name (Mergnac, 2005) in the Brittany region of France where the experiment was conducted.

The advertisement was published monthly in four different newspapers over a two-year period, appearing in the third and fourth weeks of each month. The exact same text was printed each time, with only the name being changed according to a random order. Over the two-year experimental period, a total of 96 advertisements (12 months × 2 years × 4 districts) were published. Using 6 different surnames, 16 similar advertisements were published in the local newspapers twice per year, in each district (2 × 2 × 4 = 16). To ensure that the diffusion order was randomized, we used a software program that generated a random order to build the advertisement diffusion order. Because each advertisement citing one of the six names was published twice in the same year, we formatted our data set as follows: Name1-1st sending, Name1-2nd sending; Name2-1st sending, Name2-2nd sending… and so forth for the 6 surnames. The randomizer software selected a diffusion order for the first 6 months of the year and again for the last 6 months of the year. We proceeded in a similar way during the second year, using caution to ensure that the randomizer did not assign, for a given advertisement, the same diffusion month used during the first year.

Response to the advertisement was monitored from the first day of appearance of the advertisement until the 10th day following the second appearance of the advertisement. Callers were asked where they had seen the advertisement. For ethical reasons, as individuals were deceived and called us for their children, each caller was informed that it was not possible to accept further students but three telephone numbers and addresses of three good available mathematics professors, with the same expertise
than in the advertisement were given to the caller. The number of people calling for further information during this period was designated as the dependent variable in statistical analyses.

Results

A total of 403 people responded to the advertisements over the two-year period of the experiment. The numbers of callers responding to the advertisement according to the surname conditions are presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Morbihan</th>
<th>Finistère</th>
<th>Côtes-d’Armor</th>
<th>Ille-et-Vilaine</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Surname</td>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>Year 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lemaître</td>
<td>1st publication</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2nd publication</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebon</td>
<td>1st publication</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2nd publication</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legrand</td>
<td>1st publication</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2nd publication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leray</td>
<td>1st publication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2nd publication</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>1st publication</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2nd publication</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le Gal</td>
<td>1st publication</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2nd publication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We conducted a set of two-way log-linear analyses testing interaction effects between surname (dependent variable) and each of the other variables associated with the appearance of advertisements: 6 (surname) × 4 (location); 6 (surname) × 2 (year); 6 (surname) × 2 (appearance per year). We showed a main effect of surname \( \chi^2 (5, N = 403) = 24.7, p < .001 \). There was no significant effect when considering the year of publication \( \chi^2 (1, N = 403) \).
0.10, \( p = .76 \), the appearance of the advertisement each year \( (\chi^2 (1, N = 403) = 0.09, p = .77) \) or the location where the advertisements were published \( (\chi^2 (3, N = 403) = 5.92, p = .12) \). As well, no statistical interaction effect between surname and district, year of publication or the appearance per year was found.

Additional pair wise comparisons of the test and control names showed that the name Lemaître received significantly more responses than all of the other names except for Lebon (Legrand \( \chi^2 (1, N = 152) = 7.61, p = .006 \); Leray \( \chi^2 (1, N = 142) = 13.63, p < .005 \); Martin \( \chi^2 (1, N = 145) = 11.59, p = .007 \); Le Gal \( \chi^2 (1, N = 157) = 5.36, p = .02 \); Lebon \( \chi^2 (1, N = 179) = 0.27, ns \)). The name Lebon received more calls than Legrand \( (\chi^2 (1, N = 145) = 5.03, p = .03) \), Leray \( (\chi^2 (1, N = 135) = 10.14, p = .002) \) and Martin \( (\chi^2 (1, N = 138) = 8.37, p = .004) \), but not Le Gal \( (\chi^2 (1, N = 150) = 3.23, p = .07) \).

**Discussion**

In this study, we found that the same advertisement associated with different surnames led to variation in the behavioral responses of readers. Congruent with our hypothesis, surnames carrying an attribute describing an educational occupation (Lemaître) or inferring skillfulness (Lebon) increased the attractiveness of the advertisements for parents who were looking for a tutor to help their children. These results confirm and extend those found by Luscri and Mohr (1988) showing that an individual named “Sav-age” was evaluated as more likely to commit crime than someone named “Roach”. In our experiment, we found that the influence of the name-trait was not limited to variation in the judgment about its owner, as in the study by Luscri and Mohr (1988) but also affected the behavior of the reader. Because Luscri and Mohr (1988) only tested negative name-traits, our data extend their results by showing that this process occurs with name-traits that carry positive connotations.

Moreover, we found that it is not the name-trait per se that influenced readers’ behavior but the link between a name-trait and a reader’s expectations. Indeed, the advertisement with the name Legrand was found to have no impact on reader response because it did not receive more calls than the advertisements
with no-attribute names (Leray, Le Gal, Martin). This suggests that the attributes evoked by a name are not solely responsible for the effect that was observed. Indeed, there appears to be a relationship between name-trait and expectation that is necessary to really increase the attractiveness of a name. In our study, this link between name-trait and expectation is likely to have contributed to the high response observed for the advertisements citing the names Lemaître and Lebon. These names evoke attributes which are relevant for someone who is looking for a person to tutor their child. A physical attribute connected with height would not be appropriate in such a case. However, it could be argued that in a different context, a name that evokes physical strength or height could have greater attractiveness given the fact that it would be in accordance with some individuals’ expectations (for example an advertisement offering a job in security). A systematic examination of the association between name-trait and expectation is now necessary (for example: Duverger [Orchard]) for someone who sells fruits, Couturier [tailor, seamstress] for a textile salesman, or Cellier [wine cellar] for an oenologist). This expectation hypothesis could also be tested with advertisements using name-traits that are incongruent with expectations, such as Petit (Small) for a bodyguard or watchman job, Legros (Fat) for a model, Bègue (Stutters) for a telephone sales operator.

These personological connotations of names do not seem to be explained by the usual opposition between common and uncommon frequency of surnames. Several studies show that familiarity of names is associated in a positive linearly way with judgment. (Colman et al., 1981a; Hargreaves, Colman, & Sluckin, 1983). However, results appear to be inconsistent since a quadratic relationship between familiarity of names and judgment has also been reported (Colman et al., 1981b). This discrepancy may be explained by cultural factors because the first study cited used English surnames whereas the second study added Australian surnames in its evaluation. The names Martin and Le Gal, used in our experiment, are the most frequent and familiar surnames in the geographical area where the experiment took place but they lack the attractiveness of the more unfamiliar and less common names, Lemaître and Lebon. Considering the linear model of the studies cited above, we would have expected
that the advertisements with the most frequently-encountered names, Martin and Legal, should have received more responses than the other surnames used. Now, this is not the observational pattern found in our experiment. Similarly, congruent with the quadratic model found by Colman et al. (1981a), we would have expected the advertisements citing the names with middle familiarity and frequency, Leray and Legrand, should have received more behavioral responses among the readers. Again, this is not what we found in our experiment. Instead, in our study, the advertisements with the middle frequency names received as much response as those advertisements citing the most frequently-encountered names (Mergnac, 2005). Thus, it seems that frequency alone is not sufficient to explain the behavioral responses of our participants.

Our results clearly present an interest for the literature focusing on name influence. It is well known that discriminative judgments are activated by surnames according to their geographical origin and ethnicity (see Amadieu, 2006, for a review) or according to their familiarity for people (Colman et al., 1981a; Hargreaves et al., 1983). However, if studies conducted in a laboratory setting have shown that name-traits can affect judgment, our study shows that behavior is also influenced when a name-trait is connected with the expectations of someone who is exposed to it. To our knowledge, this point of view concerning influence of names on judgment and behavior has not been studied before. Future research may well benefit from experimental designs that consider names as factors that can influence cognition and, in turn, affect judgment and behavior of others towards the people who are named. Moreover, such studies may have practical application and managerial interest in recruitment where an appreciation of the relevance of laws devoted to the CV anonymity is advocated.
References


