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The “Name Game”: Affective and Hiring Reactions to First Names

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Abstract:

Purpose: The paper seeks to examine how the uniqueness and ethnicity of first names influence affective reactions to those names and their potential for hire.

Design/methodology/approach: In study 1, respondents evaluated 48 names in terms of uniqueness and likeability, allowing us to select names viewed consistently as Common, Russian, African-American, and Unusual. In Study 2 respondents assessed the uniqueness and likeability of the names, and whether they would hire someone with the name.

Findings: Results indicated that Common names were seen as least unique, best liked, and most likely to be hired. Unusual names were seen as most unique, least liked, and least likely to be hired. Russian and African-American names were intermediate in terms of uniqueness, likeability and being hired, significantly different from Common and Unique names, but not significantly different from each other.

Research limitations/implications: The name an individual carries has a significant impact on how he or she is viewed, and conceivably, whether or not the individual is hired for a job.

Practical implications: Human resource professionals need to be aware that there seems to be a clear bias in how people perceive names. When resumés are screened for hiring, names should be left off. Our findings also suggest that when selecting, parents may want to reconsider choosing something distinctive.

Originality/value: This study offers original findings in regards to names, combining diverse research from social psychology and labor economics, and offering practical implications.

Keywords: [Recruitment](#), [Affective psychology](#), [Ethnic groups](#), [Discrimination](#)

Despite laws (e.g. the 1964 Civil Rights Act) and a growing social/cultural inclination towards fairness, discrimination in hiring continues ([Darity and Mason, 1998](#)). For example, a recent study found that a Caucasian applicant with a conviction for selling drugs was more likely to be called back after a job interview than an African-American with no record ([Pager, 2003](#)). Like most research on hiring discrimination, that study examined the interview process, where interviewers are obviously aware of the race or possible ethnic origin of the applicant (e.g. [Sacco et al., 2003](#)). However, most applicants for a job do not make it to an interview. They are excluded through information found in a cover letter, an application or a resumé. It is possible for cover letters and such to influence recruiters, for example, through ingratiation ([Varma et al., 2006](#)). However, if race or ethnic origin is not specified, it is assumed that this process is race-neutral. Yet, there can be many clues signaling race or ethnicity, one of the primary ones being the applicant's name. Some names imply that the individual is African-American (Jamal and Lakisha), while others sound Caucasian (Greg and Emily) ([Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2003](#)). How are these names perceived by people who make hiring decisions? This is the focus of our research.

Literature review

Extensive research in social psychology has demonstrated that when we perceive others as being similar to ourselves, we are attracted to them ([Byrne, 1969](#)). Much of this research has concentrated on how similar attitudes lead to greater attraction, and dissimilar attitudes lead to less attraction. We tend to like that which is familiar and similar to us. Additional research has shown that we are also attracted to people with similar values ([Turban and Jones, 1988](#)), personalities ([DiMarco, 1974](#)), and demographic backgrounds ([Glaman](#)

[et al., 1996](#)). This research has examined similarity in work groups, between superiors and subordinates, and between interviewers and applicants. However, as we noted above, perceptions of similarity or dissimilarity can be made before meeting a person, perhaps based on a person's name. A common or familiar first name will be perceived as similar, while an unusual name will appear dissimilar. How does the uniqueness of various types of first names influence affective reactions to those names?

Our research integrates earlier research from two academic areas that have examined first names. First, there is considerable research in social psychology on how an individual's name elicits impressions about the individual, even prior to interaction. [Mehrabian \(1990, 2001\)](#) and others in social psychology have examined how a variety of factors influence the perceptions of people with certain names. Studies have found, for example, that unique names (unusual names or unusual spellings) connote less attractive characteristics than names that are more common ([Mehrabian, 2001](#)), and were seen as less desirable ([Busse and Seraydarian, 1978](#); [Mehrabian, 1992](#)). Most of these studies examine people's evaluative reactions to people with these names, asking respondents to evaluate across various dimensions (e.g. ethical, successful, fun, masculinity). Only one study examined decisions made about people with different names. [Garwood et al. \(1980\)](#) found that desirable names led to more votes in selecting a beauty queen.

Other name attributes have also been studied. Nicknames have been found to imply less successful characteristics ([Mehrabian and Piercy, 1993a](#)). With male names, longer names connoted more ethical caring, and more success ([Mehrabian and Piercy, 1993b](#)). [Leirer et al. \(1982\)](#) found that formal versions of a name (e.g. Robert versus Bob or Bobby) elicit different inferences concerning personality. [Joubert \(1994\)](#) found that rare names were rated as lower in class status than more common names. [Dinur et al. \(1996\)](#) found that Israeli student preferences for names corresponded with their stereotypes about the names.

In summary, first names lead to a variety of implied characteristics. The most consistent findings were that more unique names are seen as less desirable and tend to elicit more unfavorable

characteristics. The research did not directly examine racial and ethnic differences, nor (with one exception) did it investigate decisions based on the names.

The second area of research comes from labor economics, and examines how African-American names may influence hiring decisions and life outcomes. [Fryer and Levitt \(2004\)](#) describe how the names chosen by African-American parents have shifted over time. Prior to the 1970s, African-Americans tended to choose common names for their children. Beginning in the 1970s, however, to be distinct or unique, African-American parents increasingly chose African sounding names, and this pattern continues today. The names tend to incorporate elements of both African and American culture ([Lieberson and Mikelson, 1995](#))[1]. [Fryer and Levitt's \(2004\)](#) data indicates that not only are these names distinctively African-American, but that among those born in the last two decades, "a distinctly Black name is now a much stronger predictor of socioeconomic status" (p. 801). This study found that African-sounding names tend to be more common among lower-class African-Americans. So names can imply not only race, but also economic class. However, in looking at life outcomes, [Fryer and Levitt \(2004\)](#) found that distinctly African-American names are unrelated to the life outcomes, after including controls for education, education of parents, age of mother, marital status of mother, and other factors. They suggest, however, that names may be correlated with other determinants of productivity that are not typically captured by the information provided in a resumé.

Employing an experimental design, [Bertrand and Mullainathan \(2003\)](#) examined how names influence callbacks for job interviews. These authors sent out resumé with a variety of African-American and Caucasian-sounding names. Their results indicated that resumé with African-sounding names received fewer callbacks than the Caucasian names. In addition, a higher-quality resumé elicited more callbacks with Caucasian names, but the greater quality had no impact on callbacks when paired with an African-American name. This research was repeated and publicized in a 20/20 segment on ABC, where they posted 22 pairs of names with identical resumé on prominent job websites and found that Caucasian names received more attention than African-American sounding names ([Ruppel, 2004](#)).

Related to the research in labor economics, [Bart et al. \(1997\)](#) examined how the gender and race of respondents can influence reactions to different names on resumés. Employing a sample of college undergraduates, they asked respondents to read a resumé with either a Caucasian-sounding female name (Mary Ann Roberts) or an African-American female name (Lakesia Washington). Consistent with the similarity-attraction literature ([Byrne, 1969](#); [Goldberg, 2005](#)), the authors found that female raters evaluated the female candidates higher than male raters, and that African-American raters evaluated the African-American candidates higher than the Caucasian raters ([Bart et al., 1997](#), p. 302). In addition, female raters had lower pay expectations than male raters, and African-American female raters had the lowest pay expectations of all.

The research above has answered a number of interesting questions. However, there are still major concerns and gaps in current knowledge in this area. The research from social psychology has examined a variety of name characteristics, but the dependent variables are often global assessments on general dimensions (good-bad, active-passive, strong-weak, successfulness, ethical, etc.). It is difficult to say how these characteristics influence actual behavior, for example, hiring decisions. In addition, this research has not compared racial and ethnic names. [Bertrand and Mullainathan's \(2003\)](#) study from labor economics examined job-hiring behavior, but it was not clear whether the effects were entirely due to race. For example, some of the Caucasian names used were Emily, Allison, Kristen, Brendan, Geoffrey, and Brett. Many of these names are not only Caucasian, they also tend to be perceived as above average in success ([Mehrabian, 1990](#)). It is possible that the names employed varied not just on race, but also on perceptions of familiarity, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics ([Fryer and Levitt, 2004](#)). For example, the African-American names (Latoya, Ebony, and Tremayne) are more unique than the Caucasian names (Jill, Anne, Greg). In addition to race, a lack of familiarity towards certain names may influence reactions. These additional explanations for the effects attributed to race may also apply to the findings of [Bart et al. \(1997\)](#).

Research issues

Although prior research hints at the impact that the uniqueness of African-American names can have on various outcomes, no research to date has examined the influence of uniqueness on individuals' perceptions of African-American and other ethnic names and their potential for hire. In this paper we expand on prior work by examining whether individuals with unique or ethnic names are perceived the same way as those with African-American names.

Based on the research reviewed above, we argue that as names vary in how unique they are perceived, so will they vary in how well they are liked. Therefore we make the following hypotheses:

- H1.* Common names will be seen as familiar by individuals, and more unique names will be seen as less familiar.
- H2.* Common names will be liked the most and names which are the most unique will be liked the least.
- H3.* African-American and other ethnic names will be seen as more unique than common names, and will therefore be liked less than common names.

Two studies were conducted to test the hypotheses above. The first study examined responses to a wide variety of names in order to determine if individuals perceived differences in uniqueness between the names and if uniqueness was related to likeability. The second study was designed to focus more closely on a selected subset of names. In addition to examining the uniqueness of names on likeability, the second study also examined how uniqueness influenced hiring intentions.

Study 1

Sample and procedure

In the first study we examined the perceptions of working adults and undergraduate business students to various names. Similar to past research, we prepared collections of Common names (i.e. categorized as White names in prior studies) and African-American names. We expanded our name categories to include Russian names,

which would be racially classified as White, but like the African-American names would be perceived as more unique (and less similar) than the Common names. In this way we could differentiate between race and uniqueness in our comparisons across name categories. We also included a group of unique names, which we labeled Unusual. For Common names, we accessed the Social Security Administration website (www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames/), which identified the most common male and female baby names in the USA for the past three decades. We selected male and female names that consistently ranked as the most popular names, as these names would be most likely to be perceived as similar by respondents[2].

Since the SSA website did not provide a list of names by race or ethnicity, we conducted an internet search on a variety of websites that provided names for each of the remaining categories. African-American and Russian names were chosen based on those names we found most often and we also included several names examined in prior studies. Unusual names were chosen based on those names thought by the researchers to be fictitious and/or unheard of in mainstream American culture (i.e. not used by any popular/media person).

A total of 48 names (six male and six female from each of the four categories) were employed in this study. These names were given to 505 individuals enrolled in business programs at a university located in the upper Midwest. Of these individuals, 153 were working adults (employed full-time and participating in a part-time graduate business program) and 352 were full-time undergraduate business students (either not working or working part-time). Fifty-five percent of the sample was male and 45 percent was female. In terms of demographics, 81 percent of the sample were Caucasian, 4 percent were African-American, 4 percent were Hispanic, and 6 percent identified themselves as Asian. Students did not receive extra credit for participation, but were simply asked to volunteer their time. The vast majority of students (approximately 95 percent) responded. To avoid exhaustion (and incomplete responses), half of the names were given to about half the respondents, and the other half of the names were given to the rest of the respondents. Using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), the respondents were asked to evaluate names across a variety of dimensions, including

uniqueness, likeability, nationality, ethnicity, and gender. All questions used are listed in [Table I](#).

Results

One purpose of Study 1 was to select names that are consistently viewed as Common, African-American, Russian, and Unusual. On a scale from 1 to 7, the following names were rated at 1.5 or below as being "different": John, Robert, Mary, and Susan. The following names were rated at or above 6.0 as expected to be African-American: Tyronne, Jamal, Latoya, and Tanisha. The following names were rated below 3.0 as expected to be American (i.e. were not seen as American): Vladamir, Sergei, Oksana, Svetlana. Finally, the following names were rated at or above 6.0 as being "different": Ajax, Atholl, Magestic, and Tangerine. In addition to confirming our expectations regarding perceived nationality and ethnicity, the respondents viewed the names as being male or female, although these findings were not as consistent for the Unusual names as they were for the other categories.

A second purpose of Study 1 was to see how the various names were viewed in terms of how unique and how likeable they were perceived to be. We attempted to combine several of the questionnaire items into scales; however, the reliabilities were so low that we had to examine the questions individually. When comparing the 16 names chosen above, we found a consistent, often statistically significant pattern, although this was not true for every question with every name. [Table I](#) shows the means for all of the questions across the 16 names selected.

As expected, Common names were seen as less "different" than other names, followed by the African-American names and Russian names, followed (distantly) by the Unusual names. These effects also carried over to the likeability of the names. Common names were seen as being more likeable or better than the other three groups. Unusual names were seen as being less likeable or not as good as the other three groups. African-American names and Russian names were in the middle, usually significantly different from Common and Unusual

names, but often not different from each other. Similar results were found for both male and female names.

The means in [Table I](#) suggest that uniqueness in names has a powerful impact on likeability concerning those names. Race and ethnic origin seem to also have an impact, but it is not clear if these are due to perceptions of race/ethnicity, or whether the novelty of these names makes them less likeable. To explore the possible influence of race and ethnic origin on individuals' perceptions of liking, *post hoc* regression analyses were conducted on each of the four chosen African-American names (Jamal, Tyronne, Latoya, and Tanisha) and the four chosen Russian names (Oksana, Svetlana, Vladimir, and Sergei).

The regressions on African-American names employed both uniqueness ("This name seems different") and perceptions of being African-American ("I would expect a person with this name to be an African American") as predictors of liking. Two hierarchical regressions were performed for each name. One regression entered uniqueness and then being African-American into the equation; the second regression entered being African-American and then entered uniqueness in the second step. The analyses for the male names found that perceptions of being unique significantly predicted liking, but expectations of the person being an African-American had no effect (see [Table II](#)). This pattern was consistent for both male names, across all respondents (both working adults and undergraduate students). The pattern was somewhat different for the female names. For these names, both the perceptions of being unique and the expectation of being an African-American were related to liking. These results were found for both of the female names, across all respondents. However, in looking at the change in R^2 , it is clear that even when both are significant, being unique is a stronger predictor (average $R^2=0.090$) than being African-American (average $R^2=0.029$). The hierarchical regression analyses above were also performed for the African-American names that were not chosen for Study 2, with the same results.

The regressions on Russian names employed both uniqueness ("This name seems different") and perceptions of being American ("I would expect a person with this name to be an American") as

predictors of liking. Two hierarchical regressions were performed for each name. One regression entered uniqueness and then being American into the equation; the second regression entered being American and then entered uniqueness in the second step. The analyses found that both uniqueness and being an American predicted liking for one of the four names (Svetlana). For the other three names, being American was not a significant predictor. Overall, the effect for uniqueness was very powerful (average change in $R^2=0.15$) while the effect for not being American, even when significant, was much smaller (average change in $R^2=0.014$).

Discussion

The findings above suggest that uniqueness in names can have a powerful impact on likeability concerning those names. *H1* and *H2* were clearly supported. *H3* was partially supported, in that race and ethnic origin at times also had an impact. However, these factors appear to be less powerful than uniqueness, disappearing entirely for some of the names when controlling for uniqueness.

Although this study examined our hypotheses, there are several limitations. First, a single survey was used to select names based on perceptions of race and ethnicity. Then, within the same survey, respondents evaluated the names in terms of liking. To avoid the problem of common methods bias, it would be more effective to have one sample determine the choice of names and a second sample evaluate the names. Second, not all respondents responded to the same set of names. However, having all individuals respond to all names would have been an exhaustive process and we expected that respondents would have been incapable of accurately completing such a lengthy survey. We made every attempt to distribute the names evenly (e.g. equal distributions of Common, Russian, African-American, and Unusual names) across the two surveys and two samples. However, it is possible that the effects noted in our results may be influenced by comparisons with the other names the respondents read and evaluated on their particular survey and may not generalize to other names or respondents. Third, evaluations of uniqueness and liking were assessed with single items. We had intended to combine the various questions into scales, but did not find

sufficient consistency between the items to develop valid scales. Finally, we did not assess intended behavior, such as whether a respondent would want to hire someone with that name. In the next study, we conduct a replication of Study 1 and extend our analyses to examine respondents' intentions to hire individuals with these names. In this study we also controlled for some of the limitations noted in Study 1, where possible.

Study 2

Sample and procedure

This study utilized the 16 names identified in Study 1 as best fitting the ethnic, racial and common/unique categories we established. In order to conduct a replication of our first study, we asked respondents to evaluate the names in terms of how unique they were and how much they liked the names. Then, to capture perceptions related to employment behavior, we asked respondents several questions related to how willing they would be to hire people with those names. The respondents were 166 students in a variety of part-time graduate business programs in a university located in the Midwest. The survey asked whether respondents had participated in the first study, and 4.2 percent (or seven of the respondents) said they had. This low number of overlapping respondents indicates that our sample was largely a new sample of working adults. This provided an opportunity to conduct a replication of perceptions of uniqueness and liking from Study 1. The mean age among these respondents was 30 years, and they averaged 8.41 years of work experience, providing a sample that is likely to be representative of working adults in positions with hiring responsibilities. Of the respondents, 61 percent were male and 39 percent were female. In terms of race, 78 percent were Caucasian, while 4 percent were African-American, 12 percent were Asian or Pacific Islander, 2 percent were Hispanic, and 3 percent were "other". All respondents rated all of the names. Using the results from the first study, we employed the 16 names that respondents reliably identified as Common, African-American, Russian, and Unusual. Half of the names were female, the other half male. We therefore have two names for each cell in an eight-cell format.

Measures

The three primary dependent variables were likeability, uniqueness, and hiring intentions related to the name. Three questions were employed to measure each variable (see Appendix). The reliabilities of these scales were assessed for each name. These reliabilities are presented in [Table III](#).

The reliabilities for the uniqueness scale ranged from 0.50 to 0.81, with the majority between 0.74 and 0.81. For perceived likeability the reliabilities ranged from 0.74 to 0.81, with the majority between 0.77 and 0.81. For intentions to hire, the reliabilities ranged from 0.30 to 0.75, with the majority between 0.69 and 0.75. There were no detectable patterns between the names with low reliabilities.

Results

The structure of the study can be considered a 4×2 factorial design, with four levels of name type by gender. The levels of name type range in sequence from Common names to African-American, to Russian, to Unusual names. This approach represents the order of perceived uniqueness of the names in Study 1. As expected, the overall analyses indicate that the type of name influenced perceptions of uniqueness, likeability, and intentions to hire. However, the more interesting findings are the direct comparisons among the types of names. Therefore, for each of the dependent measures we performed an overall MANOVA followed by comparisons across the various types of names. The overall analyses are 4×2 repeated-measures MANOVAs (since all respondents evaluated all of the names). The follow-up comparisons are *a priori*-tests, with expected differences between the four types of names. Because of the large number of *t*-tests, we are employing a significance level of $p < 0.01$.

In terms of perceived uniqueness, the overall MANOVA was significant for name type (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.124$, $F = 377.86$, $p < 0.001$), for gender (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.963$, $F = 104.28$, $p < 0.001$), and for the name category by gender interaction (Wilks' $\lambda = 822$, $F = 11.62$, $p < 0.01$)[\[3\]](#). The findings for the MANOVAs are presented in [Table IV](#).

Because of the gender interaction, separate *a priori t*-tests were conducted for all categories of male and female names. These *t*-tests indicated that perceptions of uniqueness were significantly different across all name types for the male names ($p < 0.001$), with the Common names seen as least unique, followed by the African-American names, followed by the Russian names, with the Unusual names perceived as being the most unique. The results were similar for female names. The only exception to this pattern was that female African-American names were not seen as significantly different from male Russian names. The findings for the *t*-tests are presented in [Table V](#).

The MANOVA for the likeability scale was also significant for name type (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.576$, $F = 39.43$, $p < 0.001$), for gender (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.904$, $F = 17.39$, $p < 0.001$), and for the name category by gender interaction (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.910$, $F = 5.33$, $p < 0.002$). Again, separate *t*-tests were conducted for male and female names. The *t*-tests for the male names indicated that all of the name types were significantly different from each other ($p < 0.001$) in terms of likeability, with the exception of the African-American names and the Russian names. As in Study 1, the Common names were liked the most, followed by the African-American names, followed by the Russian names, with the Unusual names being the least popular. However, the difference between the African-American and Russian names was non-significant ($p < 0.11$). A similar pattern was found for the female names. With female names, the Common names were liked the most, followed by the Russian names, the African-American names, and the Unusual names. Like the male names, the African-American female names were not significantly different from the Russian names.

In terms of intentions to hire individuals with the name, the MANOVA was significant for name type (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.893$, $F = 6.44$, $p < 0.001$), but not for gender (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.998$, $F = 0.293$, $p < 0.60$), and was marginally significant for the name by gender interaction (Wilks' $\lambda = 0.947$, $F = 3.00$, $p < 0.05$). As predicted, respondents were most likely to hire someone with a Common name, followed someone with an African-American name, a Russian name, and least likely to hire someone with an Unusual name. Differences between the Common male names and the other male names were significant ($p < 0.001$). The Unusual names were significantly different from the Common

names and the African-American names, but not the Russian names ($p < 0.02$). The African-American and Russian names were non-significantly different from each other. With the female names, there were no significant differences at the $p < 0.001$ level. However, if a less conservative significance level was used (e.g. $p < 0.02$), the Unusual names would have been significantly different from the other three groups. The Common, African-American, and Russian names were non-significantly different from each other.

We also conducted additional MANOVA analyses to see if characteristics of the respondents influenced their reactions to names. No significant effects or interactions were found for the gender of the respondents. In terms of race, Caucasian respondents ($n = 131$) were compared with all other groups ($n = 34$) [4]. This analysis also found no effects. Finally, the respondents were divided into three groups on the basis of work experience. These groups consisted of those respondents with zero to four years of experience ($n = 56$), five to ten years of experience ($n = 55$), and those with more than ten years of experience ($n = 49$). Like the other respondent characteristics, no effects were found for respondents' work experience.

Discussion

The two studies here demonstrate that "a rose by any other name" is not appreciated the same way. Our results from both studies indicate that the name that an individual carries has a significant impact on how he or she is viewed, and conceivably, whether or not the individual is hired for a job. Names that were seen as being more unique were liked less, and in the second study, were less likely to be hired. The best names (most liked and rated most likely to be hired) were the most common ones (e.g. Mary, Robert), while the worst names (least liked and least likely to be hired) were the most unusual (e.g. Atholl, Magestic). In between these extremes were African-American and Russian names. These names were seen as being intermediate in terms of being unique, and were also intermediate in terms of how much they were liked and how likely they were to be hired.

In spite of the effects above, Study 2 simply asked respondents how likely they would hire a person with a specific name. It is a considerable leap from there to conclude that this would actually lead to differential hiring behavior. Therefore, our next step was to examine this hiring behavior in a controlled, laboratory setting. In Study 3, described below, respondents were given resumés containing the various names, and then asked how likely they would be to hire this person.

Study 3

Sample

The respondents for this study were 105 working adults enrolled in a part-time MBA program who had not participated in either of the earlier studies. The students varied in age from 21 to 47, with a mode of 26 and a mean of 28. They averaged 6.25 years of work experience, and 55 percent reported that they had been involved in hiring at some point. Of the sample, 62 percent were male and 31 percent were female, with 7 percent not reporting gender. In addition, 82 percent were Caucasian, with 2 percent African-American, 4 percent Asian or Pacific Islander, 3 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent "other". A total of 7 percent of the sample did not indicate their race.

Procedure

The students were asked at the beginning of a class if they were willing to participate in a study examining hiring decisions. Students did not receive extra credit for participation, but were simply asked to volunteer their time. Virtually all (more than 95 percent) students participated. Respondents were told that they should imagine themselves hiring a new administrative assistant for PMA Consultants LLC, an actual company located in Chicago. The instructions included an actual ad for an administrative assistant taken from the *Chicago Tribune*. Respondents were given a booklet with eight resumés and eight sets of questions regarding hiring. Each of the resumés was constructed to provide a reasonable candidate for the position. Pretesting of the resumés had been conducted with graduate students enrolled in a staffing class in order to assess comparability of the

resumés in terms of education and experience. Slight modifications were made to certain resumés, as recommended. The resumés used the same names employed in Study 2, with one male and female name from each of the four name categories. The names, resumés and their order were randomly assigned to each booklet. After each resumé, six questions were listed for respondents to evaluate on a seven-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree) how likely they would be to hire the candidate (e.g. "Given what I know, I would hire this person for the position"). At the end of the booklet were several demographic questions.

Results

Reliability analyses demonstrated that the six evaluation questions were highly interrelated. The reliability of the scales (Cronbach's α) varied from a low of 0.914 (White female resumés) to a high of 0.938 (unusual female resumé). Like Study 2, the responses were examined in an overall MANOVA followed by comparisons across the various types of names. The overall analyses are 4×2 (name category by gender) repeated-measures MANOVAs and the follow-up comparisons are *a priori*-tests, with expected differences between the four types of names.

The overall MANOVA was not significant for name type (Wilks' $\lambda=0.944$, $F=1.998$, $p<0.12$), for gender (Wilks' $\lambda=0.995$, $F=0.572$, $p<0.50$), nor for the name category by gender interaction (Wilks' $\lambda=0.947$, $F=0.894$, $p<0.50$). Given the lack of overall effects, it was not surprising that none of the t-tests were significant at the 0.01 level (largest $t=2.02$). Additional analyses were performed to see if demographic characteristics of the respondents (sex, race, work experience, hiring experience) influenced their reactions to names. Very few significant interactions were found for these analyses (three of 48 effects were significant at $p<0.05$).

Discussion

Given the strong findings from Study 1 and Study 2, the total lack of effects in Study 3 was surprising. There are several possible explanations. One possibility is that names influence affective

reactions but not behavior. In other words, people may not like certain types of names, but these feelings do not influence hiring. However, field research from [Bertrand and Mullainathan \(2003\)](#) and [Bart et al. \(1997\)](#) suggests that there should be effects for names that indicate race or gender. A second possible explanation is that our hiring simulation did not completely imitate what happens in an actual business context. Instead of seeing the task as a part of everyday work, the respondents may have perceived it as some type of academic test or problem, and worked hard studying the resumés to make their decision. Since respondents were employed full-time, many in managerial positions, they may have been exhibiting an acquisitive orientation of impression management. This occurs among managers when they are concerned about obtaining approval from their audience ([Palmer et al., 2001](#)). In the present context, students knew that individuals administering the survey were colleagues of their course instructors and they may have been attempting to positively influence their instructors' initial impressions of them. This explanation is consistent with some of our experiences in administering the survey. First, respondents were given the opportunity to write written comments after evaluating each candidate. Over 76 percent of the respondents provided open-ended comments, and many respondents wrote comments about every candidate. Second, it took most respondents about 15 minutes, and some as long as 20 minutes, to evaluate eight single-page resumés. It is unlikely that a typical hiring manager spends that much time and effort in a preliminary review of resumés for non-exempt positions. Written comments by respondents in Study 3 suggested a strong focus on the schooling and prior work experiences of applicants, despite it being an administrative assistant position (i.e. the position did not require advanced education or extensive work experience).

This brings up an interesting question: at what point in the hiring process does an applicant's name influence the hiring manager? When quickly sorting through a large stack of applicant resumés, managers frequently scan for key words before reading in more depth ([Capelli, 2001](#)). However, in our laboratory test, the respondents carefully went through all of the information before making any evaluations, much like managers do after completing the preliminary screening process. This may have resulted in the names having no real

impact. In practice, however, managers first do a superficial sorting of resumé, and first impressions may be based on similarity to oneself early in the screening process.

In essence, it may be that our laboratory task does not reflect the actual process managers follow when hiring. In most contemporary workplaces, managers must balance the costs associated with spending their valuable time against the anticipated value of a good hire. Instead of reading every applicant's materials in depth, a hiring manager scans the resumé for specific skills or experience, sorting the resúmes accordingly. We investigated this possibility by asking several HR managers about the process they typically use in hiring for similar non-exempt positions. Without exception, every manager responded that they always skim the resúmes they are evaluating first, allocating much more time only to a small subset of qualified applicants. As one respondent explained, "Typically, I only look at education/degree, company name and dates and titles". Another respondent commented, "I probably spend about 5 seconds per resumé in the initial skimming process". Another estimated that about 30 seconds was spent per resumé. One piece of information in this brief analysis would be the person's name, which could have a significant impact.

Sociology research examining homophily – the theory that contact between similar people is considerably greater than with dissimilar people – finds that individuals often negatively discriminate when they know little about a person other than their education, occupation or similar characteristics (see [McPherson et al., 2001](#)). In addition, inter-group contact theory implies that as inter-group contact increases (in this case, racial and ethnic inter-group contact exposure), inter-group prejudice decreases (thereby reducing the likelihood of active discrimination ([Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006](#)). And, [Christopher \(1998\)](#) suggests that "although a person's first name does make a difference in how he or she is perceived by others, the impact of a name diminishes when additional information about the person is available" (p. 1180).

These arguments suggest that if a name were to influence a hiring manager, it would probably occur early in the hiring process, when little is known about the applicant beyond his or her name and when little time is spent carefully reviewing the resumé.

Overall discussion

The results from these three studies complement and expand on the findings from research in social psychology. We have taken the results from those studies and applied them to personnel decisions. Our results also complement and expand on the findings from labor economics, principally the findings from [Bertrand and Mullainathan \(2003\)](#) and [Bart et al. \(1997\)](#). However, our findings suggest that their results may not have been due simply to racial prejudice. We found similar effects for both African-American and Russian names. We found prejudice for a variety of unique names, not just African-American names.

The regression analyses from Study 1 indicated that the African-American and Russian names were not liked as much as Common names because they were unusual, and because of prejudice (against African-Americans and non-Americans). However, the uniqueness of the names appeared to be a stronger predictor of liking than the racial or ethnic category.

Contrary to the findings of [Bart et al. \(1997\)](#), in Study 2 we found no differences between Caucasian respondents and other groups in how they evaluated the different names. However, there are several differences between our sample and that of [Bart et al. \(1997\)](#). First, the sample in that study was much more evenly distributed between Caucasian and non-Caucasian respondents than our study (54 percent versus 78 percent Caucasian, respectively). Second, their subjects were all college undergraduates. In Study 2, our respondents were working adults in a part-time MBA program, presumably possessing more actual work experience. Finally, their sample was from the Southeastern part of the USA, while ours was from the upper Midwest, and regional variations in values and attitudes may exist. It is very possible that one or more of these differences accounts for the variation in results.

Another recent study by [Smith et al. \(2005\)](#) found that names (and the gender they imply) influence the recommendations made by HR professionals in response to information about applicants (e.g. salary history, single or multiple employment gaps). In fact, a recent

study found that occupational stereotypes influenced perceptions of applicant resumés such that race effects became non-significant when occupation was considered ([King et al., 2006](#)). Although there is a long history of discrimination based on gender and race, our results from Study 3 suggest that these problems may occur earlier in the hiring process than suspected. As Smith and her colleagues suggest, whether such discriminatory behavior is unintentional or not, the outcomes are still devastating for successful diversity initiatives. Although many managers dislike preferential hiring, it can be a valuable mechanism for promoting fair representation of females and minorities in the work place ([Singer and Lange, 1994](#)). As the ultimate gatekeepers of both diversity and EEO/affirmative action initiatives, HR professionals need to demonstrate how such initiatives add value to the organization ([Hammonds, 2005](#)). Therefore, it becomes incumbent upon HR professionals to discourage the use of stereotypes among anyone who participates in hiring. They must continue to promote and coach managers in the analytical techniques necessary to match qualified applicants with available positions, especially if they want to be viewed as key organizational players ([Ulrich and Beatty, 2001](#)).

Although previous research has indicated a prejudice against African-American sounding names ([Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2003](#)), our research suggests that the issue may not be simply race, but also novelty. Individuals utilize schemas as a means for simplifying cognition in situations where there is incomplete information ([Elsbach et al., 2005](#)). [Louis and Sutton \(1991\)](#) suggest that individuals rely on “habits of mind” in which we engage in much of our behavior without paying attention to it (p. 55). We propose that when faced with a name, especially an unusual name, individuals may initially respond with some type of stereotype for the name, based on uniqueness and other factors (e.g. race, ethnicity). The unique sound of a name to a recruiter can set off a chain of discomfort and dislike which, although unintentional, may result in an early dismissal from the recruitment process and result in fewer employment opportunities for individuals with unique names. Our results suggest that one reason African-American names are not liked as much as Common names is because they are perceived as being unique. The same is true for Russian names. Imagine the complex implications in a specific hiring situation: a respondent will be less likely to hire Jamal versus John. However,

this may not be simply racial prejudice, as the respondent is also less likely to hire Sergei, and much less likely to hire Atholl.

When we presented this research to a group of recruiters, several of them lamented that their clients frequently reject potential applicants with unique names – applicants with solid qualifications and excellent employment histories – from initial consideration and, in some cases, from further consideration for executive positions. One recruiter complained that a client vehemently rejected several pleas to consider a well-qualified applicant stating, “I couldn't possibly work with a person who has *that* name”. This recruiter's experience was confirmed by nods of agreement from other recruiters in the room, with most individuals expressing chagrin at the difficulty they experienced in placing applicants with unique names. What makes this even more disheartening is the fact that these well-intentioned recruiters openly acknowledge their frustration at this discriminatory behavior, but they indirectly encourage it by sending their clients other applicants with more common names. They rationalized this behavior by commenting that their own livelihood (and continued employment) depends on being able to fill orders for their clients. As a result, the behavior continues.

We noted earlier that there is a growing tendency for African-Americans, especially lower-class African-Americans, to select unusual names for their children in order to help them identify with their African roots. Critical Race Theory describes examples of how people of color make decisions to project their racial identity, for example, with hair style ([Carbado and Gulati, 2003](#)). However, selecting an unusual name may be detrimental to one's child in the long run. Along with any racial discrimination that may exist, the African-American with an unusual sounding name like Erasto (an male East African name meaning “man of peace”) or Adeola (a female Nigerian name meaning “crown of honor”) may be facing two strikes when applying for a job before he or she is even called in for an interview. Recognizing this problem may alert individuals with unusual names to find ways of addressing the negative perceptions that they are likely to encounter.

An example of this can be found in the story of a young actor whose parents gave him a traditional Indian name. Kalpen Modi experienced few auditions and a dismissive attitude among producers

when attempting to get acting jobs in the USA. He changed the name on his resumé to a more common, American-sounding name (Kal Penn) and discovered that his auditions increased by almost 50 percent ([Bhattacharyya, 2004](#)). This subsequently led to appearances on NBC's hit show, *Law and Order*. Born in the USA but given a traditional Asian name, the actor found he would be more successful by taking on a more common name. This simple example supports our theory that novelty may have a downside.

There are, of course, limitations with this research. The most serious limitation is that we are assessing what people say in a laboratory situation. Although individuals may say they do not like a particular name, or that this might influence hiring, we do not know how much this affects actual behavior in the real world. For example, the results from Study 3 suggest that job history, education and other information from a resumé may overwhelm any prejudice coming from the name. However, an unusual name might keep a resumé from being read more closely, thereby not allowing job history, education and other information to come forth. Organizational behavior research has shown a strong correlation between an individual's attitudes and subsequent behavior ([Lee and Mitchell, 1994](#)) and the study by [Bertrand and Mullainathan \(2003\)](#) demonstrates such real behavior, in accordance with our findings.

A second limitation is that we have only four names (two male and two female) to represent each type of name in both studies. Although we pretested these names in Study 1 for perceptions of uniqueness, nationality and likeability, it is possible that the names we selected are not representative of the categories to which they correspond. Until additional names can be examined, we suggest caution in generalizing the results beyond the present study. A third possible limitation is that sample is from a single city in the upper Midwest of the USA, and so may not be a typical sample of American business people. However, our results are consistent with most prior research conducted in other parts of the USA.

Finally, we have the issue of common method bias, the possibility that respondents are answering questions in a consistent fashion because they are being asked all of these questions in a single survey. We can provide two arguments that mitigate this problem.

First, we selected the names and collected data about how they were perceived (as African-American, as male or female, etc.) in Study 1. We then asked questions concerning how people reacted to these names in Study 2, with new respondents and found similar results. Second, although the results for the various outcomes had similar patterns, they were far from identical. The strongest results were found in terms of perceived uniqueness, with somewhat weaker effects in likeability, and the weakest findings in terms of whether the respondent would hire the individual. This is precisely the pattern we would expect if we propose that the names are perceived as being unique, and this lack of familiarity leads to less liking, which in turn affects decisions to hire. If the results were due to common method bias, we would expect more identical results across all three outcomes.

In summary, there seems to be a clear bias in how people perceive names. This suggests that human resource professionals need to be aware of this predisposition and continually train their hiring managers to do the same. When resumés are screened for hiring, names (like pictures) should be left off to avoid potential discrimination. In addition, applications and resumés that are received could be routed to hiring managers with initials (see [Smith et al., 2005](#)) or with applicant numbers to represent the applicant so as to avoid any possible dislike of the name. Since applications are routinely entered into an organization's human resources database, assigning an applicant number in place of a name might be a worthwhile and easy alternative to minimize potential bias. In this way, prescreening of applicants can be conducted by key word searches, as is typically done by sophisticated electronic recruitment software or job boards (e.g. Monster.com) ([Capelli, 2001](#)). This can help ensure that hiring managers focus on skills and abilities, rather than playing "the name game".

Notes

[Lieberson and Mikelson \(1995\)](#), p. 929) define "unique" as "a name given to no other child born in that year who is of the same sex or race". Critical Race Theory posits that race is a basic organizing principle in American society, and that what is common and unlabeled will be assumed to be Caucasian ([McDowell and Jeris, 2004](#); [Grimes, 2002](#)). Although we present Wilks' λ , the ANOVAs (via SPSS 13.0) also calculated the values for Pillai's trace, Hotelling's trace, and Roy's largest root. Since all of these measures gave identical results, we only present Wilks' λ . Because of insufficient sample size, analyses were not conducted for the individual racial/ethnic groups.

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Appendix

Table I: Means for Study 1 questionnaire items

Questionnaire items	Common male		Common female		African-American male		African-American female		Russian male		Russian female		Unusual male		Unusual female	
	John	Robert	Susan	Mary	Jamal	Tyronne	Latoya	Tanisha	Vladimir	Sergei	Oksana	Svetlana	Ajax	Atholl	Magestic	Tangerine
This name seems novel	2.62 _a	2.32 _a	2.30 _a	2.19 _{a,b}	3.22 _c	3.35 _c	3.48 _d	3.74 _d	3.68 _{c,d}	3.79 _d	4.37 _{f,d}	4.17 _{f,d}	4.21 _f	4.80 _g	4.95	4.49 _g
I dislike this name	2.53	3.10 _a	3.55	2.93 _a	4.00 _b	4.03 _b	4.56 _c	4.52 _{c,d}	4.41 _{d,e}	3.96	4.44 _a	4.56 _a	5.27 _{h,i}	5.59 _h	5.25 _i	5.39 _h
This name seems different	1.18	1.40 _a	1.46 _a	1.25	3.12 _b	3.11 _b	3.63	4.11 _c	4.07 _c	4.02 _c	4.83	5.14	6.04 _f	6.26 _g	6.16 _d	6.11 _d
I think this is a good name	5.50	4.90 _a	4.46 _b	4.90 _a	4.02 _b	4.13 _b	3.33 _a	3.46 _{d,e}	3.60 _{d,f,g}	3.96 _b	3.61 _f	3.61 _g	2.47 _h	2.44	2.42 _i	2.31 _h
This name does not seem unique	6.34 _a	6.18 _a	6.11 _a	6.38	4.70	4.27	4.19	3.41 _b	3.53 _b	3.86 _b	2.95 _c	2.96 _c	2.09	1.70	1.95	1.84
I would highly recommend this name	5.21	4.54 _a	3.97	4.49 _a	3.41 _b	3.50 _b	2.73 _c	2.81 _{c,d}	3.00 _{d,e}	3.40 _b	3.15 _a	3.15 _a	2.12 _f	1.90 _f	1.98 _f	1.95 _f
I would expect a person with this name to be American	6.35 _a	6.28 _a	6.26 _a	6.25 _a	5.57 _b	5.33 _b	5.46 _b	4.97	2.42 _c	2.38 _{c,d}	2.26 _c	2.26 _c	3.42 _a	2.48 _a	3.86	3.35 _a
I would expect a person with this name to be Caucasian	5.85 _a	5.85 _a	6.03 _{a,b}	6.10 _a	1.92 _c	2.25	1.84 _c	1.98 _c	4.62 _d	4.53 _d	4.09	4.46 _d	3.09 _a	3.29 _a	3.00 _a	2.89 _a
I would expect a person with this name to be African American	3.12 _a	3.26 _a	2.65 _b	2.68 _b	6.28 _c	5.90	6.39 _c	6.17 _c	2.26 _d	2.49 _{d,e}	2.47 _{d,e}	2.25 _d	3.65 _a	4.00 _{a,f}	4.66	4.03 _f
I would expect a person with this name to be American	5.96 _a	5.90 _a	6.00 _a	6.04 _a	2.08 _{b,c}	2.30 _{c,d,e}	1.95 _b	2.01 _b	2.52 _{e,f}	2.57 _{e,h}	2.40 _{g,e,i}	2.39 _g	2.63 _{f,i}	2.40 _{d,g}	2.68 _h	2.50 _{a,i}

Note: Means in the same row with common subscripts are non-significantly different from each other at the $p < 0.01$ level. Means with no subscript are significantly different from the other means in their row. 1, strongly disagree; 2, moderately disagree; 3, slightly disagree; 4, neither disagree/agree; 5, slightly agree; 6, moderately agree; 7, strongly agree

Table II: Findings for Regression Analyses in Study 1

Name	Predictor	<i>b</i> at first step	<i>b</i> at second step	Change in R^2	Sig. of <i>F</i> of change
Tyronne	1. Uniqueness	0.22	0.23	0.047	$p < 0.000$
	2. African-American		0.06	0.04	$p < 0.305$
	1. African-American	0.03	0.06	0.001	$p < 0.646$
	2. Uniqueness		0.23	0.051	$p < 0.000$
Jamal	1. Uniqueness	0.24	0.24	0.059	$p < 0.000$
	2. African-American		0.02	0.001	$p < 0.724$
	1. African-American	0.04	0.02	0.002	$p < 0.506$
	2. Uniqueness		0.24	0.058	$p < 0.000$
Latoya	1. Uniqueness	0.19	0.18	0.035	$p < 0.003$
	2. African-American		0.14	0.020	$p < 0.025$
	1. African-American	0.15	0.14	0.022	$p < 0.022$
	2. Uniqueness		0.18	0.034	$p < 0.004$
Tanisha	1. Uniqueness	0.39	0.38	0.150	$p < 0.000$
	2. African-American		0.18	0.033	$p < 0.002$
	1. African-American	0.20	0.18	0.041	$p < 0.002$
	2. Uniqueness		0.38	0.142	$p < 0.000$
Sergei	1. Uniqueness	0.35	0.34	0.120	$p < 0.000$
	2. American		-0.11	0.013	$p < 0.065$
	1. American	-0.12	-0.11	0.015	$p < 0.060$
	2. Uniqueness		0.34	0.133	$p < 0.000$
Vladimir	1. Uniqueness	0.40	0.40	0.156	$p < 0.000$
	2. American		-0.01	0.004	$p < 0.948$
	1. American	-0.05	-0.01	0.003	$p < .409$
	2. Uniqueness		0.40	0.154	$p < .000$
Oksana	1. Uniqueness	0.38	0.37	0.143	$p < 0.000$
	2. American		-0.09	0.008	$p < 0.125$
	1. American	-0.12	-0.09	0.015	$p < .049$
	2. Uniqueness		0.37	0.135	$p < .000$
Svetlana	1. Uniqueness	0.40	0.36	0.157	$p < 0.000$
	2. American		-0.14	0.018	$p < 0.020$
	1. American	-0.23	-0.14	0.054	$p < 0.000$
	2. Uniqueness		0.36	0.121	$p < 0.000$

Table III: Reliabilities for outcome scales for each name

Category	Name	Perceived uniqueness	Perceived liking	Likelihood of hiring
Common male	Robert	0.504	0.765	0.691
	John	0.543	0.774	0.502
Common female	Mary	0.690	0.805	0.712
	Susan	0.585	0.751	0.725
African-American male	Jamal	0.706	0.777	0.745
	Tyronne	0.808	0.797	0.303
African-American female	Tanisha	0.739	0.811	0.648
	Latoya	0.812	0.735	0.717
Russian male	Sergei	0.784	0.805	0.719
	Vladimir	0.786	0.774	0.685
Russian female	Oksana	0.736	0.772	0.698
	Svetlana	0.804	0.738	0.682
Unusual male	Athol	0.653	0.739	0.629
	Ajax	0.762	0.805	0.752
Unusual female	Tangerine	0.578	0.771	0.687
	Majestic	0.769	0.775	0.644

Note: Statistics are Cronbach's α based on the three items for each scale for each name

Table IV: MANOVA findings

Outcome	Effect	Wilks' λ	F	df	Significance
Perceived uniqueness	Name	0.124	377.86	3/161	$p < 0.000$
	Gender	0.610	104.28	1/163	$p < 0.000$
	Name X gender	0.822	11.62	3/161	$p < 0.000$
Perceived liking	Name	0.576	39.43	3/161	$p < 0.000$
	Gender	0.904	17.39	1/163	$p < 0.000$
	Name X gender	0.910	5.33	3/161	$p < 0.002$
Intentions to hire	Name	0.893	6.44	3/161	$p < 0.000$
	Gender	0.998	0.29	1/163	$p < 0.589$
	Name X gender	0.947	3.00	3/161	$p < 0.032$

Table V: Comparisons of names for major outcomes

	Perceived uniqueness	Perceived liking	Intentions to hire
Male common names	2.00 _a	3.59 _a	3.56 _a
Female common names	2.07 _a	3.41 _a	3.48 _c
Male African-American names	3.95 _b	3.07 _b	3.43 _b
Female African-American names	4.52 _c	2.72 _c	3.43 _c
Male Russian names	4.58 _c	2.96 _{b,c}	3.38 _{b,c}
Female Russian names	5.16 _d	2.92 _{b,c}	3.43 _c
Male unusual names	5.63 _e	2.33 _d	3.32 _c
Female unusual names	5.82 _f	2.31 _d	3.32 _c

Notes: Higher means indicate greater perceived uniqueness, greater liking, and greater intentions to hire. Means in the same column with common subscripts are non-significantly different from each other at the $p < 0.01$ level

Figure A1: Questions from Study 2
Questions from Study 2

INSTRUCTIONS: Indicate on a scale of 1-7 how much you disagree or agree with the statements about each name.

	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Moderately Disagree	3 Slightly Disagree	4 Neither Disagree/Agree	5 Slightly Agree	6 Moderately Agree	7 Strongly Agree
Ajax							
1. I dislike this name. (R)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. This name seems different.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I would not want to employ this person. (R)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I think this is a good name.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. This name does not seem unique. (R)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I would hire this person for a job.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I would highly recommend this name.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I think this name is unusual.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. I believe this individual would be a good employee.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Note: The Perceived Uniqueness scale is made up of Items 2, 5, and 8. The Perceived Liking scale is made up of items 1, 4 and 7. The Intentions to Hire scale is made up of items 3, 6 and 9