

### *What's in a Name?*

Do you like your own name? How about your initials? Chances are that you do, because people have a tendency to like things that remind them of themselves. In fact, this liking for one's name or initials is actually strong enough to influence our behavior in ways that generate a match between our own name and the things that we choose for ourselves. When all else is equal, Dennis is just a little more likely to become a dentist than Toby, while Toby is a little more likely to drive a Toyota than Dennis.

Does this tendency, known as the name-letter effect, happen consciously, or unconsciously? Professors Leif Nelson and Joseph Simmons came up with a clever way to find out. They decided to examine whether the name-letter effect would hold true for things a person would consciously choose to avoid. If the name-letter effect was still observed in such situations, that would be good evidence that it operates without our conscious awareness.

For example, baseball players want to avoid striking out. But if the name-letter effect is at work, players whose names begin with the letter K would be just a little more likely to strike out than other players, because as all baseball players know, in baseball statistics the letter K indicates a strikeout. Nelson and Simmons combed through over 90 years of Major League batting records and found that, indeed, players with the initial K were statistically more likely to have struck out than players with other initials.

The same effect was also observed with grades. Every student prefers As and Bs to Cs and Ds. But, in a large database of academic records, Nelson and Simmons found that students with the initials C or D were statistically more likely to have earned those mediocre letter grades than other students.

Finally, the professors confirmed their findings in an experiment. Students given the opportunity to earn a cash prize for solving word puzzles were more likely to underperform, and to settle for a smaller consolation prize, when the smaller prize was given a name that corresponded to their own first initial.

Does all this mean that our name is our destiny? No, of course not. But it is one more piece of evidence that human behavior is enormously complex, and can be subtly influenced in ways that we are not aware of, which is one of the most consistent and intriguing findings in modern psychology.

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