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THE EFFECTS OF FIRST NAME STEREOTYPES ON RATINGS OF JOB APPLICANTS: IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BILL AND WILLIAM?

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ABSTRACT

The belief that names have a lasting impact on how others perceive the name bearer is ancient and enduring. This study explored the effect of strategically altering an applicant's first name (i.e., Bill instead of William) on ratings of the applicant's qualifications for different jobs. It was predicted that given names would be viewed as more qualified than nicknames, but that this effect would be moderated by the gender of the rater. A 2 (given name vs. nickname) x 2 (male rater vs. female rater) ANOVA design was used to test this prediction. Results indicate that there was no main effect for the type of name used, but there were small and statistically significant effects for gender of the rater and also for the interaction between rater gender and name type. Implications of these findings and directions for future research are briefly discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The belief that names have a lasting impact on how others perceive the name bearer is ancient and enduring. From before the time when Abram became Father Abraham until Norma Jeane Mortenson became Marilyn Monroe, names have been used in an attempt to manage the impressions made by the bearer. In response to the enduring belief in the power of a name, many cultures have well-developed rules and customs to ensure that each individual receives a fitting name (Albott & Bruning, 1970). For example, the Ashanti believe that the day of the week on which a child is born influences personality and often include a reference to this day in each individual's name (Jahoda, 1954).

Many psychologists also subscribe to a belief in the power of names to make impressions. Allport (1961) considered a person's given name to be the most important symbol for self-identity

throughout life, and Walton (1937) believed that a person's first name might be a determining factor in the development of personality, popularity, and success in life. Feldman (1959) agreed that the name is important, but he felt that names had a less deterministic influence on personality. To Feldman, the name was an ever-present cue for identity that was closely tied to the connotations of the name. The real power of a name, according to Feldman, lay in the potential for a name to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In other words, names may influence the bearer's behavior by eliciting stereotyped reactions in others. Jahoda (1954) offers support for this hypothesis in his study of the connection between Ashanti names and personality characteristics of the bearer. He found that boys bearing names associated with quick tempers and aggressiveness committed more violent offenses than less-aggressively named boys. Based on this observation, Jahoda theorized that Ashanti social beliefs about a connection between names and personality might selectively enhance name-consistent traits in each individual.

Hartman (1958) suggested that some name bearers recognize the evocative nature of their given names and try to improve the fit between their natural personality and their name by using nicknames, initials, or middle names in place of their given names. Socially adept name bearers may even use many different names as an impression management strategy (Mehrabian & Piercy, 1993). In fact, history abounds with examples of individuals who strategically used different names because of the power of a particular name to evoke reactions in those around them. Thus, Theodore Roosevelt was sometimes Teddy to convey his approachability; Ronald Reagan was sometimes Dutch to convey his warmth; John F. Kennedy was sometimes Jack to convey his friendliness. Following this line of thought, the use of different names can serve a useful social function for the bearer; by choosing a name that suits the situation, the bearer can select an appropriate role to play, manage his/her impression, and influence the reactions of other people.

Impression management of this sort seems likely during the job search process, especially during the initial screening phase. Forenames connote impressions of the name bearer's intelligence, age, attractiveness, and masculinity-femininity (Kasof, 1993; Macrae, Mitchell, & Pendry, 2002; Mehrabian, 2001). Irrelevant criteria such as first-name stereotypes are more likely to affect outcomes when the task is vague and unspecified, as in screening applicant resumes (Saraydarian & Thomas, 1981). Because employers will often learn applicants' names before actually meeting them, a name with a connotation that is dishonest or does not match the job requirements might cause an applicant's resume to be evaluated negatively (Bruning, Polinko, Zerst, & Buckingham, 2000; Karlin & Bell, 1995). The purpose of the present study was to explore the effect of strategically altering an applicant's first name on ratings of the applicant's qualifications for jobs with different skill requirements.

Name Stereotypes

Numerous authors have noted the general impact of names on first impressions of the individual. For example, Karlin and Bell (1995) found that a person's name carries significant consequences in interpersonal perception, often predisposing others to a favorable or unfavorable first impression. Dinur and Beit-Hallahmi (1996) showed that impressions of first names in Israel were related to the religious and historical connotations of each name and the rater's religious attitudes; religious individuals had more favorable impressions of individuals with religious first names. Research has also shown that the connotations of various first names tend to be invariant across samples and time (Darden & Robinson, 1976), suggesting that first name stereotypes have an enduring nature.

Perhaps to take advantage of name stereotypes, many people use more than one name to suit the circumstances. Although the given name is often fixed at birth, the use of nicknames offers the individual more flexibility in creating and managing impressions. Nicknames are more susceptible to innovation, may or may not be derived from the given name, and often carry different connotations than

given names (Phillips, 1990). As a result, raters often infer different personality characteristics from nicknames than from given names (Leirer, Hamilton, & Carpenter, 1982). For example, Darden and Robinson (1976) found that the name Bill is seen as more sociable and friendly than the name William, which is viewed as more noble and deep. The choice between using a given name or a nickname can also be used to influence relationships by making them seem distant and formal or close and intimate (Darden & Robinson).

Mehrabian and Piercy (1993) suggest that the flexible use of names can be an effective strategy to manage impressions, especially in work-related contexts. In a study on the impact of using nicknames on first impressions, they found that given names for both sexes connoted greater success and morality but less popularity and cheerfulness than nicknames. Given names appear to be more suitable for settings where an image of success, intelligence, reliability, morality, and trustworthiness is desired. Nicknames seem more appropriate when an image of health, confidence, assertiveness, friendliness, and humor is desired. Thus, nicknames tended to generate impressions of informal and approachable characteristics, whereas given names conveyed impressions of more formal and competent characteristics. Accordingly, the use of a nickname might be an asset in a job requiring a high level of interpersonal skill such as sales whereas given names may be better suited to jobs requiring technical competence such engineering (Mehrabian, 2001).

Further, Copley and Brownlow (1995) investigated the relationship between the warmth of applicants' names and their judged suitability for jobs requiring warmth or technical competence. Consistent with the predictions, they found that warm names were viewed as more suitable for jobs requiring warmth but less suitable for jobs requiring competence. In a similar study, Bruning et al. (2000) found evidence that raters had higher expectations of success for masculine names pursuing masculine occupations (e.g., construction worker, truck driver) and feminine names pursuing feminine occupations (e.g., manicurist, cheerleading coach). Raters seem to desire consistency between stereotypes of applicant names and stereotypes of the job (Bruning et al., 2000).

Although researchers have confirmed the link between name stereotypes and work-related impressions, a study that directly compares the work-related impressions of given name-nickname pairs has not been attempted. The practical need for such research is clear. Most people do not have the option of abruptly changing their names from female to male or from warm to cold in order to get a job. However, the transition between a given name and a nickname is generally much smoother and realistic. Research suggests that using nicknames to manage impressions may be more beneficial for males than for females. As a general rule, name stereotypes are stronger and more consistent for male first names. Buchanan and Bruning (1971) found that raters had considerable consistency in ratings of male names but much less consistency in ratings for female names. In addition, Buchanan and Bruning reported and Busse and Seraydarian (1978) later confirmed that there is more consistency in like-dislike ratings over long periods of time for male names than for female names. Lawson (1971) found that men and women generally agree on the ratings of names, but Mehrabian and Valdez (1990) showed that first-name stereotypes associated with male and female names were more pronounced for raters of the opposite sex. As a result, some researchers have argued that male and female names might not be directly comparable (Allen, Brown, Dickinson, & Pratt, 1941; Darden & Robinson, 1976).

The present study was designed to examine the effect of using nicknames on the ratings of applicant resumes for jobs that require either technical or interpersonal skills. In order to account for the impact of rater gender on applicant ratings, gender was included as an independent variable and only male names were used. Specifically, a subset of male names with a high frequency in the population and well-known nicknames was selected to serve as the primary stimulus material. Based on the accumulated research and the preceding discussion, the following hypotheses are offered:

Hypothesis 1: There will be a main effect of name type such that applicants using given names will receive higher salary awards than applicants using nicknames.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a main effect of rater gender such that female raters will give higher salary awards to job applicants than male raters.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a two-way interaction between name type and rater gender such that applicants using a given name will receive higher salary awards from male raters while applicants using a nickname will receive higher salary awards from female raters.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 86 introductory psychology students from a regional mid-south university who participated in exchange for course credit. The average participant was 21 years and 1 month old ($SD = 5.06$). The majority of participants (77.6 percent, $N = 66$) had been in college less than two years. Approximately 79 percent of participants were Caucasian ($N = 68$) and 20 percent were African American ($N = 17$). In addition, 43 percent of the participants were male ($N = 37$) and 57 percent were female ($N = 49$).

Design and Procedure

Participants were given a rating sheet with 8 different positions (see Appendix A). Although the raters were not aware of the fact, the positions had been selected because they fell into two broad categories: jobs that emphasize technical competence (computer programmer, accountant, engineer, and chemist) and jobs that emphasize interpersonal skill (salesman, trainer, crisis counselor, and recruiter). After each position title were the names and qualifications of three applicants for the position. Two of the three applicant names for each position were constant across conditions, while the third name alternated between a given name and a nickname. The rater's task was to review each of the applicants' qualifications and decide the percentage of the maximum salary that they would offer to each job candidates in 10% increments.

To test the hypotheses, a 2 (given name vs. nickname) x 2 (male rater vs. female rater) ANOVA was conducted for each name. An omnibus ANOVA was not conducted, because it was expected that raters would react more strongly to some names than others and an omnibus test would not capture these subtle differences. Further, the raters' task was to make a salary award (in 10% increments) to each applicant based on qualifications. Each name pair was rated for a different job, against different control names, and had different qualifications. The dependent variable in the analysis was the salary offer that raters assigned to applicants in each condition. Marginal and cell means were used to interpret significant findings.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1 predicted a main effect of name type on salary awards for job applicants. Results showed that none of the given name-nickname comparisons were statistically significant. Hypothesis 1 was not supported (see Table 1).

Hypothesis 2 predicted a main effect of rater gender on salary awards for job applicants. Results showed that the male-female comparison for the William/Bill name was statistically significant, $F(1, 82) = 8.598$, $p = .004$. Examination of marginal means showed that male raters gave higher salary awards to the William/Bill name pair ($M=2.479$, $S.E. = .436$) than female raters ($M = .792$, $S.E. = .375$). Hypothesis 2 was partially supported (see Table 2).

Table 1. Summary of ANOVA Results

| Source | Dependent Variable: Salary Award for Name Pair | Type III Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|----|----------------|-------|------|
| NAMETYPE | James/Jim | 1.593 | 1 | 1.593 | .280 | .598 |
| | Robert/Bob | .330 | 1 | .330 | .048 | .828 |
| | Michael/Mike | .104 | 1 | .104 | .010 | .920 |
| | William/Bill | 3.924 | 1 | 3.924 | .568 | .453 |
| | Charles/Charlie | 6.071 | 1 | 6.071 | .654 | .421 |
| | Joseph/Joe | .423 | 1 | .423 | .069 | .794 |
| | Thomas/Tom | 1.455 | 1 | 1.455 | .166 | .685 |
| | Mathew/Matt | 2.851 | 1 | 2.851 | .365 | .547 |
| RATER GENDER | James/Jim | .001 | 1 | .001 | .000 | .992 |
| | Robert/Bob | .330 | 1 | .330 | .048 | .828 |
| | Michael/Mike | 7.413 | 1 | 7.413 | .729 | .396 |
| | William/Bill | 59.363 | 1 | 59.363 | 8.598 | .004 |
| | Charles/Charlie | 8.203 | 1 | 8.203 | .884 | .350 |
| | Joseph/Joe | 2.270 | 1 | 2.270 | .368 | .546 |
| | Thomas/Tom | 2.829 | 1 | 2.829 | .323 | .572 |
| | Mathew/Matt | 3.896 | 1 | 3.896 | .499 | .482 |
| NAMETYPE X RATER GENDER | James/Jim | 4.260 | 1 | 4.260 | .748 | .390 |
| | Robert/Bob | 21.201 | 1 | 21.201 | 3.060 | .084 |
| | Michael/Mike | 27.287 | 1 | 27.287 | 2.682 | .105 |
| | William/Bill | .421 | 1 | .421 | .061 | .806 |
| | Charles/Charlie | 9.164 | 1 | 9.164 | .988 | .323 |
| | Joseph/Joe | 39.579 | 1 | 39.579 | 6.419 | .013 |
| | Thomas/Tom | 32.548 | 1 | 32.548 | 3.714 | .057 |
| | Mathew/Matt | 17.664 | 1 | 17.664 | 2.261 | .137 |
| Error | James/Jim | 466.945 | 82 | 5.694 | | |
| | Mathew/Matt | 640.707 | 82 | 7.814 | | |

Table 2. Marginal and Cell Means

| NAMETYPE | RATER GENDER | Mean Award ¹ | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|----------|-----------------|----------------------------|---------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Jim | Male | 69% | .597 | 5.751 | 8.124 |
| | Female | 65% | .477 | 5.531 | 7.429 |
| James | Male | 68% | .521 | 5.726 | 7.798 |
| | Female | 72% | .487 | 6.239 | 8.177 |
| Bob | Male | 76% | .658 | 6.253 | 8.872 |
| | Female | 67% | .526 | 5.633 | 7.727 |
| Robert | Male | 64% | .574 | 5.286 | 7.571 |
| | Female | 76% | .537 | 6.494 | 8.631 |
| Mike | Male | 65% | .797 | 4.914 | 8.086 |
| | Female | 48% | .638 | 3.491 | 6.029 |
| Michael | Male | 53% | .696 | 3.901 | 6.670 |
| | Female | 58% | .651 | 4.538 | 7.128 |
| Bill | Male | 26% | .657 | 1.318 | 3.932 |
| | Female | 11% | .526 | .035 | 2.125 |
| William | Male | 23% | .573 | 1.193 | 3.474 |
| | Female | 1% | .536 | -.563 | 1.571 |
| Charlie | Male | 43% | .761 | 2.735 | 5.765 |
| | Female | 30% | .609 | 1.748 | 4.172 |
| Charles | Male | 30% | .665 | 1.725 | 4.370 |
| | Female | 31% | .622 | 1.846 | 4.320 |
| Joe | Male | 72% | .621 | 5.953 | 8.422 |
| | Female | 55% | .497 | 4.492 | 6.468 |
| Joseph | Male | 60% | .542 | 4.874 | 7.030 |
| | Female | 70% | .507 | 5.992 | 8.008 |
| Tom | Male | 69% | .740 | 5.465 | 8.410 |
| | Female | 53% | .592 | 4.142 | 6.498 |
| Thomas | Male | 60% | .646 | 4.667 | 7.238 |
| | Female | 68% | .604 | 5.631 | 8.035 |
| Matt | Male | 63% | .699 | 4.922 | 7.703 |
| | Female | 50% | .559 | 3.848 | 6.072 |
| Mathew | Male | 58% | .610 | 4.548 | 6.975 |
| | Female | 63% | .571 | 5.115 | 7.385 |

1. The task was to make a salary award (in 10% increments) to the applicant based on his qualifications. Each name pair was rated for a different job and had different qualifications. Therefore, the mean salary awards should not be compared across name pairs.

Hypothesis 3 predicted an interaction between name type and rater gender on salary awards for job applicants. Results showed that the interaction term was statistically significant for the Joseph/Joe name pair, $F(1, 82) = 6.419, p = .013$. Examination of cell means showed that male raters gave higher salary awards to applicants named Joe ($M = 7.188, S.E. = .621$) than they did to applicants named Joseph ($M = 5.952, S.E. = .542$), while female raters gave higher salary awards to applicants named Joseph ($M = 7.000, S.E. = .507$) than they did to Joe ($M = 5.480, S.E. = .497$). The interaction term approached significance for the Thomas/Tom name pair ($p = .057$) and the Robert/Bob name pair ($p = .084$). The same general pattern of men giving higher salary awards to nicknames and women giving higher salary awards to given names held for seven of the eight name pairs examined in the present study. Hypothesis 3 was partially supported.

DISCUSSION

Interpretation

The current study showed mixed support for the hypotheses. Hypothesis 1, which predicted an effect for name type, was not supported. Raters did not generally use name type as a criteria in making salary awards to job applicants. However, the finding that men and women had very different reactions to the William/Bill name pair confirms earlier findings (Mehrabian & Valdez, 1990; Walton, 1937) and suggests that name type is an important variable for some names. The findings become clearer once the interaction term of name type and gender is considered. Whether applicants used a given name or a nickname made a difference in the salary awards they received, but the direction of the difference depended on the gender of the rater. Female raters seemed to prefer given names, while male raters seemed to prefer nicknames.

Although the effect sizes observed in the present study were rather small, they hold important practical and theoretical implications for psychological research (see Albott & Brunning, 1970; Seraydarian & Thomas, 1981). For example, Kasof (1993) showed that much of the literature on sexism and fear of success was confounded by the tendency of experimenters to select more favorable names for male stimulus persons. The present research suggests that gender differences in reaction to first names could possibly be an important confounding variable. Similarly, Stenpreis, Anders, and Ritzke (1999) asked psychologists to rate curricula vitae with either male or female names. They found that both male and female raters gave higher ratings to a vita attributed to a male applicant than to the same vita attributed to a female applicant. However, male and female raters may have been reacting differently to the names instead of the gender of the names.

From a practical standpoint, using different names might allow individuals to manage the impressions they make. Different names can be used to emphasize different aspects of personality, degrees of warmth, and technical competence. In effect, people could utilize first-name stereotypes to their advantage: choosing which role to play and also influencing the roles of others. Walton (1937) acknowledged the evocative power of names when he reported that he used seven different nicknames during his lifetime, but avoided using the name Bill around his mother because of the dislike it aroused in her.

Future Directions

Although many authors have shown a small and reliable effect of first name stereotypes, the literature in this area remains largely devoid of theory (Albott & Brunning, 1970; Seraydarian & Thomas, 1981). To date, there is no clear explanation as to why first names matter, how the effect is

maintained on such a large cultural and time scale, or how first names fit into the network of other psychological variables.

Psychologists do know that first names are associated with stable stereotypes that interact with individual difference variables in observers to influence how other people react to the name bearer. Mehrabian (2001) reported that impressions of first names vary on at least four dimensions that roughly correspond to conscientious-agreeableness (trustworthy, kind, generous, honest, respectful, warm, obedient, etc.), sociability (playful, humorous, popular, cheerful, outgoing, adventurous, friendly, etc.), dominance (successful, ambitious, confident, independent, assertive, etc.), and masculinity (men's names are usually identified as more masculine). If the underlying structure of names is stable, it suggests a fertile line of research in person-name fit.

Another fertile research area is suggested by the work of Erwin (1999). According to Erwin, academic ability stereotypes associated with names may be internalized and may achieve reality in the performance of the individuals concerned. In other words, being named Eugene might actually have a beneficial effect on academic performance. The same effect may also hold for other aspects of name stereotypes such as masculinity/femininity, ethnicity, and social class. Erwin's research seems to beg the question, is stereotype threat theory relevant in the context of first name stereotypes? Finally, the presence of an interaction between gender and name type in the present study raises some interesting questions. Does a similar effect exist for feminine given name-nickname pairs? What about gender neutral names such as Pat, Kris, and Tracy? Does job type play a role in determining raters' reactions to name/nickname pairs?

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Appendix A. A Portion of the College Recruiter Aptitude Survey

Directions: The information in the following tables was collected during brief interviews at a college career fair. For each person, decide whether your company should make a job offer to the individual. Then, decide what percentage of the maximum salary (in 10% increments) you would offer each person if you had to hire them. Possible salary offers are 0%, 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%, 50%, 60%, 70%, 80%, 90%, 100%.

| | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Position | Computer Programmer | Computer Programmer | Computer Programmer |
| Candidate | (James or Jim) | George | Eric |
| Education | B.S. in Computer Science GPA 3.7 | B.S. in Computer Science GPA 3.5 | B.S. in Computer Science GPA 3.0 |
| Experience | 1 year internship | 1 year internship | 6 month internship |
| Special Skills | Web page design | Computer graphics | Spanish fluent |
| References | Excellent | Excellent | Very Good |
| Salary Offer (% of max) | | | |

| | | | |
|-------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Position | Accountant | Accountant | Accountant |
| Candidate | (Robert or Bob) | Nathan | Scott |
| Education | B.S. in Accounting GPA 3.9 | B.S. in Accounting GPA 4.0 | B.S. in Accounting GPA 3.8 |
| Experience | 1 year internship | 1 year internship | 1 year internship |
| Special Skills | Accounts payable | Accounts receivable | Finance |
| References | Excellent | Excellent | None |
| Salary Offer (% of max) | | | |