Research on First Names by Two Psychologists

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In common with many scientific projects, our research on first names has been an erratic migration rather than a steady forward march. Scientific articles seldom report difficulties and changes in direction. We hope that our account constitutes a useful background to our publications. Both authors are psychologists who began research together on first names in 1980.

Barry's principal career has been research on effects of drugs on the behavior of laboratory animals. He also conducts research on customs in a world sample of societies.

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Initial Studies on First Names

Barry (1979) found that presidents of the United States who shared their father's first name were usually affiliated with the political party of the immediately preceding president. Since there was meager psychological or psychiatric literature on names, Barry was elated to learn of the existence of a Journal called *Names*. Several articles provided useful new information, among them Plank (1971), which was cited by Barry (1979). Plank reported an unusually high incidence of "Jr." following the surname among men who were hospitalized for mental illness. Ten presidents of the United States (John Adams, James Madison, Andrew Jackson, John Tyler, James Buchanan, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, John Calvin Coolidge, James Earl Carter, and William Jefferson Clinton) had exactly the same name as their father, but none added "Jr." after his surname.

Names 49.4 (December 2001):259-262
ISSN:0027-7738

Barry and Harper (1982; 1993a) examined unisex names. The prevalent sequence is transition from male to unisex; the unisex name then quickly loses popularity for boys. A name, therefore, is unisex for only a short time. Lieberson, Domais, and Baumann (2000) subsequently reported on unisex names, using the term "ambisexual." They referred to our two articles but erroneously cited the journal as *American Name Society* instead of *Names.*

Since unisex names are atypical, our next study (1993b) was on the 100 most frequent first names in the United States, as reported by Smith (1950). We reported that the linguistic origin for male names was more often German, English, French, Welsh, Irish Gaelic, or Norse. Female names more often had Greek or Latin origins. Sex differences in linguistic origins of first names were less consistent in England and Wales in 1994 (Hough, 2000).

Phonetic Differentiation of Male and Female First Names

Several phonetic measures differentiate between male and female first names (Slater and Feinman 1985; Lieberson and Bell 1992; Cutler, McQueen, and Robinson 1990).

We defined an ordinal scale for the last sound of a name, which ranged from +2 (most consistently female) to -2 (most consistently male). Female last sounds are the unstressed schwa (+2) and any other vowel (+1). A zero score is a sonorant consonant. Male sounds are plosive consonants (-2) and obstruent consonants (-1).

A second scale consisted of pronunciation of the entire name, including the location of the accented syllable and the number of syllables. The most consistently female pronunciation (+2) is the accent on the second or later syllable, e.g., *Amanda, Elizabeth.* The most consistently male pronunciation (-2) is six or more sounds with the accent on the first of two syllables, e.g., *Robert, Edward.*

Using the sum of each name's score on the two scales, we studied the 25 most frequent first names for boys and girls born in Pennsylvania in 1960 and 1990 (1995). The average score for both sexes was more female in 1990 than in 1960. This finding indicates a recent increase in preference for names with female attributes.

Our measure of the accented syllable was criticized because it applied only to names with two or more syllables and is determined by some linguistic rules. We believe that the measure helps to differentiate the sexes and is not merely a duplication of other phonetic measures. For example, the surname of the Editor of *Names* is *Callary,* which has

the accent on the second syllable, but common nouns with similar sounds have the accent on the first syllable, e.g., calorie, salary.

A modified scale of the whole name emphasizes the number of syllables and omits the measure of the accented syllable. The most consistently female pronunciation is three or more syllables (+2). The most consistently male pronunciation is one syllable (-2). We applied the sum of the score for the last sound and for the modified scale on the whole name to lists by Leslie Dunkling (1995) of the fifty most frequent male and female first names over wide ranges of years in England (1850-1995), the United States (1875-1995), and Australia (1950-1995). We reported the findings at the 19th International Congress of Onomastic Sciences (1998). The average scores consistently differentiated between male and female names. Changes in the average scores for both sexes in each country indicated maximal preference for male pronunciations in 1900 and maximal preference for female pronunciations in 1995.

Differentially Spelled Endings of Male and Female First Names

In our most recent publication (2000), we coded the spelled last letter instead of the phonetic last sound. The majority of popular female names end in one of three letters, *a*, *e*, or *i*. Two last letters, *h* and *y*, occur with similar frequency in male and female names. Most popular male names end in one of the 21 remaining last letters.

The last letter differentiates to a high degree between the sexes. Advantages of the measure of the last spelled letter are that it replaces two phonetic scales, has three categories instead of five, and only a small proportion of names with the ambiguous last letter *h* or *y*.

In some languages, the last letter almost always differentiates male and female first names. In ancient Latin, female names ended in *a*, male names in *us*. In modern Spanish and Italian, most female names end in *a*, most male names in *o*. In English, there is great variation in last letters for names of both sexes, but the last letter appears to be the dominant criterion for differentiating male and female first names.

We are analyzing first names in French, German, Spanish, and Latin, using the extensive compilations of Ingraham (1997) and Norman (1996). We have obtained first name frequencies for boys and girls born in Pennsylvania in successive years after 1990. Beginning in 1990, the information includes separate frequencies for children of white and black mothers. These are some of many topics pertaining to first names, which will be studied by us and by others.

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