NAMES, Vol. 57 No. 3, September, 2009, 175–179

Implicit Egotism on the Baseball Diamond: Why Peter Piper Prefers to Pitch for the Pittsburgh Pirates

LEONARD S NEWMAN, WILLIAM HERNANDEZ, DARIA A BAKINA
Syracuse University, USA

ABRAHAM M RUTCHICK
CSU Northridge, USA

Research on "implicit egotism" indicates that people tend to react positively to anything that reminds them of themselves, including their own names and the letters in their names. Names can have effects (presumably unconscious ones) even on people's choices of mates and careers. Nelson and Simmons (2007) presented evidence suggesting that people are attracted to name-resembling outcomes even when those outcomes undermine their conscious goals. For example, they found that major league baseball players with first or last names starting with the letter *K* strike out (i.e., record a "*K*") at a rate greater than that of other players. The present archival study tested the hypothesis that Nelson and Simmons's finding was due in part to pitchers (who are generally poor batters) being overrepresented among players with names starting with *K*. Parallel analyses were run for the letter *P* (the first letter in the word *pitcher*). Results provide some support for the idea that implicit egotism has implications not only for players' performances, but also for the positions they prefer to play on the field.

KEYWORDS Implicit egotism, self-enhancements, sports psychology, name letter effect, baseball

Implicit egotism

Implicit egotism (Pelham, Caravallo, & Jones, 2005) is a simple idea to grasp: people like and approach that which reminds them of themselves. For example, all other things equal, the mere ownership of an object leads it to be more positively evaluated (Beggan, 1992). People also seek out mates with faces that resemble their own at

 DOI 10.1179/175622709X462478

greater than chance levels (Alvarez & Jaffe, 2004). Such findings stem in part from the fact that, despite variability in absolute levels of self-esteem, people tend to like themselves and believe that they are significantly above average in terms of their abilities and other attributes (Dunning, Meyerowitz, & Holzberg, 1989).

Some manifestations of implicit egotism, however, are remarkable. For example, people evaluate their own birth months and birth years more positively than non-birth months and years (Nickell, Pedersen, & Rossow, 2003). Indeed, they are also disproportionately likely to live in cities with names beginning with their birthday numbers (e.g., someone born March 3 might move to Three Forks; Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002). Names, of course, are also very important self-attributes. Accordingly, people actually prefer the letters in their own names to other letters of the alphabet, a phenomenon known as the "name letter effect" (Hoorens & Nuttin, 1993; Nuttin, 1985).

Research extending the implications of the name letter effect has found that people have a preference for consumer products with brand names that start with letters from their own names (Brendl, Chattopadhyay, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2005). An archival study by Jones, Pelham, Caravallo, and Mirenberg (2004) yielded evidence that people marry others who share their initials at greater than chance levels. In addition (and most relevant to the current investigation), people also gravitate toward careers with titles or labels that resemble their own names (e.g., Larrys and Lauries are overrepresented among lawyers, while the names Dennis and Denise are relatively more common among dentists; Pelham *et al.*, 2002).

Given how surprising (or even outlandish) some of these findings seem to be, research on the role of implicit egotism in major life decisions is not without its critics (Gallucci, 2003). Among other concerns, it would be reasonable to be worried about the possibility that the findings supporting the hypotheses were "cherry picked" from a larger set of unsupportive ones. Much of the relevant evidence, though, is not open to such alternative explanations (see Pelham, Caravallo, DeHart, & Jones, 2003), and converging evidence for the power of the name-letter effect continues to appear. Anseel and Duyck (2008), for example, found a greater than chance relationship between Belgian employees' initials and the names of the companies for which they worked.

When implicit egotism undermines explicit goals

Nelson and Simmons (2007), in a series of creative archival and experimental investigations, extended the reach of implicit egotism in an important way: they demonstrated that people might pursue name-resembling outcomes, even when doing so would undermine their conscious goals. For example, they found that college students whose names began with *A* or *B* received higher grades than those whose names began with *C* or *D*, an effect that was stronger for students who evaluated their initials more positively.

In another study, Nelson and Simmons tested the hypothesis that major league baseball players whose first or last names began with the letter *K* — such as Dave Kingman — would be more likely to strike out (an undesirable outcome) than other players. This hypothesis was based on the fact that from the earliest days of organized baseball, strikeouts have been recorded by scorekeepers with a *K*. In support of their hypothesis, Nelson and Simmons found that over 94 years of major league

baseball history (1913 through 2006), the strikeout rate for players with *K* names was 18.8 percent, as opposed to the corresponding figure of 17.2 percent for all other players. That difference, although not enormous in magnitude, was statistically significant. Thus, Nelson and Simmons' data suggest that Dave Kingman's career strikeout total might have been less than 1816 (tenth most on the all-time list) had his name only been Dave Ringman.

Previous research on implicit egotism (Pelham *et al.*, 2002), however, arguably suggests another hypothesis even more directly: that players whose first or last names begin with the letter *K* would be more likely to be pitchers than would other players. Pitchers are the players who try to strike batters out — that is, the ones seeking and attracted to *K*s. Pitchers are also generally worse hitters than are other players, and much more likely to strike out. This line of reasoning opens up the possibility that the results of Nelson and Simmons's Study 1 were due to their *K*-initialed players being made up of a disproportionately high number of pitchers (such as Kurt Kepshire of the 1980s Saint Louis Cardinals).

Method and results

To test this hypothesis, we counted the players listed in the *Baseball Encyclopedia* (Gillette & Palmer, 2007) with first or last names starting with *K*, subdividing them into pitchers and other position players. (In general, this is a rigid distinction, but the *Encyclopedia* lists 312 players with extensive enough experience as both a pitcher and some other kind of position player to be listed in both categories; these players were excluded from our analyses.) Four hundred and fifty-two out of 955 *K* players were pitchers (47.3 percent), but only 6837 of the remaining 15,375 were (44.5 percent); this difference was significant (one-tailed test), χ^2 (1, 16330) = 2.98, $p < .05$.

To conceptually replicate this finding, we ran a similar analysis with the letter *P*, hypothesizing that pitchers would also disproportionately have first or last names starting with that letter — just as Pelham *et al.* (2002) found that people with names beginning with the letter *R* are more likely to go into the roofing business than the hardware business, while the opposite is true for people with names beginning with *H*. Five hundred and eighty-six out of 1265 (46.3 percent) *P* players were pitchers (including Pat Perry and Pat Pacillo on the 1988 Cincinnati Reds team). Only 6703 of the remaining 15065 (44.5 percent) were pitchers. Although this difference was at best marginally significant (one-tailed test) — χ^2 (1, 16330) = 1.58, $p = .1$ — it was in the predicted direction.

To illustrate the potential implications of these data for Nelson and Simmons's findings for *K* players, consider first a parallel analysis focusing on players with *P* as an initial. Because Nelson and Simmons needed a reliable measure of strikeout frequency, they restricted their data set to players from the years 1913 to 2006 with at least 100 plate appearances.[1] Restricting our analyses to that same data set, we found that players with names that began with *P* ($n = 473$) were more likely to strike out than other players (n = 5864), 18.35 percent vs. 17.24 percent, t (6335) = 2.31, $p < .05$. Even within this smaller sample, though, players with *P* initials were more likely to be pitchers (133, or 28.1 percent) than were other players (1331, or 22.7 percent), and significantly so, χ^2 (1, 6337) = 7.24, $p < .01$. (The smaller proportion of pitchers in the restricted sample is due to the fact that pitchers are much less

likely than other players to reach 100 plate appearances in their careers — especially those in the American League, where designated hitters almost always bat in place of pitchers as a result of a rule change adopted in 1973.) And when pitchers are excluded from the analysis of strikeout rates, the difference between *P* and non-*P* players disappears, 14.27 percent vs. 13.73 percent, $t\ (4871) = 1.56$, $p = .12$. Thus, the elevated strikeout rate for players with first or last names starting with *P* is for the most part attributable to the disproportionate number of pitchers in that group; overall, pitchers in the data set were much more likely to strike out than were other players (29.15 percent vs. 13.76 percent).

Similarly, when pitchers are excluded from the comparison in strikeout rates between *K* and non-*K* players, the magnitude of the difference between the groups drops from 1.6 percent to 1.0 percent, a reduction of close to 40 percent. However, the difference (14.71 percent vs. 13.71 percent) is still statistically significant, $t\ (4871) = 2.61$, $p < .01$. In addition, although even in the restricted sample players with *K* initials were more likely to be pitchers (95 out of 370, or 25.7 percent) than were other players (1369 out of 5967, or 22.9 percent), a chi square test did not reveal this difference to be significant ($p = .23$).

Conclusion

Our analyses provide further support for Nelson and Simmons' conclusions about how implicit egotism can sabotage the batting performances of baseball players. However, our findings also suggest a broader role for implicit egotism in what takes place on the baseball diamond. Unconscious self-liking does not only affect how players perform on the field, but also where they are *standing* on the field. The relationship we have uncovered between baseball players' initials and whether or not they end up pitching, partially — but not completely — accounts for the findings reported by Nelson and Simmons.

Names matter in baseball, as in all walks of life. Certainly names are not always destiny — otherwise, it is unlikely that a man named Clyde Kluttz would have become a major league catcher or Bob Walk a major league pitcher. On the other hand, the 1955 World Series most valuable player might have become a pitcher anyway, and other considerations might have led him to come out of retirement in 1969 to pitch for the Padres (and their manager Pedro "Preston" Gomez), but having the name Johnny Podres arguably made all that even more likely.

Acknowledgment

Thanks to Joseph Simmons for sharing his data on players' first initials.

Notes

[1] To better allow for comparisons between our data and those reported by Nelson and Simmons (2007), we retained their operational definition of plate appearances as the sum of at bats and bases on balls. This procedure excludes other (and much lower frequency) events such as sacrifice flies, sacrifice hits, and being hit by pitches, but there is no a priori reason to suspect that the frequency of those events would be confounded with *K* or *P* initials.

Bibliography

Alvarez, L., & Jaffe, K. 2004. "Narcissism guides mate selection: Humans mate assortatively, as revealed by facial resemblance, following an algorithm of 'self seeking like'." *Evolutionary Psychology* 2: 177–194.

Anseel, F., & Duyck, W. 2008. "Unconscious applicants: A systematic test of the name-letter effect." *Psychological Science* 19: 1050–1061.

Beggan, J. K. 1992. "On the social nature of nonsocial perception: The mere ownership effect." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 62: 229–237.

Brendl, C. M., Chattopadhyay, A., Pelham, B. W., & Carvallo, M. 2005. "Name letter branding: Valence transfers when product specific needs are active." *Journal of Consumer Research* 32: 405–415.

Dunning, D., Meyerowitz, J. A., & Holzberg, A. D. 1989. "Ambiguity and self-evaluation: The role of idiosyncratic trait definitions in self-serving assessments of ability." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57: 1082–1090.

Galucci, M. 2003. "I sell seashells by the seashore and my name is Jack: Comment on Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones (2002)." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85: 789–799.

Gillette, G., & Palmer, P. 2007. *The ESPN baseball encyclopedia* (fourth Ed.). New York: Sterling Publishing Co.

Hoorens, V., & Nuttin, J. M. 1993. "Overvaluation of own attributes: Mere ownership or subjective frequency?" *Social Cognition* 11: 177–200.

Jones, J. T., Pelham, B. W., Carvallo, M., & Mirenberg, M. C. 2004. "How do I love thee? Let me count the Js: Implicit egotism and interpersonal attraction." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 87: 665–683.

Nelson, L. D., & Simmons, J. P. 2007. "Moniker maladies: When names sabotage success." *Psychological Science* 18: 1106–1112.

Nickell, G., Pederson, K., & Rossow, C. 2003. "The birthdate effect: An extension of the mere ownership effect." *Psychological Reports* 92: 161–163.

Nuttin, J. M. 1985. "Narcissism beyond Gestalt and awareness: The name letter effect." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 15: 353–361.

Pelham, B. W., Carvallo, M., DeHart, T., & Jones, J. T. 2005. "Assessing the validity of implicit egotism: A reply to Galucci (2003)." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85: 800–807.

Pelham, B. W., Carvallo, M., & Jones, J. T. 2005. "Implicit egotism." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14: 106–110.

Pelham, B. W., Mirenberg, M. C., & Jones, J. T. 2002. "Why Susie sells seashells by the seashore: Implicit egotism and major life decisions." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 82: 469–487.

Notes on Contributors

Leonard Newman is an Associate Professor at Syracuse University, where he is the area director of the social psychology program and the editor of the journal *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*. His research interests include social stigma, psychological defense, and the social psychology of genocide and mass killing.

William Hernandez is an industrial/organizational psychology MA candidate at the Thomas Harriot School of Arts and Sciences of East Carolina University. His research interests include workaholism, personnel selection, and health and relationship issues related to work stressors.

Daria A. Bakina is a social psychology graduate student at Syracuse University. Her research interests include attitudes, stigma, and intergroup relations.

Abraham M. Rutchick is an assistant professor of psychology at California State University, Northridge. His research interests include social perception and applied social cognition, with particular emphases on intergroup processes and political psychology.

Correspondence to: Leonard Newman, Syracuse University, Psychology Department, 430 Huntington Hall, Syracuse, NY, 13244-2340, USA. Email: lsnewman@syr.edu