NAMES, Vol. 61 No. 3, September 2013, 127–39

Young Adults' Responses to Infant Names

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Many parents in the United States devote a great deal of attention to selecting their children's names. To better understand this process, 532 potential parents in the United States rated their liking and perceptions of infant names. Liking was related to characteristics of the names (such as popularity, defined as how frequently the names had been previously selected by parents) and to characteristics of the raters (such as their personality traits and gender). Ratings of the physical and behavioral traits of infants depicted through both a name and a photograph were related more strongly to ratings of the photograph alone than the name alone. These results suggest that parent preferences for certain names may account for changes in name popularity over time, and also suggest that the influence of names on adults' perceptions of infants may be superseded by the influence of the infants' physical appearance.

KEYWORDS names, name liking, name popularity, stereotypes, infants, physical appearance, college-aged students

Introduction

Many parents in the United States put a great deal of thought and consideration into selecting names for their children. A visit to the pregnancy and parenting section of any bookstore or an internet search for "baby names" reveals a plethora of suggestions and information to assist parents with this decision. For example, Smith (2009) reported that a search for books related to infant naming on Amazon.com produces more than 11,000 results, and we found that a Google.com search for "baby names" produces over 55 million hits. One particular website displays the trajectory of a name's popularity, indicates where in the United States the name is the most popular, and provides additional information on choosing a baby name (<www.babynamewizard.com>). As Alter (2007) reported, some parents in the United States even choose to hire a consultant to help them find the best name for their infant.

Parents' choices of infant names are influenced by a variety of factors, including their personal liking of particular names and such factors as religious tradition,

 DOI 10.1179/0027773813Z.00000000047

family and cultural naming conventions, regional name preferences, media influences, ethnicity/race, and socioeconomic status (McCain, 1989; Joubert, 1993; 1994; Otta, 1997; Perl and Wiggins, 2004; Evans, 2008; Barry and Harper, 2010; Varnum and Kitayama, 2011). Parents' strong concern with choosing the best name for their infant may be due in part to the belief that the name they choose will affect the child's social and economic outcomes. Empirical studies have found that personal names can lead to differential outcomes, both as a function of the individual's liking of his or her own name (e.g., Nelson and Simmons, 2007) and through the responses of other people who perceive and treat individuals differently based on their names (Joubert, 1993; Erwin, 1995; Lea et al., 2007; Smith, 2009). Much of the previous research on names has examined adults' responses to the names of children or other adults. The goals of the study reported here were (a) to explore factors related to potential parents' liking of different types of infant names and (b) to examine these young adults' perceptions of the characteristics of infants as depicted through names and photographs.

One of the most consistent findings concerning infant naming practices is that the popularity of names varies across time and culture. Research has found that most adults prefer common names to more unusual names, but, when a name becomes too common within a particular cultural group, its popularity often declines, particularly for female names (Joubert, 1993; 1994; Bruning et al., 1998; Ellington, 2001; Smith, 2009; Barry and Harper, 2010). An analysis by Smith (2009) found that popular names in English-speaking countries other than the United States (e.g., Australia, England, and Ireland) are often different from popular names in the United States at a specific point in time. This finding led Smith to suggest that culture can play a larger role in the popularity of names than language. Further, in recent decades Caucasian parents in the United States have become more likely to select less popular names for their children, which Twenge, Abebe, and Campbell (2010) attribute to an increasing focus on individualism. Research has shown that individuals' liking of currently popular, previously popular, and unusual names is also associated with adults' sex, with men more likely than women to prefer common names and women more likely than men to prefer newly popular or unusual names (Joubert, 1985; 1993; Ellington, 2001). Women also have been found to show more variability in their preferences for names (Buchanan and Bruning, 1971). In the first part of the current study we examined United States contemporary potential parents' liking of currently popular, previously popular, and unusual infant names in relation to their sex, as well as to aspects of their personality and attitudes.

In the second part of the study we assessed the same participants' perceptions of infants depicted through names, photographs, or the combinations of names and photographs. Previous research (Joubert, 1993; 1994; Erwin, 1995) concluded that adults perceive other adults differently on the basis of their names. These stereotypes elicited by names convey information about characteristics such as social class, religion, race, intelligence, and personality. Erwin (1995) suggested that these stereotypes may lead to self-fulfilling prophecies and thus eventual differences among individuals with different names. Many studies also confirm that physical appearance, particularly attractiveness, elicits stereotyped perceptions of infants, children, and adults (Langlois et al., 2000). Because a person's name and appearance are usually both

present during the formation of first impressions, an important question concerns which of these factors, name or appearance, is most influential on others' perceptions. Previous research on the effects of both name and appearance on perceptions of adults has been contradictory or inconclusive (see Joubert, 1993; Erwin, 1995).

Procedure

This study was conducted using an online survey system available to students taking introductory psychology classes at a large state university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. College students between the ages of 18 and 23 years of age, who were not already parents, were given course credit to participate in this study. Potential parents, rather than parents, were recruited because these individuals were expected to be less familiar with naming trends and current popularity of specific names, as well as less likely to have chosen a name for an infant previously. A total of 124 male and 408 female students participated.

All participants first answered demographic questions and then rated their own personality and their liking for 30 infant names. Participants were then randomly assigned to rate the personality and behavioral characteristics of 3 male and 3 female infants depicted through names only (102 participants), photographs only (83 participants), or paired names and photographs (347 participants). Individual participants rated different subsets of the 30 names used in the first part of the study, 12 photographs of 11–13-month-old infants, or combinations of each name with one same-sex 11-month-old and one same-sex 13-month-old infant photograph (for a total of 60 pairs). Order of presentation of stimuli was partially counterbalanced across participants. Ratings of each stimulus were averaged across participants.

Materials

Demographic information

Participants reported demographic characteristics that were used to describe the sample and that were examined in relation to their liking of infant names.

Big Five Personality Inventory (BFI; John et al., 1991)

Participants rated themselves on the 44 personality traits included in the BFI using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (disagree strongly) to 5 (agree strongly). Subscale scores were calculated for extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. Internal consistencies (Chronbach alpha) for the subscale scores in our sample ranged from .77 to .81.

Infant names

Half of the names used in this study were female names and the other half were male names. In addition, popularity of the names was varied by including five currently popular, five previously popular, and five unusual names for each sex (see Table 1 for list of names separated by sex and popularity of name). Currently and previously popular names were obtained from the Social Security Administration popular baby names website (<http://www.ssa.gov/OACT/babynames/>). This website has been

TABLE 1

NAMES USED IN THE STUDY, BY POPULARITY CATEGORY AND SEX

	Currently Popular Names	Previously Popular Names	Unusual Names
Male Names	Aidan	Edward	Diesel
	Carter	Dustin	Emerson
	Ethan	Stephen	Rider
	Jackson	Scott	Scout
	Wyatt	Travis	Whitaker
Female Names	Arianna	Amy	Alessia
	Chloe	Heather	Dahlia
	Jayda	Lindsey	Lakyn
	Madison	Patricia	Novalee
	Riley	Susan	Shyla

widely used by onomastic researchers examining the popularity of names (e.g., Lieberson and Lynn, 2003; Smith, 2009; Tucker, 2009), as all parents in the United States are required to obtain a Social Security card for their infant after birth. This site includes all names after 1879 where the given name is at least two letters long. Currently popular names were selected from the lists of the top 100 names for males and the top 100 names for females in 2007. Previously popular names were from these lists in 1983, approximately one generation earlier. Finally, the unusual names were selected from a website of "all new baby names" given to infants in 2007 (<www.allnewbabynames.com>). Names that were selected for use in this study appeared on only one of the lists for each sex and in only one of the three popularity categories, and, on average, were similar in length within both sex and category. Participants rated their liking of each name on a 7-point Likert scale.

Photographs

Photographs of faces of six 11-month-old and six 13-month-old Caucasian infants (half male and half female) with neutral facial expressions and with clothing covered by a gray smock were used in the final rating task (see Hildebrandt and Fitzgerald, 1979).

Stern-Karraker Infant Stereotyping Scale (S-KISS; Stern and Karraker, 1986)

Participants' ratings of the personality and behavioral characteristics of infants depicted with a name, photograph, or paired name and photograph were assessed using the S-KISS. The S-KISS consists of 22 7-point adjective scales. Mean scores were calculated for each name, photograph, and name-photograph pair (averaging across the participants who rated each stimulus) for the subscales of physical maturity, sociability, appealing behavior, cognitive competence, physical potency, and liking. The internal consistency for these subscales has previously been reported to range from .82 to .89 (Stern et al., 2006).

Results

Participants (N = 532) ranged in age from 18 to 23 years old (M_{age} = 19.03 years). When asked about their race, 491 (93%) classified themselves as Non-Hispanic Caucasian, 11 as African American, 6 as Hispanic, 6 as Asian, 3 as Native American, and 11 as "Other." When asked about their marital status, 506 (95.5%) reported that they were not married, 6 reported being married, 18 reported that they were cohabitating. When asked whether they planned on having children in the future, 450 (85%) stated that they did plan on having children, while only 9 reported that they did not; the rest of the participants were undecided. The participants reported varying degrees of liberal and conservative political beliefs; 43% reported moderate political beliefs, 33% reported more liberal beliefs, and 24% reported more conservative beliefs. Participants also varied widely in their reported religiousness; on a 0 to 8 scale from not at all religious to very religious, 67% rated themselves between a 3 and a 6.

Liking of infant names

A 2 × 2 × 3 mixed model analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess the effects of sex of participant, sex of name, and popularity category of name (currently popular, previously popular, and unusual) on participants' ratings of how much they liked each name. The category of name main effect was significant, Wilk's $\lambda = .36$, $F(2, 526) = 471.66$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .64$, but the sex of participant and sex of name main effects were not. All of the two-way interactions were significant, Sex of Participant × Sex of Name, Wilk's $\lambda = .99$, $F(1, 527) = 7.76$, $p = .006$, partial $\eta^2 = .02$, Sex of Name × Category of Name, Wilk's $\lambda = .93$, $F(2, 526) = 19.45$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .07$, and Sex of Participant × Category of Name, Wilk's $\lambda = .78$, $F(2, 526) = 76.11$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .22$. The three-way interaction was also significant, Wilk's $\lambda = .97$, $F(2, 526) = 7.83$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .03$, and is illustrated in Figure 1.

Because the three-way interaction supersedes the other effects, and because the primary focus of this part of the study was on the effect of different categories of names, follow-up paired sample t-tests were conducted to test for differences in participants' liking of names in the different popularity categories separately for male and female participants. Male participants liked both currently popular and previously popular boys' names more than unusual boys' names, $t(122) = 9.98$, $p < .001$, and $t(123) = 8.99$, $p < .001$, respectively. Similarly, male participants liked both currently popular and previously popular girls' names more than unusual girls' names, $t(123) = 12.84$, $p < .001$, and $t(123) = 8.16$, $p < .001$, respectively. Male participants' ratings of currently popular and previously popular boys' and girls' names did not differ, $t(122) = .4$, $p = .524$, and $t(123) = -.56$, $p = .578$, respectively. Female participants liked currently popular boys' names more than both previously popular and unusual boys' names, $t(406) = -16.69$, $p < .001$, and $t(406) = 33.96$, $p < .001$, respectively. Female participants also liked previously popular boys' names more than unusual boys' names, $t(407) = 12.12$, $p < .001$. Similarly, female participants liked currently popular girls' names more than both previously popular and unusual girls' names, $t(406) = -22.84$, $p < .001$, and $t(406) = 26.65$, $p < .001$, respectively, and liked

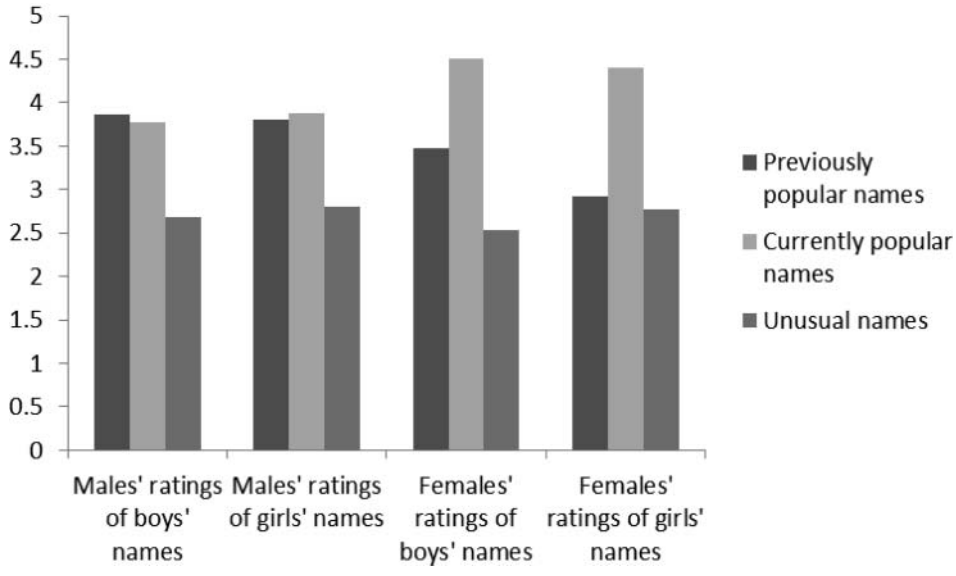

FIGURE 1 Three-way interaction depicting participants' liking of names based on the popularity of the names, the sex of the participant, and the sex of the name.

previously popular girls' names more than unusual girls' names, $t(407) = 2.05$, $p = .042$. In sum, both male and female participants liked the unusual names the least. Male participants liked the currently and previously popular names equally, whereas female participants liked the currently popular names more than the previously popular names. The sex of the name did not change these patterns.

Individual differences in liking of infant names

Further analyses were conducted to determine if participant characteristics were related to individual differences in the sample's liking of infant names. Previous analyses indicated that male and female participants showed different patterns of liking and an additional analysis revealed that variability in liking of infant names (calculated as the standard deviation of each participant's ratings of liking across all 30 names) was greater for female ($M = 1.81$) than male participants ($M = 1.57$), $t(530) = -6.28$, $p < .001$. Therefore, separate exploratory standard multiple regressions were performed to examine possible predictors of male and female participants' overall liking of infant names and their variability in ratings of liking. For each of these standard multiple regressions, the participants' five personality dimensions (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism), political beliefs (ranging from very liberal to very conservative), religiousness (from not religious at all to very religious), the extent to which they have regular contact with infants (from weekly to not at all), and the extent to which they like infants (from much more than average to much less than average) were entered as predictors. Exploratory hierarchical multiple regressions also were performed to examine possible predictors of participants' relative liking of unusual names and relative liking of currently popular

names, in which participants' ratings of the non-target popularity categories of names were entered in a first step and the same predictors as included in the standard multiple regressions were entered in a second step.

For male participants (see Table 2; refer to significant *t*-tests), overall greater liking of infant names was related to more openness. Greater variability in their liking of infant names was associated with more openness and less neuroticism. Male participants' relative liking of currently popular names was unrelated to the measured predictors, but their relative liking of unusual names was associated with greater liking of infants.

For female participants (see Table 3; refer to significant *t*-tests), overall greater liking of infant names was again related to more openness. Greater variability in their liking of infant names was associated with more extraversion and less neuroticism. Female participants' relative liking of currently popular names was unrelated to the measured predictors, but their relative liking of unusual names was associated with more openness.

Perceptions of infants based on names and photographs

Average ratings of each of the 30 names, 12 photographs, and 60 paired names and photographs were obtained for each S-KISS subscale (physical maturity, sociability, appealing behavior, cognitive competence, physical potency, and liking) by combining the ratings of all participants who rated each stimulus. Separate hierarchical linear regressions were then calculated to predict the ratings of the name-photograph pairs for each subscale. In each hierarchical multiple regression, order of stimulus presentation, sex of stimulus, and age of baby in the photograph were entered as control variables in Step 1, as these variables were found in preliminary analyses to be significantly related to some of the average S-KISS ratings of the name-photograph pairs. Average S-KISS ratings of names and of photographs were entered in Step 2. For all subscales, average S-KISS ratings of the photographs significantly predicted the average S-KISS ratings of the name-photograph pairs, β's .29 to .58, p's $< .015$. Average S-KISS ratings of the names predicted the average S-KISS ratings of the name-photograph pairs only for the liking subscale, $\beta = .23$, $p = .016$.

A final set of analyses was conducted to determine if the consistent relation between the average S-KISS ratings of photographs alone and the average S-KISS ratings of the name-photograph pairs was primarily a function of the physical attractiveness, or cuteness, of the infants depicted in the photographs. Average ratings of the cuteness of the infant photographs from a prior study (Hildebrandt and Fitzgerald, 1979) were entered into the hierarchical multiple regression analyses described above as a separate step prior to entering the average S-KISS ratings of the names and the photographs. Cuteness ratings were significantly associated with the average S-KISS ratings for the name-photograph pairs for all subscales except potency, β's .29 to .52, p's $< .05$, β for potency = .21, $p = .055$. Even with cuteness controlled, the average S-KISS ratings of the photographs alone significantly predicted the average S-KISS ratings of the name-photograph pairs for all subscales except for sociability and appealing behavior, β's .24 to .46, p's $< .05$, β for sociability = .23, $p = .054$, β for appealing behavior = .26, $p = .056$.

TABLE 2

REGRESSION ANALYSIS SUMMARY OF PREDICTORS OF MALE PARTICIPANTS' LIKING OF NAMES, VARIABILITY IN LIKING OF NAMES, AND RELATIVE LIKING OF CURRENTLY POPULAR AND UNUSUAL NAMES

	Adj R^2	*df*	*F*	*Unst. B*	*t*
Average liking of names	.13	9, 107	2.87**		
Openness				.21	2.37*
Conscientiousness				–.19	–1.82
Extraversion				–.02	–.23
Agreeableness				.12	1.15
Neuroticism				.06	.71
Political beliefs				–.09	–1.56
Religiosity				.08	3.05
Contact with infants				–.02	–.29
Liking of infants				.04	.54
Variability in liking of names	.08	9, 107	2.05*		
Openness				.13	2.05*
Conscientiousness				–.03	–.35
Extraversion				.07	.95
Agreeableness				.12	1.59
Neuroticism				–.14	–2.30*
Political beliefs				.00	–.07
Religiosity				–.02	–1.07
Contact with infants				–.04	–.65
Liking of infants				–.07	–1.15
Relative liking of CP names	.30	9, 104	1.97*		
Openness				.15	1.32
Conscientiousness				–.13	–1.01
Extraversion				–.01	–.07
Agreeableness				.16	1.20
Neuroticism				.18	1.71
Political beliefs				–.13	–1.83
Religiosity				.05	1.47
Contact with infants				.03	.29
Liking of infants				–.15	–1.51
Relative liking of UN names	.27	9, 104	1.41		
Openness				.02	.12
Conscientiousness				–.04	–.30
Extraversion				.07	.50
Agreeableness				–.17	–1.21
Neuroticism				–.08	–.68
Political beliefs				.05	.60
Religiosity				.05	1.31
Contact with infants				–.07	–.66
Liking of infants				.24	2.22*

NOTE: CP = currently popular and UN = unusual. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

TABLE 3

REGRESSION ANALYSIS SUMMARY OF PREDICTORS OF FEMALE PARTICIPANTS' LIKING OF NAMES, VARIABILITY IN LIKING OF NAMES, AND RELATIVE LIKING OF CURRENTLY POPULAR AND UNUSUAL NAMES

	Adj R^2	*df*	*F*	*Unst. B*	*t*
Average liking of names	.01	9, 363	1.54		
Openness				.12	2.01*
Conscientiousness				.00	.02
Extraversion				–.01	–.17
Agreeableness				.09	1.39
Neuroticism				–.02	–.40
Political beliefs				–.09	–2.12
Religiosity				.01	.25
Contact with infants				–.03	–.56
Liking of infants				.00	–.05
Variability in liking of names	.05	9, 363	3.01**		
Openness				.02	.53
Conscientiousness				.03	.89
Extraversion				.09	2.59*
Agreeableness				.05	1.45
Neuroticism				–.11	–3.64***
Political beliefs				.04	.66
Religiosity				.01	.66
Contact with infants				–.01	–.57
Liking of infants				–.04	–1.58
Relative liking of CP names	.30	9, 359	1.62		
Openness				–.10	–1.46
Conscientiousness				.07	1.01
Extraversion				.08	1.12
Agreeableness				.11	1.52
Neuroticism				–.06	–1.06
Political beliefs				–.07	–1.63
Religiosity				–.02	–.90
Contact with infants				–.01	–.15
Liking of infants				–.06	–1.26
Relative liking of UN names	.23	9, 359	2.33*		
Openness				.30	3.99***
Conscientiousness				–.10	–1.23
Extraversion				–.03	–.31
Agreeableness				–.05	–.61
Neuroticism				.01	.11
Political beliefs				–.01	–.23
Religiosity				.03	1.24
Contact with infants				–.06	–1.01
Liking of infants				.05	.85

NOTE: CP = currently popular and UN = unusual. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

Discussion

In line with previous research on child and adult names (e.g., Joubert, 1985; 1993; Ellington, 2001; Barry and Harper, 2010), both male and female potential parents in the current study liked previously popular and currently popular infant names more than unusual infant names. Although some studies have suggested that women occasionally like unusual names and that parents have recently been selecting less common names for their offspring (Twenge et al., 2010), the potential parents in our sample, on average, did not particularly like the unusual names we had selected. This finding suggests that potential parents may only like those unusual names that they have selected themselves or that they are familiar with through idiosyncratic or culture-specific experiences, rather than liking unusual names in general. Nonetheless, some participants were more inclined than others to like unusual names, with men who like infants more and women who are characteristically more open liking the unusual names selected for this study more than did other participants. In line with Lieberson and Lynn (2003), some individuals and couples may be more likely to select unusual names for their infants, potentially leading to greater acceptance and liking of these names as they become more commonly used. Further, the women in this study liked currently popular names more than previously popular names, whereas the men in this study liked these names equally. This finding suggests that mothers may lead the way in selecting infant names that are not already commonly used and popular, thus driving the changes over time seen in the popularity of individual names.

Young adults' overall liking of and tendency to differentiate among the infant names used in this study were generally related to the positive personality traits of openness and low neuroticism (although women's variability in ratings was related to extraversion rather than openness). These findings suggest that adults with certain personality traits may be more likely than others to attend to and differentiate among infant names. These individuals may be more influential than their partners when couples are deciding on names for their infants, and may be more likely to drive societal changes in name popularity.

Finally, analyses examining the simultaneous impact of names and photographs on young adults' ratings of infants revealed that the physical characteristics of the infants were much more influential than were their names on adults' perceptions of the infants' personality and behavioral characteristics. The only exception was for participants' reported liking of the infants, which was influenced by both name and appearance. Thus, potential parents seem to think that what an infant looks like is more predictive of that infant's behavior than the name given to that infant by his or her parents. However, because potential parents liked some names more than others, the infants' names did affect their liking of the infants. The strong impact of infant physical appearance on adults' perceptions of infants' behavioral tendencies is consistent with much research on the impact of child and adult physical appearance on others' perceptions and expectations (Langlois et al., 2000). Although physical attractiveness, operationalized here as average ratings of cuteness by other college students, seems to be an influential aspect of physical appearance, the current findings suggest that other aspects of appearance not captured by ratings of cuteness may also influence perceptions. Perhaps minor differences in infant facial expression or

preferences for certain hair styles, hair and eye color, or facial feature dimensions also subtly influence adults' perceptions.

Limitations and future directions

Because only ten names were chosen from each popularity type and there exist thousands of names with numerous variations in spellings, these findings may not generalize to all names. As previous research has reported, there are more first names for expecting parents to choose from now than ever before and the "top 100 names" each year are given to a smaller percentage of individuals than in previous generations (Lieberson and Lynn, 2003; Smith, 2009; Tucker, 2009; Barry and Harper, 2010). In addition, because of the limited diversity within our sample, these findings may not be generalizable to all parents faced with the challenge of selecting a name for their own infant.

The finding that physical appearance influenced perceptions more than names did is limited by the use of a small set of photographs and the possibility that the effects of names and physical appearance function differently during real-life interaction. Individuals typically make perceptual judgments about others during or after face-to-face interactions, rather than after seeing a picture of them or being told their name (see Joubert, 1994). Therefore, future researchers might consider using video clips rather than photographs to elicit perceptions of personality and behavior characteristics, as Barnes and Rosenthal (1985) reported that physical attractiveness was less salient in video clips than it was in photographs.

Another potential weakness of the study was that there were more female than male participants in the study. However, the ANOVA results were nearly identical using both weighted and unweighted means, and the significance of the *t*-test results for female participants would have been the same even with a sample size comparable to that of the male participants. Despite the greater statistical power for the regression analyses conducted with female vs. male data, a similar number and type of results were found for each sex, suggesting that this difference did not seriously impact the general nature of these findings.

Conclusions

A name is often the first information someone learns about another person, even before meeting them in person. Erwin (1995) suggested that names may even be able to direct the course of a relationship. As the first goal of our study, we were able to partially replicate previous findings about potential parents' preferences for names varying in popularity. However, we did not replicate previous findings that women prefer unusual names over more common names, perhaps because of the particular names included in our study. Our findings also suggest that certain individuals may be more inclined than others to like, and perhaps select for their own infant, unusual or less popular names.

We also provided evidence that although infant names clearly can impact adults' perceptions, physical appearance seems to have a stronger influence. However, even when physical appearance cues were available, names influenced young adults' liking

of individual infants. It may be that the stereotypes associated with particular names are idiosyncratic, based on individuals' liking of the name or prior experiences with others with that name.

In the United States, expectant parents often have the primary role in naming infants, and the name they choose is usually selected with care. These findings corroborate many expectant parents' propensity to consider names for their infant that they like and that elicit positive perceptions and liking in themselves and in others who may spend time with the child. These findings also suggest that highly unusual names may elicit less initial liking of a child by others than more common names, but that parents should be assured that their infant's appearance and behavioral characteristics will likely overcome these initial perceptions. These findings may also be especially pertinent to individuals who work with young children, such as child-care providers, reminding them to avoid forming perceptions and expectations of the children in their care based simply on such factors as the children's names and physical appearance.

Acknowledgment

The authors wish to thank Marion Young, PhD for her assistance with the study on which this brief report is based.

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