

# First Name Popularity as Predictor of Employability

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For more than fifty years, research in psychology has demonstrated that our evaluation of others may be influenced by their surname or first name. In this study, we evaluated the impact of the attractiveness and frequency of names in situations of recruitment for low qualification level jobs. Using data from a recruitment agency, we tested (binomial regression) for effects associated with first name popularity, surname frequency, first name + surname attractiveness, ethnicity, gender, and age on job interview outcome of 507 low qualified French persons. The logistic regression analysis indicated that, among the various variables tested, first name popularity remained the best predictor of employability.

**KEYWORDS** first name and surname attractiveness, first name popularity, surname frequency, job market, recruitment, job interview, discrimination

## Introduction

From birth, individuals receive from parents a first name and a surname that they generally keep throughout their life (except for women who choose to adopt their spouse's surname). In France, where the following study took place, surname for

children is usually inherited from the father whereas parents are free to choose children's first name among those existing. First name and surname differentiate individuals and contribute much to their identity. Although people do not choose their first name or surname, some research indicates that they may have an impact in their daily lives. Thus, for more than fifty years, the "psychology of names" has received attention and there is now a solid base of knowledge in this field (Guéguen et al., 2005; Guéguen, 2008). Concerning first name research, there are essentially two kinds of studies: the attractiveness of first names per se and the frequency of first names in a given population and their consequences.

Garwood (1976) observed that children bearing desirable first names (based on ratings by 79 elementary teachers) scored higher on school achievement measures than others with first names rated as undesirable. Similar results were obtained by Busse and Seraydarian, (1978a) and Ford et al. (1984). Furthermore, Gebauer et al. (2012: studies 1 and 2) examined the impact of people's first name attractiveness on the degree to which other members of an online-dating site sought information about them. They found that people with unattractive first names were neglected by potential partners more than those with more popular first names. Finally, Guéguen and Pascual (2012) found that candidates with more attractive first name + surname were more likely to be retained by employers. The desirability of first names is associated with variations in stereotyping thoughts and expectations of people who interacted with or evaluated individuals with these names.

Other studies have been conducted on the frequency or popularity of a first name in a given population. Savage and Wells (1948) observed a statistically significant occurrence of unsatisfactory academic performance in students with unusual first names. Joubert (1983) conducted a study on 1390 recent college graduates and showed that unusually named individuals were less likely to achieve academic honors upon graduation from a university than were their more commonly named peers. Studying professional achievement, Willis et al., (1982) examined the relationship between unusual first names and income. Data showed that unusual given names were more frequent in the poor. Furthermore, Gebauer et al. (2012: study 3) examined the impact of people's first name popularity on the degree to which other members of an online-dating site sought information about them. These authors observed that people with unpopular first names were neglected by potential partners more than those with more popular first names.

While the popularity of a first name is linked with academic performance and professional achievement, several studies have found that the relationship between the popularity of first names and their attractiveness was positively related (Busse and Seraydarian, 1978b; Crisp et al., 1984; Joubert, 1999; Lawson, 1980; West and Shults, 1976). In other words, is the negative effect of many first names due to their unpopularity or to their unattractiveness? In our study, we tried to answer this question in a recruitment context.

The assessment of applicants and the decisions made during recruitment interviews are the subject of considerable research in the social psychology of work and organizations. The present study investigated the recruitment of low qualified workers<sup>1</sup> seeking low qualified jobs<sup>2</sup> in companies in the market sector. This type of employee is almost always recruited in a short thirty-minute interview conducted by

middle managers whose skills and main function are not recruitment (Castra, 1995). This means that the interview probably serves to form an impression that will strongly impact the final decision (Bernaud, 2000: 109). It is well known that the prevailing stereotypes play a major role in how this « impression » is obtained.

In everyday life, especially in their dealings with administrative bodies or organizations, people use their first name and surname presented together to introduce themselves. In this study, we decided to explore the impact of first name and surname attractiveness and popularity on the response to job applicants subsequent to an actual job interview. Furthermore, contrary to previous research, we considered first name and surname together and distinguished attractiveness and popularity. We think that first name + surname should be both considered because if searchers studied only one aspect, it is not associated with the reality of job interviews where first name and surname are used simultaneously. Our hypothesis was that candidates with more attractive or popular first name and/or surname would be more favorably evaluated than those with less attractive or less popular first name and/or surname. In other words, people may be discriminated against in a recruitment context on the basis of their first name and/or surname characteristics.

## Method

### *Participants*

Our sample was composed of 507 low qualified French persons: 18 to 58 years old (mean = 33.80,  $\sigma$  = 8.96), 42% of women and 26% with an African-sounding name (evaluation made by undergraduate students). These individuals were registered with a job placement agency that specializes in recruiting people with low qualifications. During 2004, these individuals were requested to attend a job interview, at the end of which a decision was made. They were either not offered the job or they were offered it for a two-month trial period. Thus, we separated the administrative records of those redundant workers who were offered a job from the records of those who were not retained. After their job interview, 345 were hired and 162 were not.

### *Measure*

*Attractiveness of first name + surname (FN+S)* was estimated by an online survey completed by 2699 people (29.95 years old mean,  $\sigma$  = 11.83). They were asked to evaluate the attractiveness of 30 FN+S at random extracted from our total sample (N = 507) on a scale ranging from 0 (I don't like this FN+S) to 10 (I like this FN+S).

*First name popularity* was estimated with regard to the frequency with which first names were given to newborns between the years 1990 and 2000.<sup>3</sup>

*Surname frequency*<sup>4</sup> was estimated with regard to the frequency with which surnames were given to newborns between the years 1990 and 2000.<sup>5</sup>

## Results

First, FN+S attractiveness was positively and significantly correlated with first name popularity ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and with surname frequency ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These results are consistent with previous studies (Busse and Seraydarian, 1978b; Crisp,

TABLE 1

LOGISTIC REGRESSION RESULTS WITH JOB INTERVIEW OUTCOME AS THE CRITERION AND FN+S ATTRACTIVENESS, FIRST NAME POPULARITY, SURNAME FREQUENCY, ETHNICITY, GENDER AND AGE AS PREDICTORS

	df	Wald	p
<b>FN+S attractiveness</b>	1	0,41	0,52
<b>First name popularity</b>	1	6,99	0,01
<b>Surname frequency</b>	1	0,06	0,80
<b>Ethnicity</b>	1	0,00	0,98
<b>Gender</b>	1	1,93	0,16
<b>Age</b>	1	2,11	0,15

N = 162 non-hired applicants; 345 hired applicants.

Apostal, and Luessenheide, 1984; Joubert, 1999; Lawson, 1980; West and Shults, 1976).

Second, hired applicants had more attractive FN+S ( $t(505) = 2.05$ ,  $p < .04$ ) and more popular first names ( $t(505) = 3.67$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than those who were not hired. However, hired and non-hired applicants had the same surname frequency ( $t(505) = 1.03$ , *ns*).

To determine the best predictor of employability, we used a logistic regression analysis which makes it possible to adjust a regression surface to data when the dependent variable is dichotomic (Desjardins, 2005). This method can be used whether the predictors are continuous (age, FN+S attractiveness, first name popularity, surname frequency) or dichotomic (gender, ethnicity), and without these predictors to be necessarily normally or linearly distributed or possess an equal variance between each group (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2000). Results are presented in Table 1.

## Discussion

Only the effect of first name popularity was statistically significant ( $p = .01$ ), suggesting that applicants with higher popularity were more likely to get a job offer than those with lower popularity. Surprisingly, the effect of ethnicity was not statically significant despite claims of racial discrimination in the labor market (Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004; Kaas and Manger, 2010). The lack of an ethnicity effect may be explained by the kind of jobs considered (low qualified jobs). Using the testing method, Duguet et al. (2009) observed that résumés with an Arabic-sounding name were discriminated against on qualified jobs compared to those with a French-sounding name, but not on low qualified jobs. In our study, among the predictors tested, the popularity of the first name proved to be the strongest predictor of employability. Assuming that the name has nothing to do with the skills of a candidate, our results provide evidence of a new form of employment discrimination based on first name that has not been detected in France until now. Moreover, this bias in the evaluation of others is clearly difficult to avoid because one's first name is an essential part of the identity of an individual. Such a result is compatible with the name-based interpersonal neglect hypothesis of Gebauer et al. (2012): "negative names evoke negative interpersonal

reactions, which in turn influence life outcome for the worse” (2012: 594). A possible interpretation could be that for low qualified jobs, recruitment procedures are loosely structured and conducted by middle managers whose skills and main function are not recruitment (Castra, 1995). In such a context, the function of the interview is probably to form an impression concerning applicants. Being confronted with an applicant with a popular first name could be reassuring for a recruiter because popular first names might activate a subjective positive stereotype (Erwin, 1995; Guéguen *et al.*, 2005; Harari and McDavid, 1973), which in turn facilitates recruitment.

## Conclusion

In this study, we found that first names are related to job interview outcome, applicants with more popular first names being more likely to meet with success. Additionally, FN+S attractiveness and surname frequency were not found to be good predictors of employability. Guéguen and Pascual (2012) found that FN+S attractiveness led to more recruitment in low qualified jobs. However, our data suggest that FN+S attractiveness is correlated with first name popularity and that first name popularity is the best predictor of employability.

This study has some limitations. Only low qualified jobs were investigated, for which recruitment procedures are often unstructured and lead to recruitment on the basis of impressions. It would therefore be appropriate to replicate this research in jobs with higher levels of qualification.

Recent research (Laberon, 2011) suggests that, to get rid of name discrimination, it could be useful to help employers to recruit low qualified candidates with a more structured procedure (Castra and Valls, 2007; Castra, 2011). Future research needs to be conducted in this area.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Low qualified workers are the people who have no diploma (or lower than the French Baccalaureate Diploma).

<sup>2</sup> Low qualified jobs are jobs which require no diploma to be exercised.

<sup>3</sup> These national data are available at: <<http://www.ancestry.fr/learn/learningcenters/prenom.aspx?name=&decade=1990>> (Accessed 11 June 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Concerning surnames, we used the term “frequency” rather than “popularity” because surnames for newborns of married parents are usually inherited from the father whether first names are a parental

choice. Indeed, traditionally in France, children of a man would have the father’s surname. If a child’s paternity was not known, or if the putative father denied paternity, the newborn child would have the surname of the mother. So, parents do not choose from a list of surnames. On the other hand, concerning the first names, parents are free to choose among those existing or even to invent one.

<sup>5</sup> These national data are available at: <<http://www.ancestry.fr/learn/learningcenters/nomfamille.aspx?name=&decade=1991>> (Accessed 11 June 2014).

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