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Assessing Names? Effects of Name-Based Stereotypes on Teachers' Evaluations of Pupils' Texts

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This study investigates the effects of name-based ethnic and social stereotypes on teachers' grading of pupils' texts in contemporary Sweden. A total of 113 practicing Swedish high school teachers assessed an authentic pupil text with one of three male names inserted, each intended to evoke a certain ethnic or social stereotype. Participants also explained their grading and answered questions regarding key features of the text. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted. The study concludes that name-based stereotypes generally have little influence on teachers' assessment in contemporary Sweden. Results indicate a systematic but small and not statistically relevant name effect. A negative effect can be seen with regard to an ethnically marked name. This effect is shown when teachers evaluate language proficiency, but not for other features of the text. Regarding socioeconomically marked names there is little systematic effect. The study also suggests, however, that there may be compensatory mechanisms limiting the name effect.

KEYWORDS socio-onomastics, name-based stereotypes, perceived identity, name bias, text assessment, ethnicity.

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of name-based ethnic and social stereotypes on the grades that teachers award to pupils in contemporary Sweden. Pupils in Swedish compulsory schools are commonly asked to write personal narratives (real or fictitious) as part of their first-language education. Such texts often contain proper names that refer to people and places. As such, the study combined educational sciences with socio-onomastics. From an educational perspective, it investigated whether these names evoked connotations that influenced teachers' expectations of their pupils, thus

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creating assessment bias. From a socio-onomastic perspective, the study explored how names may influence perceived identities and interpersonal treatment.

Theoretical framework

People's identities are sometimes perceived through their names in the form of *name-based stereotypes*. These stereotypes can be defined as "widely held images" constituted by positive or negative generalizations of individuals that are evoked by names (Lawson, 1996: 1744; cf. Erwin, 1995). They have been studied since the beginning of the twentieth century. An important conclusion from early research is the distinction between personal associations evoked by a name (which are based on personal experiences and acquaintances) and name-based stereotypes (which are connotations that are commonly shared by a larger group).

The use of the concept of stereotypes could be criticized for contributing to an essentialist and simplistic view of identity construction. As Hagström (2012) has pointed out, names evoke varying connotations in different cultures, in different subgroups, and over time. This finding was also confirmed in a doctoral thesis (Aldrin, 2011) in which it was evident that parents within different social strata perceived the same names in very different ways. I therefore argue that the relationship between a name and its stereotype should be described as *indexical* (Eckert, 2008), that is, characterized by a field of intertwined potential meanings that are all shared and from which any one meaning can be activated in any given instance. I further argue that stereotypes can be understood as the mental representations of linguistic social *categorizations* (Sacks, 1992) and their category-bound attributes. Social categorizations (such as old, female, upper class, immigrant, and so on) are constantly used in interactions in order to make sense of the world, even though (or precisely because) they always simplify and generalize reality (Billig, 1996). However, their meanings and category-bound attributes are not natural or fixed. Similarly, I argue that name-based stereotypes are not stable or fixed, even though they may give the impression of being so in certain contexts. Another important concept for this study is Gumperz's (1982: 131) term *contextualization cue*, which is defined as "any feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signaling of contextual presuppositions." According to Gumperz, linguistic forms and structures may acquire a contextualizing function that signals, for example, how the content is conventionally interpreted or related to other content in a given context. Although this concept has primarily been used to refer to speakers' linguistic choices, I argue that the function of certain linguistic features in written texts, including proper names, can be interpreted in a similar way. The appearance of a proper name in a text may index conventional expectations of the identity of the name carrier, which may in turn index situated expectations of a certain behavior or performance in the specific context. Such expectations evoked by names can be either correct or incorrect in relation to a specific name carrier; either way, they contribute to the impression of the person (cf. Hagström, 2012) and the interpretation of their actions.

Effects of name-based stereotypes in a school environment

It has been shown that name-based stereotypes influence many areas of life, such as the success of a job application (Bart et al., 1997; Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004; Cotton

et al., 2007), the popularity of a personal profile on a dating site (Gebauer et al., 2011), and whether people respond to a person's actions with criticism or praise (Gray Garwood et al., 1983). There also have been several studies on the effects of name-based stereotypes within a school environment (Anderson-Clark et al., 2008; Erwin and Calev, 1984; Figlio, 2003; Ford et al., 1984; Foster, 2008; Harari and McDavid, 1973; Seraydarian and Busse, 1981; Tompkins and Boor, 1980); however, these are not conclusive in their results.

Some of these school-based studies have found that pupils with names associated with a negative name-based stereotype (such as an ethnically marked name) often receive lower grades than others (Anderson-Clark et al., 2008; Erwin and Calev, 1984; Figlio, 2003; Harari and McDavid, 1973). Conversely, other studies found no correlation between pupils' names and teachers' grading (Ford et al., 1984; Foster, 2008; Seraydarian and Busse, 1981; Tompkins and Boor, 1980). Furthermore, some methodological issues are apparent within these studies. The majority of them use "name attractiveness" as a stereotyping cue; this is a rather vague categorization marker that may intersect with other markers (such as ethnic or social cues) in unpredictable ways, thus undermining the validity of the conclusions drawn. Another methodological issue is that many studies were conducted with student teachers, who may undertake assessments in a different manner to more experienced teachers. Furthermore, most of the existing studies were conducted in Anglo-American cultures, often decades ago, making generalizations across cultures and time difficult. The present study therefore focuses on a previously unexplored area and surveys practicing teachers in Sweden.

Study design

The study investigated 113 teacher assessments of the same authentic pupil text (the pupils and their parents consented to the pupils' texts being used in the study): a narrative written on the theme "my childhood," of average quality with both strengths and deficits. Personal expression is viewed as an important ability in the Swedish school system and narrative writing is therefore a common type of assignment. Unlike previous studies, this one does not investigate the influence of the pupil's name on the assessment outcome, but rather the influence of a name that occurs within the text. Anonymous assessment is increasingly utilized in Sweden as a strategy to avoid assessment bias; this study aims instead to investigate other means of sociocultural contextualization and thus to problematize the practice of "anonymous" text assessment.

The pupil text was produced in three versions, each containing a personal male name that may index a certain stereotype. This included one ethnically marked Muslim name (Mohammed), one Anglo-American name that is perceived as ethnically unmarked (since the name has become commonly used in Sweden) but socioeconomically marked as being of lower socioeconomic status (Kevin), and one traditional Swedish name that is socioeconomically marked as being of higher socioeconomic status (Carl). The names were elicited from previous Swedish onomastic studies in which they have been suggested to evoke these sociocultural connotations (Aldrin, 2011; Malm and Zetterström, 2007; Mattfolk, 2012). The name was inserted in the middle of the text at what seemed to be a discreet position in order to avoid drawing attention to it and to give the impression of authenticity (cf. Bertrand and Mullainathan, 2004).

The data were subject to both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Participants were asked to grade the text (on the Swedish grading scale of A–F, which *nota bene* includes six grades — A, B, C, D, E, and F — where A is the highest grade and F the lowest), to freely explain their assessment, and to assess the text for correctness, stylistic precision, and liveliness (on a 1–5 scale, where 1 is the most positive assessment and 5 the most negative). An uneven number of response alternatives was used here to enable participants to choose the middle option to express uncertainty or a lack of interest. Teachers' free explanations of their assessments were qualitatively analyzed using thematic analysis with a focus on apparent micro-themes and their attribution as positive or negative. The quantitative results reported in this article were analyzed using descriptive statistics and a Kruskal–Wallis test (a non-parametric test suitable for ordinal data); a significance level of 0.05 was used. A further description of the data and method, as well as some non-onomastic analyses have previously been reported elsewhere (Aldrin, 2015).

Participating teachers were reached through an email inquiry, which was sent to all teachers at the nearly 350 high schools in western Sweden that educate pupils aged 13–15. The majority of respondents were female (76 %); a distribution consistent across the assessments for all three versions of the text. Most were very experienced teachers (the average, as well as median, length of teaching was 13 years), but less-experienced teachers were also represented (17 % had a maximum of 5 years of teaching experience). Assessors of the text with the ethnically marked name were particularly experienced (27 % had been teaching for at least 20 years, compared to 9 % and 5 % of assessors of the other versions of the text).

When asked to describe the number of high-achieving pupils at their school on a scale of 1–5 (where 1 indicates a high level of high achievers and 5 indicates a low level), the average answer was 2.7 and the median 3.0, indicating a perception that there were neither many nor few such pupils. That said, some participants (14 %) did indicate a very high level of high achievers, and some (7 %) a very low level. The number of participants who reported a very high level of high achievers within their school was particularly high among assessors of the text with the ethnically marked name (27 % compared to 4 % and 10 % for the other text versions). Furthermore, a relatively high number of assessors of the text with the name marking low socioeconomic status reported a very low level of high achievers within their school (15 % compared to 4 % and 3 % for the other text versions).

Regarding the presence of multilingual pupils at their school (again estimated on a 1–5 scale where 1 indicates a high level of multilingual pupils and 5 indicates a low level), the average answer was 3.74 and the median 4.0, indicating fairly few such students. However, 12 % reported a large number of multilingual pupils and there was a particularly high level of such pupils at the schools in which the text with the ethnically marked name was assessed (25 % reported a relatively high or high level of multilingual pupils compared to 17 % and 13 % for the other text versions). The implications of these contextual differences are discussed further in the following interpretation of the results.

Results

This section will first report the quantitative results of the study: the teachers' general assessments of the text and their evaluation of key features of the three versions of the

text. Subsequently, the qualitative analysis of teachers' explanations of their assessments will be reported.

General assessment

The three versions of the text received a relatively similar assessment. The median grade was identical across text versions (4: grade D), but there were small differences in mean values. The highest mean, corresponding to the lowest grade, was obtained for the text version with the ethnically marked name (4.05: slightly below grade D). A similar, but slightly lower, mean value was displayed for the text version with the name marking high socioeconomic status (4.00: grade D). The lowest mean, and hence highest grade, was obtained for the text version with the name marking low socioeconomic status (3.72: between grades C and D). These differences are small and not statistically significant (the Kruskal–Wallis test result was $p = 0.212$), even so, they display an interesting pattern, as is evident from Figure 1.

The majority of the assessments were clustered around the grades C, D, and E; however, small distribution differences between text versions are evident from Figure 1. The most common grade awarded to the text version with the ethnically marked name was E (chosen by 38 % of teachers), creating a peak in the lower part of the grading scale. For the text version with the name marking high socioeconomic status, the most common grade was D (chosen by 38 % of teachers), creating a peak somewhat higher in the grading scale. The distribution curve of this text version is the one that most resembles a curve of statistical normal distribution. The text version with the name marking low socioeconomic status was equally awarded grades C and D (both chosen by 36 % of teachers), creating no clear peak around a single grade.

It should be noted that no teacher awarded the text the highest grade (A) or the lowest grade (F) — which is to be expected, given the intermediate quality of the text. The second-highest grade (B) was awarded to the text version with the name marking low socioeconomic status (8 %) and to the text version with the name marking high socioeconomic status (3 %), but not to the text version with the ethnically marked name. In contrast, the second-lowest grade (E) was primarily given to the text version with the ethnically marked name (38 %) and the text version with the name marking high

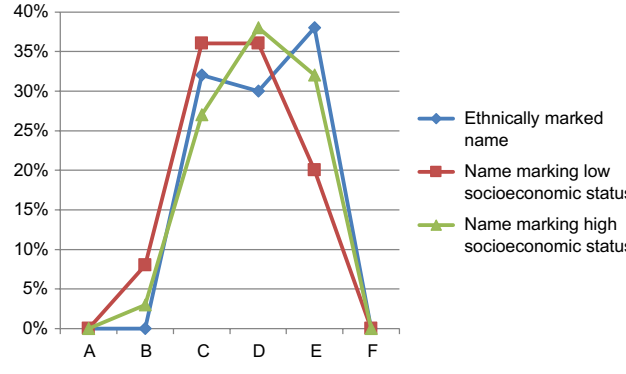

FIGURE 1 Teachers' general assessment of the text correlated to inserted name.

socioeconomic status (32 %), but to a lesser extent than the text version with the name marking low socioeconomic status (20 %). Thus the text version with the name marking low socioeconomic status received the most B grades and the fewest E grades, while the text version with the ethnically marked name received the most E grades and the fewest B grades. This indicates that, although there were no statistically significant differences correlated to name-based stereotypes, the text version with the ethnically marked name was graded slightly lower than the others. The text version with the name marking low socioeconomic status was graded slightly higher than the others, and the text version with the name marking high socioeconomic status took an intermediate position.

Evaluation of key features

The teachers' evaluations of each text version's features, linguistic correctness, stylistic precision, and liveliness also varied somewhat across the versions in a pattern that reinforced the aforementioned differences. Regarding two of the features — correctness and stylistic precision — the text version with the ethnically marked name deviated from the others. As shown in Figure 2, a much larger proportion of teachers evaluated this version of the text as "(4) fairly incorrect" (43 % compared to 18 % and 23 %) with regard to its language.

Furthermore, fewer teachers described the text version with the ethnically marked name as "(2) fairly correct" than the other versions (11 % compared to 16 % and 23 %). Consequently, this version of the text displays the least positive correctness mean (3.31 on the 1–5 scale, compared to 2.97 and 3.00 for the other versions); the medians did not differ. Although the difference is not statistically significant (the Kruskal–Wallis test result was $p = 0.069$), it confirms the pattern regarding the general assessment of the text and suggests that — at least for some teachers — the existence of an ethnically marked name evokes expectations of linguistic errors and leads the teacher to notice such features more easily. Conversely, teachers' assessments of the linguistic correctness of the text versions with the two ethnically unmarked names were similar. That said, a larger proportion evaluated the text version with the name marking high socioeconomic status as "(2) fairly correct" (23 % compared to 11 % and 16 %).

Regarding stylistic precision, the text version with the ethnically marked name again displays a different assessment pattern from the others. As shown in Figure 3, the

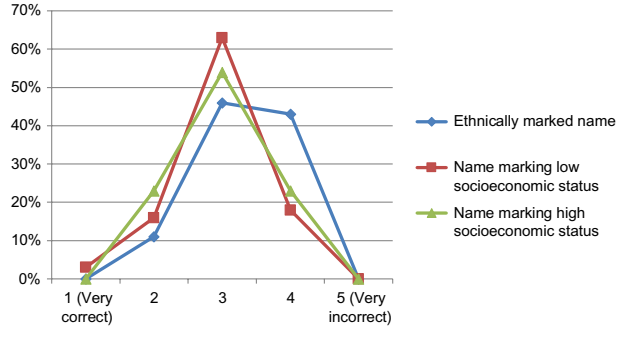

FIGURE 2 Teachers' evaluations of the correctness of the text.

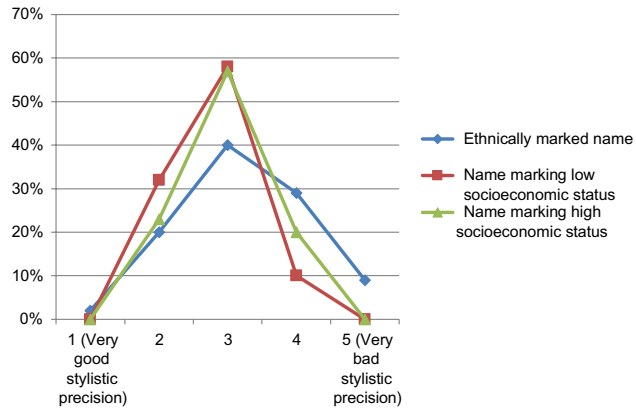

FIGURE 3 Teachers' evaluations of the stylistic precision of the text.

intermediate option (3) was most commonly awarded for all text versions, but again, a larger proportion of teachers evaluated the text version with the ethnically marked name as "(4) fairly bad" in terms of stylistic precision (29 % compared to 10 % and 20 %).

Furthermore, only the text version with the ethnically marked name was evaluated as exhibiting "(5) very bad" stylistic precision (9 % compared to 0 %). Consequently, the text version with the ethnically marked name displays the least positive evaluation mean for stylistic precision (3.20 on the 1–5 scale, compared to 2.97 and 2.79 for the other versions; the medians did not differ), although the difference is not statistically significant (the Kruskal–Wallis test result was $p = 0.100$). Interestingly, it was also only the text version with the ethnically marked name that was evaluated as having "(1) very good" stylistic precision (by one teacher). It thus seems that the existence of an ethnically marked name, to some extent, may evoke expectations of stylistic deficiencies, as well as leading teachers to heed such features. The assessment patterns of the text versions with the socioeconomically marked names were again similar, indicating that a socioeconomically marked name does not influence the assessment. However, the text version with the name marking low socioeconomic status was slightly more often assessed as showing "(2) fairly good" stylistic precision (32 % compared to 23 %) and the text version with the name marking high socioeconomic status was slightly more often assessed as showing "(4) fairly bad" stylistic precision (20 % compared to 10 %).

The last key feature — vividness of the text — was characterized by very little difference across the three versions of the text, as shown in Figure 4. For all three versions of the text, the most common answer regarding vividness was the intermediate option (3). Since the text version with the ethnically marked name did not diverge in this case, it seems that an ethnically marked name does not evoke expectations of lower performance regarding qualities unrelated to language competence.

Description of the text

The qualitative analysis of teachers' explanations for their assessment in relation to each text version also shows some systematic differences. Teachers generally chose to discuss

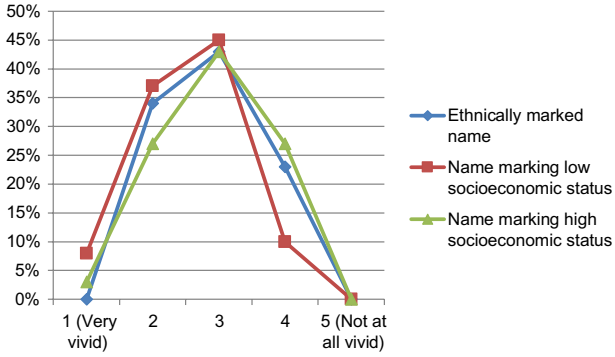

FIGURE 4 Teachers' evaluations of the vividness of the text.

the same dimensions of the text, in a similar order and to a similar extent when explaining their assessments. Some small but interesting differences were apparent, however.

For the text version with the ethnically marked name, almost all dimensions of the text discussed were described as deficient, regardless of how the text was graded; this was the case for language accuracy, wording, sentence structure, linking, and paragraphing. Some teachers also described its content and adjustment to genre as deficient. Language accuracy was commented on far more often for this version of the text than for the other two versions. The only dimensions generally described as satisfactory for the text version with the ethnically marked name were coherence, enthusiasm, and the ability to show rather than simply tell the reader something. This indicates that text dimensions related to language proficiency and writing technique were perceived negatively, while dimensions related to emotional mediation were perceived more positively. Two teachers stated that the pupil "is obviously a second language student," which did not occur for any other version of the text. It seems that an ethnically marked name within a text does indeed influence at least some teachers' readings and assessments of the text, primarily regarding dimensions connected to language proficiency.

Teachers explained their assessment of the text version with the name marking low socioeconomic status in a somewhat different way. Here, more dimensions of the text were described as satisfactory, regardless of how the text was graded; this was the case for coherence, enthusiasm, content, and structure. Other dimensions (such as linking and wording) were described by some as "quite satisfactory" but by others as "quite deficient." Teachers described the sentence structure and ability to show rather than simply tell the reader something rather incoherently. Most teachers only viewed the text's paragraphing as deficient. It seems that the global levels of the text were perceived positively while the details of the text were perceived more varyingly or negatively.

Explanations of the assessments of the text version with the name marking high socioeconomic status were rather similar to the explanations of the assessments of the text version with the name marking low socioeconomic status. However, more text dimensions were generally described as deficient (linking, sentence structure, language accuracy, and ability to show rather than simply tell the reader something), although not as many as for the text version with the ethnically marked name. The ability to show rather than simply tell the reader something was described in most negative terms for the text version with

the name marking high socioeconomic status, supporting the previous suggestion that this version was perceived to be more lifeless. The teachers described all other dimensions of the text in varying and incoherent ways.

Discussion and conclusions

This study has suggested a small but distinct and coherent variation across the three text versions. Since this variation is not coherent to the same degree with any of the other variables included in the study (gender identity and teaching experience of the participants, as well as levels of high achievers and multilingual pupils in their schools), there seems to be a small — although not statistically relevant — name effect. The teachers' assessments of the text version with the ethnically marked name deviated the most from the others, indicating that the ethnic stereotype is most powerful in this context. This version of the text obtained a somewhat more negative general grading as well as a somewhat larger perception of deficits regarding language proficiency, stylistic precision, and writing technique. This confirms previous research which has suggested the occurrence of ethnic discrimination on the basis of pupils' names (Anderson-Clark et al., 2008; Figlio, 2003), although the correlation is much less prominent in this study. The results further suggest that assessment of text features that are unrelated to language proficiency are not influenced by an ethnic stereotype, which is a new observation.

Foster (2008: 935) has proposed four hypotheses that may explain a correlation between ethnically marked names and lower school results:

(1) There is a real correlation between an ethnically marked name and lower performance.
(2) A self-fulfilling prophecy results in pupils adjusting their performance according to the kind of expectations they believe others have of a person with an ethnically marked name.
(3) An ethnically marked name lowers teachers' expectations of the pupil as well as teachers' requirements, which results in a higher grade than the performance actually justifies.
(4) An ethnically marked name lowers teachers' expectations of the pupil while teachers' requirements remain unaltered, which results in a lower grade than the performance actually justifies.

In this study, it seems most likely that the fourth hypothesis is at work. For some teachers, the appearance of an ethnically marked name within the narrative text seems to have indexed a stereotypical image of low linguistic performance, which evoked negative expectations and contributed to a negative perception of the text features. As teachers' requirements remained unaltered, this resulted in a somewhat lower grade.

Notably, only a minority of teachers seem to have been influenced by the name stereotypes in the text. However, there may be compensatory mechanisms in action. As described in the above section regarding the study design, many of the teachers that assessed the text version with the ethnically marked name worked at a school with a relatively high or high proportion of multilingual pupils (25 % compared to 17 % and 13 % for the other text versions). Previous analyses (reported in Aldrin, 2015) have shown that such schools have a general tendency to award more positive grading averages, regardless

of text version, possibly as a result of being accustomed to lower-standard texts (the mean grade was 3.31 for schools with a high level of multilingual pupils, compared to 4.25 and 4.18 for schools with a low or somewhat low level). This could indicate that Foster's (2008) third hypothesis is also operative to some extent in the data here. Some teachers may have lowered both expectations and requirements, resulting in a somewhat higher grade and creating a compensatory effect.

As also described in the previous section on study design, many of the teachers that assessed the text version with the ethnically marked name were particularly experienced (27 % had been teaching for at least 20 years, compared to 9 % and 5 % of assessors of the other text versions). Previous analyses (reported in Aldrin, 2015) have shown that there is a general tendency, that such teachers in this study gave the text a more negative grading than other teachers regardless of text version (the mean grade was 4.07 for the most experienced teachers compared to 3.89 for the least experienced teachers, who had taught for less than 5 years). It is therefore somewhat surprising that the text version with the ethnically marked name was not even more negatively graded, which further strengthens the theory of an existing compensatory mechanism.

Another conclusion of the study is that the two text versions with names marking different socioeconomic status were assessed rather similarly. If anything, the text version with the name marking low socioeconomic status was perceived the most positively overall (not the text version with the name marking high socioeconomic status, as anticipated). This may be partly explained by the fact that — as previously stated — teachers who assessed the text version with the name marking low socioeconomic status more commonly worked at a school with a relatively high share of multilingual pupils (17 % compared to 13 % of teachers who assessed the text version with the name marking high socioeconomic status), which may have created a small compensatory effect. However, another possible explanation could be that the two names did not index the intended socioeconomic stereotypes. The traditional Swedish name *Carl* may have been interpreted as an unmarked Swedish name, indexing an image of an average pupil rather than of a pupil with a higher-status socioeconomic background (and, correspondingly, a higher expected or perceived performance). This is supported by the fact that, throughout the study, the text version with this name displayed distribution patterns which resemble a statistical curve of normal distribution, indicating that this text version was assessed rather neutrally, with little or no influence of any name-based stereotype. Similarly, the name *Kevin* may have indexed an image of creativity and success (cf. Kevin Costner, Kevin Spacey, and Kevin Walker) rather than an image of someone with a lower-status socioeconomic background (and, correspondingly, a lower expected or perceived performance). However, another possible explanation for the positive assessment of the text version with the Anglo-American name is that, even though the name did index the intended stereotype and teachers lowered their expectations accordingly, they also may have lowered their requirements (cf. Foster's (2008) third explanation), resulting in a compensatory effect and higher grading. This is supported by the fact that teachers' explanations of their grading of this version of the text often displayed positive descriptions of the text's global levels and negative descriptions of its details, indicating a possible first impression bias effect that did not persist on further examination and meaning that there may be different mechanisms in action for each name in the study.

Yet another important result of this study is that the differences in teachers' assessments of the text versions were quite small and not statistically significant. Regardless of any compensatory mechanisms, as discussed above, the obtained effects of any name-based stereotypes in this study are quite limited. It seems that only a minority of the teachers were influenced by the inserted names and their stereotypical images when assessing the texts. How should this be interpreted? It is known that the effect of name-based stereotypes is greatest when little other information about the person exists (Christopher, 1998). Perhaps, then, the effect was diminished by other contextualization cues in the text (such as gendering devices)? However, the text was carefully chosen in order to prevent this (for example, content and wording could be seen as socioeconomically and gender-neutral). Perhaps the discreet position of the inserted name was not sufficient to evoke a name effect (cf. Seraydarian and Busse, 1981)? Since some teachers actually commented on the name, this cannot be a sufficient explanation either. Perhaps contextualization cues within the text simply have a smaller effect on teachers' assessment than any stereotypical images connected more directly to the pupil? I find this the most plausible explanation of the present results. After all, the name-based stereotypes studied here were connected to a fictional character and not the pupil. In those cases that the name-based stereotype clearly influenced teachers' assessments, the link between name and pupil was constructed by the teacher. Consequently, this study suggests that anonymous assessment does diminish the influence of socio-cultural preconceptions, although it is not entirely eliminated. The study also has shown that, in some cases, even contextualization cues within the text (such as names evoking name-based stereotypes) clearly influence teachers' assessments.

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