

Names | A Journal of Onomastics



Birth Order, Gender, and Naming Preferences in Contemporary Poland

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ans-names.pitt.edu

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

Vol. 71, No. 1, Winter 2023

DOI 10.5195/names.2023.2387



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Abstract

The paper investigates how birth order and gender jointly influence naming decisions among Polish parents. The impact of birth order on the choice of first names has been extensively documented in historical and anthropological studies worldwide, but it has been largely ignored in sociological research on contemporary Western countries. The study is based on a survey of 317 users of a Polish parenting forum devoted to first names and naming decisions. The names of the first-born and second-born children of the research participants are compared in terms of their popularity and traditionality, measured both objectively and subjectively, in regard to the subjective motives declared behind the naming choices. The findings show that, on the whole, the first-born children received more popular and more traditional names than the second-borns. However, when the gender of the children was figured in, the difference between the first-born and the second-born boys turned out statistically significant only in the dimension of traditionality, whereas between the first-born and the second-born girls, only in the dimension of popularity. In a within-family comparison, the names given to siblings were found to be fairly consistent in both dimensions, and the gender of the first child influenced the preferences for the second one, especially if the latter was a girl. Those results can be interpreted in the frame of different social expectations towards the genders, with a particular focus on gendered concepts of the self.

Keywords: anthroponymy, socio-onomastics, first names, naming preferences, birth order, gender, popularity, traditionality, Poland

Introduction

Sociological studies of naming preferences are usually based on aggregate statistics of first names given in a population, and consequently they ignore micro-social variables such as birth order (with a few notable exceptions mentioned below). Thus, the preferences of parents in a society, region, and ethnic or socio-economic group are treated as fixed and dependent only on non-temporal variables. This omission is easy to understand, as many secondary sources of data on first names do not specify birth order, and in studies based on primary sources the focus is elsewhere—on the macro-social factors listed above. However, such an approach yields an incomplete account of naming decisions, which most likely result from the interplay between both sets of factors.

The goal of this study is to fill in the gap for Poland, its society having not been thoroughly studied in regard to social influences on naming. There are some comprehensive works exploring the contemporary process of individualization and globalization of Polish first names (e.g., Swoboda 2013, 2019), but—to my knowledge—none of them have analyzed the relationship between birth order and naming outcomes. Thus, it has yet to be established whether the names of first-born and later-born children in Poland differ systematically in terms of their susceptibility to fashion and rootedness in Polish naming tradition.

Literature Review

The relative lack of consideration for birth order in sociological research on first names lies in stark contrast to anthropological and historical studies, which have quite often described fixed naming patterns in which subsequent children receive(d) the names of living or deceased relatives in a predetermined order (see Alford 1988, 41–42). For example, in the rural Greek region of Karpathos in the early to mid-20th century, a first-born boy was strongly expected to be named after his paternal grandfather (his father's father), whereas a first-born girl would receive the name of her maternal grandmother (her mother's mother) (Vernier 1980, 70). This corresponded to the local bilateral pattern of inheritance whereby the first son was the sole heir of his father's lineage, whereas the first daughter, of her mother's. Later-born children also belonged to the lineage of the same-sex parent, but to underline their exclusion from inheritance, second sons were named after their maternal grandfather, and second daughters, symmetrically, after their paternal grandmother. For further children, the official pattern was less specific; they received the names of other same-sex relatives, alternating between the lineages of their parents (e.g., a third daughter was named after a maternal relative, a fourth one—after a paternal one, etc.) (Vernier 1980, 72).

However, in most Western countries, such patterns have either not been widespread, as in Poland (Adamiak 2013; Dziadkowiec 2000; Bystróż 1938; Tomanek 2022; Zarębski 2018), or gradually dissolved in

the wake of industrialization and urbanization, as naming choices became detraditionalized and increasingly shaped by individual tastes and collective fashions (Lieberson 2000; Lieberson & Lynn 2003; Coulmont 2010; Gerhards 2005; Taylor 1974; Smith 1985). Therefore, social scholars interested in naming have focused on macro-social factors accounting for those choices, including class (Besnard 1995; Besnard & Desplanques 1986; Besnard & Grange 1993; Bloothoof & Onland 2011; Elchardus & Siongers 2010; Gerhards & Hackenbroch 2000; Levitt & Dubner 2006; Lieberson 2000; Lieberson & Bell 1992; Lindsay & Dempsey 2017; Taylor 1994), race (Fryer & Levitt 2004; Levitt & Dubner 2006; Lieberson 2000; Lieberson & Bell 1992), and ethnicity (Gerhards & Hans 2009; Gerhards & Tuppatt 2021; Kandt & Longley 2018; Lieberson 2000; Mateos 2014). Micro-social variables, such as birth order, have only been analyzed in a handful of studies.

These studies have consistently shown that first-borns—especially boys—have been more likely to be named after kin. Rossi (1965, 504), in her analysis of US American middle-class naming patterns, found that as many as 78% of first-born boys were named after a relative, as compared to 65% of second-borns, 57% of third-borns and 37% of fourth-borns; for girls the percentages were markedly lower—61%, 47%, 29%, and 21% respectively. Rossi interpreted this pattern as resulting from the fact that first-born boys were regarded as continuators of the family line in pretty much the same way as in traditional rural societies: “The birth of a first grandson may have very special significance for both sets of grandparents. For his paternal grandparents, he is in the direct patrilineal line—their hold on immortality” (1965, 505).

Similar results were obtained by Alford (1988, 132) for a more socially diverse sample in rural Oklahoma. The category of persons named after kin comprised all children who received at least one name (first or middle) from a relative. The results indicated that birth order strongly influenced namesaking among the boys (first-borns: 80%; second-borns: 62%; third-borns: 50%) and less so among girls (first-borns: 48%; second-borns: 50%; third-borns: 41%). A study carried out by Sharon Obasi (2016) in rural Nebraska provides more contemporary data. In the sample of children mentioned in 841 birth announcements from 1994 and 2014, 29.39% of boys and only 7.90% of girls were named after a relative (first or middle name). Also, in this study birth order proved to be an important factor: first-born males were namesaked in 32.91% of cases, and later-born ones, in 25.36% of cases; for females, the respective percentages were 10.58% and 4.80%. However, between 1994 and 2014 the percentage of first-borns among namesaked children dropped for both genders (from 69.33% to 47.37% for boys and from 85.00% to 45.45% for girls) (2016, 162). Thus, the results obtained by Alford and Obasi indicate that the “premium” for being a first-born may have lost some of its importance when it comes to exhibiting familial relatedness through naming—at least in the United States, or its rural regions.

The names of first-born children may not only express intergenerational continuity, but also underline the family’s ethnic origins and cultural background. This may become important in families that migrate to a country with a different dominant language and naming traditions, as in the case of Hispanics in the United States. Parada (2013), based on a sample of 54 second-generation Latino university students from Chicago, found a clear relationship between birth order and the likelihood of bearing a distinctively ethnic name. Among the first-born research participants, 57% were thus named, as compared with 51% of second-borns, 46% of third-borns, and 43% of fourth-borns (2013, 311). (As the sample was relatively small and comprised mainly females [37], the author did not analyze the results in terms of gender.) The effect of birth order seems to wane among third-generation immigrants, as demonstrated by Sue and Telles (2007) for children born to Hispanic parents in Los Angeles County in 1995.

Method

The data on first names and birth order were gathered through an online survey between 12 April and 20 July 2020. The link to the survey was posted on the Polish parenting forum *Wszystko o imionach* (lit. All about first names), one of the moderated forums at *eDziecko.pl*—the second most popular Polish parenting website with 1.79 million unique users in August 2020 (Wirtualnemedia 2020). Regular users of the forum are by default interested in first names as such, and many of them express their distaste for the “fashionable” names of the day, given by “too many” parents. Using the forum to recruit respondents was therefore meant to increase the likelihood of obtaining data about children with less common names, and thereby enlarge the basis for comparative analysis.

The survey was completed by 1027 respondents who provided information on 1745 children. The sample was then narrowed down to parents of at least two children born between 2010 and 2020. As it turned out, within this timeframe none of the parents had three children, so the final data set included only the names of

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first and second children provided by 317 parents, overwhelmingly mothers (95.58%) and parents with higher education (76.66%). Among the first-borns, 51.42% were boys and 48.58% girls; among the second-borns, 47.00% and 53.00%, respectively.

For every child, two features of their names were determined: first, the rank of the name among all names given in the same year in the general population, based on official statistics published by the Polish government (Gov.pl 2022); and second, its overall rank in the 20th century, based on the data provided by Grzenia (2010). The ranks were further grouped to facilitate the presentation of results. In the dimension of current popularity, names with ranks from 1 to 10 were categorized as “very popular”; those with ranks from 11 to 20 as “quite popular”; those with ranks from 21 to 50 as “moderately popular”; and finally, those with ranks above 50 as “unpopular”. In a similar way, first names with overall ranks in the 20th century from 1 to 20 were categorized as “very traditional”; those with ranks from 21 to 50 as “quite traditional”; those with ranks from 51 to 100 as “moderately traditional”; finally, those with ranks above 100 as “untraditional”. (For examples of names with their categorization, see Table 1.) It is important to stress that “traditionality” as it is defined in this study does not necessarily imply that a name has deep historical roots or that it has been present in Poland for centuries, but simply that it was widespread in previous generations of the 20th century—that is, among the parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents of contemporary parents.

The categorization outlined above yielded a quite even distribution of cases among the categories, and less popular names—as assumed in advance—were overrepresented, especially for girls. The combined categories of “moderately popular” and “unpopular” names constituted 58.03% of all cases (54.17% of male nominations and 61.80% of female ones), whereas in the general population in 2019 they accounted for 43.62% of male nominations and 43.99% of female ones (author’s calculations based on: Gov.pl 2022; GUS 2021).

Table 1. Examples of Male and Female First Names in the Sample by Degrees of Popularity and Traditionality

| POPULARITY | TRADITIONALITY | | | | | | | |
|--------------------|------------------|---|-------------------|---|------------------------|---|---------------|---|
| | Very Traditional | | Quite Traditional | | Moderately Traditional | | Untraditional | |
| Very Popular | Jan | M | Antoni | M | Aleksander | M | Lena | F |
| | Michał | M | Jakub | M | Filip | M | Oliwia | F |
| | Maria | F | Aleksandra | F | Hanna | F | | |
| | Zofia | F | Natalia | F | Zuzanna | F | | |
| Quite Popular | Adam | M | Maciej | M | Bartosz | M | Marcel | M |
| | Piotr | M | Agata | F | Ignacy | M | Tymon | M |
| | Anna | F | | | Antonina | F | Iga | F |
| | | | | | Emilia | F | Pola | F |
| Moderately Popular | Krzysztof | M | Artur | M | Dominik | M | Natan | M |
| | Marcin | M | Kamil | M | Julian | M | Oliwier | M |
| | Magdalena | F | Antonina | F | Łucja | F | Anastazja | F |
| | Małgorzata | F | Karolina | F | Klaudia | F | | |
| Unpopular | Grzegorz | M | Jacek | M | Arkadiusz | M | Iwo | M |
| | Józef | M | Władysław | M | Feliks | M | Tytus | M |
| | Agnieszka | F | Dorota | F | Dominika | F | Aurelia | F |
| | Jadwiga | F | Urszula | F | Olga | F | Zoja | F |

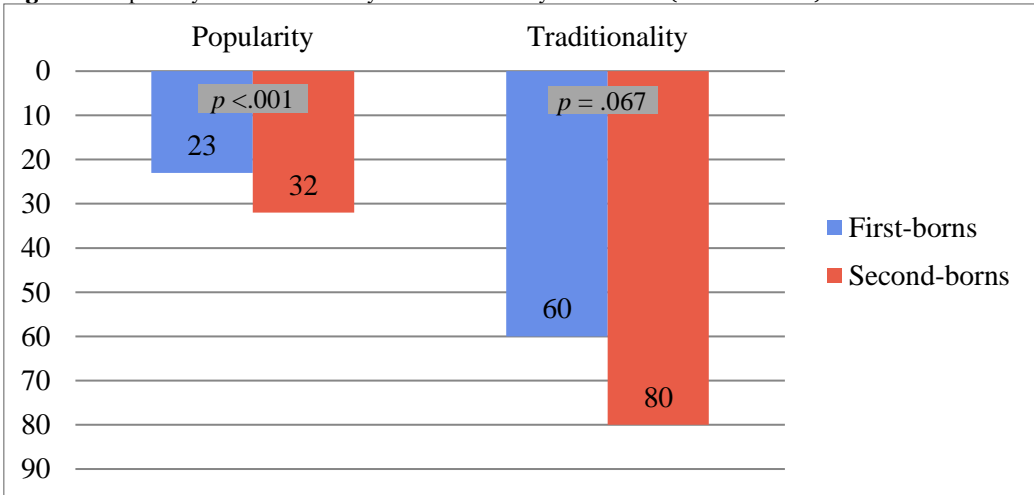
As the popularity of a name was in each case determined for a given year, the same name could be attributed to different categories in different years. The categorization above reflects the highest degree of popularity achieved by names in 2010–2020. In Table 1 above, there are only two female examples of Very popular/Untraditional names, as no male names of both characteristics appeared in the sample. Moreover, there are fewer examples of Quite popular/Very traditional and Quite popular/Quite traditional names, as some of the names meeting the criteria “moved” through this category to reach the highest degree of popularity in later years. To further explore the names’ historical depth, they were categorized according to their relation to Christianity, as the source of the bulk of Polish historical names. Here, four categories were singled out: (1) “Old Testament names”, (2) “New Testament names”, (3) “later patron saint names” (the names of Christian saints from post-Biblical times), and (4) “others”.

To facilitate the interpretation of results, the respondents were also asked about the subjective motives behind their naming decisions. The list included 15 motives singled out in an earlier, unpublished exploratory study. The respondents could also declare motives not present in the list, and those were later recoded to create additional categories. The four most frequently declared motives—the name’s perceived attractiveness, originality, adherence to Polish tradition and naming the child after kin—were included in further analysis.

Results

At the most general level, a comparison was carried out between the names of first-borns and second-borns in the sample in terms of their median ranks in the population (see Figure 1). In the dimension of popularity, the median rank for first-borns was 23.0, and for second-borns, 32.0. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed that this difference was statistically significant ($z [1, n_1, n_2 = 317] = -3.42, p < .001$). As for traditionality, the median rank for first-borns was 60.0, and for second-borns, 80.0, but in this case the result of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test was not statistically significant ($z [1, n_1, n_2 = 317] = -1.83, p = .067$).

Figure 1. Popularity and Traditionality of First Names by Birth Order (Median Ranks)



Comparisons were carried out in greater detail for boys and girls to determine how gender interacts with birth order in influencing naming decisions. The results are presented in Figures 2 and 3. In the dimension of popularity, the difference of median ranks between first-borns and second-borns turned out to be greater for girls, and only for them was the Mann-Whitney test statistically significant ($U = 2.30, n_1 = 154, n_2 = 158, p < .05$; for boys: $U = 1.25, n_1 = 163, n_2 = 139, p = .21$). The results were somewhat different in the dimension of traditionality. Here, the difference between first-borns and second-borns was clear and statistically significant only for boys ($U = 2.18, n_1 = 163, n_2 = 139, p < .05$; for girls: $U = .68, n_1 = 154, n_2 = 158, p = .49$).

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Figure 2. Popularity of First Names by Gender and Birth Order (Median Ranks)

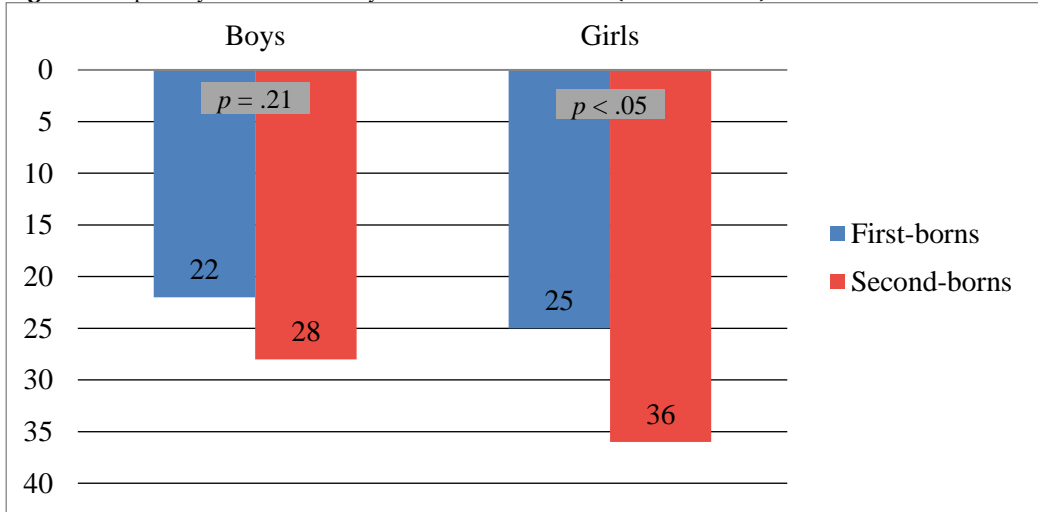
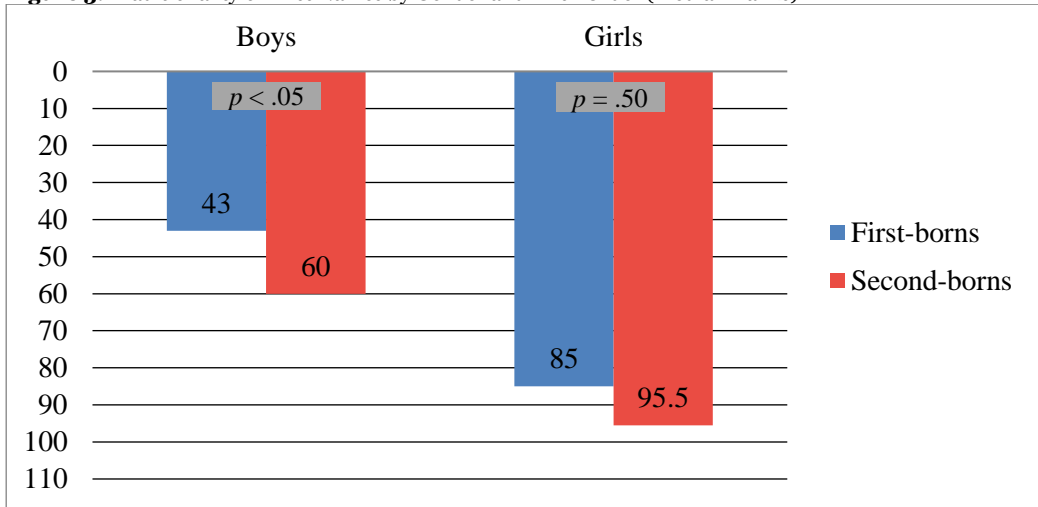


Figure 3. Traditionality of First Names by Gender and Birth Order (Median Ranks)



A separate question is whether the parents consciously paid attention to the name’s subjectively assessed popularity and traditionality. Table 2 below shows that the originality of the name (the reverse of its popularity) was indeed more often indicated as a motive for second-borns than for first-borns ($\chi^2 [1, N = 634] = 4.05, p < .05$) and for girls vs. boys, but here the difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 [1, N = 634] = 3.17, p = .075$). Similar differences were established for the most frequently declared motive—the name’s subjective attractiveness (first-borns vs. second-borns: $\chi^2 [1, N = 634] = 4.38, p < .05$; boys vs. girls: $\chi^2 [1, N = 634] = 6.37, p < .05$). The distribution of those two motives taken together indicates that female names, especially of second-born daughters, were relatively more often considered in terms of their aesthetic and distinguishing value, however those considerations also played an important role when naming boys.

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Table 2. Declared Motives for Naming Decisions by Gender and Birth Order (% of Naming Decisions in Each Group)

| DECLARED MOTIVE | CHILDREN'S GENDER AND BIRTH ORDER | | | |
|--------------------|---|--|---|--|
| | Male | | Female | |
| | First-born (<i>n</i> ₁ =163) | Second-born (<i>n</i> ₂ =149) | First-born (<i>n</i> ₃ =154) | Second-born (<i>n</i> ₄ =158) |
| Attractiveness | 63.19 | 70.78 | 69.13 | 84.18 |
| Originality | 20.25 | 23.38 | 24.16 | 34.81 |
| Tradition | 14.72 | 13.64 | 15.44 | 15.82 |
| Naming after Kin | 19.63 | 12.34 | 12.08 | 12.03 |

Note: Percentages in columns do not sum up to 100% as each respondent could declare several motives.

On the other hand, upholding tradition was declared as a motive in a comparable percentage of cases in all birth order and gender groups (first-borns vs. second-borns: $\chi^2 [1, N = 634] = .11, p = .74$; boys vs. girls: $\chi^2 [1, N = 634] = .08, p = .78$). This even distribution – quite striking when compared with the differentiated medians of objective traditionality – probably results from the fact that the popularity of a name is a much more straightforward notion than its traditionality, as the latter can be understood in different ways (e.g., it can apply to names that have ancient or medieval roots, but have never been popular in Poland—such as *Livia* and *Matylda* among female names or *Tymoteusz* and *Wincenty* among male ones). This interpretation seems all the more plausible when we consider the last motive—naming the child after kin (usually their grandparent or great-grandparent) which objectively results in more traditional naming choices (see Table 6 below)—choosing names such as *Jan*, *Piotr*, and *Stanisław* for boys or *Anna*, *Maria*, and *Zofia* for girls. For this motive, the overall differences were not statistically significant (first-borns vs second-borns: $\chi^2 [1, N = 634] = 2.59, p = .11$; boys vs. girls: $\chi^2 [1, N = 634] = 2.37, p = .12$); however, it is worth noting that the higher percentage for first-born boys is in line with the results of previously cited research that highlights a more prominent role of namesaking in this group.

Table 3. Names' Relation to Christianity by Gender and Birth Order (% of Naming Decisions in Each Group)

| GENDER | RELATION TO CHRISTIANITY | | | | TOTAL |
|----------------|--------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|-------|--------|
| | Old Testament | New Testament | Later Patron Saint | Other | |
| Overall | | | | | |
| First-borns | 7.57 | 17.35 | 29.97 | 45.11 | 100.00 |
| Second-borns | 5.36 | 14.83 | 33.12 | 46.69 | 100.00 |
| Boys | | | | | |
| First-borns | 6.13 | 28.22 | 44.17 | 21.47 | 100.00 |
| Second-borns | 5.37 | 22.82 | 48.32 | 23.49 | 100.00 |
| Girls | | | | | |
| First-borns | 9.09 | 5.84 | 14.94 | 70.13 | 100.00 |
| Second-borns | 5.36 | 7.74 | 19.64 | 67.26 | 100.00 |

The names of first-borns and second-borns were also quite evenly distributed when it comes to their relation to Christianity (see Table 3). At the general level the difference was statistically insignificant ($\chi^2 [3, N = 634] = 2.41, p = .49$). With gender figured in, one might expect that major Christian names, especially New Testament ones, such as *Jan* ('John'), *Józef* ('Joseph'), *Paweł* ('Paul'), or *Piotr* ('Peter'), would appear more often among first-born boys, as they largely overlap with "Very traditional" and "Quite traditional" names outlined above. This was indeed observed, but the difference in distribution was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 [3, n = 312] = 1.40, p = .71$). Among girls, whose first names in general were less related to Christianity, the names of Roman Catholic saints, such as *Anna*, *Barbara*, *Helena* or *Maria*, were surprisingly given more often to second-borns, but here too the difference was statistically insignificant ($\chi^2 [3, n = 322] = 3.11, p = .37$). Even if the results had reached the threshold of significance, this apparent incongruity could have been explained by the fact that most of those names—unlike their male counterparts—are at best moderately popular, and as such could have been

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chosen for the sake of their relative uncommonness (more prominent among second-born girls) rather than their rootedness in religious tradition.

Interesting conclusions can also be drawn from comparing the names of first-borns and second-borns within the families. Having established that, in general, the former were given more popular and more traditional names than the latter, can we observe any degree of consistency in naming choices – that is, the parents’ inclination to choose names located not far from each other in terms of popularity and traditionality? The answer to this question is provided by Tables 4 and 5. The unit of calculation comprises 317 pairs of first and second born siblings. The second column in both tables provides the percentages of naming decisions made for the siblings according to the degrees of popularity and traditionality of their names.

Table 4. Popularity of Siblings’ Names

| DEGREES OF POPULARITY | % PAIRS OF SIBLINGS |
|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Same Degree | 31.86 |
| (I)–(I) | 5.68 |
| (II)–(II) | 4.73 |
| (III)–(III) | 7.26 |
| (IV)–(IV) | 14.20 |
| Neighboring Degrees | 38.49 |
| (I)–(II) or (II)–(I) | 12.30 |
| (II)–(III) or (III)–(II) | 8.83 |
| (III)–(IV) or (IV)–(III) | 17.35 |
| Two Degrees Apart | 22.40 |
| (I)–(III) or (III)–(I) | 12.93 |
| (II)–(IV) or (IV)–(II) | 9.46 |
| Three Degrees Apart | 7.26 |
| (I)–(IV) or (IV)–(I) | 7.26 |
| OVERALL | 100.00 |

Degrees: (I)—very popular; (II)—quite popular; (III)—moderately popular; (IV)—unpopular

Table 5. Traditionality of Siblings’ Names

| DEGREES OF TRADITIONALITY | % PAIRS OF SIBLINGS |
|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Same Degree | 41.64 |
| (I)–(I) | 8.83 |
| (II)–(II) | 3.47 |
| (III)–(III) | 10.09 |
| (IV)–(IV) | 19.24 |
| Neighboring Degrees | 32.18 |
| (I)–(II) or (II)–(I) | 10.41 |
| (II)–(III) or (III)–(II) | 6.31 |
| (III)–(IV) or (IV)–(III) | 15.46 |
| Two Degrees Apart | 17.35 |
| (I)–(III) or (III)–(I) | 11.99 |
| (II)–(IV) or (IV)–(II) | 5.36 |
| Three Degrees Apart | 8.83 |
| (I)–(IV) or (IV)–(I) | 8.83 |
| OVERALL | 100.00 |

Degrees: (I)—very traditional; (II)—quite traditional; (III)—moderately traditional; (IV)—untraditional

In most cases, the naming choices for siblings were fairly consistent. In the dimension of popularity, 70.35% of pairs of names fell into the same category or into neighboring categories; in the dimension of traditionality the corresponding percentage was even higher (73.82%). However, if we look more closely, we can see that such consistent choices were made relatively more often by those parents who preferred less popular and/or less traditional names. For example, parents who chose only moderately popular or unpopular names for both their children constituted as much as 38.80% of the sample, compared to 22.71% of research participants whose choices fell within the range of very popular and quite popular names.

These results lead to the conclusion that the preference for quite unpopular and/or untraditional names was relatively “fixed” and could be regarded as a distinct taste in naming. On the other side of the spectrum, the choice of a popular and/or traditional name for either of the children did not necessarily express the parents’ general disposition to follow fashion or their attachment to tradition. One may surmise that in many cases they found a specific popular and/or traditional name appealing, but for other reasons than its sheer popularity and/or traditionality (e.g., its phonetic qualities or knowing someone with that name).

To verify this possibility, the objective characteristics of names were tabulated with the subjective motives declared by the parents. The results are presented in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6. Declared Motives for Naming Decisions by Degrees of Popularity (% of Naming Decisions for Each Degree)

| DECLARED MOTIVE | DEGREE OF POPULARITY | | | | χ^2 (3, <i>N</i> = 634) |
|------------------|---|--|---|--|---------------------------------|
| | Very Popular (<i>n</i> ₁ =139) | Quite Popular (<i>n</i> ₂ =127) | Moderately Popular (<i>n</i> ₃ =170) | Unpopular (<i>n</i> ₄ =198) | |
| Attractiveness | 70.50 | 72.44 | 70.00 | 70.20 | .25 |
| Originality | 2.88 | 10.24 | 20.00 | 55.05 | 147.72*** |
| Tradition | 17.99 | 15.75 | 14.12 | 12.12 | 2.41 |
| Naming after Kin | 21.58 | 15.75 | 9.41 | 11.11 | 11.38* |

*** *p* < .001; * *p* < .05.

Note: Percentages in columns do not sum up to 100% as each respondent could declare several motives.

Table 7. Declared Motives for Naming Decisions by Degrees of Traditionality (% of Naming Decisions for Each Degree)

| DECLARED MOTIVE | DEGREE OF TRADITIONALITY | | | | χ^2 (3, <i>N</i> = 634) |
|------------------|---|--|---|--|---------------------------------|
| | Very Traditional (<i>n</i> ₁ =142) | Quite Traditional (<i>n</i> ₂ =116) | Moderately Traditional (<i>n</i> ₃ =173) | Untraditional (<i>n</i> ₄ =203) | |
| Attractiveness | 69.72 | 52.59 | 75.14 | 77.83 | 7.31 |
| Originality | 10.56 | 2.59 | 17.92 | 54.68 | 126.31*** |
| Tradition | 22.54 | 12.93 | 15.03 | 9.85 | 9.71* |
| Naming after Kin | 33.80 | 13.79 | 10.98 | 2.46 | 64.08*** |

*** *p* < .001; * *p* < .05.

Note: Percentages in columns do not sum up to 100% as each respondent could declare several motives.

The name’s perceived originality turned out to be strongly aligned with its objective (un)popularity, with very few incongruous results (only 2.88% “very popular” naming decisions had “originality” as one of their motives). On the other hand, “very traditional” choices were quite rarely motivated by the name’s perceived traditionality, and the motive was also cited in a non-negligible number of cases in which the name was objectively untraditional (9.85%) or moderately traditional (15.03%). This is in line with the previous observation that the popularity of a name is a much more straightforward notion than its traditionality. It is also worth noting that even for very traditional choices traditionality as such turned out to be less important than the more particular motive of naming after kin, and much less important than the name’s perceived attractiveness. All these results confirm that there exists a distinct “taste for originality”, which can result in consistent naming choices for subsequent children, but the perception of the name’s traditionality may be more vague and therefore less influential in naming decisions.

Figure 4. Popularity of First Names of Younger Siblings by Gender of the Older Sibling (Median Ranks)

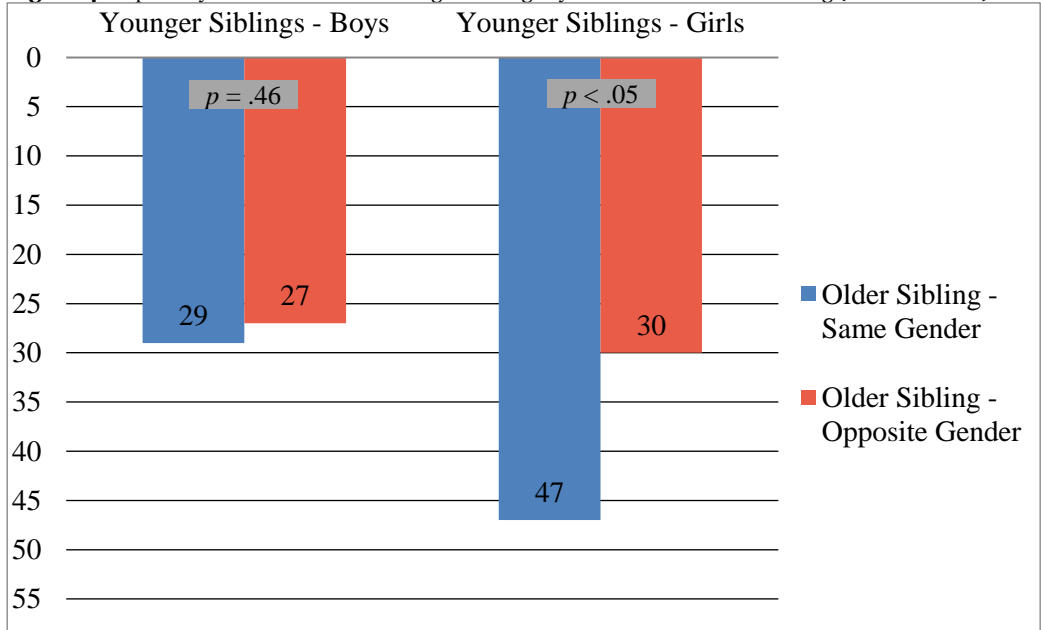
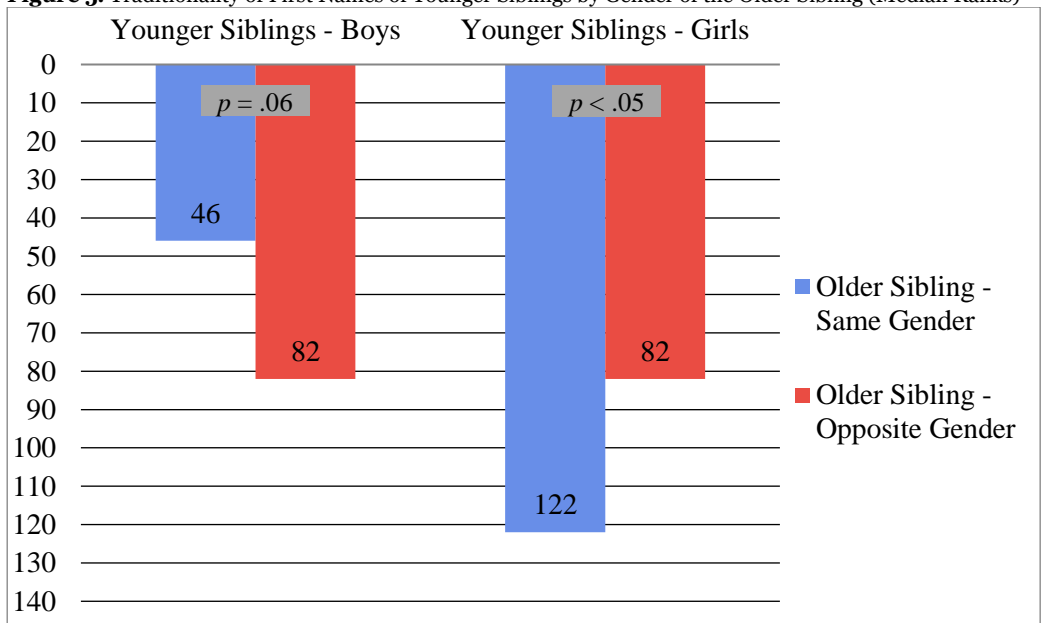


Figure 5. Traditionality of First Names of Younger Siblings by Gender of the Older Sibling (Median Ranks)



The analysis of the siblings' names also revealed that the parents, when choosing a name for the second-born child, were to some extent influenced by the gender of the first-born (see Figures 4 and 5). This was especially the case when the second child was a girl. Second-born girls with older brothers were given more popular and more traditional names than those with older sisters, and the difference was statistically significant in both dimensions (popularity: $U = 2.31$, $n_1 = 81$, $n_2 = 87$, $p < .05$; traditionality: $U = 2.06$, $n_1 = 81$, $n_2 = 87$, $p < .05$). As for second-born boys, the reverse difference appeared only in the dimension of traditionality, but it did not reach the threshold of significance ($U = 1.90$, $n_1 = 76$, $n_2 = 73$, $p = .057$), whereas in the dimension of popularity the gender of the older sibling did not show any impact ($U = .74$, $n_1 = 76$, $n_2 = 73$, $p = .46$). Thus, it seems that the names of second-born girls were relatively more influenced by the gender of their older siblings. One may hypothesize that this sprung from the aforementioned wish (not necessarily conscious) to remain consistent in one's naming choices. The parents usually did not create pairs of names with entirely different characteristics, and as the names of first-born boys were on average less popular and especially less traditional than those of first-born girls, this could have a constraining effect on the choices for second-born girls. However, the question remains why this kind of influence was much more limited in the reverse situation, that is, when the first-born was a boy. This in turn could be interpreted within the wider cultural frame of gender distinctions in the West, whereby males are regarded and regard themselves as more independent, and females as more interdependent (Cross & Madson 1997; Guimond et al. 2006), and therefore there can exist a stronger tendency to align the names of girls to those of older siblings. The results above cannot unequivocally support this interpretation, but it is worth pursuing in further research.

Conclusions

Taking a step forward from earlier studies, which have analyzed the relationship between birth order and naming choices only for specific types of names (those given after kin or ethnic ones), this study demonstrates that the relationship is of a more general nature—at least in Poland. On the whole, the names of first-borns turned out to be less “experimental” in both respects, that is, popularity and traditionality. This means that the researched parents, when naming their first children, were less likely to choose names that were particularly rare (given to few children in the present generation) or particularly innovative (not represented in large numbers in previous generations). Moreover, the parents were fairly consistent in their choices—in more than 70% of cases they chose the names for two siblings within one degree or two neighboring degrees of popularity or traditionality. However, the preference for rare and/or novel names proved relatively more stable, which suggests that it can be regarded as a distinct taste, manifesting itself in subsequent naming choices. On the other hand, opting for a popular and/or traditional name could more often be a “stand-alone” choice, resulting from more specific or circumstantial motives, such as naming the child after kin or simply liking the name in itself, independently of its social characteristics.

A more complex picture of naming choices emerges when we consider gender as an additional factor. Both male and female first-borns were given more popular and more traditional names than second-borns, but among the boys the difference was statistically significant only in the dimension of traditionality, whereas among the girls—only in the dimension of popularity. The former may result from the traditional role of first-born boys as perpetuators of the family line, name and status, as indicated by Alford (1988) and Rossi (1965). This interpretation is also supported by the fact that first-born boys in this study were named after kin almost one and a half times as often as the children in the other three birth order and gender groups. On the other hand, female names tend to be perceived more in terms of their aesthetic or “decorative” value, and the emphasis on traditionality may appear mostly in middle and upper social classes where the name is expected not to be too “frilly”, “fancy”, or “decorative”, and to befit the child's future professional status (Lieberson & Bell 1992; Lindsay & Dempsey 2017).

Gender proved to be an important factor not only on the level of aggregate, cross-family data, but also within families. Second-born girls with older brothers received more popular and more traditional names than those with older sisters. Among second-born boys, the reverse pattern appeared only in the dimension of traditionality (those with older sisters received less traditional names than those with older brothers), but this was not statistically significant. These results indicate that naming choices in Poland, especially for girls, are contextual and in many cases result not only from generalized aesthetic preferences, but also from the specific configuration of children within the family and the parents' wish to create a pair of names that will be somewhat consistent.

Limitations and Further Research

This study has at least one clear limitation. The sampling scheme based on the respondents' self-selection, as already mentioned, resulted in an overrepresentation of highly educated mothers. For this reason, and because of the moderate size of the sample, it was not possible to compare naming preferences among parents of different socio-economic statuses. Such a comparison could reveal general differences (independent of birth order) between the status groups in terms of popularity and traditionality of their children's names (see Tomanek 2021). Moreover, some of the groups could display more consistent naming preferences—that is, their taste for (un)popular or (un)traditional names could turn out to be less dependent on birth order than in the case of other groups. These possibilities are worth exploring in future studies on the subject, based on larger and stratified samples. Furthermore, the differences between second-born boys and girls in aligning their names to those of older siblings of the opposite sex were hypothetically explained as resulting from gendered concepts of the self. A robust verification of this hypothesis would require a study in which the parents' expectations for children of both genders in terms of independence vs. interdependence would be cross-analyzed with their names.

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