

# Men's First Names, Nicknames, and Short Names: A Semantic Differential Analysis\*

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WHILE A NUMBER OF PSYCHOLOGISTS in the past have considered names important in the psychology of personality, Albott and Bruning<sup>1</sup> have recently stressed names as a neglected social variable. It would certainly seem true that how an individual perceives his own name and how he believes that society perceives it can be an important influence on his self-image and hence his behavior. In their review of various investigations, Albott and Bruning describe a study by Buchanan and Bruning in which the semantic differential approach was used to measure stereotypes of names. The semantic differential technique is a powerful research tool which has been used in a number of research investigations.<sup>2</sup> Lawson used the semantic differential with men's names to confirm the existence of stereotypes and further found that (1) common names were preferred over less common, and (2) men and women tended to agree on their evaluations.<sup>3</sup>

While the first name is of interest and a matter of proper concern, it is also true that most men are not called by their full first names in everyday life. Men are usually called by associated short names or nicknames. Thus, a man named John may be called Johnny (nickname), or Jack (short name); Frederick, Freddy, or Fred. What does it mean if a man is called by a nickname rather than a short name, such as Tommy rather than Tom? Joey *vs.* Joe? Is there a connotation of the nickname or short name that is different from the connotation of the name itself?

Some would predict that the short names such as Bob, Dick, or Tom would be more highly regarded than Robert, Richard, or Thomas. But what about Bobby, Dicky, or Tommy? How do these nicknames hold up? And what about the reactions of women? This study using the semantic differential was designed to determine (1) whether stereotypes of short names and nicknames exist and (2) if short name or nickname stereotypes exist, how they compare with first names.

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<sup>1</sup> William L. Albott and James L. Bruning, "Given Names: a Neglected Social Variable," *Psychological Record*, 20 (1970), pp. 527-533.

<sup>2</sup> James Snider and Charles E. Osgood, eds. *Semantic Differential Technique* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), p. 681.

<sup>3</sup> E. D. Lawson, "Semantic Differential Analysis of Men's First Names," *Journal of Psychology*, 78 (1971), pp. 229-240.

The semantic differential is a useful instrument for evaluating how a concept or object (such as a name) is perceived. The respondent rates each concept on a number of scales. Osgood has identified three basic dimensions or factors of meaning: Evaluation, Potency, and Activity from ratings. It is also possible to construct a model in three-dimensional space to show how concepts are rated on the three factors and also their relationship to one another.

### *Method*

The rating procedure was based upon the work of Osgood *et al.*<sup>4</sup> and is basically similar to that of Lawson. The specific form was taken from Osgood and Luria<sup>5</sup> and consists of ten subscales: *valuable-worthless, fast-slow, large-small, tense-relaxed, clean-dirty, active-passive, strong-weak, tasty-distasteful, hot-cold, and deep-shallow*. Four categories were rated: reference concepts, Good, Bad, Strong, Weak, Active, and Passive; common men's first names such as Daniel, David, and James; men's short names such as Dan, Dave, and Jim; and nicknames such as Danny, Davey, and Jimmy.

The reference concepts were used as reference points for Osgood's Evaluation, Potency, and Activity dimensions. Dimension concepts were rated first in random order followed by the names. Randomization was such that no two respondents had either the dimension concepts or the names in the same order. The instrument was administered in booklets using conventional semantic differential rating instructions. A single concept or name headed each page with the ten rating scales below. The subjects were undergraduate students from several departments at State University College at Fredonia, New York.

### *Results*

Responses were analyzed using electronic data processing equipment. First, means and standard deviations were computed on each of the subscales for each of the concepts. Inspection of the data shows that the concepts and names have a good range and that the standard deviations average less than 1.7. Following Osgood *et al.*<sup>6</sup> we can assume that with the dispersal of means and with standard deviations of the magnitude found, stereotypes of nicknames do exist.

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<sup>4</sup> Charles E. Osgood, George J. Suci, and Percy Tannenbaum, *The Measurement of Meaning* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1957), p. 342.

<sup>5</sup> Charles E. Osgood and Zella Luria, "A Blind Analysis of a Case of Multiple Personality Using the Semantic Differential," in Snider and Osgood, pp. 505-517.

<sup>6</sup> Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum, p. 328.

One of the measures suggested by Osgood is the *D* (distance) score. The *D* score is essentially a profile of scores on the different subscales. The procedure had several steps. For each subject, *D* scores are computed with the generalized distance formula,  $D = \sqrt{d^2}$  in which *d* is the difference in the rating of a concept on two subscales. The ten subscales for each concept were then combined into a single *D* score. For each case *D* scores were computed for each concept against every other concept on all ten subscales. For names perceived as close together (or for dimension-concepts), *D* would be small; for names further apart, *D* would be large. The assumption was that the rating of Good and Bad as concepts would represent the Evaluative dimension; Strong and Weak, the Potency; Active and Passive, the Activity.

The Wilcoxon matched pairs procedure was used with *D*s to determine whether a name was rated significantly closer to Good or to Bad, to Strong or to Weak, to Active or to Passive. Ranks based on these data are shown in the table below.

The table shows the rank of each name, lowest numbers being closer to first concept of the dimension, Good, Strong, and Active. Men rated all names closer to Good than to Bad; to Strong, than to Weak; and to Active, than to Passive with one exception: Joey was rated closer to Weak, than Strong. Men ranked Robert, Dave, and Jim the highest on a composite score of ranks on the three dimensions. Women ranked John, Joseph, and Dave the highest. Lowest ranked by men were Davey, Freddy, and Joey; by women, Davey, Joey, and Eddy.

A further statistical evaluation was made to see whether first names were, in general, closer to Good, Strong, and Active than short names or nicknames. The results clearly show that on each dimension for both men and women, the short names were preferred over first names and nicknames. The short names were significantly preferred over the nicknames by both men and women at a statistically significant level.

A usual question in a preference study is the relative agreement of men and women. To answer this question, correlations were computed for each of the rankings by men and women on each of the dimensions and for a composite score. The correlations between men and women were Good-Bad, .59; Strong-Weak, .68; Active-Passive, .61; Composite, .68. All of these correlations are significant and show a relatively high level of agreement between men and women, indicating not only do stereotypes exist but that the men and women in the sample agree on the stereotypes.

Another way to demonstrate the relationship of the ratings is by construction of a three-dimensional model based upon the group *D* scores using the technique described by Osgood *et al.* For this procedure, means are first calculated for all subjects on each subscale for each name or

TABLE

Ranks on Three Dimensions of Meaning for First Names,  
Short Names, and Nicknames

Name	Good-Bad		Strong-Weak		Active-Passive		Composite	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
<i>First Names</i>								
Daniel	16	9	8.5	13	7	13	10	13
David	4	11	10	8	9	9	7	9
Edward	10	3	24	12	19	12	18	10
Frederick	23	26	26	26	29	23	25	25
James	6	6	17	27	16	21	13	17
John	12	2	11	1	12	1	11	1
Joseph	2	1	6	7	15	3	9	2
Robert	3	15	3	10	2	11	1	12
Thomas	17.5	20	22	24	24	26	19	24
Ronald	14.5	13	16	9	20	5	16	8
<i>Short Names</i>								
Dan	27	16	21	14	21	14	24	15
Dave	1	4	5	3	3	2	2	3
Ed	17.5	18	14.5	16	14	15	13	16
Fred	19	29	12	20	18	29	16	27
Jim	5	5	4	6	1	7	3	5
Jack	11	8	7	5	4	6	6	6
Joe	9	27	1	17	6	22	4	19
Bob	8	10	8.5	2	8	4	8	4
Tom	7	14	2	11	5	8	5	11
Ron	25	7	18	4	17	10	22	7
<i>Nicknames</i>								
Danny	26	24	25	25	11	24	23	26
Davey	21	17	29	30	27	30	28	28
Eddy	24	28	28	28	26	28	27	30
Freddy	30	30	23	18	28	18	29	23
Jimmy	20	21	19	22	22	20	20	21
Johnny	28	12	27	15	25	16	26	14
Joey	29	25	30	29	30	27	30	29
Bobby	13	22	13	19	10	19	11	18
Tommy	14.5	23	20	23	13	17	14	20
Ronnie	22	19	14.5	21	23	25	21	22

Note: *D* values were computed between Good *vs.* each name, Bad *vs.* each name, and compared using the Matched Pairs procedure. The table shows the net ranking for the whole group. The names were ranked in order of closeness to the first concept of the dimension. Thus, for men, Dave was ranked closest to Good, fifth on Strong, third on Active, and second on the Composite score.

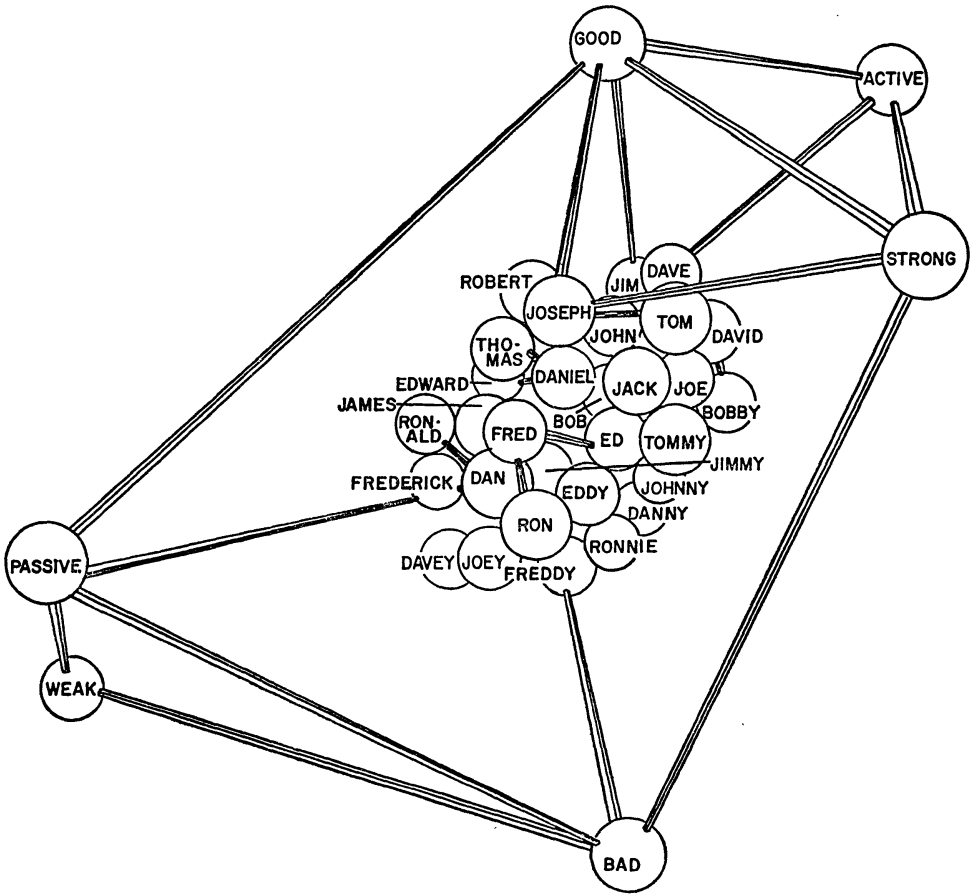


Figure 1

Three-Dimensional Model of Men's Ratings of First Names, Short Names, and Nicknames

concept rated. Then group *D* scores are obtained. Figures 1 and 2 show models constructed from ratings of men and women.

These figures show the relationship of the names to each of the concepts chosen to represent the Evaluation (Good, Bad), Potency (Strong, Weak), and Activity (Active, Passive) dimensions, as well as to one another. While the procedures are somewhat different, the interpretations generally follow the table, making allowance for perspective. The men's model does show more bunching of ratings and rather clearly the lower evaluation of the nicknames. The women's ratings are somewhat more spread out and here, too, the rejection of the nicknames is evident. In general, the positions on the two drawings are relatively similar.

The results of this investigation confirm that both men and women hold stereotypes for short names and nicknames and that men and women agree on these stereotypes.

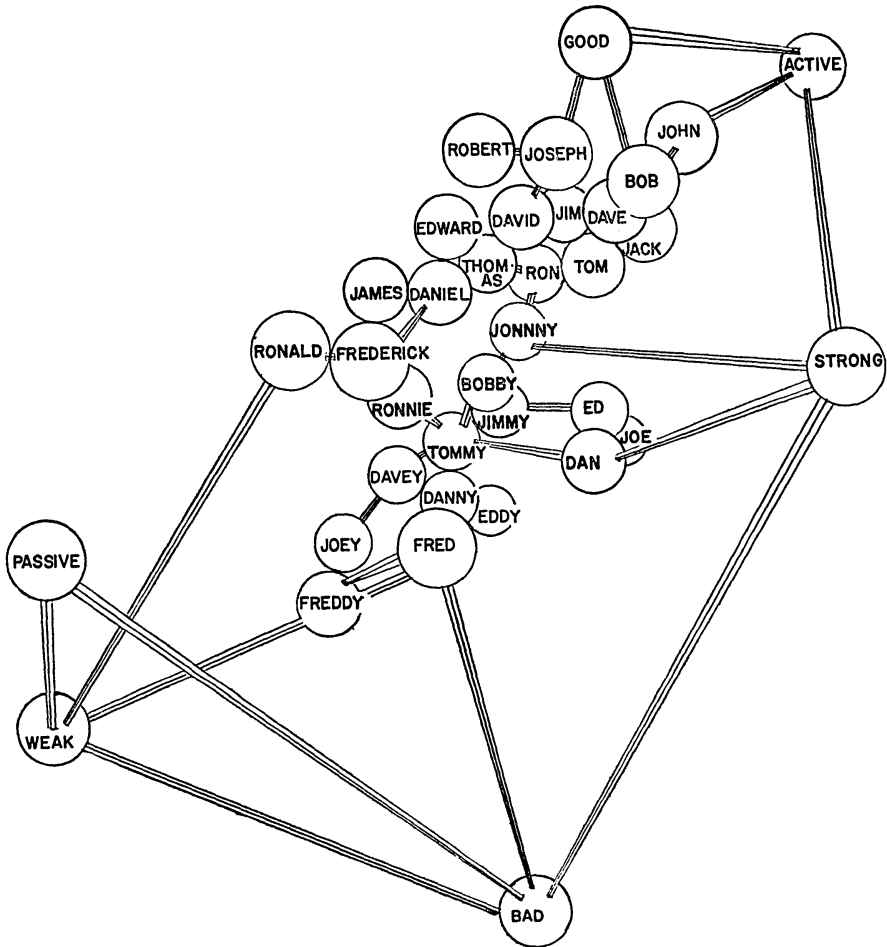


Figure 2

Three-Dimensional Model of Women's Ratings of First Names,  
Short Names, and Nicknames

Some short names such as Dave, Jim, and Tom seem to be highly preferred by both men and women over respective first names. Other short names, such as Dan and Ed were not. Nicknames in general were rated lower than both first names and short names. Parents might, therefore, give some consideration to how a name bestowed on a child can be transformed to a short name or nickname. The consequences for the individual can be important.