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What's in a name? Maybe an unconscious trend toward failure

By Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY

Your name made you do it, albeit unconsciously, suggests new research that finds your name can negatively undermine your goals.

Psychologists in marketing at Yale and the University of California, San Diego studying the unconscious influence of names say a preference for our own names and initials — the "name-letter effect" — can have some negative consequences.

Students whose names begin with C or D get lower grades than those whose names begin with A or B; major league baseball players whose first or last names began with K (the strikeout-signifying letter) are significantly more likely to strike out, according to the report published in the December issue of *Psychological Science*.

"We found that our own-name liking sabotages success for people whose initials match negative performance labels," the report says.

Assistant professors Leif Nelson of UCSD and Joseph Simmons of Yale conducted five studies over five years (including one lab experiment) using information from thousands of individuals: 6,398 baseball players (377 had K as either a first or last initial); 15,000 MBA students; 294 undergraduate students; 170 law schools with more than 390,000 lawyers; and 284 participants in their laboratory experiment.

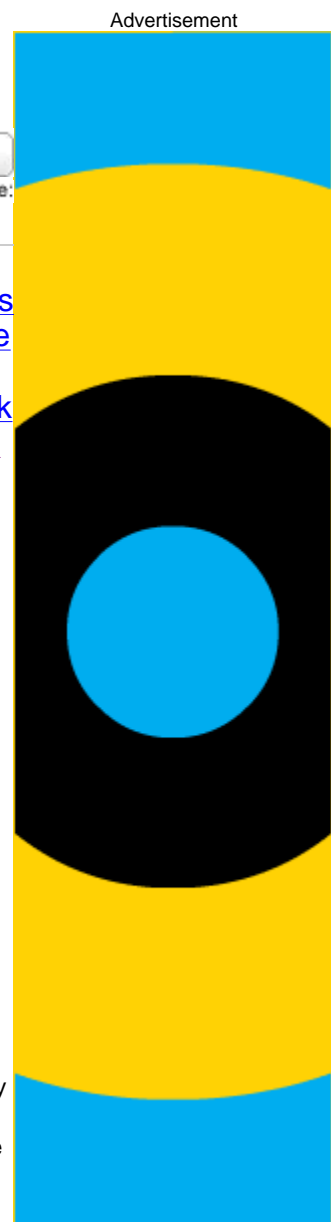
"The conscious process is baseball players want to get a hit and students want to get A's," Nelson says. "So if you get a change in performance consistent with the name-letter effect, it clearly shows there must be some unconscious desire operating in the other direction."

The researchers' work supports a series of studies published since 2002 that have found the "name-letter effect" causes people to make life choices based on names that resemble their own. Those studies by Brett Pelham, an associate professor of psychology at SUNY University at Buffalo, have found that people are disproportionately likely to live in states or cities resembling their names, have careers that resemble their names and even marry those whose surnames begin with the same letter as their own.

"If this is an unconscious preference, it suggests we don't really have free will about certain important decisions," Pelham says. "We don't really make those decisions for the reasons we thought we did."

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The twist, Pelham says, is that he has believed the name-letter effect would apply only to positive outcomes. Nelson and Simmons, he says, are "showing it applies more so to negative things than positive things."

In the first study of baseball players, Nelson and Simmons pored over 93 years of statistics for players who had at least 100 plate appearances. The second study looked at 15 years of grades for MBA students, but they did not use F because not all schools use that designation.

The study did find that those with initials of A or B don't perform any better, though. Another study of law school admissions found lesser-rated schools had a smaller proportion of lawyers with name initials A and B. The lab experiment used an anagram test that confirmed the previous studies.

The researchers say the effect is definitely more than coincidence but is small nevertheless.

"I know plenty of Chrises and Davids who have done very well in school," Simmons says.

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