

What's in a name? Studies link initials to success

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Do you like your name and initials? Most people do. Past research has found that sometimes we like these things enough to let them influence major decisions. For instance, Jack is more likely to move to Jacksonville and marry Jackie than is Philip—who is likely to move to Philadelphia and marry Phyllis. Scientists call this the “name-letter effect.”

But if you like your name too much, you might be in trouble. Leif Nelson of the University of California, San Diego and colleague Joseph Simmons of Yale University found that liking your own name sabotages success for people whose initials are related to negative outcomes. In part of their research, Nelson and Simmons investigated the effect of names in baseball, where strikeouts, which are undesirable, are recorded using the letter K. After analyzing Major League records spanning 93 years, the researchers found that batters whose names began with K struck out slightly more often than others. A monogram from an early-20th century Polish album.

“Even Karl Köley Kolseth would find a strikeout average, but he might find it a little less average than players who do not share his initials, and therefore he might avoid striking out less enthusiastically,” wrote the authors in a paper detailing the findings. The work is published in the December issue of the research journal *Psychological Science*. Nelson and Simmons also studied the phenomenon in academia. Letter grades are commonly used to measure student performance, with the letters A through D denoting progressively worse results. Nelson and Simmons reviewed 15 years of grade point averages for MBA students at a large private U.S. university. Students whose names began with C or D earned lower averages than those whose names began with A or B, they found. The latter group, though, did not do better than students whose initials were irrelevant to any grade. Therefore, having initials that match hard-to-achieve positive outcomes, like acing a test, may not necessarily cause an increase in performance, the researchers suggested. But after analyzing law schools, they found that as the quality of schools declined, so did the proportion of lawyers with name initials A and B. The results overall offer “striking evidence that unconscious wants can insidiously undermine conscious pursuits,” the researchers said in announcing their results.

Courtesy Association for Psychological Science World Science staff

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