

What's in a Name? Initials Linked to Success, Study Shows

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Do you like your name and initials? Most people do and, as past research has shown, sometimes we like them enough to influence important behaviors. For example, Jack is more likely to move to Jacksonville and marry Jackie than is Philip, who is more likely to move to Philadelphia and marry Phyllis. Scientists call this phenomenon the “name-letter effect” and argue that it is influential enough to encourage the pursuit of name-resembling life outcomes and partners.

However, if you like your name too much, you might be in trouble. Leif Nelson, University of California, San Diego, and colleague Joseph Simmons, Yale University, found that liking your own name sabotages success for people whose initials match negative performance labels.

In their first study, Nelson and Simmons investigated the effect of name resemblance on batters’ strikeouts. As any baseball fan knows, strikeouts are recorded on stat sheets using the letter “K.” After analyzing Major League Baseball players’ performance spanning 93 years, the researchers found that batters whose names began with “K” struck out at a higher rate than the remaining batters. “Even Karl ‘Koley’ Kolseth would find a strikeout aversive, but he might find it a little less aversive than players who do not share his initials, and therefore he might avoid striking out less enthusiastically,” wrote the authors.

In a second study, the researchers investigated the phenomenon in academia. Nelson and Simmons reviewed 15 years of grade point averages (GPAs) for MBA students graduating from a large private American university. Students whose names began with “C” or “D” earned lower GPAs than students whose names began with “A” or “B.” Students with the initial “C” or “D” were slightly less successful at achieving their conscious academic goals, presumably because of an unconscious fondness for these letters.

Interestingly, students with the initial “A” or “B” did not perform better than students whose initials were grade irrelevant. Therefore, having initials that match hard-to-achieve positive outcomes, like acing a test, may not necessarily cause an increase in performance. However, after analyzing law schools, the researchers found that as the quality of schools declined, so did the proportion of lawyers with name initials “A” and “B.”

The researchers confirmed these findings in the laboratory with an anagram test. The result of the test confirmed that when people’s initials match negative performance outcomes, performance suffers. These results, appearing in the December issue of *Psychological Science* (Leif D. Nelson and Joseph P. Simmons. “Moniker Maladies When Names Sabotage Success”), provide striking evidence that unconscious wants can insidiously undermine conscious pursuits.