The influence of first name valence on the likelihood of receiving help: A field experiment

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Abstract:

A field experiment was conducted to test whether the likelihood of receiving help is affected by the valence of the person in need's first name. It was expected that people bearing devalued names would receive less help compared to individuals with liked first names. It was further tested if the proposed effect was driven by a general devaluation of stigmatized names or the application of name-associated stereotypes.

Participants (N = 631) received e-mails containing an ostensibly missent reply to another person's job application. The applicant's first name was either positive or negative and the job offered was either a low-status or a high-status position. Participants could help the alleged applicant by informing the sender that the e-mail was sent to the wrong address.

For low-status job applicants, name valence had no effect on participants' helping behavior. By contrast, for high status positions, applicants with negative names received less help compared to participants with a positive name.

Keywords: first name, prosocial behavior, field experiment, helping, name valence

The influence of first name valence on the likelihood of receiving help: A field experiment

First names are usually among the initial pieces of information people learn to know about each other when meeting for the first time. As much as it is an important element of its bearer's self, first names also have substantial impact on social interactions. Names themselves can be associated with socially shared evaluations as well as a range of stereotypical attributes. It is therefore not surprising that such socially shared information is used to form judgements about other people which in turn guide behavior towards them. Previous research has shown that first name valence exerts a significant influence on social behavior. The goal of the current study was to further explore the psychological significance of name valence in a domain that is crucial to human security and well-being: helping behavior.

Past research has linked socially devalued first names to a whole range of disadvantages and negative consequences in various important life domains (Aura & Hess, 2010). For instance, Busse, and Seraydarian (1978) reported that students with less desirable names showed lower IQ-Scores, even after statistically controlling for parental education and ethnicity. People with negatively perceived first names also report lower self-esteem (Gebauer, Leary, & Neberich, 2012) and less aspiration for achievement (Garwood, 1976). People with comparably negative names also report a higher frequency of smoking and lower levels of education (Gebauer et al., 2012). While these results might be partly explained by the fact that parents' name choices are influenced by socio-economic factors, academic background, and ethnic demographic variables, studies comparing siblings also showed that the sibling with the more unusual name reported worse general adjustment (Twenge & Manis, 1998).

In their *looking glass theory*, Twenge and Manis (1998) present a model to account for the detrimental effects of negatively evaluated names. According to this theory, people are repeatedly treated unfavorably because of an unusual name which in turn leads to derogatory evaluations of the self. In support of this notion Gebauer et al. (2012) analyzed data provided by an online dating service and found that profiles of people with negative names were forty percent less successful in attracting visitors than profiles of people with a positive name. Similarly, people with an unpopular first name are less likely to be offered a job (Pascual, Guéguen, Vallée, Lourel, & Cosnefroy, 2015) and are regarded as less physically attractive (Erwin, 1993; Garwood, Cox, Kaplan, Wasserman, & Sulzer, 1980). If people generally tend to form negative impressions of individuals with socially devalued names and are less willing to socially engage with them, it seems reasonable to expect similar discriminating behavior in other important social domains, like prosocial behavior.

Previous research has shown how characteristics of the person in need for help influence helping behavior. For example, higher physical attractiveness increases the probability of receiving help (LaBuda, Rivardo, Fidazzo, & Smith, 2015; Langlois et al., 2000). Similar effects have been reported for other positive characteristics of the person in need for help, like higher ability and social status (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1981), speaking in an expressive tone (Goldman & Fordyce, 1983), and pleasant smell (Guéguen, 2001). By contrast, characteristics associated with stigmas may reduce the likelihood of receiving help. Past investigations have shown that people are less likely to help members of stigmatized groups, like individuals with HIV, mental disorders, physical deformities, or the homeless (Pryor, Reeder, Monroe, & Patel, 2010).

Similar to other stigmas, socially devalued names may reduce people's willingness to help bearers of such names. At least two processes may contribute to this proposed reduction in helping behavior (Neumann, Hülsenbeck, & Seibt, 2004). Negatively valenced first names may 1) evoke a general aversive affective reaction with resulting avoidance tendencies, 2)

activate stereotypical beliefs, which may provide justifications for refraining to help a person in need.

The current study

The present study sought to advance research on the psychological relevance of first name valence by testing the central hypothesis that bearers of socially devalued names in need for help will receive less help than people with positively valued names. Further, two potential processes underlying the proposed name-based discrimination were pitted against each other. If a basic aversive affective reaction gives rise to avoidance tendencies towards people with socially devalued first names, they should generally receive less help than people with positively valued names, regardless of the nature of the actual helping situation. However, name-based discrimination with regard to prosocial behavior could also be accounted for by the activation and application of stereotypical information. Since socially devalued names are associated with low competence stereotypes (Rudolph, Boehm & Lummer, 2007), name-based discrimination may primarily arise in situations in which the attribution of low competence provides a justification to withhold help. Accordingly, name valence as well competence-relatedness of the helping situation were experimentally manipulated in a field experiment using the lost e-mail technique (Bushman & Bonacci, 2004).

A 2 x 2 - design was used with first name valence (positive vs. negative) and job status (high vs. low) as independent variables. Participants received an e-mail with a job offer apparently intended for someone else. For half the participants, the first name of the alleged true recipient of the job offer was a positively valued first name, for the other half it was a socially devalued first name. Additionally, for half the participants the job offered to the alleged true recipient of the e-mail was a high-status managerial position, requiring a high level of competence of the alleged applicant. The other half received an e-mail with a job offer for a low-status unpaid internship position, requiring a lower level of the applicant's

competence. Participants could help the alleged true recipient of the job offer by informing the sender about the wrongly sent e-mail.

We expected that participants would be more likely to inform the sender of the e-mail in the case of an applicant with a positive name compared to one with a socially devalued name. If this proposed name-based reduction of helping behavior was primarily driven by the application of name-activated low-competence stereotypical information, helping behavior should be especially low when a person with a socially devalued name is offered a high competence position. In such a situation, participants may dismiss their responsibility to help the alleged job applicant by convincing themselves that the applicant is simply not fit for the job in question. By contrast, more general affectively-driven avoidance tendencies towards people with socially devalued names should reduce the likelihood of helping them, regardless of the respective job characteristics.

Method

Name selection

Since past research on name-based discrimination has not revealed any gender effects (Erwin, 1999; Gebauer et al., 2012), we limited the selection process to female first names to streamline the experimental design. A list of 35 female positive and negative German first names was generated based on previous studies on name effects as well as media coverage on socially stigmatized names (the full list of names and more information on the selection process can be found in the online supplemental material, http://osf.io/b2euq). All names were then evaluated by N = 107 raters (55% female, M_{age} = 34.6 years, SD_{age} = 15) on eight items (11-point scaled) which were aggregated to an average positivity score for each name (α = .84[1]). The two most positively rated names were *Sophie* (M = 6.9, SD = 1.2) and *Marie*

[1] Additionally, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to explore the dimensionality of the name evaluation questionnaire. The parallel analysis showed that a one-factor model fit the data best.

(*M* = 6.7, *SD* = 1.45). The two most negatively evaluated names were *Cindy* (*M* = 4.2, *SD* = 1.3) and *Chantal* (*M* = 4.2, *SD* = 1.2).

Participants

N = 631 participants were recruited by e-mail. All had taken part in unrelated online studies several years before the current study and agreed to be approached for participation in further studies.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. They received an e-mail that was ostensibly sent to them by mistake. The message contained an answer letter to a job application, stating that either *Cindy*, *Chantall*, *Sophie* or *Marie* (depending on condition) had successfully applied for a position at a real estate company. The last name was held constant over all conditions. Depending on experimental condition, the position offered was either an unpaid internship or a full-time management position. The alleged recipient of the e-mail was asked to reply within a few days, otherwise somebody else would be hired for the job. Hence, participants found themselves in the position to be able to help the alleged job applicant by contacting the sender of the e-mail to let them know about their mistake. They could answer either by e-mail or by telephone. The complete mail can be found in the electronic supplement (S1).

Results

Of the 631 approached participants, only 56 replied showing a relative low average level of helping behavior. The distribution of helping across experimental conditions is presented in table 1. To test our hypotheses, a logistic regression model was computed to predict whether a participant answered the e-mail or not. A logistic regression gives reliable results if at least 10 events (in this case replies) are recorded for each variable in the model (Peduzzi, Concato, Kemper, Holford, & Feinstein 1996). Although there was a low overall

probability of answering the request for help the number events per variable was 28, which is more than twice as high as recommended for logistic regression analyses. Name valence and job status were entered as effect-coded predictors, as was well as their interaction term. The main effects of job status (b =-0.13, z = 0.69, *n.s.*, *OR*: 0.89) and first name valence (b = 0.20, z = 1.75, *n.s.*, *OR:* 1.22) were nonsignificant. However, both main effects were qualified by the interaction of name valence and job status (b = 0.36, z = 2.41, $p < .05$, *OR*: 1.43), which is plotted in Figure 1.

Post-hoc tests showed that for the low status position no discrimination by first name was found (b = .16, z = .84, *n.s.*). However, the expected discrimination with regard to name valence was found significant for the high status position (b = -.56, z = -2.44, $p < .05$). Applicants with negative names were less likely to receive help when they were offered a high status job, compared to people with a more positive name. When being offered a low status job, name valence had no effect on helping behavior. For persons with a positive names no change in helping behavior was found across the two conditions (b = -0.24, z = -1.24, *n.s.*) while a reduction of helping behavior was found for persons with negative names (b =-049, z = 2.09, $p < 0.05$).

Discussion

The current experiment extended research on name-based discrimination to the domain of prosocial behavior. In line with predictions from a stereotype application model, we found that individuals with socially devalued names received less help than those with positive names, but only in a situation where the name-related stereotype provided participants with a justification to refrain from helping. These findings support the idea that the effect of first name valence on prosocial behavior is predominantly governed by the application of stereotypical information about bearers of such names rather than by a general affective devaluation.

Other research also shows that discrimination in helping behavior emerges context-specific. Saucier, McManus and Smith (2010) discuss the possibility that the potential helper's perception of a given situation varies based on personal stereotypes. This notion would be in line with our results that discrimination occurs only in situations which provide a stereotype-related justification for withholding help.

One limitation of the current study is the low overall response rate. One prerequisite for helping behavior is that the potential helper notices that helping behavior is required (Bierhoff, 2002). Since the current study made use of an email-based paradigm, it cannot be ruled out that some participants simply treated the message as spam mail and therefore did not feel obliged to take action. However, since participants only learned about the alleged applicant's name and the details of the offered job after they had deliberately decided to read the e-mail, the experimental manipulations were not confounded with judgments of the e-mail's principle credibility. Therefore, the relatively low overall prevalence of helping behavior does not invalidate our findings. Still, future research is needed to replicate and extend the current findings in larger and more diverse samples.

The looking-glass model states that people with negative names are treated unfavorably by others, leading to internalized negative self-evaluations. Our results support this claim by showing that names-based stereotypes lead people to refrain from helping individuals with socially devalued names. This may partially explain findings from past research linking unfavorable names to deteriorated adjustment and well-being.

Table 1 Response rates across the experimental factors

	Persons approached	Persons showing helping behavior
negative name (Cindy, Chantall)		
low cost	157	17
high cost	159	7
Total	**316**	**24**
positive name (Sophie, Marie)		
low cost	161	13
high cost	154	19
Total	**315**	**32**
Total		
low cost	318	30
high cost	313	26
Total	**631**	**56**

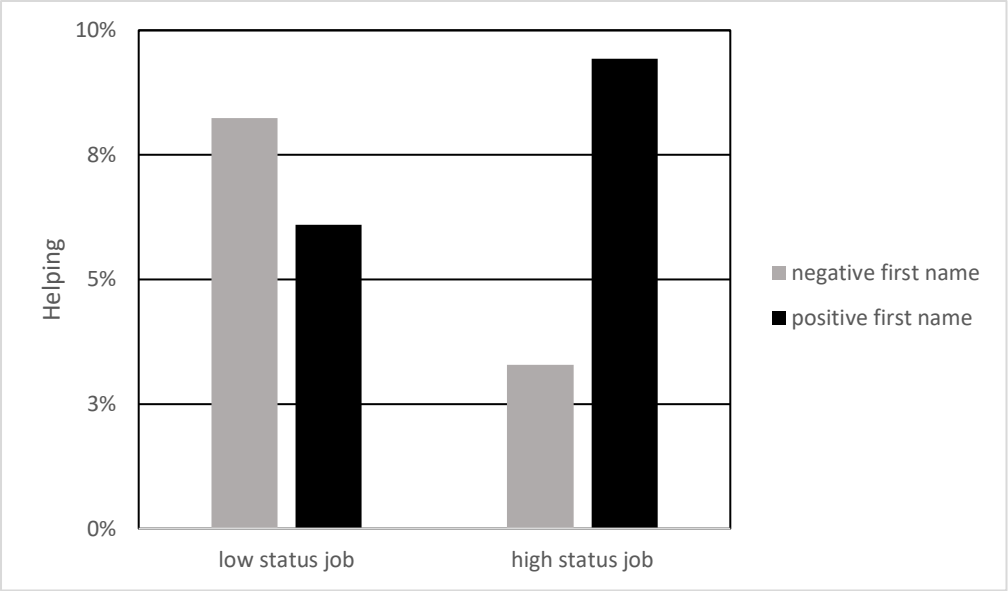

Figure 1. Helping behavior as a function of name valence and job status

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Subjectline: Rückmeldung zum 28.05.2015

Sehr geehrte Frau [Sophie| Marie| Chantall | Cindy] Godin,

Bezug nehmend auf das Vorstellungsgespräch vom 28.05.2015 freut es mich Ihnen mitzuteilen, dass Sie [für das dreiwöchige Praktikum | für die Stelle als Abteilungsleiterin für kaufmännisches Gebäudemanagement] überzeugen konnten und heiße Sie in unserem Unternehmen recht herzlich willkommen.
Wie vorab mit Ihnen besprochen, befindet sich die Niederlassung Berlin in einem Umzugsprozess innerhalb ihres Standortes. Ich bitte Sie daher, sich schnellstmöglich bis zum kommenden Donnerstag, den 11.06.2015 bei uns zu melden, da wir uns sonst gezwungen sehen, die Stelle kurzfristig an einen Mitbewerber zu
vergeben. Ihren Praktikumsvertrag [Arbeitsvertrag] würde Fr. Sternberg (Human Resources) Ihnen nach Ihrer Rückmeldung postalisch zusenden.
Ungeachtet aller organisatorischer Unannehmlichkeiten freuen wir uns auf die baldige Zusammenarbeit mit Ihnen und verbleiben mit freundlichen Grüßen.

Lisa Becker
Assistenz der Geschäftsführung

<<Address and Phonenumber>>

Subjectline: Feedback on your interview on 05/28/2015

Dear Ms. [Sophie | Marie | Chantall | Cindy] Godin,

With regard to your recent job interview on May, 28, I am pleased to inform you that we would like to offer you the [three-week internship | position as manager for commercial building management]. We would like to welcome you to our company.
As discussed during your interview, our branch office in Berlin is in a relocation process right now. I would therefore ask you to get back to us as soon as possible. Please let us know if you are still interested until next Thursday, 06/11/2015. Otherwise, we would be forced to give the position at short notice to a competitor. On your answer, Ms. Sternberg (Human Resources) is going to send you your employment contract by mail.
Notwithstanding the current organizational inconveniences, we look forward to working with you soon and remain with kind regards.

Lisa Becker,
Executive Assistant

<<Address and Phonenumber>>