

Does your name dictate your life choices?

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What's in a name? Letters. And psychologists have posited that the letters -- particularly the first letter of our names -- can influence decisions, including whom we marry and where we move. The effect is called "implicit egotism."

In 2008, two Belgian researchers found that workers in their country were more likely to choose a workplace if the first letter of its name matched their own.

A commentary published in an upcoming issue of [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, revisited the study with similar U.S. data and found that the Belgians got the cause and effect exactly backwards. And that might make us more skeptical about the effects of implicit egotism.

"Walt Disney worked for a company starting with D not because of an unconscious attraction to that letter," writes University of Pennsylvania associate professor Uri Simonsohn, "but because he so christened it."

Simonsohn analyzed records of political donations made during the 2004 campaigns, which include donors' names and employers. Like the Belgians, he found that the first initials matched. But then he compared those first-letter matches with matches of the first three letters—which more accurately reflect the actual names of both the people and the firms.

Analyzing the two side by side, he found that the effect of the one-letter

match dropped away—while the three-letter sharing increased the match of person to company a striking 64-fold. Why? Because many people work at firms they named or at those founded by their grandfathers or brothers.

Simonsohn doesn't discount implicit egotism altogether. "Having young children, I can't imagine people don't like their own letter more than other letters," he says. But letter preference is more likely to influence decisions about which you are "indifferent or ignorant"—say, choosing a wine or even a mutual fund you know nothing about.

"Not that it makes no difference—but the differences it makes in really big decisions are probably slim," Simonsohn continues. There, the first letter of the organization's name is but "one unit of difference." When you're thinking about where to work or whom to marry, "there are thousands of units to consider."

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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