

# Psychology study shows it's all in the name

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A study involving Victoria University of Wellington researchers shows people trust strangers with easier-to-pronounce names—even if those strangers are all from the same country.

The research, led by Dr Eryn Newman and Professor Maryanne Garry, investigated the effect that foreign names which are easy or difficult to pronounce have on people's judgment of risk, danger and truth.

The researchers used newspaper articles and websites to create fictitious pairs of names from various regions around the world, including the

Middle East, Asia and Europe. In each pair, one name was easy to pronounce and the other difficult—for example an eastern European pair was Andrian Babeshko (easy) and Czeslaw Ratynska (difficult).

They then tested people's responses to the easy and difficult names. In one experiment, participants imagined they were a tourist looking for a reliable, safe tour guide and rated how risky each foreign name seemed. In another experiment, participants were asked to judge how dangerous people were based on no additional information other than the names supplied.

In each experiment, the findings showed that people with easy to pronounce names were judged as being more familiar, less risky and less dangerous.

Dr Newman, an honorary research associate in Victoria's School of Psychology, says the phenomenon isn't confined to people's names.

"What was most surprising is that the pronunciation of names has effects that extended beyond the name itself. People actually thought claims attributed to easy-to-pronounce names were more likely to be true."

Dr Newman says how easily we are able to process new information plays an important role in different situations. For example, research shows people think that food additives with simpler names are safer than those with difficult names.

"Information that is more familiar to us is easier for us to process, so we automatically perceive that which is familiar as being less risky or dangerous, compared to new information."

This work also builds upon Dr Newman's previous research into the 'truthiness' effect—the phenomenon that people are more likely to

believe something is true if an image accompanies the words, or the 'fact' is accompanied with additional related information.

"What we now know from these results, is that the consequences of easy-to-pronounce [names](#) reach much further than previously thought. There are a number of situations where pronounceability could have a significant impact on people's lives. For example, we might ask whether the pronounceability of eyewitnesses' name influences jury verdicts."

Dr Newman is currently a post-doctoral fellow at the University of California, Irvine, where she also studied as a Fulbright scholar. Professor Garry is conducting a Marsden-funded project on the power of images to create false memories and beliefs, and supervised Dr Newman's PhD research into 'truthiness'.

**More information:** Newman EJ, Sanson M, Miller EK, Quigley-McBride A, Foster JL, et al. (2014) "People with Easier to Pronounce Names Promote Truthiness of Claims." *PLoS ONE* 9(2): e88671. [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0088671](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0088671)

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