

**2011 Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowships Proposal for  
Research on Human Decision Processes and Risk Management**

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**Name Discrimination:**

**How Feelings towards Whom We Know Carry Over To Others Sharing Their First Names**

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## Descriptive Summary

Prior work on discrimination has mainly focused on features that are associated with group identification, such as gender and ethnicity, in both economic and psychological research. Audit studies and field experiments have documented inequality experienced by women and minority in prevalent domains, such as labor, housing and product markets (for a review, Riach & Rich, 2002; Anderson, Fryer & Holt, 2005) and academia (Milkman, Akinola & Chugh, working paper). And social psychologists demonstrate gender and racial bias in the light of social categorization (See Fiske, 1998, for a review). Though studies manipulating group identity on the basis of similarity in some dimensions other than gender and race revealed favorability towards in-group members, group divisions were often determined by ostensibly objective criteria (for example, whether the length of a line was underestimated in Vaughan, Tajfel & Williams, 1981) (Anderson, Fryer & Holt, 2005).

In this project, we examine a potential new source of discrimination that has not been investigated before: name discrimination. Does the sharing our first name with another person influence how we are evaluated and treated?

Different from previous research on discrimination and names (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Milkman et al, working paper) where otherwise equal resumes or emails were randomly assigned to names signaling race and/or gender, we are interested in the differential treatment and judgment triggered by the mere coincidence that a newly encountered individual shares a first name with the evaluator's strongly valenced known person (denoted as "name sharer"), regardless the factual information reflected by the name. Furthermore, our predicted findings may provide an alternative explanation for existing discrimination studies that used names as racial markers.

We consider two possible mechanisms for our hypothesis. The first relies on the notion that judgment and perception can be colored by incidental similarity. Generally, "judgments about individuals are made by associating the person in question with others with whom one is more familiar" (Gilovich, 1981, pp 806), when association is accessible. From the perspective of social categorization, people close to the evaluator can be important, rich and easily applied social constructs, the mental representation and evaluative valence of which can be stored and represented in memory and further impact general social perception of unrelated individuals (for a review, Andersen & Berk, 1998). So we expect that the shared name assimilates a new person to existing social category of the name sharer who people know well and is important in people's life (defined as significant others in a series research conducted by Andersen and her colleagues). In turn, affective and motivation component of this social category is ascribed to the new individual, and the psychological distance between a perceiver and a target individual is influenced in the same manner.

The second mechanism is based on the automatic activation of relational schema via a salient relational cue, first name, which further influences perception, interpersonal expectation and goal (e.g., Fitzsimons & Bargh,

2003; Huang & Murnighan, 2010). Similarly, we argue that the valence of preexisting relational schema impacts on people's perceived closeness to a new individual as well as the motivation to approach or stay away from him or her. At the same time, positive or negative side of a previous relational schema will transfer to a new one.

To establish name discrimination, we designed two studies, each containing two parts. In the first part participants reported the first names of three people they like (Study 1) as well as three people they disliked (Study 2). In the second part, taking place at least one month after the first and without any explicit link to it, participants are invited to participate in an online study where we use the names of the people they know as stimuli.

In study 1, the second part of the study involves (i) a hypothetical allocation of \$10 between themselves and another participant that shares, or not, the first name with one of the three friends of the participant, and (ii) an elicitation of sympathy for a victim that suffers from a misfortune, where the victim shares, or not, the first name with another one of the three friends of the participant. We are interested in whether people feel closed to an anonymity sharing the same name with a good friend, reflected by increased giving (Loewenstein & Small, 2007) and sympathy (Small & Simonsohn, 2008).

In study 2, participants will read about the ambiguous actions of an individual, in the sense that they can be interpreted in either a negative or a positive manner. That individual is randomly assigned to share the name with one of the people the participant likes or dislikes. Evaluatively consistent judgment of an ambiguous individual in terms of both general likeability and descriptive-specific traits is expected, and the inclination to approach this individual is influenced in the same manner.

We have so far completed the first stage of Study 1 for more than 300 participants and are about to run the second part. The second study, currently in development, is prepared to be implemented in March/April, 2011. Also we expect to design further studies, if necessary, to disentangle two mechanisms put forward above.

I am requesting financial support from the Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowship Program to fund data collection and to cover conferences cost. Anticipating that this project is of great interest to both economics and psychology audience, I hope to share my results and get feedback at two relevant conferences: the Association for Consumer Research North American conference in St. Louis, MO., and the Society for Judgment and Decision Making conference in Seattle, WA. The budget outlined below reflects estimated costs of experiments and conferences. I am grateful for your consideration and welcome any questions you may have about my research.

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