Research Article

Moniker Maladies

When Names Sabotage Success

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ABSTRACT—*In five studies, we found that people like their names enough to unconsciously pursue consciously avoided outcomes that resemble their names. Baseball players avoid strikeouts, but players whose names begin with the strikeout-signifying letter* K *strike out more than others (Study 1). All students want As, but students whose names begin with letters associated with poorer performance* (C *and* D) *achieve lower grade point averages (GPAs) than do students whose names begin with* A *and* B *(Study 2), especially if they like their initials (Study 3). Because lower GPAs lead to lesser graduate schools, students whose names begin with the letters* C *and* D *attend lower-ranked law schools than students whose names begin with* A *and* B *(Study 4). Finally, in an experimental study, we manipulated congruence between participants' initials and the labels of prizes and found that participants solve fewer anagrams when a consolation prize shares their first initial than when it does not (Study 5). These findings provide striking evidence that unconsciously desiring negative name-resembling performance outcomes can insidiously undermine the more conscious pursuit of positive outcomes.*

People like their names and initials (Nuttin, 1987). In fact, this *name-letter effect* (NLE) is influential enough to encourage the pursuit of name-resembling life outcomes and partners. For example, Toby is more likely to buy a Toyota, move to Toronto, and marry Tonya than is Jack, who is more likely to buy a Jaguar, move to Jacksonville, and marry Jackie (Brendl, Chattopadhyay, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2005; Jones, Pelham, Carvallo, & Mirenberg, 2004; Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002).

Do people consciously or unconsciously pursue name-resembling outcomes? Do a few people named Jack deliberately move to Jacksonville for its *Jack*-resembling appeal, or are they driven by an unconscious desire? Researchers have certainly argued that the latter is true. The NLE is described as an indicator of *implicit egotism* (e.g., Koole, Dijksterhuis, & van Knippenberg, 2001; Jones et al., 2004; Pelham, Carvallo, & Jones, 2005; Pelham et al., 2002; Sherman & Kim, 2005), as own-name liking is thought to indicate unconscious self-liking. At least two types of evidence support this idea. First, the NLE correlates more strongly with explicit self-esteem when explicit self-evaluations are made under conditions that deter conscious thinking than when explicit self-evaluations are made under conditions that promote conscious thinking (Koole et al., 2001). Second, exposure to subliminal (unconscious) pairings of self-relevant and positive words increases the NLE (Dijksterhuis, 2004). Nevertheless, these findings speak more to the origins of the NLE than to the origins of Jack's move to Jacksonville, and it remains possible that Jack consciously seeks a name-resembling residence.

Demonstrating the pursuit of negative, consciously avoided name-resembling life outcomes would provide strong evidence that the NLE can exert its effects via an unconscious mechanism. To investigate this possibility, we examined performance domains in which people are consciously motivated to perform well, and in which negative performance outcomes are represented as single letters. We found that own-name liking sabotages success for people whose initials match negative performance labels.

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STUDY 1: BASEBALL PERFORMANCE

Method

For more than 100 years, fans of Major League Baseball have recorded most on-field events, and events that were originally missed have since been added to a central database (Schwarz, 2004). Although team-level features determine game outcomes, some individual events can be isolated from team influences. When a player comes to bat, his goal is to avoid making an out. Players can generate an out in many ways, but the strikeout is a special case in that it can be attributed to the actions of the batter and the opposing pitcher, but not the opposing fielders. A batter earns a strike primarily when he swings and misses, when he fails to swing at a pitch in the strike

zone, or when he has fewer than two strikes and hits the ball outside the field of play. He strikes out after three strikes. (For further information, see Rule 2.00, definition of *strike*, and Rule 6.05 in the Major League Baseball rule book; Major League Baseball, 2007.)

Because data on strikeouts are readily available, and because strikeouts are relatively independent observations, we decided to investigate the effect of name resemblance on batters' strikeouts. For scoring clarity, strikeouts have always been recorded using the letter *K* (Schwarz, 2004), and this practice is well known to most players and fans. Accordingly, we predicted that players whose first or last names begin with *K* would show an increased tendency to strike out. To test this hypothesis, we analyzed Major League Baseball players' performance from 1913, the first year for which there are complete data on strikeouts, through 2006 (the data were retrieved from http://www.baseball-databank.org/). We used players' performance across their careers as the unit of analysis and restricted our observations to players who had at least 100 plate appearances (i.e., at least 100 at-bats or walks; $N = 6{,}397$).[1]

Results and Discussion

Across more than 90 years of professional baseball, batters whose names began with *K* struck out at a higher rate (in 18.8% of their plate appearances) than the remaining batters (17.2%), $t(6395) = 3.08$, $p = .002$. Over the years, strikeouts have become increasingly frequent, but the number of players with names beginning with the letter *K* has also increased. However, players with the initial *K* struck out more often than other players even when we controlled for the average year in which each athlete played ($p < .015$). In fact, when we controlled for average year of play (and excluded initials associated with fewer than 5 Major League players—e.g., *U* as a first initial), *K* was both the first initial and the last initial associated with the highest strikeout rate. Furthermore, ethnic confounds are unlikely to account for the effect, as an analysis controlling for whether players were American or foreign born also showed that batters with the initial *K* were reliably more likely to strike out than other players were ($p = .023$). The effect was also reliable when we controlled for country of origin with a dummy variable for each of the 52 countries represented in the sample ($p = .045$).

Despite a universal desire to avoid striking out, players whose first or last names began with the letter *K* struck out more often than other players. For players with this initial, the explicitly negative performance outcome may feel implicitly less aversive. 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 be less motivated to avoid striking out. In Study 2, we sought to establish the generality of this finding by investigating a different performance domain: academics.

STUDY 2: ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Method

At most age levels, in most schools, and in most disciplines, letter grades are used to measure students' performance, and the letters *A*, *B*, *C*, and *D* are used widely to differentiate levels of performance. As is the case with baseball players, every student wants to succeed, and no one explicitly wants to perform poorly. However, we hypothesized that students whose names begin with the letters *C* and *D* find lower grades less aversive, and work less hard to avoid them, than do students with other initials.

To test this hypothesis, we acquired a data set containing 15 years (1990–2004) of grade point averages (GPAs) for M.B.A. students graduating from a large private American university. The data set provided the students' first initials, last initials, gender, ethnicity (coded using six categories: African American, Caucasian, East Asian, Hispanic, Indian, and other), and graduation year, and also indicated whether or not each student was a U.S. citizen.

Results and Discussion

We identified students whose first or last names began with the letters *A*, *B*, *C*, or *D*, excluding those with conflicting first and last initials (e.g., first initial *A* and last initial *D*); students with first and last initials from *E* through *Z* were coded as "other."[2] We conducted a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) on GPA as a function of initial (*A*, *B*, *C*, *D*, or other), controlling for demographics and graduation year. As predicted, students whose names began with *C* or *D* earned lower GPAs than students whose names began with *A* or *B*, $F(4, 14{,}348) = 4.55$, $p = .001$.[3] These findings were replicated in a regression treating initial as a continuous variable ($A = 1$, $B = 2$, $C = 3$, and $D = 4$). The data for students with initials in the "other" category provide a baseline that shows the effect was driven by students with the initials *C* and *D* performing worse than others, rather than by

[1] This restriction is sensible but somewhat arbitrary. Nevertheless, without this restriction, or with the cutoff at a higher value, we obtained the same reliable pattern of results as reported in the next section.

[2] We did not consider *F* initials to be grade relevant because, compared with *A* through *D*, *F* is much less universally associated with an academic-performance outcome. However, including students with this initial did not affect the results of this study (or of Study 3, which also examined the relation between students' initials and letter grades). The average student with the initial *A* or *B* significantly outperformed the average student with the initials *C*, *D*, or *F* (Study 2), and this effect was moderated by own-initial liking (Study 3).

[3] It is worth noting that students with the initial *A* or *B* outperformed students with the initial *C* or *D* in separate analyses of first ($p = .04$) and last ($p = .004$) initials. Moreover, these effects did not hold for students whose other initial was grade relevant but incongruent (e.g., whose first initial was *A* and second initial was *D*; $ps > .60$; opposite direction). These findings strongly suggest that the effects of initial on performance are not attributable to some ethnic confound beyond the controls for ethnic background used in this study.

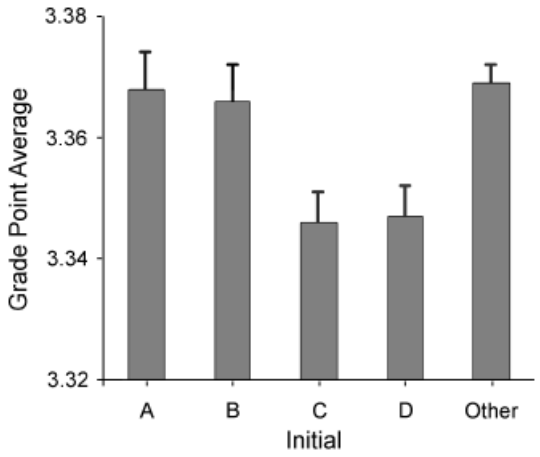

Fig. 1. Results of Study 2: grade point average as a function of the student's initial. Error bars indicate standard errors.

students with the initials *A* and *B* performing better than others (see Fig. 1).

The M.B.A. students in our sample undoubtedly believed that academic performance and successful job placement are connected. Nevertheless, despite the pervasive desire to achieve high grades, students with the initial *C* or *D*, presumably because of a fondness for these letters, were slightly less successful at achieving their conscious academic goals than were students with other initials.

It is interesting that students with the initial *A* or *B* did not perform better than students whose initials were grade irrelevant. There are at least two explanations for this finding. First, students with grade-irrelevant initials may already be maximally motivated to succeed. Second, because performance is determined by both motivation and ability, any increased motivation to succeed that arises from having initials that match positive performance outcomes may not necessarily translate into increased performance. For example, if either of the authors of this article found himself playing in a Major League Baseball game, infinite unconscious motivation to succeed would not stave off the inevitable. In contrast, if either author had an unconscious desire to strike out, this implicit goal would likely be met with resounding success. Thus, although having initials that match easy-to-achieve negative outcomes may cause a decrement in performance, having initials that match hard-to-achieve positive outcomes may not necessarily cause an increase in performance.

The first two studies support our hypothesis in very different domains. Nevertheless, archival samples make it difficult to isolate elements in the causal chain. For example, one might argue that these findings reflect the behavior not of the actors, but of their evaluators. Umpires may call more strikes on batters whose names begin with *K*, and instructors may assign more Cs and Ds to students whose names begin with *C* and *D*. Studies 1 and 2 could not eliminate this alternative explanation, so we set out to do just that in Study 3.

STUDY 3: THE MODERATING INFLUENCE OF INITIAL LIKING

Method

Do students achieve initial-congruent grades, or do teachers assign initial-congruent grades? If students, rather than their teachers, are responsible for the effect observed in Study 2, then students' own-name liking should moderate the effect. Although most people like their initials (Nuttin, 1987), people who do not should not be motivated to achieve outcomes that match their initials.

In Study 3, undergraduates with grade-relevant initials (*A*, *B*, *C*, or *D*; $N = 294$) completed a Web-based questionnaire in exchange for a chance to win a $50 prize. Replicating a procedure used in other research (e.g., DeHart & Pelham, 2007; Dijksterhuis, 2004; Jones, Pelham, Mirenberg, & Hetts, 2002), we asked students to complete a questionnaire, the first part of which asked them to use their "first intuitive reactions" to rate their liking of every letter of the alphabet on a 9-point scale (1 = *dislike*, 9 = *like*). In two subsequent sections, participants reported their initials and their GPA. We predicted that liking one's initials would moderate the relation between initials and performance.

Results and Discussion

Our index of own-initial liking was calculated as the difference between a given student's rating for his or her own initial and the average rating of that letter across the sample as a whole (Bosson, Swann, & Pennebaker, 2000). Given the results of Study 2, we created two composite groups: students with the initial *A* or *B* and students with the initial *C* or *D* (as before, students with conflicting first and last initials were excluded). We then regressed GPA on initial, own-initial liking, their interaction, and gender. As expected, a significant interaction between own-initial liking and initial, $\beta = -.49$, $p < .02$, revealed that among students who liked their initials, students with the initial *A* or *B* performed better than students with the initials *C* or *D*, whereas among students who disliked their initials, students with the initial *C* or *D* performed better than students with the initial *A* or *B* (see Fig. 2). This finding was replicated in a regression treating initial as a continuous variable ($A = 1$, $B = 2$, $C = 3$, and $D = 4$). The results of Study 3 reflect the operation of students' characteristics and cannot be explained by instructors' biases.[4]

Grades have consequences. Achieving higher grades not only earns praise from professors, family, and peers, but can also

[4]In a sample of students with grade-irrelevant initials ($N = 377$), there was no correlation between academic performance and liking of As, Bs, or Ds ($ps < .74$). There was a small significant correlation between academic performance and liking of Cs, but the relation was positive, $r = .10$, $p < .05$. These results suggest that poor academic performance does not generally increase liking of Cs and Ds. Thus, the results of Study 3 are probably not attributable to causal effects of performance on own-initial liking.

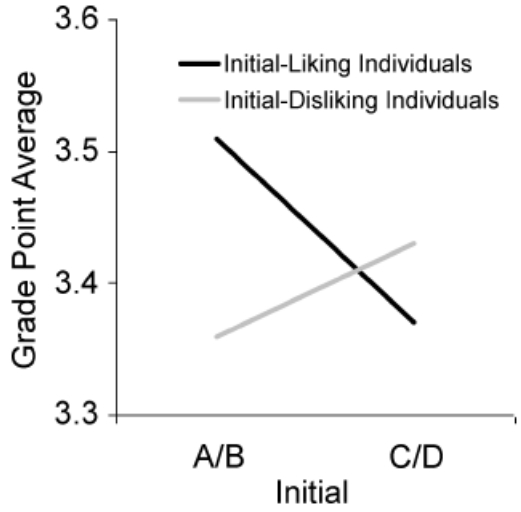

Fig. 2. Results of Study 3: grade point average as a function of initial (*A* or *B* vs. *C* or *D*) and own-initial liking, for students whose scores for own-initial liking were 1 standard deviation above and below the mean.

improve outcomes after graduation, for example, through admission to better graduate schools. In Study 4, we investigated the possibility that initials are linked to graduate-school admission.

STUDY 4: GRADUATE-SCHOOL ADMISSION

Method

If students whose names begin with *A* or *B* earn higher grades than students whose names begin with *C* or *D*, then they should also go on to better graduate schools. To test this hypothesis, we sought a sample that linked individual names with graduate schools. We found what we were looking for in a data set previously employed to test a different consequence of name liking (Pelham et al., 2002). The American Bar Association (ABA) maintains a searchable on-line database for finding a lawyer using a few criteria: type of practice, location, and law school. Access to name and law-school information enabled us to test the relation between these variables.

First, we had to build the data set. Using *U.S. News & World Report* (2003) we identified the possible set of law schools. A computer program then ran iterative searches of the ABA Web site for every lawyer with *A*, *B*, *C*, or *D* as a first, middle, or last initial.[5] Every search required that at least two letters be specified, so the program searched every law school separately for each of the 26 possible two-letter combinations including *A*, *B*, *C*, or *D* as the first initial and then for each of the 26 possible two-letter combinations including *A*, *B*, *C*, or *D* as the last initial. Overall, the program executed 208 searches for every law school. The program ran for about 3 days, recording the number of lawyers returned in each search.[6] In our analysis, we included data from schools yielding at least 100 hits, obtaining a final sample with 170 law schools and 392,458 lawyers.[7]

To measure law-school quality, we used the 2003 rankings from *U.S. News & World Report*. Because the specific numerical ranks assigned by *U.S. News* vary somewhat from year to year, we decided to use as our ranking variable the tier (1–4) in which each school was placed, reasoning that this category assignment is more robust over time. The same issue of *U.S. News & World Report* also provided gender and ethnicity data for each school.

Results and Discussion

Using law school as the unit of analysis, we regressed school quality (Tier 1, best, through Tier 4, worst) on the proportion of lawyers with initials *A* and *B* (relative to lawyers with initials *C* and *D*). In this analysis, we controlled for the percentages of women, Asian Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Indian Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Rican Americans, and international students, as indicated by *U.S. News & World Report*'s (2003) survey. Our results revealed the predicted effect of name initial on law-school quality, $\beta = -.17$, $p = .036$. As the quality of schools declined, so did the proportion of lawyers with initials *A* and *B*. This finding is consistent with our hypothesis: It seems that people with names like *Adlai* and *Bill* tend to go to better law schools than do those with names like *Chester* and *Dwight*.

STUDY 5: EXPERIMENTAL PERFORMANCE

The first four studies suggest that people whose initials match objectively undesirable performance outcomes perform worse than people with other initials. Moreover, these studies demonstrate this effect in real-world situations that have important consequences: Strikeouts, grades, and graduate schools can affect salaries, status, and careers.

However, despite the real-world import of these findings, archival studies, by their very nature, allow alternative explanations of results. Furthermore, researchers have challenged the use of archival data in investigating the NLE specifically (Gallucci, 2003; though see Pelham, Carvallo, DeHart, & Jones, 2003, for a response). To demonstrate definitively that initials have a causal influence on performance, it is necessary to conduct an experiment in which people are randomly assigned

[5]We included middle initials out of necessity. On the ABA Web site, searches for individuals with the first initial *A* identified lawyers with *A* as either the first or the middle initial.

[6]There were two disadvantages to collecting the data in this way. First, we could not remove lawyers with conflicting combinations of initials (e.g., *Alan Dershowitz*). Second, lawyers with multiple practices were counted multiple times. These disadvantages should have merely added noise to our analysis, as they did not tip the scales in favor of our hypothesis.

[7]Because of factors identified in footnotes 5 and 6, our methods overestimated the actual number of lawyers with first or last initials *A* through *D*. The search engine did not discriminate between Rutgers University of Newark and Rutgers University of New Brunswick, so these two schools and their demographic information were combined in the analysis.

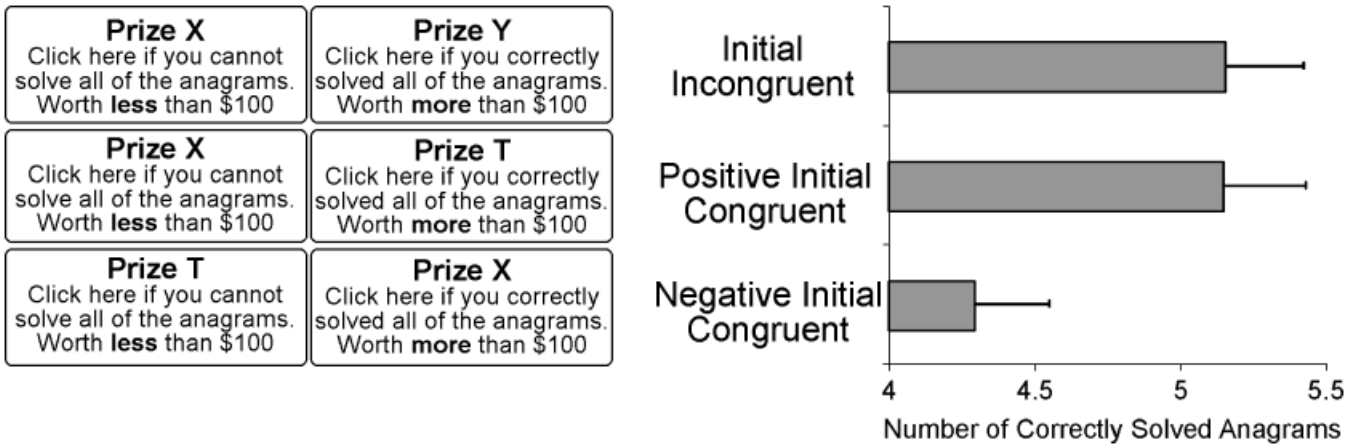

Fig. 3. Results of Study 5. The graph indicates the mean number of anagrams solved (out of 8 possible) in each of the three conditions. Error bars indicate standard errors. To the left of the graph are examples of the response options in each condition (for a hypothetical participant named Toby).

to initial-matching versus initial-irrelevant performance outcomes. In Study 5, that is what we did.

Method

Participants ($N = 284$) were recruited for an on-line experiment. They were told that if they participated, they would be entered in a $50 lottery and that they would have an opportunity to win an additional prize of approximately $100. The participants all lived in the United States, were predominantly female (83%), and ranged in age from 18 to 67 years ($M = 33$).

Participants began by answering a series of unrelated demographic questions, including questions asking for their first and last initials. Then, the instructions informed participants about an upcoming anagram task, which involved unscrambling sets of letters in order to form English words. Once participants acknowledged that they understood the task, they were asked to solve four relatively easy practice anagrams, completing as many as possible before proceeding to the next screen. The program recorded their answers.

The next screen presented the critical task. Participants were asked to solve 10 difficult anagrams (taken from Finkel et al., 2006), including 2 that were unsolvable, and were told to take as much time as they wanted to complete the task.[8] The instructions further indicated that participants who solved all 10 problems correctly would be entered into a raffle for a prize "worth more than $100," and that if they could not solve all the anagrams or chose to give up, they would be entered into a raffle for a prize "worth less than $100." The 10 anagrams were presented together in the center of the screen. Participants were told that when they had completed the anagram task, they should click on one of two buttons at the bottom of the screen to indicate whether they believed that they had or had not solved all of the anagrams correctly.

Our critical manipulation involved the labels for the two buttons. In the *name-incongruent* condition, the buttons displayed randomly assigned, initial-irrelevant prize labels (e.g., "Prize X" vs. "Prize Y"). In the *positive-name-congruent* condition, the "more than $100" button displayed the participant's first initial, and the "less than $100" button displayed a random letter. In the *negative-name-congruent condition*, the "more than $100" button displayed a random letter, and the "less than $100" button displayed the participant's first initial (see Fig. 3 for a representation of the stimuli).

Results and Discussion

Given the results of Studies 1 through 4, we expected participants whose initials matched the label for the consolation prize to solve the fewest anagrams. We also expected participants whose initials matched the prize for solving all the anagrams to perform no better than participants whose initials matched neither of the prizes, a finding that would be consistent with the results of Study 2.

Before analyzing the data, we eliminated two types of participants. First, we eliminated participants who did not answer any of the anagrams correctly (approximately 6% of the sample) and therefore seemed to have abandoned the task. Second, we eliminated participants who claimed to have answered all of the anagrams correctly (approximately 13% of the sample), because that was impossible. This left us with a final sample of 225 participants.

As predicted, prize labels significantly influenced performance on the anagram task. A one-way ANCOVA (with score on the practice anagrams entered as a covariate) revealed an effect of condition, $F(2, 221) = 3.54$, $p = .031$. Participants in the negative-name-congruent condition performed worse than participants in either the positive-name-congruent condition, $F(1, 144) = 5.36$, $p = .022$, or the name-incongruent condition,

[8]The unsolvable anagrams allowed us to monitor whether participants had paid attention to the task. Participants who later claimed to have solved all the anagrams were removed from the analyses because they could not have been fully attending to the task (cf. Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2006; Simmons & Nelson, 2006).

$F(1, 155) = 5.26$, $p = .023$ (see Fig. 3). There was no difference between the positive-name-congruent and the name-incongruent conditions, $F < 1$, a finding consistent with the results of Study 2.

Thus, participants performed especially poorly on the anagram task when the prize for failure matched participants' first initial. This finding supports our contention that the conscious pursuit of desirable performance outcomes (in this case, the goal of solving all the anagrams) can be undermined by the unconscious pursuit of undesirable name-resembling outcomes. There was no boost in participants' performance when the prize for success matched their first initials. As in Study 2, this null result may be explained by ability constraints on performance: Though a name-congruent positive outcome may increase the desire to succeed, this increased desire may not translate into increased performance. Indeed, performing well is often difficult; performing poorly is often all too easy.

One alternative explanation for these findings is that pairing the concept of failure with self-referent information (i.e., initials) made the possibility of failure more cognitively accessible and therefore made failure more likely. Although we cannot definitively rule out this intriguing possibility, we believe there are reasons to doubt that it explains our results. First, all participants were required to read the labels on both buttons in order to complete the task; thus, it seems unlikely that the accessibility of failure (or success) would be different in one condition than in the others. Second, if pairing information with initials increased the accessibility of that information, then one would expect success to be more accessible in the positive-name-congruent condition (in which initials were paired with success) than in the name-incongruent condition. However, there was no difference in performance between these two conditions, which suggests that differences in the accessibility of failure versus success cannot fully explain the results.

In sum, the results of this experiment support the findings of our four archival studies. When people's initials match negative performance outcomes, performance suffers.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The five studies reported here suggest that name liking guides the pursuit of initial-resembling performance outcomes, even when those outcomes are explicitly negative. Baseball players whose first or last names began with *K*, the letter used in Major League Baseball to represent strikeouts, were more likely to strike out than were other players (Study 1). M.B.A. students whose first or last initials corresponded to letters designating poor performance (Cs and Ds) had lower GPAs than other students (Study 2), an effect attributable to the students and not to their evaluators (Study 3). Lawyers whose first or last names began with these same initials went to worse law schools than their peers with the initials *A* and *B* (Study 4). Finally, in a laboratory experiment, people solved fewer anagrams when the consolation prize for poor performance was labeled with their first initial (Study 5).

This research extends the name-liking literature to the performance domain. More important, demonstrating these effects on negative performance outcomes strongly suggests that name liking affects life outcomes via an implicit, unconscious process. Indeed, as some researchers have persuasively argued, the best way to demonstrate the independence of unconscious thought is to put it in direct competition with conscious goals (e.g., Jacoby, Toth, & Yonelinas, 1993). It is difficult to imagine professional baseball players explicitly adopting a strike-out-often strategy simply because they want to achieve an outcome congruent with their initials. It seems more likely that *Koley* would consciously prefer a hit to a strikeout. Similarly, it seems likely that *David* would consciously rather earn As than Ds in school. Our results suggest that, to a limited extent at least, these conscious goals are sometimes subverted by an unconscious preference for the alternative.

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