

## Why Susie Sells Seashells by the Seashore, and Why It Matters

by **Jay Elias**

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It seems ridiculous when you first hear it, but it is true. People named Phil are more likely to live in Philadelphia, people born on the third of the month are more likely to live in Three Rivers, and people named Laura are more likely to be lawyers. But all these things are true, and are evidence of the **name letter effect**. In general, people are more likely to live in a city which shares the first letter of their name, marry a spouse who has the same first initial, and if your name starts with an "A", get good grades in school.

This effect was demonstrated by Brett Pelham, Matthew Miremberg, and John Jones, researchers at SUNY Buffalo, and published in their paper **Why Susie Sells Seashells at the Seashore: Implicit Egotism and Major Life Decisions** (PDF). The impulse which drives the name letter effect is **implicit egotism**.

**Jay Elias's diary** :: ::

Research on unconscious self-enhancement—or what we call *implicit egotism*—suggests that people's positive automatic associations about themselves may influence their feelings about almost anything that people associate with the self. For example, research on the *mere ownership effect* shows that giving people objects such as pens or keychains causes people to evaluate these object more favorably than they would otherwise (Beggan, 1992; Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990; Van Boven, Dunning, & Loewenstein, 2000). If people instantly acquire positive feelings about objects once these objects become part of the self, it stands to reason that people should develop deep and abiding affections for objects that are chronically associated with the self. In support of this idea, research on the *name letter effect* (Kitayama & Karasawa, 1997; Nuttin, 1985, 1987) shows that people like the letters that appear in their own names quite a bit more than they like letters that do not. This effect occurs for all of the letters in people's names, but it is particularly pronounced for people's first and last initials. This presumably unconscious self-enhancing bias has been documented in at least 14 countries (e.g., Greece, Japan, Spain, the United States).

In short, you associate the letter with which your names begins and the day on which your were born with positive emotions, and therefore, your sentiments towards places and things which share those attributes becomes more favorable. And generally, this happens without your even realizing it.

Implicit egotism is a member of the family of **cognitive biases**, or tendencies that humans have to make errors in judgment based on cognitive factors (a subject which I've written a bit about at **Docudharma**). Within this family are many famous biases such as the **hindsight bias**, which interprets past events as more predictable than they were, and **confirmation bias** which is the selection of evidence which supports one's preconceptions and deprecates evidence which contradicts prior expectations.

Most people are aware that cognitive biases exist, but are **shocked** to learn of the power that they exercise over our decisions. But the empirical evidence is strong: you, and everyone else, have chosen your profession, your spouse, and yes, even your political beliefs in some part because of the first letter of your name.

So, why does this matter? Well, it is neat, for one, but more importantly, it allows us to begin understand why debate so rarely changes minds, and why people, including ourselves, believe things which the evidence can state is clearly not true. What we believe is only partially based on the facts. **Therefore, arguments and strategies which depend solely on the facts will not always succeed**, even if they

are correct on the merits. It also teaches us some measure of the importance that feeling good about yourself plays in determining what you believe and choose. People will not behave entirely rationally, but will instead seek paths which elevate their status and self-regard.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it teaches us that we should be humble in our certainty of the rightness of our own beliefs. Our seemingly airtight arguments for our most cherished beliefs are not based solely on our powers of reason, but serve a host of other purposes for our brains and egos. Our reasoning is not, and cannot be, as sound as we try to believe.

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