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# Fitting In or Standing Out: Trends in American Parents' Choices for Children's Names, 1880–2007

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## Abstract

In an analysis of the first names of 325 million American babies born 1880 to 2007, parents have increasingly given their children less common names, suggesting a growing interest in uniqueness and individualism. The data are from the Social Security Administration's database of names, a complete survey of Americans with social security cards. Common names decreased in use from 1880 to 1919 and increased slightly from 1920 to 1949 before becoming steadily less popular from 1950 to 2007, with an unremitting decrease after 1983 and the greatest rate of change during the 1990s. The results are similar when controlled for immigration rate and when examined within the six U.S. states with the lowest population percentage of Hispanics. This behavioral evidence of growing individualism complements previous research finding generational increases in individualistic traits on self-report measures.

## Keywords

names, individualism, uniqueness, culture

To someone born in the 1880s, the United States of the 2000s would be strikingly unfamiliar. Some differences are tangible, such as electricity, air travel, television, and computers. Other changes are cultural but still very noticeable: Married women work outside the home, people are free to choose a profession, and advertisements emphasize the importance of standing out from the crowd (Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008).

Many of these cultural changes can be traced to the rise of individualism in Western societies (Baumeister, 1987; Fukuyama, 1999; Myers, 2000; Seligman, 1990). Just as a regional culture shapes individuals' attitudes and actions, so does the culture of specific time periods (for a discussion, see Twenge, 2006). Cultural change over time within a society can be understood with the same models as differences across societies. The mutual constitution model of culture and the psyche (Kitayama & Markus, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1994) proposes that cultures are created and maintained by the interaction of systems including core cultural ideas, cultural institutions (e.g., law, education, and parenting), specific social behaviors, and individual psychology. These elements are mutually constitutive because the ideas and institutions of the culture cannot exist without the individuals' specific behaviors and psychological beliefs, and individual behaviors and beliefs are shaped by the core cultural ideas and cultural institutions. For example, in a cross-cultural study of preference for uniqueness, Kim and Markus (1999) found that the cultural value of independence appears in cultural practices such as advertisements that stress individuality, behaviors such as

selecting a more unusual pen, and preferences such as selecting the pattern with a deviant form.

If the cultural importance placed on individualism is growing in the United States, there should be a corresponding increase in the cultural practices, social behaviors, and psychological processes linked to individualism. Some evidence suggests that this is true. For example, American parents now place less value on children's obedience and more on independence (e.g., Alwin, 1996). Young Americans have increasingly endorsed individualistic attitudes and traits on self-report questionnaires, inspiring the label *Generation Me* (Twenge, 1997, 2001, 2006); one study also found increasing individualism in a longitudinal study of women followed from young adulthood to middle age between the 1960s and the 1990s (Roberts & Helson, 1997). Related traits have also increased, including materialism (Astin, Oseguera, Sax, & Korn, 2002; Twenge & Campbell, 2009), narcissism (for a review, see Twenge & Campbell, 2009), and high expectations (Reynolds, Stewart, MacDonald, & Sischo, 2006; Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

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These data are historically limited because psychological measures are relatively recent, often not beginning until the 1970s. In contrast, data on names have a long, quantifiable history. Perhaps even more important, data on names are behavioral and do not rely on self-reports of traits or self-concepts, thus avoiding measurement problems such as social desirability, response style, and varying comparison groups (see, e.g., Bachman & O'Malley, 1984; Heine, Lehman, Peng, & Greenholtz, 2002; Paulhus, 1991).

In the current study, we examine naming practices in the United States from 1880 to 2007. Specifically, we assess whether parents are now less likely to give their children common names. Such a shift toward uniqueness would provide evidence for increasing cultural individualism in the United States (Kim & Markus, 1999).

Examining names is ideal for the study of culture over time, as naming practices are deeply imbedded with core cultural values (e.g., Lieberman & Bell, 1992). For example, Sue and Telles (2007) found that Hispanic parents' exposure to U.S. culture influenced the likelihood of giving their children, especially their daughters, English- rather than Spanish-based names. Names also have important psychological consequences, from implicit egotism (Hoorens & Nuttin, 1993; Pelham, Mirenberg, & Jones, 2002) to life outcomes (Christenfeld & Larsen, 2008; Kalist & Lee, 2009; Nelson & Simmons, 2007). Names are also the first transference of culture from one generation to the next. Choosing a name is an early, crucial parenting behavior. For the parent, naming a child is a specific act that reflects the cultural and social influences of the time. For the child, the name becomes a keystone of the self-structure, even though the child had no choice in the decision.

## The Current Research

In the present research, we assess the growth of cultural individualism by examining changes in uniqueness in the names American parents chose to give their children between 1880 and 2007. If parents, influenced by shifting cultural values, are increasingly focused on helping their children stand out and be unique individuals, they will be less likely to give them common names. The emphasis here is not on the names themselves, which go in and out of popularity, but how many children receive a name that many other children also receive that year.

The data are drawn from a 100% sample of Social Security Administration records—the names of the 325 million Americans who have (or had) a social security number. This is one of the largest—if not the largest—samples of Americans available. There are no sampling issues because the database includes the entire population of interest (in this case, American social security card holders).

We took several steps to control for possible confounds. First, we control for immigration rate (legal and illegal), as immigrant groups might be more likely to employ different naming traditions. Second, we examined effects in the six states in the United States with the lowest population

percentage of Hispanics, who are both the fastest-growing ethnic group and the largest ethnic group having a naming tradition based on a language other than English. Coincidentally, five of these states (Maine, West Virginia, Vermont, North Dakota, South Dakota) are also those with the largest percentage of Whites (in 2007, these states were between 88% and 97% White). The sixth, Mississippi, is the state in the United States with the highest percentage of Blacks (at 37%) and thus provides a view of naming in a population influenced by an ethnic/racial (but not linguistic) subculture.

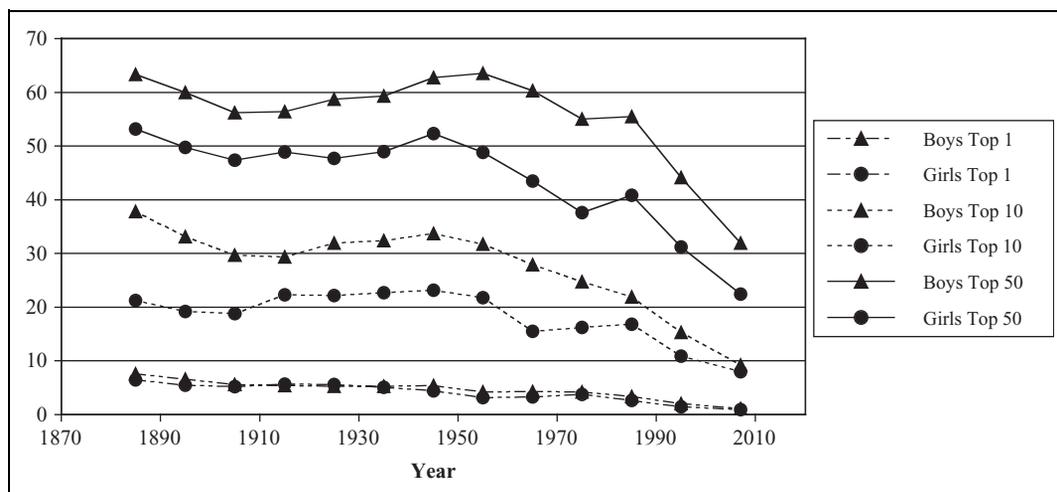
## Method

We gathered naming data from the Social Security Administration's database of baby names from 1880 to 2007, recording the percentage of babies given the most popular name or a name among the 10, 25, or 50 most popular for each year and sex. Higher percentages of babies receiving common names correspond to fewer parents giving unusual names and thus presumably an emphasis on fitting in; lower percentages of babies with common names mean more emphasis on standing out.

The data represent 100% of the names of Americans with a social security card (total  $N = 325$  million). Some people born before 1937, the year the social security system began, did not obtain a social security card, so the data before those years may not be a random sample of the population. After this year, all Americans who obtained a social security card—required for working and/or for being claimed as an adult dependent on tax forms—are included. Before 1986, the names of children who died before obtaining a card were not included; this is likely to be a very small number of people. After 1986, parents were required to obtain a social security number to claim children as minor dependents on their tax returns; thus, virtually every American born after 1986 is included.

To examine trends in populations with less linguistic diversity in naming practices, we examined the six states with the lowest percentage of Hispanics. Within states, data are available only from 1960 to 2007 and list the number of babies with each name (vs. the percentage, as the national data do). We used the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* (published by the U.S. Census Bureau, 2008) to obtain the total live births for each year for each of the six states to calculate the percentage of babies by sex with the most common name or a name among the 10, 25, or 50 most popular. To control for immigration rates, we obtained the immigration rate per 1,000 population for each decade, which includes the total rate for legal immigration and estimated illegal immigration (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008).

Because the data include the entire population of Americans with a social security card, we did not use inferential statistics (which are used when data are only a sample of a population; here, the data are based on the entire population). Thus, there are no error bars on the figures and no  $p$  values associated with correlations.



**Figure 1.** Percentage of American babies receiving common names by sex, 1880–2007  
 Note: The results represent percentages of babies receiving names among the 1, 10, and 50 most common for boys and girls.

**Table 1.** Correlations Between Year and Common Names, 1880–2007

|                      | Simple correlation with year | Controlled for immigration rate |
|----------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>Boys</b>          |                              |                                 |
| Most popular name    | -.94                         | -.95                            |
| 10 most common names | -.84                         | -.94                            |
| 25 most common names | -.73                         | -.86                            |
| 50 most common names | -.64                         | -.81                            |
| <b>Girls</b>         |                              |                                 |
| Most popular name    | -.93                         | -.93                            |
| 10 most common names | -.71                         | -.87                            |
| 25 most common names | -.73                         | -.89                            |
| 50 most common names | -.82                         | -.92                            |

Note: Negative correlations mean that later years are associated with a lower percentage of children given common names. These *r* values should not be used to calculate effect sizes as they rely on the variance among years and not among individuals.

## Results

### Change Over Time

American parents are now much less likely to give their children common names (see Figure 1). For example, 40% of boys once received one of the 10 most common names; now, fewer than 10% do. For girls, the percentage with a top-10 name dropped from 25% to 8%. Similar results occur for the top 50 names: for example, about half of girls received one of the 50 most popular names until the mid-20th century; now only 1 out of 4 do. Thus, American parents are increasingly choosing more unusual names for their children. This pattern also appears in the simple correlations (see Table 1).

From 1880 to 1919, fewer parents gave their children common names, but this trend reversed somewhat from 1920 to 1949, when common names were used more often (see Figure 1). After 1950, fewer and fewer babies received

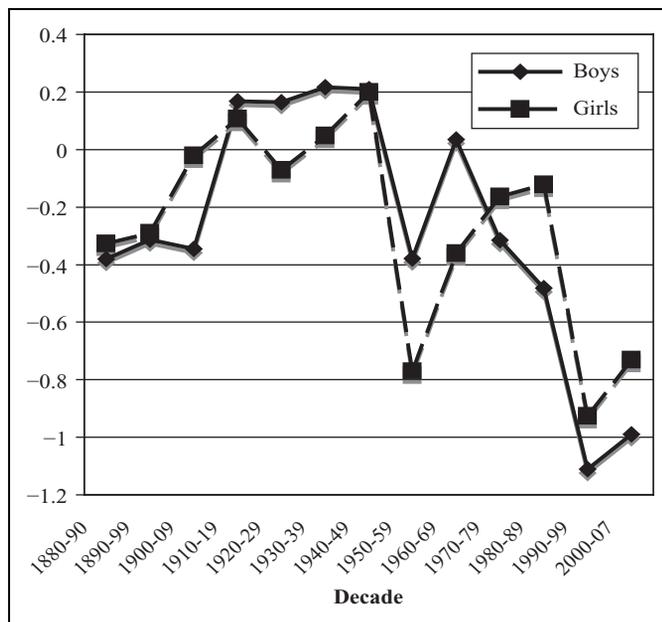
common names. After 1983, the decrease was unremitting, with the percentage of babies receiving common names decreasing every year for both boys and girls from 1983 to 2007.

We also sought to determine when the *rate* of change was most steep. Thus, we computed the rate of change within decades (the delta) for the percentage of babies given one of the 50 most common names (see Figure 2). For both male and female names, the decrease in the use of common names was steepest during the 1990s, with the decrease in the 2000s also very large.

### Accounting for Possible Confounds

One potential explanation for this change is immigration into the country, as immigrant groups presumably bring additional first names. This explanation does not fit the data, however, as the correlations are unchanged—and in some cases larger—when the immigration rate is included in the regression equation (see Table 1). Immigration rates in the late 1800s and early 1900s were considerably larger than they are today (and also from countries with different language and naming traditions, such as Italy), but parents were still more likely than they are now to give their children one of the 50 most popular names.

We approached this issue another way by looking at the data within the six states with the smallest population percentage of Hispanics (five of which are also the most White). In these states, popular names decreased in a pattern very similar to the national data (see Figures 3 and 4). Across these six states, the correlation between year (1960–2007) and boys getting one of the 50 most popular names was  $r = -.79$ , and for girls it was  $r = -.77$ . Mississippi, the U.S. state with the largest percentage of Blacks in its population, showed an even stronger decline in common names, consistent with previous research (e.g., Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Lieberman & Mikelson, 1995). Overall, the



**Figure 2.** Rate and direction of change by decade in percentage of babies receiving common names

Note: A slope less than 0 means that names were becoming less common during that decade, and a score greater than 0 means that names were becoming more common during that decade.

decline in American parents giving children common names is not primarily caused by increases in the Hispanic population.

## Discussion

In a very large data set ( $N = 325$  million) of the names of a 100% sample of all Americans with a social security card, fewer received common names over time, particularly after 1950 and with a continuous decline since 1983. Apparently American parents have been increasingly focused on promoting individuality from the very beginning of their children's lives. The results were not explained by immigration rates and are similar in states with low numbers of Hispanics. The largest decrease occurred in the 1990s, with the 2000s a close second.

An increasing number of American parents give their children names that will help them stand out rather than fit in, a behavioral indicator of the increase in the emphasis on individualism and uniqueness in American society. This trend is consistent with data from self-report measures, most of which show a rise in Americans endorsing individualistic traits (e.g., Roberts & Helson, 1997; Twenge, 1997; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). The data on names extend the evidence on rising individualism to one of the most important decisions made by parents: the names they give their children.

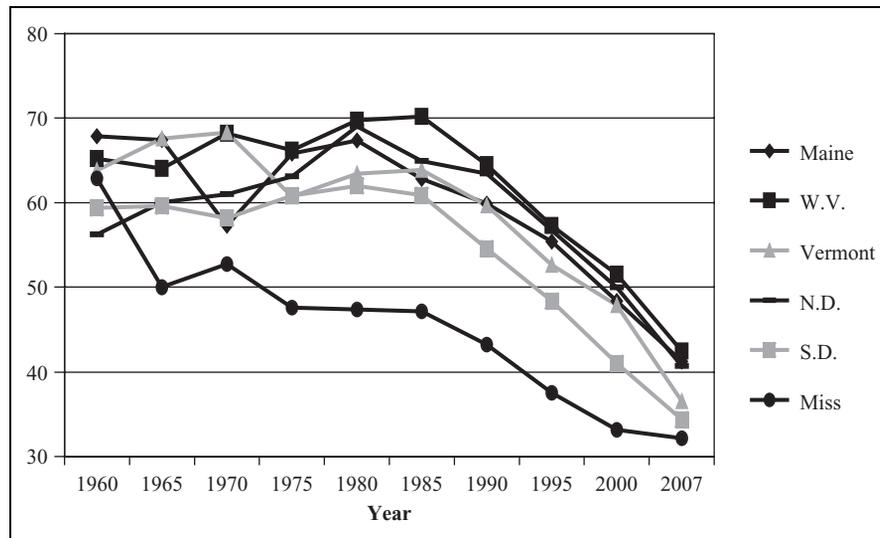
An alternative explanation is that parents are now more likely to give children names that reflect their ethnic heritage. This argument could apply even in populations that are largely White. However, "White ethnic" names were also fairly common in the past, when large numbers of immigrants from

countries such as Ireland and Italy, as well as Jewish immigrants, came to the United States; the immigration rate in the early 20th century was considerably higher than it is today. For example, Jewish immigrants might have named their sons Ira, Moses, or Levi, Italian immigrants might have named their sons Alonzo or Antonio, and Irish immigrants might have used Riley or Patrick. As some have argued, the Irish and Italians were the equivalent of minority groups in the past and were not always even considered "White" (Ignatiev, 1995). Thus, ethnic names have been used throughout the time period examined here and are not necessarily unique to recent years.

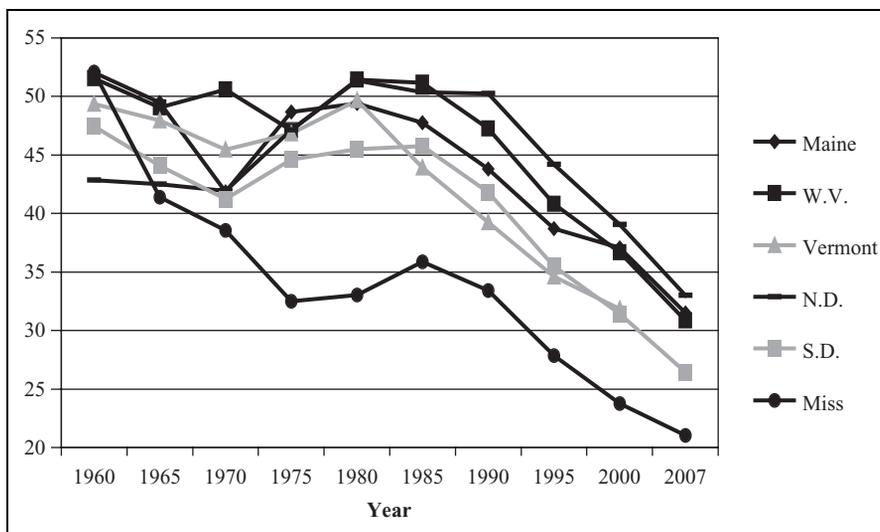
Choosing a name that reflects an individual family's ethnic heritage rather than a more "American" name to fit in could be evidence of group distinctiveness instead of individualism. In other words, it is possible that over time the assimilationist ideology of groups blending into one has become less prevalent and the multicultural ideology of each group being distinctive has become more prevalent. In this sense, group distinctiveness and individualism have considerable conceptual overlap, as both involve standing out from the larger group of Americans as a whole, though they differ in that group distinctiveness involves fitting in with a smaller group (one's ethnicity) and individualism does not. It is not possible to determine from this data set if the interest in ethnic names (e.g., a parent of Irish decent picking a traditional Irish name for a child) is about reconnecting to an ancestral ethnic group (an ethnicity-based decision), establishing individual uniqueness in a larger group containing many ethnicities (an individualism-based decision), or a little of both. This issue should be addressed by more targeted research assessing parent motives in naming.

A related alternative explanation involves the combination of race/ethnicity and social class. Upper-class White individuals have distinguished themselves in part through the use of certain names. Lower-status groups may try to appropriate these upper-class names over time. This in turn compels the upper-class group to seek a new group of names that will continue to convey their status. Such a process would likely have a greater impact on the rate of change of names rather than the diversity of names. Nevertheless, the creation of more names might occur in this process. This is analogous to trends in fashion, where high-status groups develop fashion trends others follow. Over time, fashion changes, but there are also more fashions in existence. We cannot rule out a role for class structure in the changes in naming practices and believe such an explanation can coexist with an increase in individualism.

A final alternative explanation is that parents are now more aware of which names are popular. This explanation is not as plausible as the other alternatives. First, this is a circular argument; at one time, parents may have been *more* likely to consider a name because it was common, not less. Thus, it is not awareness but the attitude toward individualism or "commonness" that has changed. In addition, the largest change in the availability of information about which names were common came with the Internet, yet the change we found began in the 1880s (very long before the Internet) and was the largest



**Figure 3.** Percentage of American boys receiving a name among the 50 most popular in the six states with the lowest percentage of Hispanics, 1960–2007



**Figure 4.** Percentage of American girls receiving a name among the 50 most popular in the six states with the lowest percentage of Hispanics, 1960–2007

in the 1990s (immediately before such Web sites became available).

### Implications

Most research finds that unusual names do not cause negative outcomes (e.g., Fryer & Levitt, 2004), although one study found that “Black names” incurred a penalty on the job market (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Kalist and Lee (2009) found that males with unusual names were more likely to be juvenile delinquents, although this may have been caused by the correlation of unusual names with low socioeconomic status and single motherhood. If unusual names are also perceived as less likable, there might be negative

consequences, as individuals whose names are less likeable also score lower in psychological adjustment (Twenge & Manis, 1998).

In addition, having a unique name may have implications for personality. Narcissism, for example, is linked to the need for uniqueness (Emmons, 1984) and psychological entitlement is linked to seeing oneself as separate from others (Campbell, Bonacci, Shelton, Exline, & Bushman, 2004). Further research should explore whether the bearers of unique names—or perhaps their parents—have more individualistic and/or narcissistic personality traits. Such an analysis would be particularly useful if it also included a measure of parental attitudes toward uniqueness, which could be an underlying cause leading to both unique names and more individualistic traits in children. This

theory could be correct, as the beginning of the decline in common names in the 1950s coincided with the rise in individualistic traits such as assertiveness among children born at that time (the baby boomers) once they reached adolescence (Twenge, 2001).

More direct outcomes are easier to predict: Classrooms (and eventually workplaces) will have fewer people with the same name. In the 1950s, the average first-grade class of 30 children would have had at least 1 boy named James (usually Jimmy), the most common male name then (assuming half the class was boys), but in 2013, 6 classes will be necessary to find only one Jacob, even though that was the most common boys' name in 2007.

### Limitations

Some limitations of the Social Security Administration database should be noted. Some people born before 1937 never obtained a social security card because their employment was not covered under social security or they died before the social security system was implemented. Before 1986, when the IRS began requiring a social security number to claim a child as a dependent on a tax return, some children who died before entering the paid work force never obtained a social security card. Nevertheless, this is a population of unprecedented size (325 million) and likely highly correspondent with the total U.S. population, especially for those born after 1937. After 1986, it is very close to 100% of the entire U.S. population born in the country during those years.

The social security names database records different spellings of names as different names, so some of the change may be because of more spellings rather than more names. However, the interest in unusual spellings, even of common names, is also an indicator of interest in uniqueness.

### Conclusion

This analysis of naming practices in the United States provides a window into cultural change over time. Naming practices are an elegant example of how cultural values such as valuing standing out are transferred from one generation to the next. Parental name selection is the first element of the symbolic self of the child. These behavioral data, in conjunction with the existing self-report data, provide solid converging evidence for increasing individualism over time in the United States.

### Authors' Note

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