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Temporal Response to Opportunities: a Look At the Last Name Effect

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Children with last names late in the alphabet are often last in line. We propose that individuals react to these inequities by developing response tendencies that influence the speed with which they respond to opportunities. In particular, we expect that adults whose childhood surnames began with letters late (early) in the alphabet will respond relatively quickly (slowly) to opportunities to secure desirable resources. Evidence from four studies provides strong support for this last name effect and suggests that it is tied to one's childhood surname.

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Temporal Response to Opportunities: A Look at the Last Name Effect

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Everyday life presents numerous opportunities to claim scarce resources, however, relatively little is known about what determines how quickly a consumer will act to take advantage of such an opportunity. To better understand this, we begin by noting that children with surnames that begin with a letter at the beginning (ending) of the alphabet are privileged (disadvantaged) in childhood. We propose that children develop response tendencies to manage these inequities and that these response tendencies persist into adulthood. Specifically, we hypothesize that individuals with a last name beginning with a letter late (early) in the alphabet will respond relatively quickly (slowly) to opportunities to claim resources.

Study 1. Students enrolled in a large wine evaluation course were told they would receive \$5 and a bottle of wine for participating in a 30-minute study. In line with the last name hypothesis, we predicted that individuals with names later in the alphabet would respond to the offer more quickly than those with names early in the alphabet. Consistent with the last name effect, there was a significant negative correlation between last name and response time ($r = -.156$). The existence of the last name effect for these students begs the question of whether the last name effect will exist for older adults in situations, where there is a clear pressure to respond quickly.

Study 2. Graduate students were sent an email and invited to respond by email to receive up to four free tickets to attend a top-ranked women's basketball game. As in Study 1, the first letter of each respondent's last name ($n=76$) their email address and was transformed into a number equivalent. Response times were measured by computing the difference between the time the offer was emailed and each respondent's reply email (in minutes). Here too there was a reliable negative correlation between response time and the number equivalent of the last name ($r = -.271$). Thus, the last name effect exists for adults in their late twenties who were aware that the opportunity was highly constrained.

Study 3. To learn about the origin of the last name effect, we conducted a study that allowed us to speak to the question of when individuals developed the response tendencies that underlie the effect. By moving to a sample of older adults (many of whom are married and have changed their name), we can determine whether the effect exists for current last name, childhood last name, or both. If it exists only for childhood last name, then the last name effect is likely rooted in a response tendency learned during childhood.

Participants were 280 adults (average age=39.1 years) who responded to an email invitation to participate in a survey in exchange for a chance to win \$500. Participants' response times were calculated from the time the email invitation was sent to the time each participant began taking the study. The first letter of each respondent's adult last name and the first letter of the last name during childhood were obtained during the debriefing of the survey, which was unrelated to the last name effect.

The correlation of childhood name and response time reveals a significant last name effect for the sample as a whole ($r = -.128$). However, when we compute the correlation between response time and adult name, the effect is much smaller ($r = -.070$). This decline is attributable to name changers, for whom there is no correlation between adult name and response time ($r = .000$). In sum, it seems that the last name effect is driven by childhood name, not adult

name, suggesting that it derives from a response tendency learned during childhood.

Study 4. Each spring, a survey of first-time academic job seekers in marketing is conducted and then posted on the ELMAR listserv. The first posting presents job placement data for individuals who responded within three weeks; these respondents are coded as *early* responders. After another month, a second Who Went Where report is released. Participants were 114 PhD students who reported job placement data to ELMAR over a two year period. We reasoned that the opportunity to share the good news of a successful job search with one's peers would be acted on more quickly by those with rapid response tendencies. As such, we expect that individuals with last names late (early) in the alphabet will be more likely to be early (late) responders.

The data indicate that PhD students with a surname beginning late in the alphabet were quicker to announce their job search success than those with surnames beginning with letters early in the alphabet. This is evidenced by a comparison of the average letter equivalent code for those who responded early ($M=11.76$, letter L) to that of those who responded late ($M=7.23$, letter G), $t(113)=2.78$, $p=.006$, $d=.523$. Though individuals with names of Asian descent had last names that began with letters that were slightly farther into the alphabet, they were as likely to be on the late report as non-Asians, indicating that the last name effect does not stem from cultural response norms.

Conclusion. These studies find a robust effect of one's childhood last name on temporal responses to opportunities, a finding that has implications for scholarship and policy ranging from issues of sampling validity, organizing structures, and the effectiveness of various marketing strategies. On this last point, the implication is that various purchase incentives will be taken up more quickly by those later in the alphabet.

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