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## Liking for name predicts happiness: A behavioral genetic analysis



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### ABSTRACT

Research has established that humans tend to view their names in a positive light and liking for one's name is positively associated with subjective well-being. In this study, the genetic basis of individual difference in liking for one's name was examined in a survey of 304 pairs of twins from Beijing, China. Results showed that (1) liking for name was heritable (47%), while unique environment also played a role (53%); (2) the positive association between name-liking and subjective well-being is driven by common genetic ( $r_g: .21-.41$ ) and non-shared environmental ( $r_e: .14-.22$ ) influences. These findings have provided novel evidence that liking for one's name is a fundamentally important trait and further shed light on the understanding of implicit self-esteem.

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### 1. Introduction

In the preface to *Dreams from My Father* (Obama, 2004), the American president Barack Obama, who referred to himself as “a black man with a funny name”, confessed that “my name is an irresistible target of mocking websites from overzealous Republican operatives”. President Obama is not alone. Many people suffer from what they or others perceive as funny or undesirable names (Gebauer, Leary, & Neberich, 2011). Research, however, has shown that how much a person likes his/her own name is more important than the desirability of that name in the eyes of others (Twenge & Manis, 1998). In this study, our interest lies in the origins of name-liking. In particular, we explore the genetic and environmental bases of name-liking as well as its association with psychological well-being.

Name is important, regardless in modern societies or primitive tribes (Lawson, 1984). Name could represent “a rite de passage”, a mark of cultural tradition, or a sign of religious faith (Dussart, 1988; Seeman, 1983). More important, a person's name usually functions as a unique social symbol representing the individual's identity (Dion, 1983). Psychological research on names can be traced back to as early as 1898 (Hall, 1898). Among the large body

of empirical research, one important topic has concerned name-liking, that is, one's attitude toward or liking for one's own name or letters in one's name. Researchers have consistently observed that people tend to view their name or name letters in a positive light, regardless of culture, ethnicity, language or cohort (Kitayama & Rarasawa, 1997; Nuttin, 1987; Stieger & LeBel, 2012). More fascinating, name-liking was found to have important adaptive value. As a trait-like construct (Gebauer, Riketta, Broemer, & Maio, 2008; Nuttin, 1987), name-liking is positively associated with self-esteem, self-acceptance, subjective well-being and self-adjustment (Gebauer et al., 2008; Strunk, 1958; Strümpfer, 1978), but negatively correlated with loneliness and anxiety (Gebauer et al., 2008; Joubert, 1990). As a state-like construct, name-liking is useful in shielding against various threats such as self-concept threat (Jones, Pelham, Mirenberg, & Hetts, 2002) and salience of mortality (Schmeichel et al., 2009).

Behavioral genetics has established the heritability of many attitudes (Olson, Vernon, Harris, & Jang, 2001) and subjective well-being (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). Given the prevalence and adaptive importance of name-liking, people may wonder whether it is heritable, and furthermore, whether its link with subjective well-being is genetically based. To address these issues, we simultaneously examined name-liking and subjective well-being in a twin sample. In assessing subjective well-being, we considered both cognitive and affective components, i.e., life satisfaction and affective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999).

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We conducted the twin study in China. Given that Chinese names are not letter-based but character-based and there is no relevant research on name-liking as well as its link with subjective well-being in China, we conducted two pilot studies before implementing our twin study. In pilot study 1, we aimed to determine which one of first name, family name and full name should be used in subsequent studies in terms of their relative importance. In pilot study 2, we aimed to ensure name-liking in China was not totally due to external environments and really predicted subjective well-being. Built on these two pilot studies, we conducted a twin study to examine the genetic and environmental bases of name-liking and its association with subjective well-being.

## 2. Pilot study 1

### 2.1. Methods

#### 2.1.1. Participants

A total of 120 university students (43% male) from Beijing, China participated in the study. The age ranged from 18 to 28 ( $M = 22.69$ ,  $SD = 1.82$ ). Every student received a present as compensation.

#### 2.1.2. Measures

We assessed name importance from six different aspects for each of first name, family name and full name separately. For instance, for full name, two example items were “To what extent your full name represents your individual identity?” and “How important is your full name to your personal value?” For each item, participants indicated their opinion on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 6 (*very much*). For all the three specific scales, the internal consistency was very high: full name,  $\alpha = .92$ ; family name,  $\alpha = .90$ ; first name,  $\alpha = .92$ .

### 2.2. Results

One sample *t*-tests (refer to 1) showed that all three kinds of names were important for Chinese,  $t_s > 19.70$ ,  $p_s < .001$ . A one way ANOVA showed that the importance of full name, family name and first name for Chinese significantly differed from each other,  $F(2, 238) = 15.92$ ,  $p < .001$ . Full name was most important ( $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ), followed by first name ( $M = 3.75$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) and then family name ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ). Post-hoc tests showed that the difference in importance between any two of the three types of names was significant,  $t(119) > 2.05$ ,  $p < .05$ .

The findings suggest that names are important for Chinese, but the most important is full name rather than first name or family name. Based on this input, we determined to use full name in subsequent studies.

## 3. Pilot study 2

Study 2 aimed to test whether Chinese people like their names and whether their liking for their names predicts their happiness. We also examined name desirability perceived by others. Previous studies have suggested a possible link between name desirability and adaptiveness (Gebauer et al., 2011; but see Twenge & Manis, 1998). More important, people in the East are particularly receptive to others' opinions (Cohen & Gunz, 2002). Thus, we need to ensure that name-liking and its link with subjective well-being is not totally determined by external factors. Otherwise, the ensuing twin study was not necessary.

## 3.1. Methods

### 3.1.1. Participants

A total of 308 freshmen (63% male) completed the measures of name-liking and subjective well-being and self-esteem as part of a larger, longitudinal survey in Zhejiang University, China. Each of them received 20 Chinese Yuan as compensation. They were 17- to 21-years-old ( $M = 18.54$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ).

### 3.1.2. Measures

*Name-liking*: We used one item to evaluate participants' liking for their own names: “How much do you like your name?” (1 = *not at all*, 9 = *very much*; Gebauer et al., 2008).

*Life satisfaction*: We assessed life satisfaction with the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), which includes five items ( $\alpha = .80$ ) such as “In most ways my life is close my ideal”. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). We used the mean score across the five items as an index of life satisfaction.

*Affective well-being*: We used eight critical items originally developed by Diener et al. (2009) to measure affective well-being. Participants rated the frequency they experienced negative (*unpleasant, sad, angry, afraid*) and positive (*happy, pleasant, joyful, contented*) affects on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 7 = *always*). The scores of negative affects were reversed and a mean score was obtained across the eight items ( $\alpha = .89$ ) as the index of affective well-being.

*Name desirability*: Thirty-one independent raters (Chinese, 12 male) rated how “good” the full name of each participant is in their eyes (1 = *very bad*, 9 = *very good*). The order of names was randomized in the rating program. We averaged the 31 ratings to get an index for each name on the name desirability.

## 3.2. Results

One sample *t*-test (refer to 1) showed that Chinese people did like their own names ( $M = 7.02$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ),  $t = 56.07$ ,  $p < .001$ . In addition, liking for one's name was significantly correlated with both life satisfaction ( $M = 4.31$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ;  $r = .24$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and affective well-being ( $M = 5.18$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ;  $r = .30$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The desirability of the names in others' eyes ( $M = 4.89$ ,  $SD = 0.46$ ), however, was not related to either name-liking ( $r = .04$ ,  $p = .56$ ) or well-being (life satisfaction:  $r = .05$ ,  $p = .38$ ; affects:  $r = .01$ ,  $p = .86$ ).

Together with study 1, study 2 suggested that individuals not only consider their own names important, but also like their own names. Moreover, their liking for their names is not due to others' opinions about their names. Study 1 and 2 provided a reasonable foundation upon which to base the next twin study.

## 4. The twin study

### 4.1. Methods

#### 4.1.1. Participants

A total of 304 twin-pairs (sex: 44% male; age:  $M = 18.29$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ) sampled from the Beijing Twin Study (BeTwiSt) participated in the study, among which 152 pairs were monozygotic (MZ) and the other 152 pairs were dizygotic (DZ; 94 same-sex, 58 opposite-sex). Twins in the BeTwiSt are socio-demographically representative of Beijing adolescents (Chen et al., 2013). To ensure the test was accessible to all participants, we only invited twins who had finished middle school. For 95% of the twin pairs, zygosity was assigned by DNA testing, with classification accuracy approximating 100%; for the remaining pairs, zygosity was determined by

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