

Claude J. Smith, Jr.

Tamenicia or Tammy; James or Jim Bob; Bessie or Heather: Patterns and Significance of Choosing Names for American Babies

When Shakespeare wrote: “What’s in a name? . . . a rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” he recognized that the name given to an object does not change its essence. Human society, however, has complicated the business of naming people. Time and tradition have gone far beyond the old practice of giving the elder son the same name as his father, wherein we ended up with monikers such as John Johnson, Will Wilson, and Martin Martinson. Perhaps it is the astonishing breeding success of homo sapiens that has necessitated increasingly diverse naming as part of our modern culture: more bodies simply require more labels.

But other forces are also at work, including the awesome power of popular culture to popularize names and also to exhaust them. Because of popular culture, many parents name their children after celebrities from showbiz and athletics. Social class also fosters name selection by encouraging lower class folk with upper class aspirations to copy the name choices of their perceived betters. Many African-Americans, particularly those of a poorer social class, seem to want to make their children stand out from other Americans by coining highly original names, often with unusual spelling. Two reactionary forces also operate: one side wanting to avoid old-fashioned names, and the other wanting to adopt an older, more traditional, often Biblical name. Somewhere between those extremes is still another

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phenomenon: the parent who wishes to have a traditional name such as Hannah or Jacob, albeit one that has a certain “newness” to it by having been out of favor in the recent past. No matter the driving force that propels name selection, that field is seeded with mines ready to blow up in the well-meaning parents’ faces.

The largely bygone practice of primogeniture exacerbated normal sibling rivalries. Fraternal rivalry was further urged by the practice of giving the first-born son the father’s name, which indicated a preferential status. (My second son, for example, has voiced his dissatisfaction that he did not receive even one of my familiar names). Widely published research into birth order shows that being first-born is an advantage, so being given the father’s specific name further tilts the odds in favor of the first-born. If I could go back in time and again decide on names for my sons, I think I might follow the practice of George Foreman and name both of them after me (“Who2 Biography”).

In modern America, propagated by the internet and by both the baby industry and the publishing industry, a new and substantial market has been created, dedicated to helping parents choose names. The online book-seller Amazon listed an amazing 11,234 results for baby name texts (“Books: Baby Names: Amazon.com”), and the internet has a huge number of baby name sites, some of importance in this study. This baby naming “industry” has largely replaced the historical, familial, and neighborhood influences of yesterday that helped small town Americans name their children. The proliferation of aids to naming indicates that parents today, perhaps because of the reduced number of offspring compared to previous generations and the decline of the nuclear family, exert more effort choosing names for their children than did our forebears. The parental desire to give a child an ideal name has several pitfalls, not the least of which is the fact that names come into and go out of popularity and distinctiveness over a few decades for various reasons, including the exhaustion suggested by Andy Warhol’s serial prints of Marilyn Monroe’s face. And the pace at which names become obsolescent or tired seems to be increasing.

Take, for instance, the female names Jessica and Jennifer, two of the most popular names for American girls in the last quarter of the 20th century. Jessica, although not a “new” name, being deriving from Biblical sources, really soared into popularity in the 1970s, when more than 8,600

out of every million baby girls in the U.S. were so named. That growth continued even faster in the 1980s, when the name peaked with more than 25,000 out of every million female babies (i.e. 2.5%) being named Jessica. The pitfalls for the child of this groundswell of name popularization are shown by the following comment of a Jessica: “Like many others [named Jessica] said, it’s pretty but too common. I’m tired of hearing my name shouted in the hallway, only to turn around and find it wasn’t [sic] for me. I would *never* [emphasis added] name my daughter Jessica” (“Jessica . . . : Comment left Aug 13, 2007”). How ironic it is in this case (and probably in many others), that an earnest, well-meaning parent, desiring to find a fresh-sounding name, enters the beginning crest of a wave of popularization that will exhaust the name and turn the child into being just one more Jessica. As an American name choice for females, Jessica declined about 40% in popularity in the 1990’s and another 50% in the early 2000’s (“Jessica. . .”). Thus, a thoughtful, fresh name choice in one year can become an exhausted name in a little over two decades.

The name Jennifer represents a similar trajectory. Not even one of the thousand most popular names in America until the 1940s, it soared to more than 35,000 namings (i.e. 3.5%) out of each million female births in the 70s. In the 1990s, it had dropped to about 7,800, or less than 25% of the frequency of only 20 years earlier (“Jennifer. . .”). Although Jennifer was *the* most popular name in the 70s, it had slipped to #64 by 2007 (“Popularity”). Several years ago a cult film, *Heathers*, dissected a conformist high school. The film’s title was derived from the popularity at that time of the trendy name. Although Heather was a top ten name for female American babies in the 1970s (along with Jennifer and Jessica), Heather had fallen precipitously to #409 in 2007 (“Heather: Popularity”), again illustrating how fast a hot name can become a cold one.

A contrary force to freshness in name selection that has existed for a long time is the desire to give an old-fashioned, more traditional, and less trendy name. Among popular girls’ names of this variety are four of the top ten names for 2002: Hannah, Emma, Samantha, and Sarah (“Social Security Press Release”). These names, which paradoxically sound fresh because they have not been popular in several decades, can quickly become not only stale, but old fashioned. To explore this phenomenon, I selected the names of my grandmothers and the mother of one of my closest college

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friends: Nellie, Edna, and Bessie. Those three names sounded to this 1960s college student old fashioned and out-of-date. In 1900, however, Nellie was the 46th most popular female name, Edna was the 15th most popular, and Bessie was the 22nd most popular (“Popular Names by Birth Year: 1900”). By 1991, Edna had become the 944th most frequent name; Nellie and Bessie did not even appear in the top 1,000 (“Popular Names by Birth Year: 1991”). Ironically, these names that sounded old fashioned in the 60s may be ready to be recycled. In perhaps twenty years, Hannah, Samantha, Emma, and Sarah will probably also have lost their quaintness and simply sound old. Thus, the contemporary parents who chose these fresh-sounding traditional names will have fallen into the Jessica/Jennifer trap.

As an insight into the power of American popular culture to shape naming behavior, in other English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Ireland, trendy American names do not obtain nearly as much traction. Currently, the three most popular names in America for girls are Emily, Emma, and Madison. Only Emma is in the top three in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and New Zealand; and Emma does not make it into the top ten names in England and Wales (“Popular baby names from around the world”). Thus, we can surmise that the popularity of names is strongly culture-driven and is not nearly so much language-driven.

The number 3 American girl’s name, Madison, is an interesting example of a phenomenon most famously addressed by Johnny Cash in his song about a boy named “Sue,” which is the way a name can cross gender boundaries, usually only from male to female. Lovers of *Gone With the Wind* remember how Scarlett threw herself at Ashley, a name that today has crossed genders and moved into one of the top ten popular names for American girls. One specialist in name study recognizes “33 names that were in use exclusively for boys 40-50 years ago, but now sound [either] androgynous or feminine. 23 of the 33 turn out to have surname origins—[including examples such as] Parker, Kelsey, [and] Peyton.” That authority further points out that the names that cross gender boundaries are usually those that previously had an aura of upper class to them, mentioning, for example, Cameron, a formerly strongly masculine name that has made the gender leap in my extended family. Conversely, exceedingly few feminine names or even gender-ambiguous names are used for males. Of the top

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200 male names in England a hundred years ago, only two, Lee and Marion (John Wayne's given name), give one any hesitation as to their gender (Wattenburg).

In the U.S. as of 2005, not one name in the top 100 for boys is gender-ambiguous ("Popular Names by Birth Year"). With apologies to Johnny Cash, there is little chance any boy would ever be named Sue. With apologies to Margaret Mitchell, Scarlett did not become a popular name despite the millions of iterations of it in the novel and movie, perhaps because the literary character was so unpleasant. The popularity of current movie star Scarlett Johansson, however, may be the cause of a trend of popularity as the name entered the 1,000 most popular names list in the 1990s and was in the top 200 by the year 2000 ("Scarlett . . ."). This growth in popularity follows the arc of Johansson's career, which blossomed in 1997 in *Home Alone 3* and in 1998 with *The Horse Whisperer* ("Scarlett Johansson").

One wonders: if a female child is named a formerly masculine name, will the name help determine her personality in the direction of masculine aggression? If a daughter is named Scarlett, will archetypal associations with the color, and character associations with the novels *Gone With the Wind* and *The Scarlet Letter* help determine the color of her future? Will having a strongly masculine name such as Cameron instead of, say, Debbie Sue aid a woman's business career? We sense it may.

Popular media help to disseminate names quickly. One of the top ten female names today is Isabella ("Popular Baby Names"), no doubt fostered, to some extent, by the modeling and movie acting of Isabella Rossellini. We can trace the influence of movies on names back to the 1930s and 40s, when the popularity of certain stars influenced the rise of certain names. Barbara, for example, was the 3rd most popular name for girls in the 1940s ("Barbara. . ."), no doubt in part influenced by Barbara Stanwyck, whose popularity is shown by the fact she was the highest paid woman in America in 1944 ("Biography for Barbara Stanwyck"). The name Betty was the 11th most popular name in the 1950s, probably abetted by the fame of film stars Bette Davis, Betty Hutton, and Betty Grable. Betty (a sobriquet for Elizabeth, as are Bess, Beth, Betsy, and Bessie, among others) is not a popular name today, but Elizabeth continues to be one of the most popular female names ("Popular Names for Birth Year").

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The 2008 Presidential race brought Sarah Palin and her children into the spotlight. Her sons are named Track and Trig, neither of which appear in the top 1,000 names for male children. We might guess that those names may grow in popularity simply from media exposure. Two of Palin's three daughters bear names well-known in popular culture: Willow, number 430 in popularity in 2007 and the name of a major character from the 1997-2003 *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* television series (though there is no indication the series is a favorite of the governor, nor do the dates suggest a derivation); and Piper, number 240 in 2007 and the professional name of actress Piper Laurie ("Popular Baby Names") as well as a character from the 1998-2006 *Charmed* television series (again, with a correlation rather than a derivation). Palin's other daughter is named Bristol, not a popular name but one that has masculine or gender-neutral qualities ("Sarah Palin").

Barack Obama's meteoric rise in American politics runs against common sense: we tend to suspect or not identify with people who sound "foreign." Obama's father recognized this as a potential liability early in his life when he came to America on a scholarship and went by the sobriquet "Barry" for many years. Barack was addressed as Barry and went by that name until he decided in college to embrace his roots ("When Barry Became Barack"). His middle name, Hussein, calls to mind Saddam Hussein, a hated figure. Despite these apparent liabilities, Obama has become the first African-American president, and the name Barack will likely grow in popularity.

Highly original or what we might call "coined" names likewise arise quickly in popularity: in 2005, the name Trinity seemed to come out of nowhere to rank number 48 for girls, a result, in the opinion of the co-author of eight baby name books, of the "butt-kicking heroine of [the movie] *The Matrix*" ("Hush, Little Genesis"). Latoya grew in popularity beginning in the 70s and peaking in the early 90s. The name did not make it into the top 1,000 names after 1994, mirroring the career of LaToya Jackson. In 2001, the name Beyonce suddenly arrived as the 702nd most popular name, popularized by the singer Beyonce Knowles. A totally invented name, Nevaeh, which is "heaven" spelled backwards, first appeared on the top 1,000 list in 2000, increased each year afterward, and rose to be the 31st most popular name in America in 2007 ("Popular Names for Birth Year"). Nevaeh, as

well as Trinity, seems destined to influence future perceptions of the family the girl was born into and its degree of religious fervor or fanaticism.

In the past hundred years or so, the frequency of popular female names has declined more and faster than those of males. In the 1890 decade, over 25% of all boys born in America were named John, William, James, George, and Charles. In 1940, 4 of those names were still in the top 5 for males. Only 1 of the top 5 names for girls from 1890 made the 1940 list: Mary. By 1980, John, James, and William were still in the top 20; the only female name from the 1890 top 5 still appearing on the top 20 list was Elizabeth. The declining popularity of the name Mary, which was probably the most frequently given female name of the 20th century, can probably be ascribed to both exhaustion and the increasing secularization of our society (“Popular Baby Names”).

Names for males were a bit less volatile in the first half of the 20th century, but the impact of popular culture and the baby naming “industry” seem to be accelerating the rapidity with which male names come into and go out of popularity. A celebrity star that struck me immediately as a powerful inducer of name popularization should have been The King, Elvis. Although as a military brat, I attended eight public schools in three states and one foreign country, I had never heard the name Elvis in life, literature, or popular culture before he appeared on television in the 1950s. It was a surprise, then, to learn that Elvis has been one of the thousand most popular male names in America since 1890. Its popularity, however, increased dramatically in the 50s and is steadily increasing in popularity in each decade since the 1980s, shortly after Elvis’ death (“Popularity of a Name”).

Other pop culture icons have sparked similar trends: Marlon came into the top 1000 names in the 1950s, following the trajectory of Brando’s career, and peaked in the 70s, as did his career. Ali and Dylan entered the list of the thousand most popular names, not surprisingly, in the 1970s, as Bob Dylan’s and Muhammad Ali’s popularity surged during that era. In the 1990s, the name Deion appeared for the first time on the top 1000 list, no doubt encouraged by the popularity of football player “Neon Deion” Sanders (“Popular Names for Birth Year”). The act of homage to a media star may be right in one era and not so ideal in another. Which image of Elvis or Marlon, the young and vibrant, or the old and bloated, will the names evoke

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in the minds of the not-too-distant future? Did any parents name their sons “O.J.” and now rue it?

Since 1950, the speed at which male names come into and go out of popularity is accelerating and will probably continue to do so. For example, only “Michael” from the top 10 list for 1960 was on the 2005 list; only 2 of the names from the 1970 top 10 list made the 2005 list (“Popular Baby Names”). These statistics overwhelmingly indicate that the naming of boys in America—Jacob, Josh, and Ethan are currently very popular—is becoming a more trendy practice that will undergo the same exhaustion syndrome we saw with Jennifer and Jessica.

An informal study of a list of graduates and associate degree completers from the University of North Florida for 2006 further illustrates this trendiness/exhaustion. Out of approximately 325 named females, I counted 7 Heathers, 13 Ashleys, 10 Jennifers, 6 Jessicas, 11 Amandas, and 6 Brittanyes. In other words, nearly 1 of every 6 females listed as graduating from the school had a trendy name (“University” B-7, B-12). One suspects that the graduating class of 2028 will have a similar distribution of trendy male names such as Jacob, Josh, and Ethan, and at that time they probably won’t be sounding nearly as fresh and distinctive as they do now.

In the book *Freakonomics*, the authors point out a striking disparity between the names chosen in the 1990s by parents with high education (and hence income) and by those with less education and income. The top 5 names listed for the two groups share not one name in common. Interestingly, one of the top 5 for the lower income group, Brianna, (Levitt 193) is the name of a major porn star. A behavior pattern based on the assumed social class of certain names also emerges: yesterday’s posh name will be co-opted by those wanting to climb the success ladder. The authors caution us, therefore, that the “parents of all those Alexandras, Laurens, Katherines, Madisons, and Rachels should not expect the cachet to last much longer” (Levitt 202). The lower classes, wishing to endow their children with a supposition of class, will likely adopt those upper class names in the next decade, and destroy whatever hints of class associations the names formerly possessed.

“Amanda,” a name with upper class associations, gave rise to an interesting episode in the grading of a teacher certification exam in Florida. An essay prompt in 2005 was for the test takers to describe a person whom

they had initially approved of or disapproved of but later changed their opinion about. Several essay graders encountered more than one paper about a girl named Amanda in which the test-takers took the same approach to the topic: Amanda was initially disapproved of as being snooty but later was found to be a nice person. At least five different graders alerted the test supervisors to this suspicious activity. So many writers had taken this approach, in fact, that the test supervisors requested all essays with that name in them be sent forward to the head table so that the papers could be compared for possible collusion. No collusion was found, but the popularity of the name and its associations with notions of snobbery (read: upper class) were anecdotally established.

Following the era of Black power in the 1970s, a number of highly original, exclusively black names suddenly appeared. Prior to that time, blacks and whites shared a great many names. By the arrival of the 80s, however, a black girl born in a black neighborhood was very likely to be dubbed with a name that was 20 times as common among blacks as it was among whites (Levitt 183). What kind of parent is it that gives such a distinctively black name to the child? It is a single teenaged mother of low income who is likely to have a “distinctively black name herself” (184). Unfortunately, these coined names are typically markers for being black and from lower class and education backgrounds. Comedian Bill Cosby apparently received criticism from whites and blacks when he castigated black parents for giving “ghetto” names to their children (qtd. in Levitt 226).

The coining follows several patterns, all deduced from our local (Jacksonville, Florida) paper: a traditional name like Juan is given a prefix such as La, Ta, De, or Sha; hence LaJuan, Tajuan, Dejuan, or Shajuan. Another pattern is the taking of a traditional name such as Jean and adding suffixes such as “ecia” or “equa”; hence, Jeanecia and Jeanequa. A third pattern is the free use of apostrophe, often a sign of accent; hence names such as Ke’wan, J’mani, or Ce’zanne. A fourth pattern is the apparent joining of two names together; hence, names such as Karlisha, Sheclesiastes, or Brodricka. These names, to many, sound like black names, and, as pointed out by Levitt, are a signal of lower class and educational status. And this connection is, perhaps, devastatingly important to the bearer of that kind of name.

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In an educational experiment, an identical set of essays was given to numerous veteran teachers to grade. Those papers typically received lower grades when presented as the work of a student with a non-traditional name that sounded black. Non-traditional, rural-sounding white names such as Billy Jo and Jim Bob also received similar lower scores. Thus, even the most experienced teachers in this experiment had *negative expectations* of students with non-traditional or lower class-bound names. If we couple that negative teacher expectation with the economic and educational reality of the homes and families from whence students who bear those kinds of names typically come, we can see that the negative expectation is in part well-founded. The author of that study, H. Edward Deluzaine, went on to say, “. . . we can logically assume that the same type of reaction occurs in people in other professions and in similar supervisory relationships.” He closes the article speculating about the number of lost opportunities in education, the military, politics, even the assembly line, and all “because of a name” (Deluzaine). His concern echoes Bill Cosby’s concern about the negative impact of “ghetto” names.

A recent news article reported that blacks in Jacksonville, Florida, are “nearly four times as likely to get a high cost [home] loan than whites” (Light F-1). The article referred to “sub-prime” loans,” which sound as though the loans are going to be below the prime rate, but which are in truth less desirable; i.e. higher than the prime rate. If a loan crosses a desk as only a piece of paper, could something as simple as a name influence the decision of a loan officer? If the previous essay study holds true, it certainly would, and thus, a black-sounding (or rural white-sounding) name could be a negative trigger because of its lower class and education associations. All things being equal, this coining of names would likely be of little import, but, as we know, all things are not equal.

The lower class African/American’s practice of coining black-sounding names seems to arise from the desire to set the child apart from the mainstream of society and to make that child special or unique. One may also speculate about the sub-text of this desire, which may be a wish to not fit into the traditions of the dominant white culture. In the 70’s, for example, some black activists used the term “slave names” to describe traditional sounding; i.e. “White” names. Many reports exist of studious black students being ostracized by black classmates for “acting white.” Thus, these

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highly original coined “ghetto” names may be part of a package triggering or indicating (to some) an outsider’s attitude of defiance, rejection of tradition, and negativity. Consider the earlier discussion of research indicating teachers’ low expectations of students with non-traditional or lower class names. The combination of suggested negative student attitudes and low teacher expectations may create a lethal brew for the lower class black student.

A strong correlation exists between black students having traditional names and being academic achievers. MSNBC recognized nine outstanding black “Creative Geniuses.” All had traditional names (“Black Brilliance”). A web site dedicated to recognizing outstanding historical black scientists and inventors listed 23 names; only one (Flemmie) sounded “black” (“Important Black Scientists”). An organization dedicated to supporting the advancement of blacks in chemistry and chemical engineering listed 7 black current professionals deemed to be future leaders in the field: all had traditional names (cited in “Black Brilliance”). These historical connections of traditional names and academic achievement are also repeated in the present.

Among today’s African-American high school students, a strong connection exists between having a traditional given name and academic achievement. Among the 36 top black students recognized by *Ebony* magazine for the year 2004, 29 (or more than 80%) had traditional names, including two Ashleys, two Joshuas, a Chauncey, and a Katherine. Of the 7 students listed with rare, unusual, or coined given names, 3 had African family names (Doku, Ugoji, and Yemene), which would explain the unusual given names of Stesha, Keside, and Yonas. If we remove them from the mix, we have only 4 out of 33 black students with non-traditional names (about 12%) in the recognized group of high academic achievers. Because these students were selected from schools across America, the correlation between traditional names and academic achievement is powerfully and persuasively established. When choosing names for their children, the parents of these high academic achievers were almost certainly guided by respect for the traditions of their own families and of the larger American society, and for the benefits of a sound education to secure one’s position in it.

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In the final analysis, then, conscientious parents, working assiduously to choose an appropriate name for their child, are walking a tight-rope just above a minefield of, among other things, family tradition; sibling rivalry; class, race, and gender associations; popularity; and obsolescence. The questions, “Should I name my little girl Tamenicia or Tammy?” “Should I name my boy James or Jim Bob, or my little girl Bessie or Heather?” and “Should I name my little boy DeAndre or Danny?”—these questions are fraught with a great deal more importance for the child than we probably have ever thought before. Indeed, we need to think a great deal more about Shakespeare’s quote: “What’s in a name?”

Claude J. Smith, Jr.
Florida Community College, Jacksonville