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**THE NUMBERS GUY**

By **CARL BIALIK**



**Is a Carl Doomed To Be a C Student? We Don't Think So**

*December 7, 2007; Page B1*

We like our names. And that preference can have negative repercussions, according to research published last month. Major leaguers with "K" initials tend to strike out more, perhaps reflecting the batters' unconscious pull to appear next to the strikeout symbol "K" on scorecards. Students with initials C and D have worse grades than the A's and B's and everyone else, gravitating toward the grades their initials represent.

These findings received widespread coverage for their headline-friendly implications. Less apparent are the statistical parables. Several statisticians commended the authors for elegant work. But the study also demonstrates how pliable numbers can be, the surprising pitfalls of working with very large data sets, and how defensible yet debatable choices can influence final results.

**WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

What do you think? How much of a role do initials play? Do you find yourself preferring things associated with your name?

**Please let me know in the comments.**



UCLA statistician Ivo Dinov finds "unsettling" various "ad hoc selections, groupings and stratification criteria" in the initials study. Yet he adds, "I consider this series of studies largely valid, intriguing and begging further

exploration and validation."

The study is the latest to seek the factors that shape our destiny. The order in which children arrive in a family may determine intelligence and personality traits; the latest study, from Norway, found that first-born military conscripts have an IQ, on average, 2.3 points greater than second-born children. A 2005 book, covered on CNN and elsewhere, associated drivers' astrological signs with their accident rates -- watch out for merging Libras.

But these findings were hardly conclusive. Many contradictory studies have called into question the birth-order hypothesis. And the "Car Carma" research was based on a single set of about 100,000 drivers in a single year. There is no evidence that Libras have been relatively hazardous road companions so far this year.

The recent initials research actually is a collection of five

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studies, including an experiment backing up the initials preferences. For the first of five studies, psychologists Leif Nelson and Joseph Simmons examined 94 years of strikeout data and found that, after controlling for increasing strikeout rates in recent years, batters with K initials struck out more than any other players.

In making this calculation, the authors included only batters with at least 100 plate appearances. But all of these batters were weighted equally, whether they had 100 plate appearances or 15,000. Sports statistician Shane Reese of Brigham Young argues that the player with more experience should count more. A few missed calls by umpires could make a player with just 100 plate appearances seem strikeout-prone, but the evidence is more solid for a 20-year veteran. Prof. Nelson and Simmons respond that weighting players would bias the results, because players who strike out less frequently are likely to last longer in the league.

By Prof. Reese's method, Kevin Koslofski (41 K's in 205 career at bats) and his ilk are still more likely to strike out than most, but less so than players with initials D and N, letters that aren't associated with fanning at the plate.

Duke statistician Jerry Reiter said he'd also like to see whether Gregs and Garys are especially likely to ground out, or whether Edwards and Elmers commit more than their share of errors. "One would expect the well if the authors' hypothesis is right," Prof. Reiter says. "If not, the authors might be finding  $\epsilon$  that do not have causal interpretations."

Prof. Nelson counters that the alternatives lack the simplicity of strikeouts and involve players plus batters and pitchers.

The authors are on firmer statistical ground elsewhere in the study. The association of slightly lower grades with the initials C and D, compared with all other initials, was highly significant statistically for covering 15,000 graduating business-school students. (Students with C and D names wouldn't be expected to perform worse in countries where those letters didn't correspond to mediocre grades, but we can't know because those numbers haven't been studied.)

University of California, Irvine, statistician Hal Stern points out something most media missed. It's tiny: 0.02 of a grade-point average point lower for the initials C and D (and this columnist isn't counting because of his first initial). Therein lies a lesson in the difference between statistical significance and confidence that there is some association between two factors -- and the strength of that association.

"In very large samples like the ones here, even small differences will be judged statistically significant," Stern says. "This means that we're confident the difference is not zero. It does not mean the difference is important." Prof. Nelson agrees that this effect is "so small that you shouldn't worry about it" to a child, though he does say the study exposes an example of how the unconscious mind can influence conscious motivation.

But Bowling Green statistician Jim Albert warns: "You can prove any silly hypothesis ... by running a statistical test on tons of data."

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