

Babies named for fathers but not mothers reflect US cultural ideologies

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From Cal Ripkin, Jr., to MLK to Robert Downey, Jr., finding men named after their fathers is easy. Children named after men in the family – with so-called patronyms – are common around the world. But what about matronymns – names for a mother or grandmother? New research shows that matronymns are rare and that family naming trends follow a regional pattern in the United States: People in states with a relatively high emphasis on honor are more likely to use patronyms, especially in the face of a terrorist threat.

"Studying naming trends can be a subtle means of peering into a society's beliefs and values without ever having to ask people to report directly about their beliefs and values," says Ryan Brown of the University of Oklahoma. Brown is not an expert in [baby names](#) but rather studies [cultural values](#) and trends. He became interested in the connection between names and cultural values when his collaborator, Mauricio Carvalho, was researching names for his new baby girl. They started to wonder whether values associated with honor and reputation affected whether people named their children after men or women in the family.

Social scientists define "cultures of honor" as places where the defense of reputation plays an unusually important role in social life. "For men in a typical honor culture, the kind of reputation that is highly prized is a reputation for toughness and bravery," Ryan says. "For women in a typical honor culture, the most valued reputation is a reputation for loyalty and sexual purity." Two decades of research has shown that people in the Southern and Western regions of the United States tend to

embrace honor cultures more than in the North.

To see how those values translate into children's names, Ryan and colleagues designed several studies to look at naming trends. The studies included surveying people about their beliefs and their likelihood of naming their children after men or women in the family and included a novel, indirect method to look at actual U.S. baby name trends. In all the studies, published today in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, they found that people who endorse honor ideology were most likely to use patronyms.

In the study of U.S. name trends, the researchers used Social Security Administration data to identify the 10 most popular boy and girl names in each state in 1960, 1984, and 2008. The idea was to look at 24-year cycles to see how frequently the same names popped up one and two generations later and then to compare it to regional trends of honor beliefs, controlling for a variety of other regional differences and demographics.

"Each state was given a patronym score and a matronym score by tallying how many of the 10 most popular names in one generation showed up again among the most popular names given to the next generation, or in the generation after that," Ryan says. "Higher scores show that baby names were being recycled from one generation to the next, and these scores showed a regional pattern to them similar to the patterns we see with other behaviors connected to honor ideology around the United States."

States in the South and West tended to have higher patronym scores than did states in the North. And those same states ranked higher in indicators of honor ideology – such as execution rates, Army recruitment levels, and suicide rates among White men and women. They also found that after 9/11, the use of patronyms increased in culture-of-honor states.

And similarly, people who were asked to think about a fictitious terrorist attack were more likely to say they'd use patronyms if they also strongly endorsed honor ideology.

"The same pattern was not observed, however, when it came to matronyms, which is exactly what we expected," Ryan says.

"Matronyms, unlike patronyms, are not any more popular in the South and West compared to the North, and they do not predict any statewide variables to a significant degree."

Indeed, matronyms are very rare in Western culture. "Everyone probably knows a guy who is a 'junior,' given the exact same name as his father, and many know someone who is 'such-and-such the third,' having the same name as both his father and his grandfather," Ryan says. "But when was the last time you met a woman who had the same name as her mother, much less the same first and middle names as her mother, like Sally Anne Jones, Jr.?" Some famous female juniors include former First Lady Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, Jr., Carolina Herrera, Jr. (daughter of the clothing designer), and Rory (aka Lorelai) from the TV show *Gilmore Girls*.

In the new analysis, Elizabeth was the only female name that showed up frequently across generations as a possible matronym. "Perhaps one of the reasons for this name's greater intergenerational use is that there are so many nicknames based on the name Elizabeth: Liz, Lizzy, Beth, Eliza, Lisa, Betty, etc.," Ryan says. "So, a girl named Elizabeth could be given her mother's name and most people might not even realize it."

Ryan says that this naming trend is one of the most pronounced gender differences we still see in society. "Women who once could only strive to work as nurses, teachers, or librarians can now aspire to be astronauts, brain surgeons, or senators," he says. "But don't expect anyone to give a girl her mother's name."

"The greater use of patronyms in these cultures reflects and transmits the value of masculinity and the male name," Ryan says. "A person's name, after all, is what people call that person, but it also represents that person's reputation – how he or she is known in a community – and all of the respect, status, or infamy that goes along with that reputation."

Ryan hopes that the current work shows how cultural values and events shape important personal decisions, such as naming children. "Our baby naming practices can shed light on what we care about, in a subtle way, and they might also serve as a mechanism for transmitting our cultural values from one generation to the next."

More information: The study, "Naming Patterns Reveal Cultural Values: Patronyms, Matronyms, and the US Culture of Honor," Ryan P. Brown, Mauricio Carvallo, Mikiko Imura, was published online on November 7, 2013, and is forthcoming in print in February 2014 in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*:
[psp.sagepub.com/content/early/ ... 67213509840.abstract](http://psp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../67213509840.abstract)

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