

Use of surname for males more than females may be sign of unintentional bias

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Two researchers at Cornell University report that people are more likely to refer to men by surname only (last name) than women. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Stav Atir and Melissa Ferguson suggest that such labeling may lead to

unintentional bias.

During the last presidential race in the U.S., the candidates from both major parties were given one-name monikers—doing so made referencing them easier. But notably, Hillary Clinton was called Hillary, while Donald Trump was called Trump. Why the difference? The researchers with this new effort wondered why as well, prompting them to look into the prevalence of men being referenced by surname versus women.

Their study consisted of analyzing online reviews students gave for their professors and transcripts of political radio shows. They also asked volunteers to rewrite information from a blurb describing a fictional chemist.

In all, the researchers looked at 5,000 professor reviews and more than 300 radio show transcripts counting the number of times a person was referenced by either their full name, or just their last name. They found that students were 55.9 percent more likely to refer to male professors by just their last name, compared to female professors. They also found that speakers on NPR political radio shows were twice as likely to do so. Intrigued, the researchers conducted an experiment in which they wrote an essay about a fictional chemist named either Douglas or Dolores Berson. They then gave the essays to 184 volunteers and asked them to rewrite it in their own words. Those asked to paraphrase the essay about Douglas were four times more likely to refer to him by his last name than were those writing about Dolores.

The researchers conducted several other experiments aimed at trying to figure out why such differences exist—they found that volunteers felt that people referred to by just their last name were considered to be better known or more eminent than those referred to by both first and last name. They were not able to find any real reason that people seem

more inclined to refer to men by their last names than women, but suggest it might indicate that a subtle form of bias exists in people's minds.

More information: Stav Atir et al. How gender determines the way we speak about professionals, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2018). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1805284115](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1805284115)

Abstract

Gender inequality persists in many professions, particularly in high-status fields, such as science, technology, engineering, and math. We report evidence of a form of gender bias that may contribute to this state: gender influences the way that people speak about professionals. When discussing professionals or their work, it is common to refer to them by surname alone (e.g., "Darwin developed the theory of evolution"). We present evidence that people are more likely to refer to male than female professionals in this way. This gender bias emerges in archival data across domains; students reviewing professors online and pundits discussing politicians on the radio are more likely to use surname when speaking about a man (vs. a woman). Participants' self-reported references also indicate a preference for using surname when speaking about male (vs. female) scientists, authors, and others. Finally, experimental evidence provides convergent evidence: participants writing about a fictional male scientist are more likely to refer to him by surname than participants writing about an otherwise identical female scientist. We find that, on average, people are over twice as likely to refer to male professionals by surname than female professionals. Critically, we identified consequences of this gender bias in speaking about professionals. Researchers referred to by surname are judged as more famous and eminent. They are consequently seen as higher status and more deserving of eminence-related benefits and awards. For instance, scientists referred to by surname were seen as 14% more deserving of a National Science Foundation career award.

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