

Research Article

The ‘Name-Ease’ Effect and Its Dual Impact on Importance Judgments

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ABSTRACT—We demonstrate that merely naming a research finding elicits feelings of ease (a “name-ease” effect). These feelings of ease can reduce or enhance the finding’s perceived importance depending on whether people are making inferences about how understandable or how memorable the finding is. When people assess their understanding of a finding, feelings of ease reduce the finding’s perceived importance. This is because people usually invest effort to understand important information but also mistakenly infer the reverse—namely, that information that requires effort to be understood is important. In contrast, when people assess the memorability of a finding, feelings of ease increase the finding’s perceived importance. Because people usually recall important information easily, in this case they equate ease with importance. Psychological effects, economic principles, math theorems, jury cases, and decisions to fund medical research can all show these effects.

Think back to the last time you read about an interesting psychological effect or an important economic principle. Did the authors name their research finding? If so, might the authors’ mere act of naming that finding have affected your perception of its importance? Moreover, at the time you assessed the finding, did it matter whether you were focused on either how understandable or how memorable that finding was? In this article, we present evidence that answers these questions. We show that merely naming a research finding can evoke subjective feelings of ease, which we call the “name-ease” effect. We further show that such feelings of ease differentially influence the perceived importance of the finding depending on whether these feelings

are engendered while people are trying to assess how understandable or how memorable the finding is.

Ample research has established that feelings serve as information and affect one’s judgments (Berlyne, 1966; Bornstein, 1989; Koriat & Levy-Sadot, 2001; Mandler, 1980; Mandler, Nakamura, & Van Zandt, 1987; Schwarz, 2004; Schwarz & Clore, 2007; Zajonc, 1968, 1980). An important source of feelings is the subjective characteristics of the stimulus itself (Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2001; Winkielman, Schwarz, Fazendeiro, & Reber, 2003). For example, researchers have found that increased expectation of seeing predictive information (Labroo & Lee, 2006; Whittlesea, 1993), clarity of visual features (Reber, Winkielman, & Schwarz, 1998), simplicity of vocabulary (Oppenheimer, 2005), and ease of pronouncing a word (McGlone & Tofiqbakhsh, 2000) all facilitate processing of information and thus induce feelings of ease. We propose that, similarly, naming a finding produces feelings of ease. First, because a name usually summarizes the finding it describes, it might increase the expectation of seeing associated information, thereby increasing the ease of processing the content of the finding. Second, regardless of whether the name summarizes the meaning of the finding, thus making its content easier to process, a name is always a cue or an easy reference to the finding with which it is associated. As a consequence, the name is likely to be relatively salient and come to mind easily even if it does not summarize the finding per se, and research has established that people associate words that are salient or highly accessible with ease of processing (Alter & Oppenheimer, 2008; Labroo, Dhar, & Schwarz, 2008). Thus, we suggest that a name is likely to always evoke feelings of ease, regardless of whether it is meaningful.

But how might feelings of ease evoked by the fact that a finding is named affect the finding’s perceived importance? We propose that the effect of ease on importance judgments depends on whether one associates ease with the memorability or the understandability of the information. If one is considering how

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memorable the information is, ease of processing arising from the fact that the finding is named will increase its perceived importance. Existing research shows that people usually recall important things more easily than unimportant things and that they also mistakenly infer the reverse association; that is, they judge information that feels easy to recall as important (Schwarz, 2004). For example, people judge individuals with easily recalled names as more famous than individuals with hard-to-recall names (Jacoby, Kelley, Brown, & Jasechko, 1989), and they judge easily recalled statements as more truthful than hard-to-recall statements (Hawkins & Hoch, 1992). We propose that when judging the memorability of research findings, people feel that a finding with a name is easier to recall than a finding without a name, and, consequently, if truthfulness and fame are indicators of importance, people will judge the named finding as more important.

However, we also propose that if people associate ease with understandability of information, rather than with memorability of information, they might view a finding that evokes feelings of ease as unduly simplistic, evident, run-of-the-mill, and thus unimportant; after all, information that is evident is usually all too easily understood and does not require much effort in thinking. Related research shows that people use effort as a heuristic for quality of information (Kruger, Wirtz, Van Boven, & Altermatt, 2004; Labroo & Kim, 2009). Therefore, we argue that because people allocate effort to understanding information they believe to be important or novel, they perceive importance and novelty to be equated with their effort to understand. However, people also reverse this relationship and infer that feelings of effort indicate the importance and novelty of information. Consequently, if the mere fact that a finding is named makes it seem easy to understand, people might view that finding as trivial, simplistic, or evident.

Thus, when people experience feelings of ease that arise from the mere naming of a finding and associate those feelings with memorability of the information, perceived importance of the information will increase. In contrast, when such feelings of ease are associated with understandability of the information, perceived importance of the information will decrease. Although usually people who pay less attention to information tend to be more likely to use heuristics to simplify decision making (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), our theorizing leads us to expect that, ironically, people who pay *more* attention to information will use such ease-of-processing heuristics. First, high-attention people presumably will be more likely than low-attention people to process the name and consequently experience feelings of ease. Second, because high-attention people in general put effort into understanding important information, they are likely to associate effort with importance when considering understandability of the information. Third, high-attention people also prioritize information and attend to what is important, and consequently are likely to recall important information easily. Thus, they also associate ease of recall with importance.

Related research on the effects of metacognitive ease on judgments has yielded compatible findings. For example, research by Petty, Briñol, and Tormala (2002) suggests that the judgments of individuals who tend to engage in high levels of information-processing activity might be more susceptible to ease-of-processing effects than the judgments of people who engage in low levels of information-processing activity, because the former are more confident in their thoughts. Additionally, Caruso (2008) observed stronger effects of metacognitive ease on judgments when people made self-relevant decisions than when they made other-relevant decisions, presumably because self-relevant decisions are associated with more confidence and receive more attention than other-relevant decisions. By a similar token, we predict that high-attention people are more likely than low-attention people to fall prey to reverse ease-of-processing inferences.

In summary, we argue that naming a finding evokes subjective feelings of ease, and that the impact of such feelings on people's perception of the importance of the finding depends on whether they associate ease with the information's memorability or understandability. If they associate ease with how memorable the information is, naming a finding will increase its perceived importance because people hold the "what is memorable is important" illusion. However, if people associate ease with how understandable the information is, naming a finding will reduce its perceived importance because people hold the "I knew it all along" illusion. Thus, the inference rules that people use when judging a finding's importance will determine the impact of ease of processing arising from the fact that the finding is named (e.g., Briñol, Petty, & Tormala, 2006; Labroo & Kim, 2009). Additionally, we propose that these effects are especially likely to emerge among high-attention people, who associate effort to understand information and associate ease in recalling information with the information's importance.

We tested these hypotheses in four experiments. In Experiment 1, we demonstrated the basic effect by asking participants who considered the memorability or the understandability of a finding to evaluate the finding's importance; the finding was named for some participants but was not named for others. Experiment 2 tested the underlying process and demonstrated that ease mediates evaluation of a finding's importance, but that the direction of the effect is moderated by whether ease is associated with memorability or understandability of the finding. Experiments 3a and 3b additionally tested who is more likely to fall prey to these ease-of-processing effects: individuals who pay more attention or those who pay less attention to the finding.

EXPERIMENT 1: NAMING A JURY DECISION

In Experiment 1, 37 undergraduate students read about a legal case, *Engel v. Vitale* (see Table 1 for the description used); the name of the case was included for some participants but not for others. Participants in the memorability-attribution condition

TABLE 1

Descriptions Used in Experiments 1, 2, and 3

Experiment 1: Engel v. Vitale

State officials may not compose an official state prayer and require that it be recited in the public schools of the State at the beginning of each school day—even if the prayer is denominationally neutral and pupils who do not want to participate may remain silent or be excused from the room while the prayer is being recited.

Experiment 1: Coase Theorem

When trade in an externality is possible and there are no transactions costs, bargaining will lead to an efficient outcome regardless of the initial allocation of property rights. Thus, under certain conditions, the efficient amount of the good involved in the externality is independent of the distribution of property rights.

Experiment 1: Weierstrass Theorem

If f is a continuous real-valued function on $[a,b]$ and if any $\epsilon > 0$ is given, a polynomial P on $[a,b]$ exists such that $|f(x) - P(x)| < \epsilon$ for all $x \in [a,b]$. In other words, any continuous function on a closed and bounded interval can be uniformly approximated on that interval by polynomials to any degree of accuracy.

Experiment 2: Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

A tendency exists for people to seek affiliations with groups that enable them to maintain a balance between the desire to assimilate and the desire to stand out.

Experiments 3a and 3b: Acromegaly

This very rare disorder of the pituitary gland produces too much growth hormone (GH). Nearly all pituitary tumors are benign, as opposed to malignant. However, they can become quite large and expand beyond the normal confines of the pituitary gland.

were instructed to read the description, turn the page, and then attempt to recall the information they had just seen. Participants in the understandability-attribution condition were instructed to read the description and think about their understanding of the information just presented. All participants then evaluated the importance of the case (1 = *not at all important, thought-provoking*, 7 = *very important, thought-provoking*).

A 2 (naming condition) \times 2 (attribution condition) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the averaged importance ratings revealed only a significant interaction, $F(1, 33) = 6.04, p < .05, p_{rep} = .95, \eta^2 = .16$ (see Table 2). For participants in the memorability-attribution condition, including a name increased the case’s perceived importance ($M = 2.60$ vs. 1.80), $t(33) = 1.73, p < .05, p_{rep} = .89$. Conversely, for participants in the understandability-attribution condition, including a name decreased the case’s perceived importance ($M = 1.56$ vs. 2.44), $t(33) = 1.75, p < .05, p_{rep} = .89$. Thus, depending on whether partici-

pants focused on recalling or understanding the information, naming increased or reduced, respectively, the perceived importance of the jury decision.

We replicated these effects using identical manipulations but different findings: (a) an economic principle ($n = 34$), the Coase theorem, and (b) a math theorem ($n = 35$), the Weierstrass theorem (see Table 1 for the descriptions used and Table 2 for a summary of results). Having demonstrated the basic effect, in Experiment 2 we investigated it using another manipulation of attribution, testing the role of ease as an underlying mechanism.

EXPERIMENT 2: UNDERLYING PROCESS

Method

Seventy-nine undergraduate students participated in Experiment 2 for monetary compensation. Experimenters told participants that the study was an investigation of either how

TABLE 2

Mean Judgments of Importance as a Function of Condition in Experiments 1 and 2

Experiment and rated finding	Memorability attribution		Understandability attribution	
	No name	Name	No name	Name
Experiment 1				
Jury decision ($n = 37$)	1.80 (0.32)	2.60 (0.32)	2.44 (0.34)	1.56 (0.36)
Economic principle ($n = 34$)	3.31 (0.23)	4.22 (0.23)	3.86 (0.22)	3.36 (0.22)
Math theorem ($n = 35$)	3.00 (0.40)	4.20 (0.40)	4.19 (0.45)	3.07 (0.48)
Experiment 2				
Psychological effect ($n = 79$)	3.09 (0.23)	4.45 (0.24)	4.10 (0.23)	3.29 (0.26)

Note. Ratings of importance were made on a scale from 1 to 7. Standard errors are given in parentheses.

memorable research findings are or how understandable research findings are. All participants then read the description of a psychological effect, the optimal distinctiveness theory, which was named for roughly half of the participants. Participants in the memorability condition rated how memorable (1 = *very difficult to recall*, 7 = *very easy to recall*) the information was; participants in the understandability condition rated how understandable the information was (1 = *very difficult to understand*, 7 = *very easy to understand*). All participants then evaluated how easy the information was to process (1 = *very difficult to process*, 7 = *very easy to process*) and how important the finding was (1 = *not at all thought-provoking, important*; 7 = *very thought-provoking, important*). Finally, they provided demographic information and then were debriefed.

Results

As we expected, a 2 (naming condition) \times 2 (attribution condition) ANOVA on the importance measure revealed only the expected interaction, $F(1, 75) = 19.39, p < .01, p_{\text{rep}} = .99, \eta^2 = .20$ (see Table 2). For participants focused on memorability, including a name increased perceived importance of the finding ($M = 4.45$ vs. 3.09), $t(75) = 4.16, p < .01, p_{\text{rep}} = .99$. However, for participants focused on understandability, including a name reduced perceived importance of the finding ($M = 3.29$ vs. 4.10), $t(75) = 2.28, p < .01, p_{\text{rep}} = .94$. Each participant's memorability rating (memorability condition) or understandability rating (understandability condition) was combined with that participant's ease-of-processing rating ($\alpha = .81$). A 2 (naming condition) \times 2 (attribution condition) ANOVA on these combined ratings revealed only the expected effect of naming condition ($M_{\text{name}} = 5.01, M_{\text{no name}} = 4.01$), $F(1, 75) = 12.33, p < .01, p_{\text{rep}} = .99, \eta^2 = .14$.

Mediation analysis revealed that when experimenters primed participants with memorability, naming increased both perceived importance ($\beta = 1.35, SE = 0.35$), $t(39) = 3.84, p < .01, p_{\text{rep}} = .99$, and ease of processing ($\beta = 0.97, SE = 0.43$), $t(39) = 2.24, p < .05, p_{\text{rep}} = .94$; in addition, ease increased perceived importance ($\beta = 0.55, SE = 0.11$), $t(39) = 4.73, p < .01, p_{\text{rep}} = .99$. When we included ease as a covariate in the regression investigating the effect of naming on perceived importance, the effect of ease remained significant ($\beta = 0.43, SE = 0.11$), $t(38) = 3.88, p < .01, p_{\text{rep}} = .99$, but the effect of naming became less significant ($\beta = 0.92, SE = 0.32$), $t(38) = 2.90, p < .01, p_{\text{rep}} = .97$; Sobel $z = 1.95, p < .05$. Conversely, when we primed respondents with understandability, naming reduced perceived importance ($\beta = -0.80, SE = 0.33$), $t(36) = 2.38, p < .05, p_{\text{rep}} = .95$, but increased ease of processing ($\beta = 1.10, SE = 0.38$), $t(36) = 2.78, p < .01, p_{\text{rep}} = .97$; in this case, ease reduced perceived importance ($\beta = -0.34, SE = 0.12$), $t(36) = 2.67, p < .01, p_{\text{rep}} = .96$. When we included ease as a covariate in the regression predicting the effect of naming on perceived importance, the effect of ease remained significant ($\beta = -0.26,$

$SE = 0.13$), $t(35) = 1.85, p < .05, p_{\text{rep}} = .90$, but the effect of naming became less significant ($\beta = -0.52, SE = 0.36$), $t(35) = 1.45, p > .15$; Sobel $z = 1.65, p = .09$. Thus, naming resulted in feelings of ease, which affected perceived importance of the finding differentially depending on whether participants associated ease with memorability or with understandability.

Experiments 3a and 3b extended these findings to the judged importance of funding research. They also investigated whether people who pay more rather than less attention to information fall prey to such ease-of-processing heuristics. We expected that because people who pay more attention to information usually put more effort into understanding important information, relative to people who pay less attention to information, the association between effort and understanding important information is likely to be stronger in their minds. Thus, when focused on the understandability of information, people high in attention are more likely to associate effort with importance of the information. But because they also naturally attend to what is important, they easily recall important information. As a consequence, when focused on the memorability of information, people high in attention are more likely to associate ease with importance of the information, relative to people low in attention. To investigate these possibilities, in Experiment 3a, we measured participants' attention (e.g., Petty et al., 2002), and in Experiment 3b, we manipulated attention through perceived self-relevance of the decision (e.g., Caruso, 2008).

EXPERIMENT 3A: MEASURED ATTENTION MODERATES THE USE OF THE EASE HEURISTIC

Method

The participants in Experiment 3a were 84 undergraduate students not majoring in biology; they received monetary compensation. The instructions and naming and attribution manipulations were similar to those of Experiment 1. The dependent variable of interest was participants' ratings of how important it is for the government to fund research to cure the disease described in the experimental materials, acromegaly (see Table 1; 1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *very important*). Participants also reported their attention to the experimental task (1 = *a little attention*, 7 = *a lot of attention*) and to tasks in general (1 = *a little attention*, 7 = *a lot of attention*). These two attention measures were conceptually related ($\alpha = .73$) and were averaged to form an index of attention.

Results

Because attention is a continuous variable, we conducted a regression analysis using the attention index, naming condition, attribution condition, all possible two-way interactions, and the three-way interaction as independent factors to predict the funding decision. The analysis revealed only a Naming Condition \times Attribution Condition interaction ($\beta = 0.26, SE = 0.14$), $t(76) = 1.77, p < .05, p_{\text{rep}} = .89$, and a three-way interaction

($\beta = -0.19$, $SE = 0.09$), $t(76) = -1.87$, $p < .05$, $p_{rep} = .91$. Spotlight analysis (Aiken & West, 1991) further revealed that for participants with high levels of attention (1 *SD* above the mean), including a name increased the judged importance of funding research after the memorability prime ($M = 4.62$ vs. 3.46; $\beta = 0.58$, $SE = 0.33$), $t(76) = 1.71$, $p < .05$, $p_{rep} = .89$, but reduced the judged importance of funding research after the understandability prime ($M = 3.50$ vs. 4.47; $\beta = -0.48$, $SE = 0.26$), $t(76) = 1.84$, $p < .05$, $p_{rep} = .90$. Similar effects did not emerge for low-attention participants (1 *SD* below the mean) primed with memorability, $t(76) < 1$, or understandability, $t(76) < 1$.

A limitation of this experiment was that we measured attention at the end of the study. Although a Naming Condition \times Attribution Condition ANOVA on the attention index did not reveal any significant effects, the manipulations that preceded this measure might somehow have influenced participants' responses. Even so, the observation that effects were stronger when participants indicated they paid more attention to the materials is informative. In Experiment 3b, we examined the effects of attention in a different way—by manipulating this variable.

EXPERIMENT 3B: MANIPULATED ATTENTION MODERATES THE USE OF THE EASE HEURISTIC

Method

Seventy-three undergraduate students participated in Experiment 3b for monetary compensation. The instructions and manipulations were almost identical to those in Experiment 3a, except that experimenters told half of the participants to imagine that they were responsible for a decision to fund medical research (high attention) and told the other half to imagine that some government employee was making the decision (low attention). The dependent variable of interest was participants' ratings of how important it is for the government to fund research to cure acromegaly (1 = *not at all important*, 7 = *very important*). As a manipulation check, participants also reported their attention to the experimental task (1 = *a little attention*, 7 = *a lot of attention*).

Results

A 2 (attention) \times 2 (naming condition) \times 2 (attribution condition) ANOVA on the attention measure revealed only a main effect of self-referencing over other-referencing, suggesting that our manipulation of attention was successful ($M = 5.79$ vs. 5.08), $F(1, 65) = 7.95$, $p < .01$, $p_{rep} = .98$, $\eta^2 = .10$. More important, the ANOVA on perceived importance revealed the expected two-way Naming Condition \times Attribution Condition interaction, $F(1, 65) = 8.55$, $p < .01$, $p_{rep} = .98$, $\eta^2 = .12$, and a three-way interaction, $F(1, 65) = 6.70$, $p < .05$, $p_{rep} = .96$, $\eta^2 = .09$. Among high-attention participants focusing on how memorable the research was, including a name increased willingness to fund the research ($M = 5.63$ vs. 3.88), $t(65) = 2.79$, $p < .05$,

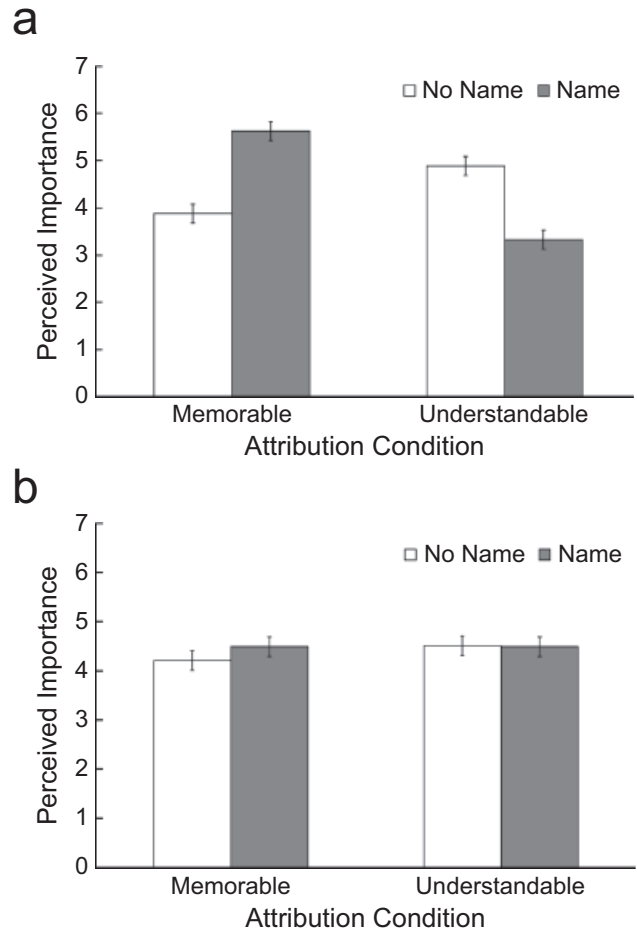


Fig. 1. Results from Experiment 3b: mean perceived importance of funding research on acromegaly as a function of attribution and naming condition in the (a) high-attention condition and (b) low-attention condition. Error bars represent ± 1 SEM.

$p_{rep} = .97$; however, among high-attention participants focusing on how understandable the research was, a name reduced willingness to fund the research ($M = 3.33$ vs. 4.89), $t(65) = 2.53$, $p < .05$, $p_{rep} = .96$ (see Fig. 1a). Similar effects did not emerge for low-attention participants (see Fig. 1b).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

We demonstrated that merely naming a finding can increase or decrease its perceived importance. Inclusion of a name increases subjective feelings of ease of processing the information. When people attribute this ease to how memorable the information is, the finding seems more important. However, when people attribute this ease to how understandable the information is, the finding seems less novel and unimportant. These effects occurred in a variety of contexts: jury decisions, economic principles, math theorems, psychological effects, and funding of medical research.

This study is important for several reasons. First, it demonstrates that merely naming a finding can result in ease of processing. Although previous research has shown that ease of processing arises from several contexts, this is the first demonstration that merely naming a finding can evoke feelings of ease. Second, our research demonstrates that the specific effect of ease of processing depends on the attribution people make during judgment. Associating feelings of ease with memorability increases perceived importance of information, but associating feelings of ease with understandability reduces perceived importance. Third, we have shown that inferences based on ease of understanding or recall are particularly pertinent to highly thoughtful people, who presumably associate effort with understanding important things and associate ease with recalling important things. This is not to say that such individuals will not correct for an impact of ease of processing on their judgment should they become aware of this possible source of influence. Otherwise, however, as they are likely to associate effort with understanding important information and ease with recalling important information, their judgment will reflect the use of these heuristics. Our results stand in contrast to the intuition that people who pay less attention to information are more likely to fall prey to heuristics.

Readers might wonder what happens in a no-attribution situation. That is, what naive theories are people likely to use on their own if they are not primed to think about memorability or understandability? On the one hand, if people are equally likely to assess memorability and understandability when considering the importance of a finding, then a control (no-prime) condition might show no difference between name and no-name conditions. This is because roughly half of the population that considers a named finding will overestimate its perceived importance (relative to an unnamed finding), and the remainder will underestimate it. On the other hand, research suggests that it might be more natural to consider memorability, rather than understandability, when assessing the importance of a person (Jacoby et al., 1989) or a claim (Hawkins & Hoch, 1992), and it is possible that considering memorability is also more natural when assessing the importance of a finding.

To test where a control condition might lie, we conducted another experiment in which participants ($n = 79$) evaluated either the optimal distinctiveness theory or the Coase theorem. For some participants, the finding was named; for the others, it was not named. Immediately after reading the description of the finding, respondents rated it for overall ease of processing (but not specifically for memorability or understandability) and importance. Regardless of whether participants evaluated the psychological effect or the economic principle, including a name increased the perceived importance of the finding and the ease of processing the finding, and ease mediated the perceived importance of the finding (the Web Appendix, in the Supporting Information available on-line, provides detailed data from this experiment—see p. XXX). Additional analysis revealed that

ease of processing correlated positively with the extent to which participants reported relying on memorability rather than understandability, and that naming a finding, which increased ease of processing, also increased the tendency to rely on memorability when judging the finding's importance. Thus, naming a finding increased ease of processing and also correlated with the use of a “memory equals importance” heuristic during judgment. This result is noteworthy because participants had to process more information when a name was included than when no name was included; however, the name evoked feelings of ease and thus increased perceived importance.

We note some limitations of this research and areas for further investigation. In certain situations, names can be designed to convey importance. That is, including a name might signify that the person (e.g., “Her Majesty”) or effect (e.g., “the big bang theory”) is important. We did not consider situations in which a name contained objective information regarding importance; instead, we took particular care to ensure that the names we used contained no information about the importance of the effects. We predict that if a name somehow incorporates objective information regarding the importance of a person or an effect, it is likely to increase judgments of importance, though this hypothesis remains to be tested. In addition, we used names that were moderately easy to pronounce, but pronounceability might cue the importance of the finding in its own right. In particular, we predict that among people focused on understandability, difficult-to-pronounce names will increase perceived importance, because effort serves as a positive cue regarding importance. In contrast, among people focused on memorability, for whom ease is a positive cue regarding importance, easy-to-pronounce names will increase perceived importance.

EPILOGUE

We call our finding the name-ease effect with some reservations. If you are now thinking about whether you understand our finding, our act of merely naming it will increase your perception of how well you understand the effect, making you feel you probably knew about it all along. Note that the name we used does not provide information about exactly what the effect is and when, why, or for whom it occurs. Nor does other research suggest that merely naming a finding should evoke feelings of ease or that, depending on the attributions made, it can increase or reduce perceptions of the importance of the research. Thus, we hope that as you recollect the effect we described, you find it memorable.

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