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SHORT COMMUNICATION

Historical Changes in Given Names in France: Insights from Research on Cultural Change

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Abstract

Based on previous research on names and cultural changes, I propose six suggestions regarding Mignot (2022), which investigated historical changes in given names in France. The study analyzed two different datasets on names and reported that the number of distinctive first names increased from the 1950s to the 2010s. Moreover, the author demonstrated that the proportion of the top 10 most popular names decreased. These two findings were interpreted as reflecting an increase in individualization (individualism). However, six points remain unclear. The first and second comments suggest excluding possible alternative explanations. The third and fourth comments recommend using previous studies that have provided valuable findings, on which new insights could be further added. The fifth and sixth comments ask the author to clarify the data used by adding more information. Addressing these comments would contribute to a better understanding of the historical changes in given names and their underlying psychological and cultural trends in France.

Keywords

name, historical change, individualism, diversity, popularity, naming, onomastics, France

JEL codes: J1, O1, Y1, Z1

Introduction

Mignot (2022) analyzed two different datasets on names in France and reported mainly four findings. First, the author showed that the absolute number of distinctive first names increased from the 1950s to the 2010s. Second, the author demonstrated that the proportions of the top 10 most popular names decreased from the 1950s to the 2010s. Third, the author indicated the number of first names in the decade's top 10, which were in the previous decade's top 10, decreased from the 1900s to the 2010s. Finally, the author ana-

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lyzed sex differences in names over time. These findings are important for understanding changes in names and naming practices in France and their underlying psychological and cultural changes.

Consistent with the topic of this article, I have conducted research on names (for reviews, see Ogihara 2023b, 2025b). For instance, I showed that unique names increased in Japan (Ogihara, 2021a, 2022a; Ogihara et al., 2015; Ogihara, Ito, 2022), described the characteristics and patterns of uncommon names in Japan (Ogihara, 2015, 2021b), and explained difficulties in reading recent Japanese names correctly (Ogihara, 2021c, 2022c). I also demonstrated related cultural changes in Japan, such as an increase in individualism (e.g., Ogihara, 2018b; Ogihara, Uchida, 2024; for reviews, see Ogihara, 2017, 2018a) and a decrease in self-esteem (e.g., Ogihara, 2016; Ogihara et al., 2016; for a review, see Ogihara, 2017).

Thus, in this article, I focus on changes in name diversity and popularity in France, which correspond to the first and second findings summarized above, and propose six suggestions.

Suggestions

1. Did the number of different first names increase even after statistically controlling for the sample size for each year?

The author stated that "[f]rom the 1900s to the 2010s, the number of different first names given at least once to each sex at the civil registry increased from about 1,500 to about 6,500 per year (Figure 1). More and more parents are choosing relatively original, distinctive and individualizing first names for their children, which allow them to appear unique or to 'stand out' from the crowd (Twenge et al. 2010; Lawson 2016: 189). This multiplication of first names may be considered as an indication of the process of individualization that has been at work in France since the 18th century, and which has accelerated since the middle of the 20th century" (p. 110). This describes national-level changes in the absolute number of distinctive first names, which is an important finding regarding the diversity of first names in France.

However, the author did not control for the sample size for each year. It is possible that the increase in distinctive first names was simply caused by the growth in sample size. A larger sample naturally tends to include more different names. Thus, a mere increase in sample size could serve as an alternative explanation for the observed rise in name diversity. It is important to rule out such alternative explanations.

Therefore, it would be more conclusive to control for the sample sizes for each year when claiming an increase in individualization. For example, Bush et al. (2018) showed that the proportion of unique (distinctive) names increased in the United Kingdom between 1838 and 2016. They controlled for sample sizes by calculating relative values of name variety (see also He, 2020).

2. Do the main findings hold even when the number of immigrants is statistically controlled for?

The author showed that the absolute number of distinctive names increased, and the percentage of popular names decreased. The author interpreted these changes as a reflection of of increasing individualization (individualism).

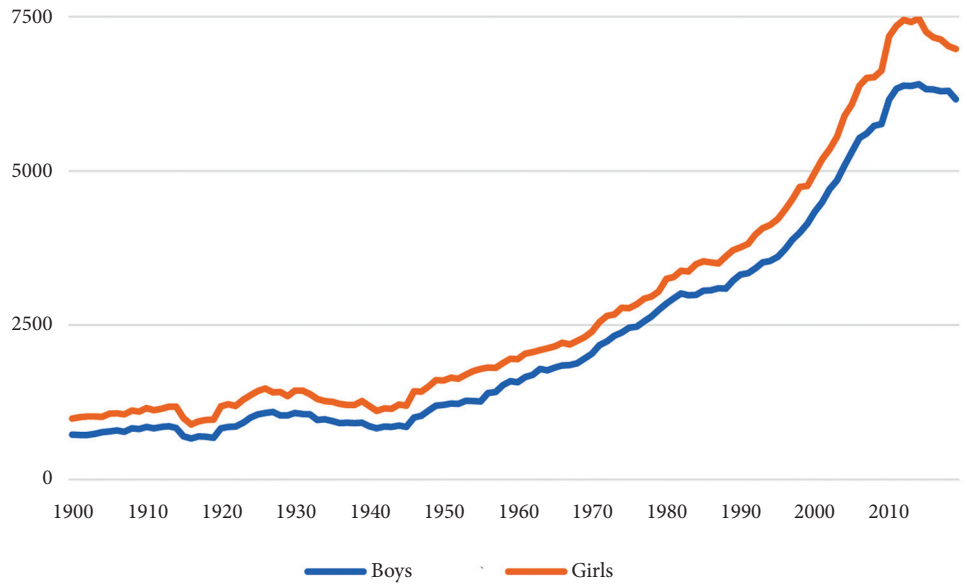

Figure 1. Number of distinctive first names given in France by sex and birth year, 1900–2019. *Notes:* Field – births in France (excluding Mayotte) from 1900 to 2019, N = 85 047 407. *Source:* INSEE 2020. Original figure: [Mignot, 2022: 110]

However, the author did not control for an increase in immigrants. They often have different naming practices and preferences (e.g., Ogihara, 2022b; Stojcic et al., 2020). Thus, the changes in names could be explained by the changes in the number of immigrants rather than by individualization. Similar to the first comment, it is important to rule out such alternative explanations.

Therefore, it is necessary to control for changes in the number of immigrants in order to make a stronger claim about increasing individualization. Indeed, previous studies have statistically controlled for this factor. For example, the previous studies that the author cited in the original article (Twenge et al., 2010, 2016) showed that the rates of common names decreased in the United States even after accounting for the number of immigrants.

3. The validity of using popular names as an indicator has been confirmed and can be further investigated

The author stated that "the number and distribution of given names may be seen as an indicator of the degree of individualization, i.e. parents' willingness to give their child – and enable him/her to express – a unique identity and to make others regard him/her as a unique individual with singular characteristics" (p. 109). The author interpreted the decrease in the rates of the most popular names as an increase in individualism, writing statements such as "[t]hese major decreases in the concentration of first names reflect the rise of cultural individualism" (p. 112).

However, this validity of using uncommon name as an indicator of individualism has already been empirically confirmed in previous research. For example, Varnum and Kitayama

(2011) indicated that the rates of the most common names (top 1 and top 10) were negatively correlated with individualism scores at the country level, demonstrating the validity of this indicator. Their analyses included 13 countries: nine European countries (Austria, Denmark, England, Hungary, Ireland, Norway, Scotland, Spain, and Sweden), two Anglo-American (North American) countries (Canada and the United States), and two Oceanian countries (Australia and New Zealand). Moreover, Ogihara (2023a) further investigated the validity of this indicator, adding two unexamined cultures to the analyses: East Asian culture (Japan) and Latin American culture (Puerto Rico). Analyses indicated that the negative relationships between the rates of popular names and individualism scores were still salient. Therefore, this study further confirmed the validity of popular names as an indicator of individualism in more diverse cultural contexts.

It is recommended that the author incorporate these findings when interpreting the results. Furthermore, the author can add the French case to this analysis because France has not been included in previous investigations (Ogihara, 2023a; Varnum, Kitayama, 2011). This would contribute to extending the examination of the validity of this indicator.

4. The relationship between diversity and popularity has been confirmed and can be further investigated

The author examined the changes in diversity of first names. In addition, the author investigated the changes in popularity of first names. The author interpreted both changes as reflecting an increase in individualism.

However, these two aspects were analyzed separately, leaving their relationship unclear. If both indicators reflect individualism, they should be negatively correlated. Establishing this relationship could further strengthen the validity of the two indicators. Indeed, recent research in the United Kingdom has analyzed these two indicators together and found negative associations between them (Ogihara, 2025a).

Therefore, it would be valuable to test this relationship in France as well. Such an analysis could provide additional evidence that both diversity and popularity reflect individualism.

5. How representative are the data and how reliable are the analyses?

The author analyzed two different datasets from distinct sources. The author briefly described them. It was explained that "[t]he first one is an online administrative database of first names given to more than 85 million newborns in France from 1900 to 2019 (INSEE 2020). This database describes the frequency of each first name in French civil registers by sex and year (excluding Mayotte, a French archipelago in the Indian Ocean) since January 1st, 1900" (p. 109). Furthermore, the author stated that "[t]he second source the author uses is a publication based on the sample of first names given to more than 89,000 newborns in France from 1800 to 1899 (Dupâquier et al. 1987). These newborns descend from 3,000 couples who were sampled to be representative of the French population got married between 1803 and 1832" (p. 110).

However, the author did not provide sufficient detail about these datasets. For example, while the total sample sizes of the two datasets were reported, the yearly sample sizes were not. As I explained in the first comment, yearly sample sizes are important for interpreting the results, which should be disclosed. In addition, information about how these data were

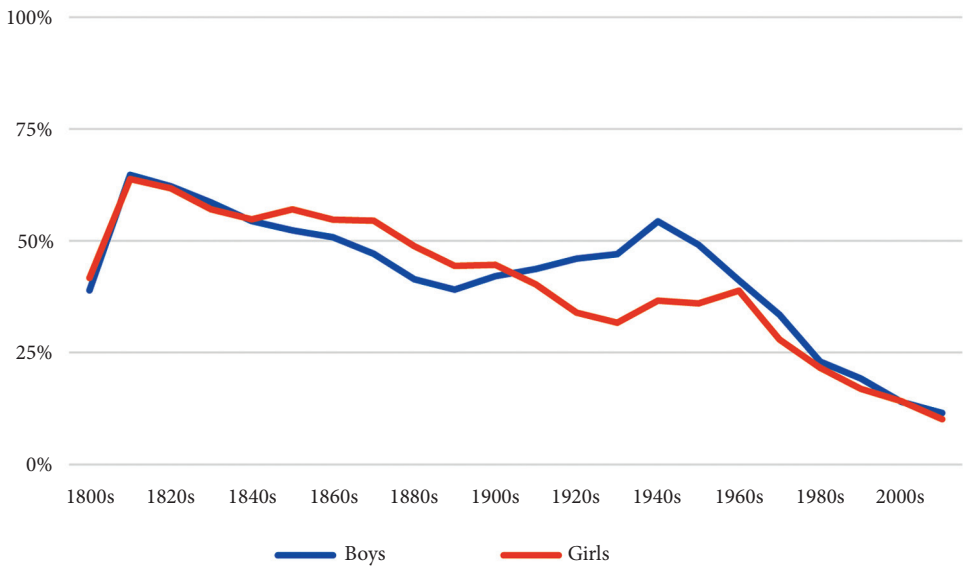

Figure 2. Share of newborns in France who were given one of the top-10 first names of the decade, by sex and birth decade, 1800s–2010s. *Notes:* Field – births in France from 1800 to 2019. *Sources:* Dupâquier et al. 1987: 106–107 (1800–1899, N = 89 379); INSEE 2020 (1900–2019, N = 85 047 407). Original figure: [Mignot, 2022: 112]

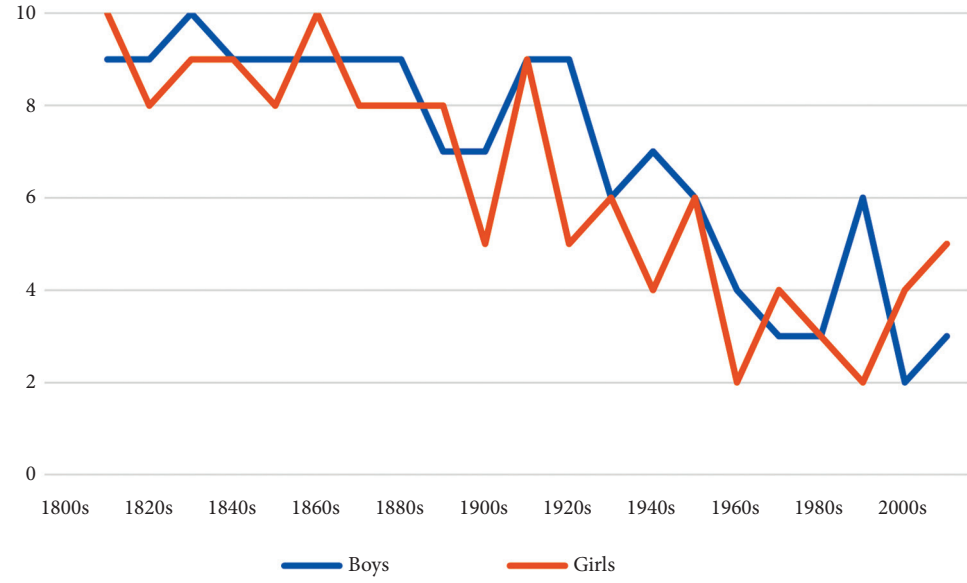

Figure 4. Number of first names in the decade's top-10 in France, which already were in the previous decade's top-10, by sex and birth decade, 1800s–2010s. *Notes:* Field – births by decade in France from 1800–1809 to 2010–2019. *Sources:* Dupâquier et al. 1987, p. 106–107 (1800–1899, N = 89 379) ; INSEE 2020 (1900–2019, N = 85 047 407). Original figure: [Mignot, 2022: 114]

collected and their representativeness should be clarified. If the samples are nearly identical to the populations (i.e., names of all newborns in France each year), this should be explicitly stated. If not, the author should explain how the samples differ from the population and how they could be biased. These points are essential because they are directly related to the validity and reliability of the analyses, which affects the interpretations and finally changes the conclusions drawn from the study.

6. How was the comparability of the two different datasets confirmed?

Related to the fifth comment, the author integrated the two separate datasets in the analyses and the figures (e.g., Figures 2 and 4 in the original article). This means that the author considered the two datasets, and the results obtained from them, to be comparable.

However, they are different datasets, and their comparability was not explained. The two datasets differ in many important respects. For example, their data collection methods were clearly different. The first dataset included names given to newborns who "descend from 3,000 couples who were sampled to be representative of the French population got married between 1803 and 1832" (p. 110). In contrast, the second dataset included names in French civil registers. Thus, the characteristics of the samples might differ. Another example is the size of the two datasets. The first dataset (1800-1899) had a total of 89,379 names, with a yearly average of 894. In contrast, the second dataset (1900-2019) had a total of 85,047,407 names, with a yearly average of 708,728. Thus, the second dataset contained approximately 800 times more names on average. This difference could affect the analyses and their results. Therefore, it would be important for the author to explain how the comparability of the two datasets was confirmed.

In addition, the author mentioned regarding the dataset ranging from 1900 to 2019 that "[t]he database, which includes only annual information on first names that were given at least three times by sex and year, is comprehensive only for the period since 1946" (pp. 109-110). This indicates that the dataset should be divided into two parts because they qualitatively differ: (1) 1900–1945 and (2) 1946–2019. Thus, readers might consider that the data only after 1946 can be used for valid analyses. At minimum, the earlier part (1900–1945) should be explained in detail. This issue is directly related to the analyses and the interpretations of the results, which should be clarified as well.

Conclusion

I have proposed six suggestions that would further increase the validity and impact of the article (Mignot, 2022). The first and second comments suggest excluding possible alternative explanations that should be controlled for. The third and fourth comments recommend using previous studies that have provided valuable findings, to which the author could add new insights. The fifth and sixth comments ask to clarify the data that the author used by providing additional information. I hope these suggestions will contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical changes in given names and their underlying psychological and cultural trends in France.

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