ANOTHER LOOK AT BASEBALL PLAYER
INITIALS AND LONGEVITY[1]

GARY SMITH

Department of Economics
Pomona College

Summary.—Abel and Kruger (2007) reported that Major League Baseball players whose names have positive initials (such as ACE or GOD) live an average of 13 years longer than do players with negative initials (such as ASS or BAD) or players with neutral initials (such as GHR or TSW). However, this conclusion is based on a very small sample, selective initials, and a flawed statistical test. There is no statistically significant relationship between initials and longevity for Major League Baseball players when a correct test is applied to independently selected initials.

Several studies (Savage & Wells, 1948; McDavid & Harari, 1966; Harari & McDavid, 1973; Levine & Willis, 1994) have investigated whether the popularity of a first name is related to how people are perceived by themselves and by others, although the direction of causation is unclear because the names parents choose for their children may be correlated with their home environment and parenting style. Other studies (McGee & Williams, 2000; Trzesniewsky, Donnellan, Moffitt, Robins, Poulton, & Caspi, 2006) suggest that self-esteem may be related to health. If so, there may be some relationship between first names and longevity. However, Pinzur and Smith (2009) found that among 2.1 million white, non-Hispanic California decedents for the years 1960 through 2004, there was no relationship between first name frequency and life expectancy.

Whatever relationship there might be between first name, self-esteem, and longevity, presumably there would be an even smaller relationship for a person's initials, which are encountered far less often than first names. In contrast to first names, people seem typically unaware of another person's initials and, likewise, seem to seldom think about their own initials. No compelling theoretical reason has been offered for why initials should affect life expectancy.

Nonetheless, Christenfeld, Phillips, and Glynn (1999) analyzed California mortality data for the years 1969–1995 and concluded that, in comparison to people whose names have neutral initials, males with positive initials lived, on average, 4.5 yr. longer; males with negative initials lived 2.8 fewer years; females with positive initials lived 3.4 more years; and that there was no difference for females with negative initials.

Although the estimated effects of initials on life expectancy reported by Christenfeld, *et al.* (1999) seem surprising and perhaps implausible, even more surprising is the report by Abel and Kruger (2007) that Major League Baseball players with positive initials lived an average of 13 years longer than did players with negative initials or players with neutral initials. This is larger than the difference in life expectancy between the United States and Iraq, Bolivia, or Pakistan.[2]

Also troubling is the fact that the MLB database used by Abel and Kruger was much smaller than the original database of California decedents. Christenfeld, *et al.* (1999) looked at nearly 4 million California decedents with known initials, of which 1,733 persons were characterized as having positive initials and 5,799 as having negative initials. The MLB database has approximately 8,000 decedents with known initials, of which 17 players have initials that Christenfeld, *et al.* (1999) characterized as either positive or negative. Abel and Kruger increased their sample sizes to 11 players with positive initials and 30 players with negative initials by modifying the initials list used by Christenfeld, *et al.*

Method

Two types of problems arise when studying the relationship between initials and longevity. First, there are considerable ambiguities in identifying positive and negative initials. Second, a valid statistical procedure should not be affected by changes in either life expectancy or in the frequency with which initials occur over time.

Identifying Good and Bad Initials

Christenfeld, *et al.* (1999) use a list of 12 positive initials (ACE, GOD, HUG, JOY, LIF, LIV, LOV, LUV, VIP, WEL, WIN, and WOW) and 19 negative initials (APE, ASS, BAD, BUG, BUM, DED, DIE, DTH, DUD, HOG, ILL, MAD, PIG, RAT, ROT, SAD, SIC, SIK, and UGH). They report that they confirmed their choices by asking 39 undergraduates to label these 31 initials and nine neutral initials as positive, negative, or neutral.

Abel and Kruger (2007) used a list of eight positive initials (ACE, CAN, GOD, HEP, LEF, NEW, WEL, and WOW) and 17 negative initials (APE, ASS, BAD, BCH, CAD, DAM, DED, DTH, FAG, FAT, FCK, HEL, HLL, MAD, RAG, SIN, and SOB). (Abel and Kruger stated that they used 18 negative initials, but their published list only contained 17.)

The positive and negative initials chosen by Christenfeld, *et al.* (1999) are not necessarily those perceived by others to be the best and worst initials since the only confirmation of their choices is that survey respondents were able to distinguish the good initials from the bad initials. The list used by Abel and Kruger was even more informal, with the only con-

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[2]Central Intelligence Agency. (2010) *The world fact book.* Retrieved April 23, 2010, from https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html.

firmation being that both authors agreed on the list. Some of their additions and omissions are puzzling. For example, they include CAN as positive instead of negative (the two players with CAN initials lived 83 and 84 years). HEP is an unconvincing choice as positive initials (the two players with HEP initials lived 89 and 94 years). Abel and Kruger also used FCK instead of FUK as negative initials, and ignored potential choices like DUM, GAY, and KKK.

The initials added and omitted by Abel and Kruger (2007) certainly bolster their statistical conclusion. For the initials added by Abel and Kruger, the difference in the average age at death for players with positive and negative initials is 17.8 years. All but one of the Christenfeld, *et al.* (1999) initials that Abel and Kruger omitted did not appear in the MLB database. The one that does appear is the negative initials (RAT) of a player who lived 85 years, a questionable omission that bolsters their conclusion.

Morrison and Smith (2005) compiled an independent list of positive and negative initials by using all $26^3 = 17,576$ possible three-letter combinations for initials to choose 100 candidates, including the 31 used by Christenfeld, *et al.* (1999). They asked 46 students and faculty to identify the 10 best and 10 worst initials on this list.

The top 12 positive initials (in order) were ACE (32), ICE (18), JOY (17), VIP (17), CEO (16), WOW (16), GEM (14), FLY (13), FOX (13), HIP (12), WIT (12), and WIN (11). The top 19 negative initials (in order) were ASS (29), KKK (27), FAG (22), DIE (21), GAY (21), ZIT (20), FUK (18), PIG (16), DUM (15), RAT (15), SOB (13), TIT (12), GAS (11), FAT (11), BAD (10), POX (10), HOR (9), BUM (8), and SIN (8). All of these initials appear in the California database.

Only two of the eight positive initials (ACE and WOW) used by Abel and Kruger (2007) were among the top 24 positive vote-getters, and only six (ASS, BAD, FAG, FAT, SIN, and SOB) of their 17 negative initials were among the top 19 negative vote-getters. Of the 11 initials Abel and Kruger added to the list used by Christenfeld, *et al.* (1999), only two (CAD and DAM) were in the 100 initials list compiled by Morrison and Smith (2005), and neither were among the top 27 vote-getters for negative initials.

A Valid Statistical Procedure

Retrospective studies have many potential pitfalls. Here, one problem is that the frequency of three-letter initials changes over time. For example, Christenfeld, *et al.* (1999) reported that the frequency of negative initials increased by 40% during their sample period 1969 to 1995. An example of the problem is if mortality rates are constant regardless of initials but there are more people with negative initials in later birth cohorts than in earlier cohorts, then people with negative initials, whether dead or alive, will tend to be younger than people with other initials.

Also, life expectancies have changed over time. If the frequency of negative initials has increased over time and life expectancies have too, then the average life expectancy of people with negative initials will be greater than the average life expectancy of people with positive initials. There is no *a priori* way to tell which of these competing factors dominates, particularly since frequency of initials does not follow a simple trend.

Christenfeld, *et al.* (1999) grouped decedents by year of death, which does not solve the problem of changing initials frequencies and life expectancies. Abel and Kruger grouped together all positive and negative initials, regardless of birth year or death year. This, too, does not address changes in frequencies of initials and life expectancies.

A valid statistical procedure for dealing with these issues is to group decedents by birth year (Morrison & Smith, 2005). For each birth year t, one calculates the average age at death for players with positive initials (AAD^+_t), players with negative initials (AAD^-_t), and controls who had neither positive nor negative initials (AAD^c_t). The most direct comparison is between players with positive and negative initials who were born in the same year. However, the MLB database is so small that there are only two years that meet this criterion. Instead, for each birth year *t*, the average age at death of players with positive initials (if any) was compared with the average age at death of the controls

$$d^+_t = AAD^+_t - AAD^c_t \ ,$$

and the average age at death of players with negative initials (if any) with the average age at death of the controls

$$d^-_t = AAD^-_t - AAD^c_t \ .$$

For example, there was one player (William O. West) with positive initials (WOW) born in 1853; he died at age 75. There were 23 control players born in 1853, who lived an average of 65.09 years, a difference of $75 - 65.09 = 9.91$ yr.

The null hypothesis is that mortality rates are not affected by initials, so that the expected value of each paired difference is zero. The nonparametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test for paired differences can be used to calculate two-sided *p* values.

Data

Sean Lahman's Baseball Archive was used to collect data on the year of birth, year of death, first name, middle name, and last name of all deceased MLB players.[3] There are some ambiguities in the identification of

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[3]Lahman, S. (2010) *Baseball archive.* Retrieved January 26, 2010, from http://www.baseball1.com/.

initials. It is unclear whether the putative low self-esteem comes from the name given at birth or from the name that a player is known by. Many baseball players are known by names that differ from the names they were given at birth, for example, Bob Gibson (Robert Louis Gibson), Nolan Ryan (Lynn Nolan Ryan, Jr.), and Babe Ruth (George Herman Ruth, Jr.). Birth names were used to determine the initials; in these three examples, RLG, LNR, and GHR.

Results

Table 1 shows the paired differences in the average age at death for players with positive and negative initials, in each case compared to controls with the same birth year. The three sets of initials are those used by Christenfeld, *et al.* (1999; CPG), Morrison and Smith (2005; MS), and Abel and Kruger (2007; AK).

TABLE 1

Paired Difference in Average Age at Death, Positive or Negative Initials Minus Control Initials

Initials	Positive Minus Control					Negative Minus Control				
	N	*M*	*SD*	*W*	2-sided *p*	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*W*	2-sided *p*
CPG	7	7.51	10.35	1.52	0.13	8	0.61	19.17	0.14	0.89
MS	8	5.57	8.90	1.54	0.12	15	0.40	15.49	0.28	0.78
AK	11	12.65	10.68	2.49	0.01	22	−0.40	15.63	0.02	0.99

Note.—The sets of initials used in three experiments are: CPG = Christenfeld, *et al.* (1999); MS = Morrison and Smith (2005); AK = Abel and Kruger (2007). W = absolute value of the nonparametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test statistic for paired differences.

For the CPG and MS initials, the mean paired difference between the positive and control initials was positive, but the two-sided *p* value was larger than .05. The mean paired difference between the negative and control initials was also positive (players with negative initials tended to live *longer* than the controls), but the *p* values were larger than .05. The initials added and deleted by Abel and Kruger (2007): (a) increased the mean paired difference between the positive and control initials, reducing the *p* value below .05; and (b) changed the sign of the mean paired difference between the negative and control initials but did not lower the *p* value.

Discussion

Abel and Kruger (2007) used an extremely small dataset to investigate the relationship between initials and longevity, even though much larger databases were available. In addition, there is no persuasive theory to support the conclusion that positive initials should increase the life expectancy of a Major League Baseball player by 13 years.

For the initials chosen by Christenfeld, *et al.* (1999) and Morrison and

Smith (2005) without reference to Major League Baseball players, there is no statistically persuasive evidence of a relationship between initials and longevity. The contrary conclusion reached by Abel and Kruger (2007) is due to a selective inclusion of initials in a very small database.

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