A Lack of Security or a Lack of Capital?
Acculturative Conservatism in Immigrant Naming

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Abstract

Recent research on immigrant naming demonstrates a marked tendency towards “acculturative conservatism,” whereby immigrants select given names for their children that were highly popular in an earlier generation of the native population. Acculturative conservatism can potentially be explained as an attempt to address immigrants’ feelings of insecurity by favoring cultural practices that most clearly convey the national identity. However, a more straightforward interpretation is that immigrants lack the necessary cultural capital to know which cultural practices are fashionable. In this paper, we first show that acculturative conservatism is a significant social force by examining how it lowered the rate of change in the fashion of given names between 1880 and 1920 in the United States. Second, we develop a novel analytic strategy to distinguish the effects of a lack of security and those of a lack of cultural capital. Our data include the English names of the early male children of Jews who immigrated to the U.S. between 1880 and 1920, and the male children in the general population in the same period. We find that Jewish immigrants tend to select among the formerly-popular English names by favoring those whose popularity was still rising and avoiding those that were declining in the native population. This suggests that Jewish immigrants had considerable knowledge of the latest fashions, but deliberately chose older names which would convey their national identity more strongly and thereby address their sense of insecurity.