# Research Notes

# 2005

# 8

# Naming Differences in Divided Germany

**Denis Huschka**
**Jürgen Gerhards**
**Gert G. Wagner**

# DIW Berlin

**Research Notes   8**

Denis Huschka *

Jürgen Gerhards **

Gert G. Wagner ***

## Naming Differences in Divided Germany

Berlin, December 2005

*       Free University of Berlin and DIW Berlin, SOEP, dhuschka@zedat.fu-berlin.de

**      Free University of Berlin, gerhards@zedat.fu-berlin.de

***     Berlin University of Technology (TUB), DIW Berlin, SOEP, IZA Bonn, gwagner@diw.de

# Contents

# Contents of Tables and Figures

# 1 Introduction*

Our point of departure is the assumption that naming one's child is a social act according to Max Weber's understanding. Choosing a name is a selection process that is crucially influenced by the social setting in which the parents are embedded. Hence, comparative name studies can shed light on the historical and societal circumstances under which name selections have taken place. The political and societal differences between East and West Germany from 1949 to 1989, which became particularly marked in the 1960s, led us to ask whether these two different German societies are reflected in different name choices. We have anecdotal evidence that Germans can guess relatively well whether someone comes from East or West Germany upon hearing their name. Most Germans believe, for example, that names like "Mandy", "Cindy" and "Mike" (sometimes creatively spelled "Maik" or "Meik") are typical of East Germans, although both parts of Germany share a mutual history and culture, very similar traditions (of naming), and the same language with absolutely no variations in grammar or orthography.

In this article, we use representative social science survey data to empirically analyze whether different societal settings in East and West Germany really did lead to different naming behavior, and if so, how these differences developed over time. First we analyze name frequency distributions and general naming patterns. Are there differences in the frequency-rank distribution of names? Do the frequency-rank distributions show greater polarization in East Germany and broader dispersion in West Germany, suggesting more individualized naming patterns in the West as a result of greater individualization in diverse areas of social life?

In the second part of our analysis, we look at concrete name types. We ask whether people in the two parts of Germany used *different name types*, and compare the concrete name types and origins of names. Did parents in East and West Germany choose the name for their children out of the same "name reservoir"? What types of names were preferred in each part of the country? Finally, we analyze naming differences over time to test the hypothesis that the divergent cultural paths in East and West Germany led to different sets of cultural preferences in each.

## 2      Hypotheses on naming differences between East and West Germany

In most western societies, naming is legally regulated, although these regulations are gener-ally not really binding and the invention of new names is usually permitted. In Germany, as well, there are only a few legal restrictions on the selection of first names[1], and during the country's division, these regulations did not differ between East and West Germany.[2] People in both parts of the country could thus choose among thousands of possible names, most of which were the same given the shared language and (naming) traditions. These almost identi-cal starting conditions in East and West Germany make it particularly interesting to test if and when evolving differences in the two societies began to exert an influence on the choice of first names.[3]

There is a broad sociological literature on the different paths of societal development in East and West Germany. Within the 40 years of their existence, the two German states developed very differently due to their divergent geopolitical relationships. This led to different social settings and structures, reference points, values and preferences, and perhaps name choices as

---

[1] In Germany, parents are generally free to choose their children's names. Only the invention of *completely original* names is more difficult here than in other countries (e. g. the U.S.), especially if these names are not merely variations in the spelling of other existing names. However, the reservoir of possible names has always been huge. During the long shared European history, tens of thousands of names have emerged.

[2] The "legal regulation" of naming in Germany does not consist of actual laws. The procedure in both parts of the country, even during Germany's division, has always been for parents to "apply" to register the names of their children at the local registrar's office. "Common" names are registered without any problems. When it comes to name innovations, it is up to the registrar to decide according to general guidelines whether the new name can be registered or not. An example of such general guidelines (adhered to in both East and West Germany) was: "Das Kind hat ein Recht darauf, nicht mit einem anstößigen, lächerlichen oder sonst wie unpassenden Vornamen belastet zu werden, der ihm die Selbstidentifikation erschweren oder zu herabsetzenden Reaktionen seiner Umwelt Anlass geben könnte." ("The child has a right not to be burdened with a name which is offensive, ridicu-lous, or in any other way inappropriate, and which could impede his self-identification or give cause for dispara-ging reactions from those around him." cf.: Duden Lexikon der Vornamen (2004)). It was thus mainly left up to the registrar whether to accept a name or not. On the question of whether East German registrars hindered the registration of western-sounding names, such as those adopted from American actors or singers, Gabriele Rodri-guez, one of the leading name experts from the "Namensberatungsstelle Leipzig" (the highest conciliation authori-ty for controversial name issues) answered that this prejudicial treatment would have been most likely prior to the significant liberalization that took place in the eighties—in particular during the sixties.

[3] There is significant evidence that naming is deeply rooted in social contexts. Given names serve as powerful social indicators, for instance when looking at cultural tastes, societal secularization, processes of individualiza-tion (see e.g., Lieberson/Bell (1992), Lieberson (2000) for the U.S., Gerhards (2003/2005) for Germany or Besnard/Desplaques (2001) for France), and chances on the job market (see: Bertrand/Mullainathan 2003, Fryer/Levitt 2004, Arai et al. 2004 and Aura/Hess 2004).

well. Before presenting the results of our analysis, we describe some characteristics of the two German societies that might have had an impact on their respective naming practices.

## 2.1 Ideologies, societies and naming

After the end of World War II, in 1949, two German States were founded: the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG = West Germany) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR = East Germany). Very early, thanks to the "Wirtschaftswunder", West Germans were able to dramatically improve their living standards and quality of life. Individualism and personal style attained new importance, and North American culture and society set the standards, not only for democracy and a prospering market economy, but also for tastes and lifestyles. East German society—or at least the image thereof presented in the official propaganda—was much more oriented towards social uniformity. The guiding ideology was to produce a "classless" society, or at least to reduce the differences between the social classes. Consumption of certain products was limited, which limited the possibilities for using them to outwardly express tastes, styles, and thus individuality. Due in part to these limitations on consumption, the living conditions among East Germans were relatively uniform. The fact that the prevailing ideology of uniformity and equality did indeed become social reality can be seen when looking at the East German labor market and analyzing historical income distributions.[4] Our hypothesis is that the differences in dominant ideologies and social structures in East and West Germany affected the distribution of names through differing motivations for name choices. Thus we expect that *in general*, in the West names were chosen to express individuality, and in the East more common, popular names were chosen to avoid standing out.

## 2.2 Role models, reference points and the media

We expect that *concrete* name choices differed between East and West Germany as well. We know from other studies that the political regime of a country and its embeddedness in geopo-

---

[4] Economic inequality was lower in the GDR, which is proven, for example, by the lower Gini-Coefficients (a measure to describe income inequality). Whereas the Gini Coefficient was about 0.24 in West Germany it was 0.19 in East Germany. An empirical value of the Gini Coefficient of zero indicates total equality (everyone having the same income) whereas a Gini Coefficient of 1 would indicate highest inequality. As a reference for comparisons: the USA as well as the UK have a Gini Coefficient of about 0.34 (all Gini-values for 1991, German values: SOEP calculations, values for the U.S. and the U.K. taken from the Luxembourg Income Study project's website: www.lisproject.org/keyfigueres/inequtable.htm, September 2005). For more details, and a view on some hidden inequalities within the GDR, see Bird et al. (1998). However, even if there was more equality, average living standards and individual material living situations in East Germany were much lower than in West Germany.

litical power structures has an impact on first names (see Wolffsohn/Brechenmacher 1999). West German society became part of the western sphere of prosperous, democratic states and was profoundly influenced by the U.S. after World War II, whereas East Germany was integrated into the Moscow-based East European network of communist countries, which were controlled by the Soviet Union and oriented towards a "communist way of life". The building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 sealed off the East almost completely. Not only did it prevent regular family visits between the two parts of Germany, it also limited "information exchange" through the censorship of both private correspondence and public media, ensuring that in the East, only state-sanctioned views were expressed. This hampered the exchange of ideas about naming between East and West and the development of common naming trends. Easterners were indeed cut off from the western world almost entirely: they could travel to Poland and Bulgaria and other socialist states, but not to western countries.

Also the naming examples set by intellectual elites and pop stars differed dramatically between East and West Germany. Whereas West Germans looked to American singers and actors as well as international writers and philosophers as role models after whom to name their children, East Germans could only do this to a limited degree. The heroes and heroines of official GDR ideology were mainly fighters, members of the resistance, and communist activists. It was of course not forbidden to *like* pop stars, singers and actors—not even American ones—but it certainly raised suspicion. In addition, there were few opportunities for fan cultures to develop in the East around western pop stars. East German singers and intellectual leaders also could not take the place of western stars in this respect: they never were able to cultivate the same glamorous image.[5]

Finally, the choosing of names may have also been affected by different media structures in the two societies. Movies, TV, and the press play an important role in transmitting ideas, and in giving people inspirations for naming. The completely different media landscapes that developed in the two German states—at least in the early years of the country's division—

---

[5] Wolffson and Brechenmacher (1999) were able to show that the given names of two of the early East German communist leaders became very unpopular a few years after they had taken office although their names had previously been quite popular.

4

would establishing a strong argument for the emergence of differing name tastes between East and West.[6]

Given the different political cultures and media landscapes, one might expect an increase in Slavic and Eastern European names in the East and an increase of Anglo-American names and names from the Romance languages in the West. We also hypothesize that the emergence of a specific East German taste in naming follows a constant development trajectory. Milestones of the country's division, like the building of the Berlin Wall, should theoretically be reflected in accelerations in separate naming developments.

Up to now, there has been only one empirical study of the overall social and societal dependence of naming in Germany: Gerhards' (2003, English version: 2005; Gerhards and Hackenbroch 2000) case study of two German towns, one in the East and one in the West, based on data drawn from birth registers with supplemental information about parents. This enabled him to test hypotheses on the influence of social setting on naming and socio-structural dependencies. He found that the degree of societal secularization has an impact on naming, and showed that the societal processes of individualization have produced a greater number of names "in use" over time. In addition, he proved the existence of differing naming habits between social strata and East and West Germany. The data used by Gerhards are not representative samples of the East and West German populations, however. With our data, *representative* analyses for both East and West Germany can be carried out to mirror how the social and societal reality in the two parts of the country impacted naming.

---

[6] However, from the beginning of the seventies onwards, it became increasingly easy to receive West German TV signals in the East (Linke 1987). The West German "yellow press" and other print media, however, only very rarely found their way into the GDR.

# 3        The German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP)

To make valid comparisons of societal sub-groups (which East Germans and West Germans would be called today), one needs a data base that covers these sub-groups representatively, meaning that all social strata are contained in the sample and that the proportions in the sample are identical to those in the total population (sample universe). If the sample is large enough (which ours is), the data mirrors different social groups: well-educated and uneducated people, religious people and atheists, rich and poor, residents of urban and rural areas, and so on. Beyond this basic requirement of establishing a representative sample, analyses of given names are burdened with several methodological and statistical difficulties that occur in particular when comparing *differently sized* sub-samples.

For this study, we analyzed data from the German Socio Economic Panel Study (SOEP), one of the world's largest household panel studies for a single country (cf. Wagner et al. 1993). The SOEP is widely used for analysis of the changing social situation in Germany (see http://www.diw.de/gsoep). A wide array of social indicators is included to cover manifold aspects of social and economic life. The sample fully represents the German population (cf. Schupp/Wagner 2002). Starting in 1984 in West Germany after the fall of the wall, SOEP was expanded to cover East Germany. More than 56,000 persons have been surveyed up to the present day, and about 4,000 of them annually since 1984, i.e., for more than 20 years. SOEP is a household survey, so every member of a household (over the age of 16) is surveyed. In many cases the households include (older) children and different constellations of parents. Because naming is a singular event and we know each respondent's year of birth, we have been able to accurately reconstruct the relevant information for our analysis retrospectively for a time span of about 100 years. Thus the full time period in which the two German states existed (1949 to 1990) is included.

After having reshaped our database to meet the specific statistical demands of our project in terms of representativeness for all birth cohorts, we faced the task of cleaning, recoding and classifying the given names in the sample. We developed a code system consisting of up to four codes for each given name.[7] One of these codes refers to the regional roots of a name.

---

[7] For detailed information, see the project documentation (Huschka et al., 2005). It is currently available on the Internet in German. An English language version will follow soon.

What we tried to capture with it is the regional origin that the name-givers (parents) probably had in mind when choosing the name. This is basically the country or area of the world where the name was "typically" used when chosen by our respondents. For instance, "Andy" is coded as "English/American," while Peter, Maximilian, and Maria are coded as "German" although they are not actually "German" but "Christian" names. German parents, however, consider them "German names" because they have been very common in Germany for centuries. Thus they are, from a German perspective, commonly seen as autochthonous names today.[8]

Another technical note is worth mentioning. A given name can be written in different ways. For instance the German name "Klaus" could originally be written with a "K" or a "C", but the pronunciation is exactly the same. On the other hand, the pronunciation of identically spelled names can differ. There is no variation in the spelling of the name "Kathleen", no matter whether the parents meant the name to have a German or English pronunciation. Therefore, we might encounter difficulties in determining whether people had the "same" name in mind. With our data, it is impossible to clarify this issue because the names in the SOEP were surveyed in written format and we thus have no idea what the actual preferred pronunciation is or was. Thus we only can use these names as one name type, and we decided to unify the differences in spelling (in case of alternative spellings) to minimize artificial variance.[9]

After excluding all persons from the sample who were born before or after the parallel existence of the two German states, or who have a migrant background from outside Germany, we can analyze for this article's calculations a total of 17,293 persons and 1,101 different name types: 11,615 persons were born between 1950 and 1989 in the "old" Federal Republic of Germany, sharing 906 different names (name types), and another 5,678 persons were born in the GDR, sharing 678 different name types.

---

[8] The three other codes refer to the cultural-historical background—the "real" background of a name, so to speak, as it is found in dictionaries. It is worth mentioning that we did not code the "meaning" of names, but their cultural heritages. For instance the name of one of the three kings from the New Testament, "Melchior," would in our system be coded as "Hebrew" because this is the "cultural heritage", even if the "meaning" of the two name parts would be "Mäläk" (King) and "-or" (brightness or light).

[9] By standardizing spelling, as a side effect, we minimize privacy protection problems, which are most severe in cases of uniquely or rarely used names. For special research questions the original spelling can be analyzed as well.

# 4 Naming practices in East and West Germany

## 4.1 Individualization and distribution patterns of names in East and West Germany

Due to the differences in the dominant ideologies and social structures of the two German societies, we expect the level of individualization to be higher in the West than in the East. The Latin root of the concept "individualization" is "in-dividuum". It means "the indivisible", and in this sense, the less someone has in common with others, the more individuality should be attributed to him. Hence, the fewer people who share the same name, the greater the level of individualization (Gerhards 2005, chapt. 6). Accordingly, we have sought to determine how many different names were in existence. If we calculate the ratio of population divided by the number of name types, we get 8.4 for East Germany and 12.8 for West Germany. This means that—statistically—more newborns share the same names in our West German sample. If we would plot a graph (with the percentages of name types on the horizontal axis and the percentages of people bearing these names on the vertical axis) to describe the rank/frequency distribution of the names in East and West Germany, we would get two lines: a more steeply rising one for West Germany and flatter one for East Germany. These lines suggest that—surprisingly—naming in East Germany is more individualized since, not only on average but also at nearly all points of the distribution curve, fewer people share the same names. But does West Germany really show more uniformity, the phenomenon we had expected to find in East Germany? The answer is no. Our application of the measure of individualization is invalid because of the unequal sample sizes and the special distributions of naming behavior within these unequally sized samples.

Name types and their distribution in samples are difficult to compare in a meaningful way, because differences in sample sizes produce misleading results if not taken explicitly into account.[10] From a certain sample size upwards, the weight of the very popular names increases steadily (in relation to the share of population covered by rarely used names) with each individual who is added to the sample. Of course, bigger samples always include more people with rare names, but more people with popular names as well. It is fairly obvious that the larger a sample, the greater the necessary increase in sample size to include a person with

---

[10] See Baayen (2001) for a general discussion about these general issues, and Huschka and Wagner (2005) for a discussion of frequencies of names.

an additional name type. Thus all the people who would be added to the sample until the person with a new name type appears have names that are already in the sample, which increases the percentages of those with the more popular name types. This does not mean that it is impossible to draw inferences from samples, but that comparisons of frequency distributions are valid only if the samples being compared are equal in size.[11]

Comparing East German and West German respondents in SOEP means dealing with great differences in sample size, since the West German sample is twice as large as the East German one.[12] The best way to handle this problem in a statistically reliable manner is to reduce the West German sample to the size of the East German sample through random sampling, i.e., drawing a sub-sample from the larger sample.[13] To improve the statistical robustness of our results, we draw not just one but 30 random "sub-samples West". The differences between the 30 sub-samples give us a hint as to the precision of our calculations.[14]

What are the results? The population / name type ratio is almost the same in East as in West Germany using the new reduced West sample: the statistical artifact of very different ratios when using samples of very different sizes for East and West Germany is corrected from 12.8 (see above) to 8.3 for West Germany, which is now as high as the East German ratio (8.4). Such a small difference of 0.1 is not statistically significant. The mean number of name types found (based on 30 random samples West) is 687, and thus only slightly higher than in East Germany (678). The corrected numbers show that East Germans were not more individualized than West Germans. But nevertheless, our hypothesis of more individualized naming behavior (in terms of more different name types) in West Germany than in East Germany was wrong.

To test how name types were distributed across the population, we plotted the frequency-rank distribution curves for East and West Germany. We see that the distribution curves present

---

[11] This methodological problem is very important if contrasting countries, birth cohorts or different points in time (see Huschka/Wagner, 2005). One can try to overcome the problem of sampling by simulation measures (see Baayen, 2001, chapters 3 to 6). But in the case of names, the best method is just to make sample sizes equal.

[12] The actual population size of West Germany is more than three times larger than the East German one. In the SOEP, East Germans (as well as labor immigrants) are over-represented to increase statistical power. So weights are used to correct proportions and to assure a representative database.

[13] In the case of differences in the length of text corpus (different numbers of words), sampling is a problem, because different parts of a text have different styles. This is the reason why linguists try to overcome the problem of the "LNRE Zone" (Zone of Large Number of Rare Events) by simulation techniques. In the case of names, sub-sampling is the optimal instrument.

[14] To ensure statistical correctness, we have drawn 1,000 random sub-samples for some calculations. This is a very time-consuming procedure, and it turned out that 30 sub-samples produce statistically robust results.

the typical picture that has been identified for other countries in other publications (see, e.g., Tucker 2001, Eshel 2001):

Figure 4-1
**Frequency-rank distribution curves of name types for East and West Germany**
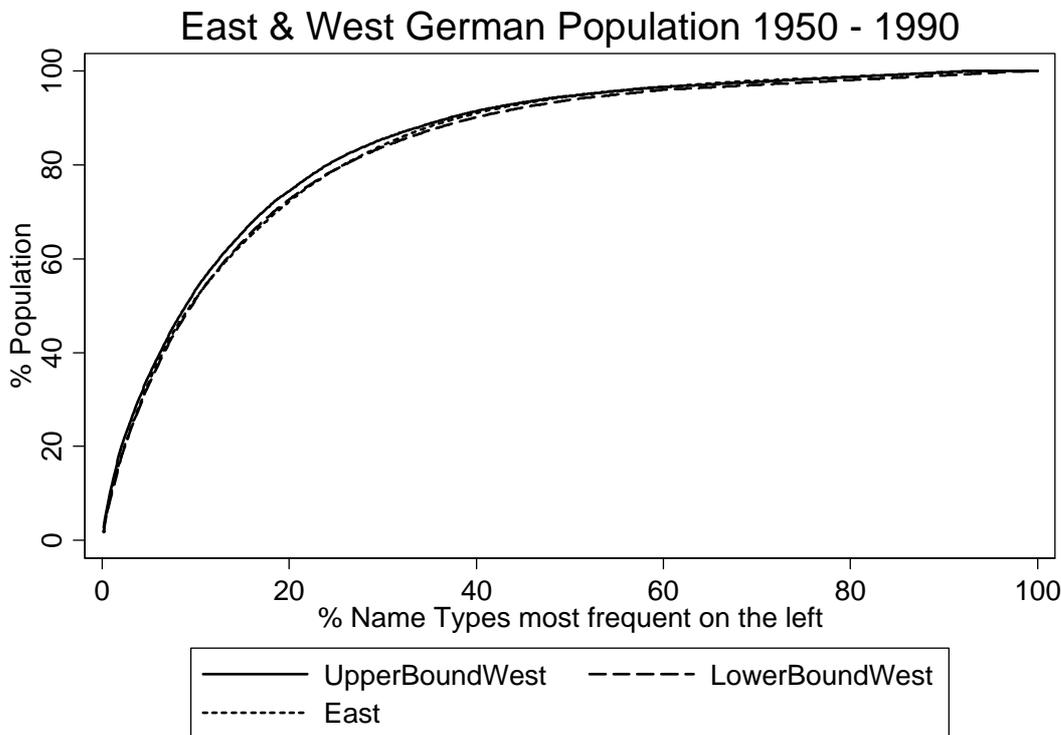


Data Source: German Socio-Economic Panel Study

On the horizontal axis, we entered the name types in descending frequency as a percentage of all names, beginning with the most popular names on the left. The newborns with each of these names are shown on the vertical axis as a percentage of all newborns. For West Germany there is not one curve but two: the so-called "Upper Bound West" describes the curve of the highest shares of newborns covered by the respective percentage of name types found within the 30 sub-samples, whereas the so-called "Lower Bound West" shows the lowest shares found. The difference between the two estimates is called "confidence interval". Meeting our expectation that they would be very uneven, the distribution curves for both parts of the country start near the zero point and rapidly rise to about 80:25 and 90:38, and then slowly to 100:100. Already, 50 percent of all name types found in East and West Germany cover 95

percent of all newborns in both parts of the country.[15] However, the more important comparative result is that there are absolutely no significant differences between the name distribution patterns of newborns in East and West Germany. In each part, people were just as likely as those in the other to receive an extremely popular, moderately popular, or rare name. Furthermore, everybody was equally likely to share his or her name with relatively the same number of people if the positions of their name types in the popularity rankings were the same in East and West Germany. Thus there is absolutely no indication for one part of the country showing more individualized naming habits, neither when looking at the numbers of name types, nor when looking at the distribution of these name types among the persons born between 1950 and 1989.

Our first substantial finding is a lack of support for the hypothesis that West Germans, much more than East Germans, deliberately created social distinction through their name choices during the 40-year time span in which the two German states existed.

## 4.2 Differences in concrete name preferences

The fact that the name distributions in East and West Germany followed exactly the same pattern does not necessarily mean that East and West Germans used the same names. In our data we found 195 out of 678 name types given to East Germans that were not used in the West at all. There are 423 names that have only been found in the West German sample, but this information is not very useful for comparisons because the West sample is larger than the East sample. Thus there is a higher probability of having more different name types in the West sample.[16] However, the crucial piece of information here is that in each part of the country, names were found that had not been given to children in the other part.[17] Hence the question arises whether people in East Germany developed different tastes although the name

---

[15] At this point we must warn against using the figures above for direct comparisons with other data on other countries. Such comparisons are not valid if the sample sizes and sample probabilities of people within the units of comparison differ substantially (see: Huschka/Wagner (2005) and Baayen (2001) for a general discussion of rare word frequencies). For the same reason, the comparisons between Israel, the US, and Germany done by Eshel (2001) are not valid, although his conclusions point in the right direction. Tucker (2001) compares differently sized, but very large samples (in the US and Canada) as well. So this comparison is not strictly correct. However it is not more than a footnote to his otherwise very impressive article.

[16] The numbers of name types are calculated using all Germans in the SOEP, born 1950–1989. To compare these numbers directly, we would have to draw equally sized sub-samples from West Germany as above, but then we would lose information. The focus of our conclusions here is not on directly comparing these numbers but rather comparing certain name features like being uniquely "western" or "eastern".
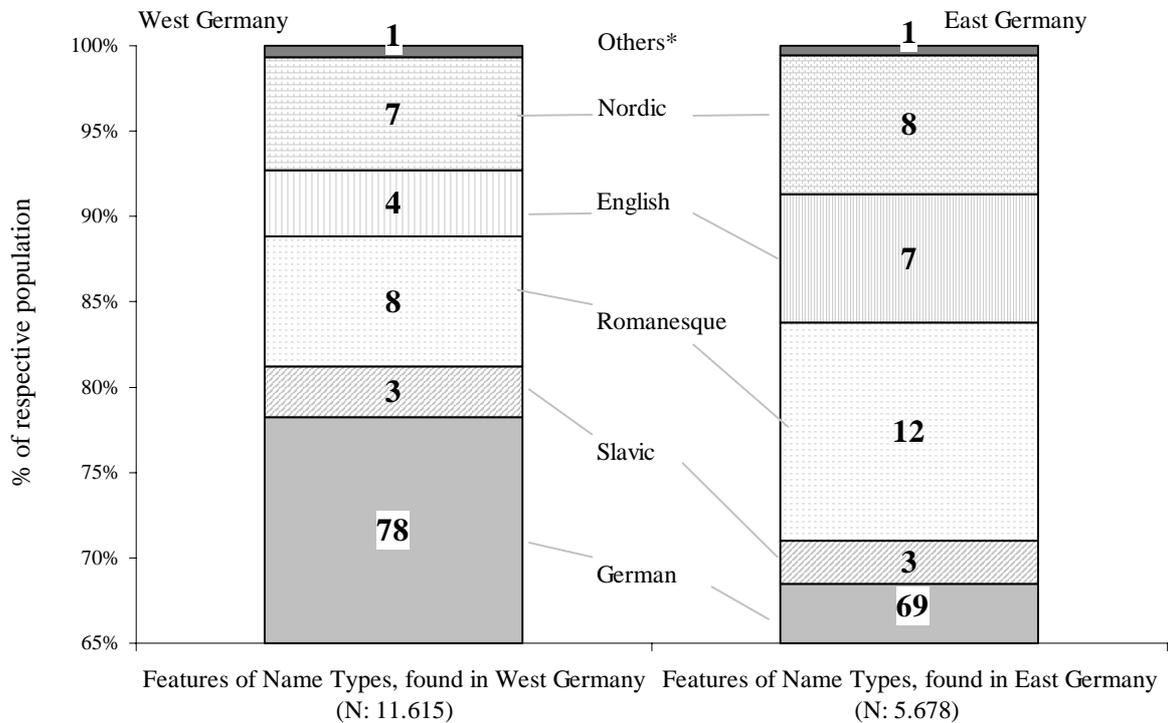
[17] To be precise: these names may be found in the other part of the country but are so seldom that they do not show up in the small samples commonly used in the social sciences.

distribution pattern was the same as in West Germany. After all, almost every third name type used in East Germany was not found in the West German sample. But how many of the East German newborns were given such unique "Eastern" names? In other words: were the names that are only found in East Germany *widespread* among newborns there, or were they chosen by only a few parents? It turns out that on average, about seven percent of East German babies were given one of the names only found in the East and not at all in the West. Obviously these uniquely East German name choices were not very popular among the "average" East Germans. For the sake of completeness, we report that the name types that are unique to the West also cover only about eight percent of the West German newborns. In both parts of the country, nine out of ten people have names that are found to be prevalent in the other part of Germany. Clearly an overwhelming majority of parents draw names for their newborns from the same name repertoire.

But does this mean that there were no or only very minor differences on the level of concrete name types as well? Again, we suggest that the answer is no. Obviously the two countries shared cultural and naming traditions as well as a common language, factors that promote common agreement about tastes and hinder the emergence of completely distinct preferences for certain names. The main difference in naming between East and West Germany might not be that certain names appear exclusively in one or the other part of the country, but that we see different levels of popularity of the same names. We can thus assume that people classify certain names as typically "eastern" or "western" not because they exist in one part of the country and not in the other, but because they are very rare in the one part and very popular in the other. So, to approach a test of naming differences, we must focus on the roots of names (a) and on differences in the popularity of these roots (b).

(a) We analyzed the origins of the name types found in East and West Germany, and plotted a graph of their distribution among the populations.

Figure 4-2
**Origins of name types**



Features of Name Types, found in West Germany (N: 11.615)    Features of Name Types, found in East Germany (N: 5.678)

*Others includes: Turkish, Arabian, Persian, Asian, Hungarian, Hebrew, Baltic and Indian names.

Data Source: German Socio-Economic Panel Study

The largest share of the newborns in both parts of the country were given German names: 69 percent in East Germany and about 80 percent in West Germany. Romanesque names, English names, and Nordic names were also considered fashionable more often in East Germany than in the West. Again, this is a surprising result. We expected the proportion of Slavic names to be higher in East than in West Germany, but this is not the case. We also expected the proportion of western names (English and Romanesque) to be higher in the West than in the East, yet the opposite is the case. Even though East Germany was part of the East European "world", expecting parents did not adopt names from their "socialist friends" but rather oriented their choices towards the Western hemisphere—and especially across the Atlantic.

Further calculations provide evidence of developments that occurred over time: in East Germany, German names fell constantly in popularity over the years, and revived around the middle of the 1980s. Names with Slavic or Nordic roots show constant popularity over time, whereas Romanesque names hit a clear peak in popularity in the mid-1970s. Only English names constantly increased in popularity over time in East Germany. The picture for West

Germany also follows the path of diminishing popularity of German names, whereas Romanesque and English names increased in popularity, but on a lower level overall than in East Germany.

(b) To find out more about different popularities of names, we concentrated on the 20 most popular name types in the two parts of the country. These top-scoring names cover approximately about a quarter of the population in both samples. To assure the robustness of our results, we again drew 30 random samples for West Germany, from each of which we then extracted the top 20 name types. All in all, we found a total of 39 different name types in the top 20 name types of all 30 of the West German sub-samples, and with these, we compared the top 20 East German name types. All in all, we found a total of 48 different name types, belonging either to the East German top 20 or to at least one of the 30 West German top-20 name type lists. The geographical roots of the top-scoring names are mainly German. In both parts of the country we found one Romanesque name type and two Nordic names among the top 20. The majority of the most popular names in Germany are German names, in East and West Germany. But there are differences in taste: we found that nine of the top 20 East German names did not occur in any of the 30 West German top-20 lists. None of the foreign name types were on the top-20 list of the other part of the country.

Table 4-3
Top 20 name types

| Initial Two Letters of Top 20 Most Popular Name Types in East and West Germany | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (full names suppressed for compliance with data protection regulations) | | | | | |
| East Germany | | | West Germany | | |
| Rank | First 2 letters of the names | Geographic Roots | Rank* | First 2 letters of the names | Geographic Roots |
| 1 | Th | German | 1 | Th | German |
| 2 | Mi | German | 2 | Mi | German |
| 3 | An | German | 3 | St | German |
| 4 | **Ka** | German | 4 | **Sa** | German |
| 5 | **Ke** | Nordic | 5 | **Ha** | German |
| 6 | Fr | German | 6 | An | German |
| 7 | St | German | 6 | Pe | German |
| 8 | Pe | German | 8 | Ch | German |
| 9 | He | German | 8 | Pe | German |
| 10 | **Je** | Nordic | 10 | **Kl** | German |
| 11 | Pe | German | 12 | **Jü** | German |
| 12 | Ma | German | 12 | **Mo** | German |
| 13 | **St** | German | 12 | **An** | German |
| 14 | **Se** | German | 13 | **Bi** | German |
| 15 | Ch | German | 13 | **An** | German |
| 16 | Uw | German | 15 | **Ma** | German |
| 17 | **Si** | German | 15 | **Cla** | German |
| 18 | **Ma** | Romanesque | 16 | **Ma** | German |
| 19 | **Ut** | German | 16 | Fr | German |
| 20 | **Da** | German | 17 | **Ma** | German |
| | | | 17 | **Wo** | German |
| | | | 17 | **Jö** | German |
| | | | 17 | Ma | German |
| | | | 18 | **Ul** | German |
| | | | 18 | **Sa** | Romanesque |
| | | | 18 | Uw | German |
| | | | 18 | **Ga** | German |
| | | | 19 | Hei | German |
| | | | 19 | **Ka** | Nordic |
| | | | 19 | **Di** | German |
| | | | 19 | **Su** | German |
| | | | 20 | **Ra** | German |
| | | | 20 | **El** | German |
| | | | 20 | **St** | German |
| | | | 20 | **To** | Nordic |
| | | | 20 | **Br** | German |
| | | | 20 | **Ch** | German |
| | | | 20 | **He** | German |
| | | | 20 | **Be** | German |

Bold indicates names not found among the top 20 in both parts of Germany.

Please note that the ranking of names, using samples, produces huge between-rank confidence overlaps. There is no doubt that the names above are the top names within the population universe of all Germans. But from a statistical point of view, the positions within the rankings are not significantly different. Thus, for example, **Th** could actually be second in popularity or rank even lower. Such confidence overlaps between point estimates are highly characteristic for every analysis based on samples but they are often not mentioned.

* The West German top-20 name list contains 39 different name types, depending on the coincidence of the 30 random sub-samples of the West sample, which have been drawn to assure comparability. If there are four names ranked 19, each of which made it to rank 19 in at least one of the 30 West German sub-samples.

Data Source: German Socio-Economic Panel Study

In conclusion we can state that there are obvious differences in taste, even when looking at the most popular names.

But how popular are the nine names belonging to the top 20 in the East but not in the West? The answer is: they appear in the West's lower ranks, between 53 and 184 of 906 possible positions. Also all the names that made it into one of the 30 top-20 lists in West Germany are frequently found in East Germany as well. Eleven of 39 appear in the East German top-20 list, and the remaining ones hold positions between 21 and 554 of 678 possible in East Germany.

To learn more about these "popularity differences" and not just differences between the top-20 lists, we calculated a measure that can be described as "popularity distance". We simply took all the 483 name types which have been found in both parts of the country and subtracted their East German ranking from their West German ranking. The results show the East/West rank or popularity distance.[18]

In our calculations, huge rank distances were found for a considerable share of the samples. If we define a distance of at least 50 ranks as a significant popularity distance, almost 38 percent of West German newborns possessed a name that had a very different popularity level in East Germany. These names were therefore much more popular—or unpopular—in the opposite part of the country. In the East, almost 57 percent of newborns received names that were either much more or much less popular in West Germany. If we use an even more restrictive definition of popularity distances as an at least 100-rank difference, we are still dealing with about every third newborn in both East and West. This suggests that while the majority used the same name types, East and West Germans had very different ideas about how elegant or fashionable specific names were. On the other hand, we also find an average of 25 percent of the newborns in East and West Germany to possess a name that was equally popular in both parts (with a popularity distance of less than 20 ranks). Only 51 of 483 name types cover this quarter of the population, whereas 230 of the name types found in both parts have a popularity distance of at least 100 ranks.

These findings support our assumption that the anticipated East/West differences in naming can be characterized as "popularity differences" between the large percentage of names given

---

[18] The highest popularity distance is the exclusive occurrence of a name type in one part of the country. For these names, no popularity distance can be found (in terms of numbers). The highest value of our measure is the maximum number of name types that are shared in both parts of the country. If names are found at the same positions in East and West, the popularity distance is zero.

to the large majority of newborns. In addition to the names with large popularity distances, we still have to deal with the seven to eight percent of children with names representing the greatest popularity distance possible: the names do not occur in the opposite sample.

In order to find out what these differences look like, we contrast the origins of names with large popularity distances with the origins of names with low or no popularity distances between East and West Germany.

Table 4-4
**Distribution of names**

| Distribution of names among the populations: (%) | | Popularity distribution of the names by origin: | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| West Germany | All names | Popularity distance > 100 ranks including names, only found in West Germany | Popularity distance 25 - 100 ranks, names more popular in West Germany | Popularity distance < 25 ranks, names slightly more popular in West Germany | |
| German | 78.2 | 28.1 | 35.1 | 36.8 | 100 |
| Slavic | 2.8 | 63.1 | 5.6 | 31.3 | 100 |
| Romanesque | 7.5 | 39.1 | 42.1 | 18.8 | 100 |
| English | 4.1 | 66.6 | 29.5 | 3.9 | 100 |
| Nordic | 6.7 | 24.1 | 49.9 | 26.0 | 100 |
| Others* | 0.7 | 68.2 | 31.8 | 0.0 | 100 |
| | 100 | | | | |
| East Germany | All names | Popularity distance > 100 ranks including names, only found in East Germany | Popularity distance 25 - 100 ranks, names more popular in East Germany | Popularity distance < 25 ranks, names slightly more popular in East Germany | |
| German | 69.4 | 24.1 | 37.4 | 38.5 | 100.0 |
| Slavic | 2.5 | 55.3 | 8.3 | 36.5 | 100.0 |
| Romanesque | 12.3 | 49.1 | 37.1 | 13.8 | 100.0 |
| English | 6.8 | 81.6 | 16.2 | 2.2 | 100.0 |
| Nordic | 8.4 | 31.3 | 47.8 | 20.9 | 100.0 |
| Others* | 0.5 | 25.8 | 74.2 | 0.0 | 100.0 |
| | 100.0 | | | | |

*Others includes: Turkish, Arabian, Persian, Asian, Hungarian, Hebrew, Baltic and Indian names.

Data Source: German Socio-Economic Panel Study

Let us first look at the column of table above that gives the shares of population with names that are equally popular in East and West Germany (popularity distance less than 25 ranks), by origin of name. The numbers vary between 39 and 2 percent. For the exotic "others",

which come from a variety of origins, the percentage of "East/West agreement about popularity" is zero. This group of names is obviously chosen for the purpose of drawing deliberate distinctions by a small, very particular group of parents. And apparently, it works: if parents want to give their children unique names, these exotic names are an effective choice. The results suggest that there is no significant popularity agreement about most of the names used in East and West Germany, no matter what their roots. Those shared most by East and West Germans are German names, followed by Slavic and Nordic names. But even when looking at German names, the shares of newborns with names that are similarly popular in both parts of the country are only 39 percent in the East and 37 percent in the West.

Focusing on the names rated differently in the two parts of the country, an astonishing 82 percent of English names given to East German newborns appear to have been rated significantly differently by West German parents. The same is true as well for almost 55 percent of the Slavic and 50 percent of the Romanesque names. The picture for West Germany follows the same pattern.

In sum, we can say that even when it comes to the same name types, East and West Germans held extremely different ideas about which names were fashionable. West Germans generally stuck to German names, although they also used Romanesque and Nordic names. East Germans used Romanesque and English names to a greater extent than their West German counterparts. They did not orient their choices toward the Eastern hemisphere, with which they were affiliated politically. Obviously name choices gave people the opportunity to express personal tastes transcending all political boundaries—or even to express visible, but silent opposition. In this way, special tastes developed, although the naming patterns were the same in terms of individualization in both parts of Germany.

## 4.3    Developments over time

What we know so far is that even if there were some exceptions in naming patterns, East and West German parents drew the names for their children from the same reservoir. There are some significant differences in concrete name popularity when looking at the roots of names, but the main differences between East and West Germany are different ideas about the stylishness of concrete names.

To complete our picture of naming differences we have answer the following question:

When did the two parts of Germany diverge from each other in terms of different naming practices? To approach an answer, we must examine the extreme categories from the table above: the shares of East German newborns with names that were equally popular in West Germany (popularity distance of less than 25 ranks) and the shares of East German newborns with names that were used very differently to name West German newborns (popularity distance at least 100 ranks, including names not found at all in West Germany). Furthermore, we need to examine this data from a historical perspective.

Figure 4-5
**Popularity distance between East and West German names**



**East Germany: percent (running average of shares of 4 years) of population has names, that are:**
(N: 5.678, weighted)

Names only found in East Germany or popularity distance of at least 100 ranks (including unique East German names)

Names, equally popular in East and West Germany (popularity distance < 25 ranks)

Names only found in East Germany
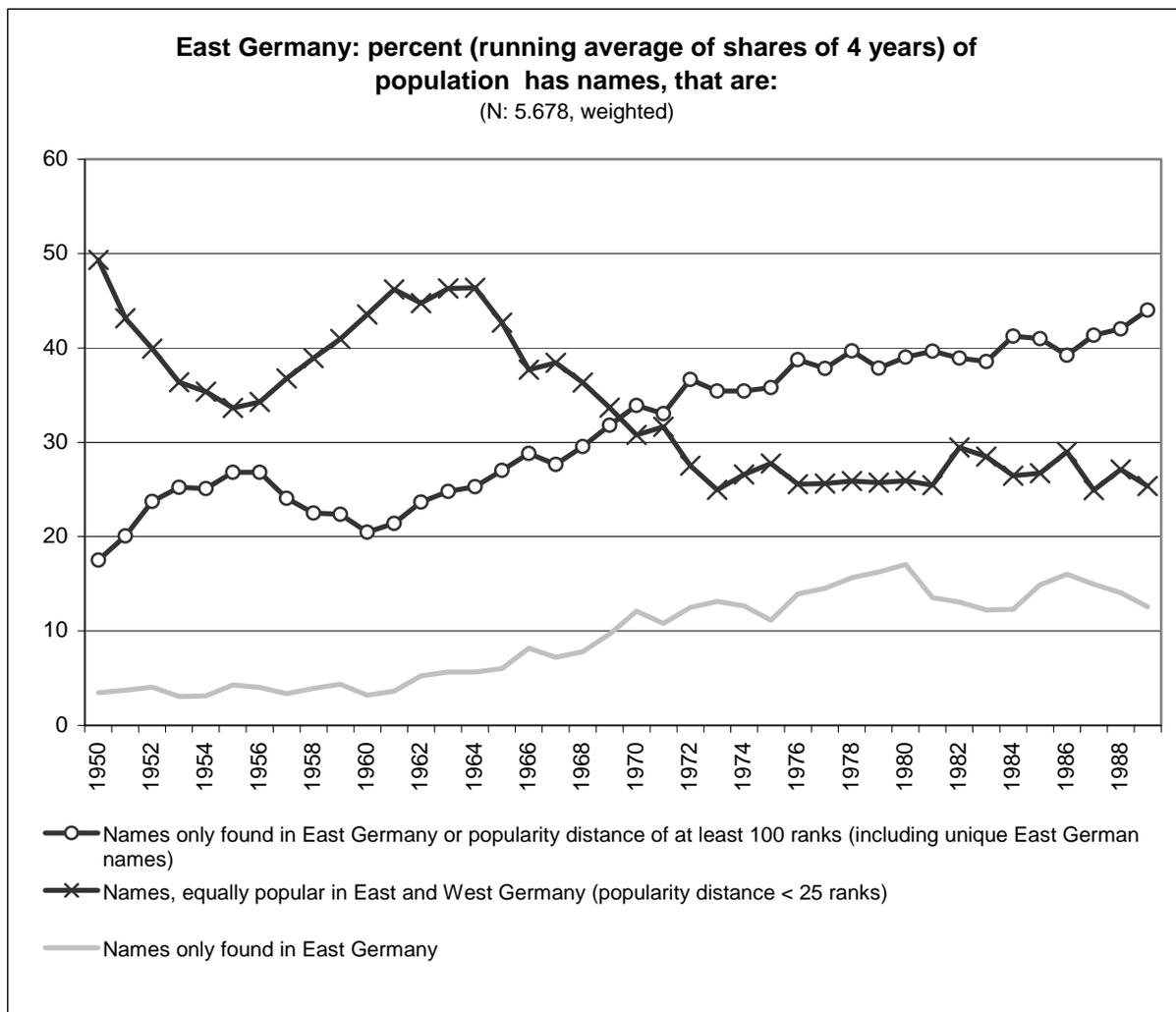
Data Source: German Socio-Economic Panel Study

The crucial information provided by the graph above is the diverging development in East Germany between equally popular names in East and West, and those names which were much more popular or unpopular in the East than in the West. In 1950, half of East German

newborns received names that were equally popular in the West. This share drops towards the mid-1950s, increases for a period of about 10 years, and then significantly drops from 1964 on to stabilize at a level of between 25 and 29 percent since 1981. The names that are only found in East Germany or have a popularity distance of at least 100 ranks cover about 17 percent of East Germans born in 1950. This share has risen significantly and, with a small break in the late 1950s, constantly. In 1989 almost half of East German newborns were given names not used for West German newborns or had a very different level of popularity among West German parents. Also the shares of children given names that were not used at all by West German parents in our sample (the third, gray line) has the same tendency but on a lower level. But their increase is obvious as well, even if the magnitude was only 17 percent of the East German newborns around 1980. In any case, the rise in popularity of the group of names given to East Germans and rated very differently in popularity in West Germany proves that what we could call a specifically "East German taste" in names really did emerge. This emergence was not limited to a few isolated "pockets" but rather covered a significant swath of East German society.

# 5        Conclusions

We can summarize the main results of our study as follows.

1. We expected that differences in the dominant ideology, lifestyles, and social structures of the two German societies had an impact on the distribution of names. Thus, the level of individualization was expected to be higher in West Germany than in East Germany. This hypothesis is not verified by our data. There are absolutely no significant differences between the name distribution patterns of newborns in East and West Germany. West Germany does not show more individualized naming habits than East Germany, either when looking at the numbers of name types, or when looking at the distribution of these name types among persons born between 1950 and 1989. This is extremely interesting given that the degree of individualization in naming grew over the last few decades within the overall German sample (cf. Gerhards 2005, Huschka and Wagner 2005).

2. We expected to find a higher share of Slavic and eastern European names in East Germany as a result of its being part of the socialist bloc under Soviet domination, and we expected a higher share of Anglo-American and Romanesque names in West Germany. This second hypothesis is not verified by our analysis either. Although East Germany was part of the East European "world", parents did not adopt names from their "socialist friends" but rather oriented their choices westwards—and particularly across the Atlantic. This may be due to a widespread rejection of Communist ideology on many levels of society. Russian names were extremely unpopular, expressing a form of silent (but visible) protest. The seven percent average share of newborns given English names in East Germany was indeed not overwhelming, but it rose to 20 percent from the late 1970s onwards.

3. East German and West German parents increasingly developed their own ideas about appropriate names for their children. From the 1970s onwards, the shares of East German children given names rated much differently in the West is consistently higher than the share with names rated similarly in the West. Not even the increased chances for East Germans to pick up TV signals from the West, especially from the 1980s onwards, reversed this trend. It can be assumed that the short period of convergence in naming in the late 1950s and early 1960s was a result of the West German "Wirtschaftswunder", which was observed closely, and no doubt with some amount of longing, by East Germans. Furthermore, during this period, peo-

ple living in the GDR still had the possibility to travel across the border to visit relatives in the West, where they could personally experience the "good life" and get a "taste" of the western world. There was still an exchange of personal information, which also included style issues, and certain adaptation mechanisms were still at work. The opportunities for personal contacts between the people in the two German states plummeted with the building of the Berlin Wall. From that point on, naming patterns in East Germany diverged starkly from West German patterns. On the one hand, the numbers of East German newborns with "Eastern" names followed a relatively linear path from the 1960s onwards. On the other, the popularity of names considered similarly fashionable in both parts of the country diminished dramatically starting in the early 1960s, but this development stabilized in the mid-1970s at a level of 25 to 29 percent. This stabilization can, in fact, be an outcome of the improved opportunity for East Germans to receive West German TV signals. The mid-1970s were also the period when English names experienced a dramatic leap in popularity, not only in the East but also in the West, albeit on a much lower level.

We believe that two more general conclusions can be drawn from our empirical evidence. First, we conclude that naming patterns underline other sociological evidence hat shows widespread rejection of Communist ideology by the vast majority of the East German population. Russian names were extremely unpopular, and silent (but visible) protest was expressed in the choice of alternative name types. Second, naming patterns seem to follow a "hidden" law in societies that share a common history, as the two German states did. Although the two societies developed different tastes for concrete name types, the degree of concentration and individualization remained the same. This is particularly interesting because the degree of individualization in naming increased over recent decades within the overall German sample (cf. Gerhards 2005, Huschka and Wagner 2005). Thus, naming patterns are not stable at all. This underlines the importance of future onomastic research which should try to answer the question why basic naming patterns remained the same in divided Germany over 40 years.

# References

*Arai*, Mahmood, Peter *Skogman Thoursie*, Anna *Thoursie* (2004): Changing Family Names: Discrimination or Assimilation. Unpublished paper presented at the Harvard University Inequality Summer Institute.

*Aura*, Saku, Gregory D. *Hess* (2004): What's In A Name? CESifo Working Paper No. 1190.

*Baayen*, R. Harald (2001): Word Frequency Distributions. Dordtrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

*Bertrand*, Marianne, Sendhil *Mullainathan* (2003): Are Emily and Greg More Employable Than Latisha and Jamal? A Filed Experiment Evidence on Labour Market Discrimination. NBER Working Paper No. 9873

*Bird*, Edward J., Joachim R. *Frick*, Gert G. *Wagner* (1998): The Income of Socialist Upper Classes During the Transition to Capitalism - Evidence From Longitudinal East German Data. In: Journal of Comparative Economics, Vol. 26, No. 2: 211-225.

*Duden* (2004): Lexikon der Vornamen 2004. Dudenverlag: Mannheim.

*Eshel*, Amram (2001): On the Frequency Distribution of First Names. In: Names: A Journal of Onomastics., Vol. 49.1: 55-60.

*Fryer*, Roland G. Jr., Steven D. *Levitt* (2004): The Causes And Consequences Of Distinctively Black Names. In: Quarterly Journal of Economics. Vol. CXIX No. 3: 767-803.

*Galbi*, Douglas A. (2001): A New Account of Personalization and Effective Communication. http://www.galbithink.org (Nov. 2003)

*Galbi*, Douglas A. (2002): Long-Term Trends in Personal Given Name Frequencies in the UK, http://www.galbithink.org/names/agnames.htm (Aug. 2005)

*Gerhards*, Jürgen (2003): Die Moderne und ihre Vornamen. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

*Gerhards*, Jürgen (2005): The Name Game., forthcoming. Transaction Publishers

*Gerhards*, Jürgen, Rolf *Hackenbroch* (2000): Trends and Causes of Cultural Modernization. An Empircal Study of First Names. In: International Sociology 15: 501-532.

*Hanks*, Patrick, Ken *Tucker* (2000): A Diagnostic Database of American Personal Names. In: Names: A Journal of Onomastics., Vol. 48: 59-69

*Huschka*, Denis, Gert. G. *Wagner* (2005): Distribution of Personal Given Names in Germany in the 20th Century – A Methodological Contribution on Onomastic Research from a Sociological Perspective.", Berlin: mimeo.

*Huschka*, Denis, Jürgen *Gerhards*, Gert. G. *Wagner* (2005): Messung und Analyse des sozialen Wandels anhand der Vergabe von Vornamen: Aufbereitung und Auswertung des SOEP - Dokumentation der Datenbasis und der Vercodung., Berlin:
http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~gerhards/english/proj_given_names.html

*Lieberson*, Stanley (2000): A Matter of Taste. How Names, Fashions, and Culture Change. New Haven: Yale University Press.

*Lieberson*, Stanley, Eleanor O. *Bell* (1992): Children's First Names: An Empirical Study of Social Taste. In: American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 98/3: 511-554.

*Linke*, Norbert (1987): Die Rezeption der Programme von ARD und ZDF in der DDR als Gegenstand der SED-Kommunikationspolitik. In: Publizistik 32: 45-68.

*Schupp*, Jürgen, Gert G. *Wagner* (2002): Maintenance of and Innovation in Long-term Panel Studies The Case of the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP). In: Allgemeines Statistisches Archiv, Vol. 86/2: 163-175.

*Tucker*, D. K. (2001): Distribution of Forenames, Surnames, and Forename-Surename Pairs in the United States. In: Names: A Journal of Onomastics., Vol. 49.2: 69-96.

*Wagner*, Gert G., Richard *Burkhauser*, Friederike *Behringer* (1993): The English Language Public Use File of the German Socio-Economic Panel. In: The Journal of Human Resources, Vol. 28/2: 429-433.

*Wolffson*, Michael, Thomas *Brechenmacher* (1999): Die Deutschen und ihre Vornamen. 200 Jahre Politik und öffentliche Meinung., München und Zürich: Diana.