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First names given in France, 1800–2019: a window into the process of individualization

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Abstract

What can first names tell us about populations of the past, as well as our present day? This article uses the number and distribution of first names given to newborns in France from 1800 to 2019 as an indicator of the degree of individualization, i.e. parents' willingness to give their child a unique identity and to make others regard it as unique. Newborns receive more distinct names, from fewer than 2,000 names per year in the 1900s, compared to more than 13,000 per year since 2010. Fewer newborns are given one of the Top-10 most frequently given names of the decade, from 65% of newborns in 1810–1819 to 10% in 2010–2019. Fashion for first names has been also changing more quickly since the early 20th century, i.e., the most popular names currently remain in fashion for a shorter period of time. Overall, in France as elsewhere in the West and in the world, more and more parents are choosing for their children – particularly for their daughters – relatively new, distinctive and individualizing names. The analysis of first names can thus help social scientists, including historical demographers, measure the process of individualization and compare it across countries – a task that has been notoriously difficult to this day.

Keywords

Baby name, civil registers, distinction, fashion, forename, historical demography, onomastics, Western countries

JEL codes: J1, O1, Y1, Z1

Introduction

What can names given to newborns tell us about populations of the past, as well as our present day? In Europe since around the 12th century, the first name of most people has been a Christian name, i.e., a New Testament name or the name of a Christian saint or martyr

(Lawson 2016: 176; Leibring 2016: 206). In Europe from the 12th to the 18th centuries, Christianization of first names – which has eliminated most pagan names as well as, in Roman Catholic Europe, most Old Testament names – greatly reduced the size of the name stock, that is, the number of different first names that were given at least once. Thus, a few first names came to suffice to name most of the population (Bozon 1987: 84–85; Leibring 2016: 205–212). This reduction in the number of first names and its concentration around the names of Christian saints has contributed, from around the 12th century, to attribution of two or even three first names, with the aim of distinguishing individuals bearing the same name (Leibring 2016: 207–208; Desplanques 1986: 67, 70; for various monographs on France from the 17th to the 19th centuries, see Dupâquier et al. 1984).

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the number of different first names in Europe increased again. In France, this was the case from the 18th century with introduction of names from Greco-Roman mythology and names from literary works: *Julius* gave *Jules*, *Augustus* – *Auguste*, *Diana* – *Diane* and *Flora* – *Flore*, while the Rousseauist names *Julie* and *Héloïse* spread (Leibring 2016: 208–209). Then in the 19th century the number of first names increased by several means: masculinization of female names and, more often, feminization of male names; suffixation (*Marie* gave *Maria* as well as *Mariette*, *Marielle*, *Marine* and *Maryse*); simplification (*Élisabeth* gave *Élise*); and emergence of compound names (Bozon 1987: 89–91).

What is the meaning of these variations in the size of the first name stock? When choosing a first name for their child, European parents have long wished to express conformity to a tradition or allegiance to a group: they gave their child the first name of his/her grandparent, godfather or godmother or the name of a local saint. Nowadays, the author would argue, parents prefer to express their own distinctive tastes, rather than conformity to some tradition or group norm: they seek to distinguish and singularize their child by choosing a name that will make it “stand out” (Twenge et al. 2010) rather than resemble other children’s names. In other terms, 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.

This paper studies the number and distribution of first names given in France, as well as the shortening of the first name fashion cycles, as indicators of the process of individualization, which itself is related to modernity, including the demographic transition (lower fertility and increasing investments in children) as well as a more recent “second demographic transition” (free choice in matters of marriage, divorce and fertility). This interpretation of the number of first names as a window into the process of individualization is in line with the fact that in French literature of the 17th - 20th centuries, the frequency of (Christian) given names has constantly been increasing (Brunet 1988: 124, based on the Frantext database).

Data and Methods

The author uses two separate data sources on first names given in France. The 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. The database, which includes only annual infor-

mation on first names that were given at least three times by sex and year, is comprehensive only for the period since 1946.

The 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.

Overall, these two data sources enable the author to study first names given in France from 1800 to 2019. When possible, the author also compares these data with administrative data on first names given in England and Wales from 1904 to 2014 (Office for National Statistics 2014, 2020), in the United States from 1880–1889 to 2010–2019 (Social Security 2020), as well as with census data on first names in Brazil in 2010 (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 2010).

The author uses STATA 15.1 to compute elementary statistics on these data sources, including the number of distinctive first names given by sex and year, the share (%) of newborns who were given one of the top-10 names of the decade, and the number of first names in the decade's top-10 which already were in the previous decade's top-10, by sex and birth decade.

Results and Discussion

Babies have been receiving a higher number of distinctive first names, especially since the 1950s

From 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. Fourquet and Manternach (2019: 60, 90) have called this trend a rise of “mass narcissism”.

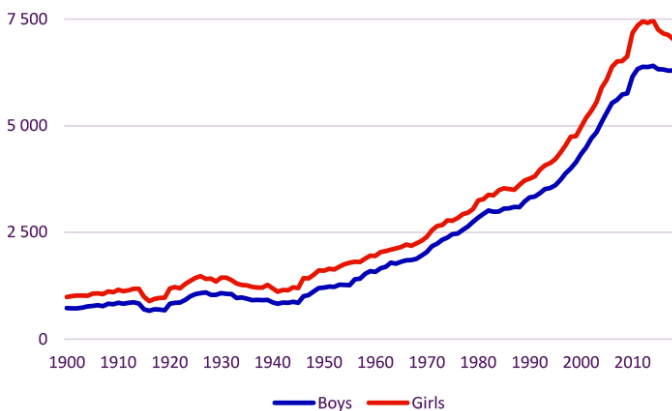


Figure 1. Number of distinctive first names given in France by sex and birth year, 1900–2019. *Field:* births in France (excluding Mayotte) from 1900 to 2019, N = 85 047 407. *Source:* INSEE 2020.

Among the first names given in France in the 20th century, there were always more female than male names (Figure 1). “Whereas in the classical ages [16th–18th centuries], female first names were always less numerous, however, since the 19th century onwards they have multiplied, and the male stock has been overtaken by the female one” (Bozon 1987: 90; see also Desplanques 1986: 65–66). More feminine versions of initially masculine names than masculine versions of initially feminine names came into existence, and in addition feminine diminutives became first names more often than masculine ones. “From the nineteenth century onward [...], the number of circulating female first names has exceeded the number of circulating male first names: while *Jeannette* becomes an individual first name, *Jeannot* remains a nickname (and is not registered in the civil registry)” (Coulmont 2014: 34).

The fact that parents tend to give relatively more original, varied or foreign names to their daughters than to their sons is not specific to contemporary France. This can also be seen in Germany at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries (Gerhards and Hans 2009: 1109–1110; see also Gerritzen 2006: 180) and in Spain in 2004 (Mateos and Tucker 2008). Actually, this fact is not even specific to the Western or Christian populations, as it has been reported in the long history of the Jewish diaspora – in which religious culture is passed on through boys – until the 20th century (Lawson 2016: 180), in the Parisian Jewish bourgeoisie during the 19th century (Grange 2016: 78–79), among immigrants to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Sue and Telles 2007: 1384; Carneiro et al. 2020), among immigrants and descendants of Hispanic immigrants in Los Angeles County in 1995 (Sue and Telles 2007: 1395–1408), among immigrants (from Southern Europe, the former Yugoslavia, and Turkey) in Germany from the 1980s to the 2000s (Gerhards et Hans 2009: 1118), among the Russian-speaking minority in Finland in the 2000s and 2010s (Eskola et Hämäläinen 2019: 207), among immigrants to France in 2008 (Mignot 2021), and among Pakistani Muslim immigrants to the UK (Bramwell 2011: 36). The fact that parents tend to give relatively more traditional names to their sons was also observed in Turkey in 1950–2010 (Sabuncu and Coulmont 2011), in Iran in the 1960s–1980s (60 percent of boys are given an Islamic name compared to only 25 percent of girls) (Habibi 1992: 258), among Israeli Jews in the 1970s–2010s (Landman 2016: 140), among the Palestinian middle school students in Israel and the West Bank in the 2000s–2010s (Amara 2014: 220–223), and among the Malays in Malaysia in 2016 (Robustova 2016: 216).

To explain this phenomenon and its relatively general nature, it is sometimes argued that sons, who are responsible for passing on the family heritage (farm, livestock, family business) as well as the family identity and family name, are quite often given first names after their forefathers, thus inheriting the small stock of traditional first names. In contrast, for girls, the choice of first name is more aesthetic, fashionable, and distinctive, leading to an increase in the number and diversity of first names given.

Babies have been less often receiving one of the most popular first names, especially since the 1950s

While in the 1810s, 65% of newborns in France were given one of the top-10 most popular names of the decade, in the 2010s it was only 10% (Figure 2). If we examine only the most common first names for each sex in the 1810s (Jean and Marie) and in the 2010s (Gabriel and Emma), the evolution is striking again: whereas in the 1810s, 14% of boys were named *Jean* and 19% of girls - *Marie*, in the 2010s only 1% of boys were named *Gabriel* and 1% of

girls - *Emma*. These major decreases in the concentration of first names reflect the rise of cultural individualism.

The most traditional first names of the last two centuries in France have been found in the whole Western world for a long time. The most given male name in France from the 1800s to the 1950s is *Jean* (Dupâquier et al. 1987). *Jean* is also the most frequently mentioned Christian first name in French literature in the 17th - 20th centuries (Frantext database, where it appears in 1,528 texts out of 3,000) (Brunet 1988: 131). It is since around the 12th century that the Latin name *Iohannes* has given various cognates: *Jean* in French, *Giovanni* in Italian, *Juan* in Spanish, and *João* in Portuguese, as well as *John* in English, *Hans* in German, etc. (Leibring 2016: 204). Latin *Iohannes* or *Ioannes* itself comes from the Greek *Ἰωάννης* which itself comes from the Hebrew *Yohanan* (יְהוֹנָן) or *Yehohanan* (יְהוֹחָנָן), which in classical Hebrew means “God is good”. *John* was also the most given first name in the United States in the 1880s-1910s (Social Security 2020), as well as in England and Wales in the 1910s-1940s (Office for National Statistics 2014, 2020). Their Spanish cognate *Juan* was also the most given male name in Mexico City (Mexico) in the 16th and 17th centuries, before being surpassed by *Joseph* or *Josép* and then *José* in the 18th century throughout the second half of the 20th century (Boyd-Bowman 1970).

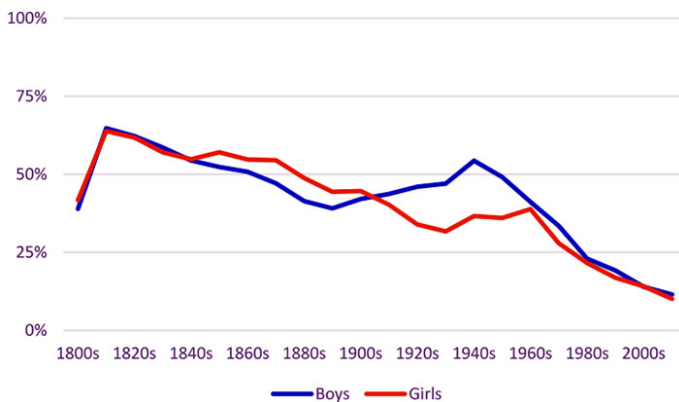


Figure 2. Share of newborns in France who were given one of the top-10 first names of the decade, by sex and birth decade, 1800s–2010s. *Field:* births in France from 1800 to 2019. *Sources:* Dupâquier et al. 1987: 106–107 (1800–1899, N = 89 379); INSEE 2020 (1900–2019, N = 85 047 407). *Note:* Following the convention adopted in (Dupâquier et al. 1987), in this figure the male name *Jean* includes all male compounds beginning with *Jean-XXX* and the female name *Marie* includes all female compounds beginning with *Marie-XXX*.

Marie is the most popular female name in France in the 1800s-1950s (Dupâquier et al. 1987), and is also the most frequently mentioned female Christian first name in French literature in the 17th – 20th centuries (Frantext database, where it appears in 1,104 texts out of 3,000) (Brunet 1988: 131). It is since around the 12th century that the female first name *Maria* has become particularly common in Southern Europe, then in Germany and Scandinavia (Leibring 2016: 206). *Mary* is the most given first name in the United States in the 1880s through the 1950s (Social Security 2020), as well as in England and Wales in the 1900s through the 1910s (Office for National Statistics 2014, 2020). *Maria* has also been the most popular female name in Mexico City since the 16th century; for example, among girls born

in Mexico City in 1800, 92% are given the name *María* among their other given names (they have an average of four) (Boyd-Bowman 1970: 21, 24). Similarly, *Maria* was the most popular name in Brazil in the 1930s – 2000s (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 2010).

The major decrease in the concentration of first names is not specific to France either. The same is true in Mexico City, where names today are much less concentrated than in the 16th and 17th centuries, when 60% to 75% of newborns were given one of the top-10 names for their sex (Boyd-Bowman 1970: 16). The same phenomena can also be observed in the United States, where the share of newborns given one of the top-10 most popular names of the decade sharply declined in the 1880s – 2010s, from 38% to 8% for boys and from 21% to 8% for girls, respectively (Figure 3; Twenge et al. 2010: 21). For more than a century, first names have been generally less concentrated in the United States than in France (Figures 2 and 3), as if the United States were more advanced in the long-term process of individualization. First names have also tended to become less concentrated (and to be relatively more concentrated for boys) in England and Wales since at least the 1990s (Stripe 2019; Office for National Statistics 2020). In Java, Indonesia, the share of newborns who are given one of the top-20 most popular names has been declining since the 1980s (Kuipers and Askuri 2017: 39–40).

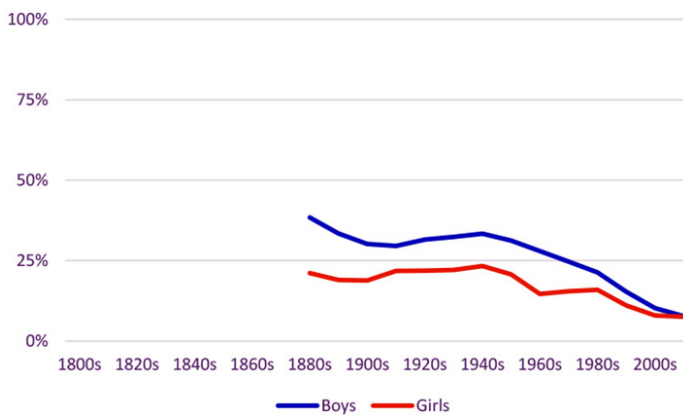


Figure 3. Share of newborns in the United States who were given one of the top-10 first names of the decade, by sex and birth decade, 1880s–2010s. *Field:* births in the United States from 1880 to 2019, $N = 372\,948\,994$. *Source:* Social Security 2020. *Note:* The first names of people born before 1937 or never applied for a Social Security card or did apply without specifying their place of birth are not included in the data.

Fashion for first names has been changing more quickly since the early 20th century

Until the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the vast majority of the most popular names given in each decade were already in the top-10 of the previous decade (Figure 4). In other words, the most popular names remained relatively stable over time. This is no longer the case today. Since the beginning of the 20th century the most popular names have been changing more and more rapidly (Desplanques 1986: 68–69). Whereas *Jean*, *Pierre*, *Louis*, *François* and *Joseph* were in the top-10 of the most popular male names given throughout the 19th century, *Enzo*, *Théo*, *Nathan*, *Mathis* and *Clément* have been in the top-10 for one de-

cade only (the 2000s). The evolution is even clearer for female names: the stability of *Marie*, *Jeanne*, *Anne* and *Louise* throughout the 19th century contrasts to the brevity of the names *Clara*, *Sarah* and *Océane* in the 2000s. In other words, the lifespan of first names is becoming shorter, thus, they are becoming more and more reliable indicators of the generation and age of their bearer, which was not the case before (Bozon 1987: 89–91). Therefore, In France, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries we moved “from the ‘baptismal name’ transmitted by godparents to the ‘first name’ chosen by parents” (Boyer 2016: 12), “from respect for tradition to a concern for distinction” (Boyer 2016: 18). In most European countries since the 19th century, the stock of female first names has been more plentiful than the stock of male first names, and the rate of name updates has been faster for female than for male first names (Lawson 1995: 1744; Leibring 2016: 210).

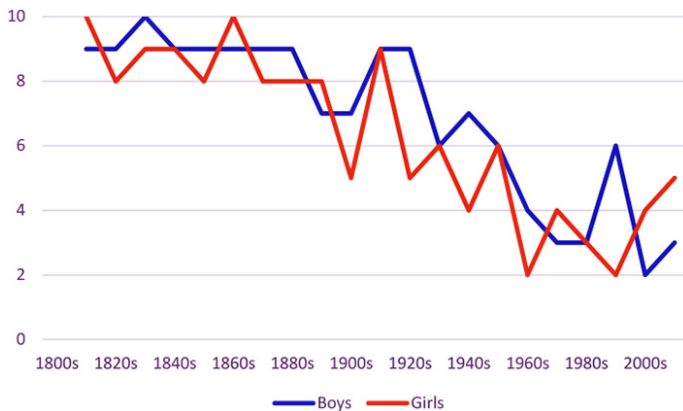


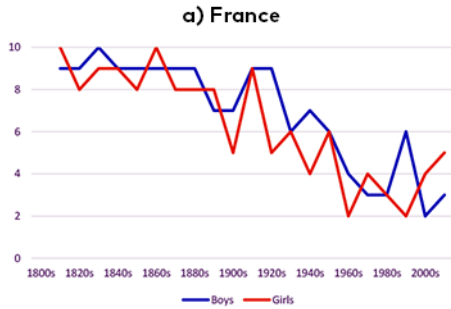
Figure 4. Number of first names in the decade’s top-10 in France, which already were in the previous decade’s top-10, by sex and birth decade, 1800s–2010s. *Field:* births by decade in France from 1800–1809 to 2010–2019. *Sources:* Dupâquier et al. 1987, p. 106–107 (1800–1899, N = 89 379) ; INSEE 2020 (1900–2019, N = 85 047 407). *Note:* Following the convention adopted in (Dupâquier et al. 1987), in this figure the male name *Jean* includes all male compounds beginning with *Jean-XXX* and the female name *Marie* includes all female compounds beginning with *Marie-XXX*.

The shortening duration of first name fashion is also observed in other Western countries where long-term data on given names are available. This is the case in England and Wales, the United States, and Brazil, with varying degrees, time frames, and gender gaps (Figure 5). This is also the case in Java, Indonesia, where since the 1980s the most popular first names have been significantly changing from decade to decade (Kuipers and Askuri 2017: 43–45).

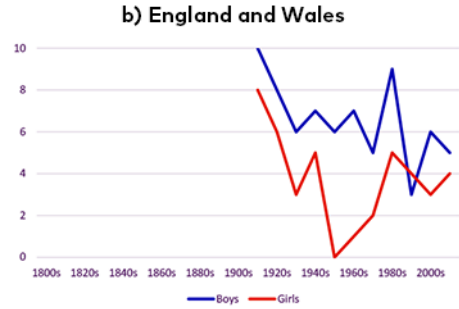
Are boys’ and girls’ first names becoming more similar?

The process of individualization, proxied here by the number and distribution of first names given in France as well as by the shortening of first name fashion cycles, is not the only long-term trend at work in French society.

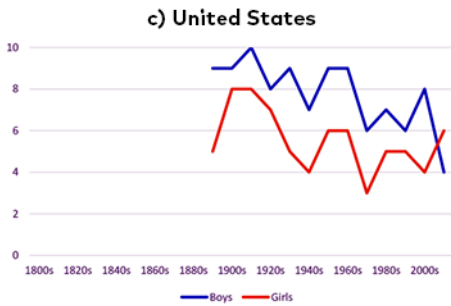
Does the evolution of boys’ and girls’ first names also reflect the convergence of status and expectations regarding both sexes? Accordingly, do boys’ and girls’ names have more similar morphology (Figure 6) and phonology (Figure 7) now than before?



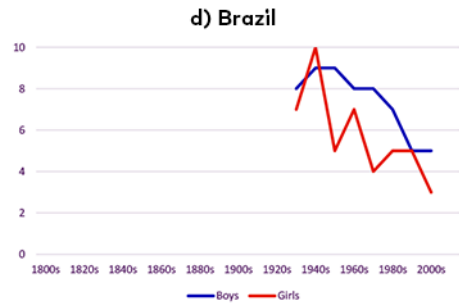
Field: births by decade in France from 1800–1809 to 2010–2019.
Sources: Dupâquier et al. 1987, p. 106–107 (1800–1899, N = 89 379); INSEE 2020 (1900–2019, N = 85 047 407).



Field: births by year every 10 years in England and Wales from 1904 to 2014, N = unknown.
Sources: Office for National Statistics 2014, 2020.



Field: births by decade in the United States from 1880–1889 to 2010–2019, N = 372 948 994.
Source: Social Security 2020.



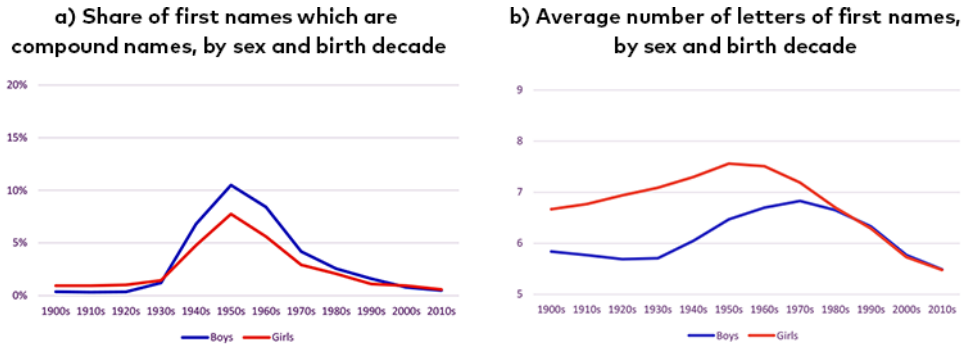
Field: decade of birth of people present at the 2010 Brazil census, N ~ 200 000 000.
Source: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística 2010.

Figure 5. Number of first names in the decade’s top-10, which already were in the previous decade’s top-10: international comparisons

The share of compound names, which was very low among the first names given at the beginning of the 20th century and is also very low today, peaked in the middle of the 20th century, especially in the 1950s, with male compound names slightly prevailing (*Jean-Pierre, Jean-Claude, Jean-Luc, Jean-Paul* or *Jean-Louis*) compared to female ones (*Marie-Christine, Anne-Marie* or *Marie-Claude*) (Figure 6A). Therefore, concerning their (compound) structure, boys’ and girls’ first names have not become more – or less – similar over time. However, both male and female first names are increasingly shorter (Figure 6B). Whereas until the 1970s female names were, on average, longer than male names, since the 1980s this has not been the case anymore (Figure 6B). Therefore, boys’ and girls’ names have recently become more similar – and indeed indistinguishable – in length.

Since the 1950s, the share of given names beginning with a vowel has slightly increased (Figure 7A), while the share of female names ending with a vowel has slightly decreased (Figure 7B). The most salient fact, however, remains the difference in ending between male and female names: today about 85% of given female names end in a vowel, compared with only 34% of male names (Figure 7B). Similarly, among the most frequently given names in Pennsylvania in 1990, most female names ended with one of the following three vowels -a, -e, or -i, while most male names ended with the other letters (except for -h and -y, which were equally frequent in both sexes) (Barry and Harper 2000). While in French the feminine ending is -e, in Latin and most Romance and Slavic languages it is -a, and it is also -a in Semitic languages like Arabic and

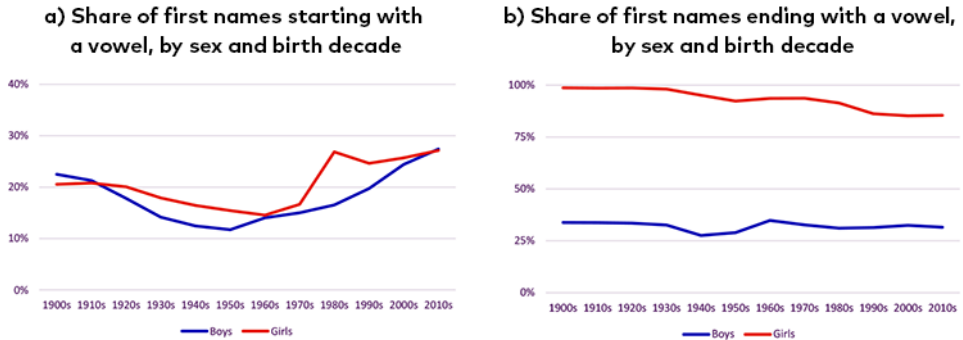
Hebrew. Since the human brain tends to associate sounds like “bouba” with a round shape and sounds like “kiki” with a pointed shape (this is called the “bouba-kiki effect”¹), several research studies are investigating whether male and female names sound different and, if so, whether these differences in sounds reflect differences in expectations from boys and girls. Among English-language first names, for example, it would appear that female first names relatively often have sonorities that may seem “round” (*Amelia*) or small-sounding (*Emily*), while male first names relatively often have sonorities that may seem “pointy” (*Jack*) or large-sounding (*Thomas*) (Pitcher et al. 2013; Sidhu and Pexman 2015; see also Whissell 2001).



Field: births by decade in France from 1900 to 2019, N = 84 264 960.
Source: INSEE 2020.

Field: births by decade in France from 1900 to 2019, N = 84 264 960.
Source: INSEE 2020.

Figure 6. Morphology of first names given in France, 1900s–2010s



Field: births by decade in France from 1900 to 2019, N = 84 264 960.
Source: INSEE 2020.

Field: births by decade in France from 1900 to 2019, N = 84 264 960.
Source: INSEE 2020.

Figure 7. Phonology of first names given in France, 1900s–2010s

Overall, in France girls’ and boys’ first names still have very different endings, however, since the 1980s, girls’ names ceased to be longer than boys’ ones.

Conclusions

This research on first names given in France from 1800 to 2019 leads to the following three main conclusions. First, newborns have been receiving a higher number of distinctive na-

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bouba/kiki_effect

mes, especially since the 1950s: from fewer than 2,000 different names per year in the 1900s, compared to more than 13,000 per year since 2010.

Second, fewer newborns are given one of the top-10 names of the decade, from 65% of newborns in 1810–1819 to 10% in 2010–2019. Once again, the drop has been particularly pronounced since the 1950s.

Third, changes in the fashion for first names have become more rapid since the early 20th century, i.e., the most often given names remain in fashion for a shorter period of time: while the names *Jean* and *Marie* were in the top-10 of the most given names throughout the 19th century, *Enzo* and *Clara* stayed in the top-10 for one decade only (the 2000s). These long-term trends indicate that in France, as elsewhere in the West and in the world, more and more parents are choosing for their children —particularly for their daughters – relatively new, distinctive and individualizing names. The author interprets these findings as indicators of a long-term process of individualization, a process which social scientists have found particularly difficult to measure, especially in the long term and across countries.

Finally, in France in the 1980s, girls' names ceased to be longer than boys', but it remains to be seen whether this fact is specific to France or generalizable to at least some other Western countries – and if so, how it should be interpreted.

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