Children's first names and immigration background in France

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Abstract

We present evidence indicating that immigrants and especially those from the Maghreb/Middle-East give first names to their children that are different from those given by the French majority population. When it comes to natives with an immigrant background, these differences are very little pronounced. Being born and raised up in France as well as being exposed to the French society and culture through residence, citizenship and the educational system draws individuals with or without immigrant background into similar ways of expressing belongings when choosing first names for their children, indicating the very strong assimilating forces in the French society.

1 Introduction

There is evidence that names reflect cultural background and socio-economic belongings (see Lieberson (2000) and Fryer and Levitt (2004)). In this paper we study for the first time the choice of first names given to children by immigrants in France and examine how these choices reflect cultural background. Immigrants and their children are influenced by the cultural features of the country of origin. At the same time the experience of interacting with the French society shapes their preferences and feelings of belongings. We examine the persistence of the impact of immigration background and the role of the French experience for naming patterns.

Parents choice of first names can be interpreted as a measure of their group belonging and might have consequences for the economic integration of their children. Based on a field experiment in the US, Bertrand and Mullainathan (2004) report that job applicants carrying names such as Emily and Greg have higher chances of call back than those with names such as Lakisha and Jamal. Arai and Skogman Thoursie (2009) report a positive earnings effect associated with name change for immigrants who renounce their foreign names.

A large number of European immigrants in France originate from Italy, Portugal and Spain. Many first names in these countries have linguistic (Roman)

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and religious (Biblical) origins in common with French names. First names in the North African and Middle-Eastern countries are less similar to common French names due to differences in the linguistic and religious roots of these names. We should thus expect first names given by immigrants with Arabic/Muslim background to be less close to French names than those given by European immigrants with a Roman/Christian background. We study how these similarities/differences in the pool of available names are reflected in the naming practices of immigrants as well as those of natives with an immigrant background in Europe or the Maghreb/Middle-East.

The French survey *Histoire de vie*, conducted by the French National Statistics, INSEE in 2003, has recorded the first name of the children of the respondents. This feature enables us to construct an index of frenchness of a name based on probabilities of observing a name among various groups. Our French Name Index (FNI) ranges between zero and one, where values closer to one reflect higher frenchness. A name like *AUDE* has an index of one and a name like *ABDELLAH* has an index of zero.

Our results indicate that immigrants from Europe give first names to their children that are different from those given by native French with native parents. These differences are more pronounced for immigrants with foreign citizenship. As expected, the differences are much larger for immigrants from the Maghreb/Middle-East. However, these differences cannot be attributed to religious roots of common names in this group as we find no correlation between FNI and the religious practice of these immigrants. When it comes to natives with an immigrant background, we find no differences except a slightly lower FNI (0.09 in a scale from 0 to 1) for natives who have a European immigrant background. Though cultural background has strong impacts on what type of first name immigrants choose for their children, these differences seem to be rather weak among those who are born in France.

The remainder of the paper is as follows. In the next section, we present data and our empirical set-up. Regression results are presented in Section 3 and the paper is concluded in Section 4.

2 Data and Empirical Setup

The data used in this paper are from a household survey conducted in 2003 by the French National Statistics Institute (INSEE). The survey covers individuals 18 years and older living in the Metropolitan France. The original sample includes 8403 respondents. We remove all immigrants who came to France in 2003 and those who do not have any children. After also removing observations with missing values, we obtain a sample of 5682 individuals.

In our data we find the following top 10 names (5 girls and 5 boys) given by different groups as listed in Table 1. As expected, the first names chosen by immigrants from Maghreb/Middle-East are different from first names chosen by Europeans. However, the natives with a background in Maghreb/Middle-East choose names that are similar to other natives. Many parents, natives or not, choose names that are not among the top 10 names. To compare the naming patterns and not only popular names among various groups we need to classify names and use this classification to measure similarities and differences.

Table 1: Top 5 boys and girls name for children

Natives with native parents
NATHALIE, ISABELLE, STEPHANIE, CELINE, CATHERINE
NICOLAS, SEBASTIEN, CHRISTOPHE, PHILIPPE, LAURENT

Natives with parents born in Europe
SARAH, LEA, MARION, ALEXANDRA, AURELIE
THOMAS, ALEXANDRE, MICKAEL, ADRIEN, NICOLAS

Natives with parents born in Maghreb/Middle-East
VALERIE, SARAH, AURELIE, ALEXANDRA,CATHERINE
NICOLAS, PHILIPPE, THOMAS, ALAIN, PATRICK

Immigrants born in Europe
NATHALIE, AURELIE, HELENE, CATHERINE, SANDRA
MICHEL, CHRISTOPHE, PHILIPPE, DAVID, FREDERIC

Immigrants Born in Maghreb/Middle-East
FATIMA, MYRIAM, SONIA, NADIA, KARIMA
MOHAMED, KARIM, RACHID, SAID, ALI

A name has three basic characteristics, root, spelling and pronounciation. There are several ways to classify names according to these characteristics and different classifications reflect more or less the proximity of the pool of names of the background culture to the pool of names in France. For our purpose, we need a measure that emphasizes the parental choice when facing a new cultural environment. We consider two names as identical if they are spelled in a similar way and pronounced in the same way by French speakers. Examples are Mohamed/Mohammed, Arnault/Arnaud or Isabel/Isabelle. Names are considered as different if they are pronounced in different ways by French speakers. Examples are Maria/Marie and Yusuf/Joseph. Finally we have all other different names with different roots, spelling and pronounciation.

We use a measure indicating the relative probability of observing a first name of children among native French population and other groups. This is similar to the index used by Fryer and Levitt (2004) defined as follows:

$$FNI(name) = Pr(name|F)/(Pr(name|F) + Pr(name|G)) \qquad (1)$$

The French Name Index FNI as defined above measures the relative probability associated with a *name* in two disjoint groups: F and G. We define F as the group of interviewed native parents not having a foreign citizen partner. This index is equal to one when only native French give this name to their children. The name $AUDE$ is such a name in our sample. The other extreme is for example the case of $ABDELLAH$ which is only given to children with two immigrant parents.

When cultural experience influences naming practices, we expect that natives with immigrant background choose names with higher FNI than immigrants do.

As shown in Table 2, we find that there is no variation in FNI with respect to the immigrant/native background of the individuals. The average FNI is lower for immigrants and foreign citizens.

Since many names have religious origins, we examine whether differences in naming patterns stem from parents' religiosity or simply reflect general differences in cultural background. We find more religious practice for foreign citizens than for French citizens and in general more religiosity among immigrants from Maghreb/Middle-East than among European immigrants. Among the natives, the pattern of religiosity is very similar for those who have immigrant parents and those who have native parents.[1] For further sample statistics see Table 2.

3   Regression results

Results of our estimations are presented in Table 3. We find that immigrants from Europe give names with higher French Name Index (FNI) than immigrants from the Maghreb/Middle-East. This reflects the large overlap in the common French names and other European names and the small overlap for French names and the pool of names from the Maghreb/Middle-East. Furthermore, we find that while natives with immigration background in Maghreb/Middle-East choose the same type of name as other natives, natives with European immigration background choose names that are slightly less French as measured by the FNI.

Controlling for a set of demographic variables and educational attainment does not change the overall picture (see Table 3). Higher age at immigration, shorter duration of residence, foreign citizenship, lower education and not having French language as one of the main languages used during childhood are associated with lower FNI. Names have linguistic/cultural roots as well as religious loadings. As indicated by our results in Table 2, there is a variation in degree of religious practice between various groups of immigrants and natives. A question to answer is whether the observed differences in naming practices are due to differences in the degree of religiosity, or if they simply reflect different cultural belongings in general.

Results in column 4, Table 3 indicate that only for immigrants from Europe we find that those who practice their religion choose significantly different names than those who do not practice a religion. This means that the lower FNI of immigrants from Maghreb/Middle-East does not seem to stem from the higher religiosity of this group but rather reflects the cultural roots of the pool of names.[2]

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[1] We measure religiosity on the basis of the following question: respondents are asked to report their relation to religion choosing among five alternatives: 1) religious practice at least once a month, 2) occasionally (except participations in marriages, baptism and funerals), 3) no practice but a feeling of belonging to a religion 4) no religious practice or feeling of belonging, or 5) rejection of religion.

[2] Separate regressions by groups yield similar results. We also experimented with including a variable whether the partner of the immigrant was native or not. Immigrants with native partners choose names with higher FNI compared to those who have immigrant partner. These estimations essentially confirms the picture presented by the models in Table 3.

4 Concluding Remarks

Measuring the relative probability of occurrence of a name among the majority population and those with immigrant background by a French Name Index (FNI) we reported results indicating that immigrants choose first names for their children that differ from names chosen by natives. The largest differences are observed for Maghreb/Middle-East immigrants. However, the native-born with immigrant background have similar naming practices for their children as the French majority population. The overall naming pattern is robust for controls of demographic and educational variables as well as a measure of religious practice.

We find that the FNI is higher for French citizens, those who are immigrated at younger age, those who have a longer residence in France and have higher education. Being born and raised up in France as well as being exposed to the French society and French culture through residence, citizenship and the educational system draws individuals with or without immigrant background into similar ways of expressing belongings when choosing first names for their children, indicating strong assimilating forces in the French society. Our results are based on data for parents born before the 1990s and children born before 2002. How these patterns will change in the future is a matter of future research. The naming patterns documented in this paper are most likely accompanied by other adjustments leading to assimilation in other dimensions of the various parts of the French population with and without recent immigration background.

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Table 2: Weighted Sample Means

| | NATIVES | | IMMIGRANTS | | | |
| | Native Parents | Immigrant Parents | Europe | | Maghreb/Mid.-East | |
			French citizen	Foreign citizen	French citizen	Foregin citizen
French Name Index						
—average for all Children	0.67	0.64	0.48	0.34	0.21	0.04
Religious vocation						
—practice once a month	0.13	0.09	0.13	0.25	0.33	0.58
—occasional practice	0.23	0.26	0.28	0.39	0.13	0.17
—no practice/belonging	0.38	0.44	0.37	0.27	0.47	0.23
—no practice/no belonging	0.21	0.19	0.19	0.08	0.08	0.02
—rejection of religion	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.01	0.00	0.00
Sex						
—female	0.54	0.55	0.61	0.68	0.42	0.50
Age						
—mean age	51.96	49.49	59.71	51.56	46.77	44.66
Years since immigration						
—average years	0.00	0.00	43.01	28.98	28.23	19.13
Age at immigration						
—mean age	0.00	0.00	14.25	23.14	18.47	25.90
Education						
—primary	0.23	0.21	0.41	0.45	0.29	0.66
—secondary	0.11	0.13	0.08	0.19	0.19	0.07
—tertiary	0.10	0.08	0.14	0.10	0.07	0.03
—higher education	0.56	0.57	0.36	0.27	0.45	0.24
Speaks with parents in:						
—French	0.84	0.55	0.07	0.03	0.09	0.01
—another language	0.07	0.15	0.76	0.87	0.57	0.71
—french and another language	0.08	0.28	0.14	0.07	0.31	0.20
—two other languages	0.00	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.09
Citizenship						
—foreign	0.00	0.02	0.00	1.00	0.00	1.00
N	3921.00	440.00	218.00	179.00	95.00	152.00

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Table 3: Childrens' first name, OLS estimates.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
intercept	0.664**	0.973**	0.953**	0.838**
	(0.004)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.017)
European parents	0.017	-0.086	-0.083	-0.061
	(0.043)	(0.044)	(0.043)	(0.041)
Maghreb/Middle-East parents	-0.041	-0.023	-0.017	-0.024
	(0.029)	(0.031)	(0.030)	(0.032)
Europe	-0.180**	-0.224**	-0.172**	-0.189**
	(0.016)	(0.023)	(0.023)	(0.036)
Europe, foreign citizen	-0.324**	-0.373**	-0.314**	-0.340**
	(0.022)	(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.037)
Maghreb/middle East	-0.457**	-0.537**	-0.486**	-0.454**
	(0.030)	(0.040)	(0.042)	(0.045)
Maghreb/middle East, foreign citizen	-0.620**	-0.694**	-0.620**	-0.589**
	(0.010)	(0.028)	(0.030)	(0.033)
Age X Native		-0.006**	-0.005**	0.000
		(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Years since Immigration		-0.004**	-0.004**	0.001
		(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.001)
Age at Immigration		-0.006**	-0.005**	-0.002
		(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Primary education			-0.068**	-0.035**
			(0.008)	(0.007)
Secondary education			-0.032**	-0.016
			(0.010)	(0.009)
Tertiary education			-0.011	-0.005
			(0.010)	(0.009)
Not Francophone			-0.044**	-0.041**
			(0.009)	(0.008)
Average age of children				-0.007**
				(0.000)
Number of children				-0.004*
				(0.002)
Religious practice				-0.002
				(0.008)
Religious practice – X European parents				-0.248
				(0.136)
Religious practice – X Maghreb/Middle-East parents				0.057
				(0.052)
Religious practice – X Europe				0.104**
				(0.032)
Religious practice – X Maghreb/middle East				0.016
				(0.035)
Adjusted R-squared	0.242	0.436	0.455	0.499
N	5682	5682	5682	5682

NOTE: Huber/White standard errors in parentheses. * and ** indicate p < 0.05 and p < 0.01.