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The first folio of William Shakespeare's work that contains the play *Romeo and Juliet*

What's in a name?

LANGUAGE MATTERS

The arrival of our first grandchild recently prompted a discussion of our reactions to names, as we wondered what his parents would call him.

Juliet Capulet, in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, is overheard by Romeo Montague saying to herself " 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy [. . .] What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

The Capulets and Montagues are locked in a feud, but Juliet affirms that she cannot stop loving Romeo simply because he has the name Montague. It doesn't matter what you call a rose, it will still smell sweet.

Despite what Juliet said, we tend to associate names with characteristics. For instance, many teachers find themselves having to suppress preconceived ideas about what kind of student someone with a particular name is likely to be.

Researchers using an experiment known as the Implicit Association Task have tried to uncover some of these biases. (As a caveat, I should acknowledge that this task is not without its critics.)

Imagine that you have to sort foods into vegetables and meat by pressing two different computer buttons, and that in the same task you have to sort positive words (*angel*) and negative words (*crisis*) using those buttons. People who are more positively disposed towards vegetables will be faster and more accurate at pressing the button for vegetables if that button is also the button they use for positive words.

Instead of vegetables and meat, participants in the experiments with names had to sort different types of name.

When Caucasian participants had to sort Caucasian and non-Caucasian names alongside positive and negative words, the results of the experiment suggested that although the participants reported no conscious bias, they were more positively disposed towards Caucasian names.

This result was taken to indicate racial bias. But this effect is probably due to in-group v out-group differences, or what we are familiar with.

For example, Dutch participants showed a positive implicit bias for typical Dutch names (eg, *Hein*) over typical Moroccan names (*Faiza*), but also for typical Dutch names over Finnish names (*Jarkko*), another predominantly Caucasian group.

In addition, no difference was found when these participants sorted Finnish and Moroccan names.

Although some names seem to stick around (eg, *Charlotte* for girls, *Oliver* for boys), many go in and out of fashion and are influenced by popular culture. In 1966, the year after the Beatles had a hit with the song *Michelle*, that name topped the New Zealand list of baby girls' names.

My own name ranked sixth in the year of my birth, but is now not even in the top 100.

The name *Karen* was in the top 10 (in Aotearoa) from 1955 to 1973 but dropped out of the top 100 in 1988. Now it is often used as an insult, to refer to someone exhibiting aggressive pettiness and self-entitlement.

According to the Twitter-sphere, Karens have short blonde hair, a love of wine, no sense of humour, and are also likely to be anti-vaxxers. Why Karen? One claim is that this use of the name Karen originates from a 2005 Dane Cook comedy sketch called "The friend that nobody likes", with a character called Karen.

Another is that it derives from a poster on Reddit who was sounding off about his ex-wife Karen. Last year saw something of a resurgence of these uses of Karen, primarily to refer to women showing racial or selfish tendencies. Someone has even coined the term Karenovirus to describe their behaviour.

So please be kind to the Karens out there.

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theguardian

Assad's regime crimes: slow, uncertain justice

Viewpoint

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

Ten years on from the uprising against his brutal regime, Bashar al-Assad still reigns supreme, with his cronies around him, committing the same crimes. Hundreds of thousands have died. The cash extorted from the families of detainees is likely to be cushioning the impact of sanctions for the elite, a report recently suggested. The contrast between the enormity of the atrocities, and the absence of a route towards accountability for those at the top, could hardly be more glaring or painful.

Yet the demands of Syrians for justice are as deep and passionate as ever. Last week, they bore their first fruit as a court in Koblenz, Germany, found a former Syrian intelligence official guilty of aiding and abetting crimes against humanity: the first conviction for the regime's crimes.

The significance of the case lay not only in establishing Eyad al-Gharib's guilt, but laying bare the vicious system in which he functioned. In the words of the prosecutors, he and his co-defendant, whose case continues, were "cogs in the wheel" of a security apparatus that carries out torture on an "almost industrial scale". Syria's survivors are all too aware that they may never see its dictator in the dock; justice is not only slow, but uncertain. Yet in this case, however incompletely, it has at last been served.