Living same-name siblings and English historical demography: a reply to Peter Razzell

Chris Galley, Eilidh Garrett, Ros Davies and Alice Reid

It is always reassuring to know that someone has read and engaged with an article that one has written.[1] Peter Razzell's response to our piece published in the previous volume of *Local Population Studies* is therefore to be welcomed because it sheds further light on what we consider to be a neglected aspect of historical demography—the presence of living same-name siblings in some British families. Before proceeding to discuss some of the issues raised by Razzell's comment it is worthwhile revealing how our article came to be written. Galley became interested in this topic as a consequence of his work charting the extent of geographical variations in infant mortality rates during the parish register period (1538–1837), while Garrett et al.'s interest arose as a result of their demographic analysis of the rich census and vital registration data that exists for Skye. A chance remark over a cup of coffee led to a productive sharing of information and a new article began to take shape. Our aim was to present what we believe to be an interesting set of results and to stimulate further discussion.

It is good to know that Razzell does not challenge any of the substantive findings taken from Garrett et al.'s extensive study of Skye; indeed he writes, 'They successfully establish the existence of living same-name children in northern Scotland until the end of the nineteenth century'.[2] Where he takes issue with us is in the introduction to, and conclusion of, our article and his carefully nuanced reading of our examples appears to show that we are in agreement with him about the extent of living same-name siblings in England. This is far from the case. Our article provides examples of living, English, same-name siblings, speculates on their likely extent during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and suggests that their presence invalidates the 'same-name' technique that Razzell developed to detect under-registration in parish registers.[3]

Razzell's technique relies on the following reasoning: if after a parish reconstitution has been undertaken two siblings are found to have the same first name, but there is no evidence in the burial register that the first one has died, he assumes that the first sibling's

1 C. Galley, E. Garrett, R. Davies and A. Reid, 'Living same-name siblings and British historical demography', *Local Population Studies*, 86 (2011), 15–36.

2 P. Razzell, 'Living same-name siblings in England, 1439–1851', *Local Population Studies*, 87 (2011), 65–9.

3 Razzell, 'Living same-name siblings', 00 also discusses other techniques used to assess the quality of parochial registration. Here we will only address the 'same-name' technique.

burial is missing from the register and under-registration has taken place. Once the extent of 'missing' 'same-name' siblings is established, correction rates can then be calculated and applied to the parish register population as a whole to estimate what rates of mortality should have been, had all burials been recorded. The validity of Razzell's technique therefore rests on the following two assumptions:

- There are no living same-name siblings in the sample population; mortality amongst the elder of the siblings is 1,000 per 1,000 born.
- Correction rates for burial registration calculated from same-name families can be applied to the population as a whole; all burials stand an equal chance of being recorded in the registers.

In the first case we believe that this assumption does not always hold true, and in the second we would argue that differences, or similarities, in rates of burial registration cannot be adequately detected from the parish registers alone, and therefore homogeneity should not be assumed.

It was not our intention to provide a wide-ranging analysis of the extent of living same-name siblings in England and Wales, although we would encourage others to undertake this task. Our article merely pointed out that by searching carefully, it is reasonably easy to find evidence of living same-name siblings with the examples of same-name twins providing definitive proof of this phenomenon.[4] We also noted how Razzell's views on same names have changed over time. These are worth repeating. In 1993 he wrote, 'It was extremely rare to give two living children identical Christian names',[5] whilst in 2000 he argued, 'same-names were not given to living siblings in England after the middle of the seventeenth century, and the practice may never have existed even at an earlier period'.[6] Razzell now provides new material, taken from wills (Table 1, p. 67), and here he concedes that, 'will abstracts for other church courts do indicate that living same-name children existed in *significant* numbers, particularly during the period before 1550' (our emphasis).[7] He even finds a few examples from the second half of the seventeenth century (two each from Berkshire, 1650–1699, and from the Canterbury Prerogative Court, 1658).[8] At present Razzell's position is that living same-name siblings do not exist, 'to any extent in the mid-seventeenth century', although we would contend that, as only one of the districts listed in his Table 1 (Durham) lies fully beyond the Severn-Wash line, this statement could relate to only the

4 Galley, *et al.*, 'Living same-name siblings and British historical demography', 19.

5 P. Razzell, 'The growth of population in eighteenth-century England: A critical reappraisal', *Journal of Economic History*, 54 (1993), 752.

6 P. Razzell, 'Evaluating the same-name technique as a way of measuring burial register reliability in England', *Local Population Studies*, 64 (2000), 10–11.

7 Razzell, 'Living same-name siblings', 00.

8 Razzell, 'Living same-name siblings', Table 1.

southern 'half' of England.[9] We would also argue that wills are a 'tricky' source from which to identify living same-name siblings as most of those mentioned will be those surviving to the point at which the will was drawn up. Some of these may have spent some time with a living same-name sibling, but this will not necessarily be 'captured' by the will.

Here we will content ourselves with providing further examples of living same-name siblings taken from two sources that Razzell uses in his response to our paper. Razzell writes, 'the published Marriage Duty enumeration of Bristol, which included approximately 20,000 inhabitants in 1696, does not include any reference to same name children';[10] yet the following can be found in Ralph and Williams' transcription:

> St Michael Parish—Roger Bagg & Grace wife. Andrew, **John**, Ann, Fulean & **John** children & Jane Vogham servant. Children 5 Servant 1;
>
> St Philip & Jacob—William Ellis & Hannah wife. Richard, **Hannah**, Elizabeth, Mary, Sampson & **Hannah** Ellis children.[11]

Writing about the London listing for 1695, Razzell also argues that, 'The London data covers 'almost 60,000 individuals', with 'the wife and children of a man listed next to his name. A search of the listing reveals no living same-name children, and as many of London's inhabitants were migrants from all regions of England, this suggests that the practice no longer existed at the end of the seventeenth century'.[12] Again a brief search revealed the following entry:

> Lammas: Jeremiah, assessor; **Ann** d; Edw, s; **Ann**, d; Chas, s; Peter, s; Jeremiah, s, Jeremiah, apprentice.[13]

We do not wish to argue that living same-name siblings existed in large quantities during the late seventeenth century, but London and Bristol are exactly those places where they would have been less obvious because the very high mortality rates in these and similar urban centres meant that few such children would have survived to be recorded together in any census-type listings.[14] Our article showed that such sources capture only a fraction of all same-name siblings.[15] However, the existence of even *one* pair of surviving, same-name siblings means that Razzell's first assumption becomes invalid. Put simply, when

9 Razzell, 'Living same-name siblings', 66.

10 Razzell, 'Living same-name siblings', 66.

11 E. Ralph and M.E. Williams eds., *The inhabitants of Bristol in 1696*, Bristol Record Society, 15 (1968), 131, 179.

12 Razzell, 'Living same-name siblings', 66.

13 D.V. Glass ed., *London inhabitants within the walls* (London, 1965), 178. A systematic search of this source was not undertaken.

14 J. Landers, *Death and the metropolis* (Cambridge, 1993), 136, suggests that only *c*.50 per cent of London Quaker children survived until their tenth birthday.

15 Galley *et al*., 'Living same-name siblings and British historical demography', 34.

Razzell encounters two siblings with the same name in a sequence of burials, he cannot be certain that the elder child has died and its burial gone unrecorded. An equally plausible assumption could be that he has discovered another example of living same-name siblings. This exact point was made eloquently by Tony Wrigley in a discussion of Razzell's technique; this was referred to in our article, but it is an argument which Razzell continues to ignore.[16]

It is clear that same-name siblings were not as common in England as they were in northern Scotland. Razzell shows that the practice of giving children from the same family identical forenames was in decline in England during the seventeenth century and we, like him, could not find any English examples of living same-name siblings during the nineteenth century. Indeed, what makes the naming patterns in Edward Gibbon's family so interesting is that a younger brother *is* given the same first name, Edward, as his older living brother, but the addition of a second name, James, probably indicates that by this date (1740) the practice of giving children identical Christian names had become unusual.[17] Exactly where and when same-name siblings died out in England is yet to be discovered, but evidence of their existence has been surprisingly easy to uncover and makes us more convinced that some of the many same-name pairs that Razzell has found in parish registers are full siblings, not step-brothers or sisters, and that a certain—although currently unknowable—proportion of them were alive at the same time.

We also have concerns about how Razzell generalises from 'same-name' families to the rest of the population. He states that, 'it is important that [correction of mortality rates] does not rely on any one inflation ratio', and lists ways that the accuracy of the burial registers may be tested against other sources.[18] The usefulness of these alternative measures in various contexts may be debated, but the issue raised by our findings in Scotland is that elder children in same-name pairs on Skye have rather higher mortality than elder children in non-same-name pairs, and therefore same-name sibling mortality is not representative of that of the population as a whole; they do not, in fact, experience 100 per cent mortality.[19] We do not dispute that in many instances children were named after

16 For the original reference and discussion see Galley *et al*., 'Living same-name siblings and British historical demography', 17–18.

17 When Razzell, 'Living same-name siblings', 65, writes that in Edward Gibbon's family, 'there were no living same name siblings baptised and buried in his family', he means that even though Edward and Edward James clearly have the same first name, they can be easily distinguished when family reconstitution is undertaken. For an interesting, nineteenth-century example of sisters being given 'similar' names see C. Jones, 'Eliza and Elizabeth', *Local Population Studies Society Newsletter*, 49 (2011), 10–11.

18 Razzell, 'Living same-name siblings', 68

19 Many infant and early childhood deaths were concentrated into a relatively few families during the early modern period. Some families experienced no infant or early childhood deaths so generalising mortality rates from families known to have experienced a higher death rate than the rest of the population will lead to overall mortality rates being overestimated. The rules adopted when reconstitution is undertaken seek to overcome this problem, see E.A. Wrigley, 'Family reconstitution', in E.A. Wrigley ed., *An introduction to historical demography* (London, 1966), 96–159.

dead siblings, even in populations where living same-name siblings were relatively common and therefore, if a second child was given the same name as an older sibling, the chances were much higher that the older child had died than if the second child had been given a different name. However a further cause for concern is whether, if a burial register was deemed to be 'defective', all burials stood an equal chance of being omitted. If this was not the case then the mortality rates estimated from the registers for particular segments of the population could be very wide of the true mark. If, for example, the burials of children under six months old are the most likely to be omitted from the registers, then the comparatively better survival of first-born, non-same-name children may mean that a smaller proportion of their burials go unrecorded than do those of first-born, same-name siblings.[20] Unfortunately in the absence of sources corroborating the number of deaths, and the number of those deaths which were recorded as burials, it is very difficult to determine differences in burial registration rates within a population or between populations, and this makes interpreting results from the 'same name' technique more problematic, particularly in a comparative context.

The issues involved may be laid out as in Table 1. Let us consider first Scenarios A and B. These involve two populations from the civil register era, where it is taken that all demographic events are recorded, and all survivors can be identified in a subsequent census. In both of these hypothetical populations we observe ten same-name sibling (sns) pairs and 100 non-same-name (nsns) pairs being born. All the younger children are born at least one year after their older sibling and at least one year before the census was taken. Linking the registers to the census we are then able to observe that in Scenario A all of the first-born sns had died before their younger name-sakes were born: their mortality was 1,000 per 1,000, as assumed by the 'same-name' technique. Ten of the first-born nsns had also died; their mortality rate was 100 per 1,000. The overall mortality rate amongst first-borns in this population was therefore 182 (20/110) per 1,000. Amongst the population in Scenario B, however, linkage to the census indicates that in fact only six of the sns first-borns had died. The remaining four survived to appear in the census with their identically named younger siblings. Again ten of the nsns first-borns had died. In this population mortality amongst the sns first born was 600 per 1,000 and overall mortality amongst all first-borns was 145 (16/110) per 1,000. Scenario A meets Razzell's assumptions: there are no living same-name siblings in the population and, because all first-born sns have died and the registers record this accurately, the correction factor is 1.0 for both sns and nsns. The extra four deaths occurring amongst sns in Scenario A mean that mortality is 25 per cent higher in this population than that in Scenario B. Had the mortality amongst sns in Scenario B been only 400 per 1,000 (as shown in Scenario C) then the overall mortality rate

20 In our Skye population, for example, 70 per cent of deaths under one year to non-same-name siblings occurred at 180 days or less. Amongst same-name siblings this proportion was 77 per cent. Infant mortality rates on Skye were low, however, and this difference may have been greater in populations where mortality was higher.

Table 1 **Calculating mortality rates in a hypothetical population, comprising 10 pairs of same-name siblings and 100 pairs of non-same-name siblings, using the same name technique, under different assumptions**

Scenario		Assumptions made when assuming under-registration of deaths	(a) Actual N of sns deaths occurring	(b) Actual N of nsns deaths	(c) Actual overall death rate per 1,000 ((a+b)/110) *1,000	(d) N of sns deaths registered	(e) Assumed N of sns deaths	(f) Correction factor (e/d)	(g) N of nsns deaths registered	(h) Estimated N of nsns deaths (f*g)	(j) Estimated death rate per 1,000 ((e+h)/ 110)*1,000	(k) Over-estimation factor (j/c)
A	1,000 per 1,000 first-born sns die All events registered		10	10	182	10	10	1	10	10	182	1.00
B	600 per 1,000 first-born sns die All events registered		6	10	145	6	6	1	10	10	145	1.00
C	400 per 1,000 first-born sns die All events registered		4	10	127	4	4	1	10	10	127	1.00
D	600 per 1,000 first-born sns die Rates of registration equal	All first-born sns die Rates of registration equal	6	10	145	6	10	1.67	10	17	243	1.67
E	400 per 1,000 sns die Rates of registration equal	All first-born sns die Rates of registration equal	4	10	127	4	10	2.5	10	25	318	2.50
F	600 per 1,000 sns die 5/10 sns deaths registered, all nsns deaths registered	All first-born sns die Rates of registration equal	6	10	145	3	10	3.33	10	33	394	2.71

would have been 127 per 1,000 and mortality in Scenario A would have exceeded this by 43 per cent.

Had these populations been observed using data from the parish register era and had the death rate for Scenario A been calculated using the 'same-name' technique the answer would have been the same, as all ten sns deaths would have appeared in the burial register—its accuracy would have been deemed to be excellent, all deaths were registered as burials. However if only six sns had died, but all had had their deaths recorded, as in Scenario B, Scenario D indicates that, if we followed the assumption of the 'same-name' technique and there could be no living same-name siblings, the supposed lack of burials would prompt us to calculate a correction ratio 'by expressing total second same-name cases (10) as a ratio of registered same-name burials (6)'.[21] Assuming burials went unregistered in equal proportions across the population, a correction ratio of 10:6 or 1.67:1 would be calculated and, alongside the assumed ten sns deaths, it would be estimated that approximately 17 (10 × 1.67, rounded up) nsns had died. Twenty-seven deaths, 11 more than the figure in Scenario B, in a population of 110 first-born siblings would give an overall mortality rate for this group of 243 per 1,000, some 1.68 times the mortality rate calculated in Scenario B. Overestimating the mortality of sns first-borns, and then assuming that the 'missing' deaths have gone unregistered, and calculating a correction rate and applying this to nsns burials, results in the overall mortality rate being overestimated by almost 70 per cent. Had only four deaths been recorded, as in Scenario C then, as Scenario E shows, the 'same-name' technique estimates an overall mortality rate of 318 per 1,000—2.5 times higher than under the assumption of 'no living same-name siblings'. So, the lower the actual mortality amongst first same-name siblings is, the greater the difference will be between the 'number of sns burials appearing in the register' and the 'number of sns burials expected under an assumption of 1,000 per 1,000 mortality', and the greater the correction factor and subsequent overestimation of overall mortality will be.

If, however, same-name siblings were less likely to have their burial recorded in a parish register—say only five in ten, whereas non-same-name siblings had all their burials recorded—then the parish registers under Scenario B, where six out of ten first-born sns had died, would record ten nsns burials but only three sns burials (Scenario F). A correction ratio would be calculated as 10:3 or 3.33:1. Applying this ratio to the ten nsns burials would suggest that just over 33 nsns deaths had occurred. The assumed ten sns and 33 nsns deaths would give an overall death rate of 394 per 1,000 (43.3/110). Thus, as comparing scenarios B, D and F shows, lower registration rates of burials (which were also not recognised to be lower) among same-name siblings than among non-same-name siblings, would lead to additional overestimation of mortality using Razzell's method, as it increases the ratio of 'presumed unregistered' to 'registered' deaths.

21 P. Razzell, 'Evaluating the same-name technique as a way of measuring parish register reliability', in P. Razzell, *Population and disease: transforming English Society, 1550–1850* (London, 2007), 9.

It can be seen from these, deliberately exaggerated, hypothetical examples that the mortality rates calculated using the correction ratios suggested by the 'same-name' technique can differ markedly, depending on several different factors, not least the content and reliability of the data sources available. Table 1 demonstrates that living same-name siblings, and lower rates of recorded burials among same-name siblings, both serve to produce estimates of mortality which are much inflated when compared to the 'true' rate offered in scenario B. Of course, had the rates of burial registration among non-same-name siblings been lower than that among same-name siblings in Scenario F then the estimated mortality rate would have been lower, and thus closer to the 'true' value. Unfortunately, without the presence of listings and other sources from which variations in rates of burial registration might be derived, we are unable to say which scenario, if any, was operating in a particular parish and therefore must be very cautious in our interpretation of mortality estimates, and of comparing them across time and space.

To conclude, we wish to echo Razzell's call for further detailed research into the issues concerning the existence of same-name children, including the correction ratios as applied in the 'same-name technique'. In the meanwhile we would urge the circumspect interpretation of mortality rates estimated using this method, until we better understand the nuances of ecclesiastical and civil registration, differentials in mortality and the evolution of naming patterns over time and space. We hope that increasing our understanding of same-name siblings and the issues they raise is a challenge readers of *Local Population Studies* will rise to meet.