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Man, woman or me? Conflicting identities as evidenced by cross-gender name changes

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Abstract

The apparent incidence of transsexuality, and the frequency of gender transition as its primary treatment, has increased in the past couple of decades. This is in large part because the attitudes in several cultures have changed and the social stigma attached to the condition is not quite as severe as in the past. One of the steps in the social, medical and legal process of transitioning from one gender to another is changing one's name.

The name one has grown up with is typically very closely tied to one's core identity, and changing it is often not a trivial matter. As most Western personal names are gendered, there may be serious conflicts between, first, one's personal identity; second, one's gender identity; and third, the overall goal to fit in as a member of one's target gender. This paper takes a look at these conflicts and attempts to analyse different strategies for resolving them, mostly in the context of gender transition but also in cases where the name is seen as incongruent with one's birth assigned sex.

Introduction

Virtually everyone learns in early childhood that there are two kinds of people: girls and boys, women and men. The criteria for this division are anatomical, but for the purposes of everyday life, biological sex is seen through the various socially constructed layers that constitute gender.¹ These two, sex and gender, are intertwined in several ways, some of them self-evident and some complex enough to require a specialised field of scholarship.

Both sex and gender can also be described from different points of view and determined by different criteria. In terms of sex, Hubbard (1996) describes three usual criteria. The most visible is genital sex, or what the person has between their legs; this is the criterion typically used to classify a newborn baby as a girl or a boy. Looking a little deeper one can observe gonadal sex, or whether they have ovaries or testes, and going even deeper one can look at chromosomal sex and check for the presence of a Y chromosome.²

Gender is usually divided into two main aspects. First, there are *gender roles*: whether someone lives and interacts with others as a woman or a man. These roles depend very much on the local culture, so that the social and career options of a woman in San Francisco are quite different from what is available to her sisters in Beijing, Mogadishu, or Riyadh. Second, there is *gender expression*: how one dresses, talks, and behaves. Here again cultural variation is immense, and a man from the court of Louis XIV would look distinctly effeminate to his brother from modern Nashville – at least until the latter found himself in a duel over the issue. In addition to these, it is often useful to see *gender identity* or the way a person sees oneself with regard to the gender division, as a third aspect coequal with the others.

Legal gender can be seen as one aspect of gender roles, in that modern governments confirm their citizens as belonging to one gender or the other. Names contribute too, and in many cultures they are gender-specific. In Finland this has been a legal requirement since the introduction of the Given Names Act (Eduskunta 1945), which included a clause forbidding one to give a male name to a girl or a female name to a boy.

1. For a brief history of how the term *gender* came to be used in this manner, see Haig (2004).

2. Or, to be a little more precise, the SRY gene

The task of dividing people into two separate and clearly distinguishable sexes would seem simple, and in most cases of course it is. However, there are several intersex conditions where a person does not fit one or more of the criteria described by Hubbard (1996). According to Blackless et al. (2000), up to 1.7% of live babies have one of these conditions. Of these, about 1.5% involve unusual hormonal activity and 0.2% sex chromosomes other than the usual XX or XY, while roughly 0.02% of babies are born with ambiguous genitals.

One way to solve the problem posed by the intersex conditions is to consider binary sex, or dividing people into men and women, as an approximation which, while strictly speaking incorrect, is still useful. After all, it is accurate in at least 98.3% and perhaps even 99.98% of all cases, depending on whether one wants to draw the line at something visible to thorough medical examination or to the naked eye. Historically, people seem to have been aware that the division is not accurate, and adjustments have been made on occasion as the need has arisen. As an example relevant to onomastics, my mother tells how one of her aunt's friends, born at the end of the 19th century, was given both a male and a female name because it was not clear which one would be more correct.

From another point of view, the concept of a clear division into two sexes and genders is brought to question by transsexuality. In this condition, first described in depth by Benjamin (1966), a person is born with a body that belongs unambiguously to one sex but a mental gender identity that is not in line with their body. In sensational media this is often confused with homosexuality, but the two are entirely separate. Transsexuality has nothing to do with sexual orientation or sexuality; instead, the core issue is that there is a severe mismatch between mind and body. In this sense, it would be more accurate to compare transsexuality with body integrity identity disorder (First 2005), an extremely rare condition where the person's body image – likely for inborn neurological reasons – does not include one of the limbs.

Traditionally transsexuality has been treated under a psychiatric diagnosis, but this is changing. There is a growing body of evidence of strong correlations between transsexuality and certain brain structures (J.-N. Zhou et al. 1995; Kruijver et al. 2000; Berglund et al. 2008), and conditions analogous to human transsexuality can be artificially created in animals (e.g. Gahr 2003). Partly because of the new medical evidence and partly because of the social implications of a psychiatric diagnosis, the European Parliament (2011) has recently called the WHO to move the diagnosis to a less stigmatising position. Largely because of the social stigma involved in seeking treatment, there are several widely varying estimates of how common transsexuality is; recent studies (like Horton 2008) give figures as high as 0.03–0.1% of the total population.

The division of people into two fully separate genders becomes even more problematical when one takes into account various gender minorities. Some people, coming from backgrounds that hint on transsexuality, put themselves consciously outside the gender binary (Bornstein 1995), some simply find that the career choices or style do not follow conventional gender roles or typical gender expression. In fact, a lot of feminist thought has been devoted to gender roles, trying to see what is based on biological constraints, what is a result of centuries of male-oriented social conditioning and what lies somewhere in between (For a modern transsexual-oriented view, see Serano 2007, 319–343). In this sense, the strict opposition between masculine and feminine can be considered as artificially constructed (Butler 1990, 23–24) although this socially constructed gender is grounded in anatomical sex.

Even though legally mandated, the gender binary has never completely taken over the Finnish personal name system either. Over half a century ago, the Given Names Act prohibited giving male names to girls or female names to boys, and today the majority of names conform to it: of the names listed in the Population Information System in early 2002, 57.9% were

predominantly female – that is, less than 5% of the name-bearers were male – and 39.9% predominantly male. However, that still leaves 2.2% of the names as gender-neutral.

Names and Identity

The term *identity* can mean several different things. Perhaps the most common use when talking about personal names is to say that a name identifies the person it refers to. Identity, in this sense, is denoting a single individual. However, another common use of the term is to mean the way someone feels they belong to a group or feels affinity with it: for instance, a person can identify as an onomastician, a science fiction fan or a Finn.

The identifying function of a proper name, or the nature of properhood, is not an entirely clear-cut matter either (Coates 2006), and while a name is supposed to identify a person uniquely, this is not normally the case. Most personal names are not unique, and a single person can use more than one name. For instance, at the moment the professional networking web service LinkedIn shows eight others who share my first and last name, three of whom are within my contact network. On the other hand, I have different names I use within a medieval recreation society I belong to and in a virtual world environment – and either of these is *my name* to the extent that I have relatively close friends who never use and may not even know the name that is on my passport.

Names can give strong hints about a person's characteristics. Given the differing naming practices, one's ethnical or cultural background can be clearly visible. Gender is often also apparent in one's name to those who have similar cultural backgrounds, although in cross-cultural contexts names can easily be misgendered (e.g. Gerhards 2005, 104–105). In some countries the connection between given names and gender is legally enforced, while elsewhere the choice of names is almost completely unregulated. However, even in countries like the United States where there is very little government regulation most of the widely used names are gender-specific.

Names are also highly personal, to the point that one's own name is neurolinguistically different from not only common nouns but even other proper names (Müller and Kutas 1996). Name is a significant part of one's self-identity, and the name a child is given influences the growing personality (Longobardi 2006), perhaps having a major effect on how their life eventually turns out (Hagström 2006, 168–169). In choosing the name for a child the parents are at the same time choosing and creating aspects of the child's future identity (Aldrin 2010).

The gender of a given name is usually nicely aligned with the sex of the name-bearer, or at least indifferent to it. This, after all, is at the core of how given names become gender-specific: either a name is entrenched in the common onomasticon as belonging to one gender or the other, or it has not (yet) become gender-specific in this way. However, sometimes this alignment is lacking. The gender distribution of a name changes over time, so that the name gets associated with only one gender (or in extreme cases, the opposite of its original gender), or a name-bearer may have a gender identity that does not match their physical sex and legal gender. How does this mismatch relate to the way the name is tied with one's self-identity? What happens when the name forces one to choose between being oneself and belonging to the gender one feels they are? Does this happen often?

My goal is to tackle these questions from two different angles. Finnish census data provides a good starting point for estimating the number of name changes over the gender boundary, as well as looking at the different types of cross-gender changes. It does not help with analysing the motives for such changes or the criteria for choosing a new name; for this, new data has to be collected from people who have changed their names.

Cross-gender Name Changes

To look at the frequency of cross-gender name changes, I used data from the Population Information System. It contains every Finnish citizen and permanent resident who was alive when the system was set up in 1969, or has been born since then. The subset I used here was extracted in early 2002. It contains people who have Finnish listed as their native language, grouped by their birth decade, with only some data fields:

- ▲ current names
- ▲ oldest known names – in the vast majority of cases, the names given at birth
- ▲ current sex

The *sex* field was used to divide names into three categories: male, female and gender-neutral. Such a division sounds simple, and in a sense it is; however, the concept of gender-neutrality is not in fact well-defined. For various reasons, virtually all common names have at least one or two bearer of the opposite sex, but a name that has some ten thousand male and two female bearers cannot really be considered gender-neutral. For this study I chose to treat as gender-neutral those cases where both sexes have at least 5% of the name-bearers. It should be kept in mind that Finnish officials use different criteria when deciding whether a name is acceptable for a boy or a girl, so that a name that is sufficiently rare and not obviously related to a strongly-gendered one can be considered neutral. For the purposes of this study such an approach would have been unwieldy.

If gender-neutrality is hard to define, cross-gender name changes are not much easier. At worst, a person can have names that belong to all three gender categories, both before and after the change. My chosen criterion was that at least one of the the old names should belong to a different category than at least one of the current ones. Obviously, this results in a lot of false positives, but the number was still small enough that weeding them out by hand was possible. Table 1 shows the total number of cross-gender name changes, before the manual search for those changes that involve an actual gender change. The results of the manual search, shown in Table 2, show a much smaller but still considerable number of name changes that involve a complete change of gender. There are several different types of these name changes.

Born	f→n	f→m	n→f	n→m	m→f	m→n
1900	10	12	12	19	11	4
1910	41	33	70	81	24	18
1920	66	43	148	141	34	31
1930	50	49	132	120	34	23
1940	64	30	83	65	17	23
1950	72	22	51	27	25	27
1960	80	38	32	15	37	23
1970	65	67	25	32	19	28
1980	40	10	26	34	7	25
1990	19	3	29	58	9	36
<i>Total</i>	<i>507</i>	<i>307</i>	<i>608</i>	<i>592</i>	<i>217</i>	<i>238</i>

Table 1. Total number of cross-gender name changes

Born	f→m	m→f	f→n	m→n
1900	2	3	1	0
1910	4	2	4	3
1920	5	2	5	1
1930	6	2	6	3
1940	7	11	9	2
1950	11	21	4	5
1960	25	30	8	3
1970	21	11	8	0
1980	2	1	2	6
1990	0	1	0	2
<i>Total</i>	<i>83</i>	<i>84</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>25</i>

Table 2. Number of complete cross-gender name changes.

First, there are changes away from gender neutrality. These are mostly cases where a person is either dropping completely one of their names that is gender-neutral, or changing it to a variant more in line with their other names. These changes were most common with people born in the first half of the 20th century, especially the 1920's and 1930's – that is, just before the Given Names Act prohibited cross-gender names. It seems that during the 1940's and 1950's, perhaps in part as a result of the act, given names became more strongly gendered than they had been. For instance, *Kaino* and *Vieno* which had originally been almost completely gender-neutral began to be seen as female names, and some men felt uncomfortable enough to change their names. This, of course, further established the names as female.

Similar changes have happened later as well. There are some cases where a new name started as gender-neutral and later on became popular enough that it was established as either male or female. The most notable example of this is *Jani*, which started out as a rare name given to both boys and girls but became a very popular male name in the late 1960's. Similarly, *Mirka* had a brief neutral period in the 1960's but became female in the 1970's.

Second, there are changes towards gender neutrality. Mostly these are cases where the person adopts an informally used nickname as one of their legal names. Such nicknames are often hypocoristic forms that can be derived from several names; for instance, in the first half of the century *Ami* appears to have been used commonly as a nickname for both the female *Amalia* and the male *Aimo*. In later decades it has been given as a name for both boys and girls.

There are also changes from a clearly male or female name to a completely neutral name. Looking at just the data in the Population Information System it is impossible to be sure about the reasons for such a change, but at least in some cases the motivation appears to be a desire for gender neutrality. It is also possible that the overall goal is to transition across the gender boundary, but under current legislation such a complete change would require a supporting letter from a psychiatrist at the gender clinic in the Helsinki or Tampere university hospital. Changing to a neutral name, however, does not have this requirement.

Third, there are changes from male to female or vice versa. There are 167 of these cases, evenly split between male and female. This number fits reasonably well with the number of medical gender reassignments in the time period. Pimenoff (2008, 11–13) gives an estimate of 203 such cases during 1970–2002, which suggests that a little over half of the changes to a neutral name were also done as a part of a gender transition. The name changes are most common with those born in the 1960's and 1970's, and this is not surprising at all. Gender change was much more difficult for the older age groups (for an extended analysis, see

Wickman 2001), so the frequency is naturally lower; still, it is worth noting that the first cases are found in the very first age group. The younger groups, on the other hand, were mostly still minors when the data was extracted from the Population Information System, so they did not yet have the opportunity.

Considerations in Choosing a Name

In order to look at the motivations and feelings involved in choosing a new name, I conducted a brief survey during May–July 2011. This was in the form of a web questionnaire, announced at various Finnish trans support forums.³ There were two sets of questions, one about the person's feelings about their old name and another about the criteria and considerations they had used for choosing the new name. I also asked whether the person would be willing to take part in an interview, but these had to be left for a possible follow-up study.

The questionnaire was answered by 68 people in time for this study. Of these, 37 described themselves as male, 19 as female and 18 as other. The 'other' category included people who described themselves as transvestites, genderqueer, intersexed, androgyne, non-gendered or not quite belonging to either of the binary genders. Some listed 'other' in addition to 'male' or 'female'.

There were three questions regarding one's feelings about the old name, graded on a scale from 1 'not at all' to 5 'very much'; a summary of the answers is in Table 3. It appears that changing the name was not particularly hard: most of the informants did not feel any great affinity with their old name or sadness for letting it go. To some extent this was of course expected, as the questionnaire was directed to people who had decided to change their names. Still, even taking this to account the answers reveal feelings that are a little more extreme than they might have been.

	The old name	Median	Average	Variance
1	felt like one's own	1	2.2	2.3
2	was easy to let go	5	4.2	1.7
3	felt sad to let go	1	1.9	1.6

Table 3. Feelings towards one's old name.

Nine questions, shown in Table 4, were about the criteria for choosing the new name. Here, the scale was from 1 'did not matter' to 4 'was very important'. Again, the answers do not contain major surprises: the most important criteria are that the name should feel like one's own, be correctly gendered and not be associated with the wrong gender. In essence, the criteria that the informants considered most important are the ones involving the link between one's name and identity.

3. Thanks to the Trans Support Centre in Helsinki, as well as others who published the link.

	New name should	Median	Average	Variance
4	be beautiful	2	2.5	0.8
5	feel like one's own	4	3.7	0.3
6	attract attention	1	1.3	0.3
7	not attract attention	2	2.0	0.8
8	be correctly gendered	4	3.6	0.3
9	not be incorrectly gendered	4	3.4	0.9
10	be appropriate for one's age	2	1.9	0.8
11	be similar to the old name	1	1.8	0.9
12	be the one that parents would have given	1	1.6	0.6

Table 4. Criteria for choosing the new name.

There were some correlations between the answers that are worth mentioning, although none were especially strong. A stronger ability to identify with the old name (question 1 in Table 3) tended to associate with a somewhat greater difficulty to let go of it (correlation coefficient of -0.57 with question 2), sadness about letting go of it (correlation coefficient of 0.41 with question 3) and a desire to find a new name that resembled the old one (correlation coefficient of 0.46 with question 11 in Table 4). It was also slightly correlated with a lower emphasis of having a new name that was correctly gendered (correlation coefficient of -0.37 with question 8), although it should be noted that the desire to not have a wrongly-gendered name (question 9) did not have a similar correlation.

Conclusions

There were no big surprises in the study. Congruence between the gender of the name and that of the name-bearer appears important for everyone, as seen in two very different types of changes. On the one hand, transsexuals see the right gender or at least the absence of the wrong gender as very important; these, along with being able to identify with the name, were the most important criteria for selecting a new name. On the other hand, if the gender distribution of the names changes over time many members of the cissexual – that is, non-transsexual – majority tend to change away from names that have become wrongly gendered.

Changing names over the gender boundary is always a balancing act between personal and gender identity, and the more attached one is to their old name the harder it is to change. Hard or not, though, many feel it has to be done: the most important result of this study is that gender is an overwhelmingly important aspect of identity also with regards to one's name. This is clearly the case, even if it is usually not apparent to those whose gender identity happens to be aligned with their legal gender, anatomical sex and given name. In the end, a wrongly-gendered name just does not feel one's own.

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