

Feminization of Unisex Names from 1960 to 1990

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Frequencies of first names given in Pennsylvania in 1960 and 1990 were used to identify 33 unisex names, given with substantial frequency to both sexes. According to earlier books of names for babies, most of the unisex names were given to boys. In 1990 most of the same names were given to more girls than boys. The findings support previous studies that names tend to evolve from masculine to unisex to feminine. Popularity of unisex names is usually brief. Most names given to a substantial number of boys and girls in one of the two years, 1960 or 1990, had low frequencies of one sex or both sexes in the other year.

Most first names of boys and girls are chosen from different lists of popular names. A useful function of a popular first name is that it identifies the person as male or female.

Although a minority of people have a unisex name, many names have been given with substantial frequency to both sexes. Prenner lists 130 unisex names. Barry and Harper ("Evolution") identified 167 names that were designated as names for either sex in books of names for babies.

Unisex names are deviations from the norm, but people with unisex names do not tend to deviate from the norm according to a study of several hundred college students by Rickel and Anderson. Students with an "ambiguous" unisex first name showed no statistically significant differences on an androgyny

scale, other measures of personality, or in social background. Slovenko (272-281) emphasizes the social and psychological confusion experienced by the person with a unisex name. Ashley (245) advises against giving a sexually ambiguous name.

Barry and Harper ("Evolution") identified unisex names in six books of names for babies: three "earlier" books, published between 1933 and 1946 (Loughead, Partridge, Wells) and three "later" books, published between 1969 and 1979 (Kolatch, Kitchin, Lansky and Lansky). More names for boys than girls in the earlier books became unisex in the later books. Unisex names in the earlier books more often became names for girls than boys in the later books. Barry and Harper concluded that names tend to evolve from masculine to unisex to feminine.

The present paper reports a test of the evolution of unisex names, using actual frequencies of names given to boys and girls in addition to the designations in books of names for babies.

Methods

Frequencies of names in 1960 and 1990, separately for boys and girls, were obtained in the form of electronic files compiled by the Pennsylvania State Health Data Center.² These files reproduce the first name recorded on the birth certificate for each boy and girl born in Pennsylvania. The earliest year available is 1960. At the time of this study, the most recent year available was 1990. The total frequency of births in Pennsylvania, combining both sexes, was approximately 240,000 in 1960 and 180,000 in 1990.³

This study is limited to names in Pennsylvania, but it is a large state with good representation of both urban and rural populations. Its location is in the heavily populated northeastern part of the United States. The information is based on a large number of individuals, with a wide variety of demographic characteristics.

The criterion for a unisex name is a total frequency of 20 or more boys and 20 or more girls, combining the two years 1960 and 1990. These frequencies constitute a substantial number of babies of both sexes given the same names. The majority of names are given almost exclusively to one sex and to fewer than 20 boys or girls in the same two years in Pennsylvania.

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The names are defined on the basis of their spelling. The criterion for unisex disregards different pronunciations for the same spelling and the same pronunciation for different spellings.⁴

A statistical program (SPSSX) was used to identify the frequency of each name, separately for boys and girls, in both years selected. Other SPSSX programs were used for tests of statistical significance.

Results

The 33 unisex names are divided into two groups on the basis of frequency of both sexes in 1960. Table 1 lists 15 unisex names with low frequencies of less than 25 in 1960. Table 2 lists 18 unisex names with high frequencies of more than 50 in 1960. No unisex name has a frequency between 25 and 50 in 1960.

In both tables, the four columns of letters show for each name the codes for boys (B), girls (G), unisex (U), or a dash if omitted. The first column was obtained from Yonge. The second column is a single code derived from Loughhead, Partridge and Wells.⁵ The third and fourth columns indicate whether the name was given to a larger number of boys (B) or girls (G) in Pennsylvania in 1960 and 1990.

The third column of letters in Table 1 shows that among names with frequencies less than 25 for both sexes in 1960, 12 names were given to more boys than girls and three to more girls than boys. This difference from an equal number of boys and girls is statistically significant ($p = .036$), using the binomial sign test (Siegel).⁶

The first four names in Table 1 continued to be given to a majority of boys in 1990, and the last three names continued to be given to a majority of girls in 1990. The remaining eight names shifted from a majority of boys in 1960 to a majority of girls in 1990. These names are *Morgan*, *Noel*, *Jaime*, *Kendall*, *Casey*, *Taylor*, and *Shannon*. None shifted from a majority of girls in 1960 to a majority of boys in 1990. This difference from an equal number of changes in both directions is also statistically significant ($p = .008$), using the binomial sign test.

Table 1. Sex and Names with Frequencies Less than 25 (Combined) in 1960

	Pa.		Pa. Frequency 1960			Pa. Frequency 1990				
	1884	1946	1960	1990	Boys	Girls	Both	Boys	Girls	Both
Blair	-	B	B	B	21	3	24	21	19	40
Jordan	-	B	B	B	4	1	5	636	177	813
Devin	-	B	B	B	2	0	2	167	39	206
Devon	-	-	B	B	3	0	3	124	88	212
Morgan	B	B	B	G	8	1	9	29	268	297
Noel	B	B	B	G	10	3	13	10	23	33
Jaime	B	-	B	G	13	7	20	15	42	57
Kendall	-	B	B	G	11	4	15	13	20	33
Casey	-	B	B	G	7	0	7	129	195	324
Taylor	-	B	B	G	3	0	3	140	237	377
Angel	G	G	B	G	10	5	15	69	72	141
Shannon	-	G	B	G	7	6	29	23	340	363
Alexis	B	B	G	G	4	14	18	19	297	316
Dominique	B	-	G	G	0	1	1	54	93	247
Jessie	G	G	G	G	6	14	20	20	39	59

Table 2. Sex and Names with Frequencies Greater than 50 (Combined) in 1960

	Pa.		Pennsylvania 1960			Pennsylvania 1990				
	1884	1946	1960	Pa.	Boys	Girls	Both	Boys	Girls	Both
Terry	B	B	B	B	513	238	751	54	5	59
Shawn	B	B	B	B	179	34	213	393	14	407
Chris	U	B	B	B	167	24	191	11	4	15
Dale	-	U	B	B	488	29	517	50	1	51
Lee	-	U	B	B	168	107	275	68	13	81
Kerry	-	U	B	G	123	35	158	16	21	37
Jan	B	G	G	B	37	90	127	3	2	5
Robin	B	B	G	G	79	879	957	5	52	57
Jamie	B	B	G	G	43	146	189	43	334	377
Kim	-	B	G	G	50	548	598	4	9	13
Lynn	-	B	G	G	49	481	530	4	20	24
Kelly	-	B	G	G	59	425	484	7	579	586
Dana	-	B	G	G	88	114	202	14	210	224
Leslie	-	U	G	G	73	329	402	8	58	66
Jody	-	-	G	G	51	149	200	6	7	13
Tracy	G	U	G	G	98	397	495	12	39	51
Carmen	G	U	G	G	35	64	99	15	27	42
Jackie	-	U	G	G	22	32	55	4	13	17

The codes from prior books, in the first two columns of letters in Table 1, show only a few differences from the majority of names in Pennsylvania in 1960. *Angel* and *Shannon* were previously coded as names for girls instead of boys. *Alexis* and *Dominique* were previously coded as names for boys instead of girls.

Table 2 lists 18 names with higher frequencies for both sexes combined in 1960. The third column of letters shows that in 1960, six names were given to more boys than girls and 12 to more girls than boys. Only two names changed from a majority of one sex in 1960 to a majority of the opposite sex in 1990. *Kerry* changed from a majority of boys to a majority of girls. *Jan* changed from a majority of girls to a majority of boys.

The first two columns of letters in Table 2 reveal that six names shifted from a code of boys in prior books to a code of girls in Pennsylvania in 1990. These names are *Robin*, *Jamie*, *Kim*, *Lynn*, *Kelly*, and *Dana* while none shifted from a code of girls in prior books to a code of boys in 1990. This difference from an equal number of changes in both directions is statistically significant ($p = .032$), using the binomial sign test (Siegel).

The columns of numbers in Tables 1 and 2 show for each name the frequency in 1960 and 1990 for boys, girls, and both sexes combined. In Table 1, the total frequencies are higher in 1990 than in 1960 for each name. Most of the increases in frequency are large. The frequency of both sexes in 1990 is more than four times the frequency in 1960 for 11 of the 15 names. The separate frequencies of boys and girls indicate that most of the names were more popular in 1990 than in 1960 for both sexes. The only exceptions are *Blair*, given to 21 boys in both years, and *Noel*, given to ten boys in both years.

The columns of numbers in Table 2 show that 14 names have lower frequencies for both sexes combined in 1990 than in 1960. Many of the decreases in frequency from 1960 to 1990 are large. The frequency in 1990 is less than one quarter the frequency in 1960 for 12 of the 14 names. The separate frequencies of boys and girls show that each of the 14 names were less popular in 1990 than in 1960 for both sexes.

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The differences in frequencies between 1960 and 1990 indicate rapid change in popularity of most of the 33 unisex names. Most of the names were given with substantial frequency to both sexes in one of the two years but not in both years. Only one name, *Jamie*, in Table 2, fulfills the criterion of 20 or more boys and 20 or more girls both in 1960 and 1990. The number of boys and girls was sufficient to fulfill the criterion in 1960 alone for 18 names and in 1990 alone for 10 names.

The 33 unisex names in Tables 1 and 2 include 18 that were sufficiently popular to be included among the 100 most frequent names for boys or girls. The 100 most frequent names for both boys and girls include *Jordan* and *Taylor* in 1990. The 100 most frequent names for boys include *Shawn* in both years, *Terry* and *Dale* in 1960, and *Devin* in 1990. The 100 most frequent names for girls include *Kelly* in both years, *Robin*, *Kim*, *Lynn*, *Leslie*, and *Tracy* in 1960, and *Morgan*, *Casey*, *Shannon*, *Alexis*, *Jamie*, and *Dana* in 1990.

The frequencies of the popular unisex names in Tables 1 and 2 are much lower than the frequencies of the names that rank first in frequency for boys and girls. The highest rank order frequencies of unisex names are 38th for 636 boys named *Jordan* in 1990 and 24th for 579 girls named *Kelly* in 1990. The frequencies of the names ranked first are 6,013 boys named *John* in 1960, 3,462 boys named *Michael* in 1990, 3,991 girls named *Mary* in 1960, and 2,014 girls named *Ashley* in 1990.

Discussion

The maximum popularity of unisex names is limited and brief. A probable reason why a unisex name becomes popular is the unusual attribute of being given with substantial frequency to both boys and girls. When the name becomes sufficiently popular, it loses the attribute of being unusual while retaining the disadvantage of failing to identify the sex of the person with the name.

The names in Tables 1 and 2 probably constitute different stages of unisex names rather than different types of names. The high frequencies in 1990 of the majority of the names in Table 1 are likely to be followed by decreases in frequencies of one or

both sexes, which occurred from 1960 to 1990 for most of the names in Table 2. The high frequencies in 1960 of the names in Table 2 were probably preceded by increases in frequencies which occurred from 1960 to 1990 for the names in Table 1.

Sexually ambiguous names listed by Ashley are *Jamie, Jody, Kelly, Robin, Murphy, Leslie, Terry, Bobby, Lynn, Kim, Randy, Dana, Courtney* and *Kerry*. These 14 names are well selected as recently or currently given with substantial frequency to both sexes. The only ones not included among the 33 unisex names in Tables 1 and 2 are *Murphy, Bobby, Randy, and Courtney*.

Other lists of unisex names show less overlap with the 33 unisex names shown in Tables 1 and 2. Only 13 of the 33 unisex names found here are included among 36 unisex names mentioned by Slovenko (249), and only 15 of the 33 unisex names are included in an earlier and larger list of 130 unisex names identified by Prenner.

The short duration of substantial frequencies of boys and girls given the same name probably accounts for the limited overlap between the 33 unisex names identified here and other lists of unisex names that are not based on frequencies of boys and girls. Many of the names in the other lists were no longer given with substantial frequency to both sexes in Pennsylvania in 1960 or in 1990.

The 33 unisex names include 20 of 167 names classified as unisex by Barry and Harper ("Evolution"). The criterion for unisex classification is designation for both sexes by the majority of three earlier books, published between 1933 and 1946, or by the majority of three later books, published between 1969 and 1979. Evidence for short duration of substantial frequencies of boys and girls given the same name is that the 167 unisex names include only 32 designated as unisex by the majority of both the earlier and later books.

A large number of boys or girls given a name appears to be a deterrent against subsequent use of the name with substantial frequency for both sexes. Smith identifies the 100 most frequent names of boys and girls in the United States in 1950. The names are reproduced by Barry and Harper ("Differences"). Many of

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these names continue to be given with substantial frequency, but most of them are given almost exclusively to one sex. None of them is included among the unisex names in Pennsylvania in 1960 and 1990.

Many of the unisex names identified in this paper support the conclusion by Barry and Harper ("Evolution") that names tend to evolve from masculine to unisex to feminine. This evolution may be attributable to a greater willingness to give a traditional masculine name to girls than to give a traditionally feminine name to boys. Ashley (244) notes that a unisex name is usually avoided for boys once it is clear that it is being given to girls also.

This differential use of masculine and feminine names supports reports that sex stereotyping is more rigidly applied to boys than girls (Etaugh and Liss; Hort, Fagot, and Leinbach; Martin). Bem discusses other expressions of male dominance in our androcentric society.

Many babies in recent years have been given names of characters in daytime television dramas. Slovenko (270) comments that *Morgan* is the name of two women in the soap operas. Fictional female characters named *Morgan* and *Alexis* contributed to the much larger increase from 1960 to 1990 in frequency of girls than boys given these unisex names in Table 1.

Girls are more likely to be given names of currently popular fictional or real characters because of a tendency to give rare or recently popular names to girls rather than boys. Traditional family names are more often given to boys (Rossi). The sex difference contributes to more rigid sex stereotyping of names of boys than girls and evolution of names from masculine to unisex to feminine.

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Notes

1. A preliminary report of this study was given at the 31st Annual Names Institute, Baruch College, New York, NY, on 2 May 1992.

2. The data on frequencies of first names were supplied by the State Health Data Center, Pennsylvania Department of Health, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The Department specifically disclaims responsibility for any analyses, interpretations, or conclusions. The authors acknowledge the helpful cooperation of Jerry Orris at the State Health Data Center.

3. The authors acknowledge the expert help in reproducing and summarizing the data by Eileen S. Kopchik at the University of Pittsburgh Computer Center.

4. Two of the unisex names in this study are known to have different pronunciations, one given to boys by one ethnic group and the other to girls by a different ethnic group. *Angel* is given to boys with medial *h* instead of *g* by Hispanic Americans. The first letter of *Jan* is pronounced as if it were *y* for boys in some American families with recent European antecedents. The pronunciations are generally the same or similar for *Jaime* and *Jamie* and for *Devin* and *Devon*, which are classified as different names because they are spelled differently.

5. A name is coded *boys* or *girls* if it is designated for that sex in at least one of the three books, and for the opposite sex in fewer books. A name is coded unisex if it does not fulfill the criteria for boys or girls and is either designated for both sexes in one or more books or designated for boys in one book and for girls in one book. A dash, indicating no code, is entered only if the name is omitted from all three books.

6. The two-tailed criterion for probability value was used in the statistical tests. Using the one-tailed criterion, the probability that the difference is attributable to chance variation is .018 instead of .036.

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