

Evolution of Unisex Names*

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Most personal names identify the sexes of their owners. Names are usually chosen from separate lists for boys and girls. In some countries, names are exclusively female or male, such as those limited to a roster of the Saints of the Catholic Church. The English language contains a wide variety of names, including some that are given to both sexes. These unisex names have been studied very little. An article by Prenner¹ included a list of unisex names and some entertaining anecdotes. A whimsical poem by Hanley² contained some examples, while eloquently expressing disapproval of unisex names. The low frequency of giving the same name to both sexes prevents unisex names from becoming established as popular, traditional names for either sex. Use of the same name for both sexes thus tends to be unstable and brief. Many unisex names have recently evolved from exclusive use for one sex. Many formerly unisex names are now used exclusively for one sex.

The present paper tests a prediction that names tend to evolve from masculine to unisex and from unisex to feminine. This prediction is based on cultural attitudes, males being favored but more limited by sex stereotyping. Therefore, parents are more likely to give their daughter a traditional male name than to give their son a traditional female name. Unisex names are avoided for a son but not for a daughter.

This prediction was tested by the names recommended for both sexes in books of names for babies. A group of three early books (published before 1950) was compared with a group of three recent books (published after 1965).

METHODS

Names that are designated for both sexes were identified in three early

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¹Manuel Prenner, "Ora Jones Married Ora Jones," *American Speech*, 17 (1942), 84-88.

²Eugene Hanley, "Confusing the Issue," *ANS Bulletin*, 58 (1979).

and three recent books that recommend names for babies. The three early sources, published 1933-1946, are Loughead,³ Partridge,⁴ and Wells.⁵ The three recent sources, published 1969-1979, are Kolatch,⁶ Kitchin,⁷ and Lansky and Lansky.⁸ These sources were selected because each of them lists a large number of names, including a substantial number that are designated for both sexes. The available version of the book by Loughead,⁹ “revised and corrected,” probably contains only minor changes. This edition was published after the death of the author.

Five of the six sources were published in the United States. The one published in England (Partridge) specified in the title that American names were included. One early source (Partridge) and one recent source (Kitchin) showed a single alphabetical list, designating female, male, or both sexes for each name. The other four books had separate alphabetical lists for the two sexes.

Some otherwise suitable and important books were not included because of small numbers of unisex names. Therefore, the books by Yonge,¹⁰ Smith,¹¹ Withycombe,¹² and Ames¹³ were not included among the early sources and the book by Stewart¹⁴ was not included among the recent sources.

Other books were excluded because they were published during the interval between the early and recent ones. These books were by Rule,¹⁵ Nurnberg and Rosenblum,¹⁶ and Sleigh and Sleigh.^{17,18}

All names listed for both sexes were classified as unisex, including those identified as variants and diminutives. A name was not included for

³Flora L. Loughead, *Dictionary of Given Names* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1933).

⁴Eric Partridge, *Name This Child* (London: Methuen, 1936).

⁵Evelyn Wells, *What to Name the Baby* (New York: Doubleday, 1946).

⁶Alfred J. Kolatch, *Names for Boys and Girls* (New York: Jonathan David, 1969).

⁷Moyna Kitchin, *Choosing a Name* (Secaucus, NJ: Chartwell Books, 1979).

⁸Bruce and Vicki Lansky, *The Best Baby Name Book* (Wayzata, MN: Meadowbrook Press, 1979).

⁹Loughead, 2d ed., 1958.

¹⁰Charlotte M. Yonge, *History of Christian Names* (London: Macmillan, 1863).

¹¹Elsdon C. Smith, *Naming Your Baby* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1943).

¹²Elizabeth G. Withycombe, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names* (Oxford: University Press, 1945).

¹³Winthrop Ames, *What Shall We Name the Baby?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1935).

¹⁴George R. Stewart, *American Given Names* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

¹⁵Larcina Rule, *Name Your Baby* (New York: Bantam Books, 1963).

¹⁶Marshall Nurnberg and Morris Rosenblum, *What to Name Your Baby* (Cleveland: World, 1951).

¹⁷Linwood Sleigh and Charles Johnson, *The Book of Boys' Names* (London: George G. Harrap, 1962).

¹⁸Sleigh and Johnson, *The Book of Girls' Names* (New York: Crowell, 1962).

the sex if the book identified its use for that sex as former (before the 19th century) or in a foreign language (such as Jean as a male name in French).

Each name designated as unisex in any of the sources was searched in all the other five sources. The name was classified as female, male, or unisex separately in each source that included it. The information was tabulated and summarized with the aid of SPSS programs.¹⁹ The article was prepared with the aid of the SCRIBE program.²⁰ Both of these resources were used at the University of Pittsburgh Computer Center.

RESULTS

Names that evolved to become used for both sexes are identified in Table 1. These names are classified as unisex in the majority of the three recent sources but in a minority of the early sources. A further requirement for inclusion in Table 1 is that the number of unisex designations must differ by at least two in the groups of three sources. A name that is unisex in two recent sources is included only if it is designated as unisex in none of the early sources. A name classified as unisex in three recent sources is included if it is classified as unisex in none or one of the early sources.

Table 1 shows that designations of these names in the early sources are predominantly male (32 names) rather than female (4 names). The difference between these two frequencies is highly statistically significant ($p < .001$). Most of the six names classified as neither male nor female are not included in any of the three early sources. Two of the six names (Christy, Lou) are designated as female in one early source, as male in another early source, and not included in a third early source.

In addition to the 42 names in Table 1, 24 names are designated as unisex in one early source and in two recent sources. These 24 names thereby changed from a minority of unisex designations in the early sources to a majority of unisex designations in the recent sources. They are excluded from Table 1 because the difference in unisex designations (one early source compared with two recent sources) is small and might depend on erroneous designations or accidental variations in a single source. In accordance with this less consistent difference, these 24 names show a similar preponderance of male over female designations in the

¹⁹Norman H. Nie, et al., *SPSS: Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975).

²⁰Brian K. Reid and Janet H. Walker, *SCRIBE: Introductory User's Manual*, 3d ed. (Pittsburgh: Unilogic, Ltd., 1980).

Table 1. Names that are unisex in the majority of recent sources are classified as male, female, or neither on the basis of the early sources.

MALE (N = 32)		FEMALE (N = 4)
Barrie	Jerry	Abbey
Bob	Kim	Jan
Bobbie	Kyle	Marty
Bobby	Lane	Nickie
Carroll	Lindsay	
Casey	Lindsey	NEITHER (N = 6)
Corey	Lynn	Abby
Courtney	Meredith	Bev
Dana	Noel	Christy
Darcy	Robin	Lou
Denis	Ronnie	Mel
Gerry	Sam	Syd
Gus	Sammy	
Hollis	Sandy	
Jamie	Toby	
Jay	Willy	

early sources but less consistently than for the names in Table 1. Among these 24 additional names, the classifications in the early sources are 14 predominantly male (Alexis, Bert, Beverley, Beverly, Bill, Billy, Carey, Gwyn, Nicky, Sid, Stacey, Tony, Wally, Willie), eight predominantly female (Angel, Cornie, Gill, Lesley, Mattie, Matty, Shannon, Winnie), and two without sex difference (Allyn, Eden).

Names that evolved from unisex to become used for only one sex are identified in Table 2. These names are designated as unisex in the majority of the three early sources but in a minority of the recent sources. A further requirement for inclusion in Table 2 is that the number of unisex classifications must differ by at least two in the two groups of three sources. This corresponds to the requirement for inclusion in Table 1.

Table 2 shows that the designations of these names in the recent sources are predominantly female (27 names) rather than male (11 names). The difference between these two frequencies is highly statistically significant ($p < .01$). The preponderance of female names, subsequent to unisex use, contrasts with the preponderance of male names prior to unisex use, shown in Table 1. The nine names in Table 2 classified as neither male, or female are not included in any of the three recent sources.

In addition to the 47 names in Table 2, 22 names are designated as unisex in two early sources and one recent source. In accordance with the

Table 2. Sex distribution in the later sources, showing names that were unisex in the majority of the early sources.

	FEMALES (N = 27)	MALE (N = 11)	NEITHER (N = 9)
Allison	Kay	Clem	Alpha
Anstice	Lorne	Constant	Anstace
Ara	Loyce	Garnet	Ardel
Ardith	Lu	Glenn	Armyn
Arva	Melva	Jack	Claudie
Bliss	Nada	Keith	Cymbeline
Blythe	Nova	Morgan	Leal
Clemence	Ora	Tate	Ola
Dixie	Rae	Trace	Welcome
Fay	Shirley	Verne	
Fayette	Sigrid	Vic	
Gillian	Valery		
Hildreth	Wyn		
Ila			

less consistent change from majority to minority unisex designations than for the names in Table 2, these 22 names show a similar but less consistent tendency to be female rather than male in the recent sources. Among these 22 additional names, the classifications in the recent sources are nine female (Alva, Florence, Gale, Hyacinth, Jo, Jocelin, Meryl, Patsy, Vivien), seven male (Clemmie, Con, Dallas, Daryl, Frank, Mickie, Sidney), and six without sex difference (Averil, Bertie, Garland, Isa, Vyvyan, Wilmot).

Table 3 lists the names that are unisex in a majority of both the early and recent sources. Five of them are unisex in each of the six sources. The others are divided approximately equally between preponderance of male and preponderance of female designations, taking into account both the early and recent sources that list them for only one sex. The seven names without a sex difference include one that is female in one early source and male in one recent source (Alex) and one that is male in one early source and female in one recent source (Billie).

This paper identifies a total of 167 names that are designated as unisex by at least two of the three early sources or by at least two of the three recent sources. Table 4 shows for each of the six sources the number of these names that are designated as unisex, female, male, or are omitted. There is remarkably large variation among the sources in their designations of these names. This variation is indicated by the large and differential numbers of female, male, and omitted names in all six sources. If the

Table 3. Names that are unisex in the majority of both the early and recent sources.

ALL UNISEX (N = 5)	NO SEX DIFFERENCE (N = 7)	MORE MALE (N = 11)	MORE FEMALE (N = 9)
Lee	Alex	Cary	Carol
Leslie	Billie	Chris	Clare
Pat	Dale	Freddie	Evelyn
Ray	Frankie	Gene	Fran
Val	Joyce	Georgie	Jackie
	Kerry	Hilary	Jocelyn
	Stacy	Kit	Merle
		Leigh	Tracy
		Phil	Vivian
		Sydney	
		Terry	

Table 4. Number of names designated unisex, female, male, and omitted, separately in each of six sources. This classification is applied to 167 names that are unisex in two or more of the three sources of the same stage (early or recent).

	Unisex	Female	Male	Omitted
EARLIER SOURCES				
Loughead	67	16	52	32
Partridge	61	13	35	58
Wells	121	9	26	11
LATER SOURCES				
Kolatch	59	25	33	50
Kitchin	83	28	17	39
Lansky and Lansky	103	29	14	21

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sources agreed in most of their designations, the classifications in Table 4 would be predominantly unisex because of the requirement for a unisex classification in at least two sources.

Further evidence for variation in designations by the six sources was found in cross-tabulations for pairs of sources. Many names were given different designations by the two sources in each pair of sources. This indicates a high degree of differentiation among the six sources in their designations of the names as unisex, female, male, and in the names that are omitted.

DISCUSSION

The results support the prediction that names tend to evolve from male to unisex and from unisex to female. This may be attributable to a prevalent preference for giving a masculine name to a girl rather than giving a feminine name to a boy.

The tendency is more consistent for evolution from male rather than female to unisex, shown in Table 1, than for evolution from unisex to female rather than male, shown in Table 2. An important additional influence in the evolution from unisex to a single sex may be the association of a famous man or woman with the name. The movie star Shirley Temple undoubtedly accelerated the evolution of the name Shirley from unisex to female. The evolution of Glenn from unisex to male might have been influenced by Glenn Ford and Glenn Miller. The evolution of Jack from unisex to male might have been influenced by Jack Lemmon and Jack Kennedy. The evolution of Vic from unisex to male might have been influenced by Vic Damone.

Several Puritan "virtue" names have evolved from unisex to female during a span of several centuries. These names were given to both sexes in England 1580-1640²¹ and in colonial New England in the 17th century.²² The names Hope, Faith, and Charity were sometimes given to triplets regardless of their sexes.²³ These and other unisex virtue names, such as Prudence, Constance, Patience, and Joy, are now female names. An exception is Constant, listed in Table 2 as recently evolving from unisex to male.

Frequencies of the most popular female and male names indicate a greater degree of stereotyping of male than of female names. Heavy concentration on a small number of male names is indicated in a list published by Smith²⁴ and in a more recent list of college students published by Lawson.²⁵ Both lists show higher frequency for the 12 most popular male than female names, and higher frequency for female than male names in the rank orders from 25th to 100th. The 100 most popular names for males and for females contain a small number of names that are

²¹Withycombe, 3d ed., 1977, p. xxxviii.

²²Herbert Barry III, "Psychological Analysis of Predilection for Parental Namesakes in Colonial New England," in *Names Northeast* (Saranac Lake, NY: North Country Community College Press, 1979), 67-77.

²³Withycombe, p. 155.

²⁴Elsdon C. Smith, *The Story of Our Names* (New York: Harper, 1950).

²⁵Edwin D. Lawson, "First Names on the Campus: A Semantic Differential Analysis," *Names*, 28 (1980), 69-83.

also used for the other sex. Most of the unisex names in these lists are female, in the rank orders between 50th and 100th.

The lists of unisex names in Tables 1 - 3 show that most of these names are rare. Several of the names are popular diminutives or nicknames. Examples are Bob, Marty, Lou in Table 1, Kay, Jack in Table 2, Pat, Alex, Chris, Fran in Table 3. These diminutives are seldom given as official names. The use of names for both sexes is usually limited to a brief time span. The 32 names in Table 3, which are unisex in the majority of the early and recent sources, constitute only 19% of the 167 names that are unisex in the majority of the sources in one stage (early or recent). The remaining 81% of the names are unisex in the majority of the sources in one stage but not in the other stage.

Popular names are generally regarded as preferable. A systematic study by Colman et al.^{26,27} has demonstrated a high positive correlation between familiarity and favorability of personal names. This correlation was higher for names of boys than of girls.²⁸ This further finding is consistent with other evidence that the unusual choice of a unisex name is applied to girls more often than to boys.

An unusual name has the advantage of being distinctive. This attribute of unisex names is in accordance with one of the purposes of names, to provide a label differentiating the owner from other people. This attribute of unisex names probably accounts for the large number of names used for both sexes, shown in Tables 1-3.

Since most people avoid unisex names for their son, some parents give a unisex name to their son for the purpose of maximizing the distinctiveness of his name. These occurrences may ensure that some names will continue to evolve from female to unisex and from unisex to male, contrary to the prevalent trend.

Contemporary society places great value on sex equality. Unisex names therefore may be expected to become more popular, but they are not likely to become preponderant. Female and male names serve the function of distinguishing the owner from all people of the opposite sex. A large increase in frequency of unisex names would detract from this useful attribute of personal names while diminishing the advantageous distinctiveness of unisex names.

²⁶Andrew W. Colman, et al., "Psychological Factors Affecting Preferences for First Names," *Names*, 28 (1980), 113-129.

²⁷Colman, et al., "Preferences for Christian Names as a Function of their Experienced Familiarity," *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 20 (1981), 3-5.

²⁸Colman, et al., 1981.