

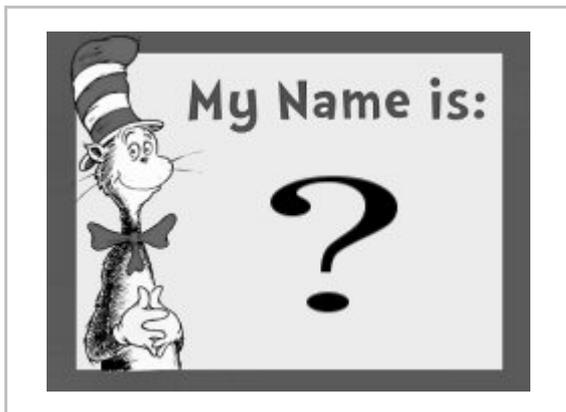
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What's in a Name?

Which words do I choose, and why? As a self-made man, how do I name myself?

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When I decided to change my name legally about ten years ago, the choice of a new name seemed straightforward. I formally adopted the nickname almost everyone knew me by, added a surname which meant something to me for a few reasons, notified the relevant authorities, and that was that.

I chose "transgender" also because physical transition unfortunately has its limits for guys like me ...

When I decided to transition medically and legally a few years ago, the choice of a new sex/gender also seemed straightforward. I formally adopted "M" instead of "F" with all the institutions and businesses legally allowed to me at present (I am currently pre-op but on testosterone treatment), told all of my

friends during the following months, and that was that.

As I see things, these names and identities were primarily for the "outside" world; mainstream society ... you know, the tax office, the bank, Centrelink, work ... bureaucracy, the legal, official side of life. Name: Joe Bloggs, Sex: M; Name: Jane Bloggs, Sex: F. Simple. Easy. Obvious to a great extent.

But what about the names and identities for the "inner" world? Identities, names, terms, labels, representations of concepts we often use to communicate something of our deeper selves, our inner beings and personal experiences? Not so simple, easy or obvious. To people on the outside, for instance, I am a bloke. A short, weird guy, yes, but just a bloke. Simple. Easy. Obvious. When it comes to physically intimate interaction with others, biology has an unfortunate but inescapable influence on the way people perceive me, even if it's merely the fact that I was born in a body which doesn't reflect my mental, emotional, spiritual-self as accurately as most other people's bodies do. I am somewhat forced into a particular type of "coming-out" or disclosure; I am limited to a certain set of self-defining descriptions of my physical aspects. Not so easy, but fairly simple and obvious. To people with whom I share an altogether different type of intimacy, however, people who know the real me or who are in a similar situation themselves, I can identify as much more. I can self-define, name myself, in a deeper way, in much more expressive language.

I am able to identify as F.T.M. or female-to-male transsexual or man with transsexual history or man of transsexual background or man living with the physical/medical condition of transsexualism. I can choose one "s" or two for the spelling of "transsexualism", depending on how I view the "condition". Alternatively I can use the term "transgender" instead of "trans(s)exual". I am able to identify as trans-man or trans-guy or T-guy or tranny boy. I could also choose to describe my physical and/or mental/emotional experience as gender-messy or gender-queer, or I may identify with gender-bender or gender-fuck.

The diversity of possible perspectives, perceptions and priorities boggles my mind, muddles my mind. But I wouldn't have it any other way. In my opinion, one of humanity's greatest gifts to itself is the gift of language (and the ability to use words in such a powerful and personal way). How we describe/define/identify our private, inner beings to ourselves and others showcases to some extent our honesty in acknowledging the truth of a "core" or "deepest" self; our courage, in sharing this information with other people; our intelligence and imagination, in "thinking outside the square" and our strength, in daring to stand alone if necessary.

Sometimes this free-thinking openness leads to debate, which I think is a good thing. Sometimes debating leads to conflict and faction-fighting, probably not such a good thing. Recently within the trans community, debate has been developing regarding the definitions and consequent applications of the terms "trans(s)exual" and "transgender(-ed)".

One group claims the identity/label "transsexual" as appropriate, reasoning that an individual changes sex, and with hormonal and/or surgical help, develops sex characteristics of the biological sex being affirmed. In essence the individual moves across the sexual divide. Another group says that the name "transgender" is applicable, because in their opinion sex is determined in part by sex chromosomes and therefore can't be changed. In effect, the individual moves across the gender divide. Then again, there are some for whom "transgender" has meaning in more than a social sense, since gender roles are social constructions (stereotypical appearance and behaviour such as boys wearing shorts and playing with cars while girls wear skirts and play with dolls). "Transgender" in this sense may include the experience of fluidity between roles/identities rather than the experience of rigid, permanent transition from one role to the other. A fourth group either sidestep the "sex" versus "gender" war or are inclusive of all identities (I can't decide which - I

suppose it depends on intent and context), by using the "trans" terminology: the trans community or trans-woman. Many other interpretations exist, but I'm sure you get the idea.

So where do I fit in? Which words do I choose, and why? As a self-made man, how do I name myself?

Well, currently I name myself "transgender". For many years I ignored the (substantial) part of my being which wasn't comfortable in a female identity. Even though from my earliest memories I frantically rebelled against all things feminine and saw myself as a boy, somewhere along the line I partially accepted my apparent biology, being unaware at that stage of other options, and hoped that being a dyke would be good enough. It was a bit of a psychological compromise: "dyke" was not as good as "man" but definitely better than "woman". I was living in a "female" role. Now I live in a "male" role. In the social sense, I changed my gender-identity.

I chose "transgender" also because physical transition unfortunately has its limits for guys like me: surgical procedures are not as successful nor as advanced as I would like (and of course there are the prohibitive costs involved), so in the foreseeable future I probably won't be able to completely change "sex". I identify as male, yes, but much as I hate to admit it, biologically born males (bio-guys) do have physical attributes that I lack.

Therefore, I think "transsexual" is inappropriate for me.

At various times I self-identify as F.T.M., trans-man (or trans-guy), or tranny boy, in addition to or instead of "transgender", depending on my mood and the social context. For example, I might use "female-to-male transgender" as a disclosure identity when speaking with someone in a mainstream or gay/lesbian venue; "trans-man" or "trans-guy" when conversing with other trans* people or while talking with my G.P., endocrinologist, or similar professional; and "tranny-boy" if I'm in a queer mood in a pansexual (any/all gender identities and sexual orientations) setting.

I also tend to use other people's terminology as a guide if I am asked about my gender-identity. To the question "Are you a transsexual?" I would respond, "female-to-male, yes, but I prefer the term transgender". If, however, the enquiry was "Are you an F.T.M.?", my answer would simply be "Yes" (or possibly "Yes, how did you know?!")

Call me optimistic or naive if you will, but I really do believe that when all of us in the wider trans community share a working understanding of why we choose some words and not others to self-define, we will be better able to choose umbrella terms or labels which more accurately reflect our collective experiences and identities. The recent "Re Kevin" court action (thank you, wonderful people) highlighted the need for a system of terminology that is both readily understandable and accessible by the "outside" world and agreed upon by a united trans community.

If we can't present words to the "outside" world that actually relate to us and our identities (individually and collectively), how can we hope/expect to be understood and accepted? If we aren't understood (to some degree at least) by mainstream society and its legal system, how can we ask/fight for equality and social/legal change? How can we tell the "outside" world our preferred names and the reasons we prefer them (transsexual or transgender in legislation for example), if we don't share this information within the "inner" world of our own trans peers and Significant Others, Friends, Family and Allies?

Perhaps if we know why different words appeal to different people, we could find more appropriate language to express our diversity within an exclusive framework, instead of a "one size fits all" approach which unfortunately seems to alienate some of the people supposedly being represented. Well, I reckon there's possibly a way to establish and maintain such a workable and adaptable system of terminology.

Let's share. Let us continue to share personal perspectives, life experiences. Share emotions and opinions. Let's discuss, disclose, debate. Explore how we can share common language. Explore our similarities and how we can share our "inner" identities with ourselves and the "outside" world. The more we share, the more we understand. The more we understand, the more we share.

I reckon it's worth a go. What do you reckon?

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