

# BARBARA BECAME BEN ... AND SUDDENLY 'BRILLIANT'

People who switch gender can find they are seen as being more – or less – intelligent than before. They offer a powerful insight into sexism, writes *Mary Ann Sieghart*

**W**hat can we learn about men and women from people who have lived as both? It's a fascinating question, and it produces answers that are more than just anecdotal. After all, if a woman transitions to a man and finds that at last he's taken seriously, promoted faster and paid more, it can't be because he suddenly has a higher IQ or is better at his job. And if a man who becomes a woman finds that she's no longer valued at work and can't get a word in edgeways at meetings, it can't be her ability or CV that's to blame.

When Joan Roughgarden was a middle-aged professor of biology at Stanford University in California in 1998, and decided to change her name from Jonathan and her gender to female, she realised that she was going to have to tell the authorities.

So she went to see Condoleezza Rice, then provost of Stanford, who later became US secretary of state. "Do you know Ben Barres?" Rice asked her.

It turned out that Barres, formerly Barbara, was going through a transition in the opposite direction. He was

also a middle-aged science professor at Stanford, but the two hadn't met. They became firm friends, and their experiences provide an intriguing insight into how differently men and women are treated, even when their ability is the same.

Barres died a few months ago, but he gave several talks about his experience. "I have had the thought a million times. I am being taken more seriously," was his main observation. "By far the main difference I have noticed is that people who don't know I am transgendered treat me with much more respect. Some people even think that my research is better."

He described an attendee at one of his seminars, unaware that Barbara and Ben Barres were the same person, saying, "Ben Barres gave a great seminar today. But then his work's so much better than his sister's!"

Because Barres, who developed male pattern baldness and grew a beard, began being treated as one of the blokes, he started to hear male colleagues say what they really thought about women – things they would never have said to Barbara. "A

neurosurgeon at Stanford told me he'd never met a female neurosurgeon who was remotely as good as a man. Another told me he thinks women are like small children."

Roughgarden, meanwhile, discovered how much harder professional life can be for women. "Ben and I were going through mirror-image experiences. He was beginning to enjoy male privilege and recognising how much of it he had now acquired and I was experiencing the reduced influence that I was beginning to have living as a woman.

"He was puzzled and even somewhat offended that his work as a woman wasn't highly regarded and yet 'the same damn work', as he would put it, as a man was highly regarded. He was experiencing that and kind of

**“**After I transitioned, reviews often had a nasty personal character**”**

amazed at it, kind of annoyed by it. I mean, glad to take advantage of it as his career really took off once he transitioned. So he moved toward the centre and my own work moved toward the periphery."

Jonathan Roughgarden had been on the university senate, but once she became Joan, she found the invitations to sit on committees mysteriously evaporated. Her salary drifted down to the bottom 10% of tenured professors at Stanford. Winning funding for her research also became harder.

"When I would write a research proposal, living as a man, there would be a certain deference to it. The reviews would be respectful. After I transitioned, the anonymous reviews both for manuscripts as well as for grant proposals often had a nasty personal character to them."

It was the propensity for male colleagues to attack the woman rather than the argument that Roughgarden found particularly galling. Jonathan had challenged scientific theories and although some fellow biologists disagreed, he was still taken seriously and offered a tenured professorship. As Joan, when she challenged Darwin's theory of sexual selection, the reaction was strikingly different.

One fellow scientist

shouted at her so aggressively she thought he was going to come over and hit her. Another invaded the stage after she gave a lecture, yelling at her. Her objectors told her that she hadn't read the literature and suggested they were smarter than her, something that had never happened to her before.

These are the experiences of just two people, but in the process of making a radio programme about this subject, I discovered so many more examples. Miriam Abelson, a sociologist at Portland State University, has interviewed 66 trans men in America. Most said they were now seen as more competent, were taken more seriously and had their authority questioned less than before they transitioned. As one of her interviewees observed: "As a male, people assume that you know what you're talking about. As a female, they assume that you probably don't."

Abelson concludes: "A majority of the people I interviewed felt that they had some kind of moment where, if they didn't already believe that sexism existed, this gave them proof."

Another sociologist, Kristen Schilt, from Chicago University, was told a story about a colleague who congratulated his boss for firing "Susan" because she was incompetent and hiring the more skilled "new guy".



After Barbara Barres transitioned to Ben, above, he found his academic work was taken more seriously. Jonathan Roughgarden's career suffered after becoming Joan, below



The punchline is that Susan and the new guy were the same person. Schilt found that the pay of trans women fell by nearly a third after they transitioned but the pay of trans men went up.

As Roughgarden, once she became Joan, started to mix with highly competent women who had never been

able to win important jobs and watched supremely self-confident men whose assurance belied their lack of ability, she formulated the answer to the question: what can we learn about men and women from people who have lived as both? "Women are assumed to be incompetent unless proven

otherwise and men are assumed to be competent unless proven otherwise." We still have a long way to go.

*The Inquiry will be broadcast on the BBC World Service on Thursday, and will be available on BBC iPlayer Radio and as a podcast*