

ESTELLE – REACTIONS TO A ROYAL NAME-GIVING IN SWEDEN

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Abstract: Reactions to the name of the newborn princess of Sweden are discussed. Her spoken name, *Estelle*, provoked strong reactions in the media from both royalty correspondents and ordinary people. Was it a “proper” royal name or was it more in the realm of nightclub queens? This debate is analysed through commentaries from the press and social media, as well as a study on how the name choice influenced other new parents in Sweden. Statistics show that *Estelle* has become slightly less popular for girls after the princess’s birth, though the name has increased as a name for pet animals.

Keywords: first names, socio-onomastics, animal names, name popularity.

Introduction

This paper focuses on an aspect of the topic of ICONN 2, names in contemporary public space. It is a case study on public reactions to the first name given to a certain child who is very much in the public eye – the Swedish Royal Princess Estelle, born in 2012. My aim is to gain new insights into a somewhat neglected onomastic field (at least in Sweden), i.e. public opinions on specific personal names.

My main line of interest was the direct and spontaneous reactions to the name-giving, as it made big headlines and created many discussions, not least through newspapers, and especially in comments on the Internet. Today’s overload of news and discussions areas means that even large media events soon lose impact, and I would like to find out if this event had a more lasting influence. For that reason, I have also studied reactions of other young parents-to-be to this particular name, and if and how their selection of names for the expected baby was affected.

The study has been methodologically influenced by works of the American name researcher Stanley Lieberman and the Swedish scholars Charlotte Hagström and Emilia Aldrin. Lieberman’s monograph *A Matter of Taste* (2000) shows how diversified the attitudes towards first names can be, and also that what is seen as positive in one group can be regarded as a negative factor by others. The Swedish anthropologist Hagström (2006) discusses first names status as social and class-related markers, while Aldrin’s doctoral thesis *Namnval som social handling* (‘Naming as a social act’ 2011) gives valuable insights in today’s young parents’ thoughts on name-giving and name choice through group discussions in real life.

Background

The Swedish Crown Princess, Victoria, and her husband, Daniel, became parents to their first-born, a girl, on February 23, 2012. Even though the King of Sweden does not have any political power, his doings, and those of the royal family in general, are closely followed by media. In recent years, some of his actions have been put under scrutiny and his discernment has been criticized.¹ The Crown Princess on the other hand is very popular. As in many countries, there are several weekly magazines in Sweden that thrive on reporting royal events, and interest in the royal family is considerable in large parts of society. The birth of a royal baby who will succeed to the throne, is of course good news for selling extra copies. Since 1979 in Sweden, the succession to the throne is gender-neutral.

In the months preceding the birth, media speculations were frequent on the expected baby's names. All so-called experts were certain of that at least one name would be a name previously used in the royal family, preferably on a queen or king. *Ingrid* or *Sofia* were names mentioned that could be recycled if the child was a girl, and *Oscar* or *Carl* if a boy was born.² Their reasoning was partly that, as the child would be first in line to the throne after its mother, the choice of a name upholding royal traditions and connotations was seen as paramount. All previous direct successors to the throne have been given spoken names found earlier in the Swedish royal house. Also, the two young successors to the thrones in Norway and Denmark have been given traditional names from the royal family history: Prince Christian in Denmark and Princess Ingrid Alexandra in Norway.³

The journalist Herman Lindqvist, who has written a long series of popularized history books, and was what could be called adviser to the royal family on historical matters, made the statement that “a glorious name with continuity in the regency will be selected”.⁴ His reactions to the actual name choice will be more discussed later.

The surprise was great when the King, the day after the birth, announced the child's names to be *Estelle Silvia Ewa Mary*, and the baby was to be called *Estelle*. The announcement was greeted with strong and varying reactions. An animated debate followed in the media.⁵

The names *Estelle Silvia Ewa Mary*

Regarded from a rhythmical point of view, the line of names (*Estelle Silvia Ewa Mary*) is not very appealing to Swedish ears, quite the opposite, with the hiatus between *Silvia* and *Ewa*, but that was not the main subject of the debate. Of the four names, two – *Silvia* and *Ewa* – are the spoken names of the two respective grandmothers; Queen *Silvia* and the

¹ See e.g. the biography *Carl XVI Gustaf – den motvillige monarken*, by Thomas Sjöberg (2010) and the debate around it.

² Fabian Persson, PhD in History and expert on royal history (in Olofsson: *Experten: Barnet kommer heta Gustaf eller Sophia*. <http://www.expressen.se/nyheter/experten-barnet-kommer-heta-gustaf-eller-sophia>)

³ See respectively www.kongehuset.dk/Den-kongelige-familien and www.kongehuset.no

⁴ Lindqvist, H. 2011. *Fyra namn troligt för Victoria och Daniels barn* (<http://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=83&artikel=4963429>)

⁵ All translations from Swedish to English in the following text are mine.

mother of Prince Daniel, Mrs Ewa Westling. Naming after grandparents has been a frequent custom in the royal family, as in many Swedish families, so those names were not questioned as such, even though *Ewa* would be a new name in the Swedish royal family. Why the fourth name, *Mary*, was chosen, was because Mary, the Danish Crown Princess, was to become the baby's godmother. The name was seen by some as not really fitting in the name line – the form *Maria*, more common in Sweden, was preferred.⁶

Most reactions focused on *Estelle*, which was to be the spoken name – and it was immediately put under scrutiny. The King presented the name with the words “a name that is dear to our family”. The American-born Countess Estelle Bernadotte (1904–1984), distantly related to the royal family through marriage,⁷ was perceived by media and court commentators as being the name inspirer.⁸ Newspaper articles were written, where journalists speculated on whether the Crown princess had ever met her, and saw her as the name source. These speculations ended when the Crown Princess's aunt, Princess Christina, said in an interview for a weekly magazine a few months later:

I don't believe that [the Countess had inspired the name] at all, Victoria has never met her. I think that Victoria and Daniel wanted a name that was just their own, something different. (Ohlsson 2012)

Estelle is a French form of the Latin word *stella* meaning ‘star’. It was used sparingly during the Middle Ages in France, and had, together with the variant form *Estella*, a revival in the 19th century in several countries, not least because of the literary figure Estella in *Great Expectations*, the novel by Charles Dickens (Hanks and Hodges 1990: 108). The earliest traces of the name in Sweden are from the late 19th century (Otterbjörk 1979: 155), but the name has never been very much in use (see below). It should also be mentioned here that the Swedish royal family have their origins in France, as their family name *Bernadotte* illustrates.

The debate begins

The name debate started immediately after the King's announcement, as the previously mentioned journalist Herman Lindqvist presented his view on the names in an interview for the web-television of one of the major evening papers, *Aftonbladet*:

Terrible. There has never been a queen named Estelle, and maybe there will never be. It's a very strange choice which I believe will be much discussed. The names are very unsuitable and rather ugly.

He then added a remark that became a much-quoted symbol of this debate: “Estelle sounds like the name of a nightclub queen.”⁹ His remarks created headlines, discussion

⁶ (*Prinsessan ska heta Estelle*. [http://www.svenskdamtidning.se/2012/02/\(Prinsessan-ska-heta-Estelle/#comments](http://www.svenskdamtidning.se/2012/02/(Prinsessan-ska-heta-Estelle/#comments))

⁷ She was married to the former king's cousin and the present king's godfather, Count Folke Bernadotte, who was UN negotiator in the Israel-Palestine conflict and killed in 1948. (*Nationalencyklopedin 2*, 1990: 471).

⁸ Namnvalet Estelle väcker reaktioner. *Dagens Nyheter* Feb 24, 2012, A7.

⁹ <http://nyheter.24se/nyheter/inrikes/660610-herman-lindqvist-fult-namn-en-nattklubbsdrottning>

in all kinds of media, angry replies from women named *Estelle*, comments by onomastic experts etc.¹⁰

The public reaction expressed in newspapers, radio, television and social media was divided. In the following, some main groups are identified and their reactions discussed.

Divided opinions among the public

Traditionalists

One group followed the line of Herman Lindqvist, stating that the names were considered disrespectful to royal traditions and, indeed, even so to the Swedish people, as the names should have been more “Swedish-sounding.” If monarchy is to survive, let the royal family at least keep their distance from ordinary people, would sum this attitude up. The royals should adhere to traditional values also in their names, was another reaction. In the web-commentary field of the weekly magazine that most closely covers the royal family’s doings, *Svensk Damtidning*, many commentators discussed the lack of concern for Swedish history in this choice of names. Fears were expressed that the name *Estelle* could hasten the demise of monarchy in Sweden.¹¹

Not a few of the commentators, however, found the name pretty and becoming to a princess, not least because of the family’s French origin and the name’s apparent connection with the late Countess Estelle Bernadotte. This part of the traditionalist group could be called the loyalists, as they seemed to accept the royal family’s decisions unquestioningly.

Estelle as a low-status name

Some commentaries on Internet chatrooms focused on a discussion about whether the name was a so-called “white trash” name. “White trash” is an American derogatory term, nowadays frequently used in Sweden by middle-class bloggers and in chatroom conversations. It refers to people of working-class origin, sometimes living on social security, who are despised, by the term users, as unsophisticated, uneducated and uncultured. In this context, some names are also regarded as white-trash names, e.g. *Cassandra*, *Melissa*, *Nicole*, *Chanelle*, *Melanie*. These names are often taken over from North American popular culture.

My material in this chapter is mostly collected from the Swedish Internet site *familjeliv.se* (family life)¹² – it is very popular and is frequented by many young mothers (parents) in Sweden. Similar expressions on these names’ social status are found on other Internet sites as well, e.g. alltforforaldrar.se/Namn-dop-namngivning.

Compared to Aldrin’s (2011: 241 f.) reports from group discussions on names, the conversation tone on this Internet site was rather harsh and antagonistic – different writers were quick to condemn names, also names borne by children to other participants in the discussion. Hagström (2006 ch. 3) reports the same attitude from a similar site, 2005, (*namechat.se*), though the term “white trash” does not seem to be as dominant as it is on *familjeliv.se* seven years later. In Aldrin’s material, where conversational analysis and

¹⁰ <http://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/namnvalet-Estelle-vacker-reaktioner/>

¹¹ <http://www.svenskdam.se/2012/02/Prinsessan-ska-heta-Estelle/#comments>

¹² All quotations from *familjeliv.se* are found at: *Estelle* Silvia Eva Mary Prinsessan. *Familjeliv Forum namn*, <http://www.familjeliv.se/Forum-3-21/m63690154-1.html>

socio-onomastic methods for analysing attitudes among young parents on names were used, group participants often tried to reach consensus. Remarks were softened if there were different opinions among the group members. These discussions were held at face-to-face meetings.

Maybe it is only to be expected that Internet group discussions and real-life discussions will create different atmospheres, but the difference in tone is really striking. On familjeliv.se, the following was said of *Estelle* (among many other negative comments): “My God – Disney princess!” and “gives me porn vibes”. Very few commentators were in agreement with that last expression, though. One commentator (Atamon) openly disagreed: “Think it’s pretty! Gives me no porn vibes at all”.

Some comments also alluded to the fact that a well-known Swedish brand of crisps and snacks is called *Estrella*, which is the Spanish form of *Estelle*: “Yuck, Estelle was terrible. Sounds like something either made of plastic or as crisps”.

There was no common consent on the alleged status of *Estelle* as a WT (“white trash”) name on familjeliv.se. Some participants would even regard it as an upper-class name, due to its French origin and because some French names, like *Amélie* and *Leonie*, today are used by trendy Swedish upper-class parents. The more general phenomenon of stigmatizing names as white trash was also discussed and questioned, as in this conversation from Feb 24, 2012 (www.familjeliv.se):

Aprikos writes:

Estelle is crying out WT. [It’s] an awful name for a future queen.

Canie agrees:

Trashy ’n’ nasty in my opinion. But the royal family aren’t known for their good taste or education either...

But Ananasochäpple replies:

Maybe the crown princess hasn’t been following Familjeliv.se, and isn’t aware of the WT-mafia, with all its consequences. Wonderfully free to choose! Positive that they selected something they like and not the expected.

The liberal (modern) attitude

This last comment can be said to represent the opinion of a third, rather large group that regarded the name choice as symbolic: parents, even royal parents, have the right to make their personal taste shown when choosing names for their child. This group also regarded *Estelle* as a beautiful and suitable name for a princess, and some suggested that the name was a sign that the royal family really had moved into modern times. To this camp belonged some already existing name-bearers of *Estelle*, who denounced Lindqvist’s earlier reported remarks as nasty and publicity-seeking.¹³ Several commentators on the monarchist magazine *Svensk Damtidning* took this view. One example is Susse, who writes:

¹³ <http://nyheter24se/nyheter/inrikes/660610-herman-lindqvist-fult-namn-en-nattklubbsdrottning>

Good choice! Regard Estelle as a tribute to the French heritage! That Folke Bernadotte's wife was called Estelle is a bonus. /.../ Stop complaining about the names! /... / all parents want to choose the prettiest name for their child.¹⁴

***Estelle* in Sweden before and after the birth of the princess**

So, many Swedes had some days of excitement and animated feelings while discussing a name that most had never reflected upon before. The furor died down, Herman Lindqvist was dismissed from his royal duties and not invited to the christening, though later forgiven.¹⁵ Was this all a storm in a teacup, or did the name chosen for Princess Estelle in any way influence other people's choice of names?

Estelle has never been a frequent name in Sweden. The earliest record, according to Otterbjörk (1974: 155), is from 1870. In 1973, 301 women had the name, a figure that in 1995 had increased to 412 (Allén and Wählin 1975, 1995), with the 1990's as the so far most popular decade. The upwards-going trend has continued: on Dec 31, 2012, 1.384 women had this name – 663 of them as their spoken name. 465 of those latter name-bearers are born after 2000 (www.scb.se/namn). From these statistics one cannot say that the princess's parents were pioneers in their name choice. The name *Estelle* fits into a smallish trend in Sweden, where names of French origin – or just French-sounding – are slowly becoming popular. Some other names in this group are: *Amélie*, *Celine*, *Leonie* and *Noelle*. These names are also used in English-speaking countries, and they are regarded as either French or American by the Swedish name-givers. As mentioned earlier, these names are by some people, though not by all, regarded as white-trash names, just like names of the *Melissa* and *Cassandra*-type.

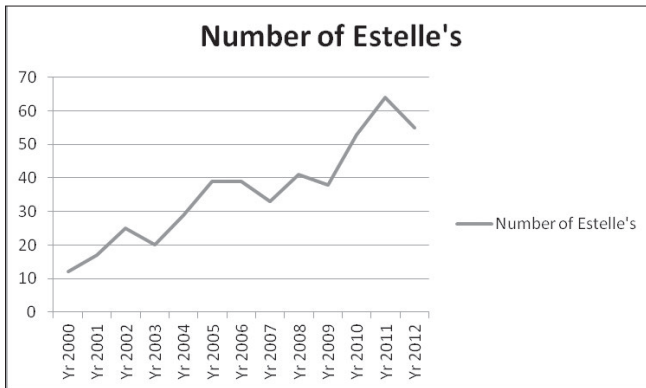


Figure 1. Number of girls in Sweden given the name of *Estelle* as a spoken name 2000–2012

Figure 1 illustrates an interesting dip in 2012 in the otherwise generally upwards-going name curve for *Estelle*. The given name, as a spoken name, sank from 64 to 55 new

¹⁴ <http://www.svenskdam.se/2012/02/Prinsessan-ska-heta-Estelle/#comments>

¹⁵ <http://www.svenskdam.se/2012/09/Kronprinsessan-Victoria-har-förlåtit-Herman-Lindqvist/#comments>

bearers. Many of these names were registered during the first six months, that is, before or around the birth of the princess.¹⁶

From this graph, it is tempting to draw the conclusion that at least some young parents last year decided against the name *Estelle* after the animated discussions around the princess's name. Another reason for dropping the name could also be that, at the risk of being regarded as imitators, parents would not want their daughter to have the same name as the princess. Several comments on familjeliv.se¹⁷ focused on that theme. I quote here from one conversation where Bina86, who has selected *Estelle* as the name for her soon-to-be-born daughter, laments that she now has to find a new name:

Bina86 writes:

I'm like on the verge of a breakdown – we have BF [anticipated birth time] in three weeks and it has been really hard to find a name, and like 2 weeks ago we decided on Estelle (which is very rare in Sweden) and then this comes up. Rather high odds you could really say. I just want to cry! HELL is what I feel.

Fashionista1 answers:

Why? Call the baby Estelle if you like the name regardless of ... like the name, too, maybe there will be another Estelle ...

Bina86 replies:

No, it's plain impossible. I want some more unique names for my children so she can't have the same name as Sweden's future Crown princess. We have talked about Kira so that will probably be the name. Good name that, too, but I was so shocked!

Some consolation for Bina86 would be that *Kira* is much rarer than *Estelle* as a name in Sweden, with only 13 new bearers in 2012 and 225 all in all.¹⁸

It will be most interesting to follow *Estelle* in the name statistics over the next years. In recent years, there have been very few first names in Sweden where public exposure, either positive or negative, actually seems to have diminished a name's popularity, i.e. if the name already was in an upwards-going cycle.¹⁹ One very sad and tragic example, however, is the female name *Engla*. The name had risen from having only 30 new bearers in 2000 to 224 in 2007. In the summer of 2008, a small girl called *Engla* was abducted and later killed by a passing stranger.²⁰ The case figured for a long time in media, and the name *Engla* was thus exposed in tragic circumstances. In the name statistics for 2008, the name had gone down to 169 bearers, with an even bigger fall to just 44 new bearers in 2009. The name has not regained its popularity, as only 37 girls got the name in 2012 (www.scb.se/namn).

¹⁶ Prinsessan har inte skapat någon Estelletrend. <http://www3.infotorg.se/Nyheter/NewsList/Prinsessan-har-inte-skatat-nagon-Estelletrend/>

¹⁷ <http://www.familjeliv.se/Forum-3-21/m63690154-1.html>

¹⁸ www.scb.se/Namn

¹⁹ One example of a name-giving with no strong reactions is the Crown Princess's name, *Victoria*, which already was in an upgoing mode at the time of the Princess's birth 1977 but didn't significantly increase until the 1980's (Allén & Wåhlin 1979, 1995).

²⁰ *Nationalencyklopedin* (2008: 59).

***Estelle* as a name for pet animals**

One name category where the name *Estelle* showed an increase during 2012 was names for dogs and cats. The statistics on cats are not as fully covering as those for dogs, but the large animal insurance company Agria reported more cats named *Estelle* in 2012 than earlier.²¹ For dogs' statistics, *Centrala hundregistret* (The Central dog register) has been used. All dogs in Sweden are to be entered here and the database covers at present ca 650 000 dogs. In that register, in January 2013, 77 dogs had the name *Estelle* (*Centrala hundregistret*). Out of those 77, not less than 52 were born during 2012 compared to only five dogs born in 2011. It is obvious that we can see an *Estelle* rise among Swedish dogs, a rise that probably is related to the royal birth. For at least one dog, we can find a clear declaration that the name was chosen because of the princess's name.

Everybody is aware of the great party in Sweden today, the christening of Princess *Estelle*. Our puppy came to the family at the same time that the Princess's name was made official. That made the name choice simple: her name was to be *Estelle* and she was to be called *Stella*. At the same time we said, for fun, that we will hold the baptizing at the same day as Princess *Estelle*, that's why we today celebrate the baptism of our dog *Estelle*.²²

Conclusion

As I have shown in this paper, the much-debated name *Estelle* gave rise to animated discussions in different media as well as some more far-reaching reactions to the name.

- The discussion and the debate on *Estelle* illustrates the social and cultural capital that is inherent in first names, not least in the very different opinions that were offered on this name's status as either very low-class or upper-class.

- The debate also illustrates some conflicting attitudes in Sweden towards monarchy in the various reactions to the royal family's choice of names. Historical issues in name selection for royals were seen as important for some groups, while other found it refreshing and modern that a previously unused name was chosen. The unexpected name choice led also to discussions, mostly by traditionalists, on the future of monarchy in Sweden.

- The debate reflects the modern quest for individuality and for uniqueness. Another facet of this individualism that the discussion around *Estelle* illustrates, is the risk of being regarded as an imitator. Some parents obviously rejected this name for their daughters after the birth of the princess, even though they were planning to use it. After the birth of the princess, the name *Estelle* increased in use for pet animals – it was seen by some as more suitable for an animal than for a child. A future longitudinal study of children's names will reveal if the princess's name will continue downwards or if it will recover lost ground.

My observations on *Estelle* range over a large area of life in the post-modern society – names are indeed good social catalysts and the choice of first names engages people. As I have shown, name discussions on the Internet, even though they can be hard to quantify, can be very useful sources for studies on present day opinions on names and on future name-giving trends.

²¹ <http://www.agria.se/artikel/estelle-populart-namn-till-valpen-och-kattungen-0> (published 2012-05-23)

²² Hur många hundar heter *Estelle*? <http://dognews.se/2012/05/22/hur-manga-hundar-heter-estelle/>

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