

Identity theft via repeated name changes

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In the United States, it is legal to change your name as many times as you like, and you don't even have to have a reason, as long as you're not doing it with fraudulent intent. The ease with which name changes can be accomplished has been exploited by people who use it to carry out identity theft. Creditors coming after you? Change your name, attach it to a stolen Social Security number, and off you go.

The story about name changes reminds me of a friend of a friend who lives in Taiwan. As a teenager, she was somewhat unhappy and changed her name on the advice of a fortune teller. (I get the impression that fortune tellers are pretty popular in Taiwan, particularly among people who are dissatisfied with their lives.) After the name change she felt a little better, but after graduating with her doctorate from a United States university (where she took on an English name), things weren't working so well and she consulted another fortune teller, who told her, "Yeah, well that name you changed to as a teenager was a good name for a teenager, but now you're an adult, and that name doesn't work any more. You should change it to this other name now that you're an adult."

She followed the fortune teller's advice and changed her name a second time, but it wasn't until after the paperwork was complete that she realized she had misspelled her name on the form. What's more, in Taiwan, you're only allowed to change your name twice. (In Taiwan, women typically do not change their names when they marry.) Maybe they imposed this rule to avoid people changing their names every other week based on the recommendation of a new fortune teller. Whatever the reason for the rule, the result is that my friend's friend is now unfortunately stuck with a misspelled name.

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