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What's in a Name? Gendered Naming Practices and Identity in Britain

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Names and their connections with social organisation and social positioning are an under-developed area of sociological research, yet one which is significant to understanding individual selfhood as well as relationships between people, and an important means by which society is organised and classified. Through recognised naming practices relationships are defined and delineated; these practices are made meaningful through repeated everyday usage and the rituals built around the passing, taking, and sharing of names.

In my research I looked at names, gender, and identity in Britain by considering the gendered practice of name changing on marriage and its related opposite, retaining one's original name. My research findings are based on data from a project which aimed to explore what British women do with their last names on marriage and whether and how this impacts upon their sense of identity. Through looking at this moment in a (heterosexual) woman's life ideas of gender, power, tradition, love, heterosexuality, family, and selfhood can all be examined.

I received 102 completed responses to an online questionnaire, which consisted of questions about background, thoughts and feelings around naming decisions, connections between names and family, work, divorce and general questions about names. Participants completed whichever sections were relevant to them. The sampling method was convenience in the main, with a small amount of snowballing. This produced a sample of 75% 'name changers' and 25% 'name retainers'. The sample was predominantly white and well-educated. Participants were asked whether they would be interested in an interview at a later stage and from those who agreed I chose participants who represented a range of positions in terms of marital status, age, and naming decision. I then conducted life history interviews with 16 participants.

The practices around names and naming are suffused with power. The giving of names is done by those in more powerful social positions, while the less powerful are given names or are named. This can be seen in the (Western) religious and philosophical example of Adam being given the opportunity by God to name creation, including Eve (Schimmel, 1989: ix), but also in the everyday moment of parents deciding a child's name. In the case of last names, the power is a gendered one. Last names in Britain are generally a father's and on marriage a woman is generally expected to change her name to that of her husband.

Women are expected to adapt their selfhoods at the pivotal life moment of marriage to be less focused on their own historical and biographical identity and to re-align themselves with their husband and his family through the taking of his name. This practice is normalised to the extent that it is rarely questioned and the gendered significance of it is lost or ignored. The practice becomes 'tradition' and as such appears to need little, if any, further explanation.

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However, the 'tradition' of name changing has only been a UK-wide phenomenon since the nineteenth century; prior to this, practices were more diverse. My sample was from or based in England and Scotland, hence I focused my historical research on the practices of these nations. English women have been changing names for centuries (Erickson, 2005: 11), while Scottish women legally retained their original name after marriage until the nineteenth century (Barclay, 2011: 98; see also Thwaites, 2012). Since the nineteenth century the homogenised narrative of Britain has clouded over this varied past and English practices have become the most prominent, along with the influence of 'romantic' sensibilities. The narratives women are able to appeal to and utilise to justify their naming decisions are heavily influenced by history and the example of those past. Scottish participants in my sample were unable to access a narrative of 'traditional' name retaining.

As the example of the past is still critical to women in making their naming decision, and tradition is central in influencing the decision made, individualisation theorists' ideas are complicated by considering the reality of women's naming practices in Britain. Theories of individualisation suggest that people look towards their own goals and relationships of a long-term nature are only continued if personal satisfaction can be found in them (see for example, Bauman, 2003: 34). Naming practices suggest otherwise. Women continue to make the more relational decision of name changing and identifying themselves with the wider familial identity in large numbers rather than retaining their original name and the individual selfhood this represents. Family and the roles of wife and mother remain significant to this decision and thoughts around selfhood for women in particular in relation to children, are key.

The couple relationship and the emotion of love are also important to naming decisions and maintaining the status quo in gendered, heterosexual relationships. Women who changed names described the decision in terms of love for and commitment to their husband. Without this change they could begin to question their feelings about the relationship itself. The emotion of love was used by a number of partners in my study to compel women to change names, even when they were unconvinced about whether they wished to. If women suggested not changing names it was acceptable for partners and family to question the love and commitment the woman felt for her partner. The name change became a significant gesture of love and commitment, equated with 'proper' feminine behaviour.

Women who did not change names received a great deal of negative feedback from people around them and had to explain their actions in a way that name changers did not. Their 'deviant' actions needed justification (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 62). Women who did not change their name did not accept that love was shown through their marriage – they refused the conspicuous commitment this naming decision would entail (see Thwaites, forthcoming).

This last point highlights the gendering of naming practices very clearly. Though a major reason given for name changing is that it brings people together, showing to others that the couple is a team and a recognisable family unit, this would frequently come in second place

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to the requirement that it is the woman who takes the man's name. If a partner protested to a woman that her not taking his name would mean they did not look like a family unit and she suggested he take her name instead, this suggestion was often laughed off. Name changing reinforces the idea of the 'family unit' being headed by a man, who passes on the family name.

Thus name changing is suffused with gendered power and relations. The selfhood of women continues to be seen as secondary to that of men. A particular construction of masculinity and femininity is bound up in the naming norm. The authority of the father-husband, head-of-household continues to be important to a large number of the male partners within this study and therefore possibly to others like them. Their wives were also a part of this gendering, some wondering whether they could look at themselves as truly committed and loving if they did not follow the norms of marriage, represented by name changing. The upset name retaining caused to the gender and social order was perceived as threatening.

The self, as Mead (1964: 205) has argued, is made up of the dynamic relationship between self and other (be that the 'other' of family and friends, institutions, or a generalised society). This interaction is clear in the decisions of my participants as they work to reconcile the thoughts of loved ones, the comments and assumptions of those working in institutions, and the expectations and pressures of the society in which they live. Whatever decision is made the naming norm must be negotiated in some way, as a part of the organising principle of heterosexuality in Britain, which in turn limits the possibilities for independent selfhood, especially for women

Naming practices represent the ideal of society; the ways in which they are passed, taken, and shared reflect these ideals. When following the norm one need not explain oneself; justifications seem unnecessary. When not following the norm justification becomes imperative. In this way silence grows around the everyday practices of heterosexuality and norms continue to be reinforced despite the gendered inequality inherent in them. Questioning the everyday is something sociologists strive to do, hence examining naming practices is important in order to understand how norms work, how heterosexuality acts as a structuring process, and how inequalities are maintained; in short how individuals in society are organised and classified.

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