Taking Thy Husband's Name: What Might it Mean?¹

Deborah A. Duggan Albert A. Cota² Kenneth L. Dion

Names are sources of identity and esteem and changing them may be stressful. In many societies, marriage is an occasion when a woman must choose to retain her birth-given last name or change it. We critically review nine empirical studies concerning women's marital names and outline directions for future research.

People's names are sources of identity and personal esteem (e.g., Alia, "Would a Rose by Any Other Name Smell at All?;" "Women, Names, and Power;" Benningfield; Dion; Steinberg et al.). The literature on women's marital names, which is our primary focus here, has been reviewed in part by Ashley; Dralle and Mackiewicz; Foss and Edson; Lebell; and Stannard, Mrs. Man. In this paper we critically review empirical reports concerning name choice and name change at marriage for women.

The topic is of interest for several reasons. First, in many societies it is customary for a woman to take her husband's last name; therefore, it is a common practice. Second, according to case histories, changing one's last name can be stressful (e.g., Falk; Stannard, *Mrs. Man*). Consequently, it is likely that some women who alter their birth-given names at marriage will be distressed by such changes. Third, in the context of the high divorce rates in North America (*Canada Year Book*), keeping one's name

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is a practical option for women who are considering marriage in the 1990s. Finally, whereas the first women to reject societal expectations about their last names at marriage were feminists (Stannard, *Mrs. Man*), women today are making decisions about marital last names based upon personal, professional, social, and legal considerations (Dralle; Foss and Edson; Kupper). In sum, the topic of marital last names is relevant to many women and an examination of issues women face in deciding which marital names to use will shed light upon the processes of name choice and name change.

Historical Overview

Although a name change at marriage is not a universal practice for women (Alia, "Would a Rose by Any Other Name;" Lebell; Soddy), in many societies, especially Western ones, it has come to be expected. In North America, the tradition for a woman to take her husband's last name after marriage began to be challenged only in the middle of the 19th century. One of the first women known to challenge the prevailing practice was Elizabeth Cady who married Henry Stanton in 1840 (Griffith). Shortly after her marriage, she began to be known as Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Although there is some controversy about who was the first woman to retain her last name at marriage, Lucy Stone is usually given credit (Stannard, *Mrs. Man*). Lucy Stone married Henry Blackwell in 1855, and shortly after her marriage began to use her full birth-given name.

It is likely that both Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucy Stone believed that women's names were valuable (for example, as markers of identity) and worth preserving after marriage. However, of the two women, Cady Stanton expressed her opinions on women's names more publicly (Stannard, *Mrs. Man*). An important factor in understanding why Cady Stanton and Stone rejected traditional marital names is the fact that both women were prominent American feminists (Griffith; Lasser and Merrill; Stannard, *Mrs. Man*; Wheeler). Their choices of marital names seem to have been consistent with other aspects of their lives (e.g., their opinions about how marriages could and should be made more egalitarian). (For more information on the history of

women's marital names, see Foss and Edson; Kupper; and Stannard, *Mrs. Man*).

Current Legal Considerations

In Canada and the United States, legal issues and requirements concerning last names for women vary across provinces and states. American legal stipulations concerning marital names have been described elsewhere (Dralle and Mackiewicz; Kupper; Stannard, "Manners Make Laws," Mrs. Man).

We focus on current legislation in the Canadian provinces of Ontario and Quebec. Ontario's Change of Name Act (Statutes of the Province of Ontario) states, in part, that anyone who changes her or his last name must document this choice. Thus, changing one's last name at marriage has been marked as an active and important process. One feature of Ontario's Change of Name Act is that everyone who changes his or her name also receives a completed birth certificate using this new name. For a woman taking her husband's last name, this aspect of the legislation would imply that she was "born married" (Rauhala A1). The Civil Code of Quebec (Statutes of Quebec, Section 442 of the Civil Code) states that, in marriage, both spouses retain their last name - as well as any other given names - and exercise their civil rights under these names. Section 440 of the Civil Code of Quebec specifies that spouses must comply with the provisions of this chapter, regardless of their matrimonial arrangement. For a married woman in Quebec to take her husband's last name, she would have to go through a legal process (Sabourin).

Empirical Research

Computer and hand searches of the literature located only nine empirical studies (one unpublished) on women's marital names. To the best of our knowledge, Holt conducted the first empirical studies addressing women's marital names, as part of a wider attempt at understanding the personality correlates of personal names and name changes. In one study (Part V), he interviewed 15 married women in the United States. One finding of interest is that after marriage, only one woman retained her

birth-given last name, whereas all others took their husbands' names. Some women who made name changes made easy and smooth transitions to their new names, but others had difficulties of varying duration and severity. Holt analyzed the factors that seemed to be associated with easy versus hard transitions to new last names. Many of the factors reflected the respondent's investment in her birth-given last name (e.g., the extent to which it was unique compared to other last names, the extent to which she identified with it as her own name). Holt, however, also pointed out that name changes for women who made multiple major life changes after marriage (e.g., moving to a new community) were relatively easy.

In another study, Holt (Part VI) interviewed 30 people on a number of issues related to personal names. As part of this study, Holt assessed respondents' opinions about a woman who did not take her husband's name after marriage. He found a strong norm against women choosing this option. Some exceptions were made, but primarily for the names that married women used publicly (e.g., for business purposes). Thus, Holt's surveys suggested that there was a strong norm for a married woman to take her husband's last name after marriage and that many women did so, with varied degrees of success in adjusting to name changes. Holt's results, across the pair of studies described here, imply that important individual differences exist in how women who change their names at marriage adjust to these changes (see also Dralle and Mackiewicz on this point).

Holt's work is a classic in the field of onomastics because of its comprehensive nature (see Sherif and Cantril 352). As well, Holt was able to anticipate many of the issues that subsequent researchers have found interesting and important. However, and notwithstanding these contributions, there are major limitations in how Holt interpreted the impact of name changes for women and for men. The following statement is taken from a section in which Holt discussed the links between identity and name changes:

On himself, the effect of a man's changing his name may be severe emotional disturbances, a feeling of split personality, or other maladjustments. But women who object to change because of possible violation of important values are usually maladjusted anyway, and projecting their difficulties onto the norm (312).

Holt's remarks, which were made in the context of marriage as a "situation" in which name changes were normative or "institutionally sanctioned" (312), are problematic. One consideration is that he provided no data to support the view that women who were angry and resentful about losing their birth-given last names after marriage were maladjusted. As well, Holt's perspective did not allow women to be legitimately angry and resentful about the social norms that effectively required them to change their names after marriage.

The first published report on attitudes toward marital last names was by Intons-Peterson and Crawford, who gathered a sample of unmarried, undergraduate psychology students (aged 18-23) and an older sample of married and unmarried adults (graduate students, faculty, and staff members) from the same university in the United States. The following areas were covered in the survey: degree of identification with birth-given names and others' beliefs regarding such identification; willingness to consider changing last names; views of legal, societal, and familial considerations regarding marital last names; perceived impact of last name choices on interpersonal power and status; and opinions on naming children.

Intons-Peterson and Crawford's survey showed that women and men in both samples identified strongly with their last names. As well, respondents seemed to underestimate how many women identify with their birth-given last names. For example, 46% of all undergraduates believed that women identified to some extent with their last names. In contrast, 86% of undergraduate women reported such identification. Intons-Peterson and Crawford's findings seemed to contradict the expectation that, compared to men, women would identify less strongly with their birth-given last names because of societal expectations that women change their names at marriage.

Some interesting differences between the student and nonstudent samples were found by Intons-Peterson and Crawford. One problem with interpreting these findings, however, is that the samples differed on several potentially important demographic variables that possibly covaried with attitudes toward marital last names. Thus, it is impossible to interpret these differences unambiguously.

Intons-Peterson and Crawford did not directly address psychological and other correlates of decisions made by women regarding marital last names. However, Dralle did so in 1987 with a sample of female physicians from two parishes in Louisiana. She found that, of married women, 64% chose to take their husbands' last names. Of the remainder, about half retained their birth-given last names and about half made other choices. In other analyses, Dralle contrasted three groups of respondents: (1) never married, (2) married, traditional name change, and (3) married, non-traditional name choice. Overall, these groups did not differ in such demographic factors as age, income, hours worked per week, desirability of birth-given first and last names, or "perceived degree of feminist identity" (174).

Dralle's study was limited by its small sample size and its restriction to professional women. Although Dralle made a positive contribution by asking women about their reasons for last name choices, she did not use these data to differentiate among the women surveyed. Future researchers should explore whether or not women who have made different choices regarding marital last names also report different types of considerations for doing so. Researchers should also address the possibility that among women making the *same* choice about marital last names, different personality, demographic, and behavioral profiles emerge depending on *why* these choices were made. That is, the marital names that women choose as well as their reasons for making these choices should be studied jointly.

Following Dralle, Foss and Edson examined the motivation for women's last name choices at marriage. They administered sets of open-ended questions about marital last names to three groups of married women: those with their own birth-given last names, those with hyphenated or new last names, and those with their husbands' last names. All respondents were either college students or had completed their degrees. Of those who had completed their college degrees, only women employed outside

the home were recruited. The sample, which the investigators admitted was not random, consisted of "friends, acquaintances, and others whose names were supplied by subjects" (359). The women ranged in age from 21 to 61 years. All were from the United States.

Responses were content analyzed by the authors who found that respondents in different groups varied in how they viewed their lives and marriages. For example, women who took their husbands' last names tended to focus on relationships and to define themselves in terms of their interactions with spouses and children. On the other hand, women who retained their birth-given last names tended to be concerned about preserving personal markers of identity in their lives and marriages.

Is taking one's husband's name stressful? Foss and Edson's study included 35 women who took their husbands' names. Although some reported being pressured (by spouses and societal expectations) to make this choice, it is unclear whether any women reported stress or anxiety. Many women viewed taking their husbands' names as a highly positive step (e.g., in marking their transition to a new social role). These results are somewhat inconsistent with those of related work done by other researchers (e.g., Holt; Stannard, *Mrs. Man*). Unfortunately, we are unable to reconcile these discrepancies.

Foss and Edson were among the first researchers to provide detailed information about why women make different choices about marital last names and to place such issues in a broader social context. These authors argued that the choice a woman makes about her marital last name provides valuable information about how she views herself and her marriage. Researchers interested in replicating and extending Foss and Edson's study should consider recruiting more representative samples of women and including some questions about the nature of the marriage relationship. For instance, is the choice of a marital last name related to the behavior of a woman (or her spouse) in the relationship?

Consistent with the aims of other scholars (e.g., Dralle; Foss and Edson), Kupper examined the motivation behind women's choices of marital names. Kupper's unique contribution was to

survey only women who had made non-traditional choices of marital last names. Women who had retained their last names at marriage were recruited by advertising in selected publications. Participants who responded initially by mailing in questionnaires referred Kupper to other potential participants. A profile of the final sample of 362 women shows that most retained their birth-given last name, and about 25% made another choice (e.g., used a hyphenated or new last name). About 90% had at least one college degree; all had been married at least once (most women were married at the time of the study); the majority came from urban-suburban areas; 96% of the women were employed outside the home; and most were between the ages of 26 and 35. Kupper also collected information from a sub-sample of men married to women who had made non-traditional name choices. All respondents were from the United States.

The results of Kupper's survey indicated that women who chose non-traditional marital names did so for a variety of reasons, with protection of identity being an important consideration. The survey also showed that a woman's choice of a marital last name affected many domains of her professional and personal life, with some consequences emerging only years after the marriage. Findings on the perspective of males suggested that while some husbands supported their wives' non-traditional name choices, "it was unusual for husbands to have an immediate and unquestioning acceptance of their wives' names. Many felt an initial ambivalence or even opposition to the idea, but gradually came to accept and support it" (65).

The contributions of Kupper notwithstanding, replications of her work are warranted, especially with different samples of women and different methods of recruiting them. Given that Kupper's respondents were well-educated women, the extent to which her findings hold for other groups of women who make non-traditional name choices at marriage is unclear. Another concern is that Kupper considered all women making non-traditional name choices as belonging to the same group. By contrast, Foss and Edson's work suggests that finer distinctions (e.g., between women who retain their names versus those who choose a hyphenated name) are worth making.⁴

The next two empirical studies address stereotypes associated with women who retain their last names at marriage. In 1984. Embleton and King sampled 43 Canadian respondents (31 males and 12 females) in two recreational bars on this issue. Respondents were instructed to describe women who had retained their last names in terms of nine characteristics (e.g., physical appearance, age, and assertiveness). The data were analyzed separately for female and male respondents and for respondents with and without university education. About half of all respondents held the view that women who retain their last names at marriage are assertive and oriented toward their jobs rather than toward their homes or families. Embleton and King noted that their study was limited by the use of a small sample. Moreover, because all respondents were interviewed in bars, the results may not generalize to other respondents or to other methods of collecting data on stereotypes. Finally, a pool of nine items is probably too small to describe the domain of the stereotypes which interested Embleton and King.

Following Embleton and King, Atkinson conducted a large survey of stereotypes of women who retain their last names at marriage and of women using Ms. as a title of address. Atkinson's survey included 325 respondents from Canada, who were recruited from church groups, student groups (secondary school and university), and other sources (e.g., university staff). Atkinson found that stereotypes of women who retained their last names at marriage were similar to those of women who used the title Ms. Both stereotypes included attributes such as "career-oriented," "independent," and "feminist." Atkinson's work addressed some of the problems found in Embleton and King's study (e.g., sample size), but it was limited in other respects; for instance, Atkinson collected information on only eight attributes.

Personal names can become the objects of evaluation and stereotyping (for reviews, see Kasof; Lawson, *Personal Names and Naming*). The work of Embleton and King and also of Atkinson is particularly interesting in this respect since it has introduced the idea that a woman's *choice* of her marital last name may become the object of stereotyping by others. This premise is especially promising when viewed in the context of other research (e.g., Foss

and Edson; Holt; Kupper). If a woman's choice of marital last name is valuable to her in defining her identity, then it is reasonable that others will use information about this choice to develop inferences about her personality and other characteristics.

The two remaining empirical studies address cross-cultural patterns of marital names. The first of these is Watson's survey of naming patterns in rural Hong Kong. In 1977-1978, Watson conducted a field study in a rural village of about 2,500 people, all of whom were Cantonese speakers. A central finding was that there was a strong link between personal naming and the development of identity, with this link taking a different form for men and for women. A rural man would choose a marriage name that enhanced his prestige; for example, this name would give him "the right to participate in important lineage and community rituals" (624). For a rural woman, however, marriage marked the loss of an important and distinctive personal name. The name given to a girl 30 days after her birth stopped being used after she was married. Given that both sexes had multiple personal names, it is noteworthy that rural men, compared to rural women, had more personal names and much more control over the form of these names.

Watson's work follows in the tradition of examining name changes as personal markers of changes in social roles. Other researchers (e.g., Alford; Holt) have provided examples from anthropological and cross-cultural studies in which important changes in a person's life are often followed or accompanied by name changes. However, Watson's research also suggests that there are links between control over names and naming and the types of social roles assigned to, and expected of, women and men. For example, women seemed "to have been largely excluded from the individuating, individualizing world of personal naming" (629); and upon marriage, women also seemed to be excluded from developing an identity outside "the world of family and kinship" (628). Watson's observation that people who have control over personal names, including marital names, tend to be powerful and influential is consistent with language research. For example, Miller and Swift (15) have argued that "naming conventions, like the rest of language, have been shaped to meet the interests of society, and in patriarchal societies the shapers have been men* (15).

The main limitation of Watson's survey, which she acknowledged (629), is its limited generalizability. It would be of interest to explore current naming practices in Cantonese-speaking communities living in China and Hong Kong as well as those established elsewhere (e.g., those living in Canada and the United States).

Alford's cross-cultural survey of personal names was the final study available to us. Alford examined personal naming patterns in 60 societies described in the Human Relations Area Files. He supplemented this source of data with information from published literature and from ethnographers working with the societies under consideration. Alford also used multiple aspects of the structure of the 60 societies (e.g., population size, frequency of divorce, religious practices, and family organization), which were coded by other researchers. He found that marital name changes occurred for women in five societies and for both sexes in five additional societies (179-185). Name changes at marriage for women were "more likely in technologically more complex societies" (88) and might be associated with societies in which a new family (or married couple) lived in proximity to the husband's family.

Alford's work has both strengths and limitations. Although he provided some interesting cross-cultural data on marital names, it is unclear from the report why some of these patterns exist. For example, why is the frequency of name changes after (or at) marriage for women twice that for men? In discussing this sex difference, Alford (88) made some interesting speculations (e.g., that identity changes at marriage are greater for women than men), but none based clearly on data from the societies under consideration. On a conceptual note, Alford suggested that a name change after marriage for a woman may help to "create an identity change" (157, emphasis in original). Thus, in keeping with Watson's analysis, changes of personal names after marriage may represent much more than markers of changes in social roles.⁵

Directions for Future Research

Relatively little empirical research exists on issues related to women's marital names compared to what is known about other types of personal names (Ashley; Lawson, "Personal Names;" Personal Names and Naming). Perhaps the custom of a married woman taking her husband's name has become so entrenched in North America that it has escaped scrutiny. Another possibility is that relatively few scholars have believed the topic of women's marital names to be important enough to warrant scrutiny. We, therefore, propose the following four areas for future empirical research:

One, additional information on the personality, behavioral, and demographic correlates of women's choices of marital last names should be gathered. Researchers have not fully explored the possibility — suggested by Sherif and Cantril — that women who make different choices regarding their marital last name may show different personality profiles. In particular, the impact of choice of marital last name on a woman's sense of esteem and identity deserves further investigation.

Two, implications of women's choices about marital last names for their children need to be examined. Although it has been customary for children to be given their father's last name (Intons-Peterson and Crawford), various options for naming children are currently available (Lebell; Lombard; Tummon).

Three, women who make different choices about their marital last names may be perceived differently by others (e.g., Embleton and King). The content of stereotypes associated with women's marital last names and the conditions under which these stereotypes arise should be explored further.

Four, given that societal norms about marriage can influence naming patterns (Alford, Watson), more information is needed on the topic of marital names in which the ethnicity of respondents is taken into consideration. As well, more data are needed from respondents in countries other than Canada and the United States.

Conclusion

This article does not directly answer the question raised in its title. The content of the article is, in our opinion, most reasonably seen as defining a context and creating an agenda for further empirical research that we (and hopefully others) will conduct on the topic of women's martial names. As this paper has shown, a variety of empirical paradigms and perspectives can be brought to bear on the topic, with each providing legitimate and important data. In addition to the methodologies used in the studies reviewed here, other paradigms that have been successfully used to explore personal names (e.g., those found in Lawson, *Personal Names and Naming*) may be useful in exploring aspects of women's marital names. We invite other researchers to explore empirically and conceptually what it means for a woman to choose a marital last name.⁶

Notes

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²Direct correspondence concerning this article to Albert A. Cota (address in Contributors column).

³The empirical studies reviewed in this paper were located in a variety of publications (one study is unpublished). We may have inadvertently omitted some relevant empirical literature on women's marital names. Any such omissions are our responsibility and should be brought to the attention of the corresponding author.

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⁴Researchers interested in Kupper's work should consult Wolfe's evaluation. Our review of Kupper's book was independent of Wolfe's.

⁵Alford also addressed personal names in the United States. We have not discussed his material on American marital names because it included little new empirical information.

⁶An additional study which bears upon this topic (Scheuble and Johnson) came to our attention too late to be considered in this article.

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