

# Attitudes Toward Married Women's Surnames: Evidence from the American Midwest

Thomas E. Murray

*Kansas State University*

Married women who retain their given surnames are perceived very differently from married women who take their husbands' surnames. Moreover, the relative strengths of these perceptions vary according to the characteristics of the people who hold them. The perceptions and the ways in which they vary are examined in the light of corresponding culturally- and demographically-defined notions of societal norms.

---

In their critical review of empirical studies concerning married women's surnames, Duggan, Cota, and Dion (1993, 98) noted that "women who make different choices about their marital last names may be perceived differently by others." They then urged that "[t]he content of stereotypes associated with women's marital last names and the conditions under which these stereotypes arise should be explored further" (1993, 98).

The "conditions under which [such] stereotypes arise" is a complex topic, and one that I can address only minimally in this essay. However, I will explore several fundamental questions related to people's attitudes toward women "who make different choices about their marital last names." Are married women who retain their given surnames really perceived differently from women who take their husbands' surnames? If so, is it possible to correlate those perceptions with any specific demographic characteristics of the people who hold them? And finally, what is the nature of those perceptions? In short, what kinds of attributes are commonly assigned to married women who either retain their given last names or adopt their husbands'?

### Background

As Duggan, Cota, and Dion (1993) have demonstrated, a paucity of research exists on how married women who choose to retain their given surnames are perceived. The earliest study dates only to 1984, when Embleton and King discovered that about half of their 43 Canadian informants stereotyped such women as "assertive" and "oriented towards a job rather than home or family" (1984, 17; other frequently-mentioned attributes included "young," "urban," "educated," "feminist," and "North American").

The strength of these attitudes varied neither with the gender nor the educational level of the informants. That homogeneity, however, almost certainly resulted from the design of the research, as Embleton and King acknowledge (1984, 17, 19): the informants were few in number, the surveys were conducted in a campus pub and a strip bar near the campus, and the sole investigator was a young female. The data, therefore, though interesting, are somewhat limited in usefulness.

The only other study in the same vein (and also based on Canadian data) was by Atkinson (1987), who surveyed 325 demographically diverse informants. Atkinson found that married women who retained their maiden names are typically viewed as "fairly career-oriented, not particularly religious, somewhat independent, somewhat assertive, fairly well educated, and somewhat feminist" (78).

Moreover, Atkinson found that the demographic characteristics of her respondents often correlated with the perceptions they held. Males, for instance, viewed women who retained their surnames as unattractive to a greater degree than females did, and females regarded them as more submissive and career-oriented. (Atkinson notes, however, that some informants did not know the meaning of *submissive*, so any results involving that characteristic are unreliable [1987, 79]. Similarly, many respondents reported the perception "dependent;" but since this contradicts "submissive," Atkinson believes the word was mistaken for *independent* [1987, 79].) And people who claimed to be strongly religious perceived the same women as young, religious, and well-educated more often than people who claimed not to be religious, or only moderately so.

Atkinson rightly notes that the results of her survey "are not conclusive," though they do certainly "point to clear avenues for future research" (1987, 80).

## Attitudes Toward Married Women's Surnames 165

Table 1. Demographic Distribution of Informants

Demographic Category	Number of informants
Kansas residents	1632
Ohio residents	1086
Illinois residents	817
Iowa residents	802
North Dakota residents	797
Michigan residents	790
Minnesota residents	785
Indiana residents	781
South Dakota residents	759
Wisconsin residents	754
Missouri residents	743
Nebraska residents	726
Upper socioeconomic group	2241
Middle socioeconomic group	5156
Lower socioeconomic group	3075
Under age 20	3982
Aged 20-39	2780
Aged 40-59	1942
Aged 60-80	1768
Males	4534
Females	5938
Whites	9938
African Americans	512
Other ethnicities	22

## Methods

The data presented here come from several sources. Between 1983 and 1986 I polled 302 students at Ohio State University, interviewed 219 other Ohioans, and mailed questionnaires to 523 other Ohio residents. Between 1984 and 1988 I gathered data in Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio (again), polling by questionnaire 4,011 students who were then attending one of 41 colleges or universities, interviewing 2,179 other informants in person, and mailing questionnaires to 7,236 other residents in those states.

Finally, between 1988 and 1995, I polled 713 students from Kansas State University by questionnaire, and interviewed 326 other Kansans in person. In all, 10,472 native speakers of English who, by their own reporting, had done a minimum of traveling and living away from their home areas served as informants, 6,204 by questionnaire and 4,268 by personal interview (the others did not return or did not complete their questionnaires).

The regional and demographic diversity of the informants was thus quite extensive (see table 1). Each of 12 states was well represented, with only Ohio and Kansas having disproportionately large numbers of respondents. The informants also represented three social classes,<sup>1</sup> four age groups, and both genders. The most questionable independent variable in my data is ethnicity, since approximately 95 percent of my informants were white non-Hispanics. The statistical test that I used in determining the significance of the data compensates for such disproportion to some degree, but any conclusions involving the ethnicity of the informants should still be weighed against the unevenness of their ethnic distribution.

I should be clear from the outset that these informants, rather than comprising a random cross-section of all midwesterners, constitute what statisticians refer to as a "convenience" sample (Davis 1990), one defined by opportunity or availability rather than chance. Michael Linn (1983, 240) has written that "informants are not to be chosen simply because of availability," and Davis (1990, 5) makes the same point when he states that "only random samples are valid for making statistical inferences about the populations from which samples are taken." On the other hand, a statistician who reviewed this article for *Names* commented concerning the convenience sample:

## Attitudes Toward Married Women's Surnames 167

Don't worry about it. If people actually obeyed the statistical injunction to use only random samples when calculating statistics, easily 80% of all social and behavioral science research would vanish. The problem is not randomness but bias—and I see no reason why your large sample is biased in any way. You see, unbiased but non-random samples behave exactly like random samples in all the usual statistical tests.

My population of informants is therefore sound, but the extent to which their opinions represent the entire Midwest is debatable.

Once the necessary demographic information had been collected and the informants had been assured that they were not being tested, they were directed to the following scenario:

(a) A man and woman have just married. The woman decides to keep the same last name that she had before the wedding.

Much later, they were directed to a second scenario:

(b) A man and woman have just married. The woman decides to change her last name so that it is the same as her husband's.

After each scenario, informants received the following directions:

Please agree or disagree with each of the statements below by putting an "X" in the appropriate blank under each statement.

The statements and accompanying opinion scales looked like this:<sup>2</sup>

The woman (is) (a) _____.									
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
strongly									strongly
disagree									agree

I requested opinions on the following 20 characterizations: tall, independent, blond, wealthy, attractive, will make a good wife, feminist, young, well-educated, wears glasses, works outside the home, caucasian, outspoken, has long hair, will make a good mother, self-confident, creative, likes to cook, drives a Ford, and goes to church. Some of these (e.g., "drives a Ford") were included merely as distracters—or, as Atkinson (1987, 60) puts it, "to reduce the potential bias of [informants] falling into a set response pattern." Moreover, and again following Atkinson (1987, 60), "[i]t would...have made the purpose of the questionnaire considerably more transparent had the [characteristics] all directly described the stereotype" being investigated.

Finally, after they had completed each of the opinion scales, the informants were asked two additional questions:

Do you have any ideas about what this woman might be like that don't appear in the above statements? (If so, list them here.) Do you have any comments that may help to explain how strongly you agreed or disagreed with the statements above? (If so, write them here.)

These scenarios, opinion scales, and questions were embedded in a lengthy questionnaire concerning a wide variety of linguistic and cultural items. Thus the informants' curiosity about why they should be asked specifically about their perceptions of married women and their surnames was minimized.

Although I took care in constructing the scenarios and opinion scales to preclude bias in my informants' responses, this method of collecting data is not without its (mostly epistemological) flaws. In short, the information I collected does not reflect the *actual* opinions of my informants, but their *perceptions* of those opinions, which may be quite inaccurate.

Do people really know what they believe about married women and their surnames? (If not, they may unintentionally report their perceptions falsely.) Will people tell the truth? (If they believe their opinions are not mainstream, or are stigmatized, they may intentionally lie.) And will people, in spite of being told the survey is not a test, attempt to anticipate "correct" responses? (They frequently do; see Moser and Kalton 1971, 379, 385-88.) But such problems are endemic to all surveys, and can be overcome completely only by gathering data through surreptitious personal observation, the ethical and legal complications of which are numerous. (If not gathered surreptitiously, the data would be tainted by the "Hawthorne effect"—that is, by the subjects knowing that they were being observed [Roethlisberger 1949].)

#### Data

A number of my findings are homogeneous to a remarkable degree. To demonstrate the homogeneity, I have performed a standard multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on the data. This statistical test compares the average (or mean) scores of the demographic groups involved and calculates the probability that the differences between those averages could have occurred purely by chance.<sup>3</sup>

Gender

Table 2 shows the mean numerical responses to the 20 items in the survey, presented as a function of the gender of the informants. We can notice, first, that the males' and females' perceptions of married women who take their husbands' surnames are extremely similar. Indeed, none of the differences between the two means for any given characteristic is statistically significant.

Table 2. Mean Responses of Informants as a Function of Gender

	Take Husband's Surname		Keep Given Surname	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
tall	5.17	5.04	5.11	5.08
independent	5.19	5.12	7.49	6.62
blond	5.26	5.33	5.42	5.59
wealthy	5.47	5.03	5.87	6.13
attractive	5.27	5.31	3.97	5.11
good wife	5.52	5.39	4.72	4.39
feminist	4.15	4.26	7.45	7.31
young	5.42	5.38	6.34	6.18
educated	5.56	5.43	6.75	6.83
glasses	5.39	5.43	5.28	5.23
works	5.37	5.46	8.23	7.11
caucasian	5.43	5.46	5.49	5.42
outspoken	5.23	5.41	7.39	7.01
long hair	5.48	5.42	5.12	5.32
good mother	5.41	5.33	4.45	6.23
self-confident	5.64	5.47	7.44	7.25
creative	5.50	5.42	5.26	5.11
cooks	5.40	5.42	3.55	4.12
drives Ford	5.34	5.41	5.20	5.34
church	5.52	5.34	4.42	4.56

Similarly, there are no significant differences between the two means for most of the characteristics surveyed regarding males' and females' perceptions of married women who retain their given surnames. However, for the attributes "independent" ( $p < 0.001$ ), "works outside the home" ( $p < 0.0001$ ), "attractive" ( $p < 0.0001$ ), "will make a good mother" ( $p < 0.00001$ ), and "likes to cook" ( $p < 0.05$ ), significant variation does exist. In other words, males, much more than females, tend to view married women who keep their given last names as independent, unattractive, likely to work outside the home, and not as likely to make good mothers or enjoy cooking as married women who take their husbands' surnames.

It is also informative to juxtapose the mean scores given in table 2 for each gender and for each of the characteristics tested. As we might expect, there is no appreciable difference in the scores for many of the attributes. But consider the differences (all significant at the .001 level or higher) for the characterizations "independent," "attractive," "will make a good wife," "feminist," "young," "well-educated," "works outside the home," "outspoken," "will make a good mother," "self-confident," "likes to cook," and "goes to church." Both males and females evidently perceive married women who retain their given surnames as quite different in these respects from married women who adopt their husbands' surnames.

#### Socioeconomic Class

In table 3 the mean numerical responses to the 20 characteristics surveyed is presented, this time as a function of the socioeconomic class (SEC) of the informants. As in table 2, all three SECs' perceptions of married women who take their husbands' surnames are very similar. None of the differences between the means listed for any characteristic is statistically significant.

When we compare the means of the three SECs for married women who kept their given surnames, however, interesting patterns emerge for three of the characteristics; members of the lower class are much more likely to view such women as more independent ( $p < 0.001$ ), feminist ( $p < 0.01$ ), and likely to work outside the home ( $p < 0.01$ ) than are members of the middle and upper classes.

Furthermore, when we compare the mean scores in table 3 for each SEC and for each of the 20 attributes, still other patterns emerge (all are



## Attitudes Toward Married Women's Surnames 171

significant at  $p < 0.01$  or higher). To a much greater degree than married women who take their husbands' surnames, married women who keep their given surnames are seen as independent, unattractive, poor potential wives and mothers, feminist, young, well-educated, likely to be working outside the home, outspoken, self-confident, and not liking to cook or go to church.

Table 3. Mean Responses as a Function of Socioeconomic Class

	Take Husband's Surname			Keep Given Surname		
	Upper	Middle	Lower	Upper	Middle	Lower
tall	5.11	5.15	5.00	5.15	5.09	5.06
independent	5.08	5.11	5.22	6.82	6.68	7.66
blond	5.50	5.28	5.19	5.52	5.52	5.43
wealthy	4.99	5.31	5.24	6.02	6.02	5.89
attractive	5.26	5.25	5.39	4.51	4.51	4.62
good wife	5.49	5.42	5.52	4.58	4.58	4.64
feminist	4.35	4.19	4.15	7.29	7.29	8.01
young	5.43	5.37	5.42	6.25	6.25	6.19
educated	5.39	5.49	5.55	6.81	6.81	6.63
glasses	5.34	5.41	5.47	5.25	5.25	5.36
works	5.54	5.43	5.32	7.42	7.42	8.19
caucasian	5.30	5.46	5.53	5.46	5.46	5.33
outspoken	5.22	5.33	5.42	7.20	7.20	7.15
long hair	5.57	5.46	5.33	5.19	5.19	5.28
good mother	5.23	5.38	5.44	5.32	5.32	5.41
self-confident	5.65	5.53	5.49	7.31	7.31	7.50
creative	5.37	5.43	5.56	5.19	5.19	5.11
cooks	5.36	5.38	5.50	3.85	3.85	3.72
Ford	5.31	5.35	5.48	5.26	5.26	5.31
church	5.51	5.31	5.53	4.47	4.47	4.53

## Ethnicity

Table 4 shows the mean differences in how whites and African Americans perceive the two groups of married women under consideration. We first notice—again—that no significant differences exist in how the two ethnic groups view the women who adopt their husbands' surnames.

Table 4. Mean Responses of Informants as a Function of Ethnicity

	Take Husband's Surname		Keep Given Surname	
	Whites	African Americans	Whites	African Americans
tall	5.10	5.03	5.09	5.15
independent	5.15	5.16	7.04	6.19
blond	5.30	5.29	5.52	5.42
wealthy	5.22	5.23	5.98	6.71
attractive	5.29	5.34	4.62	4.55
good wife	5.45	5.38	4.53	4.59
feminist	4.21	4.26	7.39	7.01
young	5.40	5.35	6.25	6.24
educated	5.49	5.42	6.75	7.64
glasses	5.41	5.46	5.25	5.28
works	5.42	5.44	7.56	8.25
caucasian	5.45	5.39	5.45	5.46
outspoken	5.33	5.37	7.18	7.07
long hair	5.45	5.37	5.23	5.30
good mother	5.36	5.40	5.46	5.35
self-confident	5.54	5.61	7.38	6.44
creative	5.46	5.36	5.18	5.08
cooks	5.41	5.44	3.87	3.93
Ford	5.38	5.37	5.20	5.27
church	5.42	5.38	4.50	4.49

A good deal of significant variation does exist, however, in how the two ethnicities view the women who choose to retain their given surnames. Though both whites and African Americans see such women as independent, for example, African Americans perceive them as much

less so ( $p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, members of both ethnic groups believe such women to be well-educated, but for African Americans that tendency is much higher ( $p < 0.0001$ ). African Americans also see such women as more likely to work outside the home ( $p < 0.01$ ) than whites do, but not as feminist ( $p < 0.05$ ) or as self-confident ( $p < 0.0001$ ).

If we contrast the mean scores listed in table 4 for each ethnicity and for each characterization, other patterns appear. Again discounting those attributes for which only trivial differences in perception exist, we still see that members of both ethnic groups view married women who retain their given last names as much more independent, unattractive, feminist, young, well-educated, outspoken and self-confident, more likely to work outside the home, enjoy cooking, and go to church.

### Age

Table 5 shows the means for the 20 characterizations tested as a function of the respondents' ages. Once again, no significant variation exists in how the members of the four age groups perceive married women who take their husbands' last names.

Married women who retain their given surnames, however, are seen as much more independent, especially by informants aged 40 and older ( $p < 0.001$ ). Such women are also viewed as feminists, but with this characterization an increasing, gradient relationship exists among the four age groups: the older the respondents, the stronger the perception of feminism ( $p < 0.01$ ). For the attribute "young," on the other hand, a division of scores again exists between informants who are under the age of 40 and those who are 40 and older, with an even more pronounced split occurring between informants aged 40 to 59 and those aged 60 to 80 ( $p < 0.05$ ).

One of the most marked contrasts seen in table 5 occurs with respect to the characteristic "well-educated," for which members of the youngest age group have a mean score considerably lower than that of the other three age groups ( $p < 0.0001$ ). The same pattern occurs for "works outside the home," though in this instance it is not so severe (or significant;  $p < 0.01$ ). If we look next at the trait "outspoken," we again see an increasing, gradient relationship among the means of the three youngest age groups, but then the mean for the oldest age group dips sharply ( $p < 0.0001$ ). And last, we can note a large increase in scores between the two youngest age groups for the attribute "self-

174 Names 45.3 (September 1997)

confident,” and a similarly large decrease among the three oldest age groups ( $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 5. Mean Responses of Informants as a Function of Age

	Take Husband's Surname				Keep Given Surname			
	< 20	20-39	40-59	60-80	< 20	20-39	40-59	60-80
tall	5.19	5.05	5.03	5.00	5.09	5.04	5.15	5.12
independent	5.14	5.21	5.02	5.22	6.83	6.61	7.39	7.56
blond	5.25	5.34	5.29	5.36	5.54	5.48	5.44	5.61
wealthy	5.30	5.21	5.33	4.94	6.00	5.89	6.11	6.16
attractive	5.28	5.19	5.34	5.43	4.58	4.64	4.58	4.70
good wife	5.41	5.52	5.39	5.47	4.55	4.61	4.49	4.42
feminist	4.20	4.31	4.15	4.16	6.53	7.39	8.21	8.32
young	5.36	5.45	5.42	5.40	6.15	6.14	6.24	6.66
educated	5.47	5.39	5.52	5.64	5.71	7.60	7.32	7.41
glasses	5.35	5.51	5.40	5.42	5.25	5.32	5.19	5.22
works	5.41	5.29	5.59	5.47	7.12	7.91	7.83	7.96
caucasian	5.52	5.38	5.44	5.40	5.45	5.39	5.52	5.47
outspoken	5.30	5.19	5.44	5.51	6.89	7.32	7.51	7.22
long hair	5.41	5.45	5.36	5.62	5.21	5.29	5.18	5.26
good mother	5.35	5.41	5.46	5.22	5.46	5.44	5.39	5.56
self-confident	5.52	5.60	5.45	5.61	7.25	7.61	7.36	7.05
creative	5.43	5.49	5.39	5.53	5.18	5.12	5.22	5.22
cooks	5.40	5.31	5.46	5.54	3.85	3.91	3.87	3.87
Ford	5.39	5.27	5.31	5.61	5.27	5.31	5.19	5.35
church	5.46	5.38	5.41	5.39	4.48	4.52	5.46	4.55

Juxtaposing the data from table 5 for each age group and for each attribute tested also produces interesting results. If we again focus only on those characterizations for which meaningful variation occurs, we

must conclude once more that all informants perceive married women who keep their own surnames as younger and more independent, unattractive, likely to make poor wives and mothers, feminist, educated, outspoken and self-confident, and more prone to work outside the home, enjoy cooking, and go to church than married women who take their husbands' surnames ( $p < 0.01$  or higher for each characteristic).

### Discussion

Interpreting these results is difficult, especially since so little comparable research exists. Some of the questions the data raise, however, along with tentative answers, are offered below.

Why do informants generally perceive married women who retain their given surnames as more independent, less attractive, less likely to make good wives and mothers, more feminist, younger, better-educated, more likely to work outside the home, more outspoken, more self-confident, less likely to enjoy cooking, and/or less likely to go to church than married women who take their husband's surnames?

First I will note that Atkinson (1987) obtained results similar to mine. Her informants characterized married women who kept their given surnames as independent, well-educated, assertive, career-oriented, feminist, and not religious (though "youthfulness...was...[not] part of the stereotype" [1987, 78]).

I should also note that according to a recent survey (Brightman (1994), the number of married women who adopt their husbands' surnames really *does* vary as a function of those women's ages and education. In short, the younger and better-educated a married woman is, the more likely she is to retain her given surname. So part of the answer to the question posed above is that my informants are perceiving reality.

But I believe two additional forces are also at work here. First, at least in the United States, for a married woman to retain her given surname has been formally recognized as legal since only the mid-1970s (Embleton and King 1984, 13; see also Stannard 1977, 1984). And as of the mid-1980s, many people still believed that it was *illegal* for a husband and wife not to have the same last name (Embleton and King 1984, 15).

Since cultural mores change much more slowly than the laws that help regulate them, then, in many people's eyes, such women are

flouting what is assumed to be an age-old tradition. (As Embleton and King [1984, 12] point out, for a married woman to retain her surname began to be common law in England only during the early nineteenth century. Further details can be found in Stannard 1977 and 1984.) Even as late as 1993, 90% of the married women in the United States were using their husbands' surnames (Brightman 1994, 9). The other 10% of these women, as Duggan, Cota, and Dion put it, are viewed as "reject[ing] societal expectations about their last names" (1993, 88). Of course they would come to be perceived as archetypes of independence, and perhaps also self-confidence.

Moreover, though most of my informants chose not to answer the survey question that asked for additional characterizations of the two types of women being investigated, and declined to provide any comments "to [help] explain how strongly [they] agreed or disagreed with the statements" on which I was seeking opinions, a clear pattern developed among the few hundred who did respond. Nearly all associate "ordinary" (i.e., non-celebrity) married women who retain their given surnames with feminism and the resurgent women's movement that swept the United States in the 1970s.

The women who participated in this movement were, at least for a large minority of my informants, some of the boldest members of society. They dared to challenge the received social order by being outspoken, working outside the home ("for no good reason") and wanting to be freed of their proprietary tasks in the kitchen. Not incidentally, such women are also often remembered as being relatively young, well-educated, not particularly religious or attractive, and, probably *ipso facto*, as feminists who have only limited abilities as wives and mothers.

Why do male informants perceive married women who retain their given surnames as more independent, less attractive, more likely to work outside the home, and less likely to enjoy cooking than do female informants?

Again I begin by comparing my results to Atkinson's. To her surprise, she found that females more than males tended to view married women who retained their given surnames as more dependent and submissive, but also more career-oriented (however, recall the caveat Atkinson offers concerning the attributes "dependent" and "submissive"). Males, though, tended to perceive such women as more unattractive than did females (Atkinson 1987, 79).

In related research, Scheuble and Johnson (1993) discovered that in their sample of midwestern college students, females much more than males believed that it was "appropriate" for a married woman to keep her given surname, especially if the woman has a professional career, is older, particularly likes her surname or does not like her husband's, or "wants to keep her family name going." And Trost (1991) has recorded similar gender-related opinions in Sweden: in both 1975 and 1989, females were "more tolerant" than males of husbands and wives having different last names (though that level of tolerance rose for both genders during the 14 intervening years).

In my data males, more than any other demographic group, tended to view the characteristics listed in the question above, and presumably the women to whom they relate, negatively—often intensely so. This became apparent in the additional characterizations that males offered: *bitch* occurred frequently, as did several other abusive epithets. The real question that I must address here thus becomes more complicated: Why do male informants perceive married women who retain their given surnames as more independent, less attractive, more likely to work outside the home, and less likely to enjoy cooking than do female informants, and why are these perceptions so routinely negative?

While the question may be complicated, the answer is straightforward. In any stratified social structure, the uppermost group risks the most if the status quo changes (see, e.g., Centers 1947, 482). And in the United States, if we measure such stratification by gender, the uppermost group is clearly that of males, who occupy far more positions of political, social, and economic power than females. The surname a married woman chooses may seem unimportant to everyone except the woman making the choice, but I believe many males feel threatened when such women do not automatically take their husbands' surnames. These males regard such decisions as symptomatic of the existing social order changing, and therefore respond more strongly than females in perceiving such women as anomalous when compared to the cultural norm the males wish to preserve.

Why do lower-class informants perceive married women who retain their given surnames as more independent, more feminist, and more likely to work outside the home than do middle- and upper-class informants?

Atkinson found that people with at most a high school education generally viewed married women who retain their given surnames as more dependent than did people with at least some college education (1987, 79). Again, however, because of the possible misreading of *dependent* as *independent*, this conclusion is suspect.

By way of explaining my data, I first state the obvious: People in the lowest SEC have less education and money than members of the other SECs. By extension (at least in the United States), they also have less social, cultural, political, and linguistic power. This lack of power translates into fewer opportunities for travel, interaction with diverse kinds of people, and in short, participation in activities that allow one's view of society to develop at a pace similar to that at which the society itself is developing.

My informants suspect that married women increasingly began to retain their given surnames during the women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and they are correct (Brightman 1994). I also suspect that most of the women starting the trend were members of the upper-middle and upper classes (women, for example, for whom *Ms.* magazine was published).

If all this is true, then the cultural norm for married women's surnames surely began to change 25 to 30 years ago, especially in those upper classes: as more married women began to retain their given surnames, it would have become more and more culturally acceptable for them to do so. And as that norm changed, people of progressively higher social-class standing more easily and more quickly changed their personal notion of "standard behavior," both because they had the wherewithal and the opportunity to do so and because they were members of the same classes in which the changes were occurring most frequently.

Why do white informants perceive married women who retain their given surnames as more independent, more feminist, less well-educated, less likely to work outside the home, and more self-confident than do African American informants?

The answer to this question becomes clear if we again bear in mind that an individual's perception of reality varies according to his or her sense of what reality is. Most of my African American informants are members of the lower class who live in inner-city ghettos, and as Labov



(1972, 203) has noted, such families "are typically female-based, or matrifocal, with no father present to provide steady economic support."

The norm for these families is that the mother supplies whatever is necessary for survival—not just economically, but emotionally and physically. To the typical African American respondent in my survey, in other words, "independent," "feminist," "likely to work outside the home," and "self-confident" are relative terms that merely define a lifestyle they have been conscripted into living. These attributes do not seem so far removed from the standard just because in many ways they *are* the standard.

Why do informants between the ages of 40 and 80 perceive married women who retain their given surnames as more independent than do informants under the age of 40? Why does the perception of such women as feminists increase with the age of the informants? Why do informants aged 60 and older perceive such women as younger and more self-confident than do younger informants? Why do informants aged 20 and older perceive such women as more highly educated, more likely to work outside the home, and more outspoken than do younger informants?

Here my data are at odds with Atkinson's, for she notes that "age did not prove to be significant as an independent variable" for any of the characteristics "young," "career-oriented," "religious," "dependent," "submissive," "well-educated," "unattractive," or "feminist" (1987, 79).

The questions posed above can be reduced to one: Why are married women who retain their given surnames perceived as more and more distant from "the cultural norm" as my informants became older?

The answer again has to do with different perceptions of cultural norms. The youngest informants in my survey, all born in 1963 or later, have lived most of their lives in a society in which an organized women's movement has been endemic. The same society has experienced, over the last 30 years, an increase in the number of married women who decline to take their husbands' surnames (Brightman 1994, 9). And as media critics often remind us, repeated exposure to any phenomenon eventually numbs the senses to it. The cultural norm then changes, and a new standard is established.

What has happened is that my youngest informants have been conditioned to expect women to be better-educated, more self-confident,

and so forth, and have also grown up in a society in which married women who retain their given surnames are more numerous than in past generations. The older informants, however, though they too are experiencing the setting of new standards, still remember "how things used to be," and so perceive those new standards as changes from the norms with which they were raised.

Why are married women who retain their given surnames viewed as more distant from the cultural norm as evidenced by the increasing age of my informants? Put simply, because they *are* more distant from what the older informants consider to be "the cultural norm."

#### Conclusion

I have provided a substantial amount of survey data which suggest that married women who retain their given surnames are perceived very differently from married women who take their husbands' surnames. Women in the latter group tend to be seen as "the norm" against which women in the first group are viewed as younger, more independent, more feminist, better-educated, more likely to work outside the home, more outspoken, more self-confident, less likely to enjoy cooking, less likely to go to church, and less likely to make good wives and good mothers. Moreover, useful demographic characteristics by which we can measure significant variation in those perceptions include gender, socioeconomic class, age, and even, perhaps, ethnicity.

I have also argued that the reasons such perceptions exist and vary as they do lie in what the various groups of people view as "the norm." These different views of reality might best be seen as threads which, when woven together, comprise the cultural fabric of at least the Midwest.

There are, thus, answers, however tentative, to questions which to this point had not been addressed adequately. Yet a number of questions remain. What other characteristics do people associate with married women who retain their given surnames? How do the perceptions I have recorded in the Midwest compare to those that exist in other parts of the United States? (This question is particularly intriguing given the patterned differences that have been discovered in dialects, onomastics, religion, architecture, agriculture, and numerous other traits of human behavior [see Zelinsky 1973].) Johnson and Scheuble (1995), for example, have found that southern respondents generally have more

liberal attitudes toward non-traditional surname choices among married women than do northeastern or western respondents. What similar region-based patterns exist?

How are married women who retain their given surnames perceived in other parts of the world? In Sweden the attitude toward such women has become much more accepting over the past generation, even among males (Trost 1991). Germany, on the other hand, has recently prescribed by law that each household should have only one surname (Walker 1996). How do such attitudes compare to those throughout the rest of Europe? What are the perceptions of people living behind the Iron Curtain, or in Third World countries? Are there other demographic variables, such as political ideology or religious preference (cf. Morgan 1987), which are relevant to these perceptions?

There are several additional questions. How are women perceived who hyphenate their given surnames to their husbands', as when Susan Jones, on marrying John Smith, becomes Susan Jones-Smith? (As of 1993, about 5% of the married women in the United States did so [Brightman 1994], which means this trend has more than tripled in popularity in just the last generation [Johnson and Scheuble 1995].) What about women who compound their surnames with their husbands', as when Cindy Green marries Joe Murphy and becomes Cindy Green Murphy? And what of women who adopt a blended version of their and their husbands' surnames, as when Karen Stockwell marries George Welling and becomes Karen Stockwelling? (According to Brightman [1994, 9], as of 1993 both compounding and blending were options chosen by fewer than 2% of the married women in the United States.)

Other questions also persist. Does the choice that a married woman makes about her own surname affect how she perceives similar or dissimilar choices that other married women make, and if so, how? Do people's perceptions of married women having one or another type of surname vary according to whether those women work outside the home, are educated or uneducated, rich or poor, African American or white, younger or older, and the like (cf. Scheuble and Johnson 1993; Johnson and Scheuble 1995)? And finally, what implications do our perceptions of married women with various kinds of surnames hold both for the women being perceived and for the people perceiving them?

These are questions for which no reliable answers currently exist. Perhaps they can serve as one starting point for the next empirical

investigation into the perception of married women who retain their given surnames.

### Notes

The research reported here was supported by grants and sabbaticals from Ohio State University and Kansas State University. I am also grateful to the students and colleagues who assisted me in collecting data; to the Department of Statistics at Kansas State University, which provided help in calculating the significance of my findings; to several anonymous readers for *Names*, all of whom provided valuable feedback on an earlier draft of this essay; and to Donna Lillian (who changed her surname from *Atkinson* to honor a grandmother), who willingly shared her research with me.

1. The governing factors here were occupation, income, highest level of education, and location of home. If informants were living with their parents (or, as students, in temporary quarters), social class membership was determined by the parents' occupation, income, highest level of education, and location of home.

2. As an anonymous reviewer for *Names* has pointed out, this 10-point scale is imperfect in that there is no absolute middle, which forces respondents always to slightly agree (by choosing "6") or disagree (by choosing "5").

3. Briefly, levels of probability are expressed as p-scores (such as " $p < 0.01$ "), and decreasing p-scores indicate proportionately *increasing* levels of significance. For example, " $p < 0.01$ " means that the differences between the averages tested could have occurred by chance only less than once in 100 times; " $p < 0.001$ ," that the probability of a chance occurrence is less than once in 1,000 times; " $p < 0.0001$ ," less than once in 10,000 times; and so forth. The minimum level of significance usually accepted is  $p < 0.05$  (which means that the probability of a chance occurrence is less than five times in 100); p-values larger than  $p < 0.05$  are not considered statistically significant.

### References

- Atkinson, Donna. 1987. "Names and Titles: Maiden Name Retention and the Use of Ms." *Journal of the Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association* 9: 56-83.
- Brightman, Joan. 1994. "Why Hillary Chooses Rodham Clinton." *American Demographics* 16 (Mar.): 9-10.
- Centers, Richard. 1947. "The American Class Structure: A Psychological Analysis." In Theodore M. Newcomb, Eugene L. Hartley, *et al*, eds., *Readings in Social Psychology* (New York: Holt), pp. 481-93.

**Attitudes Toward Married Women's Surnames 183**

- Duggan, Deborah A., Albert A. Cota, and Kenneth L. Dion. 1993. "Taking Thy Husband's Name: What Might it Mean?" *Names* 41: 87-102.
- Embleton, Sheila M., and Ruth King. 1984. "Attitudes towards Maiden Name Retention." *Onomastica Canadiana* 66: 11-22.
- Johnson, David R., and Laurie Scheuble. 1995. "Women's Marital Naming in Two Generations: A National Study." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57: 724-32.
- Labov, William. 1972. *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P.
- Morgan, Mary Y. 1987. "The Impact of Religion on Gender-Role Attitudes." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 11: 301-09.
- Moser, C. A., and G. Kalton. 1971. *Survey Methods in Social Investigation*. 2nd ed. London: Heinemann.
- Roethlisberger, F. J. 1949. *Management and Morale*. Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- Scheuble, Laurie, and David R. Johnson. 1993. "Marital Name Change: Plans and Attitudes of College Students." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55: 747-54.
- Stannard, Una. 1977. *Mrs. Man*. San Francisco: Germainbooks.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1984. "Manners Make Laws: Married Women's Names in the United States." *Names* 32: 114-28.
- Trost, Jan. 1991. "What's in a Surname?" *Family Reports* 19: 1-20.
- Walker, R. 1996. "Germany Bans Double Names for Families." *Christian Science Monitor* 10 (Oct.): 1+.
- Zelinsky, Wilbur. 1973. *The Cultural Geography of the United States*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.