Attitudes Toward Women's Marital Name Choices

Laurie K. Scheuble

Doane College

and

David R. Johnson

University of Nebraska

Attitudes of more than 900 adult respondents toward women's choosing to retain their birth name as their last name when they marry are reported. The majority of respondents were tolerant of a woman's keeping her birth name, but were not tolerant if the couple planned to have children. Women were far more accepting of a wife's retaining her birth name than were men. Also more tolerant were persons with higher levels of education, higher incomes, lived in larger communities, had more liberal political leanings, were less religious and younger.

The pervasive societal norm in the United States is that, at the time of marriage, the wife takes the last name of her husband. Indeed, this expectation is so strong that people have often incorrectly assumed that it is a law (Glendon 1989; NOW Legal Defense Education Fund & Cherow-O'Leary 1987; Stannard 1984). While it is legal in all 50 states for a woman to keep her birth surname at marriage, the normative behavior of a woman's taking her husband's last name still predominates (Brightman 1994; Johnson and Scheuble 1995). Approximately nine of ten married women adhere to the traditional naming pattern. There is evidence that selecting a nonconventional last name is more common for younger than older women, and is clearly more normative among some groups, such as professionals and career oriented women (Johnson and Scheuble 1995).

Names 46.2 (June 1998):83-96
ISSN:0027-7738

The predominant woman's marital naming practice has its historic roots in a patriarchal marriage system where the wife was viewed as her husband's property (Pearson 1985). However, the idea of a common last name for all members of the family has strong appeal as a source of identity and as a symbol of the importance of the family unit.

As American society moves closer toward gender equity both at home and in the workplace, we might expect increased tolerance of the practice of a married woman's retaining her birth surname at marriage. This expectation may be counterbalanced by the need to maintain strong family ties and identity, symbolized by the sharing of the same last name.

How do we as a society react to married women making nontraditional last name choices, and do we approve or disapprove of these decisions? What factors affect our attitudes toward this practice? Currently, we have few answers to these questions. Some answers, however, can be provided by examining the attitudes of a representative sample of adults.

The present study examines attitudes toward married women who keep their birth surname as a last name in a random sample of 935 adults in a Midwestern state. It examines both the facets of marital naming attitudes and the levels of approval or disapproval of naming practices, and also explores how a number of characteristics of the respondents affect these attitudes. Characteristics examined include the sex of the respondents, their education, income, age, working status, marital status, religiosity, race, and relative liberal/conservative values.

The number of studies of marital naming issues is small. One issue which has been studied is the frequency of nonconventional marital name choices by women. Brightman (1994) reported that about 10% of married women in the United States use something other than their husband's last name. Two percent of the women use their maiden name exclusively; five percent hyphenate their maiden name with that of their spouse; and another three percent use some other alternative, including using their maiden name as their middle name. Johnson and Scheuble (1995), in a study of a national sample of married persons and their adult offspring, found that 1.4% of the main sample and 4.6% of their offspring reported using a nonconventional last name. While these two studies differ somewhat in their estimates of the prevalence rates, they both confirm that the practice of women taking their husbands' last name is the predominate norm.

There is conflicting evidence regarding the degree of tolerance toward, and acceptance of, nonconventional last name choices. Embleton and King (1984) examined nine stereotypes toward women electing to keep their birth name in a convenience sample of 43 people interviewed in a bar or a strip club. These stereotypes included the feeling that women who retain their birth name are assertive, oriented towards a job rather than home or family, have an urban or North American upbringing, are younger, well-educated and have a feminist orientation (17). Stereotypes of women keeping their birth name reported by male respondents included assertiveness and being oriented toward a job rather than family. Only one stereotype was consistently reported among female respondents—assertiveness. The authors conclude that stereotypes of women keeping their birth names are not affected to a large extent by either the sex or the educational level of the respondents.

Atkinson (1987), in a study examining attitudes toward women who keep their maiden names, found that they were stereotyped as career-oriented, not religious, assertive, well-educated, and feminist (37). Respondents more likely to hold these stereotypes were male, less well-educated and religious.

Trost (1991) studied attitudes toward nonconventional marital name choices in a representative sample of Swedes. Overall, respondents expressed generally conservative attitudes about marital name choices. About two-thirds of the respondents stated that having the same surname as one's spouse was highly preferable or reasonable. Fifty percent of the respondents believed that it was unreasonable for children to have surnames different from one of their parents and 75 percent of respondents believed that is was preferable or reasonable that all members of a family have the same last name. Overall, women and respondents with higher levels of education were more tolerant of nonconventional naming for spouses and children than were men and respondents with lower levels of education. Because this study examines a sample of Swedes who may have quite different family norms, the findings may tell us little about attitudes in the United States.

Scheuble and Johnson (1993) examined a representative sample of students at a small Midwestern college and found them to be quite tolerant of married women's choosing a nonconventional last name. The students were asked to indicate under which circumstances they found it acceptable for a woman to keep her birth name when she married, and whether they approved of women keeping their birth name when they

married. The women in this study were significantly more tolerant than the men. Unmarried women were also asked about their own future marital naming plans. While more than 80 percent said they planned to take their husband's last name, these women were not significantly less tolerant than the women who indicated that they did not intend to take their husband's name. Other factors which were found to be associated with greater tolerance were living in larger communities, holding more liberal gender-role attitudes and having a mother with a high level of education.

In contrast to the more tolerant attitudes of college students, a Wall Street Journal/NBC nationwide news poll found that, by a large margin, people surveyed preferred that Hillary Rodham Clinton not use her maiden name as her middle name (Perry and Birnbaum 1993). Bill Clinton's failure to be elected during one governor's race in Arkansas has been attributed by at least some members of the press to negative opinions of the Arkansas public toward Hillary Rodham's use of her birth surname as a last name. (Fullerton and Lemons 1992). Only later did she add Clinton to her name. In this case, it appears that a majority of a random sample of adults was opposed to a woman's using her maiden name as her middle name. Since standards of conduct expected of public figures often differ from those expected of others, it would be premature to generalize from the attitudes toward one prominent national figure to general attitudes toward other women who may choose to retain their birth name in some form when they marry.

The limitations of the previous studies—a college student sample, a focus on attitudes toward a public figure only, attitudes from a country other than the United States, small sample size—suggest that a further examination of attitudes toward marital naming in a sample of American adults is needed to more accurately gauge the degree of, and sources of support for, nonconventional marital name choices. The current study further examines attitudes toward marital naming by asking a random sample of adults in one Midwestern state to respond to three items designed to tap facets of attitudes toward women's marital naming. One item asks about the overall degree of approval of a woman's keeping her birth name as her last name when she marries. A second item asks about perceptions of a woman's commitment to the relationship if she chooses to keep her birth surname as a last name. The final item asks about the extent to which respondents agree with the notion that couples planning to have children should have the same last name. Based on the Scheuble

and Johnson research (1995), it is expected that those respondents who are female, younger and have higher levels of income and education will be more accepting of nonconventional last name choices than will be those who are male, older and have lower levels of income and education. It is also expected that respondents living in larger cities will be more tolerant toward nonconventional naming choices than those in smaller communities since there is evidence of generally higher levels of overall tolerance in larger communities (Wilson 1991).

Since more-religious people are often more socially conservative (Morgan 1987), we expect church members and people who attend church more often to be less tolerant than nonmembers and low attendees. Similarly, other indicators of the level of social conservatism, such as political party identification and the degree to which the respondents self-identify as conservative rather than liberal will lead to less acceptance of the wife's keeping her birth name.

Race and marital status are also examined as independent variables. Since never-married people are likely to be younger than those who are widowed, divorced or separated, or married, and since younger people often express more liberal values, we expect that never-married people will express more liberal responses toward marital naming choices than will those who are married or who were married. The expectations for race are somewhat speculative. It is possible that nonwhite respondents will be more tolerant toward nonconventional marital name choices for women than white respondents, since their cultural experiences have given them greater exposure to nonconventional naming choices (Cherlin 1978; Collier, Skidmore and Blakemore 1992).

Methods

The data reported here come from a telephone survey of adults in a Midwestern state (see Osgood 1994 for details). Respondents were selected for the study using random digit dialing. The sample was drawn from a population consisting of noninstitutionalized persons 18 years of age or older, in households with telephones, who resided in the state during the survey period of October through November, 1993. Since the sample was of persons and not of households, the respondents were selected by a selection table assigned to each telephone number to be dialed, which contained information on selecting a randomly-designated respondent, depending on the number of adults residing in the household.

Table 1. Percentage distribution for 3 marital name change questions for the sample and for males and females (N=935).

Item		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I think it is alright for a woman to keep her maiden name as her last name when she gets married.+	Total	8.1%	41.2%	9.5%	36.3%	4.9%
	Male*	5.7%	41.7%	11.1%	38.0%	3.5%
	Female	10.0%	40.8%	8.3%	34.9%	6.0%
A woman who goes by her husband's last name when she get married is more committed to the marriage than a woman who does not change her name.	Total	6.0%	31.2%	12.0%	42.7%	8.1%
	Male**	4.9%	34.8%	16.3%	39.3%	4.7%
	Female	6.8%	28.5%	8.7%	45.3%	10.8%
Married couples who plan to have children should both take the same last name.	Total	19.6%	57.3%	6.8%	15.1%	1.3%
	Male**	17.7%	64.5%	4.4%	12.8%	.5%
	Female	20.9%	51.7%	8.7%	16.8%	1.9%

+This item was reverse coded upon inclusion in the scale.

Males and females significantly different at the *p < .05; ** p < 001.

The three items included in the survey are presented in table 1. A simple additive scale was constructed by summing the responses for each of the three items. A high score on the scale indicates approval of and tolerance toward women making nontraditional last name choices at the time of marriage. To simplify the interpretation of the results of the regression analysis, the three-item scale was dichotomized to contrast the most intolerant group (persons who gave a conservative/traditional response to all three of the items) with all other respondents. For each item, those respondents who selected the more conservative categories (strongly agree, agree, uncertain, for items 1 and 2 and uncertain, disagree and strongly disagree for item 3) were coded "1" (the conservative response); all others were coded "0" (the more liberal response). Table 1 shows the responses to each item individually. A summary measure (not ascertainable from table 1) was created by assigning a "1" to respondents who gave a conservative response to all three items (37.3%) and "0" to all other respondents (62.7%).

The effects of ten independent variables on attitudes toward marital name choices were considered: sex of respondent, educational attainment (in years), income (in twelve categories), age, size of residential area (in six categories), work status at the time surveyed (in seven categories), marital status (in four categories), religious preference (in five categories), political party (in three categories). Respondents' race was coded into white and nonwhite. More detailed race or ethnic categories were not included because all nonwhite groups comprised less than 6 percent of the sample.[1]

Two additional variables were included in the analysis that may be seen as intervening between the effects of the variables mentioned above and respondents' attitudes toward marital naming. These are the extent of conservatism and frequency of church attendance. Extent of conservatism consisted of the respondents characterizing themselves on a five-point scale ranging from "very liberal" to "very conservative." A higher score on the item represents a more conservative response. Frequency of church attendance ranged from "attending church several times a week" to "never attending church services."

Results

Table 1 presents a percentage distribution of three marital name attitude items for the overall sample and for males and females. In the total sample, respondents were slightly more likely to agree than disagree that it is all right for a woman to keep her maiden name when she marries. Women were significantly more likely to agree with this statement than were men ($p < .05$), but the major gender difference was that women were more likely to have an opinion and more likely to select a more extreme answer. The second item asked about the commitment level of a woman who changes her last name to that of her spouse versus a woman who chooses to retain her birth name. Generally, respondents disagreed with the statement that a woman who goes by her husband's last name is more committed to the marriage than a woman who does not. However, women were significantly more likely to disagree than were men ($p < .001$). Women responded in a more tolerant way to the question on commitment to marriage than they did to the more general attitude item. The most conservative responses were found for the last item regarding whether married couples planning to have children should have the same last name. Both male and female respondents agreed with the statement that married couples who plan to have children should have the same last name. Overall, more than 75% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. There was, however, a gender difference, with women being somewhat less likely than men to support the statement.

We then used logistic regression analysis to examine the effects of control and independent variables on the dichotomous composite measure of intolerance toward women at marriage retaining their maiden name as a last name.[2] Because the dependent variable is a dichotomy, the logistic regression model is preferred over ordinary regression. To aid in interpreting the results, we relied on the exponent (Exp b) of the regression coefficients produced by the logistic model. Taking the exponent of the b coefficients allowed us to interpret them as a multiplier for the odds of a respondent's being intolerant. When Exp b is greater than 1, the odds of an intolerant response increase that many times for each unit change in the independent variable in the equation. Coefficients less than one mean that the odds decrease.

Table 2. Logistic Regression of Control and Independent Variables on Intolerance Toward Nontraditional Last Name Choices (1= intolerant 0= other) N=862.

Independent Variables:	Model 1 Exp (b)	Model 2 Exp (b)	Model 3 Exp (b)	Model 4 Exp (b)
Respondent Sex	.4765**	.4626**	2.3677	2.0403
Education	.9176**	.8954**	.9008**	.8813**
Income	.9086**	.9065**	.9917	.9783
Age	1.0278**	1.0238**	1.0276**	1.0237**
City Size	.8126**	.8171**	.8787	.8839
Work Status:				
Working Full time[a]	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Student	.4298	.4307	.4614	.4657
Unemployed	.4952	.5509	.5485	.6043
Other	1.0968	1.0492	1.0427	1.0047
Working Part time	.6782	.6124	.6369	.5767
Housewife	1.7860	1.7823	1.5913	1.6012
Retired	1.8045	1.8492	1.7137	.6043
Marital Status:				
Married[a]	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Never Married	.8444	.8718	.9384	.9544
Widowed	1.4746	1.6962	1.4027	1.6122
Divorced/Separated	1.2004	1.3584	1.2079	1.3564
Religious Preference:				
Protestant[a]	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Catholic	1.4585	1.3731	1.4354	1.3627
Other Religion	1.5795	1.4964	1.4721	1.4432
Non-Believer	.1217	.1976	.1171	.1884
No Preference	1.0928	1.7003	1.1202	1.7096
Political Party:				
Republican[a]	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Democrat	.6837	.8787	.70000	.8832
Independent	.6458*	.7492	.6350*	.7341
Race:				
White[a]	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Nonwhite	.8297	.7054	.8242	.7023
Extent of Conservatism		1.3935**		1.3769**
Church Attendance		.8657**		.8697**
Sex*Income			.8482**	.8656*

[a] Reference (omitted) category *p < .05. **p < .01.

The results of this analysis are presented in table 2. Columns 1 and 2 present the analysis of the additive effects of the control and intervening variables on the marital name change scale. Columns 3 and 4 add a term for the interaction of gender and income (sex*income). The variables measured at the nominal level (work status, marital status, religious preference, and political party) were included as dummy variables. The first category in each was the omitted (reference) category. The Exp b coefficients for the other categories are compared to this (omitted) one. Each reference group has an Exp b fixed to 1.0. Interpretation of the coefficient is then straightforward. For example, in Model 1 the Exp b for Sex of Respondent is .4765, and the coefficient is statistically significant. Since females are coded "1" and males "0," this means that being female compared to being male decreases the odds of being intolerant by about half, holding constant the effects of the other independent variables included in the model. An example of a variable with more than two nominal categories represented by a set of dummy variables is religious preference. "Catholic" has an Exp b of 1.4585. This means that, everything else being constant, being a Catholic increases a person's odds of being intolerant 1.46 times. In other words, Catholics are 1.46 times more intolerant than Protestants (controlling for the effects of the other variables). This effect, however, is not statistically significant.

For Model 1, statistically significant effects were found for sex, education, income, age, city size and political party. As expected, women were about half as likely to be intolerant than were men. The education and income effects were also in the expected direction. For each year of education and for each category increase in income the odds of intolerance decreased by appproximately 10%. Age was significantly related to intolerance, with the odds of being intolerant increasing by about 3% for each year of age. As city size increased, the odds of intolerance decreased, by about 19% for each city size category. Finally, for political party affiliation, Independents and Democrats had about one-third lower chance of being intolerant than did Republicans.

In Model 2, the two intervening variables—extent of conservatism and frequency of church attendance—were added to the equation. Including these intervening variables had little effect on the other independent variables, although it reduced the size of the effect of political party affiliation and rendered it nonsignificant. As expected, each unit increase in conservatism increased the odds of being intolerant of women keeping their maiden name by around one-third. While church affiliation was not significantly related to intolerance, church attendance

was. As frequency of church attendance increased, the odds of intolerance increased by 13% for each unit increase in church attendance. Thus, the more often people attended church, the greater the odds of their being intolerant.

Several interaction effects were also examined to see if the effects of the variables differed for men and women. The only significant interaction with gender was sex with income. This interaction, the differential effect of income on intolerance for men and women (Sex*Income), was added to the equation and the results are presented in Models 3 and 4. The coefficient indicates that the relationship between income and tolerance is different for men and women. There was no relationship between income and intolerance for men but for women, increases in income were associated with lower odds of being intolerant. Comparison of Models 3 and 4 show that this conclusion was the same whether or not the intervening variables of church attendance and conservatism were included in the equation.

Discussion and Conclusions

The findings suggest that while there is generally high tolerance for women keeping their maiden names as their last names when they marry, when issues of family identity and commitment are introduced, the level of support for retaining maiden names is reduced. These findings are consistent with the similar survey in Sweden mentioned earlier (Trost 1991), which found that the majority of Swedes surveyed believed that everyone in the family should have the same last name. The findings are also consistent with research examining attitudes toward marital naming in a college sample, although college students were more tolerant than the adults in this study (Scheuble and Johnson 1993). Another finding similar to the Scheuble and Johnson (1993), Trost (1991) and Atkinson (1987) research was that females were significantly more accepting of nontraditional last name choices at the time of marriage than were the males surveyed.

Furthermore, intolerance toward a wife's keeping her birth name as a last name was a reflection of generally conservative values and orientations. Persons holding more conservative political values, those from smaller communities, regular church attendees and older respondents were more likely to express intolerance. We assume that this intolerance stems from the desire to conserve the traditional family values of the past and to maintain the primacy of the family unit. Another factor that may have influenced the findings are the attitudes people hold about the proper roles of men and women. Scheuble and Johnson (1993) found a strong relationship between attitudes toward

naming and gender role expectations. Measures of gender role values were not included in the survey results reported here so we could not directly test the influence of gender role expectations. However, indirect evidence for the influence of these expectations was found in the strong effect of gender on marital name intolerance, with men having about twice the chance of being intolerant as women. Another probable indicator of gender role influence was the finding that as household income rose, intolerance deceased significantly among women but not among men. This may reflect the fact that higher income households are more likely to contain professional and career-oriented women who are also more likely to support gender equity.

The conflict between the desire to allow people maximum freedom in choosing the last names they use when they marry and the potential consequences for children is evident in the large decrease in tolerance where children are concerned. It may be that people view last names as a personal choice with little societal consequence if no children are involved. When children are part of families, however, the larger issue of importance to the society as a whole becomes more prominent and desires to maintain strong family identity and protect children from possible negative consequences of having parents with different last names become involved. The concern over potential complications for society and children resulting from hyphenated last names was evident in a law passed in 1994 in Germany which prohibited hyphenated last names for both adults and children, based upon a concern for the effects of complex last names on future generations (Walker 1996). To date, there have been no research studies examining the effect on children of growing up in families where members have different or hyphenated last names.

The respondents in this study also expressed concern about a woman's commitment to the marriage if she did not take her husband's last name. While there is empirical evidence showing that marital quality is not lower in marriages where the husband and wife have different last names compared to those with the same surname (Johnson and Scheuble 1996), the large proportion of respondents who agreed that the wife was less committed to the marriage if she did not take her husband's last name suggests that, in the public eye, a common marital name is an important indicator of marital commitment.

The past three decades have seen major changes in marriage and the family in the United States, including how people identify family members. With the increased number of divorces and remarriages, more children are being raised in families in which different last names are

common. Having the same last name is clearly not the only way members of a family decide they are a family. Nonconventional last name choices at the time of marriage will continue to add diversity to families and cause us to reexamine how we think about families and family members. Changes in values often lag behind changes in norms. However, in the case of a woman's keeping her birth name at the time of marriage, the results of this study indicate that people are generally tolerant of her making a nonconventional last name choice. Additional research is needed to examine further attitudes toward nonconventional last name choice, the behavior of keeping or retaining one's last name or changing one's last name at the time of marriage and other issues having to do with women's marital name choices (see Duggan, Cota and Dion 1993). The decisions people make about naming at the time of marriage have important ramifications for the individual, the family, and society. How we identify people who are related to us and how people think about and categorize families and family members will continue to be of interest to researchers as the number of people making nonconventional last name choices increases, and as they make last name choices for their children.

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1995 meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society in Chicago, Il.

1. Details on the composition of each of these categories are available from the authors upon request.

2. This analysis was repeated with an attitude scale created from summing the responses to the three naming items as the dependent variable. Ordinary multiple regression was used, since the dependent variable was treated as continuous. The results were very similar to those reported for the analysis of the dichotomous measure. These results, as well as the correlations, means and standard deviations of all variables used in the analysis, are available from the authors upon request.

References

Atkinson, D. 1987. "Names and Titles: Maiden Name Retention and Use of Ms." *Women and Language* 10: 37.

Brightman, J. 1994. "Why Wives Use Their Husband's Names." *American Demographics* 16: 9-10.

Cherlin, A. 1978. "Hereditary Hyphens?" *Psychology Today* 12: 150.

Collier, S., T. Skidmore, and H. Blakemore, eds. 1992. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Latin America and the Caribbean.* Cambridge U P.

Duggan, D., A. Cota, and K. Dion. 1993. "Taking Thy Husband's Name: What Might It Mean?" *Names* 41: 87-102.

Embleton, S., and R. King. 1984. "Attitudes Towards Maiden Name Retention." *Onomastica Canadiana* 66: 11-22.

Fullerton, J., and T. Lemons. 1992. "First lady Hillary Clinton not content with playing second fiddle." (Little Rock) *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* 16 Feb.: D2+.

Glendon, M. A. 1989. *The Transformation of Family Law: State, Law, and Family in the United States & Western Europe.* Chicago: U of Chicago P.

Johnson, D. R., and L. Scheuble. 1995. "Women's Marital Naming in Two Generations: A National Study." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 57: 724-732.

_____. 1996. "Women's Marital Name Choice: Determinants and Effects." American Sociological Association Meetings, New York, 19 Aug.

Morgan, M. 1987. "The Impact of Religion on Gender-Role Attitudes." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 11: 301-309.

NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, and R. Cherow-O'Leary. 1987. *The State-By-State Guide To Women's Legal Rights.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Osgood, D. W. 1994. *Designs, Procedures, Instruments and Forms for the 1994 NASIS.* University of Nebraska, Lincoln: Bureau of Sociological Research.

Pearson, J. 1985. *Gender and Communication.* Dubuque IA: Wm. C. Brown.

Perry, J. M., and J. H. Birnbaum. 1993. "Hillary Clinton Turns the First Lady Role into a Powerful Post." *The Wall Street Journal* 74: (Jan. 28): A1+.

Scheuble, L., and D. R. Johnson. 1993. "Marital Name Change: Plans and Attitudes of College Students." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 55: 747-754.

Stannard, U. 1984. "Manners Make Laws: Married Women's Names in the United States." *Names* 32: 114-128.

Trost, J. 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+.

Wilson, T. 1991. "Urbanism, Migration, and Tolerance: A Reassessment." *American Sociological Review* 56: 117-123.