

Trends in Women's Marital Name Choices: 1966-1996

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Whether or not women have been more likely to select non-conventional marital surnames in more recent years has received little attention in the marital naming literature. We examine marital name choices in more than 2,000 wedding announcements reported over a thirty year period in *The New York Times*. Women were more likely to have chosen non-conventional marital names in the late 1980s and 1990s than in the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, unlike women who changed their last names to those of their husbands, women selecting non-conventional last names were more likely to be employed, to have higher levels of education and to be married in non-church locations.

Introduction

Although social science researchers have given some attention to the empirical exploration of social factors related to women's last name choices at the time of marriage, many questions remain unanswered. In particular we lack reliable information on trends in marital name choices. There are a number of reasons to expect that there has been a trend in recent decades towards less conventional marital surname choices by women. The last two decades have seen an increasing proportion of married women in the full-time labor force and with career orientations, an increase in the age at marriage, and greater emphasis on gender equity in American society. In previous studies (Johnson and Scheuble 1995; 1996), these factors have been found to relate to women's choosing to keep their birth name at the time of marriage or to hyphenate their surnames with those of their husbands.

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However, previous studies have not addressed a possible trend towards increasing rates of non-conventional marital name choice. In this article we explore historical trends in marital name choice by analyzing data gathered from 2,163 wedding announcements reported in *The New York Times* Sunday edition for the 30 year period from 1966 to 1996. We also examine the effects of employment, education, wedding location, and month of marriage on marital name choice.

Background

In the United States, normative patterns are such that most women generally choose to change their last names to those of their husbands at the time of marriage, i.e., make conventional name choices. In fact, the vast majority of women plan to take their husbands' last names when they marry. One study (Scheuble and Johnson 1993) found that nine out of 10 women planned to change their last name to that of their husband. This is in keeping with Brightman's (1994) report that 10 percent of married women in the United States used something other than their husbands' names. Two percent used their birth name alone, 5 % hyphenated their last name with that of their husband, and 3 % used another variation such as using their maiden name as their middle name.

A question that has not been adequately addressed is whether or not there has been a trend in recent years towards women making a non-conventional marital surname choice. Johnson and Scheuble (1995) found no effect of year married on wife's marital name choice, but did find a generational effect in a comparison of married women with their adult offspring. Only 1.5 % of women married before 1980 made a non-conventional name choice while their daughters, all married after 1980, were significantly more likely to have selected a non-conventional marital surname. A problem with these data is that only a small number of women made a non-conventional name choice, making it difficult to test reliably the effects of time period on marital name choice. Another study (of 600 women), selected so that around half of them had a non-conventional marital surname, suggested that women in more recent marital cohorts were less likely to follow the tradition of taking their spouses' last names (Johnson and Scheuble 1996). Thus, the available evidence suggests the possibility of a trend in recent years in which women do something other than drop their birth surnames and take their husbands' last names. The non-definite nature of the findings from previous studies indicates the need for further investigation, with a large number of cases and over a substantial time period.

We provide additional evidence of period effects in naming by examining the trends over the last 30 years in women's marital surname choices as reported in wedding announcements in *The New York Times* Sunday editions. We expect to find that brides marrying in more recent years will be more likely to make non-conventional surname choices than did brides who married in earlier periods.

In addition to testing for a period effect, we also examine other social factors which may have changed over the decades and may also effect marital surname choice. Both Brightman (1994) and Johnson and Scheuble (1995) reported that working women were more likely to make non-conventional last name choices so we expect to find a similar effect in these announcements. We also examine the effect of groom's employment. Because paid employment is part of the traditional male gender role and not working very seldom reflects a decision to be a homemaker, we are not sure what effect this will have on a bride's surname choice. The positive effect of education on making non-conventional last name choices has also been documented (Brightman 1994; Johnson and Scheuble 1995; 1996). We expect that brides with higher levels of education will be more likely to make non-conventional surname choices than brides with lower levels of education and we also expect that women marrying men with higher levels of education will be more likely to make non-conventional marital name choices.

In the United States, it is the norm for people to marry in a church. People choosing to marry elsewhere may adhere less to traditional practices than people marrying in a church. We expect that brides marrying at home or at some other location will be more likely to make a non-conventional last name choice than brides marrying in a church. Another indicator of conventional values is the ceremony officiant. People married by family members may be less likely to make non-conventional last name choices since, because their family members are more likely to be involved with religion, the bride and/or groom may have more conventional values.

Procedures

The data for this study were gathered through a content analysis of 30 years of wedding announcements in *The New York Times*. The *Times* was chosen because it is a major newspaper which includes marital surname information as part of the wedding announcement. For example, wedding announcements include phrases such as "The bride kept her last name." In cases where no last name choice for the bride was listed, it was assumed that she changed her last name to that of her

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husband. Wedding announcements which appeared from June 1966 through October 1996 were analyzed. This period was selected because in the last thirty years significant changes have occurred in women's roles: increased educational levels, lower fertility rates, higher divorce rates and changes in gender role attitudes, among others. Announcements reported in the first Sunday edition in January, April, July, and October of each year were selected. The total number of announcements was 2,383. (October 1978 is missing because a paper was not printed then due to a strike.)

Variables

The year in which the wedding announcement was published is the major independent variable. For some of the analyses, the year of publication was recorded into one of five categories: 1966-1971; 1972-1977; 1978-1983; 1984-1989; and 1990-1996.

Marital name choice, the dependent variable, was recorded into one of three categories: the bride changed her last name to that of her husband with no mention of a surname choice; she kept her birth name; or she hyphenated her last name with that of her husband. However, since only 1.5 % of the brides in this study hyphenated their last name with those of their husbands, for much of the analysis, marital name choice was dichotomized into women who changed their last name to their husbands' (conventional name choice) and those who kept their birth names or hyphenated (non-conventional name choice). Overall, 14% of the brides made non-conventional last name choices and 86% made conventional choices.

Control variables included the bride's employment (inside or outside the home), the groom's employment (inside or outside the home), the education level of the bride (high school, college, or other), the education level of the groom (high school, college, or other), location of the wedding (church, home, or other), and the ceremony's officiant (family member or other).

Analysis

We first provide descriptive figures showing a naming trend over time. We then explore, with a multi-variate model, factors explaining the wife's name choice. Since the dependent variable was generally dichotomized (conventional or non-conventional last name choice) and we needed to control for a number of variables, logistic regression was selected as the analysis method. This statistical technique allows us to

estimate the magnitude of the effect of each variable in the equation on marital name choice that would occur if all other variables in the equation were held constant. For example, the effect of the bride's working versus her not working would be statistically adjusted for differences between working and non-working brides in their education level, year of marriage, etc. To aid in interpreting the logistic regression results, we report the exponent of the regression coefficient (Exp b) produced by the logistic model. We can interpret the exponent of the b coefficient as a multiplier of the odds of a woman's making a non-conventional surname choice. When Exp b is greater than 1, the odds of making a non-conventional last name choice increase that many times for each unit of change in the independent variable in the model. For example, an Exp b of 2 implies that a woman with a given characteristic would have twice as great a chance of making a non-conventional name choice as would a woman without that characteristic. Coefficients less than 1 mean the odds decrease similarly.

Results

Figure 1 shows the marital name choice of the bride by the year the announcement was published in *The New York Times*. We expected that the percentage of women keeping their birth names as their last names and the percentage of women hyphenating their last names with those of their husbands' would increase over time. As can be seen in table 1, until the mid-1970s, it was rare for a woman to keep her birth name or to hyphenate. However, both the percentage of women hyphenating and that of women keeping their birth names increased since the mid-1970s with the percentage of women keeping their birth names in particular showing a marked increase.

We next combined the non-conventional name choices and examined the trend. Figure 2 shows the proportion of women making non-conventional last name choices by the year of publication of the wedding announcement. In order to see the changes in non-conventional name choices more clearly, the scatterplot was smoothed with a technique called locally weighted scatterplot smoother (lowess), as described by Fox (1991). Lowess produced a smoothed line by making use of separate regressions on each part of the scatterplot and by down-weighting outliers. The lowess calculated here uses a span of 50% which yields a fairly smooth but non-linear fit line. It is evident from the figure that the proportion of women making a non-conventional last name choice increased dramatically between 1966 and 1996.

Figure 1. Marital Name Choices by Year.

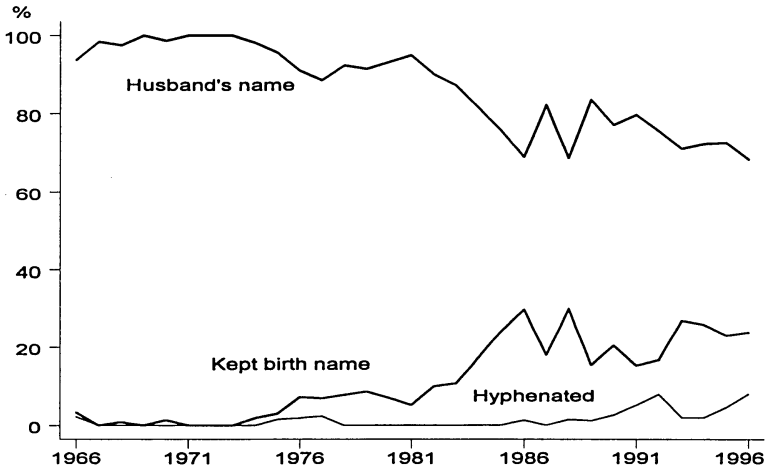


Figure 2. Non-conventional Name Choices by Year.

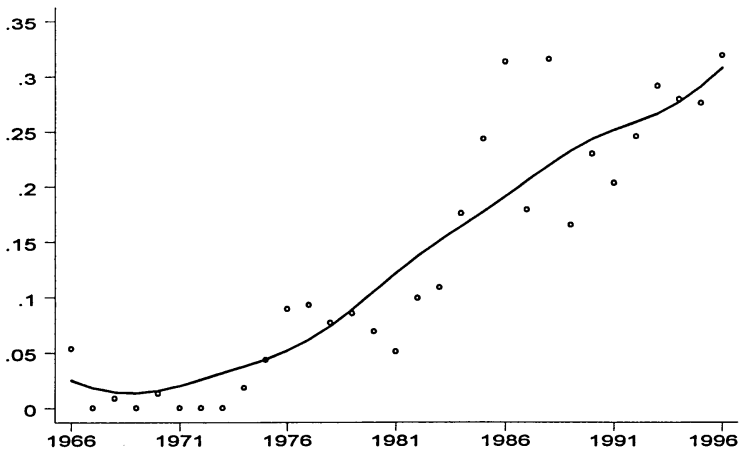


Table 1 presents a logistic regression analysis of the effects of the independent variable on women's marital name choices. Logistic regression allows us to determine the odds of a woman's making a non-

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conventional last name choice based upon the values of the independent and control variables. Model 1 presents the effect of year on women's marital name choice. The year of publication of the announcement was significantly related to marital name choice. Women married in the most recent time period (1990-1996) were almost 27 times more likely to take a non-conventional last name than were women married in the earliest time period, between 1966 and 1971.

Table 1. Logistic Regression with Women's Marital Name Choice* as Dependent Variable. N=2163.

Variable	Model 1		Model 2	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Bride Working			.354 ^a	1.425
Groom Working			.224	1.251
Education of Bride			1.075 ^c	2.929
Education of Groom			.206	1.229
Location of Wedding			c	
Church (reference category)				1.000
Home			.867 ^c	2.381
Other Location			.752 ^c	2.121
Performed Ceremony			.069	.933
Month			n.s.	
January (reference category)				1.000
April			-.413	.662
July			-.186	.830
October			-.161	.852
Years	c		c	
1966-1971 (reference category)				1.000
1972-1977	1.052 ^a	2.862	.765	2.149
1978-1983	1.914 ^c	6.782	1.304 ^b	3.684
1984-1989	3.116 ^c	22.563	2.560 ^c	12.941
1990-1996	3.285 ^c	26.720	2.451 ^c	11.594
Constant	-.327 ^c		-7.421 ^c	

*0=conventional, taking husband's last name; 1=non-conventional

^asignificant at the .05 level

^bsignificant at the .01 level

^csignificant at the .001 level

Table 1 also presents the results for a second model which adds the control variables of employment, education, wedding location, and officiant. Four of these relationships were statistically significant. Women who were employed were one and a half times more likely to choose a non-conventional marital name than women who were not and women with higher levels of education were almost three times more likely to make non-conventional last name choices than those with lower levels of education. Location of the wedding was also significantly related to marital name choice. Compared with brides married in a church, those married at home or at some other location were more than twice as likely to make non-conventional last name choices.

Comparing the effects of time period in Model 1 with the effects found in Model 2 allows us to estimate the extent to which changing characteristics of married couples may have contributed to the trends observed. After introducing the control variables, the effect of time period was still statistically significant and substantial, but the odds were reduced somewhat. After controlling for the other variables in the model, women who married between 1990-1996 were almost 12 times more likely to make non-conventional name choices than were those married between 1966 and 1971. This compares with a 27 times greater chance observed in Model 1. Clearly, changes in these control variables contributed to the greater likelihood of wives choosing non-conventional marital surnames, but the effect of period was still large and statistically significant.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our intent was to add to the body of knowledge on surname choice at the time of marriage by examining non-conventional surname choices over time. The findings show that (at least for those women listing their weddings in *The New York Times*) women were more likely to have made non-conventional marital name choices in the late 1980s and 1990s than they were in the 1960s and 1970s. We believe that there are a number of reasons for the increase in non-conventional names. First, women are attaining higher levels of education and evidence from this study and others (e.g., Brightman 1994; Johnson and Scheuble 1995; 1996) shows that women with higher levels of education are more likely to make non-conventional last name choices. Previous research also suggests that women with higher incomes are more likely to make non-conventional name choices (Brightman 1994; Johnson and Scheuble 1995; 1996).

The increasing tolerance of society is another factor that might account for the increase in more recent years in taking non-conventional last names at the time of marriage. Many more people than formerly think it is acceptable for a woman to keep her last name when she marries. Many also believe that a woman who keeps her birth name at the time of marriage may be just as committed to the marriage as one who changes her surname to that of her husband (Trost 1991; Scheuble and Johnson 1993; 1998). Thus, women marrying today may perceive that society in general has become more tolerant and may thus find it easier to take non-conventional marital surnames.

Another factor may be that perceptions of women who elect to keep their birth surnames as opposed to those who change their last name to those of their husbands. Whether these perceptions are positive or negative may depend upon the experiences and social standing of the woman concerned. Atkinson (1987) reported that women who kept their birth names were perceived as independent, well-educated, assertive, career-oriented, feminist, and not religious. McKinney (1991) and Duggan, Cota, and Dion (1993) also reported that women choosing non-conventional marital surnames were more likely to be seen as career-oriented than women taking their husbands' last names. Similarly, Murray (1997) reported that women keeping their birth surnames were seen as more feminist, better educated, more likely to work outside the home, more self-confident and less likely to make good wives and mothers than women taking their husbands' last names. Women, especially those with higher levels of education and social status, may feel these associations are positive and even desirable.

Even though there has been a decided increase in the number of women who choose non-conventional last names at marriage, the findings of this study support those of others (e.g., Brightman 1994; Johnson and Scheuble 1995), that most women do change their surnames to those of their husbands at the time of marriage.

Since the data reported here come from marriage announcements in *The New York Times*, they may not be representative of American marriages in general, and thus they may present only a partial picture of national practice and trends. Women who announce their marriages in the Times are likely to have higher socioeconomic status than many other brides. Thus, the findings may represent the experiences of relatively higher social class women. For at least this group, however, the findings show a significant increase in the percentage of women

electing to make non-conventional last name choices from 1966 to 1996. The women most likely to make non-conventional last name choices are employed, have higher levels of education, marry at home or another non-church location, and marry in more recent time periods.

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