

North American Women's Surname Choice Based on Ethnicity and Self-Identification as Feminists

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Using empirical data gathered through surveys, this paper analyzes how surname choices of women residing in the United States — whether to acquire her spouse's surname or retain her birth surname — differ based on their ethnicity, age, and feminist self-identification. From a sample of 260 Black and White females, ages 16–70+, data were categorized for participants' responses to eight questions. Crosstabs were calculated to explore correlative patterns among participants for marital status, race/ethnicity, age, surname decision upon marriage, perception of feminists, and feminist orientation. The research reveals that women's self-identification as feminists are not direct predictors of their surname choices. Fully 81 percent of women surveyed, regardless of their ethnicity and age, reported that they did change or will change their surname upon marriage. Of the 19 percent of women who responded that they would retain their birth surname when married, only 14 percent identified themselves as feminists. This study leads to further questions about trends in naming choices and perceptions of feminism and feminist actions particularly among women aged 16–39.

KEYWORDS surnames, feminism, marriage, ethnicity, identity

Introduction

A married woman's surname choice does not singularly define who she is, but research has shown that this choice is often associated with particular characteristics of a woman, including her age, occupation, level of education, and feminist orientation (Scheuble and Johnson, 1993; Johnson and Scheuble, 1995; 2002; Mills, 2003). Johnson and Scheuble (1995) acknowledge that race and ethnicity influence marital surname decisions, but there is difficulty in projecting how non-White women choose to name themselves because of the settings and demographics from which previous studies have drawn participants. Differences in surname preference based on ethnicity may exist, but, to date, the research on this question does not (Etaugh *et al.*,

1999). Furthermore, the connections between ethnicity, feminist identification, and surname selection have yet to be adequately explored in published literature. Using empirical data gathered through surveys, this paper analyzes how North American women's surname choices differ based on respondents' ethnicity, age, and feminist self-identification.

For a woman, choosing her husband's surname may be seen as an act of conformity, whereas retaining her birth surname challenges social and gender conventions (Scheuble and Johnson, 1993; 2005; Fowler and Fuerher, 1997; Hoffnung, 2006). Hoffnung (2006) asserts that women who choose non-traditional marital names do not differ from women who choose otherwise in terms of commitment to marriage, career, or children. Rather her analysis reveals that, when these women are younger, they simply prioritize career and childrearing differently (Hoffnung, 2006: 824). Furthermore, women who elect to retain or hyphenate their birth names once they are married are often labeled by others as feminists, even though they may or may not define themselves as such. Scheuble and Johnson (1993) conclude that college-age women are accepting of another woman's non-traditional surname choice, but that does not automatically indicate that they would choose a non-traditional surname. Thus, a contemporary position on surname choice does not necessarily imply dismissal of traditional values (Scheuble and Johnson, 1993).

Research shows that the popularity of women deciding to retain their birth surnames when they marry has increased as the expectations for women in terms of marriage and family have changed (Scheuble and Johnson, 1993; Johnson and Scheuble, 2002; Boxer and Gritsenko, 2005; Hoffnung, 2006). Trends in naming reveal that younger women are more likely to retain their birth name upon marriage or to use some other form of nontraditional naming (Brightman, 1994). While the correlation between age and choice in surname may seem to reflect more liberal social attitudes, this is not always so.

In the view of many people, women who choose nontraditional surnames are perceived as making distinct feminist moves and as being less committed to their marriages than women who make traditional naming choices (Atkinson, 1987; Fowler and Fuehrer, 1997; Murray, 1997; Etaugh *et al.*, 1999; Hoffnung, 2006). Stafford and Kline note that some men questioned "the woman's love or motives for marriage if she did not change her name" (1996b: 222). Mills (2003) explains that women often struggle with their desire to identify as feminists and to simultaneously adhere to traditional naming practices. While there is an assumption that to choose a nontraditional surname automatically results in one's positive identification with feminism or vice versa, this is not necessarily so. Hoffnung notes that "Name usage at the 1990s and into this century seems to indicate that feminist values are being maintained at about the same level" (2006: 824). Research has shown that women most often change to their husbands' surnames in order to establish an identity as a couple; Stafford and Kline (1996a) advise caution when assuming that this means an automatic erasure of a woman's individual identity.

Previous studies on ethnicity/race in relationship to surname decisions among women suggest that women of color are more likely to choose nontraditional surnames (Twenge, 1997; Hoffnung, 2006). Furthermore, Twenge (1997) finds that women born outside of the United States are more likely to make non-traditional

surname choices than those born in the US. For both the named and the perceiver, social, ethnic/racial, and gender identity are linked to her surname choice (Etaugh *et al.*, 1999; Boxer and Gritsenko, 2005).

Hypothesis

The purpose of this paper is to analyze patterns of surname choice among women in the United States based on age, ethnicity, and feminist self-identification. The responses of 260 females —130 Black females, 130 White females, ages 16–70+ who are married and unmarried were used to identify and examine possible trends. I hypothesize that White women over 30 are more likely to identify themselves as feminists and less likely to retain their surnames upon marriage, while Black women over 30 are less likely to define themselves as feminists and more likely to retain their surnames when married. Women aged 16 to 29, regardless of ethnicity, are less likely to define themselves as feminists and are more inclined to choose their husbands' surnames when they marry.

Methodology

I use data from the “Survey on Forms of Address” created by Donna Lillian which has been distributed in both paper and online formats (see Lillian, 2007; 2008; 2009). It has thirty-six questions. For the purpose of this paper, I focused only on responses to eight of the thirty-six questions in the survey:

1. What is your sex?
2. What is your age?
3. How would you identify your racial or ethnic background?
4. What is your marital status?
5. If you are married or if you have ever been married, did you change your surname when you married? Why or why not?
6. If you have never been married, or if you are not currently married, would you change your surname if you got married? Why or why not?
7. In your opinion, what do you think feminists believe in or stand for?
8. Do you consider yourself to be a feminist? Why or why not?

Using the quantitative and qualitative responses from these survey questions, I investigate possible correlations between surname choices, ethnicity, age, and feminist self-identification.

The aggregate survey results include data from over 3000 respondents. After I removed all responses from participants who were male, who did not live in the United States, who identified their ethnicity as something other than White/Caucasian or Black/African-American, and/or who did not answer one or more of the above questions, more than 1800 survey responses remained. Among these, there were 130 women from the United States who identified themselves as Black/African-American. In order to have an equal number of White/Caucasian women, I numbered each of the remaining 1670 respondents and used the Research Randomizer to generate 130 numbers. I then pulled from the data the respondents who matched the random

numbers and those were the White/Caucasian women who were included in my study. This way, the data analyzed included equal numbers of Black/African-American and White/Caucasian women.

I transposed qualitative responses to the question “If you are married or if you have ever been married, did you change your surname when you married? Why or why not?” into quantitative responses. Null responses were coded as (0); yes responses were coded as (1); and no responses were coded as (2). Qualitative data were organized into categories based on similarity of content of the reasons given. Reasons for women changing their surname (yes responses) were grouped in the following categories:

- aesthetics — the way her first name and birth/married surname sounded together
- convenience — it was more convenient/easier to change her name
- hyphenated/added — surname was either hyphenated or added as a last or middle name
- legalities — based on law or legal matters
- mate’s request/to respect mate — because spouse requested she change/to respect her mate
- no other option — had no other choice but to change her name
- no reason — did not see a reason not to change her name/no reason was given
- so all family/children will have same last name — to have the same surname among all immediate family members
- tradition (social/cultural) — expectation based on social or cultural tradition
- uniting/joining with mate — to show unity with mate/his family

Reasons for women not changing their surname (no responses) were categorized as

- aesthetics — the way her first and birth/married surname sounded together
- autonomy/personal identity — to assert independence/retain personal identity
- familial reverence — to respect birth family/father
- feminist stance — feminist principles
- legalities — based on law or legal matters
- no reason — did not see a reason to change her name/gave no reason as to why name was not changed
- professional identity — to preserve professional reputation
- second marriage — did not change name when married again.

I coded the qualitative responses to “If you have never been married, or if you are not currently married, would you change your surname if you got married? Why or why not?” into quantitative responses by coding null responses as (0), yes as (1), and no as (2). Qualitative data were ordered based on related reasons. Reasons for women predicting that they will (yes responses) change their surname were

- aesthetics — the way her first and birth/married surname may sound together
- hyphenate/add — surname will either be hyphenated or added as a last or middle name

- mate's request/to respect mate — spouse may request she change/to respect her mate
- no reason — did not see a reason to change her name/no reason was given
- resistance — views changing her name as an act of resistance
- so all family/children will have same last name — to have the same surname among all immediate family members
- tradition (social/cultural) — expectation based on social or cultural tradition
- to unite/join with mate — to show unity with mate/his family.

Reasons for women predicting that they will not (no responses) change their surname were

- autonomy/personal identity — to assert independence/retain personal identity
- convenience — it seems more convenient/easier not to change name
- familial reverence — to respect birth family/father
- no reason — does not see a reason to change her name/no reason was given
- professional identity — to preserve professional reputation
- same-sex relationship — involved in a lesbian relationship
- resistance — views retaining her birth surname as a counter-cultural act.

I coded responses to “Are you a feminist?” as yes (1), no (2), and unsure (3). I categorized and tallied the qualitative responses based on the corresponding quantitative data. Some responses were difficult to classify in this way (see discussion of results below).

Reasons for “Do you consider yourself to be a feminist? Why or why not?” were organized for responses of yes as:

- advocate for women/women's rights
- all women are feminists by default
- equality for all
- gender equality
- just am/no reason
- women are equal to men
- women's choice
- yes, but prefer another term (humanist/womanist).

No responses were categorized as:

- everyone should be viewed equally
- feminism has changed
- feminism rejects femininity
- feminists do not work for relevant causes
- feminists want special consideration
- issue of feminism is irrelevant
- men and women are too different/unequal
- negative connotation
- no need to prove women (who, what)
- no reason
- rejects labeling/feminist label (womanist; realist; humanist)

- term is outdated
- the feminist's fight has been won
- too liberal (feminists are)
- traditional/conservative (respondent is)
- unclear on what the feminist position is
- women deserve preferential treatment.

Results

The results reveal differences in the decision to retain or change one's surname when married for White and Black females in terms of their self-identification as feminists.

Marital status

Table 1 presents the marital status of the cumulative sample (Sample $N = 260$) separated by ethnicity. Fifty-three percent of all respondents are currently married, or have been married and are now divorced/separated, or are widowed. The other respondents are single or living with a partner, not married at the time they responded to the survey. Based on ethnicity, 49% of White women and 35% of Black women are married. Nine percent of White women are divorced/separated compared to 11% of Black women; 2% of White women are widowed and only 1% of Black women are widowed. Eight percent of White women are living with a partner, not married, compared to 4% of Black women who are living with a partner, not married. Thirty-two percent of White women are single, never married, while 39% of Black women are single, never married. The current marital status of women is significant to which question the women respond to and how their responses are interpreted.

Surname choice based on ethnicity and marital status

Married surname decisions

Respondents answered the question "If you are married or if you have ever been married, did you change your surname when you married? Why or why not?"

TABLE 1
MARITAL STATUS FOR EACH ETHNICITY AND THE TOTAL SAMPLE

	White $N = 130$	Black $N = 130$	Combined sample $N = 260$
Married	49%	35%	42%
Divorced/separated	9%	11%	10%
Widowed	2%	1%	1%
Living w/partner, not married	8%	4%	6%
Single, never married	32%	49%	41%
Column total	100%	100%	100%

TABLE 2A

RESPONSES, BY ETHNICITY, TO "IF YOU ARE MARRIED OR IF YOU HAVE EVER BEEN MARRIED, DID YOU CHANGE YOUR SURNAME WHEN YOU MARRIED? WHY OR WHY NOT?"

Yes, I changed my name upon marriage ...			
Explanation	Black	White	Combined sample
Aesthetics	2	4	6
Convenience	0	3	3
Hyphenated/added	18	5	23
Legalities	0	2	2
Mate's request/to respect mate	0	2	2
No other option	0	1	1
No reason	10	9	19
So all family/children will have same last name	2	6	8
Tradition (social/cultural)	17	17	34
Uniting/joining with mate	6	14	20
Column total	55	63	118

TABLE 2B

RESPONSES, BY ETHNICITY, TO "IF YOU ARE MARRIED OR IF YOU HAVE EVER BEEN MARRIED, DID YOU CHANGE YOUR SURNAME WHEN YOU MARRIED? WHY OR WHY NOT?"

No, I did not change my name upon marriage ...			
Explanation	Black	White	Combined sample
Aesthetics	1	0	1
Autonomy/personal identity	1	7	8
Familial reverence	1	1	2
Feminist stance	2	1	3
Legalities	2	1	3
No reason	0	4	4
Professional identity	0	1	1
Second marriage	0	1	1
Column total	7	16	23

Tables 2a and 2b show how women responded in each qualitative category. Most women answered that they changed their surnames based on convenience, aesthetics, and legalities. Eighteen Black women changed their surnames by hyphenating or adding their married surnames. Most women, Black and White, who changed their surname by hyphenation or addition did so by making their birth surname their middle name/initial and their mate's surname their own surname. These women expressed a desire to retain and/or relate to their birth family/former identity s well as acquire a new name. Examples of explanations given from women who are married and chose to change their surname are:

- ≠ “Yes, as a symbol of unity and for convenience.”
- ≠ “Yes, I changed it. It’s an honor to take my husband’s last name. It doesn’t make me less me, it just makes us more . . . us.”
- ≠ “The first time I hyphenated my name. The second time I changed it to my husband’s last name because I felt it was indication of total commitment to the marriage and it did not threaten my independence.”
- ≠ “Yes, I married an African and I wanted an African last name.”

Five Black females did not change their surnames when married compared to sixteen White females. Only three of the twenty-one married women who responded no, they did not change their surname, explicitly related the decision to change their surnames to a feminist stance or form of resistance. A White female in her thirties responded that she did not change her name on “feminist principles.” One-third of married women of both ethnicities/races chose to keep their surnames for reasons of autonomy and personal identity; a Black female in her fifties responded that she did not change her surname when married because “[. . .] my maiden name had become part of my personal identity. I also believe that women should maintain their own identity and not be overtaken by their husband’s name, personality, etc.”

Unmarried surname choice

The question “If you have never been married or if you are not currently married, would you change your surname if you got married? Why or why not?” is not directed at married women; while most of the women who responded are unmarried, some married women also responded to the question. For the purpose of this study, I am only considering women who identify themselves as unmarried and who do not respond to the previous question. Tables 3a and 3b reflect these responses. The responses of yes and the reasons given for this question mimic the explanations

TABLE 3A

RESPONSES, BY ETHNICITY, TO “IF YOU HAVE NEVER BEEN MARRIED OR IF YOU ARE NOT CURRENTLY MARRIED, WOULD YOU CHANGE YOUR SURNAME IF YOU GOT MARRIED? WHY OR WHY NOT?”

Yes, I would change my name upon marriage . . .			
Explanation	Black	White	Combined sample
Aesthetics	2	6	8
Hyphenate/add	17	5	22
Mate’s request/to respect mate	7	2	9
No reason	2	0	2
Resistance	1	0	1
So all family/children will have same last name	2	5	7
Tradition (social/cultural)	13	10	23
Uniting/joining with mate	14	5	19
Unsure	1	2	3
Column total	59	35	94

TABLE 3B

RESPONSES, BY ETHNICITY, TO "IF YOU HAVE NEVER BEEN MARRIED OR IF YOU ARE NOT CURRENTLY MARRIED, WOULD YOU CHANGE YOUR SURNAME IF YOU GOT MARRIED? WHY OR WHY NOT?"

No, I would not change my name upon marriage ...			
Explanation	Black	White	Combined sample
Autonomy/personal identity	3	1	4
Convenience	1	3	4
Familial reverence	1	1	2
No reason	1	3	4
Professional identity	3	6	9
Resistance	0	1	1
Same-sex relationship	0	1	1
Column total	9	16	25

married women offered for changing their surnames. Primarily, unmarried Black women who plan to change their names will do so because of tradition, or they expect to change their names through hyphenation or addition of their married surname. White unmarried women also intend to change their surname because of tradition, but also because of aesthetics and as a sign of commitment. Qualitative examples of unmarried women's responses for this question were:

- ≠ "Yes, I like the tradition of becoming part of my husband's family by taking his name."
- ≠ "I would change my last name. Mostly because of tradition. . . . I feel that people that don't want to change their last names lack commitment."
- ≠ "[. . .] because my boyfriend wants me to."
- ≠ "Yes, because I am very committed to my marriage with George Clooney, seriously yes."

For unmarried women, uniting or joining with their mate and to respect their mates were common reasons for changing their surnames among Black and White females.

Women who responded that they would not change their surname when married, regardless of ethnicity, were mainly concerned with retaining their professional reputations. Convenience and autonomy or personal identity were also frequent responses, examples are:

- ≠ "No. I have been single for 34 years and have established myself as a professional. There is no need to change my name to tell society that I am married."
- ≠ "No, it's just easier to keep it, especially when you're a teacher."
- ≠ "No — no other reason to do it other than a dying tradition."

These unmarried women's rejection of tradition and desire for convenience mirror the explanations provided by married women for keeping their birth surnames.

Feminist self-identification

Whether or not women consider themselves feminist is an important part of my original research inquiry. Tables 4a and 4b reflect the responses for “Do you consider yourself to be a feminist? Why or why not?” White women are more likely than Black women to identify themselves as a feminists; most of those White women related that

TABLE 4A
RESPONSES, BY ETHNICITY, TO “DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE A FEMINIST? WHY OR WHY NOT?”

Yes, I consider myself to be a feminist because ...			
Explanation	Black	White	Combined sample
Advocate for women/women's rights	27	11	38
All women are feminists by default	3	2	5
Equality for all	9	12	21
Gender equality	10	29	39
No reason	3	11	14
Women are equal to men	1	6	7
Women's choice	2	9	11
Yes, but prefer another term (humanist/womanist)	2	4	6
Column total	57	84	141

TABLE 4B
RESPONSES, BY ETHNICITY, TO “DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF TO BE A FEMINIST? WHY OR WHY NOT?”

No, I do not consider myself to be a feminist because ...			
Explanation	Black	White	Combined sample
Everyone should be viewed equally	4	0	4
Feminism rejects femininity	7	0	7
Feminists want special consideration	0	6	6
Issue of feminism is irrelevant	9	1	10
Men and women are too different/unequal	7	8	15
Negative connotation	14	12	26
No reason	19	5	24
Term is outdated	0	1	1
The feminist fight has been won	2	3	5
Too liberal (feminists are)	0	1	1
Traditional/conservative (respondent is)	5	4	9
Unclear on what the feminist position is	5	5	10
Women deserve preferential treatment	1	0	1
Column total	73	46	119

their belief in gender equality is a characteristic of their feminist identification. While fewer Black women identified themselves as feminists, the majority that did said that they were advocates for women and women's rights. Equality for all and support of women's choices were also repeated reasons among women of both ethnicities.

The range of explanations that women gave for not being feminists was broad; there were many more explanations for not identifying as a feminist than reasons for characterizing one's self as a feminist. An almost equal number of Black and White women said that there was a negative connotation surrounding feminism. Black women often responded that the issue of feminism was irrelevant, especially compared to other social and political matters; White women responded that besides the negative connotation surrounding feminism, men and women were just not equal and that these difference should be celebrated instead of mitigated.

Tables 5 and 6 reflect women's surname decisions and feminist self-identifications based on ethnicity and age. One hundred and five, or 40%, of women responded that they did/will change their surnames upon marriage while also self-identifying as feminist, compared to 14% of women who did not/will not change their surname upon marriage and identified themselves as feminists. Forty-one percent of all respondents said that they did/will change their surnames upon marriage, but did not consider themselves to be feminists; only 5% of women did not/will not change their surnames upon marriage and did not self-identify as feminists.

Based on the aggregate data, the relationships between surname choice and feminist self-identification vary based on ethnicity. Sixteen Black women reported that they did not/will not change their surname upon marriage, but only 9 of those women

TABLE 5
BLACK/AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S SURNAME CHOICE AND FEMINIST IDENTIFICATION
CATEGORIZED BY AGE

Black/African-American Women <i>N</i> = 130					
	+ Surname Change + Feminist	+ Surname Change - Feminist	- Surname Change + Feminist	- Surname Change - Feminist	Combined Total
16-19	1	0	0	0	1
20-29	19	29	2	1	51
30-39	6	11	1	2	20
40-49	9	9	3	1	22
50-59	11	12	3	3	29
60-69	3	4	0	0	7
70+	0	0	0	0	0
Column total	49	65	9	7	130
Column %	38%	50%	7%	5%	100%

Legend:

- + Surname Change — I did/will change my surname.
- Surname Change — I did not/will not change my surname.
- + Feminist — I am a feminist.
- Feminist — I am not a feminist.

TABLE 6
 WHITE/CAUCASIAN WOMEN'S SURNAME CHOICE AND FEMINIST IDENTIFICATION CATEGORIZED
 BY AGE

	White/Caucasian Women <i>N</i> = 130					Combined Total
	+ Surname Change + Feminist	+ Surname Change - Feminist	- Surname Change + Feminist	- Surname Change - Feminist		
16-19	1	2	1	0	4	
20-29	20	15	6	4	45	
30-39	10	12	10	0	32	
40-49	10	2	5	0	17	
50-59	7	6	3	1	17	
60-69	6	5	2	0	13	
70+	2	0	0	0	2	
Column total	56	42	27	5	130	
Column %	43%	32%	21%	4%	100%	

Legend:

- + Surname Change - I did/will change my surname.
- Surname Change - I did not/will not change my surname.
- + Feminist - I am a feminist.
- Feminist - I am not a feminist.

identified themselves as feminists. Of the 32 White women who answered that they did not/will not change their names upon marriage, 27 of them self-identified as a feminist. The connection between a woman's surname choice and her own classification as a feminist are not always linked.

Conclusion

According to the study results, very few women, Black or White, attribute the idea of changing or retaining their surnames to any sort of explicit feminist motive. Overwhelmingly, women who did change or who plan to change their surnames when married did so because of tradition and they chose to hyphenate or add their married surname to their previous surname.

Table 7 illustrates the aggregate sample's surname choices and feminist self-identifications categorized by age. Based on the data, 51% of women ages 16 to 29 do not identify themselves as feminists, while 49% of the respondents do consider themselves to be feminists. White women over the age of 30 are more likely to identify themselves as feminists and are more likely to change their surnames upon marriage. Black women over 30 are less likely to identify themselves as feminists, and did/will change their surnames upon marriage. Across all age brackets, except for 70+, Black women did/will change their surnames names upon marriage in higher percentages than White women. More than any other age group, women ages 16-29, among all ethnicities, are less likely to retain their birth surnames when they marry.

The data show that women of different ethnicities/races, feminist self-identifications, and ages act similarly in their surname practices but offer varying

TABLE 7
 AGGREGATE SAMPLE'S SURNAME CHOICE AND FEMINIST IDENTIFICATION CATEGORIZED BY AGE

	All Women N = 260				Combined Total
	+ Surname Change + Feminist	+ Surname Change – Feminist	– Surname Change + Feminist	– Surname Change – Feminist	
16–19	2	2	1	0	5
20–29	39	44	8	5	96
30–39	16	23	11	2	52
40–49	19	11	8	1	39
50–59	18	18	6	4	46
60–69	9	9	2	0	20
70+	2	0	0	0	2
Column total	105	107	36	12	260
Column %	40%	41%	14%	5%	100%

Legend:

- + Surname Change — I did/will change my surname.
- Surname Change — I did not/will not change my surname.
- + Feminist — I am a feminist.
- Feminist — I am not a feminist.

reasons as to why they choose traditional or non-traditional surnames upon marriage. According to the data, the choice to retain one's birth surname or change to a mate's surname upon marriage has become less of an illustration of a woman's feminist identity than cited in earlier research such as Murray (1997), Scheuble and Johnson (1993), and Twenge (1997). Women communicated that they identify as feminists, but do not feel that they have to hold on to their birth surnames to express this. In turn, a woman who chooses to retain her birth surname upon marriage may nevertheless resist identifying herself as a feminist. The interaction of age, ethnicity/race, feminist self-identification, and naming allow women to shape identities that challenge tradition and social expectations. This research leads to further questions about marriage naming trends and its relationship to feminism among women ages 16 to 39. The need is still evident for a more expansive study on race and ethnicity and marital surname choices.

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