Women, marriage and selfhood – why change names?

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The aim of this snapshot is to consider name changing in Britain and what reasons women give for doing so. Name changing on marriage, in particular, is a highly gendered phenomenon as women are the ones usually expected to make the change; name changing remains the norm within Britain and there is a social expectation that women will conform to this norm. Here I will use the testimony of a small number of participants from my wider study on women, naming practices, and selfhood to look at four reasons they give for changing names: love, 'oneness', tradition, and societal expectations.

Keywords: Gendered Identity, Marriage, Naming Practices

Name changing remains the norm for British women when they marry: a European-wide study conducted in 2001 found that 94% of British women changed names and that 71% of Britons thought this was the best option (Valetas 2001). Names are a way of organising people within a bureaucratic world, but also a way of organising people into groups within our own minds based on societal norms and assumptions. In this way last names can have connotations of class, ethnic background, religion, nationality, place, and so on, and are important markers of identity, social structure, and social relations. They link us into the present, marking out our immediate family group or those we are meant to look to for care, as well as linking us into a past via ideas of lineage and family tree. They collect together facets of identity under one symbol, masking often ongoing work at maintaining a coherent identity. Women in all four countries of the United Kingdom have been expected to change names on marriage since at least the nineteenth century thus marking out the unequal relationship between husbands and wives and the relations of care and protection expected to exist within this relationship.

The aim of my wider research is to look at name changing and name retaining on marriage, divorce, and widowhood within the British context and see how these practices

impact upon a woman's sense of (gendered) identity. The study uses mixed methods, albeit with the qualitative element dominating. I conducted a closed and open question survey in which 120 women initially showed interest and 102 valid responses were returned from women who can be generally described as English and Scottish (thus I focus on Scottish and English naming practices only), with 75 'name changers' and 27 'name retainers'. Within this snapshot I intend to outline four reasons given to me by participants for *changing* names: love, 'oneness', tradition, and social messages, as well as the importance of exploring such taken-for-granted practices.

Love

Within my research, women discussed name changing in terms of showing love and commitment towards their husband and their marriage, for example, 'I love my husband and am happy to have his name' (P47) and '[Name changing was] a sign of commitment to my husband and marriage' (P68). The public and obvious symbols of love, of which name changing is one, were to be taken on by women, and participants rarely questioned this idea. It can be seen that ingrained within the heterosexual love relationship is a patriarchal element of women giving up a part of their personhood for men. This unequal action is masked by the word 'love' and hence this kind of sacrifice is usually not noted, or is naturalised. Love is therefore not an egalitarian emotion, as it is often taken to be (May 2011). As Arlie Russell Hochschild has said, women work to do the 'emotion work' (Hochschild 2003, 165) of marriage, as well as what I would like to call 'conspicuous commitment' through name changing. In this way, the 'affirming, enhancing, and celebrating' of men rather than women which Hochschild describes in her work (2003, 165), requires women to deny their own self while affirming his (through using his name and getting rid of her own), enhancing his sense of selfhood as a husband with a (symbolically at least) dependent wife, and celebrating his selfhood by using his name and adding a link to his lineage and family tree, rather than her own. In doing so she 'conspicuously commits' by moving away from her own family (symbolically), becoming a part of his family, and continuing that line. She must, as part of her gendered love work think carefully about the feelings of others when she comes to marry: changing her name is a symbol of love and commitment, and a way of ensuring her husband and his family feel valued and deferred to over her own.

'Oneness'

Oneness is connected with love, in that participants felt that they become a 'unit' or a 'team' with their husband on marriage and through name changing. They wish to share

everything with their partners and make the boundaries of selfhood less distinct: '[Sharing a name is] part of the process of accepting that you are part of a unit and working together with someone else towards a joint future' (P82). This wish extends further to any (future) children: participants spoke of feeling a sense of pulling together as a family against the world and of children feeling secure knowing they belonged and had clear roots. The feeling of belonging was strong within these discussions. The ontological security engendered through the relational acts of love and marriage, and the symbolic act of name changing and sharing, brought peace and happiness to many participants. They felt 'at home' (May 2011, 7).

Love and 'oneness' have obvious connections: they are relational in a supposedly individualistic age. Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim have argued that women are in an in-between position between individualism and relationality (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2010, 56) and, when considering marriage and name changing, this would appear to be correct. Women continue to think largely in relational terms of what would be best for their partner, family members and (possible) children, often over and above themselves and their own feelings. Women also situated themselves within a wider society, the part they play within that, and would go on to play as wives; the following two sec-

tions look at this wider social role.

Tradition

The idea of keeping a lineage alive in a traditional way was observed by name changing participants as a positive thing: they were happy to continue, and share in, their husband's line. They referred to this action as fitting in with tradition: 'all part of the tradition' (P55). Such accounts ground women in a wider history and connect them with a past and future lineage. The 'tradition' of name changing is actually rather different in the four countries of the UK: for example, Scottish women did not lawfully change names, keeping and using their own (or both) until the nineteenth century (Barclay 2011: 98); English women, on the other hand, have changed names for centuries (Erickson 2005, 11). However, tradition was an idea used by participants wherever they came from, confirming that today's 'traditions' come in the main from nineteenth-century ideas when various traditions were invented (see Hobsbawm 1987), and naming practices became homogenised. Participants who had changed names often observed that, at least on the point of marrying, they were not very controversial people – they themselves were 'traditional' - and to not change names would have been unexpected behaviour: 'I am traditional in my belief that the woman should take her husband's name' (P64). In this way we can see the

messages of society beginning to *explicitly* creep in to women's accounts, highlighting what is acceptable and unacceptable.

Social Messages

Here I will discuss only the social messages *explicitly* mentioned by name changers in my research. Reflecting on their decision, some name changers questioned the need to adapt their identity on marriage and that this might imply a social acceptance that they are less important than their husband. Wendy Langford has noted women feel they are lesser than men and use marriage and love as a means to boost self-esteem and status (Langford 1999). I would argue that Langford's findings can be applied to name changing, with the name symbolising a woman's new access to her husband's (male) prestige. A small number of participants mentioned wishing for this status through marriage and becoming clearly someone's wife, via the name change: '[I] wanted to be married and have the status of a married woman' (P61). Significantly though, participants were often shown they had achieved a different status via the reactions of other people, for example, perceiving they received more respect at work.

Further to this, women were often explicitly told by family, friends, and their partners, that not changing names would be a snub to the husband-to-be and his family. Women were expected to put these feelings first when it came to making a decision about their name. A man was quite able to refuse to change his name and yet insist his wife did so for the sake of their 'unitedness'. The gendered nature of naming becomes clear in this action: women are required to think about the feelings of others and give up this symbol of their selfhood, while men are allowed to retain this symbol of selfhood and to think of themselves as the autonomous 'head' of the family. The reaction of husband's to wives who did not want to change names shows the emotive and integral part names play in both masculine and feminine identity. For example:

> He wanted us to share, but wouldn't take my name.... He also said children would be affected... I was disrespecting his family, and that my mum had been proud to change so I should be too, which is not true. ... He didn't take my suggestion to change to my name seriously. (P8)

The patriarchal context of name changing, both historically and in the present day (see Pateman 1988), means that there remains a social element of status inequality with women having to adapt and change their selfhoods in a way men do not.

These four reasons given by name changers show the many complex and overlapping trains of thought that are a part of name changing - some more conscious

than others - and how much work women do in situating themselves in a relational manner within family and wider society, considering what will and what will not be acceptable to others, often even before themselves.

Conclusion: The (Un)Imaginable

To conclude I wish to reflect briefly on the importance of studying taken-for-granted practices. As Jenny Hockey, Angela Meah, and Victoria Robinson argue in their study on heterosexuality, dominant categories are often not named and are therefore more recent objects of study (Hockey et al 2007, 1). It is hard to 'see' these categories because they are taken to be the norm: whiteness, heterosexuality, able-bodiedness. In my study, name changing is the norm. Participants could find the reasons for name changing hard to articulate, for example: 'I just changed my name because I was getting married!' (P4). Citing tradition and history become useful in dealing with this lack of language – they are commonly accepted narratives for explaining name changing and do not require the woman to ask too deeply of herself about her personal situation - but probing questions were required to force some participants to really consider their decision for the first time.

The articulation of accepted norms and their justifications is hard work and is meant to be so: the power behind such taken-for-granted practices is usually strong. Relations of power in patriarchy place women at a disadvantage in being able to demand to keep their names for their sense of self. Their sense of self is considered less important than that of men's *because they are women*, and as such they are in a disadvantaged power position within society (Hochschild 2003, 162). What is and is not imaginable is therefore very important and attention should be paid to such practices to understand their social importance. In my wider study I hope to address the norm of name changing and the gendered power imbalance involved in it to consider how gendered selfhoods are being created through this practice. As well as this I will focus on the smaller group of women – smaller both in my study and in society at large - who retain their original name, and I will consider what this means for these women as individuals, as well as for gendered societal structures. In this way, another taken-for-granted practice will be opened up to study, and the gendered everyday realities of our lives explored.

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