
MEDIA RELEASE with mini literature review

Views on women taking husband's name aren't black and white

by Kelly Utt-Grubb

USA Today reports that 70% of Americans think it's beneficial for women to take her husband's last name when they marry according to a new study by researchers from Indiana University and the University of Utah. Laura Hamilton, a sociology researcher at Indiana University and one of the study authors, tells USA Today that while gender-neutral terms such as "chairperson" have become commonplace, the same logic hasn't carried over to name change.

"One of the most interesting things is that a lot of people assume that because language in general is gender-neutral, that name change would also be one of those things in which attitudes would be shifting towards being much more liberal," she says.

Researchers asked 815 people a combination of multiple choice and open-ended questions to determine attitudes. Respondents who said that women should change their names tended to view it as important for establishing a marital and family identity, Hamilton says, while those who thought women should keep their own names focused on the importance of a woman establishing a professional or individual identity. Perhaps most startling is that about half of respondents went so far as to say that the government should mandate women to change their names when they marry.

I'd love to learn more about their sample and survey questions, because I'm not sure I agree with their conclusion. It's dangerous to buy headlines and survey claims hook, line, and sinker because there are almost always interrelated factors one must understand in order to truly comprehend the significance of findings.

As a family naming expert with a degree in psychology, I personally spent nearly two years in 2006 and 2007 researching trends and attitudes about nontraditional last names defined as anything other than women and children taking and keeping a man's last name. The Name Survey included data from 1000 respondents and-- although not intended to be academic-- was professionally reviewed by the Assistant Director for Survey Research and Development at the University of North Carolina's Odum Institute for Research in Social Science. Data from about half of those participants was collected via internet survey and the other half in-person or on the telephone.

Consider the following information gleaned from my study:

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- Attitudes about nontraditional naming practices are more positive than people realize. A surprising 75% of people surveyed think that using a nontraditional last name is a good idea.
- 70% feel that hyphenating two names is a good idea and 61% feel that a man using a hyphenated name is a good idea. 30% have actually used a nontraditional last name and 20% have given their child one. 46% have either hyphenated or considered hyphenating their own name and 25% have done so with their child's.
- Creative new solutions such as using the woman's maiden name for the whole family, combining two family names to create a new last name or choosing a completely new last name of special significance are being utilized.
- Many individuals (especially women) are not happy with their surname choices and want more information about their options.
- Men are becoming open to the idea of modifying their last names after marriage and a significant number have already done so.

Researchers in the Indiana-Utah study say 70% of Americans agree, either somewhat or strongly, that it's beneficial for women to take her husband's last name when they marry, while 29% say it's better for women to keep their own names. Somewhat or strongly can mean very different things, especially if respondents assume that taking a husband's name or keeping a maiden name are the only options they're being asked to compare. Additionally, "beneficial" is a curious term to use because many respondents may claim taking a husband's last name is beneficial simply due to the logistical hassles that individuals with nontraditional last names face. When asked in my Name Survey what they perceive to be the biggest difficulty, the vast majority of participants said confusion/logistical difficulties. Many claimed they had considered using a nontraditional last name but decided against it primarily because of those perceived logistical difficulties. I chose the phrase "good idea" rather than "beneficial" to determine attitudes, and I think my phrasing provides better insight.

There is very limited academic research on the topic of married names, but the research that does exist points to increasing use of and positive perceptions of nontraditional last names, NOT to scary scenarios like government mandated married names. A 2002 academic study entitled "Perceptions of Married Women and Married Men with Hyphenated Surnames" conducted by researchers at Millikin University indicates that nontraditional naming is viewed as a positive phenomenon. Researchers in that study found that married men and women with hyphenated last names were perceived differently than other people, but in generally positive terms. The woman with a hyphenated name was perceived as more friendly, good-natured, industrious and intellectually curious, while the man with a hyphenated last name was seen as accommodating, good-natured, nurturing and committed to his marriage. A 2004 Harvard University study found that the number of college-educated women who kept their surnames upon marriage rose from about 3% in 1975 to nearly 20% in 2001. According to my *Name Survey*, as many as 25% of married women are now choosing something other than their husbands' name. Again, that includes those who keep their maiden name, hyphenate their

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name, choose a combo name (Long + Smith become Longsmith), or choose a new name altogether.

Findings from my Name Survey indicate that there seems to be perceived ridicule towards those with nontraditional surnames that doesn't exist to nearly the extent believed. While about 75% of respondents thought using a nontraditional last name was a good idea in general, many communicated their assumption that a social penalty is attached to a nontraditional choice when I asked about perceived difficulties. Clearly if 75% think it's a good idea, only 25% are left to ridicule.

Regarding the findings in the Indiana-Utah study that half of respondents say the government should mandate women to change their names, I agree with Hamilton when she calls this "really interesting," considering typical attitudes towards government intervention. Because name changing isn't a hot-button political issue, Hamilton says attitudes about names are a good predictor of how respondents feel about a host of other issues. She admits that those who believe women should change their names are also often more religious and more politically conservative.

It's difficult to get an accurate understanding of attitudes on this sort of topic because opinions differ widely among various racial and ethnic groups, among those of differing political beliefs and in different regions of the country. Despite my best intentions to get a random sample, my Name Survey included mostly college educated Caucasian females. I suspect the Indiana-Utah study was heavy on those who are religious and politically conservative.

Clearly much more study—and an honest dialogue in the media about realities-- are needed on this topic.

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