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What Does it Mean for the Husband When His Wife Keeps Her Own Surname?

Rachael D. Robnett, Marielle Wertheimer, and Harriet R. Tenenbaum

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Key Implications

- When a woman keeps her surname after getting married, people tend to view her husband as less masculine and more feminine.
- People tend to make assumptions about relationship dynamics based on whether the woman keeps her own surname.
- Stereotypes may help to explain why the marital surname tradition remains common.

Background

The practice of wives adopting their husbands' surnames after marriage is one of the most widespread traditions in Western cultures. This tradition dates back to a time when women were viewed as the property of their husbands. In fact, women used to be legally obligated to change their surnames after marriage. This is no longer the case in the U.S., yet the marital surname tradition is still very prevalent in heterosexual relationships.

The goal of our study was to shed light on why women continue to take their husbands' surnames. According to some of our previous research, women who violate the marital surname tradition are viewed differently from other women. Specifically, they are often described in terms of stereotypically masculine traits such as *ambitious* and *aggressive*. These traits contrast with stereotypically feminine traits such as *nurturant* and *timid*. Women who keep their surnames also tend to be viewed as less committed to their marriage relative to other women.

We suspected that people might also hold stereotypes about the *husbands* of women who violate the surname tradition. We got this idea from research showing that some men pressure their wives to change their surnames after marriage. For instance, women in one study reported that their husbands would

view it as a "personal slight" if they kept their own surnames. We wondered if men might be concerned about facing stereotypes related to their masculinity when their wives keep their own surnames.

Hypotheses

We wanted to examine how a woman's surname choice influences perceptions of her husband. In situations where the wife keeps her own surname, we had two predictions about how the husband would be perceived:

- (1) People will view the husband as less masculine and more feminine.
- (2) People will view the husband as holding less power in the relationship.

We also had another prediction. We didn't think that everyone would hold stereotypes about the husband to the same degree. Instead, we thought that these stereotypes would be most common in people who are high in *hostile sexism*, which means they believe that men should hold most of the power in romantic relationships. This brings us to our third prediction:

- (3) People high in hostile sexism will have the strongest stereotypes about men whose wives keep their own surname.

Participants and Method

We conducted three studies to test our hypotheses. Two were carried out in the U.S. with college students. The third was carried out in the U.K. with a sample from the community. The total sample was over 300 participants. We did the study in the U.S. and the U.K. because we wanted to know whether the findings would apply to people from fairly different backgrounds.

Society puts men under a lot of pressure to be masculine and powerful.

We presented our participants with one of two short stories. Both stories described a heterosexual couple (“Christina and David”) who planned to get married. However, for half of the sample, the story concluded with Christina keeping her own last name; for the other half of the sample, the story concluded with Christina taking David’s surname. After participants read the stories, we asked them to rate David’s masculinity, femininity, and the amount of power he holds in the relationship. We also measured participants’ level of hostile sexism with a survey measure that’s been used in a lot of prior research.

Results

Our findings supported our three hypotheses. Participants who read the story about Christina keeping her own surname rated David as less masculine, more feminine, and as holding less

power in the relationship. These stereotypes were present among people in the U.S. and the U.K. They were also present in both women and men, people from many ethnic groups, and people who ranged in age from 18 to 65. As we expected, people who were high in hostile sexism were especially likely to rate David as low in power when Christina kept her own surname.

Discussion

Our findings complement other research showing that people hold stereotypes about women who keep their surnames after marriage. For instance, these women are often viewed as less committed to their marriage relative to other women. Our study extends this work by showing that people apply stereotypes to the man in the relationship as well. This is interesting given that the man isn’t actually doing anything himself; instead, people make inferences about him based on his wife’s surname.

We also found that people high in hostile sexism were especially likely to view a man as disempowered when his wife keeps her own name. Many other studies have shown similar patterns. It seems like people with hostile sexism have a strong negative reaction when women violate romantic relationship traditions. People who are low in hostile sexism might not have any reaction—or may even respond positively—when women break with tradition.

We think our findings help to explain why the marital surname tradition continues to be so common. Society puts men under a lot of pressure to be masculine and powerful. So, women might be wary of keeping their own surnames if they think this will make their husbands seem less masculine and powerful. This is probably also part of why some men pressure their wives to change their surnames after marriage.

Learn More About This Brief

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The Study:

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