

## **Understanding tradition: marital name change in Britain and Norway**

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### **Abstract**

Marital surname change is a striking example of the survival of tradition. A practice emerging from patriarchal history has become embedded in an age of de-traditionalisation and women's emancipation. Is the tradition of women's marital name change just some sort of inertia or drag, which will slowly disappear as modernity progresses, or does this tradition fulfil more contemporary roles? Are women and men just dupes to tradition, or alternatively do they use tradition to further their aims? We examine how different approaches - individualisation theory, new institutionalism and bricolage - might tackle these questions. This examination is set within a comparative analysis of marital surname change in Britain and Norway, using small qualitative samples. We find that while individualisation and new institutionalism offer partial explanations, bricolage offers a more adaptable viewpoint.

### **Keywords**

Tradition, marital surnames, Britain, Norway, individualisation, new institutionalism, bricolage

## **Introduction**

In 2016, 89% of married women in Britain had abandoned their own surname and taken their husband's, according to a recent national survey<sup>1</sup>. This is little different from the 94% recorded in a 1995 Eurobarometer survey (Valetas 1995). Even for the youngest age group in 2016, those respondents aged 18-34, nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of married women had taken their husband's name. So entrenched is this practice that women's name change is generally expected as the normal, and quite unremarkable, thing to do. Transgression, even simple scrutiny, often leads to incomprehension, anger and conflict with male partners or relatives (Thwaites 2014). All this is despite the fact that, legally, married women - like anyone else in Britain - can use whatever name they want. Most countries in western Europe and North America follow the same pattern, although there are some exceptions<sup>2</sup>.

Names are at the heart of our individual identity, and surnames in particular signal social, civil and legal status (Pilcher, 2016). So why do nearly all married women in Britain choose to change their identity through taking their husband's surname and, what is more, change to a symbolically inferior and subordinate position. For in Britain the history of female name change upon marriage is a deeply patriarchal history. Under the medieval legal doctrine of coverture a wife, her children, and her property, became the husband's possession. When hereditary surnames emerged, married women were left with no surname at all and lost named identity, except 'wife of-'. By the later Middle Ages theological and legal arguments began to see marriage as conferring spiritual unity as well as property union. The married woman, in theory,

came to share the surname of her husband as a symbol of this unity. But in practice, the name change represented the wife's subordinated identity and legal status. Coverture remained embedded in English common law right up to the late nineteenth century, when the Married Woman's Property Acts from 1870 to 1893 allowed wives control over their own property.

Nonetheless the practice of women's surname change on marriage remained. We might see this as an example of informal 'lived law', not formally legislated but socially prescriptive. The state has eased the practice of this lived law however - women have a special right, but not a requirement, to change their surname on marriage. Legally this change is effected by the marriage itself and the marriage certificate is an adequate document for all purposes, including acquiring a new passport. (The same rights were extended to same sex civil partners in 2004 and same sex married spouses in 2013). All other name changes require a Deed Poll or similar administrative measures to legally effect a change, including husbands who wish to adopt the wife's surname, and spouses who opt for a joint name. As Finch (2008: 716) puts it, the women's name change becomes 'bureaucratic routine'.

This is a striking example of the survival of tradition. How is it that a practice emerging from patriarchal history and redolent of women's subordination to men has become so embedded in an age of women's emancipation and de-traditionalisation? We pursue this question through the lens of comparative analysis with Norway, which displays an even more spectacular example of the paradoxical survival of women's

surname change. For Norway is regularly ranked among the top 4 countries on various indices of gender equality<sup>3</sup>, reflecting strong equality norms, comprehensive 'women-friendly' public policy, and the virtual disappearance of any female homemaker role (Kitterød and Rønsen 2013). In addition nearly all couples cohabit before marriage, often over the long term and many as parents (Syltevik 2010). At that stage women partners keep their own surname. Nevertheless most go on to marry and then change name. Norway also shows a less patriarchal history of married women's surnames than in Britain. A country of small, independent farmers right into the late nineteenth century, hereditary surnames were not used. Last names reflected a mixture of patronymic and locational elements, usually the father's first name and a farm name. Perhaps reflecting their key role within this peasant economy, married women kept their own names – although these might change if they changed farm. Only by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century did wives in the urban bourgeoisie begin to adopt the supposedly more sophisticated 'continental' model of taking the husband's name. This symbol of modernity received state support in the Names Act of 1923, through which hereditary surnames became mandatory and, as part of this, married women and any children were required to take the husband's surname (NOU 2001). Apparently strictly enforced, the state had created a new, more patriarchal, tradition<sup>5</sup>. The Names Act was revised in women's favour in 1949 (they could keep their own name given the husband's consent) and in 1964 (consent was no longer needed, though application would have to be made before the wedding). By 1979 the Act was made gender neutral with the presumption that spouses would keep their own names. Finally, in

2003, double-barrelled and other joint names became permissible, and the same naming rights were extended to cohabiting couples living together for 2 years or having children together.

Despite this relaxation of patriarchal legislation, and despite the ideology and practice of gender equality, 80% of Norwegian women marrying between 1980 and 2003 (the date of the last nationally representative survey) took their husband's surname (Wiecek 2003). Conversely, 97% of men kept their name. In fact, controlling for age (as older women are less likely to take their husband's name, and age at marriage has increased) the likelihood of women in Norway taking their husband's name actually increased between 1980 and 2003 (Noack and Wiik 2008). This is all the more surprising given that it was only the name changers who had to take positive action and inform the state authorities of their naming decision. As in Britain keeping your own name on marriage needs no action at all, but this was a minority practice for women in both countries. There is, however, one difference from Britain which perhaps reflect greater gender equality in Norway. About half of women name changers in Norway kept their own name as a middle name – which functions as a secondary surname. As we shall see, this is rare in Britain. There may also have been some decline in the proportion of 'changers' since 2003, as suggested by qualitative evidence (Grønstad 2015) and by more recent register data from Sweden – which shares an almost identical legal history for marital naming (Statistiska Centralbyrån 2013)<sup>4</sup>.

In this article we attempt to understand the role of tradition in relation to women's marital surname change. Is this persistent tradition just some sort of inertia or drag, which will slowly disappear as modernity progresses, or does this fulfil more contemporary roles? Are women and men just dupes to tradition, or alternatively do they use tradition to further their aims? How do some traditions remain embedded in an age of supposed detraditionalisation, where agency is widely assumed to play a greater role in allowing more personal choice, and adherence to tradition has supposedly atrophied? We have identified three approaches in pursuing these questions. First is individualisation theory, a dominant frame of reference in family sociology but currently subject to considerable critique. Hence our interest in assessing the potential of two more recent applications to family sociology - new institutionalism and institutional bricolage (Carter and Duncan 2018). We examine the relative strengths and weaknesses of these three perspectives in explaining married women's surname change in Britain and Norway, using small qualitative samples. We turn first to outline these three approaches.

### **Three approaches to tradition**

#### *Individualisation*

The focus of individualisation theory rests firmly on detraditionalisation: the progressive disappearance of tradition under the conditions of late modernity. Consequently structuring social forms like class and family have atrophied. Notoriously, in the word of Ulrich Beck, the family became a 'zombie category' – still existing but without any real life

(Beck, 2002, 204). This assumption is buttressed by a rather one-sided view of agency as mainly discursive - reflexive, purposeful and individual. People, and women especially, are increasingly freed from tradition and are both able and compelled to 'decide for themselves' how to conduct their personal lives in a 'search for new ways of living' according to Beck-Gernsheim in her book 'Reinventing the Family' - indicatively subtitled 'In search of new lifestyles' (2002: xii). Individual agency triumphs over social structure. There are therefore two roles available to marrying women deciding on their future surname (although we might ask why they marry in the first place, see Carter and Duncan 2018) – they can either be individualisers keeping their own name or laggards stuck in the habitual inertia of tradition.

Critiques of individualisation theories are well rehearsed and need not detain us. Even by 2012, Dawson (2012) could categorize multifarious critiques as 'modernist', 'interactionist', or 'discourse'. Or put more simply individualisation is nothing new and there is as much continuity as change, people cannot exist in isolation but are connected and relational, and individualisation just reflects a neo-liberal political agenda. Others have pointed to a lack of empirical support for the assertions made (Duncan and Smith 2006, Smart 2007), coupled with an overemphasis on the exotic and a neglect of the unmarked majority (Brekhus, 1998). Beck-Gernsheim (2002), discussing married women's choice of surname, gives an example. Assuming a priori that women increasingly reject taking their husband's name, she takes this as indicating the decline of the 'standard family'. This claim is based on speculative anecdote from 'London' and Germany. In fact as we have

seen even among the youngest age group in Britain 80% of wives had taken their husband's name by 2016, and a mere 2% wanted to keep their own name. In Germany, according to the 1995 Eurobarometer, 96 per cent of married women had taken their husband's name, with only 1 per cent thinking it preferable to keep their own name.

For our purposes here it is the strict binary between tradition and modernity that provides a major problem. This prevents analysis of how people actively use tradition as part of modernity. Reducing tradition to a relic or a habit from the past negates the connection between the present and the ways in which traditions are made meaningful not just through their connections with the past but with their restatement in the present and signposting to the future.

### *New Institutionalism*

In an influential paper Cherlin (2004) applied individualisation theory to American marriage - spouses pursued their own interests in marriage, rather than acting as a couple or following institutional precepts.

Yodanis and Lauer (2014) critique this interpretation both theoretically and empirically, taking inspiration from the 'new institutionalism' of sociological economics (see also Lauer and Yodanis 2010). It is institutions that govern behaviours, not the individualised 'rational economic man' central to traditional economic theory, nor his sociological cousin – the reflexive and purposeful individualiser.

Institutions are, however, made up of a bundle of self-reinforcing rules (both formal and informal) and taken-for-granted assumptions.

Institutional routines and scripts usually lie beyond the conscious

scrutiny of individuals, so that alternatives are often not considered or even remain inconceivable: it is hard to imagine other possible ways of behaving and in any case there is usually only a limited number of viable alternatives. Tradition appears as natural. Even when people attempt to change institutions or develop alternatives they are subject to 'institutional isomorphism': external coercive pressures, normative pressures, and the tendency to imitate others when faced with uncertainty. This is perhaps why fewer women end up keeping their own name than would, apparently, prefer to do so. Just 59% of British women would prefer their husband's name, in another 2016 survey<sup>6</sup>, young as well as old, probably about 20% or more lower than what happens in practice. All this promotes consistency and the status quo.

This version of new institutionalism emphasises the persistence of tradition through institutional stability and resistance to change. This provides a more convincing account of why most women who marry in both Britain and Norway change to their husband's name. Nevertheless, this is also a one-sided account, emphasising the power of institutional structures and norms. A critical question is now the opposite; how is it that some women do not follow these institutional givens and others discursively choose them?

These two opposing approaches remind us of the 'structure – agency problem' - one-sided explanations focussing on either the creativity of individual agents or alternatively the power of institutional structures (King 2005). Research then lurches from one side to the other. Implicitly, the relatively large literature on women's surname change in the USA

follows this seesaw pattern (see Noack and Wiik 2008 for summary). Some studies emphasise the power of given tradition and normative cultural expectations (e.g. Twenge 1997). This is perhaps not surprising when, at the time, only 2% or so of married women in the USA had kept their own name. But other studies focus on the minority of female name 'keepers', associated with factors like higher education, higher income, professional work, greater age, liberal family background, or subscription to gender equality (e.g. Johnson and Scheuble 1995). Noack and Wiik (2008) find much the same for Norway. Usually highly correlated, implicitly these factors are seen to promote some agency autonomy from institutional structure. An overall problem remains however - if some individuals can escape institutional structure, why can't all – or do other people simply choose to follow structure? Conversely, if structures are so strong, how can some escape?

### *Institutional bricolage*

With a focus on how people use culture and tradition, the bricolage approach sidesteps this structure-agency problem. People generally possess limited cognitive and social energy. When faced with some new situation or problem they tend to adapt what they already know, or what is easily available, to arrive at some more or less adequate solution. New social arrangements are pieced together using diverse parts of available existing norms, values and practices. While this adaption is often naturalised as tradition, it is not necessarily unthinking or uncritical; some elements of tradition might come under discursive scrutiny and may be changed or abandoned. This framework has been used quite widely in some parts of social science, in business studies for

example. Managers and entrepreneurs rarely act through long term, rational planning and resource allocation. Rather they improvise plans from what they know at the time, often using well-known 'rules of thumb', and so create 'something from nothing' (Baker and Nelson 2005).

Cleaver (2012) develops this general idea in her theorisation of 'institutional bricolage' as applied to development planning. For bricolage is not only a matter of individual adaptive behaviour, but also underlies the emergence of new institutions, both formal and informal. And, as new institutionalism describes, institutions can 'do the thinking' on behalf of individuals. This has several implications. First, Cleaver emphasises that new arrangements are most likely to succeed if they are bestowed with the legitimacy of 'tradition'. This is because cooperation and assent from others is necessary if the new arrangement is going to work. Moreover, if these arrangements are going to have some long-term future, they must become normalized to the people who practice them. People can more easily take part if new arrangements are recognisably traditional - for then they will know what to expect and have a guide on how they should act. In addition, assent and cooperation are most likely if the new arrangements are generally accepted as a 'right' and 'sensible' way of doing things, even better if any new adaption appears 'natural'. Further scrutiny becomes unnecessary. This occurs through processes of conferring continuity and authority to the new or adapted arrangements. Artefacts, symbols, mechanisms, discourses, and sanctioned power relationships are borrowed from other settings and other times. This borrowing also

means that meanings may 'leak' from one time and setting to another. If pre-existing tradition is lacking, it may even be invented; indeed it is all the more likely to be invented in times of rapid change when the crumbling of old certainties threatens both legitimacy and ontological security (Hobsbawn 1983).

Second, bricolage is a socially unequal process. Whilst everyone is potentially capable of being a bricoleur, some are able to command more resources to make adaptations work in their favour. These are not only material resources, command over things like the means of production, but also authoritative resources: command over people, for example in organisations and institutions (Giddens, 1984). Authoritative resources include moral world views which are usually strongly gendered, raced, and socially stratified ideas about the proper behaviour and the rightful place of individuals with different social identities. The more resourced will often be more able to adapt or to influence adaptations to work in their favour, and to find social assent, while the adaptive ability of others is limited. At the extreme some may have no capacity to develop adaptive arrangements at all. This implies the privileging of pre-existing patterns of authority and advantage.

Bricolage is deeply social, impregnated with collective moralities, ideas and expectations, often hidden and non-reflexive, and usually unequal. Tradition, what has gone before, becomes crucial as a resource and legitimating device. The decline of pre-existing traditions will stimulate re-traditionalisation and the invention of traditions. Rather than the high energy, high stress and high-risk experiments of the individualised actor,

the social bricoleur seeks the low energy, low stress and safer option of adapting 'tradition' (see Duncan 2011). The resulting practices are therefore neither completely 'modern' nor completely traditional, but are rather a dynamic mixture of the two.

We will now go on to explore these three conceptual approaches further in the context of marital surname change in Britain and Norway.

## **Methods**

Our discussion depends on combining three small semi-structured interview samples in Britain (2 samples from 2010 and 2014, with a total of 38 respondents) and Norway (2016, 27 respondents). The 2014 British and 2016 Norwegian samples were for a joint project on weddings, and were restricted to people who had recently married, or were going to do so. The 2010 British sample with 23 respondents concerned young women's ideas about partnering and marriage. In this sample only 8 were married or planning marriage; indeed 3 were single (the remainder cohabiting or living apart together). In all three samples name change was a substantive topic but for these latter respondents name change was more hypothetical. Ethical approval was granted by the authors' employing institutions, although no ethical problems presented and respondents were happy to talk about their actual, planned or expected weddings.

Respondents were recruited through snowballing in locations in Kent, Hampshire and Yorkshire in England, and in two Norwegian cities. Recruitment took different routes; in Kent, snowballing was initiated

through the manager of a particular wedding venue, in Yorkshire and Hampshire personal contacts provided an initial starting point, and in Norway recruitment started through Facebook and other social media. Snowball sampling can restrict recruitment to those in restricted networks who have certain defining characteristics. However, with 4 researchers<sup>7</sup> and a number of snowballing routes, the samples were reasonably diverse in terms of marital history. Nearly all respondents were under 35, although three interviewees in the 2014 British sample were in their 50s and marrying for a second time. Partly because of the aims of the 2010 British sample, there were more women than men. With one exception, all participants were White. While the British sample was reasonably diverse in terms of occupation and education, the Norwegian sample was biased towards the better educated. See Duncan and Carter 2018 and Ellingsæter 2018 for details.

We used conversational, semi-structured interviews, with an open initial question ('Tell me about your wedding starting wherever you like'). This gave participants the opportunity to identify themes and issues of particular relevance to them, and to direct the narrative and frame it in their own terms of reference (Mason and Davies, 2011). Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and participant names pseudonymised. The Norwegian sample was transferred to NVIVO.

The small sample sizes, and their ad hoc combination, partly reflect financial and time constraints. Similarly, we did not have the resources to establish sub-samples from minority groups. However, we are not concerned to make descriptive or statistical population level correlations or inferences. Rather, we are concerned with individual motivations for,

and understandings of, surname change on marriage. Consequently, we employed an 'intensive' research methodology that would better capture the 'how' and 'why' of these processes (Sayer, 1992), as well as providing descriptive information. Analysis was grounded on reading each interview transcript, identifying respondents' discursive rationalisations of their ideas and decisions about marriage and weddings, including name change (see Carter and Duncan 2016). Using this methodology we can make some moderate analytical generalisations (see Payne and Williams, 2005) at least for 'majority' weddings between heterosexual partners. There remains a need for research on particular 'minority' ethnic, religious and same-sex weddings and also for wider, 'extensive' research on overall patterns of wedding and marriage behaviour, including name change.

### **Understanding marital name change in Britain and Norway**

There were different levels of scrutiny of marital name change, ranging from the uncritical taken-for-granted of tradition to critical rejection. Some participants more consciously used tradition for displaying family. We will describe these categories in turn.

#### *Taking tradition for granted: habitual agency*

Taking the husband's name was often just taken for granted by the English respondents. 'Obviously' as Penny said, she would change her name. When asked to explain further, these respondents frequently called upon a language of convention, tradition and given social norms: 'it's traditional and conventional' (Eleanor); name change was 'the right

thing to do' (Lucy). For Jess the meaning of her wedding was 'that I'll take my partner's surname. And stand by my vows'. Moreover, name change denoted proper family status: 'it's just what's expected as you become a family and that family have one name' (Zoe). For some participants, taking the husband's name was not only assumed and unquestioned, it was desired and eagerly awaited. As Abigail put it, 'I'm so looking forward to being a wife and having my surname changed'. For Adele – who was single- changing her name would not simply be 'the done thing' but in addition 'it's nice to have to be able to say 'husband' and take someone else's name and call yourself Mrs'.

In our sample this 'naturalised' view of marital surname change was much less common in Norway, restricted to two couples who were actively religious and, exceptionally, had not cohabited before marriage. Lars considered it "tradition" and "normal" that the bride takes her husband's last name: 'That's how it has been with two of my brothers who have married, and in the rest of the family'. For Lars two different surnames would be odd and unnatural, while his name would show family unity:

'when you marry you become one ...and I think it's [name change] also a part of establishing a family, that you create your new family'.

Similarly Kristin -the only woman in the Norway sample taking her husband's surname and completely abolishing her own- felt that husband and wife should have the same surname. Her partner Knut, in a separate interview, said it was more 'natural' for them to have just his and, indeed, their parents had done the same.

Scrutiny of this taken-for-granted tradition was not entirely lacking and some English respondents had considered the possibility of a joint hyphenation of both partners' names. For most of the English sample, however, this was a brief and negative scrutiny which served only to confirm traditional name change. As Michelle dismissively put it: 'I think double barrelled names are a bit crap'. A couple of women respondents were initially more enthusiastic. But without recourse to alternative narratives, negotiation with unenthusiastic male partners was one-sided. Husbands could claim the legitimacy of established tradition, while alternatives appeared contrived. And what tradition does exist in Britain for 'double-barrelled' names is de-legitimising, negatively associated with the English upper class. Susan had considered a joint hyphenated name but she 'didn't like the sound if it either way round'. Furthermore:

[her fiancé] said it meant a lot more to him like me having his surname and as I wasn't particularly bothered either way I thought- nice gesture to take the name and kind of do the traditional thing.

In contrast in Norway the tradition of wives keeping their own names as a subsidiary surname is well established. For example Lars' partner, Line, wanted to take his name. Nevertheless she had kept her surname as middle name, 'because it's a big part of my life and my family'.

Some of the English husbands made it a condition of marriage that their wives took their name. Mandy gives a striking example:

'I actually didn't want to change my name but ...he said but if that hadn't changed there would have been no point getting married

[...] he said the wedding would have meant nothing if I hadn't changed my name'.

Similarly for Derek, the name change 'was one of [his] criteria' for getting married. He was glad Alison had become his wife for they were now 'Mr and Mrs (his surname)' as proudly celebrated on the wedding card. This traditional assumption of his partner's symbolic subordination as wife was, however, given a modern twist: he was offering the status of 'Mrs'. As he continued: 'so, you know, I wanted to make you feel special, I think, and be a Mrs instead of just being a live-in partner'. At the same time this allowed him entry to a particular male status:

'And a lot of- all our friends are pretty much couples that have either been married for years or they've recently got married and I think... I wanted to be part of that club.'

As Thwaites (2014) concludes the name change can create a symbolic continuation of traditional masculine identity as family head and authoritative presence.

From the lens of individualisation theory, these respondents have not been freed from tradition by the conditions of late modernity or, if they have, they have not responded for some reason. Women, who supposedly have most to gain from the detraditionalisation of the family, accept and maintain its traditions – at times with some enthusiasm. Men retain patriarchal family power. New institutionalism provides a fuller description of this re-traditionalisation process. Given scripts mean that alternatives remain unconsidered or discounted while the institutional isomorphism of others' expectations and coercion obstructs departure from the norm. The idea of a wife keeping her own

name might not only deeply upset some family members; others would simply not understand. Some husbands insist on their name as surname or, in Norway, the dominant last name. A bricolage perspective would elaborate this explanation by emphasising tradition as a guide to action in what is – to these respondents - a new situation. Taking the husband's name is the easiest solution and can make the best claim to trouble free legitimacy. Moreover, others – husbands and relatives - have greater authoritative resources in the absence of any convincing alternative narrative. Nothing can be worse than a new arrangement that appears socially contrived. Far better if something different appears familiar, is easily recognised, and appears endowed with self-validating truth.

*Using tradition: doing and displaying family*

So far we have looked at those respondents who were more passive bearers of tradition. But many respondents were more actively involved in choosing their name. Rather than accepting tradition they used it – which for most meant taking the husband's name. For, if our names are at the heart of our personal identity, then name change can be used as a handy tool for displaying a new family situation. One of our English respondents, Ruth, puts this well in reflecting on her imminent marriage:

'I've always imagined I would change my name [...] because it makes you feel that you're one; you're part of the same thing, you're the same family and that's - it's a really symbolic- powerfully symbolic way of saying we're together.

For people do not only have to work at 'doing family' (Morgan 1996) they also have to display this work. As Finch (2007: 66) puts it, 'the meaning of one's actions has to be conveyed to and understood by

relevant others as characteristic of family'. The 'powerfully symbolic' change of name allows Ruth to help establish family connectedness and belonging (what she feels) and to display this 'proper' family to others (what this says). Claire put this even more baldly:

'I'd like them to know that we were a family and I think names is quite a good way of doing that.'

Finch sees this display function as particularly important as de-traditionalisation proceeds, and families become more diverse and fragmented. People living in new, sometimes challenging and often more complicated arrangements, need all the more to display that they are 'proper family'. Alison, an older respondent in the English sample, gives a good example. Married early as a pregnant teenager, she followed accepted tradition and took her husband's surname. This unhappy 'shotgun' marriage soon dissolved into estrangement and divorce, but she kept her ex-husband's surname so that she and her children had the same surname. By this means she was able to display her own identity as mother, and that the children belonged to her. On her re-marriage, and now with independent grown-up children, this use of her first husband's name was not only redundant but an oppressive reminder of her first marriage. Her second name change, displaying another identity, helped bury this unhappy past. This was no uncritical acceptance of tradition, however; she consciously examined the implications of name change 'for a woman' and had even considered reverting to her long lost maiden name. But as we have seen Derek, her new husband, saw Alison taking his name, becoming 'Mr and Mrs', as one of his criteria for marriage. So using this handy tool can have a flip

side, taking the husband's name also 'leaks' a powerfully symbolic message about male dominance.

None of the men in the Norwegian sample stated directly that their wives' name change was a precondition for marriage. Indeed the appellations 'Mrs.' (Fru) and 'Mr. and Mrs' (Herr og Fru) disappeared decades ago. Nonetheless, most kept their own name unchanged and in some cases argued strongly that their names should be the dominant last name for both partners. This seemed to depend on prioritising male identity. For Sebastian his 'considerable pressure' was justified by patrilineal continuity - his surname had been in the family for 100-150 years passed down through first sons, so it was important that the name would continue. In compensation his wife could have her 'big wedding'. Similarly Nicolai had a 'pretty clear idea' that he would not renounce his name since 'it's like a bit of tradition related to it, and it comes from a small place in western Norway'. His wife, Nina, would rather have kept her own name; 'names are so important for identity, so I did not give up my whole name... I think it's bad enough that my name did not come last, but I gave in on that'. She had asked herself afterwards 'why did I not quarrel about it', believing this was because Nicolai 'was a man'. Unlike the English respondents, however, both Sebastian and Nikolai took their wife's name as middle name. Guro and Gregor were using name change in a similar way – but in the opposite direction. Both would take her (Guro's) name as last name, although keeping Gregor's as a middle name. Their reasoning was twofold - she had a special family name that she was eager to keep, while he had an immigrant name that he wanted to lose.

Many respondents cited the perceived necessity of having the same name for all family members. This was seen as important because: 'you feel more part of the family unit if you've all got the same name' (Catriona). In both national samples a common surname symbolising family as a unit was primarily associated with having children, not the couple as such. So, for Jane, the wedding 'means I get the same name as my children' or as Darren explained, his wedding would mean that 'Mummy can have the same surname. And, it means we can also have another baby afterwards'. In Norway Rita and her partner Rune wanted children, so a common name would mean 'we can call us family'. But in contrast to the English respondents this common family name would include her existing surname as middle name, otherwise she would 'lose a part of herself'. Eirin had been struggling between the 'feminist me' and her husband who wanted them to have the same name. But this was 'not urgent at least not until you get have children and have to decide their names...then it is okay to have the same name'. Brita also had similar problems. She would probably change her name if they were to have children, but she was very fond of her last name and was afraid of 'losing a bit of myself'

A family identity is seen as based on a shared name, which shows that the family 'belong' together. But changing name can also be used to reverse this belonging. In both countries a few female respondents had changed their name because they thought their name was 'boring' or, as we have seen for Alison, a way of burying a painful past and displaying a new, fresh identity. So for Shirley 'losing [her surname] isn't a very big

deal for me' because the name belonged to her stepfather with whom she was not close. Similarly Frida had taken her husband's 'exclusive' and 'nice' surname. Nonetheless she kept her 'common surname' (as her husband put it) as the family middle name as a link to her father and to 'hold on to what is mine'.

When the family do not have a common name, this supposedly leads to 'confusing the children' as Michelle claimed. She explained:

'I know there's a woman at work that's got her own surname and then her kids have got her husband's surname and it's all a bit complicated.'

Or as Claire put it: 'the kids won't know whether they're coming or going and the teachers don't know [...] I think it's a bit confusing'. This echoed the responses from other English participants, who saw the use of different surnames within a family as problematic, confusing and difficult. This view was not echoed, however, by the children with different surnames interviewed by Davies (2011); they were rarely confused by the situation and were well able to identify family members, connections and disconnections. This suggests that this 'confusion' is an adult concern - rather than 'confusing the children', surname non-conformity creates adult discomfort because of normative and moral disruption.

Conveying the 'meaning of one's actions' to others, and gaining their understanding that these actions mean good family, is not a seamless, uncontested process. In particular, new and adapted arrangements must be accepted and validated by others. This made adopting the husband's

name all the more likely; creating family unity through a joint name, or using the women's name, was rarely considered in the English sample. Indeed, such alternatives may be morally suspect: two participants suggested that women who do not adopt their husband's surnames are actually less committed, or the relationship is seen as temporary. They were not able to successfully display proper family, whatever their actual practices. As Hermione explained: 'me Auntie's married and she's kept her own name and I can- it doesn't feel as permanent I think'. Zoe, still single, echoed this sentiment:

'I think like also if you've kept your name it be kind of like saying I'm not really that committed to you.'

If, for these English participants, taking the husband's name represents belonging and connectedness with family and is a way of doing and displaying family, then keeping the women's name must be the opposite: a rejection of connections, commitment and new family identity. This feeling was not directly expressed in the Norwegian sample, probably because of the widespread practice of using the wife's surname as a secondary, middle, name.

How does this more active use of marital name change connect with the three conceptual approaches outlined earlier? For individualisation theory, these respondents might perhaps be the classic reflexive agents creating their own biographies – the only trouble is they have chosen tradition, not 'new ways of living'. This approach confuses what people can potentially do with what they actually do. The new institutional approach has little to say on this active use of tradition – perhaps these respondents show in more detail how institutional isomorphism works.

But it is the bricolage approach that deals with these cases most convincingly in its emphasis on adaption from tradition as a resource in handling new situations, and its value in gaining legitimacy. Cognitive and social energy are minimised, difficult calculations and negotiations with others about what is proper family are avoided.

*Prioritising individual identity: rejecting tradition*

Few respondents in Britain rejected conventional name changing practices altogether, although more did so in Norway. Among the English respondents recently married Josie and Mike both wanted to keep their original surnames. They had completely broken with British tradition and created a compound name by deed poll. Symbolically, the female surname was placed first. Lauren (a feminist academic) did not anticipate marrying and while she could see the appeal of sharing a family name with partner and children this was 'something I definitely wouldn't do'. The alternative of a double-barrelled name 'just seems sort of really tacky'. Rebecca was more hesitant:

'I think I would like to keep me own name ... I need to be me and I think like I wouldn't want to lose who I am. It's took me so long to make myself to like who I am... I think I probably would like to keep my own name.'

Continuity of identity was the most important consideration for Rebecca, and some Norwegian respondents put this more strongly. For Anna 'my name is to be my name, I want to keep it. And be who I am', Furthermore she would feel 'claustrophobic' if incorporated into her in-laws family's name. Caroline felt the same:

‘I am who I am, so I have no need to change my name. I have an identity feeling to my own name that I want to continue having’  
Hanna emphasised individual choice, giving primacy to ‘the nicest name’  
She went on:

‘it should not be automatic for the woman to take the name of the man, I think it's nice that we have come so far that you to a large extent can choose the name you wish to choose’

Some others in both countries, with what we might call a ‘practical feminism’, kept their original name for work or other practical purposes.

Two Norwegian women respondents articulated more explicit feminist objections. For Anna name change

‘says a lot about the patriarchal culture we have had, that it is always women who, as a rule take the man's name’

Oda held similar views, if expressed more colourfully - conventional practice ‘sucks’. She criticised women who changed their names for not thinking about what a name means, there was a reason why men do not change, and she criticised men for continuing the “weird” practice of imposing their names on other people without being willing to change their own.

The lack of such an alternative narrative for many other participants allows the patriarchal practices of women’s self-negation, and symbolic male dominance, to leak from past tradition into contemporary family. Even if alternative notions are available, they have to be successfully negotiated. Cathy gave a striking demonstration. Taking a feminist viewpoint she refused marriage, instead organising an unconventional

'non-wedding' to celebrate commitment to her continuing live apart partner. But nonetheless the centrepiece of this event was traditional name change legitimated through a narrative of romance: Cathy publicly presented her partner with a deed poll whereby she had adopted his name. As she explained:

'It's like a symbolic thing...Internationally recognised. So I wanted to do that as a gesture of my love, really, my commitment so I did that as a surprise. I mean, he was very, very pleased about that ... I never thought I would ever change my name.'

The three conceptual approaches react in different ways. For individualisation theory, at last there are reflexive women discursively breaking free from tradition and creating their own biographies. The trouble is, statistically, they are few in number. New institutionalism presents a mirror image; these are women who have somehow escaped institutional scripts and isomorphism. From a bricolage perspective, these respondents are discursively critical of tradition and, with access to an alternative narrative, can formulate alternatives. However this examination is only likely to be partial. As we saw with Cathy, other elements of tradition will remain unexamined and reproduced.

## **Conclusion**

Nearly all the English women respondents were going to change their name on marriage or had already done so. Some welcomed losing their name. Most English men simply assumed their wives would take their name and that they would keep their own. In some case marriage was conditional on this change. Only two unmarried women intended to

keep their own names, while just one couple chose a joint, hyphenated name. Not a single English respondent talked about taking the women's surname as family name. This picture fits in with evidence from the 2016 national survey discussed above.

Despite a pervasive culture of gender equality, the majority of Norwegian women were also going to, or had, taken their husband's surname. However, most kept their own name as a secondary, middle, surname so as to preserve their own identity. Furthermore, in 7 of the 21 couples women were name 'keepers', and a few male partners placed their own name in the secondary, middle, and position. There was also greater scrutiny in the Norwegian sample, with more expression of ambivalence, negotiation and even regret. This suggests some movement from the latest survey evidence from 2003 in which female name change was dominant. While most men expected to keep their own name, wives are largely left to make their own decision. However, we might expect this more democratic and gender equal behaviour in a sample of young, mostly well-educated and middle class respondents living in cities, as suggested by Noack and Wiik (2008) in their survey analysis. What we can conclude however is that an alternative practice to simply changing to the husband's name or keeping their own is available to Norwegian brides – placing their own name as a middle, secondary, surname.

How successful were the three explanatory approaches in accounting for these contrasting mixtures of tradition and new? With a focus firmly on

detraditionalisation, individualisation theory can only see those women who simply expect to change their surname on marriage – the majority - as laggards, stuck in tradition for some reason. It is particularly impotent in explaining why some women who change their surname apparently choose to do so. Those few women who reflexively decide to keep their original name fit this model best, although these remain a minority in both countries. New institutionalism is the other side of the coin. This approach is more convincing in accounting for the habitual agency of low or non-reflexive name changers who just follow tradition, but it is unable to say much about how some women escape institutional limits, take alternative courses of action, or actively use name change tradition in displaying family. These two approaches remind us of the ‘problem of structure and agency’ in social science respectively emphasising either the creative power of agents or the determining power of structure. The bricolage approach was the most adaptable of the three. This was particularly suited to explaining why and how people can actively use name changing traditions in managing family identity and display. But in addition this approach provides explanations of women’s more habitual acceptance of the tradition of changing their surname on marriage, as well as why some might keep their own name. This relative explanatory success depends on the basic idea that people use tradition in differing ways in adapting to some new situation. Tradition might provide an easy way forward, but it too needs adapting in the new situation, and this leaves space for discursive examination and invention. Similarly institutions do not only govern behaviour and impose tradition, but are themselves created in tackling change through using or even inventing

tradition. Marital surname practices in Britain and Norway are neither traditional nor new, but are combinations of the two.

## Notes

1. A weighted online survey about wedding traditions, carried out between 29.12.2016 and 3. 1. 2017 by Opinium for the London Mint. 927 of the 2003 respondents were married. The survey is not publicly available, but London Mint gave access to the authors.

2. Notably in Spain 77% of married women kept their own name in 1995. In Italy and Belgium joint names are most common (see Valetas 2001). In Quebec a 1981 law makes it mandatory for married women to retain their own name, as does a 1983 law in Greece. Both have excited opposition from wives wishing to take their husband's name

3. See for example the UN Gender Inequality Index and the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap.

4. In Sweden the proportion of brides taking the husband's name declined from 77% in 2003 to 64% in 2013. Unfortunately, Statistics Norway does not publish aggregate data.

5. Although marriage laws were in general more gender equal (Melby et al 2006).

6. A YouGov poll of name preferences, N= 1581 (816 female), weighted, carried out in September 2016. The survey has no information on outcomes. [www.yougov.co.uk](http://www.yougov.co.uk)

7. Two of the authors, Emily Garbutt, who helped with the Kent sub-sample and Ragnhild Ekelund who undertook the Norway sample. All interviewee names are pseudonyms. Translation from Norwegian by authors.

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