With This Name I Thee Wed: Women's Marital Naming Choices

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Abstract: We explore women's marital naming choices using the 2004 American Community Survey (ACS). Six percent of native married women had non-conventional surnames. "Non-conventional" surnames include hyphenated surnames, two surnames, and women who kept their own surname at marriage. Among the characteristics associated with non-conventional surname use include: younger age, higher educational attainment, being other than White non-Hispanic, a large age difference between spouses, and being foreign born. Women with a master's degree were 2.8 times more likely than those who had less than a bachelor's to use a non-conventional surname, while women with a professional degree were 5.0 times more likely, and women with a doctorate were 9.8 times more likely.

Introduction

General observation suggests that most women take their husband's surname at marriage. However, some women choose to abandon this naming norm and retain their last name. Little is known about the prevalence of non-conventional name choice or the characteristics of women making this decision. Although we are unable to identify the origin of women's last names, whether they are birth surnames or names used in a previous marriage, we can contribute to the growing body of research by adding new information about the prevalence of non-conventional name choice, and the characteristics of the women who choose non-conventional surnames.

Until fairly recently, there were no laws in the United States mandating either that women had to take their husband's surname, or that they were permitted to retain their birth surname. In the 1970s, some states passed laws stating that married women were allowed to use their birth surnames, while other states passed laws requiring married women to take their husband's surnames (MacDougall 1973; Mead 1973; Schroeder 1986). By 1975, it was legal for women in all states to keep their birth surname at marriage (Hoffnung 2006).

As women have gained increasing legal and social rights, they are better able to form their own public identities and gain greater control over their lives. One indicator that may reflect these changes is the choices women make about what surname to use after they marry. Retaining or altering one's name may be more than a social convention, indicating changes in the way women view their family and public identities. As women delay marriage, increase their educational attainment, and participate in greater proportions in the labor force, they are more likely to establish a public identity prior to creating a family identity through marriage and childbearing. By using a large, nationally representative data set such as the American Community Survey, we can provide a detailed look at the characteristics of married women, comparing those who use non-conventional surnames with those who do not.

Our objective is to examine how married women who keep their surnames at marriage, hyphenate their surname with their husband's surname, or use two surnames (non-conventional surnames) differ from married women who take their husband's surname at marriage (conventional surnames). Unlike prior research, this project will use nationally representative data and will consider more detailed categories of age differences and educational attainment, and test hypotheses based on prior research.

Data

We used data from the internal file of the 2004 American Community Survey (ACS). It was the largest and most recent sample containing our variables of interest. The 2004 ACS surveyed a national sample of housing units, both occupied and vacant. Data were collected in a total of 1,240 counties out of the 3,141 counties in the United States. The sample was designed to provide estimates of housing and socioeconomic characteristics for the nation, all states, most areas with a population of 250,000 or more, and selected areas of 65,000 or more.

The 2004 ACS interviewed a total of 534,383 households. Data were collected continuously throughout the year using a combination of mail-out/mail-back questionnaires, Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI), and Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI). Each month a unique national sample of addresses received an ACS questionnaire. Addresses that did not respond were telephoned during the second month of collection if a phone number for the address was available. Personal visits were conducted during the third and last month of data collection for a subsample of the remaining nonresponding units. The 2004 ACS achieved an overall survey response rate, calculated as the initially weighted estimate of interviews divided by the initially weighted estimate of cases eligible to be interviewed, of 93.1 percent[1].

[1] For a detailed explanation, see the ACS Quality Measures website: <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/acs-php/quality_measures_response_2005.php>.

Sample

Our sample included:

-women
-15 years and older
-currently married

We looked separately at native women because other countries and cultures adhere to different naming patterns. For example, spouses kept both of their parents' last names as their last names in some Latin American countries or opted to use their birth name on a day-to-day basis (Johnson and Scheuble 1995). By restricting our sample to native women, we were less likely to encounter this cultural variation in marital naming.

The unweighted number of married women with spouse present, both native and foreign born was 288,536, of whom 251,358 were native.

Rules for defining non-conventional names

Listed below were rules we used to determine whether a surname is non-conventional or conventional. There were 20 characters in the ACS last name field.

Names were conventional (same) when:

-Woman's name field was exactly the same as her husband's, regardless of the length of the surname

-The first 9 characters of the husband and wife's last name were exactly the same (5 percent of women with the same name as their husband had a surname of 10 or more characters)

-Husband and wife's surname fields differed by 0, 1 or 2 characters and the length of the 2 fields differed by 0 or 1 character

We believed that most of these minor character variations were a result of human error in writing the correct letters on the paper forms or keying errors when capturing the data during the collection or processing phase, and these surnames should still be categorized as the same. If

the wife and husband's surnames were the same, we cannot tell if this was the husband's family name, the wife's family name, or a name they had agreed upon which is different from both of the family names.

Names were non-conventional (different) when:

-Female surname contained a hyphen (e.g., Smith-Jones)

-Her name field contained his name, and had a space and an additional name

-Her name field was different from his name field and did not fall into the above categories

Other:

-Observations with suspicious answers (e.g., man of the house) were tabulated separately, and were not included in the multivariate model. This category included cases in which one or both names were missing.

-Paternal suffixes (e.g., Jr, Sr, III) were looked at separately to determine if the husband and wife's surnames differed, and grouped accordingly with those who had conventional or non-conventional names

Literature Review

There was a small body of literature examining the number and characteristics of married women using a non-conventional surname. One of the most widely cited articles was based on a poll conducted for *American Demographics*. Poll results showed that 10 percent of married women in the U.S. used a surname that was different from their husband's (Brightman 1994). After looking at education, age, and income, the article concluded that younger and more educated wives were those most likely to use a non-conventional surname.

Complementing this research, Goldin and Shim used the *New York Times* wedding announcements, Harvard alumni records, and Massachusetts birth records to estimate the

fraction of women retaining their surname at marriage (Goldin and Shim 2004). The authors found that about 20 percent of all U.S. college graduate women in 2001 used a non-conventional surname upon marriage, up from 2 to 4 percent around 1975. The authors also found that a "Ph.D. or M.D. is associated with a reduction of about 25 percentage points in the probability of changing one's name" using the Harvard Class of 1980 data set (Goldin and Shim 2004). Unlike Brightman, Goldin and Shim did not find that younger wives were more likely to use a different surname than their husbands. Rather, brides in their mid-twenties had a 12-to-14-percentage-point lower probability of keeping their surname at marriage compared to brides older than 30 years in 1991 (Goldin and Shim 2004). However, the sample of wedding announcements in the *New York Times* was not representative of all marriages in the country.

Other researchers have also used the *New York Times* wedding announcements. Hoffnung pointed out that in Goldin and Shim's analysis, the authors assumed that announcements not specifying the bride's surname meant that the bride took the groom's surname. However, brides may have refrained from declaring their use of a non-conventional surname in the newspaper so as to not offend the groom's family, leading to a conservative estimate of the number of women with a non-conventional surname (Hoffnung 2006). In Hoffnung's analysis, she used announcements from 1987 to 2002 with a stated name choice. Twenty-nine percent of brides kept their birth surname or hyphenated, while 71 percent took their husband's surname. Like Goldin and Shim, Hoffnung found that brides with a non-conventional surname had a higher level of education than brides with conventional surnames.

Johnson and Scheuble (1995) analyzed marital naming in two generations. The data they used were longitudinal and were nationally representative at the beginning of the panel. Their sample included 929 currently married adults in the main sample and 180 married adults in the offspring sample. The sample of offspring was based on follow-up interviews with married couples that were still married 12 years after the initial interview, so the sample, besides being small, was not representative of the nation as a whole. The authors found that only 1.4 percent of women in the

main sample and 4.7 percent of the offspring chose a non-conventional surname (Johnson and Scheuble 1995). Much like Goldin and Shim, Johnson and Scheuble found that women who married at later ages and had more education and were more likely to use a non-conventional surname.

Results

Ninety-three (93.3+/-0.1) percent of native married women with spouse present had the same surname as their husbands[2]. A total of 6 (6.4+/-0.1) percent had a non-conventional surname, with the largest component of these having a different surname than their husband, rather than hyphenating their surname with his or using both surnames. Less than one-half of one (0.1+/-0.1) percent of the women had a husband who reported a paternal suffix. Many of these men had a different surname than their wives, contrary to what Goldin and Shim (2004) found. Less than 1 (0.4+/-0.1) percent of the answers given were unusable.

There were about 3 million--6 percent (6.4+/-0.1)--native married women with spouse present who used a different surname than their husbands. This varied by age. While 3 (3.2+/-0.1) percent of native married women age 60 and over used a different surname than their husbands, 8 (7.6+/-0.2) percent of those age 30 to 44, and 9 (9.0+/-0.3) percent of those under 30 used a different surname than their husbands. Some research has found non-conventional name choice to vary by age (Brightman 1994), but other research does not support the idea that younger women were more likely to use non-conventional surnames (Goldin and Shim 2004; Johnson and Scheuble 1995).

Educational attainment showed a pattern of an increasing percentage of women using a different surname at higher levels. Women with advanced degrees had a higher percentage who used a non-conventional surname. Advanced degrees included women with a master's, professional, or

[2] All comparative statements have undergone statistical testing and are significant at the 90-percent confidence level unless otherwise noted. The margin of error appears in parentheses behind the estimate. When added to and subtracted from the estimate, the margin of error represents the 90-percent confidence interval.

doctoral degree. Twelve (12.1+/-0.5) percent of those with a master's degree, 21 (21.0+/-1.0) percent of those with a professional degree, and 33 (32.8+/-2.0) percent of those with a doctoral degree used a different surname. These women may also have married later and may have used their birth surname in professional life, which may make it more likely that they would choose to keep it after they marry (Cooney and Uhlenberg 1989).

Variations among race and Hispanic origin groups presumably reflected cultural naming practices to some extent. Six (5.8+/-0.1) percent of White alone women used a non-conventional surname, one of the lowest percentages for any race group.

For most married couples, the husband and wife were close to each other in age; on average the man was about 2.5 years older (Kreider and Fields 2002). A higher percentage of women in couples where the wife was older and couples where the husband was at least 10 years older used a non-conventional surname. Eleven (11.2+/-0.6) percent of women who were 5 years older than their husbands used a non-conventional surname. Second marriages were more likely to include spouses with a wider difference in age (Kreider and Fields 2002), so it may be that women who entered second marriages, or marrying a man who was previously married, were more likely to use a non-conventional surname.

Fifteen (14.9+/-0.7) percent of women with ancestry in Spanish, Latin American, or other Hispanic countries used a non-conventional surname, as did 14 (14.1+/-1.4) percent of women with Asian, Pacific Island, or Australian ancestry[3].

In summary, we found that married women were more likely to use a non-conventional surname if they were: younger, had at least a bachelor's degree, were older than their husbands, were at least 10 years younger than their husbands, or with ancestry in Spanish, Latin American, or other Hispanic countries and Asian, Pacific Islands, or Australian ancestry.

[3] The above estimates are not statistically significantly different.

Logistic Regression Models Predicting Whether Married Women Used a Non-Conventional Surname

In this section, we considered multivariate models predicting whether a married woman used a non-conventional surname. The models included only native married women. Independent variables included wife's age, educational attainment, race and Hispanic origin, region, the age difference between wife and husband, whether the spouses were of the same race group, wife's occupation, and the ratio of the wife's income to her husband's income.

High levels of educational attainment were strongly associated with the use of a non-conventional surname. Women with a professional degree were 5.0 (+/-0.4) times and women with a doctorate were 9.8 (+/-1.1) times more likely to use a non-conventional surname than women with less than a bachelor's degree.

As was apparent in the bivariate results, younger women were more likely to use a non-conventional surname. Women age 15 to 29 were 2.6 (+/-0.2) times more likely to use a non-conventional surname than women age 60 and over.

Women who were 5 or more years older than their husbands were 2.3 (+/-0.2) times more likely than women who were within 1 year of their husband's age or who had husbands who were 2 to 9 years older than they were. Since we do not have marital history information on this file, we cannot determine whether women in marriages with wider age gaps were more often in second or third marriages, and perhaps already had children who shared their previous last name.

Conclusion

The multivariate model showed that educational attainment was strongly associated with the use of non-conventional surnames. While prior research indicated that women with advanced degrees were more likely to use a non-conventional surname, using ACS data, we were able to differentiate among different types of advanced degrees, showing that women with doctoral

degrees were the most likely to use non-conventional surnames. As previous research has also found (Brightman 1994), younger women were more likely to use a non-conventional surname.

Most samples used in prior research were too small to consider differences by race and Hispanic origin. We found that all groups were more likely to use non-conventional surnames than White alone women or White alone, non-Hispanic women. One advantage of using such a large sample was that we were able to examine characteristics such as the age gap between a husband and a wife. We found that when there was a relatively large age gap between spouses, especially if the wife was older, the woman was more likely to use a non-conventional surname.

This paper provided an updated look at marital naming practices with a large, nationally representative data set. Many of the findings confirmed what prior research had shown. The size of the ACS data set also allowed a more detailed look at the association between advanced educational attainment and marital naming choice.

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