

## **Identity and naming practices in British marriage and civil partnerships**

Lucy Jones, Sara Mills, Laura L. Paterson<sup>1</sup>, Georgina Turner & Laura Coffey-Glover<sup>2</sup>

### **ABSTRACT**

This article demonstrates the continued prevalence of traditional, heteronormative practices regarding marriage and naming practices in Britain, and also considers the complex choices made by same-sex couples who marry in relation to whether there are any benefits in changing their surname. The study draws on data from an online survey of 1,000 UK respondents, and reveals that it continues to be viewed as more ‘normal’ for a woman to take her husband’s surname in a heterosexual union than for her to make any other choice. Whilst other options (such as the woman retaining the surname given to her by her parents, for instance) are often considered in relation to heterosexual marriage, these continue to be seen as a deviation from the norm. We find that the role of tradition is critical to heterosexual women’s decisions over what to do with their surname, whether they follow the culturally expected route or consciously deviate from it. Same-sex couples are broadly perceived to have comparably more freedom than heterosexuals regarding their names, and here we analyse whether this is the case. Through qualitative critical analysis of the discursive responses of those completing our survey, and some quantitative discussion of the data, we demonstrate that heteronormative assumptions about a woman’s role in a heterosexual relationship have continued salience and that this leads to a conscious and often difficult negotiation of her own identity as both an individual and a wife.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Civil partnerships were made available to same-sex couples in Britain in 2005 and, since 2012, same-sex couples in England and Wales have shared the same marriage rights as mixed-sex couples; marriage is now legally defined as a union between two people, rather than specifically between a woman and a man. Marriage as an institution has also changed enormously in the past 50 years, with divorce rates increasing<sup>3</sup> and more couples getting married after the birth of their children, or not at all. Despite this, there are certain traditions which – for heterosexual couples, at least – seem to have been retained; many brides still choose to wear a white gown or be ‘given away’ by their father, for example, and many women change their surname to that of their husband.

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<sup>2</sup> Together, the authors represent the Discourses of Marriage Research Group (<http://discoursesofmarriage.blogspot.co.uk/>)

<sup>3</sup> ONS (2013) figures suggest that circa 42% of marriages are expected to end in divorce.

There have been debates about the changing of a woman's surname to that of her new husband's from at least the 19th century, when Lucy Stone campaigned for the right to retain her surname on marriage.<sup>4</sup> The law on *couverture*, which meant that a woman became the possession of her husband together with her assets and capital, was not revised in the UK until the 1930s. Goldin and Shim (2004:143) note that it remained the norm until the 1970s for women, even those who were 'highly educated and eminent', to take their husband's surname. Feminist movements in the 1970s and 1980s led to some rejection of this practice, however, as taking a husband's surname came to be seen as an everyday indication of the power of patriarchy.<sup>5</sup> Feminist campaigns (see Moran, 2004) questioned the value and benefit of marriage for women generally, and the changing of one's name specifically. Despite this, the changing of one's name upon marriage has more recently been somewhat normalised - Thwaites (2012: 104), for instance, found that 74% of British women who were married to men (of a sample of 102) had changed their name - and the practice is neither universally accepted nor rejected by feminists (Mills, 2012). Some of the most recent debates on women's surname choices upon marriage were sparked, for example, when international lawyer Amal Clooney changed her surname to her new husband's in 2014. Reactions to this name change ranged from firm endorsement through discussions of choice to complete rejection (see Mills, 2015), showing that the issue of surname change remains a topical one.

Here, we explore this issue using the results of a survey of 1,000 respondents from around the UK. The article outlines the main findings of this survey, revealing apparent trends amongst both same-sex and mixed-sex couples regarding naming strategies upon becoming married or civil partnered. We also analyse the narrative responses to our questions to draw a number of conclusions regarding the symbolic significance of a shared surname and, more specifically, the role of tradition within marriage and the family today, for same-sex and opposite sex couples. First, we outline the theoretical approach taken in our analysis, one inspired by approaches within critical discourse analysis, feminist linguistics, and queer theory. We present the methodological decisions made and the implications of these on the data collected, before outlining the quantitative results and moving onto a discourse analysis of responses.

## 2. THEORETICAL CONTEXT

We draw on Fairclough (1989), who argues that powerful ideologies are legitimised and reproduced through the linguistic and cultural conventions that we often take for granted. From

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<sup>4</sup> Before the 19th century it was fairly common among the aristocracy for males to change their surnames to that of a woman that they were marrying who was richer or from a more powerful family than their own.

<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, in an indication of asymmetry, the term 'maiden name' applies exclusively to women and makes implicit links to notions of innocence, youth, and virginity, none of which are automatically presumed of grooms-to-be.

this perspective, heterosexual women being called upon to change their name to their husband's may reinforce patriarchal ideologies surrounding the family; these ideologies are reinforced through multiple institutions, including those of the law, the church, the media and the government.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, as Althusser (1994) would argue, such ideologies are frequently called upon by such institutions as common-sense representations in a process of *interpellation* and, as we strive to be recognised as certain types of subject, we either submit to or challenge these ideologies. Decisions made upon getting married in relation to our surnames, then, lead us to either engage critically with these ideologies or accept them as common sense.

As analysts, we must examine the ways in which these 'common sense' ideas are produced. Crucially, to fully understand the ways in which discourse can both shape and reflect broader social structures, we must consider the context in which they are produced (Fairclough, 1992; Weiss & Wodak, 2003; Wodak and Chilton, 2005). Critical discourse analysis (CDA), often considers specific texts (such as newspaper articles or advertisements) which are seen to reproduce pervasive ideologies surrounding gender, class, race, etc., due in part to their production by those with power (e.g. van Dijk 1993, Weiss and Wodak 2003). Through the systematic analysis of linguistic features in these texts, it is possible to show how particular ideologies are produced and sustained.<sup>7</sup> Such work is motivated by a political desire to expose the sometimes subtle or implicit ideological messages underlying texts produced by those with cultural or economic power. Here, drawing on the ethos of CDA, we produce a discourse analysis of responses to questions about surnames and identify the linguistic means by which the respondents take particular stances towards naming strategies. We argue that all social actors have the potential to both reproduce and challenge dominant ideologies, since discourse is key to the reproduction and transformation of social identities, social relationships and systems of knowledge and belief (Fairclough 1992: 64); we provide in this article a critical account of that discourse.

Our approach is informed by feminist CDA and queer linguistics. The central concern of feminist CDA, according to Lazar (2005), is to expose and challenge that which reproduces dominant discourses of patriarchy, and that which reproduces harmful gender ideologies. However, we extend this approach by integrating queer theory into our analysis, focusing on discourses that serve to marginalise those who do not meet the heteronormative ideal and normalise those who reflect dominant ideals of gender and sexuality (Motschenbacher and Stegu 2013: 520). Rather than view discourses as reproducing a *patriarchal* social order alone, then, we argue that patriarchy is one aspect of a broader *heteronormative* cultural structure. A primary focus on patriarchal structures and discourses may arguably lead to analyses which do not fully

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<sup>6</sup> See Paterson (2015) for comments on the asymmetry of UK deed poll procedures.

<sup>7</sup> Peterson's (2010) careful use of CDA to reveal the normative, homophobic ideologies underpinning the American organisation 'Family Research Council' is an excellent example of this.

explore and critique underlying assumptions about women and men (such as their representation as heterosexual, monogamous, gender normative people). By taking a queer approach, we actively engage in analysis which seeks to reveal these heteronormative assumptions. Thus, we focus not only on how traditions of surname changing positions women as, for example, the property of their husband, but on how those traditions contribute to the normalising of mixed-sex relationships and the othering or idealising of same-sex ones. Ideologies surrounding gender and sexuality are particularly likely to be found within conventions associated with the institution of marriage, of course, given its traditional role as a heterosexual union and its fundamentally patriarchal history.

Of course, that the option to change one's name upon marriage even exists also symbolises an expected change in identity. It allows an individual (traditionally a woman) to articulate their status, in terms of their private relationship with another person, in a public and institutionally-recognised way. In articulating one's familial status in this way, it may be argued that an individual engages in an act of identity (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985), or that a surname change – specifically, taking on the name of a partner or altering one's name to include theirs – is indexical of marriage, a culturally-recognised tool of categorisation. It may be expected, particularly in relation to heterosexual women, that a name change occurs to indicate a change in identification – from single person to married person. As will be shown in our data, however, not all married people associate their change in status to a change in identity, and not all people change their name. Indeed, as empirical work with American women has shown, for many people a name change would be akin to a *loss* of identity (Laskowski 2010; Sheuble and Johnson 2007<sup>8</sup>).

As social actors, however, we are framed culturally by the broader categories we are seen as being aligned with (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 594); to be a woman in a heterosexual marriage is largely seen as being a 'wife', and a name change (preceded by 'Mrs') has long been perceived as *normal* in Western society. Of course, the very institutional nature of marriage has reinforced this; in the United States until the 1970s, for example, it was a legal requirement for a woman to share her husband's name in order to engage in activities such as voting (Emens 2007). The historical tradition of surname change, we argue, means that individuals and couples are forced to make some sort of a decision; even deciding *not* to change one's name may be seen as a conscious choice and, therefore, an identity move. The cultural ramifications of the various surname options available to married people, and the inevitable links with identity, are therefore considered carefully in this article.

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<sup>8</sup> We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for directing us to these works.

### 3. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The survey was created and hosted using the online questionnaire tool [SurveyMonkey](#), and was live for four weeks in September/October 2014. A link to the survey was shared via press releases from our home institutions, our personal/professional social media feeds and our group blog, in comments posted beneath relevant news articles, and in a BBC regional radio slot (with corresponding web page) that referred to our work.<sup>9</sup> Online surveys are susceptible to some level of self-selection bias (Wright, 2006), and we found that most of our respondents were women (83.9%), with the overwhelming majority of respondents (73.5%) identifying as heterosexual.<sup>10</sup> Given that naming upon marriage historically and predominantly has been an issue for heterosexual women, the dominance of these participants is unsurprising. We do not claim, however, to be providing a representative picture of naming choices in the UK; what we do have is a large number of responses, from which we wish to make some claims about prevalent ideologies circulating in Britain today.

Questions<sup>11</sup> were posed to collect demographic data (relationship status, gender, sexual identity and age), with free-text fields used to collect responses about personal choices regarding surnames and titles for self, significant other(s) and children, and anecdotes about the choices of (unnamed) friends and family. All respondents were also asked what they felt the options available to same-sex couples with regard to naming on marriage are. Of the demographic questions, only 'relationship status' was mandatory (in order to set the framing of subsequent questions), and offered respondents a dropdown set of choices. Gender and sexuality were open-format questions, enabling respondents to self-identify using their own terms. There is not space here to develop a full discussion of respondents' choices in this regard, but it is worth noting that while a number of responses seemed to evidence a certain level of heteronormativity (i.e. >6.2% of respondents appeared uncertain about what 'sexuality' referred to, and entered their gender identity in response to this question), some others took the opportunity to personalise their responses (e.g. "Human"; "Kinsey 1.5"; "Flexibly straight"), demonstrating a rejection of binary labels.

Given that the questions in the survey concerned people's opinions on naming choices, we frame our linguistic analysis of the data in terms of stance. Broadly conceived, 'stance' refers to

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<sup>9</sup> Since the work was shared in this way, survey completions spiked in response to particular announcements rather than trickling steadily in; we have a disproportionate number of respondents from the north west of England, for instance, because a news item about the survey shared on the University of Liverpool's website attracted a lot of attention, and seemed to spread by word of mouth very rapidly at that point.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that, though we asked participants to categorise their gender identity and sexual identity, some participants chose not to respond to these questions.

<sup>11</sup> The questions used in this survey are listed on a blog post written by the group, and can be found here: <http://discoursesofmarriage.blogspot.co.uk/2016/02/surname-strategies-results.html>

‘lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgements or commitment concerning the propositional content of a message’ (Biber and Finnegan, 1989: 92). Stance can be indexed via a number of different linguistic and discoursal strategies, but the analysis that follows focuses on the following features: lexical connotations, modality choices, stance verbs expressing feelings and attitudes, and agency. Through analysing the different strategies of stance-taking, we show how ideologies of heteronormativity and patriarchy are negotiated and oriented to in the respondents’ discourse.

#### 4. ANALYSIS

Within this section, we group our analyses of stance under four headings which outline the main reasons given for changing or retaining one’s name upon marriage: following or rejecting tradition; being united; maintaining independence; and aiding the general administration of family life. We then follow this with a final analysis section, in which we analyse participants’ thoughts about the surname options of same-sex couples who get married. Underpinning the four aforementioned themes, as stated above, is the notion of identity. Indeed, the identity work that naming practices achieve is signalled in the high frequency of the term ‘identity’ in our data, occurring 142 times in total across the dataset and holding statistical significance (compared to with the British National Corpus [BNC]<sup>12</sup>). For this reason, we argue that whatever the decisions participants make about their surname choices upon marriage, the stances they take enable the construction of identity in terms of how they label themselves and how others perceive them. Below, we show how our respondents position themselves in relation to marital expectations – in some cases, claiming the identity of ‘traditionalist’, for example.

##### 4.1 Tradition

The concept of tradition was a dominant factor influencing people’s surname choices, with ‘tradition’ being one of the most frequent lexical words in the dataset (occurring 89 times in its various word-forms). Although we did not identify a pattern of diachronic change in respondents’ naming choices (Paterson, in preparation), some heterosexual female respondents sought to place taking their husband’s name as the default preference and within a temporal context: “In 1982, it was very uncommon NOT to change your name, and I just went with the tradition without really giving it any consideration” (respondent’s emphasis<sup>13</sup>); “At the time it was normal practice to take the future husband’s name”; “Being married in the seventies it was still traditional for most women to change their surname to that of the husband”. Although married and divorced heterosexual men who answered this question were more likely to cite

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<sup>12</sup> This means that the word ‘identity’ appears statistically more frequently than we would expect it to in general English, and is therefore particular to our dataset.

<sup>13</sup> Note that all responses are presented here unedited.

tradition without qualification, some also referred to the time of their marriage – “Unusual not to change the wife’s name in those days” – in explaining the fact that their wives adopted their names. Many of our respondents who married more recently, or were not yet married, also cited tradition as a relevant factor in explaining the decisions they would make, however.

Often, these (heterosexual female) respondents describe taking their husband’s surname as something that happened primarily because it did not occur to them *not* to do so, clearly perceiving the move not as a *decision* but simply the norm. For example, one respondent said “I didn’t even think about it really. We just did the traditional thing and I changed my name to his” – note how the presence of the modal adverbs ‘even’ and ‘just’ emphasise the lack of engagement in a process of decision-making. Among married or previously married heterosexual women and men, this formulation appears often: “We *just stuck with* the traditional way of doing it”; “I *just went along with* the ‘normal’”; “*Just* went the traditional route” (our emphasis). A lack of certainty expressed via modality choices is present in other responses, such as “Realistically, tradition most probably” and “Tradition I suppose”; these suggest a lack of investment in naming choices, with the use of the stance adverbials ‘realistically’ and ‘I suppose’ implying that this is the first time that the respondents have appraised their actions. Responses containing some formulation of “I had no reason not to” were also frequent, and are indicative of the extent to which these respondents naturalised tradition as the agent in this process. These responses indicate that not all married persons view name-changing as an act of identity; it is seen as inevitable that the change takes place and therefore they remove their own agency from the process. Yet, importantly, an action *has* been taken – one which may be interpreted, in line with broader cultural structures and expectations – as indicative of taking on a new identity as ‘wife’.

A number of women cited their partner’s expectations as being more influential than their own desires: “My husband is traditional and felt strongly that I should take his name,” says one recently-married respondent who, in contrast to her partner, “did not have a strong opinion either way.” Ambivalence is common in responses from people who did not identify with binary gender and/or sexuality categories, too, such as “I don’t think I am likely to get married, but if I did I feel fairly ambivalent about [it] so it would probably have a lot to do with my partner’s wishes”. The influence of partners in our respondents’ decisions about their surnames is also reflected in the prominence of ‘husband’ (239 instances) and ‘partner’ (133) in the data: both are in the top 20 most frequent lexical words in our data, and they are both statistically significant keywords when compared with the BNC sampler. Indeed, in some cases it was clear that women, in particular, felt some pressure to change their name, as in this divorced respondent (who later reverted to her own name): “I went along with the traditions for a peaceful life! I had suggested that I keep my birth name but he was horrified at the suggestion.” Others also mentioned feeling some pressure from their families to follow the heteronormative expectation of changing their names: “Didn’t want to rock the boat with our traditional families, it would have caused upset”.

These answers chime with the findings of scholarly research into heteronormative marital practices; Ball, Cowan and Cowan (1995) found that, while women are more likely to initiate discussions about marital issues, their husbands tend to have the greatest influence on the outcome of that discussion (see also Zvonkovic *et al.*, 1996). Similarly, with specific reference to getting married, Currie's (1993: 415) participants describe the groom's 'right to veto', even over elements of the planning in which he had taken no other part; 'brides-to-be very often avoided conflict by deferring to their partner's wishes'. It is interesting, especially since Besel *et al* (2009: 111) recently found that bridal magazines typically encourage women to consider other people's feelings, that some of our respondents construct their choices as a kind of lack of action: constructions such as "I went along with..." were common, indicating that they view as passive their own active, pragmatic decision to prioritise the wishes of others.

Desire is not absent, of course, from women's responses; a number of female respondents state that they wanted to take their husband's name. This was often bound up with notions of family cohesion (see section 4.2), but also with the appeal of tradition.<sup>14</sup> While some women seemed happy to claim a traditional stance via unmodalised, categorical statements – "We are both very traditional", for example, or "I like the tradition" – a number of claims were qualified in some way. As one heterosexual woman said:

My maiden name was a bit awkward (unusual and often misspelled) whereas my married name is, frankly, really cool. Plus I am quite traditionalist in some respects and was perfectly happy to change my name to my husband's without feeling that it affected my own identity/standing in society/strength as a woman.

This account makes a mitigated commitment to tradition (*quite* traditionalist *in some respects*), but foregrounds pragmatic reasons for taking the traditional option – doubling up the administrative 'problems' with her maiden name with the appeal of her husband's name. There appears to be some defensive work here that presupposes negativity towards tradition: in contrast to a qualified commitment to tradition, the respondent is unequivocal about her feelings regarding this decision (*perfectly* happy). By invoking a (feminist?) reading of the decision as one that the respondent has considered and rejected, its (postfeminist?) soundness is rhetorically bolstered. Another respondent (a bisexual woman married to a man) appears to do something similar when she writes: "We're not forced in any way to do it, it's just what we both know and are comfortable with". The idea of being comfortable with 'what we know' also came through in the construction "a traditionalist", an identity position claimed by five of the heterosexual

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<sup>14</sup> An additional reason given by heterosexual women for changing their name was that they preferred their husband's name to their own for aesthetic reasons. For example, "I never particularly liked my surname".



women in our data but always mitigated: “I’m a bit of a traditionalist about these things”, and “I suppose I’m a traditionalist at heart”. In these instances, claims to a traditionalist stance seems to be framed as a kind of confession – indeed, data in the BNC suggests that describing oneself as something “at heart” is usually to give away a more personal and/or less desirable part of one’s character (such as being ‘a purist at heart’). To be “a traditionalist at heart”, then, also suggests that this traditionalism is not exercised as frequently as other character traits are, enabling respondents to a) implicitly claim a generally more ‘modern’ outlook to which their attitude to marriage is an exception, and b) espouse alternative views when discussing, say, the actions or available actions of others. Heteronormative traditions within marriage are clearly of central importance for many engaged people, then – a perspective described by Nett (1998) as a consequence of perceiving weddings (and associated patriarchal marriage rituals) as emotional rather than rational events. As Currie (1993: 405) finds, couples who view tradition as holding symbolic significance view such norms as solidifying and strengthening, imbuing their marriage with a sense of longevity.

#### **4.2 Unity**

Connected to notions of tradition is the idea of marriage leads to a change in status; traditionally, one becomes ‘a family’ through marriage (Besel *et al.*, 2009) and all sharing a family surname has been central to this. It is clear from a number of the responses in our data that this idea has continued salience; the word ‘family’ occurs 142 times, and is statistically significant compared to the BNC sampler. The words ‘united’ or ‘(family) unit’ were explicitly mentioned 12 times in the data, with 9 of these tokens coming from (married and unmarried) heterosexual women in relation to wanting to change their name to that of their husband. Being a unit is often associated with working together, as in: “I like having the same name, it makes us feel like a team!”. Interestingly, although critique of women taking their partners’ names may position the act as one of submission to a patriarchal ideal, many women who responded to our survey express the view that marriage was about shared endeavour: “I think that sharing the same name as your partner makes you stronger, more united, and instantly you are sending a message to others that you are two people working together as one.”

Others shared this idea, stating that: “We wanted the same name to indicate our family unit” or that, “by having the same surname it shows we are a couple”; “I wanted the same name so we are identified as married”. The use of the verbs ‘sending a message’, ‘indicate’, ‘identify’ and ‘show’ are similar in revealing a concern amongst some respondents to show a wider community their institutionally recognised relationship. A heterosexual female respondent puts this perspective forward very clearly: “When a man and woman get married, they become a family unit. It makes sense that they have the same name, to re-inforce this and communicate to everybody that they are married.” Again, the verb choice ‘communicate’ indicates that it is

important for a married couple to be recognised as such by others; to suggest that ‘it makes sense’ that this is communicated, as in the example above, implies that being a ‘family unit’ is not simply about a personal status, but a social one. In this sense, taking on a new name may be viewed as a conscious act of identity. Furthermore, it is very much linked to the institutional nature of marriage that positions a couple’s personal relationship as more or less valid depending on whether they have formally registered it with a government authority. It is logical, perhaps, that those who wish to enter such an official union – where their unity is institutionally recognised – might also be likely to wish for their union to be publically evident. This seems to go beyond the rationalisation that it is ‘just tradition’ – whereby couples present their sharing of a name as a passive response to heteronormative expectations – and instead suggests some agency in making the decision to share names.

For the many heterosexual women who articulate a need to *publicly* assert their unity, however, there are also heterosexual female respondents who position taking their husband’s surname as a very *personal* decision which affects the way that they feel about their relationship. It is clear that, for these women, a shared surname is not about symbolism or a message to others, but a personal decision which impacts on their sense of identity, as exemplified by this respondent: “I feel as though the name is key to feeling a part of a new family unit of my own. I intend to have children with my husband and it is important to me that we all have the same name and feel completely a part of one another.” Such examples demonstrate agency in altering the way that the respondents perceive their own identity; they reveal that the act of taking a new name has also altered their identity by attaching them nominally to a new unit. In this sense, taking a new name can be a redefining moment whereby one’s social identity changes as the self becomes linked with a coherent unit (the family). For a contributor who states she took her husband’s name due to “my new identity as a wife and part of new family unit”, this ‘new identity’ also clearly correlates with a new cultural membership category of ‘wife’. Rather than holding negative connotations, in these instances, the word seems to represent a new status in relation to one’s husband. Agency in the naming decisions is also reflected grammatically in the respondents’ formulations here – the women are agents of the stance verbs in active clause structures, such as ‘I wanted + X’, and in the stance clauses ‘I feel + X’ and ‘I intend + X’.

Being a wife is also fundamentally connected with being a *family* and, in turn, it is clear that – for the majority of our respondents – being a family means having children. Taking a new name, whether to publicly mark oneself out as a unit or index a sense of personal identity, is seen as having a symbolic role in building a family. As one heterosexual female respondent explains, “I wanted [us and the children] to share the same name, to show that we were one family”. This pattern is followed by some of the lesbian women in our survey. For example, one woman says that, although she and her partner do not feel that they need to share a single name, “this may change if we have a child”, whilst another says – though she feels surnames are irrelevant – that

if she and her partner were to have children they “might double-barrel to give the children the same name [as us].” Another lesbian woman stated “As a gay couple, we feel it is particularly important to have a 'family' name once we have children, as others might not immediately identify us as a family”. It is interesting to note that the idea of sharing a name is important to these women, but only if and when they have children; the final example, in particular, suggests that being recognised as a family is of particular importance to same-sex couples who may otherwise not be assumed to be co-parents to a child. In this case, though, the surname both marks out and symbolically constructs a sense of family unity in line with heteronormative ideals. This says much about the cultural connection that continues to exist between marriage and family, whereby having children may continue to be seen as a reason to marry. Despite the prevalence of alternative family arrangements in the 21st century, the institutional pull of marriage and family clearly has continued relevance for many.

Although some men refer to the need for family unity in our data, few explicitly mention children in their responses. One heterosexual married man expresses concern that “double-barrelling would have led to unfortunate bullying for our children, so we went with one surname”; although this relates to the reason for his wife taking his name instead of double-barrelling, the assumption that children should have the same name as their parents (and indeed father) is clear here. Only one man in a same-sex relationship mentions children, stating that it might make him consider sharing a name with a partner if they had children. The relatively small number of responses from men regarding children is in itself worthy of comment. The responses reflect an assumption that, if anybody is to change their name in order to construct a sense of unity, it would be a woman; as it tends to be a woman’s responsibility to make this change, it seems reasonable to suggest that women in relationships are more likely to think through the consequences of, and reasons for, making these decisions. Heterosexual female respondents also comment on the importance of a child having the father’s name to ensure that he feels connected to them: “Everyone knows who their mother is, as she is the person who gave birth to them. You know who your father is by taking his name”.

These responses draw a seemingly natural and inevitable link between marriage, children, and changing one’s name. It seems to be the case that it is assumed that those who marry will also have children (van der Bom et al. 2015), and that this is a reason for people changing their name. The perception of one’s ‘new’ identity as a wife or a married couple, indicated above, appears fundamentally connected to the potential for marriage to lead to children; it seems to be because of this definition of ‘family’ that many women opt for – and are expected to desire – a ‘new’ name. The data also showed respondents’ concerns about negotiating the expectations that emerge with married life with a desire to retain one’s own name and thus be independent, however. As shown in the following section, this proves to be an important yet complex move for many.

### 4.3 Independence

For the 41 per cent of heterosexual married women who chose not to take their husband's name, their reasoning concerned their wish not to 'lose' their identity. For these respondents, the act of taking a new name would project a cultural identity that they did not align themselves with, whereas the act of retaining their name was an identity move which enabled them to express their independence. Unsurprisingly, some of these women explicitly mentioned feminism in their responses (forms of 'feminist'/'feminism' occurred 32 times, with 66 per cent of these coming from heterosexual women), reflecting Laskowski's (2010) finding that a feminist identity was a main reason for women choosing not to change their name. For example: "I chose to keep my own surname and my individual identity after marriage. As a modern feminist I believe the social 'norm' of the woman taking her husband's name is outdated and sexist, as it originally indicated ownership". In this example, the respondent is the grammatical agent of the verb 'chose', which also explicitly – lexically – indexes her agency in the decision-making process. Other words that draw on feminist discourses in our data include 'patriarchy' (8 instances), 'sexist' (9), 'equal' (17) and 'ownership' (10).

Once again, the notion of identity is central to heterosexual women's views about name changes in relation to their independence. Many of the respondents said that retaining their original surname on marriage was a way of also retaining their identity within the marriage; for example, "My surname is part of me and my identity. I am me not part of someone else (or their possession!)" and, "I felt that taking my husbands surname wasn't me, and although I like to be married I still wanted my own identity and didn't feel it was necessary to change my name." The word 'subsume', where a kept surname acts as ground held (a marker of separateness), occurs nine times in the responses, and was found in the responses of gay men and women as well as heterosexual women. One lesbian respondent said, "I can't ever imagine having my partner's name – that is a part of her, not a part of me. I have been called this all my life so it would be odd to 'become' someone else." Note here the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) that ramps up the oddity of taking a partner's name (*I can't ever imagine*), and the inverted commas that endanger the notion of becoming.

These examples suggest that changing names results in identity transformation, which indicates the performative power (Butler, 1990, 1993) of naming practices. As well as this notion of the transformative power of names, there are also responses that reveal a perception of the self as existing prior to outward expressions of identity such as naming. For example, one bisexual man states:

Both my partner and I decided to remain known under our respective birth names. Taking one or the other would have seemed to deny our pre-existing identities, and double-barrelling would have seemed impossibly posh. We did not even think of blending our surnames or taking a new one.

The concept of denying pre-existing identities seems to afford agency to a name, invoking the notion of the changing names as an imposition, in this case on both parties. Similarly, one bisexual woman states, “I was influenced by feminism and also (...) I didn't want to give up my name and stop being me.” The change of state verb ‘stop’ here produces the logical presupposition that she would only be ‘herself’ if she retained her name, and changing her name on marriage would result in a transformation of her identity. Again, a name carries agency as well as symbolism for this respondent, leading to her stance-taking away from what she positions as something which would strip her of her independent identity. In a similar example from a lesbian woman, a person’s name is intrinsically connected to their identity and a *new* name is positioned as a threat: “I am saddened that women still chose to give up their name. My name is who I am. It's mine. Why would I give it up – marriage is a partnership not a hostile takeover.” This oppositional construction, whereby ‘a partnership’ is presented as the polar opposite of ‘a hostile takeover’, is indicative of many respondents’ negative stance-taking towards the tradition of taking a husband’s surname due to the perception that is *imposed upon* a woman. In this sense, much of the resistance towards the practice is based upon a concern that women do not have agency in the face of patriarchal expectation.

The complexity of patriarchal norms in relation to a feminist desire for independence is particularly apparent in this response, from a heterosexual woman who would choose to double-barrel her surname:

His would go first, because he's the man. But I'm not giving up my identity, and I want our kids to have both. So we'd have Mr & Mrs Hissurname-Mysurname. It's fair, it's equal, but his first, because I am, nevertheless a female. And I'd allow him first place!

In this example, although the woman claims agency by refusing to ‘give up’ her identity and expressly ‘allowing’ her husband ‘first place’, a concern to acknowledge patriarchal norms regarding gender roles is clearly expressed. The implication here that ‘a female’ *should* be second to ‘the man’ may be seen to reflect deep-rooted gender inequalities. Although this response was unusual in its implicit acceptance of overt sexism, it reflects the perception of most of our respondents that a change in name would, in some way, articulate personal identity. Again, as with previous examples, taking a new name in this response is clearly aligned with losing independence; this was frequently expressed by heterosexual women in our data in relation to their work, a finding which is again reflected in Laskowski’s (2010) data. In

particular, for many women the biggest concern is losing the professional identity they have built with their original surname. These women frame taking a new name in line with relinquishing hard-earned status: “I don’t want to be Mrs anybody. I am Dr xxxxx.” and “I had already developed a professional reputation under my maiden name, and did not want to lose it”. The use of the verb ‘lose’ in this last example is significant, of course, indicating the vulnerability of one’s self-proclaimed identity and the importance of protecting it. This resonates with other constructions, mentioned above, that afford agency to a partner’s surname and imply that it would ‘take over’ one’s own individual identity and independence. Yet many professional women, in particular, had attempted to negotiate their desire for a ‘new’ family name and their existing ‘work’ name; 7.7 per cent of respondents referred to this issue, and the words ‘professional’ and ‘professionally’ are both keywords in the dataset when compared with the BNC.

Having multiple surnames is also given as a reason *not* to change one’s name: “I didn’t want to change my name in work and I didn’t want two separate names for work and my private life.” In this respondent’s decision-making, the question of marriage and its relationship with names is secondary to more individually-focused professional and pragmatic concerns, yet it still reflects the trend in the data whereby heterosexual women often felt they must make a choice (rather than their male partners). This reveals the institutional and cultural preoccupation with women’s marital status but not men’s. That so many women in our sample felt it was necessary to take on different names for different contexts suggests that their personal, domestic identity needed to be institutionally-sanctioned, yet they strongly desired to express independence in their professional environment; the men in our data did not articulate such concerns. Indeed, few of the male respondents position a name change as a choice *they* might make. Although none of the heterosexual married men in our data have changed their names, with one noting that he “didn’t want extra spelling hassle”, two explicitly acknowledge that their wife had to make a choice: “I kept mine and my wife kept her surname. The sensible thing to do” and, “My partner kept her name too. It was never really discussed. That’s what she wanted to do and that’s fine by me”. Here, although the participants do not seem to have been explicitly involved in their wives’ decisions to keep their original names, they do evaluate those decisions and position the choice as one which was mutually agreed upon – particularly in the phrase ‘that’s fine by me’, these responses allow the men to claim some agency alongside their wives. Other heterosexual men used this survey to express theirs and their partners’ feminist values, allowing them to take stances which position their relationships as ultimately equal, for example: “I believe any name-changing should be equitable and retain the individual’s identity”. For these men – as with many of the women in our data – surnames can indicate independence, and a shared name would imply an inequality between two partners.

#### **4.4 Administration**

So far, the data has shown a range of stances taken towards changing one's name, with the name itself often being seen as signalling one's marital status, familial ties, and independence. For many of our respondents, however, it was not the symbolism of taking a new surname (or not) that was a main concern, but instead the administrative impact it may have. Some felt that changing one's name would cause problems, whilst others felt that *not* sharing a family name would be a disadvantage, administratively.

One lesbian respondent remarks that while she likes the idea of experimenting with names upon marriage, it could cause problems if the couple divorced: "it seems a bit messy to me because if the relationship breaks up, what do you do then?!". Administrative concerns are given by many as a reason not to change to a shared family name; as another lesbian woman puts it, "on a practical level, changing names, ID docs, bank docs would add another level of administrative faff to life!". One heterosexual woman states that she and her husband "both briefly considered combining our names into a chimera, but each of us hanging on to our original names was less work", and a second notes that she "couldn't be bothered to forward change of name to bank, utility companies etc". Through allusion to the 'path-of-least-resistance', then, surname changes are constructed by these respondents as an unnecessary administrative burden. Other participants, however, note the administrative necessities of changing their surnames, describing the change being "practical in terms of general life admin", for instance. One heterosexual female participant observes that she and her new husband "had several cheques made out to 'Mr and Mrs....' which the bank refused to cash until I changed my name", and thus her 'choice' was forced upon her; rather than the respondent's name problematising the bank's customer infrastructure, it was the name that became the problem.

In Section 4.2, we discussed some of the ways in which children had an impact on respondents' feelings about married surnames, and the administration of family life was also a matter of concern for many of our respondents. Various participants cite the difficulties and confusion caused when families who do not share a common surname engage with institutions such as schools and doctor's surgeries, for instance. And, despite minimal reported experience, the institutional interaction most mentioned as a cause for concern is conversing with border control during international travel; respondents refer to hearing "stories of children with different names being stopped when going on holiday". These are often couples who have used both parents' surnames as part of a child's name, as in this response from an unmarried, heterosexual mother: "they have [my name] as a middle name... I heard this is easier if I ever get a plane with them there and not him". One participant, who had kept her own name on getting married and given her child his father's surname, expresses regret over her decision not to include her own surname as a middle name, saying "I worry about travelling abroad with him with different surnames".

One interpretation of these fears is that the respondents are aware not just of societal norms relating to child naming but also of the organisational infrastructure that takes those norms as a basis. One heterosexual woman who kept her own name when she married but gave her children their father's name, for instance, reports that: "at international borders I am asked what my relationship is to the children. I say I'm their mum, they ask 'from birth?'" According to Parental Passport Campaign (2014) research by YouGov has shown that more than 600,000 parents have been questioned at UK borders because their surnames do not match their children's. Thus, heteronormative naming practices are embedded and operationalised in institutional, administrative structures, and these practices clearly impact on both same-sex and mixed-sex couples. In the final analysis section, below, we consider how the respondents perceived surname changes could affect people in same-sex relationships.

#### ***4.5 Freedom and equality***

All respondents were asked if they thought that same-sex couples had different options with regards to their surnames on getting married, and the responses were particularly illuminating in terms of assumptions of relative freedom. Lesbians and gay men responding to this question typically articulate a sense of liberation in their answer, with this response from a lesbian woman being typical: "I think legally the options are the same, but in terms of social acceptability same-sex couples have more options simply because there is no norm or hierarchy to conform to". The concept of *conforming* and being socially *acceptable* resonate through all responses from gay and lesbian people in our survey, showing the salience of convention and the perceived weight of expectation on heterosexual couples: "because it's not steeped in years of tradition, people don't feel bound to do what they 'should' do and can do what they please!". The use of the modal verb 'should' demonstrates the perception that heterosexual couples are not only expected but *required* to engage in name changing practices due to long-standing rituals and conventions. Indeed, more than 40 per cent of all responses to this question spoke of tradition or convention: 'tradition' here is rarely used in explicitly positive ways, unlike in many of the responses considered in Section 4.1. Instead, its use is predominantly neutral (for example, 'established tradition') or negative (such as 'old fashioned'), suggesting that its role is unclear when attached to non-heteronormative unions.

In many of the responses to this question from heterosexual women, social pressures and the fear of judgement feature highly, as in: "it isn't so clogged with 'tradition' so they can do whatever they like and I think people will be more accepting of this". This response constructs tradition as a hindrance to decision making, with the metaphorical verb 'clogged' connoting a kind of residual build-up of something unpleasant. The use of inverted commas around 'tradition' also undermines its credibility as a description, suggesting that its commonplace use is euphemistic. Not only do same-sex couples have more freedom to choose ('they can do whatever they like'),



in this sense, but they will not suffer the judgments that mixed-sex couples might when making non-traditional decisions. Clearly, this reveals the powerful role of ideology in maintaining particular practices; if heterosexual couples decide *not* to comply with convention, it is perceived that they may be punished for it. It is particularly revealing to consider the construction of agency in relation to this: mixed-sex couples are often presented as passive in responses to this question, while tradition, and the judgment of others, is active. “I suspect they’re the same options,” says one female, heterosexual respondent, “but you’re not *led down* a particular route – e.g. there is no ‘default’ *imposed on* people (our emphasis)”. Elsewhere, family opinion is described as “bearing down upon” mixed-sex couples.

Responses from heterosexual women here suggest that, even when tradition is merely a guide, it is agential. Respondents who describe their own choices or plans in traditional terms, taking their husband’s surname as well as giving it to their children with few indicators of reluctance, typically appraise that tradition differently in the abstract, or when considering the circumstances for same-sex couples. In part, this may be due to the perceived difference in what marriage might entail for same-sex couples and heterosexual ones; just as children were presented as critical in the decision of many couples to take on a shared name, an assumed absence of children in same-sex relationships is thought to lead to greater flexibility. For example, one heterosexual woman states that “...it seems like they do not have the same pressure. Maybe because they are slightly less likely to have children?”, while another says “They have the same options but seem to make different choices, maybe because they are somewhat less likely to have children”. These responses reflect a complex cultural picture in which heteronormative ideologies dictate that heterosexuals are expected to want and have children, yet same-sex couples who want children have a more complex road ahead of them. It is worth noting the attempt to avoid othering here; although the nature of the question they are answering *requires* them to talk about gay people as different to heterosexual people, the women in the examples above use hedging devices that weaken their commitment to this proposition. In the adjective phrases ‘slightly less likely’ and ‘somewhat less likely’, the premodifying modal adverbs express weak modality; the modal verb ‘seems’ also weakens the degree of commitment attached to the notion that gay and heterosexual couples ‘do not face the same pressure’. In fact, statistics (ONS, 2014) would suggest that same-sex couples are substantially less likely to have children; the fact our respondents often sought to downplay differences between same-sex relationships and heterosexual ones may reflect, then, a somewhat liberal approach to homosexuality amongst our respondents.

Returning to the idea of marital convention, there are several suggestions in the data that same-sex couples will develop ‘their own traditions’, which are missing only for want of time. However, these are far outnumbered by those – including some who do not believe that there actually are different or more options for same-sex couples – who echo the feeling that same-sex couples ‘can do whatever they like’, and often seem to imagine that this freedom translates into a

catalogue of exotic creativity. Interestingly, these responses are often laced with a sense of envy that several respondents make explicit in answers such as: “They can do whatever feels right for their relationship – I envy their freedom”; “They can choose the best surname that works for both of them! I’m jealous!”. Here, this jealousy is tied not only to the freedom of same-sex couples to choose what is right for them, but a sense that such freedom is exercised in the interests of both partners. We were surprised to find the assumption that men and women, and therefore mixed-sex relationships, were not equal underlying a number of responses saying same-sex couples had different naming options. It was especially surprising to find this assumption premised on biological differences – that the difference of sex creates a status imbalance within the relationship that would not exist in same-sex relationships. For example, one heterosexual woman says, “Yes, because biologically they are more equal, so they are starting from a more equal position,” while another believes “both partners are of equal status due to being the same sex”. The vast majority of such responses lacked any kind of stance hedging such as “I think”, or words expressing weak epistemic modality such as “maybe” or “perhaps”. This stance-taking quite clearly positions heterosexuals as fundamentally unequal, then; although this perspective was not unanimous, its recurrence in the data does suggest that, unusually, same-sex couples are seen as being at an advantage compared to mixed-sex ones – at least when it comes to marriage.

Overall, responses to this question placed same-sex couples as having more flexibility and greater freedom than heterosexuals when it comes to naming strategies in marriage. These responses imply, then, that the traditions and expectations upon heterosexual people – though often taken on without particular consideration or analysis, as shown in section 4.1 – are often perceived as *constraining*. Indeed, the envy shown by some heterosexual respondents towards same-sex couples’ options suggests that many heterosexual people (and particularly women) do not feel that they have a choice when it comes to their surname upon marriage. In this sense, freedom of choice in this matter is typically seen as unique to same-sex couples rather than available to all. In our concluding discussion we consider the potential impact of this, by questioning whether the advent of same-sex marriage might help to reveal the ideological assumptions that are connected to heterosexual marriage.

## 6. DISCUSSION

As outlined earlier, we do not claim that the data collected from this survey represents a typical or standard view on naming strategies in relation to marriage. However, there are a number of key ideological messages that are both explicitly (often critically) expressed and implicitly indexed in the responses. Firstly, it is clear patriarchal norms regarding women taking their husband’s surnames are frequently framed as ‘traditional values’ which, by virtue of being steeped in history, are often situated as ‘common sense’. Furthermore, it is clear from our discussion that many heterosexual women, in particular, perceive these ‘values’ as being policed

by others in their community, leading to a social pressure to conform. At times this pressure comes from within the partnership, with husbands-to-be exercising what Safilios-Rothschild (1976) calls *orchestration power*; the power to make less frequent, consequential decisions, rather than the more mundane and time-consuming decision-making left to their brides. Many people, of course, feel a positive relationship with tradition and consciously express this in our data; for these individuals, a shared family name indexes a traditionalist as well as institutionally-recognised identity.

It is also clear from the data that the concept of being united as a family is a central driver for those who (would) choose to take a shared name; often, for these respondents, the taking of a shared name is an act of identity which provides public recognition of their status. In this context, marriage is often conceptualised as fundamentally heteronormative; this is apparent from the respondents' tendency to assume that marriage naturally leads to children (and that having children means needing to share a name). Overall, when it comes to heterosexual women's agency in deciding what to do about their name, any deliberation typically concerns the welfare and administrative needs of their (potential or actual) children; this was not a theme identified amongst men, reflecting the continuation of patriarchal assumptions regarding maternal responsibilities. For many respondents, of course, a desire for independence fuels strong stance-taking *away* from the traditions of surname changes; resistance is typically based on a perceived loss of one's own identity, demonstrating quite clearly the links between the names that we use for ourselves and the way we wish to be interpreted on a social level. If social identity is the way we position ourselves and other people, as Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 586) claim, the terms of address we use allows us to present ourselves as a particular type of person and in line with the cultural meanings indexed by them (e.g. 'wife'). In this sense, it is clear that naming strategies carry significant sociocultural weight and value.

This study has explicitly addressed the concerns of not only heterosexual women and men, but those of a range of identities<sup>15</sup>, and has taken into account the context of same-sex marriage as well as heterosexual marriage. Indeed, it is in relation to the question of same-sex married couples and their options concerning their surnames that some of the most interesting data has emerged. Overwhelmingly, our respondents suggest that same-sex couples have more relative freedom and equality; given that the institution of marriage is now legally equal for same-sex and mixed-sex couples in the UK, it is interesting that this aspect is perceived so differently. That greater restrictions are ideologically imposed upon mixed-sex couples may render marriage as one of very few institutional instances where being lesbian or gay is seen to be advantageous. More than this, the responses here strengthen our worrying conclusions regarding sexism in

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<sup>15</sup> Twenty-three respondents identified with other non-binary sexuality labels (e.g. 'asexual', 'pansexual', 'bisexual/queer') and five people self-identified with non-binary gender labels (e.g. 'genderqueer', 'non-binary').

marital naming practice; many (but by no means all) heterosexual women, in particular, feel obliged to take on a new name despite feeling that they are losing something of themselves in doing so. As time proceeds, it may be that the choices of same-sex couples – whereby they feel relative freedom compared to heterosexual couples – become more widespread; as same-sex marriage becomes more commonplace, conventions developed may also become culturally normalised. In other words, people in heterosexual unions may feel fewer constraints upon them once the full range of options regarding surnames (from keeping one's own to creating something entirely new) is more common. This will only occur, of course, if same-sex marriage becomes not only commonplace but *normalised*; the prevalence of the phrase 'gay marriage' in the UK (around 2400 mentions in the national press in the six months to article submission<sup>16</sup>) suggests that, currently, only the unmarked form 'marriage' is taken as 'normal'.

Although the respondents talked of choice in relation to their surname strategies, however, it is important to engage critically with the very concept of marital naming – from both a feminist and queer perspective. Ultimately, after all, the range of 'options' available to those who marry are in themselves ideological, and as Montemurro (2005, p. 27) points out, 'perhaps even those who do not regularly subscribe to old-fashioned gender roles feel compelled to construct them as a means of enacting the bride-to-be and groom-to-be roles properly'. The historical expectation that a woman would marry a man and take his name for their future family is so culturally ingrained that it has come to be seen as the default position; to make any move away from that is therefore to make a statement.<sup>17</sup> Whilst couples may perceive a decision to, for example, double-barrel their names or retain their original names as an agentive one, the stances taken are only possible within an institutional framework already set out for them. Indeed, the fact that so many heterosexual women in our data had made decisions one way or another, whereas the men typically had not needed to, demonstrates the intrinsically patriarchal framework within which these choices are made. Being resistant to sexist structures still, after all, means engaging with them at some level.

These structures are not only patriarchal, of course; they are heteronormative, in that they have been designed for mixed-sex couples to create two-parent biological families that are institutionally recognised – and sanctioned – as 'typical'. While some of our heterosexual respondents express envy at the apparent flexibility of same-sex couples, they do so in relation to mixed-sex marriage; the fundamentally heteronormative institution of marriage may have adapted to include same-sex couples, but the way that we think about these relationships is in

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<sup>16</sup> LexisNexis.com search, 20 July 2015

<sup>17</sup> Besel et al. (2009: 116) found that bridal books encouraged women to make their own decisions, yet simultaneously stressed the importance of tradition; breaking with it requires care. The authors describe their sample of books as being "permeated with messages encouraging couples to maintain traditional gender roles and expectations" (2009: 119).

relation to that institution and therefore such relationships are *different*. Furthermore, it should be noted that the apparent freedom of same-sex couples to ‘do what they like’ is somewhat idealistic if those couples have children; it tends to be assumed that they would not, within our data, yet those that *do* are forced to negotiate ideals and norms associated with children having a paternal surname that simply may not fit into a same-sex parenting model. In this way, we can see that the ideologies surrounding marital naming practices not only constrain heterosexual people, but that they operate to mark out those in same-sex relationships as separate or *other*, despite the recent inclusion of different relationships into the British institution of marriage.

As argued at the beginning of this paper, it is through the institutionalised conventions that are often taken for granted that powerful ideologies are legitimised and reproduced. We have shown here that choices people make regarding their own surnames are unavoidably tied into pre-existing ideological structures. For those taking a stance against a name change, it is possible to index a ‘feminist’ or ‘independent’ identity, yet in doing so one is forced to deviate from the norm and do something which articulates *difference*. For those women in mixed-sex relationships who favour tradition, a sense of agency may exist which reflects postfeminist discourse – though critics of this stance may argue that this “defensively sentimental celebration of femininity” (McRobbie 2009: 32) ignores the fact that the ‘options’ available to these women are only ever institutionally regulated and sanctioned. Indeed, it is clear from the responses presented here that participants do not typically think of their decisions regarding their names as being embedded within and operationalised by state structures – instead, they talk of their personal relationships with their families and partners, or their own identities as individuals. Yet, we would argue, the decision of an individual to conform or deviate from the norm reflects a stance taken to the institution of marriage overall; to abide by tradition is to be clearly and consistently legible as a married couple, and not to do so is to position oneself in line with a less clearly defined and less institutionally valued category. As same-sex marriage increases and becomes more typical, we ask whether the less clearly defined category – and the naming strategies that come along with it – will begin to become the norm.

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