

By Kelson Brighton

Ironies and Contradictions

A number of interviewees that chose to keep their own name after marrying experienced a tendency for others to refer to them by their partner's name. For example, women who kept their maiden names often found themselves being called by their husband's last name.

Susana Cruz shares her experience:

The only thing that happens is that in the U.S. people that don't know us or don't know us well will assume that my last name is his last name. Sometimes we will get an invitation in the mail that will say Mr. and Mrs. Smith, and I never feel that that is directed toward me because I am not Mrs. Smith.

Contrary to this practice of women being referred to by their husband's last name, a number of interviewees who have chosen to keep their maiden name told us that their husbands and boyfriends are sometimes referred to by their maiden names. This scenario was somewhat unexpected, given that the general trend is for women to be called by their spouse or significant other's last name.

Susana told us,

...if they know my name and they know I'm married they will assume that Cruz is my husband's last name.

Tomi-Ann Roberts shares her experience with this scenario:

So my boyfriend and I will be checking out at Safeway, and they'll look at my receipt and they'll say, "Thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Roberts."

Kayla Hunt has had a similar experience:

But what's funny is that I often deal with contractors that come to our house and they will call my husband Mr. Hunt all the time. So he just kind of looks at them, but doesn't even correct them, so we always chuckle about that.

These women expressed some surprise at the fact that the general public sometimes referred to their significant others by their maiden names, because the practice of calling a married woman by her husband's last name seems to be quite common. Calling a man by his wife's last name was somewhat of a novelty to these women. It is, however, an error that occurs more frequently than one might assume. This contradiction to the more common situation of a woman being called by her husband's last name operates under a similar assumption: that married couples have the same name.

Another central contradiction that came up in a number of interviews is rooted in the maiden name itself. Most women who keep their maiden names after marrying do so for reasons related to, but not limited to, maintaining their own identity. Often, however, that identity is tied to their father's last name. The practice of maintaining one's patronymic last name instead of taking a spouse's name may seem somewhat contradictory within the framework of preserving one's identity as a female.

Corina McKendry shares her view of this particular issue:

Because at some point I realized my last name versus someone else's last name, it's all just some man's last name. Who really cares what your last name is, because it's just some dude's last name. Once you think through it, it's just my dad's last name and his dad's dad, so who cares.

Joyce Norton-McCormick also speaks about this contradiction:

Well that's a very good question because why wouldn't I have wanted to take my mom's maiden name? *Right*. So I've thought about that too. There's a little conflict there, you're right. I have to agree. *We talked about it in class a little bit, like what's the point of not keeping one man's name in order to keep another man's name*. You know the thing is, that going back to the other question about would I change what I did... maybe I would go back and change my name to my mother's maiden name.

Many of our interviewees who chose to keep their own names did so in order to avoid losing their identity in marriage. However, it is apparent that maintaining one's maiden name in order to preserve identity is not a perfect solution to the problem presented by patronymic naming practices. While they may feel that their identity before marriage is closely tied to their maiden name, their father gave them that name. As Corina McKendry states, "It's just some dude's last name." It seems that each interviewee has experienced his/her own contradictions with regard to last naming practices.

Another approach that a few interviewees opted for was the creation of a new family name. While this approach in theory avoids the problems presented above, it seems to create its own ironies. Andrea Lucard and her family created a new last name. She discusses some of the reasons behind her choice to create a name as opposed to other existing options:

And I had decided that I wanted my children to have the same last name as I did. And that was very much based out of a feeling that I was going to bear them within my body for a nine plus months and I was going to nurse them, and I wanted my relationship with them to be visible with respect to our names. And at the same time I was uncomfortable with changing my name to my husband's. That it felt to me like it was too easy to subsume my identity within his, and then the identity within whatever children we might have into the identity with his family.... So what we did was we came up with a bunch of different options for how we might change our name. The options, I said, were he could change his name to mine; we could hyphenate our names, we could come up with a new name entirely, or we could explore the options to merge our names.

"Lucard" comes from a combination of Andrea's family name "Lucas" and her husband Malcolm's last name "Howard." While the Lucard family's decision to merge their names was rooted in Andrea's desire to have the same name as her children without simply taking on her husband's name, created names do not have the same visibility as hyphenated names within the realm of feminism. As is evident through many of our interviews, hyphenated names are quite common within our society. They are a naming option for couples that hope to maintain both identities and pass on both names to their children. Created names, which serve as another alternative naming practice, are not always recognized as a feminist practice. The format of created names conforms to mainstream naming practices, and as a result, created names may simply go unnoticed as differing at all. This is ironic because those who create their own names are likely to do so for feminist reasons.