

Sophia Carmen

Queer Node Essay

Of all of the interviews conducted for this research project, six of them concern last naming practices involving queer partnerships or marriages. Of these six participants, four are women in lesbian relationships that made name decisions upon either uniting or having children, and two are children of queer parents. There is significant variation in the decisions of each of the six couples made regarding their last names. In fact, none of them made the same decision yet all were motivated by feminist thought in some way. They showed that there is no one effective, correct, or feminist decision for gay couples. The decisions made were highly dependent on each individual context and situation. Some common factors that influenced their naming decisions were desire to create a unified family unit, both women wanting to be socially recognized as mothers, biological versus non-biological parents, ambivalence or attachments to name and family history, support or disapproval of queer relationship by extended family, and consideration of family's desires.

Although patrilineal practices are not an option in these cases, which ensures that at least one women's name will be passed down, the problem still exists of joining two families without one being erased from history. In addition, queer couples have other specific problems and considerations to examine that heterosexual couples don't have to worry about. For example, a common theme I found among the lesbian couples with children was the fear or issue regarding both women being recognized as mothers by society. Corina McKendry, a professor at Colorado College, and her wife each kept their own last names upon marrying but decided to give their children Corina's wife's name, partly because Corina is the biological mother.

But our kid actually has my wife's last name. And, we actually talked much more about that because for one, our names are horrible hyphenated because we both have three syllable last names, it's so long it would just be mean. So we weren't sure what to do, but I am the birth mom, I decided we had to go with my wife's last name. Part of it was this queer parenting book that I read. They were talking about different last naming practices, hyphenating, changing names, and they basically made this argument that the worst possible thing you can do is give your kid the birth parent's name. Because being a biological parent is already socially recognized, and so if the other mother is neither biological parent nor has the same name, these two things we automatically have broader social recognition around, they will have neither, right? I found that really compelling.

Despite Corina and her wife feeling like they made the right choice for their family, Monica Schoch-Spana and her partner made exactly the opposite decision. Before getting married, Monica, formerly Monica Spana, legally changed her name, hyphenating it to include her mother's maiden name.

For me it was both a personal thing to recognize my mother's family and a public act or teachable moment to let people know that there are ways, alternate ways of representing who you are, your family, and where you come from. And that you can preserve knowledge of that matrilineal relationship.

Upon uniting, her partner Donna decided to take the name Schoch-Spana, anticipating that they were going to have children, with Donna being the biological mother. She thought it was important as a family unit to all share the same last name. Their decision of whose name to take was based on attachment to names: Donna wasn't attached to her last name Slaughter because she didn't have a good relationship with her father, while Monica felt strongly positive about hers after legally changing it.

So I'm the bio-mother, Donna adopted Leo, so we all have the same last name. Donna wanted us to have the same last name as Leo because she didn't want there ever to be any question raised that she wasn't Leo's mother. And having the same last name meant that people understood her to be his legal mother, his so-called "real" mother.

At first, Monica felt weird that her wife was dropping her name altogether in exchange for Schoch-Spana. She wanted to break from the system of someone having to lose his or her last name—that's why she legally changed her name in the first place. She admits that it does make it socially easier for them to be recognized as a family by a common last name. But often people assume that they took each other's names when marrying. In order to make Donna's female line more visible, they gave Donna's mother's last name to their son Leo as a middle name. In a sense, queer couples have to sacrifice one form of feminism (resisting women being made invisible through names) in order to accomplish another feminist goal of having two mothers be recognized by society.

Another important factor that played a role in motivating couples' decisions was whether or not their family was supportive or disapproving of their queer relationship. For example, Catherine Smith and her partner Mandy both kept their maiden names with consideration that if they had children, they would revisit their decision. Her partner is now pregnant, and Catherine decided she is going to change her last name to Mandy's to reflect more of a family unit. Catherine's father's family, the Smiths, is not completely supportive of her sexuality or relationship.

It's important to know that I also feel slightly disconnected from my last name because my father's parents and his side of the family are not supportive of my relationship with Mandy... her last name is Steponowski, it's definitely a mouthful but she has strong relationship to her heritage, to her background, and to her last name... we both are a little bit hesitant to support a last name that doesn't necessarily support us, meaning my family.

Corina Mckendry also took into consideration the feelings of her wife's extended family, who were at first not supportive of their relationship. They chose her wife's last name to maintain a good relationship with her family, make them happy and feel connected to their granddaughter.

And I think it was actually helpful for my wife's parents as well... who used to be super conservative and Catholic, they've come a long way, but I think it was helpful for them in terms of really feeling like our daughter is their granddaughter as much as their other biological grandkids, so I think it actually made a difference in terms of her family's recognition.

To gain an understanding of the effects that queer couple's decisions have on their children, we have two interviews of individuals with queer parents. The first is Megan Druss, the daughter of two mothers, who was given her biological mother's last name and her other mother's as her

middle name. She explains that the reasoning behind her parents' decision was because her birth mom simply cared more about passing on her last name, and wanted to ensure it was passed down, while her other mother didn't have such strong feelings. Megan likes her last name and the connection it carries to her family. She reports that her mothers don't have any regrets and didn't mention any negative consequences of having a different last name than her non-biological mother, as Corina McKendry's queer parenting book suggested might happen.

The other case is Freda Hawver Pachter, who has two gay mothers and two gay fathers with whom she has close relationships. Her biological mother, Tammy, got married to her wife Staci, and they decided to have children using a sperm donor. The biological father was a friend of Tammy's from college, who himself is in a gay relationship. Freda's two mothers were both attached to their family names, so they gave their daughter both of their names, unhyphenated.

And my moms decided before I was born...because they love each other and it's like an equal thing, and I guess traditionally people take their father's last name, but since they didn't think my father would be such a huge part of my life they didn't really consider that at all, ever. So, because I guess they just assumed he would be a sperm donor that I saw every so often.

Her brother's biological mother is Staci, but he still has the same last name, Hawver Pachter. Freda approves of her mothers' decision to give their children both last names, and again brings up the issue of society's hesitance to recognize a family with two mothers as legitimate.

And I think it's kind of good for sure that we have both last names because sometimes going through airport security, like when I was littler, you needed to prove that you weren't smuggling children, and a lesbian couple is not a usual situation for like, I don't know, for people to deal with. So they needed my birth certificate and all that stuff, and I think it's definitely - it made it a lot easier that I had both of their last names instead of just one, because then they're like "Who's that woman? How do we know she isn't a child smuggler?" That was always annoying, like my moms always had to bring more documents for me and my brother. But I think that was more a "lesbian couple" thing, and I think the double last name helped with that.

Freda is very attached to her last name, stating that she doesn't want to lose any part of her identity by changing her name or dropping either of her mother's names when marrying. Despite this, she does see the potential problems of giving children three hyphenated names. One solution she proposes is creating a new name for her family, which we have seen to be an effective decision for some of the other participants we interviewed.

The last interview is of a woman named Ondriona Monty, who is in a lesbian relationship and planning to get married to her partner Natalia Ramirez. Although they don't plan on having children, they decided to both change their last names to Monty Ramirez, unhyphenated, as a signifier of their love and creation of a family.

So Natalia was finally like "Hey, I really love you. I want us to hyphenate our last names and be Monty-Ramirez." Then I was like, "Ok, why are you doing that?" And she was like, "Because I love you and it sounds good." And I was like "Well, if I had a shitty last

name would you still take it?" She said no.... It was literally like, we're getting married, she's the love of my life, we're best friends, and we wanted to use our names together.

It was very interesting to hear the different responses from the lesbian couples to the question: *How effective do you think your decision is in intervening in women being erased?*

Ondriona Monty replied,

I mean it doesn't matter for lesbians.

Monica Schoch-Spana explained that,

I think it's funny because the family structure in the United States... well, it's always been different across different family structures, but I think there's more willingness to talk about it and willingness to market how one uses, constructs, and changes their last name. So there's a lot of variation out there, I think more than there used to be. I think that's come around to the view that the variation makes people think that there isn't just one way of honoring where you come from.

Megan Druss responded,

I think just the fact that you know, having two women raise a family is you know, [laughs], giving the kids their name just really makes the statement that we're a family. Like you'll respect our love but you'll also respect us under the law. This is our family. I think that's the statement it makes.

It seems like many of the participants shared the belief that simply two women uniting and raising a family together, and being accepted by society, is a powerful feminist statement in itself. Although of course there are problems and consequences with any naming decision, all of the queer couples interviewed seemed to be happy with their choices and felt like it was right for their particular families.