

Baiza Getabecha

Sarah Hautzinger

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Tradition and Ethnicity Interacting with Feminism in Naming Practices

You know I liked my last name when people asked me about it because it isn't just to explain the fact that I felt it was important too to add my mother's name. I see a little note on one of your questions about sort of ethnic heritage. I like being able to tell people that Schoch is a German name and Spana is originally a Polish name and when that family came through Ellis Island they shortened the name at the recommendation of the clerk. –Monica Schoch-Spana

This kind of nuanced situation was typical of our findings regarding ethnicity and its relationship to feminism in last-naming practices. The attitudes are reflective of individual's relationships with their heritage in a dynamic, changing cultural environment. In a melting pot culture such as we have in the United States the general variety and individual hybridity in genealogical origins provides for a wide variety of naming practices, adding in contemporary ideas of liberties, progress and change makes the responses even more particular to each situation. Everyone seems to have a different relationship to their heritage, how that is represented in their names and how this reflects on feminist issues. I noticed a few broad trends in the attitudes and considerations: Those that were concerned with individualistic preoccupations, those that concerned themselves with familial issues and those that were concerned with more ethnicity in a broader social context. Also notable were the positions of general ambivalence, pride and criticality in relation to traditional practices in naming.

Ambivalence here does not mean that people did not care that their names had a history; rather, the attitudes privileged other concerns over the continuity of heritage and tradition while not seeing their reasoning as being a statement against the tradition. Genealogy was a concern or interest for many while continuity of traditional patrilineal practices of naming was not described as a motivational factor for many of those same people. In this way ethnic heritage, while not being rejected outright, was downplayed in its significance.

In this example Freda Hawyer-Pachter shows how genealogical concerns can be separate from concerns of traditional/cultural naming practices, forming a kind of tradition of their own while the tradition of patrilineal inheritance of the name was neither highlighted nor dismissed. The concern in this case seems to be with the familial level of consideration, how someone can develop their sense of family identity by tracing genealogy.

Do you know if either of their names had any sort of family history that was really important to them, and they didn't want to lose that family history? I don't know, it's complicated, I think, because my mother, whose last name is Hawver (her name is Staci), she, her

grandfather had a huge project before he died, which he passed on to my grandfather, of finding all the Hawvers ever. And they got pretty far, and it's like a huge deal on that side of the family. And for that reason, I doubt that my mom would ever want to drop the last name just because it's like almost become a tradition.

Freda had mentioned earlier in the interview how traditional practices of inheriting names were not at issue, because she was raised by two mothers with two fathers – two gay men, one who also served as sperm donor – who were also quite involved.

I guess traditionally people take their father's last name, but since they [her mothers] didn't think my father would be such a huge part of my life they didn't really consider that at all, ever.

Lilly Martin also kept her last name after marriage for reasons of heritage that did not involve consideration of the greater community or of the patrilineal norm.

I don't consider myself such a feminist that it was for that reason. I was just comfortable with it, I like it, it was part of my heritage, but I wouldn't sit there and say, "Oh my gosh, women have to do that because if not you are not identifying with who you are." You know what I mean? *Yes, I do.* So, to me, let's not put too much on the feminism part for me personally, just be comfortable with who you are, and if there is something in your heritage that makes you want to go that way, or your beliefs, then go for it! But if not just don't get hung up on that.

Marie Mulligan-Buckmiller [speaker 2; interviewed with twin sister, speaker 1] here sees her own identity as being separate from traditional practices of naming so that loss of a name does not mean loss of identity. Again the focus is more individualistic but not in confrontation with tradition.

I think my independence is not in a name. I don't need a name to tell me I'm independent, so I don't care if I change my name. It depends on the name. If it's a cool name, "Dr. Blank" and it sounds cool, I'll take it. [speaker 1] So you're willing to lose your identity... just so that [speaker 2] I'm not losing my identity! [speaker 1] No, you're letting your family history of Mulligan-Buckmiller just drop. [speaker 2] No I'm not! [...] My family history's in me. It's with my family. I don't think I need...my family history is one generation. Our Nana changed her name, so we already lost that history. I'm losing one generation, which is the most important generation which is already lost, but I have that in my DNA. I don't need a name to tell me who I am. [speaker 1] No one knows your DNA. [speaker 2] I know my DNA and that's what's important. I don't give a shoot what other people think. [speaker 1] Okay. [speaker 2] I'm sorry, I don't give a crap. I don't care what other people think about me. I don't need a name to tell me who I am. If you do, that's fine, personally I don't think that that's as important to me."

The practical implications of names in a contemporary context seemed to be privileged over ideas of continuity of ethnic heritage in many cases. In some cases this coincided with

feminist ideals; at other times interviewees would mention that their concerns were not motivated by those ideals. Interviewees were wary of a certain ownership implicit in many traditional patrilineal naming practices. The feminist reasons for breaking with tradition seemed focused around this issue of rejecting ownership, individual autonomy and identity retention. The case of Ann Goodman Jane provides a good example

I had worked professionally for several years using my maiden name, and did not want to lose that connection in my professional world. So it was important to me to keep that part of my name in the name after I was married. But decided to go ahead and use both names, looking forward to if we had a family and had children that they would have that connection. I think the other thing I had thought of when getting married, when you think about the ceremony, and the tradition is that someone gives you away, and that just made me nuts. First of all, no one owns me, and I don't want to be given out of my original family either.

A couple people mentioned reasons that were more along the lines of social critique and progress towards greater equality across gender lines, such as these examples from Monica Schoch-Spana and Jae Salinas, who both retained their last names against traditional norms.

For me it was both a personal thing 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 preserve knowledge of that matrilineal relationship.
- Monica Schoch-Spana

Culturally, I feel like in the Hispanic community there's a lot of "machismo" and that is essentially men dominating women socially and I felt like if I took my husband's name it'd be like he owned me, um and I feel like maybe that's an important part of the Hispanic machismo community, but I feel like it's definitely turning away from that. And I don't think me taking his last name would have helped that very much but, it would be nice for women in the Hispanic community to be seen more and respected more and maybe not taking their husband's name would help; I really don't know. -Jae Salinas

One tendency seemed to be consideration of more immediate relationships. From the individual to the family to the greater community there seemed to be more people who were concerned with practical individual concerns, the most people seemed to be concerned with family issues how their fathers would feel, or be represented. And finally there were a few (like in the preceding examples) who were concerned with how their choices impacted the greater community.

In this example a compromise was made that addressed tradition (by continuing a patrilineal tradition in naming the children) and diverged from it (by the mother keeping her name) for career reasons. In Radhika Chavans account one sees a more complicated picture that involves family considerations and tension with traditional values of more extended family.

I mean Indian last names are already so hard, I wouldn't burden my kids with two of them!

[laughs] *That is totally fair. I bet most people could barely say one, let alone both. Did you do anything with your last name and the kids' middle names?* Well middle names aren't the most common thing in Indian culture, so they don't have middle names.

In Indian culture when a woman traditionally gets married she moves in with her husband's family and takes on his family name and his family identity. Dev and I were living in America and were not taking the most traditional route, but there was certainly some cultural tension. *So your families supported your choice? Or at least mostly supported it?* Yeah, my mother has a lot of feminist idealism and she supported my choice. I am not quite sure how his family reacted to it, but I'm sure they realized it was for my career. I know his mother gets a little uncomfortable with the topic, but when we gave the kids his last name I think it eased her worries a little.

Continuation of tradition was important to some members, especially those having a more homologous heritage that they identified with, be it Norwegian, Ethiopian or Cuban. In some cases this meant continuing the patrilineal practice; in others this brought the matrilineal side to bear.

Not so much for my mother but definitely for my dad because he's so proud of his Cuban culture. He really wants to be able to keep that even though now his family's very Americanized, he still wants to be able to have a really inherent Cuban culture and be able for us to be able to identify with Cubans and have that last name and all that.' -Mia Ives-Flores

Cus, it's like; you feel like you're giving your name to somebody, you know? And... I don't know, I took pride in it. I felt that, you know, if you're marrying me then you should want my name. You know what I mean? [...] I just think, you know, acceptance of the whole thing, you know? Of marriage, of the fundamental, of everything that involves marriage. It's like, I think that if you do it any other way then you're kind of half assing what it is, you know? If you're going to do something different then call it something different. Don't call it marriage, call it unity.- Fetehe Tiyint Girma

The issue of misrepresenting oneself culturally came up in a couple of interviews where new names were being adopted or generated. Luke Terra describes the process through which he and his wife created their name:

How did you go about deciding on the new name? We asked friends for advice, we thought of lots of different name possibilities, and actually it was kind of tricky because names often hold signifiers of cultural background or family history, and we didn't want to take on an identity that wasn't ours. So we were trying to pick a name that was neutral enough that we didn't feel false, but also one that had meaning that was significant and meaningful to us. I think it was my wife who suggested Terra, and as soon as that came into the picture, it was done. It was exactly what we wanted. For us, the meaning of the word felt perfect, it means 'earth' 'soil' and all of that, it seemed like a really appropriate way to ground a family. It didn't feel like it held any overt cultural implications that we would feel false adopting, and it's not a very common name, so it seemed like the perfect name for us.

As is evident here, the reasons for opting for non-traditional practices were diverse. This is not a quantitatively based study and the focus was on the more unique practices so while it is problematic to make generalizations from these interviews it does bring to light many interesting issues about where naming practices are headed and how that influences ideas of tradition and ethnicity. One does see thematic trends that reflect upon feminism as it manifests on broader and more narrowly individual perspective approaches.