

Family Names

By Shayla Gordon

The theme of family names is integral to our Feminist Last Naming Project. Although the reasons for the last naming practices presented were informed by feminism and women's desire to be visible in the name of the family, another important theme that informed many decisions was having a unified family name. This was for not only personal reasons but for legal reasons as well. Despite the different types of naming choices many people expressly noted that their choice was informed by wanting a unifying family name.

This was most explicitly an important theme in regard to creating new last names, where the reasons stemmed from an idea of unity and wanting both parents to be represented in the family name. In the case of Luke Terra that was especially the case:

Her family name didn't feel like the right choice, and as we were talking about what kind of options we had, like combined or hyphenated names, but those all didn't feel right for us. And then we started talking about creating a new name, and that felt perfect. We felt like, as we were getting married and starting a family, that our name signified the creation of our new family... 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.

Andrea Lucard, another interviewee who combined her single name (Lucas) with her husband's single name (Howard) to become the Lucards, shares this sentiment. She goes on to express how having the new name not only gave them a unifying identity, but also became a defining quality of their family.

[M]y goal was to have a family name in which my kids had the same name as mine, and I didn't change my name to his... I wanted a family name... And we have a family identity that is the Lucard family. Mostly we talk about it in derogatory ways, I mean we'll say 'You know we're late because we're the Lucard's,' or 'The house is messy because we're the Lucard's.'

Gail Murphy-Geiss, a Sociology professor at Colorado College and an interviewee who talked about how she and her husband both hyphenate their last names explained:

[W]e didn't want to keep our own names because I didn't want to have children that had his name, and I didn't want to have children that had different names, and I didn't want to have all this different. So, I wanted us all to have the same name... You know, it's sort of fun being the only 4 people on the planet with that name... I know my one daughter at least if not both wanna keep their names because we do so much like this Murphy-Geiss uniqueness.

It was clear in her interview that their family enjoyed a strong bond through their last name even though it wasn't one name that they created or just one of their names. It still held the unique quality of being

one of a kind and so it serves as a connection to their immediate kin group in addition to having a connection to both her and her husband's individual families.

Conversely some people with hyphenated last names expressed that they regretted their last naming choice because of the symbolism and the significance that combining their names would have for their families. As Jennifer Wolfe-Smith explained:

[T]o this day, now, we just talked about it, we regret it. We wish we would have done Wolfe Smith, the combination of both our names without the hyphen where we were kind of a brand new family with a brand new last name. Yeah, and we even said it now, it would be too hard because there's three kids involved so to change everybody's last names now would be really difficult, but we do regret it we wished we would've combined it and just made a brand new name.

So, whether combining names, creating new ones, hyphenating or more traditional practices having a unifying family name seemed to be an important factor for quite of a few of the interviewees. Interestingly enough, this attachment to having a unifying and meaningful family name seemed to steer people away from the conventional naming practices (the woman taking her husband's name or hyphenating) and towards the more unusual practices such as creating or combining last names. In my opinion, after looking over the results, there seems to be a shift in how people view their given last names. Many people feel less attachment to their last name, and because family structures are less traditional (adoption, step families, homosexual couples) the definition of the familial unit separate from ancestry seems to be more common.

It then would make sense that if your last name is meant to serve as a meaningful part of your family, choosing a word or name, or taking parts of both parent's names, would have more significance and would by-pass some of the problems that these non-traditional family structures present. Problems like: whose last name to give to step- or adopted children? And, what implications does that have for feelings of inclusion and nominal kinship ties? What should homosexual couples do when they marry and if they have children? How to go about choosing a last name for children when women don't want to take their husbands last names, or the couple isn't married? There are a multitude of situations in which traditional last naming practice (a woman taking her husband's last name; children having their fathers last name) doesn't work or isn't satisfactory. Perhaps, if more emphasis is put on the values of the immediate family unit than on the name or last naming practices, more people would feel compelled to identify themselves with something that is meaningful to them as opposed to just defaulting to what is expected?

"Family Names" addresses the interviewees' expressed interest in having a unifying family name, what having a family name meant to them personally, how the desire to have a common family name informed their last naming choices, and how this desire affects their happiness or dissatisfaction with their last naming choice.