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Paternalism and Patrilineality

A large number of participants shared their last name stories, which included topics about patrilineality. Most participants explained how their naming practices were more traditional and unconscious thoughts; it was just automatic. In America, last-naming is a tradition showing loyalty, but what exactly does passing the fathers name on mean?

Heidi Lewis, for example, was one of the cases recorded where she made a decision to take her husband's last name and chose to give the same last name to her children. Heidi's story is more complicated than it seems because she is black. There is a stereotype for African-Americans that there is no husband/father present in the household. So, Heidi's decision to take her husband's name and give the same last name to her children was a political statement to highlight the fact that she is married and that there is a father in the house.

She found it useful to have her husband's last name because of the generalization that black children do not have a dad. She made sure to let everybody know her children's father was present in their lives. To Heidi, patrilineality meant a lot to her due to the breaking of ethnic stereotypes.

Many interviewees claim that the decision to pass on the fathers name was just a tradition and they did not realize that this decision was anti-feminist. For example, Lisa Mueller reported:

For generations, women had taken the names of their husbands without really considering it just as a matter of...Yeah, just as a matter of tradition. Tradition. And...it wasn't an issue.

When asked why his mother took the name of his father, the participant's response was:

I think it is because of convention. At that time that is the way people did it.

Carrie Ruiz stated:

Well my last name is my family's last name, which is my father's first last name, and in Spain everybody has two last names, so you take your father's first last name and your mother's first last name. So they are patriarchal names, but you always have two last names. So in the U.S. you have only one and I don't include the other one in the document. As you can see, fathers take value in creating a legacy throughout generations. Here is what Tomi-AnneRobert's father had said to her when she was little:

The Roberts name ends with you.

The participant responded to her father with shock and awe. She could not believe how much his last name meant to him. But, he was right; her sister and her were the last Roberts in their family.

Patrilineality shows male dominance in society, which is why some women choose different last-naming practices in a quest for equality. A few participants have shared their feminist thoughts:

I feel like taking your husband's name when you get married is just sort of this weird traditional thing that doesn't really need to be anymore. -Mialves Flores

Another said:

I think the main notion that I personally express about the whole lineage structure is that it should ultimately come down to personal choice rather than the way of patrilineal last name lineage falling down heavily on tradition. And I feel that whatever your choice is, it should be made for both a personal take as well as a consideration of the name you will give your children and that they will most likely have for the rest of their lives. -Joseph Loyaconobustos

These participants with a feminist perspective wonder why patrilineality is a tradition when the mother has an equally important role in raising children. For example one says:

I think the thing about naming that I've always been sort of curious about though is when you look at families where the woman has kept the maiden name, and you have children...the woman carried the baby, why is it the man's last name? Here, the participant questions tradition. Why is it that women go through a great extent to even bring the baby into the world, but the father rewarded by passing on his name?

But, because we have been socialized to this patrilineal tradition, it is really emasculating for men to be called by their wife's last name. For centuries, men have not been expected to change their last names. Yet, as our research shows, today's society is becoming more bilineal. Last-naming practices are straying father from tradition.