

By Katy Stetson

The Feminist Last Naming Project: The Subjectivity of Loyalty

Loyalty is both subjective and incredibly personal. It is shaped by the relationship between a beholder and a beneficiary, be it a person - one's mother, father, siblings, children, partner, or self; or an institution – family, tradition, or otherwise. And of course, the reason for one's loyalty is just as idiosyncratic. Loyalty can be rooted in respect, memory, honor, tradition...the reasons are limitless, and we all have our own. I expected to see patterns of patronymic loyalty among interviewees who kept their family name, however I saw very few patterns at all. Instead, I saw a range of stories, which were determined by family histories, life, death, love, divorce, unities, children, and personal identity. The only solid conclusion from these interviews is that the elements that shape an individual's sense of loyalty are as layered and complex as the nature of Gabra men who are women.

In the spectrum of loyalty, I found that choices made could be divided in to two categories: those who didn't change last names out of loyalty, and those who changed last names out of loyalty. Some interviewees chose not to change their last names out of loyalty to a specific relative or cause, while other interviewees chose to change their last names out loyalty when faced with indecision and the possibility of hurting feelings. I chose to use "not change" and "change" in an effort to neutralize the language, because both categories are loaded with both positive and negative inputs and outputs. Below is a selection of interviewee quotes that highlight the range of motives and results.

Unchanged names:

"I have considered taking my mother's last name. *Is there a reason you didn't act upon it?* Mostly because I thought it would hurt my father's feelings. And I would have a different last name than my brothers." Sarah Hautzinger said.

Motives: Fear of hurting feelings; fairness in divorce; sibling unity.

"And then because my only other brother Allen had died, I wanted to keep the name Cipriany around, just for my dad." Lisa Cipriany said.

Motives: Memory; honor men of family.

"It gave me an opportunity to give back to my parents. Although they are no longer living, I wanted them to feel, or have some [inaudible] for any successes I had." JoAnna McCourt said.

Motives: Honor parents.

"My older son has actually kept the Jasperse-Sjolander. I think it might be because he has a sense of fairness. Where he wanted to keep the balance between Chris and I." Charles Sjolander said.

Motives: Fear of hurting feelings; fairness in divorce.

“When I was about 7 years old, it somehow occurred to me that I wanted to represent both my parents...I made this decision out of a proto-feminist sense that my name should represent both parents.” Udis-Kessler Said.

Motives: Honor parents equally.

“I think it really keeps me in touch with my past and my family.” Joyce Norton-McCormic said.

Motives: Connection to family.

“I think it was my way of keeping a little piece of my father’s short lineage.” Kelley Douglass said.

Motives: Honor father; connection to family.

“My American grandfather took me on his knee, and he literally said to me, ‘the Roberts name ends with you.’ And I remember being like, ‘WOW!’ because there were only daughters...That’s always stuck with me, and it’s still true that the Roberts name ends with my sister and me, because our children don’t have our last name.” Tomi-Anne Roberts said.

Motives: To carry on family name.

“It really wasn’t me so much about carrying on my family name; it was just wanting to have my own identity.”

Motives: Loyalty to personal identity.

“I grew up in a large family. The three middle kids were as alike as peas in a pod. I lost my sister when I was a junior in college at age 20. I lost my brother during my first year in grad school at age 22. Keeping my last name was a kind of memorial to them and their lost lineages.” Hillary Hutchinson said.

Motives: Honor loss of siblings; memorial.

Changed names:

“I’m an issue because if anything I would want to take one of my parents last names and get rid of this hyphenated nonsense but since they’re divorced, I can’t do that. I’d be picking sides.” Issac Rowe-Raitinm said.

Motives: Divorce.

“You know I had realized what I know now, it’s just more important, what Brian and I wanted than what my in-laws wanted.”

Motives: External family pressure.

“You feel like you’re giving your name to somebody...I took pride in it. I felt that, you know, if you’re marrying me than you should want my name...I just think, you know, acceptance of the whole thing. 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 assign what it is, you know? If you’re going to do something different than call it something different. Don’t call it marriage, call it unity. But if you’re going to call it

marriage, then do it, you know, as marriage is done traditionally.” Fetehe Tiyng Girma said.

Motives: Tradition. Loyalty to partnership.

“[My father] was never unsupportive, overtly supportive, but I think deep down he was a little hurt that I had to go and mess with my last name.” Spoch-Spana said.

Motives: Illusion of lack of loyalty to family name.

“My last name is Smith, and it’s very common, and I hold no attachment to it...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...but she has a 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...I wanted to create a family unity between her and myself and be connected to her in that way. I’m sure it’s for the same reason many women change their name when they get married. They want to have the same last name as the people in their family and those they love.” Said Catherine Smith.

Motives: Lack of attachment. Search for support. Loyalty to partnership.

Loyalty can be triggered, or, perceived by many things including tradition, dismissal of tradition, a shift of motives, emotions, obligation, pressure, etc. These examples only include the student-selected information from a purposeful sample of interviewees. This does not represent a cross section or random sample, but rather a group of individuals with interesting last name stories to tell. All of the stories are different, and an individual’s understanding and perception of what a name means can change over time. Two individuals I interviewed were pleased with their decision to keep their name, as it saved one a headache when getting divorced, and it gave the other pleasure in that she had maintained her identity in 34 years of marriage. A parent may perceive their child’s loyalty differently than a child perceives their loyalty to their parent; again, it’s all subjective and incredibly personal. Everyone has a name, and everyone has the ability to do anything with said name – first, middle, maiden, hyphenated/double/last, etc. This project did not produce as many patterns as I expected, but rather highlighted the diversity and variety of individual decision when it comes to a universal practice of giving, receiving, and creating a name.

PEER EDITED BY LARA ATKINS

- Subjectivity of loyalty
- Unchanged names – motives for loyalty
- Changed names – motives for loyalty

- Diversity and variety of individual decision when it comes to universal practice of giving, receiving and creating a name.