Women's understandings of name change in mixed-sex civil partnership: Identity, family, and equality

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Abstract

Surname change for women in Britain remains the norm for those entering mixed-sex marriages. A range of sociological literature considers the implications of this for equality and social change (e.g. Thwaites, 2016; Pilcher, 2017; Carter and Duncan, 2018). Yet naming is more complex for same-sex couples formalising their relationships, where there is no established pattern or social norm, other than the heteronormative one (Clarke et al., 2008). In this paper, we consider the surname preferences of women in mixed-sex relationships considering, planning, or having had, a civil partnership. These women are an interesting case study since they have rejected traditional marriage, and yet still have the option to follow heteronormative naming practices. In this paper we draw on qualitative interview data from 15 women (and their partners) from the UK in 2020-21. We explore how surnames were understood, finding that they more closely resembled same-sex couples than married mixed-sex couples in their rejection of heteronormativity and patriarchal traditions, including women's surname change on marriage. Alongside the rejection of 'patriarchal' surname change, women expressed a desire to retain their own names- and by extension their individual identity. Yet, in considering identity and family, some complexity was added to accounts of those considering (future or current) children. In these cases, the potential for creating a shared family identity provoked a challenge to the overwhelming rejection of name-change. Ultimately, identity, family, and equality played a part in their naming decisions, and for many, this offered a freedom in opposition to traditional marriage. But given the lack of suitable frameworks for women with children entering mixed-sex civil partnerships, some are left with a less than satisfactory outcome, still reckoning with the static constraints of patronymic naming conventions.

Keywords

Civil partnership, equality, identity, names, surnames, tradition.

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Introduction

1. Marriage and naming practices in contemporary Britain

The practice of surname change after marriage is an interesting case study in Britain. Despite broad variations in practices across the globe (see Valetas, 2001 for example), it is a widely accepted and expected norm that in the UK, a woman will change her surname to that of her husband after a mixed-sex marriage. Likewise, their children will be given the husband/father's name. This means that for many married British women, they have their father's surnames until they take their husband's. In 2016 (the most recent data at the time of writing), 89% of married British women had taken their husband's surname, although this is a decline from 94% in 1995 (Duncan et al., 2019). Research highlights the power of the norm of surname change, almost regardless of the extent of the practice, in organising social structures, behaviours, and interpersonal relationships (Thwaites, 2016).

We begin this paper by outlining UK civil partnership law, including the change in 2019 which opened these up to mixed-sex couples. We go on to explore name change practices within mixed-sex marriage and same-sex civil partnerships and marriages. We then outline our methodological approach before reporting the results of our research exploring how women and couples considering, planning, or who had already entered a mixed-sex civil partnership, spoke about name change. The data that we present are somewhat unusual in representing a mixture of individuals' and couples' narratives, at different stages of civil partnership formation. Our analysis offers novel and nuanced insights into how women engaging in mixed-sex civil partnership conceive of name change in relation to tradition, patriarchy, and equality, whilst navigating the complexities of personal and family identities. In particular we find that some of the women choosing mixed-sex civil partnerships are doing and displaying a particular kind of egalitarian and feminist intimate practice through more or less agentic selection/rejection of tradition, norms and customs.

2. Mixed-sex civil partnerships

In 2005, civil partnerships were introduced as the first form of legal recognition available to those in same-sex relationships, following the *Civil Partnership Act 2004* (Hayward, 2019). Initially civil partnerships were introduced as somewhat of a compromise to permitting lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people in same-sex relationships the right to marry. Marriage remained exclusive to those in mixed-sex relationships until the *Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act* (2014) (Hayward, 2019; MacBride-Stewart et al., 2016).

The introduction of equal marriage inadvertently resulted in a disparity, whereby civil partnerships remained available to same-sex couples but were not an option for those in mixed-sex relationships (MacBride-Stewart et al., 2016). Debates ensued around whether civil partnerships should be abolished or remain in some form, with UK government administering public consultations on the matter (see, Hayfield et al., 2023). The *Equal*

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Civil Partnership Campaign (ECPC) group was established with the aim of making civil partnership accessible to all. ECPC's argument was based partly on the notion that marriage was steeped in patriarchal values and structural inequalities, and that those in mixed-sex relationships should have access to an alternative form of legal union (see Hayward, 2021; https://equalcivilpartnerships.org.uk/). Ultimately, the Supreme Court reasoned that civil partnership being open only to same-sex couples was discriminatory, based on the European Convention on Human Rights. This laid the foundations for the *Civil Partnerships Act* being amended to be inclusive of mixed-sex couples (Hayward, 2021). The first civil partnerships between couples in mixed-sex relationships took place on 31 December 2019, with 167 couples registering their partnerships on that day alone (ONS, 2020).

3. Name change

3.1. Name change among mixed-sex couples

While we know almost nothing about the practices of mixed-sex civil partnered couples, women's surname change on mixed-sex marriage is a common and taken-for-granted practice in Britain and elsewhere (Thwaites 2016; Carter, 2018; Duncan et al., 2019). Drawing on family practices theory (Morgan 2011) as well as the concepts of bricolage and pragmatism (Duncan 2011), Carter's research has shown that for many, the path to marriage, as well as its associated traditions and norms, is expected and rarely questioned. This taken-for-grantedness continues into the wedding planning and organisation, which is labour often carried out by women (the wives-to-be as well as their female friends and relatives) and leading to wedding events which are remarkably similar (Carter and Duncan, 2017). This lack of scrutiny of habitual practices characterises much of the 'traditional' behaviours involved in relationships, formalising ceremonies, and contemporary love rituals. Indeed the very reliance on 'tradition' allows and enables the avoidance of scrutiny and provides individuals with clear rules of behaviour that will be legitimated by a wider audience (Carter and Duncan, 2018). Carter and Duncan go on to suggest, however, that this does not lead to simple 'dupes of tradition' (2018: 131). Rather, opting for recognised patterns of behaviour- such as choosing one surname (the husband's) over the other- can be a 'handy tool' for *displaying* family connectedness to outsiders, indicating shared identity, commitment and family belonging.

Nonetheless, the continued use of men's surnames rather than women's does allow a 'leakage of meaning from past to present' where the selection of a historically patriarchal practice allows inequality to endure (Carter and Duncan, 2018: 131). Thus, according to Carter and Duncan and Duncan et al. (2019), women's decisions about whether to change their surnames on marriage can involve different levels of scrutiny and agency. While some barely question the change, having always anticipated a name-change on marriage, others provide a more reflexive narrative, taking into account individual, familial, and societal concerns. In this way, participants were seen to be engaging in a form of 'bricolage', where, to a greater or lesser extent, traditions and norms were being combined with new

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meanings and practices to lead to a naming decision that was personal, relational, and pragmatic (Carter and Duncan, 2018).

For Thwaites (2016) this interaction of tradition and choice can 'between them suggest the naming decision can be seen as one entirely without agency or one entirely with agency' (2016: 3). In asking women directly about their naming decisions on mixed-sex marriage, Thwaites (2016) identified a range of rationales and experiences of both name-changers and name-retainers which included tradition, choice, feminism, transgression, love, heterosexuality, family, and identity. For older name-changers, for example, marriage was a rite of passage into adulthood and name-change signalled a desired change in identity from 'single' woman to 'wife'. Feminist writers have noted the importance of heterosexual rituals to women's life course, and marriage in particular, in providing a rite of passage into adulthood (Mansfield and Collard, 1988; Thwaites, 2013). Thus, heterosexual relationship and marriage rituals have traditionally socially informed, even prescribed, people's actions, beliefs, and identities. From the mid-Twentieth Century onwards (when marriage became romanticised), a woman becoming a wife was presented as the defining moment of her life (Langhamer, 2013).

There have, however, always been exceptions. Notably, Van Every (1995) focused her research on those who were trying to do things differently: women who held a 'political critique of women's position in society who are pursuing change at a 'personal' level by trying to create anti-sexist living arrangements' within their personal and family lives, and relationships (1995: 11). For these women, their feminist identification meant that it was important to resist and reject both the label of 'wife' as well as the social institution and privilege society afforded through the role. When there is a strong counter-narrative to tradition- such as feminism- then women may feel more empowered to resist the social and historical norm, opting for new and alternative frameworks to guide behaviour. This is not easy, however, and those who resist traditional patrilineal naming practices may find that this resistance is not supported by their partners or wider family (Castrén, 2019, Mills, 2003; Thwaites, 2013).

3.2. Name change among same-sex couples

During the consultation stages of the *Civil Partnership Act 2004* (that subsequently enabled same-sex couples in England and Wales to become civil partners), researchers interviewed same-sex couples in the UK, several of whom were planning to enter a civil partnership. Some were seemingly surprised at being asked a question about changing their names, and most had not seriously considered doing so. The picture was largely one of participants resisting the patriarchal and heteronormative history of name change (Clarke et al., 2008), echoing similar arguments made at the time against same-sex marriage by some LGBT+ and feminist groups.

Indeed, scholars have noted that those in same-sex relationships may navigate tricky territory between resisting heteronormativity (defying tradition) whilst embracing legitimacy (thereby contemplating homonormativity) (Fetner and Heath, 2016). Some have highlighted how partnerships between same-sex couples can be understood as 'sites of resistance' to traditional gender roles and associated wedding practices (Fetner and

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Heath, 2016: 721; Kimport, 2012). Accordingly, participants report that they resist name change due to its association with heteronormative marriage and patriarchal tradition, with separate names seen as representative of equality in their relationships (Clarke et al., 2008; Suter and Oswald, 2004; Underwood and Robnett, 2021).

Other research indicates that those in same-sex relationships may choose not to change their names because the practice is perceived to be irrelevant for same-sex couples (Suter and Oswald, 2004). Further, they do not want to lose their sense of individuality, preferring to maintain their personal and/or professional identities (Clarke et al., 2008; Suter and Oswald, 2004; Underwood and Robnett, 2021). Name changing decisions are sometimes made on a pragmatic basis around liking/disliking their last names - or combinations of them (e.g., Clarke et al., 2008; Suter and Oswald, 2004; Underwood and Robnett, 2021). Others have reported a desire to keep a link to their family of origin (Clarke et al., 2008; Suter and Oswald, 2004). However, notably, some participants have stated that they would be happy to change their name to *disassociate*, or create distance, from their family of origin due to not being accepted by them (Clarke et al., 2008; Suter and Oswald, 2004). Either way, the consideration of family connections is an important one and shows that for same-sex and mixed-sex couples alike, naming plays an important role in how family is both ‘done’ and ‘displayed’ to others as a form of recognition and legitimation (Finch 2007).

Those who planned to, or already had, changed their name have often cited similar factors to mixed-sex couples. These include shared surnames providing a tie, securing them external recognition of their relationship, and enabling them to present themselves as a couple or family, including in relation to (plans to have) children, hence their relationships come to mirror the wider cultural context (Clarke et al., 2008; Jones et al., 2017; Suter and Oswald, 2004; Underwood and Robnett, 2021). Or as Heaphy (2018) has suggested, by making comparisons to ‘the ordinary’ marriages of mixed-sex couples, civil partnered (and married) same-sex couples are able to both disrupt heteronormative traditions and celebrate their new-found freedom to take part in these very traditions.

Thus, naming decisions for same-sex couples are inevitably made against a backdrop of traditional and heteronormative practices. However, some same-sex couples recognise the scope to be creative given that there is no dominant script specifically for same-sex couples (Clarke et al., 2008; Underwood and Robnett, 2021). Double-barrelling names has been understood as a non-traditional approach (Clarke et al., 2008), but in wider research on ‘traditional’ marriage, this option is often perceived negatively and therefore frequently dismissed (Carter and Duncan, 2018). The notion of blending names to create a new surname is sometimes referred to jokingly, rather than being considered a serious option (Underwood and Robnett, 2021). Some have noted that deciding on a new name was challenging in terms of what option to take and being in agreement on the decision (Suter and Oswald, 2004). In a recent US study, participants in same-sex relationships envisaged that if they were to marry (21% were already married), neither partner (39%), one partner (30%), or both partners (19%) would change their name (e.g. changing, blending, or hyphenating) (Underwood and Robnett, 2021). Overall, practice varies and opinions differ on the relevance or importance of name change within same-sex relationships. But in

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general, given the already disruptive potential of same-sex partnering, more freedom and creativity is possible than is imagined among the majority of mixed-sex marrying couples.

Mixed-sex civil partnerships, therefore, offer a unique and nuanced position from which to consider traditional practices and all that is associated with them. However, to date there is no research that has explored practices among mixed-sex couples planning or entering civil partnerships. In a previous publication we reported how our participants seemingly understood civil partnership as a contemporary form of relationship recognition, free of the problematic patriarchal values that they associated with marriage. Further, they constructed civil partnership registrations in ways that either rejected or reimagined elements of various practices typically associated with wedding ceremonies (Hayfield et al., 2023). Below we consider their approaches to name changing in the context of tradition, fairness and equality, wanting to do things differently (Van Every 1995; Thwaites 2016), and rejecting heteronormativity (e.g., Underwood and Robnett, 2021).

4. Methodology

This paper arises from a broader qualitative research project in which we interviewed individuals and couples to explore how civil partnership was understood by people who were considering, planning, or had already entered into (where possible), a mixed-sex civil partnership across the UK in 2020-21. Participants consented for their data to be used in all publications and presentations arising from the research.

4.1. Data generation

Ours was, to the best of our knowledge, the first study to explore mixed-sex civil partnerships in the UK. Ethical approval was granted by [UNIVERSITY BLINDED] Research Ethics Committee. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were suited to exploring this previously unresearched topic, and enabled us to ask open-ended questions and probe our participants about their understandings of civil partnerships (Edwards and Holland, 2013). Our interview schedule was designed based on existing research on mixed-sex and same-sex marriage and same-sex civil partnerships, and further informed by our own personal and professional interests within these topic areas. Recruitment was via social media with the support of *Compassion in Politics,* the *Equal Civil Partnership Campaign* (ECPC), and the *Diversity Trust*. The procedure is reported in full elsewhere (Hayfield et al., 2023). Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data extracts below are reported alongside pseudonyms chosen by our participants and their status in terms of civil partnership (civil partnered or planning a civil partnership).

4.2. Participants

Participants could take part as an individual or in couples. For our wider study, we conducted 15 online interviews (nine individual / six couple) with a total of 21 participants. The data for this paper were drawn from instances where naming practices were discussed. This topic was designed to be a part of the interview schedule, but in some instances was

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missed or overtaken by the wider discussion. The resulting subset was compiled from 13 interviews (eight individual / five couple), with a total of 18 participants (13 women and five men), aged between 27-62 years of age, with most in their mid- to late- thirties (M=40 years). Most participants self-identified as white (the exception was a woman of mixed heritage), and heterosexual (with the exception of one pansexual woman). Most couples were homeowners (only one couple was renting) and living together monogamously. At time of interview, six couples had entered a civil partnership, six were currently planning theirs, and one couple were considering entering one but were living in Scotland where they were not yet available (Scottish law has subsequently extended civil partnership legislation to include mixed-sex couples).

4.3. Approach to data analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis of the broader overall dataset has previously been reported (Hayfield et al., 2023). For this paper, we began by carefully reading the interview transcripts to identify where participants engaged in discussions directly or indirectly related to changing their names, to enable us to create a subset of data around naming practices. For this analysis, our approach was a thematic discourse analysis (a variation of reflexive thematic analysis; see Braun and Clarke, 2022) (Terry and Hayfield 2021). Our broad methodological approach was of critical realism with the emphasis on recognising individual perspectives and agency as located within wider social contexts and societal structures (Clark, 2008; Maxwell, 2012). We began with a process of familiarisation, first reading, re-reading, and making notes on the data, before discussing our initial impressions of what was interesting and meaningful. We focused on the ways in which participants spoke about and accounted for their name changing intentions and practices. Our approach to coding was primarily deductive (see, Braun and Clarke, 2022). Whilst we did not test a specific theory or hypothesis, key concepts and ideas in the existing literature served as interpretive lenses that guided our analysis. We developed initial themes based on our interpretation of patterns of meaning. These themes were reviewed and refined to develop thematic discourses of how name change practices were positioned, accounted for, and navigated. We developed themes and wrote initial definitions, which became the starting point of our analytic report, during which analysis was further developed. Our final analysis resulted in thematic discourses based on equality, tradition, identity, and family.

5. Analysis

In this section we focus almost entirely on the accounts of our women participants; although for those interviewed together, their male partners were present for the discussion, the women always led the response. This response was overwhelmingly to retain their own surnames after civil partnership because a) the negative associations surname change has with patriarchy and tradition, and b) they felt attached to their original names and wanted to keep these as an extension or part of their individual identity. These two themes are discussed in more detail below.

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5.1. Rejecting names: Patriarchy, tradition, equality

Participants predominantly presented a woman taking a man's surname as a patriarchal practice and one that they would not countenance within their civil partnerships. Vanessa stated "I suppose I do still see the whole name changing thing as quite patriarchal […] I always knew I'd keep my own name anyway" (Vanessa, civil partnered). In their accounts, marriage was discursively constructed as traditional (and unequal) which was in direct contrast to civil partnership as contemporary (and egalitarian), hence name change was rooted in tradition and presented as 'obviously' not an option.

The practice of women taking men's surnames was portrayed by participants as both problematic, and as a deeply embedded and seemingly compulsory tradition within marriage:

> I did have to have this conversation with someone not long ago, so wedding to me is very patriarchal, it's your, the father giving you away, it's, it's kind of ownership, it's like you belong to your husband now. You have to change your name all that kind of stuff and I'm just, it's not for me (Ink, civil partnered).

Ink's use of '*have to*' locates name change as an obligatory practice and part of a package of (a somewhat non-specific) '*all that kind of stuff*'. Presenting name change as part of a package situates the practice as symbolic of something other than a single innocuous act. This follows immediately from Ink's orientation to a three-part sequential list of items utilised as a problem statement - that weddings are representative of ownership. The list is initiated with the statement that fathers give women away, followed by a second item to emphasise that for this to happen reflects men's ownership of women, and reinforced through the third point that this practice is demonstrative of women belonging to their husbands. This three-part list (see, Charteris-Black, 2005; Jefferson, 1990) arguably serves to make a persuasive argument about the significance of problematic patriarchal practices - of which name change is symbolic.

Ink was not alone in locating marital name change as part of a patriarchal package that risks reproducing wider gendered inequalities. We were not always the first to introduce the topic of name change and it often arose in response to broad questions about marriage. In the following extract, Eryn was asked what the differences were between marriage and civil partnership:

> Yeah many many differences I would like to think, erm … the history of patriarchy and religion, primarily [mm hm], are the issue, and the traditions that continue to be associated with marriage including name changing [mm hm] … which I think is really important (Eryn, civil partnered).

Whilst Jemma (civil partnered with Andy) is responding to a question about her objection(s) to marriage:

> I've always felt I'm equal to Andy and I don't feel that a marriage is an equal thing, you know you change your title, you change name, and there's all that patriarchal

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> baggage that comes with it, so it was just something I didn’t want to do, erm, and y’know I quite like the fact that we aren’t conforming to the norm
> Andy: Yeah yeah progress and all that, change, change.

That their responses quickly turned to mentioning name change is perhaps indicative of how significant it was perceived to be and of how embedded the practice is within weddings and marriage. Moreover, whilst our focus in this analysis is primarily women’s practices, we note that within couple interviews men often stressed that they supported women’s narratives. Andy’s brief contribution indicates that he endorses Jemma’s account (‘*yeah yeah progress and all that*’). Men’s agreement with their partner’s perspectives arguably demonstrates them positioning themselves as invested in a discourse of gender equality. This contrasts with research where women have at times acquiesced to their husband’s desire for them to take his name (e.g. Thwaites, 2016; Carter, 2018).

These participants frequently objected to the tradition of taking a partner’s name on the basis that such practice was representative of women’s oppression. In this respect, they are very similar to the ‘heterosexual’ women in Van Every’s (1995) study who were ‘refusing to be a wife!’. Indeed, some of our participants also rejected the terms ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ and this rejection extended to other language associated with marriage and name change, including the titles ‘Mr and Mrs’ (or more derogatively ‘the missus’):

> Casey (planning): There’s also that not wanting to conform to the stereotypical view of a wife, we are a partnership. I know that he’s gonna be referred to as my husband and I will be his wife in a way that [Richard: I don’t think] people
> Richard: But you don’t want to be a wife, I don’t want to be a husband
> Casey: No, we’re partners and so that’s what civil partnerships do for us
> Richard: ‘cause even with Mr and Mrs, and even with where we are now in terms of equality, there is still a societal perception that he is going out to work and she is more often than not at home […] or in a job that is less powerful, less well paid on average, those are the perceptions.
> Eliza (planning): I kind of had this idea that there were all these issues historically around the term marriage, and the term wife and husband, and the idea that y’know you change your name, and it was a compulsory thing, the idea of it being compulsory to change your name, and that you would be Mrs and their first name.

For Casey and Richard, changes in title represented wider problematic ideas about gender and relationships. Eliza, like others, invokes name change on marriage as ‘compulsory’. This positioning arguably serves as a strategy to situate civil partnerships as apart and different from/opposite to marriage. Indeed, these practices were commonly presented as obligatory and part and parcel of a ready-made package of marriage, denying the agency and autonomy of those who do choose to change their names on marriage. However, some participants presented accounts that disrupted the notion of name change as a taken-for-granted compulsory practice within wider contemporary relationships:

> Vanessa (civil partnered): I suppose I do still see the whole name changing thing as quite patriarchal, although I do have two friends where the man took the woman’s name. So

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> I know that isn't set in stone, and I've got another friend where they amalgamated bits of each name so…

Nonetheless, this was an exception and not widely recognised. Civil partnership was explicitly positioned as chosen precisely because it offered the option to 'do things differently' and resist traditional notions of marriage (and thus surname change):

> Ink (civil partnered): People sort of say to me "oh you're married now" and I say "no I'm not married, I've had a civil partnership, it's not the same". I'm not Ben's wife, I haven't changed my name, all those things, y'know, they really mean something to me and that's why civil partnership is really important in that (yeah) I'm not giving up anything.

Having both implicitly and explicitly established that civil partnerships were at odds with the patriarchal practice of name change, some of our participants were left with somewhat of a dilemma as they negotiated alternative options. It was apparent that what to 'do' about names was sometimes a 'problem' to be negotiated and their talk reflected their search for a 'solution'. Since no participants had actually changed their names or adopted a common name, the need for a 'solution' was particularly acute when participants were considering (actual or future) children and a sense of 'family identity'.

Some same-sex couples have reported considering double-barrelling their surnames, particularly if they planned to have children (Jones et al., 2017). However, our data resonated more closely with studies of heterosexual participants in that double-barrelled names were perceived negatively (Carter and Duncan, 2018). Ink (civil partnered) had "never ever considered double barrelling my name [mm], I said to Ben that's not going to happen" and she later noted "it sounds a bit posh". Eryn (civil partnered) and her partner had discussed what surname to give their children but had concluded that "y'know a double-barrel, it's a bit wanky". Similarly, Robyn (civil partnered) was not sure that she really wanted "to saddle our child with a convoluted double-barrelled name. I don't know, I don't think I can do that to them". Double-barrelled names then, were presented within a pragmatic frame, and positioned as objectionable on the basis of how they or others perceived them, often as the preserve of the upper-classes. As a consequence, double barrelling was rarely presented as a viable option (although Ursula and her partner were one exception and ultimately planned to use a double-barrelled name after considering various options – see below).

A few participants discussed creative compromises and playful possibilities to navigate the seemingly tricky issue of name change. These included their partner taking their name, splicing names together to create a portmanteau, or making up a completely new name for both partners:

> Ink (civil partnered): I did say if you wanted to change his to mine he's perfectly welcome to do that (laughs).
> Ursula (planning): We sort of messed around with joining our names and merging our names and didn't really like any of them, thought about trying to pick a new name, but

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> actually neither of us wanted to leave our old names so we are just going to put them together.
> Tamara (planning): I think we’ll probably stay as we are separate names […] I thought [it] would be quite cool just to take a completely new name, just go for a completely new name, start a new generation.

That these solutions were being presented in a somewhat light-hearted way was evident through laughter and the casual language used (‘*it would be quite cool*’ and ‘*messed around*’). Whilst some of these were perhaps considered more realistic options than others, they were seemingly largely dismissed as a serious or realistic possibility.

Thus, what these participants do in their talk is take back the power of naming that they present marriage as taking away from women. Through constructing a distinction between the language of marriage (unequal, Mr and Mrs, *his* name) and that of civil partnerships (equal, partners, *own* names), participants give voice to their egalitarian beliefs. Name-retaining allows these women to express their values of gender equality and the embeddedness of their names within their identity, as feminists, as whole people. The rejection of name change allows them to reject marriage and patriarchy as well, and place civil partnerships in more equal terrain.

5.2. Keeping names: Family, identity, belonging

Whilst the section above focuses on the *rejection* of patriarchal naming traditions on the premise of equality, this theme concentrates on how women *embraced* retaining their own names, with explanations centring on personal and family identity. Despite the overwhelming rejection of name-change for these participants, there was some recognition that shared family names are an important part of ‘doing family’ and displaying relatedness, belonging, and shared identity. However, the creation of new families through having children was presented as a framework within which name change became a feasible option - for them and/or others – and an exception to the more common pattern of a rejection of traditional naming practices. In this way, the data resonates with research involving same-sex couples and the negotiation these couples contend with between legitimacy and resisting heteronormativity (e.g. Heaphy, 2018).

The women in our research positioned taking a partner’s name as symbolic of an amalgamation, blending, or loss of identities within their couple relationship, which was presented as problematic:

> Emma (planning): I’m not planning to take his name. I would find it really, I dunno, I just feel really uncomfortable with it […] I don’t like this sort of the fact that it’s the woman that’s given away and then she doesn’t speak at the reception, she organises the whole thing but she doesn’t have a voice in any of this ceremony or the celebration until she’s just completely subsumed by her husband’s name, so she doesn’t even get a name by the end of it […] I think it should be about gaining something when you get married or get civil partnered, not being subsumed into another individual.

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By presenting marriage, weddings, and name change as both one-and-the-same, and as inevitable, in the extract above Emma is able to contrast this with her view that marriage or civil partnership should be about gain, not loss. A woman's name change was portrayed as symbolic of a loss of identity where a woman's sense of self was at risk of disappearing. By contrast, if a woman were to keep her name, she could maintain a sense of her own personhood. Many of the women interviewed were strongly attached to their names, in contrast to the women interviewed by Carter (2018) in mixed-sex relationships. Thus they were reluctant to relinquish these names which clearly marked their identity, personhood, and family ties:

> Ink (civil partnered): My name is my name, and it's my father's name, okay again, my parents were married and my Mum took my father's name but that was back in the day and I'm very proud to be a [*last name*] and I will always be a [*last name*].

The connection between names and family ties did, perhaps unsurprisingly, reoccur throughout the interviews. Names are historically and symbolically an important marker of kinship and connection in the UK, as well as of individual identity (Finch, 2008). This connecting with wider kin through naming mirrors the accounts of those in both mixed-sex (e.g., Thwaites, 2016), and same-sex relationships (e.g., Clarke et al., 2008). Ink, therefore, was not alone in positioning her name as intertwined with her own and her family's histories:

> Flora (civil partnered): And my dad asked, asked what name I was going to be going by, which I thought was really bizarre [laughs], I'm thinking "no, I'm gonna to keep my own name, which happens to be the same as *your* name, you'd think you might of liked that" …

Flora presents her Dad even raising name change as '*really bizarre*', indicating the taken-for-grantedness of name retention in mixed-sex civil partnership. Flora also highlights the connection with her own father's name and the expectation that since she is keeping that name, he should be happy- that name retention represents a symbolic connection to our family of origin, one that is desired by patrilineal kin.

This symbolic (and literal) connection with fathers is also noted by Eryn below, whose children had been given her own surname. Although there is some complexity in her discourse:

> Eryn (civil partnered): [W]hat do I want civil partnerships to look like in the future? […] I want women to retain their surnames, and, children to have their own identities rather than their father's identities, so those are all the things that I wish, from the civil partnership project.

Here Eryn is highlighting the importance of names for representing identity and familial connection, but in this extract she misses the trickiness of such identity-markers for women and girls who should 'have their own identities rather than their father's' by retaining 'their surnames' which are actually (often) their fathers'. We may argue that this confusion is reflective of mixed-sex civil partnership more broadly: while the aims are presented as

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radical and progressive (reject marriage, reject weddings, gender equality), in practice normative ideals are somehow reproduced or re-invented (seeking security, retaining patronyms, or replacing with matronyms).

For another example, Emma who above is so ‘uncomfortable’ with a woman being ‘completely subsumed by her husband’s name’, also notes the more traditional set-up of their home life: ‘I think in some ways we do still have a fairly traditional relationship in that [partner] tends to cut the grass and I tend to vacuum that sort of thing’ (Emma, planning). The radical potential of mixed-sex civil partnerships is tempered by the lived realities of a society that still privileges marriage and structural gender inequality. Indeed, within such a society, perhaps the ‘radical potential’ of civil partnerships is more imaginary than real. As Carter and Duncan, (2018) point out in discussing bricolage, it is very hard and cognitively challenging to devise entirely new practices; individuals instead draw on known patterns, behaviours, and norms to piece together something that works for them.

In this context, acts of resistance such as retaining their surnames and rejecting the traditional language of married couples (e.g., Mr and Mrs; hubby and wife; trouble and strife) allowed participants the scope to incorporate their more radical beliefs with the bits and pieces of existing relationship norms with which they were (or could come to be) comfortable. Thus, the language associated with married couples was presented as problematic and reflecting women’s subjugation as secondary partners. In contrast, keeping their title and resisting terms that reflect a loss of their individuality allowed these women to maintain a sense of self, just like men who marry:

> Ursula (planning): [I]t’s not particularly bad for a man to be married, you don’t get labelled “trouble and strife” and, and “the missus” you are just still a person in your own right, I still don’t think people think about the fact that … they are, yeah, they become the missus and the wife and, whereas nothing negative happens to the bloke.

Marriage is presented as being at odds with women retaining their names and, by extension, their identity. Thus these women who want some formal recognition for their relationships, but do not want to lose themselves in this perceived way, civil partnership is presented as the solution. Of course, marriage is not an inevitable loss of the self for women in the UK, however, by presenting it as such, these participants are constructing a narrative which gives sense and meaning to their choice of mixed-sex civil partnership rather than marriage. This also illustrates the complex relationship between names, identity, and selfhood, perhaps especially for women in mixed-sex relationships in the UK who usually will expect to swap their father’s name for their husband’s. While some women have a strong sense of attachment to their original name and see it as a core part of their identity and selfhood, others see their name as symbolic of who they are more generally and therefore accept that their name will change as their relationship status does; this is not conceived as a loss of selfhood or identity, rather a transition from one identity (single) to another (married) (Carter, 2018).

This more nuanced approach was evident in accounts where there was some discussion of (real or future) children from the relationship. In this case, the connection between names and personal identity was weighed against the pull of names symbolising a shared family identity:

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> Robyn (civil partnered): We've still been a bit kind of up in the air, so we've both kept our own names, and we've had lots of conversations about that. It's what we then do when the baby comes out, that, is the only other thing that I'm like… in an ideal world our names would work better as a portmanteau, where we could splice them together or we would have picked a, another married name that is ours.

Sharing a name was a way of 'doing' family and indicating the couple (and often subsequently their children) were part of a family unit, part of a team (Finch, 2008; Jones et al., 2017). Family becomes 'displayed' as both a personal status and a social one (Jones et al., 2017; Carter and Duncan, 2018; Finch 2007):

> Vanessa (civil partnered): I think again if you're having children it might make quite a bit of a difference they have got the same name I can see the benefit of that.

> Eryn (civil partnered): Erm, yeah, so that's the one that people often raise, erm, that you know, I need my kids to have the same, we all need to have the same surname, well "why?" But it's the thing, right? [Yeah] So again that's an identity issue, so maybe, there's something that really matters to people about being perceived to be in a, a family unit that is observable, categorizable, erm, legally valid. I mean, I'm hypothesising [yeah] I don't know [laughs].

There is ambivalence in these accounts where the rejection of tradition and desire to retain names as an identity marker comes up against the strong moral and normative obligation to signal 'family' status for them and their children.

6. Conclusion

Women who marry often maintain the tradition of taking their partner's surname (Carter and Duncan, 2018). However, it was clear that this was not the case in civil partnership. Name changing was situated as 'obviously' inconceivable within civil partnerships because they are constructed as a form of relationship based on contemporary egalitarian values between men and women (Hayfield et al., 2023; also see, ECPC; Hayward, 2021). Most women in our study were heterosexual (with one pansexual participant) and were predominantly embracing civil partnership over marriage precisely on the basis that it represented something other than patriarchal traditional gender norms (Thwaites, 2013). The norms that they so vehemently resisted are rooted in and caught up with heterosexuality and heteronormativity (e.g., Clarke et al., 2008). In this sense, they are resisting the 'heterosexual imaginary' (Ingraham, 2013), closely aligning with those 'refusing to be a wife' in Van Every's (1995) research, and from the position of a heterosexual identity rather than from outside it, as those in same-sex relationships might.

These narratives are seemingly in contrast to research where heterosexual women have reported that part of the reason that they changed their name was in acquiescence to their male partner's wishes (e.g., Thwaites 2016; Carter, 2018), with some describing men as 'horrified' at the idea of a woman keeping her family name (e.g. Jones et al., 2017: 316).

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Whilst few men took part in our research, those who did, endorsed the idea of name change being a joint decision and one that should reflect an equal partnership. Similarly, when women spoke of their partners, they too reported that decisions about name changing were made together. There was seemingly no conflict between partners, but rather the positioning was of shared negotiation and making name change decisions collaboratively.

Nevertheless, individual identity is clearly a core consideration for women entering into a relationship formalising process. For those considering a mixed-sex civil partnership, names, personal identity, and their egalitarian values and beliefs were intimately intertwined. The only variable which may destabilise this bond may be the emergence of children and the potential for a shared family (rather than individual) identity, marked through a shared name. We may, therefore, characterise the rejection of name change as a structural consideration- rejecting the rigid constraints of gender roles and historical marriage traditions. On the other hand, we may see the embracing of their own names by the women participants as a personal endeavour- embedded in values and beliefs aligned to equality, justice and fairness.

Through their overwhelming rejection of female name change in mixed-sex civil partnership, our participants are clearly engaged in a simultaneous process of ‘doing family’ and ‘displaying identity’: creating a family connection through formalised partnership, while displaying their commitment to feminism or values of equality through retaining their own surnames. These naming decisions are a clear marker of an individual’s beliefs and values and may lead to legitimacy and acceptance (or not) of such beliefs, as well as the overall relationship and civil partnership decision. Thus participants, to a greater or lesser extent, are engaged in a pragmatic process of bricolage in reaching naming decisions: drawing on notions of tradition, identity, family, equality, and belonging to produce an outcome that holds up to scrutiny and is embedded in existing frameworks of understanding. In novel situations such as mixed-sex civil partnerships, bricolage presents a particularly apposite lens for understanding how people construct new meanings and outcomes by drawing on old and existing frameworks of understanding (Carter and Duncan, 2018). In this frame, name-retention is the practice most participants aligned with mixed-sex civil partnerships because this was different to and a rejection of traditional marriage practices, and it allowed flexibility in expressing identity and belongingness. While some participants expressed this overtly and with a great deal of agency, others were more passive in their approach to naming, highlighting the differential use of agency that bricolage allows for. We can understand naming as a practice that is done within families/relationships and is clearly used to display family connectedness, feminist values, or other beliefs and connections. The individual and relational bricolage of meanings and practices around naming among mixed-sex couples considering civil partnership enables a far more flexible and pragmatic approach than that seen among mixed-sex married couples or same-sex couples, both of whom still primarily draw upon heteronormative understandings of female name change on marriage. In the absence of a dominant narrative, mixed-sex civil partnering couples piece together their own understanding and meanings, creating a moral framework for future mixed-sex civil partners.

Surname change (especially among women) in the UK continues to be an important topic of discussion for a number of reasons: its connection to marriage and gender inequality

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is found to be problematic by many, including some mixed- and same-sex couples. Yet because of the history and legal pattern of naming within families, there are few choices for naming practices within families- someone's name usually wins, especially when children are involved (Carter and Duncan, 2018). Our sample of mixed-sex couples interested in civil partnerships represents a group of people who have already- practically and discursively- rejected marriage and therefore rejected the traditional associated naming practices. This is an innovation, a freedom, expressed explicitly by constructing a linguistic distinction between marriage and civil partnerships. But it also presents a problem- if the traditional way of naming is rejected, and there is no legitimate alternative, how should naming proceed? For many- in particular those not considering children- the solution is simple: retain their own names. For those who are concerned with children or a shared identity, however, drawing on family and/or situating themselves within a lineage of naming provides some glimpse of a solution to this dilemma. But unlike their more conventional married counterparts, the attraction of a shared family identity, connecting with past and future generations, is not enough to outweigh the negative and patriarchal associations of name-changing. Thus, the result is that a number of the participants in this study are left with a less than satisfactory outcome. This research, therefore, highlights the limits of language in accommodating change- on the journey towards greater gender equality in the UK, we are still struggling to reckon with the old patronymic constraints of naming.

6.1. Limitations and Future Research

Our research offers novel findings and insights that could inform the direction of future research. First, exploring men's perspectives on name change in civil partnership (and marriage) would complement contemporary understandings of gender and naming practices (Jones et al., 2017). Our study was conducted soon after the introduction of the revised civil partnership legislation and participants were in different stages of civil partnership formation (e.g., considering, planning, and civil partnered). Therefore, some participants' narratives were theoretical whilst others reflected their practice. Researchers could focus in future on specific practices in more depth and detail (e.g., planning and organising of registration ceremonies; Carter and Duncan, 2017; Fetner and Heath, 2016). Participants drew heavily on notions of gender equality and some referenced gardening and housework within their couple relationships. Future studies could explore divisions of household labour within mixed-sex civil partnerships and if, whether, and how couples might resist traditionally gendered practices and account for inequalities (see, Kelly and Hauck, 2015; van Hooff, 2011). Finally, our data speaks to notions of 'doing family' and family practices (Morgan, 2011). Yet little is known about how mixed-sex civil partners conceive of family frameworks in relation to their partners and wider relatives. Future research could include considerations of parents, and those who are childfree by choice, given that children were seemingly a key factor in conceptualising naming decisions.

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