
Teaching Tools & Techniques

What's in a Last Name?

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Purpose

The goal of this activity is to help students identify the varied reasons individuals choose to change (or not to change) their last name when married. Perspectives on changing (or not changing) a surname specific to one's gender, as well as, between same-sex and other-sex relationships, should be discussed. It is designed to be used as a companion piece to a more information-based presentation on gender.

Objectives

By the end of this learning activity, students will be able to:

1. provide four varied meanings given by both women and men in changing or not changing their last name in marriage;
2. describe one reason why a woman would choose or not choose to change her surname if she married a man;
3. explain one reason why a man would choose or not choose to change his last name if he married a woman;
4. identify one reason why a woman would choose or not choose to change her last name if she married another woman; and
5. recount one reason why a man would choose or not choose to change his last name if he married another man.

Rationale

The women's movement has made enormous strides in gender equality in the last 100 years. Today, women are allowed to vote, attend college, own a business, own property, be able to be the chief operating officer (CEO) and/or president of a billion-dollar company, and even be considered a serious contender for the presidency of the United States. Many women can also choose not to have children, choose to work full-time outside the home or choose to stay home full-time to raise a child. Women and men fought hard for women to receive respect and equality in and outside the home. Interestingly, a woman's right to keep her surname was one of the last legal rights granted to married women (Stannard, 1977). For centuries, a wife was viewed as property of her husband and she was expected to change her last name to his surname. The notion of women as property is no longer widely supported in society, yet the majority of women continue to change their last name to their husband's in marriage (Twenge, 1997). Society, though, does continue to provide strong normative support for women who change their birth surnames for their husband's last name (Scheuble & Johnson, 2005). Rarely does a man change his last name when he gets married to a woman.

This lesson explores the many meanings given in changing (or not changing) a last name in marriage. By trying to convince another person to change her or his last name to their own, students will be able to explore and articulate their values and opinions on gender, the power dynamics in relationships and the institution of marriage in a group setting. A number of studies (Crawford, Stark & Hackett Renner, 1998; Dion & Cota, 1991; Etaugh, Bridges, Cummings-Hill & Cohen, 1999; Twenge, 1997) have focused on women attitudes toward changing their last name to their (future) husband's or asking women how they perceived women who kept their birth surname or changed it in marriage. This activity, though, includes men in the discussion

and does not limit the learning experience to women and men who are/or intend to marry someone of the other sex. Couples will be selected randomly and it will be expected that some couples will be of the same sex and some will not. This lesson plan has been used with college and graduate-level students. However, it can be incorporated into the curriculum for high school students.

Procedure

1. Time needed for this lesson is approximately 45-60 minutes, depending on the amount of time available during one class period or as long as the class expresses interest in continuing the discussion and processing the activity.
2. The following materials are needed for this lesson: paper and pen/pencil (for students), a watch (if the room doesn't have a clock), newsprint and 3" x 5" white index cards (optional, but can be laminated for future use).
3. Introduce the lesson by stating you would like to do an activity to explore why people would change (or not) their last name in marriage. Each person will be paired with someone else in class. Same-sex and other-sex pairings need to be expected and no one will be able to change the partner she/he gets. If there are an odd number of students in the class, mention that there will be one group of three.
4. If ground rules have been established, they must be reinforced during this activity. Even though mutual respect for one another may be mandatory, honesty about beliefs about gender roles and the institution of marriage should be encouraged in order to promote an open, safe dialogue.

5. Without knowing who their partner is, have students privately write down at least three arguments that they will use in order to try to convince someone else to change her/his last name to their own.
6. Shuffled index cards with big, bold numbers written on them can be used to pair students up (i.e., two "1's", two 2's, etc.). Or, after counting how many students are in attendance, the instructor can simply go down each row and count from "1" to half the number of students saying each number twice (if there is an odd number of students, say the number "1" three times for a group of three). For example, if there are 20 students, count up to 10, then start counting again and stop at 10.
7. Have each student identify who she/he has been paired with and agree on a place to sit and talk in the classroom. Make sure they take their writing utensil and written arguments if they're moving from their seat.
8. Before the couples begin presenting their arguments, gauge students' emotional reactions to the activity thus far. How do the women feel being paired to a man? How do the men feel being paired with another man? How do the men feel being paired to a woman? How do the women feel being paired with another woman? Do any of the couples think their written arguments need to be revised due to the gender of the other person they were paired with?
9. Ask the students not to erase their written arguments, but allow them a few minutes to revise any of them if they feel they need to be changed before the discussion begins.
10. Instruct the class that each person in the pair will have 5 minutes to present their arguments in trying to convince the other person to change her/his last name to their own. Be able to keep time and stop at 5 minutes, even if some couples haven't finished. Have

the other side argue for 5 minutes. After 10 minutes have elapsed, the couple will have another 5 minutes to come up with a consensus on what last name(s) they will have.

They will report the name or names to the whole class, if and how they were able to agree with a last name, and reveal the arguments used on both sides.

11. Each couple will be asked to divulge the arguments used to try and convince the other person to change her/his last name. These arguments need to be written down on newsprint, a chalkboard or a PowerPoint slide. Place an "x" every time a similar argument is mentioned again by another couple.
12. *Other-sex pairings.* Ask the couples in other-sex groups if their initial arguments needed to be revised after they were paired. Were their arguments written expecting to be paired with a person of the other sex, or did they take into consideration that they might be paired with someone of the same gender? If so, do those arguments differ in any way?
13. Did gender play a role in trying to convince or in being convinced of changing their last name? To be more specific, how did the woman feel in arguing to a man that he should change his last name to her own? How did the man feel as a woman argued for him to change his last name to her own? How did the man feel in arguing to a woman that she should change her last name to his own? How did the woman feel as a man argued for her to change her last name to his own? Examples of possible responses from students can be found in Appendix A.
14. How did the couples feel if and when other points of view contradicted their belief or value system?

15. Since these pairings were of the other sex, what was used to try and convince the other gender to change her/his last name? What changes in last name were made and why? Examples of possible responses from students can also be found in Appendix A.
16. *Same-sex pairings.* Ask the couples in same-sex groups if their initial arguments needed to be revised after they were paired. If so, what revisions were made? Were their arguments written expecting to be paired with a person of the other sex, or did they take into consideration that they might be paired with someone of the same gender? Did these arguments differ in any way? If so, how?
17. How did the women feel in arguing to another woman that she should change her last name to her own? How did the women feel as another woman tried to convince her to change her last name to her own? What was used to try and convince the other person of the same sex to change her last name? What changes in last name were made and why? Examples of possible responses from female students can be found in Appendix B.
18. How did the couples feel if and when other points of view contradicted their belief or value system?
19. How did the men feel as another man argued for him to change his last name to his own? How did the men feel when trying to convince another man that he should change his last name to his own? What was used to try and convince the other person of the same sex to change his last name? What changes in last name were made and why? Examples of possible responses from male students can be found in Appendix C.
20. How did the couples feel if and when other points of view contradicted their belief or value system?

21. Spend some time processing how this activity has made the students feel. How did their emotional response differ when they were doing the convincing as opposed to when their future “spouse” was trying to convince them? How has this activity helped guide them to reflect on their views regarding gender roles and the institution of marriage? What surprised them when they heard others talk about the arguments used on someone else?

Assessment/Evaluation Results

High school and/or college-level students' critically thinking skills can be encouraged by assigning a paper that asks them to reveal what marriage means to them, and how the lesson in changing (or not) one's last name has challenged or strengthened their stance on this topic. Did the inclusion of same-sex couples and of men trigger certain emotional responses to their perception of marriage, gender roles, and any privileges that men still possess, especially in heterosexual relationship? Have their views on their intention (if it has not happened already) to change their last name or expect their future spouse to change their surname in any way changed by participating in this activity?

Initially, this lesson was developed as a “break” between lessons and meant to allocate around 15-20 minutes of a class session. A majority of students, though, consistently took a strong interest in participating and processing this topic. For some students, this was a highly charged subject matter because their views on gender, the power dynamics in relationships and the institution of marriage were challenged or vindicated. Respect for differing points of view must be emphasized and ample time to process the activity as a group needs serious consideration.

Other students felt empowered by the prospect of having a choice in changing their last name or not, as well as, recognizing and “owning” their reasons for changing or not changing

their surname. Lively discussions can ensue and the facilitator must be mindful of the time and be able to give an opportunity for others to voice their opinion or belief system regarding this topic.

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Appendix A

Changing (or not) a Last Name in Marriage in Other-sex Pairings

Reasons/feelings why he <u>can't</u> change his name to his future wife's last name	
1.1	Some men may describe feeling "less manly"
1.2	Several men may be concerned how society may perceive them if they even considered changing their last name to their wives
1.3	Several men may state that they like their last name (e.g., common last name, easy to say or spell, strong link with family) and/or perceive it as part of their identity
1.4	A few men may be concerned their last name will end with them and it will not be continued on with their children if he changes his last name
1.5	A few men may feel uneasy in changing their last name to a last name from a different racial/ethnic background
Reasons/feelings why he <u>can</u> change his name to his future wife's last name	
1.6	Some men may not be worried in changing their last name because they do not define their masculinity on an imbalance of power in a relationship
1.7	Other male students would find such a change in their surname welcoming because they might like to distance themselves from their own family
1.8	A few of men may reveal how her surname might improve his social status
1.9	Other male students may prefer their wives' last name because it sounds better, more common, and/or easier to spell than their own
Reasons/feelings why he would hyphenate his last name	
1.10	Several men may have been raised in other countries that expect the woman's last name to be carried on as well and may feel confused as to why both last names cannot be passed on
1.11	Various male students may feel happy in hyphenating their last name to help signify the equitable relationship they have with their future wife

Reasons/feelings why she <u>can't</u> change her name to her future husband's last name
1.12 Some women may feel disempowered that they are being asked to change their surname to their husband's last name
1.13 A few women may reveal their anger/disappointment that their last name is not "worthy" of being passed on by both of them
1.14 Some female students may have a strong connection to her surname (strong heritage, it's common, easy to spell and/or say) and would feel cheated of her identity if she had to change her last name to her husband's
Reasons/feelings why she <u>can</u> change her name to her future husband's last name
1.15 Some female students may feel relieved that the choice of a last name is already taken care of because gender expectations in society continue to encourage women to change their last name to her husband's in marriage
1.16 Several female students may feel empowered in taking on her husband's last name because that may improve her social status in society
1.17 Various women may state relief in changing their last name since their surname is not very common, hard to say and/or hard to spell
1.18 A number of women may feel the need to bring a sense of union in the marriage
Reasons/feelings why she would hyphenate her last name
1.19 A number of women could have been raised in other countries that expect the woman's last name to be carried on as well and may feel confused as to why both last names cannot be passed on
1.20 Various female students may feel happy in hyphenating their last name to help signify the equitable relationship they have with their future husband

Male's feelings toward his own attempt to his future wife to change her last name to his own in marriage

1.21 Some men may feel uncomfortable because they are looking for equity in a relationship at all levels and asking their future wife to change her last name to his would create an imbalance of power

1.22 Other male students may feel empowered because it is expected of them to carry on their family surname—it is tradition for the wife to take the husband's last name in the United States

1.23 Several men may have been raised in other countries that expect the woman's last name to be carried on as well and may feel confused in asking her

Female's feelings toward her own attempt to her future husband to change his last name to her own in marriage

1.24 A number of women may feel worried about how society would perceive herself or her husband since he changed his last name to her own

1.25 Other female students may feel empowered because it is not expected of them to carry on their family surname, but feel they have a choice

1.26 Some women may feel uncomfortable because they are looking for equity in a relationship at all levels and asking their future spouse to change his last name to her would create an imbalance of power

1.27 A few women may feel ambivalent by the name change since most of society would automatically believe that their common last name is actually the husband's last name in which she took on as her own and not vice versa

Arguments used to convince the other sex to change last names in marriage	
1.28	Couples could argue that they did not want to mess with tradition and that both felt comfortable in the wife changing her last name to her husband's
1.29	A number of couples can describe how a woman has a choice now to keep her last name or not, whereas that wasn't the case decades ago
1.30	Students may state that their religion dictates that the husband has more rights than the wife in marriage and thus, she needs to take his last name
1.31	Couples may talk about how there is a perceived social status in being a married women and being called "Mrs. His Name" is socially acceptable
1.32	Some women are being encouraged to keep their name in marriage as a sign of empowerment and show of equality in a marriage
1.33	If the couple plans to have children, the couple fears that the children may be teased or be confused if the parents have different last names than each other or that of their children

Possible changes in last names for other-sex pairings	
1.34	Some couples may agree to hyphenate both their last names in trying to find equal respect in both last names
1.35	A few couples may agree that she can hyphenate her last name (but not his) in order to have the woman still identify with her last name
1.36	Several couples may agree that each will keep their own last name and no changes will be made because neither is willing to identify with another last name but their own
1.37	Other couples could be very original and create their own last name, either they make up a new last name together or they take both last names and construct a new one that way

Appendix B

Changing (or not) a Last Name in Marriage in Same-sex Pairings with Women

Reasons/feelings why she can't change her name to her future wife's last name	
2.1	Several female students may feel discomfort since they were raised to believe they would marry a man, not a woman
2.2	Some women may state that they like their last name (e.g., common last name, easy to say or spell, strong link with family) and/or perceive it as part of their identity
2.3	A few women may feel uneasy in changing their last name to a last name from a different racial/ethnic background
Reasons/feelings why she can change her name to her future wife's last name	
2.4	Other women may feel relief in being able to express themselves to other women and be given the opportunity to role play their own reality
2.5	A number of women may prefer her future wife's last name (more common, easier to say or spell, wants to distance self from own family)
Reasons/feelings why she would hyphenate her last name	
2.6	Various female students may feel happy in hyphenating their last name to help signify the equitable relationship they have with their future wife

Female's feelings toward her own attempt to his future wife to change her last name to her own in marriage	
2.7	Some women may feel concerned because they are looking for equity in a relationship at all levels and asking their future wife to change her last name to hers would create an imbalance of power
2.8	Some female students may feel apprehensive because they never thought they would be asking someone (regardless of sex) to change their last name to their own
2.9	The majority of women may have been raised to expect that they would marry a man and she will take on his surname, thus they may feel confused and uncomfortable in asking another woman to change her last name to her own
2.10	Other women may feel empowered to have the chance to voice the recognition and importance of their last name (and not feel intimidated by a man for doing so)

Arguments used to convince the other woman to change her last name in marriage	
2.11	Some female students may argue that their surname is more common, perceived with higher respect, more appealing, has a stronger lineage behind it, easier to spell and/or say
2.12	Other women may find it empowering to argue for their last name since they are no longer considered the less privileged in the relationship and an imbalance of power due to sex/gender does not exist
2.13	A few women may argue that their identity in their careers is more established and cannot change their own last name
2.14	Various women can suggest agreeing to the last name in which that family was most welcoming of having a lesbian daughter, granddaughter, niece, cousin, etc.
2.15	Others could say that they are the only ones in their family left to be able to continue on the last name and feel compelled to do so

Possible changes in last names for same-sex pairings with women	
2.16	Some couples may agree to hyphenate both their last names in trying to find equal respect in both last names
2.17	Other couples may decide to create a whole new last name, either by making up a new last name altogether or taking both last names and constructing a new one that way
2.18	Several couples may agree that each will keep their own last name and no changes will be made because neither is willing to identify with another last name but their own

Appendix C

Changing (or not) a Last Name in Marriage of Same-sex Pairings with Men

Reasons/feelings why he can't change his name to his future husband's last name	
3.1	Some male students can report feeling uneasy that another man is asking them to change their last name because they were raised to believe they would be marrying a woman and she would be taking on his surname
3.2	Other men may feel enlightened to experience what many women go through when planning to get married to a man
Reasons/feelings why he can change his name to his future husband's last name	
3.3	A few men may feel relief in being able to express themselves to another man and be given the opportunity to role play their reality
3.4	A number of men may prefer his future husband's surname (more common, easier to say or spell, wants to distance self from own family)
Reasons/feelings why he would hyphenate his last name	
3.5	Various male students may feel happy in hyphenating their last name to help signify the equitable relationship they have with their future husband

Male's feelings toward his own attempt to his future husband to change his last name to his own in marriage	
3.6	Some men may feel concerned because they are looking for equity in a relationship at all levels and asking their future husband to change his last name to his would create an imbalance of power
3.7	Other male students may feel empowered because it is expected of them to carry on their family surname, even if their spouse is another man
3.8	The majority of men may have been raised to expect they will marry a woman and she will take on his surname, thus they may feel confused and uncomfortable in asking another man to change his last name to his own

Arguments used to convince the other man to change his last name in marriage	
3.9	Some men may find it strange because they cannot argue that, as the man, his last name should be taken given that both of them are men
3.10	Other men may find it illuminating to recognize how they are no longer the privileged other half and thus an imbalance of power cannot be guaranteed
3.11	A number of male students may argue that their surname is more common, more appealing, perceived with higher respect, has a stronger lineage behind it, easier to spell and/or say
3.12	A few men may argue that their identity in their careers is more established and cannot change their own last name
3.13	Change to the last name in which that family was most welcoming of having a gay son, grandson, nephew, cousin, etc.
3.14	Others could say that they are the only ones in their family left to be able to continue on the last name and feel compelled to do so

Possible changes in last names for same-sex pairings with men	
3.15	Some couples may agree to hyphenate both their last names in trying to find equal respect in both last names
3.16	Other couples may decide to create a whole new last name, either by making up a new last name altogether or taking both last names and constructing a new one that way
3.17	Several couples may agree that each will keep their own last name and no changes will be made because neither is willing to identify with another last name but their own