

Full Research Report

Functional perceptions of relational success and infidelity concerns for violators of gendered naming conventions in marriage

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Abstract

Replicating and extending previous findings, we report two high-powered studies exploring how heterosexual men and women's decisions to change or keep their surnames following marriage influence perceptions of various marital outcomes as a function of perceivers' sexist attitudes. Participants in Study 1 evaluated men and women who indicated keeping or changing their surname after marriage, along with an articulated reason for their decision, specifically either to disrupt or reinforce gender norms. Study 2 removed the reasoning of their choice. Independent of participant gender or whether decision reasoning was provided, both studies demonstrated that targets who violated gendered naming norms (e.g., female keepers and male changers) were perceived more negatively than those who adhered to these norms (e.g., male keepers and female changers), particularly for participants higher in hostile sexism. We frame these findings from complementary evolutionary and sociocultural perspectives.

Keywords

Attitudes, gender norms, infidelity, marriage, sexism, surname

The tradition of women adopting their husband's surname is long-standing, permeating through various Western cultures since the 12th Century (Embleton & King, 1984). Despite its conventionality, an increasing number of women have begun to buck this trend. Recent estimates suggest approximately 20% of women keep their surname following marriage within heterosexual marriages (Pew Research Center, 2012). This

decision could be rooted in a costs-benefit analysis of the interpersonal signal conveyed by these decisions. Women who keep their surname are perceived as educated and assertive (Atkinson, 1987), thereby benefiting women's professional life. They are further perceived as competent and report higher salaries (Brightman, 1994 [AQ2]). Although surname retention may denote autonomy (Noack & Wiik, 2008), these women are nonetheless viewed as relationally noncommittal (Robnett et al., 2016), which could implicate them as prone to infidelity or disinterested in the conventions men value in long-term relationships (Platek & Shackelford, 2006). Women violating marital naming conventions would likely be perceived as less capable of having a successful marriage and more prone to engaging in behaviors that may undermine the marriage because of the lack of commitment these women appear to display.

These competing signals served as the basis for primary hypotheses in this research program. This growing popularity of surname retention among women to boost perceptions of workplace competency serves as impetus to consider women's tradeoffs between professional and relational goals, particularly by identifying how sexism facilitates perceptions of women's relational success. The purpose of this program of research was to employ complementary evolutionary and sociocultural perspectives to identify the functional underpinnings of relational perceptions in domains specific to traits deemed desirable in long-term mating (i.e., Buss, 1989). This understanding of sex differences in mate preferences further led us to consider a broader understanding of subsequent gender norms that would have similarly shaped expectancies of men, thereby affording us the chance to address the relational tradeoff men incur for their own violations of marital surname norm violations (e.g., Robnett et al., 2018).

Perceptions of gender norm violations

Gender norms have been shaped by expectations of men and women in fulfilling certain social roles historically. Norm-violating individuals are often viewed unfavorably, with working mothers being perceived as lacking warmth (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005; Coleman & Franiuk, 2011), an evaluation heightened among those adhering to traditional gender norms (Gaunt, 2013a, 2013b). This antipathy could be rooted in expectancies shaped by humans' evolutionary history of sex differences. According to parental investment theory, women's minimal investments in reproduction (e.g., pregnancy) are historically greater than men's (i.e., sperm provision) and have necessitated more commitment to children from female humans (Mogilski, 2020). Consequently, this investment asymmetry would likely come at the expense of professional success for women in modern ecologies (Pratto & Hegarty, 2000). Historical childcare asymmetries would have become the basis of descriptive norms to categorize female-typical behavior in traditional gender roles shaping women's prescriptive norms (Prentice & Carranza, 2002). Norm-violating women are oft derogated in a possible mismatch between

ancestral and modern environments; descriptive roles could be less prevalent in the latter despite selection favoring evolutionarily relevant heuristics (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006; Li et al., 2018). Norm adherence should additionally inform perceptions of women's relational attitudes, particularly capability for satisfying relationships being contingent upon adherence. Surname-retaining women are perceived as uncommitted and relationally unsuccessful (Drea, 2021; Robnett et al., 2016).

Perceived marital dissatisfaction could implicate women as disinterested in their partner and open to promiscuous mating strategies inconducive to successful marriages. Individuals adhering to conventional social rules are desirable for long-term relationships, a desirability partially rooted in concomitant perceptions of disinterest in promiscuity that would threaten marital success (Brown & Sacco, 2019; Brown et al., 2020b, in press). The conventionality of taking a husband's surname may become a basis of using women's naming decisions as a modern-day gauge to determine marital interest. For men, this inference could serve to identify mates who would mitigate paternity uncertainty concerns emerging from potentially selecting mates disinterested in serial monogamy (Platek & Shackelford, 2006).

In addition to shaping perceptions of women, men's violation of gender conventions may inform perceivers about their relational capabilities. Perceivers regard stay-at-home dads as incompetent (Coleman & Franiuk, 2011). Women prioritize men's competence in mate selection (Buss, 1989), with the decision to change one's surname potentially undermining perceptions of competence that would implicate men as capable of providing resources for a relationship to offset women's historically larger reproductive costs. Identifying men's violation of these prescriptive norms could serve as a proxy for determining whether men would be viable mates. Married men whose wives violate tradition are perceived as ineffectual (Robnett et al., 2018). In considering norm-violating men further, namely those taking their wives' surnames, such men could be seen as relationally ineffective, undermining success. An increasing, albeit small, prevalence of men adopting their wives' surnames could suggest these decisional strategies could be a cue to infer men's social values (Shafer & Christensen, 2018).

Sexism and relationship perceptions

Attitudes toward norm violations could be further heightened by dispositional interest in maintaining specific relationship norms for men and women, namely through sexism. Sexist attitudes toward women are conceptualized in a dichotomy of hostile (HS) and benevolent sexism (BS; Glick & Fiske, 1999). HS is denoted by antipathy toward women's violations of social norms in the service of maintaining societal adherence to social conventions. Antipathy toward norm-violating men and women is most apparent among those endorsing hostile sexism (Gaunt, 2013b). Men reporting higher levels of HS further exhibit heightened aggression toward female partners due to perceptions of themselves

as having less power in their relationships that could potentially reflect concerns of relational dissolution and infidelity that manifest as mate-guarding (Cross et al., 2019; Cross & Overall, 2019).

Conversely, BS refers to heightened prosociality toward women because they are women (Glick & Fiske, 1999). Those endorsing BS do not typically report antipathy toward norm-violating women (Gaunt, 2013b). Rather, BS endorsement predicts favorability toward individuals who effortfully adhere to gender norms, with women functionally preferring men who endorse such beliefs in the service of identifying men most capable of investing resources for a long-term pairbond to offset their larger reproductive costs (Gul & Kupfer, 2019). Given this divergence in perceptions of women as a function of sexism type, and the fact that marital name adherence is not particularly effortful, it would seem likely that BS would not be predictive of relational evaluations.

Current research

This research extends previous findings indicating antipathy toward gender norm-violating individuals (e.g., Drea, 2021). We considered how (non)adherence to surname traditions in marriage shapes perceptions of marital quality and predicted surname-retaining women's marriages will be perceived as less successful than surname-changing women, with the former further being perceived as more prone to infidelity by both men and women. Given women's preference for men who adhere to gender norms bore out of sex asymmetries in resources acquisition (Gul & Kupfer, 2019), we further predicted surname-changing men's marriages should be perceived as less maritally successful, particularly among women.

Additionally, given women's interest in promiscuity could be more represented by their surname decisions than men's (Robnett et al., 2018), we predicted surname decisions would not influence perceptions of men's infidelity proclivity. We further predicted perceptions of women's surname decisions will be especially apparent among individuals endorsing HS, whereas perceptions of men's surname predictions would be more predicted by women's BS. An a priori power analysis for both studies indicated 250 participants would detect small effects (Cohen's $f = 0.08$, $1-\beta = 0.80$).¹ Data and materials are available: <https://osf.io/ut3fh/>

Study 1

Study 1 focused on perceptions of surname-retaining and -changing targets by focusing on how they made their decision. We were interested in how decisions are influenced by adherence to traditions versus interest in disruption.

Method

Participants

We recruited 251 MTurk workers for \$0.35, a compensation based on normed duration of the study that was commensurate to federal minimum wage. Our interest in identifying same- and cross-gender differences led one non-binary participant to be excluded from final analyses ($n = 250$; 131 men, 119 women, $M_{Age} = 37.06$, $SD = 11.72$; 72.9% White, 12.7% Black, 14% Other; 87.9% heterosexual, 8.8% bisexual, 2.8% homosexual; 47% married, 30.7% single, 21.9% in relationships).

Materials and procedure

Marital decisions

Participants first read about, and evaluated, four target individuals in vignettes, describing men and women celebrating an upcoming marriage with same-gender friends in a bachelor/bachelorette party. Vignettes were presented in a random order. Targets indicated their intention of either keeping their, or taking their partner's, surname with the reason for making that decision (i.e., maintain or disrupt gender norms). Although men's decision to change their surname to their wife's following marriage is uncommon, such decisions are increasingly possible, necessitating consideration of these decisions within the same study.

Participants evaluated each target along five relational dimensions (i.e., committed, be trusting, be trusted, satisfied, respect their partner; 1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 7 = *Strongly Agree*), dimensions we determined a priori as relevant to positive relational functioning according to complementary perspectives from relevant interdependence theories that would predict relational dissolution (e.g., [Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992](#); [Rusbult, 1980](#)). Items were reliable ($\alpha > 0.90$) and aggregated into a single relational success measure. We also used a similarly scaled single item assessing perceptions of the target's infidelity proclivity (i.e., "This person will likely cheat on their partner") to provide a face-valid assessment.

Sexist attitudes

Participants subsequently indicated endorsement of sexism using the 22-item Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; [Glick & Fiske, 1997](#)), containing two subscales addressing HS ($\alpha = 0.92$) and BS ($\alpha = 0.88$) Items operated along 6-point scales (0 = *Disagree Strongly*; 5 = *Agree Strongly*).

Results and discussion

Relational success

We submitted our data to a 2 (Participant Gender: Male vs. Female) \times 2 (Target Gender: Male vs. Female) \times 2 (Target Decision: Change vs. Keep) mixed-model custom ANCOVA with repeated factors over the latter two factors, using HS and BS as simultaneous

covariates to test for interactive effects within the same model. This analytic strategy afforded us the opportunity to identify interactive effects between within-subjects factors and continuous predictors using a single omnibus model to reduce the likelihood of Type I Error (Brown et al., 2019). A Target Gender main effect indicated men were perceived as more relationally successful ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.05$) than women ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.03$), $F(1, 244) = 11.72$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.046$.

Effects were qualified by a Target Decision \times Target Gender \times HS interaction, $F(1, 244) = 24.55$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.093$ (see Figure 1). We decomposed this interaction with two 2-way repeated ANCOVAs, separate for male and female targets; both elicited significant 2-way interactions ($F_s > 23.22$, $p_s < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2_s > 0.085$). We decomposed the interactions by individually correlating HS with perceived relational success. High-HS individuals perceived surname-changing men as less relationally successful ($r = -0.25$, $p < 0.001$); no association emerged for surname-keeping men ($r = 0.08$, $p = 0.204$). High-HS individuals further perceived less relational success for surname-keeping women ($r = -0.28$, $p < 0.001$), but not surname-changing women ($r = 0.01$, $p = 0.833$). No other significant main effects or superordinate interactions emerged ($p_s > 0.109$).

Figure 1. Perceived relational success for male (a) and female targets (b) who change and keep their surname among high- and low-HS perceivers in Study 1 (with standard error bars).



Infidelity proclivity

We conducted a similarly dimensioned ANCOVA for perceptions of targets' proclivity toward infidelity. Effects were qualified by a Target Decision \times Target Gender \times HS interaction, $F(1, 241) = 9.21$, $p = 0.003$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.037$. We decomposed this interaction with subordinate ANCOVAs for male and female targets using HS as a moderator. No interaction emerged for male targets, $F(1, 242) = 0.02$, $p = 0.871$, $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$. Effects for female targets were qualified by a 2-way interaction, $F(1, 247) = 16.19$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.062$ (see Figure 2). Individually correlating HS with female target categories, high-HS perceived both surname-keeping women ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.001$) and surname-changing women as prone to infidelity ($r = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$). No main effects emerged, nor did any other superordinate interaction ($p_s > 0.063$).

Figure 2. Perceived infidelity proclivity for women who change and keep their surname among high- and low-HS perceivers in Study 1 (with standard error bars).



Predictions were largely supported by our results. Tradition-violating decisions (female keepers and male changers) were perceived as less relationally successful. Consonant with previous findings (Gaunt, 2013b), evaluations were most apparent among high-HS individuals. Findings suggest norm adherence appears to foster perceptions of greater marital success. Hostile sexism further predicted perceptions of infidelity proclivity in women.

Although perceptions seemed rooted in antipathy toward women (Glick & Fiske, 1997), perceptions of surname-retaining women's proclivity were magnitudinally double than that of surname-changing women, reflecting perceptions of norm violation as akin to noncommitment (Robnett et al., 2016). Because men and women's HS were similarly predictive of these attitudes toward women, it could be possible that these perceptions could serve to identify suboptimal long-term mates in men and intrasexual threats in women (Vaillancourt & Krems, 2018; Wyckoff et al., 2019). This interesting nuance within our findings necessitated a replication in Study 2.

Study 2

Despite the results of Study 1 supporting hypotheses, participants were nonetheless aware of targets' motives for their surname decisions in terms of whether they wanted to adhere to traditions or defy them; reasons for (non)adherence to specific gender norms could have specifically facilitated perceptions of worse relational outcomes among those endorsing HS beyond the specific behavior. This knowledge could have shaped targets' evaluations more than the decision, particularly because individuals are more ostracizing toward those espousing radical viewpoints (Hales & Williams, 2020). Study 2 served as a conceptual replication of the previous study in which we specifically isolated decisions from reasons, wherein we presented scenarios without a specific reason.

Method

Participants

We recruited 252 Amazon Mechanical Turk workers for \$0.50 (USD), a wage commensurate with minimum wage for completion time. We excluded one participant for not indicating their sex ($n = 251$; 158 men, 93 women; $M_{Age} = 33.88$, $SD = 9.37$; 70%

White, 12% Black, 18% Other; 77.3% heterosexual, 19.1% bisexual, 3.2% homosexual; 49% married, 32.7% single, 17.5% in relationships).

Materials and procedure

Study 2 was identical to Study 1, except targets' motivations were not provided. Participants responded to the same measures from Study 1, with the same high reliabilities for perceived relational success scales ($\alpha > 0.92$) and ASI subscales ($\alpha > 0.87$).

Results and discussion

Relational success

We submitted our data to a 2 (Participant Gender: Male vs. Female) \times 2 (Target Gender: Male vs. Female) \times 2 (Target Decision: Change vs. Keep) mixed-model custom ANCOVA with repeated factors over the latter two factors, using HS and BS as covariates. A Target Decision main effect indicated name-changing targets were perceived as more relationally successful ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.11$) than name-keeping targets ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.21$), $F(1, 245) = 12.90$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.050$.

Effects were further qualified by a Target Gender \times Target Decision \times HS interaction, $F(1, 245) = 5.87$, $p = 0.016$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.023$ (see [Figure 3](#)). We decomposed this interaction with separate 2-way ANCOVAs for male and female targets. Significant 2-way interactions emerged for both target sexes, $F_s > 5.16$, $p_s < 0.025$, $\eta_p^2_s > 0.019$. Decomposing the interactions, high-HS individuals perceived surname-changing men ($r = -0.24$, $p < 0.001$), surname-changing women ($r = -0.19$, $p = 0.002$), and surname-retaining women as less relationally successful ($r = -0.28$, $p < 0.001$). No association emerged for surname-retaining men ($r = -0.09$, $p = 0.138$). No other main effects or *predicted* interactions emerged ($p_s > 0.076$).

Figure 3. Perceived relational success for male (a) and female targets (b) who change and keep their surname among high- and low-HS perceivers in Study 2 (with standard error bars).



Effects were additionally qualified by an unexpected Participant Gender \times Target Gender \times HS interaction, $F(1, 245) = 5.88$, $p = 0.016$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.023$. We decomposed this interaction by conducting two subordinate 2-way ANCOVA including HS to test for interactive effects with Target Gender; we separated them for male and female participants. Effects for women were driven by a subordinate 2-way interaction that

almost reached conventional significance, $F(1, 91) = 3.90, p = 0.051, \eta_p^2 = 0.041$. No interaction emerged for men, prompting no further consideration, $F(1, 156) = 0.51, p = 0.475, \eta_p^2 = 0.003$. The closeness to conventional significance necessitated decomposition of the interaction for female participants. High-HS women perceived women as less relationally successful ($r = -0.30, p < 0.001$); no association emerged for high-HS women's perceptions of men ($r = -0.11, p = 0.284$).

Infidelity proclivity

An additional, similarly dimensioned ANCOVA indicated effects were qualified by Participant Gender \times Target Gender \times HS and Participant Gender \times Target Gender \times BS interactions, $F_s > 7.80, p_s < 0.007, \eta_p^2_s > 0.030$. We decomposed this interaction by conducting two subordinate 2-way ANCOVAs including HS to test for interactive effects with Target Sex, which were separate for male and female participants. A subordinate 2-way interaction emerged for women, $F(1, 91) = 4.73, p = 0.032, \eta_p^2 = 0.049$ (see [Figure 4](#)). This effect did not emerge for men, $F(1, 156) = 1.28, p = 0.260, \eta_p^2 = 0.008$. High-HS women perceived male targets ($r = 0.40, p < 0.001$) and female targets as more prone to infidelity ($r = 0.56, p < 0.001$). For BS, neither subordinate interaction was significant, prompting no further decomposition ($p_s > 0.078$). No main effects or other superordinate interactions emerged ($p_s > 0.157$).

Figure 4. Perceived infidelity proclivity for women who change and keep their surname among high- and low-HS perceivers in Study 2 (with standard error bars).



Gender norm violators continued to be viewed less relationally successful in Study 2. These evaluations were especially pronounced in this study, which could demonstrate the robustness of these findings independent of potentially valanced motivational underpinnings from Study 1. These findings indicate that endorsement of HS is particularly predictive of perceptions that relationships will be less successful among those violating marital norms.

Interestingly, several effects were specifically apparent to women's perceptions, further reflecting that sexist attitudes foster gender norm enforcement for both genders that could facilitate women's identification of reproductive opportunities and threats ([Gaunt, 2013b](#)). High-HS women's perceptions of men's proclivity toward infidelity could represent sensitivity toward men's typically greater engagement in promiscuous mating strategies ([Schmitt & International Sexuality Description Project, 2003](#)). High-HS women's perceptions of women's relational success and infidelity, particularly among

women who keep their surname, could similarly reflect intrasexual competition in which they seek derogate women who could pose greater threats to a relationship (Fisher, 2004). Indeed, women demonstrate considerable vigilance toward cues in women that would implicate them as promiscuous, particularly when concerned about relational insecurity (Brown et al., 2020a; Krems et al., 2020[AQ3]). The more consistent effects of women's perceptions toward female targets without information for their decision could reflect high-HS women's responses being primarily rooted in intrasexual competition concerns.

General discussion

Adherence to marital surname conventions influenced perceptions of relational success. Surname-violating individuals were perceived as less maritally successful, particularly by those endorsing hostile sexism. Results align with previous findings demonstrating negative consequences of violating surname conventions implicating women as noncommittal and men as ineffectual (Robnett et al., 2016, 2018). We extended this work by identifying evaluative underpinnings of surname-retaining women's proclivity toward infidelity related to concerns of infidelity and intrasexual competition (Kocum et al., 2017[AQ4]).

Men and women perceived norm violations similarly in marital success. Though a sensible prediction would be for effects to be pronounced for men, men and women had equivocally negative reactions to norm-violators, which may serve to identify suboptimal mates and intrasexual competition in a process that could have historically shaped the emergence of prescriptive gender norms that facilitate derogation among sexist individuals. Findings reflect the pervasiveness of these norms and how they shape attitudes for both men and women (Cross et al., 2019; Gaunt, 2013b; Gul & Kupfer, 2019).

Interestingly, these effects were limited to individuals endorsing HS and not those endorsing BS. This asymmetry in responses could reflect that endorsement of BS is only particularly desirable when individuals are actively signaling their capabilities to adhere to prescribed gender roles given the selection pressures that would implicate adherence desirable in a long-term mate. Previous studies indicated the favorability of stay-at-home mothers was heightened among those endorsing BS (Gaunt, 2013b), whereas benevolently sexist women prefer men when they are actively engaging behaviors typifying men's proclivity to provide resources (Gul & Kupfer, 2019). The discrepancy with our findings could reflect the more active behaviors in previous studies provide a stronger signal of one's relational value that is absent from arguably more passive surname decisions. Future research would benefit from teasing apart which norm-adhering behaviors would be most desirable for those endorsing BS.

Limitations and future directions

Although findings aligned with previous research, it remains unclear whether marital success operated in direct relation to occupational success (i.e., perceived tradeoffs). Future research would benefit from considering whether surname retention signals women's autonomy (Noack & Wiik, 2008; [AQ5]). This could be considered by identifying perceptions of how women prioritize goals through surname decisions. It would seem sensible to predict surname-retaining women would be perceived as prioritizing careers over families, implicating them as unsuccessful wives among sexist individuals. Future research could further consider the bases for career and family prioritization, namely whether women seek to reap the income benefits of retention (Brightman, 1994). Individuals could be sympathetic to this reasoning and view them as more relationally successful.

Outside of keeping or changing, hyphenation has become an increasingly popular convention that may represent a balance between these tradeoffs. That is, women could potentially connote their warmth and competence through this decision. Future studies could add to existing surname literature by considering hyphenated surnames, affording researchers an opportunity to determine if this decision buffers women from evaluations of being relationally unsuccessful.

In understanding how sexism toward women influences perceptions of norm violations, future research would benefit from identifying the impact of sexism toward men. ASI is limited in scope for addressing sexism to women. Future work would benefit from specifically employing a complementary scale assessing men (i.e., Ambivalence Toward Men Inventory; Eastwick et al., 2006). Given hostility toward women predicted negative evaluations against norm-violating women, it could be possible hostility toward men would predict similar evaluations of men adhering to marital conventions.

Although these studies afforded symmetrical experimental designs for male and female targets, we recognize several limitations. First, these matched vignettes presented hypothetical scenarios that could have fostered demand characteristics in participants. Future studies could employ real-world examples (e.g., perceptions of well-known individuals who made various surname decisions) of marital decision-making less encumbered by something hypothetical. Further, our contextualization of these vignettes through a bachelor/bachelorette party could have unexpectedly elicited cues to infidelity, given their potential connotations. Future studies could employ contexts that eliminate connotations (i.e., professional settings).

Conclusions

Gendered norms in marriage present ubiquitous social consequences, particularly related to surname conventions. Our data contribute to growing evidence demonstrating that violations of such norms elicit perceptions of social difficulty. Such evidence could serve

to as an impetus for subsequent social interventions that would serve as means to ameliorate biases toward men and women. Specifically, this work could ensure the identification of effective mitigation strategies that would prevent sexist attitudes from undermining individuals from attaining various relational and professional goals.

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Open research statement

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the authors have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. The data and material used in the research are available. The data can be obtained at:

https://osf.io/ut3fh/?view_only=e819d82b73104b10ae1260ae11a35ba5 or by emailing: kelseydrea@gmail.com

Note

1. We provided exploratory analyses considering HS dichotomously as high- and low-HS for the 3-way interactions in both studies in a supplemental file available through the provided OSF link. In summary, we found that effects from these 3-way interactions were driven primarily by high-HS individuals perceiving less relational success and greater proclivity toward infidelity among norm-violating targets. These effects were most consistently found for female targets (<https://osf.io/ut3fh/>).

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