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The Implications of Patrilineal Surnames

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Abstract

Current Western tradition dictates that a woman is to take her husband’s surname upon marriage and pass it along to her children. In order to explore the reasons behind today’s relatively unchanging adherence to this trend of patrilineal surnames, surveys on marital name choices as well as publications on historical origins of the family and of family names were consulted. Some view this patrilineal trend as sexist, citing societal pressure and the patriarchy as forces compelling women to follow the tradition. While these factors do affect surname trends, the oppressive roots of the patrilineal surname run deeper than sexism. Further research revealed that sexism is not a main motivator or cause of patrilineal naming; the establishment of the permanent, patrilineal surname is linked to imperialist oppression, forced assimilation, and racism. In order to combat the oppressive structures working within surname tradition, it is suggested that people critically examine the naming practices they adhere to, and use that insightful analysis to break down said structures.

The “White Feminist” Focus

Many white, middle and upper-class feminists tend to focus on the patrilineal nature of the surname. While sexism has functioned to cement the tradition of the patrilineal surname in Western culture, it is not the main issue encompassed by modern surname practices. The majority of articles found on the subject of Western surname practice today were from this “white feminist” lens. Often, these articles illustrated the results of almost identical surveys of majority-white women in considering the problematic aspects of surnames, pushing aside the issue of race as opposed to examining the racism alongside the sexism.

History of the Family Surname

Ancient Hebrew and Roman families were patriarchal and patrilineal, and much of this has been continued through to modern generations. The first culture in which family names were used in a way similar to today’s American surname was Ancient Rome, where children were given a first name; a second name, which indicated the gens, or the group of households traced patrilineally to an ancestor that they belonged to; and a third to indicate the household, or familia.

Surnames and Oppression

Permanent surnames were rare before the 14th century. While surnames before then were common, they were descriptors of the bearer rather than permanent markers passed down through generations. The rise of permanent surnames directly coincided in societies with the advent of tax collection, police work, land revenue records, and other efforts by the State to catalog and easily identify people. These governmental efforts to rename entire populations aimed to control and label residents for purposes such as police work and tax collection. Aside from these functions which asserted governmental control on relatively small levels, surname laws were also used to force assimilation and “civilize” unfamiliar cultures, at times facilitating flagrant injustice.

In the 1950’s in Canada, the government assigned “disk numbers” to Inuit people. They were to wear their numbers on a disk around their neck, and reported often being addressed only by their numbers and not by their names. During America’s colonization, programs and laws were in place to essentially rename all Native Americans. The government’s goals, in relation to Native American cultures, were to “restructure the “family” to bring it into line with the normative patriarchy of their white Christian neighbors.” The “family and kinship practices” of Native Americans varied greatly, but they “rarely resembled the codified religious and legal forms of the dominant society,” only “serving to confirm the need for ‘civilizing’ efforts,” one of which was to force their renamed, systematic renaming.

In light of this history, the direct connection between permanent, legal, patrilineal surnames and systematic oppression, not only as it applies to the patriarchy but to imperialism, racism, socioeconomic status, and more, becomes clear. The link between one’s name and one’s identity cannot be ignored, and the racist, xenophobic erasure of specific cultural identities in favor of Christian, Eurocentric identities is evident.

Works Cited

Abstract - Raymond A. Smalar, Virginia Commonwealth University

Racial Implications

There is unrelenting pressure on minority families to adhere to Eurocentric, white American family norms. The stigmatization of the matrilineal passing of surnames due to societal disapproval of single motherhood is an attitude disproportionately expressed towards minority families. American minority families have greater pressures surrounding surname choice due to the surname’s implications on ethnic identity compounded with institutionalized racism.

Conclusion

It is only through the acknowledgement and scrutiny of oppressive practices such as patrilineal naming that the unjust systems behind them can be destroyed. The permanent, patrilineal surname dates back to the Ancient Romans but only came into widespread use in the past few centuries. In these centuries, the surname has been systematically used to catalyze state-organized imperialism and racism. Although the pressures of surname customs are felt by almost every woman who decides to marry or have children today, the unique intersections of sexism and racism give greater gravity to surname decisions for minority women. The implications of patrilineal surnames on women of color should not be equated with their implication on white women; these differences must be noted and considered, in order to analyze and break down not only structures of gender inequality, but of racial inequality as well. While the aspect of race is often ignored entirely in surname research, the problem of permanent, patrilineal surnames is one primarily of institutionalized racism and secondarily of sexism.

Special thanks: Professor Mary Shelden – mentorship; Eugenia Muñoz, Ph.D., Morgan Hayes, London Perry, and Victoria Gross – interviewees; and Heather Duke - editing.

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Top 100 Surnames in America, according to the 2000 US census

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