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The Effect of Marital Name Choices on Heterosexual Women's and Men's Perceived Quality as Romantic Partners

Kristin Kelley[1]

Abstract

Are women and men judged for breaking gender norms in the context of heterosexual marriage? Using the case of marital name choice, the author compared the effect of gender-conventional choices (woman takes man's surname) to gender-egalitarian choices (both partners keep or hyphenate their surnames) on the perceived quality of heterosexual women and men as romantic partners. Relying on a survey experiment ($n = 501$), the author found that U.S. respondents perceived women who kept their surnames and women who shared hyphenated surnames with their husbands to be less committed and loving and to conform less to respondents' image of the ideal wife than women who changed their names. These results show that gender-norm violations, not preferences for a shared spousal surname, explain the marital name penalty. Men in norm-breaking couples were also judged, albeit not as harshly as women, suggesting that there are contexts in which women are granted less gender flexibility than men.

Keywords

gender norms, gender inequality, gender flexibility, marital name choices, survey experiment

How does society perceive heterosexual women and men who make gender-egalitarian marital name choices? Research has shown that many heterosexual couples would like to have egalitarian relationships but that they are limited in their ability to share work and care equally because of weak social support for families with children (Ecklund et al. 2017; Gerson 2009; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015). Yet even in contexts in which family policies support egalitarian relationships, preferences for gender equality may not translate into egalitarian choices if individuals expect to face judgment for breaking gender norms. In fact, Lamont (2020) found that heterosexual women and men found it more difficult to implement egalitarian dating practices than individuals in same-sex and queer relationships. Although queer communities encourage resistance against social norms and flexibility in gender presentation, heteronormative structures impose gender accountability (Lamont 2020). To examine how heterosexual couples are encouraged to follow gender norms, I used the case of marital name choice to compare the effect of gender-conventional choices (in which a woman adopts her husband's surname) to gender-egalitarian choices (in which both husband and wife keep or hyphenate their surnames) on perceptions of women's and men's quality as romantic partners.

In the United States, women are legally allowed to keep their surnames after marriage, yet 87 percent of women in heterosexual relationships adopt their husbands' names (Shafer and Christensen 2018). High proportions of women in other countries also change their surnames (see Castrén 2019 for Finland; Duncan, Ellingsaeter, and Carter 2020 for Britain and Norway; Ellingsaeter 2022 for Norway; Thwaites 2020 for Britain; and Valetas 2001 for the European Union). As changing a surname requires more effort than leaving it unchanged (the legal default), the high proportion of name changers suggests that cultural factors stop women from keeping their own names.

Of the 13 percent of heterosexual couples in the United States that break marital name traditions, only 3 percent include men who hyphenate or change their names (Shafer and Christensen 2018). Whereas men in many U.S. states must pay a larger fee to change their surnames after marriage than women (Anthony 2010; Kosur 2015; Rosensaft 2002),

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men in European countries with egalitarian surname policies still rarely change their surnames (Castrén 2019; Ellingsaeter 2022), further suggesting that ideological or social factors play a role in marital name choices.

If women and men in heterosexual couples break marital name norms, does this affect how they are perceived as romantic partners? Qualitative research strongly suggests that marital name choice shapes perceptions of women's relationship commitment (Castrén 2019; Ellingsaeter 2022; Hamilton, Geist, and Powell 2011; Lamont 2020; Nugent 2010; Thwaites 2020). However, quantitative research on the effect of name choice on women's perceived commitment is inconclusive (Robnett et al. 2016; Shafer 2017), and little attention has been paid to evaluations of men's commitment on the basis of marital name choices. To close these research gaps, I designed a survey experiment using vignettes to manipulate a heterosexual couple's marital name choice in three ways: (1) a woman changes her name and a man keeps his name, which I refer to as the "conventional couple"; (2) both spouses keep their names, the "name-keeping couple"; and (3) both spouses hyphenate their names, the "name-hyphenating couple." After reading the vignette, respondents evaluated the woman's and man's perceived commitment to their relationship, their love for their partner, and how closely they conform to the respondent's image of the "ideal wife" or "ideal husband."

The design of this study has four advantages over prior research, which allow me to extend the body of work on marital name choice and make theoretical contributions to the sociology of sex and gender. First, although previous studies examined perceptions of women and men in the workplace on the basis of their adherence to gender norms (Benard and Correll 2010; Heilman et al. 2004; Hipp 2020; Quadlin 2018), family research has typically focused on more general attitudes about gender and the division of labor (Dernberger and Pepin 2020; Meagher and Shu 2019; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015; Pepin and Cotter 2018; Scarborough, Sin, and Risman 2019) or on the impact of work on family (Yu and Kuo 2021). To show how gender ideology operates at the social interactional level, I compared evaluations of women and men who made gender-conventional choices to evaluations of women and men who made gender-unconventional and egalitarian choices.[1] The results show that women in both egalitarian couple types are viewed as less committed and loving and as conforming less to respondents' image of the ideal wife than women who made the traditional marital name choice, suggesting that women are socially incentivized to adhere to norms of femininity, even in their private relationships.

Second, few studies to date have examined perceptions of men on the basis of their marital name choices (see Robnett, Wertheimer, and Tenenbaum 2018 for an exception). To shed light on why men may encourage their future wives to change their names and why they do not change their own names, I sought to answer the question of whether men are sanctioned when they or their partners break name norms. I found that men are viewed as less committed and less loving when their wives kept their surnames and are viewed as further from the image of the ideal husband when they share hyphenated surnames with their wives, suggesting that men are also socially incentivized to urge their wives to change their names.

Third, prior qualitative research suggests that respondents do not approve of name-keeping women, because of the lack of a shared family surname (Nugent 2010). Yet because survey experiments on the effect of marital name choice only compare views of women who share their husbands' surnames with women who keep or hyphenate their surnames (see Robnett et al. 2016; Shafer 2017), it is impossible to tease apart whether any penalties name-keeping women face are driven by women's norm-breaking (behavior that deviates from gendered expectations within heterosexual relationships) or because they do not share surnames with their husbands. To address this, I compared views of women who adopted their husbands' surnames (thus adhering to gender norms) with views of women in couples in which both the woman and man adopted the same hyphenated surname (thus sharing a surname but breaking gender norms). I found that women and men in the name-hyphenating couples are viewed as worse romantic partners than their conventional counterparts, showing that opposition to gender-egalitarian naming practices—and not preferences for shared surnames—underlie negative evaluations of norm-breaking women and men.

Fourth, scholars argue that men have less flexibility to break gender norms than women (Connell 2005; Vandello et al. 2008; Willer et al. 2013). However, few studies have directly compared evaluations of women who break gender norms with evaluations of men who break gender norms. In the context of marriage, women are subject to schemas of devotion to family (Blair-Loy 2001). Consequently, norms of femininity are stronger in the family than in the workplace (Ridgeway 2011). To examine the relative consequences women and men face for breaking gendered marital name norms, I compared how being in an unconventional couple affects evaluations of women and men. I found that respondents judge women in unconventional couples more harshly than men in unconventional couples, suggesting that there are certain contexts in which women are granted less flexibility in their gender performance than men.

[1] I do not mean to imply that heterosexual couples are inegalitarian at the individual level because the woman changes her name to the man's name. A woman may change her name to her husband's, and the couple may share all household and childcare activities and contribute equally to the household income. My argument is that the norm of women changing their names and men not changing their names is inegalitarian. Additionally, the cultural ideologies that support this norm—whether the idea that women should be deferent or the more innocuous claim that couples should share a family identity—are inegalitarian.

Theory and Previous Research

The "doing gender" perspective argues that gender is constructed through social interactions in which individuals signal or display femininity and/or masculinity (West and Zimmerman 1987). Individuals are expected to "do gender" across all domains of life, including work and family contexts, and are categorized as "female" or "male" based in large part on their appearance (West and Zimmerman 1987). Individuals categorized as men are expected to construct a "hegemonic masculinity" through "manhood acts," in which they exercise control over themselves and others (Connell 2005; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009), and individuals categorized as women are expected "to accommodate[e] the interests and desires of men" to construct femininity (Connell 1987:187). Practicing heterosexuality, or desiring someone on the basis of gender difference, reinforces cultural beliefs in gender complementarity and imposes an even stricter set of gender norms on couples (Ridgeway 2011; Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Schippers 2007). When men keep and women change their surnames at marriage, they adhere to gendered norms of agency and modesty, thus further constructing difference and doing gender within their heterosexual relationships (Pilcher 2017).[2]

Individuals who do not follow the expected norms of gender display are typically viewed less favorably than individuals who adhere to gender norms (West and Zimmerman 1987). Gender expectations result in double standards for men and women, both as employees and as romantic partners (Ridgeway 2011). In the context of paid work, for example, high achievement and agency are the qualities valued most in male employees, whereas likability and modesty are the qualities valued most in female employees (Heilman et al. 2004; Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Rudman 2010; Quadlin 2018; Rivera and Tilcsik 2016; Rudman and Mescher 2013). This illustrates how gender norms are enforced—in other words, how women and men are compelled to "do gender" (Hollander 2018; West and Zimmerman 1987). Previous research has given more attention to work-based sanctions than to the relationship-based sanctions associated with breaking gender norms, which is why I focused on perceptions of women's and men's relationship-based commitment in this research.

Gendered Relationship Expectations

Are women who make egalitarian marital name decisions seen as worse romantic partners than women who change their surnames? Qualitative research strongly suggests that marital name choice shapes perceptions of women's commitment. Relying on interviews with college-educated adults in the United States, Lamont (2020) reported that gendered courtship rituals, such as women changing their names after marriage, are viewed as signals of commitment even in heterosexual couples that seek egalitarian relationships. Other qualitative research has shown that U.S. respondents believe that name changing symbolizes familial commitment and that name keeping indicates self-commitment (Hamilton et al. 2011; Nugent 2010).

Research in other Western nations has also found that interviewees associate marital name choice with familial commitment. On the basis of interviews with Finnish couples, Castrén (2019) reports that the "marital name was entwined with the transition . . . to become a family. Moreover, the name choice captured the gendered expectations that positioned women and men differently in relation to the agentic work required in the transition" (p. 253). On the basis of interviews with women in Britain, Thwaites (2020) argued that name changing is legitimized by describing it as an act of love for one's partner and that name changing is also a form of "conspicuous commitment," a means for women to publicly display marriage and gain status through connection to men.

Although there is qualitative evidence that marital name choice shapes perceived commitment, studies on the causal effects of name choice have produced inconsistent findings. Relying on survey experiments with U.S. college students, studies have shown that name-keeping women are viewed as less committed and less communal than name-changing women (Etaugh et al. 1999; Robnett et al. 2016). Research based on a survey experiment with a representative sample of the U.S. population found that male respondents with high school degrees or less viewed women who kept their names as less committed, whereas all female respondents and male respondents with higher levels of education did not view name-keeping women differently (Shafer 2017). The inconsistent findings from these two studies are surprising, given that the studies based on samples of college students (Etaugh et al. 1999; Robnett et al. 2016), who usually have more progressive attitudes, revealed more evidence of discrimination against women than a study based on a diverse sample (Shafer 2017). The discrepancy could be due to the different experimental designs.[3]

[2]Research has shown that being outside of the context of heterosexuality allows same-sex and queer couples to think more flexibly about their marital name decisions (Lamont 2020; Patterson and Farr 2017). For example, Underwood and Robnett (2019) found that LGBQ couples strive to resist heteronormative practices, maintain individual identities, and legitimate their relationships to the public through their marital name decisions (see also Dempsey and Lindsay 2018; Suter and Oswald 2003).

[3]Robnett et al.'s (2016) vignette described a happy, recently engaged, college-educated couple, and the marital name manipulation was very clear. Shafer's (2017:222) vignette described a married couple in which the woman "has been spending a lot of extra hours at her office job" and the husband is "starting to feel burdened by her absence," and the marital name manipulation was subtle. Describing a woman as working excessive amounts of overtime may have diminished her perceived commitment to such an extent that variation by marital name choice was not detectable among most respondents. I describe the couple more neutrally in my study. I also describe a couple that will be getting married soon, because I expect that evaluations based on marital name choice matter most at the time when the couple is making the decision to change, keep, or hyphenate their surnames.

In this study, I reconsidered the relationship between name-keeping after marriage and perceptions of a woman's quality as a romantic partner. I hypothesized that name-changing women conform to feminine expectations of deference and modesty and that name-keeping women break these norms because they signal individualism and agency. Because women are expected to "do femininity" to be evaluated positively in their respective roles (Heilman 2001; West and Zimmerman 1987), I predicted that women who kept their surnames would be viewed as less committed and loving and as further from respondents' image of the ideal wife than women who took their husband's name (hypothesis 1).

Family Name Preferences versus Gendered Expectations

Are women who share surnames with their husbands viewed similarly with regard to their quality as romantic partners regardless of whether both partners use the man's surname or both partners use a combination of their names? Prior research has shown that respondents believe couples should share a surname to create a family identity (Hamilton et al. 2011; Nugent 2010). However, quantitative studies have only compared women who took their husbands' surnames (conventional, shared surname) with women who kept or hyphenated their surnames (unconventional, no shared surname), so they could not disentangle whether negative views of women are caused by their gender deviance or by their lack of a shared surname. If a preference for shared surnames underlies negative evaluations of women who break name norms, women who share hyphenated surnames with their husbands (i.e., both partners adopt a hyphenated surname consisting of the woman's and the man's birth surnames) will be viewed similarly to women who adopt their husbands' surnames (hypothesis 2a).

However, women who adopt hyphenated surnames still signal some agency, even if their husbands also adopt the same hyphenated surname. Therefore, women who share hyphenated surnames still violate norms of feminine deference, so social psychological theories of gender deviance suggest they will be sanctioned. Perceptions of women in this unique couple type may also be shaped by the husband's choice to hyphenate the surname. Given that men are not expected to change their surnames after marriage (Powell et al. 2010), a shared, hyphenated surname may be perceived as indicating the wife's dominance in the relationship and as challenging social norms that women should be subordinate to men. If a preference for normative gender displays underlies negative evaluations of women who break name norms, women who share hyphenated surnames with their husbands will be viewed as less committed and loving and as further from the ideal wife than women who take their husbands' surnames (hypothesis 2b).

Perceptions of Heterosexual Men Targets

Are men in marital name norm-breaking couples viewed as worse romantic partners than men in conventional couples? Marital name research typically focuses on heterosexual women's reasons for their choices and on how women are perceived on the basis of their choices. Yet men play a role in heterosexual couples' marital name decisions, even if their role is passive. Interview-based research in the United States, Finland, Britain, and Norway showed that men prefer their wives to change their names and encourage them to do so and that men rarely consider changing or hyphenating their own surnames (Castrén 2019; Duncan et al. 2020; Lamont 2020; Thwaites 2020).

Relying on a survey experiment, Robnett et al. (2018) found that men in unconventional, name-keeping couples were viewed as less powerful than men in conventional couples, suggesting that men in unconventional couples break norms of masculinity. Men may be viewed as more committed and better husbands when they adhere to gendered relationship scripts (i.e., when they retain their names and when their wives change their names). In other words, to be perceived as "ideal husbands," men may need to be perceived as "good men." This perspective suggests that men in couples in which both partners keep or both partners hyphenate their surnames will be viewed as less committed and loving and as further from respondents' image of the ideal husband (hypothesis 3a).

Although unconventional men risk masculinity loss and judgment, they may be viewed as more committed and loving than conventional men. Cancian (1986) argued that both women and men are evaluated as "loving" on the basis of sacrificial behaviors. Men who marry women who keep or hyphenate their names may be viewed as supportive or as making a sacrifice, which could increase perceptions of their commitment to their partners. Additionally, research has shown that outside of the workplace, men may be rewarded for breaking gender norms because they appear progressive (Kolb 2014). Some marital name research also suggests that this is a possibility. When asked to explicitly compare a man with a hyphenated surname with the "typical married man," U.S. college students rated name-hyphenating men as more accommodating and committed to their marriages (Forbes et al. 2002). In another study, U.S. students described men in name-keeping couples with expressive traits (Robnett et al. 2018). This perspective suggests that men in couples in which both partners keep or both partners hyphenate their surnames will be viewed as more committed and loving and as closer to respondents' image of the ideal husband (hypothesis 3b).

Relative Perceptions of Women and Men Targets

Does norm-breaking affect evaluations of women differently than evaluations of men? In the previous section, I argued that adhering to traditional marital name norms is a way for men to "do masculinity" and for women to "do femininity." Because masculinity is associated with social status (Ridgeway 2011), scholars argue that masculinity is more valued than femininity and that masculinity loss is more consequential than femininity loss (Vandello et al. 2008; Willer et al. 2013). This account suggests that men will face more severe consequences than women for breaking gender norms. In the context of the present study, this perspective on gender predicts that (1) men will be viewed as less committed and loving and as further from the ideal husband when they are in norm-breaking couples (hypothesis 3a, repeated from above) and that (2) being in a norm-breaking couple will have a stronger negative effect on evaluations of men than on evaluations of women (hypothesis 4a).

There are nevertheless many reasons to expect that women will face harsher criticism than men when breaking norms in the family domain. First, it is unclear whether men will face any penalties when they break name norms, so it seems unlikely that they would face harsher penalties than norm-breaking women. Second, the context (e.g., family, work) may determine whether breaking gender norms results in larger penalties for women or men. Norms of femininity are strongest in the context of the heterosexual family, in which it is a moral obligation for women to be seen as devoted wives and mothers (Blair-Loy 2001). Third, because Americans do not believe that men would willingly choose to change their names at marriage (Powell et al. 2010), and marital name decisions are perceived to be outside of men's purview (Castrén 2019), women may be perceived as responsible for men's deviations from marital name traditions. Survey respondents may therefore attribute couples' unconventional name choices to women and sanction them more harshly than their husbands. Fourth, some scholars find that men who enact "feminine" behaviors for the sake of their family, such as requesting flexible work assignments for childcare reasons, are viewed as more likable than women who enact the same types of behaviors (Munsch 2016). These findings suggest that breaking marital name norms will have a stronger negative effect on evaluations of women's commitment, love, and conformity to respondents' image of the ideal spouse than on men's (hypothesis 4b).

Research Design

I conducted a survey experiment to test for the causal (vs. correlational) effects of marital name choice on women's and men's perceived commitment, love, and conformity to the ideal spouse. Survey experiments are better able to capture unconscious gender biases and are less prone to social desirability biases than traditional survey methods (Auspurg and Hinz 2015).

Data

To assess perceptions of women and men who violate martial name traditions in the United States, I worked with Qualtrics, a survey firm that recruits respondents from multiple market research panels.[4] Panel members were recruited through short e-mail invitations that include the expected time of the survey and the payment[5] respondents would receive for participation but excluded details about the survey topic. Studies have shown that results from survey experiments based on diverse nonprobability samples replicate results from experiments conducted with probability-based samples (Mullinix et al. 2015; Simmons and Bobo 2015; Weinberg, Freese, and McElhattan 2014).

From December 2018 to February 2019, Qualtrics recruited a sample of respondents, targeting a demographic distribution reflecting the U.S. population in 2018 with regard to gender, age, race/ethnicity, and education. Before delivering the data, Qualtrics removed observations of respondents who failed attention checks, sped through the survey, or straight-lined (i.e., gave the same response to more than 20 consecutive questions). Among 544 respondents in the initial sample, I removed data from 41 respondents who did not correctly identify the couple's name choice at the end of the survey[6] and two respondents with missing data. The analytic sample consisted of 501 respondents (501 observations for man targets, 499 observations for woman targets). Columns 1 and 2 in Table 1 report respondents' characteristics from the initial and analytic samples. Column 3 in Table 1 reports the targeted quotas.

Experimental Manipulations

I randomly assigned respondents to different vignettes describing a soon-to-be-married heterosexual couple. First

[4]Respondents were recruited through Web site intercepts, member referrals, targeted e-mail lists, gaming sites, customer loyalty web portals, permission-based networks, and social media.

[5]Respondents were paid in the form of points that are redeemable for airline miles, gift cards, sweepstakes tickets, and vouchers (approximately equal to $1.80 for the present survey).

[6]I asked respondents a question to check that they understood the name manipulation correctly: "According to the story, what did David Miller and Amanda Taylor decide on their married last name?" I provided them with the following options: "Miller," "Taylor," "Miller-Taylor/Taylor-Miller," "They will each keep their last name," "Amanda's last name will be Taylor-Miller. David's last name will stay Miller." I did not require respondents in the condition in which both partners hyphenated their names to give the correct name order to pass the manipulation check.

Table 1. Respondent Demographic Characteristics.

	Proportion/Mean (*SD*)		
	Initial Sample[a]	Analytic Sample[b]	Targeted Quota[c]
Gender identity			
Men	.469	.459	.492
Women	.518	.527	.508
Nonbinary and trans	.013	.014	
Race			
White, non-Hispanic	.560	.568	.602
Black, non-Hispanic	.144	.134	.123
Hispanic	.211	.213	.183
Other	.084	.085	.093
Missing Data	.002		
Age (18–80 years)	44.4 (16.3)	45.0 (16.4)	
18–34 years	.332	.316	.300
35–54 years	.362	.363	.327
≥55 years	.307	.321	.373
Education			
High school or less	.344	.328	.393
Some college or associate's degree	.414	.434	.307
Bachelor's degree or more	.241	.238	.301
Annual household income			
$0–$19,999	.251	.250	
$20,000–$39,999	.245	.246	
$40,000–$69,999	.259	.263	
≥$70,000	.246	.241	
Marital status			
Married	.467	.471	
Never married, widowed, divorced, or separated	.533	.529	
Sexual orientation			
Heterosexual	.879	.878	
Gay, bisexual, queer	.122	.122	
Parental status			
≥1 children	.638	.653	
0 children	.362	.347	
Region			
South	.434	.435	
Midwest	.198	.193	
Northeast	.161	.157	
West	.205	.215	
Missing Data	.002		
Total number of respondents	543	501	

Note: Original survey data were collected by Qualtrics. Proportions are rounded to the nearest decimal point.
[a]The initial sample includes respondents who had missing data or failed manipulation checks.
[b]The analytic sample includes respondents who had no missing data and passed manipulation checks.
[c]Targeted quotas are based on American Community Survey U.S. demographic characteristics in 2018 (U.S. Census Bureau 2018a, 2018b, 2018c).

names signaled targets' sex category.[7] I manipulated the couple's marital name choice in three ways by changing the last sentence of the vignette: (1) "Amanda will change her last name to David's last name, so their last name will be Miller" (the conventional couple, representing 87 percent of heterosexual U.S. couples); (2) "David and Amanda will both keep their birth last names, so David's last name will be Miller and Amanda's last name will be Taylor" (the name-keeping couple, representing 6 percent of heterosexual U.S. couples); and (3) "David and Amanda will both hyphenate their last names, so their last name will be Miller-Taylor/Taylor-Miller" (the name-hyphenating couple, representing <1 percent of heterosexual U.S. couples; ordering of the hyphenated surname was randomized[8]) (percentages from Shafer and Christensen 2018).

I also manipulated the couples' household incomes, but I only report the effects of the marital name manipulation in this article. Respondents were randomly assigned to read about a couple whose household income would be $40,000 or $110,000 annually. I view the variation in household income as an advantage, as it allows me to generalize the effects of marital name choice to couples with different incomes. Below is an example vignette in which both partners keep their names:

[7]To select first names, I determined the average age of first marriage for women and men in 2015 (27 for women, 29 for men), which is when I began developing this study. I subtracted those ages from 2015 to determine men's and women's birth years (1986 and 1988, respectively) and selected common names in those years (Social Security Administration 2017). Names were gendered, indicating a woman and man. I expect that most respondents perceived the woman and man as heterosexual and cis-gendered. I selected common surnames that were similar in length (U.S. Census Bureau 2014). Because the forenames and surnames I selected are more commonly used by white, non-Hispanic individuals (Tzioumis 2018; U.S. Census Bureau 2014), it is likely that respondents perceived the targets as white. It is possible respondents would hold black or other nonwhite couples to different standards of marital name choice, which future research could explore.

[8]I examined whether results differed on the basis of the ordering of the hyphenated surname (see Supplemental Table C). I estimated linear regressions with a four-category variable for marital name choice: (1) woman changes name (reference); (2) both keep names; (3) both hyphenate—man's surname first; (4) both hyphenate—woman's surname first. Cognitive pretesting prior to the implementation of this study suggested that there is no cultural consensus on whether the first or second surname is the more important, which likely explains why results are consistent across surname order, with one minor exception. Compared with men in the conventional couple, respondents viewed men in both iterations of the dual hyphenated surname as further from the ideal husband; however, the effect reached statistical significance only for the surname in which the man's name was first ($b = -.66$, $p < .05$) and not the surname in which the woman's name was first ($b = -.43$, $p = .15$).

Table 2. Dependent Variable Means and Standard Deviations across Conditions.

	Woman Changes Name	Both Keep Names	Both Hyphenate Names
Evaluations of women targets			
Commitment/love	8.88 (1.50)	7.52 (2.14)	7.77 (2.09)
Conformity to "ideal" wife	7.61 (1.85)	6.41 (2.40)	6.38 (2.48)
Observations per cell	166	143	190
Evaluations of men targets			
Commitment/love	8.56 (1.67)	8.04 (1.81)	8.33 (1.67)
Conformity to "ideal" husband	7.02 (2.03)	6.65 (2.50)	6.57 (2.36)
Observations per cell	168	144	189

> David Miller and Amanda Taylor, both in their late 20s, have been a couple for 3 years. They are both employed full-time. When they move in together, their household income will be about $110,000 a year. They enjoy having dinner together and watching movies and are getting married soon. David and Amanda will both keep their birth last names, so David's last name will be Miller and Amanda's last name will be Taylor.

With this design, I was able to assess how couples' marital name choices affect how they are viewed during the period leading up to marriage. Reactions to marital name preferences during this period are more likely to shape actual marital name choices than reactions during other periods. For example, a woman who is engaged may discuss her marital name preference with family and friends (or imagine what their reactions would be) and their (imagined) reactions to her preference may shape whether she makes her preferred choice or a different choice. Research shows that women are finely attuned to taking on the role of the other and thus assessing the possible consequences to their gendered behaviors (Trautner, Hoffman, and Borland 2022). Therefore, even if marital name choices only result in strong reactions in the period immediately before and after marriage, these reactions can still have major impacts because this is the time when couples usually make their marital name decisions. It is also possible that the reactions couples receive to their marital name choices will shape how they feel about their gender performance throughout the course of their lives. For example, a woman who was seen as less committed after announcing that she intended to keep her surname may think twice before making another decision that does not correspond to gender norms.

Dependent Variables

To measure perceptions of the targets' commitment and love, I scaled responses to two questions adapted from Doan, Miller, and Loehr (2015): "How committed to the relationship would you say Amanda/David is?" and "How in love would you say Amanda/David is with David/Amanda?" (mean = 8.20, $SD = 1.88$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$). Both were measured on 10-point scales ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 10 ("very"). Love is an emotion felt toward another person, whereas commitment can refer to loyalty, support, or obligation to another person. Because the idealized form of marriage in the United States is love based (Coontz 2005) and respondents in prior qualitative studies claimed that marital name choice signaled both commitment and love, I expected marital name choice to have similar effects on perceived commitment and love.[9]

To assess perceptions of the targets as desirable spouses, I created a novel item that asks "How close do you think Amanda/David is to the ideal wife/husband?" on a 10-point-scale ranging from 1 ("not close at all to the ideal husband/wife") to 10 ("very close to the ideal husband/wife") (mean = 6.77, $SD = 2.32$).[10] As there is no single "ideal wife" or "ideal husband," I allowed respondents to make the evaluation on the basis of their own definition of this term. See Table 2 for means and standard deviations across conditions for both dependent variables.

Analytic Strategy

Because the dependent variable is measured on a continuous scale (1–10), I estimated ordinary least squares regression models to examine the effects of marital name choice on perceptions of women's and men's commitment and love and conformity to respondents' image of the ideal spouse.[11] To

[9]I examined whether results differed on the basis of the specification of the dependent variable (see Supplemental Table D). I estimated linear regressions on the commitment and love items separately and compared them with the scaled item in the main models. Results were consistent across each specification.

[10]To minimize potential ordering effects, I randomized whether respondents evaluated the woman or man first and the order of the outcome measures.

[11]Visualizations of the residuals indicated possible deviations from ordinary least squares assumptions of normality and homoskedasticity. Therefore, I analyzed regression models with robust standard errors. I also ran robust regressions, which weight observations on the basis of their influence, to ensure that outliers were not driving the results. Neither approach changed the results presented in Table 2.

examine whether the impact of marital name choice on evaluations differed for women and men targets, I estimated linear regression models with an interaction between marital name choice and target gender, clustering standard errors on respondent ID to account for the fact that respondents evaluated both women targets and men targets. All models included controls for respondent characteristics that may affect attitudes about marital name choice and gender (Hamilton et al. 2011; Shafer 2017): respondent gender,[12] age, education, race and ethnicity, marital status, parental status, sexual orientation, income, and region (Supplemental Table A reports how control variables were measured and constructed).[13] Models also include a control variable for question order (whether respondents were asked about the woman or man first) and the manipulated household income of the target couple.

Results

Table 3 reports the effects of marital name choice on women's and men's perceived commitment/love and conformity to respondents' image of the ideal wife or husband.

First, supporting hypothesis 1, I found that name-keeping women are viewed as 14 percent less committed and loving than name-changing women ($p < .001$) and about 12 percent further from the ideal wife than name-changing women ($p < .001$).

Second, respondents also perceived women in the name-hyphenating couple as about 12 percent less committed and loving ($p < .001$) and about 13 percent further from the ideal wife ($p < .001$). These results support hypothesis 2b, which argued that the gender deviance rather than the lack of a shared surname drives negative views of women who violate marital name norms. There is no support for hypothesis 2a, which suggested that women who share hyphenated surnames with their husbands would be viewed similarly to conventional women.

Third, the results provide some support for hypothesis 3a, which predicted that men would be viewed less favorably when they violated norms. Compared with men in the conventional couple, men in the name-keeping couple are viewed as about 5 percent less committed and loving ($p < .05$) and about 4 percent further from the ideal husband, although this latter effect does not reach the conventional threshold of statistical significance ($p = .10$). Evaluations of commitment and love were about 2 percent lower for men in the name-hyphenating couple than for men in the conventional couple, but this effect is insignificant ($p = .205$). However, men in the name-hyphenating couple were viewed as about 5 percent further from the ideal husband ($p < .05$). There is no support for hypothesis 3b, which suggested that men may be viewed as better romantic partners when they break marital name norms. Thus, the current research findings deviate from prior work showing, on the basis of college student samples, that women and men with hyphenated surnames were viewed favorably with regard to expressive traits (Forbes et al. 2002).

Fourth, breaking marital name norms had larger effects on evaluations of women than on evaluations of men. Being in an unconventional couple negatively affected evaluations of women and men, but the effects on women were more than twice the size of those on men. Supporting hypothesis 4b, Table 4 shows that being in a name-keeping or name-hyphenating couple (compared with a conventional couple) had a significantly larger negative effect on women's commitment and love and women's perceived conformity to the ideal spouse (compared with men's) ($p < .001$ for all). These

[12]The survey asked respondents "What is your gender identity?" Response options were "woman," "man," and "different identity (please specify)." Seven respondents selected "different identity," six indicated that they were nonbinary or trans, and two provided additional information that they identified as transmen. Unfortunately, the small number of trans and nonbinary respondents in my sample prevents me from analyzing their attitudes separately. I expect respondents with trans and nonbinary identities (regardless of whether they identify as transwomen, transmen, or nonbinary) to be more aligned in their attitudes with women because both groups have more flexible gender attitudes (Lamont 2020). Thus, I grouped women, trans, and nonbinary respondents together when constructing the respondent gender control variable. I specify in Tables 2 and 3 that respondent gender has two levels: "woman, nonbinary, trans" and "man." I refer to respondents as "women" and "men," rather than "cis-women" and "cis-men," because any individual, cis or trans, could have identified as a "woman" or "man." Thus, labeling the category as "cis" could be a misrepresentation of some respondents' identities. For results of analyses excluding trans and nonbinary respondents, see Supplemental Table E. I reach the same substantive conclusions regardless of my modeling decisions.

[13]I examined whether results changed on the basis of whether I included control variables in the model (see Supplemental Table F). The effects reported in the main results section did not change, with one exception: in the model without controls, the effect of being in the name-hyphenating couple on men's perceived conformity to the ideal husband did not reach the conventional standard of statistical significance ($b = -.46$, $p = .06$), but with controls, the effect was negative and significant ($b = -.54$, $p < .05$). This result may differ across models because demographic characteristics of respondents are not perfectly balanced across conditions in the initial or in the analytic samples, despite randomization to condition (Supplemental Table G reports respondents' characteristics by condition). Because respondent characteristics may influence marital name attitudes (Hamilton et al. 2011), it is important to control for these factors if they are unbalanced across conditions. Thus, the model with control variables should produce more accurate estimates. According to Mize and Manago (2022, 16–17), in the analysis of survey experiments "well-selected control variables can aid inference" and "better isolate the effect of the treatment."

Table 3. Linear Regression Coefficients for Effects of Marital Name Choice on Evaluations of Woman and Man Targets.

	Evaluations of Woman Targets		Evaluations of Man Targets	
	Commitment and Love	Conformity to "Ideal" Wife	Commitment and Love	Conformity to "Ideal" Husband
Marital name choice manipulation (reference: woman changes)				
Both keep names	−1.36*** (.22)	−1.22*** (.25)	−.48* (.19)	−.43+ (.26)
Both hyphenate names	−1.19*** (.20)	−1.31*** (.24)	−.23 (.18)	−.54* (.25)
Household income manipulation (reference: lower income)				
Higher income	.20 (.17)	.15 (.20)	.08 (.16)	.23 (.21)
Respondent gender (ref = woman, nonbinary, trans)				
Man resp.	−.22 (.18)	−.08 (.21)	−.17 (.16)	.17 (.22)
Marital status (reference: not married)				
Married	.22 (.19)	.03 (.23)	−.01 (.18)	.16 (.24)
Parental status (reference: no children)				
≥1 children	−.35+ (.20)	−.26 (.23)	.15 (.18)	−.11 (.24)
Sexual orientation (reference: gay, lesbian, bi)				
Heterosexual	−.62* (.28)	−.70* (.32)	−.11 (.25)	−.30 (.34)
Race and ethnicity (reference: white, non-Hispanic)				
Black, non-Hispanic	.28 (.27)	.39 (.31)	−.05 (.24)	.67* (.33)
Hispanic	.29 (.23)	.36 (.27)	.20 (.21)	.07 (.28)
Asian, Native American, and mixed race	−.25 (.33)	−.04 (.39)	−.26 (.29)	−.23 (.40)
Age (continuous)	−.00 (.01)	−.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)	.00 (.01)
Degree (reference: HS or less)				
Some college	−.03 (.20)	−.10 (.24)	−.01 (.18)	−.20 (.25)
Bachelor's degree or more	−.46+ (.25)	−.50+ (.29)	−.54* (.23)	−.23 (.31)
Income (reference: $0–$19,999)				
$20,000–$39,999	−.32 (.25)	−.03 (.29)	−.17 (.22)	−.23 (.30)
$40,000–$69,999	−.48+ (.25)	−.52+ (.30)	−.03 (.23)	−.39 (.31)
≥$70,000	−.48+ (.28)	−.39 (.32)	−.29 (.25)	−.53 (.34)
Region (reference: South)				
Midwest	−.08 (.23)	−.20 (.27)	−.41+ (.21)	−.25 (.29)
Northeast	−.38 (.25)	−.19 (.29)	−.03 (.23)	−.35 (.31)
West	−.54* (.23)	−.46+ (.27)	−.39+ (.21)	−.73** (.28)
Question order (reference: man target first)				
Woman target first	−.38* (.17)	−.80*** (.20)	.03 (.15)	−.03 (.21)
Constant	10.36*** (.42)	9.42*** (.49)	8.95*** (.38)	7.69*** (.51)
n	499	499	501	501

Note: Original survey data were collected by Qualtrics. Values in parentheses are standard errors. All models control for targets' manipulated household income, respondent gender, age, education, race and ethnicity, marital status, parental status, sexual orientation, income, region, and question order (whether respondents were asked about the woman or the man in the vignette first). Rather than dropping seven respondents who identified as nonbinary or trans, I grouped these respondents with women for analysis. HS = high school.
$^{+}p < .10$. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

findings suggest that in the family domain, evaluations of women are more sensitive to marital name norm breaking.

Sensitivity Analysis

I examined whether the results were being driven by men with lower levels of education (see Supplemental Table B). Prior research showed that men with a higher level of education and women with both lower and higher levels of education did not view women who kept their names differently from women who changed their names (Shafer 2017). Therefore, I estimated four linear regression models to examine the effect of name keeping on targets' perceived commitment and love stratified by respondents' education and gender (women and men with relatively high or low education). Each group viewed women who kept their names as less committed and loving than women who changed their names, and the effect only fails to reach

Table 4. Linear Regression Coefficients for Interaction Effects between Marital Name Choice and Target Gender on Evaluations.

	Commitment and Love	Conformity to "Ideal" Wife/Husband
Marital name choice manipulation (reference: woman changes)		
Both keep	−.50* (.20)	−.41 (.27)
Both hyphenate	−.28 (.18)	−.54* (.24)
Target gender (reference: man target)		
Woman target	.32** (.11)	.58*** (.17)
Marital name choice × target gender		
Both keep × woman target	−.83*** (.17)	−.83*** (.24)
Both hyphenate × woman target	−.88*** (.18)	−.77*** (.23)
Household income manipulation (reference: lower income)		
Higher income	.14 (.14)	.19 (.18)
Respondent gender (reference: woman, nonbinary, trans)		
Man respondent	−.20 (.15)	.04 (.19)
Marital status (reference: not married)		
Married	.11 (.17)	.10 (.20)
Parental status (reference: no children)		
≥1 children	−.10 (.17)	−.18 (.20)
Sexual orientation (reference: gay, lesbian, bi)		
Heterosexual	−.36 (.22)	−.50^{+} (.29)
Race and ethnicity (reference: white, non-Hispanic)		
Black, non-Hispanic	.12 (.23)	.53^{+} (.28)
Hispanic	.25 (.20)	.22 (.25)
Asian, Native American, and mixed race	−.26 (.28)	−.13 (.40)
Age (continuous)	.00 (.00)	−.00 (.01)
Degree (reference: HS or less)		
Some college	−.03 (.16)	−.15 (.22)
Bachelor's degree or more	−.50* (.21)	−.37 (.27)
Income (reference: $0–$19,999)		
$20,000–$39,999	−.25 (.21)	−.13 (.27)
$40,000–$69,999	−.25 (.21)	−.46^{+} (.27)
≥$70,000	−.39^{+} (.23)	−.46 (.29)
Region (reference: South)		
Midwest	−.25 (.20)	−.22 (.24)
Northeast	−.21 (.19)	−.27 (.26)
West	−.46* (.20)	−.60* (.24)
Question order (reference: man target first)		
Woman target first	−.17 (.15)	−.42* (.18)
Constant	9.50*** (.34)	8.26*** (.45)
n	1000	1000

Note: Original survey data were collected by Qualtrics. Values in parentheses are clustered standard errors. All models control for targets' manipulated household income, respondent gender, age, education, race and ethnicity, marital status, parental status, sexual orientation, income, region, and question order (whether respondents were asked about the woman or the man in the vignette first). Rather than dropping seven respondents who identified as nonbinary or trans, I grouped these respondents with women for analysis. HS = high school.
$^{+}p < .10$. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

statistical significance among men with less education, likely because cell sizes when stratifying regressions by respondent demographics are small (e.g., there are only 80 men in the sample with high school degrees or less), and the regressions are underpowered.

Discussion

The objectives of this study were to increase knowledge about the judgment women and men face when they break gender norms in the context of heterosexual relationships and to shed light on why gender norms persist despite seemingly widespread support for gender equality. To achieve these objectives, I designed a survey experiment to examine whether women's and men's decisions to change, keep, or hyphenate their surnames after marriage shaped societal evaluations of their commitment and love and desirability as marital partners. I examined how the public perceived women across three heterosexual couples—couples in which the woman changed her name and the man kept his name,

couples in which both kept their names, and couples in which both hyphenated their names—and how respondents perceived the women's husbands. Addressing perceptions of women in couples with a shared but unconventional surname choice and perceptions of their husbands are two advantages of the present study over past studies.

This research shows that women and men are viewed as better romantic partners when they adhere to conventional, gendered marital name norms. Specifically, I found that women who kept their surnames at marriage were viewed as less committed and loving and as further from the ideal wife. It is possible that commitment-based sanctions for name keeping are driven by a belief that a shared surname symbolizes a commitment to family. Many respondents in previous qualitative studies felt that women should change their names because it was important for a couple to have a shared surname (Hamilton et al. 2011; Nugent 2010). Prior research has not, however, compared views of women who change their names with views of women who take hyphenated married names and thus violate name norms but also share their partners' surnames. In the present study, I found that even women who shared hyphenated surnames with their partners were viewed as less committed and loving and as further from the ideal wife than women who adhered to name norms.

These findings support my hypothesis that perceptions of women who violate name norms are driven by gender biases or the expectation that women should be subordinate to men in their romantic relationships.[14] It appears that the argument against unconventional marital surname choices—the idea that a couple needs a shared name or identity to have a committed relationship—is a post hoc justification for opposing gender-egalitarian marital surname practices. As other scholars have suggested, women who keep their surnames signal agency and thus violate prescriptions for femininity (Pilcher 2017; Robnett et al. 2016). Women may therefore be viewed as worse romantic partners when they keep their names because they fail to "do femininity," which is necessary for heterosexual women to be viewed as ideal wives.

Men in norm-breaking couples were also judged negatively, albeit not as harshly as women. Men were seen as less committed and loving for merely being married to a woman who kept her surname. Recall that prior research showed that men who marry name-keeping women were viewed as less powerful (Robnett et al. 2018). The present study suggests that men's perceived familial commitment is at least partially determined by their adherence to traditional norms of masculinity. However, men who shared hyphenated surnames with their wives were not viewed differently from conventional men with regard to their commitment and love. Men's choice to hyphenate their surnames may have been viewed as a sacrifice, which could mitigate negative attitudes toward norm-breaking men regarding their commitment to family. Yet men with hyphenated surnames were viewed as further from the ideal husband, again suggesting that for heterosexual men, desirability as a romantic partner is partially contingent on the construction of masculinity through traditional surname choices.

Despite claims that masculinity is more narrowly defined than femininity and easier to lose (Kane 2006; Vandello et al. 2008; Willer et al. 2013), the present study suggests that masculinity loss is not always more consequential than femininity loss. In the present study, both women and men faced judgment for breaking marital name norms, but being in a name-keeping or name-hyphenating couple resulted in larger penalties for women than for men. For example, women in the name-hyphenating couples were viewed as 13 percent further from the ideal wife than conventional women, and their husbands were viewed as 5 percent further from the ideal husband than conventional men, even though name-hyphenating women are arguably less deviant than name-hyphenating men given that it is more common for women than men to hyphenate their names. It is possible that respondents attributed the couple's unconventional name choice to the woman in the couple, leading them to sanction women more harshly than their husbands.

Would marital surname choices continue to shape views of women and men if respondents knew more about the individuals in question? In the present study, I provided respondents with a small amount of information about the target couple. Marital name choice may become less (or more) salient when additional information about women is provided, or in different contextual situations. Shafer (2017) noted with regard to her finding that marital name choice did not affect perceptions of women, except among men with lower levels of education: "By providing information on how the woman is 'behaving' as a wife, respondents in the present experiment had more information to draw from when evaluating the woman in my vignette." She concluded, "I do not believe that these null results indicate a failed experimental manipulation—rather, the results add to existing literature by, to some extent, calling into question prior results with the provision of fuller information" (p. 328). The type of information may also matter. Shafer's (2017) study provided respondents with information that the woman was overworking and that her husband was dissatisfied. Thus, it could be that marital name choice does not have an effect on evaluations of women who are described negatively, or when women's professional status is emphasized. Future research should systematically test under which conditions marital name choice shapes evaluations of women and men.

Would same-sex or queer couples be held to similar or different marital name standards than heterosexual couples? Although scholars have interviewed LGBQ couples about their marital name decisions (Dempsey and Lindsay 2018;

[14]Anecdotal evidence suggests the public does not like hyphenated surnames because they are cumbersome or impractical, which could affect views of women's likability but should not affect views of women's commitment and love for their partners.

Lamont 2020; Patterson and Farr 2017; Suter and Oswald 2003; Underwood and Robnett 2019), to my knowledge there are no systematic examinations of how LGBQ individuals are viewed on the basis of their name choices. LGBQ couples are better equipped to achieve egalitarianism in their relationships, in part because they find it easier to break norms outside of the institution of heterosexuality (Lamont 2020). However, LGBQ couples may still be held to gendered, heteronormative expectations. For example, Doan and Quadlin (2019) found that U.S. respondents thought the more feminine-presenting partners within both lesbian and gay relationships should do more female-typed chores and childcare and that masculine partners should do more male-typed chores.

Conclusion

Different-sex couples are becoming more gender-egalitarian (Carlson, Miller, and Sassler 2018; Graf and Schwartz 2011; Raley and Bianchi 2006; Sweeney and Cancian 2004), and many aspire to have an equal division of labor (Ecklund et al. 2017; Gerson 2009; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015). Yet support for gender equality as a matter of principle may not matter if society continues to sanction those who seek egalitarian relationships. Lamont (2020) argued that many heterosexual couples end up conforming to traditionally gendered dating rituals because of cultural pressure. Findings from the present study show that heterosexual women and men are socially discouraged from making egalitarian marital name choices.

Women who keep their surnames or share hyphenated surnames with their husbands are viewed as less committed and loving and as further from the ideal wife than conventional women. Their husbands are also viewed as worse romantic partners than conventional men. The consequences women and men face for breaking gendered marital surname traditions are a form of norm enforcement, possibly pushing people to follow gender norms regardless of their personal preferences. Additionally, the continued practice of women but not men changing their names after marriage may reinforce a cultural ideology of gender essentialism. Gendered practices "establish boundaries of normative behavior so that subsequent generations of boys and girls do not perceive a full range of educational, career, and life options" (Charles and Bradley 2009:961). In other words, gendered patterns of name changing are a subtle reminder that women and men are expected to be different from one another.

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Supplemental Material

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