

Tradition and gender: Norwegian men's surnames

Line Førre Grønstad

Abstract: Until recently, little attention has been given to men's surname choices in couples. By analysing men's narratives, this study investigates the motivations and social implications of their choices. Drawing on historical and sociocultural perspectives, it demonstrates how men's names are privileged in Norwegian culture compared to women's names despite a high degree of gender equality. Men who break the norms want to make their own decisions. Overall, this research contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality by highlighting the transformative potential of seemingly small acts, such as name choices. It also contributes to socio-onomastics by highlighting surname choice as a meaningful and gendered activity.

Keywords: surnames, gender, men, tradition, heterosexual couples

1. Introduction

Prince Philip: You are my wife. Taking my, taking my name is the law.

Queen Elizabeth: It's the custom, not the law.

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Prince Philip: A custom practiced so universally that it might as well be the law. You can't do that. Am I to be the only man in the country whose wife and children don't take his name? [...] What kind of marriage is this? What kind of family? You have taken my career from me, you have taken my home, and my name? I thought we were in this together.

The British television programme, *The Crown*, portrays the life of the British royal family. The above conversation takes place in the third episode of the first series aired on 4 November 2016. In the early 1950s, Elizabeth, the newly crowned monarch of the United Kingdom, faced pressure, both from her husband and from the government, in matters such as where to live and what to call the family. In *The Crown*, and in real life, Queen Elizabeth had the superior position as head of the nation. Yet she was also a wife, hence in a subordinate position in the nuclear family she created together with Prince Philip.

The quote illustrates how closely connected customs and laws can be, and how individuals may relate to them. Norms become more visible in situations where gender and action do not align and examples of such situations include when a woman becomes the head of the United Kingdom in the mid-1900s or Norwegian men change their surname in the 2010s. Until recently, little attention has been given to men's naming choices as gendered, as it is most often women's choice to keep, change or combine surnames in marriage that has faced the greatest interest (examples of this focus includes Noack & Wiik 2008; Omura 2019; Fitzgibbons Shafer 2017; Hoffnung & Williams 2016; MacEacheron 2016; Robnett et al. 2016; Keels & Powers 2013). In sum, the impression is that women must offer an explanation regardless of surname choice. Men's surname keeping has resulted in few questions, even though it is the seemingly neutrality of men's keeping combined with the idea of the nuclear family as surname sharers that make women's choice making necessary. Women must in many cases choose between keeping their birthname or sharing surnames with their children and husband. In this article I aim to shift the focus from women to men to shed light on how men perceive their own surname keeping as well as surname changing.

Norway has been declared one of the most gender equal countries in the world (World Economic Forum 2022). Still, men in Norway as a group have higher wages (Penner et al. 2022) and they work longer hours (Statistics Norway 2022a), spend less time on household chores (Statistics Norway 2012) and have lower rates of sick leave than Norwegian women (Statistics Norway 2022b). In addition, and more specifically to the point here, men in Norway take their partner's surname to a much lesser extent than women. A survey from 2018 showed that almost half of the women who married took their partner's surname, while less than 5 per cent of the men changed their surname (Grønstad 2020:106).¹ And while the number of women keeping their surname increased from the 20 per cent in a 2003-survey, the number of men changing surnames stayed almost the same during the same period (Noack and Wiik 2005). Even though the majority (52 per cent of the men and 68 per cent of the women) preferred to use both the mother's and the father's surnames for the children, most preferred that the child had its father's name as the main surname (Grønstad 2020:109).

The preference for using the man's surname for all the members of the nuclear family and for the family line in a Norwegian (as well as a British) context can be termed an institution of patronymy. Historically, this use of the man's surname is a rather recent practice. The custom among most Norwegians was to have a personal name only, with the first name of their father as a last name (see for example Utne 2001). In addition, the name of the place where they lived could be added, more like an address (Utne 2003). Hence, even today, most Norwegians have surnames signifying either the first name of a man from their family living in the late 1800s (i.e. Rasmussen from Rasmus, Størksen from Størk) or the name of the place or farm where a relative lived in the early 1900s (i.e. Gjerde, Fjørtoft, Rødstøl).

Only from 1923, when the first Norwegian name law came into force, were wives and children required to use the surname of the husband and the father respectively (see Lundh 1924 for a commented

¹ In the Norwegian numbers, the gender of the partner has not been asked for, and they may also include members of married same-sex couples as same-sex marriage became legal in Norway in 2009.

version of the law). The wife was allowed to keep her surname from birth as a second first name, later termed a *middle name*. A middle name is a name of the surname type that is placed before the main surname (Utne 1999). In Norway, the custom of patronymy had been introduced among the upper classes in the late 1700s and had become the norm among the upper classes and in the urban areas by the late 1800s (Nedrelid 2002; Utne 2002). In some parts of the United Kingdom, this custom stems from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (S. Wilson 1998). Hence, in the 1950s, Prince Philip had a long tradition to lean on, as did the internationally oriented upper classes in Norway some decades earlier.

During the decades following 1923, patronymy became more broadly institutionalized among Norwegians. The patronymic institution continually recreates the heteronormative family with the man as a surname-keeper, his wife who takes his surname and his children who continue his surname. Even as the custom slowly changes, making it more common for women to keep their surnames, and even giving their surnames to their offspring, men rarely change their surnames (Grønstad 2020:105–109). During the 1940s, the 1960s and the 1970s, the law was changed in favour of increasing women's possibilities for keeping their birthnames (Fisknes, Løkkeberg & Stabel 1976; Nerdrum 1971; Austbø 1986). But it was not until 1979, that men could take their wife's surname without needing special legal permission. Of the three – men's surname keeping, women's surname changing and children's use of the father's surname – men's surname keeping shows the greatest consistency (Grønstad 2020:112). This is still the case, also in most other countries with a similar naming custom (Fitzgibbons Shafer and Christensen 2018:9; Slade 2015:337; Johansen quoted in Brylla 2009:94).

Naming practices vary around the world. In most cultures where individuals carry more than their given names, the choice of surname is highly gendered. In most of the Scandinavian countries, the Anglo-speaking countries, large parts of Europe and Japan, men keep their surnames, women tend to change upon marriage and children take surnames from their father (MacEacheron 2016; Fitzgibbons

Shafer & Christensen 2018; Kyoko 2018; Castrén 2019; Noordewier et al. 2010). Even where women tend to keep their surnames in marriage, such as Spain and Portugal, China and the Arab speaking countries, children are usually given their father's name as their main surname. If given names from both parents, these usually originate from the grandfathers, not the grandmothers (Utne 2000; Valetas 2001; Qi 2018; Pietsch 2022). Hence, the women's surnames are lost, if not in the first generation, then in the next.

In a Norwegian context, I aim to investigate the following questions: How do norms of gendered naming emerge in men's stories about their surnames and surname-choices? How do they relate their actions to these norms?

2. Material and method

The material I use to answer these questions consists of responses to two qualitative questionnaires. A qualitative questionnaire is a list of open questions on a certain topic, and is a method used within ethnology and folkloristics for documenting everyday life from the early 1900s and onwards (Skott 2008; Grønstad 2013; Lilja 1996). The first of the two was sent out by Norwegian Ethnological Research (NEG) in 2014.² It was aimed at a general audience who could read Norwegian, and asked for accounts of surname choices, experiences, and reactions. It was sent to the regular respondents of NEG, and spread through social media. The questionnaire allowed for a single narrative from the respondents, making both long and short responses possible and encouraged. I use the 101 responses received from those who identified as men, out of the total of around 450 responses. The difference in number between men and women questionnaire respondents may be part of a larger pattern of more women than men responding

² The questionnaire can be found here: <https://dms08.dimu.org/file/032wazLzTo37> (accessed 5 July 2022). NEG is a tradition archive who has documented everyday life mainly through qualitative questionnaires since 1946, located at the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History. For more information about NEG, see: <https://norskfolkemuseum.no/en/neg> (accessed 5 July 2022).

to qualitative questionnaires, something I experienced while being part of the NEG-team (Grønstad 2013). It could also be argued that surname choice in marriage is a topic more salient for women than men. With very few exceptions, the men wrote from a heterosexual perspective. One transman wrote about how surnames contributed to his transition process, and I expand on his response and the possibilities surname choice offers for the formation and confirmation of self elsewhere (Grønstad 2020:231). Of the men, 99 can be termed *keepers*, including the transman, as they all kept their surnames in relationships, or took their own surnames for granted in their accounts. Two can be termed *changers*, as they took their woman partner's surname or combined their surnames.

The respondents in the NEG questionnaires are generally asked to avoid providing their own names or the name of others due to privacy and data protection, and researchers use the responses under the condition that personal information about the respondents is not included in this work. Hence, I do not refer to the respondents by name. These men were born between 1924 and 1993, with the majority having been born in the 1940s and the 1950s. They came from most counties in Norway, from both rural and urban areas, and had academic as well as manual labour occupations.

I distributed the second questionnaire in 2016 and it was aimed at men from a majority Norwegian background who had changed their surname in heterosexual relationships. They were recruited through social media and local newspapers. The questions were similar to those in the first questionnaire, tailored especially to men with women as partners. In addition, I asked about personal information such as their original and new full names, as well as the year of their surname change and years when they had children. This questionnaire received 60 responses. These men also came from both rural and urban areas from all over Norway and had a variety of occupations. They were born between 1951 and 1991 and were younger on average than the men who responded to the first questionnaire. The majority were born in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. American research has shown that younger men took their wife's surname to greater extent than

older men, suggesting that shifts in possible choices may be related to changing attitudes across generations (Fitzgibbons Shafer & Christensen 2018:15). A Norwegian study of surname choices in marriage in Oslo in the 1990s (Fjellhaug 1998:52) also found that men who took their wife's surname were younger than those that did not.

In addition, I have interviewed three men. One was interviewed before the questionnaire was sent out, and two were chosen based on the questionnaire responses to obtain additional information on certain aspects of their stories.

I conducted several close readings of the written and oral accounts from the men in order to identify patterns and themes, looking at the different accounts in relation to each other as well as to previous research on surnames and surname choices. My analysis has been guided by the theoretical framework of 'doing gender', as developed by sociologists Candace West, Don H Zimmerman and Sarah Fenstermaker (West & Zimmerman 1987; West & Fenstermaker 1995; West & Zimmerman 2009). The practices where gender is done, happen routinely in everyday interaction with others (West & Zimmerman 1987:126). Certain forms of expression are taken to be results of a womanly or a manly nature, even though they occur as results of social situations. This means that they are both the result of, and the rationale for, different social situations and happenings. By exploring how gender is done, it is possible to discuss how differences between gendered categories are produced (West & Fenstermaker 1995:9; West & Zimmerman 1987:126).

Despite the close connection between gender equality and naming practices, the use of surnames in relationships has received little attention in discussions on gender equality in Norway (Melby et al. 2006 is one exception, with their focus on marriage and family in the decades before and after the turn of the 20th century). In works aimed at providing overviews over practices and laws where men and women as groups have been treated differently, naming laws are hardly mentioned (examples are Hagemann et al. 2020; Danielsen, Larsen & Ovesen 2015). While topics such as the right to vote, work and provide care are important, practical needs such as the every-

day organization of children's care and household chores may have resulted in some of the changes towards greater gender equality. Hence, as gender researchers Laura T. Hamilton, Claudia Geist and Brian Powell argue, surname practices may to a greater extent reflect ideas of gender and the organization of gender hierarchies as they have few practical consequences for the individual (Hamilton, Geist & Powell 2011). The institution of patronymy may be more difficult to break with if the costs of following it are experienced as smaller and the benefits higher than the costs and benefits of breaking with it.

I base my work on Hamilton, Geist and Powell's argument that changes in naming practices say something about changes in gender equality. In addition, I lean on political scientist and gender theorist Anne Phillips' argument: 'When outcomes are "different" (read unequal), the better explanation is that the opportunities were themselves unequal' (Phillips 2004:6, her parenthesis). When men and women's surname choices differ to such a great degree, I take it as an indication that men and women make their choices under different circumstances. When men change surnames, the tensions that follow may illuminate gender inequality and highlight power relations.

I organize this article into five topics. In the first, 'the neutrality of surname keeping', accounts from men who have kept their birthname make it clear that for many respondents, men are supposed to retain their surnames. Many of these men belong to the older generations. The second topic, 'a rise of reflexivity', deals with how surname keeping and surname changing has become a topic of discussion for some men; they are often younger. Here, the institution of patronymy is questioned. One reason for such reflection, is the growth of strength in the norm of gender equality, as I discuss as the third topic, 'men's choices as feminist'. Some of the men who made changes to their surname did so because, as described as the fourth topic, they had certain 'understandings of a past', where naming practices were not patronymic, arguing that present day traditions of patronymy were both recent and unfavourable for women. The fifth and final heading, 'modernizing tradition', includes accounts from men who took the act of surname sharing to be tradition, not the preference of the hus-

band's surname. These men reframed surname choice traditions and included their own change of surname as part of the traditions.

3. The neutrality of surname keeping

I begin my analysis of the responses with stories where men's keeping is taken for granted. Some of the men in the material spoke of men's surname keeping and women's surname changing as something that just happened by itself, as it actually did, when many of them married until 1979. These men spoke of their actions as tradition, not law. Perhaps few reflected on the law. However, it is probable that the law of the latter half of the twentieth century reflected the common understanding of surname giving and gender hierarchy.

Upholding the institution required gendered actions, and one respondent wrote: 'I am a man, and for me (76 years) it was and is natural to continue to use the surname that my father had' (born 1937, his parenthesis). Another, younger, man wrote: 'As a Man [sic] I have, true to tradition, kept my family name' (born 1963). As men, they took the use of their surnames for granted. American work on name choices has also shown that men used their gender as an argument for keeping their birth name (Atkinson 1987:37; Robnett and Leaper 2013:108–110). Gender researcher Rebekah Wilson's British survey found that the surname topic was experienced as irrelevant for many men with the argument that they were men (R. Wilson 2009:140). Other research from countries with a patronymic naming practice shows that men elsewhere also take the use of their surnames in the families for granted (Hagström 1999:188; Jones et al. 2017:315). Similar findings in a Swedish study made the name researcher Sonja Entzenberg conclude that the lack of reflection among men contributed to making men's surnames the natural choice for the nuclear families (Entzenberg 2004:39).

These men closely associate their surnames with their birth families, mainly to their father's side. An image of the past guides the future, and certain actions are valued above others. Sometimes this goes without saying, and sometimes patronymic practices are vocal-

ized as tradition. Even the idea of traditions more generally, could strengthen a sense of meaning in a surname. One respondent grew up in a ‘family line with strong traditions’ (born 1954). Traditions strengthen certain connections above others, as this family line followed the previous users of the surname and excluded other possible family lines. The respondent’s wife changed from a rather common surname, ‘for the reason that it was not a surname that was worth keeping – and perhaps she was polite toward me. Perhaps she was somewhat shaped by tradition, like me’ (born 1954). The surname was closely tied to his identity as it connected him with the past and to a certain family through the ‘strong traditions’ that followed the surname.

The respondent used the term tradition in two ways. Naming choices had to do with his *surname* and her *change*. Both are needed to keep up with the order of the patronymic naming institution, and both ensure continuity. By splitting naming into element and action using folklorist Anne Eriksen’s analysis of the concept of tradition (Eriksen 1994), the gendered nature of the norm was less visible. The respondent did not elaborate on what activities these traditions included, but the use of the word connotes authority through stability and continuity. For the wife, tradition meant changing surnames, strengthened by the argument that her birth name was rather common.

Changing surnames for men could be likened to disavowing the other surname bearers (Fowler & Fuehrer 1997:319; Grønstad 2015:272). Breaking with the social order could cause humorous responses aimed at managing the situation for the surname changer, of his family, friends, and colleagues that I have described elsewhere (Grønstad 2021). It may also cause frustration. This came up in the accounts of some of the men when they spoke of naming. One respondent who kept his own surname, declared: ‘Today it is rather messy with naming in the same family. I do not understand why it should be made to be so confusing. Who benefits from that??’ (born 1943). By using two question marks, he implies that nobody benefits from this, and that families where the members do not share the same surname cause problems and disorder. He does not define what kind

of problems these could be. This illustrates an overall understanding that disorder will happen if certain norms are not followed.

In the following example, one man who described how his wife took his surname in marriage without question, continued his account with describing his feelings about his own surname from birth:

[I am] very happy that *I* did not have to change my name. That would be like giving away something of myself, losing myself somehow. Almost like an amputation. I felt proud of the name. It marked a big and good and resourceful family line. I thought little about my mother's maiden name that disappeared when she got married, and that her family was as good and resourceful as mine (born 1938).

The quote shows how his surname marked a connection with his father's family. His mother's surname belongs to 'her family', which is not 'mine'. He did not reflect on his wife's surname. The connection between him and his relatives following his father's line and not his mother's, would be brutally severed if he took another surname.

Gender may create blind spots in whose relations matter and how. Now, with hindsight, he showed reflexivity towards his mother's side of the family, but the call for action has been for him to keep his surname, and for his wife to share his. While it was also legally required at the time of marriage, this obligation was not questioned, nor mentioned by the respondent.

4. A rise of reflexivity

One of the younger surname keepers showed a very different form of reflexivity towards the use of his surname:

I want to pass my family name on to the next generation, and I am the only one in my generation who can do that. This feels like a very patriarchal and paternalistic point of view, and that is something I am not 100 per cent comfortable with, but I really do feel that this is something I truly want to do (born 1983).

The respondent favoured norms of gender equality and knew that men's surnames often dominate. Hence his wish to use his own surname caused discomfort. Surname choices have become part of the conversation, and acting patronymically needs an explanation. Sociologist Anthony Giddens describes the changing situation like this:

No longer can someone say in effect, "I am a man, and this is how men are", "I refuse to discuss things further" – statements that are normally carried in actions rather than stated in words. Behaviour and attitudes have to be justified when one is called upon to do so, which means that reasons have to be given; and where reasons have to be provided, differential power starts to dissolve, or alternatively power begins to become translated into authority (Giddens 1994:106).

Giddens might have been a little early when he wrote that men could no longer use their gender as argument and may be criticized for making generalizations based on limited data. After all, as mentioned, several respondents wrote that they kept their surnames because they were 'men'. But not all take this possibility for granted any more. Describing the use of the man's family name as 'patriarchal' shows that alternative understandings of men's (and women's) surname choice are available, even if they may be less common. Differential power has at least started to dissolve.

One respondent who took his wife's surname reflected on his choice when we spoke 18 months after the change. He explained how having a new surname still felt a bit awkward (born around 1980). Those feelings may connect with ideas and experiences of the surname as something that cannot easily be separated from the individual. The ethnologist Charlotte Hagström has written the following on names:

The personal name is such an important part of the personal and cultural identity for many individuals that they cannot be separated from the name. The name identifies me and makes me who I am [...] (Hagström 2006:16, my translation from Swedish).

Implicit for many of the men who keep their name is the understanding that the full name and the person are closely connected, independent from the family of origin. The given name combined with the surname are integral parts of them. The neutral choice according to patronymy is to keep the same surname throughout life. The respondent had weighed his options and found that his wish for the family to share a surname was stronger than his desire to keep the surname he had from birth.

For some of the respondents, patronymy norms were replaced by other norms of choice-making. For one respondent, it was not only the outcome but the process of the choice making that guided his actions:

I see myself as an innovator, someone who likes to challenge established norms and traditions, especially when I see logical flaws. I am a person who seeks to make conscious choices, and I often ask the question “why”. When we got engaged, some of these questions were: why should she take my surname, or why should we “change” surnames? [...] It would have been easier not to have specific meanings about this, and instead to go with the flow (do what others do) but I see myself as an independent and reflexive person who is not afraid to try new roads or question existing norms (born 1983, his parenthesis).

Taking his wife's surname became a choice which showed coherence between action and his identity as a man who takes responsibility for his own choices. His description of the choice fits well with an ideal of reflexivity where critical distance to norms is important. The change of surname did not change who he was. Rather, for him, it confirmed that he had the willingness and ability to act according to his ideals also when they came with the cost, or even benefit, of standing out from the crowd.

Central to many of the respondents was what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls *authenticity* (Taylor 1998). Taylor describes authenticity as part of a subjective turn in modern culture, where choices ought to be made based on authority from within the individual, rather than tradition. Taylor describes it as a need to be true to oneself and live a life that is not based on what others do (Taylor

1998:43). Authority has shifted from tradition to the individual subject, guided by choices of norms to follow, and ideas of what society should be like.

5. Men's choice as feminists

Personal choices where 'the question of identity' are central cannot necessarily be sufficiently answered by reciting 'given name and genealogy,' according to Taylor (1989:27). His use of examples highlights the importance that may be attached to names and meaning. For Taylor, authenticity is not about following one's own needs but about making judgements between needs. Inner authenticity needs to relate to something outside oneself.

One of the respondents described the process of changing his surname as a journey where, in the beginning, he paid most attention to his own needs. In the end, he had a much broader perspective on the costs and benefits of his choice. Early in their relationship, he and his wife discussed which surname(s) they wanted to use together. They ended up choosing her surname as their common middle name and his as their common surname. This felt like a relief to him as his surname became the main surname. It was easier to explain this to family, friends, and colleagues. It also required fewer practical changes in his everyday life. For example, his work email stayed the same. However, when he fathered his first daughter, his wife mentioned the topic of surnames again. She argued that women's surnames often become middle names. Middle names are frequently used by Norwegians but are formally in the position of an additional first name. Many are shortened to an initial or are left out of everyday use. At this point, his focus shifted from his own needs and conveniences to how he wanted society to be for his daughter. He and his wife then decided to switch the positions of their two original surnames, making her surname the main name. For the respondent, this decision was a 'feminist project' for both of them. It was:

a form of silent but visible rebellion against set structures symbolizing so much historically and socio-culturally, both at the family level and society level [...]. We have no illusions that our choices mean much to others, but it gives me a good feeling that my daughters share the surname of their mother and mother's mother, and that this signifies to them that the women in our family (and hence in our society) are at least as important as the men while at the same time not taking this for granted (born 1975).

He, like some of the other respondents, argues that women are equally important as men. As a father, he wanted to improve the conditions for his daughters (he went on to have more children). Gender should not decide how the family structured themselves, at least not with names.

In this couple, the wife mentioned the surname choice both times. Other respondents as well became aware of the gendered nature of choosing names after women raised the topic. When it was salient for both men and women, they could make surname choices on more equal and gender-conscious grounds. Understandings of gender equality have become part of our cultural understanding and may affect us even if we do not think about it. Surname change is no longer something that Norwegian women do, rather it has become something that Norwegian women choose (Grønstad 2015). When some men begin to think about their surnames as well, the opportunity arises for men to also be changers. The responsibility of choosing surnames can be shared by men and women, and the roles of surnames in doing gender may fade away (Pilcher 2017). Following Giddens, differential power may also fade away (Giddens 1994:106). When feminist thoughts have become commonplace in a Norwegian reality, the opportunities to act according to feminist values increase. Hence, what is considered normal has shifted.

6. Understandings of a past

The difference in conditions between men and women in society guided, as shown, some men's choice of surnames for the nuclear

family. Acting rationally and authentically meant taking more arguments into account. One argument addressed how the past should be understood. One respondent took his wife's surname nearly 40 years ago in the early 1980s. He was:

amazed that more women did not see the paradox of after (usually) several years of cohabitation and often children, they choose to be given as a package from one man to another when they get married. As with surname choice, it is up to you who you walk down the aisle with, but "it's so nice when daddy can do it." (The old Norwegian custom was after all that the couple walked up the aisle together; being followed by the father is actually recent and urban and comes from the bourgeois class in the late 1800s.) Do people not see the pattern? Or does it not matter? (born 1959, his parenthesis).

The respondent argues that surname change upon marriage, as today's wedding customs, gives the impression of being old, but that the 'Norwegian custom' was both older and more gender-equal. This way, today's practices could be separated from something more original, hence more legitimate, and with Norwegian roots. The past may be used as a resource to challenge present practices. Ideas of the present and ideals of the future may guide the interpretations of past practices and the authority given to them.

This kind of argument can be recognized from the debates around the name law. In 1922, the Norwegian biologist and women's rights activist Thekla Resvoll argued that in the 18th and 19th centuries, women of the Norwegian upper classes kept their surnames from birth, and that farmer's wives at the time often kept their surnames (Resvoll [1922] 1923). In addition, in 1960, a working group preparing for the new and revised name law that came in 1964, used similar arguments in favour of increasing a woman's right to keep her surname from birth: 'About the meaning of tradition, it can be said that all reforms aiming towards gender equality have in part represented strong changes in traditions. The tradition in question here is neither old nor without exceptions' (Gaarder et al. 1960:13, my translation). Both during the 1920s and during the easing of the law to make it eas-

ier to use women's surnames for women and children in the 1960s, the authority of the patronymic tradition was questioned based on alternative understandings of the past.

This was also the case in the arguments of gender equality in connection with laws in other countries. When the Finnish name law became gender-neutral in the early 1980s, it was described as turning the clock backwards 50 years, to a more gender equal past (Blomqvist 1987:153). In Sweden, the argument that husband and wife should share the husband's surname was described as a 50-year (1916–1963) of brackets in the history of Swedish surname customs (Andersson 1984:111). Further abroad, the Japanese naming system where men and women have been required to choose either his or her surname, and where 96 per cent chooses the man's, has been described as 'not a *traditional* system at all' (Kyoko 2018:80, cursive in original).

The point here, is not the age of the different practices, but that older practices or customs exist that may be interpreted as more authentic. This way of understanding traditions aligns with historians Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's ideologically founded critique of 'invented traditions' which:

is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983:1).

Hobsbawm and Ranger show how various phenomena belonging to a tradition were made or revised in the 1800s to fit certain political needs. The past used as reference is not just any past, but a carefully selected past. These traditions could then work to legitimize certain forms of power. In the case of naming, both the upper classes and men as a group benefited when patronymic customs became law.

For some of those arguing in favour of gender equality, the careful selection of a past that breaks with patronymic wedding practices may create links with the past of a more favourable flavour.

7. Modernizing tradition

Several respondents took their wife's surname in defiance of the favouring of men's surnames. They wanted to help change patriarchal structures and create a more gender equal society and sacrificed their own surnames to do so. Their sacrifices did not go unnoticed. One surname changer described how some of his friends commented on his surname change:

[Men] make jokes about it because it's a woman thing. Traditional in the wrong way. At the same time, it is modern (born 1974).

The respondent did what was common – he shared the surname with his nuclear family, but with a twist – he was the changer, not his wife. He reflected on the tradition of patronymy and explained that he was traditional to some extent. After all, sharing a surname is tradition, and one of the two would have to change in order to fulfil the tradition, so why not him, the man, he asked rhetorically.

The respondent redefined the naming tradition to focus on surname sharing rather than surname continuity. By focusing on 'why not the man?', he shifts the focus of tradition from women's change of surnames to the sharing of surnames in the nuclear family. He positioned himself in relation to patronymy by adapting the practices within the patronymic tradition to norms of gender equality. This shift in focus illustrates how traditions may be understood as encompassing both change and stability. Tradition was important to him, as he described himself as 'quite traditional, yes, I believe it has to do with that'. However, he also agreed that his surname change could be understood as a break with tradition because 'it is the opposite' without detailing what it is the opposite of (born 1974). He reflected on the gendered nature of naming, and in addition to norms of patronymy, i.e. tradition, he had access to norms of gender equality. Patronymy as an institution is renegotiated here, still making its mark, and it was still necessary to take it into account and to position himself in relation to it.

The respondent's account of his own choices and how they were simultaneously traditional and untraditional aligns with the argument

of folklorists Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin that traditions are created anew in the present as symbolic constructions (Handler & Linnekin 1984). Traditions are constantly interpreted, and both change, and continuity are important. Even just talking about traditions or viewing certain actions as traditional means that they are being interpreted in the present: 'To do something because it is traditional is already to reinterpret, and hence to change it' (Handler & Linnekin 1984:281). Traditions are constantly shifting, even when attempts are made to keep them unchanged.

Rather than acting in accordance with or dismissing customs, some men cherished the idea of continuity across time but dismissed arguments and customs that broke with norms of gender equality. These respondents did not take the patronymic naming tradition for granted. They deconstructed and reconstructed the different elements of practices from the patronymic customs. They did not break with all previous customs but combined them in ways appropriate for their views and families. They chose surnames in certain ways, not because of tradition but because tradition and ideals of gender equality allowed for them to name their families in accordance with authenticity and connection to something other than themselves, based among others, on ideas of continuity with a past.

8. Concluding remarks

While many social elements in Norway have changed drastically in accordance with a growth in gender equality from the 1970s, naming practices show more continuity. They mirror social structures and family ideals. The choice of surnames signals subordination and power. Hence, exploring men's surname choices challenges the story of gender equality in Norway, following Hamilton et al.'s (2011) argument that symbolic actions such as surname choices give additional insight into gender hierarchies.

When men are expected to keep their surname from birth and give it to their wife and children, women have less of a choice. Surname continuity has been related to men, and surname change to women,

with continuity accorded the higher status. This part of the patronymic custom was important for some men who kept their surnames from birth. For them, their original names symbolized their individuality as men, which made the change of surnames challenging. Keeping their names was part of *doing gender* as men, following West and Zimmerman (1987). By affording women the right, or even obligation to change their own surnames, men were also doing *difference*, in the sense of West and Fenstermaker (1995). They make connections between actions specific to certain cultural, temporal, and geographical contexts, and individuals based on gender.

Despite changing surnames throughout life having been common a century ago for both men and women, it makes more sense today for women to keep their surnames throughout life than it is for men to change their surname. But as the younger men, born in the 1970s and 1980s, more often reflect on their naming practices than the older men, these traditions continue to shift in a more gender equal direction.

Certain rationality and the need to make independent choices played a part in a different set of norms to which some of the men related. This could open for surname changes for them, highlighting the coherence between values and choice-making processes. Some men took responsibility as members of the category of men and even though they had not themselves actively oppressed women (at least to their knowledge), they took one for the team, so to speak. They understood gender equality as a norm in a society where their actions mattered, at least a little bit.

This research has shown the great variety in action and attitude towards surname choice among Norwegian men in relationships with women. Even though most men still seem to take their surnames for granted, younger men are more willing to reflect on their name choices, hence a shift across generations can be seen. Both notions of tradition and notions of gender equality are important in choice making. The choices made depend on the weight given to tradition and gender equality respectively in relation to ideas of identity and self, and of family.

The aim of this research has been to contribute to a greater understanding of choice-making among people in privileged majority positions. Several questions remain to be researched. One would be to investigate how the couples begin their conversations about surname choices, and who first raises the topic. Further, who are the men who keep their surnames, and who changes their surnames, in terms of sociological categories of education, work and size of hometown? What is the relationship between the men who make changes to their surname, the surname choices of their parents, and the surname choices of their wife's parents? Further research on experiences and perspectives of Norwegian women is needed, as well as from individuals who do not conform to gender norms, those from a minority group background such as the Sámi, as well as individuals with immigration backgrounds. Also, choice making in non-heteronormative families is still an under-researched area, not the least in the Norwegian context.

Present day surname customs are both temporally and geographically situated. The narrative of surname use in couples may be understood as linear, moving from patronymy to gender equality. This narrative does not necessarily consider that both the past and the present are rather disorganized. The practices of patronymy were included in the law in 1923 to remove the perceived disorganization of naming practices at the time. That men's surnames in couples are still preferred in the 2010s, challenges idea of contemporary Norway as gender equal. Changes across the generations in the material suggest a certain movement toward gender equality in surname practices. However, we are not quite there, yet.

Epilogue

In 1960, Queen Elizabeth declared that the members of subsequent generations requiring a surname was to be Mountbatten-Windsor (Agnew 1960). Clearly, the question of surnames in the family was a topic even for a head of state, and Prince Philip was able to name his family after all, albeit together with the family name of his wife.

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