

# ‘Our family came to be with this name’: Family identity and gender roles in surname choices

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Katrine Kehlet Bechsgaard

**Abstract:** The article focuses on surname choices among families in Denmark, seeking to add a new perspective by proposing that the choices and narratives of surnames contain information about and reflect family identity formation as well as family and gender practices. It examines individuals and couples in different family formations in accordance with the diverse family landscape of Denmark in the 2020s. The analysis shows that for some, surname choices are closely related to the idea of family, while others attach less importance to surnames. It also demonstrates that while surname choices are sometimes used for doing gender, surname choices are also part of undoing gender practices.

**Keywords:** personal names, surnames, socio-onomastics, family identity, gender roles, Denmark

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Katrine Kehlet Bechsgaard (University of Copenhagen) ‘Our family came to be with this name’: Family identity and gender roles in surname choices.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the main societal changes in the past six decades has been the change in family forms and structures, including gender norms, and the use of surnames in families in Denmark reflects this development. Just four decades ago, until 1982, Danish women automatically assumed their husband's surname. Today, Danish name law no longer distinguishes between genders, and it now allows for example unmarried couples and same-sex couples to share a surname. It is no longer a given that a woman will change her surname upon marriage, and it is also common for men to change their surnames (Statistics Denmark 2020). As is the case with other modern lifestyle choices, surname choices in families are subject to individual preferences to a much larger degree than in previous times when tradition was a more dominant factor in families and society (e.g. Giddens 1990; 1991; 1992; Beck 1992). Name choices have become a way of positioning oneself as a certain kind of couple or family and forming identity (Aldrin 2011; Bechsgaard 2015).

Denmark, like other Nordic countries, has a high degree of gender equality in families and society in general, as well as in surname diversity (Valetas 2001; Statistics Denmark 2015). Yet the connection between the rise in gender equality and surname options over the past decades in Denmark has not been studied before. This article examines the role of surnames as part of family identity formation and gender roles. The study seeks to add a new perspective to surname choices in Denmark by proposing that the choices and narratives of surnames in couples and families both contain information about and reflect family identity formation as well as family and gender practices. It examines individuals and couples representing different family forms in accordance with the diverse family landscape of Denmark in the 2020s.

The recent development in surname use in Denmark is not the norm in all Western cultures. In the United States, a study from 2010 indicated that 90 per cent of married women took their husband's surname (Gooding & Kreider 2010), and in European countries such as

Germany and France, a study from 2001 concluded that most women did the same (over 85 per cent). Fewer women did so in countries such as The Netherlands, Portugal, and Denmark (51–71 per cent) (Valetas 2001). These differences in surname practices are reflected in previous studies in which, for example, men taking the surname of a spouse has not been in focus.

First names have been used as cultural indicators in several studies across research fields (e.g. Hagström 2006; Aldrin 2011; Bechsgaard 2015; Abramitzky 2017; Knudsen 2018), some of which focus on identity formation. Surnames in families have been studied, especially in the United Kingdom and the United States, and also France, most commonly with a focus on the significance of women’s marital surname changes (Johnson & Scheuble 1995; Valetas 2001; Gooding & Kreider 2010; Pilcher 2017) and negative attitudes toward married women’s surnames (Forbes et al. 2002; Murray 2013; Shafer 2017). Studies on surname choices in non-traditional families have also emerged in the United States (e.g. Patterson & Farr 2017; Underwood & Robnett 2021). In the Nordic region, a Norwegian study focused on keeping and changing surnames between 1980 and 2002 (Noack & Aaskaug Wiik 2008), and another Norwegian study has focused on men’s marital surname choices (Grønstad 2020). A Finnish study has also examined how couples negotiate marital names when first getting married (Castrén 2019). In contrast, the present study examines couples and individuals representing a variety of family forms. They were interviewed up to 15 years after first forming a family with the intention of capturing the continuing name considerations that in some cases even lead to new name choices after several years.

## **2. The role of surnames in Danish families**

Until the revision of the Danish naming law in 1981, the official term for ‘surname’ in Danish was ‘slægtsnavn’, which can be translated to ‘family name’ with an emphasis on extended family as opposed to, for example, a nuclear family. However, since 1981 the official Danish term has been ‘efternavn’, meaning ‘last name’. Whereas the former

term referred to this type of name being shared by several members of an extended family, the current term merely describes where in the full name this type of name is situated. This change in terminology thus reflects the usage of this name type, as it has become more flexible and in some cases with an emphasis on just the closest family (as will be discussed later in this article).

Of course, the terms used in English are similar to the Danish terms: ‘last name’ (the term usually used in the United States, according to Cambridge Dictionary) and ‘family name’. However, the term ‘surname’, mainly used in the United Kingdom (Cambridge Dictionary 2023) originally referred to ‘an added name derived from occupation or other circumstances’ (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2023). The term ‘surname’ will be used in this article, as I estimate that this is the term most widely used in studies of this kind.

Like in English (The Britannica Dictionary 2023), in Danish the surname comes after the first name(s) (there can be several) and middle name(s). Surnames are thus used in similar ways in Danish and in English. However, whereas middle names are most commonly a first name-typological (having a typology usually seen in first names) second name in English language and English-speaking cultures, in Danish an individual can have one or several (first name-typological) first name(s) and one or several (surname-typological) middle name(s), which are situated before the surname (Kællerød 2019; Lov om personnavne 1981). It is most common for Danes to have three names in total; in January 2023 this was the case for 55 per cent of the population (Statistics Denmark 2023).

For example, in the full name *Kasper Thomas Martini Petersen*, *Kasper* is the first of two first names, *Thomas* is the second first name, *Martini* is a surname-typological middle name, which is also in use as a surname (Danish naming law stipulates a person may only have one surname), and in this instance, *Petersen* is the surname. Had the names *Martini* and *Petersen* switched places (*Petersen Martini*), *Petersen* would be classified as a middle name, and *Martini* would be a surname. Within the same family, it is possible for some family members to choose *Martini* as their official surname and *Petersen* as

an official middle name, and other family members can decide on another combination. This has been the case since the latest revision of the Danish naming law in 2005, which removed the distinction between middle names and surnames. When hyphenated (like for example *Martini-Petersen*), it is officially considered one surname. This version of the naming law also equated cohabiting couples and same-sex couples with married and heterosexual couples (Lov om personnavne 1981). Marriage for same-sex couples was legalized in 2012. The interchangeability of middle names and surnames offers a number of options for couples wanting to change their names in connection with starting a family. Whereas a woman taking a man’s surname was the default option, in terms of legislation, up until 1982, when the naming law passed in 1981 came into force, the default option today is keeping one’s original name, but many still choose a middle name and/or surname change.

Figures from Statistics Denmark show that in 2020, 42,701 people (of a population of 5.8 million) changed their surname. Of these, the majority changed from a surname ending in *sen* (such as *Hansen* and *Jensen*; originally patronymic names) to a surname not ending in *sen*. Surnames with a *sen*-ending are very common in Denmark (the top 20 of most common surnames consists of 19 *sen*-names), and some change to a more unusual surname (Bechsgaard 2021). Of the 42,701 surname changes, 31,096 were made by women, while 11,605 by men, meaning that men accounted for approximately 25 per cent of surname changes (Statistics Denmark 2020).

This development is in line with the development of the gender-equal family, which was established in Danish family politics, starting in the 1960s. This at least has been the ideal for the past six decades in the Nordic region (see for example for Sweden: Lundqvist 2011; and for Finland: Holli 2003). The Nordic welfare states have been called ‘women friendly’ and ‘state feminists’ (Hernes 1987:153). However, studies have shown that there is still a gap between the equality ideal and practice. Research has shown, for instance, that gendered practices in families are still present to a certain extent, as are different expectations and norms of what constitutes motherhood

and fatherhood (Ahlberg et al. 2008; Roman & Peterson 2011; Anving 2012; Anving & Eldén 2019).

The changes to family life and family structures over recent decades also include a change in the frequency and timing of marriage and having children. For example, in 2017, 33 per cent of Danish women having their first child were married, compared to 40 per cent in 1997. In 2017, 53 per cent of second-time mothers and 66 per cent of third-time mothers were married (Statistics Denmark 2018). These numbers illustrate the common practice in Denmark of postponing marriage until after (at least) the first child. This practice also means that for some couples, the discussion and decision of which middle and surname(s) to use often takes place in connection with having the first child, rather than when getting married.

### **3. Family, gender, and identity**

Since the 1990s, several theoretical approaches to family life have emerged as a reaction against the existing framework, mostly focusing on the nuclear, heterosexual family (Anving & Eldén 2019:20). New theoretical approaches have focused on a need to better capture the ‘fluidity and complexity in modern life’ (Morgan 2011:52), and one of the most influential is Morgan’s approach of ‘family practices’ (Morgan 1996), focusing on ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’ family, meaning that a family is constituted and reconstituted through actions, rather than stereotypical notions of family. Some key features of Morgan’s approach are ‘an emphasis on the active or “doing”’, ‘a sense of the everyday’ and ‘a sense of the regular’ (Morgan 2011:1–2). Concepts similar to doing family have been presented as well, including Finch’s concept of ‘displaying families’ (Finch 2007). Linking to Morgan’s idea, Finch argues that ‘families need to be “displayed” as well as “done”’ (Finch 2007:66) and defines ‘display’ as ‘the process by which individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute “doing family things” and thereby confirm that these relationships are “family” relationships’ (Finch 2007:67).

The actions of keeping a surname, one party taking the other party's surname, or two parties deciding to combine surnames can be viewed as both 'doing' family and 'displaying' family. Such an action is something that is 'done' in a family, and it is visible to the surroundings and an established symbol of being a family. However, surname choices can be seen as related to stereotypical ideas of what constitutes family, more so than everyday actions in a family such as doing laundry and cooking, which are usually connected to the idea of 'doing' family. Therefore, in this article, I use the term 'doing family' in a slightly different way, as I am using it to refer to actions that strengthen being a family. Since I distinguish between doing actions that strengthen the bond to the original family and the bond to the newly created family, I introduce the terms 'doing original family' and 'doing new family', while also introducing the term 'doing individuality', meaning performing actions that strengthen a person's individuality.

Similarly, the concept of 'doing gender' also focuses on actions constituting a phenomenon. In the case of the doing gender approach, gender is understood as 'a routine accomplishment embedded in everyday interaction' (West & Zimmerman 1987:125) rather than as an innate quality in individuals. Before West & Zimmerman's (1987) introduction of the doing gender theory with its important contribution to this understanding of gender, Kessler and McKenna (1978) made the argument that gender is a social construction. These contributions built on the understandings of gender introduced by Goffman (1959) and Garfinkel (1967). Over the past few decades, the doing gender theory has been criticized, as new understandings of gender have emerged, and the concepts of 'undoing gender' and 're-doing gender' were introduced (e.g. Butler 2004; Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009; Connell 2010). It has been argued that 'doing gender' 'has become a theory of gender persistence and the inevitability of inequality' (Deutsch 2007:106). Similar to the way in which 'doing family' is used in the present article, the concepts of 'doing gender' and 'undoing gender' are used with an emphasis on strengthening and weakening (or erasing) traditional gender roles.

In relation to personal names, Pilcher (2017) has argued that names should be recognized as ‘doing’ words and has introduced the concept of gendered embodied named identity (Pilcher 2016, 2017), showing ‘how naming practices are, in fact, core to the production and reproduction of binary sex categories and to gendered hierarchies and inequalities’ (Pilcher 2017:820). Pilcher (2017) also connects personal names to the concept of ‘functional fixedness’, referring to the idea that common name practices can be a block for new practices to be introduced. Even though the use of first names is more obviously gendered, the concept of functional fixedness in relation to personal names and gender is also relevant to surname use. Danish surnames themselves are not gendered in the way that most first names are (even though the number of gender neutral first names is increasing in Denmark, see Bechsgaard 2023). This is the case in other countries, such as Iceland, where surname endings traditionally indicate gender (*dóttir* and *son*), with the recent addition of the gender-neutral ending *bur* (Bechsgaard 2020:122). However, even though surnames (in Danish) are not functionally fixed themselves, the usage of surnames has been and still is to some extent (Bechsgaard 2023). While a surname like *Østergaard*, for example, is not connected to a specific gender, societal structures (and, until 1981, legislation) have determined that if *Østergaard* is the surname of a man entering a heterosexual marriage, his wife would assume this name, as well. The analysis below shows that this functional fixedness is loosening its grip in Danish society.

For couples in same-sex relationships, the functional fixedness is naturally less prevalent than for heterosexual couples, as there is not a long tradition of marriages not involving a man and a woman (same-sex marriage was legalized in Denmark in 2012). There is evidence that LGBTQ couples are typically more resistant towards social norms (such as taking a spouse’s surname) and show more flexibility in gender presentations (Lamont 2020). For individuals in same-sex and queer relationships, traditional surname practices are not present to the same degree as for individuals in heterosexual relationships (Bechsgaard 2023), and an American study has shown that same-sex

couples who had children were less likely to follow traditional patterns in surname practices, and were more likely to keep their original surnames than heterosexual couples (Patterson & Farr 2017). In contrast, another study points to a tendency towards same-sex couples wanting their family to have one shared surname in order to have their status as a family recognized in society on the same terms as heterosexual couples (Underwood & Robnett 2021).

It has been argued by Elias (1991) that first names signal individuality or 'I-identity', whereas surnames are used to show collective identity or 'we-identity'. In the context of surname use in families, the definition of the 'we' is particularly interesting, as it can refer to both the original family, with whom an individual shares a surname and the newly created family, with whom the individual may or may not share a surname. This is in line with concepts from social identity theory (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel & Turner 1979), according to which social identity is an individual's sense of self based on the group(s) that the individual belongs to. Tajfel (1978) argues that when categorizing people, we exaggerate the differences between groups as well as the similarities within the same group. The concepts of 'in-group' (a group that an individual is a member of) and 'out-group' (a group that an individual is not a member of) are central in social identity theory, which argues that individuals categorize individuals based on their membership of social groups, and that members of an in-group will look for negative features of an out-group in order to improve their self-image. These concepts are relevant to this study, since the idea of belonging to a certain group is connected to the decision to keep an original middle name and/or surname (shared with the original family) or change to a different name (shared with a newly established family and possibly in-laws as well). Furthermore, I argue that concerning family identity, the feeling of belonging to a group can be more or less weak or strong, and the we-identity can also vary in strength. This means that one individual may have a strong we-identity (or collective identity) or a strong feeling of group identity with the original family and a weaker we-identity or group identity feeling with the newly created family.

## 4. Method and data

The present study uses qualitative methods, allowing me to collect knowledge of individuals' lives, attitudes, experiences, and opinions (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2020). The data include in-depth interviews conducted in 2021 with 23 individuals. 15 participants were interviewed individually, and the remaining eight participants were interviewed as couples (that is, in four interviews). The participants lived in the Copenhagen area, and they were between the ages of 29 and 54, all having formed a family unit (or a relationship equivalent to marriage) within the past 15 years. I draw on a social constructionist perspective on family, meaning that the participants themselves defined who they consider family. Social construction in relation to family focuses on how family members construct, maintain, repair, and change shared understandings (Braithwaite et al. 2018). This entails, for example, that one person may consider an ex-partner family and another may not, and that individuals have varying emphasis on the original family and the new family.

The majority of the participants had a long cycle higher education, while a minority had a medium-cycle higher education. They all grew up in Denmark, except that one partially grew up in another Nordic country and also has a surname from a cultural tradition of patronymic naming. Two participants had been adopted from other countries at a young age. The variation in family forms and name choices among the participants is illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1. Overview of study participants.**

Participant number	Name	Gender	Age	Family	Children ages	Name choice	Time of marriage	Time of name change	Still open to name change?
1	Sofie Løve	F	37	2	0, 3	4	1	1	Possibly
2	Marie Lindell	F	31	1	0, 3	5	2	2	Possibly
3	Maria Bisgaard Hansen	F	38	5	10, 13	4	3	1	No
4	Mette Sonne	F	40	1	8, 10	5	3	1	No
5	Martin Sonne Øhrgaard	M	41	1	8, 10	1	3	3	No
6	Nina Kathrine Holm	F	40	2	2, 9	4	1	1	Possibly

Participant number	Name	Gender	Age	Family	Children ages	Name choice	Time of marriage	Time of name change	Still open to name change?
7	Kasper Thomas Martini Petersen	M	47	2	2, 9	4	1	1	Possibly
8	Pernille Falk	F	37	1	1, 4	1	3	2	No
9	Nanna Lundholm Christensen	F	36	1	5	1	2	2	No
10	Julie Beck Morgan	F	29	6	N/A	2	2	2	No
11	Merete Nør-gaard Skovsager	F	38	1	0, 4	1	2	2	No
12	Ronny Bergholt Cortzen	M	30	6	N/A	2	2	2	No
13	Louise Divya Mahler Bruun	F	36	7	0	2	3	2	No
14	Anders Mahler Bruun	M	38	4	0, 4	2	4	2	No
15	Mette Marie Brøn-lund Fred-eriksen	F	45	1	6, 8	4	2	1	Possibly
16	Malene Aare-strup Holm	F	32	6	N/A	2	2	2	No
17	Marielouise Anette Sørensen	F	49	3	16, 19	4	7	1	No
18	Camilla Høi Roving	F	41	1	8, 12, 15	1	3/6	5	No
19	Christian Roving	M	40	1	8, 12, 15	5	3/6	1	No
20	Karina Trier Winther	F	45	5	10	1	2	2	Possibly
21	Kristín Jóns-dóttir	F	34	4	5, 12	4	4	1	Possibly
22	Nikolaj Kuhl-mann-Bentzen	M	45	1	3, 4	2	2	3	No
23	Jette Baumann Vang Olsen	F	54	5	14	1	2	2	Possibly

**Family:** 1 = Married, only shared children. 2 = Cohabiting, only shared children. 3 = Divorced, re-married, children from previous relationship, but not with current partner. 4 = Divorced, re-married, children from previous relationship, and also with current partner. 5 = Divorced, children from previous relationship, not married/cohabiting again. 6 = Married, no children. 7 = Married, shared children, and partner has children from previous relationship.

**Name choice:** 1 = Taken partner's name and not the other way around. 2 = Taken partner's name and also the other way around. 3 = Kept original name but given name to partner. 4 = Kept original name, and so did partner. 5 = Partner took their name and not the other way around.

**Time of marriage:** 1 = Not married. 2 = Before (possible) children. 3 = After first child. 4 = After first child with new partner (second child in total). 5 = After second child. 6 = After third child. 7 = Re-married after divorce.

**Time of name change:** 1 = No name change. 2 = Same time as wedding. 3 = After first child. 4 = After second child. 5 = After third child.

In order to recruit participants for the interviews, I turned to social media as well as my personal and professional network. The criteria for participation were that individuals had started what they considered a family within the past 15 years, and that they lived in the greater Copenhagen area. The criterion regarding family formation was included in order to assure that their memories of surname deliberations were still fresh while also making room for possible future deliberations (for instance, it was not uncommon for the participants to have changed their surname several years after getting married, or still be considering doing so). The study was limited to the Copenhagen area in order to avoid interference from the cultural differences between the capital and other parts of the country. However, the study can therefore not provide a full picture of surname practices in Denmark. I posted on Instagram and LinkedIn with the purpose of recruiting participants, and I sent emails to parents of my children's elementary school and pre-school as well as contacted personal acquaintances inviting them to participate in the study. The participants decided whether they wished to speak to me as a couple or individually. While there are advantages to interviewing couples – for example, they can provide more complete data, as the interviewees can fill in memory gaps for each other (Seale et.al. 2008; Arksey 2016; Wilson et.al. 2016) – it became evident that it was much more challenging to arrange an interview with couples than individuals and several potential (female) participants ended up dropping out because of difficulties with scheduling an interview also involving their (male) partner. This was not surprising, as couple interviews have generally been associated with low response rate (Arksey 1996; Racher, Kaufert & Havens 2000). Another drawback to doing couple interviews is the fact that there can be two realities in a relationship. However, interviewing couples has gained increasing attention in recent years (Eiskovits & Koren 2010), and the literature points to neither individual nor couple interviews being superior (Blake et.al. 2021).

The participants decided whether the interviews were conducted in person, online or over the phone. In-person interviews posed a challenge as the study was conducted during the Covid-19 lockdown. At

the same time, at least some of the participants had become used to online communication (using Zoom and Google Meet, for example), and since some participants were working from home, they could be interviewed during the day, which might otherwise not have been an option. I ended up interviewing six participants in person, seven online, and 10 over the phone. The average length of the interviews was approximately 45 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured, and the interview guide included 35 general questions touching on the following eight themes: 1. job, education, age, etc., 2. family and names in the family, 3. name usage in their family when growing up, 4. daily life and routines, 5. family values, 6. attitudes towards names, gender roles and family life, 7. attitudes towards names and aesthetics, and 8. feelings about (potential) name changes.

However, the exact phrasing of questions, the order of the questions, and in some cases the questions themselves varied. For example, when interviewing a divorced individual with children, some questions had to be different from when interviewing a married couple without children. The interviews were then transcribed, and the data was analysed based on content and elements of narrative analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann 2015) and in relation to the theoretical frame of the study. There are certain ethical concerns when studying something as potentially identifying as personal names. The names themselves are important, for instance because of the aesthetic value that participants attributed to them, which frequently affected the decision to add or remove a name. However, in order to protect the privacy of the participants, I decided to use pseudonyms (Lahman et al. 2022). The names of the participants were pseudonymized taking factors such as frequency of the name in the Danish population (Statistics Denmark) into consideration, together with attachment to geographic location, ending (for example, typical endings such as *sen* and *gård* were preserved), cultural/linguistic origin, and length. Some names were easily pseudonymized (such as a name like *Jensen* being replaced with a name like *Hansen*), while other names were more difficult to replace; for instance, names connected to specific geographic locations, specific languages, or being the name of a specific animal. The participants all consented to their interviews

being used for the study, and the study also went through the University of Copenhagen's ethical approval process for data collection.

## 5. Gender in surname choices

Surname choices are related to either doing or undoing gender. However, ambivalence concerned with doing and undoing gender in both surname choices and everyday practices is common.

### 5.1 Surnames and doing gender

The majority of the participants expressed aiming for gender equality in both their everyday family practices and in their surname choices, thus undoing traditional gendered surname practices. However, a minority of the participants explicitly expressed a desire to adhere to traditional gender roles in their surname choice and thereby uphold traditional gender norms. Camilla Høi Røvsing had recently changed her former surname *Pedersen* to her husband's surname *Røvsing* while keeping her original middle name *Høi*. The couple have three children, and they married at the city hall, when their oldest child was little, but they were preparing for a large church wedding and party a few months after the interview. Camilla talked about her dream of a traditional wedding in which a surname change was included, and about the fact that she changed to her partner's surname in connection with renewing her passport and after somewhat losing hope of having her dream wedding. Unlike the majority of the participants, Camilla expressed a preference for traditional gender roles, and taking her husband's surname was an important part of this:

#### Example (1)

I had a dream of maybe getting proposed to, and that we would have a real wedding, and then we could change my name. And get everything that goes with it. Rings and surname and those things. So, it has taken a really long time. And suddenly, I needed a new

passport, and I thought, I don’t know about that damn wedding – if it will ever happen.

Camilla’s husband, Christian Roving, was also interviewed, and like Camilla, he expressed a positive view on traditionally gendered surname practices. During the joint interview, he said to his wife: ‘I think it’s super cool that you have taken my surname. It’s an honour. I mean, it’s kind of a sacrifice you make for your family. That means something.’ The fact that Christian did not take Camilla’s middle name in return, however, he explained with not wanting to be identified with her family. His choice of not taking her middle name did not have to do with gender, he said the following:

#### Example (2)

It has nothing to do with Camilla. It’s just... There’s just a lot of trouble, you know? With some of the other family members. And I thought, I just didn’t really need that. I don’t know, you’re a part of it, but I didn’t have a need to be part of it like that. There were some things that I didn’t want to identify with.

Christian referred to Camilla’s family as an out-group that he did not ‘feel a need to be part of’, mentioning negative features of the group. Camilla on the other hand was concerned about her in-laws’ reaction to her entering their in-group by taking their surname: ‘I have thought a lot about whether his parents thought I was good enough to have their name.’ The upholding of traditional gender roles also shines through in the idea of a woman entering a man’s family by taking their name.

Julie Beck Morgan and her husband, on the other hand, have taken a name from each other and in that sense taken an undoing gender approach. They decided to create a new surname combination by using one name from each of them, meaning that Julie gave up her original middle name, because she preferred her original surname, *Beck*. For Julie and her husband, who do not have children and changed their names upon marriage, aesthetics initially played a significant role, and for fun, they tried out the surname combination *Morgan Beck*

on their dog before changing their names themselves. However, *Beck* was Julie's name, and *Morgan* was that of her now-husband, and Julie explained that she felt external pressure to eventually do the traditionally gender affirming thing and change the order, so that the man's name (*Morgan*) would be last and thereby be the official surname, while her name (*Beck*) would be an official middle name. Despite not having a need for doing gender in their surname choice themselves, when realizing a societal norm for gendered surname choices, Julie and her husband ended up following this perceived norm:

### Example (3)

Well, it was a bit weird, actually, because we encountered some comments about my name being at the end. You know, that it was the woman's name at the end. So, there were some humorous comments like 'now we know who wears the pants'. And I guess we just thought it was a bit silly. Like, if that's the way it was, that there was something traditional about his being last, then it was fine with us.

## 5.2 Surnames and undoing gender

The participants who expressed a wish to not follow traditional gender rules range from being very explicit about this wish – expressing a conscious attempt to undo gender and promote equality – to being less explicit and to a greater degree treating the gender issue as less important and thereby undoing gender in another sense by simply not recognizing its importance. This approach then, to some degree, erases the importance of gender in surname choices altogether. However, there is also an ambivalence in the doing, re-doing, and undoing of gender. All individuals in the study have taken some action towards gender equality, whereas other actions point to more traditionally gendered practices and values. The most explicit gender undoing is, unsurprisingly, seen in individuals who are in same-sex marriages. As Lamont (2020) mentions, there is typically more resistance against social norms and a greater degree of flexibility in gender

presentations for same-sex and queer couples. As same-sex couples have a shorter tradition of marriage customs to relate to and of course because a same-sex relationship does not consist of two individuals of different genders each associated with specific roles, doing gender and upholding gendered norms is neither a societal expectation nor an expectation within the couple to the same degree as it can be for heterosexual couples (Bechsgaard 2023).

The two participants in same-sex marriages (Ronny and Nikolaj) hyphenated their name with their husbands' (using a middle name or surname) and both said that the specific name combinations were based on aesthetic considerations, and (as also mentioned by Underwood and Robnett 2021) a need to have a shared surname for their newly created family. However, for Nikolaj Kuhlmann-Bentzen and his husband, who have two children (through surrogacy), the thought of changing their names did not occur to them when they first got married, illustrating that they at first did not consider the traditional practices related to marriage relevant to them (Patterson and Farr 2017). However, Nikolaj says that things changed once their children were born:

#### Example (4)

I think we were both very attached to our surnames and proud of our surnames, and the thought that we could take each other's surname hadn't really occurred to us, and we wanted to keep our own name. But when we became a family in this modern way that we did, well, then we thought that it gave the kids something and it gave us something to all have the same surname.

For Nikolaj and his husband, then, it simply did not seem like an option to do the traditional name-changing action when entering marriage, but the action had a different meaning, when the children entered the picture. In that sense they simultaneously broke out of and stayed inside the heteronormative framework.

It is clear in Table 1 that many participants are undoing traditional marriage practices and undoing gender norms by not changing names

upon marriage and instead, name changes may occur at a later point and remain a possibility even years after the wedding. Mette Sonne and Martin Sonne Øhrgaard are among those illustrating this. Martin's original full name was Martin Øhrgaard, and when he married Mette Sonne after having their first child, neither of them changed their names. Mette was very much against adhering to traditional gender norms:

Example (5)

- Mette: 'I am not wired that way. I don't feel the need for us to have the same name.'
- Martin: 'I wanted us to have the same name. My mother took my father's name – yours didn't.'
- Mette: 'I've never had a dream of sharing a name with my husband. It also works as a marker of your attitude towards independence. It's important for me to say that I am me, and I can get by on my own. A core value for me is that I can get by on my own.'

Martin talked about having more traditional values and also wanting to follow traditional gendered practices concerning marital naming, which also connects to the practices in his original family, where his mother followed the gendered norms (of the time). Martin connects his family values to his own parents being divorced: 'I really appreciate having a nuclear family, considering the family I came from. A quite fragmented family. I make a point of creating a more old-fashioned family.' He compares this with his sister and offers the difference in the way they do family as an explanation: 'My sister got divorced. They lived pretty individual lives.' Martin took Mette's name Sonne as a middle name, when their second child was underway, in line with his view on doing family, while at the same time undoing the traditional gender roles. However, Martin had expected his action to be reciprocated: 'I actually thought Mette would take my name as well, when I made the gesture of taking her name.' Christian, mentioned above, was honoured that his wife took his surname, whereas Martin viewed taking a spouse's name as a favourable action towards the spouse.

So, there is not a single answer to the question of who is doing who a favour. Studies from the United Kingdom and the United States, however, typically describe women as the receivers of a 'gift' by getting a man's surname (e.g. Thwaites 2014; Carter & Duncan 2018), for example highlighting a man's role in making a woman 'a Mrs instead of just being a live-in partner' (Carter & Duncan 2018:116). Martin's expectation of reciprocity illustrates his preference for a mix of the traditional and the modern. He wanted the traditional symbol of being married – sharing a name – and wanted 'a more old-fashioned family' but did not express a preference related to gender in that context. He did, however, express a wish for equivalence in that he expected his wife to join him in taking each other's name. This way, Martin ended up reversing traditional gender roles by taking his wife's name, as did Mette by not taking her husband's.

### 5.3 Gender role ambivalence and everyday practices

All participants expressed and displayed some degree of ambivalence in relation to doing or undoing gender, especially when considering everyday practices. When considering other practices besides name choices that are traditionally related to gender, the participants leaned towards either doing or undoing gender to a certain degree. However, many participants expressed or displayed contradicting attitudes and actions. For example, when talking about housework traditionally done by women – such as laundry, cooking and childcare – the women participating in the study would often disclose that they do more of these chores than their partner, while expressing some degree of shame related to this.

Marie Lindell said that she has a higher income than her husband, and that he usually cooks and would also be taking paternity leave. Furthermore, he has taken a name from her, while she has not taken one from him, illustrating that this family has in some ways reversed gender roles from the traditional. However, the picture is less clear when it comes to 'emotional gender roles' such as understanding the children's needs, knowing their bedtimes, etc.:

### Example (6)

I am just completely tuned in to their rhythms. And my husband is just totally not. (...) So there is something about understanding and following children's rhythms that comes much more naturally to me, which is much more the traditional role, right? And there might also be a slight imbalance in who does more around the house.

Marie's case shows that there is a difference between the formal and symbolic action of choosing a name and the more informal everyday actions, and even between the more formal housework, such as cooking dinner, and the more subtle and informal responsibilities, such as knowing when a child needs a nap. Furthermore, surname choices are visible to the outside world in a way that housework and childcare practices are not, and these surname choices can thereby be seen as a way of displaying a gender-equal family.

Marielouise Anette Sørensen is in her second marriage, and her current husband never mentioned the idea of her taking his surname. She expressed that even if he had, it would not be an option for her: 'I think, why should the woman be the one to change her name?' She sees her surname as closely connected to her identity, prioritizing I-identity over we-identity. 'And it is who I am. This has always been my name', while also making a connection between the name choice and a more general view on gender roles: 'I don't want to succumb to norms that once were. There is a liberation in it.' However, Marielouise's opinions on gender roles regarding surname change somewhat conflict with the everyday chores in her home:

### Example (7)

I do most of the cooking, because I like it better (...) Those gender roles don't bother me. I can see that I clean more and so on, but I have accepted that that's the way it is. If I ask him to do something, he will do it. He is not doing it to oppress me.

So, even though there is quite a traditional distribution of domestic chores in Marielouise’s home, she does not mind, because these practices are not caused by a conscious attempt by her husband to adhere to traditional gender roles.

## **6. Individuality versus family in surname choices**

Whether individuals prioritize their individuality or the collective identity of the family is connected to reflections and choices of surnames.

### **6.1 Individuality in surname choices**

Maria Bisgaard Hansen is a mother of two, divorced, and has neither remarried nor re-cohabited. Like Marielouise, who was mentioned above, it was not an option for Maria to take her husband’s middle name or surname, and ‘there is a touch of women’s empowerment in it, as well’. Maria said that she did not have a family ideal as was the case for some of the other participants: ‘I don’t think it has ever been important to me to have a nuclear family (...) I have always said that I didn’t really know if I wanted to have children.’ She also expressed a less traditional view on marriage compared to the majority of the participants: ‘I actually don’t think I have ever thought that it is necessarily forever. Maybe I don’t really have that romantic idea about it.’ Of course, Maria’s statements should be seen against the backdrop of her marriage having ended; she also reflected on not changing her name in this context: ‘Then we got divorced, and I guess it was a good thing that we hadn’t taken each other’s surnames.’

Among remarried individuals participating in the study, there is a sense of already having gone against the established norms by getting divorced and subsequently remarrying, which shines through in the individuals’ narratives about their name choices. For example, Kristín Jónsdóttir explained how she has given up on doing family in the

‘right’ way and thereby has come to focus more on doing individuality in her current marriage:

### Example (8)

Having a shared family identity wasn’t important. We both agree that we are individuals in a relationship (...) He gets to be him, and I get to be me. That’s more important than that we belong together. It probably also has to do with the fact that we’ve tried it before, doing it right, carefully picked a name for the first child, and it didn’t work! That wasn’t what fixed the marriage. So, it’s actually more important to us to be individuals.

For Sofie Løve, who is cohabiting and has two young children, her surname is so closely attached to her identity that changing it would feel strange to her: ‘I am my surname. It would be weird for me to take his. And the same for him. Taking a different surname does something to your identity.’ Sofie associates doing individuality with both her and her husband being represented in their children’s names: ‘In terms of the individual, it has been important that we included both names, even though maybe they sound a little peculiar together.’ Despite Sofie not being convinced that she and her husband will never change their names (‘You should never say never’), her wish to hold on to her own surname was closely connected to the aesthetic value and the rareness of her surname: ‘I have always been proud of my name (...) well, if you can be proud of a name, but I mean been happy with my name, always thought it was fun that I had a special name.’

## 6.2 Doing family in surname choices

For some, prioritizing family identity over individual identity means focusing on their own newly established family, while others use surnames to uphold ties to their original family.

### 6.2.1 New family

Pernille Falk got rid of her original surname and instead took a name from her husband when they got married. Now they also have two young children. Both Pernille and her husband had surnames ending in *sen* before getting married (she was *Madsen*, and he was *Andersen*), and *Falk* was Pernille’s husband’s middle name. They decided that they would have one shared surname (and both remove their *sen*-names), and they decided on *Falk*; not because it was the man’s name but because of the desire for a shared family identity: ‘For us, the important thing was that we were something as a family, that we shared a name, whether we had ended up choosing mine or his or the middle name like we ended up doing.’ The desire for a name signalling (nuclear) family identity was also clear, when Pernille described the fact that they are the only ones in the extended family with this name:

#### Example (9)

Now we are the Falks. We’re the only ones in the family with this surname. Most of the others took it as a middle name in the generation before us. We liked that it was short and easy to say and easy to understand, and that then it was our family name. Our daughter was born before we got married, so the decision of what we wanted to be called was made with her.

Their status as a family unit with the shared name as a strong symbol is obviously important to Pernille. The practice of making the family name decision when the first child is born is common among the participants. Pernille attributed their shared surname with symbolically creating their family: ‘Our family came to be with this name.’ Pernille also viewed the action of taking the name *Falk* as making her part of a new in-group. She talked about the name coming from her mother-in-law, who is pleased that Pernille and her husband are using the name, and Pernille reflected on her new name’s connection to her mother-in-law: ‘Of course, we wouldn’t have picked it if I had thought that she was awful.’

Several participants indicated that they took their partner's middle name or surname as a way of obtaining a more attractive, less boring, and/or more identifying name. For most, this meant switching a very common name ending in *sen* with a less common name. Nina Lundholm Christensen took both middle name and surname from her husband, who in turn did not change his name at all. They have a young son. Nina's original middle and surnames was *Kjærsgaard Olsen*. *Kjærsgaard* is also the name of a Danish politician, and Nina described her reasons for changing both names: 'I wanted to get rid of Kjærsgaard (...) it sucks to be associated with the politician.' Besides this association, Nina described the name choice as somewhat coincidental:

#### Example (10)

I guess I think that Christensen is nicer than Olsen, like in writing and sound, I'm not really sure why. But otherwise, if I had had a better middle name to bring to the table, we could easily have been the kinds of people who had taken my middle name, all three of us. And his surname or the other way around (...) It's kind of coincidental, I guess. I think we just agreed that he has the best names. We agreed that we wanted the same name, all three of us. That was the most important thing for my husband, and I could see the reasoning in that. And then we ended up with this model, because I thought he brought the best name to the table.

Nina described the idea of having a shared name as being 'most important' for her husband and her reasoning about it: 'I understand my husband's point of view; it's important that we have the same name (...) I don't think that holding on to your own identity is that important.' However, Nina described her father reacting to the name change: 'I could see the disappointment in his face.' This led to Nina's son being given her father's second first name as a second first name: 'It was kind of an act of compensation.' Nina clearly values performing actions that strengthen the new family identity over strengthening her individuality and also over strengthening the bond with her original family (when it comes to middle and surnames) but adheres to her father's view on the matter by 'compensating' in a different but still name-related way.

### 6.2.2 Original family

Even though the participants generally emphasized doing new family, there was also a focus on doing original family. In other words, what is considered the in-group and what is considered the out-group varies, and there is variation regarding who is included in the we-identity. Most participants said that their parents did not care about possible surname changes, but several participants talked about their parents having an opinion about their name choices (such as Nina above). Some participants talked about the important connection to their original family – some referring to their family as their clan – which is connected to sharing a name. Ronny Bergholt-Cortzen and his husband combined their names and now share a surname that consists of a name from each joined by a hyphen. Ronny described being indifferent to the order of the names (just caring about which combination sounded best) but being adamant about his name *not* becoming a middle name. So, the hyphen was added in order for the two names to have the status of one surname. Ronny is aware of not being subject to traditional marriage norms because of his status as a gay man: ‘We have pretty consciously taken advantage of the fact that we are detached from traditional norms.’ Therefore, Ronny said, they also had an untraditional wedding party, which took place a few weeks prior to the interview. They wanted to keep the names of both of them, ‘because there has to be an obvious attachment to both families. There is a strong clan culture on both sides.’ The joint name, then, was talked about in a way that puts more weight on the continuation of two ‘clan cultures’ than the beginning of a new family. Ronny emphasized the importance of his original family as a unit by talking about the fact that his original family has a saying, ‘just the four of us’, originally referring to Ronny, his parents and his sibling, but now, his husband is also part of ‘just the four of us’, highlighting the emphasis on the original family as an important unit, and in-group, to which Ronny’s husband now has access.

Merete Nørgaard Skovsager and her husband share his surname and have each kept their original middle names. She also expressed a sense of shared identity with her original family, which in this case

is closely connected to the name itself. She ‘would not under any circumstances lose the name Nørgaard’, which she said is the name her family is known by in the community where she grew up. This emphasizes the role of Merete’s original family as an in-group and a group with whom she shares a we-identity. Similarly, Merete’s husband’s surname, Skovsager, symbolizes a strong family identity and ‘there was no doubt that we were going to use that because of its history.’ She said that she thought ‘his name was so nice’, based on the fact that it is rare and has a rich history. She also expressed an awareness that taking the name Skovsager makes her part of another in-group: ‘then you’re a part of them.’

Concerning the reason why Merete’s husband did not reciprocate her taking his name, she said: ‘He was supposed to have my name, as well, but he would rather keep a name from both his mother and his father.’ Merete’s husband, then, decided to keep a name-related connection to both of his parents by keeping a middle name/surname he got from each of them. rather than take his wife’s name, signalling a sense of we-identity with his original family, viewing them as his in-group. This choice gives a sense of a family leaning in a traditionally gendered direction, which is reinforced by Merete stating that ‘If we didn’t have the same name, we might as well not get married at all’. There was also a gendered difference concerning the distribution of household chores. However, as was the case for other participants as well, this was partially explained by having very young children and building a house. Merete said the following about gender roles:

Well, they’re completely classically distributed right now. My husband works on the house, and I do the domestic things. Well, that’s the way it is. We can’t run from that fact. I guess, we just have to acknowledge that it easily gets distributed into men’s and women’s chores.

While an awareness that this is not the ‘modern’ way of doing family is evident (‘Well, that’s the way it is. We can’t run from that fact’), Merete expressed an acceptance of the current state, just as she did regarding the name choices in her family.

## 7. Conclusion

This article has examined the role of surnames as part of gender identities, individual identities and family identity formation. It has highlighted the connection between the choices and narratives of surnames in Danish families and practices, actions, and attitudes in families by examining individuals representing different family forms in order to represent the diverse family landscape of Denmark in the 2020s. The surname choices and family practices of the participants were analysed by leaning on concepts such as doing family and doing individuality, showing a variation among the participants regarding the degree to which their actions and attitudes work towards strengthening family or individuality. Similarly, the concepts of doing gender and undoing gender were applied and showed a variation in actions and attitudes that either reinforced traditional gender roles or weakened them. Whereas some participants were very explicit about undoing gender, others were more implicit. The analysis also showed that some participants have an emphasis on I-identity, finding it important to hold on to their own identity rather than be absorbed by family identity, whereas others prefer strengthening we-identity by sharing a name. Whether this sense of collective identity is directed towards the original family or the newly established family is subject to variation, and I argue that the we-identity can vary in strength.

The majority of the participants expressed aiming for gender equality in both their everyday family practices and in their surname choices, thus undoing traditional gendered surname practices, while a minority of the participants were explicitly expressing a desire to adhere to traditional gender roles in their surname choice and thereby uphold traditional gender norms. The participants who expressed a wish to not follow traditional gender norms ranged from being very explicit about this wish – expressing a conscious attempt to undo gender and promote equality – to being less explicit and to a greater degree treating the gender issue as less important and thereby undoing gender in another sense by simply not recognizing its importance. All participants expressed and displayed some degree of ambivalence in relation to doing or undoing gender, especially when consider-

ing everyday practices. While participants lean more or less in one direction, when also considering other practices besides name choices that are traditionally related to gender, many expressed or displayed contradicting attitudes and actions, showing that there is a difference between the formal and symbolic action of making a name choice and the more informal everyday actions. Furthermore, since surname choices are visible to the surroundings, and the distribution of everyday practices such as housework are usually not, the focus on gender equality in surnames can be seen as displaying family.

The analysis has shown that in Denmark, predominant gender naming traditions are being challenged by new and more flexible practices that are less dependent on gender, and the findings of this study show a greater variation in gendered naming practices within Western societies than those of the typical narratives. Additionally, traditional surname practices are being renewed by for example the ongoing possibility of surname change years into a marriage. Surname choices are closely related to the stereotypical and symbolic idea of family for some, while others attach less importance to surnames. Furthermore, it has shown that the switch from the term 'slægtsnavn' [(extended) family name] to 'efternavn' [last name] is appropriate in a society, where sharing a name with extended family members is no longer a given.

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