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‘The family fight is on!’: Finnish mixed-sex couples, humour and alternatives to patrilineal surnaming

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Abstract: Finnish marital surnaming practices give precedence to the husband’s surname as the family name after marriage. Legislation treats partners symmetrically and offers alternatives, but a patriarchal mindset still has a hold on the transition to a family. This article analyses interviews of 19 mixed-sex wedding couples and focuses on how they resort to humour in discussing alternatives to patrilineal practice. Literature shows that humour plays an important role in maintaining and regulating close relationships, but it can also be used as an indirect way to dismiss partners’ concerns. The results of this exploratory and descriptive analysis of couple interviews highlight different ways in which humour is used when discussing the potentially sensitive matter of marital surnaming.

Keywords: marital surnaming, couples, humour use, gender, Finland, couple interviews

Anna-Maija Castrén (University of Eastern Finland). Finnish mixed-sex couples, humour and alternatives to patrilineal surnaming.

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1. Introduction

In her seminal work on forenames and surnames as 'doing words' in relation to embodied sex categories and gender, Pilcher (2017) suggests that marriage is a key choice crisis point for individuals transitioning to a new life phase. This applies in particular to societies leaning towards what is sometimes called the one-name-for-a-family model (Nugent 2010), highlighting two partners' 'we-ness' (Elias 2001) and the family unit in the making. As with the surnaming of children, upon marriage, couples are offered an opportunity either to follow the normative surnaming practice that prioritizes the male-line surname in relation to sex and gender, or to disrupt it (Pilcher 2017:819). According to Pilcher, patrilineal family surnaming reproduces the patriarchal gender order, as 'a man's (embodied) sex categorisation invariably means that there are no cultural expectations whatsoever that he should, at marriage to a woman, change his surname to hers [while] precisely the opposite is true for those whose bodies have been categorized as female' (ibid.).

In this article, I analyse decision making on surnames of 19 Finnish mixed-sex couples about to marry for the first time. Gender issues in Finland are framed by an equality discourse (Holli 2003; Vuori 2009). Gender equality is considered something everybody agrees on, and it is seen as a national project that benefits everybody. The image of gender relations is harmonious and the discourse emphasizes women and men holding equal positions, their collaboration, and common goals instead of differing views (e.g. Julkunen 1999; Raevaara 2005; Vuori 2009). This symmetry is also realized in the current (effectuated in 2019) and the previous (effectuated in 1986) Finnish Names Act that treats partners as equals in transition to marriage. Since legislative changes in the mid-1980s, neither partners' surname is prioritized and the options available for couples have increased considerably in the most recent change of law.

A survey from the early 2010s on attitudes towards gender equality in Finland found that the majority of respondents in the youngest age group (15–34 years) believed that society had already achieved gender equality (Kiianmaa 2012). However, it should be noted that

this kind of widespread equality discourse is prone to generating subject positions from which it may be difficult to see inequality when it comes very close, for example in one's own intimate relationships (Holli 2003; Vuori 2009).

The data analysed here were collected before the current Finnish Names Act entered into force in 2019. At the time of data collection (carried out in several batches between 2006 and 2011), the options available were that two partners could keep their original surnames or choose a common surname that could either be their original surname or some other surname, or one partner could use a hyphenated surname. Unless the marrying authority was informed about the surname change before the wedding ceremony, both partners were assumed to keep their original surnames. The choice affected any children the couples may have, who could have either their mother's or father's surname (when partners had kept their original names) or the name that partners shared. Children could not have a hyphenated surname, and all children born to the same couple had to have the same surname (Finnish Names Act 1985).

Historically, from 1930 to 1985 it was mandatory in Finland for women to change their surname upon marriage and either take their husband's surname as their only surname or use his surname after hers with a hyphen (Paikkala 2012). Before 1930, surname changing was not enforced and different practices co-existed from one social stratum or locality to another. Even though the period during which it was mandatory for women to take their husband's surname lasted less than six decades, the custom of a woman taking her husband's surname as her only surname, following the 'one name for a family' model (Nugent 2010), came to be considered as the 'traditional' way (Kotilainen 2016). Only during the most recent years, and especially after the latest legislation change in 2019, has there been a visible decrease in the popularity of patrilineal surnaming and an increase in both partners retaining their surnames. According to the Digital and Population Data Services Agency (2023), in 2022, for the first time in history, less than a half of Finnish mixed-sex marital couples (47 per cent) followed the patrilineal naming pattern. Both partners kept their

surnames in 41 per cent of cases, while the option for the man to take the woman's surname was chosen only by fewer than 1.8 per cent of marital couples (ibid.). Thus, even if the husband's surname has lost some of its popularity, the appeal of the woman's surname as the only family name shared by two partners in a mixed-sex couple continues to be very modest.

Despite wide prevalence of cohabitation in contemporary Finnish society (Official Statistics Finland 2017), marriage still has importance in the transition to a family (Castrén 2019). Nearly 60 per cent of first-born children are born to unmarried women, but many couples marry afterwards (Official Statistics Finland 2017). Getting married for the first time, especially when there are no prior children, is a highly significant point in a young adults' life in terms of transitioning to a family of one's own. Following marriage, two partners are institutionally and socially acknowledged members of the same family unit, with new social roles as marital partners (wife or husband), and possibly in the future also as parents (a mother / mothers – a father / fathers). These family roles are already in the making during the transition to marriage (Castrén 2019), turning couples' discussion of surnames into a negotiation where the two partners' gendered family roles are also taking shape. In a society that perceives itself to be advanced in terms of gender equality, a tradition that privileges the man's surname poses – at least potentially – a sensitive question to the two partners.

The analysis in this article focuses on how couples use humour when discussing marital surnaming and it draws on what Pilcher (2017:813), following previous researchers (e.g. West & Zimmermann 1987), calls the 'doing gender approach'. Scrutinizing the use of humour in couples' discussions and negotiations on surnames draws on a relational approach to marital naming: instead of analysing surname changing or keeping as an individual's choice (usually the woman's choice; see next section), the analysis focuses on decision making as a dynamic and relational process in which both women and men are involved and participate with different agentic engagement (Castrén 2019). The analysis adopts a sociological view on humour that highlights it as 'a quintessentially social phenomenon' (Kuipers 2008:362) and offers

understanding on how, for example, conversational humour contributes to reproducing gender relations (Kotthoff 2006) and maintenance of social order (Kuipers 2008). In this article, a functional perspective on the use of humour in conversation between long-term romantic partners takes precedence. The article asks how humour is used in negotiation of gendered family roles in the transition to marriage and to family. A descriptive analysis is conducted to provide insight on micro-level relational practices in intimate relationships that contribute to the persistence of unequal gender roles in a society considered advanced in gender equality. Indeed, it is intriguing that in Finland, as in other Nordic welfare states with a long history of gender equality policy and support for shared parenthood (generous parental leave for both parents, subsidized daycare, etc.), for example, gender relations in society and in families are still not equal.

2. Deciding on names, potentially conflicting interests, and the use of humour

In the research literature, women's surname choice has been associated with other indicators of women's status in society (Goldin & Shim 2004; Scheuble & Johnson 2005; Noack & Aaskaug Wiik 2008; Hamilton et al. 2011). In a Norwegian study of marital surname changing and keeping from 1980 to 2002, Noack and Aaskaug Wiik (2008) found that the women's age at marriage, level of education, urban residence, labour market position, liberal family values, and egalitarian work-family roles had a positive influence on marital name-keeping. A link between name-keeping and higher level of education has frequently been identified in empirical studies (e.g. Goldin & Shim 2004). According to Hoffnung (2006), the likelihood of women keeping their original surname is associated with feminist attitudes and higher career commitment; identity and career aspects have frequently been found to be significant in marital name-keeping (e.g. Kline et al. 1996; Twenge 1997; Nugent 2010; Rom & Benjamin 2011; Thwaites 2013). Kelley (2023) found that women who kept

their surnames and women who shared hyphenated surnames with their husbands are perceived to be less committed to their partners and less loving. In a very recent study with Canadian data investigating brides-to-be, the woman's mother's surname choice was found to predict surname keeping (MacEcheron 2024). However, despite the increase in liberal family values and gender equality in society, as well as in diversification of family life more generally, sharing the man's surname has remained popular (Hoffnung 2006; Noack & Aaskaug Wiik 2008; US Pew Research Center 2023).

A previous analysis focusing on Finnish couples' reasoning on marital surname decision identified three patterns highlighting the gendered division of agentic work required in the transition to marriage (Castrén 2019). First, the woman taking the man's surname at marriage was taken for granted, as something self-evident. Changing surname was seen as intimately linked with becoming 'us', a new family unit, of which the shared surname was a valued symbol. The couples did not reflect upon the fact that the patrilineal surnaming practice is based on unequal treatment of genders. Second, the symmetric position of women and men in legislation was acknowledged and was seen to give couples a right to choose. However, it was considered a choice of the woman. The third pattern emerging in the analysis and shaping the discourse on surnames distanced itself from the patrilineal practice perceived as traditional and recognized women's and men's equivalent positions in relation to the marital surname. This led, however, to a dilemma that was difficult to resolve if partners were drawn to the one name for a family model, as only one surname could be chosen to represent the family unit being formed (ibid.).

The issue of conflicting interests in relationships and in decision making has been examined in the sociological research literature with the concept of ambivalence. According to Connidis and McMullin (2002), individuals experience ambivalence when social and cultural structures collide with their attempts to exercise agency in negotiating relationships that constitute what they consider a desirable family life. Ambivalence entails 'oscillating between polar contradictions of feeling, thinking, wanting, or social structures, contradictions that

appear temporarily or permanently insolvable' (Lüscher 2011:197). Individuals privileged by existing structural arrangements and cultural models are usually motivated to reproduce and defend them, while the opposite may apply to those in a more subordinate position (Connidis & McMullin 2002; c.f. Connell 2002).

Personal interactions using humour are often used to address ambivalence and potential conflicts of interest between romantic partners. Humour has been found to have important functions in long-term romantic relationships (Hall 2017; Lukasz, Kubicius & Jonason 2022). In a wide meta-analysis, Hall (2017) concluded that high levels of humour production and appreciation in romantic relationships were related to higher relationship satisfaction. People use humour to relieve tension and it can play an important role in bringing partners emotionally closer and in increasing feelings of togetherness (Ziv & Gadish 1989; Campbell, Martin & Ward 2008). Humour can help partners to maintain positive mood, prevent decrease in marital satisfaction, and thus acts as a kind of buffer in the changing situation – especially during stressful life course transitions, such as becoming a parent (Theisen et al. 2019). Humour can be used to subtly express affection in the event of disagreements, relieve tension in conflicts, and provide a way to withdraw from conflict without losing face (Campbell et al. 2008; Long & Graesser 1988). Friendly teasing can also be used to gently criticize a partner (Keltner et al. 2001).

The functions of humour depend on the type of social relations involved, the social context, and the content of the joke or humorous statement (Kuipers 2008:368; Robinson & Smith-Lovin 2001). In addition to its positive consequences, humour can also have harmful effects on interactions (Billig 2005) and can be used in ways that erode both intergroup relations and personal relationships (Campbell et al. 2008). Teasing can turn into belittling and can subject the other person to ridicule (Billig 2005). Humour can also be used to manipulate a partner (Long & Graesser 1988; Ziv 1988). For example, a humorous response to a partner's proposal can be used as an indirect way to bypass the concern expressed by the partner and to refuse a constructive discussion (Campbell et al. 2008).

Following Kotthoff (2006a; 2006b), humour can be used in cultural shaping of gender. Close analyses of humorous interactions reveal how people negotiate and confirm specific gender identities (Kotthoff 2006b) and form and perform masculinities and femininities in interaction (Kuipers 2008). Humour is used in interaction to perform and reinforce gender roles and power relations; 'social differences on a macro-level are created and perpetuated on [micro-level] interaction' (Kuipers 2008:375). Different kinds of masculinities and femininities can be detected in joking styles depending on the situation, age group and social milieu, for example (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp 2006). The ambivalence involved in the marital surname decision of mixed-sex couples and discussed in a humorous tone in research interviews offers a valuable view of the ways in which couples do gender relations and, in particular, gendered family roles without jeopardizing their perception of themselves as equals. Marital surname decision is at least potentially a sensitive topic, as two surnames, with a reference to two partners' childhood families, can be weighed up against each other. The analysis presented in this article focuses on wedding couples' decision making on surnames, with a particular interest in the use of humour. To my knowledge, no prior research has examined how conversational humour plays a part in couples' discussions on surnames in transition to marriage, which justifies the descriptive and explorative approach adopted in the analysis.

3. Data and analysis

The data include couple interviews with 19 mixed-sex couples soon to be married for the first time. The interviews were originally conducted in a study focusing on weddings and couples' social networks (see Maillochon & Castrén 2011). Prior to the interviews, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the topics discussed in the interviews, and before starting the interview they were informed of their right to refuse to answer questions and that they could withdraw from the study at any point. At the time of data collection no ethical approval process was required by the university

for social scientific research based on self-recruited participants' consent to participate.

All participants except one were of Finnish origin, aged between 20 and 36 (mean age for women 27 years, for men 28 years), and they had no children from either their current or any previous relationship. They lived in the metropolitan area of Helsinki and the majority had high levels of education, one groom had no formal education after high school and all others had a degree from a higher education institution or were currently students at one. All couples except one had cohabited before marriage.

The couples were recruited via adverts placed on Finnish wedding websites, in local newspapers and on the noticeboards of universities in the metropolitan area of Helsinki. Two couples were found via personal contacts. The recruitment criteria were that the couple was getting married for the first time within the next few months (date and venue of the wedding already set) and that neither partner had children. The sample is a convenience sample; the couples' participation was voluntary and based on their willingness to talk about their relationship, future wedding, and their social networks. Couples did not receive remuneration for their participation.

Cohabitation without marriage and births out of wedlock are widespread in Finland, although highly educated Finns are more likely to marry than others (Jalovaara & Fasang 2015). Furthermore, an analysis of all Finnish births between 2003 and 2009 found that most mothers with higher levels of education were married (69 per cent), with only one in four simply cohabiting (Jalovaara & Andersson 2017). Hence, when compared to the family trajectories of highly educated Finns in terms of union type and childbearing (ibid.) the study's participants are quite typical.

As a method of data collection, couple interviews have been associated with a low response rate, as two individuals must consent and remain involved to provide one participant couple (Arksey 1995; Racher, Kaufert & Haven 2000). Most of the couples who made contact were accepted to participate, and only two couples were rejected because their wedding was too far ahead. Thematic interviews were

conducted in Finnish at the couple's home or on the university's premises, and the interviews took place a few weeks before the wedding (except for two couples, who were interviewed soon after their wedding). The length of the interviews varied from 1.5 to 2.5 hours. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim in their entirety.

Couple interviews are a far less common method of data collection than individual interviews (see e.g. Evertsson & Nyman 2009; Gabb & Fink 2015; Pahl 1989). Joint interviews permit and encourage partners to portray themselves as a couple (Bennett & McAvity 1985) and elicit couple interaction. The purpose of couple interviews is not (only) to obtain accounts from two people, but also to observe the manner in which information is generated (Allan 1980). Joint interviews provide an opportunity to observe couples' verbal and nonverbal interaction and the construction of their conjoint dialogue (Racher, Kaufert & Havens 2000). Thus, they allow researchers to explore themes that cannot be tackled with, or that remain hidden in, individual interviews (Allan 1980).

The interview guide included a list of topics addressing the couple's relationship history, their reasons for getting married and their wedding guests and arrangements; the main emphasis in the interviews was on weddings and the couples' social networks. As in qualitative research interviews more generally, the topics were introduced by the interviewer in a freeform discussion and not by using fixed wording (Edwards & Holland 2013). Marital surnames were originally not among the research questions the data collection was designed for, so the question 'What are you going to do about surnames?' was presented in a rather casual manner to all couples and without giving any specific weight to it. It was not one of the interview topics, but more of a factual question, such as 'When did you meet?' and, for this reason, there were no pre-planned questions to elicit answers from those interviewees who preferred not to participate in the discussion at this point. Thus, the rich material on marital surnames generated by the question was not pre-meditated in any way but came as a surprise. Similarly unexpected was the abundance of ways in which the marital name was entwined with the transition couples saw taking place: through marriage they

were to become a family (see Castrén & Maillochon 2009). Moreover, the surname choice captured the gendered expectations that positioned women and men differently in relation to the agentic work required in the transition. It also illuminated how men's privileged position granted by patrilineal surnaming practice – a potential threat to partner equality – was circumvented (Castrén 2019).

The analysis followed a broadly defined critical realist framework in which material practices are given an ontological status independent of discursive practices (Sims-Schouten et al. 2007). Material practices, such as surnaming at marriage, were seen as accommodating, although not determining, the discourse that arose (ibid.). According to Sims-Schouten et al. (2007:102), critical realism combines constructionist and realist positions; it argues that 'while meaning is made in interaction, non-discursive elements also impact on that meaning'. Finnish name law with the options it offered at the time, the widely accepted cultural model of one name for a family, and the society at large in which certain gendered practices were seen as 'traditional', created a context in which certain discursive constructions were more easily enabled than others (Sims-Schouten et al. 2007).

The analytical process began with careful thematic coding of all 19 interviews carried out with the AI-powered analytical device ATLAS.ti (https://atlasti.com). In the next stage, lengthy portions of discussion on surnames were collated into a separate file. Then, a more detailed analysis of the use of humour followed. Most couples did not shift to a humorous tone when discussing marital surnames and humour played a role in only seven interviews. Sections of interview talk in which couples were playful and humorous about surnames were then thematically coded according to the type of humorous talk and whether humour seemed to be used for a specific aim. The analysis was descriptive in nature with a focus on the functions of humour use in conversation (Kuipers 2008). Throughout the analysis, the structure of dialogue was under scrutiny (c.f. Racher, Kaufert & Havens 2000), referring to what was said, who said what, and in what order. The general atmosphere of the interviews was also important: humour use was often accompanied by warm-hearted laughter,

smiles, and even flirtatious looks between the partners. As the interviews were audio recorded and not videotaped, it was not possible to systematically include, for example, facial expressions in the analysis. However, the field notes written immediately after each interview included memos about the general mood of the interviewees.

While discussions on weddings and social networks mostly engaged both partners equally, men were much less involved when discussing surnames (Castrén 2019). The question about what the couple intended to do about surnames was presented to both partners using the plural form, but it was mostly the woman who took the first – or only – initiative to answer for herself or for both. The men, while not indifferent, tended to follow the discussion between their partner and the interviewer, for example with a happy smile or more passively; many grooms acted as if the name question did not really concern them (ibid.).

In the next section presenting the results, all names are pseudonyms chosen by the author. The used pseudonyms are Finnish first names for women and men with a clear gender reference and the one surname is a common Swedish surname that is also used in Finland. When mentioning both partners of a couple, the woman's name is always mentioned first and the man's second.

4. Results: three ways of using humour

In the data, humour arises in many contexts. The overall atmosphere in the interviews was without exception highly positive, as the main topic – the forthcoming wedding – was perceived as the high-point of the couples' relationship and to be the most memorable day of their life so far. Humorous talk, generating laughter, smiles and playfulness between the two partners created moments of joy in an otherwise rather serious context of a research interview conducted for scientific purposes on the university premises or the couple's home. However, humour was also applied purposefully by the interviewees to achieve certain goals.

There were three distinct ways in which humour emerged in relation to surnames. Firstly, the use of humour regarding surname decisions centred on turning the traditional order and the related roles upside down. Secondly, the couples drew on the ridiculousness of the assumed demand for absolute gender equality in family and relationships and from the absurdities to which the compulsive search for equality can lead. Thirdly, humour was used to gently disregard the partner's concerns as well as the general importance of the surname decision altogether with a simultaneous aim of persuading the partner towards personal opinion.

Reversal of the traditional order is evident from Tilja and Tero's interview. Turning the social order that is perceived as natural, traditional, or self-evident upside down is a classic recipe for humour and fun. Turning hierarchies upside down for a set period of time is the root of carnival, for example (e.g. Le Roy Ladurie [1979] 1990). Even young children recognize the absurdity and delight in jumbling up everyday routines. To share a personal anecdote, my son considered the 'topsy-turvy day' in kindergarten as the utmost fun: he rejoiced days in advance at the prospect of eating pudding before his main course at lunch, and he laughed his heart out, year after year, at the plastic shoe cover his kindergarten teacher wore on her head when she greeted the children in the morning.

In the interview, Tilja jokes about the possibility of Tero taking her surname. After explaining how she has always known that she will change her name when getting married, she adds playfully: '[A]lthough, I have, every now and then, put forward the idea of what if Tero took my name instead!' She teases her future husband, but Tero comfortably – and smiling contentedly – refrains from commenting. On a more general level, and as already mentioned, men distancing themselves from the discussion on surnames was extremely common in the data (Castrén 2019).

Tilja reversed the traditional order to be funny and to create a good-humoured atmosphere. Also in the next excerpt, from an interview with Sara and Jouni, the idea of a man taking a woman's surname is perceived as a joke. However, the real fun starts when the

groom, Jouni, frames his future wife's potential claim for equality as something fearful. The interviewer plays along in a humorous manner. In the following excerpt, Sara, the bride, has just explained that she will take Jouni's surname and that she has not really thought of any other option.

Example (1)

Jouni:	But I've been so afraid the whole time that you'll start demanding that I have to be the one changing name.
Interviewer:	Well, now that I mentioned it…
Sara:	The family fight is on! (laughter) Well, for a fleeting moment I thought of having a hyphenated name. But it's not that practical, and then again, if we ever have children, the whole family would have the same name [if she took her husband's name]. At least it would sound nicer.
Jouni:	Actually, we didn't consider any other option.
Sara:	Yeah, no we didn't. It didn't occur to me to ask if you'd like to be [her surname].
Jouni:	Well, you said that you'll take [his surname]. And I'm okay with that.

The absurdity of a 'family fight' over Sara's surname is the focal point of the teasing shared by Sara and Jouni, implying that even the idea itself is ridiculous. As a couple, they would never fight over such matter. However, the true source of humour in this dialogue is the reversal of the traditional order. Seeing Jouni taking Sara's surname (or Tero taking Tilja's surname) as hilarious indicates the prevalence and taken-for-grantedness of patrilineal surnaming practice for the couples. In addition, the quote above from Sara and Jouni's interview brings up an important aspect in decision making, i.e. the children the couple may have in the future. Women in particular think about the surname from the point of view of children and the family in formation. The decision was therefore not only about them as two individuals (Castrén 2019). Women are generally more likely to feel forced to balance between commitment to other people and to themselves in different

areas of life, for example when reconciling work and family (Nugent 2010; Gerson 2002).

Many couples were aware of the possibilities afforded by the law and brought up the alternatives when discussing surnames. However, in the interviews, there was rarely any serious reflection on what an equitable or fair way would be to decide which surname to choose, if the spouses wanted one shared family name. Instead, they made fun of the ways in which to solve the dilemma. An example can be found in the interview with Venla and Arttu:

Example (2)

Interviewer:	What will you do with your surnames? How do you decide from many options?
Venla:	Well, we will follow the traditional way. I'll be taking my husband's surname.
Arttu:	Although, we first thought about having a tug-of-war between the two families at the wedding party (Venla laughs) but…
Venla:	It would have ended like this anyway…
Arttu:	Yeah, it would, and it was my suggestion, because I knew I had a bigger family.
Venla:	… because you have the bigger one… (laughs)

Tug-of-war was offered as a joking solution to the dilemma regarding fairness over decision making, something the couple would never seriously consider. In this second type found in the data, the humour was based on *exaggeration*; the example involves ridiculing the assumed social expectation to pursue equality in every aspect. Tug-of-war served as an exaggerated example of conflict solving, from which Venla and Arttu, as a couple, distanced themselves as a forced ideal of gender equality.

Also in Selja and Jan's interview, playfulness is related to finding an equitable solution. In the next excerpt, the couple made fun about surnames and first languages, which is Finnish for her and Swedish for him.

Example (3)

Interviewer:	What will you do with surnames?
Selja:	Svensson, Jan's surname.
Interviewer:	Was this clear from the beginning, or did you have to negotiate? Did you consider other options?
Selja:	[Her surname translated in Swedish], we thought of taking my surname and translating it to his first language (laughing). For some reason Jan wasn't too excited about this.
Interviewer:	Jan wasn't enthusiastic about the idea?
Jan:	Well, I didn't take it (Selja: … seriously) seriously, really.
Selja:	Although, for me it seemed like an absolutely splendid idea!
Jan:	I still can't believe that you were serious about this.
Selja:	Yes, I was! But, yeah, I had to give up, and actually, it was self-evident to me [to take Jan's surname]. Only if his surname had been something really horrible, well, in that case, I would probably have said something like… But, yeah, I probably would have gone with that horrible surname as well.

As in Selja and Jan's case, the possibility of taking a completely new shared surname was a frequent source of joking in the interviews. The couples happily played with different possibilities, such as taking one part of her name and another of his. Or, like Selja and Jan, translating her Finnish name into Swedish, the outcome being peculiar and humorous. One groom, Pekka, mentioned this in the interview: 'We did talk about having a brand-new name, but it was not that serious really, more as a joke, not that serious'.

Aila and Ville's interview brings up yet another aspect related to the funniness of a made-up surname and they spoke of how their entire circle of friends had thrown themselves into the topic. The friends had suggested different new names made by combining parts of the couple's original names, and according to Ville, the friends 'placed friendly bets on what our surname will be'. Friends participating in the couple's deliberation over their surname tells something about Aila and Ville

as a couple with a very open-minded approach to the decision, having talked about the matter extensively with their friends. In addition, friends participating in the process – in a humorous manner – shows that surname choice is recognized as something to be carefully considered. In this sample of 19 couples, Aila and Ville were one of only two couples who resorted to an alternative surname practice, and they ended up keeping their original surnames at marriage.

While the examples given above highlight joking about the surname decision as good-humoured banter between partners without any real tension surfacing in the interviews, the third type of humour in the data is somewhat different, illustrating a fundamental ambivalence related to decision making about surnames. The third way in which humour is used in the discussion has a purpose and is targeted to achieve something; humour is used for *persuading a partner* in some way, to overcome ambivalence experienced by the woman. At the time of the interview, Auli and Asko had not yet decided on surnames and actual negotiation took place when discussing the topic with the interviewer. In addition, this couple considered the question on surnames as being meant exclusively for the woman and, at first, only Auli and the interviewer discussed the topic.

Example (4)

Interviewer:	What will you do with your surnames? Will either of you change, or will you keep your own names?
Auli:	This has been discussed a lot. (pause) At least Asko is not going to change his name, that's for sure, and in that we're really traditional. So, I'm thinking just because I've never really liked my own name, and I can see myself taking Asko's name. But, well, Asko is a [his surname; one of the most common surnames in Finland] and I don't really know if I want to be a [his surname] either. (chuckles) This is, it's something I've been thinking about terribly, all the time really. And I think we're just going to end up drawing lots at the last minute.

Auli was very open about her conflicting thoughts over her surname and was ready to elaborate on the topic in more detail. Her mother had taken a hyphenated surname upon marriage, which was something quite rare in the small town where the family lived. Her mother then gave up using her husband's surname altogether when the legislation changed in the 1980s. Her mother's unusual decision had aroused fascination during Auli's childhood. At this point, Asko joins the conversation for the first time with a humorous tone of voice:

Example (5)

Interviewer:	Would it be out of the question for you to have different names?
Auli:	No, at least I don't think so myself. My mother kept her own name, or first she had a hyphened name and then, later, dropped the other name and used only her original surname. I do remember that when I was a child I was sometimes asked if she really was my real mother when she had a different name. I remember things like this, and at the time it was a bit like, well, why do you have that name, why can't you be like everyone else. […]
Asko:	Well, my mother did take my father's surname. And yes, I may have tried to put some pressure on you (both laugh).
Auli:	Yes, there is a lot of pressure going on there, but eventually this will be my decision.
Asko:	Yeah. It's mainly because it would be more practical or easier if and when you have children. But, well, I don't know, it's Auli's decision after all.
Interviewer:	So, you see it as Auli's decision?
Asko:	Yes. It's like, well, nowadays, when we look at our friends, those who are married, it's pretty much half and half, those who keep their own and those who don't [i.e. woman changes to husband's surname]. It's not that significant in the end.
Auli:	In a way, however, I see it as a decision that has also wider relevance, that it's not only a personal one. I

> do have those tiny seeds of feminism in me, so the decision is not, like (pause)… this has been thought over a lot, but so far no decision has been reached.

Two excerpts from Auli and Asko's interview cited above highlight the multiplexity of the surname decision and the ambivalence involved; especially Auli's last comment. It was uncommon for the interviewees to explicitly refer to feminism or gender equality when discussing names, which indicates that only few couples perceived the question in such a context. Asko appealed to his future wife based on his mother's decision with a playful tone of voice, knowing that advising the bride on the choices made by her future mother-in-law carries a certain irony. In the next sentence, however, he acknowledges his underlying effort to persuade Auli to accept the solution he personally prefers. It is worth noting that while Tilja's suggestion (quoted earlier) for Tero to take her last name instead of the other way around was clearly intended as a joke, Asko bringing up his mother's decision was not – he is offering a decision that conforms to the prevailing order. The comment was a teasing and persuasive remark that his father's last name, which Auli was not particularly fond of, had been good enough for his mother. Asko uses humour to gently disregard his partner's concerns and the general importance Auli gives to the surname decision with a simultaneous aim of persuading her toward his own opinion. In addition, he returns to the discussion to further justify his suggestion with practical aspects of a shared name 'if and when you have children'. Here, as in almost all the interviews, only the man's surname is offered and considered as the shared family name (Castrén 2019).

Asko's way of using humour to persuade Auli to adopt his preferred choice is important considering the transition to a married couple and the tensions, at least potentially, associated with it. The interviewees' teasing about the surname decision can be understood to be affiliative, referring to using humour to increase emotional closeness and to relieve tension between partners (Campbell et al. 2008). Even if in the data both partners used humour in conversation, previous research literature focusing on couples has highlighted that it is men in particu-

lar who use affiliative humour to maintain relationship satisfaction in stressful or potentially stressful situations (Theisen et al. 2019). The use of humour when discussing surnames can be understood as a gender-politically correct means of not threatening the idea of partners as equals in the relationship while arguing for the patrilineal surnaming practice. Nevertheless, the humour use in the data is also doing gender relations and gendered family roles, as the couples' fun-making draws on the reversal of the traditional order (presenting the man taking the woman's name as hilarious), from resorting to exaggeration to showing the ridiculousness of forced gender equality, and from referring to gendered family roles and the choices of the couple's parents in persuading one's partner to make a decision following the traditional order (the man's father's name was good enough for his mother, so it should be good enough for his future wife as well).

5. Discussion

When using humour in talking about surnames, the interviewed couples played with gendered expectations regarding the family with no real intention to change the patrilineal surnaming practices. Indeed, making fun about and discussing the matter highlights the transition process taking place in marriage on two levels: doing 'we-ness' (Elias 2001; or, becoming 'us', Castrén 2019) and doing gender (Pilcher 2017). Going against the man's embodied sex categorisation (Pilcher 2017) was clearly a powerful resource for humour and playfulness for the interviewed couples. As was the assumed cultural expectation to pursue equality at any cost and in every possible way in marital and family life. The analysis presented highlights the difficulty of perceiving unequal and constraining tendencies in society when they enter the sphere of our most intimate relationships (c.f. Holli 2003; Vuori 2009). It is as if the couples distanced themselves from the equality discourse (and potential conflict) to emphasize instead their particularity as a committed couple and their mutual love.

Although the interviews conducted that focused on a forthcoming wedding were far from the mundane and everyday life, in the discus-

sion on surnames, a piece of the everyday life of gender relations was being shaped and stated. In these discussions, the 'semi-careless and established customs' (Jokinen 2005:156) that define something as significant in Finnish gender relations were highlighted. From a gender perspective, most couples acted simultaneously both conventionally and reflectively (c.f. Jokinen 2005:67). Yet, for some couples, the patrilineal surnaming was so self-evident that what was considered traditional eclipsed all aspects of structural inequality (Castrén 2019), as if it had nothing to do with doing gender relations in society.

Being playful with surnames can be interpreted as relaxed reflexivity in the sense that Jokinen (2005) defines the term. It refers to varied ways in which reflexivity on gender connects with action when Finns talk about their everyday life and mundane routines, emphasizing the ease and relaxedness of gender relations in society (Jokinen 2005:67). Nevertheless, humour use when discussing surnames reproduces the patriarchal order and instils it in society in a way that does not question the individuality of couples, the agency of spouses, or their equality as partners. Joking is like candy floss spun from gender reflexivity; it is airy and tastes sweet, but it still promotes unequal structures in society.

The analysis shows that, to the interviewed couples, the alternatives to patrilineal surname choice (both partners keeping their own surnames, one of them combining two surnames with a hyphen, husband taking the wife's surname, or both partners taking an entirely new shared surname) are first and foremost sources of warm-hearted and affiliative humour (Campbell et al. 2008). Humour use when discussing surnames does not promote more equal surnaming practices but instead can be understood to indicate that the couples, despite being aware of the alternatives, deliberately distance themselves from them, not because they are against more equal gender relations in society and in family, but because for them as individuals and as 'who they are as a couple' patrilineal practice just happens to be a better fit. This resonates with what Gross (2006) has written about marriage in contemporary societies being a meaning constitutive tradition instead of a tradition that constrains and pushes individuals to normative life

choices. Humour offers the couples means to evade the nagging question of unequal treatment of genders inherently linked to the patrilineal surname choice and, in a sense, to go against initiatives for extending gender equality.

Decision making on surnames at marriage shows hidden and implicit practices and micro-level processes that reproduce the patriarchal order in Finnish society (Castrén 2019). What does this mean for the family being formed? As I see it, the consequences are parallel with what Jokinen (2005:158) calls the gender paradox in her analysis of everyday life: 'Women control everyday life, and it weighs heavily on them; men may get by with less burden, but they don't easily achieve the position of a functioning subject'. Making the decision and taking responsibility for the ensuing consequences fall on the woman's shoulders in the matter of marital surnames. On one hand, this is a burden, but on the other hand, it gives them a head start in building family identity (Castrén 2019). Men temporarily get by with less responsibility, but at the same time lose the opportunity available for a more collective mindset in this early stage of family life before possible children and the weight of everyday life (ibid.).

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