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Introduction: Conventions and creativity? Names in the (re)construction of gender

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1. Introduction to the special issue

The main goal of this special issue is to advance the present state of knowledge and understanding about contemporary gender-related personal naming practices. A landmark cross-national study by Alford (1988) of naming in 60 different countries showed gender to be the most common identifier conveyed through the 'given' names of an individual (also referred to in many countries as 'forenames', or 'first' name and 'middle' name). Articles in this special issue do examine gender and first names (Pilcher, Deakin-Smith, Aldrin and Nguygen, and also Sinclair-Palm, this issue) but its scope is broader, extending to gendered practices of surnames (also known as 'family names' or 'last names') in the context of marriage (Castrén, this issue) and/or family relationships (Bechsgaard, and also Grønstad, this issue). The special issue's theme of 'conventions and creativity' is inspired by theorizing and research which emphasizes the important role played

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by names – first names and surnames – in the social (re)construction of gender (e.g. Pilcher 2017; Robnett 2017).

2. The social (re)construction of gender

Understandings of gender as a social construction, as something we 'do' that is not determined by our biology, are rooted in a range of sociological theorizing and research. Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodological analysis of gender is foundational. His theory is based on his case study of a transgender woman ('Agnes') who had to learn how to 'pass' as a woman. Garfinkel used Agnes' conscious and purposeful experience of this process to argue that, in fact, everyone has to learn (mostly unconsciously) how to 'do gender' and everyone has to (always) actively manage their gender. For people who are not transgender, however, the process is obscured by the taken-for-granted, routinized character of their normative gender socialization and their ongoing gender conventional behaviour. Goffman's symbolic interactionist analysis of gender is also important to ideas about gender as 'doing'. Drawing on his notion of 'the presentation of self' (1959), Goffman (1976) is concerned with people's 'display' of their gender through 'conventionalized portrayals' of sex and gender (1976:69), and how these are interpreted by other people in particular locales.

In elaboration of the ideas of Garfinkel and of Goffman, Kessler and McKenna (1978) emphasized that the 'attribution' of gender to an individual, by themselves and/or by others, is the method by which the gender binary is (re)constructed. Similarly, for West and Zimmerman (1987:126), gender is a routine and reoccuring 'accomplishment' and a 'situated doing' achieved in and through social interaction (see also Westbrook and Schilt 2014). In turn, Butler's (1989; 1990) signficant contribution is their argument that sex and gender are 'brought into being' through ongoing enactments of discourses and are sustained through gender performances, or the repetition of ritualized actions.

In 'doing gender' perspectives, then, gender is theorized as a complex reoccurring set of socially constructed categorizations, identifications, practices and structures. As noted by Bechsgaard (this issue),

doing gender perspectives have attracted criticism because they seem to allow for the inevitability of gender, and of gender inequality (e.g. Deutsch 2007). Subsequently, concepts of 're-doing' gender and 'undoing' gender have emerged to address the ways that the creative practices of individuals can and do result in deviation from and/or rejection of typically binary, heteronormative and patriarchal gender conventions (e.g. Butler 2004; Connell 2010).

3. Names and the doing, redoing and undoing of gender

Whether early or more recent, and irrespective of differences in their deeper ontological roots, the various iterations of social constructionist approaches to gender I outline above have all tended to overlook the complex significance personal names and naming practices have in the doing, redoing and/or undoing of gender. In Pilcher (2017), and building on Pilcher (2016), I addressed this oversight and set out my argument that first names and surnames strongly merit enhanced and sustained recognition as 'doing' words that are intrinsic to sex categorization, to gender display, to gender attribution, to ritualized actions and to the accomplishment of gender through the ongoing management of gender conduct. To substantiate my claim, I repurposed sociological research evidence on names to illuminate the powerful role they play in people's doing, redoing or undoing of gender. I showed how first names, given to babies at birth, or chosen by transgender people, can be used as tools either in compliance with or in resistance to the conventional doing of sex and gender as binaries. Likewise, with surnames, I showed how marriage and the surnaming of children are key decision points where individuals have an opportunity to either replicate gender normative naming conventions or to disrupt them. In a commentary on and extension of my argument, Robnett (2017) undertook her own review of research evidence – this time drawn primarily from the fields of linguistics, developmental psychology and social psychology – to explore what it shows about the doing of gender through first names and surnames.

4. Issue contributions

The various contributors to the special issue address, in different ways, how people respond to predominant gendered naming conventions in their naming practices. The articles share the common the topic of the doing, redoing or undoing of gender, either through name keeping or through name changing, and whether in relation to surnames, or to first names, or to middle names or to some combination of these. Drawing mostly on qualitative data, contributors analyse decisions that people have already made about changing, or not changing, their names, and why, as well as people's thoughts about name changing as a future possibility either for themselves or their partners. Between them, authors in the special issue discuss these various aspects of gender and naming in eight different countries: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

The special issue opens with Pilcher, Deakin-Smith, Aldrin and Nguygen's article which examines gendered patterns of name changing in the United Kingdom. The authors analyse name changes made by more than 10 000 individuals over a 21-year period (1998 to 2019), focusing on gender differences in the incidence of name changing and in the changes individuals made to their names (first names, and/or middle names and/or surnames). As well as contributing new data on surname changing by women, the article extends knowledge about and understandings of practices of name changing by men and by people whose first name and middle name changes indicate a transition in gender identity. Moreover, the authors show that between 1998 and 2019, rising numbers of individuals changed some parts or, in a minority of cases, all parts, of their own names. Pilcher, Deakin-Smith, Aldrin and Nguygen argue that their findings point to the increasing complexity of name-based identities in the United Kingdom and to the pivotal role different types of name changes can have in people's (re)doing of their gender.

The next article, by Julia Sinclair-Palm, focuses on name-changing and the self-naming practices of young transgender people. Drawing on her qualitative study of trans youth in Australia, Canada and Ireland, Sinclair-Palm examines how these young people navigated their

gender identity when choosing a first name for themselves. Data reveal the complex and creative ways trans youth choose and relate to their names and highlight the potential that first names have in the undoing and/or redoing of gender. Sinclair-Palm shows how, by opting for names that are gender-neutral, some trans youth disrupted the gender binarism typically conveyed within first names. Other trans youth strategically exploited the typical gender binarism of first names, in the hope that respect for their gender identity would be enhanced and/or that such a name would help protect them from transphobia and misogyny. The author concludes by arguing that trans youths' stories about their self-naming practices not only demonstrate the fluidity of their own conceptions of gender but also contribute to the expansion of wider understandings of the complex plurality of gender identities, beyond the binary.

The remaining contributors to the special issue each report on their studies, all undertaken in Nordic countries, of people's actual marital and family surnaming choices, or people's feelings about the possibilities of name changing in these circumstances. Anna-Maija Castrén's article examines marital surnaming in Finland, where – as in other Nordic countries – gender equality is strongly embedded in the national mindset and features centrally in legislative programmes, including in name laws. Against this background, Castrén presents qualitative data drawn from interviews with soon-to-be-married mixed-sex couples and analyses the humour used by some participants when discussing surnaming options. Castrén found that, through humour, couples played with gendered expectations about family names but without any real intention of deviating from patrilineal surnaming practices. Castrén argues that the joking and playfulness she uncovered represents a reflexive recognition among couples of their equality as partners, but at the same time was a way for them to rationalize plans for the woman in the partnership to take the man's surname. Castrén's article illuminates how micro-level processes such as humour within couples' discussions about marital surnaming feed into the reproduction of gendered social orders and extends understandings of why, in 2022 and in a country like Finland

with a strong ethos of gender equality, 47 per cent of mixed-sex marital couples followed patrilineal surnaming conventions.

In her article, Katrine Kehlet Bechsgaard focuses on surname choices in the diverse landscape of contemporary Danish family formations and where changes in name law have weakened the bonds of traditional ideas about and conventional practices of family surnaming. Bechsgaard draws on data from her qualitative study of participants within mixed sex or same sex relationships, who were interviewed up to 15 years after their family relationships were first formed and whose initial choices about surnames may have changed during that period. Bechsgaard found that decisions about family surnames were typically made in relation to the birth of a family's first child. Her data show how the interchangeability of middle-surnames and surnames under Danish name law since 2005 enhances flexibility of choice in family surnaming. Most of the participants in Becshgaard's study aimed for gender equality in their everyday family practices, and this included how they displayed themselves to the outside world as a gender equal family through their surname choices. In these ways, Bechsgaard analyses the role of surname choices in the interplay between individual identities, the signaling of different family belongings and the (re)doing of conventional gender identities.

As noted by several authors in this special issue, research on marital surnaming in mixed sex couples has tended to focus on what women do and why, while men's surnaming practices are largely unexamined. In her contribution Grønstad addresses this neglect by focusing on how men account for the keeping of their surname or, the choice of a small minority, the changing of their surname at marriage. Drawing on qualitative data from Norway, Grønstad argues that keeping their surname was taken-for-granted by some men in her study and was a conventional practice important to their gender identity. In contrast, participants who were younger men tended to give gender-equality-informed reflections about their marital and/or family surname choices. Some men had changed their surname for gender equality reasons, and this practice was linked to their (re)doing of masculine identities. Grønstad's findings of cohort-linked differences in ideas

that Norwegian men have about surnames and about men changing their surnames suggest the beginnings of a shift toward the redoing of gender through surnames – and so too the possibility of enhanced gender equality in the future.

5. Concluding remarks

A foundational principle of socio-onomastics is that neither the naming practices of individuals nor larger scale trends in naming are random but are instead embedded within a complex range of sociocultural processes operating at different levels of the social world. With the exception of Sinclair-Palm, who examines self-naming by trans youth in Australia, Canada and Ireland, authors in this special issue each embed their discussion of their findings within the sociocultural processes of one specific national context. Yet, it is evident that there are several points of crossover between the five articles making up this special issue. Of course, each article is evidence of conventions and/or creativity in gendered naming practices, but other commonalities are present too. One example here is how humour is used to manage what Castrén calls (this issue) the 'sensitive' topic of surname choices. Castrén's article clearly focuses on the teasing and joking evident in her interviews with soon-to-be married couples in Finland when surnaming was discussed. Yet, Bechsgaard also notes humour to be a feature in marital and family surnaming discussions by her interviewees in Denmark and it features too in Grønstad's account of Norwegian men's ideas about marital surnaming.

A second point of crossover is that surnaming practices are shown to be gender work that is primarily done by women (see also Thwaites 2017; Wilson 2009). In Pilcher, Deakin-Smith, Aldrin and Nguygen's article (this issue) on name changing and gender in the United Kingdom, women are shown to be the majority of name-changers, a finding especially linked to their changing of surnames. The dataset analysed by Pilcher, Deakin-Smith, Aldrin and Nguygen's is, however, very unlikely to have captured the ubiquitous normative practice whereby heterosexual women change their surname at the time of their mar-

riage to a man. The authors suggest that surname changes by women in their dataset are instead evidence of, for example, a choice to discard their former married surname following a divorce. Castrén (this issue) shows that, because changing surnames is seen as 'women's work', men in her couple interviews in Finland had less to say about this topic than their woman partners did. Similarly, Grønstad reports that, in a call-out for participants to give accounts of surname choices and experiences, men volunteers were notably fewer than women volunteers. For Grønstad this finding suggests that surname choice in marriage is perceived in Norway to a less salient topic for men than it is for women.

A third commonality between articles in this special issue is how a country's laws can influence – negatively or positively – gendered naming practices (Nick 2024). For example, Sinclair-Palm notes how trans youth in Australia, in Canada and in Ireland face barriers to legally changing their first name related to their being 'underage' and/or to the costs involved. Pilcher, Deakin-Smith, Aldrin and Nguygen evidence the positive effect the Gender Recognition Act 2004 seems to have had on name changing linked to gender identity transitions in the United Kingdom. Similarly, name laws are noted by Bechsgaard, by Castrén, and by Grønstad to have enabled greater flexibility of choice and some variability of practices in marital and family surnaming in Denmark, Finland and Norway respectively.

The focus of this special issue is in keeping with both Robnett's (2017) call and my own (Pilcher 2017) for more research to be conducted on how people use names in their responses to gendered naming traditions – yet still more needs to be done. Apart from Pilcher, Deakin-Smith, Aldrin and Nguygen (this issue), who analyse gender and different types of name change made by adults, and Sinclair-Palm (this issue), whose topic is first name changing by transgender youth, the focus of the other contributors in this special issue is what adults say, or do, about marital and family surnaming, and especially in same-sex couples (although see Bechsgaard, this issue). The five articles in this special issue cannot be said to provide a comprehensive discussion of the ways that names feature conventionally or creatively

in the doing, redoing or undoing of gender. Indeed, each of the authors published here do make their own suggestions for further research to fill in our gaps in knowledge and understanding related to their particular topic. Clearly, there is capacity in breadth and depth for future research on multifarious aspects of conventions and creativity in the (re)doing of gender through names, including, for example, how parents account for their choice of gendered first names for their children. I hope, in discussing gender first name and/or gender surname practices, contributions in this special issue give people access to what Robnett (2017) has called 'alternative narratives' and thereby potentially contribute to the wider development of more varied, flexible and equal gender orders.

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