

# Marriage name game: What kind of guy would take his wife's last name?

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It's rare for men who get married to change their last names - whether they take their wife's, adopt a hyphenated version or create a combination of the two. But those that do tend to be less educated,

according to a new Portland State University study.

PSU sociology professor Emily Fitzgibbons Shafer analyzed data collected from a nationally representative survey that asked men if they did anything to their surnames in their most recent marriage.

Of the 877 men, only 27, or 3 percent, changed their name. Of those, 25 dropped their last name to take their wife's and two hyphenated their last name. Among the 97 percent who kept their name, 87 percent said their wife took their last name, 4 percent said their wife hyphenated her surname while they made no change, and 6 percent said that neither changed their name. No respondents reported creating a new last name.

The study, published online in May in the *Journal of Family Issues*, looked at whether a man's level of education—both his own and relative to his wife's—influences the likelihood that he chooses a nontraditional surname in marriage.

It found that among men with less than a high school degree, 10.3 percent reported changing their surname. Among men with a high school degree but no college, it was 3.6 percent, and among men with any college, only 2 percent. None of the men surveyed who had an advanced degree changed their name.

Even though better-educated men may have more egalitarian attitudes about gender, they also find themselves in the traditional breadwinner role and potentially have more to lose by changing their surname, the study said. Less-educated men, on the other hand, may have less to lose.

Shafer said the findings parallel studies about women who are more likely to keep their maiden names after marriage—they get married later, usually after starting careers, and are eager to preserve their professional identities. Even so, society expects women, not men, to

change their surnames.

"Sometimes people think that if women keep their own name and make men change their name, it's women being selfish or bucking tradition when they should follow gender norms," Shafer said. "We expect women to be the ones to caretake and give to their families in a way that we don't expect of men."

The findings also showed that men whose wives had more education (and potentially more earning power) than them were less likely to change their surnames than men who had the same level of education as their wives. Shafer suggests that for those men, keeping their surname is a way for them to compensate for the reversal of traditional gender roles, with their wives—not them—in the position of being the family provider.

Shafer said that future research could focus on how age at the time of marriage factors into surname choice, and given that younger men were found to more likely take their wives' names, whether future generations would be more willing to buck tradition.

**More information:** Emily Fitzgibbons Shafer et al, Flipping the (Surname) Script: Men's Nontraditional Surname Choice at Marriage, *Journal of Family Issues* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0192513X18770218](https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X18770218)

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