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Surnaming children born to lesbian and heterosexual couples: displaying family legitimacy to diverse audiences

Abstract

Surnaming practices are a case study of change and continuity in patrilineal conventions in families and also alert us to the challenges of negotiating familial identities in an era of family diversity. Using data from two Australian sources, 430,753 Victorian birth registrations and 43 in-depth interviews with heterosexual and lesbian parents, we explore continuity and breaks with convention in surnaming children. For married and unmarried heterosexual couples, the dominant surnaming practice was for children to take their father's name. By contrast, several surnaming strategies were more popular among lesbian couples including: using hyphenated or double-barrelled surnames, using the birth or non-birth mother's surname or creating a new name for the family. Despite these differences, we contend that through their surnaming decisions both lesbian and heterosexual couples are concerned with displaying the legitimacy of their parental relationships to extended family and institutional audiences. For unmarried heterosexual couples, surnames display 'intact' families and paternal commitment whereas for lesbian couples the legitimacy concern is the recognition of the same sex couple as parents.

Keywords: Surnames, lesbian parents, family display, patrilineage, cohabitation, marriage, same-sex couples

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Introduction

Surnaming practices provide a case study of change and continuity in patrilineal and patriarchal conventions in families. Historically, married women in Anglo-Saxon cultures took their husband's surname as an extension of their status as his property in law (Gittins 1993). Name-changing by women upon marriage was very much challenged by second-wave feminists as a symbol of women's oppression (Finch 2008). For instance, Jessie Bernard (1973) claimed that for a wife to change her name indicated her structurally inferior position. More recently, Nugent (2010) has argued that for women and children to assume the partner or father's surname instantiates the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell 2005) in delivering social and symbolic advantages to men.

Naming decisions also alert us to the complexities of negotiating familial identities in an era of family diversity. They illuminate how women and men—as parents, partners and individuals—assume connectedness to other family members and family heritage in the face of the considerable flux and change wrought by divorce, separation and re-partnering. Emphasising the degree to which surnaming practices are now flexible and chosen, Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) suggests that surnames have become 'individualised' in heterosexual couple families. Or, in an era in which married women can retain their birth names, and divorce gives rise to step and blended families whose members may have several different names, surnames lose much of their objective meaning as symbols of belonging, connectedness and lineage.

Women's adoption of the husband's surname on marriage is discretionary in the US, UK and Australia meaning a decision must be made about whose surname their children will have. Furthermore, many cohabiting heterosexual and lesbian couples are having children in contexts where the surnaming conventions of marriage conceivably provide less guidance for decision-making. This paper, based on birth registry and qualitative interview data obtained from Australian parents, reports on trends in the official data along with same-sex and heterosexual couples' decision-making processes when surnaming their children. We contend that despite their differences lesbian and heterosexual couples make surnaming decisions with a keen eye to displaying and

affirming the legitimacy of children's parental relationships to extended family and institutional audiences.

Gendered power and display in surname selection

Naming is performative in that it evokes the desired lived relationships and brings them into being (see Finch 2007, 2008). Conceptualising naming as a form of family display also brings to the fore considerations about how power relations are mobilised in naming decisions because family members may be unequally positioned in respect of their capacity to name.

Gendered power relations among heterosexual couples appear to favour the visibility and continuity of men's surnames. Existing social research reveals the overwhelming majority of US-resident women (around 90%) assume their husband's name upon marriage (see Brightman 1994; Johnson & Scheuble 1995; Goldin & Shim 2004; Gooding & Kreiger 2010). When parents do not share the same surname, the tendency is for children to be given their father's name (Johnson & Scheuble 2002; Lockwood, Burton & Boersma 2011). Colleen Nugent (2010) sought to explain this predominance in the US of fathers' surnames for children, even among the children of mothers who decline to change their own names after marriage. She found evidence of a culturally dominant model of family in which family unity is defined by a shared surname for all members and it is assumed that this will be the father's name.

By contrast, in lesbian and gay-parented families, naming appears to be more reflexively enacted with an awareness of how others read relationships and provides an opportunity to announce to others how the concept 'our family' is understood, in the absence of being able to rely on legal rights or well-established social conventions (see Almack 2005). Partners may elect to share or hyphenate a surname, and give their children surnames that reflect both partners' involvement in the child's conception and birth. Finch (2007) argues that display through naming is 'an important process of showing 'one's chosen family relationships to others and having them accepted' (p. 71). As such, display considerations focus our attention on the various audiences within and beyond the family that will use names as one way to make sense of relationships. In this regard, naming as a form of display may be a question of decisions that are

subject to constraints as much as they are a product of personal agency or choice. For instance, in cases where families have precarious legal recognition or social acceptance, parents' naming practices may reflect strategic considerations about 'passing' as a family as opposed to aesthetic or other factors that may inform personal choice.

In the case of lesbian parents, there is some evidence that birth mothers' surnames are often given to children, indicative of a naming hierarchy favouring biological relatedness. Almack (2005) found, in a study based on 20 English lesbian couples, that half of the couples had given the children the birth mother's surname. Although there were a number of different naming variations for the other participants, most utilised the social mother's surname or a double-barrelled/hyphenated combination of the two names. A number of the participants' stories indicated it was either 'natural' for the children to have the birth mother's surname, or that the birth mother should have the prerogative in deciding.

Research on surnaming practices and processes to date thus provides evidence of deeply conventional, unequal and institutionalised surnaming patterns alongside the potential for more subjective, individualised premises for family name selection and use. The current study illuminates surnaming practices in an English-speaking country beyond the US and UK where Anglo-Saxon naming conventions are dominant. The inclusion of lesbian and heterosexual parents allowed for comparison of different and similar interests and power relations in surnaming children based on sexuality and gender.

The questions explored in this paper are:

1. Do different types of relationships with differing socio-legal statuses use different surnaming practices for children?
2. How do parents perceive their decisions about their children's surnames reflect and display the meaning of family and relatedness?

Methods and procedure

We were given ethics clearance from Swinburne and Monash Universities. We established a website and advertised for participants on university bulletin boards and

staff email lists. We distributed cards advertising the project to health centres, libraries and leisure centres in Melbourne.

This was a mixed methods project using two modes of data collection/analysis:

1. To provide a population-based overview we analysed data from birth registration records held by the Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages (hereonin, the Registry). Data constituted all recorded births in the State of Victoria, Australia between the years 2005-2010. Information was provided on the marital status of the parent, whether children were given fathers' or mothers' surnames, a combination of both, or a different surname altogether. Although same-sex marriage is not legal in Australia, there are various state- and territory-based forms of legal recognition of same-sex relationships. Since January 2010 in the state of Victoria, it has been possible for lesbian couples conceiving through assisted reproduction to be legally recognized as children's parents and to register as 'mother' and 'parent' on the birth certificate. A separate data query was run on surnaming practices for lesbian parents whose children were born in 2010¹. Customised queries on the population-based birth registration data were run on 23 October 2014. The data were grouped into anonymised tables by staff at the Registry then given to the research team in order to maintain confidentiality of the public records.

2. The second strategy was to conduct in-depth, semi-structured telephone interviews with lesbian and heterosexual parents. Telephone interviews were used because we surmised the topic was not particularly sensitive, they would be more convenient for busy parents and allow for easy rescheduling, if required.

Interviews were conducted with 32 women and 11 men. The final interview sample comprised 18 married participants, 7 in a heterosexual cohabiting relationship, 12 in a lesbian relationship and 6 who were single (all of whom were part of a heterosexual couple when they had their children rather than single parents 'by choice'). We aimed

¹ Gay men involved in parenting children born to lesbian single women or couples, or in the context of their same sex relationship were not included because they are not detectable in state-based birth registry data. This is for a complex range of reasons including the fact that many have children through overseas commercial surrogacy and because of the legal distinction between fatherhood and sperm donation.

to sample as diverse a range of parents as feasible. This was done through initial screening questions about relationship status, whether the participant was a surname 'keeper' or a 'changer', and whose surname the children had. Our interview sample is "purposeful" (Patton 2002) in that it enabled us to find out about the diverse views of people in same-sex and heterosexual relationships. We make no claim that interview findings are generalizable to the population of Australian lesbian or heterosexual parents.

Themes discussed in the interviews included: the negotiation process about surnames; surnames and extended family relationships; beliefs about gender equity; children's views about names; and the perceived impact of naming choices. Interview questions were designed to contextualise patterns in the Registry data, and provide insight into subjective meanings of naming decisions. Interviews were analysed with close attention to drawing out similarities and differences based on the relationship status and sexuality of participants. The first and family names of participants and their children have been changed in order to protect their identities.

Findings

Customised queries provided surname data of all children born in the State of Victoria, Australia between 2005 and 2010 to single parents or heterosexual couples (See table 1). Detailed data on lesbian couples' birth registrations is presented later in the paper.

Insert table 1 about here

It was most common for children to be given the same surname as both their mother and father (55% of Victorian children registered in the time period). The next most common pattern was for children to be given the same surname as their father, but for their mother to have a different surname (35% of Victorian children). Only 5.9% of Victorian children have their mothers' surname which includes 4.5% of children who have the same surname as their mother but not their father and 1.4% of children who had their mothers' surname with a father not listed. Approximately 3% of Victorian children are given a surname that does not match either the mother's or the father's.

Only 2.5% were given a double-barreled or hyphenated surname that combined parents' surnames.

Registry data show clear differences in naming preferences of married and unmarried parents. In 75% of birth registrations to married parents, all members of the family shared the same surname and this was likely to be the husband's. By contrast, about 75% of children born to unmarried parents have their fathers' surnames, and their mothers have different names. The next most common pattern for married parents was for the child to have the father's surname and the mother to have a different name (approximately 20%). Less than 1% of children born to married parents were given hyphenated or double-barrelled names, as opposed to nearly 7% of children born to unmarried parents. About 3% of children born to married and unmarried parents have a surname that does not match that of the parents, and this is the only category with a similar proportion of married and unmarried parents.

The predominance of patrilineal surnaming

Interview participants revealed that surnaming children when parents share the same name is taken-for-granted. Married women in these families spoke about enjoying the sense of belonging that ensued from taking their husband's name on marriage then giving this name to their children. Surnames thus display membership of a committed nuclear family unit.

Eleanor's emphasis on the value of following tradition (interview 27) was typical. A stay-at-home mother, Eleanor is married to James, a computer programmer and the couple have two pre-school aged daughters and an infant son. Despite her awareness that women now had a choice about surnaming, Eleanor emphasised the appeal of continuity with past practices. She also commented that her name change marked the transition to the creation of a new family unit:

Eleanor: It was something I wanted to do. I'm in my early 30s, so we've grown up with 'women can do anything'. But I just like that idea of being a family unit [...] I see changing my name as that chance to be able to create that new family with my husband. Traditionally it's the female who takes on the male's name.

Interviewer: What does tradition mean to you? [...]

Eleanor: Tradition. I don't know. Things that have gone on before and if it works, why break it?

Eleanor also explained that sticking to tradition meant people could safely make assumptions about her family relationships and she took comfort in this. Additionally, her comments indicated the power of names to display family unity. Her unease at the thought of a deviation from convention because it potentially disrupts the sense of belonging is clear:

Eleanor: It's easier as well, once the kids come along, just to have the same name.

Interviewer: What makes it easier?

Eleanor: I think it's just that tradition of being able to group people together. [Rather than] 'Mummy, why do you have a different surname to me?'... I think once they get to school - Let's say the family name's Brown, but the mother's name is Smith, and you get called Mrs Brown and that's not your name. I think that's where it becomes a bit of an issue.

For Liz (interview 15), married with three daughters, sharing her husband's surname was described as a pleasure and symbol that she has found a 'good' man to create a family with. 'I have my husband's surname. So do all of my daughters. I love it. It identifies us as a family.' Liz was happy to adopt the traditional married naming convention even though her family history was not entirely conventional. Liz had kept her family of origin surname when she had cohabited and had a daughter with her previous partner. When she decided to marry her new partner she took on her husband's name and gave her daughter his surname too, implicitly because to do otherwise would not display commitment commensurate with the quality and substance of the relationship. Liz's description suggests that marriage is a 'capstone project' or achievement (Cherlin 2004) that surpasses the commitment of cohabitation. Sharing her husband's surname and giving it to her daughter is an honour:

Liz: When I got married, I took on my husband's name and changed my daughter's surname, through common usage, to my husband's surname. The reason for that is that I've always believed if a man is good enough to marry, you're good enough to carry his name.

The next most common pattern for women in heterosexual relationships was for them to retain their surnames and give children the father's surname. Serena and Lauren, who are married and cohabiting respectively, outlined typical reasons given by women for this choice, and the ease of following convention was the predominant theme.

Serena (interview 35) has been married to Luc for 12 years and the couple have two daughters and a son. Despite strong views about retaining her given surname, Serena indicated she was happy for the children to have Luc's surname in order to carry on

'his family line'. Luc was the only son in his family and his sister had changed her name upon marriage, meaning his 'branch' of the family would cease after this generation. Serena's comments indicate some slight defensiveness or ambivalence about having gone along with what her husband wanted, but similarly to Eleanor, comfort with convention:

Interviewer: In terms of your children having your husband's surname, is that about a convention that children take the father's name?

Serena: This is where I kind of get a bit - in a way you want to question it. But at the same time, is it really worth the effort? ... My name isn't a full reflection of who I am. My mother had a name before she changed hers, and the same with my grandmother [...] To me it wasn't about Luc giving them his name, it meant something a bit more to him. Ultimately it's just kind of a bit of ease to say: 'Yeah, that's convention.'

Lauren (interview 37) is a policy officer and her partner Dave is a policeman. They have two sons 6 and 9 who have their father's surname. Echoing Serena's notions of social ease, Lauren framed the decision as more of an assumption based on what people normally do:

Lauren: It wasn't really a decision that was made. It just sort of - I didn't care.

Interviewer: So when you say it wasn't really a decision, did you and your partner actually discuss it? Or did-

Lauren: Well, we discussed it. But I just assumed that that they would have his last name. It's normal that children have their father's last name.

Elsewhere in the interview, Lauren commented that her partner's relatives appeared more concerned about the surnaming decision than either her or Dave:

Lauren: I did have a discussion with one of [Dave's] relatives after our eldest was born. She pretty much said that she thought it was wonderful that we were continuing their family name and everything. I think there was a bit of a kerfuffle from relatives on his side of the family because we weren't married.

Lauren's comment that her partner's relatives appeared to take a keen interest in whose surname the children would have indicated a perception there was a lot at stake in the naming decision for his extended family. The implication was that in the absence of marriage, the father's name served to consolidate and even validate his family's connection to the child. The comment from the relative implies that as a visible display of paternal connection, the father's surname shores up the continuity and stability of the paternal tie that, in the absence of marriage, could be called into question.

Consistent with women's reporting of the views of their male partners and husbands, interviews with married and cohabiting men indicated that they often expected that the

children would have their name. For instance, Andrew (interview 5), a carpenter, cohabits with his partner Daisy and their baby daughter. Like the other we men we interviewed, he had taken it for granted that his daughter would take his surname and was surprised when Daisy initially disagreed.

Andrew: There was definitely a bit of negotiation with the surname. I guess I assumed that our daughter would take my surname because I'm the man and that's what happens...She mentioned to her father that maybe it should be her surname and she thought her father would agree because it would be his name being carried down. She was quite surprised when her dad said: 'No, of course not, it's got to be Andrew's name.'

In this example of a woman's explicit deferral to patriarchal authority, Andrew indicates above that Daisy's support for the paternal surname is predicated on her father's approval. And again, in the absence of marriage the paternal surname displays that the child has partnered parents.

Reasons for unconventional surnaming of children

For the married and cohabiting heterosexuals whose children had combined surnames or the mother's surname, sometimes this was based on the belief that there should be gender equity in surnaming children. However, unconventional surnaming could also be a display of conservatism stemming from concerns about being read as a reconstituted or single parent family.

Josie, 50, was one of the few women we interviewed whose children had taken her surname. Josie had cohabited with partner Bill for 25 years and the couple had two sons aged 17 and 20. Josie explained that she had been a feminist activist in the 1980s, and had had very strong views about gender equity. She and Bill had decided that if their firstborn were a girl they would use Bill's surname and if a boy were born first they would use hers. According to Josie, their decision had met with resistance from Bill's mother who had 'insinuated the decision was an affront to her son's masculinity'. Josie also commented that it had disturbed her when, over the years, some people had assumed that Bill was not the children's biological father. She had found this at different times 'irritating' and 'upsetting'. The extent to which these reactions bothered Josie indicated that she oscillated between exasperation with other people's conservatism and maintaining over time the courage of her feminist convictions.

For some participants, strong beliefs in gender equity had led to creative surnaming decisions. An intriguing finding from the Registry data was that three percent of children born to married or unmarried couples do not have the same surname as either of their parents. Jacinta and Tom (interview 21), a married inner urban professional couple in their early 40s, provided insight into this trend. The couple has two pre-school aged children, a boy and a girl. Jacinta believed that giving children their father's name was inequitable and Tom also had had no desire to do this because he was estranged from his family. They chose instead to give each of their children newly created surnames developed from their own first names. Jacinta believed this strategy was attentive to their children's individuality and their gender equity values, in that the surnames conveyed a sense of maternal and paternal heritage. At the same time, Jacinta's story begged the question of whether Tom would have been as supportive of this course of action had he not been estranged from his family of origin.

Unconventional naming decisions could also be based on concerns about being 'misread' as a divorced or single parent family, as in Linda's story. Linda, 36 a journalist and her husband Mark 39, an academic are married parents of three daughters aged 3, 5 and 8. Linda retained her given surname 'for professional reasons', and the children have a hyphenated surname. Linda recalled disagreement with her husband when she was pregnant with their first daughter. She was worried that if the children were given her husband's surname, this could give the impression the children were from his prior marriage:

Linda: He wanted them to have his name. At first, I wasn't sure, but in the end when I was pregnant with my first, I said: 'I just want them to have my name as well as yours. I don't want people to think that I'm the stepmother.'

There was a strong sense in Linda's story that the display work surnames do is to make visible 'intact' family status. If the children did not bear her name, this could also mean her parental or biological relationship to the children-either is a possibility- was called into question. What is clear is that what people think is important to Linda and the implication is that stepmothers or stepfamilies are stigmatised. It was also apparent in Linda's story that a third possibility, that of the children having her name rather than Mark's had not been canvassed.

Diverse naming practices in same-sex parented families

By contrast with heterosexual couple families, Registry and interview data on lesbian-parented families shows more diverse surnaming trends (See Table 2). Since January 2010, lesbian couples in Victoria have been able to register as either the 'mother' or the 'parent'. Of the 105 children born to lesbian couples in 2010, one third were given the same surname as the birth mother, a third had a hyphenated or double-barreled surname which combined both parents' names and about one fifth (19%) were given the same name as the mother and the parent (that is, the women had the same name as each other). Fourteen of the children born (13%) were given the non-birth mother's surname. In a very small number of cases (4) the child was given a surname that did not reflect either the mother's or the parent's surname. It is possible that these were births in which the creative practices discussed earlier in the context of Jacinta and Tom's story were in play, or the biological father was known to the women (e.g. Dempsey 2010, 2012) and his surname was given to the child.

Insert table 2 about here

Interviews revealed that among same-sex couples, there was more discussion, more negotiation and more surnaming options were considered than among heterosexual couples. There was also greater preference by lesbian couples for the hyphenated or double-barreled surname, in comparison to the birth record data for families with a registered mother and father. Whereas under 1% of children born to married parents and 7% of children born to unmarried heterosexual couples have double-barreled or hyphenated names, almost 20% of children born to lesbian couples have these names.

Hilary 35 (interview 28), a lawyer, and her partner Karen 38, a psychologist gave their two daughters a hyphenated surname. Similarly to women in heterosexual cohabiting relationships, this allowed them to keep their individuality and professional identities intact. Additionally, the hyphenated name represented a powerful display of shared parenting, in the absence of the equal legal and social recognition of both partners. Hilary explained the hyphenated surname was preferred because it implied the joint legitimacy and authority of both parents:

Hilary: I think that the kids having both of our names indicates legal parentage, rightly or wrongly. I think when one of us is taking them to the doctor or

kindergarten or childcare or whatever, it's quite clear that the person filling out the form has this name and this name is reflected in the kid's name.

The second most common pattern among lesbian couples was for the child to be given the birth mother's surname, and Monica's interview shed light on some of the reasons why this was preferred. Monica is in a relationship with Sonia and they have a son 3 and a daughter 6. Monica explained that as birth mother undergoing the physical duress of fertility treatment and pregnancy, and also 'the major instigator of their plan to have children', she had always maintained that the children should have her surname, implicitly as a way of displaying her weightier contribution. Sonia, according to Monica, had been happy to go along with this:

Monica: I never even considered that my children would have anything other than my last name.[...] If I was the one who was going to go through the pregnancies and the birth and the rest of it, I wanted them to have my name. [Laughs] It wasn't as though I didn't feel the kids were also part of Sonia's family. I just really felt like it was a recognition of that birth mum role.

Monica also elaborated that she and Sonia had decided the children should have Sonia's surname as their middle name, as a way of acknowledging her family and status as the children's other parent.

Creating an entirely new surname for the family was the third most popular choice among lesbian parents, as in Carina's story. For Carina (interview 25) surnaming decisions were made in collaboration with current partner Helen and ex-partner Simon. Simon and his second wife co-parent the elder child with Carina and Helen. Carina's surnaming decisions reflected a complex history of changing relationships and making new commitments, as well as negotiating changes with previous partners and her daughter.

Carina: When [Helen] and I decided to have another child together, we wanted to do something to communicate our commitment to each other. So we decided to change our names. Neither of us are particularly connected to our families of origin - we wanted it to be an equal kind of relationship.

Interviewer: How did you come up with that name?

Carina: We sat down with our daughter and talked about what we wanted our family to represent. The values that we decided on were strength and beauty.

It was apparent that Carina and Helen valued democratic decision-making and were keen to have a shared surname that made visible the qualities they wanted their family to stand for. Elsewhere, Carina revealed the 'social ease' display considerations we also

encountered in interviews with heterosexual couples, in that both parents having the same name as a child means fewer questions asked or explanations required. Moreover, the women wanted to change their surnames due to problematic family histories associated with non-acceptance of their same-sex relationship. They involved their daughter in the process of creating the new name and also consulted her father. The compromise was to give their elder daughter a hyphenated name with the father's surname and the newly-created family name.

A less common option among lesbian couples registering births (about 10%) was for the children to have the surname of the partner who did not give birth. This had initially been the situation in Zoe's family, and Zoe's interview gives some clues as to why this approach was not as popular among lesbian couples as giving the children the birth mother's, hyphenated or newly-created surnames. Zoe 34 and her partner Andrea 39 have a four year old daughter, and their child was initially given Andrea's (the non-birth mother's) surname. Zoe explained the decision was in the interest of displaying Andrea's parental status to family members who could otherwise undermine or minimise it: 'We thought there could be a tendency in Andrea's family for them to see it as her just taking care of my child'. However, after the birth Zoe had felt distressed about this decision and the women had changed their baby's name to a hyphenated surname:

Zoe: I felt so attached to her and because of that I had some insecurities around her not having the same name as me. [...] Most of my friends who are in relationships with men, most of their kids have taken the mother's name. So all of that kind of played out. Now I feel more secure ... But I'm still happy it's there.

Zoe's implication was that once her baby was born, she had wanted her daughter's name there because it seemed to her a powerful display of her belonging to the baby and a motherhood status that could not be challenged. Ultimately, this was reconciled by reinstating joint names. This again conveys the symbolic power of names to give a solidity to relationships that are potentially stigmatised or have precarious social acceptance.

Discussion

This paper reports on trends in surnaming Australian children along with discussion of how decisions are explained and justified by their heterosexual or lesbian parents.

Population based data, in tandem with in-depth interviews enabled us to describe the main patterns and illuminate the meaning and context of parents' decision-making processes. In most families in which parents are married, the mother, father and children all have the same surname and this will usually be the fathers' surname. For unmarried parents, the father's surname also predominated. Under five percent of children born in Victoria take their mother's surname. A desire for social ease or to follow tradition were the usual explanations. Our findings with regard to Australian heterosexual couple families thus support the overseas evidence of predominantly patrilineal surnaming for children in countries with Anglo-Saxon naming conventions. By contrast, there was no overwhelmingly dominant practice among lesbian couples for whom the three most popular practices included using hyphenated or double-barrelled surnames, using the birth mother's surname or creating a new name for the family.

Janet Finch's insight was that names are a form of display (Finch 2007, 2008). From one perspective, our research provided evidence of subjective and agentic display considerations in keeping with the individualization thesis (Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and among the minority of families who chose to depart from convention. Sociologists and historians emphasise the contingent, political and invented character of many traditions such as surnaming, that are assumed to go back to ancient times (e.g. Giddens 2002; Hobsbawm & Ranger 2012). In about three percent of births registered to same-sex and heterosexual couples there is demonstrated confidence to quite radically reformulate patrilineal surnaming conventions by creating entirely new surnames for children or families that better display more contemporary family values than adherence to patrilineage.

The frequent references to the 'social ease' or comfort in having all family members share the same surname spoke to the enduring importance of surnames as displays of family belonging. This was evidently true for the married and lesbian couples in the study in which all family members shared the same name. Vanessa May (2011) in her work on belonging comments that one of the ways in which a sense of belonging is achieved is if we can go about every day lives without self-conscious awareness of how we do it. For some heterosexual and lesbian parents, knowing that surnames will not

draw commentary or attention to the status of family relationships from outsiders was important to achieving and maintaining a strong sense of security in familial identities.

However, the more compelling question raised by this research is the persistence of patrilineal surnaming conventions among heterosexual couples in what we would expect to be a more dynamic field of naming choices. Far from invoking the sense of individual agency in Finch's conceptualisation of display, our participants' choices were very much in the service of following convention, and indicative of considerable constraints to individual agency. Why does taking the husband's name then making this the family name prevail for married women? In the families of our heterosexual interviewees, particularly those where the women have taken their husband's surname on marriage, following Nugent (2010), we find that this is not a decision about which there is much discussion or negotiation. Furthermore, patrilineal surnaming also persists for married and unmarried parents in heterosexual relationships in situations where women retain their own names and thus choose to symbolically continue their pre-partnered identities.

Particularly among unmarried heterosexual couples we expected there would be substantial negotiation about surnaming children and more diversity with regard to naming decisions. By contrast with marriage, in heterosexual cohabiting relationships there is no convention that women change their surnames and there is often a stronger ethos of gender egalitarianism (Lindsay 1999, Singh and Lindsay 1996). Though cohabiting couples are diverse and there are transnational differences in expectations and behaviour, results have consistently shown that cohabiting couples hold a more egalitarian division of housework than marrieds (see Domínguez-Folgueras 2013). In the US both working class and middle class cohabiters have egalitarian expectations (Miller and Carlson 2015). Despite this, for most cohabiting heterosexual couples, links appear not to be readily drawn between surnaming choices and egalitarian ideals or fairness.

Indeed, the extent to which patrilineal surnaming conventions were deeply embedded for our heterosexual cohabiting participants indicates to us that displaying legitimacy is the overarching purpose. The father's 'brand' in the form of the surname, in the

absence of the legal and symbolic commitment of marriage, emerged as powerful way of displaying the father's commitment and the paternal extended family connection. Reading between the lines of our interview data it appears men's commitment to women and children in cohabiting relationships is still perceived as precarious and uncertain, and that there is a hierarchy of relationships with marriage at the pinnacle. Women often commented on just how interested paternal extended family were in the surnaming decision although they tended to downplay its influence in the interests of asserting their own agency in the decision.

Furthermore, displaying a respectably 'intact' biologically related family through surnaming was clearly a concern for some heterosexual couples. Even women who baulked convention were evidently uncomfortable that sometimes this led to assumptions that their current partner was not the children's father or that they could be perceived as a stepmother. This constitutes evidence that despite the fact that many births to unmarried parents are intentional rather than stigmatized 'accidents', there is a residual sense of impropriety when paternity or family status is implicitly called into question. For unmarried couples, the father's surname makes a statement that the biological parents are or were a couple when the child was born. It is evidently important to many of our cohabiting participants that this is displayed to audiences beyond the immediate family. For married parents in situations where the woman has retained her given surname, a hyphenated name that all members share can display that the family has not been through separation or divorce.

With regard to lesbian parents' surnaming practices, Almack (2005) found that biological motherhood brought certain entitlements which she believed highlighted the constraints lesbian parents face in overcoming conventional expectations and obligations. Almack commented both on the predominance of biological mothers' surnames for children and the fact that their wishes tended to prevail in surnaming decisions. By contrast, we paint a more egalitarian picture of lesbian parents' surnaming practices if we consider that in almost 70% of the 105 births registered, parents made a surnaming choice that did not privilege the birth mother's surname. For a third of couples, the child's surname combined those of both partners reflecting a visible commitment to their equal stature as parents. For the 20% of children whose lesbian-

parented family members all had the same surname, our qualitative data indicates that this was likely to mean a new name was created for the family, rather than assuming, as among heterosexual couples, that one partner's existing surname would become everyone's. However, the fact that most of the parents in same-sex relationships who volunteered to participate in our interview study were birth mothers, combined with the relatively small numbers of children who were given the non-birth mother's surname does indicate a hierarchy of preferences and decision-making power in which biological relatedness pulls some weight.

Given the known emphasis among cohabiting heterosexual couples in maintaining the individual identities of partners (Lindsay 2000) it is surprising that the double-barrelled or hyphenated surname for children was a minority practice for the heterosexual couples in our study. Frequently in interviews with parents we heard hyphenated or double-barrelled names referred to as 'clunky', 'cumbersome', or 'difficult', indicating that they were perceived as a social burden for children. The historic upper class connotations of these names could be relevant here, as demonstrated by other descriptors we heard such as 'posh' or 'too pretentious'. Australians, despite some evidence to the contrary, pride themselves on coming from an egalitarian society in which class-based differences are less pronounced than in many other parts of the world. This could be one cultural explanation for this finding. Interestingly, lesbian couples also commented on the potential aesthetic and administrative shortcomings of lengthy hyphenated names yet this did not seem to deter many from using them. This no doubt relates to their more acute legitimacy concerns. Whereas our heterosexual couples were concerned to consolidate paternal commitment and family respectability through naming displays, lesbian couples often perceived the very legitimacy of their family was at stake in this decision. From the point of view of a lesbian couple having children, a long or 'difficult' name for the children could well appear a small price to pay if it can ward off lack of recognition of their family unit or discrimination against the parent who did not give birth. The audiences that were a particular source of consternation for our lesbian and heterosexual participants were paternal or non-birth mother extended families and school communities.

Conclusions

Choosing surnames for children is taken seriously as means of displaying family relationships whether the decision is to follow or flout convention. An intriguing finding from our study was that three percent of both married and unmarried heterosexual parents had created a new surname for their children that the parents did not share. Perhaps this is the beginning of a new more egalitarian trend of personalising and individualising family identities that began in same-sex parented families? As Smart (1997) observes names are a significant indicator of the 'past in the present'. Evidently they can also gesture toward 'the present in the future' for those who feel entitled to think more creatively about their personal capacity to shape family traditions.

That said, in the vast majority of heterosexual relationships patrilineal naming conventions continue to hold sway. Children of married and most unmarried couples are given their father's surname, regardless of whether their mothers changed their surname on marriage. Using the father's surname may enable cohabiting mothers to express their expectations of and hope for a long-term paternal commitment to their children, in the absence of marriage. We contend that using the father's surname is a powerful way of displaying legitimacy for cohabiting couples – displaying the child has a father and the mother has a heterosexual partner, where using the mother's surname might be mistaken for the still stigmatised step or sole mother family.

To extend Nugent's observation (2010) that the patrilineal surname represents a 'patriarchal dividend' for men or an advantage predicated on unequal gendered power relations, we add that it appears women are complicit with this because they perceive advantages in this for themselves and their children. In this study, the patriarchal dividend was evident in the references to the sense of belonging or 'social ease' of fitting in and thus securing legitimacy and implicitly respectability for family relationships. By symbolically conferring the father's name women may also believe they are shoring up for their children the economic and social benefits of fathers' and paternal extended families' ongoing commitment and involvement.

By contrast, for lesbian couples there is more diversity in naming choice and more open consideration and negotiation of different options. Many of our participants in lesbian relationships wanted names that would accurately reflect parental relationships

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conscious as they were of the ever-presence of heterosexism or homophobia. The stakes of non-recognition as a family loom very large for lesbian couples contemplating surnaming their children.

In an era of family diversity and increased social acceptance of the fact that marriage does not need to precede having children we no longer hear much talk of 'illegitimate' children. Despite this, our research demonstrates that changes in social mores do not mean legitimacy concerns go away. Rather, they reappear in new guises. Despite their differences, what links the lesbian and heterosexual couples in our study is their mutual concern with surnames as a powerful signifier of the visibility and status of family relationships. In this regard, surnames maintain their legacy of being labels that have potent symbolic and material effects.

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Table 1: Surnames of children born in Victoria 2005-2010

| | % of married parents | % of not married parents | % of total sample | N |
|---|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| Children with a surname that matches BOTH the mother's and father's surname | 75.71 | 1.43 | 54.80 | 232,888 |
| Children with a surname that matches the birth mother's surname, but DOES NOT MATCH the father's/partner's surname | 1.61 | 11.36 | 4.51 | 19,188 |
| Children with a surname that matches the birth mother's surname and there is no father listed on the record | 0.00 | 4.58 | 1.35 | 5,749 |
| Children with a surname that matches the father's/partner's surname, but DOES NOT MATCH the mother's surname | 19.19 | 72.87 | 35.30 | 150,054 |
| Children with hyphenated and double barrelled surnames that are a combination of both the mother's and father's/partner's surname | 0.62 | 6.80 | 2.46 | 10,459 |
| Children with newly created surname | 2.85 | 2.96 | 2.92 | 12,415 |
| TOTAL BIRTHS | 305,231 | 125,522 | 100% | 430,753 |

Source: Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages: Surnames of children born in Victoria from 1 January 2005 to 31 December 2010.

Table 2: Surnames of children born to lesbian couples in Victoria, 2010

| Children's surname | % | N |
|--|----------|----------|
| Children with hyphenated or double-barrelled surname that combines mother's and parent's | 32.3 | 34 |
| Children with the same surname as the mother | 31.4 | 33 |
| Children with the same surname as the mother and parent | 19.1 | 20 |
| Children with the same surname as the parent | 13.3 | 14 |
| Children with surname other than the above | 4 | 3.8 |

Source: Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Births registered in Victoria, Australia to lesbian couples since the *Assisted Reproductive Treatment Act 2008*, and amendments to the *Status of Children Act 1974* and the *Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1996*, came into effect in January 2010.