ABSTRACT

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GENDER AND AGENCY IN TRANSITION TO FAMILY

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The paper presents findings from an ongoing Finnish study on young couples in transition to family. The analytical focus is on the gender specific expectations regarding family roles that determine the “agentic work” (Archer 2008) of women and men in negotiations on family surname. In this process the Nordic ideal of gender equality, effectuated by the name law that treats women and men equally, collides with the cultural practices of patrilineal surnaming.

The Finnish law on surnames at marriage assumes a gender neutral perspective in a sense that both partners can keep their original names at marriage. Partners can also choose a common surname, which can be her or his original name or some other name, or one partner can use a double-barrelled surname in which other partner’s name is attached to the original name with a hyphen. Couples have to inform the marrying authority before the ceremony about the change of names, otherwise both partners are assumed to keep their original names.

The possible children can have the name of either mother or father (in the case where partners have kept their original names) or the name that the partners share. Children cannot have a double-barrelled name and all children born to the same couple must have same surname.

The present name law took effect in 1986 (Nimilaki 694/1985). Before that, from 1930 to 1985, it was mandatory for women to change their name at marriage and either to take the husband’s name as the only name or to use his name after her own surname with a hyphen (Paikkala 2012). During the first year of the new law 85 percent of couples conformed to the traditional pattern and had the man’s name as the common and the only surname for the family, whereas in less than 8 percent of cases partners kept their original surnames. In 2012, the respective percentages were 66 and 26. These statistics, however, do not differentiate the first marriages from the second or third, which may make a difference in whether or not to change name at marriage. Nevertheless, there seems to
be a considerable appeal in the man’s name to be chosen as the common and the only surname for the couple and their future children.

In trying to make sense about contemporary marriage as a deliberate choice rather than a social convention followed by everyone, I draw from a conceptual distinction between *regulative traditions* and *meaning-constitutive traditions* presented by Neil Gross (2005). *Regulative traditions* refer to traditions that involve the threatened and actual exclusion of an individual from a moral community, and they shape action by constraining it from the outside. *Meaning-constitutive traditions*, on the other hand, involve “patterns of sense-making” passed down from one generation to the next, and shape action by enabling it from the inside. The persistence of patrilineal naming practices in societies that are otherwise considered to be advanced in gender equality (Noack & Aaskaug Wiik, 2008), seems to respond to the idea of meaning constitutive tradition that constitute the actor as a being who understands and is oriented to the world in a particular way.

The paper looks at the couples’ negotiations on names from the perspective of agency. Deciding on marital names illustrates a situation in which partners make a choice in the face of pressures exerted by social and cultural structures to foster relationships they believe constitute a desirable family life (Connidis 2012). As in the negotiations on family care (Connidis & McMullin 2002a), those who are privileged by existing structural arrangements and cultural models, are motivated to reproduce them. They face fewer constraints in exercising agency. In contrast, those in a position of disadvantage may desire change, but will experience greater constraints in their ability to exercise agency. (Ibid.) Couples’ negotiations incorporate the different temporal dimensions of agentic orientation described by Emirbayer & Mische (1997), who see agency as a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past but also oriented toward the future and the present. The choice on marital name is influenced by the tradition that prioritizes man’s surname as the shared family name. In this sense, the question is very much about whether or not to reproduce certain cultural model (and structured inequality). In addition, however, the future plays an important role in partners’ reflections about the influence of the decision on the lives of their future children.

A qualitative analysis is carried out from a dataset that includes thematic couple interviews of 19 heterosexual Finnish couples soon to be married for the first time (20-36 years, no children). The focus of analysis is on the agentic work demanded from women and men in reaching a satisfactory resolution and on the interaction between partners.

The preliminary findings highlight an unequal division of agentic work in negotiations about the family surname. Men are privileged by existing structures and cultural models, and they are mostly motivated to reproduce them (cf Connidis & McMullin 2002). They act in a straightforward manner, and “exit” from the negotiations at will after offering a legitimate reason for why they cannot change their name. Most men do not try to influence the their future wife’s decision and thus follow the accepted code of gender equality prevalent in Finnish society saying that everyone has a right to decide for herself. However, this leaves women to balance between their individual preferences and the powerful cultural model saying that family has only one name (Nugent 2010). As Nugent (2010) has pointed out, women are faced with a choice between the self vs. the family, whereas the hegemony of male privilege ensures that men’s name-keeping is never judged to be in conflict with family. Thus creation of ‘family identity’, of which the shared name is considered to be the most important symbol, is shouldn’d by women alone. Women start from a position of disadvantage; they may desire a change in the prevailing cultural model that prioritizes male lineage and patrilineal surnaming, but face more constraints in exercising agency.

References