

Family Name

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In my culture, for centuries, it has been the practice for a wife to take her husband's family name, and for all of their children to take their father's family name. According to this practice, we can trace a family back in time: father, father's father, father's father's father, and so on. And we can trace it forward: male children, male children's male children, male children's male children's male children, and so on. The obvious flaw in this system of family naming is its male bias. And there is another flaw. If the whole world used this system, eventually we would all have the same family name.

In 1789, the sailors on the ship *Bounty* mutinied. Some of the mutineers settled on Pitcairn Island in the south Pacific Ocean, with wives from neighboring islands. After a few generations, all inhabitants of Pitcairn Island had the same family name. There are only 40 inhabitants of Pitcairn Island, so a few generations is enough for the names to converge. For the whole world, convergence would take a million years; not an imminent danger. But the name pool starts to decrease immediately in any segment of the population that uses the system of passing on the father's family name.

We have seen this same phenomenon happen to our genes. Each person's mitochondrial DNA is inherited from their mother only. So, after a million years of human evolution, mitochondrial DNA has converged: every person in the world now has the same mitochondrial DNA.

In Iceland for many generations, each child was given a first name from a list of approved names, and their last name was their father's first name followed by either “son” or “dottir” depending on the child's gender. This scheme maintains variety, but it is gender biased.

A short-sighted attempt to correct the gender bias is hyphenation. Each child has a given name, and a family name composed of the mother's family name and the father's family name with a hyphen between. The next generation would have four names hyphenated, and the next eight, and so on. This exponential growth is unsustainable.

Other schemes have been, and can be, proposed. Male children take their father's family name, and female children take their mother's family name. This scheme eventually segregates the names, creating male family names and female family names. It also decreases the variety until there are just two family names, one male and one female. Furthermore, there aren't just two genders; this scheme leaves unspecified what happens to someone who is neither male nor female, or is both male and female.

A variation on this scheme is to give male children the mother's family name and give female children the father's family name. If generations were synchronized, this would eventually segregate the names into four categories: even generation females, odd generation females, even generation males, and odd generation males. Salmon generations are synchronized every two years, so now the even year salmon and odd year salmon are genetically distinct. But human generations are not synchronized, so this scheme does not segregate names. Nor does it decrease variety. But it complicates family identification.

Whenever people change names, family history becomes complicated. When a wife adopts her husband's name, or when a child is adopted, a link is broken. The tradition of some North

American indigenous people is for the husband to join the wife's family, breaking the link with his former family. The indigenous naming practice was to give each baby a name, with no constraint on what it can be, and then at the age when the child becomes an adult, they are given a new name that fits them. In addition to that, each clan (extended family) has a name, and each tribe (nation) has a name.

The word “family” is not well defined. Certainly there are many kinds of family. The boundaries between families are fuzzy. So it doesn't quite make sense to identify a family by a name.

There is no scheme with all four of these attributes:

- it includes a family name
- it maintains the variety of names
- it is fair to all genders
- it doesn't require anyone to change their name

So I suggest we leave out the “family” requirement. Then the other three attributes are easy to satisfy.

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