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Why Children Must Inherit Their Last Names from Their Father, Not Their Mother



Marilyn vos Savant may be the most intelligent person alive in the world today, with the recorded IQ of 228, and she is a wizard when it comes to [solving logical and mathematical problems](#) in her weekly column “Ask Marilyn” in the *Parade* magazine. But she does get at least one biological problem wrong.

vos Savant advocates a social institution where all individuals – men and women – keep their last names for life, rather than women adopting their husband’s last name upon marriage, and where all boys inherit their last names from their fathers and all girls inherit their last names from their mothers. That is why, as an adult, she changed her last name from Mach that she was born with (vos Savant is a descendent of the physicist Ernst Mach) to her mother’s maiden name, vos Savant.

I agree with vos Savant that everyone – men and women – should keep their last names for life. For one thing, it would make it a lot easier for academic women to keep track of all of their publications on their CVs, as they go through marriage, divorce, and remarriage (and divorce and remarriage). However, it is not a good idea for daughters (or sons) to inherit their last names from their mothers. Of course, individuals (like vos Savant) are free to do what they wish with their last names. But such a system *as a social institution*, if practiced by everyone in society, will be biologically unsustainable in the long run, and girls on average will be worse off than boys in such a society.

Patrilineal inheritance of family names, where children inherit their last names from the father, not from the mother, evolved as a social institution as one of the mechanisms to alleviate paternity uncertainty. Like all mammalian males, human fathers can never be completely certain of their paternity, but, unlike most mammalian males, they are asked to invest very heavily in their offspring. Therein lies the possibility of cuckoldry – unwittingly investing their precious limited resources in the genetic offspring of another man. Males of only a very few species in nature (humans, and many avian species) face the danger of cuckoldry because male parental investment among these species is high. Males of most species in nature don’t care if they are really the genetic fathers of the offspring that their mates produce because their male parental investment is limited to the sperm deposited inside the female during copulation. (These species are known in zoology as the “fuck-and-go” species; the male and the female of such species meet, they copulate, and they go their separate ways, never to see each other again. And, girls, no, he won’t call you the next day.) As a result, males of most species in nature do not experience sexual jealousy, only humans and birds do.

Males of these few species – human fathers in particular – therefore need to be reasonably convinced that they are indeed the genetic fathers of their putative offspring before they would agree to invest heavily in them. Both nature and social institutions aid in such an effort. There is some evidence to suggest that newborn babies are born looking more like the father, not the mother (because maternity is always certain and mothers don’t need to be convinced), and mothers and maternal relatives often *allege* paternal resemblance of babies in order to assure their fathers that they are indeed their genetic fathers and thus they should invest in them. (Remember, mothers and maternal relatives don’t really care what the genetic truth is, because they are guaranteed to be equally related to the children whoever the genetic father might be.)

Patrilineal inheritance of family names is another social institution that emerged to convince the fathers of their paternity, by saying (if social institutions have a vocal cord) “The baby’s really yours, because it has your last name!” Russians take it one step further, by giving their children – both their sons and daughters – *middle and last names* after the father.

Fathers are therefore expected to invest more heavily in children who bear their last names than children who bear the

mother's last names, because they are more likely to be convinced of their paternity. As a result, *ceteris paribus*, children who inherit their last names from their fathers are expected to be more likely to survive and thrive than children who inherit their last names from their mothers. Like polyandry, the social institution of matrilineal inheritance of last names contains the seeds of its own extinction. Societies with such an institution are less likely to survive and thrive, because their children are less likely to survive and thrive, which explains why most known human cultures practice patrilineal inheritance of last names, not their matrilineal inheritance or even the system that vos Savant advocates. Worse yet, fathers in societies with the social institution that vos Savant advocates are expected to invest preferentially in sons over daughters, and thus girls are expected to be worse off than boys in such societies.

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